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From Enslaver to White Savior: The Blackford Family and the Memory of the American Colonization Society

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Abstract

Part of the same family but with a generation dividing them, Mary Berkeley Minor Blackford and her grandson, Launcelot Minor Blackford Junior, shared much of the same sentiment toward the American Colonization Society (ACS). Mary, active in the ACS before the Civil War, supported the organization despite criticisms wielded by abolitionists of the period. Mary looked to the ACS for salvation from discussions about the morality of enslavement while enjoying the comforts that the thought of an all-white America brought her. Launcelot, writing fifty years after Mary's passing at the beginning of an emerging national conversation about Black civil rights, looked to the memory of Mary to absolve his family of contributions to the Confederate cause and combat new conversations about race in America. Mary and Launcelot, though from different periods in American history, looked to the ACS and its memory to imagine a world where they had no complicity in racial oppression while supporting a movement that's main mission resisted Black perspectives and progress in the United States.

Mary Berkeley Minor Blackford lived on Caroline Street in Fredericksburg, Virginia, and in 1832, she witnessed enslaved people building the walls of a jail. Appalled by the sight, she expressed that they did not know that "they themselves might be the first to be confined there."[1] Slave traders had moved their business onto her block and began holding enslaved people there before auctions. Her response to the situation was to encourage a "generous, rich, kind-hearted Yankee" to buy the home and have the men move their business elsewhere.[2] Transporting issues out of her line of sight was a common practice for Mary and was a solution she looked to when interacting with Black people around her.

Writing 122 years after this interaction, Mary's grandson, Launcelot Minor Blackford Jr., recalled this event in his book *Mine Eyes Have Seen the Glory: The Story of a Virginia Lady, Mary Berkeley Minor Blackford, 1802-1896, Who Taught Her Sons to Hate Slavery and to Love the Union.* He allowed Mary's voice to carry the story by transcribing her entry from her journal titled "Notes Illustrative of the Wrongs of Slavery" into the chapter. He did not add any additional commentary, but he used her words to demonstrate his claim that Mary was a "generous" woman who conducted her actions "on the part of the slaves."[3]

Throughout her life, Mary was heavily involved in the American Colonization Society (ACS), an organization founded in Washington, D.C., with the mission of shipping free Black people living in the United States to the colony of Liberia. The ACS was not a governmental organization. Although it initially got funding from the U.S. Government and support from the U.S. Navy, most of the organization's revenue for exportation came through Auxiliary Societies.

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[1] Launcelot Minor Blackford, *Mine Eyes Have Seen the Glory* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1954), 42.

[2] L. Blackford, *Mine Eyes Have Seen the Glory*, 42.

[3] L. Blackford, *Mine Eyes Have Seen the Glory*, xvii.

In 1819, Edward C. McGuire, the rector of Saint George's Episcopal Church in Fredericksburg, aided in forming an Auxiliary that met there.[4] Ten years later, Mary Blackford decided that the women of Fredericksburg should also support the colonization movement, so she formed a branch of the ACS for the women of Fredericksburg and also of Falmouth, a nearby town. Mary devoted much of her life's work to the organization's cause, as she ensured that the free Black people of Virginia would be removed from the state.

When Abraham Lincoln won the election of 1860 and southern states began to leave the Union, the middle southern states were conflicted in their loyalties. Mary was fairly quiet on her thoughts on the politics of the war, as her husband supported the Confederate cause and her five sons enlisted in its army. She was upset by disunion but also struggled to imagine an America where emancipation did not happen on her terms.

Following the Civil War, southern people wanted to reinvent their identity after a devastating defeat. Southern women began creating shrines for fallen Confederate veterans and reviving their lost loved ones as heroes. As the South mourned their losses, the movement spread and developed. The memory of the Civil War in the South began focusing on the bravery of southern men and their devotion to state sovereignty rather than the politics of slavery. Writer Edward A. Pollard coined the term "Lost Cause" with his book *The Lost Cause: A New Southern History of the War of the Confederates.* His "New Southern History" focused on claiming military superiority of the South and drawing attention away from the issue of slavery.[5] Pollard argued that the South lost because of a lack of resources rather than the superiority of Northern

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[4] Carrol Quenzel, *The History and Background of St. George's Episcopal Church* (Fredericksburg, VA: Richmond, 1951), 31.

[5] Caroline Janney, *Remembering the Civil War: Reunion and the Limits of Reconciliation* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2013), 137.

forces, while also promoting the idea that the war was not about slavery but state sovereignty; he reimagined slavery as an ethical system that worked for the good of the enslaved.[6] His book reflected the white South's imagination and expanded its voice.

Mary's grandson, Launcelot, took after this notion of southern innocence and used the ACS as a tool of the Lost Cause by claiming his family did not fight for enslavement since there could have been another road to emancipation. By centering the message of the ACS as a moderate solution to emancipation, Launcelot aimed to remove himself from the rising conversation of racial oppression in the United States and his family's role in perpetuating it.

Mary and her grandson Launcelot, though two generations apart, shared many of the same sentiments regarding race and felt troubled by their responsibility in perpetuating white supremacy. When the abolitionist movement started prioritizing the voices of Black people, Mary continued supporting the ACS, viewing it as a moderate option that still gave white people control over what Black freedom would look like. When the Civil Rights movement began gaining traction, Launcelot, witnessing Black people beginning to enter white spaces and share their perspectives, looked to his family's past and found comfort in the mission of the ACS, an organization aimed to deal with the moral qualms of slavery while still prioritizing white comfort. Though alive at different times, when confronted with the ideas of Black freedom and equality, both of these Blackford family members found solace in the ACS.

Mary's childhood inspired her involvement in the colonization movement. Her grandfather, John Minor, was a wealthy planter who owned a plantation in Caroline County, Virginia, Topping Castle.[7] He accumulated his wealth through the work of enslaved people and

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[6] Janney, *Remembering the Civil War,* 137.

[7] Reel 2, "Sketch of my Life," in the Launcelot Minor Blackford Diaries #68, Southern Historical Collection, The Wilson Library, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

set up a comfortable social status for his family. Mary's father, John Minor Junior, branched out from the elder's occupation and became a lawyer. Though similarly to his father, he bought a large portion of land in Fredericksburg, and likely using the work of enslaved people, had a mansion built there named Hazel Hill. When John Minor Senior passed away, Mary's father inherited Topping Castle, the plantation where she was born in 1802.[8] Her family spent the summers in Caroline County and the winters in Fredericksburg.[9] Growing up at these two plantations, she was accustomed to life surrounded by enslaved people; she and her family profited from their labor.

Image 1: Hazel Hill (Site File, Fredericksburg and Spotsylvania National Military Park)

Despite the financial comforts that enslaved people brought to her family, Mary's father and her mother, Lucy Landon Carter, both opposed the brutal nature of the institution of slavery and proposed ways to end enslavement in the state. In 1783, looking for support from his fellow Virginians, Minor introduced a bill to the Virginia Assembly suggesting gradual emancipation, but it was never acted on. As a result, he introduced another bill proposing colonization in 1790,

[8] Reel 2, "Sketch of my Life," in the Launcelot Minor Blackford Diaries #68.

[9] Charles M. Blackford, "Four Successive John Minors (Concluded)." *The Virginia Magazine of History and Biography* 10, no. 4 (1903): 437.

but it also failed to garner any real attention.[10] John Minor was not dissimilar to other Virginians in the late eighteenth century. Founding fathers Thomas Jefferson and James Monroe contemplated gradual emancipation followed by transportation of the free people out of the country, but they did little to challenge slavery during their lifetimes.

Minor was well acquainted with other prominent Virginians, including Monroe. Along with his family coming from wealth, he found political connections through his military involvement as he fought in the American Revolution and rose to the rank of brigadier general during the War of 1812. In the early nineteenth century, the Union was under threat from the divisions between Federalists and Anti-Federalists. At the beginning of the War of 1812, Minor wrote to James Monroe, his close friend, concerning the "threatened divisions" between the two political ideologies and wrote that the increasing divide threatened the country "with a Civil War."[11]

Inspired by the legacy of her father, Mary, like other well-connected Virginian women of the time, took pride in the Union and saw it as her place to protect what her ancestors created and preserved. Many prominent white Virginian women became influential advocates of the ACS, as their political voices were limited. The organization offered a place in which they could participate in fundraising and managing the shipment of free individuals to Africa. The women involved in the ACS viewed slavery as a stain left behind by British rule that needed a moderate solution.[12] With the admission of new states into the Union and the question of whether they

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[10] C. Blackford, "Four Successive John Minors," 436.

