

Vine and Palm Tree: African American Families in Liberia, 1820-1860

by

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In memory of  
Louise DeSantis Perosino  
and for  
Lorenzo Perosino

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to complain, or to talk about how this work might be particularly difficult on a fifty-three-year-old body, or to discuss how physically taxing retail jobs exhaust and exploit their workers. This telephone call reminded me that though my parents may not understand the insights and intellectual questions that inform this dissertation, they understand work. Thanks to my parents, Tom and Beth Stango, for their support and encouragement during this process. Thank you to the extended Stango and Perosino families, especially my godmother, Laurie Moffo. And finally, thank you to my grandparents, Lorenzo and Louise (DeSantis) Perosino, for always believing in me.

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## **ABSTRACT**

This dissertation explores the role women and diasporic families played in the settlement of colonial and early republic Liberia. While the majority of African Americans actively fought against Liberian colonization, over ten thousand African Americans settled in Liberia over the nineteenth century. It argues that from the very first moments of colonization, negotiating kinship and familial structures became the central pivot of settler life and colonial governance. Local articulations of family were shaped by settlers' previous experiences under slavery, as well as specific practices in the vicinity of the Liberian settlements: most notably, the polygyny of many of the indigenous peoples already inhabiting the space that was to become "Liberia." Settlers both reconstituted and redefined the meaning of kinship after their experience of American slavery and transformed the requirements and impulses of the American colonization movement. Moving back and forth between Monrovia, Cape Palmas, Philadelphia, and Virginia, the dissertation is an examination of the gendered representations and experiences of settlers that produced frictions of kinship in Liberia. Using underutilized or previously unexamined manuscript, print, and oral sources from both sides of the Atlantic Ocean, it connects United States history with the history of its West African colony, offering a critical remapping of early African American studies.



## INTRODUCTION

*you will please to write me how do my Grandmother Betsy do all so my Grandfather Primemis Aunt Cisah Aunt Mary Aunt Lisa Celler & my Uncle George & Uncle Ned it would be quite Teagious for me to call all of my friends names but I has not for got them please to give my love to all of them and tell them I do want to see them<sup>1</sup>*

When seventeen-year-old Diana Skipwith wrote to her grandmother, Lucy Nicholas in November, 1839, she had not seen her for nearly five years. She had not seen her grandfather, aunts, uncles, or friends in that time, either. Five years removed from the United States, Skipwith did not list all of her friends' names, but noted that she had not forgotten them, even though she was still a child when she left the United States. Though both granddaughter and grandmother had lived on Bremono plantation in Fluvanna County, Virginia, they were now separated by the expanse of the Atlantic Ocean and by the division between slavery and freedom. Though Skipwith had been liberated by her master, the cost of her freedom was separation from family and friends – networks of kin – that had sustained her while she was enslaved. Though Nicholas was still enslaved and living at Bremono, the letter connected her with her granddaughter, uniting the two in a relationship inscribed on paper but long-lasting in each other's memory.

Diana Skipwith arrived in Monrovia, the settlement that would become the capital of Monrovia, in the ship *Jupiter* on January 1, 1834. She was a settler, sent to a small but growing

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<sup>1</sup> Diana Skipwith to Lucy Nicholas, November 7, 1839, Box 8, Cralle-Campbell Papers, Special Collections,

colony of African Americans located in West Africa.<sup>2</sup> Skipwith was an emancipated slave, sent to Liberia in 1833 by her master, John Hartwell Cocke, along with her parents, Peyton and Lydia; three sisters, Matilda, Felicia, and Martha; and two brothers, Napoleon and Nash.<sup>3</sup> The Skipwiths' had been emancipated, according to Peyton Skipwith's bill of emancipation, "to carry civilization + the blessed Gospel to the benighted land of their Forefathers." Cocke wrote in the bill that Peyton Skipwith's "cultivated mind," "qualification as a mechanic," "being a first rate mason," and, "above all," "his Christian walk + conversation" and his dedication to "Temperance reformation" made him eligible for manumission and immigration to Liberia.<sup>4</sup> Cocke's reference to Skipwith's industry, Christian comportment, and benevolence reflected what many other white supporters of colonization felt were the necessary qualifications for settlers in Liberia. Furthermore, Cocke's characterization of colonization's mission of civilizing and Christianizing the African continent echoed other supporters' views of the Liberian colonization project.

By the time Cocke decided to emancipate Skipwith and his family, a group of white Americans who organized themselves as the American Colonization Society (ACS), a private organization that nonetheless received Congressional funding as part of the United States' efforts to prevent the transatlantic slave trade, had been sending African Americans to West Africa since 1820. Liberia was not only a destination for free African Americans and emancipated slaves

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<sup>2</sup> I use the term "settler" to refer to African Americans who arrived in Liberia and Maryland (West Africa) during the nineteenth century. Occasionally, other scholars have used "Americo-Liberians" to refer to the same group of people, however, this term is anachronistic. My line of thinking has been influenced by Walter L. Hixson, *American Settler Colonialism: A History* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013); Lorenzo Veracini, *Settler Colonialism: A Theoretical Overview* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010).

<sup>3</sup> Upon arrival to Liberia in 1834, Peyton was 31 years old, and Lydia was 30. Diana was 12, Matilda was 10, Felicia was 6, and Martha was 4. Napoleon was 9, and Nash was 2. Within a year, Lydia, Felicia, and Napoleon were dead: the ACS recorded the cause of death as "fever," which may indicate malaria. Ship *Jupiter's* Company, arrived at Monrovia, January 1, 1834, "Information relative to the operations of the United States squadron on the west coast of Africa, the condition of the American colonies there, and the commerce of the United States therewith," 28th Congress, 2d. Session, S. Doc. 150, serial 458.

<sup>4</sup> Bill of Emancipation for Peyton Skipwith, October 1833, Box 75, Cocke Family Papers, 1725-1939, Special Collections, University of Virginia Library (hereafter cited as Cocke Family Papers).

from the United States, but also where the United States naval squadron “returned” recaptive Africans who were intercepted from illegally sailing slaving vessels still engaged in the transatlantic slave trade after the United States prohibited it starting in 1808. It is difficult to generalize white ACS members’ reasons for supporting colonization. A range of justifications for colonization existed among white supporters, ranging from a distaste for slavery, an imperative to enforce the end of the transatlantic slave trade, a need to missionize to indigenous Africans, a desire to allow African Americans to create their own society where they would be freed from the degradations of slavery and racial prejudice in the United States, to a fear of a growing free black population in the United States and a worry that this free population would lead the nation’s slaves in a rebellion to rival the Haitian Revolution.<sup>5</sup> Cocke himself owned more than two hundred slaves when he decided to emancipate Peyton Skipwith and send him and his family to Liberia. Though he emancipated and sent to Liberia other members of the Skipwith family and a handful of his other slaves, the vast majority of the people enslaved at Bremo and Cocke’s other plantation in Alabama were never manumitted.

The rest of Peyton Skipwith’s family did not get their own bills of emancipation. Instead, they were listed on Peyton Skipwith’s bill. Cocke wrote, “I therefore commend him + his family, consisting of his wife Lydia + their children viz: (Diana, Matilda, Felicia, Martha, Nash, + Napoleon, all of whom as a further reward of his faithfulness I also hereby emancipate to accompany him) to the kind offices of all Christian brethren, + their fellow Citizens particularly in the Colony of Liberia.”<sup>6</sup> Thus the Skipwith family, like the majority of immigrants to Liberia in the early nineteenth century, were sent from Virginia as a family unit. While Diana Skipwith’s emancipation might have been an afterthought to Cocke, who emancipated her only as a

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<sup>5</sup> Historiographical interpretations of the ACS are discussed further in the next section of this introduction.

<sup>6</sup> Bill of Emancipation for Peyton Skipwith, October 1833, Box 75, Cocke Family Papers.

“reward” to her father, her freedom was significant to her. In remembering her family and friends still enslaved, Skipwith likely remembered the slavery she lived through while in Virginia. In arriving in Liberia, Skipwith and her family had to remake not only their family, as they lost a mother, a sister, and a brother in the first year of settlement, but also to establish a sense of belonging to a transatlantic community of free and enslaved African Americans, both in the United States and Liberia. Furthermore, the Skipwiths had to decide what kind of relationship they would like to foster with the family who had held them in slavery and emancipated them, as well as other white Americans who circled between the United States and West Africa.

How typical were the Skipwiths relative to other settler families? Historian Eric Burin, in his examination of the history of the American Colonization Society, has calculated immigration to Liberia for the same period covered in this dissertation. According to Burin, from 1820-1860, of the 10,939 settlers sent to Liberia by the ACS, 6,043 were manumitted slaves like the Skipwiths, and 4,095 were free African Americans. However, for the period 1820-1833, right on the cusp of the Skipwiths’ arrival in Liberia, the majority of settlers were free African Americans. The Skipwiths were Virginians. Burin calculates 2,214 emancipated slaves left Virginia, roughly 36.6% of all emancipated slaves sent to Liberia from 1820-1860. No other state even comes close to the number of emancipated slaves sent from Virginia and the Upper South. As a whole, they accounted for 72% of the population of former slaves in Liberia.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> The total number of settlers who arrived under the auspices of the ACS includes Africans (285) and purchased slaves (323), as well as 44 settlers of unknown origins. Colonization seems to have been most appealing to free black communities between 1820-1833 and again, post-Liberian independence in 1847, from 1848-1860. Most free black settlers also came from Virginia (1,230) and from the Upper South more generally (2,457). Burin’s calculations do not include settlers who landed in Maryland (West Africa). Tom Shick calculates different numbers of recaptive Africans: before 1860, he describes only one ship, the *Pons*, as arriving with 756 recaptive Africans. Nine other ships brought captives to Liberia in 1860, bringing the total of recaptive Africans brought to Liberia through 1860 to 5,457. The sources for Burin and Shick are different. Burin relies on ACS data, while Shick uses United States legislative records (including the 1843 Liberian census) and consular records at the United States National Archives. Eric Burin, *Slavery and the Peculiar Solution: A History of the American Colonization Society* (Gainesville, FL: University Press of Florida, 2005), 169-174; Tom W. Shick, *Behold the Promised Land: A History*

Though the Skipwiths were manumitted slaves from Virginia, categories that reflected substantial portions of the settler base, they were unusual in other respects. Most notably, Peyton Skipwith's family arrived in Liberia with some ability to read and write, skills that most settlers did not possess, and indeed, that most slaves did not possess.<sup>8</sup> Furthermore, among emancipated slaves who wrote letters back to the United States, the Skipwiths are outliers in that their multi-decade, multi-generation correspondence stretched from their arrival in 1834 to the 1860s. Most former slaves, even if they wrote to former masters, did not write the sheer volume of letters the Skipwiths wrote to the Cockes. The Skipwiths were both representative and singular.

This dissertation traces the Skipwith family, as well as other African American settler families, as they arrived in West Africa during the early half of the nineteenth century in order to better understand how the bonds of kinship enabled both settlers in Liberia and relations in the United States to form communities that stretched over the Atlantic Ocean. I use the term "kinship" to describe a set of processes, described in the source base, for forming a free community in Liberia that linked itself both to the United States and to the African continent. Kinship describes the ways in which settlers formed a sense of collective self in Liberia. This kinship was tied to slavery, both for the emancipated slaves and the descendants of slaves who became settlers. It was, at times, a biological kinship with family members left behind in slavery,

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*of Afro-American Settler Society in Nineteenth-Century Liberia* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1980), 68. Shick has also done extensive work with the United States congressional data on the 1843 Liberian census and the list of ships arrived at Liberia pre-1843. See: Tom W. Shick, *Roll of Emigrants to Liberia, 1820-1843* (Newark, DE: University of Delaware Press, 1971), which was also available in electronic format from the Data and Information Services Center at the University of Wisconsin-Madison Libraries; "Information relative to the operations of the United States squadron on the west coast of Africa, the condition of the American colonies there, and the commerce of the United States therewith," 28th Congress, 2d. Session, S. Doc. 150, serial 458.

<sup>8</sup> Literacy is discussed in depth in Chapters 2 and 3 of this dissertation. Heather Williams suggests that southern states recognized the revolutionary potential of literacy for slaves, and thus issued legislative proscriptions prohibiting the education of slaves throughout the nineteenth century. Heather Andrea Williams, *Self-Taught: African American Education in Slavery and Freedom* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2005).

but also functioned as a discursive kinship that linked together African-descended people in the diaspora. Family and kin sustained Liberian colonization.

For the Skipwiths and other settler families, articulating kinship was a fraught process. Biological family members often remained enslaved in the United States. Freed families like the Skipwiths had to work to retain a sense of connection with still-enslaved family members. At the same time, they formed a free society with other African Americans – many of whom had not experienced slavery themselves, but were descended from people kept in bondage – in Liberia. This community formation, too, required an articulation of a type of kinship that imagined this particular group of diasporic African Americans as a collective unit. Similarly, many supporters of colonization and settlers themselves imagined the African continent as a type of “homeland” for African-descended people in the diaspora. However, for many settlers, confrontations and conflict with indigenous Africans over land and trade, and the introduction of recaptive Africans into Liberian settlement forced settlers to renegotiate their own understandings of their own relationship to this “homeland.” While missionaries, for instance, extended a type of religious kinship to some indigenous groups in Liberia, many African American settlers disavowed kin connections with Africans.

Kinship also frames the relationship settlers had with white Americans in the United States who sponsored schools, missions, and migrations of settlers. For the Skipwiths and many other formerly enslaved settlers, the relationships they had with their former masters was a complicated one. The Skipwiths manipulated multiple discourses, including the ideology of paternalism, to forge a patronage relationship with their former masters in the Cocke family. The Skipwiths’ letters highlight the messiness of this kinship forged in slavery and sustained throughout emancipation.

This dissertation covers the period from 1820, when the first ships carrying African American settlers arrived in West Africa, to 1860, when migration from the United States to Liberia halted due to sectional conflict and the impending American Civil War. At no time during this period was Liberia a coherent space. Conflicts concerning religious and political authority took place in the settlements, and the constant arrival of new settlers and recaptive Africans compounded the competing interests of settlement. Indigenous Africans, too, both resisted the colonialism of the settlers, or sought to be brought into the colonial society, depending on the particular politics and positions of a group. Throughout all of this chaos, kinship functioned as the foundation for settler society. In creating free families in West Africa, settlers also created a society that placed the family as the cornerstone of the nation. What this family looked like, however, was in flux throughout the nineteenth century.

However, even by 1847, when settlers declared their independence from the American Colonization Society and created the Republic of Liberia, multiple localities and populations described in this dissertation were *not* bounded by its borders and thus *not* part of the kin communities that existed in Liberia. The process of creating a free community of African Americans in West Africa was a messy, violent, and vile one, and the colonization process did not end in 1847. Though beyond the scope of this study, Liberia functioned as a settler state throughout the nineteenth century, as it expanded into the West African hinterland and attempted to encompass indigenous groups within its borders. Overall, Liberia offers an example of what the afterlife of slavery can produce – a sense of collective self, forged in the midst of great violence. Strikingly, this assemblage of a community of formerly enslaved African Americans and descendants of slaves created kin connections at precisely the same moment when enslaved

African American families in the United States were being torn asunder by the expanding slave markets in the antebellum Lower South.

My discussion of Liberia as a space in which kinship and family played a crucial role is informed by responses to the “social death” argument in slavery studies. In 1982, sociologist Orlando Patterson suggested that enslavement resulted in social death – a state of kinlessness – for African-descended peoples enslaved in the Americas. Scholars have been pushing back at the totality of the “social death” argument to show the ways in which African-descended peoples in the Americas maintained, remade, and made anew communities and kinship during American slavery. Most notably, Vincent Brown’s 2009 article in the *American Historical Review* suggests that, instead, scholars may choose to highlight the ways in which slaves constantly made and remade their own lives, forming new bonds of kinship, despite the totality of American slavery. Thus, I draw from recent work in African American history, from Stephanie Camp, Heather Williams, and Jessica Millward, among others, to highlight the ways in which African American women and families contested the strictures of slavery both during and after emancipation.<sup>9</sup>

The “reverse” middle passage of African American settlers in Liberia offers scholars another opportunity to understand the capacities for African American community and kinship *after* American slavery. As a post-emancipation society, Liberia is an example of a freed society made anew, much as the Reconstruction United States offered new and expanded possibilities for former slaves and free African Americans. In contrast to the social death argument, this history of family and kinship in Liberian colonization exemplifies the ways in which enslaved and

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<sup>9</sup> Orlando Patterson, *Slavery and Social Death* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1982); Vincent Brown, “Social Death and Political Life in the Study of Slavery,” *American Historical Review* 114, No. 5 (December 2009): 1231-1249; Stephanie M.H. Camp, *Closer to Freedom: Enslaved Women and Everyday Resistance in the Plantation South* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004); Heather Andrea Williams, *Help Me to Find My People: The African American Search for Family Lost in Slavery* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2012); Jessica Millward, *Finding Charity’s Folk: Enslaved and Free Black Women in Maryland* (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 2015).



formerly enslaved people created, protected, and preserved social connections *both in the United States and in colonial Liberia* in a post-emancipation society. Each of the chapters in the dissertation focuses on kinship formed through multiple settings: in the law, through education, manuscript and print, mission work, and participation in a growing middle class.

Throughout their lives in Liberia, the Skipwiths maintained correspondence with the Cocke family, leaving a written archive traceable for historians. Though the Skipwiths were sent nearly 5,000 miles across the Atlantic to Liberia, the letters they wrote are now located in an archive less than thirty miles from the plantation where they were enslaved. Thus the letters offer not only a manuscript source for understanding settler life in nineteenth century Liberia, but as artifacts joining the United States with the history of colonization in West Africa. They serve as a visible thread connecting the intertwined histories of the United States and Liberia, even in the present, when this history of intimate linkage has largely been forgotten in the history of American slavery and antislavery.

Similarly, the title of this dissertation, *Vine and Palm Tree*, is drawn from a letter written by Affiah (Wilson) Roye, the daughter of two African American settlers, who was born in Liberia, but migrated to the United States at the end of the nineteenth century and died in New York. Roye's evocation of the "vine and palm tree" was a play on Micah 4:4, which reads, "But they shall sit every man under his vine and under his fig tree; and none shall make *them* afraid: for the mouth of the LORD of hosts hath spoken *it*."<sup>10</sup> In using this phrasing, Roye connected Liberia's mission with a Biblical promise for personal property (and opportunity for prosperity) as well as freedom from fear. For Roye, her parents, and other African American settlers, Liberia

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<sup>10</sup> Affiah (Wilson) Roye to "Mr. Editor," December 17, 1887, Box 410, Methodist Episcopal Church Records, Manuscripts and Archives Division, New York Public Library; Mic. 4:4 KJV.

offered the redemption of this promise. The title of the dissertation is thus another reminder of the centrality of African American voices to narrating the histories of Liberian colonization.

In trying to center the history of African American settlers, instead of the history of the American Colonization Society, I searched for sources that told the textured story of Liberian colonization from the point of view of the settlers. In the summer of 2012, I traveled to Liberia to search for documents to help me better understand what the colonization process looked like on the ground. The archives there were unlike any of those I had encountered in the United States: there was no sterile reading room or book cradles, and most of the material I examined had not been processed.

In trying to rebuild a country devastated by decades of civil conflict from the 1980s to 2003, Liberian officials have also paid close attention to the status of their nation's treasures, including archival documents. With limited resources, the Liberian government began rebuilding its National Archives collections, inventorying artifacts in the National Museum, and processing material held in the Ministry for Foreign Affairs. The first afternoon I visited the University of Liberia, where two kind librarians allowed me to look through filing cabinets with materials related to nineteenth century Liberia and the school's founding. As I retrieved material from the cabinets' drawers, I found paper and onionskin documents, which crumbled as I opened the manila folders that encased them. These documents recounted a history of the founding of Liberia that contrasted with that United States-based sources told me: most importantly, they maintained that Liberia had been colonized, and as such, was now a post-colonial society. Many of the arguments contained within this dissertation formed during conversations I had with Liberians and through the examination of materials and public memorials related to nineteenth century colonialism during this research trip. As such, it became essential for me to find as much

as I could about the history of community formation in Liberia from the perspective of the people who lived through it.



Figure I.1: Republic of Liberia Liberation Monument

The text underneath this monument in Centennial Square in downtown Monrovia reads, “The concept of the African struggle from the depth of servitude and subjugation to the zenith of liberation and freedom / the African struggle continues / Designed by Winton D. Richards Liberia 1978 / Nichola Catavoella Sculptor Italy 1979”

Therefore, the second major argument in the dissertation concerns the nature of early American archives. Most of the scholarly work on Liberian colonization focuses on the history of the American Colonization Society: a group of white supporters of the Liberia project who had both proslavery and antislavery motivations for supporting colonization. Though these

historians have increasingly turned their gaze toward this colonizing institution, less clear are the ways in which formerly enslaved people in Liberia shaped the capacities for community and kinship after American slavery. By assembling scattered written and printed sources from archives in the American south, as well as oral histories, research in public history, and manuscript material gathered during my fieldwork in Liberia, *Vine and Palm Tree: African American Families in Liberia, 1820-1860* tells a much different story about African American settlers in Liberia.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> While the ACS published histories of their movement early in the nineteenth century, the first monograph to examine the ACS from a scholarly point of view came in 1919. Early Lee Fox, in *The American Colonization Society, 1817-1840*, argues that the colonization movement was national in scope until 1839, when the ACS became more of a Northern organization, as Southerners came to view the ACS as an anti-slavery organization. He suggests that the ACS was effective in limiting the illegal transatlantic slave trade after the prohibition passed by Congress in 1808, claiming that the ACS saved 20,000 Africans a year from being enslaved and shipped to the Americas.<sup>11</sup> Fox does not address the racism espoused by many ACS organizers. In contrast, Fox's ACS agents are ameliorative, benevolent individuals who simply wanted to preserve the Union. Similarly, Fox's monograph was published at a time when African American history was dominated by the Dunning School, which saw black emancipation as a catastrophe and viewed African Americans as racially inferior. While Fox does not go this far in denigrating African-Americans, his view of the ACS as white redeemers falls in line typical racial attitudes of the time. It was not until forty-two years later that Fox's claims were addressed in another monograph. Philip John Staudenraus, writing in 1961, agrees, like Fox, that the ACS was not a conspiracy hatched by slaveholders to remove free blacks from the United States and prevent rebellion. Rather, the ACS was concerned with race – that is, its mission was to make the United States a fundamentally white nation. Staudenraus places this type of rhetoric squarely in line with millennialist thought, arguing that the ACS members felt they needed to “atone” for the sin of slavery before the millennium could begin.<sup>11</sup> As Alex Lovit points out, Staudenraus was arguing against scholars of a new type of African American studies – one that was more sympathetic to African-Americans – that saw Liberian colonization as foolish and the ACS as idealistic racists. Lovit's dissertation is the most comprehensive view of the ACS' goals and ideas. Using the term “racial geography” to describe the ACS' mission to create an all-white nation in the United States and an all-black one in Liberia, Lovit argues that the ACS' message had a lasting impact in the United States. The ideological impact of the ACS was manifest: Citizenship was inscribed with whiteness, to the exclusion of African-Americans. An extensive literature on the history of the ACS itself exists, as well as multiple book-length studies of state branches of the ACS. Two major schools of thought exist within studies of the ACS: one that sees the Society as a benevolent society that “destabilized” slavery in the United States, and another that views the ACS as a proslavery organization. Eric Burin has traced manumissions in the South, arguing that these served to undercut slavery. He notes that promises of manumission “gave slaves agency,” and shows how slaves who were told they would be sent to Liberia negotiated to bring their families with them, hired themselves out to earn money to purchase supplies for their trips, and in some cases, refused to immigrate. In contrast, Amos Beyan argues that the ACS was supported by slaveholders of the planter class, and thus, was a fundamentally proslavery organization. Because the ACS was comprised of many different individuals with multiple – and sometimes competing – interests, it seems impossible to give an overarching view of the ACS, particularly since state branches of the ACS often took their own approaches to colonization. This dissertation does not enter into the debate about the ACS, as it is not a study of the organization, but rather, an examination of settlers and their relationship to the United States. Some scholars have chosen to focus their attention in individual state or regional colonization societies. Penelope Campbell has written Maryland settlers, Marie Tyler-McGraw on Virginia, Claude Clegg on North Carolina, and Beverly Tomek on Pennsylvania.<sup>11</sup> Campbell suggests that the Cape Palmas settlement differed from the Liberia settlement, in part because the Maryland State Colonization Society broke away entirely from the ACS and

My intervention into this historiography assembles a new archive of sources, many of which have been present in United States-based archives for over a century, that tell the history of gender, kinship, and connection between the United States and its colony and allow us to see the ways in which women and the family were central to the colonizing project. The Skipwith letters, for instance, were transcribed and published by historian Randall Miller in 1978.<sup>12</sup> With few exceptions, the letters have not been studied in depth or used beyond illustrative examples in historical studies, despite their easy accessibility.<sup>13</sup> Though Miller transcribed the letters, I have

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Maryland became its own nation. Marie Tyler-McGraw's study of (mostly white) Virginia supporters of colonization is noteworthy in that it includes a chapter on female colonizationists, who at first supported the colony under similar terms as the British Committee for the Relief of the Black Poor did, but later turned their efforts to using colonization as a platform for pro-slavery interests. There is some detail about the lives of the settlers in Monrovia, but the majority of *An African Republic* profiles the debates about colonization among the white Richmond elite. Claude Clegg, in particular, does pay some attention to the interactions between Americans and indigenous groups in Liberia, but he is limited by the sources available to him. Instead, the book mainly focuses on Quakers in the General Association of the Manumission Society of North Carolina. Still, his chapters on Americans in Liberia are perhaps the best examinations of what happened to the people who migrated to Liberia. Specifically, Clegg draws connections between what white colonizationists thought they were doing in Liberia, and how African-Americans envisioned the mission in Liberia. He is careful to draw distinctions between the Americo-Liberians and the indigenous groups they encountered there. Clegg's study is probably the best examination of interactions between white colonizationists, settlers, and indigenous Africans. Beverly Tomek highlights the multiple types of colonization that supporters in Pennsylvania espoused in the early nineteenth century. Furthermore, Philadelphia was a site of political activism by the city's growing free African American population. As a result, Tomek highlights the work of Benjamin Coates, a white Quaker who, despite ties to the ACS, convinced African Americans like Henry Highland Garnet to support Liberian colonization. Significantly, Tomek also argues that African Americans played an important role within colonization, and follows black Pennsylvanians as they moved between resisting and supporting colonization during the early nineteenth century. Tomek ultimately shows how colonization, at least in Pennsylvania, was an antislavery movement. See: Early Lee Fox, *The American Colonization Society, 1817-1840*, (New York: AMS Press, 1971 [1919]); Philip John Staudenraus, *The African Colonization Movement, 1816-1865*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1961); Alex Lovit, "The Bounds of Habitation': The Geography of the American Colonization Society, 1816-1860," PhD diss., University of Michigan, 2011; Eric Burin, *Slavery and the Peculiar Solution*; Amos Beyan, *African American Settlements in West Africa: John Brown Russwurm and the American Civilizing Efforts* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005); Penelope Campbell, *Maryland in Africa: The Maryland State Colonization Society, 131-1857* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1971); Marie Tyler-McGraw, *An African Republic: Black and White Virginians in the Making of Liberia* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2007); Claude Clegg III, *The Price of Liberty: African Americans and the Making of Liberia* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004); Beverly C. Tomek, *Colonization and Its Discontents: Emancipation, Emigration, and Antislavery in Antebellum Pennsylvania* (New York: NYU Press, 2011).

<sup>12</sup> Randall Miller, *"Dear Master": Letters of a Slave Family* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1978). The book was republished with a new preface in 1990 by the University of Georgia Press.

<sup>13</sup> Aside from Miller, the only other sustained studies of the Skipwith letters I have located come from literary scholar David Kazanjian. David Kazanjian, "The Speculative Freedom of Colonial Liberia," *American Quarterly* 63, No. 4 (December 2011): 863-893; David Kazanjian, "Unsettled Life: Early Liberia's Epistolary Equivocations," in Dana Luciano and Ivy G. Wilson, eds., *Unsettled States: Nineteenth-Century American Literary Studies*, (New York: NYU Press, 2014). Kazanjian's book-length study on Liberian and Mayan notions of freedom is forthcoming.

relied upon the originals, housed in Special Collections at the University of Virginia Library across four collections, but most substantively located in the Cocke Family Papers.<sup>14</sup> The original documents are essential: they convey information that the transcriptions cannot – information including the identity of the person who physically penned the letters serving as amanuensis, as well as information about how the letter was conveyed to the United States. Though Miller’s transcriptions have been mostly accurate, I have, on occasion, transcribed some of the letters differently.

In addition to the Skipwith letters, I have intentionally chosen to emphasize settler-produced sources from other African American families over the extensive archive produced by the American Colonization Society. Drawing from multiple archives, including the Southern Historical Collection at the University of North Carolina-Chapel Hill, the Rubenstein Library at Duke University, and the Virginia Historical Society, I read the letters as essential sources for understanding how settlers shaped the colonization process.<sup>15</sup> These letters are used in conjunction with the Liberian Government Archives in the Svend Holsoe Collection of the Liberian Collections currently housed at Indiana University in Bloomington, Indiana. The Liberian Collections contain underutilized material that reveals the importance of marriage, adoption, and divorce in colonial and early republic Liberia, and also contain important ethnographic and secondary source material. The Liberian Collections are particularly important

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David Kazanjian, *The Brink of Freedom: Improvising Life in the Nineteenth-Century Atlantic World* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, forthcoming June 2016).

<sup>14</sup> The Cocke Family Papers (No. 640) contain the majority of the letters. Other collections include the Armistead C. Gordon Papers Re: John Hartwell Cocke (No. 4302-a); the Cralle-Campbell Papers (No. 9513-B); and the “Bremo Recess” Papers Deposit of Mrs. Raymond Orf (No. 9513). Other collections containing Skipwith letters from Liberia seem to have been folded into the collection now bearing the number 640. Researchers should note that the latter two collections are not listed in the University of Virginia online catalog and should instead consult the research binders located on site at the Special Collections Library at UVA.

<sup>15</sup> In most studies of colonization, which are more focused on the ACS than this dissertation is, the main archival source base is the American Colonization Society Records, housed in the Manuscripts Division of the Library of Congress and, due to damage, currently only accessible via microfilm. While the ACS records provide some of the source base for this dissertation, particularly in Chapter 1, which examines some of the rhetoric used by the ACS, I have mainly used them as a supplement to other sources.

sources for the history of Liberian colonization, because it appears that many of the archival sources that were housed in Liberia before the Civil Conflicts of the 1990s and 2000s survive in the present day.<sup>16</sup>

Using a different set of sources produces a different kind of history. In following sources that reveal on-the-ground conditions in Liberia, we can observe how African American women, typically left out of the conversation on colonization, shaped settler society in colonial and early republic Liberia. As historian Stephanie Camp has written, “[W]omen's history does not merely add to what we know; it changes what we know and how we know it.”<sup>17</sup> From privileging settler voices over the ACS, we can see the importance roles women and the family played in colonial Liberia. Kinship, in all of its multiple meanings, became the central organization of settlement in early Liberia. It served to connect settlers to each other, to free and enslaved African Americans, and even to white Americans in the United States. This kinship, however, did not extend to indigenous West Africans. Settlers deployed gender ideology, especially, constructions of womanhood, as a means to distinguish themselves from the people who already inhabited the space that became “Liberia.”

In highlighting settler voices, I have chosen to open each chapter with lines from letters written by the Skipwith family. Expansive in scope, the letters cover the range of topics discussed in each chapter study, including land acquisition, education, the practice of writing, relationships to indigenous Africans, and middle class formation. By introducing the chapter's theme through a settler woman's words, I aim to foreground these sources before relying on others to narrate the history of Liberian colonization. This methodology brings fragments of

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<sup>16</sup> As of my research trip to Liberia in Summer 2012, it appears that the National Archives and Ministry of Foreign Affairs in Monrovia are engaged in a rebuilding process. Sources cited by Tom Shick, Svend Holsoe, and other scholars in their pre-1980s work reference material that no longer seems to exist. See also: Myles Osborne, “A Note on the Liberian Archives,” *History in Africa* 36 (2009): 461-463.

<sup>17</sup> Camp, *Closer to Freedom*, 3.

archival sources to the forefront of the arguments in each chapter. I have retained the original spelling in all of the transcribed letters from the migrants. I have not included the designation for misspellings or grammatical errors, as it detracts from the range of literacy that migrants drew from in their letters. I have, when necessary, identified the correct word from context when the spelling error is obvious and the intended meaning is not. My choice to incorporate the letters as written is influenced by Barbara Sicherman's discussion of "expressive literacy," defined as the ability to easily read and write in order to accomplish self-defined goals.<sup>18</sup> As people whose education was outlawed in antebellum Virginia, the Skipwith letters are powerful documents that attest to the indignities suffered by slaves in the United States. It seems unnecessary and derisive to continually draw attention to their grammatical and spelling errors in light of the essential information they provide.

## **HISTORIOGRAPHY**

Increasingly, historians have paid closer attention to the history of colonization in Liberia than in the past. There now exists a growing literature on both colonization and anticolonization within white and black communities, as well as multiple reinterpretations of the American Colonization Society and other colonization organizations. Furthermore, scholars of antislavery in the United States have expanded the scope of their work to include colonization and anticolonization in discussions of American antislavery.

With few exceptions, sustained discussions of colonization had long been relegated to the footnotes of major studies of American slavery and antislavery. This has changed in recent years. David Brion Davis, in *The Problem of Slavery in the Age of Emancipation*, places colonization in

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<sup>18</sup> Barbara Sicherman, *Well-Read Lives: How Books Inspired a Generation of Women* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2012).



conversation with the history of antislavery in the United States. Davis shows that colonization was a response to the growing numbers of free African Americans, particularly in the North, during gradual abolition in the North. The question of racial destiny – and the possibilities for African Americans – was tied into colonization, as white Americans debated the destinies of freed slaves. Some white Americans, like Thomas Jefferson, believed that black and white people could not coexist in the United States, and thus came to support colonization as a means to create separate societies for each race. More common among ACS officials, however, was the belief that slavery had debased African Americans, and therefore, free African Americans had to be removed from the degradation of slavery in order to thrive. According to Davis, abolition grew from the rejection of colonization in African American political culture, as many anticolonizationists noticed that the ACS’ plan looked starkly like a plan for removing all free African Americans from the United States and denying equal rights to African Americans in the United States.<sup>19</sup>

Davis, in discussing both ACS-led colonization alongside black-led emigration movements led by Paul Cuffee, Henry Highland Garnet, and Martin Delany, complements the work of Floyd Miller. Miller’s work, which draws a distinction between the ACS’s “colonization” and black-led “emigration” to Canada, Haiti, and other places, shows how many African Americans rejected the ACS’ plan for colonization in favor of emigration led by free African Americans themselves. Manisha Sinha traces a different strain of anticolonizationist sentiment in black political culture. She convincingly shows how African Americans were decisive in shaping the perspective of individuals such as William Lloyd Garrison, who at first

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<sup>19</sup> David Brion Davis, *The Problem of Slavery in the Age of Emancipation* (New York: Knopf, 2014). Davis draws heavily from work by Eric Burin and Beverly Tomek, among others, who have argued that the ACS should be understood as an antislavery organization.

was an ACS supporter, to endorse abolitionism, an argument made by Ousmane Power-Greene, as well, in his study of anticolonization.<sup>20</sup>

More recent work has reinterpreted the ACS in light of American national politics of the early republic. Brandon Mills has examined Liberia in the context of United States empire, using settler colonialism as an important frame for understanding United States expansion. He has argued that while some African Americans within the United States reversed their position on Liberian colonization after independence in 1847, the United States' failure to recognize Liberia as a sovereign nation until 1862 undermined Liberia's ability to recruit new settlers.

Furthermore, Mills contends, the United States' policy toward Liberia maintained racial hierarchy and closely aligned to United States foreign policy at the turn of the century.<sup>21</sup>

Nicholas Guyatt has examined Liberian colonization in conjunction with Indian removal, arguing that colonization and the ideas about race that whites mobilized to support it helped establish the doctrine of "separate but equal" in the early republic. Guyatt's work takes seriously the importance of colonization to the racial ideology of Americans, focusing his attention to the power of the idea of colonization in American politics.<sup>22</sup>

Another body of literature focuses on actual conditions in Liberia instead of an examination of the ACS or a state colonization society. These tend to use different archives than the previously discussed literature, and reflect archival work in Liberia. Tom Shick's *Behold the Promised Land*, attempts to uncover the uneasy relationships between settlers and indigenous

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<sup>20</sup> Floyd Miller, *The Search for a Black Nationality: Black Emigration and Colonization, 1787-1863* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1975); Manisha Sinha, *The Slave's Cause: A History of Abolition* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2016); Ousmane K. Power-Greene, *Against Wind and Tide: The African American Struggle Against the Colonization Movement* (New York: NYU Press, 2014).

<sup>21</sup> Brandon Mills, "'The United States of Africa': Liberian Independence and the Contested Meaning of a Black Republic," *Journal of the Early Republic* 34, No. 1 (Spring 2014): 79-107.

<sup>22</sup> Nicholas Guyatt, *Bind Us Apart: How Enlightened Americans Invented Racial Segregation* (New York: Basic Books, 2016). See also: Nicholas Guyatt, "'The Outskirts of Our Happiness': Race and the Lure of Colonization in the Early Republic," *The Journal of American History* 95, No. 4 (March 2009), 986-1011.

Africans.<sup>23</sup> He argues that even before Liberian independence, an aristocratic elite, comprised of African American settlers, predominated politics in Liberia. *Behold the Promised Land* benefits from archival sources in Liberia that no longer seem to exist or be accessible, as Shick's research was conducted before the Liberian Civil Conflict. While doing research for *Behold the Promised Land*, Shick compiled a detailed list of all emigrants to Liberia from the nineteenth century, which is available as a searchable database from the University of Wisconsin.

Bronwen Everill has put Liberian colonization in conversation with similar antislavery and imperial efforts in nearby Sierra Leone. Significantly, she has shown how competition between Sierra Leone and Liberia, and particularly economic competition, shaped antislavery and humanitarian politics in both England and the United States. Like Shick, Everill emphasizes, local, on-the-ground encounters in West Africa to convincingly argue that colonization policy was shaped by the settlers, and did not simply flow from England and the United States to West Africa. She shows that benevolent reform (or humanitarianism) also had imperialistic intentions.<sup>24</sup>

One particular line of inquiry into the history of Liberia has focused on ideas about gender and gender relations in colonization. Bruce Dorsey's "A Gendered History of African Colonization in the Antebellum United States," argues that colonizationists often wrapped their rhetoric in ideas about manhood, often to the exclusion of white women. Dorsey also notes that in opposing colonization, many African-Americans claimed that they had the right to remain in the United States because they were male heads of household and property owners. These ideas about masculinity – one promoted by white colonizationists, the other by African-American men – used the idea of colonization to support their claims to rights *as men*. Dorsey argues that the

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<sup>23</sup> Shick, *Behold the Promised Land*.

<sup>24</sup> Bronwen Everill, *Abolition and Empire in Sierra Leone and Liberia* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013).

masculinization of colonization had repercussions for white women. White women's roles in colonization were limited to raising money for schools in Liberia. Dorsey contrasts white women in colonization societies to white women in abolitionist groups, arguing that white women with abolitionist leanings often resisted male authority by petitioning and speaking in public to mixed audiences.<sup>25</sup>

By contrast, in her 2006 dissertation, Karen Fisher Younger argues that in the 1830s and 1840s, the American Colonization Society did allow women to participate in its endeavors in Liberia. Younger suggests that in the 1820s, the ACS had attempted to be a political organization, and its advocates focused their attention on getting governmental support for colonizing ventures. In the 1830s and 1840s, the ACS refashioned itself as a benevolent society, tapping into the rhetoric of women's labors in domesticating and civilizing society. Like Dorsey, Younger suggests that white women's involvement with colonization came via the antebellum conceptualization of white women as good mothers and educators. However, Younger diverges from Dorsey's interpretation in her reading of women's support for schools in Liberia and women's roles as the wives of missionaries sent to the colony. Younger reads the ACS literature about the African continent to suggest that ACS members saw Africans as "child-like." Therefore, the work of "raising" childlike Africans into adulthood would logically fall to white women.<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> Bruce Dorsey, "A Gendered History of African Colonization in the Antebellum United States," *The Journal of Social History* 34, No. 1 (2000): 77-103.

<sup>26</sup> Karen Virginia Fisher Younger, "'Africa Stretches Forth Her Hands Unto You': Female Colonization Supporters in the Antebellum United States," PhD diss., The Pennsylvania State University. See also, Karen Fisher Younger, "Philadelphia's Ladies' Liberia School Association and the Rise and Decline of Northern Female Colonization Support," *The Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography* 134, No. 3 (July 2010): 235-261. A large literature exists on white women's influence in politics and benevolence during the antebellum period. In particular, see Mary Ryan, *Cradle of the Middle Class: The Family in Oneida County, New York, 1790-1865* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1981); Nancy A. Hewitt, *Women's Activism and Social Change: Rochester, New York, 1822-1872* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1984); Lori D. Ginzburg, *Women and the Work of Benevolence: Morality, Politics, and Class in the Nineteenth Century United States* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990).

In his essay, Dorsey gestures towards the role of African-American women in colonizationist ventures. Since anti-colonizationist black men framed their arguments against emigrating in terms of masculinity, black women were largely excluded from those debates. However, some black women supported colonization. Dorsey cites the work of Mary Ann Shadd Carey, an African American newspaper proprietor who advocated for emigration to Canada. However, he does not explore African American women's participation in colonizing Liberia, nor does he mention the role of African American female missionaries in Liberia.<sup>27</sup> A chapter in Younger's dissertation, on the other hand, focuses exclusively on this topic.<sup>28</sup> Younger reads female missionary work in Liberia as a part of the nineteenth century ideology of the "domestic sphere." While Younger has located some African-American missionaries in Liberia, as well as some white female missionaries who married black men, her work is not concerned with race as a category of analysis. She does not make any arguments about female African-American missionaries in Liberia.

Michele Mitchell has argued that in the post-Reconstruction United States, African-Americans increasingly looked to West Africa, and specifically Liberia, as a place where African-Americans could achieve their true "destiny." These African Americans hoped to unite with Africans, via missionary efforts, to collectively forge a better future for the black race. This notion of a collective destiny merged with the discourses of "racial uplift," which were designed to remake African American society as a whole through the medium of middle class values. Mitchell argues that reformers, in particular, remade ideas about sexuality, in order to address charges of sexual misconduct and deviant sexuality. Following emancipation, black sexuality was under increased scrutiny by those enforcing white hegemony. In white racial discourse,

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<sup>27</sup> Dorsey, "A Gendered History of African Colonization," 95.

<sup>28</sup> Younger, "Africa Stretches Forth Her Hands Unto You," Chapter 6.

African American women were considered to be licentious, while African American men were assumed to be hypersexual and predatory. Ideas about racial uplift and racial destiny combated these stereotypes, both in the United States and in Africa.<sup>29</sup> Mitchell's work provides important insight into understanding how gender operated in Liberia, though her focus is later in the nineteenth century than the scope of this dissertation.

## CHAPTER OUTLINE

Chapter one, "Gender and the Structure of Society in Early Liberia," investigates how migrants came to define family and, simultaneously, the order of society in colonial Liberia. The family was the most powerful constitutive framework for the colonies and early Liberian republic, as it encompassed *all* individuals in its borders. The first part of this chapter examines the attempts of enslaved men, free people of color, and colonization societies to preserve family structures in order to create a migrant community comprised of single families. I argue that the ACS-produced literature on colonization contained a prescriptive ideal of family, centered on the male-headed household, and espoused a discourse of masculinity that would serve to uplift black men. Women were erased from the ACS' early history of Liberia. I read these promotional materials along with land deed records to reveal how, contrary to the ACS' literature, women played an important role in the physical settlement of land in Liberia through their acquisition of land via deed, inheritance, or death.

The second section of this chapter explores marriage and divorce patterns in colonial and early republic Liberia. The common Victorian trope of "heathenism," as denoted by the supposed subjugation of women, was used to mark native West Africans as inferior. Many

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<sup>29</sup> Michele Mitchell, *Righteous Propagation: African Americans and the Politics of Racial Destiny* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004).

migrant writers suggested the practice of polygyny among native West Africans left women abused and inadequately provided for native children. When migrants interfered with native families – either by adopting native children or splitting polygamous families – the results could be catastrophic for native peoples. By choosing to legally enshrine the male-headed single-family household as the only acceptable familial entity, I argue that migrants were able to thus distinguish themselves from native peoples and simultaneously name themselves as the “civilizing” force in Liberia. However, Liberian Government Archives documents, upon close examination, reveal how divorce and adoption of indigenous children undermined the ACS’ and colonial government’s attempts to control which types of families were deemed legitimate.

Chapter 2, “The Bonds of Womanhood, Reconsidered,” explores the relationships between white and black women in both United States-based colonization societies and in the Liberian settlements themselves. It seeks to place the history of white women’s support for colonization in conversation with discussions of slavery and the question of racial equality. The first section explores two Philadelphia-based white women’s organizations that supported education in Liberia, the Ladies’ Liberia School Association and the Cape Palmas Female Orphan Asylum Society. Critically reading sources produced by white women supporters of colonization in the United States, this chapter shows how white women’s philanthropy in Liberia reinforced notions of racial hierarchy and African American dependency.

The second section focuses specifically on three white Virginian women who supported colonization while owning slaves: Anne Randolph Page, Mary Minor Blackford, and Louisa Holmes Cocke. Using Susan Ryan’s work on antebellum benevolence as a frame, the section explores the ways in which Page, Blackford, and Cocke used their educational endeavors and planning to advocate for their own authority in plantation Virginia, while casting African

American settlers and slaves as unable or unprepared to care for themselves. The relationship between the white American female colonizationists, African American female migrants and native African women was unequal – though the white women invoked the language of family and claimed to be helping their “sisters” abroad, the interactions between the white women and the migrants actually illustrated white women’s perceived moral superiority while obscuring the labor of black women as teachers in Liberia.

The third chapter, “‘The reliance that was to be placed in letters’: Writing Early Liberia,” investigates the writing practices through which settlers represented themselves to audiences in the United States via a thriving print and manuscript writing practice. In this chapter, I examine letters written by formerly enslaved settlers who used these documents to sustain and create kin connections both in the United States and Liberia. The first section closely examines sets of letters written by former slaves to their masters in the United States. The letters reveal the complicated imaginings of “family” for formerly enslaved people, in which former slaves used the rhetoric of paternalism to make demands on former masters.

The second section discusses antebellum African American print culture, and in particular, the debates around colonization in African American communities. The final section shows how these letters were printed and reprinted, and circulated orally, to tell “truths” about Liberia. White and black audiences in the United States relied on the testimony of former slaves in Liberia to provide accurate information about the Liberian settlements, particularly since many free black communities were distrustful of correspondence received from the ACS rather than from settlers themselves.

Chapter 4, “‘Making Book’ and Making Books: Evangelical Printing and Reading in Cape Palmas,” is a case study of the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions



station at Fair Hope, Cape Palmas, Maryland in Liberia. The station, established in the 1830s, administered to local Grebo (Glebo) peoples. At Fair Hope, ABCFM missionaries produced books in English and a transliterated Grebo language, hoping to create a family of Protestant believers. I argue that these books were read and “read” in expansive ways by the Grebo congregants. The long history of written documentation in the region – in which making agreements with Westerners was called “making book” by Grebos – shaped both the stories missionaries wished to convey as well as the reception of the books (and by extension, the missionaries themselves).

The chapter is also an attempt to insert indigenous West Africans into the dissertation through an examination of ethnographic sources written by missionaries during the early nineteenth century. Maryland in Africa, the indigenous population was a primary target for conversion by the ABCFM, a contrast to most early missionary endeavors in Liberia. While the missionaries attempted to knit together a community of believers, ultimately, difference marked Grebo people as separate from the colonial settlements and the mission, culminating in a series of wars between Grebos and settlers throughout the nineteenth century.

The first section of this chapter explores the process through which ABCFM missionary John Leighton Wilson codified a Grebo language. The second section closely follows the printing of Grebo tracts and reads these alongside missionary correspondence and printed ABCFM materials to argue that these tracts were read in expansive ways by Grebo readers. In melding Western and Grebo practices of “making books” – that is, contracts – Grebo readers responded to these texts differently than Wilson had envisioned. The final section of the chapter explores the mission schools in Cape Palmas in-depth, revealing how missionary practice shaped family structure for Christian Grebos.

The final chapter, “Making a Nation: Creating a Middle Class and Making Liberian Independence,” focuses on the emergence of a Liberian middle class in the late 1830s and 1840s. It examines Liberian commerce and the economic reasons why Liberian settlers declared independence from the ACS in 1847. The first section includes a case study of settler and missionary Lott Cary’s transatlantic tobacco trade, as well as the use of clothing by settler women in Liberia. The second section focuses more specifically on women and their political roles in the Liberian legislature. It concludes with a discussion of the importance of a mercantile middle class to the success of Liberian independence.

## CHAPTER 1: GENDER AND THE STRUCTURE OF SOCIETY IN EARLY LIBERIA

*I am doing as well as lone woman situated as I am could expect to do. By hard labor + the assistance of some friends I and my Children are kept from suffering.*<sup>30</sup>

Matilda (Skipwith) Lomax, writing to her former master in the United States, identified herself as a “lone woman.” By the time she penned this letter from her home in Monrovia, Liberia, Lomax had married another settler, borne four children, lost one of them in infancy, and lost her husband to a drowning in rough seas.<sup>31</sup> Lomax’s articulation of the difficulties she faced as a “lone woman” pointed attention to the challenges single women faced in colonial Liberia. By extension, Lomax’s letter also suggested that male-headed households were the normative marriage pattern for the Liberian settler population. Lomax herself recognized this: she married again two years later.<sup>32</sup> Yet her letter also referenced “some friends” – suggesting that expansive networks of kin existed for Lomax to keep her family from “suffering.”

Given that African Americans in slavery placed such emphasis on family life and marriage despite (and because of) the dire circumstances in which they found themselves while living in the United States, it is not surprising that marriage, family life, and kin communities were central to the structure of society in colonial Liberia. At precisely the same moments when expanding slave markets in the Lower South were tearing apart African American families in the

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<sup>30</sup> Matilda (Skipwith) Lomax to John Hartwell Cocke, January 27, 1852, Box 139, Cocke Family Papers, Special Collections, University of Virginia Libraries (hereafter cited as “Cocke Family Papers”).

<sup>31</sup> Matilda (Skipwith) Lomax to John Hartwell Cocke, September 30, 1850, Box 134, Cocke Family Papers.

<sup>32</sup> Matilda (Skipwith) Richardson to Sarah [Sally] (Cocke) Brent, June 20, 1854, Box 146, Cocke Family Papers.

United States, formerly enslaved settlers in Liberia were creating their own families and establishing institutions to recognize their marriages and families.

In Virginia, where Lomax and the rest of the Skipwith family had been enslaved, men and women also formed families and kin communities, which were tested by the expansion of cotton (and thus the demand for slaves) in the Lower South. Herbert Gutman's pioneering study of African and African American family life discusses the particular instability of family life for Virginian slaves, in comparison to slaves from North Carolina, Alabama, Louisiana, during the antebellum era. As demand for slave labor in the Lower South increased along with cotton production, masters in places like Virginia increasingly sold their slaves South, particularly to be traded in the New Orleans slave markets. This tore apart many slave families, who in response, created resilient and expansive networks of kin and community to survive this second middle passage. Gutman argues that the regular dissolution of slave marriages had "unintended positive social consequences" including the development of extended kin networks that stretched beyond an immediate family. Kin networks could reach over an entire region, as enslaved people increasingly relied on their extended and blended families for support. At the same time that this practice allowed slaves to create vibrant communities, Gutman maintains that the practice of selling slaves was a painful and traumatic one for family and kin communities, as well.<sup>33</sup>

Similarly to the ways in which enslaved families and kin communities formed connections in adaptive and responsive ways, this chapter explores the resourcefulness and flexibility practiced by African American families in colonial Liberia. As Gutman and others have convincingly shown, enslaved and recently-freed African Americans, during slavery and after, chose to form families and kin communities in diverse and complex ways. I argue that in Liberia, similar innovation in family and kin community forms were at play. While the American

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<sup>33</sup> Herbert G. Gutman, *The Black Family in Slavery and Freedom, 1750-1925* (New York: Vintage, 1977), 123-143.

Colonization Society (ACS), dominated by an all-white Board of Managers, envisioned a narrow construction of the settler family, settlers themselves had their own ideas about what they wanted their families to look like, informed both by their experiences living in a slave society in the United States as well as their colonial experiences living in close proximity to polygyny.

