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# Traitor or Pioneer: John Brown Russwurm and the African Colonization Movement

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TRAITOR OR PIONEER: JOHN BROWN RUSSWURM AND THE AFRICAN  
COLONIZATION MOVEMENT

A Thesis Presented

by

BRIAN J. BARKER

Submitted to the Office of Graduate Studies,  
University of Massachusetts Boston,  
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

MASTER OF ARTS

June 2015

History Program

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## ABSTRACT

# TRAITOR OR PIONEER: JOHN BROWN RUSSWURM AND THE AFRICAN COLONIZATION MOVEMENT

June 2015

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Directed by Professor Julie Winch

The end of the Revolutionary War proved to be a significant moment in United States history. Not only did it signal the birth of a new nation, but it also affected the institution of slavery. Wartime rhetoric such as “All men are created equal,” left the future of American slavery in doubt. Northern and mid-Atlantic states began to implement emancipation plans, and the question of what to do with free blacks became a pressing one. It soon became apparent that free blacks would not be given the same rights as white Americans, and the desire to have blacks removed from society began to increase. One proposed solution to this problem was the idea of sending free and manumitted slaves to Africa. A man by the name of John Brown Russwurm (1799-1851) would play a prominent role in the colonization movement, and his life and legacy reflect the controversy surrounding the idea of colonization.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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Lastly, I would like to thank my friend and mentor Dr. Julie Winch, and her incredible husband Dr. Louis Cohen. I still do not know what she saw in me back in the spring of 2011, but the faith that she has shown in me and her never ending-support is the main reason that I have made it this far. I have learned so much from her over the years, and will never forget everything that she has done for me. To the rest of my friends and family, thank you for everything.

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## CHAPTER 1

### THE ROOTS OF COLONIZATION

The goal of this thesis is to explore the life and work of a truly remarkable and complex individual. John Brown Russwurm (1799-1851) was one of the first black men in the history of the United States to receive a college degree. That fact alone would have made him worth studying. He earned his coveted degree at a time when the vast majority of white Americans, even those opposed to slavery, considered black people to be their intellectual inferiors. Russwurm did more than secure a college education, though. He went on to become the co-editor of the nation's first black newspaper, *Freedom's Journal*, and in that role he had a major impact not only on the many thousands of black men and women who read the newspaper but on white people who heard about this pioneering journalistic endeavor. Why, then, given how much Russwurm achieved, is his name so often omitted from discussions of civil rights heroes and his legacy largely dismissed? As this thesis will show, it is because of the stance he took on one of the most pressing questions of his era – a question that went to the heart of the future of black people in the United States. Could they ever achieve full freedom and equality in the land of their birth, or should they leave for Africa, their ancestral “homeland,” and form their own nation, separate from white prejudice and white laws? Russwurm's initial answer was that Americans of African descent belonged in America, and not as slaves but as citizens,



with the same entitlement as their white neighbors to “life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness.” Over time, however, he changed his mind, and he did so very publicly. To appreciate the immense significance of John Brown Russwurm’s role in the debate over what later generations would call Black Nationalism it is necessary to begin by stepping back in time decades before Russwurm’s birth to the origins of the debate over black freedom, black equality and black destiny.

The Revolutionary War, besides signaling the birth of a new nation, also had a significant impact on the institution of slavery. Before the War for Independence, slavery was spread across all of British-controlled North America, and approximately one in five Americans was enslaved at the time of the Revolution.<sup>1</sup> Thomas Jefferson's famous words, "All men are created equal," and other wartime rhetoric demanding freedom and equality, left the future of slavery in America in doubt.<sup>2</sup> Moreover, thousands of slaves fought in the Revolutionary War, either for the British or the Patriots, while many others took advantage of the chaos that accompanied the war to flee from their owners and become free men and women. This growing free black population, coupled with the wartime rhetoric calling for freedom and equality, led to emancipation plans being put into effect across the Northern and Mid-Atlantic states. Vermont, although not a state at the time, abolished slavery in 1777 by way of constitutional fiat, and it was soon followed by both Massachusetts and New Hampshire. Gradual emancipation plans were also implemented by Connecticut, Rhode Island, Pennsylvania, New York, and New Jersey, and by the turn of the nineteenth century all the Northern states had begun traveling down the path towards abolition.

As the number of free Negroes in the United States began to grow in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, the desire to have them removed from society began to grow as well. Thomas Jefferson noted that any effort to move towards equality would result in, "convulsions which will probably never end but in the extermination of the one or the other race."<sup>3</sup> The mounting anxiety over the increasing number of free Negroes in the country helped to propel the idea of African colonization to the forefront of public consciousness. This push for colonization culminated in the formation of the American Colonization Society in 1816.

The historiography of the American Colonization Society over the years has been fiercely and heavily debated. Some historians have seen the society as a benevolent attempt to help African Americans gain freedom and equality, as well as put an end to slavery in the United States. Others have seen it as a way to protect slavery in the Southern states by preventing slave rebellions, denying African-Americans the rights that they should have been given at birth, and eliminating any economic competition. Both points of view have merit, as it is true that supporters of the ACS had varying reasons as to why they endorsed the society. Some ACS supporters believed in abolition, while others wanted to protect the institution of slavery. While the American Colonization Society, or ACS, is the most prominent colonization society, the African colonization movement began well before the creation of the ACS.

Although the idea of African colonization is most frequently linked to the ACS, it is important to note that the idea of colonization had existed since the early eighteenth century. While a colonization movement didn't begin to take shape among whites until

the end of the colonial era, Eric Burin notes that even as early as 1714, a resident of New Jersey urged that slaves "be set free...and sent to their own country."<sup>4</sup>

So while the seeds for colonization had been sown as early as the beginning of the eighteenth century, the movement towards an actual colonization effort didn't sprout until the latter part of the century. Beginning in the late 1770's, the New England and Mid-Atlantic states began to abolish slavery, whether outright or through the implementation of gradual emancipation plans.<sup>5</sup> The abolition movement in these states increased the anxiety over the presence of free blacks in society. Some whites suggested that the former slaves should be transported to distant lands, while others, like Anthony Benezet and Thomas Paine, suggested that they be settled beyond the Allegheny Mountains.<sup>6</sup>

While Thomas Jefferson, at some points in his long life, supported colonization as well as nationwide emancipation, fellow Virginian Ferdinando Fairfax, a justice of the peace and the largest slave owner in Fairfax County, favored individual manumission as a way to end slavery in Virginia and elsewhere.<sup>7</sup> Fairfax also supported colonization because he believed that the two races could never live side by side in harmony, and equal rights would never eliminate longstanding prejudices.<sup>8</sup> He proposed that Congress transport free blacks from each state to a colony in Africa. In his mind, this would encourage slaveholders to liberate their slaves because they would be assured that the newly-free blacks would not pose any danger to themselves or the community.<sup>9</sup> Lastly, Fairfax believed that Africa was the most suitable place because it was their native area, it was far enough away to prevent antagonisms between the races, American Negroes could Christianize the locals, and it would provide white American traders with new

economic opportunities in Africa, as the former slaves would want to buy goods from them.<sup>10</sup>

Colonization, for the most part, was largely shunned by blacks during this time period. Many considered liberty to be their birthright and didn't want to be relocated. Burin notes that the establishment of black churches and benevolent societies was a clear sign that blacks had no intention of leaving, but rather, wished to secure liberty and freedom in America for themselves, as well as for those still in bondage.<sup>11</sup>

However, there were some blacks that were in favor of colonization. In 1773, four black men, Sambo Freeman, Peter Bestes, Felix Holbrook, and Chester Joie, petitioned the British governor of Massachusetts and the colony's lawmakers for the necessary funds to create a settlement on the coast of Africa.<sup>12</sup> There were similar proposals in Newport, Rhode Island in 1780, and again in Massachusetts in 1787. However, Burin points out that the plans proposed by blacks differed from those devised by their white counterparts because they were inspired by a sense of Pan-Africanism and the desire to gain freedom and equality for themselves, as well as those blacks that were still in enslaved.<sup>13</sup>

While no significant progress was made towards colonization in the immediate post-Revolutionary period, the movement gained momentum with Gabriel Prosser's Rebellion. Prosser was born in 1776, in Henrico County, Virginia. He was very intelligent and was able to read and write. Along with his intelligence, Gabriel was also very large and strong. At twenty years old, he was well over six feet tall and possessed a great deal of strength from his years as a blacksmith. This uncanny combination of brains and brawn made him a natural leader.<sup>14</sup>

When Gabriel was 22, his master's son took over the plantation. It was at this juncture that Gabriel was allowed to hire himself out to other slave masters in the Richmond area, which enabled him to gain a certain amount of freedom and also earn money. He soon formed bonds with other slaves and with free blacks, as well as with working class whites. Gabriel became influenced by the ideals of the American Revolution, the slave uprising in Saint Domingue, and the success that some of the Northern free blacks enjoyed. These influences set him on the road to rebellion.

Gabriel eventually decided that it was time to act. He believed that if slaves fought for their freedom, they would also be joined by poor whites. His plan was to seize Capitol Square in Richmond, take Governor Monroe hostage, and enlist the help of the Catawba Indians. With the help of fellow slaves Solomon and Ben, who also belonged to the Prosser family, Gabriel began the recruiting process. While their army consisted mostly of slaves, a few free blacks, and even some whites joined the cause. Gabriel decided that the night of Saturday August 30, 1800 would be their time of attack. Monroe did receive warning of the planned insurrection, but he chose to ignore the rumors. A tremendous rainstorm forced Gabriel and his men to postpone their attack until the following day, but two slaves told their master what was afoot, and white patrols, along with the state militia, prevented any attacks from happening. As a result, Gabriel and twenty-five other slaves were sentenced to death by hanging.<sup>15</sup>

Gabriel's plot worried legislators and prompted the Virginia House of Delegates to discuss the creation of a penal colony for rebellious slaves like Gabriel and his cohorts.<sup>16</sup> Governor Monroe reached out to President Jefferson to discuss the creation of such a colony. However, a second slave rebellion prompted the legislators to also include

free blacks and new manumittedes in their resolution. Whereas Jefferson and Monroe viewed colonization as a way to end slavery, the Virginia assembly viewed colonization as a way to protect the institution, since they believed that the removal of all blacks who were not enslaved would prevent future slave rebellions and quell talk of emancipation in Virginia. Despite these differences in opinion, an alliance was made between the two parties to try to find a place to send these potentially dangerous Negroes.<sup>17</sup> However, their proposals went nowhere, as Jefferson realized that the British-controlled colony of Sierra Leone, located on the upper west coast of Africa, was not a viable place to send free blacks, since the British did not want thousands of new emigrants from the United States in their colony, and resolutions in 1804 and 1805 to Congress to use part of the Louisiana Territory for colonization never made any progress.<sup>18</sup>

While proposals for separate black settlements continued to go nowhere, it was the work of Paul Cuffe that helped the colonization movement gain serious momentum and eventually led to the formation of the American Colonization Society. Cuffe was born in 1759, on Cuttyhunk Island off the coast of Massachusetts. Although he inherited a farm from his African-born father, it was insufficient to enable him to support a family, and he turned his attention to the sea to earn a living.

While Cuffe was able to prosper as a trader, he was well-aware of the hardships that free and enslaved blacks faced in America, and he began to promote the idea of emigration to Africa.<sup>19</sup> Cuffe visited Sierra Leone and England in 1811, and also met with the African Institution. The African Institution was an organization that was established in 1807, to oversee the affairs of the British-controlled Sierra Leone colony, which had been established as a place to send black loyalists who had been freed during the

Revolutionary War, and other poor blacks in England. The organization's goal was to look after the interests of free blacks in Sierra Leone, while also trying to suppress the slave trade. Cuffe was able to convince the African Institution that the colony needed, "good sober steady characters," in order to help it prosper. He volunteered to carry blacks that were skilled farmers, artisans, and mechanics, from the United States to Sierra Leone, in return for trading privileges in the colony. The African Institution agreed to Cuffe's plan and convinced the British government to grant him a trading license. He then went on to form the Friendly Society at Sierra Leone, which was headed by John Kizell, a merchant in Sierra Leone and a former American slave. Cuffe had intended for the Friendly Society to act as his commercial depot but those plans would have to be put on hold.<sup>20</sup>

Upon his return to the U.S., Cuffe unveiled his plan to free black spokesmen in New York, Philadelphia, and Baltimore. These men included Daniel Coker, a teacher at the African School in Baltimore, James Forten, a sailmaker in Philadelphia, and Reverend Peter Williams Jr. of New York. Together these men urged free blacks to emigrate to Africa. Cuffe planned to travel to Sierra Leone once a year, but the War of 1812 delayed the accomplishment of his goal. Cuffe did try to petition Congress for special permission to continue to trade with Britain during the war. While the debate was fierce and closely contested, his petition was shot down by a 72-65 vote, and he was forced to wait until the end of the war to carry out his plan.<sup>21</sup>

Cuffe landed at Sierra Leone in early 1816 with thirty-eight American Negroes, but conditions had changed drastically since his previous visit. The governor accepted the emigrants and granted them land, but Cuffe's trading concessions were gone. One of the

provisions that the United States agreed to in the peace treaty that ended the War of 1812 was that Americans were barred from British colonial trade and Cuffe was risking confiscation of his ship by being in British waters.<sup>22</sup> The venture proved to be his last, as he would die in September of 1817. Even though Cuffe's plans never came to fruition, his petition to Congress helped draw attention to the colonization movement, and he was fondly remembered for his benevolent motives. Cuffe proved to be a key player in the growing colonization movement and helped to lay the groundwork for the formation of the ACS and the establishment of Liberia.

Reverend Robert Finley, Elias Caldwell, and Francis Scott Key, were instrumental in forming the American Colonization Society. All three men had considerable influence and each had different qualities to offer. Finley was a minister who hailed from New Jersey and he became an advocate of colonization when he observed that the social and economic status of blacks in his home state did not improve, even when they were provided with Bibles and religious knowledge. Finley, who was intent on establishing a benevolent society, deliberately chose Washington as his base, since it was close to the National Treasury and he knew that the task of colonizing free blacks would require a substantial amount of money. Caldwell was Finley's brother-in-law and the Clerk of the U.S. Supreme Court. He was also involved in many important political affairs in the Washington area, and held a high level of influence with many of Washington's lawyers and politicians, such as Henry Clay, Daniel Webster, and John C. Calhoun. Francis Scott Key was a prominent lawyer, who came from a prestigious background, and was also known as the author of "The Star Spangled Banner."<sup>23</sup>



In late 1816, the three men began soliciting support from highly placed individuals in the political community for a colonization society, with Finley publishing and distributing a pamphlet titled, *Thoughts on Colonization*, to congressmen and senators. They were able to secure the endorsement of Supreme Court Justice Bushrod Washington, Speaker of the House of Representatives Henry Clay, and John Randolph of Roanoke. They were eventually able to win enough support to prompt them to arrange a meeting and they ran an ad in the *National Intelligencer* that invited gentlemen in the area to attend.<sup>24</sup>

The meeting was chaired by Clay, who, along with Caldwell and Randolph, argued that colonization would be only for free Negroes and those that were voluntarily manumitted by their masters.<sup>25</sup> The men voted to establish a colonization society that would collect information and aid the government in creating a colony in Africa. On December 28, 1816, they named their society the, "American Society for Colonizing the Free People of Color in the United States," – it became more commonly known as the American Colonization Society (ACS) -, and adopted a constitution. The constitution consisted of ten articles: it stated the name of the society and its purpose, it established a hierarchy within the society, and it named the four days of the year when the society would meet.<sup>26</sup> Several days later the constitution was ratified and officers were elected. The January 11, 1817 issue of the *Columbian Register* showed the results of the elections. Bushrod Washington, nephew of George Washington, was unanimously elected as the organization's president, and the organization also elected thirteen vice-presidents, twelve managers, one secretary, one recording secretary, and one treasurer.<sup>27</sup>

Only two weeks after the formation of the society, steps were taken to secure federal support. Bushrod Washington, in his *Memorial addressed to the Senate and House of Representatives*, outlined his plea for federal help. He noted that the existence of distinct and separate classes was problematic for society and that immediate steps needed to be taken to rectify the problem.<sup>28</sup> Blacks were denied independence, and political and social rights, and were unable to excel within American society. They needed to be relocated to a setting far from America's shores where they could prosper and enjoy the status of citizenship—a status they could never have in the United States.<sup>29</sup> The matter was passed on to the Committee on the Slave Trade. The committee turned down Washington's request for the creation of a colony in Africa. Committee members pointed to the success that Paul Cuffe had in being able to find people who were willing to go to Sierra Leone. They noted that Sierra Leone was already established and had weathered its initial difficulties, and merely needed additional settlers. Furthermore, cooperation with the British at Sierra Leone would save the government a great deal of money.<sup>30</sup> The society was greatly disappointed by the committee's decision, since British cooperation seemed unlikely due to the hostile atmosphere engendered by the War of 1812, and the barring of American ships from British colonial areas. They also believed that Congress was too hesitant to take matters into their own hands, so they set out to gather more information about the African coast and possible colonial sites to present to Congress.<sup>31</sup>

Since their pleas for the creation of a colony in Africa never came to fruition, the ACS was forced to reevaluate and determine a new set of arguments to present to Congress, to try to have colonization adopted as a national policy. The society did not

have a headquarters office, but Staudenraus notes that they usually met in the Indian Queen tavern or Brown's tavern in the nation's capital to discuss their plans.<sup>32</sup> They used the *National Intelligencer* to spread the word about the ACS, while at the same time collecting data on Africa through the African Institution in England. However, correspondence with the Institution was slow and ineffective. It became apparent that an expedition to Africa was necessary to answer the questions they had. A white minister, Reverend Samuel J. Mills, came forward as a volunteer to head the expedition. Mills believed that a trip to Africa would keep the idea of colonization alive in the public consciousness and he could personally meet with the members of the African Institution in England on his way to Africa, as well as inspect potential colonial sites.<sup>33</sup>

It was estimated that the trip would cost \$5000, and the society set out to secure donations. The postwar economic collapse resulted in only a small trickle of funds. Mills had to resort to begging in cities such as Philadelphia, Baltimore, and New York. By the summer of 1817, further funds had to be solicited in Alexandria, Georgetown, and Washington. While trying to collect these donations, Mills had also extended an invitation to Ebenezer Burgess, a science and mathematics professor at Burlington College in Vermont, to accompany him on the trip, but by November of 1817, they still had not raised enough money. They were forced to take a \$2500 loan from Baltimore shipper Isaac Kim, and the pair finally set sail on the *Electra*, with only enough money for a one-way trip.<sup>34</sup>

Mills and Burgess planned to sail to England and meet with members of the African Institution, then set out for Africa, and more specifically, Sherbro Island, located off the western coast of Africa close to Sierra Leone.<sup>35</sup> After spending a month in

England, they set sail for Africa on February 2, 1818. They arrived in Freetown, Sierra Leone close to six weeks later. They toured Freetown for a week, then headed for Sherbro Island with the help of John Kizell, who was still in Sierra Leone.<sup>36</sup> Although Mills and Burgess had no success in convincing any of the chieftains of the villages on Sherbro Island to sell or grant them land, they still considered their mission a success, and were convinced that Sherbro Island was more than capable of supporting a colony for African-American emigrants. They believed that they had more than enough information to petition for congressional assistance. However, Mills died on the way home, on June 16, 1818, and it was left to Burgess to present their findings.<sup>37</sup>

Upon his return to the U.S., Burgess gave glowing and exaggerated accounts of Africa, even parts that he had not seen, and insisted that it was the perfect place to establish a colony. He noted that Africa was ripe with natural resources and its potential was endless, since the interior of the continent had not yet been explored. Most importantly, Burgess observed that the African slave trade had reduced much of the African population and was an obstruction to commerce. Therefore, colonization would be a way to solve this problem, and the creation of colonial settlements would help to repopulate the area and allow legitimate trade to flourish.<sup>38</sup>

Backed by the Virginia Assembly, the Maryland and Tennessee legislatures, the Presbytery of North Carolina, and the Episcopal Church in Virginia and Maryland, the ACS submitted a statement to Henry Clay, the Speaker of the House of Representatives, with their endorsement of an African colony.<sup>39</sup> On top of that, Congressman Charles Mercer, a loyal supporter of the ACS, was able to have the somewhat ambiguous Slave Trade Act passed on March 3, 1819. This act expanded on the 1807 law which put an end

to the U.S. overseas slave trade. The Act of 1819 allowed for the removal of Africans in the U.S who were victims of the slave trade, and called for the U.S. Navy to patrol the coast of the United States and Africa to intercept ships that were illegally involved in the slave trade. Moreover, it authorized the President to establish a government agency on the African coast for resettling those victims. Congress also appropriated \$100,000 for the project.<sup>40</sup> Although colonization was not mentioned in the bill, the ACS supported it, and hoped that a colony could be established in Africa.<sup>41</sup>

The society began to pressure President Monroe, who was a supporter of colonization, to use the Slave Trade Act to establish a colony in Africa. However, Monroe took the issue to his cabinet, to determine the constitutionality of purchasing land for a colony. The proposal was met with strong opposition from Secretary of State John Quincy Adams, who argued that the act contained no provisions about buying land, and that there was no precedent for such an action.<sup>42</sup> Adams was able to convince the cabinet that the Slave Trade Act did not authorize the creation of an African colony, which spelled defeat for the ACS.