[11] John Minor to James Monroe, October 11, 1812. *The Papers of James Monroe Digital Edition,* Daniel Preston and Robert Karachuk, editors. Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, Rotunda.

[12] Marie Tyler-McGraw, *An African Republic: Black & White Virginians in the Making of Liberia* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2007), 84.

would be free states or permit slavery, these women recognized the growing divide between North and South and its threat to the nation. They saw it as their godly mission to emancipate enslaved people and instill Christian values in them while slowly removing them from the United States.

Though the idea of colonization stemmed from white Virginian men from before Mary's generation, not much had been done about it in the late eighteenth century. In the early nineteenth century, however, white Americans began taking interest in the movement again. Virginian Charles Fenton Mercer was the first to revive the old idea. He proposed colonization as an economic solution to the financial decline in the U.S. following the War of 1812. Mercer saw colonization as a way to propel the United States onto the world stage by following the example of the British, who had sent much of their formerly enslaved population to the colony of Sierra Leone.[13] As Mercer saw it, Black people were a demographic bound to pauperism by their race. His intentions had no basis in supporting the well-being of Black people, but rather in his own economic interests.

Robert Finley, a minister living in New Jersey, took a liking to Mercer's idea for colonization and endorsed the Society, though his intentions differed from Mercers. Finley was not an abolitionist, but unlike Mercer, his thoughts on colonization were more focused on a route to gradual emancipation and finding a way for free people to avoid limitations because of American racism. In his pamphlet "Thoughts on the Colonization of Free Blacks," Finley claimed that earlier attempts to do something about the state of free Black people in the U.S. failed because "the servitude of the sons of Ham, as described by Noah . . . was not

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[13] Douglas R. Egerton, "'Its Origin Is Not a Little Curious: A New Look at the American Colonization Society." *Journal of the Early Republic* 5, no. 4 (1985): 465.

terminated."[14] He proposed colonization as a means of "the gradual separation of the black from the white population, by providing for the former, some suitable situation where they may enjoy the advantages to which they are entitled by nature and their creator's will."[15] Finley did not envision an America where there was an opportunity for Black citizenship; instead, he supported the idea that Black people should prove themselves in a foreign land away from white racism.

Despite Finley's beliefs being rooted in racist religious justifications for enslavement, and the idea that Black people who were born in the United States were somehow connected to the African continent, he was still more forward-thinking than many other Americans in the early nineteenth century. Many Virginians claimed that Black people were forever bound to enslavement because of their racial inferiority. One Fredericksburg citizen expressed that people of African descent were "ordained of high Heaven to serve the white man."[16] People like Finley saw colonization as a moderate solution for ending enslavement. Most followers of the ACS focused on exporting people through their wills. The goals of the organization were designed to very slowly break down the institution of slavery, allowing white people to have the comforts slavery brought them until they died. One Virginian colonizationist, St. George Tucker, latched onto the cause and proposed a plan for colonization with such strict rules on emancipation that if his plans had come to fruition, slavery would have existed in the United States another one hundred years following the Civil War.[17] The roots of the ACS were never completely cemented

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[14] Robert Finley, "Thoughts on the Colonization of Free Blacks," 1816. Antislavery Pamphlet Collection (RB 003). Special Collections and University Archives, University of Massachusetts Amherst Libraries, 1.

[15] Finley, "Thoughts on the Colonization of Free Blacks," 1.

[16] Jane Howison Beale, *The Journal of Jane Howison Beale of Fredericksburg, Virginia, 1850-1862*. (Fredericksburg, VA: Historic Fredericksburg Foundation), 1979.

[17] Manisha Sinha, *The Slave's Cause: A History of Abolition.* (United Kingdom: Yale University Press, 2016), 91.

in emancipation, and some pro-slavery figures even took part in the colonization movement. They viewed the organization as a way to rid the country of any opposition to slavery by sending free people who spoke out against the institution to another continent. Though they were in the minority, they represented the diversity in the line of thought that the unclear mission of the organization managed to attract. The colonization movement never focused on Black rights but rather provided a comfortable way for white people to remove slavery and Black Americans from their lives; it allowed white Americans to avoid the conversation of Black freedom and citizenship in the United States.

Paul Cuffe, a Quaker sea captain who was born free to a Wampanoag mother and Akan father, had an interest in creating a Black republic.[18] He thought about ways of connecting England, the United States, and Africa through trade to uplift Black people across the diaspora. Cuffe's vision was for Black people to lead this movement. While he was taking trips to Sierra Leone and exploring this idea in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, white American men were forming the ACS. Cuffe initially took interest in the organization, though suspicious about the founders' intentions. When Robert Finley and fellow ACS founder Samuel Mills were first founding the movement, they corresponded with him. Cuffe suggested that the men involve Black leadership; otherwise, the movement would not interest free Black people. When Finley and Mills were attending the organization's first meetings in Washington, D.C., Cuffe and his supporters were hopeful. However, when they learned about the degrading ways the organization talked about Black people, they rejected the movement.[19] Cuffe warned against the ACS, viewing it as a white-run mission with ulterior motives. Despite a few Black figures'

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[18] Sinha, *The Slave's Cause*, 163.

[19] McGraw, *An African Republic*, 26.

vocal interest in bridging connections with the African continent, specifically West Africa, most of the conversation about creating a colony on the West coast of Africa came from wealthy white Americans. With Cuffe's death in 1817, the ACS was the main access to colonization left on the scene.[20] Led entirely by white men, the ACS was disconcerting to free Black Americans and enslaved people alike.

Mary Blackford was familiar with free Black people's resistance to the ACS. In 1832, Mary's younger brother, Charles decided to manumit Ralph, an enslaved man that he grew up alongside. Following his manumission, Charles urged Ralph to go to Liberia, stating that he should leave the state because he might be captured by "some wretched Negro trader."[21] Because the transcripts left behind about Ralph were written by his enslavers, it is impossible to know his views on his enslavement and his relations with the Minor family; however, his silence after receiving his freedom speaks volumes. Charles wrote in his letter to Ralph that he was no longer his "master" but still his "friend."[22] Perhaps Ralph was not receptive to an offer of friendship from a man who kept him in bondage until his adult years of life because he cut ties with the family completely, and John noted that he never received a letter in return.[23] Though the Minor family saw themselves as benevolent, the family still encountered resistance from the people they enslaved. The Minors knew that when people were free they did not hold the same power over their lives.

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[20] Sinha, *The Slave's Cause*, 163.

[21] L. Blackford, *Mine Eyes Have Seen the Glory*, 31.

[22] L. Blackford, *Mine Eyes Have Seen the Glory*, 31.

[23] L. Blackford, *Mine Eyes Have Seen the Glory*, 31.

Prior to the Civil War, Mary never lived in a household without enslaved people. When she married lawyer William Blackford in 1825, she and her husband held conflicting views on enslavement and the purpose of the ACS. William was comfortable buying and owning people, to his wife's discomfort, while Mary viewed colonization as a means of gradual emancipation. William, on the other hand, held similar beliefs to Mercer. He envisioned the movement as a way to "remove the degraded free Black population."[24] Despite their conflicting outward beliefs, Mary and William did share a commonality: they wanted free Black people removed from the country.

Image 2: Mary and William Blackford (Blackford Family Papers, UNC Southern Historical Collection)

In 1829, while white Northern abolitionists were becoming disenchanted with the ACS and beginning to take the voices of Black abolitionists more seriously, Mary formed a Women's Auxiliary branch of the ACS in Fredericksburg and Falmouth. Despite the growing disinterest in colonization, Mary soon became more supportive of the movement than ever. In the summer of

[24] McGraw, *An African Republic*, 90.

1831 in Southampton County, Virginia, Nat Turner and a group of over seventy free and enslaved Black people waged a rebellion, killing many of the white people they encountered including men, women, and children. After this event, Southern white interest in colonization spiked due to the fear of free people who could potentially encourage rebellion and the issues of safety presented by abusing and degrading a population of people.

