

Virginia Women in the Colonization Movement

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White women involved in Liberian colonization used the movement to both push away the evil of slavery, which they considered a threat to American and Christian values, and to push for increased education and political power for women at home and in Liberia. These women were from families that prized themselves on American Revolutionary heritage, which gave them a fierce patriotism and the idea that they had a role to play in shaping the young nation and to stopping slavery from corrupting it.¹ They were predominantly white Christians from the upper classes, often affiliated with the evangelical movement and the Episcopal and Presbyterian churches. Their religious ties only strengthened their view that slavery was a corrupting force to society, destroying the traditional Christian family structure, perverting the morals of the masters and giving them sexual license.² Their patriotism and faith manifested itself in their ideas of the family unit and the education of mothers as essential to the growth and education of their children, which extended to black mothers as well. They fought to keep enslaved families together and often freed slaves to emigrate to Liberia as a family.³ The roots of women in the colonization movement defined their participation and what changes they campaigned for.

One of the most important things to women in the colonization movement was the preservation of the family structure. When slaves were sold, they were often separated from their families, breaking up the traditional family structure and violating the Christian family values. By mending this through colonization, order and morality would be restored.⁴ Women involved in colonization also focused on the role that the mother played within the family in educating her children, thus justifying her own education, in America and in Liberia. They hoped that encouraging education and piety in black families would have a similar effect on their own families.⁵ Though men in the movement were doubtful of or hostile to the idea of female political involvement and education, women did what they could, overtly or behind the scenes.

In a letter to a friend in the Virginia Colonization Society, the Fredericksburg and Falmouth Female Auxiliary requested that “female society must not appear too much in it. There is a considerable objection to our sex interfering in a subject that they say is purely political and that we have no business with.”⁶ The involvement of women was not without significant pushback, as it broke the gender and racial boundaries that Virginian society revolved around and threatened to disrupt societal norms. These women often conducted business with free black men and women directly.⁷ They pushed for female education in Liberia in letters, explaining that, “It is now understood that the best way to civilize a nation is to educate the girls...it is the Females who will exert an influence over the rising generation.”⁸ They funded girls’ schools in America and Virginia. Still, they remained largely tethered to their husbands, who controlled them financially and legally. Women interested in sending slaves to Liberia had to convince their husbands or wait until they were widowed. Some remained unmarried, and became prominent activists with their increased political freedom, such as Margaret Mercer.⁹ Still, waiting to be widowed was not without its drawbacks; to pay off the debts of the recently dead, their slaves were sold, and by emancipating them for emigration to Liberia, the women incurred both the cost of debt and the cost of transport across the Atlantic. For example, colonizationist Ann Page had to sell more than a hundred slaves in order to satisfy her late husband’s creditors, only sending twenty-three manumitted slaves to Liberia, less than she had previously planned.¹⁰

Religion played a major role in the ACS and in female involvement. The ACS was endorsed by each of the four major Protestant denominations.¹¹ Colonization women were guided by the idea of “civilizing” Africa by sending Christian blacks who would spread Western ideals and Christianity on the continent, to “see West Africa seasoned with divine salt, from American Christians.”¹² Slavery was seen as holding back Virginia women from becoming

“religious exemplars.” It bred domestic chaos, which prevented the sort of “orderly domestic environment” that promoted Christian piety.¹³

The motivations of colonizationists in supporting the movement were gendered. Female colonization activists were focused on gradually ending slavery and protecting moral principles. On the other hand, their husbands were primarily concerned with colonization as a way to get free blacks out of America.¹⁴ While some husbands allowed their wives’ participation in the movement, it only extended so far, especially as the debate over slavery intensified. William Blackford, to his wife and prominent colonizationist Mary Blackford, wrote, “You will have no benevolent societies here to occupy your thoughts... no... wearing out body and soul in Negrophilism or other philanthropic schemes.”¹⁵

