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Eric Burin. *Slavery and the Peculiar Solution: A History of the American Colonization Society.* Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2005. xiv + 223 pp. $59.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8130-2841-5.

Reviewed by Kirt Von Daacke (Department of History, Lynchburg College)
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The Local and Personal Contours of Black Removal in Antebellum America

Eric Burin's book, *Slavery and the Peculiar Solution: A History of the American Colonization Society*, reassesses the American Colonization Society's (ACS) role and impact upon slavery through two lenses. "First, it gauges the movement's effect on black bondage by providing a panoramic overview of the colonization crusade; second, it scrutinizes ACS activities as they played out at the local level" (p. 2). Over the course of seven chapters, Burin's book charts the development of the ACS, the impact of the ACS upon slavery, the motivations of ACS manumitters, slave negotiations with masters in preparing for freedom and colonization, the largely northern character of the organization's funding, local and regional responses to ACS manumissions, subsequent legal battles, and, lastly, the impact on the colonization movement of freedpersons' reporting back about conditions in Liberia.

Burin has engaged in exhaustive analysis of ACS records to create a comprehensive database regarding society manumissions and Liberian emigrants. Combining this with letters and family papers of both white manumitters and at times the manumittees themselves, Burin simultaneously provides a panoramic overview of white colonizationists throughout the South and a fine-grained look at black-white interaction at the local and personal level. The focus on individual manumitters, their thoughts, and their relationships with slaves represents a fresh perspective in the historiography of the ACS. Burin's privileging of such highly personal interactions sheds a welcome new light on the subject.

Much of the previous historiography concerning the ACS has spotlighted the failure of the organization to effect any significant change in southern slave society. From the group's founding in 1816 until the Civil War, the organization managed to send less than eleven thousand black Americans to Liberia. Thus, the ACS on average managed to colonize 273 black Americans per year. In 1810, there were nearly 1.4 million African Americans living in the United States. By 1860, that number had grown to 4.25 million.[1] These numbers are sobering. The ACS managed to colonize far less than one percent of the black population in the United States. Burin acknowledges the infrequency of ACS manumission and colonization, but argues for their crucial role in antebellum national debates: "ACS manumissions rippled outward, destabilizing slavery in their wake" (p. 5). In Burin's final estimation, despite the obvious numerical paucity of ACS manumissions and colonizations, the ACS represents "a movement that had profoundly shaped the debates on slavery, race, and freedom in America" (p. 167).

Burin's dovetailing of the ACS's institutional history with more telescopic micro-historical local evidence represents an exciting new approach in investigating the colonization movement. It also offers the prospect of actually highlighting those very ripples that he believes destabilized slavery. His monograph's strength lies in that tactic, and Burin's research makes it clear that more work remains to be done concerning local ACS history. The most powerful contribution offered by *Slavery and the Peculiar Institution* lies in the avenues for new scholarship Burin's work reveals. Anyone interested in exploring the role of colonization movements in antebellum American life will need to read this book closely, examining both its strengths and its limitations. This alone demonstrates the timeliness and importance of Burin's work.

Despite the promise of viewing ACS activity at the local level, Burin instead provides extensive local evidence throughout, but without ever spotlighting one place in detail. This reviewer wishes that Burin, if his evidence permits, could have performed at least a few comprehensive local case studies, contextualizing his data in such a way that the reader could see how ACS officials, slaveowners, manumitters, free blacks, slaves and local public opinion-makers interacted in one locale over time. Such

a rich and thickly descriptive approach would reward researcher and reader alike.

For example, Burin attributes a spike in ACS manumissions after 1840 in part to the rise of removal laws in southern states and anti-immigration legislation in the North. These legislative changes had an impact on slaveowners. According to Burin, "slaveholders who might have previously allowed ex-slaves to remain close by, or who might have taken them to free states, may have now figured they had no alternative but to convey manumittees to Africa" (p. 45). Although this may have been the case, Burin's privileging of the law obscures local realities. Virginia passed its removal act in 1806, a full thirty-five years before Burin's spike. Additionally, this privileging of the law ignores the distant role state laws often played in local life. The law was widely ignored and poorly enforced, and free blacks along with their white neighbors flooded the state assembly with petitions requesting approval for residency. Eventually, the state legislature found itself overwhelmed, and in 1815 revised the law giving decision-making power to the county courts.

Burin argues that certain rural Virginia counties demonstrated regular ACS manumissions and departures because they had "successive companies exiting from the same locale over time" (p. 109). Burin highlights ten out of the sixty-four counties that witnessed ACS departures because they had so many that they "nearly qualified as regulars" (p. 109).

The leader, Dinwiddie County, had sixteen different departures from 1820 to 1860, factoring out to a single departure every two and a half years. The remaining counties experienced ten or fewer departures over the same time period, meaning on average one such departure every four or more years. This rate, as Burin admits, hardly demonstrates the omnipresence of the ACS. But Burin never extrapolates from this list, or makes distinctions between the counties. Did all of these counties share demographic similarity as Burin hints? Were they all purely rural in character?

