Benjamin Butler’s Colonization Testimony Reevaluated

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One morning in the waning days of the Civil War, Major General Benjamin F. Butler called upon Abraham Lincoln at the White House. An obviously concerned Lincoln approached the general in private, acting “very much disturbed” in thought. Questioning Butler, the president remarked, “But what shall we do with the negroes after they are free?” With the hostilities of the previous four years drawing to a close, Lincoln’s attention now turned to the condition and future of the emancipated slaves. “I fear a race war,” he confided, while expressing concern that the enlisted black soldiers of the Union army would “be but little better off with their masters than they were before” if no action was taken to prevent it. The solution, he observed, was to be found in a program of colonization. Continued Lincoln, “I can hardly believe that the South and North can live in peace, unless we can get rid of the negroes.”

Instructed to study the feasibility of a colonization plan, Butler departed the Executive Mansion, promising to return with his findings. A few days later he again called on Lincoln. The logistical scale of colonizing the freedmen of the South, he reported, would make a comprehensive colonization program impossible. Butler proposed an alternative in which the “one hundred and fifty thousand negro troops” that were “now enlisted” in the federal army could be transported to a long-proposed colony location on the Panama isthmus where they could find employment in digging an American canal between the two oceans. “After we get ourselves established” on the isthmus, “we will petition Congress under your recommendation to send down to us our wives and children,” thus apparently inducing a free migration of blacks to the new colony. “There is meat in that, General Butler, there is meat in that,” responded Lincoln with instructions to the general

3. Ibid.
to pursue preparations for the plan. Butler was apparently to lead a renewed administration policy for colonization—a topic that occupied substantial attention within the Lincoln administration prior to January 1, 1863, but had since been supplanted by other priorities as the war progressed and, according to a common interpretation, abandoned entirely. It was the last time the two would meet, as Lincoln’s life ended with an assassin’s bullet a few days later.

So goes a well-known and controversial anecdote related late in life by General Butler. Though the colonization issue appeared frequently in the early years of the Lincoln presidency, its placement by Butler a few short days before Lincoln’s death, if accepted as true, may require a revision of longstanding interpretations of both Lincoln’s racial views and post-war policy goals at his untimely death. Hinting at those implications, George Frederickson observes that acceptance of the Butler anecdote would suggest that “Lincoln continued to his dying day to deny the possibility of racial harmony in the United States and persisted in regarding colonization as the only real alternative to perpetual race conflict.”

Frederickson’s observation runs counter to a commonly implied or accepted interpretation of Lincoln’s earlier colonization policies and racial views in general. While it is openly acknowledged that a younger Lincoln advocated colonization much as his “beau ideal of a statesman” Henry Clay had done before him, his racial attitudes are often asserted or assumed to have matured toward the end of his life, reaching greater acceptance for the country’s African American population. Lincoln’s papers and speeches display a drastic decline in the frequency of references made to colonization after January 1863, making the Butler anecdote all the more unusual and contentious.

4. Ibid., 904.
6. Prior to 1863, Lincoln publicly espoused a colonization policy to Congress, Roy P. Basler et al., eds., Collected Works of Abraham Lincoln, 9 vols. (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 1953–1955), 5:35, 5:192, 5:518. His most explicit advocacy came to a “Deputation of Negroes” on August 14, 1862. On September 11–12, 1862, Lincoln authorized a contract with Ambrose W. Thompson (Ibid., 5:414, 5:418) to carry out the Chiriqui colonization project in Panama, which was later abandoned. Lincoln submitted an additional article to the contract, not found in the Collected Works, on September 15 pertaining to the punishment of colonists who violated the laws of the Colombian government (National Archives, Records of the United States Department of the Interior, African Slave Trade and Negro Colonization, Records of 1854–1872,” RG 48, M 160). Lincoln’s papers after January 1, 1863, by contrast, contain very few remarks about colonization, and none in his surviving public speeches. References in Lincoln’s pen after January 1863 are almost entirely administrative papers pertaining
Speculating on Lincoln’s racial beliefs at the time of his death, David Herbert Donald notes that “[p]erhaps he still questioned whether blacks could ever achieve equality with whites in the same society, but the failure of his colonization schemes had taught him that African-Americans were, and would remain, a permanent part of the American social fabric.”7 “Colonization was dead and Lincoln did not mourn,” observes Gabor Boritt. “He did not march backwards.”8

Echoing those views, modern scholars (Frederickson being the main exception) raise doubts regarding the veracity of Butler’s 1865 account. The general’s reputation as an unreliable witness has prompted many to dismiss his claims. “The anecdote is completely spurious,” asserts Mark E. Neely.9 William Lee Miller observes that “scholars generally no longer . . . [accept] the report of Benjamin Butler that Lincoln was still considering colonization in the last months of his life.”10 As early as 1951, Warren B. Beck, in a letter to Paul Scheips, expressed doubt about the Butler story’s credibility, apparently at the urging of Roy P. Basler. In summarizing Basler’s view, Beck remarks that the notion of Lincoln maintaining his earlier views on colonization until 1865 “ran counter to the established scholarly opinion on the subject.”11

Michael Lind recently challenged that position, noting that while “some historians have questioned Butler’s veracity, there is no reason to doubt his account in light of Lincoln’s obsession with the colonization scheme.” A similar argument appears in the work of African-American journalist Lerone Bennett, though most Lincoln scholars reject those views. Lind’s assertion in particular prompted several criticisms of his work.12

Although scholars generally doubt Butler’s story, the only direct attempts to scrutinize it are by Neely, and indeed most recent critiques of the story dismiss it solely upon his analysis. Scholars including Michael Burkhiser, Michael Vorenberg, Arthur Zilversmit, Phillip Shaw Paludan, and Stephen Oates have accepted Neely’s argument with little addition in the years following its publication. As stated by Vorenberg, Neely “has shown that Butler fabricated his exchange with Lincoln.” On this basis Vorenberg labels Butler’s account among two “flimsy pieces of evidence” against the notion that Lincoln abandoned colonization, dismissing it as “at best dubious.” To Vorenberg, “there is no reason to believe that Lincoln ever espoused colonization after he issued the Final Emancipation Proclamation” on January 1, 1863.

Neely examines the Butler anecdote briefly in his book the Abraham Lincoln Encyclopedia and in greater detail for an article in Civil War History written three years prior. The underlying argument of both is a discrediting of Butler’s story based upon evidence that “Butler was not in Washington at the time he claimed the interview occurred.” Denouncing the anecdote in the strongest of terms, Neely characterizes it as “self serving reminiscence” designed to imply that Butler still retained the president’s ear following his relief from command in early 1865. The anecdote is dismissed as nothing more than a “fantasy,” one that is “not plausible at all,” being based on a meeting that never happened, and “simply not true.”

While Neely’s examinations, particularly the Civil War History study, contain several valuable observations and raise important questions about the Butler anecdote, it is the contention of this article that Neely


15. Neely, Lincoln Encyclopedia, 43.

overstates the evidence for rejecting outright Butler’s claimed 1865 encounter with Lincoln. It will be further argued that, while Neely is correct in noting a timeline error in Butler’s account that potentially places it at odds with the known dates of his spring 1865 journey to Washington, it is more likely the product of the general’s faulty memory rather than any willful deception. Surviving documents in the papers of General Butler prove beyond any doubt that he met privately with President Lincoln in the White House on the morning of April 11, 1865, a date in the immediate vicinity of the general’s claimed recollections and only three days before the president’s fateful trip to Ford’s Theatre. Based upon this reevaluation of the Butler account, its contents can no longer be dismissed solely on the apparent error in his recollected timeline.

