

Liberia in the 19th Century: From American Colony to African Republic

Fred van der Kraaij

MAP OF LIBERIA

Scale of Miles.



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From American Colony to African Republic

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To Els: my wife for over half a century, our three children Anton, Erik, and Irene, and our eight granddaughters Joanna, Emilia, Elodie, Elisa, Inola, Lorelei, Veerle and Lucia.

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Abbreviations

ACS	American Colonization Society
ARCJ	African Repository and Colonial Journal
CNDRA	Center for National Documents and Records Agency
FIFA	Fédération Internationale de Football Association (International Federation of Association Football)
HBM	Her British Majesty
IU	Indiana University
LNTG	Liberian National Transitional Government
LOC	Library of Congress
LSJ	Liberia Studies Journal
MOJA	Movement for Justice in Africa
NTGL I	National Transitional Government of Liberia I
NTGL II	National Transitional Government of Liberia II
NTGL III	National Transitional Government of Liberia III
PRC	People's Redemption Council
Q&A	Questions & Answers
TRC	Truth and Reconciliation Commission
TWP	True Whig Party
UK	United Kingdom
UNESCO	United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization
US	United States
USA	United States of America
USDS	United States Department of State
W.I.	West Indies

Standard code of US states

CA	California
CT	Connecticut
DC	District of Columbia
FL (FLA)	Florida
GA	Georgia
IL	Illinois
IN	Indiana

MA	Massachusetts
MD	Maryland
ME	Missouri
MN	Minnesota
NC	North Carolina
NE	Newark
NJ	New Jersey
NY	New York
OH	Ohio
PA	Pennsylvania
RI	Rhode Island
VA	Virginia
VT	Vermont
WI	Wisconsin

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Physical and demographic data

Physical geography

Liberia is located between Sierra Leone in the west, Guinea in the north and Ivory Coast in the east. The coastal area, with a coastline of approximately 570 km, consists of a flat plain, 15-55 km wide, sparsely covered by remnants of tropical forest and savannah-type vegetation, stretching from Cape Mount in the west to Cape Palmas in the east. Due to Liberia's location on the south-western corner of the 'bulge' of West Africa, its coastline is characterised by a powerful and dangerous surf. At its widest point, Liberia measures 280 km, between the coast at Buchanan and Nimba. Inland, there are hills and mountain ranges. The best known are the Bomi Hills northwest of the capital Monrovia, the Wologisi Mountain Range in the northwestern part of the country (the highest mountain range in the country), the Nimba Range in the north (on the borders of Liberia, Guinea, and Ivory Coast), the Bong Range in west-central Liberia, and the Putu Range in the southeast of the country. Tropical forests cover approximately two-thirds of the total land area, making Liberia the largest portion of the remaining forested area of the Upper Guinean rainforest. These forests have a high biodiversity in terms of tree and mammal species. Much of it is untouched. Liberia has a harsh, tropical climate with an abundant rainy season (May-October). On average, over 4.5 meters of rain falls annually in and around the capital Monrovia, decreasing to about half that amount towards the southeast and inland. All this water is drained by numerous rivers, generally flowing northeast to southwest. The Cavalla and St. Paul's Rivers are the most important, with the largest drainage system. The St. Paul's River is located in the hinterland of Monrovia. The Cavalla River forms the natural border with Ivory Coast in the southeast. On the other side of the country, the Mano River separates Liberia from Sierra Leone. The rivers are rich in fishery resources, as are the maritime zones claimed by Liberia, including its territorial waters of 12 nautical miles ('Territorial Sea'), an Exclusive Zone of 200 nautical miles, and a Continental Shelf of 200 nautical miles. Offshore exploration for commercial quantities of oil and gas has been unsuccessful so far. Liberia is rich in natural resources, particularly, but not exclusively, iron ore. Moreover, it has an enormous agricultural potential. The country also possesses unprecedented and significant quantities of gold and diamonds, an unknown portion of which is being illegally mined and smuggled out of the country.

Illustration 1

Topographical map of Liberia.



Source: Topographic map of Liberia by Oona Räisänen, available under the Creative Commons Attribution-Share Alike 4.0 International, 3.0 Unported, 2.5 Generic, 2.0 Generic and 1.0 Generic license at https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Topographic_map_of_Liberia-en.svg.

Demographic data: Ethnic groups ('tribes') and languages

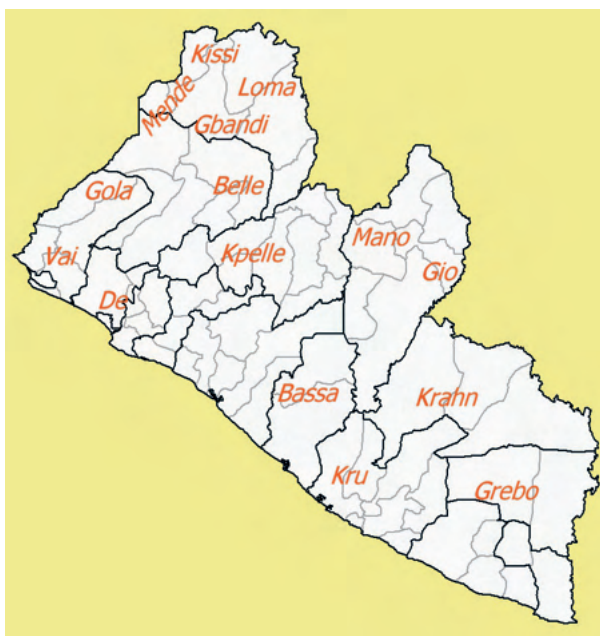
Liberia officially has sixteen different ethnic groups (called 'tribes' in Liberia). The country's official language is (American) English. Most people speak a local variant, Liberian pidgin English. The vast majority of Liberians speak one or more languages from the following three language groups: the Kru-language group (Bassa, Belle, Dei, Grebo, Krahn, and Kru), the Mande-speaking group (Gbande, Gio, Kpelle, Loma, Mende, Mandingo, Mano, and Vai) and the Mel or West Atlantic group (Gola and Kissi). Some of these languages are also spoken in neighbouring Guinea, Ivory Coast, and Sierra Leone. Due to urbanization and also as a result of refugee flows during the civil wars, many different tribal languages are spoken in and around the national capital Monrovia and in Montserrado County. The northwest of the country is the home region of the Mandingo, but due to the dispersion of Mandingo people throughout the country, the language is spoken in many areas. The ten most commonly spoken languages in the country are presented below (estimates by the author - based on Van der Kraaij 2015, xvii).

- 1) Kpelle 800,000
- 2) Bassa 650,000
- 3) Grebo 625,000
- 4) Kru 425,000
- 5) Mano 375,000
- 6) Gio 300,000
- 7) Loma 300,000
- 8) Kissi 225,000
- 9) Vai 200,000
- 10) Gola 175,000

Moreover, five to ten languages are estimated to be spoken by fewer than 100,000 Liberians, more than half having a maximum of 15,000 speakers (Gbande, Mandingo, Krahn, Mende, Belle, and Dei, among others).

Illustration 2

Liberia – Map: Ethnic groups ('tribes').



Source: Map of the Tribes in Liberia by Metilsteiner, available under the Creative Commons Attribution 3.0 Unported license at https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Liberia_Stammesgebiete.jpg.

Presidents of Liberia 1848-present

<i>President</i>	<i>Term of office</i>	<i>Remarks</i>
<u>19th century</u>		
Joseph Jenkins Roberts	1848-1856	
Stephen Allen Benson	1856-1864	
Daniel Bashiel Warner	1864-1868	
James Spriggs Payne	1868-1870	
Edward James Roye	1870-1871	deposed, unnatural death
James Skirvin Smith	1871-1872	
Joseph Jenkins Roberts	1872-1876	
James Spriggs Payne	1876-1878	
Anthony William Gardner	1878-1883	resigned
Alfred Francis Russell	1883-1884	
Hilary Richard Wright Johnson	1884-1892	
Joseph James Cheeseman	1892-1896	died in office
William David Coleman	1896-1900	resigned
<u>20th century</u>		
Garretson Wilmot Gibson	1900-1904	
Arthur Barclay	1904-1912	
Daniel Edward Howard	1912-1920	
Charles Dunbar Burgess King	1920-1930	resigned
Edwin James Barclay	1930-1944	
William Vacanarat Shadrach Tubman	1944-1971	died in office
William Richard Tolbert	1971-1980	assassinated
Samuel Kanyon Doe ¹	1980-1990	assassinated
<u>21st century</u>		
Charles Ghankay Taylor	1997-2003	resigned
Moses Zeh Blah	2003	served only two months
Ellen Eugenia Johnson Sirleaf	2006-2018	
George Manneh Weah	2018-2024	
Joseph Nyuma Boakai	2024-present	

Interim-President, Council Heads, and Heads of State during and after the civil wars (1989-1997; 1999-2003)

Amos Claudius Sawyer	Interim-President, IGNU, 1990-1994
David Donald Kpormakpor	Head, NTGL I, 1994-1995
Wilton Gbakolo Sengbe Sankawulo	Head, NTGL II, First Council of State, 1995-1996
Ruth Sando Fahnbulleh Perry	Head, NTGL III, Second Council of State, 1996-1997
Charles Gyude Bryant	Head, LNTG, 2003-2005

Note

¹ Chairman of the People's Redemption Council (PRC), 1980–1986; President, 1986–1990.

Introduction

Wedged between three former European colonies on the coast of West Africa lies a small country with a land area of about 100,000 sq. km, the size of the American state of Ohio, with fewer than 6 million inhabitants, that is widely known to have never been colonized. People with more than a casual interest in Africa may also know that this country was founded by freed slaves from the United States. They may also remember the people of this country electing Africa's first female president in democratic elections, or because an internationally renowned and acclaimed professional footballer (FIFA World Player of the Year and winner of the *Ballon d'Or*) was elected to the country's highest office – if it weren't for the two brutal, senseless back-to-back civil wars which cost hundreds of thousands innocent people their lives or the horrific Ebola epidemic which struck in 2014. Personally, I had never heard of Liberia before meeting Romeo A. Horton, the Dean of the College of Business and Public Administration of the University of Liberia, in the Netherlands in 1974, partly explained by my scientific orientation and research in the French-speaking West African Sahel region, which I had visited extensively a few years before. Dean Horton hired me to teach economics in Liberia. In early 1975, I reported to my new employer in Monrovia. My job at the University of Liberia and my stay in the land of the Pepper Bird would prove to be a life-altering experience. Among the hundreds of students whom I taught were future ministers, one of whom even became a notorious warlord, while one of my university colleagues served as interim president during the first civil war. I taught the students the principles of economics. They made me increasingly curious about their country. Since there was no textbook on Liberian economics available to students, I decided to compile the necessary study material myself. To this end, I visited ministries and spoke with civil servants, from top to bottom, even ministers. I incorporated the annual reports and other reports they lent me into my lessons. I visited rubber plantations and iron ore mines across the country and interviewed managers and workers.¹ In Monrovia itself, I also met with

¹ My research into the background and impact of foreign investment on the Liberian economy and public sector would, years later, result in a book that I successfully defended as PhD thesis, *The Open Door Policy of Liberia. An Economic History of Modern Liberia*. 2 vols. Bremen, 1983.

journalists and political activists, including the well-known journalist, prolific reporter, and critic of the then-Tolbert government, Albert Porte, and the political activist duo Amos Sawyer and Togba Nah-Tipoteh, founders of the *Movement for Justice in Africa*, MOJA. During one of my many conversations with Tipoteh, it turned out he had been my immediate predecessor at the university's Business School College, dismissed by the hardliners of the Tolbert regime for his critical stance and statements. We became good friends and maintain good contacts to this day. My relationship with the political scientist and College Dean, Amos Sawyer, also went beyond collegial conversations. Sadly, he passed away in 2022. Another colleague from the Business School, the Zimbabwean Muchaneta Nyambuya, who was married to a woman from a prominent Liberian family (the Cassell family) introduced me to the 'family affair' of Liberian politics. Unfortunately, 'Mucha' Nyambuya, a supporter of Bishop Muzorewa and later a Mugabe critic, died a few years after returning to his country on the eve of independence under suspicious circumstances, following an intrusive interrogation by the national security service, known locally as the '24-hour treatment.' May his soul rest in peace. Equally invaluable was the information about Liberian politicians and other 'big shots' that I received from a Dutch resident in Monrovia, Rosemarie Whisnant, the widow of President Tubman's Social Secretary, former ambassador and former minister, Lloyd K. Whisnant. From 'Rose' I learned that political and family relationships in Liberia overlap. Our friendship lives on to this day. The 'family affair' of Liberian politics during President Tubman's Administration (1944-1971) was also detailed by the American professor Gus Liebenow in his book *Liberia. The Evolution of Privilege* (1969). Based on the information from Whisnant's widow, I compiled my own overview of the 'family affair' during the Tolbert Administration (1971-1980), which gave me an excellent insight into the 'who's who' of the Liberian elite and enabled me to interpret and better understand political processes. Towards the end of my stay in Liberia, at the end of the 1970s, cracks in the political scene became increasingly apparent and the situation became explosive. 'The day Monrovia stood still', a phrase coined by Albert Porte to describe the Rice Riots of 'April 14, 1979' was – in retrospect – the beginning of the end. The violent military coup of the People's Redemption Council (PRC) on 12 April 1980 ended our family's five-year stay in Liberia, but it did not mean the end of my interest in this country that I had grown to love. My research into the economic history of modern Liberia (see note 1) had sparked my interest in the early history of the republic and its preceding colony and never let me go. More than 50 years after I first set foot at Robertsfield International Airport, this book is the result.

This book focuses on the colonisation of a small territory on the West African coast by African-American settlers and their journey to independence. The book's geographical focus is on the area formerly known as the Grain Coast or the Pepper Coast. During the horrific slave trade that partially depopulated the West African coastal region and the subsequent colonisation, the area was also known as 'the white man's grave.' Less well-known is that thousands of African-American settlers are also buried there, having found their final resting place. They were victims of the tropical climate, of unknown diseases, of violent conflict – or died of natural causes. Contrary to the prevailing idea and view, still prevalent in 2026, that Liberia was never colonized, this book delves deeply into Liberia's colonial history.

In January 1822, a group of African-Americans landed on the west coast of Africa, at Cape Mesurado, soon followed by more free-born Black people and freed slaves from the United States. Their colony was named Liberia, 'land of the free.' The colonists were sponsored by a private American organisation, the American Colonization Society (ACS). Among the founders and directors of the ACS were a striking number of slaveholders. The US government often played a crucial role in the colonial project, militarily, politically, and also financially. The ACS's example was soon followed by similar organisations, and more American colonies emerged on the west coast of Africa, near the colony of Liberia, such as 'Mississippi in Africa' and 'Maryland in Africa'. After uniting, they declared independence in 1847. The first African republic was born. While slave traders were one of the colonists' greatest threats during the first half of the 19th century, land-hungry, imperialist European colonial powers posed a threat during the latter half. Moreover, during both the colonial and republican periods, there was internal conflict among the colonists – despite their backgrounds, they were by no means a homogeneous group – which resulted in political parties and political clashes.

The African-American settlers, who liked to call themselves 'pioneers', did not find empty land, uninhabited, when they stepped ashore. Numerous conflicts with the local population resulted, for various reasons, not least because the colonists prohibited the slave trade, while the local rulers often colluded with the slave traders. It is important to mention that the original inhabitants of the area that would become the Republic of Liberia are deliberately barely mentioned in this book. The human focus of this book is on colonisation, the settlers, and the how and why of their move to the unfamiliar continent of their ancestors. It describes how colonisation unfolded including the acquisition, expansion (and loss) of colonial territory, the often-tense relations with the indigenous

population, and the hostile reactions of imperialist European colonial powers to the American project. It also describes how African-American settlers, after the proclamation of the Republic, shaped a new country, one of the many challenges they faced. African-American settlers came to Africa and ultimately created a Black nation. Impulsively and unconsciously, they copied Western ideas about state formation, without sufficient consideration for local (African) peoples, institutions and cultures.

This book is a historical reflection aiming at providing insight into what – and why – happened on the Grain or Pepper Coast, in Liberia, in the 19th century. It is hoped that this insight will prove useful for a better understanding of these 19th-century events, and will also contribute to an explanation of some major events in following centuries. Moreover, my research for this book also yielded a surprising discovery. I'll return to this later.

I've already indicated that the indigenous population of the area that became Liberia is not the focus of this book. The various local tribes living in the coastal region mostly originated from the savanna regions further north in West Africa, which penetrated the dense tropical rainforest on their way to the coast. A single tribe reached the Pepper Coast by sea. Two other topics are also deliberately omitted from this book: corruption and religion. Not because there's nothing to say about them. Far from it. Liberia's second president, Stephen Benson (1856-1864) was found guilty in 1863 of embezzlement and misuse of public funds, President Royce (1870-1871) was also accused of corruption and theft which contributed to his deposition and subsequent death – to name but a few. Regarding religion, one of the underlying ideas behind the founding of the ACS – besides the desire to get rid of a (Black) segment of the population many White Americans considered troublesome and dangerous – was that African-American settlers in Africa would spread Western civilization and the religion of Christianity. Immediately after their arrival, the colonists established churches that they knew from the land where they were born: Methodist, Episcopalian, Baptist, etc. The proliferation of churches in the American colonies and later the Republic of Liberia is so great that it justifies modesty here and a separate study. The oldest church in the country dates from January 1822, the Providence Baptist Church of Monrovia, founded in January 1822 by pastor Lott Carey. Officially, Liberia is a secular state. Christianity is the predominant religion, Protestantism the largest denomination. Muslims constitute a minority group. However, despite the foregoing, traditional belief systems are widespread. To just illustrate the importance of religion and its role in society and politics, three of the eleven presidents in the 19th century were ordained ministers and priests while more

recently, in the 20th century, during the Tolbert Administration, both the president and vice-president were ordained priests: President William R. Tolbert was a Baptist minister, Vice-President Bennie D. Warner was a bishop in the United Methodist Church. Interestingly, two notorious warlords in the First Civil War became preachers after laying down their arms: Prince Johnson who ordered his men to torture President Doe to death, and Joshua Blahyi aka ‘General Butt Naked’.

I have to add here a few remarks on the use of terminology to describe different population groups, referring to their origins or physical characteristics, and the choices I have made in this book. In the late 18th century and in the 19th century, even well into the 20th century the use of the term ‘people of color’ (‘colour’ before Webster’s standardization in the United States) for light-skinned people of mixed African and European heritage, was common and accepted. In the course of the 20th century and the present century these terms have lost their neutral meaning, and their use has become controversial. I have chosen not to use the terms ‘people of colour’ or ‘persons of colour’, *except when citing historical sources*, but to use the terms ‘Black person(s)’ and ‘Black population’ for people and persons with African ancestors and ‘multiracial persons’ in case of people of African-European ancestry.

Regarding the n-word, which was used in spoken language as well as publications in the 19th century and still in the first half of the 20th century, I have avoided the ugly racial slur appearing here. An exception has been made for the reproduction of historical documents. After the n-word fell into disuse due to its offensive nature, it was initially replaced by ‘negro’ and ‘coloured people’. ‘Negro’ is historically a neutral term for people of black African ancestry, but as from the last quarter of the 20th century it has been considered outdated and is increasingly perceived by some as offensive. It is used here only *in citations or when directly referring to the original phrasing*, in order to do justice to the original, historical source. Furthermore, I have chosen to use the term ‘African-American’ for colonists of African descent who were born in the United States. The main reason for this choice is that they brought the American culture (values, customs, food, religion, clothing, housing, language, etc.), as they had experienced it with them to Africa, and because they not only felt ‘American’ but also called themselves ‘American’. The fact that free-born Blacks and freed enslaved people were not granted US citizenship until 1868 does not change this. I have avoided the words ‘native’ and ‘aboriginal’, preferring ‘indigenous’ and ‘original’ when referring to the population living in the area where the colonists from the United States arrived and settled. However, although

anthropologists, ethnologists, and other social scientists prefer the term 'ethnic group' to 'tribe', I have decided to use the latter word to refer to people of the same ethnic origin or group. Decisive for this choice is the fact that 'tribe' is generally accepted in Liberia and also officially used by the government. On another subject, in accordance with growing international usage, I have preferred to use the term 'enslaved' rather than the word 'slave' which was commonly accepted and in use until recently. Where I have used the latter, it has been for reasons of readability, for which I ask the reader for flexibility and understanding.

Finally, the terms 'Americo-Liberian' and 'repatriate'. In Chapter 8, I have given a historical background of the term 'Americo-Liberian', also explaining why I have chosen to use this term in this book. First, because its focus is on the 19th century when the word 'Americo-Liberian' originated and was generally used to refer to non-tribal people, not only by outsiders but also by the descendants of the first settlers themselves. Secondly, although the term has increasingly fallen into disuse since the last quarter of the 20th century, there is insufficient evidence that it is perceived as offensive by those involved. Thirdly, some authors – both Liberian and non-Liberian – still use the term (also in the 21st century), not least in an official publication such as the TRC's Final Report, published in 2009. As to the question of using 'Americo-Liberian' or 'repatriate', in my view, the discussion about the use of the word 'repatriate' is highly semantic. The main reason for not using 'repatriate' is that I find the word misleading and confusing; furthermore, I disagree with the interpretation that 'repatriate' means 'back to a place perceived as his or her ancestral home'. Africa is a continent, not a country.

My research has greatly benefitted from the abundant literature existing on Liberia. A wealth of information has been published over the past 200 years. It's impossible to highlight specific publications here. For the benefit of students, researchers, and other interested readers, I have included an overview of the most important literature on Liberia in the Annex. However, I would like to add a word of caution. Not all books and articles (and nowadays websites) on the history of Africa's oldest republic paint an accurate picture, to put it mildly. Some published information is contradictory, incomplete, inaccurate, or biased and political propaganda. Striking examples are the description of how the first negotiations between ACS representatives and local rulers proceeded in December 1821 (prior to the arrival of the first group of colonists), the origin of the name Liberia (and who gave it this name), and the deposition of President Roye in 1871 (effectively Liberia's first coup d'état). Here lies an important task for future researchers of Liberian history. An important source that has perhaps been underutilised in the

past is nineteenth-century American newspapers and related publications. The remarkable discovery I made during my research, just mentioned, lends credence to my suggestion. Researching 19th century American newspapers in my personal archives, I discovered that the name Liberia does not date from 1824, as has always been thought and is the official version, but from 1822. I elaborate on his historic discovery in Chapter 4. Moreover, it was most likely not ACS director General Harper who came up with the name Liberia, but then who did? This book aims to shed some light on this.

In Part One, I present a brief survey of the Grain Coast (before 1822), also called the Windward Coast, and part of the Upper Guinea Coast. Part Two describes the appalling conditions of the enslaved people in the United States in the late 18th and early 19th centuries, the rising opposition against the institution of slavery (the abolitionist movement), the reaction of the US government (a trade ban) and the creation of a private, White dominated, organisation, the American Colonization Society (ACS), aimed at the removal of Black people from the United States, and openly characterised by the slogan ‘there is no place for two races in the US’. The focus of Part Three is on the ACS sponsored emigration of Black people and their installation in West Africa, the Liberia Colony (from 1822 onwards), and the political, military and financial support given by the US government. The latter inevitably leads to the conclusion that the US government was, in fact, co-founder of the colony. The perceived success of the ACS colonisation project was a source of inspiration for White people in other American states to create auxiliary and state colonisation organisations. This resulted in more American colonies in the vicinity of Liberia Colony. Twenty-five years after the first African-American settlers set foot on Cape Mesurado and after uniting the colonies, the colonists promulgated an independent and sovereign republic, excluding the indigenous population from the affairs of the country and from citizenship (similar to the position of enslaved and free-born Black people – freed slaves after Lincoln’s 1863 Emancipation Act – in the United States until the adoption of the 14th Amendment to the US Constitution in 1868). Part Four consist of a description and interpretation of the tools and symbols of independence: Constitution, national motto, seal, flag, and territory. The penultimate Part Five takes a look at the first 50 years of the republic focussing on political developments including the deposition of President Roye (1871), the modern economy including the conflict between supporters and opponents of foreign investors, and the struggle for survival in light of territorial encroachments by eager colonial European powers. Part VI contains a brief sketch of Liberia around the turn of the century (1900) and the Epilogue. The latter

provides a concise look at events in the 20th century in light of the starting point of the republic in the 19th century. I conclude with a (symbolic) recommendation. This proposal is being shared by many Liberians. For that reason, I have no hesitation whatsoever in writing this down. I wholeheartedly support the proposal to change the existing national motto 'The Love of Liberty Brought Us Here' into 'The Love of Liberty Unites Us'. National unification in Liberia is long overdue but 'better late than never'.

PART ONE

The Grain Coast

The Windward Coast

Upper and Lower Guinea

1

The Grain Coast Before 1822: Geographical and Historical Context

A sketch of the Guinea Coast, where coastal areas became known in Europe for their principal trade products, initially gold, ivory, and spices, soon through the slave trade—with special attention to the Grain or Pepper Coast, also known as the Windward Coast.

The Grain Coast before 1822

The Grain Coast – the Windward Coast – Upper Guinea and Lower Guinea

The historical names of the coastal regions of West Africa bordering the Gulf of Guinea are based on their main commercial products: Pepper or Grain Coast, Ivory Coast, Gold Coast and, from the 17th century onwards, Slave Coast. The coast between Sierra Leone and Ivory Coast was called the Malagueta Coast or Pepper Coast, after one of its main products, the Malagueta pepper. The Dutch and the British used the name ‘Grains of Paradise’ for the same product, which was abbreviated to the ‘Grain Coast’.

The Grain Coast is not a well-defined region. According to the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* it is the coast between Cape Mesurado, in the west, and Cape Palmas, in the east.¹ However, the 18th-century cartographer Herman Moll includes in the Grain Coast also a substantial part of modern Sierra Leone, Liberia’s coast between Cape Mount and Cape Palmas, plus a part of Ivory Coast (see Illustration 3).²

Sometimes the Grain Coast is referred to as Windward Coast though in reality the latter term covers a slightly different stretch of the West African Coast. In the 17th century, the British gave the name Windward Coast to the coast from Rio Nunez in modern Guinea to Cape Palmas in modern Liberia (and sometimes further east).³

Illustration 3

'Negroland and Guinea with the European settlements'. Herman Moll, 1732.



Source: Negroland and Guinea : with the European settlements explaining what belongs to England, Holland, Denmark &c, Herman Moll, 1732, by the Norman B. Leventhal Map Center, available under the Creative Commons Attribution 2.0 Generic license at [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Negroland_and_Guinea_with_the_European_settlements_explaining_what_belongs_to_England_Holland_Denmark_%26c._\(5960808885\).jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Negroland_and_Guinea_with_the_European_settlements_explaining_what_belongs_to_England_Holland_Denmark_%26c._(5960808885).jpg).

The American historian Philip D. Curtin, based on eighteenth-century English usage, describes the Windward Coast as stretching from Cape Mount in modern Liberia to Assinie in modern Côte d'Ivoire (Ivory Coast).⁴ In his outstanding and thorough analysis of the Dutch role in the transatlantic slave trade, Dutch-born American historian Johannes M. Postma makes no distinction between the Windward Coast (comprising approximately today's Liberia and Ivory Coast) and Upper Guinea.⁵ The Guyanese historian and political activist Walter Rodney, however, defines Upper Guinea as the coast between the Gambia and Cape Mount.⁶

Christophe Wondji, an Ivorian historian and university professor divides the West Atlantic Coastal region into Upper Guinea and Lower Guinea, the former stretching from Senegal to Cape Palmas and the latter from Cape Palmas to the Niger Delta in the Bight of Biafra. Interestingly, he emphasizes that – from a

strictly anthropological point of view – the western part of Ivory Coast must be included in the Upper Guinea Coastal Region.⁷

Eighteenth-century cartographers used different concepts when demarcating Upper Guinea and Lower Guinea which they also called West Guinea and East Guinea. In 1771, the French cartographer Bonne published a map showing Upper Guinea stretching from the Senegal River and the Kingdom of Jalofs in the west to the Kingdom of Dahomey and the Bight of Benin in the east, Lower Guinea being the coastal region between the Dahomey Kingdom and the Kingdoms of Loango and Congo in Central Africa (see illustration 4).⁸

Illustration 4

Map of Upper and Lower Guinea. Bonne, 1771.



Carte de la Guinée contenant les Isles du Cap Verd, le Senegal, la Côte de Guinée proprement dite, les Royaumes de Loango, Congo, Angola et Benguela, avec les Pays voisins autant qu'ils sont connus. M. Bonne, 1771 (Fred van der Kraaij collection).

Origin of the word Guinea

The name Guinea lives on in the Gulf of Guinea and in three independent African states: Guinea, sometimes referred to as Guinea-Conakry to distinguish it from its neighbour, Guinea-Bissau, in West Africa, and Equatorial Guinea in Central Africa.

The etymology of the term *Guinea* is not exactly known. Some explanations go back to the Portuguese in the 15th century; some others point to an African origin of the word Guinea. As from the second half of the 15th century the term Guinea was used to refer to the lands of the *Guineus*, the Black people met by Portuguese sailors south of the Senegal River. According to one theory the Portuguese word *Guiné* originates from the term *Genewah* which in turn was a corruption of Djenné, a famous trading city on the Upper Niger River in the Mali Empire.⁹ Another theory holds that the Portuguese based the word *Genewah* on the Berber word *Ghinawen*, also written as *Guinauha*, which means ‘burnt people’ or ‘land of the blacks’. Similarly, the Berber term *Akal-n-Iguinawen* (or *Akal-n-Iguinaouen*) means ‘land of black people’. The two theories converge in a third implying that the Malian city of Djenné might come from the Berber *Ghinawen*.¹⁰ Finally, a local explanation implicates the West African ethnic group Soussou (‘Susu’) living mainly in what is now the Republic of Guinea. In the Susu language, locally called Sosokhoui (or Sosoxui), *djine* means woman. The first Portuguese sailors who landed on the coast met with local women whom they asked the name of the region. The women, who did not understand the question, answered that they were women (*djiné*). Subsequently, the Portuguese misunderstood the answer and hence named the region *Guiné*.¹¹

The Guinea Coast, 16th-19th century: trade relations and the slave trade

Structural trade relations between Portugal and the Guinea Coast developed as from the 1440s. They heralded a new era for Africa – and Europe. Before the first Portuguese sailors set foot on Africa’s shore, other Europeans had already been trading with the peoples on the coast. Notably French traders preceded the Portuguese.¹² However, the latter’s impact on the region lasted much longer, through the naming of regions, promontories, mountains, and rivers. In the Grain Coast,¹³ the Portuguese – notably Piedro de Centra during his first visit in 1461 – gave rivers and capes names that are still in use. From west to east, there are the Galinhas, St. Paul’s, Mesurado, Junk, St. John’s, Cestos, Sanguin, and Cavalla Rivers. Also, the promontories Cape Mount (Cabo do Monte), Cape Mesurado (Cabo Mesurado¹⁴) en Cape Palmas (Cabo das Palmas) still bear names of Portuguese origin.¹⁵ As from around 1600, Dutch traders followed in the footsteps of the Portuguese in the Grain Coast,¹⁶ followed by French and English traders.

There is little doubt that the transatlantic slave trade had the biggest impact on the region. Most experts agree that during the 1450-1900 period about 10 to 12

million Black Africans were transported, forcibly and against their will, from the Guinea Coast to the United States of America, the Caribbean ('West Indies'), and Brazil, where they were sold as slaves.¹⁷ Zooming in on these numbers, it is important to distinguish between departure and arrival dates. Postma citing Lovejoy's synthesis of the transatlantic slave trade figures, reports that between 11 and 12 million people were captured and subsequently shipped in one of the many ports on the Guinean Coast whereas nearly 9.8 million enslaved Africans landed in the America's.¹⁸ The nefarious slave trade caused not only human suffering on an unprecedented scale but also destroyed communities and civilisations in Africa from where the captured Africans came. However, it is beyond the scope of this study to elaborate on its implications here.¹⁹

It is crystal clear that without the transatlantic slave trade, millions of slaves and former slaves would never have lived in another continent than Africa. Without the transatlantic slave trade, Liberia would not have been created by African-Americans – multiracial people, free-born Blacks, and former slaves – who for various reasons decided to leave the country where they were born – the United States – to start a new life in West Africa. An important factor contributing to the creation of Liberia was the growing importance of abolitionism in the United States. However, the Black settlers who arrived on the Grain Coast did not find empty, uninhabited land here. This created numerous problems, as will be discussed in later chapters.

The peoples of the Grain Coast

Various ethnic groups (tribes²⁰) have been living on the Grain Coast for many centuries. Their number varies with the definition used for the area.²¹ Within these groups, there are sub-groups (clans), each with their own territory. Their settlement on the coast took place over many centuries and long before the arrival of the first group of African-American colonists. Initially, starting in the early 1820s, only the coastal tribes interacted with the newly arrived colonists. As the colony expanded, also tribes living further inland developed relations with the Black colonists from overseas and, after 1847, with the settler-government. During the greater part of the 19th century the exact boundaries of 'Liberia' were unclear and even hardly known,²² hence the exact number of tribes and indigenous people living in Liberian territory were not known. Around 1900, 16 tribes were living in the territory which the Liberian government claimed. They can be divided into three main language groups: (1) *the Kru-speaking*: Bassa, Belle, Dei, Grebo, Krahn (Krahn-Sapo), Kru; (2) *the Mande-speaking*: Gbande, Gio, Kpelle,

Loma, Mano, Mandingo, Mende, Vai; and (3) *the Mel or West Atlantic group: Gola, Kissi*.²³ One of the few in-depth histories of the indigenous population of the region prior to the creation of the Republic of Liberia is *Between the Kola Forest & the Salty Sea. A history of the Liberian People Before 1800*, written by the Liberian historian C. Patrick Burrowes.²⁴

Notes

¹ Encyclopaedia Britannica, Grain Coast, <https://www.britannica.com/place/Grain-Coast>, accessed on 18 July 2025.

² See e.g. Herman Moll's map, *Negroland and Guinea, with the European settlements, Explaining what belongs to England, Holland, Denmark &c.*, 1729.

Source: Wikipedia, Negroland, <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Negroland> and Wikimedia Commons, https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Negroland_and_Guinea_with_the_European_Settlements,_1736.jpg, accessed on 18 July 2025.

³ Burrowes, C. Patrick (2019b), *Liberia & the Quest for Freedom. The Half That Has Never Been Told*. Know Yourself Press, Bomi County, Liberia, 8.

⁴ Besides this eighteenth-century description of the Windward Coast, Curtin mentions a nineteenth-century 'Windward Coast' which refers to the region on either side of Sierra Leone. See: Curtin, Philip D. (1969), *The Atlantic Slave Trade: A Census*. University of Wisconsin, Madison, 128.

⁵ Postma, Johannes Menne (1990), *The Dutch in the Atlantic Slave Trade 1600-1815*. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge. New York, 116-122.

⁶ Rodney, Walter (1966), *A History of the Upper Guinea Coast, 1545-1800* (Thesis, SOAS University of London).

⁷ Wondji, C. (1992), *The states and cultures of the Upper Guinea Coast*, in: B.O. Ogot (Ed.), *General History of Africa, Volume V, Africa from the Sixteenth to the Eighteenth Century*, UNESCO, Paris, and Heineman, Oxford (368-399), 368.

⁸ See e.g. *Carte de la Guinée contenant les Isles du Cap Verd, le Senegal, la Côte de Guinée proprement dite, les Royaumes de Loango, Congo, Angola et Benguela, avec les Pays voisins autant qu'ils sont connus. Projettée et assujettie aux Observations Par M. Bonne, Me. De Mathem. A Paris, chez Laltré, rue St. Jacques, à la Ville de Bordeaux avec Priv. du R. 1771. (2 feuilles).*

⁹ Leo Africanus (c. 1494 – c. 1554) was the first to claim that the term 'Guinea' was a corruption of Djenné. Source: [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Guinea_\(region\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Guinea_(region)), accessed on 20 July 2025.

¹⁰ Source: Guinea (region), Etymology, citing Cooley, W.D. (1841), *The Negroland of the Arabs examined and explained*, [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Guinea_\(region\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Guinea_(region)), accessed on 20 July 2025.

¹¹ Kaké, Ibrahim Baba, and Sorel, Jacqueline (1987), *Lieux et peuples d'Afrique*, Editions Nathan, Paris, France, 101, based on Maurice Delafosse (1912), Haut-Sénégal, Niger, Larose, Paris.

¹² Johnston, Sir Harry Hamilton (1906), *Liberia*. 2 vols. Hutchinson & Co., London, 29-32.

¹³ We base ourselves here on the narrow definition that includes an eastern part of Sierra Leone, present-day Liberia and the western part of present-day Côte d'Ivoire (see note 2) limiting ourselves to the territory of present-day Liberia.

¹⁴ Reportedly, Cape Mesurado, a bold promontory on the coast, was called originally Monte Serrado, but bad pronunciation corrupted the name into 'Mesurado'. Source: *The African Colony*, in: New-York American, May 1, 1832, Vol. XIII, No. 1167, p. 3 Nowadays the region (county) is known as 'Montserrado (county)'.

¹⁵ Johnston 1906, 49-52.

¹⁶ Van der Kraaij reports that 'around 1600, Dutch traders had offices in both the Upper Guinea and Lower Guinea coastal regions: in Senegambia (the island of Gorée), and further south along the coast, in the present-day countries of Guinea-Bissau, Sierra Leone, Liberia and Ghana (Upper Guinea) and at the mouth of the Congo River and in Angola (Lower Guinea)', in: Van der Kraaij, Fred (2015), *Liberia: From the Love of Liberty to Paradise Lost*. African Studies Centre, Leiden, 11.

¹⁷ The grand total of captured and enslaved people transported from Africa to the Americas and the total number of enslaved people landed in the America's have been the subject of much debate. Estimates have varied widely ranging from ten to fifty million. See e.g. Curtin 1969, 'The Slave Trade and the Numbers Game: A Review of Literature', 3-14, and Postma 1990, 'Measuring the Atlantic slave trade', 2-5. Paul E. Lovejoy of York University (1982) synthesized and re-calculated Curtin's data publishing his findings and conclusions in the *Journal of African History*, vol. 23, 496-497, 'The Volume of the Atlantic Slave-Trade: A Synthesis'. Also see his publication *The Upper Guinea Coast and the Trans-Atlantic slave-trade database* in: Special Issue: The Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade Database and African Economic History (2010), 1-28, https://educacioncivicamep.wordpress.com/wpcontent/uploads/2015/04/african_economic_history_vol_38.pdf accessed on July 21, accessed on 21 July 2025.

¹⁸ Postma 1990, 5.

¹⁹ The dire consequences of the evil slave trade were even compounded by the colonisation of the African continent by European powers, as eloquently explained by Walter Rodney in his 1972 work *How Europe underdeveloped Africa*, published simultaneously by Bogle-L'Ouverture Publications, London, and Tanzania Publishing House, Dar es Salaam.

²⁰ In Liberia, the term 'tribe' is used to refer to an 'ethnic group', by both official bodies and the general public. Liberian usage is followed here.

²¹ For the purpose of this publication, we will focus here only on what is nowadays called the Republic of Liberia.

²² Yekutieli Gershoni (1992a; 1992b) published two excellent and detailed articles on the history of Liberia's territorial boundaries, 'The Formation of Liberia's Boundaries, Part I: Agreements', in: *Liberian Studies Journal*, Vol. XVII(1), 25-46, and 'Formation of the Liberian Boundaries, Part II: The Demarcation Process', in: *Liberian Studies Journal*, Vol. XVII(2), 177-203.

²³ Van der Kraaij 2015, xvii, referring to Charles Meurs (2001), *Peoples of Africa: Ethno-linguistic Map* (Brussels: Marc Léo Félix); Tuah Wulah (2005), *The Forgotten Liberian: History of Indigenous Tribes*. (AuthorHouse, Bloomington, Indiana); Ethnologue, Languages of the World, Liberia, <https://www.ethnologue.com/country/LR>, accessed on 18 July 2025.

²⁴ Burrowes, C. Patrick (2016), *Between the Kola Forest & the Salty Sea. A history of the Liberian People Before 1800*. Know Your Self Press, Bomi County, Liberia. Burrowes' study covers all of Liberia's 16 tribes; it also includes the different ways of spelling and their alternative names.

PART TWO

The Slavery Problem in the United States of America in the 19th Century and the Creation of the 'American Colonization Society'

2 The American Colonization Society and the US Context of the Founding of Liberia

The condition of the enslaved population and of free people of African descent in the United States around 1820 – Abolitionism-Emancipation vs Colonisation - The American Colonization Society (ACS)

The US context

The enslaved population of the United States around 1820

The introduction of enslaved Africans by European slave traders into what is now the United States of America goes back to the 16th century. Over the next three centuries, millions of captured Africans were forcibly transported across the Atlantic Ocean to North America.

Illustration 5

Historical marker 'First Africans in Virginia', located at Point Comfort/Fort Monroe, Virginia, where the first enslaved Africans arrived in the English colony of Virginia.



Source: First Africans in English Colonies Historical Marker by Daniel Stewart aka DrStew82, Creative Commons Attribution-Share Alike 4.0 International license at https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:First_Africans_in_English_Colonies_Historical_Marker.jpg.

As early as 1565, a Spanish admiral, explorer and cruel, ruthless conquistador, Pedro Méndez de Avilés, disembarked 500 captured Africans in then Spanish Florida, in the area of what is now St. Augustine, originally a colonial city founded by Méndez de Avilés, in Florida.¹ In 1619, the captain of The White Lion, a Dutch privateer, exchanged 20 Africans – captured from a Portuguese slave trader – for provisions in the British colonial settlement of Jamestown, Virginia.² It is interesting to note that this transaction is often – wrongly – considered as the beginning of slavery in North America. In 1625-26 the Dutch West India Company brought 11 Africans captured from a Portuguese slave vessel to New Amsterdam (later renamed New York³) in the Dutch colony New Netherland which then covered an area corresponding to the present-day states of New York, New Jersey, and Delaware.⁴

The slavery problem in the United States in the 19th century

The slavery problem, closely related to the *'negro problem'* was probably the most important social and political problem of the United States in the 19th century.⁵ The removal of freed slaves and free Black people or free 'people of color'⁶ from the United States and the promotion of their emigration to West Africa cannot be studied without taking these two problems into consideration.

Northern free states versus Southern slave states

The abolition of slavery and the emancipation of freed slaves and free Black people divided the United States and would ultimately lead to a civil war (1861-1865). In the early 19th century, the United States was divided into two blocs: the Northern free states and the Southern slave states. The free states were generally located north of the Mason-Dixon line, the slave states south of this demarcation line, which runs through Pennsylvania, Maryland, Delaware and West Virginia.

Since the end of the 18th century, an increasing number of Northern states had abolished slavery, albeit often in a gradual and incremental manner. However, it should be noted that the outlawing of slavery did not immediately improve the social position of former slaves and free Black people. Vermont was the first state to abolish slavery, in 1777, followed by Pennsylvania (1780), Massachusetts and New Hampshire (1783), Rhode Island (1784), Connecticut (1784 and 1797), New York (1799 and 1817), Ohio (1802), New Jersey (1804), Indiana (1816), and Illinois (1818).⁷

Illustration 6

Map showing the free states and the slaveholding states, U.S., mid-19th c.

File: Julius Rubens Ames, Moral Map of U.S. 1847 Cornell CUL PJM 2051 01.jpg



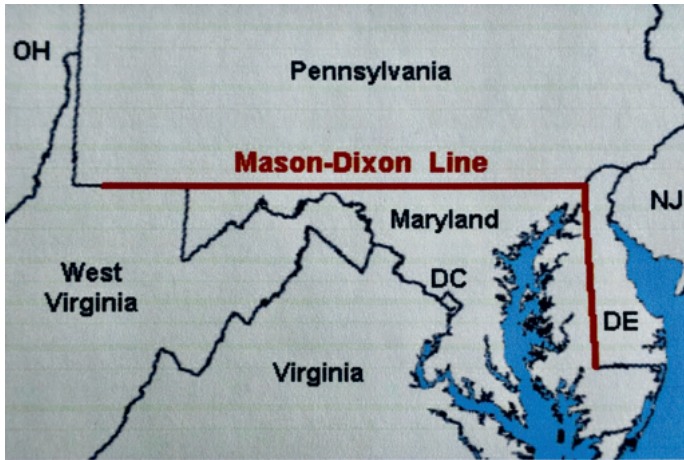
Source: Moral Map of U.S. 1847 (first published in 1837) by Julius Rubens Ames, available in the public domain at https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Julius_Rubens_Ames,_Moral_Map_of_U.S._1847_Cornell_CUL_PJM_2051_01.jpg.

Census results (1790, 1800, 1820, rounded figures) showed that in 1790 the United States had a total population of 3.8 million, of which 700,000 were enslaved. In 1820, these numbers had risen to well over 10 million (total population) and 1.5 million slaves. The increase in the number of enslaved people was the result of both demographical growth and the (after 1807 illegal) import

of captured and enslaved Africans.⁸ But these numbers conceal important differences between regions and states.

Illustration 7

The Mason-Dixon Line.



Source: Extent of the *original* Mason-Dixon Line by United States Department of the Interior, available in the public domain at <https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Mason-dixon-line.gif>.

In the Northern free states, the enslaved population was 2.1% of the total population in 1790, but in 1820 it was only 0.3%. However, in the Southern slave states, the enslaved population was one third of the total population (1790-1820), with outliers in Virginia and Georgia (over 40%) and even more than 50% in South Carolina (1820).⁹ Consequently, the reaction to the country's two most important problems – cited above – differed per state and region, but notably the free states and the slave-holding states held different views. An important, special factor in the discussion was the fast growth of the number of free Black people. In the Northern states, the share of 'Free Non-Whites' – a category used in the censuses – in the total population increased from 1.4% in 1790 to 1.7% (1800) and 2.1% (1810), but subsequently decreased to 1.8% in 1820. On the other hand, in the Southern states the group of 'Free Non-Whites' quadrupled from 32,000 in 1790 to 133,000 in 1820.¹⁰ This increase and the expected tendency alarmed many White Americans, both in the Northern and the Southern states. The response was the creation of the American Colonization Society, which will be discussed in more detail later.

The condition of the enslaved population and of free Blacks around 1820

The status and position of the enslaved population in American society and their (denied) rights were enshrined in the United States Constitution, state laws and ordinary laws. In short, slaves were dehumanised, they had no rights, they were 'personal property'. Free Blacks were better off, but their position in society was still inferior to that of White Americans and their civil rights were in many ways not equal to those of White Americans. Neither free Black persons nor slaves were citizen of the United States.¹¹ They had no rights which White Americans had to respect. This only changed after the Civil War (1861-1865).

The following, all legal provisions, illustrate the inhumanity of the slavery system. Slavery and the slave trade were based on the dehumanisation of human beings, who were reduced to objects, the property of a master, without any rights, without a free will, without a personal future. It is hard to imagine today, but the law stipulated that¹²:

- A slave is the personal property of his owner.
- Since a slave is personal property of his owner, he can be sold, mortgaged, or leased at any time, at the discretion of his owner.
- A slave may also be sold through legal proceedings to satisfy the debts of a living person or the legacies of a deceased owner, at the request of creditors or legatees.
- Slaves have no property rights; everything they own (or acquire) belongs to their owners.
- A slave cannot be a party in any form of legal proceedings against his owner before a court of law, regardless of the damage he has suffered at his hands.
- A slave cannot be a witness against a White person, either in civil or criminal cases.
- A slave cannot be a party in civil proceedings.
- Slaves cannot enter into contracts.
- The owner of a slave may, at his discretion, inflict any punishment upon his slave.
- Slaves must submit not only to the will of their owner but also to that of all other White persons.

- Slaves are punished more severely than White persons for the same offence or violation of the law.
- Slaves are prosecuted and tried in criminal cases without a jury.
- Slaves are denied the benefits of education.
- Slavery is hereditary and perpetual.

