

Dealing with the Slavery Issue

American Colonization Society

By Sterling A. Rachootin

What can be described as the bible of American Coins, A Guide Book of United States Coins by R.S. Yeoman, otherwise known as the Red Book, has pictured as its first photo a copy of the Spanish Milled Dollar or Pillar Dollar, which is not an official U.S. coin, but is deemed so important to the history of our coinage that it has this revered placement in this book. In like manner perhaps we might consider the inclusion of the Liberian token known as the American Colonization token of 1833 as a suitable frontispiece for a future Civil War Token Society publication. No one would disagree that the paramount issue leading to the Civil War in America was the slavery issue, however long before war broke out measures were considered, to head off the catastrophe of a civil war, specifically the American Colonization Society plan to repatriate free Blacks to Africa.

Paul Caffe (1759-1817), a Black self-made merchant sailor of Massachusetts, and perhaps the first Black to achieve substantial wealth, felt that the only way for Blacks to achieve a decent existence was to leave America and resettle in Africa. In 1812, he took 38 Negroes aboard one of his own ships and set sail for Sierra Leone in Africa, paying all their expenses out of his own pocket. "American racism forced him to accept the racist doctrine of separation as the ultimate solution" according to his biographer. Fifty years earlier, men like Thomas Jefferson and others had thought it feasible to combine gradual emancipation with deportation. James Gillespie Birney (1792-1857), a slaveholder from Kentucky, became a zealot for the cause of ending slavery. He was educated at the college of New Jersey (now Princeton), gave up a prosperous law practice in Alabama to become an agent for the American Colonization Society which has as its aims to put an end to slavery and repatriate freed slaves to Africa or some Caribbean area. This movement first began in 1816. Birney, after freeing his inherited slaves, began publishing the Abolitionist newspaper the "Philantropist" in Cincinnati, and became executive director of Garrison's American Anti-Slavery Society. In the presidential election of 1840-1844, he was the nominee of the Liberty Party, which advocated the abolition of slavery by moral persuasion and political action. His 1844 third party campaign was particularly significant because it drew enough popular votes away from the Whig candidate Henry Clay to allow Polk to win the election for the Democrats.

The American Colonization Society was formed under the leadership of such prominent slaveholders as John C. Calhoun, Henry Clay, John Randolph, and Buchrod Washington. They persuaded the U.S. Congress to purchase a strip of land in West Africa which they named Liberia, from the word "Liberty", and named its capital Monrovia after the then president James Monroe.

Many associations parallel U.S. influences. Liberia's flag is red, white, and blue, and its constitution is based on the U.S. Constitution, etc.

The idea of having freed Blacks living alongside slaves was a real threat to many southern slave holders, as it threatened the whole concept of slavery. "A free African population is a curse to any country... and corrupters of the slaves", so spoke a South Carolina judge. Educating slaves was strictly forbidden in Southern states.

Meanwhile in the North, the heavy immigration of Irish and German workers created a fierce competition between them and the free Black workers which was a prime reason for making Blacks unwelcome north of the Mason-Dixon Line, along with the racial prejudice found inherent in western culture.

The first group of Black colonists set sail for Liberia in 1820. By 1830, some 1400 Negroes were settled in the colony. There was a slow trickle with less than a total of 15,000¹ freed Blacks having left the American shores. With rare exceptions, slaves eagerly accepted offers of emancipation regardless of the conditions imposed upon them. Some slaves were offered freedom if they would leave the state, or in some instances, the country. One Virginia slave master offered freedom to 14 (Some sources use the figure 7,000 Freed Blacks) of his slaves if the American Colonization Society paid their travel expenses back to Africa. It was carried out. All of the 123 slaves of Isaac Ross elected to go to Liberia as provided in his will.

Of the 4,441,830 Negroes in America in 1860, there were 3,953,760 slaves and 488,070 free men. Some Blacks bought their freedom, others were freed by their masters or by state legislatures, and many just ran away from their slave owners. Some of the freed Blacks held slaves themselves, so that these runaways could not be taken back by slavers.