Women interested in colonization often freed people they knew well, those who they had an emotional attachment to or who they knew had skills that could be useful in Liberia.¹⁶ They intended for Liberia to be a new life of freedom for the emancipated. However, sometimes the expectations of the emancipator and the path of the emigrant didn’t exactly line up. For example, the Blackfords sent an emancipated slave named Abram Blackford to Liberia. Mary Blackford’s vision of him was of a simple farmer, but he instead described himself as a teacher with an education.¹⁷ He went on to become an owner of a sloop and a factory, and became a successful Liberian merchant. He had his own plans and aspirations that came in conflict with hers; Mary Blackford was dismayed when Abram’s plans subverted her own. Liberian colonization wasn’t the life of freedom that some portrayed it as, either. Emigrants faced economic hardship, death, and warfare upon arriving at Liberia, and negative accounts of the colony changed the composition of Liberian emigrants; from the 1820s to the 1830s, it shifted from mostly free blacks to mostly manumitted slaves.¹⁸

Virginia occupied a peculiar space within the North-South dynamic, and thus was the only state where women were involved in colonization over time. Though it was located in the South, less slave labor in northern Virginia meant fewer women occupied the typical “plantation mistress” role.¹⁹ Voluntary emancipation and colonization was seen as an acceptable compromise between the radical abolitionism and the evils of continued slavery. Ultimately, Nat Turner and the emergence of Northern abolitionism turned public opinion against colonization, and the women were perceived to be susceptible to insidious Northern ideas and dismissed.²⁰ The colonization movement was taken over by proslavery advocates hostile to the idea of any emancipation, instead promoting only the emigration of already free blacks.²¹ The Colonization Society was seen as relying on the “morbidly tender consciences and weak minds of benevolent men, and women more especially, to induce them to emancipate their slaves.”²²

In order to deflect criticism, female colonizationists shifted their stated goals towards female education in Liberia, distancing themselves from radical female abolitionists. For example, one colonization society renamed itself to the Ladies Society for Promoting Female Education in the Colony of Liberia.²³ Despite their efforts, their campaign for education in Liberia was a failure as well, lacking the funds or facilities to sustain such an educational system in Liberia.²⁴ Women who were for the emancipation of slaves into the 1850s were thought of as simply uneducated in the benefits of the practice; as one proslavery colonizationist stated, the mission was to “educat[e] the public mind until every man and woman shall come to know and feel that slavery is not only right in itself, but that for most of the negroes held in slavery, manumission would be a curse and a cruelty.”²⁵ The discussion around colonization allowed ideas such as the morality of slavery, the education of women, and how slavery and America should exist to be openly discussed for a period of time.

Notes

¹ Marie Tyler McGraw, *An African Republic: Black and White Virginians in the Making of Liberia* (Chapel Hill, North Carolina: University of North Carolina Press, 2007), 99.

² Marie Tyler McGraw, *An African Republic*, 99.

³ Marie Tyler McGraw, *An African Republic*, 84.

⁴ Marie Tyler McGraw, *An African Republic*, 84.

⁵ Marie Tyler McGraw, *An African Republic*, 86.

⁶ Marie Tyler McGraw, *An African Republic*, 91.

⁷ Marie Tyler McGraw, *An African Republic*, 86.

⁸ Marie Tyler McGraw, *An African Republic*, 91.

⁹ Marie Tyler McGraw, *An African Republic*, 87.

¹⁰ Elizabeth R. Varon, *We Mean to Be Counted: White Women and Politics in Antebellum Virginia* (Chapel Hill, North Carolina: University of North Carolina Press, 1998), 45.

¹¹ Elizabeth R. Varon, *We Mean to Be Counted*, 45.

¹² Elizabeth R. Varon, *We Mean to Be Counted*, 45.

¹³ Elizabeth R. Varon, *We Mean to Be Counted*, 41.

¹⁴ Elizabeth R. Varon, *We Mean to Be Counted*, 46.

¹⁵ Marie Tyler McGraw, *An African Republic*, 96.

¹⁶ Marie Tyler McGraw, email to Marie Tyler McGraw, August 2, 2020.

¹⁷ Marie Tyler McGraw, *An African Republic*, 99.

¹⁸ Elizabeth R. Varon, *We Mean to Be Counted*, 57.

¹⁹ McGraw, email to Marie Tyler McGraw, August 2, 2020.

²⁰ Elizabeth R. Varon, *We Mean to Be Counted*, 27.

²¹ McGraw, email to Marie Tyler McGraw, August 2, 2020.

²² Elizabeth R. Varon, *We Mean to Be Counted*, 68.

²³ Marie Tyler McGraw, *An African Republic*, 92.

²⁴ Elizabeth R. Varon, *We Mean to Be Counted*, 61.

²⁵ Elizabeth R. Varon, *We Mean to Be Counted*, 68.

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