

# OUT OF VIRGINIA



Sphex Club of Lynchburg

Nov. 10, 2025

Joe Stinnett

## **Chronology of Colonization**

**1829-1865:** Total of **375** emigrants to Liberia from Lynchburg area.

**1806:** Virginia passes law that anyone freed from enslavement after 1806 must leave the state or return to slavery.

**1825:** Lynchburg Colonization Society founded by local enslavers. Most Black people oppose colonization.

**1829:** First Lynchburg family emigrates to Liberia. Already free, they weren't sponsored by Lynchburg Colonization Society.

**Early 1830s:** Colonization expands to include enslaved people freed only if they agree to emigrate to Liberia.

**1842:** Nancy Lynch family, freed by grandson of John Lynch, ask to go to Ohio, coerced to go to Liberia instead.

**1847:** Liberia becomes sovereign nation with elected legislature.

**1840s-1850s:** Washington Copeland, enslaved, convinces 48 people from Lynchburg area to emigrate in small family groups.

**1860:** Total emigrants sent to Liberia from US since 1822: **10,545**. Death rate: **50 percent**. Indigenous population: **250,000**.

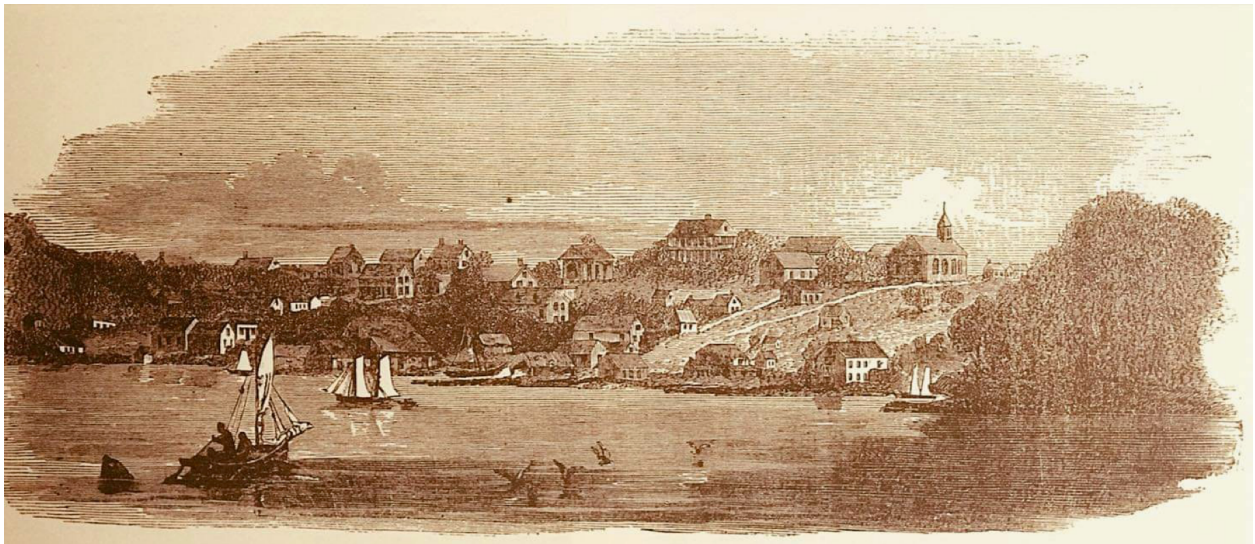
**April 1865:** Civil War ends, local whites redouble efforts, sometimes via violence, to oppress Black people, claiming they are not "free men" but only former slaves.

**November 1865:** Organizing themselves, **172** people from Lynchburg emigrate to Careysburg, Liberia in one large group.

