

Chapter 6

**Race, Identity, and Choice:
Black Voices on Liberia and the American Colonization
Society***Thomas Keefe*

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Introduction

Africa's Republic of Liberia began as a colony founded by the decedents of Africans who were born both free and enslaved in the Americas. From the 1820s through 1840s, the Society for the Colonization of Free People of Color of America transported thousands of formerly enslaved African Americans to the coast of West Africa. The American Colonization Society (ACS), as it was more commonly known, was established by White Americans, not African Americans, and controlled the colony of Liberia until 1847. The general historical narrative often treats Liberia with rose-colored glasses tinted with American exceptionalism. As Africa's first independent nation of the modern era, Liberia's very name derives from its national motto: "The Love of Liberty Brought Us Here." Daniel Bashiel Warner, who was born in Baltimore County, Maryland before immigrating to Liberia as a child, similarly described the country as "a home of glorious liberty" in Liberia's national anthem. Highlighting its American roots, Liberia's flag is even based on the flag of the United States, featuring alternating red and white stripes, and a blue canton with a white star.¹

¹ Thomas Streissguth, *Liberia in Pictures* (Minneapolis: Twenty-First Century Books, 2006), 69.

In reality, the history and legacy of Liberian colonization is far more complicated. Not only did the ACS's leadership often embrace White supremacist ideals, but the founders of Liberia paid no heed to the region's indigenous population whose land was taken for the colonial experiment. Historian Ousmane Power-Greene goes so far as to call the ACS an "antiblack" organization.² Not only was immigration to Africa sometimes involuntary, but the leaders of the emergent Americo-Liberian culture often repeated the sins of the United States, transporting White supremacist ideas about African culture instead of establishing the equality so greatly desired by African Americans in the United States. This chapter includes a variety of African American perspectives regarding ACS and repatriation, with particular attention to Paul Cuffe, James Forten, Martin Delany, and Frederick Douglass. Additionally, it explores the lived experience of those African Americans who became part of the colony of Liberia and, later, the independent Republic of Liberia.

Background

The history of Liberia is not often included in American history and, when it is addressed, it is typically limited to the founding of the American Colonization Society in 1817 and the establishment of Liberia on January 6, 1822. Those five years represent a narrow depiction of the American Colonization Society and the Liberian experiment. Among those who returned to Africa were recently emancipated slaves transported against their will as well as lifelong free men and women from both the North and South.

² Ousmane K. Power-Greene, *Against Wind and Tide The African American Struggle against the Colonization Movement* (New York: New York University Press), 2014.

This included wealthy Black entrepreneurs, who voluntarily went to establish new lives in their ancestral homeland. The history of the United States and Liberia continued well after the signing of the Liberian Declaration of Independence on July 26, 1847 and includes Firestone rubber plantations, Hershey and Mars cocoa plantations, blood diamonds, and the conviction of Americo-Liberian Charles Taylor for crimes against humanity.

While this chapter is about the lived experiences of African Americans, it is important to acknowledge the perceptions and motivations of White supporters of African repatriation. Laws governing slavery served to dehumanize African Americans for economic gain and to prevent the likelihood of organized rebellions. So, for many White slaveholders, repatriation to Africa was touted as issue of public safety and the preservation of power. Their counterparts in the North similarly embraced the return of Black men and women to Africa, sometimes behind a facade of Christian morality, due to their own rejection of racial equality and social integration.³

While they may have opposed slavery, many White abolitionists “expressed horror at the very prospect of Black equality.”⁴ By colonizing Liberia, they saw an avenue to end slavery in America without having to address questions of racial equality or social integration with free Black men and women. Among Southern slaveholders, “the fear of servile insurrections was never absent from the minds of the people of the South.”⁵

³ Thandeka, *Learning to Be White: Money, Race and God in America* (New York: Continuum Press, 1999).

⁴ Richard S. Newman, *Black Founders: The Free Black Community in the Early Republic*. (Philadelphia: The Library Company of Philadelphia, 2008), 3.

