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African American Migration to Liberia, 1820-1906

Peer-Reviewed Dataset Article

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Description

This dataset is the most comprehensive collection of data on people who emigrated to Liberia under the auspices of the American Colonization Society and its affiliate state societies during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. It contains entries for 16,332 men, women, and children who migrated to Liberia from 1820 to 1904. It provides their names, ages, places of origin, dates of departure, and, for many, information on their level of literacy and occupations. The data was collected for a 2022 book on Liberia, *Sovereignty without Power: Liberia in the Age of Empires, 1822-1980,* published by Cambridge University Press; a more detailed discussion of the migrants and the world they lived in appears there.[1]

Migrants to Liberia, although only a small share of the millions of people worldwide who departed their places of birth during the nineteenth century, were historically significant in the histories of both the United States and West Africa. During the antebellum period, and to some

[1] I would like to thank Bill Collins, Bronwen Everill, Chris Minns and Marianne Wanamaker for helpful feedback in assembling the migrant data for the book project. I would also like to thank the editors and two anonymous referees for helpful comments.

extent even after emancipation, the options available to African Americans wishing to leave the American South were extremely limited. Emigration outside the jurisdiction of the United States was one answer. Liberia was one such destination, along with Haiti, Mexico, and the western frontier.[2] Emigration to Liberia has tended to be treated separately from other migrant flows because of the long and complicated evolution of ideas about African American emigration to Africa. Although there had been early support for emigration to Africa among free Black communities in the north, this support began to wane shortly thereafter with the founding of the Society for the Colonization of Free People of Color of the United States, more commonly known as the American Colonization Society (hereafter ACS). Its leaders were white slave owners who worried that a growing free Black population would stoke instability amongst those who remained enslaved. Migrants to Liberia are thus often portrayed less as active agents in their own destiny than as hapless pawns in a largely white effort to prevent emancipated African Americans from gaining any path to full citizenship within the United States. However, Bronwen Everill writes that this approach "obscures the choices of those who did go, as well as the decision process of those who rejected extraterritorial emigration but chose to move within North America."[3] By bringing together all known data on those who emigrated, this dataset allows for the more comprehensive investigation of who chose to go to Liberia, and how they compare to those who migrated to other destinations.

Figure 1 shows annual numbers of emigrants from the dataset. It distinguishes between those whose emigration was organized by the ACS and emigrants who went through the Maryland Colonization Society (MCS), which was the largest of state colonization societies. There remains much work to be done to reconstruct the activities of the smaller state societies. Although it is unlikely that the addition of emigrants sponsored by these societies will change the aggregate patterns of migration illustrated below, it may be that their records allow for the inclusion of smaller but historically important migrant communities. One great example is the community of 346 emigrants from Barbados investigated by Caree Banton.[4]

Based on the data we do have, there were considerable fluctuations in annual numbers of migrants. The 1830s and 1850s alone account for just over half of all migrants who departed. A further 15 per cent went during the 1860s, despite the disruption of the Civil War causing a rapid fall in numbers during the first part of the decade. "Liberia fever"of the 1870s saw another surge. After this the annual level of migration declined, though a steady, but small, number of migrants continued up to the early 1890s. Faith in the ACS was severely undermined by the "crisis" of 1892, in which hundreds of migrants who came to New York to depart for Liberia were left stranded by the ACS, which had not anticipated their arrival, and had no ships or resources with which to send them. After that there were only a few small groups of migrants, often selected specifically for the trip, the last in 1904.

[2] Ira Berlin, *The Making of African America: The Four Great Migrations* (New York: Penguin Books, 2010), 133-4; Kendra T. Field, "'No Such Thing as Stand Still': Migration and Geopolitics in African American History," *Journal of American History* 102 (2015): 701-4.
[3] Bronwen Everill, "'Destiny Seems to Point Me to that Country': Early Nineteenth-Century African American Migration, Emigration and Expansion," *Journal of Global History* 7, no. 1 (2012): 55.
[4] Caree Banton, *More Auspicious Shores: Barbadian Migration to Liberia, Blackness, and the Making of an African Republic* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019).

