

‘The Love of Liberty Brought us Here’: Migration of African-Americans from the United States to Liberia, 1820-1904

Leigh Gardner

London School of Economics and Stellenbosch University

l.a.gardner@lse.ac.uk

Abstract:

African-American settlers and their descendants dominated Liberian political and economic institutions for nearly 150 years after the country’s declaration of independence in 1847. This paper examines the human capital of the migrants, drawing on individual-level data for 16,000 African Americans who migrated from 1820-1904. By comparing the migrants to those who remained in the US using American census data, the paper contradicts claims made by earlier studies that migrants were disproportionately literate and skilled. It shows instead that, following an initial wave of more skilled pioneers, migrants were increasingly southern, unskilled and illiterate relative to their peers. The paper argues that this changing composition of settlers helps to explain the adoption of institutions in Liberia which closely resembled those of the American South. This paper adds to a growing literature in African economic history using micro-data, and contains one of the first efforts to match individuals across generations by combining the migrant lists with the Liberian census of 1843.