

MEETING ON THE FORMATION OF THE AMERICAN COLONIZATION SOCIETY, 1816

The American Colonization Society, made up of white people from the North and upper South, provided one solution to the problem of slavery in the republic. Convinced that blacks did not have the intellectual capabilities to live as full citizens, Society members feared an emancipation that would allow millions of degraded black people to remain in the country. Therefore, the Society proposed sending free blacks and ex-slaves to the colony of Liberia, on the west coast of Africa. Most free blacks opposed colonization, preferring instead full citizenship in the United States. By 1830, only about 1,400 African-Americans had gone to live in Liberia.

Believing that the Legislature of Virginia had entered upon this subject with a spirit and a determination to prosecute the measure proposed, and desirous of producing a more general and simultaneous feeling and movement in aid of this object, by calling the attention of the General Government to the subject, a meeting for the purpose of forming a Colonization Society was appointed to be held in this city on the 21st of December, 1816. At the time proposed a very respectable number of gentlemen attended.

Source: Cochran, Thomas C., ed., *The New American State Papers: Labor and Slavery. Volume 5: Resettlement of Free Men* (Wilmington, DE: Scholarly Resources Inc., 1972), 25–31.

The following extracts relative to the proceedings of the meeting are from the National Intelligencer of December 24.

Mr. Henry Clay, of Kentucky, having been called to the Chair, and Mr. Thomas Dougherty, of this District, having been appointed Secretary,

He understood the object of the present meeting to be to consider of the propriety and practicability of colonizing the free people of colour in the United States, and of forming an association in relation to that object. That class of the mixt population of our country was peculiarly situated. They neither enjoyed the immunities of freemen, nor were they subject to the incapacities of slaves, but partook, in some degree, of the qualities of both. From their condition, and the unconquerable prejudices resulting from their colour, they never could amalgamate with the free whites of this country. It was desirable, therefore, both as it respected them and the residue of the population of the country, to drain them off. Various schemes of colonization had been thought of, and a part of our own continent, it was thought by some, might furnish a suitable establishment for them. But, for his part, Mr. Clay said he had a decided preference for some part of the coast of Africa. There ample provision might be made for the colony itself, and it might be rendered instrumental to the introduction, into that extensive quarter of the globe, of the arts, civilization, and Christianity. There was a peculiar, a moral fitness in restoring them to the land of their fathers. And if, instead of the evils and sufferings which we had been the innocent cause of inflicting upon the inhabitants of Africa, we can transmit to her the blessings of our arts, our civilization, and our religion, may we not hope that America will extinguish a great portion of that moral debt which

she has contracted to that unfortunate continent? We should derive much encouragement in the prosecution of the object which had assembled us together by the success which had attended the colony of Sierra Leone. That establishment had commenced about 20 or 25 years ago, under the patronage of private individuals in Great Britain. The basis of the population of the colony consisted of the fugitive slaves of the Southern States, during the Revolutionary war, who had been first carried to Nova Scotia and who afterwards, about the year 1792, upon their own application, almost in mass, had been transferred to the Western coast of Africa. This colony, after struggling with the most unheard-of difficulties—difficulties resulting from the ignorance, barbarity, and prejudices of the natives; from the climate; from wars, African as well as European; and such as are incidental to all new settlements—had made a gradual and steady progress, until it has acquired a strength and stability which promises to crown the efforts of its founders with complete success. We have their experience before us; and can there be a nobler cause than that which, while it proposes to rid our own country of a useless and pernicious, if not a dangerous portion of its population contemplates the spreading of the arts of civilized life, and the possible redemption from ignorance and barbarism of a benighted quarter of the globe!

Mr. Elias B. Caldwell, of this District then rose.

