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Abstract

Colonization, the state-sponsored emigration and resettlement of freed slaves outside the United States, was a prevalent narrative in the antebellum United States, and had a vocal adherent in Abraham Lincoln. Despite its ideological support, American colonization had few examples of emigration in action, leading to the attempted settlement on the Haitian island of Île à Vache. Led by speculators and Wall Street financiers under the aegis of the Lincoln administration, 453 black settlers departed Virginia in April 1863 for the hopes of a new, prosperous life in Haiti. The venture proved disastrous, however, as the colony was marred by disease, administrative malfeasance, and ultimately mutiny. Within two years, 350 of the emigrants returned to the United States, tattered by the experience. While the dominant historical narratives surrounding colonization have broadly focused on Lincoln's words in support of such schemes, the tangible failure of Île à Vache provides an example of colonization in action. Following the abject failure of the Île à Vache venture, President Lincoln embraced the nation's multiracial future and left the ill-fated and ill-advised concept in the past. The failure of state-sponsored immigration on Île à Vache put an end to one of the more controversial elements of Abraham Lincoln's presidency, and facilitated the transition toward an integrated future.

Keywords

Abraham Lincoln, Civil War, Colonization, Haiti, Île à Vache, Ile a Vache

Île à Vache and Colonization: The Tragic End of Lincoln's "Suicidal Folly"

Graham Welch

"I shall, if I get a sufficient number of you engaged, have provisions made that you shall not be wronged."⁵⁴ These words from President Abraham Lincoln in 1862 would prove to be prophetic for all the wrong reasons when, in two years, 350 freed blacks and emigrants returned to the United State in tattered Union army uniforms, all victims of a disastrous attempt at settlement abroad on the Haitian island of Île à Vache.⁵⁵ A policy vision that existed from the embryonic days of the United States, the settlement of former slaves abroad had its opportunity in practice on the island under the aegis of the Lincoln administration and its representatives, all to collapse in a venture marred by disease, corruption, incompetence, and death. This event proved to have a significant effect on Lincoln, and ended a life-long exploration of colonization for both him and the nation. Through reconsideration following abject failure, Lincoln embraced policies of black inclusion that would have transformative impacts both on the Civil War and the nation going forward. Through disaster, the Île à Vache endeavor put an end to one of the more controversial legacies of Abraham Lincoln, ultimately forcing him to embrace a multiracial future.

⁵⁴ Roy P. Basler, ed., *Collected Works of Abraham Lincoln* (Springfield, Il: The Abraham Lincoln Association, 1953): 5:374. Hereafter Referred to as *Collected Works*.

⁵⁵ Frederic Bancroft, *Frederic Bancroft: Historian*, ed. Jacob. E. Cooke (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1957), 249.

The decision to send freed men, women, and children to Île à Vache was not the brainchild of Lincoln, rather it was the tangible completion of decades of colonization rhetoric and action throughout the United States. Colonization, the state-sponsored emigration and resettlement of freed slaves outside of the United States, possessed a deep legacy in the early United States.⁵⁶ Thomas Jefferson, in his 1785 *Notes on the State of Virginia*, documented his concerns over the justice of forced bondage as well as “new provocations” of slavery that could arise in the future, and later took an interest in political proposals of colonization.⁵⁷ The political legitimization of colonization began in 1816, when Virginia Delegate Charles Fenton Mercer and New Jersey Reverend Robert Finley established the American Colonization Society (ACS), emerging as the preeminent colonization organization.⁵⁸ Even Henry Clay, Lincoln’s “beau ideal of a statesman” and Whig forbearer took an active interest in the ACS alongside other early national luminaries John Marshall, Francis Scott Key, and James Madison.⁵⁹ By its own estimates, the ACS had aided in the

⁵⁶ Eric Foner, “Lincoln and Colonization,” in *Our Lincoln: New Perspectives on Lincoln and His World*, ed. Eric Foner (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2009), 183.

⁵⁷ Peter Onuf, “To Declare Them a Free and Independent People’: Race Slavery, and National Identity in Jefferson’s Thought,” *Journal of the Early Republic* 18, no. 1 (Spring 1998): 31

⁵⁸ P.J. Staudenraus, *The African Colonization Movement: 1861-1865* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1961), 19.

⁵⁹ Staudenraus, 27, 69; *Collected Works*, 3:29. Madison was even elected President of the American Colonization Society in 1833, proudly accepting the post by offering his “earnest prayer, that every success may reward the labors of an Institution... so

emigration of 11,909 African Americans from the date of its founding through 1867, though only a negligible amount occurred following the outbreak of war.⁶⁰ Furthermore, local colonization groups emerged across the United States from Providence to Augusta, frequently pressing state governments for funding of prospective journeys.⁶¹ Colonization was hardly a passing political fancy, but rather was an ingrained belief in the minds of many of the young nation's leaders. However, it also remained to be seen whether such proposals could ever succeed in reality on a larger scale and with governmental assistance, a question that would be answered with the failure of Île à Vache.

Support for colonization was widespread throughout the antebellum United States, albeit for divergent motivations. In the North, colonization sentiment arose from a similar religious vein as abolitionism, specifically a post-Great Awakening missionary impulse to both remove bondage at home and to project the Gospel abroad.⁶² There were also calls for colonization strictly as a means to control a rising labor force of freedmen, as evidenced by the Tammany Hall Young Men's Democratic Club's resolution in March

noble in its object of removing a great evil from its own country." (Staudenraus 183)

⁶⁰ *Memorial of the Semi-Centennial Anniversary of the American Colonization Society* (Boston: Cornhill Press, 1867), 32; Staudenraus, 66, 248.

