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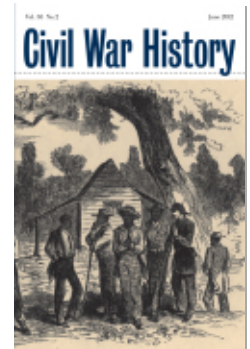
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The African American Delegation to Abraham Lincoln: A Reappraisal

KATE MASUR

Abraham Lincoln's August 1862 meeting with a delegation of black Washingtonians has always been crucial to those interested in assessing Lincoln's views on race and on African Americans' future in the United States. At that meeting, Lincoln famously told the five delegates "you and we are different races" and it was "better for us both . . . to be separated."¹ Lincoln hoped the Chiriquí region of what is now Panama would be an auspicious destination for African Americans, whom he doubted would be able to enjoy prosperity and peace in the United States. Black abolitionists' response to Lincoln's colonization proposal is also well known. Men like Robert Purvis and Frederick Douglass denounced it, charging Lincoln with racism and insisting that African Americans should demand rights and equality in the nation of their birth. The coming months would reinforce the logic of their position. Lincoln issued the Emancipation Proclamation, and black men began enlisting in the U.S. armed forces, opening the way for African Americans' claims to full citizenship.²

For the opportunity to present this work to an interested audience, I thank Edna Greene Medford and Joseph Reidy of Howard University. Thanks also to Bill Blair, Karen Younger, Tony Kaye, and two anonymous reviewers for their assistance and astute advice.

1. Abraham Lincoln, "Address on Colonization to a Deputation of Negroes," *Collected Works of Abraham Lincoln*, vol. 5, ed. Roy P. Basler (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers Univ. Press, 1953), 371, 372.

2. Accounts of Lincoln's interest in colonization include Eric Foner, "Lincoln and Colonization," in *Our Lincoln: New Perspectives on Lincoln and His World*, ed. Eric Foner (New

Despite the considerable attention to Lincoln and the black abolitionist response, however, fundamental questions about the delegation itself have long gone unanswered or, in some cases, answered incorrectly. Many have seen Benjamin Quarles's pathbreaking 1953 book, *The Negro in the Civil War*, as the definitive account of the delegation. Quarles wrote that Lincoln's colonization agent, James Mitchell, "hand-picked" the five delegates and that four of them were recently freed "contrabands." This assertion helped Quarles make a key interpretive point. Mitchell and Lincoln had sought out freedpeople rather than bona fide community leaders, Quarles argued, because he wanted a pliable delegation that would not challenge his Central American colonization proposal. Quarles's account implied that little more could be known about the composition of the delegation and, relatedly, that black institutions in Washington mattered little for understanding the outcome of the famed meeting with the president.³

As it turns out, there was much more to the story than Quarles's account suggested. First, none of the delegates to Lincoln was newly freed from slavery. In fact, all five were members of Washington's antebellum black elite and had strong ties to local religious and civic associations. Moreover, neither Mitchell nor Lincoln chose the delegates. Rather, the delegation emerged from institutions and decision-making processes that black Washingtonians had developed before the Civil War and put to use in the dynamic wartime context. Far from being sympathetic to the prospect of government-sponsored colonization in Central America, the delegates who

York: Norton, 2008); Paul J. Scheips, "Lincoln and the Chiriqui Colonization Project," *Journal of Negro History* 37, no. 4 (Oct. 1952): 418–53; Michael Vorenberg, "Abraham Lincoln and the Politics of Black Colonization," *Journal of the Abraham Lincoln Association* 14, no. 2 (Summer 1993): 22–45; Gabor S. Borritt, "The Voyage to the Colony of Lincolnia: The Sixteenth President, Black Colonization, and the Defense Mechanism of Avoidance," *Historian* 37, no. 4 (Aug. 1975): 619–32; Willis Boyd, "Negro Colonization in the National Crisis, 1860–1870" (PhD diss., UCLA, 1953). Accounts that emphasize African Americans' hostility to the proposal, in some ways anticipating the outcome of the debate, include James M. McPherson, "Abolitionists and Negro Opposition to Colonization during the Civil War," *Phylon* 26, no. 4 (4th Qtr., 1965): 391–99; McPherson, *The Negro's Civil War: How American Negroes Felt and Acted during the War for the Union* (New York: Vintage, 1965), 91–97; David W. Blight, *Frederick Douglass's Civil War: Keeping Faith in Jubilee* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State Univ. Press, 1989), 140–42; Benjamin Quarles, *Lincoln and the Negro* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1962), 116–19.

3. Benjamin Quarles, *The Negro in the Civil War*, with new introduction by William S. McFeely (1953; repr., New York: Da Capo, 1989), 147. See also Quarles, *Lincoln and the Negro*, 115–16.

met with Lincoln were inclined to oppose emigration. In fact, three of the five men were active in the Social, Civil, and Statistical Association (SCSA), a black organization that, just weeks before the meeting with Lincoln, had attempted to banish several emigration promoters from Washington.⁴

But Washington's African Americans were neither unified in opposition to emigration nor universally accepting of the delegation itself. To the contrary, the leaders of black Washington who sought to present a unified front against emigration faced a myriad of challenges. Several prominent African Methodist Episcopal (AME) ministers supported emigration or at least an open debate about the topic. Edward Thomas, the chair of the Lincoln delegation, unexpectedly decided to support Lincoln's proposal for a black colony in Chiriquí, and hundreds of black Washingtonians volunteered for the first voyage. Meanwhile, Lincoln's invitation to the White House itself ignited controversy in black Washington. Local African American religious and civic leaders used longstanding practices, developed through inter-denominational collaboration among churches, to select the delegation. But some black Washingtonians—including members of the delegation itself—questioned whether a small group of representatives could purport to represent masses of people whose perspectives and interests varied a great deal. Black Washingtonians' disagreements about the Lincoln delegation help explain the peculiar fact that the delegation never issued an official response to the president's proposal. Beyond that, they bring to light a remarkable debate not only focused on emigration but also on the responsibilities of leadership and the mechanics of representation.

To an extent rarely acknowledged, in 1862 the capital was the center of national lobbying and debate about black emigration. This was largely the result of congressional policy. In April, Congress passed the District of Columbia Emancipation Act, which provided both for compensated emancipation of the capital's approximately three thousand slaves and for an appropriation of \$100,000 to fund the settlement of those free and newly freed African Americans "as may desire to emigrate to the Republics of Hayti or Liberia, or such other country beyond the limits of the United States as the President may determine."⁵ Because the Emancipation Act left the destination

4. The editors of *The Black Abolitionist Papers* first corrected the record, noting that all five men were eminent members of Washington's free black community. Until this article, however, historians have not followed up on the implications of that finding. See C. Peter Ripley et al., eds., *The Black Abolitionist Papers*, vol. 5, *The United States, 1859–1865* (Chapel Hill: Univ. of North Carolina Press, 1992), 155n1.

for government-sponsored emigration undetermined, promoters of diverse colonization schemes flocked to Washington, hoping to persuade the government to favor them with its largesse. As one proponent of Liberian emigration put it, "This \$100,000 . . . is the *carcass* over which the turkey buzzards are gathered together!" The colonization bonanza seemed to grow even larger that summer, when Congress appropriated an additional \$500,000 for colonization purposes, creating a fund of \$600,000 at the president's disposal.⁶

The government appropriations and the Lincoln administration's keen interest in colonization opened a new chapter in a longstanding debate among African Americans. For decades, black northerners had discussed whether to leave the United States and light out on a project of racial uplift and autonomy in some other, more friendly location. Over the antebellum period, African Americans' support for emigration tended to rise in periods of white animosity toward free blacks and ebb when prospects for a future in the United States appeared to improve. For instance, interest had grown in the 1850s, when developments such as the 1850 Fugitive Slave Act and the 1857 Dred Scott decision made many northern African Americans fear for their safety and despair for their futures in the United States. Although the number of northern African Americans who actually left the United States remained relatively small, the debate about emigration was intense and hard fought, and it revealed sharp disagreements among African Americans about the relative merits of continuing to engage with American institutions and claiming American citizenship versus abandoning the country for better prospects elsewhere.

In 1862, three destinations for black emigration were under consideration: Liberia, Haiti, and Central America (particularly the province of Chiriquí in New Grenada). Each one had its own history and meaning for African Americans. The most controversial destination was Liberia, which was established in 1822 as an enterprise of the American Colonization Society (ACS). The ACS was a coalition of slaveholders and antislavery activists who wanted to diminish the

5. "An Act for the Release of Certain Persons Held to Service or Labor in the District of Columbia," *United States Statutes at Large*, 12:378.

