

THOSE WITHOUT HISTORY: RECAPTURED AFRICANS, AMERICAN FREE BLACKS,
AND THE US-LIBERIA CONNECTION

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Dedicated to Tamatea

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Introduction

When Edward J. Roye became the fifth president of Liberia in 1870, many Liberian people struggled to accept the darkness of his skin. According to one columnist in the *Atlanta Constitution*,

“The isolated colonists of Liberia had not been accustomed to see a colored man thus march up the ladder of success, therefore all eyes were turned toward him—many with jealousy and some with hatred.”¹

As this writer suggested, Roye’s political rise inspired animosity towards him from many Liberian citizens, and his dark skin made him a target of intense scrutiny. Like all of his predecessors, Roye was born in the United States, a characteristic the first ten presidents of Liberia shared. Unlike the men who came before him, however, Roye had a considerably darker complexion than his other light-skinned Americo-Liberian compatriots, a physical aspect that actually helped him get elected. Roye resonated with both the darker-skinned indigenous people and the “Congoes”—former victims of the slave trade who had been recaptured by the US Navy and taken to Liberia in the mid-1800s, formerly known as recaptured Africans—, a crucial voting bloc that helped sway the election in his favor.² Indeed, in the period in which Roye ascended to the chief executive office, Liberian society felt divided, especially between settlers and local Africans. Liberian historian Joseph Saye Guannu even argued in 1985 that Roye’s election exemplified a “struggle within a class,” referring to the idea that darker-skinned Americo-Liberians were wrestling for power from lighter-skinned Americo-Liberians.³ Although Roye’s

¹ “An Enterprising Negro Barber: Edward J. Roye’s Career in Africa and Elsewhere—How a Terre Haute Barber Became President of, and the Richest Man in Liberia. Elected President of Liberia. Senator and Chief Justice. Imprisonment, Escape, and Death,” *The Atlanta Constitution (1869-1875)*, Jul 14, 1874, 2.

² Sharla Fett, *Recaptured Africans: Surviving Slave Ships, Detention, and Dislocation in the Final Years of the Slave Trade* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2017): 4-5.

³ Joseph Saye Guannu, *A Short History of the First Liberian Republic* (Pompano Beach: Exposition Press of Florida, 1985): 11.

presidency lasted only two years, his tenure highlighted the racial and ethnic tensions that characterized the early history of the new republic, tensions that eventually erupted into grisly violence a century later.

As a politician, Roye championed policies based on the inclusion of indigenous Liberian people, aiming to improve their access to education and to Monrovia, the capital of Liberia. Roye, like the early founders of Liberia, believed assimilation and cooperation between the Africans in the interior and the settlers on the coast to be crucial for the improvement of both society and its people. The president encouraged the flow and exchange of information and ideas, particularly through the creation of a railroad, which he insisted would make the “barriers of heathenism and superstition... disappear.”⁴ Looking at examples of railroads across the “civilized world,” Roye argued that Liberia “should endeavor to follow such examples as far as they can be adopted in our circumstances to promote intercourse between the distant portions of the country,” hoping to connect the disparate people of the nation in meaningful ways.⁵ Roye’s policies of inclusion exemplified the assimilationist practices that Liberian settlers had used to varying degrees of success throughout the nineteenth century, as well as a sense of superiority Americo-Liberians felt in relation to the “heathen” Africans. While historians have often focused on different aspects of Roye’s presidency, his assimilationist policies and his constituent base provide a unique window into the early history of Liberia.

In much of the research regarding Liberia, historians tend to focus on the connection the republic had and continues to have with the United States, emphasizing the similarities the two countries share.⁶ Indeed, as early as 1910, historian Roland P. Falkner urged American citizens

⁴ “Threatened Revolution in Liberia,” *The Manchester Guardian*, June 29, 1870, 8.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 8.

⁶ Tom Shick, *Behold the Promised Land: A History of Afro-American Settler Society in Nineteenth-Century Liberia* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1980); Roland P Falkner, “The United States and Liberia,” *The*

not to forget the shared history between the two polities, even encouraging the US to consider reintegrating their former colony into the nation as an unincorporated territory.⁷ Although Falkner's proposition was somewhat problematic for a number of reasons, research like his that has emphasized the intertwined relationship between Liberia and the US is significant. The connection between the two countries can help a historian better understand the history of both. Some of the similarities are overt: Liberia's constitution strikingly resembles that of the United States, and both stress the importance of freedoms of speech, religion, and assembly, while also outlining the creation of a government with three distinct branches.⁸ Even the two nations' flags share the same color and design, the only difference being that Liberia's flag only contains one star (see figure 1). Perhaps the most important similarity is the fact that the republic of Liberia was established by free black Americans, and the individuals who emerged as political and social leaders in the country all had roots in the US. The first presidents and congressmen in Liberia were all born in the US, and positions of power throughout the first few decades of the country's existence were dominated by American settlers, who became known as Americo-Liberians.⁹



Figure 1: Liberian Flag and United States Flag side by side. Retrieved from <http://africanorbit.com/news/743/liberian-american-relations-do-liberians-really-know-and-comprehend-the-spirit-of-america.html>

American Journal of International Law 4 (1910); Benjamin G. Dennis and Anita K. Dennis, *Slaves to Racism: An Unbroken Chain from America to Liberia* (New York: Algora Publishing, 2008).

⁷ Falkner, "The United States and Liberia," 545.

⁸ *Liberia Constitution of 1847*, 1847.

⁹ Guannu, *A Short History of the First Liberian Republic*, 97.

Further, scholars writing about Liberia often try to relate the tactics Americo-Liberians used to create a national identity and culture to the strategies American leaders employed. Benjamin Dennis, a Liberian scholar related to former Liberian Minister of Foreign Affairs Cecil Dennis, tackled this issue in his work, *Slaves to Racism: An Unbroken Chain from America to Liberia* (2008). Dennis argued that the ways Americo-Liberians treated the indigenous people living in their country were influenced by their American heritage, and he insisted that the prejudiced treatment indigenous Africans received from Americo-Liberians mirrored the ways white Americans treated their black counterparts. “Instead of a pluralistic or integrated society,” wrote Dennis, “there were two Liberias—two social and cultural realms that did not mesh.”¹⁰ Dennis’ work suggested that the supporters of the colonization movement and the founders of the American Colonization Society (ACS)—the group that helped transport black Americans to Africa to establish a colony—had hoped that Americo-Liberians would be able to “redeem” the indigenous Africans. Unfortunately, the settler Liberians’ unsuccessful efforts to incorporate their neighbors created a desire to separate themselves from the people who refused to adopt their ideals and beliefs. This urge to separate themselves from those they perceived as different sounds quite similar to the impetus for the creation of the ACS, and the creation of Liberia in the first place.

However, while research detailing the interactions between Americo-Liberians and indigenous Africans is certainly significant, historians like Dennis have failed to recognize the importance of Americo-Liberian interactions with the other population group that helped get Roye elected in 1870: the recaptured Africans. For much of the nineteenth century, Liberia was

¹⁰ Dennis and Dennis, *Slaves to Racism*, 11.

made up of Americo-Liberians, at least sixteen different ethnic groups of indigenous people, *and* recaptured Africans, African people being illegally transported by slavers to become slaves in the western hemisphere who were “re-captured” by the US Navy between 1819 and 1861.¹¹ The relationship between Americo-Liberians and recaptured Africans is often briefly mentioned in research regarding Liberia, but historians like Sharla Fett and Karen Fisher Younger have attempted to emphasize that captives were integral to the founding of the republic and should be recognized as a significant part of the early history of the country.¹² As these two authors suggest, despite the fact that “scholarship [regarding captives] is nearly silent,” recaptured Africans played a pivotal role in initiating the establishment of Liberia and made up a principal proportion of the laboring class for at least a few decades in the nineteenth century.¹³ Further, in the eyes of the ACS and the Americo-Liberians, captives represented the most successfully incorporated group of Africans in Liberia, providing evidence for the possibility of accomplishment of the “redemption” of Africa and its people, a stated goal of the republic.

Thus, research suggests that historians focused on the similarities between Liberia and the United States should consider how the incorporation of recaptured Africans highlights a connection between the thought processes of the leaders in both countries. In this thesis, I want to answer an important historical question: how can a historian better understand the intimate connection between the US and Liberia by examining the story of recaptured Africans? This work explores how the tactics employed to incorporate Africans into Liberia (including indigenous Africans, but focused on captives) present an important similarity in the way both Americans and Americo-Liberians interacted with those they viewed as inferior. This thesis will

¹¹ Shick, *Behold the Promised Land*, 28; Fett, *Recaptured Africans*, 4-5.

¹² Fett, *Recaptured Africans*; Karen Fisher Younger, “Liberia and the Last Slave Ships,” *Civil War History* 4 (2008).

¹³ Younger, “Liberia and the Last Slave Ships,” 425.

argue that the Americo-Liberian drive to incorporate recaptured Africans into the country highlighted their belief in unavoidable ethnic and cultural differences, leading them to promote the idea that settler Liberians needed to “civilize” and “uplift” those they viewed as lacking cultural refinement. I contend that the impulse to integrate and assimilate Africans into Americo-Liberian culture—and Liberia itself—was connected to the American colonization supporters’ drive to separate free blacks from the US, because both of these mindsets were premised on a sense of cultural superiority aimed at those perceived as lesser beings. Both the ACS and the Americo-Liberians harbored a sense of cultural superiority towards the people they insisted they were “helping,” and the ways members from both groups interacted with and wrote about those they aimed to support reflected that idea. Supporters of the ACS viewed racial difference as inherent and immutable, an idea that drove them to separate free blacks from the US for their own benefit. At the same time, many Americo-Liberians harbored an ethnic bias against Africans, and thus attempted to assimilate these people to force them to accept the “correct” culture. By understanding a crucial dissimilarity between how Americo-Liberian leaders and American leaders dealt with those they viewed as “uncivilized,” one will be able to see a commonality between the two groups: an emphasis on cultural superiority and ethnic difference.

To illustrate this argument, this thesis will highlight the reasons that drove Americo-Liberians to endeavor to remake both indigenous and recaptured Africans into productive citizens of the state, while explaining how that reasoning resonated with the American drive to separate free blacks from the US. In chapter one, I will describe the “free black problem” and the fundamental ideas of racial difference that drove political thinkers in the US to promote colonization, eventually culminating in the creation of the American Colonization Society. I will emphasize the underlying beliefs in white superiority and unshakable cultural difference that

inspired colonization proponents to search for a separate space for free black Americans, all to maintain their idea of separate spheres for separate races. By exploring the reasons why certain American political leaders looked to colonization as a solution to the “free black problem,” this chapter will emphasize and explain why a significant proportion of the American population thought free blacks and free whites must be segregated for both groups to succeed and prosper.

In chapter two, I will discuss the Slave Trade Act of 1819 and the creation of the Africa Squadron—a US naval branch tasked with halting the illegal international slave trade—and illustrate how these two policy decisions precipitated the creation of Liberia. As the Africa Squadron began to capture slavers, they needed somewhere to relocate the recaptured Africans for whom they were suddenly responsible. When the US President at the time searched for a group concerned with an African colony, he found the ACS, connecting the organization with the federal government and providing them with the necessary funds to establish a new nation on the opposite side of the Atlantic, the Republic of Liberia. In elaborating upon this history, the second chapter will explore the early history of Liberia, explaining the major reasons why the American settlers decided to incorporate local Africans and eventually captives, such as a yearning to grow the population. Importantly, this chapter will argue that the drive to incorporate stemmed from the same underlying beliefs in cultural superiority and ethnic division that inspired colonization proponents to separate. Moreover, this chapter explains how two disparate ideas of how to treat people viewed as “lesser” stemmed from the same foundational principles.

Finally, the third chapter will critically examine attempts to assimilate recaptured Africans, a group of over five thousand people who arrived in Liberia via the Africa Squadron. The Americo-Liberian settlers were most successful in incorporating this collective group for several reasons, and the tactics they used to bring these people into society are important within a

discussion of assimilation and separation. By exploring the apprenticeship system, the religious instruction, and the re-naming process each recaptive experienced, this chapter will give readers a look into how assimilation worked in practice. Further, this chapter will argue that although it is unclear whether captives completely accepted their situation, it is abundantly plain that Americo-Liberians believed they did. The final chapter will show why this distinction is important, and explore how Americo-Liberians presented the “Liberated Congos” to the world as justification for the Liberian state, examples of the way they hoped to redeem the African continent.

In a similar fashion to most works on Liberia’s early history, this thesis relies upon the *African Repository and Colonial Journal* as an important primary source. To keep American citizens updated on progress in Liberia, the American Colonization Society produced the *African Repository* from 1825 until 1919, a journal that aimed to promote black colonization and Liberia’s successes. The journal has been digitized and is available in an online database from Haithi Trust; in preparation for this project, I scoured through each journal from 1843 until 1886 to gain a solid understanding of how writers engaged with recaptive people.¹⁴ However, it is important to emphasize that save for a few exceptions, most of the written sources from this period were produced by Americo-Liberians, American travelers and missionaries living in the country for a brief period, or members of the American government and ACS. Thus, the views expressed in these sources were primarily written by people with a vested interest in the “redemption” of Africa and its people, as well as the perpetuation of the Liberian republic. Whether black or white, the authors all aimed to subdue and eliminate the alleged backwardness of African cultures, supplanting such putative deficiencies with elements of American culture

¹⁴ *The African Repository and Colonial Journal* vols.19-62 (1843-1886). Accessed at <https://catalog.hathitrust.org/Record/000521442>.

that they appreciated, such as the English language and Christianity. Additionally, no sources written by recaptured Africans between 1816 and 1870—the primary time frame this thesis focuses on—have been identified, so while we know what others said about them, we will likely never know what these people themselves said. Still, the *African Repository* is a significant collection of primary sources detailing the early history of Liberia, and it is crucial for understanding how recaptured Africans were perceived by those around them.

Additionally, I utilized other primary sources from the period, such as newspaper articles, legal documents, and published letters, to supplement the sources in the *African Repository*. Newspapers throughout the US published articles on Liberia, such as the *New York Times* and the *Baltimore Sun*, and journals like the *Journal of the Society of the Arts* also provided helpful sources on Liberian people in the nineteenth century. Additionally, I accessed newspapers published in Liberia itself on microfilm, such as the *Monrovia Observer* and *Liberia Herald*, and these newspapers helped paint a more vivid picture of the republic from the perspective of the people living there. For my chapter on the American Colonization Society and the colonization movement, I engaged with letters and works published by prominent colonization advocates—like Robert Finley and Henry Clay—to interpret the opinions of these men from their words directly. Also, Liberia's early history is intimately connected to American legislation like The Slave Trade Act of 1819, and as such I have made sure to use legal documents in this work that helped lead to the creation of an American colony in Africa.

Furthermore, I utilized the already established scholarship on Liberia's early history to contextualize my primary source work. Sharla Fett's *Recaptured Africans*, Tom Shick's *Behold the Promised Land*, Karen Fisher Younger's "Liberia and the Last Slave Ships," Claude Clegg's *The Price of Liberty*, and Henry Noble Sherwood's "Formation of the American Colonization

Society” were all instrumental secondary resources, providing me with insight on recaptured Africans, the ACS, and on nineteenth-century Liberia as a whole.¹⁵ Works by historians focused on Africa, such as those by Merran Fraenkel, Lisa Lindsay, Joseph Saye Guannu, and Yekutiel Gershoni also helped further my understanding of Liberia and its people, even though their works did not specifically focus on recaptives.¹⁶ Additionally, Abayomi Karnga’s *History of Liberia* (1926) was not only written by an indigenous Liberian, but was also one of the first published histories of the republic; this source provided a unique perspective on the country’s history and helped me to better understand how an indigenous African viewed the ethnic relations in their own home.¹⁷ Alongside these main secondary sources, I utilized a plethora of journal articles retrieved from *JSTOR.org* to increase my depth of understanding about Liberia and recaptured Africans.

As a whole, this thesis will show that the incorporation of African people, principally recaptured Africans, highlights a significant similarity between American colonization supporters and settler Liberians: a belief in cultural superiority. The ACS’s underlying focus on unavoidable racial difference led colonization advocates to promote separating black and white Americans. Similarly, Americo-Liberians not only saw assimilation as a way to increase their population and secure laborers and militia men, but also as an avenue to further their goal of spreading “superior” beliefs and ideals to Africans. Together, these examinations will emphasize

¹⁵ Fett, *Recaptured Africans*; Shick, *Behold the Promised Land*; Younger, “Liberia and the Last Slave Ships”; Claude Clegg, *The Price of Liberty: African Americans and the Making of Liberia* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004); and Henry Noble Sherwood, “Formation of the American Colonization Society,” *The Journal of Negro History* 2 (1917).

¹⁶ Merran Fraenkel, *Tribe and Class in Monrovia* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1964); Lisa Lindsay, *Atlantic Bonds: A Nineteenth-Century Odyssey from America to Africa* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2017); Guannu, *A Short History of the First Liberian Republic*; and Yekutiel Gershoni, *Black Colonialism: The Americo-Liberian Scramble for the Hinterland* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1985).

¹⁷ Abayomi Karnga, *History of Liberia* (Liverpool: D.H. Tyte and Co., 1926).

how the drive to either separate or incorporate highlighted racial and ethnic prejudices harbored by members of both groups. The view of an “other” as inherently lesser provided the foundation for both the ACS’s plans to transport free blacks to Africa and the Americo-Liberian’s plans to forcefully assimilate indigenous and recaptive Africans, and that connection is significant for truly understanding the early history of Liberia.

Chapter I—The Pernicious Population: Free Blacks and the American Colonization Society

Writing in 1816, Presbyterian minister Robert Finley pondered the potential benefits of creating an American colony on the coast of Africa exclusively for black men and women:

“Who can tell of the blessings which might be conferred upon Africa herself, when her strangers should be restored, and she should receive her children redeemed from bondage by the humanity of America, and by the hand of virtue and religion restored from their captivity.”¹⁸

Finley, a Christian interested in both abolition and the promotion of black freedom, wrote on the subject of colonization quite frequently, and his ideas about the potential of a separate space for free black Americans did not fall on deaf ears in the United States. On December 21, 1816, he helped organize a meeting of like-minded men in the nation’s capital, where a group of well-established white men met to discuss the possibility of creating a colony where free American blacks could live apart from the white citizens of the country. The meeting, attended by both relatively unknown Americans and high-profile ones—such as Henry Clay and Francis Scott Key—, ended with the resolution to create a society to, in their own words, “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.”¹⁹ This group called themselves The American Society for Colonizing the Free People of Color of the United States, eventually shortening their name to the American Colonization Society, or ACS.

