Settler Colonialism in West Africa?:
The Colonial Philanthropic Society in Senegambia, 1814-1818

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Between 1814 and 1818, the Société coloniale philanthropique (the Colonial Philanthropic Society, hereafter “the Society”), a colonization society founded in Paris, attempted to found a settlement in West Africa, on the Cap Vert peninsula in what is now Dakar, Senegal.¹ The Society promised to provide an outlet for French citizens affected by the recent upheaval of the Revolutionary and Napoleonic wars and to build a thriving agricultural colony. Members of the Society planned on purchasing slaves from local Eurafrikan and African traders and “freeing” them to work as indentured laborers. Their commercial plans for the colony focused on growing cotton and indigo, both already locally cultivated. After an exploratory mission in 1816, the Society sent a group of settlers from France the following year. Yet the project failed to last beyond a year, with many of the settlers leaving the colony by 1818.

Nevertheless, its existence, though short-lived, was critical to the larger history of French colonization in West Africa. In a moment when the future of French colonial ventures was uncertain, there was a space for experiments with private colonization efforts, plantation schemes, and even European settlement in Africa. In this view, the project can be seen as one of several efforts to find a new direction for the colony in the aftermath of the abolition of the Atlantic slave trade. The Society’s project anticipated later French agricultural experiments and labor regimes in Senegambia. An attempt to found cotton and indigo plantations along the Senegal River in the 1820s and a system of indenture for Senegambian workers that lasted from 1818 to 1848 were two colonial systems the Society had proposed, in some form.²

¹ For an early narrative history of the Colonial Philanthropic Society, see Claude Faure, Histoire de la presqu’île du Cap Vert et des origines de Dakar (Paris: Emile Larose, 1914), chapters II and III. Authors addressing the history of the kingdom of Kajoor or the events surrounding the wreck of the Medusa have mentioned the Society’s projects or its individual members in brief, but for the most part the Society appears peripherally in these accounts. See for example Mamadou Diouf, Le Kajoor au XIXe siècle: Pouvoir ceddo et conquête colonial (Paris: Karthala, 1990), 123-124; Darcy Grimaldo Grigsby, Extremities: Painting Empire in Post-Revolutionary France (Yale University Press, 2002); and Maureen Ryan, “Liberal Ironies, Colonial Narratives and the Rhetoric of Art: Reconsidering Géricault’s Radeau de la Méduse and the Traite de nègres,” in Théodore Géricault: The Alien Body: Tradition in Chaos, eds. Serge Guilbaut, Maureen Ryan, and Scott Watson, exhibition catalog (Vancouver: University of British Columbia, 1997), 18-51.

The failure of the scheme, however, helped to convince the French government not to pursue further settler colonial projects in the region. Failed colonial projects like the Cap Vert settlement are important for historians to examine, I argue, because they reveal the contingent nature of French colonialism. In other words, failure was as important to colonialism as success. The Society project failed, in the eyes of its supporters, because the Minister of the Navy withdrew support. Yet there were larger problems that could not have been remedied, even with the full backing of metropolitan officials. The lack of negotiations with the inhabitants of Cap Vert, the unpreparedness of the settlers, disease, and the impossibility of carrying out the agricultural schemes proposed by the Society ensured the failure of the settlement. The possibility of settler colonialism in Senegambia met a dead end after this experiment.

The Society formed in the context of a longer history of proposed and actual settlement projects on the West African coast and elsewhere. The most immediate analogous project was the failed settlement of Kourou, in French Guiana, in the aftermath of the Seven Years’ War. Facing the prospect of a shrinking colonial empire in the Americas as the war came to a close, the French secretary of state, Choiseul, formulated a plan for a new colony. Around 17,000 French settlers made their way to Kourou after the war ended in 1763. However, the vast majority of these settlers either died of disease or returned to France by 1766. Yet even after the failure of Kourou, Physiocrats, abolitionists, and other commentators interested in colonial trade in the last several decades of the eighteenth century proposed French colonial projects in Guiana and West Africa.

