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Using Petitions to Teach Slavery

Damon W. Freeman

University of Pennsylvania, dfreeman@sp2.upenn.edu

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NOTE: At the time of publication, author Damon Freeman was affiliated with Indiana University. Currently December 2006, he is a faculty member of the School of Social Policy and Practice at the University of Pennsylvania.

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Using Petitions to Teach Slavery

Abstract

For many years, the historical experience of slavery has occupied a unique niche in the minds of Americans. For some, the presence of enslaved Africans, while unfortunate, did not necessarily mean that American democracy was flawed (after all, they argued, American slavery was not all that bad). Others were repulsed by the institution and labeled the United States Constitution an immoral document for protecting the horrors of slavery. Regardless of their view, many Americans turned to the words and experiences of slaves themselves to support their arguments.

Comments

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On the cover: Benjamin H. Latrobe's *An Overseer Doing His Duty, Near Fredericksburg, Virginia*. Courtesy of the Maryland Historical Society, Baltimore, Maryland.



Using Petitions to Teach Slavery

Damon Freeman

For many years, the historical experience of slavery has occupied a unique niche in the minds of Americans. For some, the presence of enslaved Africans, while unfortunate, did not necessarily mean that American democracy was flawed (after all, they argued, American slavery was not all that bad). Others were repulsed by the institution and labeled the United States Constitution an immoral document for protecting the horrors of slavery. Regardless of their view, many Americans turned to the words and experiences of slaves themselves to support their arguments.

This article looks at slavery petitions as one source for uncovering the experiences of enslaved African Americans and the general history of American slavery. From the 1770s to the 1860s, thousands of southerners petitioned their state legislatures asking for new laws to govern slave behavior, regulate interracial relations, and restrict the movement of free persons of color. Approximately three thousand of these petitions have survived over the years and have been collected by the Race and Slavery Petitions Project at the University of North Carolina at Greensboro <<http://history.uncg.edu/slaverypetitions/intro.html>>. The project's director, Professor Loren Schweninger, was interviewed by the OAH's *Talking History* radio program on 15 October 2001.

In his interview, Schweninger described the unique quality of these sources for understanding the history of slavery. Unlike the celebrated narratives of former slaves such as Frederick Douglass, Harriet Jacobs, and others, slavery petitions represented the immediate testimony of persons at the time. They are also verifiable sources of information since most petitions had cosigners who would attest to the validity of the petitions' claims. Schweninger also emphasized that petitions have an edge over the famous Federal Writers Project interviews with former slaves during the 1930s. Due to the natural loss of memory over time, many interviewees would have forgotten important details by the time they were in their eighties and nineties. In addition, many of them were children at the time of the Civil War. Their youthful age

might have softened the impact that slavery had on them compared to adults. Petitions are therefore invaluable sources for studying slavery.

Analyzing the many petitions proposing changes in existing laws or a new law brings out a wealth of information. Petitioners frequently alluded to laws that did not work in regulating slave behavior and underscored the importance of the institution as a form of property. For instance, a South Carolina magistrate petitioned the state legislature asking for ten pounds reimbursement. He had guarded a slave who was to be burnt at the stake for murder. To prepare for the execution, he purchased tar, kindling, a large pole, and chains. Expecting to be compensated for the materials since he had taken "care" of the condemned slave, the petitioner emphasized the centrality of the idea of slaves as property. Other petitions requested manumission, free blacks often filing petitions on behalf of other slaves. Free blacks also petitioned to protest laws circumscribing their activities.

Schweninger stressed that further research was necessary to determine under what conditions would legislatures grant freedom, how they handled petitions, and for what reasons would they refuse to grant such petitions. The unfinished second phase of the study, analyzing and cataloguing fifteen thousand county court petitions from across the South, might shed light on the subject.

Classroom Exercise

There are multiple ways in which petitions can be used in the classroom. Whether in United States history survey courses or more specialized courses on the history of slavery, it might be fruitful to use them at different points during the semester or quarter rather than devoting one class to the subject of petitions. Slavery petitions covered every conceivable topic from the American Revolution to the Civil War, including free blacks, compensation, children, education, slave resistance, women's property rights, religion, colonization in Africa, the War of 1812, and even international affairs. Although most petitions

that survived are from the Upper South, a significant portion from South Carolina, Mississippi, and Texas ensure geographic breadth. This exercise should take two class periods of fifty minutes each with a homework assignment and, due to the difficult language used in the petitions, is recommended for high school and college level classes only.

