The Sanctuary City

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Chapter 3

African Diasporas
Liberians and Black America

“My natural parents were from the interior. And then my foster family are Americo-Liberian,” says Rev. Dr. John K. Jallah. “So that gave me a unique connection and advantage.” It also gave him, like Liberians in general, a more complicated relationship with the United States than most peoples of the world. For Liberia was America’s first colony.

From his birth in 1946, Jallah was “groomed to succeed my father,” a Grand Poro Zoe (priest) of the Loma tribe in rural Western Province, near Liberia’s border with Guinea. But around age nine, he converted to Christianity thanks to Swedish Pentecostal missionaries visiting their village and took the name John. At age twelve, in 1958, he realized, “If I continued living in the tribe, I would not be able to continue in school. . . . So, I decided, like some were doing,” to go stay with his brother, who worked and lived at the Firestone Tire Plantation some three hundred miles away.

A logical destination for a boy who wanted to remain in school, Firestone was the centerpiece of America’s second colonization of Liberia. In 1926, at a time of expanding US influence in Africa, the company offered the nation’s government a five-million-dollar loan to pay off its crippling debt to Britain. In exchange, it got a ninety-nine-year lease on one million acres (about 10 percent of the country’s arable land) for six cents an acre. By the 1980s, the plantation supplied some 40 percent of the US demand for latex and 10 percent of global demand. As a correspondent for The Atlantic wrote in the 1970s, the
company “became such a dominant factor in the Liberian economy and so
great a source of public services such as roads and schools that cynics enjoyed
joking for years that, while most of Africa was colonized by Britain or France,
Liberia was colonized by Firestone.”

After two days of walking, to his surprise John found his brother in another
town, Fissibu. “That evening we boarded the Raymond Concrete Pile em-
ployee bus for Zorzor,” catching a ride with people who worked for this com-
pany based in New York City “that had the contract from the government to
construct the road” from Liberia’s capital Monrovia to Western Province.
Later named Lofa County, this corner of the country was one of the last ar-
eas to recognize the nation’s central government, in the 1930s. One man on
the bus was a manager for the company. “So, he asked my brother, ‘who is
this boy?’” He replied that John, the son of their father’s third wife, had come
looking for him so he could go to school. The stranger said, “No, I am adopt-
ing him right now.” His brother “resisted a little bit,” but soon gave in to the
man’s demand.

The manager, Horatio George Hutchins, “was one of the pioneer’s
children,” descended from the free-born American Blacks and emancipated
slaves who had initially colonized Liberia. Beginning in the 1820s, the Ameri-
can Colonization Society, an institution with deep ties to Philadelphia, settled
thirteen thousand Black people there. In 1847, these colonists severed ties with
the colonization society and made Liberia the first independent republic in Af-
rica. US leaders refused to recognize the nation until the American Civil War
in the 1860s, since they did not want Black diplomats in Washington.

Americo-Liberian colonists and their descendants controlled the nation’s
wealth and its government until 1980, exploiting indigenous populations much
like Europeans in the rest of Africa. However, as The Atlantic correspondent
observed, “Unlike most white ruling minorities in Africa,” Americo-Liberians
had “a system of drawing tribal people into their culture.” They commonly
took in native children to educate and raise in return for their labor as domes-
tic servants, especially the children of second and third wives, like John Jallah.
They called this the ward system.

John moved to Monrovia with the Hutchins family, gaining a new family
and access to the privileges of Americo-Liberian society, especially education.
Hutchins “educated me throughout high school” and “in time he became my
sponsor. He was my parent. . . . Called me as his son. All his children, we are
brothers and sisters.” In high school, John trained at the Bible School for Min-
istry. He also studied electrical engineering at the Liberian/Swedish Vocational
Training Center in Yekepa, Nimba County, the iron-mining town of the
Liberian-American-Swedish Mining Company (LAMCO). “Then I went to
teacher’s college to teach in vocational schools, then went back to regular teacher’s college.”

With this training, he landed a position as supervisor at the largest hospital in Liberia. Then under construction, the John F. Kennedy Memorial Medical Center in Monrovia was a project supported by the US Agency for International Development (USAID). This was the third era of America’s imperial relationship with Liberia, a key Cold War ally, with attendant aid, mining contracts, and military support.

In September 1969, through the Liberian Ministry of Health, John “got a World Health Organization fellowship grant that took me to England, West Germany, Holland, and then in Milwaukee to specialize in medical equipment.” He trained at General Electric in Milwaukee and then in Washington, DC. He spent spare time with two “school mates from Liberia” in DC, one in the same fellowship program, specializing in hospital administration, the other a physician. Migration to the United States for higher education, training, and professional jobs had become common for the sons of Americo-Liberians in the 1960s, as for Ghanaian, Nigerian, and other West African sons from families with means. US scholarships also funded some students from more modest backgrounds in newly independent African nations in this period.

In 1971, John returned to his position at the JFK Hospital in Monrovia, which officially opened that year. USAID assisted its start-up—“every department had an American consultant”—for a few years after that. Then he took “a short break” from 1974 to 1978, working as the chief hospital technician for LAMCO in Yekepa and teaching electricity at his alma mater.

In 1980, Samuel Doe, a career military officer trained by US Green Berets, staged a coup with seventeen fellow soldiers from the Krahn tribe, executing Liberia’s president and thirteen cabinet members. Doe became the nation’s first native premier, but his regime would prove to be as corrupt and abusive as those of the Americo-Liberians before him. The administration of president Ronald Reagan ignored this in return for permission to station US military broadcasting and navigation infrastructure in Liberia.

Following the coup, the People’s Redemption Council, Doe’s initial governing body, “requested that I go back to the [JFK] hospital and take over the engineering department,” Reverend Jallah explained. The council included people who had been adopted by Americo-Liberians and had trained in Europe and the United States, like himself. “A lot of people ran away from the country, the hospital was down, they were looking for people who were experienced” to revive it. He remained there until the First Liberian Civil War (1989–1997), “the Charles Taylor war” as he put it, broke out a decade later.
Taylor, whose father was American-Liberian and whose mother was from the Gola tribe, graduated with a BA in economics from Bentley College, outside Boston. He headed the General Services Agency in Doe’s government before his removal in 1983, based on accusations that he had embezzled nearly one million dollars. He fled to the United States, was arrested in Boston, escaped from jail, and found his way to Libya, where he trained as a guerrilla fighter. In December 1989, he led forces of the National Patriotic Front of Liberia (NPFL), backed by Libya, Burkina Faso, and Ivory Coast, over the Ivorian border into Nimba County. On their way to Monrovia, they ransacked the Firestone plantation. But Taylor soon made the plantation his base of operations and the company negotiated with him to restart production. Firestone’s “taxes” paid to Taylor would fund the NPFL for the rest of the war, including its battles with government and West African forces protecting Monrovia and with rebel factions around the country; its training of child soldiers; and its genocidal extermination of the Krahn and Mandinka tribes, among other atrocities.21

“It took them six months or so to get to the suburbs” of the capital, a distance of a few hundred miles, remembered Reverend Jallah. “I finally gave up and left Monrovia in June” 1990 with his wife, their younger daughter and son, and two grandchildren. Their two older daughters were already out of the country, one studying social work in New York, the other specializing in early childhood education in Germany. The family walked to Tubmanburg (named for Harriet Tubman), in Bomi County, western Liberia, near Sierra Leone. “We stayed there until the area had fallen to Charles Taylor.” Departing in early September, “there were checkpoints everywhere, so traveling was not easy. . . . Some places we negotiated with the rebels,” who “had commandeered people’s cars,” and who “could execute you” on a whim.22

Taylor controlled most of the country by this point, even as West African forces intervened, landing in Monrovia. They would defend the capital throughout the conflict. But on his way to greet them on September 9, Samuel Doe was captured by former Taylor ally Prince Johnson and his splinter rebel group, who executed him live on international television.23

Meanwhile, the Jallah family “partly rode, partly walked from Bomi to Lofa. That’s about two hundred miles or so.” It took two weeks. “I went to my village,” Reverend Jallah recalled, a big smile coming over his face. “When things were normal [before the war], we had built a residence in the village. And we lived there for almost a year.” Tragically, though, during their time spent in the villages, without access to medical care, his wife became blind from glaucoma.24
“So, we came back to Monrovia” in 1991, crossing rebel territory. He went to work at the JFK hospital again for two years, all the while “doing the church work” too. Then, in 1993, he “retired” and went into full-time ministry at a church he had established in the city. Two years later, in August 1995, the main rebel factions agreed to a cease-fire and formed a unity government. Its civilian head invited Reverend Jallah to serve as deputy minister for internal affairs. He was responsible for county and local government properties, indigenous agriculture, community economic development, and local security in the country. But in April 1996, heavy fighting broke out in Monrovia between rebels and forces of the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) trying to enforce peace, which further destroyed much of the city.

“So, when there was [this] mass disturbance, we went across to the Ivory Coast as refugees.” The government there “didn’t allow the refugees to establish a camp there,” as it feared refugee camps could breed further violence. “So, you go and rent from the citizens. They used it as a way of generating income,” and some families and churches hosted and fed Liberians for free. In November 1997, after eighteen months of interviews, employees of the International Organization for Migration refugee program put Reverend Jallah, his wife, and four of their grandchildren on a plane to Brussels with a connection to JFK Airport in New York.

The Jallahs’ two eldest daughters and some friends picked them up in two cars. “They had a whole group to meet us, a big event.” Their daughter in New York had moved to Philadelphia, got a job, applied for a green card, and “filed for us” through the Lutheran resettlement agency. Their son and youngest daughter, who had been cut off from them as they fled Monrovia, arrived some months later.

They came at what turned out to be just past the midpoint in Liberia’s civil wars. The first civil war ended when Charles Taylor was elected president in summer 1997. But his large margin of victory resulted from voter intimidation and his troops continued to terrorize their enemies. In April 1999, a dissident force of largely Krahn and Mandinka fighters invaded from Guinea, beginning the Second Liberian Civil War, which lasted until 2003. By war’s end more than 250,000 Liberians had died, in a nation of about 3.3 million prior to the wars. Some 1.5 million people fled, mostly to neighboring countries, where they lived in camps or among the local population and often experienced displacement again as the civil wars spread.