6. Quoted in Boyd, "Negro Colonization and the National Crisis," 144. For revived interest and a sense of competition among proponents of different colonization schemes, see also William McLain to James Hall, Apr. 28, 1862, Domestic Letters, Outgoing Correspondence, Papers of the American Colonization Society, Library of Congress, reel 203 (hereafter ACS); "Twenty-first Annual Report of the Massachusetts Colonization Society," *African Repository* 38, no. 8 (Aug. 1862): 240–41; "Denmark, Hayti, and Chiriqui," *New-York Colonization Journal* 12 (July 1862): 3; William Seraille, "Afro-American Emigration to Haiti during the American Civil War," *Americas* 35, no. 2 (Oct. 1978): 199.

black population of the United States. Northern African Americans had long questioned the motives of ACS members, who sometimes advocated forced deportation of free blacks and often espoused racist views. Their doubts about Liberia were heightened by reports from emigrants there describing difficult conditions and widespread disease and mortality. Northern African Americans' views about Liberia improved somewhat after 1847, when the country became independent from the ACS and black migrants began governing the nation.⁷ Amid talk of the U.S. extending diplomatic recognition to Liberia for the first time, in early 1862 the Liberian government sent commissioners to Washington to lobby for a share of the colonization appropriation and recruit settlers. In May the commissioners spoke to freedpeople staying in temporary housing near the Capitol, and they compiled a small list of people seeking passage to Liberia.⁸

The prospect of emigration to Haiti had a very different history and meaning for African Americans in 1862. Haiti had emerged from French colonial rule as the world's first independent black republic and the western hemisphere's first postcolonial nation. The nation itself was thus a source of inspiration and pride for African Americans. In the 1820s, the Haitian government had appealed to African Americans to settle there, creating a flurry of debate in the United States. Haitian emigration gained renewed popularity during 1859 and 1860, when U.S.-based emigration advocates, led by James Redpath, a white abolitionist, worked with the Haitian government to encourage settlement. Results were disappointing, however. By 1861, word reached African

7. The ACS sponsored the emigration of close to eleven thousand people before the Civil War. Nearly all of them were from slaveholding states, either free blacks who chose to go, or slaves manumitted on the condition that they depart for Liberia. Eric Burin, *Slavery and the Peculiar Solution: A History of the American Colonization Society* (Gainesville: Univ. Press of Florida, 2005), table 2, table 5, 170, 172–73; Steven Hahn, *A Nation under Our Feet: Black Political Struggles in the Rural South from Slavery to the Great Migration* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard Univ. Press, 2003), 321; P. J. Staudenraus, *The African Colonization Movement, 1816–1865* (New York: Columbia Univ. Press, 1961), appendix, 351. Other work on the ACS and Liberia includes James T. Campbell, *Songs of Zion: The African Methodist Episcopal Church in the United States and South Africa* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1995), 73–77; Howard Temperly, "African-American Aspirations and the Settlement of Liberia," *Slavery and Abolition* 21, no. 2 (Aug. 2000): 67–92.

8. "The Liberian Delegation," *New-York Colonization Herald* 12 (July 1862): 1; Alex Crummell and J. D. Johnson to Caleb B. Smith, May 16, 1862, Records of the Office of the Secretary of the Interior Relating to the Suppression of the African Slave Trade and Negro Colonization, 1854–1872, National Archives Microfilm Publication M160, reel 8 (hereafter STNC); "Commissioners of the Liberia Government to the Colored People of the United States," *African Repository* 39, no. 1 (Jan. 1863): 23; "Forty-sixth Annual Report of the American Colonization Society," *African Repository* 39, no. 2 (Feb. 1863): 34–35.

Americans that emigrants to Haiti were often treated shabbily by locals and that the Haitian government did far less than promised to accommodate them. Nevertheless, Haitian emigration was still a going concern in spring 1862, and Redpath himself sought to recruit new settlers from among those who would be freed by the District of Columbia Emancipation Act.⁹

Central America had emerged most recently as a destination for black emigration. An 1854 African American emigration convention had turned its attention to Latin America and the Caribbean, and the politically powerful Blair family of Maryland—Francis P. Blair and his sons Frank and Montgomery—began advocating colonization in Central or South America later in the decade. Lincoln himself became interested in Chiriquí as early as spring 1861, when Ambrose Thompson, a white American with a contested claim to thousands of acres of land there, suggested that the government establish a naval station and a black colony, taking advantage of the area's natural coal deposits. The arguments in favor of Chiriquí were myriad. The area could provide a nearby home for emigrant African Americans; black settlers could help extract and export coal; and a U.S. enclave on the Central American isthmus could be strategically advantageous. By spring 1862, Lincoln's interior secretary, Caleb Smith, supported the idea of contracting with Thompson to establish a black colony in Chiriquí, and by August, Lincoln himself had come to see Chiriquí as the best destination for government-sponsored colonization.¹⁰

Once the president had settled on his preferred site for black colonization, however, a crucial question remained. Would the capital's African Americans go along? Black Washingtonians had debated emigration to Haiti during the brief period in 1861 when prospects for relocation there looked especially bright. But by spring 1862, many saw emancipation and

9. William McClain to James Hall, Apr. 25, 1862, McClain to James Hall, Apr. 28, 1862, and McClain to John Orcutt, May 13, 1862, ACS. See also Serraille, "Afro-American Emigration to Haiti"; Willis D. Boyd, "James Redpath and American Negro Colonization in Haiti," *Americas* 12, no. 2 (Oct. 1955): 169–82; John R. McKivigan, "James Redpath and Black Reaction to the Haitian Emigration Bureau," *Mid-America* 69, no. 3 (1987): 139–53; Floyd J. Miller, *The Search for a Black Nationality: Black Emigration and Colonization, 1787–1863* (Urbana: Univ. of Illinois Press, 1975), 232–49; Chris Dixon, *African America and Haiti: Emigration and Black Nationalism in the Nineteenth Century* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood, 2000).

10. *Proceedings of the National Emigration Convention of the Colored People* (Pittsburg: A. A. Anderson, 1854); Scheips, "Lincoln and the Chiriqui Colonization Project," 420–28; Foner, "Lincoln and Colonization," 147–49, 151, 154. For border-state Republican support for colonization before the war, see Eric Foner, *Free Soil, Free Labor, Free Men: The Ideology of the Republican Party Before the Civil War* (1970; repr., New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1995), 268–80.

civil war as harbingers of better fortunes to come. The “colored people” of Washington, one frustrated ACS agent explained, believed they were in the “paradise of freedom” and were not “in a very good state of mind to hear of Liberia or any other far off land of promise.”¹¹

Yet the benefits of freedom within the United States remained illusory for many black Washingtonians that spring and summer. Under provisions of the Fugitive Slave Act, “loyal” slaveholders could demand remittance of human property that had escaped into the District of Columbia, and local officials in the capital were more than willing to remand fugitives to their owners. At the same time, migrant freedpeople were hard-pressed to find adequate housing in the crowded capital. On seeing the “hopelessness” of freedpeople in Washington and at surrounding Union army outposts, one African American opponent of emigration told ACS officials he had become “convinced that their removal to Liberia would be a great blessing to them” and predicted they would go “by hundreds.” That July, Lincoln informed his cabinet that he hoped to issue a proclamation of emancipation, but the public had little idea that the president was moving in that direction. Indeed, as Lincoln continued to advocate compensated emancipation in the loyal border states, it was not at all clear that a federal turn toward abolition was imminent.¹²

Given both the uncertainty of wartime conditions in Washington and the longer history of African Americans’ debate about emigration, it is not surprising that some black locals were interested in leaving the country. In June, roughly 150 people, most of them from Washington, departed for Haiti from Alexandria, Virginia.¹³ Meanwhile, Joseph E. Williams, an advocate of Central American emigration, generated considerable interest and support. Williams, who was African American, had previously worked on James Redpath’s Haitian emigration project. He had ceased supporting that enterprise after a trip to Haiti revealed that colonists “were to hold inferior positions, to become mere slaves, ‘hewers of wood and drawers of water’ for men of our own color.” On returning to the United States, Williams denounced

11. William McClain to John Orcutt, Apr. 30, 1862, ACS. For the 1861 debate about Haiti, see *Anglo-African*, May 11, 1861, Dec. 7, 1861.

12. “Will They Go? Where?” *New-York Colonization Journal* 38 (Sept. 1862): 2. For more on the enforcement of the Fugitive Slave Act in Washington during the Civil War, see Kate Masur, *An Example for All the Land: Emancipation and the Struggle over Equality in Washington, D.C.* (Chapel Hill: Univ. of North Carolina Press, forthcoming fall 2010).

13. *Washington National Republican*, June 9, 1862; “Emigration to Hayti,” *New-York Colonization Journal*, 38 (July 1862): 2.

