

***No Country for Ex-Slaves:
Lives of Settlers in the American Colonization Society Experiment***

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Decades before the Emancipation Proclamation, white Americans were looking to free slaves in the newly formed nation of freedom and equality. This abolition movement resulted in a significant population of free blacks in the United States. The American Colonization Society was founded in 1816 to resettle these people in Liberia, a US territory on the gold coast of western Africa.¹ By its 50th anniversary, the ACS had sent over thirteen thousand African Americans across the ocean² on a journey that mirrored the trip their ancestors had taken years earlier during the Atlantic slave trade. The new group of colonists settled in and around the newly established capital, Monrovia, and began to create a new home after years of slavery and racial prejudice in the United States.

While the American people dealt with expansion and the dissolution of the Union, Americo-Liberians faced their own set of challenges in a new environment. Their story is largely unknown in the larger scope of US history. Modern historians have examined the formation of the American Colonization Society as a representation of American racial and abolitionist thought, but the Society affected more than the citizens of the states. Filling a new nation with black Americans, the ACS has another story which takes place on the African continent. The colonists of Liberia, as seen in the letters they sent back home to the US, took time adjusting to

¹ Marie Tyler-McGraw, *An African Republic: Black & White Virginians in the Making of Liberia* (Chapel Hill:

² American Colonization Society, *A view of exertions lately made for the purpose of colonizing the free people of colour in the United States, in Africa, or elsewhere* (Washington DC: Jonathon Elliot, 1817), 3.

new surroundings and building a new society while they maintained a distinct identity from their African neighbors. This distinct identity of Americo-Liberians persisted for decades after the formation of the American Colonization Society and the Liberian colony.

The Founding of Liberia and the American Colonization Society

African slavery began almost as early as colonization in North America as it quickly became clear that a labor source was necessary to work the vast and fertile land. Portuguese and Spanish colonies in the Caribbean brought over multitudes of slaves across the Atlantic, many of whom faced their death in unbearable work situations. In the British colonies of North America, fewer slaves were imported, but these Africans were able to live longer and reproduce until a substantial black population existed, particularly in the Southern colonies.

The American Revolution and ensuing events highlighted some already emerging conflicts within the system of American slavery. At the Constitutional Convention in 1787, delegates struggled to account for slave populations in congressional representation and included in the final constitution an un-amendable end to the slave trade in 1808. In most Northern colonies, slavery was abolished shortly after American independence, while Great Britain ended slavery in all its colonies in 1833.³ After living and, in some cases, fighting through the Revolution, the slaves of the South began in some places to talk of freedom, giving rise to fear in white Americans. In one particular case in Virginia, a small attempted rebellion in 1800 with

³Joshua D. Rothman, *Reforming America, 1815-1860: a Norton Documents Reader* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2010), 160.

slaves carrying flags reading “death or Liberty”, “confirmed white fears that black Virginians identified with Virginia’s recent Revolutionary past.”⁴

In addition to this fear of a slave insurrection, many white Americans saw the moral implications of continued slavery in the US and feared for their souls. Since colonial times, religious groups, such as the Quakers, had become outspoken abolitionists, and, as the new nation came upon the nineteenth century, this anti-slavery sentiment increased. Northern slaves had been set free and even in the South, some slave-holders bequeathed freedom on their slaves as George Washington famously did upon his death. The resulting free blacks were seen as a “negro problem,”⁵ which troubled white Americans striving to live conscientiously as well as practically. The Free Soil Party was dedicated to preventing the spread of slavery into western territories, yet was as equally concerned with preventing the migration of free blacks West. As one Northerner and Free Soil member explained, “As a great evil, I detest slavery, but what will you do with the free blacks when it is abolished?”⁶ This question was common, and so in 1817, distinguished men from across the United States and all across the political spectrum gathered in Washington to answer it, forming the American Colonization Society.⁷

The ACS was met with both criticism and support as soon as it was formed. The organization sought a kind of compromise between abolition and slavery by offering a comfortable route for slave owners to manumit their slaves. Still, many on either extreme of the argument found problems with the project. Some abolitionists argued that colonization undermined their argument that African Americans were simply, “brothers with a skin/ Of

⁴ Tyler-McGraw, 10.

