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"EMIGRATION TO LIBERIA," BY MATTHEW F.K. MCDANIEL

 APRIL 30, 2014 BY [ALLEN MENDENHALL](#)  [LEAVE A COMMENT](#)

Reviewed by **Allen Mendenhall**

Emigration to Liberia is the story of the nearly 500 African-Americans who left Columbus, Georgia, and Eufaula, Alabama, from 1853 to 1903, to emigrate to Liberia, the West African nation that was founded in 1822 by United States colonization.

Matthew F.K. McDaniel marshals evidence from written correspondence and newspapers to piece together the first narrative treatment of those African-American emigrants from this specific region, which he calls the "Chattahoochee Valley." He contends that the establishment of Liberia united many Northerners and Southerners for different reasons, namely, in the North, for the gradual abolition of slavery, and, in the South, for the stability of the slave system once freed African-Americans were removed from the purview of their brothers and sisters in bondage.

Liberian emigrants from the Chattahoochee Valley made up roughly ten percent of the total number of emigrants to Liberia from the entire United States; therefore, the story of the migration from this region reveals much about the overall characteristics of the entire emigrant movement and provides clues as to why many emigrants decided to leave in the first place.

"To blacks," McDaniel explains, "the prospect of Liberia was escape, safety, and opportunity. They could own their own land in their own country and be governed by their own people. Liberia was a new start and a new future for families, far from the whites who had oppressed them."

McDaniel supplies enough historiography to interest and benefit historians working in the field, but enough narrative to engage non-specialists. At only 64 pages, excluding the highly useful notes and bibliography, his book can be read in a single sitting. Its brevity has to do with the fact that it began as a 2007 master's thesis in history at the Louisiana State University. Credit must be given to the editors at NewSouth Books for having the wisdom, faith, and generosity to take a chance on such a short but important work.

Settled by Europeans between 1816 and 1823, Eufaula fell into the hands of whites after the 1832 Treaty of Cusseta forced the Creek Indians off their ancestral land. Columbus was founded in 1828, six years after the founding of Liberia. The future of the African Americans who remained in Eufaula and Columbus turned out to be much different from that of the emigrants to Liberia, many of whom suffered or returned to America.

"Liberia was neither American or African," McDaniel submits, "but a strange medley of the two worlds, and it disappointed many of the Chattahoochee Valley emigrants," who became stuck "within a stringent social hierarchy" that was "similar to the one they had escaped from." They were not used to the tropical climate and were not skilled in the work that was specific to the region; they discovered, too, that the native Liberian elite "mimicked the customs and styles of the whites who had once looked down upon them."

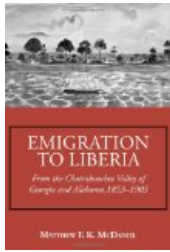
An appendix rounds out McDaniel's research by listing the names, ages, sexes, and, among other things, occupations of all the emigrants who sailed in either the 1867 or 1868 voyages to Liberia aboard the ship *Golconda*. To run your finger down the list, slowly, is to invite questions about who these people were, what they were like, what they did for entertainment, what their wishes and dreams were, what they were leaving behind and hoping to accomplish with their move to Africa, and what happened to them after they arrived there. Facts and data are limited, so, in many cases, we cannot know for sure.

McDaniel has done well with what information he had available to him. Let's hope he's inspired others to pick up where he left off. This is a story worth telling and knowing.

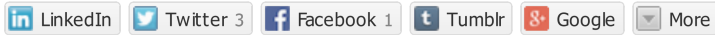
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