In the slaveholding states, there was gradually more room for the emancipation of enslaved people but initially often with severe restrictions. In the state of Virginia, for example, there was a law that stipulated that any emancipated Negro¹³ over the age of twenty-one who remained in the state for more than twelve months after obtaining his right to freedom could be re-enslaved.

Illustration 8

Negro Shack, Montgomery, Alabama, postcard.



Source: Postcard of "Negro Shack, Montgomery, Ala." By E.G. Fowler, available in the public domain at https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Negro_Shack_postcard.jpg.

The rights and position of free Black people were better, but not ideal, and certainly not equal to those of White Americans. For example, in most states, the right to vote was reserved (by law) for Whites: in Rhode Island, Connecticut, New Jersey, Delaware, Maryland, Virginia, South Carolina, Alabama, Missouri, Mississippi, Louisiana, Kentucky, Ohio, and Illinois. Ordinary laws stipulated the same in North Carolina, Georgia, and Tennessee.¹⁴ Moreover, free Blacks could not hold office, they could not give testimony and were not allowed to serve on juries. Further, though in most states free Black persons had the right to own property, in some states, their right to own property was very uncertain without a White guardian.

United States: Abolitionism-Emancipation vs Colonisation

Abolitionism

Abolitionism as an effort to end the transatlantic slave trade and to abolish slavery emerged as an important movement towards the end of the 18th century. The movement achieved significant successes at the beginning of the 19th century. In 1807, the British Parliament passed the Abolition of the Slave Trade Act, outlawing the transatlantic slave trade, though not slavery. Also in 1807, the United States Congress adopted a ban on the import of slaves into the country which went into effect on 1 January 1808. However, the ‘Act Prohibiting the Importation of Slaves’ did not end the slave trade within the United States, nor did it abolish slavery in the country. In 1819, Congress passed an ‘Act in addition to the Acts Prohibiting the Slave Trade’, which authorized the American president to send an American ‘African Slave Trade Patrol Squadron’ to the Guinea Coast to seize ships engaged in the illegal slave trade and to appropriate US\$100,000 to resettle the liberated slaves in Africa. (Subsequently, cooperation with the American Colonization Society was established for this purpose – see below).

The abolitionist movement in Europe gained momentum towards the end of the 18th century and at the beginning of the 19th century. The colonisation of Africa by European powers was at its zenith during the last quarter of the 19th century. Characteristic of European colonialism was the military conquest of vast regions in Africa, the overthrow of local governments, the submission of the local population, and the establishment of European rule in the colonies. In the United States, however, ‘colonisation’ stands for ‘Back to Africa’ of its own, Black population, an important difference.

United States: Emancipation versus Colonisation

Discussions in the United States were not only between the supporters and opponents of slavery. The fast-growing group of free-born Blacks and freed slaves also resulted in a discussion about the position of free Black people in the US.

The discussions within the abolitionist movement separated two groups. One group of abolitionists supported the idea that African-Americans and White Americans had the same rights and that the former should be enabled to enjoy these rights as free citizens. They advocated the integration and emancipation of the free Black population in American society. The second group was in favour

of the removal of African-Americans from American society and their 'return' to Africa. It is worth noting that this, notably White, group voiced its view immediately following the Declaration of Independence in 1776. Both groups existed in the Northern ('free') and Southern ('slaveholding') states. One private organisation played a central role in this discussion between abolitionists and the supporters of colonisation: the American Colonization Society (ACS).

Plans for the colonisation of Blacks outside the United States date back to the 18th century. Prominent politicians openly spoke about it. As early as the 1770s, Thomas Jefferson publicly defended the '*colonization of blacks outside the United States possibly in Africa or the West Indies*'.¹⁵ In 1777, George Washington, a slaveholder like Thomas Jefferson, suggested a plan '*for the restoration to Africa of her stolen children*'.¹⁶ In line with these ideas, prominent politicians from slaveholding states advocated the colonisation of Blacks outside White America in the early 1800s.¹⁷

A Congressman, Mr. Early, from Georgia, said in the US Congress in 1806-1807: '*We must either get rid of them (the Negroes), or they of us; there is no alternative*'.¹⁸ In 1811, Thomas Jefferson (US president from 1801 till 1809) recounts that he attempted to 'transfer' African-Americans to Sierra Leone or the Portuguese colony of Brazil.¹⁹ Not surprisingly, Ellen Johnson Sirleaf, president of Liberia (2006-2018) does not hesitate to place Thomas Jefferson in the group of abolitionists who wanted to rid the United States of all Black people as soon as possible.²⁰ Incidentally, Jefferson did not only want to get rid of the Black population; the original Native American population suffered the same fate.²¹

The American Colonization Society

Much has been published about the American Colonization Society. It is beyond the scope of this publication to cover the entire history of the society. Here the focus lies on its creation and objectives, and on the motivation of its founders. Part Three covers the main activities of the American Colonization Society and its auxiliaries on the West African coast, when presenting the American Colony on the Grain Coast (1822-1847).

Creation and objectives

In December 1816, a group of White Americans met in Washington DC. Among them were influential politicians and managers. On 28 December 1816, during

their third meeting, chaired by Henry Clay,²² Representative for Kentucky, Speaker of the House of Representatives, and one of the most powerful persons in the US, they created the 'American Society for Colonizing the Free People of Colour of the United States', a private organisation.²³

Illustration 9

Selection of newspaper advertisements and announcements.

9A (left) Four advertisements promising a reward for returning a 'runaway slave'; 9B (top right): Two 'Runaway Ads'; 9C (middle right): Two advertisement for the purchase of slaves; 9D (bottom right): Negro girl at auction.

TWENTY DOLLARS REWARD.—Was stolen from me, on the night of the 25th ultimo, my saddle HORSE, about 15 hands high, and 10 years old. His color is something between a bay and a sorrel, with some white hairs mixed in, which appear upon a close examination. He is a little crossed with the Chickasaw, which shows itself by the blossom in his eyes, by his hoofs being all streaked with white, and by white under his tail. He is rather short for his height, has a large head, which he carries high; his hind legs rather crooked, long tail, mane short and fine, not over six inches long; strongly made, and moves well under the saddle.

Any person who will deliver him to me, or will give me any information where he is, so that I get him, shall receive the above reward.

PETER WOOD,
Aquia Mills, Maryland.
sept 18—2wd&c

THREE HUNDRED DOLLARS REWARD.
Absconded from the subscriber on the 17th ultimo, negro servant ALFRED; and, some days previous, JERRY. They are brothers—Alfred about 23 years old, and Jerry 21; both of small stature and black. Alfred has a peculiar stammer and twitch of body when suddenly questioned; his clothing blue roundabout and striped cloth pantaloons. Jerry gray pantaloons and drab jacket; no doubt each had and took with him other clothes; they have a manumitted father in Washington, by name Peter Johnson. I will give a reward of \$50 if taken within ten miles of the Capitol; \$100 if over ten; and the above reward if in Pennsylvania, or any free State, and all reasonable expenses for lodging them in Washington jail so that I get them again. All persons are hereby warned against harboring or employing them. One-half of the foregoing reward for either of them.

NOTLEY MADDOX,
Prince George's county, Md.
ap 4—wep&2awdtf

FIFTY DOLLARS REWARD.—Ran away from the subscriber, near Washington city, a mulatto man named EDWARD MATTHEWS on the night of the 10th instant. Ned is a dark mulatto, six feet or upwards in height, slender in his person, and good appearance generally, and wears whiskers. He has lost a front tooth above. His age is about 35. He had a good supply of clothing, which he is supposed to have taken with him.

I will give fifty dollars if taken in the District of Columbia, or one hundred if taken elsewhere, and secured so that I get him again.

HARRIET WHITE,
Rockville turnpike, near Washington.
sept 25—eo2w

TWENTY DOLLARS REWARD.—Ran away from the subscriber, on the 22d instant, a negro man named HENRY. He is about 40 years of age, and about 5 feet high, stout built, has lost all his front upper teeth, except his two eye teeth. His clothing not recollected. This man I purchased out of the estate of Henry Davidson, Charles county, Maryland; he was taken up once before in Washington, and a pass found in his pocket, given by a certain person in Washington. It is probable he may make for the Canal, as he has worked there, and has expressed a wish to work there again. The above reward will be given for him if delivered to me at my residence in Charles county, Md. within four miles of Piscataway. All persons are forewarned from harboring or employing him.

SYLVESTER F. GARDINER.
sept 28—eo4w

RUNAWAY.—Was committed to the jail of Washington county, Md. on the 12th day of September last, a negro man, who calls himself JOHN WILLIAMS. His complexion is a dark mulatto, about 5 feet 7 inches high, about 40 years of age, and a little bald, and says he is a free man, and was raised in the State of Virginia, at a place called Dumfries, and lived last with Captain Bull; had on when committed a blue close-bodied coat, not much worn, striped cotton pantaloons, Monroe shoes, and a white fur hat, about half worn. The owner is requested to come and prove property, pay charges, and take him away, otherwise he will be discharged according to law.

JOHN NEWCOMER,
oct 7—eo3t Sheriff.

RUNAWAY.—Was committed to the jail of Washington county, Md. on the 12th September last, a negro man who calls himself ELIJAH PARKER. His color very black, about 5 feet 6 inches high, and about 60 years of age, and says he belongs to Fielden Sowers, near Millwood, Clarke county, Va. Had on when committed a dark drab linsey coat, old linen pantaloons, coarse Monroe shoes, and an old black hat. The owner is requested to come and prove property, pay charges, and take him away, otherwise he will be discharged according to law.

JOHN NEWCOMER,
oct 7—eo3t Sheriff.

NEGROES WANTED.—Cash and the highest market prices will be paid for any number of likely young negroes of both sexes, (families and mechanics included.) All communications addressed to me at the old establishment of Armfield, Franklin & Co., west end of Duke street, Alexandria, D. C., will meet with prompt attention.

GEORGE KEPHART.
july 26—2awep&1awdpt

CASH FOR NEGROES.—The subscriber wishes to purchase a number of Negroes, of both sexes, for the Louisiana and Mississippi markets. He will pay the highest prices the Southern markets will justify. Those wishing to get the highest market price will do well to give him a call at his jail, on 7th street, between the Centre Market and Long Bridge, at the rough-cast house that stands in the large garden surrounded by trees, on the west side of 7th street. Negroes are taken on board, at the low price of 25 cents per day, from the country or town. Letters addressed to the subscriber will be attended to promptly.

WM. H. WILLIAMS,
july 27—dis

NEGRO GIRL AT AUCTION.
BY R. WRIGHT, Auctioneer.

ON FRIDAY Afternoon, the 20th inst. at 4 o'clock P. M. at my Auction Rooms, I shall offer for sale, a very likely valuable Servant Girl, from 15 to 16 years of age, accustomed to house work generally, and slave for life. She will not be sold out of the county of Washington. Further terms at sale.

RICHARD WRIGHT,
sept 18—ts Auctioneer.

Source: 9A, 9B, 9C: Daily National Intelligencer, Washington, October 7, 1839; 9D: Daily National Intelligencer, Washington, October 17, 1839 (Fred van der Kraaij collection).

We will henceforth refer to this organisation as the American Colonization Society, ACS. Article 2 of the Constitution of the ACS mentions as the ACS's objective *'to promote and execute a plan for colonizing (with their consent) the free people of color residing in our country, in Africa, or such other place as Congress shall deem most expedient'*.

The founders of the ACS came from both Northern and Southern states, from states with many and with few free Blacks, and slaves. Among the founders were slaveholders, judges, rich businessmen, congressmen, and political administrators.²⁴ The first elected president of the ACS was Bushrod Washington, a nephew of the American president George Washington. Eligible for membership of the ACS were citizens of the United States. Since American Black people only obtained citizenship in 1868 it is doubted whether they could become member of the ACS, an organisation that had as its objective their removal from the United States. The ACS was a private organisation,²⁵ but its founders realised that the organisation's hybrid character made it imperative to have the support of both the American government and those of other countries.

The motivation to create the ACS

The supporters of colonisation of free Blacks and, more specifically, the supporters of the ACS had different reasons to support the emigration of African-Americans: humanitarian principles, Christian motives, political considerations, self-interest, and, last but not least, discrimination – even racism. Most founders of the ACS had in common the view *'that racial prejudice in the United States, which they shared to varying degrees, was an insuperable barrier to black citizenship and freedom, (and) that domestic tranquility required solution of the "problem" of free African Americans.'*²⁶ This view implicitly confirmed the 'white' character of the ACS. The wide variety in motivation of the supporters of the ACS has been described eloquently and extensively by authors like Huberich²⁷ and Fox²⁸ which interested readers may find useful to read.

One of the most controversial personalities supporting the cause of colonisation is Thomas Jefferson. His views are characteristic for the epoch and had great impact on his contemporaries. For these reasons they deserve more attention here. Jefferson was one of the leading politicians and philosophers in the late 18th century and early part of the 19th century. He was one of the most important authors of the Declaration of Independence (1776) – *'All men are created equal'* – and he represented all Americans at the highest level (during his presidency, 1801-1809). His liberal views and progressive ideas made him very

popular for a very long time, but both his role as slaveholder and his political points of view concerning the superiority of the White race make him a controversial person, too. *‘He considered black people inferior to whites and warned that their continued presence was a threat to the young nation he had helped to found. They could not simply be freed and allowed to remain in the United States, Jefferson warned. They had to go.’*²⁹ Contrary to his public statements about the biological differences between the White and Black races and his disapproval of sexual relations between the two races, he fathered six children with one of his slaves, Sally Hemings.³⁰

Illustration 10

Thomas Jefferson’s Monticello estate, Albemarle County, Virginia.



Source: Thomas Jefferson’s Monticello by Martin Falbisoner, available under the Creative Commons Attribution-Share Alike 3.0 Unported license at https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Thomas_Jefferson%27s_Monticello.JPG.

Jefferson was the owner of hundreds of slaves during his lifetime; on average he owned 200 slaves at any point in time. His prestigious Monticello estate³¹ in the state of Virginia was completely dependent on slave labour.³² In daily life he held racist views, not uncommon in his home state, where also other important politicians such as Madison, Monroe, and other supporters of colonisation originated. Their view can be summarized as ‘no place for two races in the United States’. This view was widespread: *‘On a conviction that the White and the Negro races could not live peacefully together on a basis of equality the Colonization Society was founded.’*³³

Equally illustrative of the view on colonisation (read: removal) of African-Americans is the speech given by one of the founders of the ACS, Henry Clay, in 1839, when assuming the presidency of the Society. Clay spoke about broad subjects such as slavery, abolitionism, the separation of the two races of the American population, and of colonisation as a means to achieve this separation. He holds off any intervention of the Society to end slavery and supports the view that the states alone, in which slavery exists, have the exclusive right to decide upon its continuance or termination. *'The Society does not meddle with slavery, either to prolong or to discontinue its existence. (...) We neither seek to perpetuate nor to abolish slavery.'*³⁴ It is useful to note that Clay himself had slaves working for him on his plantation in Lexington, Kentucky (cf. note 22). Clay also underlines that the Society cannot agree or cooperate with the abolitionists: *'The roads of colonization and abolition lead in different directions (...) We deal only with free persons of color; their efforts are directed towards the slave. We seek to better the condition of the free person of color; they the slave (...).'* He concludes that the ACS has demonstrated the practicability of colonisation as an efficient means to realise the separation of the two races of the American population and supports the idea of a (for various reasons) slow and gradual colonisation to realise *'the separation of the two races of our population.'*³⁵

The ideas of Jefferson et al. were shared by the general public in the United States in the early 19th century. American newspapers published in the 1817-1847 period – both in Northern and Southern states – contain much information on the ideas and sentiments of supporters of colonisation. An example is the report of a discussion in the House of Representatives on 11 February 1817, as published by the *'Niles Weekly Register'*. Under the heading *Free people of color. Report on colonizing the free people of color of the United States, House of Representatives, Feb. 11*, the weekly – published in the state of Maryland – presents a long list of arguments in favour of colonisation.³⁶ The main thrust of the article is *'there is no place for two races on the territory of the United States.'*³⁷

Opposition to the ACS colonisation objective

As indicated earlier, abolitionists who favoured the integration of African-Americans in the United States opposed the idea of colonisation. In 1831, a young newspaper editor, William Lloyd Garrison, started a newspaper, *The Liberator*, which voiced a strong anti-colonisation view and favoured the integration and emancipation of free Black people. The newspaper became the mouthpiece for Black and White abolitionists who were against the ACS. In 1832, Garrison

published the objections of Black abolitionists from the Northern states in *Thoughts on African Colonization; or, An Impartial Exhibition of the Doctrines, Principles, and Purposes of the American Colonization Society, Together with the Resolutions, Addresses, and Remonstrance's of the Free People of Color*.³⁸ In 1853, another important work on the ACS was published, *Facts and Opinions touching the Real Origin, Character and Influence of the American Colonization Society: Views of Wilberforce, Clarkson, and others, and Opinions of the Free People of Color of the United States*. The author, G.B. Stebbins, does not hide his criticism of the Colonization Society. The Preface, written by William Jay, states as follows: *'It will be seen that the idea of banishing the free blacks sprang from the alarm caused by a slave insurrection; and that, from first to last, the enterprise (i.e. the ACS, the present author) has been regarded as intimately connected with the security of the slave-owners and the permanency of human bondage. It is freely admitted that benevolent men of the north have cooperated in this effort, in the hope of benefiting the unhappy people whom it was proposed to exile. In the pursuit of what appeared to them a good object, they seem not to have been duly scrupulous about the means used to effect it.'*³⁹

Another critical examination of the ideas of the American Colonization Society and the motives of its founders was expressed more than a century later by the Liberian historian Amos J. Beyan. He concludes that the ACS was an organisation dominated by the ruling elite in the slaveholding states, that is, by the slaveholders. He further argues that the undemocratic character of the ACS was reflected later in many Liberian institutions.⁴⁰ The ACS continued to interest historians and other scholars after the turn of the century. In the early years of the 21st century, a critical study on the history of the American Colonization Society was published, written by the American historian Eric Burin. Based on impressive archival research, Burin focuses on the ACS from the point of view of Americans (i.e. slaveholders, slaves, Black and White Southerners) and looks at the ACS' main objective as two sides of the same coin: manumission (notably on the condition of emigrating to Liberia) and colonisation. It is noteworthy that the series' editors, Stanley Harrold and Randall M. Miller, conclude in their Foreword that *'After the 1960s, most historians accepted the abolitionists' contention that the ACS was essentially proslavery.'*⁴¹ In 2014, two studies were published. In the first study, *'A Conspiracy to Colonize 19th Century United States Free Blacks in Africa by the American Colonization Society'* by Grant 'Sylvester' Walker, the author concludes that *'The reasons the American Colonization Society established the colony of Liberia were not meant to help the condition of the black race but to promote the interests of the Society and others such as the slave-*

owners. *It was a controversial organization from its inception to its decline.*⁴² Walker's conclusion of the ACS being a controversial organisation is shared by John Seh David in his study *'The American Colonization Society: And the Founding of the First African Republic'*. David qualifies the ACS mission to encourage, support and organise the emigration of free African-Americans as a risky rescue mission, which put the organisation in direct opposition with anti-colonisationists.⁴³ In 2016, a short essay was published, *The American Colonization Society: 200 years of the "Colonizing Trick"* by Nicholas Guyatt, who criticises the idea of colonisation because it effectively entailed a large-scale system of racial segregation.⁴⁴ He cites David Walker (1785-1830), a Black activist and writer, son of an enslaved father and a free woman of African ancestry⁴⁵ who presented a critical view of the ACS in his 1829 *Appeal to the Colored people of the World*.⁴⁶ It is worth noting that David Walker's ideas and writings had a profound influence on White radicals like William Lloyd Garrison (mentioned *supra*). Finally, in 2025, Valarmathi Vishnu, presented in the Columbia Journal of History an article with a somewhat different focus ('American foreign policy'), *The American Colonization Society and Liberia: Unforeseen Legacies of US Intervention*. Vishnu observes that while the motivations of the ACS founders and supporters were multifaceted and a blend of humanitarian, racial, and political considerations, debates about these motives have not yet ended. The author observes that *'(...) historical inquiry has wrestled with contrasting perspectives of whether the ACS was a conservative pro-slavery entity, an emancipationist organization, or neither.'*⁴⁷ She concludes that *'The ACS, in seeking to alleviate domestic racial strife, inadvertently sowed the seeds of enduring disparities and societal divisions within Liberia. From the early settlements along the coast to the forceful annexation of tribal lands and the exploitation of indigenous populations, the ACS's actions laid the groundwork for a socioeconomic landscape fraught with power imbalances and exploitative labor practices.'*⁴⁸

More observations

Legally, the American Colonization Society was a monster, as well-explained by Charles Huberich in his outstanding, classic work on Liberia, *'The Political and Legislative History of Liberia'*. The ACS was the owner – at least it claimed to be the owner – of the lands on which the African-American colonists in West Africa were housed and it disposed of these lands at will, such as the granting of land to colonists. The ACS ruled the colony, it appointed the governor, the council and

the (ACS) Agents. The ACS coined money and it even could declare war on the indigenous people living in the region. In other words, the ACS acted like a state, but in reality, it was a private organisation which was not even mandated by a government.⁴⁹ To make things worse, the ACS started undertaking activities which were not stated in its Constitution. By receiving recaptured Africans and installing them in the Colony, the ACS violated its own Constitution, in particular Article 2, which states as the ACS's objective 'to promote and execute a plan for colonizing (with their consent) the free people of color residing in our country' (*supra*). After all, these recaptured Africans – from intercepted slave vessels – did not reside in the United States nor did they come voluntarily to the colony.⁵⁰

In the American colony in West Africa things were even more complicated. The US government did not consider itself legally obliged to protect the African-American colonists in Liberia – since it did not recognise them as American citizens – whereas the colonists could not claim US protection for the same reason. However, in 1819 the US government supported the ACS with an amount of US\$100,000.00⁵¹ – and later provided more funds – and also gave military support – on an ad-hoc basis – to the colony. At a later stage, the ACS and the US government agreed that the latter would give financial contribution for each *recaptive* installed by the ACS. It is difficult not to conclude that, at the very least, the US government had an ambiguous attitude towards the ACS.

Notes

¹ Fairbanks, George R. (1858), *The History and Antiquities of the City of St. Augustine, Florida, Founded A.D. 1565. Comprising some of the most interesting portions of the early history of Florida.*, New York, Charles B. Norton, 17. https://ufdcimages.uflib.ufl.edu/AA/00/06/13/94/00001/AA00061394_00001.pdf - accessed on 24 May 2026.

² Postma 1990, 12.

³ In 1664, an English war fleet conquered the Dutch colony including New Amsterdam renaming the principal settlement in New York, in honour of the Duke of York (later King James II of England). Subsequently, the Dutch recaptured the colony briefly, but in 1667 it was definitely transferred to the British in exchange for the colony Suriname in South America.

⁴ Wilson, Sherril D. (1994), *New York City's African Slaveowners. A Social and Material Culture History*, in: Hodges, Graham (Ed.), *Studies in African American History and Culture*. Garland Publishing, New York & London, 37.

https://books.google.nl/books?id=_nxznK7QjVMC&pg=PA37&dq=eleven+slaves+dutch+west+india+company+1626&redir_esc=y#v=onepage&q=eleven%20slaves%20dutch%20west%20india%20company%201626&f=false accessed on 17 August 2025.

⁵ Fox, Early (1919), *The American Colonization Society, 1817-1840*. The John Hopkins Press, Baltimore, Chapter 1, The Free Negro and the Slave, 13-46. See also Huberich, Charles Henry (1947), *The Political and Legislative History of Liberia*. Central Book Company, New York, 18.

⁶ The terminology used to describe different population groups, referring to their origins or physical characteristics, has changed over time. As explained in the Introduction, the present author has chosen not to use the terms 'people of colour' or 'persons of colour' – *except when citing historical sources* – but to use the terms 'Black person(s)' and 'Black population' for people and persons with Black ancestors.

⁷ Litwack, Leon F. (1961), *North of Slavery. The Negro in the Free States 1790-1860*. The University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 3, and 14-15.

⁸ Exact data are not available, but historians estimate that up to 50,000 slaves were imported illegally into the United States after the ban on the import of slaves into the country had been adopted (1807/08).

⁹ It cannot be excluded that the census undercounted the Black population due to the enslaved status of the majority of the Black population and the legal marginalisation of the free Black population. Source: *African Americans in the Federal Census, 1790-1930*, african-american-census-research.ppt, accessed on 17 August 2025.

¹⁰ *Slave, Free Black, and White Population, 1780-1830*, <https://userpages.umbc.edu/~bouton/History407/SlaveStats.htm>, accessed on 17 August 2025.

¹¹ As late as 1857, the US Supreme Court ruled that Americans of African descent ('Black people' including both enslaved and free persons of African descent) could not become US citizens ('Dred Scott v. Sandford, 1857'), according to the Constitution. The 14th Amendment to the US Constitution would only put an end to this in 1868. The 14th Amendment granted United States citizenship to former slaves and to all persons 'subject to US jurisdiction': Section 1 of the 14th Amendment reads: 'All persons born or naturalized in the United States, and subject to the jurisdiction thereof, are citizens of the United States and of the State wherein they reside. No State shall make or enforce any law which shall abridge the privileges or immunities of citizens of the United States; nor shall any State deprive any person of life, liberty, or property, without due process of law; nor deny to any person within its jurisdiction the equal protection of the laws.'

¹² This overview is based on Strout, George M. (1856), *A sketch of the laws relating to slavery in the several states of the United States of America. With some alterations and considerable additions*. H. Longstreth, Philadelphia, xii, Chapters 2 and 3, 9-96.

<https://www.loc.gov/item/07014938/> and <https://www.loc.gov/resource/gdcmasbookdig.sketchoflawsrela00lcstro/?st=gallery> accessed on 15 August 2025.

¹³ In the Introduction the present author explained the word choices he made.

¹⁴ After the Civil War, in 1870, the 15th Amendment to the US Constitution was ratified. Section 1 states: ‘The right of citizens of the United States to vote shall not be denied or abridged by the United States or by any State on account of race, color, or previous condition of servitude.’ In practice, states created numerous obstacles that seriously hindered or made impossible the exercise of this right to vote. See also note 11.

¹⁵ Beyan, Amos J. (1994), ‘The American Background of recurrent Themes in the Political History of Liberia’, in: *Liberian Studies Journal, Volume XIX*(1), 21.

¹⁶ Huberich 1947, 19.

¹⁷ Beyan 1994, 21.

¹⁸ Kaltenbrun, Mary (1941), ‘*The Negro Colonization Movement in Kentucky*’, p. 5. Electronic Theses and Dissertations. Paper 1821, <https://doi.org/10.18297/etd/1821>, accessed on 22 July 2025. Kaltenbrun’s source: *Annals of Congress*. 1806-1807, 174.

¹⁹ *Colonization of Free Blacks*, Boston Weekly Messenger, April 24, 1817. The article cites as its source the Richmond Enquirer and it contains an extract of a letter written by Thomas Jefferson, dated Monticello, January 21, 1811. Also mentioned by Charles S. Johnson (1987), *Bitter Canaan. The Story of the Negro Republic*. Transaction Books, New Brunswick, USA, and Oxford, UK. Republished 1987, Routledge, London, 17.

²⁰ Sirleaf, Ellen Johnson (2009), *This Child Will Be Great. Memoir of a Remarkable Life by Africa’s First Woman President*. Harper Collins, New York, 3.

²¹ Reportedly, it was also Jefferson who first launched the idea that led to the Indian Removal Act of 1830. See: Miller, Robert (2008), *Native America, Discovered and Conquered: Thomas Jefferson, Lewis & Clark, and Manifest Destiny*, Bison Books, 90, in: https://nl.wikipedia.org/wiki/Indian_Removal_Act#cite_note-1 accessed on 30 September 2025.

²² Clay is remembered in Liberia by the name Clay-Ashland, a settler town 10 miles northwest of Monrovia, on the St. Paul’s River. Ashland is the name of his plantation in Lexington, Kentucky, where he had slaves working for him. Clay-Ashland was founded by emigrants from the State of Kentucky in 1846.

²³ Article 1 of the Constitution of the ACS, in: *Colonization of the Blacks. Report on the official creation of the ACS on December 28, 1816*. Poulson’s American Daily Advertiser, Philadelphia, January 3, 1817, p.2.

²⁴ Encyclopedia.com, *American Colonization Society and the Founding of Liberia*,

<https://www.encyclopedia.com/social-sciences/encyclopedias-almanacs-transcripts-and-maps/american-colonization-society-and-founding-liberia>, accessed on 22 July 2025.

²⁵ Huberich deals extensively with the legal consequences of ACS' international actions and, in general, its status in international law – as well as the question whether the ACS' handling of affairs was in accordance with the United States Constitution. Legally, from 1816 till 1831, the ACS was a voluntary association of individuals working together to realise a common objective – even though the individual members had different motives for supporting the ACS. Due to its unclear legal status, the ACS in 1831 became a corporation (incorporated in the State of Maryland). The objective of the Society remained unchanged (Huberich 1947, 23-37).

²⁶ Tyler-McGraw, Marie (2007), *An African Republic. Black and White Virginians in the Making of Liberia*. The University of North Carolina Press, Chapel Hill, 2.

²⁷ Huberich 1947, 24.

²⁸ Fox 1919, 51-52.

²⁹ Sirleaf 2009, 3.

³⁰ Thomas Jefferson Encyclopedia - Thomas Jefferson Foundation, Inc., Th. Jefferson Monticello, *Sally Hemings*, <https://www.monticello.org/site/plantation-andslavery/sally-hemings> - accessed on 22 July 2025.

³¹ In 1987 declared a World Heritage Site by UNESCO.

³² Encyclopedia Britannica, Slavery and racism of Thomas Jefferson, <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Thomas-Jefferson/Slavery-and-racism>, accessed on 22 July 2025.

³³ Kaltenbrun 1941, 3.

³⁴ *American Colonization Society – Mr. Clay's speech on taking the chair, as President of the ACS*, Christian Intelligencer, edited and published by an Association of Members of the Protestant Reformed Dutch Church, New York, January 27, 1838.

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ *Free people of color. Report on colonizing the free people of color of the United States*, Niles Weekly Register, Baltimore, April 12, 1817.

³⁷ For a general overview of the supposed incompatibility of the two races as neighbors within the United States it is useful to consult Campbell, Penelope (1971), *Maryland in Africa. The Maryland State Colonization Society 1831-1857*. University of Illinois Press, 'Introduction', 3-13.

³⁸ For the complete text of William Lloyd Garrison's *Thoughts on African Colonization; or, An Impartial Exhibition of the Doctrines, Principles, and Purposes of the American Colonization Society, Together with the Resolutions, Addresses, and Remonstrance's of the Free People of Color* (Boston, Massachusetts: Garrison and Knapp, 1832): <https://archive.org/details/thoughtsonafrica00garr/page/n1/mode/2up>

and https://archive.org/stream/thoughtsonafrica00garr/thoughtsonafrica00garr_djvu.txt accessed on 22 July 2025.

³⁹ Stebbins, G.B. (1853), *Facts and Opinions touching the Real Origin, Character and Influence of the American Colonization Society: Views of Wilberforce, Clarkson, and others, and Opinions of the Free People of Color of the United States*. John P. Jewett and Company, Boston, and Jewett, Proctor and Worthington, Cleveland, iii-iv.

⁴⁰ Beyan, Amos J. (1989), 'The American Colonization Society and the Origin of Undemocratic Institutions in Liberia in Historical Perspective', in: *Liberia Studies Journal, Volume XIV(2)*, 140-152. Recommended reading is his 1985 dissertation entitled, *American Colonization Society and the Formation of the Liberian State, 1822—1900*. West Virginia University.

⁴¹ Burin, Eric (2005), *Slavery and the Peculiar Solution. A History of the American Colonization Society*, University Press of Florida, x.

⁴² Walker, Grant 'Sylvester, *A Conspiracy to Colonize 19th Century United States Free Blacks in Africa by the American Colonization Society*. A Trafford Publication, 2014, 73.

⁴³ David, John She (2014), *The American Colonization Society: And the Founding of the First African Republic*. Publisher; iUniverse.

⁴⁴ Guyatt, Nicholas (2016), *The American Colonization Society: 200 Years of the 'Colonizing Trick'*, December 22, 2016, <https://www.aaihs.org/the-american-colonization-society-200-years-of-the-colonizing-trick/> accessed on 24 August 2025.

⁴⁵ Asukile, Thabiti (2007), *David Walker (1785-1830)*, January 17, 2007, <https://www.blackpast.org/african-american-history/walker-david-1785-1830/>, accessed on 24 August 2025.

⁴⁶ Walker, David (1830), *Walker's Appeal, in Four Articles; Together with a Preamble, to the Coloured Citizens of the World, but in Particular, and Very Expressly, to Those of the United States of America*, written in Boston, State of Massachusetts, September 28, 1829. Boston.

(<https://docsouth.unc.edu/nc/walker/walker.html>) accessed on 24 August 2025.

⁴⁷ Vishnu, Valarmathi (2025), The American Colonization Society and Liberia: Unforeseen Legacies of US Intervention, in: *Columbia Journal of History*, May 27, 2025, 2-3. <https://columbiahistoryjournal.com/blog-21/iimcmeijhda5avvusotdmstvkhyq1w>, accessed on 24 August 2025.

⁴⁸ Vishnu 2025, 15.

⁴⁹ Huberich 1947, 31.

⁵⁰ Huberich 1947, 35-36.

⁵¹ Huberich thoroughly discusses the objective as well as the legal complications and interpretation of the US law that enabled this US\$ 100,000 support. Huberich 1947, 68-71 and 622 ff. See also the present publication, Chapter 6.

PART THREE

The American Colonies 1822-1847

3

The American Colonies 1822-1847

In 1822, African-American colonists gained a foothold on the Pepper Coast but soon encountered resistance from the local population.

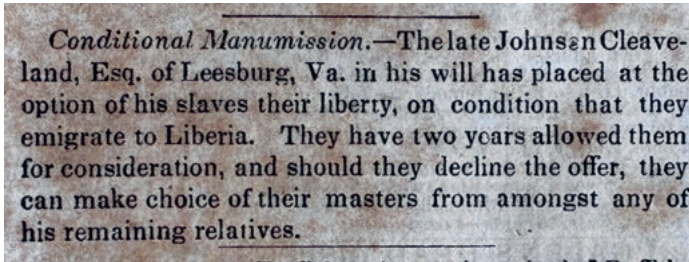
A brief overview of the ACS operations

Initially, the ACS had ambitious plans: to send some 20,000 free Blacks *each year* ‘back to Africa’.¹ These plans never materialised because free Blacks refused to co-operate with the emigration scheme – they wanted integration and emancipation in American society – whereas White abolitionists were against colonisation. The latter’s objections were, summarised as follows: ‘*first, because the plan originated with the slave-owners; secondly, on account of the ineligibility of the coast of Africa as a place for the proposed colony; thirdly, on account of the unwillingness of the people of colour to go there; and fourthly, on account of the expensiveness of the scheme.*’²

In the end, the ACS transported *a maximum* of 17,500 free African-Americans to West Africa and installed them in the American colony.³ About one third of them were slaves liberated by their former masters *on the condition of emigrating to Liberia*.⁴ This involuntary nature of emigration has been extensively documented in many books and articles and newspaper reports of the time.⁵ Moreover, given the dire and desperate situation of enslaved people in the United States – without any rights, completely dependent on the goodwill or whims of their White owners, who could do with them as they pleased – it is highly questionable to what extent this could even be considered a voluntary decision to exchange this hopeless and bleak existence in the United States for an uncertain future across the ocean in an unknown continent, Africa. Obviously, the same applies to free Black people who, while free, had few rights and were, at best, considered ‘second-class citizens’ (though without civil rights).

Illustration 11

Conditional manumission.



Source: New York Transcript, September 13, 1834 (Fred van der Kraaij collection).

The ACS also played an important role in the settlement of about 6,000 recaptured Africans in the colony of Liberia. A recaptured African or 'recaptive' is a captured and enslaved person who has been freed from an intercepted slave ship and brought ashore. The American Navy dumped 'recaptives' in the colony of Liberia (and in neighbouring colonies named after US states); the British Navy brought them to Freetown in their Sierra Leone colony, and the French Navy used 'Libreville', in the present-day republic of Gabon, for this purpose. Usually, reliable sources of information indicating the region of origin of the (re)captured Africans were lacking. In the colony of Liberia, the 'recaptives' were called 'Congo people' or 'Congoes' both by the US Navy and the ACS Directors and Agents. This warrants the assumption that most recaptured Africans originated from the Lower Guinea area (Congo/Angola). However plausible this hypothesis may sound, it is not supported by convincing evidence or any concrete facts.

The emigration of African-Americans to Liberia came to a standstill after the end of the American civil war (1865). Slavery in the United States was abolished with the adoption of the 13th Amendment which freed three to four million enslaved people in the country, the large majority of them in the Confederate states. Though their civil rights were far from guaranteed or respected, they preferred to live in the country where they were born, the United States. For an overview of African-American emigration to Liberia (1820-1843 and 1843-1865), see Annex.

The first colonisation attempts, 1817–1821: a difficult start

The first attempt to establish a colony for free Black people from the United States took place in Sherbro country, on the Grain Coast, and south of the colony of Sierra Leone, which the British founded in the late 18th century.⁶ The second

attempt to create a settlement further south on the Grain Coast, in Bassa country, at the mouth of the St. John's River, failed too; the group of American emigrants were stranded in the Sierra Leone colony. Only the third expedition organised by the ACS was successful. The settlers landed at Cape Mesurado.

The first colonisation attempt, 1820

Initially, the White directors of the ACS hesitated between creating an American colony on Africa's west coast and joining the British colony of Sierra Leone.⁷ Later they preferred Sherbro country, south of the Sierra Leone colony.

In 1818, two White ACS Agents, Samuel J. Mills and Rev. Ebenezer Burgess,⁸ travelled to West Africa to investigate the possibilities for a colony. Mills would not survive the trip. They first travelled to the colony of Sierra Leone, then sailed further down the coast. The report that Burgess wrote upon his return was positive and the first expedition was organised.

In February 1820, the first ship with 86 African-American emigrants,⁹ the *Elizabeth*, sailed from New York to West Africa, heading for Sherbro country where the ACS purchased a part of the Island of Sherbro.¹⁰ Interestingly, the *Elizabeth* was a public vessel of the United States.¹¹ Moreover, the US government provided both financial support to the expedition and military protection. The responsibility of the US government for the expedition is further illustrated by the implied agreement by the government that it would ship the emigrants back to the United States in the event that they wanted to return (and indeed a few emigrants did). Hence one of the most authoritative authors on this subject concludes: *'The entire expedition was at the charge of the American Government'*.¹²

Upon arrival in the area, the African-American colonists discovered that nothing had been organised, no supplies, no housing. Notably the absence of any shelter proved catastrophic, since their arrival – in April-May – coincided with the start of the (heavy) rainy season. In August 1820, ACS Secretary A.B. Caldwell¹³ informed the auxiliary societies and the general public that he had received bad news from the African settlement. Within a period of three months, three of the four accompanying Whites – two ACS Agents and two US Government Agents – and 15 of the 88 emigrants had died.¹⁴ But the worst was yet to come. In the end, the settlement was abandoned and the surviving colonists fled to the neighbouring colony of Sierra Leone. (In 1822, they joined a new group of American emigrants who had arrived at Cape Mesurado.¹⁵ See below.)

The second colonisation attempt, 1821

In 1821, 32 African-Americans sailed in the *Nautilus* to West Africa.¹⁶ The *Nautilus* was also chartered by the US Government. The emigrants were accompanied by four Whites: two ACS Agents and two US Government Agents. The first stop was in Fourah Bay, Sierra Leone colony. Here the emigrants awaited the outcome of the negotiations for the purchase of land from native chiefs. Two Agents, Ephraim Bacon for the US Government and Rev. Joseph R. Andrus for the ACS, travelled further south to meet with local chiefs and convince them to sell their land. The colonial authorities in Sierra Leone had indicated that they preferred not to have an American colony too close to the British colony.¹⁷ Bacon and Andrus first travelled to Cape Mesurado but were not welcome there. They continued their journey along the coast and arrived at the mouth of the St. John's River, in Bassa country. Here they were more successful and reached an agreement with the local Bassa king, but the signed contract was rejected by the ACS administrators in the US.¹⁸ Tropical diseases and other inconveniences soon led to the death of an unknown number of African-American emigrants in Fourah Bay. Some survivors returned to the United States, some emigrants later joined the settlers at Cape Mesurado (1822), and a few remained in the colony of Sierra Leone.¹⁹ Bacon returned to the US. The three other Agents stayed in the Sierra Leone colony. Two of them died within one month (28 July – 25 August 1821).

The third expedition, 1822

A new ACS Agent was soon appointed, Dr Eli Ayres. He arrived in Fourah Bay in November 1821 and encountered a group of dissatisfied and rebellious emigrants. He immediately announced a series of heavy fines and penalties for sedition, mutiny, insubordination, and disobedience, but he had little power to introduce or enforce these measures since the colony of Sierra Leone was ruled by British colonial authorities and not by the ACS. However, his behaviour is worth mentioning; it shows the power structures: the free-born Blacks and freed slaves had to obey the White ACS Agents.

Ayres, accompanied by Lieutenant Robert Stockton,²⁰ a Navy official and commander of the US schooner *Alligator*, left the emigrants in Fourah Bay and sailed further along the coast. Their destination was Cape Mesurado. The suitability of Cape Mesurado as a location for an American colony and the attitude of the local chiefs had been secretly investigated and recommended by an American naval commander, Commodore Matthew Perry, at the suggestion of Ephraim Bacon.²¹ They reached Cape Mesurado in December 1821. Here they

negotiated with local Dei and Mamba chiefs for the acquisition of Dozoa Island, in the mouth of the Mesurado River, Cape Mesurado and an adjoining strip of land. There are different versions of what happened next. Ayres himself reports, according to ACS reports,²² that he and Stockton were unarmed when negotiating with King Peter for the island in the mouth of the river and the Cape. He attributes the success of the negotiations to *'Lieut. Stockton's skill in combining flattery with a well-timed threat, all of which worked to our advantage.'*²³ Already the following day disagreement arose over the land acquisition. However, according to a widespread, completely different version, Stockton drew his pistol during the encounter and pointed it at the head of Dei King Peter, Paramount Chief of Cape Mesurado. King Peter subsequently agreed to the deal.²⁴ According to yet another version, when the negotiations threatened to stall, Stockton took a gun and gave it to Ayres with orders to shoot if necessary. Ayres then placed the gun against King Peter's head.²⁵ Whatever the right version, the fact that the land for the first settlement was literally obtained at gunpoint from King Peter by Stockton and Ayres has been officially acknowledged by Liberia's Truth and Reconciliation Commission – established after Liberia's second civil war in 2005 – and labelled a significant root cause of conflicts between the African-American settlers and the local population.²⁶ Making matters worse for the local chiefs on that historic day in December 1821 was that the entire situation was not favourable to them. They knew that one of the two White negotiators was a US Navy officer, whereas an armed American ship was nearby. Hence, the local chiefs signed the contract – known as the 'Doukor contract' – selling a portion of their land. The agreement (in English) was signed by King Peter and five other kings: Kings George, Zoda, Long Peter, Governor, and Jimmy (none of them could read or write), along with Dr Ayres and Commander Stockton. The land was bartered against goods reportedly worth 300 US dollars. On 16 December 1821, Ayres wrote an enthusiastic letter to his ACS bosses: *'(...) We have purchased a tract of country containing one million dollars' worth of land (...)'* for which he had paid goods whose value was *'(...) not amounting to more than three hundred dollars (...).'*²⁷ However, the local kings later complained that not all goods promised by Ayres and Stockton were actually delivered.²⁸ Moreover, the exact limits of the territory acquired were vaguely described in the agreement ('Contract') that had been signed by the African kings, Ayres and Stockton, in terms such as *'(...) bounded (...) by a line drawn in a south-east direction from the north of Mesurado River.'*²⁹ Jehudi Ashmun would upon arrival in the colony half a year later, on 8 August, complain that there was no document in the colony describing the exact boundaries of the territory acquired by his predecessor³⁰ (see below).

Once their mission appeared successful, Ayres and Stockton returned to Sierra Leone, picked up the remaining emigrants from the *Elizabeth* and the *Nautilus*, who had been waiting there, and travelled with them to the land they had just bought – on a US Navy ship. On 7 January 1822, the colonists landed at Cape Mesurado. However, upon arrival they met with a group of hostile natives who did not even allow them to unload the ship.

The main explanation for the changed attitude of the local population lies with the concept of land ownership. In general, in most regions of Africa, land is considered the collective property of the population and cannot be sold by chiefs or sub-chiefs. One of the chief native negotiators, King Peter, had ‘sold’ land that belonged to his tribe and which he was never allowed to sell. Moreover, he had ‘sold’ land that belonged to another tribe. And to make everything even more complicated, part of the land acquired by Ayres and Stockton consisted of a sacred area, that had to remain preserved forever.³¹

The colonists first settled on Dozoa Island, which they called Perseverance Island. When the settlers wanted to move to the mainland, they met with resistance from the natives. On 24 April 1822, Ayres threatened with a war if the latter did not give in. He knew that a squadron of the US Navy was nearby. Ayres *‘gave them to understand that he had purchased the territory in question and paid for it, that therefore he intended to retain it, and that if they thought they were able to expel him they might make the attempt, and he would show them what fighting was: – he would bring ships, and batter down all the towns of those who opposed him from Cape Mount to the Line.’*³² One day later, on 25 April, the African-American colonists hoisted the American flag on the mainland, on Cape Mesurado.

The colonisation, 1822 – 1847

Installation, territorial expansion, and conflicts

On 8 August 1822, Jehudi Ashmun arrived in the colony after a 59-day voyage that had begun in Baltimore, MD. He travelled with a group of more than 50 colonists including 18 recaptured slaves who had been temporarily settled in the state of Georgia, whom he was escorting at the request of the ACS. Ashmun was a 28-year-old theology teacher with journalistic ambitions, fiercely opposed to slavery and the slave trade. He had a temporary contract with the Colonization Society, which he likely accepted due to financial difficulties and a lack of funds.

With the group of settlers, Ashmun brought with him, the colony numbered approximately 130 colonists. The settlement consisted of about thirty houses and was named *Christopolis* by the settlers, 'city of Christ' in Greek. Ashmun found the settlement in utter chaos. The physical and mental resilience of the settlers was low due to the harsh tropical climate, deadly diseases like malaria and yellow fever, and the hostile attitude of the local population. The supplies provided by the ACS (building materials, food) had run out. The two White ACS Agents (Eli Ayres and his assistant Christian Wiltberger who was also responsible for liberated slaves from intercepted slave vessels) had left, leaving the colony under the leadership of a settler, Elijah Johnson (June-August). Ashmun, in accordance with his agreement with the ACS Board before leaving for Africa, took charge of the colony and began by restoring order. He placed the settlement under military control and appointed several confidants to prominent positions including Elijah Johnson, Lott Carey, and Frederick James. After Ashmun's temporary appointment was converted into a permanent position, he became the ACS's Principal Agent on the coast. Few could have imagined then that he would become one of the most important founders of 'Liberia.'

From 1822 onwards, the colony increased both in numbers of colonists and size of territory.³³ From the very early start of the colony, however, there were conflicts and fights between the local, indigenous population and the American colonists. In 1822, two famous battles opposing the two groups took place. These battles – the Battle of Crown Hill (on 11 November) and the Battle of Fort Hill (1 December)³⁴ – have gained a prominent place in Liberia's history and have been described in great detail by a number of nationalistic authors.³⁵ According to tradition, in the Battle of Crown Hill the colonists Elijah Johnson and Lott Carey saved the colony. The Battle of Fort Hill made a settler-woman, Matilda Newport, a heroine. Since the 1970s, however, a growing number of academic researchers have been questioning the veracity of Matilda Newport's heroic act and have qualified her existence as a myth.

