FLAGS OVER LIBERIA

by G. de G r a a f

In the middle of the 14th century the Normans and the Genoese began the explo-- ration of the west coast of Africa. The first known European to reach what is now Liberia, in 1461, was a Portuguese named Pedro da Cintra; he was sent out by King Alfonso V.

From that time on, the whole west coast of Africa was mapped, and nearly all the prominent features - capes, rivers etc. - along that coast bear names of Portuguese origin. So do also the capes on both ends of the coastline of Liberia, Cape Mount and Cape Palmas, as old maps show us.

After the Portuguese came the French, and the English, the Dutch, the Germans. We may be sure that all these discoverers, traders, planted flag-poles on for them strategic points, and raised their colours. However, the Flag of Liberia not being based in any way on the flags of these traders, I think it beyond the subject of to-day to discuss their flags.

It was in the year 1816, when James Monroe was President of the United States of America, that the American Colonization Society was founded with the express purpose of helping freed slaves in the United States to return to Africa.

The first expedition, which sailed for Africa in february 1820, unfortunately met with great disaster, and it lasted until january 7th, 1822, that the first settlers, the "Pioneers", landed on a small green island at the mouth of the Mesurado river.

The island was called Perseverance Island, but later on was given the name of Providence Island. Thus the settlers wanted to emphasize that it was more the help and guidance of Providence that had brought them there than it was their own perseverance!

In december of the year before, an agreement had been made with six tribal Kings, according to which the said island and Cape Mesurado were bought from the natives. In april 1822 formal possession was taken of these lands, and an American Flag was raised. This must have been the Flag of the United States with 23 stars.

Soon after this ceremony, in the course of 1822, when Elijah Johnson was in charge, he led the small group of settlers from Perseverance Island to the place on the mainland now named Monrovia. This caused a kind of war with the natives, and when the situation was getting very critical a British gun-boat came off Cape Mesurado. The Commander offered to send help if Johnson would cede to the British Flag. Jonson refused point-black, and exclaimed:

> " we want no flag-staff put up here that will cost more to
> get it down again than it will to whip the natives",

and the British vessel sailed away.

More groups arrived and settled on different places along the coast.

From 1822 until 1839 Agents appointed by the American Colonization Society governed the settlements.

In 1839 the settlements or colonies were united into one Government under the name of the Commenwealth of Liberia, with Thomas Buchanan as Governor. A new Constitution was granted. Following the development of the American Flag, we may assume that on the day the Commonwealth came into being, the Flag had 26 stars.

It may be remembered that already in the year 1824, the Reverend Gurley invented the name LIBERIA - after liber, liberty - while in the same period the name MONROVIA - after James Monroe - was given to what is now the Nation's Capital.

Montserrado County and Grand Bassa County formed part of the Commonwealth from the beginning; in 1841 Sinoe County was admitted.

The American Flag flying over the Commonwealth of Liberia had 28 stars when the Board of the American Colonization Society came to the resolution dated april 9th, 1847, reading as follows:

> " As a flag is requested for our colony at Liberia, and as it will be
> proper to make the flag nearly like the Flag of the United States,
> being dependant thereon, yet sufficiently distinct to designate it
> as the Flag of the African Colony, resolved that the Flag of the
> United States be adopted, omitting the stars and substituting there-
> fore a white cross in the center of the azure field. " (Fig. 60)

In the meantime preparations to come to complete independance had started in 1846.

On july 10th, 1847, Governor J.J. Roberts sent a letter of the following contents

to Mrs. Susannah Lewis:

" Dear Madam,

The Governor of Liberia sends greetings to you and your distinguished consort, Mr. Lewis. The object of this communication is to inform you that in a talk with several gentlemen of the Committee appointed to draft a Declaration of Independance of our Country, the necessity of having a new Flag for our Country that has recently been given a new name, was discussed.

The old Flag has been thought to be not comprehensive enough in its significance of the things that stand for here in Africa; and have decided that we might have an other Flag of a more significant design and meaning.

We certainly feel that the Ladies of this town might be called upon to make such a flag, and to assist us in finding a suitable design.

Your name was mentioned as the Chairlady for this business. You can, at your convenience, convene such a number of ladies when and where you may designate and notify me of the same, and I will appoint a Committee of Gentlemen who will meet with you and explain further our desire.

Hope that you will accept.

