

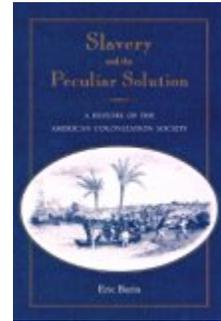
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Eric Burin. *Slavery and the Peculiar Solution: A History of the American Colonization Society*. Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2005. xiv + 223 pp. \$59.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8130-2841-5.

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What Is to Be Done?

During the Early Republic, Americans struggled to address the paradox of slavery and freedom. This dichotomy prompted numerous debates and wild schemes designed to address the existence of slavery in a society based on individual freedom. Among the reform-minded societies that came out of such discussions was the American Colonization Society. This society addressed this paradox through the plan of African colonization. Eric Burin's study of the American Colonization Society (ACS) is the latest interpretation of the African colonization movement and the actions of that organization at the local level. Part of the Southern Dissent series edited by Stanley Harrold and Randall M. Miller, its title, as most scholars will note, appears a play on Kenneth Stampp's *The Peculiar Institution* (1956).

The study focuses on "colonization's relationship with slavery ... from two vantage points. 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). The emphasis on ACS activities at the local level in the South is the most important contribution this study makes, as most studies tend to look at the colonization movement from the national perspective. Burin delves into the debate regarding the true purpose of the ACS, suggesting that "colonization tended to undermine slavery" (p. 2). Thus, his examination returns the ACS and African colonization to the antislavery interpretation. Such an assertion is problematic, which Burin

admits. Historians have attempted to fit the ACS into a particular mold since the 1920s. Nonetheless, his study is probably the first since P.J. Staudenraus's *The African Colonization Movement* (1961) to place the society in the antislavery circle.[1]

The suggestion that colonization was a crusade against slavery is, arguably, an exaggeration. The vast majority of colonizationists supported the movement in hopes of keeping slavery (and the debate over it) from destroying the Union. Many accepted the Jeffersonians' proposition that slavery was doomed for extinction anyway; colonization would only aid in the eventual outcome. This thought process did not change much until after Nat Turner's Rebellion, the Virginia Debates of 1832, and the Nullification Crisis. Most white Americans believed that the republic would fall if there were two free races, especially if one of those races was denied political and social rights. Colonization offered a solution to this dilemma. Burin recognizes this fact: "The enterprise's longevity and salience partly stemmed from its malleability: the venture certainly meant different things to different people" (p. 33). It remains difficult to see colonization as a crusade, especially when John Randolph and Henry Clay, both founding members, insisted that the ACS not address the issue of slavery at all.[2] Nonetheless, the membership of prominent slaveholders in the ACS, as well as the number of slaves manumitted for colonization, does imply dissent against slavery in the South.

Burin further locates the true base of support for colonization in the Upper South and Border States. He also demonstrates the influence of revolutionary ideology in the discussion regarding slavery and colonization. The ideals of the revolution were most important to the post-revolution generation. For example, Burin turned to Charles Fenton Mercer, whom he credits with “laying the groundwork for the establishment of the ACS.” Mercer was a southern modernizer “who wished to replace the slave-based agrarian economy with a free-labor, commercial-industrial one” (p. 13). There were, indeed, many men similar to Mercer, and to place the impetus for the ACS’s formation on him ignores prominent northern figures such as the Reverend Robert S. Finley from New Jersey. These men looked to an industrial society based on free labor; they sought also to preserve the Union. Colonization was the means to do both and address the question of their time—the fate of slavery and African descendants in America.

One quite interesting question that Burin addresses is why colonizationists thought that they could succeed at settling African Americans outside the United States (pp. 20-21). Burin cites historian William Freehling’s explanation that the era under examination provided no evidence that the scheme would not work. In the context of the mass migration then occurring in the Atlantic world, ACS supporters had no reason to think that they could not re-settle African Americans. Burin suggests that the problem with the thesis is that Freehling did not consider the realities of colonization at the local level (p. 21). Thus, Burin returns to his study’s real contribution to the scholarship on this topic. Colonization was not a simplistic endeavor that effortlessly moved colonists across the Atlantic. Situations at the local level complicated and slowed emigration, making ACS efforts less tenable in reality. For example, Burin finds that liberated slaves in urban areas generally opposed emigration to Liberia; thus, the ACS targeted rural areas. Colonizationists encountered problems there, however, as slaveholders faced scorn and sometimes worse from neighbors (p. 36). Moreover, by the early 1830s a rift emerged “between the Upper South men who dominated the powerful board of managers, and the northerners who filled many important positions in the organization” (p. 23), which worked against the ACS. The conflict was primarily over the public image of the ACS and its position on slavery. Burin also points out that a split occurred in the movement because of poor fiscal management, which further slowed the organization’s progress (p. 24).