The participants in the first ACS meeting could not have known how successful their organization would become, but they mobilized quickly and started trying to flesh out a plan to create a separate space for free black individuals. A few years after its inception, the ACS even

¹⁸ Robert Finley, “Thoughts on the Colonization of Free Blacks, 1816,” (Washington, D.C., 1816): 7.

¹⁹ Henry Noble Sherwood, “Formation of the American Colonization Society,” *Journal of Negro History* 2 (1917): 226-227.

partnered with the federal government, which gave its leaders the tools they needed to help create a pseudo-America on another continent for black Americans the country did not want. By the early 1820s, the group had purchased land on the western coast of Africa from a collection of local chiefs and had begun sending free black Americans to populate and cultivate the land, creating the first and only American colony in Africa, known as Liberia.²⁰ The colonists in Liberia declared independence in 1847, but they continued to work with the ACS and the American government to try and stabilize themselves and progress as a nation. And even while national support for colonization efforts and the ACS specifically dwindled throughout the 1850s and 1860s, the ACS continued their efforts, eventually achieving at least some version of their goal. By 1867, the organization had helped facilitate the journeys of over 13,000 free black Americans from the US to Liberia, and, as Finley himself put it, helped create a colony the “wild and wandering people” of Africa could look to for inspiration.²¹

With this idea in mind, this chapter aims to explore the early history of the ACS and its connection to free black Americans, because understanding this group and its reasoning for promoting colonization is a crucial aspect of understanding the establishment of Liberia. Beginning with a discussion of the perception of free blacks in the US in the nineteenth century, this chapter will explain the impetus for a colonization movement that led to the creation of the ACS in 1817. Additionally, this chapter will answer a particularly salient question surrounding the founding of the American colony in Africa: why did the United States send anyone to Liberia? I argue that the United States founded Liberia on the premise of separation, and a refusal to assimilate black individuals into American society in a meaningful way outside of the

²⁰ Karen Fisher Younger, “Liberia and the Last Slave Ships,” *Civil War History* 4 (2008): 428.

²¹ Younger, “Liberia and the Last Slave Ships,” 428; Finley, “Thoughts on Colonization,” 7.

context of slavery. The religious and political thinkers in the US who supported colonization argued that an American colony in Africa would improve both the continent and the black Americans themselves. By allowing free blacks to create their own society, the US colonization proponents insisted that they enabled black Americans to exercise their inherent rights as people, and “redeem” Africa in the process by introducing the continent to Christianity and other elements of “civilization.”

Principally, however, I argue that the US transported free black Americans to Liberia because they aimed to preserve the idea of separate spheres for separate races. The American Colonization Society hoped to rid the country of populations that undermined an unspoken stance on racial integration: that only subjugated black people had a place in American society. While some accepted the idea that blacks had inherent rights to the privileges enjoyed by other American citizens, the proponents of colonization insisted that they should only have the opportunity to live freely outside of the US. Thus, the creation of the colony that would become Liberia helped to illustrate white Americans’ belief that American blacks would remain inferior should they stay in the US, inspiring the ACS to promote and advocate free black colonization throughout the nineteenth century.

The Free Black Problem and the Establishment of the ACS

In the early nineteenth century, a growing population of people living in the United States believed that black and white Americans could not coexist in one society unless one group subjugated the other.²² However, as more black individuals began to escape slavery, and more states began to abolish the practice, political and religious thinkers identified a problem: how

²² Claude Clegg, *The Price of Liberty: African Americans and the Making of Liberia* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004): 3.

should the United States deal with *free* blacks? To subjugate these people would rob them of their ability to exercise their inherent rights as humans, but to allow them to continue to live in the nation would upset the peculiar institution of slavery, which the southern states were not willing to dismantle. Additionally, the general incorporation of free blacks into American society undermined the notion of separate spheres for separate races to exercise their inherent human rights, and a significant population of the US refused to accept an equal, interracial society. Thus, the idea of segregating American free blacks from the rest of the country became the founding principle for proponents of black colonization, and the establishment of a colony for free blacks to organize their own society became the ultimate goal. The identification of the free black problem and the subsequent decision to pursue colonization led to the creation of the American Colonization Society in 1817, an agency whose main focus was to promote the establishment of some such space for free black Americans to foster and thrive on their own.

To begin, it is important to emphasize movement and migration in the story of Liberia. The history of the republic must be understood within the larger context of black individuals either moving or being moved, especially across the Atlantic Ocean. The Trans-Atlantic Slave trade facilitated a lot of this movement, forcibly removing over twelve million people from Africa and enslaving them in the Western Hemisphere, with close to 1.2 million of those people being moved after every established nation had banned the trade.²³ However, the forced and voluntary movement of blacks living in the United States back across the Atlantic is significant in its own right, especially after the end of the Revolutionary War. After Great Britain's defeat in 1783, the slaves who fought for the British suddenly needed a place to live; some travelled to Nova Scotia, some went with their former masters to London, and others even arrived in

²³ Sharla Fett, *Recaptured Africans: Surviving Slave Ships, Detention, and Dislocation in the Final Years of the Slave Trade* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2017): 3.

Jamaica.²⁴ Significantly, some free blacks from this group were sent to the coast of Africa to live in Sierra Leone, a British colony that became the home of hundreds of thousands of British recaptured Africans during the nineteenth century.²⁵ In this sense, the history of Liberia is representative of the varied forms of black diaspora occurring throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Black movement, whether compulsory or voluntary, inspired new nations and new ideas about black nationalism, and the history of the creation of Liberia bolsters that idea.

Although the reasons for movement to Liberia varied among the different people who travelled there, the impetus for a colonization movement in the US stemmed from a view shared by primarily white men that free black men and women upset the American status quo. Free blacks frustrated many pro-slavery and some abolitionist citizens throughout the country, as they undermined the idea of separate spheres for separate races to live in. As early as the founding of the US, prominent figures like Thomas Jefferson began articulating the idea that colonization might be the best solution to the free black problem. Jefferson himself emphasized his advocacy of colonization in his famous piece, *Notes on the State of Virginia*, published in 1785. Although he favored limited emancipation and believed that blacks could achieve a certain level of sophistication by working for whites as slaves, he insisted that separate spaces for separate races must be achieved, even asking the question, “Will not a lover of natural history then... excuse an effort to keep those in the department of man as distinct as nature has formed them?”²⁶ His views on slavery aside, Jefferson’s language in this piece emphasized the idea that blacks and whites were intended by nature to be separate, and thus there was an inherent need to create isolated

²⁴ John Pulis, “Introduction,” in *Moving On: Black Loyalists in the Afro-Atlantic World* (New York: Routledge Publishing, 2013): xx.

²⁵ Finley, “Thoughts on Colonization,” 5.

²⁶ Thomas Jefferson, *Notes on the State of Virginia* (Boston: Lilly and Wait, 1832): 240.

areas for each race to thrive. As Jefferson showed, political thinkers had been contemplating the idea that free black people should have their own separate land for a while, so it is perhaps not surprising that the idea eventually gained a considerable amount of political support.

Additionally, early examples of small-scale colonization efforts in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries provided inspiration for people considering the idea. Not only were other countries using the colonization method to deal with free black individuals—exemplified by Sierra Leone—, but a few singular persons in the US were using their own means to try and test colonization. In 1798, a captain named Izard Bacon living in Virginia sent fifty-two freed black Americans to Pennsylvania, in the hopes that he would eventually gain resources to ship them from the north to Africa.²⁷ Similarly, Paul Cuffe, a free-born black interested in colonization, orchestrated the transport of nine families from the US to Sierra Leone in 1815, marking the beginning of American-based colonization.²⁸ Jefferson’s writings and ideas about colonization certainly inspired the men who would go on to form the ACS, but examples like Cuffe and Bacon actualized the process. These small-scale instances of black separation from the US provided the foundation for what would become the colonization movement, and proved that the transport of blacks eastward across the Atlantic might be possible.

Interestingly, support for the colonization movement came from all over the country, especially from white men. At least three of the men who eventually came together to form the ACS had the same ideas before coming in contact with one another. In his work on the creation of the ACS, Henry Noble Sherwood has argued that the founders of the ACS—Robert Finley, Samuel Mills, and Charles Fenton Mercer—all began writing about the prospect of colonization

²⁷ Sherwood, “Formation of the American Colonization Society,” 209.

²⁸ Clegg, *The Price of Liberty*, 24

even before meeting each other, although for slightly different reasons. Finley began writing about the potential of colonization in 1814 while teaching in New Jersey, while Mills established a school in the same state to train black missionaries to work “either in the country or abroad.”²⁹ At the same time, Mercer promoted plans for black deportation in an 1816 meeting of the Virginia General Assembly.³⁰ Sherwood contended that it was possible that these men could have had contact with one another, but argued that the lack of evidence suggesting correspondence reinforced the idea that both religious and political thinkers were independently reaching the same conclusions about the free black population. Additionally, the fact that a multitude of people became focused on the issue of free blacks emphasized the idea that their presence in the US was seen as a problem to be solved, potentially with the solution of colonization.

These men eventually came together to establish a society for themselves, and the aforementioned meeting on December 21, 1816 enabled them to flesh out the logistics of colonization, such as deciding on where to send free blacks. The option to transfer these people to Africa remained the most prominent one, but some ACS members discussed trying to get Congress to set aside land within the US for free blacks to establish their own society. While setting up his missionary school, Mills had been petitioning to gain access to land in either Ohio, Illinois, or Indiana to test his experiment, though the land never materialized.³¹ Similarly, Finley wrote about the advantages of placing a black colony within the country in his writings from 1816, as he viewed this option to be much more feasible than transporting a massive amount of people across the Atlantic. Finley argued that both the transport to Africa and the purchase of

²⁹ Sherwood, “Formation of the American Colonization Society,” 214-216.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 214-216.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 215.

land on that continent would be more expensive, and he insisted that creating a functional black government that far away from the US would be much more difficult.³² The ACS entertained a lot of options when deciding on the best place to establish a colony, but ultimately decided that the benefits of placing it outside the US outweighed the risks.

Further, the members of the ACS concluded that it was not only important for free blacks to exercise their inherent rights as humans outside the US, but it was also crucial to establish the colony specifically in Africa. After much debate, the ACS alleged that a colony outside the US presented the best landscape for a plethora of reasons, ranging from the idea that free blacks would never truly be free if they remained in close proximity to whites, to the notion that sending blacks out west might lead them to ally with the Native Americans and create “an asylum for fugitives and runaway slaves.”³³ However, the ACS also decided that Africa specifically should be the continent on which to purchase land, despite having closer options. The black-run government of the Caribbean island of Haiti declared independence in 1804, and the question of whether or not free blacks should be transported there became an important issue in ACS dialogue in the 1820s. However, as historian Claude Clegg described in his work on Liberia, the ACS and its leaders—who were, in Clegg’s words, “motivated primarily by self-interest”—ultimately became critical of immigration to Haiti and averse to Haitian society itself.³⁴ The ACS insisted that a colony in Africa offered an opportunity for free blacks to express themselves and their rights in the *correct* way, specifically because a new American colony in an ungoverned continent allowed the black Americans to “impart their own [American] manners, religion, laws,

³² Finley, “Thoughts on Colonization,” 2.

³³ Sherwood, “The Formation of the American Colonization Society,” 224.

³⁴ Clegg, *Price of Liberty*, 51.

and language” on their own society and eventually the rest of Africa.³⁵ While the ACS tended to describe Haiti in negative ways, their analysis that the country had established its own specific set of societal rules by the beginning of organized colonization was accurate. Africa, on the other hand, represented a land of unbridled opportunity in the eyes of the ACS, where they could buy land, set the agenda for the new country, and choose the ultimate societal aims for the people they transported there.

In the end, the group decided to focus their efforts on sending free blacks to Africa, both because they viewed Africa as a continent in need of guidance, and because they thought American free blacks would be the perfect stewards to lead indigenous Africans out of cultural darkness. Members alleged that these people had not earned the right to be free and achieve success in a white-dominated society, but had still gained enough knowledge—especially of Christianity—to try and “civilize” the continent they saw as heathen. For example, Henry Clay, an active ACS member and Kentucky congressman known by many as the “Great Compromiser,” was convinced that Africa was the best place for free black Americans. In a letter he wrote to a friend published after he died, Clay admitted he favored abolition, but believed slavery to be “a far less evil than would arise out of... [blacks] remaining here mixed up in our communities.”³⁶ The congressman argued that the colonization of Africa made much more sense than creating a colony in the western US, especially for free blacks, stating:

“He would then be not only in the home of his forefathers, but he might render great service to the natives of Africa, by introducing among them the arts of civilization and the religion of Christ.”³⁷

³⁵ Clegg, *Price of Liberty*, 51.

³⁶ Henry Clay, “From a Letter to Jacob Gibson,” *The Private Correspondence of Henry Clay*, edited by Colton, Calvin (Sacramento: Creative Media Partners LLC, 1856).

³⁷ Clay, “From a Letter to Jacob Gibson.”

Clay's writing underscored many of the major ideas of the ACS and promoted the notion that colonization in Africa would not only be best for free blacks, but also Africans themselves. As Clay's writings suggest, the redemption narrative became a driving force of ACS efforts to establish a colony for free blacks across the Atlantic.

Importantly, although the ACS predicated the redemption narrative on the notion that African people had no grasp of civilization, that idea begs the question: what did the American colonization proponents like Clay mean by "civilized"? The proponents of colonization used words like "civilization" and "civilized" frequently in their writings and speeches—often connecting the terms to an acceptance of Christianity—, yet they never explicitly defined them. However, Ralph Waldo Emerson, an American author active during the nineteenth century, wrote a piece on the values of "American Civilization" in the mid-1860s during the Civil War. In his work, Emerson argued that "civilization... is a vague, complex name, of many degrees," with no set definition.³⁸ He insisted that the word implied progress and a focus on moving forward, and wrote that a civilized person would likely be an organized person with a deep understanding of important aspects of society, such as religion and freedom. Significantly, Emerson argued that "in the hesitation to define what [civilization] is," most writers during the period simply defined the term by "negations...[arguing that] a nation that has no clothing, no alphabet, no iron, no marriage, no arts of peace, no abstract thought, we call barbarous."³⁹ His words emphasized that in the eyes of most Americans, the people they viewed as different, especially those of a different race, were opposed to modernity, and thus needed the help of American people to find civilization.

³⁸ Ralph Waldo Emerson, "American Civilization," *The Atlantic* (Washington, D.C., April 1862): 1.

³⁹ Emerson, "American Civilization," 1.

Within the context of the colonization movement, Emerson's definition of "civilization" as a term based in "negations" is poignant, suggesting a belief in cultural disparity that drove the ACS to separate free blacks from the US. His work underscored the common misconception that groups like Native Americans or Africans had no culture—"no alphabet... no abstract thought"—and thus needed a teacher to help them become "civilized" and reach their potential.⁴⁰ Importantly, his words help explain what the ACS meant by spreading civilization: they wanted the rest of the world to think, talk, and act in the ways they deemed appropriate, and, in essence, act more like themselves. The notion of American people as the protectors and promoters of civilization made free blacks the perfect group to redeem Africa. Not only could the ACS rid their own country of an unwanted population, but they could also improve the barbaric tribes across the Atlantic in the process.

Thus, by 1817, the ACS had focused their colonization efforts upon finding a suitable place in Africa for free blacks, emphasizing a belief that savage indigenous Africans could escape the darkness of the continent when provided with the correct role models. However, this focus on transporting free blacks to another continent underscored the foundational reasoning behind colonization: a superiority complex that enabled supporters to believe that free black Americans could not succeed in the US, and thus had no place in the country. The notion that the two races could not live in the same nation if both hoped to be free and prosper drove the ACS to advocate separating free blacks from the US, and this belief reflected an acceptance of a cultural hierarchy that drove the organization to look towards Africa in their promotion of colonization.

⁴⁰ Emerson, "American Civilization," 1.

The Colonization Movement and Separation

Like many white Americans in the nineteenth century, the ACS founders and supporters had a complicated relationship with free blacks. While some saw the creation of a colonization movement as a way to achieve general abolition, a sizable majority saw colonization as an alternative to the efforts of abolitionists, a group viewed by ACS members like Henry Clay as “altogether unorganized and most unfortunate.”⁴¹ Importantly, the ACS’s drive to promote free black colonization stemmed from their belief in a cultural hierarchy, in which whites reigned supreme and those of African descent hovered towards the bottom. Although members still perceived free blacks as superior to indigenous Africans, the underlying belief that blacks were inferior to whites led to the advocacy of separating blacks from the country.

Members and supporters of colonization fell in different places on the political spectrum, especially when it came to their views on slavery. Some members of the ACS saw colonization as a way to solidify slavery’s place in the US, such as congressman John Randolph, who owned hundreds of slaves that worked on his tobacco farm. A congressman who served in both houses of the Virginia Legislature, Randolph employed tactics to promote what historian Nicholas Wood has called “Slave Power—the political power wielded by slave owners to expand and perpetuate slavery.”⁴² Randolph believed that supporting the colonization of free blacks would allow him and other slaveholders to diminish the free black population and fortify slavery in the US. Indeed, at the first formal meeting of the ACS in December 1816, Randolph argued that the group had not focused enough on colonization’s connection to the institution, and he insisted that they “must materially tend to secure the property of every master in the United States over his

⁴¹ Clay, “From a Letter to Jacob Gibson.”

⁴² Nicholas Wood, “John Randolph of Roanoke and the Politics of Slavery in the Early Republic.” *Virginia Magazine of History and Biography* 120, no. 2 (2012): 107.

slaves.”⁴³ His words on this occasion emphasized his view of black Americans as sub-human, perhaps underscoring his reasoning for joining the ACS in the first place. While Wood’s work argued that Randolph’s views on slavery were complex and developed constantly throughout his life—he even manumitted his slaves in his will—, Randolph’s arguments at the first meeting underscored the complicated views many ACS members had on both slavery and black Americans.

