

Black History Month

The Colonialization Movement

Paul Cuffe was born on Cuttyhunk Island in 1759. His father had been captured in West Africa and enslaved, but by the time of Paul's birth his father had bought his freedom from his Quaker owner. Paul turned to the sea and became a successful ship captain. Aware of the hardships which black Americans, free and enslaved, lived, Paul, a devout Quaker, had a vision of promoting their emigration to Africa. After many delays he was able to take a group in 1815 and while he hoped to take a group each year declining health kept him from further travel. In 1816 a group of prominent whites, mostly slaveholders, formed the American Colonization Society (ACS) and by 1822 they had established a colony in Africa which eventually became the independent nation of Liberia in 1847. In the early years they sought and received advice from Paul Cuffe.

The Hampden County Colonization Society was organized in 1825. Western Massachusetts had become a haven for African Americans who had escaped from slavery. On January 4, 1826 the ship *Vine* sailed from Boston with 33 African Americans on board headed for the colony of Liberia. Also on board was a young Congregational clergyman, the Rev. Horace Sessions, who had grown up in Hampden. He had been instrumental in raising both hopes and money for the project. They all arrived safely, but in only a few days, "the African fever" malaria claimed the lives of half the migrants and soon afterward, on the return trip home, Horace Sessions also died.

Like Sessions, many ministers were early members of the colonization movement. The Rev. William B. O. Peabody of Springfield delivered a sermon on July 4, 1828 as part of the proceedings of the Hampden County chapter. Although more trips to various locations took place, in later years ardent abolitionists began to move away from the idea of colonization. Those encouraging colonization had widely divergent moral, political, and philosophical perspectives and agendas.

William Lloyd Garrison, an anti-slavery crusader, criticized the colonization movement for being a "slaveholders' Plot" to prolong slavery. He believed that sending all free African Americans back to Africa denied those individuals their rights as American citizens. In 1838 a group of citizens created the Hampden County Anti-slavery Society as an alternative moral and political position. The anti-slavery movement in this area grew so strong that Springfield and the Pioneer Valley became an important "Hub" in the "underground railroad" network.

In later years colonization was seen as a program to appease slaveholders and those who thought the races were incompatible. It continued for many years and was pushed by Abraham Lincoln even during the Civil War. The ACS was finally dissolved in 1912.

Adapted from *The Struggle for Freedom: The History of African Americans in Western Massachusetts* published by The Republican, 2013.

For Reflection

1. The article notes that those encouraging colonization had widely divergent moral, political and philosophical perspectives and agendas? What do you think some of those perspectives and agendas were?
2. Have you ever taken on a cause thinking it was the right thing to do, only to learn later it might have been harmful to others? Are there issues today that you struggle with, finding it hard to know which choice is the best?
3. Paul Cuffe wanted to make it possible for African Americans to return to their home continent. Some wanted to “send” African Americans home. Spend some time considering the idea of “home” and what it means to you. Sometimes we speak of “coming home to God” or “dwelling in God’s house.” Hold the idea of “home” in your prayers this week. What are you hearing?
4. Do some research and read more about colonization to understand better the variety of motives behind those supporting it.