

Sheridan, Louis ^[1]

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by William S. Powell, 1994; Revised October 2022.

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ca. 1793–1844

Louis Sheridan, farmer, free black merchant, and Liberian official, was probably the Louis Sheridan mentioned in the 1800 will of Joseph R. Gautier (d. 15 May 1807), [Elizabethtown](#) ^[3] merchant, as the son of Nancy Sheridan, "my emancipated black woman" to whom he left "my plantation at the Marsh." Louis obtained a good education and engaged in extensive mercantile operations. Although he was multiracial with a fairer complexion, he was recorded as white in the [Bladen County](#) ^[3] censuses for 1810, 1820, and 1830. He was aided in business by [John Owen](#) ^[4], former governor, and other white men of the Lower Cape Fear who gave him letters of introduction. Sheridan made business trips to nearby [Wilmington](#) ^[5] as well as to Philadelphia, New York, and elsewhere, sometimes making purchases of goods valued in excess of \$12,000. As a young man he preached for a brief time and also subscribed to and served as an agent for two black newspapers.

Sheridan occupied one of the best houses in Elizabethtown, and his household in 1829 was composed of himself, aged twenty-six, eight male and four female enslaved people, and three free black people. In 1830 the household consisted of twenty-three persons including sixteen enslaved people, five free black people, one of whom is said to have been his mother, and two white males under the age of thirty, who may have been clerks in his store since many of his customers were white. As an enslaver, Sheridan had the reputation of being harsh and "a severe master."

Although he had friends of many races, Sheridan had difficulty in finding his place in society. Until the liberties of free black people in America began to be restricted following an insurrection of enslaved people in Virginia in 1831, he opposed the colonization of black people in Africa. Legislative action and changes in the North Carolina Constitution in 1835, however, led him to yield to the suggestion of agents of the American Colonization Society that he move to Africa. They observed that "[f]or energy of mind, firmness of purpose and a variety of practical knowledge, Sheridan has no superior."

In 1836 Sheridan decided that he and "39 other persons of my family" would begin plans to move. He freed his own enslaved people in 1837 and sailed for Liberia two days before Christmas, taking with him between \$15,000 to \$20,000, a large quantity of lumber, and thirty tons of merchandise to be sold there. He had refused to take a ship from Norfolk and agreed to sail only when a ship was made available in Wilmington. He also insisted that ample good food and drinking water be provided for the voyage as well as comfortable accommodations for his family.

After arriving in Liberia, Sheridan was unhappy with the provisions made for his people, and he expressed his displeasure to the chief administrator. He quickly gained the reputation of a troublemaker, especially after he tried in vain to get some of the colonists to petition backers in the United States for a change in the rules. Nevertheless, Sheridan acquired a long-term lease for six hundred acres and was authorized to establish a new settlement. Under his leadership land was cleared, and corn, sugarcane, and coffee trees were planted; he also experimented with other produce such as corn, rice, and sweet potatoes and with cattle. He soon was at odds with some of the white administrators and corresponded with Americans who had abandoned the idea of colonization and joined the abolitionist movement. He spoke out against inefficiency and bemoaned the fact that Liberia was so dependent on supplies from the United States. And even though he employed some native labor, he complained of the "barbarous natives."

One of his critical letters, published in [William Lloyd Garrison's](#) ^[6] *Liberator* ^[7], was used by abolitionists in their opposition to colonization. Because of this as well as his conflict with local officials, Sheridan was not chosen to fill an important vacancy in the government, and he became even more dissatisfied. He once considered returning to North Carolina but lacked the necessary resources.

Liberia became a commonwealth in 1839, and with the arrival of a new governor, Sheridan's position improved. He was made official storekeeper and general agent for a portion of the country. During a native uprising he successfully organized military defenses and fed the populace. Afterwards he worked to earn the goodwill of native chieftains, negotiated treaties, and enlarged the boundaries of the commonwealth. At the death of the governor, however, Sheridan was displeased with the choice of a successor, and he frequently voiced his objections to conditions. Towards the end of 1843 he became ill and he died the next year, so unappreciated that the journals that had praised him highly a few years before did not even report his death.

References:

Bladen County census returns, 1810, 1820, 1830

Wanda S. Campbell, *Abstracts of the Wills of Bladen County, North Carolina, 1734–1900*(1962)

Willard B. Gatewood, "'To Be Truly Free': Louis Sheridan and the Colonization of Liberia,"*Civil War History* 29 (December 1983)

Paths Toward Freedom: A Biographical History of Blacks and Indians(1976)

Additional Resources:

NC Architects, Thomas Sheridan (Louis Sheridan's half brother):<http://ncarchitects.lib.ncsu.edu/people/P000448> [8]

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Jimmy Emerson, 2008. "Trinity Methodist Church, Elizabethtown, North Carolina Erected in 1836." Available from <https://www.flickr.com/photos/auvet/2434639525/> [9] (accessed March 8, 2012).

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