Similarly, in historian Ella Forbes’ work on the American Colonization Society, she argued that the presence of “slaveholders and sympathizers” at the organization’s inception emphasized the group’s underlying belief in preserving slavery.⁴⁴ Forbes insisted that the admittance of members like Randolph, Andrew Jackson, and Henry Clay underscored the group’s commitment to bolstering the institution in the South, and she highlighted the group members’ views on race as an important indicator of their true purpose for promoting colonization. For example, in his support for colonization, Henry Clay wrote:

“Can there be a nobler cause than that which, whilst it proposed to rid our country of a useless and pernicious, if not dangerous proportion of its population, contemplates the spreading of the arts and of civilized life, and the possible redemption from ignorance and barbarism of the benighted quarter of the globe?”⁴⁵

Not only did Clay’s quote emphasize his belief in the cultural inferiority of indigenous Africans, it also highlighted his belief that the actions of the ACS were “noble,” not because they improved the situation of free blacks, but because they rid the US of an inferior and “useless” population. Although he believed that free blacks could be a positive influence on indigenous Africans, it is significant that he saw these people as purposeless in their original homeland.

⁴³ Alexander Archibald, *A History of Colonization on the Western Coast of Africa* (Philadelphia: William S. Martien, 1846): 87.

⁴⁴ Ella Forbes. “African-American Resistance to Colonization,” *Journal of Black Studies* 21, no. 2 (1990): 217.

⁴⁵ Forbes, “African-American Resistance to Colonization,” 218.

Clay's promotion of colonization bolstered the idea that, for some supporters, the reasoning for removing black Americans from their birth country related more to their view that blacks in the US would always be lower than their white counterparts, and thus needed to be sent somewhere else to become productive.

On the other hand, some of the group members' views on black and white relations related to the idea that the US could never collectively overcome racism, a belief of ACS founder Charles Fenton Mercer. Mercer regarded slavery as "the blackest of all blots, and foulest of all deformities," a societal ill that had been forced upon the US by her mother country, Great Britain.⁴⁶ Still, Mercer had little idea how to deal with the problem and believed that forcing abolition on the country would be worse than simply allowing slavery to exist. He even owned a few slaves to work his farmland in Virginia, a fact that underscored his complicated relationship with black Americans.⁴⁷ Moreover, in historian Douglas Egerton's work on the ACS and their origins, the author emphasized a view shared by members of the group like Mercer that free blacks could never escape the societal lower class, making them a danger to the newly established US. Egerton noted that Mercer had travelled to England and viewed how industrialization created class conflict in London, and the Virginian soon became "obsessed with the concept of class warfare" exacerbated by the presence of black Americans.⁴⁸ Mercer believed that widespread racism in the US would never allow free blacks to enter the working middle class, not only making them dangers to an industrializing nation, but also more likely to fall to the lowest rung on the social ladder. In Mercer's mind, it made the most sense for a free black to "expatriate himself" to Africa rather than remain in America as a "vagabond on the face of the

⁴⁶ Douglas R. Egerton, "'Its Origin Is Not a Little Curious': A New Look at the American Colonization Society," *Journal of the Early Republic* 5, no. 4 (1985): 467.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 468.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 469.

earth.”⁴⁹ As one of the founders of the ACS, Mercer’s views on black-white relations help to explain some of the reasoning for promoting a colonization movement. His view that “an everlasting mark” of black skin would perpetually subjugate blacks in the US underscored the notion that cultural difference and the seeming inevitability of white domination of blacks drove the creation of the ACS.⁵⁰

This belief that racism could never be overcome informed the actions of the ACS and their subsidiaries, and many supporters saw colonization as the only solution to the country’s race problem. In his work on why white northerners supported their local chapter of the ACS, the Pennsylvania Colonization Society (PCS), historian Eric Burin argued that “negrophobia” certainly encouraged white Pennsylvanians to join, but he also noted that “manumissions dominated the PCS leaders’ thinking and rhetoric.”⁵¹ Thus, while it would be simple to dismiss all members of the ACS as inherently malicious and against black success, this would mischaracterize the complex beliefs of many colonization supporters. Burin instead insisted that colonization proponents found themselves stuck in the middle of foolish “proslavery ideologues” and naïve “abolitionists... courting disaster,” and ultimately believed colonization to be the only viable solution.⁵² Many colonization supporters yearned to uplift black Americans out of slavery but simultaneously believed that racial harmony would never survive in the US, meaning separating the free black population from the country altogether became the only option.

⁴⁹ Charles Fenton Mercer to Charles James Faulkner, Faulkner Family Papers (Virginia Historical Society, Richmond, 1832). Found in Egerton, “‘Its Origin Is Not a Little Curious,” 469.

⁵⁰ Charles Fenton Mercer, *An Exposition of the Weakness and Inefficiency of the Government of the United States of North America* (n. p., 1845): 170. Found in Egerton, “‘Its Origin Is Not a Little Curious,” 468.

⁵¹ Eric Burin, “Rethinking Northern White Support for the African Colonization Movement: The Pennsylvania Colonization Society as an Agent of Emancipation,” *Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography* 127, no. 2 (2003): 200.

⁵² Burin, “Rethinking Northern White Support for the African Colonization Movement,” 200.

Still, while the mentality of being stuck between a rock and a hard place enabled many ACS supporters to advocate colonization, it simultaneously reinforced the idea that blacks were culturally inferior beings, potentially undercutting abolition altogether. Journalist William Lloyd Garrison, for example, an initial supporter of colonization, changed his tune in the 1830s, arguing against colonization in favor of abolition. In his 1832 work, *Thoughts on Colonization*, Garrison insisted that the colonization efforts encouraged slaveholders to keep their slaves in bondage until they could actually be transported to Africa, which ultimately undermined abolition by discouraging manumissions other than for the express purpose of deporting those people. At the same time, he argued that the process of manumitting some slaves while keeping others in bondage unintentionally increased the value of those slaves, making the institution more profitable for stalwart slaveholders. Garrison referred to colonization as a “cruel, heaven-daring, and God-dishonoring scheme,” principally because it unintentionally bolstered slavery and implicitly strengthened the notion of blacks as an inferior people.⁵³ Burin summed up this idea quite well in his piece, arguing that “the philosophical underpinning of the movement—that African Americans would forever be inferior in this country and therefore better off in Africa—impeded the abolitionist campaign for general emancipation and racial equality.”⁵⁴ As Burin and Garrison both emphasize, colonization efforts both implicitly and explicitly supported a theory of unchangeable difference that undermined the place of free blacks in American society, leading to a belief in the necessity of separation.

Additionally, Burin and Garrison’s works pointed to the idea that the ACS’s tactics in practice often had more to do with separating blacks from the US than actually accomplishing

⁵³ Burin, “Rethinking Northern White Support for the African Colonization Movement,” 207-208.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 201.

any goals in regard to ending slavery. Claude Clegg noted in his work that initially, the ACS was well-supported by religious groups, especially Quakers, many of whom believed they were helping to advocate for a cause that would lead to the ultimate betterment of the country.⁵⁵ While the ACS did not receive widespread support from the primary population they dealt with—free blacks—, they were able to achieve their goals by encouraging manumissions among religious slaveholders. However, these manumissions reinforced the idea of racial difference, as most slaves who gained their freedom through this process would not have received it if they did leave the country. Indeed, according to ACS records, more than half of the American men and women they transported to Liberia were former slaves freed for the express purpose of leaving the US, meaning these people had little choice but to abandon their home if they wanted to escape bondage.⁵⁶ These numbers suggest that colonization further solidified the rift between blacks and whites in the US, highlighting the idea that colonization primarily attracted those whose views on cultural difference between the races allowed them to believe that the separation of people was just.

Moreover, given the fact that some members of the ACS supported slavery and that even those who did not still saw blacks as inferior, it is perhaps unsurprising that free black thinkers advocated against colonization and helped lead to the downfall of the movement. Historians like Ella Forbes and Edward Magdol argued that it was the “abolitionist blacks who actively resisted, and ultimately defeated colonization efforts,” as their condemnation of the movement undermined the ability of groups like the ACS to cultivate support.⁵⁷ Free black thinkers quickly mobilized to demonstrate against colonization soon after the ACS formalized. Leaders like

⁵⁵ Clegg, *The Price of Liberty*, 39.

⁵⁶ Benjamin G. Dennis and Anita K. Dennis, *Slaves to Racism: An Unbroken Chain from America to Liberia* (New York: Algora Publishing, 2008): 10.

⁵⁷ Forbes, “African-American Resistance to Colonization,” 211.

James Forten and Absalom Jones met in 1817 in Philadelphia to criticize the ACS, maintaining that the US was and would remain their true home. Black leaders decried colonization because it separated black Americans from one another while enforcing an “unmerited stigma... upon the reputation” of both free and enslaved blacks.⁵⁸ Black opponents of colonization insisted that they wanted to try and help those forced into slavery out of the institution, not leave them behind, and they made sure their white contemporaries knew of their displeasure, especially through publications.

For example, writings by two well-known black activists—Frederick Douglass and David Walker—indicated that many in the free black community regarded colonization as a scheme to undermine black Americans and their place in the country. In his widely-read 1829 publication, *Appeal to the Colored Citizens of the World*, black abolitionist David Walker denounced colonization, arguing that efforts of the ACS were thinly veiled attempts to preserve a racial hierarchy that subjugated black people. In Walker’s eyes, colonization represented

“a plan to get those of the coloured people who are said to be free away from those of our brethren whom they unjustly hold in bondage... for if the free are allowed to stay among slaves, they will have intercourse together, and of course, the free will [teach] them that they are men, as well as other people, and certainly ought and must be free.”⁵⁹

Walker’s view of colonization suggested that the efforts of the ACS undermined the ability of blacks to become free, not least because they denied the humanity of slaves by separating them from their free black counterparts. As Walker’s work indicated, the ACS’s actions promoted the view of black individuals as lesser, and their drive to separate blacks from the US underscored their belief in white cultural superiority. Similarly, Frederick Douglass became a vehement opponent of colonization, arguing that those who supported the ACS undercut the ability of free

⁵⁸ P. J. Staudenraus, *The African Colonization Movement, 1816-1865* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1961): 32.

⁵⁹ David Walker, *Appeal to the Colored Citizens of the World* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1829): 47.

blacks to support those subdued in bondage. In an 1859 edition of his newspaper, *Douglass Monthly*, he argued that colonization “measures... draw off the attention of the free colored people from the means of improvement and elevation here,” and tried to force free black citizens away from their home.⁶⁰ As Douglass’ piece emphasized, the ACS could not gain substantial black support because their movement was predicated on the idea that free blacks were inherently inferior, and thus could never succeed in the US. Collectively, the disapproval of colonization by prominent free black thinkers underscored the notion that the movement was based on a belief in an inherent racial disparity that made blacks lesser.

Through this lens, the reasons many white Americans supported the ACS and colonization efforts becomes clear: an underlying belief that racism and cultural difference could not be avoided. Not only did some members openly disparage black Americans, many of those who did not still held on to the belief that blacks would never be able to reach the same social level or understand American culture in the same way as whites, leading to an advocacy of colonization. The colonization movement and the drive to remove free blacks from the US stemmed from an unshakable belief in the superiority of the white race, underscoring the belief that the separation of the races was the only option to enable blacks to achieve their full potential. Significantly, the hopes of the ACS to create a black America in Africa became realized a few years after their founding with the passage of the Slave Trade Act of 1819.

Conclusion

On September 18, 1858, Abraham Lincoln engaged in his fourth debate with Stephen Douglass as they battled for the presidency, and Lincoln explicitly outlined his view of black and

⁶⁰ Forbes, “African American Resistance to Colonization,” 220.

white relations in the US. When asked if he “was really in favor of producing a perfect equality between the negroes and white people,” Lincoln responded,

“I say upon this occasion I do not perceive that because the white man is to have the superior position the negro should be denied every thing. I do not understand that because I do not want a negro woman for a slave I must necessarily want her for a wife.”⁶¹

The crowd at the debate received this answer with applause and laughter, but Lincoln’s idea was indicative of the impetus for the colonization movement, and the reason why the US decided to send both free blacks—and eventually recaptured Africans—across the Atlantic Ocean. For a mixture of both pragmatic and “moral” reasons, members of the US government and the ACS promoted colonization because it rid the country of unwanted black populations, helping to reinforce the idea that separate races could only succeed in separate spheres. This sentiment of separation provided the foundation for the colonization movement; the ACS saw no scenario in which free blacks could be incorporated into society without subjugation, and thus chose to instead remove as many of these people from the country as they could. Although in their early years the ACS struggled to find support from the federal government, the passage of the Slave Trade Act of 1819 and the need to find a landing spot for recaptured Africans connected the agency with the funding it needed to get off the ground, eventually leading to the establishment of the republic of Liberia.

⁶¹ Abraham Lincoln, “The Lincoln-Douglas Debates 4th Debate Part I,” updated 2018, <http://teachingamericanhistory.org/library/document/the-lincoln-douglas-debates-4th-debate-part-i/>, accessed 26 November, 2018.

Chapter II—This Once Doomed Land: The Creation of Liberia

In 1869, the American Colonization Society invited the Honorable Joseph J. Roberts to speak in Washington, D.C. at the fifty-second anniversary of their organization. Roberts, the first and later seventh president of the Republic of Liberia, discussed a plethora of topics in his speech, but he paid particular attention to the indigenous and recaptive African populations in his country. In his eyes, “hundreds [of these people] have been Christianized, and many have become, in their civilized habits, so assimilated to the Americo-Liberians that a stranger would not readily on the streets discriminate between them.”⁶² Roberts insisted that in their quest to redeem the African continent, the Americo-Liberians had made great progress by attempting to assimilate the African populations they encountered. The indigenous Africans and the captives who had grown to resemble the Americo-Liberian settlers in their “civilized habits” and ways of life represented success stories, and evidence that colonization was an inherent societal good. Indeed, in the same volume of the *African Repository* that published Roberts’ speech, US colonization agent J. K. Converse argued that “colonization has ever been the means by which God has diffused his richest blessing from person to person.”⁶³ Both Converse and Roberts emphasized the idea that assimilation and the spread of “civilized” and Christian ideas helped to drive the creation of Liberia, incorporating people into the republic in significant ways.

But, to get to this point in Liberia’s history, we must first answer a critical question: how did any American settlers actually end up on the African continent? Although the ACS had been striving to promote colonization since their inception in 1817, they had made little traction with the federal government in their first few years of work. However, as this chapter will explain, the

⁶² “Address of Honorable Joseph J. Roberts,” *African Repository* 45 (1869): 114.

⁶³ “African Colonization: Objections Considered,” *African Repository* 45 (1869): 118.

establishment of the colony that would become Liberia had a direct connection to US efforts to halt the transatlantic slave trade, a connection that finally brought the government and the ACS together. The alliance between the ACS and the US government led to the purchase of land on the western coast of Africa, the creation of an American colony and the Republic of Liberia, and a unique example of black diaspora. By examining the end of the American slave trade in 1808, the Slave Trade Act of 1819, and the creation of the Africa Squadron, this chapter will explore how the ACS and the federal government worked together to form a colony in Africa for both free blacks and recaptured Africans, two populations with no perceived place in American society.⁶⁴ Further, this chapter will argue that the people who eventually assumed control of the country, the Americo-Liberians, mostly agreed with what they perceived as fundamental American values—like democracy, free labor, and Christianity—but yearned to have more of a place in society itself. Thus, they felt they needed to set up their country to look fairly similar to the United States, just run by black Americans. By exploring how the immigrants who became the leaders of Liberia interacted with the African people they perceived as lesser, this chapter will show how their efforts focused on promoting the spread of Christianity and “civilization” across the African continent.

Throughout the 1850s, *The Liberia Herald*—one of the major publications circulating in Liberia at the time—published a series of anonymous essays that attempted to examine and discuss the state of the republic. The second publication, simply titled “An Essay on Liberia, continued,” described the nation as “this once doomed land.”⁶⁵ The language of that phrase was significant, as it highlighted not only the author’s preconceptions about Africa as a continent, but

⁶⁴ Claude Clegg, *The Price of Liberty: African Americans and the Making of Liberia* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004): 36.

⁶⁵ “An Essay on Liberia, Continued,” *The Liberia Herald*, April 2, 1856. Microfilm, Microforms Center UW-Madison Memorial Library, Reel No. 4999.

also their perception that the land the republic stood on may no longer be doomed—in other words, it could possibly be redeemed. The author further articulated their mindset, arguing

“Now the scene is changing for the better, civilization through the affluence of the settlement of Liberia, though but of yesterday is seen which ever way the eye is turned; this is pleasing to all who desire to see the prosperity of the land in all places, there is the improvements of a civilized land.”⁶⁶

Though the author did not outline the specific improvements, they made it clear that something positive had occurred, and that all who had a stake in Liberia’s preservation would be pleased with the path upon which the country and its people were traveling. By analyzing the establishment of Liberia within the context of the slave trade, and by engaging with how the groups of people who lived in the new country interacted, this chapter will explain this author’s reasoning, and what the United States, the ACS, and the Americo-Liberians hoped to accomplish with the creation of Liberia.

The Slave Trade Act of 1819 and the Africa Squadron

Although its advocacy of colonization dated back to 1816, the ACS still needed a reason for the federal government to support them financially, and that reason came with the passage of the Slave Trade Act of 1819. While the US abolished the slave trade in 1808, officials rarely enforced this law, enabling slavers flying the American flag illegally to avoid interference from other nations’ navies. When the US rejected Great Britain’s request for search and seizure rights on these ships, they suddenly had to find a way to police their own trade, leading to the Slave Trade Act of 1819 and a new relationship between the ACS and the federal government.

⁶⁶ “An Essay on Liberia, Continued,” *The Liberia Herald*, April 2, 1856. Microfilm, Microforms Center UW-Madison Memorial Library, Reel No. 4999.

For the first eighteen years after it formally declared itself a nation, the US allowed slave trading ships to sail under the auspices of the American flag until it outlawed the practice on January 1, 1808. However, the decision to abolish the slave trade had been decided decades before: at the debates surrounding the drafting of the Constitution in 1787, lawmakers hashed out an agreement that the trade would be allowed to continue for twenty years, then discussed by Congress no earlier than 1808, when, in all likelihood, the practice would be banned.⁶⁷ When Congress began discussing the issue in early 1807, members agreed that the trade was no longer an issue and subsequently moved to outlaw the practice. Both houses of Congress approved a bill to abolish the slave trade on March 2, 1807, and President Thomas Jefferson eagerly signed the bill into law the same day, ensuring that the US slave trade would become illegal the next year.⁶⁸

While the agreement to outlaw the trade was certainly significant, the fact that the international slave trade was no longer crucial for sustaining slavery in the US by 1807 was equally important. The enslaved population in the country had become self-reproducing, so slaveholders no longer needed to import new Africans to support their business, and could instead rely on the rising population of American-born blacks to work for them. Thus, while the Constitution had mandated that discussions for outlawing the trade take place by 1808, the abolition was not a particularly fiery issue, principally because most US citizens had separated slavery as an institution from international slave trading as a practice.

