CHAPTER 2 *This Most Important Charity*

THE AMERICAN COLONIZATION SOCIETY

"Slavery is indeed a fearful evil; a canker in the bud of our national prosperity; a bitter drop in the cup of domestic felicity." So began Virginia Cary's chapter on "domestic management," the twenty-eighth of her *Letters on Female Character*."[1] Cary's book, as we have seen, was a widely acclaimed articulation of the ideology of domesticity. Cary urged women to accept subordination to their husbands, to content themselves with the domestic sphere, and to pursue the path of Christian virtue. But why did Cary include in her domestic handbook such a stark condemnation of slavery?

White women, according to Cary, had the duty to create orderly domestic environments in which Christian piety could flourish. Slavery bred domestic chaos. As mistresses of slave households, white women, exposed daily to the temptations of absolute authority, too often became slaves to their own tempers, and white children who were raised without sympathy for their fellow beings became unruly despots. Slaves, whom she referred to as "helpless fellow beings," Cary saw as malleable, as good or as bad as their masters made them. If whites taught them the rules of morality, slaves would act with dignity and respect. But Cary was fundamentally pessimistic about human nature. Because of the tendency of absolute power to corrupt those who held it, the evils of slavery could be mitigated, but not overcome. Only in the absence of slavery, Cary implied, would Virginia women be able to fulfill their calling as religious exemplars. Until the day when "heavenly Mercy" would dismantle the slave system, white women had to struggle to submerge the tyrant in the "true woman."[2]

Cary's assertions—that slavery was not the Old Dominion's fault but had been "inflicted" upon her by the "parent country"; that slavery had a detrimental effect on the morals of the white population as well as the black; and that in time, under divine guidance, the institution would be dismantled—were Virginian to the core, firmly within the tradition of Jefferson, Madison, Monroe, and other statesmen of the Commonwealth who saw slavery as a "necessary evil." Rather than identifying

herself with any political tradition or party, however, Cary addressed the subject of slavery purely in her capacity as a domestic manager. After calling slavery "a great national evil," she left aside the issue of the political legitimacy of the peculiar institution. How and when slavery ended was God's business; in the meantime, it was women's province to ameliorate the conditions in which whites and blacks coexisted.[3]

Cary's book is a fitting place to start a discussion of female colonizationists in Virginia, for although she did not explicitly endorse the scheme of sending free blacks to Africa, many of Cary's views on slavery were shared by women who supported the American Colonization Society. In recent years, scholars have debated whether white Southern women were "covert abolitionists," more inclined to antislavery sentiments than their men, or proslavery partisans, who equaled or even surpassed men in their zeal for the peculiar institution and in their capacity for cruelty toward slaves. This debate has focused on Mary Boykin Chesnut of South Carolina, who, in her extensive Civil War diary, described slavery as a "monstrous system," lamenting that it made white women and slaves alike victims of the absolute power of white men. Anne Firor Scott argued in her seminal work *The Southern Lady* (1970) that Chesnut's lament was but one of many manifestations of white women's discontent with and even opposition to the system of slavery. More recently, Elizabeth Fox-Genovese has made the case that Chesnut was no abolitionist: Chesnut criticized the abuses of the system of slavery, particularly miscegenation, and not the system itself. According to Fox-Genovese, even such mild critics of slavery as Chesnut were "few and far between" in the antebellum South; the vast majority of slaveholding women understood that they were beneficiaries and not victims of slavery.[4]

While it is incontrovertible that slaveholding women were as a class committed to upholding the institution of slavery, the tendency of scholars to categorize them either as abolitionist sympathizers or defenders of slavery is misguided. Such a view takes little account of the differences between the upper and lower South or between the early and late decades of the antebellum period. Most important, Southern women's historians, focusing on private letters and diaries, have overlooked women's contributions to public debates over slavery. Hundreds of white women in antebellum Virginia publicly expressed their opposition to slavery—in newspapers, journals, petitions, broadsides, and addresses—and publicly worked to dismantle the slave system. The vast majority of these women supported African colonization as the solution to the problem of slavery. Female colonizationists, like their male

counterparts, covered a broad political spectrum: some, out of fear of or loathing for blacks, sought to "rid" the Commonwealth of them; but others were motivated by sympathy and even affection for blacks, whom they understood to be the victims of brutal oppression. To dismiss these women because they fell short of the paradigmatic moral vision and courage of the abolitionists is to overlook a rich and illuminating piece of the historical record.

The American Colonization Society was founded in 1816 to promote the emigration of free blacks to Africa. Throughout the first decade of its existence, the ACS tried to prove that colonization was both "politically legitimate, and religiously benevolent and right." Political legitimacy rested on the case that although the ACS wanted to enlist the aid of the federal government, it contemplated no interference with the Constitution and no legal coercion of slaveholders. The political goals of the ACS, its advocates contended, were benign—to provide a "middle ground" between the philosophies of radical abolitionism and proslavery ideology, on which all moderate people could meet, and to export republican institutions and ideals to Africa. Religious legitimacy rested on the case that the ACS was fundamentally a missionary society, dedicated to bringing the "glorious beams of christian revelation" to Africa.[5]

Both the political and religious cases for colonization were readily accepted in Virginia. The Virginia General Assembly appropriated money for the colonization society, and male-headed auxiliaries to the ACS were established across the length and breadth of the state. The most prominent auxiliary, the Richmond and Manchester Society, was presided over by such political luminaries as John Marshall, James Madison, and James Monroe. Each of the four major Protestant denominations endorsed the ACS and took up collections on its behalf. The religious press categorized colonization as a cause which, like Bible, tract, and temperance societies, deserved the active support of all Christians. A small but significant group of Afro-Virginians embraced the cause of evangelizing Africa. In 1815, black members of Richmond's First Baptist Church formed the Richmond African Missionary Society. In 1821, in cooperation with the ACS, the missionary society sent its charter member, preacher Lott Cary, and his wife and family, to West Africa; Cary would earn a reputation as the chief black missionary in Liberia.[6]

ACS leaders solicited and celebrated white women's contributions to the organization. Because colonization was a charitable enterprise, these men suggested, women had a special affinity for it. ACS vice president Henry Clay, speaking in Kentucky in 1829, declared that coloniza-

tion had been "countenanced and aided by that fair sex, which is ever prompt to contribute its exertions in works of charity and benevolence, because it always acts from the generous impulses of pure and uncorrupted hearts." Virginia lawyer Peachy Grattan paid tribute to women at a meeting in Rockingham County. "Our mothers, our wives, and sisters, always foremost in every benevolent and charitable design, are with one heart, and one voice, enlisted in its service," he said of the ACS in 1825.[7]

Abundant evidence of female zeal for colonization can be found both in ACS publications and in the private papers of Virginia women. Throughout the 1820s, scores of Virginia women donated time and money to the colonization cause. Female contributions, which were publicized in the ACS monthly journal the *African Repository*, took a wide variety of forms. Some women acted through their churches, typically by purchasing membership in the ACS for their pastors. Some made outright donations in their own names; some bequeathed money to the ACS, or provided for the manumission and emigration of their slaves in their wills. Beginning in 1825, a number of informal networks of female colonizationists were converted into female auxiliaries to the ACS. These organizations proved to be highly effective at soliciting contributions for the cause. The Female Liberian Society of Essex County, for example, raised the sum of $170 in a six-month period in 1825; theirs was, according to the *African Repository*, "an example worthy of imitation." Colonization women favored a fund-raising tactic that would later be adopted by female abolitionists—raising money by selling goods at fairs. In May of 1830, the women of Charlottesville raised $500 for "the benevolent objects of the American Colonization Society," by holding a colonization fair at a local hotel.[8]

A common thread running through writings by and about female adherents of the ACS is their view that colonization was a religious scheme, not a political one. Colonization women saw themselves as missionaries, drawn to the ACS out of a sense of religious duty. They would spread the Gospel among slaves in order to prepare them to promote Christianity in Africa. Historian Donald Mathews has given a name—"Evangelical womanhood"—to the Southern evangelical incarnation of benevolent femininity. According to Mathews, Evangelical womanhood served as a rationale for women to practice benevolence outside the confines of their homes. Well before the emergence of an organized abolitionist movement, Mathews has argued, "Evangelical southern women had already established their peculiar and most important act of benevolence by becoming tribunes, teachers, and missionaries to slaves."[9]