⁵ Early L. Fox, *The American Colonization Society* (Baltimore MD: Johns Hopkins, 1918), 9.

⁶ Scott Nelson and Carol Sheriff, *A People at War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 13.

⁷ Fox, 10.

somewhat darker hue.”⁸ The small but influential Liberty Party maintained a similar view that equal rights were the eventual goal of true abolitionism, and that the ACS avoided this by simply exporting free blacks.⁹ Some in the South saw it as a conspiracy to gradually take their labor force away from them. For many years, slave owners strongly defended the institution of slavery, which was, “in proper hands, a loving, benevolent institution.”¹⁰ White Americans argued on both sides of the colonization debate as they saw how the deportation of free blacks might affect their personal and moral interests.

The voices of African Americans in this debate were less pronounced, but some, especially free blacks, spoke out both for and against colonization. Many slaves expressed hope and excitement over the prospect of new life in Liberia, although their optimism was countered by many others who chose not to leave when given the option. Free blacks in the North also involved themselves in the debate. Notable leaders hailed this as a means of removing men and women from their bondage and giving them a place to foster freedom, equality, and autonomous rule. Others preferred to stay in the US and work for equal rights and an end to racism. The pros and cons of colonization which Americans explored during the early years of the nation fit into the larger debate over slavery and race which characterized Antebellum America.

The American Colonization Society exported both freed slaves and free blacks from the United States from 1817 until its dissolution in 1964, but the organization changed shapes over the years as it came under new leadership. From its foundation until the Civil War and the Emancipation Proclamation, the ACS worked under the guise of an anti-slavery agenda. A much

⁸ Rothman, 166.

⁹ Ibid., 179.

¹⁰ Nelson, 21.

stronger objective, though, was maintaining a nation of racial homogeneity, and it is this goal that continues to draw criticism of the society as a, “conspiracy against human rights.”¹¹ These first thirty-three years of colonization are the ones that saw the manumission of slaves by Southern slave-holders for the purpose of resettlement, and it is this time period of Liberian history that will be examined in relation to the daily life of black settlers.

Liberian Life Examined by Burin and Fox

In the multitude of antebellum America literature, little has been done to investigate the importance of the American Colonization Society, particularly in regards to the American Colony itself. This reflects the attitude of the ACS itself, which from its start “looked upon its work chiefly from the point of view of its effect upon the solution of the negro problem in the United States.”¹² In his study of the American Colonization Society, Early Fox defends it as an underappreciated but important part of ending slavery in the United States. When Fox wrote in 1918 the ACS was still in existence, though working under a different structure than at its founding. He does well to analyze the attitudes of white Americans, particularly slave owners, towards the practice, which was increasingly viewed as immoral. Many pro-slavery Americans saw themselves as helping out, “a slave by nature so indolent[sic] and intemperate that without restraint he would be so wretched himself and a burden to others.”¹³ The founders of the ACS, Fox shows, are not forward thinking men who see the absurdity of racial science, but rather believe that there, “never could exist a sincere union between the whites and the blacks, even on

¹¹ Ibid., 18.

¹² Fox, 12.

¹³ Ibid., 19.

admitting the latter to the rights of freemen.”¹⁴ As he outlines the foundation of the ACS, Fox shows the sentiments of “colonizationalists”, or advocates of the ACS, as fundamentally racist, a conclusion shared by more modern historians of the topic.

The roots of the colonization effort trace further back than 1817, according to Marie Tyler-McGraw. Thomas Jefferson advocated, “the removal of all free and emancipated blacks from Virginia” as early as 1800, and it was in Virginia that extreme measures to fix the “negro problem” were made, even going so far as to evict all freed blacks from the state within a year of emancipation.¹⁵ This effort to supplant African Americans was preceded by a similar effort by the British in Sierra Leone, which gained the support of a prominent black New Englander, Paul Cuffee. Cuffee, and many other supporters, saw an African republic as a means for Christian conversion of not only the colonists, but the African people in surrounding West Africa.¹⁶ Furthermore, they believed colonization would act as a measure of preemptive defense of free blacks against, “a coming bloody racial confrontation in the South.” However even those African American leaders who supported colonization hoped to also create racial equality for those blacks who would not choose to leave.¹⁷ Radical abolitionists, like William Lloyd Garrison, stood firmly opposed to colonization, as they saw only immediate emancipation and racial equality as necessary, and scathingly criticized politicians, like Henry Clay or Elijah Paine, who supported a compromise such as colonization.¹⁸

¹⁴ Ibid., 28

¹⁵ Tyler-McGraw, 12.

