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**“OPPOSITION TO EMIGRATION, A SELECTED
LETTER OF WILLIAM WATKINS)
(The Colored Baltimorean)”**

Bettye J. Gardner*

In the decades before the Civil War the attention of both blacks and whites was drawn to the issue of colonization. For whites in Maryland, the alarming increase in the black population from 7.2% in 1790 to 26.9% in 1860, and the increase of free blacks from 13.5% to 17% in the same period, led to the establishment of the Maryland Colonization Society.¹ After fourteen years as a part of the national organization, the General Assembly of the state legislature of Maryland incorporated the Society in 1831 as a state subsidized organization and pledged to furnish \$200,000 over the succeeding 20 years to transport free blacks to Liberia.²

With an organized state society and legislation that was increasingly repressive the Baltimore black community entered into heated discussions on the pros and cons of emigrating to Liberia, Haiti, or the West Indies. Although most of the black support for colonization came from other areas of Maryland, the Baltimore black community was divided over the feasibility of giving up the known quantity for the unknown. Beginning in 1826 with a large number of black Baltimoreans who met at the Sharp Street Church, and continuing throughout the Ante-bellum period, the issue of emigration was a recurring discussion. It is significant, however, that few of Baltimore's black population actually went to any of the places that were discussed.

One of the most outspoken critics of colonization in the 1820's and 1830's was William J. Watkins, a minister, school teacher, and frequent correspondent to *The Genius of Universal Emancipation*, *The Liberator* and *Freedom's Journal* under the pseudonym "The Colored Baltimorean." Watkins was born in Baltimore, attended the school run by Daniel Coker, and at the age of 19 became the teacher of that school when Coker left for Africa.³ Subsequently, William Watkins gained such renown as a teacher until it was reported that a "year in his school was all the recommendation a boy or girl of that day needed."⁴ Additionally, realizing, that there was a need to educate the whole person, he, Lewis Wells (Baltimore's Ante-bellum black doctor), William Douglass, and William Lively formed one of the earliest Mental and Moral Improvement Societies in the city.⁵

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Unlike many of his contemporaries who vacillated on the question of emigration, Watkins argued vehemently that all efforts to encourage emigration by the colonization societies was nothing more than a scheme to rid the country of free blacks. As Watkins perceived it, the struggle was here and all energy should be directed toward that end. So strong were his views on colonization that he is generally credited with encouraging William L. Garrison to oppose the movement also.⁶

While much of the Ante-bellum thought presented in articles and books reflects the thinking of Northern free blacks, William Watkins lived all but the last six years of his life in Baltimore, a city with strong ties to the South. The letter which is included here, was written by Watkins in July, 1827 and represents the thinking of one of the most eloquent and gifted writers of the Ante-bellum period.

July 6, 1827

Messer. Editors—

Being one of those coloured sons of the Union, whose degraded condition, has, of late, excited so much benevolent feeling and corresponding effort, among the good and wise of our country, and for the amelioration of whose condition, and considerable number of societies and plans, have been, professedly, instituted and devised; it cannot but be expected, that gratitude to my benefactors, as well as a concern for my own happiness, would naturally excite me to a candid investigation of any proposition, that promises to elevate me to the dignity of a man. Being thus influenced, my attention has for some time been directed to the merits of that distinguished institution, denominated the African Colonization Society. This very popular society, it is said, is composed of the wisest and most philanthropic men in the country. Those, who thus eulogize the members of that institution, are, perhaps, more thoroughly and intimately acquainted with their views and motives than we are. We know little or nothing of them, but what we gather from their writings; and from these, we cannot but think, that, if they are the wisest, they are not, however, the most philanthropic, of our country.

For, in the first place, it appears very strange to me that those benevolent men should feel so much for the condition of the free coloured people, and, at the same time, cannot sympathize in the least degree, with those whose condition appeals so much louder to their humanity and benevolence.—Nor, is this all: we are apprised that some of the most distinguished of that society, are themselves, Slaveholders! Now, how those men can desire so ardently, and labour so abundantly, for the exaltation of the free people, thousands of whom they have never seen, and feel so little concern for those who are held in bondage by themselves; whose degraded condition is directly under their observation, and immediately within the sphere of their benevolence to ameliorate, is a philanthropy, I confess, unaccountable to me. Indeed, I have thought, that a philanthropic slaveholder is as great a solecism as a sober drunkard. If these gentlemen disavow being actuated by interested motives, and would have us to think favourably of them and their proceedings, they must commence their labour of love by striking at the root of the great and growing evil;—they must commence by proclaiming deliverance to their own captives;—they must open (to the extent of their power

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and influence) the prison doors of those that are bound, and set at liberty those that are bruised. Until this shall have been done, or at least commenced, we shall continue to question the genuineness of their benevolence.