Liberians’ neighbors shared their civil wars and experiences of displacement. Taylor’s NPFL allied with rebels in Sierra Leone at the start of its eleven-year civil war (1991–2002). This group was notorious for recruiting child soldiers and severing the limbs of their victims as they fought to control the export of “blood
diamonds” from Sierra Leone’s mines. The NPFL then supported rebels in Ivory Coast in 2002–2004. Two decades on, as the Philadelphia Ivoirian community leader Eric Edi observed, “The region is still burning and unstable,” with enduring violence and tensions, even if the wars are officially long over.29

The Jallah family’s story of multiple displacements was typical for Liberians during the wars, and the ways in which its members got to the United States reflect some of the broad diversity of Liberians’ migration.30 Their prior experiences and links to people in the United States were the norm for people with Americo-Liberian family ties. These relationships often helped people leave, often as permanent family refugees like much of the Jallah family. Many other Liberians came to the United States during and after the wars via tourist or other temporary visas and were granted Temporary Protected Status (TPS), allowing them to stay. This variety of statuses was just one of the ways in which Liberians were diverse. They came from urban and rural backgrounds, Christian and Muslim and indigenous religions, and different ethnic groups, which meant different sides in the civil wars.

Liberians had diverse ties to America, too. While some were descended from the African Americans who colonized Liberia, many came from tribes that had been exploited by Americo-Liberians. Some had close ties to American businesses and institutions, and others were descended from people who had sold fellow Africans into slavery. “It’s history that we ought to face,” says Reverend Jallah.31

**American Family**

Liberians’ experiences of protection and support in the United States reflected old patterns of ambivalence about the place of African people and their descendants as members of American society whose lives matter. The colonization movement grew largely from slaveholders’ concern that free Blacks could lead slaves to rebel and from white Americans’ broader hostility toward free Blacks. Nearly two centuries later, Liberians could virtually all claim a well-founded fear of persecution based on their membership in a social group, given the interethnic violence of the civil wars. Under UN and US law, this should qualify them for permanent refuge. Yet close to one-quarter of all Liberians who came to the United States during the civil wars and more than 40 percent of those with refugee, asylum, or other protected status received TPS instead. Liberians’ place in the American family became even more complicated when they settled themselves—and were resettled by agencies—in the Black neighborhoods of Philadelphia and other US cities.
As with Southeast Asians, sanctuary is a concept seldom associated with Liberians and other Africans. In Philadelphia, Liberians rarely participated in sanctuary movements, though they supported the city’s sanctuary policies. Instead, they built other networks and civil society institutions, often with other Black people. They only occasionally called this work “sanctuary.” However, the often temporary and disputed legal status of many Liberians, the interpersonal and structural violence they faced in the United States and Africa, and the protections and assistance they sought and provided for one another make sanctuary a fitting framework for grappling with their experiences and position in US cities and society and their postwar reconstruction of Liberia.

The United States played a leading part in the long history that produced Liberia’s civil wars and people’s displacement. The Liberian Truth and Reconciliation Commission concluded that the atrocities of the wars, counting thousands of human rights violations by all sides, “were the result of complex historical and geopolitical factors.” These included the “slave trade, US efforts to return slaves and free African Americans to Africa, the abuse of the indigenous population by” Americo-Liberians, “looting of the country’s substantial natural resources by its own corrupt government and by foreign interests” (largely from the United States), and “political ambitions of other African leaders.” The commission called out US leaders who “failed to take effective action to limit the bloodshed.” They had not stopped Firestone and Liberians in the United States from funding Taylor and other warlords whose forces raped, murdered, and burned the villages of rival groups. During the final rebel siege of Monrovia in 2003, Liberians piled bodies of civilians killed in the bombing in front of the US embassy, upset that the roughly 200 US Marines stationed on three warships off the coast came ashore only briefly.

The question of what the United States owed Liberians was clearer to Africans than to Americans. As a Liberian woman at a reception center in Abidjan, Ivory Coast, in 2004, succinctly put it, “Our parents went into slavery in America. They helped America develop. The United States has a moral debt to us.” But lawmakers in Washington, DC, like US citizens at large, knew little to nothing about Liberia’s history. Moreover, the United States did not participate in Liberia’s civil wars in the same way it did in Vietnam, and the Cold War ended around the time the first war began, removing the old logic that had determined which peoples the United States accepted as refugees. Still, while a few thousand Liberians went to Europe, the United States took in most of the people who were resettled.

Americans often cast Liberians’ refuge as temporary, and their experience of the US immigration system proved especially complicated. President George H. W. Bush first granted Liberians TPS in March 1991. President Bill
Clinton allowed that to expire in 1999 but transferred Liberians on TPS to the status of Deferred Enforced Departure (DED), a category newly created by the 1996 immigration law. Under TPS and DED people received work permits, but under DED they were not eligible for federal financial aid for college and could not leave the country and return. The Patriot Act, passed after the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, blocked the admission of anyone who had materially aided groups that were trying to overthrow their government. As a result, Liberians who had been forced at gunpoint to do laundry, cook, and other noncombat tasks for rebel troops could no longer come as refugees.

In 2002, during the second civil war, George W. Bush redesignated Liberians for TPS, which was extended until 2007, when people on TPS went back on DED. In 2006, the United States removed Liberia from the list of countries eligible for family-based refugee resettlement. The administration of Barack Obama extended DED several times, and with the outbreak of Ebola in West Africa in 2014, it again granted TPS to Liberians, Guineans, and Sierra Leoneans (who also had had TPS from 1997 to 2004). The Trump administration announced the end of DED for Liberians in 2018.

In explaining why some Liberians did not merit permanent protection, US officials spoke of war and Ebola as temporary crises that would ultimately abate, making it safe to return home. Many Liberians, however, cried foul. They pointed to other groups to whom the United States granted permanent refugee status amid civil wars and “ethnic cleansing,” including people fleeing the Balkans at the same time in the 1990s. Why were they given the right to stay permanently while so many Liberians and Sierra Leoneans received only temporary protection? Many Africans charged that these decisions were simply racist.

The US media often presented Liberians as a people broadly on TPS, but most were not. Between 1989 and 2004, almost 21,000 Liberians were resettled as permanent refugees in the United States, many through family. Just over 6,000 were granted asylum. The figures for TPS are not well documented, but by 2004 an estimated 20,000 Liberians in the United States had signed up for it. Still, the largest number of Liberians in this period, over 27,000 people, came as immigrants, usually through family reunification visas, rather than refugee or other protected status. Such family-based visas accounted for close to two-thirds of all immigration to the United States in this era. However, TPS and its ultimate promise of forced departure hung over the Liberian diaspora in the United States at large. Nearly every Liberian in the country was “family” with someone who was on TPS or DED.

As the life story of Reverend Jallah suggests, Liberians’ definition and experiences of family are far more expansive and inclusive than the nuclear family.
categories recognized in US law. Uncles and aunts are legitimate parents, with specific obligations to care for nephews and nieces as their own. Children of first, second, and third wives are direct siblings, as with adoptive Americo-Liberian extended families. A broader definition of family like this is typical of many West African societies. “US immigration has not been fair in trying to understand this cultural dynamic,” charged Voffee Jabateh, another Liberian community leader in Philadelphia. Knowing they could not trust people’s claims about parenthood, authorities resorted to DNA testing before approving family refugee or immigration applications for Liberian and other African children.39

Like the federal government, Liberians did not treat their own status as static. Most people on TPS actively sought more stable status and many got it. Some married people with green cards. Some “played the lottery,” as another Liberian community leader in Philadelphia put it, by applying for the Diversity Visa Lottery. Many of those who won the lottery, as well as others with green cards, used family reunification visas for immigrants to bring or change the status of as many family members as they could.40 This diminished the number of people on DED to about 3,600 by the time the Trump administration declared an end to that protection.41

Liberians had a different relationship with the resettlement system from Southeast Asians and other refugees who had no coethnic receiving community when they first arrived. Liberians’ diversity of immigration status and social class made them less tied to welfare than most refugee groups. Liberians on TPS received resettlement support services just like permanent refugees, such as job seeking and ESL. But more than most refugee groups, Liberians resettled themselves.

Liberians founded and adapted preexisting community organizations that built their own support networks, both locally and transnationally. The Volags and other receiving community groups provided key support. But Liberian civil society grew its own services partly, and quickly, out of preexisting associations established by Liberian migrants in the 1970s and 1980s. The most prominent were the Liberian Associations of different states; their national umbrella organization, the Union of Liberian Associations in the Americas (ULAA); and county associations.

More than most other immigrants, Liberians participated in rebuilding their homeland after the wars. The diaspora also played a greater role in the truth and reconciliation process than refugees from other civil wars. The ULAA and other groups supported the formation of state and civil society institutions in Liberia. The county associations invested in education, health, telecom, and
other infrastructure and community development in each of its fifteen counties.42

Even the most transnationally active Liberian organizations in Philadelphia and the United States, though, remained focused on the welfare of the diaspora first. In addition to helping people reunite families and stabilize their status, Liberian civil society addressed a host of social issues, from trauma among children who had experienced and sometimes fought in the wars to the isolation that elders faced in the city. Community leaders, including Reverend Jallah, established social service organizations that grew to serve a wider range of African immigrants and refugees, and often also African Americans and other immigrants. Liberians played central roles in forming a set of Pan-African institutions in the region. In these and other ways, Liberian Philadelphia illuminates the experiences of a broad set of African diasporas.

Philadelphia’s Pan-African civil society reflected the city and region’s importance as a center of African and Caribbean immigration, along with a welcoming politics of many African Americans, including key city leaders. It also grew partly in response to tensions and violence between Black immigrant and receiving communities in the 1990s and 2000s. In some ways, this and other patterns resembled the experiences of Southeast Asian refugees in the 1980s.

Liberians settled and were resettled in majority–African American neighborhoods, especially Southwest and West Philadelphia and adjacent suburbs, with other people from Africa, the Caribbean, Southeast Asia, and other regions. Liberians and other immigrants helped revive these areas, which revitalized largely without gentrifying. However, Liberians and other African and Caribbean immigrants shared African Americans’ residential segregation and many of their experiences of economic discrimination, disadvantage, and racism. In the city neighborhoods where they settled, violence remained high, especially compared to other US cities, where violence diminished significantly at the end of the twentieth century.43

Intergroup relations among African and Caribbean immigrants and African Americans were of an entirely different character, being often more intimate, more complicated, and more productive than those between African Americans and Southeast Asians. Philadelphia’s diverse Black communities came from distinct histories, with different relationships to slavery and to the United States. But more successfully than some centers of African and Caribbean immigration, foreign- and native-born Blacks in Philadelphia developed a politics and practices of mutual protection and assistance on both local and transnational scales.
Little Africa

Philadelphia has been a prominent center of Black life for centuries, making African and Caribbean immigrants’ experiences distinct from those of many other newcomers. In 1790, one in seven city residents was of African descent.\(^{44}\) In the nineteenth century, the city had the largest Black population in the North. In the twentieth it was a major destination of the First and Second Great Migrations of African Americans from the South, during and after the two world wars. In the 1960s and 1970s, some Liberian, Nigerian, Ghanaian, and other African university students and professionals came to Philadelphia, drawn by its many institutions of higher education. By the 1980s it was a minority-majority city, due also to white flight.

