



Episode 2 ,2005: Black Star Line Williamston, North Carolina

Tukufu: Our first story looks at one of the most controversial politicians of the 1920s, who wanted to return African Americans to Africa. In the early 1920s, the most famous and feared black man in America was Marcus Garvey. At giant rallies, he demanded an end to the racial violence, poverty, and discrimination plaguing the country. No venture reflected Garvey's revolutionary dream of equality better than the Black Star Line, a mighty fleet of ships that would bring economic power to blacks around the world and transport many of them back to a proud and independent African nation. Garvey's movement sent shock waves around the world, yet today almost no traces of the Black Star Line still exist. A woman in North Carolina thinks she may have discovered two rare artifacts from Garvey's past, and she thinks they may reopen a mysterious chapter in her own family history.

Rachel: Well, when my mom passed away and we were cleaning out the house, um, we found some old pictures, and we found these two certificates that belonged to my great-grandfather. The first time I noticed that Marcus Garvey's signature was on the certificates, I was kind of nervous, and then I kind of got excited. I thought to myself, if this is really Marcus Garvey's signature on these documents, I've got something pretty big here.

Tukufu: I'm Tukufu Zuberi. Elyse Luray and I are headed to Williamston, North Carolina, to meet Rachel and hear the story behind her documents.

Rachel: Okay, guys, here are the certificates I wanted you to see.

Elyse: Oh, they're stock certificates.

Tukufu: Yeah, look at this! "This certifies that Cornelius Martis is the owner of 40 shares of the capital stock of Black Star Line, Incorporated."

Elyse: And mine says the same thing, except it says "Mr. & Mrs. Cornelius Martis."

Rachel: And notice the signature.

Tukufu: "Marcus Garvey, President." You know, I've never seen a signature of Marcus Garvey up close, so this is potentially extremely important. Marcus Garvey, for his generation, was as important and as well-known as Martin Luther King, Jr., or Malcolm X.

Elyse: Tell me, Rachel, what do you want to know? What can we do for you?

Rachael: Well, I want to know if these certificates are real. And I would like to know why my great-grandfather owned them.

Elyse: Can you tell me a little bit about your great-grandfather?

Rachael: Well, I don't know much about him, but I know that he worked on boats, but that's about it.

Elyse: Well, that gives us some information.

Tukufu: Yeah, it does. Well, I'm excited about the possibilities here, so we're going to do what we do and get back to you as soon as we can.

Rachael: Okay.

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Tukufu: You know, I didn't want to get too excited in front of Rachel, but this is potentially a very important piece of history right here.

Elyse: Yeah, what's the Black Star Line?

Tukufu: Okay, you can see this artwork here, right? You have this man of African descent pointing towards the globe. And here you have Africa, and in the middle of it is "Africa, the land of opportunity." Over here you have a ship. Garvey wasn't just interested in having the shipping line. He wanted to use that shipping line to transport people of African descent around the world back to Africa to form a strong African nation.

Elyse: Hmm, that's pretty radical for 1919, right?

Tukufu: Yeah, it was pretty radical. And not only that, look. He bought 40 shares at \$5 each. That makes this worth \$200. You take two of them, that's \$400 that he spent as an investment in 1919.

Elyse: That's equivalent to almost \$5,000 in today's money. Where would a guy who works on boats for a living get that kind of money? And why would he spend it on stock? I want to take a closer look at these certificates to see if they're authentic.

Elyse: Well, if you look at them, the first thing you can see is that there's natural wear, which is a good sign. I like the fact that all the handwriting is in a fountain pen, because the ballpoint pen wasn't invented until 1945. And the writing looks right for that period. Lastly, I like the fact that there's an embossed seal on both of the stock certificates. That was very common during that time period.

Elyse: So these could be period, but I'm not an expert in antique stocks and bonds, so we still got a lot to figure out here.

Tukufu: While Elyse checks out the certificates, I'm going to focus on the history of the Black Star Line. I first heard about Marcus Garvey when I was around 18 years old, and his message still inspires me. In 1916, he moved to the U.S. from Jamaica and settled here, in Harlem, New York City. Pretty soon, the impact of his message was felt around the world. Garvey preached that black pride and self-reliance were the only ways that people of African descent were going to survive a racist world. In the 1920s, Jim Crow laws of segregation and disenfranchisement made white supremacy legal in American society. Lynchings and race riots were common. Marcus Garvey responded with the largest mass movement in black history. It was called the U.N.I.A, the Universal Negro Improvement Association. Garvey sought and soon found financial backers for his movement with a single-minded focus on race pride. Garvey said, "If you believe the Negro has a soul, if you believe the Negro is a man, if you believe the Negro is endowed with the senses commonly given to other men by the creator, then you must acknowledge whatever they have done, Negroes can do." The first step was economic independence. The U.N.I.A. opened black-run businesses all over Harlem, but Garvey had bigger plans. He knew that the British had a hugely successful shipping line called the White Star Line. Why couldn't blacks have one, too? And why not call it the Black Star Line? But how did he pull off such an audacious plan? And did these certificates have anything to do with it? I'm meeting my friend, Robin Kelly, a professor of African-American studies at Columbia University, near the spot in Harlem where Garvey's most ambitious plan was set in motion.