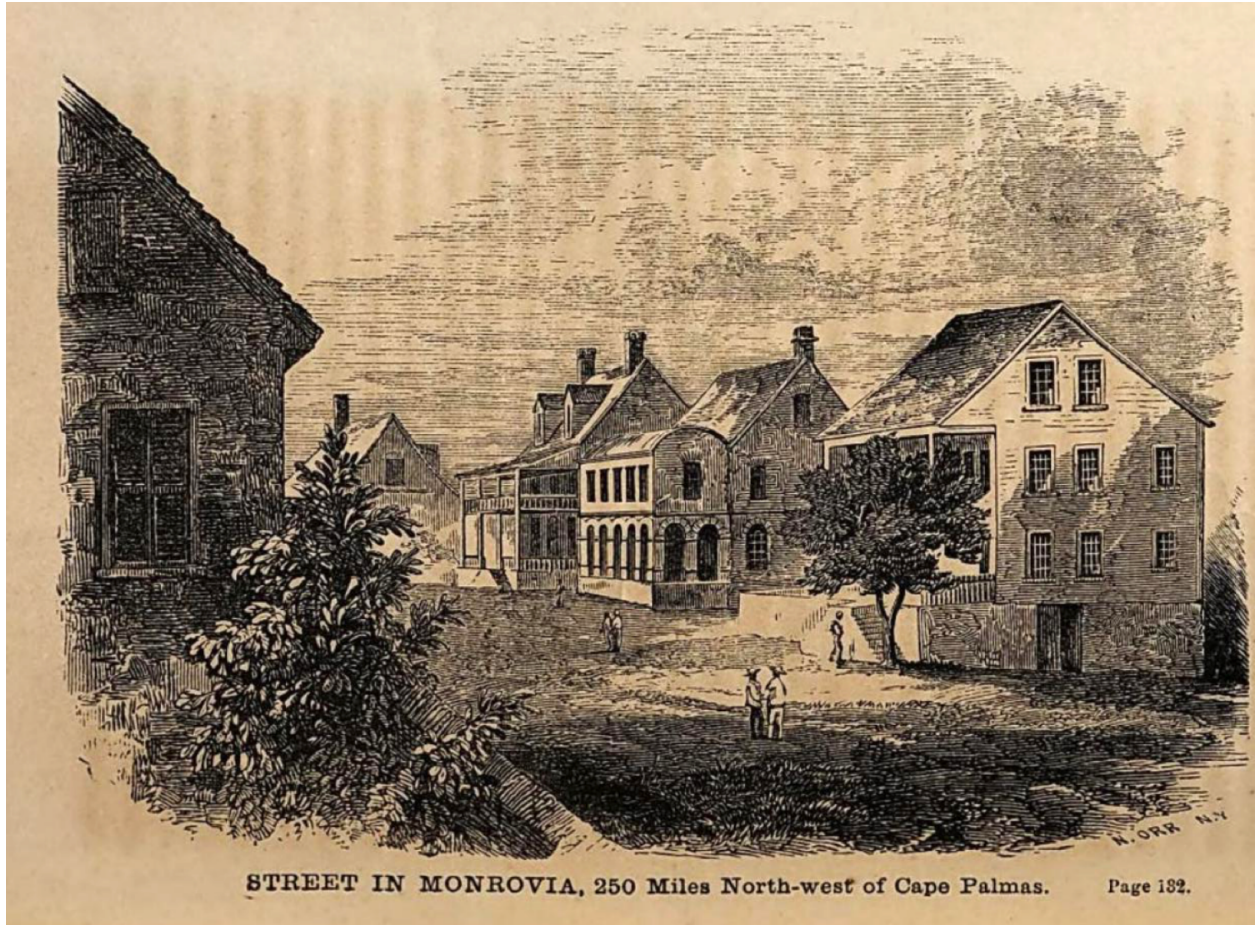


So Ted and I didn't plan this but his paper last time on emigration was really good. I panicked when he started talking because my paper is also about emigration, so prepare yourselves! I'll be talking about emigration out of the United States

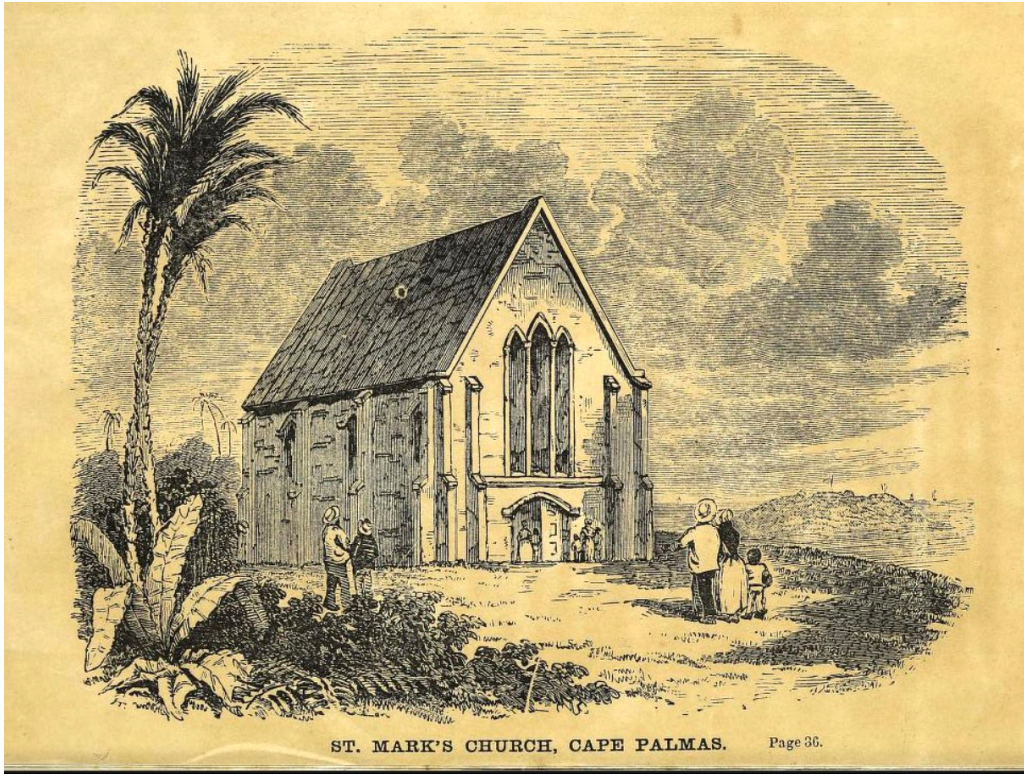
though, to Liberia. That's Liberia in red on the map. It looks small because Africa is so big. It's really only a little smaller than Virginia in land area. Here are a few more images to give you an idea of what Liberia looked like in the mid-19th century.



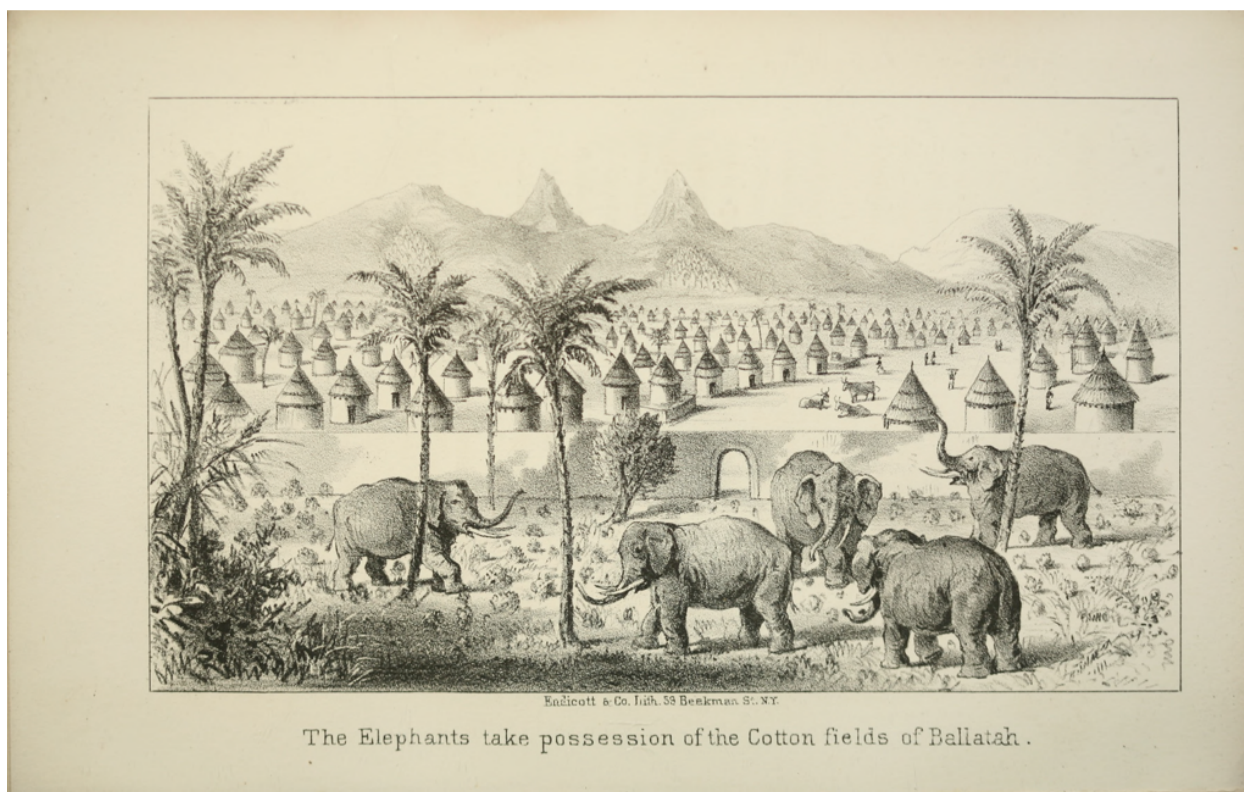
The harbor at Monrovia, Liberia, circa-1855. Augustus Washington



STREET IN MONROVIA, 250 Miles North-west of Cape Palmas.



