**Dr. Louise Fleming at Bolengi 1897-1898**

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Note: The letters quoted in this article are in possession of the author and all are unpublished.

Dr. Louise Fleming’s much anticipated arrival at the American Baptist Mission Union station at Bolengi in the Congo Free State came on September 14, 1897, when she alighted from the ABMU’s Henry Reed missionary steamer.

With the reassignment of Dr. Fleming from the station at Irebo, Charles and Emily Banks, Bolengi founders, at long last had the help of a trained physician to augment the care offered to native people, other missionaries, traders, explorers, and Belgium officials.

Dr. Fleming’s nine months at Bolengi are recorded in letters sent by Emily Banks primarily to her sister, Fanny Murphy, who had previously served at Bolengi. Emily wrote these letters in a manner that was both intimate and candid about mutual acquaintances in Congo. Emily’s spelling and grammar is preserved in the following selections from her letterbook.

**Arrival, hope at Bolengi**

“. . . welcomed Dr. Fleming who is busy today getting in order, Charlie [Charles Banks] has been all the morning at work over there putting her stove up & a lock on the cupboard in the veranda, &c &c. There is another load to come up from Irebo for Dr. F—. . .” (September 18, 1897)

In a discussion of the health of new missionary arrivals to Congo, “. . . I am hoping however that Dr. Fleming may be able to do something for her [a Miss Rudkin] otherwise the party just out will be humanly speaking a great failure.” (September 15, 1897) Happily, Emily records in a later entry that Miss Rudkin was well enough to marry Mr. Nye three weeks later. (November 16, 1897)

**Relationship among the missionaries**

“. . . about 3 months ago Dr. Fleming a colored woman came to stay here. She is my very dear friend & we get on happily together in school & other work.” (January 1, 1898)

When not teaching at the mission school or working in the hospital, the two friends sewed clothes for the Banks girls at the London home for missionary children:

“ . . . Dr. Fleming & I will be busy making dollie’s cloths for our own two girlies [Banks daughters] & the two little orphans Bessie & Gracie who live with them.” (March 2, 1898)

Dr. Fleming helped with the Banks’s attempts to raise livesock:

“This morning our big pig was found very sick & died in the afternoon. Charlie being in bed [“rheumatism”], Dr. F. kindly went to see what our piggie died of, so off I went too . . . “ (April 3, 1898)

**Relationship between Dr. Fleming and Mr. James, the engagement**

“. . . & Mr. James is coming back on Xmas.” (September 18, 1897)

“Dr. Fleming is looking forward to her wedding day with characteristic enthusiasm. I like her to work with, much. O dear what an outfit [trousseau] she is providing to be sure, about 30 dresses!” (November 16, 1897)

**Dr. Fleming’s failing health**

“Christmas holidays are over & we began school again, but Dr. Fleming left early, she is only able to lay about & rest. I fear Mr. James has to answer for her bad health. He has not written for 6 or 8 months & she hears only through the C.B.M. [Congo Balobo Mission] letters about him. He promised to come out last Aug. to get married, instead of which he ceases to write & goes off to Scotland, gets sick & is ordered to Jamaica, where you will doubtless see him, if he jilts Dr. F—he deserves horse-whipping, don’t say anything if you see him, but Dr. F—health is being certainly undermined with suspense & hope deferred, she loves him dearly, which is more than he deserves.” (January 3, 1898)

“Dr. Fleming a colored lady who is now staying here for a time does not seem to stand the climate so well as the white folk although she came from Florida, her temp. is nearly always below normal . . .” (April 11, 1898 to “My dear Sister Fanny”, one of the matrons at the London missionary children’s home where the four Banks children resided.)

“Dr. Fleming has been in bed a month now & does not improve.” (May 23, 1898)

“Dr. F—will go down in the Goodwill [mission steamer] to see Dr. Sims! We are expecting Mr. James up on the Pioneer [mission steamer] . . .” (June 5, 1898)

“. . . owing to Dr. Fleming’s long sickness I have been unable to do any writing, having had to spend at least 2 thirds of each day with her & continue school &c. She left us two days ago to consult Dr. Sims who will probably send her home.” (July 2, 1898 addressed to “My dear Sister”, referring again to the children’s home matron.)