¹⁶ Ibid., 26.

¹⁷ Ibid., 24.

¹⁸ Fox, 125.

The opponents of colonization went beyond Garrison. In addition to his anti-slavery society, “most black northerners opposed colonization,”¹⁹ as their preferred goal was racial equality over deportation. Eric Burin examines this resistance to the ACS, as well as the criticism of Southern slaveholders, in his study of the motives and successes of the colonization project. He depicts colonizationalists as well-intentioned political moderates, hoping to compromise as regional and moral arguments became increasingly heated. Even the location of this sought after colony was part of the larger debate, with Western territories and Caribbean islands proposed as sites of relocation. Eventually, the African West coast was selected as the destination of freed slaves, and the colony of Liberia appeared a perfect haven of, “beautiful resources waiting to be exploited, countless heathens longing to be saved,” and an “escape from racism”.²⁰ The assumed benefits of a Liberian settlement were, ironically, the primary challenges of the future colonists. While the American Colonization Society may have been founded with good intentions, it soon came under the un-approving eye of both abolitionists and slave holders who saw it as dangerous to their own causes.

Historians have established the motives and success of the colonization project as it affected antebellum United States, but the other side of this story is largely unexplored. With six chapters dedicated to Virginia’s role in colonization, Marie Tyler-McGraw devotes little space to the experience of black Virginians in Liberia. When she does get around to the life of the colonists, Tyler-McGraw shows how difficult this life could be, particularly for the recently emancipated slaves. As was the case in many colonial beginnings, “the initial sites proved

¹⁹ Eric Burin, *Slavery and the Peculiar Solution: a History of the American Colonization Society* (Gainesville: University of Florida, 2005) 8.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 40.

unhealthy or unsafe; indigenous peoples resisted the incursion; and many people died.”²¹ The area given to the freed slaves was already inhabited by various nationalities of African people, including the Vai, Gola, and Dey, and the relations between settlers and indigenous people were tense.²² The Liberian experiment was one born of religious roots, and many Americans saw it as a “benevolent society”²³ meant to Christianize the free blacks and the African continent as a whole. Still, few and unfriendly interactions between the new Liberians and the people of the West African coast occurred in the first decades of the colonization project, so that this missionary goal was scarcely achieved.

These negative experiences of Liberian settlers made it back to the United States, in the forms of letters and returning settlers. Indeed, “[B]etween 1820 and 1843, twenty-two percent of all emigrants quit the colony,”²⁴ and these were only the ones with the financial and legal abilities to move again. The stories of struggles in Liberia spread to the point that many slaves and free persons alike, when given the option, rejected the opportunity to emigrate to Liberia, particularly in urban areas where information and learning were more available.²⁵ Although he goes into little detail on the lives of settlers, Burin makes it clear that establishing a home in Liberia was a difficult task which the ACS provided limited support for, making the free black colonists struggle primarily on their own.

The secondary sources can all agree that the primary purpose of the American Colonization Society was not to improve the lives of slaves, but rather to address the increasingly

²¹ Tyler-McGraw, 128.

²² Ibid., 135.

²³ Ibid., 86.

²⁴ Burin, 66.

²⁵ Ibid., 36.

tense issue of slavery and racial differences observed by white Americans. Even as Fox may argue that this society played a substantial role in ending slavery, its inability to provide for the Liberian colonists is an alarming historical issue that has received minimal attention. The life of colonists is an important part of United States history as one of the first sites of American imperialism and the home of a large number of US emigrants. The lives of the Americo-Liberians between 1820 and 1860 were full of difficulties, illness, and conflict as they transitioned from a nation of slavery and racial inequalities, to one of entirely unknown challenges.

