

THE AMERICAN COLONIZATION SOCIETY'S WEST AFRICAN ENTERPRISE--COLONIAL LIBERIA TO A FAILED STATE

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ABSTRACT

Back to Africa enterprises surfaced periodically in American history in response to societal and governmental unwillingness to absorb equitably that portion of the population with African roots. By late 18th Century, the slave population and free blacks were of increasing concern to slave holders, social moderates and abolitionists, albeit for distinctly different reasons. The several colonies of free American blacks established on the West African coast in what was to become Liberia were nurtured with material, political and ecclesiastical support from the American Colonization Society and timely assistance from the American Government. Liberia's political and economic leadership derived from American settlers was seemingly destroyed in a 1980 military uprising by tribal soldiers trained by the U.S. Army. The next 25 years were a progression of steps into the abyss and the country is only slowly recovering from being perceived as a failed state. The paper traces critical political and economic events in this American enterprise.

Confronting the American Dilemma

Bathed in the aura of an everyman's Declaration of Independence and fired with an emerging sense of unity after a long war against British rule, respected leaders in the several sections clearly were uneasy about the issue of African slavery that was legally sanctioned in six of the thirteen states. Slave-holding states and especially their large plantation owners were confronted by a social mix comprising both increasing numbers of slaves and free blacks. Finding some place beyond the borders of the new

emerging nation where free blacks might reside was openly discussed. Some in New England viewed the issue as a wretched distortion of the values inherent in their war for independence and a sore on their Christian beliefs. Slave-holders were uneasy with free people of color in the vicinity who might incite their slave work forces.

The 60,000 black slaves identified in the first census in 1790 had increased to approximately 250,000 by 1820 (Census Cassell, 1970). As a member of the Virginia Assembly in 1778, Thomas Jefferson submitted legislation forbidding the further importation of slaves. It was passed without opposition (Parton, 1889). Jefferson also authored a report in 1787 stating that "after the year 1800 of the Christian Era there shall be neither slavery nor involuntary servitude in any of the said states" (Hirst, 1926; 524). Later, he proposed "colonization of emancipated slaves to a faraway place as circumstances of the time should render most proper" (Parton, 1889; 218).

Ferdinando Fairfax of Virginia proposed that Congress acquire a colony in Africa and transport to it free blacks from every state. New Englanders envisioned the sending of missionaries to Africa with the emigrants. Contacts in England with leaders of the Church Missionary Society (CMS) and Britain's Crown Colony at Freetown in Sierra Leone brought home the need to obtain governmental support for any colonization scheme. Costs and political hurdles would be severe for a private organization. These communications encouraged the first black American colonists to choose Sierra Leone for their initial, albeit brief landfall in Africa.

It was the effort led in large part by a Reverend Robert S. Finley [Findlay?] of Basking Ridge, NJ that evolved into the organization known as the "American Society for Colonizing Free People of Color in the United States" (Cassell, 1970). Findlay reportedly was dismayed to learn that few of the freed men with whom he had contact knew much about the bible. Significantly, Findlay's brother-in-law was Elias Caldwell, Clerk of the Supreme Court and confidant of many of the leading figures in Washington politics and society. Caldwell enrolled Bushrod Washington, brother of George Washington, Henry Clay, Speaker of the House of Representatives, and John Randolph of Virginia into the fledgling organization. Clay presided at the first meeting, in Washington, D.C. on December 21, 1816, and throughout the remainder of his illustrious political career, was an active supporter. A number of his speeches in the

Senate dealt with African colonization and his support for the goals of the American Colonization Society (Speeches, 1859; 265-284). Others present were Richard Bland Lee and Edmund I. Lee, brothers of future General Robert E. Lee, Daniel Webster, and several members of Congress. On December 28th of that year, a constitution was adopted with thirteen vice presidents, including Clay, General Andrew Jackson, and William Crawford, Secretary of the Treasury. Francis Scott Key, who composed the National Anthem, was a member of the Board of Managers (Cassell, 1970). Key and his colleagues in Maryland were responsible for establishing and naming of the settlements in West Africa's Grain Coast that eventually became Liberia's Maryland County.

