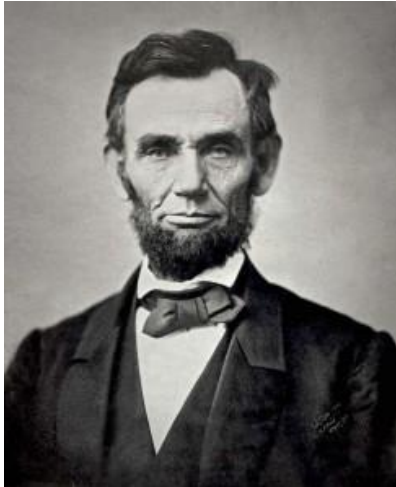


# Bernard Kock Colonized Cow Island With Freed Slaves

-Boyce Thompson



This shot of Lincoln was taken one month before he signed a deal with Kock

History has been brutally unkind to Bernard Kock, my third great-grandfather. Historians use all sorts of pejoratives to describe him — swindler, scoundrel, opportunist — and perhaps with good reason. But at least some of the hostility toward Kock is rooted in the fact that he made Abraham Lincoln look like a hypocrite.

Kock convinced the president, during the Civil War, to back a plan to deport formerly enslaved Black people to an island off the coast of Haiti, where they would provide cheap labor for a cotton plantation. He got Lincoln to sign on the dotted line the day before he issued the Emancipation Proclamation that freed enslaved people in the South.

Unfortunately for everyone involved, especially the formerly enslaved people and freemen, the colonization project went awry, creating a massive embarrassment for the Lincoln administration, which committed to the project and then failed to fund it. But Kock took much of the blame for developing the idea and selling it to Lincoln. When an armed rebellion occurred on the island after Kock's investors failed to come through with lumber to build homes for the emigrants, Kock probably went too far in re-exerting his control, though his life may have been in danger.

I don't remember anyone in the family mentioning Bernard Kock or his exploits, even after several drinks. The connection to Kock comes from the Kruttschnitt side of the family. Bernard Kock's daughter, Elise Minna Kock (1857-1947), married Julius Kruttschnitt, Sr., the chairman of the Southern Pacific Railroad. Julius was my great-great-grandfather.

Kock, a German-born New Orleans tobacco broker, went to the extraordinary length of trying to protect his reputation by issuing a *Statement of Facts* published in New York by William G. Bryant & Co. Only a handful of libraries have this book, widely ignored by Lincoln biographers. Luckily, one is Howard University, right here in Washington D.C., which has a copy on microfiche.

The book refutes some commonly held misconceptions, especially that Kock alone is responsible for what happened at Ile a Vache. It's time that my relative had his fair say.

No matter how history judges his moral integrity, Kock was an accomplished entrepreneur. He developed his colony scheme during an 1862 visit to the Great Exhibition in London, where he saw two bales of excellent-quality Haitian cotton on display. The display "impressed me with the idea that cotton culture might be pursued to great advantage in a country so fertile but thinly settled as Hayti."

While the growing conditions may have been right, the big issue was where to procure labor to grow and pick the cotton. Kock put one and one together. He had heard that Haitian President Fabre Nicolas Geffrard was interested in promoting the immigration of American blacks to Haiti. He also knew the United States was considering deals to create colonies of formerly enslaved Black people in Panama and Liberia. A deal started to coalesce in Kock's creative business mind.

### **Lincoln Didn't Think Blacks and Whites Could Co-exist**

Remarkably, all this was going on during the American Civil War. Lincoln didn't believe in forced deportation. Nevertheless, emigration would succeed "in freeing our land from the dangerous presence of slavery" and "in restoring a captive people to their long-lost father-land with bright prospects for the future," according to a 1996 Lincoln biography by David Herbert Donald.

After gaining letters of introduction to Haitian officials, Kock set off for Haiti, arriving in Jacmel on June 3, 1862. He traveled by horseback to Port-au-Prince, where President Geffrard gave him a warm greeting and promised his "hearty assistance," according to Kock. Geffrard had big plans for improving the country, which had fought hard for its independence from Spain, Britain, and France. He had publicly expressed an interest in creating a middle class using black immigrants from America.