I am yours, Madam, most sincerely,

J. J. Roberts, Governor.   "

The Committee on the making of the Flag consisted of the following ladies: Susannah Lewis, Rachel Johnson, Mary Hunter, Sarah Draper, Collinette Teage, Matilda Newport, and Mrs J. B. Russworm.

The Declaration of Independance was signed on july 26th, 1847, by eleven signatories, delegates from Montserrado County, Grand Bassa County and Sinoe County:
S. Benedict, H. Teage, Elijah Johnson, J. N. Lewis, Beverly R. Wilson, J. B. Gripon, John Day, Amos Herring, A. W. Gardiner, Ephraim Titler and E. E. Murray; secretary was Jacob W. Prout.

Mr. J. J. Roberts, the last Governor of the Commonwealth of Liberia, became the first President of the Republic of Liberia.

The new Flag, produced by the Committee of Ladies, still being the National Flag of Liberia, consisted of eleven stripes, six red and five white, alternately displayed longitudinally. In the upper angle next to the staff is a square blue field five stripes deep. In the center of the blue field is a single fivepointed white

star. The eleven stripes commemorate the eleven signatories of the Declaration of Independence. The white star represents the shining light of the lone negro republic, and the blue what was then the dark continent of Africa (Fig. 61).

This symbol of negro liberty was unfurled on august 24th, 1847, amidst great rejoicing, as the historians tell us.

It was on april 11th, 1961, that a new law on the Liberian Flag was approved by the National Legislature. This Law mentions among other items:

DESCRIPTION OF THE FLAG:
The National Flag of the Republic shall consist of eleven horizontal red and white stripes. The stripes shall alternate and the first and last shall be red.
There shall be a blue square canton extending from the left top corner of the Flag to the bottom of the third red stripe, and a large white five-pointed star superimposed in the exact center of the blue canton.

DISTINGUISHING CHARACTERISTICS OF THE FLAG:
The following shall be the distinguishing characteristics of the Flag:
1. The exact shade of the blue in the Flag shall be Navy Blue, which symbolizes liberty, justice and fidelity;
2. The exact shade of the white in the Flag shall be pure white, meaning the achromatic color of highest brilliance, and symbolizing purity, cleanliness and guilelessness; and
3. The exact shade of the red in the Flag shall be ruby red, which signifies steadfastness, valor and fervor.

The National flag is seen on all kinds of printed matter, publications, pamphlets, newsletters, etc.

As unfortunately we see so often in the flag-field, the Liberian Flag was mistreated too, as the following examples will show us.

On the occasion of a State Visit by the President of Liberia to the Netherlands, a large quantity of small Liberian flags was made in the wrong design. The blue canton is one stripe too small; the star is upside down. A cigar-manufacturer introduced a series of cigarbands with flags of various nations. The Liberian Flag was given with the Great Seal in the blue field instead of the white star.

On stamps too, Liberia had the National Flag several times.

As you no doubt know, His Excellency William V. S. Tubman is the President of

the Republic of Liberia since 1944. Under His presidency the country is developing at high speed. His Unification Program was of the greatest importance for the country, where twenty-eight different languages are spoken, apart from the official english. President Tubman made the peoples Nation-minded. Therefore I think it was a very good idea to present on the occasion of the 70th birthday of the President, a Flag for each of the nine Counties, forming the Republic of Liberia today.

The Unity of the Nation President Tubman worked so hard for, is emphasized on these County-flags by the Liberian National Flag in the canton. Let us look at the County-flags one after the other.

MONTSERRADO COUNTY (Fig. 62)

The colours blue and red represent both the original inhabitants of the county and the 19th century immigrants from the new world. The dark shade of the blue represents the then darkness of the African continent. The red symbolizes the struggle, courage and the blood shed by the immigrants in order to establish themselves. The light blue represents the result of the blending of the two cultures. The figure in the middle, as you may recognize, represents Providence Island, the birth-place of the merging of the two cultures.

GRAND BASSA COUNTY (Fig. 63)

The blue background is the historical colour of the county, and signifies loyality to the State. The four red and white stripes represent the four men who were the delegates from Grand Bassa County at the Constitutional Convention of 1847, and who co-signed the Liberian Declaration of Independance. We see here a very close connection with the National Flag.

SINOE COUNTY (Fig. 64)

The white represents purity, and the green, cutting across the county, stands for the tropical forests.