Since then, Philadelphia has been an important center of immigrant settlement from dozens of countries in Africa and the Caribbean. Nigerians, Ethiopians, Jamaicans, and Haitians have been among the largest groups.\(^{45}\) By 2010, Liberians were the largest group of foreign-born Blacks in the city and region. The US Census counted some 13,000 Liberians in the city and suburbs, among over 60,000 African immigrants, though community leaders estimated much higher figures.\(^{46}\)

Philadelphia became the number one destination for Liberians in the late 1990s and early 2000s. Many people relocated from New York or Washington, DC, as the Philadelphia Inquirer reported, “drawn by word among fellow Liberians of cheaper homes, more jobs and safer neighborhoods” than many could afford in those more expensive regions.\(^{47}\) Another factor in choosing Philadelphia was the help they could expect from community organizations run by other Liberians. West and Southwest Philadelphia had been home to several Liberians attending universities in the 1980s, who started one of the first chapters of the ULAA and hosted the meeting at which leaders formed the national organization. In 2003, the second annual Miss Liberia USA pageant took place in the city.\(^{48}\) By 2006, more Liberians lived there than in any other metropolitan region of the United States.\(^{49}\)

The 1990s and 2000s marked a change in the character of the Liberian population in the United States. As journalist and social worker Sam Togba Slewion noted, by the 1990s it was no longer “only college kids.”\(^{50}\) Now Liberians in the United States included people of varied ages, from both urban and rural origins, and with a range of personal and family problems resulting from the wars. Most were fleeing the wars, no matter their diverse visa categories. Virtually all had family dispersed across West Africa, the United States, and sometimes the United Kingdom, many of whom they were obligated to support.
The resettlement of Liberians followed the same logic of self-sufficiency applied to other refugees, yet crucially, their preponderance of family-based resettlement and preexisting community ties made that a more realistic goal than for some other groups. When Reverend Jallah, his wife, and their grandchildren arrived toward the end of 1997, their daughter and her husband “had their house prepared for us. We had a room there, all of those things. Then they notified Lutheran Children and Family Services that we were here. They, too,” came to meet the family. The next week, they attended a one-day orientation class. “Then we started looking for a job.”

To illustrate just how different Liberians often were from many other refugees, staff at the Volags liked to tell stories such as the one about waiting at the airport to welcome a couple: When they arrived, the husband informed them that his wife, a famous singer, had booked tour dates around the United States and had a connecting flight. They were sorry, but they could not accompany the caseworkers to the apartment they had arranged for them.

Like other West African immigrants, and like other refugees, Liberians came with a wide range of education and work histories, from people with advanced degrees and international experience to people who had hardly ever been outside their village. In 2010, 13 percent of Liberian adults in the United States had not finished high school. Yet more than two-thirds had attended college, one indication of how privileged people were more often able to flee overseas. Still, like many other immigrants and refugees, even Liberians with the highest credentials and notable experience, like Rev. Dr. John Jallah, typically started near the bottom rung of the US labor market. Some sought new training and some moved up the occupational ladder, often in public and nonprofit roles where they helped other people. Reverend Jallah’s story reflects these patterns and trends, too.

The most common first job in Philadelphia for Liberian men, young and old, was as an attendant at a parking lot or garage, either downtown or at one of the hospitals scattered around the region. Reverend Jallah got a job with the Colonial Parking company at the Healthplex hospital in suburban Media, about a twenty-minute car ride from Southwest Philadelphia. The problem was, though, that he was an inexperienced and lousy driver, even at age fifty-one. Back in Liberia, like other prominent employees of major companies, institutions, and government, he usually had a chauffeur. Consequently, rather than have him move cars, his boss at the parking lot assigned him the role of cashier on the night shift.

While many Liberian men with little education remained parking attendants, Reverend Jallah quickly pursued other opportunities. “Then I got a second job in the day,” he explained, as therapeutic support staff, a “wraparound”
employee assisting an African American student with learning disabilities at University City High School. “Then I went back to school, to Philadelphia Biblical College, did some other . . . training at Temple [University], micro-business training with [Lutheran Children and Family Services], participated in several workshops.” In the LCFS program, he drafted a business plan for a cleaning company, which he started in 2000. Employing other Liberian men and women, they cleaned mainly offices in the city and suburbs, mostly at night. This would be Reverend Jallah’s source of income.55

The nonprofit workshop at Temple “led me to open the Agape Senior Center,” also in 2000, one of various social service organizations founded by Liberians around the same time.56 All the founders were college-educated men and women. Many, including Rev. John Gblah, Voffee Jabateh, Portia Kamara, and Sam Togba Slewion, earned master of social work degrees at Temple and worked at the city’s Department of Human Services (DHS). By one account, sixteen Liberians worked at DHS in the late 1990s and early 2000s and others worked in counseling and similar positions in schools and nonprofits around the city. A few Liberians became university faculty, teaching staff, and administrators.57

The largest number of Liberian women worked as home health aides or in nursing homes, joining the ranks of women from the Caribbean, Philippines, and Latin America in “caring sector” positions largely staffed by immigrant women. Others worked in retail and fast food. Many Liberian women and men arrived in Philadelphia in the 1990s and 2000s saying they wanted to be a Certified Nurse’s Assistant, even if they had no related experience, remembered Juliane Ramic from NSC.58 They were already attuned to this occupational niche and the pathway it offered. As they gained training, including at the Jewish Employment and Vocational Service Center for New Americans, many attained higher-level nursing positions in hospitals and rehab centers. The growth of the region’s service economy from the 1990s opened more doors for work as certified nurses, in child care, and other parts of the health and care sectors. These occupations often had greater “ladders” that enabled people to move up than other sorts of jobs.59 By the 2010s, though, the second generation—their daughters—more often went to social work school, aiming to work in Liberia and the United States.60

Like work opportunities, housing conditions in West and Southwest Philadelphia improved in the 1990s and 2000s. To be sure, with a century-old housing stock and a mix of more and less responsible landlords, old problems persisted. But the city and local nonprofits targeted vacant properties for demolition and rehabilitation in these decades, and immigration offset the city’s loss of older working-class white and African American populations.
Yet even as immigration helped stabilize the housing market in sections of West and Southwest Philadelphia such as Cobbs Creek and Elmwood, these areas where Liberians and other Blacks lived remained relatively poor and segregated. African American and Black immigrant residents experienced greater rates of eviction, foreclosure, and violence than residents in the gentrified neighborhoods of West Philadelphia near the University of Pennsylvania and downtown. In 2010, more than half of all Liberians in the United States were “cost-burdened,” spending more than 30 percent of their household income for rent or mortgage payments.61

Like Southeast Asians, many Liberians lived in multigenerational households—grandparents with their children and grandchildren, even if elders often experienced isolation. Many people lived with extended family, and those who lost relatives in the wars lived with surrogate families. These two categories made up 20 percent of all people in Liberian-headed households in the United States in 2010.62 Also like Southeast Asians, some Liberians lived in apartments before moving to row houses in the city and nearby suburbs. Many moved to Upper Darby and nearby towns in Delaware County, just across the city line, where immigrants and African Americans hoped to find better schools and safer, quieter neighborhoods.63

Southwest Philadelphia remained the center of Liberian Philadelphia, however. Other immigrants in the area included Malians, Haitians, Jamaicans, and many other people from West and East Africa and the Caribbean, along with Southeast Asians and later, Central Americans. The Jallah family lived just off Woodland Avenue, with “two other Liberian families on the same block,” as well as Nigerian, West Indian, and African American neighbors.64

Liberians opened a growing number of groceries, restaurants, cafes, hairbraiding, and other shops along Woodland Avenue, where West African foods such as cassava leaf and fufu, a root porridge, became widely available.65 Local residents and journalists dubbed the area, alternately, “Little Monrovia,” “Little Liberia,” and “Little Africa.”66 Other African and Caribbean merchants on the avenue opened shops too, as did Southeast Asians. Black people remained largely absent from America’s popular and scholarly narratives about immigrants’ contributions to economic development. But places like Woodland Avenue and other corridors in Southwest Philadelphia, Upper Darby, and African and Caribbean immigrant neighborhoods in the cities and suburbs of New York; Washington, DC; Atlanta; Minneapolis–St. Paul; Denver; and other metropolitan regions, showed they also belong at the center of our understanding of America’s urban revival (see figure 3.1).67

The biggest way in which Liberians’ housing and neighborhood experiences differed from those of most other refugees was their reception and support,
Figure 3.1. Map of Liberian settlement in Philadelphia and its suburbs in 2010. (Source: American Community Survey; map by Danielle Dong.)
from the start, from extended families and fellow members of community associations. “You can go anywhere and sleep,” said Portia Kamara, “two or three families [sometimes live] in one home, working together and raising families.” If they lost their housing, people in the Liberian community always offered them a place to stay. Their experiences of displacement during the civil wars were one thing that made people so accommodating, Kamara explained. But these informal support networks rendered people’s housing problems largely invisible to authorities. Indeed, Liberians’ and other West Africans’ common practice of staying temporarily with a string of extended family and friends was a form of what housing experts call “hidden homelessness.”

Resettlement agency staff marveled at the strength of Liberians’ preexisting networks. At the meetings and banquets of county associations and the Liberian Association of Pennsylvania, they witnessed how these groups’ leaders and members assisted one another with landlord disputes, housing and job searches, access to health care, children’s problems in school, and myriad other issues. Association leaders were regularly called to their constituents’ homes and places of work to help with all manner of things as well, including sometimes to diffuse tense situations with police.