For Virginia's most prominent female colonizationists, the convic-

tion that Africa should be Christianized went hand in hand with the conviction that the institution of slavery was sinful and should, on moral grounds, be gradually dismantled. Anne Rice, wife of John Holt Rice, shared her husband's enthusiasm for reform causes and for the ACS. According to Rice's niece Mary Virginia Terhune [Marion Harland], a popular novelist of the 1850s, Rice was a fervent "convert" to colonization, and imagined herself as "the leader in a crusade that would wipe the stain of slavery from her beloved state." In 1848 she manumitted her oldest slave, Anderson, and his family, and sent them to Liberia; "in the fullness of time," Terhune writes, Rice arranged the emigration of five families, and "well nigh impoverished herself" in so doing.[10]

Louisa Cocke shared Rice's sentiments. A devout Presbyterian, she believed that slavery was an evil institution, and that whites would have to "render an account hereafter for our injustice" to slaves. She made a series of donations to the colonization cause in the 1820s and 1830s. In 1833, her husband John Hartwell Cocke manumitted Peyton Skipwith, his wife Lydia, and their six children and sent them to the ACS colony of Liberia; the Cockes and Skipwiths maintained an extensive and often poignant correspondence throughout the antebellum period. Like many colonizationists, Cocke practiced selective manumission. He sent fourteen other freed slaves — only a small fraction of the total number in his control — to Liberia over the course of the antebellum period.[11]

Ann R. Page, an ardent Episcopalian from Frederick County, hoped the colonization movement would break the "evil power of slavery." Page felt, her biographer asserts, that she was called by God "to a great missionary work in her own country, and at her own home." "To see Western Africa seasoned with divine salt, from American Christians," Page confided to her cousin and fellow colonizationist Mary Lee (Fitzhugh) Custis, was her fondest wish. Page lamented the effects of absolute power on the souls of masters and mistresses. In 1823 she wrote that "we are especially tempted to make the poor subservient to our own indulgence when those poor are our bond slaves and we can do as we like with them, and hush their murmurs by authority or by selling them." Debt, the proverbial nemesis of would-be emancipators, eventually compelled Page to do the very thing she decried. In order to satisfy the creditors of her late husband, Page sold more than one hundred slaves in 1826. The rest she worked zealously to prepare for freedom and for emigration to Liberia; between 1832 and 1838 she sent an estimated twenty-three manumitted slaves to the colony.[12]

The most prominent female colonizationist in Virginia was Mary Berkeley Minor Blackford, a staunch Episcopalian. Mary had learned

her devotion to the ACS at the knee of her mother, Lucy Minor, who sent nine manumitted slaves to Liberia in 1826. As children, Mary and her brother Launcelot, who went on to serve as a missionary in Liberia, were accustomed to depositing their savings in a joint money box, "whose contents were carefully hoarded to aid the benevolent designs of the Colonization Society." In 1825, Mary married William Blackford, a promising young lawyer. The couple settled in Fredericksburg, where William became an influential newspaper editor and leader of the local Whig Party. The Blackfords were the archetypal middle-class slaveowners; their slaveholdings fluctuated but probably never exceeded six. William shared Mary's passion for the colonization cause, but not her antislavery views: while Mary hoped that colonization would pave the way for the gradual emancipation of the slaves, William saw the scheme primarily as a means to remove the "vicious and degraded" free black population. After years of entreaties, Mary finally persuaded William to free and provide for the emigration of one of their slaves, Abram, in 1844.[13]

In 1829, Blackford founded the Fredericksburg and Falmouth Female Auxiliary to the ACS, soon to become Virginia's most active female society. The Fredericksburg auxiliary distributed ACS tracts throughout the countryside, and tried to provoke the languishing male auxiliary to good works. By May 1830, such efforts had netted the ACS $500 and eighteen new female "life members"—including Dolley Madison, wife of ex-president James Madison, and Catherine Lomax, manager of the Fredericksburg Female Orphan Asylum. The work of her auxiliary, Mary Blackford wrote to ACS secretary Ralph Gurley, was carried on "in the domestic circle, around our own or the firesides of our neighbors, without the sacrifice of time or the proprieties of our sex."[14] She and her coworkers were merely exerting their benign influence in popularly sanctioned ways—using familiar vehicles for benevolence such as fairs and the distribution of tracts to exhort their neighbors to good deeds.

While male and female colonizationists alike trumpeted the religious benevolence of the cause, their claims did not insulate the ACS from political criticism. By the late 1820s the ACS was meeting with considerable political opposition in Virginia from proslavery men who thought it an abolitionist front, and from states-rights Jacksonians who saw colonization as part of an effort by nationalists like Henry Clay and John Quincy Adams to extend the power of the federal government. Hoping to win the support of Virginians who were wary of the Northern ties and nationalism of the ACS, the Richmond male auxiliary reorganized in 1828 as the Virginia Colonization Society (VCS), an in-

dependent state society which continued to remit its funds to the ACS, but took over the job of publicizing the cause in Virginia. While some VCS leaders still believed in gradual emancipation, they reasoned that in order to win converts and legislative support in the Commonwealth, they needed to focus on the removal of free blacks rather than encouraging manumissions.[15]

The formation of the VCS was the first in a series of events that would expose the fallacy of the notion that women could work on behalf of colonization without addressing the politics of slavery. The ideology of religious benevolence could not protect the ACS from criticism—nor could evangelical womanhood protect colonization women. Some women construed their benevolent duty narrowly: to ameliorate the conditions of slavery within the domestic sphere. But others, such as Page and Blackford, believed that they should serve as agents of the cause of gradual emancipation. These women chose, after the formation of the VCS, to work through the national society rather than to work with the new state society. They evidently believed that the parent society was more sympathetic to their goals than the VCS; they found an ally in the secretary of the ACS, Presbyterian minister Ralph Gurley. Page, discouraged by her neighbors' disapproval of her efforts, confided her hopes for colonization to Gurley. "The cause has for so many years been the chief object of my heart and life," she wrote, "that I require one, who sees it in the light you do, to bear with me." Blackford revealed to Gurley that while the "more liberal and benevolent" among men supported her auxiliary's efforts, others looked upon the women "as intruders into a subject we have no business to meddle with." Blackford's frustration motivated her to begin a long and fruitless search for a male agent who could act on behalf of the auxiliary.[16] The daunting task of balancing the need for propriety with the need for publicity was only going to get more difficult.

On August 21, 1831, in Southampton County, Virginia, a slave preacher named Nat Turner led a revolt which sent shockwaves of fear through the white population of the Old Dominion. Moving from farmhouse to farmhouse, Turner and his band of men left some sixty whites dead and others maimed and terrified in their wake. The Virginia militia and federal troops caught up with the rebels and put down the outbreak on August 23. But they could not restore order and peace—already, furious whites had begun indiscriminately massacring dozens of innocent blacks. Martha Jefferson Randolph, Thomas Jefferson's daughter, spoke for many elite Virginians when she advanced the opinion that

Nat Turner's Rebellion was the result of abolitionist agitation—particularly the distribution of David Walker's stirring booklet, *An Appeal to the Colored Citizens of the World* (1829), and William Lloyd Garrison's antislavery newspaper *The Liberator* (founded in 1831). The rebellion confirmed Randolph in her belief that "exportation [of the slaves] must be the consequence of emancipation." She lamented that raising money for colonization was a "very slow business" and that in response to Turner's rebellion, whites were rendering the conditions of the slaves "more insupportable."[17]

Virginia governor John Floyd put a distinct spin on this conspiracy theory in a letter of November 1831. The "most respectable . . . females," he opined, had paved the way for the Southampton incident by teaching blacks to read and write and by distributing Northern religious tracts proclaiming the spiritual equality of blacks and whites. Floyd was himself eager to see the slave system dismantled, but he, like many others, thought that Virginians should do the dismantling themselves, free from Northern interference.[18] The work among slaves that colonization women saw as "benevolent," Floyd viewed as subversive. The notion that women were both unwitting dupes, especially vulnerable to Northern heresies, and effective agents of political propaganda would be echoed in the coming years by proslavery Virginians who were unsure about the allegiance of Virginia women to the slave system. Floyd seems to have grasped what many contemporary historians have overlooked—that the political battle over slavery in Virginia which Turner's rebellion sparked was a battle for the hearts and minds of white women as well as men.