Day One

Teachers should start by giving a brief lecture on the growth of slavery during the 1820s to provide historical context. In particular, they should focus on the aborted 1822 slave conspiracy in South Carolina led by Denmark Vesey. Facts addressed in the lecture should include the size and scope of slavery in South Carolina and the nation, the demographic composition of the conspirators, and the response by state governments across the South to the conspiracy (1). The states of Delaware and Mississippi should also be covered. In focusing on Delaware, Mississippi, and South Carolina, it is important that students understand the regional differences in slavery and what slaves would have experienced themselves. At the same time, they should know the national and global factors that led to slavery's expansion into southwestern areas. Students must take careful notes for the homework assignment. The lecture should last no more than twenty minutes.

Following the introductory lecture, the class should listen to Schwenger's interview. Lasting about twenty minutes, students at the end should be able to: 1) articulate what slavery petitions were; 2) why they were sent; 3) who sent them; and 4) provide one or two examples from the recording. This can be done through class discussion or perhaps in the form of a short quiz, but teachers should leave ample time to distribute and explain the homework assignment.

Homework

Divide the class into three groups. All students should get copies of each petition. Petition One describes an 1823 proposal by the South Carolina Association to prevent the entry of all free blacks into the state. Petition Two features an 1824 request from Andrew Burland, described as a free mulatto, to the Mississippi state legislature asking for the same citizenship rights as any white man. Petition Three, from the Wilmington Union Colonization Society, calls for the removal of all free blacks in the state to west Africa in 1827.

Following the distribution of the petitions, the class will receive one question to ponder as they do their reading: Should slaves and free blacks have national restrictions imposed on their activities? Students in Group One will answer in the affirmative, while Group Two students will answer no. As they read the three petitions, they should construct arguments that support their position. Group Three students will act as a congressional committee assigned to hear the arguments for and against restrictions. They should prepare a series of questions designed for each side based on their reading of the three petitions. In addition, all students regardless of their grouping should draw on their notes from the introductory lecture and the *Talking History* interview. If teachers wish, they may require a one to two page paper from

students that outlines the points each would make to support their position. This may be helpful in grading those students who might be reluctant to speak in class.

Day Two

At the beginning of the class, teachers should allow each group to huddle together for fifteen minutes to prepare for the class discussion. Students in each group should compare and contrast the points or questions each individual compiled the previous night. Groups One and Two will select no more than three spokespersons each to make their arguments. Group Three students should select six spokespersons, three to question Group One and three to question Group Two. Group Three students should also choose at least five questions to ask each side. Teachers should circulate to answer questions and to help with the process.

After preparation for the discussion, Group One spokespersons will have seven and a half minutes to make their arguments in support of restrictions. The first Group Three spokespersons can question Group One participants, but the discussion should be moderated by teachers. At the end of Group One's time, Group Two will have the same amount of time to state their opposition to restrictions. The second Group Three spokespersons should question Group Two. At the end of the group discussions, Group Three students will meet as a whole and take a quick vote on which side won the debate.

During the last twenty minutes of class, teachers should conclude by having a general discussion about slavery and the use of slavery petitions as sources. Such questions may include: 1) What can petitions tell us about slavery? 2) Are they reliable sources of recorded events or do they reflect the biases of the petitioners? Should state legislatures have relied on them to make political decisions? 3) Most importantly, what do these petitions reveal about American democracy? How can the concept of people as property be reconciled with the national belief in "life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness?"

As Professor Schwenger stated in the *Talking History* interview, the use of slavery petitions is an invaluable tool in understanding the history of American slavery. Moreover, understanding slavery is essential towards developing multi-cultural awareness in today's student population. With the help of enthusiastic and passionate instructors, students will begin to appreciate and comprehend slavery's legacy in modern America. □

Endnote

- (1) For further information about Vesey's life and influence, readers should consult Douglas R. Egerton, *He Shall Go Out Free, The Lives of Denmark Vesey* (Madison, Wisconsin: Madison House, 1999) and David Robertson, *Denmark Vesey, A Buried History* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1999).

