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Blyden, Edward W.
Inaugural Address at the Inauguration of Liberia College
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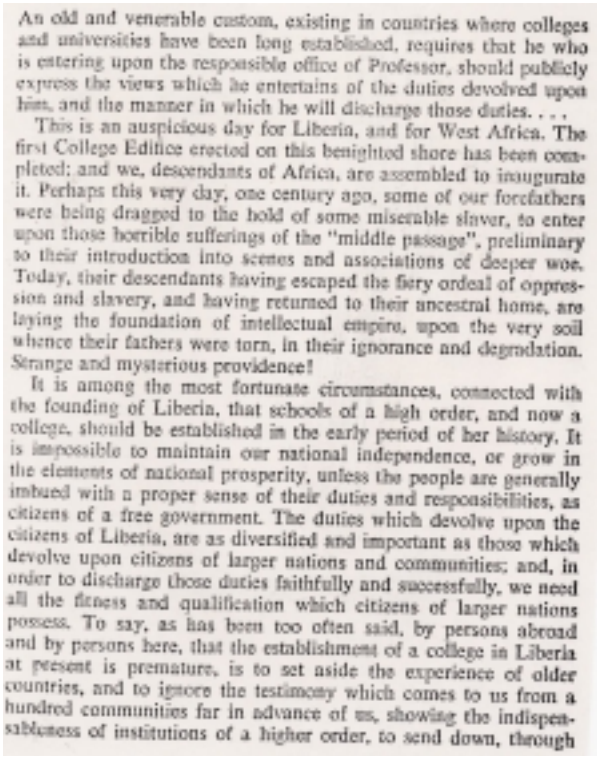
An old and venerable custom, existing in countries where colleges and universities have been long established, requires that he who is entering upon the responsible office of Professor, should publicly express the views which he entertains of the duties devolved upon him, and the manner in which he will discharge those duties…

This is an auspicious day for Liberia, and for West Africa. The first College Edifice erected on this benighted shore has been completed; and we, descendents of Africa, are assembled to inaugurate it. Perhaps this very day, one century ago, some of our forefathers were being dragged to the hold of some miserable slaver, to enter upon those horrible sufferings of the "middle passage", preliminary to their introduction into scenes and associations of deeper woe. Today, their descendants having escaped the fiery ordeal of oppression and slavery, and having returned to their ancestral home, are laying the foundation of intellectual empire, upon the very soil whence their fathers were torn, in their ignorance and degradation. Strange and mysterious providence!

It is among the most fortunate circumstances, connected with the founding of Liberia, that schools of high order, and now a college, should be established in the early period of her history. It is impossible to maintain our national independence, or grow in the elements of national prosperity, unless the people are generally imbued with a proper sense of their duties and responsibilities, as citizens of a free government. The duties which devolve upon the citizens of Liberia, are as diversified and important as those which devolve upon citizens of larger nations and communities; and, in order to discharge those duties faithfully and successfully, we need all the fitness and qualification which citizens of larger nations possess. To sa, as has been too often said, by persons abroad and by persons here, that the establishment of a college in Liberia at present is premature, is to set aside the experience of older countries, and to ignore the testimony which comes to us from a hundred communities far in advance of us, showing the indispensableness of institutions of a higher order, to send down, through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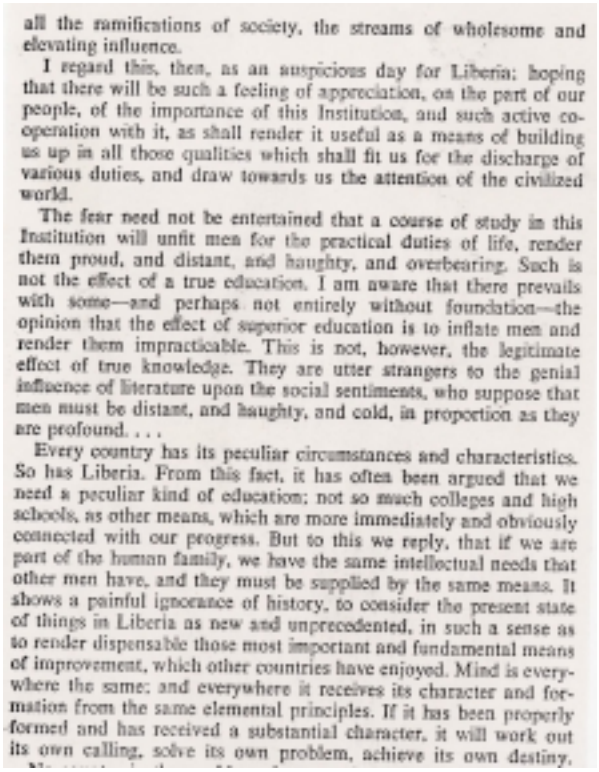
all he ramifications of society, the streams of wholesome and elevating influence.