However, the ACS still held out hope for an expedition to Africa. Soon, several free men of color came forward and volunteered to become the ACS' first colonists.<sup>43</sup> William Crawford and Francis Scott Key met with Monroe and urged him to interpret the Slave Trade Act in a broader sense. Monroe eventually agreed, and the steps toward creating an African "agency" began to take place. The ship *Elizabeth*, along with an American war ship, the *Cyane*, would sail to Africa to create this agency. Although the stated purpose of the trip was the establishment of the agency that the Slave Trade Act provided for, it was really a colonization venture. Eighty-six black passengers were sent

to Africa on the *Elizabeth*, and while the men were described as carpenters and laborers, and the women as nurses and laundry women, they were really colonists. President Monroe made sure that this expedition was led by white men, as he appointed Samuel Bacon, a traveling agent of the Missionary and Bible Society of Pennsylvania, as the principal agent for this venture, while a man by the name of John P. Bankson was named as Bacon's assistant. Bacon and Bankson were accompanied by Samuel Crozer, who was a representative of the ACS. They set sail on January 31, 1820, with instructions to purchase land at Sherbro Island and frame a constitution for the colonists.<sup>44</sup>

The venture proved to be a disaster. After meeting Mills and Burgess, John Kizell had acquired a stretch of land at Campelar for the use of future colonists. Campelar proved to be their downfall. The place was unhealthy, infertile, and possessed hardly any natural resources. Campelar also provided no direct access for merchant ships, and supplies had to be unloaded onto small schooners and rowed to the island. Everyone soon became sick, and Bankson, Crozer, and Bacon all died. The surviving colonists returned to Sierra Leone's capital of Freetown, where they stayed as guests of the British for the next year.<sup>45</sup> The first serious colonization attempt had ended in failure and had left many colonizationists dejected and disappointed with Burgess' glowing reports.

Undeterred by the disaster, Monroe soon began work on a second expedition, which would again prove to be ineffective. Samuel Bacon's brother, Ephraim, and Jonathan Winn were appointed as government agents, while two more white men, Joseph Andrus and Christian Wiltberger were selected by the ACS to head the expedition. These men, along with thirty-three emigrants, set sail on January 23, 1821 aboard the *Nautilus*. Unlike the leaders of the first expedition, they did not have a specific spot in mind for a

settlement, and were planning on locating the best possible site, rather than trying to force it, as they had done on Sherbro Island.<sup>46</sup>

Upon their arrival at Sierra Leone, they gathered all the information that they could about the first expedition, and the decision was made to establish a site anywhere other than Sherbro Island. They began their search south of Sierra Leone, and a treaty was made with King Jack Ben of Grand Bassa for forty square miles of land. However, the treaty called for three-hundred dollars in annual tributes, which the society would not stand for. Andrus was removed from his post, and Dr. Eli Ayres was sent to replace him. By the time he arrived, Andrus and Winn were dead and Bacon had fled to the West Indies. The emigrants had a rebellious temperament and even the threat of severe punishment was not enough to entice all of the colonists to try to relocate.<sup>47</sup>

After two expeditions, there was still no government agency in Africa and no established colony for emigrants. The society then sent Robert Field Stockton to Africa with the authority to purchase a piece of African territory. Stockton was a lieutenant in the United States Navy who was a supporter of the colonization movement. He also believed that the colonization initiative was the perfect opportunity for the navy to play a larger role in national affairs, so he pressured the Secretary of the Navy to assign him to the newly built ship the *Alligator*, and send him to Africa. When he arrived in Africa, Stockton met up with Ayres, and they continued on their search for a suitable site. The British recommended that they look at Cape Mesurado, which was located by the St. Paul river.<sup>48</sup>

The men arrived at Cape Mesurado on December 12, 1821. They explained to King Peter the benefits that colonization would bring. However, King Peter announced

that he could not sell the cape and returned to his village. Unlike Bacon and Andrus, who did not put up a fight when King Peter refused to continue with negotiations, Stockton and Ayres forcibly made their way to Peter's village. Stockton put a pistol to Peter's head, and on the next day, December 15, 1821, the cape was sold for muskets, beads, tobacco, gunpowder, food, and rum, which amounted to less than three-hundred dollars.<sup>49</sup>

The society finally had its colony, and it was named Liberia, which was a spin on the Latin word *liber*, which meant free. Also, the first settlement in Liberia was named Monrovia, in honor of President Monroe.<sup>50</sup> However, Monroe was unable to provide the aid that the society wanted. Due to the cabinet hearing on the Slave Trade Act, the station at Cape Mesurado was not eligible for federal financial support, since the Slave Trade Act only provided for the creation of an African agency and not a colony. So while the society was able to finally get its colony, it was still considered a private agency that could not claim government protection or be granted subsidies.<sup>51</sup>

After the establishment of Liberia, the society quickly went about creating a framework for the colony. Laws and regulations, including a constitution, were drawn up. Slavery and liquor were outlawed, while procedures for probate were established. There was no bill of rights, but colonists were promised that they would be treated like American citizens. It should also be noted that whites were forbidden to own land within the colony.<sup>52</sup>

However, while the ACS was eventually successful in establishing a colony in Liberia, the society was hampered by a series of issues that were never resolved. Included among these issues were: the constant fight for funding, their struggle to gain support,



emigration schemes to other parts of the world that undermined the society's work, and the role that African-Americans played, inside and outside of the organization.

The problems of funding and government assistance were significant ones for the society from its inception. While the passing of the Slave Trade Act gave the society hope, that hope was short-lived, as John Quincy Adams quickly shot down the constitutionality of purchasing land for a colony in Africa. Nonetheless, the society repeatedly appealed to the Senate and the House of Representatives for help. One such appeal occurred on February 3, 1820. This memorial of the president and board of managers of the ACS tried to demonstrate to Congress just how important their mission was. They noted that the 1810 census showed a rapid increase of free people of color, and they made the case that those people could not be useful or happy in the country. The ACS argued that emigration was a matter of national importance that, "cannot fail to receive all the countenance and aid it may require."<sup>53</sup> While the society did receive some financial assistance, the interpretation of the Slave Trade Act severely limited just how much federal support the ACS was entitled to. While the ACS leadership continued to petition Congress, it was considered a private agency that had to rely on donations.

The ACS made numerous attempts to solicit donations from supporters. One of the organizations that stepped forward was the Winter Masonic Lodge No. 77 in Baltimore, in 1826. The Lodge considered the work of the ACS to be benevolent and philanthropic, and the members believed that they would be fulfilling their own duties of benevolence by agreeing to help the society. The Lodge made the resolution to donate twenty dollars to the ACS as soon as the funds became available.<sup>54</sup> Other organizations and groups followed suit.

Along with the attempts to secure donations, the ACS still continued to ask Congress for help. The U.S. Congressional Serial Set shows how the different Legislatures of some of the Southern states felt about federal support of the ACS. Included in these sets are the resolutions of Georgia and Missouri, both of which were opposed to giving assistance to the ACS.

The Georgia Legislature's resolution in 1827 protested against the appropriation of funds on constitutional grounds as well as the fact that legislators believed that colonization was not feasible. They argued that it was declared in the Constitution that any powers not delegated to the federal government would be left to the individual states. They believed that the framers of the Constitution would hardly allow for the adoption of a policy that would interfere with Southern interests, and that the Southern states that adopted the Constitution were interested in not only retaining slavery, but allowing it to spread as well. Also, they believed that the creation of an African colony would increase the probability of foreign wars.<sup>55</sup> Similarly, in 1827, the members of the Missouri Legislature protested against the federal granting of funds to the ACS. Their argument also rested on Constitutional grounds. They noted that the U.S. government was a government of limited powers and it did not have the right to do anything that was not explicitly stated in the Constitution. They declared that if the government tried to appropriate funds to the ACS, it would be making a "mockery" of the Constitution. They were also apprehensive about the consequences of the establishment of an African colony, and feared that it would ultimately lead to full emancipation.<sup>56</sup>

The ACS struggled mightily in its early years to try to overcome a multitude of problems. Although the Slave Trade Act had helped the society gain a foothold in Africa,

the law also hampered the organization at the same time. The ACS was ineligible for federal aid, and many Southern states did not want to give financial aid to the society either. The ACS also faced opposition from many free blacks who were opposed to the idea of colonization. Free blacks believed that they were entitled to the same freedoms and opportunities that were available to whites, and they did not want to leave the land of their birth. While the ACS was struggling to stay afloat, a young man living in New York would soon make a decision that would forever change the colonization movement and its legacy.

## CHAPTER 2

### RUSSWURM'S EARLY YEARS

The origins of one of the most important figures in the Pan-African movement can be traced back to Jamaica. John Brown Russwurm was born plain John Brown on October 1, 1799 in Port Antonio, Jamaica, which was the capital of the eastern Jamaican parish of Portland.<sup>1</sup> His father, John Russwurm, was a white American merchant from Virginia who was also a slave owner.<sup>2</sup> The senior Russwurm was of German descent, and was born into an upper-class Virginia family in 1761. As a youth, he was sent to Britain to complete his education. After finishing his education he returned to the U.S., but soon decided to move to Jamaica to seek his fortune. It is not clear when he arrived in Jamaica, but Winston James notes that a good estimate was sometime in the early 1790's, and he chose to operate as a merchant, rather than a slave plantation owner.<sup>3</sup>

Unfortunately, not much is known about the younger Russwurm's mother, and matters are further complicated by the fact that there are many conflicting reports about her background and social status, and a significant number of these reports lack strong supportive evidence. While the contemporary laws and social values may give researchers some possible insight into her background, there is simply not enough factual evidence to do more than make certain assumptions. In his book, *The Struggles of John Brown Russwurm: The Life and Writings of a Pan-Africanist Pioneer, 1799-1851*,

Winston James explores some of the inconsistent descriptions of Russwurm's mother. He notes that many nineteenth-century sources described her as creole, while a report that appeared in 1848, in the Maine newspaper, the *Portland Transcript*, noted that the elder Russwurm, "Married a colored lady, from a very respectable family, by whom he had his son John."<sup>4</sup> As we will see shortly, this report, even though it appeared during Russwurm's lifetime, is almost certainly inaccurate. James also notes that she has been described as mulatto and her son as an octoroon, but no one has offered any valid evidence to support this claim. There is even the possibility that she died in childbirth or shortly after her son was born, which may help to explain why Russwurm never talked about her.<sup>5</sup> On the other hand, Amos Beyan believed that Russwurm's mother was a slave, and since Jamaican laws stipulated that the status of a child was that of his or her mother, that would have meant that Russwurm himself was also a slave.<sup>6</sup> However, regardless of what one chooses to believe, the fact remains that there is simply not enough credible information to correctly define and categorize Russwurm's mother. One thing that most researchers do seem to agree upon, however, is that the elder Russwurm loved the woman who gave birth to his son, and he treated her like a wife, even though Jamaican law prohibited interracial marriage.<sup>7</sup> This in turn would disprove the report that ran in the *Portland Transcript*, which stated that the elder Russwurm was actually married to his son's mother.

In 1807, when John was around the age of seven, the senior Russwurm sent him to boarding school in Montreal. The act of sending away a biracial child to learn a skill or trade was not uncommon in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. However, while some white men did this as an act of love for their children, others did it to cover up the

sexual exploitation of their slaves, as well as the stigma that came with having an interracial relationship and fathering a child of mixed race.<sup>8</sup> In the case of the elder Russwurm, the move appears to have been an act of love, since he sent his son to Canada, rather than England, so he would be physically closer to him. In fact, the younger Russwurm's later writings on the Caribbean suggest that he even returned to Jamaica on a fairly regular basis during school vacations, which would give further credence to the belief that the elder Russwurm loved his son and wanted to remain in close contact with him.<sup>9</sup>

While not much is known about young Russwurm's time in Montreal, it appears that he was treated fairly well. Although blacks could not have expected to be treated as the equals of whites in Canada, it was certainly a more welcoming place than most of the United States would have been. In fact, as Amos Beye observed, Canada was seen as somewhat of a "promised land" for many blacks, especially during the first half of the nineteenth century.<sup>10</sup> Russwurm's experiences in Montreal were almost certainly better than those of free blacks in towns like Preston, Birchfield, Halifax, and Shelburne in Nova Scotia. The large population of free blacks in those towns, along with a shortage of jobs, led to tensions between blacks and whites, that culminated in the Shelburne race riot in 1784. Blacks continued to face discrimination in those towns for a long time after.<sup>11</sup> Conversely, the fact that Montreal had relatively few black residents meant that they were not seen as an economic threat and were treated fairly well. Also, as Russwurm would experience later in his life with the ACS, his lighter skin may have worked to his benefit in Canada, as lighter-skinned blacks were preferred over darker skinned blacks, and those with lighter skin enjoyed a higher level of social acceptance.<sup>12</sup> As for specific details

about his time spent in Canada, however, there is hardly any information available. Historian Winston James searched diligently but found no information on Russwurm's Montreal sojourn. It is known that he learned French while he was there, but the names of the schools that he attended, his living arrangements, whether he lodged in a dormitory or with a private family, remain unknown. James also points out that Russwurm never made any mention of his time in Montreal in either his own journalistic writings or in his private correspondence with friends or relatives, and it is only because of his close friend James Hall that we know anything of Russwurm's days in Canada, since Hall mentioned them in Russwurm's obituary.<sup>13</sup> One interesting thing to point out is that his experiences in Francophone Canada may have had a strong impact on Russwurm's beliefs and the subjects that he took an interest in. According to Winston James, even though Russwurm was treated well by the French-speaking inhabitants of what is today the province of Quebec, but was then referred to as Lower Canada, he developed a resentment towards the French government for its imperialistic policies in West Africa and the Caribbean, and most notably for its subjugation of the native inhabitants of Haiti, which, as we will come to see, was a place that was near and dear to his heart.<sup>14</sup>

In 1812, five years after sending his son to Montreal, the elder Russwurm moved from Jamaica to Maine, which was at the time a province of the Commonwealth of Massachusetts. The move from Jamaica to Maine was an interesting one on Russwurm's part, as were as the reasons that he gave to justify it. It is important to remember that Russwurm came from an upper-class family in Virginia and he was also a slave-owner, so settling in Maine, far away from his family, and in an area that outlawed slavery, seemed like an odd choice. Furthermore, his family stated that he chose Maine due to

recurring health issues, which does nothing to further explain his relocation to the North, as there are no records or evidence that would explain why Maine would be the best option for his health.<sup>15</sup> Just like his decision to send his son to Canada instead of England, it is most likely that Russwurm's relocation to Maine was an act of love, born out of the desire to remain close to his son. While the consequences of this decision could hardly have been predicted at this point in time, settling in Maine may very well have been the greatest thing that John Russwurm Sr. did for his son.

It was in Maine, in 1813, that the elder Russwurm would meet and marry a white woman by the name of Susan Blanchard, a widow in her twenties with three young children.<sup>16</sup> Susan would prove to be a pivotal figure in her stepson's life, and their mutual affection would continue for the rest of their lives, long after her husband passed away. Susan was a very generous woman and also very open-minded, considering the racial climate of the time. In fact, it was Susan who was able to convince her new husband to give his son his last name. So Russwurm's son, who had previously been known only as John Brown, would finally become John Brown Russwurm in 1813. The elder Russwurm's initial refusal, or hesitation, to bestow his name upon his son may have stemmed from the fact that it was considered taboo to have sexual relations with a slave, and as Amos Beyan points out, Russwurm only relented due to pressure from his wife.<sup>17</sup> As one can see, even early on in her marriage to Russwurm, Susan seemed to be the one that pulled everyone together, and was able to provide the younger Russwurm with a family life that he had never had before.

Even though Russwurm Sr. refused to give John his last name until 1813 and he used medical reasons as an excuse to move to Maine, rather than saying that he wanted to



be close to his son, Winston James notes that he appeared happy to be reunited with John. Now that he was settled in Maine, he seemed to be unashamed of having a mixed race child, and according to historian J.T. Hull, the elder Russwurm did not try to conceal his relationship with John. He even introduced him to some of the most prominent people in Portland. In the town his son was respected and enjoyed the same privileges as other young boys.<sup>18</sup> However, their reunion would not last long, as the elder Russwurm would pass away in April of 1815. There is a little bit of confusion as to the exact date of Russwurm's death. Winston James notes that John Russwurm Sr. died on the third of April, but the Find a Grave Index of Maine and the Maine Death Records each have different dates. The Maine Death Records note that Russwurm died on April 26, 1815.<sup>19</sup> The Find a Grave Index contains an actual picture of Russwurm's gravestone which states that his death occurred on April 25, 1815. The differences in dates could possibly be a clerical error, but both the Find a Grave Index and the Maine Death Records appear to be referencing the same John Russwurm. The Maine Death Record states that Russwurm was born around 1761 and that he died in Portland, while the Find a Grave Index contains part of the inscription on the gravestone that states that Russwurm was, "Formerly [a] resident of Port Antonio, Island of Jamaica," and that he was 54 years old at the time of his death.<sup>20</sup>

Regardless of what the correct date of Russwurm's death was, his passing was a real turning point in his son's life, and it is also where we see just how generous and loving Susan Blanchard Russwurm was. Russwurm would need her support, as his relatives from his father's side in the South would offer him nothing, and would rarely, if ever, respond to his letters. In fact, one of the few times his Southern relatives even

bothered to answer John was when they were inquiring about the money that the elder Russwurm left to them under the terms of his will.<sup>21</sup> With no one from his father's side to turn to, Russwurm was reliant upon his step-mother, who continued to treat him like her own son, and he would stay with her for two years after his father's death. However, John faced several difficulties while staying with Susan. Their monetary situation was unstable, as she had to look after not just John, but his infant half-brother, and her three children from her previous marriage. It also appears that John encountered racism as well. His skin color made it difficult for him to attend good schools, and the discrimination he experienced, especially with his father no longer around, was most likely something very new to him. He had spent most of his life living outside of the United States, and he probably did not have a firm grasp on the racial climate in the country. The burden that he felt he was placing on Susan, as well as the hostility he encountered, proved to be enough to drive him back to Jamaica.<sup>22</sup>

Russwurm departed for Jamaica in the spring of 1817. As Winston James points out, it is important to note that this was not a selfish decision on Russwurm's part. He wanted to alleviate the financial strain on his family, and he felt that his color was a disability to himself, as well as to them.<sup>23</sup> Russwurm's time in Jamaica was anything but happy, however. He had no personal resources and he could not locate any of his father's former friends, on whom he was counting for assistance. He did not stay in Jamaica for very long. It is also uncertain if he had anyone to stay with during his time in Jamaica, or if he had even thought about that before he departed. He wrote to Susan, telling her of his plight, and he left the island before he even received her response, which begged him to come back to Maine.<sup>24</sup>

Upon returning to Maine, Russwurm got word that his step-mother had remarried, and was now Mrs. Dawes. He decided he did not want to impose on the family, and was unsure of how he would be received by his step-mother's new husband, so he decided to remain in town in Portland, rather than return to the farm in neighboring Yarmouth which Susan had inherited after the death of John's father. However, Susan refused to abandon John, especially when she got word that he was not looking too well, and she set him up with a guardian named Calvin Stockbridge, who was a small-scale merchant in the area. Stockbridge would prove to be a pivotal and often overlooked figure in John's life. He would serve as a father figure to John, and John himself noted that Stockbridge was his most reliable correspondent in Maine while he was in Africa.<sup>25</sup> In 1819, Stockbridge even provided John with financial assistance so that he could attend Hebron Academy.