Damon Freeman is a Ph.D candidate in history at Indiana University. He has taught courses in American and African American history at the high school and college level. His research focuses on the Civil Rights Movement, social policy, and African American intellectuals.

Petition 1

South Carolina, ca. December 1823

To the HONOURABLE the Members of the SENATE of the State of SOUTH-CAROLINA; THE MEMORIAL Of the Officers and Members of the South-Carolina Association;

SHEWETH,

That a complaint amongst our citizens, being of late years very prevalent, that the laws enacted against free persons of colour, were not executed; your Memorialists have recently formed themselves into an Association, for the purpose of aiding in their enforcement, by giving to the constituted authorities, the earliest information of their infraction. The fundamental principle of their Society, being, OBEDIENCE TO THE LAWS, and reverence for the civil magistrate, and their labours being felt, to be evidently beneficial to the State at large, they have had the good wishes of their fellow-citizens generally, and their Association has increased, in numbers and respectability, beyond their most sanguine expectations.

In the prosecution of their object, your Memorialists have had ample opportunities, from the personal experience of their Standing Committee, of perceiving the defects in some of the these laws: and they have thought it their duty, with the utmost deference to the Legislature, to notice a few of the most prominent, and to petition for redress.

In the first place, there can scarcely exist in our southern community, an evil of greater magnitude, to the country at large, than the constant intercourse, which is maintained between the blacks of the North and the South. The means of communications has been confined, principally to the City of Charleston: and hence it is, that in the interior, there is not the same knowledge of the danger to the State at large, from this intercourse. Not only are the greatest facilities afforded, to such as would inveigle away our slaves, by the employment of blacks on board of the passage vessels and packets, whereby this evil has increased of late to an alarming degree; but abundant opportunities are offered these people, for introducing among our slaves, the moral contagion of their pernicious principles and opinions. These evils are the more to be dreaded, because, there appears every prospect of this intercourse increasing. The difficulty on the part of the free negroes at the North, in procuring employments suited to their habits and inclinations, and the consequent low wages at which they may be procured, has induced many ship owners there, to employ them, in preference to whites. In one instance the Liverpool

Line Ship Canada arrived here from New-York (in June last) with her whole crew, fifteen in number, all black, and the Brig Maine from Boston, has also since come into this port, with her crew also black. There is scarcely a vessel which arrives in our port from the North, which has not two or three, or more black persons employed, as stewards, cooks, or mariners; and the belief is general, that were it not for the obstacles, offered by the informations and prosecutions of your Memorialists, most of the vessels coastwise, would, in a few years, be manned principally by free negroes and persons of colour from the Northern and Eastern States. The consequence of this, to our slave property, and to the peace and quiet of the State, must be obvious to all. Now too, that so many different lines of packets are established, between this port and New-York, and the opportunities for embarking are occurring almost every day in the year, there can be no security, that our slaves, will not be seduced from the service of their masters, in greater numbers than heretofore, and that the Abolition Societies of the North, will not be encouraged to persevere in their designs, to intrigue, through this class of persons, with our slave population. Heretofore the societies there, have confined their views, to the abolition of slavery in the particular State, or section of the Union, in which they originated. But of late, their views have been greatly extended, To permit a free intercourse to exist, under such circumstances, between our slaves and their free persons of colour, would be, to invite new attempts at insurrection. To your Memorialists, who, from the agents which they employ, have the best knowledge of the proceedings of the blacks at the North, and of the projects of their adherents and friends there, the evil presents itself, in a form truly appalling, to every owner of lands and negroes.

But it is not from North alone, that we are threatened with doctrines subversive of our peace. In all the British West-India Islands, with scarcely an exception, there is, at this moment, considerable inquietude, in consequence of the desire of a strong party in the British Parliament, to interfere with the regulations of their slaves. In the Island of Grenada, a memorial was presented by the free persons of colour, setting forth, "that as loyal and dutiful subjects, they ought to be admitted into a participation, in the rights and privileges to which every Englishman is entitled, under



This is the original petition sent to the South Carolina senate. (Image courtesy of the Department of History, University of North Carolina, Greensboro.)