Floyd believed that Virginia had to act immediately, during the legislative session of 1831–32, to prevent another uprising, and the leading politicians and editors of the Commonwealth agreed. As the General Assembly began its deliberations, the colonization movement, which had languished in the late 1820s, experienced a revival. The VCS met in Richmond in January of 1832 for the first time since 1828 and vowed to secure further legislative support for the removal of free blacks. Colonization petitions poured into the General Assembly from around the state, mostly from the Tidewater counties that had large numbers of free black inhabitants. The majority of these memorials called attention to the dangers posed by the presence of free blacks in the Commonwealth.[19]

Three of the petitions intended for the legislature had a special agenda—to provide white women's perspectives on the slavery issue. The "Memorial of the Female Citizens of the County of Fluvanna" was drafted in the winter of 1831. While the petitioners did not explicitly identify themselves as colonizationists, the ACS hailed the petition as

an example of colonization sentiment and published it in the *African Repository*. It is likely that the authors of the petition were members of the Fluvanna County colonization auxiliary.

The petitioners began by saying that they had never before "had occasion to appeal to the guardians of their country's rights for redress of any national grievance." But, they continued, "a blight now hangs over our national prospects, and a cloud dims the sunshine of domestic peace throughout our State." They argued that the "increasing evils of slavery" undermined "domestic discipline." Evoking a scenario meant to strike terror in the hearts of the legislators, the petitioners suggested that as men tended to public affairs, white women were left vulnerable to harm from the slaves. In the name of family and country, they concluded, the legislature must take steps to abolish slavery: "We now conjure you by the sacred charities of kindred, by the solemn obligations of justice, by every consideration of domestic affection and patriotic duty, to nerve every faculty of your minds to the investigation of this important subject—and let not the united voices of your mothers, wives, daughters, and kindred, have sounded in your ears in vain!!"[20]

The Fluvanna petition connected domestic peace and national prospects—if slavery were not abolished, the petitioners implied, the result would be not only domestic violence but national decline. In their formulation, gradual emancipation was no longer merely the business of churches and voluntary associations. It was the business, indeed the responsibility, of the state. The petitioners did not restrict themselves to reminding men of their domestic responsibilities, but invoked their "patriotic duty" as well.

The "Female Citizens of Fredericksburg" could "not refrain in uniting with their sisters from Fluvanna." So wrote Mary Blackford in a second female petition to the General Assembly on the subject of gradual emancipation. Blackford, too, reminded the legislature of women's vulnerability—their "defenseless state in the absence of our Lords, in times of apparent peace." Whereas the Fluvanna petitioners had urged the legislature to empathize with white women, Blackford also spoke of the interest of the slaves. "We would not amid a crowd of selfish considerations, forget the interests of an unfortunate people. We would supplicate for them, from your body, such an attention to their welfare and happiness."[21]

Blackford closed her petition with the secular image of female civic duty in times of crisis. Women appealed to the legislature not only as mothers and Christians but as patriots as well: "The example too of the Females of every great people, from the virtuous wife of Coriolanus to

our own Revolutionary Matrons teach us that in times of great interest to their Country, women may come forward, meekly and humbly, to do what they can to strengthen the hands, and inspire the hearts of their wise and brave country men." Unlike the Fluvanna petition, Blackford's never made it to the legislature. Blackford admitted that she was too "weak and timid" to circulate the petition. It rests in her family papers, with only one signature, that of her friend Lucy Gray.[22]

The Shenandoah Valley produced a third female petition, one signed by 215 women. The January 19, 1832, memorial of the women of Augusta County begged the legislature "for the adoption of some measure for the speedy extirpation of slavery from the Commonwealth." The petitioners, many of whom were Presbyterians of Scots-Irish origin, lived in a region of the state in which large-scale plantation slavery had never taken root and reservations about slavery ran high. While the Augusta women did not specifically endorse colonization as a remedy for the slavery problem, they included in their number some relatives of male officers of the Augusta colonization auxiliary. The petition was presented to the legislature by delegate John McCue, a Presbyterian minister and avid colonizationist.[23]

The Augusta petitioners began by explicitly locating themselves within the political sphere: "although it be unexampled, in our beloved State, that females should interfere in its political concerns . . . yet we hold our right to do so to be unquestionable, and feel ourselves irresistibly impelled to the exercise of that right by the most potent considerations and the perilous circumstances which surround us."[24] That the women considered their intervention "unexampled" is revealing. For thirty years, women had been active in charitable enterprises, temperance, and colonization; they had even submitted petitions to the legislature on behalf of their charities. The petitioners could have chosen, as many colonizationists had before, to identify reform of the slave system with other moral reform movements. But in the minds of the Augusta women, slavery was no longer simply a domestic issue, a local one, or a religious one. It was now the subject of national controversy, and demanded a political remedy.

The petition went on to elaborate upon the "perilous circumstances." Like that of the Fluvanna women, the Augusta appeal was animated by fear of, not empathy for, slaves—it bade the legislature to remember "the late slaughter of our sisters and little ones, in certain parts of our land," an event which the women suspected was part of a larger plot. The petitioners evoked the specter of their destruction at the hands of the "bloody monster" that lived at their "own hearths." They attested

that they would rather do without slave labor than live with those hardships "we now endure in providing for and ruling the faithless beings who are subjected to us." Favorable reports, they noted, came back to them from friends who had fled the South and resettled in free states.[25]

Eventually the petitioners returned to the question of their "right" to intervene in politics. In a remarkable passage, they laid out their interpretation of the relation between the private and public spheres:

> We are no political economists; but our domestic employments, our engagements, in rearing up the children of our husbands & brothers, our intimate concern with the intercourse & prosperity of society; we presume, cannot but inform us of the great & elementary principles of that important science. Indeed it is impossible that that science can have any other basis than the principles that are constantly developing themselves to us in our domestic relations. What is a nation but a family upon a large scale?[26]

Rather than advancing the notion that woman's sphere operated according to rules and values all its own, the women of Augusta portrayed the domestic sphere as a microcosm of the public one. Like the Fluvanna and Fredericksburg petitions, the Augusta memorial reminded men of their patriotic duty. "We implore you," the petitioners concluded, ". . . by our female virtues, by the patriotism which animates and grows in our bosoms . . . not to let the power with which you are invested lie dormant. . . . This we pray and in duty bound will ever pray." Only the extinction of slavery would preserve the peace and ensure the prosperity of future generations.[27]

Taken together, the three petitions shed light on how the events of August 1831 had transformed the public discourse over slavery. While Blackford and her counterparts in Fluvanna and Augusta came at the slavery issue from different angles—Blackford's petition evinces sympathy for the plight of slaves while the other two petitions bespeak antipathy—the three petitions used similar language to justify political intervention by women. One of the effects of Nat Turner's Rebellion, the petitioners implied, was to politicize domestic life. The Fluvanna and Augusta women challenged the validity of the domestic metaphor for slavery—that slaves were obedient members of the patriarchal household—and argued instead that blacks and whites lived in a state of protracted domestic warfare. Without help from the legislature, the memorials suggested, women simply could not fulfill their mandate of preserving domestic harmony. Blackford, too, evoked martial imagery in her elaboration of female duty. But her memorial, alone among the

three, recognized that slaves were the true victims of domestic warfare between blacks and whites.