MARYLAND COUNTY (Fig. 65)

The yellow represents one of the colours of Maryland's original flag, the green goes for the green grass of the county. The palmtree is representing Cape Palmas, and the pale blue stands for the sky, the lighthouse for light.

This may be sufficient for Maryland to-day, as it would take us too far to talk about the foregoing flags of Maryland, when it was a colony, and when it was an independant state, before it was admitted to the Republic of Liberia in 1857.

GRAND CAPE MOUNT COUNTY (Fig. 66)

White is the standard colour of the county, and represents purity and peace. The green is in shape of the mountain after which the county was named.

LOFA COUNTY (Fig. 67)

The colour green spreads all over and represents the green forest of the county; the blue cuts across and stands for the Lofa river flowing through the county. Brown in a form of an arm holding a faggot, and stretching across the river, represents the arm of unity reaching across the Lofa river, thereby uniting all sections of the county into the national fabric of unification and understanding.

BONG COUNTY (Fig. 68)

The purple colour means dawn, the orange newness. Both colours blended together means the dawn of a new county. The white signifies the pureness of the hearts of the people of Bong County. In the white field are mining tools referring to the richness of iron ore.

NIMBA COUNTY (Fig. 69)

The red, white and blue symbolizes valour, purity and fidelity. The globe in the center represents Nimba County. The brown stands for the iron ore deposits in the county, the green for the forests, the light blue for the sky, and the red for the rising sun over mount Nimba.

GRAND GEDEH COUNTY (Fig. 70)

The colour green symbolizes a new county springing up like a green plant. The white stands for purity of heart, and the blue indicates peace and prosperity of the Tubman Administration. The mountain stands for Grand Gedeh Mountain, after which the county is named, rising above the green forests.

According to the mythology of the inhabitants of the county, Mount Grand Gedeh is a mountain of hope and reward. It is the paradise for the souls of great heroes. To-day, as in the days gone by, the people of the county still feel that their hope is in this mountain. With its rich iron ore, and probably other minerals, it is hoped that one day mining industry will come and raise the economic standard of the people. The rising sun symbolizes a new bright day in the history of Liberia. The gigantic green forest at the base of the mountain stands for fertility of the soil.

Finally, a few words about the PRESIDENTIAL FLAG (Fig. 71).

With regard to the Presidential Standard the available documentation may be

somewhat confusing. Different designs are given in
- the National Geographic Magazine, 1917
- the Handbook of Flags by Preben Kannik, 1958
- two more examples.

Up till now I could not find a satisfactory explanation for this. Is it merely a matter of development of the original design? Or is it a result of insufficient communication?

The Presidential Standard is flown together with the National Flag of Liberia. If there is only one flag-staff, the National Flag is on the top, and the standard thereunder. Normally, also on the President's automobile, the National Flag is on the right, the standard on the left. The Presidential Car has no licence plate, but carries a plate with the standard instead.

+ + +

I am fully aware of the fact that this Report is by far not complete. It could not be, only for the simple reason that it would take too much time to-day.

The eleven most important flags of Liberia you have seen. I hope the other Liberian flags may have our attention on some future occasion.

May I conclude this Report now by expressing the wish that Liberia may continue to keep the lone star at full staff in length of time!

Illustrations,Report Nr. 16 :
Flags over Liberia

Fig. 60   Flag of the COLONY OF LIBERIA
           (Resolution dated april 9th, 1847)
           The flag of the United States, omitting
           the stars and substituting therefore a
           white cross in the center of the blue
           field.

Fig. 61   National Flag of LIBERIA
           (August 24th, 1847)
           11 stripes, 6 red and 5 white alterna-
           tely, a white star in the center of the
           square blue canton.

           C o u n t y   F l a g s
           =========================

           (The canton of the county flags is
            the Liberian National flag)

