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On the Freetown Waterfront:
Household Income and Informal Wage Labour in a
Nineteenth Century Port City

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**On the Freetown Waterfront:
Household Income and Informal Wage Labour in a Nineteenth Century Port City¹**

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Abstract: In this article, we use the 1831 Freetown Census alongside a variety of business and colonial papers to argue for the importance of informal, seasonal, flexible labor conducted at the household level – rather than individual breadwinner – in understanding how the economy in urban port cities in Africa and elsewhere in the Atlantic World operated in the nineteenth century. We construct a welfare ratio of different wage categories over the nineteenth century, as well as presenting sample household welfare ratios using real households from the Census. We argue that the flexibility, ‘entrepreneurship’, and precarity of the informal port city economy of the nineteenth century is relevant for understanding the nature of the modern gig economy and the predominance of ‘underemployment’ and informal employment in African urban areas. An archivally-based long view of how households strategized about their welfare can help to undo some of the ‘compression of history’ prevalent in the literature, and can offer contextualization to recent comparative real wage series.

Keywords: Standard of living; port city; household economy; Africa; informal economy

Introduction

In 1831, the British colonial government in Sierra Leone recorded in their census that at Number 7 Rawdon Street in the Eastern District of Freetown, James Jackson, a Trader, lived with Lucinda George, a “work woman”, David George, a ships carpenter, Sarah George, a “little girl”, Yellee, a housekeeper, and three servants.² On Cross Street No. 2, one household contained two ships carpenters identified as “native strangers” – migrants to the

¹ We would like to thank audiences at the AEHN Conference, 2018 (University of Bologna), Labour in History and Economics Conference, 2019 (All Soul’s College, University of Oxford), and the Global Urban History Project Conference, 2019 (University of Leicester) for useful comments on earlier versions of this paper. Funding from CRASSH Cambridge, Gonville & Caius College, Cambridge, the John Carter Brown Library, the Huntington Library, and the Leverhulme Fund made the research and writing possible.

² British National Archives (BNA) CO/267/111

growing city from the interior of Sierra Leone – as well as two canoemen, named Saruar and Bargoo in the record. These types of mixed households were not anomalous, either to Freetown, or to the myriad other Atlantic port cities of the early nineteenth century.³

Recent scholarship has begun to integrate African economies into global comparisons of the level and evolution of real wages, prices and standards of living, and has started to challenge assumptions about Africa's long-term growth.⁴ As numerous historians have begun to articulate their objections to a view that African growth has been historically stagnant, we have benefitted from an increased interest in the kinds of data series on wages, consumption, and economic output that have occupied historians of the Industrial Revolution.⁵ Ewout Frankema and Marlous van Waijenburg's important contribution of African wage data for the broad comparative and international project of understanding wages and growth in the nineteenth and twentieth century is a welcome one and it has generated other interventions that have collectively helped to demonstrate that "the whole idea that Africa has been *the poorest and most slowly growing region* since the Industrial Revolution, let alone 1500, is based on a backward extrapolation of post-1960 growth experiences without a solid empirical foundation."⁶

In the process of making these important comparisons, however, we have been struck that the field has, despite these historians' own caveats, often had to replicate the conception of the male breadwinner model as a transnational and transhistorical fact, an artefact of Allen's original approach that has shaped the attempts to draw international comparisons. In this paper, we explore what the absence of women's and children's wages means for understanding the actual standard of living in a city like Freetown in the nineteenth century,

³ Guyer, 'Household and Community in African Studies', (1981); Vaughan, 'Which Family? Problems in the Reconstruction of the History of the Family as an Economic and Cultural Unit', (1983); Lane, 'Work on the Margins', (1997); Rockman, 'Review essay: Work in the Cities of Colonial British North America', (2007), Humphries and Sarasua, 'Off the Record: Reconstructing Women's Labor Force Participation in the European Past', (2012); Berman, 'Women's Work in Family, Village, and Town', (2007); Bateman, *How Women Made the West Rich* (2019); Berg, 'Women's Consumption and the Industrial Classes', (1996); Catterall and Campbell, eds., *Women in Port* (2012); Everill, "'Industriousness" and Slavery in Saint-Louis and Goree', (2017).

⁴ Frankema and van Waijenburg, 'Structural Impediments to African Growth?', (2012); de Zwart, 'South African Livings Standards in global perspective', (2011); Rönnbäck, 'Livings Standards on the Pre-Colonial Gold Coast', (2014).

⁵ Allen, 'The Great Divergence in European Wages and Prices from the Middle Ages to the First World War', (2001); Allen, *The British Industrial Revolution in Global Perspective*, (2009); Allen et al., 'Wages, Prices, and Living Standards in China, 1739-1925', (2011); Allen, 'Spinning Their Wheels: A Reply to Jane Humphries and Ben Schneider', (2020); Humphries, 'Women's Labour Force Participation', (1995); Humphries, 'The lure of aggregates and the pitfalls of the patriarchal perspective', (2013); Humphries and Schneider, 'Losing the Thread: A Response to Robert Allen', (2020); Ozmutur and Pamuk, 'Real Wages and Standards of Living in the Ottoman Empire', (2002); Stephenson, 'Real Wages? Contractors, Workers, and Pay in London Building Trades, 1650-1800', (2018).

⁶ Frankema and van Waijenburg, 'Structural Impediments to African Growth?', (2012), pp. 912-14.

and what a household wage can tell us about the nature of informal work in the broader urban nineteenth century.⁷

Using samples from the 1831 Census, as well as other colonial documents, trading books, business papers and receipts, and missionary publications to investigate the occupational structure and standards of living in a city like Freetown over the long nineteenth century tells a story of a service-based economy in which workers in both the formal and informal economy responded to and created new opportunities as those opportunities presented themselves. Engaging with this history reveals the male breadwinner model as an anomaly and the industrialized welfare state as a particular event in time and space. We argue that Freetown's mixed households and informal jobbing can tell us more about how the economy did and does work for all but a historical minority.

Africa and the standard of living debate

Africa entered the standard of living debate as several different questions and methodologies converged, namely questions about the role of wages in catalyzing the industrial revolution, the Great Divergence between Western Europe and the rest of the world since 1500, and the persistence of poverty and inequality in modern Africa.⁸ To demonstrate that Africa *had* experienced periods of growth, and to show that, in fact, specific histories and starting points matter, historians began constructing real wage data for parts of Africa to show that the types of colonial relationship, levels of wage inequality within colonies, role in the slave trade, and other factors reveal a much more dynamic and complex picture of Africa's long term growth. Inequality measures have been a major focus of African studies as well, as scholars try to determine correlations between historic and contemporary inequality.⁹

One of the complexities of cross-country comparison has been whether to focus on urban unskilled labourers or rural workers, but in both cases the basis for comparison needs to be a wage. We understand that the comparison of the welfare ratio across time and space relies on the creation of a standardized formula for measuring the standard of living. As a means of understanding the lived experience of the economy, however, we think it is important to point out that the male breadwinner model was not reflective of how people and

⁷ Boter, 'Living Standards and the Life Cycle', (2020); Hatcher and Stephenson, *Seven Centuries of Unreal Wages* (2018).

⁸ Allen, 'The Great Divergence', (2001); Pomeranz, *The Great Divergence* (2000); Acemoglu, Johnson and Robinson, 'Colonial Origins of Comparative Development', (2001); Nunn, 'The Long-Term Effects of Africa's Slave Trades', (2008).

⁹ Tadei and Alfani, 'Income Inequality in French West Africa', (2019); Galli and Rönnbäck, 'Colonialism and Rural Inequality in Sierra Leone', (2020); de Zwart, 'South African Livings Standards in Global Perspective', (2011); Bolt and Hillbom, 'Long-Term Trends in Economic Inequality', (2016).

households actually lived and worked in Freetown, or, we suggest, other port cities. Vanishingly small numbers of the population were wage workers in the colonial African economies of the early twentieth century - Cooper, for instance, estimates that under 1 per cent of the population of French West Africa were wage workers in 1928.¹⁰ In part this is a problem of the availability of data to fit what is needed to make cross-country comparisons: it relies on the kinds of colonial bookkeeping that makes long-run data series possible, which means that it is necessarily limited to a particular time and set of economic constraints dictated by the types of colonial economies operating from the end of the nineteenth century.

The typologies of late nineteenth century African colonial economies typically describe three variants: “peasant export”, “concession”, and (white) “settler.”¹¹ While this loose typology has its analytical merits, it overlooks the economic complexity of urban economies in places like Freetown, which had long-standing commercial ties to both the Atlantic and African markets, and which were initially oriented around both import-export *and* service. Occupations in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century that indicate the port-services orientation of the economy include “captain and crew”, pilots, “blacksmith and coopers”, warehouse laborers, laborers at stores/factories, and overseers of public works at the port.

The informal nature of a lot of these occupations, however skilled they may have been, was a result of the seasonal and sporadic nature of work in these ports. The informal economy and accompanying levels of under- and unemployment in Africa have been the focus of a lot of development economics literature.¹² Industrial policy was the focus of much economic intervention in Africa across the latter part of the twentieth century and the centrality of Walter Rodney’s underdevelopment thesis in understanding the impact of the slave trade and colonial rule on African economic development focussed historical attention on the failure to industrialize and formalize the economy, caused by colonialism and neo-colonial policies.¹³ But as the ‘gig’ economy has shifted conceptions of temporary work and

¹⁰ Cooper, *Decolonization and African Society* (1996), p. 31.

