

Mr. President, Madam Boakai, Mr. Vice President, Mr. Speaker, Madam President Pro Temp and members of the National Legislature, Your Honor the Chief Justice and Associate Justices of the Supreme Court, members of the cabinet and officials of government, members of the diplomatic and consular corps, traditional leaders, religious leaders, members of the Armed Forces of Liberia, distinguished guests, fellow Liberians at home and throughout the diaspora, ladies and gentlemen:

First, let me say that I am deeply humbled and very grateful for the honor bestowed on me. This is the honor of a lifetime. Thank you Mr. President for the invitation to serve as this year's independence day orator.

If you please, allow me before I begin, to acknowledge my mother, Elizabeth Woods Brewer, a daughter of Bassa, who is buried in the soil of this great county, right there across the mighty St. John River. May she continue to rest in peace. I also want to acknowledge Erica, my wife of 40 years, and our son Aidan.

Claiming Our History: The Inheritance of a Republic

Independence Oration

I Why History Matters

My fellow Liberians,

As we gather today to commemorate the 179th anniversary of our nation's independence, I would like us to consider a question that many young Liberians have asked, sometimes quietly and sometimes aloud:

"What is there to celebrate?"

Others go even further. They tell us that our history is little more than a catalogue of failure and disappointment. Indeed that the whole idea of Liberia was a mistake. Still, others urge us to leave the past behind altogether, and concern ourselves only with the present, and the future.

These are serious questions. And they deserve thoughtful answers.

This morning, I wish to offer a different way of thinking about Liberia and its history.

My argument is simple.

Liberian history is one of our greatest national assets.

And when it comes to understanding our collective past, the great challenge facing us is not simply that too many Liberians do not know their history. Our great challenge is that too many have come to believe their history has little value. Yet, a people who lose confidence in their history eventually lose confidence in themselves.

History is not merely a record of yesterday's events. History is the source of our identity, our memory, our wisdom, and our sense of national purpose. Wealth may be gained and lost. Governments may rise and fall. Borders may change. But a nation's history remains the foundation upon which every generation builds.

No one else can claim Liberian history for us.

Only Liberians can.

Today I would like us to reflect on three questions.

First, how did we arrive at this moment in our long national journey?

Second, why does July 26, 1847, matter – not only to Liberia but to the wider world?

And finally, how should we think about the past, and what responsibilities does it place upon us?

II The Long Journey of the Republic

To claim Liberia's history, we must first understand that Liberian history did not begin in 1847.

Nor did it begin in 1822.

The Republic whose independence we celebrate today rests upon foundations laid over many centuries.

Historians often remind us that the past is not flat. Every generation inherits a different Liberia. Every age confronts new challenges. To understand who we are today, we must begin at the beginning.

Our knowledge of Liberia's earliest history is necessarily incomplete. Yet, we know enough to say with confidence that the peoples who have occupied this land have lived here for many, many centuries.

Portuguese mariners left written descriptions of the Windward Coast as early as the fifteenth century. [THE WINDWARD COAST IS THE COAST BETWEEN CAPE MOUNT AND CAPE PALMAS] The Portuguese accounts are corroborated by oral traditions, archaeology, and linguistics. Together, these sources reveal a long history of migration, settlement, and cultural exchange. They tell us that communities speaking Gola and Gissi languages were among the oldest inhabitants of this region, that the Dei speaking people were the first to arrive on the coast, while later migrations from the north and east brought the ancestors of many of today's other Liberian peoples. , including the Kuwaa, Vai, Bassa, Krao, Glebo, Krahn, Kpelle, Mahn, Dahn, Lorma, Bandi, Mandingo, Mende, and others.

But the larger point is this: the ethnic communities we know today did not emerge fully formed. Like all human societies, they evolved over time. People migrated, traded, intermarried, forged alliances, divided, fought wars and reconciled their differences, and sometimes created entirely new identities.

The Liberia of today is the product of centuries of migration and cultural interaction and exchange. Our ethnic identities are not fixed by nature. They were shaped by history – by migration, trade, marriage, conflict and cooperation across many centuries. Our ancestors were not born into the identities we know and have today. Our ancestors helped create these identities.