Box 1: The myth of Matilda Newport

December 1822

Due to the attacks and continuous threats, the colonists had built 'Fort Hill' on Cape Mesurado. Fort Hill may have been located at the intersection of modern Ashmun and Center Streets, in downtown Monrovia. According to official history, a group of 1,500 tribal warriors attacked Fort Hill in the early morning of 1 December 1822. The colonists' militia only counted 35 armed men. A settler woman, Matilda Newport, saw the large numbers of attackers invading the area. Cold-bloodedly, she used a coal from her burning pipe to lit a cannon. The resulting explosion killed many attackers, scaring the survivors, who fled. The attack was repulsed and the colony was saved. So much for the official version.

In 1916, the National Legislature declared 1 December a National Day, Matilda Newport Day. Celebration of 'Newport Day' included a gun salute at sunrise, the unfurling of the Liberian flag, prayers, parades, speeches, re-enactments and a grand ball. Schoolchildren were required to participate. A monument was erected in Matilda Newport's honour in Monrovia; a street and a school were named after her. The Centennial Pavilion, built to commemorate the Republic's centennial during the Administration of President Tubman (1944-71), features a plaque depicting Matilda Newport firing a cannon. In 1975, President Tolbert honoured her with the issuance of a special postage stamp; a few years later Newport Day was abolished by President Tolbert (1971-80). In 1980, the military government abolished Newport Day as a national holiday altogether.

A retrospective by historians

In 1975, Jane Martin and Rodney Carlisle published the results of a study, *The Search for Matilda Newport: A Background Paper*, on the occasion of the celebration of Matilda Newport Day in Liberia. Siahyonkron Nyanseor conducted extensive research on Matilda Newport's alleged deed, based partly on the work of Martin and Carlisle.

His (unpublished) research paper is entitled: Matilda Newport's Deed, Myth or Reality. In 2003-2004 he published the essay Putting to Rest the Matilda Newport Myth. The author's article is also available on his blog Nyanseor' Dukpa, A Source of History, Culture and Emancipation.

Siahyonkron Nyanseor ultimately does not judge well-known Liberian authors of the mid-20th century favourably. He concludes that '(...) A. Doris Banks Henriens and her contemporaries were not only biased in their writing of Liberia's history, they also committed academic dishonesty. (...)'. Moreover, he finds that most references to the indigenous population were negative and unnecessarily insulting. He effectively and convincingly ends the Matilda Newport myth. She may have existed, but her real name was Matilda Spencer.

In 2007 Svend E. Holsoe published 'Matilda Newport: The Power of a Liberian Invented Tradition'. He closely follows the reasoning of Siahyonkron Nyanseor and is also very critical with respect to the existence of and the heroism attributed to Matilda Newport.

Who was she?

Indeed, Matilda Newport really existed. Interestingly, the oldest reference to her existence in literature dates back to 1854. Matilda Newport was a freeborn Black woman, probably from Georgia. Her real name, Matilda Spencer, appears on the passenger list of the Elizabeth, which sailed to West Africa in 1820. She travelled with her husband, Thomas Spencer. The latter was killed in the Battle of Crown Hill (November 1822). Matilda Spencer remarried Ralph Newport, presumably in early 1823. The latter drowned in 1836; a year later, Matilda Newport died of pleurisy.

Sources: Jane Martin, The Search for Matilda Newport: A Background Paper, 1975; Siahyonkron Nyanseor, Matilda Newport's Deed, Myth or Reality, and Putting to Rest the Matilda Newport Myth, 2004; Svend Holsoe, Matilda Newport, The Power of a Liberian Invented Tradition, 2007.³⁶

Illustration 12

Two stamps showing Matilda Newport firing a canon.

Left: a 25 cents stamp, red, issued in 1947, on the 125th anniversary of Mathilda Newport's alleged heroic defence of the settlement of Monrovia during the 1822 battle of Fort Hill.

Right: a 25 cents stamp, green, issued in 1975, on the occasion of the International Women's Year.



Source: Fred van der Kraaij collection.

Elijah Johnson also played an important role in the battle of Trade Town (when colonists were fighting against slave traders and conniving tribes, 1824), the 'Gola War' (1832) and the 2nd battle of Trade Town (1838). Other serious armed conflicts in the 19th century were the 'Bassa War (1835), the 'Fish War' (a Kru vs. settler war, 1838), the Vai – settler battles (1839/1840), the 'Gola war' (1840), the 'Bassa war' (1851/52), and the 'Grebo wars' (1856/57; 1875/76; 1893).³⁷ The fights and wars had more than one cause: disagreement over a series of issues – land tenure, authority over an area, participation, and exclusion but also ordinary misunderstandings, as well as trade-related conflicts, often between slave traders and conniving tribes.³⁸

It is no surprise that the colonisation brought many problems, as *'the immigrants had never seen Africa before, the indigenous Africans had never seen them before.'*³⁹ The local population called the newly arrived people 'Americans' – as the colonists called themselves too. The two groups – colonists and tribal population – differed in many ways. There were differences in clothing, language, habits, education, religion, even in colour, as many immigrants of the first groups of settlers were of mixed-race ancestry, notably in the 1820s and 1830s.⁴⁰ Three important points of contention deserve special mention, as they were a regularly recurring source of tension and conflict between the two groups: (1) the land issue; (2) trade related disputes including slave trade; (3) the feelings of superiority that the colonists displayed towards the indigenous population, whom they described as savage and barbaric.

Notes

¹ Poulson's American Daily Advertiser, Philadelphia, May 6, 1819. Printed by Zachariah Poulson, *Letter to the Editor, Mr. Poulson*.

² *Letter to the Editor, Mr. Poulson*, 1819. The writer signs: 'tho' I am a Virginian and a member of the Colonization Society, I am NO SLAVEHOLDER'. It is interesting to note that the writer repeatedly mentions that there were slaveholders among the founders of the ACS. He also gives examples of non-slaveholders who are ACS members.

³ Based on the 1867 Annual Report of the ACS, William E. Allen (2009) reports that the ACS eventually transported an (estimated) total of 17,000 free Blacks to Africa, in: 'Making History in the Bedroom: Americo-Liberians and Indigenous Liberians Sexual Unions, 1880s - c. 1950s', *Liberian Studies Journal*, Volume 34(2), 18. See his footnote 7: Annual Report of the ACS, Proceedings of the Board of Directors, 1867, 56-64. Huberich reports that the total number of emigrants in the 1820-1885 period was 15,774 and that by the end of 1892, the total number was 16,399. Huberich (1947, 42). Burrowes, C. Patrick (2013) reports a grand total of 14,557 emigrants, 1820 to 1885 (including 346 from Barbados), with a breakdown per state, in: *From Virginia Slave to African Statesman, Hilary Teage (1805-1853)*, Know Yourself Press, Bomi County, Liberia, 39. The discrepancy between the data given by Huberich and Burrowes is only partly explained by the different time periods covered. Unfortunately, Burrowes does not provide the source of his data, which makes it difficult to compare his findings with Huberich's data.

⁴ Allen 2009, 18.

⁵ See e.g. Bell I. Wiley (1980), *Slaves No More. Letters from Liberia 1833-1869*. The University Press of Kentucky; Alan Huffman (2004), *Mississippi in Africa*. Penguin Group (USA) New York; 'Priest, James M.', the family background of James Priest, Vice-President under President Warner (1864-1868): in: Notable Kentucky African American Database, <http://nkaa.uky.edu/nkaa/items/show/1834> - accessed on 23 July 2025; more examples in 'African Colonization in Kentucky': https://books.google.nl/books?id=bX99uVmqysC&pg=PA218&dq=%22african+colonization+in+Kentucky%22&ei=YJWAScbHZTckwTcmty8Bg&redir_esc=y#v=onepage&q=%22african%20colonization%20in%20Kentucky%22&f=false - accessed on 23 July 2025. Also, an article published on 30 November 1839 in an American weekly newspaper leaves no doubt that some of the freed slaves hardly had a real choice. In the article, the General Agent of the ACS, J. Wilkeson, appeals to readers who share the ACS objectives to provide funds ('at least \$ 2500') for the shipment,

equipment and the settlement of a family of 34 persons who have offered themselves as emigrants to Liberia, but who lack the necessary funds. Wilkeson: *'They were recently liberated by the Will of Mr Hunter, of Virginia. The Society must receive them by the 20th of December next, or they revert to their original condition of slavery.'* Source: *Colonization*, The Christian Intelligencer, edited by an Association of Members of the Protestant Reformed Dutch Church, New York City, November 30, 1839. Several other examples can be found in the Niles Weekly Register of 5 September 1835. The weekly newspaper contains two cases of slaveholders who freed their slaves in their last will on condition that they 'return to Africa'. In Bath County, Virginia, General Blackburn died in 1835. In his last will he manumitted his 46 slaves, provided they were sent to the Colony of Liberia. Alexander Doleson of Davidson County in Tennessee, who also died in 1835, stipulated in his last will that his 26 slaves should be freed, on condition that they went to Liberia Colony. The two examples, and more, are listed in the website, *Liberia: Past and Present of Africa's Oldest Republic*: <https://archives.liberiapastandpresent.org/ColonizationSociety.htm>, accessed on 23 July 2025.

⁶ The British had established a colony on the coast of West Africa, where they shipped freed slaves and other Black people who had earned their freedom by fighting alongside the British in the American Revolutionary War (1775-1783). A first settlement of freed slaves, in 1787, failed. A second settlement was more successful and developed into Freetown.

⁷ *Free people of color. Report on colonizing the free people of color of the United States*, Niles Weekly Register, Baltimore, April 12, 1817.

⁸ Samuel John Mills and Ebenezer Burgess are commemorated in the name of the town of Millsburg, founded by colonists in 1828, about 20 miles northwest of Monrovia, on the St. Paul's river.

⁹ Fox 1919, 88-89. Huberich reports that 88 emigrants sailed on the *Elizabeth* to West Africa but mentions 86 emigrants citing *the Census of 1843* in footnote 15 (Huberich 1947, 77). A US newspaper reports 82 Black persons sailing on the *Elizabeth* (source: *The African settlement*, The American, New York, November 4, 1820).

¹⁰ *Liberia As It Is*, National Gazette and Literary Register, Philadelphia, June 14, 1838,

¹¹ Huberich 1947, 141.

¹² Huberich 1947, 76-77.

¹³ The settler town of Caldwell, about 5 miles northwest of Monrovia, on the St. Paul's River, was named after him.

¹⁴ *The African settlement* 1820.

¹⁵ Huberich provides a detailed account of the colonisation attempt in Sherbro country (Huberich 1947, 84-94 and 97-141).

¹⁶ Fox 1919, 89. Huberich reports 33 emigrants (Huberich 1947, 157).

¹⁷ *From Africa*, The National Gazette and Literary Register, Philadelphia, August 20, 1821.

¹⁸ There is no copy of the Agreement dated April 13, 1821 in the ACS archives, and, so far as known, the text of the Agreement has never been published (Huberich 1947, 161). Therefore the reason for disapproving the Agreement is not known with certainty. A reason for the ACS managers to reject the contract might have been the local chiefs' refusal to abandon their participation in the slave trade after the arrival of the American colonists (Huberich 1947, 176).

¹⁹ Huberich provides statistics with respect to the total number of emigrants of the two ships, the *Elizabeth* and the *Nautilus*: state of origin, education ('literate/illiterate'), social status (free-born; ex-slave) and where they went (Sierra Leone; returned to the United States; died.), Huberich 1947, 143-144.

²⁰ Stockton Creek, near Monrovia, is named after him.

²¹ For political reasons this information was kept secret until 1844 when naval commander Matthew Perry (in 1843 promoted to Commodore, in command of the African Squadron) disclosed it in a letter to Governor Roberts in 1844 (Huberich 1947, 214-219).

²² *Review of the Reports of the American Colonization Society, from the Christian Spectator – The Reports of the American Society for colonizing the free people of colour in the United States, 1818, 1819, 1820, 1821, 1822, 1823*; 75-104, in: The Seventh Annual Report of the American Society for Colonizing the Free People of Colour of the United States. Washington city, 80-84.

²³ ACS 1824, 82.

²⁴ One of the first alternative versions appeared as early as 1850, a few years after the creation of the Republic of Liberia in 1847. See *The New Republic*, Written for the Massachusetts Sabbath School Society, and approved by the Committee of Publication. Massachusetts Sabbath School Society, Boston, 1850, 67. (For convenience, this source will hereinafter be referred to as 'The New Republic'). This course of events has been confirmed by many scholars and other authors including Amos C. Sawyer (1992) (who served as Liberia's Interim-President, 1990-1994), in: *The Emergence of Autocracy in Liberia. Tragedy and Challenge*. Institute for Contemporary Studies, ICS Press, San Francisco, 98.

²⁵ Walker 2014, 60, based on Staudenraus (1959), *The History of the American Colonization Society* (Unpublished Ph. D. dissertation. University of Wisconsin), 83. Staudenraus also describes the forcible nature of the purchase in *The African Colonization Movement 1816-1865*, investigating the American Colonization Society (ACS) organized in 1817 (Columbia University, 1961), 64/65.

²⁶ Final Report of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Liberia, TRC (2009), Volume I: Findings and Determinations. Monrovia, Republic of Liberia, 66, <https://www.trcofliberia.org/resources/reports/final/trc-final-report-volume-1-full.pdf>, accessed on 25 July 2025.

²⁷ Huberich 1947, 191. The transaction is reminiscent of the acquisition of Manhattan Island by the Dutch in 1626. Reportedly, the Dutch paid local chiefs approximately US \$ 24 worth in trade goods for the island (60 Dutch guilders).

²⁸ Johnston 1906, 129.

²⁹ Huberich 1947, 195.

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Huberich 1947, 197-213.

³² ACS 1824, 83-84.

³³ This section is based partly on Van der Kraaij 1983, *The Open Door Policy of Liberia. An Economic History of Modern Liberia*, Uebersee Museum Bremen, 6-9.

³⁴ Gurley mentions 2 December as the day of the battle of Fort Hill, see Gurley 1835, 84-85.

³⁵ In the third quarter of the 20th century, Liberian authors such as A. Doris Banks Henries, Richard Henries and Ernest Jerome Yancy elaborate in their history books for Liberian schools on the heroism of Elijah Johnson, Lott Carey and Matilda Newport during the battles with Dei warriors in 1822. In: A. Doris Banks Henries, *The Liberian Nation. A Short History*. Revised and updated version of 1954. Collier-Macmillan International, New York; *Civics for Liberian Schools*. 1966, Collier-Macmillan, New York; *More About Heroes and Heroines of Liberia* (schoolbook, mimeographed) (not dated, Liberian Information Service, Monrovia; Richard and Doris Henries, *Liberia - The West African Republic*. Revised edition of 1966 (1977, Sabanoh Press, Monrovia); Ernest Yerome Yancy, *Historical Lights of Liberia's Yesterday and Today*. Revised edition of 1954. (1967, Herman Jaffe, New York); *Liberia – A Nineteenth-Twentieth Century Miracle* (1971, Nateev-Printing and Publishing Enterprises); *The Republic of Liberia* (1970, Alexander Mozes' Printing House, Tel-Aviv).

³⁶ Sources: (1) Jane Martin, with assistance from Rodney Carlisle, *The Search for Matilda Newport: A Background Paper*, Presented at the Symposium on the Celebration of Matilda Newport Day in Liberia, Held by the Institute of African Studies, University of Liberia, Monrovia, Liberia, August 7, 1975 (34 pp.; unknown binding); (2) Siahyonkron Nyanseor (based partly on the work of Jane Martin and Rodney Carlisle) conducted extensive research on Matilda Newport's alleged deeds. His (unpublished) research paper is entitled: *Matilda Newport's Deed, Myth or Reality*. In 2004 he published the essay *Putting to Rest the Matilda Newport Myth* (published in: *The Perspective*, Atlanta, Georgia, Part I, dated December 1, 2003;

Part II dated February 4, 2004). The article is also available on his blog Nyanseor's Dukpa, A Source of History, Culture and Emancipation, <https://dukpa.wordpress.com/2009/08/31/putting-the-matilda-newport-myth-to-rest/> - accessed on 1 October 2025; (3) Holsoe, Svend E. (2007), Matilda Newport: The Power of a Liberian Invented Tradition, in: *Liberian Studies Journal*, Volume XXXII(1), 4-94.

³⁷ Truth and Reconciliation Commission (2009), Volume II: Consolidated Final Report. Republic of Liberia, Monrovia, 166-167.

³⁸ TRC 2009, 166.

³⁹ Brown, G. (1941), *Economic History of Liberia*. Washington, William Heinemann, 20.

⁴⁰ Van der Kraaij 1983, 6.

4

The Naming of the Colony ‘Liberia’: 1822

The author reveals that the name Liberia for the American colony already existed in 1822, and did not originate in 1824, as the official version states. Nor is it true that General Harper was the originator of the name Liberia. But then, who coined the name ‘Liberia’?

The official version: 1824

According to the official history of Liberia, on 20 February 1824, the ACS Board of Managers made two important decisions. On that day, the ACS decided that the colony at Cape Mesurado would be named *Liberia*, as proposed by Board member Robert Goodloe Harper,¹ and that the settlement would be called *Monrovia*, in honour of US president James Monroe (1817-1825) who was supporting the colonisation scheme. The Seventh Annual Report of the ACS (1824), describing the ACS’ Annual Meeting held in Washington DC on 20 February 1824, quotes Board member General Harper. It is pertinent to provide a literal quote here: *‘(...) I will now call the attention of the Society to a matter of some, though not, perhaps, of very great importance. It is to a proposition for giving a name to our African colony. (...) Our Colony has at present no name. It is situated, indeed, near a Cape called Montserado, and has hitherto taken its only designation from this circumstance; but that is a name not appropriate to its object, a name that means nothing. In reflecting on this circumstance, I have thought of a name that is peculiar, short, and familiar, and that expresses the object and nature of the establishment – it is the term LIBERIA; and denotes a settlement of persons made free: for our Colony may with truth be called the home and country of freedman, in contradistinction to the slaves of whom they once formed a part. (...)’*² General Harper then submitted a resolution which was unanimously adopted:

*‘Resolved, That the territory and settlement of the Society, near Cape Montserado, on the southwest coast of Africa, be, and hereby is, named LIBERIA; by which name it shall be called and known in all the acts and writings of the Society and its Agents.’*³ Subsequently, he submitted another resolution, which was

also unanimously adopted: *'Resolved, That the town laid out and established at Liberia, shall, in like manner, be called and known by the name of MONROVIA, as an acknowledgement of the important benefits conferred on the settlement by the present illustrious chief magistrate of the United States.'*⁴ General Harper then addressed the audience, not mincing words about his views on the ACS' objectives and actually endorsing some of the criticism of opponents of colonisation. In fact, the first two objectives he mentions contain undeniably racist and discriminatory elements. *'(...) What are these objects? They are in the first place to aid ourselves, by relieving us from a species of population pregnant with future danger and present inconvenience; to advance the interests of the United States by removing a great public evil; to promote the benefits of the individuals removed, as well as those of the same race that yet remain; and finally, to benefit Africa by spreading the benefits of knowledge and freedom on a continent that now contain 150 millions of people, plunged in all the degradation of idolatry, superstition, and ignorance. All these objects are embraced in the vast enterprise in which we have engaged. (...)'*⁵

Two remarkable statements by General Harper regarding the naming of the ACS deserve special attention: (1) 'Our Colony has at present no name', and (2) 'I have thought of a name that is peculiar, short, and familiar, and that expresses the object and nature of the establishment – it is the term LIBERIA'. After these statements were recorded in the Seventh Annual Report of the ACS (1824), they have been repeated in numerous official publications and in scholarly literature on the colonial history of Liberia. Their veracity has never been questioned. And yet, it has recently become clear that the reality is different. This is the first time this has been revealed.

A surprising discovery

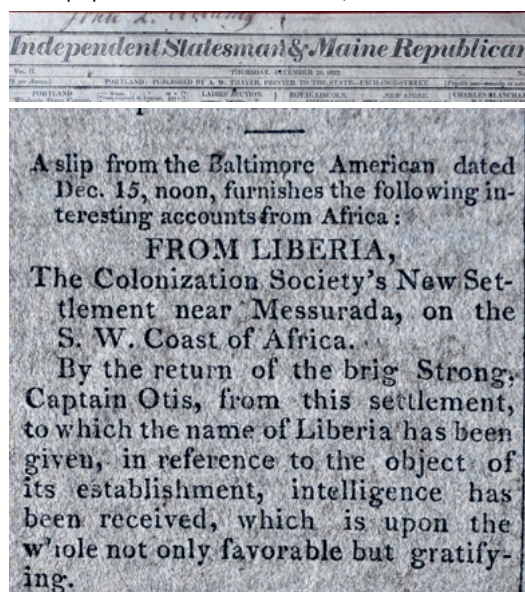
During my research on the ACS and the history of the American colonies on the west coast of Africa I discovered that the name *Liberia* was already in use before General Harper's February 1824 motion – not just once, but repeatedly. To be more precise, already in December 1822, American newspapers published news and articles on *Liberia*. In December 1822, at least five American newspapers published articles mentioning *Liberia* as the name of the settlement created by the ACS in West Africa.⁶ The following year – 1823 – (at least) twelve American newspapers published articles about 'the colony of Liberia', using varying wording.⁷ And at least three different newspapers wrote about 'the African colony of Liberia' in January-February 1824 – that is, before the ACS officially adopted

the name Liberia for the ACS colony on the west coast of Africa on 20 February 1824.⁸

The oldest article found bearing the name *Liberia* dates from 12 or 15 December 1822. Unfortunately, the exact date is not known with certainty. On one of the two dates mentioned, the Baltimore American (published in the state of Maryland) ran an article entitled *News from Liberia*, with the subheading *The Colonization Society's New Settlement near Messurada, on the Southwest Coast of Africa*.⁹ At least two American newspapers reproduced the relatively lengthy article (three-quarters of a column) unchanged. In The Massachusetts Spy of 25 December 1822, it appeared under the heading *From Liberia* followed by the same subheading, *The Colonization Society's New Settlement near Messurada, on the Southwest Coast of Africa*.¹⁰ A few days later, the Independent Statesman & Maine Republican published the same article, with the same headline and subheading, on 26 December 1822.¹¹ All three newspapers informed their readers about 'this settlement, to which the name of Liberia has been given.'

Illustration 13

Newspaper article 'From Liberia', 1822.



Source: *Independent Statesman & Maine Republican*, December 26, 1822 (Fred van der Kraaij collection).

Two other newspapers, one from Rhode Island and one (again) from Maine, had a similar, albeit shorter, report for their readers in the same month. On 20 December 1822, The Rhode Island American and General Advertiser published under the headline *American Colonization Society* the following text: ‘(...) *the Society's new settlement on the southwest coast of Africa, near Messurado, to which they have given the name of Liberia. (...)*’.¹² A short article to the same effect appeared on the front page of The Portland Gazette, published in the state of Maine, on 31 December 1822 under the heading *Summary of News – Foreign*: ‘(...) *The settlement formed by the American colonization society on the S.W. coast of Africa, is called Liberia. (...)*’.¹³ This establishes beyond doubt that the name *Liberia* was already in use for the American colony on the west coast of Africa in December 1822. Moreover, interestingly, the oldest newspaper mentioning the name *Liberia* was the Baltimore American, which was issued in the city of the same name in the state of Maryland and ... the town where General Harper resided and where he died in 1825. The inevitable question arises whether Harper knew the December 1822 article in the Baltimore American. And there is another intriguing question. The Sixth Annual Report of the ACS, from 1823, after describing the events in the colony in the first six months of 1822, reports that ‘(...) *A vessel chartered by the Society, having on board Dr. Ayres, and such a number of colonists as can be accommodated, will sail in a few days, from Baltimore to Liberia, the name of the purchased Territory on the coast.*’¹⁴ Harper was an active Board member of the ACS and it is hard to imagine that he had no knowledge of the contents of the 1823 Annual Report containing a report of the Sixth Annual Meeting of the ACS held in Washington DC on 20 February 1823 – a meeting which he had attended. But if it had not been Harper who had come up with the name *Liberia*, then who?

Who coined the name *Liberia*?

Two names emerge of men who played an important role in this phase of the colonisation scheme, both White Americans, just like General Harper, incidentally. One is Jehudi Ashmun, the other is Ralph Gurley. Interestingly, more than one source associates Gurley with the naming of *Liberia*.¹⁵ Unfortunately, the information is often incomplete and unreliable. As mentioned before, Ashmun was ACS Agent in the colony from August 1822 to April 1824, albeit with interruptions due to illness. Jehudi Ashmun (1794 -1828) was an ardent supporter of the cause of colonisation, a strong opponent of slavery and the slave trade, an ordained minister, and had connections with Baltimore where he

lived till 1819 before moving to Washington DC where he joined the ACS. His book *'History of the American Colony in Liberia, 1821-1823'* is the earliest written history of the Colony of Liberia. Ralph Gurley (1797 – 1872) was a Presbyterian clergyman who had an inordinate interest in the cause of colonisation, and devoted nearly his entire working life to the ACS. He became a member of the ACS in 1822, was its Secretary for many years and Vice-President in 1854. Gurley visited the colony in 1824 and together with Ashmun he drew up the Colony's 1824 Constitution.¹⁶ Gurley is also well-known because of his 1835 biography of Ashmun, *'Life of Jehudi Ashmun, late Colonial Agent in Africa'*.

The search for Liberia's name-giver focused primarily on two written sources. The mention of 'Liberia' in the title of Jehudi Ashmun's *'History of the American Colony in Liberia, 1821-1823'* reflects the year of publication (1826). Much of Ashmun's history book is devoted to the bloody conflicts between colonists and natives, and to the merciless climate and tropical diseases that took their toll. Nowhere in the book does Ashmun refer to the name Liberia. This virtually rules him out as the person who gave Liberia its name. Both in this book and in his communications with the ACS Board of Managers, he refers exclusively to *'the Colony'* or *'the Settlement at Cape Montserado'*. Notwithstanding the foregoing, it is worth noting that in his history book, Ashmun refers to the Sixth Annual Report of the ACS – in which Ashmun's letters and reports to the ACS Board are discussed extensively and in which the name 'Liberia' appeared – hence it is difficult not to conclude that he must have been aware of the name *'Liberia'*, mentioned in that document. The second key document, is Gurley's biography of Ashmun, *'Life of Jehudi Ashmun, late Colonial Agent in Africa.'* Here too, it comes up short. Gurley never mentions Ashmun's possible role in the naming of Liberia and mentions, almost in passing, in a footnote, that the name Liberia for the ACS colony was adopted by the ACS at the suggestion of General Harper during its Seventh Annual Meeting in 1824. This is also remarkable, because he, Gurley, must have been aware of the name *Liberia* before General Harper proposed it as the name for the ACS colony in February 1824. He must have read the 1823 Annual Report of the ACS in which the name *'Liberia'* was mentioned. After all, Gurley was very much involved in the ACS, and he is listed at the beginning of the Sixth Annual Report (1823) as an ACS Officer ('Agent'). Consequently, we must conclude that neither Ashmun nor Gurley qualifies as the historical name-giver we are looking for – unless it was Gurley after all, but he had decided not to contradict or criticise Harper, who thus walked away with the historical credit. We may never know for sure. By the way, how reliable is Gurley in his book? After all, he also writes about the land acquisition by Ayres and

Stockton in December 1821 that ‘These gentlemen (...), *by great skill and perseverance* (italics by the present author), obtained a valuable tract of land, including Cape Montserado, (...)’ while in reality the land had been acquired at gunpoint. The mystery remains. It is equally surprising – and difficult to explain – that Gurley, who lived in Washington DC in 1822, shows no knowledge of the newspapers of December 1822 mentioning ‘the Colony of Liberia’.

The search for the person who coined the name Liberia goes hand in hand with the timeframe. Recalling, the first African-American colonists arrived on the West African coast in January 1822 and settled on an island in the Mesurado River, which they named Perseverance Island. Three months later, in April, they moved to the mainland. It was with the settlement on the mainland that the need arose for a new name. Scrutinising 19th-century American newspapers revealed that at the end of September 1822 there was still no mention of the name Liberia. Consequently, our conclusion must be that the name Liberia originated sometime between the end of September and mid-December 1822.

With this conclusion in mind, the possibility that another key figure from this early phase of Liberia’s colonial history was the name-giver was also briefly investigated. In particular, two persons were examined more closely, both settlers: Lott Carey and Elijah Johnson. The former was born enslaved, probably in 1780, near Richmond, in the state of Virginia. He bought his freedom in 1813, became a preacher in the first Baptist Church of Richmond, Virginia, and travelled on the *Nautilus* to West Africa. Early 1822, he and other emigrants joined other African-American emigrants who had settled on Cape Mesurado. In November of that year, Lott Carey and Elijah Johnson played a key role in the Battle of Crown Hill, when the settlement was nearly wiped out. In 1828, the ACS appointed him as its Vice-Agent in the colony, which was very exceptional: he was the first settler to occupy this position. In that year he even led the colony for a short while, in the absence of Ashmun. In November 1828, he died following an accidental explosion at a powder magazine. Elijah Johnson (c. 1787-1849) was of multiracial descent. His place of birth is variously reported as New Jersey, New York State, and Maryland. He was ordained as minister of the Methodist church in New York. In 1820, he sailed to West Africa on the *Elizabeth* and was the leader of a group of colonists who, after staying temporarily on Sherbro Island and in Fourah Bay, settled on Perseverance Island and, later, Cape Mesurado (1822). He played an important role in the relocation of the settlers from Perseverance Island to Cape Mesurado. Johnson served as acting Colonial Agent during Ayres’ absence from June 1822 till August of the same year – the first colonist in this position – and

again from April till August 1823. Elijah Johnson was one of the signatories to the Declaration of Independence (1847).

As stated before, the time frame in which the name Liberia must have originated extends between late September and mid-December 1822. Ashmun was in the colony during this period, and Carey and Johnson were among his most important assistants. They were preoccupied with survival (climate, fights between settlers and natives). A month after arriving in the colony, in September, Ashmun's wife died of a tropical disease. Ashmun himself also became seriously ill in the first few months after his arrival. In the following months, the colony struggled to survive, with two decisive battles in November and December. Considering that the journey from Cape Montserado to Baltimore took between 70 and 80 days, there's little reason to assume that either Carey or Johnson acted as the name-giver. Hence, the mystery remains...

Notes

¹ Senator Robert Goodloe Harper (1816-1821), born in Virginia (1765) and died in Maryland (1825), both 'slave-states', was an active member of the ACS. De settler town of Harper - the capital of Maryland County, formerly known as 'Maryland in Africa' - was named after him.

² The Seventh Annual Report of the American Society for Colonizing the Free People of Colour of the United States. 1824. Washington city, 5-6.

³ ACS Annual Report 1824, 6.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ ACS Annual Report 1824, 7.

⁶ They were the following five newspapers: the Baltimore American (Baltimore, MD, dated December 12 or 15, 1822); the Rhode Island American and General Advertiser (Providence, [R.I.], dated December 20, 1822); The Massachusetts Spy (Worcester, [Mass.], dated December 25, 1822); the Independent Statesman & Maine Republican (Portland, Me., December 26, 1822); and The Portland Gazette (Portland, Me., December 31, 1822). Three of the five newspapers are included in the digitised LOC archives (the Rhode Island American and General Advertiser, The Massachusetts Spy, and The Portland Gazette), one newspaper is in the author's personal archives (Independent Statesman & Maine Republican) and one newspaper - the Baltimore American - has proved untraceable.

⁷ The twelve newspapers, with a total of 38 articles (based on the LOC digitised archives) were:

(1) the Alexandria Gazette & Advertiser (Alexandria, Va.); (2) the American Watchman and Delaware Advertiser (Wilmington, Delaware); (3) the Daily National Intelligencer (Washington D.C.); (4) the Hillsborough Recorder (Hillsborough, N.C.); (5) the Paladium of Virginia and the Pacific Monitor (Lewisburg, Va., [W.Va.]); (6) the Rhode Island American (Providence, R.I.); (7) the Richmond Enquirer (Richmond, Va.); (8) The Alexandria Herald (Alexandria, Va.); (9) The Massachusetts Spy & Worcester Advertiser (Worcester, Mass.); (10) The National Republican and Ohio Republican Register (Cincinnati, Ohio); (11) The Portland Gazette (Portland, Me.); (12) The Virginian (Lynchburg, Va.).

⁸ The following three newspapers: the American Watchman & Delaware Advertiser (Wilmington, Delaware; January 9 and January 27, 1824); the Richmond Enquirer (Richmond, Va.; January 10, 1824); the Christian Register (Boston, Mass.; January 30, 1824). Only the first two newspapers are included in the LOC digitised archives; the last newspaper is part of the author's personal archives.

⁹ *News From Liberia*, Baltimore American (Baltimore, MD), December 12 or 15, 1822. This article was reprinted by The Massachusetts Spy in its 25 December 1822 issue, citing the Baltimore American of December 12, 1822. The Independent Statesman & Maine Republican of 26 December 1822 wrote the following introductory text above the article, which was reproduced verbatim: '*A slip from the Baltimore American dated December 15, noon, furnishes the following interesting accounts from Africa*', followed by the heading: *From Liberia*. Since no issue of the newspaper in question, the Baltimore American, could be traced, it is not possible to say which is the correct date, 12 or 15 December 1822.

¹⁰ The Massachusetts Spy (Worcester, Mass.), Wednesday, December 25, 1822, No. 44, of Vol LI, *From Liberia*, p. 2, column 5. This newspaper refers to the Baltimore American of December 12, 1822.

¹¹ Independent Statesman & Maine Republican (Portland, Maine), Thursday, December 26, 1822, No. 25, of Vol. II, *From Liberia*, p. 2, columns 2-3. This newspaper refers to the Baltimore American of December 15, 1822.

¹² The Rhode Island American and General Advertiser, Friday, December 20, 1822, No. 24, of Vol. XV, *American Colonization Society*, p. 2, column 4.

¹³ The Portland Gazette (Portland, Maine), Tuesday, December 31, 1822, No. 33, of Vol. XXV, *Summary of News – Foreign*, p.1, column 5.

¹⁴ ACS 1823, 21.

¹⁵ E.g. Anderson, Earl (1952), *Liberia. America's African Friend*. The University of North Carolina Press, 71; Büttikofer, J. (1890), *Reisebilder aus Liberia. Resultate Geographischer, Naturwissenschaftlicher und Ethnografischer Untersuchungen während der Jahre 1879-1882 und 1886-1887*. 2 vols. Brill, Leiden, the Netherlands,

14-15; Johnston 1906, 142-143; Marinelli, Lawrence A. (1964), *The New Liberia. A Historical and Political Survey*. Frederick A. Praeger, New York, and London, 34; Wauwermans, Colonel Henri (1885), *Libéria. Histoire de la Fondation d'un État nègre libre*. Institut national de Géographie, Brussels, Belgium, 122-123.

¹⁶ Gurley was the main editor of the *African Repository*, an ACS publication that had started in 1825 as the *African Repository and Colonial Journal*, renamed *African Repository* in 1850. After 1892 the publication's name changed again and became *Liberia*.

5

From Colony to Commonwealth to Independence

The author describes the growth of the Colony of Liberia, the creation of more American colonies on the Pepper Coast, the merger into the 'Commonwealth of Liberia' (1839) and the proclamation of the Republic of Liberia (1847).

The first Constitution (1824)

Prior to the departure of the Elizabeth from New York to West Africa, in February 1820, the African-American emigrants agreed to respect the rules and regulations stipulated by the ACS Board of Managers and to accept the authority of the ACS Agents in the colony. This agreement, known as the 'Elizabeth Compact', was mentioned by the principal agent of the US Government in Africa, Samuel Bacon, in his journal but has since vanished.¹ In June 1820, the ACS Board of Managers adopted a Constitution for 'the settlement in Africa', however, without specifying the settlement's exact location since no territory had been acquired yet. The constitution was slightly amended in December of the same year.²

After the acquisition of land in the Mesurado area in December 1821 by Ayres and Stockton and the creation of the actual settlement the following year, the constitution which had been adopted in 1820 could become operational and more specific. In 1824, Jehudi Ashmun, ACS Principal Agent ('Governor') of the Colony of Liberia, and Ralph Gurley, General Agent of the ACS in the United States, wrote a Plan of Civil Government for the colony based on the 1820 Constitution. The document was adopted on 22 August 1824 by the ACS Board of Managers and can be considered the colony's first constitution. It is noteworthy that it granted the African-American settlers rights that they were denied in the country they came from. Article 1 mentions: *'All persons born within the limits of the territory held by the American Colonization Society, in Liberia, in Africa, or removing there to reside, shall be free and entitled to all the privileges, as are enjoyed by the citizens of the United States.'* It is also worth noting that the constitutional provisions only applied to the African-American colonists. It

excluded both the recaptives ('Congoes' or 'Congo people') and the indigenous Africans.³

Illustration 14

This is probably the first published map to name the Colony of Liberia. Detail of A. Brué's map of Senegambia, Sudan, and Upper Guinea (1828), showing the Colony of Liberia and the settlement of Monrovia.



Source: Carte de la Sénégambie, du Soudan et de la Guinée septentrionale. Brué, 1828 (Fred van der Kraaij collection).

Liberia Colony – Further expansion

Gradually the colony expanded as more colonists arrived from the United States. More land was acquired from the native chiefs, and new settlements were set up: Caldwell, Marshall, Millsburg, New Georgia. The latter was named after the state of origin of a group of Africans ('recaptives') who were liberated from intercepted slave vessels and temporarily settled in the State of Georgia in the United States (more in the section 'Bassa Cove Colony' below). Later the ACS settled more recaptives in New Georgia (see the section, 'The Congoes' or recaptives' below).

Between 1820 and 1830 the ACS organised and financed the transportation and settlement in the colony of Liberia of 1,420 emigrants at a total cost of

US\$106,367.72. Most of them (82.8 per cent or 1,176 emigrants) came from three states only: Virginia (580 emigrants or 40.8 per cent), North Carolina (400 emigrants or 28.2 per cent) and Maryland 196 emigrants or 13.8 per cent). Interestingly, until 1827 the majority of the emigrants were free Black people. Afterward, they were primarily recently freed slaves or slaves who had been freed on the condition of emigration and who, therefore, would not have regained their freedom without the colonization society.⁴

Auxiliary societies

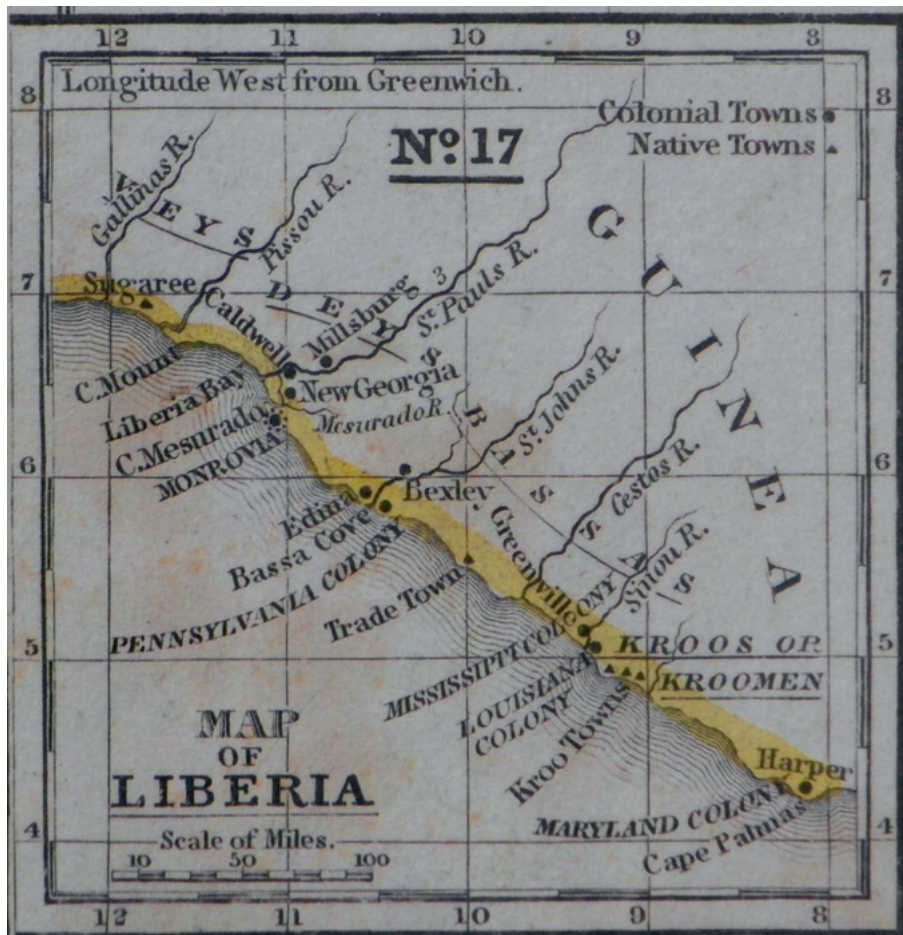
Following the success of the ACS, similar organisations were set up in the United States before the Civil War (1861-1865) especially in the big cities in the Northern states, New York, Philadelphia, Baltimore, as well as in free and slave-holding states. The auxiliary societies were also private organisations and had the same structure and objective as the ACS. Their White supporters and directors shared the motives of the ACS founders to support and promote the emigration of free Blacks to Africa. Eventually, the following societies were created in the Northern states (free states): the Connecticut State Colonization Society, the Indiana Colonization Society, the Maine Colonization Society, the Massachusetts Colonization Society, the New Hampshire State Colonization Society, the New Jersey Colonization Society, the New York City Colonization Society, the New York State Colonization Society, the Ohio State Colonization Society, the Young Men's Colonization Society of Pennsylvania and the Vermont Colonization Society. In the Southern slave-holding states, the number of colonisation societies created were equally numerous: the Alabama Colonization Society, the Georgia Colonization Society, the Kentucky Colonization Society, the Louisiana Colonization Society, the Maryland State Colonization Society, the Mississippi State Colonization Society, the North Carolina Colonization Society, the Society of the District of Columbia for the Colonization and Civilization of Africa, the Tennessee Colonization Society and the Virginia Colonization Society. The large number of auxiliary societies founded may illustrate the popularity of the idea of colonisation of free Black people. However, after the abolition of slavery (1863), the end of the Civil War (1865), and the subsequent adoption of the 14th Amendment of the Constitution (1868), the idea of colonisation gave way to the pursuit of integration and emancipation of the free Black population into American society. All colonisation societies focused on the Grain Coast where the ACS had been the first to create a colony.

More colonies

The creation of the Colony of Liberia led to the creation of more colonies for the settlement of free African-Americans. The colonies that were founded were often named after the state where the settlers came from: Bassa Cove (or 'Pennsylvania Colony'), Kentucky Colony ('Kentucky in Africa'), Louisiana Colony ('Louisiana in Africa'), Maryland Colony ('Maryland in Africa'), Mississippi Colony ('Mississippi in Africa') and 'Ohio in Africa' (aborted).

Illustration 15

Map of Liberia showing Liberia Colony and Other American Colonies. Mitchell, 1839.



Source: S.A. Mitchell, map of Liberia colony 1839 by Fred van der Kraaij, available in the public domain at https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Mitchell_Map_Liberia_colony_1839.jpg.

'Bassa Cove Colony'

The reason for the creation of Bassa Cove Colony was the manumission of more than one hundred slaves by a slaveholder in the State of Virginia, Dr Hawes.⁵ In his last will, he freed his slaves *on condition of their transportation to the colony in West Africa*. This clause was not unusual. It happened more frequently that slaves were liberated *on condition of their removal from the United States*.⁶ However, the ACS lacked sufficient means for the transportation of such a large number of emigrants to West Africa and their settlement in Liberia Colony. In 1834 the Young Men's Colonization Society of Pennsylvania was created to execute the last will of the Virginian slaveholder. Hence the name of 'Pennsylvania Colony' for the settlement which was later created.

The ACS had another, similar problem in the State of Georgia. In Savannah, Georgia, a group of liberated slaves – seized from a slave vessel – were waiting for transportation to West Africa. Since the ACS lacked the necessary funds, the Colonization Society of New York agreed to take care of them. However, it became clear that this society, too, lacked the necessary funds for the transportation and settlement of the recaptives. Hence, the New York Colonization Society entered into a cooperation agreement with the Young Men's Colonization Society of Pennsylvania to create a new colony on the Grain Coast, killing two birds with one stone. The new colony would be created at Bassa Cove, near the St. John's River, and about sixty miles – about one hundred kilometres – south of Monrovia, on the coast.

In October 1834, the first colonists arrived on the shores of Bassa Bay, after the American negotiator for the two colonisation societies had reported that *'(...) in perfect love and harmony the land for a colony at Bassa Cove had been purchased from the native chiefs. (...)'*⁷ Meanwhile, the ACS had created two settlements in the same area: Edina⁸ and Bexley,⁹ which later were ceded to the United Colonization Societies of New York and Pennsylvania.¹⁰ In 1837, Edina and Bexley were incorporated into the Bassa Cove Colony.¹¹

Half a year after its establishment, the settlement at Bassa Cove, named Port Cresson,¹² was attacked by King Joe and his Bassa tribesmen; many settlers were butchered. The incident became known as the Massacre of Bassa Cove. Probably King Joe and his men felt threatened by the presence of the colonists who would not have allowed them to continue their involvement in the slave trade. With the help of settlers from Monrovia, the Bassa people were eventually defeated and forced to accept the settlers' authority.¹³ In the following years, however, tensions between the two groups persisted, leading to more armed conflicts.¹⁴ In 1838,

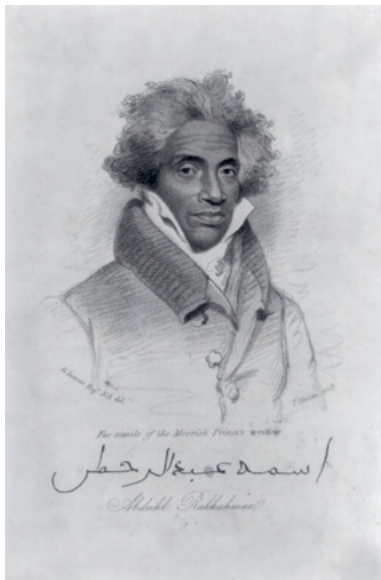
Bassa Cove decided to merge with the Colony of Liberia into the Commonwealth of Liberia. The decision became effective the following year. As a consequence, Bassa Cove Colony ceased to exist; the Pennsylvania Colonization Society and the New York City Colonization Society transferred all their possessions in the colony to the ACS. In 1841, Bassa Cove was re-named Buchanan to honour Thomas Buchanan, a former Governor of Bassa Cove and cousin of James Buchanan, 15th President of the United States, and who was appointed the first Governor of the Commonwealth of Liberia (1839-1841).¹⁵ According to the Census of 1843, Bassa Cove Colony had 124 inhabitants in that year. Edina had a population of 202 in 1843.¹⁶

'Mississippi in Africa' and the 'Louisiana Colony'

Even though the number of free Black people in the State of Mississippi was never large – 519 in 1830 – the number of enslaved people increased rapidly, from 32,814 in 1820 to 65,659 (in 1830) and 195,211 (1840). In 1840 the slave population even outnumbered the White population (179,074).

Illustration 16

Abdul Rahman Ibrahima, also known as 'the Moorish Prince'.



Source: Ibn Sori, or Abduhl Rahhahman, engraving by Thomas Illman (1834), after a drawing by Henry Inman, available from the United States Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division, under the digital ID cph.3a39953, available in the public domain at https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Ibn_Sori.jpg.

The unequal demographical growth continued after 1840 and became a growing source of concern of important and influential White citizens of the state, who *'saw in the intermediate class of the free Negro a danger to their own safety by slave insurrections stirred up by the free Negroes and to their property interests by these free Negroes assisting slaves to escape.'*¹⁷

In 1831 the Mississippi Colonization Society was founded, a society which was mainly concerned with removing the menace to White domination.¹⁸ Before the creation of the Mississippi Colonization Society, a few former slaves had already emigrated from Mississippi to the Colony of Liberia. Probably the best known of them is Abdul Rahman Ibrahima, a Moorish prince who had been captured in West Africa when he was 26 years old, enslaved, and shipped to the United States where he was sold to a plantation owner; he was freed after nearly 40 years.