Mary, concerned for her own safety, took advantage of the moment to promote the colonization movement. Soon after the event, she made her way down to Southampton to speak with some of the families who had witnessed the rebellion. Reflecting in her journal, she wrote about a conversation she had with a witness of the revolt. Mary expressed that many of the slaveholders she knew were good people. Though Mary never owned anyone under her name, she acted as a slaveholder. William did not enslave many people at the same time while him and Mary lived together, but the Nat Turner Rebellion made it clear that slavery was a risk to any enslaver and their families. Because of this rebellion, Mary realized that even the people she deemed to be benevolent slaveholders still had a hand in promoting the oppression of Black people. Rebellion threatened the racial caste system that had long been the fabric of Virginian society. She credited the incident to the enslaved people being "ignorant and diluted," but shortly followed up her statement, added that she was "sure that with a hundredth of the wrongs they [enslaved people] suffer we white people would have risen in arms fifty times."[25] Through these remarks it is clear that she recognized the cruelty of slavery and also understood that enslaving people came with dangerous consequences. Although she rejected the idea that the people involved in the rebellion were justified in their actions, she still credited the evils of the

[25] L. Blackford, *Mine Eyes Have Seen the Glory*, 28.

institution as a reason that prompted people to rebel. This conversation was extremely uncomfortable for someone who considered themselves a benevolent slaveholder.

Following the Southampton rebellion, Virginian women, fueled by the realization that no one was immune to the repercussions of slavery, began writing petitions calling for a more defined road to emancipation. Mary, inspired by a petition written by the women in Fluvanna County, Virginia, decided to draft one of her own. Petitions had long been a way for women to exercise their voices politically. In the winter of 1831, three different parties of white women, including Mary and the women of Fredericksburg, wrote petitions to the Virginia legislature that called for gradual emancipation and colonization. The first petition was from Augusta, Virginia, where the women wrote they were concerned over "the late slaughter of our sisters and their little ones in certain parts of our land," referring to the insurrection in Southampton.[26] Following the Fluvanna petition in November of that year, Mary took it upon herself to draft a letter to the Virginia General Assembly. In her letter, she wrote "We are tremblingly alive to the fear of appearing too forward in this matter," concerned about the optics of a woman sharing her thoughts on one the largest political issues of the day.[27] She continued to justify her letter by stating that "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 countrymen."[28]

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[26] Patrick H. Breen, "The Female Antislavery Petition Campaign of 1831-32." *The Virginia Magazine of History and Biography* 110, no. 3 (2002): 384.

[27] Breen, "The Female Antislavery Petition Campaign of 1831-32," 394.

[28] Breen, "The Female Antislavery Petition Campaign of 1831-32," 395.

Operating within the gendered constraints of her time, Mary, not looking to provoke a question of immediate liberation, proposed "to restore" Black Americans "to the land of their Forefathers."[29] Mary also indicated that an emancipationist cause was the morally proper thing to do given the brutal history of enslavement and its contradictions of the ideas of "peace and freedom in the United States.[30] Despite her efforts in writing the petition and getting a few signatures from women in the area and other members of the Fredericksburg and Falmouth Auxiliary, Mary never ended up sending the letter to the Virginia General Assembly noting that she "had not support" and was "weak and timid."[31] Though Mary had moments where she sought "justice" for Black Americans, she never looked to challenge any social norms and wielded emancipation on the behalf of her own safety and moral consciousness.[32] As she saw it, emancipation needed to be followed by colonization for the safety of white Americans and the good of Black people. Though she did not remain an active member of the ACS following her move to Lynchburg, colonization was a sentiment she carried with her throughout her life.

Along with advocating colonization, following the Nat Turner Rebellion Mary took it upon herself to treat the enslaved people around her nicer, hoping they would take pity on her if they decided to rebel. Mary was well aware of issues of injustice committed against enslaved people but her reasoning for detesting the actions of slaveholders had more to do with her safety and salvation than it did with the rights of the oppressed. When the slave traders moved onto Mary's block in 1832, she felt the threat of rebellion due to the mistreatment of the enslaved

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[29] Breen, "The Female Antislavery Petition Campaign of 1831-32," 395.

[30] Breen, "The Female Antislavery Petition Campaign of 1831-32," 395.

[31] Breen, "The Female Antislavery Petition Campaign of 1831-32," 394.

[32] Breen, "The Female Antislavery Petition Campaign of 1831-32," 395.

people that she witnessed while strolling down her street. Walter Finnall, a brutal slave trader, bought a house only a door down and across the street from where Mary lived. In her journal, she recounted that an enslaved boy had been trying to escape to the North, and Finnall locked him in the basement of his home before he aimed to sell him away. The mother of the boy wanted to see him before he was sold. Mary wanted to reason with Finnall and ask if the mother and son could meet once more. After knocking on his door, Mary was greeted by Finnall's son. She asked if she could talk to his mother, "hoping from one of my own sex to find that mercy I looked for in vain from a man."[33] When the boy came back down the stairs, he told Mary that his mother had no interest in speaking to her. In response, Mary "asked him if he did not fear the judgments of an offended God."[34] She then wrote that she "warned him that such cruelty wouldn't go unpunished and reminded him of the affair at Southampton which just occurred."[35] Mary feared not only what God thought of slavery, but also of the earthly punishments that enslaved people could place on her. Fear guided Mary's activism, and she worried more about what the enslaved people would do to her than she did for their safety and well-being.

In 1832, Northern abolitionist William Lloyd Garrison criticized the Fredericksburg Colonization Society. He wrote regarding the Auxiliary's claims to their benevolent intentions that "If the Auxiliary Society of Fredericksburg do not aim at the removal of the entire colored population, it is to their credit, and proves that they may justly claim an intellectual superiority to the mother institution."[36] However, he added that "if the object of the Colonization Society be, as

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[33] L. Blackford, *Mine Eyes Have Seen the Glory*, 40.

[34] L. Blackford, *Mine Eyes Have Seen the Glory*, 40.

[35] L. Blackford, *Mine Eyes Have Seen the Glory*, 40.

[36] *The Abolitionist* (Boston: Garrison and Knapp, 1833), 102.

our friend states, for the benefit of the free blacks, it seems to us that these last should by this time have discovered and appreciated the benevolence of the Society,"[37] faulting the Fredericksburg branch for its ignorance of free Black perspectives. Although a few free people decided to relocate to Liberia, most did not want to live in a foreign country away from everything they knew. The majority of emigrants were enslaved people taking a chance at their only opportunity for freedom. Most colonizationists wrote in their wills that the people they had enslaved could find freedom in Liberia, and if they chose not to go, they could choose to stay enslaved under a friend or family member of the slaveholder.[38] For most emigrants, Liberia was a limited opportunity for freedom, and the only other choice was slavery.

Just two years after Garrison's criticisms of the branch, Mary changed the goal of her Auxiliary. Whether the change in motives was due to the increasing criticisms of the ACS or if it was because of the difficulties that the branch had raising funds in Fredericksburg is unclear.[39] What is certain is that the new mission was just as unwilling to listen to the voices of Black people. No longer focused on settling free people, she changed the name to the "Ladies' Society of Fredericksburg and Falmouth, for the Promotion of Female Education in Africa," with the new purpose of the Auxiliary being to raise funds to send missionaries and schoolteachers to Liberia.[40]

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[37] *The Abolitionist*, 103.

[38] McGraw, *An African Republic*, 5.

[39] Mary and her fellow members of the Fredericksburg branch had different methods of raising money for the organization, one of which was selling sewn goods. Mary noted that it had been difficult to raise money in Fredericksburg and sending people to Liberia was costly. See Patrick H. Breen. "The Female Antislavery Petition Campaign of 1831-32," 393.

[40] McGraw, *An African Republic*, 92.