Hebron Academy was located in Hebron, Maine, approximately thirty miles north of Russwurm's residence in North Yarmouth.<sup>26</sup> It was a school that served as a stepping stone to college for youths in the area. It was founded by Baptists in 1804, and Christianity was at the core of its philosophy. It was mandatory for students to pray in the morning and evening, and although they studied math, English, and various other subjects, the main textbooks in use at the academy were the Bible and *Beauties of the Bible*, which was a book written in 1806 by evangelical preachers Ezra Sampson and Harry Crosswell, which contained excerpts from both the New and Old Testaments, along with annotations. This book was also specifically designed for use in schools and to help improve the knowledge and piety of students.<sup>27</sup> Hebron's main educational mission statement made it very clear how much emphasis was placed on religion. It stated that, "It shall be the particular duty of the preceptor to endeavor to impress upon the minds of his

pupils a sense of the being and attributes of God, and of his superintending an all-wise Providence and, of their constant dependence upon and obligation to Him, and their duty at all times to love, serve, and obey Him, and to pray to Him. And to inculcate the doctrine of the Christian religion regularly and at stated times at least once a week.”<sup>28</sup>

While Russwurm made some good friends at Hebron and was a member of one of the school’s fraternities, he stayed less than a year, and left with a strong distaste for the school. That distaste appeared to stem from the school’s ideology and heavy emphasis on religion, which was a subject that he tried to steer clear of in his time as editor of *Freedom’s Journal*. This appeared to be his only complaint with the school, however, as he made no indications that he had encountered any racism during his time at Hebron Academy.<sup>29</sup> While Hebron was a preparatory school, Russwurm lacked the necessary resources to attend college after his time there. In the long run though, this actually worked to his advantage, as he decided to leave Maine and work as a teacher. He taught in black schools in New York, Philadelphia, and Boston. Russwurm’s time spent in these cities was the first time that he had sustained contact with African-Americans.<sup>30</sup>

The time Russwurm spent teaching in these cities was an eye-opening experience for him. Maine had one of the lowest percentages of blacks in the entire country. Of the state’s 300,000 residents, less than 1,000 were black, and the percentage of blacks in Maine was 0.3 percent according to the 1820 Census. This was the lowest total in New England, and one of the lowest in the country.<sup>31</sup> Most of Russwurm’s teaching was done in Boston, and it was there that he really became aware of the struggles of African-Americans, and more specifically, free people of color like himself. Besides the \$300 a year that he made teaching in the African schools in Boston so that he could eventually

attend college, the friendships and contacts that he established with some of Boston's prominent black citizens proved to be just as important to his future as the money that he was able to save for his education. These friends included the like of Prince Saunders, another African-American teacher, Primus Hall, a former slave who had served in the Revolutionary War and who worked tirelessly to improve the education of free blacks, Rev. Thomas Paul, a Baptist minister who helped found the first African Baptist Church and was a noted abolitionist, and David Walker, an African-American abolitionist and anti-slavery activist. All of them would prove to be invaluable friends in later years.<sup>32</sup> As noted earlier, Haiti was a place near and dear to Russwurm's heart throughout his adult life, and it was in Boston that this love for the black republic was born and cultivated.

Russwurm was fascinated by, and almost obsessed with, the Haitian Revolution. The Haitian Revolution took place in the French island colony of St. Domingue and resulted in the establishment of the Republic of Haiti, the first black republic in world history, and the second republic in the Americas behind the United States.<sup>33</sup> The revolution has been described as the largest and most successful slave rebellion in the world, and not only was the institution of slavery eradicated, but the rebels managed to completely end French control over the colony.<sup>34</sup> However, the Haitian Revolution was very complex, and it was more than just slaves banding together and overthrowing their masters, as there was discontent on all levels of society among both whites and blacks, at the time the revolution occurred.

Saint Domingue was a cash machine for France in the 1700's and was far and away its wealthiest overseas colony, due to its production of sugar, coffee, indigo, and cotton, all of which were cultivated by the island's large slave population.<sup>35</sup> The

revolution was complex because of the island's class system. At the time of the revolution there were five different groups of people living in St. Domingue, each with their own interests to look out for. There were two groups of whites living on the island. At the top were the island's white plantation owners, and underneath them were the other white inhabitants known as the *petits blancs*, who were small-scale merchants, artisans, and teachers. A great many of them also owned a few slaves if they could afford them. The white population consisted of about 40,000 people at the time of the 1791 uprisings, and there was already an independence movement among them due to steep tariffs on imports imposed by the French government, and the fact that they were forbidden to trade with any other countries besides France. The three remaining class groups in St. Domingue were all of African descent. There were the free people of color who numbered approximately 30,000, enslaved blacks who numbered around 500,000, and former slaves who had run away and established independent "maroon" communities. Runaways and rebellions were nothing new in St. Domingue as the slaves refused to submit to their oppressed status, and the fact that they greatly outnumbered their masters gave them confidence that they could successfully revolt.<sup>36</sup>

Inspired by the French Revolution, a convoluted situation arose on St. Domingue as all the different groups were vying for independence from France, and these movements would coincide with one another. It would be the enslaved black population, led by former slave Toussaint L'Ouverture, that would act first. They rose up in rebellion against the white population on August 21, 1791. L'Ouverture was phenomenally successful, and by 1792 he had managed to bring one-third of the island under his control. He and his rebel fighters were able to hold off reinforcements from France, and

even the British, who arrived in 1793, and were forced to withdraw by 1798. L'Ouverture did not stop with St. Domingue, however. He soon expanded the revolution into the neighboring Spanish colony of Santo Domingo, abolished slavery, and declared himself Governor-General over all of Hispaniola.<sup>37</sup>

L'Ouverture would not hold this title for long. Napoleon would send his brother-in-law, General Charles Leclerc, and 43,000 troops to capture him and restore order to the island. L'Ouverture was taken captive and sent back to France, where he died in prison in 1803. However, the revolution did not die with the capture of L'Ouverture. Jean-Jacques Dessalines, another former slave, and one of L'Ouverture's generals, led the rebels at the Battle of Vertieres, on November 18, 1803, where they defeated the French forces.<sup>38</sup> On January 1, 1804, Dessalines declared the nation to be independent, and renamed it Haiti. The successful Haitian revolution greatly alarmed slave-owners in the United States, as the issue of slavery and slave rebellions weighed heavily on the minds of white people in the U.S.<sup>39</sup> It also inspired many black Americans, including some of the people that Russwurm befriended while in Boston.

As Winston James observed, the first three decades after the Haitian Revolution saw a growing interest in Haiti among the black population of the United States, and Haitian emigration societies would begin to appear in major cities like Boston, Philadelphia, New York, and Baltimore. Even though there was instability in the newly created republic, countless numbers of blacks sought to emigrate there to start a new life. Two of the main proponents of Haitian emigration happened to be Prince Saunders and Rev. Thomas Paul. Both men were also admirers of Paul Cuffe and were also in favor of colonizing and Christianizing West Africa. Saunders and Paul traveled to England in

1816 to seek abolitionist support for Haitian emigration. While in London, Saunders began to pen the *Haytian Papers*, which were aimed at supporting “emperor” Henri Christophe, Dessaline’s successor, who was engaged in a massive modernization project in Haiti. Saunders traveled to Haiti to organize several schools, and is even credited with introducing smallpox vaccination to the republic. Although he had a falling out with Christophe, upon his return to Boston, Saunders continued to campaign on Haiti’s behalf, and he even issued an American edition of the *Haytian Papers*, which he circulated around Boston.<sup>40</sup>

Thomas Paul would also make a trip to Haiti. He had wanted to serve as a Baptist missionary in Haiti for some time, and he was given his opportunity in May of 1823 by the Baptist Missionary Society of Massachusetts. He arrived in July, and although he was warmly received, he served only three months of his six-month appointment before returning to Boston. He had a difficult time with the French language, and even the local Creole dialect, which made it impossible for him to enjoy any kind of success. Although his trip may have seemed like a failure, Paul left Haiti with an admiration for its people and he continued to be a strong advocate for emigration, and even helped a group of black Bostonians emigrate to Haiti.<sup>41</sup> Russwurm’s friends in Boston certainly had an impact on him, and helped to sow the seeds for emigration in his mind. While the idea of emigration had been planted in Russwurm’s head, and even his step-mother suggested that he emigrate to Liberia during his time in Boston, he would forego emigration in order to pursue his education at Bowdoin College.<sup>42</sup>

Bowdoin College, located in Brunswick, Maine, was founded in 1794 as a local alternative to Harvard.<sup>43</sup> Russwurm enrolled at Bowdoin on September 30, 1824, and his



annual expenses at the school reportedly amounted to just \$12.44, which he paid for with the money that he had made teaching in Boston. Russwurm was accepted into Bowdoin as a junior, which illustrated the fact that despite his dislike of Hebron Academy and the education he had received there, he had been trained well, and had a firm grasp on several academic subjects. He initially wanted to earn a degree in medicine, but while he was allowed to attend medical lectures at Bowdoin, he gave up the pursuit of a career as a physician for unexplained reasons. He was most likely talked out of medicine by his professors, since that field was still considered to be one reserved for upper-class white citizens. As a result, Russwurm studied a variety of other subjects, including theology, mathematics, science, history, and classical subjects like philosophy, Greek, and Latin, which he was incredibly fond of, and he would work towards a Bachelor's degree in liberal arts.<sup>44</sup>

However, Russwurm learned significantly more than just liberal arts at Bowdoin. He was lucky enough to study under professors like Thomas Cogswell Upham and William Smith, who were both deeply involved with the abolition and black colonization movements. While both men opposed slavery, they were zealous advocates of colonization because they believed that there was no way that blacks and whites could coexist peacefully in America.<sup>45</sup> There is no doubt that studying under these two men would have an indirect influence on Russwurm's beliefs about colonization.

Just like anywhere else Russwurm had stayed up to this point, it was almost certain that he encountered racism on some level from fellow students at Bowdoin, and his decision to forego a career in medicine was a reminder of his inferior status, even as a college student. For reasons unknown, Russwurm also boarded with a private family

twelve miles away from campus.<sup>46</sup> The U.S. College Students List, 1763-1924, which has access to the official Bowdoin records, confirms this. The list shows that instead of a room number, John B. Russwurm had an off-campus address. He stayed with a Mr. H. Pettengill, a carpenter, during his entire time at the school, and he was one of only four students in his class that lived off campus.<sup>47</sup> Russwurm did not appear to have faced an overwhelming amount of hostility and even his own accounts note that he was well-received by both his classmates and his professors for his academic performance. He was invited to join a fraternity, which made him the first black man in America to join a college fraternity. He would also develop strong friendships that would last for decades, with men like John P. Hale, a future U.S. Senator and presidential candidate, Henry Wadsworth Longfellow and Nathaniel Hawthorne, who both became famous writers, and Horatio Bridge, who would later provide military help to consolidate Russwurm's leadership in West Africa.<sup>48</sup> Another friend, James Hall, would maintain a lifelong relationship with Russwurm and would praise him as being "Of a sound intellect, a great reader, with a special fondness for history and politics...A man of strict integrity, a good husband, father, master, and friend..."<sup>49</sup> These friendships were also notable because, unlike his friends in Boston, these men were white.

Russwurm was one of the country's first black college graduates. Just as there was some confusion over the exact date of his father's death, there is also some uncertainty regarding Russwurm's exact place on the list of early "colored" graduates. In 1932, Bella Gross, in an article in the *Journal of Negro History*, claimed that Russwurm was the first black college graduate in U.S. history, while in 1969 Philip Foner stated that Russwurm was the second.<sup>50</sup> Winston James took a more conservative approach and

merely noted that Russwurm was among the first black college graduates. The most accurate or at least the most detailed source appears to be the *Journal of Blacks in Higher Education*. The *JBHE*, in a 2002 article titled “The Earliest Black Graduates of the Nation’s Highest-Ranked Liberal Arts Colleges,” does an excellent job of examining the first early black graduates, the years they graduated, and the schools that they graduated from, and also looks at the schools that were the most receptive to black students. The *JBHE* notes that Alexander Lucius Twilight, who graduated from Middlebury College in Vermont, in 1823, is generally considered to be the first black graduate in U.S. history. The second black graduate was Edward Jones, who graduated from Amherst College in 1826. This makes Russwurm the third black graduate in U.S history, as he graduated several weeks after Jones did.<sup>51</sup>

Russwurm’s graduation ceremony took place on September 6, 1826. Of the thirty or so Bowdoin graduates of 1826, Russwurm was one of several that were called upon to give a commencement address.<sup>52</sup> It is important to note that this was not an unusual occurrence, even though Russwurm was black. He had excelled at Bowdoin and those who had proven their academic excellence were often invited to speak at commencement. His love of Haiti was no secret, and he had openly stated during his time at Bowdoin that he wished to emigrate there after graduation. So it was no surprise that when called upon to deliver his commencement address, Haiti was at the heart of his speech, which was titled “The Condition and Prospects of Hayti.”

Russwurm’s address would last about ten minutes, which was the customary length that was required for the exercise.<sup>53</sup> While an observer noted that he seemed to be embarrassed at first, he found the audience to be quite receptive, and he was able to

gather his courage and deliver a moving oration.<sup>54</sup> Russwurm's speech was an insightful and ardent defense of human liberty which took Haiti as an example. He argued that every man, no matter where they lived, had a desire for liberty. "Man alone remains the same being, whether placed under the torrid suns of Africa or in the more congenial temperate zone. A principle of liberty is implanted in his breast, and all efforts to stifle it are as fruitless as would be the attempt to extinguish the fires of Etna."<sup>55</sup> He continued by saying that liberty would come to all men, even those that had been deprived of it. "It is in vain to stem the current; degraded man will rise in his native majesty and claim his rights. They may be withheld from him now, but the day will arrive when they must be surrendered."<sup>56</sup>

Russwurm then shifted his focus to Haiti. He noted that after years of political struggle, Haiti had finally been able to gain its freedom, and now that the Haitian people had obtained their liberty, there was nothing that could ever convince them to rescind their declaration that they were a free and independent people, "Nothing can ever induce them to recede from this declaration. They know all too well by their past misfortunes...that security can be expected only from within themselves. Rather would they devote themselves to death than return to their former condition."<sup>57</sup> Liberty, as Russwurm observed, also has the power to renew, and even change people, as it has the ability to cheer the spirit, "...when once Freedom struck their astonished ears, they became new creatures, stepped forth as men, and showed to the world, that though slavery may benumb, it cannot entirely destroy our faculties." He defended the Haitian people by observing that, "If cruelties were inflicted during the revolutionary war, it was owing to the policy pursued by the French commanders, which compelled them to use

retaliatory measures.”<sup>58</sup> Lastly, he noted that Haiti had flourished after achieving independence. The natural abilities of the Haitians, which were no longer restricted by slavery, had allowed them to grow and develop. “Restored to the dignity of man to society, they have acquired a new existence; their powers have been developed; a career of glory and happiness unfolds itself before them.”<sup>59</sup>

Russwurm’s address was well received by both the audience and the local media. Winston James shares a quote from a woman who attended the ceremony who remarked, “Well I do declare, the Negro has done the best of them all.”<sup>60</sup> A reporter from the *Eastern Argus* was in attendance and noted that, “It was one of the most interesting performances of the day.”<sup>61</sup> The *Argus* also decided to share a substantial portion of the speech with its readers, and other newspapers like the *Boston Courier*, the *Boston Centinel*, the *Boston Commercial Gazette*, and the *Norwich Courier* reprinted the portion that appeared in the *Argus*.<sup>62</sup> Russwurm had a lot to be proud of, since he was one of the first black college graduates in the country, and had made some significant friendships, but the next stage of his life would not go quite as he had planned.

### CHAPTER 3

#### THE FIGHT TO BE HEARD

While not much is known about Russwurm's extended family in the South, or if Russwurm had ever even met any of his relatives, he did try to establish contact with some of his cousins. In January of 1826, Russwurm stated openly, in a letter to his cousin John Sumner Russwurm in Tennessee, his desire to emigrate to Haiti after his graduation from Bowdoin. He wrote that if he was not invited to Haiti by the Haitian government, he would study medicine in Boston before moving to Haiti. He was serious about studying medicine, as evidenced by the fact that he had attended medical lectures at Bowdoin, but he did not have enough money to continue on with his education, and perhaps he realized that he would face many difficulties if he tried to establish a successful medical practice in the United States. He did move back to Boston, however, and he stayed for a while with his friend Rev. Thomas Paul. It is unclear why he never wound up emigrating to Haiti, because even as late as October of 1826, his former guardian Calvin Stockbridge stated that he believed Russwurm would soon leave for Haiti if he was unable to find a job in the United States. In fact, Russwurm could not even find work in Boston after his time at Bowdoin. He was well-respected and admired as a teacher, and members of the Boston schools committee had been sad to see him depart for Bowdoin in 1824, but as well-liked as he was, there were no teaching positions available when he came back to

Boston two years later. The man who had replaced him was also doing a good job, and the committee thought it would be unfair to relieve him of his duties, despite the fact that Russwurm now had a college degree.<sup>1</sup>

An interesting opportunity did present itself however, as evidenced by a letter addressed to Russwurm from Rev. R. R. Gurley, an officer of the American Colonization Society, on December 25, 1826. This letter shows that Russwurm was given an offer by the ACS to take a job in Liberia. Russwurm turned down the offer in a reply he sent to Gurley on February 26, 1827, but one line in his response is very interesting. Russwurm stated that, "...at present, it would not be advisable to accept the liberal offer of your board of managers."<sup>2</sup> Even though Russwurm turned down the offer, his reply does not appear to be an outright rejection of the ACS and everything that the organization stood for, which is important to take note of, as we shall see later. Nevertheless, the possibility exists that this was nothing more than Russwurm being polite in his response to Gurley, and that he never had any intention of joining the ACS.

