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The "Back-to-Africa" Movement in Arkansas

BY ADELL PATTON, JR.

The "BACK TO AFRICA" movement in Arkansas began in 1877 and lasted sporadically into the twentieth century. The period of most intense activity occurred between 1877 and 1890, and although the efforts of Arkansas blacks to emigrate to Africa were recognized at that time in both Arkansas and New York City, the episode remains neglected in the historical literature on the "exodus." Recent scholarship suggests that the concept of diaspora, which is applicable to the Arkansas case, consists of three elements: (1) the involuntary and voluntary emigration from Af-

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For the 1879 exodus to Kansas, see Nell Irvin Painter, Exodusters: Black Migration to Kansas After Reconstruction (New York, 1977); for the early role of the American Colonization Society in Liberia, see P. J. Staudenraus, The African Colonization Movement, 1816-1865 (New York, 1961); on the social and quantitative developments of this movement, see Tom W. Shick, Behold The Promised Land: A History of Afro-American Settler Society in Nineteenth-Century Liberia (Baltimore, Md., 1977); and on the colonization role of Arkansas blacks after 1890, see Edwin S. Redkey, Black Exodus: Black Nationalist and Back-to-Africa Movements, 1890-1910 (New Haven, Conn., 1969).

For a list of Arkansas immigrants to Liberia, see Peter J. Murdza, Jr., Immigrants to Liberia, 1865 to 1904: An Alphabetical Listing (Newark, Del., 1975); for the "back-to-Africa" dilemma mixed with fraud, see James Logan Morgan, "Dr. Lightfoot, 1892," The Stream of History 16 (April 1878): 3-13; see also Myrle Clarine Volger, "Negroes of Area Joined Back to Africa Movement," Independence County Chronicle 16 (January 1975): 46-57. I thank Tom Dillard for locating the "dilemma" sources for me.

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rica; (2) assimilation into and identification with the new culture and environment; and (3) a psychological yearning for and physical "return" to the "homeland" of Africa. The latter clearly indicated marginality: individuals or groups, living in the twilight zone of two cultures, possessed nostalgia for the old and a developing affection for the new. Such individuals were on the fringe or periphery of two modes of existence, and for some the "back to Africa" scheme provided a mechanism for resolving the status dilemma.

Inspired by a complex of motives, a group of white Americans, including prominent individuals in all sections of the country, launched the American Colonization Society (A.C.S.) in 1816 to assist freed blacks in the United States in emigrating to Africa. Black American response to the organization, throughout its long history, ranged from bitter opposition to enthusiastic endorsement. As a result of efforts by the A.C.S., the Republic of Liberia, on the coast of West Africa, came into existence in 1847 and received official recognition from the United States seventeen years later. Although the Civil War radically altered the legal status of the vast majority of black Americans, the Liberia Exodus movement continued to attract considerable support among the newly freed slaves. Postwar advocates of back-to-Africa schemes argued that blacks in the rural South had become a surplus population because cotton production in particular and agriculture in general no longer required so large a number of laborers. While white southern planters struggled to maintain and control their labor force of freed blacks, Liberia promised to satisfy the yearning of freedpersons to own land—a prospect that stood in...
sharp contrast to such possibilities in the post-Reconstruction South.\(^6\)

In 1878, Martin R. Delaney, then residing in South Carolina, characterized the back-to-Africa movement in that state. "Our Exodus movement," he explained, "is the uprising of poor but industrious and religious people, who desire to cultivate the land in Liberia, and do good to the natives, promoting peace and Christian civilization."\(^7\) While the desire to acquire land in Liberia provided impetus for the movement, the urge among blacks generally to own land in the South remained strong indeed. Efforts toward this end were manifestations of the self-help philosophy embraced by blacks in the post-Civil War era.\(^8\)

In terms of regional distribution, the Arkansas exodus movement was strongest in mostly all-black counties within the alluvial Mississippi Delta. The research of Willard B. Gatewood, Jr., indicates that while blacks throughout Arkansas were experiencing varying degrees of discrimination by the end of the century, blacks in the eastern counties of the Mississippi Delta faced the greatest obstacles.\(^9\) It is no wonder then, that a county squarely in the Delta served as the birthplace of the Arkansas exodus movement. Thus, the first convention of the Liberian Exodus Arkansas Colony (L.E.A.C.) was held at the Third Baptist Church in Helena, Phillips County, on November 23, 1877. Those attending the meeting came from Phillips, Lee, St. Francis and Cross counties, and together they formed a constitution and drew up a charter.

