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"An Object Best Worthy of Succor": White Virginia Women and the African Colonization Movement, 1825-1840

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“AN OBJECT BEST WORTHY OF SUCCOUR:”

White Virginia Women and the African Colonization Movement, 1825-1840

A Thesis

Presented To

The Faculty of the Department of History

The College of William and Mary in Virginia

In Partial Fulfillment

Of the Requirements for the Degree of

Master of Arts

by

Caroline S. Hasenyager

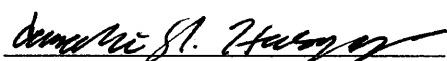
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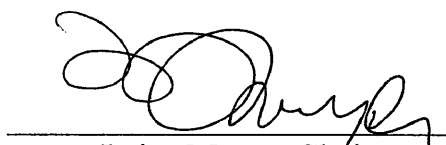
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Master of Arts


Caroline S. Hasenyager

Approved, May 2004


Leisa Meyer, Chair


Carol Sheriff

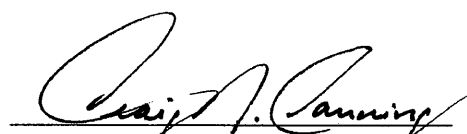

Craig Canning

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ABSTRACT

In Virginia in the early 1820s, the idea that elite, white women—respectable Southern “ladies”—would enter the political realm in significant numbers seemed both unlikely and unappealing. That, by the 1840s, they would be enthusiastically recruited into the rough world of partisan politics was virtually unthinkable. The African Colonization Movement, which flourished in the intervening decades, played a vital role in introducing these women to the public domain. As it was related to issues—slavery, emancipation, slave revolts and the potential dangers of free African-American communities—that were increasingly understood to be as relevant to the domestic realm of women as to the public world of men, colonization was a cause that could be espoused by elite women with little danger to their respectability. At the same time, a new characterization of women, drawn largely from social and religious views expressed during the revival of Evangelical Christianity known as the Second Great Awakening, but also from the post-Revolution focus on female education, was beginning to change ideas about their capabilities and obligations to society. The notion that women were capable of greater virtue and were particularly suited to imparting morality to society gained prominence and lent credibility to female colonizationists. These women raised large sums of money for the cause, founded auxiliary societies to spread the movement across the state, and sought to foster a genuine community with religious and educational resources rather than a simple outpost in Liberia. Contemporaries recognized the important role played by elite women in the significant if ultimately short-lived success in Virginia of the colonization movement, and this realization of the invaluable assistance women could provide to political causes helped to pave the way toward women’s increased involvement in antebellum Southern politics.

“AN OBJECT BEST WORTHY OF SUCCOUR:”

White Virginia Women and the African Colonization Movement, 1825-1840

Introduction

Despite strong cultural prohibitions against the involvement of women in the public domain, elite, white Virginia women were, at the start of the nineteenth century, increasingly making their presence and opinions known outside of the domestic realm. By 1840, many of these women—on the basis of their race, economic position and lineage—would be invited into the political realm by men anxious to ally their causes with the supposed greater virtue of these “ladies.” Many of these women enthusiastically embraced this role, however marginal it may have been, in partisan politics. The significant participation of upper- and middle-class white Virginia women in the African Colonization movement played an important part in the changing perception, held by women as well as men, of Southern women’s proper place in the public sphere. While the ideal of passive, domestic womanhood remained, it was increasingly unrealistic, as another model was steadily gaining ground. A controversial characterization of women, drawn primarily from social and religious views expressed during the Second Great Awakening but also from the post-Revolution focus on female education, was beginning to change ideas about women’s capabilities and obligations to society. By the 1830s, the notion that the piety and morality of women required them to look beyond the confines of home and family and to exercise their beneficent influence on the greater community had come to have tremendous influence on Virginia society. Colonization was not the only public or charitable cause in which these women engaged in the first half of the nineteenth century, but it was in many ways the most significant. It combined women’s long-standing charitable activities with more conventional religious ones, and also

provided an increasingly socially acceptable way for them to become involved in their state's most important and contentious political issue.

The colonization movement was widespread, diverse in its makeup and claimed many adherents all over the United States in the antebellum period, and yet it has received comparatively little attention from historians. The movement has been especially neglected by historians of women. Broader works about white women and the slavery debate focus almost exclusively on Northerners. A chapter of Elizabeth R. Varon's *We Mean to be Counted: White Women and Politics in Antebellum Virginia* contains the most thorough discussion of the colonization activities of Virginia women, but Varon herself explicitly argues that the subject merits further study.¹ The activities and influence of the colonization societies were also critical elements of the history of slavery debate in Virginia and, to a lesser but still significant extent, were involved with the spread of evangelical religion in the South in the early nineteenth century.

The Second Great Awakening was one of the most influential social movements of the era, and an exploration of a particular political movement that it so greatly affected is worth pursuing. It is difficult to overstate the importance of this religious revival, particularly to white, middle-class women. The theories it produced regarding women's proper duties in society both inspired and justified the political activities of many such women. The Second Great Awakening was especially potent in the South where tradition mandated that women of any race or class did not belong in the public sphere, and especially that elite, white women must be carefully protected from its corrupting influences. Above all, the close connection between white women's colonization activities and the Virginia slavery debate renders this a consequential topic. Starting in the 1820s, slavery was the most significant political question in the state and would remain so until the Civil War. The importance of achieving, through a greater

¹ Elizabeth R. Varon, "This Most Important Charity," chapter two, *We Mean to be Counted: White Women & Politics in Antebellum Virginia* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1998).

understanding of the opinions and activities of women of the white elite, as full as view as possible of the debate is indisputable.

CHAPTER I

“THE MOST BENEFICIAL RESULTS FROM THEIR ACTIVE ZEAL:” THE MANY FORMS OF WOMEN’S COLONIZATION SUPPORT

Sources describing the political opinions and actions of antebellum Virginia’s elite, white women, regarding colonization or anything else, are both scattered and scarce. Women’s comments on politics, usually referring to slavery and its alternatives, the great political issue of the day, are found in the same letters and diaries in which family matters and social events are discussed, and often occupy just as much space. Many women were hesitant to openly proclaim their opinions, fearful of ridicule or condemnation. Of the women who published their opinions or made donations to colonization societies, many chose to use pseudonyms or requested that their names be withheld. This practice makes it difficult to determine exactly who these women were and how representative they were of the white female community in Virginia as a whole. However, enough other evidence survives, largely through the women’s correspondence, society donation records and membership and officer lists to prove that they existed in significant numbers, even if most other information about them—their names, social and economic status—is lost to us.

One of the best surviving sources documenting women’s involvement in colonization is the *African Repository and Colonial Journal*, the official journal of the American Colonization Society (ACS). It contains correspondence from auxiliary

societies and individual sympathizers, records of subscriptions to the Journal, relevant articles from other newspapers and periodicals, and monthly donation lists. From this source it is clear that white, generally elite, Virginia women were a steady, if not overwhelming presence in the movement—a significant and consistent minority if not an actual majority. Female auxiliaries to the American and Virginia Colonization Societies were founded across the state, though the most prominent appear to have been those in Albemarle County, Petersburg, and the joint societies of Richmond and Manchester and Fredericksburg and Falmouth. The women of these societies not only raised money to send free black people to Liberia, but also worked to improve conditions of life for those settlers and promoted Christianity and educational opportunities in the colony. The new societies were often so influential that they generated auxiliaries of their own.²

The influence of these women and the societies they founded is all the more remarkable given the fact that married women in the antebellum period had very little control over their own property. Under Virginia law, little different from the English Common Law from which it had been taken, a woman's property, upon marriage, was automatically and entirely transferred to her husband, and if a wife worked outside the home, he controlled her wages as well. In effect, married women had no legal existence apart from their husbands.³ As historian Suzanne Lebsock has shown, some married women in Virginia were beginning to gain greater control over their property, but it was a slow and piecemeal process. In equity courts, as opposed to common law, married women could acquire a separate estate. Many fathers took advantage of this loophole to secure their daughters' inheritances—usually as a token against the possible

² An example of this is the Louisville Female Association for Promoting the Education of Females in Liberia, which was founded as an auxiliary to the Colonization Society of Richmond and Manchester. The founders' intention was to focus solely on funding education in the colony, a matter that had come increasingly to the attention of the parent society. *The African Repository and Colonial Journal*, (Washington: American Colonization Society, reprinted by Kirkus Reprint Corporation, New York, 1967), vol. 9, July 1833, p. 149.

³ Suzanne Lebsock, *The Free Women of Petersburg: Status and Culture in a Southern Town, 1784-1860* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1984), p. 23.

incompetence of their husbands—but these privileged women were still a minority.⁴ For the most part, married women were entirely dependent on their husbands for access to money, husbands who may or may not have been amenable to their requests. The contributions of both single and married women appear in the pages of the *African Repository* but, as many women's names appear on the donation lists without any telltale "Mrs." or "Miss," it is impossible to determine which group gave in greater numbers. This is not the only example of the *African Repository* telling us a great deal about these women but also not nearly enough. It is an irreplaceable source, extremely valuable but also frustrating, as the donation lists reveal only a fraction of women's contributions to the movement.

Hardly a month went by without donations collected from various church congregations across the state, oftentimes consisting of fairly significant sums. To give just two examples, in June 1832 the ACS received one hundred dollars from Presbyterian Church of Norfolk, and in August 1834, one hundred and forty dollars from the Millwood Episcopal Church in Frederick County.⁵ Women made up the majority of members in congregations across the South and it is more than likely that many contributed to these collections, but, unfortunately, it is impossible to determine for how great a percentage of these donations they were responsible.⁶ There were, of course, some women who contributed openly and independently to the ACS or its auxiliaries. While the amounts varied, bequests were usually small but not insignificant—five to ten dollars was quite common. In July 1830, the ACS reported having received ten dollars from Sarah Miller, the treasurer of the Fredericksburg and Falmouth society, which she had sent separately from her society's combined donation of two hundred and twenty-four dollars. A month

⁴ For a fuller explanation of separate estates, see Lebsack, "Loopholes: Separate Estates," chapter three.