This new mission highlighted the white-centered thinking emboldened by the Auxiliary. Mary was aware that disease was a present threat in Liberia. Her younger brother, Lancelot Byrd Minor, had gone to Liberia as part of the ACS mission, fallen ill, and died in 1843.[41] Like free Black people, white agents were also put at risk when traveling to the newly formed country, but they had more freedom in the decision to go than the formerly enslaved people. Colonization members were also more wary about sending white people to Liberia. As a part of the organization's attempts to direct Black education, they planned to send white teachers to Liberia. Amelia Davidson, a colonizationist living in Philadelphia wrote Mary Blackford in 1836, concerning the situation. Davidson expressed concerns over sending white agents to Liberia, noting the "very great risque [risk] of life and health" that going presented to the agents.[42] She also remarked that, "of all the white females who have gone to Liberia, how few have lived to enter on their work," referring to the dangers present in the travels to the country.[43] Mary and her counterparts were well aware of the health risks and the dangers of travel that sending people to Liberia presented, but they were not concerned for the health of Black emigrants because their main goal was not about Black people finding success in Liberia, but getting them out of America no matter the cost of life.

The Blackfords never owned many people at the same time. The 1830 census shows that they enslaved one person and were living with two free people.[44] Slavery was the foundation of

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[41] L. Blackford, *Mine Eyes Have Seen the Glory*, 2.

[42] Scan 66, Folder 4 in the Blackford Family Papers #1912, Southern Historical Collection, The Wilson Library, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

[43] Scan 66, Folder 4 in the Blackford Family Papers.

[44] 1830 United States Census Fredericksburg County, Virginia, digital image s.v. "William M. Blackford," Ancestry.com.

their generational wealth but no longer of particular profit to them; the racial hierarchy in America, however, was strongly ingrained into their sense of being. Like most Americans of her time, besides outspoken abolitionists, Mary never saw Black people as equal. Unlike most Americans, however, she quelled her strong discomfort with Black freedom by looking to the ACS. Mary used the organization to operate through Virginia law. In 1806, the state established that people must leave the state after twelve months following their manumission, or in Mary's words, "they would be sold as slaves."[45] Mary never thought about challenging these laws, as it was not in her nature to go against the status-quo, but she worked within them to send free people out of the state.

Mary grew up following this line of thinking, and it was also something she never questioned. Mary's husband left the country in 1842 to fulfill his appointment by President John Tyler as Charge d'Affaires in Bogota, New Granada.[46] He took their eldest son, William Blackford Junior, who was ten years old at the time, with him.[47] During this time, Mary wrote to her son frequently. On a summer day in Fredericksburg in 1842, a formerly enslaved woman found herself at Mary's residence on Caroline Street. In desperation, the woman left a calling card explaining her situation to Mary. She was trying to collect money to get to Ohio with her family. The family had been set on walking there, but their plans were disrupted when her son

[45] July 3, 1842 from Mary to William Blackford, Diary of William Matthews Blackford (1801-64) covering diplomatic mission to Colombia, Accession #2221-b, Special Collections, University of Virginia Library, University of Virginia, Charlottesville, Va.

[46] The Richmond Auxiliary of the ACS reached out to John Tyler when he was incoming governor of Virginia to ask him to appeal to the state legislature for funding for the organization. Tyler believed that the Federal Government should not be involved in funding the organization and that it should be left up to the states. Like William Blackford, his position on colonization was that it should exist to remove free Black people from the United States. McGraw, *An African Republic,* 44.

[47] Reel 3, "Sketch of my Life" in the Launcelot Minor Blackford Diaries #68.

faced a hip injury hindering his ability to make the Northward journey. In a note to William, Mary disclosed that a family friend had rescinded the dollar he and his brothers donated to support her philanthropic affairs, so Mary decided to give the dollar to the woman to pay for train tickets. In her letter, Mary explained to William Jr, that he "must understand she is a liberated slave, and this is the law."[48] Mary was not an abolitionist, but rather she was a rule follower, and she was content with Virginia legislation and willing to work with the precedents set by her ancestors. When Mary witnessed abuse toward enslaved people, she looked to appease them out of fear of rebellion. When she met free people, she looked for any means to send them out of the state.

In 1843, while William was still living in Bogotá, he wrote Mary a letter permitting her to free Abram.[49] Mary, pleased with the outcome of her begging, had written earlier of his potential freedom, saying "God knows that I have earned it," centering his manumission on her own interests.[50] Mary shipped Abram to Liberia, and he wrote her from the colony.

Many free people living in Libera often wrote to their former master. In doing so, they were writing to one of their few points of access to goods and also writing as representatives of their race.[51] Lott Carey, a Black advocate for colonization said in the 1820s "I wish to go to a country where I am esteemed by my merits– not by my complexion."[52] For Carey and other emigrants like him, Liberia was an opportunity to show white America what Black people were

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[48] July 3, 1842 from Mary to William Blackford, Diary of William Matthews Blackford.

[49] L. Blackford, *Mine Eyes Have Seen the Glory*, 60.

[50] L. Blackford, *Mine Eyes Have Seen the Glory*, 56

[51] See David Kazanjian, "The Speculative Freedom of Colonial Liberia." *American Quarterly* 63, no. 4 (2011).

[52] McGraw, *An African Republic*, 66.

capable of when they were not limited by American racism.[53] Abram explained in a letter his typical encounters to Mary and expressed that things were going fairly well in the new colony. He asked if she could send him a few goods to hold him over while also telling her that "an industrious person can live here."[54] At the end of the letter, he slipped in a tragic moment explaining that he "heard a crying over the street- and when I come to find out thy [there] has been a woman died very sudden which was supposed to be well about half an hour ago, she was not prepared for death I think."[55] He did not dwell on the event, finishing his letter by stating "nothing more at present to say, but remainds [remains] you [your] acquaintance."[56] Abram called this moment of a healthy person falling ill in Liberia to Mary's attention, though he was careful in not dwelling on the situation for too long, still focusing his letter on his successes in Liberia and asking Mary how she was doing and wishing health to her family.

Abrams letter only gives a small insight into life in Liberia. Many people who went were sent with the beliefs of rugged individualism and that if they were able to work hard enough, they would have a good life. Abram wanted to show Mary he was capable of industriousness. Even though Abram reveled in his successes when communicating with Mary, some of the Black Americans in Liberia expressed that the colony was just a new form of slavery and that they missed their families and homes. Mary sent an outfit to Abram for his new life, which was a fairly uncommon practice amongst ACS members colonization members looking to show off

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[53] McGraw, *An African Republic*, 66.

[54] John W Blassingame, *Two Centuries of Letters, Speeches, Interviews, and Autobiographies*. (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1976). 62.

[55] Blassingame, *Two Centuries of Letters, Speeches, Interviews, and Autobiographies*, 62.

[56] Blassingame, *Two Centuries of Letters, Speeches, Interviews, and Autobiographies*, 62.

their status through the dress of the people they freed.[57] Abram's letters give insight into the uncertainties of life in colonial Liberia, the negligence of many of the slaveholders who decided to send free people there, and the control that former masters still had over the free people. Mary still had some sway over the lives of the people she formerly enslaved. She kept them at a large distance that was too far for them to resist and where they could still be at the mercy of her good will by her actions of sending money, goods, and other necessities to the free people.

When her husband and son returned from New Granada in 1846, William Senior was in search of a job. He decided to take a position as editor of the Lynchburg *Virginian*, so the family left Fredericksburg. Despite Mary's anti-slavery leanings, in 1846, William purchased a woman named Peggy to help her with the children. Mary took a strong liking to Peggy, but never taught her to read or write, despite having taught most of the people she enslaved, even though the practice was against the law.[58] She kept Peggy uneducated in accordance with Virginia law and made it more difficult for her to access means of resistance and communicate with other enslaved people. Literacy was only a gift that Mary granted to those she expected to free and send away.

Upon her move to Lynchburg, Mary became inactive in colonization efforts, likely due to the frontier nature of the area at the time. She still morally supported the cause and continued writing and sharing ideas with other supporters of colonization. In 1851, she wrote a response to her cousin and famed oceanographer, Matthew Fontaine Maury, about his plans to send free people to places other than Liberia; he considered the Amazon Basin. Maury and Mary held very

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[57] Scan 1, Folder 27 in the Blackford Family Papers.

[58] L. Blackford, *Mine Eyes Have Seen the Glory*, 256.

different views on slavery, about which she was aware. She opposed his idea because she worried that opportunistic Southerners, like Maury himself, would try to steal the land and expand slavery to the new territory as they had in the past.[59] She emphasized to Maury that slavery needed to be purged from the United States and expressed to him that America was like Egypt in the Old Testament of the Bible.[60] She compared the plight of the Israelites in Egypt to the enslavement of people of African descent in the United States. Evoking the image of the plagues forced by God upon the Egyptians, Mary claimed that the plague of slavery in the U.S. was much worse than what the Egyptians suffered.[61] Through her analysis of biblical stories, it is evident that she viewed slavery as a burden on white Americans. Rather than centering on the enslaved people that America's racist caste system impacted the most directly- and worrying for their safety and well-being, throughout her life, Mary worried for her own safety and the threat that slavery posed to her soul.