The end of the Napoleonic era marked a renewed opportunity for French colonial projects in West Africa. In 1815, as a result of the treaties ending the Napoleonic Wars, France prepared to repossess Senegal from the British, who had traded control of the colony back and forth with the French beginning with the Seven Years’ War. The colony of Senegal consisted of Saint-Louis at the mouth of the Senegal River, the small fortified island of Gorée off the Cap Vert

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1. P.-H.-J. Sévigny, a director of the Colonial Philanthropic Society, argued in 1824 that the Society had met its end six years earlier due to changes in the naval ministry and the opposition of powerful speculators. In a letter requesting the proceeds from the auctioning off of the Society’s materials after its failure, he argued that the Society had acted honorably and had only failed because of the withdrawal of ministerial support. Sévigny to Clermont-Tonnerre (Minister of the Navy), 15 July 1824, Archives nationales d’outre-mer (hereafter ANOM) SEN XV 4.


peninsula about 120 miles south, and other small forts that facilitated the river trade. The small geographical expanse of the colony reflected its use as a trading post for gum and slaves, rather than a permanent European settlement. The reoccupation seemed to offer an opportunity for France to recoup its losses after 25 years of chaos, but with the end of the slave trade in view, the colony would have to find new directions.7

The end of the Napoleonic era also inspired political migration. Particularly after Napoleon’s Hundred Days, prominent Bonapartists and republicans were exiled, new laws threatened those who had not been loyal to the government with arrest, and perhaps fifty to eighty thousand people were purged from government positions, with thousands more purged in the ranks of the army.8 Bonapartists settled in Texas, Alabama, and elsewhere as they fell out of favor.9 The formation of the Colonial Philanthropic Society in 1814 was not a coincidence, as its members sought to secure leave to make the West African coast a site of refuge. In a letter from April 1815, the Society reminded the Minister of the Navy that their members were soldiers and employees “who all felt the blows brought about by the political events of 1814.”10 In the eighteenth century, France’s establishments on the West African coast and along the Senegal River had been trading posts with small European populations subject to disease and frequent personnel changes.11 However, a number of travel accounts began to emphasize the healthy nature of the coast, the fertility of the land, and possibilities for agricultural development and trade.12 Republicans and Bonapartists seeking to emigrate saw in West Africa the possibility of a settler colony.

10 Sévigny, Rogéry, and Dumouza to Decrès, Minister of the Navy and Colonies, 15 April 1815, ANOM SEN XV 2a.
11 On disease, the European presence, and the short duration of stays of monopoly company officials in the colony during the eighteenth century, see James F. Searing, West African Slavery and Atlantic Commerce: The Senegal River Valley, 1700-1860 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 97, 103, 163.
12 A printed report promoting the Society to the Conseil d’État in 1817 cited Geoffroy de Villeneuve and Pelletan, among others, as commentators who recognized Cap Vert to be a suitable site for settlement: L.-À.-G. Bosc and P.-H.-J. Sévigny, Mémoire au conseil d’état pour la Société-Coloniale-Philanthropique de la Sénégalie; exposant les avantages politiques et commerçiaux qui peuvent résulter pour la France de la fondation de cette nouvelle colonie, ainsi que les faits relatifs à l’établissement de la Société-Coloniale (Paris: Imprimerie de J.-M. Eberhard, 1817), 24-5, ANOM SEN XV 3b. The authors are cited by name only, but the published works the Society was referencing are Jean-Gabriel Pelletan, Mémoire sur la colonie française du Sénégal avec quelques considérations historiques et politiques sur la traite des nègres, sur leur caractère, et les moyens de faire servir la suppression de cette traite à l’accroissement et à la prospérité de cette colonie (Paris: Panckoucke, 1800) and René Geoffroy de Villeneuve, L’Afrique, ou Histoire, moeurs, usages et coutumes des africains: le Sénégal (Paris: Nepveu, 1814). In a governmental report critical of the Society, Geoffroy de Villeneuve’s publication is blamed for spreading false hopes about the peninsula: “Mémoire sur un écrit présenté au Conseil d’État au nom de la prétendue société coloniale philanthropique de la Sénégambie,” 8 July 1817, ANOM SEN XV 2a.
Between 1814 and 1817, the Society promoted its project to found a settler colony on Cap Vert with a number of justifications in letters and reports to the Minister of the Navy, as well as in published reports for the public. First, the Society argued Cap Vert would rid France of potentially dangerous Frenchmen, as former soldiers and employees who were loyal to now deposed regimes and found themselves out of work could have a place to emigrate. The minister agreed – after Napoleon’s brief return to France in 1815, a report from the Minister of the Navy’s office acknowledged it had become important to find an outlet for aimless Frenchmen excluded by the changing regimes. Denis Rogéry, an ex-infantry officer and Society member, claimed in 1816 that the group’s organizers were receiving many requests from French citizens hoping to travel to the proposed settlement, writing “There are so many sons of families that need to begin to succeed in their lives, so many people going to the United States or other foreign countries, that it would be very possible to have 3000 or 4000 people sign up.”