Box 2: Abdul Rahman Ibrahima, a West African Prince, sold into slavery, who returned to Africa

During the 1827-1829 period, American newspapers extensively reported on the life, enslavement, and manumission of Abdul Rahman Ibrahima also known as 'the Moorish Prince'. It is the almost unbelievable but true story of a Muslim slave, Abdul Rahman Ibrahima, a West African prince. The spelling of his name varies.

Abdul Rahman Ibrahima was born in Timbuktu (in present-day republic of Mali) in 1762 as the son of Ibrahima Sori and his Moorish wife. At the age of five he moved with his father, a Fula (Fulani) theocratic monarch who became King of Timbo, in the Fouta Djallon region of nowadays the republic of Guinea (Conakry). Because of his royal background he received a good education, as a result of which he spoke four African languages in addition to Arabic. At the age of 26, while serving as a military commander in his father's army, Abdul Rahman Ibrahima was captured by hostile tribal warriors, sold to slave traders, and shipped to North America. There he was bought by Thomas Foster, a plantation owner in Natchez, Mississippi.

Abd Rahman Ibrahima worked for 15 years as a slave on Foster's plantation. An accidental meeting in 1807 led to his release but it would still take more than 20 years before he returned to Africa. After Henry Clay and even US president Quincy Adams intervened, he was finally freed by Foster. In January 1829, he sailed on a boat, chartered by the ACS, to West Africa where he arrived in the colony of Liberia in March. He died in Monrovia four months later (6 July 1829) before he could reach Timbo.

Source: Terry Alford, *Prince among Slaves. The True Story of an African Prince sold into Slavery in the American South* (New York, NY, 1977) and numerous US newspaper articles about the life of Abdul Rahman Ibrahima.¹⁹

In 1836, the colonisation society bought from local chiefs an area of about 3,000 square miles at the mouth of the Sinoe River, midway between Bassa Cove and Cape Palmas, where the Maryland State Colonization Society had established a colony. Later more land was acquired. The colony was called 'Mississippi in Africa' and the new settler town Greenville, in honour of judge James Green who had freed his about 50 slaves, in his last will, and had reserved an amount for their transportation to West Africa. Green's liberated slaves were part of a group of 69 colonists who had already arrived in the colony of Liberia in 1835, but had been settled temporarily in Monrovia and in Millsburg since the Mississippi Colonization Society had not yet acquired land for a colony. In 1836 another group of 42 liberated slaves from the State of Mississippi had arrived in Liberia Colony. They too were temporarily settled in Millsburg. In July 1838, the first group of 37 colonists arrived directly from Mississippi and settled in the new colony; the two other groups joined them.²⁰

Two months later Governor Finley of the Colony was murdered and robbed of a considerable amount of money he carried with him, and which belonged to the notorious slave trader Theodore Canot (see below). Finley had maintained a dubious relationship with the slave trader and had travelled with him in a slave vessel to Bassa Cove Colony. After Canot learned that Finley had been murdered and robbed, he organised a punitive expedition to avenge the murder of the Governor. Canot and his men, joined by a colonial militia from Bassa Cove, attacked a number of nearby villages.²¹

Many years later, in 1848 and 1849, two more groups of former slaves from the State of Mississippi arrived in the colony. They had worked on a cotton

plantation, Prospect Hill, owned by Isaac Ross. When Isaac Ross, a rich man and co-founder of the Mississippi Colonization Society, died in August 1836 he left a testament stipulating the selling of his plantation; the proceeds had to finance the transportation of his more than 200 slaves to West Africa and their settlement in the colony of Liberia. His heirs disputed the validity of his testament and protracted litigation followed. In the end, his last will was respected and implemented.²² In 1848, 34 former slaves of Ross' Prospect Hill Plantation left Mississippi in the United States for 'Mississippi in Liberia', 41 in 1849, others had left before. The largest group – 142 freed slaves – followed the same year.²³ Reportedly, the majority of the freed Mississippi slaves were illiterate and unskilled labourers, mostly plantation workers. They engaged in agricultural activities producing primary crops. *'Those who were literate and educated went into international trade and commerce.'*²⁴ Life in the colony was hard. Deadly diseases resulted in loss of life. Conflicts with indigenous tribes also caused casualties and loss of goods which were plundered or destroyed. Moreover, the colony was underfunded whereas relations with the settlers in the colony of Liberia, and between the Mississippi Colonization Society and the American Colonization Society which sponsored them, were far from good. By 1840, the colony was bankrupt and without a leader.²⁵ In 1841/1842, the colony 'Mississippi in Africa' was incorporated in the Commonwealth of Liberia to safeguard its survival. Its name changed from 'Mississippi in Africa' to 'Mississippi in Liberia'.

The Mississippi Colonization Society co-operated closely with the Louisiana Colonization Society during the 1830s. The latter first envisaged to create a settlement on the opposite bank of the Sinoe River from the Mississippi settlement. However, since this area, locally known as Blue Barre, was inhabited by 'hostile natives' and the land had not yet been acquired, the Louisiana Colony was eventually located a short distance upriver instead.²⁶ In this case, too, not all colonists arrived voluntarily in the Louisiana Colony. In 1842, a Louisiana slave owner announced he would free 80-85 slaves *'for the purpose of sending them to Africa.'*²⁷

When the Mississippi Colonization Society and the American Colonization Society reached agreement on the union of 'Mississippi in Africa' and the Commonwealth of Liberia in 1841, which became effective in 1842, the former including the Louisiana Colony became part of the Commonwealth of Liberia. The settlers had no say in this decision.²⁸

In the end, the total number of emigrants from the State of Mississippi to West Africa was small: only 551 (1838-1866), more than half of whom arrived after

1841.²⁹ The colony was very small. Greenville only had 79 inhabitants in 1843, making it the smallest settler town in the ‘Commonwealth of Liberia’.³⁰

*‘Maryland in Africa’*³¹

The origins of the Maryland State Colonization Society date back to 1817. In that year, an auxiliary organisation of the national colonisation organisation – the ACS – was established in the state of Maryland, led by General Robert Goodloe Harper (one of his associates included Dr Eli Ayres³²). Ten years later, in 1827, the independently operating auxiliary organisations established at the local, regional, and county levels in Maryland united to form a central organisation at the state level. In the same year, the Maryland State General Assembly decided to donate US\$1,000 annually to the ACS to finance the emigration of free Black Marylanders to the Liberia Colony. However, when it turned out in 1828 that only 12 emigrants had been funded, this annual financial support was discontinued.³³ Subsequently, in early 1831 White Marylanders created their own colonisation society, the Maryland State Colonization Society.³⁴ It is useful to recall here that Maryland was a slave state, located south of the Mason-Dixon line.

The bloody Nat Turner rebellion in neighbouring Virginia in August 1831 worried White Marylanders who – blaming the insurrection on free Blacks – feared that a similar rebellion could take place within their borders. After all, whereas in Maryland lived as many free Blacks as in Virginia – according to the 1820 Census results nearly 40,000 in each state, on a total of 133,500 free Blacks in all Southern slave states – in Maryland free Blacks represented nearly 9.7 per cent of the total population, against 3.7 per cent in Virginia.³⁵ Maryland also experienced a rapid growth of the Black population. In 1830, the number of free Blacks living in Maryland had risen to nearly 53,000³⁶ which represents a 33 per cent increase compared to 1820.

In December 1831, the Maryland State Legislature allocated US\$200,000 to be spent over a period of 20 years, for the transportation and the settlement of 10,000 free Blacks and former slaves in West Africa. At the same time, it took measures to force freed slaves to leave the state. In 1832, the Maryland Legislature enacted laws limiting the freedom of free Blacks who were not allowed to vote, be a jury member, or occupy a public function, and providing for their removal to West Africa.³⁷ Against this background, there is some room for doubt about the voluntary nature of the emigration of freed Blacks from Maryland to West Africa.

The first group of emigrants from the State of Maryland arrived in 1834. The colonists settled on Cape Palmas, a rocky peninsula south of Liberia Colony and Bassa Cove Colony. The colony was called 'Maryland in Africa' and the main settler town Harper, in memory of – soldier, politician, and lawyer – general Robert Goodloe Harper (1765-1825).

The maximum number of African-American colonists that settled in 'Maryland in Africa' does not exceed 1,300³⁸ – much less than anticipated, but '*The great majority of black people, in Maryland and in the United States as a whole, emphatically refused to migrate to Africa*'.³⁹ In 1854, the Maryland colonists declared their independence from the Maryland State Colonization Society and created an independent republic, Maryland. The territory of the new state was located on the coast, between Garraway in the west and the San Pedro River in the east (in modern Ivory Coast).⁴⁰ A few years later (1856), the settlers of the republic of Maryland waged war against Grebo and Kru tribesmen – who resisted the ban on slave trading imposed on them by the republic – and asked the republic of Liberia for assistance. The joint military expedition by Liberia and Maryland was successful and it was the prelude to a closer bond. A referendum was held in Maryland in February 1857, and the republic was dissolved on 6 April 1857. An Act of the Liberian Legislature of the same date made the county of Maryland the fourth county of the Republic of Liberia. The number of colonists was then estimated at 900 and the indigenous population at 60,000.⁴¹

The colonists, 'citizens of Maryland in Liberia', became citizens of the republic of Liberia. Like Liberia, Maryland had a clause in its Constitution limiting citizenship to '*persons of colour*' and excluding the indigenous population. Furthermore, in both Liberia and Maryland, only citizens were entitled to own land. This unequal legal status and the resulting exclusion of the tribal population from the newly created state would leave its mark on the new state and lead to numerous conflicts. The main point of contention was always the tribal population's challenge to the authority of the state.

It is interesting to note that among Liberia's ten African-American presidents – all born in the United States – three came from the state of Maryland. Stephen Benson came, aged six years old, with his family to the ACS colony on Cape Montserado in 1822; he was Liberia's second President, 1856-1864. Daniel Warner travelled with his parents to the Liberia Colony in 1823 when he was eight years old; he was the country's third President, serving from 1864 till 1868. Garretson Gibson was three years old when his parents settled in the colony Maryland in Africa at Cape Palmas, in 1835. Gibson was the last African-American president, 1900-1904.⁴²

'Kentucky in Africa'

The bulk of the African-American colonists came from the Southern slave states of Virginia, Georgia, North and South Carolina, Tennessee, Mississippi, Maryland, and Kentucky. An estimated 80 per cent of the total number of emigrants came from these eight states.⁴³

The state of Kentucky saw a rapid growth of its slave population after 1790. Between 1790 and 1820, its slave population increased tenfold, from 12,430 to 126,732 enslaved people. Between 1810 and 1820, Kentucky's slave population grew nearly twice as fast as its White population: nearly 60 per cent against 34 per cent (from 80,561 to 126,732, the slave population, whereas the White population increased from 324,237 to 434,826). The number of free Blacks increased in this ten-year period from 1,713 to 2,759 representing a 61 per cent growth.⁴⁴ The growing calls to remove the free Black population from the state should be seen against this backdrop. For example, a Kentucky newspaper reported in the late 1820s that, with regard to colonisation, *'(...) it would be better to send our free black population to the African Colony, than to keep them amongst us, is acceded by all.'*⁴⁵

In 1828, an auxiliary organisation of the ACS was created in Kentucky. Like the national colonisation organisation, the White Kentuckians raised money for the removal of freeborn Blacks and manumitted slaves, who had been set free on condition of emigrating to the continent of their ancestors.⁴⁶ A striking example of the involuntary nature of emigration is found in an American newspaper from 1833, which reported that *'(...) The Rev. Richard Bibb, of Kentucky, has liberated thirty-two of his slaves – furnished them with clothing, besides 444 dollars in money, and sent them to Liberia'*.⁴⁷ That this involuntariness was no exception is evident from a newspaper report a few years later, describing the preparation of the emigration of a large group of Black people: *'(...) The colored people (...) were obtained principally in Kentucky and Tennessee, (...) and were emancipated for the purpose of colonizing.'*⁴⁸ In other words, they were manumitted on condition of emigrating to Africa.

In the 1840s, the Kentucky Colonization Society bought land on the Grain Coast for the colonisation of free Blacks and freed slaves. The organisation acquired a 40 square mile site along the St. Paul's River, north of Monrovia. In 1846, the settlement was called 'Kentucky in Africa', and its most important settler town, Clay-Ashland. The town was named after one of the founders of the ACS, the Speaker of the House of Representatives, Representative for Kentucky, and slaveholder, Henry Clay (cf. ch. 2, note 22).⁴⁹ With the creation of the

independent republic of Liberia in 1847 'Kentucky in Africa' became part of the new state and ceased to exist.

Two of Liberia's ten American-born presidents hailed from Kentucky; they grew up in Clay-Ashland. Alfred Russell arrived in the colony in 1833 at the age of 16 and rose from the vice-presidency to the presidency in 1883 after the resignation of his predecessor; he served till 1884. William Coleman settled with his widowed mother at the age of 11 in Clay-Ashland in 1853. When the incumbent president died in November 1896, Vice-President Coleman succeeded him. He was president of Liberia till the turn of the century.⁵⁰

'New Virginia'

In the early 19th century, Virginia was by far the largest slave state.⁵¹ In 1810, one in three slaves in the US lived in Virginia: 34.7 per cent of all enslaved people in the country, or 392,518 slaves (Northern and Southern states combined). By 1820, the number of enslaved people in the state had increased to 424,153. Their relative share had declined to 27.8 per cent, still more than one in four slaves in the country.⁵² The growing number of free Black persons was seen by the White population as a threat to peace and prosperity in the state: *'The rapid increase of the free people of colour, by which their number was extended in the ten years preceding the last census of the United States, from fifteen to thirty thousand, if it has not endangered our peace, has impaired the value of all the private property in a large section of our country.'*⁵³ Thomas Jefferson, 3rd President of the United States (1801-1809), recounts in 1818 that in the last year of his Administration, the Governor of Virginia contacted him with the question where the coloured population of his state could be sent: *'I received in the last year of my entering into the administration of the general government, a letter from the governor of Virginia, consulting me, at the request of the legislature of the state, on the means of procuring some such asylum to which these people might be occasionally sent. I proposed to him the establishment of Sierra Leone, (...), and at the same time suggested, if that could not be obtained, some of the Portuguese possessions in South America as most desirable. (...)'*⁵⁴

Immediately following the creation of the ACS, an auxiliary organization was established in Virginia (1818).⁵⁵ The Black population continued to increase, in 1830 the number of free Blacks had risen to more than 47,000 whereas the enslaved population totalled nearly 470,000.⁵⁶ The next year, the Colonization Society of Virginia was created. Shortly thereafter, in August 1831, the bloody Nat Turner insurrection in Southampton County shook Virginia to its foundations,

with repercussions in neighbouring states. Reportedly it was the deadliest slave rebellion in US history, leaving 55 -65 White people dead. The uprising and the massacre of Whites resulted in a multiplier of fatalities among the slave population and among free Black people, many of whom had nothing to do with the uprising. This occurred not only in Virginia but also in other slave states. The fear led to widespread violence by Whites against Black people. In a Virginia newspaper, the editor-in-chief described the scene he witnessed as ‘(...) *the slaughter of many blacks without trial and under circumstances of great barbarity* (...)’.⁵⁷ In the aftermath of the insurrection, laws were passed in Virginia, as well as in other slave states, that further restricted the position of free Black and enslaved people (outlawing education, restricting religious gatherings) and there were increasing calls to relocate free Black people to Liberia.

After the Nat Turner insurrection, the Virginia Assembly appropriated US\$90,000 for the emigration of free Black people and in 1837 the Virginia Colonization Society announced its intention to acquire a tract of land on the African coast and to create a settlement to be called New Virginia. Subsequently land was acquired from African chiefs and a settlement established on the St. Paul’s River, opposite the settler town of Caldwell in the Colony of Liberia. It immediately became part of the Commonwealth of Liberia.⁵⁸

According to the scholar Marie Tyler-McGraw, no state was more involved in the creation of Liberia than the State of Virginia. ‘*White Virginians provided much of the political and organizational leadership and black Virginians provided a majority of the emigrants*’.⁵⁹ Indeed, one third of all colonists in the period 1820-1860 originated from Virginia. This slave-holding state headed the list of states with the highest number of African-American emigrants. Almost 75% of the settlers in Liberia originated from Virginia, Maryland, and North Carolina (Census of 1843).⁶⁰ Liberia’s first president, Joseph Jenkins Roberts was a Virginian. In 1829, at the age of 20, he arrived in the colony with his family. In January 1842, Roberts – almost 33 years old – was appointed Governor of the Commonwealth of Liberia, the first time that a colonist was in charge of the colony. Until then this position had been filled exclusively by White ACS Agents. In January 1848, Roberts was installed as the first president of the new republic, a position he held until 1856. After the ill-fated Royce Administration, he again held the highest office in the republic, from 1872 to 1876. Two other African-American presidents came from Virginia too. James Spriggs Payne travelled to the colony of Liberia on the same boat as Joseph Jenkins Roberts (in 1829), ten years old. He became Liberia's fourth president (1868-1870) and also served a second term (1876-1878). Anthony William Gardner⁶¹ hailed from Southampton

County, Virginia, and was also ten years old when he immigrated with his parents to Liberia in 1830. In 1878 he succeeded Payne as President of the Republic. Gardner resigned prematurely in January 1883 during a political crisis caused by a protracted border conflict with the British in neighbouring Sierra Leone.⁶²

'Ohio in Africa'

Ohio, like other Northern states, had outlawed slavery, yet free Black people did not have the same rights as White people. The total population grew at an extraordinary rate, from 230,760 in 1810 to nearly 1 million in 1830 and almost 2 million in 1850. The number of Black people also increased, both in absolute numbers and as a percentage of the total population. While 'Free Non-Whites' (a category used in the censuses) numbered only 1,899 in 1810 (or 0.8%), ten years later their number had more than doubled to 4,723 (still 0.8%), but by 1850 the number had risen to 25,000 people or 1.3% of the total population of the state. Most of the Black population lived in the Southern part of the state, at or near the border with Kentucky, a slave state. This may have been related to the Fugitive Slave Act of 1850⁶³ and the help of Black Ohioans to fugitive slaves from the Southern slave states.⁶⁴

Early in 1848, members of the Ohio Committee of Correspondence of the American Colonization Society (an auxiliary organization of the ACS) expressed the idea of purchasing a territory in West Africa, beyond the limits of Liberia – which had been proclaimed an independent republic in the preceding year – with the intention of creating a colony for the Black people of Ohio. A second objective was to combat the still ongoing slave trade in the area with the help of the colonists. They had in mind an area northwest of Liberia, the Galinhas, a hotbed of slave traders. In the autumn of 1848 President Roberts visited Britain and raised funds from a rich anti-slavery supporter which, combined with funds from wealthy individuals in Ohio, would be sufficient to purchase the territory. Most funds had been pledged on condition of eradicating slave trading activities in the region. In February 1849, a British squadron arrived in the coastal region between their Sierra Leone colony and the republic of Liberia. Slave barracoons in the area were destroyed, slaves liberated and local, tribal militia defeated. To prevent the return of slave traders, the British squadron carried out a blockade of slave trading points for about fifteen months, which may have cost the English an estimated US\$200,000. The local chiefs, who had profited handsomely from the slave trade, saw their income diminish or disappear and were thus forced to reach an agreement with the Liberian colonists and sell their land to Liberia. In May 1850,

President Roberts announced that the Galinhas territory had been purchased from African kings and chiefs. The coastal area of approximately 200 miles was immediately incorporated into the state's territory which now included a coastline of approximately 700 miles.

After the departure of the British squadron and the purchase of the territory, the Ohio chapter of the ACS, supported by a major donor from Cincinnati, Ohio, favoured rapid colonisation of the newly acquired territory to prevent a revival of the slave trade in the region. In Ohio there was interest, manifested by some Black people, to leave for Liberia. It was agreed with President Roberts that one-half of the Galinhas territory would be available for emigrants from Ohio (and from neighbouring states Indiana and Illinois⁶⁵). The colony thus created would constitute a new county of the republic of Liberia and would be called *Ohio*.⁶⁶ However, the Colonization Society failed to obtain the needed funds from the Ohio Legislature for a colonisation scheme for the Black population. Financial deficits at the state level and the refusal (unwillingness) to pay for the emigration of Black people from *other states* were major reasons for this failure. Moreover, tribal wars in the Galinhas contributed to a decline in enthusiasm for colonisation, but reportedly *‘The most threatening influence on the “Ohio in Africa” plan was the continuous heckling done by the abolitionists who everywhere attended colored people's meetings and advised them to “stay home” and fight for their rights. The colonization movement was condemned as unjust and inhumane.’*⁶⁷ And so, the ambitious project never materialised. There were, however, some Black people from Ohio who emigrated, through the usual ACS channels. One of them was Edward James Roye. Born in Newark, Ohio, in 1815, Roye came to Liberia in 1846, sponsored by the ACS. In January 1870, he became Liberia's fifth African-American president. His reign was short and ended tumultuously. In October 1871, President Edward James Roye was deposed in a violent coup d'état under circumstances that were never fully clarified.

The 1830s – Overview

Whereas the ACS and other colonisation societies sent positive and enthusiastic reports and letters from the colony,⁶⁸ in reality the colonists were facing hard times even though the majority of them enjoyed their freedom. The climate was tough and many colonists did not survive the climate and the tropical diseases. Moreover, there were many conflicts, including with the indigenous population, who were confronted with people who had come from far away – overseas – and were now living and working on their lands. Furthermore, there were conflicts

with the numerous slave traders who persisted in their illegal and objectionable activities, not only nearby the colony but even within the territory claimed by the settlers. And relations with the ACS were far from harmonious. The ACS Directors, managers, and Agents often showed a very paternalistic attitude towards the free-born Blacks and freed slaves. In daily practice, all important decisions in the colony were taken by the White ACS Agents. There was even tension and conflict between the different groups of colonists. The African-American colonists came from different states, not all had the same social status, and their level of education varied widely. Lastly, Britain and France refused to acknowledge the authority of the ACS and other colonisation societies in the colonies on the Grain Coast. This often led to conflicts between French and British traders on the one hand and settlers on the other hand, notably as the colonies expanded and the commercial activities of the colonists increased. However, as soon as a European country threatened to infringe upon the rights of colonists or to seize the land of the colony, endangering the existence of the colony, the government of the United States would intervene militarily or diplomatically. Notwithstanding all problems, dangers, and conflicts, by the end of the 1830s the territory claimed by the African-American colonists extended from Cape Mount in the west to the San Pedro River in the east, a coastal line of some 300 miles, and some 20-30 miles inland.⁶⁹

The Commonwealth of Liberia

In 1838/1839, Liberia Colony and Bassa Cove Colony united and formed the Commonwealth of Liberia. The Commonwealth comprised the eight settler towns of Monrovia, New Georgia, Caldwell, and Millsburg in Liberia Colony and Marshall, Bexley, Bassa Cove, and Edina in Bassa Cove Colony. A central government was organised and established in Monrovia. The ACS Board appointed Thomas Buchanan as Governor of the Commonwealth. Thomas Buchanan was the General Agent of the Pennsylvania Colonization Society and had been Governor of Bassa Cove Colony until 1837. Joseph Jenkins Roberts, a colonist from Virginia and a prosperous trader, became Vice-Governor. Roberts had a multiracial background. In fact, he *'was so light that he could have easily passed for a white man'*, according to a well-known Liberian scholar and statesman, Abayomi Karnga.⁷⁰ An elected council of colonists would act as a legislative body although the ACS retained the right of veto on all decisions. Citizenship was restricted to colonists; male colonists aged 21 and older had the right to vote. A Supreme Court was created, presided over by the Governor. The

US Government immediately reacted to the creation of the Commonwealth with a much-needed supply of arms, ammunition, cannon, naval boats, and supplies.⁷¹

The census of 1838 showed that there were 2,247 colonists (recaptured slaves and the tribal population were not registered), 20 churches, 10 schools, and 4 printing presses.⁷² Another source mentions that the Commonwealth contained 9 towns, 21 churches, 30 ministers, 10 day schools, many Sabbath schools, 4 printing presses, and two newspapers (the Liberia Herald, and the African Luminary, a religious paper).⁷³ A third source mentions 18 churches (including 4 in Monrovia, 2 in New Georgia, 3 in Bassa Cove, 1 in Marshall and 2 at Cape Palmas). Of these, 8 were Baptist, 6 Methodist, 3 Presbyterian and 1 Episcopalian.⁷⁴ The latter source also includes the colony of 'Maryland in Africa', making it strictly speaking not comparable with the other two sources, but it seems justified to conclude that there were more churches than schools in the colonies. Most churches were not only houses of worship but also organised Sunday schools and Bible classes. The ten primary schools were supported generally by foreign education and missionary societies. There was no secondary school. An estimated 500 – 1,000 indigenous people were also living in the colonies, mainly youth. Monrovia was the largest settlement, with about 1,200 inhabitants and an area of nearly two miles in length and one mile in width.⁷⁵

Illustration 17

Map of the West Coast of Africa from Sierra Leone to Cape Palmas including the Colony of Liberia. J. Ashmun and A. Finley, 1831.



Source: J. Ashmun and A. Finley, 1831 (Fred van der Kraaij collection).

Thomas Buchanan died in 1841 and was succeeded by Vice-Governor Roberts. This was an historic transfer because it was the very first time that the colony was governed by a colonist. The following year, ‘Mississippi in Africa’ joined the Commonwealth. The name ‘Mississippi in Africa’ changed to Sinoe County, the original name of the region.⁷⁶

The 1840s – Overview

Furthermore, the Commonwealth of Liberia had to deal with trade conflicts with European countries and the pressure exerted by the British and French government on the settlers and the indigenous population increased. In 1842, the French flag was hoisted in Garraway, between Sinoe County and Maryland in Africa. The British Navy and the colonial Liberian authorities seized each other’s ships more than once. Governor Roberts travelled for consultations (and support) to the United States in 1844. Shortly after his return to Monrovia an American squadron paid a ‘courtesy call’ to the Commonwealth. Meanwhile, the number of colonists increased, little by little, between 1842 and 1845. The Commonwealth’s territory also expanded in the same period.

In 1846, the umpteenth conflict with the British angered the government in Monrovia. When the captain of a British ship refused to pay harbour dues in Bassa County, the colonial authorities seized his vessel. This seizure led to the British government order to seize a ship of an African-American colonist. The British refused to acknowledge the authority and jurisdiction of the ACS in the Commonwealth since it was a private organisation. Subsequently, in 1847 – and after consultation with the ACS – the African-American colonists declared ‘Liberia’ an independent and sovereign republic.

Notes

¹ Huberich 1947, 145.

² Huberich 1947, 147-148.

³ *Constitution, For the Government of the African Colony of Liberia. Articles 1 to 10*, The National Advocate, New York, July 9, 1825; and *The historical importance of the 1824 Constitution*: <http://www.liberiapastandpresent.org/1824Constitution.htm>, accessed on 10 September 2025.

⁴ Fox 1919, 89, citing Lugenbeel, James Washington (1850), *Sketches of Liberia, Comprising a Brief Account of the Geography, Climate, Productions, and Diseases*

of the Republic of Liberia. Washington DC. J.W. Lugenbeel served in several functions in relation to Liberia. In 1843 he arrived in Monrovia as the ACS appointed Colonial Physician in the Commonwealth of Liberia. At about the same time he was the US Government Agent for Recaptured Africans. Following the Declaration of Independence he was appointed US Consular Agent in 1848, a function he occupied till his return to the United States the following year. (Source: Huberich 1847, 848).

⁵ *The Young Men's Colonization Society of Pennsylvania*, The Christian Mirror, Portland, Volume XIII, No.12, October 30, 1834, p. 4, column 5.

⁶ The Christian Intelligencer confirms in its 8 July 1837 edition the well-known fact that emigration was not always voluntarily -: '*(...) eleven persons of color have been freed by will for the purpose of going to Bassa Cove. (...)*'. The writer of the article adds that '*(...) such are the laws of the State, that unless the Colonization Society receives them when set free, they are liable to be sold again and this made slaves for life.*'. The Colonization Society meant here is the Pennsylvania Colonization Society. Source: *Colonization*, Christian Intelligencer, Edited and Published By An Association Of The Protestant Reformed Dutch Church, Volume VII, No. 50, New York, July 8, 1837, p. 3, column 3.

⁷ Huberich 1947, 568-578.

⁸ There is more than one version of the origin of the name Edina. One version states that the settlement was founded in 1832 and was named after the city of Edinburgh in Scotland, which co-financed the foundation of the settlement. Source: Gilman, Daniel Coit; Peck, Harry Thurston; Colby, Frank Moore (1906), *The New International Encyclopaedia*, New York: Dodd, Mead and Company, p.188, cited in: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Edina,_Liberia, accessed on 19 September 2025. Huberich (1947) reports that in 1833 a philanthropic society in Edinburgh, United States ('either Edinburgh in Pennsylvania, or Edinburgh in Mississippi' – Huberich considers the latter the most likely) sent a group of coloured people to the Liberia Colony, who were settled on a piece of land on the south bank of the St. John's River, purchased from chief Bob Gray. That is why the settlement was called Edina. Huberich 1947, 154.

⁹ The settler town of Bexley or Bexely is named after Lord Bexley (1766-1851), a high-ranking English politician, Chancellor of the Exchequer, who was one of the only three non-American Vice-Presidents of the American Colonization Society. Source: Facebook, Bexley Archives, 'Liberia's Bexley', dated 14 July 2019, <https://www.facebook.com/BexleyArchives/posts/liberias-bexleya-fascinatingwards-words-todayrecent-posts-on-nicolas-vansittart/2302857033091101>, accessed on 19 September 2025.

¹⁰ '*Liberia As It Is*' 1838.

¹¹ Tracy, Joseph and Solomon Peck, Enoch Mudge, William Cutter, Enoch Mack (184), *History of American Missions to the Heathen, from their Commencement to the Present Time*, Spooner & Howland, pp. 558-571, 619; in: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Edina,_Liberia, accessed on 19 September 2025.

¹² Named after Eliott Cresson, founder of the Pennsylvania Colonization Society and rich Philadelphia trader who had financed the settlers' journey to West Africa.

¹³ *Grand Bass(u)a settlements*, in: Library of Congress-Exhibitions-The African-American Mosaic: Liberia, <https://www.loc.gov/exhibits/african/afam003.html>, accessed on 12 September 2025.

¹⁴ Lindsey, Susan E. (2020), *Liberty brought us here. The true story of American slaves who migrated to Liberia*. University Pres of Kentucky, 27-38. Also: Miller, Randall (Ed.) (1978), *'Dear Master'. Letters of a slave family*. Cornell University Press. Ithaca, and London, 71.

¹⁵ Dunn, D. Elwood (2022), *A Liberian Life. Memoir of an Academic and Former Minister of State for Presidential Affairs*, Brill, Leiden, 3.

¹⁶ Huberich 1947, 597.

¹⁷ Huberich 1947, 598

¹⁸ Banks Henries 1954/1966, 70.

¹⁹ Sources: Alford, Terry, Alford (1977), *'Prince among Slaves. The True Story of an African Prince sold into Slavery in the American South*. Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, New York. Numerous American newspapers published articles about the remarkable and unusual life of Abdul Rahman Ibrahima. Unfortunately, not all publications were factually consistent, which significantly complicated my research. The Christian Mirror (Portland, Me.) paid extensive attention to the shocking and fascinating story of the 'The Prince of Timboughtou' in various editions in 1828 and 1829 - see the issues dated 28 March 1828 ('*The Unfortunate Moor*', p. 2); 31 October 1828 ('*The Prince of Timboughtou*', p. 4); 2 April 1829 ('*Randall on a Moorish Prince*', p. 3), and 9 July 1829 ('*The Moorish Prince*', p. 4). Also the Boston Recorder and Religious Telegraph (Boston, Mass.) published an article on this unfortunate captured and enslaved African ('*The Prince of Timbuctoo*', 25 April 1828) as well as The Philadelphian (Philadelphia/Penn.), on 23 May, 1828, '*The Captive African Restored To Liberty*', also the Christian Register (Portland/Me.), '*The Prince of Timbuctoo, Abdul Rahhahman*', 31 October 1828, and the Philadelphian Recorder (Philadelphia/Penn.), '*The African Prince*', 4 July 1829, p. 3.

²⁰ Huffman, Alan (2004), 153-157, and Huberich 1947, 597-609.

²¹ Huberich 1947, 611-612. See Part V, The Slave Trade In And Around The American Colonies And The Attempts To End It.

²² Alan Huffman (2004) wrote a fascinating book – ‘a combination of a reportage and narrative history’ – about the rich Mississippi cotton planter Isaac Ross, his last will stipulating the selling of his Prospect Hill plantation and using the proceeds to transport his two hundred slaves to West Africa, the legal battles, and the deadly slave revolt that burned the Ross Mansion to the ground – and the final outcome: the ex-slaves emigrating to Liberia.

²³ Huffman 2004, 84-85 and Huberich 1947, 608.

²⁴ Huffman 2004, 155.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Huffman 2004, 161-162.

²⁷ *Colonization*, in: The Christian Mirror, Portland, March 24, 1842, Vol. XX, No. 34, p. 3, column 2.

²⁸ Huberich 1947, 609-611.

²⁹ Huberich 1947, 599. Burrowes (2013) reports a total number of African-American emigrants from the State of Mississippi of 612 during the period 1830-1885 but does not specify in which colony they settled, 39.

³⁰ Huberich 1947, 614-615. See also, Jo M. Sullivan, Jo M. (1979) ‘Mississippi in Africa: Settlers among the Kru, 1835-1847’, in *The Liberian Studies Journal, Volume VIII(2)*, 79-95.

³¹ In the ‘Discussion of the Literature’ three works have been included which contain a detailed account of the history of the Maryland State Colonization Society, the colony ‘Maryland in Africa’, and its successor ‘Maryland in Liberia’: (1) Campbell, Penelope (1971), *Maryland in Africa. The Maryland State Colonization Society 1831-1857*. University of Illinois Press; (2) Hall, Richard L. (2003), *On Afric’s Shore. A History of Maryland in Liberia 1834-1857*. Baltimore, Maryland Historical Society; (3) Latrobe, John H.B. (1885), *Maryland in Liberia: A History of the Colony Planted By the Maryland State Colonization Society Under the Auspices of the State of Maryland, U.S. At Cape Palmas on the South-West Coast of Africa, 1833-1853*. Maryland Historical Society Fund Publication No. 21. Baltimore.

³² Hall, Richard L. (2003), *On Afric’s Shore. A History of Maryland in Liberia 1834-1857*. Baltimore, Maryland Historic Society, 15.

³³ Maryland State Colonization Society Overview, in: The Maryland State Archives Present: Legacy of Slavery in Maryland, An Archives of Maryland Electronic Publication, https://slavery.msa.maryland.gov/html/casestudies/mscs_overview.pdf, accessed on 16 September 2025.

³⁴ *Maryland State Colonization Society*, in: Methodist Protestant, Baltimore, MD, March 11, 1831. New Series – Vol. 1, No. 10. Edited by Gamalie Bailey, M.D. –

Published for the Methodist Protestant Church, By J.J. Harrod, Baltimore, p. 77-78, column 1-3, and p. 78, column 1.

³⁵ *Slave, Free Black, and White Population, 1780-1830*, <https://userpages.umbc.edu/~bouton/History407/SlaveStats.htm> accessed on 16 September 2025.

³⁶ Freehling, H. (1991), *The Road to Disunion: Secessionists at Bay, 1776-1854*, Vol. 1, Oxford University Press, p. 210 as reported by https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Republic_of_Maryland – accessed on 15 September 2025.

³⁷ Hall 2003, 25.

³⁸ Huberich mentions that the Maryland State Colonization Society has settled at ‘Maryland in Liberia’ 1,227 persons during the 1831-1862 period (Huberich 1947, 41). Burrowes reports only 402 emigrants from the State of Maryland in the 1830-1879 period of which 29 in the 1860-1879 period (Burrowes 2013, 39), although adding that ‘Of those who settled in Maryland County in Liberia, roughly 87 percent were from the State of Maryland and 10 percent from Georgia, with a smattering from Virginia and Tennessee.’ (Burrowes 2013, 40, partly based on Penelope Campbell who states that the number of emigrants totalled 1,049, of whom 934 came from Maryland, 35 from Virginia, and 80 from Georgia (Campbell 1971, 196).

³⁹ Hall 2003, XVI.

⁴⁰ The territory and boundaries of the new state of Maryland are well described by Huberich 1947, 1013.

⁴¹ Campbell 1971, 236.

⁴² Smith, David, Jr. (2004), *The African American Presidents: The Founding Fathers of Liberia, 1848-1904*. New African American History Press, Atlanta, Georgia, 12-20 and 46-49.

⁴³ Burrowes 2013, 39.

⁴⁴ *Slave, Free Black, and White Population 1780-1830*, <https://userpages.umbc.edu/~bouton/History407/SlaveStats.htm>, accessed on 19 September 2025.

⁴⁵ *Colonization*, From The Kentucky Olive Branch, in: Daily National Intelligencer, Washington, December 17, 1829, No. 5266, Vol. XVII, p. 2, column 3.

⁴⁶ ‘*Kentucky in Africa*’, A special edition of Kentucky Life, Kentucky Educational Television, PBS, <https://ket.org/program/kentucky-in-africa/>, accessed on 18 September 2025.

⁴⁷ *Liberia*, in: Niles’ Weekly Register, Baltimore, April 13, 1833, Fourth Series, No 7 – Vol. VIII., Vol. XLIV, p. 98.

⁴⁸ *Colonization Society*, in: Christian Intelligencer, New-York, May 13, 1837, Volume VII, No. 42, p. 2, column 1-2.

⁴⁹ *Notable Kentucky African Americans database, Kentucky Colonization Society*: <http://nkaa.uky.edu/nkaa/items/show/744>, accessed on 18 September 2025.

⁵⁰ Smith 2004, 36-45.

⁵¹ The state's territory and boundaries changed in 1861 when, after Virginia sided with the Confederates at the outbreak of the Civil War, the western part of the state seceded and continued as West Virginia (April 1861). On 20 June 1863, West Virginia officially became the 35th state of the United States.

⁵² *Slave, Free Black, and White Population 1780-1830*, <https://userpages.umbc.edu/~bouton/History407/SlaveStats.htm>, accessed on 19 September 2025.

⁵³ *Colonization Society*, National Intelligencer, Washington, January 17, 1818, Vol. XIX, pp. 1 and 4.

⁵⁴ Copy of a letter from Thomas Jefferson, Late President of the United States, to John Lynd, dated Monticello, Jan. 21, 1811, in *Colonization Society*, National Intelligencer, Washington, January 17, 1818, Vol. XIX, No. 2703, pp. 1 and 4.

⁵⁵ *Colonization Society*, National Intelligencer, Washington, January 17, 1818, Vol. XIX, No. 2703, pp. 1 and 4.

⁵⁶ *Slavery in Virginia*, The Christian Mirror, Portland, March 24, 1842, Vol. XX, No. 34, pp. 1-2.

⁵⁷ Aptheker, Herbert (1983), *American Negro Slave Revolts*, International Publishers, New York, 301 citing the Richmond Whig dated September 3, 1831, source: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nat_Turner%27s_Rebellion#cite_note-33, accessed on 25 September 2025.

⁵⁸ Huberich 1947, 21-22.

⁵⁹ Tyler-McGraw 2007, text on dust-jacket.

⁶⁰ Tyler-McGraw 2007, 128. According to Sawyer, more than 60 per cent of the emigrants who came to Liberia between 1820 and 1842 came from Virginia, North Carolina and Maryland (Sawyer 1992, 99).

⁶¹ Sometimes – incorrectly – spelled as Gardiner.

⁶² Smith 2004, 6-12, 20-23, 32-36.

⁶³ The Fugitive Slave Act of 1850 required citizens and officials of Northern free states to cooperate in the return of runaway slaves. Thus, this law required anti-slavery citizens in the free states to cooperate in the enforcement of slavery (in the Southern states) and contributed to the tensions between 'North' and 'South' that led to the Civil War.

⁶⁴ *Slave, Free Black, and White Population, 1780-1830*, <https://userpages.umbc.edu/~bouton/History407/SlaveStats.htm> accessed on 16 September 2025; and *Free African Americans in Ohio*, Rutherford B. Hayes Presidential Library and Museums, <https://www.rbhayes.org/research/free-african-americans-in-ohio/>, accessed on 26 September 2025.

⁶⁵ Shunk, Edward Wesley, *Ohio in Africa*, Ohio History Journal, Volume 51, April – June 1942, Number 2, 79-88, 80.

[https://resources.ohiohistory.org/ohj/browse/displaypages.php?display\[\]=0051&display\[\]=79&display\[\]=88](https://resources.ohiohistory.org/ohj/browse/displaypages.php?display[]=0051&display[]=79&display[]=88), accessed on 27 September 2025. Edward Wesley Shunk originally prepared *Ohio in Africa* as a chapter of a thesis entitled ‘*The Negro Colonization Movement in Ohio prior to the Civil War*’, which was presented for the degree of Master of Arts at the Ohio State University, August 1941.

⁶⁶ *Ohio in Africa. Memorial To the Honorable, the Senate and House of Representatives of the State of Ohio*. Ohio Committee of Correspondence, of the American Colonization Society. January 8, 1851, 1-4.

⁶⁷ Shunk 1942, 79-88.

⁶⁸ Reports of the colonisation societies and articles in US newspapers of this period contain numerous examples of such positive and enthusiastic reporting. Negative reports are rare, if any.

⁶⁹ Van der Kraaij 1983, 7-8.

⁷⁰ Karnga, Abayomi (1926), *History of Liberia*, D.H. Tyte & Co., Liverpool, 39. Abayomi Karnga was born in Grand Cape Mount County, Liberia, and of Congo recaptive parentage, his father was Prince of Solongo in nowadays Democratic Republic of Congo. He was a prominent Liberian scholar, politician and statesman (1883-1951). Source: Dunn, D.E., & Holsoe, S.E. (1985), *Historical Dictionary of Liberia*. African Historical Dictionaries, No. 38. The Scarecrow Press, Metuchen, NJ, and London, UK, 99

⁷¹ Yancy, Ernest J., (1971), *Liberia – A Nineteenth-Twentieth Century Miracle*. Nateev-Printing and Publishing Enterprises, Tel-Aviv, 155.

⁷² Roberts, Thomas D., Irving Kaplan, Barbara Lent, Dennis M. Morrissey, Charles M. Townsend, Neda Franges Walpole (1972), *Area Handbook for Liberia*. Washington DC, The American University, 11-12. However, Huberich mentions a settler-population of 2,281 persons in 1838 (Huberich 1947, 567).

⁷³ *The New Republic* 1850, 166.

⁷⁴ ‘*Liberia As It Is*’ 1838.

⁷⁵ *Liberia*, Zion’s Herald’, Vol. IX, No. 16, Boston, April 18, 1838.

⁷⁶ Huberich 1947, 611.

6

The Slave Trade in and Around the American Colonies and the Attempts to End It

The colonists were at times successful in breaking up the slave trading. However, slave trading persisted long after the arrival of the first settlers, some of whom became actively involved in this nefarious traffic. The US Navy was active in suppressing the slave trade too, dumping recaptured slaves ('Congoes') in the American colonies. The US government provided crucial military and financial support while the ACS acted in violation of its mandate.

Slave trade in and around the American colonies in the 19th century

In the 19th century and particularly in the first half of this century, the slave trade flourished in a large coastal region stretching from Rio Nunez in modern Guinea to Cape Palmas in modern Liberia ('the Windward Coast'). Tens of thousands of captured Africans were shipped and transported to the Americas, despite the outlawing of the slave trade and the naval blockades. Among the notorious slave traders active in the region were powerful, hard-hearted, and at times cruel men such as Mongo John, active in the Rio Pongo area (in nowadays Guinea), Ahmed-de-Bellah in the Fouta Djallon (also in present-day Guinea), and Pedro Blanco in the Galinhas area and in the American colonies. The most infamous slave trader was probably Theodore Canot, not least because he wrote a controversial book about his adventures and his dealings with the local population, including the slave trade.¹ However, there were also lesser-known slave traders who sailed along the West African coast in search of enslaved Africans to transport to the Americas and sell them there. The following events focus on the territory that African-American settlers occupied or claimed, a coastal region of about forty miles. In the late 1820s and 1830s, this included Cape Mesurado and its vicinity, Caldwell and Millsburg ('Junk Territory'), and Grand Bassa and Little Bassa.

The listing of events here is illustrative and is not intended to provide an exhaustive overview.

In 1829, a Swiss missionary residing in the Colony saw that slave trade was taking place in the colony: *'for within six miles from Monrovia he had seen three factories for the use of the slave traders'*.² The same year, a settler, John Brown Russwurm – who would later become the founder and first editor of the settlers' first newspaper, the Liberia Herald, and governor of 'Maryland in Liberia' (1836-1851) – wrote a concerned letter shortly after arrival in the colony. He estimated the number of settlers at about 1,550 with some 400 recaptured Africans, seized from intercepted slave ships. The number of tribal people living in and near the colony was unknown. In a letter dated 'Liberia, Nov. 19th, 1829' Russwurm wrote that *'The slave trade was carried on with more vessels, nor with greater vigour, than at present. Even now while I am writing, slavers are within forty-four miles of the colony, at Cape Mount. It is a disgrace that our Government should be so dead on the subject. The morning we arrived, we spoke an American schooner off this harbour, which, the colonists informed me, they verily believed to be engaged in this nefarious traffic'*.³ ACS Agent Richard Randall⁴ confirmed his observation, reporting from Monrovia that he had reason to believe that the horrible slave traffic was not only prosecuted at the Galinhas but also to the leeward of Monrovia, north and south of the Liberia colony, *'and to a greater extent than for many years'*.⁵ In 1830, Russwurm mentioned in his newspaper, the Liberia Herald, the settlement of a Spanish slave trader, Don Miguel, in Bassa territory.⁶ His barracoons were eventually destroyed by colonists. Mid-1830, ASC Vice-Agent Anthony D. Williams communicated that a native war had been raging for some time, between King Boatswain on one side, and the Qua people, and King Tom Bassa, of Little Bassa, on the other. King Boatswain was notoriously known to be one of the most important slave traders of the region.⁷ Interestingly, Joseph Mechlin,⁸ Colonial Agent of the ACS, wrote in 1830 that he had met with some local chiefs who made a request to be put under the protection of the colonists who were asked to establish a settlement in their neighbourhood. This way they would feel protected from King Boatswain, whose terror they all feared.⁹ The idea behind this was also expressed by a British officer who passed three years on the African coast and who, after visiting the American colony, wrote in a positive and perhaps over-optimistic article, *'Wherever the influence of this colony extends the slave trade has been abandoned by the natives, and the peaceful pursuits of legitimate commerce established in its place.'*¹⁰ ACS Vice-Agent Williams also reported that since Don Miguel's death in Bassa country his place was taken by Pedro Blanco, another Spanish slave trader, who had expanded

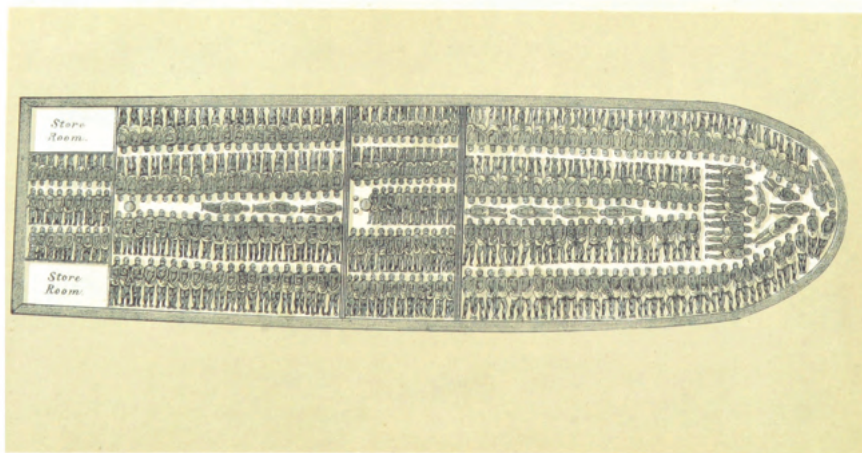
his operations from the Galinhas to Cape Mount where he established a slave factory, just 45 miles from Monrovia.¹¹ The slave trade at Little Bassa continued, as reported by the Liberia Herald in 1832,¹² as it did in the coastal region between Monrovia and Sierra Leone.¹³

Summarizing, in the early 1830s the slave trade had far from disappeared on the Windward Coast and was still going on near and even in the American colonies. In 1835, S.R. Wynkoop, an American missionary explored the Windward coast, from Cape Mount to Cape Palmas. He concluded that the Galinhas Territory was still the most extensive slave market on the West African coast. Grand Cape Mount was traditionally a slave market too, he writes, but in recent times slave trading activities had considerably diminished though not entirely disappeared. Cape Mesurado had been a slave market until the early 1820s; the establishment of the colony had broken up the slave trade. Little Bassa, located between Monrovia and Grand Bassa ('Bassa Cove'), Wynkoop reports, was no longer a slave market after January 1834, after the two major tribes – the Fishmen and Krumen – had destroyed the barracoons and chased the slave traders. Grand Bassa had been a slave market too, but the barracoons had disappeared in the 1830s: *'There were two factories – one on each side of the river St. Johns. The first was destroyed when the American Colonization Society obtained the western section, and the other when the Young Men's Society, by their agent, purchased the southwestern section.'*¹⁴ Last but not least, Young Sesters and Cape Palmas. Wynkoop found no evidence that Young Sesters, located south of Bassa Cove, was still a slave market. He concludes very optimistically that *'colonization has been the means of destroying that cursed traffic from Cape Mount to Trade Town, a distance of 170 miles.'*¹⁵ However, there are reasons to doubt the veracity of Wynkoop's observations and conclusions. One of them is the report of a successful uprising of about 60 slaves on board a Spanish slaver off the coast at Little Bassa in February 1835.¹⁶ Furthermore, it was reported in 1836 that there were many slavers on the coast and that the British Navy had captured three Spanish slavers while lying within the port of Monrovia.¹⁷ Late 1836, a US navy ship, the Potomac, sailed to Bassa Cove. The commander reported that the slave trade had severely damaged the colony over the past three years as the slave traders encouraged the local population to wage war against each other, which led to looting and kidnappings. The captured Africans were traded for goods provided by the slavers. Within a year, four new barracoons had even been created almost in sight of the colony.¹⁸ The main objection to Wynkoop's account, however, was the difference between his descriptions and optimistic conclusions and the picture

that the slave trader Canot painted in his book '*A Slaver's Log Book or 20 Years' Residence in Africa*'.¹⁹

Illustration 18

The lower deck of a slave ship.



