NEW DIRECTIONS IN THE STUDY OF AFRICAN AMERICAN RECOLONIZATION

EDITED BY BEVERLY C. TOMEK AND MATTHEW J. HETRICK

Foreword by Stanley Harrold and Randall M. Miller

University Press of Florida
Gainesville · Tallahassee · Tampa · Boca Raton
Pensacola · Orlando · Miami · Jacksonville · Ft. Myers · Sarasota
Introduction
The Past, Present, and Future of Colonization Studies

BEVERLY C. TOMEK

William Lloyd Garrison once described African colonization as “inadequate in its design, injurious in its operation, and contrary to sound principle.” He accused the “master spirits in the crusade,” the slaveholders who helped found and continued to support the American Colonization Society (ACS), of tricking otherwise good people throughout the nation into joining a formidable coalition united by the desire to send black Americans to Africa. If opponents of slavery only had to fight against “men-stealers and slaveholders,” he contended, “victory would be easy.” Unfortunately, he concluded, they had to fight a “whole nation,” including its churches, its most respected leaders, even its well-meaning reformers, some of whom actually agreed that slavery must end.¹

When Garrison declared war on the American Colonization Society (ACS), he focused on a national organization whose appeal cannot be measured simply by examining its membership rolls and lists of donors, as some scholars have done. Although few Americans joined the ACS or donated funds to it, many did support the notion of separating the races by removing blacks to Africa.² Neither can the appeal be understood simply by reading the society’s reports or the speeches of its most famous members.

The movement appealed to different people for different reasons. Pro-slavery politicians and some, but not all, slaveholders supported it from hope that removing free blacks would strengthen the bonds of slavery. Some politicians regretted the effects slavery had on the nation’s development, contending that continued reliance upon bound labor encouraged the South to remain an agrarian society dependent upon a single cash crop. Other supporters saw it as a way of removing people whose presence they
deemed a destabilizing social force that left white Americans (especially those in the South) in constant fear of retribution and revolt. Some gradual abolitionists supported colonization as the best means to peacefully convince slaveholders to give up their human property and the best way to avoid civil war. Finally, some social reformers supported colonization as the only means for black Americans to break free of the racism that held them down in the United States, and some black Americans agreed.

Garrison did not agree with colonization on any level. He decided to battle this hydra in 1832 because he wanted to convince Americans that slavery was a sin, that it must end immediately, and that “men-stealers” deserved no compensation for doing the right thing and freeing their captives. He wanted to re-chart the nation’s moral course in a way that would transform society by forcing white Americans to admit and atone for their sins and then offer black Americans equal citizenship and opportunity. His dream has yet to be fulfilled.

Garrison dedicated himself to opposing the African colonization movement, but his real enemy was more fundamental—a cultural current of racism that permeated every aspect of society in the United States from before the ACS emerged in 1817 to well beyond the death of Reconstruction in 1877. The ACS clung to life until the 1860s, and the legacies of suspicion, division, and separation it fostered still haunt the United States today. What were the true intentions of those who supported this movement? How did African colonization come to dominate the discourse of antislavery and race relations in the United States? How was the idea able to last so long? Why have racial separation and various forms of de facto and de jure segregation been so difficult to move beyond? The essays in this collection address these and other key questions.

Historical Background

The story of African colonization begins with the enslavement and forced migration of Africans to the New World. As European leaders began to exploit the Americas for wealth—whether precious metals or cash crops—they encountered unprecedented labor needs. The easiest solution was to enslave indigenous peoples, but Native Americans knew the land and could escape fairly easily. More importantly, they lacked immunity to European diseases and died in great numbers, so European colonizers in British North America turned to the poorer people in their own nations, enticing them with passage to the colonies in exchange for a set labor contract
that generally included four to seven years of indentured servitude, after which time the servants would receive “freedom” dues of some sort. This labor source also had its problems, primarily because landowners could only exploit these workers for a limited time, and servants resisted and ran away from the abuses.

At the same time that some explorers headed to the New World, others sailed down the African coast seeking trade opportunities. They began to buy human beings to use as forced laborers in the American colonies, creating the Atlantic slave trade. Landowners in the New World colonies learned the value of African strength and knowledge in their quest for labor, and as the African population grew and its labor value increased, white colonial leaders began to construct the social and legal framework of race-based chattel slavery. Of course, as Frank Tannenbaum has shown, this framework differed according to the social and political customs and ideologies of the home countries, with perhaps the strictest racial divisions being drawn in the English colonies. Unlike Spanish and Portuguese colonists, who were strongly influenced by Iberian customs and the Catholic Church, the English colonists developed a strong racial caste system that forbade “interracial” marriage and discouraged the type of personal interaction that would favor cooperation and ease white attitudes toward manumission.3

Opposition to slavery arose immediately. Africans resisted capture and rose up in slave factories and on ships. Slaves rebelled and ran away and otherwise disrupted masters’ efforts to control them completely. During the eighteenth century, especially during the Revolutionary Era, free blacks argued passionately and articulately for freedom. They pointed out that slavery violated human rights and God’s law.4 Some Europeans and European colonists also argued against slavery early on, maintaining that a system based on human bondage carried grave danger, defied scripture, and bode ill for progress. In the English North American colonies, most opponents of slavery belonged to the Society of Friends, called Quakers.