Family was the central component of colonial Liberian society. The ACS made settler legible through family units. Thus the first section of this chapter explores the ideology of settlement as articulated in ACS correspondence and literature. It examines the attempts of enslaved men, free people of color, and colonization societies to preserve family structures in order to create a settler community comprised of monogamous families. I argue that the ACS-produced literature on colonization contained a prescriptive ideal of family, centered on the male-headed household, and espoused a discourse of masculinity that would serve to uplift black men. The ACS erased women from its early history of Liberia. However, the ACS' plan for land allotment parceled land to settlers, male and female, based on marriage status. I read these ACS materials along with land deed records to reveal how, contrary to what the ACS' literature maintained, women played an important role in the physical settlement of land in Liberia through their acquisition of land via deed, inheritance, or death. Much of the scholarship on colonial Liberia relies entirely on ACS-produced sources to make an argument about the inherent masculinity of this colonial project. I argue, instead, that in light of the land deeds present in Liberian archives, the ACS literature is better understood as prescriptive. Women played a central role in the colonizing process from the start, as they were critical to the acquisition of land in Liberia.

The second section of this chapter explores marriage and its dissolution in colonial and early republic Liberia. The common Victorian trope of "heathenism," as denoted by the

supposed subjugation of women, was used by Americans (white and black) to mark native West Africans as inferior. Many settler writers suggested the practice of polygyny among native West Africans left women abused and inadequately provided for native children. When settlers interfered with native families – either by adopting native children or splitting polygamous families – the results could be catastrophic for native peoples. By choosing to legally enshrine the male-headed single-family household as the only acceptable familial entity, I argue that settlers were able to thus distinguish themselves from native peoples and simultaneously name themselves as the “civilizing” force in Liberia. Therefore, the settler elite tightly controlled marriage and acceptable familial practices. At the same time, family took on expansive meanings as settlers confronted, often in armed conflict, the populations of indigenous West Africans that already inhabited the space settlers hoped to make into “Liberia.”

## IMAGINING THE COLONIAL FAMILY

American Colonization Society agent Jehudi Ashmun, a white American sent to the colony in 1822 to oversee the settlement at Cape Mesurado, offered his advice to colonists as well as to would-be settlers back in the United States. Agricultural improvements over trade with native peoples, he emphasized, was “*the only way you will ever find out to independence, comfort and wealth.*”<sup>34</sup> Ashmun’s advice, published for the first time posthumously in 1825 under the title *The Liberia Farmer*, provided would-be settlers with a guidebook for building a successful farm in Liberia. Tips for erecting fences, growing cassada [cassava] and yams,

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<sup>34</sup> Jehudi Ashmun, *The Liberia Farmer; or, colonist’s guide to independence and domestic comfort. Inscribed to all the industrious settlers of Liberia, by their friend and agent, J. Ashmun*, in Ralph Randolph Gurley, *Life of Jehudi Ashmun, late colonial agent in Liberia. With an appendix, containing extracts from his journal and other writings; with a brief sketch of the life of the Rev. Lott Cary* (Washington: James C. Dunn, 1835 [1825]), Appendix, 64. Emphasis in original.

gathering cotton, and growing sugar cane reminded readers of all the possibilities for success in Liberia. The Liberian farmer – told to “support your families” – was to rely on his industry in the fields. Single men, Ashmun explained, might be able to eke out a “poorly” existence by relying on trade, but those who wanted families (which Ashmun presumed to be the superior choice to bachelorhood), needed to farm.<sup>35</sup>

Ashmun himself was the first in a line of many white ACS agents who governed the colony at Liberia on behalf of the Board of Managers in the United States. Ashmun, a former Presbyterian minister from New York who had been educated at Middlebury Theological Seminary, governed the colony at Liberia from his arrival in 1822 to his death in 1828. The ACS attempted to maintain firm control over its colony of African Americans in Liberia, despite the settlers’ view that the colony should be governed by the settlers themselves. Conflict started, according to Ashmun, even before the settlers and the agent arrived in West Africa. Some settlers, including Peter Small, a free man from Philadelphia, had brought dogs on board the ship *Elizabeth* that carried the settlers and an ACS agent named Samuel Bacon to Liberia. While on board, the dogs caused a “commotion,” and Bacon ordered the dogs thrown overboard. In recounting the story, Ashmun described how “the authority of the master came near being overpowered by the violence of the people.”<sup>36</sup> The terminology Ashmun used to describe the event – “the master” nearly losing control due to “violence” – is the same terminology slaveowners in the United States used to describe their slaves. Ashmun’s reference to “violence,” too, evoked the fear that many white ACS supporters felt in the wake of the Haitian Revolution

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<sup>35</sup> Ashmun, *The Liberia Farmer*, 64-65.

<sup>36</sup> Jehudi Ashmun, *Memoir of the Life and Character of the Rev. Samuel Bacon, A.M. Late, an officer of marines in the United States’ service: afterward, attorney at law in the state of Pennsylvania: and subsequently, a minister of the Episcopal Church, and principal agent of the American Government for persons liberated from Slave-Ships, on the Coast of Africa: Where he terminated his Life in the month of May, 1820* (Washington City: Jacob Gideon, 1822), 248-249.

and Vesey Revolt.<sup>37</sup> The ACS remained in control of Liberia from 1822 until it approved a new constitution in 1839, which allowed colonists to elect their peers to the Commonwealth Legislative Council. In the following year, Joseph Jenkins Roberts – who would, in 1847, become president of a newly-independent Liberia – was elected as governor.<sup>38</sup>

As agent, Ashmun retained the power to determine settler rations and land plots, while a board of settlers appointed by the agent could “decide all disputes between Individuals” and oversee judicial proceedings.<sup>39</sup> The agreement reached in 1820 with settlers and codified in the 1824 Constitution did not, however, prevent conflict. In 1823, settlers demanded that the ACS censure Ashmun for assigning the best town lots to his friends, and when the ACS failed to respond quickly enough, they seized provisions held in the storehouse.<sup>40</sup> Though the ACS returned Ashmun to power shortly after the settlers’ revolt, the episode made clear how dire the stakes were for settlers in the newly established colony. A petition from one group of colonists in the settlement at Edina suggested there were similar problems still occurring in 1835 when they wrote to the ACS to complain about the partitioning and administration of land. The men wrote that their governor, Joseph Mechlin, purchased land on the east side of the St. John River from

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<sup>37</sup> Many white supporters of colonization felt free African Americans were a threat to the system of slavery and blamed them for instigating open revolt among enslaved populations. See Ashli White, *Encountering Revolution: Haiti and the Making of the Early Republic* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2010).

<sup>38</sup> *Statute Laws of the Commonwealth of Liberia, and Plan of Civil Government* (Monrovia?: 1841?). See also: Tom W. Shick, *Behold the Promised Land: A History of Afro-American Settler Society in Nineteenth-Century Liberia* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1980), especially 39-41; Charles Henry Huberich, *The Political and Legislative History of Liberia: a documentary history of the constitutions, laws and treaties of Liberia from the earliest settlements to the establishment of the Republic, a sketch of the activities of the American colonization societies, a commentary on the constitution of the Republic and a survey of the political and social legislation from 1847 to 1944; with appendices containing the laws of the colony of Liberia, 1820-1839, and Acts of the Governor and Council, 1839-1847* (New York: Central Book Company, 1947). Unfortunately, the accounts of the Council, placed in the Liberian Government Archives damaged during the Liberian Civil Conflict, are missing. See Myles Osborne, “A Note on the Liberian Archives,” *History in Africa* 36 (2009): 461-463.

<sup>39</sup> 1824 Constitution of Liberia (Monrovia?: 1834?).

<sup>40</sup> Huberich, *The Political and Legislative History of Liberia*, 296.



Chief King Joe Harris but Mechlin “refused to give up the said lands” to the settlers.<sup>41</sup> Mechlin, who took over the colony after Ashmun’s death, was deeply unpopular with the settlers.<sup>42</sup> While Ashmun, Mechlin, and the ACS expected Liberia to grow into a colony of self-sufficient farmers, this was a difficult enterprise in a colonial environment, particularly when a white agent allotted land.<sup>43</sup>

Farming, then, was imagined as a primary way in which the ACS expected colonists to support themselves. In dedicating the advice manual to farming instead of trade, Ashmun, and by proxy, the ACS, envisioned a colony of families – not bachelor traders.<sup>44</sup> Despite the fact that the choice to farm was presented as a way to promote the ideal of a family, *The Liberia Farmer* barely mentioned women or children, except to note that they might be useful in producing manufactures from cotton.<sup>45</sup> As with much of the other promotional literature of the early years of Liberia colonization during the 1820s and 30s, the constitutive members of the family – women and children – were almost nonexistent in Ashmun’s guide.

In planning for the colonization of Liberia, the governing board of the ACS called for the settlements to be built with the latest innovations in American building and cleanliness in mind. Homes were required to be fenced in, land was expected to be cleared, and a “substantial” house must be made out of “stone, brick, or pise [pisé], or of frame or logs weather boarded, and

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<sup>41</sup> Petition, July 10, 1835, Reel 153, American Colonization Society Records, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress (hereafter cites as ACS Records).

<sup>42</sup> Ashmun died shortly after arriving in New Haven, Connecticut. Two African American settlers held the position of agent in the interim: Lott Cary and Colston Waring, two Virginians who were political leaders among the settlers. Another ACS-appointed white agent, Dr. Randall Miller, held the post for four months before Mechlin, but appears to have died in office.

<sup>43</sup> Antonio McDaniel discusses settler food preferences in his study of mortality in the colonization of Liberia. Settlers relied on imports from the United States to sustain the food supply. Antonio McDaniel (Tukufu Zuberi), *Swing Low, Sweet Chariot: The Mortality Cost of Colonizing Liberia in the Nineteenth Century* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995), 67-70.

<sup>44</sup> Despite Ashmun’s warnings, few of the successful traders were actually single men. For instance, John Brown Russwurm, one of the leading politicians in early Liberia and one half of the Russwurm and Dailey commercial firm, married Sarah McGill, daughter of Monrovia trader Samuel McGill, and thus cemented his commercial and political authority.

<sup>45</sup> Ashmun, *The Liberia Farmer*, 65.

covered with tile or brick.” Homeowners were also responsible for clearing the streets around their lots.<sup>46</sup> The design of these homes was a replication of the architecture of the American South – and explicitly *not* the mud and thatch dwellings common in this region of West Africa.<sup>47</sup> Although many white Americans supported the attempted replication of American domesticity in African American settler society, as we shall see, Liberia was not “another America.”<sup>48</sup>

Even though thousands of women and children migrated to Liberia during the antebellum period, the ACS insisted on imagining their settlers as men. As sociologist Antonio McDaniel has shown in his calculations of the settler population in Liberia, during the initial phase of colonization from 1820-1828, there were 108 men for every 100 women. Later, from 1836-1843, the gender ratio shifted to 126 men for every 100 women. This pattern suggests that most settlers traveled in family groups, which is also the conclusion reached by Tom Shick, who compiled demographic data for Liberian settlers to 1843.<sup>49</sup> Though the sex ratio of settlers was relatively even compared with other settler groups of the nineteenth century, as McDaniel shows, the ACS did not seem to acknowledge the presence of women in the Liberian colony. In his 1818 address to the Society, ACS supporter Ebenezer Burgess noted that the process of colonization would

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<sup>46</sup> American Colonization Society, “Digest of the Laws Now in Force in the Colony of Liberia, August 19<sup>th</sup> 1824,” in *Constitution, Government and Digest of the Laws of Liberia, as confirmed and established by the Board of Managers of the American Colonization Society, May 25, 1825*, (Washington: Way & Gideon, 1825), 10-11.

<sup>47</sup> The visual and architectural similarities between the antebellum South and nineteenth century Liberia have been explored in Svend E. Holsoe, Bernard L. Herman, and Max Belcher, *A Land and Life Remembered: Americo-Liberian Folk Architecture* (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 1988).

<sup>48</sup> Amy Kaplan, *The Anarchy of Empire in the Making of U.S. Culture* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2005); James Ciment, *Another America: The Story of Liberia and the Former Slaves Who Ruled It* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2014).

<sup>49</sup> McDaniel, *Swing Low, Sweet Chariot*, 62-65; Tom W. Shick, “A Quantitative Analysis of Liberian Colonization from 1820 to 1843 with Special Reference to Mortality,” *Journal of African History* 12, No. 1 (1971): 45-59; Tom W. Shick, *Roll of Emigrants to Liberia, 1820-1843* (Newark, DE: University of Delaware Press, 1971). Both McDaniel and Shick rely on the data assembled by the United States Congress in 1843: see “Information relative to the operations of the United States squadron on the west coast of Africa, the condition of the American colonies there, and the commerce of the United States therewith,” 28th Congress, 2d. Session, S. Doc. 150, serial 458. The calculations done by McDaniel and Shick are useful to this study, but limited in that they rely on data produced only through 1843.

“nurture them to manhood.”<sup>50</sup> What “manhood” entailed for African American men, who were so feared and reviled because of the racial hierarchy in the antebellum United States, Burgess did not specify. But it was clear that the pronoun “them” signaled men only.

The ACS’ plan for Liberia was closely modeled on a vision of republicanism that linked the new colony with the history of the colonization of Virginia in the United States, which Nicholas Guyatt has called “a republican mirror to the United States.” The ACS made direct comparisons with Jamestown, in particular, and suggested that colonizing Jamestown was both more expensive and more deadly than colonization in Liberia, which, in their view, “has prospered beyond all example.”<sup>51</sup> Though not explicit in their language, the ACS implicitly envisioned counterpart roles for settler women in their formulation of a yeoman republic in Liberia. Just as settler men were to work the land as farmers, settler women could expect to fulfill duties within the household, such as childcare, clothing production, and food production.

However, as Stephanie McCurry has argued in her study of gender and the yeomanry in the South Carolina Lowcountry, white women’s work within yeoman households also included field labor. Though this labor was “customarily ignored and even denied,” the small households of yeoman farmers required the labor of white women, even in households where slaves were present (though slave labor did reduce the labor of white women).<sup>52</sup> In Liberia, the labor of settler women sustained households, particularly as disease and death incapacitated members of

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<sup>50</sup> Ebenezer Burgess, *Address to the American Colonization Society for colonizing the free people of color of the United States, read at a special meeting, in the City of Washington, November 21<sup>st</sup>, 1818*, (Washington: Davis and Force, 1818), 5.

<sup>51</sup> Nicholas Guyatt, “‘The Outskirts of Our Happiness’: Race and the Lure of Colonization in the Early Republic,” *The Journal of American History* 95, No. 4 (March 2009): 999; *African Repository* 9, No. 12 (February 1834): 363. Brandon Mills notes that the ACS’ vision “was merely one of many speculative claims marshaled on behalf of the fledgling colony” in the early years of colonization, but with Liberian independence in 1847, the argument for Liberia as a republic mirroring the United States took on heightened significance as it “could best serve the United States by reproducing its political values.” Brandon Mills, “‘The United States of Africa’: Liberian Independence and the Contested Meaning of a Black Republic,” *The Journal of the Early Republic* 34, No. 1 (Spring 2014): 81.

<sup>52</sup> Stephanie McCurry, *Masters of Small Worlds: Yeoman Households, Gender Relations, and the Political Culture of the Antebellum South Carolina Low Country* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), 72-85.

the family. Matilda (Skipwith) Lomax noted that she was engaged in farming in a letter recounting the crops grown on Liberian farms: “we ingenerally [in general] raised on our Farms – Corn, Potatoes, Cassado [cassava] & rice.” Eight years later, she was still engaged in this farm work, and reported, “the sun has parched up mostly all the rice the fields,” and thus she requested help from her former master to sustain herself and her three children.<sup>53</sup> While elite settler women may not have been required to perform this work, instead asking indentured servants or hired workers to perform farm labor, it seems likely that most settlers performed this type of farm labor themselves. Thus while ACS sources did not signal the importance of women to the yeoman households of Liberia, settler-produced sources did.

Furthermore, language and rhetoric of colonization itself was gendered as male. Bruce Dorsey has argued that the ACS’ emphasis on colonization as a masculine endeavor also explains why most pro-colonization white women focused their attention on education for both African and settler women in Liberia instead of helping African American men.<sup>54</sup> Despite the ACS’ insistence on colonization as a masculine endeavor, women and children were key players in the colonization of Liberia. While much of the scholarship has taken the ACS at its word that colonization was a “manly” enterprise, in reality, on the ground conditions in Liberia were fundamentally shaped by the presence of these men’s families. As Antoinette Burton, Catherine Hall, and Ann Stoler, among others, have all made clear, that while the rhetoric of colonization in the nineteenth century was masculinist, the process was fundamentally shaped by the presence

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<sup>53</sup> Matilda (Skipwith) Lomax to John Hartwell Cocke, November 23, 1849 Box 130, Cocke Family Papers; Matilda (Skipwith) Richardson to John Hartwell Cocke, August 1857, Box 153, Cocke Family Papers.

<sup>54</sup> Bruce Dorsey, “A Gendered History of African Colonization in the Antebellum United States,” in *Journal of Social History* 34, No. 1 (Autumn 2000): 77-103. For a different take on white women’s involvement in colonization, see Karen Fisher Younger, “Philadelphia’s Ladies’ Liberia School Association and the Rise and Decline of Northern Female Colonization Support,” in *The Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography* 135, No. 3 (July 2010): 235-262.

of women.<sup>55</sup> Despite the lack of discussion of women in ACS-produced sources, women were required for the yeoman republic to work.

Jehudi Ashmun's *Liberia Farmer* was not the only publication offered by an ACS official that emphasized a particular vision of masculine colonization. The ACS' prescriptions for proper homes and family structures emerged from a convergence of two swirling debates in U.S. antebellum political culture. First, antislavery activists in the United States increasingly drew attention to the ways in which the institution of slavery tore apart families. The second debate centered on polygyny, a touchstone that would later dominate American political debate by mid-century with the growth of Mormonism in the American West. But in the 1820s and 1830s, colonization supporters focused their attentions on reports of polygyny from West Africa.

The ACS' publication and promotional arm, the *African Repository* newspaper, published in the United States, revealed to its readers the horrors of polygyny and its twin, female subjugation. Exoticized and fanciful stories filled the *Repository*'s pages. One "Account of the Kroomen," a pseudo-ethnographic retelling of an observers interaction with Kru men who helped load and unload boats on the coast of Liberia, noted that it was possible for one man to have "eighteen wives." The article concluded by suggesting that the wives performed the work of "servants," both working in the fields and in the home.<sup>56</sup> This article, like many others in *The African Repository*, was meant to evoke emotion and empathy in the reader; it is part of the trope of sentimentality found in contemporaneous literatures, ranging from fiction to reformist appeals like that of Ashmun in his tale of the dying man. However, as Susan Ryan has noted, reformers'

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<sup>55</sup> Antoinette Burton, *Dwelling in the Archive: Women Writing House, Home, and History in Late Colonial India* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003); Catherine Hall, *Civilising Subjects: Colony and Metropole in the English Imagination, 1830-1867* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002); Ann Laura Stoler, *Carnal Knowledge and Imperial Power: Race and the Intimate in Colonial Rule* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002).

<sup>56</sup> "An Account of the Kroomen," *The African Repository* 1, No. 2 (April 1825).

vision of sentimentality was not based upon complete equality between the reformer and the reformed. Rather, “[t]he simultaneous erasure and persistence of difference facilitates both the sentimental bond that creates the desire to give and the maintenance of hierarchy.”<sup>57</sup> Thus, *The African Repository*’s readership was invited to support the ACS’ mission of Christianizing Africans, which would, according to the doctrine of the ACS, both bolster white supporters of benevolent colonization while contemporaneously extending the influence of Protestant Christianity and American republicanism in West Africa. African American settlers also used the rhetoric of benevolence to elevate themselves above indigenous West Africans, as we will see in Chapter 5.<sup>58</sup>

The ACS manuscript archive offers evidence concerning the ways in which slaves were emancipated and sent to Liberia. Manumission was tied to a willingness to migrate and a desire to work. Worthiness and work were cast in masculine terms that excluded settler women. In early 1826, the last will and testament of John Smith, who had resided in the state of Virginia, was sent to the ACS’ offices in Washington D.C. Smith’s will indicated that his slaves were to be freed upon his death and the death of his wife. However, the newly freed slaves were not

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<sup>57</sup> Susan M. Ryan, *The Grammar of Good Intentions: Race and the Antebellum Culture of Benevolence* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2003), 19. I also argue that in the context of the Liberia venture, the ACS was implicated in what Homi Bhabha calls “colonial mimicry,” in which the ACS’ white supporters purported to mold both settlers and indigenous Africans into Christians. The result is that the ACS was able to maintain its authority and whiteness, while making claims on the civility of its mission. In using Bhabha’s analysis, I am also implicitly making the argument that the ACS’ mission in Liberia was profoundly colonialist and steeped within ideas of the racial superiority of whites. See Homi Bhabha, “Of Mimicry and Man: The Ambivalence of Colonial Discourse,” in *October: Discipleship: A Special Issue on Psychoanalysis* 28, (Spring 1984), 125-133..

<sup>58</sup> In her study of modern Glebo (in the nineteenth century, called “Grebo” or the ambiguous “Kroomen”), Mary Moran shows subsistence – obtained through farming – is women’s purview. She argues that this obligation forms part of the Glebo system of viewing men and women as “two separate, noncomplementary kinds of human beings.”<sup>58</sup> Thus, Moran suggests that women in Glebo society formed their own hierarchy – absent of competition from men – based on women’s work. While the Glebo of the 1980s cannot stand in for the “Kroomen” of the 1820s, a different sex-gender system was often remarked upon by the ACS and African American settlers in Liberia. Mary H. Moran, *Civilized Women: Gender and Prestige in Southeastern Liberia* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1990). Of course, the linkage of polygyny and the drudge labor of women was not a new concept for most white American readers – similar observations had been made about American Indians for centuries. See, for instance, Kathleen M. Brown, *Good Wives, Nasty Wenches, and Anxious Patriarchs: Gender, Race, and Power in Colonial Virginia* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1996).

meant to remain in the United States. Instead, Smith left instructions for his executors to contact the ACS and send his former slaves to Liberia.

I do hereby give a me[ager?] grant to each of said negroes so emancipated without regard to age, sex, or cond[ition] one good serviceable new shert [sic] one pair of shoes and stockings, blanket, and one ye[ar] provision exclusive of ship-provision on board to carry with them; the quant[ity] and quality thereof to be left to the discretion of my Executors. I hereby direct that them to pay all expences [sic] of removing said emancipated slaves, out of any money that may [unintelligible] their hands belonging to my estate, and furthermore direct them to open correspondence either by letter of in person, or both with the American Colonization Society for the removal of free negroes to Africa so as to enda[vor?] to ascertain.<sup>59</sup>

Smith's will was not unique; the ACS records indicated that other slave owners manumitted their slaves on the condition that they would move to Liberia. Publications like *The African Repository*, as well as sermons from ministers in support of the ACS, convinced some tepid supporters of slavery that a humanitarian end to slavery had to include some reparations. However, these reparations were explicitly not tied to American soil – the concept of former slaves receiving compensation for their time as slaves in the United States was far beyond the ACS' intended goals. Rather, by “returning” former slaves to their “homeland,” and thus paying for passage and provisions to Liberia, slave owners were able to claim that they did, in fact, care for their slaves and had an emotional attachment to them. This discourse of paternalism is further explored in Chapter 3 of this dissertation.

Slave owners who considered freeing their slaves and placing them in the care of the ACS seem to have been concerned with what their former slaves would find in Liberia. This seemed to be tied to the ACS' missionary aims; clearly, whites expected the freed slave population in Liberia to work on behalf of the United States and its benevolent societies. Hence, Smith provided money for the passage to Liberia and the ship rations needed to send them – no

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<sup>59</sup> “Will of John Smith of the County of [paper missing] State of Virginia,” *The Records of the American Colonization Society*, Reel 1, ACS Records.

small expense – but did not provide for his former slaves once they were in Liberia. Similarly, in Harriet Beecher Stowe’s serialized novel *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, later published in two volumes in 1852, the character George Harris, a runaway slave, decides to move his family to Liberia. Harris acknowledges that in moving to Liberia, he faces an arduous task, but ultimately embraces the Protestant value of work, and decides to begin a new life in Liberia, free from the evils of slavery. “I go to *Liberia*, not as to an Elysium of romance, but as to a *field of work*. I expect to work with both hands, – to work *hard*; to work against all sorts of difficulties and discouragements; and to work till I die. This is what I go for; and in this I am quite sure I shall not be disappointed. [sic]”<sup>60</sup> Though this account of hard work comes from Stowe’s fiction, which is outside the scope of this study, an agent of the ACS could have written similar words.

Work, in fact, was a major component of the ACS’ strategy in Liberia. In his account of the colony in Sierra Leone, ACS agent Samuel J. Mills noted that the black settlers living in Sierra Leone seemed to be working hard to make their new colony a successful one.

The people were cheerful, and generally employed in some kind of labour. Some were unloading goods; some burning shells for lime; and some at work in the carpenters’ and smiths’ shops. We stood some time to see a company of soldiers go through the manual exercise. They were mostly Africans, above the ordinary stature, well formed, and neatly dressed. They appeared to be quite expert and intelligent.<sup>61</sup>

The workers and soldiers that Mills described were exemplary individuals. The message of this passage was that if “returned” to Africa and instilled with a strong Protestant work ethic, the black race could be respectable members of society. Here, the image of armed black men (soldiers) was not intended to be threatening, as images of the Haitian revolution or the Vesey

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<sup>60</sup> Harriet Beecher Stowe, *Uncle Tom’s Cabin, Or, Life Among the Lowly*, Vol. 2, (Boston: John P. Jewett & Company, 1852), 303.

<sup>61</sup> Gardiner Spring, *Memoirs of the Rev. Samuel J. Mills, Late Missionary to the South Western Section of the United States, and Agent of the American Colonization Society, deputed to explore the coast of Africa* (New-York: Published by the New-York Evangelical Missionary Society, 1820), 161.



conspiracy were to be understood. Rather, these men were “civilized” and prepared to defend their colony from the barbarism of the “uncivilized” African tribes.

The ACS literature praised legitimate hard work. The alternative, of course, was the lucrative, yet contemporaneously understood to be uncivilized, slave trade. “If Africa is ever civilized, the slave-trade must cease,” ACS agent Ebenezer Burgess began. “If Africa is ever colonized, the slave-trade *will* cease, at least in the vicinity of the colonies.” Burgess suggested that one of the reasons for Africa’s degradation was the Atlantic slave trade. “Among the greatest obstacles to the civilization of that continent, are the desire of illicit gain, the severe temper and the aversion to honest industry, which the slave-trade has generated among the chiefs and the tribes.”<sup>62</sup> According to the ACS, then, the settlers would be able to counter the avarice of the slave trade with legitimate hard work, which was expected to be profitable.

Many of the accounts of the land on Sherbro Island, near Sierra Leone, detailed the fertility of the soil and ideal conditions for starting a colony. The ACS imagined that the colony would be productive and successful, perhaps by trading with nearby Sierra Leone. “The country thus obtained, embraces large tracts of fertile land, capable of yielding all the rich and varied products of the tropics; possessing great commercial advantages, with an extent of sea-coast from one hundred and fifty to two hundred miles.”<sup>63</sup> The ACS expressed hope that the indigenous Africans would be willing to part with ivory, especially, in exchange for commodities and foodstuffs that the colony would produce. Additionally, the ACS expected that because Africa was their land of origin, the black settlers would prosper on their native soil. “Is there, on

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<sup>62</sup> Burgess, *Address to the American Colonization Society*, 13.

<sup>63</sup> American Colonization Society, *A Few Facts Respecting the American Colonization Society and the Colony at Liberia* (Boston: Peirce and Williams, 1830), 5-6.

the habitable globe, a soil more fertile, production [sic] either richer, or more varied, a climate better adapted to the constitution of the black man, than that which God hath given him?”<sup>64</sup>

*The African Repository* also emphasized the progress that the settlers were making on the ground in Liberia. “There is in the colony a prevailing, increasing spirit of obedience, industry, enterprise and piety. Schools are established, churches are building, government is respected, agriculture receives general attention, and the wilderness is retiring before the face of civilized man.”<sup>65</sup> The ACS focused on illustrating the gains that they were making in Liberia. Here, civilization was tied to normative functions of American life – the schools, churches, and government depicted here represent an attempt to re-create American virtues in Liberia. A journal of life in the Liberian settlements also explained that education was important to the settlers. “The managers regard a govt [sic] system of Grammar school education, the benefits of which may be employed by any child in the settlements as of vital [sic] importance to the colony.”<sup>66</sup> Education was key for reproducing the civility and Christian morality that the ACS deemed so important to the colony. It also presumed the labor of settler women as educators. Quite similarly, an article published in *The African Repository* also informed American readers about the gains being made in Liberia, and called for donations of wood and nails with which to build “a neat and airy hospital.”<sup>67</sup> The ACS was deeply invested in arguing that their venture in Liberia was successfully bringing the trappings of civilization to the West African coast.

Special attention was paid to the construction of homes in Liberia. In a letter to ACS leadership in Washington D.C., an ACS sponsor inquired about the supplies to be sent with a

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<sup>64</sup> American Colonization Society, *The third annual report of the American Society for Colonizing the Free People of Colour of the United States* (Washington: David and Force, 1820), 24.

<sup>65</sup> “American Colonization Society,” *The African Repository and Colonial Journal* 1, No. 1, (March 1825): 5.

<sup>66</sup> Unsigned journal [Jehudi Ashmun?], 8 May 1825, Reel 300, ACS Records.

<sup>67</sup> Jehudi Ashmun, “Late and Important News From Liberia,” *The African Repository and Colonial Journal* 1, No. 1, (March 1825): 29.

ship in December 1825. Beef and potatoes were procured for the voyage, 250 pounds of sugar were included for trade with indigenous Africans, and 6 pigs as well as 10 sheep were taken on board to start farms once in Liberia. The sponsor, however, asked, “I will take this opportunity of arguing, if no lumber is given; must the Colonists go without any?”<sup>68</sup> The homes were described as “comfortable,” and therefore, settlers were acclimating nicely to life on the coast.<sup>69</sup> The ACS required that homes be fenced in, expected land to be cleared, and mandated settlers build a “substantial” house. Homeowners were also responsible for clearing the streets around their lots.<sup>70</sup>

Similarly, a journal account of the settlement near Monrovia made particular note of the settlers’ industriousness in building their plantations just outside of Monrovia. “These sturdy settlers had the sense to unite in a request to be permitted, instead of settling in town, to [unintelligible] to their plantations at once; which in the order of allotments, must fall at the distance of nearly three miles from their town lots.”<sup>71</sup> Thus, the ACS portrayed the settlers as easily adaptable to the conditions of domesticity and farm life. This type of farm living was clearly based upon a model of an agricultural economy, quite similar to small farm life in the American South; in fact, some districts were named after U.S. States, for example, the Virginia and New Georgia districts.

Indeed, the ACS argued that it alone was equipped to civilize both former slaves and the indigenous Africans they encountered in the space cordoned off as “Liberia.” “And why may not America, the best and the brightest in this wonderful series of revolution, carry back *by colonies*

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<sup>68</sup> Horace Sissious to James Laurin, 9 December 1825, Reel 1, ACS Records.

<sup>69</sup> American Colonization Society, *A Few Facts*, 7.

<sup>70</sup> American Colonization Society, “Digest of the Laws Now in Force in the Colony of Liberia, August 19<sup>th</sup> 1824,” in *Constitution, Government and Digest of the Laws of Liberia, as confirmed and established by the Board of Managers of the American Colonization Society, May 25, 1825*, (Washington: Way & Gideon, 1825), 10-11.

<sup>71</sup> Unsigned journal [Jehudi Ashmun?], 8 May 1825, Reel 300, ACS Records.

to Africa, now in barbarism, the blessings which, through the ages that are passed, and nations that have perished, were received from her?”<sup>72</sup> Thus, the ACS attempted to bolster itself through the use of the impulse of civilization.

The quality of religious and moral instruction was also of paramount importance to the ACS. In a letter to the ACS’ headquarters in Washington DC, a sponsor suggested that two of the individuals on board a ship that was set to leave for Liberia in December 1825 would be especially useful to the colony. “There are two coloured preachers among the colonists, who think much of going. One wishes to go among the neighboring heathen, the other among the Colonists. They are of Good character & might be greatly useful though I cannot speak from experience or observation of their past life.”<sup>73</sup> Perhaps, then, some of the settlers were interested in the ACS’ mission primarily as a means to practice their religious influence in converting the indigenous Africans. Similar projects had been underway in Sierra Leone before the ACS sent their first ships, and news of the gains made in Sierra Leone reached American religious leaders.<sup>74</sup>

The ACS was indeed cognizant of what specific type of recruits they wanted to populate Liberia. White neighbors and friends frequently sent letters to the ACS to attest to a potential settler’s good character. According to the ACS, the colony at Liberia was supposed to be a city upon a hill for the members of the black race. Therefore, they hoped that only hard-working Christians would inhabit the new colony. “The best class of the people of colour should have all the encouragement to come forward and have a controlling influence, which protection,

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<sup>72</sup> T. R., “Observations *On the early history of the Negro Race*,” *The African Repository and Colonial Journal* 1, No. 1 (March 1825): 12.

<sup>73</sup> Horace Sissious to James Laurin, 9 December 1825, Reel 1, ACS Records.

<sup>74</sup> See, for example, the narrative of Samuel Ajayi Crowther, reprinted in Philip D. Curtin, ed., *Africa Remembered: Narratives by West Africans in the Era of the Slave Trade*, (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1967), 298-316.

patronage, and independence can give them.”<sup>75</sup> Clearly, the ACS wanted to be sure that any settlers who moved to the colony would be worthy of the privileges of citizenship.

Indeed, the ACS passed laws for the colony of Liberia that dictated what they expected settlers to do, and how they expected settlers to act. Any infractions were supposed to have been reported to the agent. The agent could choose to remove a particular person or family from the colony if he decided that the laws were not being followed. In fact, the entire government of the colony ultimately reported to the agent, who had the authority have the final word in all matters.<sup>76</sup> Laws in Liberia forbade “quarrelling, riot, drunkenness, Sabbath-breaking, profaneness, and lewdness,” which ensured that colonists were at least expected to behave like Christians.<sup>77</sup> All men were expected to work “for the public,” two days out of every week, in addition to “attending to his own domestic labors.” Men who did not complete their labor for the week could expect that they and their families would no longer receive rations or resources from the ACS.<sup>78</sup> Ultimately, the agent had the discretion to award land and rations as he saw fit.

Though the allotment of land was tied to the size of a family, men were not the only holders of land deeds. In his account of the history of the colony at Liberia, Agent Jehudi Ashmun detailed the plan he followed in assigning tracts to the settlers. The plan encouraged marriage: any man who arrived in Liberia married, or married within his first year in the colony, received 25 acres for himself, 24 for his wife, 10 for each child, and a “town lot” in Monrovia for the family. Single men received 30 acres and a town lot. “Laborers and mechanics” were entitled to 10 additional acres if deemed by the ACS agent to be in “good conduct.” However, both

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<sup>75</sup> Burgess, *Address to the American Colonization Society*, 29.

<sup>76</sup> “Constitution for the Government of the African Colony at Liberia,” in *Constitution, Government and Digest of the Laws of Liberia*, 5-8.

<sup>77</sup> “Digest of the Laws Now in Force in the Colony of Liberia, August 19<sup>th</sup> 1824,” in *ibid*, 9-10.

<sup>78</sup> *Ibid*, 9-10.

single women and “minors” – an undefined term – also received land grants of 25 acres.<sup>79</sup> In effect, single women earned more land than married women. It makes sense, of course, that land and marriage were so tied together: inheritance law in Liberia seemed to mostly have followed primogeniture, though as we shall see, this was not always the case. What was significant here was that the settler population, most of whom had previously been enslaved, were now being *encouraged* to legally marry and were *granted* property to dispense with as they pleased.

The sources found in the Montserrado County land deeds archive evidenced that settlers did receive the lands allotted to them by the system. In 1836, the earliest year for which there is substantive data, the land record listed deeds for 38 settlers who received grants from the Colonization Society, including several women and minors. Though the extant land deeds for colonial and early republic Liberia reflect a broader time period than when Ashmun wrote the plan for land allotments, it appears that new settlers were still receiving allotments.<sup>80</sup> The land deeds also reveal what Ashmun’s breakdown of land allotment suggests: women often held land in their own names, or were jointly listed with their husbands if the land was granted to both of them after arrival. Thus settler women were not only helpmeets who labored in the fields, much as the wives of yeoman farmers in South Carolina did. They were vital to the acquisition of land in colonial Liberia, and it appears common for women to have held land in their own names.

Caroline Lundy, a freeborn seamstress from Virginia, arrived at Cape Mesurado in 1829 at the age of 22 with her husband and her parents. Unfortunately, Lundy became a widow shortly after they arrived in the colony, and her father died within a year. As the land deed from 1831

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<sup>79</sup> Ashmun, *Memoir of the Life and Character of the Rev. Samuel Bacon*, 287.

<sup>80</sup> Volume 7 (1849-1854) Land Record of Montserrado County, Republic of Liberia, Reel 1, Joseph J. Roberts Family Papers, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress (hereafter cited as Land Record, JJR Papers). Though the file is labeled as 1849-1854, some of the deeds bear earlier dates. This is the only extant record of land deeds from the early nineteenth century I have located in either the United States or Liberia, though the Ministry for Foreign Affairs in Monrovia does hold some wills. However, these holdings are inconsistent due to the burning of the Liberian National Archives during the 1990s.

suggested, Lundy was granted Monrovia town lot 148 because she had fulfilled “each and every of the duties enforced and conditions prescribed by sundry regulations.”<sup>81</sup> Lundy was not just a landholder – she also transferred money owed to Richmond colonization supporter Benjamin Brand when he was owed restitution from the estate of settler and missionary Lott Cary, who had been trading tobacco with indigenous people on behalf of Brand before he died unexpectedly in a gunpowder explosion, an event detailed in Chapter 5. Lundy replaced Cary as a trading partner with Brand, sending him ivory and camwood to sell in the United States.<sup>82</sup> As a landholder, Lundy was able to engage in successful transatlantic trade.

The land deed records frequently indicated that husbands and wives jointly sold land to another party – and the deeds required the signature or mark of both husband and wife, a custom probably carried over from the United States.<sup>83</sup> When Reed Cooper purchased land in 1849, his deed bore the signatures of both Mathias and Elizabeth Liberty. Henry and Anna Sharpe sold their land to Henry J. Roberts that same year.<sup>84</sup> Perhaps because of the relatively even sex ratio in Liberia, the land deeds frequently showed married couples acquiring and selling property. This contrasts with what Loren Schweninger has found for free African American women in the antebellum South, who in most places outnumbered free African American men of marriageable age. There, property owning women tended not to marry or, if they did, required a “conveyance in trust” to protect their property interests.<sup>85</sup> Because African Americans in Liberia were not subject to the same types of restrictions on their freedom and property owners as African

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<sup>81</sup> Land Record, JJR Papers.

<sup>82</sup> Caroline Lundy to Benjamin Brand, November 26, 1831; Benjamin Brand to Catharine [Caroline] Lundy, April 24, 1832, Section 7, Benjamin Brand Papers, Virginia Historical Society.

<sup>83</sup> Marylynn Salmon, *Women and the Law of Property in Early America* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1986).

<sup>84</sup> Land Record, JJR Papers.

<sup>85</sup> Loren Schweninger, “Property Owning Free African-American Women in the South, 1800-1870,” *Journal of Women’s History* 1, No. 3 (Winter 1990): 13-44.

Americans in the United States, and because they had access to legally recognized marriage, settler women seem not to have requested the same protections to their property before marriage.

It is unclear what happened to settler women's property in cases of divorce. The practice of divorce seems uncommon from what remains of the legislative record from early nineteenth century Liberia: only 15 applications for divorce can be found there, and the records are silent on what became of the family's holdings in all but one case, which is explored in depth in the next section of this chapter.<sup>86</sup>

Property was also acquired through inheritance. Nancy Lynch drew up a deed that gave Sarah Blackford, her daughter, multiple lots of land in Monrovia, "in consideration of the natural love and affection" she had for Blackford.<sup>87</sup> Lynch arrived in Liberia in 1843 from Lynchburg, Virginia. Sarah was 14 upon her arrival in Liberia with her mother and married another Virginia settler, Abraham Blackford.<sup>88</sup> Lynch's deed ensured that the land would pass to the other woman: preserving the legacy the older woman had cultivated in the colony. It is unclear why Abraham Blackford was not listed in the will of his mother-in-law. Emily Graham bequeathed her farmland and feather beds to her sons, David and Charles Mitchell. Graham's sister, Elmira Freeman, received a "large Testament" – this was the only book listed in the estate, signaling the importance of the bible to Graham – as well as more mundane objects, such as dinnerware.<sup>89</sup>

Graham's will fits with what we know of household inventories in the United States: if there was

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<sup>86</sup> The extant legislative record covers the period 1839-1859. The one case where the wife was awarded anything in the divorce settlement was Mary Ann Parsons, who was granted \$24 a year from her former husband, Samuel Parsons, on account of "ill treatment." For Parsons, see Folder 34, Box 4, Liberian Government Archives, Part 1, Svend Holsoe Collection, Liberian Collections, Indiana University. The other divorce applications are noted in Boxes 4 and 5 of this collection.

<sup>87</sup> Will of Nancy Lynch, Land Record, JJR Papers.

<sup>88</sup> Barque *Globe's* Company, arrived at Monrovia December 31, 1843, *Roll of emigrants that have been sent to the colony of Liberia, Western Africa, by the American Colonization Society and its auxiliaries, to September, 1843, Information relative to the operations of the United States squadron on the west coast of Africa, the condition of the American colonies there, and the commerce of the United States therewith*, 28th Congress, 2d. Session, S. Doc. 150, serial 458.

<sup>89</sup> Will of Emily Graham, Land Record, JJR Papers.



only one book in a home, it was likely to be a Bible, and women frequently received household goods. Even more remarkable than this large estate was that Graham achieved this wealth while illiterate: her will was signed with a mark.

Inheritance laws from Liberia do not survive in legislative records. Another source, in the form of a letter written by a formerly enslaved woman to her former master, suggested that inheritance practices concerning land were not as malleable as they might have seemed from the register of land deeds. Matilda (Skipwith) Richardson, the self-described “lone woman” at the start of the chapter, discussed her difficulty in acquiring land. After the death of her father, Peyton, in 1849, she remarked to her former master that the settlement of Peyton’s estate did not enrich her. Apparently, Peyton Skipwith’s debtors had seized his estate, and his daughter did not inherit anything aside from his “3 or 4 lots in town,” which were “not worth nothing.”<sup>90</sup> Almost a decade after her father’s death, she recalled this injustice done to her, and used it to explain why she still did not have enough to support herself and her family. While her brother Nash Skipwith – who did not have a family to support, she noted – was allowed to live in her father’s house after his death, she was on her own.<sup>91</sup> Was Peyton Skipwith’s will unique in that it favored his son over his daughter and her family, or was this the common practice? Does Matilda Lomax’s recounting of her loss of the land she felt should have been hers suggest that she *expected* to be the primary recipient of her father’s estate, despite her gender? Might this suggest that other women in Liberia *did* inherit instead of sons, and was this perhaps this was the source of Lomax’s frustration? Land would have been of vital importance for a formerly enslaved population that was legally defined as property in the United States. It is no wonder that the land deeds and wills chronicled in the archives were integral to settlers’ sense of self and society, as

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<sup>90</sup> Matilda (Skipwith) Richardson to Sally Cocke Brent, July 24, 1858, Box 16, “Bremo Recess” Papers, Deposit of Mrs. Raymond Orf, Special Collections, University of Virginia.

<sup>91</sup> Matilda (Skipwith) Richardson to John Hartwell Cocke, October 18, 1851, Box 138, Cocke Family Papers.

Matilda (Skipwith) Richardson showed in her bitter remembrance of what happened with her father's estate.<sup>92</sup>

Land grants in the Liberian settlements were predicated on the dispossession of indigenous West African people. All of these land transactions among settlers – including Ashmun's grants to settlers, the inheritance passed to settler women's children, and Matilda Richardson's inheritance of her father's town lots – were legitimated by a colonizing power, the Liberian government, which was constantly shifting in its march from colony to commonwealth to republic. The questions concerning who had the authority to sell land to settlers, and whether these rights were simply usage rights or property rights, were not limited to the settler community. After arrival in Liberia, settlers soon found themselves in conflict with native people over land rights, especially the Dei (Dey), who had refused to sell land to the government or settlers. After nearly a decade of conflict over this refusal to sell land that periodically bubbled to the surface, Dei leaders launched a full-scale attack on the American settlements in 1832. They were ultimately unsuccessful, and the settlements of Americans continued to grow. This was the last major effort by the Dei to oppose the transfer of land.

By the 1840s, the response of the Liberian government to other indigenous groups' opposition to colonization was to allot land to individuals – not to the group as whole. An 1846 resolution of the Liberian Legislative Council attempted to bring indigenous people living near American settlements into the fold by requiring individuals to register the number of people residing in their household, the location of their residence, and their occupation first with their chief, and then with the Liberian government. From this information, the government allotted land to individuals, and warned them that they should “apprise them[selves] of the difficulties to

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<sup>92</sup> Dylan Penningroth has shown how property ownership helped create community and family bonds among African Americans in the American South. Dylan C. Penningroth, *The Claims of Kinfolk: African American Property and Community in the Nineteenth-Century South* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2003).

which they will expose themselves by trespassing on either public or private property.” This legislative act was an attempt to impose an American understanding of land rights onto a group of people whom the Liberian government considered “unsettled.” The Dei, Gola, and Vai people living in the vicinity Montserrado County typically understood land to be for the use of all in the village.<sup>93</sup>

The Dei, as well as other groups living near the settlements in Montserrado County also practiced polygyny, with multiple wives performing agricultural labor in the community. It does not appear that indigenous women received land allotments, and it is unclear how the Liberian government defined “household” for indigenous people. For the Dei and other groups in the region, a household may or may not have included a person’s family – not all wives lived in their husband’s household. Whether intended or not, the effect of the Liberian government’s land allotment plan struck a blow to polygyny and signaled an attempt to institutionalize monogamous marriage.

Though scholarly studies of colonization maintain that the work of colonization was a manly enterprise, the sources indicate the ACS awarded women land, women sold this land, and women passed this land onto their family members and friends with surprising regularity. The next section of this chapter suggests that marriage, like land allotment, was a key constructor of Liberian society, and it, too, reflected a gendered order of society.

## **MARRIAGE AND DIVORCE: THE CONSTRUCTION OF FAMILY**

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<sup>93</sup> Eighth Session of Council, Jan 5-Jan 17 1846, Folder 24, Box 4, Liberian Government Archives, Part 1, Svend Holsoe Collection, Liberian Collections, Indiana University; Svend E. Holsoe, “A Study of Relations between Settlers and Indigenous Peoples in Western Liberia, 1821-1847,” *African Historical Studies* 4, No. 2 (1971): 331-362; Mary Moran, *Liberia: The Violence of Democracy* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2006); Claude A. Clegg III, *The Price of Liberty: African Americans and the Making of Liberia* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004).

The ship *Elizabeth* sailed from Virginia and arrived on Sherbro Island, Sierra Leone in March, 1820. It was the first of many that would arrive from the United States to West Africa carrying African American settlers to their new home. The American Colonization Society believed that first arriving in the established British colony of Sierra Leone would make Liberian migration run smoothly, and Paul Cuffee, the African American and Wampanoag sea captain, had previously settled two groups of African Americans in Sierra Leone in 1811 and 1816. Daniel Coker, a missionary of the African Methodist Episcopal Church, was on board the *Elizabeth* and quickly became a leader for the group of settlers as they were ravaged by disease at Sherbro.

The survivors of this very first migration were joined in March of the next year by another group of settlers, arriving on the *Nautilus*. This second ship carried some of the families that would be foundational in forming colonist society, as well as several missionaries. On board was the Baptist missionary Lott Cary, one of the first African American missionaries sent from the United States.<sup>94</sup> Other important families, including the Teagues, as well as Maria Coker (wife of Daniel) and their two children, arrived on the *Nautilus*.<sup>95</sup> On board the ship, and cramped in its small cabins, were a group of four white missionaries and supporters of colonization, including Christian Wiltberger, an Assistant Agent for the ACS and a minister of the Presbyterian church. Wiltberger kept a diary of his voyage in the *Nautilus*, and recorded in it the development the colonists' society in Fourah Bay.

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<sup>94</sup> Cary's name is sometimes rendered as "Carey." I have chosen to spell it "Cary," as it is the spelling used in the 1837 account of his life. James B. Taylor, *Biography of Elder Lott Cary, Late Missionary to Africa* (Baltimore: Armstrong & Berry, 1837).

<sup>95</sup> Brig *Nautilus*, arrived at Sierra Leone March 8, 1821, *Roll of emigrants that have been sent to the colony of Liberia, Western Africa, by the American Colonization Society and its auxiliaries, to September, 1843, Information relative to the operations of the United States squadron on the west coast of Africa, the condition of the American colonies there, and the commerce of the United States therewith*, 28th Congress, 2d. Session, S. Doc. 150, serial 458.

Wiltberger's diary is an important source for tracing the early history of the Liberian colonization project. The source can be used to glean the various ways settlers, missionaries, and ACS agents came into conflict, even on board the *Nautilus*. Wiltberger himself served multiple roles on board the ship, as did other ministers and settlers, but came to serve as Acting Agent after the death of Joseph Andrus, who died shortly after his arrival at Fourah Bay.<sup>96</sup> Wiltberger's account of the new American settlement in West Africa chronicled the conflicts and difficulties encountered by the passengers on the *Nautilus* and their relationship with the passengers of the *Elizabeth*. One pivotal conflict centered around religious authority, and in particular, the right to perform marriage ceremonies.

As part of his duties as ACS agent, Wiltberger was responsible for keeping the peace among the various denominations represented by the settlers and missionaries. Wiltberger might have understood that in the United States, the racial hierarchy of antebellum culture vested authority in the figure of a white man – but this construction seemed to evaporate, even as quickly as when the settlers and missionaries camped out in the ship to Fourah Bay. Wiltberger seemed surprised that Colin Teague and Lott Cary did not agree with him in his interpretation of God's role in the death of sinners.<sup>97</sup> In addition to debating doctrine and observing religious meetings – interactions in which Wiltberger seemed to have played a passive role in watching the settlers practice worship in their own ways, rather than put his ministerial training to use – he also went down to steerage to watch African American congregants practice their faith. If Wiltberger preached for the settlers on the ship, he did not make note of it. Instead, he observed African Americans, including Lott Cary, Colin Teage, R.H. Sampson, as well as others he did

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<sup>96</sup> Harry Johnston, *Liberia*, Vol. 1 (London: Hutchinson, 1906), pp. 126-128; Elwood Dunn, Amos Beyan, and Carl Patrick Burrowes, *Historical Dictionary of Liberia*, second edition (Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press, 2001), 67.

<sup>97</sup> January 28, 1821, Christian Wiltberger Diary, Christian Wiltberger Papers, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress (hereafter cited as "Wiltberger Diary").

not know, as they led services in the belly of the ship.<sup>98</sup> Wiltberger's observations about religious services on the *Nautilus* suggested that even before arriving in West Africa, the settlers started to form a community that African Americans led and supported themselves.

In his diary, Wiltberger also noted births, deaths, and marriages among the settlers. These marriages among settlers were not simply civil affairs. Typically performed by a minister, the question of marriage – and who had the authority to perform marriages – became a sticky point in a colony comprised of individuals divided both by racial and denominational lines, and in a space where the hierarchy of these designations might not have held true. In the context of colonial Liberia, marriage was a key institution in giving shape and structure to society. There was indeed much debate about how marriage ceremonies could be performed – and who could perform them, from the *Nautilus* on.

Wiltberger recorded in his diary that there was some disagreement on who had the religious authority to marry two colonists, Mrs. Theare and Allen James. James had secured African Methodist Episcopal (AME) minister Daniel Coker to perform the marriage.<sup>99</sup> Wiltberger, who had already come into conflict with Coker, expressed his distaste for Coker to the groom. After this, James asked Lott Cary, an African American missionary for the Baptists, to perform the marriage; Cary declined. Wiltberger then attempted to get R.H. Sampson to perform the marriage, who also declined. After Coker married Theare and James – in Wiltberger's home, no less – another African American Baptist missionary, Colin Teague, expressed alarm at Coker's having performed the marriage.<sup>100</sup>

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<sup>98</sup> February 9, 1821; February 11, 1821; March 2, 1821; March 3, 1821, Wiltberger Diary.

<sup>99</sup> I have not been able to identify a "Mrs. Theare" elsewhere in the records. No person with this name appears on the registers for the *Elizabeth* or the *Nautilus*. Allen James died in 1830, so he does not appear in the census of 1843. It is possible that Mrs. Theare was a Sierra Leonean or a recaptive African.

<sup>100</sup> September 27, 1821, Wiltberger Diary.

What was at stake in the Theare-James marriage? The act of performing a marriage would have given the officiant religious legitimacy. But Coker had already been preaching in Fourah Bay, an act that would have given him considerable religious authority in the colony, despite Wiltberger's misgivings about Methodism.<sup>101</sup> The act of marriage seems to have been more than just a religious ceremony – it was, for the first time for many African American settlers who were formerly enslaved, the first time their marriages might have been civilly recognized.