ST. MARK'S CHURCH, CAPE PALMAS.



This is a drawing from a book by an Americo-Liberian explorer. I love the happy elephants. It's actually in today's Guinea near the eastern edge of the deep Liberian forests.

While researching the end of slavery for a newspaper series about the Civil War, I read in the Oct. 19, 1865, edition of the Lynchburg *Daily Virginian* that a large group of local freedmen—172 total—were emigrating to West Africa. Eight had signed a public letter to the newspaper announcing their intentions. These few

inches of type intrigued me. Why had I never heard of these people? I'm familiar with the history of Lynchburg and Virginia. I knew that some Southern enslaved and freedmen had been sent to Liberia, where malaria killed many of them, but nothing about these local emigrants.

But I eventually learned that story of these Lynchburg people was preserved by the Library of Congress in the voluminous records and letters of the American Colonization Society, the group that wanted to coerce and force Black Americans out of Virginia and the United States.

Some of our veteran members may recall that I presented what little I knew about the 1865 Lynchburg group in my second Spheeris speech 10 years ago. After that speech, Tom Tiller began encouraging me to delve deeper into the story and write a book about it. I scoffed but Tom's friendly enthusiasm and encouragement eventually convinced me and I thought, "hmmm, a book, how hard could it be?" Plenty hard, and I could not have done it without the help and encouragement of Tom and emeritus member Ken West, who were my first readers and made innumerable suggestions that made the book better. I also wanna give a shout out to Mike Gillette, who asked a good question after that first speech, "Why? Why did these families leave now that they were free?" I thought to myself, how should I know? But I didn't forget the question. I hope my forthcoming book, **Out of Virginia: Black Americans' Search for Freedom in 19th Century Liberia**,

answers that question. Or even better, that it lets 19th century Lynchburg Black Americans, people like an enslaved man, Washington Copeland of Lynchburg, speak for themselves. I don't have a photo of him and doubt if one ever existed, but this is how I visualize him as he contemplated freedom, liberty, citizenship, and Liberia.



*Thoughts of the Future (Thoughts of Liberia, Emancipation)*, Edwin White, 1861.

This painting shows a real person, a Baltimore man, in his sparse cabin reading a newspaper. He was apparently a house painter and a handyman and a neighbor of the artist. (Some art critics have speculated that he's supposed to evoke Abraham Lincoln with his long legs and top hat.)

About 375 people emigrated to Liberia from the Lynchburg area between 1829 and 1865 via the American Colonization Society. It was an organization abounding in conflicting motivations but dedicated to moving Black Americans out of the United States. Many were teenagers and children because the emigrants almost always went in family groups. Some were free Black men and women who went willingly to seek a better life and citizenship in a new land, but the majority were freed only on the condition they emigrate to Liberia, a region of West Africa that was already home to an estimated 250,000 people, many different ethnic groups and languages, and multiple cultures.

I had a hard time reconciling the inherent racism and victimization of the colonization movement with the willpower of some emigrants as they decided for themselves to go to Liberia and fought to survive once there. Then I realized that this contradiction WAS *the story*. The two Black Lynchburg men who led the 1865 emigration acted on their own to leave Virginia despite their emancipation. A free Tennessee minister and his family spent 1830 marooned in Lynchburg working to get to Liberia. Washington Copeland, enslaved by Lynchburg's wealthiest citizen, was among the most influential advocates of Liberia in Virginia in the 1840s and 1850s, but two Bedford County women resisted colonization for nearly ten years and when forced to Liberia in 1859 began planning their return before they even landed in West Africa. A Nelson County grandmother coerced to emigrate with her

family in the 1850s spent her final moments on earth dying of malaria in the loft of a tiny cabin in Careysburg, Liberia.

White Virginians mostly ignored and forgot about these people and their heroic struggles for freedom and liberty, so I want to talk a little bit about how the Lost Cause movement contributed to that.

Like other students growing up in Virginia in the mid- twentieth century, I heard in segregated public schools that Black people were inferior to white people, and that after the Civil War, they were too ignorant to handle their freedom. Lasting for nearly a century, these were bald-faced lies first written into Virginia textbooks and society soon after the war ended and renewed around 1900 as part of the Lost Cause movement which aimed to deny the facts of the Civil War and Reconstruction and restore elite white men to a position of legal and economic superiority over everyone else in Virginia.

Once set in motion, southern schools, newspapers, churches, and other institutions, not to mention my own ancestors, perpetuated this Lost Cause interpretation of the Civil War. That's why it remains so powerful among some Virginians of my generation. Southern slavery was not that long ago in generational terms. Most of the teachers I had in elementary school during the 1960s had likely known an old Confederate veteran or had one as a family member or had family members who enslaved people. It is still hard for me to acknowledge

that one of my own great-grandfathers, a Confederate sergeant wounded in Pickett's Charge, was fighting a war to perpetuate slavery, whether or not he believed that himself. Or that another great-grandfather, a farmer, enslaved a family of four.

As a child, I was curious about slavery and asked my Lynchburg grandmother if she remembered it, not realizing she was born years after 1865. She said no, but that slavery "wasn't so bad." I read a book about Robert E. Lee in elementary school and asked my Amherst grandmother about him. As if talking about a Biblical figure, she replied, "Oh, Robert E. Lee was a great man." Their fathers were both Confederate soldiers.

Lynchburg's immersion in Lost Cause mythology was deeper than I realized. Edward A. Pollard is credited with inventing the term with his widely read 1867 book, *The Lost Cause: A New Southern History of the War of the Confederates*. He grew up on the Oak Ridge estate in Nelson County and died in Lynchburg. Confederate Gen. Jubal Early spent the last 20 years of his life in Lynchburg working to perpetuate white supremacy and market the myth that the war had been about the rights of the states, not slavery. He and Pollard described it as a constitutional struggle between two philosophies of government and culture, the Southern one warm, refined, Anglo-Saxon and agricultural, the Northern one cold, base, foreign and industrial.