The Augusta and Fluvanna petitions, like other antislavery petitions, were taken into consideration by the special legislative committee charged with recommending a course of action to the General Assembly. These antislavery memorials received a good deal of publicity. John McCue presented the Augusta memorial to his colleagues along with a stirring antislavery speech, which was reprinted in the *Richmond Enquirer*. He told the select committee that "if an opportunity had been afforded, [the petition] would have been much more numerously subscribed by the ladies of the county." The Augusta petition also drew the notice of a proslavery correspondent to the *Enquirer*, with the pen name "Appomattox" (Richmond lawyer Benjamin Watkins Leigh), who calculated that some 2,000 people had signed memorials asking the legislature to take up the slavery issue. According to Leigh, though the petitioners ran far ahead of public opinion, they exercised a significant influence on politicians and editors alike.[28]

Women were present not only by proxy but in person at the famous debates in the House of Delegates. Louisa Cocke, for example, went to the Capitol to hear "Mr. Brown of Petersburg on the all engrossing question of emancipation which is now agitating the whole country." After weeks of deliberation, the select committee on slavery decided that it was inexpedient for the legislature to take any measures to dismantle the slave system. Alison Goodyear Freehling has convincingly argued that the 1831–32 slavery debate, rather than representing the triumph of proslavery forces in Virginia, was rather another chapter in the "perennial political quest for a 'middle ground' between slaveholding and non-slaveholding interests." While the legislature rejected immediate emancipation, a procolonization majority, including many conservatives, endorsed gradual emancipation. The House of Delegates resolved that state funds should be used to support the voluntary emigration of free blacks and manumitted slaves. The Senate, dominated by proslavery planters, then voted to postpone consideration of the "colonization bill" until a later date.[29]

Freehling's contention that the 1832 legislative session did not put an end to meaningful debate over slavery in Virginia is borne out by the testimony of women on both the pro- and antislavery sides. Mary Eliza Rives, a proslavery plantation mistress, agreed with many editors and politicians that by discussing slavery in public, the General Assembly had opened a Pandora's box. She believed that open debate on slavery would not preserve the public peace but undermine it. In April of 1832,

she sent to her sister-in-law Judith a letter accusing advocates of gradual emancipation of "agitating a question which will be like a lighted faggot in the state, and which perhaps will not be extinguished in twenty years, and then not without bloodshed."[30]

Rather than being discouraged by the legislature's pronouncements, colonization women redoubled their efforts to promote the cause. In July of 1832, sixty women in Albemarle County formed a female auxiliary society to the ACS. Its secretary, Susan Terrell, stated her belief that the society would soon have "almost every lady in the county" and boasted that its efforts had won the approval of "some of our best men." The Albemarle auxiliary raised $500 in 1832; female societies in Powhatan, Louisa, Warrenton, and Richmond likewise made healthy remittances to the ACS that year.[31]

Blackford's Fredericksburg society continued to be the best-publicized female auxiliary in the state. In order to dispel the "mists of ignorance and prejudice" surrounding the society, Blackford penned the first annual "Report of the Board of Managers of the Fredericksburg and Falmouth Female Auxiliary Colonization Society" and had it published as a broadside. The report, which was also published in the Methodist *Christian Sentinel*, urged Blackford's sisters throughout the state to come forward and aid in the work of "this most important charity." Blackford conceded that some prejudices still existed against women who were active in charities, particularly in colonization, which "divides public sentiment, and is, in some respects, a political question." But she had this to say to opponents of female activism:

> . . . we would ask whether, because the scheme of Colonization involves ultimate political interests, our sex is to be forever precluded from any agency in its promotion? . . . The same course of reasoning would go to exclude female agency from the promotion of the Sunday School, the Missionary, or the Bible cause — for who will pretend to say that each of these schemes of amelioration is not pregnant with the highest consequences to the peace and prosperity of the State[?][32]

Blackford turned the popular argument that colonization was like other benevolent enterprises, and therefore not political, on its head. Since religious benevolent societies, like the colonization society, involved "ultimate political interests," she argued, it was wrong to exclude women from either sort of enterprise.

While she worked in public to promote her auxiliary, principally by distributing literature to her neighbors, Blackford undertook, in the fall of 1832, a new project: a private journal entitled "Notes Illustrative of

the Wrongs of Slavery." Her preface states that the "Notes" constitute a challenge to those who maintain "that Slavery is in accordance with the will of God." The entries that follow the preface are anecdotes about the horrors of slavery—not of "isolated instances of wrong and oppression but daily occurrences so common as scarcely to excite remark." What render Blackford's observations into an analytical indictment of the system are the themes that tie them together: the notion that the necessary setting for the exercise of Christian virtue is a republic in which everyone's fundamental rights are protected by law; that slavery "hardens the heart" to human suffering; and that blacks have the same innate capacity for "tender feelings" as whites.[33]

On a clear October evening, as she walked in shame past a jail kept by slave traders "to confine men whose only crime is that they wish to return to their families," Blackford thought to herself, "Thank God! . . . that I live in a land where no white man at least can be unjustly thrown into confinement until just cause can be shown why. . . . And may I live to see the time when the poor down trodden negro too shall enjoy this great privilege!" By denying blacks the protection of the law, Blackford observed, the institution of slavery undermined the exercise of virtue by whites and blacks alike. She inveighed against the measures which prohibited blacks from holding religious assemblies or learning to read and write. To illustrate the ill effects of such laws, she described a horrible scene in which a group of slaves who attended a Baptist meeting in Hanover County were "all whipped, old and young, Men & women," by an armed patrol. Nor did she shy away from the subject of sexual abuse. Black women, she understood, were the special victims of a system in which "the conjugal tie can be broken at the will of the Master at any time." Telling the story of a "wretched Mother" who had been impregnated and then abandoned, destitute, by a slave trader, Blackford noted that black women often became "the prey of the brutal lust of their oppressors."[34]

"Mercy is not in man when interest and power unite in drawing him from it," Blackford concluded from observing the intractable racism of her neighbors. She recounts an incident in 1832 in which she interceded on behalf of a black woman, whose son, about to be sold south by a slave trader, was incarcerated in the trader's cellar. The mother begged her son's guard to let her see the boy one last time. When she was refused, Blackford wrote, the mother "came over the street to our house. . . . [I] asked her if she thought my intercession would do any good. She answered, perhaps it might. So I put on my bonnet and went over with her, she waiting at the gate while I went to the door." Getting nowhere with

the guard, Blackford asked to see the wife of the trader, "hoping from one of my own sex to find mercy that I looked for in vain from a man." The trader's wife denied any responsibility in the matter. Blackford tried again to influence the guard: "I fixed my eyes steadily upon the hard hearted being before me and . . . warned him that such cruelty could not long go unpunished and reminded him of the affair at Southampton [Nat Turner's Rebellion] which had just occurred." Blackford's efforts achieved nothing; some weeks later, she saw the young prisoner led off in chains.[35]

While Blackford believed that the system of slavery had also produced a "hardening effect" on the minds of its black victims, she marveled that "it had not produced the effect in a greater degree," and devoted the bulk of her journal to examples of blacks who rose above the moral level of their oppressors. The story of a slave woman whose husband escaped from the clutches of a slave trader and crossed 500 miles on foot to return to his wife Blackford saw as "one of the many proofs that such feelings exist among the negroes, notwithstanding the course of treatment pursued by the whites toward them in continually slighting their marriage ties." Perhaps the most wrenching section of the "Notes" is the story of Betsy, a slave whose "simple narrative" Blackford transcribed. Betsy recalled being kept in a slave trader's jail in which old and young were routinely cobbed—beaten with a board with holes in it. After hearing the cries of a young girl undergoing this torture, she lamented to Blackford, "I sometimes think the world will not stand much longer, there is so much wickedness in it." Her own children were soon sold away from her. In an editorial postscript to the narrative, Blackford averred that this heartbroken woman had transcended bitterness and served as a beloved mammy to the young daughter of her new master.[36]

Blackford's journal is both a unique document, without counterpart in Southern antislavery literature, and an embodiment of the limitations of and contradictions in the colonization movement. With the exception of the abolitionist publications of South Carolina's exiled Grimké sisters, Blackford's journal is the most thoroughgoing attack on slavery penned by a white Southern woman in the antebellum era. First and foremost a plea for empathy, Blackford's journal implores the reader to "Think what it is to be a Slave!!!," to conjure the "nameless horrors" of being deprived of one's rights as a human being. It shares a number of themes—the prevalence of sexual exploitation, the breakup of families, the assault on marriage ties, the suffering of mothers and children—with slave narratives produced by women. The narrative of Bethany Veney, who had been a slave in Virginia, poignantly put into

words a sentiment that Blackford struggled to express: "hearts that love are much the same in bond or free, in white or black."[37]

