



MATILDA NEWPORT MONUMENT

Monrovia, Liberia

6.349975, -10.653281



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Executive Summary

The Matilda Newport Monument in Monrovia, Liberia, commemorates the victory of American free Black settlers over the indigenous population in battle in 1822. The protagonist of the story, Matilda Newport, is credited with lighting a cannon that resulted in the defeat of the native people. The monument has stood in Monrovia since 1922. Though Newport's story has been debunked, and celebrating these events has been widely contested in Liberia since the 1970s, the monument still stands. This case study examines the interpretations of Newport's legacy and the impact of this legacy on relations between Americo-Liberians and Native Liberians.

Introduction

The legacy of Liberian folk heroine Matilda Newport, once commonly celebrated in Liberia, is now widely contested. From the late nineteenth century, Newport was recognised as a key figure in the defeat of the native population at Cape Mesurado by American Black settlers in 1822. For around a century, she was widely celebrated by Liberians, including an annual celebration of 'Matilda Newport Day' every 1 December. Her legacy was first contested in the 1960s, and public debates about her continued into the twenty-first century. Whilst Matilda Newport Day is no longer celebrated, she is still commemorated with a monument outside the Centennial Pavilion in Liberia's capital, Monrovia, and a street and school named after her. It is now commonly accepted that her purported actions in battle are fictionalised and that her legacy holds negative connotations for Native Liberians, who form the majority of the population of Liberia. This case study examines the interpretations of Newport's legacy and the tensions between Americo-Liberians and Native Liberians that are to be found in this history.

Background

A Mythologised History of Liberia

Cape Mesurado, a coastal region on the site of modern-day Monrovia, was colonised by a group of free Black Americans in the 1820s with the help of the American Colonisation Society (ACS).¹ In 1822, the native people of the region around Cape Mesurado – the Dei, Bassa, and Gola people – initiated two attacks on the colony, but they were repelled by the American colonists.² Eyewitness accounts of the events make no mention of any women involved in defending the colony. However, later in the century, accounts of the battles began to mention a woman named Matilda Newport, who is credited with firing a cannon that drove away attacking 'natives'. The first such account appeared in 1854, over thirty years following the events it described.³ Over the following decades, the story of Matilda Newport became increasingly detailed, with many accounts claiming she lit the cannon with coal from her pipe. By the early twentieth century, the tale had come to symbolise the victory of the American settlers over the Native Liberians and was celebrated annually on Matilda Newport Day.⁴ However, modern scholarship on Matilda Newport has revealed that whilst she did exist and was among the colonialists in Cape Mesurado in 1822, her involvement in defending the colony is fictional.⁵

Celebrating Matilda Newport

¹ The ACS was an American organisation founded in 1816 that supported the migration of freeborn black Americans and emancipated slaves to Africa.

² Svend E. Holsoe, "Matilda Newport: The Power of a Liberian Invented Tradition," *Liberian Studies Journal* 32, no. 2 (2007): 28.

³ *Ibid.*, 28-30.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 33-34.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 31-32; Siahnyonkron Nyanseor, "Putting to Rest the Matilda Newport Myth - Part 2," *The Perspective*, January 7, 2004

Matilda Newport came to be widely celebrated by the end of the nineteenth century. In 1916, the holiday commemorating the final battle between the American settlers and the Dei people on 1 December was renamed Matilda Newport Day.⁶ Throughout the twentieth century, Matilda Newport existed firmly in the Liberian imagination: school children would learn about her in class and would have to parade through the streets on Matilda Newport Day in Monrovia and other Liberian cities.⁷ For Liberians, Newport was said to represent the triumph of Americo-Liberians, leading to the eventual establishment of the Liberian Republic in 1847. She also represented the importance of Liberian women, having been described as ‘Liberia’s Joan of Arc’ and a ‘Sainted Mother.’⁸

The Matilda Newport Monument

The Matilda Newport Monument, which now stands outside the Centennial Pavilion in Liberia’s capital, Monrovia, is reported to have been erected in 1922, the hundredth anniversary of the battles at Cape Mesurado.⁹ It is unclear who commissioned the monument, though Jane J. Martin and Rodney Carlisle cite ‘the Newport Volunteers, along with a company of women’ as being responsible for the erection of the monument.¹⁰ The ‘Newport Volunteers’ may refer to a company of the Liberian militia of the First Regiment in Montserrado County, which was renamed the ‘Newport Volunteers’ in 1864.¹¹ Therefore, the monument may have been initiated by an official body or institution, such as the government or militia, collaborating with a Liberian community group or organisation.

