

Section 3

Colonization

The American Colonization Society

Fear of free African Americans as a subversive class shaped the program of the most significant white antislavery organization of the 1810s and 1820s—but whether its aim was actually abolition is debatable. In late 1816 concerned white leaders met in Washington, D.C., to form the American Society for Colonizing Free People of Colour of the United States, usually known as the **American Colonization Society (ACS)**. Among its founders were such prominent slaveholders as Bushrod Washington—a nephew of George Washington—and Henry Clay. In 1821 the ACS, with the support of the U.S. government, established the colony of **Liberia** in West Africa as a prospective home for African Americans.

The ACS had a twofold program. First, it proposed to abolish slavery gradually in the United States, perhaps giving slaveholders financial compensation for their human property. Second, it proposed to send emancipated slaves and free black people to Liberia. The founders of the ACS believed that masters would never emancipate their slaves if they thought emancipation would increase the free black population in the United States. Moral and practical objections to this program were not immediately clear to either black or white abolitionists. In fact, the ACS became an integral part of the Benevolent Empire and commanded widespread support among many who regarded themselves friends of humanity.

Although the ACS was always strongest in the upper South and enjoyed the support of slaveholders, including Francis Scott Key, Andrew Jackson, John Tyler, and John Randolph, by the 1820s it had branches in every northern state. Such northern white abolitionists as Arthur and Lewis Tappan, Gerrit Smith, and William Lloyd Garrison initially supported **colonization**. They tended to emphasize the abolitionist aspects of the ACS and clung to a belief that free and soon-to-be-emancipated African Americans could choose whether to stay in the United States or go to Liberia. In either case, they hoped, black people would be free.



Reading Check What were the goals of the American Colonization Society?

GUIDE TO READING

- ▶ What were the goals of the American Colonization Society?
- ▶ What elements of the argument in favor of colonization appealed to some African Americans?
- ▶ Why did many African Americans oppose colonization?

KEY TERMS

- ▶ American Colonization Society (ACS), p. 263
- ▶ Liberia, p. 263
- ▶ colonization, p. 263
- ▶ black nationalist tradition, p. 264
- ▶ voluntary colonization, p. 265

▶ Guide to Reading/Key Terms

For answers, see the *Teacher's Resource Manual*.

▶ Reading Check

First, the ACS wanted to abolish slavery gradually in the United States. Slaveholders would be compensated for the loss of their human property. Second, the ACS wanted to transport emancipated slaves and free blacks to Liberia.

► Recommended Reading

P. J. Staudenraus. *The American Colonization Movement, 1816–1865*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1961. Although published in the 1960s, the most recent account of the American Colonization Society.

Black Nationalism and Colonization

Prominent black abolitionists initially shared this positive assessment of the ACS. They were part of a **black nationalist tradition** dating back at least to Prince Hall that endorsed black American migration to Africa. During the early 1800s, the most prominent advocate of this point of view was Paul Cuffe of Massachusetts. In 1811, six years before the ACS organized, Cuffe, a Quaker of African and American Indian ancestry, addressed Congress on the subject of African-American Christian colonies in Africa.

The ACS argument that appealed to Cuffe and many other African Americans was that white prejudice would never allow black people to enjoy full citizenship, equal protection under the law, and economic success in the United States. Black people born in America, went the argument for African colonization, could enjoy equal rights only in the continent of their ancestors. In the spirit of American evangelicalism, African Americans were also attracted by the prospect of bringing Christianity to African nations. Like white people, many African Americans considered Africa a pagan, barbaric place that could benefit from their knowledge of Christianity and republican government. Other black leaders who favored colonization objected to this view of Africa. They considered African cultures superior to those of America and Europe. They were often Africans themselves, the children of African parents, or individuals who had been influenced by Africans.