Source: The lower deck of a Guinea-Man, in the last century by Andrew Hull Foote, available in the public domain at [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:FOOT\(1854\)_p038_A_SLAVE_SHIP.jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:FOOT(1854)_p038_A_SLAVE_SHIP.jpg).

Between 1826 and 1848, Canot was active in a large area of West Africa, including the Cape Verde Islands, the slave island of Gorée, and the entire costal area between the Gambia River and 'Maryland in Africa'. Theodore Canot was a charming and charismatic adventurer and notorious slave trader. He was born around 1807, from French-Italian parents, his real name was Theophilus Conneau. His brother was a physician at the Royal Court in France and may have found himself in a compromising situation had his brother's real name been known. Slave trader Canot not only had good connections with slave traders Ormond, Ahmed-de-Bellah, and Pedro Blanco, but also with local chiefs and Kru boatmen and also with some leading colonists. At one point, Canot even had a residence in Monrovia while also being on good terms with the highest authority in the person of Governor Finley in the colony of Mississippi in Africa, a White man (see *supra*). He built barracoons at Cape Mount, Cape Mesurado, at New Sesters or Sestros (about ten miles south of Bassa Cove), at Greenville ('Mississippi in Africa'), and at Cape Palmas ('Maryland in Africa'). His main establishments were in the Galinhas area, at Cape Mount and at New Sesters

(nowadays called New Cess). In the latter place Kru people openly worked with him; at Cape Mount he was assisted by Vai (or Vey) people.²⁰ After Finley's murder by Bassa men in 1838, Canot organised a military expedition to arrest and execute the alleged murderers who also had stolen money Finley carried with him but allegedly belonged to Canot. See *supra*. Joined by a colonial militia from Monrovia and Bassa Cove under the command of Elijah Johnson, Canot and his men attacked a number of nearby villages ('Fishtowns'), setting huts on fire.²¹ The subsequent 'Fish War' would last a year and end with a victory for the colonists. Governor Finley's close relationship with slave trader Canot was not unique. Reportedly, Governor Thomas Buchanan of the Commonwealth of Liberia (1839-1841) investigated the claim that some colonists had collaborated with slavers and had concluded that this indeed had happened.²² Governor Buchanan was an ardent opponent of the slave trade. He toured the colonies of Liberia and Bassa Cove immediately after being inaugurated and was shocked to learn that '*Probably three fourth of the vessels boarded by English cruisers, and found to be slavers, are protected by American papers and the American flag.*'²³

In a communication to General ACS Agent Wilkinson Buchanan reports the seizure of a slave vessel, the *Campbell* of Baltimore, by H.B.M. brig *Saracen* on 3 December 1839, and when visiting the slaver, saw abundant evidence that the crew was engaged in slave trading; the vessel and cargo were the property of Pedro Blanco. On 8 January 1840, another slave vessel, the schooner *Laura* of Baltimore was seized on its way to Cape Mesurado by H.B.M. schooner *Viper*. Governor Buchanan relates also in the same dispatch that while sailing from Marshall to Monrovia he set out in pursuit of a large open boat with 23 slaves, but that unfortunately the crew and slaves managed to escape.²⁴ In 1840, he attempted to purchase the Galinhas, a hotbed of slave traders despite a British blockade, with the intention to proclaim jurisdiction over the region, breaking up the slave traffic, destroying the shore establishments of the slave traders and bringing peace to a region devastated by inter-tribal wars caused by the slave trade. However, he was thwarted by the British and his plans did not succeed. The British policy to end the slave trade in the region consisted of a combination of a naval blockade, the destruction of barracoons on shore, and negotiations. The commander of the British cruisers negotiated with slave traders including Canot to persuade them to give up their nefarious commerce. Reportedly, the latter – who was installed at New Cesters – agreed, placing himself under the protection of the British government, even hoisting the British flag. Governor Buchanan was outraged when he learned of these developments, suspecting the British of making New Cesters their headquarters on the West African coast. By treaty the ACS had

acquired the right to proclaim jurisdiction over New Cesters, some years earlier, though this had never been enforced or followed by the settlement of colonists and the construction of houses. Buchanan even met with Canot, who promised to give up his trading activities at New Cesters, a strategically important region between the two Northern American colonies (Liberia and Bassa Cove) and the two Southern colonies, 'Mississippi in Africa' and 'Maryland in Africa'.²⁵

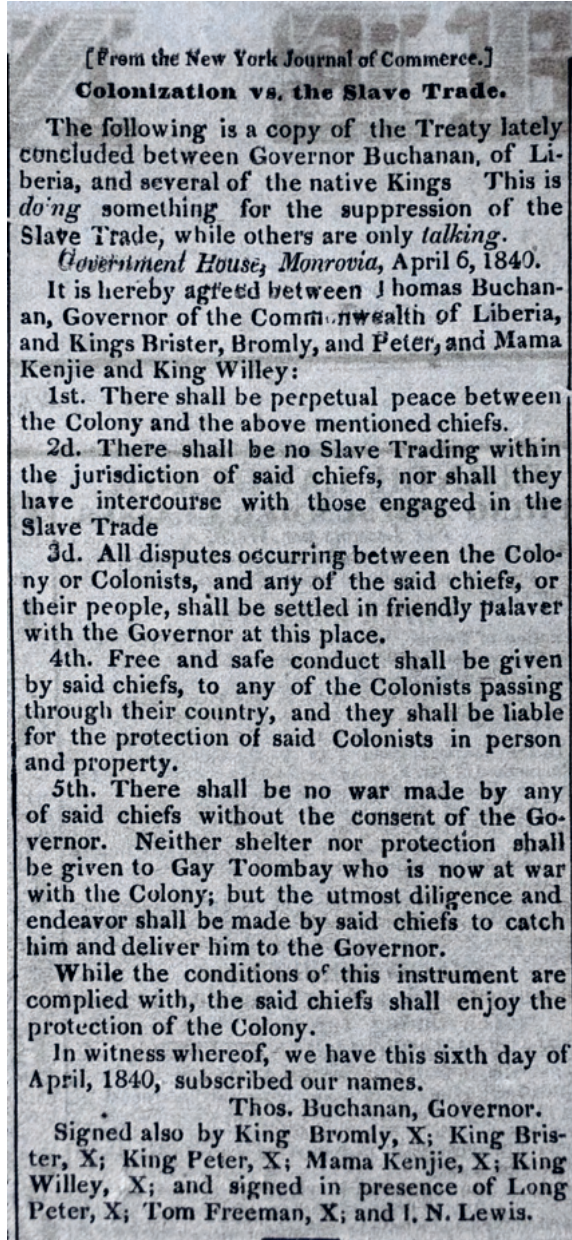
Fighting slave traders on land and at sea

There is an apparent contradiction between the ACS being an organisation ruled by slaveholders and their supporters and the suppression of the slave trade by the same organisation. Fox explains in his study '*ACS, 1817-1840 (1919)*' that the ACS objective of colonisation of Africa (see *supra* for the American interpretation of the idea of *colonisation*) can be seen as (i) a means of ridding the USA of a group of (Black) people considered to be dangerous to the peace in the country and the safety of its White population, (ii) an important factor in the elevation of Black people, who would never get this opportunity in the country where they were born, (iii) an instrument for the civilisation of Africa, and (iv) a way to spread Christianity.²⁶ Among abolitionists, there were significant differences regarding the best way to combat the slave trade. Some believed it would automatically cease once slavery was abolished. Others believed it could only be achieved through joint and permanent patrols of the waters off the coast of West Africa by the major maritime powers. Finally, there were proponents of colonisation who were convinced that the best way to eradicate the slave trade was to establish colonies along the coast that would prevent the trade of slaves between European and American slave traders and their African accomplices.²⁷ Following the 1808 ban on the importation of slaves into the United States, the ACS played a role in Congress passing an 'Act in addition to the Acts Prohibiting the Slave Trade' in 1819. This Act authorized the American president to send an American Slave Trade Patrol Squadron to the Guinea Coast to seize ships engaged in the illegal slave trade and to appropriate US\$100,000 to resettle the thus liberated slaves in Africa. See *supra*. The US government supported the ACS not only with an amount of US\$100,000.00, it later provided more funds and also gave military support, on an ad-hoc basis, to the colony.²⁸

As of around the year 1800, the US Navy seized slavers. It took another forty years, in 1842, for the Navy to establish a permanent squadron to monitor the waters of the Gulf of Guinea to prevent American-flagged ships from participating in the slave trade.

Illustration 19

Colonization vs. the Slave Trade, including a copy of the Treaty of 6 April 1840 between Governor Buchanan on behalf of the Commonwealth of Liberia and the local kings Brister, Bromley, and Peter, and Mama Kenjie, and King Wiley.



Source: *The National Gazette and Literary Register*, Philadelphia, July 31, 1840 (Fred van der Kraaij collection).

The US naval action followed – albeit belatedly – the British and French naval blockade of the region, which had been imposed after these European countries banned the slave trade; however, they had to let American slave ships pass because foreign powers were not allowed to seize American ships. The US Africa Squadron succeeded on several occasions in seizing slave vessels near the American colonies, for example near the Galinhas (1844), Cape Mount (1845), and Cape Palmas (1847).²⁹ The US Navy did not limit its role to monitoring the sea, but more than once it also provided military support to the African-American colonists on the mainland who fought the native population collaborating with slave traders. There were numerous conflicts between the colonial authorities and the indigenous population who colluded with the slave traders, leading to skirmishes and sometimes even outright wars. However, there were occasional successes, such as the peace treaty concluded by Commonwealth Governor Thomas Buchanan and local chiefs in 1840. By signing the peace treaty of 6 April 1840, the latter – some of whom notoriously collaborated with White slave traders – promised to end the slave trade in their territory. They also promised free and fair conduct to all colonists passing through their territory and to protect them and their property. They pledged to live peacefully together and pledged their cooperation in capturing a warring fellow chief. In return, the local chiefs would enjoy the protection of the settlers. See illustration 19.

Whereas the removal of non-White people from the United States and their emigration to the African continent was the main objective of the ACS, the suppression of the slave trade was not a stated objective of the colonization society. Nevertheless, the colonisation of Black people made a significant contribution to the suppression of the slave trade in and around the American colonies.

*The recaptured Africans – Recaptives – Congoes*³⁰

In 1808, the US Congress had adopted the Act Prohibiting the Importation of Slaves. On 3 March 1819, Congress adopted a Supplemental Act. This enabled the US government to send US Navy ships to the coasts of the United States and Africa to monitor shipping, to seize American slavers, and transfer recaptured Africans to US government officials. Furthermore, the 1819 Act authorized the appointment of US Agents who, *residing on the African Coast*, would receive these ‘recaptives’ or liberated Africans. The Act also allocated US\$100,000 for the transportation of the recaptured Africans. Later, the 1819 Act was very broadly interpreted and even used to justify expenses for the settlement of

recaptives in Liberia, and the construction of schools and churches, the payment of teachers – who would ‘civilise’ and convert them to Christianity – and superintendents to teach them agriculture.

The ‘US Agency for Recaptured Africans’, later called the ‘US Agency for Liberated Africans’, has played an important role in the colony of Liberia. The first ship with African American emigrants, the *Elizabeth*, not only carried 88 colonists to West Africa but also two US Government Agents for Recaptured Africans, Samuel Bacon (Principal Agent) and John P. Bankson (Assistant Agent). As mentioned in the section on ‘The first colonisation attempt, 1820’, the entire costs of the first expedition were paid by the US Government. It was the start of close cooperation ‘in the field’ between the ACS and the US Government, which went beyond the activities of the ACS Agent in the colony and the residing US Agent for Recaptured Africans. Huberich states: ‘(...) *the Government paid from one-half to two-thirds of the total remuneration received by the incumbent of the two distinct offices. Savings were also effected in the remuneration of the medical officers who attended to the wants of the colonists and the recaptured Africans; and on the basis that the recaptured Africans required military and police protection the Government contributed liberally towards building forts and furnishing arms and ammunition.*’ He adds: ‘*Most of these expenditures were not warranted under the Act of March 3, 1819.*’³¹

The US Agent for Recaptured Africans, Samuel Bacon, took out with him on the *Elizabeth* 51 workmen (male and female), among them mechanics, labourers, cooks, seamstresses, nurses and washerwomen, as well as agricultural equipment and tools for crafts such as a carpentry workshop and a smithy, even weapons, ammunition, and a barge (property of the United States). The expedition landed in Sierra Leone and settled on Sherbro Island. Then fate (and the climate) struck. Both US Agents died soon after their arrival. Furthermore, many labourers and their families did not survive. The second expedition was led by Jonathan B. Winn (Principal US Government Agent) and Ephraim Bacon (Assistant Agent). It was more successful. They arrived in Sierra Leone in late 1821, accompanied by 40 workmen, picked up the survivors of the first expedition, plus materials, equipment, and provisions, and continued to Cape Mesurado, where meanwhile – in January 1822 – the ACS had settled.

As of 1822, groups of liberated Africans arrived in the American colony. Upon arrival, the recaptives were immediately transferred to the US Government Agent for Liberated Africans. From then on, they fell under the authority and jurisdiction of the ACS. One year after their arrival, they became entitled to the same rights and privileges as the African-American colonists, who sometimes objected to

granting the 'Congo people' or 'Congoes' certain rights. In this period, the US Government continued to provide considerable material support such as building materials, food, agricultural tools and equipment – and weapons and ammunition to defend the colony against the indigenous population.

In August 1827, a large group of 142 liberated Africans arrived from Savannah, Georgia, sent by the US Government. The Principal US Government Agent in the colony, Dr Richard Randall, died half a year after his arrival. He was succeeded by his assistant, Dr Joseph Mechlin, who 'received' 91 liberated Africans from the State of Florida in 1830, also sent by the US Government. From then on, all recaptured Africans were the responsibility of the ACS.

The important financial, material, and military support by the US Government to the colony of Liberia is well documented in an 1830 audit report on the expenses of the US Navy during the preceding ten years – ten years that were crucial for the survival of the colonisation adventure. The report showed that fewer than 260 liberated Africans had been transported to Africa since the adoption of the 1819 Act, which had cost the US government a total of US\$264,710 – i.e. more than one thousand dollars per recaptive. However, these expenses were not made for the direct support to the liberated Africans, but for overhead costs such as the salaries, indemnities and other related costs of supervisors and Government Agents, for materials, food, ships, and even weapons and ammunition.³²

In 1843, an estimated number of 300 liberated Africans lived in the colony of Liberia, the only colony which received recaptives. The first groups of recaptives settled in New Georgia. In total, 5,722 recaptured Africans were settled in the colony of Liberia, up to 1867. The large majority of them arrived during the Commonwealth period and after Liberia's independence. The largest group in the colonial period (1822-1847) consisted of the 756 recaptives from the slave ship *Pons* (1845).³³ Within a relatively short period of time, in 1860 and 1861, 3,347 recaptives were landed, which caused serious problems regarding their accommodation.

Initially, the ACS provided for separated places of settlement for recaptives and African-American colonists. This led to the creation of the settlement of New Georgia,³⁴ named after the state of origin of the first group of 142 liberated Africans (from Georgia). Later, the ACS sent recaptives also to Caldwell and other settler towns. Thus, the two groups mingled, which was also necessary for logistical and financial reasons. At times, the ACS lacked sufficient funds to receive the large numbers of recaptives. When in 1845 the 756 recaptured Africans from the slave ship *Pons* were landed in the colony of Liberia, many of

them were *'in a naked, starving and almost dying condition, and all except 21 under twenty years of age'*,³⁵ the ACS decided to find them homes with settler families. In 1845, the colony was still small, with an estimated 2,500 – 3,000 colonists and less than 1,000 settler families. On average, every settler family 'received' one recaptive who started a new life as a 'ward'. *'Officially, the ward was a member of the family but, in practice, they were often used as an extra pair of hands.'*³⁶

In general, after 12 months, the adults received lands from the ACS and certain colonial privileges – under certain conditions ('good behaviour', in the judgement of the White ACS Agent). They were closely and strictly monitored by the Agent.³⁷ It was the official policy of the US Government and the ACS that the captives stay in the colony on the basis of a voluntary agreement, but where could they go? In most cases their places or regions of origin would not be known. They were called 'Congoes' ('Congo people') but no overview exists of the regions of origin of the captives. As mentioned earlier, the ACS violated its own Constitution by receiving and settling the captives. The latter felt and behaved themselves very superior to the indigenous population. They called themselves also *Americans* and dressed like the American colonists.³⁸

Concluding remark – The role of the US Government

It is hard to tell how much the US Government spent in all for the Agency for Liberated Africans. Total expenses of the main colonisation societies – the ACS and the Maryland, New York, Pennsylvania, Mississippi and Louisiana Colonization Societies – for the 1819-1866 period amounted to US\$2.6 million. The US Government's budget for the settlements amounted to US\$2.3 million in the same period, but the American government did much more. The military support it provided, and the US Navy patrols, protected the colony which legally formed no part of the United States, contributed to the natives' respect for the colonists, and helped to reduce the activities of slave traders operating in the Gulf of Guinea.³⁹

The foregoing leads us to an important conclusion. In fact, the government of the United States was a co-founder of Liberia.

Notes

¹ Mayer, Brantz (1928), *Adventures of an African Slaver. Being a True Account of the Life of Captain Theodore Canot, Trader in Gold, Ivory and Slaves on the Coast of Guinea: His Own Story as Told in the Year 1854 to Brants Mayer and Now Edited with an Introduction by Malcolm Cowley*, Albert and Charles Boni, New York. The original manuscript of Conneau's/Canot's adventures on the West African coast were published as *A Slaver's Log Book or 20 Years' Residence in Africa, the Original 1853 Manuscript by Captain Theophilus Conneau* (Prentice-Hall, Englewood Cliffs, NJ). For a more recent account of his activities nearby and within the territories of the American colonies: Brantz Mayer (1928), *Adventures of an African Slaver, Being a True Account of the Life of Captain Theodore Canot, Trader in Gold, Ivory and Slaves on the Coast of Guinea: His Own Story as told in the Year 1854 to Brantz Mayer*. Albert & Charles Boni, New York, 302-342. Huberich also describes the friendly relations between Canot and the settlers in Monrovia and Cape Palmas (Huberich 1947, 439-440). Burrowes also provides an interesting insight in Canot's slave trading activities in the vicinity of – and even within - the colonies (Burrowes 2019b, 31-33 and 51-57).

² *Swiss missionaries to Liberia*, in: Daily National Intelligencer, Washington, November 25, 1829, Vol. XVII, No. 5247, p. 3, column 3.

³ *Letter From Liberia*, in: Philadelphia Recorder, Philadelphia, June 12, 1830, Vol. VIII, No. 11, p. 4, columns 2-3.

⁴ Randall Street in downtown Monrovia is named after him.

⁵ *Liberia*, in: Christian Mirror, Portland, April 30, 1830, Volume VII, Number 38, p. 3, column 3.

⁶ *From Liberia*, as reported by the Christian Mirror and N.H. Observer, Portland, June 10, 1830, Vol. VIII, No. 44, p. 3, column 2.

⁷ *The Colony at Liberia*, in: National Gazette and Literary Register, Philadelphia, October 23, 1830, Vol. XI, No. 1507, p. 2, columns 2-3.

⁸ Mechlin Street in downtown Monrovia is named after him.

⁹ *Liberia*, in: Christian Register, Boston, January 21, 1832, Vol. XI, No. 3, p. 4, columns 1-3.

¹⁰ *The African Colony*, in: New-York American, May 1, 1832, Vol. XIII, No. 1167, p. 3, columns 2-3.

¹¹ *Latest From Liberia*, in: Philadelphia Recorder, Philadelphia, December 18, 1830, Vol. VII, No. 38, p. 2, columns 3-4.

¹² *Bassa Slave Trade*, From the Liberia Herald, December 9, 1832, in: Poulson's American Daily Advertiser, Philadelphia, February 28, 1833, Vol. LXII, No. 17,589, p. 2, column 7.

¹³ *From Western Africa*, in: Poulson's American Daily Advertiser, July 9, 1833, Vol. LXII, No. 17,647, p. 2, column 5.

¹⁴ *Liberia*, in: The Christian Mirror, April 23, 1835, Vol. XIII, No. 37, p. 2, columns 2-3.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁶ *Slave Trade at Little Bassa*, in: The Christian Mirror, Portland, May 14, 1835, Vol. XIII, No. 40, p. 3, column 2. In a short article, *News omitted*, preceding *Slave Trade in Little Bassa*, the newspaper editor expresses his doubts about the correctness of Mr. Wynkoop's statements and the 'power of colonization'.

¹⁷ *From Liberia*, in: Poulson's American Daily Advertiser, Philadelphia, March 4, 1836, Vol. LXV, No. 18,495, p. 2, column 5.

¹⁸ *American Colonies in Africa*, in: New-York American, March 27, 1837, Vol. XIX, No. 5758, p. 1, column 7.

¹⁹ See note 1.

²⁰ Lawrence, A.W. (Ed.). (1929), *Memoirs of a Slave-Trader by Theodore Canot*. Written out by Branz Mayer, London, 9-15.

²¹ Huberich 1947, 611-612, and Johnston 1906, 156. Canot gives an extensive account of the murder of Governor Findley and the subsequent punitive expedition in his book, Chapter XLII: The Murder of Governor Findley; Mayer 1928, 321-329. Johnston disputes the veracity of Canot's stories.

²² Burrowes 2019b, 58 citing Huberich 1947, 689-690.

²³ *Africa*, New York Times and Commercial Intelligencer, New York, July 10, 1839, Volume 3, Number 410, p. 1, column 1.

²⁴ *Slave Trade in Africa. Government House, Monrovia, 27th January 1840*, Newark Daily Advertiser, Newark, N.J., April 23, 1840, p. 2, column 5.

²⁵ Huberich 1947, 682-687.

²⁶ Fox 1919, 51-52.

²⁷ Fox 1919, 221.

²⁸ Huberich thoroughly discusses the objective as well as the legal complications and interpretation of the US law that enabled this US\$100,000 support (Huberich 1947, 68-71 and 622 ff.) See also Chapter 6, 'The Congo-people or recaptives', in the present publication.

²⁹ Canney, Donald L. (2006), *Africa Squadron. The U.S. Navy and the Slave Trade*. Potomac Books, Washington D.C., 233. Canney's book is highly recommended for an in-depth study of the US Africa Squadron. Canney describes and analyses the Africa Squadron's operations along the African coast and explains how and why the

squadron failed to effectively realize the US Navy's anti-slavery goals in the antebellum era.

³⁰ This section is mainly based on Huberich 1947, 618-637.

³¹ Huberich 1947, 618.

³² Huberich 1947, 621-630.

³³ The following publications contain much information on the arrival of nearly 1,000 recaptives from the slaver Pons in the colony: (1) *US Senate, 31st Congress, 1st Session, Rep. Com. No. 14, in Senate of the United States*, January 22, 1850; Canney 2006, 71-84; Van der Kraaij 2015, 4.

³⁴ Initially the settlement was called Careysburg, after Lott Carey. The name New Georgia was dropped later and nowadays the town has its original name back.

³⁵ Van der Kraaij 2015, 4.

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ See e.g. Ashmun's 1827 report to the Secretary of the Navy, in: Huberich 1947, 632-633.

³⁸ Huberich 1947, 634-635.

³⁹ Huberich 1947, 637.

PART FOUR

1847

Independence

7

1847 – The Independent Republic of Liberia

Liberia's constitution, seal, and flag reflect the American colonial background of the new republic, from which the 'Founding Fathers' excluded the local, indigenous population. Moreover, the unclear demarcation of the national territory led to numerous problems and conflicts.

Since the 15th and 16th centuries, European sailors and traders regularly frequented the West African coast. In the 19th century, these were mainly American, English, French, Dutch, Spanish, and Portuguese traders who were accustomed to trading and negotiating directly with the coastal population. They were averse to any trade restrictions and opposed the monopolistic claims of European governments, which they saw as a threat to free trade. The traders, particularly the British, rejected claims made by the colonial Liberian authorities and were supported in this by the British navy. The British contested the Liberian colonial authorities' claim to regulate, subject to tariffs, restrict, or prohibit the trade of foreign traders in their territory. They argued that the colony of Liberia was not a sovereign state with the right to impose these trade-restrictive measures. Conflicts had always existed since the establishment of the ACS colony in the early 1820s, but they increased as the colonial territory expanded. During Governor Buchanan's administration (1839-1841), the conflicts intensified, resulting in the seizure of ships, among other things. They reached a peak during the administration of Buchanan's successor, Governor Joseph Roberts, an African-American colonist.

The founding of the Republic of Liberia

In July 1847, a Constitutional Convention was held in Monrovia, seat of the Commonwealth of Liberia. Eleven delegates to the Convention had been elected to frame a new Constitution: 6 from Montserrado County (Monrovia, New Georgia, Caldwell, and Millsburg, formerly Liberia Colony), 4 from Grand Bassa County (Marshall, Edina, Bexley, and Buchanan, formerly Bassa Cove) and 1 from Sinoe County (Greenville, formerly 'Mississippi in Africa'). In 1847,

Monrovia had an estimated 1,000 inhabitants and was the largest settler town; Greenville was the smallest, with less than 100 inhabitants.¹ Reportedly, ‘Congoes’ (‘Congo people’) and the indigenous peoples living in the territory of the Commonwealth did not participate in the Constitutional Convention as they were not entitled to vote; only male African-American colonists (‘citizens’) 21 years of age or over had suffrage, as stipulated in Article 24 of the Constitution of the Commonwealth of Liberia. Consequently, the eleven delegates represented about 2,500 – 3,000 people, the estimated total number of colonists living in the Commonwealth in 1847.²

The Constitutional Convention adopted the draft constitution unanimously even though the delegate from Bassa County and probably also the one from Sinoe County were against independence.³ It is very likely that the colonists in Bassa County feared the dominance of the settler-traders – the ‘merchant princes’ – in Monrovia (‘Liberia Colony’) more than the paternalistic attitude of the American Colonization Society (ACS).⁴

On 26 July 1847, Liberia was declared a ‘Free, Sovereign, and Independent Nation’. Two months later, on 27 September, the draft constitution was submitted to the voters. Many opponents of independence did not vote, resulting in 214 votes in favour and 58 against the new constitution.⁵ Hence, the final decision to declare independence was taken by a majority of the votes cast but by less than one third of the electorate.

The Constitution and the Declaration of Independence

The Constitution, which was adopted, was – it is generally believed – written by an American Harvard professor, Simon Greenleaf,⁶ and resembles in many ways the US Constitution.⁷ However, the African-American colonists contributed much more to the 1847 Constitution than what people generally assume. This is clearly shown by sections 12 and 13 of Article V, which contain the criteria for citizenship, as the American historian Robert T. Brown convincingly argues.⁸ Also the Liberian historian C. Patrick Burrowes underscores the contribution of African-American colonists to a number of important independence-related documents. He provides important information and insight by focusing on the work of one of the early colonists, Hilary Teage, who drafted the Declaration of Independence, the Preamble and the Bill of Rights.⁹ In the Declaration of Independence the representatives of the people of the Commonwealth of Liberia declare the Commonwealth a Free, Sovereign and Independent State, by the name

of the Republic of Liberia. Noteworthy is the reference made to the background of the colonists:

We the people of the Republic of Liberia were originally the inhabitants of the Unites States of America.

In some parts of that country, we were debarred by law from all the rights and privileges of men – in other parts, public sentiment, more powerful than law, frowned us down.

We were everywhere shut out from all civil office.

We were excluded from all participation in the government.

We were taxed without our consent.

We were compelled to contribute to the resources of a country, which gave us no protection.

We were made a separate and distinct class, and against us every avenue to improvement was effectively closed. Strangers from all lands of a color different from ours, were preferred before us.¹⁰

The American historian and Professor of Law, Charles H. Huberich, praises the dignity of the Declaration of Independence but criticizes the disproportionate respect expressed in this document for the ACS in view of – in his eyes – the organisation’s historical record.¹¹ The Nigerian author and former president Nnamdi Azikiwe considers the Declaration of Independence an historical epic and a literary masterpiece. However, according to Azikiwe, ‘(...), *this document failed to give the Liberian indigenes the praise due to them for not only accommodating the immigrants, but also assimilating and amalgamating with them. It failed to recognize the political acumen and the social and material cultures of the African tribes which inhabit these regions.*’¹² Azikiwe’s view corresponds to a certain extent with the opinion of the Liberian historian and politician Abayomi Karnga, who points at what he considers a huge defect in the Constitution: the omission to define the relationships between the traditional indigenous kingdoms of the Hinterland and the new republic, e.g. by opting for a federal constitution including the kingdoms and the American colonies.¹³ The exclusion of the indigenous population is indeed a striking and essential shortcoming of both the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution of the

new Republic. This exclusion would be repeated in the organic laws of the Republic enacted on basis of the constitution. The limitation of constitutional rights to colonists and their descendants would continue to exist until 7 May 1907, when the constitution was amended.¹⁴

The national symbols: the seal and the flag

The seal

The national seal shows a 19th century sailing vessel approaching the coast, a palm tree, a plough and a spade on the shore, a flying white dove with an open scroll in its claws and a rising sun. Above the emblem the national motto: THE LOVE OF LIBERTY BROUGHT US HERE and below it, the words REPUBLIC OF LIBERIA. The symbols on the seal are obvious: a peace-bringing bird, the white dove, arrives with a message from overseas (the consent of the ACS, the granting of independence).

Illustration 20

The Liberian coat of arms, with the national motto 'The Love Of Liberty Brought Us Here'.



Source: Current coat of arms of Liberia, adopted 1963 by FXXX, available in the public domain at https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Coat_of_arms_of_Liberia.svg.

The ship is a 19th century sailing boat that brought the freed slaves from the United States to West Africa. The national motto also refers to the colonists: THE LOVE OF LIBERTY BROUGHT US HERE. The spade and the plough represent tools

that the African-American colonists brought with them. The palm tree stands for one of the main products of the region.

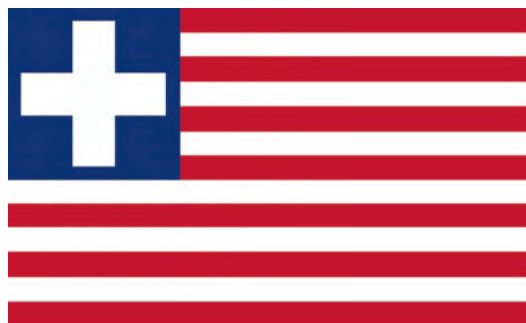
The flag

The Liberian flag shows six red stripes with five white stripes alternately and running lengthwise. In the upper angle of the flag, in the centre of a blue square, a single five-pointed white star. The Liberian flag closely resembles the American Stars and Stripes, except for the number of stripes (11 rather than the 13 on the American flag) and the number of stars. The eleven stripes on the Liberian flag stand for the eleven delegates to the Constitutional Convention who signed the Declaration of Independence. The single, white star represents Liberia as Africa's only independent republic.¹⁵ On 24 August 1847, the new flag of Liberia, made by a number of prominent ladies, was hoisted for the first time (see Box). Ever since that day, 24 August has been celebrated as 'Flag Day' in Liberia. It is interesting to note that in 2009 Liberia's Truth and Reconciliation Committee, established after the country's back-to-back civil wars to study the root causes of the wars (1989-2003), qualified the constitution, national seal, and the flag as 'divisive'.¹⁶

Illustration 21A

The Liberian Flag 1827 – 1847.

From 9 April 1827 to 24 August 1847, Liberia had a flag that was almost identical to that of the United States, as was also the explicit wish of the ACS Board, which adopted a resolution to that effect on 9 April 1827. It also consisted of 13 equal horizontal red and white stripes, with the only difference being that the blue canton of the African colony's flag featured a white cross instead of the then 24 stars of the US flag. The cross referred to the Christian background of the founders of the ACS, which was also reflected in the name originally given to the first settlement, Christopolis.

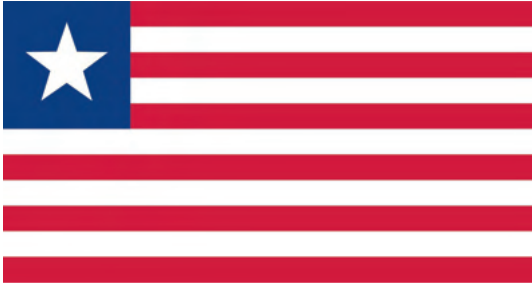


Source: Flag of Liberia (1827-1847) by Helt, available in the public domain at [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Flag_of_Liberia_\(1827-1847\).svg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Flag_of_Liberia_(1827-1847).svg).

Illustration 21B

The Liberian Flag, 1847 – present.

The 1847 flag consist of eleven equal horizontal red and white stripes, representing the eleven signatories of the Declaration of Independence, while the single white cross in the blue canton of Liberia's first flag has been replaced by a white five-pointed star.



Source: The Flag of Liberia, available in the public domain at https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Flag_of_Liberia.svg.

The following box is an almost entirely verbatim copy of an article that appeared in the Newark Daily Advertiser of 14 December 1847, based on an article from the Liberia Herald, and contains an eye witness' report of Flag Day 1847. J.J. Roberts is referred to as Governor – he had not yet been elected, and would not be inaugurated as Liberia's first president until 3 January 1848. Liberia's first flag was made by seven women representing the three colonies constituting the new republic: Sarah Draper, Mary Hunter, Rachel Johnson, Susannah Lewis (chair), Matilda Newport, Sarah McGill Russwurm, and Colinette Teage. All were born in the United States and related to prominent men. Liberia's current flag, as described in the main text, is the latest in its history.

Box 3: Rejoicing in the Colored Republic

A brief account of the celebration of the birth of the young Republic in Liberia on 24 August 1847 (abridged version, not corrected for typos)

The Twenty-Fourth

The dawn of the day was announced to the inhabitants by the thundering of a canon from Central Fort. At sunrise the staff intended to bear the testimony of female patriotism and order in the cause of

Liberia's independence rose and towered proudly in the air, ready to receive the stripes and the star, (...)

At 9 o'clock A.M. the Governor with the Commissioned and non-commissioned officers of the first regiment assembled at the Court House, and at the same time Capt. McGill's company of Light Infantry, and Captain Barbour of State Fencibles, formed in Broad Street. By this time people were pouring from all quarters in the direction of the Government square, and the Government House and piazzas were already crowded to overflowing with ladies.

At 11 the companies escorting the Governor and other officers marched up, and formed a line in front of Government House, and soon afterwards a message was sent to the ladies that His Excellency was ready to receive them. The committee appointed by the ladies to represent them on the occasion, consisting of Ms. S.E. Lewis, Mrs. M.L. Hunter, Mrs. R. Johnston, Mrs. C. Hazel, Mrs. E.M. Teage, Mrs. C. Ellis, and Mrs. W.N. Yates descended, bearing the flag, and advanced towards the Governor, who met them a few paces in front of the troops. As soon as the ladies appeared issuing from the door, the line presented arms. Mrs. Lewis presented the flag, accompanied by a neat patriotic speech. At the conclusion of the speech, three cheers went up from the troops, and the assembled multitude, which made the welkin ring, while the waving of hats in the streets, and handkerchiefs from the piazzas and windows, testified how heartedly everyone was pleased. The Governor received the flag with his accustomed gallantry, unfurled it, and handed it to the standard bearer, who, on the present occasion, was Capt. F. Payne, of the Monrovia Militia. He then replied in the best speech we ever heard him make. He briefly adverted to the past history of the colony – noticed the rapidity with which it had advanced and the present position; acknowledged the pride he felt as a representative of the Republic of Liberia, in receiving the flag at the hands of Monrovia; assured them on his behalf, and on behalf of his fellow soldiers it will never be disgraced by cowardice or treachery; and that it will be preserved among the Archives of the Republic as a testimony of their patriotism to rising generations. Three

lusty cheers announced the conclusion of the ceremony – the ladies retired and the flag with the guards took the centre of the line.

The flag is made of silk. On one side in the blue field, it bears the Motto of the Republic in large letters, thus, over the star 'The love of liberty,' under it, 'Brought us here.' On the other side, is 'Republic of Liberia.' The staff is of rose wood, with a gilt head in the form of a spear.

At half-past 11, the troops marched up to Central Fort and formed on the right of the flag staff. The staff is about 30 feet high, and erected on the most elevated spot in the centre of the town.

The flag was then detached from the spear, and bent on to the halliards. At 12 the first gun of the national salute sent forth its thunder, when the flag rapidly ascended to its place, and floated on the breeze. – At the same time a responsive gun was heard from signal hill, and the flag displayed there. A salute of Twenty-One guns was then fired, every alternate gun being from signal hill.

As soon as the salute was over this flag was lowered, and one of the bunting raised in its place. The flag was then attached to the spear, took its place in the line, and the whole marched off and halted in front of the Government House. After a halt of a few minutes, the troops marched off, escorting the Governor, other officers and a number of citizens, to the Methodist Church. When they arrived they found the Church already filled to overflowing. The flag of the republic was stationed on the right of the altar, near Mr. E. Johnson, the Marshal of the day; the left was occupied by a flag and banner of Mr. James' school. These also bore appropriate mottos. The exercises in Church were conducted in the following order. First, singing. Second, Prayer of supplication by Rev. Mr. Ellis, of the Presbyterian Church. Third, singing. Fourth, Reading of the Declaration of Independence by Hon. J.B. Gripon. Fifth, singing. Sixth, Oration by Rev. J.S. Payne, of the M.E. Church. Seventh, singing. Eighth, Prayer of thanksgiving by H. Teage of the Baptist Church. Ninth, Doxology. Tenth, Benediction by Rev. A.D. Williams.

(...) The services in Church over, the line was again formed and marched to the Government House, when the companies were dismissed.

At 2 P.M., a number of gentlemen sat down at dinner at Col. Hick's. (...) About 4, the party retired (...) and prepare for an evening's entertainment, which the indefatigable Mr. Cary was getting up in the Governor's new building. (...) At half past seven, about ninety persons – gentlemen and ladies sat down to supper. Many patriotic toasts were given, and many gallant sentiments were offered, but, be it remembered, they were drank in the very best and purest water, which Monrovia affords.

The amusements of the evening were increased by a band of music; and after the tables were removed, the guests entertained themselves in conversation until one in the morning, when they retired well pleased no doubt, each with himself, and every other. (...)

In concluding, we feel bold to assert that nothing could exceed the good order, decorum and regularity of the proceedings of the day. Everything was conducted in the most admirable order. It was a day which will be long remembered. During the ceremony of presenting the flag, many eyes were suffused with tears. And indeed who that remembered the past could forbear to weep? Who that looked back to America and remembered what he saw and felt there, could be otherwise than agitated? It is indeed a great undertaking; but that Almighty Being who hath conducted us thus far, can and will conduct us to the goal at which we aim.'

Source: Rejoicing in the Colored Republic, *Newark Daily Advertiser*, Newark, N.J., December 14, 1847, Vol. 16, No. 298, p.2, column 5.

The territory

Broadly speaking, the territory of the Republic of Liberia in 1847 covered the area from Cape Mount in the west to the boundary with the colony of 'Maryland in Africa' in the east and extended some 45 miles inland.¹⁷ Everything within this

territory, including all the peoples of this region, fell within the jurisdiction of the new Republic.¹⁸ It is important to note that the exact and detailed description of Liberia's territory in the 1848 Act on the Territorial Boundary of the Republic was a unilateral description, which did not necessarily reflect the views and agreement of other parties concerned, like the indigenous population or countries such as Britain and France. The new republic was the first and only modern state on the African continent (the century-old empire of Ethiopia represents another form of government). Huberich presents an important description of the boundaries of the territory of the republic of Liberia.¹⁹ His classic work on Liberia (1947) includes a map made by the ACS in 1846 (following page 820).

Illustration 22A

Map of Africa by Thomas Cowperthwait. Detail showing the territory of Liberia around 1850.



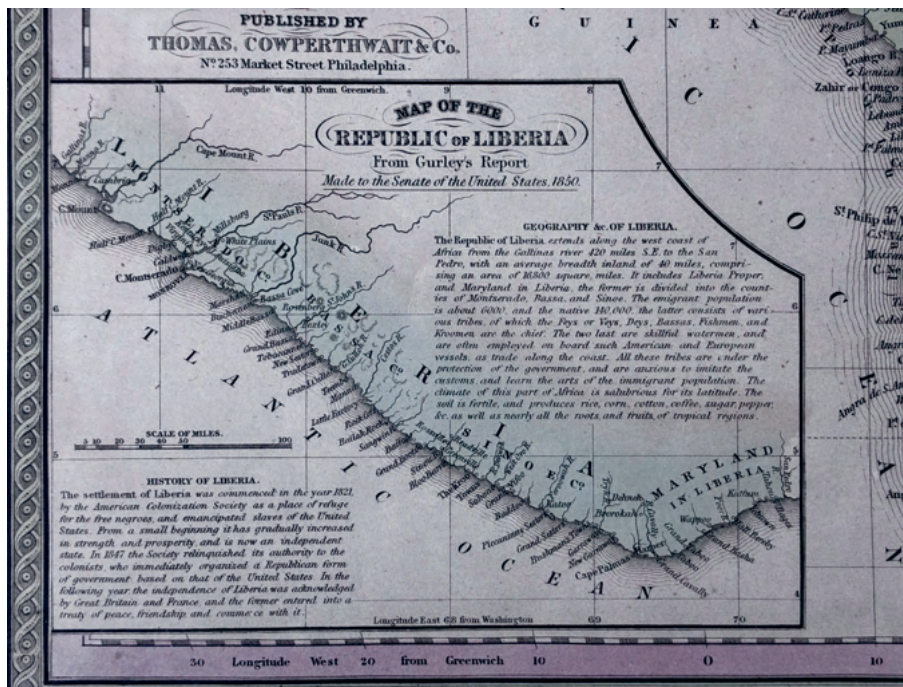
Source: Map of Africa From the Latest Authorities. Thomas Cowperthwait, 1850 (Fred van der Kraaij collection).

It is significant that on this map the inland boundaries of the new republic are lacking. In 1848 and later years the republic acquired important extensions of its territory. In the early years of the republic the Galinhas territory, between Monrovia and the Mano River, was bought in order to eradicate the slave trade in this area (1849-1850; *supra*). It is noteworthy that this was made possible with the support of the British government and private British and American financiers. Also in 1849, New Cesters – situated between Bassa and Sinoe counties – was annexed, after the successful eviction of Spanish slavers by Liberian troops, aided

by French, British, and American military assistance.²⁰ In 1857 the Republic of Maryland – created in 1854, formerly ‘Maryland in Africa’ – was annexed. As a consequence, the area between Garraway in the west to the San Pedro River in the east²¹ (in modern Ivory Coast) became part of the territory of the Republic of Liberia. All people living in this area – colonists (‘citizens’) and indigenous population (‘subjects’) – from then on fell under the authority of the government in Monrovia.

Illustration 22B

Map of the Republic of Liberia (from Gurley’s report, 1850), inset, Map of Africa, Thomas Cowperthwait, 1850.



Source: Map of Africa From the Latest Authorities. Thomas Cowperthwait, 1850 (Fred van der Kraaij collection).

Citizenship and other specific clauses

Art. V, Section 13th of the Constitution of 1847 states ‘(...) none but persons of color shall be admitted to citizenship in this Republic’. This clause excluded Whites from citizenship.

Furthermore, Art. V, section 12th of the Constitution stipulates: *'No person shall be entitled to hold real estate in this Republic, unless he be citizen of the same.'* Hence, Whites were not only excluded from citizenship in the new republic but were also excluded from owning real estate, notably land. It is generally believed that the American Simon Greenleaf is the author of the 1847 Constitution (*supra*). However, several authors have argued that this limitation of citizenship and ownership rights emanated from a wish of the African-American colonists. Brown, for example, states that *'Certainly Greenleaf, nor for that matter any other member of the American Colonization Society, could not have been responsible for sections 12 and 13 of Article V, which restricted the ownership of property and citizenship rights (...).'*²² Burrowes writes in a similar line of thought that this limitation of citizenship in section 12 of Article V was not even restrictive enough for the main architect of the Declaration of Independence, Hilary Teage, who advocated that the privilege of citizenship should be 'earned' through responsible conduct.²³

Against the background of the origin of the Republic of Liberia, this exclusion of Whites and limitation of citizenship rights and ownership of property may be understandable. However, it was disputed right from the beginning, and it would have many and severe consequences.²⁴ And yet another observation can be made. The African-American colonists who created the Republic of Liberia in 1847 also did not grant citizenship to the indigenous people of the republic. They were considered 'subjects'. Since tribal people were not citizens of the republic, they were not entitled to own land. Moreover, for the same reason they were also not eligible for public functions nor were they allowed to vote. In her book *Presidents of the First African Republic* (1963), A. Doris Bank Henriès wrote, after explaining that elections were held in the Commonwealth on 27 October 1846, to vote on the question of independence: *'Tribal and non-tribal citizens flocked to the polls on that eventful day of October 27 and voted overwhelmingly for a declaration of independence.'*²⁵ The author thus paints a surreal situation, since the concept of tribal citizens was a contradiction in terms. At the same time, the impression is given that the tribal peoples living in the area were involved or agreed with the settlers who declared an independent republic and claimed territory that was often disputed by the indigenous population.

