

The Colonization Movement (1830s)

The Colonization Movement was an effort to bring free African Americans from the United States to Africa. Though the idea of colonization dates back to the 18th century, it took off in the 19th century with the founding of the American Colonization Society (ACS) in 1816. The main founder of the ACS was Presbyterian minister Robert Finley, and other early members included Kentucky statesman and slaveholder Henry Clay, Francis Scott Key (composer of the “Star Spangled Banner”) and George Washington’s nephew Bushrod Washington.

Members of the ACS had divergent views on why they supported colonization: some had a real interest in helping free African Americans escape the prejudice and violence they faced in the United States. Others, including Finley, thought African Americans would never be able to integrate into normal life in the United States because of their inherent inferiority and therefore should be separated from white Americans. He also hoped that expatriating African Americans to Africa would eventually end the institution of slavery. Still other pro-slavery supporters of colonization wanted to move free African Americans to Africa because they were seen as a threat to the institution of slavery.

The great majority of the ACS’s members were white, though some African Americans supported colonization. Colonization supporter Paul Cuffe, of mixed African and Indian ancestry, wanted free blacks to build new communities of dignity and independence in Africa, the homeland of his forebears.

Still, many African Americans opposed colonization as a thinly veiled attempt to rid the United States of its free African American citizens and allow the institution of slavery to continue unquestioned. Opponents of colonization such as Frederick Douglass wanted to focus on making the lives of free African Americans better in the United States, and to help enslaved African Americans by fighting for abolition. Free black Philadelphians such as James Forten, Absalom Jones, and Robert Purvis were vocally opposed to colonization, along with Pittsburgh black leaders such as John Peck and John Vashon.

Both white and black abolitionists, many of whom supported the immediate abolition of slavery in this country, tended to oppose the Colonization Movement. By the 1830s, this opposition was strong, with resolutions by the 1837 Anti-Slavery Convention of American Women and other abolition groups stating their opposition to the ACS.

The ACS did acquire land in West Africa, much of what is now the country of Liberia, and sent as many as 10,000 freed black slaves and free African Americans to the colony between 1821 and 1867.

Document 1: Job R. Tyson

Tyson, Job R. *A Discourse Before the Young Men's Colonization Society of Pennsylvania, Delivered October 24, 1834 ... by J.R. Tyson: With a Notice of the Proceedings of the Society, and of Their First Expedition of Coloured Emigrants to Found a Colony at Bassa Cove.* Philadelphia: Printed for the Society, 1834.
PHS Call number: PAM E 448 .T9 1834

**See especially the letter from Samuel Benedict to Elliott Cresson, pages 60-62. Also see letter from Francis Thornton, Jr. regarding Isaac Walker, page 63.*

Source note: Job R. Tyson (1803-1858) was elected to the board of managers of the Pennsylvania Colonization Society in 1850. Tyson was also a Whig member of the U.S. House of Representatives from Pennsylvania. Samuel Benedict (1792-1854) was a former slave who emigrated in 1835 to Liberia, where he became an influential figure in politics and the judiciary. Elliot Cresson (1796-1854) was a Philadelphia philanthropist and one of the most active members of the Young Men's Colonization Society of Pennsylvania, a branch of the American Colonization Society.

Historical context: The Young Men's Colonization Society of Pennsylvania was founded in 1830, four years before this discourse was written, as an offshoot of the American Colonization Society. Elliot Cresson, member of the Young Men's Colonization Society of Pennsylvania, was a prominent Quaker as well as a zealous supporter of colonization. Though many Quakers were abolitionists, including well known leaders such as Anthony Benezet and Lucretia Mott, many 19th century Quakers were also colonization supporters, anti-abolitionists, and even slaveowners.

Reading questions for the Samuel Benedict letter to Elliot Cresson, pages 60-62:

1. What is the tone of this letter?
2. What are Benedict's reasons for moving to Liberia?
3. Has Benedict ever been to Liberia?
4. What is the perspective of the author (Job. R. Tyson) on colonization?
5. What are Benedict's objections to the Abolition Movement in the United States?

Reading questions for Francis Thornton's testimonial on Isaac Walker, page 63:

1. What do you think the writer's perspective is on colonization?
2. Why might someone like Walker need a testimonial like this one, to carry with him?

Document 2: Thomas C. Brown

American Anti-Slavery Society. *Examination of Thomas C. Brown: A Free Colored Citizen of S. Carolina, as to the Actual State of Things in Liberia in the Years 1833 and 1834, at the Chatham Street Chapel, May 9th & 10th, 1834.* New York: S.W. Benedict, 1834.

PHS Call number: PAM E 450 .B76 1834

**See especially pages 3-12; on page 10, Brown mentions speaking with Elliott Cresson, who suggests he should speak in favor of colonization. Also refer to pages 31-32, especially for Reverend Ralph Randolph Gurley's perspective on abolitionists.*

Source note: Elliot Cresson (1796-1854) was a Philadelphia philanthropist and perhaps the most ardent member of the Young Men's Colonization Society of Pennsylvania, a branch of the American Colonization Society. Ralph Randolph Gurley (1797-1872) was a key administrator of the American Colonization Society for 50 years, eventually becoming director for life. At this time, he was the agent and secretary of the society.