After touring Haiti, Kock determined that his best bet would be locating the plantation on an island off the southern coast of the mainland. Ile a Vache (Cow Island) was the best bet of those islands. But when he approached the government about a long-term lease, he ran into opposition from cabinet members who opposed renting national lands to a white man so soon after their war for independence.



“It was a herculean task, but by dint of a proper management and an iron energy, I obtained ... a twenty years’ lease, with conditions just such as I wanted,” wrote Kock, apparently not one to understate his achievements.

Kock obtained a 10-year lease with an option for an additional ten years. In return, he agreed to pay the government about 15 cents per acre in rent. He was also required to give the government 35.25% of the lumber he cut on the island. In return, the Haitian government would provide him “protection and assistance,” which it turned out he needed. He also obtained an exemption from tonnage taxes on any lumber cut and custom house duties for food and other imports used by the colony.

The terms of the agreement allowed Kock to use 10% white overseers. In keeping with the spirit of Haitian colonization efforts, he agreed to use only farm workers of African or Indian descent. The deal was that the colonists would be naturalized as Haitian citizens upon arrival. And when the lease expired, they would be given preference to become farmers or landholders.

During his time in the islands, Kock formed a close friendship with Dr. Leopold Muller of Port au Prince, Haiti’s surgeon general. Muller and a partner, E. Dutertre, owned a cotton plantation in southern Haiti called Perigny. The pair confirmed to Kock that the soil and climate on Cow Island were conducive to growing cotton. Dutertre confided that he had tried to lease the island himself. Hearing this got Kock pretty excited about his opportunity.



Seward thought Kock was a scoundrel.

The paperwork complete, Kock traveled to New York and then to Washington D.C. President Lincoln at the time was “engaged in the scheme of colonizing negroes in Central America, and seemed to be quite in favor of it,” Kock wrote. However, Lincoln’s Secretary of State, William H. Seward, had appeared to undermine Lincoln’s efforts by publishing in September 1862 a colonization circular to foreign governments that laid out difficult conditions.

Seward wrote that to enter an agreement; foreign governments would have to 1) have homes ready on arrival, 2) make adequate compensation, 3) make schools and medical care available and 4) give emigrants all the rights of citizens. In Kock’s mind and the brains of many historians, these harsh conditions effectively blocked any colonization efforts.

### **Overpromise, Under-deliver**

The concept of colonization had been gaining momentum in America for quite some time. Antislavery societies as far back as 1816 had publicly discussed colonizing African Americans. Many of these groups believed that abolishing slavery wouldn’t end racism, and that could only be accomplished, they argued, by “removing the cause of the disruption.”

Colonization was hotly discussed within the Lincoln administration. Secretary of the Navy Gideon Welles wrote in his diary that it was “distinctly understood” that emancipation and colonization were linked. Lincoln, Welles wrote, wanted to work out a treaty with a Central American or West African country to which the formerly enslaved people could be sent.

Nevertheless, Kock had a hard time getting the U.S. government's backing. He failed to win the attention of lower-level officials considering other colonization deals. He decided his only option was to take his case right to Lincoln.

In a letter to the president, Kock wrote that his original intention was to employ German and Swiss emigrants to cultivate cotton in Haiti. But his opinion changed after seeing the wretched condition of "contrabands who have found their way within the lines of our armies." He proposed to use these contrabands "to rekindle your sympathies on their behalf, and to increase your zeal in promoting their interest and happiness."

Kock went well beyond the terms of the Seward doctrine to propose a near utopia for the colonists. He would give each family a "comfortably furnished house, with a garden spot attached." Without an extra charge, he would supply all their provisions, provide hospital and medical attendance, a church, and a schoolhouse with a minister and teachers. He pledged to sign a four-year contract with each family and pay higher wages than those prevailing in the West Indies. And there was a significant upside for the emigrants.

"At the expiration of the term for which these persons are employed," Kock wrote the President, "the Government of Hayti, by special law, will give each family sixteen acres of good land, and to each single man eight acres, so that, with this grant, and the money earned during the four years of service, the intelligent negro may enter upon a life of freedom and independence, conscious that he has earned the means of his livelihood, and at the same time disciplined himself to the duties, the pleasures, and the wants of free labor."

In words that would later come back to haunt him, Kock proposed that he would act as governor of the island, personally superintending the colony's operations. By enforcing "wise and paternal regulations, I will see to the physical and moral wants of those entrusted to my care."