¹¹ Austen, *African Economic History* (1987); Oliver & Atmore, *Africa Since 1800* (2005); Amin, ‘Underdevelopment and Dependence in Black Africa’, (1972).

¹² Chidi Nzeadibe and Mbah, ‘Beyond Urban Vulnerability’ (2015); Meaghar, ‘Crisis, Informalization and the Urban Informal Sector in Sub-Saharan Africa’, (1995); Eckert, ‘From Poverty to Informality?’ (2019); Bromley and Wilson, ‘The Urban Informal Sector’, (1979).

¹³ Rodney, *How Europe Underdeveloped Africa* (1972); Buelens and Cassimon, ‘Belgian Congo’, (2013); Amin and Girvan, ‘Underdevelopment and dependence’, (1973); Gutkind and Wallerstein, *The Political Economy of Contemporary Africa* (1976); Bowden et al., ‘Measuring and Explaining poverty’, (2008); Austin, ‘Capitalism and the Colonies’, (2014).

wages in Europe and the US as well, the topic of informal work and underemployment has recently become the subject of increased interest more generally.¹⁴

Cooper adds his voice to a growing chorus of those interested in using African examples to illuminate trends in global economic and labor histories, but also has long pointed out the potential pitfalls of “abstraction from the social basis of economic life.”¹⁵ In Africa, women’s temporary employment in cash work in providing meals to migrant workers or participating in migrant mining communities, or in prostitution or beer brewing has been used to underscore the importance of informal labor’s relationship with providing “household” comforts, either to migrant male laborers or through the financial gains of the work in providing for their families.¹⁶ Barchiesi highlights that “the history of precarious, casual and informal labour in Africa rather brings into sharp relief the exceptionality and contingency of the social conditions through which capitalist employment can be conducive to socially inclusive deals.”¹⁷ The experience of African labour conditions shows precarity and informality as the global rule, rather than the exception.

This paper presents an intervention into this debate, investigating occupations, wages, and costs of living in the port economy of Freetown to examine how port cities as a specific type of economy operated over the nineteenth century. As work on wages in African contexts proliferates, it is crucial to keep in mind two points. First, port cities offered all kinds of wage opportunities that were unavailable elsewhere. Second, the male wages prioritised by much of the literature were only a fraction of overall household income, with the wages of women and children and non-wage sources of income contributing to the overall household budget. As Horrell and Humphries warn, “A focus limited to the labor input of adult males must overestimate productivity.”¹⁸

Tracing the types of occupations, earnings potential, and the different possibilities for the standard of living in the city helps to add nuance to the debate about the ‘reversal of fortune’ in Africa.¹⁹ In particular, it highlights the complexity of ‘Africa’ as a unit of

¹⁴ Hyman, *Temp* (2018); Lewchuk, ‘Precarious Jobs’, (2020); Koutsimpogiorgos et al., ‘Conceptualising the Gig Economy and its Regulatory Problems’, (2020).

¹⁵ Cooper, “Africa and the World Economy,” (1981), p. 5; Cooper, *Africa in the World*, (2014); Comaroff and Comaroff, ‘Theory from the South’, (2012); Austin, ‘Reciprocal Comparison and African History’, (2007).

¹⁶ Damtar, ‘Of Akankyema and beyond,’ (2020); Ibrahim, Rutherford and Buss, ‘Gendered “choices” in Sierra Leone’, (2020); Burja, ‘Women “Entrepreneurs” of Early Nairobi’, (1975); White, *The Comforts of Home: Prostitution in Colonial Nairobi* (1990).

¹⁷ Barchiesi, ‘Precarious and Informal Labour’, (2019), p. 46.

¹⁸ Horrell and Humphries, ‘Women’s Labour Force Participation and the Transition to the Male-Breadwinner Family, 1790-1865’, (1995).

¹⁹ Acemoglu et al., ‘Colonial Origins of Comparative Development’, (2001); Jerven, ‘A Clash of Disciplines?’, (2011); Austin, ‘Reciprocal Comparison and African History’, (2008).

economic analysis. A variety of West African port cities had longstanding commercial (as well as cultural and political) connections with the Atlantic World, and while this was partially reshaped by the annexations of the later nineteenth century colonial period, any attempts to understand ‘African development’ in the long-run should take careful notice of these evolving deep economic histories to understand how colonialism was refracted by local experience and not simply imposed as a set of institutions imported from Europe.

As increasing interest is paid to Africa’s economic history, the relationship between urbanisation, economic development and occupational structure can help to illuminate the ways that the people who migrated to or lived in the growing cities of nineteenth century coastal West Africa helped to build something new. Freetown, like a lot of other port cities at the time, was a place of temporary employments, of chance and opportunity. Optimists have characterised the innovations in the informal economy as ‘entrepreneurship’.²⁰ Necessarily full of migrants, port town residents were transient and opportunistic.²¹ Despite Robert Lee’s somewhat surprising assertion that “port cities were noted for a general lack of female employment opportunities outside the sphere of domestic service,” the port cities of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century Atlantic World provided numerous opportunities for women as well.²²

Rather than assuming that the natural trajectory for urban economies in the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries was to transition from services to industrial centers, and therefore to see the ‘lack’ of that transition as a flaw in African development, it is worthwhile to think about the seasonality and sporadic opportunities in port cities involved in slave trading and other forms of Atlantic commerce as persistent forms of economic activity that can tell us about how households in these types of port economies engaged with paid work. Why did the male breadwinner model not become the standard for Freetown? We would argue that it was probably much less the norm, globally, than the alternative, and certainly that even at the height of labor union activism, the nature of port work in places like Liverpool and Baltimore was such that while day rates may have been high, expectations remained that the family might have to find multiple ways of sustaining itself, from taking in

²⁰ Ochonu, *Entrepreneurship in Africa* (2018); Andrae and Beckman, ‘ASR forum: Engaging with African Informal Economies’, (2013).

²¹ Lee, ‘The Socio-Economic and Demographic Characteristics of Port Cities: A Typology for Comparative Analysis?’, (1998).

²² Rockman, *Scraping By: Wage Labour, Slavery, and Survival in Early Baltimore* (2009).

boarders to combining multiple generations into one household, to other forms of temporary work undertaken by women and children to fill in the gaps.²³

The breadwinner model was associated with a very particular type of industrialized economic activity and did not apply to the whole economy even in places where industrialization was most widespread: it may have come to dominate in white collar and unionized-blue collar labor in particular mining towns or factory towns, and beyond that, even more temporarily, as a result of the welfare state in some places for several decades in the mid-twentieth century. But even within the US or European states where those trends can be seen, disenfranchised and marginalized immigrant workers, people of colour, and women-led households all found themselves operating outside of this supposed norm.²⁴ A view to Freetown's nineteenth century economy, therefore, encourages us to think more critically about the supposed normative economic models that are being deviated from in the late twentieth and early twenty-first century.²⁵

Occupational structure of Freetown

Freetown was founded in 1787 as the Province of Freedom, a philanthropic settlement for the colonization of Black Britons from London. Although the very first settlement fairly soon collapsed, the Sierra Leone Company, run by commercially-minded philanthropists from the Clapham Sect, took over the running of the colony in 1791, with a new wave of settlers made up of "Black Loyalists" from the American Revolution. In 1800, another group of settlers arrived from Jamaica. And from 1808 to the 1840s the colony had a regular group of new settlers - "Liberated Africans", from the newly outlawed Atlantic slave trade.²⁶ The colony was therefore made up of Black Americans, Black Britons, Black Jamaicans, as well as local Temne, Mende, Bago, and Susu, migrant Fula, and an increasingly prominent group of self-identified "Aku" (Yoruba) Liberated Africans.²⁷

What set this colony apart from other West African ports was its establishment at the end of the eighteenth century and its focus on non-slave trading commerce: the colony was

²³ Boter, 'Living Standards and the Life Cycle', (2020); Pedersen, *Family, Dependence and the Origins of the Welfare State* (1995); Cooper, *Decolonization and African Society* (1996); McCarthy, *Double Lives* (2020); Hartigan-O'Connor, *The Ties That Buy* (2009); Griffin, *Breadwinner* (2020); Rockman, 'Work in the Cities of Colonial British North America', (2007); Humphries and Schneider, 'Spinning the Industrial Revolution', (2018).

²⁴ Hyman, *Temp* (2018).

²⁵ Piketty, *Capital in the Twenty-First Century* (2013).

²⁶ Fyfe, *A History of Sierra Leone* (1961); Everill, *Abolition and Empire in Sierra Leone and Liberia* (2013); Scanlan, *Freedom's Debtors* (2017).

²⁷ Anderson, *Abolition in Sierra Leone* (2020).

always associated with the abolitionist project and while some illegal slave trading inevitably took place in the rivers around the city, Freetown's economy was not based on the slave trade. Despite this particularity of Freetown's history, migrations to the coastal zones as the interior large states began to break apart in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries coincided with the arrival of European ships interested in conducting coastal trade, contributing to the growth of a number of port towns across the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Historians have looked at the ways that these political and economic changes impacted African participation in the increasing European trade (including the slave trade).²⁸ The growth of towns around Cape Coast Castle and Anamabu oriented towards these slave trading ports, or Saint-Louis and Gorée, resulted both from migration away from the interior as the political changes taking place there pushed people towards new political establishments, and from the pull of new economic opportunities arising from Atlantic trade.²⁹ The early migrants to these port cities were different from those who arrived in the late nineteenth and twentieth century period of urbanisation because they did not have to seek out wage labour in order to pay newly-imposed colonial taxes. They were unlikely to strike it rich in these coastal towns, but they were moving there because of the opportunities for work, marriage, and consumption, much as free people did around the Atlantic World in the first half of the nineteenth century. As Diaw notes, "with the creation of new coastal towns and increasing exchange flows related to the littoral economy, the role of coastal communities as intermediaries between European traders and the hinterland becomes central."³⁰ Atlantic ports in West Africa, then, provided a range of occupational opportunities, but life there was, as elsewhere, precarious.