“Mr. James came by it [the Pioneer] so perhaps he may bring up Dr. F—but I hardly think so, tis more likely they will get married at the Pool [Stanley Pool] where she has been staying since she left about two months ago. She was quite well again when I left [the Pool].” (September 23, 1898.)

**A wedding, but not for Dr. Fleming**

“This morning we were up by day-break & busy with preparations for the day. I got the wedding breakfast table ready, while the dear little bride [Miss Withers who will marry Mr. Ellery] arranged the flowers. The doctor got breakfast for us in her house (your old house) & prepared the bridal chamber (your old bed-room) it looks so nice & fresh . . .

“. . . I gave the bride away & doctor acted as bridesmaid . . .

“ . . . Dr & I sang 900 in “Psalms & Hymns” . . . she poor soul cried & sang together, her own love affair was so opposite to those whose wedding we were at . . .” (January 8, 1898)

“Dr. Fleming will I expect remain here till she hears what Mr. James means to do. When married she is expected to make her home at Ikau.” (January 8, 1898)

But a year later, Emily writes:

“Last news from Dr. Fleming, she had broken her engagement with Mr. James.” (New Years Day 1899)

“ The H. R. will be here the middle of February 7 Dr. F—will be on board.” (January 28, 1899)

Dr. Fleming is expected to return to Bolengi, but illness again interferes:

“Mr. & Mrs. Billington [ABMU missionaries] are here they leave tomorrow with all of Dr. Fleming’s belongings. (She herself has gone home sick!)” (March 12, 1899)

**Conclusions:**

The date of Dr. Fleming’s arrival at Bolengi was September 14, 1897, rather than the general “1898” commonly used by historians seeking to recreate Dr. Fleming’s movements in Congo. She suffered a broken engagement, which seems to have caused a health crisis. She was bedridden on and off after Christmas, 1897, and in June, 1898 she left Bolengi to consult with Dr. Aaron Sims at Stanley Pool. She never returned to Bolengi; her total time there was about nine months.

Dr. Fleming stayed at the Pool for another eight months, both being cared for and undoubtedly working with Dr. Sims during times of good health. By March, 1899, Dr. Fleming had gone back to the United States, without returning to Bolengi for her things either because of the pain of being around people who knew of her broken engagement or because of ill health.

Dr. Fleming’s contemporary and friend was Nora Gordon, a black African missionary from the United States, who married Reverend Simeon Cunningham Gordon, a [Jamaican](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jamaica), in 1895. The Gordon’s were stationed at Stanley Pool following their marriage, where three years later, Dr. Fleming reunited with her old friend. It was a personally challenging time for both women. The Gordons had two children in Congo, both of whom died, and Nora, herself, died in the United States in 1901.

The definitive identity of Mr. James, said to have married Dr. Fleming, is unclear. Emily Banks’s letters mention that Mr. James was connected to the Congo Balolo Mission, and served at the CBM station at Ikau. (Sources have reported him at Ikon, but no station is known to exist by that name. The Ikon misspelling is probably a transcription error of “Ikau” that has been repeated by scholars.) Mr. James is never referred to as “Tata” James in the letters of Emily Banks, and it is unknown who coined the term since missionaries typically referred to each other as “Mr.”, “Mrs.”, or “Miss” and, when appropriate, “Dr.”

It is curious that Emily suggests to Fanny that Mr. James may end up being posted to Jamaica. There was a Mr. R. R. James who served as a pastor for many years in Jamaica. This Mr. James was Jamaican-born and attended Calabar College, a college for training native Baptist ministers. In 1881, he was accepted into the Baptist Union. He was about Dr. Fleming’s age.

While Dr. Fleming certainly intended to marry Mr. James, the actual wedding never came to pass. After waiting for two years for her reluctant bridegroom, Dr. Fleming broke the engagement before leaving Africa forever.

Dr. Fleming died at the age of 38, on June 22, 1899, in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, according to her death certificate. The same document registered her by the nickname, “Lulu”, and spelled her last name with two m’s. (Emily Banks never uses this nickname in her correspondence.) Erroneously, Louise Fleming’s birthplace was listed as “Africa.” Her death certificate named Olive Cemetery, a black burial ground in Philadelphia, as her final resting place. In 1923, remains from Olive Cemetery were moved to the black owned Eden Cemetery in Collingdale, Pennsylvania.