Though a gifted deal-maker, Kock had oversold the deal. First, he had promised a kind of ideal New England village that would have to be built in short order. Second, he took responsibility for the health of the people entrusted to his care when the sea journey would be potentially hazardous and conditions on the uncultivated, mosquito-infested island were less than ideal.

The government's part of the deal was to pay for transportation to the island and subsistence for the emigrants for a short period once they arrived. Kock also asked Lincoln to furnish agricultural implements and machinery "and everything else that may be necessary for the successful commencement of the enterprise."

Kock, who expected to make a killing selling cotton at war-time prices, offered to refund all the government's money within two years. He even gave the government a deed of trust on all his personal property on the island, plus an unspecified share of the semi-annual crops. He asked that a government agent accompany him to supervise the colonists' rights and help him secure the punctual payment of government funds.

Lincoln appeared to like the terms of the deal, but he told Kock that he had received reports of his questionable character. Though it isn't clear what stories had reached Lincoln, detractors at

that time averred that Kock might “clear out” after receiving the bonus of \$50 for each African American he colonized. Kock, after all, was from the South, though he was born in Germany, and his sympathies in the war weren’t clear.

To overcome these objections, Kock said he would gladly wait to be paid until an American agent in Haiti verified that the colony was in operation. Kock presented a vision for the settlement that included fair labor laws—work only ten hours a day, six days a week, with Sundays for worship—and profit-sharing for workers. His goal, he told Lincoln, was to take up to 5,000 workers eventually.

The President was satisfied. He and Kock signed the deal the next day, December 31, 1862. Remarkably, Lincoln signed the Emancipation Proclamation the next day, January 1, 1863. It made no mention of colonization.

Unfortunately for Kock, the President’s signature alone in those days wasn’t good enough to secure the deal; it still had to be ratified by Seward. According to Kock, the Secretary of State told Kock the next day “that neither I or the President had the right to make such a contract.” Seward refused even to receive the document. Two days later, on January 3rd, Seward ominously wrote to Lincoln: “I think it necessary to have a few precautions taken before I certify the contract of Bernard Kock and I will speak with you on the subject when we meet.”

Tired of being stonewalled by Seward, Kock once again obtained a meeting with Lincoln — it’s amazing that you could get meetings with the President that easily back in the mid-1800s. Lincoln told Kock that additional questions about his character had surfaced. Lincoln, according to Kock, was concerned that he might take the money and the people and “clear out.” This may have referenced another rumor that Kock would run away with the enslaved people and sell them to a Confederate pirate. In response, Kock suggested that the government escort his boat to the island. And once again, he offered to take payment only after a government agent had assured the safe arrival of the passengers.

“This proposal seemed to satisfy the President. He told me that he would send for the contract the following day, examine it again, and do me justice,” Kock wrote. The next day, unable to obtain an interview with Seward but satisfied that he had the President’s support, even if he didn’t have a signed contract, Kock left for New York. That was his first big mistake.

### **A Short Road Show for Greedy Investors**

Kock returned to New York—he had an office at 17 Broadway—to secure investors. He wanted to find partners whose respectability would lend credence to the deal and stop the slander. He also needed money to purchase plantation supplies. He found three eager partners, Paul S. Forbes, Leonard W. Jerome, and Charles K. Tuckerman, whose offices were just around the corner at 50 Broadway. All three were abolitionists. They agreed to put up \$70,000 to fund the venture in return for 50% ownership.

An agreement was drawn up, but unfortunately for Kock, it was never signed, his second big miscalculation. It was a pretty sweet deal for the investors, though, who could receive a 600%

return in nine months if things went according to plan. Kock hoped that by September, he could produce a crop of 1,000 bales of cotton. At the war price of \$1 per pound, at 450 pounds per bale, the receipts would come to nearly a half million dollars, an extraordinary return on an initial investment of only \$70,000. Also, the climate in Haiti was conducive to producing two crops a year.

Kock proceeded to charter a British ship, the *Ocean Ranger* and had it equipped to handle the first 500 workers. He also hired W.J. Watkins to serve as one of the first plantation supervisors. Watkins, a free black man and Baltimore school teacher began interviewing, contracting, and assembling the émigrés at Fort Monroe, where they waited for the arrival of the ocean liner. Kock had lined up suppliers for everything he required, including a sawmill. Everyone awaited orders.