But for all the merits of her analysis, there were distinct limits to Blackford's powers of empathy. Like other colonizationists, she did not reckon among blacks' rights the right to live in freedom in their native country, nor did she imagine that blacks and whites could coexist as equals. Having been kept in "profound ignorance" by whites, she argued, blacks were "not prepared" for immediate emancipation and full participation in the American republic. Only in Liberia would they be safe from prejudice and united in communities of common interest. There, she noted in a letter to Ralph Gurley, "the delightful consciousness of freedom and equal rights may like a sculptor's tools, bring forth hidden qualities" in the race. Moreover, Blackford, unlike white and black abolitionists, seemed reluctant to acknowledge white women's full complicity in the brutal enforcement of the slave system. "Slaveholding ladies," ex-slave Austin Stewart of Prince William County wrote in his memoirs, not only looked on the punishment of bondspeople "with approbation" but often used "the lash and cowhide themselves, on the backs of their own slaves, and that too on those of their own sex!" Blackford must surely have known of such instances, yet she reserved her harshest criticisms for white men, slave traders in particular. Finally, like so many other Southern colonizationists, who saw fit to emancipate some—but not all—of their slaves, Blackford herself relied on the labor of slaves. Beginning with the birth of her first child in 1826, Blackford suffered physical disabilities that worsened with each of the six pregnancies that followed. Her husband, William, believing that the chronically infirm Mary needed help tending to the children, bought a slave girl named Peggy in 1846 to serve as "mammy." In spite of Mary's "abhorrence of slavery," the Blackfords kept Peggy in bondage throughout the antebellum period; the family assumed, conveniently, that the affection they held for "Ma'm Peggy" was mutual.[38]

Isolated in an increasingly hostile proslavery environment, Blackford remained steadfast in the belief that the American Colonization Society, while it claimed only to "send free people of color by *their own consent* to Liberia," was "gradually preparing a Country for the whole unfortunate race when Slavery shall be abolished." Unfortunately for her and other like-minded colonizationists, the doctrine of gradual emancipation came under withering attack in the early 1830s. In the minds of abolitionists, the antislavery credentials of Southern slaveholders such as Blackford were highly suspect. William Lloyd Garrison's "Thoughts on African Colonization" (1832) and his journal *The Libera-*

tor rejected the notion that colonization was "benevolent," and argued instead that the ACS was a slaveholders' tool, meant to undermine support for immediate emancipation. Moreover, Garrison noted that free blacks had vehemently rejected the colonization movement. He produced as evidence nineteen proclamations by free blacks in Northern cities, expressing opposition to the ACS.[39]

Indeed, as historian Marie Tyler-McGraw has demonstrated, the changing composition of the Liberian emigrant pool signaled free blacks' growing unwillingness to migrate: while the majority of emigrants in the 1820s were free black families, by the early 1830s the majority were manumitted slaves from large estates. Free blacks had come to believe that "colonization was less an opportunity presented to them than a judgment placed upon them." Most damaging to the cause of emigration in Virginia, Tyler-McGraw argues, were the grim reports of economic hardship, appalling death rates, and internecine warfare that black emigrants, such as Richmonders Edward and Helen Lewis, brought back from Liberia. Well aware that the Virginia Colonization Society was in the hands of proslavery forces, free blacks, in the wake of the Virginia legislature's 1832 rejection of gradual emancipation, rejected colonization in turn.[40]

By the mid-1830s, white women were playing a prominent role in the abolitionist critique of colonization. In 1836, the Grimké sisters launched a speaking tour of antislavery societies in New England and New York, giving women unprecedented visibility in the abolition movement. A national convention of antislavery women met in New York in 1837, initiating a petition drive to convince Congress of the need for immediate abolition. The Southern press took notice of these activities, branding them as subversive and unfeminine. Angelina Grimké specifically targeted Southern women in her 1836 *Appeal to the Christian Women of the South*. She argued that Christian women should act as "instruments of reform" by advancing the antislavery cause as a "matter of *morals* and *religion*, not of expediency or politics." To those, like Blackford, who believed that immediate emancipation without colonization would leave blacks vulnerable to prejudice and lacking in resources, Grimké replied that "duty is ours and events are God's." To those who feared that such bold actions would alienate them from their communities, Grimké responded that women must find the moral courage to endure persecution. In later works, Grimké would call the ACS an "EXPATRIATION Society" that hid the "monster of prejudice" behind the "mantle of benevolence."[41]

Even as abolitionists attacked colonization and urged Southern

women to abandon it, Thomas Dew, a Virginia professor, dealt colonization a crippling blow from the other end of the political spectrum. Dew's 1832 essay, *Review of the Debate in the Virginia Legislature of 1831 and 1832*, portrayed colonization as an abolitionist plot, and a "totally impracticable" one at that. Since Liberia was a failure, Dew averred, manumitted blacks would stay in Virginia, posing a threat not only to slaveholders but to nonslaveholding whites as well. Dew devoted a section of his essay to the "influence of Slavery on the female sex." He constructed what would become a popular argument among proslavery theorists—that white women benefited from the institution of slavery, for the labor of the slave was a substitute for that of the woman. Dew not only addressed slavery's impact on white women but also their attitudes toward slavery. Southern women, Dew lamented, did not seem to recognize that slavery was responsible for their "elevation" in society. Instead, filled with "benevolence and philanthropy" and "fine feelings unchecked by considerations of interest or calculations of remote consequences," women were inclined "to embrace with eagerness even the wildest and most destructive schemes of emancipation." Woman's influence was powerful and would be exercised either for the "weal or woe" of Southern society. Southern men, Dew cautioned, should take an interest in the moral and intellectual development of "*her* in whose career we feel so deep an interest."[42]

Colonizationists, one historian has noted, were slow to join the battle against their foes. In late 1832, at Ralph Gurley's request, Jesse Burton Harrison of Lynchburg penned a response to Thomas Dew, denying that there was any connection between colonization and abolition. All over Virginia, colonizationists repudiated abolition. At its 1833 annual meeting, for example, the secretary of the Lynchburg Colonization Society proclaimed that like Bible, missionary, and education societies, the ACS was benevolent, intent on "snatching from the depths of the most cheerless and hopeless poverty a class of beings, who . . . are proverbially heedless of the future." An 1833 editorial in the *Christian Sentinel* claimed that Christians should not "engage in the political controversies which may arise out of the subject of slavery as existing in our country." But to support colonization was acceptable, because "it meddles with no State policy . . . but receives all free colored persons who may offer themselves voluntarily to emigrate to Africa." Christians, the editor suggested, should resist the attempts of "designing and interested individuals" to make colonization a "political question."[43]

Unfortunately for those who sought to cloak colonization in the mantle of benevolence, the "designing individuals" who saw coloniza-

tion as a "political question" included not only the movement's critics but also some of its most prominent supporters. By the mid-1830s, Northern colonization societies, such as those in New York and Philadelphia, were trying to increase public support for the cause by arguing that colonization principles did indeed embrace emancipation. Southern state societies, such as the VCS, countered with bitterly sectional rhetoric, in which colonization became a weapon in the South's battle against Northern aggression. At the seventh annual meeting of the VCS, in 1838, Henry Wise denounced the abolitionists for trying to "demolish all social relations." No longer was there room in the VCS for those who hoped colonization was a wedge to general emancipation—while abolitionists favored "Philanthropy to the SLAVE!," colonizationists favored "Friendship to the SLAVEHOLDER."[44]

On the subject of white women's part in the slavery controversy, male colonizationists in the South sent out mixed messages. The notion that women were easy prey for the abolitionists had its share of advocates. James Garland of Virginia, for example, declared at an ACS meeting in 1837 that Garrison and his cronies waged their warfare on the South "aided by the misguided support of *priest-ridden* women and children." In his speech at the state society's 1838 annual meeting, VCS president John Tyler fumed that the abolitionists "seek to enlist woman—she who was placed upon the earth, as the rainbow in the heavens, as a sign that the tempest of the passions should subside. Woman is made an instrument to expel us from the paradise of union in which we dwell."[45]

What part did Virginia's white women take in the debate over colonization and abolition? Unwilling to disavow the goal of philanthropy toward the slave or to embrace immediate emancipation, Virginia's staunchest female colonizationists adopted a new tack in the mid-1830s, focusing their energy on the promotion of female education in Liberia. Such a strategy had many merits—it allowed Virginia women to build bridges to their counterparts in other states and to women in Liberia, while at the same time distancing them from the radical tactics of female abolitionists.