Throughout the early nineteenth century, the Blackford family, like many other Virginians, were devout Whigs. As the nation grew and new states were admitted into the Union, the issue of slavery began to divide the Whigs. Following the Kansas-Nebraska Act of 1854, the party essentially disintegrated. In the election of 1860, Virginia voted for the Constitutional Union candidate, John Bell, who wanted to keep neutral on the question of slavery. Bell lost to Abraham Lincoln; a former Whig who ran on the ticket of the new Republican Party that

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[59] Matthew Fontaine Maury and Mary Blackford varied greatly in their politics on slavery. Maury took interest in Manifest Destiny and the idea of acquiring land in Central and South America to expand the institution of slavery. See John Grady, *Matthew Fontaine Maury, Father of Oceanography: A Biography 1806-1873* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company Press, 2015), 90.

[60] Scan 7, folder 51 in the Blackford Family Papers.

[61] Scan 8, folder 51 in the Blackford Family Papers.

opposed the expansion of slavery into the new territories. Susan Blackford, Mary's daughter-in-law, described the election of 1860 in her memoir. She stated that her "husband [Charles Blackford] and his people, my brother and all my people belonged to the old Whig party."[62] Susan explained that her family believed in the Union and that they "did not believe that the question of the empty right to carry slaves into territories was of sufficient importance to peril the Union that it might be maintained."[63] She soon described the resulting war as one of "the aggressive action of the North."[64] Despite the family's wealth of writing throughout the war years, Mary was fairly silent on her perspectives on the politics of the war, only sharing a few short thoughts at the beginning and end of the conflict.

In 1860, a fellow member of the ACS, George Washington Bethune, wrote to Mary concerning the Confederate attack on Fort Sumter. Like Mary, he quarreled with the institution of slavery but strongly detested abolitionism, which supported not only the abolition of slavery but the equal rights of African Americans. His concern to Mary was over disunion, and he stated, "I join my prayers with you my dear," indicating they held similar views on the conflict.[65] When Mary's five sons decided to take up arms for the Confederacy, she expressed disappointment to her cousin John B. Minor, writing "my own beloved sons, I labored to train them to love their country and be willing to die (if need be) by her flag, and yet I may live to see them fighting against it."[66] The issue of slavery seldom came up in her writing. However, she did express that

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[62] Susan Leigh Blackford, *Letters from Lee's Army; or Memoirs of Life in and Out of the Army in Virginia During the War Between the States.* (New York: C. Scribner's Sons, 1947): 7.

[63] S. Blackford, *Letters from Lee's Army,* 7.

[64] S. Blackford, *Letters from Lee's Army,* 7.

[65] Scan 79, Folder 79 in the Blackford Family Papers.

[66] L. Blackford, *Mine Eyes Have Seen the Glory*, 156.

"All the quarrels that have shaken the country to its foundations have grown out of this fatal cause [slavery] and now it is destroying us great people," pointing to the true reason for Southern secession.[67] During the war, however, she remained silent on her views regarding slavery.

Throughout the war, colonization came into consideration. President Abraham Lincoln never saw the idea as a means of complete emancipation as Mary did. He knew that the idea was not feasible on a broader scale. Instead, he saw colonization to Haiti, rather than Liberia, as a political and practical option to appease some free people by giving them the option to go to a Black-led republic while also easing the fears of white people with similar politics to Mary, those who supported the Union, but did not want to see the effects of Black freedom in their respective states.[68] In August 1862, Lincoln, worried about the white public's response to the soon to be announced Emancipation Proclamation, met with five free Black clergymen from Washington, D.C., to discuss colonization. Lincoln's meeting was met with loud denunciations by abolitionists. Frederick Douglass claimed that Lincoln's support for colonization during the conference was an indicator of how he was "a genuine representative of American prejudice and negro hatred."[69] Despite Douglass's condemnation of the scheme, several free people volunteered to go to Haiti under the direction of Bernard Kock, an entrepreneur interested in Haitian cotton. In 1863, after the Emancipation Proclamation took effect in rebelling southern territory, Kock and 453 free volunteers headed to Cow Island, a small chunk of land off of the Southwest Peninsula of Haiti. The mission proved to be a failure, and many of the free people

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[67] Marie Tyler-McGraw, *An African Republic*, 103.

[68] Burlingame, *The Black Man's President: Abraham Lincoln, African Americans, and the Pursuit of Racial Equality* (Pegasus Books, 2021), 63.

[69] Michael Burlingame, *Abraham Lincoln: A Life* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 2009), 3062.

suffered from disease and mistreatment by Kock.[70] With the news of the project's neglectful nature, Lincoln sent a ship to retrieve the surviving 368 emigrants.[71] The project's failure brought an end to any serious colonization efforts. Further cementing the fact that Black freedom was going to happen on American soil, after Lincoln announced the Emancipation Proclamation in January of 1863, Black men began enlisting in the United States army, fighting for an end to slavery.[72]

In 1865, the Blackford family emerged from the war relatively unscathed. All of Mary's sons survived the war, but her husband, William Blackford Senior, who served as the Confederacy States' treasury agent in Lynchburg, died from disease in 1864. His five sons served as the pallbearers at his funeral, dressed in their "full Confederate uniforms."[73]After the Battle of Appomattox Courthouse in April 1865, the Confederacy surrendered, and the United States' victory was complete. With the ratification of the 13th Amendment, American slavery was over. The question after the war was about what freedom was going to look like for recently emancipated people. In this sense, the war over Black autonomy had just begun. During this time, Mary's efforts were still concentrated on supporting missions in Africa, and she was clinging to the idea that emancipation followed by colonization was the best course of action. Ardent ACS supporters, including Ralph Randolph Gurley wrote to Mary after the war. He expressed to her that "great changes have assumed since we met," referring to emancipation.[74]

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[70] Burlingame, *Abraham Lincoln: A Life*, 3075.

[71] Burlingame, *Abraham Lincoln: A Life*, 3075.

[72] David W. Blight, Blight, David W. *A Slave No More: Two Men Who Escaped to Freedom: Including Their Own Narratives of Emancipation* (Orlando, FL: Harcourt, 2007), 159.

[73] S. Blackford, *Letters from Lee's Army* vol. 2: 187.

[74] Scan 12 Folder 88 in the Blackford Family Papers.

Gurley followed up in his letter that he believed her "Christian faith" to be "unchangeable" and that he knew her "compliance in the divine love to our race and . . . toward our colored people," were also fixed.[75] Still set on the idea of separating the races, he explained to Mary that he prayed for emancipated people to take Liberia into consideration.[76] Like Gurley, Mary was not over the defeat of her plans for emancipation. She expressed that "had gradual emancipation been adopted, connected with colonization in Africa, what an amount of good might have been done!! The preventing of this terrific war would have been one item, besides the benefit to the poor negros, and to Africa."[77] Mary was not opposed to emancipation. In fact, in 1866, she wrote excitedly in her journal that "Slavery has been abolished!!" though she projected her discontent with immediate emancipation by following her statement with the idea that freedom had happened "too suddenly for the real good of the Slaves," ignoring the fact that enslaved people had been fighting for centuries to obtain their freedom.[78] She was still upset that the gradual method followed by the removal of free people had not been adopted. Mary's son William expressed to her on multiple occasions that she had "never been really happy since the slaves were emancipated" and he proposed it was because her "pet hobby" was gone.[79] Mary did not want to deal with the disruption that free people brought to America's racial hierarchy and the lack of control she now had over their futures.

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[75] Scan 12 Folder 88 in the Blackford Family Papers.

[76] Scan 12 Folder 88 in the Blackford Family Papers.

[77] McGraw, *An African Republic*, 103.

[78] L. Blackford, *Mine Eyes Have Seen the Glory*, 249.

[79] L. Blackford, *Mine Eyes Have Seen the Glory*, 255.