One of the most startling points of comparison between African Americans who remained in the United States and those that migrated to Liberia was access to fundamental civil rights – in particular, the right to marry. It is well documented that marriages between enslaved people were not recognized by any civil jurisdiction in the antebellum United States. As Amy Dru Stanley, Brenda Stevenson, and Nancy Cott, among others, have shown, African American family life in slavery was subject to the capricious violence of the chattel slavery system. Denied the right to marry, relationships between enslaved men and women were regularly torn asunder at the slave auction block. Slaves, and free people married to slaves, remade their families as relatives were hired out and sold off. Herbert Gutman noted that Virginian slaves were subject to having family members sold off at a greater frequency than slaves in the Lower South. As Deborah Gray White and others have noted, slave women were encouraged to marry, as their children would become the enslaved property of their masters. Many slaves married other slaves belonging to a different master and living on different plantations, a practice called an “abroad” marriage.<sup>102</sup> The ability for white women to marry, and the legal fiction of creating one “person”

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<sup>101</sup> June 22, 1821; June 24, 1821, Wiltberger Diary.

<sup>102</sup> Gutman, *The Black Family in Slavery and Freedom*, 129; Deborah Gray White, *Aren't I a Woman?: Female Slaves in the Plantation South* (New York: Norton, 1985); Brenda Stevenson, *Life in Black and White: Family and Community in the Slave South* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997); Amy Dru Stanley, *From Bondage to*

in marriage occurred precisely because African American women were denied these same rights.<sup>103</sup> The constant threat – and enactment – of sexual violence that African American women faced also limited how and when they could form romantic relationships. Still, partnerships between enslaved African Americans prevailed despite the uncertainty and violence of slavery. Settlers in Liberia did not need to fear their family units being split apart by a slave master, but they did have to consider the possibility of deaths in the family, particularly because of their susceptibility to illness and disease – in particular, malaria.

Marriage among enslaved people in the United States was a varied practice that differed between regions. Most helpful for comparison with colonial Liberia, perhaps, is marriage practices in Virginia, since about 3,700 of the Liberian settlers hailed from that state.<sup>104</sup>

Furthermore, elite settlers who became influential in Liberian politics, such as Lott Cary, Colston Waring, Joseph Jenkins Roberts, Nathaniel Brander, and Hilary Teague were Virginians, as Marie Tyler-McGraw notes in her study of Virginians involved in Liberian colonization.<sup>105</sup> Substantive scholarly work on African and African American family life exists for Virginia and can provide a point of examination and comparison for understanding similar practices in colonial Liberia.

In her work on family life in Virginia, Brenda Stevenson argues that most slaves had short weddings, which could involve practices such as “jumping the broom” to mark the

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*Contract: Wage Labor, Marriage, and the Market in the Age of Slave Emancipation* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1998); Nancy Cott, *Public Vows: A History of Marriage and the Nation* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2002); Stephanie Camp, *Closer to Freedom: Enslaved Women and Everyday Resistance in the Plantation South* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004).

<sup>103</sup> Kathleen Brown, *Good Wives, Nasty Wenches, and Anxious Patriarchs*.

<sup>104</sup> Emigrants Database, *Virginia Emigrants to Liberia*, Virginia Center for Digital History, University of Virginia, <http://www.vcdh.virginia.edu/liberia/index.php?page=Virginia%20Emigrants%20To%20Liberia>.

<sup>105</sup> Cary and Waring served as Vice Agents of the ACS in addition to their work as Baptist ministers. Roberts was the first black Governor of Liberia and later, its first president. Brander served as Colonial Agent and Associate Justice of the Liberian Supreme Court in the Commonwealth of Liberia and later became the first Vice President of Liberia. Teague wrote the Liberian Declaration of Independence, and later served as the first Liberian Secretary of State and joined the Liberian Senate. Marie Tyler-McGraw, *An African Republic: Black and White Virginians in the Making of Liberia* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2007), especially 150-170.



marriage ceremony. Stevenson argues that this practice likely had Anglo-Saxon origins, not African ones, and was imposed on enslaved people by masters attempting to make light of the familial bonds of slaves. However, she notes that the practice took on important significance for slaves, who remade this practice to reflect the significance of the marriage for themselves.<sup>106</sup> Few slaves were able to have their marriage recognized by clergy, though Biblical words may have been read at some marriage ceremonies.

The right to be married in a formalized ceremony and not to risk having the marriage torn apart was a new one for African Americans in Liberia. Scholars have documented the lengths slaves and freed people would go to in order to maintain and reinforce their familial bonds. Ted Maris-Wolf's work on re-enslavement law in Virginia shows how some free African Americans chose to be enslaved (or re-enslaved, following manumission) in order to remain in close proximity to their spouses and children. Virginia's 1806 law required freed people over the age of twenty-one to get permission to remain in the state; by 1856, some African Americans pushed for a voluntary re-enslavement law that would allow former slaves to remain in Virginia with their families at the expense of their freedom, while thousands of freed slaves remained in Virginia illegally and subject to expulsion or re-enslavement in order to remain with their family and kin connections.<sup>107</sup> Heather Williams has uncovered a similar story about the perseverance of African American familial bonds beyond slavery in her work on slaves' attempts to find and connect with family members who had been sold away. After the American Civil War, former slaves continued to reconnect with their family members lost in slavery, even as former slaves

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<sup>106</sup> Stevenson, *Life in Black and White*, 228-231.

<sup>107</sup> Ted Maris-Wolf, *Family Bonds: Free Black and Re-enslavement Law in Antebellum Virginia* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2015).

remarried.<sup>108</sup> Maris-Wolf's and Williams' work shows the great importance freed and enslaved people placed on their marriages and familial bonds. No wonder, then, that authority over who had the right to perform marriages became a central question in colonial Liberia.

As Christian Wiltberger noted in his diary from his time on the *Nautilus*, the marriage of Mrs. Theare and Allen James was subject to public scrutiny focused on which religious authority should administer the marriage. Daniel Coker, the AME minister who performed the marriage despite Wiltberger's objections, did not join the Liberian colony but instead became a leading member of the Krio (or creole) group of American- and European- descended peoples in Sierra Leone.<sup>109</sup> Lott Cary, the Baptist minister who refused to perform the marriage, founded the first church in Liberia and became a successful tobacco merchant and leader of the colony, briefly taking over for agent Jehudi Ashmun following his death.<sup>110</sup> Colin Teague, another Baptist minister, took over Cary's church after Cary's accidental death in a gunpowder explosion in 1828. Teague was the father of Hilary Teague, who later penned the Liberian Declaration of Independence and served as a Senator and Secretary of State. As discussed below, it was Hilary Teague who first introduced Samuel Parson's petition for divorce to the Liberian Senate. African American settlers in Liberia quickly established a political hierarchy that built upon religious authority. Marriages themselves, too, seemed to be both a religious and civil enterprise.

In her study of marriage in the United States, Nancy Cott examines how marriage, as a public institution, shaped the United States' national agenda for a gender order. Cott suggests that the "public affirmation" of marriage was a key component: the "public" in "public vows"

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<sup>108</sup> Heather Williams, *Help Me to Find My People: The African American Search for Family Lost in Slavery* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2012).

<sup>109</sup> Daniel Coker faced opposition among the founders of Liberia because his religious affiliation. Bronwen Everill, *Abolition and Empire in Sierra Leone and Liberia* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), especially 22-32.

<sup>110</sup> On Lott Cary, see Ralph Randolph Gurley, "Sketch of the Life of the Rev. Lott Cary," in *Life of Jehudi Ashmun, Late Colonial Agent in Liberia* (Washington: James C. Dunn, 1835); James B. Taylor, *Biography of Elder Lott Cary, Late Missionary to Africa* (Baltimore: Armstrong and Berry, 1837). For more on Lott Cary's work as a tobacco merchant, see Chapter 5 of this dissertation.

suggests that marriage in the United States fell into the purview of both local society and the federal government. Cott also argues that in the United States, the secular authorization of marriage grew out of a particular history of church and state conflict in Europe: conflicts that Americans were not eager to repeat in North America.<sup>111</sup>

Though religious authorities (who more often than not also held civil and political authority, as well) performed marriages, in Liberia, as in the United States, the marriage was subject to public affirmation. The Liberian colony's major newspapers, the *Liberia Herald* and *Africa's Luminary*, posted the marriage banns in their columns. In both papers, the marriage notices appeared along side the reports of deaths, the marine list of ships coming into port and leaving, and news of goods prices as well as shipments received and for sale. In the *Herald*, marriage announcements could appear just before the results of political nominations or the results of elections. Along with the name of the bride and groom, the newspaper documented the officiant – always a minister – as well as the town where the new family resided. For instance, the *Herald* for July 22, 1831 announced the marriages of Miles White and Annica Outlin in Millsburg by Rev. Charles Butler; Levi Cartwright and Mary Barbour in Monrovia by Rev. Elijah Johnson; William Fox and Mary Ann Boston in Monrovia also by Rev. Elijah Johnson; and Samuel White and Anne Taylor in Caldwell by Rev. Solomon Bailey. This news was immediately followed by the announcement of candidates for Vice Agent, Councilors, High Sheriff, Treasurer, the Committee of Health, the Committee of Agriculture, and the Colonial Printer.<sup>112</sup> The public displaying of marriages had multiple purposes: as in other societies, it allowed the marriage to be subject to public approval and to ensure the suitable marriagability of both parties. Marriage banns were also published in African Americans newspaper in the United

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<sup>111</sup> Nancy Cott, *Public Vows: A History of Marriage and the Nation* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2000).

<sup>112</sup> *Liberia Herald*, 2, No. 5 (July 22, 1831).

States. *Freedom's Journal*, the first African American newspaper, regularly published marriage banns, starting with its second issue. The March 23, 1827 edition of the paper announced that Mr. Henry Stevens, from Virginia, was married to Mrs. Elizabeth Dixon of New York.<sup>113</sup>

The Liberian newspapers, by placing the announcement of marriage alongside notices of nominations for political office, made the marriages a type of “public vow,” as Cott describes in her study of the United States. However, unlike in the United States, where Cott argues church-state balance was highlighted through the secularization of marriage, in Liberia, it appears that the convergence of religious and secular authority was not an issue for the settler population. For instance, Elijah Johnson, the African American minister who married two of the couples featured in the *Liberia Herald* for July 22, 1831, had previously served as an interim colonial agent before the appointment of Jehudi Ashmun. Indeed, Johnson’s family remained active in political life in Liberia throughout the nineteenth century: Elijah Johnson’s son, Hilary Johnson, served as President of Liberia from 1884 until 1892.

Given that marriage was so central to both the ACS’ plan for land acquisition and the settlers’ sense of family bonds, dissolving marriages was no easy task. Deborah Gray White reads the dissolution of slave marriages as evidence of some level of autonomy enslaved women attempted to keep over their own lives even as they were subjected to the horrors of slavery. Because enslaved women did not depend on their husbands for their homes, food, or clothing, she argues, they were not forced by necessity to remain in unhappy marriages, as free women might have been. However, she notes, enslaved women might only have been allowed to divorce their husbands if they had chosen a new husband, as their masters would have wanted the

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<sup>113</sup> *Freedom's Journal* 1, No. 2 (March 23, 1827).

enslaved women to continue to bear children.<sup>114</sup> Divorce seems to have been a more complex matter in Liberia, however.

On December 5, 1849, Senator Hilary Teague presented the Liberian Senate with a petition he had received from Samuel H. Parson. Parson wished to be divorced from his wife, Mary Ann. The petition was read, and referred to a committee in the House. The next week, Senator James B. McGill, a successful Monrovia merchant, read two letters from Mary Ann Parson. In the letters, she asserted that she, too, agreed with her husband that the two should be divorced. However, Mary Ann Parson's letter also suggested that she had received "ill treatment" at the hands of her husband. The matter was then referred to the Senate's committee on "for miscellaneous purposes." At 4:00 pm, the legislative record notes, the Senate decided that the divorce should be granted to the Parsons, on the condition that Samuel H. Parson pay Mary Ann Parson a \$24 per annum – an alimony payment. Thus, on the day that Mary Ann Parson had her letters read in the Senate, she was granted a divorce that was "passed into a law."<sup>115</sup>

What was the "ill treatment" that Mary Ann Parson received from her husband? Why, contrary to the patterns of divorce petitioners to the Liberian legislature in 1840, did her husband initiate the divorce proceedings? The Parson divorce case raises many questions that cannot be answered with the limited archival materials that remain concerning Liberia in the 1840s. No substantial legislative records about marriage from the first two decades of Liberian settlement have been found. These might have been preserved in the Liberian Government Archives, unfortunately, the majority of nineteenth century materials housed there were likely destroyed in

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<sup>114</sup> White, *Ar'n't I a Woman?*, 157-160.

<sup>115</sup> December 5, 1849; December 14, 1849, Senate Minutes, Folder 34, Box 4, Svend E. Holsoe Collection, Liberian Collections, Indiana University.

the Liberian Civil Conflict of the 1980s and 1990s.<sup>116</sup> However, the archival material from the colonial, and later, national, legislative archive in the 1840s provides a window into understanding how marriage, divorce, and adoption were regulated.<sup>117</sup>

The institution of marriage itself seems to have been controlled by religious authorities in the colony. However, in the first half of the nineteenth century, there was significant overlap between religious and civil authority. Divorce, on the other hand, seems to have been solely a civil issue. As with the divorce of Samuel Parson and Mary Ann Parson, all records of divorce from early nineteenth century colonial and early republic Liberia are from the legislative record. Of the fifteen identifiable divorce records available in the Legislative archive, it seems that only four divorces were definitively granted.<sup>118</sup> Of these, the Parson case is unique in that it is the only one to level a charge at one party – the “ill treatment” Mary Ann Parson claimed against her husband – and the only one to award an alimony payment. It was the only case in which the Senate explicitly claimed one party to be at fault. Apparently, the House objected to the stipulation that Samuel Parson should pay his former wife \$24 per annum: they attempted to amend the bill granting divorce to remove the alimony obligation. After deliberation by Senators

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<sup>116</sup> Osborne, “A Note on the Liberian Archives.” My field research in Monrovia in July 2010 leads me to agree with Osborne, that much of the material from the early nineteenth century that had been held in the Liberian Government Archives no longer exists. However, the work of reconstituting the archive is ongoing in partnership with the Liberian Collections Project at Indiana University, an underutilized source for examining the history of Liberia and colonization.

<sup>117</sup> My discussion of the Liberian legislature comes from an investigation of the notes and copies taken by anthropologist Svend Holsoe during his research in Liberia before the start of the Civil Conflict. These are housed as part of the Liberian Collections Project at Indiana University. The records available there from the Senate and House in Liberia date from the 1840s. While it would be ahistorical to project backward and assume that the institution of marriage was treated the same in 1849 as it was in 1822, the source material at hand does give a sense of legislation around marriage in both pre- and post-independence (achieved in 1847) Liberia.

<sup>118</sup> However, the archival record of the Legislature, available only at the Liberian Collections at Indiana University, is of course incomplete. More divorces might have been granted in the decade 1843-1853 that are not reflected in the archive. See Box 4, Svend E. Holsoe Collection, Liberian Collections, Indiana University.

James B. McGill and James Brown, the Senate decided not to amend the bill further – it appears they accepted the House’s view that no alimony should be provided to Mary Ann Parson.<sup>119</sup>

Why did the Liberian Legislature refuse to award alimony to Parson after deliberating the issue? Alimony was not mentioned at all in any of the fourteen other divorce cases in the record. Perhaps the payment was the result of the “ill treatment” – whatever that entailed – Parson described in her two letters to the Legislature. The only other case to which “charges” of an unknown nature were referred was the divorce case of Matilda and John Jones in 1846. In the Jones case, the Senate decided to wait until “such evidence can be provided” as to support the “charges” Matilda Jones made in her petition to them. Apparently, no such evidence ever materialized, and Matilda Jones’ petition was refused in January of the following year.<sup>120</sup> It seems likely that the “charges” Jones made against her husband were similar to the charges of “ill treatment” Mary Ann Parsons brought against her own husband. Unfortunately, what these women said to the Legislature about their marriages was not recorded in the archives. However, in the eyes of the Liberian Legislature, it appears that the evidence leveraged by Mary Ann Parson was more convincing than that of Matilda Jones.

The decision to not award Parson alimony might have been, in part, due to the understanding that most eligible unmarried people in Liberia quickly remarried following the death of a spouse. As settler Matilda (Skipwith) Richardson wrote in a letter to her former master after the death of her fiancé, a first husband, and second husband, “I am doing as well as lone

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<sup>119</sup> December 5, 1849; December 14, 1849; December 17, 1849, Senate Minutes, Folder 34, Box 4, Svend E. Holsoe Collection, Liberian Collections, Indiana University; December 16, 1849, House Minutes, Folder 15, Box 5, Svend E. Holsoe Collection, Liberian Collections, Indiana University.

<sup>120</sup> Eighth Session of Council, January 5 – January 17, 1846, Legislative Minutes; Ninth Session of Council, January 4 – January [?], 1847, Legislative Minutes, Folder 24, Box 4, Svend E. Holsoe Collection, Liberian Collections, Indiana University.

woman situated as I am could expect to do.”<sup>121</sup> The suggestion in Richardson’s letter was, of course, that “lone” women were not expected to do well at all. The prospect of being a “lone” woman in colonial and early republic Liberia likely arose in two situations – divorce, and death.

Death was a common theme in discussions of Liberian colonization. In the antebellum period, many Americans knew of Liberia only from newspaper reports, stories, and rumors. The discourse of diseased climate and unhealthy bodies, in particular, gained resonance as reports from visitors to the settlements circulated in the United States. In the editorial in which *Freedom’s Journal* reversed the newspaper’s opinion on Liberian colonization in March of 1829, reports of disease in Liberia were directly addressed. The editorial suggested that the news of disease coming from West Africa were solely about the settlements at nearby Sierra Leone, and did not reflect the reality of the situation in Liberia. The editorial claimed, “That Sierra Leone is unhealthy is no argument that Liberia must be too.” Furthermore, the editorial praised the colony in Liberia, comparing it with the English settlement in Jamestown, Virginia and suggesting that Liberian settlers “will not have, to encounter one hundredth part of the hardships which the first settlers in Virginia and Plymouth had to undergo.”<sup>122</sup>

The writer of the article was almost certainly John Brown Russwurm. Russwurm, who was born to an enslaved black mother and a white planter father, benefited from his father’s recognition and was highly educated. Before joining *Freedom’s Journal*, Russwurm had been one of the first black men to graduate from Bowdoin College in Maine. From there, he rose from a junior editor position at the *Freedom’s Journal* to senior editor by 1829, the year he penned the editorial supporting colonization. Later that year, Russwurm departed for Liberia.<sup>123</sup>

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<sup>121</sup> Matilda (Skipwith) Richardson to John Hartwell Cocke, January 27, 1852, Box 139, Cocke Family Papers.

<sup>122</sup> *Freedom’s Journal*, March 7, 1829.

<sup>123</sup> Russwurm is discussed in Chapter 5 of this dissertation. For more on his work with *Freedom’s Journal* and his changing views on colonization in Liberia, see Amos J. Beyan, *African American Settlements in West Africa: John*



Russwurm's response to the allegations that the Liberian settlements were diseased, unhealthy places was a necessary one. The ACS and other supporters of colonization constantly had to contend with reports that the climate of West Africa was inhospitable for American settlement. In the first decade of Liberian colonization, reports from Sierra Leone were printed and reprinted in American newspapers. Two years before Russwurm printed his editorial in *Freedom's Journal*, the same newspaper shrewdly placed news about Charles Mercer's address to the United States House of Representatives, and his request for funding for the American Colonization Society, next to a report from Sierra Leone. This report from Sierra Leone, originally printed in the *New York Enquirer*, stated that 1,621 people were sent from England to Sierra Leone, and that 926 had died. The article explicitly linked failure in Sierra Leone with the foolishness of the ACS and the Liberian mission, stating, "Yet this is a part of the world, to which our philanthropists wish to deport the unhappy blacks of the United States."<sup>124</sup> Until Russwurm took the helm of *Freedom's Journal* and reversed his opinion on Liberian colonization, the views of the paper were decidedly against colonization. Print, *Freedom's Journal*, and Russwurm's decision to migrate to Liberia are discussed in depth in Chapter 3 of this dissertation.

Disease continually plagued the Liberian settlements and, after independence in 1847, the Liberian nation. Antonio McDaniel has calculated the death rate of settlers to Liberia for the period before 1843, and concludes that the rate of mortality was higher in Liberia than in other nineteenth century colonial contexts.<sup>125</sup> The high death rate in Liberia must have affected family patterns. Marriage could be a powerful stabilizing force in an otherwise unstable settler society.

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*Brown Russwurm and the American Civilizing Efforts* (New York: Palgrave, 2005) and Winston James, *The Struggles of John Brown Russwurm: The Life and Writings of a Pan-Africanist Pioneer, 1799-1851* (New York: New York University Press, 2010).

<sup>124</sup> *Freedom's Journal* 1, No. 1, March 16, 1827.

<sup>125</sup> McDaniel, *Swing Low, Sweet Chariot*.

Remarriage and integrating children from previous marriages did not seem to pose a problem for settlers or for the civil government of the Liberian colony and nation of Liberia. Matilda Skipwith, for instance, was engaged to one man, who tragically drowned around 1842. She married a printer, cooper, and clerk named Samuel Lomax in 1847. The two had four children; two of them, Eliza Adala and Lydia Ann, survived until adulthood. Some time in the late 1840s, Samuel Lomax drowned. She later married James Richardson in 1854 and had a child sometime before Richardson's death in 1860. Within the household, she cared for her children, as well as her cousin, James Skipwith, who migrated to Liberia by himself.<sup>126</sup>

However, death was not the only factor in complicating marriage relationships in early Liberia. James Skipwith, for instance, left a wife and two children behind when he left Virginia for Liberia in 1858. Skipwith did not intentionally leave his family behind: each of them had been enslaved and subjected to the demands placed upon them by the Cocke family, who owned them. While James Skipwith was able to earn enough money to free himself and be sent to Liberia, his wife and two children were not as fortunate. Skipwith spent the remainder of his life trying to earn enough money to send for his family. He never remarried.<sup>127</sup> Being forced to leave behind some family members seemed common among the colonists who arrived in Liberia. Randall Kilby, a formerly enslaved man from Virginia, also left behind a wife and at least one daughter in the United States when he departed for Liberia in 1854. Kilby, however, brought along his freed wife, Chaney, as well as their children George Washington, Solomon Mcguire, and Moses Abner. Their one-year-old son, Abraham Joseph, died en route to Liberia. Randall

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<sup>126</sup> Matilda (Skipwith) Richardson to John Hartwell Cocke, October 18, 1851, Box 138, Matilda Skipwith Lomax Richardson to Sally Cocke Brent, July 4, 1848, Box 125; Matilda Skipwith Lomax Richardson to John Hartwell Cocke, September 30, 1850, Box 134; Matilda (Skipwith) Richardson to John Hartwell Cocke, January 27, 1852, Box 139; Matilda (Skipwith) Richardson to John Hartwell Cocke and Sally Cocke Brent, June 20, 1854, Box 146; all in Cocke Family Papers.

<sup>127</sup> James Skipwith to Berthier Edwards, May 31, 1860; James Skipwith to John Hartwell Cocke, March 29, 1852, Box 139; July 17, 1858, Box 155; August 20, 1859, Box 157; July 10, 1860, Box 160; all in Cocke Family Papers.

and Chaney Kilby had triplets after landing in Liberia: they named the children John Early Wesley Gay, Amelia Ann, and Commodore Perry.<sup>128</sup>

The high death rate also required that families be blended. Solomon Bailey, a Methodist minister, lost his first wife upon their arrival to Liberia in 1834. Accounting to his biographer, Bailey then married “a woman of large family.” While Bailey and his new wife raised this “large family” together, apparently family life was not easy. The biographer reported that, “In this second marriage, he was not as happy in spiritual matters as previously, but seemed to bear his domestic troubles with Christian fortitude.”<sup>129</sup> Women, too, married into families and took on the care of children that were not their own. Ruth Brown, 20, married James Brown (who would serve in the Liberian Senate in 1848 and be one of the two men who decided not to award Mary Ann Parson alimony from her husband), who was twenty years her senior. Ruth presumably looked after James’ children: James, 21; Charles, 17; Ann Liberia, 12; and Mary Ann, 5.<sup>130</sup>

The high death rate in Liberia was not the only reason why such importance was placed on the regulation of families. Articulations of the importance of land and marriage – as defined by the ACS and the African American settlers in Liberia – were designed in explicit opposition to the indigenous groups that settlers encountered on a daily basis. Scholars studying American encounters with non-Europeans have examined the concept of holding wealth in land versus holding wealth in people in depth. It would be possible to suggest this formulation and suggest that American understandings of power – related to property rights – were fundamentally

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<sup>128</sup> Randall Kilby to John R. Kilby, June 26, 1856, Box 4, Folder 2, John Richardson Kilby Papers, David M. Rubenstein Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Duke University. Kilby immigrated to Liberia on the ship *Sophia Walker* in 1854 under the name Randal Bunch. Apparently, while living in Liberia, he changed his surname to Kilby. The ship listing for Bunch/Kilby can be found in *The African Repository* 30, No. 7 (July, 1854): 214-217. See also Craig M. Kilby, “The Kelley Brothers and the American Colonization Society: From Northumberland County to Liberia,” *The Bulletin of the Northumberland County Historical Society* 45 (2008): 34-53.

<sup>129</sup> *Africa’s Luminary* 1, No. 17 (November 15, 1839).

<sup>130</sup> Census of the Colony of Liberia, September 1843, Town of Monrovia, “Information relative to the operations of the United States squadron on the west coast of Africa, the condition of the American colonies there, and the commerce of the United States therewith,” 28th Congress, 2d. Session, S. Doc. 150, serial 458.

different than indigenous understandings of power – related to the amount of people one person could control. This concept, though perhaps useful, can become too readily exportable to stand in for understandings of “wealth” in studies of indigenous people across the world. It would also explain why polygyny was central to the familial lives of the indigenous West Africans the settlers encountered in Liberia. A man who had multiple wives was wealthy enough to care for them and their children, and in turn, they provided necessary labor for the family.<sup>131</sup>

## CONCLUSION

A final example from the land deed register of Montserrado County is instructive in illustrating the complexities of defining the household in early nineteenth century Liberia. According to the register, Susanna Boston received most of the holdings of Jacob Warner, her father, in 1835. Though Werner was not a Virginian, as many of the settlers discussed in this chapter were, he was from Maryland, a comparable state in the Upper South. Jacob Warner, a former slave, was member of Liberia’s emerging elite. Jacob Warner’s son, Daniel Warner, became the third president of Liberia in 1864. However, he was not mentioned in his father’s will. Another daughter, Matilda Warner, and Henrietta Warner, a “formerly bound girl” also inherited land from Warner.<sup>132</sup> The status of this “formerly bound girl” is unclear – very likely, she was a recaptive indigenous African who had been taken from a slave ship caught by the U.S.

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<sup>131</sup> Anthropologist Caroline Bledsoe makes this argument about “wealth in people” in her study of modern Kpelle women. However, as Bledsoe notes, Kpelle people have only recently begun working and living in the Monrovia region where the settlers were located – they were not present in the same numbers during the early nineteenth century. How many of the African American settlers of early nineteenth century Liberia would have encountered Kpelle men and women? It seems unlikely that this understanding of wealth in people would not have changed in the century and a half that separates Liberian colonization from Bledsoe’s fieldwork. Therefore, it may be possible only to suggest that some settlers might have known that indigenous understandings of wealth differed from their own. Perhaps, this may be a reason why the allotment of land became a hinging point for the governance of the colony. Caroline H. Bledsoe, *Women and Marriage in Kpelle Society* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1980).

<sup>132</sup> Will of Jacob Warner, Land Record, JJR Papers.

Navy and returned to Liberia. Many of these recaptives were enrolled into various forms of unfree labor in Liberia, including indentured servitude. Though the local governor legislated and oversaw the treatment of these recaptives, visitors to Liberia frequently remarked on the poor treatment of indigenous people in the settlements.<sup>133</sup> Henrietta Warner, the bound girl, did seem to be incorporated into Liberian society. Her marriage notice appeared in the periodical *The African Repository* two years after she inherited part of Daniel Warner's estate. It is unclear if she married an African American or another recaptive.<sup>134</sup> Henrietta Warner's story is one in which an African woman, who likely had never been to the United States, became kin to a family of African Americans.

In conclusion, the multiple forms of land allotment explored in this section show that though Jehudi Ashmun and the Colonization Society envisioned a colony of male-led farming households, conditions on the ground differed greatly, as land was always contested and the composition of the household family was similarly in flux. The "formerly bound girl" Henrietta Warner's inheritance of land and her marriage in the city of Monrovia suggested that she had become part of Liberian society through her inclusion in the Warner household. Her example is instructive in showing that households in Liberia were indeed more expansive than the Colonization Society had anticipated when it allotted land based on biological family size. When Warner inherited land, and when she married in a settler church, she became part of a complex African and African American society in Liberia. Notions of household and family that African

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<sup>133</sup> Indentured servants were to serve for a term of seven years, provided with clothing, and had to be enrolled in a school at least three months of the year, according to an Act of June 6, 1838, Folder 6, Box 2, Liberian Government Archives, Part 1, Svend Holsoe Collection, Liberian Collections, Indiana University. This law would not have applied to Henrietta Warner, who was apparently no longer bound by 1835.

<sup>134</sup> Ship *Oswego's* Company, arrived at Monrovia, May 24, 1823, *Roll of emigrants that have been sent to the colony of Liberia, Western Africa, by the American Colonization Society and its auxiliaries, to September, 1843, Information relative to the operations of the United States squadron on the west coast of Africa, the condition of the American colonies there, and the commerce of the United States therewith*, 28th Congress, 2d. Session, S. Doc. 150, serial 458; *African Repository* 13, No. 9 (September 1837).

Americans adapted from the United States had to become expansive in order to incorporate people like Henrietta Warner. And though the archival record is unfortunately limited in describing how native peoples encountered and responded to the encroachment of African Americans onto their land, what is clear is that they, too, shaped Liberian colonization.

The next chapter continues this theme of examination of the space between prescriptive ideas of what Liberia might be and what settlers accomplished on the ground. Turning our focus from the ACS to white women who supported educational projects in Liberia, it seeks to understand how white colonization supporters imagined settlers as in need of their benevolent support.

## CHAPTER 2: THE BONDS OF WOMANHOOD, RECONSIDERED

*My daughters have a good time to improve themselves in education for they have nothing else to do much but to go school and I think they will improve  
Dianna keeps up her night school as yet and also is a teacher in the sunday school of the Baptist Church<sup>135</sup>*

In his letter to his former master, Peyton Skipwith highlighted the way in which his daughters would “improve” in Liberia: through education. Diana Skipwith, the eldest of his daughters, was twelve when the family arrived in Liberia in 1834. She had some reading and writing skills, but did not choose to pen her own letter to Virginia that year, and instead asked her father to serve as her amanuensis. In the contents of this letter dictated to her father and addressed to her former master’s daughter, Diana Skipwith discussed the “evry day” school and the Sabbath school she hoped to attend once she had recovered from illness. After recounting the death of her sister, Felicia, she wrote of wishing to return to Virginia. But she noted that she did not want to leave Liberia without her education. “I want to get learning before I come to amirica if I ever Should Come,” she wrote.<sup>136</sup> For Skipwith, her enslaved past was tied in with her hopes for the future: a past that limited her ability to learn to read and write along with a hope that if she could gain this knowledge in Liberia, only then she would return to the United States.

Peyton Skipwith’s letter that opens this chapter reveals how his daughter learned to read and write and what she did with this knowledge. Six years after Diana Skipwith wrote of her desire to get an education and return to the United States, she was teaching in the Baptist Sunday

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<sup>135</sup> Peyton Skipwith to John Hartwell Cocke, April 22, 1840, Box 98, John Hartwell Cocke Papers, Albert and Shirley Small Special Collections Library, University of Virginia.

<sup>136</sup> The letter is written in Peyton Skipwith’s hand. Diana Skipwith to Sally (Cocke) Brent, February 12, 1834, Box 3, Armistead Gordon Papers, Albert and Shirley Small Special Collections Library, University of Virginia.

school in Monrovia while attending night school. Thus Skipwith began serving the community that supported her educational aspirations.

The Skipwith daughters, Diana, Matilda, and perhaps even Felicia and Martha, had received some instruction while enslaved in Virginia.<sup>137</sup> John Hartwell Cocke, their former master, had provided opportunities for the education of slaves on his plantation, Bremono. At Bremono, religious instruction, which included reading and writing practice, occurred in the chapel as well as the Sabbath school. At first, Cocke employed Northern teachers to instruct his slaves. After Cocke's neighbors objected to this practice, presumably because teaching slaves to read or write was illegal in Virginia at this time, Cocke and his second wife, Louisa (Holmes) Cocke took over the teaching duties.<sup>138</sup> In her diary, Louisa Cocke detailed the instruction she provided for slaves at Bremono. In doing so, she joined a small group of other white women, with both pro- and anti-slavery views, who supported the education of former slaves with the intention of sending them to Liberia. The Philadelphia Ladies' Liberia School Association, as well as Cocke's fellow Virginians, Ann Randolph Page and Mary Minor Blackford, supported education in Liberia through a variety of philanthropic efforts.

Although Diana Skipwith learned to read while she was enslaved, she could not write her own letters. "I hope by the next opportunity that I will be able to write my own letters," she expressed in the letter she dictated to her father and sent to Cocke's daughter, Sally (Cocke)

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<sup>137</sup> Upon arrival to Liberia in 1834, Diana was 12, Matilda was 10, Felicia was 6, and Martha was 4. The register of their arrival in Liberia noted that Diana, Matilda, and Felicia knew how to read. Their brother Napoleon, 9, also knew how to read, but Nash, 2, did not. Their mother, Lydia knew how to read. However, the register specified that Peyton Skipwith only knew how to read, which is not consistent with the information from his letter dated February 10, 1834, which clearly evidences his ability to write. Ship *Jupiter's* Company, arrived at Monrovia, January 1, 1834, "Information relative to the operations of the United States squadron on the west coast of Africa, the condition of the American colonies there, and the commerce of the United States therewith," 28th Congress, 2d. Session, S. Doc. 150, serial 458; Peyton Skipwith to John Hartwell Cocke, Box 77, John Hartwell Cocke Papers, Albert and Shirley Small Special Collections Library, University of Virginia.

<sup>138</sup> Randall M. Miller, *Dear Master: Letters of a Slave Family* (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 1990 [1978]), 34.



Brent.<sup>139</sup> Other letters from Diana Skipwith also reveal the ways in which the educational opportunities for slaves at Bremo did not satisfy Skipwith, despite the notoriety the Cockes had received for providing *any* educational instruction for their slaves. If we look at the evidence from the perspective of Skipwith, Cocke's work in educating his slaves seems less than revolutionary.

Modern historiography often paints John Hartwell Cocke as a moral reformer or an "enlightened" master who expressed antislavery views or "detested" slavery, much in the same vein as discussions of Thomas Jefferson. The education of slaves at Bremo – and the experiment with sending worthy slaves to his Hopewell plantation in Alabama in preparation for their resettlement in Liberia – are often cited as "evidence" of Cocke's morality, though Skipwith's letters suggest that perhaps too much has been made of the education Cocke provided to his slaves. For example, the guide to the Cocke Family Papers at the University of Virginia state, "John Hartwell Cocke was greatly troubled by the issue of slavery, and he concentrated his time and money in promoting the American Colonization Society, and preparing his slaves for gradual emancipation through vocational training and teaching them to read and write." The Thomas Jefferson Foundation writes that, "Both Jefferson and Cocke detested the institution of slavery, yet neither advocated an immediate emancipation of slaves... General Cocke made visible efforts to educate his slaves even when laws forbade it, and worked publicly to advance the re-colonization of blacks to Africa, eventually sending abroad some of his own slaves." Historian Gregg D. Kimball writes, "...[A]lthough some Virginia slaves learned to read by themselves, in churches or through enlightened masters such as reformer John Hartwell Cocke, it became

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<sup>139</sup> Diana Skipwith to Sally (Cocke) Brent, February 12, 1834

increasingly difficult for African Americans to become literate in the antebellum era.”<sup>140</sup>

However, the Skipwith letters reveal that the educational opportunities afforded by Cocke were indeed limited. Furthermore, it appears that much of the work of educating slaves was done by other slaves themselves, as we shall see.

Diana Skipwith wrote to Betsy Morse, an enslaved friend still at Bremono, via Louisa Cocke, the wife of her former master. “[T]ell her for me if that was her handwriting she can right well enough to write to me for I do want to get a letter from her very bad,” she asked Cocke to convey to Morse, after receiving a handkerchief from Morse.<sup>141</sup> Perhaps Morse had embroidered some letters onto the handkerchief, or attached a note with it. Skipwith’s letter reveals an acknowledgement that Morse – and perhaps other slaves at Bremono – may not have felt able to write an entire letter, as Skipwith herself might have felt in 1834, when she asked her father to pen the first letter sent back to Virginia.<sup>142</sup> Diana Skipwith’s struggle to learn to read and write while enslaved, the emphasis she placed on acquiring those skills once free, and the work she did to educate other settlers as a Sunday school instructor reveal the importance of education, and especially, reading and writing, to settlers in Liberia.

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<sup>140</sup> “A Guide to the Cocke Family Papers, 1725-1939,” Special Collections, University of Virginia Library, <http://ead.lib.virginia.edu/vivaxtf/view?docId=uva-sc/viu00103.xml>; Gene Zechmeister, “Cocke, John Hartwell,” Thomas Jefferson Foundation, <https://www.monticello.org/site/research-and-collections/cocke-john-hartwell>; Gregg D. Kimball, “African, American, and Virginian: The Shaping of Black Memory in Antebellum Virginia, 1790-1860,” in W. Fitzhugh Brundage, ed., *Where These Memories Grow: History, Memory, and Southern Identity* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2000), 70.

<sup>141</sup> Diana Skipwith to Louisa (Holmes) Cocke, May 8, 1838, Box 91, John Hartwell Cocke Papers, Albert and Shirley Small Special Collections Library, University of Virginia.

<sup>142</sup> Wilma King takes a different view of Cocke’s plans for educating slaves, more critical than those who have viewed Cocke as altruistic. She notes the importance of Lucy Skipwith’s teaching to the education of slaves at Hopewell Plantation in Alabama. Lucy Skipwith was a niece to Peyton Skipwith, and brought to Alabama in 1840 along with 48 other slaves as part of Cocke’s plan to prepare slaves for emigration to Liberia by separating them from other slaves deemed less likely to emigrate. Though Cocke’s plans at Hopewell are read as part of his intention to manumit slaves, it is also possible that he required their labor in Alabama. Lucy Skipwith pushed Cocke to limit the working hours of the slaves at Hopewell, as they were too tired to attend night classes and had to miss day classes to pick cotton. Wilma King, *Stolen Childhood: Slave Youth in Nineteenth-Century America* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2011), 182-183.

Reading and writing skills were uncommon among enslaved populations in the antebellum Southern United States.<sup>143</sup> Famously, Frederick Douglass revealed the difficulties he faced in trying to learn to read while being owned by Sophia and Hugh Auld. Soon after Sophia Auld began teaching Douglass how to read, her husband forbade her to continue the lessons. Douglass tells us that Hugh Auld, told his wife, “that it was unlawful, as well as unsafe, to teach a slave to read.” Douglass was left to learn to read and write by trading bread for lessons from the poor white children who he encountered on the street.<sup>144</sup> The Skipwiths were unusual in that the Cockes had started their reading and writing lessons early: as Douglass showed, whites in the South commonly associated black literacy with danger to white supremacy. In South Carolina, Denmark Vesey, a literate free black man, led a revolt in June of 1822 that convinced many white southerners that free African Americans – especially literate free African Americans – might “incite” rebellion among the enslaved population. Nat Turner, leader of the 1831 Virginia revolt which shares his name, was also literate. In the wake of these revolts, which struck fear into the hearts of white slaveholders, many southern states and municipalities passed legislation prohibiting the education of African Americans. In 1819, Virginia passed just such a law, which made illegal any meeting of African Americans for the purposes of attending school or learning how to read or write.<sup>145</sup> Even though Cocke educated a select number of his slaves, the climate of 1830s Virginia was one that was not hospitable to the education of African Americans.

This chapter explores the tension between white women’s support for education in colonial and early republic Liberia and the ways in which educational support elided settler

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<sup>143</sup> Heather Andrea Williams, *Self-Taught: African American Education in Slavery and Freedom* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2007).

<sup>144</sup> Frederick Douglass, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, An American Slave* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2001 [1845]), 31.

<sup>145</sup> However, Brent Tarter notes that this law did *not* prevent slave owners from educating their own slaves. Brent Tarter, *The Grandees of Government: The Origins and Persistence of Undemocratic Politics in Virginia* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2013).

sovereignty and upheld white women's philanthropy and moral superiority over the educational endeavors of African American women. An important dimension of this chapter is indebted to Susan Ryan's *Grammar of Good Intentions*. Ryan shows women used their roles as benevolent activists to argue for a certain type of citizenship and participation in politics. However, this hierarchy of benevolence defined middle class women in another key way. Most importantly, by attempting to "help" lower class and racially marked people, middle class white women reinforced their status as people emphatically *not* in need of help.<sup>146</sup>

In examining the relationships between white and black women in both United States-based colonization societies and in the Liberian settlements themselves, this chapter seeks to place the history of white women's support for colonization in conversation with discussions of slavery and the question of racial equality.<sup>147</sup> Critically reading sources produced by white female supporters of colonization in the United States, this chapter shows how white women's philanthropy in Liberia reinforced notions of white superiority and African American dependence. Many of the white women who supported colonization were slaveholders or from slaveholding families. Even white women supporters who had no obvious ties to slavery were not advocates of racial equality. Their mobilization of resources to send people to Liberia and to educate the settlers, while having revolutionary potential, actually served to buttress racial hierarchy in the United States.

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<sup>146</sup> Ryan, *The Grammar of Good Intentions*.

<sup>147</sup> The literature on gender and colonization in Liberia is relatively small, though there exists some studies of white women and benevolence toward Liberia. For a study of masculinity in Liberian colonization, see Bruce Dorsey, "A Gendered History of African Colonization in the Antebellum United States," *Journal of Social History* 34 (Fall 2000), 77-103. There are two case studies of white women's involvement in the colonization movement, one focusing on Virginia and another on Pennsylvania: Elizabeth R. Varon, "Evangelical Womanhood and the Politics of the African Colonization Movement in Virginia," in *Religion and the Antebellum Debate Over Slavery*, eds. John R. McKivigan and Mitchell Snay (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 1998) and Karen Fisher Younger, "Philadelphia's Ladies' Liberia School Association and the Rise and Decline of Northern Female Colonization Support," *The Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography* 134, No. 3 (July 2010): 235-261. Varon and Younger both provide important insights on white women's support for colonization and offer an important counterpoint to Dorsey's arguments. However, both limit their arguments to focus only on white women.

The first section focuses on education in Liberia and the philanthropic support of white women from the United States. It starts with an examination of the Philadelphia-based Ladies' Liberia School Association, which supported African American teachers in Liberia as they opened schools for settler children in the 1830s. It then turns to an extended discussion of the Cape Palmas Female Orphan Asylum Society, another Philadelphia-based benevolent society that supported an Asylum in Maryland (West Africa) of the Episcopal Church in the 1850s as an example of the type of benevolent endeavor white women supported in Liberia.

The second section focuses specifically on Ann Randolph Page and Mary Minor Blackford: two women who supported colonization and had sent former slaves to Liberia, as well as Louisa Cocke, wife of John Hartwell Cocke, who led schools for slaves in Virginia and helped prepare the Skipwith family for their journey to Liberia. The section explores the ways in which Page, Blackford, and Cocke used their educational endeavors and planning to advocate for their own authority in plantation Virginia, while casting African American settlers and slaves as unable or unprepared to care for themselves. The relationship between the white American female colonizationists, African American female migrants and native African women was unequal – though the white women invoked the language of family and claimed to be helping their “sisters” abroad, the interactions between the white women and the migrants actually worked to reinforce racial hierarchies and white women’s moral superiority.

**“IT IS NOW SAID THAT THE BEST WAY TO CIVILISE A NATION, IS TO EDUCATE THE GIRLS”<sup>148</sup>**

In 1857, Anna M. Scott, an Episcopal missionary in Cape Palmas, West Africa, decided to publish a history of her experiences at the mission station near the Liberian settlements.

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<sup>148</sup> Benjamin Brand to Lott Cary, January 1826, Section 4, Benjamin Brand Papers, Virginia Historical Society.

Scott's *Glimpses of Life in Africa*, published by the American Tract Society and disseminated among evangelicals with a missionary zeal, documented the conversion work she and her husband did among the Grebo people of the eastern border of Liberia. In *Glimpses of Life in Africa*, Scott detailed what she viewed as the "superstitions" of the Grebo people, as well as their domestic arrangements. Scott told stories about many of the Grebo people at the mission who were interested in converting to Christianity and giving up their fetish objects – called "greegrees." Scott also documented what she heard new converts say about the redemption offered by the missionaries.

Scott narrated a story about the conversion of a Grebo man she called Gola, identified as an orator and performer for his community. Scott identified "one great obstacle" in the way of his conversion – the fact that Gola had several wives and children. He was a practitioner of polygamy, or more specifically, polygyny: the practice of one man having multiple wives. Scott described the work the missionaries did to convince Gola of the evils of polygamy; they told him that he could not love his wives and children above Christ. Eventually, Gola relented: he "gave up" his wives, except for one. His first wife, Mlende, Scott noted, had a "violent temper" and no interest in the gospel. Because of this, he picked his second wife, Gidade, as his one true wife, even though she had no children. Scott interpreted Gola's choice as one rooted in Christian belief, writing, "he was guided in his choice mainly by the hope that she might one day become to him a Christian companion." The missionary ended Gola's story by supporting his choice: she noted that Gidade had not borne Gola any children; thus, his choice must have been based on Gidade's interest in Christianity, and not in a desire for personal or material gain.<sup>149</sup>

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<sup>149</sup> Anna M. Scott, *Glimpses of Life in Africa*, by Mrs. Anna M. Scott, *Missionary of the Protestant Episcopal Church at Cape Palmas, West Africa* (New York: American Tract Society, 1857), 30-32.

Education in Liberia, for missionaries like Scott, was centrally about the conversion of Africans to Christianity. But stories like the one Scott recounted were too few. When the Cavalla missionaries could not convert enough Grebo people, they turned to serving the population of settlers. Scott and the other Episcopal missionaries built on work that had been done in West Africa since the 1820s. One important endeavor was sponsored by the Ladies' Liberia School Association, founded in 1823 in Philadelphia. The Association supported multiple schools and teachers in and around Monrovia.

Karen Fisher Younger has calculated that the Association, which was comprised of Quakers, Presbyterians, and Episcopalians, grew by an average of 41 members per year in the years 1834-1839 and collected around \$1500 in donations per year.<sup>150</sup> The work of teaching in these schools seems to have gone to Elizabeth Caesar and Elizabeth Mars Johnson Thomson, two African Americans who were hired by the Association in 1832.<sup>151</sup> Caesar oversaw the school at Caldwell, while Thomson worked in her own school in Monrovia until she was replaced in 1835 by Susan Ciples after Thomson emigrated to Maryland in Africa. An African American man, James Eden, also operated a school in New Georgia.

The girls' school at Caldwell also allowed older students to teach the younger ones, which was probably necessary as the school enrolled 58 students. Supporters from Philadelphia were generous in outfitting the school: one donor sent 48 new testaments, copy books, 31 sets of copper plates, white paper, inkstands, lithographs – over 250 books in total. At Monrovia, the

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<sup>150</sup> Karen Fisher Younger, "Philadelphia's Ladies' Liberia School Association and the Rise and Decline of Northern Female Colonization Support." See also: Karen Fisher Younger, "Africa Stretches Forth Her Hands Unto You': Female Colonization Supporters in the Antebellum United States, PhD diss., Pennsylvania State University, 2006.

<sup>151</sup> Younger, "Philadelphia's Ladies' Liberia School Association," 253. In other scholarly work, Thomson's name is occasionally incorrectly rendered as "Thompson."

girls' school was able to hire an assistant (unnamed) at a salary of \$200 per annum.<sup>152</sup> The Association continued to support these schools until 1848, when the Society disbanded.

Another group of women from Philadelphia worked to support the establishment of a school in West Africa, though with the support of the Episcopal Church. This time, its location was in Cape Palmas, and it was built in 1853 in the months before the Republic of Maryland declared its independence from the Maryland State Colonization Society.<sup>153</sup> The Cape Palmas Female Orphan Asylum Society, a group of supporters of the Episcopal Church and its mission at Cavalla in Cape Palmas, included lists of officers both "local" to Cape Palmas and "American Officers" in the United States. The group was formed at the request of Bishop John Payne, a white missionary who served the Episcopal mission in Cape Palmas from 1837 to 1871. In addition to the missionaries stationed in Cape Palmas: Payne, Cadwallader Colden (C.C.) Hoffman, Jacob Rambo, and William Wright, the wives of the missionaries and the female teachers were all listed as officers who formed the Ladies' Committee, including Martha Williford, who was an unmarried teacher at the time, but later married Payne after the death of his first wife, Anna Barroll Payne. Additionally, the Society's secretary was Lucy H. Shober, a life member of the Children's American Church Missionary Society and supporter of mission

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<sup>152</sup> *Third annual report of the ladies' Liberia school association, Presented May 5, 1835* (Philadelphia: Lydia Bailey, 1835), 4-7.

<sup>153</sup> The Maryland State Colonization Society first started sending settlers to Cape Palmas in 1834. Two years later, John Brown Russwurm was appointed governor of the colony, called Maryland in Liberia, and was the first African American to hold this title in the colonies that later comprised Liberia. From 1841 to May 1854, it was known as the State of Maryland. On May 29, 1854, the state declared its independence and was thus known as the Republic of Maryland. It became incorporated into Liberia on March 18, 1857, as it had come into armed conflict with Grebo and Kru groups, and required military support from Liberia. It is known today as Maryland County. An earlier mission, sponsored by the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions (ABCFM), was also located at Cape Palmas in the 1830s. This mission and its work is the subject of Chapter 4 of this dissertation. On the history of Maryland, see John H.B. Latrobe, *Maryland in Liberia: A History of the Colony Planted by the Maryland State Colonization Society Under the Auspices of the State of Maryland, U.S. at Cape Palmas on the South-West Coast of Africa, 1833-1853* (Baltimore: John Murphy, 1885); Penelope Campbell, *Maryland in Africa: The Maryland State Colonization Society, 1831-1857* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1971); Richard L. Hall, *On Afric's Store: A History of Maryland in Liberia, 1834-1857* (Baltimore: Maryland Historical Society, 2003).



work and philanthropy in Philadelphia.<sup>154</sup> The Constitution of the Society, dating from 1853, stated that ladies who donated at least a dollar a year gained membership; ladies that donated ten dollars purchased a life membership. However, men could only become honorary members by donating thirty dollars. Furthermore, the Constitution stipulated that “[t]he Secretary, Treasurer, and Managers shall be ladies.”<sup>155</sup>

The Asylum Society was unusual in that both men and women comprised the Board of Managers. As Kristen Fisher Younger has shown, the Philadelphia Ladies’ Liberia School Association was encouraged to avoid the question of slavery and the American Colonization Society’s politics in general, and instead support education in Liberia only. However, she shows that the Association was tightly linked to the ACS and colonization organizations. By the 1840s, the ACS recast itself as an explicitly political organization, instead of a benevolent one, and thus, women were excluded from the ACS’ Board as it did not fall under white women’s sphere of influence.<sup>156</sup> Women’s involvement with the Asylum Society, however, could be safely couched as part of women’s roles as benevolent teachers, seeking to extend moral instruction and Christian knowledge to West Africa. While not listed as a missionary or teacher in 1853, one of the teachers supported by the Ladies’ Liberia School Association in the 1830s, Elizabeth Thomson, had been a teacher at Payne’s mission station in 1854 after moving to Cape Palmas from Monrovia.<sup>157</sup> By 1857, Thomson was in charge of the “sewing school” at the mission, and

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<sup>154</sup> *The first annual report of the Cape Palmas Female Orphan Asylum Society, read in St. Andrew’s Church, Philadelphia, Tuesday Evening, Nov. 8<sup>th</sup>, 1853* (Philadelphia, Stavely & McCalla, 1853); *Twelfth Annual Report of the American Church Missionary Society, adopted at the Annual Meeting held in St. Peter’s Church, Baltimore, Md., Wednesday, October 11<sup>th</sup>, 1871* (New York: Unknown printing, 1871), 66.

<sup>155</sup> *Cape Palmas Female Orphan Asylum Society* (Philadelphia?: Unknown printing, 1853), 11-12.

<sup>156</sup> Karen Fisher Younger, “Philadelphia’s Ladies Liberia School Association and the Rise and Decline of Female Colonization Support,” *The Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography* 134, No. 3 (July 2010): 235-261. On the masculinist project of the ACS more generally, see Bruce Dorsey, “A Gendered History of African Colonization in the Antebellum United States,” *Journal of Social History* 34, No. 1 (Autumn 2000): 77-103.