the British Constitution." The Committee to whom the House of Assembly referred this memorial, have reported, "that a bill should be brought into the House, to repeal an existing law in that colony, so far as the rights and privileges of the free coloured inhabitants are affected thereby, and also that the elective franchise ought to be extended, to free persons of colour, possessing the qualification required by law." In Antigua and St. Christophers, similar petitions have been presented to their Colonial Assemblies, the fate of which is not known. In the Island of Jamaica, a similar question was intended to be made, and such has been the uneasiness in some of the Islands, that some persons, it is said, have actually removed into the United States with their families. But, in Demerary, as appears by the Governor's proclamation of the 19th August, the United Colony of Demerary and Essquebo, was put under martial law, in consequence of a very serious attempt, at a general insurrection. From official documents, it appears, that on the East coast of Demerary, near one thousand armed negroes were embodied, but afterwards defeated and dispersed by the military, with the loss of about one hundred and fifty negroes; and by the Royal Gazette of that Colony of the 28th August, it also appears that the convictions were numerous, and the examples prompt and terrible. In the Island of Barbadoes, the Governor in August last, was obliged to issue his proclamation, to contradict a report, that the slaves were to be emancipated; and later accounts represent, that they were then in alarm, in the expectation of an insurrection. From other Islands, other reports on the same subject, entitled to great credit, have from time to time reached different parts of the United States; but, as they come to your Memorialists in no official form, they forbear to mention particulars. Your Memorialists, however, repeat with the utmost confidence, that at no period of the history of the West-Indies, has there been such uneasiness and excitement, and angry feeling on the part of the whites, and such insubordination amongst the slaves, as has been experienced of late in that quarter, attributable altogether to the proceedings of the African Associations in London, and to the influence of Mr. WILBERFORCE in Parliament, whose object is now open and avowed, that the work of abolishing slavery in the Colonies, ought immediately to be commenced. The conductors of the public journals in all the Islands, unhesitatingly charge the intemperate enthusiasts in and out of the British Parliament, as the sole, and immediate cause of all the disturbances, and from several of the Colonial Assemblies, remonstrances and addresses have been forwarded to the Mother Country, in spirit and feeling, not greatly inferior to a Declaration of Independence.

With such proceedings in these Islands, and with the known habits and sentiments, of the coloured people of the North, aided and encouraged as they are, by a portion of their white population, your Memorialists cannot conceive a measure, which can give greater security to the State in general, than to prevent ANY FREE COLOURED PERSON FROM ANY PART OF THE WORLD ever entering again into the limits of the State of South-Carolina, by LAND OR BY WATER. It has been the most anxious desire of your Memorialists, to avail themselves of the existing laws for the purpose of stopping an intercourse, which they feel to be so ruinous to the country; and defective as the laws are, by reason of the mildness of their penalties, your Memorialists have, nevertheless, at considerable expense to their Society, greatly succeeded. Many masters of vessels begin to bring white seamen into our port, and with a little aid from the Legislature, your Memorialists are confident, that by the excellence of their organization, and by means of their incessant informations, and prosecutions, it would be in their power, to bring to justice all violators of these laws, and to suppress the intercourse for ever hereafter. They confidently hope, that every man who has a family, or property to protect, would rejoice at such an event. That the Legislative body may be apprized, of the extent, to which this intercourse may be maintained, your Memorialists beg leave to submit, that since the organization of their Society, which is not much more than two months, they have on one subject alone, caused the Act of the Legislature to be executed against one hundred and fifty-four coloured persons, who have entered the State, in defiance of its enactments. Of these, there were

From Northern Ports,	118
the West-Indies,	15
Europe,	<u>21</u>
	154

If in so short a time, and principally during a season, when there is little or no trade, so many have arrived here, some idea may be formed, of the number which must enter into our limits, in the course of the year.

