



## *Abolition in Sierra Leone*

Tracing the lives and experiences of 100,000 Africans who landed in Sierra Leone having been taken off slave vessels by the British Navy following Britain's abolition of the transatlantic slave trade, this study focuses on how people, forcibly removed from their homelands, packed on to slave ships, and settled in Sierra Leone, were able to rebuild new lives, communities, and collective identities in an early British colony in West Africa. Their experience illuminates both African and African diaspora history by tracing the evolution of communities forged in the context of forced migration and the missionary encounter in a prototypical post-slavery colonial society. A new approach to the major historical field of British antislavery, studied as a history not of legal victories (abolitionism) but of enforcement and lived experience (abolition), Richard Peter Anderson reveals the linkages between emancipation, colonization, and identity formation in the Black Atlantic.

RICHARD PETER ANDERSON is Lecturer in colonial and postcolonial history at the University of Exeter. He has published in journals including *Slavery & Abolition*, *African Economic History*, and *History in Africa*. He is co-editor of *Liberated Africans and the Abolition of the Slave Trade, 1807–1896* (forthcoming) with Henry Lovejoy.

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# Abolition in Sierra Leone

Re-Building Lives and Identities in  
Nineteenth-Century West Africa

RICHARD PETER ANDERSON  
*University of Exeter*



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*For my parents*

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## *Notes on the Text*

The subject of this book is a population of formerly enslaved Africans referred to in the scholarship as Liberated Africans or recaptives. Many studies state that Liberated Africans were originally termed recaptives. Yet as Christopher Fyfe points out, this usage is anachronistic.<sup>1</sup> “Captured negroes” was the first term adopted following the 1807 Abolition Act, and remained in currency until Freetown’s Captured Negro Department was renamed the Liberated African Department in 1822. While the very first page of the first register of freed Africans from November 1808 refers to “Liberated Africans,” the term was not widely used in Sierra Leone or by British authorities elsewhere during the first decade of suppression, and it was not until 1820 that the term “Liberated Africans” made its first appearance in Parliamentary Papers.

An 1816 report by Edward Bickersteth, the Assistant Secretary of the Church Missionary Society sent to inspect the mission in 1816, contains what may be first use of phrase “Recaptured Negroes.”<sup>2</sup> But while the adjective “recaptured” was in use by the 1820s, there is no record of the noun “recaptive” before the 1880s. It might therefore be inappropriate in a study on identity to employ this anachronistic term. Yet “recaptives” is used herein for two reasons. First, the term conveys the two key moments – that of enslavement and the subsequent intervention of the British Navy – that defined the lives of those who disembarked from slave ships at Freetown. Second, employing the term “Liberated African” uncritically fails to consider

<sup>1</sup> Christopher Fyfe, *A History of Sierra Leone* (London: Oxford University Press, 1962), 114.

<sup>2</sup> *Proceedings of the Church Missionary Society for Africa and the East, Seventeenth Year: 1816–1817* (London: L. B. Seeley), 161.

the very circumscribed freedom that many recaptives faced in this colonial setting.<sup>3</sup>

A further complication arises from the various meanings of the term Sierra Leone over time. Chapter 1 employs the term Sierra Leone in reference to a region of coast, defined by Philip Curtin and adopted by the *Voyages* database as stretching from Guinea-Bissau to just west of Cape Mount (Liberia).<sup>4</sup> But the term does not represent a political or ethnolinguistic region except in the documents of slave traders, nor does it correspond in any meaningful way to pre-colonial African history.<sup>5</sup> The term also does not correspond to the present-day borders of Sierra Leone, which expanded dramatically with Britain's declaration of a protectorate in 1896. To avoid confusion, the text usually refers to the "colony" or "peninsula" of Sierra Leone, today the Western Area and one of four principal regions in the post-colonial state of Sierra Leone.

The social and cultural history of recaptives means engaging with several African languages. Many of these languages were being studied and transcribed for the first time in Sierra Leone in this period. I have employed modern usage, including tone marks, except when quoting contemporary documents, in which the spelling and orthography of these languages were often only in their formative stages.

<sup>3</sup> My reasoning echoes Sharla Fett, who argues in the case of Liberia and American slave trade suppression that "recaptive" and "recaptured" serve "both as a more accurate descriptor [than 'liberated'] of the social experience of slave ship rescue and as a useful metaphor for the conflicting representational claims made on the bodies of slave ship refugees." Sharla M. Fett, *Recaptured Africans: Surviving Slave Ships, Detention, and Dislocation in the Final Years of the Slave Trade* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2017, 4).

<sup>4</sup> P. E. H. Hair, "The Spelling and Connotation of the Toponym 'Sierra Leone' since 1461," *Sierra Leone Studies*, New Series, 18 (1966): 43–58.

<sup>5</sup> Paul E. Lovejoy, "The Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade Database and the History of the Upper Guinea Coast," *African Economic History*, 38 (2010): 1–28.

## *Abbreviations*

<b>CMS</b>	Church Missionary Society Archives, University of Birmingham
<b>CO</b>	Records of the Colonial Office, The National Archives, Kew
<b>FO</b>	Records of the Foreign Office, The National Archives, Kew
<b>HCA</b>	Records of the High Court of Admiralty, The National Archives, Kew
<b>LADLB</b>	Liberated African Department Letterbook, Sierra Leone Public Archives, Fourah Bay College, Freetown
<b>MMS</b>	Methodist Missionary Society Archives, School of Oriental and African Studies, London
<b>SLPA</b>	Sierra Leone Public Archives, Fourah Bay College, Freetown