⁵ Joseph Cephas Carroll, *Slave Insurrections in the United States, 1800-1865* (Boston: Chapman and Grimes, 1938), 19.

Conservatively, there were more than two hundred and fifty revolts involving more than ten slaves in American history. These numbers do not include individual acts of rebellion, smaller incursions, undocumented actions, or attempted insurrections that did not materialize.

One of those unmaterialized revolts was Gabriel's Rebellion in 1800. After Gabriel Prosser's plot was discovered, the government of Virginia briefly discussed repatriating Black Americans to Africa, an idea that would become the obsession of a prominent White Virginian, Charles Fenton Mercer, a decade later.⁶ It was in this environment that Black and White Americans both in the South and the North began discussing the repatriation of African Americans to West Africa. Ultimately, Robert Finley and Samuel J. Mills, both of whom were influential White ministers, established the Society for the Colonization of Free People of Color of America in Washington, D.C., on December 21, 1816. Just four years later, in 1820, the American Colonization Society began transporting free African Americans to the coast of West Africa.

African Americans and Repatriation to Africa

America's Black population had divergent opinions on repatriation. Some even supported a separate Black colony within continental U.S. territories. For example, in 1817, free African Americans in Richmond, Virginia, asked the United States government to give Black families land west of the Mississippi River. However, the government feared

⁶ Jason T. Sharples, *The World that Fear Made: Slave Revolts and Conspiracy Scares in Early America* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2020).

an alliance between Native Americans and African Americans, which would threaten White continental hegemony. To this end, ACS Secretary Elias B. Caldwell rejected “the practicability of colonization” within the American continent, predicting alliances with “Indians, or the nations bordering on our frontiers, in case of war” and the likelihood that a Black Homeland “would become the asylum of fugitives and runaway slaves.”⁷

While an estimated thirteen percent of America’s Black population was free in the early nineteenth century, the population of free African Americans was not homogenous. There were free Black men and women in both the South and the North who had divergent levels of education and socioeconomic backgrounds. This chapter will explore the perspectives of four specific African American freedmen regarding the Liberian experiment: Paul Cuffe (1759-1817), James Forten (1766-1842), Martin Delany (1812-1885), and Frederick Douglass (1817-1895). These are the lived experiences of men who discussed, argued, and wrote to each other to understand better the virtues and dangers of immigration to West Africa. It should be noted that these perspectives are limited by gender and economic status.⁸

⁷ “Meeting of Free People of Color of Richmond, Virginia,” 1817, in William Lloyd Garrison, *Thoughts on African Colonization: or an impartial exhibition of the Doctrines, Principles & Purposes of the American Colonization Society. Together with Resolutions, Addresses & Remonstrances of the Free People of Color* (Boston: Garrison and Knapp, 1832); Matthew Mason, *Slavery and Politics in the Early American Republic* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2009), 113.

⁸ Frankie Hutton, “Economic considerations in the American Colonization Society’s early effort to emigrate free blacks to Liberia, 1816–36,” *The Journal of African History*, 12:1 (1983), 45–59.

While the experiences of African Americans in agricultural labor are well-known, at least ten percent of both enslaved and free Black labor was in maritime industries.⁹ Born free in Massachusetts, Paul Cuffe, for example, was one of the most acclaimed sailors of his generation. His mother was a member of the Wampanoag Nation, and his father was a member of Africa's Ashanti who was enslaved and brought to the auction block in Newport, Rhode Island. A successful mariner and devout Quaker, Cuffe became focused on "rescuing enslaved peoples from America and establishing a homeland in Africa which would also, it was believed, have the effect of bringing Christian faith and 'civilisation' to the people of Africa." Note the dual motivation of rescuing enslaved Americans as well as bringing Christianity and "civilization" to West Africa. In 1811, Cuffe captained the ship *Traveller* with an all-Black crew to Sierra Leone to explore the British colony and repatriate Black Loyalists who had fought against the United States during the American Revolution. Unfortunately, the War of 1812 interrupted his plans, but on December 10, 1815, Cuffe set sail for Africa with thirty-eight free African American colonists. Cuffe financed most of the expedition himself. Upon his return to the United States, he was recruited by Robert Finley and Samuel J. Mills to share information with the newly formed American Colonization Society.¹⁰

Like Cuffe, James Forten was a successful Black businessman also engaged in maritime industries. A freeman from Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, Forten worked as a

⁹ W. Jeffery Bolster, *Black Jacks: African American Seamen in the Age of Sail* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press), 1997.