Reading Pollard and Early and Confederate President Jefferson Davis, one thing stands out. Confederate veterans and their followers did not consider enslaving people, whipping them, and selling their children, a problem.

“The question of the right or wrong of the institution of slavery” was not involved, wrote Davis in his influential 1881 book, *The Rise and Fall of the Confederate Government*. (That’s an untruth we still hear today.)

Since my original Spex speech about Liberia, I’ve read hundreds of letters about, and from, Lynchburg residents, Black and white, in the American Colonization Society’s online archives, preserved by the Library of Congress. They are full of proof that the Lost Cause advocates and their followers were in total denial of the facts in their comments about race and discrimination. Washington Copeland’s letters are a good example.

*'I am 55 years old, a carpenter by trade —  
can do almost anything —  
can read write & cipher very well.'*

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Washington Copeland  
Lynchburg, Sept. 29, 1859

I found Washington Copeland to be so inspiring and self-confident that I want to focus on him for much of this presentation. His letters to the colonization society reveal a man who considered himself every bit the equal of his enslaver, Samuel Miller in all things except wealth and citizenship. Copeland distrusted white people and ingratiated himself with them at the same time. He saw Liberia not as a foreign land to be colonized by Black Americans but as a place where they could not only be free but also achieve citizenship, acquire land, and ensure a better future for their children. He had a hand in convincing 48 local people to emigrate in the

1840s and 1850s.

It's important to remember that any Black Americans freed in Virginia after 1806 were banished by law from the state unless they agreed to re-enslavement.

Many of the emigrants Copeland encouraged were freed by wills of enslavers which ordered they choose between a free state like Ohio, or Liberia, or continued enslavement. These were maybe the toughest choices of their lifetimes. *(Ted covered this dilemma last week, which was faced by all emigrants everywhere.)*

The conditions for free Blacks in Ohio weren't much better than for the enslaved in Virginia. And emigrating with your family to Liberia was extremely dangerous, because 50 percent of the emigrants died within a year or two, mostly from malaria.

In the summer and fall of 1865 nothing much had changed for Black Virginians in and around Lynchburg despite their emancipation. Still subject to discrimination, abuse and violence, they had almost no rights, little property or money, former enslavers were colluding to make sure they received little or no pay for field labor, and white residents demanded they accept their status or leave town.

But why were they the only large group in South to leave the country so close to the moment of their emancipation? I believe the local Black community's familiarity with Liberian emigrations over the previous 35 years, in large part

because of Washington Copeland, had a lot to do with it. Family groups from Lynchburg and surrounding counties had been going to Liberia since 1829. Smaller groups and individuals emigrated almost every year in the 1850s. Pamphlets and books about Liberia circulated in Lynchburg, and after the mid-1830s, colonization was the only form of Black freedom that could safely be discussed.

BLACK PEOPLE IN LYNCHBURG WANTED RIGHTS OF CITIZENSHIP AND LIBERTY, NOT JUST "FREEDOM." IN LATE 1865, THEY WERE REGARDED BY THE LOCAL WHITES AS FORMER SLAVES ONLY, NOT CITIZENS OR EVEN FREE MEN AND WOMEN AND CHILDREN. THIS HAD BEEN SPELLED OUT EXPLICITLY IN THE NEWSPAPER. NONE OF THE AMENDMENTS GRANTING THEM RIGHTS HAD BEEN PASSED. I BELIEVE THIS IS WHY THE LARGE GROUP LEFT LYNCHBURG IN LATE 1865.

Although the colonization society boasted that new emigrants were free to live wherever they wanted in Liberia, the reality was different. An ACS annual report combined cynical honesty about emigration with grotesque hope:

‘Some of them will doubtless not live through the acclimating process. They will go to an early tomb! But the mould shall live fresh upon their graves, and the flowers planted over them shall flourish ... for they died in a holy endeavor to rekindle the extinguished fires, and rebuild the shattered fortunes of their race.’

—  
*American Colonization Society*  
1855

Colonization rhetoric like this triggered the Reverend E.W. Stokes and other ministers in Liberia who saw colonization as anything but a holy endeavor. Stokes, from Baltimore, was among the first Black men ordained by the Protestant Episcopal Church. In a formal letter, the ministers protested emigrants being sent hither and yon amid rampant fever, “dragged like galley slaves to a place they do not like and to which they had no intention of going.” With each new settlement established, the ACS renewed its claim that it was in a healthy locale, but the ministers said many of the settlements were in “very unhealthy, yea, sickly places.”

The American Colonization Society is committing “the wholesale murder of innocent human beings, for though men may be reared in the degradation of slavery, they have immortal souls.”

—  
*The Rev. E. W. Stokes, Monrovia*  
1853

Washington Copeland must have known at least some of the dangers of emigrating to Liberia, but he never mentioned it in his letters. He was enslaved by one of the city’s best known, and richest, citizens, Samuel Miller.

*‘When Mr. Miller first owned me he was much opposed to the cause and said he would give five hundred dollars more for me if he could get it out of my head — but he could not and finally through my influence he has sent 8 persons to Liberia.’*

—  
Washington Copeland,  
Lynchburg, 1859

The eight Millers were among the nearly 50 local people Copeland helped convince to go to Liberia in the 1840s and 1850s. Many of them were freed by their deceased owners’ wills, on the condition they either emigrate to Liberia; move to a “free” state like Ohio; or remain enslaved in Virginia. That’s a polite way of saying it: In effect, they were banished from the place where their families had lived for generations. They weren’t going “back to their homeland.” By 1860, it was rare for them to even have a grandparent who wasn’t born here.

The American Colonization Society was established in 1816, ostensibly to give already-free Black people a better life in the land of their ancestors, and to help

Christianize Africa. Despite these lofty goals, its written records show that the organization's day-to-day focus was **always always always** moving as many Black Americans as possible out of the United States. That included spending limited resources on more emigrations instead of supporting emigrants who were already in Liberia.

Some of colonization's white Virginia supporters believed slavery was wrong for economic, not humanitarian, reasons and some simply thought the state had too many enslaved people for the available work and needed to expel them. Some Northern supporters of the Society believed slavery was morally wrong but also believed the two races could never live together in harmony. Such thinking had resulted in a variety of schemes to push Black Americans out of the United States to places ranging from Haiti to the unexplored Northwest, to Mexico, or to Central America. The American Colonization Society favored West Africa. A letter Thomas Jefferson wrote to Lynchburg's founder, John Lynch, was one of the society's founding documents. Jefferson said colonization was a good idea and mentioned its likely "civilizing effect" on Indigenous Africans.