But all was not right in Washington, D.C. Concerns about Kock's character continued to fester like a wound that wouldn't heal. The aspersions were so pervasive that Kock's lawyer, after a visit to the capital, suggested that he sign over to his partners his contract with the U.S. government and his lease with the Haitian government. Once Kock consented to this change, Secretary Seward drew up a new agreement. Unfortunately for the investors, he included a powerful new clause requiring the Haitian government to "guarantee the performance" of the contract. The U.S. government executed the new deal on April 3, 1863.

The partners were very concerned that getting a performance guarantee from the Haitian government would be difficult, if not impossible. They reasoned that the requirement could, in turn, jeopardize the \$50-per-head bonus from the U.S. government. Taking 500 people at \$50 apiece would produce \$25,000, about a third of the investors' upfront investment. But Kock convinced them the actual payout would be in the cotton crop. He insisted on proceeding with the venture. As an act of good faith, he offered to reduce his stake to 25%.

Mr. Tucker seemed surprised, Kock relates in his *Statement of Facts*. "But, Mr. Kock, will that be enough for you?"

"One-quarter of the enterprise will be a fortune," Kock told his partners, "and I desire to show you, gentlemen, that I appreciate your confidence."

Though a new partnership agreement was drawn up, it was never signed, another major blunder on Kock's behalf.

"I cannot leave," Kock told his partners, "unless you give me your solemn promise, that you not only will send me by first steamer my papers containing my power to do as required, but also that you dispatch, immediately after my departure from the fort, the balance of the required cargo, every article of which, especially the sawmill and lumber, is of extreme necessity."

Not content with their general promise, Kock asked each of his three partners to pledge their word of honor separately.

“I felt at the time that, as a businessman, I acted wrongly to start without my papers; but my confidence in my associates was unlimited, and I tried to excuse myself for my imprudence by the recollection of the fact that my promised engagement of the Negroes had not been consummated, and that only after that was completed I would become de facto a partner in the enterprise.”

Due to Seward’s stonewalling, Kock’s six-month deadline with the Haitian government for starting the venture had passed. Nevertheless, Kock departed on April 13th from Hampton Roads aboard the *Ocean Ranger* with 421 colonists. The partners agreed to send a second ship shortly after with the sawmill, steam machinery, and 170,000 feet of lumber to build homes for the colonists.

For some reason, history has been relatively kind to Kock’s investors. Consider that John G. Nicolay and John M. Hay, in a 10-volume Lincoln biography published almost 30 years later, tried to engender sympathy for the Big Three, as we’ll call them. The deal Kock presented them — a 600% return over nine months, with great moral benefits to society — was just too good to pass up. They would have us think that the investors’ greed was perfectly natural and so strong that they signed up without taking the time to investigate Kock’s “personal character” and qualifications. Instead, the Big Three depended “blindly upon the misrepresentations Kock made to them.”

Nicolay and Hay, Lincoln’s personal secretaries, fling other mud at Kock. They say that it “became known” to the government in a short time that Kock was an “irresponsible and untruthful adventurer.” They report on a false rumor that Kock had struck a deal with a Confederate privateer, Semmes, to hand over the Negroes to him on the high seas as captured runaway slaves.

This didn’t happen, and no concrete evidence was ever produced that Kock considered it. Yet, 28 years after the fact, Lincoln’s apologists seem intent on resurrecting the ugly rumor to rewrite history.

### **Unsmooth Sailing Ahead**

Kock set sail on April 6, 1863, shortly after Seward ratified the deal, in the company of the United States Marshall, which traveled with him as far as Sandy Hook. By orders from Washington, the Marshall was supposed to satisfy himself that “all was right.”

“It appears, although almost incredible, that the authorities in Washington, though fully aware of all the facts, entertained to the last suspicion that I might be bound on a slaving expedition for which they were to furnish the property,” Kock wrote.

Unfortunately, something even more disastrous happened during the voyage: Several passengers contracted smallpox. Kock reported in his deposition that he did his best to quarantine the sick on the boat. Then, once everyone reached Haiti, he instructed carpenters to go to a remote part of the island and build a hospital for the sick, 20 to 25 in number, he estimated. He had his friend Dr. Muller treat the patients.



