

1972

## Robert F. Stockton

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### Recommended Citation

Duke, Marvin L. (1972) "Robert F. Stockton," *Naval War College Review*: Vol. 25 : No. 5 , Article 8.  
Available at: <https://digital-commons.usnwc.edu/nwc-review/vol25/iss5/8>

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*From the first day of the Republic, the inherent contradiction between the philosophy of individual freedom—as contained in the Declaration of Independence—and the reality of human degradation manifest in the institution of slavery threatened to destroy the American Nation. One of the first attempts to alleviate the growing tensions arising from this situation involved elements of the U.S. Navy which was called upon to suppress the continuing but illegal slave trade between Africa and the United States. The role played by one Lt. Robert Stockton, however, was of special significance not only in suppressing the traffic in slaves, but also in procuring land needed for the purpose of allowing freed American slaves to return to Africa to start life anew.*

## ROBERT F. STOCKTON

### EARLY U.S. NAVAL ACTIVITIES IN AFRICA

An article

by

Captain Marvin L. Duke, U.S. Navy

While not generally known, the Congress of the United States directed the President as early as 1819 to use armed ships off the coasts of the United States and Africa to suppress the slave trade. The following year the U.S. Navy's first African squadron began patrolling the West Coast of Africa and along the traditional slave route—a practice which was to last for more than 40 years. The history surrounding this squadron and one of its outstanding officers, Lt. Robert F. Stockton, provides us with a fascinating look at the young U.S. Navy and the part it played in purchasing the land which eventually became the Republic of Liberia.

On 2 March 1807 the United States enacted a law prohibiting the African slave trade, which President Thomas

Jefferson stated would invoke the constitutional authority of the Congress to withdraw the citizens of the United States from all further participation in those violations of human rights which have been so long continued on the unoffending inhabitants of Africa, and which the morality, the reputation, and the best interests of our country, have long been eager to proscribe. The act was never adequately enforced, however, and American citizens continued to traffic in enslaved Africans, as President James Madison informed Congress in 1810, equally in violation of the laws of humanity, and in defiance of those of their own country.

Finally, after much persuasion by President James Monroe, Congress did design a bill with more teeth which

eventually became law on 3 March 1819. The new law authorized the President to deploy U.S. naval forces for the express purpose of seizing all American ships found to be or to have been trafficking in slaves. Furthermore, as an incentive to those charged with enforcing these measures, the act authorized the equal distribution of all property seized between the U.S. Government and the officers and men bringing the offending vessels to justice. All slaves seized in conjunction with the trafficking vessels were to be safely delivered to responsible U.S. officials who, in turn, were commissioned to return them to Africa. A bounty of \$25 was to be paid to the officers and crews of U.S. Navy ships and revenue cutters for every slave delivered in this fashion to responsible U.S. officials, (See appendix I.)

An important part of this law which related to the "safe-keeping, support, and removal beyond the limits of the United States" of "persons of colour," was due to the insistence of the American Society for Colonizing the Free People of Colour of the United States, more commonly called the American Colonization Society.

By 1816 there were approximately 2 million slaves and nearly 200,000 "free people of colour" in the United States, many of whom had been set free by their masters. A considerable number of slaveholders followed the example of George Washington who specified that his slaves be freed at the time of his death. The number of Negroes freed increased almost daily, and the question of what their new status was to be remained unanswered.

Freed slaves enjoyed few of the advantages of free citizens, and their prospects for achieving improved living standards were dim indeed. Further, their very freedom was a source of dismay among the southern slaveholders. So when Elijah Caldwell and Dr. Robert Finley proposed the forma-

tion of the Colonization Society as an agency which would establish a colony of freed Blacks on the West Coast of Africa, many northerners and southerners were able to unite their efforts toward the same goal, even if for different reasons. Through this institution, southerners who wished to rid themselves of the persistent problem associated with having freed Blacks living in their midst and northerners who wanted to make reparations to the freed Blacks so that they could be restored to the land of their fathers and resume an existence in Africa as Christians and enlightened propagators of civilization were able to reach a happy compromise. It was also hoped that they might have found, in time, a self-supporting community and tend, both by precept and example, to stem the still swift running tide of the odious traffic in slaves.