Letters Home

After leaving Buchannon, Virginia in 1833 and spending, “fifty-six days on the ocean,”²⁶ Samson Caesar arrived in Monrovia, Liberia a free man. Virginia accounted for most of the Liberian colonists, taking up one third of the new population between 1820 and 1860,²⁷ and it is back to Virginia that Caesar writes “as often as possible.”²⁸ Like many colonists, Caesar was a manumitted slave, and his former master was still living and was the recipient of many letters. The tone of the letters reveals a friendly relationship between Caesar and Henry Westfall, his former master, suggesting that the move to Liberia was voluntary and well-received. In two years, Samson Caesar wrote “as many as a dozen” letters back to Virginia and receives “but two letters”²⁹ in return. Six of those outgoing letters have been compiled, and it is this collection that I will be studying.

²⁶ Samson Ceasar, *Samson Caesar Letters* (Liberian Letters. Charlottesville: University of Virginia Electronic Text Center, 1998), 1.

²⁷ Tyler-McGraw, 128.

²⁸ Caesar, 1.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 5.

Samson Caesar's letters give a good picture of life in Monrovia in 1834, when American Colonization Society sponsored emigration was at a low,³⁰ and the Liberian colony had been well established for seventeen years. His account is that of a singular person, so perhaps it is not fully indicative of living conditions for the majority of colonists. A second collection of letters, written between 1857 and 1866, are used to confirm the conclusions drawn from Caesar's correspondences. These 49 letters come from many of the 58 slaves who were set free upon the death of their master, James Hunter Terrell, and come not only from Monrovia, but other towns such as Careysburgh and Mount Finley. These letters, sent later in the history of Liberian settlement, observe many of the same fundamental problems in the settler population that persist even as the community grows older and more experienced. Analyzing this collection of letters in conjunction with Samson Caesar's own epistles will give a thorough picture of Liberian life in the first decades of the American colonization project.

Religion played a large role in all aspects of antebellum society, and its effects spread even to the lives of slaves. Samson Caesar demonstrates this pervasive Christianity as he mentions religion and faith extensively in his correspondence. Travelling with Caesar to Liberia was a missionary, Reverend Wright, who aimed to help Christianize the colonists and the natives.³¹ The presence of religion in Liberia was already well-established by 1834, as both Methodists and Presbyterians played a large role in supporting new immigrants in finding work and education. The Methodists even had their own bishop in addition to several ministers in the immediate Monrovia area.³² True to the religious roots of the American Colonization Society

³⁰ Burin, 169.

³¹ Caesar, 1.

³² Ibid., 1.

which secondary sources have already explored, the Liberian colony was full of missionary activity for the whole of the African continent.

On a personal level, faith played an important role in Samson Caesar's life and probably many others facing the trials of starting a new life in Liberia. While death took so many of the colonists, one could take solace "in Jesus' arms where sickness and sorrow, pain and Death are felt and feared no more."³³ Caesar's faith in the face of adversity, in his case primarily illness and unemployment, was unwavering and frequently referenced as he wrote back to his former master who had presumably taught this religion to him. It seems that every day brings the possibility of death as illness is so common, and as even Reverend Wright dies there is little to be done but to "thank God it is as nigh to heaven in Africa as it is in America."³⁴ The faith of freed men like Samson Caesar only increases as the struggles of life in Liberia increase as religion played a huge part in the daily life of the colonists in the American Colonization Society experiment.

Samson Caesar was not unique among the many religious Liberian colonists. Also from Virginia but arriving in Monrovia twenty-three years later, Mary Michie takes, "great pleasure to have this opportunity to address a letter," recounting how, "in the midst of danger & death, while we could discern nothing above, & around us but the blue canopy of heaven, & under us the deep, deep blue sea, we were Providentially cared for, and bless to reach this our destined port."³⁵ It is evident that Mary Michie has been raised with faith as she celebrates her safe arrival as a gift from God. The faith of the Liberian settlers is indicative of the strength of religious

³³ Ibid., 3.

³⁴ Ibid., 3.

