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## **The First African Republic: A Survey of The Political and Economic History of The Republic of Liberia**

**By Cooper Smith**

In the motley assembly of African nation-states there stands a western coastal state whose history breaks from the standard narrative of the continent. The Republic of Liberia and Ethiopia were the only nations not to be colonized by the European imperial powers. Yet even with this company Liberia stands apart: Ethiopia's sovereignty was threatened by an encroaching Italian force, a force which the Ethiopians were successful in repelling. Liberia on the other hand faced no such episode. In all their scheming and chicanery with tribal chiefs, religious leaders, and petty kings, the European powers appeared to possess a level of respect for Liberian sovereignty comparable to the respect the "civilized" Western nations had for each other. A survey of the coastal nation is necessary in order to understand how Liberia became immunized to the plague of Western colonization.

The origins of the Republic of Liberia lie in an American resettlement movement which emerged at the beginning of the Nineteenth Century. In 1790 the slave population of the United States was around 697,697, by 1820 the number of slaves had increased to 1,538,128. The growth of the slave population became a grave concern for many Americans. Many Americans detested slavery as corrosive to the morality of both slaves and their masters. American statesmen understood the finer feelings of the soul towards mankind as indispensable to the capacity of self-government under a republican form. To corrode these feelings would make citizens callous towards their fellow man, training them to view their neighbor as things to be dominated and controlled rather than equals within the body-politic. Slavery was abhorred for corrupting the morality of the slaves as well, stunting their impulse for self-reliance, and inculcating habits contrary to those necessary to sustain republican government. To the

manufacturing North, slavery threatened the very existence of its infant industries. The life blood of the Northern free-labor system rested in an artisan apprentice class to both produce value and expand the system by establishing independent workshops. It was readily apparent to the North that this expansion could not be accomplished while free-labor artisans were competing with a slave-labor class in the same states. The vast acres of land and labor necessary to continue a plantation economy precluded the possibility of independent artisan workshops springing up around them. Worse still, the Southern planters understood that expansion was necessary for the survival of the plantation economy. The concentration of slave populations in the South would cause the ultimate collapse of the plantation model through a surplus supply of slave labor, or through slave rebellions like the Gabriel Prosser rebellion of 1800, the Denmark Vesey rebellion of 1822, and the Nat Turner rebellion of 1831.

It was evident that the unregulated growth of the slave population was untenable for peace and security in the American system. Many religious groups and concerned statesmen called for the gradual emancipation of the slaves. This too was seen to be untenable as the cost of educating and incorporating the freed Blacks into a society holding deep prejudices against them seemed to solve none of the problems intended to be solved. The concerns and grievances with slavery precipitated the creation of the American Colonization Society (ACS). The object of the ACS was philanthropic in nature: to see the repatriation of manumitted slaves and free blacks to the African continent for the establishment of their own colonial settlements. To the ACS this was the best way of remedying the ills of slavery. Repatriation would provide American freemen a fresh start on a continent free from the prejudices of whites. The freedmen would be given their own land to till, cultivate, and improve, thereby revitalizing the spirit of self-reliance and ownership of one's labor, which slavery had suppressed. Most importantly these freedmen would

bring Protestant Christianity to the African continent. Through charity and good habits, the American Colonization Society set out to create a free, black, Protestant republic on the African continent, the efforts of which culminated in the founding of the Republic of Liberia.

The recolonization project was attractive to many free Black Americans. Motivated by a spirit of adventure, a mission to escape discrimination and prejudice, and the desire to own the fruits of their own labor, roughly 16,000 black freedmen emigrated to the Liberian settlement via the American Colonization Society. The emigrants to Liberia came from a variety of backgrounds. Some were slaves manumitted on the condition that they would be repatriated to Africa, others were slaves who earned enough money to purchase their freedom and sought a better life outside the United States, others still were freeborn blacks dissatisfied with second-class status.

It was the prerogative of the ACS that the black settlers concern themselves with agriculture rather than industry. The agrarian program of the ACS was guided by the ideals of Jeffersonian Democracy, the philosophy was that the best republicans were those who earned their daily bread by working the soil. Before the settlers could concern themselves with industrial labor, they first needed to conquer the natural environment around them through the agricultural improvement of the land. In 1819 the *Elizabeth* set sail as the first emigrant voyage of freedmen to Sierra Leone. The agents of the ACS were charged with negotiating purchases of land from the local tribes to build the first Liberian colonial settlements. The *Elizabeth* was equipped with clothing, building materials, munitions, and farming equipment, provided with assistance from the United States and safe passage by the Navy.

