Colonization Apart From Garrison: Widening the Lens on America's Black Resettlement Movement

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Among the least known stories of America's early historical narrative, African colonization was the United States' large and lengthy attempt to resettle free blacks outside American territory during the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Despite the size and duration of the movement, African colonization is largely absent from a modern-day retelling of America's founding and formative years. Where the historical details of this movement fall short, William Lloyd Garrison can be counted on for clarification by denouncing colonization as the "enemy of abolition" of slavery. Garrison provides an historical lens through which to view black resettlement. While this lens helps to clarify colonization, and gives shape to this rather elusive part of American history, to accept explicitly Garrison's reading of colonization is to miss the distinct nature of the movement. When viewed apart from Garrison's theory, the African colonization movement occupies a distinct and important place in American history and speaks to the deep complexity that surrounded the country's early debates over slavery.

During its emergence in the Revolutionary era, black colonization was initially proposed by a handful of prominent individuals. One of the earliest proponents of the colonization of free blacks was founding father Thomas Jefferson. In the 1770s, Jefferson suggested black relocation in response to what

was becoming known at the time as the slavery dilemma. Amidst America's break with the British Monarchy, it became strikingly clear that the new nation's continued practice of slavery conflicted with the very principles of freedom, democracy, and equal rights upon which the republic was founded. To reconcile this conflict and abolish outright the slave system was considered highly problematic. For several reasons – including the South's economic dependence on slave labor and a growing doubt over whether the black and white races could ever live harmoniously in a free society – a sudden emancipation of slaves en masse was thought to be a threat to the stability of society and the Union at large. As a result of these issues, early supporters of African colonization proposed black relocation as a way to slowly and peacefully eradicate slavery, and at the same time, keep the framework of the new Union intact.

By the beginning of the nineteenth century, support for black emigration had evolved into an official organization known as the American Colonization Society (ACS). Founded on December 21, 1816, the ACS initially considered sending free blacks to Haiti or Canada, but in 1825 settled on the colony of Liberia in West Africa. Thousands of free blacks and ex-slaves had returned to a substitute homeland of which they may or may not have had knowledge. After its inception, the ACS grew in size and stature, developed several auxiliary societies and garnered the support of some of the most prominent figures in the country. Ultimately a failed venture, the ACS only formally dissolved in 1964,

technically placing the organization as a proponent of the African colonization movement for nearly two hundred years.

In those two hundred years, colonization was never so much at the forefront of American history as when it came under the scrutiny of William Lloyd Garrison. In the 1830s, Garrison waged a large-scale war on colonization, based on his belief that the movement perpetuated the institution of slavery. Never did this accusation come through so succinctly as it did in a private letter to a relative in which Garrison confessed, "I look upon the overthrow of the Colonization Society as the overthrow of slavery itself…they both stand or fall together."[1] Equating the demise of colonization with the end of slavery itself, Garrison held colonizationists entirely responsible for keeping the slave system alive. In reality, supporters of colonization never voiced their wish to sustain slavery. However, since the movement believed any solution to slavery required the cooperation of the South, colonizationists did not directly condemn slaveholders, and thus represented for Garrison the closest thing to a pro-slavery organization.

For several reasons, Garrison's condemnation of colonization is a dominant way to view black emigration. Thought of today as a figurehead of the abolitionist movement, Garrison led the moral cause that fought for and eventually won the emancipation of slaves. Having stood at the helm of this victory, Garrison represents in the minds of many a powerfully influential way to

[1] William Lloyd Garrison to Henry E. Benson, July 21, 1832, quoted by Zorn, Garrisonian

view American slavery and the abolition of it. By association, that influence easily extends to the subject of African colonization. In addition, coming just prior to major shifts within the movement, Garrison's assault on colonization provided a seemingly conclusive and final word on the movement before it was altogether altered.[2] Finally, the size and scale of Garrison's assault on colonization adds to his prominence as a leading voice on the matter of black relocation. Filtering through the literature, press, and public discussions of the time, Garrison's attack on the movement stretched far and wide in the 1830s, saturating the air with anti-colonization propaganda. The breadth and intensity of Garrison's attack on colonization is well described in a 1917 dissertation that compares Garrison's conflict with the colonization movement to the large and violent rift that divided the nation in the 1860s. The author writes, "It was a great struggle, that between the Garrisonians and the Colonizationists. Verily, it was the first American civil war on the subject of slavery."[3] With this massive, influential, and timely assault on the movement, Garrison provides a historically definitive way to view black resettlement. Apart from Garrison, however, black