Some Liberians found Philadelphia utterly disorienting. As Reverend Gblah recounted, people who had never been on a plane flew into the airport at night, seeing the lights of the city, and having come from a country at war, they thought the lights were fires and the city was burning. Many, he said, were surprised to “find the same vegetables year-round in the store.” Reverend Jallah often told the story of an elderly couple who left their West Philadelphia row house for the grocery store a few blocks away but on their return became disoriented since all of the streets and houses looked the same. Being from a rural village, they were not used to reading street signs or house numbers. Fortunately, school was letting out and their grandson came running past as they wandered down the block. They hurried after him and found their way home. The isolation of elders like these, including many whose command of English and whose accents were such that they had difficulty communicating with Americans, inspired Reverend Jallah to start the Agape Center.

Children also experienced isolation, leading to problems with neighbors and the city. In Liberia, Portia Kamara observed, by age twelve children are expected to help manage the household, cooking, watching siblings, and so on. In the United States, parents left children alone when they worked, often for long hours in multiple jobs to support dispersed extended family. Sometimes kids would go outside and get in trouble, occasionally hit by a car but more often just seen alone on the sidewalk or street. In response, neighbors called the Department of Human Services and the police, accusing parents of neglect.
These conditions inspired Kamara and other Liberians to pursue social work, as they and other parents and community leaders intervened to “save families and save our community.” They sought to save their children from prison, which claimed many of their African American neighbors, and to save them from deteriorating relations with those neighbors and schoolmates.74

On October 31, 2005, at 60th Street and Woodland Avenue, three African American teens teased and then beat unconscious a thirteen-year-old Liberian boy named Jacob Gray, who was on his way home from school. Gray’s jaw was fractured, and a blood clot formed in his brain. He told police he did not even know why the teens had attacked him. The event made international news.75 Suddenly, Philadelphians at large became aware of the Liberian community and of its tensions with African Americans.

*Front Page Africa* in Monrovia reported that the “vicious beating . . . exposed a larger problem of animosity between African Americans and African immigrants,” as community and school leaders noted that “the attack fits a widespread pattern.” It had “been going on for quite a while,” said a twenty-five-year-old Liberian student at Temple University who ran a music and video store in Philadelphia. “It’s just the first time we’ve seen it in the newspapers.” Sam Togba Slewion estimated that he heard complaints about “fights and near-fights between native-born and immigrant Blacks several times a week,” some that became cases in municipal court, in family court, and before the human relations commission.76 “The kids talk about being called African chimps, African monkeys, sometimes being told to go back to Africa,” and were often mocked and bullied for their accents and clothes, noted Portia Kamara.77 This harassment exceeded normal adolescent teasing.

Relations between Africans and African Americans suffered from unfamiliarity and stereotypes. They often knew little of each other’s histories of slavery, colonization, exploitation, civil war, freedom struggles, Jim Crow, and mass incarceration. As one West African noted, some immigrants were shocked to hear African Americans “blame Africans for selling them into slavery.”78 Many Africans who came to the United States in the 1960s and 1970s “don’t relate” to the Civil Rights Movement, observed Voffee Jabateh, as most were “isolated” with other international students on college campuses, even as some supported the movement. But African Americans’ “problems have become our problems. Their segregation has become our segregation.”79

Among adults, “the perception here is that Africans come and take jobs,” said Konah Mitchell, another Liberian social worker. “And for Africans it’s that you’ve been here, so what have you achieved?” As Jabateh explained, in Africa “we had no government assistance. No welfare. No housing assistance.” Many African immigrants thought American Blacks who lived in poverty had it easy
thanks to entitlement programs. “I work hard for everything I got,” was their attitude, “I’m not like you, who get things free.”

By 2010, the median household income among Liberians in the region was $51,000, well below the native-born average ($72,000) but well above that of African Americans ($35,000). Many American Blacks were unaware of Africans’ diversity of social class. Some saw African neighbors getting good jobs and buying homes and wondered how they achieved that so quickly, while African Americans continued to experience entrenched poverty and discrimination.

Like other groups before them, young African immigrants in Southwest and West Philadelphia sought protection by traveling to school in groups. Many families pulled their children out of Philadelphia public schools, instead choosing charter or parochial schools or moving to the suburbs. Some teens formed gangs, including at Bartram High in Southwest Philadelphia and Upper Darby High, where a gang called Liberians in Blood (L.I.B.), was featured on National Public Radio in 2008. As Portia Kamara related, one youth who was involved explained to her that these gangs were for self-defense: “We are not forming gangs to go out and rob people, but it is a way of protecting ourselves against African Americans who think they can hurt us.”

Young Liberians’ problems in school extended beyond bullying and fights. As the *Philadelphia Inquirer* reported in 2003, “Schools have struggled to cope with the recent spike in African students, who often need language help even though they are considered to be English speakers.” Many had missed schooling during the wars, “so they either must struggle in class with Americans their own age, or suffer the stigma of being put with younger students.” Initially counted as African American by the School District of Philadelphia, some “battle-scarred children” lacked counseling or language support, and some “re-treated into a stoic silence.” Community activists, organizations, and school officials responded by developing programs in and out of school, working through children’s trauma and “teaching everything from English to cultural cues.”

Tensions within the Liberian community perpetuated people’s trauma as well. People from the nation’s fifteen counties and sixteen ethnic groups, which were associated with different sides and events in the wars, lived in Philadelphia and its suburbs. Some would be accused of war crimes. In the supermarket and on the street, Liberians encountered people from their home country who were either directly or indirectly responsible for the deaths, displacements, or rapes of their family members during the wars—not unlike Guatemalans and Salvadorans in bigger centers of Central American population. As lawyers working with the Liberian Truth and Reconciliation Commission wrote in
2009, six years after the wars ended, “the peace remains fragile. The conflict’s impact is evident in the streets of Monrovia, the homes of villagers in the Liberian countryside, and Liberian gathering places in London, Philadelphia, Staten Island, and elsewhere.”87 Ivoirian, Sierra Leonean, and other immigrants in Philadelphia experienced similar tensions among themselves and with Liberians.88

The beating of Jacob Gray in 2005 sparked widespread attention to the problems of violence and trauma, yet it also revealed that Liberians and their allies had already built an extensive civil society focused on these and other issues. Community groups, city agencies, and Philadelphia’s Liberian consul, Teta Banks, held town hall meetings in response to the beating. Officials from the police, school district, district attorney, human relations commission, city council, and numerous churches, civic and community organizations attended, including from the new Mayor’s Commission for African and Caribbean Immigrant Affairs.89

This last organization had been created that summer by Mayor John Street. Its founding press release “reaffirmed to the world Philadelphia’s historic commitment to tolerance, freedom and democracy,” and recognized African and Caribbean immigrants’ contributions to the city. As the commission’s secretary, Sam Togba Slewion, noted, Black immigrant advocates had long stressed to city officials that inner-city “communities would have died without immigrants.”90 The commission held its first official meeting in response to Jacob Gray’s beating. Its members, however, had been working for some years on the commission’s “main functions . . . to encourage the development and implementation of policies and practices intended to improve conditions affecting the cultural, social economic, political, educational, health and general well-being of the African and Caribbean immigrants, refugees, and asylees residing in Philadelphia.”91

Liberian and Pan-African Civil Society

Liberian associations in America represented a preexisting infrastructure for supporting the diaspora and families back in Liberia. But the civil wars inspired dramatic shifts in their membership, missions, and work. In the 1980s, the ULAA and county associations helped families cover funeral expenses and organized birthday parties and other social events. In the 1990s and 2000s, as Reverend Jallah put it, these organizations “took on new meaning and new roles,” rebuilding families, communities, and institutions in Liberia and the United States.92 Interethnic tensions among Liberians and other West Africans
persisted from the civil wars, but much of this abated as community leaders worked to build peace among Africans and between them and their neighbors. In Philadelphia, this work took increasingly Pan-African and multicultural forms.

The long list of organizations in which Reverend Jallah has engaged reveals a diverse ecosystem of civil society supported by active networks of leaders in Liberian and Pan-African Philadelphia. He has chaired the Liberian Association of Pennsylvania, the Liberian Ministers Association of the Delaware Valley, and the national Union of Liberian Ministers in the Americas. The ministers’ groups play vital roles in supporting Liberians when family members die and in resolving family and community conflicts, among other crises. Reverend Jallah’s Agape Senior Center has offered English classes and other basic supports and orientation to elderly Africans, building their survival skills and promoting dignity and self-esteem (see figure 3.2). This drew him into collaboration with the Philadelphia Corporation for the Aging, the city’s largest service agency for seniors, whose advisory board he joined. In two of his many evening and weekend commitments, he has served on the boards of the region’s most prominent Pan-African institutions, the Mayor’s Commission for African and Caribbean Immigrant Affairs and the Coalition of African and Caribbean Communities in Philadelphia (AFRICOM), where he has led the Conflict Resolution Committee.

Figure 3.2. Rev. Dr. John K. Jallah (standing third from the left) with elders at the Agape Seniors Center in West Philadelphia in 2006. (Photo courtesy of Rev. Dr. John K. Jallah.)
The variety of local work in which he engaged reflects an effort to “do everything I can to help my people.” “Some of us, we see our responsibility toward others, and therefore get ‘integrated and educate ourselves’ as much as possible and ‘join as many organizations as we can.’” Reverend Jallah joined African American churches in order to understand Black Americans better, to put himself in a better position to help immigrants and native-born Blacks live together in peace. “You cannot help me to settle in Philadelphia if you are not part of Philadelphia,” he acknowledged.

In his sentiments and the variety of his organizational affiliations, he was representative of a large group of Liberian and other Black leaders in Philadelphia. Some of the earliest included Rufus Mendin and his colleagues at Liberian Redevelopment, which they founded in 1994 to assist Liberians and other “Africans in adapting to life in their new home.” They offered help with conflict resolution, food for the elderly, housing and temporary shelter, and other support services, addressing almost any problem people wanted help with. Others included the group of social workers who went to Temple, worked at DHS, and often went on to found and lead nonprofit organizations.

Voffee Jabateh was the second Liberian to graduate from Temple with a master’s degree in social work, after Portia Kamara. Adopted and educated by an Americo-Liberian family in Monrovia, who renamed him Joseph, Voffee later took back his African name. He ran an import-export company and a used car business that employed twenty-five people in Liberia. His Americo-Liberian mother helped him leave in 1990 when the civil war broke out. The United States granted him asylum.

In Philadelphia, he first worked washing dishes at a fast-food restaurant, but after a couple of weeks found work as a mental health counselor since he had a degree in sociology. Five years later, he went to work at DHS, and later went to Temple for his master’s. He too became a prominent leader of the Liberian Association of Pennsylvania, ULAA, and other organizations. With help from SEAMAAC and Alphonso Kawah, the Liberian case worker it hired, Jabateh and his colleagues and relatives, including Reverend Gblah, pooled enough money in 1999 to found the African Cultural Alliance of North America (ACANA).