The settlement would be not only a safety valve for unruly subjects, the Society’s founders argued, but also a new source of colonial agricultural wealth for France. A report described the Society’s project as a settlement to be “founded in a fertile country, suited to the same crops as the Antilles, and providing at a reasonable cost the necessary labor to cultivate it.” While sugar cane could not succeed there, indigo and cotton were already growing without anyone tending them, the Society reported. The organizers of the settlement scheme argued that coffee, cloves, cinnamon, pepper, and other spices and fruit trees would also thrive in the fertile ground.

To provide the labor for the agricultural settlement, the promoters planned to buy enslaved people out of slavery, a system the Society referred to as rachat, and engage them as indentured laborers for a period of six to nine years, depending on their age. The idea of African plantations worked by free Africans...
(often with a period of indentureship) had emerged in the eighteenth century, as various European abolitionists and proponents of opening new African trade proposed founding agricultural colonies in West Africa.\textsuperscript{20} The Society, following these earlier proposals, argued that indentured labor would introduce West Africans to civilization. The Society suggested that the African laborers would be introduced to “the habits and needs of civilized peoples” during their time of indenture, learning Christian morals and useful skills.\textsuperscript{21} The indentured Africans would “follow the example of the Whites” by embracing marriage, agriculture, land ownership, and industrious work habits, the Society claimed.\textsuperscript{22} Thus two goals would be met at once: the philanthropic mission of the society would be fulfilled and a ready labor force would ensure the success of the establishment.

The environment and relations with the inhabitants of Cap Vert were also considered favorable. The climate, the Society argued in their appeals to the French government, was milder, and therefore healthier for European settlement, than many parts of the West African coast.\textsuperscript{23} The indigenous population was believed to be friendly and numerous, with the peninsula’s six villages estimated at several thousand people. Members of the Society predicted that the peninsula could be defended easily and that the excess population of Saint-Louis and Gorée, who would no longer be able to support themselves by the slave trade, would come to participate in agriculture. These calculations led the Society to vastly overestimate the desire of inhabitants of the region to sign on to European-led agricultural projects.\textsuperscript{24}


\textsuperscript{21} Bosc and Sévigny, Mémoire au conseil d’état, 29, ANOM SEN XV 3b. Bosc and Sévigny’s report argues that this system was already being used by the Moravians and by the company in Sierra Leone; see Mémoire au conseil d’état, 31. This system of buying enslaved persons into a period of indenture (under the name “engagement à temps”) became a means of recruitment for the French colonial government’s labor and military force and for private individuals between 1817 and 1848; see Zuccarelli, “Le régime des engagés à temps au Sénégal” and Getz, Slavery and Reform in West Africa, 46-51. After the abolition of slavery in the colonies, a system of indenture was developed in the British empire, and a similar practice emerged in the aftermath of the abolition of slavery throughout the French empire in 1848; see Céline Flory, De l’esclavage à la liberté force: Histoire des travailleurs africains engagés dans la Caraïbe française au XIXe siècle (Paris: Karthala, 2015). The term rachat also appears in a different context in the 1830s and 1840s in the colonial records of Senegal, where it refers to slaves purchasing their freedom, as Trevor Getz notes in Slavery and Reform in West Africa, 70-75.

\textsuperscript{22} Bosc and Sévigny, Mémoire au conseil d’état, 29, ANOM SEN XV 3b.

\textsuperscript{23} Bosc and Sévigny, Mémoire au conseil d’état, 31-32, ANOM SEN XV 3b.