The Civil War altered the course of American history, and what freedom would look like for Black Americans was the newest debate waging in a still-divided country. As the Blackford family moved into the post-war years, they resettled into their civilian lives. Her sons went back to work, and Mary remained in Lynchburg for some time with Peggy who was now working for wages, though the family claimed she never spent any of the money she made.[80]

Along with the question of how freedom for Black Americans would look, there was a growing concern over mending the divide between North and South. At first, Reconstruction gave hope to Black Americans. However, things changed shortly after Abraham Lincoln gave a speech proposing suffrage for educated Black people and those who had served in the war effort. Enraged, Confederate sympathizer John Wilkes Booth shot the president.[81] After Lincoln's assassination, Union troops were scattered throughout the South to ensure there would be no further rebellion from white Southerners and to protect free people.

The succeeding president, Andrew Johnson, was more lenient to the South than Republicans hoped for; however, Southerners were still unhappy with their situation. Still feeling as if the South was being repressed by the federal government with the stationing of U.S. troops, and upset with the thought of Black progress, Benjamin Blackford, another one of Mary's sons, wrote to his brother, Launcelot in August 1865, expressing that "things are bad enough in the country now to suggest the idea of seeking another, I admit."[82] He proceeded to write about ex-Confederates who decided to leave for Brazil and Mexico. After his remarks on leaving the

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[80] L. Blackford, *Mine Eyes Have Seen the Glory*, 255.

[81] After this speech Booth changed his plan from wanting to kidnap Lincoln for a ransom to restore the Confederacy to planning to assassinate the president. See Terry Alford, *Fortune's Fool: The Life of John Wilkes Booth* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015), 257.

[82] Scan 49, folder 88, in the Blackford Family Papers.

country, he explained that he thought about moving North but was worried about finding himself "in a community where negro suffrage and equality are more imminent than the most apprehensive consider them now to be in the South."[83] He then suggested to Benjamin "to stick by Old Virginia, where we know the people even as we are known of them, where our ancestors have lived under three different governments, where their bones rest and where their names live and rest."[84] Not wanting to live in a place where racial equality was a possibility, Launcelot and Benjamin decided to stay in their home state.

William Jr. also shared his thoughts on free people in a letter to Mary after the war in 1865. He wrote to her out of concern over the status of Abingdon, Virginia, telling Mary that "free people"' were out of control in the area and stated that "an organization has at last been formed in Abingdon and some arrests have been made."[85] Despite the horrific actions of white Southerners, there was still hope for Black Americans. In 1869, the states ratified the 15th Amendment, protecting Black men the right to vote. There were Black members of Congress, and Black people were beginning to build a new life in the United States. Conversely, none of this happened easily. While free people were still climbing out of the ruins of slavery, there was heavy white opposition to their challenging of the racial hierarchy. Immediately after the war, angry white Southerners banded together to form organizations like the Ku Klux Klan to oppose Black progress.[86] As Black people aspired to better futures and more opportunities post

[83] Scan 49, folder 88, in the Blackford Family Papers.

[84] Scan 49, Folder 88, in the Blackford Family Papers.

[85] Scan 77, Folder 88, in the Blackford Family Papers.

[86] David W. Blight, *Race and Reunion: the Civil War in American Memory* (Cambridge, Mass: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2001): 81.

emancipation, white people began to organize physical force, economic limits, and legal restrictions to police them. The post-war period caused white Southerners to band together in fear of Black progress and violence toward Black people became justified as keeping the South in order.[87]

In 1870, as Mary aged, she decided to live with her son, Launcelot, who was the principal of Episcopal High School in Alexandria, Virginia. The house now consisted of Mary, her bachelor son, and Peggy. The family remained close and life became more normal for white Southerners after the presidential election of 1876. It was a close race; Republicans agreed to withdraw troops from the South if Democrats placed their votes for Rutherford B. Hayes. After Hayes won the presidency, Republicans kept their promise and removed troops from the South.[88] This action brought an end to Radical Reconstruction. Jim Crow then began to dictate the freedoms of Black Southerners. Segregation soon became the status-quo of the South, along with debt peonage, restrictions on jobs and education, and physical violence toward Black people. No member of the Blackford family mentioned much about the restrictions on Black rights following 1876, they likely supported them. The only commentary Mary had to share was her continuing support of removing free Black people from the country as a solution to their plight. Though Mary supported Black schooling, as many of the women who supported the ACS did, this was because of the control it gave them over the values taught to Black children.[89] In a sense, many colonization supporters had turned their efforts towards the home front.

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[87] See George C. Rabel, *But There Was No Peace: the Role of Violence in the Politics of Reconstruction* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1984)

[88] Janney, *Remembering the Civil War*, 153.

[89] Crystal Lynn Webster, *Beyond the Boundaries of Childhood: African American Children in the Antebellum North* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2021), 42.

In 1884, while still living with his mother, Launcelot Minor Blackford married Eliza Chew. As her sons grew older and made families of their own, the Civil War became a more distant memory for them. For Christmas in 1885, William gifted his sister a book of his poetry recounting his service in the Confederate army. The book focused on the glory of battles; writing on the Battle of Fredericksburg he remembered "the boom of a cannon from Stafford's bold heights to signal our foemen have opened the fight."[90] His memories of the war shaped through his poetry reflected on the glory of different battles and not the political tensions that led to the conflict. When reflecting on the surrender at Appomattox he penned about Confederate General Robert E. Lee writing:

> Devoted and brave he had led the lost cause
> Through success and reverse in the past,
> But fortune can change not the victory won
> O'er Lee's country men's' hearts to the past[91]

William was not over the failure of the Confederacy and continued to view its efforts as a noble lost cause. This idea was ingrained into the teaching of his children and in 1894, when William's brother, Launcelot, had his fourth child with his wife Eliza Chew Blackford, they raised him with these recollections of the war.

Throughout Launcelot Junior's upbringing, there were major strides in reconciliation between the North and the South. In 1913, Woodrow Wilson of Virginia became President of the United States, the second Democrat and first Southerner to take the position of head executive since before the Civil War. Wilson's presidency was one of the first significant steps toward white reconciliation. In 1913, a fifty year reunion of Union and Confederate veterans was held at

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[90] William M. Blackford to Eliza C. A. Blackford, Accession 4763, Special Collections Department, University of Virginia Library.

[91] William M. Blackford to Eliza C. A. Blackford, Accession 4763.

the Gettysburg Battlefield.[92] Though Wilson did not wish to attend the event, he soon realized its importance, noting that it was an opportunity to "celebrate the end of all feeling as well as the end of all strife between the sections."[93] This reunion sparked an era of white Americans bonding together. Even though many Civil War veterans, especially Union veterans, did not forget the emancipationist narrative of the war, the spark had been lit for a reuniting of white Americans at the expense of Black freedom.

Image 3: Launcelot Senior and Junior (Blackford Family Papers, UNC Southern Historical Collection)

During Wilson's presidency, Launcelot served in World War I.[94] At this point in time, the memory of the Civil War was transforming. As Civil War veterans aged, their sons and

[92] Blight, *Race and Reunion*, 7.

[93] Blight, *Race and Reunion*, 7-8.

[94] "U.S., World War I Draft Registration Cards, 1917-1918," digital image s.v. "Launcelot Minor Blackford," Ancestry.com.

daughters became the living memories of their parents. Launcelot Senior died in 1914, and his namesake soon followed in his military footsteps. During World War I, Launcelot Junior enlisted as a private in the United States Army. At the same time that young white men were uniting through warfare, white Southern women bonded through the United Daughters of the Confederacy and switched from raising funds for monuments to Confederates' gallant service and sacrifice to putting their efforts toward war relief.[95] The focus of Civil War memory was now less on the question of politics and divisions between North and South, and more on the formation of white identity in the United States. With the military remaining segregated until after World War II, the generations of white men who served in the army during these conflicts reunited the country while repressing Black Americans and forgetting about their contributions to saving the Union. After World War I, Launcelot studied at the University of Virginia and graduated in 1923, becoming a doctor. When the United States entered World War II, he offered his services once again and enlisted as a medic.

[95] Janney, *Remembering the Civil War*, 280.