Haitian emigration but began promoting the Chiriquí idea, probably as an agent of Ambrose Thompson. Williams invited black ministers in Washington to discuss emigration plans with him, and he organized local African Americans to petition Congress to sponsor a settlement in Central America. While some black leaders initially viewed Williams with suspicion and opposed the petition, he gradually attained a measure of credibility, not least because he garnered support from one of the city's foremost black pastors, Henry McNeal Turner.¹⁴

Turner is best known for his post-Civil War careers as both a politician in Georgia and an advocate of African Americans' return to Africa in the 1890s.¹⁵ Much less has been written, however, about the brief period at the outset of the war when Turner was pastor at Washington's politically active Israel AME Church and the author of regular dispatches to the Philadelphia-based AME *Christian Recorder*. Turner insisted that emigration proposals must receive a hearing in Washington, and he signed one of Williams's petitions. He also commended Williams in a dispatch to the *Christian Recorder*, writing that "however much some of us may differ from the policy urged by Mr. Williams, I think that [he] is actuated by motives pure to the race he represents." In coming months, as Lincoln's Chiriquí colonization proposal divided black Washingtonians, Turner would remain an outspoken advocate of open debate on the matter.¹⁶

14. *Christian Recorder*, July 19, 1862, May 17, 1862; *Washington National Republican*, Apr. 10, 20, 23, 1862. The petition is published in Ira Berlin et al., eds., *The Wartime Genesis of Free Labor: The Upper South*, ser. 1, vol. 2 of *Freedom: A Documentary History of Emancipation, 1861–1867* (New York: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1993), 263–66. For Williams in Thompson's employ: *Message from the President of the United States*, 39th Cong., 1st sess., 1866, Sen. Exec. Doc. 55, 3.

15. For a recollection of Turner's leadership in Washington in this period, see Sidney Andrews, "Israel Bethel Church," *Atlantic Monthly* 32, no. 194 (Dec. 1873): 727–37. The most comprehensive biography of Turner is Stephen Ward Angell, *Bishop Henry McNeal Turner and African-American Religion in the South* (Knoxville: Univ. of Tennessee Press, 1992). The most extensive discussion of Turner's early career is Edwin S. Redkey, "Henry McNeal Turner: Black Chaplain in the Union Army," in *Black Soldiers in Blue: African American Troops in the Civil War Era*, ed. John David Smith (Chapel Hill: Univ. of North Carolina Press, 2002). For his later career, see also Redkey, ed., *Respect Black: The Writings and Speeches of Henry McNeal Turner* (New York: Arno, 1971); Clarence E. Walker, *A Rock in a Weary Land: The African Methodist Episcopal Church during the Civil War and Reconstruction* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State Univ. Press), 122–39; John Dittmer, "The Education of Henry McNeal Turner," in *Black Leaders of the Nineteenth Century*, ed. Leon Litwack and August Meier (Urbana: Univ. of Illinois Press, 1988).

16. *Christian Recorder*, July 19, 1862; Berlin et al., *Wartime Genesis*, 265. Francis P. Blair Jr. introduced the petition to the House of Representatives, *Journal of the House of Representatives of the United States*, 37th Cong., 2d sess., Apr. 21, 1862, 578.

Many black leaders, both in Washington and elsewhere, felt differently. Frederick Douglass was bothered enough by Williams's successes in the capital that he addressed the matter in a lengthy column in the May 1862 issue of *Douglass' Monthly*. Douglass conceded that he did not know how many people had signed Williams's petitions, but he asserted that "whether many or few their proceeding in this case has no other effect and can have no other effect than to inflict an injury on the cause of the colored people at large." Even a small number of people pressing for expatriation would make the wrong impression. "The action of the few," he wrote, "will be taken as representing the wishes of the many" and thus inadvertently aid the cause of white colonizationists "who have made the ridding of the country of negroes, the object of long years of unwearied but vain exertion."¹⁷

Some elite black Washingtonians shared Douglass's view that African Americans must adopt a unified stance against emigration, and at the end of July, one black civic association took dramatic action to end the local debate. The Social Civil and Statistical Association counted among its members many of the best-educated and wealthiest black men in Washington. The association was conceived as a mutual aid society whose broader purpose was to "improve our condition by use of all proper means calculated to exalt our people." Many members of the SCSA came from families that had always been free or had become free over the course of the preceding decades. They were teachers, businessmen, and employees of the federal government, and many were active in church-based organizations and secret societies. The SCSA was not a religious organization, but many of its members were associated with the Fifteenth Street Presbyterian Church, the city's most prestigious black congregation, which had been founded by the father of SCSA member John F. Cook Jr. The association's president was William Slade, the lead servant in the Lincoln White House.¹⁸

17. "Colored Men Petitioning to be Colonized," *Douglass' Monthly*, May 1862, 642.

18. The quotation is from the *Washington Evening Star*, Aug. 5, 1862. Slade was a longtime Washington resident who had moved to Cleveland just before the war; he returned to the capital in the summer of 1861. John E. Washington, *They Knew Lincoln* (New York: E. P. Dutton, 1942), 108; entry of Aug. 29, 1861, "Records of Session and the Church Records, vol. 1, 1841–1868," Records of 15th Street Presbyterian Church, box 34–1, Moorland Spingarn Collection, Howard Univ. (hereafter MSCHU). The SCSA may have been modeled after—or cofounded with—an identically named organization founded in Philadelphia in 1860. For the Philadelphia organization, see *Proceedings of the State Equal Rights Convention of the Colored People of Pennsylvania Held in Harrisburg* (Philadelphia: Printed for the convention [by Mc. C. Crummill, printer] 1865), 30–31; Hugh Davis, "The Pennsylvania State Equal Rights League and the Northern Black Struggle for Legal Equality, 1864–1877," *Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography* 126, no. 4 (2002): 614.

Internal records of the association have not been located, and many details about its goals and procedures remain unknown. Yet it is clear that members saw the association not just as a mutual aid society, but also as an organization that would shepherd black Washington through the upheavals of the Civil War. In spring 1862, members of the SCSA collected statistics about the number of black private schools in the capital and the amount of real estate held by black individuals and churches, numbers black leaders used to argue—against those who opposed emancipation—that African Americans would thrive in freedom. In collecting and publicizing such information, the SCSA was, in effect, developing a case for African American citizenship. This commitment helps explain why members of the association took dramatic action against emigration agents in late July and in August sought to shape the delegation to President Lincoln.¹⁹

The organization burst into public prominence when its members attempted to banish several colonization promoters from the capital. Members of the SCSA were provoked to action by news that in the course of lobbying Congress, one of the Liberian commissioners, John D. Johnson, had told a Republican congressman that “contrabands turned adrift by the war . . . should be sent out of the country whether they are willing to go or not” and that escaping slaves were “mere children in capacity” and “needed the control of the superior race.”²⁰ The comments attributed to Johnson represented much that African Americans despised in the traditions of white-led emigration efforts with which Liberia was associated. Black northerners had long believed that white supporters of emigration to Liberia hoped to forcibly deport African Americans, not simply offer them the option of leaving the United States. Moreover, they had long suspected that whites’ support for colonization was

19. Testimony of William Slade, file 1, American Freedmen’s Inquiry Commission Records, National Archives Microfilm Publication M619, reel 200. The association may have been responsible for the publication of such information in a local Republican newspaper. *Washington National Republican*, Apr. 15, 1862.

20. “Important Meeting of the Colored People of Boston,” *Boston Liberator*, Aug. 1, 1862 (reprinted in *San Francisco Pacific Appeal*, Sept. 13, 1862). Reports first published in the *Anglo-African* were picked up by the *Pacific Appeal*, a black newspaper published in San Francisco. Since there is evidently no extant version of the *Anglo-African* for summer or fall 1862, it is necessary to rely on the *Pacific Appeal* here. It is possible that Johnson, an American-born migrant to Liberia, had been misquoted. But it is also likely that he, like many other African American promoters of black nation-building, saw emigration as a project of racial uplift in which black leaders would bring civilization and Christianity to the black masses, whether to African Americans or to native Africans.

driven not by their sense of the best interests of African Americans but by racist sensibilities. Many therefore found the words attributed to Johnson offensive in the extreme.

On hearing of Johnson's remarks, the SCSA convened immediately and sent a delegation to confront him and demand that he leave town.²¹ According to the committee's own account, the SCSA members found Johnson "boiling over with rage and excitement." The "gentlemen" presented Johnson with a letter charging that he was "now engaged in acts inimical and treasonable to the interest of the colored people of this community and of the country generally" and demanding that he leave the city. Johnson initially protested but, the committee reported, he eventually acknowledged that he had made the comments attributed to him. That evening, SCSA members William Ringgold and William Wormley, the son of a prominent caterer, returned to the boarding house where Johnson was staying, challenged him again, and then knocked him down and hit and kicked him. Johnson swore out warrants for their arrest, whereupon Ringgold and Wormley's friends rushed to produce bail, contributing nearly \$60,000 worth of property as bond.²²

A groundswell of opposition to colonization agents followed the attack on Johnson. In southwest Washington, another community organization resolved to tar and feather Johnson if he ventured into the ward, and a literary society offered to turn over all its funds to the SCSA for use "in any action" against Johnson "or others of like stripe." Rumors circulated that Haitian emigration promoters would be attacked next, and a group of young men gave "a severe beating" to Joseph E. Williams, the advocate of Central American emigration, "and kicked him from the National Hotel, and afterwards treated him to a few buckets of cold water." In a report to the New York-based *Anglo-African* newspaper, an SCSA representative crowed, "The colored people are now aroused, and unless these men leave the city, it is feared that a general outbreak will follow." The correspondent concluded his report on an ambivalent

21. "The People of Washington and J. D. Johnson," *Pacific Appeal*, Sept. 13, 1862.