Using the 1831 Census, we can see how people identified their main occupation. We took "Eastern Freetown district" (now Central Freetown) (MAP) as our sample. This district contained 3005 people, in 638 households. One hundred thirteen different occupations were listed for the residents of Eastern Freetown, including sailors, boat captains, coopers, carpenters, blacksmiths, porters, timber loaders, sailmakers, fishermen, sawyers, shinglemakers, ropemakers, fencemakers, market men and traders, as well as boarding house keepers, bakers, charwomen, hawkers, butcheress, and laundresses. Servants were the most often recorded occupation, making up just over a quarter of the total population of the

²⁸ Dawson, *Undercurrents of Power* (2018); Gutkind, 'The Boatmen of Ghana: The Possibilities of a Pre-Colonial African Labor History', 1986; Rönnbäck, 'Livings Standards on the Pre-Colonial Gold Coast', (2014); Kea, *A Cultural and Social History of Ghana* (2012).

²⁹ Reese, 'Liberty, Insolence, and Rum,' (2004); Reese, 'Eating Luxury' (2009); Reese, 'Facilitating the Slave Trade' (2010); Sparks, *Where the Negroes are Masters: An African Port in the Era of the Slave Trade* (2014); Everill, "'Industriousness" and Slavery in Saint-Louis and Goree', (2017); Rönnbäck, 'Livings Standards on the Pre-Colonial Gold Coast', (2014).

³⁰ Diaw, 'Ethnogenesis, Mobility and Politics in the History of West African Canoe Fishermen', (1992), p. 64.

district. In our Eastern Freetown sample, trades made up just over a fifth of the adult population's occupations. Labourers made up ten per cent of the male population of our sample.

Figure 1. Occupations in the 1831 census.

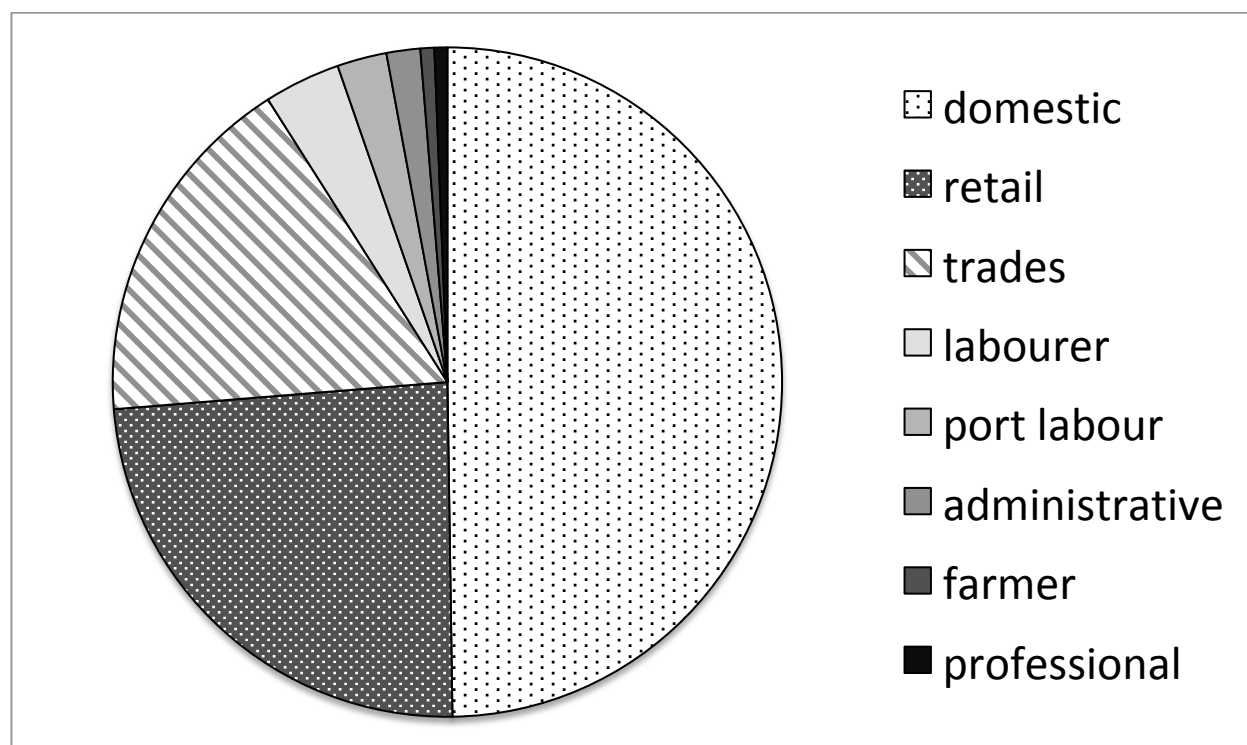
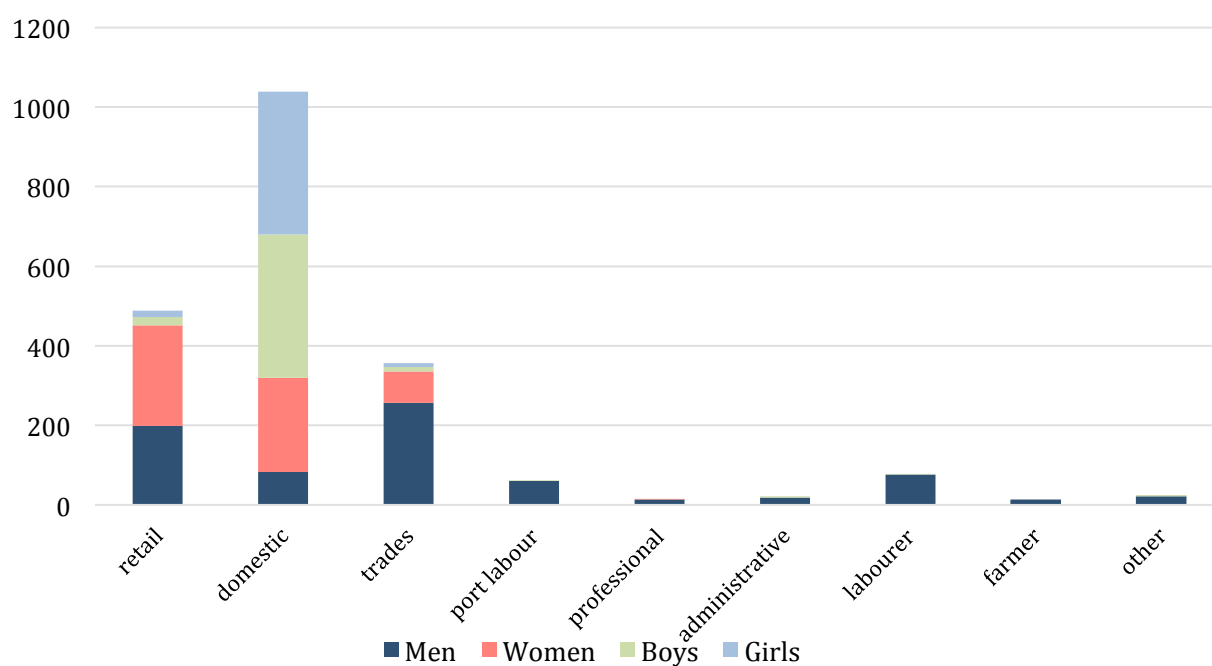


Figure 2. Occupations and gender in the 1831 census.



In Eastern Freetown, around 10 per cent of the men were involved in port-specific trades. Excluding “Kru Town”, 1.5 per cent of people in the whole of Freetown were listed as fishermen; 0.6 per cent were boatmen or grumettas. The town had 24 ship’s carpenters.³¹ Beyond this, 504 Kru were reported to be living in the “Kroo Town” section of Freetown. Given that ‘Kru’ was not an ethnic designation as such, but essentially a quasi-occupational one – the Kru were coastal mariners from the region stretching across Liberia and Côte d’Ivoire – it is highly likely that a significant portion of this population was proficient with boat construction and repair as well, since they had made their name as expert canoe-makers and auxiliary crewmembers on European naval, merchant, and whaling ships.

Household income

But we also *know* that households had more than one source of income. Households were made up of multiple wage earners.³² They could include both a husband and wife, extended family, children, as well as employed domestic labourers. The urban “houseful” in port economies around the Atlantic World contained a mixture of members—enslaved and free, family and servants, related and unrelated—often numbering more than six people.³³ West African households similarly included a mixture of family and other dependants, and Lorelle Semley writes that in Dahomey - a major source of enslaved captives who were resettled in Sierra Leone as 38.5 per cent of the Liberated African population³⁴ - a father’s power “in a household or extended family, depended on the presence of women not only for reproduction but for labor and prestige.”³⁵

In Eastern Freetown, where the census lists the members of each household, 47 per cent of households had two earners and 19 per cent of households had more than two earners. Only 5 per cent of non-European households had a single male earner; in other words, as in places like London, nearly all women worked outside of the house.³⁶ We can see this in mixed multiple earner households, which could include older children or unmarried siblings. A household like number 5 Water Street, for example, had Mrs. and Nancy Jordan, both charwomen, Mingo Jordan, a sawyer, Roseannah, a little child, as well as Moses Murray, a fisherman. As the Yoruba proverb made clear, “Abanidze mah ba ni se ifa enia; eni ti o dze

³¹ Everill, ‘Freetown’s Ship Repair Cluster in Nineteenth-Century Sierra Leone’, (2020).

