**The American Colonization Society**

 (**ACS**; in full, "The Society for the Colonization of Free People of Color of America"), established in 1817 by [Robert Finley](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Robert_Finley) of [New Jersey](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/New_Jersey), was the primary vehicle to support the return of free [African Americans](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/African_Americans) to what was considered greater freedom in [Africa](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Africa). It helped to found the [colony](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Colony) of [Liberia](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Liberia) in 1821–22 as a place for [freedmen](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Freedmen). Among its supporters were [Charles Fenton Mercer](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Charles_Fenton_Mercer), [Henry Clay](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Henry_Clay), [John Randolph](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/John_Randolph_of_Roanoke), and [Richard Bland Lee](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Richard_Bland_Lee).[[1]](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/American_Colonization_Society#cite_note-Bateman.2C_Graham_2000_pp._161-1)[[2]](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/American_Colonization_Society#cite_note-AFP-2)[[3]](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/American_Colonization_Society#cite_note-nyt_1853-3)[[4]](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/American_Colonization_Society#cite_note-Finkelman2006-4)

[Paul Cuffee](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Paul_Cuffee), a wealthy [mixed-race](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mixed-race) New England [shipowner](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Shipowner) and [activist](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Activist), was an early advocate of settling freed blacks in Africa. He gained support from black leaders and members of the US Congress for an emigration plan. In 1811 and 1815–16, he financed and captained successful voyages to British-ruled [Sierra Leone](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sierra_Leone), where he helped African-American immigrants get established.[[5]](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/American_Colonization_Society#cite_note-5) Although Cuffee died in 1817, his efforts may have inspired the American Colonization Society (ACS) to initiate further settlements.

The ACS was a coalition made up mostly of evangelicals and [Quakers](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Quakers), who supported [abolition](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Abolitionism_in_the_United_States) and Chesapeake slaveholders who understood that unfree labor did not constitute the economic future of the nation. They found common ground in support of so-called "repatriation". They believed blacks would face better chances for full lives in Africa than in the U.S. The slaveholders opposed state or federally mandated abolition, but saw repatriation as a way to remove free blacks and avoid slave rebellions.[[2]](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/American_Colonization_Society#cite_note-AFP-2) From 1821, thousands of free black Americans moved to Liberia from the [United States](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/United_States). Over twenty years, the colony continued to grow and establish economic stability. In 1847, the legislature of Liberia declared the nation an independent state.

Critics have said the ACS was a racist society, while others point to its benevolent origins and later takeover by men with visions of an American empire in Africa. The Society closely controlled the development of [Liberia](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Liberia) until its declaration of independence. By 1867, the ACS had assisted in the movement of more than 13,000 Americans to Liberia. From 1825 to 1919, it published the *African Repository and Colonial Journal*. After 1919, the society had essentially ended, but it did not formally dissolve until 1964, when it transferred its papers to the [Library of Congress](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Library_of_Congress).[[6]](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/American_Colonization_Society#cite_note-6)

**Colonization as a solution to the problem of free blacks**

Following the [American Revolutionary War](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/American_Revolutionary_War), the "peculiar Institution" of [slavery](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/History_of_slavery) and those bound within it grew, reaching four million slaves by the mid-19th century.[[7]](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/American_Colonization_Society#cite_note-7) At the same time, due in part to [manumission](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Manumission) efforts sparked by the war and the [abolition of slavery](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/History_of_slavery#Early_United_States_law) in Northern states, there was an expansion of the ranks of [free blacks](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Free_Negro)with legislated limits.[[2]](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/American_Colonization_Society#cite_note-AFP-2) In the first two decades after the Revolutionary War, the percentage of free blacks rose in Virginia, for instance, from 1% to nearly 10% of the black population.