Fig. 62   MONTSERRADO COUNTY
           Divided diagonally from the top of the fly
           to the bottom of the hoist, dark blue over
           red.
           In the center a light blue disc with green
           and brown figures.
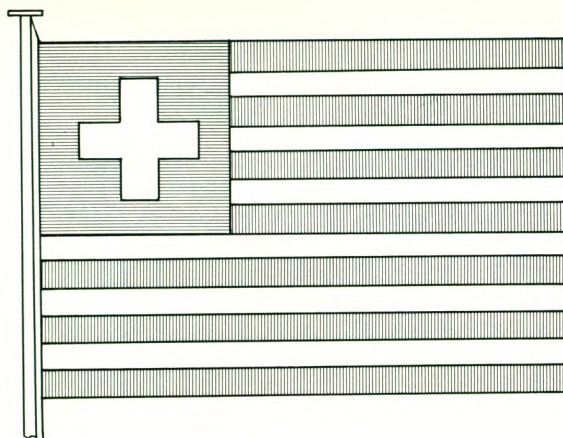
Fig.60
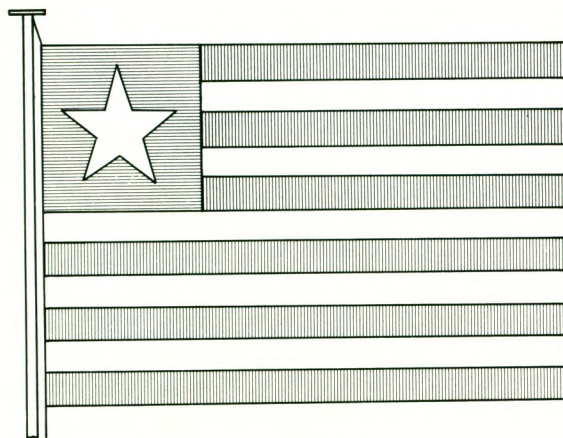
Fig.61
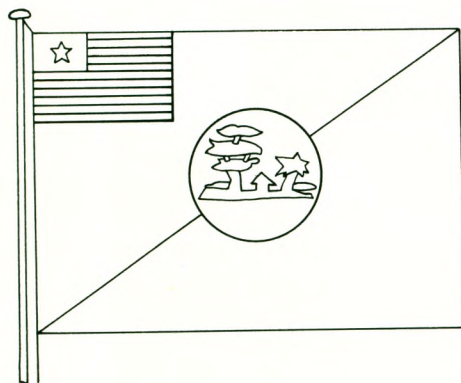
Fig.62

Fig. 63   GRAND BASSA COUNTY

A dark blue field with four stripes in
the lower corner of the fly : red/white/
red/white.

Fig. 64   SINOE COUNTY

A white flag with a green cross.

Fig. 65   MARYLAND COUNTY

Three horizontal stripes : yellow/light blue/
                            yellow

Hill :   green

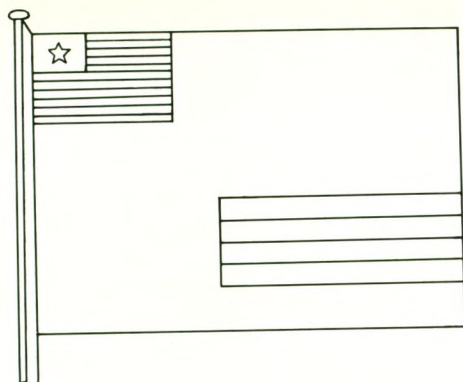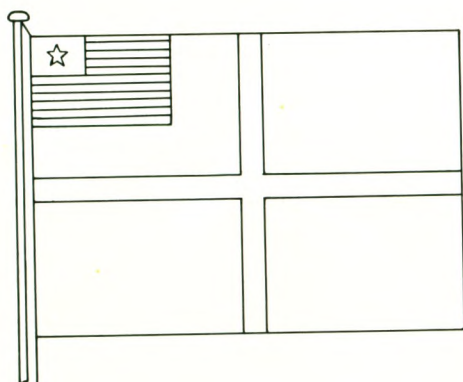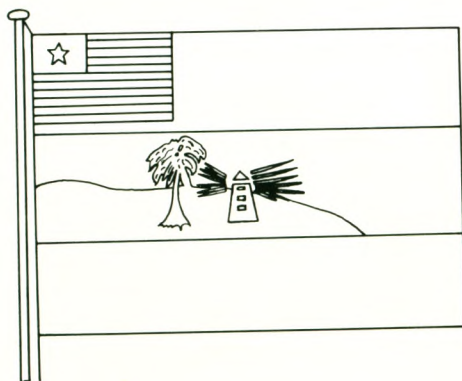Palm tree :   green with
                            brown trunk

Lighthouse :   white

Fig.63

Fig.64

Fig.65

Fig. 66   GRAND CAPE MOUNT COUNTY

A white flag with a green border.
The mountain is green.