Concluding remark

Politically and constitutionally, the Liberian state had become a reality; but not only were its indigenous populations excluded in every respect, there was also no

question of a sovereign state with complete control over its borders and territory. The threats to the young state came from the fragile relationship between settlers and the indigenous population (excluded from the new state), foreign traders including slave traders, and land-hungry European imperialist powers expanding their colonial empires in Africa. As we will see in the next chapters, the costs of the young republic's political survival drained the financial resources of the Liberian state, hampering its ability to invest in the country's socioeconomic development and the improved well-being of its population.

Notes

¹ Huberich reports 912 inhabitants in Monrovia in 1843 and 79 in Greenville for the same year, based on the Census of 1843. Data for subsequent years are not available. Huberich 1947, 767.

² Robert T. Brown reports (1982) that *'There were approximately 2500 Americo-Liberians at that time, of whom some six hundred were males over twenty-one and thus eligible to vote.'* ('Simon Greenleaf and the Liberian Constitution of 1847', 53, in: *Liberian Studies Journal*, IX(2)51-61). Huberich reports a total population of 2,390 in 1843 - excluding 'recaptives' ('Congoes') and indigenous people - of whom 676 were males of 21 years and older (based on the 1843 Census); Huberich 1947, 767.

³ Huberich 1947, 824-825, 841-842, and 846.

⁴ Brown 1982, 52.

⁵ Huberich 1947, 846. According to Brown *'Only 269 (colonists) cast ballots, 211 in favor of independence and 58 opposed.'* (Brown 1982, 53).

⁶ Huberich 1947, 821-836. Simon Greenleaf was a Professor of Law in the Harvard Law School, United States. He was also President of the Massachusetts Colonization Society. He played an important role in the creation of Liberia College (Huberich 1947, 849-850).

⁷ An important difference is that Liberia is a unitary state and the United States a federation. Those who are interested in an in-depth comparison of the two constitutions should consult Huberich 1947, vol. 2.

⁸ Brown 1982, 51- 61.

⁹ See Burrowes 2013. Hilary Teage was born a slave in the state of Virginia, United States. His year of birth has also been reported as 1802 (in: Brown Sherman, Mary Antoinette (1975), 'Liberian intellectuals in the nineteenth century: An appreciation', 169, in: *Liberian Studies Journal*, VI(2), 162-175).

¹⁰ Smith 2004, 81-82.

¹¹ Huberich 1947, 832-833.

¹² Azikiwe, Nnamdi (1934), *Liberia in World Politics*, A.H. Stockwell, Ltd., London, 63.

¹³ Karnga (1926), 37.

¹⁴ Azikiwe 1934, 64.

¹⁵ The date of the Resolution adopting the Seal and the Flag is not known exactly, either 28 July or 29 July 1847 (Huberich 1947, 837 fn 13).

¹⁶ TRC 2009, 111.

¹⁷ A detailed description of the territory of the new republic was included in one of the first Acts passed by the Legislature at its First Session on 1 February 1848 (Huberich 1947, 1011-1012).

¹⁸ The Liberian historian C. Patrick Burrowes takes a different view when describing the new republic's territory as 'a few scattered coastal towns' where mainly colonists lived. He rejects explicitly the Liberian State's responsibility for conditions in territories beyond the colonial towns (Burrowes 2013, x-xi). Burrowes not only brushes aside the Act which describes in great detail the new republic's territory (cf. note 263), he also disregards the fact that the ACS and other colonisation societies acquired vast tracts of lands from local chiefs and gave each male colonist 50 acres of land upon arrival in the colony.

¹⁹ Huberich 1947, 1013-1014. A list of the treaties of cession executed during the period from 15 December 1821 to 15 January 1833 is contained in a Report to the Board of Managers of the ACS, 8 April 1833, reprinted in Chapter XIII (Vol. I). The report gives the boundaries described in the deeds.

²⁰ Foote, Andrew Hull (1854), *Africa and the American flag*, Appleton & Company, New York, 184-185; and Gershoni 1992a, 26.

²¹ In 1835, the Maryland State Colonization Society published a map of the colony of Maryland in Africa (as of 1834). The deeds of cession by the native chiefs to the Maryland State Colonization Society, 1834-1849, are reprinted in Latrobe 1885, 95-125. Source: Huberich 1947, 1013 (fn 64).

²² Brown 1982, 54. Brown's argument leaves uncontested that originally, under the Constitution of 1820, no White person could own lands, since the explicit purpose of the American colony was to create a home for free African Americans, and other persons would not be granted permission to reside in the colony. (Huberich 1947, 1029).

²³ Burrowes 2013, 60. Also: Burrowes, C. Patrick (1998), 'Textual Sources of the 1847 Liberian Constitution', in: *Liberian Studies Journal*, XXIII(1), 1-42.

²⁴ In 2019, C. Patrick Burrowes published an overview of the history of citizenship in Liberia, including the origin of the 'Negro Clause' (phrasing taken from the summary on the book's back cover), starting with President Weah's publicly expressed wish –

one week after assuming the presidency in January 2018 – to remove Article 27(b) of the 1985 Constitution, which states that ‘(...) *only persons who are negroes, or of negro descent shall qualify by birth or by naturalization to be citizens of Liberia.*’ (Burrowes (2019a), *Citizenship & Nationality in Liberia. The Half That Has Never Been Told*, Published by Know Your Self Press, Liberia, 1). In March 2026, former President Ellen Johnson Sirleaf addressing the House of Representatives urged the National Legislature to realize a number of constitutional reforms including the amendment of Article 27(b), qualifying it as a ‘racist provision’ in the Constitution (source: ‘*Undo the racist provision*’, in: Front Page Africa dated 6 March 6 2026. https://frontpageafricaonline.com/news/liberia-ex-president-sirleaf-urges-legislature-to-lead-constitutional-reform-calls-for-citizenship-rights-for-non-negroes-in-historic-address/#google_vignette accessed on 6 March 2026.

²⁵ Banks Henries 1963, 8.

PART FIVE

1847 – 1900

Settler Colonialism

8 Settler Colonialism

This chapter outlines the differences and similarities of Liberia's fourteen presidents in the 19th century. Twelve presidents came from the USA; two presidents were born in Liberia. All fourteen presidents faced numerous internal and external conflicts. The chapter concludes with a note on the term 'Americo-Liberian'.

The presidents

The first President and Vice-President

On 5 October 1847, presidential elections were held.¹ There were several candidates. Many people eligible to vote, however, abstained from voting. The Governor of the Commonwealth of Liberia – which united the three American colonies: Liberia Colony, Bassa Cove Colony and the colony 'Mississippi in Africa' – and presidential candidate Joseph Jenkins Roberts reports that the election period was one of 'harmony' and 'without any serious commotion', but the Colonial Physician appointed by the ACS who also occupied the position of US Government Agent for Recaptured Africans in Monrovia, Dr Lugenbeel, described the situation as '*It is all confusion, and almost anarchy. I have heard of several fist-fights (...)*'. There were also reports of opponents intimidating voters.² Be that as it may, Governor Joseph Jenkins Roberts won the elections and became Liberia's first president, with Nathaniel Brander as his Vice-President. Simultaneously, legislative elections were held and representatives for the House of Representatives and Senators elected.

On 3 January 1848, Joseph Jenkins Roberts was inaugurated as Liberia's first president. The first country to recognise the new state headed by Roberts was Great Britain. A few weeks after Roberts' election, the American Squadron on the African coast fired a 20-gun salute in honour of the new political era of the colony,³ but it wasn't until 1862, during the Administration of President Abraham Lincoln, that the US officially recognised Liberia.⁴

Box 4: Joseph Jenkins Roberts, 1809 – 1876

Joseph Jenkins Roberts was born in Norfolk, Virginia in 1809; he grew up in Petersburg, Virginia. Jenkins' middle name was likely his White father's; his free Black mother had regained her freedom at the very young age of 15. As a young boy, Joseph Roberts worked on the boats of his Black stepfather, a freed slave who owned a locally renowned boat company, transporting goods between Petersburg and Norfolk. Later, Joseph, along with a partner (also a free Black man), would create their own company, 'Roberts, Colson, and Company', one of the first African American transatlantic shipping companies, trading between Liberia and the United States. In 1829, the Roberts family moved to the ACS colony, from where 20-year-old J.J. Roberts managed the company's African business interests; his partner, Colson, initially remained in Virginia to pursue business interests in the United States. An interesting anecdote is that on the same ship that Roberts sailed to Liberia in 1829, was also James Spriggs Payne, who also later became President of Liberia. Joseph Roberts' move to Liberia was reportedly also strongly inspired by religious faith, to preach the gospel. 'Roberts, Colson, and Company' became a vital link in the trade between the United States and Liberia, with offices and warehouses in Monrovia and further inland. The company quickly expanded its operations in and around the colony, purchasing more boats and expanding trade both inland and along the coast. Trade wasn't limited to the United States but also included travel to and from Europe.

The now-wealthy merchant Joseph Roberts entered the colony's administration and politics in 1833. He was elected High Sheriff of the colony. His duties included supervising elections, collecting taxes, and keeping neighbouring tribes under control.

He participated in a number of military expeditions: against slave traders (Europeans, tribal chiefs, and colonists), to collect taxes, and to break the resistance of the indigenous population against the colonial authorities. In 1836, the widower Joseph Roberts remarried 16-year-old Jane Warring, the daughter of a wealthy merchant and Baptist minister – also former Virginians – and an octoroon like himself. The accumulation of family

wealth and social status placed the Roberts couple among the leading elite. Joseph Roberts's abilities, experience, and status contributed to his selection by the settlers as acting Governor, Vice-Governor, after the White Thomas Buchanan was appointed Governor of the Commonwealth of Liberia by the ACS Board in 1839. After Buchanan's death in 1841, he took his place and became Governor in 1842. This made history, as it was the first time the ACS colony was led by a colonist.

In 1848, he became Liberia's first president. One of his priorities was international recognition of the new (and only) African republic. To this end, he made numerous, successful trips to Europe. Besides a commercial spirit and military prowess, he also demonstrated diplomatic skills and eloquence. His critics, however, pointed out that his commercial interests always played a role in what he did or said, while he, like most other colonists, considered himself superior to the indigenous population. In 1856, he was succeeded by Stephen Benson. The following year, he led a military expedition to Harper (in the independent State of Maryland in Liberia) and put an end to a war between the colonists and the Grebo people. This contributed significantly to the integration of 'Maryland in Liberia' into the Republic of Liberia.

In 1872, Joseph Roberts became president again, serving until 1876. He died a few weeks after the end of his presidency.

Sources: Banks Henries 1963, 1-16; Smith 2004, 6-12; Sternstein 2020, 22-87, and Encyclopaedia Virginia, William Colson (1805-1835), <https://encyclopaediavirginia.org/entries/colson-william-1805-1835/>, accessed on 23 October 2025.

Presidents 1848 – 1900

The presidential term of office was two years whereas an incumbent president could be re-elected. Throughout the 19th century, the presidential term remained two years. A total of twelve colonists held the highest office in the republic, two of whom served non-consecutive terms (Roberts and Payne). The twelve presidents of the 19th century formed a heterogeneous group. Ten presidents were US-born and came from different states: Virginia (3), Maryland (3), Kentucky (2), Ohio (1), and South Carolina (1). Only two presidents were born in Africa.

Illustration 23

Joseph Jenkins Roberts, c. 1851.



Source: Joseph Jenkins Roberts, the first and seventh president of Liberia, c. 1851. Original daguerreotype by Augustus Washington, photo by Rufus Anson. Available in the public domain at https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Joseph_Jenkins_Roberts.jpg.

Most presidents were born free (10), two were born as slaves (Russell, Coleman); the father of one president was a runaway slave (Roye). At least three presidents were of multiracial descent (Roberts, Payne, Russell), some were very dark-skinned (Benson, Warner, Roye, Smith), some were light-skinned and were barely distinguishable from White people (Roberts, Russell). Some presidents arrived in the West African colony as relatively wealthy settlers, while others became successful merchants and businessmen after their arrival. Presidents Roberts, Benson, Roye, and Coleman were well-to-do-traders, Warner a successful businessman. Interestingly, three presidents were ordained as priests (Payne, Russell, Gibson).⁵ These differences would contribute to political differences and conflicts of which the ‘colour conflict’ that exploded in 1871 was the most violent one. However, scientists and researchers of Liberian history differ on the political importance of the skin color in the settler community.

The Nigerian historian Monday B. Akpan writes that the majority of the prominent, successful Liberian traders in the 19th century were multiracial colonists (the ‘merchant-princes’). Some of them had received some training and property from their White fathers. In the colony they assumed leadership in both political and economic spheres over colonists of dark complexion, most of whom were former field slaves. By the late 1880s, the dominance of the former group declined, both because many prominent light-skinned settler-families had died out and as a result of a large influx of immigrants of dark complexion.⁶ One of Liberia’s most famous personalities of the 19th century, the educator, diplomat, politician, and prolific writer, Edward Wilmot Blyden (1832-1912), shares the opinion that the colour divide (skin colour) had a great impact on internal politics. The Liberian historian C. Patrick Burrowes disagrees with Blyden’s view that ‘*complexional stratification was an animating factor in politics*’ in the 19th century’. He also draws attention to the fact that two of Liberia’s Presidents before 1870 were light-skinned (J.J. Roberts and James Spriggs Payne) and two were dark-skinned (Stephen A. Benson and Daniel B. Warner). All four had been elected on the ticket of the Republican Party.⁷ Burrowes’ opinion contrasts with the view of political scientist and former interim-President of Liberia, Amos C. Sawyer, who describes in detail the racial animosity and tension which existed in the settler community in the 19th century.⁸

In their 2020 book on Liberia’s African-American Presidents and the internal politics of the young republic during the 19th century, Faith and Martin Sternstein explain that, in their view, the dominance of domestic politics by multiracial colonists resulted from the underrepresentation of freed slaves (‘*darker in skin color*’) in the first waves of emigrants from the United States. The latter consisted primarily of free Black people who were generally multiracial, more literate, and more skilled in relatively advanced economic occupations than recently manumitted slaves.⁹

Historians refer to the first presidents of Liberia in different ways. ‘The Founding Fathers of Liberia’ is a common expression. Less usual, but not less appropriate, is the name ‘African-American Presidents’. In the history of the first African republic three categories of presidents can be distinguished. The first category consists of the ‘African-American Presidents’: the presidents of Liberia who were born in the United States and who came to Africa as African-American emigrants (as an adult or child). The second category is that of the ‘Americo-Liberian’ presidents: they were born in Liberia, but their parents or ancestors emigrated to Liberia. The third category consists of the ‘indigenous presidents’,

tribal presidents who do not have African-American or Americo-Liberian ancestors. This category did not exist in the 19th century.

Below follows a list of 19th century presidents of Liberia, their presidencies, as well as year and place (state) of birth.

1. Joseph Jenkins Roberts, 1848 – 1856 (born in Virginia, USA, 1809)
2. Stephen Allen Benson, 1856 – 1864 (born in Maryland, USA, 1816)
3. Daniel Bashiel Warner, 1864 – 1868 (born in Maryland, USA, 1815)
4. James Spriggs Payne, 1868 – 1870 (born in Virginia, USA, 1819)
5. Edward James Roye, 1870 – 1871 (born in Ohio, USA, 1815)
6. James Skivring Smith, 1871 – 1872 (born in South Carolina, USA, c. 1825)
7. Joseph Jenkins Roberts, 1872 – 1876 (born in Virginia, USA, 1809)
8. James Spriggs Payne, 1876 – 1878 (born in Virginia, USA, 1819)
9. Anthony William Gardner,¹⁰ 1878 – 1883 (born in Virginia, USA, 1820)
10. Alfred Francis Russell, 1883 – 1884 (born in Kentucky, USA, 1817)
11. Hilary Richard Wright Johnson, 1884 – 1892 (born in Monrovia, Liberia, 1837)
12. Joseph James Cheeseman, 1892 – 1896 (born in Edina, Liberia, 1843)
13. William David Coleman, 1896 – 1900 (born in Kentucky, USA, 1842)
14. Garretson Wilmot Gibson, 1900 – 1904 (born in Maryland, USA, 1832)

In this list the American usage is followed of counting the presidency twice in case of non-consecutive terms (see Roberts #7 and Payne #8).

The large majority of Liberia's 19th-century presidents were African-Americans, born in the US. Interestingly, with the exception of E.J. Roye all African-American presidents were born south of the Mason-Dixon line. Hilary Johnson and Joseph Cheeseman were two Americo-Liberian presidents. They were succeeded by African-American presidents Coleman and Gibson. The latter, elected in 1899, was Liberia's last African-American president.¹¹

Note on the term 'Americo-Liberian'

Due to a now and then emerging controversy over the use and meaning of the term 'Americo-Liberian' it is useful to first shed some light on the background of this cognomen.

It has not been established with certainty who used the term ‘Americo-Liberian’ first and when. One of the most informative overviews of the meaning and use of the cognomen ‘Americo-Liberian’ is from the Liberian historian Clarence E. Zamba Liberty. He describes how the term has been used through the different periods in the historiographical literature of Liberia. According to Zamba Liberty, the term ‘Americo-Liberian’ can occasionally be found in the literature on Liberia as early as the late 1830s. Its use increased after 1847, especially in the late 1860s and 1870s, and has been in constant use from about 1880 until the second half of the 20th century. Unfortunately, he does not give any sources for his findings.¹² In any case, the term Americo-Liberian was widely accepted in the latter half of the 19th century to refer to the descendants of African-American settlers, as a passenger on the emigrant ship ‘Azor’ arriving in Monrovia did in 1878 when describing his encounter with ‘the first Americo-Liberian’ he saw.¹³ One of the earliest mentions of the term ‘Americo-Liberian’ in American newspapers was in newspapers from 1858 and was used by President Stephen Benson (1856-1864). Under the heading ‘*Cotton in Liberia*’ the newspaper article reads as follows: ‘*The American portion of the population of Liberia have commenced, with much spirit, the cultivation of cotton. PRESIDENT BENSON, in a recent letter says “There has been twenty-times more cotton planted by Americo-Liberians this year than ever before (...)”*’.¹⁴ Another US newspaper, the Lowell Daily Advertiser and Courier also repeatedly used the term ‘Americo-Liberian’ in its 1858 issues.¹⁵ In 1926, the Liberian author, historian and statesman of Congolese origin, Abayomi Karnga, cites a sugar cane grower on the St. Paul’s River who in 1864 spoke of Congoes, Golas, Vai, and American-Liberians, in a letter to his friend in the United States.¹⁶ On the other hand, three important publications on Liberia – one by a Liberian explorer (1860), another by Belgian military officer (1885) and a third by a Swiss zoologist (1890) – make no mention of the term ‘Americo-Liberian’.¹⁷ In 1906, a British traveller, Sir Harry Johnston, published an impressive, two volume work on Liberia, which became a classic, with an entire chapter on ‘The Americo-Liberians’.¹⁸ A few years later, the (White) American anthropologist Frederick Starr repeatedly used the same term when referring to descendants of the former American slaves.¹⁹ A glance at the abundant literature on Liberia shows that well into the 20th century and even in the early 21st century both Liberian and non-Liberian authors used the term ‘Americo-Liberian’ without caveat. Early in his presidency, William Tubman (1944-1971) called for an end to Americo-Liberianism²⁰ – though he did not live up to his own call. Accordingly, still in the 1970s members of the ruling elite proudly called themselves ‘Americo-Liberian’.²¹ In the fourth quarter of the 20th

century this attitude started to change though. In 1976, the Liberian journalist, lawyer and politician Tuan Wreh, a Kru-Liberian, calls the term ‘Americo-Liberian’ a misnomer.²² Slowly but surely, an increasing number of academics and politicians started to reject the term ‘Americo-Liberian’. This process was greatly enhanced by the coup of 12 April 1980 which ended Americo-Liberian rule over Liberia and made Master-Sergeant Samuel K. Doe Liberia’s first Head of State of tribal origin. In 2002, Zamba Liberty writes that the term ‘Americo-Liberian’, originally considered by non-tribal Liberians to be highly complimentary, has turned into a derogatory qualification. In 2019, the Liberian historian Carl Patrick Burrowes also writes that the term ‘Americo-Liberian’ ‘(...) *is now mostly used in a divisive and derogatory way*’ and alleges that the term was invented by White foreigners.²³ However, this claim is not confirmed or supported by the findings of Karnga or Zamba Liberty, for example. Unfortunately, Burrowes neither provides more details nor a source for his findings. His view and definition are not shared on a large scale. Still in the 21st century, numerous Liberian and non-Liberian scholars use the term ‘Americo-Liberian’.²⁴ In 2009, Liberia’s Truth and Reconciliation Committee, an authoritative and independent source, uses the term ‘Americo-Liberian’ in its Final Report without any comment or caveat.²⁵ Also the final report of the TRC Diaspora Project, ‘A House with Two Rooms’, uses the term ‘Americo-Liberians’ in various places without any reservation.²⁶ In June 2008 public hearings of the Liberian diaspora took place at Hamline University in St. Paul, Minnesota/USA, bringing together hundreds of people living in the US, the UK, Ghana, and Liberia. The participants shared their experiences and testified publicly during the hearings. One participant testified that during the civil war, anyone who did not speak a dialect was identified by the rebels as an Americo-Liberian.²⁷ Several participants stated that within the diaspora community in the US, there was suspicion and hostility between tribal Liberians and Americo-Liberians.²⁸ It is striking that a table included in the 2009 final report showing the tribal affiliation of the participants not only distinguished seventeen (Liberian) tribes but also, as a separate category, ‘Congo/American-Liberian’.²⁹

Instead of the term ‘Americo-Liberian’, Zamba Liberty prefers the term ‘emigrants’ when referring to those who came from overseas to what was to become Liberia (as opposed to those who migrated to the coastal region from adjacent forest areas and Northern savanna regions).³⁰ A number of Liberian academics use the term ‘repatriate’ as an alternative for the term ‘Americo-Liberian’ (e.g. Patrick Burrowes, Elwood Dunn, Robtel Pailey, Amos Sawyer, Byron Tarr). Burrowes defines the term ‘repatriate’ as ‘*Someone who settles (...)*

*in a country perceived as his or her ancestral home;*³¹ An obvious objection to this definition is the fact that ‘Africa is not a country’ while it is also difficult to imagine considering an entire continent as ‘home’. In reality, most African-American emigrants were ignorant of the exact geographical origin of their ancestors who had been captured and enslaved in Africa and shipped across the Atlantic. Based on historical data, it is undisputed that only a limited number of them originated from the sparsely populated Pepper Coast or Windward Coast, as the region comprising modern-Liberia was then called. Most of the enslaved Africans came from densely populated regions such as the Bight of Benin (‘the Slave Coast’) and the Congo River Basin. Perhaps the most important and compelling objection to the term ‘repatriate’—and one of the main reasons why a large number of free Black people in the United States opposed the colonial objective of the ACS – is the argument that Black people in the US had been born in the United States and were no more African than White Americans were British or European.³²

Illustration 24A

Americo-Liberian house, Careysburg, Montserrado County, 1975.



Source: Photograph by Matthias Lampe.

Illustration 24B

Old settler-style house made of corrugated iron, upcountry, Montserrado County, 1976.



Source: An old settler-style house made of corrugated iron sheets by Fred van der Kraaij, available under the Creative Commons Attribution-Share Alike 4.0 International license at https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:ASC_Leiden_-_F._van_der_Kraaij_Collection_-_16_-_045_-_An_old_settler-style_house_made_of_corrugated_iron_-_Montserrado_County,_Liberia,_1976.tif.

In view of the foregoing and in light of the fact that the focus of the present book is on the 19th century when the term ‘Americo-Liberian’ was common, the cognomen ‘Americo-Liberian’ is being used in this essay where it is deemed appropriate and with no value judgement. Thus, when speaking of ‘African-Americans’, reference is made to colonists who were born in the United States of America and who came to Africa as an adult or a child. The term ‘Americo-Liberian’ refers to Liberians who have no tribal affiliation and whose parents or ancestors emigrated to Liberia from the Americas.

The independent republic of Liberia

Overview 1847-1900

The creation of the republic did not change or reduce the problems which the colonists had to face during the colonial period (1822-1847), probably with one exception: the patronising attitude of the White administrators of the ACS and the other colonisation societies. On the other hand, one problem became more urgent, notably during the last quarter of the 19th century: the confrontational relationship with European countries. The political survival of the republic was at stake more than once. But the republic's successful fight to survive politically had a high price: Liberia was frequently on the brink of bankruptcy, giving a modern economy hardly any chance to develop. Around the turn of the century, Liberia was as underdeveloped as it was in 1847, but it had survived politically.

The causes of Liberia's problems 1847-1900

The diversity of the settler population

The Black colonists, who also called themselves pioneers and – notably after 1847 – became known as ‘Americo-Liberians’, formed a heterogeneous group of people. The differences were related to the social status of the emigrants, their place or state of birth, the wealth they brought with them or accumulated after arrival in the colony, the level of education, and the colour of their skin.

During the colonial period (1822-1847), nearly 4,600 African-American emigrants settled in the colonies.³³ Most of them came from the Southern states, notably Virginia, North Carolina, and Maryland. Only 6 per cent of the emigrants came from the Northern, free states; about half of them were literate. Overall, about 75 per cent of the emigrants were illiterate.³⁴ The educational background of the colonists was closely associated with their social status at emigration. In general, the illegitimate offspring of slave-holders and slaves, the freeborn Blacks, and the African-Americans who volunteered to emigrate were literate. They formed the majority of the first wave of emigrants, between 1822 and 1827. However, between 1827 and 1850 the majority of the emigrants were ex-slaves who had been set free *on condition of* emigrating. They were the least educated. The emigrants who arrived after 1850 were, in general, better educated and skilled than their predecessors. The occupational background of the emigrants – professionals, artisans, semiskilled or unskilled – in combination with their

wealth and the level of education were determining factors in the colonist's place in the settler community.³⁵ This, in turn, had a great impact on their political weight and roles in the community.

The settlers also had a lot in common. They shared a Christian faith, behaved as Americans, dressed as Americans (in particular the style of the Southern states), lived in Southern plantation-style houses, spoke (American) English, celebrated 'the 4th of July' (which was a holiday in the colony), and ate American food which was imported by the ACS or themselves. This taste for American food reduced the incentive to produce locally. Moreover, it resulted in a flow of money abroad to finance the food imports which reduced the available funds to invest in agriculture. More on this topic follows in the section on the modern economy.

The external conflicts

An important cause of Liberia's problems were the many external conflicts which resulted in a chain of financial problems: (1) the conflicts between settlers and the tribal population; (2) the conflicts with European traders and slave traders operating within and nearby the colonies; (3) the conflicts with European countries, notably Britain and France, which on the one hand were caused by the aforementioned trade conflicts and on the other hand were related to the 'Scramble for Africa', notably after the Berlin Conference, 1884-1885.

The conflicts and subsequent military expenditures exhausted the modest national budget and prevented productive investments in agriculture, education, public health, etc. External loans which were meant to reduce budgetary deficits but were accepted at unfavourable terms, aggravated what was already a precarious situation. The imposition of new taxes and other unpopular measures on the tribal population led to insurrections and wars which necessitated even more military expenditures. Corruption and mismanagement (due to a lack of qualified personnel) resulted in a low efficiency of the public sector. Altogether, these factors created a vicious circle. The Liberian government was not able to solve these problems. Under these circumstances, the conflict between Black people of different skin colours would take on a key position, however absurd and strange this may sound. In addition, European colonialism threatened the independent existence of the republic. In 1893, President Cheeseman (1892-1896) desperately asked the United States to extend a protectorate over the country.³⁶ The nexus between the 'colour conflict', the economic role of foreigners, and the disputed authority over its territory, characterises Liberian affairs in the 1847 – 1900 period.

Notes

¹ *From Liberia*, Newark Daily Advertiser, December 20, 1847.

² Huberich 1847, 844-846.

³ *The New Republic* 1850, 238.

⁴ That same year (1862), the US Africa Squadron's patrols off the Guinea coast were terminated; the US naval vessels in question were urgently needed to blockade the Southern ports during the American Civil War. Liberia was now forced to rely on its own resources to combat the slave trade on the coast and to control escalating conflicts with the indigenous population. Source: Sternstein, F., & Sternstein, M. (2020), *Ten African-American Presidents*, KDP Publishing Company, USA, 108, 216; quoting Alan R. Booth, *The United States African Squadron, 1834-1861*, 111, quoted in Katherine Harris, *African and American Values: Liberia and West Africa*. Lanham, MD, Rowman & Littlefield, 1985, 72, (Sternstein 2020, 108, 216.)

⁵ See also Sternstein 2020, 200-202.

⁶ Akpan, M.B., Colour and Culture Conflict in Nineteenth Century Liberia, unpublished manuscript, cited in Akpan (1975a), 'The Liberian Economy in the Nineteenth Century: The State of Agriculture and Commerce', 14, in: *Liberian Studies Journal*, VI(1), 1-25.

⁷ Burrowes 2013, iii-v.

⁸ Sawyer 1992, 102-103, 153-154, and 165-167.

⁹ Sternstein 2020, 50-51.

¹⁰ The original spelling of the family name was 'Gardner' (as noted on the passenger list of the ship which brought the Virginia family to the Bassa Cove colony in 1830, and in the 1843 census).

¹¹ Liberia's first 20th century President, Arthur Barclay (1904-1912) was born in Bridgetown, Barbados, British West Indies. All subsequent presidents were born in Liberia. See also Smith 2004.

¹² Liberty, Clarence E. Zamba (2002), *Growth of the Liberian State. An Analysis of Its Historiography*. New World African Press, Northridge, California, 268-271.

¹³ Williams, Alfred Brockenbrough (1878), *The Liberian Exodus. An Account of Voyage of the First Emigrants in the Bark 'Azor', and Their Reception at Monrovia, with a Description of Liberia - Its Customs and Civilization, Romances and Prospects*. The News and Courier Book Presses, Charleston, S.C., 27-28. Electronic Edition. First edition, 2000. Academic Affairs Library, UNC-CH. University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, 2000.

<https://docsouth.unc.edu/church/williams/williams.html>, accessed on 26 October 2025.

¹⁴ *Cotton in Liberia*, Christian Inquirer, New-York, December 4, 1858, Vol. VIII, No. 10, p. 3, column 2. It is quite possible that older sources (newspapers) containing articles about Americo-Liberians exist, for example in the US Library of Congress. The aforementioned edition of the Christian Inquirer is located in the author's personal archive.

¹⁵ See e.g. *Liberia Tobacco and Cotton*, Lowell Daily Journal and Courier, November 22, 1858, Vol. XXIV, No. 5774, p. 2, column 3; *Liberia and the French Immigration System*, Lowell Daily Journal and Courier, December 28, 1858, Vol. XXIV, No. 5803, p. 2, columns 1-2.

¹⁶ Karnga 1926, 41-42.

¹⁷ Anderson, Benjamin (1870), *Narrative of a Journey to Musardu, the Capital of the Western Mandingoes*; S.W. Green, New-York; Wauwermans 1885; Büttikofer, 1890.

¹⁸ Johnston 1906, 340-398.

¹⁹ Starr, Frederick (1913), *Liberia. Description History Problems*. Chicago, 22, 25, 27, 43, 155.

²⁰ As expressed in his speech at the First National Executive Council in Harper City, on 24 May 1954. Source: *The National Unification Program of Liberia: Hands Across the Country*, policy documents and speeches by President William V.S. Tubman, published by The Bureau of Information, Department of State, Monrovia, 1954, 9.

²¹ Personal experience of the present author when living in Liberia in the second half of the 1970s.

²² Wreh, Tuan (1976), *The Love of Liberty... The Rule of President William V.S. Tubman in Liberia*. C. Hurst & Company, London, 133.

²³ Burrowes 2019b, v

²⁴ E.g. Smith 2004, 2, 51, 53, Sternstein 2020, 199.

²⁵ TRC 2009.

²⁶ A House with Two Rooms: Final Report of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Liberia Diaspora Project (2009). Authors: Dulce Foster, Dianne Heins, Mark Kalla, Michele Garnett McKenzie, James O'Neal, Rosalyn Park, Robin Phillips, Jennifer Prestholdt, Ahmed K. Sirleaf II, Laura A. Young. The Advocates for Human Rights, DRI Press, Saint Paul, Minnesota.

²⁷ A House with two Rooms, 2009, 77, n191.

²⁸ A House with two rooms, 2009, 365.

²⁹ A House with Two Rooms, 2009, 601.

³⁰ Liberty 2002, 269.

³¹ Burrowes 2019b, vi.

³² Republic of Maryland, Wikipedia, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Republic_of_Maryland consulted on 20 October 2025.

³³ In 1843, the settler population of the Commonwealth of Liberia was 2,390 – excluding ‘Congoes’ and indigenous population – according to the 1843 Population Census, as cited by Huberich (Huberich 1947, 767, cf note 1). This was partly the result of the very high mortality rate among the settlers which characterised the early colonisation period (Sawyer 1992, 98). More than 10,000 African-American emigrants arrived in the second half of the 19th century.

³⁴ Sawyer 1992, 98-99.

³⁵ Sawyer 1992, 98-100.

³⁶ Van der Kraaij 1983, 12-18.

9 The Deposition of President Roye (1871)

The first unconstitutional removal of an elected president, which brought J.J. Roberts back to power, is still shrouded in mystery.

The deposition of President Roye in 1871, who died the following year under circumstances that have never been clarified, was the result of the divisions among the settler population over a number of fundamental issues.

Three interrelated issues

Liberia's domestic politics in the second half of the 19th century reflected the importance of three related issues.¹ The minority of multiracial, light-skinned colonists – mostly ‘merchant princes’ who initially dominated affairs in the colony and later the republic – and the vast majority of dark-skinned colonists were separated by both their education level and the colour of their skin. The ‘colour issue’ coincided with the economic development and trade issue and the upcountry issue. The three issues were closely linked. The upcountry issue contained three components: the territorial expansion of the colony (later the republic), the extension of the authority of the Liberian state further inland, and the development of the interior (‘Hinterland’). The economic development and trade issue revolved around the role of foreigners in the economic development of the republic, which was sometimes perceived as going against the economic interests of the ‘merchant princes’.

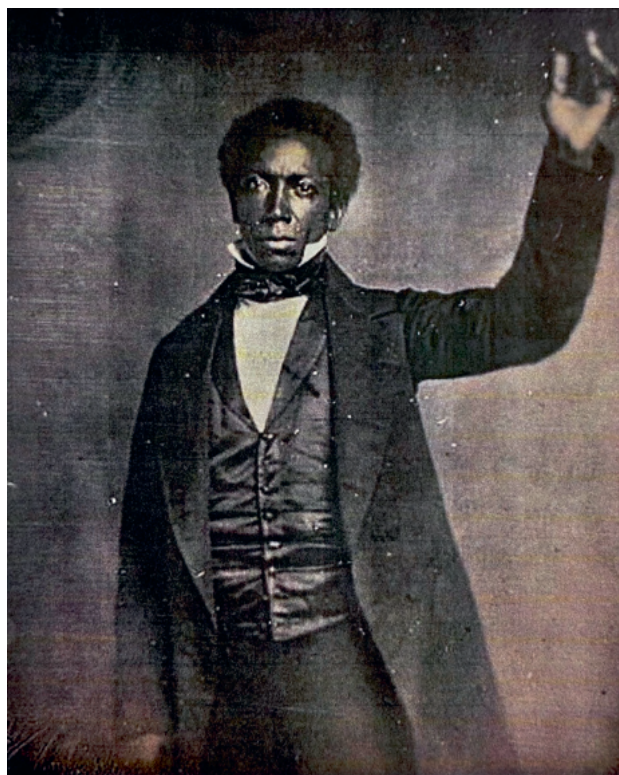
The election of Edward James Roye

In the early 1850s, two political parties existed: the True Liberian Party, later renamed the Republican Party (the light-skinned and multiracial colonists, called *mulattoes* in Lynch 1970) and the Old Whigs (the dark-skinned colonists, *Blacks* in the original source), renamed the True Whig Party in 1869.² During the early decades – the 1820s, 1830s, 1840s – light-skinned colonists dominated the colony's commercial life. The successful traders were called ‘Merchant-Princes’. They were against an inland expansion of the territory where they controlled

trade.³ However, the colonial society changed its composition gradually with the arrival of more, dark-skinned, often uneducated emigrants.⁴ The latter played an important role in the victory of Stephen Benson – Vice-President during President Robert's last term, but not really belonging to the Monrovia elite – over Roberts in the 1855 presidential election and also in the election of Daniel Warner in 1863; both Benson and Warner were dark-skinned colonists (see note 5 of chapter 8). The changes in the composition of the settler group also partly explain the economic recession in the 1860s, after a period of modest economic growth in the 1840s and 1850s. Sawyer describes how by the late 1860s, heightened racial tension and policy disagreements among the merchants led to a split in the group of merchant-princes. This resulted in the creation of the True Whig Party (TWP) by a faction of the Black merchants who elected Roye as standard-bearer of the newly created political party.⁵ In 1869, Roye won the presidential elections.

Illustration 25

Edward James Roye, c. 1858.



Source: Edward James Roye, c. 1858. Source: United States Library of Congress. Available in the public domain at https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Edward_James_Roye.jpg.

He had also been a presidential candidate in the 1867 elections, competing against James Spriggs Payne and James Moore. As none of the candidates had obtained a majority vote, the House of Representatives had to decide and chose James Spriggs Payne, '*the candidate favored by the mulatto merchant leaders*'.⁶ The victory of Roye in 1869 ended the dominant position of the Republic Party. All previous presidents had been Republicans. The 1869 presidential elections had painfully exposed the country's divisions. Initially, the incumbent Administration declared Payne the winner after votes cast for Roye were withheld by Payne supporters. A civil war loomed. Later, Roye was declared the winner of the election, after which a Republican warned that if Roye's policies were detrimental to the economy and the country, his Administration would be short-lived.⁷

Roye was born in the state of Ohio, the son of a former slave and according to his own account a pure descendent of the Ibo people (Nigeria). He had arrived in the colony of Liberia in 1846,⁸ became a successful and rich trader, and subsequently went into politics. He won the presidential elections with the slogan '*Internal expansion and economic development*' and was inaugurated as Liberia's fifth president on 3 January 1870. In his Inaugural Address, he emphasised the importance of infrastructural improvements in the interior of the country and invited foreign capitalists to come and invest in Liberia.⁹

President Roye inherited a virtually empty Treasury and in 1871 he took a £100,000 loan from a British bank (approximately US\$500,000). When news of the unfavourable loan conditions and the numerous discounts – resulting in net proceeds of the loan of less than £20,000 – reached Monrovia, the opposition reacted sharply.¹⁰ His opponents had already been angered by Roye's plans to change the presidential term of office from two to four years. The constitutionally agreed two-year presidential term of office meant in practice that a newly inaugurated president had (less than) two years to realise his electoral promises and policies. Moreover, every other year elections had to be held entailing costly election campaigns. For these – and possibly other, untold – reasons, President Roye wanted to extend the presidential term. In October 1871, he issued a proclamation and announced that the amendment to the constitution changing the president's term of office had been adopted. Street fights between supporters of the two rivalling political parties broke out. The background of the conflict was a power struggle within the merchant leadership. Sawyer clearly explains that policy disagreements between rival factions formed the core of the conflict – the controversial foreign loan and disputed extension of the presidential term – but points out that this power struggle took place in a climate of 'seething racial animosity'.¹¹ The subsequent course of events is shrouded in mystery.

Box 5: Liberia is in trouble – published on 25 October 1871

Liberia is in trouble. About two years ago President Roys was elected for the term of four years. Recently, however, the Congress of Liberia passed an act, limiting the President's term to two years, and now the partisans of Roberts, who will be remembered as the predecessor of Roys, insist upon the immediate resignation of the latter and a new election by the people, Roberts himself being a candidate for the office. Roys refuses to resign, and declares his intention to serving out the term for which he was elected, in which he is sustained by a considerable party, and this refusal has given rise to a great deal of bitterness between the two factions, and a civil war is threatened. In fact, blood has been shed already. An affray lately occurred at the seat of government between the adherents of Roys and Roberts, in which the collector of the port, a staunch supporter of the president incumbent, and one of the most able and prominent men in the country, was killed.

Source: Liberia is in trouble, *The Evening Star*, Washington D.C., October 25, 1871, Vol. 38, No. 5,807, p. 2, column 1 (not corrected for typos, notably Roye's name is misspelled).

The newspaper article in Box 5 is from *The Evening Star*, published in Washington DC, and is dated 25 October 1871, i.e. the day before President Roye was deposed. Box 6 contains details of the background to the conflict that led to Roye's ouster, as published in *The Vermont Chronicle* of 23 December 1871.

Box 6: Troubles in Liberia – published on 23 December 1871

'(...) The British steam-ship Loando has arrived in the Mersey from the West coast of Africa. Affairs at Monrovia had assumed a serious aspect. Some time ago a loan was negotiated in England for the purpose of constructing railroads, &c., in Liberia, by which the country could be opened up to European trade and native enterprise. When the Loando left Monrovia it was currently reported that the President and his son were in jail, charged with having misappropriated upward of £ 40,000 worth of Liberian bonds. The following extract from a manifesto issued by the

chiefs of the Executive Committee will tend to show the nature of the offense under which the President is charged: 'He has contracted a foreign loan, contrary to the law made and provided; and without an act of appropriation by the Legislature, he has, with his officers been receiving the proceeds of that loan. He has ignored a fundamental principle of the Constitution, making the Executive, Legislative and Judicial Departments of Government distinct and separable. Invading the courts of justice, he has assumed to dictate the selection of jurors, thus interfering, with the even-handed justice of the Judiciary. Every effort to induce him to desist from his unconstitutional course has been unavailing. Threats and entreaties have been alike lost upon him. He has turned a deaf ear on the remonstrances from all the counties of the Republic. He has declared the people in a state of rebellion, and attempted to escape to foreign countries with the officers clothed with their full power, in order to wield against us in other lands a power which at home he had employed in vain to crush the liberties of the people.' It is added that 'the sovereign people of Liberia did, by their resolution in the City of Monrovia, joined to the resolutions from the other counties of the Republic, depose President E.J. Roye from his high office of President of Liberia, and did decree that the Government shall be provisionally conducted by a chief executive committee of three members, until the arrival of a constitutional officer at the seat of Government.'

Source: Troubles in Liberia, *The Vermont Chronicle*, Windsor, Vermont, December 23, 1871, Volume XLVI, Number 51. p.2, column 1 (abridged version; not corrected for typos).

The deposition of President Roye

The 'Roye-episode' is one of the most confusing events in the history of Liberia. Various versions exist as to what exactly happened. The reason for the following detailed elaboration of what has become known as 'the Roye episode' is not only the wish to present the precise historical facts but above all the desire to demonstrate that various aspects of Liberia's history know different versions which at times exclude one another.¹² According to one version, a mob attacked Roye's house, dragged him out of his house and threw him in prison (Karnaga).¹³ According to another version he was impeached and deposed legally (Banks Henries; Johnston)¹⁴ or illegally (Cassell; Huberich; Lynch).¹⁵ Yet another source

reports that initially Roye agreed to resign following pressure from former president Robert's supporters, then changed his mind and declared a state of emergency. This enraged his opponents who forced him to flee.¹⁶ Several sources report that he managed to escape from prison in early 1872. Some historians allege that he drowned while trying to escape, with the proceeds of the British loan tied around his waist (Banks Henries; Huberich; Johnston),¹⁷ which (implicit) accusation is left out by two other authors.¹⁸ Other authors claim that while fleeing Roye was attacked by a mob and beaten to death (Cassell; Karnga).¹⁹ One of Roye's best friends, Edward Wilmot Blyden, recounts that Roye was '*shot dead by a mulatto colonist*' (Lynch).²⁰ A number of authors remains vague or is not very precise as to the date of Roye's death, on 11 or 12 February 1872 (Huberich; Johnson; Lynch; Richardson).²¹ One author even mentions that he died in office (Yancy).²² Authoritative authors such as Dunn and Holsoe, as well as, to a lesser extent, Banks Henries, report that Roye died on 12 February 1872.²³ When, in 1978, the present author visited the portrait gallery of Liberian presidents on the fourth floor of the Executive Mansion in Monrovia, he observed that underneath the portrait of E.J. Roye was written: 'Died: February 11, 1872.'²⁴ The sequence of events described by Sawyer confirm 11 February 1871 as the date of Roye's drowning.²⁵

Consensus exists about the date of Roye's deposition: 26 October 1871. Two days later, President Roye and his secretaries of state and the treasury were arrested.²⁶ TWP supporters were arrested on a large scale. Immediately following Roye's deposition a junta of three Republicans (Reginald A. Sherman, Charles B. Dunbar, and Amos Herring) took over the reins of state.²⁷ The former declined the offer to become president of the republic.²⁸

Authors of Liberian history books write differently about Roye's succession and the role played by his Vice-President James Skivring Smith. Cassell is convinced that Smith never became president.²⁹ Karnga writes that Smith was threatened with impeachment and even with physical violence should he attempt to claim the presidency. Nowhere in Karnga's account of the 'Roye-episode' is mentioned that Smith was installed as Liberia's sixth president.³⁰ Johnston devotes an entire chapter to the 1871 loan and its consequences but does not mention that Smith succeeded Roye.³¹ Guannu and Yancy do not include Smith in the overviews of Liberia's presidents.³² Lynch refers to Smith as 'an ex-Vice-President' and not as a former president.³³ Equally remarkable is that Liberia's President Coleman (1896-1900) did not honour him in the obituary after Smith's death in 1896 and sufficed with the brief remark: '*Hon. Dr. James S. Smith, who had also been long in the service of his country.*'³⁴ However, Huberich, Banks

Henries, Dunn, Holsoe, Tarr, and Liberty mention without a shadow of a doubt that indeed Vice-President Smith succeeded Roye. Vice-President Smith lived in Grand Bassa County and only reached Monrovia one week after Roye's arrest. He was inaugurated immediately as Liberia's sixth president.³⁵ James Skrivning Smith served the last two months of Roye's term. His Annual Message to the Legislature dated 4 December 1871 forms the irrefutable proof that he succeeded Roye.³⁶ Unfortunately, ignorance about Smith's presidency persists, sometimes even at a level where one would not expect it. In his Inaugural Speech on 22 January 2018, President Weah (2018-2024) wrongly called himself Liberia's 24th president. Smith's presidency made him Liberia's 25th president.³⁷

President James Smith (4 November 1871 – 1 January 1872)

President James Skirvin Smith ('Dr. Smith') was born in the state of South Carolina. In 1833 he came with his parents, free Blacks, to Liberia, eight years old. Hand-picked as his assistant by the White Colonial Physician of the ACS in Liberia, Dr James Lugenbeel, he was later given the opportunity to study medicine at prestigious medical schools in the United States (in the Northern states of Vermont and Massachusetts), obtaining his medical degree in 1848, the second Black person to graduate from an American medical college. Upon return in Liberia in 1849, he was employed as the ACS physician in Sinoe and Grand Bassa Counties. In the mid-1850s he became involved in politics, first as a member of the Republican Party, but he switched to the TWP in 1869. He was elected Vice-President in the presidential elections of that year that brought President Roye and the TWP to power.³⁸ In his Annual Message, President Smith extensively dealt with the deposition of his predecessor and the reasons for it: the British loan and the extension of the president's term of office. He stated that President Roye and the Legislature disagreed on the validity of the elections result regarding the proposed extension of the term. The Legislature was divided: the House of Representatives declared the amendment of the constitution adopted whereas the Senate, where the multiracial colonists held a majority, refused to acknowledge it.³⁹ In his Annual Message, President Smith reproached the Legislature for not having acted adequately and in time, even though his words were carefully chosen. It is not clear why the conflict between the President and the Legislature was not submitted to the Legislature or the Supreme Court. Remarkably, in his Annual Message, Smith agreed with the deposition of his predecessor. Although he was a 'True Whig' he supported the view of the Republican Party led by J.J. Roberts on the decisions and actions taken by Roye.