Established by a group of performing artists and social workers, ACANA’s mission and programs focused on arts and culture, human services, and community development. They used cultural programming to draw Africans, who were often wary of government-supported programs, into social services. They bought a former crack house, a laundromat where people used to sell drugs, and soon purchased other properties along Chester Avenue in Southwest Philadelphia, converting them into offices, classrooms, and performance
spaces. When the sun set and the avenue’s merchants pulled down the metal grates over their storefronts, ACANA’s doors stayed open and the lights stayed on. Jabateh and his colleagues imagined turning the area into an arts and culture corridor, a “sanctuary where people can walk down the street” without fear.

With funding from the city, ACANA quickly became the largest African social service nonprofit in Philadelphia, running youth antiviolence, adult literacy, job readiness, after-school, food assistance, and other programs. Its founders were already well integrated and connected to city leaders and agencies. Their district councilwoman, Jannie Blackwell, was a strong supporter, as was her ally, council president John Street, who won the mayoral election the year they established ACANA. The organization’s first music festival in 2000 attracted several thousand people to Bartram High’s track and football stadium. The crowd overflowed for blocks all around. The festival moved to a larger venue downtown at Penn’s Landing on the Delaware River in 2008.

Across the 2000s, ACANA’s constituency changed, shifting its mission and much of its work. From an initial aim “to help refugee and immigrant families,” especially from Liberia and Sierra Leone, it quickly incorporated African Americans and other immigrants into its programs. Some attended its drumming and dance classes, which also employed African American instructors. This helped ease some initial tensions between Liberian and Sierra Leonean immigrants and African Americans who identified more with different West African cultural traditions, mainly from Ghana and Nigeria.

After the beating of Jacob Gray, and as more and more African Americans and diverse immigrants knocked on its doors, ACANA’s leaders recast their mission as “bridging the gaps”—in people’s access to employment and services and between immigrants and their African American neighbors. In 2006, Jabateh reported that African Americans made up 25 percent of their clients. “We being Black people, we cannot” turn them away, he said. One year later, that figure climbed to more than one-third, and by the 2010s it was roughly half.

ACANA’s leaders formed close relationships with Black American and Caribbean community leaders, including the colloquial “mayor of Chester Avenue,” Josephine Blow, an African American who was born in North Carolina to parents from Jamaica. The longtime leader of the avenue’s merchants association, she began to literally pull African Americans into ACANA’s computer, entrepreneurship, and youth programs. Both she and the organization’s staff recruited people by presenting these services as a way in which African Americans and Africans alike could benefit from the advantages that each group perceived the other as having.
Parts of ACANA’s work remained focused on Liberians, Sierra Leoneans, and Guineans, such as Project Tamaa, which was run in partnership with the Liberian staff member at the Children’s Crisis Treatment Center. This behavioral health program worked with former child soldiers and other traumatized youth and their parents and teachers. Project Tamaa employed the Sanctuary Model of recovery developed by psychiatrist Sandra Bloom in Philadelphia in the 1980s, an approach that recognizes the pervasiveness of trauma in people’s experiences and seeks to build a broader “trauma-informed community” promoting safety and care.\footnote{106}

ACANA’s multiple petitions to the State Department to become a resettlement agency were rebuffed. But the organization developed its own immigration services department, which employed two attorneys by the 2010s. They served some 1,400 clients in 2013. Like the lawyers at resettlement agencies, they helped Liberians and other immigrants gain permanent status.\footnote{107}

ACANA weathered steep funding cuts to its social programs during the Great Recession that began in 2008, partly thanks to its immigration services division and also since it had bought properties and did not pay rent on Chester Avenue, where it had begun to support a diverse group of Black and Asian shopkeepers. In 2016, it became the commercial corridor manager for the larger Woodland Avenue, expanding its neighborhood revitalization work with festivals, streetscaping, including a mural titled “Bridging the Gaps,” and facade improvements and funding for small businesses, among other types of support (see figure 3.3). ACANA’s staff assisted several groups of immigrant merchants who formed what Africans call susu lending networks, in which members’ dues underwrite each other’s business investments and expansion on a revolving basis. When several African Americans spread rumors about the organization “taking over” and “making it just for Africans,” they hired them as community organizers.\footnote{108}

Similar but even more multicultural patterns characterized the organization that Portia Kamara and her husband, Gore, founded in Upper Darby in 2003, named Multicultural Community Family Services (MCFS). Like ACANA, their constituency quickly expanded from Liberians to West Africans more broadly, and by 2008 to people of all backgrounds. Initially, they ran counseling and support groups for immigrant teens and connected West Africans to health and educational services. They soon expanded to GED degree and job placement programs for young people who lacked a high school diploma. Like immigrant organizations generally, they assisted people with almost any manner of problem they brought through the door.\footnote{109}

What started as crisis intervention with immigrant families developed into more formal tutoring, including for the SAT college entrance exam, and a sup-
In the organization’s first or second year, Portia Kamar remembered, two teens who had been in their counseling program and were part of a “core group of students [who] shaped the focus and activities of MCFS” knocked on her door one night to ask if they could form a soccer team. From about thirty players at first, the MCFS soccer club grew to include more than two hundred boys and girls by the 2010s. Thousands of teens participated in MCFS programs over the years, which helped to stabilize their lives. Many went to college and some pursued PhDs. “With ongoing support and encouragement, immigrant youths will do well,” Portia observed, “but they need that support, continuing support.” With the group, “they had the support of each other, which was critical.”

Founded out of the Kamaras’ living room and back porch after they moved from West Philadelphia to Upper Darby, they soon moved MCFS to its own office in the town’s central business district. “The first time I ever felt unwelcome was in Upper Darby,” Portia recalled, adding that it was the first place she “was ever called a n— —.” When she phoned a local councilman, he spent

**Figure 3.3.** *Bridging the Gap* mural along Woodland Avenue in Southwest Philadelphia, by artist Willis “Nomo” Humphrey. The mural was produced in 2008 through community meetings organized by ACANA and the Philadelphia Mural Arts Program, a project funded by the Philadelphia Department of Behavioral Health to address community relations. The figures at the top are African American civil rights activist Nina Gomer DuBois and her husband, sociologist W. E. B. DuBois; nineteenth century cleric and founder of West Africa’s Wassoulou Empire Samory Touré; and Liberia’s postwar president Ellen Johnson Sirleaf. At the bottom left is a depiction of a colonial-era image of Africans packed into a slave ship. (Photo by Domenic Vitiello, 2020.)
ten minutes railing against Africans, whom he claimed were all living twenty-five people to a house. Portia replied that Africans are hard-working and well educated. “As I pushed back, his voice became smaller.” This signaled larger trends in the area’s population and intergroup relations.

In the 2000s, Upper Darby and nearby working-class suburbs became one of the two most diverse parts of the region, along with Lower Northeast Philadelphia. Like most immigrant suburbs, civil society and assistance for newcomers in these areas consisted almost exclusively of religious congregations and their largely informal supports. In Upper Darby and adjacent Millbourne, these included Sikh temples, mosques, and churches. The Irish Pastoral Center served largely undocumented Irish immigrants out of a Catholic church. One other immigrant support organization, the Welcoming Center for New Pennsylvanians, which helped people find jobs, was also established in Upper Darby in 2003 but soon moved to downtown Philadelphia. The township’s own Welcome Center started the same year, helping immigrants and sometimes nonimmigrants access public services, employment, ESL classes, citizenship applications, health insurance, legal and homeowner assistance—some of this in partnership with MCFS.

MCFS became a multicultural organization in virtually every way. Its staff and leadership reflected the area’s diversity, with people from Liberia, India, Costa Rica, and the United States. By 2011, 40 percent of the people they served came from Asia and Latin America and 60 percent came from African, African American, and Caribbean communities. The soccer club included boys and girls from around the world. Their families came out to watch practices and games, producing multicultural community gatherings on a regular basis. A similarly diverse range of youth and adults participated in MCFS’s ESL, behavioral health case management for children and families, and “friendship building” programs that engaged young people in and outside schools and with their caregivers at home. The only program for a single group was its Liberian Elders Circle, which combated social isolation among seniors with weekly activities.

Like ACANA and other groups in Philadelphia, MCFS focused much of its work on building healthy relationships between immigrants and African Americans, occasionally framing them explicitly as “sanctuary.” Portia Kamara and her colleagues played key roles in responding to bullying, fights, and the chapter of L.I.B. that formed at Upper Darby High School. Their advocacy and programs helped immigrant students learn to navigate schools, neighborhoods, and American culture and society. They helped Upper Darby’s teachers, school staff, and social workers understand, serve, and integrate immigrants and children of immigrants more effectively, especially in the mid-2000s “when many first-
generation youth were enrolled at the high school and facing significant challenges,” Portia related. In 2016, the school board passed a resolution to welcome and protect undocumented students, becoming a “sanctuary district.”

MCFS and other Liberian organizations also influenced police-community relations in Upper Darby and nearby suburbs, where officers remained overwhelmingly white. In one instance, as a Liberian boy walked home from MCFS soccer practice, officers pulled up in a car and began questioning him about a robbery that had just happened. He led them back to the soccer field, where a diverse group of teammates attested to his being at practice a few minutes before. Liberian community leaders in Upper Darby and neighboring townships actively built close relations with the police, so much that the police chiefs from various Delaware County towns attended the inaugural ceremonies of the president of the Liberian Association of Pennsylvania.

Yet Upper Darby, like most suburbs, remained a place with less government and philanthropic funding available for social service programs than in big cities like Philadelphia. This meant that MCFS, like other nonprofits before it, would have a difficult time surviving just by operating social programs. Its leaders’ decision to develop not only a training program for older youth to become home care aides but also a social enterprise providing home health and support services enabled the organization to sustain its other programs for youth, elders, and families.

With its training program and business, Attentive Home Care, MCFS provided pathways to decent jobs for women, in its own business and others, as the health and allied caring industries grew in response to the baby boomer generation reaching retirement age in the early twenty-first century. By the mid-2010s, Attentive Home Care employed over seventy-five women at a time, almost all of whom were immigrants. They helped many longtime residents of Upper Darby and nearby city and suburban neighborhoods stay in their homes as they aged.

