

## Liberia: America's Settler State

### INTRODUCTION

Despite its abolishment of the international slave trade in 1808, America in the period following the American Revolutionary War was home to an ever-increasing population of both free and enslaved African Americans. This growing demographic posed a threat to the white community, which was concerned about the implications of black assimilation into American society. Many northerners were afraid of free blacks taking their jobs, while slave owners in the South were concerned that the presence of freedmen living in slave states would encourage slave revolts and runaways.<sup>1</sup> In response, some proposed an expatriation of African Americans to colonies in Africa, which would grant blacks their freedom and whites their peace of mind. This idea took hold, and in 1816, the American Colonization Society (ACS) was formed with the mission to facilitate the establishment of such settlements.<sup>2</sup> In addition to the central goal of mitigating white-black tensions in America, the operation also aimed to “civilize” and evangelize African natives. The ACS also stressed the economic benefits of establishing trade agreements with the African populations via colonies, which would secure for American merchants trade currently monopolized by Europeans. In 1819, when the ACS received funding from Congress, the enterprise began in earnest, and the first of many ships set sail for West Africa, with three white ACS agents and 88 emigrants on board.<sup>3</sup> Over the next few decades, the ACS would work

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<sup>1</sup> David, Magdalene. "The Love of Liberty Brought Us Here (an Analysis of the Development of the Settler State in 19th Century Liberia)." *Review of African Political Economy* 11.31 (1984): 57-70. Print.

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.loc.gov/exhibits/african/afam002.html>

<sup>3</sup> [https://secure.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/en/wiki/American\\_Colonization\\_Society](https://secure.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/en/wiki/American_Colonization_Society)

closely with the Liberian colonies<sup>4</sup> in a struggle to establish permanent, self-sufficient settlements.

Prior to the 1830s, the US government only maintained an official interest in Liberia insofar as it served as an outpost from which to execute America's anti-slave trade campaign. The Monroe Doctrine, which stymied international involvement between the Eastern and Western hemispheres, prevented the government from taking a more direct interest in Liberia's internal affairs. Instead, the American Colonization Society maintained control over the territory's administration until 1838, when Liberia proclaimed itself a self-governing commonwealth. This declaration of sovereignty was prompted by criticism that accused the ACS of attempting to acquire an empire as well as the ACS's own financial problems. At this point, ACS still maintained some control over Liberia's internal affairs, but its political and commercial influence waned substantially. In 1847, Liberia declared itself a Republic and legislative powers found themselves in the hands of the settlers.<sup>5</sup> This paper examines the ways in which government policy affected the economic growth of the Liberian settler society from the early periods of its settlement in the 1820s to the worldwide depression in the latter part of the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

## **THE AMERICAN COLONIZATION SOCIETY ATTEMPTS TO PROMOTE AGRICULTURE**

The American Colonization Society took great measures to provide emigrants to Liberia the proper incentives for agricultural production. Upon arriving to the colony, each settler was allocated free land including a town lot for a house and five acres for subsistence farming. The

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<sup>4</sup> Called "Liberian" as an homage to the liberty of the original settlers.

<sup>5</sup> David, Magdalene. "The Love of Liberty Brought Us Here (an Analysis of the Development of the Settler State in 19th Century Liberia)." *Review of African Political Economy* 11.31 (1984): 57-70. Print.

state also provided farming tools, advice, and premiums for increased production.<sup>6</sup> Nevertheless, the settlers failed to accomplish much in the field of agriculture. Rather, most inhabitants of coastal West Africa colonies involved themselves with the import-export trade of commodities and foodstuffs, while the lack of agriculture generated a balance of payments deficit in the states expenditures, creating the constant need for financial support from the ACS.<sup>7</sup> Without sustained agriculture, Liberia could not function independently.