Before the European colonial powers drew borders upon maps, identities and boundaries were far more fluid than we often imagine today. Communities migrated, divided, merged, and reinvented themselves. As the distinguished West African historian Boubacar Barrie reminds us, West Africa was once **"a land of people without frontiers."**

Understanding this longer history reminds us that Liberia did not create its peoples. Rather, its many peoples, over countless generations, created the Liberia we have inherited. Long before there was a Liberian state, there was already a Liberian historical experience.

Long before there was a Republic of Liberia, there were sovereign African societies existing in this space. They governed themselves according to their own laws and institutions. They maintained systems of diplomacy, commerce, spirituality, and justice. They cultivated the land, managed regional trade, and developed technologies suited to their environment.

The desire for self-government then, did not begin in 1847.

What independence did, was to give that older aspiration a new and modern constitutional form.

Among the most celebrated of these sovereign communities was Bopolu, a thriving commercial center and perhaps the oldest continuously inhabited town in present-day Liberia. Far from being isolated, our ancestors participated in regional and international commerce. As the historian Patrick Burrowes has shown, kola and malagueta pepper cultivated in this region found their way into Mediterranean markets centuries ago. The scholar Judith Carney has amply demonstrated that the rice-growing knowledge carried by captives from this part of West Africa entirely transformed the Carolina low country in the United States, where their descendants – the Gullah Geechee people of South Carolina – today – remain living testimony to the resilience of African culture.

This too, my fellow Liberians, is our inheritance.

Yet, every nation has chapters of its history that are painful to revisit.

And this, is one of ours.

As European traders established themselves along the Atlantic coast, commercial networks that had long connected our region to the Sahara gradually shifted toward the Atlantic Ocean. What followed was one of the greatest tragedies in human history.

The Atlantic slave trade did not simply remove millions of Africans from their homes. It shattered families, redirected economies, fueled warfare, and interrupted centuries of political development. No community in what is now Liberia escaped its effects. Every single society was touched by it.

Like our own civil conflict in recent memory, the transatlantic slave trade drew entire communities into a catastrophe from which few could remain untouched.

Yet, even in this tragedy, we discover another thread that runs through Liberian history.

Centuries of resisting enslavement strengthened among many of our ancestors a profound attachment to freedom, self-government, and sovereignty. Those ideals would later shape the Republic itself.

In 1724, when the French trader Chevalier des Marchais attempted to persuade the rulers of Cape Mesurado to permit the construction of a European fort, the Dei ruler known as Peter firmly refused. Peter informed the visitors that they were welcome to build a warehouse in the swamps of Bushrod Island, but not upon the Cape itself.

That decision speaks across the centuries.

It reminds us that long before the modern Republic, the peoples of this coast understood the value of sovereignty.

Nor was this coast an isolated frontier awaiting discovery. Beneath Cape Mesurado lay Dukor, already a multilingual commercial settlement connected to the wider Atlantic world. Merchants, sailors, fisherfolk, interpreters, Africans who had traveled abroad, Europeans, and people of mixed ancestry all lived and traded there. It was a place of diplomacy, commerce, and cultural exchange - a whole century before the arrival of the first American repatriates.

This too, my fellow citizens, is our inheritance.

The Return to Africa and the Birth of the Republic

The story of the Republic of Liberia's founding did not begin with the American Colonization Society, also called the ACS.

It began much earlier, in the hearts and minds of people of African descent who, though separated from their ancestral homeland by slavery, never entirely forgot Africa.

In 1811, Paul Kofi – a Black American shipowner and sea captain from Massachusetts – sailed to the West African coast in search of a place where free people of African descent might build new lives. He later carried a shipload of Black American emigrants to Sierra Leone. That voyage captured the imagination of free Black communities throughout the United States. Hundreds volunteered to accompany him on a second expedition, but Kofi died before that dream could be realized.

The dream, however, did not die.

Let us acknowledge here though, that Black America never spoke with one voice on this question. Many free African Americans opposed emigration and believed their future lay in the United States. However, others, like the Reverend Lott Carey of the Richmond African Baptist Society, believed they had a duty to return to the land of their ancestors.