Free Blacks found it difficult to earn a living. Many trades were denied to them. Many Whites refused to work side by side with Blacks, and most frequently, only the least desirable types of labor were open to them, yet every state required that free Blacks had to work and they had to show proof they were working. Negroes had to carry passes and were not allowed to move about freely. If found away from their homes, they could be accused of being runaways, and being Black, they could not testify in our courts against Whites. By the year 1830, voting rights were greatly restricted or not existent for free Negroes. Churches, both North and South, denied membership to Blacks or required that they be segregated within the church. In Baltimore, Blacks paid school tax, but could not send their children to school.

With all the inequities and injustices dealt the Blacks, most Blacks still opposed the American Colonization Society repatriation goals. It was deemed an outrage and nothing more than an excuse for the benefit of slave holders. In New York, Martin R. Delaney, a graduate of Harvard Medical School and Black, called the Society "anti-Christian" and "one of the Negroes' worst enemies". Delaney favored separatism (repatriation) for Blacks to resettle Africa. He felt that the White power structure would never share power with Blacks that prejudice was so ingrained in White culture, that Blacks could never achieve equality in America. On the other hand, there was the former slave turned activist, Frederick Douglas, who felt that Blacks would eventually achieve full freedom and civil rights because of the American concern with democracy and justice. Both of these men wrote articles in the North Star, an abolitionist publication. The vast majority of Blacks in America sided with Douglas.

Abraham Lincoln though he despised slavery held a racist attitude toward Blacks as did the majority of Whites, North and South. "Lincoln's compassion for the Negro was short of that which he felt for Southern Whitemen, even those among them who were slaveholders and rebels".² Lincoln, speaking to a delegation of Black freeman stated..."You and we are different races...this physical difference is a great disadvantage to us both, as I think your race suffers greatly, many of them by living among us, while we suffer from your presence, in a word we suffer on each side. If this is admitted, it affords a reason at least only we should be separated". Lincoln went on to say, "...even when you cease to be slaves, you are yet far removed from being placed on an equality with the White race. You are cut off from many of the advantages which the other race enjoy...not a single man of your race is made the equal of a single man of ours. Go where you are treated best and the ban is still upon you". Lincoln went on to state that Blacks were the cause of the Civil War and that he believed in resettlement in Africa or Central America.

Up through the Civil War and after, there was the option of Blacks to settle in Liberia. Prejudice against Blacks was rampant after the cessation of hostilities even after the slaves achieved full citizenship following passage of the 13th Amendment to the Constitution in 1865. The 14th and 15th Amendment reinforced civil rights and citizenship for all Americans. I need not go into roadblocks the various states initiated against Blacks, such as poll taxes, literacy tests, restrictive covenants, segregation, and outright intimidation to prevent Blacks from exercising their basic rights. Where the states were negligent, the KKK maintained its vigilante tactics to suppress the Blacks. And it wasn't that long ago when Martin Luther King shared his dream with all Americans, that being just about 100 years after the Civil War.

With so many of our most notable leaders in America, in every walk of life, including President Lincoln himself, advocating repatriation back to Africa for Blacks, it seems that the American Colonization token deserves a place of honor amongst Civil War token collectors, whether you agree or disagree with its implications and objectives. It is interesting to me how so few history books make mention of racial prejudice in America, the American Colonization Society, and the country of Liberia, but then again, how many history books even make mention of Civil War tokens?

The American Colonization Society token is about the size of an average Hardtimes token, measuring about 1 1/16 inches in diameter and about the same thickness. On the obverse at the top, following the contour of the token, is the word "LIBERIA", and at the base straight across is the date "1833". Pictured in the foreground is a native, presumably welcoming a returning shipload of American Blacks, clutching a palm tree, and in the distance offshore is a ship. To the right of the central figure is a native plant. On the reverse is found writing only. Encircling the entire token are the words, "American Colonization Society ONE CENT". In the center, on three horizontal lines are found 1.) "FOUNDED" 2.) "A.D." 3.) "1816".

Of the 7 Colonization tokens that I own, 4 of them are different varieties. There are small ships and large ships, there are variations in the palm trees, especially the fronds, and the native bush on the right side may be tall or short with foliage variations. The placement of the lettering on the reverse also show differences as the relationship of the "6" in 1816 to the letters "CE" in the word "cent" below the date. These variations do not greatly affect the valuations of these tokens.

¹Hughes and Meltzer, A Pictorial History of the Negro in America

²Life in the North During the Civil War, Smith & Judah p. 135

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World Book Encyclopedia

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