<sup>157</sup> “Survey of the Protestant Missionary Stations Throughout the World, in their Geographical Order,” *Missionary Register*, January 1854, 14.

filled in at the Asylum after illness forced the head matron, Anna Scott, to return to the United States.<sup>158</sup> Thus Thomson linked together two Philadelphia-based philanthropic efforts for education, one in the 1830s, and the other in the 1850s. By June 1853, the Asylum building was already in the process of being constructed.<sup>159</sup>

Despite Payne's stated intentions for the Asylum to serve indigenous girls, the student body seems to have been comprised of orphaned and impoverished settler girls. A list of scholarship recipients in a report of the Asylum Society listed short biographies of each of the girls and their progress at the Asylum. Of the twenty-five recipients named, 14 were born in Cape Palmas, 4 in Maryland (United States), 2 in Virginia, 1 in Massachusetts, and the birthplace of 4 was not specified. The 14 girls born in Cape Palmas were likely the orphaned children of African American settlers. Only one of the girls, Julia Barnett, is specified as fluent in Grebo, and she was born in Maryland (United States). The missionaries hoped she would "make an efficient teacher in one of our native schools." Indigenous girls would of course know how to speak Grebo before entering the mission's schools.<sup>160</sup> Indigenous girls likely attended the "native schools" the mission held around Cape Palmas.

However, the Ladies' Liberia School Association and the Cape Palmas Female Orphan Asylum Society had different aims, at first. While the Ladies' Liberian School Association had aimed to bring African American teachers to Liberia to instruct settlers, the Female Orphan Asylum Society sought to support indigenous girls and women in their educational pursuits. Bishop Payne wished to open the Orphan Asylum as a means to train "intelligent native

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<sup>158</sup> C.C. Hoffman to [Unknown recipient], June 9, 1857; July 21, 1857, as quoted in *Tidings from the Orphan Asylum* (Philadelphia: J.S. McCalla, n.d.), 7-9.

<sup>159</sup> *The first annual report of the Cape Palmas Female Orphan Asylum Society, read in St. Andrew's Church, Philadelphia, Tuesday Evening, Nov. 8<sup>th</sup>, 1853* (Philadelphia: Stavely & McCalla, 1853).

<sup>160</sup> "Showers of Blessings ;" or, a Report of the continued prosperity of the Female Orphan Asylum at Cape Palmas, W. A. (Philadelphia: King and Baird, 1859), 13.

christian[sic] females, as teachers, and wives of native teachers and missionaries at different posts of the mission.” Payne expressed frustration that there was nowhere in the United States where the women could receive teacher and missionary training, and instead focused his attention on building this institution on “their own soil.” A report from the Asylum Society from 1856 listed similar reasons for the Asylum’s necessity. “It would lift woman from the dust and degradation to which heathenism always sinks her down, and fit her for, and send her forth upon her appropriate mission of forming the mind, and moulding[sic] the character of her people.”<sup>161</sup> Thus the Asylum stood for Christianity’s redemption: in educating the indigenous women of Cape Palmas, it could save from them from heathenism and set them as civilizing influences within indigenous society, a formulation of classic republicanism. Though there is no evidence that Grebo or any other indigenous girls lived in the Asylum during the 1850s, it was Payne’s hope that the mission’s work would help indigenous girls lead their people out of heathenism.

Payne’s description of the would-be students as potential wives of native teachers, then, suggests that he saw similarities between African American settlers and Grebo people. His reference to “heathenism” suggested that he was unimpressed with the state of settler society in Maryland (West Africa), though it was “their own soil.”<sup>162</sup> Payne might have agreed with some ACS supporters, who felt that African Americans were more suited to life in Africa than the United States.

By the 1850s, when Payne was working on the Asylum project and writing these letters, a new racial science was coming into British and American discourse, replacing the earlier idea that environmental conditions were responsible for the degraded state of Africans. By the middle of the nineteenth century, biological determinism became an important frame of racial thinking.

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<sup>161</sup> *A Report of the Origin, Progress, and Present Position of the Female Orphan Asylum, at Cape Palmas* (Philadelphia?: Unknown printing, 1856), 16.

<sup>162</sup> *Ibid.*

Polygenism, the idea that different races do not share the same origin and were thus created separately, was supported by many white nineteenth century scientists, and popularized in the United States by Charles Pickering, Samuel Morton, and Louis Agassiz. Famously, Morton collected human skulls, measured them, and used them to “prove” that different races had corresponding brain sizes, and thus, could not be the same species.<sup>163</sup> While Payne, as an Episcopal Bishop, likely did not agree completely with the idea of polygenism, as it conflicted with the biblical origin story contained in the book of Genesis – that God created woman from man, and all humans descended from these two – some of the debates in racial theory could have influenced his thoughts about the African American settlers. Payne’s collapsing of the African American settlers with Grebo people suggests he saw more similarities than differences between the two groups. The African American settlers themselves, on the other hand, seemed to emphasize these differences. John Brown Russwurm, the African American Governor of Maryland (who was born in Jamaica, but was indeed of African descent) came into constant conflict with Grebo neighbors in Cape Palmas.<sup>164</sup>

It is also possible that Payne hoped to recruit Grebo girls for the Asylum, but found that they were unwilling or not allowed to go. A letter from Virginia Hale Hoffman, one of the Episcopal missionaries in Cape Palmas, suggested that “betrothment money” was important to Grebo families. Hoffman recounted the story of Helen White, a girl who attended school at the mission. She married a Christian Grebo boy, John Wimer. After Wimer’s death, White was married to Wimer’s brother, who was not Christian, as her “betrothment money” was not paid

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<sup>163</sup> On racial theories and scientific racism, see: Stephen Jay Gould, *The Mismeasure of Man* (New York: Norton, 1996 [1981]); Bruce Dain, *A Hideous Monster of the Mind: American Race Theory in the Early Republic* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2003). Darwin’s publication of *The Origin of Species* in 1859 refuted polygenism. Charles Darwin, *On the Origin of Species* (London: John Murray, 1859).

<sup>164</sup> *Cavalla Messenger* 4, No. 8 (February 1856); Erskine Clarke, *By the Rivers of Water: A Nineteenth Century Atlantic Odyssey* (New York: Basic Books, 2013), 113-118; Jane Martin, “Krumen ‘Down the Coast’: Liberian Migrants on the West African Coast in the 19<sup>th</sup> and Early 20<sup>th</sup> Centuries,” *The International Journal of African Historical Studies* 18, No. 3 (1985): 401-423.

when she was a girl. Hoffman reported that this practice was now prevented “by the mission paying the girl’s parents the same sum they could receive from a husband.”<sup>165</sup> Perhaps Payne and the other missionaries did not start this practice until 1857, and thus, when the Asylum was opened, it was impossible for Grebo girls to attend without the threat of being removed from the mission by Grebo friends and family in order to marry.

The building was formally opened on April 19, 1855, and missionaries Reverend Hugh Roy and Anna Scott moved into the building, though it was not entirely complete at the time.<sup>166</sup> Anna Scott was the second wife of Reverend Scott, whose first wife, Jane Harrison Scott, died shortly after arriving in Cape Palmas.<sup>167</sup> It was significant that a married couple headed the Asylum family, both to incorporate the girls into a proper antebellum familial structure and to model respectable missionary married life. In her work on benevolent organizations in antebellum Boston and New York, Anne Boylan shows that the New York Orphan Asylum tightly controlled its own institutional family by limiting the orphans’ contact with “disorderly” family members. The New York Asylum also insisted on having a married couple as its head, as well.<sup>168</sup> Despite the fact that some of the girls had extended biological family members still living, the mission family served as their new community. Artee Wilson, one of the girls at the Asylum, described missionary C.C. Hoffman as a “kind father.” Similarly, she wrote to Anna

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<sup>165</sup> Helen White was almost certainly named after Helen Wells White, who was sponsored by the ABCFM and sent to Cape Palmas with her husband, David White. The Whites arrived in Cape Palmas in 1836, but died shortly after. The Whites arrived along with Benjamin Van Rensselaer James, whose work is discussed in Chapter 4 of this dissertation. Virginia Hale Hoffman to [Unknown], April 7, 1857, as quoted in George D. Cummins, *Life of Virginia Hale Hoffman, late of the Protestant Episcopal Mission to Western Africa* (Philadelphia: Lindsay & Blackiston, 1859), 80; Erskine Clarke, *By the Rivers of Water: A Nineteenth-Century Atlantic Odyssey* (New York: Basic Books, 2013), 130-132.

<sup>166</sup> *A Report of the Origin, Progress, and Present Position of the Female Orphan Asylum, at Cape Palmas* (Philadelphia?: Unknown printing, 1856), 6.

<sup>167</sup> Anna Scott, *Glimpses of Life in Africa, by Mrs. Anna M. Scott, Missionary of the Protestant Episcopal Church at Cape Palmas, West Africa* (New York: American Tract Society, 1857); George D. Cummins, *Life of Virginia Hale Hoffman late of the Protestant Episcopal Mission to Western Africa* (Philadelphia: Lindsay & Blackiston, 1859), 127-129.

<sup>168</sup> Anne Boylan, *The Origins of Women’s Activism: New York and Boston, 1797-1840* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2002), especially 80-83.

Scott, upon her departure for the United States, “We miss you very much, for you were like a mother to us.” Wilson’s use of familial phrases to refer to the missionaries was even more remarkable as she did have a living biological mother, to whom she returned while suffering from an ulcer on her foot.<sup>169</sup>

Women played an essential role in supporting the Orphan Asylum and the projects of the Episcopal mission at Cape Palmas beyond modeling familial duties. One letter from Anna Scott directed a portion of her letter to Philadelphia’s “benevolent ladies... who support this Institution” and warned them not to “expect too much at first.” She noted that only two of the scholars knew how to write, and they had limited abilities, at that. She ended her note by suggesting that sewing, keeping a clean home, and studying were essential to the education of the girls and young women. “We presume the ladies wish, as we do, that these girls shall become proficient in sewing and housework, as well as in study ; so that they may be qualified to fulfil[sic] all the duties of women.”<sup>170</sup> Thus the white women in Philadelphia who financially supported the Asylum were invited to make curricular decisions about the Asylum, and the missionaries in Cape Palmas felt beholden to their supporters.

Reports printed by the Asylum Society in Philadelphia reprinted letters from Payne, Scott, and the other missionaries working at the Asylum. They offer important sources for understanding the aims of the mission in opening the Asylum and the daily operations there. They also offer clues as to what the indigenous girls who lived and attended classes there thought of their missionary education. Manuscript correspondence from Martha (Williford) Payne, second wife of the Bishop, also survives and gives some sense of life at the mission in Cape

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<sup>169</sup> Artee Wilson to Anna Scott, August 11, 1857; C.C. Hoffman to [Unknown recipient], April 1, 1857, as quoted in *Tidings from the Orphan Asylum* (Philadelphia: J.S. McCalla, n.d.),10-11.

<sup>170</sup> *A Circular from the Board of Managers of the Cape Palmas Female Orphan Asylum, to their Friends and Patrons* (Philadelphia: King and Baird, 1856), 4.

Palmas.<sup>171</sup> More printed sources – books printed in the United States authored by Anna Scott – recount her experiences as a missionary and teacher at the Cavalla mission, along with other sources from missionary supporters and relatives of the missionaries in Cape Palmas.<sup>172</sup>

Sewing seems to have been particularly important to the missionaries who instructed the girls at the Asylum. Ready-made clothing sent out to the Asylum was not ideal – it was often too small. Bishop Payne asked instead for fabric and other material, which the girls could use to furnish their own clothing, which “would constitute a part of their education.” Payne also suggested that the girls at the Asylum could produce clothing for other children at the mission, as well as attendees of the Sabbath school. Clothing was a constant need for missionaries and teachers, who often recounted that children could not attend school for want of clothes. This seems to have been the case from the earliest education work in Liberia in the 1820s through the Asylum’s founding in the 1850s. In sending girls’ dresses to Lott Cary, white Richmond merchant Benjamin Brand noted that, “The Ladies [of the Presbyterian Church in Richmond] I believe, wish the girls dresses [sic] to be kept for such native African Girls as may be educated.” Brand continued, emphasizing the importance of this work, “It is now ~~understood~~ said that the best way to civilise [sic] a nation, is to educate the Girls.”<sup>173</sup>

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<sup>171</sup> The publications of the Cape Palmas Philadelphia Orphan Society reprinted letters from missionaries and teachers in Cape Palmas. Letters from Martha (Williford) Payne were sent to Martha Stackhouse Williford Service and Emma Maria Service from her departure for Liberia in 1849 through 1875, when Payne returned to the United States. Martha (Williford) Payne was the daughter of Martha Stackhouse Williford Service and the half-sister of Emma Maria Service. Before leaving for Liberia, she taught at Montpelier Institute, a co-educational school sponsored by the Episcopal Church, outside of Macon, Georgia, while her family resided in Augusta.

<sup>172</sup> Anna M. Scott, *Mlede, the African demon woman* (New-York: Protestant Episcopal Society for the Promotion of Evangelical Knowledge, 1856); Anna M. Scott, *Glimpses of life in Africa* (New York: American Tract Society, 1857); Anna M. Scott, *Day dawn in Africa; or, Progress of the Prot. Epis. Mission at Cape Palmas, West Africa* (New-York: Protestant Episcopal Society for the Promotion of Evangelical Knowledge, 1858).

<sup>173</sup> *Third Annual Report of the Ladies’ Liberia School Association, Presented May 5<sup>th</sup>, 1835* (Philadelphia: Lydia R. Bailey, 1835), 7-8; John Payne to [Unknown recipient – possibly Reverend Richard Newton?], August 3, 1855, as quoted in *A Circular from the Board of Managers of the Cape Palmas Female Orphan Asylum, to their Friends and Patrons* (Philadelphia: King & Baird, 1856), 7; Lott Cary to Benjamin Brand, April 3, 1825; Benjamin Brand to Lott Cary, January 1826, Section 4, Benjamin Brand Papers, Virginia Historical Society. Clothing and the founding of the Dorcas Society in Monrovia are discussed in Chapter 5 of this dissertation.

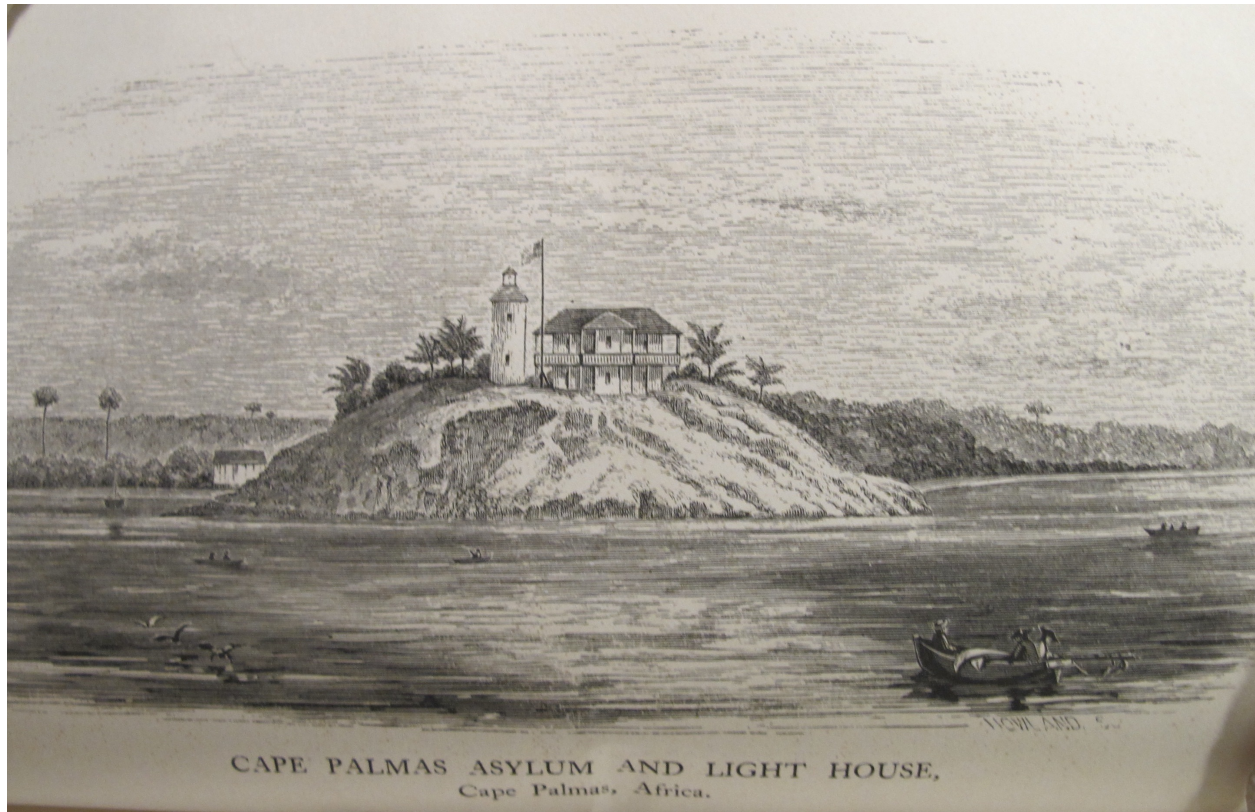


Figure 2.1: Cape Palmas Asylum and Light House  
from *A Circular from the Board of Managers of the Cape Palmas Female Orphan Asylum, to their friends and patrons* (Philadelphia?: Unknown printing, 1856)

“Civilising,” then, was implicit in the education of the girls at the Orphan Asylum. It started with the construction of the building. The dormitory and matron’s room were constructed of stone lime imported from Hamburg, and white plaster walls flanked the rooms. The beds were made of iron, decorated with quilts sent by the Philadelphia ladies, and on the wall over each bed, Anna Scott inscribed “suitable texts” of “good taste.” Over one of the doors, “I will lay me down to peace and sleep, for thou, Lord, only makest me to dwell in safety.” On the walls, “Let every thing be done decently and in order,” and the opposing wall, “Gather up the fragments, that nothing be lost.” These scriptures, from Psalm 4:8, 1 Corinthians 14:40, and John 6:12, served to remind the girls of the orderliness, cleanliness, and propriety of the institution. According to Scott, the bedroom was “pleasant” and “well ventilated,” indicating the cleanliness



of the building. Each girl had her own shelf in a cupboard, in which she could place her personal effects.<sup>174</sup>

The school itself, like the dormitory, was also made of plaster, and students (both residents and the day school students) sat on long benches on opposing sides of the room. Anna Scott's workplace was at the west end of the room, and a table in the center was covered with bouquets of flowers – oleander, pride of Barbados, and African lilies – as well as the copy and composition books used by students.<sup>175</sup> The classroom overlooked the Atlantic Ocean, giving the girls and teachers a view of the “point of the Cape.” Another inscription was painted over the door of the classroom; “Wisdom is the principal thing : therefore get wisdom ; and with all thy getting, get understanding.” This quotation, from the King James version of Proverbs 4:7, made visible the mission of the Asylum: to teach girls, so that they might be raised as Christian women capable of supporting the mission through their lives.<sup>176</sup>

Scott went on to inform the Society that visitors to Cape Palmas approved of the school building. Captains, she wrote, felt the location was both “beautiful and healthy.” They supported the purpose of the building, and commented on “the style in which it is built.”<sup>177</sup> Outside commenters could reassure readers and supporters of the Society that their money, used to construct the building and outfit the Asylum, was being used wisely. These careful designs and attention to detail in the decorations were not mere frivolities. They evoked a sense of appropriate domesticity. Antebellum discourses of domesticity, closely tied to the culture of female benevolence, highlighted the importance of a carefully arranged home. Texts, such as

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<sup>174</sup> Anna M. Scott to [Unknown recipient – possibly Reverend Richard Newton?], February 11, 1856, as quoted in *A Report of the Origin, Progress, and Present Position of the Female Orphan Asylum, at Cape Palmas* (Philadelphia?: Unknown printing, 1856), 10-11.

<sup>175</sup> John Payne to [Unknown recipient – possibly Reverend Richard Newton?], January 22, 1856, *ibid*, 6-7.

<sup>176</sup> Anna M. Scott to [Unknown recipient – possibly Reverend Richard Newton?], February 11, 1856, *ibid*, 9.

<sup>177</sup> *Ibid*, 9-10.

Catharine Beecher's *Treatise on Domestic Economy*, provided white American women with instruction in housekeeping, and were massively popular in the United States.<sup>178</sup> In the *Treatise*, Beecher suggested that a model institution is housed in a "noble and tasteful" building, made of stone, and has "thorough ventilation."<sup>179</sup> The Asylum in Cape Palmas shared these features, as the Society and missionaries likely shared Beecher's vision for the girls' education in benevolence. The building also sharply contrasted with Grebo structures and homes. In her ethnographic account of Grebo people, Anna Scott described Grebo homes as made of thatch and boards of about five feet in length. She described the "heathen house" of the Grebo as a "queer, black little house" and a "smoky place."<sup>180</sup> Thus the Asylum's very building connected the mission and its students with American-based forms of benevolence while simultaneously distancing the missionaries from indigenous practices.

For white women like Anna Scott and the other white women who taught at the Asylum in Cape Palmas, or supported it from Philadelphia, ideals of femininity and morality underpinned their social activism. The ideology of Protestant womanhood in antebellum America suggested that women were required to protect their virtue, and use their "benevolent femininity" to purify the world. As Lori Ginzberg has shown, there was conflict over what women's role should be in shaping the world. The 1840 split of the American Anti-Slavery Society signaled a shift in which some women, disheartened by the lack of progress their moral suasion was making, chose to

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<sup>178</sup> Catharine Beecher, *A Treatise on Domestic Economy: For the use of young ladies at home, and at school* (Boston: Marsh, Capen, Lyon, and Webb, 1841). On the popularity of *A Treatise on Domestic Economy*, see Kathryn Kish Sklar, *Catharine Beecher: A Study in American Domesticity* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1973).

<sup>179</sup> Beecher, *A Treatise on Domestic Economy*, 54.

<sup>180</sup> Anna Scott, *Glimpses of Life in Africa, by Mrs. Anna M. Scott, Missionary of the Protestant Episcopal Church at Cape Palmas, West Africa* (New York: American Tract Society, 1857), 5; 40-41

enter into electoral politics. Another group of women held onto the antebellum culture of benevolence more tightly, turning instead to institution building, such as the Orphan Asylum.<sup>181</sup>

The Asylum Society intended to reform the girls at the Asylum in the mold of antebellum benevolence as suggested by people such as Catharine Beecher. Anna Scott noted that the girls often remarked that they had no previous experience with education, and had led difficult lives before being folded into the mission family. She recorded the girls as saying, “Then, we were taught nothing ; we had to go out into the swamps, rain or shine, and drag in timber, in order to earn a little money to buy something to eat ; now we have a comfortable house, good food, and have teachers who are willing to teach us all in their power.”<sup>182</sup> Though the majority of the girls were born in Cape Palmas, some had emigrated from Maryland and Virginia, and were likely either enslaved themselves or had parents who had been slaves. In either case, the American girls would have had limited opportunities for education. The description of swamps, too, might have described enslaved and free African Americans living in the United States, who had to eke out money, food, and shelter in constrained conditions. The swamps, too, recall the Great Dismal Swamp of Virginia and North Carolina, where many slaves fled over the nineteenth century, and which harbored communities of maroons in the United States.<sup>183</sup> The contrast with the Asylum was apparent: Scott’s description of the orderliness of the building, coupled with the “beautiful and healthy” location with an idyllic view of the ocean, served to contrast the degraded and hard life of the girls before coming to the Asylum.

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<sup>181</sup> Lori Ginzberg, *Women and the Work of Benevolence: Morality, Politics, and Class in the Nineteenth-Century United States* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990).

<sup>182</sup> Anna M. Scott to [Unknown recipient – possibly Reverend Richard Newton?]. February 11, 1856, as quoted in *A Report of the Origin, Progress, and Present Position of the Female Orphan Asylum, at Cape Palmas* (Philadelphia?: Unknown printing, 1856), 10.

<sup>183</sup> For a fictional account of escaped slaves in the Great Dismal Swamp, see Harriet Beecher Stowe, *Dred: A Tale of the Great Dismal Swamp* (Boston: Phillips, Sampson, and Company, 1856). On maroon communities in the United States, including the Great Dismal Swamp, see Sylviane Diouf, *Slavery’s Exiles: The Story of the American Maroons* (New York: NYU Press, 2014).

Cleanliness was also an important feature of the education the girls received at the Asylum. “Cleanliness is next to godliness” was written over the window in the washroom, the only such wall inscription recorded in the correspondence from the missionaries at the Asylum that was not a direct biblical quote. Girls were required to bathe daily, and older girls obliged to wash and iron their clothes. The Asylum provided towels, basins and tubs, soap, and toothbrushes to the girls. As Kathleen Brown has argued, “cleanliness did not simply signify moral good but had become an important means of achieving it.” Through washing their bodies and clothing, the girls at the Asylum prepared themselves for their conversion and faithfulness to the mission’s cause.<sup>184</sup>

Thirty-one girls attended classes at the Asylum when it opened in 1856, including both day students and girls living at the Asylum, and they ranged in age from five to fourteen years old. The courses and regimen offered at the Asylum continued the work of the buildings and grounds in preparing the girls for lives as pious wives of missionaries and instructors who could lead the Grebo to Protestant salvation. Church attendance was mandatory every Saturday morning, and the girls also attended Sunday school after services. Their day began at 6:00 in the morning, and they were required to make beds and clean the room before attending “family prayers” at 7:30. Breakfast came at 8:00, and school started at 9:15. It ran until 12:30, and the girls had the midday meal soon after. On Mondays and Tuesdays, the girls washed and ironed bedding and clothing after school; the other days, the girls had “sewing school.” The day was finished by supper, evening prayers, and bathing time, and all girls were to be in bed by 9:00 pm. Other rules prohibited girls from leaving the Asylum without permission, and “visiting” was

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<sup>184</sup> Anna Scott to [Unknown recipient – possibly Reverend Richard Newton?], February 11, 1856, as quoted in *A Report of the Origin, Progress, and Present Position of the Female Orphan Asylum, at Cape Palmas* (Philadelphia?: Unknown printing, 1856), 11; Kathleen Brown, *Foul Bodies: Cleanliness in Early America* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009), 291.

forbidden on Sundays, as the girls were required to be in church.<sup>185</sup> This highly controlled environment kept the girls at the Mission and away from Cape Palmas' settler and Grebo populations. It is possible that some of the girls had family and friends in Cape Palmas whom they wished to visit, but in the tightly contained Asylum, they were surrounded only by other orphans and missionaries.

The courses offered at the Asylum included “spelling, reading, geography, arithmetic, natural philosophy, physiology, and a more advanced adult class in the rudiments of botany.”<sup>186</sup> It is unclear who enrolled in the botany course; perhaps other missionaries or adults among the settler population may have attended this class. While the variety of instruction offered to the girls ranged from composition to the natural sciences and math, the main goal of the Asylum was to “make them acquire habits of neatness, order, and regular application to work and study.” The curriculum and regimented daily schedule resembled the ones that girls enrolled at female academies in the United States might follow.

Most importantly, the missionaries and Asylum supporters hoped the girls would achieve Christian salvation. In recounting the illness and death of one of the girls, missionary C.C. Hoffman noted that Rosanna Grant “joined the church” shortly after Hoffman arrived in Cape Palmas. Hoffman confirmed that Grant, while suffering from measles, was prepared for death. In asking her if she “trusted in Jesus,” she replied, “*In Him alone.*” Hoffman continued to read biblical passages to Grant as she lay dying, and was joined by “a number of the girls” who

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<sup>185</sup> Anna Scott to [Unknown recipient – possibly Reverend Richard Newton?], February 11, 1856, as quoted in *A Report of the Origin, Progress, and Present Position of the Female Orphan Asylum, at Cape Palmas* (Philadelphia?: Unknown printing, 1856), 10; *A Report of the Origin, Progress, and Present Position of the Female Orphan Asylum, at Cape Palmas* (Philadelphia: King & Baird, 1856), 7, 20-21.

<sup>186</sup> John Payne to [Unknown recipient – possibly Reverend Richard Newton?], January 22, 1856, as quoted in *A Report of the Origin, Progress, and Present Position of the Female Orphan Asylum, at Cape Palmas* (Philadelphia?: Unknown printing, 1856), 7; Anna M. Scott to [Unknown recipient – possibly Reverend Richard Newton?], July 21, 1855, as quoted in *A Circular from the Board of Managers of the Cape Palmas Female Orphan Asylum, to their Friends and Patrons* (Philadelphia: King & Baird, 1856), 4.

“witnessed” Grant’s good death. Grant hoped that this witnessing might convince other girls to “strengthen their faith.” Finally, he expressed hope that “may they [the girls] all follow her to that happy place whither she has gone !”<sup>187</sup>

Short biographies of the twenty-five girls at the Asylum were published for readers back in the United States. Some of the girls wrote letters back to their patrons, which were also published for a broader audience. One scholar, seventeen-year-old Julia Barnett, who was born in Maryland (United States), was also fluent in Grebo, which made her a good candidate for becoming a missionary teacher. In her letter to Sunday school children at the Church of the Holy Trinity in West Chester, Pennsylvania, whose scholarship sponsored Barnett, she noted that she was “a poor, orphan girl” and described herself as being “brought” to the Asylum “to be instructed in the things of God.” She went on to describe the missionaries – the Hoffmans, and teacher, Miss Ball, “as a father and mothers.”<sup>188</sup> Barnett ended her letter by thanking her patrons for their support and “kindness” in providing her with “clothing, food, and kind teachers.” Another girl, Julia Carpenter, who was sponsored by the Sunday schools of St. Luke’s Church in Philadelphia, also thanked her friends in Philadelphia for “being so kind.” She noted that she did not know how to read “very well” and “did not know anything about God” before coming to Asylum. Carpenter, like Barnett, was from Maryland (United States), and only a year younger than Barnett. She, too, was an orphan, but did have a sister who looked after her since her parents died when she was seven years old. Carpenter’s sister was able to work after an illness (possibly

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<sup>187</sup> C.C. Hoffman to [Unknown recipient – possibly Reverend Richard Newton?], January 3, 1859, as quoted in *Showers of Blessings, or, a report of the continued prosperity of the Female Orphan Asylum, at Cape Palmas, W.A.* (Philadelphia: King & Baird, 1859), 10-11.

<sup>188</sup> Miss Ball stayed on as a teacher until 1861, when she left the mission to marry a German missionary, much to the disappointment of the Episcopalians at Cavalla. Martha [Williford] Payne to Emma Service, January 4, 1861, Box 1, Emma M. Service Papers, Southern Historical Collection, University of North Carolina.

malaria or yellow fever), and according to Carpenter, “Mr. Scott came to her and asked if she could spare me, she said yes, and that is the reason why I am at the Asylum.”<sup>189</sup>

A final letter, from Louisa Digges, was sent to the United States and printed. Digges was a “half orphan” and fifteen years old, and like Carpenter, sponsored by St. Luke’s Church in Philadelphia, though by an individual sponsor identified only as a “Female Member” of the Church. Digges was born in Cape Palmas, and fifteen years old. She wrote to her sponsors, “[T]hough I have not seen your faces, I love you all, and do pray for you, and hope you do the same for me.” Her gratitude to her friends in Philadelphia signaled the importance she placed on “hear[ing] and know[ing] about God” through her studies at the Asylum. She also reported that eight of her classmates there “have become Christians.”<sup>190</sup> Thus the letters from Barnett, Carpenter, and Digges corroborated what the missionaries wrote in their letters to the Asylum Society in Philadelphia: the Asylum was helping to Christianize and civilize the orphaned settler girls in Cape Palmas. Though the letters were included as part of the Society’s publication, and thus may have been edited to reflect positively on the mission, they suggest that both American and African-born settler-descended girls at the school had a favorable impression of their time at the Asylum.

The girls’ letters, printed in the Asylum Society’s publications back in the United States, were likely monitored both by the missionaries and officials back in Philadelphia. As promotional materials, they both conveyed information about the Asylum and encouraged potential donors and supporters to help continue the work of the Asylum through financial support. As such, they are not transparent sources. However, they do give a sense of what life at the Asylum was like for the girls attending lessons and living there.

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<sup>189</sup> “*Showers of Blessings ;*” or, a report of the continued prosperity of the Female Orphan Asylum at Cape Palmas, W.A. (Philadelphia: King & Baird, 1859), 13-23.

<sup>190</sup> *Ibid.*

Both missionaries at Cavalla and sponsors in the United States supported the religious and civilizing instruction of the orphans at the Asylum. However, the religious and philanthropic support of the missionaries and Society did come at a cost to the girls at the Asylum. One practice at the Asylum was to provide a number to the girls, rather than using their names. Anna Scott noted that the girls had numbers assigned to them based on their ages. “We found it necessary,” she wrote, “to prevent confusion” and use numbers instead of names. Every object assigned to the girls – clothing, beds, chairs, books, shelves – were all numbered.<sup>191</sup> In numbering the girls, instead of using their names, the missionaries attempted to efface the earlier histories of the girls. Instead of being called by their names – which were given by parents, family members, or friends, the girls were reduced to a number in the Asylum. In her work on benevolence, Susan Ryan argues that the ACS strategically disparaged African Americans, to portray them as *so* degraded as to require the support of benevolent white supporters (in this case, to remove them from the United States). She writes, according to the ACS, “[T]he best way to help free African Americans was to represent them as negatively as possible.”<sup>192</sup> In the example of the missionaries using numbers instead of names for the girls, this negative representation was extended even further – in using numbers instead of names, the missionaries attempted to alienate the girls. In trying to make the girls acceptable middle class women, the missionaries also emphasized difference between themselves and their charges. Susan Ryan writes:

The simultaneous erasure and persistence of difference facilitates both the sentimental bond that creates the desire to give and the maintenance of hierarchy that suggests that such giving is safe, that it does not threaten the identity or the status of the giver, that does not, ultimately, make helper and helped the same.<sup>193</sup>

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<sup>191</sup> *A Report of the origin, progress, and present position of the Female Orphan Asylum, at Cape Palmas* (Philadelphia: King and Baird, 1856), 10-11.

<sup>192</sup> Ryan, *The Grammar of Good Intentions*, 171.

<sup>193</sup> *Ibid*, 19.



In forming the girls at the Asylum into potential teachers and missionaries, the members of the Asylum Society in the United States as well as the missionaries at Cavalla provided necessary education and housing for indigent settler girls. However, in caring for them as children, and in assigning them numbers instead of names, the Society and the missionaries upheld the superiority of their whiteness.

In the next section, similar tensions between the benevolence of white supporters of education in West Africa and those they were attempting to help will be explored in depth. Turning from Philadelphia women to Southern women, as well, provides a window into understanding antebellum benevolence among slaveholding white women.

#### **PREPARING AND SURVEILLING SETTLERS: PAGE, BLACKFORD, AND COCKE**

While the white women in Philadelphia who supported education in West Africa formed organizations to support their vision, white women in Virginia supported colonization in other ways. Ann Randolph Page, Mary Minor Blackford, and Louisa Holmes Cocke, all white Virginian women, had first-hand experience with former slaves who had immigrated to Liberia and corresponded with the settlers after their arrival there.<sup>194</sup> Each envisioned their relationship with the former slaves as one that continued beyond slavery. As such, it retained a patina of the hierarchy of race relations that bolstered slavery in the antebellum United States. These women sought to prepare would-be settlers for life in Liberia, but went beyond this to continue to monitor the activities of their former slaves *after* the settlers arrived in Liberia. Though these women supported colonization and their former slaves based on their belief that slavery was damaging both to the slave and to the master, they did not favor abolitionism or racial equality.

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<sup>194</sup> The significance of this correspondence is discussed in detail in Chapter 3 of this dissertation.

In continuing to surveil their former slaves, they too upheld a form of benevolence that elevated themselves while illustrating the neediness of the former slaves.

While Page, Blackford, and Cocke were born into families that owned slaves or married men who owned slaves, they had complicated relationships to slavery. In her discussion of these women, Elizabeth Varon has argued that they rejected abolitionism and by the 1850s, had moved from supporting gradualist programs like colonization to defending slavery as the political climate in Virginia changed.<sup>195</sup> At an earlier moment, these women could frame colonization – and in particular, support for education in Liberia – as involvement in a benevolent enterprise.

Ann Randolph Page was an ardent supporter of the colonization project in Liberia. According to her biographer – her son-in-law, Charles Andrews – Page had questioned the institution of slavery since childhood. Still, she married a wealthy slave owner, and suddenly found herself responsible for more than two hundred slaves after the death of her husband in 1826. While some of the enslaved people Page owned were sold, some remained in Ann Page’s household. It was then that Page began preparing her slaves for a new life in Liberia. Page sent her emancipated slaves to Liberia in multiple trips between 1832 and 1836.<sup>196</sup> There, the formerly enslaved Page contingent was among the first groups of settlers to arrive in the Liberian settlements. Some of the family, including Robert Page, along with his family including son John, settled around Bassa Cove, in a settlement called “Edina” because the settlement was built with the support of people from Edinburgh, Scotland. Nephews of Robert, Solomon and Peter Page, also lived in Edina. Peggie Potter seems to have settled in another place entirely: the port city, Monrovia.

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<sup>195</sup> Elizabeth Varon, *We Mean to be Counted: White Women and Politics in Antebellum America* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1998), 69-70.

<sup>196</sup> Charles Wesley Andrews, *Memoir of Mrs. Ann R. Page* (New-York: Protestant Episcopal Society for the Promotion of Evangelical Knowledge, 1856) 24, 41.

Page began collecting supplies for her slaves to use once they were emancipated and sent to Liberia in 1830. Influenced by ideas about antebellum domestic life in the United States, her inventory of items to collect included needles, calicoes and cotton; winter shoes; clothing, diapers, and towels; iron pots and a tea kettle; and coffee, vinegar, flour, and brown sugar.”<sup>197</sup> The inclusion of the tea kettle, in particular, evokes an image of a respectable American household. Where the settlers would get tea to make in the kettle, however, was another matter. Similarly, the inclusion of flour reveals the extent to which Page envisioned her slaves replicating antebellum southern life in their cooking. Wheat products, of course, were not produced in West Africa; instead, starches such as rice and pounded cassava formed the basis of most meals. Page was not alone in her anticipation that settlement in Liberia should resemble proper American households. There is evidence that there was a demand for these goods in Liberia – Ann Page was not wrong in her estimations of what the settlers would need. Robert Page wrote to Virginia, asking for flour, molasses, and bacon, noting that “such articles must always be imported here.”<sup>198</sup>

Even if the imagining of Liberia was based on antebellum American domestic values, Page seems to have realized that conditions in the settlements necessitated additional preparation, specific to the West African coast. Along with the distinctly American supplies Page sent along with her slaves, she also included herbs and plants to make medicines to reduce the fever of a child – as well as the instructions on how to prepare the medicines – and tobacco “to help them to purchase a few articles from the natives.”<sup>199</sup> Even if African American settlers attempted to define themselves by distancing themselves from indigenous West Africans by

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<sup>197</sup> List from September 1830, List from October 14, 1834, Box 13, C.W. Andrews Papers, David M. Rubenstein Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Duke University.

<sup>198</sup> Robert M. Page to Charles Andrews, May 5, 1849, Andrews Correspondence, VHS.

<sup>199</sup> List from September 1830, List from October 14, 1834, Box 13, C.W. Andrews Papers, David M. Rubenstein Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Duke University.

claiming a different understanding of gender, they still had to rely on the people they intended to subjugate.

Mary Minor Blackford had a slightly different relationship with her correspondent in Liberia, James C. Minor. On October 17, 1851, James C. Minor picked up his pen and wrote home, to Virginia, the place of his birth. “[M]yself and my family are still surviving the wreck of nature, and are in tolerable good health, thank God.” Minor’s words did not reveal what the relationship between him and the letter’s recipient was, though they shared a surname. However, the letter’s recipient, Mary Minor Blackford, scrawled a note at the top of Minor’s letter after receiving it: “From a freedman in Liberia liberated by my mother.”<sup>200</sup>

Blackford’s pencil reclaimed the relationship between herself and her mother’s emancipated slave. Her marking – literally, on the page of the letter – reminded its readers of the relationship. And Blackford, the most well-known female supporter of colonization in the state of Virginia, probably did share the letter with friends and family in an effort to show the merits of colonization. But perhaps the letter also served as a reminder for Blackford herself of the intertwined history of her family and Minor’s. After all, the former slave bore her given name. Minor’s letter chastised Blackford for not having written: his letter reveals that though he had been diligent in writing to her, he had heard nothing in reply. Minor himself was one of the most successful settlers in Liberia. As the printer of the *Liberia Herald*, Minor was responsible for running the colony’s largest printing office.

Page and Blackford were the two most prolific and ardent white women supporters of colonization in the Southern United States. Both were Virginians who married into prominent families. Matthew Page, Ann Meade Page’s husband, was a member of the Virginia House of

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<sup>200</sup> James C. Minor to Mary Blackford, October 17, 1851, Folder 53, Box 4, Blackford Family Papers, Southern Historical Collection, The Wilson Library, University of North Carolina.

Delegates and owner of a 2,000-acre estate; William Blackford, Mary Minor Blackford's husband was an attorney and newspaperman later appointed as chargé d'affaires in Bogotá, Colombia. Both members of the Episcopal Church, the two women were also deeply religious.

Blackford was connected to Liberia in other ways. Her brother, Lancelot Minor, had served as an Episcopal Missionary under John Payne at Cape Palmas. In the First Annual Report of the Cape Palmas Female Orphan Asylum Society, he was mentioned as the sponsor of an indigenous man named J. Musu Minor (who presumably took his name after Lancelot), who was working to open Taboo Station in Cape Palmas at the time of the Asylum's founding.<sup>201</sup>

Blackford continued to receive letters from Minor as well as Abram Blackford, her former slave whom she had sent to Liberia in 1844. Mary Blackford had outfitted Abram Blackford before his arrival, asking her brother Lucius to send along carpenter's tools and other items. Lucius suggested that if Abram wanted to use a horse, he would also need a horse plow. The outfit reflects the lack of knowledge the Blackfords had about Liberia: horses were not viable farm animals in Liberia. Abraham Blackford continued to write to his former master, telling her of his success in Liberia.<sup>202</sup>

Mary Blackford continued to receive reports about Abram from William McLain, secretary of the American Colonization Society. Abram inherited property from another former Virginian slave, Benjamin Lawson. Lawson had, according to McLain, attempted to purchase the freedom of his wife before his death. He was unsuccessful. McLain also reported that Abram was generally well, particularly after receiving his large inheritance from Lawson.<sup>203</sup>

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<sup>201</sup> *The first annual report of the Cape Palmas Female Orphan Asylum Society*, 11.

<sup>202</sup> Varon, *We Mean to be Counted*, 64-65; Lucius Minor to Mary Blackford, September 18, 1843, Box 2, Blackford Family Papers, Southern Historical Collection, University of North Carolina.

<sup>203</sup> William McLain to Mary Blackford, January 4, 1845, Box 3, Blackford Family Papers, Southern Historical Collection, University of North Carolina.

In addition to Blackford's personal connection to Liberia, she also formed a female auxiliary of the American Colonization Society in Fredericksburg and Falmouth. As the leader of this group, Blackford helped with projects such as raising \$500 for a fair sponsored by a Baltimore auxiliary to raise money for colonization.<sup>204</sup> In addition to partnering with the female auxiliary in Baltimore, Blackford also corresponded with members of the New York and Philadelphia-area auxiliaries, including Beulah Sansom, the president of the Ladies' Liberia School Association.<sup>205</sup>

When she married John Hartwell Cocke, Louisa Cocke moved to Bremo plantation, which also housed hundreds of Cocke's slaves. Though Page and Blackford worked to emancipate their slaves and support colonization, respectively, Cocke's role at Bremo was quite different. As the mistress of the plantation, she oversaw household duties and directed the labor of the enslaved members of the household.<sup>206</sup> One of her duties was quite unusual – she operated a Sunday school for the slaves at Bremo. Both of the Cockes were supporters of colonization: they even received news from one of the first white missionaries in Monrovia, Mrs. Winn, from the brig *Nautilus* when it returned to Virginia after its trip to Monrovia in 1821.<sup>207</sup>

Peyton Skipwith's letter to his former master, John Hartwell Cocke, which opened the chapter, informed the slave owner of the opportunities for education in Liberia. While Peyton's daughters, Diana and Matilda, had received some instruction in reading and writing while

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<sup>204</sup> Ralph Randolph Gurvey to Mary Blackford, September 9, 1829, Box 1, Blackford Family Papers, Southern Historical Collection, University of North Carolina.

<sup>205</sup> Elizabeth Varon has argued that Blackford needed to tread a careful line between publicizing her auxiliary and staying out of the political debates surrounding colonization in Virginia, particularly after any antislavery work became suspect following Nat Turner's revolt in 1831. Beulah Sansom to Mary Blackford, July 14, 1837, Box 1, Blackford Family Papers, Southern Historical Collection, University of North Carolina; Varon, *We Mean to be Counted*, 46-64.

<sup>206</sup> On white women's roles on plantations, see Elizabeth Fox-Genovese, *Within the Plantation Household: White and Black Women of the Old South* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1988); Thavolia Glymph, *Out of the House of Bondage: The Transformation of the Plantation Household* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008).

<sup>207</sup> June 2, 1821, Diary 8, Louisa Cocke Diary, Reel 1.

enslaved by Cocke in Virginia, they arrived in Liberia with limited writing capabilities. The Cockes believed that religious and moral instruction might be provided to their slaves, so that a few might be manumitted and sent to Liberia.<sup>208</sup>

Yet for all their work to educate and convert their slaves to Christianity, John and Louisa Cocke sustained their home and their livelihood by extracting labor from the hundreds of enslaved humans they owned. In the archive of Cocke's plantation, held at the University of Virginia, there are dozens of letters from the Skipwiths and other families to their former master, recounting their attempts to create a Christian republic in Liberia, as well as letters from American Colonization Society officials thanking Cocke for his support of their plans. There are hundreds of letters from John Hartwell Cocke to the various reform societies he participated in, signaling his interest in temperance, public education, and Christianity. There are accounts of Louisa Cocke's lessons to enslaved children in her personal diary. And there are fragments of documents, like a bill of sale for an unnamed "negro girl" who the Cockes sold for \$206.50, which is testimony to what all of the other pieces of paper in the 194 boxes of the collection do not reveal: the real business of Cocke's plantation and the family's deep investment in American slavery.<sup>209</sup>

Given that slave states were increasing barriers to the education of African Americans in the antebellum decades, it is even more striking that the Skipwiths learned to read and write. In her diaries, Louisa Cocke recorded the work she did at Bremo in instructing slaves to read, write, and be successful Christians. Cocke spread the work of teaching around. In teaching her "colored scholars" reading, she sent "several of the older domestics" to read "from the Scriptures" and another religious tract. She also asked an enslaved man, Jesse, to give a prayer to the scholars.

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<sup>208</sup> Miller, *Dear Master*, 32-36.

<sup>209</sup> Bill of Sale, April 16, 1838, Box 91, John Hartwell Cocke Papers, Albert and Shirley Small Special Collections Library, University of Virginia.

She hoped Jesse would eventually serve as a full time teacher and preacher among the slaves at Bremono.<sup>210</sup> Thus, even though Cocke and his wife are often commended for their support for the education of slaves at Bremono, much of the work was being done by the slaves themselves. It also seems that the slaves themselves, led by Jesse, organized prayer meetings independent of the Cokes. “Most of them attend every night at his room, where he instructs them,” Cocke recorded in her diary. She noted that Jesse would probably be more successful in teaching the slaves than she would, but did not offer her reasoning as to why this might have been the case.<sup>211</sup>

Furthermore, Louisa Cocke’s diary reveals that John Hartwell Cocke was not as antislavery as much of the history of his plantation and support for antebellum reform movements may suggest. Louisa Cocke recorded that she was “a good deal disturbed” when her husband sold “some of the color’d people to Alabama” because of their “bad conduct.” She also noted that the new overseer was disliked due to his “wanton cruelty.”<sup>212</sup> How difficult might it have been for slaves at Bremono to learn from a master who had just sold friends and family to Alabama?

Looking closer at Peyton Skipwith’s letter reveals yet more evidence that this education was *not* solely the responsibility of John Hartwell Cocke. The schools that Diana and Matilda Skipwith attended in Liberia were not run by Cocke or his wife. Diana was instructed by Mrs.

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<sup>210</sup> December 23, 1821, December 30, 1821, Diary 9, Louisa Cocke Diary, Reel 1, Special Collections, University of Virginia Libraries.

<sup>211</sup> February 17, 1822, Diary 9, Louisa Cocke Diary, Reel 1, Special Collections, University of Virginia Libraries. Randall Miller writes, “At Bremono, Cocke and his Christian wife Louisa began a daily program of religious indoctrination and reading among the slaves, a program which also included tutoring in letters. Cocke initially staffed his plantation chapel and his infant and Sabbath schools with Northern teachers and clergymen, but he quickly ran afoul of both public opinion and of a Virginia law prohibiting slave education. Thereafter, Cocke directed family devotions, and Mrs. Cocke guided the slave children through the rudiments of reading and writing.” No mention is made of Jesse or the other enslaved teachers at Bremono. Randall Miller, *Dear Master*, 34.

<sup>212</sup> July 16, 1825, Diary 10, Louisa Cocke Diary, Reel 2, Special Collections, University of Virginia Libraries.



Lewis Johnson, while Matilda received her education from Miss Evans.<sup>213</sup> Lewis Johnson was a settler – the son of Elijah Johnson, one of the first settlers who arrived in 1820 and a member of the political elite who signed the Liberian Declaration of Independence. His brother, Hilary Johnson, became president of Liberia in the 1880s. It is unclear who his wife, Diana’s teacher, might have been, but it is almost certain she was an African American settler herself. The identity of Matilda’s teacher, Miss Evans, is also unclear. She may have been a settler, or perhaps a missionary (white or black) sent to Liberia.

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<sup>213</sup> Diana Skipwith to Sally Cocke, August 24, 1837, Box 9, “Bremo Recess” Papers Deposit of Mrs. Raymond Orf, Special Collections, University of Virginia Libraries.



Figure 2.2: Chapel from Bremono Plantation, Fluvanna County, Virginia

While this chapel was built in 1835, one year after Peyton Skipwith's family arrived in Liberia, it housed their congregation on Bremono plantation. The chapel was moved twice since it was used on Cocke's plantation. It is now a Virginia Historic Landmark, and the plaque attesting to this on the left door reads "Bremono Slave Chapel." It is currently in use as the Parish House of Grace Episcopal Church.

Peyton Skipwith's letter also reveals that though Diana was still learning to read and write, she was an instructor in a Baptist Church-sponsored Sunday school. Diana's work as a Sunday school teacher reveals that despite white American support for education in Liberia, the actual responsibility for teaching fell to the settlers themselves – and often settler women like Diana. Even religious education was supported by African American settlers themselves, some serving as missionaries.

## CONCLUSION

During a visit to the United States in 1886, Joseph Jenkins Roberts' widow, Jane Waring Roberts, traveled to Washington D.C. Jane Roberts served as Liberia's first "First Lady" from 1848-1856 and again during her husband's second term from 1872-1876, which ended with Joseph's death. After her husband's death, Roberts had moved to England, where she had previously traveled with her husband, but occasionally made trips to the United States, and specifically, Washington. During an 1886 visit to Washington, D.C., Roberts met with Rose Cleveland, the sister of United States president Grover Cleveland. While it is unclear where the two met, Rose Cleveland was still serving as the First Lady of the United States – Grover Cleveland married later that year. It is possible that these two first ladies met in the White House.<sup>214</sup>

While the two women might have had much in common as the spouses of heads of state, Roberts was the one in need of a favor. Roberts visited with Cleveland in order to give a statement in support of Liberia College, the college in Monrovia, which had opened its doors twenty-three years earlier. Roberts served as a consultant to help Cleveland – and President Cleveland – learn about the state of the college and the country. Following Roberts' visit, President Cleveland met with the president of Columbia College (later, George Washington University), George Whitefield Samson, another supporter of Liberia College. Samson enthusiastically supported the growth of the college, which was financially supported by white

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<sup>214</sup> G[eorge] W[hitefield] Samson to J[ames] C[handler] Braman, January 23, 1886, Folder 8, Box 4, Record Group 1, Trustees of Donations for Education in Liberia Records, Massachusetts Historical Society.

donors in the United States. Attesting to Roberts' statements and reliability, Samson told Cleveland that, "Christian women had ruled this country for fifty years past."<sup>215</sup>

Samson's statement points toward a long history of interracial cooperation – and conflict – between women on both sides of the Atlantic to support endeavors in Liberia. Most often, these women worked to support educational endeavors in Liberia, though this was not the only route women took in supporting the Liberia project. This chapter explored the multiple ways in which white women assisted in the colonization of Liberia. It also illustrated how benevolence during the nineteenth century was often in a hierarchy that reduced black women to dependence. By supporting reform movements – support for colonization in Liberia can be counted among these – white women were able to solidify their claim to social and political power over those deemed needy. Benevolence, of course, was not politically neutral. As white women claimed to be the natural educators of African American settlers, they discounted the work that African Americans themselves did in educating former slaves and settlers.<sup>216</sup>

The following chapter continues to examine the reading and writing practices that settlers in Liberia developed once they arrived there. Some, like the Skipwiths, had some knowledge of these skills already. Others, like many of the girls at the Cape Palmas Female Orphan Asylum, did not. Settlers used their new literacy in many ways. Some, like James Minor, worked for Liberia's growing print media in the production of books and newspaper on presses in both Monrovia and Cape Palmas. Others used literacy to maintain and form connections with correspondents in the United States, including former masters and their families. Print and

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<sup>215</sup> *Ibid.* Liberia College was chartered in 1851 by the Liberian legislature, but did not open its doors until 1863. Jane Roberts had an immediate connection to the college, as her husband, Joseph Jenkins Roberts, was one of the first professors and the first president of the institution. Liberia College became the University of Liberia in 1951.

