

"Christian Imperialism in the American Colonisation of Liberia"

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I would like to start my remarks today by talking about the conflict between these two men, John Brown Russwurm and John Leighton Wilson. They met in Cape Palmas, Liberia, where Wilson was serving as a missionary of the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions and Russwurm was the newly-appointed governor in 1836. Russwurm was the first person of color whom the board of the Maryland Colonization Society had seen fit to appoint to this role; prior governors in Cape Palmas had all been white. And from the time of Russwurm's appointment, what had been good relations between the colony and the mission quickly turned sour. By 1839, Wilson was writing to the United States that the mission would have to leave the country—he could not abide continuing on in the particular colonial space that was Cape Palmas in the 1830s. By 1844, he received permission to leave, and took the American Board's mission south to Gabon, to a place that—at the time—was free from European colonization.

It was highly unusual for one of the Board's missionaries to recommend closing a station like this, and his reasons for doing so are worth exploring in some detail, especially given this series' interest in religion and colonization. For it was colonization, and what Wilson had come to determine was its incompatibility with Christianity, that he thought demanded the mission's removal from Liberia.

Wilson summarized the "history of colonization in every other age of the world" as one marked "at every step by oppression and bloodshed." Wilson's writings would be some of the most anti-colonial that the Board's missionaries yet produced, even as he continued to think with the

framework of what I have termed “Christian imperialism” in my book. He insisted that missionaries’ greatest concern was with those whom colonial governments oppressed. It was to them that the missionaries wanted to bring the gospel, and it was with them that the missionaries ought to stand in solidarity. If colonial governments failed to help native peoples, then those colonial governments ought to be resisted.

This was a bit of a novel perspective coming from an American Board missionary in the first half of the 19th century. These missionaries relied upon colonialism to prepare the way for their work, to keep them safe while they labored outside of their home countries, and to partner with them in the “civilizing” work that seemed key to their evangelism.

But Wilson claimed that he was working with an entirely uncooperative colonial government under Russwurm. After years of tension between colonists and natives, Russwurm had led the colonists to prepare for military conflicts and the expulsion of the Grebo from the region.

So we might ask: what was different about Wilson’s experience with colonialism in Liberia that led him to this stance? And what does this story show us about the connections between missions, colonialism, and racism.

BRIEF CONTEXT OF THE ABCFM

The American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions was the first and the largest American missionary organization of the 19th century. Founded in 1810 by a group of Congregationalists and Presbyterians, it began its work with a dual focus of continuing an earlier tradition of American missionary work with Native Americans in North America and also

embracing a new interest in overseas evangelism. They sought to inspire American Christians to answer the Great Commission of the Gospel and to go into the world to preach the gospel to all nations. The first American Board missionaries went to India in 1812; by the time that Wilson went to Liberia in 1833, it sponsored additional missionaries in the Hawaiian Islands, Greece, Cape Town, Turkey, Syria, Persia, Ceylon, Siam, China, Singapore, Patagonia, and, in North America, the Cherokee, Chickasaw, Choctaw, Creek, Osage, Pawnee, Sioux, Ojibway, Maumee, and Seneca nations.

Illustration here is from a missionary certificate in 1833—you can see from the closeup of the illustration the sort of vision that the ABCFM had for its work. The ship is coming from the place where the sun is rising into an imagined geography that is a sort of amalgam of what these missionaries called “the heathen world”—partly Asian, partly African, partly Middle Eastern—where the crowds are eagerly welcoming the missionaries’ arrival. The missionaries are going to be bringing some sort of enlightenment to the gathered multitudes.

The American Board had a broad geographic scope in these years, certainly—but very little success, if we measure missionary success by conversion. These missionaries went out into the world, usually without any foreign language training before their departure, and then began their work learning vernacular languages, establishing schools, and preaching when they could to small audiences. Once language barriers were removed, Board missionaries would itinerate, preaching in the streets, distributing religious books and tracts, and trying to get a sense of where they might be able to establish more schools and spread their influence more broadly. They linked “civilization” to Christianity, convinced that in order to become a Christian, one must embrace at least part of

the trappings of Western culture. In this way, the Liberia mission that John Leighton Wilson established was no different from any of the other Board missions.

