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William E. Allen

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HISTORICAL METHODOLOGY AND WRITING THE LIBERIAN PAST: THE CASE OF AGRICULTURE IN THE NINETEENTH CENTURY¹

WILLIAM E. ALLEN
GEORGIA PERIMETER COLLEGE

Some of the late nineteenth century success of Liberia coffee, sugar, and other commodities can be attributed to the leasing of plantations to enterprising foreigners, although a few leading politicians did own successful farms . . . For most Americo-Liberians, the role of dirt farmer was decidedly beneath their station.²

Yet the reasons for this apathy among most Americo-Liberians for agriculture, which prevailed up to the early 1870s, were not far to seek. The majority of them being newly emancipated slaves, who had in servitude in America been used to being forced to work, erroneously equated their newly won freedom with abstinence from labour.³

I

Both arguments are inaccurate, yet the authors made essential contributions to the writing of Liberian history. J. Gus Liebenow became renowned within Liberian academic circles for his earlier book, *Liberia: the Evolution of Privilege*. In that book he analyzed the policy that enabled the minority Americo-Liberians (descendants of free blacks from the United States who founded Liberia in 1822), to monopolize political and economic power to the exclusion of the majority indigenous Africans

¹A section of this paper was presented at the 2004 African Studies Association Annual Meeting. I thank the audience for the comments and criticisms.

²J. Gus Liebenow, *Liberia: The Quest for Democracy* (Bloomington, 1987), 21.

³M. B. Akpan, "The Liberian Economy in the Nineteenth Century: the State of Agriculture and Commerce," *Liberian Studies Journal* 6 (1975), 4.

for more than a century.⁴ M. B. Akpan dissected Liberia's dubious political history and concluded that Americo-Liberian authority over the indigenous population, was identical to the discriminatory and oppressive policy practiced by European colonizers in Africa.⁵

Liebenow and Akpan's charge of Americo-Liberian antipathy for agriculture was not new. Scattered accounts of this allegation appeared now and again in the nineteenth-century Liberian archives.⁶ After the turn of the century, the charge of Americo-Liberians' aversion to agriculture became apparent in secondary sources.⁷ Its continual appearance in recent historiography (especially following the revisionism that characterized African nationalist history in the 1960s and 1970s) suggests a general acceptance.⁸ This study examines the methodology employed by scholars

⁴J. Gus Liebenow, *Liberia: The Evolution of Privilege* (Ithaca, 1969). Liebenow's text was included in the occasional collection that the Liberian intelligentsia cited during the charged political atmosphere of the 1970s, when Americo-Liberian rule was being openly challenged for the first time. Liebenow's argument resonated with the large number of students of indigenous extraction, particularly those at the University of Liberia, the nation's only public institute of higher learning.

⁵See M. B. Akpan, "Black Imperialism: Americo-Liberian Rule over the African Peoples of Liberia, 1841-1964," *Canadian Journal of African Studies* 7 (1973), 217-36.

⁶The archives include publications by the American Colonization Society (ACS), underwriter of the Liberian colonization project, letters written by Liberian immigrants during the nineteenth century, and the Census of 1843. Publications by the ACS are *African Repository and Colonial Journal* (hereafter ARCJ): this was later shortened to *African Repository* (hereafter AR) and the *Annual Report of the American Colonization Society* (hereafter *Annual Report*). Most of the correspondence was published in Bell I. Wiley, ed., *Slaves No More: Letters from Liberia, 1833-1869* (Lexington, 1980). The Census of 1843 was conducted by the United States Government: U. S. Congress, Senate, US Navy Dept., *Tables Showing the Number of Emigrants and Recaptured Africans Sent to the Colony of Liberia by the Government of the United States. A Census of the Colony*, (Sept., 1843, Senate Document no. 150, 28th Cong., 2d Session, 1845); hereafter, *Census*.

⁷The Harvard African Expedition described Americo-Liberians as "lazy." Richard P. Strong, *The African Republic of Liberia and The Belgium Congo* (Cambridge, 1950), 40. See as well James Sibley, *Liberia Old and New: a Study of its Social and Economic Background, with Possibilities for Development* (New York, 1928), 86-87, 132-33; George W. Brown, *An Economic History of Liberia* (Washington, 1941), 137-139.

⁸For example, see Dwight N. Syfert, "The Liberian Coasting Trade, 1822-1900," *JAH* 18(1977), 219; Eckhard Hinzen and Robert Kappel, eds., *Dependence, Underdevelopment and Persistent Conflict: On the Political Economy of Liberia* (Bremen, 1980), 16; Amos Sawyer, *The Emergence of Autocracy in Liberia, Tragedy and Challenges* (San Francisco, 1992), 161, 164; James Fairhead et al., eds. *African-American Exploration in West Africa: Four Nineteenth-Century Diaries* (Bloomington, 2003), 20.

(including Liebenow and Akpan) to determine how they arrived at what is turning out to be a colossal misrepresentation—Americo-Liberians' disdain for agriculture.

II

Repatriation of free blacks to Africa in the nineteenth century was conceived out of the growing trepidation that white America held for a burgeoning population of free blacks, by widespread racism in the United States, and by the resolve of a few philanthropists. The ideology of equality that enlivened the American War of Independence of also inspired slaves, and some slave masters, to fight for emancipation. Consequently, by 1810, the free black population in the United States had climbed to 150,000, nearly tripling the 60,000 number recorded in the census of 1790. Although the increase was much slower in the decades after 1810, the population of emancipated blacks continued to grow.⁹

It was this growth that spawned fear in many white Americans. Thomas Jefferson's dire prediction about the danger posed by the expanding black population was typical: "[d]eep-rooted prejudices entertained by the whites; ten thousands recollections by the blacks . . . will divide us . . . and produce convulsions which will probably never end but in the extermination of the one or the other race."¹⁰ Jefferson also warned that "a revolution of the wheel of fortune" might place the slave over the master.¹¹ These ominous predictions, combined with a wellspring of virulent racism in the United States, galvanized the ongoing national debate about the repatriation of free blacks to Africa.