³² Guyer, ‘Household and Community in African Studies’, (1981).

³³ Hartigan-O’Connor, *The Ties That Buy* (2009); Everill, “‘Industriousness’ and Slavery in Saint-Louis and Goree”, (2017).

³⁴ Anderson, *Abolition in Sierra Leone* (2020), p. 31

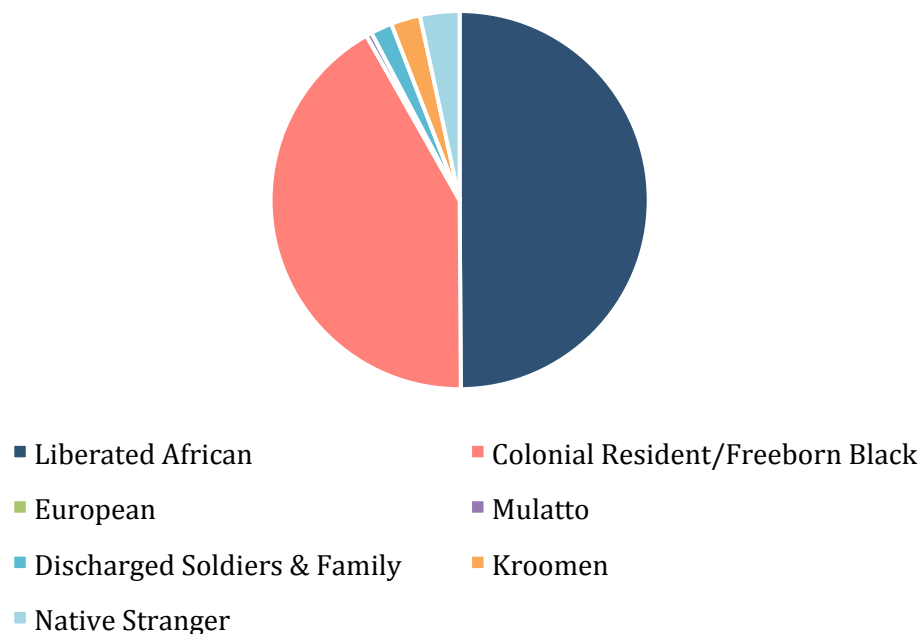
³⁵ Semley, *Mother is Gold, father is Glass* (2011), p. 47.

³⁶ Erickson, ‘Married Women’s Occupations’, (2008).

didon ni idze kikan,” or “a guest who is no advantage to a person is selfish; he who eats the sweet should also eat the sour.”³⁷ As Richard Burton translated this in his 1865 collection of West African proverbs, it meant everyone in a household was expected to pitch in.

Over half of the girls and boys in the census of Eastern Freetown were listed as servants. These could be servants who were the children of the family and lived out; or they could be servants from other families who lived in the household. Before the abolition of apprenticeship for formerly enslaved people in the British Empire in 1838, many Liberated Africans were apprenticed to residents of Freetown as a means of both providing room and board for the newly arriving population and ostensibly teaching the work skills needed for the broader economy. Equally, families sent their children into service as a means of maintaining them through difficult times. The census is unclear about which, in each particular case, but we can see from last names that both cases were typical. Other occupations undertaken by children were “apprentice”, “shop boy”, “market wo/man”, “charwoman”, and “nurse.” Only thirty nine per cent of children were not listed as having an occupation other than child or school pupil.

Figure 3. Ethnicity of domestic service categories.



Beyond family and servants, rooms could also be rented out to visiting Europeans. The household living at number 6 East Street, for instance, consisted of Lucretia Haywood, a

³⁷ Burton, *Wit and Wisdom from West Africa*, (1865), p.198.

“free born Black” nurse, Flora Haywood, listed as a charwoman, Sam Haywood, a clerk; Rachel, Kate, Hannah, servants listed as Liberated Africans; Tom Turner and Sarah Macaulay, “free born Black” children who were servants; as well as Warner Case and Jane Case - a European ship captain and his wife, Thomas Kent, a European boy seaman, and John Hamilton, a “Mulatto” young child.³⁸ This multiplies the meaning of household income - not only were two-thirds of all households in Eastern Freetown made up of more than one earner; the house itself could earn rent from its occupants.

Land acquisition, or access to real estate, was an important part of women’s market participation around the Atlantic world in this period, allowing them not only to establish retail shops, but to rent rooms to seasonally mobile sailors, merchants, soldiers, missionaries and imperial administrators. Property ownership and market trading could provide additional streams of income, but were also seasonal or could be undertaken out of necessity. Letting rooms was a common economic strategy around the Atlantic World in the nineteenth century.³⁹ Given that several settler women traders - including Sophia Smalls - had already purchased property investments of roughly £150 by the early nineteenth century – turning them into boarding houses for colonial officials and visiting ship’s captains – the scale of this profit was not unusual. Boarding houses like Sophia Smalls’ charged £3/7/6 per week.⁴⁰ The governor of the colony, Zachary Macaulay, reported in 1793 that “All the Companys servants are lodged in the houses of Settlers for which they pay rent at the rate of from 3/6 to a Dollar a week.”⁴¹

Crucial to the functioning of the port’s service economy, as elsewhere in the world, were the jobs performed by women, in these boarding houses and more generally. Laundry and domestic work like cooking and cleaning were regular forms of informal economic participation that the port offered to expand family wages. With the greater part of male wages coming from port work that kept them away during the day or even longer, women were crucial to the running of port cities.⁴² Women married to pilots, seamen, fishermen, boatmen, and traders, could be running a household on their own for part of the year. Fifteen per cent of the households of Eastern Freetown were female-headed in 1831. These households tended to contain mixtures of servants, extended family members, and children and would have reflected the composition of these households in other Atlantic port cities as

³⁸ British National Archives (BNA), CO 267/111 p. 348.

³⁹ Aston, Capern and McDonagh, ‘More Than Bricks and Mortar’, (2019).

⁴⁰ John Carter Brown Library (JCBL) BFBR B.611 F.8 Olive Branch disbursements.

⁴¹ Huntington Library (HL), MSS MY418 Box 19A, Folder 7, 28 November, 1794.

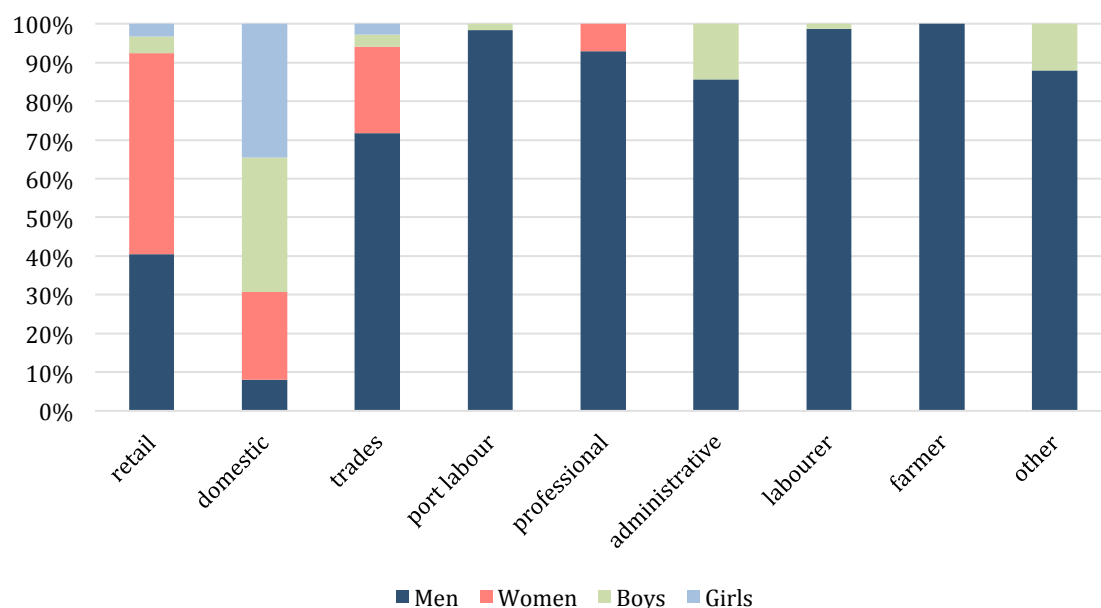
⁴² Hartigan-O’Connor, *The Ties That Buy* (2009).

well as in other African settings where compounds could be organized around polygynous households.

Market trading and the coasting trade

Beyond specific port-oriented occupations, aimed at providing services for seasonal shipping and fishing, women were responsible for sorting and salting fish, for spinning cotton, and for taking produce to market.⁴³ Early settler women had engaged in trade, once the Sierra Leone Company liberalized access to the market in 1794. Martha Hazeley, Sophia Smalls, and Mary Perth were among the first six settlers granted trading licenses in the colony.⁴⁴ “Market women” dominated women’s occupational designations in the census although it is likely that many of these only engaged in market trading some of the time, alongside other activities, rather than on a full-time basis. By the time of the 1831 census eleven per cent of the population was recorded as “market people;” with 18 per cent of Liberated Africans in Eastern Freetown listed in this occupation. Thirty two per cent of all women in Eastern Freetown were market women.