By 1834, Blackford had become thoroughly disillusioned with the "unaccountable apathy . . . benumbing the public mind." The cause was languishing, she wrote Gurley, for want of "someone to speak to the people and interest them," adding, "Our sex forbids this." That Blackford ruled out public speaking is not surprising. It was literally unheard of for Southern women to deliver speeches on the subject of slavery. None of the leaders of the VCS or ACS ever condoned public speaking by women; judging by the evidence, colonization women never addressed

"mixed" public assemblies of men and women. Unable to change the minds of her neighbors, Blackford announced in the *African Repository* in 1834 that her auxiliary was reconstituting itself as a female African education society; "it would seem to us that it is peculiarly befitting our sex to be thus engaged," she noted. After searching fruitlessly for an appropriate outlet for its funds, Blackford's group began in 1837 to support a girls' academy run by Presbyterian missionaries in the Maryland colony, Cape Palmas. In its third annual report, the Ladies' Society of Fredericksburg and Falmouth, for the Promotion of Female Education in Africa, reemphasized the missionary aspect of colonization: "We would make it our main object to promote the knowledge of God."[46]

The Richmond and Manchester female auxiliary adopted a similar strategy. In order to reassure the public of the benevolence of their aims, the Richmond women changed the name of their auxiliary in 1834 to the Ladies Society for Promoting Female Education in the Colony of Liberia. The society eventually hired an African American teacher, Mrs. Cyples, and opened a school for orphan girls in Monrovia, Liberia (it had thirty-two pupils in 1836). The actions of the Fredericksburg and Richmond auxiliaries reflect a national trend. Margaret Mercer, who served as a teacher at girls' academies in Essex County and then in Cedar Park, Maryland, devoted the proceeds of her Cedar Park Liberian Society to promoting the founding of a high school in Liberia. Female education societies were formed in such places as Louisville, Kentucky, New York City, and Philadelphia; the Richmond and Philadelphia enterprises cooperated closely. Such efforts won the hearty approbation of male colonizationists, who saw in them a refutation of the abolitionist charge that colonizationists cared nothing for the fate of those who emigrated.[47]

As promising as it may have seemed, however, female colonizationists' change of tack did not ultimately revive their beleaguered movement. The schools sponsored by women proved prohibitively expensive to maintain. "The Society is now in great want of funds," the Richmond society's 1837 annual report declared. "Without them our school must suffer, and our benevolent operations must remain stationary or be curtailed." Apparently these appeals fell on deaf ears—the auxiliary's 1838 annual report declared that its orphan school was "languishing." Liberian women increasingly addressed the needs of dispossessed females by forming their own benevolent associations, such as the Ladies Benevolent Society of Monrovia; it included among its leaders Mrs. Colin Teague, one of Richmond's first emigrants. While it may well have gratified white women to see, as the *African Repository*'s editor put it, that

"the same spirit of benevolence which animates them is manifested by their colored sisters on the other side of the Atlantic," the grinding poverty of Liberia proved a formidable obstacle to women's collective exertions. By 1850, the *African Repository* was declaring that despite women's efforts, "the facilities for a thorough education are not afforded to the youth of Liberia."[48]

Nor ultimately could Virginia's colonization women reverse the political trends in their home state. All over the Commonwealth, the fate of gradual decline befell women's auxiliaries in the 1830s. The Albemarle auxiliary, described in the *African Repository* in 1833 as a "flourishing institution," was, by 1836, in trouble. Susan Terrell, its secretary, attributed the decline in receipts to Northern agitation: "Many of [the auxiliary's] members since the great Abolition stir of the North have become apparently indifferent while a portion are more zealous in the cause than ever." In the heart of the Shenandoah Valley, too, colonization sentiment among women was evaporating. The VCS mounted an unsuccessful petition drive for legislative aid in 1837. Only thirty-five women signed a colonization petition of February 10, 1837, from the citizens of Rockingham and Augusta Counties—an alarmingly small number compared to the 215 women who had signed the 1832 antislavery petition from Augusta.[49]

In what appears to have been a last-ditch effort to improve the prospects of the cause, the leading female colonizationists of the Richmond area formed the Female Colonization Society of Virginia (FCS) in 1840. The society was designed to replace the VCS as the hub of female auxiliary activity and to serve as a model for other such organizations: "This we believe to be the first State Society formed by the Ladies, and we hope that not only will the Ladies of every city, town and village in Virginia, form Societies auxiliary to the State Society, but that in every State of the Union, the ladies will go and do likewise." The female society would be the medium through which auxiliary donations were forwarded to the ACS. Its eight female officers came from Richmond, Fluvanna, Goochland, Chesterfield, and Rappahanock and represented each of the Protestant denominations in Richmond and Manchester. As the Richmond female auxiliary had over a decade earlier, the new female society described colonization as a missionary scheme. And it passed a resolution requesting that the editors of religious newspapers publish its constitution and circular.[50]

In 1845, Catharine Ellis willed her estate to the Female Society, but the bequest was void, since the society had not been incorporated. After 1845, the society received no further mention in ACS publications.

Whether the FCS disbanded or continued to carry out its mission in obscurity is unclear. Over the course of the 1840s, references to Southern colonization auxiliaries, male and female, dwindled in the religious newspapers which had helped to promote colonization in its heyday. The declining visibility of Southern colonizationists in the press reflects the Southern evangelical retreat from politics in the wake of the denominational schisms in the Presbyterian, Methodist, and Baptist Churches. Despite the fact that the ACS continued to have some powerful allies among Virginia's clergymen, such as Presbyterian minister William Henry Ruffner, donations from churches, especially Methodist and Baptist ones, slowed to a trickle in the 1840s.[51]

A small band of stalwart female supporters of the cause kept up a stream of individual remittances, but on the whole, female donations fell off steadily in the late 1840s. Moreover, group remittances by Virginia women became rare; colonization seems to have provided women with fewer opportunities for autonomous organization than it had in previous decades. No longer did the *African Repository* publicize the work of the "tenth legion" of female auxiliaries. Women's colonization organizations in Rockbridge, Albemarle, Fredericksburg, Warrenton, and elsewhere disappear from the historical record.[52]

By 1850, the American Colonization Society was firmly under the control of a Northern-dominated board of directors, while the Virginia Colonization Society, by contrast, was an unabashedly proslavery organization. One of many signs that the gulf between antislavery and proslavery colonizationists was growing ever wider is an 1852 petition to the legislature, from an anonymous "Virginian." "From what the writer has seen and known personally," the petitioner stated, "he honestly believes that the female free negroes keep their husbands and families from emigrating to Liberia. For while we know of many men among them ready and willing to go, they are held back by a stubborn refusal of their wives to accompany them." In a move that would have appalled the likes of Blackford, the petitioner proposed the passage of a law that would sell free black women "into perpetual slavery upon condition they do not emigrate to the land of their forefathers." Whether his observation that women were less willing to emigrate than men has any basis in reality is unclear. It is clear, however, that white antipathy to free blacks rose steadily as the free black population grew; Virginia lawmakers seriously debated measures for the outright expulsion of free blacks in the 1850s.[53]

Many women evidently approved of the rhetoric of the VCS — dozens contributed money to the state society in the 1840s and 1850s. Interest-

ingly, however, none of the women who have left a historical trail in the form of letters, diaries, memoirs, and the like subscribed to the view that the sole purpose of colonization was to deport free blacks. On the contrary, women's correspondence with ACS officials and with emigrants evinces their belief in the cause of gradual emancipation and their concern for the fate of manumitted slaves. It may be that antislavery colonizationists went "underground": they continued to contribute to the ACS as individuals, but they no longer used auxiliaries as vehicles for their work, and they no longer sought publicity for collective efforts.[54]