I regard this, then, as an auspicious day for Liberia; hoping that there will be such a feeling of appreciation, on the part of our people, of the importance of this Institution, and such active co-operation with it, as shall render it useful as a means of building us up in all those qualities which shall fit us for the discharge of various duties, and draw towards us the attention of the civilized world.

The fear need not be entertained that a course of study in this Institution will unfit men for the practical duties of life, render them proud, and distant, and haughty, and overbearing. Such is not the effect of a true education. I am aware that there prevails with some—and perhaps not entirely without foundation—the opinion that the effect of superior education is to inflate men and render them impracticable. This is not, however, the legitimate effect of true knowledge. They are utter strangers to the genial influence of literature upon the social sentiments, who suppose that men must be distant, and haughty, and cold, in proportion as they are profound…

Every country has its peculiar circumstances and characteristics. So has Liberia. From this fact, it has often been argued that we need a peculiar kind of education; not so much colleges and high schools, as other means, which are more immediately and obviously connected with our progress. But to this we reply, that if we are part of the human family, we have the same intellectual needs that other men have, and they must be supplied by the same means. It shows a painful ignorance of history, to consider the present state of things in Liberia as new and unprecedented, in such a sense as to render dispensable those most important and fundamental means of improvement, which other countries have enjoyed. Mind is everywhere the same; and everywhere it receives its character and formation from the same elemental principles. If it has been properly formed and has received a substantial character, it will work out its own calling, solver its own problem, achieve its own destiny.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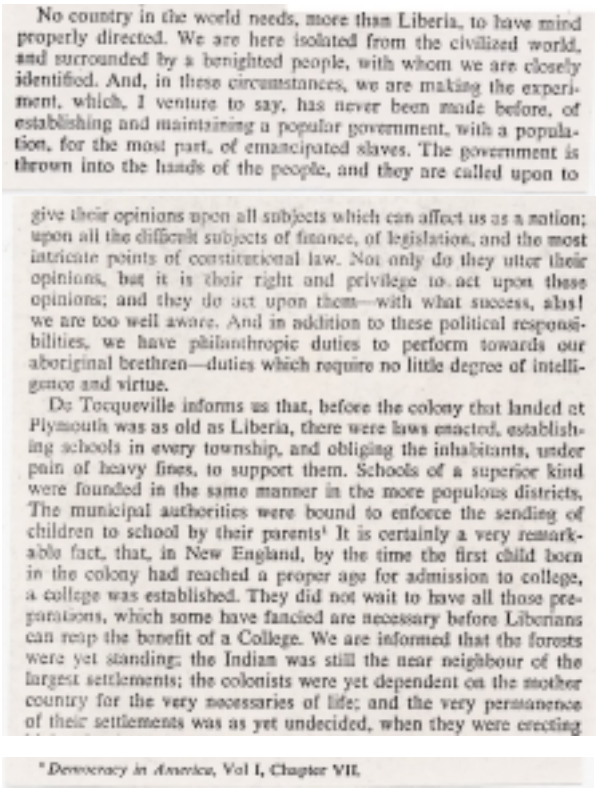
No country in the world needs, more than Liberia, to have mind properly directed. We are here isolated from the civilized world, and surrounded by a benighted people, with whom we are closely identified. And, in these circumstances, we are making the experiment, which, I venture to say, has never been made before, of establishing and maintaining a popular government, with a population, for the most part, of emancipated slaves. The government is thrown into the hands of the people, and they are called upon to give their opinions upon all subjects which can affect us as a nation; upon all the difficult subjects of finance, of legislation, and the most intricate points of constitutional law. Now only do they utter their opinions, but it is their right and privilege to act upon these opinions; and they do act upon them—with what success, alas! we are too well aware. And in addition to these political responsibilities, we have philanthropic duties to perform towards our aboriginal brethren—duties which require no little degree of intelligence and virtue.

De Tocqueville informs us that, before the colony that landed at Plymouth was as old as Liberia, there were laws enacted, establishing schools in every township, and obliging the inhabitants, under pain of heavy fines, to support them. Schools of a superior kind were founded in the same manner in the more populous districts. The municipal authorities were bound to enforce the sending of children to school by their parents[1] [.] It is certainly a very remarkable fact, that, in New England, by the time the first child born in the colony had reached a proper age for admission to college, a college was established. They did not wait to have all those preparations, which some have fancied are necessary before Liberians can reap the benefit of a College. We are informed that the forests were yet standing; the Indian was still the near neighbour of the largest settlements; the colonists were yet dependent on the mother country for the very necessaries of life; and the very permanence of their settlements was as yet undecided, when they were erecting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[1] *Democracy in America, Vol I, Chapter VII.*