The most crucial impetus of the colonization movement, however, was provided by Rev. Robert Finley of New Jersey, who was convinced that the United States had a moral obligation to "repair the injuries" resulting from the slave trade.¹² Noting that "[e]very thing connected with their [slaves'] condition, including their colour is against them" in the United States, Finley and a handful of men espoused African colonization as the solution to the "Negro" problem. In 1816 they organized the American Colonization Society (ACS), and began mobilizing public support for the

⁹"United States Historical Census Data Browser," <<http://fisher.lib.Virginia.edu/census/>>.

¹⁰Thomas Jefferson, *Notes on the State of Virginia*, ed. David Waldstreicher (Bedford, MA, 2002), 175-76.

¹¹*Ibid.*, 196.

¹²Staudenraus, *African colonization Movement, 1816 to 1865* (New York, 1980), 17.

repatriation of free blacks to Africa.¹³ Roughly six years later, Liberia was founded on the west coast of Africa, following substantial financial support from the United States government.¹⁴

Free blacks from the United States were among three regional categories of immigrants the ACS and its affiliates transported to Liberia in the nineteenth century. By the end of the century, approximately 17,000 free blacks had been repatriated to Liberia.¹⁵ About half of them were former slaves from plantations in the South, many emancipated on the condition that they emigrate.¹⁶ The second group were the liberated Africans, referred to variously as recaptives and recaptured Africans. United States and British navy patrols liberated the recaptured Africans from slave ships en route to the Americas in an attempt to enforce the ban on the importation of slaves in both countries. By the end of the century, a total of approximately 6,000 recaptives had been transported to Liberia. Generally, the recaptives claimed the “Congo” as their homeland; hence, they became known as “Congoes” in Liberia.¹⁷ The final wave of immigration consisted of 346 Barbadians, who arrived in Liberia in 1865.¹⁸ They were primarily former slaves, many of whom were planters, sugar boilers, millwrights, and distillers.¹⁹ Altogether, the three categories of immigrants reached a total of approximately 23,000 by the end of the century.

Commercial pursuit was generally the paramount aspiration of the Americo-Liberians, as the small and influential group became actively engaged in the transatlantic commerce. Liberian-owned vessels coasted the west African littoral, peddling European and American manufactures such as firearms, liquor, and textile. In return, they purchased mostly

¹³Ibid., 15.

¹⁴Ibid., 55-58.

¹⁵Total compiled from Annual Report 1867; *ibid.*, 1876; *ibid.*, 1896. This figure corresponds more or less with those cited in the secondary sources, e.g., Staudenraus, *African Colonization Movement*, Appendix.

¹⁶The rolls of immigrants are listed in most editions of the *Annual Reports* and the *African Repository*, especially from the 1850s and later. See also the census of 1843, and Robert Brown, *Immigrants To Liberia: 1843 to 1865* (Philadelphia, 1980); Claude Clegg, *The Price of Liberty: African Americans and the Making of Liberia* (Chapel Hill, 2004), 132-33..

¹⁷While the majority claimed descent from the “Congo” (possibly any of the vast regions in central Africa), others included Tiv, Igbo, and Yoruba from Nigeria. See Sawyer, *Emergence of Autocracy*, 115-16; *ARCJ*, 1839, 9; *AR*, 1859, 164; *AR*, 1860, 323; *Annual Report*, 1841, 23; *ARCJ*, 1847, 25; *AR*, 1861, 70-76.

¹⁸*AR*, 1865, 186, 242.

¹⁹*Ibid.*, 236-42.

palm oil and camwood, which were sold either to foreign traders on the coast or shipped directly to the United States and Europe.²⁰ In the last third of the century, Liberia's "merchant princes" (as the wealthier traders were dubbed by contemporaries) were eliminated from the transatlantic trade due largely to the precipitous decline in the prices of Liberia's exports.²¹

Scholars, including Liebenow and Akpan, acknowledged that agriculture was stymied by the lack of capital, alien diseases, and labor scarcity, among others. However, they are inclined to conclude that the primary cause for the failure was the immigrants' negative social attitude toward cultivation. For example, some have contended that agriculture was inhibited by the immigrants' persistent distaste for the local African foods, and their dependence on foreign cuisine. Others claimed that the large proportion of former slaves in Liberia abhorred agriculture because it evoked repulsive memories of thralldom. Still others have charged that the emancipated slaves mistook their freedom in Liberia for abstention from labor; the epigraph by Akpan that opens this paper is representative of this latter allegation.²²

III

From the onset, the largely rural background of the free blacks, the recaptured Africans, and the Barbadians belies the charge that the immigrants adopted a visceral dislike for agriculture on arrival in Liberia. The historical methodology scholars employed has led to this misrepresentation. Take, for instance, Liebenow's assumption noted above that "success of Liberia coffee, sugar and other commodities can be attributed to the leasing of plantations to enterprising foreigners." The facts patently contradict Liebenow's claim. Certainly, the amendment to the Liberian constitution reversed the prohibition that precluded foreigners from leasing land.²³ However, the amendment was enacted in 1876, the decade that the

²⁰ Syfert, "Liberian Coasting Trade."

²¹ J. B. Webster and A. A. Boahen, *History of West Africa: the Revolutionary Years, 1815 to Independence* (New York, 1970), 150-52; AR, 1886, 2; Syfert, "Liberian Coasting Trade," 230-33; AR, 1886, 2.