Nevertheless, although the US abolished the slave trade in 1808, they failed to effectively enforce the ban, enabling slavers to fly the American flag and use American ships for their industry. This perpetuation of American slave trading deeply frustrated the British navy, which

⁶⁷ W.E.B. Du Bois, *The Suppression of the African Slave Trade to the United States of America* (reprint, New York: Oxford University Press, 2007): 54-61.

⁶⁸ *Act Prohibiting Importation of Slaves*, 5 U.S.C. § 426, United States Congress, 1807.

by 1819 had established its own unit to halt illegal slave trade activities, a group known as the Royal Africa Squadron.⁶⁹ In their quest to completely eliminate the slave trade, the British naval squadron wanted to impose their right to search slavers of other nations, such as those flying American flags, and they attempted to create bilateral treaties with the US to establish this privilege. Unfortunately for the British, the US government still harbored feelings of deep resentment following the destruction of their capital in the War of 1812. Accordingly, the US refused British search and seizure rights regarding American ships, compelling the US to implement a solution for dealing with illegal American slavers.⁷⁰

On March 3, 1819, Congress passed a solution: The Slave Trade Act of 1819. This law increased the power of the president to regulate the slave trade and enabled the US to create their own naval unit to enforce the ban they had imposed eleven years before. The act authorized President James Monroe to employ a squadron of “armed vessels” to traverse the coasts of both the US and Africa in search of illegal slavers, and to “seize, take, and bring into any ports of the United States” any ship violating the law and transporting slaves illegally.⁷¹ The wording of the congressional resolution empowered Monroe to create the US Africa Squadron, a group specifically charged with enforcing American naval law on the ocean, while also empowering the US government to keep their property out of British hands.

The establishment of a specific naval unit solved one problem but unintentionally created another: what should the US do with the thousands of Africans their navy captured? As Fett described in her work on recaptives, nearly 2.8 million Africans were illegally trafficked to the

⁶⁹ Henry Yule, *The Africa Squadron Vindicated* (London: 1850): 4.

⁷⁰ Sharla Fett, *Recaptured Africans: Surviving Slave Ships, Detention, and Dislocation in the Final Years of the Slave Trade* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2017): 10.

⁷¹ *An Act to Protect the Commerce of the United States, and to Punish the Crime of Piracy*, United States Congress, March 3, 1819.

western hemisphere during the “second slavery” era, a period in the nineteenth century in which “antebellum U.S. slavery constituted part of a larger” new cycle of the transatlantic slave trade. Slavery as an institution continued to expand into new industries in North and South America—such as cotton, sugar, and coffee—, meaning a high volume of people were still being trafficked to nations other than the US.⁷² The Africa Squadron not only had to stop the people perpetuating the trade, but they also had to deal with the massive population of Africans the ships were transporting. Between 1807 and 1819, the small collections of recaptives captured by the US Navy became property of the state in which they were initially relocated. However, many of the ports in which the recaptured Africans arrived were in southern, slave-holding states, creating a dilemma regarding how to deal with these people so recently freed from the slave trade.⁷³ To rectify this, the Slave Trade Act shifted responsibility for the recaptives from the state to the federal level and explicitly tasked Monroe with finding a new space for the recaptured Africans themselves. The act stated:

“And be it further enacted. That the President of the United States be, and he is hereby, authorized to make such regulations and arrangements as he may deem expedient for the safe-keeping, support, and removal beyond the limits of the United States, of all such negroes, mulattoes, or persons of color, as may be so delivered and brought within their jurisdiction.”⁷⁴

In addition, the Act appropriated \$100,000 for the express purpose of establishing an American colony in Africa.⁷⁵

However, the explicit language of the act is significant, as it underscored one of the reasons why Monroe eventually partnered with the ACS to accomplish the goals set out for him.

⁷² Fett, *Recaptured Africans*, 17.

⁷³ Fett, *Recaptured Africans*, 17.

⁷⁴ *An Act to Protect the Commerce of the United States*.

⁷⁵ Clegg, *The Price of Liberty*, 36.

The act specified that Monroe had to find a colony for recaptured Africans “beyond the limits of the United States,” and this phrase spoke volumes about the place of recaptured Africans in a slave society.⁷⁶ While the American public continued to separate slavery as an institution from the slave trade, recaptured Africans highlighted the difficulty of preserving the former while condemning the latter. Even though the US attempted to solve the issue of abolishing the slave trade, they created a new problem for themselves when they tried to find a space for the survivors of the trade in the US. To re-enslave these people would defeat the purpose of regulating the trade at all, but to simply grant them citizenship would perpetuate the issue free blacks already presented, and undermine the notion of separate spheres for separate races. Through this lens, captives and free blacks shared specific qualities that led to their removal, highlighting both the pragmatic and “moral” reasons for colonization. In the mind of many Americans, colonization not only gifted black Americans the ability to achieve true freedom and exercise their inherent rights as people, but also helped solidify the separation of races in the US while furthering the goal of African redemption.

With the connection between free blacks and captives established, it made sense that Monroe and Congress jointly made the decision to work with the ACS. As Karen Fisher Younger describes in her work on captives, “the newly formed ACS seemed to provide the solution to the dilemma over what to do with recaptured Africans,” and their plans for colonization progressed both the aims of the organization and the federal government.⁷⁷ Monroe established a working relationship between the ACS and the federal government, and he gave the organization ample funding and naval support to pursue their goals of free black colonization, so long as their

⁷⁶ *An Act to Protect the Commerce of the United States*.

⁷⁷ Karen Fisher Younger, “Liberia and the Last Slave Ships,” *Civil War History* 4 (2008): 428.

plans included recaptured Africans. The first voyages chartered to Liberia received federal funding, the first officers employed in the colony received their salaries from the government, and in February of 1820 when the first Americans made their trek to establish a colony in Africa, Monroe sent a warship, the *Cyanne*, to protect them on their journey.⁷⁸ These instances of cooperation illustrated the distinct ties between the government and the ACS and underscored their efforts to achieve their common goal of removing unwanted populations from the US. While the group sent in 1820 encountered trouble with nearby indigenous groups and ultimately failed to create a lasting colony, a second contingent sent in 1821 found a desirable site at Cape Mesurado on the West Coast of Africa just south of the site of their inspiration, Sierra Leone.⁷⁹ The group struggled to force the Africans living in the area to sell them their land, but again utilized the strong arm of the federal government to achieve their goals. Navy Lieutenant Robert Stockton forced the indigenous Africans populating the area into negotiations at gunpoint a few months later, and both parties signed a treaty that ceded land to the United States, effectively creating the fledgling colony of Liberia.⁸⁰ The new settlement even named its capital Monrovia, an homage to the President who helped establish the new nation.

Assimilation of Local Africans

When they arrived, the free black settlers in Liberia recognized that their work was cut out for them, both because they were in an unfamiliar terrain, and because they were surrounded by unfamiliar indigenous African people. While the settlers' efforts to assimilate African people were most successful with recaptured Africans, their tactics of incorporation began with the local

⁷⁸ Younger, "Liberia and the Last Slave Ships," 428.

⁷⁹ Clegg, *The Price of Liberty*, 37.

⁸⁰ Roland P Falkner, "The United States and Liberia," *The American Journal of International Law* 4 (1910): 531.

people they came in contact with initially, methods that aimed to expand the territory of the colony and include more citizens. The major reasons for incorporation stemmed from a hope to increase the population of the new republic, an aim to find reliant laborers and militia men, and a focus on spreading Christianity throughout the region. Crucially, a recognition of how settler Liberians attempted to incorporate all Africans surrounding the republic is important for understanding why they yearned to assimilate those they viewed as inferior.

Initially, one of the main driving forces for Americo-Liberians to try and incorporate Africans into their country stemmed from a need to grow the population. The authors of *The Historical Dictionary of Liberia* wrote that between 1820 and 1843, 287 recaptives landed in Liberia, but that number represented six percent of the entire immigrant population.⁸¹ That percentage meant that by their calculation, the Americo-Liberians numbered less than 5,000 people by 1843, a relatively small population in comparison to the local African population surrounding them. Further, historian Claude Clegg notes that by 1858, the immigrant population in Liberia was still only around 7,600, indicating that their population increased only marginally in fifteen years.⁸² This low population was compounded by the fact that even when free blacks arrived in the country, they came in relatively small groups, meaning the settlers could not rely on immigrants to help grow the country. Accordingly, the assimilation of African people represented a practical way to increase the population with accepted classes of people, those who adhered to Christianity and adopted English as their language.

Unsurprisingly, ACS managers and Americo-Liberian leaders encouraged missionary work and educational instruction for indigenous Africans living on the outskirts of the colony to

⁸¹ D. Elwood Dunn, Amos Beyan, Carl Patrick Burrowes, "Congo Recaptives," *The Historical Dictionary of Liberia* (Lanham: Scarecrow Press, 2000): 83.

⁸² Clegg, *The Price of Liberty*, 245.

try and grow the new settlement. Historian M.B. Akpan, whose work focused on black imperialism in Liberia, argued that assimilation represented the first piece in Liberia's "Native Policy," or how they intended to deal with indigenous Africans in a way that would "improve" the country and expand their territory. Americo-Liberians even established "'civilized' settlements of Afro-Americans" in different parts of the country to try and situate themselves within enclaves of indigenous people and break them up, hoping to facilitate assimilation and the adoption of Liberian values among local African tribes.⁸³ Akpan's research helps to underscore the initial drive to assimilate disparate people into Liberia. Further, the quoted word "civilized" in Akpan's work emphasized the Americo-Liberian belief that their indigenous Africans surrounding the colony needed American culture to escape their barbarism. Indeed, the original author who wrote that word was published in the *African Repository* in 1838, and he insisted that although the official population in Liberia was only about 5,000 (around 3,000 immigrants and 2,000 local Africans), Liberians felt excited by the indigenous Africans, "mostly youth, who have come into the colony to learn 'Merica fash' and to make themselves 'white men' by conforming to the habits of civilization."⁸⁴ As these two authors highlighted, the Americo-Liberians yearned to incorporate Africans to try and grow their population, but only if those African people accepted Liberian beliefs and ideals.

Simultaneously, incorporating local Africans into Liberian society also increased the number of available laborers, laborers who were already familiar with the land. While assimilation has often been viewed as a top-down process, African historian William Allen's work on Liberia in the nineteenth century emphasized that the Liberian settlers also received a

⁸³ M.B. Akpan, "Black Imperialism: Americo-Liberian Rule over the African Peoples of Liberia, 1841-1964." *Canadian Journal of African Studies / Revue Canadienne Des Études Africaines* 7, no. 2 (1973): 226.

⁸⁴ "Liberia as It Is," *African Repository* 14 (1838): 61.

great deal of knowledge from their African neighbors, especially with regard to agriculture.

Although some Americo-Liberians ventured to the republic with resources or gained some when relatives arrived, many poorer settlers had to rely on local food staples, like eddo or palm oil.

Allen argued that settlers depended on “indigenous knowledge” in the beginning of the formation of society, especially when learning critical survival skills through African instruction, such as subsistence farming.⁸⁵ Further, some poorer individuals even received instruction on how to build dwellings, and some settlers utilized local tactics to create their homes out of bamboo.

This initial exchange of ideas opened up pathways to create working relationships between settlers and indigenous Africans, eventually leading to the creation of the apprenticeship system. By 1838, Americo-Liberians had enacted an apprenticeship law to regulate the inclusion of Africans from local tribes into Liberian society, especially in agricultural and domestic roles.⁸⁶ Utilizing primarily African youths, Americo-Liberians provided workers with some clothing and schooling to try and encourage local tribes to send their children into well-to-do homes. Further, some settlers simply employed indigenous African people to do their work for them, especially those with large plots of farmland. While Americo-Liberians bemoaned the work ethic and seasonal nature of the Africans they employed, many still continued to try and employ these people until the arrival of large groups of recaptives. The assimilation project gave Americo-Liberians an avenue through which they could not only try and spread their cultural values in the region, but also a pathway through which they could gain knowledge of the land—and potentially avoid working it.

⁸⁵ William E. Allen, “Liberia and the Atlantic World in the Nineteenth Century: Convergence and Effects,” *History in Africa* 37 (2010): 12.

⁸⁶ Merran Fraenkel, *Tribe and Class in Monrovia* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1964): 12.

Akpan's work argues that these assimilationist tactics eventually broke down with local Africans, and the Americo-Liberians were largely unsuccessful in incorporating the indigenous tribes that surrounded them. This failure to assimilate reflected a sense of difference and a refusal to culturally concede on the part of both settlers and indigenous people—a situation in which both groups viewed their people as the top of the social hierarchy. The settlers refused to accept indigenous dress, religion, and political institutions, and also openly rejected intermarriage between the two groups, believing this action to be beneath any respectable Liberian citizen. Similarly, the indigenous Africans rejected the cultural tendencies of the Americo-Liberians, and “many of them sneered at the slave antecedents of settlers, whom they regarded as socially inferior to themselves.”⁸⁷ This refusal to accept assimilation either way highlighted that in the early stages of the formation of the republic both Americo-Liberians and local African people viewed themselves as the group the other should look to for guidance, stalling the settler redemption project and strengthening divisions between neighbors.

Thus, although the tactics employed in efforts to assimilate the indigenous tribes surrounding Liberia continued throughout the nineteenth century, the success of these tactics dwindled, leading to resentment between the two identity groups that would continue throughout the following decades. While some Liberian leaders in the 1870s, such as President Edward J. Roye, attempted to bridge the gap between settlers and local Africans to improve the country, many Americo-Liberians refused to associate with those they viewed as inferior.⁸⁸ However, while many Liberian settlers eventually decided to distance themselves from the indigenous Africans, it is important to remember that they initially began by attempting to incorporate

⁸⁷ Akpan, “Black Imperialism,” 225.

⁸⁸ “The Fifth President of the Republic Liberia,” *African Repository* 46 (1870): 121-124.

African people into their society, both to improve the country and to elevate the Africans. Luckily for the Americo-Liberians, their tactics of assimilation had a much greater influence on recaptured Africans, a population that blossomed in Liberia in the late 1850s because of the success of the improved Africa Squadron.

Buchanan's Improvements to the Africa Squadron

While the government had created a naval unit to enforce the slave trade ban by 1819 and had established a landing spot for illegally trafficked Africans by 1821, the Africa Squadron failed to have much of an influence on the slave trade before the late 1850s. The unit managed to disembark over 5,000 people in Liberia by the time it disbanded in 1861, but the vast majority of these people arrived after 1858, when US President James Buchanan implemented critical reforms to improve the effectiveness of the unit.⁸⁹ Although not particularly concerned with abolition or the plight of recaptured Africans, Buchanan used the Africa Squadron issue as a way to present himself as a productive leader, and his reforms helped to change the demographics of the country that his predecessor James Monroe had started decades before.

The creation of the Africa Squadron gave the US the ability to present itself as a nation policing the illegal slave trade, but the unit's performance before Buchanan's improvements could only be described as ineffective. ACS records reported that between 1822 and 1843 less than three hundred recaptured Africans disembarked in Liberia.⁹⁰ Further, the Africa Squadron failed to catch a single ship in four out of ten of the years between 1840 and 1849, a decade in which slave ships landed over 350,000 Africans in Brazil alone.⁹¹ Both of these data sets

⁸⁹ Younger, "Liberia and the Last Slave Ships," 433.

⁹⁰ Fett, *Recaptured Africans*, 161; Tom W. Shick, "The Economic and Political History of Afro-American Settlers in Liberia, 1820-1900" (PhD Dissertation, University of Wisconsin Madison, 1976): 158.

⁹¹ Younger, "Liberia and the Last Slave Ships," 431.

indicated that the Africa Squadron had difficulties achieving either of its goals—halting illegal slavery and preventing Africans from being transported to the western hemisphere—, but their failures to successfully complete their job can partially be seen as a result of poor planning and management. The Squadron had limited naval resources, and by the mid-nineteenth century the ships they used to patrol the waters were usually slower than the ones they needed to pursue. The unit also based its activities in the Cape Verde Islands, an island chain off the north western coast of Africa, which was not conducive to capturing slave ships.⁹² Most of the people being trafficked came from places like modern-day Nigeria, Benin, Republic of Congo, the Democratic Republic of Congo, and Angola, and were shipped out of ports near west central Africa.⁹³ While their base was relatively close to Liberia, it was thousands of miles away from the site of actual slave trading activities, making it much more difficult to intercept slave ships. Poor logistical planning and improper equipment hindered the Africa Squadron’s ability to have a meaningful impact on the slave trade, and without improvements the situation seemed unlikely to change.

The Africa Squadron’s inefficacy became a subject of public interest when James Buchanan took office in 1857, and he faced what historian Karen Fisher Younger called a “triple threat” of pressure to improve the naval unit.⁹⁴ Although Buchanan did not lean strongly in either direction regarding slavery or the slave trade during his career before the presidency, the storm of pressure around him when he entered the office mandated that he make changes to the Africa Squadron. As had been the case in the 1810s when the US crafted the Slave Trade Act of 1819, Great Britain had ramped up its efforts to halt the slave trade and they argued that the US had failed to truly hold up the high standards they set for themselves in the Act. In the 1850s, Great

⁹² Younger, “Liberia and the Last Slave Ships,” 433.

⁹³ Fett, *Recaptured Africans*, 4.

⁹⁴ Younger, “Liberia and the Last Slave Ships,” 432.

Britain began ignoring the US's denial of search and seizure rights, and instructed their naval officers to board ships flying the American flag in search of illegal slaves or instruments associated with the trade.⁹⁵ At the same time, a few politicians and media outlets in southern states had begun advocating for the re-opening of the transatlantic slave trade, and citizens fearful of the trade's revitalization urged Buchanan to take a stand against such proposals.⁹⁶ Even worse for the president, his Republican opponents in Congress played on the sectional and sensationalist political climate in the country, and cited the Africa Squadron's failures as one of many reasons to doubt the new executive and his administration's ability to effectively enforce the law.⁹⁷ Thus, by the end of 1858, the environment around Buchanan precipitated a need for Africa Squadron changes.