After stagnating in Boston for a few months after his graduation from Bowdoin, Russwurm moved to New York City towards the end of 1826. At that time, New York City had a population of 200,000. About 14,000 of the city's residents were free blacks.<sup>3</sup> It was in New York City that Russwurm really developed a strong sense of Black Nationalism. While he had made friends with whites and had been respected at Bowdoin, Russwurm found that he was treated like an outcast in New York by the white population, as was every other person of color. There was intense hostility towards blacks in the city, as evidenced by the large number of pro-slavery newspapers that were being published and the significant amount of racist propaganda that was in circulation.<sup>4</sup> A

large portion of the black population in New York City lived in lower Manhattan, otherwise known as Five Points. Though often depicted as a slum, Five Points was inhabited by many well-educated and famous blacks, and was also home to many cultural points of interest. Men such as David Ruggles, Patrick Reason, and Ira Aldridge called Five Points home, and the area also contained the Methodist Episcopal Church, the African Free School, and black intellectual organizations like the Philomathean Society and the Phoenix Society.<sup>5</sup>

The area also contained many black entertainment centers. Those centers included Joe Stewart's Criterion, Douglass' Club, Anderson's Club, and Johnny Johnson's Club, to name a few. Five Points was an important area for blacks in the city, and it helped many to develop and perfect their talents, including their theatrical skills, as the African Company put on plays, such as *Othello* and *Richard III*.<sup>6</sup> Although Five Points did have a disproportionate number of black residents, the area was not exclusively black. Many white residents also lived in Five Points. The fact remains though, that black New Yorkers found themselves excluded from most other neighborhoods in the city and so, regardless of their socio-economic status, they tended to cluster in the Five Points. Russwurm would make *his* home in the Five Points and it was there that he would meet with a group of black men whose determination to improve the lives of people of color would change *his* life forever.

As Amos Beyan points out, the limited freedoms that black Northerners had won for themselves at the conclusion of the Revolutionary War were rapidly being taken away from them at the turn of the nineteenth century.<sup>7</sup> Free blacks, not just in New York City but throughout the nation, found themselves surrounded by enemies and subject to attack



from whites. One of the men behind these attacks in New York was Mordecai Noah, a playwright, essayist, politician, and newspaper editor, who was also described as an “Afro-American-hating Jew.” Noah was the editor of several New York City newspapers, including the *New York Enquirer*, and the *New York National Advocate*. He used his position as editor to print racist propaganda. Noah also happened to be a prominent citizen of New York, which made his attacks against blacks even more damaging because of his level of influence.<sup>8</sup> Noah was not alone in his attacks on free blacks. Other notable newspapers, such as the *New-York Evening Post* and the *New York Morning Chronicle*, also printed articles that were highly critical of black people and were full of negative stereotypes. The free black community also felt threatened by rhetoric and hatred that was delivered to the public through the pulpit, and even attacks or misrepresentations by white people who professed to be their friends.<sup>9</sup>

It is important to understand why the attacks on blacks in New York during this time period were so vicious. In 1799 the New York State Legislature passed “An Act for the Gradual Abolition of Slavery.” This act provided for gradual manumission, similar to Pennsylvania’s 1780 manumission act and to gradual abolition laws in Rhode Island and Connecticut. The abolition act stated that all males born into slavery in the state of New York after July 4, 1799 would be free at age twenty-eight and all females would be free at twenty-five. All blacks born into slavery before July 4, 1799 would remain slaves for life, but they would be classified as indentured servants. However, in 1817 Governor Daniel D. Tompkins signed into law a statute that granted freedom to slaves in New York who were born before July 1, 1799, on July 4, 1827.<sup>10</sup> While this statute did not entirely end slavery in New York, since non-residents were allowed to bring their slaves to the state

for up to nine months and retain ownership of them, it signaled the end of slavery for citizens of New York. Due to the fact that New York City already had a large population of free blacks, white residents were not happy about the prospect that this number might grow significantly. This led to a very hostile situation between blacks and whites in New York City, especially when it came to competition for jobs and the right to vote.

Free blacks in New York grew tired of the tidal waves of attacks, and now that slavery was about to end, several prominent black New Yorkers believed that they needed to establish their own press to both combat attacks upon them and enlighten their brethren. This goal ultimately led to the creation of *Freedom's Journal*, the first black newspaper in the United States. In the early weeks of 1827, the prominent members of the black community gathered at Boston Crummel's house and chose Samuel E. Cornish and John Russwurm to act as senior editor and junior editor, respectively.<sup>11</sup>

Cornish was born in Delaware to free black parents, and was around thirty-two years of age when he was chosen as senior editor. Little is known about his youth or his origins. Beyan claims that Cornish had a Jamaican background, similar to Russwurm's, but offers no evidence to substantiate that claim.<sup>12</sup> What is known, however, is that Cornish moved to Philadelphia in 1815, and studied under John Gloucester, the pastor of the First African Presbyterian Church, in order to become a minister. He earned his preacher's license in 1819, and spent six months as a missionary to slaves on the eastern shores of Maryland. He was living in New York by 1821, and organized the New Demeter Street Presbyterian Church, where he was ordained in 1822, and where he would preach until 1828.<sup>13</sup> Russwurm and Cornish were the perfect complement to one another, and they helped to balance each other out. Cornish was a man from the Upper

South, who was cautious, conservative, and deeply religious. On the other hand, Russwurm was heavily influenced by his time spent in New England, he was well-read, he had little time for prejudice and racism, he was more aggressive than Cornish, and he was not particularly religious until much later in life.<sup>14</sup> However, both men took their responsibilities as editors seriously, and each was passionate and committed to improving the situation of African-Americans.

The journal's office was originally located at 6 Varick Street, although its place of publication moved several times.<sup>15</sup> The journal was issued every Friday, and its motto was "Righteousness Exalteth a Nation," a shortened version of "Righteousness exalts a nation, but sin condemns any people," a biblical text that can be found in the Book of Proverbs 14:34, and one which Russwurm had also referenced in his Bowdoin commencement address.<sup>16</sup> *Freedom's Journal* was the first newspaper of its kind, and establishing and maintaining a project of such magnitude would prove to be a monumental task. Monetary issues were among the key hurdles that would need to be overcome if Russwurm and Cornish wished to be successful. There are no surviving financial records for *Freedom's Journal*, so it remains impossible to tell just who helped to fund and support the venture, although evidence suggests that both blacks and whites gave financial aid to the paper.<sup>17</sup>

In order to try to find out which black members of society helped to support the paper, scholar Jacqueline Bacon examined the list of agents that the paper had. The agents were people who promoted the paper and helped to obtain subscribers in different cities, and the agents' names appeared in a list at the end of each edition of the newspaper. Bacon notes that the list of agents featured many prominent and well-

connected African-Americans. Included among these agents in Boston were two of Russwurm's very good friends, David Walker and Rev. Thomas Paul. The agents used various means to help *Freedom's Journal* financially. David Walker, who was a member of the Massachusetts General Coloured Association, held a meeting at his house about a month before the first issue of *Freedom's Journal* was published. Rev. Thomas Paul was at this meeting, along with John T. Hilton, who was the leader of Boston's African-American Masons. At this meeting, they agreed to give their, "aid and support [to the paper], and to use [their] utmost exertions to increase its patronage." Along with providing whatever money they could, they would seek to gain new subscribers, which in turn would lead to more financial aid and profit for the paper.<sup>18</sup>

There were also agents that could afford to directly donate funds themselves. For example, Stephen Smith, an African-American lumber merchant in Pennsylvania, was known to be a contributor to the journal. Subscription fees and advertisements were two other ways that Russwurm and Cornish could gather money for *Freedom's Journal*. A yearly subscription to the journal cost three dollars and subscribers were required to pay for a minimum of one year. The journal itself noted that agents who brought in five subscriptions were entitled to a sixth for free, which may also have helped to build good will and encourage agents to procure more subscriptions.<sup>19</sup> As for advertisements, they appeared in each issue of *Freedom's Journal*, including the first, which featured an advertisement for the B.F. Hughes School for Coloured Children of Both Sexes, located in the basement of the St. Philip's Church in New York City, with tuition costing two to four dollars per quarter.<sup>20</sup>

With a host of friends and philanthropists, *Freedom's Journal* was able to find secure financial backing, and the quest of its editorial board to improve the situation of black people in general and give the free black community a voice could begin. The first issue of *Freedom's Journal* was published on March 16, 1827. Initially the journal consisted of four pages, each with four columns, although Russwurm would later change the format to eight pages, with three columns per page.<sup>21</sup> Although many historians have argued that it was the actions of men like Mordecai Noah that helped lead to the creation of *Freedom's Journal*, the newspaper was much more than simply a rebuttal to the attacks on the free black community. The journal tried to cover a broad range of topics and build a sense of Black Nationalism. As Jacqueline Bacon noted, it would be an injustice to say that *Freedom's Journal* was only an anti-slavery newspaper or a newspaper that focused only on attacking white racist propaganda.

Bacon notes that *Freedom's Journal* strived to cover as many topics as possible. Cornish and Russwurm boldly declared, "Whatever concerns us as a people, will ever find a ready admission into the FREEDOM'S JOURNAL." The two editors would remain true to their word, as *Freedom's Journal* would address many issues, such as colonization, education, self-improvement, women's roles in society, and slavery. The journal stressed the need for education and encouraged people to read. However, one of the unique aspects of *Freedom's Journal* was the fact that the journal was an open forum, where readers were encouraged to share their ideas and beliefs, even if they contradicted those of other readers, as well as those of Russwurm and Cornish. This stance was unique because until that time newspapers were expected to be partisan and to promote the interests of a certain party or group, rather than thoughtfully and truthfully examining all

sides of an issue. Russwurm and Cornish hoped that their willingness to publish articles that were in opposition to their publicly stated views would help to win people over, and would allow blacks to become informed on all issues that affected them. This made Russwurm and Cornish pioneers in helping to bring truth and responsibility to reporting.<sup>22</sup>

Russwurm and Cornish notified readers in their very first issue about everything that they hoped to accomplish and cover with *Freedom's Journal*. The first issue contained both a Prospectus and a message to their patrons that explained why *Freedom's Journal* was being established. In the Prospectus the editors did note that the attacks by people such as Mordecai Noah were partly responsible for the creation of the journal. "Daily slandered, we think that there ought to be some channel of communication between us and the public...For often has injustice been heaped upon us...but we believe that the time has now arrived when the calumnies of our enemies should be refuted by forcible argument." However, the bulk of the Prospectus focused on Russwurm's belief that education was an important factor in improving the situation of free blacks in America. "As the diffusion of knowledge, and raising our community into respectability, are the principal motives which influence us in our present under-taking we hope our hands will be upheld by all our brethren and friends."<sup>23</sup>

Along with the Prospectus, the first issue of *Freedom's Journal* contained a note to their patrons, which further explained Russwurm and Cornish's beliefs and values. They observed that they wished to plead their own cause, rather than being spoken for by others. They wanted to have their own voice because they believed blacks had been grossly misrepresented by white people, even those they looked up to. "From the press

and the pulpit we have suffered much by being incorrectly represented. Men, whom we equally love and admire have not hesitated to represent us disadvantageously, without becoming personally acquainted with the true state of things, nor discerning between virtue and vice among us.” Russwurm and Cornish also hoped that the journal would serve as a means to connect free blacks throughout the nation with one another and bring them closer together, “It is our earnest wish to make our Journal a medium of intercourse between our brethren in the different states of this great confederacy: that through its columns an expression of sentiments, on many interesting subjects which concern us, may be offered to the publick: that plans which apparently are beneficial may be candidly discussed and properly weighed...” By connecting together the free blacks throughout the nation, the editors believed that they could effectively fight racial oppression by bringing all matters concerning them to the attention of the public “The civil rights of a people being of the greatest value, it shall ever be our duty to vindicate our brethren, when oppressed, and to lay the cause before the publick.” The editors also did not want their readers to forget those blacks that were still being held in bondage, “And while these important subjects shall occupy the columns of FREEDOM’S JOURNAL, we would not be unmindful of our brethren who are still in the iron fetters of bondage. They are our kindred by all the ties of nature; and though but little can be effected by us, still let our sympathies be poured forth, and our prayers in their behalf...”<sup>24</sup>

As we have seen previously, the editors, especially Russwurm, placed a high priority on education, and this was a subject that they continued to stress. They noted that a lot of time was spent focusing on trivial matters and that it was important for blacks to be taught the importance of self-improvement at an early age, “And as much time is

frequently lost, and wrong principles instilled, by the perusal of works of trivial importance, we shall consider it part of our duty to recommend to our young readers, such authors as will not only enlarge their stock of useful knowledge, but such as will also agree to stimulate them to higher attainments in science.”<sup>25</sup> Russwurm also believed that it was time for blacks to begin learning about fiscal responsibility, “...we shall feel it is our incumbent duty to dwell occasionally upon the general principles and rules of economy. The world has grown too enlightened, to estimate any man’s character by his personal appearance. Though all men acknowledge the excellency of Franklin’s maxims, yet comparatively few practise upon them.”<sup>26</sup> Lastly, the editors noted that anything pertaining to the history of Africa or current events on the African continent would appear in the journal. “Useful knowledge of every kind, and everything that is related to Africa, shall find a ready admission into our columns; and as that vast continent becomes daily more known, we trust that many things will come to light, proving that the natives of it are neither so ignorant nor stupid as they have generally been supposed to be.”<sup>27</sup> They were confident that the more that was discovered about Africa, the more people would realize that blacks were far from being savages or stupid.

The first issue of *Freedom’s Journal* was a perfect illustration of just how wide-ranging the publication was in terms of its contents. Besides the Prospectus and the message to patrons, the issue contained a section on domestic news, foreign news, and even a poem. The domestic news section contained several pieces of information, including maritime news, a report of a meeting of the American Colonization Society, and a fire that had occurred in Norfolk, Virginia. The international news stories included the announcement that a monument was to be erected in England in honor of the Duke of



York and an assault that had taken place in France on Prince Talleyrand. However, the most interesting piece contained in the journal's first issue was a poem, titled, "The African Chief," written by a man named William Cullen Bryant, a white abolitionist.<sup>28</sup> The poem was about an African ruler who held a place of high importance in his homeland, but was captured and sold into slavery. The poem was an indictment of the institution of slavery and showed the disregard that the captors had for the people that they were selling into bondage. This first issue of the journal covered a wide array of topics, and the articles and information it contained showed just how serious Russwurm and Cornish were about helping to improve the situation of free blacks. Along with the poem on the African chieftain, the pieces of domestic and international news would insure that the readers of *Freedom's Journal* were well-informed and up-to-date on current issues. Russwurm and Cornish hoped that if blacks were informed and educated, their detractors could no longer label them as ignorant or stupid.

*Freedom's Journal* was well-received by other newspapers, especially in the New England area. An article that appeared in the March 20, 1827 issue of the *Rhode-Island American* noted that, "The editors are both men of colour, and the first number of their paper is certainly very respectable. They write with modesty and good sense, and as their object is laudable, they deserve encouragement."<sup>29</sup> The same article was reprinted in the March 22 issue of the *Essex Register*, the March 23 *Newburyport Herald*, the March 30 *New-Bedford Mercury*, the March 31 *Haverhill Gazette*, and the April 3 *New-Hampshire Gazette*, together with excerpts from the *Freedom's Journal* Prospectus. In addition, the March 30 *Salem Gazette* wrote that the, "Enterprise is a novel one, and we really hope the publishers will be cheered with a liberal support. The colored population of the city can

yield such a support if they are as ambitious as they should be.”<sup>30</sup> The *Eastern Argus* and the *Weekly Eastern Argus* also carried articles similar to the aforementioned ones, but since these two papers were printed in Maine, the editors made sure to point out that Russwurm was a graduate of Bowdoin. They also noted that the cost of the journal was three dollars a year and that it was published once a week.<sup>31</sup>

A May 11 article in the *Newburyport Herald* contained an undated quote from the *National Observer*, which stated that, “This paper is well edited, and gives rise to pleasing reflections on the progress of literature and science among the colored population of the country.”<sup>32</sup> The *Newburyport Herald* also mentioned that its readers could see the Prospectus for *Freedom’s Journal* at their office, and that they would pass on to Russwurm and Cornish the names of people who wished to become patrons of their journal.<sup>33</sup> So while many of the articles on *Freedom’s Journal* were similar, or even exactly the same, the fact that they appeared in multiple states like Maine, Massachusetts, New Hampshire, and Rhode Island, illustrates the fact that white people all over New England were supportive of the journal and hoped that Russwurm and Cornish would succeed in their endeavors.

Subsequent issues of *Freedom’s Journal* would run articles on a variety of subjects. The May 18, 1827 issue again featured a foreign news section that touched upon political events in London. Additionally, there was a domestic news section, which mentioned the killing of a rabid dog and a jail sentence of twenty-four years for one Patrick Mallory in Concord, Massachusetts, who was convicted of murder. The issue also contained an interesting article on Free African Schools in the United States. The editors noted that they realized how often they preached about the importance of education, but

that serious steps needed to be taken to provide free blacks with better opportunities for schooling. Russwurm and Cornish wrote that, “[t]hey believed that the future respectability of our people will eventually rest on the education which our children and youth receive, that they should enjoy to the full extent what few advantage, public or private benevolence has granted them.”<sup>34</sup>

An issue of *Freedom’s Journal* which appeared two months later on July 27, 1827 continues the trend of the editors in publishing information on a variety of topics. This issue contained a foreign and domestic news section, but it also featured two other interesting pieces. One piece, a literary work titled “Female Tenderness,” illustrates just how important a woman is in a man’s life. The piece is written in the first person by a black man who is deeply depressed by the constant slander and oppression that he faces from whites, and just when he feels like giving up, he is reminded of how a caring and supportive woman can make everything feel better, “...the kind attentions of a woman, were capable of conveying a secret charm, a silent consolation to my mind. Oh! Nothing can render the bowers of retirement so serene and comfortable, or can so sweetly soften all our woes, as a conviction that woman is not indifferent to our fate.”<sup>35</sup> The issue also contained an article about a dinner that was hosted by the members of the Friendship Society, on July 4, 1827, in Baltimore. The members, who were drawn from that city’s rapidly growing free black community, met to commemorate the abolition of slavery in New York. The article listed eleven toasts which were given that night, all of which are worthy of note:

1. The Day we celebrate in memory of the Abolition of Slavery in the State of New York- May  
the example be followed in every state in the Union

2. John Jay, one of the surviving advocates of the abolition of Slavery in the State of New York-  

May he long be remembered as the friend of our colour
3. The “Freedom’s Journal”- May its fame spread through this great Continent, and may it  

continue to advocate the cause of the sons and daughters of Africa
4. “We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are born free and equal,” has been  

resounded from one end of the Union to the other by white Americans- May they speedily  

learn to *practice* what they so loudly proclaim.
5. Give us our rights, and our motto shall be also, “Our Country right or wrong.”
6. Our departed friend Elisha Tyson, the African’s Philanthropist
7. The members of Friendship Society- May they be distinguished for their integrity, love of  

harmony, and anxiety for improvement
8. Our emancipated Brethren of New-York- May they become useful and honourable citizens,
9. The Genius of Universal Emancipation- Its course is good and just, may it rise superior to all  

opposition
10. The President of the day- May he continue to be distinguished by his moral conduct.
11. Emancipation without emigration, but equal rights on the spot: this is republicanism

Besides being an open forum for blacks to address all of the issues that they had to deal with, one of the focal points of *Freedom’s Journal* was to combat the African colonization movement, and more specifically the ACS. Although Russwurm had been polite in his response to R. R. Gurley in February of 1827, at this point he was very much opposed to the ACS and those who supported it, as were most of the Northern free black population, who saw the society as an organization that was trying to remove them from the land of their birth.<sup>36</sup> The fact that the ACS had a number of prominent white members who were adamantly opposed to equal rights for blacks, did little to help the organization’s standing within the free black community. As toast number eleven from

the Members of Friendship Society illustrated, blacks wanted to be given their equality on the spot, rather than be forced to emigrate to another country, simply to gain rights that they should be entitled to as Americans.