⁶¹ Beverly C. Tomek, *Colonization and its Discontents: Emancipation, Emigration, and Antislavery in Antebellum Pennsylvania* (New York: New York University Press, 2011), 7.

⁶² Staudenraus 12, Tomek 45.

1862: “we are opposed to emancipating negro slaves, unless on some plan of colonization, that they may not come into contact with the white man’s labor.”⁶³ Southern colonizationists, including those who saw no moral objection to slavery, argued that exclusion of free blacks, coupled with gradual emancipation, would be beneficial for white planters in the future and reduce the threat of black retribution.⁶⁴ Both attitudes were shaped by a pseudoscientific notion of race that emerged in the 1830s and continued to the age of Lincoln, centered on the supposed infeasibility of a multi-racial state.⁶⁵ It was evident that mixed motivations were at the heart of colonization, and would further demonstrate the difficulties of implementing effective policy.

As colonization movements gained credence in national and state discourse, one powerful political advocate emerged in Washington from Springfield, Illinois, in the form of Abraham Lincoln. Leaders in colonization circles recognized his personal devotion to the movement, as in 1853 and 1855 Lincoln addressed the annual meeting of the Illinois Conservation Society.⁶⁶ Lincoln’s support of colonization, as evidenced through a

⁶³ James M. McPherson, “Abolitionist and Negro Opposition to Colonization During the Civil War,” *Phylon* 26, no. 4 (1965): 391.

⁶⁴ Lacy K. Ford, Jr., “Making the ‘White Man’s Country’ White: Race, Slavery, and State-Building in the Jacksonian South,” *Journal of the Early Republic* 19, no. 4 (Winter 1999): 719.

⁶⁵ James Brewer Stewart, “The Emergence of Racial Modernity and the Rise of the White North,” *Journal of the Early Republic* 18, no. 2 (Summer 1998): 213.

⁶⁶ Eric Foner, *The Fiery Trial: Abraham Lincoln and American Slavery* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2010), 127.

lifetime of speeches, came from a sincere and profound desire to improve the condition of African Americans, even in this misguided venture. This sentiment of benevolence is evident in Lincoln's 1852 eulogy for Henry Clay, in which the future President speaks of a longing for justice "in restoring a captive people to their long-lost father-land, with bright prospects for the future; and this too, so gradually, that neither races nor individuals shall have suffered by the change."⁶⁷ Later speeches reflected this pattern for Lincoln, as he expressed the same missionary impulse that guided early colonization advocates in one 1857 speech in which he invoked Christian duty to the policy, comparing African Americans to enslaved Israelites.⁶⁸ This rhetoric also emphatically disproves a prevalent historical narrative surrounding Lincoln and colonization espoused by James Oakes, in which he described colonization rhetoric as solely political grandstanding and pandering to "make emancipation more palatable to white racists."⁶⁹ Lincoln's words and actions throughout his public life establish his sincere dedication to the cause of colonization, which would ultimately conclude with the failed experiment at Île à Vache.

Lincoln's decision to approve the Île à Vache venture stemmed from a combination of logistical and diplomatic convenience that had proven impossible in

⁶⁷ *Collected Works*, 2:132.

⁶⁸ Bancroft, 189.. *Collected Works*, 2:410.

⁶⁹ James Oakes, *The Radical and the Republican: Frederick Douglass, Abraham Lincoln, and the Triumph of Antislavery Politics* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2007), 194.

other possible locations. Upon his inauguration, Lincoln explored possible venues for colonization, including directing his Minister to Guatemala with gauging interest in colonization projects throughout the Americas.⁷⁰ By 1862, the administration had narrowed possible locations for emigration into the Western Hemisphere. While the West African nation of Liberia had been a location of interest since its founding by the American Colonization Society in 1822, attempts at state building quickly failed, and left the nation in the midst of disease and a harsh diplomatic climate.⁷¹ Lincoln himself lamented this reality, stating, “If they were all landed there in a day, they would all perish in the next ten days,” but his acceptance of the infeasibility of transatlantic colonization further demonstrates his practical nature in the matter of black emigration.⁷²

After eliminating Liberia as a feasible option, Lincoln explored the possibilities of emigration to Central and South America, a policy that entailed new diplomatic challenges. Much of this diplomatic responsibility fell on the shoulders of Secretary of State William Seward, a staunch advocate of assimilation, who publicly declared, “I am always for bringing men and states *into* the Union,

⁷⁰ Phillip W. Magness and Sebastian N. Page, *Colonization after Emancipation: Lincoln and the Movement for Black Resettlement* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2011), 3.

⁷¹ Staudenraus, 66. Ed Rugemer, *The Problem of Emancipation: The Caribbean Roots of the American Civil War* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana University Press, 2008), 93.

⁷² *Collected Works*, 3:15.

never for taking any *out*.⁷³ Lincoln acknowledged these difficulties before, stating, “The political affairs in Central America are not in quite as satisfactory condition as I wish.”⁷⁴ The administration, per the advice of the Sen. Samuel Pomeroy and Rev. James Mitchell, Lincoln’s Commissioner of Emigration and Colonization, found the most favorable scenario in the province of Chiriqui, in present day Panama.⁷⁵ Lincoln had initially authorized the mission under the auspices of “coal and privileges,” but that promise proved unfounded when Joseph Henry of the Smithsonian Institute found Chiriqui coal to not only be poor for steam engines, but dangerously flammable.⁷⁶ In addition, background checks revealed that the private speculator behind the Chiriqui venture had been suspected of embezzlement, prompting a swift reconsideration of this specific plan.⁷⁷ By September 1862, the Central American plan was dead, leaving one remaining option to fulfill Lincoln’s dream of colonization in Île à Vache.