Buchanan's reforms played a critical role in transforming the Africa Squadron and enabling the unit to achieve its goals, principally through two changes. Buchanan moved the supply base from Cape Verde to St. Paul de Loanda, an island off the coast of West Central Africa, putting the unit much closer to the bulk of the slave trading action. A *New York Times* article written two years after Buchanan's reforms emphasized the effect of this reform, arguing that moving the base proved to be very successful, as it placed the Squadron "right in the vicinity of the present working ground of slavers," and made "its present location... most opportune for real service."⁹⁸ Further, Buchanan added five ships to the Squadron—more than doubling its size

⁹⁵ Younger, "Liberia and the Last Slave Ships," 432.

⁹⁶ See L.W. Spratt, "The Philosophy of Secession; A Southern View, Presented in a Letter addressed to the Hon. Mr. Perkins of Louisiana, in criticism on the Provisional Constitution adopted by the Southern Congress at Montgomery, Alabama," February 13, 1861, call number 2847conf, *Documenting the American South, Beginnings to 1920*, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill Libraries, online, accessed October 7, 2019.

⁹⁷ Younger, "Liberia and the Last Slave Ships," 432.

⁹⁸ "From the African Coast; Arrival of the Store Ship Supply at this Port—Movement of the Slave-Trade—The San Jacinto gone to Cadiz—Our Squadron—Changes in the Personelle (*sic*) of the Fleet," *New York Times*, March 13, 1860.

and bringing the grand total up to eight—all of which were steam-powered, making the unit much quicker and able to keep pace with the illegal slavers it pursued.⁹⁹ However, while Buchanan drastically altered the ability of the US Navy to actually enforce its slave trade ban, it is important to note that no other president before him made similar policy moves. The Africa Squadron had been failing for decades, yet change only occurred when pressure engulfed the president from multiple sides, both domestically and abroad. If the US government and its citizens truly cared about supporting their newly founded colony or actually halting the perceived evil of the slave trade, it seems unlikely that they would have waited until reaching a boiling point to act. The fact that the Africa Squadron had been allowed to fail to properly perform its job until a storm of pressure surrounded the executive underscored the lackadaisical approach the US had in dealing with issues related to the slave trade and recaptive populations.

Nevertheless, Buchanan's Africa Squadron proved effective, leading to a dramatic shift in the population of Liberia as US ships continued to drop off more and more captives. From 1859 to the end of the Squadron in 1861, the group captured twenty-two vessels, almost two-thirds of all the vessels they captured during their entire tenure, and dropped off over 5,000 recaptured Africans.¹⁰⁰ Between 1859 and 1860 alone, the Africa Squadron seized ten slavers, enabling them to disembark over three thousand captives in Liberia.¹⁰¹ An unnamed author in the *African Repository* discussing missionary work in Liberia insisted that in 1860 "these heathen Congos numbered one-third as many as all the Liberians," settlers and local Africans included.¹⁰² While the way he referred to captives emphasized his view of these people as

⁹⁹ Donald Canney, *Africa Squadron: U.S. Navy and the Slave Trade, 1842-1861* (Virginia: Potomac Books, 2006): 202-204.

¹⁰⁰ Lisa Lindsay, *Atlantic Bonds: A Nineteenth-Century Odyssey from America to Africa* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2017): 89; Younger, "Liberia and the Last Slave Ships," 433.

¹⁰¹ Fett, *Recaptured Africans*, 23.

¹⁰² "Items of Intelligence: These Congoes," *The African Repository* 53 (1877): 30.

inherently savage, his writings also showed what a difference an effective blockade of the slave trade could have on the new republic. When the Africa Squadron fired on all cylinders, they changed the lives of not only the recaptured Africans, but also the lives of those Liberians who suddenly had to find space and work for over 5,000 new people.

The effectiveness of the Africa Squadron in this period shocked Liberian citizens, and some writers even believed the influx of such individuals would be catastrophic. In late 1861, the U.S. Agent for Liberated Africans, John Seys, wrote a report to the Secretary of the Interior detailing the general livelihood of Liberia, particularly focusing on recaptured Africans. Seys admitted his original skepticism of the influx of captives in the letter, and mentioned that he had previously written about how disastrous the introduction of such a massive quantity of people would likely be on the young republic. He questioned not only how “so many thousand (*sic*) of these emaciated savages” would be cared for in Liberia, but also worried about their “effect on the people of Liberia—the effect morally and politically.”¹⁰³ Seys’ use of the phrase “savages” reiterated the view of captives as inferior beings, and his idea that the presence of a large number of Africans might negatively affect the moral and political nature of Liberian people showed his bias against the people the US government employed him to care for. Further, his assessment of the situation highlighted the feelings of dread the Africa Squadron’s sudden effectiveness inspired in Liberia and emphasized the influence the recaptured Africans had on the fledgling republic. His assessment of how recaptured Africans would fit in underscored both the US and Liberian governments’ hopes to improve the African continent and its people.

¹⁰³ John Seys. “Conditions of the Recaptives Now in Liberia,” *The African Repository* 39 (1863): 110-111.

Conclusion

In late 1861, John Seys, the US Agent in Liberia who initially greeted the thousands of recaptured Africans with trepidation and worry, wrote a letter to Reverend R. R. Gurley expressing a different mood. While Seys was still frustrated with the lack of resources he could provide for recaptives, he told Gurley that

“These people improve fast, and I am everyday more convinced that to efficiently benefit the recaptured African he must be sent to Liberia. Here is found every possible inducement for him to improve, and here, if anywhere in Christendom, he can become a man.”¹⁰⁴

In this instance, Seys’ words highlighted the idea that Liberia represented the only proper place in Africa for an African to learn how to become a full-fledged “man” of Christ and civilization. With his quote, Seys’ explained the impetus that drove assimilation in Liberia: to spread Americo-Liberian culture and to “improve” the African continent, two ideas rooted in a presumption of cultural superiority. The passage of the Slave Trade Act of 1819, the creation of the Africa Squadron, and the connection between the US government and the ACS helped to formally establish a colony where assimilation and acceptance of settler culture was mandatory for citizenship. With the help of Americo-Liberian leaders, “this once doomed land” and its people could be saved, and the incorporation of local and recaptive Africans exemplified the methods Americo-Liberians used to redeem their republic.¹⁰⁵ To better understand how these tactics of incorporation worked in Liberia, it is helpful to more deeply engage with the methods of assimilation used on the most successfully integrated population: the recaptured Africans.

¹⁰⁴ John Seys, “Letter from the U.S. Agent,” *African Repository* 38 (1862): 61.

¹⁰⁵ “An Essay on Liberia, Continued,” *The Liberia Herald*, April 2, 1856. Microfilm, Microforms Center UW-Madison Memorial Library, Reel No. 4999.

Chapter III— “Disappearing” Liberian Congoes and the Process of Incorporation

In 1865, a report entitled “Ability of Liberia to Receive Emigration” attempted to convey to readers the successful incorporation of recaptured Africans into the Liberian republic, saying:

“But a short time ago, we distributed some five thousand Congoes, principally in Mesurado County, who were soon gone from our gaze and in an incredibly short time were Liberians through mental, industrious and religious training.”¹⁰⁶

The piece, written by “an intelligent Liberian” and published in the *African Repository*, discussed the efforts of the ACS and the Americo-Liberians to cultivate a large population of “Congoes” in their image.¹⁰⁷ As noted in chapter two, between 1859 and 1861 Liberia received well over five thousand recaptured Africans, increasing the country’s population by almost a third. Yet the Liberian author in this report insisted that although the captives may have had “Congo” roots, they had now transformed into Liberian people. The author’s language emphasized labor, religion, and educational training as aspects of what made one a citizen in the republic, highlighting the importance of both Christianity and English education in Liberian society. The writer even utilized the metaphor that recaptured Africans had disappeared, almost as if they no longer resembled the beings they were before their arrival in the country, and instead had been replaced by new Liberian citizens. Read through an historical lens, this report suggested that to fully integrate into the population, recaptured Africans had to be taught how to be Liberian citizens, principally by learning to labor for the nation while expressing an adherence to the dominant religious beliefs and language of the country’s founders. However, this report raises an important question: how did recaptured Africans become so incorporated into Liberian society in such a short amount of time?

¹⁰⁶ “Ability of Liberia to Receive Emigration,” *African Repository* 41 (1865): 280.

¹⁰⁷ “Ability of Liberia to Receive Emigration,” 280.

With this question in mind, this chapter will expand upon a significant element of Liberian history: how recaptured Africans became “official” members of their new home. In the past, historiography of Liberia has often overlooked recaptives. When authors do mention them, they primarily focus on their initial arrival and little else.¹⁰⁸ However, the “disappearance” of recaptured Africans is historically significant, and understanding how Americo-Liberians “transformed” recaptives is crucial for a discussion about how Americo-Liberians interacted with and perceived African people in their republic. Thus, an explanation of how and why Americo-Liberians attempted to incorporate recaptured Africans will reveal why recaptives suddenly disappear from the historical record.

This chapter will argue against the report from 1865, insisting that recaptured Africans did not simply fade from view in Liberian society, but instead became part of a new group known to most Liberians as the “Congoes.” Both Americo-Liberians and indigenous Liberians had previously used this term to describe recaptured Africans, an indication of the belief that all recaptives hailed from the Congo region in West Central Africa.¹⁰⁹ However, as the recaptured Africans became increasingly incorporated into Liberian society, the term became a social distinction in the nineteenth century, describing a unique group of “civilized” Liberians who hailed from somewhere other than the United States.

Additionally, this examination of the inclusion of recaptives will illuminate the reasons that drove Americo-Liberians to incorporate both local and recaptured Africans into the country

¹⁰⁸ Merran Fraenkel, *Tribe and Class in Monrovia* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1964); Lisa Lindsay, *Atlantic Bonds: A Nineteenth-Century Odyssey from America to Africa* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2017): 6; Benjamin G. Dennis and Anita K. Dennis, *Slaves to Racism: An Unbroken Chain from America to Liberia* (New York: Algora Publishing, 2008): 14; Roland P. Falkner, “The United States and Liberia,” *The American Journal of International Law* 4 (1910): 532.

¹⁰⁹ Dennis and Dennis, *Slaves to Racism*, 14; Helene Cooper, *The House at Sugar Beach* (New York: Simon and Schuster Publishing, 2008): 6.

as citizens. This chapter argues that although the reasons for incorporation seemed surface level at first—such as a desire to find people to work the land or defend the republic—each of these reasons stemmed from a deeper belief in African inferiority. Just as the supporters of colonization promoting free black separation emphasized their belief in the inferiority of American blacks, the Americo-Liberian drive to assimilate Africans highlighted their acceptance of their own cultural superiority and their hope to “redeem” the African continent. The desire to spread Christianity and Americo-Liberian culture led the leaders of Liberia to attempt to assimilate outsiders, helping increase the population of the new republic with “correctly” acculturated citizens.

To better understand the processes of incorporation and assimilation that recaptured Africans endured, it is helpful to explore three of the main devices that Americo-Liberians used to facilitate this social transformation. By examining the apprenticeship (or ward) system, Christian religious instruction, and the process of renaming that both the group and each individual experienced, this chapter will emphasize the larger idea that those living in Liberia (especially Americo-Liberians) stopped seeing recaptives as the beings they were when they arrived, and instead viewed them as a distinct group of Liberian citizens. Additionally, this chapter will conclude with a discussion of the evolution of the term “Congo,” and how its development indicated the Liberian peoples’ assumption that recaptured Africans had assimilated. While most Americo-Liberians described incorporation as overwhelmingly positive and beneficial for both the people and the country, this process attempted to strip recaptured Africans of their identity and superimpose a new sense of being onto each person, focused on Christianity, the English language, and a willingness to work for the republic. To date, there is no known record of what the recaptives made of this cultural transition, or if any of them truly

abandoned their previous cultural beliefs and ideals. However, the sources suggest that Americo-Liberians and ACS officials believed that recaptives did, and the Liberian leaders subsequently presented the “Liberated Congoes” to the world as justification for the existence of the Liberian state and as examples of the way they hoped to redeem the African continent.

As mentioned in the previous chapter, an unnamed author in *The African Repository* writing in 1877 about missionary work in Liberia mentioned that in 1860, “these heathen Congos numbered one-third as many as all the Liberians,” settlers and local Africans included.¹¹⁰ The author used this statistic to praise the impressive success missionaries had had in converting Africans in the republic to Christianity, underscoring the Liberian focus on the spread of Christian religions. In another way, though, the author’s work was perhaps more poignant in highlighting the sheer number of recaptured Africans present in Liberia at a given moment in history. The population statistic suggested in the report emphasized why it is so important to understand how recaptured Africans got lost in history, a process that will become clear through an examination of their incorporation. This chapter will shed light on the missing recaptured Africans, arguing that they became the principal members of a new social group that would develop over time: The Congoes, “civilized” citizens in an American country on the African coast.

Early Small-Scale Assimilation of Recaptives for Defensive Improvements

Although the assimilation project began with local African people, the Americo-Liberian ability to incorporate Africans into their society was most successful when dealing with recaptured Africans. The initial small-scale attempts to bring people into the new republic helped

¹¹⁰ “Items of Intelligence: These Congoes,” *The African Repository* 53 (1877): 30.

to increase the population of Liberia and buttress the country's defensive capabilities. However, the underlying reasoning for these assimilation tactics was strikingly similar to the colonization proponents' reasoning for separating free blacks from the US: a belief in cultural superiority and irreconcilable difference.

As mentioned in the discussion of why settler Liberians attempted to assimilate local Africans, the ruling population in the republic yearned to create a larger population base to continue growing the country. Accordingly, the assimilation of recaptives represented a practical way to increase the population with accepted classes of people, those who adhered to Christianity and adopted English as their language. At the same time, the incorporation of these people into Liberian society also provided the solution to other problems in the republic, such as a desire to improve the country's defensive capabilities. In 1861, journalist Gerald Ralston noted that all male citizens in Liberia between the ages of sixteen and fifty were required to join a militia, the only exceptions to this rule being "clergymen, judges, and a few other privileged persons."¹¹¹ Because the recaptives who landed in Liberia had initially been transported to toil on plantations in the western hemisphere, the majority of these people were young, fit males who were believed to be better suited for work. Thus, when they arrived in Liberia, the male recaptives significantly boosted the republic's militias, as none of them fit the qualifications for exemption.

With little chance of avoiding militia service, recaptured Africans played a crucial role in augmenting Liberia's ability to defend its territory and potentially expand further into the interior. Claude Clegg maintains that their incorporation into the military even made them less well-liked by some of the surrounding local African tribes, which likely made the process of

¹¹¹ Gerald Ralston. 1861. "21st Meeting: - 'on the Republic of Liberia, its Products and Resources.'" *Journal of the Society of Arts* 10 (Nov 22): 437.

assimilation into the Americo-Liberian culture easier.¹¹² Recaptives were documented as militia members as early as the 1830s, when colonists utilized recaptured Africans as fighters in a battle with Kai Pa, a Dei leader. “Used as frontline shock troops” in this battle, recaptive soldiers felt the brunt of the Dei attacks, but also razed Dei villages and dwellings, further ingratiating them with the colonists while simultaneously distancing themselves from indigenous groups in the hinterlands.¹¹³ The use of recaptives as militia members provided another reason for the assimilation project, as incorporating recaptured Africans as members of the republic enhanced the ability of Liberia to defend itself.

Importantly, the reasons behind this small-scale inclusion of recaptives spoke to an underlying belief in the superiority of Americo-Liberian values and customs in comparison to what they viewed as a monolithic African culture. While incorporating recaptured Africans into the country for military service helped to solve blatant problems, the tactics of inclusion also furthered the ambition to “civilize” African people and mold them in a particular image. For instance, in an address to a crowd in 1861, Reverend Alexander Crummell described the success of the recaptive people who had recently arrived in Liberia, and he argued that enrollment in the military helped advance the goals of spreading “civilization.” Discussing the recaptured Africans who had arrived on the *Echo* in late 1858, Crummell insisted that they had quickly adapted to the ways of Liberian people, learning to become churchgoers and school attendees. Simultaneously, he emphasized the importance of the militia in helping to improve the recaptured Africans, as he believed “there [was] nothing which does so much for civilizing a man as putting a gun in his hands. It turns a savage into a man directly.”¹¹⁴ The crowd greeted Crummell’s assertion with

¹¹² Claude Clegg, *The Price of Liberty: African Americans and the Making of Liberia* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004): 94.

¹¹³ Clegg, *Price of Liberty*, 108.

¹¹⁴ Alexander Crummell, “Address of Rev. Alexander Crummell,” *African Repository* 38 (1861): 277.

both laughter and applause, indicating relatively widespread agreement with his claim. His words and the crowd's reaction underscored the idea that while small-scale incorporation into the military helped to solve problems in the republic, it also helped to improve the character of those who were accepted into the nation. To better understand how incorporation of larger groups of recaptured Africans was used to attempt to alter their identity, we now turn to one of the most significant tactics used to assimilate: the apprenticeship system.

The Apprenticeship System

In many ways, the early histories of the United States and Liberia shared striking similarities, exemplified by the apprenticeship system used by settlers in the African republic. Similar to the system of indentured servitude used by settlers in colonial America, the apprenticeship (or ward) scheme gave Americo-Liberians access to indentured labor under the pretense that those laboring would one day gain their own piece of land to cultivate. As the previous chapter suggested, Americo-Liberians initially attempted to recruit indigenous people to perform this labor, and indeed many indigenous Liberians became entrenched in the system. However, the introduction of recaptives into Liberia provided the country with a large population of available workers, and they soon became a significant source of labor.¹¹⁵ Most recaptives entered into contracts for a period of seven to fourteen years and were expected to work for Americo-Liberians in various industries, such as sugar and coffee cultivation.¹¹⁶ Crucially, the apprenticeship system not only provided Americo-Liberians with a solution to their labor

¹¹⁵ Lisa Lindsay, *Atlantic Bonds: A Nineteenth-Century Odyssey from America to Africa* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2017): 10.

¹¹⁶ Karen Fisher Younger, "Liberia and the Last Slave Ships," *Civil War History* 4 (2008): 438.

problems, but also created an avenue through which masters could attempt to assimilate their African apprentices.