\textsuperscript{24} “Rapport, Ministère de la Marine, Direction des Colonies, Administration Générale, Etablissement d’une colonie au Cap-Verd,” undated [1815-16], ANOM SEN XV 2a.
A fundamental concern, however, was whether the Society even had a right to the land. Rogéry argued a treaty made between the damel (ruler) of Kajoor and the French in 1786 had secured French rights to the land. However, as early as February 1815, Comte Trigant de Beaumont, who had been appointed governor of Senegal, worried about whether the damel of Kajoor would recognize the 1786 treaty. In the instructions to Julien Schmaltz, the governor who replaced Trigant de Beaumont by June 1816 and was charged with taking back possession of Saint-Louis and Gorée, the Minister of the Navy warned that the Society should not be allowed to explore Cap Vert until France’s treaty rights to the land were verified. The Minister ordered Schmaltz to monitor the relations of the settlers with local groups and forbid the Society’s members from crossing the treaty boundaries to travel into the interior of Africa.

Despite these concerns, the Society’s proposals of 1814 and 1815 led the Minister of the Navy to allow an initial exploratory group of 28 people associated with the Colonial Philanthropic Society to travel with the French government’s expedition to take possession of the colony from the British in mid-1816. The exploratory delegation destined for Cap Vert, after undergoing several personnel changes, included eight members: Parson (ex-engineer), Richefort (ex-naval officer), Ebérard (a colonist from Martinique), Estruc (doctor and surgeon), Rogéry (ex-infantry officer), Kummer (naturalist and engineer), and Corréard (listed as an ex-surveyor or an engineer-geographer). These representatives of the Society prepared for the voyage by carrying out research: Estruc was studying the fields of disease and hygiene, and Rogéry had visited the directors of the Jardin des Plantes and was also hoping to meet with people who had been to America and India to learn about colonial crops that could be introduced into West Africa. The eight members of the delegation were accompanied by 20 workers who represented a range of skills: there were two joiners, two locksmiths, a cooper, a wheelwright, a sawyer, eight carpenters, three masons, a gardener, and a farmer.

The voyage did not end well, however. Some of the explorers and workers were traveling on the Medusa, which famously ran aground off the African coast.

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50 Other sources date the treaty to 1787. In this treaty, as in previous treaties, the damel of Kajoor ceded the peninsula to the French, but the French did not act to take possession of the peninsula. Faure, *Histoire de la presqu'île du Cap Vert*, 1-12.
52 Julien Schmaltz was charged with the turnover of the colony in 1816; *Instructions générales*, t. I, 227-230. For more on Schmaltz’s career, see Léonce Jore, “La vie diverse et volontaire du colonel Julien Désiré Schmaltz,” *Revue d’histoire des colonies* XL, no. 193 (1953): 295-312.
54 Parson, *Premier rapport de M. Parson*, 2nd edition (Paris: au bureau de la Société coloniale philanthropique, 1817), iii. Corréard is listed as an ex-surveyor in the Parson report; other sources call him an engineer-geographer. Research did not reveal the first names of some of these individuals.
55 Rogéry to Portal, 5 January 1816, ANOM SEN XV 3.
56 Minute, 18 May 1816, ANOM SEN XV 3.
in July 1816. Some survivors reached shore, but 150 passengers – including sailors, soldiers, and workers – found themselves on a raft left floating in the Atlantic. Only 15 survivors were found when rescuers located the raft days later. Back in France, the incompetent captain’s decisions that led up to the shipwreck, the abandonment of the raft, and the lack of support for survivors turned the event into a scandal and rallying cry for liberals keen to point out the faults of the regime. The disturbing details were publicized in an account by survivors Corrédard, who had traveled to Senegal with the Society’s delegation, and Savigny, as well as in the painting *Radeau de la Méduse* by Géricault, who consulted with Corrédard.

The wreck of the *Medusa* was a serious blow to the Society. The *Journal des débats* reported in September 1816 that all of the Society’s agricultural instruments had been lost and agricultural trials would be set back a year. Members drifted away: Adolphus Kummer, one of the Society’s directors, abandoned the project to follow a British official, Major John Peddie, on a mission meant to explore the course of the Niger River. Additionally, evidence of the unsuitability of the peninsula for colonization began to emerge. The British refused to turn over Saint-Louis and Gorée until they had received orders from their superiors, forcing French refugees from the *Medusa* to take shelter in a temporary tent settlement on Cap Vert. The lack of adequate shelter and spread of fever would inspire Schmaltz to refer to the refugee settlement as a “deadly experiment” that proved colonization should not progress on Cap Vert. Schmaltz cast doubt on the fertility of the land and argued that cotton could not grow there, contrary to what the Society claimed.