<sup>216</sup> Susan M. Ryan, *The Grammar of Good Intentions: Race and the Antebellum Culture of Benevolence* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2004); Christopher Leslie Brown, *Moral Capital: Foundations of British Abolitionism* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2006).

manuscript writing became important to maintaining bonds of friendship and community that extended beyond the borders of the West African settlements and solidified them as a civilizing force.

### CHAPTER 3: “THE RELIANCE THAT WAS TO BE PLACED IN LETTERS<sup>217</sup>”: WRITING EARLY LIBERIA

*my Dear Betsey my hart in a maner of speaking Blead when i think of you all and think that i never shal se your all face a again your will give my love to one and all of the people to my grandmother Betsy and father primis and to all of my inquireing friends<sup>218</sup>*

Diana Skipwith’s letter to Betsey Morse offers a glimpse into a friendship that transcended two divides: the ocean that separated Bremono Plantation in Virginia from Monrovia in West Africa and the distance between slavery and freedom. Skipwith, who in 1839 had been free for five years, penned the letter to Morse, still enslaved at Bremono. Skipwith’s sentiments in her letter reflected her desire to reconnect, and remain connected, with friends and family from whom she had been separated upon her emancipation and subsequent immigration to Liberia. Her worry – that she would never “se your all face a again” – marked the physical distance that separated Skipwith from her former home. However, in keeping up her correspondence, Skipwith managed to maintain relationships with those still in Virginia and those still enslaved. Elsewhere in the letter, she hoped that if she was not to see her kin in this life, they would “shorly se one nother face to face but not in this world” if she and Morse managed to “refrain our wicked wais and turn to christ.”<sup>219</sup> Thus through the power of the written word, Skipwith linked together her past life in slavery, her new home in Liberia, and hopes for a reunification in heaven.

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<sup>217</sup> *The Fourth Annual Report of the Maryland State Colonization Society, to the members and the public* (Baltimore: John D. Toy, 1836), 6.

<sup>218</sup> Diana Skipwith to Betsey Morse, May 20, 1839, Box 95, Cocke Family Papers, Special Collections, University of Virginia Libraries (hereafter cited as Cocke Family Papers).

<sup>219</sup> *Ibid.*

Building on the limited instruction in reading that she had received in the United States with further schooling in Liberia, Skipwith and her family sustained a four-decade-long correspondence with the family that had formerly kept them in slavery. At Bremo, where the Cockes lived, and Hopewell, the family's plantation in Alabama, the Skipwiths' extended family still remained in slavery. Through corresponding with the Cockes, the Skipwiths in Liberia were able to maintain connection not only with their former master, but with the friends and family, "all of the people," who remained in slavery. In her message to Betsey Morse, Skipwith bound the letter, physically, to the one she wrote to Louisa Cocke: both letters were contained on the same folded folio, with Cocke's letter on the recto and verso of the first leaf and continuing onto the recto of the second leaf, and Morse's letter starting on the recto of the second leaf and continuing onto the verso.<sup>220</sup> The proximity of the letters evidences the intimacy of slavery in the United States: Cocke and Morse, mistress and slave, occupied similar space inside of the Bremo household, though they moved through it in radically different ways.<sup>221</sup>

The practice of letter writing was essential to bridging the distance between the United States and West Africa for many African American settlers who found themselves in Liberia during the first half of the nineteenth century. Letter writing, and literacy more generally, took on special significance for formerly enslaved settlers like Diana Skipwith, who were removed from the horrors of enslavement only to be thrust into a wholly new and alienating colonial setting. In his study of African American manuscript writing in the Reconstruction South, literary scholar Christopher Hager has shown that formerly enslaved people created community and fashioned

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<sup>220</sup> *Ibid.* The letters were sent care of Colin Teague, the Baptist missionary from Richmond, Virginia, who is described in Chapter 1 of this dissertation. Teague died on board a ship to the United States in 1839, presumably carrying this letter.

<sup>221</sup> This intimacy between white and enslaved women in domestic spaces often led to extreme violence, and the plantation home itself was often the site of this violence. See Thavolia Glymph, *Out of the House of Bondage: The Transformation of the Plantation Household* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008).

self-identities for themselves through writing. Hager argues writing was *not* always a liberatory practice for newly freed people, but was often vexing and arduous.<sup>222</sup> Newly freed settlers in Liberia, like Diana Skipwith, also struggled with the difficulties of learning to read, write, and share letters with a white audience comprised of slave owners. This chapter takes letters written by formerly enslaved settlers in Liberia as its source base to show the ways in which letter writing connected formerly enslaved people to the people with whom they had complex and intimate relationships: their former masters and masters' families.

I argue that these letters worked to sustain the links that bound settler families to the histories of their former enslavement. These texts were carefully calibrated to preserve the relationship between former slave and former owner despite the letter writers' independence. They allowed settlers to make claims on former masters by using the rhetoric of paternalism. White men invoked the ideology of paternalism as a way to justify and exert power over nonwhite peoples and women of all colors by emphasizing their dependence, and therefore, likeness to children. These men argued that they had a responsibility to provide for their slaves as a benevolent and Christian father would provide for his family. Paternalism was, in Eugene Genovese's words, constituted through an "insistence upon mutual obligations"; on one hand, enslaved peoples provided unfree labor, and on the other, good masters were supposed to provide and care for their slaves. The rhetoric, of course, did not reflect the brutal reality of chattel slavery.<sup>223</sup> But the ideology of paternalism was far more versatile than the slave owners had imagined. It could be reversed and used to make claims on them.

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<sup>222</sup> Christopher Hager, *Word by Word: Emancipation and the Act of Writing* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2013).

<sup>223</sup> Eugene Genovese identified and named the ideology of paternalism. While his work has been subject to much debate since the 1970s, the concept is still a useful one for many historians of antebellum slavery. Eugene Genovese, *Roll, Jordan, Roll: The World the Slaves Made* (New York: Random House, 1976), 5. For a more recent assessment of Genovese's work and its merits, see Walter Johnson, "A Nettlesome Classic Turns Twenty-Five," in *Common-Place*, Vol. 1, No. 4 (July, 2001), <http://www.common-place.org/vol-01/no-04/reviews/johnson.shtml>. For a similar



The first section of this chapter argues that Liberian letters can be read as critical sources for understanding settler society in early Liberia. Here, sets of letters written by former slaves to their former masters are closely examined. The letters reveal the complicated imaginings of “family” for newly freed people. In the letters, they demanded supplies and news from their former masters, and asked when they could expect their family members to be manumitted and join them in Liberia. I argue that these claims on former masters redeployed the framing of paternalism to make demands on their new patrons. These settlers turned the ideology of paternalism on its head, used it for their own purposes, and wrested some power from the plantation household. The letters also served to link former slaves like Diana Skipwith with still-enslaved kin like Betsey Morse: the letters reflect the ways in which writing allowed settlers to preserve and protect connections with the still-enslaved.

However, it is important to understand the context in which these letters were circulated, particularly within the antebellum African American press. Section two discusses antebellum African American print culture, and in particular, the debates around colonization in African American communities. While nearly all African American newspapers condemned colonization in favor of more immediate and radical abolition, famously, *Freedom’s Journal* (1827-1829), the first African American newspaper, reversed its stance on colonization under the editorship of John Brown Russwurm, who later migrated to Liberia and then Maryland (West Africa). *Freedom’s Journal* collapsed soon after Russwurm left the United States. Understanding the anticolonizationist press is essential for explaining the value of Liberian letters. This section concludes by arguing that Liberian letters were printed and reprinted, and circulated orally, to tell particular “truths” about Liberia. Letters were used by both pro- and anticolonization

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discussion of the role of Protestant Christianity in affirming white hegemony in the antebellum south, see Christine Heyrman, *Southern Cross: The Beginnings of the Bible Belt* (New York: Knopf, 1997).

publications, as evidence of the positive good or entrapment of Liberia, respectively. Both white and black audiences in the United States came to rely on the testimony of former slaves in Liberia to provide accurate information about the Liberian settlers – a reversal of the typical ways in which white audiences in the antebellum United States distrusted African American testimony.

### **LETTERS FROM LIBERIA AND THE RHETORIC OF PATERNALISM**

As we saw in the previous chapter, education, and in particular, the ability to read and write, were highly prized skills in the American settlements in West Africa. Even the Skipwiths, who had some education in Virginia and wrote the largest extant corpus of letters from one settler family, required further instruction once in Liberia. Diana Skipwith's correspondence with the wife and daughter of her former master reveals the tenuous nature of post-emancipation life in Monrovia. Though free, Skipwith chose to remain connected to her former master's family, and thus had to use letters to connect her new life as a freed woman with her previous one under slavery.

Literary scholar David Kazanjian has argued that letters from Liberia were used to “make a claim on slavery's coercive kinship.” His description of the “unsettled” status of the Liberian settlers via a reading of their epistolary record places, in his reading, settlers in a constant negotiation between freedom and slavery, a constant back and forth that remains unresolved in the letters.<sup>224</sup> I read the Skipwith letters differently, instead arguing that the Skipwiths and other

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<sup>224</sup> David Kazanjian, “The Speculative Freedom of Colonial Liberia,” *American Quarterly*, Vol. 63, No. 4 (December 2011); David Kazanjian, “Unsettled Life: Early Liberia's Epistolary Equivocations,” in Dana Luciano and Ivy G. Wilson, eds., *Unsettled States: Nineteenth-Century American Literary Studies*, (New York: NYU Press, 2014). Kazanjian's book-length study on Liberian and Mayan notions of freedom is forthcoming. David Kazanjian,

formerly enslaved letter writers were intentional in their deployment of paternalistic language. In addressing Cocke, the Skipwiths strategically employed language that would remind the Cokes of their familial obligations to their former slaves.

The complex dynamic of the relationship between former slave and master can be observed in Diana Skipwith's letters to her former master's daughter, Sally (Cocke) Brent. As discussed in the previous chapter, though Skipwith had started her education in Virginia, upon arrival in Liberia, she chose not to pen her first letter back to the United States herself, instead asking her father, Peyton, to serve as her amanuensis. By 1837, Diana Skipwith highlighted all of the education she had received, and her strength in writing and penmanship. In her letter to Brent, she described her schoolteacher as "verry Stud[ious] [sic]" and detailed the schoolhouses where she and her siblings took their lessons. Eager to impress Brent, Skipwith drew attention to her newly developed writing skills, ending the letter with a clever appeal for praise that also functioned as a sly condemnation of the prohibitions, both legal and cultural, against her continued education in the United States: "This is Some of my one [sic] hand riting. Do yo think I improv or not?"<sup>225</sup> On one hand, Skipwith's sentiment could be read at face value, as conveying the development of her writing skills while in Liberia. But the letter could also be understood as a subtle jab at the restrictive codes of conduct – both those that were legally enshrined, like prohibiting the education of slaves, and the informal social mores that regulated daily life on a plantation. In Liberia, Skipwith recognized her ability *to* improve and showcase her own handwriting without fear of reproach. Furthermore, she was not afraid to convey her displeasure with her former master's daughter. The letter also reveals that African Americans *could* indeed

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*The Brink of Freedom: Improvising Life in the Nineteenth-Century Atlantic World* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, forthcoming June 2016).

<sup>225</sup> Diana Skipwith to Sally Cocke, August 24, 1837, Box 9, "Bremo Recess" Papers Deposit of Mrs. Raymond Orf, Special Collections, University of Virginia Libraries (hereafter cited as "Bremo Recess" Papers).

participate in a thriving Anglo-American culture of letter writing. During the early nineteenth century, when white Americans and Europeans were developing ideas about racial hierarchies based on the notion of the superiority of white intelligence – fields of study that supported phrenology and polygenesis, for instance – a letter from a former slave like Skipwith could counter the notion that white people were somehow inherently more capable. Skipwith was, in essence, proving to Brent that with the same opportunities afforded to young white girls, Skipwith could be every bit as capable in writing and reading as white girls. This was an argument related to an earlier nineteenth century idea about race: one that located the debasement of African Americans not in biology, but in environmental conditions. Skipwith’s letter was an argument for the possibilities for, and potential of, African Americans once removed from the degradation of slavery. However, Skipwith’s articulation of the possibilities for African Americans post-slavery was not located solely in the politics of racial uplift. As James Stewart has argued, though “respectability” was still an important concept for African American communities in the 1840s, the idea of uplift had taken on new meanings. African Americans now demanded equality and citizenship for *all*, not just “respectable” persons.<sup>226</sup>

Though the Skipwith letters comprise the largest body of letters from Liberia sent by one family, they were not unique in their correspondence with former masters in the United States. And literacy was vital to these other families, too. Skipwith was not the only formerly enslaved settler to emphasize the importance of an education to her former master’s family. Peggue Potter, another formerly enslaved Virginian, was a destitute colonist in Monrovia, Liberia, who found herself living in a “Hut” with her elderly mother, Ruth. Her son, Daniel Nelson, had been sent to live with her brother-in-law, as there was no space for him in the hut. Nelson was in need of

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<sup>226</sup> James Brewer Stewart, “The Emergence of Racial Modernity and the Rise of the White North, 1790-1840,” *Journal of the Early Republic* 18, No. 2 (Summer 1998): 181-217.

schoolbooks, a slate, and pencils. Potter revealed these hardships to the son-in-law of her former mistress, Ann Page. Potter was almost certainly illiterate, but she begged her son, who had learned to read and write in Liberia, to pen a letter to Page's son-in-law, Charles Andrews of Virginia, to ask for money, supplies – and most importantly books – to help support Nelson's education. Eleven years after she had been emancipated and sent to the settlement at Monrovia, Potter sought to sustain the link between her own family and that of her former owner in order to secure these precious books. While Nelson asked specifically for Smith's *Geography*, *Arithmetic*, and *Grammar* for use in school, he ended his letter by asking Andrews to "send me some Books of all kinds." Despite the family's dire financial circumstances, reading and writing were of paramount importance for this settler family.<sup>227</sup>

Peggie Potter and Daniel Nelson had been the slaves of Ann Page, one of the Virginian white women who supported colonization described in the previous chapter. Though Ann Page had been dead for nearly a decade when Potter and Nelson wrote their letter, they sought to maintain the connection with their former mistress' family. By asking for books, in particular, they may have intended to signal to Andrews that in Liberia, they were still attempting to read and write, and thus, "improve" themselves much in the way Diana Skipwith had done with her writing.

Settlers in Liberia wrote home to the United States not simply to ask for material supplies, but also to gain information about their family and friends at home. Matilda (Skipwith) Lomax, Diana Skipwith's sister, also wrote to Sally (Cocke) Brent in July 1848, and enclosed a letter for her grandmother, Lucy Nicholas, who was still enslaved at Bremono. She wanted news about her Uncle George, who was supposed to have gone to Liberia after earning money at John

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<sup>227</sup> Peggie Potter to Charles Andrews, December 9, 1847, Charles Wesley Andrews Correspondence, Virginia Historical Society (hereafter cited as Andrews Correspondence); *Liberia Herald* 12, No. 6 (May 3, 1843); *Africa's Luminary* 3, No. 17 (November 19, 1841).

Hartwell Cocke's Hopewell Plantation in Alabama. However, George Skipwith never made it to Liberia. She also gave her grandmother news of her Uncle Erasmus, who had been sent to Liberia but was currently en route to the United States.<sup>228</sup> Through writing to Brent, Lomax was able to get a letter to her enslaved grandmother. Peyton Skipwith also wrote a letter to his mother, Lucy Nicholas, after hearing the news of his father Jesse's death. From Monrovia, Skipwith comforted his mother via letter, writing, "I am in hopes that you will not greav after Father because I beleav if he keep the faith he is gone to beter world then this."<sup>229</sup> Though Skipwith could not be physically present with his mother, he hoped for a reunification of the whole family in heaven.

Robert M. Page, who, like Peggue Potter and Daniel Nelson, had formerly belonged to Ann Page, politely asked her son-in-law, Charles Andrews about the circumstances of his (and his family's) birth dates. "I would be glad to learn our true ages as somehow we have lost [them?]"<sup>230</sup> This line is the only one in the letter that would have reminded Andrews of his family's connection to slave holding. The other requests – for nails, cloth, tools, etc. – might have come from a merchant's factor living in Liberia. But Robert Page's request to know his true age makes this former slave's letter stand apart as one that served as a reminder to Andrews that his family had previously owned the man writing the letter. Perhaps, then, Andrews' sense of paternalistic duty would encourage him to agree to Page's inquiries. The Page family was interested in their genealogy and sought to reconstruct their family history, especially while they resided a world away from their place of birth. Robert Page's mother remained enslaved in

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<sup>228</sup> Matilda (Skipwith) Lomax to Sally (Cocke) Brent and Lucy Nicholas, July 4, 1848, Box 125, Cocke Family Papers. Erasmus apparently did not take to Liberia as well as his brother Peyton did. He signed aboard as a steward on the U.S. Brig *Porpoise*, which was part of the anti-slave trade squadron. Peyton Skipwith to John Hartwell Cocke, September 29 1844, Box 112, Cocke Family Papers.

<sup>229</sup> Peyton Skipwith to Lucy Nicholas, May 10, 1838, Box 91, Cocke Family Papers.

<sup>230</sup> Robert M. Page to Charles Andrews, May 5, 1849, Andrews Correspondence.

Virginia, and he often asked Charles Andrews and his wife, Sarah, about her. Noting that he had been glad to hear from Andrews earlier, and “especially my mother,” he asked Andrews to also send his love to “particular to my dear mother and all my Brothers and sisters.”<sup>231</sup> Just as Peggue Potters’ son, Daniel Nelson, penned his mother’s letter for her, Robert’s son, John Page, served as an amanuensis for his father’s wishes.

The letter reveals that for this emancipated family, the conditions of their former enslavement continued to matter. In attempting to constitute a genealogy for themselves, they were attempting to build a connection to the past that slavery sought to sever. Details of births, deaths, marriages, and other important life events were often obscured from slaves themselves, even if they were recorded by masters (and preserved in archives). In his first autobiography, Frederick Douglass wrote, “I do not remember to have ever met a slave who could tell his birthday... [t]he white children could tell their ages. I could not tell why I ought to be deprived of the same privilege.” Douglass went on to state that he could not even ask his master his true age, and suggested that masters purposefully kept this information from their slaves. Douglass had to guess his own age, a predicament he said made him unhappy, even as a child.<sup>232</sup> For the Pages, knowing their “true ages” might be one way in which they could remake their lives, after slavery, but they had to rely on the generosity of Andrews to provide the information. Thus they were both free, and seeking to further extend that freedom by knowing their ages, yet reliant still on their former master’s family for this information.

Robert M. Page noted that while he was glad to be free, this freedom meant that he was separated from his extended family by settling in Liberia. Page reminded Charles Andrews that his family had been forcibly split up after he was granted his freedom with a short line that

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<sup>231</sup> Robert M. Page to Charles Andrews, October 28, 1849, Andrews Correspondence.

<sup>232</sup> Frederick Douglass, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, An American Slave Written by Himself* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2001 [1845]), 13.

connected his new family, forged in freedom, with his children's ancestry. He wrote to Andrews, "[T]he children all join me in love to their Grandmothers – who they have never seen."<sup>233</sup>

Though Page was now free, his family was split, and his children now had to grow up without meeting their grandmothers. However, in joining "in love," Page used the written word to connect his children to his mother and mother-in-law, despite the limitations imposed by freedom upon the family connection by freedom. Page's phrasing also reflects his assumption that the letter may be read aloud to the grandmothers, or at least, its contents conveyed to them. The Skipwith family included similar connections in their letters to the Cocke family. Matilda Skipwith, writing to Sally Cocke, as her sister Diana had, asked her to, "[W]rite me about Uncle George Skipwith. I have not heard of him since I have been in Liberia, or Aunt Luvine, Uncle Ned, his Aunt Falitia, Primous."<sup>234</sup> In the same letter, she mentioned that her father had not heard any word from his mother or sister, who were still enslaved in Virginia. Though Skipwith had known her relatives before she embarked for Liberia, the project of using the written word to connect with family members, still enslaved, was similar to Page's use of the letter to introduce his children to their grandmothers. Page and Skipwith seemed to *expect* that their former masters' families would do as asked. In both cases, the letters relied upon Charles Andrews and the Cocke family to establish the connection by sharing the contents of the letter with their slaves.

Since American archives contain mostly the correspondence *received* from Liberia, and not always what was sent there, little evidence suggests how often former masters wrote to the settlers. One copy of a letter written by Sarah Andrews to the Page family in Liberia survives. Sarah Andrews, writing to Peter Page, gave some indication of how the (black) Page family was

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<sup>233</sup> Robert M. Page to Charles Andrews, May 5, 1849, Andrews Correspondence.

<sup>234</sup> Matilda Skipwith Lomax Richardson to Sally Cocke, October 23, 1844, Box 13, "Bremo Recess" Papers.



far in the United States. “Aunt Milly who lives with us often talks most lovingly of you all, especially her little Peter. Her health is pretty good and she looks fair[?] + well though often complaining - Uncle Joe is tolerably well.” Letters, like this one from Andrews, were the only way that the settler Page family might get news of their family and friends at home. Andrews also followed through with Robert M. Page’s request to know his true age, writing, “Peter was born on Christmas day 1826 - I am very sure. John and Sol early in 1828. I think Sol. in April. For John I cannot certainly remember when.”<sup>235</sup> Andrews’ letter was an attempt at a response to Robert M. Page’s letter, but reveals that perhaps there was no written record of the births of the Page slaves (or, if there were, Andrews did not consult them in forming her response).

It does appear that some settlers did not hear back from their correspondents. Diana Skipwith was not afraid to convey her displeasure with her former master’s daughter. The slowness of Sally’s responses frustrated Diana. Peyton Skipwith, her father, remarked in a January 1838 letter to his former master that “Diannah says that she did not receive a letter from Miss Sarah Cox [Sally (Cocke) Brent] and that she thinks hard of it – for she has only got one letter from her since she arrived in Africa.” The enumeration of letters added credence to Peyton Skipwith’s claims that Diana Skipwith had written far more often than Brent had. He subtly conveyed that Diana Skipwith was so upset that she was no longer taking the time to write to her former mistress. He simply wrote, “She has not written to Miss Sarah [Sally] by this vessel,” and asked for more writing paper, which was “very scarce.”<sup>236</sup> Again, this line reinforced the message: Paper was hard to come by in Liberia, but Skipwith had still made an effort to write to Brent. Why couldn’t Brent, who had easy access to paper, be bothered to write? Similarly, Skipwith hoped to reconnect with her former mistress, Louisa (Holmes) Cocke, in heaven,

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<sup>235</sup> Sarah W. Page Andrews to Peter M. Page, 1850[?], Andrews Correspondence.

<sup>236</sup> Peyton Skipwith to John Hartwell Cocke, January 30, 1838, Box 3, Armistead C. Gordon Papers, Collections, University of Virginia Libraries.

writing, “i Trust that i will see your face a gain but i am a fraid that i never will in this world... Oh tell me i yet have a friend though a friend i am never to see.”<sup>237</sup> Skipwith made claims on the Cocke family women – not as former acquaintances – but as women with whom she had grown up, looked after, and shared intimate details of her life. She hoped to spend eternity with the Cockes, as the women were committed to their Protestant faith and earnestly believed in a reunion in heaven. She expected the Cocke family to correspond with her because the bond she shared with them was *like family* – a family not only in the sense of the antebellum discourse of paternalism, but also in the sense of a community of believers, united in their belief in god as the father. J. Lorand Matory has studied Yoruba religion and its capacity to transcend time and space in order to connect ancestors, living and dead. Diana Skipwith’s letter reveals that Protestant Christianity could be just as capacious, in her formulation of it as a religion that would reunite master and slave in heaven. It is possible that Skipwith might have expected a more equal relationship in heaven, however.<sup>238</sup>

The relationship between this world and the next was evoked in Peyton Skipwith’s letter to his mother, as well. “Mother I hope wil give you Consolation if you never see me no more in this world I am triing to meat you in a better world than this whare we Shal part no more.”<sup>239</sup> Skipwith’s hope for reunification with his mother suggests that he might have accepted that her immigration to Liberia was impossible, as was the possibility of his returning to the United States. Instead, the pair needed to rely upon the written word (carried to the enslaved Nicholas through the Cocke family) and their belief in a heavenly reunification.

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<sup>237</sup> Diana Skipwith to Louisa Cocke, May 20, 1839, Box 95, Cocke Family Papers.

<sup>238</sup> J. Lorand Matory, *Black Atlantic Religion: Tradition, Transnationalism and Matriarchy in the Afro-Brazilian Candomblé* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005).

<sup>239</sup> Peyton Skipwith to Lucy Nicholas, May 10, 1838, Box 91, Cocke Family Papers.

The Skipwiths' anticipation that they would meet loved ones again after death was not unusual for settlers and missionaries in Liberia. The phrase "if nothing happens" was frequently used to express doubt about future plans – evidence that missionaries understood the precarious position their work placed them. As white missionary Harriet Myer Laird wrote to her friend while on board the *Jupiter* en route to Liberia, "The idea of never again seeing or hearing from you is by no means agreeable."<sup>240</sup> Diana Skipwith's letter tapped into a common practice of understanding the Liberian journey as one that might strain relationships in this life, but that a reunion of sorts would happen for some in the next. Her expectations of the Cockes, that they would continue to correspond and support her, reflect Skipwith's understanding of Protestant salvation: for her, the afterlife was tangible and real phenomenon for which she had to prepare.

Eventually, Skipwith turned to writing to Louisa (Holmes) Cocke instead of Sally (Cocke) Brent. Brent had been unresponsive to her letters, possibly because she had already married and had been caught up in her new family.<sup>241</sup> Skipwith's need for information about home, her family, and friends – and for the supplies like handkerchiefs that could make a meager life in Liberia more bearable – was so great that she was willing to carefully undermine Sally Brent to get these things. Skipwith's tactics – repeatedly admonishing her former master's family for more news of home, writing multiple letters and enumerating the letters sent and received, and writing to other family members when all else failed – were all used by other letter writers in Liberia.

Matilda (Skipwith) Richardson did not seem to have the close relationship with Sally (Cocke) Brent that her sister, Diana Skipwith, did. Matilda was twenty years old when her sister died in 1844. Only after Diana's death did Matilda Skipwith begin writing to her friends and

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<sup>240</sup> Harriet Myer Laird to Elizabeth, December 15, 1833, Folder 3, Box 1, Harriet Myer Laird Papers, Presbyterian Historical Society.

<sup>241</sup> Diana Skipwith to Louisa Cocke, May 8, 1838, Box 91, Cocke Family Papers.

family in Virginia. She also worried that Sally Cocke would not remember who she was, reminding her, “The person that send you these letters is the Daughter of Payten [Peyton] Skipwith now Matilda Richardson.”<sup>242</sup> While Diana Skipwith only wrote to John Hartwell Cocke once, after Sally Cocke had failed to respond to her frequently or quickly enough, Skipwith Lomax Richardson wrote to John Hartwell Cocke repeatedly. While Diana Skipwith had hedged her bets that her former friend, Sally Cocke, might be receptive to her letters, Matilda Skipwith more quickly realized that writing to *all* members of the Cocke family might bring about a more rapid response.

James Minor, a settler living in Monrovia, wrote to Mary Blackford of Virginia, the white colonization supporter described in Chapter 2. He complained to Blackford that, “I have not failed to transmit to you regularly by every opportunity both letters and papers, and have not received any answers at all.”<sup>243</sup> In Buchanan, Liberia, Richard Blaunt McMorine wrote to James Johnston Pettigrew, in North Carolina, that “I wrote You Some two years go But have not heard from you But I wrote To Mr. M. Feorbs [Forbes] at the Same time.”<sup>244</sup> While mailing letters back and forth across the Atlantic Ocean could present difficulties, the settlers seemed to know that the simple answer was to send multiple letters to each person. Hopefully, one of the letters would reach its intended recipient. Perhaps the letter-writers wondered why their correspondents in the United States could not use a similar tactic.

Letter writers in Liberia could also ask former masters to reunite their families in *this* life, rather than waiting for the next. Though the majority of the settlers to Liberia arrived in family

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<sup>242</sup> Matilda (Skipwith) Richardson to Sally (Cocke) Brent, August 19, 1857, Box 16, “Bremo Recess” Papers, UVA.

<sup>243</sup> James C. Minor to Mary Berkeley Blackford, October 17, 1851, Folder 53, Box 4, Blackford Family Papers, Southern Historical Collection, University of North Carolina (hereafter cited as Blackford Papers).

<sup>244</sup> Richard Blaunt McMorine to James Johnston Pettigrew, June 1858, Folder 213, Box 10, Pettigrew Family Papers, SHC. The relationship between McMorine and Pettigrew is unclear. Pettigrew owned a large number of slaves, so it is possible that McMorine had once been enslaved by Pettigrew.

groups, some of the settlers left behind immediate family members, in particular, children. James Skipwith, nephew to Peyton Skipwith and cousin of Diana Skipwith and Matilda Skipwith Lomax Richardson, had been able to earn his freedom and migrate to Liberia. But his wife, Patsey, and their two children, remained enslaved in Virginia, and were now owned by John Hartwell Cocke's son, Dr. Cary Charles Cocke. James Skipwith had earned his freedom through work, and indeed been hard at work in Liberia since his arrival in 1858. He wrote that in Liberia, "we have to carry our tools all day in our hands + our Bibles at Night." By 1860, Skipwith did not know where his wife and children were living. He had not heard from them in months. Had they been separated? He was desperate for information about them, asking Berthier Edwards, one of Cocke's enslaved laborers, to find out why Patsey had not written to him recently. He begged for Edwards to "tell me sumthing about them."<sup>245</sup> For James Skipwith, letters were the only way that he might find out information about his family – and the only way that they might be redeemed.

James Skipwith continued to press Cocke to redeem his wife and two children. His letters to Cocke reminded the slave master that he had been quite successful in Liberia. He had kept his pledge to remain temperate, and did not fail to report this back to Cocke, who had been involved with a variety of antebellum reform movements, and in particular, was an advocate for temperance. Skipwith, no doubt, knew that Cocke would be impressed with his temperance. In addition to his success as a baker, which earned him the respect of "the leading + Furst Men of this Republic," Skipwith also remarked that he was studying to be a minister, was teaching in a Sabbath school, and attended revival meetings in Monrovia. In his letters, Skipwith sought to demonstrate his material and moral success in Liberia. By describing his leadership in the

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<sup>245</sup> James Skipwith to Berthier Edwards, May 31, 1860, Cocke Family Papers. James Skipwith was the son of George Skipwith, the same uncle Matilda Skipwith had asked about in her letter from July 4, 1848.

religious community of the settlement, he proved that he was a well-respected individual. He also reported to Cocke that he had been monitoring the situation of the Sturdivant family, another formerly enslaved family, who had been owned by Sally Faulcon, Cocke's sister, and sent to Liberia. He reported to Cocke that "no Cats + no gogs [dogs] live worse a disgrace to our family."<sup>246</sup> Skipwith's report on the Sturdivants also had the effect of making Skipwith seem like a more capable patriarch than Leander Sturdivant, the head of the benighted family. Perhaps Skipwith was making an implicit contrast between Sturdivant's failures to care for his own family, who lived with him, and Skipwith's potential ability as the head of a family, which went unrealized as his wife and children did not reside in Liberia. Leander Sturdivant, according to Skipwith, was an inadequate patriarch. So why, then, was he allowed to have his family with him in Liberia, if Skipwith was not?

If Skipwith was a good enough man to support himself and to instruct others in religious matters, no doubt, he would be a good provider for his family's material comfort and moral well-being. Despite his material success in Liberia, James Skipwith knew he did not have enough money to purchase the freedom of his wife and children, so he focused on providing for them, even though he was an ocean away. He sold some items to Cocke, and informed his former master that, "I am forty dollars Short in my Goods which you Bought in Richmond." He suggested that Cocke repay him by giving the money to his wife. "I dont see ware I shall evry make A Nought [enough] to Redeame my Wife an children I would rather Be thir wir [where] I Could Put sumthing in their hand if it wairs [were] But A little."<sup>247</sup> Even in absentia, James

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<sup>246</sup> James Skipwith to John Hartwell Cocke, March 29, 1852, Box 139; July 17, 1858, Box 155; August 20, 1859, Box 157; July 10, 1860, Box 160; all in Cocke Family Papers.

<sup>247</sup> James Skipwith to John Hartwell Cocke, January 30, 1858, Box 3, Armistead C. Gordon Papers, Special Collections, University of Virginia Libraries.

Skipwith wanted to help support his family. No doubt, he hoped that this gesture was not lost on his former master.

In this final letter from July 10, 1860, Skipwith's emphasis on the Sturdivants' disgrace upon "our family" reminded Cocke that the two men were bonded together, not only by familiarity and affection, but also by the *actual* relationship of family. It was in this letter that again Skipwith asked Cocke to consider redeeming and sending Patsey and the children to Liberia. Admitting that his letter was "Bad writen" because of his nervousness in writing, he told Cocke that, "I donot know of eny thing that could make me Happyer then to see your People up by the side of eny People that has come to Liberia."<sup>248</sup> James Skipwith's letters relied on multiple articulations of the "family." First, he connected his own biological family with Cocke's. The use of the possessive plural in describing the disgrace the Sturdivants brought upon both Skipwith and Cocke did more than just articulate Skipwith's displeasure with his fellow settlers. It also reinforced the sense of obligation that Skipwith felt Cocke should have to him. White patriarchs were, in the ideology of the antebellum South, expected to provide for their subordinates. Skipwith affirmed that his family – and to some extent, his own person – remained under Cocke's care, while simultaneously arguing that Skipwith himself *could* also be a good patriarch. What Skipwith needed, more so than material aid to help support himself in Liberia, was the purchase of his family and payment for their passage to Liberia.

Ultimately, Skipwith's sadness at the prospect of never again seeing his wife and children was his undoing, at least according to his cousin and fellow settler. Matilda Skipwith Lomax Richardson, wrote that while James Skipwith was sick, "he was hopping to see his wife and as

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<sup>248</sup> James Skipwith to John Hartwell Cocke, July 10, 1860, Box 160, Cocke Family Papers.

she did not come it made him worse.”<sup>249</sup> Did James Skipwith realize that civil war was fomenting in the United States? Skipwith, like all peoples who had been enslaved, no doubt knew well that slaves were subject to the whims of their masters. This held even truer during chaotic times. In 1861, the abolition of U.S. slavery was far from a foregone conclusion. Did he worry that his wife had been sent down to the slave markets on the Gulf of Mexico? Notably, Matilda (Skipwith) Richardson reported that James Skipwith was focused on seeing his wife again. Did he assume that their children had already been taken from their mother’s arms? It was possible. John Hartwell Cocke, for all of his support of colonization, had sold slaves as late as 1864.<sup>250</sup> As Heather Williams has shown in her work on the search for and reunification of family members in the post-Civil War United States, African-Americans did seek to find their lost family members, though they were rarely successful. The internal slave markets of the United States, and the realities of a war that brought death, destruction, and displacement to millions of people in the Southern United States inhibited the locating of far-flung family members.<sup>251</sup> At the end of his life, James Skipwith turned his attention to the care of his children once again, to ask through his cousin Matilda (Skipwith) Richardson that his brother, Richard Skipwith, who was still enslaved, should “take good care of his children and bring them up in the fear of the Lord.”<sup>252</sup> If James Skipwith could not hope to be reunited with his children in this life, then perhaps they could be reunited in death.

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<sup>249</sup> Matilda Skipwith Lomax Richardson to John Hartwell Cocke, February 23, 1861, Box 162, Cocke Family Papers.

<sup>250</sup> Cocke sold Ben, 44, for \$2,600; Carter, 21, for \$3,900; and Willis, 32, for \$3,400. What became of the men after their sale remains unclear. Bill of sale between John Hartwell Cocke and E.L. Pence, July 28, 1864, Cocke Family Papers.

<sup>251</sup> Heather Andrea Williams, *Help me to Find My People: The African American Search for Family Lost in Slavery* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2012).

<sup>252</sup> Matilda Skipwith Lomax Richardson to Richard and William Skipwith, February 22, 1861, Box 162, Cocke Family Papers.



If James Skipwith spoke to John Hartwell Cocke in a familiar language – the language of duty and obligation, reinforced by the ideology of paternalism – his cousin, Matilda Skipwith also utilized gendered language to be more effective in her letters. While men wrote significantly more letters to the United States than women did, this could be attributed to higher rates of literacy for settler men. But when women did write, they often directed their attention to their former mistresses. Did the settler women hope that women would be more receptive to their letters because of their shared experiences as women? Or, perhaps more practically, were formerly enslaved women more likely to write to their mistresses because they were on friendlier terms than with the masters? Diana Skipwith and Sally Cocke clearly had a close relationship while Skipwith was enslaved; no doubt, Cocke’s unwillingness to write to Skipwith upset the young woman a great deal.

Matilda Skipwith, as previously noted, wrote to more of the Cocke family than her sister had, possibly to increase her chances at getting a response. She often remarked that her sex made it particularly difficult for her to support her family in Liberia. She wrote to John Hartwell Cocke that after the death of her first husband, she was left “with three small Children to provid for.” She continued, telling Cocke of her troubles, “Every thing is hard for a widow without sufficient means.”<sup>253</sup> She did try to work to support her family, but found that women’s wages were significantly lower than men’s in early Liberia – she reported that she earned 25 cents a day, while men could expect \$1.50. Her repeated references to the difficult time she had in Liberia *because she was a woman* were, no doubt, included to evoke sympathy from the Cocks. Perhaps, John Hartwell Cocke would be inspired by a sense of obligation to send goods to her. Perhaps Skipwith was attempting to tap into white American reformers’ notions of African

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<sup>253</sup> One of the children must have died after she wrote this letter. Matilda (Skipwith) Lomax to John Hartwell Cocke, September 30, 1850, Box 134, Cocke Family Papers.

American need, which Susan Ryan has described as a tactic benevolent reformers took to make their supported causes seem dire. Might Skipwith have realized this language was one that Cocke himself spoke? Did she hope to fit this expectation in her writing, in order to affect Cocke?<sup>254</sup>

Perhaps Matilda Skipwith hoped Sally Cocke would sympathize with her plight. As a white woman, Sally Cocke could expect her father, and later, her husband to care for her. Now that Skipwith Lomax Richardson's father and husband were both dead, who was to care for her? She might have thought that describing her difficulties in caring for her family in terms that Sally Cocke would understand would have the desired effect. Sally Cocke recognized her need, and did send her some items to help support her and her children.<sup>255</sup> Like her cousin James Skipwith, Skipwith Lomax Richardson used the tactic of telling the Cocks about her religious commitments in Liberia. She proudly noted that she had been a member of the Baptist Church since she was fifteen, and that she also had joined the Daughters of Temperance and the Sisters of Friendship in Monrovia.<sup>256</sup> These activities were common for antebellum women in the United States, who formed benevolent organizations throughout the north and south. Perhaps Sally Cocke joined a temperance society in Virginia, as Matilda Skipwith did in Monrovia. Skipwith Lomax Richardson was also invested in her daughters' educations, asking for schoolbooks for them, much as Peggue Potter and Daniel Nelson asked Charles Andrews for books, before requesting the more obvious provisions of flour and pork barrels.<sup>257</sup>

Despite these reminders that the formerly enslaved were owed both acknowledgement and material support from their former masters, very few of the letters from Liberia were hostile.

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<sup>254</sup> Matilda (Skipwith) Lomax to John Hartwell Cocke, May 19, 1852, Box 140, Cocke Family Papers; Susan M. Ryan, *The Grammar of Good Intentions: Race and the Antebellum Culture of Benevolence* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2004).

<sup>255</sup> Matilda (Skipwith) Richardson to John Hartwell Cocke, February 1, 1858, Box 16, "Bremo Recess" Papers.

<sup>256</sup> Matilda (Skipwith) Richardson to John Hartwell Cocke, August 1857, Box 153, Cocke Family Papers.

<sup>257</sup> Matilda (Skipwith) Lomax to John Hartwell Cocke, June 20, 1854, Box 146, Cocke Family Papers.

During the rare moments when a former slave was enraged, the anger was not directed at the former master, but at another individual. For instance, Randall Kilby wrote to his former master, John, in June 1856 to send news of the birth of his triplets: John, Amelia, and Commodore Perry. Kilby also told his former master that he had received the shipment of flour and promised to send some coffee to Virginia once the crop had been harvested. Perhaps Kilby named his son after his former master. This may have been done strategically, to curry favor with a man who was willing to send a barrel of flour and a box of other good across the Atlantic to his former slave. Notably, Kilby seemed to regularly receive letters from his former master, and did not share Diana Skipwith's complaints that the white family in the United States was not writing enough.

The end of Kilby's letter contains a scathing indictment of another man. He wrote to his former master, "I hope that all are well Excepting Elijah Hampton for the Five Lick he gave me and tell him to send me my half dollar he owes me for my Hound."<sup>258</sup> Elijah Hampton might well have been an overseer at John Kilby's plantation in Nansemond, Virginia.<sup>259</sup> Regardless, Kilby had remembered the violence inflicted upon his body and made palpable his anger and resentment in his letter. What did Kilby intend by including this snapshot of an injustice in a letter to his former master? Did Kilby want his former master to seek out Hampton and reproach him for his actions? Did he want the debt of the half dollar to be paid? Or, perhaps, was this a commentary on the everyday injustices done to enslaved people – a few strokes of the whip upon a bare back; hard-earned money stolen. These types of interactions would have been very common to enslaved people. One can imagine that Kilby, who was 42 at the time of his

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<sup>258</sup> Randall Kilby to John R. Kilby, June 26, 1856, Box 4, Folder 2, John Richardson Kilby Papers, David M. Rubenstein Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Duke University.

<sup>259</sup> A listing for Elijah Hampton, 48 appears on the 1850 census for Nansemond County. This may or may not be the Elijah Hampton Kilby referred to in his letter. United States Census, 1850, index and images, *FamilySearch*, <https://familysearch.org/pal:/MM9.1.1/M8DX-Z97>, Elijah Hampton, Nansemond county, part of, Nansemond, Virginia, United States; citing dwelling 622, family 622, NARA microfilm publication M432, roll 962.

emancipation, had suffered similar violence over the course of his life as an enslaved man.<sup>260</sup>

This pain erupted in Kilby's letter, written after he had been manumitted, and presumably, many years after the incident had occurred. Kilby's letter, perhaps, revealed the realities of slavery that the rhetoric of paternalism could not mask. As much as slave owners like John Kilby wanted to believe they were caring for their slaves' best interests, and as much as formerly enslaved people like Randall Kilby used this same rhetoric to make demands on their former masters, the ideology of the benevolent master was simply just that – an ideology designed to legitimate slavery. The discourse of paternalism was indeed powerful for white masters' imaginings of themselves, and if used correctly by their former slaves in Liberia, it could be persuasive, leading them to act in particular ways.

#### **TRUTH TELLING: LIBERIAN LETTERS AS EVIDENCE**

While settlers continued to send letters to the United States, the African American community debated the merits of colonization in print. *Freedom's Journal* vehemently opposed colonization, at least, at first. In a May 18, 1827 article, James Forten, writing under the pseudonym "a man of colour," wrote of a meeting of nearly 3,000 men in Philadelphia that met to discuss colonization. At the meeting, he noted, "there was not one, who was in favour of leaving this country ; but they were all opposed to colonization in any foreign country

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<sup>260</sup> Kilby immigrated to Liberia on the ship *Sophia Walker* in 1854 under the name Randal Bunch. Apparently, while living in Liberia, he changed his surname to Kilby. This, again, can be taken as evidence of his attempts to claim a connection with John Kilby, his former master, who was apparently receptive to his former slave's letters. The ship listing for Bunch/Kilby can be found in *The African Repository* 30, No. 7 (July, 1854), 214-217. See also Craig M. Kilby, "The Kelley Brothers and the American Colonization Society: From Northumberland County to Liberia," *The Bulletin of the Northumberland County Historical Society* 45 (2008): 34-53.

whatever.”<sup>261</sup> Richard Allen, founder of the African Methodist Episcopal Church, wrote in November of that same year in *Freedom’s Journal* against colonization. “This land which we have watered with *our tears* and *our blood*, is now our *mother* country and we are well satisfied to say where wisdom abounds, and the gospel is free.”<sup>262</sup> Forten and Allen deeply distrusted the ACS and the colonization project in general, viewing it as a plan to rid the South of free African Americans, rather than an attempt to end slavery in the United States.

Thus when *Freedom’s Journal* editor John Brown Russwurm elected to immigrate to Liberia in 1829, the reaction from Philadelphia’s African American community was resounding. While Russwurm was publishing letters from ACS agent Jehudi Ashmun and reprinting selections from *The African Repository* in *Freedom’s Journal*, he was burned in effigy in Philadelphia.<sup>263</sup> Russwurm, in defending colonization, wrote in *Freedom’s Journal*:

The subject of Colonization is certainly important, as having a great bearing on that of slavery ; for it must be evident, that the universal emancipation so ardently desired by us & by all our friends, can never take place, unless some door is opened whereby the emancipated may be removed as fast as they drop their falling chains, to some other land besides the free states, for it is a fact, that prejudices now in our part of the country, are so high, that it is often the remark of liberal men from the south, that their free people are treated better than we are<sup>264</sup>

Russwurm advocated colonization on the basis of racism in the North, and expressed hope that in having a place to send free people, more slave owners would be likely to emancipate their slaves.

Russwurm arrived in Liberia that same year, and quickly became the editor of Monrovia’s

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<sup>261</sup> “Original Communication,” *Freedom’s Journal* 1, No. 10, May 18, 1827. Forten is identified as the writer in Floyd Miller, *The Search for a Black Nationality: Black Emigration and Colonization, 1787-1863* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1975), 83-84.

<sup>262</sup> “Letter from Bishop Allen,” *Freedom’s Journal* 1, No. 34, November 2, 1827.

<sup>263</sup> “Latest from Liberia,” *Freedom’s Journal* 2, No. 52, March 28, 1829; “From the African Repository, *Freedom’s Journal* 2, No. 51, March 21, 1829; Julie Winch, *Philadelphia’s Black Elite: Activism, Accommodation, and the Struggle for Autonomy, 1787-1848* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1988), 39-48.

<sup>264</sup> “Colonization,” *Freedom’s Journal* 2, No. 50 (March 14, 1829).

secular newspaper, the *Liberia Herald*. Russwurm had a long career in West Africa, migrating to Maryland (West Africa), where he became the first black governor there in 1836.<sup>265</sup>

Beyond *Freedom's Journal*, colonization was distrusted in the black press within the United States. By the 1830s, most free African Americans were uninterested in the prospect of colonization. Floyd Miller points to the growth of the convention movement and the push for a more radical antislavery as reasons why colonization and emigration lost favor with African Americans until the 1850s, when emigration (though not sponsored by the ACS) became a popular idea once again.<sup>266</sup>

Frederick Douglass, perhaps the most famous former slave in antebellum America, also argued against colonization, writing “We live here—have lived here—have a right to live here, and mean to live here.”<sup>267</sup> William Nesbit’s scathing report of his time in Liberia, *Four Months in Liberia: Or, African Colonization Exposed*, published in 1855 with an introduction from Martin Delany, is perhaps the best-known anti-colonization text from this time. He wrote of Liberia, “The whole country presents the most woe begone and hopeless aspect which it is possible for a man to conceive of.”<sup>268</sup> Nesbit’s impressions of Liberia circulated so widely on both sides of the Atlantic that another African American in Liberia, Samuel Williams, published his reply, *Four Years in Liberia* three years later, as “an answer to Nesbit’s book.” Williams accused Nesbit and Delany of falsifying the account. In his reply, he suggested Nesbit knew “nothing” about Liberia, and that his short time in the country did not make him an authority on

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<sup>265</sup> For a biography of Russwurm, see Winston James, *The Struggles of John Brown Russwurm: The Life and Writings of a Pan-African Pioneer* (New York: NYU Press, 2010).

<sup>266</sup> “Colonization” refers to the ACS-sponsored Liberia project; “emigration” refers to a broader set of plans to establish an African American community outside of the United States, in places like Haiti and Canada. Miller, *The Search for a Black Nationality*.

<sup>267</sup> Frederick Douglass, “Colonization,” *The North Star*, January 26, 1849.

<sup>268</sup> William Nesbit, *Four Months in Liberia: Or, African Colonization Exposed*, in Wilson Jeremiah Moses, *Liberian Dreams: Back-to-African Narratives from the 1850s* (University Park: Penn State University Press, 1998), 88.

its character.<sup>269</sup> Keeping in mind this tradition of anti-colonizationist print protest, African Americans in the United States were skeptical of letters from settlers and believed that they could be falsified to create an image of Liberia that did not reflect its harsh realities.

Manuscript and print were the mechanisms through which settlers sustained connections with friends and relations in the United States and simultaneously developed a cultural life in Liberia. Americans – white and black – were hungry for information about the new settlements in Liberia. Colonization was fiercely debated in both white and black circles in the United States. One can hardly open a black newspaper from the antebellum United States without seeing an article decrying or supporting colonization. The manuscript letters sent to the United States were frequently read aloud. Many were also reprinted in newspapers, periodicals, and books in antebellum America.

In the midst of debate about colonization and Liberia, the letters became a type of currency in claims to authenticity about the settlements. These letters were used to represent Liberia, as well as the ways that African Americans debated the “truth” about conditions in Liberia. This preoccupation with authenticity in letters fits with what Ann Fabian has shown in antebellum culture. Debate swirled concerning who had the authority to tell truths, and what power might be wrested from these claims. Furthermore, the growing lack of face-to-face communication in antebellum culture necessitated tools to prove authenticity. Anxiety about authenticity increased with the rise of conduct literature, which Americans feared might mask the true identities of writers.<sup>270</sup> The ACS, which founded the settlement at Monrovia, was not highly regarded in most African American communities in the United States. This automatically made

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<sup>269</sup> Samuel Williams, *Four Years in Liberia: A Sketch in the Life of the Rev. Samuel Williams*, in Moses, *Liberian Dreams*, 175.

<sup>270</sup> Ann Fabian, *The Unvarnished Truth: Personal Narratives in Nineteenth-Century America* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002); Karen Halttunen, *Confidence Men and Painted Women: A Study of Middle Class Culture in America, 1830-1870* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1983).

any information about Liberia suspect. Compounding the challenge was the fact that many African American leaders, like Frederick Douglass and James Forten, believed that colonization was a ruse and an attempt to remove from the United States the very people who posed the biggest threat to the twinned systems of racial prejudice and chattel slavery – free African Americans. Further complicating the status of Liberian letters was the fact that anything purported to be written by African Americans was immediately called into question, as William Andrews and Frances Smith Foster have shown in their analyses of slave narratives.<sup>271</sup> However, unlike the slave narratives whose authorship was called into question by white readers, in the case of Liberian letters, African Americans were the ones critiquing the documents.

Scholars in African American studies have explored the intertwined histories of literacy, freedom, and religious salvation for enslaved peoples. The best-known slave narrative in American history, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass*, makes apparent the link between Douglass' literacy and his eventual freedom, achieved by Douglass' forgery of a travel pass. Douglass called his literacy "the pathway from slavery to freedom."<sup>272</sup> The links between literacy, legal freedom, and Protestant religion were, of course, salient for African American settlers in Liberia. In particular, reading and writing were the tools by which settlers could engage in religious and spiritual activities, the most important of which was reading the Bible. Both American missionary societies and informal religious groups often took the lead in educating settlers, in addition to their stated goal of converting and educating indigenous West Africans. Furthermore, the actual work of letter writing was often done by missionaries, as

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<sup>271</sup> William L. Andrews, *To Tell a Free Story: The First Century of Afro-American Autobiography, 1760-1865* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1988); Frances Smith Foster, *Written by Herself: Literary Production by African American Women, 1746-1892*, (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1993).

<sup>272</sup> Douglass, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass*, 32.



illiterate settlers could dictate their words to their amanuenses, as Daniel Nelson did for his mother Peggue Potter and Peyton Skipwith did for his daughter Diana.

In most Liberian cases, the writer was a family member – often a child in school – who wrote the letter for a relative. But the white and black missionaries in Liberia could also do this work. One such missionary, I. Clarke, wrote a note at the end of a letter from settler Robert Page to his former master, noting at the bottom of the page, that, “Mr. R. M. Page is a very worthy man and a constant devoted Christian... [h]e is certainly deserving the sympathy and charity of his friends in America.”<sup>273</sup> Here, one white man, I. Clark, wrote to another, the former master, to attest to the character of Robert Page, a settler. This type of reminder functioned in a similar capacity as the letters and lists of subscribers from white patrons which bookended many slave narratives from the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. No wonder, then, that some African Americans were distrustful of letters purporting to be from Liberia, since many of the letters were physically written by white supporters of colonization.