[2] The intensity of Garrison's attack on colonization declined in the late 1830s. After 1840, the colonization movement was debt-ridden, lacked support, and was no longer predominantly a colonizing enterprise. While these years in no way signaled the end of colonization, they did mark a transition away from the movement's original, thriving, effective presence during the early nineteenth century.
J.P. Staudenraus. *The African Colonization Movement, 1816-1865*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1961, p. 240.
[3] Early Lee Fox. *The American Colonization Society 1817-1840.* Baltimore: The John Hopkins Press, 1919, p. 176.

emigration is no less defined, and in fact occupies a distinct and noteworthy place in America's early historical narrative.

Often, this narrative is broken down into easily discernable dichotomies that help to compartmentalize the many components of this complicated era. Such dichotomies include black and white, North and South, and slave and free. While such clear-cut divisions did in fact exist, this time in history is also marked by more interwoven tensions between politics, morality, race, wealth, and humanity – tensions at the heart of understanding this time period and embodied by the rationale of the colonization movement.

Conceding the injustice of slavery, colonizationists also warned against a total and immediate emancipation of slaves, fearing that such a large-scale manumission would have grave repercussions for society and the larger American Republic. As a result, colonizationists argued for a gradual abolition in which slaveholders would be encouraged to emancipate their slaves under the stipulation that they relocate to Africa. Over time, colonizationists imagined these emancipations would increase, eventually bringing about an end to slavery. With this mindset, the colonization movement was at the intersection of this era's most pressing concerns and conversations, including those over justice, policy, economy, and democracy.

In particular, the colonization movement's concern for justice can be seen in its repeated expressions of contempt for slavery and its desire to see the institution ultimately eradicated. For example, Ferdinando Fairfax, an early

supporter of black removal, penned one of the earliest articles devoted to African colonization in which he wrote, "Liberty [is] a natural right, which we cannot, without injustice, withhold from this unhappy race of men."[4] Envisioning a continuous process of emancipation, under the stipulation of colonization, Fairfax's emigration plan was meant to encourage manumission to such a degree, that it would ultimately lead to an end to slavery. Thoughts like these continued through to the formation of the American Colonization Society in 1816. The ACS Secretary, Ralph Randolph Gurley, expressed some of the strongest anti-slavery sentiments ever voiced by the colonization movement. Responding to Garrison's arguments against black emigration, Gurley wrote in 1833, "I am well aware that [colonization] is denounced…by Mr. Garrison…as designed…to strengthen, rather than weaken the system of slavery…I do not hesitate to acknowledge…my hope of the *peaceful* abolition of slavery in this country…if in *any other* land slavery can be perpetual, it cannot be perpetual *here*…it must be abolished."[5]

Concomitant with their desire to see the slave system eradicated, colonizationists were concerned over the integration of freedmen into society if slavery were in fact to be abolished. During the Revolutionary era, this concern stemmed from a new political mindset that "suggested that homogeneity,

[4] Ferdinando Fairfax. "Plan For Liberating the Negroes Within the United States," American Museum, of Universal Magazine, VIII (December 1790), pp. 285-87, p. 285.
[5]Ralph Randolph Gurley and Henry Ibbottson. *Letter of the Rev. Ralph R. Gurley, on the American Colonization Society: Addressed to Henry Ibbotson, Esq. of Sheffield, England* [Washington, D.C.: J.C. Dunn, 1833, p. 7.

or…cultural likeness, was a necessary element in building a strong republic free of social discord."[6] When America broke ties with Britain in the late 1700s, it embarked upon a new experiment in Republicanism, the goal of which was to take power out of the hands of a single, monarchical sovereign and put it into the hands of the people. For such self-governance to work, early Americans believed society needed to consist of like-minded and equally educated and skilled individuals, so as to sustain a common interest amongst the people and keep power and opportunity evenly distributed within society. Viewed outside this homogeneity, it was thought that enslaved blacks would emerge from bondage as free men and women without the skills or education necessary to successfully integrate into society. As a result, they would form themselves into distinct factions, requiring separate laws from the rest of their community. For the new republic, framed around the ideal of a homogeneous polity, such division amongst its citizens was considered a threat to the success of the new Union. Frequently, this was the reasoning behind early colonizationist thought. Ferdinando Fairfax in particular stressed the "propriety, and even necessity" of black colonization as a way to avoid social disunion. In 1790 he wrote, "if [slaves] be emancipated, [they] would never [be] allow[ed] *all* the privileges of citizens; they would therefore form a separate interest from the rest of the