Tukufu: So the waterfront must have been very different 86 years ago.

Robin Kelly: Oh, yes. In fact, we had shipping piers all along here on the Hudson, and it was at the pier

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at 135th Street, November, 1919, when the Black Star Line launched its first ship, the S.S. Yarmouth. The Yarmouth created a sensation in Harlem. Black slaves had been brought forcibly to the New World on ships. Now Garvey promised that a fleet of black-owned ships would one day return free men to build an independent African state. Imagine, 5,000 black people crowding on the pier to witness this -- this moment of history, some paying a dollar a head to go on the ship itself to tour it. You had the U.N.I.A. band playing music, people cheering. It was a moment of celebration.

Tukufu: Over the next year, the Yarmouth traveled to Panama, Costa Rica, and Jamaica, opening up trade between African entrepreneurs. Coming into port, it was often met by wildly enthusiastic crowds, who showered the crew with flowers, fruit, and other gifts. Over the next eight months, Garvey raised a huge sum, about \$600,000, to buy more boats. Where was all this cash coming from? Wall Street banks wouldn't lend Garvey money, and he didn't want their help anyway. Instead, Robin told me the U.N.I.A., Garvey's organization, sold stock to the men in the street by advertising in his newspaper, The Negro World.

Robin: Let me show you an advertisement here.

Tukufu: "Widening horizons. There should be no trouble about making up your mind to help your race rise to a position in the maritime world that you and every other Negro can point to with pride."

Robin: Yeah, it's amazing. Notice at the bottom here. Individuals could fill out this subscription form, send in \$5, and own a share of the Black Star Line.

Tukufu: Okay, so this is really a stock offering presented in a very populist manner of a newspaper coupon.

Robin: Exactly. I mean, this was Garvey's vision: to ensure that black people around the globe could have a piece of the Black Star Line. So for them, it wasn't just a financial investment. This was an investment in the future of the race.

Tukufu: So stock certificates were the main tool Garvey used to build his empire. Rachel may have an authentic fragment of American history.

Elyse: Caleb Esterline is director of research at RM Smythe & Company, and an expert in antique stocks and bonds. Okay, what's the first thing you look for when you're authenticating these?

Caleb Esterline: Well, first of all, you have to realize these are financial documents, like bank notes. They were designed not to be counterfeited, so there's going to be a lot of things on here that we can look for, such as the serial numbers. All the numbers on here are going to be different. You'll never find two certificates with the same number. And you're going to see a very intricate border. It was another anti-counterfeiting measure; very hard for people to replicate.

Elyse: Okay, so is there anything else -- just by looking at the paper -- that helps you think it's right?

Caleb: In the 1950s, they started putting optical brighteners in paper, so if you look at papers made after 1950 under a black light, you'll see them fluoresce, whereas these shouldn't have any fluorescence in them.

Elyse: Okay, do you have a black light?

Caleb: Yeah. I've got a certificate from 1971 from Ringling Brothers.



Episode 2 ,2005: Black Star Line Williamston, North Carolina

Elyse: Mm-hmm.

Caleb: If you look at it under light, you'll see it fluoresce.

Elyse: Oh, I see, cool.

Caleb: Now if you look at these certificates from the Black Star Line. There's nothing.

Elyse: There's nothing.

Caleb: That means that this paper was produced prior to 1950.

Elyse: Okay, so we know that the paper's good, but the signature's the most important thing. Okay, what do we have here?

Caleb: Here we have the Marcus Garvey signature from the Black Star Line certificate. And here's a 1933 printed example of a genuine signature. By comparing how Garvey forms his "M"s, the "G," the space between the "G" and the "a," and the fluid motion he made while signing, we can conclude the example on the top is a genuine, authentic Marcus Garvey signature.

Elyse: So our Black star certificates are real.

Caleb: Yes, they are.

Elyse: Yes! That answers Rachel's first question. But that doesn't explain why Cornelius Martis made such a huge investment. Did he believe the stocks would make him rich one day?

Tukufu: Ted Kornweibel is a professor of African-American history and an expert on Marcus Garvey. I'm hoping he can tell me what happened to all those Black Star Line investors. Was the Black Star Line a success?