Before Kock arrived, three houses had been built by his overseer, Mr. Eugene Muller. The ship contained enough wood to construct three more buildings — a hospital, a warehouse, and a home for women and children, though it's hard to follow Kock's account. Kock permitted some men to build palmetto huts for their families. He instructed a large force to cut lumber and build a wharf 60 feet out to sea and 20 feet wide. It was built chiefly of teak without nails in three or four days.

Kock was counting on the sawmill in the second boat to cut lumber to build more homes and pay his expenses. After eight days, it still hadn't arrived. He thought he "would find a ready sale on the [Haiti] coast for lumber, and that besides I was dependent upon the mill and the other machinery attached to it for my own manufacture of timber-wheels, wagons, and other requirements of husbandry, the expense of purchasing which I was desirous of avoiding."

While his partners had agreed to a sizeable overall investment, they gave Kock only a tiny amount of money to start. They were counting on the U.S. government's \$50 per head spiff before releasing more money. In the meantime, they underfunded the venture. They didn't send enough food, lumber, and medicine to start the colony properly.

The investors immediately started playing hardball. Tuckerman sent Kock a letter dated April 20th that spelled out how he wanted the workers treated. Even as he expressed confidence in Kock, he wrote that the investors wouldn't send any more money until the Haitian government confirmed that the workers were adequately housed and fed. Kock didn't see how he could meet the terms of the letter without funding from his investors. But he managed to obtain the necessary letter from the Haitian government.

Even so, his partners continued to stall. Kock agreed with his workers to pay them 16 cents a day, including board, in addition to 10% of yearly profits, based on how much work they did. The catch was that he planned to pay them in his currency, which could only be used in his stores on the island. The money was printed in New York by Tuckerman and Forbes.

Kock wrote that on June 2nd or 3rd, he wrote a letter to Tuckerman with a corrected list of his colonists and a certificate from the United States consul at Aux Cayes that he had adequately founded the colony and that the colonists were happy and contented. He asked for a copy of his paper acknowledging his one-quarter interest, and "I again denounced their breach of promise and contract." Unfortunately, he didn't keep a copy of the letter.

W.S. Skinner, Kock's plantation superintendent, who had stayed behind to come with the second shipment, later testified that the partners had little regard for the well-being of Kock or the colonists. In a sworn deposition published in Kock's book, Skinner reported that Forbes said, "how can I send out another ship without knowing if the Ocean Ranger with all on board might be lost?" When Skinner protested, pointing out that Kock only had a six-month food supply, Forbes allegedly said that Kock was smart enough to take care of himself. "There is plenty of fish, wild animals, and wild fruit on the island, and if they do not know how to help themselves under such circumstances, they deserve it."

The Big Three ultimately agreed to send some additional provisions. But they refused to send the sawmill until Skinner could report on the project's viability. Even after Skinner proceeded to the

island and produced a favorable report, the partners hesitated to invest additional funds, no doubt waiting to collect the “per head” fee from the U.S. government.

### **Things Go From Pretty Bad to Much Worse**

Later in June 1863, after Kock presumably sent the letter without keeping a copy, an A.A. Ripka showed up on the island. In a conspicuous flexing of muscle, he announced that he was a new partner in the venture. He told Kock that his New York partners had full power of attorney as lessees of the island. In what must have been a crushing blow to Kock, he said that Kock would not be getting a signed contract for his share of the deal. And he said the crucial sawmill would not be sent until the partners could again “ascertain the viability of the project.”

While Ripka said he had no intention of interfering with Kock’s management of the plantation, Kock was convinced that Ripka’s mere presence, and the power in his hands, would be a “death-blow to the enterprise.” Ripka, Kock wrote, was “entirely unacquainted” with the different elements of the enterprise, “especially with the character of the Haytien authorities, of my Southern negroes and white overseers, each class of whom demanded in their management all the tact founded on thorough experience.”

Finally, on July 1st, a brig arrived at the island with provisions, clothing, and other articles that should have come two months before. The sawmills, time books, and other necessities Kock ordered weren’t aboard. The ship did contain the balance of the lumber needed to build five additional buildings Kock had initially planned to construct.

W.S. Skinner arrived with the brig and was supposed to issue a progress report on the settlement before the remainder of the goods would be sent. Skinner investigated everything that day. He wrote to the New York partners that what Kock had accomplished, given the circumstances, had exceeded his expectation. But Skinner, for some unknown reason, didn’t send the letter. “On the contrary,” Kock wrote, “it appears that my associates already thought of abandoning the project.”