Another significant contribution of Burin’s study is

his examination of manumissions in the South. Burin notes that the vast majority of individual manumissions in the early colonization period took place in the Upper South (p. 36). Of greater interest, however, is his conclusion that the number of manumissions also depended on whether slaveholders lived in urban or rural areas. Manumission was much more difficult, he contends, in rural areas. Burin then proceeds to discuss the factors that influenced slaveholders’ decisions. This is an important part of the study, as no other study (that the reviewer is aware of) has differentiated manumissions specifically for colonization in such a way. That a greater number occurred in the Upper South is not surprising. Northern, free neighboring states had larger immigrant populations, which Burin mentions, specifically the Germans who moved into the western regions of Maryland and later West Virginia. These people had little to tie them to the institution of slavery. In addition, a considerable factor was the industrialization of growing urban centers such as Baltimore. The emergence of the market economy, the transition to mixed agriculture, and the loss of political influence in the Chesapeake region weakened slavery’s hold there. Maryland had the largest (proportionally adjusted) free black population in the country. Further, soil depletion and the migration of planters’ sons to western territories contributed to the declining numbers of slaves in the state and, of course, higher numbers of manumissions (pp. 37-40).

Burin further differentiates ACS manumissions by examining programs employed by some larger slaveholders. He emphasizes that programs such as those promoted by John McDonogh, a Louisiana slave owner, actually aided in controlling slave populations. The promise of literacy in preparation for emigration and freedom in Africa, Burin argues, gave slaveholders an added element of control over their slaves. The potential pitfall of using slaveholding emancipators like McDonogh as a model, however, is that they were atypical. Burin relied on other historical collections; nonetheless, he seems to place more emphasis on McDonogh than on other slave owners. McDonogh’s plan was to provide education and training that would allow the soon-to-be-freedmen to carry the gospel to Africa, among other things, while profiting from their labors for additional years (p. 41). His slaves, in fact, financed their emigration. He also did not release all of his slaves for colonization by the ACS. Slaves freed in such programs, Burin notes, were also predominantly adult males. This practice arguably increased control over slave populations (p. 43). Yet, this example is perhaps not so profound given the pref-

erence of all the colonization societies for adult males in their colonies, especially those known to be industrious and obedient. Adult males would not drain social resources; adult males would develop the colonies more quickly, allowing increasing numbers to be sent; finally, adult males were most likely to make the colonies prosperous, which would lure free African Americans whose position in the United States, economically and socially, was tenuous. The numbers of African Americans transported, and little else, measured success for most white Americans supportive of colonization. Adult males were the most needed group in the colonies for these objectives to be met. Burin either ignores this fact or views the social control that manumission programs gave to slaveholders as more important.

Another of Burin's contentions that scholars will certainly debate is that "ACS liberations were not instances of complaisant slaves dutifully working toward freedom, as white colonizationists originally expected. Rather, they were the product of tenacious negotiations that fundamentally recast slaveholders' manumission plans" (p. 58). In short, Burin suggests that slaves weighed offers of manumission on condition of emigration carefully to exploit the offers to their best advantage (p. 59). In assessing these offers, Burin's study explores the types of information slaves considered, as well as the sources of that information. Scrutiny was necessary as colonizationists manipulated accounts from the colony to best serve their purposes (pp. 70-73). That such activities occurred is not surprising. Auxiliary societies and ACS publications were geared more towards white society because colonizationists relied on white America for the money to cover colonization, place pressure on the government to support the movement, emancipation, and the diffusion of information to African Americans. Burin in fact makes these points (chapter 4) in examining the role of the Pennsylvania Colonization Society in the larger movement the ACS led.