²² Sawyer, *Emergence of Autocracy*, 105, 114, 161-64; Brown, *Economic History of Liberia*, 139-40; Liebenow, *Liberia: The Quest for Democracy* (Bloomington, 1987), 21; Akpan, "Liberian Economy." See my rebuttal to these allegations in William E. Allen, "Rethinking the History of Settler Agriculture in Nineteenth-Century Liberia," *IJAHS* 35(2004), 435-62.

²³ Akpan, "Liberian Economy," 20.

Sugar Manufacturers

Name	Date of Emigration
John B. Jordan ^a	1852
Garret Cooper ^b	Unknown
William Anderson	1852
Jesse Sharp	1849
L. L. Lloyd ^c	Unknown
Augustus Washington	1853
William Roe	1853
Thomas Howland	1857
M. T. Decoursey ^d	1851

Source: Compiled from Robert T. Brown, *Immigrants To Liberia*; Wilson Jeremiah Moses, ed. *Liberian Dreams: Back-to-Africa Narratives from the 1850s* (College Park, 1998), 179-223; *AR & CJ*, 1850, 235, *AR* 1863, 27-29; 310-311; *Liberia Herald*, 6 August 1856; *AR*, 1863, 310-311; *AR*, 1865, 137-140; *AR*, 1863, 27-29; *Annual Report*, 1871, 15; *Annual Report*, 1866, 15-16; *AR*, 1864, 187-188; *AR*, 1865, 234; *AR*, 1859, 248; *AR*, 1867, 172.

^aJohn B. Jordan, probably the first Liberian farmer to purchase a steam sugarcane mill in 1856, died in 1862, shortly after he became a successful sugar cane cultivator. *Liberia Herald*, 6 August 1856; *Annual Report*, 1857, 15; James Fairhead et al., eds. *African-American Exploration in West Africa: Four Nineteenth-Century Diaries* (Bloomington, 2003), 370n54.

^bGarret Cooper and two sons, William and James, operated the farm.

^cThere is no "L. L." Lloyd on the roll. But seven persons with the surnames of "Lloyd" are recorded on the list. All of them traveled to Liberia in the same vessel, on the same date and from the same state. L. L. Lloyd's name may have been mistakenly omitted or incorrectly written on the roster, due to the "record keeping" of the ACS which Brown described as "haphazard." (See Brown, *Immigrants To Liberia*, iii)

^dDecoursey was also a coffee farmer. *AR*, 1863, 311; *ibid.*, 1869, 185.

overseas trade in sugar and coffee trade commence its downward spiral after more than ten years of slow but continuous growth. Sugar and coffee export began in the late 1850s and rose steadily through the early 1870s; the sugar trade collapsed after the 1880s, while the end of coffee came shortly after the turn of the century.²⁴

Therefore, Liebenow's claim is without merit because the year of the land-lease law, 1876, marked the era of decline, not the inception of com-

²⁴Syfert, "Liberian Coasting Trade," 217-35; Sawyer, *Emergence of Autocracy*, 156-14; JWebster/Boahen, *History of West Africa*, 152; C. L. Simpson, *Memoirs of C. L. Simpson: the Symbol of Liberia* (London, 1961), 100-01.

mercial agriculture. The period from approximately the late 1850s thru 1875, when the law forbade foreigners from leasing land, was the age of agricultural success. The table on the facing page contains the names of the leading sugar manufacturers, all of whom are Americo-Liberians; evidence has yet to be presented to prove that these men leased plantations to foreigners or to firms from overseas.

Foreign involvement in coffee production after 1876 appears likely, although the current argument is unconvincing. According to Akpan, “several American and British companies and merchants, including Edward S. Morris, leased land in Liberia on which they grew coffee for exports. . . .”²⁵ A communication by Liberian coffee planter, A. B. Hooper, seemingly corroborates Akpan’s claim. In 1878 Hooper informed his erstwhile master: “I have leased my land to an English company to plant coffee in co-partnership.”²⁶ Details of the co-partnership are elusive, making it impossible to evaluate the contribution of the company. On the other hand, Hooper was an established coffee planter prior to consummating the co-partnership. In 1852, about two years after Hooper emigrated, the *Liberia Herald* described him as the “most systematic in farming of all Liberian agriculturalists.”²⁷ The paper continued:

It would be silly in us to attempt a description of Mr. H’s beautiful place—it is yet two years since what is now his farm, was complete wilderness—it was the home of the wild animals of the forest—it is now . . . beautifully laid off . . . *In the rear of the house, the staple articles of the country, coffee and sugar cane are growing; . . .* If one wishes to see a very handsome place, —beautiful nurseries of coffee and cotton, he must visit “Iconium.”²⁸

In the United States the following year, the *New York Tribune* carried an excerpt from a letter, which reported that Hooper owned “70,000 or 80,000 coffee trees; 7,000 of these will bear next season for the first time.”²⁹ This subsequent statement by Hooper, contained in his 1878 correspondence, is testimony of his resourcefulness:

I want to put out one hundred thousand coffee trees within the next two years. The people of this country are getting along very well. They are

²⁵Akpan, “Liberian Economy,” 20.

²⁶AR, 1878, 38.

²⁷*Liberia Herald*, (n.d.), quoted in AR, 1852, 240.

²⁸*Ibid.* emphasis added.

²⁹*New York Tribune*, (n.d.), quoted in AR, 1853, 301.

planting coffee. This country in twenty years more will be one of the great coffee markets of the world.³⁰

Consequently, without proof that the English company played a decisive role, and given the evidence of Hooper's achievement and resourcefulness prior to the lease agreement, any suggestion that the company was the catalyst in his success could only be conjectural.