In entering upon their important duties, your Memorialists have had to struggle, with a great and an increasing difficulty. This arises from the inadequacy of the law, to prevent its re-iterated infraction, by some who have already been subjected to its penalties. Amongst those who have entered the State contrary to law, some have been confined in jail twice, and some thrice for the same offence. The penalty of mere confinement during the stay of the vessel in port, which in the case of Northern vessels, generally does not exceed a few days, seems to be disregarded by many, who would cheerfully submit to this temporary deprivation of liberty, rather than forego the irresistible temptation which these people have to come to a Southern country. As the act now stands, there is no penalty upon the captain, who brings into the State a person of colour. The penalty only occurs if the master refuses or neglects to carry him away; your Memorialists would, therefore, respectfully suggest, that an adequate fine be imposed upon the master of the vessel in the first instance; and that, for the first offence, the seaman should be confined in jail, during which confinement he should receive regular notice from a magistrate, never to enter again into the State; and that if he shall ever return to the State, after being regularly warned and sent away, that he should be liable to corporal punishment, or to be sold for a term of years. With these alterations in the law and by extending the act to all the descendants of negroes, whether on the father's or mother's side, your Memorialists believe, the evil would be at once suppressed, whilst as the law stands at present, it can never be enforced, so as to be productive of the good, contemplated by the Legislature.

The intercourse being so far stopped, that no person of colour from abroad shall ever again land on our shores; your Memorialists would pray to have the law revised, which prohibits free persons of colour from visiting the Northern and Eastern States; nor is it less essential to extend the provisions of the act, so as to prevent slaves who are carried out of the State by their masters, from being returned again into it, if at any time during their absence, they have been in the West-Indies, or in any part of Europe, or within the limits of States North, of the Potomac, or the Susquehanah. Your Memorialists lastly, most respectfully pray your honourable body, that you would give your earliest attention, to the state of our laws, respecting slaves and free persons of colour generally. Most of these laws were passed, prior to the adoption of our State Constitution, and when we were a Colony of Great Britain. Some of their provisions are useless, some obsolete, and many require modification. To adapt them to the present state of society, and to the new relations in which we stand to the rest of the world, would be productive of great public good. Passing from the dependency of a Colony, to the rank of a sovereign State, and at liberty to resort to any measures which may be necessary for our own security, Your Memorialists cannot but hope, that the dangers

which menace our prosperity as a Slave-holding-State, will be met by a corresponding energy in the laws. Your Memorialists, without presuming to point out the alterations which may be necessary and proper, most respectfully suggest and pray your honourable body, that a general revision of these laws should take place, with all the assistance, that time, deliberation and research, and experience and talents can give to the subject; so that our magistrates and citizens hereafter, instead of being compelled to look into hundreds of acts and parts of acts passed in the course of a century, may be presented by the Legislature, with one CONSOLIDATED NEGRO ACT, or code, for the government of this class of people; embracing the provisions of every previous act, which may heretofore have been enacted, and which policy requires to be continued, and repealing, at the same time, every other act or part of an act, in relation to the subject which is to be found on the Statute Book. An act of this nature and character, drawn up with great care and with the subject well distributed and arranged, and in which the framers of it, shall avail themselves, as well "of the reproaches of our enemies, as the suggestions of our friends," and having in view at the same time, every regulation or plan of discipline, which is essential to our own preservation, will give security to the master, without taking away from the protection of the slave; and whilst it shall enable every planter and citizen, at one glance to see his rights and his duties, and thus be a public convenience, it will, in the humble opinion of your Memorialists, give more confidence to the capitalist, and more permanency to the quiet and good order of our slave population, than can be expected, under our present system.

And your Memorialists, as in duty bound, will ever pray. [signed] Keat Simons, President On behalf of the Officers and Members of the South-Carolina Association.

[A total of 334 names was printed on the next page of this typeset petition.]

Source: Records of the General Assembly, Petition of the South Carolina Association to the Senate, ca. December 1823, ND #1415, SCDAAH. Granted. PAR #11382224.

