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Two Princes Of Calabar

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The Unforgettable Ordeal of the Two Princes of Calabar

In the annals of history, few stories resonate with the raw, poignant force of the **Two Princes of Calabar**. It is a narrative that transcends the typical historical account, weaving together elements of high-stakes adventure, deep tragedy, judicial brilliance, and the unyielding strength of the human spirit. This is not merely a footnote in the history of the transatlantic slave trade; it is a powerful, personal saga of two young African royals who were brutally torn from their homeland, thrust into the horror of slavery, and who ultimately secured a miraculous freedom through a daring legal action that helped shape the moral arc of the Atlantic world. Their journey from the opulent courts of Old Calabar to the cold, unforgiving plantations of the West Indies, and finally to the hallowed halls of British justice, remains one of the most compelling and instructive episodes of the 18th century.

The tale of the **Two Princes of Calabar**centers on two cousins: Little Ephraim Robin John and Ancona Robin Robin John. They were not commoners; they were members of the powerful Efik royalty, belonging to a lineage of slave traders themselves. The port city of Old Calabar, located in what is now southeastern Nigeria, was a central hub in the transatlantic slave trade. The Efik people, acting as middlemen, traded with European captains, exchanging enslaved people from the interior for European goods like textiles, alcohol, and firearms. This was the world into which the two princes were born—a world of intricate political maneuverings, wealth, and a brutal commerce that they had been raised to accept as a normal part of life.

Their world would shatter in the summer of 1767. The Efik people were fractured by a bitter internal conflict between two rival factions—the "Old Town" faction and the "New Town" faction, from which the princes hailed. The British slave traders, ever opportunistic, saw a chance to secure a monopoly for themselves. They conspired with the Old Town faction, promising to help them eliminate their rivals. Under a flag of truce, the leaders of the New Town faction, including the two princes and their father, King Robin John, were lured onto a British slave ship anchored in the Calabar River. The meeting was a trap. As the unsuspecting Efik leaders were feasting on the ship, they were seized. Their followers on shore were attacked and slaughtered. The Royals were immediately clapped in irons and transported across the Atlantic, sold as slaves on the island of Dominica. The very men who had been princes were now property.

The Horrors of the Middle Passage and American Enslavement

The journey across the Atlantic, known as the Middle Passage, was a living hell. For the **Two Princes of Calabar**, the indignity and terror of capture were compounded by the foul, cramped, and disease-ridden holds of the slave ship. They were stripped of their status, their clothes, and their very identities. They were now cargo, destined for a life of brutal, unending labor. Upon arrival in Dominica, they were sold to different plantations. The shock of their new reality was absolute. From being rulers in their own land, they were now forced to work under the lash of a white overseer, subjected to a system designed to dehumanize them at every

turn.

The conditions on the Caribbean sugar plantations were famously brutal. The work was back-breaking, the punishments were savage, and life expectancy was short. For the two cousins, the physical suffering was compounded by a profound spiritual and psychological dislocation. They were literate and highly intelligent, accustomed to the complexities of Efik diplomacy and business. Now, they found themselves in a world where they were denied their very humanity. However, they did not succumb to despair. They held on to one crucial asset: their ability to read and write. Little Ephraim Robin John had been taught to write English by a missionary in Calabar. This skill, which they never lost, became their most powerful weapon.

Their first attempt at freedom was a bold and desperate act. They escaped from their plantations and, using their knowledge of the coast and their literacy, managed to get aboard a ship that they believed was sailing for England. They thought that if they could reach England, a land that they knew had laws, they could find justice. They were tragically mistaken. The ship's captain, a man named John Street, betrayed them. He sailed not for England but for Virginia, where he attempted to sell them back into slavery. This new chapter in the saga of the **Two Princes of Calabar**saw them facing the cotton fields of the American South. They were owned for a time by a Scottish merchant in Norfolk, but their spirit remained unbroken. They planned a second escape, and this time, they were determined to make it to England, the source of the authority they desperately needed to appeal to.

From Plantation to the Privy Council: The Legal Battle for Freedom

The journey to England was an epic of endurance. Using forged passes and their own cunning, the two princes managed to get on board a ship bound for Bristol. When the ship arrived in England in 1772, the **Two Princes of Calabar**stepped onto English soil for the first time. They were free men in principle, as slavery was not explicitly legal on English soil. However, they were terrified of being captured and forced back onto a ship. They were penniless, alone, and far from home. But they had a plan. They knew that the Lord Mayor of London had some legal authority over the Port of Bristol. They traveled to London and threw themselves on the mercy of the Lord Mayor, who granted them a writ of habeas corpus to prevent their seizure.

Their legal victory, however, was only a temporary reprieve. They needed to secure their freedom permanently. More importantly, they wanted to return to Calabar to reclaim their birthright. They were taken in by abolitionist sympathizers, including Granville Sharp, the great English campaigner against the slave trade. Sharp was a pivotal figure. He recognized the incredible propaganda value of the **Two Princes of Calabar**. Here were two noble, literate, dignified Africans who were living proof that the slave trade was a monstrous injustice. Sharp helped them document their story and assisted them in bringing a lawsuit against the captains who had enslaved them, namely Captain William Lippincott and others.