The conversation at Butler’s meeting cannot be independently established beyond what the general claimed many years later, leaving its subject, as attributed to Lincoln by Butler, susceptible to doubt. This paper examines existing evidence that may attest to the plausibility of Butler’s recollection, or parts of it. The words of the conversation exhibit some signs of exaggeration and remain unverifiable barring new evidence. Still, given that a meeting did occur, it is appropriate to reevaluate Butler’s anecdote and to examine Lincoln’s views on colonization during the last two years of his life.

Butler’s visit to Washington

Virtually every historian to address the Butler anecdote, Neely included, has based his or her analysis solely on the general’s 1892 autobiography, more commonly known as Butler’s Book. This late-in-life account is commonly assumed to contain all that is known about the otherwise elusive meeting Butler claimed to have with Lincoln in 1865.17 Far less known is a chapter that Butler contributed six years prior to a compilation of reminiscences on Lincoln edited by Allen Thorndike Rice. The 1886 Rice contribution contains a nearly identical version of the colonization meeting with several small but important nuances, including some that shed light upon the timeline discrepancies highlighted by Neely. As such, it constitutes an earlier, and in some ways stronger, source on the colonization anecdote.

The argument made by Neely against the existence of any meeting between Butler and Lincoln in spring 1865 centers around the time frame given by Butler in his autobiography. According to that text,

the meeting was held sometime “after the negotiations had failed at Hampton Roads,” referring to the peace conference attended by Lincoln in early February. The colonization meeting, which actually consisted of two different encounters separated by roughly two days’ time, according to Butler, is also implied to have preceded Lincoln’s journey to City Point, Virginia, by the word of Lincoln, who reportedly tells Butler at the conclusion of his first interview, “I am to go down to City Point shortly.”

That Butler places Lincoln in Washington only two days later for the second meeting, thus precluding this announced trip and seemingly indicating a faulty recollection, has apparently escaped the attention of those who have examined the claim.

Butler also recalls visiting Secretary of State William Seward during this same visit to Washington, placing it “as near as I can remember” at two o’clock on the date of Seward’s carriage accident that left him bedridden during the assassination attempt on him, coinciding with events at Ford’s Theatre. It is acknowledged that Butler recorded those recollections without the benefit of a journal. Further, the exact placement of events such as the Seward meeting is the ambiguous product of memory by Butler’s own admission in the text. Neely nonetheless uses these three events—Hampton Roads, City Point, and the carriage accident—to date the meeting and thus challenge Butler’s veracity.

If Butler’s admittedly shaky timeline is taken as accurate, the meetings with Lincoln occurred between February 3, when the Hampton Roads conference concluded, and March 23, 1865, the latter being the date of Lincoln’s departure from Washington for City Point. Lincoln explicitly informed his son Robert Todd Lincoln on March 21 that he would be “starting to you about One p.m. Thursday,” the 23rd.

Two days later he telegraphed the same message to Ulysses S. Grant in City Point, noting “[w]e start to you at One p.m. to-day.” These two documents establish the time and day of Lincoln’s departure from Washington for City Point. Yet as Neely points out, at 1 p.m. on March 23, Butler was in New York City, still en route to Washington for his visit that spring. The New York Times reported Butler’s visit at the time of his arrival on March 23, noting, he “is there at his own pleasure, and will remain a week or ten days.”

Seward’s carriage accident on April

19. Ibid., 904.
5 occurred while Butler was in Washington, but also during Lincoln’s City Point trip. Given Lincoln’s known whereabouts at City Point, it is assumed that a meeting between Butler and Lincoln was not possible. Writes Neely, the meeting “could not have occurred when Butler said it did or at any time near the date.”

Turning to the earlier Rice version of Butler’s story, evidence immediately appears of Butler’s own admitted uncertainty of the exact timing for the meeting, as well as a slightly different time frame. Here Butler seemingly places the meeting “as I remember it” prior to Seward’s carriage accident but after the surrender of General Lee and Lincoln’s visit to Richmond. “Lincoln,” he notes, “was very much disturbed after the surrender of Lee, and he had been to Richmond, upon the question of what would be the results of peace in the Southern States as affected by the contiguity of the white and black races.” Lincoln’s journey to Richmond on April 4 and Lee’s surrender on April 9 again complicate the April 5 carriage accident’s placement, though both are reasonably attributed to erroneous recollection. Ultimately, only two logical possibilities flow from this revelation of timeline contradictions and differences between the Rice and autobiography versions: either (1) Butler fabricated the meetings he claimed to have held with Lincoln, or (2) Butler did indeed meet Lincoln but, relying upon admittedly flawed recollections of events that took place several decades prior, incorrectly placed the meetings and surrounding events. Despite many scholarly endorsements of the former view, strong evidence from Butler’s personal papers, along with corresponding documentation, provides a reason to believe that the latter is the case.

A brief reconstruction of Butler’s activities during his visit to Washington will serve to illustrate that he both sought and obtained a private meeting with Lincoln shortly after the president’s return from Richmond and City Point, as implied in the Rice account. The meeting still postdates Seward’s carriage accident, requiring the conclusion that Butler erred slightly in his timeline—a duly noted but hardly unforgivable mistake. Butler’s journey to Washington began shortly after March 20 in response to a March 1 notice by the Treasury Department regarding an unaccounted sum of money in the general’s records. Butler entered

26. That Butler, especially in his autobiography, was prone to making minor timeline errors is evidenced elsewhere in the text. In one noted example from the same chapter as the colonization anecdote, Butler incorrectly places the Hampton Roads conference “in the last of January” rather than its actual date at the beginning of February. See Butler’s Book, 902–3.
his request to visit Washington from Lowell, Massachusetts, for the purpose of adjusting his accounts in the Treasury Department. Two days later General Halleck notified Butler that his presence was not required for the matter; however Butler had already departed for the capital and would arrive there on the night of March 23. He would remain in the city until April 14, only to return a few days later in the wake of the assassination that evening. Based upon the general’s correspondence, he appears to have spent the next two weeks after his arrival inquiring about his treasury accounts and responding to rumors of cotton smuggling that allegedly took place at Fortress Monroe, his previous command, which were then under investigation by his successor.

Throughout this period Butler was aware that Treasury Department agent Hanson Risley accompanied the president at City Point. Risley, incidentally, was a central figure in the larger cotton-trading controversy that had drawn the ire of several northern congressmen against the Lincoln administration, including criticism directed at the president himself. A close associate of Seward and political boss Thurlow Weed, Risley had been involved in the granting of cotton-trading permits with the south to Lincoln’s personal friends, including Leonard Swett and the brother of Ward Hill Lamon. Indicating Butler’s purpose of obtaining a meeting with Lincoln upon the president’s return, he maintained correspondence with Risley from his hotel in Washington. One surviving reply from Risley indicates Lincoln’s expected return to the capital:

April 2, 1865

General,

I am detained by company and may not get in this evening. I learn that Mrs. Lincoln is going back to City Point but do not know when. The President will not come up before Thursday & she intervened & kept him there longer as his health is improving.