The conflict between the settlers and the native Africans began to germinate the moment they stepped foot on the continent. The first mission of the ACS agents was to secure a land

purchase from the native tribes. The natives, however, were reluctant to cooperate with the agents and settlers. The agents sought to build their settlement at Cape Mesurado, which was under the control of the Dei tribe. King Peter of the Dei refused to cooperate with the agents, believing that they would impede the operation of the slave trade and disrupt commerce between the tribes. There too was a cultural disconnect between the agents and African tribes. The African tribes did not possess the same concept of property as the Americans. To the Dei, land was not owned by a single individual but held in common for the benefit of all, placed within the public trust of the king. The king was incapable of disposing of land, especially to those he believed would harm the interests of the tribe. Having lost patience in negotiating with the natives the agents resorted to the compulsion of the pistol, forcing King Peter to give them land for a settlement.<sup>1</sup>

The freedmen settlement perturbed the native Dei, Golla, Bassa, and Vai tribes, and so in 1822 a military assembly of the tribes conducted a series of invasions on the settlement in an affair known as the Dei-Settler War. The settlers were vastly outnumbered by the native forces, yet they were successful in repelling the persistent invasions with advanced firearms and cannons. The military superiority of the settlers forced the tribal coalition to begrudgingly accept the Cape Mesurado settlement. The kings of the native tribes acquiesced to peace treaties which opened trade between the settlers and the natives, allowing the settlers easier access to the hinterland of the colony.<sup>2</sup> The tribes were dissatisfied with this arrangement, in part because they did not fully understand the terms of the treaties they were forced to sign, but also because

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<sup>1</sup>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): 217-36, <https://doi.org/10.2307/483540>.

<sup>2</sup>Jeremy I. Levitt, *The Evolution of Deadly Conflict in Liberia: From 'Paternalitarianism' to State Collapse* (Durham: Carolina Academic Press, 2005).

settlements were allowed to expand along the coast, excluding the natives from places of religious significance and areas integral to tribal life, such as fishing spots. For this, warfare and skirmishes would define the relationship between the settlers and the natives in the succeeding decades of the colonial period.

The sieges which befell the settlers, and their successful repulsions of those invasions, were formative in the development of the settlers' Americo-Liberian identity. The tribal raids revealed the work demanded for the recolonization project to be successful. The American-born settlers, being separate and distinct from the native Africans, saw these battles as a price to be paid for their freedom.

On July 26, 1847, the Republic of Liberia declared its independence from the American Colonization Society and established its own constitution of government. As the founding documents of Liberia, the Declaration of Independence and Constitution outlined the principles of Americo-Liberian identity and their place on the continent. The Declaration describes the Liberian people as having originated in America but coming to the African continent to improve their position from that which they had in America. The Declaration professed Liberia as a place of refuge for those downtrodden by the cruelties of slavery and affirmed the sovereignty of God. The Declaration professed the mission of Liberia to be the eradication of the African slave trade and the Christianization of the native African population. The Constitution of Liberia, shaped in the mold of the United States Constitution and the state constitutions, established an independent legislature, executive, and judiciary with the same powers as their American correlatives. The Constitution also included provisions peculiar to the Liberian mission, such as the reservation of

Liberian citizenship to those of African descent<sup>3</sup> and the power of the President to appoint officers to instruct the native Africans in agriculture and husbandry.<sup>4</sup>

Indeed, the science of agriculture was greatly improved in the Pepper Coast with the arrival of the Americo-Liberians. The settlers brought with them modern farming technologies, techniques, and notions of private property ownership to the continent. The use of scythes, cradles, and sickles to grow cash crops was a system unknown to the native Africans who were familiar with using primitive hoes to grow disparate yields of rice.<sup>5</sup> The communal system of property ownership was forced to make way for the Western notion of private property. Lots of acreage around the principal settlement were distributed to settlers in a manner resembling the homesteading system of the United States. As such, many native Africans were forced out of their territory as the land was cleared to make room for cash crops. Sugar cane in particular showed promise as a successful cash crop in the farm settlements along the St. Paul River in the 1840s. A prosperous milling industry sprung up around the sugar plantations in the following years, and in 1863 Liberia sold seventy-two thousand pounds of sugar to the United States, British settlements, and settler enclaves.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> “The great object of forming these Colonies, being to provide a home for the dispersed and oppressed children of Africa, and to regenerate and enlighten this benighted continent, none but Negroes or persons of Negro descent shall be eligible to citizenship in this Republic” Liberian Constitution (1847) Art. V § 13

<sup>4</sup> “The improvement of the native tribes and their advancement in the arts of agriculture and husbandry, being a cherished object of this government, it shall be the duty of the President to appoint in each county some discreet person whose duty it shall be to make regular and periodical tours through the country for the purpose of calling the attention of the natives to these wholesome branches of industry, and of instructing them in the same, and the Legislature shall, as soon as it can conveniently be done, make provisions for these purposes by the appropriation of money” Liberian Constitution (1847) Art. V § 15.