Settler Liberians favored the apprenticeship system because they believed it would ultimately aid both the country and the laborers themselves, and the writings of settlers and American travelers in Liberia emphasized that idea. For example, Alexander Crummell, a black American clergyman who lived in the country for two decades while attempting to convert indigenous Africans to Christianity, wrote a great deal about his time in Liberia, and many of his observations focused on local and recaptive Africans. In a letter he wrote in 1861, he argued that the apprenticeship system would impart benefits upon the recaptured slaves, such as learning English, participating in Christian worship, and internalizing ideals of western culture which would make them better, more civilized beings.¹¹⁷ Many Americo-Liberians agreed, insisting that the apprenticeships positively affected the recaptured Africans, better empowering them to achieve full integration into the Americo-Liberian community. In many ways, the apprenticeship system became the vehicle that Americo-Liberians used to incorporate recaptured Africans into their way of life. By living with—and working for—Americo-Liberians, the system attempted to surround each recaptive with the thoughts and beliefs of settler Liberians.

To begin, it is important to emphasize that while most recaptured Africans became apprentices or wards in Liberia, this often depended on the size of the group of people with whom each recaptive came. As Catherine Reef points out in *This Our Dark Country*, Americo-Liberians found it much easier to apprentice Africans when they came in small groups, such as the shipment that arrived on board the *Pons* in 1846.¹¹⁸ As mentioned earlier, the Africa

¹¹⁷ “Recaptured Africans in Liberia,” *The Friend; a Religious and Literary Journal* 35 (1861): 29.

¹¹⁸ Catherine Reef, *This Our Dark Country: The American Settlers of Liberia* (Boston: Clarion Publishing, 2002): 69.

Squadron was quite ineffective until President Buchanan instituted major reforms in 1858, meaning that shipments of recaptured Africans only arrived periodically before then, if they arrived at all. Up to that point, settlers had little trouble placing small recaptive groups and individuals in areas both useful for the country and for their development as “civilized” people. While well over seven hundred *Pons* shipmates disembarked in 1846, the Americo-Liberian population still vastly outnumbered them, allowing the settlers to easily find places for these captives in agricultural areas that needed support. Additionally, up to this point Liberia had not declared independence, so the ACS leaders in charge of the colony helped facilitate the distribution of people.¹¹⁹ ACS agents kept the recaptured Africans in a sanctioned holding receptacle in Monrovia for a few days, then sent them to live with Liberian settlers they deemed to be of high enough character to impart cultural and social instruction.

However, Reef notes that the sheer number of recaptured Africans that arrived between 1859 and 1861 (well over 5,000 people) made placements much more difficult, as the number of disembarking Africans was far higher than the number of individual people who needed labor.¹²⁰ She emphasizes that even though the ACS, the Americo-Liberians, and the other American government employees still distributed people as best they could, the high number of African people made this process chaotic; Christian missions took in some recaptured Africans, some found themselves forced into boarding schools, and others were sent away from Monrovia to live upriver, encouraged to create their own “Congo Towns.”¹²¹ Thompson Town and other spaces in Liberia—like New Georgia, Old Fields, or a place literally called Congo Town—became known

¹¹⁹ Lindsay, *Atlantic Bonds*, 84; 97.

¹²⁰ Tom Shick, *Behold the Promised Land: A History of Afro-American Settler Society in Nineteenth-Century Liberia* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1980): 125; Reef, *This Our Dark Country*, 69.

¹²¹ Reef, *This Our Dark Country*, 69.

for having a high population of recaptured people, many of whom avoided apprenticeships.¹²² Thus, while a vast majority of recaptured Africans became part of the apprenticeship system in some way, individual experience varied.

Still, evidence suggests that most Liberian recaptives spent their first years in the country apprenticed to Americo-Liberians, either in plantations, households, or missionary stations, helping to fulfill societal needs in the agricultural sector.¹²³ The settler Liberians were focused primarily on encouraging recaptive participation in crop cultivation, as they had had trouble in the past procuring people to complete the arduous tasks. In many cases, Americo-Liberians had no interest in participating in agricultural pursuits like sugar cultivation, as they viewed the work to be both difficult and beneath them. Unfortunately, as discussed in the last chapter, this aversion to farming worsened the Americo-Liberians' situation because the settlers had difficulty forcing the local African population to work for them. In 1861, Alexander Crummell wrote a letter that emphasized the lack of a competent labor force in Liberia. He argued that the indigenous populations surrounding Monrovia and the upriver settlements created problems for the Americo-Liberians, "inconvenience[ing] planters by a demand for high wages, and by irregularity in labour."¹²⁴ A report written by John Seys, a former minister and the U.S. Agent for Liberated Africans, echoed this idea in 1864, arguing that "the great want of that country is a more general development of its internal resources, and especially those of the soil."¹²⁵ Seys' choice of words was significant, as the idea of developing "those of the soil" could indicate not

¹²² Dunn, Beyan, and Burrowes, *Historical Dictionary of Liberia*, 83; Address written by Alexander Crummell, *African Repository* 44 (1868): 166; "Liberia Mission of the Southern Baptist Board," *African Repository* 48 (1872): 118.

¹²³ Sharla Fett, *Recaptured Africans: Surviving Slave Ships, Detention, and Dislocation in the Final Years of the Slave Trade* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2017): 172.

¹²⁴ "Recaptured Africans in Liberia," 29.

¹²⁵ John Seys, "Recaptive Africans in Liberia," *African Repository* 41 (1865): 15.

just the cultivation of resources, but also the social development of the African people. This double entendre reinforced the idea that both Liberia's agricultural output and the recaptured Africans themselves needed to develop, bolstering the view of an apprenticeship system as a tool to improve the country and its inferior people. Both Seys and Crummell emphasized the nation's yearning to increase its agricultural production, as well as the idea that Americo-Liberians hoped to avoid performing the work themselves. Luckily for the settler population, recaptured Africans had little choice but to fill this societal role.

The recaptured Africans quickly emerged as a solution to the lack of available labor in Liberia, helping to reduce the need to use local African tribes. While indigenous labor often proved difficult to procure in the eyes of Americo-Liberians, according to the Slave Trade Act of 1819, recaptives were the property of the US government, and had little choice but to follow the instructions of the ACS leaders that apprenticed them out to Americo-Liberian people.¹²⁶ The notion that the US government owned each recaptured African emphasized the continuing legacy of their enslavement, and simultaneously meant that recaptives were legally bound to the fields if the ACS told them to work. In a report from 1864, John Seys echoed the idea that recaptives had become a principal proportion of the labor force in Liberia, insisting that they played a role in the cultivation of important cash crops, such as coffee and sugar. Seys asserted that "in Liberia, recaptured Africans become lords of the soil," and he insisted that the Americo-Liberians felt encouraged by the agricultural work of the recaptives.¹²⁷ Seys, like other Americo-Liberians, perceived recaptured Africans as destined to work in agricultural field, and his use of the phrase "lords of the soil," indicated that settler Liberians believed recaptives to be adept at farming.

¹²⁶ Fett, *Recaptured Africans*, 17.

¹²⁷ John Seys, "Recaptive Africans in Liberia," 17.

Moreover, Seys' second use of the phrase "of the soil" further articulated his view of recaptives as menial laborers who could help solve some of the country's agricultural issues. Using a group of recaptives living in Sinoe County as an example, Seys wrote "it is most pleasing to see the amount of plantains, bananas, eddoes, yams, peanuts... and various kinds of fruit they carry daily into Greenville for sale to the Liberians."¹²⁸ In this sense, the Americo-Liberians used the apprenticeship system to force recaptives into roles they themselves may have wanted to avoid, and found pleasure in the fact that this work both improved the country and helped recaptives acculturate themselves and acclimate to their new home.

Further, Seys' argument that recaptives had become "lords" of their domain meant that settlers could both avoid employing local people, and, in some cases, Americo-Liberians with poor work ethics. In another letter discussing recaptives, Seys wrote about Payne, Yates, and Co., a group operating a sawmill in Junk that requested a few apprentices to help with their production. Seys described how

"One of the young Congoes, quite a youth, had already learned sufficient of the business as to be able to take place at the engine, of a man who had been receiving \$4 a month wages... So steady, so punctual, so reliable is the Congo lad, that the Liberian's services are no longer required."¹²⁹

In an important way, Seys' writing conveyed not only how vital recaptured Africans became to Liberian industry, but also a potential acceptance of an Americo-Liberian losing his job to a recaptive. Seys used this example to augment his main point that "everyday convinces me that Liberia is the home for these Recaptured Africans," meaning that even at the expense of an

¹²⁸ John Seys, "Liberated Africans," *African Repository* 41 (1865): 40.

¹²⁹ John Seys, "Letter from Rev. John Seys," *African Repository* 37 (1861): 62.

Americo-Liberian, the success of a recaptive worker was a positive, an indication of how well a recaptive had learned to succeed in their new occupation.¹³⁰

The arrival of recaptured Africans in the mid-nineteenth century provided a solution to Liberia's labor shortage, and the reports from settler Liberians living in the country highlight how effective captives became in their work. For example, a report from the *Missionary Advocate* discussed the life of John Robinson, a recaptive who ran a coffee plantation at White Plains. This individual—defined by the author as a superintendent—arrived on the slave ship *Pons* in 1846, and in only a few years had become a leader in his trade.¹³¹ Similarly, a Seys' letter from 1862 described the exploits of a “Congoe youth... who is *boss* or headman of [a] steam saw-mill.” These descriptions emphasized not only the recaptive adoption of at least some elements of Liberian culture—indicated by the first recaptive's English name—but also the idea that recaptive Africans greatly influenced agricultural production. Further, one of the more striking descriptions of recaptive labor came from a prosperous sugar planter living on the St. Paul's River in 1864, who reported that his business's success resulted almost entirely from the work of liberated Africans. He insisted that his “entire farming operations [were] carried on with them (Congoes),” and he even emphasized the diversity of their positions, saying his “sugar-maker, cooper, and fireman [were] Congoes.”¹³² The unnamed interviewee went on to praise his workers for their skills in tasks like chopping wood, and his descriptions drove home the overarching message of recaptive proficiency in agricultural pursuits. These three sources showed the different roles recaptured Africans could play and their abilities to succeed, but simultaneously underscored the idea that they primarily found work in the agricultural sector.

¹³⁰ Seys, “Letter from Rev. John Seys,” 63.

¹³¹ “Items of Intelligence: Africa,” *African Repository* 39 (1863): 125.

¹³² “Recaptured Africans in Liberia,” *The Anti-Slavery Reporter* 8 (1860): 284; American Colonization Society, “Forty-Seventh Annual Report of the American Colonization Society,” 2.

Additionally, all of these sources bolstered the idea that the recaptives helped provide the foundation for Liberia's brief agricultural success during the late 1850s and early 1860s.¹³³ Liberian scholar Tom Shick argued that the country's agricultural efficiency increased as it began expanding into the hinterlands between the 1850s and 1870s, and the successful production of export goods resulted in general wealth for the nation.¹³⁴ While part of his argument focused on the idea that most of this wealth went into the pockets of Americo-Liberian elites, another aspect emphasized the role recaptured Africans played in facilitating this economic boom. Recaptive apprentices made up the majority of the labor force on both sugar and coffee plantations, acting as both managers and field workers, and their diligence allowed Liberia to generate a considerable amount of revenue by trading these products abroad.¹³⁵ Seys' previously mentioned 1865 report illustrated this idea quite well, as he insisted that "every acre of land redeemed from the primeval forests of Liberia by these liberated Africans and put into coffee, sugar, or cotton adds to the aggregate wealth of the country."¹³⁶ Of course, as Shick noted in his work, this economic boom was short-lived and Liberian producers eventually failed to compete with other cultivators—like coffee growers in Brazil—, but the significant impact recaptured Africans had on agricultural production in the country should not be undervalued.

Moreover, although Americo-Liberians had had trouble incorporating the African tribes that surrounded them, the apprenticeships in some cases helped train recaptured Africans to try and bridge this gap. It has been well-documented by historians that after Americo-Liberians failed to collectively assimilate the indigenous Africans in their republic, they hoped to utilize

¹³³ Abayomi Karnga, *History of Liberia* (Liverpool: D.H. Tyte and Co., 1926): 41; Clegg, *The Price of Liberty*, 246.

¹³⁴ Shick, *Behold the Promised Land*, 112.

¹³⁵ Clegg, *The Price of Liberty*, 246; Shick, *Behold the Promised Land*, 114-116.

¹³⁶ Seys, "Recaptive Africans in Liberia," 17.

recaptives as a sort of cultural buffer between themselves and the local Africans living on the outskirts.¹³⁷ Indeed, Americo-Liberians often encouraged recaptive settlements away from Monrovia and further upriver, hoping to strengthen the physical distance between themselves and the indigenous groups in the interior. Places like Thompson Town and New Georgia, two settlements dominated by recaptured Africans, highlighted this division.¹³⁸ However, in some cases, the incorporated captives often helped further the efforts to assimilate indigenous African people, with varying degrees of success. In his work on the expansion of Liberia into the interior of Africa, historian Yekutiel Gershoni wrote about how some members of the Gola tribe—especially young men—became apprentices to recaptive people and subsequently became absorbed into Liberian society in ways other members could not. Gershoni argued that the “Gola tradition of absorbing strangers into their culture” led to the exchange of people in both ways; some captives became workers in prominent Gola households, while Gola leaders “encouraged their lower-class brethren to exchange women and children with the Congos.”¹³⁹ This cultural fusion certainly influenced both captives and Gola people, but Gershoni discussed how lower-class Golas often benefited the most by gaining acceptance into Liberian society. The Gola boys who were sent to work with the Americo-Liberian elite gained no education or cultural training from their patrons, and thus returned home unchanged and members of the lowest class of people. Those who worked for the captives, on the other hand,

“received the same education as the family’s children and took part in the same process of being integrated into the Americo-Liberian community. When the Congos were accepted into the community, the lower-class Gola educated by them followed them and

¹³⁷ Yekutiel Gershoni, *Black Colonialism: The Americo-Liberian Scramble for the Hinterland* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1985): 85; Fett, *Recaptured Africans*, 160.

¹³⁸ Dunn, Beyan, and Burrowes, *Historical Dictionary of Liberia*, 83; Address written by Alexander Crummell, *African Repository* 44 (1868):166; “Liberia Mission of the Southern Baptist Board,” *African Repository* 48 (1872): 118.

¹³⁹ Gershoni, *Black Colonialism*, 85.

joined the lower ranks of the administration, thus becoming in time part of an urban, lower-middle class.”¹⁴⁰

Gershoni’s work highlighted that in some instances, the “Congoes” helped to further the incorporation of indigenous people into Liberia, almost as conduits between the Americo-Liberians and the indigenous Africans who had grown to dislike one another.

Thus, while Americo-Liberians understood that apprenticeships relied on exploiting free African labor, they justified this process by arguing that the Africans gained as much from their situation as the country gained from their industry. Indeed, Alexander Crummell’s aforementioned message from 1861 emphasized this idea, arguing that the apprenticeship system represented an immeasurable societal good that imparted American values upon the participating apprentices, stating “I need not speak of the benefit to them in thus being placed in juxtaposition with civilization.”¹⁴¹ Crummell’s point was to promote the idea that the recaptured Africans needed the apprenticeship system as much as the system needed them. His words underscored his view that the African refugees only achieved true liberation when they adopted the core values of Liberian culture, which they could only learn through close contact with Americo-Liberians. Without the apprenticeship system, the recaptured Africans simply represented what the rest of indigenous Africans did: the backwards African culture Americo-Liberians hoped to eventually eradicate.

On the other hand, stories of recaptured Africans fleeing their indentured servitude consistently appeared in letters and journals regarding Liberia, indicating that many captives did not perceive their apprenticeship as positively as their masters. For example, in September 1860 eleven boys fled their mission home in Muhlenberg, using resources like grass-cutting

¹⁴⁰ Gershoni, *Black Colonialism*, 85.

¹⁴¹ “Recaptured Africans in Liberia,” *The Friend; a Religious and Literary Journal* 35 (1861): 29.

knives and a canoe to travel southeast. When asked where they were going by a bystander, they reported that they “were on their way to the Congo country” and using the sun as a compass.¹⁴² Similarly, in October of the same year, a group of approximately twenty-five young men left their households in Liberia and set out on a quest to find their homeland.¹⁴³ Both of these examples showed that many recaptured Africans did not want to participate in the forced labor their masters assigned, choosing to instead attempt to navigate unfamiliar terrain to try and get back home. They demonstrated not only a desire to return to a life before enslavement and apprenticeships, but also a yearning to escape their new role as laborers in a foreign land.

Further, these examples also highlighted methods Americo-Liberians and ACS leaders used to perpetuate the apprenticeship system, illustrating the settler desire to keep apprenticeships alive. Both of the aforementioned groups were eventually hunted down and taken back to Liberia, a fate many captives who escaped their apprenticeship faced. In fact, some Americo-Liberians were employed to hunt Africans fleeing their apprenticeship, creating an industry out of the perpetuation of an institution in which many captives wanted no part.¹⁴⁴ Additionally, reports of apprentices being kept in chains to prevent them from fleeing signaled the Americo-Liberian desire to preserve the apprenticeship system, even when it restricted African freedom.¹⁴⁵ The use of restraints to ensure that captives worked bolstered the notion that the country relied on their labor, so much so that Americo-Liberians willingly forced recaptured Africans to play their part. Preservation of the apprenticeship system was paramount,

¹⁴² Diary of a Liberian Officer on 24 September, 1860, cited in Fett, *Recaptured Africans*, 173.

¹⁴³ John Seys reporting to Isaac Toucey, 16 October 1860, cited in Fett, *Recaptured Africans*, 172.

¹⁴⁴ Fett, *Recaptured Africans*, 176.

¹⁴⁵ Lindsay, *Atlantic Bonds*, 98.

and Americo-Liberians would quite literally hunt down anyone attempting to undermine the institution.