Petition 2

Jefferson County, Mississippi, ca. 1824

The petition of Andrew Barland of Jefferson County To the Honble the Senate and House of Representatives of the State of Mississippi; Your petitioner Humbly Sheweth That he is the offspring of a white man by a mulatto woman- That he was born in Adams County and is now about thirty nine years of age, that his father gave him a decent education and property enough to be independant, that he intermarried with a respectable white family, by which said wife he has two children, that he has resided about sixteen years in the County of Jefferson and is well known to the most respectable Citizens of said County, that he has almost in every case & by every means, been treated and received as well as tho he had been a white ?man and of fair character; that he has been summoned as a juror very often and served as Grand & Petit Juror and often given testimony in open court as a Legal witness- that his vote at elections has often been taken & for many years your petitioner has enjoyed all the priviledges of a free white Citizen, but a controversy with a bad man of the name of Joseph Hawk caused an exception to be taken to your petitioners testimony on account of his blood, but with pride your petitioner can state, that altho his oath was refused the jury who tried the cause gave a verdict in favor of the word of your petitioner altho opposed by the oath of his adversary, a white man- Your petitioner further sheweth to your Honble bodies that his education, his habits, his principles and his society are all identified with your views, that he holds slaves and can Know no other interest than that which is common to the white population, that his sisters have all married white men of fair and respectable standing and have always recd. the same respect shewn to white women of the same station in society- Your petitioner prays your Honble. bodies, to extend to your petitioner such priviledgs as his Count[r]y men may think him worthy to possess, and them and ?to their recommendation your petitioner most confidently refers your Hon. bodies & your petitioner will ever pray. [signed] Andrew Barland We whose names are hereto subscribed have know[n] Andrew Barland for many years, some have known him from his childhood others as long as they have lived in the County, and view him as a most excellant man honest, moral, industrious and worthy the granting of priviledges of a free man, and recommend him for that purpose, but should the

[signed] P. B. Harrison R. Dunbar Jun. Tho. Hinds Philip Dixon B. M. Bullen K.H. Holmes Jas. G. Wood Wm M. Green James Dunbar Jacob Stampley-Se[n]ior Filmer W. Green Abner Pipes Wm Harper

Source: Legislative Petitions, Petition of Andrew Barland of Jefferson County to the Mississippi General Assembly, ca. 1824, RG 47, boxes 16-7, MDAH; Certificate, P.B. Harrison, et al., ca 1824. No act was passed. PAR #11082401.

Petition 3

Wilmington, Delaware, ca. 1827

To the honourable the Senate and House of Representatives of the State of Delaware.

The Memorial of the Wilmington Union Colonization Society respectfully solicits your attention to the condition of the free negroes and free mulattoes in this country. Your memorialists are greatly mistaken, if this condition does not present to our Statesmen a subject deserving their most anxious care and requiring all their wisdom.

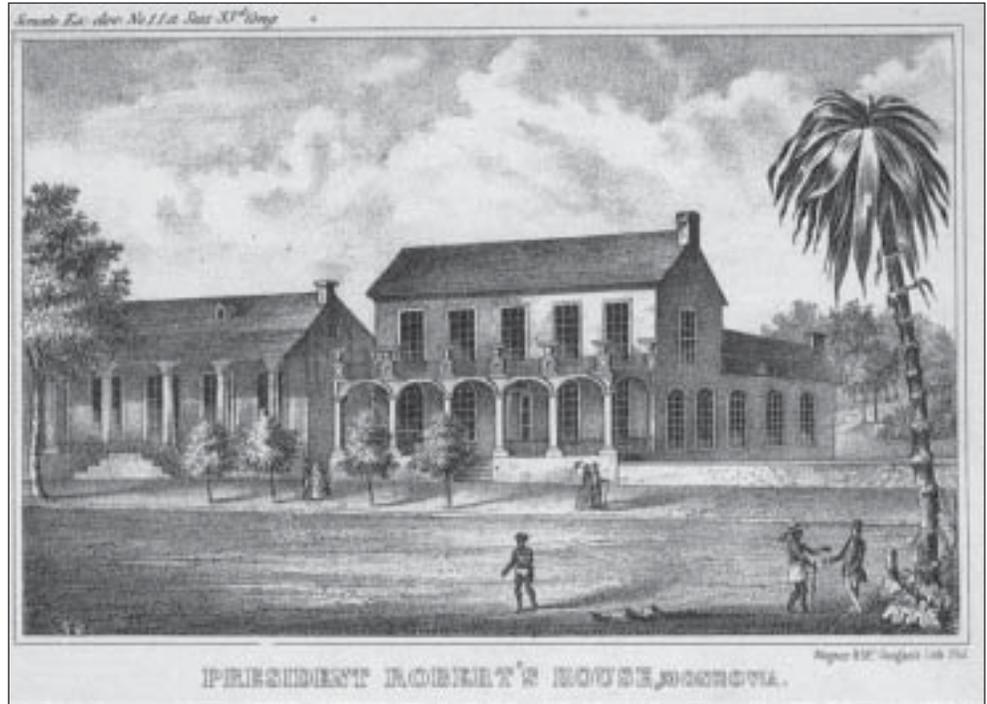
The free people of colour now constitute a considerable part of our population; and they are fast increasing. Their natural increase is as rapid, as that of white persons; and every year, many are added to their number by the enfranchisement of slaves.