Historians have posited various reasons for Liberia's failure to achieve agricultural success in the first half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Frequently cited reasons include 1) the hypothesis that previously enslaved Americo-Liberians could not handle the psychological stress of doing manual labor that evoked conditions of slavery 2) the notion that the settlers may have been too lazy to do the necessary labor or that 3) they preferred imported American foods to more native fare, and the importation of foodstuffs hindered agriculture. Evidence has been found, however, that contradicts these three hypotheses. For example, Ralph Gurley, ACS corresponding secretary, wrote in 1849 that the immigrants in Liberia were remarkably industrious.<sup>8</sup> Rather than exhibiting a fear of or prejudice against manual labor, in correspondences with past slave owners, ex-slaves in Liberia demonstrated perseverance and determination in their attempts at agriculture.<sup>9</sup> Additionally, reports indicated that Americo-Liberians actually reveled in African cuisine and enjoyed the cultivation of its ingredients.<sup>10</sup> The refutation of these three common

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<sup>6</sup> David, Magdalene. "The Love of Liberty Brought Us Here (an Analysis of the Development of the Settler State in 19th Century Liberia)." *Review of African Political Economy* 11.31 (1984): 57-70. Print.

<sup>7</sup> Akpan, M. B. "Black Imperialism: Americo-Liberian Rule over the African Peoples of Liberia, 1841-1964." *Canadian Journal of African Studies* 7.2 (1973): 217-36. Print.

<sup>8</sup> Annual Report of the American Colonization Society, 1856, 30.

<sup>9</sup> Allen, William E. "Rethinking the History of Settler Agriculture in Nineteenth-Century Liberia." *The International Journal of African Historical Studies* 37.3 (2004): 435-62. Print.

<sup>10</sup> Annual Report of the American Colonization Society, 1859, 248.

hypotheses leaves open the debate for what truly caused the lack of growth in agricultural production.

William Allen proposes three alternative reasons to explain Liberia's inability to secure agricultural success. First, he cites labor scarcity in Liberia, likely resulting from the combination of high mortality rates and a low immigration rate.<sup>11</sup> In support of this theory, Allen applies the established relationship between labor supply and productivity in the New World to the case of staple crops in Liberia.<sup>12</sup> In addition, earlier British and French attempts to establish coffee and sugar cane plantations in West Africa also attributed their failures to labor scarcity.<sup>13</sup> Allen goes on to mention how the lack of available capital for the production of staple goods may have hampered agricultural production. Evidence that capital was the limiting factor is grounded in the occasional infusion of investments that result in production upturns. For example, in the latter half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, Americo-Liberian sugar cane farmers invested approximately \$33,500 in equipment like sugar cane mills and boilers, and this investment was closely followed by growth in the sugar manufacturing industry.<sup>14</sup> Allen's third reason for decreased agricultural productivity points to the quality of the tropical soil. P. W. Richards reveals that tropical soils generally contain fewer nutrients than soils in the temperate zone.<sup>15</sup> Additionally, Peter Ahn reports that West African soils tend to contain large concentrations of tiny stones called *laterite*, which make the soil very susceptible to leaching.<sup>16</sup> These two

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<sup>11</sup> McDaniel, *Swing Low, Sweet Chariot: The Mortality Cost of Colonizing Liberia in the Nineteenth Century* (Chicago, 1993), 125; Tom W. Shick, "A Quantitative Analysis of Liberian Colonization from 1820 to 1843 With Special Reference to Mortality," *Journal of African History* 12, 1 (1971), 45-59.

<sup>12</sup> Philip Curtin, *The Rise and Fall of the Plantation Complex: Essays in Atlantic History* (New York, 1990)

<sup>13</sup> Boubacar Barry, *Senegambia and the Atlantic Slave Trade* (New York, 1998), 138-39; A. G. Hopkins, *An Economic History of West Africa* (London, 1980), 138.

<sup>14</sup> Allen, William E. "Rethinking the History of Settler Agriculture in Nineteenth-Century Liberia." *The International Journal of African Historical Studies* 37.3 (2004): 435-62. Print.

<sup>15</sup> P. W. Richards, *The Tropical Rain Forest: An Ecological Study*(London, 1966), 219.

<sup>16</sup> Peter Ahn, *West African Soils* (Oxford, 1970), 84-93;

observations about coastal West African soil also help account for Liberia's weak agriculture sector in the 19<sup>th</sup> century and onward.