Schmaltz also challenged the assumption that the Lebu, the inhabitants of the fishing villages of Cap Vert, would be welcoming. The Minister of the Navy, in his instructions to Schmaltz before the governor set off for Senegal, had

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35 *Journal des débats*, 23 September 1816, 3.
37 Summary of letter from Schmaltz, 7 April 1817 in “Extrait de la correspondance de Mr. Schmaltz, commandant pour le Roi et administrateur général du Sénégal et dépendances, parvenue au bureau le 4 juin 1817,” ANOM SEN I 1c.
38 Summary of letter from Schmaltz of 28 November 1816 in “Extrait de la correspondance de Mr. le colonel Schmaltz, commandant pour le Roi et administrateur du Sénégal et dépendances, parvenue au bureau le 5 janvier 1817,” ANOM SEN I 1c; Summary of letter from Schmaltz of 2 January 1817 in “Extrait de la correspondance de Mr. Schmaltz, Commandant pour le Roi, et Administrateur au Sénégal et dépendances, parvenue au Bureau le 5 mars 1817,” ANOM SEN I 1c.
suggested the *damel* of Kajoor would be happy to reaffirm the treaty giving the French rights to Cap Vert since he would be rid of an unruly group of subjects, as the peninsula’s inhabitants had challenged the rule of Kajoor at various moments. The Lebu had indeed revolted against the *damel* in 1795 and considered themselves to be independent. Schmaltz reported that the Lebu were “extremely thieving, self-interested, and defiant. Emboldened by their success against the *damel*, whose yoke they had thrown off, they became insolent and exceedingly demanding.” Schmaltz suspected this population would not tolerate the settlers, dooming the project.

Even as news of these setbacks began to reach France, the Society published two reports promoting Cap Vert, the first in October 1816 and the second, published along with a revised edition of the first, in 1817. The author, M. Parson, made the case that the exploratory mission was a part of was laying the ground for future settlers of the Colonial Philanthropic Society. Parson wrote that he and Jean Michel Claude Richard, the gardener from the government’s expedition (and not part of the Society) made a survey of the peninsula in late July 1816 and confirmed that the soil in some areas was suited to growing cotton, indigo, and other crops. Parson compared the richness of the soil to the banks of the Garonne and described the resemblance between a plain growing with millet and the fields of Normandy, comparing the proposed settlement site favorably to France for the Society’s audience. With the addition of plows, more advanced methods of sowing, and the labor of freed slaves (*affranchis*), the settlers could not fail to succeed, Parson promised. Still, the reports hinted at the complexity of the treaty situation. Parson noted that the settlers would have to make treaties with the *damel* of Kajoor, with Moctar (the “grand marabout” or Muslim religious leader the inhabitants of Cap Vert considered to be their true leader), and with the individual heads of the six villages on the peninsula, as well as make regular tributary payments to the owners of the largest cattle herds in the area. By the time the second report was published, Parson had died in December 1816 on Gorée. However, the publication of the two reports together, with accompanying footnotes written by Sévigny, created the impression that the exploratory mission had been a success.

The Society members back in France also attempted to gain financial support and recruits. In September 1816, the Society hung posters around Paris calling on people to become shareholders. The Society publicly promoted three

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41 Summary of letter from Schmaltz, 7 April 1817 in “Extrait de la correspondance de Mr. Schmaltz, commandant pour le Roi et administrateur général du Sénégal et dépendances, parvenue au bureau le 4 juin 1817,” ANOM SEN I 1c.
voyages scheduled to depart for Cap Vert in October or November 1816, late December 1816, and February or March 1817. The Society imagined a large-scale, permanent colony that set itself apart by the quality of the settlers it recruited, a quality guaranteed by the private nature of the settlement scheme. Society members noted that colonies that were founded by governments were populated by convicts, prostitutes, and people without any education, capital, or desire to contribute to the colony. In contrast, the willing settlers who had founded Pennsylvania, a privately-run colony in its early existence, found themselves in a “Colonie libre” that had thrived. A private colonization company, the Society argued, could produce in twenty years results that would take centuries in a colony started by a government. The Society’s directors described its recruits:
The population is essentially moral and industrious. These are men who belong to the non-laboring and enlightened classes of society, artists, or workers chosen from the immense number of those who presented themselves, all of whom have the moral guarantee that comes from possession of property, or from having the values needed to make these lands bear fruit.
The Society’s promoters argued that this type of morally-upstanding voluntary settler would put the private colony on better footing than those colonies founded by national governments and settled by convicts and other unwilling emigrants.