These people are in one of the most important, if not the most important, classes of our population — the labouring class; and it is not necessary to remark, that they do in various ways affect this class. The effect produced by the diminution of respectability, not to say degradation, of the labouring class, by which many, who would be the most useful members of the community, are driven from their proper sphere, to oppress society with their burden instead of profiting it by their labour, has consequences not easily calculated.

There is a more important view of this subject. We have liberated the free people of colour from physical restraint. So far as conduct is concerned,—the right to pursue the dictates of their own judgements or inclinations,—they have all the freedom secured by our constitution and laws. But we do not allow to them the means of moral restraint, without which freedom will not be discreetly used. Our laws do not and cannot permit them to enjoy the most important civil privileges. They cannot elect nor be elected to any office; they cannot serve on a jury, so that trial by jury, a most important feature of which is trial by one's peers, is not allowed to them; they can not be heard as witnesses in a court of justice in opposition to the interest or in contradiction of the testimony of a white person. Our manners are and must be as unfavorable to them as our laws. We will not permit them to associate with us. We will not tolerate any notion of equality with them. We will not act in reference to them nor will we suffer them to act in relation to us, except upon the unquestioned principle, that they are in a state of degradation, to which we will not descend, and from which they must not expect to rise. The consequence is, that those powerful motives, which form the palladium of morals and the safe-guard even of laws, and which enable men to be free without abusing freedom, the love of reputation, the desire of respectability, the dread of reproach, the value of character, are either unknown to them or have little influence.

In these observations your Memorialists intend no accusation against our laws or our manners. Our separation from these people is the effect of moral causes, the foundation of which we could not safely remove; amalgamation would demoralize society; the consequence of breaking up the present distinctions would be not to raise the free coloured people, but to sink all to a state of degradation yet unknown. Your Memorialists believe, that every one will assent to the correctness of their conclusion, that the increase of these people among us, as they must increase if they remain among us, is an alarming consideration. If we will reflect upon the progress of this increase, we shall see, that their numbers in a few years must be troublesome, independent of the deleterious influence, which has been noticed, upon the labouring class, and independent of the danger threatened by this growing evil.

This danger is of two kinds. As to one;—will not crimes increase as rapidly, as their numbers?—As to the other,—brought up, as these people are, in the sight of our privileges, will they consent to be excluded from them?—Numbers will give power,—and at all events, will afford facility for secret mischief, if not encouragement to open violence. Are not these people by their very condition our enemies? Do we, or can we, bind them to us or to our laws by any ties of common feeling or reciprocal obligation, by the influence of gratitude or respect? Must we they not feel themselves to be, as we treat them, aliens to our common weal? When therefore your Memorialists ask the question,—Will prudence permit such a heterogeneous population to take root in our soil and grow up into power among us?—does not the reflecting mind anticipate every argument, which they could urge for the removal of these people? We ought not to conceal this evil from ourselves.



The American Colonization Society sent African Americans to Liberia, an American colony along the coast of western Africa. The colonists and their supporters tried to recreate their American experiences, as we see in this lithograph of President Roberts's House in Monrovia. ("President Roberts's House, Monrovia", Philadelphia: Wagner & McGuigan's, ca. 1850. Library of Congress Lithograph Prints and Photographs Division [12].)

Let us consider, that this condition is still in infancy; that the real character of this population is not yet disclosed. The negro, when emancipated from slavery, retains many of the habits of thinking, which had formed themselves in bondage. Among these, there are always fear and deference, sometimes affectionate regard for white people. We have not yet reached the time, when these habits have not a general and powerful influence. They are however wearing off by degrees; time is planting other feelings in their place; and he is a careless observer, who does not see, that the character of this population is undergoing, in the particular, to which allusion is here made, a constant change. In illustration of some of our these remarks, your Memorialists could cite the laws of several States expelling free negroes from their limits. They will mention only the Act of our own General Assembly of 1811 prohibiting free negroes from coming from other States into this State. The difficulty heretofore has respected the removal of the free people of colour. The question has been, how or where can they be removed? The answer to this question will, for its reception, depend upon the opinion, which is entertained of the necessity of the measure. If we are indifferent about a measure, a slight inconvenience attending its execution may seem to be an insurmountable obstacle. That this population can be removed from our soil, and that this removal can be effected with ease by the power of this nation, your Memorialists consider to be perfectly certain.