Most enslaved and free Black Virginians had no interest in leaving the Commonwealth of Virginia, their longtime home, and saw colonization as a white scheme to prop up slavery. They wanted freedom and liberty and citizenship in their home state and insisted that they too were Americans. But in pre-war and

1865 post-war Virginia, not even free Black Americans were citizens. Washington Copeland boiled it down to this:

*'No man is free in any country unless he is  
a citizen of the country.'*

Washington Copeland  
Circleville, Ohio, 1860

By 1820, Black people made up nearly 40 percent of Virginia's population, and white Virginians thought that was too many, far more than were needed for the available labor. In 1825 a dozen of Lynchburg's leading white citizens, nearly all slaveholders themselves, formed a local society affiliated with the American Colonization Society, declaring colonization the solution to the economic and moral questions raised by slavery. Free Black people, of which Lynchburg had

more than a few thanks to its Quaker heritage, were thought to be an evil influence on the enslaved. The Lynchburg-area emigrations began in 1829 with a free Black family from Bedford County influenced by Richmond's free Black community. They determined for themselves that they would have a chance for a better life outside the United States. But in Lynchburg—as in the South more generally—colonization almost immediately expanded to include those who had been freed on the condition they emigrate to Liberia. This was a far-less voluntary choice, supporting the Black belief that colonization was a hypocritical attempt to avoid abolition and emancipation. Washington Copeland agreed and didn't believe the situation would improve in the United States, ever.

He also likely knew that the colonizationists' goal of diminishing Black numbers was absurd, especially in Virginia, which had more people enslaved than any other state. Multiple counties east of the Blue Ridge were majority Black. Campbell and Bedford were among the largest slaveholding counties in Virginia by 1860, with more than 10,000 enslaved residents each despite the thousands sold South from the Lynchburg slave markets.

Copeland's advocacy of Liberian colonization was based on his belief that all Black Americans would be better off in a country where they would be citizens, and that emigrating to Liberia was the only way that could happen.

Surviving emigrants from the Lynchburg area sometimes wrote letters home,

and Copeland stayed in contact with “his” emigrants into the 1860s. He was a self-confident man and seems to have known almost everyone in Lynchburg. His body may have been enslaved, but not his spirit.

He worked as a semi-independent contractor and shared an attitude with writer and abolitionist Martin Delany, who “escaped the prison of inferiority that was created by the practice of white supremacy and found his strength in the acceptance of his innate capabilities as a man,” according to modern historian and philosopher Molefi Kefi Asante, a professor at Temple University.

Copeland, born around 1804, was a family man with a wife, two daughters, and two sons. How he got his education is unknown. He had subscribed to the colonization journal for many years and was well-informed about its activities. The contradictions inherent in the colonization movement were exemplified by Copeland, who fit no stereotype. Most Black people didn’t want to leave Virginia, despite their worsening situation in Lynchburg. Copeland did want to leave, and in fact believed that all Black people would be better off if they left the U.S. He must have known that many hundreds of people had already died in Liberia but never mentioned it in his letters.

Copeland wrote that the young men who emigrated in 1842 with the Nancy Lynch group, freed by the grandson of Lynchburg’s founder, “went through my influence.” The news that an enslaved man was helping other enslaved people

leave the country would not have helped the cause of colonization among white people, who suspected the colonization society was actually an abolitionist group, and the ACS did not correspond directly with Copeland until after he bought his freedom from Miller in 1859.

Copeland was comfortable in the white, Black, free, and enslaved communities, mentioning multiple enslaved, white and free people by name in his letters, and noting that he'd convinced a local philanthropist to pay for his subscription to the colonization journal. He kept a precise count of his emigrants, accounting for nearly half of all Central Virginia emigrants between 1840 and 1860.

Liberia itself, which became a sovereign nation in 1847, had a distinct flavor of Virginia, which provided many of the emigrants who had risen to the top of the Liberian social strata, including the country's first president.

Copeland's enslaver, Samuel Miller, owned more than 30 people in 1840. Local historians Al Chambers and Jim Elson have called him generous and foresighted, but also enigmatic and misogynistic. A self-taught investor, he was reputed to be one of the richest men in the South by the time of the Civil War.

Miller fathered at least one child, a girl, with a woman he enslaved. He freed the child, Sarah Lee, sometime prior to 1850 and she moved to Ohio. Miller left Sarah's daughter, his grandchild, a house and lot in his will, as well as \$12,500 in stock. While Miller did not mention the relationship in his will, he acknowledged it

to a friend and former business partner, who was another Washington Copeland acquaintance. Miller never married, but he had six other children with a white woman, Mary Davidson, who lived in a cottage on his property. Her mother had signed a contract for Mary “to live with him in that way” as a business arrangement, according to a witness in the court case over his will.

He had owned Copeland since at least 1850 but needed fewer and fewer enslaved as his wealth increased and he diversified from tobacco and farming. But one enslaved woman, Willie Ann Kelso, remained at his home outside Lynchburg (it still stands in today’s Richland Hills) until he died in 1869, nursing him through his lengthy final illness. His will had directed that on his death she be freed and sent to a free state. But she was freed by the Emancipation Proclamation and the Civil War, not by his will, and successfully sued Miller’s estate for nearly \$2,000 owed her for his care. According to testimony in another suit over Miller’s will, quote, “She continued to tend him, to be in vigilance his friend, in absolute devotion his slave, to the last hour of his life. He shattered her health by the incessant watching and laborious service which his condition and his preference for her ministrations imposed upon her.” (I found this in Jubal Early’s bound copy of the trial transcripts at Jones Memorial.)

Maybe Miller resented Washington Copeland’s persistence and independent spirit, his self-described hardheadedness. Maybe his disinclination to free him was

a business decision because a talented enslaved craftsman like Copeland was a valuable asset and as a businessman Miller wanted cash in return.

But in 1859, Copeland had finally saved enough money from his independent carpentry work to buy his own freedom and that of his wife from Miller.

They went to central Ohio, not West Africa, moving to the small town of Circleville. But Ohio was no paradise for Washington Copeland. His wife died within months of their fall 1859 arrival, and he blamed it on what he called “this cold country.” He continued to face racism and discrimination in Ohio, but for the first time in their lives, some of his family members were counted by name in the 1860 U.S. census, but not his sons, who were still enslaved in Lynchburg.