The case was complex. The court had to decide if the princes were legally enslaved or free men. The defense argued that all Africans were legal property. The princes' legal team argued that their capture was an act of piracy and murder, not legitimate commerce. The evidence was overwhelming. The story of the trap was corroborated by several British sailors who had been present. The case of the **Two Princes of Calabar** became a cause celebre. While the court ultimately did not rule on the legality of the slave trade itself, it did rule that these two specific men had been illegally enslaved and were therefore free. The decision was a massive victory. The ship captains were ordered to pay restitution.

Their Return to Old Calabar

The story of the **Two Princes of Calabar**does not end with their legal freedom. The most remarkable chapter of their journey was yet to come. With the restitution money they were awarded, they were able to book passage back to Africa. In 1774, seven years after they had been violently torn from their home, Little Ephraim

Robin John and Ancona Robin Robin John returned to Old Calabar. They arrived not as humiliated victims, but as triumphant survivors. They had seen the world in a way few Africans had. They had seen the vastness of the Atlantic, the horrors of the plantations, and the halls of British power.

Their return had a profound impact on their society. They brought back more than just their freedom; they brought back a deep, personal understanding of the true cost of the slave trade. Having experienced it directly, they were forever changed. While they could not and did not single-handedly stop the slave trade—it was the economic engine of their society—they did use their influence to change how business was done. They published an account of their enslavement and the treachery of the British captains. This account served as a powerful warning. They also used their new authority to enforce stricter rules on how trade was conducted. They effectively made the slave trade in Calabar more transparent and "fairer," according to the brutal standards of the time, to prevent the kind of treacherous ambushes that had led to their capture.

Their story was printed and widely circulated in England and America, becoming a key piece of abolitionist literature. The **Two Princes of Calabar**became symbols. For the growing abolitionist movement in Britain, they were proof that Africans were not the "savages" that slave traders claimed they were. They were men of intelligence, faith, and nobility. The princes themselves, through their petitioning and publication, became early and effective African voices against the trade that had enslaved millions. The historical record of their own words, written in their own hand, survives in archives, providing a direct, unfiltered link to their experience.

The Deeper Meaning and Legacy

The legacy of the **Two Princes of Calabar**is multi-layered. On one level, it is a thrilling and inspiring story of survival against all odds. It is a narrative of agency, showing how even within the most oppressive system in human history, individuals could fight back and win. But on a deeper level, it is a story of moral complexity. The princes were not innocent victims of a crime they had no part in. They were members of a slave-trading elite. Their own family had profited from the enslavement of others. The story does not allow for a simple narrative of good versus evil. Instead, it forces us to grapple with the brutal reality that the tragedy of the slave trade was a shared horror, one in which Africans were both victims and perpetrators. The experience of the two princes gave them a unique and painful perspective on the entire system, a perspective that they took back to Africa and used, to a limited but real degree, to effect change.

Their story is also a testament to the power of literacy. In a world where millions were silenced, their ability to read and write was their ultimate salvation. It allowed them to navigate the legal system, to tell their own story, and to stand as equals before the bar of public opinion. The **Two Princes of Calabar**were not just rescued from slavery; they rescued themselves. Their journey from royalty to slavery to freedom and back again is a microcosm of the entire Atlantic world of the 18th century. It contains all the elements: the global economy, the brutal violence, the legal hypocrisy, and the powerful human desire for freedom.

To fully appreciate the scope of this story, it is helpful to distill its key elements. The following points highlight the most significant aspects of the journey of Little Ephraim Robin John and Ancona Robin Robin John:

- Their Status: They were not ordinary enslaved people. They were highly literate, politically connected, and culturally sophisticated members of the Efik ruling class.
- Method of Capture: They were captured in a deliberate act of piracy and betrayal by British slave traders who conspired with a rival African faction.
- Their Struggle: They endured the Middle Passage, slavery in Dominica, an escape to Virginia, and a second escape to England.
- Their Legal Victory: They successfully sued for their freedom in the English courts, winning a landmark case that did not end slavery but secured their personal liberty and exposed the illegalities of their capture.
- Their Return: They used their victory and the restitution money to return to Old Calabar, where they became powerful critics of the slave trade's worst excesses and published their account.

- Their Historical Significance: They were among the first African voices to directly challenge the slave trade within the British Empire, providing a powerful counter-narrative to pro-slavery arguments.

The story of the **Two Princes of Calabar** is also a significant case study in the development of human rights law. Their case, *Robin John and Another vs. Lippincott and Others*, was a direct precursor to the more famous Somerset case of 1772, which established that slavery was not supported by common law in England. The courage and persistence of these two men helped to lay the legal and moral groundwork for the abolition of the slave trade. They are not simply historical figures; they are protagonists in one of the most dramatic and important human rights battles of the modern era.

A Conclusion of Enduring Importance

The saga of the **Two Princes of Calabar** is more than just a fascinating historical anecdote. It is a profound

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