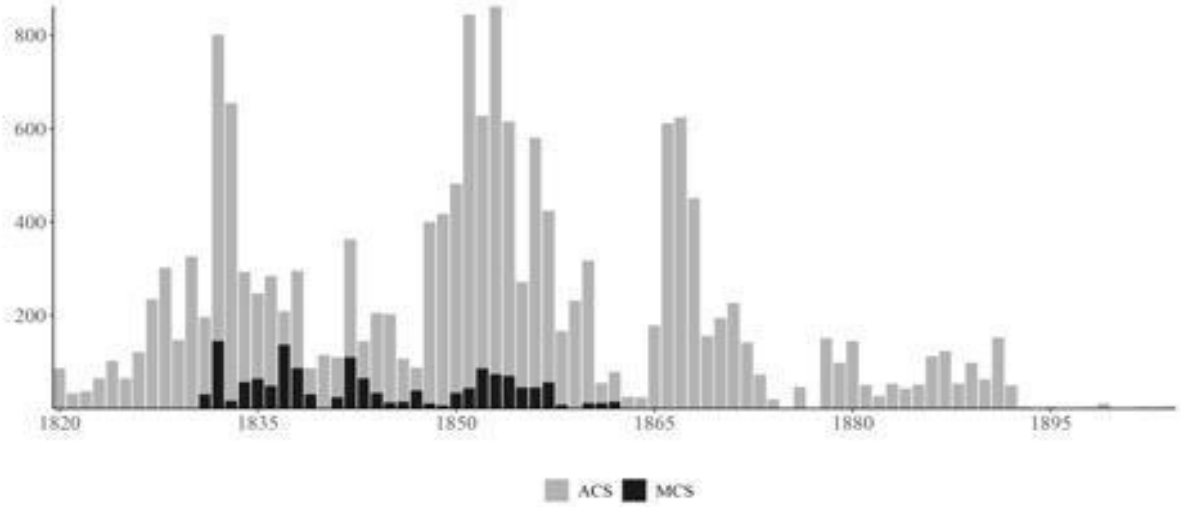

Fig. 1: Annual migrants to Liberia.

While these general trends have long been known, this dataset brings together for the first time the available data on emigrants across all periods. The main intention is to facilitate comparisons, allowing for a more detailed picture of how emigration to Liberia changed over time, or between regions of origin. Bringing together the full dataset and using it alongside other available data also makes it possible to compare those who emigrated to Liberia with those who migrated within the United States or to other destinations outside it. Previous research on African American emigrants to Liberia has focused on subsets of the migrants, either based on specific historical periods or on their place of origin. Perhaps the most widely cited work is that of Tom Shick, who published a rigorous analysis of the first wave of migrants who emigrated between 1820 and 1843.[5] Subsequent research examined later cohorts. Other work has focused on emigration from particular states or communities.[6]

The 1830s saw an increase not only in total migration, but also in the number of migrants who had been born into slavery. The original aim of the ACS had been to facilitate the emigration of freeborn African Americans, but increasingly migrants were people who had been emancipated on the condition they would emigrate. Figure 2 shows the number of migrants by status from 1820 until 1863, when Abraham Lincoln's "Emancipation Proclamation" officially freed all those who remained enslaved in rebelling states. Migrant lists from shortly after that date note this transition by describing emigrants as emancipated by "A. L. Proclamation."[7]

[5] His best-known work is Tom W. Shick, *Behold the Promised Land: A History of Afro-American Settler Society in Nineteenth-Century Liberia* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1980). For his data on individual emigrants, see Shick, *Emigrants to Liberia* (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 1971).
[6] Kenneth C. Barnes, *Journey of Hope: The Back-to-Africa Movement in Arkansas in the Late 1800s* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004); Claude Clegg, *The Price of Liberty: African Americans and the Making of Liberia* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004); Lisa A. Lindsay, *Atlantic Bonds: A Nineteenth-Century Odyssey from America to Africa* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2017); Robert Murray, *Atlantic Passages: Race, Mobility, and Liberian Colonization* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2021); Marie Tyler-McGraw, *An African Republic: Black and White Virginians in the Making of Liberia* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2007).
[7] See migrant lists in American Colonization Society papers, Library of Congress, Microfilm Reel 306.