Figure 4. Occupation categories by gender and age.



Freetown’s trade did include a growing export market, but it was equally important for imports and for provisions. The port cities on the Windward Coast were particularly efficient for focusing the commerce of arriving American and European ships. In 1795, ship captain Martin Benson bought provisions from the Sierra Leone Company store after selling

⁴³ Melville, *A Residence at Sierra Leone* (1849).

⁴⁴ White, *Sierra Leone’s Settler Women Traders* (1987).

his own merchandise and as he was preparing to set sail for the Leeward trade. He bought 6 fowls for 10s; '2 goats for our passage £2/5'; 4 hundredweights of rice 'our bread being bad' for £2/10 (50s); 5 weights of Souchong tea for 8 shillings and 6 pence; and 9 3/4 weights of butter for 17 shillings and 1 penny.⁴⁵ The fowls, goats, rice, and possibly even the butter would have been raised and produced in the city itself or its hinterland, and sold to the store in exchange for Sierra Leone currency or store credit. The seamen of the *Charlotte* were also advanced £8/15/10 in Sierra Leone currency to spend in the city. Freetown's political and commercial leaders preferred to use paper currency in order to move away from the variability (and the slave trade connotations) of the trading bar, but also to encourage people to see Freetown as a market town, to which they could come for purchasing, as well as selling their goods.⁴⁶

For instance, in 1801, Binah Jordan, a settler, was paid \$9 in Sierra Leone currency for baking 305 weight of flour into ship's bread for the *Olive Branch*, a net profit to her of \$2.70 in Sierra Leone Company dollars.⁴⁷ In 1793, an ordinance had been passed by the colony limiting the amount of profit to 30 per cent per loaf for bakers, so as to control profiteering and wheat shortages. Records also show that in 1802, the Sierra Leone Company Store sold 1 1/2 yards of flannel for \$1.05; 1 yard of printed calico for 86 cents; 2 yards of white calico for \$1.00; a pair of shoes for \$2.10; and two pounds of sewing twine for \$1.20.⁴⁸ The town was important as a centre of retail commerce, not only as a wholesale exporter of primary products.⁴⁹ The city offered numerous opportunities for trade, something that early colonial officials found frustrating, preferring the ideal of an agrarian colony.⁵⁰

Trading was not limited to women, though. One quarter of the men in Eastern Freetown listed trader, market man, or merchant as their occupation. In the 1790s, settlers and indigenous Sierra Leoneans involved in commerce could make money by trading on behalf of the colony. Zachary Macaulay, governor of the colony, reported that he "sent off Douglas (a native) with money goods sufficient to purchase about Eight Tons of rice to the Yallucker when he had been established about three months ago. A man of the name of Johnson who has been some time in our service I sent to a place appointed for him by Addow in the River Bagroo with Goods for about ten tons of Rice or Eight tons of Camwood; and

⁴⁵ John Carter Brown Library (JCBL), BFBR B.513 F.6 Trade Book, Disbursements.

⁴⁶ Falconbridge, *Two Voyages to Sierra Leone in 1791-2-3* (1794).

⁴⁷ JCBL, BFBR B.611 F.8 Schooner Olive Branch.

⁴⁸ JCBL, BFBR B.611 F.8 Schooner Olive Branch.

⁴⁹ Everill, 'Freetown's Ship Repair Cluster in Nineteenth-Century Sierra Leone', (2020); Magrabi et al., *The Economics of Household Consumption* (1991).

⁵⁰ Everill, 'Contested Perceptions of Agriculture in the Colonies of Sierra Leone and Liberia', (2013b).

Chambard went back to Mende in order to dispose of the goods on his hands.” The payment for these three traders was arranged so that “Douglas received about fifty shillings a month and Johnson about five pounds, as per Chambard he receives no wages but has stipulated to furnish Rice and Camwood at a price which he supposes will produce to him a profit equivalent to wages.”⁵¹ As our welfare calculations below demonstrate, these trading journeys could provide seven times the daily consumption basket for each day of the journey, a sizeable profit that a family could then use on the trader’s return, during the downtime that accompanied this kind of sporadic work. But in the meantime, the family would need to find other sources of income.

Flexible, informal work

Beyond the household wage, we also know that people were doing multiple jobs. Market trading, for instance, was a flexible occupation. There were also the seasonal work and temporary jobs associated with life in a port city. The informal and sporadic nature of work can be gleaned from more than the data sources. Colonial archives express irritation about the way that residents of Freetown and the surrounding region approached labour. Increasingly over the nineteenth century, forms of labor that were not active and industrious were regularly dismissed, or not counted as labor reflecting a racialized view that Black people around the British Empire were lazy.⁵²

In Temne (one of the groups that made up a large portion of the local population), Yóna (yo) is the term for work. In various examples of how this phrase might be used, we get a glimpse of the European view of Freetown’s economy in the nineteenth century. A Church Missionary Society Temne vocabulary gave the sentence example, “o-landba o sa yo ma-pant; kere tenon o yo-be”, translated as, “the young man generally does work; but to day he does not (work).” Elsewhere in the vocabulary, we encounter “ama-pant ame ma ji s’obe trabana traka Pa Lamina” (“this work is very profitable for Mr. Lamina”). And “yor ma-pant” (“pretend to do work”).⁵³ Only three per cent of households in the 1831 census had no occupations listed; however, it was clear that the missionaries and colonial government were concerned that the stated occupations of Freetown residents were not fully occupying them. Instead, as was the growing concern in the British West Indies after emancipation, Europeans thought that African workers had a propensity to do a day’s well-paid labour and then retire

⁵¹ HL, MSS MY418, Box 19, July 16, 1793.

⁵² Rönnbäck, ‘Livings Standards on the Pre-Colonial Gold Coast’, (2014); Atkins, ‘Preindustrial temporal concepts and labour discipline in nineteenth century colonial Natal’, (1988).

⁵³ Schlenker, *A Collection of Temne Traditions, Fables and Proverbs* (1861).

to consume the profits. Sierra Leonean (later Nigerian) missionary Samuel Crowther's translation of a proverb in his native Yoruba, indicated the widespread admonition of spendthrift ways: "The rat says he knows every day; but he does not know another day (*so as to lay up something for it*).⁵⁴"

We also get a glimpse of the maritime economy in the example "am-bil na yi k'esete ka-bana traka trammi (romi)" ("The canoe is of great use to me"). The vocabulary described a *Yon* as "a bamboo stick hollowed out to about the middle of its length...used to catch fish with." Schlenker described, "the stick is left in the water for this purpose sometimes a whole day."⁵⁵ This description is interesting because of the way it interacts with some of the assumptions made by the European residents of the colony, that ultimately influenced the way that labor was recorded and reported in official documents. By the early twentieth century, it had become accepted truth amongst colonial governments that, without forced labour, Africans would not work for wages.⁵⁶ European officials complained about the lack of work discipline of labourers in the colony, but they overlooked two important factors. The first was their unwillingness to see that the high land-labor ratio in West Africa more generally pushed wages up, making low-paid waged work unappealing.⁵⁷ The second was that the sporadic nature of much informal employment meant that work often took the form of this type of fishing.

But literature on Freetown's population has also regularly celebrated the town's entrepreneurial spirit, and the upward social mobility of its Liberated Africans, something that attests to the sometimes positive view of informal economic activity even in the nineteenth century.⁵⁸ Entrepreneurialism was described both at the time and subsequently as a feature of Yoruba life.⁵⁹ What many observers noted at the time was household "industriousness."⁶⁰ Europeans commented on the ability of people not only to work hard, but to 'hustle' by mobilizing temporary family labour, migrating seasonally to follow work, or tend smallholdings and engage in market trading.

Two doors down from the Haywood's mixed household boarding house, at number 4 East Street, Smart, Jack Smart, Ben Smart, William Smart, and Henry Smart - five "free born

⁵⁴ Burton, *With and Wisdom from West Africa*, (1865), p.186.

⁵⁵ Schlenker, *A Collection of Temne Traditions, Fables and Proverbs* (1861).

⁵⁶ Cooper, *Decolonization and African Society* (1996), p.39

⁵⁷ Green, 'The Economics of Slavery in the Eighteenth-Century Cape Colony', (2014).

⁵⁸ Cole, *The Krio of West Africa* (2013); Galli and Rönnbäck, 'Colonialism and rural inequality in Sierra Leone', (2020); Porter 1963

⁵⁹ Ochonu, *Entrepreneurship in Africa* (2020).

⁶⁰ Falconbridge, *Two Voyages to Sierra Leone in 1791-2-3* (1794); Everill, "'Industriousness" and Slavery in Saint-Louis and Goree', (2017).