Yours very truly,

H. A. Risley

28. Ibid., 573.
29. Ibid., 586.
33. Hanson A. Risley to Benjamin F. Butler, April 2, 1865, Benjamin F. Butler Papers, Library of Congress.
By this point it was clear that Butler would remain in Washington beyond the ten days initially reported in the newspapers. His decision to remain appears to have been specifically for the purpose of meeting with Lincoln. This may be inferred from the letter he received on April 7 from J. G. Carney, an associate in Lowell. Wrote Carney, I “suppose now, as the President is to return to Washington by . . . [illegible] day, that you may stay to see him.”

Butler apparently spent the first week in April pursuing his inquiries about the cotton-trade investigation and giving speeches in celebration of the Union’s mounting victories. Shortly after the fall of Richmond, Butler and Vice President Johnson addressed a crowd outside of Willard’s Hotel, where he was staying. The general spoke from Willard’s on April 10, advocating a reconstruction policy that disqualified former Confederates from political office.

President Lincoln’s ship returned to Washington at 6 p.m. on April 9, marking the earliest possible point for him to have met with General Butler. While it is not recorded whether and when Butler approached Lincoln on this date or the following day, records show he obtained a scheduled meeting at the White House on the morning of April 11. On April 10, Lincoln’s secretary John Hay delivered a memorandum to General Butler:

Executive Mansion
Washington, 10 April, 1865

My Dear General:
The President will be pleased to see you at nine o’clock tomorrow (Tuesday) morning.

Your Obedient Servant,
John Hay
A.O.S.

Thus Butler’s final meeting with Lincoln appears to have occurred not before the City Point trip but on April 11, 1865, after Lincoln’s return from that location and Richmond, as suggested in the Rice version of Butler’s account.

By all indications, the April 11 meeting between the president and Butler occurred in private, as no account of its subject other than the

34. J. G. Carney to Benjamin F. Butler, April 7, 1865, ibid.
general’s exists. Though it began at nine o’clock, the only indication of its length is to be gained from conjecture based upon Lincoln’s other activities that day. Curiously, some circumstantial evidence suggests that its duration was much longer than the brief conversation from Butler’s anecdotes. The two likely conversed about Butler’s management of Fortress Monroe. During his stay in Washington, Butler prepared a defense for himself against the cotton-profiteering investigations of his former subordinates at the fort, then underway at the request of General George Gordon. In late February and early March, Butler obtained petitions to the president for interference into Gordon’s investigation by several of the involved parties. In all likelihood, he used the meeting to deliver these petitions for George W. Lane, Charles Whitlock, Ezra Baker, and J. M. Renshaw to Lincoln. Lincoln immediately acted upon the petitions. That afternoon he sent a tersely worded intervention telegram to General Gordon, reading, “Send to me at once a full statement as to the cause or causes for which, and by authority of what tribunal, George W. Lane, Charles Whitlock, Ezra Baker, J. M. Renshaw, & others, are restrained of their liberty. Do this promptly & fully.” The Gordon investigation also may have come up at the afternoon cabinet meeting as a result. Gideon Welles’s diary indicates that “the cotton question was the chief topic” of discussion. No other indicator of the meeting itself beyond Butler’s two accounts and this circumstantial evidence has emerged. The cotton-investigation material indicates incompleteness in Butler’s version of his interview, though it is unlikely that the simple delivery of petition papers would require a formally scheduled meeting. Furthermore, the prompt intervention into Gordon’s investigation and the ability of Butler to obtain a private meeting are suggestive that Lincoln placed a greater value on the general’s consultation at this late date in his life than is typically believed.

The April 11 scheduled appointment seems to have been what Butler described in his autobiography as “the last interview I ever had with Abraham Lincoln.” The timing of nine o’clock further corresponds to Butler’s recollection of this final meeting during which he “called” upon the president “early in the morning.” Though surviving records document only the April 11 meeting, their existence resolves the timeline issue. Neely’s claim that the colonization interview “could not have occurred when Butler said it did or at any time near the
date” is accordingly incorrect. In light of these developments and the documentation of Butler’s April 11 meeting with Lincoln, it no longer suffices to use errors in Butler’s timeline as a basis for discrediting his account. Historical examination of the anecdote should accordingly move beyond the issue of the meeting’s date, turning instead to its purported content.

**Hay, Mitchell, and the Prospects of Colonization**

The Lincoln administration’s colonization policy through January 1863 has been thoroughly documented in the scholarly literature. Yet, as Oates contends, Lincoln had “pretty much written colonization off as unworkable” by the time that the small-scale Haitian colonization project on Isle a Vache concluded in failure the next year. Instead he hoped to “prepare Southern blacks for life in a free society.”42 Some writers, including Scheips, Frederickson, Charles H. Wesley, James Lockett, and Ludwell Johnson have discussed the Butler story as potential evidence that Lincoln pursued colonization to the end of his administration, though the more common view, as noted, treats Butler’s story with skepticism and generally accepts the theory that Lincoln quietly withdrew from his earlier position.43

An evaluation of the evidence surrounding Lincoln’s late-term colonization views proves difficult due to the scarcity of documentation. While there is a noticeable decline in references to colonization in Lincoln’s papers after early 1863, Lincoln never explicitly repudiated the policy in any of his surviving writings. The existing evidence of a change of heart by Lincoln is thus the product of an assumption based upon other policies he did speak about and an ambiguous passage in the diary of John Hay. Each is worth consideration in greater detail.

The presidential secretary’s diary entry for July 1, 1864, notes, “I am glad the President has sloughed off that idea of colonization.” Hay continues by stating his own opinion: “I have always thought it a hideous & barbarous humbug & the thievery of Pomeroy and Kock have about converted him to the same belief. Mitchell says Usher allows


Pomeroy to have the records of the Chiriqui matters away from the Department to cook up his fraudulent accounts by. If so, Usher ought to be hamstrung.\textsuperscript{44} The diary says little more on the subject, leaving few additional clues on the exact meaning of his unusual phrasing, “sloughed off.”

The reference to the Chiriqui colonization project on the Panama isthmus gives particular context to this entry. Though an active policy of Lincoln’s in late 1862, the Chiriqui project entered dormancy in early 1863 amidst growing opposition from the Central American governments, a dispute over the validity of the colony’s land rights before the Colombian government, and concern over its potential intrusion upon the 1850 Clayton-Bulwer Treaty with Britain.\textsuperscript{45} The date of Hay’s entry also coincides with Congress’s final colonization disbursements, which were repealed on July 2, 1864.

While it is tempting to read an answer on Lincoln’s policy into Hay’s position, Scheips notes that this passage must be understood through Hay’s personal dislike for both Senator Samuel C. Pomeroy and colonization in general. Upon examining the financial records, he observes that “Hay’s statement concerning Pomeroy’s thievery is not justified.”\textsuperscript{46} Hay nonetheless clearly saw a drawback of some form in Lincoln’s policy, perhaps reflected in the president’s unspoken acquiescence to Congress’s cancellation of most colonization expenditures the same week as the entry. Given the passage’s cryptic wording, it seems to sustain a more cautious interpretation than the affirmative repudiation of colonization often read into it. In particular, Hay’s description of Lincoln’s reported frustrations with the Chiriqui project, and with it the cause of his “slough[ing] off,” are contradicted by a later recollection of Gideon Welles: “President Lincoln, though disappointed in these experiments [Chiriqui and Isle a Vache], by no means abandoned his policy of deportation and emancipation, for the two were in his mind indispensably and indissolubly connected. Colonization in fact had precedence with him.”\textsuperscript{47}

An element of personal bias accompanies the testimony of each


\textsuperscript{45} For an extensive history of the Chiriqui project, see Scheips, “Lincoln and the Chiriqui Project,” 443–45. He emphasizes Central American opposition to the project and William Seward’s hesitance to press the issue as the primary reasons for inactivity on the project after early 1863.