BRIEF HISTORY OF THE ACS

The American Colonization Society emerged out of much the same context of reform and benevolent movements in the United States in the early decades of the 19th century. Founded in 1816, the ACS was dominated by an uncomfortable coalition of Americans who were responding to a range of concerns about American slavery and racism. Its basic idea was to create a colony somewhere (ultimately, Liberia) that would be settled by formerly enslaved African Americans. There, outside of the territorial bounds of the United States, these freedpeople could establish a new country that would spread American democratic governance abroad while also, some supporters added, spreading Christianity and civilization. It was only through this sort of colony, they argued, that the United States would be able to pay back its debt to Africa.

Among American historians, there has been much ink spilled over whether this was an antislavery or a proslavery organization. It was, in fact, both. For some supporters, it was a way to end slavery in the United States—gradually, and without the challenges that they feared might result from attempting to build a multiracial republic within the United States. For others, however, colonization provided a way of supporting slavery in the United States. By removing freedpeople from the country, they hoped, those who remained enslaved would not be radicalized by the proximity of free Blacks and slavery could continue.

For this reason, the organization was quite controversial among African Americans at the time, who quickly recognized the racism at the root of the organization. The premise of colonization was

that it would be impossible to have a republican nation made up of citizens who were both white and Black. Any free person of color could not be considered a valid part of the body politic. As we will see, this racist perspective would come to be quite important for the white missionaries whom the ABCFM would send to Liberia.

In 1819, the ACS, with the support of some of the elite politicians who were its members and leaders, gained the support of the US government to purchase land in West Africa; the first group of settlers arrived in 1821.

In some of its literature, the ACS presented itself as a kind of missionary organization. As you've been looking at this membership certificate from the 1830s, you might have noticed some of the parallels between the imagery of the ABCFM document and this one. Both feature a ship traveling across the sea, both have a bright sun in the background, suggesting the promise of enlightenment—and while this one does not have an audience of eager people waiting to welcome whoever and whatever the ship is carrying, it does have an eagle, carrying a scroll marked “Liberia.” The ACS, like the ABCFM, imagined the United States as the home of civilization and light that would be borne to a faraway continent—a place that they imagined as covered in figurative darkness.

ACS as MISSIONARY

So, let us think about Liberia as a missionary space, with both the ACS and the ABCFM claiming some sort of missionary role in the country.

I love using this map for thinking about mission work in this era, because it really does show us how Americans were thinking about the whole world. It's color-coded, with darkness representing heathenism and lightness representing Protestant Christianity. You'll note a gradation of color, with a medium-gray representing Catholic lands. Africa, if we look at the map as a whole, looks at first fully clothed in darkness. But if we zoom in close to West Africa, we can see hope for evangelization in Sierra Leone and Liberia—colonial and missionary projects of Britain and the United States, respectively.

The ACS understood that its project would transform Liberia. Its fundraising literature emphasized the ways that the colonists would be able to help Africans by providing a model of American civilization. Colonists would bring with them the seeds of American culture and civilization, including its political and religious institutions. The colony officials seemed to have taken these goals to heart, with Governor Mechlin writing in 1830 that he hoped to help the indigenous Africans move “from being ignorant pagans, [to] civilized and Christians.”¹

There were some Black missionaries among the early groups of colonists. Lott Cary, most famously, was a Baptist minister and missionary who took on important leadership roles in the early years of the colony. But by the early 1830s, white missionary supporters in the US had some complaints about the ACS as a missionary organization. The Black colonists, they thought, were mainly concerned with their own survival and success, not with evangelizing the Indigenous African peoples in the surrounding region. Black ministers and missionaries worked to establish churches among the settler population, not the Africans. And so, with this explicit goal in mind, the American Board sent its missionaries to the region.

