

## **Forgotten Paths of Empire: Firestone and the Promise of Liberia**

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A hemorrhagic fever mysteriously erupted during the summer rainy season along the coast of West Africa. Suddenly, the attention of all the world's nations seemed fixed on the small republic of Liberia.

The year was 1929. Among the Americans who fell victim to the yellow fever outbreak that swept West Africa during that summer was William T. Francis. Appointed by Calvin Coolidge as American Minister and Consul General to Liberia in 1927, he was the only black official in the American diplomatic service. Francis's death, along with those of a number of prominent American, British, and Japanese medical researchers and educational advisers, prompted the US government and the League of Nations to put intense political pressure on the Liberian government to address the "unsanitary conditions" deemed a "menace" to "the lives of the citizens and subjects of foreign nations who reside in Liberia."

The yellow fever outbreak signified a major threat to American business in Liberia. In 1926, Firestone Tire and Rubber Company gained access to one million acres of land in Liberia to establish a rubber plantation that could supply the United States with rubber free from British control. It succeeded by bringing the forces of industrial capital, foreign diplomacy, and science and medicine to bear on the transformation and development of what would become America's rubber empire.

Liberia became an important testing ground for American visions of development from the promises of welfare capitalism to the dreams of technical assistance delivered through Truman's Point Four Program after the Second World War. For many American investigators and institutions, the Firestone plantations became research laboratories upon which they built professional careers in tropical medicine and biology—the American story of which has largely been untold. By the early 1950s, a vast monoculture of rubber trees on more than 100,000 acres of land, formerly occupied by the Bassa people, accounted for 70 percent of Liberia's total exports. The Firestone project in Liberia began a series of major land ruptures, perturbations in both the landscape and the lives of people, and set the country on a path of economic dependency on large-scale agricultural, logging, and mining concessions that continues to this day. At the same time, the promise of Liberia created unique possibilities for African-American diplomats, physicians, engineers, and scientists during the Jim Crow era in the United States even as it brought limitations to Liberian economic self-determination.

*Forgotten Paths of Empire* draws upon the fields of history of science, medical history, and environmental history to illuminate how science and medicine, natural resource development, and global economic and political relations opened the Liberian interior to Firestone while altering the political economy, environment, and lives of the Liberian people. The book offers a history of ecology and disease, of commerce and science, of racial politics and political maneuvering that brings to light the conditions of possibility in which a civil war and the worst Ebola outbreak in human history emerged.