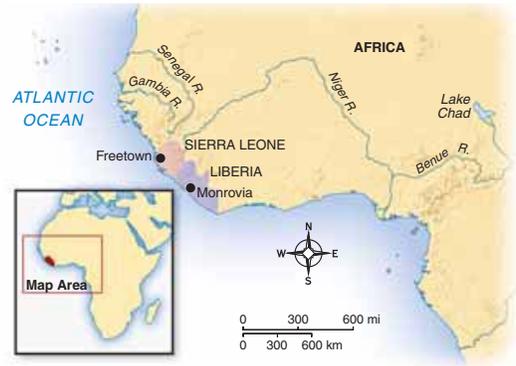
In 1815 Cuffe, who was the captain of his own ship, took thirty-four African-American settlers to the British free black colony of Sierra Leone, located just to the north of present-day Liberia. Cuffe himself would probably have later settled in Liberia if his American Indian wife had not refused to leave her native land. So it was the AME bishop Daniel Coker who led the first eighty-six African-American colonists to Liberia in 1820–1821. Pro-ACS sentiment was especially strong among African Americans in Coker’s home city of Baltimore and other Chesapeake urban areas. By 1838 approximately 2,500 colonists had made the journey and were living less than harmoniously with Liberia’s 28,000 indigenous inhabitants (see Map 8-2).

In 1847 Liberia became an independent republic. But despite the efforts of such Black Nationalist advocates as Henry Highland Garnet and Alexander Crummel, only about ten thousand African-American immigrants had gone there by 1860. This amounted to just .3 percent of the increase of the black population in the United States since 1816. Well before 1860 it was clear African colonization would never fulfill the dreams of its black or white advocates.



Monrovia, Liberia, ca. 1830. This map shows the American Colonization Society’s main Liberian settlement as it existed about ten years after its founding.

Other African Americans saw Haiti as a potential refuge from the oppression they suffered in the United States. Haiti was especially attractive to those whose ancestors had lived in the Caribbean and to those who admired its revolutionary history. In 1824 about two hundred men, women, and children from Philadelphia, New York City, and Baltimore went to Haiti. By the end of the 1820s, between eight and thirteen thousand African Americans had arrived there, but African Americans found Haitian culture to be more alien than they had anticipated. They had difficulty learning French and distrusted the Roman Catholic Church. By 1826 about one-third of the emigrants had returned to the United States.



MAP 8-2 The Founding of Liberia

British abolitionists established Sierra Leone as a colony for former slaves in 1800. The American Colonization Society established Liberia for the same purpose in 1821.



Why were Sierra Leone and Liberia established in West Africa?



Reading Check What elements of the argument in favor of colonization appealed to some African Americans?

Black Opposition to Colonization

Some African Americans had always opposed overseas colonization. As early as 1817, such influential black leaders as James Forten were wavering in their support of the ACS. Although Forten continued to support colonization in private, he led a meeting that year of three thousand black Philadelphians to denounce it. By the mid-1820s, many black abolitionists in East Coast cities from Richmond to Boston were criticizing colonization in general and the ACS in particular.

Among them was Samuel Cornish, who with John Russwurm began publication of *Freedom's Journal* in New York City in 1827 as the first African-American newspaper. Cornish, a young Presbyterian minister and a fierce opponent of the ACS, called for independent black action against slavery. The *Journal*—reflecting the values of antebellum reform—encouraged self-improvement, education, black civil rights in the North, and sympathy among black northerners for slaves in the South. Russwurm, however, was less opposed to the ACS than was Cornish. This disagreement helped lead to the suspension of the newspaper in 1829. That same year Russwurm, who was one of the first African Americans to earn a college degree, moved to Liberia.