Among the officers of the society, the following prominent names were to be found: Henry Clay, Judge Bushrod Washington (George Washington's nephew), John Randolph, and Francis Scott Key.

Among the first officers ordered to the African squadron, soon after its inception, was Lt. Comdt. Robert F. Stockton.\* His orders, dated 14 February 1821, from the Secretary of the Navy read:

You have been appointed to the Command of the U.S. Schooner *Alligator* now at Boston and equipped for sea. You will proceed to that post and report yourself to Captain Isaac Hull, the Commandant of the Navy Yard, who will deliver over to you the schooner of which you will immediately assume command... When ready for sea

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\*A lieutenant when actually in command of a ship was referred to as lieutenant commandant, and his monthly salary went from \$40 to \$50 per month for that period of time he was in command.

proceed to the Coast of Africa . . . thence cruise along the coast (between Cape Verd [Cape Verde] and the equator) in the usual course of the slave trading vessels. Enclosed you will find the General Cruising instructions under the acts of Congress for the suppression of the slave trade, and the capture of piratical vessels . . . by which you will be governed, as well as by the laws, copies of which are herewith enclosed.

After replenishing in the West-Indies by way of slave routes, . . . make a second cruise to the Coast of Africa avoiding the rainy and unhealthy season usual upon the Coast.

Profit of all occasions to inform the Dept. of your proceedings. . . .

When you shall arrive upon the Coast of Africa you will endeavour to find the U.S. Agents, Mssr. J. B. Winn and E. Bacon and communicate with them upon the objects connected with their establishment and your cruise. You will take on board the Alligator one of the U.S. Agents and some of those appointed by the American Colonization Society and proceed along the Coast to examine the different points and most suitable place to be fixed on for a future settlement, taking into view the convenience of navigation and a good harbour for our Ships of War which may cruise upon the Coast for the suppression of the slave-trade.

A place called Axim has been designated as possessing many advantages for such a settlement, and the Agents will receive more general knowledge of this location and comparatively of its advantages and disadvantages with other places, in all which your aid and

judgment may be beneficial; especially in deciding the convenience of a port or place of safe anchorage for the public Ships, in order to land the Captured Africans to be placed under the care of the agents specially appointed by the Government for that purpose. In all reasonable requests of the agents for your assistance in transporting them, examining the coast, or making such surveys and reports as shall best promote the objects contemplated, you will, as far as may be compatible with propriety and the safety of the vessel under your command, afford a ready compliance.

Wishing you health and a pleasant cruise, I am, very respectfully,

Sir, your ob. servant,

Smith Thompson

Robert F. Stockton was the grandson of Richard Stockton, a Judge of the Supreme Court of New Jersey, who, as a Member of Congress, was a signer of the Declaration of Independence. Judge Stockton was captured by the British in 1781, thrown into prison, and died several months later. Robert's father, Richard Stockton, Jr., was a famous New Jersey lawyer, a U.S. Senator during Washington's administration, and later served a term in the House of Representatives during the War of 1812. Robert, who entered Princeton at 13 years of age in 1808, did not choose to finish his education because of the impending war with England. With only a year and a half remaining until graduation, he made application for a midshipman's warrant and was so commissioned in September 1811 at the age of 16.

Midshipman Stockton was soon ordered to the frigate *President* commanded by Commodore Rodgers. Almost 4 months after joining *President* and just 3 days after the declaration of war with Great Britain, Rodgers sailed

from New York in *President* commanding a squadron consisting of *Congress*, *Hornet*, and *Argus*, and thus young Stockton had hardly breathed the salt water air before he heard the whistle of the enemy's cannon shot. Stockton's coolness in action and enthusiasm favorably impressed Rodgers, who chose the young midshipman, nicknamed "Fight-ing Bob," as his aide.