¹⁰ Paul Walker, "Captain Paul Cuffe (1759–1817): Nineteenth-Century African American Seafarer and Entrepreneur," *Black Theology* 13:3 (2015), 222.

privateer and in shipyards before becoming a successful sailmaker. He strongly opposed the American Colonization Society because he believed African Americans had a birthright to the United States, and he refused to abandon a nation built on the backs of the enslaved who had yet to taste freedom. Moreover, Forten believed that the ACS was disingenuous and had an ulterior motive: "They think that the slave holders wants [sic] to get rid of them so as to make their property more secure."¹¹ A business supporter of abolitionist William Lloyd Garrison, Forten convinced an initially vacillating Garrison to also oppose repatriation. Forten served as Vice-President of Garrison's American Anti-Slavery Society, which was open to both Black and White Americans, including prominent national figures like Susan B. Anthony, Samuel Cornish, and Elizabeth Cady Stanton. In addition, Forten's daughters married the brothers of a prominent biracial abolitionist family in Philadelphia.¹²

Martin Delany belonged to the same generation as Forten's daughters. A free African American from Charles Town, Virginia (now West Virginia), Delany coined the Pan-African slogan "Africa for Africans." After training as a physician's assistant in Pittsburgh in 1850, he became one of the first three Black students admitted to Harvard Medical School but was dismissed following complaints by White students. These experiences, combined with his firsthand witness of Southern slavery during an 1839 tour, influenced his advocacy of Black Nationalism, separation, and self-sufficiency. While

¹¹ Cited in Rosalind Cobb Wiggins, *Captain Paul Cuffe's Logs and Letters, 1808-1817* (Washington, DC: Howard University Press, 1996).

¹² Julie Winch, "The Making and Meaning of James Forten's Letters from A Man of Colour," *William and Mary Quarterly*, 64:1 (2007), 1-6.

Delany worked alongside Frederick Douglass on the *North Star* newspaper, he has historically been characterized as a foil to Douglass: Douglass the Assimilationist versus Delany the Separatist.¹³ At the same time, however, Delany joined Douglass in opposing the American Colonization Society, arguing that the organization was “one of the most arrant enemies of the colored man, ever seeking to discomfit him, and envying him of every privilege that he may enjoy.” Delany would not only visit Liberia, he even negotiated a potential land-share agreement between African Americans and the indigenous people of Abeokuta (located in modern-day Nigeria). These plans would soon after be discarded with the outbreak of the U.S. Civil War. Delany returned to the United States to fight against pro-slavery Confederates, becoming the first Black field grade officer of the United States Army. A decade following the war and the sustained failure of the United States to offer long overdue equality to Black Americans, Delany resumed his advocacy for Liberian immigration, co-founding the South Carolina-based Liberia Exodus Joint Stock Steamship Company.¹⁴

Unlike Cuffe, Forten, and Delany, Frederick Douglass was born into slavery. After successfully running away from Maryland, Douglass partnered with William Lloyd Garrison’s American Anti-Slavery Society and quickly emerged as one of the nation’s most eloquent and fierce orators against slavery as well as the racist motivations behind the

¹³ Robert Steven Levine, *Martin Delany, Frederick Douglass, and the Politics of Representative Identity* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1997).

¹⁴ Kunal M. Parker, *Making Foreigners: Immigration and Citizenship Law in America, 1600–2000* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2015); Olivia B. Waxman, “Years Before the ‘Send Her Back’ Chants, This U.S.-Backed Effort Tried to Send Free Black Americans ‘Back,’” *Time Magazine*, July 22, 2019.