Quakers and others who opposed slavery for a variety of reasons created the first abolitionist groups in the New World. Some of these early abolitionists considered the immorality of capturing human beings and selling them as objects, but others worried more about the notion that such behavior would eventually earn slaveholders as well as their non-slaveholding neighbors retribution from an angry God. Others who opposed slavery maintained that, no matter how hard slaveholders tried to keep control over their human property, the enslaved would eventually break free and wreak vengeance, not only on those who had oppressed them, but also on
those who had stood by and allowed it to happen. Finally, other opponents of slavery insisted that members of a biracial society would inevitably mix, leading to what they called “amalgamation.” The focus on white safety in these arguments illustrates the self-interested side of some early antislavery efforts.\textsuperscript{5}

From Pennsylvania northward, slavery existed in varying degrees of importance to local economies through most of the colonial era, but it was not integral to the economic and social structure as it was in the southern colonies. During and because of the American Revolution, northern states adapted various programs of emancipation, most of which were gradual. These plans provided for freedom of enslaved people, but only after they had worked long enough to compensate the financial losses their freedom would bring their masters. Many who supported this type of abolition argued that, during the period before their release, slaves could be prepared for productive citizenship.

Northern states took different paths toward gradual abolition. Vermont eliminated human bondage through its state constitution, which freed men at the age of twenty-one and women at eighteen. Pennsylvania passed a state law in 1780 that provided for the eventual end of slavery in the state. It allowed owners to keep their current slaves and free their offspring only after periods of indenture, and lawmakers required owners to post bonds of thirty pounds each on all manumitted slaves to provide for their care in the case of indigence. They also passed laws prohibiting vagrancy, interaction with slaves, and racial mixing. In 1783, Massachusetts took a third path to abolition when the state supreme court ruled against slavery—ending it immediately.\textsuperscript{6}

Historians have generally agreed that most Americans, even those in the southern states, claimed to oppose slavery on some level or another during the early years of the Republic. In the South, however, slavery had become an integral part of the economic and social fabric. Thus, although tobacco cultivation had sapped the land of key nutrients, leaving it exhausted and slavery less profitable in the tidewater Chesapeake region by the late 1700s, slaveholders remained reluctant to release their laborers.\textsuperscript{7} They switched to wheat and other crops and hired out or sold their “excess” slaves, thereby maintaining slavery.

Thomas Jefferson’s often-quoted complaint of holding a “wolf by the ear” has reached the status of cliché, but it remains the best way to illustrate the position of slaveholders. His wealth and status depended upon forced labor, yet many historians agree he realized that slaves could revolt. He also knew
well the temptation to “amalgamate,” as historians have shown that he very likely had multiple children with one of the women he owned. Jefferson and others of his generation realized that slavery was as much a social as an economic system. Black bondage was what enabled them to keep the races separate on a psychological level, if not physically, and it provided them the means of controlling black behavior as much as possible. They looked to the northern states to illustrate the problem with general emancipation, arguing that freed blacks relied on the public dole and committed a variety of crimes.  

These claims forced abolitionists to grapple with the racial implications of freedom. During the years of the Early Republic, gradualist organizations such as the Pennsylvania Abolition Society (PAS) took censuses of blacks and worked to prove wrong assertions of black misbehavior. Initially these efforts appeared to succeed in defending free blacks from racist arguments, but as the free black population grew, so too did white resistance to black freedom. By the early 1800s black and white abolitionists found themselves under increasing attack from resentful whites. At that time the PAS began to consider what should be done with freedpersons. The group considered colonization in the western territories of North America but rejected it, choosing instead to continue fighting for abolition in the District of Columbia and other federal jurisdictions and to fight in court against those who kidnapped free blacks to enslave them. They also worked to educate free blacks and help them find jobs that offered independence and success.  

As they began to seriously consider African colonization, white and black Americans took their cue from English reformers. British humanitarians and abolitionists founded the African colony of Sierra Leone in the 1790s with poor blacks from London and black loyalist refugees from the American Revolution. The effort gained official sanction when the British government assumed control of the colony in 1808 and began to send “recaptives,” or people who had been rescued from the illegal slave trade, to the colony. Sierra Leone provided an example for American reformers who founded the American Colonization Society (ACS) in 1816 and the colony of Liberia in 1822. In both cases colonization provided an outlet for an unwanted population while also promising a means to end slavery and “redeem” Africa through the spread of Christianity, commerce, and Western civilization.  

Reformers in Great Britain and the United States worked in part out of self-interest, but the selfishness was more acute in the United States, where