*'My wife, two daughters and five grandchildren are free and in Ohio but my two sons are slaves and I cannot persuade (my family) to go to Liberia unless my boys could go also. Could you not put me on some times plan by which I could obtain their freedoms or at least one of them?'*

—  
Washington Copeland,  
Lynchburg, Sept. 29, 1859

Copeland called Ohio an unfriendly place where he received even less respect than in Virginia and still lacked basic rights of citizenship. He wrote that God made Black people suffer slavery and racism in America so they would want to go to Africa and Liberia, “the promised land.” No abolitionist — “I hate them” — Copeland said he was a “whole soul colonization man.” Was he really opposed to abolition, or did he believe that was what the ACS wanted to hear? A later comment indicates he disliked abolitionists for his own reasons.

*'They say abolish slavery and after they get us (free) they will not do anything for us except Rob us of everything.'*

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Washington Copeland  
Circleville, Ohio, 1860

Like the Black anti-slavery writer and abolitionist Martin Delany who I mentioned earlier, Copeland drew a sharp line between simple freedom and true citizenship.

*'The liberty of no man  
is secure, who controls not  
his own political destiny.'*

*Martin Delany  
'Political Destiny of the Colored Race on the American Continent'  
1854*

A vigorous writer himself, Copeland was always ready to advance the cause of colonization. He frequently returned to his most audacious suggestion, that the ACS send him gratis on a voyage to Liberia to scout the country, return, and become an ACS agent, traveling and lecturing in the states. There were no Black colonization agents, and the colonization society was not enthusiastic, but Copeland and a couple of his white friends were persistent.

Liberia was never far from Copeland's mind. He said that not even the risen Christ would have been able to convince white Virginians they were wrong about slavery and race and giving Black Americans a fair chance at success and

prosperity.

*'For my life I can not see where a colored man can be free but in Liberia I do not care what his talents what can he do with it in America ... there is not a (spot) of land in America but the white man wants it.'*

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Washington Copeland  
Feb. 17, 1860, Ohio

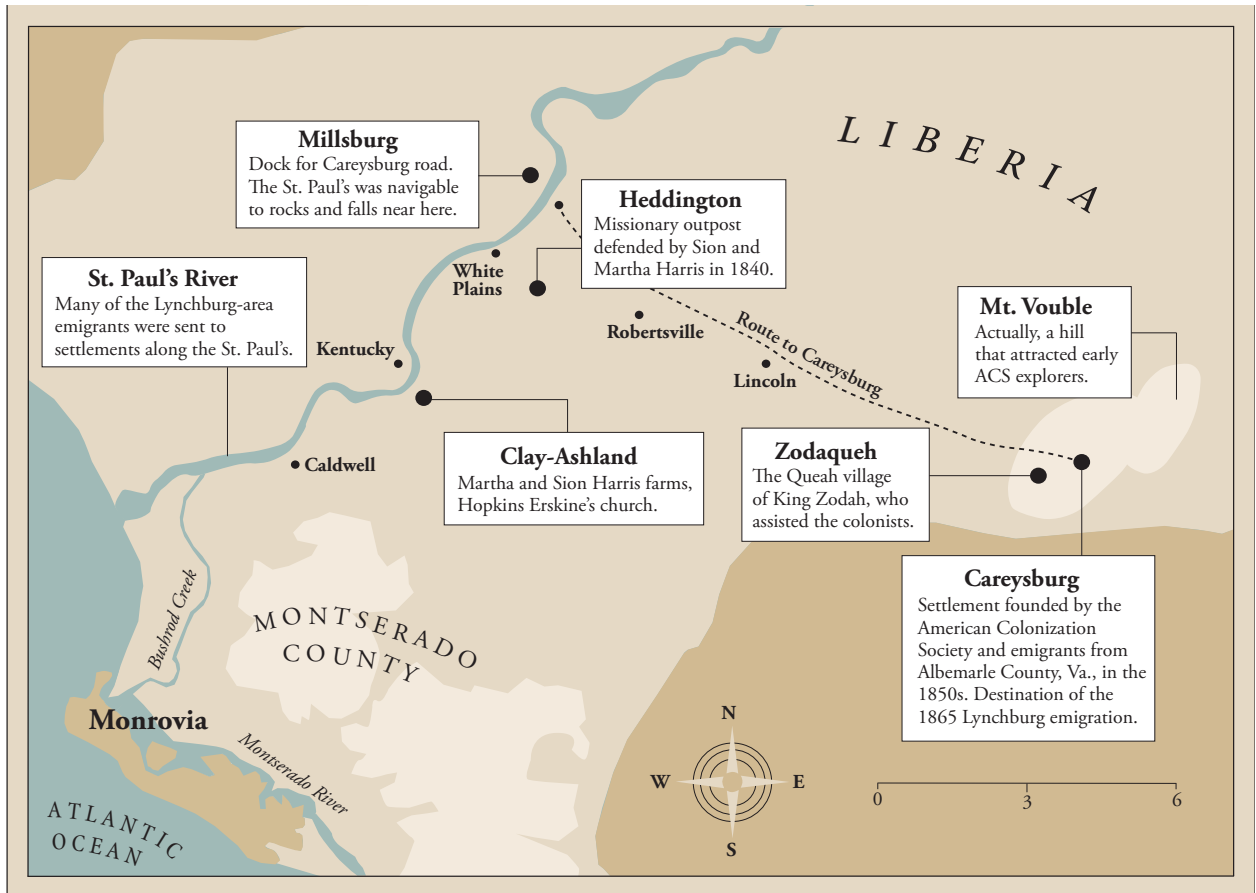
A colonization society manager finally arranged to give Copeland a free passage to Liberia, slipping him aboard a colonization ship in 1860 with some emigrants from Georgia. After each voyage, the ACS noted the running total of people it had sent to Liberia, and this voyage brought the number to 10,545, again documenting the total futility of the white effort to reduce or even impact Black numbers in the United States. After 40 years, the emigrants equaled a less-than-miniscule sliver of the Black American population of 4.5 million.

Copeland traveled with emigrants in the ship's hold. But he soon befriended

one of the cabin passengers, Dr. James Hall of Baltimore, a longtime white colonization official who had previously lived in Liberia as governor of Cape Palmas, a remote area down the coast from Monrovia.

Also headed for Monrovia on the *M.C. Stevens* were three African youngsters — Tony, 12, Pilo, 13, and Sagado, 12 — referred to as “intelligent little fellows.” Kidnapped somewhere in West Africa, these children were put on a slave ship bound for Cuba with 400 other Africans. The boys hid while the rest of the captives were landed in Cuba and were later rescued by a U.S. warship which intercepted the slaver on its return voyage. They were among thousands of Africans from other parts of the continent rescued from slave ships by the American and British navies and then dropped off in Liberia with no attempt to return them to their actual homeland.