The Society worked on a subscription model to attract settlers. The subscriptions were divided into four categories, as laid out in a proposal from December 1816. “Colonists,” for their investment, had the right to land, a wooden house, and, for the first 500 subscribers, an African domestic servant, and “Indentured Workers (Engagés)” would work in the new establishments. “Capitalists” contributed money with the hope of a return, while “Subscribers for the Deliverance of Captives” contributed money toward the freedom of the enslaved, including not only the purchasing of enslaved Africans out of slavery but also the redemption of enslaved Europeans and the purchase of a ship to protect the population against Barbary pirates. This last proposal led to scrutiny; as one bureaucratic report put it, “but where was permission given to act against the Barbary traders, and what right has a private association to declare war on people with whom the government is not in hostilities?”

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46 Note, 30 September 1816, SEN XV 2a. (As described below, only one voyage would actually depart, in March 1817; another would be banned from leaving.)
4 Bosc and Sévigny, Mémoire au conseil d’état, 15–17.
48 Bosc and Sévigny, Mémoire au conseil d’état, 15–17.
50 Bosc and Sévigny, Mémoire au conseil d’état, 16–17.
53 “Extrait d’un rapport de la 3e Division, bureau du commerce au Ministere de l’intérieur fait au Ministre secrétaire d’État de ce Département le 29 avril 1817, concernant la Société coloniale philanthropique,” 29 April 1817, ANOM SEN XV 2a.
Subscribers who planned to settle in the new colony came from a variety of backgrounds, and, we can surmise, for a variety of reasons. The colonists who would depart for Senegal on the Belle Alexandrine in March 1817 included 148 men, 19 women, and 10 children under 16 years of age. The men were further classed by broad professional categories. Sixty were in the category “without mechanical or industrial professions,” including teachers, men of letters, merchants, military servicemen, and domestic servants. There were five people in trades related to food – bakers, cooks, butchers, and cafe owners. Sixty men were classed as belonging to the skilled trades, such as blacksmiths, gunsmiths, tanners, wheelwrights, carpenters, tailors, masons, and coopers. Seven men were jardiniers and cultivateurs (gardeners and farmers); nine were surveyors, mechanics, and architects. The remaining men included chemists and pharmacists, one officer of the merchant marine, and one surgeon.\(^54\) The emphasis on skilled labor supported the Society’s claim that they were recruiting hard-working settlers with expertise that would be useful for a self-sufficient colony of productive individuals. The small number of women may suggest that men were disproportionately recruited for the initial establishment of the settlement, or it may suggest an acceptance of marriage between French men and African women.

As the Colonial Philanthropic Society carried out its recruitment, the promises of the Society began to worry metropolitan officials. In September 1816, the posters, publications, and other activities of the Society were brought to the attention of the Minister of the Navy and Colonies in a note written by a member of the administration that alerted the minister to the fact that while the government had ruled to support the exploratory mission, authorization had not been given to the Society itself.\(^55\) On 17 November 1816 a note was published in the official journal, the Moniteur, attempting to dissuade potential subscribers by refuting the Society’s claims that it had the official backing of the government.\(^56\)

Still, after various delays, the Belle Alexandrine set off for West Africa on 17 March 1817 with 177 passengers.\(^57\) However, on 16 May, the administration decided that no more emigrants would be allowed to go to Africa until news of the first voyage had reached France.\(^58\) The government’s misgivings were confirmed by a series of negative reports from Governor Schmaltz.\(^59\) In a letter written 7 April 1817, as the colony awaited the arrival of the Belle Alexandrine, Schmaltz reiterated the problems with the proposed settlement site, stating that there was no water eight months of the year, barely enough food for the current

\(^{54}\) Untitled note “177 passagers ont été embarqués sur le navire la Belle Alexandrine...”, Marine, Direction des Colonies, Bureau d’administration, March 1817, ANOM SEN XV 3b.

\(^{55}\) Note, Bureau d’administration, Direction des Colonies, 30 September 1816, ANOM SEN XV 2a.

\(^{56}\) Note inserted in the Moniteur, 17 November 1816, ANOM SEN XV 2a.

\(^{57}\) Untitled note “177 passagers ont été embarqués sur le navire la Belle Alexandrine...”, March 1817, ANOM SEN XV 3b.