22. *Washington Evening Star*, Aug. 5, 1862; "The People of Washington and J. D. Johnson," and "Carter A. Stewart et al. to J. D. Johnson," both in *Pacific Appeal*, Sept. 13, 1862; William McClain to James Hall, July 30, 1862, and William McLain to John Orcutt, Aug. 4, 1862, ACS. On May 1, 1863, Wormley and Ringgold were each sentenced to a fifty-dollar fine and ten days' imprisonment for the assault. The next day, a pardon from President Lincoln released them from prison. They were not absolved of the fine, however. Abraham Lincoln to Edward Bates, May 2, 1863, *Collected Works of Abraham Lincoln*, vol. 6, ed. Roy P. Basler (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers Univ. Press, 1953), 194-95.

note, however, writing that the SCSA did not oppose “Liberia or any other country.” Rather, the association was fighting “against the machinations and schemes of the old Colonization Society and their leaders and abettors.” The SCSA did not completely reject emigration, the writer indicated, but instead drew crucial distinctions among the myriad programs under discussion.²³

Less than two weeks elapsed between the SCSA’s confrontation with Johnson and President Lincoln’s initial overtures to Washington’s African American leaders. On Sunday, August 10, Lincoln’s colonization agent, James Mitchell, sent word to black churches that the president wanted to meet with a delegation of African Americans. That Thursday, representatives of the churches and “several other interested persons” convened at Union Bethel AME Church in downtown Washington. Attendees seem to have known neither what the president had in mind nor whether Lincoln himself would be there. At the meeting, Mitchell informed the assembled group that Lincoln wanted to engage black leaders in a discussion of emigration out of the United States. Attendees were silent for “several minutes” before someone spoke up to suggest that the meeting organize itself, at which point those in attendance duly chose a chair and secretary and got to work.²⁴

Attendees at the Union Bethel meeting raised grave questions about the sources of the president’s interest in colonization. They wondered whether the proposed meeting was the “voluntary action of the President, or forced upon his consideration by the selfish interest of non-resident parties.” In expressing concerns about selfish “non-resident parties,” the group at Union Bethel may have been alluding to the Liberian commissioners, and John D. Johnson in particular, who had been lobbying the government to make Liberia the destination for black colonization. Indeed, that very day, Joseph J. Roberts, the former president of Liberia, and ACS official William McLain

23. “The People of Washington and J. D. Johnson”; McClain to Hall, July 30, 1862.

24. “The President’s Interview with a Committee of the Colored People of Washington,” *Pacific Appeal*, Sept. 20, 1862. The report in the *Pacific Appeal*, which was copied from the *Anglo-African*, incorrectly dated the meeting between Lincoln and the black delegation July 14, 1862. A separate article, also copied from the *Anglo-African*, said Mitchell spread word in black churches of Lincoln’s proposed meeting on Sunday, July 10. The editors seem to have replaced August with July in both instances. We know Lincoln’s meeting with the delegation was August 14, not July 14; and, while July 10, 1862, was a Thursday, August 10, 1862, was a Sunday. In addition, it would have been unlikely that Mitchell approached black churches on July 10, since Lincoln did not officially appoint him until August 6. Thus, only four days separated Mitchell’s Sunday announcement from the Union Bethel and Lincoln meetings. For the date of Mitchell’s appointment, see Boyd, “Negro Colonization in the National Crisis,” 146.

were meeting with Lincoln to make the case for Liberia. But the group's questions may also have been directed at Mitchell himself. Mitchell had come to the capital from Indiana, where he had been an ardent colonizationist. While Mitchell professed great concern with the well-being of escaping slaves, he also believed in a world of "stronger" and "weaker" races and was convinced that "a homogeneous population is necessary to the existence of a sound republic." The president's representative was hardly the kind of figure who inspired trust among African Americans. With many reasons to doubt the president's intentions, attendees discussed the origins and credibility of the proposed meeting with the president "to a great length."²⁵

Mitchell sought to reassure. He insisted that he spoke only for himself and the president, and he mentioned that Henry McNeal Turner, the widely respected pastor at Israel AME Church (who was not at the meeting), had also helped prompt Lincoln's invitation when Turner had "sought an interview on his own responsibility with the President in relation to the \$600,000 emigration fund." He went on to argue that Lincoln genuinely wanted advice from "colored men" about the disposition of the appropriation.²⁶

Yet attendees at the meeting also questioned what it would mean for a small group chosen there to represent the city's—or even the nation's—African Americans before the U.S. president. Some "did not feel authorized to commit our people to any measure of colonization."²⁷ John F. Cook Jr., an SCSA member who became a member of the delegation to Lincoln, would later express concerns about "taking the responsibility of answering the President on a matter in which more than four million of his people were concerned."²⁸ As Lincoln's invitation itself implied, the war was opening new possibilities for African Americans' participation in politics at the highest levels. But new opportunities also raised crucial questions about how political representation would work as slavery crumbled. How should representatives be chosen, and what were the implications of a few people speaking for a great mass?

25. "President's Interview with a Committee of the Colored People of Washington." For Lincoln's August 14 meeting with Roberts and McLain, see Vorenberg, "Abraham Lincoln," 35–36. For Mitchell's views: James Mitchell, *Brief on Emigration and Colonization and Report in Answer to A Resolution of the Senate* (Washington, D.C.: H. Polkinhorn, 1865), 2–3, 8–9. See also Boyd, "Negro Colonization in the National Crisis," 144–46; Foner, "Lincoln and Colonization," 145, 154.

26. "President's Interview with a Committee of the Colored People of Washington."

27. *Ibid.*

28. Quoted in "Defence of Mr. Edward M. Thomas," *Anglo-African*, Jan. 3, 1863.

Finally and reluctantly, the Union Bethel group decided to send a delegation to Lincoln, but not before passing resolutions registering two major objections. First, attendees took a moderate stance against leaving the country, stating their belief that it was “inexpedient, inauspicious, and impolitic” to support emigration and suggesting “that time, the great arbiter of events and movements, will adjust the matter.” In other words, with the war on, they thought it best to wait and see what would happen. In their second resolution, they put themselves on record questioning the propriety of a small group of men presuming to represent all black Americans. It was, they resolved, “unauthorized and unjust for us to compromise the interests of over four-and-a-half millions of our race by precipitate action on our part.”²⁹ So rejecting the very premises of the conversation Lincoln hoped to initiate, the five delegates, with Mitchell, left Union Bethel for the White House.

Who were those five delegates? All were members of Washington’s well-organized and well-educated antebellum black elite. Delegate John F. Cook Jr. was the son of a prominent educator and religious leader who had founded the Fifteenth Street Presbyterian Church. Cook had attended New York’s Central College and Oberlin College before returning to the capital to take charge of the school run by his recently deceased father. Benjamin McCoy, another delegate, was a founder of the all-black Asbury Methodist Church, where he had taught Sabbath school and directed choir. He had also organized and run his own private school.³⁰ Delegation chair Edward Thomas was well-known among African Americans as an intellectual and cultural leader. He was active in Israel Lyceum, one of Washington’s several prewar black debating societies, and he was renowned for his collections of fine art, coins, and a personal library of almost six hundred volumes.³¹ At

29. “President’s Interview with a Committee of the Colored People of Washington.”

30. On Cook, see William H. Grimshaw, *Official History of Freemasonry among the Colored People in North America* (1903; repr., New York: Negro Univ. Press, 1969), 148–49; Moses B. Goodwin, “Schools and Education of the Colored Population in the District,” *Special Report of the Commissioner of Education on the Condition and Improvement of Public Schools in the District of Columbia*, 41st Cong., 2d sess., House Ex. Doc. 315, 200–203. On McCoy, see page 213 of “Schools and Education”; Henry S. Robinson, “Some Aspects of the Free Negro Population in Washington, D.C., 1800–1862,” *Maryland Historical Magazine* 64, no. 1 (1969): 59; Paul E. Sluby Sr., *Asbury: Our Legacy, Our Faith, 1836–1993* (Washington, D.C.: The Church, 1993), 7, 9, 23. John T. Costin also hailed from a very prominent family; see Goodwin, “Schools and Education,” 203–4.