The monument, also described as the ‘Cendtaph’ by anthropologist Svend Holsoe, is a four-sided column coloured white and blue, standing about as tall as the Centennial Pavilion. On one side of the column, close to eye level, is a depiction of Newport lighting a cannon with her pipe and driving off attackers of the Cape Mesurado colony.¹² The native people are depicted as very small in comparison to Newport and are wearing feathered headdresses in a style often used to depict Native Americans, despite the fact that this form of headdress does not exist amongst any ethnic

⁶ Mary H. Moran, “Newport, Matilda (1795-1837),” in Henry Louis Gates, Emmanuel Akyeampong, and Steven J. Niven, eds., *Dictionary of African Biography* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011).

⁷ Svend E. Holsoe, “Matilda Newport: The Power of a Liberian Invented Tradition,” *Liberian Studies Journal* 32, no. 2 (2007): 38; Fred P. M. van der Kraaij, “Matilda Newport (1822) and the Civil War,” *Liberia: Past and Present of Africa’s Oldest Republic*, December 1, 2008; Siahyonkron Nyanseor & J. Kpanneh Doe, “Expunging Our National Symbols of Falsehoods: A Rejoinder to James Thomas-Queh’s “Preserve Our Historical National Symbols, But Cleanse Our Minds into a Positive Future,”” *The Liberian Dialogue*, July 21, 2014.

⁸ The Independent Probe, “Hailing Matilda Newport’s Defense of the Native Land @183yrs; Happy Birthday ‘The First Regiment,’” *The Independent Probe*, December 1, 2020.

⁹ Though the monument stands outside the Centennial Pavilion, this building wasn’t constructed until 1947, 23 years later after the monument is reported to have been erected. It is unclear whether the monument previously stood elsewhere and was moved, or if it has remained on the same site since its erection. Svend E. Holsoe, “Matilda Newport: The Power of a Liberian Invented Tradition,” *Liberian Studies Journal* 32, no. 2 (2007): 34; Siahyonkron Nyanseor, “Putting to Rest the Matilda Newport Myth - Part 2,” *The Perspective*, January 7, 2004.

¹⁰ Jane J. Martin and Rodney Carlisle & Students of the Seminar in Historical Sources, University of Liberia- Semester I, 1975, “The Search for Matilda Newport,” A background paper presented at the Symposium on Matilda Newport Day in Liberia, held by the Institute of African Studies, University of Liberia, 1975, 16.

¹¹ Svend E. Holsoe, “Matilda Newport: The Power of a Liberian Invented Tradition,” *Liberian Studies Journal* 32, no. 2 (2007): 33.

¹² Svend E. Holsoe, “Matilda Newport: The Power of a Liberian Invented Tradition,” *Liberian Studies Journal* 32, no. 2 (2007): 34.

group of Liberia.¹³ There is a second monument to Newport at the site of the Joseph J. Roberts monument at Fort Norris, Ducor Hill, Monrovia, where the story of Newport is carved in stone relief. The cannon purportedly fired by Newport still stands near this site.¹⁴

History of the Contestation

Despite making up a small minority of the population of Liberia, Americo-Liberians held political power over the country from the establishment of the Republic of Liberia in 1847 until a *coup d'état* in 1980.¹⁵ From their arrival in the region, American Black settlers viewed the indigenous Liberians as 'primitive' and 'uncivilised', establishing a 'caste' system which held Native Liberians living under Liberian jurisdiction at the bottom of the social structure.¹⁶ From the early twentieth century, Americo-Liberian rulers instituted a colonial policy of 'indirect rule' over the Liberian interior, which treated Native Liberians as colonial subjects.¹⁷ Native Liberians were granted a franchise in 1945, and 'indirect rule' was abandoned in 1964, raising the 'African masses... from an essentially colonial to a citizen status.'¹⁸ Following the *coup d'état* of 1980 and two civil wars in the late twentieth century, Liberia's presidents have since been of Native Liberian heritage.¹⁹ This historical context sets a backdrop of friction and conflict between Americo-Liberians and Native Liberians, against which the contestation of Matilda Newport's legacy can be understood.