Some men decided to support emigration following an abortive slave rebellion headed by [Gabriel Prosser](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gabriel_Prosser) in 1800, and a rapid increase in the number of free African Americans in the United States, which was perceived by some to be alarming. Although the ratio of whites to blacks was 8:2 between 1790 and 1800, it was the increase in the number of free African Americans that disturbed some proponents of colonization. From 1790 to 1800, the number of free African Americans increased from 59,467 (1.5% of total U.S. population, 7.5% of U.S. black population) to 108,398 (2% of U.S. population), a percentage increase of 82 percent; and from 1800 to 1810, the number increased from 108,398 to 186,446 (2.5% of U.S. pop.), an increase of 72 percent.[[8]](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/American_Colonization_Society#cite_note-8) The perception of change was highest in some major cities, but especially the Upper South, where the most slaves were freed in the two decades after the Revolution.

This steady increase did not go unnoticed by an anxious white community that was ever more aware of the free blacks in their midst. The arguments propounded against free blacks, especially in free states, may be divided into four main categories. One argument pointed toward the perceived moral laxity of blacks. Blacks, it was claimed, were licentious beings who would draw whites into their savage, unrestrained ways. The fears of an intermingling of the races were strong and underlay much of the outcry for removal.

Along these same lines, a second argument held that blacks had a tendency toward criminality.[[9]](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/American_Colonization_Society#cite_note-9) A third argument focused on the supposed mental inferiority of African Americans made them unfit for the duties of citizenship and incapable of real improvement. Finally, economic arguments were also advanced, most notably by those who said that the presence of free blacks threatened the jobs of working class whites in the North.

Southerners had their special reservations about free blacks, fearing that the freedmen living in slave areas caused unrest among slaves and encouraged runaways and slave revolts. They had racial reservations about the ability of free blacks to function. The proposed solution was to have free blacks deported from the United States to colonize parts of Africa.[[10]](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/American_Colonization_Society#cite_note-10)

**Paul Cuffee**

Paul Cuffee in 1812.

[Paul Cuffee](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Paul_Cuffee) (1759–1817) was a mixed-race, successful Quaker ship owner descended from [Ashanti](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Ashanti) and [Wampanoag](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wampanoag_people) parents. He advocated settling freed American slaves in Africa and gained support from the British government, free black leaders in the United States, and members of Congress to take emigrants to the British colony of [Sierra Leone](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sierra_Leone). He had an economic interest, as he intended to bring back valuable cargoes. In 1815 he financed a trip and the following year,[[11]](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/American_Colonization_Society#cite_note-WDL-11) in 1816, Cuffee took thirty-eight American blacks to [Freetown](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Freetown), Sierra Leone; other voyages were precluded by his death in 1817. By reaching a large audience with his pro-colonization arguments and practical example, Cuffee laid the groundwork for the American Colonization Society.[[12]](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/American_Colonization_Society#cite_note-12)

Origins

The ACS had its origins in 1816, when [Charles Fenton Mercer](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Charles_F._Mercer), a [Federalist](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Federalist_Party) member of the [Virginia General Assembly](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Virginia_General_Assembly), discovered accounts of earlier legislative debates on black colonization in the wake of [Gabriel Prosser's](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gabriel_Prosser) rebellion. Mercer pushed the state to support the idea, and one of his political contacts in Washington City, John Caldwell, in turn contacted the[Reverend](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Reverend) [Robert Finley](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Robert_Finley), his brother-in-law and a [Presbyterian](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Presbyterianism) minister, who endorsed the plan.[*[citation needed](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia%3ACitation_needed%22%20%5Co%20%22Wikipedia%3ACitation%20needed)*]