ACS. While Douglass was a committed anti-colonialist, he was also a fierce critic of the U.S., including the discriminatory North where he lived, once saying to Garrison, "I have no love for America, as such; I have no patriotism. I have no country. What country have I? The Institutions of this country do not know me—do not recognize me as a man." As much as he rejected America's public facade as the birthplace of freedom, though, he believed that to abandon the United States by immigrating to Africa was to also abandon the millions of enslaved Black men and women in the South.¹⁵

The American Colonization Society

Douglass recognized that the American Colonization Society (ACS) was led by an eclectic partnership of Southern slaveholders and Northern religious leaders.¹⁶ Although Robert Finley, a Presbyterian minister from New Jersey, later claimed credit for the idea of colonization, it is commonly believed that Finley organized the ACS at the behest of his brother-in-law, Elias Cardwell, who had been contacted by Charles Fenton Mercer (some sources have misidentified the brother-in-law as John Caldwell). Mercer had incidentally discovered that Virginia had once explored creating a colony for African Americans and became obsessed with colonization. Ultimately, Finley and Samuel J. Mills of Connecticut established the Society for the Colonization of Free People of Color of America in Washington, D.C., on December 21, 1816.¹⁷

¹⁵ John Blassingame, et al., eds., *The Frederick Douglass Papers: Series One—Speeches, Debates, and Interviews, Vol. II* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1979), 57.

¹⁶ Bjorn F. Sillion Southard, *Peculiar Rhetoric: Slavery, Freedom, and the African Colonization Movement* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2019).

¹⁷ Douglas R. Egerton, "'Its Origin Is Not a Little Curious': A New Look at the American Colonization Society," *Journal of the Early Republic* 5:4 (1985), 465-467, 471-472.

Four years later, in 1820, the American Colonization Society began transporting free African Americans to the coast of West Africa. But, while the ACS founders were both Northerners, its leaders were mostly slaveholding Southerners. Prominent supporters of the ACS included Associate Justice of the Supreme Court of the United States Bushrod Washington (the nephew of President George Washington), former President James Monroe, future president Abraham Lincoln, and Senator Henry Clay of Kentucky, who owned enslaved African Americans. Elias Caldwell, the Clerk of the U.S. Supreme Court of the United States, and the brother-in-law of Robert Finley, became the Secretary of the American Colonization Society. One can still see the legacy of powerful White Americans etched onto maps of Liberia to this day, from its capital city Monrovia (named after President James Monroe) to cities that include Buchanan (named after Thomas Buchanan, cousin of President James Buchanan) and Clay-Ashland (named after Henry Clay's Lexington, Kentucky, home and plantation that enslaved dozens of Black men and women).¹⁸

Americo-Liberians

In 1820, the population of the United States was approximately 10 million, including 1.5 million African Americans. While African Americans heatedly debated the merits of the colonization movement, ultimately, 4,571 African Americans emigrated in the early years of the Liberian colony. The first expedition of 1820 carried eighty-six Black colonists to West Africa aboard the *Elizabeth*. Individual states also established

¹⁸ J. Winston Coleman Jr., "Henry Clay, Kentucky and Liberia," *The Register of the Kentucky Historical Society*, 45:154 (October, 1947), 309-322.

repatriation colonies along Africa's Pepper Coast, many of which bore Americanized names: Liberia, the Republic of Maryland, Kentucky in Africa, Mississippi in Africa, Louisiana, and two other colonies established by the Virginia Colonization Society and the Quaker Young Men's Colonization Society of Pennsylvania. These would later be annexed by the Republic of Liberia over subsequent decades. In total, by the start of the U.S. Civil War in 1860, approximately 13,000 Black men and women had emigrated from the United States to Liberia.¹⁹

African American immigrants to Liberia included Isaac Wright (1780–1846). Born enslaved in Baltimore, Maryland, Wright changed his name to Daniel Coker after escaping to New York, where he became a Methodist minister. Along with Richard Allen, he co-founded the American Methodist Episcopal (AME) Church. Coker was even offered the position of first Bishop of the AME Church but deferred to Allen.²⁰ Numerous scholars have suggested that Coker was one of the two most strategic writers among the Black pamphleteers of the early nineteenth century, joining James Forten as a master of appealing to both Black and White audiences.²¹ While Forten was an ardent anti-colonialist, Coker was open minded, even attending a lecture by Paul Cuffee regarding

¹⁹ James Fairhead, Tim Geysbeek, Svend E. Holsoe, and Melissa Leach, eds., *African-American Exploration in West Africa: Four Nineteenth Century Diaries* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2003), 10.