The L.E.A.C. leaders faced opposition from, among others, a black preacher in Helena, Reverend J. T. Jenifer, who blasted them from his pulpit, saying, "certain leaders of this movement, namely: H. M. Turner, R. H. Cain, B. F. Porter, and A. L. Stanford, should have a rope put on their necks, led to the woods and made promise to leave the country, or the rope tightened until they did."\(^10\) But the proponents responded to such criticism by affirming their determination and attacking their opponent: "Long live the leaders of the Liberian Exodus. Long live the African Colonization Society . . . as Christ bade us pray for our enemies, Long live J. T. Jenifer to repent of his wickedness."\(^11\) They proceeded with their plans and, in keeping with their newly drafted constitution, appointed commissioners who were to travel to Liberia for the purpose of procuring suitable land for the L.E.A.C. Upon returning to the United States, these commissioners were to arrange for the transportation of the colonists "back to Africa." The delegates selected C. H. Hicks of Lee County and Anthony L. Stanford, the president of the convention, to be their commissioners.\(^12\)

Almost nothing surfaces in the historical record of C. H. Hicks, and even though A. L. Stanford served in the Arkansas state legislature in the 1870s, he too remains an obscure figure. However, from examining the records of the American Colonization Society and certain secondary works, a picture of this remarkable man emerges. Born in Greenwich, Cumberland County, New Jersey, on July 4, 1830, he joined the African Methodist Episcopal Church and later became an ordained minister, receiving the

\(^*\)A circular distributed by the South Carolina Council of the Liberia Exodus addressed the question of land ownership: "The large landed proprietors hold their lands and refuse to sell, as a matter of self protection against the competition of the numerous population of agricultural laborers." Circular, Incoming Correspondence, July 17, 1878, American Colonization Society Papers, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.; hereinafter cited as A.C.S. Papers.

\(^1\) In regard to the percentage of white-owned land, see United States Commission on Civil Rights, The Decline of Black Farming in America: A Report of the United States Commission on Civil Rights (Washington, D.C., 1982), 17; the study reports: "One-fourth of all landowners controlled from one-half to two-thirds of all the land in most southern counties. More than 70 percent of the blacks in the cotton states were employed in agriculture. In 1880 blacks owned less than 8 percent of all farms."


\(^3\) Ibid., 3.

\(^4\) Ibid., 4.
Doctorate of Divinity. He entered the Eclectic Medical College of Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, in 1868 and received his medical diploma two years later. Leaving Philadelphia, he began the practice of medicine in Mississippi in 1871. In the latter part of 1872, he crossed the Mississippi River into Arkansas and embarked on a career as a doctor, a minister, a state senator and ultimately the leader of the Arkansas exodus to Africa.

His skills as a doctor, coupled with his training and experience as a minister, probably served him well in the Arkansas environment. Eclectic medicine employed the use of botanical products, something Arkansans, both black and white, were accustomed to. But how and where Stanford practiced remains unknown. The historical record is strangely silent on this enigmatic man until 1877 when he was first elected to the Arkansas Senate. Stanford represented the Fourteenth District, which was comprised of Phillips and Lee counties, in the Twenty-First and Twenty-Second General Assemblies.

Professor Charles Bowlus (University of Arkansas at Little Rock) provided very useful obituary information on the Reverend A. L. Stanford (correspondence of December 2, 1983) in the Arkansas Mansion of August 1883 (a nineteenth-century black publication).

The American College of Medicine in Pennsylvania and the Eclectic College of Philadelphia were chartered in 1860 after a split from the Eclectic Medical College of Pennsylvania. In 1865 the former college changed its name to the Philadelphia University of Medicine and Surgery; the rising opposition to eclectic medicine from regular physicians appears to have been behind the change in name. See Harold J. Abrahams, Extinct Medical Schools of Nineteenth-Century Philadelphia (Philadelphia, 1966), 245.

There is some reason to be suspicious of the authenticity of Stanford's degree. The college Stanford graduated from was closed in 1880 after it was exposed as a "diploma mill." Harold H. Abrahams has subjected the college to close scrutiny, and it appears that its dean had political ambitions and freely distributed medical diplomas among black voters as patronage for their support. After subjecting the records to meticulous research, Abrahams lists the matriculates and graduates of the college at the end of his chapter entitled, "The Eclectic Medical College of Philadelphia University of Medicine and Surgery." Stanford does not appear among the matriculates in 1868-1869 nor does he appear among the graduates in 1870. Abrahams, however, is continuing to compile his list of matriculates and graduates. Abrahams, Extinct Medical Schools, 389-417, 426.