As Lincoln explored emigration opportunities in Central America and the Caribbean, he drew the ire of abolitionist groups both black and white. National abolition figures had been wary of Lincoln’s proposals to prevent the spread of slavery and gradual emancipation

⁷³ John M. Taylor, *William Henry Seward: Lincoln’s Right Hand* (New York: HarperCollins, 1991), 191.

⁷⁴ *Collected Works*, 5:374.

⁷⁵ Paul J. Scheips, “Lincoln and the Chiriqui Colonization Project,” *The Journal of Negro History* 37, no. 4 (October 1952): 427-53.

⁷⁶ *Collected Works*, 4:562. Bancroft, 226.

⁷⁷ Bancroft, 225.

since his arrival on the national stage.⁷⁸ On colonization, however, these disagreements reached a fever pitch, such as William Lloyd Garrison's public denouncement of "puerile, absurd, illogical, impertinent, and untimely" schemes in his periodical *The Liberator*, placing responsibility on the President who endorsed them.⁷⁹ These disagreements accompanied colonization during his presidency, but became most raucous upon his meeting with the Deputation of Negroes in 1862.

The antipathy between Lincoln and abolitionists on the issue of colonization reached its apogee on August 14, 1862, when a committee of five African American leaders met with Lincoln at the White House. These men might not have been the best audience to colonization proposals, as three were members of a black abolitionist group that had recently been responsible for the banishment of emigration lobbyists from Washington.⁸⁰ Lincoln outlined his colonization proposals, but his rationale, particularly the statement "you and we are

⁷⁸ One major critic of Lincoln the candidate was Charles Grandison Finney, evangelical abolitionist and president of Oberlin College, who denounced Lincoln in 1860 on grounds that, despite his qualifications, Lincoln's "score of humanity towards the oppressed race was too low." Allen C. Guelzo, "Lincoln and the Abolitionists," *The Wilson Quarterly* 24, no. 4 (Autumn 2000): 60.

⁷⁹ Manisha Sinha, "Allies for Emancipation?: Lincoln and Black Abolitionists," in *Our Lincoln: New Perspectives on Lincoln and His World*, ed. Eric Foner (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2009), 183.

⁸⁰ Kate Masur, "The African American Delegation to Abraham Lincoln: A Reappraisal," *Civil War History* 56, no. 2 (June 2010): 119.

different races. We have between us a broader difference than exists between almost any other two races,” met a harsh rebuke.⁸¹ The outcry to this meeting in the black community was widespread, evidenced by Frederick Douglass’ characterization of Lincoln as a “genuine representative of American prejudice and Negro hatred.” in the September 1862 issue of *Douglass’ Monthly*.⁸² Ultimately this experience demonstrated a key problem for Lincoln regarding colonization, specifically that the President, who had limited experience with African Americans in his personal life, had drastically misgauged black resistance, which was nearly universal.⁸³

The negation of transatlantic and Central American colonization schemes, while disheartening to Mitchell and other advocates, also opened the opportunity for the venture to Île à Vache. The proposal did not emerge from within the administration, but rather came per the solicitation of Bernard Kock, an American speculator who had obtained an agreement with the Haitian government for ten-year privileges for timber on Île à Vache, a hilly island off of the coast of Haiti roughly 25 square miles in size.⁸⁴ Kock found entry into the White House through frequent correspondence with Mitchell,

⁸¹ *Collected Works*, 5:371.

⁸² Christopher N. Breiseth, “Lincoln and Frederick Douglass: Another Debate,” *Journal of the Illinois State Historical Society* 68, no. 1 (February 1975): 14.

⁸³ David Herbert Donald, *Lincoln* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1995), 167. Richard Blackett, “Lincoln and Colonization,” *OAH Magazine of History* 21, no. 4 (October 2007): 21-22.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, 230.

supplementing his own legitimacy by appending his correspondence with the title “Governor of A Vache.”⁸⁵ Mitchell was aware of Haiti as a possible locale for colonization, as the abolitionist and Republican activist James Redpath had funded a campaign to export freedmen to the main island from 1860-62; this project, however, quickly foundered, as Redpath encountered both Haitian opposition and financial difficulties that forced his retreat.⁸⁶ Nonetheless, the prospects of a federally-funded colonization venture proved enticing for Mitchell, who agreed on the terms of a contract with Kock on November 6, 1862: 5,000 free blacks would depart to Île à Vache at the rate of \$50 per person in transfer costs, with Kock also responsible for the construction of sufficient living quarters, medical facilities, and the distribution of fair wages.⁸⁷ The contract also included \$600,000 in funds authorized by Congress for the purposes of colonization, no insignificant amount at a

⁸⁵ Ibid., 231.

⁸⁶ John R. McKivigan, “James Redpath and Black Reaction to the Haitian Emigration Bureau,” *Mid-America: An Historical Review* 69, no. 3 (1987): 139.

Willis D. Boyd, “James Redpath and American Negro Colonization in Haiti, 1860-1862,” *The Americas* 12, no. 2 (October 1955): 180.

Redpath experienced the journey of emigration himself, making the transatlantic voyage from his native Scotland to Michigan in the 1840s. (John R. McKivigan, *Forgotten Firebrand: James Redpath and the Making of Nineteenth-Century America* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2008), 4).

