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Book: Lincoln sought to deport freed slaves

By [Stephen Dinan](#)

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The Great Emancipator was almost the Great Colonizer: Newly released documents show that to a greater degree than historians had previously known, President [Lincoln](#) laid the groundwork to ship freed slaves overseas to help prevent racial strife in the U.S.

Just after he issued the Emancipation Proclamation in 1863, Lincoln authorized plans to pursue a freedmen's settlement in present-day [Belize](#) and another in [Guyana](#), both colonial possessions of [Great Britain](#) at the time, said [Phillip W. Magness](#), one of the researchers who uncovered the new documents.

Historians have debated how seriously Lincoln took colonization efforts, but [Mr. Magness](#) said the story he uncovered, to be published next week in a book, "Colonization After Emancipation: Lincoln and the [Movement for Black Resettlement](#)," shows the president didn't just flirt with the idea, as historians had previously known, but that he personally pursued it for some time.

"The way that Lincoln historians have grappled with colonization has always been troublesome. It doesn't mesh with the whole 'emancipator,'" [Mr. Magness](#) said. "The revelation of this story changes the picture on that because a lot of historians have tended to downplay colonization. ... What we know now is he did continue the effort for at least a year after the proclamation was signed."

[Mr. Magness](#) said the key documents he and his co-author, [Sebastian N. Page](#), a junior research fellow at Oxford, found were in British archives, and included an order authorizing a British colonial agent to begin recruiting freed slaves to be sent to the Caribbean in June 1863.

By early 1864, the scheme had fallen apart, with British officials fretting over the legality of the Emancipation Proclamation and the risk that the South could still win the war, and with the [U.S. Congress](#) questioning how the money was being spent.

Roughly a year later, Lincoln was assassinated.

The [Belize](#) and [Guyana](#) efforts followed other aborted colonization attempts in present-day [Panama](#) and on an island off the coast of [Haiti](#), which actually received several hundred freed slaves in 1862, but failed the next year.

[Michael Burlingame](#), chair of Lincoln Studies at the [University of Illinois](#) at Springfield, said there are two ways to view Lincoln's public support for colonization.

One side holds that it shows Lincoln could not envision a biracial democracy, while the other stance — which [Mr. Burlingame](#) subscribes to — says Lincoln's public actions were "the way to sugarcoat the emancipation pill" for Northerners.

"So many people in the North said we will not accept emancipation unless it is accompanied by colonization," said

[Mr. Burlingame](#), adding that Lincoln himself had always made clear colonization would be voluntary and nobody would be forced out of the United States.

The newly released documents underscore just how hot a topic colonization was in the 1800s, when prominent statesmen debated whether blacks and whites could ever live together in a functioning society.

Earlier in the century, the American Colonization Society already had organized efforts to ship thousands of black Americans to Africa to the colony of Liberia, and the debate over colonization raged even within the black community.

Frederick Douglass, one of the country's most prominent free blacks, generally opposed colonization, though [Mr. Burlingame](#) said on a couple of occasions he showed signs he might embrace it — including appearing open to a venture in [Haiti](#) during the Civil War.

Still, Douglass also rejected the argument that blacks and whites couldn't live together, and he pointed to places in the North as examples of where it already was happening.

[Mr. Burlingame](#) said some abolitionists viewed colonization as a plot to preserve slavery by getting rid of free blacks in the North, while others saw it as a way to undermine slavery by fundamentally questioning the principles slavery was based on.

[Mr. Magness](#), a researcher at the Institute for Humane Studies at George Mason University, said he first got wind of Lincoln's efforts while researching a meeting between the 16th president and Union Gen. Benjamin Butler in the waning days of the war, at which colonization had been discussed.

Most of the U.S. documents about the [Belize](#) and [Guyana](#) deals have gone missing, but [Mr. Magness](#) and his co-author tracked down what he called an "almost untapped treasure cache of Civil War-era records" from the British side that showed Lincoln's deep involvement in the planning and authorization.

With 4 million blacks in the U.S. at the time of the war, colonization would have been a tricky and pricey move.

The [Belize](#) project's first shipment of laborers would have only been 500, and even if the project had been seen through to fruition, it would have accommodated just 50,000.

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