There was opposition on the part of some free blacks to repatriation schemes, and particularly to those of the American Colonization Society (Smith, 1993). Phrases such as "a plan to dump free Negroes into the savage wilds of Africa and a circuit route back to bondage" and "emigration would raise the price of slaves and discourage further manumission," were freely employed (Cassell, 1970). The colonization cause, however, was enhanced by establishing auxiliaries throughout the country. These provided distribution channels for literature and political influence as well as the financial bases for raising funds. A journal, The African Repository and Colonial Journal, was started in 1825 and, under one name or another, continued to be published into the early 20th Century.

Supporters of the Colonization Society helped to push the Slave Trade Act of 1819 through both houses of Congress, for the first time providing the imprimatur (and potential resources) of the Federal Government to colonize free people of color in Africa. This provided the leverage necessary to rally the dissenters in President Monroe's Cabinet behind the African scheme. The "Elizabeth," carrying the first 86 colonists and supplies and accompanied by the naval vessel, "Cyane," departed from New York on January 31, 1820 en route to Sherbro Island, Sierra Leone. Two managers appointed by The Society accompanied the first colonists.

First Settlements

Church Missionary Society officials in London had suggested Sherbro Island as a possible home for the American colonists. Located southeast of Freetown, this island was a trading point for goods drawn from the interior

but outside of the Freetown Crown Colony's writ. As with much of the West African coast, the island also was home to intermittent slaving stations serving markets in the New World. It should have come as no surprise that some of the locals were unimpressed by the newcomers from the United States. A retreat for former slaves or their descendants could be seen as conflicting with prevailing economic pursuits. Flooding and disease also added to the colonists' problems. These few transplanted "Americans" were generations removed from their African roots, wherever these might have been. Culturally, they had acquired the language and ways of Americans except for skin color. One can but image how they contrasted with the indigenous Africans on the island, and later in what was to become Liberia. Whatever their egalitarian impulses, they behaved much as white colonialists did then and later when in contact with traditional black African societies. This expressed cultural-technological superiority on the part of the settlers and their descendants permeated Liberian politics and societal interaction throughout the country's history and ultimately contributed to its downfall.

In December 1821, led by the commander of the US Navy vessel on duty with the colonists, the Sherbro settlement moved en masse southeast along the Grain Coast (named for the Malagueta Pepper and encompassing the coast between Sherbro and the future Liberia-Ivory Coast boundary at the Cavalla River) to a promontory known as Cape Mesurado. On a small island to be called Providence near the mouth of a tidal inlet, the first colony in what is today Liberia had its birth. (1) The settlement eventually shifted to the higher ground of the mainland and was called Monrovia after President Monroe. In time, nearby satellite communities emerged. The Monrovia colony was in large part supported by the Colonization Society in Washington whereas state chapters provided emigrants and material support to settlements established elsewhere along the coast and in the Cape Mesurado-St. Paul River region: Clay-Ashland (Kentucky) near Monrovia; Grand Bassa or Buchanan (Pennsylvania); Cape Mount or Robertsport (Indiana); Sinoe or Greenville (Mississippi) and Harper or Cape Palmas (Maryland). The name 'Liberia' was proposed by the Society at its annual meeting in 1824 and readily accepted by the colonists (Cassell, 1970). Maryland-supported Cape Palmas continued to stress its identity until 1857 when it opted to join the Liberian Republic. The need to obtain troops from Monrovia to help put down a "native uprising" convinced the Maryland colonists that they no longer could afford to go it alone.