But there is another objectionable feature in the plan of this society, well calculated, as we think, to corroborate our suspicions of the motives of its founders. Its members hold out the anti-christian doctrine, that justice cannot be done to us while we remain in this land of civilization and gospel light. They tell us we can never enjoy the unalienable rights of man in this "land of the free, and home of the brave;"—that if we desire the privileges of freemen, we must seek them elsewhere; not in Hayti, on account of its proximity to this country, but on the burning sands of Africa, where, say they, bring permanently fixed, a mighty ocean will forever intervene as a barrier between us and them. Now, permit me to ask, why this strong aversion to being united to us, even by soil and climate: Why this desire to be so remotely alienated from us? Is it to extend to us in the hour of danger, the friendly hand of assistance? Or rather is it not to get effectually and forever rid of that "heterogeneous," or supposed "dangerous element in the general mass of the free blacks," who, it is said, "are a greater nuisance than even slaves themselves?" Thus the members of the African Colonization Society frequently speak; and, I think we may learn from such, as well as many other observations of like import, what is the life-giving principle of the African Colonization system. We are, say they, "an inferior race—repugnant to their republican feelings," in short, "a nuisance." Not, indeed, that we have made ourselves so by our crimes,—no, but we are a "nuisance," because the Creator of all things, the Sovereign Ruler of the Universe has thought proper, in his infinite wisdom, to tincture us with a darker hue than that of our white brethren. Or, if you please, because the lot of our ancestors happened to be cast in the torrid zone, beneath the scorching beams of a vertical sun. This is our crime; and for this alone we are told that we can never be men, unless we abandon the land of our birth, "our veritable home," and people an uncongenial clime, the barbarous regions of Africa. O that men would learn that knowledge and virtue, not colour, constitute the sum of human dignity. With these we are white, without them black.

Again, were the members of that distinguished institution actuated by the motives so generally ascribed to them, why is it, permit me to ask, that they dread, or become offended at an investigation of the principles upon which the society is based? Why is it that they would have us yield, with implicit credulity, without the exercise of our own judgment, to whatever they propose for our happiness? Does not the dread of liberal enquiry, indicate something radically wrong in their principles? They should ever bear in mind, that if it is their prerogative to devise, it is ours to investigate. We are all interested. Some of the benevolent societies of our land, have proceeded on principles widely different from those which we have just noticed. They, so far from dreading, a liberal investigation of their views and motives, are making every possible effort to attract public attention. It would appear, that they are never so sanguine in their expectations of success, as when the public are disposed to scrutinize their pretensions. They do not dread, but court investigation. And what have they lost by this liberal procedure? Are they not daily increasing in number, respectability and influence? So true it is, that "truth loses nothing by investigation." But after all that has been said for, and against the society, in question, we may safely affirm that if it be of God, it will, (in spite of all opposition) stand: if not, it will, (in despite of the power and high authority now combined to sustain it) fall.

Furthermore, how much benevolence has been displayed by that philanthropic society, in preparing any of the emigrants that have left the country, for usefulness in the colony whither they have repaired? Would it not be more congenial with the profession [sic] object of that society to educate, pretty liberally, in this country, some portion of the emigrants, and thereby prepare them the more effectually to carry to the land of their forefathers, (to use the language of Mr. H. Clay) "the rich fruits of religion, civilization, law and liberty," than to send them away in all their acknowledged ignorance and depravity?—Many good wishes have been expressed by the members of the African Colonization Society in behalf of poor, degraded Africa. They most pitiably deplore the ignorance, barbarity, and moral corruption that have for so many centuries maintained an unbroken sway over her unfortunate sons. But what have they done, or what are they doing to effectuate a destruction of this deplorable state of things among them? Their speeches will, in some sort, furnish an answer. They tell us that we, who are "of all classes of the population of this country, the most vicious; who, being contaminated ourselves, extend our vices to all around us; to the slaves and to the whites;" are to be the pioneers of this great work of regeneration and reform. Fine materials indeed to accomplish so glorious a work! This is a phenomena in the moral world, to which I beg leave to call the attention of the ministers of the gospel, on the Sabbath nearest the fourth of July. Thus, we have exposed our sentiments relative to the principles which we have thought govern the members of the African Colonization Society, generally. If we are wrong, we hope they will set us right. We are aware that many will say, that we have taken an uncharitable view of the subject; but be this as it may, we think differently. We would, however, beg those who may be inclined to think unfavourably of what we have advanced, before they pass judgment upon us, to fancy themselves for a moment in our situation; and take into consideration, all the propositions of that society relative to us, and, if they do not, after such an experiment, think as we do, I am much mistaken. We now close these observations, by addressing the members of that society in the language of one of its members. "If my opinion differ from yours, it is well that you should be early apprized of it. You will, at all events, give me the credit, as I publicly proclaim them, of having honestly adopted them; and, having adopted them after mature deliberation, I shall independently adhere to them, as long as I believe them right."⁷

¹ James Wright, *The Free Negro In Maryland* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1921), p. 265.

² *Ibid.* pp. 272-273.

³ "Essay on William Watkins," The Daniel Murray Collection. State Historical Society of Wisconsin, Madison, Wisconsin. See also Bettye J. Gardner, "William Watkins: Antebellum Black Teacher and Anti-slavery Writer" in *The Negro History Bulletin*, September/October, 1976.

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ *Freedoms Journal*, July 6, 1827, pp. 66.