It is equally difficult to confirm whether Edward Morris, the foreigner Akpan alluded to, actually "grew coffee for export." Evidence indicates that Morris, an American, was remembered by contemporaries for promoting the Liberian coffee (*Coffea liberica*) and other national produce.³¹ Two key achievements of Morris stand out. The first, and probably Morris' singular contribution, was undoubtedly his mechanical coffee huller. This machine spurred coffee production, by replacing the painstaking, time-consuming mortar and pestle that Liberian coffee planters had hitherto used to separate the coffee beans from the hull.³² The huller became an instant success when it began operation in Liberia in the early 1870s.³³

Morris next endeavor in promoting *Coffea liberica* occurred in the United States, where he assiduously orchestrated Liberia's participation in the 1876 Philadelphia Centennial Exhibition. *Coffea liberica* and other local commodities were elegantly displayed at the exhibition.³⁴ Morris' efforts were rewarded when *Coffea liberica* was selected from among the prominent coffee species from around the world as the "Superior Coffee."³⁵ Given that the land-lease bill was passed in the same year the Philadelphia Exhibition was held, and that coffee requires about five years for gestation, one can assume that the displayed coffee originated on farms owned solely by Americo-Liberians. Indeed, the distinction conferred on *Coffea liberica* in the United States greatly enhanced its reputation. Notable coffee planters like Brazil and Ceylon, for example, scurried to buy Liberian coffee seeds and sprouts.³⁶

³⁰AR, 1878, 38.

³¹Edward S. Morris, *Address Before the Liberian Union Agricultural Enterprise Co.* (Philadelphia, 1863), 7-8; Stockham/Morris, *Liberia Coffee* (Philadelphia, 1887), 1, 22; AR, 1866, 187.

³²Stockham/Morris, *Liberia Coffee*, 6.

³³AR, 1878, 29; Allen, "Rethinking," 458.

³⁴Stockham/Morris, *Liberia Coffee*, 11, 21.

³⁵*Ibid.*, 10; Allen, "Rethinking," 458, 461.

³⁶See, for example, *The African Times*, 16 September 1876, quoted in AR, 1877, 21; *Philadelphia Times*, (n. d.), cited in AR, 1878, 12-13.

Although Morris reportedly leased 800 acres, this does not constitute evidence of his success as a coffee grower.³⁷ Contemporaries of Morris did not include him among Liberia's elite coffee growers. They instead cited Americo-Liberians such as Alonzo Hoggard, June Moore, Jefferson Bracewell, and Solomon Hill.³⁸ In fact, in 1877 Bishop Gilbert Havea, an American visitor, wrote that M. J. Decoursey, the sugar manufacturer, owned the "largest coffee plantation in the country."³⁹ Until evidence is advanced to the contrary, one should assume that these men were the sole proprietors of the coffee estates, and that they did not lease their coffee farms to foreigners. Finally, two separate approbations that appeared in the *Philadelphia Times* and the *New York Observer* in 1880 and 1882 respectively, offered clues about Morris' mission in Liberia; he was viewed more as a philanthropist and trader than as a coffee planter: "Morris is a Quaker, and a fervent, evangelical Christian. He is laboring for the intellectual, moral and spiritual welfare of the Negroes in Liberia and the regions beyond, as well as for *commercial ends*."⁴⁰ One of Morris' "commercial ends" was purchasing coffee from Liberian farmers, which he later sold in the United States.⁴¹

Another example that Liberians were primarily responsible for whatever progress was achieved in commercial agriculture (even after the land-lease concession), is the prize that was awarded M. J. Decoursey, the eminent coffee grower and sugar manufacturer. James Irving, a Liverpool merchant, established a competition in 1876, whereby a monetary prize would be presented to the producer of "a ton of the best Liberian coffee." Decoursey's coffee was the winner. He received the reward of, 20 and a "medal in solid silver." Inscribed on one side of the medal were the words from Proverbs 28:19: "He that tilleth his land shall have plenty of bread."⁴²

IV

The unproven charge that Americo-Liberians were contemptuous of cultivation stemmed from a specific methodological deficiency. While scholars have been able to identify a series of key events in the history of agricul-

³⁷AR, 1880, 6.

³⁸AR, 1877, 92; *ibid.*, 1873, 338; Svend E. Holsoe and Bernard L. Herman, *A Land and Life Remembered: Americo-Liberian Folk Architecture* (Athens, GA, 1988), 10.

³⁹AR, 1877, 109-10.

⁴⁰Quoted in AR, 1882, 62; AR, 1880, 5-7, emphasis added.

⁴¹Akpan, "Liberian Economy," 18.

⁴²AR, 1877, 25.

ture, they have failed to establish the essential interconnections or trends between these incidents. As a result, the historical narrative tends to merely recount disparate events. I will demonstrate that, by attempting to explain the connections between events, a new interpretation emerges that provides a multi-dimensional perspective that contradicts the current view that the immigrants had a strong aversion to agriculture. Two analytical tools in the new methodology are an interdisciplinary approach and comparative analysis, which—among other benefits—will mitigate the perennial problem of scarce historical sources.

One event that scholars often point to as proof that Liberian immigrants neglected cultivation, is the commencement of the overseas trade in sugar and coffee during the second half of the century. Or in other words, Americo-Liberians' failure to produce sugar and coffee for export prior to the 1850s. Akpan's conclusion is typical: "[f]rom all this, we might conclude that with but with few exceptions, Liberia's economy between 1822 and the early 1860's benefitted little from the settlers' contribution to agriculture." Consequently, Akpan describes the early period as one of "relative neglect."⁴³ But a more rigorous analysis will reveal several essential connections between the two eras, that is, efforts made in the early period and the later success. Put differently, the seed of success of the later period was literally planted in the so-called age of "neglect."