Keeping in mind this tradition of anti-colonizationist print protest, most likely, African Americans in the United States were most likely aware that letters from settlers would be falsified to create an image of Liberia that did not reflect its harsh realities. Authenticity was also required for an African American readership on both sides of the Atlantic. It became common for letter writers in Liberia to include some detail that a reader back home could verify. Occasionally, settler letter writers would include details in their letters, or small material items sent with them, to attest to the letter having been penned by the person whose name was signed on it.

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<sup>273</sup> Robert Page to Charles Andrews, May 6, 1839, Box 1, C.W. Andrews Papers, Rubenstein Library, Duke University.

Ruben Moss wrote to his brother, Benjamin, that he had arrived safely in Liberia and had been busy at work preaching in the three Baptist churches in Monrovia. He ended his letter by authenticating its contents: “I will now give the sign which I was to give you, that you may know this letter is from me. It was to mention the accidents. The first was your getting your leg caught under a tree ; the second was, my falling off the horse and having my hand split open by an axe.”<sup>274</sup> These gruesome lines let Benjamin know that the letter was, indeed, written by Ruben. Ruben’s letter was apparently originally published in a newspaper called the *Winchester Virginian*. Unfortunately, only limited issues of this paper survive in archives and an original manuscript copy of the letter has not been found. It was republished in Boston’s *The Colonizationist and Journal of Freedom*, a monthly pro-colonization newspaper, as well as *The African Repository and Colonial Journal*, a paper published in Washington by the American Colonization Society. This was a common practice in antebellum newspapers and periodicals: letters were printed and reprinted, and readers often encouraged to respond to the items they saw printed in the pages. The Colonization Society needed reports like Moss’, which provided a positive counter to the information that Americans were imbibing about Liberia. Even though *The African Repository* was published in the United States and intended for a mostly white and literate audience, there is evidence that it was making its way to Liberia. Settlers, too, were curious about how their colony was being portrayed in the United States. For the settlers in Liberia – and their friends and family back in the United States – letters were not simply written documents. They became like commodities – artifacts that could serve to “prove” the tales people told about Liberia. Virtually every publication about colonization from the antebellum

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<sup>274</sup> I have been unable to locate the original letter, or a copy of *The Winchester Virginian* from this date. *The African Repository and Colonial Journal* 9, No. 5, July 1833, 155; *The Colonizationist and Journal of Freedom* [Boston], No. 3 (June 1833), 94.

United States – written by either a white or black author – contained actual letters from Liberia to suggest the text’s authenticity and rootedness in fact.

The Maryland State Colonization Society took note of this tactic, and described a similar instance in which a settler took a “half strip of calico, the other hand retained by the person to whom he was to write when he reached Africa. If he was permitted to write without restraint, and if he spoke his real sentiments in the letter, he enclosed his portion of the calico.” Moss’ note in his letter to his brother and the settler’s strip of calico reveal the recognition of “the reliance to be placed in letters.”<sup>275</sup> Even before the settlers had embarked from the United States, they realized that letter writing was the only way they would be able to communicate with loved ones who were left behind.

Other letter writers knew that their letters would be read aloud to the enslaved friends and family still on the plantation. Settler Jesse Lucas included a message to his mother in a letter to Albert and Townsend Heaton, the sons of his former master, informing her of his second marriage and the birth of his son, Alexander. He wrote that Alexander did “want to come + see you very much” but argued that a visit would not be possible, as “times are hard” and “money is hard to get.” After the greeting to his mother, Jesse went on to request that the Heaton boys ask their mother to send the settlers a barrel of flour.<sup>276</sup> Letters like these had multiple purposes. They conveyed wants and needs for goods, and listed specific material objects that the recipient should send. But the letters did more than just ask former masters to make good on their promises to provide for their formerly enslaved dependents and friends. They connected literate, semi-literate, and illiterate communities, black and white, on both sides of the Atlantic Ocean. Perhaps Jesse Lucas’ mother was illiterate, and therefore, sending the letter to the two white boys

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<sup>275</sup> *The Fourth Annual Report of the Maryland State Colonization Society*, 6.

<sup>276</sup> Jesse and Mars Lucas to Albert and Townsend Heaton, April 24, 1836, Letters of the Lucas Brothers of Liberia, Special Collections, University of Virginia Libraries.

to read aloud was the only way to get information to her. Since Jesse wrote all of the letters from the Lucas brothers, it seems that his brother, Mars, was probably illiterate or semi-literate. The letters sent back to Liberia were also read aloud to other settlers. John Aiken wrote to his former master, John McDonogh, “I read it [the letter] to all your people here and it made us all to rejoice and tears to flow when we remembered you.”<sup>277</sup>

Letter writers anticipated that their letters would be widely circulated in print. Settler William C. Burke’s letter to American Colonization Society secretary Ralph Randolph Gurley included a complaint that, “You did not publish the Letter of mine on the subject of Alms House.”<sup>278</sup> Burke must have been looking for his letter in one of the many publications sent from the United States to Liberia. Another settler, Deserline Harris, wrote to ACS official John Brooke Pinney to inquire about a best essay contest he had seen advertised in the *Liberia Herald*, Monrovia’s major newspaper. Harris was eager to win the one-hundred-and-fifty dollars, which the winner of the contest would receive. In early Liberia, this was a lot of money – more than a laborer could expect to earn working every day for six months in a place where regular work was hard to find. Harris wrote in his letter that, “If it be published, I will be happy if you will procure it and forward me a copy ; and if it be not published, please return the manuscript.”<sup>279</sup> Harris’ desire to see the essay on colonization published was likely informed by the knowledge that the ACS would welcome any good publicity about the settlements from African Americans already there. If the essay did not win the prize money, Harris wanted the essay back – presumably to

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<sup>277</sup> John Aiken to John McDonogh, August 7, 1846, McDonogh Papers, Tulane University, as quoted in Bell I. Wiley, *Slaves No More: Letters from Liberia, 1833-1869* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1980), 140-141.

<sup>278</sup> William C. Burke to Ralph Randolph Gurley, July 26, 1858, Reel 158, American Colonization Society Records, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress.

<sup>279</sup> Deserline Harris to J.B. Pinney, May 15, 1852; reprinted in *A History of the legislation of Virginia, and the opinions of some of her eminent statesmen upon the subject of African Colonization*, in *Documents of the Colonization Society of Virginia* (Richmond: Macfarlane & Fergusson, 1853).

send to another newspaper or magazine with editors sympathetic to the colonization cause. Pinney had not heard anything of the contest, but wished to publish Harris' essay anyway, ignoring the instructions that Harris sent along with the essay. For Pinney and other white supporters of colonization, the stakes were high. In addition to the controversy over colonization within the African American press, William Lloyd Garrison had practically eviscerated the ACS and the colonization scheme in the pages of the *Liberator*. By the 1840s, many whites who supported abolition were publicly distancing themselves from colonization. Pinney and the ACS needed reports like Harris', which provided a positive counter to the information that Americans were imbibing about Liberia.

While scholars of African American literature typically think of the written word as a tool that redeemed enslaved peoples – both literal, in the sense of freedom, and in the religious sense – the written word could also trick them. Grey Gundaker and Walter Johnson have both described how print, when in the hands of white masters and overseers, could be used to trick, track, and confound illiterate African Americans.<sup>280</sup> Those settlers who included personal details and trinkets in their letters were obviously very concerned with the accuracy of their letters. It was important that *their* words – not the language of a white colonization official, or an eager missionary – make it back to their families in the United States.

Even publications from anticolonizationist writers included Liberian letters. For example, William Nesbit did this in *Four Months in Liberia* to verify his impressions of Liberia as a land besieged by death, disease, and misery. Daniel Coker's narrative of his journey to West Africa, *Journal of Daniel Coker*, included correspondence to support his, mostly positive, view of the

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<sup>280</sup> Grey Gundaker, "Give Me a Sign: African American, Print, and Practice" in Robert A. Gross and Mary Kelley, eds., *A History of the Book in America, Volume 2: An Extensive Republic: Print, Culture, and Society in the New Nation, 1790-1840* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2010): 483-494; Walter Johnson, *River of Dark Dreams: Slavery and Empire in the Cotton Kingdom* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2013).

settlements in Sierra Leone and Liberia. Even fictional works attempted to use this tactic to assuage readers that the tale was not too far from truth. This is the case for Sarah Josepha Hale's *Liberia, Or Mr. Peyton's Experiments*, which included letters from some of the most prominent African American settlers in Liberia, including Methodist missionary Beverly Wilson, and Zion Harris, a farmer who owned much of the valuable farmland outside of Monrovia, among others.<sup>281</sup> But Hale's use of these letters is an interesting reversal of roles. Instead of African American writers needing to have a white person authenticate their writing, Hale – who was white – relied on African American settlers to verify her own work.

This hunger for letters from Liberia whose authority could be verified emerged from a climate of skepticism and deep fear of the implications of Liberian colonization. Audiences in the United States – particularly black audiences – were rightfully distrustful of the propaganda in support of colonization published by the American Colonization Society. As a counter to skepticism, letter writers in Liberia realized the importance of the documents they sent to the United States. They looked to publish their materials in American newspapers and magazines, and they made a routine of writing to American correspondents whenever ships left ports in Liberia. The value of these letters was beyond a mere curiosity for Americans – when settlers in Liberia took up their pens to write to friends and family in the United States, they knew that they were creating extraordinarily valuable currency for the trade in truths.

## CONCLUSION

The sources in this chapter show how kinship and family were deployed and manipulated by African American settlers in nineteenth century Liberia in the decades before the American

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<sup>281</sup> Sarah Josepha Hale, *Liberia; Or, Mr. Peyton's Experiments* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1853).

Civil War. I argue that in this correspondence, settlers leveraged the fact that slaveholding was still common in the United States to their advantage. Former slaves like Diana Skipwith made claims on their former masters and requested a type of sponsorship or clientage, once in Liberia and free, that depended upon the former slave claiming a family-like relationship with their former master. While these African American settlers were, indeed, legally and practically free people, the bonds of fictive kinship kept emancipated slaves tied to their former owners. In Diana's case, there seems to have been an affective bond between herself and her former master's family and especially Sally. This might have been real – it certainly seems palpable – or it might have been affective and strategic, poised with an interest in keeping networks that could provide news, trade goods, and sustenance open. The letters constitute an archive through which we can track African American settlers as they reappropriate a racial geography and write the space of Liberia into existence in the American mind.

Settler letters from Liberia had multiple purposes. They conveyed wants and needs for goods, and listed specific material objects that the letter recipient should send. But the letters did more than just ask former masters to make good on their promises to provide for their formerly enslaved friends. They connected literate, semi-literate, and illiterate communities, black and white, on both sides of the Atlantic Ocean. Diana Skipwith's letters to Sally Coker, as well as the other print and manuscript news that emerged from colonial Liberia, reveals the ways in which the United States was intimately connected with its colony in West Africa. Letter writing was both a practical and performative way to sustain and create connections with people in the United States. These texts were carefully calibrated to preserve the relationship between former slave and former owner despite the letter writers' independence. Though free, the settlers who had clientage relationships with former masters did, in part, recognize the power these former

masters still had over them - particularly because of the wealth disparity between masters and settlers. In these letters, which were addressed to slave masters, settlers also sought to reconnect with actual family members, who were still enslaved in the United States. These casual references to the “whole” family (which undoubtedly included still-enslaved family members), as well as the additional letters to family members that Matilda Skipwith included in her letters, were a strategic tool employed by multiple letter writers and represent a common manuscript practice of letter writing in Liberia. The letters were also performative, as we saw in Diana Skipwith’s letter to Sally Cocke in which she showcased her own handwriting. By simply learning to read and write – and in illustrating these talents to white Americans – settlers were making claims to a common culture of letter writing. Writing, in particular, functioned as a hallmark of both Christianity and civilization. As Diana noted in her first letter to Sally, education was inherently valuable, and could be used to argue that African Americans were certainly as capable as whites. The letters also set apart the settler population from native West African groups, like the Dey in Cape Mesurado, who did not at this time have a history of written communication. Thus, letter writing became a powerful tool for forging bonds of kinship with non-biologically related Americans, as well as denying any relationality to non-Western groups.

Furthermore, print was an important vehicle through which African Americans debated colonization, and a space in which settlers entered into conversations about Liberia happening in the United States. Diana Skipwith highlighted the importance of newspapers to connecting communities on both sides of the ocean in sending copies of Monrovia’s newspapers, the *Liberia Herald* and *Africa’s Luminary* to Louisa Cocke, Sally Cocke, and Ann Cabell. Skipwith wrote, “take them and read them and think of me.”<sup>282</sup> In asking the Cokes to remember her via print,

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<sup>282</sup> Ann Cabell was a daughter of John Hartwell Cocke. Diana Skipwith to Sally Cocke, November 7, 1839, Box 8, Cralle-Campbell Papers, Special Collections, University of Virginia Libraries.



Skipwith suggested that print, too, had similar capabilities to link together settlers and former masters, as her letters did.

The next chapter builds on this theme of reading and writing as central to practices of Protestant Christianity for antebellum Americans. Turning from the epistolary and print practices of African Americans writing in and about Liberia, the next chapter discusses missionary work among Grebos in Cape Palmas. Just as African American settlers used manuscript and print in expansive ways, Grebo readers read religious texts for equally creative possibilities.

#### CHAPTER 4: “MAKING BOOK” AND MAKING BOOKS”: EVANGELICAL PRINTING AND READING IN CAPE PALMAS

*it is something strange to think that those people of africa are called our ancestors in my present thinking ife we have any ancesters they could not have been liked these hostile tribes in this part of africa for you may try and distill that principle and belief in them and do all you can for them and they still will be your enemy*<sup>283</sup>

Peyton Skipwith remarked to his former master that he saw no connection between himself and the indigenous Africans he encountered in the Liberian settlements. The hostility Skipwith felt may have been related to the constant conflict between the settlers and the indigenous people of the area that was to become “Liberia.” Skipwith’s distancing of himself and his ancestry from the West Africans he encountered may have been a rhetorical device used to show his former master how Christianity shaped and redeemed him. Skipwith noted that despite trying to “distill that principle and belief,” indigenous audiences were not, in his mind, interested in learning what Christianity had to offer. This chapter offers a different view: a study of one group of missionaries’ attempts to convert a group of indigenous people, called the Grebo, in Cape Palmas, to Christianity.

Skipwith’s perspective was not necessarily in conflict with that of the missionaries. In writing to his former master, Cocke, he may have wanted to publicly situate himself as more

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<sup>283</sup> Peyton Skipwith to John Hartwell Cocke, April 22, 1840, Box 98, Cocke Family Papers, Special Collections, University of Virginia Libraries.

similar to Cocke than to indigenous people around Monrovia. The Grebo of Cape Palmas may have responded to settlers and missionaries differently than the indigenous groups around Monrovia, where Skipwith resided, at least in the 1830s. And Skipwith had a different relationship to the African continent and the people on it than the missionaries in this chapter – the majority of whom were white Americans – since Skipwith was descended from African people brought to the Americas in the transatlantic slave trade.<sup>284</sup>

The ship *Niobe* carried an unusual cargo during its voyage in October 1835. On the trip from Baltimore, Maryland (United States) to Maryland in Liberia – the colony at Cape Palmas, West Africa, held by the Maryland Colonization Society – the ship carried a printing press intended for use at the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions (ABCFM) station at Fair Hope, Cape Palmas. Fair Hope had been established two years prior by the white Presbyterian Reverend John Leighton Wilson, a South Carolinian who led the mission station and was assisted by his wife, Jane Bayard Wilson. The Wilsons were joined by an African American teacher, Catherine Strobel, and her daughter, Margaret. The four Americans at Fair Hope were, according to Wilson, “cheered” and “grateful” for the arrival of the *Niobe* in December. It carried both the press that Wilson requested for use at the mission, and the reinforcements sent to assist in the work of converting souls in Cape Palmas, including Benjamin Van Rensselaer James, an African American printer, and the Reverend David White and his

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<sup>284</sup> The relationship between Africa and the Diaspora was a complex one in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Phillis Wheatley, the poet who was born in West Africa, enslaved, and sent to Boston, was asked after achieving her freedom if she would like to go to Africa as a missionary. She wrote, “[H]ow like a Barbarian shou’d I look to the Natives; I can promise that my tongue shall be quiet/for a strong reason indeed/being an utter stranger to the language of Anamaboe.” Though Wheatley herself was born in Africa, she expressed an unfamiliarity with the languages and practices there, and remained in the United States. Her ideas, expressed in a letter to John Thornton, the British philanthropist and evangelical, reflected some of the dissonance in Peyton Skipwith’s letter from nearly 70 years later. Phillis Wheatley to John Thornton, October 30, 1774, as quoted in John Shields, ed., *The Collected Works of Phillis Wheatley* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998).

wife, Helen Wells White.<sup>285</sup> The main targets for conversion in West Africa were Grebo: a native West African group of people who had been in the region hundreds of years before the arrival of the ABCFM missionaries.<sup>286</sup>

James was never officially designated a missionary – at times, the ABCFM publications referred to him as an “assistant missionary” or just a “printer.” Presumably, the ABCFM made this designation based on James’ race. Yet as James became a central figure at the mission as its printer, his work coincided with the duties of a missionary.<sup>287</sup> Wilson had requested a press for the mission station after he realized that the Grebo students that he and Jane Bayard Wilson taught were having difficulty reading and writing in English. For evangelical Protestants in the nineteenth century, reading the sacred text of Christianity, the Bible, was essential for the conversion of souls. If reading and writing were essential to preparing Grebo converts to Christianity for their salvation, then the Bible, and other religious texts, needed to be translated into the vernacular. And to do that, Wilson needed to spread the word in the Grebo language.<sup>288</sup>

In the early 1830s, the settlement at Maryland in Africa was new. The Maryland Colonization Society (MCS), a group of mostly white philanthropists from the United States, founded an independent colony at Cape Palmas in 1834. Maryland in Africa – and the MCS –

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<sup>285</sup> The Whites died shortly after their arrival in Cape Palmas, in January 1836. John Leighton Wilson to Rufus Anderson, July 9, 1836, Reel 149, American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions Archive, Houghton Library, Harvard University (hereafter cited as ABCFM Archive). Virginia Hale Hoffman to [Unknown], April 7, 1857, as quoted in George D. Cummins, *Life of Virginia Hale Hoffman, late of the Protestant Episcopal Mission to Western Africa* (Philadelphia: Lindsay & Blackiston, 1859), 80; “Missions: West Africa,” *Report of the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions, presented at the Twenty-Eighth Annual Meeting, held in the city of Newark, N.J., September 13, 14, & 15, 1837* (Boston: Crocker and Brewster), 1837, 41.

<sup>286</sup> The most extensive work on Grebo peoples remains Jane Jackson Martin, “The Dual Legacy: Government Authority and Mission Influence Among the Glebo of Eastern Liberia, 1834-1910,” PhD diss., Boston University, 1968.

<sup>287</sup> “Mission at Cape Palmas,” *Twenty Eighth Annual Report of the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions: September, 1837* (Boston: Crocker and Brewster, 1837), 41-43; “Statistical View of the Board and its Missions,” *The Missionary Herald: Containing the proceedings at large of the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions: with a general view of other benevolent operations, for the year 1840* 36 (Boston: Crocker and Brewster, 1840), 18.

<sup>288</sup> John Leighton Wilson to Rufus Anderson, August 4, 1835, July 20, 1836, Reel 149, ABCFM Archive.

remained separate from the American Colonization Society and the settlements in Liberia during the tenure of the ABCFM mission in Cape Palmas. Later, in 1857, the autonomous Republic of Maryland, which had declared its independence from the MCS three years prior, joined with Liberia. During the time period discussed in this chapter, the colony was still under the authority of the MCS. While the settlements in Liberia and Maryland in Africa no doubt shared some characteristics, they were separated by about 300 miles: these were two distinct spaces in the 1830s and 40s.<sup>289</sup>



Figure 4.1: Map of Liberia

<sup>289</sup> There are two major contemporary studies of Maryland in Liberia: Penelope Campbell, *Maryland in Africa: The Maryland State Colonization Society, 1831-1857* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1971) and Richard L. Hall, *On Africa's Shore: A History of Maryland in Liberia, 1834-1857* (Baltimore: Maryland Historical Society, 2003). A president of the MCS also wrote a history of his organization: John Hazlehurst Boneval Latrobe, *Maryland in Liberia: A history of the colony planted by the Maryland State Colonization Society under the auspices of the state of Maryland, U. S., at Cape Palmas on the southwest coast of Africa, 1833-1853* (Baltimore: J. Murphy, 1885).

E. Weber & Co., 1845, Geography and Maps Division, Library of Congress.

The Cape with settlements at the top left of the image is Mesurado, the location of Monrovia and the American Colonization Society settlements. The Cape at the bottom right is Palmas, the location of the Maryland Colonization Society settlements and the Fair Hope mission station.

The ABCFM was the preeminent American Protestant missionary organization in the early decades of the nineteenth century. Founded by a group of students at Williams College, the group was Congregational in origin, but closely allied with Dutch-Reformed Protestants and Presbyterians like Wilson. Millennialist thought profoundly influenced the ABCFM's activities – many evangelicals believed that converting the “heathen” across the world was a necessary step before Christ would reign on earth. They therefore sent missionaries to administer to American Indians, but also sent families like the Wilsons abroad – not just to Cape Palmas, but also to South Africa, India, Ceylon, Hawaii, East Asia, and the Middle East. Jane Bayard Wilson's presence in Cape Palmas was thus expected. The ABCFM particularly emphasized the importance of the mission *family*: missionary wives were common, and most men married before they left for the mission field.<sup>290</sup>

Why did Wilson beg the ABCFM officials in Boston to send a press? This was not a new concept for Protestant missionaries. Printing Biblical books, tracts, and pamphlets in the vernacular – the local language spoken in the area of the mission station – was common practice throughout the nineteenth century. However, in Cape Palmas, there seemed to be a locally specific demand for education, written documents, and books. While the missionaries might have arrived in Cape Palmas expecting to teach would-be Grebo converts to read the Bible and,

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<sup>290</sup> For more on the ABCFM's activities in the early nineteenth century, see Clifton Jackson Phillips, *Protestant America and the Pagan World: The First Half Century of the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions, 1810-1860* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1969); Emily Conroy-Krutz, *Christian Imperialism: Converting the World in the Early American Republic* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2015). Some single women did leave the United States under the auspices of the ABCFM. See Amanda Porterfield, *Mary Lyon and the Mount Holyoke Missionaries* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997).

perhaps, hopefully, join the community of believers, what actually happened during this cross-cultural “encounter” was as much on Grebo terms as it was American. The way books were made in Cape Palmas was not *only* dependent on how Wilson, James, and the other missionaries understood the printed word. By the time the missionaries arrived in Cape Palmas, the Grebo leaders in that area already had an idea of what missionaries, Christianity, literacy, and “books” meant. These ideas most often did not conform to what the missionaries had in mind when they planned their mission trip. Richard White’s theorization of the “the middle ground” – a space of “creative misunderstanding” might also be applied to Cape Palmas in the 1830s and 40s.<sup>291</sup> Following White’s lead, it appears that Cape Palmas was a sort of middle ground in these decades: none of the groups in question – American missionaries, Grebos, African American settlers – had a monopoly on power in the area. And certainly, missionary demand for souls, Grebo demand for trade, and settler demand for land placed all three groups in close proximity and competition with one another. Each group wanted something another possessed.

One of the central arguments of this dissertation is that while Americans might have formulated ideas and plans for colonization in Liberia, what happened *on the ground* differed greatly. This chapter follows in that vein. I am less concerned with what the missionaries planned to do with their press and at their missions than I am with what actually happened to the press, books, and congregants at Fair Hope. However, I acknowledge that there is a problem with

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<sup>291</sup> Richard White, *The Middle Ground: Indians, Empires, and Republics in the Great Lakes Region, 1650-1815* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 52-53. White’s articulation of “the middle ground” has become a cornerstone for American Indian Studies. White himself has expressed reservations about the way the concept has been applied in places outside of the eighteenth century *pays d’en haut* in Richard White, “Creative Misunderstandings and New Misunderstandings,” *The William and Mary Quarterly*, Third Series 63, No. 1 (January 2006): 9-14. The concept of “the middle ground” has been reexamined and revised in other historical contexts. See: Ned Blackhawk, *Violence over the Land: Indians and Empires in the Early American West* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2008); Kathleen DuVal, *The Native Ground: Indians and Colonists in the Heart of the Continent* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2006); Pekka Hämäläinen, *The Comanche Empire* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2008); Alan Taylor, *The Divided Ground: Indians, Settlers, and the Northern Borderland of the American Revolution* (New York: Knopf, 2006); Michael Witgen, *An Infinity of Nations: How the Native New World Shaped Early North America* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2012).

sources. I have not been able to locate any written responses from the Grebo congregants who attended services at Fair Hope in the nineteenth century, or from the children who attended the mission schools. The sources I would most like to have – those that would reflect, in first-person, the lives of Grebos who met with the missionaries and demanded education and books – do not appear to exist. In my attempts to uncover what might be considered Grebo voices from this era, I have relied on written testimony from colonizers: from the missionaries and from the African American settlers in Cape Palmas. I have also relied on the work of anthropologists and ethnohistorians who have used “upstreaming” – a methodology that attempts to uncover what historical subjects might have done or thought based on contemporary interviews and observations. This methodology is controversial, especially because it can too easily lead into depicting indigenous peoples as static, unchanging, and antimodern. While I have attempted to read the sources I do have “against the grain,” there is no question that these sources – like all sources – are compromised and incomplete.<sup>292</sup> However, in the absence of archives, these methods have been crucial to my understandings and interpretations of Grebo-American encounters. These techniques – despite their very real problems and limits – have allowed me to make new arguments about the education of Grebos, the demand for books in Cape Palmas, and the multiple ways that books of all kinds were read in the 1830s and 40s.

Historians of Protestant America have long argued that the written word – and especially, the Bible – formed a connective tissue between communities of believers. David Hall has convincingly shown that among seventeenth-century Puritans in New England, books (and especially the Bible) allowed both common, lay persons as well as the elect and the clergy, to

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<sup>292</sup> For more on archival methodology and the limits of reading sources “against the grain,” see: Nupur Chaudhuri, Sherry J. Katz, and Mary Elizabeth Perry, eds., *Contesting Archives: Finding Women in the Sources* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2010); Saidiya Hartman, “Venus in Two Acts,” *Small Axe*, No. 26, Vol. 12, No. 2 (June 2008): 1-14; Ann Laura Stoler, *Along the Archival Grain: Epistemic Anxieties and Colonial Common Sense* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009).



form a communal language and identity based on their relationship to the written word.<sup>293</sup> Similarly, in colonial Cape Palmas, written agreements and books enabled missionaries and Grebos to communicate with each other on similar terms. However, the meanings of these objects – written agreements, books, and even the written language created by Wilson – varied. While Protestant religious belief, entrenched in the Bibles and tracts that came off of the ABCFM press, did connect Grebos and American Protestants in a family of believers, the way these books were steeped in meaning changed depending on who was reading them. While Wilson, James, and the ABCFM supporters in Boston might have *thought* that the books and tracts from the press would be helpful in converting Grebos to Protestant Christianity, these objects took on new and expansive meanings in this colonial context. While the ABCFM hoped the books would convert Grebos, Grebos used the books to gain reading and writing skills that would be useful in trade negotiations.

Over and over again, missionaries in Liberia claimed that the native “kings” they encountered were pleased by the opening of schools nearby. Literacy, however, had different meanings for native peoples in Liberia than it did for the American missionaries. George Brown, a Methodist missionary, reported that in his negotiations with King Bango around the settlement at Heddington, the King was pleased that Brown would open a school there. Brown stated, “I made a book\* at their request, and King Peter bound his son to me for three years, and promised me all his *piccaninnies*, – his small boys.” John Seys, the head of the Methodist mission in Liberia, clarified in printing Brown’s letter that the term “book” was used “to mean all instruments of writing, – indentures, letters, orders, &c”. Wilson noted a similar phenomenon among the leaders of the Grebo he encountered in Cape Palmas. He wrote in his journal that,

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<sup>293</sup> David Hall, *Worlds of Wonder, Days of Judgment: Popular Religious Belief in Early New England* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1990). See also Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (New York: Verso, 1983).

“When it was known that we were going to Cape Palmas for the purpose of teaching the natives, we received numerous application from headmen to take their sons + educate them. Some of them wish me to give them a written promise to this effect.” The desire of native West Africans to have their sons educated – and to have written documents attesting to the nature of the missionaries’ work with their children – reveals that prior to missionary contact, native peoples in Liberia knew enough about Westerners and literacy to make agreements on their own terms.<sup>294</sup> Grebos recognized the value Americans and other Westerners placed on literacy in making agreements, as well. Furthermore, the missionaries needed to recruit girls to attend the mission school, as the Grebo leaders they met were more inclined to send sons. The Episcopal Mission in Cape Palmas, as we saw in Chapter 2, paid families betrothment fees in exchange for the girls’ uninterrupted attendance at mission schools. While I have not found evidence that the ABCFM was doing the same, they did have to negotiate to ensure girls’ attendance at Jane Wilson’s boarding school for Grebo girls.

Wilson noted that the Grebo term for print, *ni kinidi*, actually was translated as “to make a book.” He also described the term as one that applied to both print and manuscript. Wilson saw the Grebo use of the same word for “print” and “manuscript” as evidence of lack of sophistication in the language. Tying the Grebo ignorance of print and mechanical type to their supposed lack of “civilization,” he wrote in his dictionary that “They have heretofore been ignorant of the *modus operandi* of printing, and of course they have no other mode of expressing it, than by that above mentioned.”<sup>295</sup> But the Grebo use of *ni kinidi* to simultaneously denote print and manuscript ways of communication was, perhaps, more expansive than Wilson

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<sup>294</sup> George Brown to John Seys, March 5, 1839, *Africa’s Luminary* 1, No. 2 (April 5, 1839); February 11, 1834, John Leighton Wilson, *Journal of J. Leighton Wilson on a missionary tour to Western Africa in the year of 1834*, Reel 149, ABCFM Archive.

<sup>295</sup> Anonymous [John Leighton Wilson], *Dictionary of the Grebo Language in Two Parts* (Fair Hope, Cape Palmas: Press of the A. B. C. F. Mission, 1839), 62.

considered. If *ni kinidi* did translate as “to make a book,” it might have had the same double-meaning that “making book” did. That is: *ni kinidi* could mean to produce a book of print material, or it could mean to make an agreement or contract (and put it into writing, as the man George Brown encountered wanted). Historians of books and print culture have long been arguing that scholars must consider the interconnected nature of oral, manuscript, and print cultures.<sup>296</sup> Grebos seem to have been doing this same work of connecting oral agreements, written contracts, and printed matter – all rendered as “books” in their language – hundreds of years earlier.

The way that missionaries and Grebos collectively “made book” in Cape Palmas further indicates how this colonial encounter was not one-sided. The local, specific meanings of “books” and print in Cape Palmas and its vicinity inflected the ways that African Americans and white Americans interacted with the people they were supposed to be “civilizing.” While Wilson assumed that Grebos did not have a prior history of “printing,” this is not entirely accurate. Clearly, Grebos had been working with Europeans and Americans for a long while before the American missionaries arrived, and had been carving out written agreements long before Wilson and James’ printing press arrived in the *Niobe*.

The first section of this chapter explores the process through which John Leighton Wilson codified a Grebo language, using information he had in his library about George Pickering’s work with the Cherokee language. Here, the Grebo language is compared with two other indigenous-generated languages, Sequoyah’s Cherokee language (adopted instead of Pickering’s version of the language), and the Vai language of West Africa. In making the Grebo-English dictionary, Wilson relied heavily on Grebo informants to guide him through language

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<sup>296</sup> Robert Darnton, “What Is the History of Books?,” *Daedalus* 111, No 3 (1982): 65-83; Roger Chartier, *The Order of Books: Readers, Authors, and Libraries in Europe between the Fourteenth and Eighteenth Centuries* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1992).

usage. With Benjamin Van Rensselaer James' help, Wilson was able to put the language to practical use in the publications that streamed from the printer.

The second section turns to the printing of Grebo tracts. I read the tracts – using Wilson's Grebo-English dictionary, when necessary, alongside missionary correspondence and printed ABCFM materials. While Wilson thought he was making books to help convert Grebo readers to Christianity, “making book” had complex meanings for Grebo readers, who saw value in the books beyond the words printed on the page. In melding Western and Grebo practices of “making books” – that is, contracts – Grebo readers responded to these texts differently than Wilson had envisioned.

The final section of the chapter explores the mission schools in Cape Palmas in-depth, revealing how missionary practice shaped family structure for Christian Grebos. Missionary education in Cape Palmas not only relied on the written word, but on the formation of Christian families. Sons sent to the mission school needed Christian wives – but missionaries found it more difficult to attract Grebo girls to their schools. This section explores how the ABCFM attempted to create an indigenous ministry through education and marriage, but ultimately failed by 1841.

### **MAKING A COMMON LANGUAGE: CODIFYING GREBO**

In order to print in Grebo, Wilson first had to create a written language that would be intelligible to the people he was trying to convert. Wilson was no doubt inspired by efforts underway among other colonizing whites and indigenous West African groups to create a written language. William Crocker, a white Baptist missionary in Grand Bassa, had developed a

syllabary in Bassa in the early 1830s. Similar efforts were underway among the Vai, where Vai linguist Momolu Duwalu Bukele was developing a script near Grand Cape Mount in Liberia during the 1830s. Wilson had knowledge of Bukele's Vai script when he was developing a written Grebo language, and noted in a report to the ABCFM that some of the letters resembled Hebrew, Greek, and Arabic ones. If Wilson knew about Crocker's efforts with the Bassa language, he did not write back to the ABCFM about it until 1837, years after he had developed the Grebo script. The Vai was unique among the written languages being developed in West Africa at the time, as it was indigenous in origin and not based on a Roman alphabet. Printing in a language other than English was difficult, particularly if the type was not Roman. Ultimately, this is probably why Wilson decided to use the Roman orthography for Grebo.<sup>297</sup>

The biggest influence on Wilson's development of the Grebo script was the Cherokee orthography, based on Roman letters, developed by John Pickering. This Cherokee orthography was not adopted by the Cherokee Nation, nor was it used in print materials produced on Cherokee land. A different Cherokee syllabary, developed by Sequoyah in the 1820s, became the language most used both in Cherokee country and the bilingual newspaper, the *Cherokee Phoenix*.<sup>298</sup> It is unclear how much knowledge Wilson had of Sequoyah's syllabary, though undoubtedly, if the ABCFM newspaper, the *Missionary Herald*, was reaching Wilson in Cape Palmas, he could have read in its pages about the missionaries' use of the Cherokee language back in Georgia. In addition to news about the Cherokee language, Wilson had Pickering's *A Grammar of the Cherokee Language* in his library at Fair Hope. He also corresponded with

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<sup>297</sup> John Leighton Wilson and Stephen Wynkoop to the Prudential Committee for the ABCFM, April 22, 1834, Reel 149, ABCFM Archive; John Leighton Wilson to Rufus Anderson, July 20, 1836, Reel 149, ABCFM Archive; Konrad Tuchscherer, "The Baptist and the Bassa Syllabary: William Crocker's Liberia Experiment in the 1830s," *American Baptist Quarterly* 22 (June 2003): 212-220; Konrad Tuchscherer and P.E.H. Hair, "Cherokee and West Africa: Examining the Origins of the Vai Script," *History in Africa* 29 (2002): 427-486.

<sup>298</sup> There is debate about who – Sequoyah or a white ABCFM missionary, Samuel A. Worcester – created the print (as opposed to the script) orthography for the Cherokee language. See Ellen Cushman, "The Cherokee Syllabary from Script to Print," *Ethnohistory* 57, No. 4 (Fall 2010): 625-649.

David Greene, the assistant ABCFM secretary, about the possibility for developing a Grebo orthography. He wrote to the ABCFM in Boston that, “With the assistance of Mr Pickering’s book + Mr Greene’s letters I have been enabled to arrange an alphabet which I am hopeful will answer well.” The Cherokee language designed by Pickering even influenced which letters Wilson chose for the Grebo orthography. In the *First Reading Book of the Grebo Language*, Wilson noted that, “In the alphabet the letter *C, Q, and X* are dispensed with according to the suggestions of Mr *Pickering*.”<sup>299</sup> By using the print and manuscript materials available to him from Pickering and Greene, Wilson was able to create a Grebo orthography using Roman letters with accents to denote different vowel sounds. Of course, the work of creating a written Grebo language was not a solitary enterprise. Wilson had translators to help: Wasa Baker, Simleh Balleh, and Mworeh Mah, Grebo men who resided in the vicinity of Cape Palmas and were able to communicate in both English and Grebo. They taught Wilson how to speak Grebo. This was a difficult task. He told the ABCFM that the Grebo language was made up of “nasals” and “gutturals,” and that he was “compelled in consequence to adopt other characters than those of the English alphabet, or to attach other sounds to the letter.” The sounds required to speak in Grebo did not come easily to the missionary who was used to speaking in English. But *speaking* Grebo was not nearly as important to Wilson as *printing* Grebo. For Wilson, getting the written word of God to the Grebo congregants was of paramount importance. Despite his progress with the language, he wrote to the ABCFM in Boston that they “must not infer from my preparing the primer that I have knowledge of the language. This is not necessary – besides it will have without doubt many imperfections + inaccuracies - + hereafter many improvements.” This

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<sup>299</sup> Anonymous [John Leighton Wilson], *First Reading Book of the Grebo Language* (Fair Hope, Cape Palmas: Press of the A. B. C. F. Mission, 1838). Emphasis in original.

imperfect, transliterated Grebo was then set in type by Benjamin Van Rensselaer James, and printed on millions of pages.<sup>300</sup>

James was not the only printer at the mission. The work of the ABCFM in Cape Palmas rested on the labor of Benjamin Van Rensselaer James and another African American printer whose identity remains anonymous. The mission also enlisted the help of two unnamed Grebo boys who assisted James in the printing office. James knew the printing trade before he arrived in Cape Palmas. Wilson, writing in 1835, the year before James arrived, asked the ABCFM to send a “coloured man” to print at the mission. Why did Wilson want an African American missionary to be sent to Cape Palmas? Perhaps Wilson’s thinking was in line with most white medical advice at the time, which suggested that African Americans would be immune to diseases in West Africa. Unfortunately, thousands of African American settlers, as well as both white and black missionaries, fell victim to malaria, yellow fever, and other illnesses in Liberia.<sup>301</sup>

The actual work of printing in the nineteenth century was a complicated process. This process was made even more difficult by the limited resources available in West Africa. Paper, in particular, was constantly in short supply. Wilson had to bring writing paper to Monrovia when he printed the first primer in Grebo at the press there. Even after the press had arrived in Cape Palmas, Wilson and James lamented that a full fount of type was desperately needed.

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<sup>300</sup> John Leighton Wilson to Rufus Anderson, February 7, 1837, Reel 150, ABCFM Archive; John Leighton Wilson to Rufus Anderson, August 4, 1835, Reel 149, ABCFM Archive. For more on the Grebo assistants who helped Wilson create a Grebo orthography, see Erskine Clarke, *By the Rivers of Water: A Nineteenth Century Atlantic Odyssey* (New York: Basic Books, 2013), X-XI. By 1840, the ABCFM mission at Fair Hope printed 1,838,332 pages of religious tracts and texts, according to Wilson. See “Annual Tabular View” for the year 1840, Reel 150, ABCFM Archive.

<sup>301</sup> John Leighton Wilson, Alexander Wilson, and Benjamin Van Rensselaer James to Rufus Anderson, December 6, 1839, Reel 150, ABCFM Archive; John Leighton Wilson to Rufus Anderson, August 4, 1835, Reel 149, ABCFM Archive. On disease in Liberia, see Antonio McDaniel, *Swing Low, Sweet Chariot: The Mortality Cost of Colonizing Liberia in the Nineteenth Century* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994). I suspect, but cannot verify, that the other African American printer might have been John Revey, a Baptist missionary who relocated from Grand Cape Mount to Cape Palmas in the late 1830s. Revey had knowledge of mapmaking and engraving, and likely had experience operating a printing press.

Wilson continually asked the ABCFM to send a bindery, but it appears that one was never procured.<sup>302</sup>

Wilson traveled to Cape Mesurado and the town of Monrovia in September 1835, a year before James arrived as the printer in Cape Palmas. While on this trip, ostensibly to recover his health, Wilson printed a Grebo primer for use at the Fair Hope schools. He apparently did so without the permission of the ABCFM authorities back in Boston, indicating that he felt the need for the primer was urgent. In explaining his misstep to the ABCFM, he suggested that because the missionaries were unable to successfully communicate with their Grebo pupils, they had to take in fewer students. He wrote to them that, “The disadvantage of teaching the natives to read from English books is so great that my wife has found it expedient to reduce the number of her scholars down to five or six boys.” Given the choice between reaching fewer souls and leaving his mission station without the permission of the ABCFM, Wilson chose the former. This incident suggests that because of the time it would take to get responses from the authorities in Boston, the missionaries in Cape Palmas were often left to their own devices to determine the best course of action on the ground. This reiterates the point that even though colonization and missionary officials in the United States might have had specific plans or ideas in mind for their settlements and stations, the realities of life in West Africa often interfered.<sup>303</sup>

While in Monrovia, Wilson printed his primer at the offices of the *Liberia Herald*. The *Herald* was established in 1826 and taken over by John Brown Russwurm, who later went on to become the first black governor of an American colony in West Africa when he was appointed by the Maryland Colonization Society to govern Maryland in Liberia in 1836. The *Herald* was

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<sup>302</sup> John Leighton Wilson to Rufus Anderson, September 30, 1835, Reel 149, ABCFM Archive; Benjamin Van Rensselaer James to Rufus Anderson, April 4, 1838, Reel 150, ABCFM Archive; John Leighton Wilson, Alexander Wilson, and Benjamin Van Rensselaer James to Rufus Anderson, December 6, 1839, Reel 150, ABCFM Archive; John Leighton Wilson, “Report for the Year 1840,” Reel 150, ABCFM Archive.

<sup>303</sup> John Leighton Wilson to Rufus Anderson, September 30, 1834, Reel 149, ABCFM Archive.



closely associated with the governance of the Monrovia settlement, and therefore, the American Colonization Society. Conflict between the settlers in Monrovia and the government came to a head in early 1835 when a riot broke out in Monrovia. A group of dissatisfied settlers attacked the *Herald* offices, but were persuaded not to attack the press by the *Herald*'s editor, Russwurm. Russwurm resigned his post as editor and was replaced by Hilary Teague, an African American settler and member of one of the most prominent Monrovia families.<sup>304</sup> When Wilson arrived at Monrovia, he found Teague at the head of the *Herald*, and the printer, James C. Minor. Minor, an African American settler who had formerly been enslaved by the Blackford family of Virginia, had been printer at the *Herald* offices since his arrival in Liberia in 1829. It is unclear where Minor learned the printing trade. Minor used his capacity as printer to communicate with the Blackford family in the United States, sending news by “both letters and paper” to the daughter of his former master, Mary Blackford. A former slave, therefore, was the person responsible for printing the first book ever produced in the Grebo language.<sup>305</sup>

No copy of this first primer in the Grebo language survives. But over the late 1830s and early 1840s, Wilson and James produced other texts in Grebo. With the exception of the *Grammatical Analysis of the Grebo Language*, published in 1838, the vast majority of the pages that came off of the press were in Grebo. Wilson suggested that the font of type sent out with the press should be large, as the material to be printed was designed for Grebo students learning the language. And the needs for printing at the mission grew with each year. In 1837, the first full year James was at Cape Palmas, 35,200 pages were printed. In 1838, the number grew to

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<sup>304</sup> Carl Patrick Burrowes, *Power and Press Freedom in Liberia, 1830 to 1970* (Trenton, N.J.: African World Press, 2004).

<sup>305</sup> James C. Minor to Mary Blackford, October 17, 1851, Box 4, Blackford Family Papers, Southern Historical Collection, University of North Carolina.

90,392, and in 1839, 683, 940 pages were printed. By 1840, over one million pages were printed at the mission, tallying 1,028,800 for that year.<sup>306</sup>

## WAYS OF READING

*Easy Lessons in Grebo and English*, like the *Grammatical Analysis*, had a larger English component than other texts printed at the Fair Hope Station. This book offered translations of Biblical and religious phrases, with Grebo printed on one side of the page, and English on the other. “The bible tells us we must not work on sunday[sic], we must not lie, we must not fight, we must not steal, we must not commit adultery,” offered one lesson. And this was a salient lesson for the Cape Palmas missionaries, who often complained of the theft of goods and supplies from the mission. “Adultery,” too, was a locally specific prohibition, as the missionaries constantly maintained that the Grebo generally lived in sin by practicing polygyny. Another lesson in the tract emphasized the importance of literacy and reading the Bible. “We must read the bible every day, and we must do those things which the Bible tells us to do.” Were these “lessons” intended for training missionaries? Or, were the lessons to help the American-born teachers in Cape Palmas train their Grebo students in the practicalities of living a productive and holy Protestant life? Because the lessons were indeed specific to the on-the-ground conditions in Cape Palmas, and the instruction was more moral than theological, it seems like this tract was mostly intended for a Grebo audience, or for instructing Grebo scholars in Cape Palmas.<sup>307</sup>

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<sup>306</sup> John Leighton Wilson, “Annual Tabular View,” 1838, Reel 150, ABCFM Archive; John Leighton Wilson to Rufus Anderson, July 20, 1836, Reel 149, ABCFM Archive; John Leighton Wilson, “Annual Tabular View,” 1840, Reel 150, ABCFM Archive.

<sup>307</sup> Anonymous [John Leighton Wilson], *Easy Lessons in Grebo and English* (Cape Palmas, West Africa: Press of the A. B. C. F. Mission, 1839), 9. For an example of Wilson’s reflections on polygyny in Cape Palmas among the Grebos he met there, see February 21, 1843, John Leighton Wilson, *Journal of J. Leighton Wilson on a missionary tour to Western African in the year of 1834*, Reel 149, ABCFM Archive.

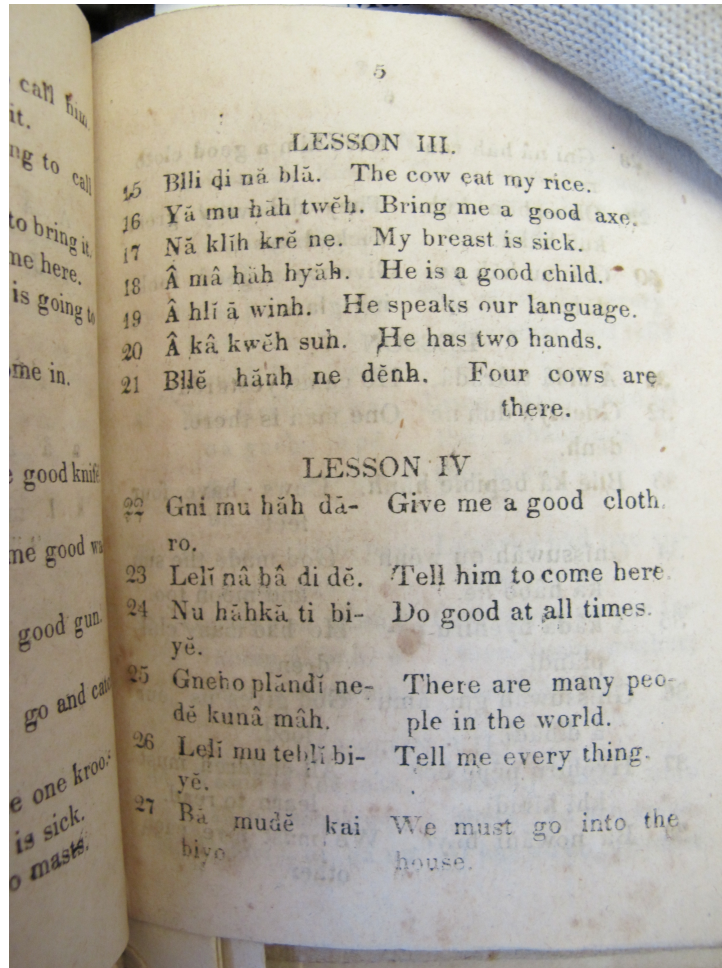


Figure 4.2: *Easy Lessons in Grebo and English*  
 (Cape Palmas: Press of the A. B. C. F. Mission, 1839)  
 Beinecke Library, Yale University.

*Easy Lessons in Grebo and English* knitted English- and Grebo-speakers together. It also combined elements of American and West African society. The “lessons” the tract offered were not just language lessons, however. These lessons were also designed to give their readers a common understanding of culture and society. The lessons varied from the obvious suspects – the lessons forbidding adultery and advocating bible reading – to the locally specific and particular. One lesson taught the reader how to say “The Leopard is going to kill him.” Another offered “The cow eat my rice [sic].” The leopard line was specific to West Africa. Most English audiences had not encountered a leopard before. But the second – detailing the act of a cow

eating rice – curiously combined American and West African elements. Cows were not indigenous to Liberia. While colonists tried to import the animals, few thrived there. Rice, on the other hand, *did* come from West Africa.

Similarly, the cover for *Nah Buh*, a small book that contained the conversion story of a boy named Henri, offered an image of a horse on its cover. A horse would have been quite unfamiliar to most Grebos, as the animal was not present in the Cape Palmas region at the time – but the image might have been one of the few engravings James had on hand at the press.

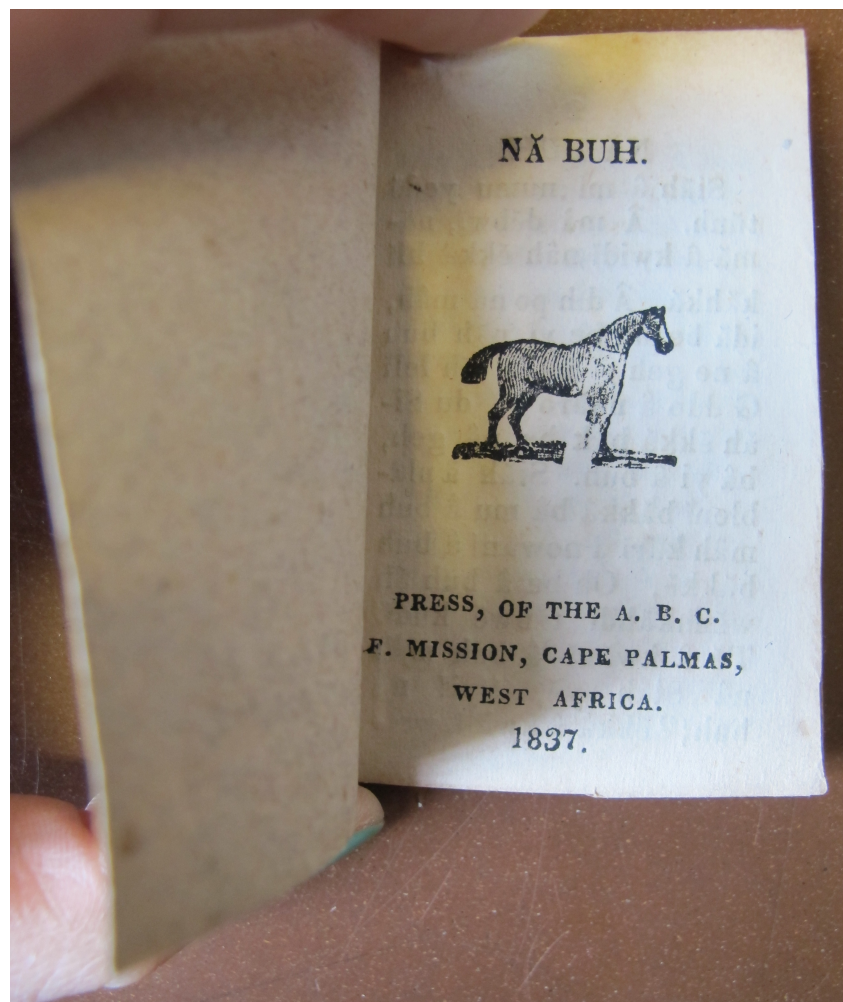


Figure 4.3: *Na Buh*  
(Cape Palmas: Press of the A. B. C. F. Mission, 1837)  
Sterling Memorial Library, Yale University

These lessons would only be intelligible in a hybrid American-West African environment. And in the 1830s, the only places like this were the colonies in Liberia and Cape Palmas. The tracts and books printed by James signaled an attempt to draw together two different audiences.<sup>308</sup>

Uncovering how readers used these texts is always a difficult task, even when dealing with historical subjects who left extensive documentary evidence. Wilson's documentary evidence does leave behind some clues as to how Grebo readers might have understood the printed tracts and books that they received from Wilson and the other missionaries.

The majority of Grebos in the vicinity of Cape Palmas were not Muslims, but they certainly had contact with other groups, like Mandingos, who read and wrote in Arabic. Some Grebos had knowledge of Portuguese, due to trade relations sustained over hundreds of years by the 1830s, between Grebos and Portuguese slave traders. Despite Wilson's claims that Grebos were entirely ignorant of writing or print, many of the people Wilson encountered in Cape Palmas had some prior exposure to these concepts. Grebo students were most likely already familiar with written texts, even though their own language had not been codified.