Given the aforementioned obstacles to agricultural growth in Liberia, it would seem that the ACS's efforts to build a self-sufficient economy were doomed from the start. Indeed, a combination of factors contributed to the seemingly insurmountable odds. First, Liberia lacked the labor force to be productive, and the Monroe Doctrine prevented the ACS from taking direct action to increase the labor supply. Colony leaders could not reasonably look to enslave local Africans for laborers since the notion of Liberia itself was based on emancipation. Without a sufficient labor force, the settlers could not be productive, and as a result they could not earn the capital needed for economic growth. Instead, the colonists were relegated to subsistence farming, a system under which no staple theory linkages could emerge, and thus no economic growth could be sustained. Once the ACS relinquished control of the settlements to the colonists in the late 1830s, the Republic of Liberia was free to take more direct action to solve issues like labor scarcity. This is covered in more detail below.

## **A SHIFT TO PLANTATION PRODUCTION UNDER THE REPUBLIC OF LIBERIA**

During the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century, rising international demand for tropical produce like palm oil and camwood raised the incentive to push agricultural production to a higher level. Large commercial firms started to replace individual ventures and simple partnerships, and as local capital became available from profits earned through the export trade, Liberia finally started to see a bit of backward linkage as that capital was invested back into agriculture. Unfortunately, neither forward nor final demand linkage arose to any significant level during this period, and just so as the staple theory would predict, Liberia slipped into poverty once again as worldwide demand started to shift in the following decades.

The shift to plantation production would, however, change the Liberian government's role in promoting economic growth. While the old, peasant mode of production required enforced property rights, regulated social dialogue, and organized defenses, commodity production relied primarily on access to productive resources like land and labor. To address these needs, post-1847 the newly sovereign Republic of Liberia declared all unoccupied land state property and required it to be purchased.<sup>17</sup> This provided the framework for private accumulation, which helped support the plantations that produced on the basis of a monopoly in land. Additionally, labor was made more accessible through a state-enforced system of apprenticeship that required displaced and indigenous Africans living in settler areas to work for emigrant families for several years. In these ways, the Liberian state supported the production of its colonies, but because its economic success relied solely on the export of a few staple crops, the national economy could not weather shifts in global demand.

In contrast to the American Colonization Society, the government for the Republic of Liberia was able to better cater to the economic needs of its people. While its provisions led to backward linking of investments, Liberia's commodity production was unfortunately severely hindered by the worldwide depression in the late 1800s. Perhaps if worldwide demand for Liberia's export products remained strong for a longer period, forward linking or perhaps even final demand linking could have emerged. As it happened, though, Liberia was still dependent upon export trade when the depression hit, and as a result, its economic strength was drained.

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<sup>17</sup> David, Magdalene. "The Love of Liberty Brought Us Here (an Analysis of the Development of the Settler State in 19th Century Liberia)." *Review of African Political Economy* 11.31 (1984): 57-70. Print.

## CONCLUSION

Throughout the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the Liberian government was largely unsuccessful in its attempts to encourage economic development. Under the early peasant mode of production, the failure of agriculture to beget a sustainable economy could be attributed to labor scarcity, while under the later plantation production model, the decreased demand resulting from a worldwide depression slowed economic growth. From its birth, Liberia was plagued by two shortages that negatively affect settler economies – a lack of labor and little demand abroad for domestically produced goods.

This paper also opens a discourse for many other points of study that lay outside of its scope. Particularly of interest would be how the Liberian government's relationship with neighboring tribes and nations affected its ability to provide necessary factors for economic growth to its population. Another interesting topic might involve similar analyses of more recent time periods. One of the primary difficulties in compiling this report has been the lack of data that exists for the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century. While I would have liked to conduct a regression analysis on certain potential relationships between statistics such as immigration rates and GDP per capita, the relevant data simply did not exist. A study of 20<sup>th</sup> century Liberia would have to deal with the necessary implications of studying a more mature nation, but would also benefit from better data from which to draw conclusions.