As noted previously, Russwurm and Cornish were the perfect complement to one another, as Cornish's calm and composed nature helped to even out Russwurm's more rash and temperamental views and behavior. However, in September of 1827, six months after the creation of the journal, Cornish resigned as senior editor, which left Russwurm as the sole editor of *Freedom's Journal*. It appears that the parting of Russwurm and Cornish was an amicable one, and in his resignation letter Cornish expressed a desire to focus on working as a missionary for the Presbytery of New York. It is after Cornish's departure that we are able to see just how much animosity Russwurm felt towards the ACS, and he made no effort to hold his tongue or mince words. Some of his most vitriolic and hostile thoughts on colonization were revealed in a series of exchanges between himself and an anonymous writer who took the pen-name "Wilberforce." Those exchanges were published between August 3 and August 31, 1827. A letter addressed to "Wilberforce" that appeared in *Freedom's Journal* on August 17, 1827, contained some very harsh words for the ACS. Included in this letter were passages such as, "The society has been very zealous and successful of imposing upon the public, the foolish idea that we are all longing to emigrate to their land of 'milk and honey,' and a thousand other Munchausen stories..." and, "You well know, that such men...care not whether the emigrants die the next day after their arrival in Liberia, or not; having obtained all they desired, our removal from this country for their own personal safety, and the better security of their slaves." These excerpts make it very clear that at this point Russwurm

despised the ACS and everything that it stood for, especially its ties to white racists, who merely wanted to remove free blacks from the country and prevent future slave rebellions. It should be noted that there is some confusion as to exactly who “Wilberforce” was. Despite constant goading and encouragement from Russwurm, “Wilberforce” never revealed his true identity. However, the letters from Wilberforce were sent to Russwurm by Dr. Samuel Miller of the Princeton Theological Seminary. Winston James contends that although Miller himself may have been the author of those letters, “Wilberforce” was most likely Dr. Archibald Alexander. Alexander was Miller’s close friend and colleague, and was one of the earliest supporters of the colonization movement. His colleagues and contemporaries often remarked that he bore a close physical resemblance to William Wilberforce, an internationally known British abolitionist, which could have explained the pen-name “Wilberforce.” After the “Wilberforce” letters appeared in *Freedom’s Journal*, Miller canceled his subscription to the paper, and it became a forbidden item in the Princeton Theological Seminary where both men worked. Winston James believes that the cancellation and banning of *Freedom’s Journal* was Miller’s way of standing up for his colleague, after Russwurm’s attack.<sup>37</sup>

The period from late August to early September of 1827 was a tumultuous one for John Russwurm. *Freedom’s Journal* was still only six months old when he had to deal with the resignation of its senior editor, Samuel Cornish. Cornish was no longer there to help temper Russwurm’s sometimes rash and unfiltered writing. Russwurm’s scathing attacks on the ACS drew the ire of those few blacks who actually supported the organization. His overt hostility to the ACS also cost him some support and good will

from white friends of colonization who had supported the paper. It did not take long for criticism of Russwurm to surface after Cornish resigned his post. An article that appeared in the October 10, 1827 edition of the *Middlesex Gazette* in Connecticut criticized *Freedom's Journal* by stating that, "It upholds the preposterous plan of raising the colored population to a perfect equality with the whites. This absurd project must be discountenanced by every man of common sense."<sup>38</sup> Despite the criticism leveled at him and the pressure of running *Freedom's Journal* by himself, Russwurm continued on, but it was not long before his beliefs started to waver, and he would soon make a decision that would alter not only the rest of his life, but his legacy and how he would be remembered in the pan-African movement.

## CHAPTER 4

### A CHANGE OF HEART

John Russwurm had chosen to settle in New York because he believed that it was the best place in which to take a stand against the racism that was permeating the United States, and *Freedom's Journal* was the vehicle that he chose to combat this racism. However, *Freedom's Journal* did not end the unjust treatment of blacks, and not long after the departure of Cornish, Russwurm began to have doubts that the situation of black people in America would ever improve. One also needs to keep in mind that Russwurm had an interracial background and, according to Amos Beyan, this played a large role in his mindset. Even though Russwurm was half white, he still faced persecution and would never be considered equal to whites. As a result, Russwurm came to believe that the amalgamation of whites and blacks would never be a realistic possibility, and even if it was, the biracial children such unions produced would still face inequality, simply because they were not one-hundred percent white.<sup>1</sup> This doubt and disillusionment would lead to a shocking announcement. John Brown Russwurm, the man who had relentlessly attacked the ACS and the colonization movement, would change his stance and embrace colonization.

While the change of heart may seem shocking because of how outspoken Russwurm had been in his criticism of the ACS, the move is not as surprising as it might



first appear. As we saw earlier, Russwurm talked at length about his desire to emigrate to Haiti after his graduation from Bowdoin, although ultimately he did not do so. In February of 1827 he turned down an invitation from Ralph R. Gurley to go to Liberia under the auspices of the ACS. Even though Russwurm declined Gurley's offer, it was not an explicit rejection or a contemptuous one. He merely stated that it was not wise for him to accept such an undertaking at that point in time.<sup>2</sup> This could mean that Russwurm was merely being polite in his reply to Gurley, or that he may have viewed joining the ACS as a future option if he was not successful in his battle against racism in the United States. Either way, it certainly appears that Russwurm viewed employment in some capacity with the ACS as a possibility.

There were other warning signs that Russwurm's stance on colonization was beginning to change. Once he became the sole editor of *Freedom's Journal*, he gradually began to allocate more space in the journal to advocates of colonization.<sup>3</sup> Russwurm also started featuring more pro-colonization articles and advertisements, and the paper's readers began to sense that he was having a change of heart.

There does not appear to have been a single event or catalyst that prompted Russwurm to change his position on colonization; rather, it was a decision that he spent a considerable amount of time thinking about.<sup>4</sup> Russwurm would officially announce his conversion to the colonization cause on February 14, 1829, when he stated that after examining the arguments for and against colonization, he had emerged as, "a decided supporter of the American Colonization Society."<sup>5</sup> Russwurm gave his readers a multitude of reasons for supporting the colonization movement, and for the establishment

of a colony on the west coast of Africa, which gives credence to his statement that his decision to become involved with the ACS was not a hasty one.

Russwurm believed that the west coast of Africa, and more specifically Liberia, was the ideal place for an African colony. His rationale can be seen in the February 14, 1829 issue of *Freedom's Journal*. He noted that Europe was overburdened by a starving population and that Asia was too far away to be a realistic place for blacks to move to, which left Africa as the logical location. While Russwurm had a soft spot for Haiti, he believed that Africa was the better choice, due to the fact that many of the people who had traveled to Haiti had returned with unfavorable reports, and there also appeared to be a sense of unwillingness among American blacks to travel to Haiti.<sup>6</sup> In addition, the Haitian government, which had previously offered free or discounted emigration packages, was now rethinking its generosity.

Russwurm listed several reasons why black people in America should support the colonization movement. He believed that detractors of the ACS, including himself, disliked the society because they did not understand its true goals. Russwurm thought that anti-colonizationists were guilty of assuming that the interests of white Southerners were the guiding force of the society, and that blacks had to ask themselves if they were making prejudiced and uninformed judgments about the ACS.<sup>7</sup> He also believed that blacks were hesitant to trust themselves to the protection of the ACS and were fearful of going to foreign lands because they were apprehensive about the possibility of being sold into bondage. However, it was Russwurm's belief that everyone would eventually adopt the colonization cause, because all blacks were facing an insurmountable barrier to equality in the U.S.<sup>8</sup> He also thought that emigration to Liberia would allow for the

spread of Christianity and western civilization, and American blacks could accumulate wealth and achieve respectability in Africa, and that they would be welcomed with open arms by the native inhabitants of Liberia.<sup>9</sup> Finally, Russwurm addressed free blacks who were opposed to colonization, declaring that they should be able to decide for themselves if they wanted to support the ACS, because freedom of choice was a right that had been denied them by whites.<sup>10</sup>

Russwurm's decision to endorse the ACS would forever change both his life and his legacy. As noted earlier, the majority of free blacks were opposed to colonization, and Russwurm would pay a heavy price for his change of heart. One did not have to look very hard to see just how despised the ACS really was. Opposition to the ACS by black leaders began in late December of 1816, right after the society was formed. On January 24, 1817, the free black population of Richmond, Virginia sent out resolutions to churches and anti-slavery organizations which stated their disapproval of the ACS. These resolutions were signed by William Bowler and Lentey Crow, two of the most prominent members of the free black community.<sup>11</sup>

Opposition to the ACS was very strong in the North, particularly in Philadelphia. In January of 1817, Bishop Richard Allen, James Forten, and three thousand other free blacks met at Bethel Church in Philadelphia to give voice to their distrust of and opposition to the society. Forten, who chaired the meeting, stated that no one in attendance supported the ACS, and everyone was in agreement that any attempt to remove blacks from the country would be a violation of the Declaration of Independence and the Bill of Rights.<sup>12</sup> The mass meeting in Philadelphia was just one example of the rejection of the ACS on the part of Northern free blacks. Hostility to the ACS was

evident in the African-American communities of New York City, Boston, New Haven, and many other urban centers. Men and women of color stressed that their ancestors had helped to cultivate America, and they themselves were therefore entitled to share in its bountiful harvest.<sup>13</sup> Russwurm's Boston friend David Walker, a militant black abolitionist, argued that the ACS violated American principles and would help to perpetuate slavery.<sup>14</sup> Others were equally enraged and perturbed, even if they lacked Walker's eloquence. Free blacks were not just vocal about their opposition to the motives of the ACS, they also unleashed their wrath on those who chose to emigrate to Liberia. A number of free blacks who emigrated long before Russwurm, such as Perry Lockes, Samuel Wilson, Nathaniel Peck and others, were seen as opportunists and traitors to their enslaved brethren.<sup>15</sup>

By the time Russwurm became a supporter of the ACS, there had been more than a decade's worth of recorded opposition to the society, so he certainly knew that his decision would not be popular. Indeed, the reaction to his announcement was strong and swift. Only ten days after he announced his change of heart in *Freedom's Journal*, Russwurm wrote in a letter to R. R. Gurley that his conversion to the ACS had already caused him persecution. However, he remained composed and did not waver, even comparing himself to Martin Luther at the Diet of Worms.<sup>16</sup>

Even though Russwurm remained calm and composed, that would do nothing to stem the tide of criticism that he would face. As Amos Beyan points out, the criticism that Russwurm encountered was a lot harsher than the criticism that was leveled against the white members of the ACS. This was due to the fact that blacks were afraid that Russwurm's support of the ACS would not only undermine their opposition to the ACS,

but would also help lead to the destruction of racial solidarity and racial consciousness. The initial wave of criticism that Russwurm faced was enough to make him decide to resign from his position as editor of *Freedom's Journal*. He would announce his resignation on March 28, 1829, and while he expected that the journal would be continued after his departure, the March 28 issue would be the final one.<sup>17</sup>

It was when Russwurm resigned his post and declared his desire to emigrate to Liberia that he was bombarded by the harshest criticisms, which, interestingly enough, did not stop, even after he had been out of the country for quite some time. As noted earlier, there was strong opposition to the ACS in the African-American community in Philadelphia, and the free black leaders of the city burned Russwurm in effigy almost immediately after he announced his decision to leave the country.<sup>18</sup> One would think that after he had sailed for Africa, the criticism and anger that was leveled against Russwurm would have subsided somewhat, but that was far from the reality. In fact, the anger directed towards Russwurm seemed to pick up in intensity the longer he was gone, and the most notable criticisms of his character took place after he had left America. One critic summed it up best when he stated that Russwurm had done so much damage to blacks that, “neither time nor space will ever obliterate” it, which shows just how much anger and resentment blacks held against Russwurm.<sup>19</sup>

The memory of John Brown Russwurm among free blacks did not mellow as time passed. In fact, the passage of time only served to reinforce the resentment towards him. Critics labeled him as a tool of the ACS and a traitor. One black critic believed that Russwurm caved to pressure from white patrons of *Freedom's Journal*, “but when his

patrons failed to support the paper...[he] converted the people's paper to the use of the Colonization Society by which change he worked himself into their employ...”<sup>20</sup>

White abolitionist William Lloyd Garrison's newspaper the *Liberator* became a popular medium for people to criticize Russwurm. In a letter to Garrison, which appeared in the April 16, 1831 issue of the paper, a prominent black Baltimorean by the name of William Watkins attacked Russwurm, stating that the lure of money and power had induced him to forsake his brethren. The same sentiment was shared by a man only known as C.D.T., who observed that it was monetary necessity that drove Russwurm to Liberia, and he would not have left if he had been prospering in America.<sup>21</sup> Finally, Russwurm's critics labeled him as ignorant. This criticism was evident in an editorial that appeared in the May 7, 1831 edition of the *Liberator*, in which Garrison noted that, “If [Russwurm's] vanity had not been superior to his judgment, and his love of distinction greater than his regard for consistency, he would never have been seduced away to Liberia.”<sup>22</sup>

The case of John Brown Russwurm is interesting. While it appears that he truly had a change of heart because of how well-reasoned his arguments for embracing colonization were, the fact that he was a public figure and had been very vocal about his prior opposition to the ACS meant that his change of stance was vilified by free blacks who thought that he was a traitor and an opportunist. However, being an educated man and also being half white, Russwurm may have known better than anyone else that freedom and equality in America might never come. After years of fighting for change, instead of flip-flopping, he was simply taking another road -- one that he believed would lead to a better life for black Americans. In the process his legacy suffered, and this is

most likely why his name is never mentioned among the great black leaders in United States history. While he faced severe criticism, resigning his post as editor of *Freedom's Journal* allowed Russwurm the opportunity to work to address the plight of blacks and enable them to achieve their full potential in every facet of life, regardless of whether or not his critics in America agreed with him.

## CHAPTER 5

### THE MONROVIA YEARS

Even though Russwurm announced that he was embracing colonization in February of 1829, the process of securing the patronage of the American Colonization Society was not as simple or smooth as it appeared on the surface. It has to be kept in mind that Russwurm had been an outspoken critic of the ACS, and simply renouncing his old views would not be enough to make the society embrace him in return. While Russwurm's critics labeled him an opportunist, Winston James points out that those same critics would have been surprised to find out that the ACS did not welcome Russwurm with open arms, and the society did not make him rich. In fact, Russwurm would have to work quite hard to gain not only the trust of the ACS but a position with the society as well. While Russwurm acknowledged that he understood the ACS's suspicions, the process of gaining acceptance took even longer than he anticipated. Russwurm had been in contact with R. R. Gurley since January of 1829, when he secretly informed Gurley of his change of heart, but it was not until July of 1829 that the ACS offered Russwurm a position.<sup>1</sup> In those seven months, the Board of Managers of the ACS solicited references from people who knew Russwurm before coming to a decision. Fortunately for Russwurm, the fact that he openly and publicly admitted that he was wrong, combined



with the fact that some of his friends remained loyal to him, even though they disagreed with him, was enough to convince the ACS to employ him.

Among those who came to Russwurm's aid were Reverend Peter Williams, Charles C. Andrews, David Walker, and even Samuel Cornish. Reverend Peter Williams, the black pastor of St. Phillip's Episcopal Church in New York, was adamantly opposed to colonization but he had worked with Russwurm in helping to found *Freedom's Journal* and he quietly gave his support to Russwurm because he thought that it was his duty to help blacks who wished to emigrate to Liberia, even if he did not agree with them. Charles C. Andrews, the white principal of the New York African Free School, would also correspond with Gurley on Russwurm's behalf. Two of Russwurm's most notable supporters were David Walker and Samuel Cornish. Walker would continue to support Russwurm after he changed his stance on colonization by publicly defending his character and integrity, and he remained an agent of *Freedom's Journal* until its last issue, even though it was well-known that he was an opponent of the ACS.<sup>2</sup> The case of Samuel Cornish is the most interesting, however. Cornish was both hurt by and in shock over Russwurm's decision to join the ACS. He grudgingly wrote to the ACS and informed them that Russwurm was trustworthy and capable of exemplary work. However, this would signal the end of the relationship between Russwurm and Cornish. In fact, in January of 1838, in the *Colored American*, the new newspaper he helped edit, Cornish would lash out at his former colleague and compare him to Benedict Arnold, while also accusing him of being a selfish opportunist.<sup>3</sup> Cornish's attack on Russwurm came nine years after Russwurm became a colonizationist, which further illustrates just

how angry many in the Northern free black community were at him and how enduring that anger was.

While the ACS was soliciting references from former colleagues and friends, Russwurm was doing all that he could to gain the trust of the organization. Before he was offered an official position, he volunteered to work on his printing skills at the Rensselaer School in New York if given the opportunity to do so, and he told Gurley that he would try to familiarize himself with multiple pedagogic systems which could be employed in Liberian schools. C. C. Andrews from the New York African Free School offered to teach Russwurm the “mutual instruction” methods that were used there, and Russwurm was also interested in learning about the Pestalozzian method of teaching, although it is not known if he ever did so. He also offered to export books to the colony and seek donations if Gurley gave him the authority to do so. Russwurm’s efforts and references impressed the society and also reassured its leaders that his change of heart was indeed genuine. As a result, he was appointed to the office of Superintendent of Schools in Liberia, and was charged with trying to revive the colony’s newspaper, the *Liberia Herald*.<sup>4</sup>

Russwurm was given this position in July of 1829, and his last several months in the United States were spent tying up loose ends. He soon found out that people owed him significantly more money than he owed in debts. A large part of the problem was that a significant number of the readers of *Freedom’s Journal* simply did not pay for their subscriptions. Readers could choose to pay \$2.50 up front for a year’s subscription or two six-month installments of \$1.50. However, as Winston James points out, Russwurm never enforced these payment guidelines, and many readers continued to receive copies

of the paper even if they had not paid. While it is unclear just how much money was owed to him by subscribers, Russwurm would receive just enough money to avoid being in debt.<sup>5</sup> He would also travel to Maine in August to visit his family, staying until early September. Apparently he stayed in Maine long enough to receive an M.A. from Bowdoin, but it is unclear whether or not this was an actual M.A. or an honorary one.<sup>6</sup> Russwurm would also visit his friends in Boston before heading to Baltimore, from where he set sail for Liberia aboard the *Susan* in late September of 1829.

Before looking at Russwurm's work and exploits in Liberia, it is first necessary to examine the town of Monrovia, and the situation that Russwurm would be entering. Chapter four of Winston James book, *The Struggles of John Brown Russwurm: The Life and Writings of a Pan-Africanist Pioneer, 1799-1851*, is titled, "We have found a Haven," and while that may have been true for some blacks who emigrated to Liberia, that does not mean the colony did not have a host of serious issues. One of the problems with the settlement at Monrovia was the fact that the colony was in disarray, and not only lacked a sense of order, but also featured lawlessness due to the fact that the colony lacked an established set of laws. The colony also contained a prejudiced social and political hierarchy which favored lighter skinned blacks over darker skinned blacks, which is exactly what the emigrants had been hoping to avoid when they left the United States. The ACS was governed by white leadership, and just like the situation in the U.S., lighter skinned blacks were viewed more favorably than darker skinned blacks by whites in positions of authority.

A constitution for the colony was drawn up in 1824, and this constitution contained ten articles. Articles one, five, and six were the most notable and important

articles in this constitution. Article one stated that all persons born within the colony would be entitled to the same rights that white citizens were given in America, article five prohibited slavery, while article six stipulated that U.S. common law would prevail in Liberia.<sup>7</sup> All three of these articles would prove to be very difficult to uphold and enforce.

Despite what people may think, given the situation that blacks faced in America, slavery proved to be a significant problem for Liberia for several decades, even though the constitution explicitly stated that slavery was outlawed. Most troublesome about the situation was the fact that the slave trade in Liberia was being carried out by some of the colony's most prominent black settlers, such as John N. Lewis, Hilary Teage, and James Payne, all of whom worked with notable white slave traders Theodore Canot and Don Pedro Blanco. While the ACS was aware of the slave trade in Liberia, the Board of Managers largely ignored the problem because they did not want to draw public attention to the issue, which would give their opponents even more reason to attack them. While the ACS struggled to keep the slave trade a secret, the issue concerned them enough to prompt them to institute a one-thousand dollar fine for anyone who was caught trading slaves, although this did little to deter those who were involved with slavers.<sup>8</sup> The colony was also in disarray because of the lack of a formal set of laws and penal codes, due to the ambiguity of article six of the constitution, which did not establish a set of laws and a justice system. Also, despite the fact that Liberia was founded on the idea of equality, there was still a racist hierarchy that existed in the colony.