\textsuperscript{46} Ibid., 440.

statement. Hay seems to enlist Lincoln’s support for his disdain towards Pomeroy and Kock, whereas Welles’s remarks were many years removed from his service as secretary of the navy. Together though, the ambiguity in Hay’s statement and the contrary claims by Welles impose limitations upon its use as evidence of a conclusive change in belief by Lincoln.

Interestingly, Hay’s stated source for Pomeroy’s alleged improprieties was the Reverend James Mitchell, Lincoln’s commissioner on emigration and a vocal advocate of colonization policy. Mitchell’s use as a source for rumors that “about converted” Lincoln against colonization is unusual given his continued advocacy of colonization long after the diary entry, though news of his quarrels with the other named individuals is not. An acquaintance of Lincoln from before his election, Mitchell’s name appears in an 1861 letter to Seward recommending him favorably. “James Mitchell . . . I know and like,” wrote the president, “He was, for years, colonization agent, for Indiana.” Basler traces Mitchell’s earliest work on colonization to May 28, 1862, in the Department of Interior, though his exact appointment by Lincoln has proven elusive until the present. An appointment document

48. Scheips indicates that the diary passage reflects Hay’s personal dislike of Pomeroy. Hay’s main informant, emigration commissioner Mitchell, “perhaps . . . was not the most reliable witness” against Pomeroy either, as the two similarly enjoyed mutual animosities over the expenditure of colonization funds (“Lincoln and the Chiriqui Project,” 439–40). By the time of the 1864 entry, Mitchell was involved in a prolonged dispute with Interior Secretary Usher and Pomeroy over control of the finances for his office, and complained frequently of the Chiriqui project’s alleged corruption (see Mitchell to Lincoln, September 2, 1864, Lincoln Papers). An assessment of the quality and biases in Welles’s articles appears in the work of his main biographer, John Niven, Gideon Welles: Lincoln’s Secretary of the Navy (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1994). Niven indicates that Welles’s Galaxy series began in 1870 as a response to a publication by Thurlow Weed, who promoted Seward’s cabinet activities at the expense of other members including “Father Welles.” Though initially a rebuttal to Weed, the essays quickly developed into a history of Lincoln’s cabinet presented in segment “as if they were chapters of a book.” Nevin describes the essays were “more than just a polemic, well-anchored in fact,” and describes them as carefully assembled narratives that drew heavily upon Welles’s notes and correspondences. They exhibited aspects of Welles’s biases against Seward and Stanton, though Lincoln emerges in a positive light. Welles’s Lincoln “was seen as a great President—strong, perceptive, humane, his own master” (570). Interestingly, Welles (“Administration of Abraham Lincoln,” 438), like Hay, expresses his own reservations in Chiriqui colonization, the project having “the appearance of a speculative job.” He does not extend this view to Lincoln though, and repeatedly asserts that the President’s colonization interests outlived the Chiriqui project.


50. Ibid., 5:375 n. 1.
apparently survives in two secretarial transcriptions of Mitchell’s com-
mission within the records of the Department of the Interior:

Rev. James Mitchell is appointed Agent to aid in the execution
of the several laws and parts of laws enacted and approved during
the second session of the Thirty-Seventh Congress, which
provide for the Migration or Colonization of persons of African
descent. His office shall be in connection with the Department of
the Interior, and the “general duties and designs of which shall be
to organize and locate colonies, superintend the immigration,
settlement, or colonization of colored people of African descent
under the direction of the President, who, by their own free con-
sent may desire to migrate to countries beyond the limits of the
United States, and such other general duties as may be directed
by the President, on the subject of migration.”

Abraham Lincoln
Aug. 4th 1862

Mitchell would remain a fixture in colonization policy, most nota-
bly organizing the August 14, 1862, meeting between Lincoln and a
“Deputation of Negroes” at the White House to propose a colonization
plan. He persisted in his advocacy of colonization until June 1865
when the Johnson administration discontinued its use of the emigra-
tion office following a prolonged salary dispute between Mitchell and
the secretary of the interior.

From his arrival in 1862 through 1864, Mitchell provided Lincoln
with proposals, reports, and correspondences pertaining to the emi-
gration office’s colonization work. Boritt describes his tenure as ineffectual and plagued by quarrels with “successive secretaries of
the interior, only weaken[ing] the governmental effort.” He seems
to have had Lincoln’s ear on colonization more than once though.

51. Slave Trade and Colonization Records. The section in quotations is a duplication
of the act of Congress’s authorizing clause. Mitchell referred to this particular document
as an “amended commission,” suggesting there had been an earlier appointment. See
also Caleb B. Smith to Lincoln, May 5, 1862, Lincoln Papers.
Slave Trade and Colonization Records.
54. Examples include: Mitchell to Lincoln, May 18, 1862, July 3, 1862, and June 1864,
in Lincoln Papers. See also Mitchell to Lincoln, November 25, 1863, Slave Trade and
Colonization Records. Mitchell’s last colonization report to Lincoln was delivered shortly
before the July 1864 appropriation bill, and printed in pamphlet form a year later. See
James Mitchell, Brief on Emigration and Colonization (Washington, D.C.: M. Polkinhorn &
Son, 1865).
Notably, Mitchell’s papers and corroborating records from the emigration office attest to Lincoln’s support for an effort in 1863 aimed at encouraging black migration to the Caribbean.

In late 1865 Mitchell wrote that he first approached Lincoln some three years prior to propose a colonization project in which canvassing agents, operating under the sanction of the British and American governments, would be permitted to recruit and transport American freedmen to British Caribbean holdings. According to the commissioner, the two had a conversation about July 23, 1862, in which Lincoln stated, “Surely, if England wants our negroes, and will do better by them than we can, I say let her have them, and may God bless her!”56 The following September, amidst negotiations over the Chiriqui project, Seward distributed a circular to several European and Latin American powers seeking cooperation in the transportation of freedmen to their Caribbean colonies. Among the responses received, agents from British Honduras (Belize) and British Guiana (Guyana) showed the strongest interest.57

The Lincoln administration began negotiations in February and March 1863 with John Hodge of the British Honduras Company.58 Bearing papers from both the British government and Charles Francis Adams, Hodge was received by Seward and directed to Usher, whose department was to oversee the plan. As described by Hodge, his company would work in coordination with the Department of the Interior to recruit “able bodied labourers” among male freedmen and transfer them, along with their families, to Central America under the supervision of the British Honduras Company.59 The scheme initially sought permission for canvassers to recruit 1,000 male workers and their families, for a total of about 5,000 colonists, from the free black population. The group would relocate to Central America, settling on the company’s land as contract laborers. Hodge also requested colonization funding at the time to facilitate future migration to the

58. A State Department record dated February 19, 1863, details the British government’s proposal: “[T]hat private persons should be permitted by the Government of the United States to obtain in those States colored immigrants and to enter into contracts with such emigrants for service for three years in the British West Indian Colonies; the emigration being placed under the control of Her Majesty’s Legation at Washington . . .” Slave Trade and Colonization Records.
59. In particular, see U.S. Legation in London to Seward, March 29, 1863. Lord Lyons, the British ambassador, presented Hodge to Seward upon his arrival on April 22, informing the State Department that he “has come here on business connected with the emigration of coloured people from this country to the Colony” of British Honduras. See Lyons to Seward, April 22, 1863, and Seward to Usher, April 22, 1863, Ibid.
colony, though Usher appears to have declined. As Mitchell’s 1864 report to Lincoln indicates, the British agents agreed to recruit emigrants “with no expense to us” in exchange for the U.S. government sanction. Transport would be paid for by labor.60

The canvassing plan received a cool reception from the War Department, which had its own purposes with the freedmen, but Mitchell and Postmaster General Montgomery Blair took up the effort. Mitchell conferred with Hodge and other agents in early June and drafted a paper authorizing them to commence recruitment among the freedmen:

Emigration Office
Washington D.C. June 11th, 1863

John Hodge of London, and S. R. Dickson, agents of the British Colonies of Honduras and Guiana, are here in accordance with the well settled policy of the United States, to aid such free persons of color as desire to remove to their colonies. We, therefore, recommend all parties and persons having the direction or charge of such, to present no hindrance to them or their agents in the work of canvassing for emigrants, but to render them and their regularly appointed agents, all the aid possible in this work.