By 1860 in Dinwiddie County, 42 percent of the population was enslaved, 6 percent of whites owned slaves, and 19 percent of slaveowners owned ten or more slaves. But Dinwiddie County bordered the city of Petersburg, with its substantial free black population. What effect did proximity to an urban center of black freedom have upon Dinwiddie slaveholders?- Three other counties bordered urban areas (Frederick County/Winchester, Campbell County/Lynchburg, Spotsylvania County/Fredericksburg). By 1860, two of these chain migration counties had populations less than 20 percent enslaved (Augusta and Frederick), while three others (Albemarle, Hanover, and Spotsylvania) had slave populations that made up one half or more of the total population. Large slaveholders, here classified as those owning ten or more slaves, made up anywhere from 15 to 33 percent of slaveowners in the ten counties. Over the same group of counties, the free black population ranged from as few as 257 in Hanover to 3,746 in Dinwiddie.[2] Again, a more concentrated focus on specific locales may reveal more about the impact of the ACS.

If the researcher unpacks data from one such county, a changed picture emerges. Albemarle County, where Burin finds ten separate ACS departures from 1820 to 1860, has no recorded manumissions contingent upon removal to Africa until 1835, and the remainder are clustered in the 1850s.[3] This same county has more acts of manumission requiring removal to a free state. These are spread more evenly over the nearly thirty years after the Nat Turner rebellion. In terms of people freed in this period, manumissions requiring removal to Liberia freed over 150 slaves, but this was achieved largely through three acts by three slaveholders in 1835, 1856, and 1857. Fifty-six other instances of emancipation occurred between 1820 and 1860, freeing anywhere between one and ten slaves at a time, the vast majority not requiring any sort of removal at all. In this county, the ACS clearly had an impact, but one concentrated in the decade before the Civil War, and concentrated in the hands of a few large slaveholders in a county with well over four hundred such slaveowners.

Again, in assessing the impact of the Nat Turner revolt in Virginia upon ACS colonization activity, Burin discusses the flurry of legislation after 1831, but the reader gets no sense of how state-appropriated colonization funds were distributed nor how removal and restriction were enforced locally. Burin's account may have benefited in particular from analysis of Virginia's state legislature-mandated county colonization censuses of 1833. County commissioners were ordered to make a list of all free blacks in their respective county, complete with name, sex, residence (including the name of the nearest white citizen), occupation, physical description, and willingness to migrate to Liberia. An examination of at least one rural Virginia locale where such records remain extant could have provided powerful evidence. New scholarship by Melvin Patrick Ely, Joshua Rothman, Eva Sheppard Wolf and others likewise suggests that a closer examination of local activities is required, and in particular for rural areas.[4] Such studies reveal a localized and highly personal world in which

face-to-face relationships could trump racist ideologies, racist social hierarchies, and racist laws. In these accounts, this highly personal culture at times acted as a buffer protecting free blacks from increasingly proscriptive legislation and white racism.

Burin's study, agreeing with Ira Berlin's 1974 classic *Slaves Without Masters,* argues that "a community's forebearance toward manumission varied directly with the frequency of such transactions" (p. 101). Burin's data for Virginia, where more than one third of all ACS manumissions occurred, leads him to argue that although urban sectors in the eastern portion of the state had the highest rates of manumission, rural areas had the highest rates of ACS manumission (p. 36). Virginia, the most prolific colonizationist state, had 186 ACS emancipators who freed and colonized 2,214 former slaves, and witnessed 1,230 free black residents join the Liberian emigration. Burin estimates that more than sixty percent of these emancipations occurred in rural areas.

For Burin, this urban-rural split arose because "urban slaves, unwilling to forsake the autonomy and opportunities of city life, expressed little interest in emigrating to Liberia, and their disinclination helped push ACS operations into the countryside" (p. 36). Those same urban areas, however, were also home to the loudest denunciations of colonization and its putative negative effects on slaves and slavery. Newspapers across the urban South regularly published vitriolic condemnations of colonization schemes and of the ACS (pp. 114-115). Perhaps powerful urban white opposition to the ACS, not free black unwillingness to countenance colonization, drove missionaries into the countryside.

Burin also argues that rural areas represented far more fertile territory for those preaching the benefits of colonization: "in the plantation districts, the comparative disadvantages of rural living made bondpersons more amenable to offers of freedom in Liberia, while white antipathy toward free blacks increased the likelihood that manumittees would in fact move overseas" (p. 36). The fate of Virginia's 1806 removal law casts some doubt on this conclusion, as rural free blacks and their white neighbors flooded the assembly with requests to allow free and newly freed blacks to remain. Once again, those 1833 county colonization surveys may represent an excellent and largely untapped resource. One central Virginia county, Albemarle, complied with the state legislature's order and compiled a census of the county's 452 free blacks. The evidence for this county, situated in the heart of Burin's Upper South Piedmont ACS manumission district, casts more doubt on Burin's conclusion. Not a single free black surveyed in Albemarle County expressed interest in colonization.[5] As these local numbers and the aggregate figures for the entire existence of the ACS suggest, most African Americans, "flushed with hope, spurned the ACS's offer" (p. 166).