On December 21, 1816, the society was officially established in Washington at the [Davis Hotel](http://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Davis_Hotel&action=edit&redlink=1). Attendees included [James Monroe](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/James_Monroe), [Bushrod Washington](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bushrod_Washington), [Andrew Jackson](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Andrew_Jackson), [Francis Scott Key](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Francis_Scott_Key), and [Daniel Webster](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Daniel_Webster), with [Henry Clay](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Henry_Clay) presiding over the meeting. Its co-founders were considered to be [Henry Clay](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Henry_Clay), [John Randolph of Roanoke](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/John_Randolph_of_Roanoke), and [Richard Bland Lee](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Richard_Bland_Lee). Mercer was unable to go to Washington for the meeting. Although Randolph believed that the removal of free blacks would "materially tend to secure" slave property, the vast majority of early members were [philanthropists](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Philanthropists), clergy, and abolitionists who wanted to free African slaves and their descendants and provide them with the opportunity to "return" to Africa. Few members were slave-owners, and the Society never enjoyed much support among planters in the Lower South. This was the area that developed most rapidly in the 19th century with slave labor, and initially it had few free blacks, who lived mostly in the Upper South.

Motives

The colonization effort resulted from a mixture of motives. Free blacks, [freedmen](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Freedman), and their descendants, encountered widespread discrimination in the United States of the early 19th century. Whites generally perceived them as a burden on society and a threat to white workers because they undercut wages. Some abolitionists believed that blacks could not achieve equality in the United States and would be better off in Africa. Many slaveholders were worried that the presence of free blacks would encourage [slaves](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Slave) to rebel.

Despite being antislavery, some Society members were openly racist and frequently argued that free blacks would be unable to assimilate into the white society of America. John Randolph, a famous slave owner, called free blacks "promoters of mischief."[[13]](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/American_Colonization_Society#cite_note-13) At this time, about 2 million African Americans lived in America of which 200,000 were free persons of color (with legislated limits).[[2]](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/American_Colonization_Society#cite_note-AFP-2) [Henry Clay](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Henry_Clay), a congressman from Kentucky who was critical of the negative impact slavery had on the southern economy, saw the movement of blacks as being preferable to [emancipation](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Abolitionism_in_the_United_States) in America, believing that "unconquerable prejudice resulting from their color, they never could amalgamate with the free whites of this country. It was desirable, therefore, as it respected them, and the residue of the population of the country, to drain them off".[[14]](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/American_Colonization_Society#cite_note-ATH-14) Clay argued that because blacks could never be fully integrated into U.S. society due to "unconquerable prejudice" by white Americans, it would be better for them to emigrate to Africa.[[14]](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/American_Colonization_Society#cite_note-ATH-14)

Reverend Finley suggested at the inaugural meeting of an [African](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Africa) Society that a colony be established in [Africa](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Africa) to take free people of color, most of whom had been born free, away from the United States. Finley meant to colonize *"(with their consent) the free people of color residing in our country, in Africa, or such other place as*[*Congress*](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/United_States_Congress)*may deem most expedient."* The organization established branches throughout the United States. It was instrumental in the establishment of the colony of [Liberia](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Liberia).

**Fundraising**[[edit](http://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=American_Colonization_Society&action=edit&section=6" \o "Edit section: Fundraising)]

During the next three years, the society raised money by selling memberships. The Society's members relentlessly pressured Congress and the President for support. In 1819, they received $100,000 from Congress, and on February 6, 1820, the first ship, the *Elizabeth*, sailed from New York for West Africa with three white ACS agents and 88 emigrants aboard.[[15]](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/American_Colonization_Society#cite_note-HodgeNolan2007-15)

The ACS purchased the freedom of American slaves and paid their passage to Liberia. [Emigration](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Emigration) was offered to already free black people. For many years the ACS tried to persuade the U.S. Congress to appropriate funds to send colonists to Liberia. Although [Henry Clay](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Henry_Clay) led the campaign, it failed. The society did, however, succeed in its appeals to some state legislatures. In 1850, [Virginia](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Virginia) set aside $30,000 annually for five years to aid and support emigration. In its Thirty-Fourth Annual Report, the society acclaimed the news as "a great Moral demonstration of the propriety and necessity of state action!" During the 1850s, the society also received several thousand dollars from the [New Jersey](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/New_Jersey), [Pennsylvania](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pennsylvania), [Missouri](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Missouri), and [Maryland](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Maryland) [legislatures](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Legislature).