²⁰ James Sidbury, *Becoming African in America*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 176.

²¹ Richard Newman, Patrick Rael, and Phillip Lapsansky, *Pamphlets of Protest: An Anthology of Early African-American Protest Literature, 1790-1860* (New York: Routledge, 2013), 10.

the British colony of Sierra Leone.²² While Coker was originally against colonization, he eventually repatriated to Africa after a fallout with Richard Allen. He joined the first expedition of the American Colonization Society that settled in British Sierra Leone before ACS had negotiated with the indigenous West Africans for the land that eventually became Liberia.²³ He would spend the next two decades as one of Africa's first and most prolific Methodist missionaries.²⁴

Another colonial missionary was Edward Jones (1807–1865), who was born a freeman in Charleston, South Carolina, to Jehu and Abigail Jones. His father was a freedman and successful tailor, real estate investor, and hotel owner. After becoming the first Black graduate from Amherst College, Jones travelled to Liberia as a missionary before permanently settling in the British colony of Sierra Leone.²⁵ Jones's interest in Africa was shared by Louis Sheridan (1766-1842) from nearby Blanden County, North Carolina.²⁶ Enslaved at birth, he was given his freedom as a young child by Joseph R. Gautier, who was likely his father.²⁷ Sheridan became a highly successful businessman and a personal friend with John Owen, the former Governor of North Carolina. A White

²² Willard B. Gatewood, Jr., "'To Be Truly Free': Louis Sheridan and the Colonization of Liberia," *Civil War History*, 29:4 (1983), 160.

²³ Rhondda R. Thomas, "Exodus and Colonization: Charting the Journey in the Journals of Daniel Coker, a Descendant of Africa," *African American Review*, 41:3 (2007), 507-519.

²⁴ Mac Dixon-Fyle and Gibril Raschid Cole, eds., *New Perspectives on the Sierra Leone Krio* (New York: Peter Lang Publishing, 2006), 95.

²⁵ Gatewood, 160.

²⁶ Claude Andrew Clegg, *The Price of Liberty* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1999), 153.

²⁷ Catherine W. Bishir, "Sheridan, Thomas (ca. 1787-1864)," in *North Carolina Architects & Builders* (Raleigh: North Carolina State University Libraries, 2009).

contemporary commented that Sheridan was “honored and esteemed by all who know him.”²⁸ Ironically, Sheridan owned several enslaved African Americans, though he once famously said, “I would die tomorrow to be free today.” Originally opposed to colonization, Sheridan’s position changed after the passage of new laws by the North Carolina legislature targeting free African Americans. By the 1830s, Sheridan had immigrated to Africa along with his former slaves. Perhaps the most successful Southern immigrant to Liberia, however, was Joseph Jenkins Roberts (1809-1876). Born free in Virginia, Roberts inherited his stepfather’s shipping business that utilized flatboats along the James River. After moving to West Africa as a young man, he became the first African American Governor of Liberia in 1841 and, seven years later, the nation’s first president.²⁹

Given the prominent role of Henry Clay in advocating the colonization movement, it is no surprise that African Americans from Kentucky played a prominent role in Liberia’s history, serving not only as leaders of colonial Liberia but other colonies such as Kentucky in Africa. Alfred Francis Russell (1817-1884), for instance, was born into slavery in Lexington, Kentucky, as the son of an enslaved mixed-race woman and a White man. Indeed, Russell was only 1/16th African and would have been legally considered “White” in many states, but not in Kentucky. In 1833, a fifteen-years-old Russel and his family were emancipated; they voluntarily moved to Liberia the same year. Another mixed-race Kentuckian, William Coleman (1842-1908) also immigrated to Liberia with his family as a child, and would go on to serve the African nation as the Speaker of the House of

²⁸ Gatewood, 160.