⁵ *African Repository*, vol. 8, July 1832, p. 158; vol. 10, September 1834, p. 223.

⁶ Donald Mathews, *Religion in the Old South*, (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1977), p. 102.

later, the contributions of five dollars apiece from Agnes and Mary Marshall of Oak Hill (who would make identical donations for at least the next two years) were recorded.⁷

It was not uncommon for some women to be unwilling to release their names, but entirely forthright in revealing their sex. A donation of two dollars was described as coming from “a charity box of a Young Lady of Virginia,” a gift of twenty dollars was made by “a lady of Frederick County,” and two hundred dollars was received from “A Friend in Fredericksburg: (a Lady and a distinguished patroness of the Society, who declines, from motives of delicacy, from having her name made known to the public).”⁸ Another woman asked her minister, the Reverend J.C. Andrews of Winchester, to forward her donation of one hundred dollars to the ACS on her behalf. Miss Judith Lomax did the same through the services of an attorney.⁹ In 1826, W.F. Turner, Esq., forward eight dollars “contributed by the ladies...for the purpose of constituting the pastor of the first Congregational Society, a member of the Colonization Society.”¹⁰ These women, though they wished to preserve their privacy, may have felt, notwithstanding the mandates of their society, that there was nothing improper in women having and expressing views on public affairs. We cannot be certain, of course, but surely they would have concealed their sex as well, had they truly believed their interests and opinions were somehow inappropriate. Perhaps more noteworthy is the self-identification of these women as “ladies,” a very specific term in the antebellum South and one that was laden with meaning. Southern ladies were understood to be women of irreproachable character, upper or middle class, and sheltered, by virtue of their social and economic status, from the harsher realities of life. In short, ladyhood was the badge of elite, white womanhood. That such respected women clearly believed that

⁷ Ibid., vol., 6, July 1840, p. 126, 159; vol. 7, August 1831, p. 192; vol. 8, December 1832, p. 318.

⁸ Ibid., vol. 6, March 1830, p. 30; vol. 7, September 1831, p. 220.

⁹ Ibid., vol. 12., January 1836, p. 40; Vol. 2, September, 1826, p. 227.

¹⁰ *African Repository*, Vol. 2, December 1826, p. 324.

colonizationist activity in no way detracted from their gentility must surely have done much to render colonization a more reputable endeavor in the eyes of many Southerners.

In some cases, women, though they were married to men who also sympathized with the movement, chose to make their donations independently. In November 1832, the five dollar donation of Mary Chandler of Norfolk was recorded on a separate line from that of her husband. A year later, Priscilla Clark of Halifax County sent ten dollars of her own, separate from the forty dollars her husband contributed the same month.¹¹ Despite living in a culture that insisted virtually everything about them, even their legal identity, be subordinated to their husbands, there were clearly women who believed their opinions and ideals to be their very own. One might go so far as to propose that these women wished to be considered separately and advertised their opinions as independent—even if their perspectives were similar to their spouses’—to forestall the possible assumption that their beliefs had been largely influenced by their husbands.

It was also not uncommon for women to earmark funds for colonization in their wills or to suggest to their executors that it was a cause deserving of support. Writing her will in July 1820, Susan Meade of Frederick County, whose well-connected Virginia gentry family was prominent in the movement, used this document, not only to recommend funds for the colonization movement, but also to clearly express her own opinions on the matter. To Meade, slavery was both a moral abomination and a religious sin, and she believed its end all over the nation was drawing near. Moreover, she considered herself fortunate that she had money to provide to help transport colonists to Liberia.¹² Meade’s brother, the future Episcopal bishop and one of Virginia’s premier colonizationists, William Meade, was one of her executors and, after her death, would transfer close to three thousand dollars from her estate to the ACS.¹³ The family’s ties to

¹¹ *Ibid.*, vol. 8, December 1832, p. 318; vol. 9, November 1833, p. 256.

¹² Will of Susan Meade, 3 July 1820, Mary Lee Fitzhugh Custis Papers, The Virginia Historical Society, Richmond, VA, MSS 2C969565-6.

¹³ *African Repository*, vol. 1, September 1825, p. 233; vol. 1, January 1826, p. 348.

the movement only grew stronger over the years. Apart from the consistent support of both the Reverend Meade and his Frederick County congregation, another unmarried sister, Lucy F. Meade, contributed frequently to the Society and left it one hundred dollars at her death.¹⁴

It seems indicative of her commitment to colonization that Susan Meade chose to record her opinions and desires in her will. Given her family's sympathy for the movement, she might have simply made her wishes privately known and trusted that her executors' would carry them out. The will itself is not long, not quite two handwritten pages, and more than half of it is devoted to Meade's opinions on slavery and colonization. She concluded with the requests that her slaves be freed upon her death and that her family should "see to their comfortable maintenance, and instruction in reading the word of God; and to do the best for them that the laws of our Country will allow."¹⁵ A will was a public, and permanent, document. Clearly, Meade wished to ensure that not only would her controversial views not be swept under the rug, but also that her family and friends, among them many of Virginia's most prominent, slaveholding families, would remember her commitment.

* * *

While dollar amounts varied from year to year, it is obvious, even only from those donations that can be reliably attributed to them, that white Virginia women were consistent contributors during the 1820s and 1830s. They also appear to have embraced the cause in greater numbers, at least initially, than their male counterparts. For the first year that the ACS made its donation lists available, women were responsible for more than fifty percent of Virginia's total contributions.¹⁶ Those numbers were exceptionally

¹⁴ Ibid., vol. 6, June 1830, p. 126.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Calculations based on data from the *African Repository*, vol. 1, July 1825, p. 160, September 1825, pp. 222-24, November 1825, p. 288, January 1826, pp. 348-49; vol. 2, March 1826, pp. 31-2.

high and would not be repeated, but it is important to note that women's donations did not decline so much as men's increased. Between 1830, when slavery, and thus colonization, was becoming a statewide issue, and 1836, when white Virginians' enthusiasm for the movement began to wane, women always accounted for at least ten percent, and occasionally a little more than that, of the state's total contributions.¹⁷ A complete explanation of those numbers is impossible, but some interesting hypotheses can be proposed. Women's support surpassed that of men before the Southampton Insurrection of 1831 infused the colonization movement with a sense of desperate urgency and rendered it indisputably a political issue. Fear of the state's black population, both free and enslaved, certainly existed among whites before that time and will be discussed later, but prior to the uprising, humanitarian and religious motives for supporting colonization appear to have been most prominent, at least in public. In essence, colonization was, at this time, first and foremost a charitable endeavor, and elite, white women may have been more likely to be touched by it. Throughout the South, white women were typically viewed as tenderhearted and irrational and thus more likely to sympathize with slaves and, presumably, free blacks. Southern planters and politicians were particularly fearful of women's emotional response to what they considered anti-slavery propaganda and took pains to shelter them from it.¹⁸ In Virginia during the 1820s, the movement was not yet as controversial or politically charged as it would later become. Women's involvement with colonization societies may have escaped the serious notice of many men, or they may have considered it an appropriately benevolent and benign interest for their wives.

Men were not unaware of the significance of the sums women raised for the movement. They frequently expressed admiration for their accomplishments, and a few hoped to provoke a friendly competition between male and female societies. When the

¹⁷ Calculations based on data from the *African Repository*, vols. 6-12.

¹⁸ Catherine Clinton, *The Plantation Mistress: Woman's World in the Old South* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1982), p. 182.

Fredericksburg and Falmouth Female Colonization Society, having been in existence for barely a year, delivered its first fruits, two hundred dollars, to the parent society, one astonished man wrote, “The sum...exceeds anticipations, but it is not all that will be raised, as the Society has hardly gotten under weigh [sic]...I do not think I am too sanguine in anticipating the most beneficial results from their active zeal. They will, I hope, provoke the Gentlemen’s Society here, to good works.”¹⁹ To some men, these women may have been out of bounds, but to others their behavior provoked wonder rather than outrage. It might also be argued that to some Virginians colonization, though undeniably a very public movement, was anything but an ordinary one. As mistresses of slaveholding households, often slaveowners in their own right, white women were no less involved in the slave system than white men. Many women justified their involvement in colonization on these exact grounds, and to some men it may have seemed an obvious point that slavery involved both sexes equally. In any event, this particular man was clearly not averse to using women’s accomplishments to shame other men into greater feats of productivity.

As should not be surprising for a time when few women had much or any money of their own, and were usually financially dependent on their husbands and families, not all women who wished to lend their support had cash readily available with which to do so. White female sympathizers of colonization all over the United States often held fairs where they sold their handiwork to raise funds. In 1830, the Albemarle Female Auxiliary Colonization Society raised five hundred dollars for the parent society at a fair.²⁰ Occasionally, women would send in possessions of their own to be sold by the ACS. The September 1833 edition of the *African Repository* noted that “the proceeds of a comb sent by a Lady of Orange co., VA,” totaling five dollars, had been added to the society’s

¹⁹ *African Repository*, vol. 6, March 1830, p. 30.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, vol. 6, June 1830, p. 126.

coffers. Some women sent practical items that could be used by the colonists in Liberia. In the winter of 1831, two women from Alexandria donated four pairs of stockings.²¹

Women do not only appear on the *African Repository's* donation lists. They frequently sent letters as well, and correspondence, some from white Virginia women, was published from time to time. In these letters, women shared their opinions and updates about their various auxiliaries, and asked all manner of questions about colonization as well. A letter from a "Lady in Virginia," printed in the May 1832 edition asked for advice on the best way to settle her slaves in Liberia once she had freed them. She wrote, "I wish you...to write to me when you would counsel their going. The whole subject I rely on you to judge and act for me in, as if it were your own."²² Seven months later, another "Lady in Virginia," expressed her concerns over the plight of young, unmarried women in the colony, writing, "There are a number of persons who have young female slaves, they would wish to send to Liberia; but as conscientious motives induce them to do it, they cannot send them unprotected, and cast them...upon the world...Could some plan be devised to afford a suitable asylum for unprotected young females, it would be the means of many a one going."²³ The precise motivation behind this desire to ensure protection for traveling African-American females is unclear, but several interesting possibilities can be raised. It may have been a straightforward and entirely innocuous request to provide these female emigrants with assistance and protection during a long and potentially perilous voyage and later in adjusting to their new land. But one suspects that the spirit of well-meaning but nevertheless condescending paternalism was also at work. The frequent tendency of slaveholders to infantilize their slaves is well-known, and it is likely that many whites believed African-Americans to be largely incapable of looking after themselves without any help, particularly in such strange circumstances.