Nowhere was the interrelationship between the two eras demonstrated more vividly than in the adaptation the American emigrants made to farming in Liberia's tropical environment. Farming in the United States was determined more by variations in temperature, rather than by sharp alterations in rainfall. As a result, vegetables could be grown in most parts of the United States for nearly "three hundred days" (i.e., March to November).⁴⁴ On the contrary, the planting period in Liberia was generally restricted to the early weeks of the rainy months, just before the arrival of torrential rains. The heavy runoffs that usually followed the rains tended to wash away seeds and sprouts.⁴⁵

⁴³Akpan, "Liberian Economy," 6, 2. This tendency is evidenced by the fact that authors generally commenced reconstructing the history of agriculture in the second half of the century, with hardly any mention of the previous period. See Sawyer, *Emergence of Autocracy*, 158-65; Hinzen/Kappel, *Dependence*, 16-25; Webster/Boahen, *History*, 150-52.

⁴⁴Sam B. Hilliard, *Hog Meat and Hoecake: Food Supply in the Old South, 1840-1860* (Carbondale, 1972), 172-73.

⁴⁵For a discussion on the West African seasonality, see Hans Ruthenberg, *Farming Systems in the Tropics* (Oxford, 1971), 14; Paul Richards, *Indigenous Agricultural Revolution* (Boulder, 1985), 44-49.

Several communications in the archives suggest that the sharp seasonality in Liberia presented a perennial challenge to the colonists. Agent Jehudi Ashmun (1822-28) noted the difference in the agricultural manual that he prepared for the colonists:

Here you can find neither Winter, Spring, Summer nor Autumn . . . you must learn an entirely different way of farming . . . It is vastly important that your new grounds should be cleared, well burnt, planted and fenced before these rains come on. It is not possible to do either, well, afterwards.⁴⁶

Agent William Mechlin (1829-1833) notified his superiors in Washington in 1831: "I think we are not sufficiently well acquainted with the proper time for planting . . . The crops of last year did not succeed well in consequence of the unusual drought."⁴⁷ And in 1859, John Pinney of New York (who had served as Liberian colonial agent from 1834 to 1835) sent the following message to an acquaintance in Liberia: "I observed by paper that the cotton seed failed or was destroyed by too much rain. . . by planting seeds near the close of the rainy month, say in October—the plant would bear all in the dry season and no bolls will rot."⁴⁸

Adaptation to this new pattern of farming was gradual. Besides the individual experience that farmers acquired, mainly through trial and error, knowledge of tropical farming was accumulated at the government-owned public or colonial farms. These farms were originally intended to provide employment to indigent immigrants. However, the public farms evolved into an agricultural experimental station of sorts, providing training in tropical agriculture, particularly in the cultivation of coffee and sugar cane.⁴⁹ The case of sugar production is illustrative.

In 1841 Governor Thomas Buchanan (1839-41) hired a Mr. Jenks or Jenkes, a white man who reportedly had considerable expertise in sugar-cane cultivation and sugar manufacturing, to superintend the Bushrod Island Public Farm. Jenks passed away within a couple of years.⁵⁰ Prior to his death, however, he and the public farm manufactured several thousand pounds of sugar.⁵¹ Essentially this development marked the turning

⁴⁶Ashmun, *Liberian Farmer*, 3, 8.

⁴⁷ARCJ, 1831, 259-60.

⁴⁸*Liberia Herald*, 4 January 1860.

⁴⁹ARCJ, 1838, 5; *ibid.*, 1842, 2; 1843, 255; *Annual Report*, 1841, 36.

⁵⁰ARCJ, 1842, 2; *ibid.*, 1843, 17; *Annual Report*, 1843, 12.

⁵¹*Ibid.*, 1842, 256; *Annual Report*, 1841, 36.

point in sugar manufacturing, because a few farmers began making sugar for local consumption thereafter.⁵²

Sugar production continued slowly, but steadily, throughout the rest of the 1840s and early 1850s.⁵³ Sugar export commenced regularly afterward, until the eventual collapse. The colonists recognized the critical link between the knowledge they accumulated in tropical farming at the public farm under Jenks and later success. The physician J. Lawrence Day used this Shakespearian prose in his eulogy of Jenks to confirm the interconnection: “[t]he good he did, lives after him.”⁵⁴

V

Another instance, which demonstrates the propitiousness of connecting events in historical reconstruction, is the case of the immigrants’ inability to apply draft animals to agriculture successfully. This topic is generally ignored. The few who have acknowledged it tend to speak of draft animals solely in relation to cultivation. However, such arguments are tenuous, considering that the utility of animal-drawn plows in tropical west Africa is severely limited by the profusion of trees and dense undergrowth—among other constraints.⁵⁵ Fortunately, Liberian farmers aspired to employ livestock in various capacities, most importantly, in sugar manufacturing. Establishing the connection between these two events is a more reliable argument to pursue.⁵⁶

Due to constant labor scarcity, sugar cane farmers viewed livestock as the backbone of the sugar industry.⁵⁷ Usually, farm animals were expected to perform two pivotal tasks. Oxen carted the harvested cane to the sugarcane mill and then ground the cane. Grinding entailed that the animals supply the muscle to propel the huge metal rollers that squeezed the juice from the cane stalk. Even after the labor-saving steam sugarcane mills made a strong appearance after the 1850s, livestock were still needed because most farmers could only afford the cheaper manual or wooden

⁵²*Liberia Herald*, 17 March 1842.

⁵³AR, 1851, 227; *ibid.*, 1852, 239-340.

⁵⁴*Annual Report*, 1843, 12.