Black” labourers - lived with Combo, Jackbelle, and Sackballoo, three “native strangers” who were also listed as labourers. Mixed male households like these highlight the migrant and seasonal labour that was an essential part of Freetown’s economy, as well as colonial economies elsewhere.⁶¹ The types of occasional labor required by a port service economy depended on the seasonality of ship arrivals, the availability of materials for repairing ships, and the skills to be able to execute these tasks. Goods were transported by African canoemen from European ships to shore along a coast where surf-ports were the norm.⁶²

Pilots were another necessary part of the coastal trade and one could easily earn a living as a pilot (or as an owner of enslaved pilots) in the many port towns of the Guinea Coast, following the seasonal patterns of arriving ships. Officially, there were 5 pilots in Eastern Freetown in 1831. Pilotage along the Sierra Leone River, from Freetown harbour to Bunce Island and back in 1800, for instance, cost the Schooner *Olive Branch* \$8, well above the 3 pence per day necessary for basic subsistence.⁶³ In Freetown, in the Gambia River, and in the Senegal River, the going rate for pilotage at the end of the eighteenth century was the equivalent of £2. In Freetown, this was typically paid in Sierra Leone Company currency. The Ship *Charlotte*, in 1795, paid a pilot and 2 seamen £2 10s (50 shillings) to steer the boat out. With an average of 26 boats recorded as ‘in and out’ of Freetown by Macaulay from 1793-1798 inclusive, something like £65 could be earned by pilots and 2 seamen in a given year. It is likely that seamen and pilots served in dual capacities depending on available labour and experience over time. The 1831 census reports that there were 50 ‘boatmen’ or ‘grumettas’ living in Freetown, who would have divided up the available work; if the number was similar in the 1790s, they would have earned on average £1 6 shillings a year.

That doesn’t sound like a lot of money, which makes sense – this was not a full-time occupation – and illuminates the piecemeal nature of the work. 86 per cent of the vessels going in and out of Freetown port in 1793 were local vessels, trading regionally for provisions and exports. These boats required crews, who may have earned around one shilling per day for the duration of the journey. These regional trips were short - usually a week or two - but frequent. The *Providence* went to Sherbro for rice three times in the summer of 1793.⁶⁴ Assuming captains and crews developed relationships, a sailor on one of these voyages might make up to £2 2 shillings over the course of three trips. If this was combined with occasional earnings as a pilot or hired hand for transatlantic ships, he might

⁶¹ De Haas, ‘Moving beyond colonial control?’, (2019).

⁶² Dawson, *Undercurrents of Power* (2018).

⁶³ JCBL, BFBR B.611 *Olive Branch Trade Book*,

⁶⁴ HL, MSS MY418.

earn something like £5 from this sporadic trade per year. In Freetown, that would be enough to buy 705w of Souchong tea from the Sierra Leone Company Store; or 12 Ivory tea chests (with 10 shillings to spare); or 27.5 yards of flannel.⁶⁵ This could then allow someone to begin participating in some trade on the side as well, a path routinely taken amongst the settlers, much to the chagrin of the colonial government, who wanted the settlers to become farmers, not traders.⁶⁶ Non-settler sailors would also likely have been part of local boat crews participating in fishing or the ‘native coasting trade’, which could be the mainstay of their income.⁶⁷

Estimating the standard of living

Because of this sporadic and seasonal nature of service and retail work, across the nineteenth century, the colonial government of the Sierra Leone colony recorded wages and costs of living in a variety of ways. There is no long-run series stretching across the nineteenth century, unfortunately, as the Blue Books only start in the 1830s, and even then, the types and categories of data they report changes over time. However, there are other ways of estimating the costs of living and wages from various colonial documents and business records.

Given the types of work available in Freetown, which ranged from one-off jobs to self-employment to annual salaries, and the seasonality of the labor in the colony (ships arrived largely between October and April; agricultural labor was needed in three month windows), we decided to calculate the welfare ratio based on a day’s work. In other words, if someone was paid to load timber on to a boat, how many days could they sustain themselves on the resulting wage? We felt that this would better account for the type of sporadic and combined wages that individuals and families were piecing together and better reflect the ways that labor actually was remunerated. With salaries, therefore - domestic wages paid monthly, or managerial wages that were recorded as annual wages - we divided the annual wage by the annualized daily consumption basket – assuming that people would still need to eat on their days off. As the Yoruba proverb declared, “omo banabana nre oko igi” or “the poor man has no holiday.”⁶⁸

What this means in practice is that while some salaried jobs appear to be more poorly remunerated than some trades, it is worth remembering that the annual nature of the

⁶⁵ JCBL, BFBR B.611 F.8 Olive Branch, Bill for June 14, 1802.

⁶⁶ Everill, *Abolition and Empire in Sierra Leone and Liberia* (2013).

⁶⁷ Syfert, ‘The Liberian Coasting Trade, 1822-1900’, (1977).

⁶⁸ Burton, *Wit and Wisdom from West Africa*, (1865), p.185

managerial jobs or domestic service positions meant a level of security. A clerk may have only made the equivalent of 9 consumption baskets a day, but he did *every day*; whereas a blacksmith could make 25 consumption baskets for a job, but if that job took longer than a day, or if that was the only work for 25 days, those baskets needed to stretch further.

These calculations were additionally complicated by the fact that many jobs were remunerated in the form of food, trade goods, and/or lodging in addition to money.⁶⁹ Sometimes this was recorded as goods worth a certain monetary value. Sometimes this was seasonal labor paid a wage plus rice. Sometimes it was a wage plus clothing, provisions and tools. For the sake of the comparison, we left these out of our calculations, but it is worth bearing this type of payment in mind when considering household strategies.

Our wages come from a variety of sources. The Blue Books have categories of wages running from 1836, though they become more detailed from 1884. For the period from 1817-1836, we have some Liberated African Department wages for various types of employment done for the department. For the early period, we have scattered accounts from the Sierra Leone Company and from merchant ships' records of their time in the colony.

For the consumption basket, we were fortunate that, in the early period, we have the prices of rations given to the arriving Maroon settlers, supplemented by receipts and other comments on consumer prices from letters and voyage records. For the period during which the census was taken, we have information from the Liberated African Department regarding the costs of their rations. In both of these cases, the tendency to under pay the subsistence costs for newly arrived settlers is balanced out against the Colonial government's propensity to profit by inflating their figures to the Colonial Office.

To work out the consumption basket, we used price lists from the Blue Books to construct an Allen-style basket, adjusted for the local foods and fuel types available. We were also able to use colonial correspondence about the rations provided to arriving Maroon settlers from Jamaica in 1799; the price of the Liberated African Department's ration 'buy-out' in 1827; and 1890s prison rations (full, half, and low, which was ultimately deemed unliveable) which again can orient our consumption basket to reflect local diets, and which have informed our choices of baskets for the earlier period.

From 1836, the Colonial Government included in its annual Blue Books an index of wages and consumer prices. This series makes up the bulk of the data for this study, although it was deficient in some respects and suspect in others. In terms of the wages themselves,

⁶⁹ Muldrew, 'What is a Money Wage,' (2018).

there are five different categories of wage. Four are articulated in the Blue Books: domestic labour, predial labour, trade, and timber loading. The first three were activities undertaken by either settlers or recaptives; the fourth was done by Kru labourers who migrated from Liberia. The fifth wage category is taken from the Blue Books as well, but is based on those in ‘professions.’ Since this was a regular route for settlers after a few generations and participation in education both within and outside of the colony, it seemed important to include it as a wage category. It was calculated as an average wage over the period studied using a combination of data on the salaries of teachers, church ministers, colonial writers, clerks, those involved with the police force, and those employed as supervisors or managers for the Liberated African Department and its districts. This average does not include those employed in the private sector as lawyers or doctors.

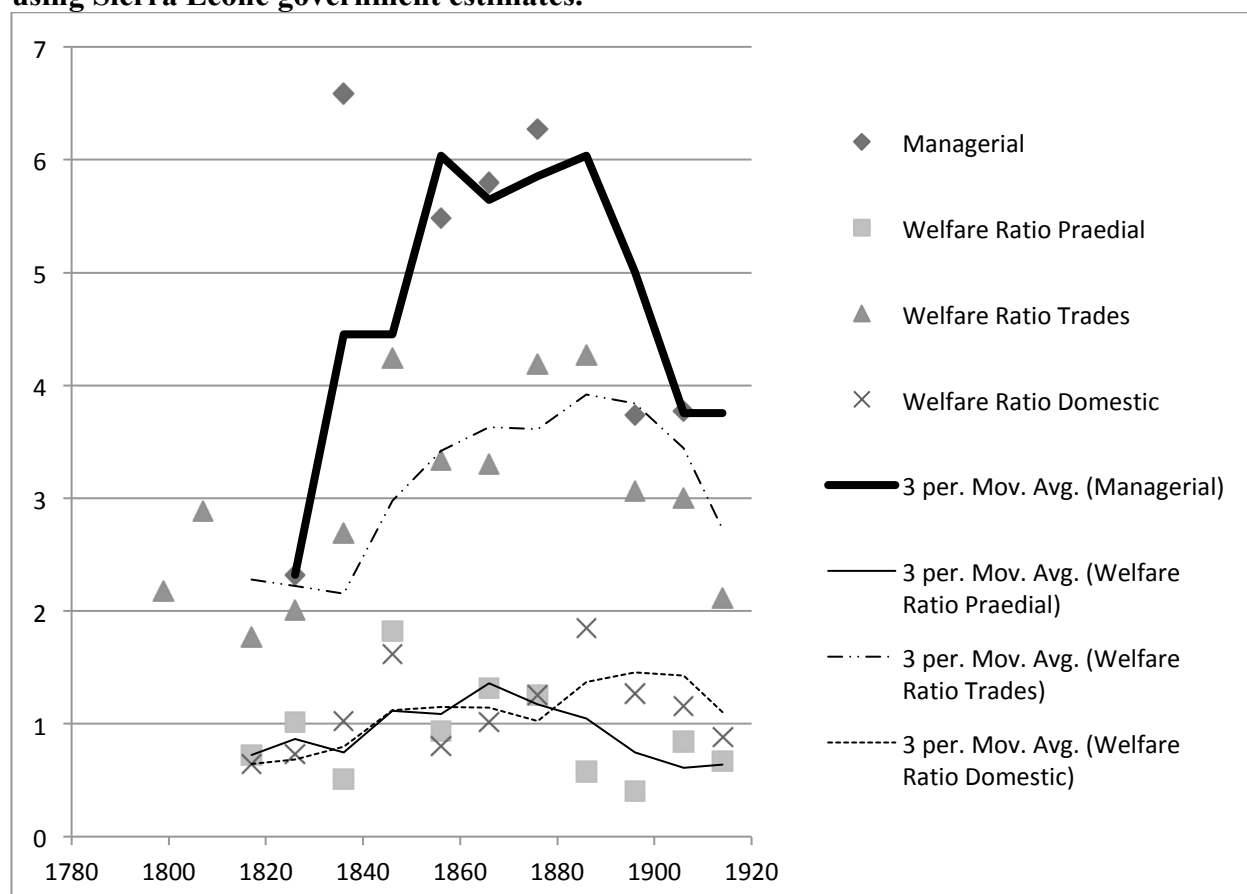
Finally, we needed to calculate the tax burden and rent. In the original plan for the colony, there was to be a 310 day working year, and out of this, sixty two days would be taxed. Cox-George has pointed out that the later 1812 act which amended the original set of tax laws “blended a tax on immovable property, on householders, with a personal tax on males of over sixteen years of age who have resided in the Colony for not less than three months....by introducing the taxes on domestic animals and on land in the same measure, the whole scheme was transformed into a general property tax more or less graduated.”⁷⁰ Property taxes ranged from 1 shilling per acre in the 1790s (though these were challenged by the settlers), to between 2s. 6d. and 10s. in the 1810s, to between 5 shillings and £7 10 shillings depending on a property’s rental value assessments in the 1840s, which was subsequently changed to 5 per cent of the value. Over the course of the nineteenth century, taxation was affected by the constantly changing colonial administrations and the growing revenue imperative. And in 1872, all property taxes were abolished. Direct taxes were reintroduced in 1899 and levied as a percentage of the assessed annual value of property and land. In 1906 this was supplemented by an annual water rate levied in two parts: a general rate payable on all property within the water works area, whether provided with services or not; and a supply rate, assessed separately in proportion to the facilities for the “use and enjoyment of water”. House rents ranged from £5 to £150 per year, but all of the original settlers had been allocated plots of land, which made a large portion of them, and their descendants, property owners rather than renters themselves - although “quit rent” was owed for some time to the colonial government. One of the surest routes to wealth was early