²¹ Ibid., vol. 7, September 1831, p. 220; vol. 9, September 1833, p. 192; vol. 6, May 1831, p. 32.

²² Ibid., vol. 8, May 1832, p. 85.

²³ Ibid., vol. 8, December 1832, p. 311.

Influenced by white stereotypes of African-Americans as uncivilized and prone to immoral behavior, white colonizationists may have been anxious to establish some sort of moral guardianship over the female emigrants in Liberia. In a letter to his former owner, a Liberian colonist named Abram Blackford emphasized the widespread religious observance in the colony, writing, "I see they is a great deal of religious person here. I has attended meeting very regular. Thy is a Presbyterian church and a Baptist and also a Methodist."²⁴ This letter was included in Launcelot Blackford's biography of his prominent colonizationist grandmother and might reflect a concern among some white colonizationists that, left to their own devices, the Liberian colonists might become lax in their moral and religious behavior. Finally, a somewhat less cynical but perhaps more naïve scenario: antebellum America was obsessed with the fragility and vulnerability of women, though in most instances these qualities were ascribed exclusively to white women, and the words of this colonizationist might be taken at face value. An isolated young woman in a new environment, particularly such a place as Liberia which Americans, black as well as white, frequently described as savage and in need of Christian civilization, might well be preyed upon by unscrupulous men. Perhaps what is most important to remember is that this woman was sincere in her motivations, however cynically a later generation might be tempted to interpret them.

Women did not always have questions; often they simply used the *Journal* to advertise their successes. In 1835, one woman announced to the *Journal* that not only had she previously sent some of her manumitted slaves to Liberia, but also that she was preparing to liberate and send a family of four more.²⁵ In the increasingly charged debate over slavery, this woman may have felt she had done more than a simple good deed. She specified that she was about to send a family to the colony; one of the most frequent

²⁴ Launcelot Minor Blackford, *Mine Eyes Have Seen the Glory: The Story of a Virginia Lady Mary Berkley Minor Blackford, 1802-1896, Who taught her sons to hate Slavery and to love the Union* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1954), p. 63.

²⁵ *African Repository*, vol. 11, December 1835, p. 370.

charges against slavery was that it all too often broke up family units. There is certainly an air of self-congratulation in her words. Three years earlier, in a letter dated 22 October 1832, another woman reported, writing in the third person, "Tis the wish of a man servant belonging to the writer...to remove to Liberia; and it is highly gratifying to her, that he has at length accepted a boon, which she has for several years offered him on the condition, that he would join our Colony in Africa. She is convinced...in view of his character and attainments, that there are few emigrants better qualified, not only to obtain and support a respectable standing in society, but to promote also, the best interests of the Colony."²⁶ Though modesty was a womanly quality prized and preached as both the ideal of Southern womanhood and evangelical Christianity, it is clear that some women did not consider it at all unseemly to publicize their activities. They felt that they were doing a good service to their former slaves, and in some cases, by emphasizing that they had manumitted hard, honest workers, a good service to Liberia as well, and saw no need to do so in absolute obscurity.

* * *

White women, and the societies to which many belonged, did more to promote colonization in Virginia than raise money and contribute goods, though their fundraising, due to the *African Repository*, is the easiest of their activities to trace. They exchanged information amongst themselves and distributed literature on colonization both in their own towns and elsewhere. Mary Berkeley Minor Blackford of Fredericksburg worked tirelessly on behalf of colonization and the welfare of blacks in general for most of her life and was the most prominent female colonizationist in Virginia.²⁷ Among her other activities, she left pamphlets advocating colonization with an innkeeper's wife she knew well. This woman not only distributed the pamphlets to her customers, but she also

²⁶ Ibid., vol. 8, December 1832, p. 310.

²⁷ Varon, p. 45.

chastised any slave traders who patronized her establishment, telling them that epidemics of disease were God's punishment on whites for maintaining slavery.²⁸ Blackford and her friends also did all they could to encourage other women to involve themselves and their female acquaintances in the movement. In February 1833, Mary Carter Wellford Carmichael wrote to her sister, "Mrs. Blackford has been to see me lately to endeavour...to interest me in the Colonization Society. Mrs. Grinnan gave me several copies of the last Annual Report of the Society in this place, drawn up by Mrs. Blackford, and I shall send you one by this Mail, begging you at the same time to read and circulate those pamphlets on the subject which I carried you last spring."²⁹ If less well documented than women's financial contributions, this more personal advocacy and encouragement amongst women, their friends and others may have been where they were most influential. It is not difficult to believe that for every woman in Virginia who supported colonization monetarily, there was at least one other woman whose means were more limited but whose commitment was just as strong.

²⁸ Blackford, p. 45.

²⁹ Mary Carter Wellford Carmichael, to Jane Catherine Wellford Carmichael Corbin, 18 February 1833, Mary Carter Wellford Carmichael Letters, The Virginia Historical Society, MSS 2C212312.

CHAPTER II
 “TO HER CARE THE MIND IS COMMITTED:”
 WOMEN AND EDUCATION, AT HOME AND ABROAD

Among leaders of the colonization movement, the idea that white women could lend distinctive talents to the cause encouraged many white men to accept and even encourage their involvement. Once the Liberian colony was fairly well-entrenched, ACS leaders began to give serious thought to creating a fully-developed community there, not just an outpost. Their minds quickly turned to education and they solicited women in particular to help found and support schools in Liberia. However, women did not need either much encouragement or to be told that education was for them a “natural” province. In 1830s America, the involvement of women in the education of both sexes was hardly novel, and elite white women, as we shall see, were particularly attuned to its importance.³⁰ In March 1831, an anonymous woman published an appeal in the *African Repository* to other women on behalf of the colony and its fledgling schools, commenting, “For charities connected with the work of education, the sphere and the

³⁰ Though they did not yet dominate the profession, more and more American women were becoming teachers at this time. For many, it was a proper way of contributing to the support of their families, while others, somewhat more radically, saw teaching as a respectable alternative to marriage. In addition, women had taken an active role in furthering female educational opportunities since the first days of the Republic, promoting the founding of schools and actively combating the traditional beliefs that held such formal education to be of little value. Education was also seen as an antidote for an idle preoccupation with fashion, or worse, an attraction to vice. The female colonizationists of the 1820s and 1830s had come of age in this environment of increased attention to education and their intense commitment to founding a morally upright and industrious society in Liberia is beyond doubt. In this light, it should not be surprising that the establishment of schools in the colony was considered to be such a vital step. See Kathryn Kish Sklar, *Catharine Beecher: A Study in American Domesticity* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1976), p. 97; Linda Kerber, *Women of the Republic: Intellect & Ideology in Revolutionary America* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, for the Institute of Early American History and Culture, Williamsburg, VA, 1980), pp. 201-206.

sympathies of women seem to possess a native affinity—to her care the mind is committed, when it first emanates from the Creator. To guide its infant streams in pure and holy channels might be an angel’s mission,—yet it is entrusted to her.”³¹ She asked women to encourage their female relatives, friends, and servants, any woman within their influence, to spend one evening per week working for the benefit of the Liberian schools, whether it be by, “their skill, their industry, or their genius.”³² It is interesting that she phrased her entreaty in distinctly female, maternal prose that was likely to have the wished-for effect on its audience:

The time has arrived, for Africa...when her plea is no longer in vain, charity prepares to restore her exiled children to her bosom...Mothers! are your children spared from the grave, to blossom in beauty and cheer your hearts with the promise of intellect and wisdom...bring as your thank offering, a gift for Africa, that bereaved mother, so long bowed down by a double mourning—*for the dead—and for the living.*³³

This woman could hardly have made a more stirring, or savvy, appeal, touching the pride as well as tugging on the heartstrings of mothers everywhere. Also, by portraying devotion to education in Liberia as not just an appropriate but entirely natural, maternal, female impulse, this author may have silenced many critics of women’s involvement in the cause.

Though they viewed education for all as important, women in Virginia became particularly involved in promoting schools for female colonists. While they were motivated by sympathy for the plight of other women, women’s education had also

³¹ *African Repository*, vol. 7., March 1831, p. 13.

³² *Ibid.*

³³ *Ibid.*, pp. 13-14.

received unprecedented public attention in recent decades and this surely influenced their priorities. Several months before the *African Repository* published its aforementioned appeal, the Female Colonization Society of Richmond and Manchester sent a letter to the Liberian settlers explaining that they had for some time desired to establish a free school for women in the colony, but that they needed help from the colonists. They would locate a suitable female teacher and support her if the settlers could build a proper schoolhouse. The women begged for a speedy reply, as they felt the matter to be of the greatest importance and hoped that there would be no impediment to the project's realization.³⁴ At subsequent meetings, the women expressed their hope that not only would their projected school "act as a lever to raise the present low standard of education," but also one day serve as the foundation of a women's college, a rather radical proposal in the United States of the 1830s.³⁵ It took some time, but eventually the first part of their goal was accomplished. At the Society's sixth annual meeting in 1834, they reported that they had obtained a satisfactory teacher and that a way of paying her salary had been agreed on, adding, "It is unnecessary in this report to say any thing on the importance of female education; all present appreciate it." The dedication of these women to this particular aspect of the colonization movement is clear from the report's conclusion, "The name of this Society has been changed to the 'Ladies Society for Promoting female education in the Colony of Liberia.'"³⁶

* * *

The devotion to educational opportunities in Liberia evinced by many of Virginia's elite, female supporters of colonization is perhaps not at all surprising given the increased interest in overall women's education that was prevailing in the United States during this period. Since the end of the Revolution, the number of girls' schools

³⁴ Ibid., pp. 25-26.

³⁵ Ibid., vol. 9, July 1833, p. 149.