Reverend Carey, not the ACS, paid his own passage to Liberia. Explaining his decision, Lott Carey wrote these memorable words:

"I am an African, and I feel bound to labor for my suffering race."

And Reverend Carey was not alone. As early as the eighteenth century, free Black communities established organizations such as the African Union Society in Rhode Island and proudly identified themselves through institutions bearing the name "African:" the African Methodist Episcopal Church, African Baptist churches in Savannah Georgia and Richmond Virginia, African schools, and many, many other examples.

Long before the Republic was founded, there already existed a powerful conviction among many people of African descent in the Diaspora that Africa's future belonged in African hands.

This, too, my fellow citizens, is our inheritance.

It is long past time to recognize that the Republic of Liberia emerged from one of the most remarkable meet-ups in history. Returning descendants of Africa brought the hard-earned lessons of survival, education, faith, resistance, and the determination to build a free republic upon the continent of their ancestors, at a time when African sovereignty was under assault across much of the continent.

Some had endured slavery. Others had been born free. Some came from the United States, others from the Caribbean, or from Sierra Leone, and neighboring African territories. Recaptured Africans, rescued from illegal slave ships, added their languages, cultures, skills, and resilience to the emerging nation.

Africans who had remained on the continent brought to the table generations of political experience, commercial knowledge, diplomatic skill, and cultural continuity. Among those Africans whose contributions deserve renewed recognition are William Campbell, David Noah, and William Davis.

These African abolitionists understood the political landscape of the Windward Coast, spoke its languages, enjoyed the confidence of African rulers, and built relationships across cultural boundaries. They were the ones who introduced the ACS to Cape Mesurado, interpreted local political institutions, explained customs and traditions, and helped establish the trust upon which successful diplomacy depended.

So ACS agents entered neither an unknown land nor an unfamiliar people. They entered a country whose rulers, merchants, interpreters, and diplomats had long participated in regional and Atlantic commerce. It was people like William Campbell, David Noah, and William Davis who transformed unfamiliarity into understanding, understanding into diplomacy, and diplomacy into cooperation. Their leadership reminds us that the founding of the Liberian republic was made possible not only by the vision of returning descendants of Africa but also by Africans themselves already on the continent whose wisdom and statesmanship helped prepare the way.

Why does July 26 Matter?

Let me stress again, that it is important to see July 26 not as the beginning of Liberian history, but as the beginning of the Liberian republic. Two separate things. The republic has a founding date; the history of its people does not.

I need not rehearse every detail that led to the declaration of independence. What matters is understanding why that declaration became necessary.

For many years the American repatriates and the indigenous rulers of this coast negotiated, cooperated, and, at times, struggled together to build a new political community. One fact deserves particular attention.

The rulers of Cape Mesurado ultimately agreed to transfer sovereignty over the Cape to the new Black republic. 100 years earlier, they had refused to surrender that sovereignty to European slave traders. Yet they chose to become partners in a different enterprise – the creation of a sovereign Black state.

And in doing so, they became co-founders of the Liberian experiment.

That fact deserves a more prominent place in our national memory.

So why does that date – July 26, 1847 – matter?

Not because Liberia suddenly became a perfect nation.

No nation is born perfect.

July 26 matters because a free Black people declared to the world that they possessed both the right and the capacity to govern themselves.

Joseph Jenkins Roberts explained the purpose of independence in 1846. It was, he said, **"to vindicate the race from scandal."**

In other words, to demonstrate that people of African descent were fully capable of sustaining a modern constitutional republic.

To appreciate the boldness of that declaration, we must remember the world in which it was made.

Across much of the globe, slavery still existed.

European empires were expanding, questioning the fledgling state's right to levy customs duties.

Theories of racial inferiority were gaining respectability in universities and governments alike.

Against that tide, Liberia declared something radically different.

That Africans could govern themselves.

That Black liberty could sustain republican government.

That an African nation could take its place among the family of nations.

That achievement was imperfect.

It was incomplete.

But it was extraordinary.

This is why July 26 belongs not only to Liberia, but to the history of the modern world.