This certainty, they believe, will be apparent to every one, who will examine the subject. The American Colonization Society has obtained on the coast of Africa a place to receive these people. It is proved by experience, that the climate suits their constitution. The soil is fertile, beyond what we have any knowledge of, and the country is pleasant and most advantageously situated. There is ample room for all the coloured people in the United States, and their posterity, for generations,—place for the growth of a mighty nation. Nature herself points to Africa, whence the progenitors of these people were brought, and where is still their kind, as the place country, to which they should be restored.

The American Colonization Society was organized in December 1816. In December 1821 they succeeded in obtaining a suitable district of country for their purpose. It was to be expected, that an undertaking, the chief operations of which were upon another continent, would be attended by some disasters. The history of the settlement of many of these States would fully illustrate this remark. It was also to be expected, that the change from the climate of this country to that of Africa would have no inconsiderable effect upon the health even of people of colour. At first, it was not known how to guard against the effects of this change, and there were no conveniencies [sic] upon the spot to aid any endeavours for this object. The society has had to contend with difficulties and has surmounted them. It is now known, when is the best season for arrival upon the coast of Africa; and what measures should be pursued for preserving the health of the emigrants.

A colony has been planted; and it flourishes. It is proved by experiment, that these people can be removed to that country and comfortably and advantageously settled. The expenses of removal and the time consumed by the voyage are also ascertained by experiment. The removal of the first emigrants cost, for each, fifty dollars. This expense has been gradually diminished and the expense of the last removals did not exceed on an average ten dollars for each emigrant. The present perfect state of navigation renders the voyage of little account. A vessel departing from this country in first part of February will reach this colony during March. Can there be a doubt, when we see, that this voyage can be performed in less than two months and at the expense of ten dollars for each emigrant, that this nation can remove, and with facility, this population?

The question has been suggested, Will these people consent to go? Your Memorialists might answer this question by stating the fact, that this Society has always found more desirous to go, than they had means to remove. They however say confidently, that if so much of the resources of the National Government were applied to this object as to make facilities for this removal general and common, there can be no doubt, that this whole population would flow in a current in that direction. It would be understood, that in Africa, the land of their fathers, are fertile fields and pleasant skies, and that a nation is forming there, in which they can establish themselves in comfort and independence, in the undisturbed enjoyment of the rights of man.

The view, which your Memorialists have taken, concerns our own safety, the measures, which enlightened policy requires us to pursue? May they not bring before you another view? May they not ask, Is there no obligation upon us to restore these people to their country? We have emancipated them from slavery; but we have given to them, we can give to them, none of the advantages of freedom; none of those great advantages, of which if we were deprived, we should deem ourselves slaves. Can we permit them to remain in this state of humiliation? Do not the highest considerations require, that if we can not admit them to the participation of the rights of freemen on our own soil, we ought to place them, where they will not be driven from society and set without the influence of every noble principle, by the very circumstances of their condition?

The Wilmington Union Colonization Society deeply impressed with the importance of this subject have deemed it their duty to bring it before the honourable the Senate and House of Representatives. The course which the National Government will pursue in relation to it must depend upon public opinion; and this opinion will be greatly influenced by deliberations and resolves of the State Legislatures.

It is among your highest duties to guard against occasions of evil; to take care reasonably to eradicate whatever may threaten calamity to ourselves or to posterity. Your Memorialists believe, that no subject deserves more careful attention, than that, which they have now submitted to you. They are satisfied, that you will not let it pass without examination, and that you will consider of the best means to promote the measure, which your Memorialists have briefly explained and which they believe to be of vital concern to the happiness and prosperity of this country. By Order of the Society

[signed] Robert Porter Chairman

Source: Petition of the Wilmington Union Colonization Society to the Senate and House of Representatives of Delaware, ca. 1827, General Assembly, Legislative Papers, DSA. Resolution Passed. PAR #10382701.