³⁶ Ibid., vol. 10, December 1834, pp. 314-315.

had not only soared but the curricula that many offered had expanded significantly from a regimen previously focused on sewing, dancing and other mainly ornamental accomplishments. Domestic skills were still considered paramount for women of all classes, but the improvement of women's minds had become a matter of national importance. The founders believed wholeheartedly that if their new nation was to survive and flourish, succeeding generations of citizens must be as virtuous and patriotic as the Revolutionary generation. Women, they concluded, had a vital role to play as the first educators of the nation's future citizens, and thus they could not be allowed to remain ignorant. At the very least, according to historian Linda Kerber, "prospective mothers needed to be well informed and decently educated."³⁷ In practice, this theory was applied almost exclusively to white women of the upper and middle classes, as it was from those strata of society that the nation's future leaders were expected to be drawn, but the determination to improve women's educational opportunities touched all American women, if most unevenly.³⁸ But some American women had their own ideas as to the purposes of education that went far beyond seeing to the morals and mindsets of their children. They particularly prized the new emphasis on the cultivation of reason and analytical thought, and, with the added confidence of a broader education, they sought to increase the influence of women in many areas of American society, including the political realm.³⁹

This ideology, termed Republican Motherhood, meshed well with the later notion of Evangelical Womanhood, was enthusiastically embraced by many members of both sexes, and, most important, was used to great effect by women seeking to expand their educational opportunities. Girls' schools sprang up all over the more densely-populated

³⁷ Kerber, pp. 199-200.

³⁸ Mary Caroll Johansen, "'Female Instruction and Improvement': Education for Women in Maryland, Virginia and the District of Columbia, 1785-1835" (Ph.D. dissertation, College of William and Mary, 1996), pp. 4-6; 13-14; 19-21.

³⁹ Mary Beth Norton, *Liberty's Daughters: The Revolutionary Experience of American Women, 1750-1800* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1980), pp. 269-271.

and urbanized North, but the South—Maryland, Virginia and the District of Columbia in particular—were not unaffected by these changing attitudes.⁴⁰ Scholar Mary Carroll Johansen claims that the above areas, the “Upper South,” were a special case and did not mirror the experiences of either the North or the plantation-dominated states of the Lower South. Though still largely agrarian by Northern standards, substantial regional towns and small cities, such as Fredericksburg, Lynchburg, Norfolk, Petersburg, and Richmond in Virginia, were expanding, and had populations large enough to support new schools. Even the more rural parts of the state were affected. Wealthy planters might send their daughters to one of the many boarding schools established during this period or have all of their children educated at home by private tutors. Curricula varied, but it nevertheless changed significantly until in many schools it began to more resemble that of a college for young men, often including Latin, Greek and the sciences, than the decorative emphasis of the pre-Revolutionary era.⁴¹ While the idea of the importance of women’s education always had its critics, it took root in Virginia and by the 1830s, it was virtually a matter of course that well-to-do females would receive some degree of education before marriage.

The growth of women’s education in the United States has more relevance to the colonization activities of Virginia women than simply raising the subject’s profile and becoming a benefit to be extended to the settlers in Liberia. The notion of Republican Motherhood that fostered this expansion helped, like Evangelical Womanhood, to pave the way toward an acceptance, however controversial it may have been initially, of women’s involvement in the public domain. While the theory itself was narrowly construed—confining women as ever to the household—it also inevitably opened the door to greater respect for women’s opinions and talents. The sons of the first generation of Republican mothers came of age at about the same time as the colonization movement,

⁴⁰ Johansen, pp. 3; 6-7.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 10; 12; 36-39.

as well as the female-dominated benevolence societies, really took off. It is not impossible that this acquaintance with better-educated mothers, sisters and wives rendered the male population more tolerant and respectful of outspoken women than their fathers and grandfathers might have been.

But the greatest impact of Republican Motherhood and the educational revolution it sparked was clearly felt by the women who benefited from it. The practical benefits of better educational opportunities are obvious, but women were just as affected by the attendant changes in attitude. It is clear that some women never believed that simply by virtue of their sex they were intellectually inferior to men or that they had no role to play in public affairs. Abigail Adams, Mercy Otis Warren and Judith Sargent Murray are just some of the most famous examples of such Early American women. But many others had just as clearly absorbed the gender conventions of their day. To these women, the notion that they had not only the capabilities but also a duty to be well-educated and informed could hardly have been a neutral point. When this is combined with the rhetoric of the Early Republic—that women were entrusted with a sacred charge in the moral and educational training of the next generation of citizens—it is hard to imagine these ideas as anything but thought-provoking. In Kerber's words, "the mother, and not the masses, came to be seen as the custodian of civic morality."⁴² To many it must have seemed as if this enormous, but limited, influence was inherently illogical. Women, either those who had to be told that they were capable of understanding public matters or those who had known this all along, might be forgiven for wondering that if they had these talents and particular moral strengths, why should they not put them to work in the outside world? Thus, if they had not been already so inclined, the language of Republican Motherhood, and later that of Evangelical Womanhood, provided women with an inspiration, an avenue, and a socially acceptable rationale with which to push for a greater role in public affairs.

⁴² Kerber, p. 11.

* * *

Though biographical information regarding most of the colonization movement's female supporters is difficult to obtain, its white, elite, female advocates in Virginia doubtlessly benefited from the new educational philosophies that abounded. Given their largely upper- and middle-class orientation, which will be explored in greater depth later, it is highly likely that many of them attended the dozens of day and boarding schools established in Virginia in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. The time spent in these schools led young women to develop close friendships, some which lasted their whole lives and which provided them with contacts all over the state and beyond. The life of Margaret Mercer and the school she founded provide an interesting example. Mercer, an elite Southerner who divided her time between Virginia and Maryland, was an ardent believer in colonization and eventually focused her support on providing educational opportunities for Liberian colonists. Intensely independent, Mercer chose to remain unmarried and involved herself in charity work at an early age, championing many causes but expressing a particular distaste for slavery. When her father died in the early 1820s and left her many of his slaves, she quickly contacted the ACS about how to send them to Liberia. Despite the disapproval of family members and friends, she funded their voyage and settlement at her own expense, depleting the remainder of her inheritance.⁴³ Later she founded a girls' school, housed for some time at her family's estate in Cedar Park, Maryland, and encouraged her students to support colonization. Under her auspices, they founded the Cedar Park Liberian Education Society, which was a great success. In May 1835, Mercer delivered thirteen hundred dollars her society had

⁴³ Marie Tyler McGraw, "The American Colonization Society in Virginia 1816-1832: A Case Study in Southern Liberalism," Ph.D. dissertation, George Washington University (Ann Arbor, MI: University Microfilms International, 1980), pp. 83-84.

raised to the ACS to be used toward the support of two young colonists who were studying medicine at the University of Glasgow.⁴⁴

The significance of the Cedar Park Liberian Society went even further than the impressive funds it raised. It was a joint student and alumnae venture and it allowed past and present students to communicate about the colonization movement and work on its behalf. This Society appears to have been unusual, if not actually unique, in the South, but it was only a grander version of what was surely happening on a smaller scale amongst many former students. Old friends corresponded and kept each other up to date on the important events of their lives and, if they were so inclined, shared social and political opinions and advocated causes dear to their hearts. In The Bonds of Womanhood: "Woman's Sphere" in New England, 1780-1835, Nancy F. Cott discusses the emotional friendships formed amongst middle-class women in the years following the American Revolution, and argues that these relationships provided women with the necessary support and encouragement to pursue benevolent and political activities.⁴⁵ I would argue that the explosion of girls' schools provided an opportunity for similar friendships to be forged amongst Southern women. In a region where much of the population lived in rural isolation, it was now possible for many young women to meet and form the communication networks necessary to bolster and sustain so widespread movement as colonization. Though any firm estimation of their numbers is impossible, these informal networks may have been the most common and effective way female colonizationists spread the word and convinced others to join in their cause.

⁴⁴ *African Repository*, vol. 12, January 1836, p. 22.

⁴⁵ Nancy F. Cott, "Sisterhood," chapter five *The Bonds of Womanhood: "Woman's Sphere" in New England, 1780-1835* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1977).

CHAPTER III

“NOW IS THE TIME FOR VIRGINIA TO *ACT*.”

MIXED MOTIVES, A GOLDEN OPPORTUNITY, AND THE BEGINNING OF THE
END OF COLONIZATION IN VIRGINIA

The most direct way women could promote colonization was of course to free slaves of their own and encourage them to go to Liberia. Mary Blackford's mother, Lucy Landon Carter Minor, who seems to have been largely responsible for her daughter's convictions, emancipated eight of her slaves and sent them to Liberia in 1826, even before she and her family became active members of the ACS. For Lucy Minor, emancipation seems to have been her ultimate goal, and colonization merely a worthy vehicle toward it. Her great-grandson later recalled that she also freed her house servants, even though they had expressed a wish to remain in Virginia.⁴⁶ Nancy Turner, a white Virginian who eventually settled in the free state of Ohio, hated both slavery and the fact that her family was so heavily invested in it. She eagerly anticipated the day when she would inherit her father's slaves and could then improve their situation. She wrote of the plight of free black people in America:

The poor freed slave is a slave still...If...negroes are ever free, it cannot be here. This is the boasted country of Liberty & Independence! It is so indeed to the favored white man but the poor black tastes not this cup of blessing. No it is forced from his thirsty lips by the rude hand of the oppressor...The colored

⁴⁶ Blackford, p. 20.

man must cross the mighty ocean, ere his foot can rest on a land of freedom to him! Mine then shall cross, if they are willing. This is a matter of mere experiment: but if they wish they shall try it.⁴⁷

Turner is an interesting case because, unlike so many other colonizationists, she does not appear to have been influenced by fear of the growing free black population. Of course, this is a memoir and her feelings may not have been so purely benevolent at the time, but her focus seems to have been on the dismal prospects faced by black people in the United States. To Turner's great regret, when her father finally did die, he left his estate in such disarray that the family had no choice but to sell off many of his slaves. In the end she was able to send only one family to Liberia—a family whom she makes clear was most eager to go—and free one other man who refused to emigrate because his wife and children were the property of another man. Turner was clearly dissatisfied with the result of her years of planning, but consoled herself that she had done the best she could.⁴⁸ It is important to note that Turner, like Lucy Minor, did not impose emigration as a condition of freedom, despite her lifelong belief that the United States was not a place for free African Americans. She firmly maintained that her opinion was in no way based on prejudice, explaining, "I have no prejudices against coloured people to prevent my living peaceably & happily with them, but I always thought they would be happier in a country to themselves; and therefore I have wished to see them colonized if it could be done with their own consent."⁴⁹ She also admitted, though, that she was glad to not be directly involved in the question, as she had heard such conflicting reports of Liberia to no longer be sure what to believe and had no wish to be further concerned with such a