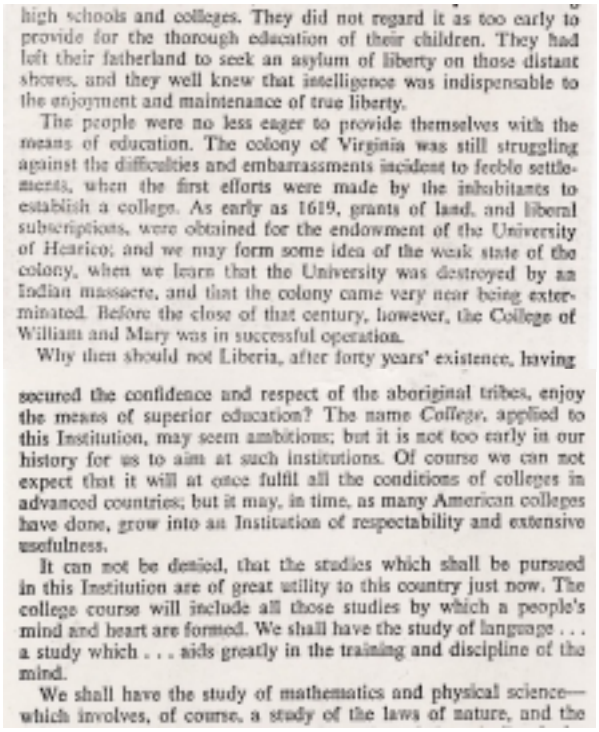
high schools and colleges. They did not regard it as too early to provide for the thorough education of their children. They had left their fatherland to seek an asylum of liberty on those distant shores, and they well knew that intelligence was indispensable to the enjoyment and maintenance of true liberty.

The people were no less eager to provide themselves with the means of education. The colony of Virginia was still struggling against the difficulties and embarrassments incident to feeble settlements, when the first efforts were made by the inhabitants to establish a college. As early as 1619, grants of land, and liberal subscriptions, were obtained for the endowment of the University of Henrico; and we may form some idea of the weak state of the colony, when we learn that the University was destroyed by an Indian massacre, and that the colony came very near being exterminated. Before the close of that century, however, the College of William and Mary was in successful operation.

Why then should not Liberia, after forty years' existence, having secured the confidence and respect of the aboriginal tribes, enjoy the means of superior education? The name *College*, applied to this Institution, may seem ambitious; but it is not too early in our history for us to aim at such institutions. Of course we can not expect that it will at once fulfil all the conditions of colleges in advanced countries; but it may, in time, as many American colleges have done, grow into an Institution of respectability and extensive usefulness.

It can not be denied, that the studies which shall be pursued in this Institution are of great utility to this country just now. The college course will include all those studies by which a people's mind and heart are formed. We shall have the study of language … a study which … aids greatly in the training and discipline of the mind.

We shall have the study of mathematics and physical science—which involves, of course, a study of the laws of nature, and the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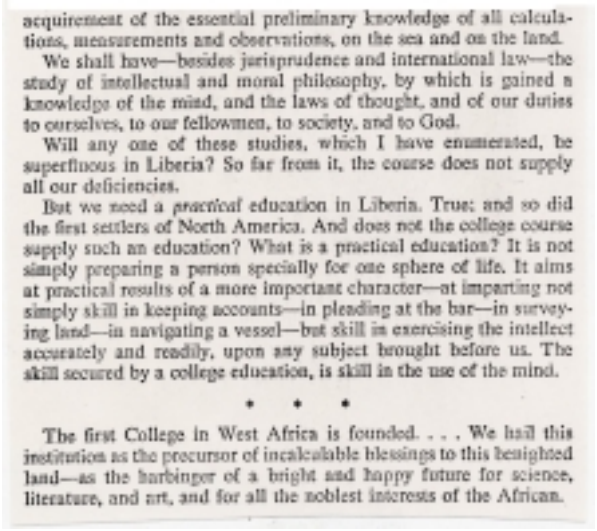
We shall have—besides jurisprudence and international law—the study of intellectual and moral philosophy, by which is gained a knowledge of the mind, and the laws of thought, and of our duties to ourselves, to our fellowmen, to society, and to God.

Will any of these studies, which I have enumerated, be superfluous in Liberia? So far from it, the course does not supply all our deficiencies.

But we need a *practical* education in Liberia. True; and so did the first settlers of North America. And does not the college course supply such an education? What is a practical education? It is not simply preparing a person specially for one sphere of life. It aims at practical results of amore important character—at imparting not simply skill in keeping accounts—in pleading at the bar—in surveying land—in navigating a vessel—but skill in exercising the intellect accurately and readily, upon any subject brought before us. The skill secured by a college education, is skill in the use of the mind.

* * *

The first College in West Africa is founded. . . . We hail this institution as the precursor of incalculable blessings to this benighted land—as the harbinger of a bright and happy future for science, literature, and art, and for all the noblest interests of the African.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