Leaving aside the question of whether it was better for Africans to be ruled and exploited by black colonialists or by white ones, the latter, at least in Freetown, were on the whole more efficient. Liberia throughout most of its history lacked sustained and meaningful financial support of a home country treasury and efficient administrative cadres to follow-up military conquest or acquisition of territory by treaty. Funds for infrastructure development were not available. Basic services such as health delivery were either non-existent or deplorable and remained so until World War II. Government was at pains to provide even rudimentary services in the scattered Americo-Liberian coastal settlements, much less the country's vast interior with its numerous tribal groups and much larger population. When officials ventured there, it usually was to seize food or to collect taxes and not to provide services (Strong, 1930). The reason for establishing a Frontier Force (Akingbade, 1977) was to deflect British and French threats to police the lawlessness in Liberia's vast interior if Monrovia was not up to the task. The first troops were deployed in 1908. Improving discipline of this Frontier Force (to differentiate it from the militia or Americo-Liberian defense establishment serving the coastal settlements), was a recurring issue with American consular officials in Monrovia and eventually led to officers from the United States Army being seconded temporarily to Liberia (Maugham, 1920). How effective their presence was remains questionable, but it set a precedent for later military assistance.

Were it not for the American Colonization Society in the early years and the periodic desire of influential Americans to make a success of this back to Africa enterprise, one could easily despair for its success. The U.S. State Department occasionally interceded on Liberia's behalf and on at least two occasions during the first decade of the Twentieth Century American warships provided arms for settlers who were fighting indigenous peoples in the southeast. There also was diplomatic assistance (Mower, 1947). (2) Determined to channel commerce through their own coastal settlements, the Americo-Liberians denied European traders direct access to the country's interior. By 1865, imported goods had to be landed at one of six ports of entry where duties could be levied (Stanley, 1966). Foreign and Americo-Liberian traders alike were dependent on the indigenous peoples (called Africans or natives by the settlers) for collecting and transporting agricultural commodities to the coast. Not unexpectedly, indigenous peoples desired trading stations in the areas outside of settler control. They also resented being treated as inferiors by

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the black colonialists and having to provide the labor and agricultural wealth to maintain the newcomers. Resentment was especially strong with the Kru- and Grebo-speaking peoples in the Southeast and helps to explain the almost continuous conflict between the Maryland settlers and their indigenous and more numerous neighbors. Kru were valued sailors on European ships and it was common for vessels to stop along their coast to take them aboard. Head taxes were applied to ships' captains on the number of sailors taken aboard.

The Making of a Modern State

Through much of its history in a mostly colonial Africa, Liberia was one of the few countries governed by blacks. Unfortunately, it lacked the means to benefit from modernization and often was perceived pejoratively as another Haiti. These perceptions were to change. In 1929 Liberia was chosen to be the site of what was to become the world's largest natural rubber plantation. The country's reputation was further enhanced with the onset of World War II. Transformation of this once sleepy country to a place easily recognized in the corridors of political and economic power in Washington and elsewhere during and immediately after the war was due primarily to two factors: exponential growth of trans-Atlantic commercial and military aviation and Japan's severing of the West's supply of Southeast Asian rubber.

Liberia's strategic location at one end of the shortest air route between South America and Africa was initially exploited for sea plane use in 1941 and in a major airfield construction program early in World War II funded by the American government. Were it not for the earlier development of the gigantic rubber plantation and the local availability of heavy construction equipment used in clearing the bush, it is unlikely that Liberia would have earned its place in aviation history. Massive amounts of technical assistance (Hansen, 1947) and private investment entered Liberia toward the end of the war and afterwards. Post war American investments accelerated this country's transformation and radically changed its economic character and social dynamics (Stanley, 1984). The American Secretary of State stopped over in Liberia en route home from the January, 1945 Yalta Conference to give a mixed official and private sector imprimatur to this new dynamic. (3) Liberia was destined to become the "poster child" for the American approach to enlightened development in what at the time was still a colonial ruled Africa.

The Firestone Rubber Company's arrival in 1929 literally transformed the local economic landscape. For a time, the company operated the one bank in Liberia, had access to custom revenue as part of a debt repayment, and generally exerted powerful influence. It would not be an overstatement to say that Firestone had more economic power than the Liberian Government! In 1947-48, when the United Nations Organization was debating the creation of a modern Israel, Washington worked through Firestone to obtain a "Yes" vote from Liberia's Government. This single investment was instrumental in transforming Liberia's economy.