Inside Philadelphia, city government and philanthropies supported a larger civil society, but immigrant and receiving communities still had to fight for resources and services. West Africans played key roles in getting immigrants and African Americans access to health care and other services, partly by pushing city departments to accommodate people with limited English and those without legal status or insurance. No one was more instrumental in this than Tiguida Kaba, a restaurant owner and activist from Senegal who was employed by the health department as an outreach coordinator from 2001 to 2007. She also cofounded an African women’s group at the AIDS Care Group, a Delaware County nonprofit that provided medical care and social services to people living with HIV/AIDS and other diseases around Southeast Pennsylvania.
In 2002, Kaba started the African Family and Health Organization (AFAHO), inspired by a friend who bled to death from a ruptured fibroid tumor because she was too scared to go to the hospital since she lacked legal status in the country. Kaba initially ran AFAHO out of her home, helping people with her own funds, her knowledge of a half-dozen languages, and certification as a medical and legal interpreter and HIV counselor. AFAHO conducted the first needs assessments of African and Caribbean populations’ health in the city. The Family Planning Council in Philadelphia gave AFAHO an office and Liberian Alphonso Kawah helped Kaba reach English-speaking immigrants and African Americans. The organization grew in the 2010s under Kaba’s successor, Liberian immigrant Oni Richards, who became its director in 2012.

“Addressing and advocating for health equity is the foundation of AFAHO’s work,” Richards explained. AFAHO’s staff sought out the most marginalized African and Caribbean immigrants and refugees in Philadelphia and Delaware County and connected them with care. They formed ties with churches, mosques, hair-braiding salons, women’s groups, stores, restaurants, and community organizations to reach people and cultivated a wide network of medical, educational, and human service providers. The organization offered diverse kinds of support, from medical escorts, translation and interpretation, and bilingual health education materials to training for health professionals. Some of its work targeted specific health issues such as obesity, breast cancer, domestic violence, “culturally and linguistically appropriate sexual and reproductive health programs,” and a “medical and supportive program for women impacted by female [genital] cutting.” Among other outcomes, Richards reported, “maternal and infant mortality is nearly absent among AFAHO’s clients,” who numbered some 2,000 people each year. The organization also developed its own social services, including case management; ESL, financial and computer literacy classes; food and housing assistance; and a youth after-school program.

In Philadelphia and Delaware County, Liberians and other Africans started and joined churches, mosques, and ethnic associations that furthered their networks of mutual aid. Reverend Gblah opened a church on Elmwood Avenue in Southwest Philadelphia in 2006, which ran a food pantry, helped people find jobs, and gave neighbors and congregants rides to the doctor and “to where the bus doesn’t go,” as he said. Churches like his offered people a mix of regular and ad hoc support in ways that resembled ethnic and home associations formed by many immigrants from West Africa. Tiguída Kaba led the Benkomah (Mandingo) Women’s Association, with members from Liberia, Guinea, Sierra Leone, Burkina Faso, Mali, Senegal, and Gambia, as people of Mandingo ethnicity live in a large area of West Africa. Like other associa-
tions, its main activities involved mutual aid for members and their families and social events at which they helped people with their immediate needs. Members of ethnic associations, which also included groups like the Sierra Leone Women’s Club and the Cote d’Ivoire Association, helped each other with child care and sometimes with temporary housing. They supported families financially at times of major life events such as births, weddings, and deaths by raising money and catering receptions. They also raised funds to bail immigrants and their children out of jail.\textsuperscript{124}

Liberian and other leaders from these and many more organizations in the region were active members of AFRICOM, which was formed in 2001 after a group of Nigerians, including Dr. Bernadine Ahonkhai and Dr. Jude Iheoma, invited other African community leaders to form a Pan-African coalition. AFRICOM’s founders and early members included Voffee Jabateh and others from the Liberian Association of Pennsylvania, as well as community leaders from Cote d’Ivoire, Eritrea, Mali, Senegal, Sierra Leone, and Sudan, and human relations commission employee Ernie Greenwood, an African American.\textsuperscript{125}

Over the years, it became even more Pan-African, with concerted efforts to involve more immigrants from the Caribbean. Liberians like Reverend Jallah and Vera Tolbert served for many years on its board and committees.

AFRICOM did not have a full-time staff in its first decade. But working with ACANA its members helped organize an annual health fair coordinated by Tiguida Kaba, along with the African and Caribbean Soccer Tournament that she ran and the Echoes of Africa cultural festival that she cofounded with Councilwoman Blackwell. The festival took place at the Philadelphia Zoo, and the health fair and tournament, which AFRICOM later took over, were usually held at a city recreation center in Southwest Philadelphia. Hundreds of people attended these events. At the health fair, staff from hospitals, clinics, and other organizations offered free screenings and information and signed up children and adults who were eligible for health insurance benefits. The soccer tournament attracted teams and fans from across Africa and the Caribbean. AFRICOM leaders, occasionally with funding but more often as volunteers, also engaged in regular health referrals and advocacy, conducted outreach for the US Census, and ran a food access program with the Greater Philadelphia Coalition Against Hunger, enrolling people for food stamp benefits and other food programs.\textsuperscript{126}

AFRICOM’s monthly membership meetings were at least as important for building peaceful relations among African and Caribbean immigrants and African Americans and connecting them to services. These meetings were a forum for networking, raising constituents’ issues, and finding them support with everything from navigating public school bureaucracy to job fairs and
social programs. Leaders of organizations ranging from ethnic associations to African American community development corporations (CDCs) joined and attended. The Partnership CDC in West Philadelphia hosted AFRICOM’s meetings and rented an office to the organization from 2007 to 2011. Radio Tam Tam and Radio Xalaat, two stations established by AFRICOM members from Senegal, regularly hosted colleagues from other communities and broadcast news and information to local and international audiences.

In its early years, AFRICOM’s most active committee was its Conflict Resolution Committee, which sent leaders to schools and neighborhoods where people experienced conflict within and between different groups. By the 2010s, this committee’s work diminished, even if it did not disappear entirely, as community relations improved. Women leaders of AFRICOM, such as Dr. Bernadine Ahonkhai, Tiguida Kaba, Vera Tolbert, and others, started volunteer-led cooking classes and a food cupboard serving immigrant and American families in West Philadelphia. Starting in 2016, AFRICOM had a small, part-time staff led by executive director Eric Edi, from Cote d’Ivoire, which started to do more outreach and community organizing. Still, AFRICOM’s greatest impacts lay in supporting a strong network of Pan-African community leaders (and many non-Black partners) who promoted a politics and practices of peacemaking and mutual interest, support, and well-being among immigrant and receiving communities.

The Mayor’s Commission for African and Caribbean Immigrant Affairs played similar roles and included many AFRICOM leaders, growing out of and reinforcing these networks and this politics. Chaired by Stanley Straughter, an African American and honorary consul for Guinea, and by Councilwoman Blackwell, its monthly meetings likewise served as forums for exchanging information, including about changes in immigration policy and issues and events in various communities. Leaders of the commission convinced the Philadelphia Police Department to provide uniforms for the police in Liberia in 2007 as a gesture of goodwill toward the country’s rebuilding. Blackwell and the Street administration arranged for the commission to open an office in City Hall, where it aided immigrants in accessing public services until it fell victim to budget cuts under Mayor Street’s successor, Michael Nutter, during the Great Recession.

In the mid-2000s, however, especially following the beating of Jacob Gray, Black immigrant-native relations attracted much attention as well as public and philanthropic investment. In addition to antiviolence and other social programs, some of the most visible work took place on the commercial corridors of West and Southwest Philadelphia. The Welcoming Center for New Pennsylvanians partnered with the African American-led 52nd Street Business
Association to start Welcoming Center West. Its two-person staff, an African American and an immigrant, helped bring together African, African American, Caribbean, and Asian merchants who had experienced tensions with customers and one another. They trained them in cross-cultural communication and customer service and organized events celebrating the cultures of merchants and area residents with food, music, and crafts activities for youth. Among other physical improvements, Welcoming Center West helped transform a Cambodian-run beer store, which neighbors had previously considered a nuisance. With the Welcoming Center’s support, its owners removed the bulletproof glass at the counter, installed live plants, and hung pictures of customers and their kids on the walls.\footnote{130}

The Partnership CDC did similar diversity training with merchants on the 60th Street corridor. Like other African American-led organizations in West and Southwest Philadelphia, it hired an African immigrant, Lansana Koroma, an activist from Sierra Leone. His outreach to African immigrant families helped incorporate them into the CDC’s financial literacy and homeownership programs. In 2006, when some one hundred West Africans, mostly Muslims who had overstayed their visas, were detained by ICE in the immigration prison in York, Pennsylvania, he visited their families and helped them access services to stay in their homes or find new ones.\footnote{131}

Much of the funding for these projects dried up at the end of the decade, and The Partnership CDC closed in the 2010s. But this community building and development work had lasting effects on intercultural relations and on the capacity of organizations like ACANA and the Welcoming Center, helping them expand commercial corridor support in subsequent years. The Welcoming Center would become an internationally known leader in local immigrant integration.

Another Pan-African nonprofit, the African and Caribbean Business Council, formed in 2006 with a similar mission: to “promote and preserve the business interests of African and Caribbean entrepreneurs in the Greater Philadelphia area while bridging the cultural divide between member countries and the larger community through education and mutual tolerance.”\footnote{132} Its attempts to develop a credit union fizzled but its business capacity–building and networking programs lived on, growing a mutually supportive community of African, Caribbean, and African American entrepreneurs.\footnote{133}

Like other immigrant groups from highly educated backgrounds, Liberians also organized professional and alumni associations, some of which did community work and all of which strengthened their networks. These included the Association of Liberian Journalists, Association of University of Liberia Alumni in the USA, and Monrovia College Alumni Association in the
Amer i cas, which all raised scholarship funds for Liberians and their children in Africa and America. The Philadelphia Folklore Project, based in Southwest Philadelphia, assisted Liberian dancers and musicians in sustaining their art, as did ACANA. The Philadelphia Folklore Project helped former members of Liberia’s National Cultural Troupe establish the Liberian Women’s Chorus for Change, which spread awareness of Liberia in the United States and raised support for postwar peace-building efforts.