⁴⁷ Nancy Johns Turner Hall, "The Imaginist or Recollections of an old lady, a native of one of the Southern States, now a resident of the state of Ohio in the year 1844," The Virginia Historical Society, MSS5:941405:1, p. 94.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 165-167.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 167.

serious and perplexing question. Turner did not go greatly into detail, but certainly the death of her former slave, Jack, and one of his children, who had enthusiastically gone to Liberia with his family to preach the gospel, not long after reaching the colony, contributed to her disillusionment.⁵⁰

Many slaves were given no choice, but were emancipated on the condition that they would go to Liberia. The reasons for this demand are convoluted. Some slaveholders, like Nancy Turner, genuinely believed, or at the very least, thought they did, that African Americans could never be truly free in the United States, and that sending them to Africa was the greatest blessing they could bestow on them. Others were spurred by the desire to send Christian settlers to Africa, and still others by the prospect of draining much of the Southern labor pool and thus opening up jobs for whites and European immigrants.⁵¹ Fear of the free black community was another common motivation. In 1800, a slave revolt led by Gabriel Prosser of Henrico County had been just barely averted and free African-Americans were immediately blamed, though there was no evidence that any had been involved. The common view of this population among white Virginians was that they were lazy, unproductive, and prone to criminal behavior. According to scholar Marie Tyler McGraw, “There were demands that the manumission act of 1782 be repealed, demands that all free blacks leave the state and demands that slavery be abolished and all ex-slaves be sent outside the state.”⁵² A quarter of a century later, opinions had not substantially changed in Virginia, with much of the white population wary of the free African-American communities that were so visible both in the cities and of the more rural areas in the eastern part of the state. To those inclined to view them with suspicion and fear, Virginia’s free African-American

⁵⁰ Ibid., pp. 166-167.

⁵¹ There do not appear to have been, at least in the South, specific, organized groups who espoused each of these positions. It was also not uncommon for supporters to be motivated by more than one factor.

⁵² McGraw, p. 34.

population, comprising forty thousand people by the mid-1820s, was a threat that could no longer be ignored.⁵³

Perhaps the most important point to be kept in mind when considering the colonization movement—in Virginia certainly, but also all over the United States—is that pro-slavery and pro-colonization sentiment were by no means incompatible, and both flourished in Virginia. Free blacks had been the colonization movement’s initial focus, at least in terms of its publicly stated rationale, and while many colonizationists saw their endeavor as the first step toward complete emancipation, others did not.⁵⁴ Slaveholders who saw free blacks as likely to encourage bad behavior among their enslaved brethren had much to gain if the Liberian colony was a success. Just one example of this feeling can be found in a letter from William C. Rives, a Virginian and onetime minister to France. He wrote, “I am no *Abolitionist*, and never have been one... The policy I have favored, as both the *most safe and practicable*, is that of the COLONIZATION SCHEME, which by gradually draining the country of its free colored population, and of slaves who should be voluntarily manumitted by their masters, would at the same time, promote the interests of the slave owners themselves, by removing a great source of corruption and disaffection among the slaves.”⁵⁵ Others, all over the country, viewed slavery as a doomed institution. Morally wrong, it was bound to end sooner or later, but white Americans had it in their power to determine on just what terms it would do so. In a speech in January 1831, R. J. Breckenridge, a prominent southern colonizationist, warned:

⁵³ Patricia P. Hickin, “Antislavery in Virginia, 1831-1861” (Ph.D. dissertation, University of Virginia, June 1968), p. 255.

⁵⁴ The founders of the American Colonization Society had foreseen and provided for this diversity of motives and interests, explaining in the Society’s constitution that, “the members may be, without inconsistency... the friends or enemies of slavery, and may be actuated by kindness or by hatred towards ‘the free people of color.’” William Jay, *Inquiry into the Character and Tendency of the American Colonization, and American Anti-Slavery Societies* (originally published by R.G. Williams, 1838; reprinted, New York: Negro Universities Press, 1969), p. 12.

⁵⁵ William C. Rives, 30 August 1834, printed in the *Richmond Whig*, 9 September 1834, reprinted in the *African Repository*, vol. 10., October 1834, p. 250.

Men will not always remain slaves...No cruelty or bondage, however rigorous, can suppress, forever, the deep yearnings after freedom...Domestic slavery...may terminate in various ways; but terminate it must. It may end in revolution...It may end in amalgamation; a base, spurious, degraded mixture, scarcely the least revolting method...Or it may be brought to a close, by gradually supplanting the slaves with a free and more congenial race among ourselves; and restoring them to the rights of which they have been so long deprived, and to the land from which their fathers were so inhumanely transported.⁵⁶

As neither revolution nor race mixing was an attractive prospect to most white Virginians, appeals in this vein were highly effective. By the summer of 1831, support for colonization had been growing at a steady rate all over the country for several years, but the movement in Virginia was no longer quite so active as in the past. Though it continued to solicit and receive donations, the Virginia Colonization Society, the state's primary auxiliary, did not hold a meeting between 1828, when it was organized, and late 1831, after new life had been breathed into the Virginia colonization movement.⁵⁷ While it is unclear precisely why interest flagged for a time, there is no question as to what revived it.

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⁵⁶ *African Repository*, vol. 7, April 1831, p. 181.

⁵⁷ Hickin, p. 259.

On 21 August 1831, in the dead of night, Nat Turner, a slave from Southampton County, led a brutal attack on slaveholding whites, killing fifty-five people, nearly all of them women and children. Though the insurrection was put down in only a few days, it was several weeks before Turner was caught, and terror quickly spread throughout Virginia.⁵⁸ As historian Alison Goodyear Freehling put it, “The greatest danger, white Virginians recognized, was not of *general* insurrection, but of *individual* acts of violence. Slave domestics could always poison whites’ food, murder sleeping slaveholders and their families. Locked doors and bolted windows could not protect against insurgent blacks within the house.”⁵⁹ Outraged and frightened whites quickly lashed out, particularly against the free black population, which whites considered to be just as dangerous as the slave community, if not more so. The citizens of Northampton County lost no time in circulating a petition to have *all* free blacks removed to Liberia, and this was a comparatively benign example of the state’s ugly mood.⁶⁰ In the vicinity of the rebellion, white mobs terrorized free blacks for days on end, heedless of the fact that there was no evidence to connect the free black community with Turner. The lucky ones were able to take refuge in the woods.⁶¹ Others were tortured and killed, their heads displayed on poles as a warning.⁶² Believing that their lives were in danger, three hundred free blacks from the vicinity of Southampton County alone eventually fled to Liberia with the help of the ACS.⁶³

⁵⁸ Donald R. Wright, *African Americans in the Early Republic, 1789-1831* (Arlington Heights, IL: Harlan Davidson, Inc., 1993), pp. 108-113.

⁵⁹ Alison Goodyear Freehling, *Drift Toward Dissolution: The Virginia Slave Debate of 1831-1832* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1982), pp. 9-10.

⁶⁰ *Richmond Enquirer*, 13 November 1831, p. 2. (vol. XXVIII, no. 53, Earl Gregg Swem Library, College of William and Mary).

⁶¹ Ira Berlin, *Slaves Without Masters: The Free Negro in the Antebellum South* (New York: Pantheon Books, Random House, 1974), p. 188.

⁶² Wright, p. 113.

⁶³ Daniel W. Crofts, *Old Southampton: Politics and Society in a Virginia County, 1834-1869* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 1992), p. 17; Hickin, p. 271.

Many members of the Society saw in the insurrection a golden opportunity for their cause and did not hesitate to exploit it. An anonymous contributor to the *African Repository* wrote in the October 1831 edition:

What *can* be done? Much might have been effected by the Colonization Society, and may be, if those most interested shall *heartily* take up the subject...and willing to make some personal sacrifices to the general safety and public peace. Years ...may pass away before the people...of the south will feel that same confidence in the security of their wives and little ones... We cannot consent to any proceeding which shall inflict additional oppressions on the people of color—but late events will run into many *new severities*, unless some plan is devised to quiet the apprehensions of whites... We have reached a period when ‘something must be done,’ as well to give security to the white population, as to prevent the imposition of new hardships on colored persons.⁶⁴

Similar sentiments prevailed in Virginia over the following months and state politicians received scores of letters from worried citizens, many of whom urged colonization. According to another anonymous writer, “The people of Virginia are awaking to the solemn consideration of the whole subject of the evil of their colored population, and have expressed their purpose...to aid in the colonization of such as now are free, and of such as may become so, either by the will of individuals or the laws of the

⁶⁴ *African Repository*, vol. 7, October 1831, p. 246-247.

State.”⁶⁵ To this person at least, there was nothing charitable for white Virginians about colonization. It was an act of pure and necessary self-interest. One clergyman bluntly told a member of the House of Delegates, “Now is the time of Virginia to *act*.” He argued that in the fifteen years since the formation of the American Colonization Society, ample proof had emerged that colonization was not only a desirable but also a practical goal, and one that benefited both whites and blacks.⁶⁶

Perhaps nothing so aptly expressed the sentiments of frightened white Virginians as a petition to the state legislature circulated by the citizens of Petersburg, begging the legislators to make some decisive move regarding the state’s free black population. The petitioners came directly to the point stating that “the mistaken humanity of the people of Virginia, and of your predecessors, has permitted to remain in this Commonwealth, a class of persons who are neither freemen nor slaves...they are, of necessity degraded, profligate, vicious, turbulent and discontented.” Viewing free blacks as largely uninterested in honest and gainful employment, and as a burden on the community, the authors hinted that they also gave dangerous ideas to their enslaved brethren, “their apparent exemption from want and care...excites impracticable hopes in the minds of those who are even more ignorant and unreflecting—and their locomotive habits fit them for a dangerous *agency* in schemes.” The petitioners, they hastened to defend themselves, did not wish to be cruel, but they must first and foremost, “take care of the interests and morals of society, and of the peace of mind of the helpless in our families.” Those vulnerable dependents—women and children—could not be happy until “this cause of apprehension be removed.” A mobile community of black people, answerable to no master and apparently devoid of any constructive contributions to Virginia society, was simply too dangerous a reality to ignore. Happily, the desire to removed free blacks was

⁶⁵ Ibid., vol. 7, February 1832, p. 387.