Still, sources from the period indicated that some recaptured Africans eventually bought into the apprenticeship system, learning to emulate an Americo-Liberian identity to both survive and succeed in their daily life and work. The level to which each individual allowed themselves to become acculturated certainly varied, and some recaptured Africans simply worked because they had to and adapted to their new life accordingly. However, the most striking examples illustrated that some recaptured Africans mimicked their masters' inclinations, aiding the process of assimilation in their own unique ways. Speaking in 1861, Alexander Crummell addressed the nation to discuss Liberia's progress as a republic, and he made a point to emphasize that the recaptured Africans were also developing. He argued that those who had arrived on the *Echo* in 1858 had quickly adjusted to their new home, learning the ways of the people and becoming mild-mannered members of the community. To illustrate his point further, he highlighted an example of one of his compatriots, a man named "Judge James" who housed four female apprentices as domestic servants, saying:

"[Judge James] had taken two recaptured females into his house as servants, and after they had lived there for a few months, he took two others. But the first two refused to associate or eat with the other two, and said they were not civilized enough. But by and by the second two became brightened up, and were then permitted to associate with others."¹⁴⁶

Crummell's veracity could certainly be questioned, as he was invested in presenting Liberia in a positive light, but his discussion of Judge James is still significant for multiple reasons. While Crummell provided no indication that Judge James' treatment of these women was illicit, this story combined with reports from ACS officials of improper relations with captives may make

¹⁴⁶ "Address of Alexander Crummell," *African Repository* 37 (1861): 277.

one question his character. Further, the behavior of the captives themselves is more important than Judge James' actions, as this instance bolstered the idea that indicators of "civilization" may have weighed heavily on the mind of an apprentice, leading one to shun others until they learned to adapt. The interactions of the female apprentices emphasized that recaptured Africans understood how displaying "civilized" traits could lead to better treatment, both by Americo-Liberians and other captives. By refusing to associate with the "uncultured" women, the domestic servants in Crummell's story exemplified the tactics some recaptured Africans used to improve their societal position and potentially showed the ways captives taught each other to assimilate. Crummell's example emphasized the pervasive ways incorporation influenced the actions of recaptured Africans, as well as the ways new and old captives interacted.

As a whole, the apprenticeship system represented a crucial first step for Americo-Liberians to begin shaping recaptured Africans in their image, and this method of creating a labor force provided the foundation for the assimilation process. Through their apprenticeship, captives became engulfed in Americo-Liberian ideals, learning how to act and speak in a "civilized" manner, all while playing a pivotal role in the nation's agricultural sector. By essentially loaning out each person to industry leaders, missionaries, or other Liberian citizens, the leaders of Liberian society facilitated incorporation into the republic by attempting to recreate their identity and force captives to resemble Liberian citizens. Within this system, recaptured Africans familiarized themselves with the major tenets of Americo-Liberian social order, such as Christianity and the English language.

Christian Religions

For Americo-Liberian leaders, religious teachings represented a major aspect of the apprenticeship system, and many viewed the promotion of Christianity as part of their reason for living in Liberia. As the proverbial redeemers of Africa, many Americo-Liberians felt that the republic had a responsibility to Christianize the continent, and they saw the Christianization of recaptured Africans as an important step on the path towards African salvation. Americo-Liberians and ACS officials writing during this period even used adherence to Christian values as a marker of recaptive success, illustrating the important role western religions played in the identity and value systems of Liberian citizens. Additionally, although the versions of Christianity taught to each recaptured African varied, the specific belief system used was not as important as the overarching idea of eradicating indigenous belief systems and introducing Christian ones. There is little evidence of Catholic missionaries in Liberia, but Protestant denominations such as Methodists, Baptists, Episcopalians, and Presbyterians found root in the country, and all of these religious sects aimed to convert captives to the Christian way of life.¹⁴⁷ While the distinct groups themselves may have hoped to create more converts to their specific denomination, the overarching message of religious conversion simply focused on promoting Christianity in general.

Although many American settlers in the republic no doubt believed that Africans had no religion, most African people adhered to some set of religious values. Abayomi Karnga, a Liberian writing about his country's history in 1920, emphasized that most tribes living on the continent believed in concepts of spirituality and the existence of a higher power. The specifics of each indigenous religion varied, but Karnga described these religions under the umbrella of

¹⁴⁷ Clegg, *The Price of Liberty*, 224.

the term “Spiritualism,” arguing that most people agreed upon the manifestation of a “Holy Spirit” in the world around them, leading them to worship the “divine powers [that] inhabit stones, trees, springs, and animals.”¹⁴⁸ The early Europeans who made contact with Africa had little understanding of the indigenous system of beliefs, leading them to condemn indigenous African religions and to describe them as “Fetishism.”¹⁴⁹ This misunderstanding and suspicion of indigenous religions permeated the European and North American world, creating false justifications for systems of African subjugation, manifested in forms like enslavement, colonialism, and, crucial for our purposes, the apprenticeship system.

Further, Sharla Fett emphasizes the salience of African religions among recaptives being taken to Liberia. Fett used the *Castilian* voyage in 1860 as a case study for examining recaptive transport, and her research shows that recaptured Africans participated in indigenous religious ceremonies and practices while on their voyage to their new home. Using the reports of the ship doctors, William Proby Young and John McCalla, Fett discusses burial ceremonies on the ship, exemplified by a recaptive named Bomba and a group of other female captives wrapping a deceased girl in cloth strips and tying cords around her wrist before sending her body out to sea.¹⁵⁰ The ceremony illustrated the bonds created by recaptured Africans on-board the *Castilian*, as the recaptive women used their resources to try and give the young girl a proper burial, even though they may not have known her before their collective transport. Additionally, the inclination of women to try and perform a burial ceremony at all highlighted that at least some captives adhered to an indigenous religion, one that meant enough to them to continue practicing outside their homeland.

¹⁴⁸ Karnaga, *History of Liberia*, 7.

¹⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 8.

¹⁵⁰ Fett, *Recaptured Africans*, 143-144.

Similarly, Fett notes the use of ritualistic healing and sorcery on the ship, exhibited by Young's reports of a woman "making gashes with a razor in the swollen feet of a scurvy patient," as well as McCalla's observations of a healer rubbing his hands and saying incantations above an invalid patient while attempting to gather "a handful of the 'evil spirit' which he threw away to one side."¹⁵¹ Fett's research and explanations of these practices on the *Castilian* are significant, as they expose the religious backgrounds of a group that eventually were instructed to accept new beliefs. The practices exhibited on-board the ship in 1860 bolstered the idea of recaptive spirituality, undermining the belief that the apprenticeship system gifted religion to non-spiritual heathens.

Still, the religious elements inherent in the apprenticeship system represented an important part of the overarching national Christian identity that settler Liberians yearned to foster. Liberian leaders aimed to illustrate their religiosity and promote Christianity in most aspects of the state, and even their founding documents show a focus on the country's divine nature. The Liberian Constitution, for example, published in 1847, began with the lines:

"We the People of the Republic of Liberia: Acknowledging our devout gratitude to God for our existence as a Free, Sovereign and Independent State, and relying on his Divine Guidance for our survival as a nation... do hereby solemnly make, establish, proclaim, and publish this Constitution for the governance of the Republic of Liberia."¹⁵²

This phrasing in the Preamble emphasized a clear feeling of God's presence in the new nation and also showed that they hoped he would guide their national endeavors, a notion influenced by the writers' own experiences with Christianity.

Similarly, the inaugural addresses of many of the presidents during the nineteenth century emphasized a focus on Christianity, as well as a hope that God would direct the nation and

¹⁵¹ Fett, *Recaptured Africans*, 149-150.

¹⁵² *Liberian Constitution of 1847*, "Preamble." 1847.

approve of its endeavors. For example, in his first inaugural address to the nation, President J. J. Roberts expressed his belief that the ultimate goal of the Liberian state was “introducing civilization and religion among the barbarous nations of this country.”¹⁵³ He believed Liberia’s Christianizing mission to be both honorable and endowed by God, and he hoped the country could bring the indigenous African people out of “darkness, debasement, and misery... shedding abroad over them the light of science and Christianity.”¹⁵⁴ Roberts’ speech emphasized the view of African people as inherently shrouded by heathenism and in need of guidance, a view that provided justification for the apprenticeships. As Roberts’ words illustrated, the apprenticeship system’s focus on cultivating Christian religious beliefs in recaptives fit in to the social goals of the nation, helping to build a national Christian identity and bring African people out of darkness.

This intense emphasis on religion represented a vital piece of Liberian identity, as many Americo-Liberians felt that a belief in Christianity was a central part of what made a person “civilized.” Sir Harry Johnston, an English Africanist who visited the country in the late nineteenth century, criticized the Americo-Liberians by describing them as “suffer[ing] from ‘religiosity,’” or a deep desire to present one’s self as religious. He argued that Americo-Liberians “still worship[ped] cloths as an outward and visible manifestation of Christianity and the best civilization,” highlighting an unhealthy focus on outward displays of religion to assert one’s civilized identity.¹⁵⁵ Johnston’s critique emphasized that Americo-Liberians felt the need to prove to themselves and others that their distant African heritage did not undermine their cultural development, and expressions of Christian ideals became the principal method for subverting

¹⁵³ J.J. Robert’s Inaugural Address, cited in Amos Beyan, *The American Colonization Society and the Creation of the Liberian State: A Historical Perspective, 1822-1900* (New York: University Press of America, 1991): 153.

¹⁵⁴ J.J. Robert’s Inaugural Address, cited in Beyan, *The American Colonization Society*, 153.

¹⁵⁵ Harry Johnston, *Liberia* (New York: Negro Universities Press, 1906): 353-354.

that idea. Most settler Liberians viewed Africa as inherently backwards and lacking in meaningful culture, and they accepted the idea that the continent needed to be saved by blacks who had ascended to a cultural apex through their interactions with western people. As the redeemers of Africa, they had to show they had mastered “civilized” culture and could impart those values upon anyone who needed them. Thus, the Christianization of the recaptured Africans represented an essential step in proving to the world around them how successful the continent could become.

Accordingly, articles and reports from the period often used the adoption of Christianity as a barometer for how “civilized” recaptured Africans became during their apprenticeships. For example, John Seys, himself a former religious leader, frequently used religion as a measure of recaptive success. For example, in a report from 1861, Seys discussed the ability of a recaptured youth to “repeat from memory the whole Decalogue, the Apostle’s Creed, and a little hymn, ‘I want to be an angel’” as a way of highlighting the accomplishments of a recaptured African with whom he had interacted.¹⁵⁶ A minister from Monrovia, J. T. Richardson, gave similar examples in a letter from 1870, describing three Africans who had converted to Christianity and been baptized. Richardson described how the “three Congoes” talked to him in “broken English” about the awesome power of the Christian lord, and he insisted that their experiences would have “encouraged Christians in America to perseverance and unwearied diligence in this great and glorious work.”¹⁵⁷ The writings of the authors from this period underscored the use of religion as an outward display of success and “civilization.” The Americo-Liberian focus on changing

¹⁵⁶ Seys, “Conditions of the Recaptives,” 111.

¹⁵⁷ J.T. Richardson, “Liberia Baptist Mission: Letter from J.T. Richardson,” *African Repository* 46 (1870): 15-16.

indigenous faith represented a major aspect of incorporating recaptured Africans into the nation, and the perceived achievements of their apprentices further justified their efforts.

In addition, reports of recaptured Africans utilizing religious institutions were frequently cited in newspapers and reports from the country, such as when captives entered into marriage. In Crummell's address to the country in 1861, he discussed how a recaptured African married a "colonial" woman without his master's approval, resulting in a battle in the courtroom between his new wife and his former employer. The woman won the case, enabling her new husband to be "carried off" from his former apprenticeship.¹⁵⁸ This example spoke volumes about the view of captives as property, emphasized by the man's inability to represent himself in a courtroom while his wife and his master fought to win ownership of him. The captive's experience showed how some Americo-Liberians continued to perceive captives as chattel, even those captives for whom they deeply cared. Additionally, this example showed captive adherence to Christian religious institutions, but the reasons why this man got married is unclear, other than presumably his desire to commit to his new wife in a Christian society. However, this captive's use of marriage highlighted the potential reality that he participated in the ceremony to escape his apprenticeship. Marriage allowed him to leave his master's gaze and live on his own terms; thus, whether or not the captive man fully accepted Christianity, he used the tools of the religion to better his situation in his new home.

Further, a marriage between two captives who arrived on the same ship in 1859 featured prominently in Liberian newspapers, with the *Liberia Christian Advocate* reporting:

"Married. On Thursday, the 17th inst. (March,) at the Colonization Receptacle in Monrovia, by the Rev. John Seys, Kalendah, *alias* James Buchanan, to Kandah, *alias* Ann Liberia Jeffs, both liberated Africans of the company by the U.S. Ship Niagara."¹⁵⁹

¹⁵⁸ "Address of Alexander Crummell," *African Repository* 37 (1861): 277.

¹⁵⁹ "Intelligence from Liberia," *African Repository* 35 (1859): 277-278.

This example is significant for multiple reasons, such as the newspaper's choice to include both newlyweds' African and English names, which will be discussed more in the next section. However, the report went on to emphasize that the reason these two finally got married was because they were separated upon arrival, and the couple felt that the only way to become reunited was to submit to the dominant religion and commit to one another in a Christian marriage.¹⁶⁰ Again, while the source showed a general acceptance of Christian ceremonies, the way marriage was used indicated the recaptives' understanding of how to better their lives in Liberia. Marriage allowed Kalendah and Kandah to live together, surely making their lives more tolerable in the country they were forced to call home. Both this example and the one in Crummell's address highlight the idea that some recaptured Africans potentially began to use religious institutions to their advantage. While some likely accepted their new faith, some no doubt simply accepted their circumstances and tried to improve their own situation, and these two marriages show possible examples of that idea.

Still, the Americo-Liberian conversion efforts became a point of pride among many, and recaptured Africans increasingly became the shining example of Liberia's success as a nation throughout the nineteenth century. A report from 1877 underscored this idea, going as far as to argue that Liberia should be known as the "Missionary Republic" because of their successful efforts at converting recaptives.¹⁶¹ The unnamed author stated that the recaptured Africans had embraced civilization, accepted the Christian faith and had begun to practice it regularly, insisting that some had even started their own congregations. The "Congoes" were so "civilized," in fact, that the author felt some may even have been ready to return to their original

¹⁶⁰ "Intelligence from Liberia," 277-278.

¹⁶¹ "Items of Intelligence: The Congoes," *African Repository* 53 (1877): 30.

home (which he called “Congo Country”) to preach their new faith and begin Christianizing the rest of the continent.¹⁶² The author’s use of religion as a determinant factor for the progress of a person surely resonated with other settler Liberians, and his belief that recaptured Africans should return as missionaries to their home country is quite significant. Not only did this description show that he and others had accepted the captives as citizens, but also that he believed captives were entrenched enough in Liberian society that they could help the nation towards its ultimate goal of redemption of the African continent.

As this report indicated, some Americo-Liberians certainly hoped that by creating Christian followers out of the captive apprentices, they could rely on them to help further their mission of spreading Christianity throughout the republic and the rest of the continent. Indeed, historian Laurie Maffly-Kipp argued that the spread of religion was central to the colonization movement. She maintained that for many of the supporters of Liberia, both in the republic itself and in the US, the country had become “associated with the spread of Christian culture, education, and churches.”¹⁶³ Further, Maffly-Kipp indicated the hope in Liberia that Africans themselves would help lead the charge to spread Christianity throughout the continent.¹⁶⁴ In the case of at least one recaptured African named Daniel Bacon, this hope became realized. Bacon was brought to the country on the *Pons* in 1846, and he was used as an apprentice while learning to read, write, and speak in English and accept Christianity.¹⁶⁵ In the early 1860s, Bacon became “licensed by the bishop to travel as a sort of evangelist or exhorter” in Liberia, expected to travel among the Republic to inspire an adherence of the Christian faith among African people,

¹⁶² “Items of Intelligence: The Congoes,” 30.

¹⁶³ Laurie Maffly-Kipp, *Setting Down the Sacred Past: African-American Race Histories* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2010): 53.

¹⁶⁴ Maffly-Kipp, *Setting Down the Sacred Past*, 171.

¹⁶⁵ “A Leaf from ‘Reminisces in Liberia: Daniel Bacon, of the Pons,’” *African Repository* 41 (1865): 149.

principally other “Congoes.”¹⁶⁶ While it is unclear whether his efforts were fruitful, Daniel Bacon provided an example of how the apprenticeship system both helped to provide labor for the country and spoke to a belief in the superiority of Americo-Liberian culture. Viewed as a success story among Americo-Liberians, Bacon helped further the Christianization of African people that the Americo-Liberians had failed to reach, showing how important assimilation was for advancing the spread of Liberian cultural values.

As a whole, Americo-Liberians believed that their efforts to Christianize recaptured Africans succeeded in many cases, but the efforts themselves are perhaps more important because they highlight fundamental reasons for incorporation. Through efforts that would today be described as evangelism, captives were taught to accept Christianity and utilize its institutions despite the prevalence of African spirituality. The desire to override and ignore the different beliefs each captive held emphasized the Americo-Liberian view of Africans as inferior and unfamiliar with the customs of “civilized” religions. Further, although the various rationales behind why some acquiesced will likely never be known, the embrace of western religions certainly helped some recaptured Africans make the best of their situation in their new home, either by reuniting with an old lover or by escaping an unwanted apprenticeship. Additionally, the many examples of recaptured Africans accepting western religions bolstered the Liberian national identity as a “Missionary Republic,” a country on a mission to redeem the rest of the continent. Captive religious incorporation provided justification for the Americo-Liberians to continue trying to ignore or eliminate indigenous African culture and allowed the elite Liberian class to present themselves as saviors on the world stage.

¹⁶⁶ “Missionary Intelligence,” *African Repository* 38 (1861): 317.

“Congoes” and the English Language

In tandem with the forced religious conversions recaptured Africans experienced, acceptance of the English language and of an American identity played an important role in the process of social incorporation. As many of the sextant sources make clear, recaptives gained new names when they arrived in Liberia, illustrated by people like the coffee plant manager, John Robison, or the married couple from the *Niagara*, Ann Liberia Jeffs and James Buchanan.¹⁶⁷ Furthermore, the overwhelming majority of primary sources from the period after recaptive arrival usually referred to these new people as “Congoes,” a moniker that attempted to eradicate the potential for individual African identity by superimposing a new group name over previous existing ones. The process of renaming—both each individual and the group as a whole—, also represented a solution to a surface-level problem with a deeper reasoning. Americo-Liberians and the ACS attempted to give each recaptive a new personal sense of self, and a new group identity, one that distinguished them from both settler Americo-Liberians and local African people in the nineteenth century. This group identity differentiated recaptives from indigenous Liberians and ones with American roots, making them easier to recognize; however, in most cases it also brought them closer to the Americo-Liberians and illustrated the view of African identity as something that could be supplanted. Further, the fact that the phrase “Congo” eventually became synonymous with “Americo-Liberian” exemplified how the incorporation of recaptives into Liberia transformed Liberian peoples’ views of each other.

