

John B. Russwurm, Colonization Endorsed

The African colonization movement divided free black communities. A minority advocated the Liberian alternative as the only hope for improving their existence. The most prominent black colonizationist was John B. Russwurm (1799–1851), the second black to earn an American college degree when he graduated in 1826 from Bowdoin College. He left *Freedom's Journal* in 1829, accepted an appointment from the Maryland Colonization Society, and sailed for Liberia, where he eventually served as governor of the Maryland-in-Liberia settlement. In the following editorial, he explains his reasons for endorsing colonization.*

We feel proud in announcing . . . ourselves . . . ready to embrace the first convenient *opportunity* to embark for the shores of Africa. . . .

The subject of Colonization is certainly important, as having a great bearing on that of slavery: for it must be evident that the universal emancipation so ardently desired by *us* & by all our friends can never take place unless some door is opened whereby the emancipated may be *removed*, as fast as they drop their galling chains, to some other land beside the free states; for it is a fact, that prejudices now in our part of the country, are so high, that it is often the remark of liberal men from the south, that their free people are treated better than we are in the boasted free states of the north. If the free states have passed no law as yet forbidding the emigration of free persons of colour into their limits; it is no reason that they will not, as soon as they find themselves a little

* *Freedom's Journal* (New York), 14 March 1829.

more burdened. We will suppose that a general law of emancipation should be promulgated in the state of Virginia, under the existing statutes which require every emancipated slave to leave the state, would not the other states, in order to shield themselves from the evils of having so many thousands of ignorant beings thrown upon them be obliged in self-defense to pass prohibitory laws? . . . If no good whatever arose from the establishment of colonies, the fact that they remove all obstacles in the way of emancipation should gain for them the support and good wishes of every friend of humanity, & of every enlightened man of colour. It is true, that no such laws at present are in force to our knowledge, but who can foretell how soon before they may, without waiting for the period of a general emancipation in any of the slaveholding states.

Our wiseacres may talk as much as they please upon . . . our future standing in society, but it does not alter the case in the least; it does not improve our situation in the least; but it is calculated rather to stay the exertions of those who are really willing to make some efforts to improve their own present conditions. We are considered a distinct people, in the midst of the millions around us, and in the most favorable parts of the country; and it matters not from what cause this sentence has been passed upon us; the fiat has gone forth and should each of us live to the age of Methuselah, at the end of the thousand years, we should be exactly in our present situation: a proscribed race, however unjustly—a degraded people, deprived of all the rights of freemen and in the eyes of the community, a race who had no lot or portion with them.

We hope that none of our readers will from our remarks think that we approve in the least of the present prejudices in the way of the man of colour; far from it, we deplore them as much as any man; but they are not of our creating, and they are not in our power to remove. . . . It will never be in our power to remove or overcome them. . . .

Sensible then, as all are of the disadvantages under which we at present labour, can any consider it a mark of folly, for us to cast our eyes upon some other portion of the globe where all these inconveniences are removed—where the Man of Colour freed from the fetters and prejudice and degradation, under which he labours in this land, may walk forth in all the majesty of his creation—a Free Man! It was, we believe, the remark of [an Englishman], while on the African coast, that the natives whom he saw were a fine athletic race, walking fearlessly as if sensible of their important station as men, and quite different from the thousands of their brethren whom he had seen in the West Indies and the United States; and never was a truer remark made, if we are to credit all other travellers on that Continent, who have likewise born testimony to the same fact.

Peter Williams Jr., Colonization Rejected

The vast majority of free blacks rejected the African colonization movement. The views of Peter Williams Jr., a black Episcopal priest in New York City, were representative of their thoughts on the subject. Although Williams (ca. 1780–1840) had initially encouraged Russwurm and others to go to Liberia, he became an outspoken critic of colonization by 1830. He explains his reasons for that stance in the following document from that year, a Fourth of July sermon to his congregation. Williams spent his final decade toiling in the American antislavery movement.

Though delivered from the fetters of slavery, we are oppressed by an unreasonable, unrighteous, and cruel prejudice, which aims at nothing less than the forcing away of all the free coloured people of the United States to the distant shores of Africa. Far be it from me to impeach the motives of every member of the African Colonization Society. The civilizing and Christianizing of that vast continent, and the extirpation of the abominable traffic in slaves (which notwithstanding all the laws passed for its suppression is still carried on in all its horrors), are no doubt the principal motives which induce many to give it their support.

But there are those, and those who are most active and most influential in its cause, who hesitate not to say that they wish to rid the country of the free coloured population, and there is sufficient reason to believe, that with many, this is the principal motive for supporting that society; and that whether Africa is civilized or not, and whether the Slave Trade be suppressed or not, they would wish to see the free coloured people removed from this country to Africa.

Africa could certainly be brought into a state of civil and religious improvement without sending all the free people of colour in the United States there.

How inconsistent are those who say that Africa will be benefited by the removal of the free people of colour of the United States there, while they say they are *the most vile and degraded* people in the world. If we are as vile and degraded as they represent us, and they wish the Africans to be rendered a virtuous, enlightened, and happy people, they should not *think* of sending *us* among them, lest we should make them worse instead of better. . . . Those who say *we* are the most vile people in the world would send us to Africa to improve the character and condition of the natives. Such arguments would not be listened to for a moment were not the minds of the community strangely warped by prejudice. . . .

* *Emancipator* (Boston), 22 April 1834.

Much has been said by the Colonizationists about improving the character and condition of the people of colour of this country by sending them to Africa. This is more inconsistent still. We are to be improved by being sent far from civilized society. This is a novel mode of improvement. What is there in the burning sun, the arid plains, and barbarous customs of Africa, that is so peculiarly favourable to our improvement! What hinders our improving here, where schools and colleges abound, where the gospel is preached at every corner, and where all the arts and sciences are verging fast to perfection? Nothing, nothing but prejudice. It requires no large expenditures, no hazardous enterprises to raise the people of colour in the United States to as highly improved a state as any class of the community. All that is necessary is that those who profess to be anxious for it should lay aside their prejudices and act toward them as they do by others.

We are NATIVES of this country, we ask only to be treated as well as FOREIGNERS. Not a few of our fathers suffered and bled to purchase its independence; we ask only to be treated as well as those who fought against it. We have toiled to cultivate it, and to raise it to its present prosperous condition; we ask only to share equal privileges with those who come from distant lands, to enjoy the fruits of our labour. Let those moderate requests be granted, and we need not to go to Africa nor anywhere else to be improved and happy. We cannot but doubt the purity of the motives of those persons who deny us these requests, and would send us to Africa to gain what they might give us at home.

But they say the prejudices of the country against us are invincible; and as they cannot be conquered, it is better that we should be removed beyond their influence. . . . The African Colonization Society is a numerous and influential body. Would they lay aside their *own* prejudices, much of the burden would be at once removed. . . . But, alas! The course which they have pursued has an opposite tendency. By the *scandalous misrepresentations* which they are continually giving of our character and conduct we have sustained much injury, and have reason to apprehend much more. . . .

They profess to have no other object in view than the colonizing of the free people of colour on the coast of Africa, with their *own consent*; but if our homes are made so uncomfortable that we cannot continue in them, or . . . we are driven from them, and no other door is open to receive us but Africa, our removal there will be anything but voluntary. It is very certain that very few free people of colour *wish* to go to that *land*. The Colonization Society *know* this, and yet they do certainly calculate that in time they will have us all removed there. How can this be effected but by making our situation worse here, and closing every other door against us?