⁸⁷ James D. Lockett, “Abraham Lincoln and Colonization: An Episode That Ends in Tragedy at L’Île à Vache, Haiti, 1863-1864,” *Journal of Black Studies* 21, no. 4 (June 1991): 431. Bancroft, 236.

time when the overall federal budget was slightly greater than \$60 million and the nation was at the peak of the Civil War, costly in both dollars and lives.⁸⁸ On Île à Vache, the Lincoln administration had found an ideal location for a federally funded colony, and December 1, 1862, only a month before the signing of the Emancipation Proclamation, Lincoln had agreed to terms with Kock, and the first government-run colonization was afoot.⁸⁹

The Île à Vache proposal also succeeded in satisfying the one unwavering aspect of Lincoln's colonization policy, specifically that it remain voluntary. During one Cabinet debate over colonization proposals, in reaction to a suggestion of compulsory deportation, Lincoln emphasized, "Their emigration must be voluntary and without expense to themselves."⁹⁰ This unwavering belief in colonization as strictly a voluntary measure further demonstrates Lincoln's earnest conviction that blacks would be inclined to pursue emigration. On paper, Île à Vache was the ideal opportunity to do just that.

The first inauspicious signs of the Île à Vache venture emerged nearly immediately after the administration approved the contract with Kock. After Lincoln approved Secretary Seward's request for a temporary investigation into Kock on January 8, 1863,

⁸⁸ Lockett 431. Magness and Page, 4.

⁸⁹ Lockett, 437.

⁹⁰ Gideon Welles, *Diary of Gideon Welles, Secretary of the Navy Under Lincoln and Johnson, Volume 1* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1911), 152.

one month after the signing of the initial contract, word began to trickle into Washington concerning the “Governor.”⁹¹ Statements from New Orleans depicted a man who had used deceptive business practices to unload shipments of low-quality tobacco on unsuspecting merchants, while the United States Commissioner in Haiti spoke of Kock as an unpopular figure in Port-au-Prince and just as forebodingly, had not yet heard of any progress in constructing a settlement on the island.⁹² These allegations overwhelmed to both the Interior Department and the President, and on April 16, 1863, Lincoln formally rescinded Kock’s contract.⁹³ Shortly beforehand, on March 20, Lincoln agreed to terms with more reputable characters, Wall Street financiers Paul S. Forbes and Charles K. Tuckerman, for a rate of \$50 per colonist at a maximum of 500 colonists.⁹⁴ Unfortunately for the expectant colonists, this transfer would not spell the end for Bernard Kock in Haiti, as ultimately his actions at the helm of the failed colonization project would validate Attorney General Edward Bates’ claim that he was but “an errant humbug.”⁹⁵

As for the black settlers themselves, sources and documentary evidence of their lives both before and after Île à Vache are regrettably limited. Records from Fort

⁹¹ *Collected Works*, 6:42.

⁹² Bancroft, 240. Willis D. Boyd, “The Île à Vache Colonization Venture, 1862-1864,” *The Americas* 16, no. 1 (July 1959): 50.

⁹³ *Collected Works* 6:179.

⁹⁴ Boyd, “The Île à Vache Colonization Venture, 1862-1864,” 50.

⁹⁵ Edward Bates, *The Diary of Edward Bates, 1859-1866* (Washington, U.S. Government Print Office, 1933), 268.

Monroe, however, reveal that they were “principally Virginia Negroes from the Tidewater area around Norfolk, Petersburg, and Richmond,” and by status as contrabands, represented an ideal group for the experiment of emancipation and subsequent colonization.⁹⁶ The chosen colonists for the project represented a unique subsection of newly freed blacks; aside from a few family units, the settlers were individuals divided relatively evenly by gender.⁹⁷ Their enthusiastic reaction to the prospect of colonization provided hope for future projects, as accounts describe those chosen to have exalted cries of “Amen” and “Hallelujah” in anticipation of a future of landowning and true freedom.⁹⁸ Desire to depart former Confederate territory was a common sentiment for freed slaves under federal jurisdiction, as conditions for these “contrabands” were rife with disease and malnutrition.⁹⁹ These aspirations for improvement would tragically not come to fruition on Île à Vache, and ultimately their experience defined the human element of the disaster.

From the moment the vessel *Ocean Ranger* departed Fortress Monroe on April 14, 1863 carrying 453 black settlers, the mission to colonize Île à Vache was an unmitigated failure.¹⁰⁰ The journey itself demonstrated the

⁹⁶ Boyd, “The Île à Vache Colonization Venture, 1862-1864,” 51.

⁹⁷ Bancroft, 244.

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, 245.

⁹⁹ Jim Downs, *Sick from Freedom: African-American Illness and Suffering During the Civil War and Reconstruction* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012), 47.

¹⁰⁰ Bancroft, 243

inherent dangers of mass ocean transport, as a major bout of smallpox killed at least twenty-five settlers at sea, while the survivors were allegedly forced to pay for their own water rations.¹⁰¹ The real horrors began, however, once the settlers arrived on the island, as Kock instituted a policy of “no work: no rations” that rivaled any antebellum plantation.¹⁰² The contractors had reneged on their duty to construct any serviceable accommodations to protect them from the ravages of exposure, and the emigrants were left to construct crude huts for any shelter. Meanwhile, disease raged across the island from an outbreak of fever, killing a number of freed men and women.¹⁰³ In addition to their physical maladies, colonists suffered psychologically from what physician and Île à Vache witness Dr. James Brazier deemed “homesickness [and] depression of the spirit” in an interview with the Freedmen’s Inquiry Commission in December 1863.¹⁰⁴ Concurrently, attempts at cultivation proved unfruitful and starvation soon coupled with disease on the island, forcing the survivors to subsist on the decaying remains of corn and salt pork from the journey.¹⁰⁵ The situation on

¹⁰¹ *Ibid.*, 247.

