



African Colonization Augustus Washington (1851)

Augustus Washington was of blended African-Asian ancestry; he once described his father as “probably an unmixed African” and his mother as “a native of South-Asia.” Although Washington’s father had grown up in slavery in Virginia, Washington was born free in New Jersey and was living in Connecticut at the time he wrote this editorial. Published in two parts in the New York Tribune, the editorial urged free African Americans to resettle in Liberia, a cause promoted by white-led colonization societies but generally rejected by African Americans and white abolitionists. Washington himself emigrated to Liberia with his wife and children two years after writing this. In Liberia, Washington became a politician, serving terms in both houses of the Liberian legislature.

Washington links the colonizing of Liberia to Christian missionary aspirations as well as to US civil religion—to an exceptionalist conception of a national mission and to the mythology of the United States as a nation founded by refugees from oppression. Washington’s editorial may have inspired the pro-colonization arguments that are set forth by one of the African American protagonists of Uncle Tom’s Cabin, the bestselling anti-slavery novel published in 1852 by white author Harriet Beecher Stowe.

Ever since the annexation of Texas and the success and triumph of American arms on the plains of Mexico, I have been looking in vain for some home for Afric-Americans more congenial to their feelings and prejudice than Liberia. The Canadas, the West Indies, Mexico, British Guiana, and other parts of South America have all been brought under review. And yet I have been unable to get rid of a conviction, long since entertained and often expressed, that if the colored people of this country ever find a home on earth for the development of their manhood and intellect, it will first be in Liberia or some other parts of Africa. A continent larger than North America is lying waste for want of the hand of science and industry—a land whose bowels are filled with mineral and agricultural wealth and on whose bosom reposes, in exuberance and wild extravagance, all the fruits and productions of a tropical clime. The providence of God will not permit a land so rich in all the elements of wealth and greatness to remain much longer without civilized inhabitants. Everyone who has traced the history of missions in Africa, and watched the progress of that little republic of Afric-Americans on the western coast, must be convinced that the colored men are more peculiarly adapted and must eventually be the means of civilizing, redeeming, and saving that continent if ever it is done at all. Encouraged and supported by American benevolence and philanthropy, I know no people better suited to this great work—none whose duty more it is. [...]

It was no difficult task to have seen that [...] human nature, human pride and passions, would not allow the Americans to acknowledge the equality and inalienable rights of those who had been their slaves. [...] For this reason, seven years ago, while a student, I advocated the plan of a separate state for colored Americans—not as a choice but as a necessity, believing it would be better for our manhood and intellect to be freemen by ourselves than political slaves with our oppressors. I enlisted at once the aid of a few colored young men of superior talent and ability; and we were earnestly taking measures to negotiate for a tract of land in Mexico, when the war and its consequences blasted our hopes and drove us from our purpose. About five years ago, I told my excellent friend, Geo. L. Seymour of Liberia (who, after a residence of some years there,

had returned to this city to take out his family), that I knew only one way to develop the faculties of our people in this country, and that [was] by their entire separation from oppression and its influences; and that if I was compelled to abandon my plan of a separate state in America, I would devote my voice, my pen, my heart and soul to the cause of Liberia. I have since written to him that he has my heart in Africa now, and in two or three years, if we live, I will shake hands with him on the banks of the St. John. [...]

What is colonization? For the benefit of those who treat it with contempt and think that no good can come out of it, I may merely remark that the thirteen original states, previous to the Declaration of Independence, were called the colonies of Great Britain; the inhabitants, colonists. [...] These colonists came from the land of their birth and forsook their homes, their firesides, their former altars, and the graves of their fathers, to seek civil and religious liberty among the wild beasts and Indians on a foreign, bleak, and desolate shore. Oppressed at home, they emigrated to Holland; and, after remaining there twelve years, returned to England; and found not the hope of rest until they came to America. That very persecution and oppression of the mother country planted in America the purest civil and religious institutions the world had ever seen. And now this powerful republic, by her oppression and injustice to one class of this people, will plant in Africa a religion and morality more pure, and liberty more universal, than it has yet been the lot of any people to enjoy. I never have been of that class who repudiate everything American. While I shall never make any compromise with slavery nor feel indifferent to its blighting, withering effects on the human intellect and human happiness, I cannot be so blind as not to see and believe that, in spite of all its corrupting influences on national character, there is yet piety, virtue, philanthropy, and disinterested benevolence among the American people; and when, by the progress of free thought and the full development of her free institutions, our country shall have removed from her national escutcheon that plague-spot of the nation, she will do more than all others in sending the light of liberty and everlasting love into every portion of the habitable globe. [...]