Criticism of Matilda Newport's legacy grew in the 1960s and 1970s. Objections focused on two main areas of contestation: the veracity of the story of her involvement in battle and the divisive connotations of celebrating the American settlers' victory over Native Liberians. Studies published in 1975 and 2007 established that Matilda Newport did exist and was among the colonists residing at Cape Mesurado in 1822. However, these studies found that her actions in battle are almost certainly fictional, as are other claims about her life, such as that she helped set up the first Liberian school.²⁰ More significantly, Liberians began to question why this story was so widely celebrated, given that it holds a negative and derogatory meaning for the majority of Liberians.

¹³ Blaine Harden, "Mildewing Monrovia Has a Hint of Antebellum South, Pinch of Anacostia," *The Washington Post*, August 1, 1986; Cameron Zohoori, "A scene at Centennial Pavilion in Monrovia, Liberia," photograph on Flickr, posted by Visual Communications, Syracuse University, June 20, 2011.

¹⁴ Thomas Cook, "The Matilda Newport Cannon in Liberia," Thomas Cook, accessed December 16, 2022; Google Maps, "Joseph J. Roberts Monument," 859P+XH9, Monrovia, Liberia, Google Maps, accessed December 16, 2022.

¹⁵ Peter Dennis, "A Brief History of Liberia," *The International Centre for Transitional Justice*, May 1, 2006.

¹⁶ Emmanuel O. Oritsejafor, "National Integration in Liberia: An Evolving Pursuit," *The Journal of Pan African Studies* 3, no. 1 (2009): 100; M. B. Akpan, "Black Imperialism: Americo-Liberian Rule over the African Peoples of Liberia, 1841-1964," *Canadian Journal of African Studies* 7, no. 2 (1973): 227.

¹⁷ M. B. Akpan, "Black Imperialism: Americo-Liberian Rule over the African Peoples of Liberia, 1841-1964," *Canadian Journal of African Studies* 7, no. 2 (1973): 229-233.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 236.

¹⁹ Peter Dennis, "A Brief History of Liberia," *The International Centre for Transitional Justice*, May 1, 2006.

²⁰ Jane J. Martin and Rodney Carlisle & Students of the Seminar in Historical Sources, University of Liberia- Semester I, 1975, "The Search for Matilda Newport," A background paper presented at the Symposium on Matilda Newport Day in Liberia, held by the Institute of African Studies, University of Liberia, 1975, 16; Svend E. Holsoe, "Matilda Newport: The Power of a Liberian Invented Tradition," *Liberian Studies Journal* 32, no. 2 (2007): 33, 36.

Contestation has focused on the celebration of the Matilda Newport story rather than the monument specifically. In an early criticism of Matilda Newport Day, in 1944, politician Didwho Welleh Twe expressed discomfort at the celebration:

I have always felt that the continual celebration of the destruction of men of the Bassa Tribe by Matilda Newport is a shortsighted policy to sustain. It invites ill feelings from within and criticism from without. The outside world would feel, and rightly so, that is radically wrong in Liberia where one brother fires cannon in celebrating [sic] the day he was successful to kill the brother.²¹

'Heroism' and 'Cowardice'

Some Liberians have argued that the underlying themes of the Matilda Newport story have been at the root of the conflict between Liberians for decades. The story reinforces the division between Americo-Liberians and Native Liberians, which further fuels conflict between the two groups. In 2003, Liberian journalist and activist Siahyonkron Nyeonseor argued:

Liberian history is replete with accounts of heroism on the part of Americo-Liberians (Settlers), and accounts of cowardice on the part of Native-Liberians (the aborigines)... This false sense of heroism and cowardice have been the main source of conflict amongst generations of Liberians... These conflicts also became the key stimulants for continued distrust, disunity, and infighting amongst Liberians up to this day. For instance, the story of Matilda Newport was a mixed bag of Americo-Liberian pride, and native-Liberian nightmare, yet successive Americo-Liberian-dominated government leaderships in Liberia found it necessary to honour and celebrate the supposed good deeds of Matilda Newport as a national holiday.²²