Preparation of colony

[Jehudi Ashmun](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jehudi_Ashmun), an early leader of the ACS colony, envisioned an American [empire](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Empire) in Africa. During 1825 and 1826, Ashmun took steps to lease, annex, or buy tribal lands along the coast and along major rivers leading inland. Like his predecessor Lt. [Robert Stockton](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Robert_Stockton), who in 1822[[11]](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/American_Colonization_Society#cite_note-WDL-11) established the site for [Monrovia](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Monrovia) by "persuading" a local chief referred to as "King Peter" to sell [Cape Montserado](http://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Cape_Montserado&action=edit&redlink=1) (or Mesurado) by pointing a [pistol](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pistol) at his head, Ashmun was prepared to use force to extend the colony's territory. His aggressive actions quickly increased Liberia's power over its neighbors. In a treaty of May 1825, King Peter and other native kings agreed to sell land to Ashmun in return for 500 bars of [tobacco](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tobacco), three barrels of [rum](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Rum), five casks of [powder](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gunpowder), five [umbrellas](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Umbrella), ten iron posts, and ten pairs of [shoes](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Shoes), among other items.

First colony[[edit](http://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=American_Colonization_Society&action=edit&section=8" \o "Edit section: First colony)]

The ship pulled in first at [Freetown, Sierra Leone](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Freetown%2C_Sierra_Leone), from where it sailed south to what is now the northern coast of Liberia. The emigrants started to establish a settlement. All three whites and 22 of the emigrants died within three weeks from [yellow fever](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Yellow_fever). The remainder returned to Sierra Leone and waited for another ship. The *Nautilus* sailed twice in 1821 and established a settlement at Mesurado Bay on an island they named Perseverance. It was difficult for the early settlers, made of mostly free-born blacks who had been denied the full rights of United States citizenship. In Liberia, the native Africans resisted the expansion of the colonists, resulting in many armed conflicts between them. Nevertheless, in the next decade 2,638 African Americans migrated to the area. Also, the colony entered an agreement with the U.S. Government to accept freed slaves who were taken from illegal slave ships.

Expansion and growth of the colony

During the next 20 years the colony continued to grow and establish economic stability. From the establishment of the colony, the ACS had employed white agents to govern the colony. In 1842, [Joseph Jenkins Roberts](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Joseph_Jenkins_Roberts) became the first non-white governor of Liberia. In 1847, the legislature of Liberia declared itself an independent state, with J.J. Roberts elected as its first [President](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/President_of_Liberia).

The society in Liberia developed into three segments: settlers with European-African lineage, freed slaves from slave ships and the West Indies, and indigenous native people. These groups would have a profound effect on the history of Liberia.

African Repository and Colonial Journal

In March 1825, the ACS began a quarterly, *The African Repository and Colonial Journal*, edited by Reverend [Ralph Randolph Gurley](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ralph_Randolph_Gurley) (1797–1872), who headed the Society until 1844. Conceived as the Society's [propaganda](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Propaganda) organ, the *Repository* promoted both colonization and Liberia. Among the items printed were articles about Africa, letters of praise, official dispatches stressing the prosperity and steady growth of the colony, information about emigrants, and lists of donors.

Civil War and emancipation

The ACS continued to operate during the [American Civil War](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/American_Civil_War), and colonized 168 Blacks while it was being waged. It sent 2,492 Blacks to Liberia in the following five years. The federal government provided a small amount support for these operations through the [Freedmen's Bureau](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Freedmen%27s_Bureau).[[16]](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/American_Colonization_Society#cite_note-16)

**Lincoln and the ACS**

*Main article:*[*Abraham Lincoln and slavery#Colonization*](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Abraham_Lincoln_and_slavery#Colonization)

Since the 1840s, Lincoln, an admirer of Clay, had been an advocate of the ACS program of colonizing blacks in [Liberia](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Liberia). Early in his presidency, [Abraham Lincoln](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Abraham_Lincoln) tried repeatedly to arrange resettlement of the kind the ACS supported, but each arrangement failed.