Historical context:

- The American Anti-Slavery Society was founded in 1833 by prominent abolitionist William Lloyd Garrison and others who believed the institution of slavery should be abolished. Elliot Cresson, member of the Young Men's Colonization Society of Pennsylvania, was a prominent Quaker as well as a zealous supporter of colonization. Though many Quakers were abolitionists, including well known leaders such as Anthony Benezet and Lucretia Mott, many 19th century Quakers were also colonization supporters, anti-abolitionists, and even slaveowners.
- During the Examination, questioners of Mr. Brown as well as Brown himself mention "recaptured Africans." This term refers to enslaved African people brought illegally to the United States (where the importation of slaves from Africa was banned in 1808), "recaptured" by American naval ships, and resettled in Liberia.

Reading questions:

1. When was this source written, and who was its author? What was the purpose of writing the source?
2. Why do you think there so many questions about alcohol use and sale in Liberia?

3. On page 5, a “member of the examining committee” of the American Anti-Slavery Society asks Brown whether he is an American or an African. What does this question suggest about attitudes towards African Americans in the 1830s?
4. What do the disruptions of this meeting (see pages 12 and 19) say about the differing visions of abolition and colonization in the 1830s?
5. Does this source corroborate, or contradict, Document 1 (the Tyson discourse)?
6. What observations can you make about the questions people asked during the meeting?
7. What about abolitionism does Reverend R.R. Gurley most strongly object to (pages 31-32)?

Document 3: The Census of Liberia

Charity, C. (2017). *Roll of Emigrants that have been sent to the colony of Liberia, Western Africa, by the American Colonization Society and its auxiliaries, to September, 1843, &c.* Christine's African American Genealogy Website. Retrieved from <https://ccharity.com/contents/roll-emigrants-have-been-sent-colony-liberia-western-africa/>

**See especially:*

[Ship Indiana's Company](#) (Samuel Benedict and family)

[Ship Ninus's Company](#) (Isaac Walker and family)

[Ship Hercules's Company](#) (Thomas C. Brown and family)

Source note: The three webpages listed above show the passenger lists for three ships that brought free African Americans to Liberia, as recorded in the 1843 census of Liberia. Each of these passenger lists includes individuals and families mentioned in Documents 1 and 2: Samuel Benedict and his family, Isaac Walker and his family, and Thomas C. Brown and his family. In addition to information on these three individuals and their families, there is data on dozens more immigrants arriving in Liberia, including profession, age, state of origin, and, importantly, date and cause of death (if the person died before or during 1843). Please refer to the bibliographical information at the top of this page, along with the link, to find many other passenger lists from the 1843 census.

To see to the original source cited by Christine's African American Genealogy Website, please refer to the following source:

“Information relative to the operations of the United States squadron on the west coast of Africa ...” 28th Congress, 2d. Session, S. [Doc. 150, serial 458](#)”). Index to ships is on page 307; index to census lists is on page 413; census table for Monrovia is on pages 308-349.

Document 4: Map of Liberia

Map of the west coast of Africa from Sierra Leone to Cape Palmas, including the Colony of Liberia / compiled chiefly from the surveys and observations of the late Rev. J. Ashmun. Philadelphia: A. Finley, 1830 (fold-out plate detached from *Annual Report of the American Society for Colonizing the Free People of Colour of the United States*, Washington, 1830)
PHS Call number: MAPCASE 46:34)

Source note: Reverend Jehudi Ashmun (1794-1828), a minister, was active in the American Colonization Society and was a colonial agent of Liberia from 1822 to 1828. Note the year of Ashmun's death—he died in Connecticut, probably of a disease caught in Liberia—two years before his map was printed in Philadelphia.

Questions:

1. The coastline of Liberia is labeled in several places with “country of the Bassas” “country of the Deys,” etc. What do you think these designations mean? What do they tell you about the land the African American and white American colonists were settling on?
2. Based on the plan for the town of Monrovia, what are the priorities of the settlement?
3. Why do you think the colonists chose the spot that they did to build the town of Monrovia? What were the advantages of this location?
4. Observe the location of Millsburg and of Caldwell, two towns mentioned in Brown's testimony about his time in Liberia. Why do you think those particular locations were chosen for the towns?
5. Who created this map? What was the mapmaker's perspective on colonization? Can a map be biased? Why or why not?
6. What do you think was produced in the “colonial factories” mentioned on that map? Does their mention on the map refute Brown's testimony that there weren't factories to speak of in Liberia?

Document 5: Wiley Secondary Source

Wiley, Bell I., editor. *Slaves No More: Letters from Liberia, 1833-1869*. Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1980.
PHS Call number: DT 633.2 .S55 1980

**See especially introduction, pages 1-11.*

Source note: Bell Wiley (1906-1980) was an American historian and white southerner who became known for his scholarship on the Civil War. He helped to debunk the popular myth that most slaves wanted to stay with their masters after emancipation, and became known for his scholarly focus on social history.

Reading questions:

1. Who is the author of this source? Who is the intended audience?
2. How did the American Colonization Society obtain the land for colonization in what became Liberia?
3. Was colonization a valid option for African Americans after being freed from slavery? Why or why not?
4. How did most free African Americans feel about colonization as a solution to the problem of what freed slaves will do (and where they will live) after emancipation?
5. Did pro-colonization people believe in equal rights for freed African Americans?
6. Did anti-slavery people believe in equal rights for freed African Americans?
7. Why was colonization so appealing to many white Americans who were opposed to the institution of slavery?