<sup>5</sup>Santosh C. Saha, “Agriculture in Liberia during the Nineteenth Century: Americo-Liberians’ Contribution,” *Canadian Journal of African Studies / Revue Canadienne Des Études Africaines* 22, no. 2 (1988), <https://doi.org/10.2307/485903>.

<sup>6</sup>Tom W. Shick, *Behold the Promised Land: A History of Afro-American Settler Society in Nineteenth-Century Liberia* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1977).

With the Declaration of Independence and Constitution ratified the Republic of Liberia stood as sovereign power among the company of nations. Liberia could now legitimately exercise the power of sovereigns, particularly the collection of tariffs and control over claimed territory. The first nation to recognize Liberian sovereignty, interestingly enough, was Great Britain, not the United States. Due to Southern opposition to the recognition of a Black African republic, United States recognition of Liberia was delayed until the Lincoln Administration. The treaties of commerce and friendship were not well received by British merchants and the natives. Merchants and natives had been conducting trade with each other decades prior to the establishment of the Republic. Recognition of Liberian sovereignty cut British merchants off from a reliable market, forcing them to work through the middle-man settler.<sup>7</sup> Though the British merchants protested to their Foreign Office their complaints did not impede the amicable relations blossoming between the two nations. President Joseph Roberts of Liberia met with Foreign Secretary Palmerston on several occasions to solidify economic ties. The British hoped that Liberia could be a supplier of cotton to fuel its textile industry, gifting the nation five gin rollers in the hopes of spurring its cotton production.

Relations began to sour as the Liberians began seizing British ships for violation of the nation's navigation and commerce laws. Worse still the Liberians believed these British merchants were encouraging native discontent, as evident by a Kru assault of the Bassa Cove Settlement.<sup>8</sup> The navigation controversies centered around the Gallinas River territory which was an area of dispute between Liberia and British Sierra Leone. Tensions reached a boiling point when Liberian forces seized two British merchant ships in the Mannah River in

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<sup>7</sup>*Behold the Promised Land*

<sup>8</sup>*Behold the Promised Land*



1869. The merchants were convicted of violating the navigation laws and inciting native opposition to the government. The British government challenged the seizures and the convictions by sending a naval squadron to the Liberian coast. The British demanded an indemnity payment of nearly five thousand British pounds, a demand to which the Liberians were forced to assent. Liberia was cash poor at this time, so the nation resorted to marketable raw materials like palm oil and camwood to pay off the indemnity.

The indemnity and an empty treasury prompted the newly elected President Edward James Roye to take out a one hundred-thousand-pound loan from a British bank. The loan, Roye hoped, would be repaid through Liberia's agricultural sector, but the declining global price of sugar and coffee in conjunction with the erroneous terms of the high-risk loan only dug Liberia into a deeper hole.<sup>9</sup> The fervent unpopularity of the loan prompted demonstrations in the capital, and Roye was forced to resign. The Republic elected its former President Joseph Jenkins to office once again in the hopes of providing stable leadership to bring the nation out of economic devastation.

Though Liberian sovereignty had been tested by tribal uprisings, violations of commercial law by foreign merchants, and indemnity to the British, Liberia enjoyed a juridical statehood over some six hundred miles of internal hinterland. This is to say that, with the exception of some territorial disputes, the international community recognized Liberian sovereignty over the land it claimed, though it had no formal civil or military control of the internal territory. In the 1880s Liberian sovereignty was threatened by the Berlin Conference and the Scramble for Africa. The European nations, in establishing "effective occupation" as the

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<sup>9</sup>Agriculture in Liberia during the Nineteenth Century: Americo-Liberians' Contribution

standard for delineating territorial claims, placed Liberia's unoccupied internal territory in jeopardy of British and French expansion. Liberia tried courting foreign investors and engineers to assist in building military garrisons and civilian settlements in the Liberian frontier but were unsuccessful. Liberia itself engaged in the Scramble for Africa, to be a step ahead of the British and French, by moving to incorporate the native Muslim towns of Medina and Jenne.<sup>10</sup> When Britain and France received word of this, they moved to limit Liberian power by acting upon their claims to disputed territory; in 1882 Britain took control of the long-contested Gallinas River district for Sierra Leone and in 1891 France annexed the territory between the Cavalla and San Pedro rivers for Cote d'Ivoire. Liberia formerly ended the territorial disputes between Britain and France through a set of treaties whereby Liberia formally recognized their claims to the contested areas, and Britain and France renounced their ancient claims to settled Liberian coastal territory. These treaties produced the political geography which Liberia possesses to this day, cementing its juridical statehood.