An armed rebellion broke out when the colonists learned that the brig didn’t contain the lumber to build housing and supplies that Kock had promised. Kock, needless to say, was caught in a precarious position, out-manned and out-gunned by an angry workforce that thought it had been misled.

“I had only seven white men to rely upon (my cook and steward, both Germans, refusing to stand by me), and in all four rifles and twenty five double-barreled shot-guns). The negroes had nearly all revolvers, but fortunately little or no ammunition, the importation of which into the island, together with that of whiskey, I had forbidden since my arrival. But they had axes, hoes, and machetes—all dangerous weapons, especially the latter.”

Kock had to call on 15 soldiers from Haiti to quiet the rebellion. After the hostilities subsided, Kock had a dozen “ringleaders” arrested and sent to the mainland. He admitted that at this point, he relied on some “extreme measures” to control the workers. Starting in July, in a draconian measure by any historical standard, he stopped giving the workers rations “in over to avoid their

shirking work with full stomachs.” However, he agreed to pay them the equivalent of the meals missed. And he says he made exceptions to this policy for any worker who was sick.

In August, Kock said he received another request from his New York partners to obtain a certificate from the Haitian authorities attesting that workers were naturalized and that the colony was functioning correctly. The Haitian government promptly signed a certificate drafted by Kock. The partners wanted to use this paperwork to obtain the \$50 per head bonus.

According to a March 7th, 1864 letter from the Department of Interior, they never received the money. Though there’s a lot of blame for this project’s failure, some of it belongs to the U.S. government, which never came through on its obligation to provide funding, despite repeated written assurances that, in the beginning, at least, the colony was properly settled. Even the Haitian government believed the settlement was an early success.

Unfortunately, the deal began to unravel quickly in August. Kock learned that his partners had approached the Haitian government about giving them 1/6 of the equity in the venture instead of the 15-cents-an-acre rent. Incensed, Kock went to Geffard to try to stop the deal; the president told him he had no legal rights. But Geffard also reassured Kock that he wouldn’t do the exchange.

Meanwhile, Ripka had transferred powers of attorney to Haiti-based Brown, Ross & Co. The firm left Kock’s three remaining overseers in charge of the plantation but ordered them not to let Kock interfere in the settlement’s affairs. Kock sought redress with the Haitian government, to no avail.

“Although my negroes, one and all flocked round me and declared that they would work for nobody but me, threatening Brown, Ross & Co., at the same time, that if I were to leave the enterprise, they would all cancel their four-year labor contracts and make no new ones with anybody.”

On October 24th, Kock received a letter from Brown, Ross, & Co. on behalf of the partners relieving him of his duties. The letter advised him to go to the mainland until his status could be determined. It also said he would be paid \$300 monthly; Kock says he was never paid. On October 31, Ripka told Kock that his position had been terminated.

But Kock didn’t give up. He wrote to the partners in New York, expressing his continued belief in the deal’s viability. He also said he’d found a high grade of valuable rosewood on the island. He said this “West Indian Rosewood” was as good as Brazilian Rosewood. Kock ended his letter by threatening to sue and exposing all the facts, which he ultimately did.

Ripka then tried to sell the partners’ interest to Brown, Ross & Co. The Haitian government wouldn’t sanction the transfer. At that point, the partners abandoned the deal. Kock tried unsuccessfully to obtain a new contract with the government.

“On the 20th of December, 1863, I visited for the last time my beautiful island. I found that the enterprise had been abandoned, and that the negroes had all become more or less demoralized in

the absence of proper control. Many of them had gone actually mad, under the influence of some religious excitement, to which they had surrendered themselves.”

Kock found on the island a U.S. agent who had been sent out to examine the state of the colony. Kock said the man told him he was delighted with the island and was surprised the enterprise had failed. Kock, too, found the crops growing finely on the island but, of course, neglected.

“I returned the same night to Aux Cayes, and thus had to abandon an enterprise which, if my associates had sustained me as they had promised, would have resulted in the most brilliant success in planting every obtained, as it presented all the advantages of position, soil, cheapness of labor, and high prices for the growing staple, most favorably combined.”