²⁹ Clegg, 158.

Representatives and its thirteenth president. His presidency was succeeded by another descendant of Black Kentuckians, Arthur Barclay, whose family had fled the United States during the Civil War.³⁰

Like their Southern counterparts, Northern immigrants to Liberia included prominent and financially successful Black families. Edward James Roye, for instance, was born a freeman in Newark, Ohio, in 1815, as a full-blooded Igbo. His father died with a significant insurance policy, and Roye became instantly very wealthy. Following his immigration to Liberia, he would serve as the nation's Chief Justice and, later, president. One of the North's most well-known Black figures was John Brown Russwurm (1799–1851), who had been born in Jamaica to an English father and an enslaved African woman. With his father, Russwurm moved to Canada before settling in the United States. After becoming Bowdoin College's first Black graduate, Russwurm published the nation's first African American newspaper, *Freedom's Journal*, in New York City with Samuel Eli Cornish. The duo published numerous articles opposing the colonization movement. However, Russwurm eventually had a change of heart regarding Liberia and wrote that "though some may be suspicious of the motives, still, all who know me will do me the justice to say, that the change in my views was - arising from a correction of error in my former opinion." He would subsequently spend the rest of his life in West Africa, where

³⁰ Charles Henry Huberich, *The Political and Legislative History of Liberia, Vol. I* (New York: Central Book Company, 1947), 836.

he edited *The Liberia Herald* newspaper before becoming governor of the nearby colony of Maryland in Africa.³¹

Unfortunately, in the written record of Black perspectives regarding Liberia and the American Colonization Society, the voices of Black women are largely missing from the historical narrative. Mary Ann Shadd, for instance, was the first female Black publisher in North America and served as a leader of the abolitionist movement, but her exact views on repatriation are unclear. Similarly, the Forten daughters were prominent members of the abolitionist movement, but whether the sisters held the same anti-colonial attitudes as their father is unknown. While Anna Erskine is mentioned in Americo-Liberia history, her place in history seems relegated to her status as the granddaughter of Liberian President James Spriggs Payne and as the long-time partner of the renowned Liberian writer and diplomat Edward Wilmot Blyden. However, as historian Leslie Alexander notes, while the elite White and Black leadership of the ACS and West African colonies may have been entrenched in a patriarchal system that devalued the political voices of women, Black women of the era no doubt held the same myriad of perspectives on the virtues or limitations on repatriation to Africa as their male counterparts. While Black abolitionists from Harriet Tubman and Sojourner Truth to Sarah Redmond and Charlotte Forten are well known, we also know that there were scores of unnamed women who embraced Black Nationalism. These women participated in celebrations of their African heritage throughout the 1820s-1840s in New York City's Black pride parades that featured "African

³¹ James Winston, *The Struggles of John Brown Russwurm: The Life and Writings of a Pan-Africanist Pioneer, 1799-1851* (New York: New York University Press, 2010), 46.

music, clothing, colors, and banners.” That some would also support the Liberian colonization experiment is not a far stretch.³²

With a few notable exceptions, absent from the history of the American Colonization Society are also the voices of poor African Americans who either did not voluntarily choose immigration or did not rise their socio-economic status in Liberia. When Isaac Ross, for example, posthumously dissolved his plantation, he freed three hundred enslaved men and women, and the proceeds of the plantation’s sale were designated to fund their transportation to Liberia.³³ No one asked the three hundred now “free” men and women their views on colonization. In one historians examination of Kentucky’s thriving colonial movement among slave owners, he found that many enslaved people “were adverse to accepting freedom with the stipulation that they be deported” to West Africa, a far-off land rife with uncertainties that would also separate them from family members in the U.S. Upon arrival, many working class African Americans complained of the lack of access to farming tools, supplies to build homes, and an overabundance of snakes. One Kentucky emigrant to Liberia wrote home to an acquaintance, warning, “I cannot as a friend recommend him to come out here.”³⁴

³² Leslie M. Alexander, *African or American? Black Identity and Political Activism in New York City, 1784-1861* (Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 2011), 23, 51; for more on Black Nationalist support for African repatriation movements in the twentieth century, see Keisha N. Blain, *Set the World on Fire: Black Nationalist Women and the Global Struggle for Freedom* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2018).