Burin's tabulations concerning ACS emigration from 1820 to 1860, which he sees as demonstrating the ACS's gently seismic weakening of slavery, also suggest another possible reading. Instead of weakening slavery through ACS missionary activity and ACS emigration, what if emigration actually supported slavery? Alternatively, what if the slaveholding individual's decision to free slaves and send them to Liberia was increasingly a response to the rising sectional crisis over slavery and an attempt to strengthen the peculiar institution? These slaveholders saw slavery threatened by a conspiracy of northern abolitionists, and for them the ACS offered a way to protect slavery. According to Burin's numbers, 40 percent of emigrants from 1820 to 1860 were free blacks. The remainder were manumittees whose freedom was conditional upon agreeing to emigrate to Liberia. Thus, the ACS, regardless of actual intent, functioned to remove free blacks from slave society, thereby sharpening the line between black slave and white citizen. Slaveowners could free individual slaves without increasing the free black population and without threatening the institution of slavery. But both this interpretation and that offered by Burin remain weak when one considers just how few emigrants ever went to Liberia, despite the ACS's best efforts. Perhaps Burin's research actually suggests the fundamental weakness of colonization as a plan in the face of a slave system yoked to a largely rural culture in which personal relationships held great social power. In such a system, slaveholders could fashion a reality for themselves in which freeing individual slaves in no way threatened slavery. Even for rural free blacks, colonization remained very unpopular because although "freedom bore bittersweet fruit ... it was sweet enough" (p. 159). Thus, the ACS and its efforts may have actually been shaped both by the continuing national debate after 1820 regarding slavery, race, and freedom, and by a shared black-white rural culture of personalism that privileged the security of face-to-face relationships.

Burin sees those rural manumissions as having a particularly destabilizing effect upon slave control, as the appearance of freed emigrant parties trekking eastward increased rebelliousness amongst slaves. This, in turn, rankled whites: "freedpersons who trooped through a neighborhood were anathema to proslavery whites" (p. 109). White and black alike in these rural locales were participants in a highly personal culture that privileged

face-to-face interactions. A mob of strangers passing through would cause fascination, fright, or both. The same may have applied to ACS missionaries, who may have been seen as unknown, untrustworthy, and of questionable reputation. For rural Upper South locales, the sight of gangs of free blacks and slaves moving about would have appeared banal and quotidian, unless those people were unfamiliar. The same situation may have applied to unfamiliar, foreign, and disreputable whites. What if complaining whites were more concerned about the strangeness, the foreignness of the passing travelers and visiting missionaries? Again, the ACS's efforts may have been shaped by this very culture, too.

The observations listed above represent tantalizing questions for further research, not unfortunate shortcomings, and demonstrate the importance of this monograph. Professor Burin's valuable book represents a burgeoning sea change in approach to the colonization movement, one in which researchers step outside the rather hermetically sealed world of the writings of a few prominent American Colonization Society officials, to, instead, integrate those letters and accounts with more traditional social history evidence. *Slavery and the Peculiar Institution* should be required reading for anyone interested in research on colonization, both for its impressive research and for the many exciting questions it raises.

Notes

[1]. U.S. Census Bureau, "Historical Census Statistics on Population Totals by Race, 1790 to 1990, and by Hispanic Origin, 1970-1990, For the United States, Regions, Divisions, and States," 2002, prepared by Campbell Gibson and Kay Jung, Population Division, Working Paper Series No. 56, U.S. Census Bureau (Washington, D.C., 2002), http://www.census.gov/population/www/documentation/twps0056.html.

[2]. Data taken from the Geospatial and Statistical Data Center at the University of Virginia's Historical Census Browser, http://fisher.lib.virginia.edu/collections/stats/histcensus/.

[3]. Albemarle County Court (Va.), Will Books 7-26 (1819-1865). Charlottesville, Virginia. Originals transcribed by author.

[4]. Melvin Patrick Ely, *Israel on the Appomattox: A Southern Experiment in Black Freedom from the 1790s through the Civil War* (New York: Knopf, 2004); Joshua D. Rothman, *Notorious in the Neighborhood: Sex and Families across the Color Line in Virginia, 1787-1861* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2003); and Eva Sheppard, "The Question of Emancipation in Virginia from the Revolution to the Slavery Debate of 1832" (Ph.D. diss., Harvard University, 2000).

[5]. Ervin L. Jordan Jr., "'A Just and True Account': Two 1833 Parish Censuses of Albemarle County Free Blacks," *Magazine of Albemarle County History*, 53 (1995): pp. 116-117.

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