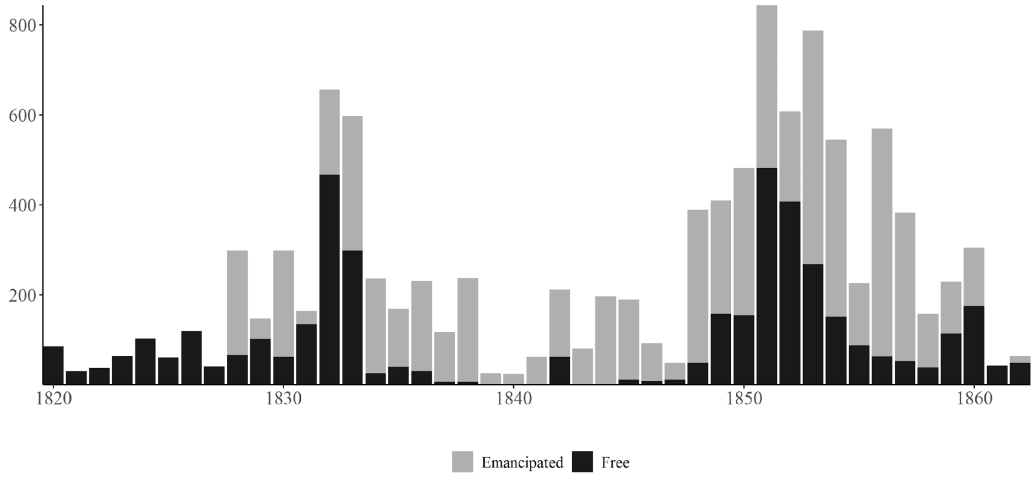

Fig. 2: Migrants by status, 1820-1862.

The geographic origins of the migrants shifted along with the African American population as a whole during the nineteenth century. During so-called "second slavery," close to a million enslaved people were forcibly removed from coastal states to newly established plantations in Mississippi, Louisiana, and Alabama. Figure 3 shows the regional origins of migrants by decade. From the beginning, only a small percentage came from northern states. This share decreased even more as the ACS became increasingly controversial among the free Black population. At the same time, the share of migrants from Virginia and Maryland were overtaken by migrants from the lower South.

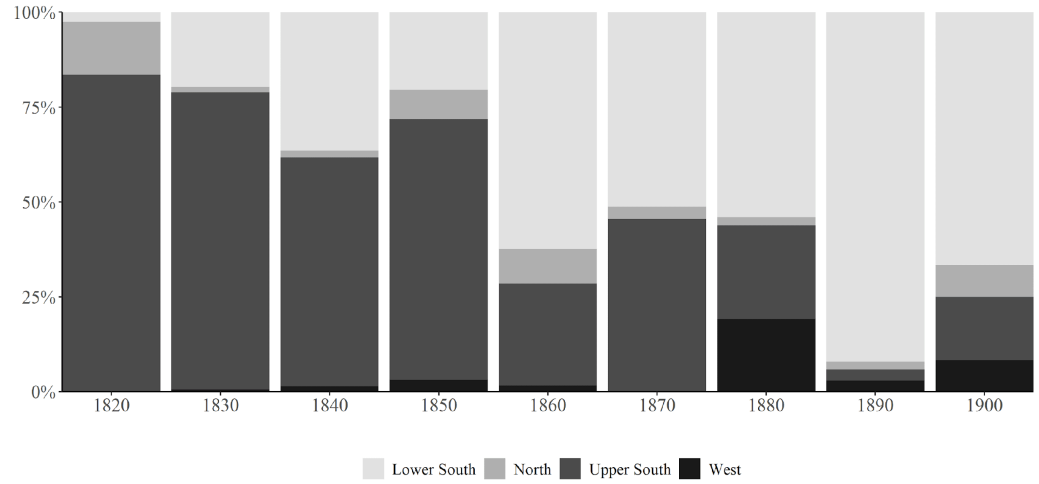

Fig. 3: Regional origins of migrants by decade, 1820-1900.

