



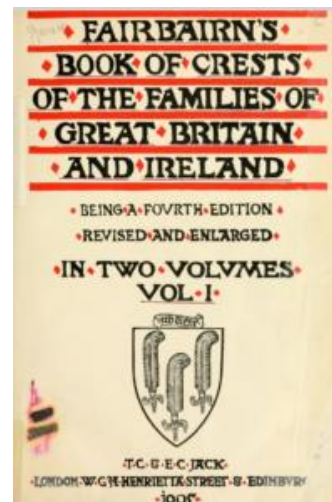
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To celebrate Black History Month of February, WRBA member Maxine Richmond shares a special group of livery buttons.



African Princess atop a crown.

[View this button](#) to learn more about its NBS classification, its button maker, and the interpretation of its ducal coronet.



This button (1874-1895) is noteworthy for depicting a young black lady emerging from a ducal crown, wearing a Victorian fashion choker. About 200 British noble families are listed in the [1905 edition of Fairbairn's Book of Crests](#) describing their crests using keywords such as 'blackamoor,' 'moor's,' 'demi-moor,' or 'Africa', reflecting the African-themed imagery in vogue for symbolizing colonial achievements, military conquests, or historical connections.

Legitimacy and Pretentions



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Heraldry identification of livery buttons would have been much simpler if the **firstborn sons always inherited** the estate (see [Primogeniture](#)). Instead, history has shown that brothers, cousins, or even their wives and sisters challenged his claim to the title by family disputes, political maneuvering, or by force. Instead of preserving stability as intended, the system often led to strategically arranged marriages, political intrigue, conflicts and rebellions, causing changes in heraldry.

African Princess

In 1871, a story in the [Old Kingdom of Egypt](#) was musically composed into [opera Aida](#) by Giuseppe Verdi to celebrate Egypt's modern era following the **opening of the Suez Canal**. Aida is the Ethiopian princess, a prisoner of war taken to Egypt and forced into servitude. The tragedy worsens when her lover, an Egyptian commander, wins the battle to conquer her homeland Ethiopia without knowing Aida's true identity. As a reward for his military victory, the Egyptian king betrothed the young commander to his daughter — a jealous and possessive Egyptian princess. History, if not repeating itself, is certainly good at rhyming itself.

Read more about [Sissieretta Jones](#).



Aida: Dance Montage



Watch the video on [YouTube](#) or [DuckPlayer](#).

Aida sorrowfully sings **"O patria mia"** (My homeland) longing for the tranquil green hills of Ethiopia that she will never see again. Did [Sissieretta Jones](#), born around 1868, a world-renowned African American soprano who traveled overseas multiple times to perform for kings and queens, sing this aria too? She was not allowed on the opera stage in the US because of her skin color. In 2025, Russian choreographer [Oleg Glushkov \(Bolshoi Russia\)](#) created the expressive body movements of the battle scene. Watch video snippets of [2025 Met Opera production of Aida](#).

Britain's 19th-Century Engagement with Africa

End of the Slave Trade:

Britain banned the transatlantic slave trade in 1807 and abolished slavery throughout its empire with the [Slavery Abolition Act of 1833](#) (which took effect in 1834). By the mid-19th century, the Royal Navy was actively patrolling the Atlantic and Indian Oceans to suppress illegal slave trading.

A Shift Toward Natural Resources:

With the decline of the slave trade, British interests increasingly turned to natural resources and commercial opportunities. In South Africa, British influence expanded notably after the [Dutch Cape Colony](#) was formally ceded following the Napoleonic Wars (around 1814-1815). The discovery of [diamonds in Kimberley](#) in 1867 and of [gold in the Witwatersrand region](#) of the Transvaal in 1886 spurred economic ambitions and intensified competition with the Boer republics.

West Africa - Trade Routes and Conflict:

In West Africa, Britain focused on controlling key trade routes and securing access to valuable commodities such as [palm oil—a resource essential to British industry](#). This period also saw military engagements like the [Ashanti Wars](#) (beginning as early as 1823 and continuing into the early 20th century) as the British sought to subdue the powerful Ashanti Kingdom and consolidate their influence in the region.

East Africa - New Frontiers and the Nile:

In East Africa, British involvement included establishing a presence in [Zanzibar](#) and supporting the gradual abolition of the regional slave trade. By the 1880s, British expansion into the interior—of what are now Kenya and Uganda—began in earnest. Through the establishment of the [British East Africa Company](#), Britain aimed to secure economic footholds and strategic control over vital waterways, including areas near the sources of the Nile River.

Egypt and Sudan - Strategic Interventions:

Britain's intervention in Egypt in 1882 was driven by the need to secure control of the [Suez Canal—a critical maritime route to India and the East](#). Similarly, in Sudan, British and Egyptian forces eventually overcame the [Mahdist Revolt \(1881-1898\)](#), culminating in an Anglo-Egyptian victory that reasserted control over the region.

Africa as a Prize - The Colonial Scramble:

At the [Berlin Conference \(1884-1885\)](#), European powers formalized their claims over Africa, drawing boundaries that would have long lasting impacts. By the mid 1890s, Britain had established a dominant colonial presence on the continent, controlling vast territories and strategic assets like the Suez Canal. To consolidate this control, the British built railways, ports, and telegraph systems—developments that paved the way for major social, economic, and political changes in Africa throughout the 20th century.

Missionaries and Cultural Change:

British [Christian missionaries](#) also played a significant role in Africa during this period. They introduced Western education, medicine, and religion, although their activities were deeply intertwined with the broader colonial enterprise and its complex legacy.

153 Strand Street in London, 2025

Firmin & Sons, established in 1655, began as a button maker and has since evolved into a designer and supplier of various uniforms, liveries, badges, and accessories. When our African Princess button was created, the company was located in a late 17th-century structure in the heart of London at 153 Strand. In the [mid-2010s, there were proposals by King's College London to redevelop adjacent buildings](#) (numbers 154-158 Strand), which included plans to demolish these structures while retaining only the façades of 152 and 153. These proposals faced significant opposition from heritage groups and the public. As of the latest available information, 153 Strand remains intact, preserving its historical significance in London's architectural landscape.

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Music Video: [Glory](#) by John Legend