In his new duties Stockton was primarily occupied assisting the commodore in the defense of Baltimore. In one of his more daring exploits, Stockton succeeded in blocking a narrow channel in the vicinity of Fort McHenry. While towing vessels and sinking them to prevent the British approach, he came under heavy enemy fire. After successfully completing this mission, he retired to the fort and there assisted a marine battery which was engaged in firing upon the British ships moored in the harbor. His outstanding performance won for him an accelerated promotion, and on 9 December 1814 he became one of only 150 lieutenants then on active duty in the U.S. Navy. With the conclusion of the War of 1812, Lieutenant Stockton sailed with Decatur against the Dey of Algiers and the Barbary pirates, gaining further seasoning in battle.

While in the sloop-of-war *Erie* as first lieutenant, Stockton took part in several duels with British officers in defense of American honor. It must be remembered that British naval gentlemen had long been accustomed to asserting precedence over officers of other flags, and with the War of 1812 so recently terminated, some sources of friction naturally remained between British and American officers. In his first encounter Stockton became indignant after reading the contemptuous and insulting language about "Yankees" written by a British officer under the comments of an American officer certifying the competence of a stevedore. Stockton sought out the offender and requested either an

apology or satisfaction. As the British officer refused to apologize, Stockton gained his satisfaction during the ensuing duel when the Britisher received a shot in the leg.

Stockton's next affair took place in Gibraltar and concerned itself with the outrageous treatment afforded a very respectable captain of a Boston merchantman. A regulation required anyone on the street after a certain hour to carry a lantern. The American captain was ignorant of this regulation, and upon returning home from supper only a few doors from his boarding house, he was arrested by the guard for not having a lantern. Upon being brought before a British Army officer at the station, the American was discredited and abused. After his release, which was obtained only after the insistence of the American consul, he challenged the Britisher to a duel. The British officer answered him by saying that only a fool would suppose that a British officer would fight the captain of a "damned Yankee merchantman."

Stockton sought redress in his countryman's behalf but received only more abuse, so a duel was arranged, resulting in a slight wound to the British officer but no satisfaction for Stockton, who indicated that in his opinion the officer was a coward. The British now maintained that Stockton would have to fight all the captains of the regiment. As Stockton negotiated to do this very thing, the Governor of Gibraltar interceded, and, at his insistence, the officers of *Erie* were not allowed to go ashore.

Much later, upon returning once again to Gibraltar, Stockton received a message from the same British captain with whom these difficulties were still pending, and a rendezvous was arranged. The Britisher was wounded again in this encounter, and Stockton had to flee to escape arrest. His return to the ship was very perilous, and he barely escaped capture on several occasions. His arrival at the ship was greeted with three cheers

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from the American squadron as well as from other vessels whose crews had observed his adventurous escapes.

Governor Don of Gibraltar and Commodore Steward, Commander of the American squadron, finally were able to settle the differences between the British and Americans, which resulted in general pacification and culminated in a grand ball given by the Governor at which the English and American officers came together in good will and complete harmony.

Stockton was also a good friend of Dr. Finley, the founder of the American Colonization Society, and a sincere believer in the goals of the society. In 1821, after 10 years of naval service and under the persuasion of Judge Washington, president of the society, and Francis Scott Key, one of its managers, Stockton agreed that with the approval of the Navy he would attempt to obtain some territory on the West Coast of Africa better suited to colonization by freed slaves than that which had previously been utilized.

The *Elizabeth*, the first ship chartered by the American Colonization Society for the purpose of relocating American Blacks, set sail in February 1820 with 91 passengers aboard. In addition to Dr. Samuel Crozer of the society and two Government agents, the Reverend Samuel Bacon and John P. Bankson, the *Elizabeth* was bringing 88 new emigrants to be settled somewhere in West Africa. They were first disembarked in Sierra Leone where they were told by the Governor that no room could be found for them there. At the Governor's recommendation, the *Elizabeth* then moved about 100 miles south of Freetown to Sherbro Island and attempted to establish a colony there. In a few weeks time, however, 22 of the Blacks were killed by a virulent fever. Those who survived eventually were transferred to Monserado, now Monrovia, to await further assistance.

