

Frequently Asked Questions: Susan E. Lindsey & *Liberty Brought Us Here*

How did you find this story?

While I was doing other research many years ago (so long ago I still had red hair!), I stumbled across a single line saying that a man named Ben Major had freed his enslaved people and they went to Liberia. I dug a deeper and found that they had corresponded across the ocean for years. I was stunned to learn that their letters from Africa still existed in a museum in Illinois. I lived only a few hours away and made a trip to the museum as soon as I could. The first time I read the Major letters, I was moved to tears. I sat quietly, alone in a reading room, and absorbed the thought that I was holding a letter written by a former slave, a brittle and faded piece of paper that had sailed across the ocean on a ship more than a century and a half earlier.

I wanted to know more. Why did Ben Major, who descended from a long line of slave owners, decide to free his enslaved people? Did the newly emancipated people *want* to go to another country? Did they have a choice? What would life in Africa have been like for them? What was the colonization movement about? Were those who supported colonization motivated by noble or nefarious intentions? My curiosity led to years of research and eventually to this book.

What motivated you to write this book?

I felt compelled to tell the story once I read the letters sent from Liberia. I was captivated by this powerful and emotional tale. I had four main objectives:

To examine the ongoing relationship between a former slave owner and the people he freed—a subject seldom tackled in historical writing—and preserve their story.

To shed light on the story of the colonization movement, an episode in American history that is not widely known or taught.

To explore the challenges of immigration and establishing a new republic, and the tragic consequences of clinging to old ways and attitudes.

To present perspectives beyond the standard narrative that the colonization movement was all about racism or exile/deportation.

What kind of research did you do?

I conducted more than six years of very extensive and careful research for this book, using secondary and primary sources (including never-before published letters the Liberian settlers sent to their former owner and some of the former owner's private records and correspondence). I asked people who were born in Liberia and people who were experts in Liberian history to read my manuscript during my revision process, and I took their comments to heart. University Press of Kentucky asked three independent subject matter experts to review the manuscript before they

accepted it for publication. I've included more than 400 endnotes citing all of my sources, as well as an extensive bibliography.

What surprised you about this story?

1. The Major and Harlan immigrants to Liberia were literate at a time when it was illegal in most Southern states to teach enslaved people to read and write.
2. The black Majors went to great lengths to continue their relationship with their former owner. In turn, he showed a willingness to help them survive their first several years in Liberia. They appear to have genuinely cared for and respected one another.
3. The American Colonization Society was established in 1816 and was active until 1913. During that time, 16,000 American freeborn and formerly enslaved black people left America to settle in Liberia. It was the largest out-migration in US history.
4. Colonists included women, children and the elderly.
5. About 20 percent of the colonists died of malaria in their first year in Africa.
6. Some people viewed colonization as a scheme to end slavery; others viewed it as a way to ensure the continuation of slavery. Motivations of colonizationists were complex and often contradictory.
7. Some abolitionists, freeborn black people, enslaved people, and slave owners supported colonization; others in these same groups opposed it. There were no easily drawn lines.
8. Once in Liberia, the settlers from America imposed a culture that mimicked much of what they knew in the American South, including a two-tiered society that put indigenous people below them.
9. The colonization movement had an enduring impact on Liberia, ultimately resulting in two horrific civil wars.
10. Ben Major so valued the letters from his formerly enslaved people that he retained them his whole life, and his survivors and descendants preserved them for generations.