In addition to outward displays of religion, the recaptive’s use of English became another marker of their success in the eyes of Americo-Liberians. J. T. Richardson’s letter about three baptized recaptives mentioned earlier used the three men’s broken English as a point of pride, an

¹⁶⁷ “Items of Intelligence: Africa,” *African Repository* 39 (1863): 125; “Intelligence from Liberia,” *African Repository* 35 (1859): 277-278.

example Richardson combined with their display of Christianity to prove they had truly accepted the values of both religion and civilization.¹⁶⁸ Further, in a letter written to the Secretary of the Interior in the United States, John Seys used a recaptured African's adoption of English as a marker of their adoption of true freedom. Describing the recaptives as "Fed and fat, clothed and happy, learning rapidly all the manners, civil customs, and language of these American-born Christian blacks," Seys emphasized that the Africans had ultimately been "made free and happy" by their acceptance of western culture, especially the English language.¹⁶⁹ Even accounts from mission schools used the same language. A report from a missionary school in 1862 emphasized that the "Congoes" were doing well in their new home, indicated by the fact that most had learned to speak and listen in English, and some had learned to read and write in the language.¹⁷⁰

Recaptured Africans' imitations of the Americo-Liberian culture—such as speaking in English—, helped prove to the latter group that the former had accepted civilization. Forcing recaptives to learn English during their apprenticeships and then using their acceptance as a measuring tool for their development allowed Americo-Liberians to justify to themselves and the world at large that their ward system positively influenced each recaptured African's sense of self. Additionally, by the time large groups of recaptives arrived, a significant population of Liberian citizens already spoke English. Thus, instructing the newcomers to learn their language was a practical way for Americo-Liberians to establish a lingua franca without having to learn new African languages. Undoubtedly, however, the language instruction drove home the idea that a recaptive's birth language had no place in Liberian society, and the fact that they had to

¹⁶⁸ J.T. Richardson, "Liberia Baptist Mission: Letter from J.T. Richardson," *African Repository* 46 (1870): 15-16.

¹⁶⁹ John Seys, "Conditions of the Recaptives Now in Liberia," *African Repository* 39 (1863): 110-111.

¹⁷⁰ "African Missions," *African Repository* 38 (1862): 185-186.

learn English whether they wanted to or not still highlighted the Americo-Liberian sense of cultural superiority.

The imposition of a new English name was also significant for both recaptured Africans and Americo-Liberians, especially as recaptives initially became introduced to their new home. Recaptives received generic Christian names like John, Eliza, or Abraham, and some even gained the identity of famous English-speaking people, as referenced by one young boy being renamed Samuel Schumaker after the man who founded Gettysburg College in Pennsylvania.¹⁷¹ The name-changing process implicitly told a captive that their former identity was not useful or important in their new home, and forced each captive to adapt accordingly. Each recaptured African slowly lost the connection to their birth name as others used it less, and had to accept a new, English-language-based identity, one given to them by a stranger. Americo-Liberians hoped that these names would make recaptives indistinguishable from other settler Liberians who had roots in the United States, potentially helping them to avoid future discrimination despite their past.¹⁷² These name changes thus helped progress the assimilation process, making it more difficult to tell captives and Americo-Liberians apart.

Further, the new English names better enabled the people responsible for these recaptured Africans—such as government agents or the masters who apprenticed the Africans—to keep track of the multitudes of people who arrived in the country. For example, reports of captives being forced to wear large nametags until both their masters and they remembered their name helped to show why renaming was important.¹⁷³ Americo-Liberian masters wanted to remember who was who, and they yearned to force captives to internalize their new identity. The nametag

¹⁷¹ Fett, *Recaptured Africans*, 174.

¹⁷² Reef, *This Our Dark Country*, 42-43.

¹⁷³ Diary of a Liberian Officer on 24 September, 1860, cited in Fett, *Recaptured Africans*, 175.

could be removed once both parties remembered, highlighting the idea that part of the renaming process was an attempt to smooth out the recaptive transition into society for both Americo-Liberians and recaptured Africans.

While the personal names imposed new identities, they also helped to distinguish captives from the local Africans in the country, as did the group name “Congo.” As previously mentioned, the term “Congo” originated from the belief that recaptured Africans came from the Congo region, sold onto slave ships near the mouth of the Congo River.¹⁷⁴ However, this name represented a misnomer in a certain sense: while it is true that a majority of slaves being traded across the Atlantic came from the West Central African region—and many likely came from slavers selling on the Congo—it would be impossible to specifically trace how each individual got to the region from which they were sold. The journey from initial capture in the African interior to arrival at a slave trading post on the coast could sometimes take place over hundreds of miles, making it difficult for both recaptured Africans to find their way home and for Americo-Liberians to accurately refer to them by the region or tribe from which they derived. Therefore, while the accuracy of the name Congo would be difficult to prove, the staying power of the term helped everyone living in Liberia to distinguish who was who.

Further, evidence indicated that even indigenous Liberians used the term to refer to recaptured Africans, emphasizing the usefulness of the phrase for grouping people in the republic. Indeed, while English sources from indigenous Africans in this period are difficult to find, a piece by Naprah-Boneh-Worreh, a member of the Kru tribe, illustrated that some indigenous groups in Liberia used “Congo” to refer to recaptured Africans. Speaking about each tribe’s educational capabilities in 1871, the Kru author insisted that “The Bassa Tribe, the Veys,

¹⁷⁴ Dennis and Dennis, *Slaves to Racism*, 14.

the Grebos, the Queahs, are apt to learn; [but] the Congoes are dull and stupid.”¹⁷⁵ His description is unique, as it highlighted local African beliefs and opinions about recaptured Africans and their ability to develop intellectually, emphasizing both resentment and contempt for the immigrants. His language also underscored indigenous resistance to interact with or show respect to captives, stressing the idea that many indigenous African people believed recaptured Africans to be unworthy of their position in the republic’s social hierarchy. Further, his use of the term “Congo” indicated the pervasive nature of the group name, signifying that at least some indigenous people used it in reference to captives.

Similarly, historian Abayomi Karnga referred to the “Congoes” as their own tribe, and he discussed their arrival in the same context as the arrival of other indigenous tribes in the region. Karnga’s description of the recaptured Africans differed considerably with Naprah-Boneh-Worreh’s, asserting that “considered as a tribe [Congoes] are most loyal to the State... [and] are brave, intelligent, prolific, [and] diplomatic.”¹⁷⁶ The stark contrast between Karnga’s and Naprah-Boneh-Worreh’s descriptions helped to show how different indigenous groups viewed captives. More importantly, Karnga’s focus on the idea of these people as a collective unit is significant, especially when discussing other tribes in Liberia, as it showed how some indigenous Liberians perceived captives as their own distinct group. Karnga describing captives as “Congoes” in the same way he would describe another group’s particular African identity highlighted the notion that “Congo” had come to represent a recaptured African’s ethnicity or heritage, erasing each individual’s identity and replacing it with one given to them by another group. In this way, the use of the phrase “Congoes” by non-Americo-Liberians emphasized the

¹⁷⁵ Naprah-Boneh-Worreh, “Reminiscences (*sic*) of Liberia,” *African Repository* 47 (1871): 284.

¹⁷⁶ Karnga, *History of Liberia*, 12.

pervasiveness of the term, as well as the idea that “Congo” distinguished the recaptured Africans from others in Liberia.

However, the development of the term “Congo” in the nineteenth and twentieth century is significant, as “Congo” has slowly changed to include more Liberian people. The term originally attempted to erase each recaptive’s previous identity and force them to accept a new one, a sense of self based on a misunderstood African heritage and a compulsory recognition of Americo-Liberian ideals and beliefs. When Americo-Liberians or Americans referred to these people, they used “Congo” almost as a term of endearment, one that emphasized their difference but also the unique ways they had embraced and been accepted by Liberian society. It is perhaps telling, then, that the use of the term in Liberia eventually shifted, evolving into a reference to all people living in the country who behave like settler Liberians. While the exact timeline of this shift is unclear, the phrase “Congo” continued to develop in Liberia until all citizens with a connection to the US fell under its umbrella. Indeed, the *Historical Dictionary of Liberia* (2000) stated that,

“In recent years, the term “Congo” has come to refer to anyone, particularly in the rural communities, who is of settler/Congo descent, and even those individuals living in the rural settlements who are of indigenous origins but emulate the ways of the settlers.”¹⁷⁷

Authors like Yekutiel Gershoni, Benjamin Dennis, and Helene Cooper have argued the same, with Gershoni stating in 1985 that “even today, indigenous Africans use the terms ‘Americo-Liberian’ and ‘Congo’ interchangeably.”¹⁷⁸ Thus, while the exact date of this change is unclear, the notion that it occurred at all holds significance in the discussion about the incorporation of recaptured Africans into Liberian society. Historians will likely never know how recaptured Africans viewed their own identity shift, and whether or not they truly embraced “civilization.”

¹⁷⁷ Dunn, Beyan, and Burrowes, *Historical Dictionary*, 83.

¹⁷⁸ Gershoni, *Black Colonialism*, 27; Dennis and Dennis, *Slaves to Racism*, 14; Cooper, *The House at Sugar Beach*, 8.

However, the shift in the meaning of the term “Congo” to refer to anyone with ties to settler society indicates that those around recaptured Africans (both Americo-Liberians and indigenous Liberians) believed that the incorporation process had brought captives and settler Liberians closer together in important ways.

In the eyes of many Americo-Liberians, each captive’s acceptance of English and the renaming process represented their adherence to an identity makeover and their acceptance of “civilization.” It is important to note that individual and collective identities are fluid and incomplete, and certainly not every recaptured African lost their sense of individuality through this process. However, through methods of assimilation like renaming and language instruction, the Americo-Liberians attempted to strip recaptured Africans of their personal and tribal names, their languages, and the regions they came from. As a whole, the incorporation of captives highlighted the Americo-Liberian hope that they could redeem captives by forcing them into a new muddled social group: The Congoes, Liberia’s civilized Africans. The proliferation of the term “Congo” furthered this idea, and the fact that it came to represent any person in the republic connected to Americo-Liberians emphasized that people in the republic believed the process of incorporation to have been ultimately successful.

Conclusion

In Amos Beyan’s 1991 work on Liberia, he argued that the way Americo-Liberians believed a society should be structured distorted their view of how a successful society operated. By focusing so heavily on outward manifestations of “civilization,” such as professions of Christianity or English, Beyan emphasized that a civilized person was “defined in Liberia as

those who became Christians, spoke English, and dressed or behaved like westerners.”¹⁷⁹ When examining the tactics of incorporation experienced by recaptured Africans, Beyan’s sentiment has clear historical evidence. Through the employment of the apprenticeship system, Americo-Liberians enabled themselves to utilize a bonded laboring population, and simultaneously forced recaptives to accept elements of settler culture. While it is unclear to what extent the recaptives embraced their new identities, the historical record emphasizes that Americo-Liberians believed their system of assimilation was successful. They wrote about the success in their journals and letters, utilizing examples of recaptive work ethic, spoken English, or adherence to religious institutions to prove to themselves that they could redeem these “wild beasts,” and potentially Africa as a whole.¹⁸⁰

Further, the tactics of assimilation Americo-Liberians used reinforced the idea that their drive to incorporate stemmed from two major places: a desire to solve problems facing the republic and an underlying ambition to “redeem” Africa. The Americo-Liberian attempts to assimilate the African people they encountered exemplified the settlers’ belief that they were connected to the indigenous populations in Liberia by a shared notion of race. This connection enabled Americo-Liberians to bring in local Africans and recaptured ones in an attempt to elevate the entirety of the black race. However, these attempts to improve those they viewed as inferior underscored the idea that the underlying reason for assimilation of African people was strikingly similar to the colonization supporters’ reasoning to separate free blacks from the US: a belief in cultural superiority. The Americo-Liberians used incorporation as a way to bring people into their country, both to increase the population and to create workers and military members,

¹⁷⁹ Beyan, *American Colonization Society*, 158.

¹⁸⁰ “Negroes Rescued from Slavers, Sending them Back to Africa,” *New York Times*, 26 June 1860.

but their attempts to assimilate the Africans they encountered ultimately highlighted their hope to make African people resemble Americo-Liberians, and to eliminate the differences they believed made a person “uncivilized.” By making citizens out of those who accepted their beliefs and values—and distancing themselves from those who refused—the Americo-Liberians showed how they could solve minor issues while advancing towards another stated goal, “improving” the African people they interacted with and their own country at the same time.

Conclusion

In 2008, *New York Times* journalist Helene Cooper published *The House at Sugar Beach*, an autobiography about her childhood in Liberia. In the first chapter, Cooper argued that the word “Congo” had become “endemic” in her home country, and citizens used the word to describe certain areas in different towns, as well as to indicate a specific group of people. When discussing her family roots, Cooper wrote, “We are called the Congo people—my family and the rest of the descendants of the freed American slaves who founded Liberia in 1822.”¹⁸¹ As Cooper’s use of the word suggested, the definition of a Liberian “Congo” had shifted significantly since the arrival of recaptured Africans in the mid-nineteenth century. By the twentieth century, the word was often viewed as derogatory, a way of mocking the privileged and well-off members of Liberian society. Indeed, when Cooper described her own experiences during the First Liberian Revolution in the 1980s, she noted that Liberians with indigenous heritage stormed the streets of Monrovia shouting, “Who born soldier? Country woman! Who born minister? Congo woman!”¹⁸² Cooper’s work highlighted that at some point, the misnomer that originally represented a specific group became a symbol of the Liberian elite, an indication of the ambiguity surrounding who was really a “Congo.” A term once used to describe a distinct population of Africans in Liberia, “Congo” had now taken on a new connotation, and in many citizens’ minds the population had devolved into a dichotomy between settler and indigenous, with the descendants of recaptured Africans “gone from [society’s] gaze,” primarily mixed-in to the settler population.¹⁸³ But, how had this “disappearance” happened?

¹⁸¹ Helene Cooper, *The House at Sugar Beach* (New York: Simon and Schuster Publishing, 2008): 6.

¹⁸² Cooper, *The House at Sugar Beach*, 184.

¹⁸³ “Ability of Liberia to Receive Emigration,” *African Repository* 41 (1865): 280.

In its entirety, this thesis has attempted to both answer that question and to explain why this “disappearance” is significant within the context of Liberia’s relationship to the United States. The creation of the colony that would become Liberia helped to illustrate white Americans’ belief that American blacks would remain inferior should they remain in the US, inspiring the ACS to promote and advocate free black colonization throughout the nineteenth century. Simultaneously, while incorporating Africans into their society helped solve issues in the republic, the Americo-Liberian decision to attempt to assimilate any African they could—principally recaptured Africans—emphasized their belief in the inferiority of African people. While the methods the proponents of colonization and the Americo-Liberians employed to improve their situation were quite distinct, the underlying motive for both groups stemmed from a sense of cultural superiority aimed at those they viewed as inferior.

Further, this thesis emphasizes the important role an oft-overlooked group, the recaptured Africans, played in the early history of Liberia. From the beginning of its colonial history, Liberia provided an answer to a burning question in the US: where should the Africa Squadron place the captives they discovered? However, this thesis emphasized that captives were not simply a jumping-off point, a group of people who helped provide a reason for starting a colony who then disappeared from the historical record. Instead, this work has shown that captives were critical members of Liberian industry, militias, and, crucially, the primary recipients of tactics of forced assimilation. Although the identity changes forced upon them by Americo-Liberians and the ACS led the writers of the mid-nineteenth century to proclaim that the captives had disappeared, this declaration did not reveal that these people had actually transformed, but instead that Americo-Liberians and ACS supporters believed they did, a distinction worth noting. The notion that by 1865 captives had lost their social distinctiveness

as an intermediate group and had mostly transformed into Liberian citizens in the eyes of both settler and indigenous Liberians is significant. This perception of recaptured Africans as incorporated into the social ranks of the Americo-Liberians advanced the notion that the republic's population was becoming dichotomous, with those of African heritage harboring resentment towards those from across the Atlantic.

Indeed, as the settler Liberians assimilated captives and the local Africans that accepted "civilization," their focus on only including those they deemed respectable as citizens distanced them from many indigenous Liberians in the hinterland. By 1858, only fifteen indigenous Africans had gained citizenship in Liberia, meaning that though thousands lived within the nation's boundaries, most had no say in the political process and had little opportunity for social mobility.¹⁸⁴ Twenty-nine years later, when Samuel Seton—a Grebo delegate in the Liberian House of Representatives—attempted to promote a bill to grant all indigenous Liberians citizenship, his bill was tabled and his advocacy was largely ignored.¹⁸⁵ This failure to bridge the gap between the two principal populations in the republic indicated a definite separation between the settler Liberians who controlled the government and the indigenous Liberians who were affected by that government's decisions.

As these data suggest, this thesis has also implicitly attempted to illustrate how the dominant group in two separate societies treated those they viewed as "other," and how that treatment progressed racial tensions. The actions of both colonization proponents and Americo-Liberians highlighted a shared belief in unchangeable difference between themselves and those perceived as other, a belief that fomented racial boundaries and ethnic divisions in each group's

¹⁸⁴ Claude Clegg, *The Price of Liberty: African Americans and the Making of Liberia* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004): 241.

¹⁸⁵ Joseph Saye Guannu, *A Short History of the First Liberian Republic* (Pompano Beach: Exposition Press of Florida, 1985): 140.

respective country and eventually led to intense violence, exemplified by civil wars in both nations. While it would be a stretch to say that the separation of free blacks from the US or the incorporation of recaptured Africans in Liberia directly resulted in violence, it is fair to say that the actions of these groups were in their own way part of an historical trend of growing divisions. While neither of the dominant group's actions discussed in this thesis were the principal cause of violence, the treatment of those viewed as other certainly contributed to the bubbling of tensions that would eventually spill over.

In its inception, Liberia represented a colony for "unwanted" populations, principally American free blacks and recaptured Africans. While these two groups perceived themselves as different, this thesis has shown that the reason they both arrived in Liberia and became citizens stemmed from a similar belief in the inferiority of those deemed different or lesser. By showing how the separation of free blacks from the US and the incorporation of Africans into Liberia were connected by the same core principles, one can see another connection between the African republic and the country that founded it. Further, this thesis has shown how integral a knowledge of the history of recaptured Africans is to fully understanding the early history of Liberia. An examination of the methods of and reasons for the incorporation of recaptured Africans highlights a previously unexplored connection between the US and its only African colony. To brush off the incorporation of recaptured Africans as simply a footnote in Liberia's past would mischaracterize their role in the early history of the nation, and would undervalue the relevance of their story in a discussion about the similarities between two connected nations. By engaging with the origins of Liberia, a historian can craft a more comprehensive view of the country's history, furthering their understanding of how these distinct yet significant groups played an important role in the establishment of the republic.

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