The expediency of colonizing the free people of colour in the United States, may be considered in reference to its influence on our civil institutions, on the morals and habits of the people, and on the future happiness of the free people of colour. It has been a subject of unceasing regret, and anxious solicitude, among many of our best patriots and wisest statesmen, from the first establishment of our independence, that this class of people should remain a monument of reproach to those sacred principles of civil liberty, which constitute the foundation of all our constitutions. We say, in the Declaration of Independence, "that all men are created equal" and have certain "inalienable rights." Yet it is considered impossible, consistently with the safety of the State, and it certainly is impossible, with the present feelings towards these people, that they can ever be placed upon this equality, or admitted to the enjoyment of these "inalienable rights," whilst they remain mixed with us. Some persons may declaim, and call it prejudice. No matter—prejudice is as powerful a motive, and will as certainly exclude them as the soundest reason. Others may say they are free enough. If this is a matter of opinion, let them judge—if of reason, let it be decided by

our repeated and solemn declarations, in all our public acts. This state of society, unquestionably tends, in various ways, to injure the morals and destroy the habits of industry among our people. This will be acknowledged by every person who has paid any attention to the subject; and it seems to be so generally admitted that it would promote the happiness of the people, and the interest of the country, to provide a place where these people might be settled by themselves, that it is unnecessary to dwell on this branch of the subject.

As to the blacks, it is manifest that their interest and happiness would be promoted by collecting them together where they would enjoy equal rights and privileges with those around them. A state of degradation is necessarily a state of unhappiness. It debases the mind; it cramps the energies of the soul, and represses every vigorous effort towards moral or intellectual greatness. How can you expect from them any thing great or noble, without the motives to stimulate, or the rewards to crown great and noble achievements? It not only prevents their climbing the steep and rugged paths of fame, but it prevents the enjoyment of the true happiness of calm contentment, satisfied with enjoying but a part of what we possess, of using only a portion of what is in our powers. Take away, however, the portion that is not used, and it immediately becomes the object of our fondest desires. The more you endeavor to improve the condition of these people, the more you cultivate their minds, (unless by religious instruction,) the more miserable you make them in their present state. You give them a higher relish for those privileges which they can never attain, and turn what we intend for a blessing into a curse. No; if they must remain in their present situation, keep them in the lowest state of degradation and ignorance. The nearer you bring them to the condition of brutes, the better chance do you give them of possessing their apathy. Surely, Americans ought to be the last people on earth, to advocate such slavish doctrines, to cry peace and contentment to those who are deprived of the privileges of civil liberty. They who have so largely partaken of its blessings, who know so well how to estimate its value, ought to be among the foremost to extend it to others.

Mr. John Randolph, of Roanoke, rose and said, it appeared to him that it had not been sufficiently insisted on, with a view to obtain the co-operation of all the citizens of the United States, not only that this meeting does not in any wise affect the question of negro slavery, but as far as it goes, must materially tend to secure the property of every master in the United States over his slaves. It appeared to him that this aspect of the question had not

been sufficiently presented to the public view. It was a notorious fact, he said, that the existence of this mixed and intermediate population of free negroes was viewed by every slave holder as one of the greatest sources of the insecurity, and also unprofitableness, of slave property: that they serve to excite in their fellow beings a feeling of discontent, of repining at their situation, and that they act as channels of communication not only between different slaves, but between the slaves of different districts; that they are the depositaries of stolen goods, and the promoters of mischief. In a worldly point of view, then, without entering into the general question and apart from those higher and nobler motives which had been presented to the meeting, the owners of slaves were interested in providing a retreat for this part of our population. There was no fear that this proposition would alarm them: they had been accustomed to think seriously of the subject. There was a popular work on agriculture, by John Taylor, of Caroline, which was widely circulated and much confided in, in Virginia. In that book, much read because coming from a practical man this description of people were pointed out as a great evil. If a place could be provided for their reception, and a mode of

sending them hence, there were hundreds, nay, thousands of citizens, who would, by manumitting their slaves, relieve themselves from the cares attendant on their possession.

Mr. Robert Wright, of Md. said he could not withhold his approbation of a measure, that had for its object the melioration of the lot of any portion of the human race, particularly of the free people of colour, whose degraded state robs them of the happiness of self government, so dear to the American people. And, said he, as I discover the most delicate regard to the rights of property, I shall, with great pleasure, lend my aid to restore this unfortunate people to the enjoyment of their liberty; but I fear gentlemen are too sanguine in their expectations, that they would be willing to abandon the land of their nativity, so dear to man. However, I have no indisposition to give them that election by furnishing all the means contemplated. But, while we wish to promote the happiness of these *free* people of colour, we ought to take care not to furnish the means of transporting out of the reach of the master his property.

Edward Ayers et al. eds., *American Passages*
(Fort Worth: Harcourt, 2000)