The company had arrived off the coast with a small army of expatriate roughnecks and considerable earth moving equipment. Everything had to be man-handled onto shore. Rubber trees were planted during that first year and were producing latex by 1936. Whereas the typical rubber plantation in southeast Asia has six production units, Firestone made provision for 45 units in its main Liberia plantation (a smaller plantation was later developed in Maryland County). Firestone's operation encompassed a self-contained community with hospital, schools, postal facility, roads and other support services in addition to its large rubber factory. There was a radio antenna for communicating with Akron, Ohio. The company's purchase of privately produced (off-plantation) rubber made it the country's largest source of income aside from government salaries.

Pan American World Airways in 1941 was possibly the best known and most powerful airline in the world (Willcox, 1930). As America's principal overseas airline, its political influence abroad and at home was legendary. From 1941 Pan Am offered sea plane (Clipper) service to Africa from the Maritime Terminal at New York's LaGuardia Airport. Scheduled flights were via Miami, Puerto Rico, Recife (Brazil) and Leopoldville (Belgian Congo). The first over water stop in Africa was in Liberia, close to the Sierra Leone boundary. Situated near the small, largely hillside and picturesque Americo-Liberian settlement of Robertsport is a large, sheltered tidal inlet known as Fisherman's Lake. It is a natural sea plane facility situated on an almost straight line to northeastern Brazil. This base warrants a footnote in history because of at least one very special cargo. Late in 1941 or early in 1942, a Clipper arrived at Fisherman's Lake carrying a load of sand bags filled with a uranium ore from the Belgian Congo (Pan Am, 1975). It was from this shipment that Enrico Fermi and his co-workers carried out the first

successful chain reaction of the atom in early December, 1942 when a light bulb was illuminated under the stands at the University of Chicago's Stagg Field.

World War II

Firestone's plantation and infrastructure, combined with Pan Am's pioneering spirit in aviation, provided two of the critical elements in Liberia's transformation. World War II and Britain's declining fortunes in its North African war provided the immediate need for an air bridge from the United States via Brazil to Liberia. By July 1941, joint British-American plans had been prepared to accommodate land based aircraft on air routes to, within and beyond Africa. (4) The trans-Atlantic connection would be through Liberia, even though Pan Am, the chosen instrument for getting airfields built and for maintaining them once constructed, wanted a site near Freetown in the British Sierra Leone colony to be its first land-based African terminal. Washington, however, wanted the facility to be located in neighboring Liberia, both to protect the image of American neutrality (all this was taking place five months before Pearl Harbor) and, just possibly, for the longer term when the United States, probably through Pan Am, would seek to dominate world air service. Pan Am created a construction subsidiary known as Panair to build airfields and eventually had 50 of its own land based planes and 1300 personnel engaged in passenger service on African routes, in addition to providing logistics for military traffic. Civilian personnel at the Liberia airfield (named Robertsfield to honor the country's first president) were replaced by a black American military base operations contingent. An opportunity to be photographed with these troops may have contributed to a frail President Roosevelt's decision to make a long detour in order to visit this airfield following the January, 1943 Casablanca Conference. Roosevelt returned to Banjul (Bathurst) after only four hours in Liberia, during which time he was taken on a tour of the base, lunched at the adjacent Firestone Rubber plantation and, not least, received the President and President-elect of Liberia (United States, 1943). Roosevelt invited these gentlemen to the United States and the latter wasted no time in arranging passage on a freighter to New York. Their follow-up visit to Washington secured an American commitment (United States, 1943) to build a deep water port in Liberia. This Liberia port project was as much a projection of American economic and political muscle as a wartime strategy. (5) Starting with a few technicians, American assistance stimulated the international

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corporate investment that was later to transform the Liberian economy. Natural rubber plantations were followed post war by four large scale iron ore mines funded by American, German and Swedish capital. Railroads and one new iron ore port were built. Rubber and mining phases were followed by the cutting and near destruction of Liberia's once extensive and clearly valuable hardwood forests.