A second party set out in 1821 in

*Nautilus*, a vessel chartered by the U.S. Government. It carried two agents of the Government—J.B. Winn and Ephraim Bacon, brother of Samuel, and two agents of the society—Joseph R. Andrus and Christian Wiltberger. Some emigrants accompanied them. On their arrival at Sierra Leone, the emigrants were left at Fura Bay while Bacon and Andrus traveled down the coast in search of a suitable location for a permanent settlement, but without success.

In this search they went as far south as Grand Bassa. Soon after they returned to Sierra Leone, but Mr. and Mrs. Bacon became ill and returned home. Shortly afterward Mr. and Mrs. Winn died of fever; thus Wiltberger was left alone in charge of the settlement until Dr. Eli Ayres arrived as chief agent of the society the following autumn.

As can be readily seen in these experiences, the admonishment in Stockton's orders to avoid the area's unhealthy season was fully warranted. Similarly, Capt. Robert T. Spence, a contemporary of Stockton's, saw 60 members of his crew struck down by the West African yellow fever. He vividly describes the fog, calm, intense heat, torrents of rain, and interminable humidity which characterized the rainy season and went on to write that the ship's sick list never seemed to decrease with the death of a crewman, "for death but made room for others brought down with similar symptoms and threatened with a similar fate."<sup>1</sup>

Stockton set sail in *Alligator* on 21 September 1821 bound for Sierra Leone. On arrival he and Dr. Ayres conferred with Sir George McCarty, the Governor of the colony, about the acquisition of land for the society. The

<sup>1</sup>U.S. Congress, *American State Papers, Naval Affairs 1789-1825* (Washington: Gales and Seaton, 1834), p. 1102.

Governor told them that the coastal areas best suited for the society's purposes lay several hundred miles to the south. The Governor felt, however, that it would be impossible to obtain it by peaceable cession from the ferocious and warlike natives who inhabited the area, who were actively engaged in the slave trade. The natives had resisted all efforts of the British, French, and Portuguese to purchase their land, refusing to negotiate the sale of any part of it. In fact, Andrews and Bacon, the earlier representatives of the society, had been forcibly repelled by the same native chieftains the previous year when they tried to negotiate a similar arrangement.

Stockton and Ayres were determined, however, and could not be dissuaded. When they arrived in the vicinity of Cape Mesurado, they found it to be everything they desired for the colony, and Stockton resolved to make the attempt to purchase land in this area. He decided to proceed with caution, first becoming acquainted with the local inhabitants and their chiefs, winning their confidence, and then revealing his plans to them.

Stockton went ashore, traded with the natives, and was able to win their confidence, especially one of the principal chiefs called King Peter. It was to King Peter that he enumerated the advantages and benefits that a colony would bring, including increased trade, better agricultural methods, new arts, et cetera. He proposed the cession of land in the vicinity of the cape, and King Peter seemed to agree to the proposition. A place and time was accordingly set at which the treaty was to be signed. At the appointed hour, however, King Peter was not to be found, for he and his people had journeyed 20 miles into the jungle after being advised by a mulatto slave trader that the purchase of the land by the Colonization Society would be detrimental to the lucrative slave trade. Undaunted, Stockton and Ayres, accompanied by a Croo inter-

preter and one seaman, went after Peter through the jungles and swamps and came upon his village. There they were confronted by a scowling Peter, together with some of his lesser chiefs.

This group, consisting of about 500 Blacks, was not particularly happy to see Stockton and his companions. The full measure of Stockton's determination can best be appreciated once one considers that these savages were renowned for their treachery, ferocity, and hatred of all white men. When Stockton revealed to Peter that he was a naval officer, the mulatto denounced him as an enemy of the slave trade, and the assembly seemed prepared to cut Stockton and his party to pieces. Stockton, in an overpowering voice, called for silence and deliberately drawing a pistol from his breast, cocked it, gave it to Dr. Ayres while pointing to the mulatto and told him to shoot the villain if he again opened his lips! Then, with the same deliberation, he cocked another pistol and, pointed it at Peter's head and asked to be heard. He reiterated that their mission was not to defraud or cheat them, but to confer on them and their