Copeland stayed in Liberia several weeks. His sojourn began during one of the most pleasant months in West Africa, December. By March, the heat would become oppressive, with the rainy season beginning in June and lasting until October, reversing the planting seasons emigrants were accustomed to in America. To trade produce, rice and commodities, emigrants and West Africans alike navigated the St. Paul's.



(Map by Jon Ness of The News & Advance)

Despite appearances, the Monrovia Copeland visited in 1860 was not an isolated little Southern-style town. It was also a port city, a market town, and the capital of a sovereign nation with commercial and military ship traffic as well as a small ship-building industry, surrounded by Indigenous people and Africans from other parts of the continent, all with vibrant cultures. While Copeland was in Liberia, the town saw the arrival of Prince Marmora, the leader of a confederation of several Indigenous groups, with an entourage of 100 people including a band

with five horn players, drums and cymbals. Marmora, a Muslim who spoke English, negotiated with the Liberian president on behalf of other West African leaders who were interested in keeping Indigenous commerce flowing between the interior and Monrovia. On market Saturdays, as many as 60 canoes from upriver farms brought in produce and native commodities.

Like Lynchburg, Monrovia was built on a hill, with stone warehouses at its base. Fruit trees flourished in the quarter-acre lots but so did weeds and bushes as the original structures deteriorated. The Americo-Liberians worshipped at three churches — Methodist, Baptist, and Presbyterian. Two newspapers documented the goings-on, the *Liberian Herald* and *Africa's Luminary*. Many of the emigrant families had Indigenous children living with them, a custom that continued into the twentieth century. Liberia College had been completed (but not opened) in Monrovia, with three professors, two of whom would be appointed in 1862 as commissioners to travel to the United States and urge free people to emigrate.

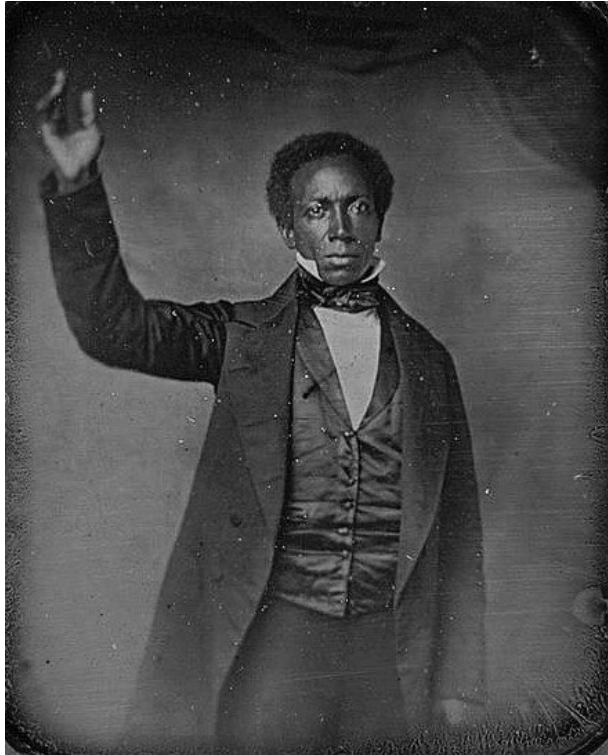
Where did Copeland stay during his 1860 visit? It seems likely he boarded with the people he called his “fellow servants” from the Samuel Miller farm. The most recent, Harriet Miller, had arrived in Monrovia a few years before to join her sister and several other Millers who had emigrated one or two at a time throughout the 1850s through Copeland’s influence on their enslaver. The Millers had survived their own initial exposure to the *anopheles* mosquitos and were doing well, with no

interest in returning to the U.S., Copeland wrote. He also claimed he found about 100 people he knew around the country. After arriving in Monrovia, he sent a note to Billy Helms, who had emigrated from Lynchburg 12 years before at Copeland's encouragement. Helms "immediately came down the river" for an emotional reunion with his friend: "You ought to have witnessed the greeting between us," Copeland wrote. Helms had ordered a barrel of flour and two barrels of dried mackerel to be shipped on the same voyage that brought Copeland to Monrovia. Like Copeland, Helms was a talented craftsman who could do a little of everything and was planning to build a boat, as well as a machine to clean coffee beans for processing.

Determined to collect as much information about the country as possible, Copeland didn't spend all his time with people he already knew. He attended an African church service and listened to an Indigenous minister. The Liberian legislature, modeled on the U.S. Congress, was meeting and Copeland not only attended four sessions, where he said the legislators were as talented as those in America, he also called on a future president of Liberia and dined with him. Liberian Sen. Edward J. Roye, an Ohio native, was one of the wealthiest men in the country.



That's Roye on the left with his hand raised and here he is in a daguerreotype image.



Liberian merchant, senator, and later president, Edward Roye, in 1856. / Photograph by Augustus Washington

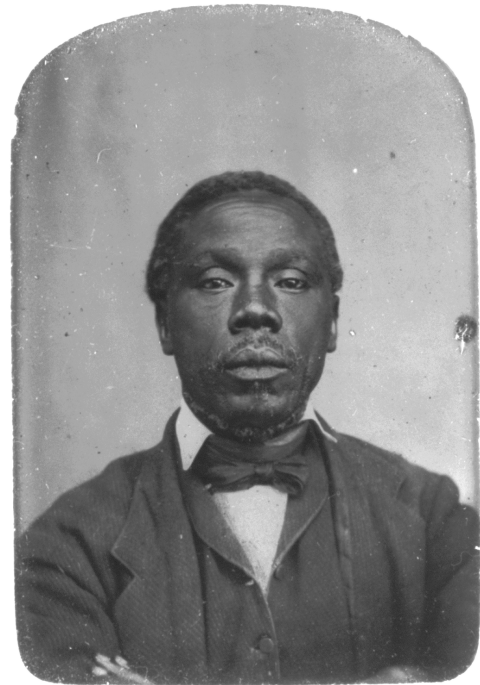
Roye owned a merchant ship and a fine home in Monrovia, but Copeland promptly informed the Liberian senator that people back in Ohio thought Roye was dead. The very much alive Roye offered a hearty rejoinder: “He said ‘not so Copeland for I am in better health than ever I was in my life.’ ” Roye would be elected President of Liberia in 1870 but what impressed Copeland the most in 1860 was Roye’s material success. He said Roye was worth \$300,000 dollars and that

his ship cost him \$15,000, writing, "I dined with him in Monrovia, he has a large home ... full of dry goods of all kinds." A barber in America, Roye had accumulated \$1,000 in capital to help launch his merchant career. By the time of Copeland's visit, he was advertising that he wanted to buy \$50,000 worth of cotton and pay in cash. The Mandings and other ethnic groups grew Liberian cotton from native seed about 100 miles into the interior and wove it into cloth for their own use and to trade in Monrovia. The world demand for cotton was strong, but the settlers themselves couldn't grow enough to make export profitable.