Some scholars believe that Lincoln abandoned the idea by 1863, following the use of black troops. Biographer [Stephen B. Oates](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Stephen_B._Oates) has observed that Lincoln thought it immoral to ask black soldiers to fight for the US and then to remove them to Africa after their military service. Others, such as the historian [Michael Lind](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Michael_Lind), believe that as late 1864 or 1865, Lincoln continued to hold out hope for colonization, noting that he allegedly asked Attorney General [Edward Bates](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Edward_Bates) if the Reverend [James Mitchell](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/James_Mitchell_%28American_politician%29) could stay on as "your assistant or aid in the matter of executing the several acts of Congress relating to the emigration or colonizing of the freed Blacks."[[17]](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/American_Colonization_Society#cite_note-17) Mitchell, a former state director of the ACS in Indiana, had been appointed by Lincoln in 1862 to oversee the government's colonization programs. In his second term as president, on April 11, 1865, Lincoln gave a speech supporting [suffrage](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Suffrage) for blacks.

Criticism and decline of the ACS[[edit](http://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=American_Colonization_Society&action=edit&section=13" \o "Edit section: Criticism and decline of the ACS)]

[Lemuel Haynes](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lemuel_Haynes), a free black Presbyterian minister at the time of the Society's formation, argued passionately that God's providential plan would eventually defeat slavery and lead to the harmonious integration of the races as equals.[*[citation needed](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia%3ACitation_needed%22%20%5Co%20%22Wikipedia%3ACitation%20needed)*] Beginning in the 1830s, some abolitionists increasingly attacked the ACS, criticizing colonization as a slaveholders' scheme and the ACS's works as palliative propaganda to soften the continuation of slavery in the United States. The presidents of the ACS tended to be [Southerners](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Southern_United_States). The first president of the ACS was [Bushrod Washington](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bushrod_Washington), the nephew of [U.S. President](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/President_of_the_United_States) [George Washington](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/George_Washington) and an [Associate Justice](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Associate_Justice) of the [United States Supreme Court](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/United_States_Supreme_Court). From 1836 to 1849 the [statesman](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Politician) [Henry Clay](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Henry_Clay) of [Kentucky](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kentucky), a planter and slaveholder, was ACS president.

Three of the reasons the movement never became very successful were the objections raised by free blacks and abolitionists, the scale and costs of moving many people (there were 4 million freedmen in the South after the Civil War), and the difficulty in finding locations willing to accept large numbers of black newcomers (no African tribe accepted newcomers,[[*citation needed*](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia%3ACitation_needed)] so the society relied on creating settlements at small colonial ports).

Dissolution

In 1913, and again at its formal dissolution in 1964, the Society donated its records to the U.S. [Library of Congress](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Library_of_Congress). The donated materials contain a wealth of information about the founding of the society, its role in establishing Liberia, efforts to manage and defend the colony, fundraising, recruitment of settlers, conditions for black citizens of the American South, and the way in which black settlers built and led the new nation.

In Liberia, the Society maintained offices at the junction of Ashmun and Buchanan Streets at the heart of Monrovia's commercial district, next to the [True Whig Party](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/True_Whig_Party)headquarters in the [Edward J. Roye Building](http://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Edward_J._Roye_Building&action=edit&redlink=1). Its offices at the site closed in 1956 when the government demolished all the buildings at the intersection for the purpose of constructing new public buildings there. Nevertheless, the land officially remained the property of the Society into the 1980s, building up large [property tax](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Property_tax) bills because the [Ministry of Finance](http://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Ministry_of_Finance_(Liberia)&action=edit&redlink=1) could not find an address to which to send tax bills.[[18]](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/American_Colonization_Society#cite_note-18)