¹ “American Colonization Society. Colony at Liberia,” *Missionary Herald* (Sept. 1831), 290.

JOHN LEIGHTON WILSON

John Leighton Wilson was a somewhat odd choice for the first American Board missionary to Liberia, and his personality and background would come to be quite important. The preference had been to send a Black missionary, but the Board found it difficult to find someone who was willing to go in the capacity that they wanted. Those who were willing to go to Liberia tended to be interested in working with the colonist population. And many others simply had no interest in leaving. And so, the Board turned its attention to white Southerners, hoping that their adjustment to a warm climate would better prepare them for the challenges of life in Africa. And so, John Leighton Wilson was selected.

A South Carolinian, Wilson was raised in a slave-owning family and himself enslaved over thirty men, women, and children at the time of his appointment as a missionary. When he prepared to set off for Liberia, he freed most—but not all—of these slaves, on the condition that they agreed to go to Liberia themselves. The two who refused—children at the time—remained in the United States, where they were enslaved by Wilson’s sister and her family.

This illustration is from the history of West Africa that Wilson would publish later in life, after his return to the United States—and you can see from it a bit of the ways that missionaries represented themselves as the embodiments of not only a different religion, but a different culture. Here, that is most notable in their dress. Even without seeing their faces, we can identify the woman at the center of the image as Wilson’s wife Jane—who occasionally accompanied her husband on his travels through the region—and the two men as Christian Westerners.

Wilson started his time in Liberia optimistic about the future of the colony. Wilson found that it had the potential to be “one of the most flourishing [settlements] in the world” in time. He found the colonists to be for the most part “industrious, active, and enterprising,” though he also worried that they did not work as much for the betterment of the native peoples as he would have liked. The colonists relied upon them for manual labor, and seemed—while not opposed to evangelization—not interested in supporting it eagerly. Selecting Cape Palmas, to the south of the colonial capital in Monrovia, for his base, he and his fellow missionaries began the work of creating schools for the Grebo.

In the early years, Wilson worked well with the governor of Cape Palmas, Dr. James Hall. They traveled together, exploring the region and getting their bearings. Wilson was pleased to see that, over time, the Grebo had been “very materially improved” by the presence of the American colonists—marked by new agricultural practices, styles of home, and the like. When tensions arose between the colony and the Grebo, Wilson acted as mediator.

This positive emphasis in Wilson’s description of the colonial government changed by 1838, when disagreements between the colony and the mission came to dominate his writing. He reported to the ABCFM that his entire opinion about the project of colonization had changed. In fact, he wrote, “the colonization scheme has not only failed to accomplish the good which its friends and patrons expected of it, but that it has been productive of innumerable evils of which they had not the most distant apprehensions.” In a five-part letter, Wilson informed Anderson of what he perceived as the failure of colonization in Monrovia and Cape Palmas to bring much benefit to the colonists or to the native Africans, of which the words here are an excerpt. More importantly, perhaps, Wilson claimed that colonization did active harm to the native Africans he hoped to

convert, and that the colonists aided the continuation of the slave trade and in fact attempted to enslave Africans themselves within the colony.

In large part, this change in tone can be attributed to the change in leadership with the appointment of John Russwurm. Wilson had initially supported the decision, but soon expressed profound concerns about the colony being governed by an African American. He directly linked the appointment of a black governor with the decline of the colony.

Russwurm, though, had come to power at a moment of particularly high tension between the colony and the Grebo. The finances of the colony had reduced Russwurm's ability to give "dashes," or gifts, to the indigenous population, which had been so important to maintaining balance and good feelings, and a series of thefts on the colonial store had led to fighting. Soon, the colonists began to feel the need to be more vigilant in their military exercises. This would be at the heart of the conflict between the two men and, indeed, the two organization's visions for Liberia.

In particular, Wilson and Russwurm would clash over who had to serve in the militia. The colonial constitution specified that all black male residents of the colony were in the general militia. While Russwurm granted that those specifically sent to Liberia by missionary societies were exempt, he maintained that other members of the mission family—namely, Black teachers working for the mission—were required to serve.