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#### BIOGRAPHIC SUMMARY



Capt. Marvin L. Duke, U.S. Navy, is a graduate of the U.S. Naval Academy, earned a bachelor's degree in aeronautical engineering from the U.S. Naval Postgraduate School, a master of science degree in nuclear engineering from Iowa State University, and a master's degree in international affairs from The George Washington University. As a naval aviator, his operational experience has been concentrated in both VQ and VW activities, most recently serving as Executive Officer of VQ-1 and subsequently as Commanding Officer of VW-1. Captain Duke is a graduate of the College of Naval Warfare (Class of 1967) and is currently serving as Head, Academic Instruction, for the College of Naval Command and Staff.

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country inestimable blessings; that King Peter might now murder them, but that if this was done, God on high who was now looking upon them would punish their guilt with a terrible vengeance. At this very instant, the sun, which had been veiled behind a dark cloud, burst forth in full radiance, and the natives became convinced that Stockton was divine. The natives threw themselves to the ground in front of Stockton—the success of Stockton's proposals was assured. On the next day, 15 December 1821, Chiefs Peter, George, Yoda, and Long Peter (of the Dē and Mamba tribes) transferred to the American Colonization Society not only the future site of Monrovia, but also a coastal strip approximately 130 miles long and 40 miles wide which might be reserved forever for the settlement of freed slaves. For this cession of land, the following goods were given to the chiefs:

six muskets, one small barrel of powder, six iron bars, two iron pots, one barrel of beads, two casks of tobacco, twelve knives, twelve forks, twelve spoons, a barrel of nails, a box of pipes, three looking-glasses, four umbrellas, three walking-sticks, one box of soap, a barrel of rum [Stockton had assured Bacon that the unopened keg contained molasses], four hats, three pairs of shoes, and a few bolts of white calico.<sup>2</sup>

On 26 July 1847 the freed slaves who had settled and were living on the land originally purchased by Stockton and Ayres became citizens of the new Republic of Liberia.

It is interesting to note that Stockton, on a subsequent cruise in *Alligator*, captured several ships off the coast of Africa, flying the French flag, which

were known to be slavers. The French Government became quite indignant about the affair, pointing out that Stockton's orders precluded the capture of ships not flying the American flag. Stockton, however, felt something had to be done, for he found he could not obey the letter of the law without violating that same law's clear intent. An American slaver on sighting *Alligator* would fly different colors and have papers to back up its guise. Stockton, firmly convinced that the fundamental principles of justice and the law of nature should apply, was determined that the case should be tried in the courts of the United States. The ensuing case concerned the French ship *Jeune Eugenie* (2 Mason's C.C. Reports), in which Stockton was represented by his friend Daniel Webster. The opinion of the Circuit Court of the United States sustained the legality of the capture of this vessel, upholding Stockton's contention that a slaver's cargo and voyage made her a pirate and that a flag could not protect her in a trade declared to be illegal by the government of the country to which she belonged. Judge Story, who delivered the opinion of the court, summed it up by saying that he had come to the conclusion that the slave trade was prohibited by universal law and by the law of France; and that, therefore, the claim of the asserted French owners must be rejected.

Charles J. Peterson, a noted military historian of the 19th century, said of Stockton that had he lived a generation earlier, he would probably have divided with Hull, Decatur, Stewart, and Bainbridge the glories of our naval victories in 1812. But the war in which those great men won their laurels found Stockton a lad with the rank of midshipman, and fate was not able to present him with a single opportunity to achieve that renown for which his ardent spirit burned. Near the end of his career, however, Stockton, serving as a commodore, did win a measure of the

<sup>2</sup>R.C.F. Maughan, *The Republic of Liberia* (New York: Scribner's, 1919).  
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battle laurels he desired in the war with Mexico. His exploits in California forever won him the gratitude of local

residents who proudly responded by naming the city of Stockton after this outstanding naval officer.