¹⁰² Boyd, “The Île à Vache Colonization Venture, 1862-1864,” 53.

¹⁰³ Bancroft, 246-249.

¹⁰⁴ Records of the American Freedmen's Inquiry Commission, File No. 9, "Hayti and the south," Record Group 94, Letters Received by the Office of the Adjutant General (Main Series) 1861-1870 1863-328-0, Microfilm 619, Reel 201, Frame 254, NARA.

Île à Vache was nothing short of nightmarish, unbeknownst to its promoters at home.

Washington remained ignorant of these developments, aside from a June 1, 1863 report from George C. Ross, American Vice-Consul at Aux Cayes, Haiti, confirming that operations were “flourishing under the able, wise and humane director of its projector, Bernard Kock.”¹⁰⁶ Evidently Forbes and Tuckerman, ignorant on the logistics of colonization, had appointed Kock to coordinate their operation on the ground.¹⁰⁷ By July 1863, the emigrants had reached a breaking point of mutiny, and the terrified “Governor” fled the island for his life, while the Haitian government dispatched a military unit to maintain order.¹⁰⁸ Within weeks, word of these atrocities reached American soil through Southern press outlets, and the nation and its leaders would learn the harsh realities of colonization, but not before rescuing the destitute colonists.¹⁰⁹

The most significant outcome of the catastrophe at Île à Vache was its profound impact on Lincoln,

¹⁰⁵ Ibid., 247. Boyd, “The Île à Vache Colonization Venture, 1862-1864,” 52-53.

¹⁰⁶ Bancroft, 247.

¹⁰⁷ Boyd, “The Île à Vache Colonization Venture, 1862-1864,” 51.

¹⁰⁸ Bancroft, 246.

Records of the American Freedmen's Inquiry Commission, File No. 9, "Hayti and the south," Record Group 94, Letters Received by the Office of the Adjutant General (Main Series) 1861-1870 1863-328-0, Microfilm 619, Reel 201, Frame 256, NARA.

¹⁰⁹ Ibid., 244.

specifically his decision to not only rectify the situation as quickly as possible, but also never engage in further ventures of colonization. In response to these atrocities, Lincoln acted curiously slowly to rectify the situation and remove the emigrants from a situation for which he was ultimately responsible. In mid October 1863, more than three months after the first media accounts of the island's conditions emerged, Lincoln ordered D.C. Donnohue, a former legal associate of Secretary Usher, to sail to Île à Vache and verify the reported conditions on the island while offering immediate aid to the victims.¹¹⁰ In the meantime, Lincoln was preparing the rescue of the victims of this failed operation, ordering Secretary Stanton on February 1, 1864 to commission a naval vessel, complete with supplies and medical personnel, to depart immediately to the island for rescue purposes.¹¹¹ By March 4 1865, the U.S. Navy's *Marcia C. Day* had departed from Île à Vache with 350 surviving emigrants, reaching its ultimate destination in Alexandria, Virginia, per Lincoln's orders.¹¹²

According to future Assistant Commission of the Freedmen's Bureau John Eaton, Lincoln expressed grave distress over the failure on Île à Vache, and was left shaken by the experience.¹¹³ The timing of the incident was unfortunate for all sides, as reports of Kock's Haitian fiefdom emerged just as the dust was settling at Gettysburg

¹¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 248.

¹¹¹ *Collected Works*, 7:165.

¹¹² Bancroft, 252.

¹¹³ Foner, *The Fiery Trial*, 259. Richard Zuczek, ed., *Encyclopedia of the Reconstruction Era* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 2006), 1:214

and the War continued in full throughout the summer. Nonetheless, it remains significant that Lincoln, once fully aware of the atrocities committed under his watch, ultimately acted to set the situation right and return the emigrants to their nation of birth.

In the aftermath of Île à Vache, its primary actors were quick to pronounce blame for the disaster in nearly all aspects of the operation. Forbes and Tuckerman were quick to denounce the actions of the man they appointed to run the colony, blaming the “obnoxious” Kock for dereliction of duty and breach of contract in one public statement.¹¹⁴ In addition to the rampant acts of exploitation on the island, federally-promised support proved to be an illusion to both the emigrants and their benefactors; of the \$600,000 allocated for colonization efforts, only \$38,329.93 was ever spent on Île à Vache, a majority of which went straight to the salaries of Rev. James Mitchell, expenses such as the transportation costs for the project, and compensation to Sen. Samuel Pomeroy for his legislative assistance in the project.¹¹⁵ Forbes and Tuckerman were unable to recoup their investment that ended up totaling over \$90,000 despite their protestations, which included the publishing of a self-exonerating pamphlet that deflected the majority of the blame onto the Interior Department and Kock.¹¹⁶ Usher’s Interior Department, “eager to forget a fiasco that was held up to ridicule by the increasingly powerful Radical branch of the Republican Party,” was reluctant to

¹¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 248.

¹¹⁵ Lockett, 442.

¹¹⁶ Bancroft, 256.

request funds at the risk of spectacle, and Forbes and Tuckerman's appeal ultimately went unheeded.¹¹⁷ Curiously enough, Kock attempted to return to the island where he had caused so much havoc on Christmas Day 1863, only to flee in terror on the first boat out when he learned of threats to his life at the hands of those he had exploited.¹¹⁸ Ultimately, the responsibility for this humanitarian disaster lay at the feet of the Chief Executive, and his reaction proved monumental in the end of colonization as a chimera in American policy.