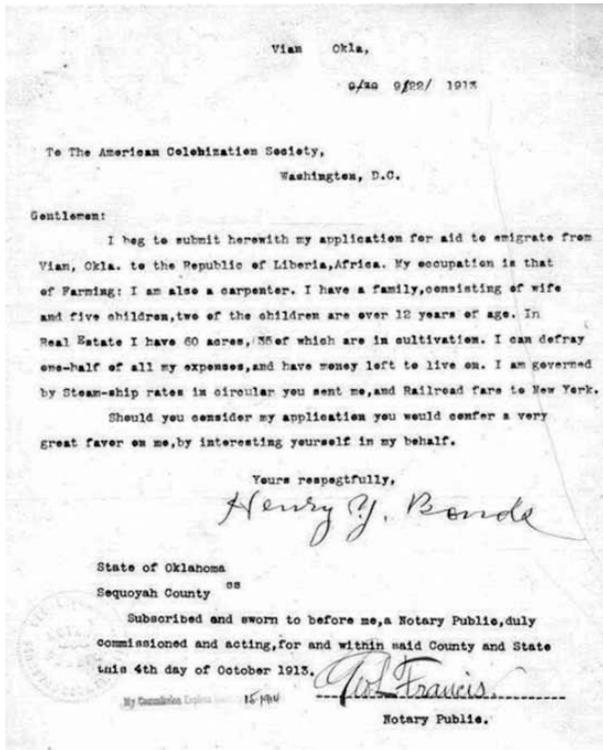
People like Cornish regarded themselves as Americans, not Africans, and wanted to improve their condition in this country. They considered Liberia foreign and unhealthy. They had no desire to go there themselves or send other African Americans there. They feared that ACS talk about **voluntary colonization** was misleading. They knew that nearly every southern state required the expulsion of slaves individually freed by their masters. They were also aware of efforts in the

► Map 8-2

They were established as colonies for former slaves.

► Reading Check

Supporters of colonization believed that whites in America would never grant blacks equal rights and full citizenship. Blacks would only enjoy such rights in the land of their ancestors. Moreover, African American evangelicals were attracted to the idea of bringing Christianity to Africa.



Although black abolitionists opposed colonization, some blacks actively sought to emigrate to Africa. In this letter, Henry Bonds asks for help from the ACS to move to Liberia.

Maryland and Virginia legislatures to require *all* free black people to leave or be enslaved. These efforts had little practical impact, but they made African Americans fear that colonization would be forced on them. In 1858 Arkansas actually required the reenslavement of free black people who did not leave that state. But, rather than migrate to Africa, most of its small free black population fled to the North, Canada, Louisiana, or the Indian territory.

By the mid-1820s most black abolitionists had concluded that the ACS was part of a proslavery effort to drive free African Americans from the United States. The ACS, they maintained in public meetings, was not an abolitionist organization at all but a proslavery scheme to force free black people to choose between reenslavement or banishment. America, they argued, was their native land. They knew nothing of Africa. Any effort to force them to go there was based on the racist assumption that they were not entitled to and were incapable of living in freedom in the land of their birth. “Do they think to drive us from our country and homes, after having enriched it with our blood and tears?” asked David Walker.



Reading Check

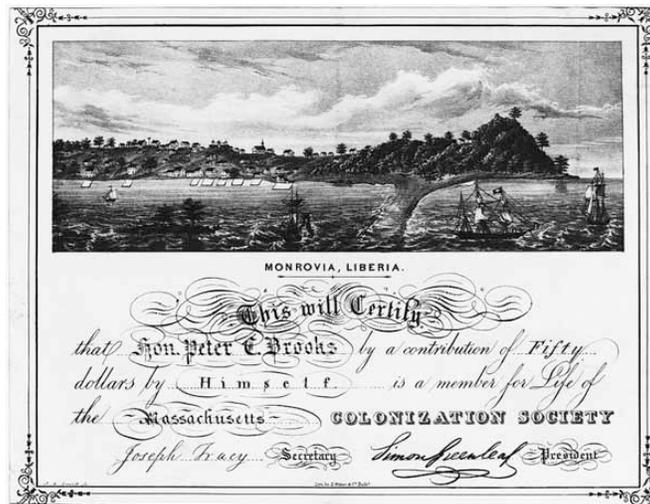
Why did many African Americans oppose colonization?

▶ Reading Check

They saw themselves as Americans, not as Africans. They considered Liberia foreign and unhealthy. Finally, they did not trust ACS claims that colonization would be voluntary.

▶ Retracing the Odyssey

Oberlin College, Oberlin, Ohio. Oberlin, one of the first racially integrated and coeducational institutions of higher learning in the United States, was an antislavery and Underground Railroad center. The college maintains a collection of antislavery publications.



The Massachusetts Colonization Society supported the colonization of Liberia by freed slaves.