⁵⁵Anthony Hopkins, *An Economy History of West Africa* (London, 1973), 36-37; Jack Goody, *Technology, Tradition, and the State in Africa* (London, 1971), chapters 2-5 and esp. 76.

⁵⁶Two accounts indicate that draft animals were used outside the sugar industry, to plow and to haul timber. See Wiley, *Slaves No More*, 234; AR, 1888, 48.

⁵⁷Holsoe/Herman, *A Land and Life Remembered*, 10; Akpan, “Liberian Economy,” 23; AR, 1863, 28-29.

mills.⁵⁸ Demands on livestock were further intensified by the high level of integration involved in the different stages of sugar manufacturing. Synchronization required, for instance, that the cut cane be transported and grounded almost immediately, or the concentration of sugar in the cane would degenerate.⁵⁹ Consequently, it was essential to have a reliable team of livestock if one was to succeed in sugar manufacturing.

Regretably, the Liberian environment was inhospitable to livestock, particularly the bovine and equine populations that were so crucial to the fledgling sugar industry. Tropical west Africa is the habitat to the tsetse fly (*Glossina morsitans*) vector of the deadly trypanosomiasis infection (*Trypanosoma rhodesiense*) that eventually kills livestock like horses and cattle.⁶⁰ In west Africa only two species of cattle have adapted to trypanosomiasis—the humpless longhorn called the N'Dama and the humpless shorthorn referred to in Nigeria as Muturu.⁶¹ The robust zebu cattle (*Bos indicus*), used as draft animals in most parts of Africa, will generally succumb to the infection.⁶²

Although the trypanosome-resistant humpless longhorn cattle were common throughout Liberia, they proved unfit for the strenuous demands of agriculture, including hauling and grinding sugar cane. The response of sugar manufacturer William Anderson to a query from the *Liberia Herald* in 1863 is indicative of the problem: “. . . I lack, as do all my brother farmers, *animals*, or at least such as would better suit our purposes.”⁶³ That same year, Jesse Sharp bewailed that “he broke down sixteen oxen” while grinding sugar cane.⁶⁴ A 1842 missive by Governor Joseph Roberts contains further clues that the trypanosome-resistant Liberian cattle was incapable of enduring the grueling task of farm work:

⁵⁸An estimated twenty mills were purchased throughout the sugar cane era, of which approximately thirteen were operated manually, while the remainder were powered by steam. AR, 1863, 27; *ibid.*, 1874, 40; *Annual Report*, 1865, 22; *Annual Report*, 1866, 29.

⁵⁹Richard S. Dunn, *Sugar and Slaves: The Rise of the Planter Class in the English West Indies, 1624-1713* (New York, 1973), 195.

⁶⁰George Brooks, *Landlord and Strangers: Ecology, Society, and Trade in West Africa, 1000-1630* (Boulder, 1993), 11-13; James C. McCann, *Green Land, Brown Land, Black Land: an Environmental History of Africa, 1800-1990* (Portsmouth, NH, 1999), 24-26.

⁶¹John Ford, *The Role of Trypanosomiasis in African Ecology: a Study of the Tsetse Fly Problem* (Oxford, 1971), 449.

⁶²*Ibid.*; Brooks, *Landlord and Strangers*, 12-13; McCann, *Green Land*, 24-26.

⁶³AR, 1863, 29.

⁶⁴*Ibid.*, 310.

It is difficult, in Liberia, . . . to cultivate a farm to any considerable extent for the want of draft animals. The cattle on the coast are found to be small, and insignificant and not at all suited to the purposes of the farm. Those from the interior which are larger, when brought to the coast lived but a short time. We are now making an effort to introduce the horse⁶⁵

But imported equines were also susceptible to the disease. Mules, donkeys, and mares obtained from the Cape Verde Islands repeatedly capitulated to trypanosomiasis on the Liberian coast.⁶⁶ Additional evidence that horses were also struck by the disease is provided by Benjamin Anderson, Liberia's renowned explorer, who, following his famous journeys to the Guinea savanna in 1868-1869 and 1874, remarked that the "horse loses vigor" on reaching the Liberian coast.⁶⁷ Without immunity to trypanosomiasis, the equines from the Cape Verde were doomed on the tsetse-infested Liberian coast; similarly in neighboring Sierra Leone, trypanosomiasis annihilated the entire equine population in the nineteenth century.⁶⁸ Studies suggest that the death of the trypanosomiasis-resistant humpless longhorn in Liberia was due to the combination of stress, derived from farm work (e.g., hauling and grinding sugar cane) and the excessive tropical heat. These unfavorable circumstances ultimately compromised the immune system of the animals and exposed them to the deadly trypanosomiasis; a similar fate befell the larger bovines from Guinea.⁶⁹

The above analysis shows that, when the connection between sugar manufacturing (or agriculture) and draft animals is established, the charge of negligence loses considerable credibility. Many immigrants who were accustomed to working with draft animals in the United States linked the success of agriculture to the availability of livestock. As a result, attempts were under way very early in the colony to harness animal power. One account noted in 1828 that "a team of small but good oxen in use, and several others are now breaking in" and that the first horse was introduced from the interior by "Francis Devany."⁷⁰ Despite these efforts, and the

⁶⁵ARCJ, 1843, 329.

⁶⁶*Annual Report*, 1840, 23; *ibid.*, 1864, 6; ARCJ, 1840, 23.

⁶⁷AR, 1880, 86.

⁶⁸D. C. Dorward and A. I. Payne "Deforestation, the Decline of the Horse, and the Spread of the Tsetse Fly and Trypanosomiasis (NAGANA) in Nineteenth Century Sierra Leone," *JAH* 16(1975), 239-56.

