

COMPARING THE VIEWS OF DAVID WALKER AND JOHN DAY, TWO NINETEENTH-CENTURY FREE BLACKS

TEACHER TOOL 3: THE AMERICAN COLONIZATION SOCIETY

The following is an overview of the American Colonization Society:

The American Colonization Society was founded in 1816 by Reverend Robert Finley, a white Presbyterian minister from New Jersey. Reverend Finley believed that African Americans, even those who were not enslaved, would never be able to be integrated into white America. He hoped that they would be able to achieve full equality and opportunity in Africa, the place of their origins. Although the organization focused on encouraging Free Blacks to colonize in Africa, Finley and many of his peers believed that this objective would also initiate a gradual end to slavery in the United States. Although many supporters of American Colonization Society harbored good intentions, specifically desiring the end of American slavery and improved conditions for African-Americans, another, equally invested group promoted colonization for less charitable reasons. Southern slaveholders believed that encouraging free blacks to leave the country, would better preserve the institution of slavery. They feared the disruptive influence of free blacks in slave society, and reasoned that their slaves would accept bondage and racial inequality if they knew no alternative. By 1820, American Colonization Society supporters had raised the funds to send the first ship of settlers to the African Coast. For the first several years, American Colonization Society settlers endured the hardships familiar to most early colonizers. Many died of Yellow Fever, endemic on the west coast of Africa, and often the newcomers faced armed and hostile encounters with natives in the region who did not welcome the outsiders.

Thus, by the late 1820s when David Walker was preparing his *Appeal to the Coloured Citizens of the World*, many abolitionists, both black and white, had become disenchanted with the American Colonization Society, its contradictory and not always admirable objectives, and the harsh reality of its dubious achievements. As abolitionists moved towards a greater focus on immediate emancipation and racial equality within the United States, those still supporting American Colonization Society appeared as apologists for the slaveholders acceptance of racial inequality. Nonetheless, by 1847, the colony established by the American Colonization Society, now known as Liberia, had become an independent nation, and established a modicum of economic and political stability. As Liberia became home to a mixed population of Free Blacks in Africa, hostility and conflict intensified towards free blacks in the United States as they became implicated as threats to the preservation of slavery. By 1854, John Day, who had committed himself and his family to the African colonization project in the 1820s, must have felt vindicated as he urged his free black peers to abandon the United States in favor of a fresh start in the newly recognized nation of Liberia.

For further information and details on the American Colonization Society, visit the website of the PBS Series *Africans in America, Part 3, American Colonization Society*, <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/aia/part3/3p1521.html>

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