It marked the birth of the first independent Black republic in Africa in the modern era and gave tangible expression to an idea that inspired people of African descent far beyond our shores.

This, too, my fellow citizens, is our inheritance.

The Republic Takes Shape

Independence did not instantly create the Liberia we know today with 43,000 square miles.

The Republic proclaimed on July 26, 1847, was a small coastal state. It occupied only a fraction of the territory that constitutes modern Liberia and exercised effective authority over little more than its settlements along the coast and the lower St. Paul River. The Liberia we know today was built gradually, over decades rather than in a single moment.

This is an important point because we are often tempted to read history backwards. We imagine that the institutions of the twentieth century existed from the very beginning of the Republic.

They did not.

For much of the nineteenth century, the overwhelming majority of the people living within the territory of present-day Liberia continued to govern themselves according to their own political traditions. They selected their own leaders, administered justice through their own institutions, and defended their own sovereignty. The Republic, even if it had wished to do so, lacked the capacity to govern most of the interior directly.

Instead, nineteenth-century Liberia was shaped by negotiation as much as by administration. The Republic and numerous indigenous polities coexisted in a relationship that was at times cooperative, at times contentious, but always dynamic. Each influenced the other. Liberia was not built simply by extending the authority of Monrovia. It was built through decades of negotiation, alliance, accommodation and sometimes conflict.

History must always be understood in its own time.

We must never read history backwards.

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The Republic on Trial

If independence did not complete Liberia's story, it marked the beginning of a new chapter.

The young Republic entered a difficult and often hostile world. It possessed limited resources, a small population, and little military strength. Powerful European empires dominated the Atlantic, while the slave trade continued to devastate much of West Africa.

Yet the Republic achieved something remarkable.

Liberia helped bring an end to the slave trade along the Windward Coast. That achievement alone deserves a more prominent place in our national memory.

The Republic also offered something less obvious but equally important.

It created political space.

Throughout much of the nineteenth century, the independent African polities beyond the Republic's immediate authority continued to govern themselves while developing relationships with Monrovia. Those relationships were not uniform. They involved diplomacy, trade, alliance, and, at times, conflict. But they also created opportunities for cooperation in the face of growing external threats.

One of the most important of those partnerships was with the powerful Condo Confederation centered at Bopolu. At the time, Condo possessed greater military strength than the government in Monrovia. Yet its leaders concluded that their long-term interests were better served by cooperating with the Republic than by opposing it.

That decision mattered.

History often remembers the presidents who governed from Monrovia. It should also remember the indigenous leaders whose choices helped preserve the independence of the Republic. Without their cooperation, Liberia's history—and perhaps even its survival—might have been very different.

That, too, my fellow citizens, is our inheritance.

The Scramble for Africa

But the greatest test came in the closing decades of the nineteenth century.

In 1884 and 1885, representatives of Europe's great powers met in Berlin, Germany to divide the African continent among themselves.

No African nation was invited.

No African people consented.

Across the continent, ancient kingdoms and independent societies were assigned to foreign rulers as though they were possessions on a map.

Only two African states retained international recognition of their sovereignty:

Ethiopia...

and Liberia.

That fact alone reminds us how exceptional the Liberian experiment had become.

Ethiopia defended its independence on the battlefield.

Liberia defended its independence through diplomacy, international law, and political skill.

But diplomacy alone could not preserve the Republic.

The people living along Liberia's northern and northwestern frontiers also made choices.

Faced with the advance of European colonial armies, many sovereign communities chose alliance with Liberia rather than incorporation into the British or French empires, dilemmas brilliantly captured in Vamba Sherif's novel *The Emperor's Son*.

These women and men acted in their own interests.

Yet in doing so, they helped shape the Liberia we know today.

Our national boundaries were not simply drawn upon European maps.

They were also forged through the decisions of African communities determined to preserve as much of their independence as possible.

This, too, my fellow citizens, is our inheritance.

A New Century, A New Challenge

The twentieth century presented Liberia with a different kind of struggle.

The greatest threat was no longer territorial conquest.

It was economic dependence and the consequences of having an open economy.