James Mitchell
Commissioner of Emigration61

After receiving Mitchell’s paper, Hodge secured a meeting with Lincoln on June 13 at the request of Blair.62 Following their discussion

60. According to Hodge, funding would be used to induce “self sustaining Emigration, by which in the course of time 50,000 individuals . . . of African descent may be comfortably transferred to, and employed in Honduras.” While the government pursued the canvassing proposal, it does not appear to have granted this request for funding. See Hodge to Usher, letters of May 6 and May 7, 1863, Ibid. Mitchell indicated in 1864 that the British agents had agreed to finance the project in exchange for giving “their agents access to our people of color, and protect(ing) them in mustering the emigrants. . . .” See Mitchell, Brief on Emigration and Colonization, 14.

61. Two existent copies of this document report different dates for Mitchell’s note. The Department of the Interior’s record of the paper, marked “Copy” (Slave Trade and Colonization Records), suggests that Mitchell submitted the request almost a year prior, on June 14, 1862. A printed circular containing the request lists the date as June 11, 1863 (Mitchell, Brief on Emigration and Colonization, 15). The latter date appears to be correct as it corresponds with Hodge’s visit to Washington, specifically mentioned in the document.

62. Blair’s introductory note, which was evidently accepted, as it resides in Lincoln’s papers, reads “Mr. Hodge called this morning as you requested but could not get in. I now give him this note, which he will send in to let you know that he is in attendance to see you as requested through me last night.” The “Mr. Hodge” referred to by Blair
Lincoln gave Hodge’s plan his endorsement by signing Mitchell’s order: “I approve the within. A. LINCOLN. June 13, 1863.” Mitchell detailed the plan publicly in a newspaper column on August 19, 1863, writing that its “features . . . have received the sanction of the President.” During his stay Hodge reportedly visited camps of liberated freedmen and launched recruitment efforts. An essay promoting the British Honduras Company’s plan appeared in the African-American *Christian Recorder* newspaper on May 23, directing applicants to contact its agents in New York, Washington, and Philadelphia. Mitchell further indicated that his office was preparing to receive and direct the British agents pending final agreements with the State Department.

According to Mitchell, Lincoln’s backing of the project corresponded with his continued support for colonization. In an 1894 interview with the *St. Louis Daily Globe-Democrat*, Mitchell claimed to have discussed colonization with Lincoln in August 1863. Mitchell asked Lincoln if he has long been an unidentified figure, but the address on the note identifies its bearer as “Mr. Hodge of Honduras.” See Blair to Lincoln, June 12, 1863, Lincoln Papers. A condolence letter from the British Honduras Company, sent to Charles Francis Adams after Lincoln’s assassination, apparently alludes to this meeting as well: “Mr. Lincoln showed great kindness to our manager when seeking labor in the United States, and took an interest in the company’s affairs,” United States Department of State, *Expressions of condolence and sympathy regarding the assassination of Abraham Lincoln* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1867), 355–56. Hodge may have presented Lincoln with a description and maps of British Honduras, which are found in his papers marked “colonization—British Honduras” but filed in 1862. This placement appears to derive from a date printed in the pamphlet.

63. This particular endorsement has been known to Lincoln scholars for some time, notably Vorenberg, “Lincoln and the Politics of Black Colonization,” footnote 37. Vorenberg describes Lincoln’s signature as a “private” endorsement of efforts by “independent agencies and foreign countries to recruit emigrants” while suggesting that Lincoln had backed away from colonization by this time. The involvement of Mitchell and the Interior and State departments indicates a more formal role in the project though.

64. In the same article Mitchell specifically indicated that his office had ceased its earlier colonization projects “at the present time.” He portrays the British colonial proposal as a change in course in the administration’s colonization strategy, perhaps reflecting the commonly observed division in Lincoln’s actions after January 1863. See “Emigration Office, Washington D.C.” Newspaper clipping from *The Methodist*, August 19, 1863, Slave Trade and Colonization Records.

“might say that colonization was still the policy of the Administration.” Lincoln reportedly answered, “I have never thought so much on any subject and arrived at a conclusion so definite as I have in this case, and in after years found myself wrong.” The president, says Mitchell, continued by noting, “it would have been much better to separate the races than to have such scenes as those in New York the other day,” referring to the murder of free blacks during the July 1863 draft riots. Mitchell’s work on the canvassing project continued until at least the end of the year. On November 24 he wrote Hodge, then in British Honduras, enclosing the earlier newspaper column as “the position of this office” and commenting, “the President is disposed to sustain it against all unfriendly influences.”

The effort seems to have stalled sometime in early 1864, with little to no activity occurring by the time Congress repealed the emigration office’s budget in the July. Mitchell sought unsuccessfully to revive it again in late 1865, writing to Interior Secretary James Harlan that the British agents “are this day asking me to fulfill this engagement.” He contended that the recently deceased Lincoln intended for the program to continue, describing it as “what remains to us of the policy of our departed chief” and asking that the “whole policy” of Lincoln “be fulfilled” by its adoption.

The context of Mitchell’s letters in the months following Lincoln’s death necessitates a cautious assessment. Mitchell was promoting a renewed colonization policy before Congress at the time, making Lincoln’s memory a potentially valuable ally for legislation. The president’s support appears to have sustained the canvassing project through 1863

66. James Mitchell, “Interview,” St. Louis Globe-Democrat, August 26, 1894. Bennett, who excerpts the interview (Forced into Glory, 554), and Lind, What Lincoln Believed (209), use it as evidence that Lincoln continued to support colonization. Mitchell’s recollected quotation is uncharacteristically resolute for Lincoln, reflecting at minimum its thirty-year distillation. Mitchell nonetheless indicates that Lincoln answered his question in the affirmative. Mitchell’s aforementioned 1863 letters claim similar approval from Lincoln.

67. James Mitchell to J. Hodge, Esq. November 24, 1863, Slave Trade and Colonization Records. A note from John Nicolay indicates that Mitchell had a scheduled appointment with Lincoln on November 5, 1863 (Collected Works, 8:525). The date corresponds with Lincoln’s receipt of a petition from the African Civilization Society, presented by Mitchell, requesting a donation for their efforts. There is no indication that Lincoln approved the donation request, and Mitchell again appealed for a donation to the Society in his 1864 report, writing that the “aid asked could not be rendered” due to “imperfect legislation” governing his office (Mitchell, Brief on Emigration and Colonization, 16). See also Mitchell to Lincoln and African Civilization Society to Lincoln, November 5, 1863 in Lincoln Papers.