Finally, the oldest organizations of the Liberian diaspora, the ULAA and county associations, continued to play crucial roles in aiding families in Philadelphia and other centers of Liberian settlement. Their leaders assisted people largely ad hoc at social events or by calling and visiting families at home, hospitals, and funeral homes. The chapters collaborated with local health and human service providers, including ACANA, MCFS, the Agape Center, and resettlement agencies, to connect their constituents to various resources. As with other African home associations in the United States and Europe, the welfare of the diaspora remained the first priority of the state chapters of the county associations and ULAA. The national bodies, meanwhile, focused principally on transnational community development, investing in the postwar stabilization and rebuilding of Liberia.134

Reconstructing Liberia

Living as transnational families and communities, Liberian civil society leaders logically worked in America and West Africa at the same time. The county associations played the central roles in community and economic development in Liberia, though the diaspora also began to form smaller hometown associations. The ULAA engaged more in political affairs, from the truth and reconciliation process to re-forming public and civil institutions after the wars. Some of the other organizations discussed in this chapter worked in West Africa too, whether more or less formally. For most Liberian community leaders, this diverse and geographically dispersed work was interrelated, a single broad project of rebuilding lives, families, communities, and institutions in the places where Liberians had come to live. This was mainly Liberians’ own project, though it sometimes involved others in Pan-African Philadelphia as well.135

Reverend Jallah’s organizational life again reflected the diversity of Liberian transnational civil society, and the intense and extensive engagement of many community leaders like him. He served on the national board of the ULAA; chaired the Federation of Lofa Associations in the Americas, the na-
tional body for Lofa County associations; and was a member of the Loma University Alumni Association. He continued to serve as a minister to his church in Monrovia and helped lead church associations in Liberia. His church in Liberia ran a school, for which he raised funds in Philadelphia. He also coordinated a farm collective in Lofa County, traveling to Liberia periodically but mainly doing this work from Philadelphia, before training its managers and taking a less active role. This was just some of his transnational community work, the broad extent of which was fairly typical among the most active Liberian community leaders of his generation.

Although the ULAA established a social service council in 2004, it remained a largely political organization. Its leaders were deeply involved in the reconstruction of Liberia’s national government and civil society, supporting democratic elections and reforms that promoted transparency, including in communication with the diaspora. As Sam Togba Slewion put it, they “stay involved in the government to make sure that government is treating people fairly.”

The administrations of Ellen Johnson Sirleaf, the first woman elected president in Africa, and her successor, George Weah, sent emissaries to consult diaspora community leaders in Philadelphia; Staten Island, New York; Providence, Rhode Island; Baltimore, Maryland; Columbus, Ohio; and Atlanta. They constantly appealed to members of the diaspora to return home, Slewion related. “One of the things that the Liberian government knows is that the middle class is in the States . . . the professional community is in the States,” he said. The remittances they sent home were one reason “the Liberian government talks to them, keeps them in the loop . . . engages professionals in the government because they know that they have power.” Slewion himself would return to live and work in Liberia in the 2010s.

The ULAA and its leaders helped ensure that Liberia’s was the first Truth and Reconciliation Commission to involve the diaspora in the entire truth-seeking process, among more than thirty nations that have implemented such commissions. In Philadelphia, they partnered with the University of Pennsylvania’s Transnational Law Clinic to take testimony from members of the diaspora. No residents of the region were tried for war crimes per se. Only Charles Taylor’s son, US-born Chuckie Taylor, was convicted by a US court for crimes committed during the war. However, in the late 2010s the United States charged and convicted three men living in the Philadelphia suburbs for failing to disclose in their asylum applications or lying in other court cases about their responsibility for massacres and other atrocities during the wars.

The county associations became the diaspora’s main vehicles for supporting community and economic development in Liberia. Like other county
associations, the Lofa County Association began as a student group in the 1970s, organized mainly for social purposes. After the war, people in the United States “wanted to get in touch with family members, with the village, and everyone who had been uprooted from the village wanted to get in touch with each other,” Reverend Jallah related. They “sent delegates once the war started to end. . . . [We] sent people to see what had happened and see how the village was.” Ultimately, “the crisis really caused the county associations to take a little more [of a] role in keeping track of what was going on and the rebuilding effort.”

The county associations, one for each of the nation’s fifteen counties, raised funds in the United States for various programs and projects. The state chapters provided scholarships for school and university students in Liberia and sent medical and school supplies, typically through annual drives. Scholarships for students in the sciences, health, teaching, and agriculture targeted sectors of need in each county, requiring recipients to work there for two or three years after graduating.

The national boards of the county associations usually took on the development projects, financing, planning, and building schools, medical clinics, and other facilities. Sometimes they helped launch agricultural and other enterprises. In the late 2000s and 2010s, many county association leaders, who were also often active in the ULAA, began to collaborate with the Liberian government and other partners on larger regional projects such as roads, telecommunications, air and seaports, and agricultural infrastructure.

The Sinoe County Association was among the most active county associations in Philadelphia, with leaders including Sam Togba Slewion and Rev. John Gblah. When Slewion was president of the national board, it was the first county association to establish life insurance policies for its membership. In 2010 it acquired thirty acres in one of Sinoe County’s largest cities, in partnership with Taylor University in Indiana. The association built and operated the $150,000 Samuel Morris Center for Global Engagement, with offices, conference rooms, and a library and media center to promote reading and internet access. The university was an early tenant. Development partners also included the county and national governments.

During an “assessment tour” of the county in 2010, delegates from the Sinoe County Association observed that the lack of money transfer services in the county presented a barrier for people displaced by the war to return, as many who came back relied on support from family overseas. The association recruited Moneygram to open in partnership with the local First Financial Bank, establishing the first postwar money wiring service in a county with
100,000 residents. Liberian nonprofits also sent representatives to the United States to seek the association’s assistance, including a builder of low-cost housing for teachers in rural areas that gained the association’s financial and political support. \textsuperscript{145}

Other county associations pursued projects of similar types and scales. The Grand Gedeh Association also invested in telecommunications, building an Internet café in the county seat. \textsuperscript{146} When a multinational firm established a mine in Nimba, Liberia’s largest and most resource-rich county, the county association, the United Nimba Citizens’ Council (UNICCO), set up a committee of geologists who submitted a proposal to President Sirleaf for a development fund. In the resulting community benefits agreement, the mining company underwrote development funds for the governments of Nimba and neighboring Bong and Grand Bassa Counties. UNICCO’s larger project was a 12,000 square foot Women’s Empowerment Center, which trained women in prenatal and postnatal care and small business development. The association also helped Nimba County University College establish and build an electronic library system. \textsuperscript{147}

Still, like other immigrants who invest in their homelands, Liberians who were active in county associations experienced tensions with people in Liberia. “They reject us,” explained UNICCO’s president, Dahn Dennis, who also served at various times as executive director of the Tappita District Development Association, president of the Liberian Association of Pennsylvania, founder and director of the Nimba Youth Organization, and board chair of the Kou Yorway Foundation, a faith-based organization investing in schools and training teachers and principals in Liberia. People who became American citizens “are not considered citizens of Liberia,” and Liberians rejected a bill proposed by diaspora members to allow for dual citizenship. “In as much as we are advocating on their behalf, and meeting their needs daily, they still don’t consider us to be Liberians.” Even as Liberians in the United States “send money all the time” and association leaders visit annually to listen and learn which projects people in the counties want them to support, many “look at us as though we are strangers” and “don’t want us to participate in any discussions” about governance and development. \textsuperscript{148}

Some of these tensions stemmed from real and perceived inequality, as people in Liberia “feel that we have money, that we have a better life,” said Dennis. Members of the diaspora “are sponsoring their kids in colleges here [in the United States], in Morocco, some in China, some in India, and some in South Africa. But yet still they look at us as outsiders. ‘They are not one of us . . . They are Americans, they are settled, they got their education, their
kids are having three meals a day, and we are not,’” said critics in Liberia. Even for people who return to Liberia, “they consider us to be job takers. We come here, get education, go back and take jobs.”

This all made it more challenging to involve the diaspora in the county associations. “Other Liberians, other Nimbaians, decide not to be a part of the organization,” Dennis reported. “Why should we continue to assist people who are continuously rejecting us,” some say. But people dedicated to the work of county, district, and other transnational associations, “we say ‘no.’ . . . We have to continue this, because we think it is our calling, to help them, no matter what.” Much as Liberians have worked to keep families and communities together in America, he concluded, “we are fighting . . . for peace, and oneness, and we want to continue to provide and meet their needs.” Ultimately, “we try to overcome it professionally.”

Notwithstanding these and other challenges, county association leaders played key roles in state building and the oversight of development. Some of their work came from the diaspora’s recognition that the postwar interim government and international organizations were not focused on local reconstruction, but rather on immediate national goals like security. They pushed county governments to perform and helped boost their capacity for development. The associations’ national boards often sent representatives to Africa on a monthly basis. Some, like UNICCO, maintained partner groups or employees in Liberia to assist with projects and communicate with leaders in the United States. During the course of a large project, the national and county agencies in charge might call and send meeting minutes to association leaders in Philadelphia, Providence, and other US regions every week. Despite the tensions noted previously, for many Liberians in Africa and the United States this lent further legitimacy to reconstruction and development projects. County associations and their leaders also sometimes backed political candidates, though, provoking tensions in Liberia and the United States.

The more recently established hometown associations served smaller communities, usually first with mutual aid to members and their families and later via larger economic development and place-based projects. The Tallah Families Association began in 1993 as an effort of the roughly 200 migrants in the United States from the township of Tallah, Grand Cape Mount County, to remain connected and help fund extended family members’ schooling and other needs in both North America and West Africa. In 2009 leaders renamed it the Tallah Development Corporation, reflecting their increased focus on infrastructure and building projects. This included wells that brought drinking water to six of the township’s ten boroughs and a $10,000 investment to repair and upgrade Tallah Junior School, which they raised in collaboration with
the school’s alumni association. Like the state chapters of the county associations and of the ULAA, however, the corporation also remained focused on the immediate needs of its members and their families in Philadelphia and Africa.\(^\text{155}\)

Similarly, Liberian and other West African ethnic associations and churches in Philadelphia raised funds for school fees and supplies for children in Africa. They commonly funded repatriation of deceased members’ bodies to be buried in Africa, which cost over $10,000 by the 2000s, and more later. They sent money to departed members’ families in Africa and to people deported by ICE to help make up for remittances and wages they no longer received.\(^\text{156}\)

The staff of social service organizations run by Liberians in the Philadelphia region, including MCFS and the Agape Center, played largely informal, ad hoc roles helping constituents with transnational family problems.\(^\text{157}\) However, ACANA established a more formal, largely independent satellite office in Monrovia. With partners in Freetown, Sierra Leone, and Accra, Ghana, its staff helped refugees and internally displaced people with reintegration services, largely education, mental health, and access to jobs for people returning to Liberia or staying in neighboring countries. The Liberia and Sierra Leone offices also distributed computers to classrooms around the two countries and supported small business development.\(^\text{158}\)

Some of Philadelphia’s Pan-African organizations engaged in transnational economic and community development, too. The Mayor’s Commission for African and Caribbean Immigrant Affairs and the African and Caribbean Business Council together organized trade missions to Africa; their members traveled to Liberia and other nations along with local politicians and officials from Philadelphia’s port authority and commerce department. In collaboration with AFRICOM, they hosted trade missions of dignitaries and business leaders from Liberia and other African countries. These efforts mostly promoted import-export ventures for companies of all sizes.