Nyeonseor also argued that many Liberians had honoured Matilda Newport Day 'without the slightest idea' of what was being celebrated.²³ Similarly, in 2008, Liberian historian Augustine Konneh gave testimony about the causes of the civil war, in which he called for Liberians to 'reconsider some of the nation's myths,' one of which is the Matilda Newport story.²⁴ Like Nyeonseor, Konneh emphasised that the sense of 'heroism' and 'cowardice' perpetuated by the story was a cause of tension amongst Liberians.²⁵ It has also been argued that the continued existence of the Matilda Newport Monument, as well as a street and school named after her, demonstrates 'Liberia's continuing struggle to create a national identity.' Liberian historian Joseph Saye Guannu is quoted in 2010 saying that as a Native Liberian, he 'cannot identify with [the monument]' and that 'it is not a unifying symbol.'²⁶

Some Liberians have described celebrating Matilda Newport Day in their childhood. In 2003, shortly after the end of the Second Civil War, Nyeonseor, a Native Liberian, wrote:

²¹ Didwho Welleh Twe, *Independence Day Oration*, July 26, 1944, cited in Siahyonkron Nyeonseor, "Putting to Rest the Matilda Newport Myth - Part 1," *The Perspective*, December 1, 2003.

²² Siahyonkron Nyeonseor, "Putting to Rest the Matilda Newport Myth - Part 1," *The Perspective*, December 1, 2003.

²³ Siahyonkron Nyeonseor, "Putting to Rest the Matilda Newport Myth - Part 2," *The Perspective*, January 7, 2004.

²⁴ Fred P. M. van der Kraaij, "Matilda Newport (1822) and the Civil War," *Liberia: Past and Present of Africa's Oldest Republic*, December 1, 2008.

²⁵ Augustine Konneh, "Dr Augustine Konneh, Part 1 TRC LIBERIA," YouTube video, 18:24, posted by "LibFirstMag" May 28, 2022.

²⁶ Jordana Hochman, "Liberia Dispatches 2: Matilda Newport," NPR, November 9, 2010.

During the reenactment, one group of actors would dress-up in native-Liberian attires with their faces painted to portray native-Liberian tribesmen, and the other groups of actors would dress-up in Antebellum south style outfits to portray Americo-Liberians [sic] settlers or pioneers. And suddenly, a woman dressed-up as an old lady would appear from nowhere, light a cannon pointed directly at the actors dressed like native tribesmen (portrayed like fools in front of the cannon), and then “BOOM” the cannon goes off, and all of them would fall and pretend to die.²⁷

Nyeonseor states that even as a child, he understood that ‘something was just not right’ about the events, a feeling that was confirmed in adulthood.²⁸ In contrast, in 2008, Helene Cooper, an Americo-Liberian descended from a founder of the country, described re-enacting the events at school in 1975 with nostalgia, stating that it ‘it never occurred to [her]’ that Native Liberians were not happy with the celebrations.²⁹ These memories demonstrate the stark difference in how the celebration was met by Americo-Liberians and Native Liberians.

Despite widespread criticism and the abolition of Matilda Newport Day in 1980, symbols of Newport endure into the twenty-first century.³⁰ Whilst there is some criticism of the persistence of such symbolism from outside Liberia, there is no longer such a strong focus within the country.³¹ Van der Kraaij has suggested that Liberians are no longer interested in the debate about their national symbols.³²

Decision-Making Processes

Abolition of Matilda Newport Day

Sources differ as to who made the decision to abolish Matilda Newport Day, though there is general agreement that the celebration was abolished in 1980. Some sources state that Americo-Liberian former president William Tolbert (1971-1980) abolished it as part of the ‘Unification Policy’ that was followed by the government of the time.³³ After abandoning ‘indirect rule’ in 1964, this policy of unification had been initiated by Tolbert’s predecessor, President William Tubman (1944-1971), in an attempt to ‘remove the political, economic and social barriers which separated the African masses from the Americo-Liberian population.’³⁴ Therefore, Tolbert may have made the decision to improve social relations between Americo-Liberians and Native Liberians following public criticism of the celebration. Other sources credit Samuel K. Doe, who came to power following the *coup d’état* of 1980 for abolishing Matilda Newport Day. Others

²⁷ Siahyonkron Nyanseor, “Putting to Rest the Matilda Newport Myth - Part 1,” *The Perspective*, December 1, 2003.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Helene Cooper, “In Search of a Lost Africa,” *The New York Times Magazine*, April 6, 2008: 3-5.