68. Mitchell, Brief on Emigration and Colonization, 3, 10.
though, and Mitchell’s advocacy, both before and after the assassination, gives little indication that he ever doubted he had Lincoln’s concurrence. The small scale of the canvassing effort, particularly in relation to the projects of late 1862, is particularly characteristic of Mitchell’s colonization views. Possibly induced by his animosity toward the principal agents of the Chiriqui plan, Mitchell repeatedly urged Lincoln to suspend larger projects until after the war. As he wrote in 1862, “On the return of peace when the draft on the Treasury for war purposes subsides, then may we stimulate more expensive and extended emigration then may our ships of war, be used as transports.” 69 Lincoln gave no surviving response to this proposal beyond what Mitchell reports in his letters and interview. It nonetheless represents a possible policy option of which Lincoln was aware as his administration moved away from Chiriqui-style proposals.

It is notable that signs of discord began to appear between Mitchell and Secretary of the Interior John P. Usher in late 1863, perhaps explaining why the canvassing project stalled and the lack of attention given to colonization after that point. For most of 1864 the administration’s two principle colonization agents bitterly clashed over their respective roles. Mitchell resented Usher’s connection to the failed Isle a Vache project, which he disavowed as an illegitimate and corrupt contract. Usher in turn viewed Mitchell as a meddlesome bureaucrat and an unnecessary draw of salary from his department. 70 Their dispute reached Lincoln’s desk shortly after the Hay diary entry when Mitchell informed the president of Usher’s “foolish war on me com-

69. James Mitchell to Abraham Lincoln, July 1, 1862, Lincoln Papers.
70. The dispute with Usher seems to have originated with a request from the Secretary of the Interior to assume the functions of the emigration office for the purpose of reducing budgetary expenses in 1863. Lincoln does not appear to have acted on the request, as Mitchell’s office continued its functions until June 1864. See Usher to Lincoln, May 18, 1863, “Receipt of James Mitchell from the Executive Office,” January 29, 1864, letter from the Secretary of the Interior to the Senate, March 11, 1864, and Usher to Lincoln, June 29, 1864, all in Lincoln Papers. Mitchell explicitly disavowed the validity of remaining contracts in the Chiriqui and Isle a Vache projects in his summer 1864 report to Lincoln (Brief on Emigration and Colonization, 17). In late 1863, Usher and Mitchell became engaged in a protracted dispute over control of colonization policy itself. For example, Mitchell wrote Usher on October 22, 1863, stating “I have either the charge of the colonization work in this Department, or I am independent of the Secretary of the Interior, and assigned here for office room.” Other disputes included Usher’s removal of colonization records from Mitchell’s office, allegations of corruption in the remaining Chiriqui contracts, and Usher’s denial of payroll disbursements to Mitchell’s secretaries. See John B. Thompson to George C. Whiting, October 21, 1863, salary memorandum by Usher, January 23, 1864, and treasury disbursement request by Mitchell, January 21, 1864, all in Slave Trade and Colonization Records.
menced at the instigation of the Arch-traytor [sic] Elwood Fiske years ago, and continued by the direction of an equally pure cliant [sic] A. W. Thompson.” When Congress repealed its colonization funding, Usher immediately suspended Mitchell’s salary and absorbed his office’s remaining resources.71

At some point in late 1864 Lincoln directed Attorney General Edward Bates to address the dispute and provide him with an opinion on restoring Mitchell’s salary. Upon initial consideration, Lincoln’s intervention provides hope of a glimpse into the status of his colonization views.72 Mitchell references the case in his letter to Lincoln on October 20, stating, “I much desire to know the fate of my petition now in the hands of the Attorney General,” expressing his thanks to Lincoln, and asking him for reappointment to another office “that will not be so much exposed to the fierce fires of an unscrupulous faction on one hand and corrupt officials on the other.”73 That Lincoln submitted a request to Bates is indicated by the attorney general’s letter of November 30, apologizing for his neglect to “give formal answer to your question concerning your power still to retain the Revd. Mr. Mitchell as your assistant or aid in the matter of executing the several acts of Congress relating to the emigration or Colonizing of the freed blacks.” Bates, who was tendering his resignation as attorney general at this time, reported his inability to compose a formal opinion before leaving office but informally suggested “that you have the same right to continue Mr. Mitchell that you had to appoint him originally.”74

Unfortunately, the Mitchell-Usher dispute left very little documentation from Lincoln. Lincoln’s request to Bates does not appear to have survived. Nor do any responses, if ever written, to the multiple letters by Mitchell and Usher seeking his mediation of the dispute. Though potentially an area of future research, existing records of Lincoln’s inter-

71. Mitchell to Lincoln, September 2, 1864, and October 20, 1864, Lincoln Papers.
72. For one such treatment of the Bates opinion as evidence that Lincoln still supported colonization in 1864, see Lind, What Lincoln Believed, 224. This position has been widely criticized though.
73. Mitchell to Lincoln, October 20, 1864, Lincoln Papers.
74. Edward Bates to Abraham Lincoln, November 30, 1864, ibid. The dispute over Mitchell’s salary was unresolved at the time of Lincoln’s death. The legal issue indicated in Bates’s letter reflects the distinction between Congress’s repeal of the colonization budget and Mitchell’s appointment, which came from the August 4, 1862, commission by Lincoln. Bates indicates that the commission remained intact at Lincoln’s discretion, with the budget controlling the emigration office. In June 1865 Attorney General James Speed gave President Johnson an opinion indicating that the funds for Mitchell’s salary had been repealed, thus ending the dispute. See James Harlan to Mitchell, June 6, 1865, Slave Trade and Colonization Records. Also see Mitchell, Brief on Emigration and Colonization, 7.
vention offer little additional information about his colonization beliefs in late 1864. The canvassing project of 1863 does, however, shed some new light upon Lincoln’s colonization policy. Rather than suddenly halting colonization, the president’s interests shifted to the smaller-scale canvassing effort in British Honduras at least through 1863. The canvassing project is still removed from Butler’s meeting by over a year, yet its apparent sanction by Lincoln indicates a need to further examine the role colonization played in his administration’s later years.

Colonization and Lincoln’s known beliefs

Left with scant evidence beyond the Hay diary, scholars have taken to evaluating Lincoln’s post-1863 colonization views based upon his known positions on other issues. Neely in particular uses this approach to bolster his timeline argument. “Butler’s anecdote,” he notes, “is at odds with Lincoln’s known views” on the seemingly related subjects of voting rights and race relations. In his last public address Lincoln told a crowd in Washington, “I would myself prefer that [the elective franchise] were now conferred on the very intelligent, and on those who serve our cause as soldiers” among the black population.75 He ultimately deferred to Louisiana on this decision, yet his willingness to consider voting rights for members of the United States Colored Troops suggests inconsistency with Butler. Neely makes this argument strongly: “[W]hen Lincoln accepted freedmen as soldiers on January 1, 1863, he guaranteed a biracial future for the country because no President could ask a man to fight for his country and then tell him it was no longer his country. By the end of his administration Lincoln definitely had ‘sloughed off’ the idea.”76

The voting rights evidence demonstrates an important development in Lincoln’s racial attitudes toward the end of his life, yet Neely’s inferences seem to assert greater deterministic consistency than would be expected for an issue that weighed so heavily on Lincoln’s mind. In particular, Lincoln’s views on freedmen voting rights were in their relative infancy at the time of his death, exhibiting signs of careful nuance. Welles attests to Lincoln’s reluctance over intruding on state election laws when addressing this issue. He “considered the proposition to disregard the fundamental laws and reserved rights of the States” in a way that would “ultimately be ruinous in its consequences to our federal system.” Welles continues: “On the contrary, it was the policy

76. Neely, Lincoln Encyclopedia, 83.
of the President, distinctly and unequivocally declared and always consistently maintained, that only qualified voters by the election laws of the State existing immediately before the so-called act of secession, should vote on the question of reestablishing a State government, or, in common parlance, reconstruction.”