The Pennsylvania Colonization Society (PCS), Burin contends, contributed most to the ACS objective by working hard to get funds (pp. 79-80). This theme is not given the prominence it deserved in a chapter mostly about the organizational goals of the Pennsylvania Colonization Society and its members' wishes to help emancipate slaves. While the interpretation fits within the argument that the ACS was an antislavery organization, there was considerable tension between the Pennsylvania society and the ACS—that tension no doubt a factor in the PCS's joining the New York society in 1838 to promote their own colony in Africa. The chapter also returns

to the theme of colonizationists "rationalizing" (p. 86) negative reports from Africa for the benefit of the movement. Again, historians need to consider the audience as much as the agenda for this state auxiliary. The PCS appealed to a white audience appalled by the growth in the free black population in Pennsylvania—that is what motivated them to donate money to promote manumission of slaves for emigration. They had to believe that freedom was going to be accompanied by emigration—"a constant theme in discussions of individual manumission and general emancipation" (p. ix). The role of the PCS in the context of this study seems overstated.

Opinions about the ACS and colonization as well as the success of the organization depended on the "location of the manumission, the magnitude of the emancipating operation, and the observer's proximity to the enterprise" (p. 100). The farther south one went and the greater the slave population, the more the resistance to the movement, especially after 1832. That a full third of the manumissions took place in Virginia (p. 101) supports Burin's assessment that support for colonization was strongest in the Border States. His examination of who was most likely to emancipate slaves for emigration will prove useful as will his analysis of the problems agents had in getting potential colonists to port (pp. 105-110). That opposition to colonization increased in the South as the Civil War approached is not a profound observation, however. Colonizationists' true failure was in containing the debate over slavery at the national level—one of the goals supporters established when the movement began.

Burin also addresses the legal questions raised by colonization-driven manumission. The two pressing legal questions dealt with whether the state had the power to circumscribe slaveholders' property rights (disowning slaves) and if the state would sanction slave agency (bondsmen being able to choose) in ACS operations (p. 121). The former was a question colonizationists' founding members recognized in 1816. Part of the reason they did not publicly address the question of slavery was their reluctance to interfere "with the legal rights and obligations of slavery."³ Burin traces these legal questions throughout the period under review and finds that legal opposition tended to increase as tensions over slavery traversed the national discourse. To no one's surprise, Upper South judges found in favor of the slaveholders and colonization, while further south, jurists eventually moved to repudiate the notion that slaves could choose between slavery in the United States and freedom in Africa (p. 136).

The final chapter analyzes the experience of freepersons in Liberia. This subject is very well documented with other studies. That settlers' experiences varied is clear from their correspondence to the colonization societies or to former masters. Many were disappointed while many others were satisfied with their new homes. Still others preferred a hard existence where they were truly free to a life of degradation in American society. Aside from showing that the settlers' negative accounts hurt colonizationists' recruiting efforts, this chapter seemed unrelated to the rest of the study, particularly if the overriding conclusion is that the ACS was an anti-slavery organization.

The conclusion ends the study by suggesting, "Colonization played a vital role in the Civil War" (p. 160). That Lincoln was a supporter of colonization is well known. The degree to which he pursued it is probably less so. While tracing the evolution of Lincoln's notion of colonization, what seems most clear in this portion of the analysis is that the Civil War removed colonization from the national spotlight as a solution to the slavery problem. The vital role of colonization in the war itself is unclear other than the fact that Lincoln clearly went through an evolution of his position on both colonization and slavery as well as what the war would ultimately be about. Certainly, the war and colonization did little to solve the real question—what was to be done with the African American?

His strong evidence notwithstanding, historians will undoubtedly contest the overall conclusions of Burin's

work. Likewise, the notion that colonization was a peculiar solution to slavery will spark debate, especially given the prevalence of auxiliary societies that sprang up around the nation after the ACS was created in 1816. That does not mean, however, that *The Peculiar Solution* is without merit. Ultimately, this is a study of how some white Americans struggled to resolve the great American paradox of freedom and slavery while giving finality to the question about the racial future of the United States. Burin makes a valuable contribution to the literature on the subject of colonization and slavery in the era before the Civil War. The true strength of the book is its examination of colonization at the state level. Here he shows the complexities of colonization as well as the problems facing slaveholders who dared to free their bondsmen. Yet, if the colonization movement was peculiar for anything, it was probably more so for its longevity. The ACS did, after all, continue to thrive and send African Americans to Liberia long after the peculiar institution's demise.

Notes

[1]. Staudenraus argued that the ACS was a humanitarian organization. P.J. Staudenraus, *The African Colonization Movement, 1816-1865* (Columbia: Columbia University Press, 1961).

[2]. Staudenraus, *The African Colonization Movement*, 28-29; *African Repository*, 1 (October 1825): 225, and 1 (January 1826): 335.

[3]. *African Repository*, 1 (January 1826): 335.

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