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## APPENDIX I

### ACT OF THE U.S. CONGRESS OF 3 MARCH 1819

Be it enacted by the Senate and House of Representatives of the United States of America in Congress assembled, That the President of the United States be, and he is hereby, authorized, whenever he shall deem it expedient, to cause any of the armed vessels of the United States to be employed to cruise on any of the coasts of the United States, or territories thereof, or of the coast of Africa, or elsewhere, where he may judge attempts may be made to carry on the slave trade by citizens or residents of the United States, in contravention of the acts of Congress prohibiting the same, and to instruct and direct the commanders of all armed vessels of the United States, to seize, take, and bring into any port of the United States, all ships or vessels of the United States, wheresoever found, which may have taken on board, or which may be intended for the purpose of taking on board, or of transporting, or may have transported, any negro, mulatto, or person of colour, in violation of any of the provisions of the act, entitled "An act in addition to an act to prohibit the importation of slaves into any port or place within the jurisdiction of the United States, from and after the first day of January, in the year of our Lord one thousand eight hundred and eight, and to repeal certain parts of the same," or of any other act or acts prohibiting the traffick in slaves, to be proceeded against according to law: And the proceeds of all ships and vessels, their tackle, apparel, and furniture, and the goods and effects on board of them, which shall be so seized, prosecuted, and condemned, shall be divided equally between the United States and the officers and men who shall seize, take, or bring, the same into port for condemnation, whether such seizure be made by an armed vessel of the United States or revenue cutter thereof; And the same shall be distributed in like manner as is provided by law for the distribution of prizes taken from an enemy. Provided, That the officers and men, to be entitled to one half of the proceeds aforesaid, shall safe keep every negro, mulatto, or person of colour, found on board of any ship or vessel so seized, taken, or brought into port, for condemnation, and shall deliver every such negro, mulatto or person of colour, to the marshal of the district into which they are brought, if into a port of the United States, or, if elsewhere, to such person or persons as shall be lawfully appointed by the President of the United States, in the manner hereinafter directed, transmitting to the President of the United States, as soon as may be after such delivery, a descriptive list of such negroes, mulattoes, or persons of colour, that he may give directions for the disposal of them. And provided further, That the commanders of such commissioned vessels, do cause to be apprehended, and taken into custody, every person found on board of such vessel, so seized and taken, being of the officers or crew thereof, and him or them convey, as soon as conveniently may be, to the civil authority of the United States, to be proceeded against, in due course of law, in some of the districts thereof.

And be it further enacted, That the President of the United States be, and he is hereby, authorized, to make such regulations and arrangements, as he may deem expedient, for the safe-keeping support, and removal beyond the limits of the United States, of all such negroes, mulattoes, or persons of colour, as may be so delivered and brought within their jurisdiction: And to appoint a proper person or persons,

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residing upon the coast of Africa, as agent or agents for receiving the negroes, mulattoes, or persons of colour, delivered from on board vessels, seized in the prosecution of the slave trade, by commanders of the United States' armed vessels.

And be it further enacted, That a bounty of twenty-five dollars be paid to the officers and crews of the commissioned vessels of the United States, or revenue cutters, for each and every negro, mulatto, or person of colour, who shall have been, as hereinbefore provided, delivered to the marshal or agent duly appointed to receive them: And the Secretary of the Treasury is hereby authorized and required to pay, or cause to be paid, to such officers and crews, or their agent, the aforesaid bounty, for each person delivered as aforesaid. . . . And be it further enacted, That it shall be the duty of the commander of any armed vessel of the United States, whenever he shall make any capture under the provisions of this act, to bring the vessel and her cargo, for adjudication, into some of the ports of the state or territory to which such vessel, so captured, shall belong, if he can ascertain the same; if not, then to be sent into any convenient port of the United States.

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He (King George III) has waged cruel war against human nature itself, violating its most sacred rights of life and liberty in the persons of a distant people who never offended him, captivating and carrying them into slavery in another hemisphere, or to incur miserable death in their transportation thither.

*Thomas Jefferson: Original draft of the  
Declaration of Independence*