The ranks of gradualists included Mary Custis Lee, wife of Robert E. Lee. A longstanding supporter of the ACS, Lee corresponded in the 1850s with her ex-slaves, William and Rosabella Burke, who had settled in Monrovia. The Burkes provided Lee with details of their daily lives and assessments of Liberia's prospects, and she in turn gave them the news of their friends and relatives in Arlington; Ralph Gurley frequently served as a go-between for the two families. Elizabeth Van Lew of Richmond, who, after her father's death in 1843, prevailed upon her mother to emancipate the family's nine slaves, reached out to ACS secretary William McLain for advice on how to send supplies to Liberia. Mary Brown of Elm Grove sent ten dollars to McLain with her "sincere thanks for your long continued services in behalf of our poor collered [*sic*] brother."[55]

Helen Grinnan, Mary Blackford's coworker and confidante in the Fredericksburg auxiliary, looked to ACS officials to confirm her belief in the righteousness of colonization. After reading the 1846 letter of Virginia emigrant Willis Helmn (*sic*), a manumitted slave who complained that starvation and disease were the main features of life in Liberia, Grinnan worriedly contacted William McLain for clarification; McLain explained that Helmn was a malcontent and reassured Grinnan that most of the emigrants were satisfied with conditions in the colony. Despite troublesome developments in Africa and at home, Grinnan remained committed to the cause of gradual emancipation, writing Blackford in 1849 that if the abolitionists would only "hold their peace . . . we should in time, do our duty" and emancipate the slaves.[56]

Another diehard gradual emancipationist was Margaret Mercer. The daughter of Governor John Francis Mercer of Maryland and cousin of Virginia colonizationist Charles Fenton Mercer, Mercer had in 1829 freed sixteen of her slaves and sent them to Liberia. An educator by profession, Mercer used her lectern as a bully pulpit for colonization. In 1836 she purchased an estate, Belmont, from fellow colonizationist Ludwell Lee and relocated from Maryland to Virginia. She ran the

estate using only free black labor or neighboring slaves whom she remunerated for their work. She also opened a new school in which she continued her colonization work; the students made handicrafts to raise funds for Liberia. Hard economic times and growing public suspicion of reformers made Mercer's work difficult. But she remained adamant in her belief that colonization was "the only possible means of reconciling the South to the subject of emancipation."[57]

The most detailed accounts of the changing fortunes of the colonization movement come from the pens of Anne Rice and Mary Blackford. In 1848 Rice sent her oldest slave, Anderson, and his family to Liberia, and in 1851 she sent four additional servants there. Dire news of sickness and war in Liberia led her to wonder, in 1856, whether she had done the right thing in sending them. Rice's letters to ACS officials in the 1850s bespeak her growing isolation. In an 1857 letter to McLain, she offered a critique of the radicals on either side of the slavery issue—"I think both sides go too far & are on extremes and such as I know will not receive any information but what suits their own views." The next year she reported that more and more Virginians were asserting that slavery was a positive good. By 1859, Rice was so sensitive about her antislavery views that she apologized even to her friend and ally Ralph Gurley. After declaring that "our good, & wise, & pious now seem to set down content, with consciences quite relieved that [slavery] is the very best state for the coloured race," she excused herself for writing so indiscreetly on the subject.[58]

As for Blackford, in the 1840s she concentrated on a very personal matter—the safe emigration of her slave Abram. In 1844, she convinced her husband, William, to fulfill a longstanding promise that he would free Abram as soon as it became financially feasible. William thought that Abram would be better off as his slave than in Liberia, but Mary believed it possible to provide Abram with all the requisite resources for success in the colony; at her behest, Abram spent 1843 with Blackford's brother Lucius, honing his skills as a farmer and handyman. On the eve of Abram's departure, Blackford pumped Gurley and ACS treasurer William McLain for information about the colony, asking, "Will you also tell me what he had best be provided with? How long he will receive support from the Society after he arrives? Will he be well attended to while he is sick? How much land will be given him?"[59]

Blackford felt amply rewarded for her efforts on Abram's behalf when she received a letter from him on September 9, 1844, from Monrovia, reporting that all was well. She kept up a warm correspondence with Abram and with her mother's former slaves, James Cephas Minor and

Mary Ann Minor, during the 1840s and 1850s. Abram's letters bespeak his pride in his newfound freedom and his concern for those in Virginia. In letters to Mary Blackford and to Susan Wheeler, a black friend in Fredericksburg, Abram reported that the whites he met in Monrovia were polite, and respectfully referred to him as "Mr. Blackford." "It is much Bether than to be in the state [where the practice is] for them to call you Boy," he wrote to his former owner. In an 1846 letter, he conveyed his respects to the Blackford family and asked Mary to write his mother and tell her he was well. Historian Randall Miller, in analyzing the correspondence of the Cocke family and its manumitted slaves, the Skipwiths, has observed that since former slaves were still dependent on the philanthropy of their masters when provisions in Liberia proved scarce, "we can never know how much, if at all, the emigres lifted their masks" to express their true feelings. He finds nonetheless that the Cocke/Skipwith correspondence "implies something of trust and affection"; the same can be said of Mary Blackford's exchanges with Abram.[60]

While Abram's was a success story, Liberia's reputation among prospective emigrants continued to worsen in the 1840s. After Abram's emigration, Blackford found herself lacking in willing recipients of her charity. She wrote to McLain in 1845 that there was "no chance of persuading any of the free people here to emigrate to Liberia, as their partialities lean toward Ohio and other Northern States." When she and her family left Fredericksburg for Lynchburg in 1852, Blackford's career as a public advocate for the ACS came to an end.[61]

Separated from her female auxiliary in Fredericksburg, Blackford scaled down her activities, occasionally sending in small remittances of no more than a few dollars. As sectional tensions mounted, she felt increasingly alienated, not only from her community but also from her husband and sons. William Blackford, who had always emphasized the degradation rather than the possible redemption of the free black population, became more sectional in his outlook, and wooed his sons to his way of thinking. Blackford lamented this state of affairs in a letter to her mother in 1853: "The object nearest to my heart is to do these boys good, but as they grow older my influence weakens, [as] they think my notions womanly." To Blackford's notion that "it is patriotic for the North and South to go among each other and cultivate kindly feelings," her husband and sons counterposed that Southerners should be free to solve their own problems without instruction or interference from the North.[62]

In August of 1856 Blackford sent a series of despairing missives to longtime friends McLain and Gurley. One letter enclosed a five-dollar

contribution. "How I wish it was five hundred," she wrote, "for never did the cause seem so important as now, for it would afford a mighty remedy for the greatest evil that hangs over our country, if its benevolent and patriotic objects could be carried out." A few weeks later, Blackford lamented the growth of proslavery sectionalism in Virginia: "I cannot express what I feel at the state of things in our country. It has really become a reproach to advocate human liberty, and I hear statements so high handed and oppressive, that I can hardly believe I live in a free government. . . . Oh that something could be done to arouse the people of Virginia, but the good old patriots that would have done it, have passed away, and their opinions on the subject are laughed at." In Blackford's view, Virginia was in a state of moral decline. To her, the remedy for sectional tensions lay in the values and virtues of her parents' generation, which had been committed to the idea of gradual emancipation. Blackford had once seen herself as a standard-bearer not only of Christianity but of the Revolutionary legacy. On the eve of secession, she felt like a relic of a world that had passed away. The failure of the Union she interpreted as the failure of women like herself to transmit the legacy of the founders to the next generation.[63]

It is tempting to relegate the likes of Mary Blackford to the file marked "loser's history." Women proved, ultimately, to be ineffectual agents for the colonization cause. Their numbers dropped off as controversy over colonization heated up, and they could not insulate the movement from crippling attacks from either end of the political spectrum. To be sure, even the most sympathetic of female colonizationists bear up poorly in a comparison with abolitionists.