Fay Hempstead, A Pictorial History of Arkansas: From Earliest Times to the Year 1890 (St. Louis, Mo., 1890), 1222-23.
Curiously, Stanford's political success occurred after Recon-struction had ended in Arkansas, and it coincided with his interest in the American Colonization Society's back-to-Africa movement. In fact, Stanford appears to have used his position in the Arkansas state senate to promote the back-to-Africa cause. He criss-crossed various counties in 1878, perhaps as part of his campaign for re-election, and handed out House of Representatives stationery to local black farmers. Senator Stanford probably used the stationery to make application to the A.C.S. and hand out free mail services to black friends who were members of the house. In any event, black farmers like Berry Coleman used that stationery to make application to the A.C.S.

The evidence suggests that Stanford entered the political arena with his own peculiar agenda. He had committed himself to the back-to-Africa cause before his election to the state senate; and even before the first convention of the Arkansas Exodus Colony in 1877, Stanford wrote from Helena to William Coppinger, secretary-treasurer of the American Colonization Society, about the condition of blacks in the South and the logistics of the movement. He reported in an elegant handwriting:

The colored people of the South are extremely poor. Poverty is a word inadequate to describe the perilous condition of these people. And it seems impossible for them to extricate themselves. The white people of the South, many of them, labor to keep money out of the hands of these poor people in order to prevent their becoming able to leave the country. Some of the colored people, a few, have land and stock but it is to them almost valueless as they can get no money for it. If there could be some plan adopted by which they could...

On January 2, 1878, A. L. Stanford and C. H. Hicks sailed aboard the bark Monrovia from New York for Liberia. After touring Liberia for two months, they returned to the United States to make reports to the A.C.S. Both Stanford and Hicks endorsed the society's Liberia project. Hicks argued that Africa was the place for American blacks; it was their homeland and offered them more than they could hope to gain in America. He found the citizens and immigrants in the African republic to be prosperous and pleased with their surroundings, and he reported that his own health had been stable throughout the journey, indicating that general health conditions were good. He pointed out, finally, that several families around Forrest City, Mill Brook, Council Bend, and Wittsburg, Arkansas, had expressed interest in emigrating to Africa and that he planned to emigrate himself.

Stanford complimented the A.C.S. for having established what he described as the prosperous colony of Liberia for the downtrodden "Negro" race. Writing from Philadelphia on June 9, 1878, he foresawed previous misgivings about emigration and professed himself to be a true convert to the African cause. He now believed that Africa was the natural home of the "Negro." He cautioned the A.C.S., however, that a greater awakening in the public mind was necessary because those wishing to emigrate would need assistance. And he warned the A.C.S. about the need to be particular in selecting emigrants:

Again I do not think the colony so successfully planted in Liberia ought to be burdened with great numbers, at present, of the indolent, ignorant, and immoral class of American Negroes. I favor a gradual emigration of the more enterprising, hardworking, moral and intelligent class. If some means could be adopted to aid this latter class as much as possible[,] I believe that such a course would not only prove a blessing...
to Africa but would also be the means of inducing the former
class to make themselves efficient.\textsuperscript{21}

It was Stanford's intention to go back to Arkansas, complete
his final term in the general assembly, and then return to Africa.
On his way back to the state, he delivered lectures on emigration
to Africa in principal cities. One such lecture, delivered in
Philadelphia on June 7, 1878, was entitled, "The Future of Africa
and her Present Needs."\textsuperscript{22} Once back in Arkansas, Stanford
appealed to the sympathy of Coppinger of the A.C.S. again on
January 16, 1879. Circumstances in the state, he wrote, were not
favorable to emigration. Blacks in Arkansas who wanted to go to
Africa were suffering economically because of the drop in cotton
prices. Thus they were less able than ever to fund their own
emigration. He reported that only some twenty persons could
pay their fares to New York in the fall and additional funds would
be needed from the A.C.S. to transport the many others who
wished to emigrate to Africa. Stanford complained that "in looking
over the large list of persons which the Colonization Society
in its benevolence has charitably settled in their fatherland I find
that Arkansas is not represented while colored people of almost
every other state [have] been benefited." Stanford pointed out
that Arkansas's inland position made it especially difficult for Ar­
kansas blacks, whom he considered a better class of potential im­
migrant, to participate in the back-to-Africa movement. He
hoped that Arkansas blacks would receive as much help from the
A.C.S. as had blacks located near seaports.\textsuperscript{23}

At the same time that Stanford was appealing to the A.C.S.
for special assistance, B. K. McKeevers, a black man of North
Creek in Phillips County, wrote Coppinger about deteriorating
conditions in Arkansas. Certain whites had become aware of the
back-to-Africa drive and apparently hoped to put a stop to it.
McKeevers, who identified himself as a Presbyterian minister and
school teacher who hoped to go to Liberia, reported:

\textsuperscript{21}Incoming Correspondence, June 9, 1878, A.C.S. Papers.
\textsuperscript{22}A.C.S., Sixty-Third Annual Report, 12-13; incoming correspondence, January
16, 1879, A.C.S. Papers.
\textsuperscript{23}Incoming Correspondence, January 16, 1879, A.C.S. Papers.