In contrast to other nineteenth century migrant flows, which tended at least at first to be predominantly male, migrants to Liberia went largely as family groups. Table 1 gives the gender balance of the migrants by decade and shows that it remained relatively even throughout the nineteenth century, shifting only with the smaller and more selective migrant groups in the first decade of the twentieth century. There was also a large share of migrants under the age of

twenty, as shown in Figure 4.

	Female	Male
1820	43.8	51.6
1830	44.4	53.5
1840	45.8	51.8
1850	46.3	52.5
1860	46	53.2
1870	47.5	52.1
1880	46.2	52.8
1890	46.4	51.2
1900	58.3	41.7

Table 1: Gender balance of migrants by decade.

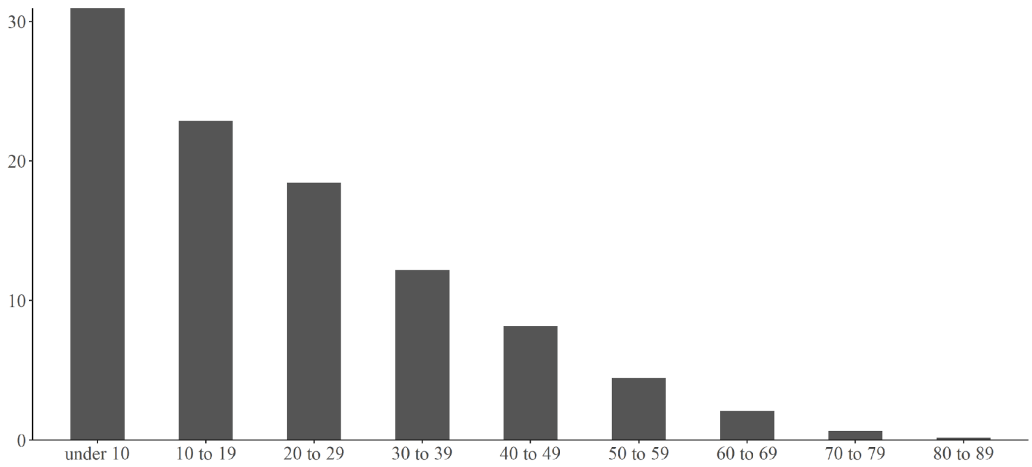

Fig. 4: Age distribution of migrants.

The migrant data collected by the ACS also provides information, albeit often incomplete, on the human capital of those who migrated. Whether migrants tended to be wealthier and better educated than non-migrants, or the reverse, is a central question in broader histories of migration. On the one hand, the costs of migration and challenges of obtaining information about distant locations might have made migration easier for the wealthier or more skilled. On the other hand, poorer migrants might be less able to weather the consequences of crises and therefore had little choice but to migrate. Conclusions vary by destination and over time.[8] There

[8] This remains a lively debate in the global study of migration history; for two examples, see Ran Abramitzky and Fabio Braggion, "Migration and human capital: self-selection of indentured servants to the Americas," *Journal of Economic History* 66 (2006): 82-905 and Yvonne Stolz and Joerg Baten, "Brain drain in the age of mass migration: does relative inequality explain migrant selectivity?" *Explorations in Economic History* 49 (2012): 205-20.

remains, for example, no consensus on the selection of African American migrants out of the South. Earlier studies often claimed that those who moved north during the Great Migration were more educated than those who remained.[9] However, more recent work has suggested that migrants were not originally more educated but rather availed themselves of educational opportunities after they had migrated.[10]

Since previous work on emigrants to Liberia has focused on cohorts rather than the complete group of migrants, their conclusions on the selection of migrants who went to Liberia have varied. Tom Shick, in his study of the first wave of migrants, noted that the migrants had a comparatively high level of literacy. Claude Clegg, writing about emigrants from North Carolina, remarked on their low levels of literacy. A more comprehensive dataset can help explain these contrasts. Literacy rates were highest among early cohorts of migrants but fell over time as the share of emigrants born into slavery increased. The same is true of the share of migrants with skilled or semi-skilled occupations. Further discussion of these conclusions can be found in the methodology section.