³⁵ Mary Michie et. al, *Terrell Letters* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Electronic Text Center, 1998) 1.

organizations back in the United States, as well as the types of slave owners likely to manumit their slaves in favor of colonization. As a spiritual awakening swept America and moral reform lessened support for the institution of slavery, Southerners, like Henry Westfall and James Terrell, emancipated their own slaves to participate in the colonization of Liberia, and Samson Caesar and Mary Michie are both examples of this religious upbringing carried over to Monrovia.

The religions of these manumittedes reflect their identities as Americans. They practice what they learned in Virginia, because both Michie and Caesar were born and raised in the US, as were most settlers of the Liberian colony.³⁶ Samson writes home detailing his experiences primarily with Methodists, a religion growing in popularity in antebellum America. His religious upbringing, as well as the upbringing of Michie and the other freed slaves of James Terrell, is unclear in terms of denomination. Both sets indicate protestant Christianity, probably inherited from their former owners. Henry Westfall was a known Methodist in his hometown of Buckhannon, VA³⁷ and James Hunter Terrell's family included very active members of Grace Church in Albemarle County.³⁸

A secondary goal of colonization was the Christianization of the West African people, and eventually the continent as a whole. It is clear that the settlers did play some role in proclaiming Christianity in Africa, although the reception of this gospel message is not noted in the letters. As in the United States, Christians in Liberia participated in camp meetings³⁹ and

³⁶ Tyler-McGraw, 187.

³⁷ Henry Fry Westfall, *Diary of Henry F. Westfall, 1861* (Buckhannon, WV: Upshur County Historical Society, 1939).

³⁸ Louisa H. Minor, *Diary of Louisa H.A. Minor, 1855-1866, Albemarle County, Virginia, accession number 10685* (Frederick, MD: University Publications of America, 1986).

³⁹ Caesar, 5.

freed slaves took a direct role in spreading Christian belief. Colonists tried to “Blow the gospel trump,”⁴⁰ all across Africa, although their interactions with the Africans within and without the Liberian territory were very limited. The effects of Liberian colonists, in spreading Christianity in Africa, as a whole, were negligible, and the vast majority of Christians on the continent were not influenced by settlers in Monrovia. The evangelization in Liberia was not limited to non-Christians, though, as the Americo-Liberians preached to one another. Shortly after he arrived in Africa, freed slave Hugh Walker was “invited to preach in the baptist and methodist and presbyterians”⁴¹ churches, exemplifying how fluid the boundaries between denominations could be in this society. In the settling of the Liberian colony, religion played an evidently important role in everyday life as well as the formation of community, and for ex-slaves this religion was inherited from their former owners.

Religion was not the only thing that travelled with free blacks from the US to Liberia, as their letters make it clear that they were very dependent on American food and other objects. Samson Caesar complains that, “Some think that everything grows in this country with out labour but they are mistaken,”⁴² and it is clear that the almost twenty-year-old colony is not self-sufficient yet. Caesar further observes that, while in America, slaves worked because “the cow-hide is hardly ever off of their backs and when they come here they feel So free that they walk about from morning till evening with out doing one Stroke of work.”⁴³ Perhaps he is right in his deduction, for it is reasonable that a nation of immigrants coming out of forced agricultural labor would be resistant to go back to that same work. Regardless of the reason for it, these

⁴⁰ Ibid., 3.

⁴¹ Michie et. al, 5.

⁴² Caesar, 4.

⁴³ Ibid., 4.

remarks show that agricultural development in Liberia was lacking, which Caesar believes is a problem for the new settlement.

Caesar notes that the colony, as of his arrival in 1833, has not established its agricultural trade as a basis of economy. In the American North and South, farming was the single largest industry in the early 19th century and created the most jobs as well as the most trade. Samson Caesar looks at Liberia and his new life in Monrovia while remembering Virginia in the back of his mind. His letters show constant comparisons of Africa to America, which is only natural since he has presumably never lived anywhere else. Caesar was not alone in this, and much of Liberia was compared to and modeled off of the US. Beginning with its name, a variation on the English word “liberty,” the colony was made by Westerners and took on American characteristics. The capital city and home of Samson Caesar is Monrovia, named for President James Monroe, and other towns and areas of the country bear marks of American influences. Near Caesar’s home was a town called “New Georgia,”⁴⁴ reminiscent of New England or New York. In the same way that the United States was formed by and maintained British characteristics, Liberia was thoroughly American in its names and practices.