³³ Alan Huffman, *Mississippi in Africa: The Saga of the Slaves of Prospect Hill Plantation and Their Legacy in Liberia* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2004).

³⁴ Coleman, 311-312, 319.

As previously noted, the motivations behind African American immigration to West Africa were diverse. Many had no say in their deportation, as the terms of their manumission from slavery mandated their relocation to Africa. Others, like John Russwurm and Martin Delany, embraced Black Nationalist ideals that rejected America's potential for racial equality and viewed complete separation from the U.S. as the only way to obtain a future for Black families. Some, like Daniel Coker and Edward Jones, saw Africa as ripe ground for Christian missionary work among native peoples.³⁵ The increasingly oppressive laws of the 1830s targeting free African Americans in the wake of Nat Turner's rebellion drove some, such as Louis Sheridan, to abandon the South for Liberia. Southern governments also put limits on the ability of Southerners to manumit enslaved African Americans. Some states banned the practice of manumission in wills, and others required state legislatures to approve all manumission. Approval of manumission frequently required immigration, so the "choice" offered was continued enslavement or deportation. Journalist Aryn Baker described Liberia as "founded by American statesmen in 1820 and populated, forcibly by some accounts, with former slaves." Whether it was called repatriation, immigration, or colonization, it was often a false, or forced, "freedom" for many African Americans. At the same time that the ACS reached its height of popularity among White elites, those same figures within state legislatures and the federal government were also ordering the removal of Native American populations from the South. Examining the Indian Removal Acts side-by-side

³⁵ Namata Blyden, "Edward Jones: An African American in Sierra Leone," in John Pulis, ed., *Moving On: Black Loyalists in the Afro-Atlantic World* (New York: Routledge, 1999), 159-182.

with the simultaneous repatriation of African Americans to Liberia, it was clear that non-Europeans were not welcome in White America.³⁶

However important it is to emphasize race, one cannot ignore the reality of classism and a loss of political ascendancy. While early America was unquestionably a racially prejudiced society, it was also a classist society. Indeed, many of the Founding Fathers supported a conservative definition of enfranchisement that solidified the political power of property owners. The established socioeconomic class, having secured and extended their political power were not interested in diluting their ascendancy with poor White men, let alone women, Jews, Catholics, Native Americans, or African Americans. While Black opponents of colonization like Forten and Douglass tried to elevate American politics to include African Americans, colonists like Sheridan and Russwurn were, in many ways, preserving their wealth and escaping second-class freedom.

Conclusion

And yet, as Sheridan once said, "I would die tomorrow to be free today." Regardless of his financial success and property ownership, Sheridan recognized the formidable uphill battle to obtain full-class citizenship in the United States. American laws, as classist as they may have been, were even more racist. The movement towards Jacksonian "democracy" in the 1820s and 1830s for the "common man" led to an expansion of the franchise and political opportunities to working class White men, while at the same time limiting opportunities for Black men. Indeed, many middle- and upper-

³⁶ Aryn Baker, "Why the U.S. Has a Special Responsibility to Help Liberia with Ebola," *Time Magazine*. September 17, 2014.

class Black men who could vote prior to the 1820s saw themselves disenfranchised by the 1830s, regardless of their financial security and property ownership.

As one of the nation's most successful Black men, John Russwurm was desperate to escape the "suffocatingly racist environment of the United States - a reading of the American social and political landscape that told him that the North, as well as the South, was incapable of supporting the growth of a strong and dignified Black populace enjoying the benefits of full citizenship."³⁷ Joseph Jenkins Roberts and the younger immigrants who left for Liberia in the company of older family members certainly made the most of their new opportunities in Liberia.³⁸

However, in Liberia, the Americo-Liberian elite too often created what historian James Ciment calls "Another America" based upon the plantation system and the exploitation of indigenous Liberians and even darker-skinned Americo-Liberians.³⁹ Ironically, the often light-skinned African Americans immigrants to West Africa were often perceived as White by the native people of the region but Black by European Americans.⁴⁰ The colonial era was marred by constant warfare between the Americo-Liberian elite and indigenous people from the nation's interior, especially from Kru and Grebo ethnic groups. Perhaps most tellingly, the region's indigenous people were denied citizenship status,

³⁷ Winston, 48.