Image 4: Launcelot during WWII (Blackford Family Papers, UNC Southern Historical Collection)

After the Second World War, Launcelot headed home and began to reflect on his family's past. Now a seasoned veteran himself, he held more interest in his family's commitment to the Confederacy and understanding their involvement in its cause. In the opening of Launcelot's book, he explained that it was during his time at the Emory Unit in Southern France during WWII when he obtained an interest in his family history. While he was working there, he met "a young line officer, disabled by an honorable wound for further combat and therefore assigned to less arduous duties in the hospital."[96] The young man, named Ed, had studied American history in college. When they met each other, Ed was reading *Lee's Lieutenants* by Douglass Southhall Freeman, a historian who often wrote sympathetically of the South and worked to revive Confederate commanders as heroes. He asked Launcelot if he knew of Colonel William W. Blackford, to which Launcelot replied that he was his uncle. Launcelot explained that, in that moment, he "could feel my elevation in my friend's esteem."[97] Ed sparked Launcelot's interest in his family's history, and he began to read the letters and journals collected by his father and uncles.

One year after WWII ended, he started working on his book. Launcelot, now aging himself, was looking to understand his family's past and the tales he had been told as a child. He published *Mine Eyes Have Seen the Glory: The Story of a Virginia Lady, Mary Berkeley Minor Blackford, 1802-1896, Who Taught Her Sons to Hate Slavery and to Love the Union* in the year 1954, aptly titled to exonerate his Confederate ancestors. In his Preface he explained that part of the reason he wrote the book was because he had been "brought up to believe" that his father and

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[96] L. Blackford, *Mine Eyes Have Seen the Glory*, xv.

[97] L. Blackford, *Mine Eyes Have Seen the Glory*, xv.

four uncles "did *not* fight to preserve slavery."[98] He found his family's documents "in a heavy green chest made in Bogotá [in] about 1844," and after he had done some rifling, he reflected that the "most noteworthy member of the family" was not one of his uncles or his father, but rather "the mother of these five young Confederate soldiers."[99]

Image 5: Mary, pictured with her children, niece, and daughter-in-law (Blackford Family Papers, UNC Southern Historical Collection)

Launcelot had no recollection of Mary. He wrote that in the brief overlap of their time on earth, Mary's "mind wandered far" and "could only be brought back to reality when Launcelot's baby namesake was allowed to play on her bed."[100] He explained that he wanted to keep family legends to a minimum and that he "earnestly" strove for "complete historical accuracy."[101] His

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[98] L. Blackford, *Mine Eyes Have Seen the Glory*, xvii. Emphasis in original.

[99] L. Blackford, *Mine Eyes Have Seen the Glory*, xvi.

[100] L. Blackford, *Mine Eyes Have Seen the Glory*, 255.

[101] L. Blackford, *Mine Eyes Have Seen the Glory*, xviii.

work is a compilation of large text blocks of letters and other primary sources often followed by a brief analysis of the source with a few family recollections thrown into the mix. Launcelot was not a historian, but instead a man interested in his family's story and reviving their memory.

Launcelot found comfort in Mary. He noted that she was an "independent thinker and fearless fighter" who "hated slavery with a holy passion and she loved the Union with a passion no less intense."[102] Though he mentioned his father and uncles as subjects of interest, throughout the book he focused little on their writings. He claimed that their letters proved "consistent" with the narrative he had been told about their involvement in the Confederacy, but he did not dive deeply into the writings of his uncles and father, instead, he centered his family history on Mary.

As white America began to give more attention to Black calls for equality, Mary was the affirmation Launcelot needed to revitalize his Confederate ancestors. Like Mary, during a time of Black resistance, he wanted an outlet to give him salvation. He strived to absolve himself and his family from the growing conversation about white people's responsibility for creating and sanctioning white supremacy in the United States. Launcelot looked to the ACS through the memory of his grandmother to repaint his family as misunderstood moderates who were victims of divisive politics plaguing the nation.

Throughout Launcelot's narrative is a recurring theme of benevolent Virginians faced with challenges too large for them to solve. He proposed that the American Colonization Society had been the perfect solution for Virginians. Through his remembrance of the organization in the Antebellum period, his own problematic views about race in America are evident. He introduces the ACS as a benevolent organization created by the Reverend Robert Finley. His un-nuanced position on the founding purposes of the ACS is unsurprising, but by crediting Finley, he framed

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[102] L. Blackford, *Mine Eyes Have Seen the Glory,* xvi.

the organization as one primarily focused on gradual emancipation. Despite William Blackford Senior's support of the society being due to his wish to get rid of the free Black population, Launcelot did not mention much about his involvement in the organization throughout his book. Instead, he primarily focused on Mary, the emancipationist. Launcelot lamented over the failure of the Society, describing its fate as "one of the tragedies of American history."[103] He then discussed the mission of the ACS, saying that it aimed to emancipate enslaved people by "repatriating" them and that "some of the founders hoped to see the day when all Negros would be freed and sent back to Africa," as if Black Americans had deep cultural connections to the continent.[104] He then added, "But, instead of being a powerful organization supported by all who wished the Negro well, the Society ran into immediate difficulties."[105] He blamed abolitionists and stubborn slaveholders alike for the failures of the Society's mission, painting the ACS to be the level-headed institution despite its major issues of funding and its improbable mission of convincing all Southern slaveholders to manumit the people they held in bondage.

Launcelot spent little time analyzing abolitionists of the period. He instead argued that Garrisonians' wholesale denunciations of the Society were misleading and that they did not understand the benevolence of Southern slaveholders and then claimed that before the Nat Turner rebellion, the enslaved people in Virginia seemed to be "indeed happy in their lack of

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[103] L. Blackford, *Mine Eyes Have Seen the Glory*, 19.

[104] L. Blackford, *Mine Eyes Have Seen the Glory*, 19.

[105] L. Blackford, *Mine Eyes Have Seen the Glory*, 24.

responsibilities."[106] After his short analysis on abolitionists he contrasts Mary with "Southerners who honestly believed slavery was good" to make her appear more progressive.[107]

In the chapter where Launcelot addresses the issues of disease and early death that plagued the freed settlers, its introduction is through a letter posing this problem as a reason to keep people enslaved. The letter is written by one of Mary's cousins Captain V. Moreau Randolph to his brother that Launcelot claimed Mary "carefully preserved."[108] In the letter, Randolph stated "that bondage is the normal condition of the African race."[109] Along with his clearly racist views, Randolph criticized the ACS. He explained that one of his friends freed the 13 people he owned and sent them to Liberia. He then said that they had "never thriven in the colony and were now all dead."[110] Instead of proposing another means of freedom or funds to the ACS, Randolph stated that his friend began to believe "that the reopening of the slave trade would be of incalculable benefit to the entire world, *White and Black."* By comparing Mary to men like Randolph, Launcelot made her appear to be more forward thinking despite the flaws of colonization. By contrasting Mary with her pro-slavery cousins, Launcelot pushed the idea that Mary was a racial egalitarian because she believed that Black people could make their own way in Liberia if they were industrious enough despite the lack of resources and the threat of disease. By focusing on slaveholders as the main opponent of the organization, he made it seem like the

[106] L. Blackford, *Mine Eyes Have Seen the Glory*, 25.

[107] L. Blackford, *Mine Eyes Have Seen the Glory,* 108.

[108] L. Blackford, *Mine Eyes Have Seen the Glory*, 108.

[109] L. Blackford, *Mine Eyes Have Seen the Glory,* 108.

[110] L. Blackford, *Mine Eyes Have Seen the Glory,* 110.

only other option for Black people in the United States was slavery. He avoided the conversation of abolitionists who proposed freedom in the United States by omitting them from his narrative.

The racist notions deeply ingrained into the vision of the ACS never impacted Launcelot's understanding of the society, mainly because he did not see the mission as problematic. His book was not meant to challenge the racial issues present within nineteenth century America, but rather to push the idea that the kindness of Virginia slaveholders was the ultimate solution to racism in the world. One of the moments this thought is most evident is when he told the history of Lancelot Byrd Minor.[111] Launcelot described his great uncle as a "hero" who followed the free people his mother manumitted to Liberia at the risk of his health, again denoting the fact that disease was just as much a threat to the free people.[112] He explained that Lancelot Byrd recognized that the Black Americans living in Liberia already knew Christ, so he redirected his efforts to the native Liberians. Though Launcelot Blackford painted the Indigenous people in Liberia as receptive to the missionary, colonial Liberia was fraught with cultural tensions. Missing from *Mine Eyes Have Seen the Glory* is part of a letter that James Cephas Minor wrote to Mary, telling her that "The religion, habits, manners, customs, and dress of the unattended to portion of the aborigines among us are so vague and insignificant that the children are imbibing some of the lowest in principles."[113] James, an American and a devout Christian, believed it was important that Indigenous children relinquish their heritage to become good, upstanding Liberian citizens. Mary and other women in the ACS did not take issue with

[111] Launcelot Minor Blackford Senior added the "u" to his name but was named after his uncle. See Blackford Family Papers.