ANDERSON REPLY

An argument over two such men quickly escalated; soon, Wilson began to question the ability of missions to survive within the context of settler colonialism. Part of what frustrated him was the

question of whether the mission was part of the colony or a separate entity. Wilson insisted that the mission was on grounds over which the colony had no control, though this was not the case. (In the image here, you can see some of the ABCFM's response to Wilson's concerns about the colony during this conflict.)

The Board urged Wilson to show more deference to the colony—and to Russwurm—in the future. Chastened, Wilson promised to behave better, but by no means gave up his objections.

The Colonization Society discussed these issues, too. The Maryland Colonization Society explained that the colony was “the political government” and as such, looked upon all who settled in their territory in the same way that “civilized governments elsewhere look upon their visitors or their people.” The colony worried that if the missionaries were separate, and if they allied with Africans against the colony, it would not end well for the colonists. He instructed Russwurm to obtain all lands where the missionaries hoped to establish new stations, so that the missionaries would not be able to operate in Liberia except with the permission of the colony.

Wilson responded by increasingly harsh critiques of the colony. Instead of providing examples of what the native Africans could aspire to, he argued, the colonists were instead hindering their progress.

Some of Wilson's frustration can be attributed to his understanding of what the goals of colonization were. He had supported colonization because of its claims to promote the civilization of Africa. He had left the United States expecting to be united with the colonists in a missionary endeavor. Colonization, he wrote, had “been dignified by the appellation of a missionary

enterprise, and every colonist has been represented as a missionary going forth to carry the bread of life to his perishing fellow men.” And yet when he looked at the colonists, he did not see what he expected to see in a missionary. Shocked and upset by the practice of African-American families bringing native children into their homes as domestics and then not educating these children, Wilson charged the colony with failing to live up to its promises. He went further, charging the colony with actively oppressing the colonists. It was for this reason, he argued, that the natives felt “disgust and hatred for the colony,” and looked at Americans “as their enemies and oppressors.”²

In late 1841, the final step in this break between the mission and the colony occurred when the colony issued an ordinance with deep implications for the native youth in the mission schools and the missionaries themselves. The ordinance required all white and black people (other than those on visiting military or commercial ships) arriving at Cape Palmas to pledge allegiance to the colonial constitution under threat of banishment. It also strengthened the power of the governor in enforcing other colonial laws. The issue of missionary teachers’ service in the militia again became a topic of debate. And now, it seemed it was time to leave.

Anderson revealed the Board’s new sense of the importance of separation from the colony when he advised the missionaries to approach the situation taking the course “proposed by Abraham and Lot.” In Genesis, when Abraham and Lot fought with each other about how to divide resources in a new land, they resolved to separate, one going in one direction, and the other in the opposite. Anderson was urging the missionaries to do the same, and move their mission in the opposite direction of the colony. Yet this advice was not without judgment. Anderson and the

² John Leighton Wilson to Rufus Anderson, letters on colonialism no. 2, (n.d.), ABC 15.1, Vol. 2.

missionaries would have remembered Lot's eventual fate in Gomorrah, which God destroyed for the sins of that city. The Board thus issued a rather stark critique of the colony and its government.

GABON HOUSE

In 1844, Wilson left Liberia for Gabon, where the missionary would evangelize and teach the Mpongwe, who had expressed an interest in welcoming the missionary and his schools. One further thing about Gabon attracted Wilson: it was far distant not only from Liberia, but from any European colonies. That they saw this as a benefit marked a profound shift in the missionary outlook. In all previous missions, the Board valued proximity to Euro-American settlements. Their experiences in Liberia changed this. Despite the frequency of trade, at the time of Wilson's arrival, there was no European settlement on the Gabon River, and this was doubtless part of its appeal. This would not last—soon French gunboats would arrive, prompting an entirely new debate about missions and colonization. But the departure of Wilson from Liberia for his new home in Gabon marked the end of this first period of contest over the nature of American missions and empire in West Africa.