Fig. 67   LOFA COUNTY

Ground colour :   green
River :   blue
Arm and faggot :   brown

Fig. 68   BONG COUNTY
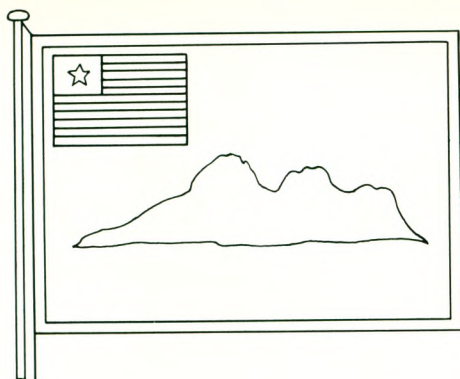
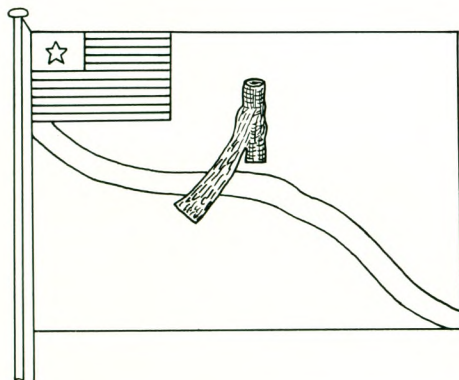Purple over orange,
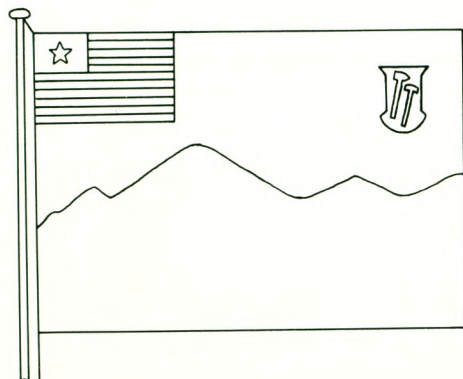black mining tools in a white shield.

Fig.66

Fig.67

Fig.68

Fig. 69   NIMBA COUNTY

Three horizontal stripes : red/white/dark blue
Disc :   light blue
Soil :   green
Mountain :   brown
Tree :   green
                          with brown trunk
Rising sun :   red

Fig. 70   GRAND GEDEH COUNTY

Light blue over white,
green mountain, red rising sun.

Fig. 71   The Presidential Flag

has a dark blue field charged with a
shield outlined in gold : "gules, 5 pallets
argent, on a chief azure a star argent"
(Red shield with 5 white vertical stripes,
blue "chief" with white star).
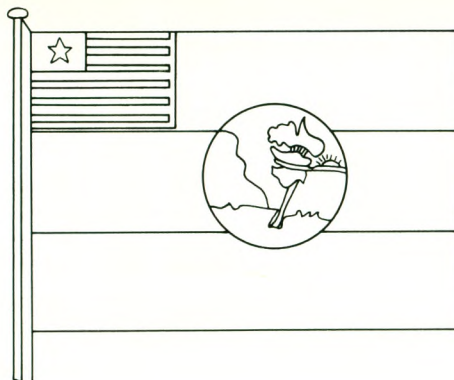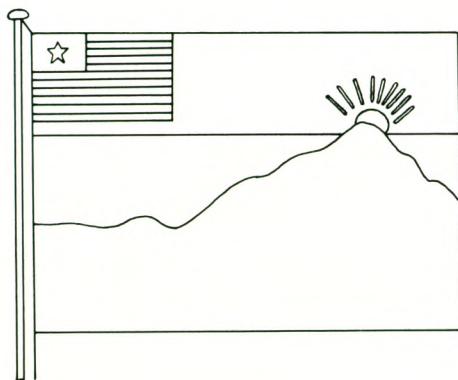One white star in each of the corners.
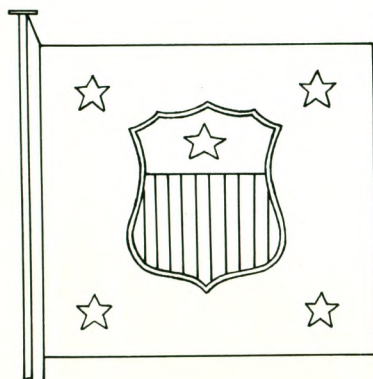
Fig.69

Fig.70

Fig.71