

The presence of free African Americans posed thorny legal and social questions everywhere in the slavery states. They were “free” in a sense, but did not enjoy the basic rights of white citizens, such as to vote and to trial by a jury of their peers. They could own some property, but faced harsh discrimination in every walk of life. For various motives, certain white (but few black) leaders endorsed the idea of sending free blacks “back” to Africa, primarily to what is now Liberia.

The Loudoun County Auxiliary of the American Colonization Society, formed in 1817, sought to free enslaved persons and then transport them out of the country to form their own society. By 1830 free blacks had established Liberia on the west coast of Africa. Prominent Loudoun citizens supported colonization, including President James Monroe, for whom the capital of Liberia, Monrovia, was named. Through the extended family of Dr. James Heaton, a founding member of the Loudoun group, two enslaved men, Jesse and Mars Lucas, were emancipated. The colonization society in Loudoun made it possible for the Lucas family to migrate to Liberia in January 1830.[1]

Some who supported colonization - including prominent Loudoun enslavers -- did so primarily in order to rid the country of free blacks who might threaten the viability of slavery societies (see Loudoun Court Petition in 1836, below). Other, more well-meaning anti-slavery individuals advocated colonization as a humane solution for a dispossessed people, both enslaved and liberated. They raised funds to offer transportation and provisions for free African Americans who wished to leave America for their ancestral home.

Nonetheless, the two pro-colonization groups shared certain views. Like most Americans at the time, they believed that free blacks did not quite qualify as “Americans” or even perhaps belong here even though many had lived in Virginia for generations. Supporters of colonization on both sides also held the dubious conviction that free blacks, by virtue of their race, would readily re-adapt to their ancestors’ way of life once resettled in Africa, while propagating Christianity, western civilization, and trade in Africa. The reality on the ground in Liberia was considerably harsher. After an initial burst of enthusiasm in the 1820s, the movement waned. In all, only about 15,000 African Americans migrated from the United States to Africa.[2]

1. Lucas-Heaton Letters: Between 1830 and 1836, the Lucas brothers corresponded with their Loudoun County family, both “white and colored.” Two letters, courtesy of the Loudoun Museum, can be read here. One is from Mars Lucas, and the other is to both brothers from the Lucas’ former owner, Albert Heaton. An original letter from the Lucas-Heaton collection is part of the Loudoun Museum collection of artifacts.

2. David Emory Shi, *America, A Narrative History, Volume I*, 11th edition (2019), New York: W.W. Norton & Co., pp. 252-254, 280, 558-59. Also, see Stevenson, *Life in Black and White*, pp. 278-285. Out of a group of 30 Loudouners who migrated to Liberia in 1830, only four remained in Liberia by 1843. Twenty others -- including Mars Lucas and Albert Heaton -- had died while two had returned to the U.S. and four others had settled elsewhere in West Africa. *Ibid*, pp. 283-285.

LUDWELL LEE, MARGARET MERCER, AND THE AUXILIARY COLONIZATION SOCIETY OF LOUDOUN COUNTY

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The American Colonization Society (ACS), also known as the American Society for Colonizing the Free People of Color in the United States, was founded in 1816 in Washington, D.C. One of its founding members was the Reverend Robert Finley, a Presbyterian minister from New Jersey. Finley believed the rising tensions between European descendants and the enslaved African Americans could not be reconciled, and the safest and most expedient means of solving the issue was to send all African Americans, enslaved or free, to the colony of Liberia located on the west coast of Africa. Late in 1816 Finley arrived in Virginia to promote his society and message, and following a December 21, 1816 meeting of Virginia's most influential men, auxiliary chapters began opening throughout Virginia, including Loudoun County.

Ludwell Lee (son of Richard Henry Lee, the seventh son of Thomas Lee), gained ownership of Belmont Plantation through his marriage to his first cousin, Flora. Lee's enslaved workforce broke ground on the plantation in the late 1790's and completed it by the turn of the century. For several decades Belmont, like most of the properties that relied on an enslaved workforce, invested in tobacco and the road systems needed to bring that crop to the eastern markets along the Potomac, such as Georgetown. But the soil was ill suited for the crop and a series of successive crop failures had plantation owners seeking other means of livelihood and prosperity. Several succeeded in switching to grains, while others, such as Ludwell, struggled instead with the looming demise of an agricultural system that could no longer easily support the enslaving of a large workforce.

In 1819 Ludwell became one of the founding members and acting president of the Loudoun Auxiliary chapter of the American Colonization Society. Little is known of Ludwell outside of Belmont. Slightly more is known of the auxiliary society he helped found. The Society's goals began broadly: to help free blacks relocate from Virginia to a new colony on the west coast of Africa. At the outset, abolitionists within the group sought to educate the enslaved who were going to return to Africa, specifically, Liberia, in the hopes these efforts would ease their way into a new society that would then spread Christianity to the new region. It is unlikely that Ludwell sympathized with these efforts; he did not free any of the enslaved at Belmont for the journey to Liberia while he was alive, or in his will. It may be that he agreed in principle with abolition, but like many plantation owners was unable to reconcile his financial and social advantages by ending his practice of enslavement.

Margaret Mercer, however, truly believed in the effort. A single woman and avowed Colonization supporter, she purchased a vast section of Belmont from Ludwell Lee's second wife after he had died in 1836. How did Mercer, a former resident of the Annapolis region, find her way to Belmont? Her cousin, Charles Fenton Mercer,* who notified her of the property's sale, observed that Ludwell had been a member of the Colonization Society, so it is possible Mercer may have taken interest in owning the property of a fellow Colonizer. Also, the price was right. The property was in serious disrepair and thus fairly inexpensive for a property and house of its size. This suited her needs and the intended use of the manor house.

Mercer was trying to raise money to get out of the debt that she had inherited from her father, without having to sell the 16 enslaved persons conveyed to her in his will. Her goal was to open a second all-girls' school at Belmont (the first was located at Cedar Hill near Annapolis), in part to raise funds that would pay for the passage to Liberia of the enslaved in her household.

It took years, but Mercer finally freed the enslaved in her charge and purchased their passage to Africa. She reportedly allowed several enslaved children to take lessons from her at Belmont. Mercer died at Belmont in 1846 of tuberculosis. In 1847 the Liberian Colony declared independence from the Colonization Society.

*[Charles Fenton Mercer -- Princeton graduate, senior officer in the War of 1812, mill owner and founder of the town of Aldie, first president of the B&O Canal, and member of the U.S. Congress for over two decades -- served as vice president of the ACS for several years. He was among those who favored colonization as a means to rid the country of free blacks.]

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