The fact that Smith, like Roberts, was a light-skinned person, may have led him to take this position.⁴⁰ However, it cannot be ruled out that sympathy for his former party colleagues may also have played a role.

In December 1871, the Legislature organised 'the election' of former president Roberts as Liberia's next president.⁴¹ Since most TWP supporters had been arrested or intimidated, the outcome of the 'election' was no surprise. On the first Monday in January 1872, J.J. Roberts was inaugurated for the fifth time as Liberia's president. In his Annual Message of 9 December 1872, he did not even mention the violent deposition of Roye, but heavily criticised the British loan and accused Roye of incompetence, mismanagement, fraud, and corruption.⁴²

The conflict explained

The deposition of President Edward Roye in the 25th year of existence of the Republic of Liberia certainly qualifies as an illegal *coup d'état* by a minority. It was an unmistakable sign of the weaknesses of the country's institutions since the only acceptable way of impeachment – according to the constitution, through a joint action of the Legislature – had not been followed. Moreover, during the January 1872 trials of public officials, including President Roye, who were accused of treason, the defendants' right to have the assistance of a legal counsel were not upheld.⁴³ Roye's deposition revealed another division in the settler community. The settlers upriver (St. Paul's River, in Montserrado County) were very unhappy and angry with Roye's forced and illegal removal and the take-over by a non-elected provisional government. According to the Superintendent of Montserrado County, in a message to the US resident minister, the upriver communities even contemplated secession and placing themselves under the protection of the United States government.⁴⁴ The bypassing of the Legislature and the kangaroo trials of former government officials including the president meant the institutional breakdown of the country's basic political institutions, created a lot of confusion among the dark-skinned settlers, severely weakened the settler government, and damaged its reputation abroad.⁴⁵ The political consequences of this institutional breakdown and the economic-financial impact of the 1871 Loan significantly contributed to the political weakness and the economic decline that characterised the last quarter of the 19th century.

Whereas the underlying, fundamental conflict which was the driving force behind the 1871 '*coup d'état*' was the colour conflict between light-skinned and dark-skinned colonists, the 'Roye-episode' meant more than just a conflict along a colour line that divided the settler community. The victory of Edward Roye and

the TWP in 1869 was also a victory of the supporters of a more prominent role for foreigners in the development of the country. The Republicans strongly opposed this idea, mainly because of their personal financial interests. Now they were in the lead again, but their reign would not last. J.J. President Roberts (1872-1876) was succeeded by James Spriggs Payne (1876-1878), also a light-skinned Republican and former president. He was defeated in the 1877 presidential elections by the TWP candidate, Anthony Gardner. The elections had been a tight race between two political parties with opposing views and interests – like the 1869 elections had been. The TWP won the elections thanks to a smart strategy: it promised the Congoes a seat in the House of Representatives if they voted for them. The strategy worked and Anthony Gardner won the presidential elections. The TWP would not relinquish power during the rest of the 19th century.

Notes

¹ This and following sections are based partly on Van der Kraaij 1983, 23-27.

² Lynch, Hollis R. (1970), *Edward Wilmot Blyden, Pan-Negro Patriot, 1832-1912*. London, Oxford University Press, 38.

³ Lynch 1970, 50.

⁴ Syfert, Dwight N. (1975), 'The Origin of Privilege: Liberian Merchants, 1822-1847' in: *Liberian Studies Journal VI*(2), 109-113. Also see: Sawyer 1992, 97-125, and Sternstein 2020, 50-51.

⁵ Sawyer 1992, 166.

⁶ Sawyer 1992, 347, n33, citing USDS, Despatches, January 8, 1868.

⁷ Sternstein 2020, 149.

⁸ A. Doris Banks Henries, David Smith Jr., and Faith and Martin Sternstein report that Roye arrived in Monrovia in June 1846 (Banks Henries 1963, 50; Smith 2004, 25; Sternstein 2020, 146). However, Sawyer writes that Roye emigrated to Liberia in 1844 at the age of twenty-nine (Sawyer 1992, 165).

⁹ Van der Kraaij 1983, 24.

¹⁰ President Hilary Wright Johnson, Annual Message to the Legislature, 4 December 1884, in: D. Elwood Dunn (Ed.). (2010), *The Annual Messages of the Presidents of Liberia 1848 - 2010: State of the Nation Addresses to the National Legislature*. De Gruyter, Berlin.

¹¹ Sawyer 1992, 165.

¹² This applies also to another important part of Liberia's 19th-century history: the settlers' attitude towards manual work in the agricultural sector (see the next section on 'The modern economy').

¹³ Karnga 1926, 47.

¹⁴ Johnston 1906, 261; Banks Henries 1963, 58. However, Banks Henries subsequently qualifies the action of 'the people' as a 'lawless action' (Banks Henries 1963, 59).

¹⁵ Cassell, C. Abayomi (1970), *Liberia: History of the First African Republic*. New York, 278; Huberich 1947, 1134; Lynch 1970, 51.

¹⁶ Sawyer 1992, 166-167.

¹⁷ Banks Henries 1963, 55-56; Huberich 1947, 1134; Johnston 1906, 261-262.

¹⁸ Sawyer mentions only that Roye drowned when trying to reach an English ship (Sawyer 1992, 167). Zamba Liberty is one of the few authors who has provided a credible source of his information that '*Roye drowned while attempting to swim to a British vessel lying offshore*', citing from an article 'Drowning of President Roye', in *The African Repository*, XLVIII (July 1872), 220 (Zamba Liberty 2002, 123, fn 253).

¹⁹ Cassell 1970, 279; Karnga 1926, 47.

²⁰ Lynch 1970, 51.

²¹ Johnson 1906, 261; Huberich 1947, 1134; Lynch 1967, 51; Nathaniel R. Richardson (1959), *Liberia's Past and Present*. The Diplomatic Press and Publishing Company, London, 108.

²² Yancy 1954, 275.

²³ Banks Henries 1963, 55-56; D. Elwood Dunn and Svend E. Holsoe (1985), *Historical Dictionary of Liberia*. African Historical Dictionaries, No. 38. Metuchen, New Jersey and London, The Scarecrow Press, 150.

²⁴ Van der Kraaij 1983, 531.

²⁵ Sawyer 1992, 166-167.

²⁶ Sawyer 1992, 167.

²⁷ Karnga 1926, 48; Banks Henries 1963, 54.

²⁸ Richardson 1959, 89.

²⁹ Cassell 1970, 279.

³⁰ Karnga 1926, 47-48.

³¹ Johnston 1906, 258 – 277. Nevertheless, Johnston includes '(Vice-President) James S. Smith, October 19th, 1871, to January 1st, 1872' in the List of Presidents of Liberia (Johnston 1906, 376-378). However, the reported date of 19 October 1871 conflicts with the (undisputed) date of Roye's deposition, 26 October 1871.

³² Guannu, Joseph Saye (1976), *Liberian History Since 1857. A reference for high school students* (Monrovia, unknown publisher, 72-91; Yancy 1954, 275 – 282.

³³ Lynch 1970, 183.

- ³⁴ President William David Coleman, *Annual Message to the Legislature, 14 December 1896*, in: Dunn 2010.
- ³⁵ Huberich 1947, 1134; Banks Henries 1963, 54-61; Dunn and Holsoe 1985, xv; Dunn, D. Elwood and Tarr, S. Byron (1988), *Liberia, A National Polity in Transition*. The Scarecrow Press, Metuchen, NJ, and London, UK., 52 and 215 (note 16); Liberty 2002, 123, citing *The African Repository XLVIII (May, 1872)*, 130;
- ³⁶ James Skivring Smith, VI President of Liberia, 1871-1872, *Annual Message to the Legislature, Republic of Liberia, December 4, 1871*, in: Dunn 2010.
- ³⁷ Executive Mansion, Liberia, *President George Manneh Weah's Inaugural Speech in Full*, p. 5, https://www.emansion.gov.lr/sites/default/files/documents/Inaugural%20Speech%20By%20H.E.%20President%20George%20Manneh%20Weah_1.pdf, accessed on 22 October 2025.
- ³⁸ Bank Henries 1963, 57-60; Smith 2004, 28-32; Sternstein 2020, 160-164.
- ³⁹ Lynch 1970, 50.
- ⁴⁰ Lynch 1970, 183.
- ⁴¹ Karnaga 1926, 48.
- ⁴² Joseph Jenkins Roberts, VII President of Liberia, 1872 – 1876, *Annual Message to the Legislature, Republic of Liberia, December 9, 1872*, in: Dunn 2010.
- ⁴³ Sawyer 1992, 167, 349 n47.
- ⁴⁴ According to the Superintendent of Montserrado County, H.W. Erskine, in a letter dated 26 October 1871 to the US resident minister (Sawyer 1992, 167, 349 n49 citing USDS, Despatches, November 1, 1871).
- ⁴⁵ Sawyer 1992, 167-168.

10 The Modern Economy

History is unclear about the colonists' interest in agricultural activities and, consequently, about the share of agriculture in the modern economy. Trade was important, especially in the early years of colonization. As the Liberian state expanded its national territory, conflicts with European traders increased, leading to the restrictive Ports of Entry Acts. To protect its economic interests, the government resorted to increased military spending, which came at the expense of productive investments.

The modern economy

The focus is here on the modern economy, i.e. excluding the subsistence economy of the majority of the tribal population.¹

Socioeconomic characteristics of the colonial society

Reportedly, from 1822 to 1862 about 19,000 emigrants came to Liberia including some 6,000 recaptives (Congoes).² Certainly the 6,000 'Congo people' did not come voluntarily, but also a great number of the African-American emigrants did not come spontaneously: the former slaves had been manumitted *on condition* of emigrating to Liberia. However, notably in 1832 and 1833 (after the Turner slave rebellion, 1831) and after 1847, the number of African-Americans who volunteered for emigration increased. They were eager to leave a racist country. Of the 11,909 African-American emigrants who came to Liberia before 1866, 4,541 had been born free, a small number (344) had bought their freedom, whereas 5,957 slaves had been liberated for the purpose of emigration.³ During the American civil war (1861-1865), the emigration from the United States virtually came to a standstill. After the war it restarted but never reached the pre-war numbers. The Liberian government actively explored various possibilities to promote immigration. In 1865, a group of 346 persons from Barbados emigrated to Liberia following an invitation from President Warner (1864-1868). They were British subjects residing in the West Indies. Many of them were free-born Black people who belonged to the Black middle class in Barbados. The Barbadian

emigrants would have a significant influence on the course of events in the Republic of Liberia, both in terms of nation-building and economic development.⁴ The ACS assisted their emigration, transporting them to Liberia and settling them in the country. By aiding them the Colonization Society again violated its constitution, notably Article 2, which stipulated that the objective of the ACS was *'to promote and execute a plan for colonizing, with their own consent, the free people of color residing in the United States, in Africa, or such other place as Congress shall deem most expedient'*. An authoritative source on Liberia's colonial history, Huberich, reports that the emigrants from the West Indies were among the best colonists in Liberia because of their high level of education and positive mentality.⁵ Among the almost 350 emigrants were *'trained artisans, farmers, teachers and small traders. Most of them were literates. (...) The majority of these colonists settled in Montserrado County where they built the town of Crozierville.'*⁶ The Barbadians as well as their descendants would make important contributions to Liberia's political, commercial, and intellectual life in the 19th and 20th centuries.

Sawyer presents a socioeconomic structure of the 19th-century settler community, consisting of an 'upper class' of merchants (in the early colonisation years dominated by light-skinned colonists), an urban 'middle class' (small-scale traders, professionals, preachers, and government employees), the 'urban poor' (mostly manumitted slaves who had been freed upon condition of emigrating to Liberia), the 'rural planters' (a group composed of freed slaves, skilled and educated colonists, and some recaptives) and – at the bottom of the social hierarchy – the recaptives or 'Congoes'.⁷ The latter group would often constitute a source of cheap labour used on farm lands or for household chores by economically and socially better placed members of the settler community.

Agriculture and commerce⁸

Upon arrival in Liberia, every male immigrant received 10 (in some cases 25) acres of land. Those accompanied by their families could even receive more. Moreover, additional land could be bought at the modest price of one dollar an acre. Reportedly, many African-American emigrants, however, were hardly inclined to engage in agriculture. Several reasons may explain this, as some authors have argued (though not undisputed). First, as the Nigerian author Akpan states, having been forced to work on plantations in the United States, many African-American colonists resented working on the land, even their own. Secondly, while in the United States they had developed a taste for American

food and disliked West African food which they considered inferior. Thirdly, many light-skinned colonists avoided the hot African sun. Finally, the American tools and agricultural equipment imported by the ACS were often unsuitable to the African environment and climate.⁹ The American historian Dwight N. Syfert concludes that, for a number of reasons, many colonists preferred trading activities over agricultural activities. *'Tropical agriculture was difficult and unfamiliar to black American emigrants, and had psychological implications as well, since field work was naturally associated with slavery in many minds. Commerce was more quickly profitable and not psychologically demeaning. Thus individual settlers and the ACS entered the West African coasting trade (...).'*¹⁰ As a matter of fact, the colonists had declared independence in 1847 to protect their trading interests. Their action had been triggered by a trading conflict with the British.¹¹

The Liberian historian William E. Allen fundamentally disagrees with this point of view: *'The conventional wisdom that Americo-Liberians disdained agriculture is based on inaccurate stereotypes'*. Allen supports his conclusion with an impressive number of examples.¹² More detailed information on the issue can be found in Allen's PhD dissertation which focuses on commercial agriculture in 19th-century Liberia. The main conclusion is that the scarcity of labour and capital were the main obstacles to the growth of commercial agriculture. The causes of the scarcity were high mortality, low immigration, and the poverty of the African-American settlers.¹³ The Indian historian scholar Santosh C. Saha agrees with Allen's main conclusion in a 1988 study.¹⁴ A comparative but partial study of the literature on the subject does not result in more insight explaining this apparent contradiction. Numerous 19th-century newspapers consulted elaborate on the agricultural potential and possibilities in the colonies although sometimes these reports are hardly distinguishable from outright propaganda for the Colonization Societies' main objective of colonisation of free Blacks. Moreover, sometimes the patronizing nature of the White ACS administrators and agents is hardly hidden when commenting on the attitude or activities of the emigrants. On 21 July 1831, the ACS Colonial Agent Mechlin wrote on the subjects of agriculture and commerce: *'(...) Agriculture flourishes less than any other branch of human pursuit in the Colony. The mania for trading which pervades all classes, is represented as the chief obstacle to the general cultivation of the soil. Another is, the indolence and ignorance of many who are permitted to emigrate. The commerce of the Colony is very flourishing (...).'*¹⁵ Interestingly, an interview with Vice-Governor Williams of the Colony of Liberia and Joseph Jenkins Roberts, then High Sheriff

of the Colony, during a meeting of the Colonization Society of the City of New York on 13 September 1833, yielded the following interesting Q&A session (not corrected for typos):

Q: (To Mr. Williams): Do the inhabitants turn their attention to agriculture?

A. Less than could be wished. They are more fond of trading. But when they do farm it they are successful. I know of one farm from which between forty and fifty dollars worth of produce was sold, beside supporting the family, and another which sold between two and three hundred dollars plus.

Q. What is the character of the Grand Bassa?

A. It is an agricultural settlement.

Q. What are their productions?

A. They raise rice, corn, yam, plantains, cassada, banannas, squashes, melons, cucumbers and potatoes – both Irish and sweet – the latter of which grow particularly well.

Q. Do you mean that they raise Indian corn there?

A. Certainly I have seen it and eat it.

Q. What are some of their fruits?

A. Oranges, and most if not all, the usual tropical fruits.

Q. What kind of domestic animal do they have in the topics?

A. Cattle and cows are plenty. Hogs and poultry also do well, and are abundant, and also sheep.¹⁶

While an interesting interview, it is clear from the article that the purpose of the interview was to convince opponents of colonisation that they were wrong. The previously mentioned tension between agriculture and trade is again expressed by the Daily National Intelligencer of 25 December 1833: *‘More attention would be paid to agriculture than has heretofore been done; the colony has suffered more from the neglect of cultivating the soil than from any other cause. The traffic in which the colonists generally have been engaged, to the neglect of a proper culture of the soil, has much depreciated in value from what it was originally.’*¹⁷

On 16 August 1837, the newly appointed Governor of Bassa Cove colony, Rev. Mr. Matthews, reported to the Agent for the Colonization Society of the City of New York, Rev. Dr Proudfit, after a field trip: *‘Agriculture is attended to better than heretofore; the other day I saw a fine field of rice of ten acres. (...) Mr. More (a colonist – the author) supplied nearly the whole colony with vegetables from only one acre of land; so productive is the soil if well cultivated. The public will ask, why, then, do the Colonists often suffer for the want of food? We reply that many of them are not industrious; and without labor we can live nowhere. The Society, they will allow me to say, must be particular in the selection of at least a*

majority of the emigrants, or we shall advance but slowly in carrying out the objects of the Colonization Society (...)'.¹⁸ Be that as it may, an inescapable conclusion must be that trade, administration and politics were more popular than agriculture with the first groups of colonists (before 1832). Gradually, however, the colonists' mentality changed in favour of agriculture, as was noted at the end of the decade: '(...) we learn that the attention of the colonists is more and more turned to agriculture'.¹⁹ The fact that this was not a one-off observation is also evident from the following newspaper article from 1841. The source is Samuel A. Benedict, a colonist born into slavery in Georgia who emigrated to Liberia in 1835, with an expedition sent out from Savannah by the New York Colonization Society (see above 'Bassa Cove Colony'). In the colony, he quickly rose through the ranks, despite his limited education, thanks to his intellect, industry, and integrity, and after a few years he possessed a small self-made fortune. He was self-educated, became a lawyer and, among other things, a representative of the people, a legislator, and a judge. In 1847, he became President of the Constitutional Convention that brought the Commonwealth of Liberia to independence. Samuel Benedict was an opponent of Roberts.²⁰ (He lost the 1847 presidential election to his opponent.²¹) In 1841, Benedict was briefly back in the United States 'to visit his native land' and for business. In the article, he praises Liberia's wealth: *'The soil is generally good, producing almost everything that grows in tropical countries; rice is raised in abundance, together with a variety of esculent roots; stock can be raised in abundance, and having latterly paid more attention to that object we will in a few years be amply supplied; our woods abound with deer and other game, our sea and rivers also abound with excellent fish; we have an abundant growth of the palm tree, (...) the lands are well timbered (...)'*. On the subject of agriculture, while obviously referring to agricultural activities carried out by colonists (mark his words 'among us') he writes: *'and as agriculture, the surest source of wealth and plenty, which I am sorry to say has heretofore been too much neglected among us, has been lately better attended to, we therefore feel more encouraged to go forward.'*²² The Census of 1843, which excluded recaptured Africans and indigenous people, showed already an increasing interest in the cultivation of coffee.²³ The gradual shift in interest from trade to agriculture had already been noted shortly before: *'Many of the colonists who have been unsuccessful in trade have turned their attention to farming – the cultivation of coffee, etc.'*²⁴ In 1858, President Benson announced a year of experiment in the cultivation of cotton and tobacco. Four colonists – two of them being old Virginia tobacco growers – showed optimism about the future of tobacco production in Liberia, as the costs of producing there

were estimated being one-fourth of the costs in the United States. Benson added that *'One hundred of acres of cotton have also been planted in one county by Americo-Liberians, and the other three counties have planted in proportion.'*²⁵ However, more research is needed to make firmer and more substantiated statements on the attitude of the majority of the settlers with respect to manual work for agricultural purposes. Notwithstanding the foregoing, Johnston wrote in 1906: *'The Americo-Liberians are keen traders, fonder, indeed, of trade than of agriculture.'*²⁶ and in 1985 Akpan concluded: *'(...) Most Americo-Liberians preferred trade to agriculture (...).'*²⁷ Successful traders engaged in politics and became high-ranking government officials, cabinet ministers, and sometimes even presidents of the republic. The first five presidents (Roberts, Benson, Warner, Payne, and Roye) were all rich traders. The 1871 deposition of Roye also meant the end of a period often referred to as the period of the Merchant-Princes.²⁸

From the 1860s onwards, Liberian farmers became increasingly interested in growing coffee, which originally grew wild in the Liberian forests. The growing interest in this profitable export product was positively encouraged, and plantation owners eagerly exploited the existence of large groups of recaptives who had arrived in the country in the 1860s. The liberated Africans had been placed in Americo-Liberian families through the so-called 'ward-system'. Many wards were employed at plantations as apprentices or cheap labour.²⁹

The modern economy underwent structural changes in the late 1870s. The traders who were engaged notably in the export of local products failed to adjust in time to changing external circumstances (the emergence of steamships, competition from substitutes like beet sugar, and changing trade patterns following the European colonisation of the African continent). Despite the Ports of Entry Law of 1864 (see the section on 'the Ports of Entry Acts' below), European trading firms like Woermann from Germany and H. Muller from the Netherlands strengthened their positions. In the 1890s, the economy hit a recession. Even though external causes, such as a strong competition from other coffee growers, were to blame for the difficulties, the main cause of the recession was related to domestic failures, in particular poor marketing methods and a domestic labour shortage. The latter was a structural problem in Liberia and contributed to malpractices like forced free labour. Around the turn of the century the Liberian economy was in bad shape. A dual economy had emerged, with a structural imbalance between a badly performing modern economy and a traditional subsistence economy. The lack of infrastructure and of well-trained and educated people caused productive capacity to remain at a very low level. The Liberian government's persistent shortage of funds prevented it from

investing and increasing the country's productive capacity. The main alternative, external financing, divided the colonist community, both before and after 1871.

The role of foreigners³⁰

In 1847 the government in Monrovia claimed a territory consisting of a coastal region, 200 miles long and extending 45 miles inland. Three years later it bought the Sherbro and Galinhas territories, west of Cape Mount, aided financially by Britain.³¹ In 1857, 'Maryland in Africa' joined the republic. Thus, the republic's territory extended from the Sherbro-Galinhas territories in the west (in modern Sierra Leone) to the San Pedro River in the east (in modern Ivory Coast), a coastal strip with a length of 450 miles. Again, ten years later, the territory claimed by the Monrovia government included a coastline of 600 miles and stretched approximately 50 miles inland.³² The consequence of this territorial expansion was that foreigners trading in this area fell under the authority of the Liberian State and were subject to its laws including the payment of import and export duties. These duties were the most important source of revenues for the Liberian Treasury. However, traditionally, European traders resisted the payment of these taxes.

The reaction of European governments to the declaration of independence (1847) was mainly positive. Britain immediately recognised the new republic, soon followed by France, and later a number of German Hanse towns and Denmark (1855), Belgium (1858), and the United States (1862). They were followed in the 1860s by Italy, the Netherlands, Norway, Sweden, Austria, and the North German Confederation.³³ Foreign governments – notably Britain, France, and the United States – played a remarkable role in this period of Liberia's history. At times they provided relief in awkward situations (financially, military), but increasingly they disputed the authority of Liberia over large parts of its territory, notably during the last quarter of the 19th century.

Liberia's territorial expansion met with resistance from both the tribal population and the European traders, mainly British, who connived to challenge the authority of the Liberian State. The government in Monrovia claimed a large territory but often lacked the financial and military means to enforce its authority and the respect for its laws. In 1851, President Roberts (1848-1856) complained about the subversive actions of certain foreign traders who he accused of encouraging the tribal population to rebel against the government in Monrovia.³⁴ In 1852, reports emerged that foreigners were trading with Bassa and Kru and supplying them with arms.³⁵

The Ports of Entry Acts

The Colonial Council had already introduced measures to contain the trade of foreigners in the colony during the colonial period (1822-1847). It is noteworthy that the colonists-traders were well represented in the Colonial Council. Consequently, the Council defended the commercial interests of the Merchant Princes by limiting the trade of European – i.e. White – traders with the local population. This inevitably led to war with the local population: with the Dey and Gola in 1832 and with the Bassa in 1835, who were against these laws restricting their trade with foreign traders. In 1838, the Colonial Council created a ‘Port of Entry’ to facilitate the recovery of import and export duties.³⁶ In 1848, in an attempt to better control the activities of foreign traders, the new republic, led by President Roberts, introduced the first Port of Entry Act. This Act limited the activities of foreign traders to four ports of entry: Monrovia, Marshall, Buchanan, and Greenville. However, due to British and French protests, the law was hardly enforced and eventually repealed.³⁷ At the end of the 1850s, British traders in the Galinhas coastal region refused to pay import duties to the Liberian Government, encouraged by the colonial government in Sierra Leone. This angered the government in Monrovia. The Liberians and British had a longer standing dispute over the Galinhas territory. Increasingly, the dispute became a border conflict. In 1864, during the Administration of President Daniel Warner, the Liberian Legislature adopted another Ports of Entry Act in yet another attempt to stop the evasion of laws, taxes, and duties. The Act limited the activities of foreign traders to six ports of entry, from west to east: Robertsport, Monrovia, Marshall, Buchanan, Greenville, and Harper.³⁸ The 1864 Ports of Entry Act’s first objective was to protect the financial and political interests of the Liberian State. Simultaneously, the leading politicians, all Republicans, wanted to safeguard their personal interests. The Act limited only the activities of foreign traders, not those of Americo-Liberians, who thus acquired a monopoly. Of course, European traders and the tribal population were against this Act. The Americo-Liberian traders exploited their monopoly by imposing low buying prices which resulted in attempts by the local population to trade with foreign traders outside the ports of entry. In July 1868, March 1869, and in March 1871, the Vai in the Cape Mount area were punished by an armed militia of the Liberian Government for violating the Ports of Entry Act, which led to a violent reaction.³⁹ In April 1879, the Greboes living between the Cavalla and San Pedro Rivers revolted against the Act. They rejected the authority of the Liberian State over the region (which was later annexed by France) and placed themselves under the protection of Great

Britain. In 1886, a sub-group of the Greboes living more to the west rebelled for the same reason.⁴⁰ In order to withstand the tribal resistance to the Ports of Entry Act the Liberian Government purchased weapons. In 1869, in the last year of his term, President Spriggs Payne bought US\$40,000 worth of weapons on credit from the American government to contain the Vai rebellion. President Cheeseman bought a gun-boat in 1893 to fight the Greboes of Half Cavalla who had separated themselves from the Liberian republic in protest against the Ports of Entry Act. Two years later the Liberian Government bought a second gun-boat to fight future rebellions.⁴¹ Thus the Act which was meant to generate more revenues resulted on the one hand in less trade – which provided the bulk of revenues for the Liberian Treasury – and consequently less revenue. On the other hand, the Liberian Government was forced to spend more on weapons and military expeditions to suppress the tribal resistance to the Ports of Entry Act. As a result, the financial problems of the government never ended. Foreign loans as a solution to the financial problems constituted a controversial issue, as the ‘Royer-episode’ had made apparent. In the late 1860s the downturn in external trade resulted in an economic recession and a virtual empty Treasury. Allegedly, when President Edward Roye was inaugurated in 1870 he used his own money to prefinance essential public services.⁴² The empty Treasury was also the reason for seeking a British loan which contributed to his deposition. The Liberian Government also used changes in the Ports of Entry Act as a political weapon – to please or to punish the tribal population of certain coastal towns. In 1881, President Gardner added a few coastal towns as Ports of Entry.⁴³ Around the turn of the century there were ten Ports of Entry.⁴⁴

The increase in European economic interests and activities

President Roye attempted to initiate more foreign investments but was not successful, partly due to his premature departure. Subsequent governments took some measures which were intended to make it more attractive for foreign capitalists and investors to start business in Liberia. During President Spriggs Payne’s last term (1876-1878) the Legislature adopted an important amendment to the Constitution which was meant to attract more foreign investments and to increase the government’s revenues (much needed for the amortisation of the public debt). The amendment changed the clause which excluded foreigners from owning property and allowed them to lease land for a period of 50 to 99 years – for agricultural, business or commercial purposes, or for prospecting for minerals.⁴⁵ However, the prevailing political view continued to give Americo-

Liberians a leading role in the development of the country. Unfortunately, several Liberian-owned mining companies failed to start due to a lack of capital (1869, 1881).⁴⁶ In 1884, President Hilary Johnson was inaugurated as Liberia's 11th president. He was the first president who was not born in the United States but came from a famous settler family. His father Elijah Johnson had played an important role in the creation of the republic and was one of the signers of the Declaration of Independence. President Johnson (1884-1892) was a True Whig and a moderate supporter of foreign investments. During his Administration several British traders-investors obtained important concession rights in the rubber sector (1887, 1889).⁴⁷ Johnson's successor, Joseph Cheeseman (also an Americo-Liberian president, 1892-1896) even gave another Englishman the exclusive concession rights for the entire rubber sector.⁴⁸ Most concessions, however, were limited to trading activities – the collection and purchase of wild rubber – in the coastal region. Only towards the end of the 1890s did foreign traders start to expand their activities upcountry.⁴⁹ The Liberian Government also attempted to attract foreign capitalists willing to invest in the country's infrastructure. In 1889, an American obtained a concession for the construction of a railway system but it never materialised. A second attempt, in 1894, also failed.⁵⁰ German and Dutch trading companies (Woermann, Muller) managed to increase their commercial position and interests during the last quarter of the 19th century. The increased presence of foreign traders, investors, and bankers had an important spin-off: a growing knowledge of the country. One of the most important 19th-century publications on Liberia was written by a Swiss Professor, J. Büttikofer. In 1890, a Dutch publisher published Büttikofer's famous *Reisebilder aus Liberia*, the first and for a very long time best written book on Liberia's fauna.

These developments gave rise to political complications. In 1900, the African-American president William Coleman was even forced to resign. One major cause leading to his resignation was his handling of conflicts with tribal people living in the interior of the country, which he wanted to develop with the aid of foreign capital.⁵¹ During his presidency (1896-1900) he had to deal with intertribal warfare and the widespread resistance of the native population against his government (Vai, Gola, Mandingo, Kpelle, Kru, and Grebo). Coleman wanted to pacify the interior in order to exploit and develop it. His crackdown on tribal communities and the oppressive nature of his government led to much unrest and internal opposition against his interior policy. Coleman also wanted to change the Ports of Entry Act.⁵² In his last Annual Message to the Legislature he mentioned his resignation but was silent about its reasons and main cause.⁵³ On 11 November

1900, he was succeeded by Garretson Wilmot Gibson, the last Liberian president born in the United States.⁵⁴ President Gibson also did not mention in his first Annual Message to the Legislature the reasons of Coleman's resignation.⁵⁵

Notes

¹ This section is based partly on Van der Kraaij 1983, 12-46.

² Brown 1941, 136-137.

³ The figures do not include the more than 1,000 African-Americans who emigrated with the aid of the Maryland Colonization Society.

⁴ An interesting 21st c. publication on this subject is Caree E. Banton's *More Auspicious Shores - Barbadian Migration to Liberia, Blackness, and the Making of an African Republic*. Cambridge University Press, 2019, reviewed by Robert Murray (2023) in the *Journal of West African History*, Vol. 9, Iss.1, 162-166.

⁵ Huberich 1947, 36 n36.

⁶ Van der Kraaij 1983, 16.

⁷ Sawyer 1992, 108-116.

⁸ For an overview of Liberia's economy in the 19th century, see M.B. Akpan (1975a), 'The Liberian Economy in the Nineteenth Century: The State of Agriculture and Commerce', in: *Liberian Studies Journal, Volume VI(1)*, 1 – 25, and: Akpan (1975b), 'The Liberian Economy in the Nineteenth Century: Government Finances', in: *Liberian Studies Journal, Volume VI(2)*, 129-162.

⁹ Akpan 1975a, 1-8.

¹⁰ Syfert 1975, 109-128.

¹¹ Syfert, Dwight N. (1977), 'The Liberian Coasting Trade, 1822-1900', in: *Journal of African History XVIII(2)*, 217-235.

¹² Allen, William E. (2004), 'Rethinking the History of Settler Agriculture in Nineteenth-Century Liberia', 453, in: *The International Journal of African Historical Studies, Vol. 37, No.3*, 435-462. Also: Allen, William E. (2014), *Historical Methodology and Writing the Liberian Past: the Case of Agriculture in the Nineteenth Century*, Published online by Cambridge University Press. See <https://www.cambridge.org/core/journals/history-in-africa/article/historical-methodology-and-writing-the-liberian-past-the-case-of-agriculture-in-the-nineteenth-century/1/06709E58E2395DF54990E29378A12CC1#>, accessed on 24 October 2025.

¹³ Allen, William E. (2002), *Sugar and Coffee: A History of Settler Agriculture in Nineteenth Century Liberia*. Ph. D. dissertation, Florida International University, Miami.

- ¹⁴ Saha, Santosh C. (1988) 'Agriculture in Liberia during the Nineteenth Century: America-Liberians' Contribution', in: *Canadian Journal of African Studies/Revue Canadienne des Études Africaines*, Vol. 22(2), 224-239.
- ¹⁵ *Liberia*, Christian Mirror, Portland, December 8, 1831, Volume X, Number 18, p. 2, column 6 ('based on the last number of the African Repository').
- ¹⁶ *Colonization – Colony of Liberia*, New York Weekly Messenger Young Men's Advocate, New-York, December 18, 1833, Vol. III, No. 22, p. 1, columns 1-2. Note that the citation has not been corrected for typos.
- ¹⁷ *Latest from Liberia*, Daily National Intelligencer, Washington, Wednesday, December 25, 1833, Vol. XXI, No. 6514, p. 3, column 5.
- ¹⁸ *Colonization Society*, Christian Intelligencer, New York, October 21, 1837, Vol. VIII, No. 13, p. 3, column 1.
- ¹⁹ *Africa*, New York Times and Commercial Intelligencer, New York, Tuesday Morning, July 2, 1839, Volume 3, Number 404, p. 2, column 2.
- ²⁰ Huberich 1947, 847-848. According to Huberich, Benedict might have been elected first president of Liberia but for his representation, as counsel, in a high-profile murder case.
- ²¹ Sternstein 2020, 48-49.
- ²² Communication from Samuel Benedict to Alexander Proudfit, Cor. Sec. of the New York Colonization Society, dated September 1841, *Interesting from Liberia*, The Christian Mirror, Portland, November 11, 1841, Vol. XX, No.15, p. 4, columns 1-2.
- ²³ Huberich 1947, 769.
- ²⁴ *From Liberia*, Poulson's American Daily Advertiser, Philadelphia, June 18, 1836, Volume LXV, No. 18,586, p. 2, column 5, citing The Liberia Herald of 15 April 1836.
- ²⁵ *Liberia Tobacco and Cotton*, Lowell Daily Journal and Courier, November 22, 1858, Vol. XXIV, No. 5774, p. 2, column 3.
- ²⁶ Johnston 1906, 428.
- ²⁷ Akpan, M.B. (1985), *Liberia and Ethiopia, 1880-1914: the survival of two African states*, in: A. Adu Boahen (Ed.), *General History of Africa*, VII, Africa under Colonial Domination 1880-1935. Heinemann, California, 274.
- ²⁸ Brown 1982, 141-143.
- ²⁹ Akpan 1975, 18.
- ³⁰ This section is based partly on Van der Kraaij 1983, 12-46.
- ³¹ Hargreaves, J.D. (1962), 'African Colonization in the Nineteenth Century: Liberia and Sierra Leone', 202, in: *Sierra Leone Studies – The Journal of the Sierra Leone Society (edited by A.T. Porter)*, New Series, No. 16, 189-204.
- ³² Cassell 1970, 249.
- ³³ Brown 1941, 132.

- ³⁴ Third Inaugural Address of President Joseph Jenkins Roberts, December 3, 1851, in: Guannu, Joseph Saye (Ed.). (1980), *The Inaugural Addresses of the Presidents of Liberia From Joseph Jenkins Roberts to William Richard Tolbert, Jr., 1848 to 1976*. Exposition Press, Hickville, NY, 14.
- ³⁵ Cassell 1970, 173/174.
- ³⁶ Van der Kraaij 1983, 21.
- ³⁷ Akpan 1975, 138-140.
- ³⁸ Van der Kraaij 1983, 21.
- ³⁹ Akpan 1975, 143-144.
- ⁴⁰ Akpan 1975, 146.
- ⁴¹ Van der Kraaij 1983, 467, Chapter 2, note 42.
- ⁴² Akpan 1975, 155-157.
- ⁴³ Martin, Jane J. (1969), How to build a nation: 'Liberian ideas about national integration in the later nineteenth century', 32, in: *Liberian Studies Journal*, Vol. II(1), 15-43.
- ⁴⁴ Akpan 1975, 148.
- ⁴⁵ Akpan 1975, 20.
- ⁴⁶ Johnston 1906, 286.
- ⁴⁷ For more insight into the life of Hilary Richard Wright Johnson (1837-1901): Brown Sherman 1975, 162-176.
- ⁴⁸ Cassell 1970, 341-366. See Van der Kraaij 1983, 468, Chapter 2, note 84, for the details of the concession agreements concluded.
- ⁴⁹ Van der Kraaij 1983, 30.
- ⁵⁰ For more detailed information see Cassell 1970, 346-347, 368, and Van der Kraaij 1983, 468 (Chapter 2, note 87).
- ⁵¹ Source: *Liberia: Past and Present of Africa's Oldest Republic – President William David Coleman, 1896 – 1900*, <http://www.liberiapastandpresent.org/ColemanWilliamDavid.htm> accessed on 25 October 2025.
- ⁵² See his Annual Messages to the Legislature, 1896, 1897, 1898 and 1899, in: Dunn 2010.
- ⁵² William D. Coleman, President, *Annual Message to the Legislature*, not dated, 1900, in: Dunn 2010.
- ⁵³ William D. Coleman, President, *Annual Message to the Legislature*, not dated, 1900, in: Dunn 2010.
- ⁵⁴ Wilmot Gibson was born in the State of Maryland, United States, in 1832 and came with his parents to Liberia as a young boy aged 3. In: Smith 2004, 47.
- ⁵⁵ President Garretson Wilmot Gibson, *Annual Message to the Legislature, December 10, 1901*, in: Dunn 2010.

11

European Colonialism and the Loss of Territory

Territorial threats by European countries increased after the 1884/1885 Berlin Conference, resulting in loss of territory which Liberia owned or claimed.

Liberia struggled to survive politically as several European countries tried to establish a protectorate over Africa's first independent republic ruled by Black people.

Territorial expansion

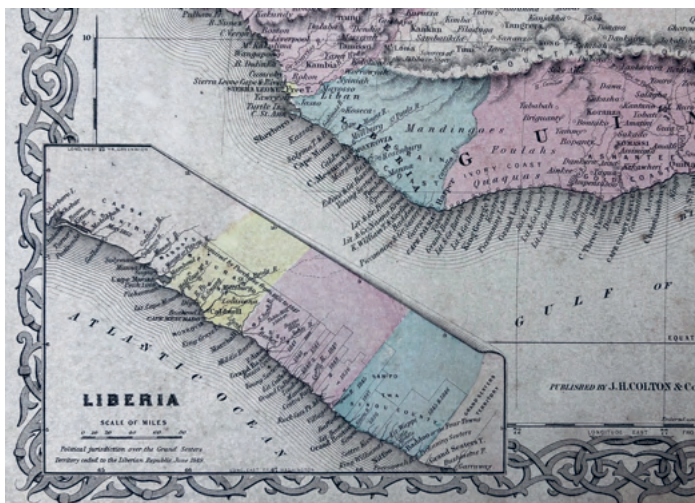
Liberia expanded its territory after the creation of an independent state in 1847. From a country consisting of a coastal strip, 200 miles long and extending 45 miles inland, in 1847, it became a territory with a coastline of 600 miles and extending approximately 50 miles inland in 1867. President Benson (1856-1864) sent surveyors to regions up the St. Paul's River that had not yet been explored by settlers. The two 'explorers', George L. Seymour and Levin Ash, travelled deep into Mandingo territory and returned deeply impressed.¹ In 1868, a former Secretary of the Treasury, Benjamin K. Anderson, also travelled to 'Mandingo-country', northwest of the St. Paul's River. He travelled further than Seymour and Ash had done. His expedition resulted in his famous travel report, *Journey to Musardu*,² which greatly increased the government's interest in the interior. This happened during the first presidency of James Spriggs Payne (1868-1870). In 1869, a Department of the Interior was created. Liberia, however, did not have sufficient means of its own to finance the expansion of its territory and the related development. It had been one of the reasons for president Roye (1870-1871) to contract a loan with British bankers.

The Liberian government gradually increased its authority over a larger territory in the interior, or claimed this territory. Initially the residential area of the Americo-Liberian settlers consisted of a coastal strip which stretched about 40-50 miles inland. Now a new territory was annexed or claimed, which was

being called the ‘Liberian Hinterland’. It was not inhabited by citizens (i.e. Americo-Liberians) but by subjects (‘the native population’).³

Illustration 26

J.H. Colton (1855), Map Africa with inset Liberia territorial acquisitions. J.H. Colton, 1855.



Source: Map Africa, North Western Sheet, J.H. Colton, 1855 (Fred van der Kraaij collection).

Illustration 27

Map Africa including a map of Liberia showing its territory and territorial acquisitions. A.J. Johnson, 1864.



Source: Map Africa, A.J. Johnson, 1864 (Fred van der Kraaij collection).

Loss of territory

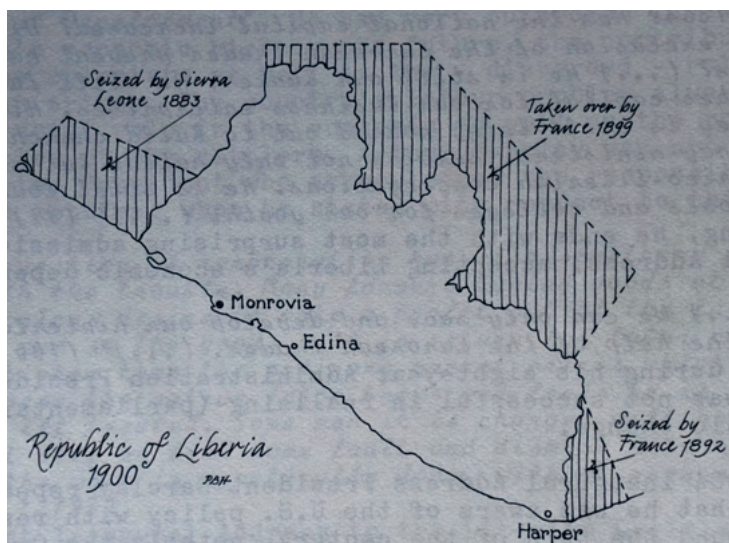
Already during the Administration of President Stephen Benson there were border disputes. In 1863, a delegation led by the president himself met with the colonial British authorities in Sierra Leone in order to delineate a formal boundary line between Liberia and Sierra Leone.⁴ In his first inaugural address, President Daniel Warner (1864-1868) mentioned the ongoing border dispute with the British.⁵ Unfortunately, he couldn't solve it either, nor could his successors. From the 1870s onwards, a number of European governments disputed the Liberian authority over the territory it claimed. The British increased pressure on the Liberian government to reach an agreement in the dispute over the Galinhas territory. After the US government sent a Navy ship to Monrovia, in 1875, the British calmed down, at least temporarily. In 1879 a German Navy ship bombarded the Liberian coast in retaliation for the plundering of a German trading ship by indigenous people (its 'subjects') and forced the Liberian government to compensate for the goods lost. In the same year, France wanted to establish a protectorate over the country and was willing to take over Liberia's public debt. The United States came to Liberia's rescue, again, this time with diplomatic action. After the government in Monrovia had turned down the proposal, the French claimed jurisdiction over the area east of Cape Palmas.⁶

European imperialism in Africa increased during the 1880s and reached its zenith with the 1884-1885 Berlin Conference. The 'Scramble for Africa' – the European claim and occupation of African territory – had been underway for some time before the conference, but intensified afterwards. The guiding principle was that of 'effective occupation' of African territory. In 1882, Britain demanded from the Liberian government the immediate recognition of British authority over the disputed area – the Galinhas territory, between the Mano and Sherbro Rivers. To flex its muscles, the British Government sent the British governor of Sierra Leone with four gun-boats to Monrovia. Liberia was too weak to defend its view and territory. In 1883, Britain annexed the Galinhas, well over 10% of Liberia's territory. In protest, Liberia's president Gardner resigned. A year later his successor, president Hilary Johnson, signed the Havelock-Blyden Treaty which officially confirmed the British annexation. From then on, the Mano River formed the boundary between Liberia and Sierra Leone. In all Liberia had spent approximately US\$100,000 to acquire and defend the Galinhas territory – bought in 1850 for the sum of nine thousand dollars⁷ – it had now lost to Britain.⁸ It is ironic that in the end Britain paid Liberia compensation for the loss of the territory.⁹

The threats to Liberia's independence were far from over. In 1885, Spain offered the country a huge loan in exchange for it becoming a protectorate.¹⁰ In the same year, France repeated its offer to take over all of Liberia's debt in exchange for a protectorate.¹¹ In 1886, Germany tried the same but was also unsuccessful in establishing a protectorate over Liberia.¹² In 1892, France annexed the territory east of Cape Palmas, formerly part of the territory of 'Maryland in Africa'. Liberia was too weak to react. In the end the Cavalla River became the official boundary between Liberia and the French colony of Ivory Coast. The following year (1893) the Liberian government asked the United States in desperation to establish a protectorate over the country. The American government declined the 'offer' but instead intervened diplomatically in favour of its stepchild. The Liberian Government was assured by Britain, France, and Germany that they would respect Liberia's independence.¹³ It would not help. In 1904, Britain tried again to establish a protectorate over Liberia and, in 1907, Liberia officially relinquished a territory of about 2,000 square miles to France and accepted the Cavalla River as the official boundary between Liberia and the French colony of Ivory Coast.¹⁴

Illustration 28

Loss of territory to Britain (1883) and France (1892; 1899).



Source: Fred van der Kraaij 1983, p. 34, map 3.

Notes

¹ Sternstein 2020, 96 citing Thomas Hamilton Bebb Walker (1915), *The Presidents of Liberia: A Biographical Sketch for Students, Containing Biographies of the Presidents and Some of the Leaders in the Making of the Republic*. Mintz printing, Jacksonville, FL, 33.

² Anderson 1870.

³ It was only during the presidency of Arthur Barclay (1904-1912) that citizenship was granted to the native population. However, the main reason for this historic decision was to prevent further French encroachments on Liberia's territory. Defending Liberian territory thus turned into a defence of Liberian citizens. Source: Blamo, J. Bernard (1972), 'Nation-Building in Liberia: The use of symbols in National Integration', 27-30, in: *Liberian Studies Journal, Vol. IV(1)*, 21-31. In daily life, neither the status nor the position of the native population changed and they remained excluded from government and public affairs.

⁴ Sternstein 2020, 110.

⁵ Sternstein 2020, 119.

⁶ Johnston 1906, 282

⁷ Huberich 1947, 687.

⁸ Van der Kraaij 1983, 27-29.

⁹ In 1903 the Anglo-Liberian Boundary Treaty was signed. This treaty included a precise description of the boundaries between Liberia and Sierra Leone. Liberia was paid a compensation of £4,750 for the loss of the territory (Johnston 1906, 280).

¹⁰ Lynch 1970, 184.

¹¹ Charles Dunbar Sherman (1948), *Economic Effects of Foreign Loans and Concessions in Liberia*. Unpublished M.A. thesis. The American University, Washington D.C., 71.

¹² Lynch 1970, 184.

¹³ Richardson 1959, 189.

¹⁴ Van der Kraaij 1983, 36.

PART SIX

The Turn of the Century

Epilogue

12

The Turn of the Century

Liberia entered the 20th century politically as a segregated country. A small minority with colonial ties ('citizens') ruled a country inhabited by a large tribal majority ('subjects'). Institutionally, the state was in an embryonic stage. Financially, it was on the brink of bankruptcy. Economically it was an underdeveloped country with a dual economy. In terms of nation-building, Liberia was a fragile state too.