But the fact that women like Blackford failed in their self-appointed task of proving the righteousness and viability of colonization is no reason to write them off. For, together with their male allies, colonization women offered up an influential argument about women's civic duty, one which resonates to the present day in the scholarly debate over Southern women's "covert abolitionism." In essence, colonizationists made the case that Southern women had a special moral perspective on slavery. Because of their role as domestic managers, women had a unique awareness of the threat slavery posed to the maintenance of orderly homes and communities. Because of their piety and sensitivity, women had a particular sympathy for the plight of slaves. Because of their role as mothers and teachers, women had the special ability to mold the opinions of the next generation on the issue of slavery. Because of their disinterestedness — their selfless concern for the common

good—and moral integrity, they had a unique ability to inspire those around them to good deeds.

This vision of women received its most sustained articulation in biographies of Ann R. Page and Margaret Mercer, published in the North in 1848 and 1856 respectively. Page's biographer, Charles Andrews (an ACS agent for Virginia), presented his subject as the very personification of the spirit of charity, of the virtues of "self-denial" and "disinterestedness." Andrews believed that Page had had a great impact on antislavery sentiment in Virginia. "In an extensive tour through the state in the year 1836," Andrews heard the "remark from many persons, that they had never felt any particular interest in the condition of the slaves, or had their consciences awakened respecting them, until they heard of the efforts of Mrs. Page." Andrews also quoted Ralph Gurley's biography of ACS missionary Jehudi Ashmun, which featured a stirring tribute to the influence of Virginia women: "In a future world, the fact may stand revealed, that from the sacred retirement of a few devout ladies in Virginia, who at the Savior's feet had learned better lessons than this world's philosophy can teach, emanated a zeal and charity in behalf of the afflicted Africans, which has widely spread, and inspired ministers and statesmen with an almost divine eloquence in their cause."[64] Gurley held that women, by virtue of their piety—their attention to God's word rather than to "this world's philosophy"—could lead men by example to patriotic deeds.

Equally laudatory of women was Caspar Morris's biography of Mercer. Like Page, Mercer was commended for her "disinterestedness" and "self-denial." She was not only a great Christian but a "patriot woman, [who] lived and suffered and virtually bled and died in the service of her country." Furthermore, Morris saw Mercer's career as a rebuke to those who claimed that the real aim of the colonization movement was to "rivet more closely the bonds of the slave." Mercer was a "shining testimony of the fact that the society was countenanced in its origin and supported to the present hour by persons who were ready at any cost . . . to promote the good of those in whom they recognized the traits of common brotherhood." In short, Gurley, Morris, Andrews, and the scores of other men who lauded women's contributions to colonization made the case that women were effective organizers, who brought needed converts and funds into the organization, and moral exemplars, who proved by their very association with colonization that it was a benevolent scheme.[65]

By the mid-1850s, only a small minority of Virginians would have endorsed Andrews's and Morris's view of colonization. But ironically,

rather than rejecting the notion that women had a special moral perspective on slavery, many defenders of slavery accepted it. Some of Virginia's most zealous advocates of Southern rights feared that antislavery feeling ran high among the ranks of Virginia women. Southern nationalists such as Edmund Ruffin and Roger Pryor routinely lambasted colonization as a Northern-inspired attempt to undermine the Southern social order. An 1859 letter from Ruffin to the *South* (Richmond), a states'-rights paper, portrayed women as especially vulnerable to antislavery heresy: "The teachings and arguments of the agents & mouthpieces of the [Colonization] Society, and their efforts have mainly operated on morbidly tender consciences and weak minds of benevolent men, and women more especially, to induce them to emancipate their slaves." Pryor, editor of the *South*, agreed that Southern security depended on the inculcation of a "*proper sentiment*" on the slavery question among women. "If, especially, the mothers of the Southern country were all sound on the question," he suggested, "there would be less occasion for combined effort on the part of our citizens to put down the insolent schemes" of the abolitionists.[66]

Indeed, in the 1850s a chorus of voices argued that women must be taught the "proper" views on slavery and educate their children in turn. In the pages of the *South*, a proslavery colonizationist claimed that Southern patriots needed to "educat[e] the public mind until every man and woman shall come to know and feel that slavery is not only right in itself, but that for most of the negroes held in slavery, manumission would be a curse and a cruelty." The proprietors of the Southern Female Institute in Fredericksburg urged the General Assembly to support their female academy in order to promote "Southern" values among women. Southern daughters, at a time in their development when "their feelings are stronger than their reason," were too often exposed to Northern teachers who "infected [them] with that sickly sentimentalism which . . . generates such monsters as the Abby Kellys and the Fanny Wrights who stand now . . . upon the platforms of Anti-slavery societies and women's rights conventions."[67]

A similar case was made by Alexander H. Sands, commencement speaker at the 1859 graduation ceremony of the Hollins Female Institute in Richmond. Sands called on proslavery women to educate their misinformed sisters:

> I do ask you to look well to the surroundings of this question—to read and understand the argument used in behalf of slavery, and to correct a false sentiment, which I fear is already too prevalent among

females, that the institution is wrong. It is not wrong . . . and our educated women ought to know it that they may imbue their children with it and educate in the truest and best method a popular sentiment in conformity to right reason and to the word of the Living God. This is one of the duties (and but one) which an educated woman at the South owes to the State.[68]

Whether or not "false sentiment" on slavery was more prevalent among Southern women than among men, we will never know with certainty; few people of either sex left records as rich as Blackford's. But the fact that the most prominent female colonizationists endorsed the broad interpretation of colonization as a wedge to gradual emancipation even as the leaders of the VCS repudiated it is surely significant. ACS ideology continued to resonate with women long after sectional tensions had undermined public support for colonization. The ACS had defined a host of activities, from education to manumission, as philanthropy, and had defined philanthropy as the special province of women. In the minds of Blackford, Rice, et al., the architects of ACS ideology—Gurley foremost among them—understood women's concerns and appreciated women's contributions.

With the rise of sectional tensions, the ACS case for the involvement of women became politically suspect in Virginia. Men like Ruffin feared that women still clung to the hope of gradual emancipation and still believed that individual acts of kindness, such as manumission, were moral imperatives. Rather than simply bemoan the fact that some women were not "sound" on the slavery question, proslavery apologists began to construct a counterargument. George Fitzhugh, Alfred Taylor Bledsoe, and a host of others followed Thomas Dew's lead. They conceded the moral superiority of women over men—of *Southern* women, that is; Fitzhugh averred that the "judgment of women is far superior to that of men." But, in Fitzhugh's opinion, Southern women's moral refinement was a product of the institution of slavery, and their superior perceptions should lead them to support, unequivocally, the peculiar institution. As we shall see in Chapter 4, many Virginia women in fact rallied to the defense of slavery and Southern values in the 1850s. A new generation of female authors took it upon themselves to prove that masters and mistresses were humane and well-meaning. Women's special moral perspective, these writers would argue, allowed them to describe Southern domestic relations with objectivity.[69]

In short, the Virginia sources suggest that the question of whether or not Southern women were "covert abolitionists" is the wrong one to ask.

White Virginians of both sexes, the subjects of this chapter included, resoundingly rejected abolitionism. But the rejection of abolitionism did not preclude meaningful debate over slavery or over women's part in the slavery controversy. The "moderate" position on slavery—that the institution was wrong and should be slowly and cautiously dismantled—was the victim of a protracted siege. As it fell, so too did a particular vision of women's civic duty, one so eloquently expressed by Blackford. In the 1850s, the notion that white women were the special victims of the slave system gave way to the idea that they were the special beneficiaries of it; and the argument that women had the public duty to work for gradual emancipation gave way to the notion that they had the public duty to defend slavery.

Long before Virginia women took up their pens on behalf of slavery, however, they entered the public sphere to participate in a different political cause—the advancement of political parties. Only by examining the realm of party politics can we put the experiences of colonization women in historical context. The decline of antislavery sentiment in Virginia did not mark the retreat of women from the political sphere. In the 1840s, many of the men and women who had joined together to promote the causes of temperance and colonization rallied behind the banner of the Whig Party. How did the Whigs justify the inclusion of women in partisan rituals? By arguing that women had a special moral perspective on politics.

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