Two other Pan-African organizations established by West Africans in Philadelphia grew up in the 2000s to provide training, technical assistance, and networking for Black entrepreneurs and communities that were interested in transnational development, including Liberians. A Sierra Leonean, Agatha Johnson, who founded the Afri-Caribe Micro-Enterprise Network (AMEN), and an Ivorian, Jean Marie Kouassi, who founded Palms Solutions, had both worked for the World Bank and other development agencies. They were critical of traditional approaches to development and they sought to involve diaspora community members more meaningfully in planning and owning their work. They also recognized the imperative to address social needs that must be met for diaspora communities to engage effectively in development. AMEN
remained a business support group, operating between Philadelphia, Atlanta, and West and South Africa.159

But Palms Solutions became a more local organization, mainly since its constituents chose to focus on local rather than transnational projects. Working with youth and teachers, Kouassi became one of the chief advocates for immigrant children in city schools.160 In 2012, he worked with other African community leaders to start what became the Philadelphia African and Caribbean Cup of Nations for Peace. “More than a soccer tournament, it [was] a diplomatic tool used to bring our communities together to address pressing local and international issues” through “sports diplomacy,” commemorating the United Nations’ International Day of Peace in September. Its annual themes included US-Africa relations, fund-raising to combat the Ebola epidemic in Liberia, and public health in Philadelphia and Africa, including a drive for immigrants to get flu shots. The Philadelphia Inquirer called its summer school program one of the best facilitators of immigrant integration into the city’s school system.161

In 2016, Mayor Jim Kenney adopted the tournament, turning it into the Philadelphia International Unity Cup. It lost its international diplomatic, peace, health, and educational missions but continued to exert positive influence locally. The tournament expanded to teams representing countries around the world, though anyone could join any country’s team. With its final held at the region’s professional soccer stadium, it generated more excitement and about as much goodwill toward city government among diverse immigrants, especially men, as the city’s sanctuary policies did. All games were free for spectators, and West African teams dominated. The Liberian team lost the final 1-0 to Ivory Coast in 2016 but won the tournament the next three years, defeating Sierra Leone 3-1 in the 2017 final, Ivory Coast 4-3 in the following year’s final, and a United States team 3-0 in the final in 2019.162

Philadelphia’s diverse set of Liberian and Pan-African civil society organizations, through both their transnational and their local work, reveal the multiple meanings and dispersed geography of Liberian reconstruction. To rebuild Liberia and its neighbors required repairing families. This extended not only to what Americans considered distant and adopted family in West Africa but also to promoting peace and mutual support among the larger family of Black people and sometimes even more multicultural communities where Liberians lived in America. As scholars of West African home associations in Britain have observed, it is important not “to overstate the distinction between ‘development at home’ and ‘welfare in the diaspora.’”163 In Philadelphia, Liberian and Pan-African civil society tied the work of community revitalization in the United States to that of rebuilding Liberia, Nigeria, Haiti, and other parts of Africa and the Caribbean.
Deferred Enforced Departure

Liberian and Pan-African civil society mobilized successfully to promote peace and help diverse people with myriad needs. Still, Liberia remained one of the poorest nations on earth, and Southwest Philadelphia was among the region’s poorest neighborhoods. Almost one-third of all Liberians in the United States attained American citizenship by 2010. Yet in other ways Liberians’ place in America was still tenuous, especially for those on TPS or DED. What protections and assistance they required became increasingly contested as Liberia stabilized politically and immigration debates in the United States became further polarized with the election of Donald Trump.

In Liberia, despite substantial investment from abroad, in 2012 more than half the population lived in extreme poverty, on less than fifty cents a day, and more than 60 percent were illiterate. The UN ranked Liberia 182nd out of 187 countries on its Human Development Index. Transparency International put it near the bottom in its Global Corruption Barometer. In 2011, President Sirleaf won the Nobel Peace Prize. That year, the nation received $765 million in development aid and an estimated $523 million in remittances from the diaspora; and the United Nations spent over $500 million on a peacekeeping force of 7,500 troops that remained in the country.

Critics in the development industry charged that Liberia had become dependent on foreign aid and that development agencies had drawn Liberian professionals away from government and local civil society. Many young Liberian Americans in Philadelphia, like their parents, sent remittances to extended family, but they were reluctant to invest in the country’s development beyond that, due to corruption and concerns that their money would not be used wisely by government or civil society. The county associations continued to organize projects, though they were still run by Reverend Jallah’s generation and mostly had not yet incorporated younger Liberian Americans.

In Philadelphia and other US regions, Liberians remained, on average, wealthier than African Americans. But they shared the segregation and much of the discrimination and disadvantage that Black people in general experienced in US society, including in housing and labor markets. On Woodland Avenue, ACANA developed plans in the late 2010s to build an arch and market the corridor as a district worthy of cultural tourism akin to Chinatown and Little Italy. African Americans came to embrace the food, hair-braiding, and other businesses on the avenue. But it remained an open question whether more than a small number of non-Black people would consider African culture desirable to consume and Southwest Philadelphia safe or attractive to visit. Notwithstanding the remarkable accomplishments in community
building of Liberians and their allies, racism and inequality remained intractable in America.

Through the administrations of Bill Clinton, George W. Bush, and Barack Obama, Liberian community leaders in Philadelphia and their allies in city council and the region’s state and congressional delegations lobbied for renewing TPS and DED. They mobilized support with their counterparts in Georgia, Maryland, Minnesota, New York, Ohio, and Rhode Island. The number of people on DED decreased to roughly 3,600 by 2018, out of some 60,000 or more Liberians in the United States. Still, virtually every Liberian in these regions knew, and most were close to, someone with that status. People on DED could work, renew their driver’s licenses, and access health benefits; but they could not get student financial aid, leave the country, or know when they might be told to leave.

On March 27, 2018, President Trump announced that “conditions in Liberia no longer warrant a further extension of DED,” which would be terminated effective March 31, 2019. This decision came shortly after Trump enraged Liberian and other communities with remarks about “shithole countries” in Africa and the Caribbean. At the same time, he ended TPS for people from El Salvador, Haiti, Honduras, Nicaragua, and Sudan. Like Liberians, many of these people had been in the United States for decades.

The lack of opportunity in Liberia meant that most people who were forced to return would lose their ability to support their family in Africa and America. The few thousand people who were repatriated to Liberia when Ghana closed its refugee camps in the prior decade had struggled to survive. Some Liberians in the United States still feared violence from old rivals and people who had claimed their property. “To see that Liberians in the United States have stabilized their lives—and I think that’s part of the American Dream and the pursuit of happiness—and still uproot us and send us back to Liberia will force us to become refugees all over again,” one DED recipient protested.

The Trump administration’s stance was not new. Back in 2009, the president of the Federation for American Immigration Reform, one of the chief architects of Trump’s later immigration agenda, declared as Liberians’ DED was up for renewal, “It is time for people to go back and rebuild their country.” For Liberians to stay after their country’s wars were over would make “a mockery of the concept of short-term temporary humanitarian protection.” Liberians were the only group ever to receive DED, which critics cast as an overly generous concession to a group that no longer needed protection.

Uncharacteristically, three days before the March 2019 deadline, Trump extended it by a year. “The overall situation in West Africa remains concerning,” his executive order stated. “The reintegration of DED beneficiaries into
Liberian civil and political life will be a complex task, and an unsuccessful transition could strain United States–Liberian relations and undermine Liberia’s post-civil war strides toward democracy and political stability.\textsuperscript{178} It was unclear if this decision responded to a lawsuit on behalf of fifteen Liberians challenging the end of DED.\textsuperscript{179}

But two weeks later, in April 2019, the Trump administration announced a plan for ICE to target people from Liberia, Sierra Leone, Nigeria, Eritrea, and Chad who had overstayed their visas. The administration threatened these countries with restrictions on future visas. Under Trump, ICE significantly expanded the deportation of Black immigrants.\textsuperscript{180}

Then, in December 2019, senators from Rhode Island and Minnesota, who had long supported their Liberian constituents, succeeded in inserting a section for Liberian Refugee Immigration Fairness into the National Defense Authorization Act for 2020. This gave Liberians without legal status access to green cards as long as they had not committed serious crimes or, under another new Trump administration rule issued two months later, as long as they and their family members were unlikely to use public benefits.\textsuperscript{181} As many as 10,000 Liberians without permanent status were eligible, more than the several thousand people on DED.\textsuperscript{182} Anti-immigration advocates cried foul, arguing that this “amnesty” set a terrible precedent, violated the principles of TPS and DED, and had nothing to do with national defense.\textsuperscript{183} Liberians, on the other hand, asked why it took decades for the United States to grant them permanent legal status. Voffee Jabateh offered a simple answer, which was echoed by many advocates: “Historically, Black lives have never mattered to America.”\textsuperscript{184}

Still, thousands of Liberians’ status remained unresolved. In Trump’s last year in the White House, his administration botched the processing of people’s applications under the new program. A computer glitch initially rejected them all. His successor, Joe Biden, reinstated DED for Liberians on his first day in office, giving more time for people to apply for green cards.\textsuperscript{185} Yet ICE continued to deport Black immigrants at a substantial rate during Biden’s first months in office. Changing the agency’s culture and operations would take more than a new president.\textsuperscript{186}

Black immigrants’ experiences as targets of a racialized, exclusionary politics overlapped in some ways with the experiences of Muslim immigrants in the United States. Many African immigrants, including some Liberians, were Muslim, as were many African Americans and other immigrants in Philadelphia. Some Black immigrants were also affected by the United States and its allies and adversaries in the War on Terror that spread around Africa and Asia in the early twenty-first century. The next chapter relates the experiences of other people who were caught in the midst of this and related wars in the Middle East.