We have been an unfortunate people. For 400 years, the avarice, fraud, and oppression of Europeans and their descendants have been preying upon the children of Africa and her descendants in America. Says my eloquent correspondent,^a in writing upon this subject: "I know this was the soil on which I was born, but I have nothing to glorify this as my country. I have no pride of ancestry to point back to. Our forefathers did not come here, as did the Pilgrim fathers, in search of a place where they could enjoy civil and religious liberty. No, they were cowardly enough to allow themselves to be brought manacled and fettered as slaves, rather than die on their native shores resisting their oppressors." [...]

Ever since the adoption of the Constitution, the government and people of this country, as a body, have pursued but one policy toward our race. In every contest between the great political parties, we have been the losers. [...] Every state that has lately revised or altered her constitution has been more liberal in extending rights to the white and less so to the colored man. In view of these facts, I assume, as a fixed principle, that it is impossible for us to develop our moral and intellectual capacities as a distinct people under our present social and political disabilities; and judging by the past and present state of things, there is no reason to hope that we can do it in this

^a *It is unclear who this is—perhaps George L. Seymour, the friend whom Washington named earlier?*

country in future. [...] It is impossible for [us], while in this country, to prove to the world the moral and intellectual equality of the Africans and their descendants. Before such an experiment can be fairly tested, our colored youth, from childhood, must be admitted to a full participation in all the privileges of our schools, academies, and colleges and in all the immunities and rights of citizenship, free from every distinction on account of color and the degrading influences that ignorance, prejudice, and slavery have heretofore thrown around them.

In the face of these facts, we are compelled to admit that the Afric-Americans, in their present state, cannot compete with the superior energy and cultivated intellect of long civilized and Christian Saxons. And hence we are driven to the conclusion that the friendly and mutual separation of the two races is not only necessary to the peace, happiness, and prosperity of both, but indispensable to the preservation of the one and the glory of the other.

[...] American Christians, as an expiation for the past, have a great duty to discharge to a prostrate nation, pleading in silent agony to God with "tears more eloquent than learned tongue or lyre of purest note."^b We too have a great work to perform. To the Anglo- and Afric-American is committed the redemption and salvation of a numerous people for ages sunk in the lowest depth of superstition and barbarism. Who but educated and pious colored men are to lead on the van of the "sacramental host of God's elect" to conquer by love and bring Africa, with her trackless regions, under the dominion of our Savior—to baptize her sons at the font of science and religion and teach them to chant the praises of Liberty and God until "one song employs all nations, and all cry, 'Worthy the Lamb, for he was slain for us'?"^c

^b *The quotation is from The Course of Time, by white Scottish poet Robert Pollock.*

^c *The quotations about the "sacramental host" and about the song in praise of the Lamb are from The Task, by white English poet William Cowper.*

Sources: [Augustus Washington,] “African Colonization—By a Man of Color,” *New-York Daily Tribune*, July 9, 1851, 6, <https://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn83030213/1851-07-09/ed-1/>; Augustus Washington, “African Colonization—By a Man of Color (Continued),” *New-York Daily Tribune*, July 10, 1851, 7, <https://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn83030213/1851-07-10/ed-1/>. Public domain.

Excerpts edited and annotated by John-Charles Duffy. Paragraph breaks adjusted for a more compact presentation of the text; for the same reason, poetic lines formatted as block quotations in the source publication are integrated here into the running text without line-break indicators. A sentence fragment integrated into a full sentence. Spelling and punctuation corrected or otherwise emended in line with modern conventions. A minor misquotation of Pollock’s wording has been corrected, but emendations made by Washington to Pollock’s punctuation have been retained. For the sake of modernization, several political terms capitalized in the source have been converted here to lowercase: *republic*, *state*, *colonization*, *colonies*, *slavery*, and *government*; *constitution* has likewise been converted to lowercase when referring to state constitutions, as distinct from the federal Constitution. *Liberty* is capitalized here, as in the source publication, when seemingly personified.

These edited excerpts from Washington’s editorial are intended for *teaching* purposes only. For *research* purposes, you should consult, quote, and cite the source publications listed above.

See also: Washington briefly described his African-Asian parentage in Augustus Washington to Theodore S. Wright, January 15, 1846, published as “Letters to Rev. T. S. Wright, of New-York—No. II,” *Charter Oak* (Hartford, CT), February 12, 1846, 2, <http://hdl.handle.net/11134/30002:22174101>.

For arguments that Harriet Beecher Stowe drew on Washington’s editorial, see Joe Webb, “The George Harris Letter and *African Repository*: New Sources for *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*,” *ANQ* 21, no. 4 (Fall 2008): 30-34; Marcy J. Dinius, *The Camera and the Press: American Visual and Print Culture in the Age of the Daguerreotype* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2012), 158-162.



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