\(^{58}\) This is referenced in “Note pour le Conseil des Ministres,” June 1817, ANOM SEN XV 3b.

\(^{59}\) “Note pour le Conseil des Ministres,” June 1817, ANOM SEN XV 3b; summaries of letters from Schmaltz of 28 November 1816 and 2 January 1817 in “Extrait de la correspondance de Mr. Schmaltz, Commandant pour le Roi, et Administrateur au Sénégal et dépendances, parvenue au Bureau le 5 mars 1817,” ANOM SEN I 1c.
inhabitants, and wood was so scarce that people who lived on the peninsula were even refusing to sell any to Gorée.60

The Society publicized the arrival of the colonists with a printed notice distributed to their family members announcing that the settlers had arrived in view of Gorée between 10-12 April. The group had had a two-hour meeting with the governor in which boundaries were established. The Society would recognize his authority, but since they had signed statements confirming they were traveling at their own risk, the settlers would also govern the colony internally. The tract reassured the families that all was well: "The colonists were well received by the blacks, not one shot was fired and the best understanding exists between them and the colony."61

The settlement quickly found itself in trouble, however. The colonists began suffering from illness and hunger. In July, Captain Roussin, a military official stationed in the colony, reported on settlers on the Cap Belair section of the peninsula: “At the end of three months, they still had no shelter, not a bit of land cultivated; the only drinkable water was more than one mile away, they only had provisions for six weeks, and the rains were about to start.”62 Settlers soon began returning to France. Colonists who arrived back in France in late summer 1817 reported that only eight of their party remained at Cap Bernard, possessing only a month of provisions, a little wood, and a dozen farming implements.63 The last “debris” of the expedition, including arms and tools, were sold at public auction in September and October 1817.64 By the beginning of 1818, then, only about eight months after the arrival of the Belle Alexandrine, most of the settlers had either died of illness, gone back to France, or, if they had skills useful to the colony, were now working in Saint-Louis.65

The short-lived experiment with settler colonialism in West Africa attempted by the Colonial Philanthropic Society did not become a scandal on the level of the wreck of the Medusa, with which it was so intimately connected. But the settlement attempt and its failure did reinforce the limits of French colonial projects in the region. While some proposals to send permanent French settlers to Senegal continued to emerge, the idea was not taken up again. Cap Vert was also abandoned as a site of possible colonization, for the time being. Finally, the Minister of the Navy realized a private colonial project was too risky. Future agricultural schemes would fall under a greater degree of colonial oversight. Though the Society had done its best to promote its settlers as moral and its mission as the kind of well-planned project only a private group could develop, the failure of the Cap Vert settlement led the administration to rule out the possibility of a settler colony. On the other hand, a plantation project under the direction of Governor Roger would be the focus of the colonial administration in

60 Summary of letter from Schmaltz of 7 April 1817 in “Extrait de la correspondance de Mr. Schmaltz, commandant pour le Roi et administrateur général du Sénégal et dépendances, parvenu au bureau le 4 juin 1817,” ANOM SEN I 1c.
61 Société coloniale philanthrope, Rapport sur la Nouvelle colonie sénégambienne, n.d. [circa April-May 1817?], ANOM SEN XV 2a. A note in pencil at the bottom of the first page states that the notice was distributed to the colonists' families.
63 Réponses faites par les passagers du Brick l’Argus aux questions contenues dans la dépêche ministérielle du 29 Août 1817,” 3 September 1817, ANOM SEN XV 3.
64 Sévigny to Clermont-Tonnerre (Minister of the Navy), 15 July 1824; Note “Réclamations de fonds déposés dans la Caisse Royale du Sénégal,” 1 August 1824, ANOM SEN XV 4.
65 Faure, Histoire de presqu'île du Cap Vert, 43-47.
the 1820s, and a system of indentured servitude emerged with the creation of a labor force of Africans bought from slavery within the boundaries of the colony from the 1820s through the 1840s. The Society’s scheme prefigured these later directions of French colonial policy in Senegambia. The uneven development of French colonization of Senegal after the failure of the Colonial Philanthropic Society reminds us that the French presence in West Africa was shaped by contingent factors. The particular context of the French repossession of its West African colonies after the Napoleonic Wars allowed this short-lived settlement to suggest limits and possibilities for later colonial expansion.