³⁰ The Independent Probe, “Hailing Matilda Newport’s Defense of the Native Land @183yrs; Happy Birthday ‘The First Regiment,’” *The Independent Probe*, December 1, 2020.

³¹ Daniel Meier, “Why is Matilda Still Around?” Daniel Meier Author, April 14, 2019.

³² Fred P. M. van der Kraaij, “Liberia’s National Symbols (cont’d),” *Liberia: Past and Present of Africa’s Oldest Republic*, June 30, 2015.

³³ Svend E. Holsoe, “Matilda Newport: The Power of a Liberian Invented Tradition,” *Liberian Studies Journal* 32, no. 2 (2007): 38; Mary H. Moran, “Newport, Matilda (1795-1837),” in Henry Louis Gates, Emmanuel Akyeampong, and Steven J. Niven, eds., *Dictionary of African Biography* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011); Siahyonkron Nyanseor & J. Kpanneh Doe, “Expunging Our National Symbols of Falsehoods: A Rejoinder to James Thomas-Queh’s “Preserve Our Historical National Symbols, But Cleanse Our Minds into a Positive Future,” *The Liberian Dialogue*, July 21, 2014.

³⁴ M. B. Akpan, “Black Imperialism: Americo-Liberian Rule over the African Peoples of Liberia, 1841-1964,” *Canadian Journal of African Studies* 7, no. 2 (1973): 235-236.

state that celebration on the day was discouraged by Tolbert, but completely outlawed by Doe.³⁵ However, very little detail is available about the process of this decision. Historians have characterised both Tolbert and Doe as authoritarian, so it is not unlikely that these decisions were made without a consultation process, though there is no evidence either way.³⁶

The Matilda Newport Monument

Today, Liberian public debate about Matilda Newport's legacy has dwindled. Van der Kraaij suggests that Liberians nowadays are no longer interested in discussing their national symbols, and that the younger generation may not have even heard of Newport. Whilst monuments to Matilda Newport still stand – including the monument outside Centennial Pavilion, the relief at the site of the Joseph J. Roberts monument, the cannon at Fort Norris and a street and school named after her – no decision has been made to either remove or alter any of these.

Summary and Conclusions

Despite the fact that it is no longer widely discussed or contested in Liberian public discourse, it is clear that the story and legacy of Matilda Newport have been a powerful feature of Liberian history. The division and conflict that underlie the story have defined relations between Americo-Liberians and Native Liberians. This can be seen in the treatment of the native population as colonial subjects in the first decades of the Republic, through to the conflicts in two civil wars at the end of the twentieth century. The celebration of Matilda Newport Day has had an unmistakable impact on the idea of a united Liberian nation, and vice-versa, and it can be seen as a microcosm of how relations between Americo-Liberians and Native Liberians have played out during the nation's 175-year history. Whilst the subject is currently much less frequently addressed, the debate may again be revisited by Liberians in the future.

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Figures

Zohoori, Cameron. "A scene at Centennial Pavilion in Monrovia, Liberia." Photograph on Flickr.

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About Contested Histories

Many contestations have been over memorials, street names, and other physical representations of historical legacies in public spaces in recent years. These contestations often reflect deeper societal tensions, whether triggered by political transitions, demographic shifts, inter-ethnic strife, or a growing awareness of unaddressed historical injustices.

The Contested Histories project is a multi-year initiative designed to identify principles, processes, and best practices for addressing these contestations at the community or municipal level and in the classroom. Conflicts about history, heritage, and memory are a global phenomenon. Although each case is different, comparative cases can indicate lessons learned and reflect best practices.

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The Institute for Historical Justice and Reconciliation (IHJR) is a research centre at EuroClio - European Association for History Educators in The Hague, The Netherlands. The IHJR works with educational and public policy institutions to organise and sponsor historical discourse in pursuit of acknowledgement and the resolution of historical disputes in divided communities and societies.

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