The racial hierarchy in the colony reflected the racist views that existed in America. At the top of the ladder were the light skinned blacks such as Russwurm, who

were thought by the leaders of the ACS to be superior to other blacks due to their lighter complexion. Underneath them were darker skinned blacks who possessed some education or vocational skills and also had some wealth. Below them were dark skinned blacks who came to Liberia with very little education or very few skills. Similar to the status of those who lacked an education were recaptured Africans, who had been illegally sold into bondage, but were set free after the slave ships they were on were intercepted by American warships. On the lowest rung of the ladder were the indigenous people of Liberia, who were seen as savages and barbarians. Those who did assimilate into the colony were forced to forget about their past and adopt the values and beliefs of the ACS settlers. So despite the fact that the ACS and prominent black settlers claimed that they wanted to promote equality and end racism, they were, in a sense, creating the same sort of political and social structure that existed in America.<sup>9</sup> As we will see shortly, Russwurm, the champion for African equality, would benefit from this structure.

Despite the problems that the colony faced, Russwurm would arrive in Monrovia on November 12, 1829, and would enthusiastically begin his quest to help the ACS and the colony. It took him about a week to settle in and feel comfortable with his surroundings in Liberia. He then eagerly began on the substantial amount of work that had been assigned to him by the ACS. Not only was he the Superintendent of the school system, but he served as colonial secretary and was also put in charge of editing the *Liberia Herald*. Russwurm's job as editor of the *Liberia Herald* was probably the most important because he could use the paper to help improve the educational system by telling the colonists just how important an education was.

The *Liberia Herald* was started in 1826, when a man by the name of Charles L. Force, a freed American slave, was hired by colonizationists in New England to establish a newspaper in Liberia. Force died almost immediately after his arrival in Liberia, but the project was successfully carried on by an unidentified black man who had been freed by a Mary B. M. Blackford of Fredericksburg, Virginia. The first issue of the paper was printed in 1826, but only a handful of issues appeared between 1826 and the time of Russwurm's arrival in late 1829.<sup>10</sup>

Russwurm helped make the newspaper the voice of the colony, and used it to help shed light on the education problem in Liberia. Just like he had done in *Freedom's Journal*, Russwurm argued that the only way of accomplishing self-improvement was through education. He noted that no government could sustain freedom without education, and that education was the link that bound people together.<sup>11</sup> The paper was circulated not just in the colony, but in the U.S. as well. As a result, it contained constant pleas for assistance, and the paper celebrated the arrival of teachers, supplies and the opening of new schools.<sup>12</sup> Russwurm used the *Liberia Herald* to advocate for schools to educate recaptured Africans, as well as American-born settlers and their children. He also argued that infant schools were a necessity because children needed to know at an early age just how important classroom learning was.<sup>13</sup>

Even though Russwurm used the paper as a platform to promote education, the *Liberia Herald* covered a wide array of different topics, just like *Freedom's Journal* had done. Russwurm published articles on self-improvement and offered tips to parents and children. He also published articles on domestic news, such as the slave trade in Africa, although he made no mention of the fact that some settlers in Liberia were involved in

that trade. In addition, he devoted space in the paper to international news, which made the *Herald* extremely popular among the settlers.<sup>14</sup> As always, anything that concerned Haiti found its way into the paper.

One of the criticisms that Russwurm faced when he chose to embrace colonization was being labeled a tool of the ACS. While his conversion to the colonization movement was a genuine one, this criticism is legitimate when it concerns the *Liberia Herald*. The *Herald* was subsidized by the ACS, and Russwurm, eager to win the support of the white members of the ACS, used the paper to promote the ideals of the society. For instance, the paper supported the despotic Governor Mechlin. Russwurm praised Mechlin for the violent annexation of territories such as Gola, Kpelle, and Bassa. He also supported Mechlin's opposition to allowing recaptured Africans to settle in Monrovia, while keeping negative allegations of Mechlin's conduct out of the press, such as the rumor that he was sexually involved with a settler's wife. Russwurm's unwavering support of Mechlin stemmed from the fact that the governor thought highly of Russwurm. This can be seen in a letter that Mechlin wrote to ACS officials in March of 1830, in which he stated that, "I found him [Russwurm] everything you described him to be, and I considered him a great acquisition."<sup>16</sup> As one can see, Russwurm's desire to ingratiate himself with the prominent white leaders of the ACS came at the cost of sacrificing some of his values concerning equality, since he was praising the conquest and subjugation of native Africans.

Along with supporting Mechlin, the paper also promoted other ACS values. Russwurm tried to Americanize Monrovia and the surrounding territories by endeavoring to get native peoples and recaptured Africans to renounce their traditional customs. He

also campaigned for prohibition in the colony, which coincided with the emergence of the temperance movement in the U.S.<sup>17</sup> Due to the fact that the paper was circulated in the U.S., he continued to speak highly of the colony, with the hope that more Americans would emigrate. While his praise of Liberia pleased the ACS and colonizationists in America, it did little to attract emigrants to the colony. Russwurm was hoping that he could attract educated blacks from America to help speed the growth of the colony, but the majority of free blacks, especially those with an education and a commitment to civil rights, seemed content to stick it out in the U.S. in the hope of eventually gaining equality. Those who did choose to make the trip to Liberia tended to be in a more desperate situation. Many were manumitted slaves who were forced to emigrate because of the manumission laws in the states where they had been living. (A number of Southern states required that the newly emancipated leave within a matter of weeks or forfeit their freedom.) They lacked a formal education, and had never had to be self-sufficient.<sup>18</sup> Many emigrants were women, which led to a sexual imbalance in the colony and slowed the growth of the colony's population.<sup>19</sup> Russwurm was surprised at the lack of emigrants and maintained that those who were reluctant to join the cause were simply ignorant or scared. He could not even convince his friends to make the journey to Liberia with him. Russwurm wrote to Edward Jones, another black college graduate, who had worked with him on *Freedom's Journal*, on March 20, 1830. He spoke glowingly about Liberia and said he could not wait for Jones to join him, "I long for the time when you my dear friend, shall land on the shores of Africa, a messenger of that Gospel which proclaims liberty to the captive, and light to those who sat in great darkness!" However, although Jones was involved with an African Mission school in Hartford, Connecticut that was run



by the ACS, and he would eventually travel to Sierra Leone after being recruited by the British, he would never make the trip to Liberia.<sup>20</sup>

Although Russwurm was unsuccessful in finding new recruits in America, these early years in Liberia were his happiest. He was passionate about his work, and he not only enjoyed the support of the prominent white members of the ACS, but he had the endorsement of Governor Mechlin, the most powerful man in the colony. Russwurm would also find love in his early years in Liberia. In 1833 he would marry Sarah McGill, the only daughter of George and Angelina McGill, a black couple from Maryland.<sup>21</sup> George McGill arrived in Monrovia in 1827, and served as a teacher and a Methodist preacher, while also developing a successful trading business and becoming quite wealthy. McGills's wife Angelina and their five children would eventually make the trip to Monrovia in 1830, but Angelina would die three days after her arrival.<sup>22</sup> While her exact age is unknown, Winston James observed that Sarah was most likely in her late teens when she married Russwurm. From what is known about their marriage, it appears to have been a very loving one, and Russwurm considered Sarah to be his best friend and confidante. Together the couple had five children, George Stockbridge, James Hall, Francis Edward, Angelina, and Samuel Ford.<sup>23</sup>

While Russwurm would enjoy his early years in Liberia, his situation would slowly begin to deteriorate. As noted earlier, due to his light complexion, Russwurm was one of the primary beneficiaries of Liberia's social and political structure. He enjoyed the benefits of this system so much that he refused to challenge the racism that existed in Liberia, and he even went so far as to suggest that only light-skinned blacks should run the affairs of the colony.<sup>24</sup> Also, while *Freedom's Journal* was meant to serve as an open

forum for blacks, the *Liberia Herald* was run much differently. The original motto of the *Liberia Herald* was, "Freedom is the Brilliant Gift of Heaven." However, once in Liberia, Russwurm disapproved of the notion of a free press, and even argued that it was senseless and dangerous, and he abolished the paper's motto once he became editor.<sup>25</sup> Russwurm's alliance with the domineering ACS and Governor Mechlin, as well as his condescending attitude towards the vast majority of the colonists, made him very unpopular. His position would have remained safe had he been able to stay in the good graces of the ACS, however, that would not be the case, and his fall from power would shortly follow.

Russwurm's main desire in Liberia was to try to become governor of the colony. However, a lack of support from the settlers, and the dwindling support from the ACS, would make achieving this goal impossible. Before Governor Mechlin left office in 1834, he appointed Russwurm as Secretary of the colony. This appointment outraged settlers because the position of Secretary of the colony was supposed to be an elected one that was voted on by the settlers under the terms of the 1825 constitution. Therefore, this appointment was illegal, and it only served to anger the settlers. Furthermore, Mechlin's successor, George Penney, did not invalidate Russwurm's appointment. In response, the Colonial Assembly, led by settlers, chose to remove Russwurm from his position as Secretary of the colony in 1835. This move angered the ACS and they chose to ignore the law and reinstate Russwurm as Secretary, which did nothing to help his reputation in the eyes of the colonists.<sup>26</sup> Russwurm now had no support from the settlers, who believed he was arrogant and associated him with the despotic white governors of Monrovia. Without the support of the black settlers, Russwurm was now completely reliant on the ACS in

order to remain a prominent member of the colony, and this would prove to be his undoing.

While Russwurm would have the support of Governor Mechlin and was not bothered by Governor Penney, who only held power for one year, things began to fall apart for him in 1835, with the appointment of Dr. Ezekiel Skinner as the new governor of Liberia.<sup>27</sup> Skinner was a despotic governor just like Mechlin and Penney, however, unlike the other two men, Skinner, with no resistance from the ACS, began to undermine Russwurm's power. Skinner received the authority to name an associate editor to the *Liberia Herald*, which severely limited Russwurm's power and autonomy. Also, the position of Vice Governor was one of the few positions that settlers could vote for, and other members of the black elite such as Colin Teage began working with Skinner to curb Russwurm's power and make sure he was not elected.<sup>28</sup> Faced with the reality that he would most likely never going to be able to run for governor, and knowing that the settlers disliked him, Russwurm decided to start a business with Joseph Dailey, a black emigrant from Philadelphia, in the hope that he could regain the support of both the colonists and the ACS if he met with success as a merchant. However, this venture failed because business in general was poor in Liberia, and this was worsened by the fact that the colony could not maintain stable relations with the indigenous peoples of the region. Russwurm would also be undermined by his partner Dailey. Unlike Russwurm, Dailey wanted to return to America, and he held the same views towards Russwurm that many others did, calling him a tool of the ACS, which makes one wonder why the two decided to go into business with one another in the first place.<sup>29</sup>

While the failure to be considered for governor and his unsuccessful business ventures were the final straw, Russwurm's frustrations with the ACS had been brewing for some time. He was concerned about the way the colony was being governed as early as 1832. Winston James notes that one of Russwurm's primary concerns was the inadequate health care in the colony. Dr. George P. Todsens was the chief physician in Liberia, and he was a complete failure when it came to managing the health needs of the colonists. Not only were colonists lucky if they could see him within a month after becoming sick, but he also charged them an exorbitant amount of money for any treatment he gave them. In the case of Reverend Spaulding and his wife, their medical bill was so high that they chose to return to America.<sup>30</sup>

One of the other problems the colony faced was the lack of a proper code of laws, as was noted earlier. This prompted Russwurm to remark to Gurley that only one probate case had been settled in the colony's fourteen years of existence.<sup>31</sup> While Russwurm's concerns were legitimate, it appears that he was becoming bitter about the fact that it was unlikely that he would ever become governor of the colony. In a letter to Judge Samuel Wilkerson in 1834, he remarked that, "the colonists are becoming too enlightened to receive and respect every one, whom the partiality of friends may think qualified."<sup>32</sup> Russwurm was clearly upset that his concerns and complaints were falling on deaf ears and that he was constantly being passed over for governor. He became so disheartened that in a letter to his white half-brother Francis Edward in 1835, he stated that, "I suppose I shall die in Africa, but I hope not in Liberia."<sup>33</sup> He would also write to the ACS in 1835 and remark, "I have given every pledge any man gave who is a respecter of the laws of his country by investing all my earnings in real estate in the colony and placing my wife

and child under the protection of its laws; but I have suffered so much persecution of late that I am almost tempted to abandon all and flee to a land where the laws cannot be altered or amended to suit party purposes.<sup>34</sup> Even though the dream of a haven in Liberia appeared to be dead, an opportunity would soon present itself to Russwurm, and he would find the home that he had always been looking for.

## CHAPTER 6

### THE MARYLAND STATE COLONIZATION SOCIETY

Even though Russwurm was disheartened by his experience in Liberia, he was far from defeated and, luckily for him, the opportunity he had been waiting for presented itself at just the right time. When one thinks of the colonization movement, the first organization that comes to mind is the ACS. However, fortunately for Russwurm, the ACS was not the only institution that was involved in promoting African colonization. There were a number of auxiliary colonization groups that had been formed throughout the United States, and their members helped raise funds and made donations to the ACS. Some of these groups tried to establish their own settlements, but failed because those settlements could not survive on their own.<sup>1</sup> The notable exception to this pattern of failure was the Maryland State Colonization Society (MSCS).

The MSCS was founded in 1817 as an auxiliary to the ACS. Like other auxiliaries, the MSCS raised funds and recruited settlers for the ACS. The General Assembly of Maryland also gave one-thousand dollars to the ACS every year to pay for the transportation of free black Marylanders to Liberia. However, that body decided to end its yearly financial assistance to the ACS in 1829, and on February 21, 1831, the MSCS declared itself to be a separate entity, independent of the ACS.<sup>2</sup>

There were several reasons why the MSCS chose to part ways with the ACS. The most significant one was the difference in the core philosophy that each group was founded upon. The ACS had always maintained that its goal was the emigration of free blacks to Africa. While admittedly some members of the ACS were abolitionists, there were many other prominent members of the organization whose primary goal was to rid the country of free blacks and maintain the institution of slavery. In sharp contrast to that, the goal of the MSCS was the abolition of slavery in Maryland. This can be seen in a March 1833 meeting when the board of managers stated that the MSCS was "...a society whose avowed object was the extirpation of slavery in Maryland..." and again in another meeting on June 28, 1833, when they noted, "That the Maryland State Colonization Society look[s] forward to the extirpation of slavery in Maryland..."<sup>3</sup>

The colonization movement in Maryland was also heavily influenced by Nat Turner's slave rebellion. In August of 1831, sixty-five whites were killed in Southampton, Virginia in that uprising.<sup>4</sup> As a result, the General Assembly of Maryland passed several laws in March of 1832, to try to prevent future slave revolts.<sup>5</sup> The General Assembly chose to recognize and subsidize the MSCS as an official state movement, and pledged to provide the organization with \$200,000 over a twenty year period to cover the expenses of transporting free blacks to Liberia.<sup>6</sup> This amounts to \$9,000 more per year than the General Assembly had previously given to the ACS, which illustrates just how seriously the General Assembly viewed Nat Turner's rebellion. The General Assembly also passed several other laws to try to control free blacks in the belief that they had somehow been complicit in the rebellion or that their very presence served as an incitement to those blacks who were still enslaved. The Assembly ordered all counties in

the state to report the number of resident free blacks to the MSCS headquarters in Baltimore. A bill was passed that also barred manumitted slaves from staying in the state for more than ten days after they gained their freedom, and free blacks were not to be employed by anyone after June of 1832. In addition, free blacks were not allowed to own guns without the approval of local officials, they were barred from gathering together for religious services without the presence of a white person, and any free black person who was found guilty of a crime that did not meet the requirements for the death penalty was to be deported from Maryland.<sup>7</sup> These laws, which were quite harsh, were not only intended to try to control the activities of free blacks, but were also an attempt to force them to embrace the idea of colonization. It should be noted that these new laws would be hard to enforce, however, they illustrate just how serious Maryland was about trying to prevent future slave rebellions.

The MSCS's decision to part ways with the ACS, combined with the deep-seated fears produced by Nat Turner's rebellion, prompted the MSCS to send several scouting expeditions to Liberia to determine the feasibility of establishing their own colony. The first expedition took place in October of 1831. The MSCS put Dr. James Hall in charge of taking thirty-one emigrants to the ACS colony in Monrovia aboard the *Orion*.<sup>8</sup> However, not much is known about this expedition and it has not been the subject of very much research. It was the second expedition in December of 1832, which was again led by Dr. Hall, that really jumpstarted the colonization movement in Maryland.

This expedition was chartered by the MSCS, and one-hundred and forty-four black Marylanders departed from Baltimore on December 9, 1832 aboard the *Lafayette*. The experiences of these emigrants were quite disturbing to the MSCS. The passengers



on the *Lafayette* claimed that they were not given enough food by the Liberian settlers when they arrived, and that many of the items that they were given were spoiled. They alleged that the Liberian settlers stole their possessions and that the overall morale of the colony was very low. Even worse, the emigrants from the *Lafayette* charged that there was rampant corruption in Liberia, and that the gifting of public land was used to buy votes and political influence in the colony.<sup>9</sup>

Due to Russwurm's high standing in the colony and the fact that he was still in the good graces of the ACS in 1832 and early 1833, the MSCS reached out to him to try to verify the claims of the passengers of the *Lafayette*. Russwurm informed the MSCS that the agricultural system was failing in Liberia because many of the settlers were involved in commerce and trade with the indigenous peoples, and they were unable to provide for their own basic wants. While he denied that the newly arrived emigrants were treated unfairly, Russwurm did state that all of Liberia's problems were caused by the original settlers themselves, who refused to carry out tasks that were assigned to them.<sup>10</sup> The accounts sent back to the MSCS by the passengers of the *Lafayette*, along with Russwurm's, were enough to convince the Board of Managers of the MSCS that action needed to be taken.

After receiving the disturbing reports from Russwurm and the emigrants aboard the *Lafayette*, the officers of the MSCS came to the conclusion that they needed to establish their own colony in Africa in order to fulfill their colonization goals. At their meeting on June 28, 1833, the board of managers of the MSCS proposed to establish a settlement at Cape Palmas. They believed that Cape Palmas offered an abundance of commercial and agricultural opportunities, and it was the most suitable place on the west

coast of Africa in which to establish a colony.<sup>11</sup> Along with selecting Cape Palmas as their desired place for a colony, the leading members of the MSCS also adopted several resolutions at their June 28 meeting. These resolutions reiterated that the goal of the MSCS was the gradual abolition of slavery in Maryland, and that there would be no alcohol in their colony, except for medicinal purposes.<sup>12</sup>

Once these resolutions had been adopted, the MSCS began to look for someone to send to Africa to purchase land for the settlement at Cape Palmas. As noted earlier, since he had been part of the *Orion* expedition in 1831, and had spent time in Monrovia, Dr. James Hall was formally chosen by the MSCS on September 9, 1833, to sail to Cape Palmas to negotiate a land purchase.<sup>13</sup>

The MSCS was quite aware of the toxic situation in Monrovia and all of its shortcomings and problems. Learning from the mistakes of the ACS, the MSCS leadership decided that they would write their own constitution ahead of time, so that a form of government would already be in place once emigrants started arriving. This constitution was approved on November 22, 1833. It contained a preamble, eight articles, and a bill of rights. The constitution required emigrants to sign a declaration stating that they would abstain from alcohol and no one who used or traded alcohol could hold office. It required emigrants to keep good faith with the local people, it noted that all elections would take place by ballot, and it also gave the MSCS the ability to adopt new laws, as long as they did not contradict the constitution.<sup>14</sup>

Additionally, the MSCS adopted an ordinance titled, “An Ordinance for the Temporary Government of the Territory of Maryland in Liberia.” This ordinance consisted of forty-five articles and was intended to help the emigrants, who would be

unaware of how to run a political system. The ordinance divided the land into townships, established a set of guidelines for property transfers, and set up a system of government that consisted of a governor, secretary, justices of the peace, and constables, who would be elected by the people. Each township would also have a vice-agent, two counselors, a register, a sheriff, a treasurer, and a committee on new emigrants, and these positions would be voted on by each township's three selectmen. In addition, the ordinance established a court system, made sure that public schools were properly maintained, outlawed the creation of a militia, banned traffic with the local inhabitants unless a person had been given a license to engage in trade by the agent of the township, and stipulated that no one could hold land in the colony unless they lived there.