⁶⁶ Ibid., vol. 8, May 1832, p. 88.

not unfeeling at all, but “sanctioned by enlightened humanity.” In the United States, denied the privileges and opportunities of white citizens, blacks could “never have the respect and intercourse...which are essential to rational happiness, and social enjoyment and improvement. But in other lands they may become an orderly, sober, industrious, moral, enlightened and Christian community...” The petitioners painted a cheerily optimistic picture. Colonization would not only safeguard white America and provide free blacks with real opportunities for respect and prosperity, but it would also bring industry, morality and Christianity to Africa, that “barbarous and benighted continent.”⁶⁷

Amidst all the white ranting about the degeneracy and danger of the free black population, many of those who expressed their concerns made specific mention of the dangers slavery posed to women and children, who had made up the majority of the Insurrection victims. The message was clear: not even the home was safe any longer. In the terrified and paranoid Virginia of 1831, this recognition, that the female realm could no longer be divorced fully from public matters, would open the door even further for white women to make their opinions on slavery and colonization known to an increasingly wide audience.

* * *

The Southampton Insurrection revived enthusiasm for the colonization movement all over Virginia and only emphasized the long since recognized need to find a statewide solution to the question of slavery. By 1831, doubts about the long-term viability, or even desirability, of the institution in Virginia had been circulating for some time. Independent though this debate was from the Turner uprising, it would be naïve to suppose that the Insurrection did not greatly affect the debate, helping to bring matters to a climax during the state legislative session of 1831-1832.

⁶⁷ *Richmond Enquirer*, 18 October 1831, p. 2, (vol. XXIII, no. 46, Earl Gregg Swem Library, College of William and Mary); reprinted from the *Petersburg Intelligencer*.

The great majority of Virginia's black population, enslaved and free, was situated in the eastern part of the state. Dozens of Virginia's western counties, close to free Ohio, populated by small farmers and largely devoid of slave labor, were increasingly resentful of the east, which dominated state politics. Virginia's constitution, written in 1776 mainly by members of the Tidewater elite, gave slaveholding easterners a disproportionate amount of control of the state government. By 1830, with the population of the western counties growing, there was more and more pressure for the situation to be changed. Among other issues, the westerners took aim at slavery. In this heady period of potential change, no aspect of Virginia's slave system was safe from discussion. It should be emphasized that the westerners' opposition to slavery was not based so much on humanitarian ideals as on their own tradition of smaller-scale, yeoman farming and ever-growing contempt for the slaveholding elite.⁶⁸ But it was angry opposition nonetheless. Despite this hostility, complete emancipation never enjoyed substantial, widespread support. Even if done gradually, emancipation alone left white Americans living side by side with a greatly increased free African American population, a specter that disconcerted some whites and terrified others. Colonization was a far more popular idea, and the various ways to implement it were debated endlessly. The legislature, however, desperate above all to maintain the balance between the state's slaveholding and non-slaveholding citizens, found it difficult to do much of anything. There were simply too many competing positions. Some pro-slavery politicians feared that any state support for the colonization of free blacks would inevitably encourage abolition. Others supported state-mandated colonization for both free African Americans and manumitted slaves, but were uneasy about the use of public funds being used to aid the endeavor. Eventually a bill passed the House, securing funds for colonization, but the bill was stalled indefinitely in the Senate. In the end, little was accomplished other than the

⁶⁸ Freehling, pp. 18-19; 35; Hickin, p. 129.

legalized erosion of most of the civil rights still enjoyed by Virginia's free black population.⁶⁹

The legislature's failure to act decisively was a great disappointment to many supporters of colonization. Advocates had long hoped that both the state and federal governments would take a greater role in the movement. As early as 1823, the Reverend William Meade had written to his cousin Mary Lee Fitzhugh Custis that he wished the American government could be persuaded to render greater aid to and "cherish our establishment."⁷⁰ Two years later, he reported that the ACS was doing well, but again lamented how much more could be accomplished, "if Government will only do its part, how nobly should we go on working."⁷¹ Though the ACS and its auxiliaries continued to attract followers as well as substantial donations, with the legislative stalemate, colonization leaders in Virginia lost, it would become clear, what had been *the* major opportunity to implement more effectively their ambitions. The movement had been under attack by both pro-slavery elements in the South and radical abolitionists in the North from the very start. It was damned as either insidious or immoral or both, and the opposition had only grown with each passing year. Now, colonization in Virginia, at precisely the panicked moment when it might have made innumerable converts, lost all hope of official support and was entirely at the mercy of the ultra-sensitive and mercurial white elite.

⁶⁹ Freehling, pp. 185-191.

⁷⁰ Reverend William Meade to Mary Lee Fitzhugh Custis, 9 April 1823, Mary Lee Fitzhugh Custis Papers, The Virginia Historical Society, MSS2C9695b2-4.

⁷¹ Reverend William Meade to Mary Lee Fitzhugh Custis, 30 May 1825, Mary Lee Fitzhugh Custis Papers, The Virginia Historical Society, MSS2C9695b2-4.

CHAPTER IV
 “PREGNANT WITH THE HIGHEST CONSEQUENCES TO THE PEACE AND
 PROSPERITY OF THE STATE:”
 COLONIZATION AS A WORK OF FEMALE BENEVOLENCE

Virginia’s elite white women were no less affected than men by the 1831-1832 frenzy over slavery and its future. Interest in colonization grew substantially among them, and many believed that the now urgent circumstances warranted their emergence from the prescribed domestic female realm into the male world of politics. In the fall of 1831, the state legislature received a petition from the women of Flauvanna County, likely drafted by members of that county’s female colonization auxiliary, begging them to do something to restrict and eventually end slavery, so that the scourge would not continue to spread and beget more violence.⁷² The women drew a clear connection between the fear engendered by the insurrection and women’s abilities to perform effectively their household and family duties. Arguing that a terrified and unprotected woman would be of no benefit to her family, they implored the legislature to remove from Virginia a source of torment to future generations:

Your Memorialists have hitherto been blessed with
 contentment in the happy privacy of domestic retirement,
 where they have enjoyed peace and security...nor have

⁷² Even though the petition makes no direct reference to colonization, Varon believes it unlikely that its authors were not colonizationists. To support her assertion, she writes, “the ACS hailed the petition as an example of colonization sentiment and published it in the *African Repository*.” Varon, pp. 48-49.

they, until now, had occasion to appeal to the guardians of their country's rights for redress of any national grievance... But a blight now hangs over our national prospects, and a cloud dims the sunshine of domestic peace throughout our State... We feel confident in your sympathy ...and trust that none of your revered body will impute our interference in this delicate matter, to...and extravagant expectation that your utmost exertions can effect an immediate removal of the evil we deplore... We shudder for the fate of our female descendents... We now conjure you...by every consideration of domestic affection and patriotic duty...and let not the united voices of your mothers, wives, daughters, and kindred, have sounded in your ears in vain!!⁷³

These women excused their “unfeminine” interference in politics on the grounds that even that most sacred and secluded female domain, the home, was at risk as a result of recent events. Female advocates of colonization had long been aware of the apparent contradiction between their activities and the normative Southern conceptions of proper white womanhood. The ideal Southern woman was passive and wholly domestic, devoted to her family and faith and entirely uninterested, to say nothing of uninvolved, in the corrupt, and masculine, world of public affairs.⁷⁴ It should be noted that the above petitioners took great pains to pay lip service, at the very least, to this ideal and most certainly to not bruise the pride of the men to whom they were appealing. Their clear implication was that they would have truly preferred to remain entirely in the home, but

⁷³ *African Repository*, vol. 7., December 1831, pp. 310-312.

⁷⁴ An excellent and concise articulation of the idea of southern womanhood can be found in Anne Firor Scott's *The Southern Lady, From Pedestal to Politics, 1830-1930* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1970).

that external circumstances had compelled them to speak out. By highlighting their former safety and contentment, they praised the achievements of past legislative sessions, and while they implored the legislators to do something about insurgent slaves, they were careful not to blame the politicians for the current situation. They also invoked the particularly Southern concept of male protection of women by referring to the legislators as their “guardians.” Perhaps the women’s most important point, given how easily they could be criticized for stepping outside of the appropriate female bounds, was the blatant and twofold connection they drew between patriotism and the preservation of the domestic sphere. It was not only the patriotic duty of Virginia’s politicians to protect the white female population, they proclaimed, but it was also that of the women themselves to take an active role in the defense of their own domain.

It is also clear that the conflict between their reality and the Southern ideal bothered some women more than others. In a report of the Female Auxiliary Colonization Society of Fredericksburg and Falmouth, the women more openly defended their involvement in a cause that brushed up against the political arena. After outlining their attempts on behalf of fundraising and attracting new members, they went on to explain:

All this...can be attempted and accomplished without...
 compromising the proprieties of sex, or violating the rules
 of the most fastidious delicacy. We are aware that prejudices
 do yet exist...against the active agency of females in behalf
 of...this, inasmuch as it...divides public sentiment, and is, in
 some respects, a political question...we would ask whether,
 because the scheme of Colonization involves ultimate political
 interests, our sex is to be forever precluded from any agency in
 its promotion...The same course of reasoning would go to

exclude female agency from the promotion of Sunday School, the Missionary or the Bible cause—for who will...say that each of these schemes of amelioration, is not pregnant, with the highest consequences to the peace and prosperity of the State.⁷⁵

In this report, these elite, white women offer a forceful, if indirect, defense of their growing presence in the political realm. They describe all of women's hitherto praised and encouraged benevolent activities—in this case religious education and expansion—as inherently political as such actions influenced the well-being of the state. They characterized their involvement in colonization as not radical but rather as part of a tradition of benevolence long accepted by society. The women's choice of words is also interesting. Colonization, like women's accepted charitable endeavors, is “pregnant with the highest consequences” for the state. Rather than being an abnormal and unwomanly occupation, the women emphasized, colonization was an entirely natural female pursuit and compatible with women's other responsibilities.