The Liberian airfield at Firestone (Robertsfield) is a considerable distance from the Pan Am Clipper facility at Fisherman's Lake and it was not until 1973 that the two places finally were linked by road (Stanley, 2000). Pan Am provided a scheduled passenger shuttle service to connect the two air bases, but only after a land airstrip was built near Fisherman's Lake. In early 1942 cured latex from the Firestone plantation was flown to Fisherman's Lake and transferred to Clippers for the flight to the United States. Pan Am offered another domestic passenger airline known as "The Liberian Clipper Service." Two amphibian Grumman "Ducks" able to carry several passengers connected the several coastal towns to Monrovia and to one another. Both of Liberia's air transport facilities were in use, less than six weeks after Pearl Harbor! The non-stop direct trans-oceanic connection between South America and Africa later was skewed in order to include a fuel stop on Ascension Island whose airfield was hurriedly built by U.S. Army engineers early in 1942. Two-engine DC-3 aircraft were stretching their fuel capacity flying non-stop between Brazil and Liberia. The fact that routes were in use and airfields built or under construction at strategic sites suggests how advanced was American involvement with Great Britain before the United States formally entered the conflict.

One of the few endeavors still thriving from this period is the Liberian Flag of Convenience or ship registration program. Indeed, the Liberian flag flies on more tonnage than any other country's flag. This scheme was hatched in the first instance by American oil companies seeking a means to provide oil to Great Britain early in World War II when trade in American flag ships to most of Europe was embargoed by Washington. Standard Oil of New Jersey, among others, made an arrangement with Panama to carry that country's flag on some of its oil tankers (Carlisle, 1981), transfers surely undertaken with the knowledge and blessing of American officialdom. Panamanians may have been greedy and were accused of providing sensitive shipping information to German agents in neutral countries. Everything would be done near Washington where

records would be maintained. Ship owner, banker and oil company personnel would be brought together knowing transactions would be through familiar channels and held in confidence. Liberia would receive its tax and registration monies (Stanley, 1983) on schedule and ship owners would avoid what many considered the excessive wage rates, mandated fringe benefits and taxes for American registered vessels.

End of the Old Order

The transformation of Liberia is a pattern of historical intrusion into and exploitation of the more populated hinterlands, to the final surrendering of political power to the inhabitants of the same hinterlands. The Americo-Liberians, who possessed considerable technological or educational advantages over the peoples of the interior, were unable to sustain their privileged position over a period of geopolitical change. Important dynamics included the growing disparities in numbers, greater awareness of current events amongst hinterland populations, improved access to modern weapons and, not least, failure of government to provide basic services on a sustained basis.

The once important and relatively efficient militia tradition amongst Americo-Liberians faded away with the economic transformation impacting the coastal elite. Soldiering would now be left almost entirely to tribal recruits. Junior grade officers of Americo-Liberian background selected for advanced training in the United States quickly lost their new found esprit de corps once back in Liberia. The army was no place for innovative thinking. American military assistance, designed to help modernize what was little more than a rag-tag collection of soldiers, seldom achieved the desired objectives. What American assistance did achieve was to provide modern weapons to soldiers from increasingly politically astute ethnic groups who had suffered repeatedly at the hands of Americo-Liberians.

In April, 1980, one small faction among these newly trained troops brutally ended the old oligarchy, first murdering the President and his security detail and, soon thereafter, most of the leading and corrupt Americo-Liberian politicians (Chaudhuri, 1985). Mutineers even broke into the French Embassy to abduct and presumably kill the son of the murdered President. Monrovia was pillaged by troops no longer under restraint. Thousands of Americo-Liberians who could afford to leave for a new life in the United States did so. The armed takeover proved how fragile was Americo Liberian

control. Once the top was removed, there remained no body of substance to contest the takeover. Institutions that might have responded with force were lacking in motivation or capacity. The once proud militia comprised of Americo-Liberians no longer existed. The Army chain of command failed at a critical juncture and no counter force of armed citizens or police could be marshaled to combat what at first was little more than a dozen or so mutineers. There were no organized bodies of troops and officers loyal to the Government, even if they could have been mobilized.