The Twentieth Century saw a revival of American commercial interest in Liberia. Liberia joined the Allies in World War I after Germany declared war against the United States. Liberia again declared war against Germany in World War II in the aftermath of Pearl Harbor. Liberia provided a strategic African base for the Allies in the African front. During the interbellum period Liberia's economy underwent developments in its resource sector, specifically in rubber and iron. Strengthened relations with the United States allowed the Firestone Rubber Company to establish modernized rubber plantations in the Republic, producing a valuable commodity and employing a substantial portion of the labor force.<sup>11</sup> Liberia's rubber supply was strategic for the

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<sup>10</sup>“Black Imperialism: Americo-Liberian Rule over the African Peoples of Liberia, 1841-1964,”

<sup>11</sup>George Dalton, “History, Politics, and Economic Development in Liberia,” *The Journal of Economic History* 25, no. 4 (1965): 569–91, <https://doi.org/10.1017/s0022050700058423>.

Allied military effort, since the global supply of rubber was controlled primarily by the Germans and the Japanese.

The Rubber Revolution in Liberia continued to drive Liberian economic development into the Twentieth Century. Between 1950 and 1960 Liberian government revenue grew eightfold, and the debt incurred by the nation grew to almost one hundred million dollars. The gross domestic product of the nation doubled during this period as well. Under the stewardship of the Firestone Company Americo-Liberian entrepreneurship was able to flourish as Liberians were educated on the agricultural methods and quality standards necessary to build a thriving rubber industry.<sup>12</sup> Though Liberia was making economic strides in the mid-Twentieth Century its gains were very unevenly distributed. Nearly all government investment went to developing Monrovia, the capital, into a modern city.<sup>13</sup> Infrastructure projects were carried out under a plan of harmonizing the nation's economic sectors, which is to say the connection of Liberia's rubber plantations and ore mines to the capital city. The native Africans were largely left behind in this great leap forward for Liberia, the majority of them being forced into subsistence agriculture or wage-labor on the sugar and palm oil plantations.

To the extent that Liberia was a settler state from its very inception, it too suffered the same fate as Africa's other settler states. In 1989 the Americo-Liberian regime, which had ruled the country for nearly a century and a half, was overthrown in a military coup orchestrated by Samuel Doe, a member of the Krahn people. The military coup was followed by a decade of political repression and selective ethnic killings by the Doe dictatorship. Doe himself was later

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<sup>12</sup>History, Politics, and Economic Development in Liberia

<sup>13</sup>Louis P. Belek, "The Development of Liberia," *The Journal of Modern African Studies* 11, no. 1 (1973): 43–60, <https://doi.org/10.1017/s0022278x00008077>.

overthrown in another coup, and the Republic was thrown into a period of civil war and genocide which lasted until 2003.

Some final consideration ought to be given as to why Liberia met this fate. Deficiencies in the strength of the Americo-Liberian nation can be attributed to the pusillanimity of the United States in African recolonization. Due to immense opposition from the Southern slaveholding class, the United States lacked the political will to engage in an active campaign of territorial purchase, repatriation, education, and investment of freedmen to Africa. The recolonization movement prevailed in popularity and perceived feasibility over abolitionism even up to the Lincoln administration. In fact, Lincoln created an emigration office in the Department of the Interior for the specific purpose of finding areas suitable for recolonization.<sup>14</sup> In a conference with a delegation of Black intellectuals, Lincoln proposed the formation of settlements in Central America and Africa, drawing upon the successes of recolonization of Liberia.<sup>15</sup> These plans never came to fruition, as abolition proved more expedient to the interests of Northern political and economic interests than recolonization and was likely a far more attractive outcome for enslaved Blacks. Consequently, Americo-Liberians never constituted more than ten percent of the Liberian population, making them extremely vulnerable to native upheavals. The lack of fresh blood to the continent likely resulted in an atrophied ruling class. The majority of progress in Liberian occurred under the presidencies of Roberts and Tolbert, the former serving for twelve years and the latter serving for twenty-seven. Each man made great strides for Liberia, but failed

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<sup>14</sup> United States Dept. of the Interior. (1862). *Report of Colonization and Emigration*. Washington, DC: GPO. <https://archive.org/details/reportoncoloniz00lincgoog/page/n6/mode/2up>

<sup>15</sup> Lincoln, Abraham. *Collected Works of Abraham Lincoln*. Volume 5, pp. 370-375, 1809-1865. <https://quod.lib.umich.edu/l/lincoln/lincoln5/1:812?rgn=div1;singlegenre=All;sort=occur;subview=detail;type=simple;view=fulltext;q1=April+16,+1862=trgt>

to build strong institutions which could inculcate habits of good government in their successors.

A larger Americo-Liberian settler population could have increased the likelihood of intermarriage between settlers and natives, helping to diffuse the tensions between the two groups and foster cooperation and assimilation of the natives into settler systems. Instead, Liberia suffered the fate of both the apartheid state and the post-colonial state: the overthrow of the ruling settler class, followed by bloody civil war between adversarial ethnic and religious groups.

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