Curiously, Wilson's name did not appear on the title page of the *Grammatical Analysis* or the many other texts translated into the Grebo language, like *Matthew's Gospel*, published in the same year. While not including his name on the gospel makes sense – Wilson believed the gospels were divinely inspired and written through the direct intervention of God – it is unclear why he did not take credit for the *Grammatical Analysis*. After all, Wilson did the work of turning the Grebo language into a written artifact. Did Wilson refrain from putting his name down because he realized the *Grammatical Analysis* was a collective effort, on the part of himself, his three Grebo teachers, and the printer, James? Or did he refrain from placing his

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<sup>308</sup> Anonymous [John Leighton Wilson], *Easy Lessons in Grebo and English* (Cape Palmas, West Africa: Press of the A. B. C. F. Mission, 1839), 4-5.

name on the title page because he wanted the credit for it to go to the ABCFM *mission* instead of to an individual?<sup>309</sup>

The *Grammatical Analysis* was unique among books printed at Fair Hope Station because it seems intended for a Western readership. This makes Wilson's decision not to include his name on the text further perplexing – why would he not want to gain acknowledgment and support within the United States for his efforts in creating a written Grebo language? Including his name could be self-serving – a way of asserting an authorial voice among a sea of white missionaries in the United States imaginary. But including his name could also have been a powerful fundraising tool. For the ABCFM, a relatively new organization, and the Fair Hope mission, a fledgling group of missionaries always in search of more funding, a book with Wilson's name on it would immediately call its reader to support the good work being done in Cape Palmas. The mission was always in need of money, and Wilson could have used his name – as it was a type of calling card that immediately brought to mind the mission – as a way to raise money. One copy of the *Grammatical Analysis*, which survives in the United States in the collection of the Library Company of Philadelphia, was inscribed from Wilson to a “Mr. Spilerby.”<sup>310</sup> Perhaps this was a gift copy that Wilson gave to Spilerby in order to promote the mission enterprise. Were other copies of the *Grammatical Analysis* given away to American supporters?

The *Grammatical Analysis*, since it was written in English, seems most likely targeted toward an American audience of mission supporters and potential missionaries. It can therefore

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<sup>309</sup> Because Wilson did not include his name in the *Grammatical Analysis*, it has often been incorrectly attributed to the Bishop John Payne, an Episcopalian missionary who worked with the Grebo in Cape Palmas in the years after the ABCFM left.

<sup>310</sup> Anonymous [John Leighton Wilson], *A Grammatical Analysis of the Grebo Language* (Cape Palmas, West Africa: Press of the A.B.C.F. Mission, 1838), 1-3; Edwin Wolf II, ed., *The Annual Report of the Library Company for the Year 1971* (Philadelphia: The Library Company of Philadelphia, 1971).

be understood as an ethnographic text. The first few pages of the tract described the history of the Grebos. Wilson estimated that the Grebos numbered about 25,000, and they had been in their present location on the coast of Liberia for at least two hundred years. Wilson also noted that he found links between the Grebo language with that of the Bassa and Kru. By codifying Grebo, Wilson hoped that he would create a workable written language that would be used by speakers of the various “dialects” along the Grain and Ivory Coasts (present-day Liberia and Côte d’Ivoire). His intention was to create a “common standard for all of them.” While Grebo people are related to other Kru groups, like the “Kroo” and Bassa-speakers Wilson referred to in his letter, his attempts to use one language to speak to all of these groups of people could be read as an attempt to flatten the linguistic and cultural diversity of West Africa for Western audience. The codification of the Grebo language illustrates how even though the missionary was well-intentioned, the practice of rendering an oral language to writing – and thus, making it legible to Western and white audiences – collapsed the multifaceted ways in which Grebo people interacted with their families, friends, and neighbors on the West African coast. An attempt to create a written language also concretized Grebo in a way that the oral language had not been subjected to. By Wilson’s own account, Grebo shared one-third of its words with the Kru and one-fifth with the Bassa. But by committing the language to ink and paper, Wilson made it difficult for new words, or words from other languages in the region, to make it into the written Grebo vocabulary. Similarly, because a non-native speaker codified the language, Wilson might not have understood the means by which new words and expressions entered the Grebo lexicon. Though Wilson had “native helpers” to assist with his acquisition of the Grebo language, no Grebos wrote texts in this language at the time. Thus, it is very different than the West African

Vai language, or the American Cherokee language, both of which were picked up by their respective native speakers and writers.<sup>311</sup>

Other texts, like *Matthew's Gospel*, seem entirely intended for a Grebo audience. These tracts and books were written almost entirely in the newly transliterated Grebo. The only part of the books that appeared in English was the cover. *Matthew's Gospel* read, "MATTHEW'S GOSPEL TRANSLATED INTO THE GREBO LANGUAGE. CAPE PALMAS, W. AFRICA: FAIR HOPE STATION, PRESS OF THE A. B. C. F. MISSION. 1838." Why did the missionaries print the cover page in English, complete with the details of publication that would not have been relevant to a Grebo audience? Though some of these tracts and books made their way to the United States – most likely sent by Wilson himself to mission supporters – they were primarily designed for use in the schools that John Leighton Wilson, Jane Bayard Wilson, Benjamin Van Rensselaer James, Catherine Strobel, and Margaret Strobel taught. It is possible that the books were sent back to the United States with visitors to the mission, and thus served a double purpose as instructional and promotional materials.<sup>312</sup>

James, the printer, was clearly very busy at the mission. In addition to the *Grammatical Analysis* and the *Matthew's Gospel*, in 1838, he printed a *First Reading Book of the Grebo Language*. For 1839, he printed a *Dictionary of the Grebo Language*, a book called *Judgment, Easy Lessons in Grebo and English*, a *Sunday School Book*, a *Grebo Hymn Book*, and *Lăzerüş ka Daiŵi hě* (the biblical story of Lazarus being raised from the dead). The next year, the printer turned out a *Basa* [sic] *Spelling Book*, for the Baptist mission, probably with the assistance of John Revey, an African American Baptist missionary who had been employed at Grand Cape

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<sup>311</sup> Anonymous [John Leighton Wilson], *A Grammatical Analysis of the Grebo Language* (Cape Palmas, West Africa: Press of the A.B.C.F. Mission, 1838), 1-3. See also, Wolf, *The Annual Report of the Library Company for the Year 1971*. While Wilson did not know it at the time, the Grebo language is a subset of the Kru linguistic family.

<sup>312</sup> Anonymous [John Leighton Wilson], *Matthew's Gospel Translated into the Grebo Language*, (Cape Palmas, West Africa: Press of the A.B.C.F. Mission, 1838).



Mount and later associated himself with the ABCFM mission in Cape Palmas. This book was attributed to I. Clark. Also in 1840, James printed a tract called *Life of Jesus Christ, a Third Reading Book*, the *Story of Esther*, a tract called *Hyăh äh kñidi*, a tract called *Gidu*, and *Baïbli äh hïstorï* (a Bible history). For the year 1841, the year that Wilson left Fair Hope to open a new mission station in Gabon, James printed *First Part of the Grebo Reader, with Notes and a Dictionary for the Use of Beginners*, in Grebo. The rest of the books printed after this point were in Mpongwe, what Wilson called “the Gaboon language.” It appears that even though Wilson relocated to Gabon, the tracts and books were still printed in Cape Palmas, as they bear the publishing location, “Cape Palmas, West Africa: Press of the A. B. C. F. Mission.” The titles included *Scripture Precepts, in the Gaboon Language* (1843), *Simple Questions in the Gaboon Language* (1843), and *Colloquial Sentences in the Gaboon Language with Translations into English* [sic] (1843). By 1844, it appears that the books printed in the Mpongwe language were being produced in Gabon, meaning that the press had been relocated from Cape Palmas to Gabon, a distance of approximately 1,300 miles.<sup>313</sup>

The vast majority of these tracts were short. The texts needed to hold the attention of an English language learner, often a child, as they learned both the English language and Protestant teachings. The link between language acquisition and Protestant conversion is well documented. As David Hall has shown for early America, and David Paul Nord and Candy Gunther Brown for the nineteenth century, print and evangelicalism were intertwined. Reading skills were essential if new converts were to read the Bible for themselves. And that was the ultimate goal: to allow Christians to read the Bible without the help of an intermediary. Would-be Protestants

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<sup>313</sup> See, for instance, *Short Catechism in the Mpongwe Language*, which bears the location mark of “Gaboon” instead of Cape Palmas. Anonymous [John Leighton Wilson], *Short Catechism in the Mpongwe Language* (Gaboon [Gabon], Western Africa: Press of the A. B. C. F. Mission, 1844). Wilson relocated because of conflict with the African American settlement in Cape Palmas, and especially the governor of Maryland in Liberia, John Brown Russwurm. Erskine Clarke describes this conflict in detail in *By the Rivers of Water*.

were to read the word of God to discover the truth of salvation. This was true both for the Grebo to be converted in Cape Palmas and the legions of white Americans back in the United States. The drive to encourage literacy was, in the nineteenth century, connected with the drive to forge and maintain an American Protestant nation.<sup>314</sup>

Many of the books seem to have been printed in very small tracts. Like the other Grebo tracts and books, these small texts were unbound. *Na Buh*, a seven-page account of a boy named Henri's experience receiving the words of Jesus Christ in a Bible, only measured about two inches by three inches. Other texts, like *Lazerusi Ka Daivi He* (the biblical story of Lazarus being raised from the dead) and *Aisaki* (the biblical story of Abraham and Isaac) were of a similar size: there were likely more books of this size printed that do not survive.<sup>315</sup> The small size would probably have made it possible for the recipients of the small tracts to carry them around on their person. The portability of the documents is akin to what other scholars have discussed in regards to the power of written and printed words within African American communities in the United States.<sup>316</sup>

Along with this Protestant tradition of giving the word in printed form to would-be believers, there might have been another reason why the books were kept small. American observers of Grebo men and women noted the prevalence of "greegrees" (occasionally called grigris or gree-grees) in Grebo religious practice. Most missionaries looked upon greegrees with disdain and used the term to refer to a wide variety of religious practices. The term also

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<sup>314</sup> David D. Hall, *Worlds of Wonder, Days of Judgment*; David Paul Nord, *Faith in Reading: Religious Publishing and the Birth of Mass Media in America, 1790-1860* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004); Candy Gunther Brown, *The Word in the World: Evangelical Writing, Publishing, and Reading America, 1789-1880*, (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004).

<sup>315</sup> Anonymous [John Leighton Wilson], *Na Buh* (Cape Palmas: Press of the A. B. C. F. Mission, 1837); Anonymous [John Leighton Wilson], *Lazerusi Ka Daivi He* (Cape Palmas: Press of the A. B. C. F. Mission, 1839); Anonymous [John Leighton Wilson], *Aisaki* (Cape Palmas: Press of the A. B. C. F. Mission, 1839).

<sup>316</sup> For more on the relationships between African American communities and the bible, see: Allen Dwight Callahan, *The Talking Book: African Americans and the Bible* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006).

described religious practice of other groups beyond Grebos. Anna Scott, in her memoir of her time as a missionary wife in Cape Palmas, described the conversion of one man from the area in terms of him “giv[ing] up” greegrees. After announcing this at mission services, Scott noted, the man “invited the missionary to go to his house and receive all his gree-grees. One of them had belonged to his family before he was born, and was probably sixty years old.”<sup>317</sup> In Scott’s telling the story of the man’s conversion, the term “greegree” stands in both as a set of religious practices *and* as physical objects. Another missionary in Cape Palmas, Hoyt, reflected on meeting a Grebo man, and managed to make dismissive remarks about both Grebo and Catholic religious practices at the same time. He reported that the man made a comparison between a Catholic crucifix and his own greegree: “The natives evidently regarded the crucifix as the *fetish* of the Catholics, and remarked, ‘These men have gree-gree, all same as we.’”<sup>318</sup> Wilson himself noted that one man he encountered wore his greegree on his person – around his neck.<sup>319</sup> Might the Grebos who received the small tracts from the ABCFM press have considered them to be akin to greegrees? Perhaps this is why James printed such tiny volumes for the Grebo congregants.

Most of the evidence regarding Grebo life outside of the mission during this time period comes from Wilson’s travel journals, which constitute a type of ethnography. Wilson met one man at Grand Bassa who equated the Bible with a “greegree,” which was a sacred amulet held by Grebos and other native peoples in this area of West Africa. This Grebo man,

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<sup>317</sup> Anna M. Scott, *Glimpses of Life in Africa, by Mrs. Anna M. Scott, Missionary of the Protestant Episcopal Church at Cape Palmas, West Africa* (New York: American Tract Society, 1857), 28-30.

<sup>318</sup> William B. Hoyt, *Land of hope. Reminiscences of Liberia and Cape Palmas, with Incidents of the Voyage. By Rev. Wm. B. Hoyt, Later Missionary of the Methodist Episcopal Church* (Hartford: Henry J. Fox & Wm. B. Hoyt, 1852), 176-177. In her dissertation, Jane Martin called the greegrees “fetishes” and related them to Grebo belief in spirits, or *kui*. See Martin, 35-36.

<sup>319</sup> January 30, 1834, John Leighton Wilson, *Journal of J. Leighton Wilson on a missionary tour to Western Africa in the year of 1834*, Reel 149, ABCFM Archive.

pointed to a greek[sic] Testament which I held in the other hand, + said, ‘that your gregrie, you sabby it (understand it) + it take care of you but it no take care of black man, cause we no sabby it’ – but pointing to the gregie in my hand ‘we sabby it + it take care of us – it no take care of white man cause he no sabby it’<sup>320</sup>

The Grebo man described here used the Bible as a way to explain the concept of a greegree to Wilson. This interaction between the white missionary and the Grebo man is revealing. It seems that Grebos who interacted with the missionaries knew the sacred power of their book, the Bible. The “word,” of course, was understood by most nineteenth century Protestant missionaries to be the physical embodiment of their faith. Scholars typically think of these missionaries using indigenous concepts, celebrations, and items to translate the Christian message to native peoples. But this encounter flipped the usual paradigm – it illustrated how Grebo people explained their own beliefs to missionaries using Christian terms.

Though the missionaries attempted to convince would-be Grebo converts that *reading* the tracts and books was important, it seems as though Grebos might have recognized the physical *object* of the book as the cornerstone of their interaction with the missionaries. Their desire for written agreements – to “make book” – suggests that native leaders knew the value of written documents and literacy.<sup>321</sup> Because of the long history of trade on the Western Coast of Africa, which was based on written agreements, ledgerbooks, and bills of exchange – all paper agreements – it seems likely that these native people would have wanted to educate their sons in English so that their boys could help mediate the written world of the American missionaries. But this desire to “make book” illustrates that not only did these people understand the value of written documents, they also knew that for Americans, written documents were evidence of a

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<sup>320</sup> “Journal of J. Leighton Wilson on a missionary tour to Western Africa in the year of 1834,” February 7, 1834, ABCFM Archive, Reel 149.

<sup>321</sup> George Brown to John Seys, March 5, 1839, *Africa’s Luminary*, Vol. 1, No. 2 (April 5, 1839); February 11, 1834, John Leighton Wilson, *Journal of J. Leighton Wilson on a missionary tour to Western Africa in the year of 1834*, Reel 149, ABCFM Archive.

different type. These documents were cultural cache. They could bind the missionaries to their agreements in a way that oral exchanges would not. That is: Though they were small, and subject to destruction, these documents were not *as* ephemeral as spoken words.

“Making books,” and even just “books” had multiple meanings in Cape Palmas. The idea of “books” is not as straightforward as one might imagine. As the word was read and translated, written and spoken, understood and obscured – its meanings changed. The malleability of the concept of “books” – and of “making books” – reveals once again that colonization encompassed a constant dialogue among all parties involved. This is the “exchange” of settlement. It was not just that the missionaries brought printed books and a Grebo syllabary to a passive Grebo audience. The meanings of “books” and printing fundamentally changed because of the Grebo understandings of the terms and texts. When Wilson and the other American missionaries arrived in Cape Palmas, they were not working with a blank slate of heathen minds to mold. The people they met in Cape Palmas had prior ideas about knowledge, literacy, and interaction with Westerners.

The demand for a “written promise” arose in a context of growing Western presence in Western Africa. The Grebos, like many other native peoples in West Africa, had a long history of trade with Westerners. But in the early decades of the nineteenth century, European and American “exploration” and expansion into Africa was rapidly increasing. Was part of the appeal of getting the missionaries’ words in writing to help prevent violent seizure of Grebo holdings? While the colonists in Liberia and the missionaries supposedly purchased the land they occupied from the native peoples they encountered, misunderstandings about land use and occupation proliferated during this period. And in Cape Palmas, the competition for trade resources led to bloody conflict only a few years after Wilson arrived there. So, perhaps, these written

agreements were the Grebo leaders' attempts to keep the missionaries at bay. Yes, Wilson and his group could educate the boys. But they could not take Grebo land, interrupt trade, or force the mass conversion of all the children in the villages.

The people Wilson encountered had similar prior knowledge of books and literacy. While on a trip to Monrovia, Wilson met a "Soosoo" (Susu) man who was Muslim and could read Arabic. Wilson and the man had a conversation about a "book," which Wilson surmised was the Qur'an. According to Wilson, the book was held sacred by the man, and had been given "to two old Mandingo men, let down by a rope from heaven in a brass pot. It taught that – those who did bad would be burned + those who did well would go to heaven." In Wilson's telling of the meeting, the text of the man's book had been passed down from God to man, and from man to man.<sup>322</sup>

Wilson certainly oversimplified the man's explanation of his religious beliefs, and no doubt simplified Islamic traditions in West Africa by assuming the book the Susu man was talking about was the Qur'an. But the fact that he noted that the man's spiritual life was guided by a book is significant. Wilson understood that the people he encountered in West Africa were not all uneducated or unfamiliar with texts. He even knew that religious texts had a particular resonance with many West Africans. There might have been another reason Wilson recounted this story to the ABCFM leadership back in Boston. The narrative Wilson provided made palpable the urgent need for missionary work in West Africa. If Christian missionaries were competing with Muslims for souls, for Protestant evangelicals back in the United States, the stakes were high. In effect, by recounting this story, Wilson was asking the Boston men for more

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<sup>322</sup> January 30, 1834, John Leighton Wilson, *Journal of J. Leighton Wilson on a missionary tour to Western Africa in the year of 1834*, Reel 149, ABCFM Archive.

support, more supplies (like the printing press he would eventually receive), and most importantly of all, more missionaries.

Why might the Susu man have bothered to discuss his religious beliefs with Wilson? The reasons for this remain a bit more opaque, as we do not have the man's account of this interaction – or even his name. But what might the man have gained from sharing his story with the white missionary? If we are to take Wilson's account seriously – which may be questionable practice, given the constraints both of his memory of the event, as well as his own beliefs about African inferiority and simplicity – we might be able to get some insight into the Susu man's thought process from Wilson's account. Once Wilson pressed the man on his beliefs, and their link to Islam, the man seems to have grown tired of the white missionary's line of questioning. Wilson wrote, "I suspected his book to be the "Koran[sic] + put to him the question which is in the mouth of every Mohomedan, if his book did not say that there is one God + Mahomet is his prophet – at which he laughed heartily and went off."<sup>323</sup> It seems that though the man was willing to talk about his religious beliefs – the book being sent down in a pot, that bad deeds were punished and good rewarded – the man grew tired of Wilson's line of inquiry. Rather than continue to engage in this conversation with Wilson, the man chose to laugh and leave once he grew tired of responding to the missionary. Was the man laughing at the missionary's questions, or laughing because he understood the purpose of missionaries in West Africa? Presumably, the man would have heard of missionaries (perhaps, even met one before) and knew of their attempts to change the religious landscape of West Africa. Was this laugh dismissive – did the man realize that a few lone missionaries would not, alone, change hearts and minds in Cape Palmas and Liberia?

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<sup>323</sup> January 30, 1834, John Leighton Wilson, *Journal of J. Leighton Wilson on a missionary tour to Western Africa in the year of 1834*, Reel 149, ABCFM Archive.

The laughter and exit of the Susu man also revealed that despite Wilson's documentary evidence, intended to convince a Boston audience of his success in Cape Palmas, in the 1830s, the few white missionaries and African American settlers in the region were not as powerful as they imagined themselves to be. The Americans attempted to control trade, provided tools of war like guns and powder, and reframed the context for colonial interaction. But the Susu man's response to the missionary – laughter, especially – signals that this man, at least, recognized that Wilson was not *that* important of a contact. Wilson was one of a handful of missionaries in West Africa expected to minister to hundreds of thousands of indigenous peoples that Americans knew almost nothing about. So, while Wilson and his Boston supporters thought they were bringing ideas about religion and Christianity – and by necessary extension, books – to West Africans, they really were entering into conversations about books, manuscript, and literacy that began before they arrived. While Wilson and James brought the press and printed books to the Greboes they met in Cape Palmas, the *significance* and *meaning* of literacy and books was primarily shaped by indigenous attitudes and preconceptions about these objects.

#### **USING PRINT: GENDER AND EDUCATION AT THE FAIR HOPE STATION SCHOOLS**

After the Grebo language was set to type, the ABCFM missionaries printed their small primers, tracts, and Bible stories with the intent to distribute them to Grebo students and potential converts. The books were used by the missionaries and the students in the schools at Cape Palmas, and they were also given out to students and would-be converts at the schools and mission buildings at Fair Hope. It is unclear if the receivers of the books were allowed to take them home, to their families, or if the books had to remain in the mission buildings. Many of the



students boarded at the mission, though some of them were day students or only attended Sunday school there.

It seems like the demand for printed material grew over the few years Wilson and James were in Cape Palmas with the press. While Wilson was not terribly optimistic about the need for print in 1836 – he retracted his previous statements about wanting a press in Cape Palmas as soon as possible – three years later, he remarked that the printer and the press could hardly keep up with demand for tracts and books. Apparently, the students were deeply engaged in their studies. Wilson reported that, “the demand for tracts + books will soon be greater than we shall be able to meet without our present means of operation.” Was Wilson giving the tracts and books to any Grebo who would take them? Or did the tracts only go to the students who attended one of the many mission and Sunday schools in Cape Palmas? Either way, the missionaries’ letter suggested that because the mission was so successful in printing and giving away books, more funding should be secured to increase production. Wilson’s ledger notes reveal that the American Bible Society and the American Tract Society were both providing funding to help support the fledgling print enterprise in Cape Palmas.<sup>324</sup>

Was it possible that some of the tracts and books were intended for use in the schools, and others intended to be given away to any interested Grebo? Wilson, unfortunately, remained silent on the matter. But the content of the books offer some clues. The majority of the printed matter that came off of the press in Cape Palmas was relatively short in length. This is especially true of the tracts and books that appeared to be made for a Grebo (or mostly Grebo) audience. The first *Reading Book* in Grebo, printed in 1837, only amounted to only sixteen pages. Other texts might have been used by more advanced students, such as *Baīblī āh hīstorī*, a 123-page

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<sup>324</sup> John Leighton Wilson to Rufus Anderson, April 1, 1836, Reel 149, ABCFM Archive; John Leighton Wilson, Alexander Wilson, and Benjamin Van Rensselaer James to Rufus Anderson, December 6, 1839, Reel 150, ABCFM Archive.

book that traced biblical histories. Perhaps the shorter reading and psalm books were handed out at church services – after all, the verses and songs contained within their pages would be useful to Grebo congregants who might not have attended the mission’s schools. Maybe Sunday school attendees received these books as part of their catechisms. Those tracts had a very practical use, and it seemed likely that Wilson and the other missionaries were eager to hear their students and neighbors lift up their voices during services.

The missionaries at Fair Hope operated a few different schools. Wilson’s “Annual Tabular View” for 1838 reveals the composition of these schools. John Leighton Wilson led the 35 boys who attended the seminary, a boarding school. Most likely, these boys were the most promising of the bunch – and the seminary was probably where the sons of local Grebo leaders attended lessons. Jane Bayard Wilson taught in a boarding school for twelve girls. Benjamin Van Rensselaer James, the printer, also operated a school of his own, which was most likely a “free” school in which the children returned home following their lessons. Catherine Strobel, the African American woman who accompanied the Wilsons to Cape Palmas, also taught in a school. Wilson reported that two “colonists” – the African American settlers who arrived under the auspices of the Maryland Colonization Society – were also teachers for the mission. Presumably, one or both of the African American colonists ran the third “free school” identified in Wilson’s report. All together, the free schools had 50 male students and one female student. Wilson noted that the boarding schools cost the students \$120 annually, while the “native schools” (presumably the day schools) charged students \$50 a year to attend.<sup>325</sup>

Two years later, the mission grew substantially. In addition to the Fair Hope schools, the missionaries opened an offshoot of the mission at Fishtown. Fishtown boasted a preacher who was also a physician-in-residence (almost certainly Dr. Hall), two teachers (including one

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<sup>325</sup> John Leighton Wilson, “Annual Tabular View” 1838, Reel 150, ABCFM Archive.

woman), and one native assistant. At Fair Hope, four teachers remained (perhaps the colonists may have left the mission), including the Wilsons, James, and Strobel. By then, Fair Hope boasted four native assistants at the mission. Wilson estimated that 75 congregants attended services at Fair Hope, while Fishtown had 100. As for the schools, Wilson's seminary had 39 students; his wife's had 15. There were four free schools, two at Fair Hope and two at Fishtown, which Wilson now clarified were "night schools," presumably catering to adult pupils. The schools at Fishtown did not cost money – Wilson noted that schools taught by natives did not incur a fee. The missionaries now had two more outposts, as well: one at Rocktown and another at Sârckéh. Rocktown was administered by "an American" (presumably an African American colonist, probably "Mr. Polk"), while Sârckéh had two native assistants running its school.<sup>326</sup>

In the schools in Cape Palmas, the teachers employed a Lancasterian model of instruction. In this system, more advanced students assisted in teaching other students as they progressed with their lessons. And at the Fair Hope Station, the most advanced students were in John Leighton Wilson's seminary classroom. In 1838, the first year Wilson reported data for the seminary, thirty-five students were enrolled. The class was comprised entirely of boys, and Wilson expected them to board at the mission complex and learn English. Ideally, these were the young men to whom the leadership of the mission would fall once the American missionaries left Cape Palmas or passed away. Wilson himself believed that Africans were the ideal leaders for the missionary effort in West Africa. He reflected that an African American missionary would not be afforded the same respect and authority as a white missionary would among the Grebos. In Cape Palmas, whites "convey[ed] the influence." But Wilson did think that a native ministry would be successful. Though he thought that educating African Americans for the missionary service might be productive, he felt that it was just as likely for the missionaries in Cape Palmas

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<sup>326</sup> John Leighton Wilson, "Annual Tabular View," 1840, Reel 150, ABCFM Archive.

to instruct Grebo men for the same purpose. He wrote that, “it will be as easy for us to educate natives here as for you to educate Am negroes in U. States[sic].” However, Wilson noted that any African Americans sent out by the ABCFM should not be considered “regular missionaries,” and that they should only communicate with the authorities in Boston through the white, official missionaries. Despite Wilson’s admiration for the Grebo who surrounded him in Cape Palmas, he was highly skeptical of African American settlers having any authority over them.<sup>327</sup>

Why did some Grebos send their children to mission schools? There are many reasons why Grebo fathers might consider sending their children – especially their sons – to the missionaries’ schools. The Grebo families that Wilson and his team of missionaries encountered in Cape Palmas had a relationship with Europeans that spanned hundreds of years. Portuguese traders had visited this area of West Africa, known then as the Pepper (or Grain) Coast, named after the melegueta pepper indigenous to the area. The “pepper,” also known as the “grains of paradise,” was actually a seed desired by Europeans. Portuguese traders had visited this area since the fourteenth century in search of the grain. But the traders were also there to traffic in human bodies for the slave markets throughout the Atlantic world. Even by the time Wilson arrived in the 1830s, decades after Britain and the United States had banned the transatlantic slave trade, slave traders were still present in the region. Because of this long history of commerce – both “legitimate” and not, in the parlance of the nineteenth century – Grebo leaders knew the value of language skills. And they also knew the value of sustained contact with Europeans and Americans. Creating and maintaining relationships was essential to the

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<sup>327</sup> John Leighton Wilson to Rufus Anderson, August 4, 1835, Reel 149, ABCFM Archive; John Leighton Wilson, “Annual Tabular View,” 1838, Reel 150, ABCFM Archive. For more on Wilson’s views of a native ministry, see John Leighton Wilson to Rufus Anderson, January 10, 1835, Reel 149, ABCFM Archive. For more on the history of the Lancasterian system and its use in American schools, see David Nasaw, *Schooled to Order: A Social History of Public Schooling in the United States* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1979); Carl F. Kaestle, *Pillars of the Republic: Common Schools and American Society, 1780-1860* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1983); Mary Kelley, *Learning to Stand and Speak: Women, Education, and Public Life in America’s Republic* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2006).

commercial life of Grebos, who made their work loading and unloading goods and people along the Pepper Coast. Some of the young Grebo men Wilson met in Cape Palmas already had some English language skills, indicating that at least some individuals had been educated in English before the Americans arrived. For some Grebos, then, educating their children was a way to make important connections with potentially influential Americans and ensure that the next generation of Grebo men would be able to communicate with any merchants or traders that might appear in the region.

Overwhelmingly, the students sent to the mission school were boys. And Wilson felt that separating the students from their parents was essential to ensure the conversion of their souls and the repudiation of their heathen ways. Noting that American settler children, if sent away too long to engage in trade with the Grebos, were apt to favor the Grebo language and descend into savagery, Wilson argued that the home and family environment of children was critical to their development and maturity. He went on to describe the ways that “adoptions” of native children, particularly girls, who could also be turned into domestic servants, would be beneficial to their development into good Christians.

On the other hand when the natives are taken into the families of Americans, + especially females, they conform to civilized life + become respectable. This fact and many others confirms my own mind in the belief that to do any material good for the rising generation of Africans it will be necessary to separate the children entirely, + that at a very early age, from the example + influence of their parents.<sup>328</sup>

According to Wilson, the best way to influence (or really, convert) the Grebo was to go after the children and educate them at a young age, particularly in boarding schools. For girls, this was especially salient. Wilson, as well as other missionaries operating in Liberia, lamented that young girls were most often betrothed to a man before their education could be completed. The

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<sup>328</sup> February 5, 1834, John Leighton Wilson, *Journal of J. Leighton Wilson on a missionary tour to Western Africa in the year of 1834*, Reel 149, ABCFM Archive.

missionaries were most skeptical of polygamy. Wilson reported that, “It is nothing uncommon to see little girls of ten or twelve years of age among the wives of the most aged man,” suggesting that in order to convert girls, the missionaries had to intervene in family structures among the Grebo, and do so at a very early time in the girls’ lives. Wilson reported that a “niece of the King” was now living in his house, under the tutelage of his wife, Jane Bayard Wilson. He hoped that the girl would be just the first of many who might attend Jane’s female school and frequent the mission. Mrs. Thompson, a white Presbyterian missionary stationed in Cape Palmas, visited Fair Hope station and observed that girls were subject to removal from the mission schools in order to marry. Thompson reported that “all girls now received into the Mission, are either secured by the payment of the betrothment money to the parents, or redeemed from a former purchaser.” In exchange, she said, “a written pledge is given by the missionary for her support and education, promising also, that soon as she reach a suitable age, she shall be disposed of in marriage.” Thompson found this a good solution, as it allowed Grebo girls to continue their educations while joining with educated Grebo men in proper patriarchal families. She suggested that “In this way wives are secured for the boys, and many happy couples now rejoice in their emancipation from the cruel custom of their fathers.” While the ABCFM was literally paying for child brides for their indigenous male scholars, the practice was legitimated by the promise of ending polygamy and redeeming the benighted Grebo women.<sup>329</sup>

Educating girls was also important because the future missionaries and all the scholars at the mission schools needed wives if they were to become good Protestants. The type of family life that John Leighton and Jane Bayard Wilson promoted required the conversion of both

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<sup>329</sup> February 21, 1834, John Leighton Wilson, *Journal of J. Leighton Wilson on a missionary tour to Western Africa in the year of 1834*, Reel 149, ABCFM Archive; John Leighton Wilson to Rufus Anderson, August 4, 1835, Reel 149, ABCFM Archive; Mrs. Thompspon to unknown, n.d., as quoted in E.F. Hening, *History of the African Mission of the Protestant Episcopal Church in the United States, with memoirs of deceased missionaries and notices of native customs*. (New-York: Stanford and Swords, 1850), 30-31.

husband and wife. And without Christian girls to choose from, would some of the scholars revert to the sinful polygyny of their parents? One of Wilson's students, Waser, brought a girl into Wilson's study and explained that his father wanted to arrange a marriage between Waser and the girl. He asked Wilson to, "take her + teacher her book + all Merica fash, my heart be very glad for dat palaver." Waser expressed a desire for a wife that would, essentially, be able to assist him in his missionary endeavors. If Waser and his schoolmates were supposed to continue the work Wilson had started in Cape Palmas, he needed a wife to keep the mission house, teach in the mission school, and bear children who could also become missionaries. Additionally, the missionary *family* was key for modeling what Protestant families should look like – a sharp contrast to the blended and polygamous families of the Grebos in Cape Palmas. Wilson agreed to take Waser's betrothed in, provided that the two behaved appropriately. The girl lived in Waser's house, along with two other girls who had been brought there for the same purpose – to wed the boys in the mission school.<sup>330</sup>

If girls' education in Cape Palmas was tied to their potential marriagability, it meant that their education had to meet the expectations of the missionaries who trained them for that purpose. Assisting a missionary as a missionary wife was no small task. White women, like Martha Willard, who went to Cape Palmas in 1849 as a teacher for the Episcopal mission there, were expected not only to support the male missionaries, but to run schools of their own and mentor especially the girls and women at the mission. Willard married the Bishop John Payne in 1858, after his wife's death. The speed at which Payne remarried highlights the missionaries' need for wives to assist in their work. Martha Willard Payne found herself so busy with "such an amount of labor" at the mission that she felt it "wonderful" that she managed it have gotten through it all "without a breakdown." In addition to the work of teaching, which Payne set out to

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<sup>330</sup> John Leighton Wilson to Rufus Anderson, July 20, 1836, Reel 149, ABCFM Archive.

do years earlier, when she was a single woman, she now looked after the other missionaries, administered to the ill and infirm, and organized most of the work at the mission itself. The physical, emotional, and spiritual labor undertaken by a missionary's wife was arduous, and the Grebo girls who were to marry the future missionaries had to be prepared. Of course, teaching the girls to be proper wives added to the work that missionary wives like Martha Willard Payne and Jane Bayard Wilson had to do. Wilson taught and looked after Waser's future wife and the other two girls attended. She also looked after all three girls, all of whom lived in her home.<sup>331</sup>

While Jane Bayard Wilson did not report on the news from her school, it likely resembled the schools run by Ann Wilkins, a white woman who taught in the Methodist school at White Plains, outside of the Monrovia colony. Wilkins reported that a native girl, Mary Mason (her identity and affiliation is unnoted), was making great strides in learning English. Wilkins reported that, "This child can now read in any book or newspaper that she happens to take up." Though Wilson was skeptical of native peoples learning to read in English, it seems like Wilkins' student was able to do so. Wilkins also noted that Mary Mason was useful even before she learned to speak English. She reported that Mason, "has long been capable of helping me considerably in sewing on her own clothes, and those for the boys." Wilkins' letter, which also explained more about the school she had established at White Plains, reveals some important points of comparison between the systems of education and printing in Cape Palmas, which were occurring simultaneously to Wilkins' letter. In fact, the article in *Africa's Luminary* which followed Wilkins' printed letter was a report from Francis Burns, an African American missionary for the Methodists stationed in Cape Palmas. Wilkins' school, unlike Wilson's schools in Cape Palmas, seemingly combined girls and boys in the same class. Wilson had the

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<sup>331</sup> Martha Willard Payne to Emma Service, January 4, 1861, January 7, 1861, Emma Service Papers, Southern Historical Collection, University of North Carolina.



advantage of a wife to teach the girls' school; Wilkins seems to have been unusual in that she came to Liberia by herself, and therefore, the work of teaching both boys and girls fell to her.<sup>332</sup>

Learning to read and write in Grebo did not necessarily mean that the Grebo students converted to Christianity. While Wilson and the other missionaries no doubt *wanted* their students to convert, contemporary missionaries expressed anxiety about quick conversions. William Hoyt, a Methodist missionary who lived in Cape Palmas a decade after the ABCFM missionaries left, noted that, "The children taken from among the natives in the vicinity of the schools, are cautioned by their parents, against accrediting the religious views of their teachers." It seems that Grebo parents were sending their children to the mission schools for non-religious reasons. And Hoyt was skeptical about the adherence of the children to their Christianity – he reported that "when they are released from the school, they too generally wander again... to their old superstitious customs."<sup>333</sup>

## CONCLUSION

If the missionaries were not entirely successful in converting Grebos, and if the Grebos were not ultimately successful in learning skills to help them with trade, what was the ultimate result of the ABCFM mission experiment in Cape Palmas, and the Grebo experience in interacting with Wilson, James, and the other missionaries?

"Reading" and "books," two concepts that historians of the book have examined in-depth, had capacious meanings in Cape Palmas. As David Hall has argued for colonial New England, "publishing" and "authorship" held expansive meanings for settlers in the seventeenth century,

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<sup>332</sup> Ann Wilkins, "Account of the School at White Plains," February 12, 1839, *Africa's Luminary* 1, No. 3 (April 19, 1839).

<sup>333</sup> Hoyt, *Land of Hope*, 185.

beyond what contemporary understandings of these categories reveal.<sup>334</sup> In a similar way, “reading” and “books,” though created in Cape Palmas by Americans, were not read in the ways we might suspect if we follow the history of books and printing just from the point of view of Wilson and the other missionaries. As Derek Peterson has shown in his study of twentieth century colonial Kenya, writing can be used in specific ways, drawn from the history of the region and people who are “learning” to read and write from colonial or missionary entities.<sup>335</sup> The long history of written documentation in the West African region – in which making agreements with Westerners was called “making book” by Grebos – shaped both the stories missionaries wished to convey as well as the reception of the books (and by extension, the missionaries themselves).

Missionaries in the colonies at Liberia had contentious relationships with colonial governments, both in Monrovia and its environs and in Maryland in Liberia. The following chapter turns from missionary work among Grebos in Cape Palmas to a growing settler middle class in Monrovia. Through the acquisition of trade goods and clothing and participation in benevolent and mutual aid societies, settler women were central to the development of a settler middle class that defined respectability politics and mobilized it as such to claim equality with a white middle class in the United States. In turn, this settler middle class turned away from comparisons with indigenous West African women and men: a dissonance revealed in Peyton Skipwith’s words which open this chapter. By the 1840s, settlers had created a society distinct from both indigenous West Africans and similar enough to the United States that they could move claim independence based on American notions of self-sufficiency. It was this middle class

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<sup>334</sup> David Hall, *Ways of Writing: The Practice and Politics of Text-Making in Seventeenth-Century New England* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2008).

<sup>335</sup> Derek Peterson, *Creative Writing: Translation, Bookkeeping, and the Work of Imagination in Colonial Kenya* (Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 2004).

that mobilized to argue for Liberian independence and requested recognition of Liberian sovereignty.

## CHAPTER 5: MAKING A NATION: CREATING A MIDDLE CLASS AND MAKING LIBERIAN INDEPENDENCE

*Dear Grandmother I am almost a shame to write you for any thing but so as it is I will ventour you will be pleas to send me some cloth to make me one White frock as there is none to be had in the Colony*<sup>336</sup>

In Diana Skipwith's letter to her enslaved grandmother, Lucy Nicholas, Skipwith revealed the importance of clothing in the Monrovia settlement. In 1839, Monrovia was a growing settlement that featured a lively port, where ships carrying news, goods, and people from the United States landed with increasing regularity.<sup>337</sup> Skipwith was seventeen years old and took primary responsibility for watching the children in the Skipwith household. She was not yet married, but offered opinions on her possible suitors to Louisa Cocke and worried about her future as a potential wife. Skipwith's request to her grandmother for cloth in order to make a dress embarrassed her; she was "almost a shame" to ask this of Nicholas. Why might Skipwith have asked this of her grandmother?

Skipwith's letter suggests, as we saw in Chapter 3, that the links between families split apart by Liberian colonization were sustained by correspondence that linked together Virginia and Monrovia, slave and free. The letter also points to a growing economic exchange between the United States and West Africa – one in which Skipwith could expect to receive the material

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<sup>336</sup> Diana Skipwith to Lucy Nicholas, November 7, 1839, Box 8, Cralle-Campbell Papers, Special Collections, University of Virginia.

<sup>337</sup> During the 1830s, trading companies, such as Joseph Jenkins Roberts and William Nelson Colson's Roberts, Colson, and Company, imported and exported between Liberia and the United States. Roberts remained in Liberia, while Colson operated out of Petersburg, Virginia. See Juliet E. K. Walker, *The History of Black Business in America: Capitalism, Race, Entrepreneurship*, Vol. 1 (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2009), 155.

for her dress. And significantly, the material was to come from a woman who was still-enslaved, suggesting that Nicholas, though a slave, had access to money to purchase the cloth or cloth itself to care for her granddaughter who now lived on the other side of the ocean.

It is possible that in asking for the cloth to make a “White frock,” Skipwith hoped to join the ranks of Monrovia’s growing fashionable elite. By the late 1830s, settler women were participating in a variety of activities that reflected the development of a middle class – including participation in a Ladies’ Literary Institute, forming a Dorcas Society, building large homes, and yes, purchasing and sewing fashionable dresses – in Monrovia. Demonstrating claims to equality with observers in the United States through practices of respectability and racial uplift, this settler middle class spurred a Liberian independence movement that culminated in 1847.

Commercial expansion in the 1830s and 1840s was key to Liberian independence. Bronwen Everill has convincingly argued that competition between Liberia and neighboring Sierra Leone for trading rights was ultimately an impetus for the settlers to declare independence. Traders from Sierra Leone and other nations had long used the port at Bassa Cove (located in between Monrovia and Cape Palmas). In failing to recognize the authority of the Liberian government, British traders refused to pay custom duties, and in one case, even raised the British flag there. When the United States and the ACS did not assist the Liberian government in forcing the British to recognize Liberian sovereignty, the settlers chose independence.<sup>338</sup> Though the second black republic had separated itself politically from the ACS, it was not until 1862 that the United States formally recognized Liberia (and Haiti, that same year).

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<sup>338</sup> Bronwen Everill, *Abolition and Empire in Sierra Leone and Liberia* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 140-147.

Bronwen Everill is not the first to make the argument that trade was central to settlers' decision to declare independence from the ACS. Tom Shick writes that settlers, "as wards of a private organization, found themselves without the rights and privileges inherent within the principles of sovereignty." Like Everill, he finds that British and other traders took advantage of Liberia's lack of sovereignty by trading within the bounds of Liberia with West Africans and refusing to recognize Liberian authority to limit this trade. Shick brings this analysis through independence, showing how a 1839 Navigation Act established port-of-entry policy that limited foreign trade to six ports where there was a strong presence of Liberian settlers. There, Liberian merchants were designated as intermediaries in this trade, and forced foreign traders to pay a customs duty to the Liberian government. One British firm, Laurie, Hamilton, and Company, continually pushed the British Foreign Office to intervene with the Liberian government through the 1850s, but were reminded that England recognized Liberian sovereignty.<sup>339</sup>

This interpretation of Liberian independence emphasizes the ways in which settlers' concern for their commercial interest shaped political decisions. Less clear, however, are the ways in which settler *women* participated in these conversations. Through an examination of middle class behaviors and institutions, this chapter argues that women's consumption of trade goods, their participation in benevolent and literary organizations, and their presence at legislative sessions were critical to Liberia's independence movement and later, in the push for the formal recognition of Liberia by the United States. By demonstrating claims to equality through participating in middle class activities that were legible to audiences in the United States, settler women made a powerful argument for Liberian sovereignty.

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<sup>339</sup> Tom W. Shick, *Behold the Promised Land: A History of Afro-American Settler Society in Nineteenth-Century Liberia* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1980), 102-111.

Typically, studies of gender in Liberia have focused narrowly on masculinity. For example, John Saillant argues, “The essential notion of a black man as a modern citizen – a free citizen, capable of education, commerce, governance, religious faith, and rule over dependents – was articulated for the first time anywhere in the Atlantic world in Liberia.”<sup>340</sup> However, ideals of femininity and the practices of respectability also shaped the character of Liberian independence. Acting as benevolent reformers, fashionable ladies, and respectable women, overall, were critical to the development of Liberian nationhood.

In returning to Diana Skipwith’s request to her enslaved grandmother for white cloth to make a dress, we can also observe the ways in which former slaves were able to participate in this growing middle class culture in Monrovia. It is significant that Skipwith was formerly a slave – in Virginia, it would have been exceptionally difficult for her to access both the cloth and the time to make a white dress for herself. In asking her grandmother for the material, Skipwith attempted to engage in a literal self-fashioning through which she transformed herself from “slave” to “free woman” through her garments. Cloth was essential: but the trade in cloth and the way it was put to use by African American settlers were essential to the formation of a middle class in Liberia, which would go on to carve commercial independence.

Skipwith’s emphasis on the importance of dress mirrors what Stephanie Camp has argued in regards to enslaved women in the United States South, who constructed fashionable dresses for themselves. In wearing fashionable clothing, slave women sought to “appropriate a symbol of leisure and femininity (and freedom) and denaturalized their slave status.”<sup>341</sup> Much in the way that enslaved women Camp describes used clothing to resist the totality of American slavery,

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<sup>340</sup> John Saillant, “Missions in Liberia and Race Relations in the United States, 1822-1860,” in Daniel B. Hays and Grant Wacker, eds., *The Foreign Missionary Enterprise at Home: Explorations in North American Cultural History* (Tuscaloosa, AL: University of Alabama Press, 2003), 28.

<sup>341</sup> Stephanie H.M. Camp, *Closer to Freedom: Enslaved Women and Everyday Resistance in the Plantation South* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004), 83.

settler women like Diana Skipwith used the trappings of middle class respectability to distinguish themselves as free women acting on their own behalf.

This discussion of respectability draws from Jasmine Cobb's work on "'optics of respectability' – a spectator practice that evaluated proscriptions on free African American women's comportment and circulated as a critical perspective on free women's visibility." Cobb convincingly shows that black women used visual mediums to argue against the images of African American degradation in the racist caricatures of free African American life circulated by white artists like Edward Clay. Further more, in her study of African American women's visuality in the United States, Cobb maintains that these women participated fully in middle class activities, such as creating friendship albums and maintaining parlors . Taking part in middle class practices was a political act, which allowed African American women to claim a national identity by comporting themselves as though citizenship had already been won.<sup>342</sup> Using Cobb's work as a frame, I examine images of African American women in Liberia to show how similar nation-building work was at play. These modeled the possibilities for free African American women in Liberia, and thus the images served as endorsements of Liberia, particularly post-independence, but also as markers of the potential for black womanhood in Liberia.

The first section of this chapter focuses on the emergence of a Liberian middle class in the late 1830s and 1840s. First, it examines Lott Cary's economic transactions as an example of how Liberian settlers acquired trade goods. While multiple trading firms operated out of Liberia during the colonial period, Cary's partnership with Benjamin Brand of Richmond, Virginia provides and archival record of this practice. The second part of the section focuses on one

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<sup>342</sup> Jasmine Nichole Cobb, *Picture Freedom: Remaking Black Visuality in the Early Nineteenth Century* (New York: NYU Press, 2015); quotation on page 73. My understanding of "respectable" behavior and racial uplift is drawn from Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham, "African-American Women's History and the Metalanguage of Race," *Signs* 17, No. 2 (Winter 1992): 251-274 and Michele Mitchell, *Righteous Propagation: African Americans and the Politics of Racial Destiny after Reconstruction* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004).



commodity and its uses in Liberia: clothing. Clothing was of great importance to settler women, as a visible marker of difference between African American settlers and indigenous West Africans. It ends with a discussion of women's benevolent societies in Liberia.

Following from this, the second section begins with a discussion of women's petitions to the Liberian legislature during the 1830s and 1840s. Advocating on behalf of reform organizations, women hoped to sway the legislature to prohibit the sale of alcohol in Liberia. Ultimately, the trade in spirits was not completely prohibited (the trade in rum was too profitable for this), but the petitions show the influence settler women believed they had in early republic Liberia. The section continues with a discussion of the meaning of independence in Liberia. The success of Liberian independence – shaped by settler women's participation in politics – was dangerous to white American notions of racial hierarchies. While not as revolutionary as Haiti, Liberia was a prominent and visible example of African American capacity, offering an example of what African American community could look like, post-slavery.

## **BUILDING A MIDDLE CLASS**

The linkages between trade and the development of a middle class can be most clearly seen in an examination of Baptist missionary Lott Cary's estate. Cary, born into slavery in Virginia in 1780, was "hired out" by his master for work in Richmond's tobacco factories. There, Cary became familiar with tobacco production and Virginia's tobacco trade. In 1813, Cary's wife died. By this time, Cary had saved \$850, which he used to purchase his freedom and the freedom of his two children. Two years later, Cary, along with future Liberian settler Colin Teague, established the Richmond African Missionary Society. Like Cary, Teague had been

enslaved and purchased his and his family's freedom. Cary and Teague received support from the Richmond African Missionary Society, the Baptist Triennial Convention, and the American Colonization Society to travel to Liberia as missionaries in 1821. There, they established Providence Baptist Church, the first such congregation in the Liberian settlements.

Antebellum Richmond, Cary's birthplace, was a site of tobacco production. It was also a major center of slave trading. As demand for slaves in the upper south declined and cotton became the "king" crop of the American economy, no where in the United States, aside from New Orleans, was a bigger site of slave trading. As an enslaved man in Richmond, Cary witnessed the early stages of the expansion of the American slave market, in which 300,000 enslaved people were ripped apart from their families. As cotton production expanded into the deep south, demand for slave labor increased there, while the production of tobacco (which was farmed on much smaller plots of land) decreased the demand for slave labor. At the same time that Cary, Teague, and other Richmond African Americans were organizing the Missionary Society, hundreds of thousands of other African Americans in Richmond found themselves in the city's slave market.<sup>343</sup>

While other studies have focused on Cary's work as a missionary and minister to a congregation of free and freed people in a new colony, his work as a tobacco factor is less well-known.<sup>344</sup> Cary took on many roles during his short time in Monrovia: settler, missionary,

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<sup>343</sup> Allan Kulikoff, *Tobacco and Slaves: The Development of Southern Cultures in the Chesapeake, 1860-1800* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1986); Philip D. Morgan, *Slave Counterpoint: Black Culture in the Eighteenth-Century Chesapeake and Lowcountry* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1998); Walter Johnson, *Soul by Soul: Life Inside the Antebellum Slave Market* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999); Lorena Walsh, *Motives of Honor, Pleasure, and Profit: Plantation Management in the Colonial Chesapeake, 1607-1763* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2010); Jack Trammell, *The Richmond Slave Trade: The Economic Backbone of the Old Dominion* (Charleston: The History Press, 2012).

<sup>344</sup> There is no modern biography of Lott Cary.

Ralph Randolph Gurley, "Sketch of the Life of Lott Cary," in *Life of Jehudi Ashmun, Late Colonial Agent in Liberia* [1835]; James Barnett Taylor, *Biography of Elder Lott Cary, Late Missionary to Africa* [1837].

physician, and tobacco trader.<sup>345</sup> Neither early nineteenth century accounts of Cary's life, published after his death in 1828, mention Cary's work as tobacco trader in the colony, though they do note his skill in the tobacco warehouses of Shockoe, Richmond. Ralph Randolph Gurley, the corresponding secretary of the ACS, published an account of Jehudi Ashmun's life that included a section about Cary in 1835. Gurley noted that in 1813, Cary used the money he had earned in a tobacco factory to purchase his freedom and that of his two sons. Gurley wrote that while Cary was enslaved and working in the Richmond tobacco factory, he was able to earn money through tips from tobacco merchants impressed with Cary's skill and speed in retrieving hogsheads of tobacco from the warehouse and through selling waste tobacco.<sup>346</sup> In his 1837 biography of Cary, James Barnett Taylor, a prominent Baptist pastor and later, secretary of the Foreign Mission Board, corroborated this story about Cary's work and his self-purchased freedom. Taylor went on to note that after purchasing his freedom, Cary continued to work in the tobacco warehouse, earning \$800 a year and purchasing and shipping tobacco on his own account, up to 24 hogsheads at a time.<sup>347</sup>

Cary's freedom was purchased through his work with and knowledge of tobacco. He continued this work while a missionary and agent in Liberia, which is left out of both Gurley and Taylor's accounts of his life. An archival record of Cary's relationship with white tobacco trader Benjamin Brand, who was himself a supporter of colonization, reveals the ways in which Cary continued to depend on the tobacco trade for his livelihood, even after emancipation. Ironically, tobacco was the crop that allowed for the expansion of African slavery in early Virginia, yet it provided the means through which Cary and his family earned their freedom. Cary's tobacco

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<sup>345</sup> Taylor, 44.

<sup>346</sup> Gurley, 159.