This dataset serves two main purposes in understanding the histories of both Liberia and African American emigration during the nineteenth century. First, it enables the study of how the cohorts of migrants changed over time, as new opportunities for mobility emerged and the political and economic context changed. Second, it allows for the comparison of emigrants to Liberia and emigrants to other destinations. Recent digitization of census microdata, for example, can show how migrants to Liberia compared with those from the same state and/or birth cohort who migrated elsewhere or indeed remained in their home state. Initial comparisons along these lines show that Liberian migrants were less likely to be literate or employed in high-skilled occupations than those who moved north within the United States, particularly as the nineteenth century progressed.[11] More detailed work would no doubt yield further insights not only into the group of emigrants who went to Liberia but into how would-be migrants conceptualized their changing opportunities.

This dataset is not yet comprehensive; more work remains to be done. Apart from the Maryland Colonization Society, emigrants through other state colonization societies have not been included here. This dataset also does not include a group of migrants from the West Indies who became an influential political constituency in Liberia in the twentieth century.[12] Finally, there remain migrants who arrived by other means and are therefore not included here; some of these, like John Russwurm and Alexander Crummell, became important figures in Liberian society.[13] I hope that by publishing this dataset, it will help bring emigrants to Liberia into the broader story of nineteenth-century migration and motivate others to add new data as it emerges.

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[9] See, for examples, Stewart E. Tolnay, "Education selection in the migration of southern Blacks, 1880-1990," *Social Forces* 77 (1998): 499; Thomas N. Maloney, "African American Migration to the North: New Evidence for the 1910s," *Economic Inquiry* 40 (2002); Trevon D. Logan, "Health, human capital and African-American migration before 1910," *Explorations in Economic History* 46 (2009): 188.
[10] William J. Collins and Marianne Wanamaker, "The great migration in black and white: new evidence on the selection and sorting of southern migrants" *Journal of Economic History* 75 (2015): 959.
[11] For more detail on this analysis, see Gardner, *Sovereignty without Power*, chap. 3.
[12] This group of migrants are discussed in detail in Banton, *More Auspicious Shores*.
[13] I thank an anonymous referee for pointing out this example.

Dates of Data Collection

2016-2019

Dataset Languages

English

Geographic Coverage

United States, Liberia

Temporal Coverage

1820-1904

Document Types

Census or Register
Digital Data Repository
Ship Registry, Log, or Manifest

Sources

Brown, Robert T. "Immigrants to Liberia 1843 to 1865: An Alphabetical Listing." Liberian Studies Research Working Paper No. 7. Philadelphia: Institute for Liberian Studies, 1980.

Murdza, Jr. Peter J. "Immigrants to Liberia 1865 to 1904: An Alphabetical Listing." Liberian Studies Research Working Paper No. 4. Newark, DE: Liberian Studies Association in America, 1975.

Shick, Tom W. *Emigrants to Liberia, 1820-1843*. Newark: University of Delaware Press, 1971.

Maryland State Colonization Society Papers, MS 571, reels 25-27. Maryland Center for History and Culture, Baltimore, MD.

