

## Back to Africa vs. 40 Acres and a Mule

The feeling from black people that America “owes them something” stems from a tradition of belief that has been passed down for generations. In the vast majority of precolonial African societies, there was no such thing as “land ownership.” Most Africans dealt on a first-come basis. But it wasn’t the first people to come to a spot of land, it was the first people to make something GROW on the land. The closest thing Africans got to land-ownership was the commonly believed ideal that once you made the land productive, it belonged to you and your community and newcomers were expected to move on. During the slave era in America, you read many accounts of slaves feeling a sense of ownership toward the land they were working on. After abolition, this notion exploded into expectation. Many slaves believed that they had earned some land by virtue of having worked on it their entire lives, rather than their masters. When a rumor got out that the Freedman’s Bureau was awarding 40 acres and a mule to all freed slaves, many slaves believed it because, well, it was about damn time. Since then, this school of thought that America owes the descendants of slaves 40 acres and a mule has only grown and evolved. This was the argument Frederick Douglass used when his friend Martin Delany claimed in the 1830s that the only way black people were going to get equal rights was if they emigrated to Africa and formed their own society. This was also the argument W. E. B. Du Bois used when his not-friend Marcus Garvey claimed in the 1920s that the only way black people were going to get equal rights was if they emigrated to Africa and formed their own society. This was also the argument Martin Luther King used when Stokely Carmichael claimed in the 1960s that the only way black people were going to get equal rights was if they emigrated to Africa and formed their own society. Black people have poured blood, sweat, and tears into this country—helped BUILD this country—the anti-emigrationists argued, and had every right to and expectation of freedom RIGHT HERE. They were Americans, now.

The issue of a Back-to-Africa movement actually found its realization in the form of the nation of Liberia. As every American should know but for some reason is almost never taught, the African nation of Liberia was formed when American free blacks sailed back to Africa to establish a “civilized” black society. The capital of Liberia is Monrovia, named after James Monroe, who was U.S. president at the time. Bizarrely, the organization that sent these Americanized blacks back, the American Colonization Society, was an ungodly partnership of white and black abolitionists with white supremacists. The abolitionists needed political and financial backing, and found it in a collection of white politicians who believed that bringing blacks to America and trying to live with them had all been a really big mistake. Sadly, the Americanized blacks who founded Liberia ended up subjugating the native population with a sense of cultural superiority the same way Europeans had done to their own ancestors generations before. Even to this day, Liberia’s “Krio” ethnic group—with names like Johnson, Taylor, and Smith—still rule over an unequal society where blacks with native ancestors are seen as “backward.” So, the next time you hear someone say blacks should go back to Africa, you tell them some of them already did. Maybe that will make them happy.