While this defense of women's political involvement was artful and impressive, other women did not bother to go so far to justify their choices. They merely rationalized their colonization activities by filing them away under religious and charitable enterprises, endeavors for which the prevailing social prescriptions of the day acknowledged women had a special affinity. Historian Elizabeth Varon claims that even if some women in the state genuinely saw their colonization work as wholly religious or charitable, it would have been difficult for them to continue to do so after the formation of the Virginia Colonization Society in 1828. Once colonization started to take on local as well as national dimensions, controversial and undeniably political talk of

⁷⁵ “Report on the Female Auxiliary Colonization Society of Fredericksburg and Falmouth,” 12 May 1832, *African Repository*, vol. 8, June 1832, pp. 119-120.

emancipation began to be heard in the meetings of auxiliaries across the state.⁷⁶ That women faced criticism over their actions from people less eager to embrace a new conception of white womanhood is clear, but it is impossible to determine just how many of them harbored their own concerns about the propriety of their activities. Certainly, the ideal of white Southern womanhood was so firmly ingrained as to cause some women to take pause and others to loudly and vehemently defend their actions. But it is also likely that still other women, cultural dictates notwithstanding, saw no particular contradiction between following their consciences and maintaining their femininity, and left it at that.

⁷⁶ Varon, p. 47.

CHAPTER V

“O TO SEE WESTERN AFRICA SEA-SONED WITH DIVINE SALT:”
THE POWER AND EMPOWERMENT OF EVANGELICAL CHRISTIANITY

The growth of the Evangelical movement, of the Second Great Awakening, as its nineteenth-century incarnation is called, and the effect it had on both women and men throughout the United States has been well-documented. However, the enormous implications of Evangelicalism, which was particularly strong in the South, for both the colonization movement and the role of women must be emphasized. The central message of Evangelical Christianity, which attracted slaves and free blacks as well as whites, was the equality of all men and women before God. Historian Donald Mathews argues that “reflective Evangelicals could not slough off a sense of guilt in relation to blacks; they admitted the slaves’ special claims upon them for religious instruction and supported the American Colonization Society...This conservative solution...attracted Evangelicals who continued to believe that slavery was an evil, but who despaired of freeing blacks in this country.”⁷⁷ Of course, Evangelicalism also made many converts among slavery’s defenders, but Mathews’ point that colonization was a logical companion of Evangelicalism is well-taken. Many dedicated Evangelicals could not deny the spiritual equality of their black co-religionists and turned to colonization as a practical as well as appropriately pious remedy. Another prominent feature of the evangelical revival was the importance ministers placed on the central role of women in daily religious life, an idea that tied in well with long-standing notions of the domestic realm.⁷⁸ That white women

⁷⁷ Mathews, p. 79.

⁷⁸ Ibid., p. 112.

were in general highly moral and capable of greater virtue than men, and thus could exercise a greater positive influence on others, was a widely accepted notion in the antebellum era. Religious leaders soon called on women to spread their influence beyond their families and into the greater community. Given how respected women's understanding of religious duties was, it should not be surprising that their delineation of the importance of a particular cause, in this case colonization, was heeded by many people. This new ideology, referred to by many scholars of Southern history and culture as Evangelical Womanhood, made it easier for women to involve themselves in causes that might otherwise have been seen as purely social or political. Like colonization itself, Evangelicalism, with its implicit push for social change, was far more popular in Virginia among whites of the middle and lower classes than among the planter elite. However, it is important to remember that not all female colonizationists were members of evangelical churches.⁷⁹ The prominent Mary Blackford was a devout and traditional Episcopalian. Nevertheless, Blackford and her co-religionists benefited from the atmosphere of increased tolerance for publicly engaged women that was the product of Evangelical Womanhood. In Mathews' words, "the compelling power of the Evangelical ideal was so great throughout the South that even the liturgical, understated church of the aristocracy was affected by it."⁸⁰

Of course, women were handed neither actual increased influence in their communities nor widespread acceptance of the propriety of their involvement in the public sphere. The religious rhetoric of the Second Great Awakening, and the social

⁷⁹ McGraw points out that though Episcopalians as a whole were less enthusiastic about colonization than many members of other Protestant denominations, Virginia's most prominent colonizationists were members of the Episcopal Church. She highlights the role of the Reverend William Meade who, during the 1820s and 1830s, "produced more money for the Society than any other one person...through donations from his own family, his parish and the Frederick County Auxiliary Society which he formed." McGraw attributes the wariness of their co-religionists, who dominated the planter class, largely to the emancipation sympathies held by many of the most visible colonizationists. Mathews, however, asserts that there were Evangelical Episcopalians, people who were attracted to some aspects of the Second Great Awakening, but who remained within the auspices of the Church, and that the Meades were among these. McGraw, p. 58; Mathews, pp. 116-117, 129-131.

⁸⁰ Mathews, p. 131.

ideas it gave rise to, provided public-minded women with an inspiration and justification for their behavior. But it was the women themselves who, by advancing into and enjoying considerable success in the public domain, slowly changed mainstream ideas about women's proper role and capabilities. In the case of the colonization movement, the dedication of its white, elite female adherents in Virginia, as well as the impressive success of their efforts, has already been discussed. Furthermore, all over the United States women were making their presence felt in a great variety of social, political and charitable endeavors. Women had entered the public sphere in large numbers and instead of being themselves debased, they had, just as Evangelical preachers had urged, lent their talents and morals to what were widely seen as worthy causes. It was, to put it simply, difficult to argue with success, and with each passing year, as white American women became ever more involved in the public realm, their behavior was increasingly seen as normal and "natural."

Thus, by the late 1820s, it was largely considered socially acceptable in the South for white women to engage in religious and charitable activities outside their homes. The colonization zeal among many Virginia women was often inspired just as much by a desire to Christianize Africa as by a belief that slavery was wrong or that free blacks were a menace, or both. In an undated letter to her cousin, Mary Lee Fitzhugh Custis, Ann R. Page, the sister of the Reverend William Meade, wrote of her hopes for colonization, "O to see Western Africa sea-soned with divine salt, from American christians! O to send over our best trained servants to help to lay the foundation! This is what my soul longs for."⁸¹ An anonymous female contributor to the *African Repository* rejoiced that "Liberia is reclaimed from its savage sway...From her, light and peace are to pervade a pagan continent."⁸² The previously discussed will of Susan Meade demonstrates a clear

⁸¹ Ann Randolph Meade Page to Mary Lee Fitzhugh Custis, Mary Lee Fitzhugh Custis Papers, The Virginia Historical Society, MSS29695b7.

⁸² *African Repository*, vol. 7, March 1831, p. 14.

commitment to both the eventual emancipation America's slaves and the religious welfare of all African-Americans:

I leave the money...bequeathed to me by my sainted mother ...to apply as may seem best...to any charitable or benevolent institution—I would name the 'Colonization Society for the free people of colour in Africa' as being an object best worthy of succour, as it embraces two objects of the dearest import, to mortal, and immortal creatures—both temporal and eternal freedom is dawning on this long injured people, and we who have lived by the sweat of their brow, should thank God for the honour and privilege, of seeing this day, and of having a mite to throw in to help them to their native home.⁸³

That a significant number of women in Virginia actively supported the colonization movement is apparent. What is much less clear is where exactly these women fit into the larger canvas of Virginia society and what motivated them to involve themselves in the cause. The relatively few previous works that have discussed this topic have struggled with these questions. The paucity of sources makes it difficult to offer wholly-confident assertions, but some basic conclusions can be safely drawn.

Colonization sentiment, among both women and men, appears to have existed in its greatest strength in Virginia's urban areas and their outlying counties, though it was also popular in more rural areas that had substantial populations of free blacks. This argument is based on the amount of support that came from cities such as Richmond and Fredericksburg, which were the homes of large, active, and generous auxiliary societies. White women in cities and large towns would have had easy and convenient access to the

⁸³ Will of Susan Meade, 3 July 1820, The Virginia Historical Society, Richmond, VA, MSS 2C969565-6.

most recent newspapers and they would have found it more difficult than their rural counterparts to ignore important political matters, even if they believed that such matters were outside their range of concern.

Colonization had its believers among all segments of society, but sympathy and financial support came largely from the middle class, the members of which were more likely to be engaged in the professions and less likely to own large numbers of slaves, or, indeed, any slaves at all.⁸⁴ The moderate-sized contributions of most Virginia women at this time might also be interpreted as evidence of the comfortable but not lavish financial circumstances of most of the donors. The elite, Episcopalian establishment was by and large too invested in maintaining slavery to lend much support to a movement that, at least until the mid-1830's, seemed too closely allied to emancipation.⁸⁵ There were, of course, exceptions. As late as 1836, members of some of the state's most established gentry families, male and female alike, were making donations to the ACS, but their numbers were dwindling.⁸⁶ It is also worth bearing in mind that, regardless of sex, members of these most prominent families who sympathized with colonization may have felt extremely uncomfortable voicing their opinions and either kept them to themselves or rendered any support anonymously. As for the lower classes, made up primarily of small farmers, whatever their inclinations, they had little with which to aid the cause, and records of financial donations constitute the best source with which to track colonization sentiment. The *African Repository* does record contributions, usually from various church congregations, of small or uneven amounts, suggesting that the community may have been either too poor to make a substantial donation or that the sum came from the

⁸⁴ McGraw, pp. 60-62.

⁸⁵ In Chapter 3, "Discontent," of *The Southern Lady*, Anne Firor Scott argues that some women of the planter class throughout the South were dissatisfied with slavery, and the endless work and occasional humiliation it meant for them, and entertained anti-slavery sympathies. Scott is persuasive to a large extent, although I think she overstates her case, but there is no evidence that a significant number of women of the planter class, in Virginia or elsewhere in the South, took an active interest in colonization.