Following his reversal of the Île à Vache venture, Lincoln not only remained silent on the failed Haitian colony, but also never issued another public statement concerning colonization, a decision that is astounding after his many prior proclamations on the matter.¹¹⁹ His

¹¹⁷ Boyd, "The Île à Vache Colonization Venture, 1862-1864," 59.

¹¹⁸ Bancroft, 250.

¹¹⁹ Magness and Page, 7. Foner, "Lincoln and Colonization," 183.

It should be noted that one countervailing account exists in the 1892 memoirs of General Benjamin Butler, who claimed that Lincoln confided unto him, "I can hardly believe that the South and North can live in peace, unless we can get rid of the negroes." However, recent historical investigation has shed light on the illegitimacy of Butler's claims, as not only was he recalling the conversation nearly three decades later solely from memory, but telegraph records show that at the time of this supposed conversation, Butler was at his home in Massachusetts while Lincoln was at City Point per an invitation from General Ulysses S. Grant. Benjamin F. Butler, *Autobiography and Personal Reminiscences of Major-General Benjamin F. Butler* (Boston: A.M. Thayer & Co., 1892), 903. Mark E. Neely, "Abraham Lincoln and Black Colonization:

abandonment of colonization as a viable policy option was evident in his acceptance of Minnesota Senator Morton S. Wilkinson's bill introduced on March 15, 1864, which formally withdrew any federal funds for future colonization. Upon its passage on July 2, Lincoln signed the bill, and the colonization in the United States was effectively dead, with nary a word from the President.¹²⁰ Colonization was officially an afterthought in Congressional policy as a direct result of Île à Vache, but it was Lincoln's rejection that would prove to be the nail in the moribund movement's coffin.

Despite his silence on the matter, Lincoln's abandonment of colonization as a viable policy in the wake of Île à Vache is evident through the commentary of those still involved both in the administration and dwindling colonization efforts. On July 1, 1864, nearly four months since the last of the Île à Vache refugees had returned to Washington, Lincoln's personal secretary John Hay expressed relief when he wrote, "I am glad the President has sloughed off that idea of colonization. I have always thought it a hideous & barbarous humbug & the thievery of Pomeroy and Kock have about converted him to the same belief."¹²¹ The inclusion of Pomeroy and

Benjamin Butler's Spurious Testimony," *Civil War History* 25, No. 1 (March 1979): 79-80.

¹²⁰ Michael Vorenberg, "Abraham Lincoln and the Politics of Black Colonization," *Journal of the Abraham Lincoln Association* 14, no. 2 (Summer 1993): 41.

¹²¹ John Hay, *Inside Lincoln's White House: The Complete Civil War Diary of John Hay*, ed. Michael Burlingame and John R. Turner Ettlinger (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1997), 217.

Kock in this statement further shows the specter of Haiti within the administration. Conversely, Pomeroy became increasingly frustrated with a lack of new emigration efforts, and wrote to Lincoln in demand of action for the estimated fourteen thousand freedmen who had reached out to Pomeroy in hopes of manning the next colony.¹²² Emancipation was a watershed moment for ACS activists, and abandonment by a perceived ally in the White House proved fatal; the organization, which had already been operating under heavy costs without matching incomes, dwindled in popularity until it published its final newsletter, *The African Repository*, in 1892.¹²³ Through making the deliberate effort to remain silent on colonization, but also to ignore any possibilities of future endeavors following Île à Vache, Lincoln showed the transformative impact this failure had on his evolution toward a dying policy.

The abject failure of the Île à Vache venture had dramatic ramifications for the Lincoln administration in its aftermath, as preexisting rivalries and disagreements within the White House reached an apex. Opinions on colonization were split nearly evenly across Lincoln's cabinet, with Seward, Welles, and Stanton firmly against any such proposals, while Interior Secretaries Caleb Smith and John Usher, alongside Postmaster General Montgomery Blair were vocal in favor of colonization as a

¹²² Vorenberg, 42.

¹²³ Allan Yarema, *The American Colonization Society: An Avenue to Freedom?* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 2006), 73.

policy measure.¹²⁴ Many of these arguments centered on Emigration Commissioner Mitchell, who frequently drew the ire of his superiors in the Interior Department with his frequent association with speculators and other less-reputable colonization advocates.¹²⁵ Île à Vache provided an ideal opportunity for an incensed Usher to freeze Mitchell's salary and have him expelled from his office.¹²⁶ These disagreements also embroiled the President himself, particularly regarding his Secretary of State, William Seward. While Seward fulfilled his duties to explore colonization options, he frequently voiced his displeasure to the President.¹²⁷ While recovering from an assassination attempt within the same conspiracy that had killed Lincoln, Seward told an interviewer, "Only once... did we disagree in sentiment... His 'colonization' scheme, which I opposed on the self-evident principle that all natives of a country have an equal right in its soil."¹²⁸ The

¹²⁴ Taylor, 191. Welles, 151. Vorenberg, 38. Donald, 344. Secretary Blair's brother, Congressman Francis Blair, Jr., was one of the most strident advocates of colonization during the 1850s and 1860s, both through campaigning on the House floor for colonization as well as sitting on the House Committee on Emigration that resolved on July 16, 1862: the highest interests of the white race, whether Anglo-Saxon, Celt, or Scandinavia, require that the whole country should be help and occupied by those races alone." (Bancroft 201).