A century ago, Liberia entered into its agreement with the Firestone Company.

Few decisions have shaped modern Liberia more profoundly.

The agreement promised investment, employment, and international recognition.

It also transformed the country's economy.

Rubber plantations expanded.

Labor moved away from independent small-scale farming.

Political authority became increasingly centralized in the executive branch.

Liberia entered more deeply into the global capitalist economy, but on terms largely determined by others.

The consequences of that decision continue to shape our lives today.

History rarely presents us with simple choices between good and bad.

More often, it presents difficult choices between competing possibilities.

One assumes that the leaders of that generation made the decisions they believed necessary for the Republic's survival.

Whether we agree with every decision is less important than understanding why those choices were made.

History asks us first to understand...

and only then to judge.

The Republic Tested Again

The twentieth century also witnessed the concentration of political power, growing demands for reform, military intervention, civil war, and national tragedy.

These events remain within living memory.

Many here today and in the listening and viewing audience experienced them firsthand.

We need not recount every painful chapter.

We carry them with us.

But neither should we allow those painful decades to become the whole story of Liberia.

No nation should be judged solely by its darkest hours.

The true measure of a people is not whether they experience hardship.

It is whether they find the courage to rebuild.

And Liberia is rebuilding.

Today, nearly two centuries after independence, our Republic endures.

Imperfect.

Still unfinished.

Still striving.

But enduring.

That is no small achievement.

And that, too, my fellow citizens, is our inheritance.

III Conclusion: Claiming Our Inheritance

My fellow Liberians,

As I come to a close, allow me to leave you with a few final thoughts.

History is not simply about the past.

There is a difference between **the past** and **history**.

The past is everything that has happened. It cannot be changed.

History is what we choose to remember, what we strive to understand, and what we decide is worthy of passing on to those who come after us.

That choice belongs to us.

Every nation has chapters of which it is proud and chapters it wishes had never been written. Liberia is no different. We have known moments of extraordinary courage and moments of profound failure. We have built, and we have destroyed. We have united, and we have divided.

But no nation becomes stronger by forgetting its history.

Nor does it become wiser by denying its history.

Wisdom begins when we have the courage to look honestly at the past, to celebrate what deserves celebration, to learn from what deserves criticism, and to carry both forward with humility.

Especially to the young people of Liberia, let me say this.

Do not inherit only this Republic's territory.

Inherit its memory.

Do not inherit only its flag.

Inherit the sacrifices that gave it meaning.

Do not inherit only its Constitution.

Inherit the generations of women and men who struggled—often against impossible odds—to preserve the freedom that you enjoy today.

And above all, do not allow anyone to persuade you that your history is something to be ashamed of.

It is your inheritance.

Claim it.

All of it.

The triumphs.

The disappointments.

The victories.

The mistakes.

The moments that inspire us.

The moments that humble us.

All of it belongs to us. It is a shared inheritance.

Because only a people secure enough to face their own history honestly can build a better future.

Every generation inherits a Republic it did not create.

The generation of 1847 inherited centuries of African civilization and the dream of freedom carried across the Atlantic by people who refused to forget their ancestral home.

The generations that followed inherited a fragile Republic and preserved its sovereignty against enormous odds.

Another generation inherited the responsibility of building a modern economy.

Another inherited the burden of repairing a nation broken by conflict.

Now that inheritance has passed to us.

And one day, it will pass to those who come after us.

The question is not whether we inherited a perfect Republic.

We did not.

The question is whether we will leave to our children a Republic stronger than the one we received.

That is the true test of patriotism.

That is the true meaning of citizenship.

And that, I believe, is the enduring meaning of July 26.

My fellow Liberians,

A nation inherits many things—its rivers and forests, its towns and villages, its Constitution and its flag.

But none is more valuable than the memory of how it became a people.

That memory is our inheritance.

Let us preserve it.

Let us enlarge it.

Let us honor it.

Let us fight for it. It is worth the fight.

And let us pass it on—stronger, richer, and wiser than we received it.

May God continue to bless the Republic of Liberia.

And may God bless the Liberian people.

Thank you.