⁷⁰ Cox-George, *Finance and Development* (1961).

investment in property, not least for renting out to visiting merchants or colonial administrators. But for the colony's poorer residents, living with larger households - renting together with other labour migrants, for instance - could reduce rent and tax payments.

This graph shows a daily welfare ratio for an individual worker. Domestic labour and praedial labour were typically supplemented with provisions, and sometimes with clothing or with trade goods. Domestic service wages remained constant, with most changes in wages reflecting changes in whether provisions, housing, and clothing were included in wages or not. In the 1831 census, apprenticeship of Liberated Africans would still have been practiced, in which case, the servants listed as Liberated Africans were probably only given room, board, and clothing, rather than a wage. As room and board became a regular pattern of remuneration as the century progressed, we can infer the latter moved into the norm.

Figure 5. Number of consumption baskets that could be purchased with a day's wage using Sierra Leone government estimates.



But beyond measuring how many consumption baskets a day's wage would buy, we were able to use the census to reconstruct some actual sample households. We chose sample

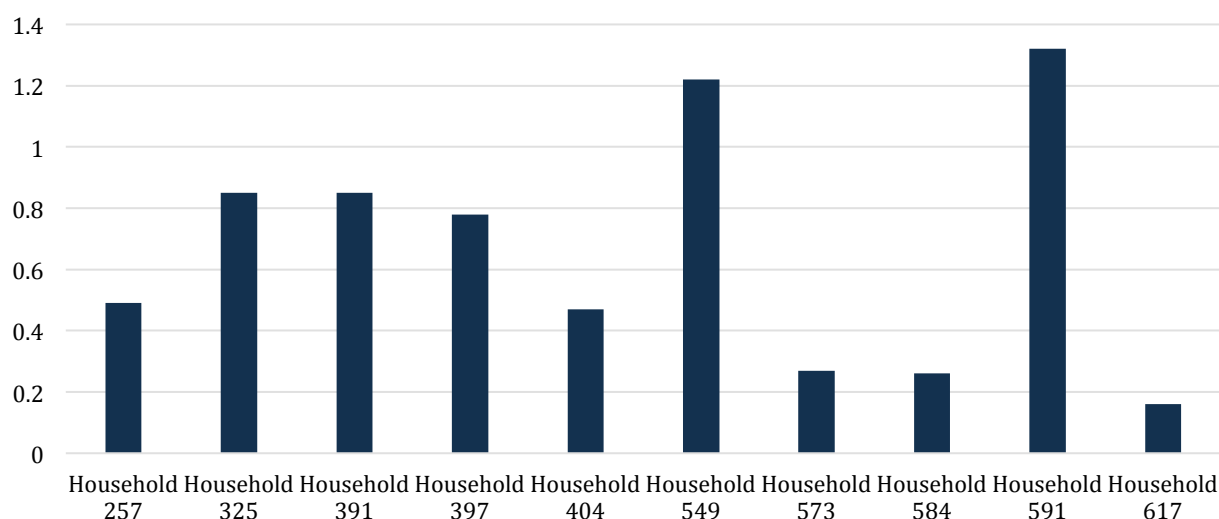
households in which there were known fixed wages associated with a day's work so that we could model the income from the household's earners. We included several households with two earners and no dependants; several with dependents; several with more than two earners; and one with only one occupation listed.

<u>Household No. 257</u>	<u>Household No. 325</u>	<u>Household No. 391</u>	<u>Household No. 397</u>	<u>Household No. 404</u>
2 work women	1 labourer	1 labourer	1 labourer	1 labourer
1 labourer	1 work woman	1 charwoman	1 charwoman	1 charwoman
1 child			1 child	3 children
				1 household servant
1 household servant				

<u>Household No. 549</u>	<u>Household No. 573</u>	<u>Household No. 584</u>	<u>Household No. 591</u>	<u>Household No. 617</u>
1 labourer	1 pilot	1 pilot	8 labourers	1 pilot
2 children	1 workwoman	1 charwoman		1 wife
2 servants	3 servants	3 servants		7 children
1 old woman	1 child	2 children		3 servants

Households 257, 325, 391, 404, 573, 584, and 617 all have 2 or fewer earners. Households 549 and 591 have more than two earners, and have paying boarders. It is interesting to note that the majority of male "laborers" in the census lived on their own or with groups of other laborers, and rarely in households with children. Households with two wage earners - labourer and servant, or labourer and charwoman, for instance - were also very rare. We used them for these household models because the wages allowed us to construct a household welfare ratio. But what was far more common for a labourer was to be living with other labourers, or, if married, the wife was more likely to be a "market woman." Unfortunately, even though this occupation dominated women's work in the census, it is difficult to estimate how much income a market woman would have contributed to the household. Similarly, many of the wage earning women lived with men with more sporadic or seasonal wages (trades, port occupations).

Figure 6. Sample household welfare ratios from 1831 census.



What becomes clear from this household modeling is that the subsistence basket was not possible on a single occupation, wage-earning, “male breadwinner” basis - families had to contribute, people had to supplement their main listed occupations with odd jobs, raising food, market trading, renting out rooms, and seasonal work. This is hinted at in the government’s request for funding to support the Maroons in 1799: “all those of the Maroons who may be industrious on their farms will be likely to have raised several articles of provision kind for themselves, so as to cause a still further reduction in the expense of maintaining them, the remaining three months, to complete the twelvemonth, may be calculated not to cost more than in proportion to about one half of the expense of the first six months.”⁷¹ There was an expectation that the colony’s residents would have some level of self-sufficiency in food production on the plots allocated to them - fishing, farming, raising chickens - which would cut down on the costs of buying all provisions.⁷² Extras could be sold at market when needed.