[6] David M. Streifford. "The American Colonization Society: An Application of Republican Ideology to Early Antebellum Reform." *The Journal of Southern History*, Vol. 45, no. 2 (May 1979), pp 201-220, p. 207.

community. If this separate interest of so great a number in the same community, be once formed…it will endanger the peace of society."[7]

In the years following the Revolution, concern over integrating freed slaves into society became more directly tied to a developing racial prejudice. In the nineteenth century, this prejudice evolved from a general antipathy towards blacks, to a more codified system of discrimination that began to equate black skin with qualities of an African slave's lowly status that denoted inferiority, degradation, and ignorance.

Over time, this system worked to exclude people of color from society, and included the enactment of laws that restricted emancipation. In reaction to these events, justification for black removal began to reflect this growing racial bias. Colonizationists argued that racial prejudice was becoming such a deeply embedded part of the American psyche, that unless an outlet was created to combat restrictive emancipation laws, manumissions would continue to be suppressed and slavery would never be eradicated. By the time the ACS was formed in 1816, combating these laws was a fundamental part of the colonization movement's platform. With the option that emancipated slaves be colonized, it was thought the need for emancipation restraints would lessen, and "by this means the evil of slavery…diminished."[8]

Equally central to colonizationist thought was the matter of the South's cooperation in the eventual eradication of slavery. Economically reliant on

[7] Fairfax, 286.
[8] Robert Finley. *Thoughts on the Colonization of Free Blacks.* [Washington D.C.] 1816, p. 5.

cotton, and the slave labor that produced it, the South also claimed their slaves as property, two notions that colonizationists recognized as potentially divisive issues for the country. A sudden and widespread abolition of slavery, they argued, would both upset the economic stability of the South and be an infringement upon the property rights of southern slave-owners. In effect, this would put the South at odds with their northern counterparts and threaten to divide the country. Understanding that the success of the newly formed United States required the inclusion of the South in the Union, colonizationists justified black resettlement as a way to avoid alienating Southerners on the issue of slavery and provided a manner in which the North and South could work in concert towards ultimately eliminating the slave system.

Stressing the seriousness of this issue, colonizationists rather prophetically predicted that if the South felt their way of life infringed upon, it would result in a terrible civil war. Specifically, they warned of "a conflict between the North and the South more appalling than any ever witnessed in our country. The most terrible elements of human passion will be wrought with fury; the wings of an awful darkness will overshadow us, while all hearts tremble, and all faces turn pale with dismay."[9] In 1832, Secretary of the Colonization Society Ralph Randolph Gurley described this potential rift in a more straightforward manner. He wrote,

> the system of slavery…so interwoven with…society,

[9] Gurley and Ibbottson, 7.

> Involving so much of [lawful] property and labor and feeling…it is plain that if [it] is ever to be peacefully abolished, it must be *by the consent of the south*…every thing may be lost, by exciting a conflict on this subject, between [the] two portions of our country.[10]

By "every thing," Gurley no doubt meant the Union. All the time and effort put forth in creating and sustaining the new democratic republic would be lost if slavery was not peaceably removed.

Of course, all was not lost. The United States endured a brutal civil war, but slavery was eventually abolished and the Union survived. It is a survival, however, that carries with it scars of a complicated past. The colonization movement sheds light on this complexity. In an attempt to address the injustice of slavery, a burgeoning racial prejudice, the politics of Republicanism, and the stability of the new Union, supporters of black emigration sat at the intersection of politics, power, wealth, freedom, and race, and struggled to come into greater accord with one another in the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. In its attempt to address and balance all of these elements, the colonization movement permits a view of early America in which the deep social, political, and economic issues tied to the country's struggle over the slave system are evident.

More than a narrative about overcoming the evil of slavery, America's early past is a story about the simultaneous and interdependent growth of human bondage and the fabric of American democracy. In effect, what

[10] Gurley, 3.

comes to light is that there is a part of our freedom – of the very ideals this country was founded upon – that *includes* the oppression of others. William Lloyd Garrison's writings provide a dominant view of the black resettlement movement. African colonization, free from Garrison's shroud, points to the reality of economic and social concerns that have made the battle for equal rights a long, arduous, and ongoing part of United States history.

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