31. Edward M. Thomas Death Notice, *Philadelphia North American and United States Gazette*, Mar. 17, 1863; “Miscellany,” *Historical Magazine* 9 (Apr. 1865): 136; Ripley et al., *Black Abolitionist Papers*, 5:141–42; handwritten history of Union Bethel AME Church, box 89–1, Simms Family Papers, MSCHU; William H. Severson, *History of Felix Lodge no. 3, F.A.A.M.* (Washington, D.C.: R. L. Pendleton, 1908), 20.

least three of the delegates (Cook and Thomas, as well as John T. Costin) were leaders among black Freemasons.³² And Cook, Thomas, and Cornelius Clark were SCSA members.

The meeting with Lincoln, therefore, was less a dramatic mismatch between an astute Lincoln and naive freedmen, as Quarles suggested, than a standoff among formidable men with strong and well-formed views. Indeed, Lincoln's well-known speech to the delegates reveals that the president himself saw his interlocutors not as malleable former slaves but rather as educated men with well-defined interests of their own. The president addressed the delegates as "freemen," and speculated, "Perhaps you have long been free, or all your lives." When Lincoln urged them "to do something to help those who are not so fortunate as yourselves," he implied that the delegates were among a privileged group whose members would be disinclined to emigrate. Lincoln went on to call the delegates "intelligent colored men," and he added, "It is exceedingly important that we have men at the beginning capable of thinking as white men, and not those who have been systematically oppressed." Lincoln's allusion to black men "thinking as white men" was a slur on the intellectual capacities of black men, but his intention was to distinguish between the delegates' intelligence and the supposedly lesser capacities of "those who have been systematically oppressed."³³ Lincoln correctly viewed the delegates not as newly emancipated freedmen but, rather, as educated men of considerable stature.

The idea that Mitchell "hand-picked" the delegation now seems implausible. Newspapers did not publish an account of how attendees at the Union Bethel meeting chose the delegates to Lincoln. Yet, given the SCSA affiliations of at least three of the five men and the tenor of the meeting at Union Bethel, it is likely that the Union Bethel group chose a delegation that it knew would be skeptical of Lincoln's overtures. As their resolutions indicated, attendees thought the timing was wrong, and they did not feel comfortable being asked to speak on behalf of the nation's African Americans. Significantly, John F. Cook Jr. and the delegation's chair, Edward M. Thomas, were the very men who had proposed the resolutions denouncing the entire enterprise.

Why, then, did Lincoln and Mitchell pursue a meeting through these channels and with these men? First was the matter of legitimacy. Mitchell and Lincoln may have realized that if the president wanted to meet with representatives of black Washington, they would need to go through black

32. Severson, *History of Felix Lodge*, 8, 16; Thomas Death Notice.

33. Lincoln, "Address on Colonization," 371, 372-73.

Washingtonians' existing organizational channels. African American churches had been working District-wide, across denominational boundaries, since at least the 1840s, when black ministers had formed a "Pastoral Association" and Sunday school teachers had created the Sabbath School Union, an alliance of teachers and students from across the city. Such networks were very much alive in April and May 1862, when black ministers convened across denominational lines to formulate a response to the Emancipation Act.³⁴ The structure of the August 14 Union Bethel meeting was similar to these earlier gatherings, with representatives from the District's largest black churches convening to discuss a major question. For some black Washingtonians, the conventional format of the Union Bethel meeting undoubtedly conferred legitimacy on the delegation chosen there. If Mitchell had in fact "hand-picked" a delegation to the president, black Washingtonians would have been even more skeptical of its representativeness and even more doubtful about the president's intentions.

At the same time, Lincoln and Mitchell may have been inclined to trust the men selected at Union Bethel because they were longstanding residents of the capital who had deep ties to members of Washington's white political elite. Members of Washington's antebellum black elite often worked as messengers and servants in the federal government and related areas of private employment. For example, William Syphax, one of the founders of the SCSA, began working for the Interior Department in the 1850s. Delegate John F. Cook Jr.'s father had worked as an assistant messenger in the government Land Office before lighting out on his own as a teacher and minister. And William Costin, the father of delegate John T. Costin, worked for two decades as a messenger for the Bank of Washington.³⁵ These black men were well known in their own times as both leaders in black education and civic life and intermediaries between black Washington and the city's white elite.

Consistent with that larger context, two important figures in the Lincoln delegation saga, Edward Thomas, the delegation's chair, and William Slade, the president of the SCSA, had close ties to Washington's political elite. Thomas was a messenger in the House of Representatives who, according to an 1863 obituary, had "gained the respect and confidence of every member

34. Daniel Alexander Payne, *Recollections of Seventy Years* (1888; repr., New York, Arno, 1968), 75; *Christian Recorder*, July 19, 1862; *Washington National Republican*, Apr. 9, 28, 1862.

35. On Cook and Costin, see Goodwin, "Schools and Education," 200, 198, 203. E. Delorus Preston Jr., "William Syphax, a Pioneer in Negro Education in the District of Columbia," *Journal of Negro History* 20, no. 4 (Oct. 1935): 456, 457.

of Congress and habitue of the House” through his “long continued course of fidelity and affability” in his work. Slade was the lead servant in the White House and reputedly a confidante of Lincoln’s. Lincoln had been collegial with other African Americans who served him, including William de Fleurville, his Springfield barber, and William Johnson, a servant for whom Lincoln secured a job with the Treasury Department in Washington. Slade’s daughter recalled that Lincoln had been friendly with her father, who had often stayed awake into the night during the president’s bouts of insomnia.³⁶ Lincoln’s personal disposition toward African Americans he knew, along with broader traditions of trust and reciprocity between Washington’s black and white elite, may have helped him trust Slade and may have inclined him to work with the SCSA despite its anti-emigrationist stance. Indeed, it is possible that Slade worked behind the scenes to help Lincoln and Mitchell understand civic life in black Washington and to persuade them to trust the delegation selected at Union Bethel.

Still, it is somewhat curious that Lincoln and Mitchell did not seek out Washington’s AME ministers as conduits for the colonization proposal. At least three of them were on record in support of emigration. Henry McNeal Turner had signed Williams’s petition that spring and had written favorably about colonization in his columns in the *Christian Recorder*. He may even have approached Lincoln about the disposition of the colonization fund. James A. Handy, the pastor of Union Bethel AME church and chair of the meeting where the delegation to Lincoln was chosen, was also a vocal proponent of emigration. And another AME minister, Benjamin Tanner, appeared on the Liberian commissioners’ list of Washingtonians interested in emigrating to Liberia.³⁷ These pastors had much to recommend them as

36. Thomas Death Notice; Washington, *They Knew Lincoln*, 100–101, 107–11, 183–202. Slade’s daughter recalled that Lincoln “never treated [the White House staff] as servants, but always was polite and requested service, rather than demand it of them” (101). For Fleurville and other Springfield African Americans in Lincoln’s life, see also Richard E. Hart, “Springfield’s African Americans as a Part of the Lincoln Community,” *Journal of the Abraham Lincoln Association* 20, no. 1 (Winter 1999): 35–54. The close and complex relationship between Mary Lincoln and Elizabeth Keckly, her seamstress, is well-known and analyzed in detail in Jennifer Fleischner, *Mrs. Lincoln and Mrs. Keckly: The Remarkable Story of the Friendship between a First Lady and a Former Slave* (New York: Broadway, 2003).

37. In dispatches to the *Christian Recorder* after the Lincoln meeting, Turner denied being a strong supporter of Lincoln’s plan, but he did not deny that he had gone to see Lincoln about the disposition of the appropriation. C. Peter Ripley et al., eds., *The Black Abolitionist Papers*, vol. 4, *The United States, 1847–1858* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1991), 319n21; Crummell and Johnson to Smith, May 16, 1862, STNC.

mouthpieces for Lincoln's colonization proposal. Their parishioners might be open to their influence, and they were connected to a larger church hierarchy dedicated to black autonomy. Although early AME leaders had vigorously opposed the ACS, some AME ministers and laypeople were interested in emigration as a route to racial uplift and independence. In fact, in July 1862, AME leaders meeting in Washington and New York had cordially received the Liberian delegation.³⁸

But the AME ministers were neither longstanding Washingtonians nor participants in the networks of power and patronage that connected the local black and white elite. Henry McNeal Turner did, in fact, have allies among Washington's white Republican elite, and he occasionally invited white politicians to speak at his church. But his ties were with Radical Republicans, not with moderates of Lincoln's stripe. Moreover, the AME ministers' denominational affiliation meant that they, unlike men such as Slade and Thomas, did not depend on white institutions for their livelihood or prestige. Indeed, their AME church affiliation may have made them seem threatening—perhaps *too* independent—to Lincoln and Mitchell. Finally, whereas the AME ministers were relatively recent arrivals, sent to Washington by the church hierarchy, the men who comprised the delegation were far more legitimately local.³⁹ For all these reasons, then, AME ministers were not part of the delegation despite being relatively open to emigration, while local men who were more opposed to emigration but whose ties to both the white elite and black institutions were stronger made the famed trip to see the president.