Still, Copeland arrived during a time of guarded hope along the St. Paul's River. "The farmers all seem to be going ahead in growing cane, making sugar syrup and many planting coffee," wrote Lynchburg emigrant and Tennessee native Martha Erskine Harris Ricks. At the same time, Hopkins Erskine, Martha Ricks' brother and one of the most educated and talented of all the Americo-Liberians, still needed the chief ACS agent in Liberia to secure his supplies and trade goods including pork, flour, lard, butter, muslin, linen, flannel, and seed corn. The emigrants had to reimburse the ACS for requests like this.



Mrs. RICKS, The Queen's Liberian Visitor.  
ELLIOTT & FRY Copyright. 55, BAKER STREET W.  
AND AT 7, GLOUCESTER TERRACE, S.W.



Martha Erskine and her brother,  
Hopkins, were marooned in  
Lynchburg for a year as children.

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They emigrated with their family from Lynchburg around 1830. From Tennessee, they had been marooned here for a year due to the ineptitude of the colonization managers. With the family was Sion Harris, who Martha later married. **He came back to Lynchburg in the 1840s on a recruiting trip, as did Hopkins Erskine in 1866.** Here are some comments from all three.

‘I can say that I thank God I am at home in Africa. ... I never expect to conten(d) with the ‘colored’ man in America no more. If they come, well; if not (it is) well with me. I expect to die in Africa where the free air blows, for here (is) liberty. We have been oppressed long enough. We (mean) to stand our ground & contend for our rights until we die.’

—  
*Sion Harris, Liberia, 1847*  
*(Martha’s first husband and childhood friend )*

He was killed by a bolt of lightning in the early 1850s.

'I have been surrounded by war and death.  
Indeed, I thought my end was nigh; but God  
has saved my life ... God fought the battle,  
and delivered us out of the hands of our  
enemies.'

---

*Martha Erskine Harris (Ricks)*  
*Caldwell, Liberia, 1840*  
*(After combat with West Africans when*  
*she and Sion Harris were nearly killed.)*

*“Our hope of building up a nation of independent and industrious civilized and Christian people is not predicated alone on emigrants by any means but we are looking to our untutored brethren of these vast forests ... to teach them Christianity and (civilization) is our aim.”*

—  
*Hopkins Erskine  
Clay-Ashland, Liberia, circa-1860*

On its return trip, the ship that brought Copeland to West Africa carried some Liberian sugar and syrup ordered by a Lynchburg merchant. The ship also brought Copeland himself back to America, but not before a final trip down the coast when he accompanied colonization official Hall and some emigrants to Cape Palmas at the far south-eastern end of Liberia.

The colonization society had not agreed to pay for Copeland’s return voyage to the states, but he talked Hall into letting him return to America on the same ship at no charge. After his return, to America, Copeland was confident enough of his free status that he planned to visit Virginia and Lynchburg to proselytize for Liberia,

but the Civil War prevented that, and he lectured in Ohio instead:

*‘I would never have left Liberia if I had been ten years younger ... I found six of my fellow servants in Liberia doing well and they could not be prevailed on to return under any circumstances ... I intend to be a soldier in the field for Liberia for the balance of my days’*

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*Washington Copeland  
Sept. 3, 1861*

In September 1861 he also wrote that he had five people from Circleville interested in emigrating and asked for help with arrangements. He said he planned to emigrate himself, but that trip didn't materialize.

Washington Copeland never stopped endorsing Liberia. He remarried in 1862 and tried again to emigrate in 1863. Instead of pleading his case to the ACS, he went directly to the U.S. government, asking that it pay for himself and a Circleville minister to emigrate. Mentioning them by name, Secretary of the Interior J.P. Usher wrote that they didn't qualify for the assistance.

After this 1863 rebuff, Copeland disappears from the historical record. He sometimes wrote as if contemplating his eventual passing: There's no indication he ever emigrated, and I believe he died sometime between 1863 and 1870. He isn't listed in the 1870 census although his family members are.

Copeland didn't mention fever or sickness in his letters about his trip, but several weeks in Liberia was sufficient time to contract malaria. Staying only a few weeks meant he was less exposed to the mosquitos than the emigrants. Had he picked up the disease and returned stateside to suffer recurring bouts of fever? He didn't say. Despite occasional references to his age and having only 10 years left to live, maybe nothing killed him except cold Ohio.

Copeland's legacy of determination for freedom, civil rights and dignity was passed to members of his family. Bucyrus Copeland, also a carpenter, spent the war years enslaved in Lynchburg and appears to have been one of the sons Washington Copeland mentioned in his letters. He would emigrate with the large Lynchburg group in 1865. James Copeland, Washington Copeland's grandson, was involved in one of the first protests by Black Americans denied their legal voting rights, in 1870 in Ohio. White poll workers told a group of Black men attempting to vote in a Circleville election that their ballots would not be counted, despite passage of the 14th and 15th Amendments. The would-be voters, including James Copeland, did not take no for an answer, held a community meeting, and petitioned

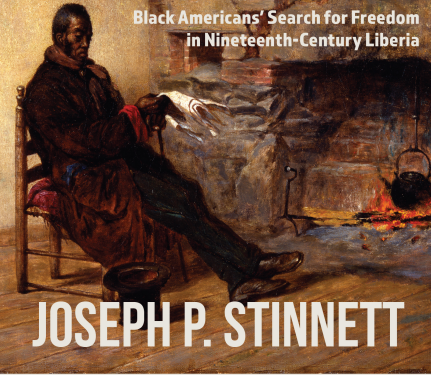
their congressman, contributing to passage of the Enforcement Acts of 1870-71, which made interfering with the right to vote a federal crime. Washington Copeland would have approved. And so I believe would the man in the painting.

A horizontal strip of a handwritten signature in cursive script, reading "Washington Copeland". The ink is dark and the background is light and textured.

Thanks for listening. My book ([www.outofvirginia.com](http://www.outofvirginia.com)) will be published in March 2026 by the University of Virginia Press.

# OUT OF VIRGINIA

Black Americans' Search for Freedom  
in Nineteenth-Century Liberia



JOSEPH P. STINNETT