The Ku Klus [Ku Klux Klan] has begun to talk to Negroes
out here and whip them about a week ago[,] they taken out
one C. J. Thomas (Clerk of co. No. 16 Liberia Exodus Ark
Colony). After giving him two heavy blows over the head
with a pistol he got away. Dear Sir I hope you will do all you
can for me as I shall continue to seek an asylum from this
segregation [segregation] . . . may long live the Colonization
Society for this great favor to the Anglo African."\textsuperscript{24}

Having performed his duty as one of the two commissioners
for the L.E.A.C. and investigated conditions in Africa, and having
completed his term in the Arkansas Senate, Stanford went on the
lecture circuit to drum up financial support for emigration. He
wrote to Coppinger on May 18, 1879, from Savannah, Georgia,
concerning a question about which Stanford had strong feelings.
Some members of the A.C.S. were advocating migration to the
American West rather than to Africa, but Stanford opposed emi­
gration to any place other than Liberia. He left Georgia for plan­
ed lectures in Charleston, Washington, D.C., and New York and
asked that his medical testimonials be sent along with Eucalyptus
seeds from the Agricultural Department to be used in the treat­
ment of malaria. Stanford now wanted the A.C.S. to appoint him
as medical officer for the emigrants at the rate of seventy-five
dollars per month. After traveling through Arkansas, Tennessee,
Mississippi, Alabama, Georgia, South Carolina, and North
Carolina, "with little or no pecuniary benefits," Stanford was en
route to New York City where he hoped to secure safe passage
to his "fatherland and to labor in hastening the glorious day . . .
when even Africa shall take her place among the civilizations of
the world."\textsuperscript{25} He promised to repay funds previously advanced to
him from fees received from the Arkansas emigrants and others
for services rendered. But he was nearly penniless and requested
financial help for passage to Liberia. Stanford's financial status
was clearly little better than the other Arkansas emigrants who
finally reached the North en route to Liberia in early 1880.

\textsuperscript{24}Incoming Correspondence, February 13, 1879, A.C.S. Papers.
\textsuperscript{25}Incoming Correspondence, May 18, 1879, June 7, 1879, A.C.S. Papers.
After settling their crops in late 1879, the Arkansas emigrants arrived in New York City some time during the first half of 1880 in a destitute condition. They became known as the “Arkansas Refugees” because of the appalling conditions under which they were forced to live. They had spent several months in Philadelphia, where they received aid from the Pennsylvania auxiliary of the American Colonization Society in the amount of $4,000, before going on to New York to await transportation for Liberia. The New York Evening News in April 1880 carried the following headlines in two of its consecutive columns: “WRETCHED REFUGEES—EMIGRANTS FOR LIBERIA ON THE VERGE OF STARVATION”; and “WRETCHED CONDITION OF THE ARKANSAS REFUGEES. THE DEATH TOLL INCREASING.” The emigrants occupied a squalid, overcrowded apartment at No. 118 Thirty-Seventh Street in Denham Court. Thirty-four men, thirty-two women, and thirty children were in need of food; soon their ranks were swelled by additional numbers. Death began to take its toll; four were buried without prayer or graveside services; and a church relief committee had to pay for their funeral expenses. Suffering from inadequate nutrition, they were left penniless and stranded in a neighborhood described as objectionable: “Black and white meet together in orgies, and disgust and disturb the neighborhood.”