At the Executive Mansion on August 14, after telling the delegates that it would be best for black and white people alike if African Americans emigrated out of the United States, President Lincoln laid out the case for Chiriquí as an ideal destination and encouraged the delegates to begin leading “your race” to this new promised land. The delegates pledged to “hold a consultation and in a short time give an answer,” and Lincoln told them to

38. “Notices of Liberian Commissioners,” *African Repository* 38, no. 8 (Aug. 1862): 255; “Blyden in America,” and E. W. Blyden, “From Our Special Correspondent,” both in *New-York Colonization Journal* 38 (Nov. 1862): 1. The Liberian commissioners reported being well received by a variety of black denominations, including Baptists and Presbyterians, as well as Methodists. For the philosophy of racial self-determination espoused by the AME church, see Walker, *Rock in a Weary Land*, 4–29; Campbell, *Songs of Zion*, 20–28.

39. On Turner's relationships with white politicians, see Andrews, “Israel Bethel Church,” 732; John W. Cromwell, “The First Negro Churches in the District of Columbia,” *Journal of Negro History* 7, no. 1 (Jan. 1922): 69–70; Angell, *Bishop Henry McNeal Turner*, 36.

take all the time they needed. Such niceties immediately gave way, however, to an explosion of controversy. Prominent northern African Americans and the abolitionist press erupted in indignation that Lincoln would hold onto the idea of colonization in the midst of a war that might lead to slavery's end and to unprecedented opportunities to secure African Americans' future within the United States.⁴⁰

Meanwhile, a crisis of leadership was unfolding in black Washington, one that would bring to light black Washingtonians' disparate and conflicting views not just on emigration but also on representation itself. First, Edward Thomas, chair of the delegation, reversed course, telling Lincoln in a letter that the members of the delegation had entered the meeting "entirely hostile" to his ideas but had changed their minds after "all the advantages were so ably brought to our views by you." He proposed that two delegates visit Philadelphia, New York, and Boston, to discuss the proposal "with our leading friends," predicting that it would take only two weeks for such meetings to generate ample support for the president's plan.⁴¹ Thomas used the pronoun "we" in his letter, as if the entire delegation was in agreement, but he was the missive's only signer.

Thomas's letter to Lincoln may have remained private, but his decision to report back to the SCSA, and not to the consortium of church representatives in Union Bethel Church, was very public indeed. Two weeks after the Lincoln meeting, Thomas and two or three other delegates failed to appear for a meeting at Union Bethel, where committees from the city's black churches expected to hear a report. A minority of the Lincoln delegation reported to a "small assemblage" gathered at the church, and the group passed again the skeptical resolutions made at the August 14 Union Bethel meeting.⁴² But dissatisfaction with the delegates was rampant. A *Baltimore Sun* correspondent reported that attendees felt the delegates had "exceeded their instructions," and correspondents to the AME *Christian Recorder* lamented the delegation's failure to report back to the body that had sent them. Henry McNeal Turner remained sanguine, expressing hope that delegation would "lay the question before our people in an official manner" so "the nation" might "hear from

40. Lincoln, "Address on Colonization," 370–75; McPherson, *Negro's Civil War*, 91–97; Blight, *Frederick Douglass's Civil War*, 140–42.

41. Edward M. Thomas to Abraham Lincoln, Aug. 16, 1862, Abraham Lincoln Papers, LC.

42. *Washington National Intelligencer*, Aug. 29, 1862. Quarles recorded this as the delegates' official response in his *Negro in the Civil War*, 149.

the black man in every direction.” Turner added an allusion to the almost bottomless debt at the heart of relationship between the United States and African Americans: “I suppose no colored man in the nation would have any objection to going any where, if this government pay them for their two hundred and forty years’ work.”⁴³

Others were clearly infuriated at the process through which the delegation had been selected and by the subsequent behavior of Thomas and others. “Cerebus,” a pseudonymous correspondent to the *Christian Recorder*, called the delegation a “*bogus committee*” and questioned “*who gave that committee authority to act for us, the fifteen thousand residents of color in this District—and who requested them to represent the interests of the two hundred and ten thousand inhabitants of color in the Free States.*” Cerebus’s questions echoed the objections of those who at the original Union Bethel meeting had doubted that a small delegation chosen in such a manner could adequately represent the views of all African Americans. While those assembled at Union Bethel had concluded that they must go forward with the Lincoln meeting despite their qualms, Cerebus refused to accept the compromise of principle. He also denounced emigration in the broadest terms. Noting that a group of locals had already begun planning to leave the country under government auspices, Cerebus insisted, “We did and still do consider voluntary emigration as simply the stepping stone to *compulsory expatriation!*”⁴⁴

Turner took on Cerebus’s argument in his column the next week, defending the selection of the delegation and meditating more generally on the problem of political representation for African Americans. The delegation was not a political body, he insisted. “Mr. Cerebus talks as though the President had called a congress of colored representatives, and that they had been in session, and had cast the destinies of the colored man.” The reality, Turner argued, was that Lincoln had “called for a committee of ministers, or a committee of intelligent colored gentlemen, and not for a representative.” “Colored people have no representative yet in a political point of view,” he insisted. With his emphasis on “yet” and the “political point of view,” Turner sought to distinguish between the proto-politics in which they were now engaged and electoral politics, with its (ostensibly) clear rules for choos-

43. H.M.T., “Washington Correspondence,” *Christian Recorder*, Aug. 30, 1862.

44. Letter of Cerebus, *Christian Recorder*, Aug. 30, 1862. For the small meeting, see Turner’s report in the same issue.

ing representatives. Turner went still further, however, by suggesting the difficulty of imagining how any small group of people could represent the interests of a much larger group. In fact, he said, "every man and woman is his or her own representative, and has the right of representing themselves."⁴⁵ As he questioned the very foundations of representative government, Turner also expressed a belief that all individuals were capable of making their own decisions and advocating for their own interests. Here and elsewhere, Turner argued for a flowing conversation about African Americans' options as the war altered people's assumptions about what was possible in their lives.

In the meantime, Thomas was in trouble with the SCSA. The organization refused to accept his report on the Lincoln meeting, ostensibly on the grounds that the group itself had not sent the delegation to Lincoln. Rebuffed by the SCSA, Thomas, who had declared his intention to go on the Chiriquí expedition, accepted financial support for a trip north to canvass black leaders from Jacob R. S. Van Vleet, an editor at Washington's *National Republican* newspaper and a supporter of colonization.⁴⁶ While Thomas was away, the SCSA announced plans to put him on trial within the organization. The charges against him were at first vague and seemed tied to the perception of impropriety in his financial relationship to Van Vleet. It soon became clear, however, that among myriad doubts about Thomas's integrity, members of the SCSA were most outraged by his support for Central American emigration. In the end, they were divided on how to deal with Thomas and decided not to expel him. Yet the trial itself suggests how disappointing his change of mind was for those in the SCSA who had hoped the Lincoln delegation would yield a unified expression of opposition to Lincoln's proposal.⁴⁷

The SCSA could ostracize Thomas for his apostasy, but it could not silence the many others who also supported—or were at least interested in—Lincoln's proposal. One of the few prominent black northerners who openly supported it was Henry Highland Garnet. In the 1850s, Garnet had helped found the African Civilization Society to promote voluntary emigration to Africa. Now, he

45. H.M.T., "Washington Correspondence," *Christian Recorder*, Sept. 6, 1862.

46. Van Vleet had attended the August 14 meeting at Union Bethel and had urged the group to send a delegation to the president despite its reservations. After the meeting, he sent Lincoln a letter attesting to Thomas's integrity, and now he offered to fund a trip north to gather support for the project. For his attendance at Union Bethel, see "President's Interview with a Committee of the Colored People of Washington." For his endorsement of Thomas, see J. R. S. Van Vleet to Abraham Lincoln, Aug. 17, 1862, Lincoln Papers.