Liberian colonists employed more than just American names in their everyday lives in Africa, they also utilized American goods, which they imported and had sent from friends and family in the US. Though James Terrell’s manumittedes came to Liberia forty years after the colonization project had begun, they found many things lacking in their new home of Monrovia and the bulk of their letters home are requests for American items. Their requests are most often for mundane items: “1 peice[sic] of Blue flannell[sic] Cloth, 1 Box of Soap, 6 Yellow

⁴⁴ Ibid., 4.

flannell[sic] shirts."⁴⁵ Their need for clothing and food items demonstrates the lack of progress made towards self-sufficiency in the colony.

Terrell's former slaves would disagree with Caesar's conclusion that idleness was the root of Liberia's problems, since many of them spoke of their diligent work on the land and they were also incredibly well-educated for slaves. William Douglass, one of the more prominent manumittedes in his community, managed to have some success as a sugar farmer, but even with this individual success he writes that, "I would like to come over"⁴⁶ to the United States. Samson Caesar has a similar wish to return to America, and although he has a job teaching writes to his former master, "I do not know when I can come but if God Spares me I hope to See you all in this world."⁴⁷ The communications of these colonists strongly suggests that the Liberian colony throughout the most active years of the American Colonization Society was lacking in development and failed to satisfy its settlers.

The lack of development in the colony is matched by its lack of integration with surrounding nations and ethnic groups. Samson Caesar admits that, "[I]t is almost needless for me to undertake to describe Africa to you. I have Seen but little of it."⁴⁸ Americo-Liberians did not venture much beyond their settlements in and around Monrovia, even decades after the colonization project began. Many proponents of Liberian colonization saw the West African destination as ideal, since African Americans would fit right in with the people already there. This goal was not realized, though, and Caesar demonstrates how different he viewed himself

⁴⁵ Michie et. al, 6.

⁴⁶ Ibid., 44.

⁴⁷ Caesar, 5.

⁴⁸ Ibid., 4.

from “the natives all naked”⁴⁹ and instead chooses to interact solely with his fellow settlers and correspond with friends back home.

The idea that free blacks would somehow identify with the Africans of the Grain Coast, Caesar shows, is unfounded and untrue. Most Liberian colonists were born and raised in the United States and descendants of a wide variety of African cultures not necessarily originating in or around the Liberian territory. The exception to this rule is recaptured slaves, protected by the Anti-Slave Trade Act after 1819, who were looked after by ACS agents,⁵⁰ but these made up a minority of the Liberian population. The settlers in Liberia maintain separate communities, which, “are improven[sic] very much with amegrants[sic],”⁵¹ but do little in terms of interactions with surrounding Kpelle or Cru people already present within the borders and did not even consider them Liberian citizens.⁵²

The separation of Americo-Liberian life from that of native Africans was only one of many ways which the settlers failed to acclimate to their new home. Their displacement to another continent came with limited resources for building society. The education of many manumitted and even free blacks failed to equip them for the task of replicating the American life in Liberia. While Burin asserts that, “ex-slaves attitudes toward Liberia tended to become more favorable the longer they lived there,”⁵³ Samson Caesar’s letters contradict this. When first arriving in Liberia, he promises to come back to America in just a few years.⁵⁴ This intention to go back to Virginia continues throughout his correspondence home.

⁴⁹ Ibid., 3.

⁵⁰ Fox, 216.

⁵¹ Michie et. al, 36.

⁵² Burin, 155.

⁵³ Ibid., 145.

⁵⁴ Caesar, 1.

Caesar's dissatisfaction with life in Liberia probably stemmed from the difficulties of starting life over in an entirely foreign place, but personal connections were a stronger pull to America for him. Each time he writes, Caesar sends his love not only to the recipient of his letters, Henry Westfall, but also to the rest of the Westfall family, his own family, and neighbors in Buchannon. Likewise, other colonists inquire after their loved ones and hope for a reply, as Julia Hardens sends "my respects to old aunt Racheal If alive. please to reply by the return of the Ship."⁵⁵ Based on their letters to him, it seems clear that James Minor did respond to the former slaves of his uncle, James Terrell, but these letters did not satisfy the colonists who grew impatient for them.⁵⁶ Caesar's communications with his former owner and his own family members were apparently not reciprocated, though, and he complains, "that I have received but two letters from you since I landed. I have written as many as a dozen to you. You have no excuse for not writing."⁵⁷ This lack of interest on the part of Westfall is another way in which colonialists in the US failed to continue supporting Americo-Liberians after sending them to Africa.