⁸⁶ To give just three examples, Mrs. Mary C. Lee of Arlington gave twenty dollars at the beginning of 1836, and Mrs. Custis of Arlington and Miss Landonia Randolph of Powhatan County donated four dollars each several months later. *African Repository*, vol. 12, March 1836, p. 71; November 1836, p. 360.

smaller gifts of many people. It was also fairly common for congregations to raise money to pay the ACS membership fees for their minister, who would then presumably disseminate information to the community. It is possible that many of these congregations were composed of people of more modest means, who chose an influential person in the community to represent them in the wider movement and who had to be content with lending more limited and indirect support.

The motivations of Virginia's white colonizationists were clearly very diverse but often worked in tandem. The great strength of evangelical religion in Virginia and the desire of many colonizationists to see the gospel brought to Africa have already been discussed. The cities, evidently the home of the bulk of colonization sympathizers, contained large communities of free African-Americans, and it would have been difficult for anyone to ignore the degradation to which they were usually subjected. White Southerners were generally of two minds regarding the condition of most free African-Americans: they either lamented the discrimination in America that prevented most from living successful lives or feared that their unhappy condition would encourage them to "misbehave." Whether based on fear or compassion, or both, the desire to remove the free black community from their midst was extremely strong among whites in Virginia and would naturally be most strongly felt by those whites who came into the greatest degree of contact with that population.⁸⁷ However, some colonizationists also certainly hoped that their movement would lead to the gradual emancipation of all the slaves in Virginia, and were not motivated simply by the desire to rid their state of the free black population. The Reverend William Meade told his family that he wished to free his own slaves as soon as it was financially feasible, and his ambition was shared by enough

⁸⁷ Though fear, religious principles and genuine compassion were clearly at work, Hickin argues that there was also an economic component to colonization sentiment in Virginia. Some advocates wished to "rid the state of an unskilled, poorly motivated black labor force and to substitute an intelligent, industrious, skilled white labor supply." But this program was hindered by disagreement as to whether the free black population alone ought to be removed or if slavery should also be abolished and all blacks expelled. Hickin, pp. 247-249.

people throughout the state to cause pro-slavery elements to denounce colonization as an abolitionist plot.⁸⁸ Given the increasing tension that pervaded the question of slavery, it is perhaps understandable why the pro-slavery advocates were so sensitive. By the 1830s the majority of Virginia's emigrants to Liberia were recently manumitted slaves.⁸⁹ Emancipation sentiment could not be reliably written-off as part of a fringe movement. It appeared to be making very real inroads among the slaveholding population.

It is possible that the same spirit of paternalism that allowed many Southerners to excuse and even justify the existence of slavery was also at work in the minds of advocates of colonization. It is difficult to form an opinion one way or the other on this point. Certainly almost all colonizationists, especially those who took an active part in the ACS and its auxiliaries, were interested in benefiting black people. Regardless of how much they may also have been motivated by a desire to remove what they may have believed to be a threat to the stability of Virginia's rigidly race and class-based society, a genuine humanitarian impulse was also at work. White Virginians who emancipated their slaves and encouraged, or required, them to go to Liberia may well have been accustomed to regarding them in a benevolent, paternalistic manner. Historian Elizabeth Fox-Genovese explains that "paternalism invokes a specific metaphor of legitimate domination: the protective domination of the father over his family."⁹⁰ This theory governed virtually every white family in the South, but in slaveholding households it took on a more complicated meaning. It justified the dominion of masters over slaves, but also, by casting the slave system in familial terms, implied that slaveholders had some nebulous obligation to oversee the welfare of their slaves. Fox-Genovese argues that "the slaves...did their part to elaborate the metaphor of family and to hold their white folks

⁸⁸ Reverend William Meade to Mary Lee Fitzhugh Custis, 30 May 1825, Mary Lee Fitzhugh Custis Papers, The Virginia Historical Society, MSS2C9695b2-4.

⁸⁹ Varon, p. 57.

⁹⁰ Elizabeth Fox-Genovese, *Within the Plantation Household: Black and White Women of the Old South* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1988), p. 64.

accountable to their professed ideals.”⁹¹ Though the relationship between mistresses and slaves, especially female slaves, was endlessly complex and hostile just as frequently as it was compassionate, it seems clear that many female slaveholders did take very seriously their responsibility toward their slaves.⁹² It is possible that many slaveowners felt that their goodwill and moral influence was as necessary to their slaves’ well-being as any more tangible item, and for some of them, manumission, colonization, and improvements to the Liberian colony may have been logical outgrowths of paternalism.

In this light, the ongoing efforts to form, and not merely establish, the Liberian colony might be interpreted as evidence of white advocates’ belief that the colonists needed the assistance of white Americans to maintain a moral and productive society. Some communications from colonizationists to the settlers do reveal a perhaps unintentionally condescending tone. In a letter announcing their wish to found a girls’ school in Monrovia, some female colonizationists expressed the hope that the colonists would understand the great necessity of their endeavor. The last line of the letter reads, “Hoping that *you* will feel *sensible* of its importance, we are your sincere friends and well wishers.”⁹³ It is difficult to read this line as anything but the presumption of the Society’s members that the Liberian colonists might not be able to discern on their own the need for improved education. There is no intentional contempt or derision in this letter, only the sense that in order to play it safe, their Society should assume the colonists required as much help as possible from their white patrons.

Many Virginians certainly saw colonization as the greatest gift they could bestow on African-Americans—restitution for the great crimes that whites had perpetrated on them, and a ticket out of a country that would never grant them full rights. The colonizationists offered what they saw as the best opportunity available for African-Americans to improve themselves, morally, intellectually and materially. Historian Patricia P. Hickin writes of the colonizationists, “it might be more accurate to describe

⁹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 132.

⁹² *Ibid.*, pp. 133-134.

⁹³ *African Repository*, vol. 7, March 1831, p. 26.

them as pessimists, at least in their appraisal of human nature...Negroes—they reasoned, not illogically—would have more opportunities to fulfil their capabilities in a land where they would not excite the fears or jealousies of whites.”⁹⁴ However, no matter how well-intentioned most white colonizationists may have been, the fact remains that many sympathetic slaveholders, on emancipating some or all of their slaves, specified that they must emigrate. Many Southerners feared race-mixing and especially a race war, fears which were only heightened by the Southampton Insurrection, and as a result, mandated emigration. But other slaveholders had more ambiguous motives. Perhaps they felt it was either their right or responsibility to direct the fates of the people who had once been their property, and certainly many believed that Liberia held better prospects for blacks than the United States. But by disregarding the possibly contrary wishes of the emigrants themselves, it is reasonable to surmise that many of these whites could not conceive that blacks were capable of determining their own destinies.

In the end, the safest thing to say about the motives of white Virginia colonizationists is that there was no single and uniform motivating factor. Religious considerations often combined with fears for the order and security of the state. Guilt and shame that Virginia was complicit in what many saw as the sin of slavery compelled some to try and make amends. The great debate on the future of slavery in the state that surrounded the 1831-1832 legislative session likely spurred many more to take an active interest. During the first half of the 1830s, when colonization sentiment was at its height in Virginia, it would have been virtually impossible for white women, particularly in urban areas or in places, like Southampton County, where the question was of immediate importance, to ignore the matter.⁹⁵

⁹⁴ Hickin, p. 262.

⁹⁵ The decline of the colonization movement in Virginia in the latter half of the 1830s is not directly related to the topic of this paper, but a little information about it might be useful. By 1837, the cause had been firmly identified with the state's pro-slavery elements, earning it increasing scorn from the North and causing the pro-emancipation colonizationists, who had been so prominent in the early years, to largely withdraw. The various societies and auxiliaries were also plagued by money problems, donations also having been affected by the financial crisis of 1837. Though colonization sympathies never died out completely in Virginia, it was no match for its stagnating establishments and the growing sectionalism, and thus pro-slavery sentiment, in the South. For a fuller explanation, see Varon, p. 57-62; Hickin, p. 298-299.

CONCLUSION

Colonization, a political movement no matter what purely benevolent label some chose to put on it, was only the beginning. By the 1840s, the same class of women who had labored on behalf of the ACS and its myriad auxiliaries were being enthusiastically invited into the political process by many of Virginia's most prominent politicians. American politics had grown no more civil or genteel; in fact, politics were uglier and more partisan than ever before. Nevertheless many men now considered it vital that women take a very public role. In *We Mean to be Counted: White Women and Politics in Antebellum Virginia*, Elizabeth R. Varon argues that the presidential campaign of 1840, in which white women were actively courted by the Whig party, signaled a turning point in the civic roles of women. The Whig line was a significant departure from previous popular rhetoric of women's place in the public sphere. Varon terms this new female ideal as "Whig Womanhood" and defines it as "the notion that women could—and should—make vital contributions to party politics by serving as both partisans and mediators in the public sphere."⁹⁶ Drawing on the rhetoric of Republican Motherhood and Evangelical Womanhood, these politicians cast women as vital intermediaries who could transmit partisan politics to their families and at the same time confer a greater air of morality on the Whig party as a whole. Virginia Democrats accused women who participated in this manner of being crude and unladylike, but by the next election they

⁹⁶ Varon, pp. 71-72.

had adopted similar tactics.⁹⁷ Upper- and middle-class Virginia women—usually, but not always on behalf of the Whig party—formed associations to support or honor particular politicians, draw attention to important causes, and occasionally expressed their opinions in the press. There were those, throughout the United States as well as in Virginia, who expressed skepticism or downright unease that such behavior was not only being tolerated but actually applauded and encouraged, but the criticism had little effect.⁹⁸ By the eve of the Civil War, Varon argues that “the inclusion of women in the rituals of party politics had become commonplace, and the ideology that justified such inclusion had been assimilated by the Democrats.”⁹⁹

The Whig and eventually Democratic campaigns of the 1840s marked the first time the “ladies” of Virginia were involved on a large scale in partisan politics. But the circumstances that rendered this phenomenon socially acceptable had their roots in women’s activities in the 1820s and 1830s and most especially in the colonization movement.

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 72.

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 72; 87-89.

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 72.

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