47. "Defence of Mr. Edward M. Thomas," *Anglo-African*, Jan. 3, 10, 1863.

published a column in the *Anglo-African* supporting government-sponsored emigration. Garnet reasoned that escaping slaves in the Confederacy needed a place of refuge, and that the U.S. government ought to provide it. "Let the government give them a territory, and arm and defend them until they can fully defend themselves, and thus hundreds of thousands of men will be saved, and the Northern bugbear 'they will all come here' be removed," Garnet opined.⁴⁸ In fact, in fall 1863, Garnet and the African Civilization Society would seek federal funds to pursue new settlements in Africa, although the money was never forthcoming.⁴⁹ Frederick Douglass's own family was divided on the Chiriquí question. While Douglass adamantly opposed emigration in all forms, his son Lewis, a skilled printer, hoped to depart with the government expedition.⁵⁰

While the black elite debated the merits of emigration, hundreds, and likely thousands, of black Washingtonians volunteered to leave for Chiriquí. At first, rumors circulated that the president might seek to deport black people against their will, but government representatives quickly clarified, through speeches and other public announcements, that forced colonization was not in the offing. Mitchell advertised the venture in speeches at the government's "contraband camp," and in a newspaper announcement he invited contact from interested "men of color."⁵¹ After Lincoln made Senator Samuel Pomeroy of Kansas the public face of his colonization policy, Pomeroy released an address "To the Free Colored People of the United States," making a case for the Chiriquí project using arguments for black independence and racial self-determination long made by African American emigration advocates. "Let us plant you free and independent beyond

48. Henry Highland Garnet to Editor [of *Anglo-African*], *Pacific Appeal*, Oct. 11, 1862. The *Pacific Appeal* believed the "Central American question should receive our respectful consideration." Editorial, Sept. 20, 1862. On September 27, the newspaper also reported the proposal had garnered "an interest in the plan of colonization in part of the colored race in America, unknown before." For another published letter in favor of emigration, also in the *Pacific Appeal*, see McCulloch to Editor, Nov. 29, 1862. On Garnet and the African Civilization Society, see Miller, *Search for a Black Nationality*, 183, 187–92, 228–31.

49. Geo W. LeVere et al. to James Mitchell, Sept. 12, 1863, in James Mitchell to A. Lincoln, Nov. 25, 1863, STNC. See also Miller, *Search for a Black Nationality*, 261–62.

50. *New York Times*, Sept. 2, 1862 (reprinted in *San Francisco Daily Evening Bulletin*, Sept. 26, 1862); *Pacific Appeal*, Sept. 27, 1862; *San Francisco Daily Evening Bulletin*, Nov. 5, 1862. See also Blight, *Frederick Douglass's Civil War*, 143n34.

51. *Washington National Republican*, Aug. 26, 28, 1862; advertisement, *Washington National Intelligencer*, Aug. 29, 1862. On rumors, see H.M.T., "Washington Correspondence," *Christian Recorder*, Aug. 30, 1862.

the reach of the power that has oppressed you,” he proposed. Now was the “hour for you to make an earnest effort to secure your own social position and independence,” he urged, assuring would-be emigrants that “no white person will be allowed as a member of the colony.”⁵²

By all accounts, Pomeroy had no trouble recruiting a first shipload of five hundred emigrants to Chiriquí. The senator had first proposed that one hundred colored men “with their families” would depart on October 1, “as pioneers in this movement.”⁵³ By mid-September, he estimated that some four thousand people had volunteered for the trip, and in late October he told a Senate colleague that thirteen thousand people had applied.⁵⁴ While Pomeroy’s estimates are subject to question and cannot be verified, it is clear that people volunteered in considerable numbers. Turner, who had no direct interest in the project, reported that over a thousand applied to go on the first expedition.⁵⁵ Freedpeople figured prominently among those who volunteered for the Chiriquí expedition. Their support for emigration is not surprising for, as recent historians have demonstrated, across the South newly freed African Americans often considered emigration—in Steven Hahn’s words—“one of several strategies designed to create or reconstitute freed communities on a stable foundation—and at arm’s length from whites.” The phenomenon Hahn called “grassroots emigrationism” was vibrant in the capital as it was elsewhere in the South.⁵⁶

52. Letter of Senator S. C. Pomeroy, *Washington National Intelligencer*, Aug. 27, 1872. Pomeroy’s open letter was widely reprinted. See *Boston Daily Advertiser*, Aug. 27, 1862; *San Francisco Daily Evening Bulletin*, Sept. 17, 1862; *Pacific Appeal*, Sept. 20, 1862; *New-York Colonization Herald* (Sept. 1862): 1. Pomeroy invoked his own experience as an antislavery settler in Kansas to justify his suitability for this new task. On Pomeroy’s appointment, see Caleb B. Smith to S. C. Pomeroy, Sept. 12, 1862, STNC.

53. Letter of Pomeroy, *Washington National Intelligencer*, Aug. 27, 1872.

54. *Washington National Intelligencer*, Sept. 15, 1862; *Boston Liberator*, Sept. 19, 1862; *Daily Cleveland Herald*, Sept. 13, 1862. On the boat, see *Washington National Republican*, Sept. 25, 1862. Samuel Pomeroy to Orville Browning, Oct. 27, 1862, box 1, Orville Browning Papers, Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library, Manuscript Division. Pomeroy mentioned 13,700 in a letter to Congressman James R. Doolittle, and in spring 1863 he told Lincoln 14,000 had volunteered. Samuel Pomeroy to Abraham Lincoln (copy), Apr. 16, 1863, folder 2, Chiriqui Colonization Collection (SC 2081), Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library, Manuscript Division; Scheips, “Lincoln and the Chiriqui Colonization Project,” 238. For Pomeroy’s summary of his work, see S. C. Pomeroy to Mr. Usher, Feb. 4, 1864, STNC.

55. Letter of H.M.T., *Christian Recorder*, Oct. 18, 1862.

56. Hahn, *Nation under Our Feet*, 322, 318. Sources that imply or state outright Washington-area freedpeople’s interest in joining the expedition include “The Expedition to Chiriqui,”

In fact, support for emigration among Washington freedpeople may have been linked to the longstanding activism of the ACS in the Chesapeake region. The society was based in the capital itself, and in Maryland and Virginia, the two states bordering the District of Columbia, it and local colonization societies had been well organized and relatively successful. Most of the fugitives who migrated to the capital during the war hailed from either Maryland or Virginia, and many likely knew of the ACS or other emigration projects. Direct evidence of migrant freedpeople's views on emigration is difficult to come by, but Liberian commissioner John B. Johnson reported that "numbers" of newly freed migrants to the capital hoped to "join their friends and families" in Liberia.⁵⁷ Whether freedpeople hoped to go to Liberia, or somewhere else, or nowhere at all, the Chesapeake region's history of debate about black emigration likely primed some longstanding free blacks and newly escaped slaves to consider seriously the government's proposed colony in Chiriquí.

Unfortunately, however, those who decided to stake their hopes on the Chiriquí expedition would soon be disappointed and in some cases materially devastated. Even as some federal officials expressed continuing optimism about the enterprise, the original departure date of October 1 passed with no action. Gradually, the public came to understand what insiders had known for some time: the entire project had come to a standstill because of opposition from Central American governments.⁵⁸ In early November, a group of

Douglass' Monthly, Nov. 1862, 751; "Pomeroy's Colonization Scheme Abandoned," *Pacific Appeal*, Sept. 27, 1862; J. D. Johnson to [Abraham Lincoln], Mar. 3, 1863, and J. D. Johnson to J. P. Usher, Apr. 10, 1863, both in STNC. For postwar interest in emigration among southern African Americans, see also Michele Mitchell, *Righteous Propagation: African Americans and the Politics of Racial Destiny after Reconstruction* (Chapel Hill: Univ. of North Carolina Press, 2004); Kenneth C. Barnes, *Journey of Hope: The Back-to-Africa Movement in Arkansas in the Late 1800s* (Chapel Hill: Univ. of North Carolina Press, 2004).

57. Johnson to [Lincoln], Mar. 3, 1863, STNC. Johnson made a similar statement in Johnson to Usher, Apr. 10, 1863. See also "Disposition to Emigrate," *New-York Colonization Journal* 38 (June 1862): 4. Marie Tyler-McGraw, *An African Republic: Black and White Virginians in the Making of Liberia* (Chapel Hill: Univ. of North Carolina Press, 2007), 63–81; Staudenraus, *African Colonization Movement*, 104–16, 179–84. For the settlement of Maryland African Americans in a separate colony, see Richard L. Hall, *On Africa's Shore: A History of Maryland in Liberia, 1834–1857* (Baltimore: Maryland Historical Society, 2003).