Confined to a sick bed in the study of Shiloh Presbyterian Church, the Reverend Henry Highland Garnet, a prominent militant black leader, spoke briefly about the condition of the refugees to a newspaper reporter sometime in April 1880:

These people came here on their own accord. They left Arkansas to avoid oppression. Except that they were not held in bondage, their condition was worse than when slavery existed. Colored men there were hired by the year. They are paid no money until the twelve months expire, meanwhile purchasing the necessities of life from their employers, who charge three or four times more than the market rates. In this way the laborers are brought into debt, and under the law of the state, they cannot leave an employer’s service while in arrears to him. To avoid this a colony was formed to settle in Liberia.28

Probably in response to newspaper publicity, people of all nationalities donated clothing, baskets, and other provisions. Bakers left bread and buns at the door of the Denham Court apartment. Meanwhile, the A.C.S. sent out circulars about the destitute condition of the refugees and received contributions such as that from R. L. Fellows of New Haven, Connecticut, who sent a check for thirty dollars for the “Arkansas Refugees” in May 1880.29

The stage was now set. “The Movement comes from our own hearts; God put it there,” went the credo of the 105 emigrants from Arkansas. Fifty-six came from Helena, and the rest came from nearby towns and rural areas in surrounding counties. The constitution of the L.E.A.C. professed the following sentiments: “We feel it no less a duty than a pleasure and privilege to give the Gospel and Civilization to our fatherland. Africa must be redeemed, and that by persons of African descent; and there are none so well prepared as are the American Negroes.”30 The words “persons of African descent” indicated a certain perspective taken by the L.E.A.C. concerning a question raised by persons associated with the colonization movement. The L.E.A.C. clearly believed that all persons of African descent were eligible to emigrate—a belief that stood in contrast to the cultural nationalism of Reverend Edward Wilmot Blyden, an outstanding Pan-African patriot and educator in Liberia in the nineteenth century who advocated that only “pure Negroes” should emigrate to Liberia. Nevertheless, Blyden addressed the “Arkansas Refugees” on May 16, 1880, in Reverend Garnet’s Presbyterian Church. In his closing remarks, Blyden said: “Let me congratulate you, brethren, on your resolution to go to the land of your fathers.... The best of all is, God is with you. When you land in that country [Liberia] you will be surprised at the new feelings which will take possession

28Clipping, incoming correspondence. April 1880. A.C.S. Papers.
29Clipping, incoming correspondence, entry no. 239, A.C.S. Papers.
of you. . . . There is unspeakable grandeur, in what you now ignorantly call 'the wilds of Africa' and the 'Dark Continent.'" Blyden further encouraged them to assist and cooperate fully with their indigenous brethren; for they would be received with gratitude.31

Two expeditions departed for Liberia, one on May 22 and the other on May 29, on the barks Liberia and Monrovia respectively. Some families of "Arkansas Refugees" were delayed in New York for lack of funds and would make another attempt in the fall of 1880. One hundred and thirty-six emigrants embarked in May 1880, however, under the auspices of the American Colonization Society. The "Arkansas Refugees" constituted the largest number of the voyagers: seventy-six were twelve years of age and above; forty-nine were between eleven and two years of age; and eleven were only two years old. Twenty-five were of good standing in nineteen Baptist and Methodist churches. There were twenty-three farmers, two coopers, two teachers, two ministers, one blacksmith and one brick mason.32

On June 24, 1880, according to a cable from Madeira, the "Arkansas Refugees" arrived in Monrovia after a voyage of thirty-two days. The journey from their Arkansas homes had been a long and perilous one, but now Brewerville, located on the St. Paul River, became their new home. Little more is known of their experiences in Brewerville, but Stanford lived only a few years after reaching Africa. According to an obituary "Judge" Stanford had achieved a level of success and respect in his new home. When he died in 1883, he was serving as Judge of the Court of Quarter Sessions and Common Pleas and was eulogized as a man of "excellent ability" and possessing certain "rare qualities."33

The Liberian Exodus Arkansas Colony of 1877-1880 was no isolated incident but part of an emigration impulse which was lasting and continuous. After over seventy-eight years of operation, the A.C.S. had enabled 16,424 emigrants to settle in Liberia. Together with 5,722 recaptured Africans who were repatriated to Liberia, a grand total of 22,146 emigrants were involved in the colonization scheme by 1895, and the movement continued into the twentieth century.34 The Arkansas episode began in 1877, abated in 1882, and regained some of its momentum in the early twentieth century. The low price of cotton and the hardships of sharecropping provided much of the inspiration for this first back-to-Africa crusade. When Reverend A. L. Stanford led the 105 "Arkansas Refugees" to Liberia in 1880, Brewerville became their new frontier settlement. They established homes and farms and built schools and churches. The Arkansas refugees, together with other refugees from the United States, introduced the American models of democracy, culture, and technology to Liberia, helping to create the modern Republic of Liberia.35 They had freed themselves of the hardship of sharecropping and realized their dreams of land ownership, dreams that would have remained virtually closed to them had they remained in the Arkansas Delta.

31American Colonization Society, Seventy-Eighth Annual Report, 1895, 5.
34African Repository 56 (1880): 73, 85.
35Arkansas Mansion, August 1883.