Continuing his guarded approach, Lincoln emphasized the franchise as a reward for military service—a point that Neely considers inconsistent with Butler’s colonization plan, which advocated using soldiers to establish its colony. It is of note though that Butler’s anecdote portrays this aspect of the scheme as his own recommendation. Butler proposes it to resolve the mathematical problem of transporting the freedmen. Yet he gives no clear indication that Lincoln himself espoused this specific solution, much less contextualized it alongside his cautious advocacy of voting rights for black soldiers.

An additional criticism of Butler questions his assessment of Lincoln’s motivations for pursuing a colonization policy. Butler connects this policy to Lincoln’s alleged concerns about racial violence between white southerners and the freedmen. At one point in the autobiography’s version of the conversation, Lincoln seemingly rebuffs any anxiety over former Confederate troops, who “were good citizens or they would not have been good soldiers.” He does, however, express the concern that disbanded black soldiers will become guerillas, hence the inconsistency. Neely somewhat overstates the evidence, though, with the assertion that Butler’s Lincoln “expressed confidence in the peaceful nature” of white southerners. Butler’s Lincoln openly worries that the freedmen will become “but little better off with their masters than they were before, and yet they will be free men.” Lincoln also expresses fear of violence, instigated by the “oppression of [the freedmen] by their late masters.”

Butler, as with most writers to address the subject, witnessed the period of racial violence and oppression in the Reconstruction era south prior to penning his recollections. Butler’s Lincoln uncharacteristically emphasizes a fear of violence by the freedmen, perhaps indicating an embellishment by the general for the purpose of bolstering his own credentials as an advocate of the freedmen. Yet the underlying issue of racial violence is a recurring characteristic of Lincoln’s known colonization advocacy prior to 1863, and of multiple postwar recollections, each emphasizing Lincoln’s fear that the freedmen would be abused by their former masters. Mitchell, for example, invoked Lincoln’s re-

78. Butler’s Book, 903.
79. Ibid.
action to the murder of black freedmen during the New York Draft Riots in his 1894 interview. Welles, in 1877, stresses a similar point: “Emancipation had constituted no part of the policy of the President at the time of his inauguration, and when finally decreed he connected with it, as an essential and indispensable part of his policy, a plan of deportation of the colored population . . . From a conviction that the white and black races could not abide together on terms of social and political equality, he thought they could not peaceably occupy the same territory.”

Lincoln, he continues, recognized the wrong of “the whole system of enslavement” but believed “that any attempt to make them [the former slaves] and the whites one people would tend to the degradation of the whites without materially elevating the blacks.” Separation, as obtained by voluntary colonization, would, by contrast, “promote the happiness and welfare of each.”

Welles reiterates similar aspects of Lincoln’s beliefs throughout his discussion and gives little indication, to his knowledge, that Lincoln ever fully abandoned them. He speculates, for example, that the hindsight of failing to see colonization accomplished would have delayed Lincoln’s decision to issue the Emancipation Proclamation: “He believed it would be best for both the whites and blacks that the latter should leave the country, or, as he expressed it in his interview with the colored representatives, ‘it is better for us both to be separated.’ Knowing his convictions and earnest solicitude on this branch of his policy, I have sometimes doubted whether he would not have hesitated longer in issuing the decree of emancipation had he been aware that colonization would not be accepted as an accompaniment.”

Strikingly similar observations appear in the recollections of other associates. Congressman George W. Julian recalled in 1886 that Lincoln, upon issuing his preliminary Emancipation Proclamation in September 1862, “wished it distinctly understood that the deportation of the slaves was, in his mind, inseparably connected with the policy.” “[I]t is by no means certain,” continues Julian, “that if the President had foreseen this fact [the failure of the Chiriqui project] his preliminary notice to the rebels would have been given.” Carl Schurz, while acknowledging the genuine nature of Lincoln’s antislavery beliefs, remarked critically that “he continued to adhere to the impracticable colonization plan even after the Emancipation Proclamation had al-

81. Ibid.
82. Ibid., 444.
ready been issued.” It is also notable that Henry C. Whitney, an old Illinois acquaintance of Lincoln’s, engaged in speculation that the president “would have made still more heroic efforts” at colonization “had he completed his second term.”

As the final Emancipation Proclamation’s date coincides with the time when Lincoln is traditionally thought to have backed away from colonization, comments such as Welles’s deserve consideration by the historian seeking to understand the extent that this policy remained on his mind. Welles’s portrayal of Lincoln is characteristically respectful, even if apprehensive toward the policies he discusses. He describes Lincoln’s beliefs as “more advanced than those of the colonizationists” in terms of the complexity of thought the president applied to the situation. Never completely developed, Lincoln’s brand of colonization arose from his trepidations about racial conflict. According to Welles, he genuinely feared “a war more terrible than that in which we were now engaged,” brought on by the oppression of the freedmen.

The navy secretary’s purpose in stressing this point is self-admittedly a refutation of Republican radicals and abolitionists, who often claimed Lincoln’s posthumous legacy in the intervening decades. Speculation may indicate that the hindsight of Black Codes, discrimination, and violence in the Reconstruction south influenced Welles’s writings about Lincoln. The account certainly suffers from its distance in time from the events it describes, and Welles’s dislike for the radicals is apparent. He complains that Lincoln’s sentiments had been “much misrepresented and misunderstood” by the radicals and structures his essay to correct this record as he saw it. “[T]hose who applaud his course” with the Emancipation Proclamation “omit to mention that colonization and deportation of the slaves when set free was deemed by [Lincoln] an essential part of his emancipation policy.” Without passing judgment against Lincoln, he seeks to convey the unacknowledged depth entailed in his thought. Yet his writings do not simply assert Lincoln’s colonization credentials as a counterpoint to Reconstruction politics. Welles’s portrayal of Lincoln’s beliefs is methodical, showing a president who struggled at length with the colonization issue and presented it as a circumspect means of addressing an immensely complex and volatile political situation. Though similarly shaded by its date and retrospection, Welles’ account offers explanatory value on colonization as a more tempered witness than Butler. His depiction conveys a depth in Lincoln’s

thought on the issue that would seemingly preclude a hasty retreat from the issue, even in the absence of public espousal after early 1863.

While attesting little to the duration of Lincoln’s beliefs on the matter, some evidence suggests that disagreement with Lincoln over colonization left an unusually strong impression on William Seward. In an anecdote reported in Carpenter’s 1866 biography of Lincoln, Seward reportedly used the issue to illustrate a rare political divergence from the president. According to the story, a friend named J.C. Derby visited Seward at his bedside while he was recovering from the attempt on his own life the night of Lincoln’s murder. The Secretary remarked, “No knife was ever sharp enough to divide us upon any question of public policy, though we frequently arrived at the same conclusion through different processes of thought.” Seward continued: “Once only did we disagree in sentiment.” Derby then asked the subject, to which Seward replied, “His ‘colonization’ scheme, which I opposed on the self-evident principle that all natives of a country have an equal right in its soil.”