The most interesting part of the ordinance, however, was that it stated what the requirements were to make an individual an eligible voter in the colony. While the colonization movement was supposedly driven by the desire for freedom and equality among blacks, it has been noted that the social structure created by colonization institutions was merely a continuation of the one that existed in America. An example of this social structure was the fact that light-skinned blacks were favored over darker-skinned blacks, which was something that Russwurm benefitted from. This prejudiced social structure in Maryland could be seen when the MSCS decided who qualified for voting rights. The ordinance limited voting rights to males over age twenty-one who held land. If a man who was legally of age did not hold land, he could pay a tax of at least one dollar to be eligible to vote.<sup>15</sup> So, while some blacks were finally given the right to vote, those men who did not possess a sufficient amount of money, along with women, regardless of their economic status, were still denied voting rights.

While women may have been barred from the ballot box, they were afforded protection that women in many other countries were not given, let alone in the settlements in Liberia. Winston James notes that the MSCS chose to imprison any males who were found guilty of beating their wives.<sup>16</sup> This groundbreaking law, and the aforementioned constitution, were not the only revolutionary actions that the MSCS took in preparing for a smooth start to the settlement at Cape Palmas. Emigrants aboard the *Lafayette* had spoken of health concerns upon their arrival in Monrovia. As a result, the MSCS resolved to make sure that each emigrant had been vaccinated and had received a general health certificate from a physician before he or she left the United States. While James does not specify which vaccination emigrants were given, it can be safely assumed that it was the smallpox vaccine, since it was the only vaccine that existed at the time. In order to stimulate the growth of the new settlement, the MSCS decided that each emigrant would be given five acres of land, with the option to purchase additional land for the price of one dollar per acre. This was done to help develop a robust agricultural system, which was not present at Monrovia. Moreover, the MSCS chose to build houses at the settlement and sell them at a fixed price to new emigrants, and the money earned from those transactions would be used to erect houses for future emigrants. Lastly, each emigrant was given six months of provisions to help them transition to life in the colony. Those provisions consisted of meat, fish, bread, tea, and molasses.<sup>17</sup> It is important to note that the Maryland colony's constitution does not specify if every emigrant, regardless of age, gender, or marital status, would receive both the land and the provisions that were outlined above, and further research has not been able to clarify the issue.

The MSCS leadership was clearly well-prepared and did diligent work before establishing their settlement. Now that they had established a form of government and a set of guidelines for their prospective colony, the next step was trying to buy the land that they needed. However, before Dr. Hall set sail for Liberia, the MSCS chose to reach out to the ACS to make sure that there were no hard feelings between the two organizations. Historian Mary Sagarin had noted that the ACS was not happy with the MSCS's decision to become an independent organization and establish its own colony.<sup>18</sup> This prompted the MSCS to send a letter to the ACS in the summer of 1833, which stated that its members were not trying to start a rivalry, but simply thought that this was the best way to end slavery in Maryland.<sup>19</sup> Finally, on November 28, 1833, Dr. Hall, Reverend John Hersey, and Reverend J. Leighton Wilson set sail for the coast of Africa. They were accompanied by several white members of the Missionaries of the American Board of Foreign Missions, which was a Christian missionary society founded in 1810.<sup>20</sup>

Writing in 1885, John B. Latrobe noted that the trip to Africa aboard the *Ann* was slow and tedious. He claimed that the *Ann* was a poor sailing ship and encountered weather problems along the way. In fact, the ship sailed so poorly that Dr. Hall chose to disembark the ship at the first sign of land and sail toward the coast on a lateen sail boat. It took him three days to reach land and another two days to reach Monrovia. Upon his arrival, Hall began to solicit volunteers to help establish the new settlement. Among these recruits was George R. McGill, father of Sarah McGill, whom Russwurm had married earlier that year, and he was chosen to be the assistant agent at Cape Palmas. James M. Thompson was also one of the recruits that Dr. Hall was able to secure, and he was chosen to act as secretary of the colony. Six days after his arrival at Monrovia, Dr. Hall,

along with his recruits, set sail aboard the *Ann* towards Cape Palmas. They would make a stop at Bassa where they gained four more volunteers, and they finally arrived at Cape Palmas on February 11, 1834.<sup>21</sup>

On February 12, a palaver took place between Dr. Hall and the three kings of the area, King Parmah of Cape Palmas, King Baphro of Grand Cavallay, and King Weak Bolio of Grahway. While temperance was to be the policy of the settlement, Hall knew that rum would be necessary in order to negotiate an agreement, and indeed rum was insisted upon by the three rulers before they would even engage in talk. The rum, along with an undisclosed amount of silver dollars, was enough to secure a deal before nightfall. On February 14, the transaction was made official between Dr. Hall and the three kings, in the presence of George R. McGill and James Thompson.<sup>22</sup>

John Latrobe noted that the first order of business after purchasing the tract of land was trying to determine where to establish the settlement. Latrobe mentioned that two sites presented themselves as potential candidates, one on Cape Palmas, and one on the mainland. If the mainland was chosen, the settlers could immediately begin farming, however, the settlement would be at the mercy of the local inhabitants, who could cut it off from the ocean and even starve the settlers into submission. While the Cape would not offer the same agricultural opportunities as the mainland, a colony there could remain relatively independent and the colonists would also have access to the ocean. The Cape was ultimately chosen as the site of the settlement.<sup>23</sup>

The decision to vaccinate the emigrants paid off, and while some of the passengers aboard the *Ann* suffered from a fever upon their arrival, none of them perished, and they were able to accomplish a lot of work within their first few months. By

June 2, 1834, all but one of the town lots had been cleared, fenced, and planted, a jail had been erected, twelve houses had been built, a kitchen and rice house had been constructed, and a large native house where future emigrants could stay until they had a permanent home had also been built. By the end of December the colonists had been able to turn their attention to farming.<sup>32</sup>

By the beginning of 1836 Dr. Hall's health was rapidly deteriorating and the search for a new governor began. The MSCS appointed Oliver Holmes Jr. of Baltimore as temporary Governor on February 4, 1836.<sup>25</sup> However, the temporary nature of this appointment meant that the MSCS was trying to determine a long-term replacement for Dr. Hall. This would soon lead to an opportunity that Russwurm had been waiting his entire life for.

Prior to Holmes' appointment as temporary Governor of Maryland in Liberia, John Russwurm had found himself in an uncomfortable position. He was strongly disliked by the majority of the free black population in the United States, who deemed him a traitor to the black equality movement. He also faced strong opposition in Monrovia as well. Russwurm no longer had the support of the ACS, and his prior unwavering support of Governor Mechlin had earned him the distrust and contempt of the colonists. Ironically, the alienation that he faced at home and in Monrovia turned out to be one of the best things that could have happened to him.

Mary Sagarin noted that the MSCS realized that one of the mistakes the ACS had made was the continued appointment of white governing agents, and even Dr. Hall believed that the MSCS should appoint a black man as governor of the Maryland colony.<sup>26</sup> In keeping with their desire not to commit the same mistakes the ACS had

made, and their willingness to experiment with bold moves, the Board of Managers of the MSCS unanimously chose to appoint John Brown Russwurm to the position of Governor of Maryland in Liberia in June 1836.<sup>27</sup> So while Russwurm was not able to become Governor of Monrovia like he had initially hoped, he did become the first man of color ever to be named governor of any colonization settlement in Africa.

Russwurm's appointment was a landmark moment for the pan-African movement. He himself acknowledged this when he stated that, "I avow it publicly that the greatest stimulus ever presented to the man of colour in the United States has been the promotion of men of his race to offices of great trust and responsibility."<sup>28</sup> However, while the vote to appoint Russwurm as Governor of Maryland was a unanimous one, the Board of Managers knew that it was taking a risk and was leaving itself open to criticism. To try to make sure that the beginning of Russwurm's tenure went as smoothly as possible, Latrobe directed him to spend time at the archives at Cape Palmas where he could study and learn the colony's ordinances. Latrobe also provided Russwurm with a list of written instructions that amounted to twelve pages. It is uncertain when and if Russwurm knew that he was going to be appointed governor of the Maryland colony. What we do know is that he received his letter of appointment at the same time he received Latrobe's orders to study at the archives, along with the list of instructions.<sup>29</sup> Since he was the president of the MSCS, Latrobe was frequently in touch with Dr. Hall and Oliver Holmes, and whether or not any of the three let it slip that the Board of the MSCS was considering appointing Russwurm as governor remains a mystery.

Even though the MSCS believed that they had made the right decision to elect Russwurm, their decision was not met with universal praise. In fact, many people were



very critical of the decision. Mary Sagarin noted that the harshest criticism came from navy officers who felt that their personal level of influence would be degraded if they had to meet on equal terms with a black man.<sup>30</sup> Naval officer Joseph Nicholson of the *U.S.S. Potomac* was one example of a navy officer who was upset with Russwurm's appointment. While Nicholson was impressed with the colony itself, he observed that it was, "...of the greatest importance to have white agents at the respective settlements, gentlemen of general information and firmness of character. Not only do they command more respect from the Kings and natives of the country, but the colonists themselves more readily submit to their government"<sup>31</sup> While such observations and criticisms were not an attack on Russwurm himself, they were a general reflection of the racist attitude of the times, when the appointment of a colored man to a noteworthy position was seen as unfathomable. Despite these criticisms and the misgivings of men like Nicholson and members of the ACS, the MSCS board members had made up their minds, the decision to appoint Russwurm to become the new governor was a decision that they would not regret.

CHAPTER 7  
GOVERNOR RUSSWURM

Due to the criticism of men like Captain Joseph Nicholson, Russwurm knew that he was under immense pressure to succeed as Governor. He knew that the MSCS board had weighed very carefully their decision to elect him, and he promised not to disappoint them when he stated that, “They have departed from the old and beaten paths, by their resolutions in my favour, and may my right hand forget ‘its cunning,’ ere I abuse their confidence. I shall enter on my duty with my whole mind engaged in it, and failure shall not arise from neglect.”<sup>1</sup> Russwurm was aware that he was in for a significant challenge in the Maryland colony. One of the biggest problems that he faced was the differing ideologies between the ACS and the MSCS. It is important to remember that the goal of the MSCS was the extirpation of slavery in Maryland, and the majority of the colonists that were sent to the Maryland colony were manumitted slaves or previously freed blacks, who were forced to emigrate due to the state of Maryland’s harsh new laws that were implemented after Nat Turner’s rebellion. The sudden turmoil caused by these new laws, and the swiftness with which Maryland acted, meant that many of these emigrants did not have time to prepare, unlike those blacks who willingly chose to emigrate with the help of the ACS.

Russwurm's first order of business was to try to develop a strong agricultural system so that the colonists could provide for themselves. While it is not clear if this was applicable to both men and women, as previously noted, the MSCS provided new emigrants with six months of supplies, and also maintained a store in the colony, Russwurm knew that he needed to motivate the colonists to begin farming. As a result, he enacted a law that stated that no one could receive aid from the store unless they had grown at least "one acre of land in potatoes, cassada, pantans, cotton, or rice." (While not totally clear, it can be reasonably assumed that Russwurm was referring to either the vegetable cassava or the fruit casaba, and that pantans were most likely plantains.<sup>2)</sup> Nevertheless, Russwurm knew that in order for the colony to succeed, it would take hard work from everyone, and it was his job as governor to provide the necessary motivation that the colonists needed.

In fact, the colonists enjoyed only moderate success in developing a reliable agricultural system, and Russwurm soon realized that he would have to turn to commerce in order to keep the colony afloat. While he still wanted colonists to grow crops that could be consumed locally, he soon allowed them to begin growing exportable items such as coffee and sugar cane. Russwurm furthered the colony's economic growth by purchasing two vessels in 1840. He named one of them *Latrobe*, in honor of John Latrobe, the president of the MSCS, and the other one he named *Doctor*. It is unclear just whom this ship was named after. Amos Beyan noted that it could have been named in honor of his brother-in-law Samuel Ford McGill, who was a medical doctor, but there is also the possibility that it was named after his friend Dr. James Hall.<sup>3</sup> Either way, the cultivation of tradable crops and the purchase of the two ships helped to develop a strong

economic base. Russwurm also created a paper currency system in Maryland that consisted of five cent, ten cent, and twenty-five cent notes. Amos Beyan noted that the introduction of this currency, along with the barter system that was already in place, allowed Russwurm to purchase from and trade with the native Glebo Africans. Among the goods that Russwurm bought from the natives were rice, palm oil, and camwoods.<sup>4</sup>

While developing the economy was essential to the success of the Maryland colony, Russwurm did not lose sight of some of his earlier goals. During his time as editor of *Freedom's Journal*, he had been a strong advocate of education. His desire to better the lives of free blacks through education remained strong in Maryland. Before Russwurm became the governor of the Maryland colony, missionaries had helped to provide an education for young colonists. Upon his appointment as governor, Russwurm began the process of trying to set up schools and establish a strong educational system. This process was frustrating for him, and it led him to remark in 1838 that "All the colonists deplore the want of education, and a few are willing to make every exertion to send their children to school, but the majority think it all sufficient, if they can stammer through a book, and scratch the[ir] names on a paper."<sup>5</sup> However, as Amos Beyan points out, this assessment is far from the truth, and it most likely stemmed from the fact that the majority of the colonists lacked a proper education to begin with, which frustrated Russwurm, who was known to have a fiery temper. In fact, Beyan observes that most of the colonists desired an education, especially for their children, and obtaining an education was among their chief goals in Maryland.<sup>6</sup>

One of the main handicaps that Russwurm faced in developing a strong educational system was the lack of suitable teachers. Sagarin commented that many of

the teachers in Maryland were young, and some were still teenagers. She referenced an instance where a young girl came to the colony as a teacher, even though she could barely read, and could only spell one-syllable words. It became evident that her only qualification was the fact that she was willing to leave the U.S. and become a Maryland colonist.<sup>7</sup> In spite of these limitations, Russwurm was able to achieve great success with his education initiatives in Maryland. Only a couple of years after his arrival in the colony, he opened two schools for children, even though the population of the entire colony was less than three-hundred people. By 1845, there were three schools in the colony, which enrolled a total of seventy students. By 1850, Russwurm had established five schools, with an estimated attendance of one-hundred and twenty to one-hundred and seventy-five students, and by the time of his death in 1851 he had finally succeeded in creating a high school.<sup>8</sup>

The education and experience that Russwurm gained as a student in Canada, at Hebron Academy, and at Bowdoin College had prepared him well for his role as a champion of education. The Maryland schools taught reading, writing, arithmetic, spelling, geography, and grammar. Russwurm also employed the Monitorial method of teaching, also known as the Lancasterian system, which was developed in the late eighteenth century by Joseph Lancaster. This method of teaching was low in price and it helped make up for the lack of skilled teachers in the colony. The Lancasterian system was based on a hierarchy where older students would teach younger students and those younger students would teach students that were even younger than them. This method of teaching also included a merit-system that rewarded students who excelled, and it was believed to be the best system for developing a high level of academics, while also

instilling Christian piety.<sup>9</sup> The schools in Maryland operated from 9:00 AM to 4:00 PM, and students were given a thirty minute recess at noon. The day began with prayers and religious teachings, which were then followed by reading, writing, and spelling exercises. These exercises were conducted both orally and by students copying words on to slates. Also, similar to what went on in some American schools, students would sometimes be quizzed in the presence of school officials and members of the community.<sup>10</sup>

Russwurm's accomplishments in the field of education were quite remarkable, and in some ways Maryland's schools were even more progressive than schools in the U.S. During the first half of the nineteenth century in the U.S., little to no emphasis was placed on women's education, and in fact it was seen as both unnecessary and undesirable.<sup>11</sup> However, this was not the case in the Maryland colony. Both the missionaries and Russwurm stressed education, and as we saw earlier, women were generally afforded more rights and protection in Maryland, due to laws that mandated the imprisonment of men for beating their wives.<sup>12</sup> Russwurm's success in creating an educated and enlightened society was not limited to the organizing of schools for children, however. There were public lectures given by Russwurm, there was a debating society which met twice a month, and a literary association named the Russwurm Literary Association. A public library was also created. By the time of his death, Russwurm had been able to turn the colony into a flourishing community that not only contained a strong educational system, but an enlightened community that also boasted agricultural societies, choral societies, and numerous mutual aid associations.<sup>13</sup>

While it can be argued that Russwurm's greatest achievement in Maryland was the implementation of his education initiatives, he was equally impressive in how he

handled relations with native Africans. Unlike so many others before him, especially the governors of Monrovia, Russwurm went to great lengths in order to maintain peaceful relations with the neighboring communities of indigenous Africans. He took the time to learn the languages of several of the native communities so that he could communicate and negotiate with them directly. At times, he was even accused of favoring the natives over the colonists that he governed. A glaring example of this so-called “favoritism” came to light in 1838. Charles Snetter, a Maryland colonist, rounded up several other colonists in an attempt to avenge the murder of a fellow colonist by a group of local people. Snetter and his men mistakenly attacked a group of innocent Africans, which resulted in the death of one native and the wounding of several others. As a result, Russwurm made the decision to banish Snetter from the colony, which was met with harsh criticism by the other colonists. The criticism bothered Russwurm enough that he threatened to resign his position as Governor. However, after the MSCS expressed its approval of his decision to banish Snetter, Russwurm chose to stay on.<sup>14</sup>

The decision to banish Snetter is where we begin to see Russwurm’s leadership abilities emerge. While he faced criticism for making an unpopular decision, he did not backpedal or change his mind. The Snetter decision set a precedent in the colony, and colonists soon came to the realization that Russwurm would not side with them if they chose to harm any of the native peoples. Russwurm also strove to conduct fair and honest negotiations with the indigenous rulers. When he was in negotiations to purchase Fish Town, he was told stories about previous negotiations conducted by men such as Dr. Hall, during which the natives were knowingly given inferior or defective goods and

products. This revelation appalled Russwurm and he made a concerted effort to treat the local people fairly when negotiating land purchases and the trading of goods.<sup>15</sup>

Whether or not Russwurm actually had noble intentions when dealing with the natives inhabitants is certainly debatable as we shall see later, and it is most likely the case that he simply wanted to live in peace. Keeping good relations with the indigenous peoples would be a key element in achieving that goal. However, there is no denying how successful Russwurm was in maintaining harmony between the newcomers and the natives. While there were often tense moments between the two parties, Russwurm was able to avoid all-out warfare, which was an incredible accomplishment.

The Charles Snetter incident showed that Russwurm would not hesitate to make a decision that he knew would be unpopular with the people he governed. Being able to make tough and unpopular decisions is the sign of a competent leader, but, it was how Russwurm dealt with the Board of Managers of the MSCS that showed just what a great leader he was, and just how far he had come since his affiliation with the ACS. When Russwurm was involved with the ACS, he continually tried to win the favor of the Board of Managers and Governor Mechlin. This strategy backfired on him when he fell out of favor with the ACS, and it also alienated him from his fellow colonists. It seems that Russwurm learned from this mistake, and he realized that while it is important to have support from your superiors, you also need to look after the best interests of the people you are governing, as it is their well-being that you are responsible for, even if it means taking a stand against the people that elected you.