Conclusion

The Liberian colony was designed to be a home for free blacks and ex-slaves, but the extent to which it succeeded has not been closely evaluated by studying the experiences of settlers. Eric Burin, Early Lee, and Marie Tyler-McGraw focus on the ACS as it relates to history in the United States, but this society created an American colony of Americo-Liberians who are often overlooked in the study of history. Their history is just as complex and conflicted as that of

⁵⁵ Michie, et. al, 39.

⁵⁶ Ibid., 43.

⁵⁷ Caesar, 5.

the US during the first half of the 19th century. Burin points out that many African Americans chose not to emigrate, and some who did ended up returning to the US, but for many free blacks and manumittedes on ACS ships, there was no return. They lived out their lives in an experimental colony with limited resources and support while the colonizationalists continued to send more and more immigrants.

The collection of letters from Samson Caesar to his former master shows one ex-slaves transition to settler life. Challenged by a new environment and lack of basic infrastructure, Caesar struggled to build a satisfying life in his new home. He consistently expresses frustration with ill-equipped and ill-educated fellow settlers, grief over the illness and death which plague the immigrants, and loneliness, as he does not identify with the native Africans and misses family and friends back in the States. Caesar's testimony demonstrates his cultural identity as an American and not an African as he maintains the religion and practices of his former life in Virginia, contradicting many white colonizationalists belief that racial homogeneity determined societal unity and peace. Many early Liberian settlers, in fact, experienced violent conflict with the indigenous Kpelle people,⁵⁸ likely the same "naked" people which Caesar observed in his letter home.

The many letters from the various freed slaves of James Terrell serve as a confirmation of the conclusions derived from Caesar. This group of manumittedes left Virginia after the death of Terrell in 1857, and so they give a picture of Liberian life several decades after Caesar arrived and fifty years after the initiation of the American Colonization Society. Still, the same problems persist as these colonists feel quite isolated from their African surroundings and separated from

⁵⁸ Tyler-McGraw, 148.

their American homeland. They, too, show religion characteristic of the American South and are clearly accustomed to the material goods which the US market economy had provided. Their continued requests for goods suggest the lack of a Liberian trade market sufficient for the wants of its people. Overall, even those settlers which do find work and health in Liberia continue to miss their friends and family in the states and many of them suggest a wish to return, though that desire is likely unattainable.

In recent years, historians have begun to uncover the American Colonization Society as a racist institution which sought to prevent, “a civil war of castes and color between an inferior and superior race, where the one would have to be exterminated.”⁵⁹ There is a clear change in attitude from Early Lee’s 1917 history of the ACS to the re-visitation of the topic by Tyler-McGraw and Burin in the 21st century, as the later writers are less sympathetic to the philosophy of colonialists. Lee saw Liberia as a means to free slaves which contributed significantly to the eventual emancipation. The majority of African American slaves, though, were not given freedom during the years before the civil war, and the final solution of the slavery problem, universal emancipation, did not come from the efforts of the ACS.

The Colonizationalists sought to prevent sectional conflicts in the US and protect African Americans, but failed on both accounts. The Liberian experiment sent tens of thousands of free blacks and ex-slaves to a foreign land with little support. There, they may have faced their death by disease or conflict with the African people who already inhabited the area of land taken to be the Liberian colony. The ideology of colonization is vital to understanding the mindset of a moderate majority of antebellum Americans, but the experiences of the Americo-Liberians is

⁵⁹ Nelson, 31.

equally important and should be further investigated by American historians. Samson Caesar, Mary Michie, William Douglass, and many other immigrants represent a facet of US history still unexplored as they subsisted in the Liberian colony but continued to maintain cultural and personal connections with the United States.

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