<sup>347</sup> Taylor, 14.

trading in Liberia also reveals the ways in which white Virginians, African American slaves, settlers in Liberia, and West Africans were all connected through economic enterprise.

The earliest evidence of the connection between Cary and Brand comes from early 1824, after Cary had been in the colony just over two years. Brand wrote to Joseph King and Thomas Tyson of Richmond to attest to Cary's character and his reliability in regards to opening a trade in tobacco with Liberia. A certificate was signed by Richmond's tobacco traders and the president of the U.S. Bank in Richmond, and indicated that Cary was an "honest" man, and thus, a suitable person to carry out this trade. Brand wrote that, "Consignments of Tob.o[sic] would be made from this place to Lot[sic] Cary if a propect[sic] of profit could be seen, but we are entirely unacquainted with the trade to Africa."<sup>348</sup> While Brand was unsure if tobacco would be a profitable venture, in this letter, he freely speculated that Cary might be the one to make the tobacco trade a reality. Much in the way that the ACS imagined Liberia as a blank slate for creating an enterprising society, Brand imagined that there were fortunes to be made there.

Together, Cary and Brand created a trading company that exchanged flour, tobacco, and other goods from the United States for coffee, ivory, and camwood from West Africa. Cary's enterprise depended on close collaboration with a network of indigenous West African traders living on the edges of the Monrovia settlement. Cary and Colston Waring, another African American settler-trader, even constructed a channel up the Mesurado River in order to facilitate trade. No longer did small boats need to row up to seafaring vessels to exchange goods: now, this work could be done right along Monrovia's wharves.<sup>349</sup> The goods Brand hoped to get in

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<sup>348</sup> The certificate was signed by Seymour Seatt, William Barret, Wm. G. Pendleton, William Gilliatt, Anderson Blair, Anderson Rogers, Harrison Hobson, and someone identified as Sampson. Benjamin Brand to Joseph King and Thomas Tyson, March 31, 1824, Section 4, Benjamin Brand Papers, Virginia Historical Society. See also, Marie Tyler-McGraw, *An African Republic: Black and White Virginians in the Making of Liberia* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2007), 41-42.

<sup>349</sup> Tyler-McGraw, 154; James Wesley Smith, *Sojourners in Search of Freedom: The Settlement of Liberia by Black Americans* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1987), 61.

exchange for this tobacco were ones procured and produced by indigenous people, with the exception of coffee. Ivory and camwood were traded by indigenous people and often crossed hundreds of miles before reaching the banks of the Mesurado River. Thus, expanding markets for American tobacco pulled indigenous Africans into the market economy, just as the expansion of the tobacco trade in North America, which relied on American Indian buyers, had included indigenous Americans.

Brand's notes suggested the value of Virginia tobacco in West African markets. He received information about commerce in West Africa from William Crane. Crane, a Baptist from New Jersey who was also a shoe merchant, supported colonization in Virginia and taught a school for Richmond's African American Baptists, including Lott Cary.<sup>350</sup> Trade with West Africans was complex and risky: no insurance or banking networks existed in Liberia in 1824.<sup>351</sup> William Crane described the system of trade to Brand as such: tobacco was sold in bundles. Three bundles equaled a "bar" of tobacco." A bar was worth one American dollar, and 60 of these bars could purchase a ton of camwood. Here, Crane's math became slippery. He suggested that a ton of camwood was both \$80 in Baltimore's market. This price discrepancy suggested that camwood was worth more in Baltimore (and presumably, the United States) than in West Africa. Other scaled prices were offered for ivory (the weight of ivory determined its price), beeswax, palm oil, tortoise shell, and leopard skins. Palm oil from Liberia was sold in Richmond as early as November, 1824, when the candle makers purchased it for 5½ cents.<sup>352</sup>

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<sup>350</sup> Tyler-McGraw, 41.

<sup>351</sup> I use "West African" to describe the buyers of tobacco in this period, as the buyers, for the most part, resided outside of the American settlements that were called "Liberia." While Liberia began to make territorial claims to the land surrounding the Mesurado River throughout the nineteenth century, in the 1820s (the scope of this section), this land was decidedly not American-controlled.

<sup>352</sup> "Notes or memorandums on the trade of Liberia," November, 1824, Section 5, Benjamin Brand Papers, Virginia Historical Society.

Lott Cary wrote to Crane, his former teacher, at other moments, suggesting items that might be traded, aside from tobacco. Beads, India cotton, iron pots, handkerchiefs, and West India rum were listed alongside tobacco. Nails, window glass, files, chisels, crosscut saws, hammers, hatchets, copper, copper nails, canvas, tar, pitch, paint, and hinges were all listed as implements to be imported to Liberia, clearly for the construction of buildings, including homes. Irons for building mills, looms, and spinning wheels, as well as “implements for agriculturalists” were also in high demand, suggesting that early settlers hoped to build industries in their new settlements. Cary noted he could pay for these items with leopard skins, suggesting that trade with indigenous people may not have been well established yet in 1823 – camwood and ivory came from trade with West Africans, while leopard skins could be obtained by the settlers outfitted with guns.<sup>353</sup>

Cary and Brand seem to have traded regularly. One letter from Cary indicates that \$550 worth of tobacco was sold from Liberia, and Brand was paid with a banker’s draft (it is unclear which bank issued the draft). Cary suggested he did not pay for the tobacco in camwood, as the shipping expenses were too high. Cary also noted that tobacco sales had seasons: he warned that any tobacco sent after October or November would “miss” the market for it. Finally, Cary noted that he sent along a sample of the product of coffee produced in Liberia, which came from a new plantation along the St. Paul River, outside of Monrovia. Coffee, presumably, was less expensive to ship than camwood, and perhaps Cary was trying to get Brand to accept payment in coffee rather than camwood.<sup>354</sup>

Payment was indeed a complex issue for cross-continental trade, which became even more muddled after Cary’s death following a gunpowder explosion on November 8, 1828. His

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<sup>353</sup> “Articles of trade suitable for Montserrado,” Lott Cary to William McCrane [handwritten copy], December 5, 1823; August 21, 1824, Section 6, Benjamin Brand Papers, Virginia Historical Society.

<sup>354</sup> Lott Cary to Benjamin Brand, April 23, 1826, Section 4, Benjamin Brand Papers, Virginia Historical Society.

biographer, Ralph Randolph Gurley, recorded that the colony's factory north of Monrovia had been raided by "the natives" – a group of unspecified indigenous West Africans. A slave trader took over the use of the factory, and Cary and a group of other settlers planned to attack the group that had overtaken the factory. A lit candle in the munitions house overturned, and the building exploded with eight people, including Cary, inside. Cary suffered for two days from his injuries before dying on November 10.<sup>355</sup>

Following Cary's untimely death, Benjamin Brand attempted to recoup the cost of the tobacco he had sent to Cary. Three other settlers, John Brown Russwurm, Joseph Dailey, and Caroline Lundy seem to have taken over the trade that Brand engaged in with Cary. Russwurm and Dailey had their own commercial company, while Brand seems to have worked with Lundy because he knew her while she was a slave in Virginia. Despite the fact that it took until September of 1832 for Brand's account with Cary to be resolved, the trade with Liberia was too lucrative to quit. Colin Teague, as executor of Cary's estate, paid "in full of all demands against the Estate." Teague apologized for the delay, explaining that, "I should have settled it long ere this had not the affairs of the Estate been in such confusion."<sup>356</sup>

This commerce between West Africa and the United States was essential to middle class formation in colonial and early republic Liberia. Goods, like the tobacco that Cary moved from Richmond to the hinterlands of Monrovia, allowed some settlers to acquire capital. One family, the McGills, was so successful in their trade that they mobilized an entire fleet of ships. Furthermore, the constant trade with the United States allowed some settlers to acquire material goods, like the cloth Diana Skipwith asked her grandmother to send her. Since 1846, the *Liberia*

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<sup>355</sup> Gurley, 160.

<sup>356</sup> Colin Teague to Benjamin Brand, September 3, 1832, Section 7, Benjamin Brand Papers, Virginia Historical Society.

*Packet* shuttled people and trade goods across the Atlantic, and was available to people like Skipwith, who did not engage in large-scale commerce.<sup>357</sup>

Tobacco was not the only commodity that settlers traded, as we saw from Diana Skipwith's letter. Clothing, in particular, was an important commodity for settler society in the 1830s and 1840s. It was a visible identifier that distinguished African American settlers from West Africans living in and around Liberia. Tom Shick suggests that in order to distinguish themselves from indigenous people, settlers had to "maintain an exaggerated, often pompous alternative."<sup>358</sup> Whether exaggerated or not, the disparity in clothing among settlers and indigenous people was often remarked upon, and remained consistent from the 1820s through the 1840s.

Christian Wiltberger, who served as Assistant Agent for the ACS after arriving in West Africa on the *Nautilus* in 1821, became *de facto* Agent after the other white ACS agents on board died, noted multiple conflicts over clothing in the colony during its first few months of existence. One conflict was between a settler, John Lawrence, and his wife, Henrietta Lawrence. The pair had arrived with their two-year-old daughter, Mary, in 1820 on the *Elizabeth*. While at Sherbro Island, the couple got into an argument that ended with John remaining at Sherbro in Sierra Leone, while Henrietta and her child remained with the American colonists. In threatening to leave his wife, John Lawrence mentioned he would take "the children, their clothes + his wives [sic] Clothes, + leave." In mentioning clothing alongside his own children as things and people he would take away from his wife, John Lawrence's threat shows the importance of clothing to settlers, particularly early on in the colonization process. Clothing was likely the only possession that most settlers had upon arrival in Liberia, unless a former master outfitted their former slaves,

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<sup>357</sup> Everill, *Abolition and Empire in Sierra Leone and Liberia*, 145.

<sup>358</sup> Shick, *Behold the Promised Land*, 53.



as we saw with the discussion of Ann Randolph Page's preparation for her slaves in Chapter 2 of this dissertation.

Another marital disagreement, between Lewis and Matsy Crook, also highlighted the importance of clothing to this couple. According to Wiltberger, Matsy Crook "acted very bad" to her husband, and described this behavior by nothing that she "did not wash his clothes, cook his victuals."<sup>359</sup> By not washing her husband's clothing or cooking food, Crook failed to perform work that both her husband and Wiltberger felt was her obligation. While food was essential nourishment for helping settlers survive the acclimation process, clean clothing also seems to have been of the utmost importance to both settlers and the ACS. Crook was not living up to the standards of respectability that her husband expected.

Wiltberger's diary contains further examples of how precious clothing was to the settlers. As Acting Agent, Wiltberger gave clothing out to the settlers. After doing so one morning, he was met by Francis Posey, a shoemaker who had arrived on the *Elizabeth*. Posey's wife, Lucy, had gotten him some flannel shirts, but sent them back to Wiltberger. The two men got into a disagreement, and Wiltberger asked Posey to leave and shut the door behind him. Posey then told Wiltberger he was still owed money from Wiltberger, who bought a martingale (a harness for a horse) from Posey but had not yet paid for it. Although Wiltberger agreed that he still owed Posey money, he still refused to open his door. Finally, Wiltberger threatened to "crop his name off the list," presumably, a list that the ACS used to give out clothing and other supplies. Posey told him to "do it as quick as you please."<sup>360</sup>

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<sup>359</sup> The reference to "children" instead of "child" suggests that Henrietta Warner gave birth to another child after departing from West Africa. August 10, 1821, October 2, 1821, Christian Wiltberger Diary, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress; Ship *Elizabeth's* Company, arrived at Sierra Leone March 9, 1820, "Information relative to the operations of the United States squadron on the west coast of Africa, the condition of the American colonies there, and the commerce of the United States therewith," 28th Congress, 2d. Session, S. Doc. 150, serial 458.

<sup>360</sup> Christian Wiltberger Diary, December 13, 1821, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress.

The next day, Hannah Bennet (the wife of settler Parris Bennet, who arrived on the *Elizabeth*), had heard of the row with the Poseys. She visited Wiltberger, and complained to him using “blasphemous language.” Wiltberger threatened to “crop her off the list,” and Bennet replied she did not “have anything to say” but “made use of every abusive language” to convey her displeasure with Wiltberger. When Colin Teague and Parris Bennet, paid a visit to Wiltberger to resolve the issue, they noted that Hannah Bennet had not had a trial, and demanded that she be offered one before Wiltberger cut her off from the supplies. Teague argued that since the United States government was a “republican” one, a trial was necessary before a judgment was made. Wiltberger refused to offer a trial, and Hannah Bennet, along with Francis Posey, were refused rations.<sup>361</sup>

In response to Posey and Bennet having been cut off from their rations over a disagreement about clothing, some of the settlers formed a group called the American African Union Society. Lott Cary, Colin Teague, Elijah Johnson, Allen James, Daniel Coker, and Thomas Harris formed the executive branch of the Society, serving as president, vice president, treasurer, recording secretary, corresponding secretary and assistant corresponding secretary, respectively. Wiltberger told Dr. Eli Ayers, an Agent of ACS and physician, about the Society, who “did not like it at all.” The Society informed Wiltberger in writing that they were investigating the matter of the settlers who had their rations cut off. When Ayres questioned Cary

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<sup>361</sup> It is very likely that Hannah Bennet was Hannah Francis, who had immigrated to West Africa at the age of 20 with her parents and siblings. No other “Hannah” appears in the list of passengers on the *Elizabeth* or the *Nautilus*, and Francis was only one year younger than Parris Bennet, who arrived in Liberia by himself. Both Bennet and Francis are described as having stayed in Sierra Leone on the ship’s register. Ship *Elizabeth’s* Company, arrived at Sierra Leone March 9, 1820, “Information relative to the operations of the United States squadron on the west coast of Africa, the condition of the American colonies there, and the commerce of the United States therewith,” 28th Congress, 2d. Session, S. Doc. 150, serial 458; Christian Wiltberger Diary, December 15, 1821; December 15, 1821; December 17, 1821.

why the Society had been formed, Cary said that, “it was to regulate the conduct of the people.”<sup>362</sup>

The Society kept pressure on Wiltberger and the ACS to have a trail for Posey and Bennet. Instead, Posey was warned that if there was a jail, he might be put into it, and that no trail would be held. Both Posey and Bennet were left unsatisfied: though Bennet received her rations on December 29, 1821, both chose to remain in Sierra Leone while the ACS pressed down the coast to Cape Mesurado, where Monrovia was to be founded. In the ship’s register, Parris Bennet is listed as having chosen to leave “Liberia” – which only existed conceptually at the time – due to “dissapointm’t.”<sup>363</sup> Wiltberger led other settlers to Cape Mesurado, where he would help found Monrovia before departing for the United States in mid-1822.<sup>364</sup>

Though the Society was not wholly effective in restoring rations and dignity to Francis Posey and Hannah Bennet, they established a collective response to the ACS’ injustice. This emphasis on collective enterprise suggests that settlers recognized the power in association and assembly. And significantly, the conflict with Wiltberger over rations was not centered on food, but on clothing. This incident suggests that clothing was a central concern for many of the settlers in what would become Liberia, and that organizing collectively to protect a right to clothing was a practice that future middle class settlers would continue.

Clothing took on important meanings in West Africa, where settlers used it to distinguish themselves from indigenous people. Clothing was something that benevolent organizations in the United States routinely sent to Liberia, for the use of children in school, in particular. As we saw

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<sup>362</sup> Christian Wiltberger Diary, December 17, 1821; December 21, 1821; December 22, 1821; December 27, 1821; December 28, 1821, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress.

<sup>363</sup> Christian Wiltberger Diary, December 29, 1821, LOC; Ship *Elizabeth’s* Company, arrived at Sierra Leone March 9, 1820, “Information relative to the operations of the United States squadron on the west coast of Africa, the condition of the American colonies there, and the commerce of the United States therewith,” 28th Congress, 2d. Session, S. Doc. 150, serial 458.

<sup>364</sup> Harry Johnston, *Liberia*, Vol. 1 (London: Hutchinson & Co, 1906), 130-131.

in Chapter 2, girls enrolled at the Cape Palmas Female Orphan Asylum were required to sew and launder clothing as part of their education. The Sabbath Schools requested clothing for their indigenous students, and organizations like the Virginia branch of the American Colonization Society took up donations from white women in Richmond, who turned cotton cloth into clothing for these students.<sup>365</sup> Clothing was critical for distinguishing settlers from indigenous West Africans. Though collections were taken up to clothe children enrolled at Sabbath and mission schools, it does not appear that most West Africans living around Monrovia and the other Liberian settlements were interested in adopting the dress of the African Americans. Ephraim Bacon, Assistant Agent of the ACS who arrived in West Africa on the *Nautilus*, recorded in his journal that in 1821, clothing given to indigenous people around Monrovia was often sold or thrown away. He wrote, “[I]t was difficult to induce them to even put it on.” One girl, identified only as “Mr. [Elijah] Johnson’s servant girl,” was able to persuade some indigenous people in putting on the clothes. It is unclear who this servant girl was – it is probable that she was a recaptive African employed by the Johnson family.<sup>366</sup>

Some of the settlers themselves seemed to take time to become accustomed to having access to fine clothing. Six months after arriving in Liberia, the settlers were “decently clothed,” and the work of making clothing fell to female settlers. In recording the details of clothing production, Bacon also discussed the lack of drumming in the colony, temperance, and regular

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<sup>365</sup> January 20, 1827, Minute Book, Minutes of the Virginia Branch American Colonization Society, Virginia Historical Society.

<sup>366</sup> E. Bacon, *Abstract of a journal of E. Bacon, assistant agent of the United States to Africa: with an appendix, containing extracts from proceedings of the Church Missionary Society in England, for the years 1819-20. To which is prefixed and abstract of the journal, of the Rev. J.B. Cates, one of the missionaries from Sierra Leone to Grand Bassa ; in an overland journey, performed in company with several natives, in the months of February, March, and April, 1819. The whole showing the successful exertions of the British and American Governments, in repressing the slave trade.* (Philadelphia: S. Potter, 1821), 61.

attendance at church services. Bacon's journal linked together appropriate clothing and adherence to middle class American markers of refinement.<sup>367</sup>



*Figure 5.1: Unidentified woman, probably a member of the Urias McGill family, three-quarter length portrait, facing front, holding daguerreotype case, Augustus Washington, c. 1855, Library of Congress. The image is possibly not a member of the Urias McGill family, as the Library of Congress has identified her, but perhaps Sarah McGill Russwurm.<sup>368</sup>*

<sup>367</sup> *Ibid.*, 63-64.

<sup>368</sup> Scholars who have studied the image identify its subject as probably Sarah McGill Russwurm, with Deborah Willis and Barbara Krauthamer suggesting it may be a mourning portrait, taken two years after John Brown Russwurm's death. Winston James, *The Struggles of John Brown Russwurm: The Life and Writings of a Pan-Africanist Pioneer, 1799-1851* (New York: NYU Press, 2010), 81; Deborah Willis and Barbara Krauthamer,

Historians know much more about the man who took this daguerreotype than its subject. Augustus Washington, a skilled African American photographer who opened a successful studio in Hartford, Connecticut in 1846, is perhaps best known for his startling portrait of the radical abolitionist, John Brown. Washington himself was born free in New Jersey, and came to support colonization. Washington produced this daguerreotype of the “unidentified woman” shortly after his emigration from Hartford to Monrovia, Liberia in 1853. His daguerreotypes of the first president of Liberia, Joseph Jenkins Roberts and his wife, Jane Waring Roberts, and other Liberian politicians and dignitaries, were produced in his Monrovia studio. Washington’s depictions of freeborn and formerly enslaved African American settlers in Liberia, as well as the children of this settler generation, have provided scholars with what the Library of Congress has called “a durable memento” of African American life in colonial and early republic Liberia. Marcy Dinius argues that Washington’s work was able to “help realize the republic – to make it visible as an accomplished goal – for both those supporting and disputing its existence in America, even after the colony had become an independent nation in 1847.”<sup>369</sup>

The Library of Congress has not given a fixed identity to the woman in the photo, but she appears to be related to the man who is pictured in the daguerreotype that is located next to her image in the case she is holding in the picture. The man in that image, Urias Africanus McGill, was one of the most successful merchants in Liberia and one of the founding members of the McGill Brothers trading firm.

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*Envisioning Emancipation: Black Americans and the End of Slavery* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2013), 45.

<sup>369</sup> Ann M. Shumard, *A Durable Memento: Augustus Washington, African American Daguerreotypist* (Washington, DC: National Portrait Gallery, 1999); Marcy Dinius, *The Camera and the Press: American Visual and Print Culture in the Age of the Daguerreotype* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2012), 154-169.



*Figure 5.2: Urias A. McGill, half-length portrait, facing front, Augustus Washington, c. 1855, Library of Congress.*

The McGill family descended from Angelina and George McGill, the latter of whom had been enslaved in Maryland but purchased his freedom. George and his son, Samuel, 12, arrived in Liberia in 1827 to visit the new colony for themselves. After finding Liberia satisfactory, the rest of the McGill family joined them: mother, Angelina; Sarah, 16; James, 11; Roszelle, 10; Urias, 8; and Cleopatra, 7. Angelina McGill died shortly after the family landed in Monrovia, and George moved his family to Cape Palmas in 1834. The McGills were highly successful settlers: George McGill started trade dealings that his sons would pick up. Samuel was educated



at Dartmouth Medical School and became a governor of Maryland (West Africa); James went into business; Urias was a ship captain, and all three of them, along with Roszelle, partnered to form the McGill Brothers firm.<sup>370</sup>

In both portraits of the McGill siblings, the subjects display markers of refinement and elegant clothing. The woman wears gold earrings and a long chain necklace; Urias McGill's suit includes embroidery on the vest. The woman's hands are clothed in gloves, offering a suggestion of fashion sense and good taste. Urias McGill's daguerreotype is colorized, and perhaps the woman's is, as well, though it may be too damaged to be visible. Even the frame on the artifacts is detailed, featuring turtles in its design (which may evoke crossing water). The casing is much more elaborate than that of Washington's other Liberia portraits, such as the one of Senator John Hanson, as we shall see.

As Jasmine Cobb has shown, freed people used daguerreotypes and other images to work towards "disentangling Blackness from slavery."<sup>371</sup> Though Cobb's work situates images of African Americans in an argument about nationhood and former slaves' insistence that the United States was their proper home, similar work was at play for the McGills and other African American settlers depicted by Augustus Washington.

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<sup>370</sup> Brig *Doris*' Company, arrived at Monrovia August 11, 1827; Schooner *Reapers*' Company, arrived at Monrovia February 18, 1831 "Information relative to the operations of the United States squadron on the west coast of Africa, the condition of the American colonies there, and the commerce of the United States therewith," 28th Congress, 2d. Session, S. Doc. 150, serial 458; James, *The Struggles of John Brown Russwurm*, 77-79.

<sup>371</sup> Cobb, *Picture Freedom*, 6.





*Figure 5.3: Jane Roberts, three-quarter length portrait of a woman, full face, c. 1851-1860, Library of Congress. This is a copy of a daguerreotype from Rufus Anson after an original by Augustus Washington.*

Jane Roberts, wife of President Joseph Jenkins Roberts, illustrates African American refinement and gentility in this daguerreotype. She wears a similar necklace as the woman in the earlier photograph, and holds a fan. Jasmine Cobb has argued that daguerreotypes such as this one “offered a sense of ‘truth’ in representation.” Roberts appears to have color added to her cheeks, a tactic, Cobb notes, that was negotiated between the photographer and the subject of the image.<sup>372</sup> In choosing to add color, Roberts signaled her vitality, but this was not only freedom that rendered her so lively. Her cheeks also sent the message that Liberia was a healthy place. Thus the image countered reports of fever, disease, and starvation in Liberia that circled within

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<sup>372</sup> Cobb, *Picture Freedom*, 3.

the antebellum United States. By choosing to appear in this daguerreotype with flushed cheeks, Roberts made an argument for colonization.

Settler women not only sat for photographs to enact their respectability. As we saw in Chapter 2, benevolent organizations could be powerful mechanisms for women to claim authority and power. This was true for African American settler women in Liberia, as it was for white women in support of colonization in the United States. By the 1840s, middle class settlers embraced clothing as a visible marker of their civility and preparedness for leading a colony in West Africa. In 1843, benevolent organizations that provided clothing to the indigent were established. The Ladies Dorcas Society was established in Monrovia, alongside the Ladies Benevolent Society and the Union Sisters of Charity Society. Members of the Legislative Council and the Governor were invited to attend a celebration thrown by the Dorcas Society, as well. Another Dorcas Society was established down the coast at Buchanan in 1855.<sup>373</sup> It appears that the Society in Monrovia had operated since 1840, though it was not officially incorporated until three years later. It was affiliated with the Methodist Church in Monrovia, and still in operation until 1860, when it celebrated its twentieth anniversary.<sup>374</sup>

## **BUILDING INDEPENDENCE**

In addition to the Dorcas Societies, settler women also formed associations to support other benevolent causes. Temperance, in particular, was a significant movement in Liberia, in part because rum was an important trade item for merchants interested in exchanging goods with West Africans. In a letter to her former master, John Hartwell Cocke, Matilda (Skipwith)

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<sup>373</sup> Folder 23, Box 4; Folder 5, Box 5, Liberian Government Archives, Part 1, Svend Holsoe Collection, Liberian Collections, Indiana University.

<sup>374</sup> *African Repository*, Vol. 36, No. 3 (1860), 125.

Richardson noted that she belonged to multiple religious and benevolent organizations, and listed the duration of her membership, writing, “I have been in the Baptist Church as a member for eighteen years, and I have member of Daughter’s of Temperance for four years Sister’s of friendship for five years.”<sup>375</sup> Richardson’s emphasis on her membership to these organizations was significant – she likely knew that Coker was a strong proponent of temperance and news that Richardson had joined the Daughters of Temperance would be met with approbation.

According to Tom Shick, four temperance societies and one anti-tobacco society existed in nineteenth century Liberia: the Grand United Order of the Daughters of Temperance, the Philanthropic Order of the Sons of Temperance, the Rising Star Union Daughters of Temperance, and the Rose of Sharon Union Daughters of Temperance. The Anti-Tobacco Society, he argues, was never as popular as temperance in Liberia.<sup>376</sup> Banning trade in rum of other spirits was a difficult battle for the temperance organizations, as it was an important commodity for trading with West Africans.

During the January 1846 session of the Legislative Council, one of the temperance organizations (likely the Daughters of Temperance) petitioned the legislature to “impose greater restrictions on the sale of ardent spirits in the Colony.” Forty eight “ladies of Monrovia” signed this petition, which was presented to the Council, but ultimately left to be “carefully filed with the archives of the Colony.”<sup>377</sup> Though the trade in “ardent spirits” was not completely banned, the women were successful in restricting its sale. In a letter to the ACS, Joseph Jenkins Roberts reported in February, 1846, “[T]he Legislature took a decided stand against the sale of ardent spirits in the colony. The 7<sup>th</sup> section of an act regulating commerce and revenue, imposes such

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<sup>375</sup> Matilda (Skipwith) Richardson to John Hartwell Coker, August 1857, Box 153, Coker Family Papers, Special Collections, University of Virginia Libraries.

<sup>376</sup> Shick, *Behold the Promised Land*, 62-63.

<sup>377</sup> Folder 24, Box 4, Liberian Government Archives, Part 1, Svend Holsoe Collection, Liberian Collections, Indiana University.

restrictions on dealers in spirituous liquors as will, in my opinion, amount almost to a prohibition.” The regulation did not equal prohibition – it installed a licensing system for selling spirits, which cost its purchaser \$500.<sup>378</sup>

Roberts did not note the role of the “ladies of Monrovia” in his letter to the ACS describing the success of the regulations against the trade in ardent spirits. But the extant legislative archives suggest that settler women not only petitioned their government to place prohibitions on this trade, but they were ultimately successful. Temperance was one of the many causes that women’s organizations in Liberia supported, as evidenced by the references to other groups, such as the “Sister’s of friendship” mentioned in Matilda Richardson’s letter. Unfortunately, the archival record retains scant information about what these women’s organizations did, and who comprised them. From Richardson’s letter, it seems that women of less substantial means like Richardson herself did participate in these benevolent societies.

In her study of middle class formation in upstate New York, Mary Ryan argues that both women’s participation in commerce and their work in benevolent organizations shaped both family and society in the antebellum United States. Reform organizations, like the ones Richardson joined, were essential to the reproduction of the middle class. Benevolent organization were also forms of organization that could bring together people like Richardson, who had lost kin, into communities.<sup>379</sup>

Where the trail of archival record of settler women’s participation in Liberian politics goes cold, the visual record may reveal more than manuscripts can, much as the visual record also illustrates the importance of Liberian politics for an international audience as an example of African American capability. The visual history of the Liberian legislature was created by

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<sup>378</sup> *African Repository*, Vol. 22, No. 5 (May 1846), 154; Shick, *Behold the Promised Land*, 62.

<sup>379</sup> Mary P. Ryan, *Cradle of the Middle Class: The Family in Oneida County, New York, 1790-1865* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1981).

Augustus Washington in a set of eleven daguerreotypes of the Liberian Senate from 1857. These artifacts, which date from the December 1, 1856-January 23, 1857 session of the Senate, in art historian Dalia Scruggs' words, form "a witness to the impossible being made possible." Through the images, the senators, in Scruggs' view, present themselves as embodiments of black male citizenship. She argues that much like Frederick Douglass controlled his own image in photography, the senators in Washington's daguerreotypes "convey strength, masculinity, and seriousness."<sup>380</sup>



*Figure 5.4: John Hanson, three-quarter portrait, three-quarters view, wearing glasses, seated at desk, c. 1856-1860, Library of Congress*

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<sup>380</sup> Dalila Scruggs, "'The Love of Liberty Has Brought Us Here': The American Colonization Society and the Imaging of African-American Settlers in Liberia," PhD diss., Harvard University (2010), 155-197. Marcy Dinius argues that Washington, as the daguerreotypist, "make[s] the actual existence – the "reality" – of these people [the senators] and places indisputably apparent to viewers." Thus while Scruggs locates the agency in the images in the senators themselves, Dinius emphasizes Washington's role behind the lens of the camera. Dinius, *The Camera and the Press*, 175-188.

This daguerreotype of Senator John Hanson of Grand Bassa County portrays the Senator after years of work as a merchant that allowed him to join Liberia's middle class. Hanson was a slave in Maryland who purchased his own freedom and arrived in Liberia in 1827.<sup>381</sup> In this image, he reflects the clothing and taste of the Liberian middle class, showing the transformation from slavery to freedom in his very person. Even the desk itself reflects the seriousness of managing the early republic of Liberia. Furniture, too, was often shipped in from the United States, just as cloth had been.

In addition to the daguerreotypes of the Liberian Senate produced by Augustus Washington, another image of the 1857 Senate exists. African American painter Robert Griffin created a portrait of the Senate, using watercolor. Dalila Scruggs describes the ways in which Griffin's painting functions as "a symbol of black competence and the ability to self-govern." Scruggs offers a compelling reading of the meaning of the painting, which, she suggests, may have been shaped by an engraving of the United States Senate sent to Liberia on the same ship that Griffin arrived on. This engraving is depicted towards the top of Griffin's painting. Thus, Scruggs argues, in painting the Liberian Senate, Griffin favorably compared Liberia's black republic with that of the United States.<sup>382</sup>

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<sup>381</sup> Brig *Doris*'s company, arrived at Monrovia August 11, 1827, "Information relative to the operations of the United States squadron on the west coast of Africa, the condition of the American colonies there, and the commerce of the United States therewith," 28th Congress, 2d. Session, S. Doc. 150, serial 458; Shumard, *A Durable Memento*.

<sup>382</sup> Scruggs, "The Love of Liberty Has Brought Us Here," 155-170. Little is known about Griffin, other than that he was an African American who arrived in Monrovia in January 1856.





Figure 5.5: Robert K. Griffin, *Liberian senate*, c. 1856, Library of Congress

While Scruggs is convincing in her argument that the painting showcased the capacity of the republic comprised of African American men, she does not note the African American women seated in the foreground of the painting.

Notable in the foreground, eight women observe the legislative proceedings. Adorned with fashionable bonnets and overcoats, the bright yellows, blues, and greens stand out in the painting, which depicts the Legislature in black and white, aside from the red tablecloth at the front of the room. Two women have colorful ribbons on their bonnets; another wears a bonnet with a printed pattern in white and red. The clothing of the women indicates a carefully chosen

palette of colors, suggesting that Griffin's decision to portray women in the gallery of the Legislature was shaped by the fashionable society of Liberia's settler middle class, as was Diana Skipwith's hope to create a white dress in the letter, which opened this chapter.

Two pairs of women are seated next to each other; in each pair, one of the women is turned toward her partner. These women's faces are visible, and suggest a conversation between the women in each pair. Just as two men in the audience on the right side of the painting are engaged in discussion, with one man pointing toward the other, the women seated in the audience, too, participate in the political debate. Furthermore, the pair of women depicted on the left of the painting (in the yellow and blue bonnets) are shown to be in discussion such that some of the other men seated in their row are turned towards them, perhaps listening to their conversation.

Elite white women played similar roles in the United States early national government. Catherine Allgor has shown that these women were able to work within female society to extend their power and influence in American politics. The women in Allgor's study, like the women in Griffin's painting, discussed and debated the politics with each other and with the politicians in the legislatures. They sat in galleries, where they observed the legislative proceedings, and discussed political matters.<sup>383</sup> It is probable that the women depicted in Griffin's painting partook in similar activities in Liberia.

Griffin's painting predates a similar image from the National Colored Convention at Washington, DC from 1869, twelve years after the painting was completed. In this image, fashionably dressed African American women also sit and stand in attendance at a meeting of the Colored Convention. Two women, in the right foreground, speak with each other. As Martha

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<sup>383</sup> Catherine Allgor: *Parlor Politics: In Which the Ladies of Washington Help Build a City and a Government* (Charlottesville, VA: University Press of Virginia, 2000).



Jones has shown, women were “visible” during debates in African American public culture in the Civil War era. This particular meeting depicted in the image included women’s rights supporters, as well as a female delegate, Harriet C. Johnson, whose presence was opposed by some of the other delegates, Jones notes.<sup>384</sup>

Though the painting is a creation of Robert Griffin’s, it incorporates true-to-life details depicted in Augustus Washington’s daguerreotypes of the senators. Notice John Hanson on the left side of the painting, labeled with a “5.” His painting mirrors the Washington daguerreotype, as do the other painted senators mirror Washington’s other ten daguerreotypes.<sup>385</sup> It is probable, then, that Griffin painted the women in the gallery as he saw actual settler women observing and participating in the Liberian legislature. While the women in Griffin’s painting of the 1857 Liberian senate were not invited to join the government as senators, they discussed and debated Liberian politics. They petitioned the legislature – successfully – to limit the trade in rum. Ultimately, settler women pivoted their participation in benevolent societies and physical presence as a visible reminder of the possibilities for black women’s political and social organization.

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<sup>384</sup> Martha Jones, *All Bound Up Together: The Woman Question in African American Public Culture, 1830-1900* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2007), 146-147.

<sup>385</sup> Both Carol Johnson and Marcy Dinius read the painting as part of the set of Washington daguerreotypes, which offer more detail than the painting. However, they both note, taking a daguerreotype of the Senate as it is depicted in the painting would have been impossible. Dinius, *The Camera and the Press*, 175-176; Carol Johnson, “Faces of Freedom: Portraits of the American Colonization Society Collection,” *Daguerreian Annual* (Pittsburgh: Daguerreian Society, 1996): 265-278.



*Figure 5.6: The National Colored Convention in session at Washington, D.C. sketched by Theo. R. Davis, 1869, Library of Congress*

While it is unclear why Griffin created this portrait of the Liberian Senate, it offered a visual reminder to American audiences of the successes of the black republic in West Africa. In creating a visibly respectable middle class society that then declared its independence and sovereignty, settlers offered an example of what a free black society could achieve. The painting could stand as an argument for abolishing slavery in the United States, as well. It suggests that in freedom, African Americans could establish and maintain their own republic. In 1857, this was a potentially revolutionary argument, as the United States republic was beginning to fracture in violent ways, particularly in the Bleeding Kansas confrontations of the late 1850s. As the United States republic was crumbling, the Liberian republic grew. Perhaps, then, the painting makes an argument for the fulfillment of the promise of democracy in Liberia, rather than in the United States.



*Figure 5.7: Sanctuary of Providence Baptist Church*

The grandness of the room depicted in Griffin's painting contrasts with the building in which the Liberian Declaration of Independence was signed. This room, the sanctuary of Providence Baptist Church in Monrovia, is where many of the same men met in 1847 to sign the document that gave Liberia its sovereignty. Providence was important in colonial Liberia: it was the church that Lott Cary founded, and likely the first religious institution built in Liberia. Though much has changed with the room since the nineteenth century, it offers an important juxtaposition with the republic envisioned in Griffin's painting of the senate. Just as Griffin's painting memorialized the meeting of the Liberian Senate, a wall engraving in Providence Baptist Church recalls the signing of the Declaration at Providence.





Figure 5.8: Signers of the Declaration of Independence

The memorial to the signers of the Declaration of Independence is on the wall of Providence Baptist Church. In addition to listing the names of the African American men who signed it, it details the donors of the sign: the Dorcas Circle of Providence Baptist Church. The memorial was dedicated on February 11, 1973. Furthermore, it names the Chairman of the Circle, Sister J. Eva George, on the same memorial as the signers of the Declaration. The perseverance of women's benevolent societies in Liberia into the twentieth century signals the

continued participation of African American and Liberian women in politics and the commemoration of milestones in Liberian history. The memorial, furthermore, is a visual representation of the ways in which the histories of benevolent organizations and religious institutions were tied to the political history of Liberia.

## CONCLUSION



*Figure 5.9: Jane Roberts, c. 1905  
From Harry Johnston, Liberia: Vol. 1, attributed to Mr. Henry Irving*

Jane Waring Roberts, the widow of Liberian statesman Joseph Jenkins Roberts, spent her last years in London, living near Battersea Park. Harry Johnston identifies this image as a portrait

of Jane Roberts, though I have been unable to locate it in any other source. Just as the earlier photo of Jane Roberts and the “Unidentified McGill Woman” suggest, the politics of refinement and fashion followed settler women as they made ambassadorial journeys throughout the Atlantic world.<sup>386</sup>

Roberts herself became an unofficial ambassador of the Liberian Republic later in life. Her husband, as the first president of Liberia and one of the first professors at Liberia College, traveled between Liberia, the United States, and Europe until his death in 1876. Jane Roberts long outlived her husband, dying in England in 1914. She spent the last decades of her life in front of an international audience. As the first “First Lady” of Liberia, Roberts was a living representation of the respectability of settler women in Liberia. In this image, for instance, she wears an intricately embroidered cloak and lace hairpiece. Even by the early twentieth century, cloth and clothing were important markers through which Liberian women displayed respectability.

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<sup>386</sup> Johnston, *Liberia*, Vol. 1, 224-225.

## CONCLUSION

*Please give my love to Berther Edwards and tell him that I can not write this time but will do so another I hope he is well you can tell him that his Cousin received his letter also and was glad to hear from him I must now close as I have nothing more to say There are a great many of our people gon to war. I want you to give my love to all the friends, I must say good bye<sup>387</sup>*

In her final letter to the United States, Matilda (Skipwith) Richardson reported the death of her cousin, James, to his brother, William Skipwith. She offered greetings to her friends and family still enslaved in the United States, and enclosed two other letters with the one for William: one for William's brother, Richard, and another for her former master, John Hartwell Cocke. Her observation that some of "our people" had left for war – a conflict in Cape Palmas between indigenous groups – was ambiguous: "our people" might have referred to other former Cocke slaves, or simply meant other settlers. The people had "gon to war" in Cape Palmas in February, 1861; by the time the letter carrying this news reached Virginia, the people in Virginia had "gone to war," too. By July, the people did not need to go to war: war had *come* to Virginia, less than one hundred miles north of Cocke's Bremo Plantation, at Manassas.

If Richardson continued to write to Virginia, she would have found that Cocke continued to support colonization after the end of the American Civil War, and indeed asked Lucy Skipwith (Matilda's cousin) whether she would be willing to go there in 1865. Lucy Skipwith thanked Cocke for his "advice," but told him "I cannot get my consent to go there." Skipwith also

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<sup>387</sup> Matilda (Skipwith) Richardson to William Skipwith, February 22, 1861, Box 162, Cocke Family Papers, Special Collections, University of Virginia Libraries. It is possible that Skipwith continued to write letters to her family or to Cocke. Especially during wartime, getting a letter to Virginia was difficult and may not have arrived or been preserved.

reported that none of the other slaves at Hopewell Plantation in Alabama were willing to go. Despite her unwillingness to go to Liberia, Skipwith remained at the plantation, and reported that “Some of every bodys black people in this Neighbourhood have left their homes but us.”<sup>388</sup> Perhaps Lucy Skipwith followed her neighbors’ lead and left Hopewell soon after – she did not send any more letters to Cocke. Cocke died shortly after the end of the American Civil War, in 1866.

Lucy Skipwith’s refusal to go to Liberia was the typical response for newly free African Americans in the 1860s. But by the late 1870s, many African Americans turned to migration. Michele Mitchell notes that immigration to Liberia appealed to African Americans in the post-Reconstruction South much in the way that migration to Northern states did. Furthermore, she argues, African Americans were drawn to Liberia as a place where they might have an opportunity to explore “collective survival and national identity.”<sup>389</sup> At the turn of the twentieth century, black nationalism and subsequent “back to Africa” movements gained supporters in the United States. The largest of these was Marcus Garvey’s Universal Negro Improvement Association, which aimed to bring the black diaspora of the Western Atlantic to the African continent.

As the relationships between the Skipwiths and their friends and family in the United States illustrate, Liberia was closely linked to the United States throughout the colonial and early republic period. The “reverse” middle passage of African American settlers in Liberia offers

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<sup>388</sup> Freedom came slowly to Hopewell Plantation. As late as March 1864, Lucy Skipwith was asking Cocke not to sell Maria, Lucy’s daughter. She wrote to Cocke about Maria’s would-be buyer “I would like to see him acomadated but it seems that nothing will do for him but Maria if he must have her I would rather be hired to him & go myself rather than be parted from her.” Maria was seventeen-years-old at the time. Her mother’s willingness to hire herself out in place of her daughter and her note that “nothing will do for” the potential buyer but Maria was ominous; Skipwith could have been trying to protect her daughter from rape. Lucy Skipwith to John Hartwell Cocke, March 28, 1864 Box 171; December 7, 1865, Box 173, Cocke Family Papers, Special Collections, University of Virginia Libraries.

<sup>389</sup> Michele Mitchell, *Righteous Propagation: African Americans and the Politics of Racial Destiny after Reconstruction* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004), 20.



scholars another opportunity to understand the capacities for African American community and kinship. As a post-emancipation society, Liberia stood as an example of a freed society made anew, much as the Reconstruction United States offered new and expanded possibilities for former slaves and free African Americans. This history of family and kinship in Liberian colonization exemplifies the ways in which enslaved and formerly enslaved people created, protected, and preserved social connections both in the United States and in colonial Liberia through the language of kinship.

## EPILOGUE

*how men and women were glad to leave there homes of plenty and suffer so that they were free and could serve God under there own vine and fig tree (excuse me palm tree), they went not to seek wealth and honor, but a home for there oppressed children nobly did they battle for liberty some of them suffering and died, and at last Liberia was founded.<sup>390</sup>*

In late 1887 in New York, Affiah (Wilson) Roye, the daughter of two African American settlers and a Liberian by birth, reflected on the founding of her country. She explained that the settlers, both men and women, left “there homes” in the United States. Despite the fact that many of the settlers were slaves in the United States, Roye described life in the United States as one “of plenty,” in contrast to the “suffering” of life in Liberia. She continued by linking her interpretation of the mission of Liberia – to “serve God” – with an attempt to find a different “home” for the “oppressed children” of African Americans. For Roye, that “home” was Liberia.

Roye’s reference to “there own vine and fig tree” – which she corrected with “excuse me palm tree” – reflects Roye’s Biblical literacy. As the daughter of a Methodist missionary, Roye might have read or heard Micah, Chapter 4, Verse 4 for the first time in Liberia. But she called it to mind again in writing her letter in New York. In changing the fig tree to the palm tree, Roye placed the Bible in a context that linked together the United States and Liberia, past and present, parent and child.

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<sup>390</sup> Affiah (Wilson) Roye to “Mr. Editor,” December 17, 1887, Box 410, Methodist Episcopal Church Records, Manuscripts and Archives Division, New York Public Library (hereafter cited as Methodist Records).

In the fall of 1851, Roye's mother, Affiah Wilson, wrote to her son, James. James Wilson was living apart from his family – one of the most important African American families in the Monrovia settlement and the surrounding areas in Liberia. Almost certainly he was engaged in leading a group of Liberian men in Maryland in Africa. The men were there, most likely, to put down a rebellion comprised of Kru men – indigenous peoples who, in the 1850s, fiercely resisted the settler colonialism of the African Americans who landed and lived in the territory. But Affiah Wilson's letter to her son did not include details of the war. She did not seem particularly concerned with the strategies employed by commanders, the number of wounded and dead, or the physical safety of her child. Instead, she focused her attention on the state of James Wilson's soul. She reminded him of his origins – his place of birth. She wrote to him, “my dear Jon I hope that you will not forget the rock from whence you were borne and the hil from whence you were dug.” For her part, as the wife of Methodist missionary Beverly Wilson, Affiah Wilson noted to her son that she had successfully participated in the “covenanting” of a group of migrants at Millsburg, a settlement outside of Monrovia on the St. Paul River. Her announcement of the good work of settlers served as a reminder to her son, James, that he, too, needed to search his soul. She ended her letter by imploring her son to take his faith seriously, particularly *because* he was engaged in dangerous work in fighting with native peoples, writing, “O James I want to see you a Bible cristan such a one as god will own in death.”<sup>391</sup> This constant refrain of death – and the potential for reunification in the afterlife – was inscribed in hundreds of the letters from early nineteenth century Liberia. Wilson's emphasis on the *Bible*, too, reflects back in her daughter's reference to the “vine and palm tree.”

Affiah Wilson, along with her husband, were African American missionaries sent from Virginia to Liberia to spread the gospel to both African American immigrants to Liberia, as well

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<sup>391</sup> Affiah Wilson [Senior] to James Wilson, Monrovia, September 15, 1851, Box 409, Methodist Records.

as any indigenous Africans who might be convinced to listen. Beverly Wilson was a deacon and an elder of the Virginia Annual Conference of the Methodist Episcopal Church, which had been in Liberia since the 1820s. In Monrovia, the Methodist mission was overseen by the Reverend John Seys, a man whose long career in Liberia – he later became the first American ambassador in the country – is well-known for its controversies and conflict with the Baptist contingent of politicians in Liberia. Additionally, the Methodists had smaller outposts near the settlement at Cape Palmas. Beverly Wilson himself was in Liberia since 1833, having visited the territory to assess its condition before moving his family there. His publicity tour following his first visit to Liberia included visits with leading colonization supporters in Virginia, and his letters about the possibilities free people of color could find in Liberia reached audiences in Philadelphia and Boston. He lauded the order and religiosity of the settlements, as well as the success of the missions, noting that, “many others are anxiously desirous for an acquaintance with the Word of Life.”<sup>392</sup>

Examining the Wilsons allows us to examine the multifaceted religious imaginings of the diasporic world. As J. Lorand Matory has argued, in regards to Candomblé, in the African diaspora, religious adherents theorized belief as a way to transcend the boundaries of space and time.<sup>393</sup> African American missionary families in Liberia were tapped into this capacious possibility for belief. In enacting the conviction to “go forth and preach the gospel,” these missionaries and purveyors of Christianity drew connections not only between themselves and their “heathen” African brethren, but also between themselves and their American homeland and the constituency of white evangelicals. In other words, these missionaries employed the language

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<sup>392</sup> Beverly R. Wilson, June 5, 1835, *The Colonization Herald*, Vol. 1, No. 7 (July 4, 1835).

<sup>393</sup> J. Lorand Matory, *Black Atlantic Religion: Tradition, Transnationalism and Matriarchy in the Afro-Brazilian Candomblé* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005).

of spiritual family not only in regards to their congregants and students in the mission schools, but also to the worldwide network of believers that supported their mission work.

Beverly Wilson was most likely born free, while the status of Affiah Wilson is unclear. The Wilsons, a young Methodist couple, had decided to dedicate their lives to the emerging mission field in West Africa. As missionaries, the Wilsons taught children in Sunday school, attended camp meetings, and fostered indigenous African children in their home. In many ways, the Wilsons were similar to other missionaries to Africa during the early nineteenth century. The Wilsons had a particular interest in converting souls in West Africa, however. As an African American family, the Wilsons imagined their Sunday school students and foster children as their brethren. They saw their own history – as African Americans whose families had been enslaved in North America – as fundamentally linked with the history of those who remained in Africa. Of course, although the Wilsons envisioned their destiny as African Americans as intertwined with those on the African continent, they did not suggest that Africans and African Americans were exactly the same. Religion, in particular, differentiated the Wilsons from their neighbors in Monrovia and its environs. Both similarity and difference characterized the Wilsons' conceptualizations of mission work in West Africa.

Their children had different geographical imaginings of diaspora than this first generation. For Affiah (Wilson) Roye (the daughter shared the same name as her mother, thus I refer to her as “Roye”), born in Monrovia, I have been able to trace her multiple migrations following her birth in 1843. During her life, she worked as a teacher, adopted (whether formally or informally) many West African children, and continued the work her parents had set out to do. In 1864, she married Edward Roye, also a descendant of African American settlers. Seven years after their marriage, her husband's father, Liberian President Edward James Roye, was

assassinated. Her husband quickly sailed for England, hoping to escape political persecution and also to settle his father's finances. While in England, he heard about an investment opportunity in Adelaide, Australia. At some point after arriving in Adelaide, Roye was confined to an asylum, where he remained for the rest of his life. Affiah (Wilson) Roye remained in Liberia, often writing to her husband's doctor in Australia, hoping to arrange a visit with him.<sup>394</sup>

Unfortunately, this visit never came to be. In a letter, Roye compelled her husband to return to the fold, writing that, "I am still hoping to see you again, but if we never meet in this life oh let us meet in heaven where parting is no more you must ask God to help, you come back into his embrace as you once was, oh come back to the Sherpheard."<sup>395</sup> Here, Roye used the same type of language that missionaries like her parents employed to transcend the boundaries of time – hoping for a reunion in another life.

By 1884, Roye was in the United States, where she was seeking medical treatment. While she was there, she wrote letters to her nephew in Monrovia. In these letters, Roye outlined detailed plans for a return to Liberia, and chastised her nephew for letting her father's home fall into a state of disrepair. The fact that Roye knew the roof needed to be replaced reveals the degree to which news between the United States and its former colony in West Africa was spreading. Also tellingly, throughout her correspondence, Roye referred to herself as a Liberian – never as an American or as the descendant of Americans – revealing identities and affiliations were often generationally and geographically dependent.<sup>396</sup>

In her letters, Affiah (Wilson) Roye identified herself as both a Christian and a child of missionaries. She remarked to her nephew that her father's home was often used to shelter the

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<sup>394</sup> Affiah (Wilson) Roye to Edward Roy [Junior], September 17, 1886, Box 410, Methodist Records; "Obituary: Affiah E. Wilson Roye," *The Christian Advocate* [New York] December 15, 1892.

<sup>395</sup> Affiah (Wilson) Roye to Edward Roye [Junior], September 17, 1886, Box 410, Methodist Records.

<sup>396</sup> Affiah (Wilson) Roye to "Lammy," July 17, 1888, *Ibid.*

homeless in Monrovia and that her mother looked after all of the children who resided there – whether they were hers or not.<sup>397</sup> Roye’s recollection gives us some idea of the duties that African American missionaries performed in Liberia. Not surprisingly, they centered on care of the family, and they point to an expansive notion of what family entailed.

Roye tied her own genealogy with the lineage of the idea of a unified Christian elect. She wrote, “our Mothers were honest women and married black men but that all black or white if they do right are worthy to be called men and women. Oh yes I never before felt proud of being a Liberian before I came to America. I also love it because my Father + Mother were not ashamed to go there labor and work there and be called Liberians not Americans then die there.”<sup>398</sup> For Roye, the connection between herself and those in Liberia was not made simply because of their shared color. For her, the potential for a spiritual family superseded the relationship between members of the African diaspora, writing, “please God I would like to live to go back and work for my heathen brothers and sisters I am not ashamed to call them that for I feel that God made them and therefore they are my brothers and sisters not because I am black and they black but because God made them.”<sup>399</sup>

Affiah (Wilson) Roye’s understanding of her relationship to native people in Liberia differed from that of her parents’ generation. As the child of missionaries, and as someone who was not born into slavery or a slave society, her sense of purpose, belonging, and allegiance separated her from the first missionary generation in Liberia. By the end of the nineteenth century in Liberia, class and society had already separated African Americans and their descendants from indigenous Africans. Instead, Roye connected herself to Africans through a belief in a single creation of humanity, instead of a shared racial background. Furthermore, by

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<sup>397</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>398</sup> Affiah (Wilson) Roye, n.d., Box 410, Methodist Records.

<sup>399</sup> *Ibid.*

traveling to the land of her parents' birth, Roye was able to claim and be proud of her identity as a "Liberian."



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