Russwurm was able to walk this tightrope quite successfully. While he did not make it a point to argue with the Board of Managers at every turn, Russwurm was able to



identify accurately the instances where he needed to assert himself. One of these occasions took place in 1844, when the MSCS wanted to impose a ten percent tax on the colonists and their trade. Russwurm flatly refused to levy such an extortionate tax and it was lowered to one percent.<sup>16</sup> Mary Sagarin noted that this was a notable move and a bold one by Russwurm, since the Maryland colony still relied on the MSCS for support.<sup>17</sup> This decision showed that Russwurm had transitioned from being a “yes man” for the ACS, to a great leader who was not afraid to take a stand for what he believed to be right. It was this kind of decision-making that won him the respect and admiration of the colonists, and it is also why the MSCS chose to elect Russwurm as governor, even though they did butt heads on occasion.

Russwurm’s accomplishments in the Maryland colony are even more remarkable due to the fact that he suffered from severe medical problems shortly after his emigration to the new colony. Despite the belief that blacks would not suffer from the harsh tropical environment as much as whites would, the environment did indeed have an impact on Russwurm. His health also further deteriorated as a result of the long hours that he worked every day. He was not being facetious when he told John Latrobe that “None in your employ eat the bread of idleness in Africa,” and he often worked more than eighteen hours a day.<sup>18</sup> It is unclear just exactly what Russwurm was suffering from, but he often categorized it as rheumatism in his arms and legs, and he also became emaciated.<sup>19</sup> As a result of this illness, and out of the need for medical treatment, he would make his first and only trip back to the United States.

There seems to be a little confusion about when exactly John Russwurm returned to America. Mary Sagarin wrote that he returned to American in 1849, and that his wife

did not make the trip with him, although she does not provide a citation for that proposed date.<sup>20</sup> Winston James, on the other hand, noted that Russwurm arrived back in the United States on August 10, 1848, after only twenty eight days at sea, and that he was indeed accompanied by his wife, Sarah McGill Russwurm, and one of their sons, although he did not specify which son made the trip.<sup>21</sup> It would appear that Winston James has the correct information, as John Latrobe, the President of the MSCS, wrote that Russwurm had applied for a leave of absence to visit the U.S., and that Dr. Samuel McGill was named as Russwurm's temporary replacement on April 7, 1848.<sup>22</sup>

Almost immediately after he arrived in Baltimore, even before receiving medical care and visiting with the Board of Managers of the MSCS, Russwurm traveled north to Maine, where he visited his stepmother Susan Hawes, and some of the remaining contacts that he still had there.<sup>23</sup> If any of Russwurm's detractors still believed that he was a tool in the colonization movement, or that his decision to embrace colonization was not genuine, those detractors would soon be silenced. While he was visiting New England he received a remarkable offer. William Fessenden, a Bowdoin alumnus and abolitionist, along with several of Russwurm's old friends in Boston, invited him to become the president of a black college they were hoping to establish in that city.<sup>24</sup> Even though Russwurm cared deeply for his stepmother, and being appointed president of an all-black college would be an incredible honor, he was never tempted to stay in America, as he now considered Africa to be his home.

After Russwurm returned to Baltimore and received medical treatment, the Board of Managers of the MSCS held a dinner in his honor. Winston James noted that the dinner caused a sensation in Baltimore, especially at the hotel where it was hosted, and

that the waiters were shocked that they had to provide the same level of service to a man of color as they were accustomed to provide for whites.<sup>25</sup> Reflecting on the event many years later, John Latrobe noted that all of the members of the MSCS were impressed with the courteous and dignified manner in which Russwurm conducted himself.<sup>26</sup>

While Russwurm was glad to have seen his stepmother, and was gratified by the dinner held in his honor, he was anxious to return to Africa. He departed from Baltimore on September 6, 1848, and arrived in Cape Palmas on November 17.<sup>27</sup> Russwurm felt physically and mentally rejuvenated upon his return to Africa, and even remarked that the medical treatment “has added twelve or fifteen years to my life, from my feelings.”<sup>28</sup> However, his health would soon fail him, and he was bedridden by 1851. Even while he was gravely ill, he still carried out his duties as Governor to the best of his abilities. Russwurm’s ailments would finally get the better of him, however, and he passed away on June 9, 1851. While it is unclear exactly what he died from, it was undoubtedly linked to the “rheumatism” that had plagued him since his arrival in the Maryland colony.

Even though he had been confined to his bed for some time, his death was still a shock to everyone. Dr. Samuel McGill noted that two weeks prior to his death, Russwurm had been free from pain, and even on the day of his death, he had still carried out as many duties as he could.<sup>29</sup> News of Russwurm’s death reached Baltimore in October of 1851, and the Board of Managers of the MSCS were deeply saddened when they learned of it. They observed that Russwurm had proved all of his doubters wrong and that a black man was certainly capable of governing men.<sup>30</sup> This observation by the MSCS speaks volumes about the achievements of John Brown Russwurm. The MSCS had taken a gamble by appointing a black man to such an important position, which

meant that Russwurm would not be allowed to make any mistakes, since he would be under intense scrutiny. It was clear that he understood the situation that he was placed in, and he was also cognizant of the fact that many people wanted him to fail. He went on to prove all his doubters wrong, and he worked diligently at his job until the day he died.

There is no denying that Russwurm was able to accomplish great things in the Maryland colony. Nevertheless, it should be noted that he did face criticism from the settlers, and that he was guilty of instituting and enforcing a prejudiced social hierarchy in the settlement. It would also be distorting the truth to overlook some of the criticisms that he faced. Russwurm has been depicted by historians like Mary Sagarin and Winston James as a kind and compassionate leader, who treated the colonists and native Africans as his friends. However, Amos Beyan argues that many of the colonists accepted Russwurm's leadership simply because they had no choice. As the years passed, discontent with his leadership began to grow, and some compared the colony to a large plantation with Russwurm as the overseer.<sup>31</sup> Colonists also grew concerned about the length of Russwurm's tenure as governor, and this became apparent when he traveled back to America. In 1848, several colonists, led by one Joshua H. Stewart, wrote to the MSCS and told them that Russwurm had been in power for too long, and that they wanted a new governor. Stewart was concerned about the dangers that can arise when a person holds on to power year after year, and in a letter to the MSCS, he argued that "after twelve years any man would lose all sympathies for those he governed, and would inevitably become a petty tyrant. [And] that such a long term in office violated the rules of republicanism and...the colony might next have a king over it."<sup>32</sup>

Russwurm has also been lauded for his dealings with the native peoples. In reality, he was not always as kind to them as some historians would have you believe. As part of his goal to “civilize” the indigenous inhabitants, Russwurm had the children of native Africans work as servants in settlers’ homes. The children were not compensated for their work, they were obliged to replace their birth names with Western ones, and they were forced to abandon their traditional values, which gives credence to the comparison of the Maryland colony to a large plantation.<sup>33</sup>

Russwurm was also guilty of treating the settlers and indigenous peoples in a paternalistic manner, and creating a clear social ladder in the colony. At the top of the ladder were Russwurm, and several other Westernized blacks, such as Anthony Wood and Thomas Jackson, who had been members of the Colonial Assembly before Russwurm arrived in Maryland.<sup>34</sup> Below the Westernized blacks were the settlers, and the bottom rung of the social ladder was occupied by the native Africans. Russwurm also made no effort to hide his disdain for those that he considered to be beneath him. He constantly referred to the natives as “savages” and even remarked that the settlers needed to “learn their social and political Alphabet much as a child does his ABC’s”.<sup>35</sup>

With all that being said, however, it is hard to blame Russwurm for these shortcomings. While he did govern the colony for fifteen years, his work impressed the MSCS, and they showed no desire to replace him, which was something only they had the power to do. Russwurm was also the product of a social institution in both Canada and the United States that had always favored lighter skinned blacks over darker skinned blacks. His lighter complexion, along with his education, had always found him favor in the U.S. and in his dealings with the ACS and the MSCS, so it was only natural that he

considered himself to be superior to those who were darker skinned and lacked an education. Also, this paternalistic nature may have stemmed simply from the fact that he felt responsible for the well-being of the people of the Maryland colony, and he may have been trying to look out for their best interests. So while he may not have created a utopian society, he did take his job as governor very seriously. He did the best he could to develop an educational system for free blacks and make the group of colonists self-sufficient. He was certainly not perfect, but he was an important figure in the pan-African movement who fought for the rights of free blacks.

## CHAPTER 8

### RUSSWURM'S RIGHTFUL PLACE

The American Revolution was a turning point for free blacks in America. Citizens of the thirteen colonies had become inspired by such wartime rhetoric as, "All men are created equal," and after the Revolution, the individual state governments were forced to look at the issue of slavery. How could they demand liberty and justice while they still held men and women in bondage? Anti-slavery sentiments began to appear in the Northern and Mid-Atlantic states, and even in some states in the Upper South such as Virginia and Maryland. While it took some time, emancipation plans, whether outright or gradual, were implemented in states such as Massachusetts, Connecticut, Pennsylvania, New Hampshire, and although it did not technically become a state until 1791, Vermont. While anti-slavery sentiments did exist, the state governments had no intentions of giving freed slaves equal rights, and the desire to abolish the institution of slavery in the Northern and Mid-Atlantic states was rooted in large part in the fact that slavery was not an essential part of their economy. The fact that slavery in the North differed greatly from slavery in the South, coupled with the decline of the overseas slave trade, left the future of Northern slavery in question. As the number of manumitted blacks continued to grow, and with no desire on the part of the majority community to integrate them into society, it soon became apparent that a solution was needed to rid the country of free blacks. Both

Northern and Upper Southern states wanted to remove free blacks. Northern whites did not want to face economic competition from free blacks and they also did not want Southern runaways or manumitted slaves flocking to their states. Most white residents of states in the Upper South shared similar sentiments. The Upper South contained a significant number of free blacks whom the majority of white people had no use for, and with the ever present threat of slave rebellions, the idea of creating a colony in Africa for free blacks was seen as a way to solve this “problem.”

One of the central figures to emerge in the colonization movement was John Brown Russwurm. Russwurm was the product of an interracial relationship between a white Virginian merchant and a Jamaican woman. He was lucky enough to have been loved by his father, unlike so many children that were born out of such relationships. As a result, he was given opportunities that were unavailable to most people of color. He would go on to become one of the nation’s first black college graduates, act as junior editor and later on sole editor of *Freedom’s Journal*, the nation’s first black newspaper, and would eventually become Governor of the Maryland colony in Africa.

However, despite all of these accomplishments, trying to determine Russwurm’s rightful place in the pan-African movement is very challenging. Oddly enough, he is remembered and honored by many, yet the complex story of his life has, for the most part, been left out of most history books. Some of the awards and commemorations named in his honor include schools and landmarks, as well as scholarships. In New York, where *Freedom’s Journal* was published, the John B. Russwurm School was opened in September of 1956, and sits on the corner of Fifth Avenue and 135<sup>th</sup> Street in Harlem. Some of the scholarships named in honor of Russwurm include the Bowdoin College



John Brown Russwurm Scholarship, and the Indiana University of Pennsylvania Russwurm Outstanding Student Award. The creation of the Bowdoin Scholarship was spearheaded by several Bowdoin undergraduates to help a Southern black college student who was expelled for taking part in a sit-in at a lunch counter in the fight for equal rights. While historian Mary Sagarin does not provide the name of the student who was the first recipient of the scholarship or the institution that he attended, she notes that the scholarship has been awarded every year since 1960 to a black undergraduate student, with the help of the National Scholarship Service and the Fund for Negro Students.<sup>2</sup> The Indiana University of Pennsylvania scholarship is awarded every year by the African American Cultural Center to a black undergraduate who has demonstrated outstanding achievements and contributes to the development of multiculturalism.<sup>3</sup> One other award is the John B. Russwurm award, which is awarded annually by the National Newspaper Publishers' Association to the nation's top black newspaper, in honor of *Freedom's Journal*.<sup>4</sup> Children in Liberia are also taught about the history of the Maryland colony, and a small island located just off of Cape Palmas has been named Russwurm Island.<sup>1</sup>

Even with all of these commemorations and memorials, John Brown Russwurm remains largely a forgotten man in the discussion of notable African Americans, and more often than not, he is confused with the white abolitionist John Brown, who was responsible for the 1859 raid on Harper's Ferry. Russwurm does not get the respect that he deserves for several reasons. There seems to be a misunderstanding of and lack of appreciation for the colonization movement, and Russwurm was heavily criticized by both his contemporaries and later generations of historians who saw him as a traitor and a sellout.

When one looks at African American history, one realizes that the colonization movement is not a subject that is covered in great detail in schools. Black civil rights leaders such as W.E.B DuBois, Malcolm X, and Martin Luther King Jr. are held in high regard, but those individuals who embraced colonization are merely footnotes in American history. This attitude stems from the fact that many historians remain skeptical of the colonization movement because of the harsh words that contemporaries had for those black men and women who endorsed colonization. For many blacks during the early 19<sup>th</sup> century, colonization was not seen as a way to improve the conditions of those who were already free or bring about the emancipation of the enslaved, rather, it was an attempt to rid the country of free people, while maintaining the institution of slavery in the Southern states. While it is true that many white supporters of colonization wanted to maintain the status quo in America, many of the free blacks who embraced colonization really did believe that emigrating to Liberia would help them achieve a better life for themselves and their children.

Russwurm's omission from the history books was largely the result of the criticism that he faced for choosing to become a proponent of colonization. He had been such an outspoken critic of the ACS, that when he chose to join the same organization, he faced a severe backlash from the free black community. White antislavery activist and newspaperman William Lloyd Garrison helped lead the initial attack on Russwurm's character. As the editor of the antislavery newspaper the *Liberator*, Garrison was in a perfect position not only to attack Russwurm, but to reach a wide audience whose opinions he could sway. In the May 7, 1831 issue of the *Liberator*, Garrison claimed that Russwurm had a "love of distinction far greater than his regard for consistency," and that

he had allowed the ACS to seduce him into embracing colonization.<sup>5</sup> Garrison would continue his attack exactly two weeks later when he accused Russwurm of being a black Benedict Arnold, who had turned his back on his brethren for the promise of future rewards.<sup>6</sup> So despite the fact that Russwurm's decision to join the colonization cause was not motivated by the promise of future rewards, he was not spared from false accusations by his contemporaries.

It is very likely that Garrison's attacks on Russwurm were largely responsible for the way that future historians viewed Russwurm as well, because the negative opinions of his character would endure, even a century after he made the decision to join the ACS. Writing in 1936, historian Arthur Schomburg, who was of African and Puerto Rican descent, noted that while Russwurm was a brilliant journalist and teacher, he had sold his birthright for a chance to join the ACS.<sup>7</sup> However, the most damning attack on Russwurm came from Bella Gross in her article "*Freedom's Journal and the Rights of All*," which was published in the *Journal of Negro History* in 1932. Gross, just like Schomburg, argued that Russwurm sold himself to the ACS for special favors and positions of influence in Liberia.<sup>8</sup> Winston James also points out that Gross apparently altered the information contained in her citations. For example, on page 280 of "*Freedom's Journal and the Rights of All*," she writes that Russwurm "had the audacity to defend the policies and expulsion laws of Ohio, because 'our rightful place is in Africa' ".<sup>9</sup> Gross' citation for this claim is the March 7, 1829 edition of *Freedom's Journal*. However, there is no mention of Ohio or Russwurm's quote in that edition. This false claim and others like it by Gross are very damaging to Russwurm's image because digital technology did not exist at the time Gross went into print with her article and there was no way for readers to

check her claims. In addition, the fact that this piece appeared in a reputable publication like *The Journal of Negro History* meant that people most likely took Gross' words at face value, and did not bother to do further research. These attacks by Gross and Schomburg, with no evidence to substantiate them, have helped to cause irreversible damage to Russwurm's legacy.

Another criticism that Russwurm has faced is that he gave up or took the easy way out, instead of doing the 'noble' thing of staying in America and continuing to fight for equal rights. Arthur Schomburg favored someone like Samuel Cornish over Russwurm because, "Men like Cornish, who battled in and out of season for the American colored people to remain here in the land of their birth rather than to run across the ocean chasing rainbows, served posterity best, and now merit our everlasting thanksgiving."<sup>10</sup> Historians like Schomburg implied that not only did Russwurm give up on fighting for equal rights in America, but that he was being a coward by "running across the ocean." So, unfortunately for Russwurm, he has been painted as not only a traitor, but a coward as well.

However, what many early twentieth century historians failed to realize is that there can be more than one way to solve a problem, and they have refused to give Russwurm credit for at least trying something different, rather than sitting around and hoping that equality would be given to black people one day. Writing in 1831, Russwurm attacked all opponents of colonization by challenging his adversaries directly. "[W]ill any of these men who labor from such *pure* motives, do anything more than spout, and run from city to city, dissuading those, whose wishes are for bettering their condition, from making an *attempt*."<sup>11</sup> In Russwurm's eyes, even though many free blacks were opposed

to colonization, the ones who embraced colonization were at least making an attempt to better their lives, instead of relying on religious teachings and sermons that promised that equality would eventually come because they were loved by God.<sup>12</sup> One of the men who defended Russwurm's decision to try to help free blacks by joining the colonization cause was Rev. A. F. Russell, a Cape Palmas colonist. In a letter to Rev. John Seys written in July of 1852, some months after Russwurm's passing, Russell stated,

“How can it be thought by a colored man, a poor ninety-ninth rate being in America, that he is disgracing himself or blighting his honor, to leave America before all his brethren are free? Where is the honor of hopeless oppression? Where is the honor arising from holding a few self-torturing feeble, worse than time-wasting anti-slavery meetings in a free state? Telling over to each other what they have experienced a thousand times, and will experience a thousand more, without altering their condition. Why sing to each other, we are degraded, oppressed?...What have I to do with a native land, that never saw one of my race a free man, but to leave it, for the black man's own home...In the United States you are only men in shape- and when slave labor is no longer needed, years hence, you will remain in the United States if you will-- holding a position somewhat analogous to the ourang-outang, “an animal,” they will say, “something like a man that used to work with our oxen, plough with our horses, hunt with our dogs,” etc.”<sup>13</sup>

Sadly, defenses of Russwurm's philosophy like those of Rev. Russell are few and far between. John Brown Russwurm's legacy has been tarnished by people who do not seem to understand the sacrifices and decisions that he made. At a time when free blacks were struggling to be heard, he provided them with an opportunity to speak out through the pages of *Freedom's Journal*. He worked tirelessly to provide black people with the information necessary to improve their lives and the lives of their children by stressing

the importance of education, and the need to learn about the economy, so that they could become self-sufficient. He also had to walk a tightrope and please not only the black readers of *Freedom's Journal*, but also the white readers who had helped to support the paper. Russwurm was not afraid to explore alternate routes, which is a trait that all pioneers need to possess. When the future of free blacks in America looked bleak, he chose to embrace colonization, with the hope that an African colony could provide a new life for free blacks, where they could gain an education, become self-sufficient, and live lives not blighted by prejudice. While he was not perfect, Russwurm worked diligently every day for the rest of his life to achieve these goals, even when he was on his deathbed.

Russwurm's accomplishments are even more impressive considering that there was no one that came before him that he could base his decisions on. As the editor of the first black newspaper in the United States, he had to learn how to run the paper as he went along, while under intense scrutiny from both free blacks and whites all across the country. Similarly, as the first black governor of the Maryland colony, he knew that people all over the world would be watching him, and that he would not be allowed to make mistakes. He responded to this challenge brilliantly, and helped build the colony from the ground up. Just because Russwurm took a different path than most civil rights leaders does not mean that his achievements are any less important or impressive. John Brown Russwurm paved the way for future civil rights leaders, and he was a true pioneer in the pan-African movement, who deserves to be mentioned among the nation's greatest civil rights advocates.

## NOTES

### CHAPTER 1 NOTES

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