Methodology

The dataset was collected by harmonizing the four sources of data cited above and using this to generate other variables used in the analysis of the data.[14] For each person who emigrated, all four sources utilized provided a name (usually, though not always, first and last), an age, a year of departure, the ship on which they traveled, their state of origin, and destination in Liberia. In

[14] Robert T. Brown, "Immigrants to Liberia 1843 to 1865: An Alphabetical Listing," Liberian Studies Research Working Paper No. 7 (Philadelphia: Institute for Liberian Studies, 1980); Peter J. Murdza, Jr. "Immigrants to Liberia 1865 to 1904: An Alphabetical Listing," Liberian Studies Research Working Paper No. 4 (Newark, DE: Liberian Studies Association in America, 1975); Shick, Tom W. *Emigrants to Liberia, 1820-1843.* Newark: University of Delaware Press, 1971; Maryland State Colonization Society Papers, MS 571, reels 25-27, Maryland Historical Society, Baltimore, MD.

addition, the three ACS lists also included an indicator of education and the migrant's occupation. These variables were transcribed directly into the dataset. Two of the three published lists–created by Brown 1843-64 and Murdza–were previously available only in print form and were digitized by the author. The list compiled by Shick (1820-43) was available electronically as a .dat file but needed to be translated from his coding system in order to be comparable to the others.

One question that might be raised is the consistency of these published sources with the original emigrant lists. Spot checks with original lists in the American Colonization Society papers at the Library of Congress suggest that these authors made few if any changes to the initial data. To take one example, Margaret Miller appears in Brown's list of emigrants departing on the *Morgan Dix* in November 1851 as a twenty-six-year-old weaver from Virginia who was emancipated rather than born free.[15] Margaret Miller also appears on the original ACS list of emigrants on the *Morgan Dix*, which departed from Baltimore on November 1, 1851. Miller is also listed here as age twenty-six and a weaver from Culpeper County, VA who was born enslaved but emancipated by the will of a Miss Margaret Miller, after whom she was evidently named. She appears in the original list alongside her children: Henrietta (7), John Joseph (6), and Judy Ann (3).[16] They also appear in Brown's list, with their correct ages. So while some information may be lost in the transcription–Brown does not record her religion (Baptist) or her county of origin–it seems unlikely that the published lists contain systematic errors likely to influence the interpretation of the dataset as a whole. There may also be some inconsistencies in the spelling of names–the Claget family of Shick's list, who departed in 1830 on the *Brig Montgomery,* appear in the ACS records as Clagett. However, this is not uncommon in records from the nineteenth century across a variety of contexts, a source of much debate in literature on the linking of individuals across historical sources.[17]

In addition, I used the existing lists to create several other variables to facilitate analysis of the data and comparison with other migrant flows. First, age was subtracted from year of departure to generate year of birth. Second, first names (where available) were used to assign genders to each migrant in order to better understand the demographics of the emigrants. In the majority of cases, this was straightforward, and the dataset includes the imputed gender of 14,564 migrants. The missing values were instances where no first name was given or only initials. Young children were sometimes not given names, and simply listed as "infant," in which case no gender was assigned.

I also simplified the education description to calculate a literacy rate. The original education data used several categories, which were not consistent over time or across the three lists. Tom Shick's list of migrants from 1820-1843, for example, used five descriptors: "reads," "writes," "spells," "educated," and "illiterate." Robert Brown's list of emigrants from 1843-1864 also uses five descriptors, but not the same as Shick: "reads," "read and write," "spells," "good," and "fair." Brown has no indicator for illiteracy (or no education). In the final list, Peter Murdza (1865-1904) uses four: "none," "reads," "writes," and "teacher." All of these are different methods of standardization of the varied descriptions given in the original sources, where "read" or "read

[15] Brown, "Immigrants to Liberia 1843 to 1865," 44.
[16] American Colonization Society papers, Library of Congress, Microfilm.
[17] See, eg, Ran Abramitzky, Leah Boustan, Katherine Eriksson, James Feigenbaum and Santiago Perez, "Automated linking of historical data," *Journal of Economic Literature* 59 (2021): 866.

and write" were the most frequently used, but other descriptions such as "very good" also appear. In the preamble to his data, Brown notes that "none of these categories can be relied on to mean very much and they certainly were not applied consistently. The best one can do is to assume that all the terms suggest some level of literacy."[18] The Maryland Colonization Society list made no attempt to record information on education.