³⁸ Brandon Mills, "The United States of Africa," *Journal of the Early Republic*, 34:1 (2014), 79–107.

³⁹ Ciment, 1.

⁴⁰ Robert Murray, *Atlantic Passages: Race, Mobility, and Liberian Colonization* (Jacksonville: University Press of Florida 2021).

which included the right to vote, until 1904.⁴¹ The Americo-Liberians dominated the political and economic systems of Liberia for more than a hundred years. From 1848 to 1980, almost all of Liberia's twenty presidents were from the Americo-Liberian class of men who were both mixed-race and financially successful (including two members of the Barclay family of Kentucky).⁴² The only exception was Edward James Roye. While Roye was a wealthy African American, he was full-blooded Igbo and not mixed-race. Some historians have speculated that it was Roye's lack of mixed-race status that caused him to be overthrown by the nation's elite as President of Liberia on October 26, 1871, prior to his mysterious death the following year.⁴³ The South Carolina-born and mixed-race Vice President of Liberia, James S. Smith, completed Roye's term. Even well into the twentieth century Black Nationalists like Marcus and Amy Jacques Garvey "maintained a utopian vision of Liberia as a haven for black men and women throughout the diaspora," while simultaneously viewing the nation's marginalized indigenous population as "uncivilized" who needed African American missionaries, intellectuals, and businessmen to bring them Christianity, commerce, and civilization.⁴⁴

The final indigenous Liberian revolt against the elite descendants of African Americans occurred on April 12, 1980. Master Sergeant Samuel Doe, a member of the

⁴¹ Harold D. Nelson, *Liberia: A Country Study* (Washington, DC: United States Government, 1984).

⁴² Elwood D. Dunn, Amos J. Beyan, Carl Patrick Burrowes, *Historical Dictionary of Liberia* (Lanham, Maryland: Scarecrow Press, 2000), 80.

⁴³ Everett Jenkins Jr., *Pan-African Chronology II: A Comprehensive Reference to the Black Quest for Freedom in Africa, the Americas, Europe and Asia, 1865-1915* (Jefferson, North Carolina: McFarland, 2015), 84-86, 436.

⁴⁴ Blain, 106.

Krahn ethnic group, led sixteen indigenous non-commissioned officers into the presidential palace, killing President William Richard Tolbert Jr. and twenty-seven others. One of the few members of the Tolbert Cabinet not executed was Ellen Johnson Sirleaf, who was, not coincidentally, one of the only indigenous members within the administration. Sirleaf would spend the rest of her life seeking reconciliation and peace for a nation long afflicted with tension between its indigenous citizens and the descendants of African American immigrants. She would eventually not only be awarded a Nobel Peace prize for her efforts, but would become Africa's first elected female head of state.⁴⁵

Discussion Questions

1. What did Louis Sheridan, a free and wealthy Southern African American, mean when he said in 1836, "I would die tomorrow to be free today"?
2. Discuss the various motivations behind African American immigration to West Africa.
3. How was the American Colonization Society "antiblack"? What motivations did both Northern abolitionists and Southern slaveholders share in supporting the organization?

Writing Prompt

⁴⁵ Benjamin G. Dennis and Anita K. Dennis, *Slaves to Racism: An Unbroken Chain from America to Liberia* (New York: Algora Publishing, 2008).

- 1) For further research, consider scholars Benjamin G. Dennis and Anita K. Dennis's argument that the Libero-Americans replicated the patriarchy and racist society of the American South when creating the Republic of Liberia. Identify the merits of this argument, and well as the ways that ways nineteenth century Antebellum American and Liberia were different.