The general public in Monrovia was all but paralyzed. One hundred and sixty years of expatriate rooted black control simply disappeared. It was as if those of Americo-Liberian heritage knew that they were on a short fuse, that the economic inequities between their class, always in power but only a tiny minority of the country's population, and the rest of the society could not persevere for much longer. Devolution of meaningful political power to the majority could be discussed in theory but never acted upon. Liberia's constitution was modeled in large measure after the American constitution, but the checks and balances necessary to prevent misuse of authority failed to emerge. They existed only on paper. Change, perhaps a violent one, was all but inevitable. An oligarchy simply melted away. Within a decade, the new leaders were either fighting amongst themselves or engaged in conflict with various factions often based on ethnicity (Kaplan, 1994). In time, the only troops left to support the original junta were from the same tribe, one of the country's smallest. Armed groups proliferated and the vast interior fell into anarchy. Carrying a gun was the only sure way to be guaranteed a meal. Unable to dislodge the leadership in Monrovia, the factions consolidated their positions in the countryside and sorted out their own hierarchies. Instability touched the regions adjacent to Sierra Leone and a new phase of the conflict opened-up.

More recently, Liberia has experienced free elections and hosted another visit of a sitting President of the United States. Liberia's former President is in jail in The Netherlands awaiting a war crimes trial and foreign investment is slowly seeping back into the country. Much of the country's foreign debt has been forgiven. Nevertheless, Liberia remains a political entity dependent upon foreign troops (various UN contingents) to maintain law and order. Numerous former fighters have yet to be successfully reintegrated in society, a ticking time bomb where soldiering has been a way of life. Liberia is the poster child of a client state, in this case a client of both the United States and the civilized world. It is still recovering from being a failed state.

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Notes

- (1) One of the many tragedies associated with the long and total political control of Liberia by the descendants of black colonizers (Americo Liberians) was the costly development of Providence Island into a National Historical Site and construction of a bridge connecting the island to the city of Monrovia, all this just prior to the collapse of the country's government and society.
- (2) League of Nations proposals in 1930 to place Liberia temporarily in receivership following serious allegations of forced labor on the part of Government officials came to nothing because of the inability of Britain and France to force the issue against the wishes of the United States. Public opinion and prodding from Washington defused the issue and eventually forced the resignations of both the sitting President and Vice-President
- (3) Edward Stettinius, Jr., a prominent Republican who had achieved a national reputation as director of social services for the giant U.S. Steel Corporation during the economic depression of the 1930s, had been brought into Government to bolster its bipartisanship. He was brother-in-law to Juan Trippe, legendary head of Pan American Airways. Near

war's end, Stettinius had become Secretary of State and proponent for a new, enlightened form of partnership between developed countries and the developing ones. Liberia was to be the proving ground for this new relationship. He was closely involved in convincing American banks to support Liberia as an alternative maritime Flag-of-Convenience to wartime discredited Panama. His Liberia Company developed a plantation in Liberia and its investment bank handled the maritime registration paperwork.

- (4) The British contribution can be deduced from the location or names of airfields which effectively defined the routes: Takoradi or Accra in the Gold Coast (Ghana), Lagos and Maiduguri in Nigeria and Geneina, El Fasher and Khartoum in the Sudan. From here the Nile was followed downstream. After the defeat of Rommel, the flow of aircraft continued and most of the American bomber group based in Libya arrived in this manner. Increasingly, however, planes flew eastward from Khartoum, first to Gura and Aden, then to Salala (Trucial Oman) and Karachi, the Western staging area for aircraft sent to the China-Burma-India theater of operations. Source: Harry L. Hopkins collection at the Franklin D. Roosevelt Library in Hyde Park, New York and from a wealth of declassified material in the Albert F. Simpson Historical Research Center, Maxwell Air Force Base, Alabama. There is valuable information in these hitherto secret papers. A history of the 1203rd Army Air Forces Base Unit, Liberia Collection has been heavily drawn upon for events at Robertsfield. Summary Operations Department Pan American Airways-Africa, Ltd. (October 1941-October 1942) has been employed to better understand some of the Pan Am operations in Liberia.