The anecdote comports well with Seward’s ambivalence to pressing the Chiriqui land claims in 1862 after Central American governments challenged their validity, and treaty considerations with Britain impeded on their prospects. Seward’s divergence from Lincoln is visible though. During an 1868 cabinet meeting, Welles records that Seward “attempted to belittle Mr. Lincoln” over the Chiriqui incident.  

Assessing the Plausibility of Butler’s Account

The ethical implications of Lincoln’s colonization policies have always posed a challenge for those seeking to understand them, regardless of what is concluded about their duration. His views, whether those known before 1863 or reported as late as 1865, seem to conflict with the Emancipation Proclamation’s ethical significance, though Lincoln evidently conveyed to his contemporaries that he saw the two as interrelated. Welles perceived this problem in deferring judgment on Lincoln’s position, noting only that “it is impossible at this day for those who were not participants to conceive the perplexities attending the disposition of the slavery question” amidst disparate factions, volatile political and social realities, and the backdrop of a war. Here Welles expresses the hindsight entailed in making such an affirmative evaluation of Lincoln’s policy. Butler’s story conveys


a similar and perhaps more pronounced difficulty by affixing a late date on Lincoln’s views, hence its historical interest as well as its troublesome reputation.

The intrinsic characteristics of the anecdote are in many ways as much of a challenge to scholars as the ethical debate it provokes. The 1865 meeting certainly happened, yet Butler’s reminiscence of it exhibits many flaws, the most obvious being its ultimately forgivable misstatement of the timeline. Neely raises doubts about the story and does so with justification. Butler’s claim that Lincoln complimented his handling of troop operations (generally considered poor) on the James River in 1864 is in all likelihood an embellishment. The general’s neglect to include information about his Treasury difficulties and the cotton petitions shows an incomplete accounting of the meeting. Butler’s claim about proposing the Panama Canal in 1865 is similarly suspect, given that he penned it against the backdrop of a French canal project and barely a decade removed from the successful American effort. He also embellishes his own reputation on racial equality, names himself as Lincoln’s choice to “lead” the effort, and puts the proposed scheme into motion before his departure from the White House. Each of these details raises suspicion. Butler’s own dubious military ability makes him an improbable choice, and Lincoln’s protracted consideration of colonization in earlier years suggests he would have proceeded with similar care in 1865.

The challenge with Butler thus comes in discerning the extent to which imprecision and exaggeration corrupt the anecdote. Butler’s description of Lincoln is imperfect, but the motivations and colonization interests he assigns to Lincoln mirror those described by Welles with reasonable accuracy, the latter having given no indication that the president substantially altered them late in life. Emigration office records also suggest that Lincoln sustained the British Honduras canvassing program through 1863, extending his recorded interest in colonization beyond the current consensus.

Textual evidence seems to indicate that Butler penned his autobiography without relying heavily on the earlier Rice version. Conceptually, the stories convey nearly identical details. Both attribute the discussion to Lincoln’s concerns about racial conflict in the south. Both consist of a two-part meeting separated by two or “some few days,” the second occurring in the morning. Both conclude with Butler proposing a similar plan based on the deployment of black troops in Panama, to be followed by subsidized relocation for their families. Lincoln then concludes the meeting, twice telling Butler “there is meat in that suggestion” (Rice) or “there is meat in that” (autobiography). Aside from this concluding remark though, the two differ greatly.
in language. The quoted conversations match only in concepts, not wording, as would be expected if Butler had used the Rice version when writing his book. Even if Butler overstated certain facts from the conversations, these seemingly independent writings about the meeting and its complex details exhibit the characteristics of a recollection rooted, at least to some degree, in actual events.

Some of Butler’s more dubious exaggerations may have a strain of underlying truth. While the canal proposal seems unlikely, the Isthmus of Darien certainly had the attention of the president and the War Department in early 1865 due to a diplomatic rift with Colombia over passage rights.89 Butler’s portrayal of Lincoln’s “race war” fears shows signs of distortion as mentioned, yet it also seems to reflect the president’s known fears about violence against the former slaves. Herman Belz acknowledges this anxiety, even while recognizing the “low reputation” of Butler’s story: “[T]he fear of violence and of continued fighting was in accord with views Lincoln expressed elsewhere concerning reconstruction. . . . His main objective was to secure peace and order, then to proceed with solving the political problems of the relations between North and South, and if partial colonization could promote these ends, he was willing at least to investigate its possibilities.”90 While conceding the seemingly contradictory relationship of colonization with genuine concern for former slaves, Belz notes “it is possible that Lincoln approached colonization from humanitarian considerations” as a means of avoiding continued violence.91

Constrained by the limitations of written evidence, inquiry into Butler’s account becomes necessarily speculative. Given the general’s probable exaggerations, one conceivable scenario involves the conversation turning to the subjects of racial conflict and colonization, with Lincoln indicating his willingness to receive Butler’s suggestions. Such a conversation would fall short of the specific project Butler describes

89. In late 1864 the governor of Panama prevented U.S. Admiral George Pearson from transporting troops and Confederate prisoners across the isthmus to New York City. Amidst the diplomatic rift, Seward dispatched Gen. Daniel Sickles to the region in February 1865 to secure U.S. passage rights. Sickles was instructed to communicate “that if the New Granadian [Colombia] authorities persist in denying our rights, the President will feel compelled to submit the whole subject to Congress in order that, if by them deemed advisable, he may be authorized to adopt other means to sustain and secure them.” Sickles was also instructed to monitor “a project of a French Company to construct a canal across the Isthmus.” William Seward to D. E. Sickles, January 6, 1865, National Archives, Archives of the State Department, Special Missions, 2:29–33.


91. Ibid., 283 n. 8.
or Lincoln’s choice of Butler to complete the task, though it indicates
the possibility, and perhaps even likelihood, that Lincoln still entan-
tained colonization ideas. Many unlikely parts of the conversation
appear in Butler’s quotations of himself, rather than those attributed
to Lincoln. The use of black troops to establish a colony, the canal
component, and the policy itself are all expressed as ideas of Butler,
“which I will suggest to you, Mr. President.” Lincoln’s only reaction,
“there is meat in that, General Butler,” is far from espousal of the plan’s
particulars, though it would indicate a more likely scenario in which
Lincoln patiently received and considered Butler’s suggestions.

The present inquiry set out to provide a firmer basis for evaluating
Butler’s colonization anecdote by resolving the issue of its reported
timeline. Though established in date, the anecdote leaves many addi-
tional questions unanswered and provides room for further exami-
nation of an underexplored area of Lincoln’s presidency. As the
full conversation between Butler and Lincoln was known only to
its participants, one of them assassinated only three days later and
the other writing of it twice several decades after the fact, a compre-
hsive and unbiased record of its events is unlikely ever to emerge.
What is certain is that a private meeting in 1865 between Butler and
Lincoln occurred. The details of this meeting, as conveyed by Butler,
exhibit duly acknowledged signs of embellishment and the distort-
ing effects of their distance from the event itself. Beginning with
the meeting’s known date though, the two Butler accounts deserve
greater attention than they have received. Sufficient evidence exists
to merit additional consideration of Lincoln’s colonization views
later in life, and tends to caution against the conclusiveness that
many scholars have previously attached to the view that Lincoln
fully abandoned this position. The Butler anecdote remains an
imperfect example, yet some of its more plausible details may indicate
that Lincoln retained an interest in colonization, even if limited, as
late as 1865.