The Liberated African Department also provided extra income for those involved in other occupations. This could represent a steady but very small contribution to the household budget. Jobs like “lamp lighter” for the Liberated African village schools were steady work, but only paid a tiny fraction of the subsistence cost - 13d a month - plus clothing, provisions, and tools. Constables were similarly paid about one day’s subsistence basket per month, plus

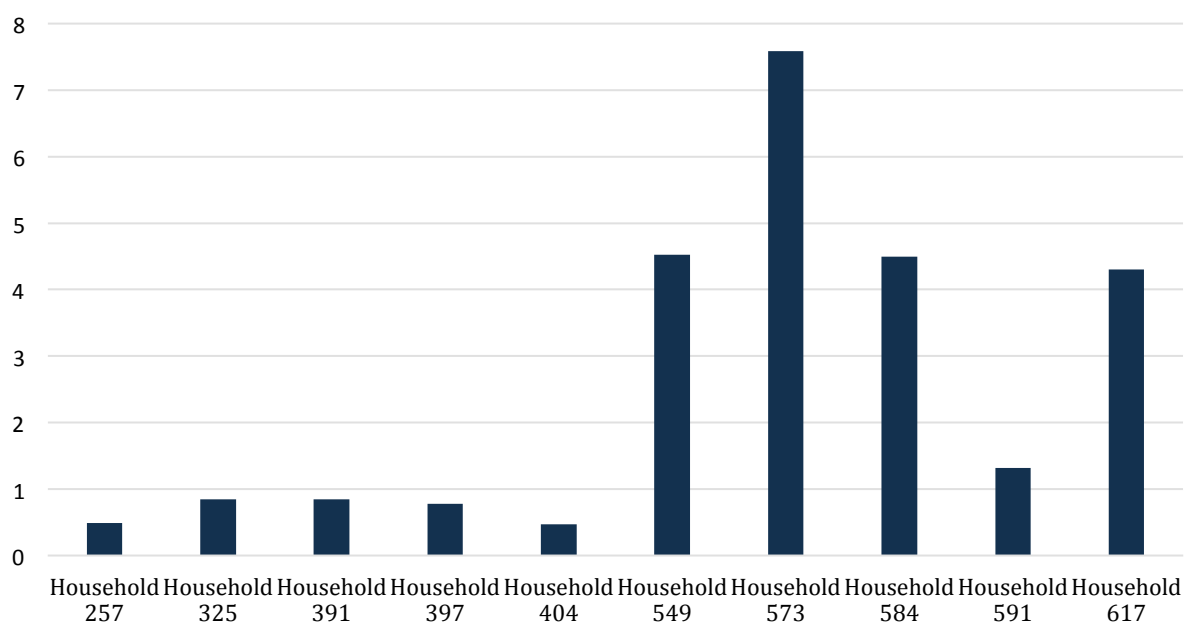
⁷¹ BNA CO 267 10 June 1799 Governor and Council to the Duke of Portland

⁷² Everill, ‘Contested Perceptions of Agriculture in the Colonies of Sierra Leone and Liberia’ (2013b).

clothing and provisions. A boat crewmember on retainer in the Liberated African Villages was paid just under one subsistence basket a day, plus clothing and provisions.

Beyond this supplemental work, the nature of extra jobs like transporting officials to Bunce Island or running a boarding house could provide windfall wages, but were unpredictable. Renting a room to a European could provide 24 subsistence baskets a day, but was obviously temporary. Similarly, running a boat to Bunce Island and back could earn a crewmember something like 28 subsistence baskets in a day or two of work, but was a sporadic opportunity. The same households would look quite different on the days that a windfall came in.

Figure 7. Household welfare ratios from 1831 census.



Informal work and the transition to a colonial administrative capital

Freetown remained a port city throughout the nineteenth century, but the meaning of that maritime relationship has inevitably changed. While fishing, farming, and trading were still vital to many, over the second half of the nineteenth century, and maritime industries continued to play a role in Freetown's service economy, the growth of the city as a colonial administrative capital saw new opportunities arise in the informal and formal service sectors, something demonstrated in the growth of managerial wages in our welfare ratio calculations above. Missionary education and the emphasis on the "domestic ideal" worked together with increased opportunities in colonial service may have led to an expanded middle class,

emulating the gendered norms of the Victorian era.⁷³ Some middle class women moved out of the labour market by the early twentieth century and households remained mixed through the mid-twentieth century, reflecting the continued migration of people to the urban centre for jobs, education, and family connections.⁷⁴ Women also followed their husbands to the port cities of West Africa as they were shipped out to fight in the World Wars.⁷⁵

Porterage and domestic service grew as occupational categories. Day labourer continued. As was the case during the 1831 census, the service-oriented economy still yielded a variety of composite wages. For instance, municipality records note that members of the fire brigade were paid “per drill”. The three “leading firemen” were paid 9d per drill, while the 33 other fireman were paid 6d per drill each. Over the course of the year 1907-1908, there were 104 drills.⁷⁶ While 6d was enough to feed two people for a day, this was such sporadic employment that it is unlikely that anyone was fully depending on this wage alone for subsistence. But a fireman who was also a farm labourer, for instance, would be able to combine the seasonal wages of 96d and a bushel of rice per month during the planting and harvest seasons. Or, he might also be a watchman or a lamplighter or a messenger for the municipal government. His wife might be a hawker, and he may have some children in domestic service.

Services and retail continued to be important to the increasingly urban economy of the city. As White describes, from the 1910s to 1930s, the Krio trader Bure Catherine Palmer “worked at a number of projects besides her import/export business. Six days a week she rose at 3:00 AM to bake bread to be sold during the day. Using her house as a shop, she also sold goods ordered from German and American catalogues, print cloth used for Krio-style dresses, and Madras cloth used for headties...in the afternoons, she would train young girls in dressmaking.”⁷⁷ Palmer was married to a controller of customs, an administrative post, and they had three children. Combining these sources of income, she earned enough to travel to London for holiday, and to educate her children.

As was the case during the earlier phase of the colony’s economy, the service-oriented economy still yielded a variety of composite wages. The trends in agricultural versus domestic labor shifted again in the final period of our data, as the opening of the protectorate

⁷³ Strickrodt, ‘African Girls’ Samplers from Mission Schools in Sierra Leone’, (2010); Bickford-Smith, ‘Betrayal of the Creole elites’, (2004); Jeater, ‘The British Empire and African Women in the Twentieth Century’, (2004).

⁷⁴ White, *Sierra Leone’s Settler Women Traders* (1987).

⁷⁵ Zimmerman, *Militarizing marriage* (2020).

⁷⁶ Sierra Leone Archives (SLA), MP 4768/1907 Estimate of Revenue and Expenditure, 1907.

⁷⁷ White, *Sierra Leone’s Settler Women Traders* (1987), p.88.

and the introduction of taxation there induced male laborers to engage in work, flooding the labor market and reducing the costs of that labor. In 1899, the Aborigines department complained that the influx of self-emancipated enslaved Sierra Leoneans from the Protectorate “As these slaves are not obliged to report themselves here escaped they choose it not unnaturally occurs that the majority of them do not do so; but fully one third of the labour population here may be said to consist of them.”⁷⁸ Colonial administrators complained that “The immediate result is, that whilst the already overcrowded labor market of Freetown is being daily augmented a graduate depopulation of the producing Districts adjacent to the Colony is going on and we are having more consumers than producers, besides the Quarter ... of constant additions to the ranks of the criminal classes from the large number of those who have no work to do.”

While migration may have added to colonial administrators’ concerns about underemployment and sporadic work, however, these were by no means new concerns. There was a continued need for day labourers and temporary employment in Freetown as in other port cities even as tax imperatives elsewhere in the colonial economy drove increasing numbers of workers to waged employment. What incentive would the colonial government have to encourage higher wages - limiting the need for household participation or multiple jobs? Low wages both suppressed wages for employers by ensuring that households would all need to go out to work and therefore keeping the labor market competitive; and ensured that there were plenty of workers looking for even temporary employment in order to earn the wages to pay their tax bills. In other words, although the colonial government complained about the influx of laborers and underemployment, this was a trend that kept the city operating much as it had throughout the nineteenth century.

As Cooper argues for the final phase of colonial rule, it was only with the growth of developmentalism and the need to manage growing colonial unrest after the Second World War that “Colonial cities became less the realm of the colonial expert and more that of the “industrial relations” specialist, who argued against migratory labor and in favor of taking Africans out of their cultural milieu and reproducing their families under the eyes of European welfare experts, even if this implied paying family wages or family allowances that exceeded the free market price of labor.”⁷⁹

⁷⁸ SLA, MP 4457/1892 from Aborigines Dept to CS 29 June 1889.

⁷⁹ Cooper, ‘From Free Labor to Family Allowances,’ 1989, p.745

Conclusion

This paper suggests that Freetown's service economy can illuminate how families operated within an informal economy in ways that advanced the welfare of their households without a 'male breadwinner' wage. This is a story of West Africa's economy that differs from the growth narratives that predominate in understandings of Africa's economic past, in part, because it does not assume progression towards an industrial economy. Looking at a port city in Africa offers a different kind of perspective, moving away from the colonial typologies, that exposes an earlier form of economy that significantly influenced the ongoing relationships of households to work in their cities.

Beyond simply reminding ourselves that West Africa had service-oriented port cities in the eighteenth and nineteenth century, this paper suggests that thinking about the strategies of port city residents – and service-economy participants more generally – is vital to any understanding of long-run economic trends. As Seth Rockman argues for colonial American port cities, "we can see parallels between the pre-industrial urban economy of the colonial era and the postindustrial economy of the present. Both are largely service economies in which many working people lack political citizenship, are acted upon by multiple forms of inequality, and do not produce actual goods that can be sold for profit—and yet the economy cannot function without them."⁸⁰

Freetown was in some ways a unique place in nineteenth century Africa because of the particular nature of its relationship with Britain and the surrounding African polities, as well as the diversity of origins and experiences of its resident population. However, it was not unique in the Atlantic World, and arguably looked like many other small port cities – in Africa as much as in Europe, or the Americas – in its regional and global interactions, migration patterns, and, crucially, the nature of its household occupations. And it is in this respect that the experience of the men, women, and children of the city in piecing together seasonal, temporary, rentier, trading, agricultural, and waged work is a useful insight into the nature of the urban service economy, its opportunities, its failings, and its relevance to the nature of non-industrial, non-salaried labor.

While 'formal' economic activity grew across the colonial period, and especially from the late nineteenth century, the male breadwinner model, the full-time salaried job, and 'full employment' were exceedingly rare in Freetown's history. We argue that, historically, they were an anomaly of the mid-twentieth century, and that a longer view of the city's economy

⁸⁰ Rockman, 'Work in the Cities of Colonial British North America', (2007), p. 1023.

more accurately reflects the nature of household economies and the daily experience of work, in urban Africa, as elsewhere.

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