[112] L. Blackford, *Mine Eyes Have Seen the Glory*, 37-38.

[113] Scan 81, Folder 58 in the Blackford Family Papers.

imposing western standards on native Africans; in fact, they encouraged it. Launcelot Blackford's image of Liberia was cleansed of all the issues truly existent there. He wanted his writing to paint Liberia as a haven of freedom, making out the members of the ACS as kindly religiously inclined people. In reality, the racial tensions existent in the United States were transported as cultural tensions in the Liberian colony and free people were faced with the uncertainties of poverty and disease in an unfamiliar land.

Launcelot's book consists of many attempts to absolve his family of their racism by latching to Mary's beliefs. When he wrote about his family's involvement in the Confederacy, he laid unbased claims about Mary's thoughts on the war. In his chapter titled "Mary's Training of Her Children," he argued that Mary instilled anti-slavery values in her children, saying that she "would not let her children forget the continuing importance of sending 'free persons of color' to Liberia."[114] When Abraham Lincoln won the election of 1860 and South Carolina seceded and other Southern states began to follow, Launcelot reflected on how "Mrs. Blackford, like most intelligent Virginians, was deeply conflicted."[115]

He did not go deeply into the politics of the war, but rather urged that Mary "loved the Union" and then followed that by stating "Mary Blackford probably loved Virginia more."[116] After adding quotes from Mary's views on the war, including her letter to John B. Minor expressing her discontent with the fact that all of her sons decided to take up arms against the Union, Launcelot claimed that "She and Mr. Blackford were proud of their sons, satisfied that

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[114] L. Blackford, *Mine Eyes Have Seen the Glory*, 84.

[115] L. Blackford, *Mine Eyes Have Seen the Glory*, 141.

[116] L. Blackford, *Mine Eyes Have Seen the Glory*, 172.

each did his manly duty."[117] Mary never noted being happy over her sons' decisions to fight for the Confederacy. The most emotion she ever expressed over their military duty was fear for their safety. Launcelot grappled with Mary as the saving grace of his family due to her unwavering morals on gradual emancipation through colonization, but he did not understand how her thoughts on the issue of slavery did not encompass the political beliefs of her sons or husband. Mary's ambiguous morals leave some room for interpretation, but Launcelot bent her beliefs at every political turn for her immediate family's benefit.

As Launcelot remembered his family in the post war period, he emphasized the fact that Peggy, the woman that William bought for Mary in 1846, continued working for their family. He also had special vested interest in the life of Peggy because he remembered her. He stated that she was "a most important member" of his household in his youth and recalled her "excellent sense of humor."[118]

The kind master-slave relationship was a recurring theme throughout Launcelot's recollection of his family history. The idea of free people as subservient and grateful to their former enslavers became popularized throughout the 20th century through Hollywood. The success of films like *Gone With the Wind* and *Song of the South* depicted relationship between white Southerners and the people they enslaved as loving and content in their situation[119] These types of relationships have often been used in Lost Cause narratives because they are hard to entirely debunk, given that most enslaved people left no written record due to their illiteracy. Launcelot claimed that Peggy and Mary shared a close bond. The details of Peggy's life are

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[117] L. Blackford, *Mine Eyes Have Seen the Glory*, 173.

[118] L. Blackford, *Mine Eyes Have Seen the Glory*, 256, 285 footnote 7.

[119] Janney, *Remembering the Civil War*, 303.

ambiguous and what remains of her memory is conveyed by the family who owned her. Launcelot recalled that when Mary passed away, "Mam' Peggy succeeded to the matriarchal position of her mistress in a way incomprehensible to anyone but a Virginian."[120] Through the memory of Peggy, Launcelot wanted to emphasize Virginia exceptionalism and attempted to prove that because of Mary's close relationship with a Black woman who did not openly complain about staying with the family after emancipation, his family consisted of exceptional slaveholders.

Image 6: Peggy Dean (Blackford Family Papers, UNC Southern Historical Collection)

Peggy remains an elusive figure historically because of Mary's failure to teach her to write. Nothing the family said about Peggy can be corroborated through her perspective. At the end of his book, Launcelot recalled a story told to him by his Father. He wrote that Peggy "received payments for her services after the war" but that she "never spent anything, so in time

[120] L. Blackford, *Mine Eyes Have Seen the Glory*, 255.

her savings account exceeded $5,000."[121] Launcelot Senior claimed that Mary proposed using the money "for the benefit of the missions in Africa." Launcelot Junior then wrote that Peggy returned to his father later and told him "hit ain't my will at all" and then crudely expressed that Black people had never done anything for her."[122] Whether or not this is actually how this interaction happened, Launcelot Junior used this story to support the idea that Mary cared for Black people. He tokenized Peggy, trying to paint her as a representative of the fact that Mary pushed for the benefit of Black people in Africa even when the one Black person she had a close relationship with was reluctant.

After sharing this story, Launcelot ended *Mine Eyes Have Seen the Glory* with one last vignette about Peggy. He wrote that his grandmother suggested that she be buried by her feet. Peggy quickly contested this proposal, telling Launcelot Sr. that she did not want to be buried by anyone's feet. In the last lines of the book, Launcelot wrote that when his father died in 1914, three years after Peggy's passing, that his "body was laid at the feet of Mam' Peggy."[123] Through his interpretation, he made it sound like Launcelot's final resting place was purposely placed at the feet of Peggy as a tribute to her wishes and a sign of the family's egalitarianism. Whether or not the placement of their bodies was deliberate or if it was a result of when they each passed and which plots were open in the graveyard, Launcelot wields Peggy's proximity to his family to end his history with a nice story about the relationship between a free woman and her former enslavers. Engraved on Peggy's tombstone are the words "Nurse and for 70 years beloved inmate of the Blackford household. Faithful unto death will give thee a crown of life."

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[121] L. Blackford, *Mine Eyes Have Seen the Glory*, 255.

[122] L. Blackford, *Mine Eyes Have Seen the Glory*, 255.

[123] L. Blackford, *Mine Eyes Have Seen the Glory*, 258.

Image 7: Peggy's Grave (Photo taken by Helen Dhue)

Mine Eyes Have Seen the Glory ends with a favorable view of the Blackford family and the idea that if the American Colonization Society had support from its critics the American Civil War could have been prevented. Launcelot's optimism toward colonization is less of a reflection of its efforts and more a reflection of his beliefs about the Civil War being rooted in Lost Cause sentiment taught to him by his Virginian family. Living through the 1950s, Launcelot was experiencing the next big push for Black rights in the United States. As the world was changing, the military was desegregating, and he was aging, Launcelot looked to the past, clinging to any claim of morality he could find within his family history.

Mary and Launcelot, though from different time periods in American history, were connected through a familial thread that had an extremely difficult time imagining Black agency in the United States. For both of these Blackford's, the ACS provided something that they needed in the moment. For Mary, it was a form of salvation as a way to be able to gradually encourage slaveholders to emancipate the people they held in bondage while also getting rid of any violent free people who insisted on resisting the institution of slavery. For Launcelot, the

ACS provided him with an ambiguous enough organization and his grandmother provided him with an inspiring enough person for him to be able to claim that his family had been opposed to enslavement. As Black people began to shape their futures in the country through resistance and organization, Mary and Launcelot looked to their imaginations to create a world where they had no complicity in racial oppression while praising a movement that resisted Black perspectives, progress, and existence in the Union that the Blackford family fought to destroy and nearly 180,000 Black men fought to preserve.[124]

[124] David Blight, *A Slave No More*, 159.

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"I hereby declare upon my word of honor that I have neither given nor received unauthorized help on this work."

-Helen Dhue

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