⁶⁹Ford, *Trypanosomiasis*, 449; Michael R. Goe and Robert E. McDowell, "Animal Traction: Guidelines for Utilization" in *Cornell International Agriculture Mimeograph* (Ithaca, 1980), 16.

⁷⁰ARCJ, 1828, 15.

occasional importation of livestock from the Cape Verde Islands because they “were more suitable,” working animals could never be sustained in Liberia.⁷¹ This terse 1840 remark by Governor Thomas Buchanan epitomized the connection immigrants made between draft animals and agriculture: “There is no reason to expect that agriculture will thrive in Liberia without working animals, than in Iowa or Michigan. . . .”⁷²

VI

A final illustration has to do with mulattos and malaria. It also evinces how a methodology that focuses on establishing linkages between circumstances can recover key nuances omitted by an approach that merely narrates events. Scholars usually placed the onus of negligence more conspicuously on mulattos, claiming that they were more contemptuous of agriculture than the darker-skinned immigrants. Denunciations, like the one by James Fairhead and his three co-editors, is typical: “[m]ulatto immigrants, especially avoided farming. They had little experience with tropical agriculture and found farming socially demeaning, associated as it was with slavery.”⁷³

Here, Akpan explains the allegation succinctly:

Besides, not only did the settlers as a rule dislike manual labor, but also many of them who were mulatto or mixed blood went as far as to contend that since it appeared that the Liberia climate and malaria told more on them than on the settlers of darker complexion, the latter should engage in agriculture and mechanical arts, while they (the mulattoes) should be employed in the government⁷⁴

VII

An alternative explanation holds that “avoiding farming” or “being employed in the government” was probably the mulattos’ defense against the threat of malaria. A closer examination of the facts revealed that mulattos were disproportionately affected by malaria, and the threat from the disease may have convinced them to choose careers outside of agriculture. J. B. Webster and A. A. Boahen described the lopsided malarial mor-

⁷¹Ibid., 1836, 19.

⁷²Ibid., 1840, 23.

⁷³Fairhead, et al., *African-American Exploration*, 20.

⁷⁴Akpan, “Liberian Economy,” 6.

tality as “eight out of ten” for mulattos as opposed to “four out of ten” for immigrants of a darker hue.⁷⁵ While this statistic is difficult to corroborate, anecdotal evidence and epidemiological studies appear to confirm the unequal death rate. In 1869 Edward Blyden of Liberia College compared mortality among mulatto and full-blooded “Negro” students at the college. He discovered that of the majority mulatto students—“more than three-fourths” at the time—“death and disease have made sad ravages.”⁷⁶ The disease Blyden alluded to was the “African fever” (primarily malaria), an epidemic that decimated Americo-Liberians in the nineteenth century.⁷⁷

The subject of mulattos’ susceptibility to malaria, is in turn, connected to the much broader topic of whites’ vulnerability to the disease, on the one hand, and to Africans’ immunity to it on the other. Prior to the twentieth century, it was generally assumed that the astonishingly high mortality rate for Caucasians in the tropics, especially west Africa, was generally ascribed to biology or to the African climate.⁷⁸ Studies would later prove that the unusual death rate had more to do with epidemiology. Normally, the longer a population resides in a given disease environment, the greater its potential for adaptation to pathogens in that location.⁷⁹ This was certainly the case with west Africans, who for generations, have lived in an endemic malarial environment.

On the contrary, whites who sojourned to west Africa in the nineteenth century, encountered a new set of diseases and consequently had

⁷⁵Webster/Boahen, *History*, 154; Akpan, “Liberian Economy,” 14.

⁷⁶Edward Blyden, “On Mixed Races in Liberia,” *Annual Report of The Board of Regents of the Smithsonian Institution* (Washington, 1871), 386.

⁷⁷For the connection between the African fever and malaria see Dennis G. Carlson, *African Fever: a Study of British Science, Technology, and Politics in West Africa, 1787-1864* (Canton, MA, 1984), 1-32; Philip D. Curtin, “The End of the ‘White Man’s Grave’? Nineteenth-Century Mortality in West Africa,” *Journal of Interdisciplinary History* 21 (1990), 63-88; Kenneth F. Kiple and Virginia H. Kiple *Another Dimension of the Black Diaspora: Diet, Disease, and Racism* (New York, 1981), Chapters 3-4; Antonio McDaniel, *Swing Low, Sweet Chariot: the Mortality Cost of Colonizing Liberia in the Nineteenth Century* (Chicago, 1993), chapter 4. On Liberian mortality see, McDaniel, *Swing Low*; Tom W. Shick, “A Quantitative Analysis of Liberian Colonization from 1820 to 1843 with Special Reference to Mortality,” *JAH* 12(1971), 45-59.

⁷⁸Philip D. Curtin, *Death by Migration: Europe’s Encounter With the Tropical World in the Nineteenth Century* (New York, 1989); idem., “End.”

⁷⁹Alfred W. Crosby, “Virgin Soil Epidemics as a Factor in the Aboriginal Depopulation in America,” *William and Mary Quarterly* 3 (1976), 293-94; Kiple/Kiple *Another Dimension*, chapter 1; William H. McNeill, *Plagues and People* (New York, 1998), introduction; Curtin, “Epidemiology and the Slave Trade,” *Political Science Quarterly* 83 (1968), 190-216.

no immunity to them. Presumably, British and American visitors on the coast of West Africa had some immunity to *Plasmodium vivax*, because this milder strain of malaria existed in England and the United States.⁸⁰ However, the newcomers encountered the more virulent malarial strain, *Plasmodium falciparum*, in Africa, apparently for the first time. The mortality rate that *Plasmodium falciparum* unleashed on white visitors led contemporaries to dub west Africa “the White Man’s Grave.”⁸¹