¹²⁵ Gabor Boritt, "Did He Dream of a Lily-White America? The Voyage to Linconia," in Gabor Boritt, ed., *The Lincoln Enigma: The Changing Faces of an American Icon* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), 9. Hay, 19.

¹²⁶ Foner, "Lincoln and Colonization," 164.

¹²⁷ Taylor, 191.

¹²⁸ F.B. Carpenter, *The Inner Life of Abraham Lincoln: Six Months at the White House* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1995), 291.

Lincoln administration provided an ideal microcosm of the debates over colonization, and ultimately the fiasco at Île à Vache brought these debates to the forefront.

In the public arena, media coverage of the Île à Vache disaster proved to be overwhelmingly negative towards colonization as a policy option for the Lincoln administration and allies. Colonization efforts in the Caribbean in the months preceding Emancipation already elicited outcry from Northern media members of both political parties. The Democratic *New York Evening Express* railed against logistical costs that deportation would “entail upon the White Labor of the North,” while the Republican *New York Times* offered an equally blunt editorial statement: “No, Mr. Pomeroy. No, Mr. President. The enfranchised blacks must find homes, without circumnavigating the sea at the National expense.”¹²⁹ The media reaction was swift following Île à Vache, and following its report of the material failings of the operation, the *Chicago Tribune* issued an editorial with the prescient title “The End of Colonization.” In it, the staff swiftly declared, “We have probably seen the last of a long line of attempts to colonize the blacks from this country” due to infeasibility in both logistics and black desire, observing, “their general reluctance to leave the country is a good reason why they should not.”¹³⁰ African American newspapers issued sentiments of relief, such as the *New Orleans Tribune*’s declaration that “We shall hear no more of that suicidal folly.”¹³¹ These editorials,

¹²⁹ Vorenberg, 35. *New York Times*, October 1, 1862.

¹³⁰ *Chicago Tribune*, March 23, 1864.

¹³¹ Foner, “Lincoln and Colonization,” 165.

coupled with factual accounts of the horrific details on the island, contributed to a public discourse that rejected colonization once and for all following Île à Vache.

The failure of colonization as a feasible policy option, while temporarily disheartening to Lincoln, nonetheless left new opportunities for post-war racial policies, particularly military enlistment and participation in an emancipated nation. This turn to assimilation, rather than displacement, found support within black communities, particularly those who saw enlistment as an avenue to support the nation and president that had granted them freedom.¹³² African-American intellectuals had embraced their own permanent status, as abolitionist and staunch anti-colonization advocate David Walker wrote in his *Appeal* that indeed the true “promised land” for former slaves was in the United States.¹³³ Lincoln voiced his support of black enlistment and subsequent positions in the post-war society in his final public address on April 11, 1865, when he advocated for “the elective franchise... on those that serve our cause as soldiers,” an effort he argued would sustain the reunified Republic.¹³⁴ Through statements such as this, the President offered optimism of black allegiance and democratic participation in a way that

¹³² Tomek, 246.

¹³³ Chris Apap, “Let No Man Budge Us One Step’: David Walker and the Rhetoric of African American Emplacement,” *Early American Literature* 46, no. 2 (2011): 332. David Walker, *David Walker’s Appeal, in Four Articles, Together with a Preamble to the Coloured Citizens of the World, But in Particular, and Very Expressly, to those of the United States of America* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1995), 56.

¹³⁴ *Collected Works*, 8:403.

would never require such ill-conceived attempts as Île à Vache again. In the symbolic transition from colonization to assimilation, a number of the surviving men of the colony found both shelter and income through enlistment in the Union army, fulfilling one black abolitionist's desire for recognition that "this land which we have watered with *our tears* and *our blood*, is now our *mother country*."¹³⁵

Despite its failure on both humanitarian and political grounds, the Île à Vache excursion proved to have one positive lasting consequence for the United States and the legacy of Abraham Lincoln in the realm of diplomacy, specifically through the diplomatic recognition of Haiti. Following Toussaint L'Ouverture's 1804 victory and subsequent expulsion of French colonists from the island state, the Jefferson administration issued a temporary embargo and diplomatic non-recognition of the sole black-controlled state in the Western Hemisphere; the latter policy soon became a norm for Jefferson's successors in the White House.¹³⁶ This policy stood in stark contrast to the traditional *de facto* policy of diplomatic recognition toward former Spanish and French colonies in the Americas, described by the House Foreign Affairs Committee in 1822 when it reported to President James Monroe, "it is sufficient that it is really sovereign and independent," as grounds for recognition, a

¹³⁵ Apap, 327.

¹³⁶ Gordon S. Brown, *Toussaint's Clause: The Founding Fathers and the Haitian Revolution* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2005), 291.

qualification that undoubtedly applied in Haiti.¹³⁷ The Île à Vache endeavor, however, caused a rapid shift in this policy, as American involvement on Haitian soil necessitated recognition of the state that had already signed a contract with Kock.¹³⁸ On December 3, 1861, one year prior to his approval of the Île à Vache proposal, as part of his annual address to Congress, Lincoln recommended the recognition of both Haiti and Liberia, citing “important commercial advantages might be secured by favorable commercial treaties with them.”¹³⁹ Within months the United States had formally reestablished ties with Haiti; in response, the Republican press praised Lincoln, typified by the *New York Times* proclaiming victory over the era “when the slave-lords ruled in our legislative halls.”¹⁴⁰ The diplomatic recognition of Haiti after decades of ambivalence and hostility demonstrates that for all of the individual losses of the Île à Vache fiasco, some good still managed to emerge from the island.