Ted Kornweibel: Yes and no. Psychologically it was. Now Garvey recognized that, to mobilize millions, he had to reach their minds. That's the first step in a revolution. He helped people free themselves from the mental shackles of racism.

Tukufu: Mm-hmm. How about from a financial point of view?

Ted: It was a business failure. Garvey didn't know anything about the shipping business, took bad advice.

Tukufu: And the people he chose to run the line ranged from incompetent to downright dishonest.

Ted: Within a year, the ships were either sunk, abandoned, or out of commission.

Tukufu: Any hope that Garvey investors would recoup their money was made less likely by the actions of the United States Justice Department. Garvey's Black Nationalism had created panic in Washington and among colonial governments in Africa. They each sought help from a young justice department official named J. Edgar Hoover.

Ted: The federal government was really after Garvey. More informants, undercover agents, were -- were tailing Garvey than any other black subject.

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Tukufu: The justice department found that Garvey had solicited funds through the mail, using a photograph of a ship he didn't yet own. It was a technicality, but enough to arrest Garvey in 1922 and charge him with mail fraud. The Black Star Line went out of business soon after, and thousands of small investors lost their hard-earned money. So why did Cornelius hold on to his certificates all these years?

Elyse: I need to find out a little bit more about Rachel's great-grandfather. Tukufu told me that the U.N.I.A. still exists, operating out of an office in Philadelphia. Hi, I'm calling to see if you have any records of the Black Star Line, specifically stock certificates of a purchase around 1919. They tell me that many of the U.N.I.A. financial records from that time were destroyed in a fire. So that's a dead end. Here's something. This is the 1930 Census, and I found Cornelius Martis. In 1930, he was living at 417 Herkimer Street in Brooklyn. He lived there with his wife and his daughter, and he was a painter. Maybe there's some clues in Rachel's collection of Cornelius's personal papers. Here's his seaman's I.D. card from 1918. Ah, this is interesting. This is Cornelius's seaman certification, and it says here that he was born in Curacao in the Dutch West Indies. I know that Marcus Garvey was also from the Caribbean, from Jamaica. I wonder if there's any more to this Caribbean connection. Listen to this: "In the first mass West Indian influx, which began around 1900 and peaked in the early 1920s, New York City was the main port of entry." Twenty-eight thousand Caribbean immigrants moved to New York City in the years after World War I. It seems that many of them were already a part of Garvey's movement back home. And these Caribbean immigrants became the heart and soul of the Garvey movement in Harlem. Cornelius Martis was part of this wave of immigration. His Caribbean neighborhood in Brooklyn was home to other Marcus Garvey supporters. I even find federal documents that show the FBI investigated another Garvey supporter and stock-buyer on the same street where Cornelius lived. I think I have the information Tukufu needs. Now Tukufu and I are headed back to Rachel's to tell her everything we discovered about her Black Star Line certificates.

Rachael: Oh, wow! Oh, my goodness, I can't believe this. This is actually Marcus Garvey's signature?

Elyse: Two times.

Rachael: Wow, I really have a piece of history in my hands.

Tukufu: The investigation of your documents allowed us to discover some very fascinating facts about your great-grandfather, Cornelius. I tell Rachel that Cornelius's investment was probably so large because he had believed strongly in Garvey's dream. The Caribbean laborers who lived in Cornelius's neighborhood were the rank and file of Garvey's support. Discrimination on the waterfront made black dock and ship workers especially ardent Garvey backers. And even when owning stock attracted the attention of the FBI, Cornelius held on to his, evidence that he had faith in Garvey's message of justice and equality long after the Black Star Line had collapsed. But your great-grandfather was one of those courageous individuals who continued to believe in the Garvey movement and what he stood for. And I think that it is a great thing that Cornelius not only purchased this stock, and a significant amount of stock at that, but that he preserved these stocks for you and your family.

Rachael: I don't know what to say. I'm -- I'm excited. I'm -- I'm proud of my great-grandfather, and I'm really honored to have these stocks.

Tukufu: Garvey's dream was of an African Zion, where African-Americans would use their education and economic power to help strike the shackles of colonialism from an entire continent.

Tukufu: In 1924, Garvey also sent a small group of his supporters to Liberia in West Africa to begin planning



Episode 2 ,2005: Black Star Line Williamston, North Carolina

for large-scale repatriation. But the government of Liberia blocked Garvey's efforts, fearing the militancy of his supporters. Such opposition, and Garvey's financial troubles, meant his dream of a vigorous, back-to-Africa movement was never fully realized. Garvey died of a heart attack in London in 1940.

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