Medical documents in the United States relating to febrile illness maintain that Africans transported to the Americas as the result of the transatlantic slave trade, continued to maintain some immunity to malaria. For instance, while the Philadelphia yellow fever of 1793 killed both blacks and whites, the total death rate was higher among the latter group.⁸² Similarly, nineteenth-century mortality figures for yellow fever and malaria in several cities in the antebellum South affirmed lower deaths among blacks. Between 1821 and 1858, 3,948 whites in Charleston, South Carolina, died of the fever as compared to 754 blacks.⁸³ Approximately a century later, scientists from the National Microbiological Institute of the United States Public Health Service, proclaimed that “American Negroes are relatively insusceptible to *Plasmodium vivax*.”⁸⁴

While the repatriated free blacks in Liberia had some resistance to *Plasmodium vivax*, they did not have any defense against the more deadly *Plasmodium falciparum*. Moreover, lengthy residence in the United States may have even lowered or degraded the immunity of the returning immigrants, rendering them highly susceptible to malaria.⁸⁵ This deficiency explains why, for example, by 1843 nearly half of all immigrants in Liberia had died, mainly of malaria, and “life expectancy at birth was less than three years.”⁸⁶ Studies indicate the epidemic exacted a higher toll on mulattos because the admixture of white genes precipitated the decline of their defense against malaria.⁸⁷

Thus, mulattos’ susceptibility to malaria was real, not exaggerated, as some are inclined to suggest. The threat of malaria may have pushed

⁸⁰Carson, *African Fever*, 23-31; Dale C. Smith, “Quinine and Fever: the Development of the Effective Dosage,” *Journal of the History of Medicine* 31(1976), 343-67.

⁸¹A useful summary is found in Curtin, “End.”

⁸²Kiple/Kiple, *Another Dimension*, 62-63.

⁸³*Ibid.*, 53.

⁸⁴Martin D. Young et al., “Experimental Testing of the Immunity of Negroes to *Plasmodium Vivax*,” *Journal of Parasitology* 41(1955), 315.

⁸⁵Kiple/Kiple, *Another Dimension*, 56; McDaniel, *Swing Low*, 126.

⁸⁶*Ibid.*, 77; *Census*, 306; Shick, “Quantitative Analysis,” 48-59.

⁸⁷Kiple/Kiple, *Another Dimension*, 56.

mulattos away from agriculture to careers such as commerce, politics, and law. For most of the nineteenth century, Liberia consisted of low-lying swampland that dotted the coast, and these low-lying lands with stagnant waters became the center of agricultural activities. The immigrants were quick to associate the deadly malaria with the sprawling swamps.⁸⁸ This view was supported by the available medical knowledge, which attributed malaria to noxious air or miasma emanating from swamps.⁸⁹ It is conceivable then that mulattos would consider agriculture a health hazard, and as a result, choose careers that kept them far away from the insalubrious swamps.

Furthermore, the conventional wisdom that enjoined new immigrants to eschew strenuous activity, especially during the acclimating period, was probably also a push factor.⁹⁰ For instance, an American physician in Liberia, J. W. Lugenbeel, counseled newcomers about “the great advantage of mental as well as physical quietude.”⁹¹ Considering the physical demand and unpredictability of farming that was alluded to earlier, such advice from the authoritative colonial physician was bound to lead mulattos (immigrants in general) away from agriculture. Relatively comfortable careers in commerce, politics, or law, would have been a “healthier” option.

VIII

In reconstructing the history of nineteenth-century Liberian agriculture, scholars rely on a methodology that is demonstrably inadequate. That inadequacy has led to the misguided assertion that Liberian immigrants disdained agriculture. Not only does the very rural background of the immigrants (American blacks, recaptured Africans, and Barbadians) render such attitude unlikely, but the facts point to a different conclusion. There is no evidence, for example, to support the claim that the leasing of land by foreigners was responsible for the success in sugar and coffee production. Undoubtedly, the evidence is consistent: Americo-Liberians farm-

⁸⁸*Annual Report*, 1857, 13; *Annual Report*, 1880, 7; AR, 1877, 90; Wiley, *Slaves No More*, 90; Wilson Jeremiah Moses, ed., *Liberian Dreams: Back-to-Africa Narratives from the 1850s* (College Park, 1998), 96.

⁸⁹The discovery of the mosquito as the vector of malaria in the late 1890s altered this interpretation. Leon Warshaw, *Malaria: Biography of a Killer* (New York, 1949), 39-64; McDaniel, *Swing Low*, 86-87.

⁹⁰Blyden, “Mixed Races,” 387.

⁹¹Lugenbeel, *Sketches of Liberia*, 31-32.

ers, not foreign investors, were solely responsible for the success in coffee and sugar production.

The methodology that has generated this misrepresentation tends to focus primarily on narrating events, rather than attempting to discover connective trends between a series of historical events. Several examples clearly demonstrated that when interrelationships are established, the allegation of the Americo-Liberian antipathy toward agriculture loses credibility. First, the interconnection between the success in agriculture after 1850 and the earlier period proves that, contrary to conventional wisdom, agriculture was not neglected in the first half of the century. Second, the overseas trade in sugar and coffee after 1850 can be traced directly to the early progress the colonists made in overcoming the challenges posed by farming in an alien tropical environment. Third, historical sources indicate that the absence of draft animals was a major setback for agriculture, particularly for the fledgling sugar manufacturing sector. Finally, the suggestion that mulatto exaggerated malarial illness to skip farming becomes questionable, when one considers the epidemiological factors that made them highly susceptible to this epidemic. These illustrations demonstrate that the event-centered approach in historical reconstruction is bound to be problematic, because history involves a complex web of interactions.