To make observations at different points and time more comparable, I transformed the level of education indicated into a simple binary measure indicating whether an emigrant was literate or not. If any education was shown, or if there was no information but the person was listed as having a high-skilled occupation such as reverend, this was coded as literate. Where no indication or illiteracy was indicated, or no information on education was given, it was assumed that the emigrant was illiterate. This last choice requires some justification. A long history of anti-literacy legislation in slave states might have prompted some people to hide the fact that they could read or write, and it may also be that the quality of ACS record-keeping declined over time. Note that this was not applied to the list of emigrants from the Maryland Colonization Society. Instead, these emigrants were simply left out of literacy calculations.

While caution should therefore be used in applying this at the level of individuals or small groups, the overall level of literacy calculated in this way is approximately in line with what we know about the literacy of enslaved and free populations at the time, suggesting that the underestimate is not dramatic. Existing estimates of the literacy of enslaved people vary, but generally suggest a level of about 10 percent. Data from the emigrant lists shows about that same level of literacy for migrants born enslaved. Similarly, literacy rates for freeborn migrants are comparable to, if slightly lower than, those of the free Black community as a whole from the 1850 US Census. In this case, lower rates of literacy for freeborn emigrants may reflect that their regional origins were disproportionately southern.[19] For the sake of transparency, and to facilitate studies of this from other angles, the original education data has been included here along with the imputed literacy measure.

Finally, individual occupations were used to generate a standardized variable indicating whether the migrant was unskilled, semi-skilled, or skilled. As in the case of education, the original occupation listing from the records has been included as well as the classification variable. Occupational classifications follow previous work on occupational mobility in Britain and the United States.[20] Those in semi-skilled occupations included people like Augustus Curtis, a smith who arrived in Liberia from Virginia in 1823, aged 21, or Jane Key, a seamstress who came from Georgia in 1849 at age 38. Emigrants with skilled occupations were those like James H. Tucker, a merchant arriving from South Carolina in 1850, aged 40, or Daniel Williams, a 51-year-old engineer from North Carolina, who also arrived in 1850. A significant number of the emigrants were listed as farmers, while others listed occupations classified as unskilled such as laborer or housework. Occupation data was less frequently reported than other variables, and in 6,563 cases no occupation was reported. In these cases, I assumed that the emigrant in question was in an unskilled occupation. As with the literacy data, the shares of emigrants in skilled and semi-skilled occupations are comparable to, though often a bit lower than, estimates for the

[18] Brown, "Immigrants to Liberia 1843 to 1865," iii.
[19] For more detail on the validation of these estimates, see Gardner, *Sovereignty without Power*, chap. 3.
[20] Joseph Ferrie and Jason Long, "Intergenerational Occupational Mobility in Britain and the United States Since 1850," *American Economic Review* 104 (2013): 1109-1137.

African American population as a whole.[21]

The dataset does not include all of the information available on each migrant. The four sources of data that were compiled to create this dataset provided different sets of information on each migrant, reflecting differences in the information collected by the ACS and other institutions. For example, Tom Shick's list of early emigrants to 1843 contains information on mortality and return migration which was unfortunately not collected for later cohorts. Peter Murdza's list of emigrants includes more detailed places of origin as well as information on religion. As these could not be collected across the whole dataset, they are not included here. The Maryland Colonization Society's list was the least informative, including only names, ages, legal status, and destination.

For broader contextual data on Liberia's economic history from the same book project, see my Liberian Economic History Database.[22] Additional explanation for how these data were calculated can be found in Gardner, *Sovereignty without Power,* particularly the two data appendices.

Date of Publication

August 2024

Data Links

Dataset Repository: Harvard Dataverse, https://doi.org/10.7910/DVN/NJFNGY
Related Dataset Repository: Liberian Economic History Database, https://www.aehnetwork.org/data-research/liberian-economic-history-database/
Linked Data Representation: Enslaved.org

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[21] Logan, "Health, Human Capital and African-American Migration before 1910"; Collins and Wanamaker, "The Great Migration in Black and White," 959.
[22] https://www.aehnetwork.org/data-research/liberian-economic-history-database/.