The historiographical conversation surrounding Île à Vache is focused on one of the more confounding aspects of the abolitionist movement and presidency of Abraham Lincoln, specifically, support of colonization as a policy appendage of emancipation. To an observer

¹³⁷ Gregory Weeks, “Almost Jeffersonian: U.S. Recognition Policy toward Latin America,” *Presidential Studies Quarterly* 31, no. 3 (September 2001): 493.

¹³⁸ Alfred N. Hunt, *Haiti's Influence on Antebellum America: Slumbering Volcano in the Caribbean* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1988), 186.

¹³⁹ *Collected Works* 5:31.

¹⁴⁰ *New York Times*, January 1, 1862.

today, the concept of colonization appears at its most innocuous to be infeasible and at its most malicious as the ultimate solution for American racists.¹⁴¹ Colonization as a serious policy option appears outlandish from a contemporary perspective, and Lincoln's support for black emigration provides a contrast from the image of the Great Emancipator. A range of scholarly works exists on national and local efforts to spur African American colonization up until the Civil War, as well, demonstrating the persistence of this movement in the antebellum years.¹⁴² Nonetheless, writings concerning Lincoln and colonization focus primarily on his ideological support for the movement, rather than his tangible efforts to enact such a policy. Therein lies Île à Vache; the Haitian island provided an ideal experimentation for these grand schemes, all to collapse in a spectacular fashion. For the majority of writings, even those specific to the endeavor, Île à Vache is but one example of colonization as a failed policy, rather than as a pivotal moment in Lincoln's strategy toward a post-

¹⁴¹ Frank J. Williams, "Doing Less' and 'Doing More': The President and the Proclamation - Legally, Militarily, and Politically," in Harold Holzer, Edna Greene Medford, and Frank J. Williams ed., *The Emancipation Proclamation: Three Views* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2006), 49.

¹⁴² Examples of such works on the American Colonization Society and its state subsidiaries include, P.J. Staudenraus' *The African Colonization Movement 1861-1865* Beverly Tomek's *Colonization and its Discontents* and Penelope Campbell, *Maryland in Africa: The Maryland State Colonization Society, 1831-1857* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1971).

Emancipation and biracial United States.¹⁴³ Ultimately the historical record, as proven in this essay through a combination of policy shifts and lack of official statements following the disaster are more reliable than speculation, demonstrating that the Haitian excursion was the death knell for colonization.

An evaluation of the historical narratives of colonization reveals one of the most contentious aspects of Lincoln scholarship, specifically his beliefs regarding race. Some historians have viewed Lincoln's support for colonization as an indelible blemish on his legacy, characterized by Eric Foner's description of these programs as "the ethnic cleansing of America" in one review.¹⁴⁴ Both this interpretation, as well as a newfound interest in colonization as anything but a footnote in history, emerged in the 1960s with a newfound historiographical interest in race.¹⁴⁵ Some of these more vociferous analyses assert that "to his dying day" Lincoln questioned the ability of blacks and whites to coexist in a

¹⁴³ For example, In John Burt's *Lincoln's Tragic Pragmatism* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2013), he concludes a section on Lincoln's views on colonization by referring to Île à Vache as but a "coda" to the broader narrative, without delving into the specifics of the ventures itself, a common thread in colonization historiography. (Burt 365).

¹⁴⁴ Eric Foner, "Lincoln's Virtues: An Ethical Biography," *New York Times Book Review*, February 10, 2002.

¹⁴⁵ Arthur Zilmermit, "Lincoln and the Problem of Race: A Decade of Interpretations," *Papers of the Abraham Lincoln Association* 2 (1980): 22.

post-Emancipation United States.¹⁴⁶ Nonetheless, these accounts provide a view of the President that frequently do not place colonization within its proper historical context, despite its obvious faults in both morality and pragmatism, as well as rejection within the black community. The accounts of abolitionists wary of Lincoln furthered the historiographical debate over Lincoln and race, a persistent and inflammatory element of his legacy.¹⁴⁷ It is evident that an examination of the tragedy at Île à Vache contributes to a controversial but relevant appraisal of Lincoln's presidency, and thus must it be interpreted in both its failure as an endeavor as well as a driver of future policy.

When the *Marcia Gay* departed the shores of Île à Vache on March 4, 1864, it left behind not only the ruins of one failed experiment at black resettlement, but also the fate of a movement itself. The Île à Vache fiasco was a combination of governmental mismanagement, individual malfeasance, and misplaced policy ambitions, together culminating in death and disease for a chosen collection of society's most marginalized residents. Ultimately the responsibility for these failures fell on the shoulders of Abraham Lincoln, who made the concerted effort to not only rescue the surviving members of the expedition for return to American shores, but to forever abandon future schemes of black resettlement. In the

¹⁴⁶ George M. Frederickson, "A Man but Not a Brother: Abraham Lincoln and Racial Equality," *The Journal of Southern History* 41, no. 1 (February 1975): 57.

¹⁴⁷ Richard N. Current, *The Lincoln Nobody Knows* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1958), 223-236.

place of colonization, Lincoln instead explored ways to integrate those he had freed into a post-emancipation society, shaping future efforts to reunite the United States. Alexis de Tocqueville once wrote, “The great privilege enjoyed by Americans is not to be more enlightened than other nations but also to have the chance to make mistakes that can be retrieved.”¹⁴⁸ The incident on Île à Vache, while undeniably a tragic and preventable event, proved a retrievable mistake through the negation of an unfeasible and unpopular solution to racial questions, replaced by subsequent transformation toward a more integrated future.

¹⁴⁸ Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, trans. George Lawrence, ed., J.P. Mayer (New York: HarperCollins, 1969), 225.

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