Around the turn of the century 10,000 – 12,000 descendants of the African-American colonists who had created the republic ('Americo-Liberians') were living in the country, exclusively in the coastal region. They ruled a country where they had excluded the indigenous population – which formed the majority of the population – from citizenship and the ownership of land, as well as from participation in the affairs of the republic. The size of the indigenous population was not known. It was estimated at 100,000 – 200,000 people, mainly living in the 'Hinterland'. The ruling elite considered them 'uncivilised'. In fact, Liberia was a segregated society. The ruling class of Americo-Liberians, including the Congoes, and the indigenous population lived in different worlds within the same country. Notwithstanding the foregoing, the wide gap between the two social groups allowed for exceptions, made possible by the ward system and amorous relations between individuals.

Administratively and institutionally Liberia was still in an embryonic stage. The cabinet consisted of a president, vice-president, and four departments – the Treasury, War and Navy, Interior and State Departments – plus an attorney-general and postmaster-general. Sectoral departments such as agriculture, education, health, public works and economic affairs did not exist. The legislature was composed of a senate and a house of representatives. Each of the five coastal counties – Montserrado County, Grand Bassa County, Cape Mount County, Sinoe County, and Maryland County – was entitled to two senators. The number of representatives depended on the size of the Americo-Liberian population in the county concerned. The 'Hinterland' was not represented in the legislature. Representatives and senators were elected by male Americo-Liberians, 21 years of age and older, and virtually all legislators came from Americo-Liberian families.

Liberian state and society were characterised not only by a social gap and political discrimination but also by a dual economy. However, the modern economy was barely developed whereas the subsistence economy of the majority of the population was as traditional as it had been for centuries. Politically and in terms of nation-building, Liberia was a fragile state at the end of the 19th century. It had managed to survive politically despite many crises and numerous threats to its independence, but financially it was on the brink of bankruptcy. Unfortunately, coherent statistics covering the economic situation and developments are lacking. However, the yearly budget showed a structural deficit, as did the trade balance. The government resorted to borrowing to resolve the resulting financial constraints, often with negative consequences for the financial independence of the republic and its sovereignty. German, British, Dutch and American trading houses played a key role in the external trade traffic. Commercial banks did not exist in the country. The British pound and American dollar circulated freely, alongside Liberian money (mostly coins). At the same time, barter was not uncommon in the interior, in the northwest of the republic (present-day Lofa County), traditional Kissi currency was even still in use.

Infrastructure development was modest, to say the least. Due to the lack of a well-equipped port, cargo ships were still loaded and unloaded outside the dangerous surf, after which smaller ships brought the cargo ashore. On land, there were a few roads (passable in the dry season, not in the rainy season) and only in the coastal strip where the Americo-Liberian population lived. Inland, the population travelled exclusively by foot trail, using makeshift bridges, or by boat. Monrovia had a modest telephone network reaching about 30 miles inland. Postal traffic (letters, parcels) was possible, also to foreign countries, though a telegraph connection with the outside world was absent. At least five newspapers were published: the *Baptist Monitor*, the *Cape Palmas Reporter*, the *Living Chronicle*, the *Liberia Recorder*, and *New Africa*.¹ Unfortunately, in the absence of a recent census, no total data are available on the number and geographical distribution of schools or health centres. However, it is known that the role of (primarily foreign) missionary work in the education and health sectors was significant, due to the presence of a substantial number of missionaries, some of whom were based inland. Some authoritative authors even state without hesitation that ‘*The educational work in the interior for the first fifty years of the Republic had been almost exclusively carried out by American missionaries (...)*’.²

Notes

¹ Baret, L. (1902), *République de Libéria. Situation économique de la République de Libéria 1900-1901*. Rapports commerciaux des Agents diplomatiques et consulaires de France, No. 125. Supplément au Moniteur officiel du Commerce du 8 mai 1902. Paris: République française.

² Sternstein 2020, 198.

Epilogue

The 20th century began in Liberia under precarious circumstances. On 11 December 1900, Garretson Wilmot Gibson took over from President Coleman (1896-1900), who had resigned (see *supra*). Gibson was ordained as an Episcopalian priest and had received his primary and secondary education entirely at mission schools in the Maryland colony. At the time of Coleman's resignation, he was Secretary of State and actually not eligible for the presidency, but Vice-President Ross had died shortly before, and the legislature preferred Gibson over the constitutionally entitled speaker of the house. During the Gibson Administration, border conflicts with the French (in the colony of Guinea) and the British (in the colony of Sierra Leone) continued. In 1903, the British wrested additional territory from Liberia. Gibson was succeeded by Arthur Barclay. Barclay was among the group of emigrants from Barbados who came to Liberia in 1865 and settled in Crozierville. As President of Liberia (1904-1912) he made history.

In 1904, the British made another attempt to establish a protectorate over Liberia. Moreover, as a result of a misunderstanding, Liberia lost more territory than necessary in 1907 when it signed the treaty with France, which established the Cavalla River as the new eastern border. In 1908, a new border dispute with France arose. It led to Liberia requesting formal protection from the United States, which was rejected. The imperialistic threats and territorial encroachments by European powers led the Liberian Government under the leadership of Artur Barclay to a remarkable decision in 1907/1908. The Constitution was amended giving citizenship to the original population – until then considered only as ‘subjects’ – and introducing a system of ‘indirect rule’. The Liberian government hoped, by claiming to protect its citizens from foreign aggression, to prevent further territorial loss, mindful of the Berlin Conference’s criterion of effective occupation. However, Liberia’s problems were far from over and the critical period in the country's history continued unabated. By 1909, there was talk of a coup attempt by the British commanding officer of the ‘Frontier Force’. The Frontier Force was an imposed condition of a British loan which the Liberian government had contracted in 1906; its official mission was to provide training to Liberians to police the country’s borders. Also in 1909, the Kru raised the British flag in the eastern part of the country, in Garraway, after one of their numerous

uprisings against the Liberian government. The British flag was also raised in Cape Palmas. In 1910, the Grebo (in Maryland County and the adjacent Hinterland) rebelled again and asked to be placed under the protection of Great Britain. This was averted thanks to a US intervention. In 1912, the Kru at River Cess revolted, protesting against the Port of Entry Law. They were joined by the Bassa in the Buchanan area. It wasn't the last tribal uprising against the Liberian authorities.

President Arthur Barclay was vehemently opposed to the 1864 Port of Entry Law. In his First Inaugural Address he had already announced his view, which was far from being widely accepted by the country's political elite: '(...) *We can only save and develop our hinterland by the help of the European trader.*'¹ and by European trader he also included White Americans and other foreign investors. However, it would take almost a quarter of a century before the first major foreign investor established itself in the country: the US rubber company Firestone, in 1926. A few years later, the country was shaken to its foundations and nearly lost its political independence as a result of the 'Labour Scandal'. The accusations of involvement in slavery and forced labour against the country's political leadership were endorsed by a League of Nations-appointed group of experts, which also included former president Arthur Barclay, to such an extent that President King and Vice-President Yancy hastily resigned (1930). Secretary of State Edwin Barclay, Arthur Barclay's nephew succeeded King. He followed in his uncle's footsteps. Among his first acts was the repeal of the Ports of Entry Act of 1864. He explicitly invited foreign investors, but the international economic crisis of the 1930s prevented his economic policies from bearing fruit. He did, however, make the US dollar sole legal tender in the country, thus confirming Liberia's political orientation and economic and financial dependence on the United States. Liberia became an economic success story during the Administration of President William Tubman (1944-1971) when it became home to the largest mercantile fleet in the world, hosted the world's largest rubber plantation, and became Africa's number one exporter of iron ore and number three on the world list of iron ore exporters. Unfortunately, the double-digit economic growth, based on foreign capital and manpower, led neither to the development of the country nor to a substantial improvement in the living conditions of its inhabitants. It did, however, produce the now classic one-liner 'Growth without Development'.² Moreover, the fruits of economic growth were unevenly divided. The country's political, social, and economic elite continued to be in the hands of no more than 30 Americo-Liberian families, although they were internally divided and therefore never in charge at the same time.

President Tubman died in office at the age of 75. He was succeeded by his Vice-President, William Tolbert, a Baptist preacher (1971-1980). Tolbert inherited an economy in decline. In Tubman's shadow, he had always remained an inconspicuous figure. Yet as president, he emerged as one of Liberia's most progressive Americo-Liberian presidents. His progressive policy of involving the indigenous population more in national politics even threatened to result in a palace coup by the conservative wing of the still-ruling TWP.³ The infamous military coup of 12 April 1980 may have prevented this. Tolbert became Liberia's second president who did not survive a *coup*, after President Roye. The *coup d'état* brought an untimely and bloody end to both his presidency and more than a century of TWP power (1878-1980), and produced the country's first Head of State and President of tribal origin, Samuel Doe, a Krahn-Liberian from the east of the country. During the *coup* and the following days, AFL soldiers stopped Americo-Liberians on the streets and asked them to speak a tribal language. If they were unable to do so – and this was the case for most of them – they were immediately arrested. The *coup* turned out to be an explosion of violence and anarchy including a bloody public execution of cabinet members and top TWP officials on the beach in Monrovia by half-drunk AFL soldiers. Many Liberia watchers saw this violent outcome coming, albeit not in all its details, including Harvard professor Raymond Buell.⁴

It got even worse. Doe's reign (1980-1990) became the prelude to two back-to-back civil wars (1989-2003). Liberians entered the 21st-century fighting. The brutal civil wars, which had strong religious overtones, claimed hundreds of thousands of victims, devastated the country, and ruined the economy. They were largely intertribal, where belonging to the 'wrong' tribe was sufficient reason for death. None of the numerous warlords ever claimed a specific territory. These were certainly not wars of secession. In retrospect, the 1980 *coup* served as a catalyst. The take-over by enlisted men and non-commissioned officers of the Armed Forces of Liberia (AFL), all of tribal origin, put an end to the reign and power of the Americo-Liberian oligarchy. Just as the departure of colonisers in some other African countries in the 1960s led to political chaos and civil war, Liberia, too, became a victim of violence and power struggles after the departure of its rulers in 1980.

There are several reasons that explain this. First, internal divisions. Liberia's approximately 16 tribes belong to three language groups: the Kru-speaking people (in the eastern part of the country, bordering the Republic of Ivory Coast), the Mande (in western and northwestern Liberia, bordering the Republic of Sierra Leone and Guinea) and the Mel or West Atlantic group (Gola and Kissi).

However, since the indigenous population had not developed any loyalty to the Liberian authorities, their loyalty had remained with their own tribe. Secondly, there had been insufficient nation-building among the tribal population. The Liberian nation was not theirs. It was the nation of Americo-Liberians and 'Congo people'. Public life in the cities was traditionally dominated by the ruling elite, as was politics in general. School books were oriented towards the achievements of the settlers (or 'pioneers' as they liked to call themselves), and Liberia's colonial past was glorified, whereby some authors sometimes took liberties with the truth. Lastly, they were insufficiently prepared to govern the country. Government in Liberia had always been 'a family affair', and even if Liberians of tribal origin were included in the executive branch (the cabinet), the legislature, or the judiciary, they always constituted a small minority. Their willingness to cooperate with Americo-Liberians was a natural selection which kept this group small. Pressure on the government to involve indigenous people more in government and to end the de facto one-party state increased in the 1970s, especially in the second half of the decade, which coincided with the Tolbert Administration. In retrospect, the Rice Riots of April 1979 were a harbinger of the inevitable.

After the end of the second civil war (1999-2003), Liberia had to start from scratch, both politically, economically, and institutionally. In 2006, the people elected the country's first woman-president, Ellen Johnson Sirleaf, who got the country back on track to some extent, aided by the cancellation of its substantial international debt but severely hampered by the outbreak of the deadly Ebola epidemic during her second term. She caused a national and international stir by extraditing her predecessor, warlord-president Charles Taylor (1997-2003), who was subsequently sentenced to 50 years in prison by the Special Court for Sierra Leone. Post-civil war Liberia has so far had four democratic, multi-party presidential elections (2005, 2011, 2017, 2023) and three peaceful transfers of power: in 2006, 2018, and 2024. It is still too early to speak of an irreversible trend, but a remarkable shift in the ancestry of presidents is evident. (This observation does not change the fact that it is hoped that the distinction between tribal and non-tribal ancestry will disappear as soon as possible.) Samuel Doe, Liberia's 21st president, was the country's first indigenous president in the 139-year history of the republic after being declared winner of the fraudulent 1985 presidential election. By the way, Doe was tortured to death by a warlord in 1990. His official successor was former warlord Charles Taylor (1997-2003), who had started the first civil war in 1989. Taylor's father was an Americo-Liberian, his mother a Gola-Liberian. Vice-President Moses Blah, a Gio-Liberian, completed

Taylor's term after his resignation. Though Blah's presidency lasted only from August till October 2003, making him the shortest-serving president of his country, he made history as Liberia's 23rd president and its second president of tribal origin. Liberia's first democratically elected post-civil war president, Ellen Johnson Sirleaf (2006-2018), was of mixed German-African ancestry. Her father was the son of a Gola chief who grew up as a ward with an Americo-Liberian family in Monrovia. Her mother hailed from Sinoe County and was also raised in an Americo-Liberian family in Monrovia. After two terms (2006-2018), she was succeeded by George Weah, a former international football star who had entered politics and was elected to the highest office in the republic in 2017. Weah was Liberia's first democratically elected indigenous president and third president of tribal descent (Kru). He was a one-term president. In the 2023 presidential elections, he was defeated by Joseph ('Joe') Boakai, a Kissi-Liberian from Lofa County. With his 79 years when he was inaugurated as Liberia's 26th president on 22 January 2024, Boakai became Liberia's oldest president ever.

A new beginning has been made, but Liberia still has a long way to go. Looking back at the origins of the Liberia colony and the Republic of Liberia: the African-American colonists, who were unwanted by the Caucasian-American colonists and their descendants in the country where they were born and which they helped build with their (forced) labour – and where they had few or no rights – and who were 'sent away' to 'Africa', faced a huge challenge. The challenge was to build a Black nation based on Western ideas and African cultural institutions including religious beliefs and expressions. It would take more than one book to describe this process and make a well-founded assessment of the historical developments. However, it seems justified to conclude that the Liberian experiment has not yet produced the desired results. This was not the case in 1900, nor was it in 2000.

This conclusion can be partly explained by the mentality of the African-American settlers in the 19th century, who looked down on the indigenous population, whom they considered 'uncivilized'. Moreover, they felt American above all else. This attitude and mentality persisted well into the 20th century. President Tubman's unification policy launched in 1944, consisted more of neatly and cleverly formulated objectives than of concrete actions. Tubman and other members of the ruling elite were trapped within their own parameters, which were characterized by an inseparable barrier '*between the civilized and uncivilized peoples of Liberia*'.⁵ Much has changed in the past 50 years though, as briefly outlined and explained above.

Currently, well into the 21st century, the Liberian government and the Liberian people face a number of challenges. First, the reconstruction and further development of the country, a Herculean task. However, Liberia is a rich country, well-endowed with natural resources. The country has everything it needs to feed, clothe, house, and give a good future to its more than five million inhabitants. The second challenge is to reconcile civil war victims and perpetrators, and to end the impunity which reigns since the end of the civil wars. Up till the present day, more than twenty years after the signing of the Comprehensive Peace Agreement (2003), not a single Liberian warlord or rebel fighter has been brought to justice to answer for human rights violations and the torture, rape, murder, and cannibalization of fellow Liberians, children, men, women. The final report of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC), published in 2009, which recommended the establishment of an Economic and War Crimes Court, has disappeared into a deep drawer. The third challenge is the continuation of the process of decolonisation, which started in the 1970s and 1980s. This challenge is actually a double challenge: ‘decolonisation without erasing the history of the country.’ It is up to Liberians to decide how to respond to this double challenge. I will mention just one action here, and I don’t stand alone with the following suggestion. Though a seemingly superficial topic, it has great symbolic value.

‘The Love of Liberty Unites Us’

Numerous Liberians have advocated in the past for a revision of the national symbols (national motto, seal, flag, anthem), national decorations, streets and city names. While naming a few of them risks discrediting those not mentioned, the following five Liberians are mentioned here for illustrative purposes: Dr Hannah Abeodu Bowen Jones, Independence Day Orator during the Tolbert Administration in the 1970s; Jerome J. Verdier, Sr., in his capacity as Chairman of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, in the TRC Final Report (2009); Dr Togba Nah-Tipoteh in his role as National Vision 2030 Steering Committee Chairman in 2012; Dr D. Elwood Dunn in his 2012 National Independence Day Oration, and – last but not least and the most recent – Dr Robtel Neajay Pailey in her 2024 National Independence Day Oration that provoked many reactions. On the subject of changing the national symbols she had the following to say:

A re-imagined Liberia is not only free from colonial relations of power, it is also free from colonial artefacts that cripple us. In this vein, I would like to renew

previous calls to adopt national symbols that represent the ‘cultural breadth and historical depth’ of our shared experiences. I urge us to forge a new political identity by re-imagining and revising these symbols. Why is the national motto on our seal not ‘the love of liberty united us here’, as suggested by the Truth and Reconciliation Commission’s final report? Why are we still calling our highest national honor the ‘Most Venerable Order of Knighthood of the Pioneers of the Republic of Liberia’ when the word ‘pioneers’ remains politically charged? How could renaming our capital Monrovia help us to decolonize?

Pailey continued with the following commendable suggestion:

By refashioning our flag, seal, national anthem, and national awards, among others, we can re-imagine Liberia based on a set of ideals that we all uphold. We should establish a committee of Liberian scholars, local government officials, cultural experts, and visual artists to devise new symbols of national relevance that will culminate in a referendum.⁶

As stated in the Introduction: *National unification in Liberia is long overdue, but ‘better late than never’.* People cannot change the past, but they can shape the future.

Notes

¹ Van der Kraaij 1883, 33, citing Guannu, 1980, 203.

² In 1966, a group of scientists from Northwestern University (United States) published ‘*Growth without Development. An Economic Survey of Liberia*’ (Clower *et al.*). The book was negatively reviewed by President Tubman and immediately banned in Liberia.

³ Dunn 2022, 131.

⁴ Buell, Raymond L. (1947), *Liberia: A Century of Survival 1847-1947*. University of Pennsylvania Press, Philadelphia, PA.

⁵ ‘*The National Unification Program of Liberia. Hands Across the Country.*’ *Echoes From the First National Executive Council, Convoked By President William V.S. Tubman, in Harper City, Maryland County, May 24 – June 26, 1954*. Published by The Bureau of Information (Department of State), Monrovia, Liberia. In 2,5 pages of the report of The First National Executive Council, the word ‘uncivilized’ appears eight times (pp. 9-11).

⁶ *Full Speech as Delivered by Liberia 177th Independence Day Orator. A Radical Agenda for re-imagining Liberia. National Oration 177th Independence Day Celebration*, Republic of Liberia, July 26, 2024. The New Dawn, July 26, 2024, <https://www.thenewdawnliberia.com/full-speech-as-delivered-by-liberia-177th-independence-day-orator/>, accessed on 29 October 2025.

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- Christian Register (Boston, MA)

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 Independent Statesman & Maine Republican (Portland, ME)
 Lowell Daily Journal and Courier (Lowell, MA)
 National Gazette and Literary Register (Philadelphia, PA)
 Newark Daily Advertiser (Newark, NJ)
 New-York American (New York, NY)
 New York Times and Commercial Intelligencer (New York, NY)
 New York Weekly Messenger Young Men's Advocate (New York, NY)
 National Gazette and Literary Register (Philadelphia, PA)
 Niles' Weekly Register (Baltimore, MD)
 Methodist Protestant (Baltimore, MD)
 Philadelphia Recorder (Philadelphia, PA)
 Poulson's American Daily Advertiser (Philadelphia, PA)
 The American (New York, NY)
 The Evening Star (Washington D.C.)
 The Massachusetts Spy (Worcester, MA)
 The Portland Gazette (Portland, ME)
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Annex: Overview of the Literature

Part 1 Colonisation and emigration

Colonisation societies

The American Colonization Society (ACS) was founded in 1816. Subsequently, many similar organisations and auxiliary organisations were set up in both the Northern and the Southern states.

All colonisation societies focused on the Grain Coast where the ACS was the first to create a colony, the Colony of Liberia.

Each of the colonisation societies published Annual Reports and many other reports covering their activities.

The American Colonization Society (ACS)

The background, founding and activities of the ACS have been analysed and described in many publications. Certainly, one of the most informative is the *African Repository and Colonial Journal* (ARCJ), a quarterly started by the ACS in March 1825. The ARCJ defended the cause of colonisation and for that reason was criticised for being a propaganda organ of the Society. In 1850, the quarterly's name was changed to *African Repository*. Both the *African Repository and Colonial Journal* and the *African Repository* contain a wealth of information. The publications include reports, activities and other information related to the ACS and Liberia, notably the names of the freed slaves who emigrated to Liberia, of the plantations where they worked and the names of the slave-owners. After 1892 the publication's name changed again and became *Liberia*. The ACS ceased its activities *de facto* after 1919 but was officially abolished in 1964. All ACS archives and documentation with respect to the Colonisation Society, African-Americans, the colony, and later the republic of Liberia can be found in the US Library of Congress, Washington DC.

Furthermore, a selection has been made from the abundant literature on the ACS. The following works deserve special mention:

- Beyan, A.J. (1985), *The American Colonization Society and the Creation of the Liberian State: A Historical Perspective, 1822–1900*. West Virginia University.
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Maryland State Colonization Society (MSCS)

The Maryland State Colonization Society, founded in 1831, created the colony 'Maryland in Africa'. The following works give a detailed insight into the history of the Maryland State Colonization Society, the colony 'Maryland in Africa', the republic of Maryland, and its successor 'Maryland in Liberia'.

- Campbell, P. (1971), *Maryland in Africa, the Maryland State Colonization Society 1831 – 1857*. University of Illinois Press, Chicago, IL, & London, England, UK.
- Hall, R.L. (2003), *On Africa's Shore. A History of Maryland in Liberia, 1834 – 1857*. Maryland Historical Society, Baltimore, MD
- Latrobe, J.H.B. (1885), *Maryland in Liberia: A History of the Colony Planted By the Maryland State Colonization Society Under the Auspices of the State of Maryland, U.S. At Cape Palmas on the South-West Coast of Africa, 1833-1853*. Maryland Historical Society, Baltimore, MD.

The Kentucky Colonization Society

The Kentucky Colonization Society is much less well known than the ACS or the MSCS. The African-American history of the state of Kentucky is closely associated with the history of the colony and later the republic of Liberia. For this reason, the following works have been selected.

- Bennett, C.R. (1980), *All things to all people: the American Colonization Society in Kentucky, 1829-1860*. (Ph. D. dissertation). University of Kentucky. Retrieved 3 November 2025 from <https://nkaa.uky.edu/nkaa/items/show/3000038>.
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- The Kentucky Colonization Society. Retrieved 3 November 2025 from <http://nkaa.uky.edu/nkaa/items/show/744>.

The Virginia Colonization Society

The following is an outstanding work on the Virginia Colonization Society and the contribution of African Americans from the earliest and largest slaveholding state, the State of Virginia, to the ACS colony of Liberia. The book also focuses on the role of White Virginians in African colonisation.

Tyler-McGraw, M. (2007), *An African Republic. Black and White Virginians in the Making of Liberia*. The University of North Carolina Press, Chapel Hill, NC.

The Mississippi Colonization Society

The following work is a combination of reportage and narrative history. The author mixes the history of the American South, of colonialism in Africa, and of the making of Liberia with his own research findings and conversations in Claiborne County, the State of Mississippi, and tells the captivating saga of the slaves of Prospect Hill Plantation who were manumitted and emigrated to Liberia.

Huffman, A. (2004), *Mississippi in Africa*. Penguin Group, New York, NY.

The 'Ohio in Africa' Colony

Not much has been published about the failed attempt of the ACS and its auxiliary societies in Ohio to establish a colony named 'Ohio in Africa.' Edwards Wesley Shunk wrote *Ohio in Africa* as a chapter of his thesis entitled *The Negro Colonization Movement in Ohio prior to the Civil War*, which was presented for the degree of Master of Arts at the Ohio State University, August 1941. See his contribution in the *Ohio History Journal* (Vol. 51, 1942) with the same title ('Ohio in Africa'). Furthermore, the reports of the Ohio Committee of Correspondence of the American Colonization Society contain useful material for researchers.

Shunk, E.W. (1941), *Ohio in Africa*. MA Thesis, Ohio State University.

Shunk, E.W. (1942), Ohio in Africa. *Ohio History Journal*, 51.

African-American emigration to Liberia (including Maryland in Africa)

Alphabetical listing of Emigrants, Roll of Emigrants, etc. (1820-1904)

Before the US civil war:

1820-1843:

Shick, T.W. (1971), *Emigrants to Liberia, 1820 To 1843: An Alphabetical Listing*.
Liberian Studies Research Association Working Paper no. 2. University of
Delaware/Liberian Studies Association in America, Newark, DE.

1820-1843:

‘Message from the President of the United States, Communicating in compliance with a resolution of the Senate (1845)’, ‘Information relative to the operations of the United States squadron on the west coast of Africa, the condition of the American colonies there, and the commerce of the United States therewith.’
Senate, 28th Congress, 2nd Session, (150), Washington City. Includes a ‘Roll of Emigrants that have been sent to the Colony of Liberia, Western Africa, by the American Colonization Society and its Auxiliaries, To September 1843, &c., pp.152-298’.

This overview contains in alphabetical order all emigrants shipped to Liberia, per year and per ship, with other relevant information: State or place from which they emigrated; Free born or otherwise; Where located on their arrival in the colony; Extent of education; Profession; Deaths; Removals. Washington DC, US Congress, 1845.

1843-1865:

Brown, R.T. (1980), *Immigrants To Liberia, 1843 to 1865: An Alphabetical Listing*.
Liberian Studies Research Association Working Paper no. 7. Institute for
Liberian Studies, Philadelphia, PE.

1820-1854, Maryland in Liberia:

Hall (2003, 433-517) gives an ‘*Annotated Roll of Settlers in Maryland in Liberia, 1820-1854*’ which contains a Roll of Emigrants to the colony of Maryland in Liberia. Each entry includes name and age at the time of departure, date of departure and ship, and, where possible, a note on subsequent life in the colony.

After the US civil war:

1865-1904:

Murdza, P.J. (1975), *Immigrants to Liberia: 1865 to 1904. An Alphabetical Listing*.
University of Delaware/Liberian Studies Association in America, Newark, DE.

Experiences of African-American colonists and travellers as told by themselves

Three works have been selected that give an excellent insight into the experiences of African-Americans emigrants and travellers as told by themselves.

Randall Miller relates the story of an American slave family, the Skipwiths. Some family members emigrated to the Colony of Liberia; others settled in America's deep South. The letters which Miller edited tell the story of the plantation- and slave-owner, the slaves who stayed in America and the freed slaves who became colonists in Africa. The correspondence provides a precious insight into colonial life in Africa and plantation life in the United States in the 19th century.

Miller, R.M. (Ed.). (1978), "*Dear Master*". *Letters of a slave family*. Cornell University Press, Ithaca, NY, & London, England, UK.

Wilson Jeremiah Moses edited a collection of historic documents containing the narratives of four African Americans who travelled to Liberia in the 1850s. They greatly differ in their views. Their accounts vary from an attack on the ACS and a critique of Liberia, to pro-colonisation and pro-emigration.

Moses, W.J. (Ed.). (1998), *Liberian Dreams. Back-to-Africa Narratives from the 1850s*. The Pennsylvania State University Press, Philadelphia, PA.

Bell I. Wiley collected and annotated 273 letters written by former slaves who emigrated to the colony of Liberia. They wrote about the discouragement felt and disappointment experienced, but also about their determination to overcome the merciless climate, the hostility of nature, and the numerous conflicts with the natives.

Wiley, B.I. (Ed.). (1980), *Slaves No More. Letters from Liberia 1833-1869*. The University Press of Kentucky, Lexington, Kentucky.

Part 2 The Republic of Liberia in the 19th century

The origin of the tribes of the Grain Coast and the Republic of Liberia has long been a mystery to the outside world. (NB: In Liberia, the term ‘tribe’ is used to refer to an ‘ethnic group’, by both official bodies and the general public. Liberian usage is followed here.) Little if anything was known of their history, culture, and society. Moreover, what was known originated from European and American traders, travellers, and researchers. Ethnological field work and publication of research findings by Liberians were, and to a certain extent still are, scarce. As from the middle of the 20th century, an increasing number of African and notably Liberian authors have been publishing books, reports, and articles on the various tribes living in Liberia. Information on Liberia’s tribes can be found in in-depth studies, but sometimes the information is dispersed and can be found in a large number of sources and publications which not only deal with this particular tribe or sub-group. An example is the Loma bibliography written by Robert Leopold of the Smithsonian Institution (United States) and covering more than 370 written sources, 10 sound recordings, and three movies. The Liberian historian Carl Patrick Burrowes wrote a major work on the people living in the region before Liberia was created (published in 2016). The book (his PhD dissertation) took 30 years of research.

Burrowes, C.P. (2016), *Between the Kola Forest & the Salty Sea. A history of the Liberian People Before 1800*. Know Your Self Press, Bomi County, Liberia.
Leopold, R. (2006), A brief history of the Loma people. *Liberia Studies Journal*, 31(2), 5-30.

As seen through the eyes of 19th-century authors

In the early 1900s, the outside world – notably Europe and the United States – knew little of the region that was to become Liberia. Only a very small number of the European traders who visited the Grain Coast as from the 14th century – French, Portuguese, Dutch, German, and British – wrote about their experiences with the peoples they encountered on the coast – or theirs are the only accounts that have survived. Their writings, mostly logbooks and travel reports, are a precious source of information on the Grain Coast before the arrival of African American colonists.

During the 19th century the main focus of publications on Liberia was related to the colonisation adventure (see Part 1). Very few publications provided in-

depth information on the native population. For this reason, this section (Part 2) devotes much attention to Liberia's tribal population.

In the course of the 19th century, there was a gradual increase in the number of in-depth travel reports and studies of a scientific nature. Their scope and focus vary. Some publications are more general in character, while others focus on a particular tribe or region.

The following authors and publications deserve special attention. The list is not meant to be exhaustive. However, it shows the limited number of major publications on Liberia in the 19th century.

- Büttikofer, J. (1890), *Reisebilder aus Liberia. Resultate Geographischer, Naturwissenschaftlicher und Ethnografischer Untersuchungen während der Jahre 1879-1882 und 1886-1887*. 2 vols. E.J. Brill, Leiden, the Netherlands.
- Delafosse, M. (1900), *Un État nègre: La République du Libéria*. Paris, France.
- Lugenbeel, J.W. (1850), *Sketches of Liberia, Comprising a Brief Account of the Geography, Climate, Productions, and Diseases of the Republic of Liberia*. Alexander. Washington City.
- McPherson, J.H.T. (1891), *History of Liberia*. John Hopkins Press, Baltimore, MD.
- Wauwermans, H.E. (1885), *Libéria. Histoire de la Fondation d'un État nègre libre*. Institut National de Géographie, Brussels, Belgium.

The list contains exclusively European and American authors. Two 19th-century Liberian authors, however, also wrote outstanding works on Liberia and the tribes of the Hinterland.

One of the first and most elaborate and well-documented descriptions of some of the tribes in the Liberian Hinterland was written by former Liberian Secretary of the Treasury, Benjamin Anderson. His travel accounts are based on his own experiences. Benjamin Anderson was born in Baltimore, the State of Maryland, in 1834, and undertook two journeys into the interior of Liberia (in 1868-69 and 1874). His first trip took him to Musardu and extended much further inland than the first Liberian expedition in 1865. Anderson's trip resulted in a wealth of information and was published in 1870 as *Narrative of a journey to Musardu, the capital of the western Mandingoes*. S.W. Green, New York, NY. The account of his second trip has been published as *Narrative of the Expedition Despatched to Musahdu by the Liberian Government under Benjamin G.K. Anderson, Esquire*

(1874). Edited by Frederick Starr, College of West Africa Press, Monrovia, November 1912.

Source:

Anderson, B. (1971), *Narrative of a Journey to Musardu, and Narrative of the Expedition Despatched to Musahdu in 1874*. Frank Cass, London, England, UK.

The second Liberian author who merits mention here is Edward Wilmot Blyden (1832-1912), even though only a few of his many publications focus on the tribes in the coastal region (e.g. *A Chapter in the History of Liberia*. Freetown: 1892 which focuses on Bassa County). Blyden was an influential Pan-Africanist, politician, philosopher, educator, and diplomat, and a prolific writer. He originated from the West Indies, where he was born in 1832. In 1850, he emigrated to Liberia. After the turn of the century, he lived for several years in Freetown, Sierra Leone, where he died in 1912.

As seen through the eyes of 20th-century authors

During the 20th and 21st century, increasingly, Liberian authors published on Liberia and the country's tribes, even though notably during the first half of the 20th century non-Liberian authors, notably Americans, still made an important contribution. Sometimes, specific and relevant information on Liberia's tribes has been included in early works on Liberia of a more general nature, e.g. Abayomi Karna's *History of Liberia* (1926). Up to the present day, history and politics are more popular than anthropology and sociology, notably with Liberian authors.

The following list, too, is not meant to be exhaustive:

Allen, William E. (2002), *Sugar and Coffee: A History of Settler Agriculture in Nineteenth Century Liberia*. PhD dissertation, Florida International University.

Boone, C.C. (1929), *Liberia As I Know It*. Richmond, VA.

Brown, G. (1941), *Economic History of Liberia*. William Heinemann, Washington DC.

Buell, R.L. (1928), The Liberian Republic. In *The Native Problem in Africa* (2 vols.). Harvard University and Radcliffe College. Second impression 1965, Frank Cass & Co. London, England, UK. See Vol. 2, Section XIV, 704-891.

Burrowes, C.P. (2016), *Between The Kola Forest & The Salty Sea. A History of the Liberian People Before 1800*. Know Yourself Press, Bomi County, Liberia.

- Davis, R.W. (1976), *Ethnohistorical Studies on the Kru Coast*. Pencader. University of Delaware/Liberian Studies Association in America, Newark, DE.
- Dennis, B.D. (1972), *The Gbandes. A People of the Liberian Hinterlands*. Nelson-Hall Company, Chicago, Ill.
- Dunn, D.E. (Ed.). (2010), *The Annual Messages of the Presidents of Liberia 1848 - 2010: State of the Nation Addresses to the National Legislature*. Berlin: Walter de Gruyter GmbH, Berlin, Germany.
- Fahnbulleh, V.J. (1968), Origin and Migration of the Grebo Tribes. *The Liberian Historical Review*, IV(1), 9-12; 29-30.
- Germann, P. (1933), *Die Völkerstämme im Norden von Liberia*. R. Voigt-Länders, Leipzig, Germany.
- Grimes, M.A. (1968), *Educational and National Development in Liberia, 1800-1900*. PhD Thesis. Cornell University, Ithaca, NY.
- Guannu, J.S. (Ed.). (1980), *The Inaugural Addresses of the Presidents of Liberia From Joseph Jenkins Roberts to William Richard Tolbert, Jr., 1848 to 1976*. Exposition Press, Hicksville, NY.
- Harley, G.W. (1941), *Notes on the Poro in Liberia*. Papers of the Peabody Museum of American Archaeology and Ethnology, XIX(2), Harvard University, Cambridge, MA.
- Harley, G.W. (1950), *Masks as Agents of Social Control in Northeast Liberia*. Papers of the Peabody Museum of American Archaeology and Ethnology, XXXII(2). Harvard University, Cambridge, MA.
- Johnston, H.H., (1906), *Liberia*. 2 vols. Hutchinson & Co., London, England, UK.
- Karnaga, A. (1926), *History of Liberia*. Liverpool: D.H. Tyte & Co., Liverpool, England.
- Liberty, C.E.Z. (2002), *Growth of the Liberian State. An Analysis of Its Historiography*. The New World African Press, Northridge, CA.
- Sawyer, A.C. (1992), *The Emergence of Autocracy in Liberia. Tragedy and Challenge*. ICS Press, San Francisco, CA.
- Schröder, G., & Seibel, D. (1974), *Ethnographic Survey of Southeastern Liberia: The Liberian Kran and the Sapo*. University of Delaware/Liberian Studies Association in America, Newark, DE.
- Schwab, G., (1947), *Tribes of the Liberian Hinterland*. Edited, with additional material by George W. Harley. Papers of the Peabody Museum of American Archaeology and Ethnology, Harvard University, Vol. XXXI. Harvard University, Cambridge, MA.
- Sherif, V. (2016), *Land of My Fathers*. HopeRoad Publishing, England, UK.
- Starr, F. (1913), *Liberia. Description, History, Problems*. Chicago, IL.
- Sternstein, F., & Sternstein M. (2020), *Ten African-American Presidents*. KDP Publishing Company, USA.

- Strong, R.P. (Ed.) (1930). *The African Republic of Liberia and the Belgian Cong.* Based on the Observations Made and Material collected During The Harvard African Expedition 1926-1927. 2 vols. Harvard University Press, Cambridge, MA.
- Walker, T.H. (1921), *History of Liberia*. Hornhill Publishing, Boston, MA.
- Westermann, D.H. (1921), *Die Kpelle: Ein Negerstamm in Liberia*. Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, Göttingen, Germany.
- Wulah, T. (2005), *The Forgotten Liberian. History of Indigenous Tribes*. Author House, Bloomington, IN.

Last but not least – in alphabetical order – Warren L. d’Azevedo (1920-2014), Mohammed Alpha Bah (1943-2017), Svend E. Holsoe (1939-2017), Bai T. Moore (1916-1988), Wilton G.S. Sankawulo (1937-2009), and Vamba Sherif (1973-present). Moore and Sankawulo were famous novelists and essayists describing Liberia’s cultural life; d’Azevedo, Bah, and Holsoe outstanding researchers and academic authors. Vamba Sherif is one of Liberia’s most successful 21st-century authors who broke through with his acclaimed historical novel about the founding of Liberia. However, mentioning here just a few of these authors’ many publications would not give them the full honour they deserve.

Three noteworthy initiatives

In the first half of the 1950s, the Bureau of Folkways of the Interior Department (Monrovia, Liberia) started with what was meant to be a series of publications on Liberia’s 16 tribes. These publications did not aim at a scientific or academic audience but at the general public. Moreover, the responsible government institution, the Bureau of Folkways, in those days had a very limited capacity. Nevertheless, the reports and brochures produced contain very interesting information, and were written and composed by Liberians. Notably S. Jangaba M. Johnson, Bai T. Moore, and Oscar Norman conducted some of the very first in-depth studies of tribal life by Liberians. The following four publications have been traced:

- Johnson, S.J. (1954), *Traditional History, Customary Laws, Mores, Folkways and Legends of the Vai tribe*. Interior Department, Monrovia, Liberia.
- Fahnbulleh, V.J., Moore, B.T., & Johnson, S.J. (1955), *The Tribes of the Western Province and the Denwoi*. Interior Department, Monrovia, Liberia.

Johnson, S.J. (1957), *Traditional History and Folklore of the Grebo Tribe*. Interior Department, Monrovia, Liberia.

Johnson, S.J. (1961), *Traditional History and Folklore of the Gola Tribe in Liberia*, 2 vols. Interior Department, Monrovia, Liberia.

Another noteworthy publication of the Interior Department is *Laws and Administrative Regulations Governing the Poro and Sande Societies*, by Varney J. Fahnbulleh (Monrovia, 1961). Unfortunately, other publications of the Bureau of Folkways have not been traced.

A second series of publications on Liberia's tribes which merits mention, published around the same time, was aimed at high-school level. Called 'Studies of Liberian family life', it was the result of a research project, the *Liberian Educational and Cultural Research Project*, which was sponsored by USAID and the San Francisco State College Team with the collaboration of the Liberian Government and the Monrovia Consolidated School System. The projects were led by Mrs. M. Elbertha Garnett-Knott, Chair of the African Studies Department of the William V.S. Tubman High School in Monrovia. One of the publications which was traced is Nestor H. Duncan's *Family Life in Lofa County: Kissi, Gbandi, Loma, Mandingo, Kpelle* (1960). This project, too, did not aim to be of a scientific or academic level, but Duncan's publication is an important building block in better understanding the five tribes in Lofa County.

Last but not least, a very important incentive for Liberian authors was the creation of the Liberia Studies Association in 1969. Over the years, the *Liberian Studies Journal* (LSJ) has become an important platform for Liberian and foreign researchers and academics – not only for anthropological/ethnological and related studies and research but also for a wide range of Liberia-related subjects. The LSJ bibliography (1969 – present) contains many examples of very interesting research and relevant information on Liberia's 16 tribes by Liberian authors. For the sake of brevity, the reader is referred to this bibliography (LSJ Bibliography 1969-2006, TOCs 2007-2013.1.pdf).

Primary Sources

Indiana University Liberian Collections

The probably largest collection of Liberian related document outside of Liberia is located in the United States, at Indiana University (IU).

As stated on the IU website: ‘The Indiana University Liberian Collections include historical and ethnographic documents, newspapers, government publications, books, journals, dissertations, maps, slides, negatives, photographs, microfilms, audio and video tapes, artifacts, and memorabilia.’

The IU’s African Studies Research Guide offers a detailed overview of the Indiana University Liberian Collections: see <http://guides.libraries.indiana.edu/africanstudies/liberia>, accessed on 3 November 2025. It should be noted, however, that the greater part of the collection concerns the 20th century.

More information about these and other collections related to Liberia, including descriptions and access information can be found at Archives Online at Indiana University, <http://webapp1.dlib.indiana.edu/findingaids/search?repository=lc>, accessed on 3 November 2025.

The IU, in the person of the late Dr Verlon Stone (1944-2023), has been playing an important role in the rescuing of historical material in Liberia where climate, lack of funds, mismanagement, and political unrest, notably the two civil wars, have resulted in a catastrophic loss of important documents. IU has been cooperating notably with the National Archives in Liberia (the Center for National Documents and Records Agency, Government of Liberia (CNDRA), see <http://www.cndra.gov.lr>, accessed on 3 November 2025.

Liberia’s CNDRA (the ‘National Archives’) is at present of limited use and significance for historians, researchers, and students, but it is a potentially important source of primary sources. This is illustrated by the discovery of the handwritten originals of the Declaration of Independence and the 1847 Constitution in 2013 – thought to be lost but preserved in a locked safe which had been found in the basement of the Executive Mansion in Monrovia in 2013.

Last but not least, the Library of Congress (LOC) in Washington D.C. The LOC archives contain thousands of American newspapers published in the 19th century, a large number being available online. An unknown number contain valuable contemporary reports on the ACS, the auxiliary and state colonization societies, the American colonies on the West Coast of Africa, and the republic of Liberia after 1847.

Part 3 Additional, recommended reading

Books

The following four publications are all novels, inspired by or based on Liberia's culture and/or history.

- Gay, J. (1973), *Red Dust on Green Leaves. A Kpelle Twins. Childhood*. InterCulture Associate, Thompson, CT.
- Moore, B.T. (1963), *Ebony Dust*. Ducor Publishing House, Monrovia, Liberia.
- Sankawulo, W. (1974), *The Marriage of Wisdom and Other Tales from Liberia*. Heinemann, London, England, UK.
- Sherif, V., (2016), *Land of My Fathers*. HopeRoad Publishing, England, UK.
Original Dutch edition first published in 1999.

Articles

The following selected publications cover, among other topics, Liberia's economy in the 19th century, a number of the country's sixteen tribes, and the tribes' resistance to Americo-Liberian rule.

- Abasiattai, M.B. (1987), Resistance of the African Peoples of Liberia. *Liberia-Forum*, 3(4), 53-71.
- Akpan, M.B. (1973), Black Imperialism: Americo-Liberian Rule over the African peoples of Liberia, 1841-1964. *Canadian Journal of African Studies/Revue Canadienne des Etudes Africaines*, 7(2), 217-236.
- Akpan, M.B. (1975a), The Liberian Economy in the Nineteenth Century: The State of Agriculture and Commerce. *Liberian Studies Journal*, VI(1), 1-25.
- Akpan, M.B. (1975b), 'The Liberian Economy in the Nineteenth Century: Government Finances. *Liberian Studies Journal*, VI(2), 129-162.
- Akpan, M.B. (1980), The Practice of Indirect Rule in Liberia: The Laying of the Foundations, 1822-1915. In Hinzen, E., & Kappel, R. (Eds.), *Dependence, Underdevelopment and Persistent Conflict – On the Political Economy of Liberia*. Uebersee Museum Bremen, Germany.
- Akpan, Monday B. (1985), Gola Resistance to Liberian 'Rule' in the Nineteenth Century, 1835-1905. *Liberia-Forum*, 1(1), 5-27.

- Allen, W.E. (2004), Rethinking the History of Settler Agriculture in Nineteenth-Century Liberia. *The International Journal of African Historical Studies*, 37(3), 435-462.
- Brown Sherman, M. A. (1975), Some Liberian Intellectuals in the Nineteenth Century. *Liberian Studies Journal*, VI(2), 162-176.
- D'Azevedo, W.L. (1969), A Tribal Reaction to Nationalism (Part 1). *Liberian Studies Journal*, I(2), 1-22.
- D'Azevedo, W.L. (1969), A Tribal Reaction to Nationalism (Part 2). *Liberian Studies Journal*, II(1), 43-65.
- D'Azevedo, W.L. (1970), A Tribal Reaction to Nationalism (Part 3). *Liberian Studies Journal*, II(2), 99-117.
- D'Azevedo, W. L. (1971), A Tribal Reaction to Nationalism (Part 4). *Liberian Studies Journal*, III(1), 1-21.
- D'Azevedo, W.L. (1975), Honorable S. Jangaba M. Johnson: Liberian Ethnographer. *Liberian Studies Journal*, V(1), 1-6.
- Gershoni, Y. (1992a), The Formation of Liberia's Boundaries, Part I: Agreements. *Liberian Studies Journal*, XVII(1), 25-46.
- Gershoni, Y. (1992b), Formation of the Liberian Boundaries, Part II: The Demarcation Process. *Liberian Studies Journal*, XVII()2, 1992, 177-203.
- Holsoe, S.E. (1973), Theodore Canot at Cape Mount, 1841-1847. *Liberian Studies Journal*, IV(2), 163-182.
- Johnson, S.J.M. (1969), The Traditions, History and Folklore of the Belle Tribe. *Liberian Studies Journal*, I(2), 45-74.
- Leopold, R. (2002), Loma Bibliography. *Liberian Studies Journal*, XXIX(2), 81-113.
- Moore, B.T. (1990), Problems of Vai Identity in Terms of My Own Experience. *Liberian Studies Journal*, XV(2), 10-12.
- Shepperd, S. (2006), Nitien: The Curious Case of Kru Money. *Liberian Studies Journal*, XXXI(2), 50-85.
- Syfert, D.N. (1977), The Liberian Coasting Trade, 1822-1900. *Journal of African History*, XVIII(2), 217-235.

Reports

- Advocates for Human Rights (2009), *A House with Two Rooms: Final Report of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Liberia Diaspora Project*. DRI Press, Saint Paul, MN.
- Republic of Liberia (2009), *Final Report of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Liberia*. Monrovia, Liberia.

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Between 1822 and 1847, some 4,500 American ex-slaves and free-born Blacks, unwanted and ill-treated in the country of their birth, sailed to West Africa to settle in an unknown territory with an unhealthy, harsh tropical climate. Their uncertain colonisation adventure was organised and financed by White American private organisations with support from the US government.



In 1847, the Black American colonists proclaimed the first independent African republic. But the settlers were not settling in an empty land. This led to many conflicts with the indigenous population, who were excluded from the new republic, as well as with slave traders and land-hungry European colonial countries. As a result, Liberia entered the 20th century as a fragile state with an uncertain political future.

While researching the history of Liberia's origins, the author made a remarkable discovery. In this book, he reveals that the name Liberia already existed in 1822, and does not date from 1824, as is the official version.

Fred van der Kraaij is a Dutch researcher and author with professional experience in Sub-Saharan Africa since 1972. He holds a PhD in Economics from Tilburg University. His dissertation on Liberia's 'Open Door Policy' was published by the Übersee Museum Bremen, Germany, as 'An Economic History of Modern Liberia'.

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