58. For early rumors that diplomatic conflicts would stymie the plan, see *Boston Daily Advertiser*, Aug. 30, 1862 (quoting *New York Times*); *Washington National Intelligencer*, Sept. 1, 1862. Lincoln suspended plans on Oct. 7. See *Message from the President of the United States*, 39th Cong., 1st sess., 1866, Sen. Exec. Doc. 55, 4–5, 21. For accounts of the diplomatic disaster, see Scheips, "Lincoln and the Chiriquí Colonization Project," 437, 441–45; Thomas Schoonover, "Misconstrued Mission: Expansionism and Black Colonization in Mexico and Central America

black Washingtonians wrote Lincoln a letter clarifying the human costs of the government's failed gambit. The anonymous writers explained that more than five hundred families had made preparations to leave on the government expedition. "Many of us have sold our furniture, have given up our little homes to go on the first voyage," the petitioners wrote. The "uncertainty and delay" was "reducing our scanty means, until fears are being created that these means are being exhausted." "Poverty in a still worse form than has yet met us may be our winter prospect," they feared. The stranded migrants professed disbelief that Lincoln would "create hopes within us, and stimulate us to struggle for national independence and respectable equality," only to abandon them.⁵⁹ Still looking for a new destination, Lincoln—through an assistant—asked their forbearance.⁶⁰

The failure of the government to send even one group of emigrants abroad in fall 1862 had varying repercussions in black Washington. As the government enterprise disintegrated, Turner reported that Joseph Williams, the Central American colonization agent, was generating considerable interest again. Perhaps those left homeless and propertyless by the demise of the government expedition turned to Williams in hope of finally getting to Central America under private auspices.⁶¹ Meanwhile, Pomeroy anticipated that somehow government resettlement plans would go forward, and at the end of November, he and Mitchell used a Thanksgiving feast for freedpeople in the city's "contraband camp" as an occasion for touting emigration. Turner was dismayed by their gumption, but he nonetheless maintained his position in favor of open debate on the issue. "Let it be discussed," he opined, "and let those go who wish, and those stay who desire; let us have free expression about it, for all this helps to develop intellect."⁶²

during the Civil War," *Pacific Historical Review* 49, no. 4 (Nov. 1980): 613–20. Pomeroy later blamed the mission's failure on both diplomatic conflicts and a government policy that "seemed to indicate, that these persons were to be hereafter employed in the military & naval service of the United States," an allusion to the Preliminary Emancipation Proclamation, which Lincoln issued on September 22, 1862. S. C. Pomeroy to Mr. Usher, Feb. 4, 1864, STNC.

59. *Boston Liberator*, Nov. 7, 1862, 179 (report of Nov. 2). Pomeroy told Senator Orville Browning that from the thirteen thousand applications he received, he "selected 500—good substantial colored men & women, persons who will do well, and be a valuable acquisition to any community." Pomeroy to Browning, Oct. 27, 1862.

60. *Washington National Intelligencer*, Nov. 5, 1862; *Pacific Appeal*, Dec. 13, 1862.

61. H.M.T., "Our Washington Correspondent," *Christian Recorder*, Nov. 1, 1862.

62. H.M.T., "Washington Correspondence," *Christian Recorder*, Dec. 6, 1862. For Pomeroy's hope that government-sponsored colonization would continue, see Pomeroy to Lincoln, Apr. 16, 1862; S. C. Pomeroy to Mr. Usher, Feb. 4, 1864, STNC.

Many black leaders felt otherwise. Frederick Douglass and the most powerful members of the SCSA believed African Americans should reject the government's proposal with a resounding and unified "No." Douglass's concern about dissent among African Americans was clear in his fear that even a small number of black volunteers for emigration would "be taken as representing the wishes of the many." With the matter of black colonization now at the center of national political life, Douglass had implied, it was better to create an illusion of unity than to reveal divisions and therefore open possibilities of being misunderstood or exploited. Likewise, on the same day a Washington newspaper published the impoverished would-be migrants' letter to Lincoln, "some of the colored people of the city" told a *Baltimore Sun* correspondent "that reports to the effect that they desire to emigrate [are] erroneous." They wanted readers to know that they "are satisfied with their position and condition here" and that although the government's "scheme of colonization" might interest "colored people of the North," those of Washington and the South wanted to remain.⁶³ Like Douglass, those who sought to shape coverage in the *Sun* wanted to convey the impression that black Washingtonians were united in opposition to emigration, evidence to the contrary notwithstanding.

After the demise of the Chiriquí project, the SCSA continued to try to make itself the arbiter of debate in black Washington. After attempting to run colonization agents out of town and ostracizing Edward Thomas, the organization published, in both black and white newspapers, a series of resolutions advising local black institutions to be selective in the lecturers they permitted to speak to them. The SCSA had resolved that while it was "ready and willing at all times to encourage a more full diffusion of education," it strenuously opposed the "mock lecturers and political agitators" who came to the city and, out of "speculative and individual motives," sought to "annihilate every element of unity, peace, and that friendship which should, if possible, be the characteristics of our fellow-citizens." The SCSA asked black organizations in Washington to extend invitations only to "such orators and teachers in the cause of religion, morality, literature and science as may be disposed to benefit us by their kind and generous service."⁶⁴ While the resolutions did not specifically condemn emigration promoters, their overall sensibility reflected the SCSA's desire to exert control over the breadth of people and ideas to which black Washingtonians were exposed.

Such impulses to manage and circumscribe the debate over emigration

63. *Baltimore Sun*, Nov. 5, Aug. 22, 23, 1862.

64. "Our Free Colored People," *Douglass' Monthly*, Feb. 1863, 798. Also published in *Washington National Intelligencer*, Dec. 9, 1862; *Anglo-African*, Jan. 17, 1863.

were driven, at least in part, by a desire to protect freedpeople from those who would exploit them. The SCSA had accused John D. Johnson of attempting to take “heartless and unprincipled advantage of men . . . whom a condition of cruel bondage has denied all means of knowledge.” Freedpeople, the organization insisted, must be shielded from those who “[held] out to them inducements to emigrate to Africa . . . which we know with their limited knowledge in the matter, they are unable intelligently to accept.”⁶⁵ In a similar vein, Frederick Douglass, who complained bitterly about Washingtonians’ support for emigration, insisted that additional “intelligent colored men” must join Edward Thomas on the trip to Chiriquí, with “the purpose of counselling the emigrants, and aiding in the direction of their future movements.”⁶⁶ Historians have demonstrated that slaves emerged from bondage well equipped to make both individual and collective decisions and resourceful about pursuing their own interests. But if Douglass and the SCSA did not give freedpeople the credit they deserved, it was not because they despised them but because they believed slavery had inflicted great harm and because they saw themselves as critically responsible for racial uplift.

The dynamic wartime context also helps explain why some black leaders cared so much about protecting freedpeople and about restricting or minimizing debate on emigration. Many self-appointed black spokesmen believed the nation was at a crucial turning point and that any public missteps by African Americans would have dire consequences. During summer and fall 1862, the most fundamental aspects of African Americans’ status in the United States were under discussion at the highest levels of government: emancipation, black men’s enlistment in the Union army, and African Americans’ citizenship. At such a pivotal moment, these leaders believed evidence that African Americans might be less than committed to a future in the United States could do great harm to the causes of abolitionism and racial equality. A desire to emigrate might be construed as a lack of patriotism, while dissent among African Americans could be understood as evidence of incapacity for leadership or collective decision-making. Their assessments of these perils had considerable merit.

There were, however, other approaches. In the waning days of 1862, as people waited to see whether Lincoln would follow through on his promised proclamation of emancipation, Henry McNeal Turner was characteristically ecumenical about African Americans’ collective future. “We have all the world

65. Carter A. Stewart et al. to John D. Johnson, in *Pacific Appeal*, Sept. 13, 1862.

66. “The Expedition to Chiriquí,” *Douglass’ Monthly*, Nov. 1862, 751.

before us," he wrote in December. "We are going *just where we please*; going to church, going to stay here, going away, going to Africa, Hayti, Central America, England, France, Egypt, and Jerusalem; and then we are going to the jail, gallows, penitentiary, whipping-post, to the grave, heaven and hell. But we do not intend to be sent to either place unless we choose." Once again, Turner emphasized individual self-determination, this time by stressing the multiplicity of African Americans' aspirations and destinies. Freedom, he seemed to argue, was the opportunity to pursue one's dreams, whatever and wherever they might be. Turner was unperturbed by dissent among African Americans. For months he had advocated serious debate on emigration proposals (including Lincoln's), and he had never voiced doubt that freedpeople were capable of sorting through the arguments and making informed decisions.⁶⁷

Turner's perspective notwithstanding, the success of Douglass, the SCSA, and others who attempted to present a unified front against emigration may, perhaps, be measured in historians' continuing tendency to represent black public opinion in 1862 as unified against emigration and to gloss over the substantive discussions the issue generated. Support for emigration remained a minority position among African Americans. Yet is it most accurate to see those who condemned the president's proposal as representing one facet of a complex and vibrant debate, not only about emigration itself but also about political process. The Lincoln meeting, and the colonization debate more generally, raised significant questions about who could speak for whom, in black Washington and nationally. Black men like Edward Thomas and Frederick Douglass, long recognized by white people as racial representatives, seemed to believe it was more important to move forward with the work of representation than to question how the process ought to work. But these men faced new challenges as slavery crumbled and African Americans took center stage in the debate about the nation's future. Old channels of authority and spokespersonship could no longer be taken for granted, as people like Turner, Cerebus, and the attendees at the August 14 Union Bethel meeting demanded a conversation about the mechanics of representation. They all knew they were living in momentous times. What they might not have known was that the broad, procedural questions raised by the episode—about representation and representativeness, the importance of conformity versus dissent, and the significance of individual versus collective expression—would remain salient far into the future.

67. H.M.T., "Washington Correspondence," *Christian Recorder*, Dec. 6, 1862.