James Mitchell and the Mystery of the Emigration Office Papers

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As an administrator of the federal Emigration Office, Reverend James Mitchell had little patience for bureaucratic rules and procedure. Perhaps it was this rebellious flair that endeared the feisty Ulsterman to Abraham Lincoln, himself no stranger to the discomforting tendencies of Washington decorum. “Mitchell I know and like,” Lincoln told William H. Seward while reviewing candidates for political appointments at the outset of his presidency.1 Mitchell and Lincoln first met in 1853, when the minister traveled through Illinois to recruit members for the American Colonization Society.2 A resident of neighboring Indiana, Mitchell had been that state’s colonization agent for many years, as well as a friend of Caleb Blood Smith, Lincoln’s incoming Secretary of the Interior. When Lincoln convinced Congress to appropriate $600,000 for the controversial policy of establishing freedmen’s settlements abroad, Mitchell, as an enthusiastic colonization backer and veteran of the movement, was likely already in line to lead the effort.

As Mitchell approached the White House on a wintry January morning in 1864, though, the procedural nuisances of the federal system clearly had taken a toll on his fervor for a policy that he often spoke of in heavy, fatalistic terminology and once described as his life’s work. He came to retrieve a file of papers relating to the government’s colonization programs, which now sat stagnant amidst the joint distractions of the Interior Department bureaucracy and the raging Civil War. The contents were presumably broad, described as all “papers filed by me and related to the President, which can be found,” the product of almost two years of work, though most of it without result.3 They likely

contained a handful of administrative papers on the Chiriqui colony in Panama, abandoned in its infancy, and the Ile a Vache settlement off the coast of Haiti, only weeks away from its disastrous conclusion in which the U.S. Navy rescued its surviving freedmen colonists from a year of disease and neglect. Despite his title, Mitchell could legitimately disown both projects beyond their initial promotion. Chiriqui had long since been placed under the direction of Kansas Senator Samuel Pomeroy, who was facing allegations of appropriating the project’s finances for his personal use. The task of straightening out what remained of Ile a Vache fell to John P. Usher, Smith’s successor as Secretary of the Interior, who now seemed more interested in shedding any personal culpability in that fiasco.4

4. Usher’s 1864 report to the Senate on colonization made a single guarded reference to the discontinuation of the Haitian venture, prompting the “return” of its emigrants. The press widely interpreted this statement as an attempt by Usher to shield himself from the controversy, with the New York Times chiding “how much he has had to do with causing its failure, how carefully he has so managed matters as to secure the defeat of the scheme, which he professed to be aiding, he does not state.” Though long considered a colonizationist member of Lincoln’s cabinet, there is surprisingly little
The bulk of the papers, however, likely pertained to a lesser known colonization venture in British Honduras, or modern day Belize. Mitchell successfully obtained approval from Lincoln in June 1863 for this scheme, and he spent the better part of the year in discussions with British colonial authorities to prepare for the first wave of emigrants, though by January 1864 the project teetered on the edge of collapse. A few weeks prior, London soured on the scheme over concerns about the legal status of the Emancipation Proclamation and the "contrabands"—the southern slaves freed in the course of the war and now aggregating in camps around Washington. Mitchell also faced the hostility of the War Department, which viewed the Emigration Office as a competitor for recruits into the United States Colored Troops and thus a threat to the war effort.5

The most pressing obstacle, however, was the personal animosity of Usher, who never much liked Mitchell and had spent the better part of the previous year attempting to relieve himself of a man he considered insubordinate and meddlesome.6 In all probability, Mitchell sought out the White House records before the Interior Secretary


5. For a more complete history of the British Honduras colony and related ventures, see Phillip W. Magness and Sebastian N. Page, Colonization After Emancipation: Lincoln and the Movement for Black Resettlement (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2010).

6. The exact origin of Usher and Mitchell’s mutual disdain is unclear, though it pre-dated the Lincoln presidency. Both men were veterans of the rancorous Indiana political climate of the 1850s. Usher served as a Republican legislator and later attorney general, while Mitchell was employed in the administration of Democratic Governor Joseph A. Wright. Mitchell later attributed their differences to a decades-old personal dispute involving Midwestern newspaperman Elwood Fisher. Mitchell and Usher clashed over colonization almost immediately after Caleb Smith’s departure. Within months of taking office in early 1863, Usher unsuccessfully pleaded with Lincoln to remove Mitchell and abolish his position. The two fought constantly for the next year on virtually everything, ranging from complex colonization contracts to matters as simple as a $5 reimbursement for janitorial services in the Emigration Office. Usher eventually succeeded in convincing Congress to rescind Mitchell’s budget in July 1864. In turn, Mitchell worked behind the scenes with Methodist Bishop Matthew Simpson to pressure Lincoln for Usher’s dismissal from the cabinet after the fall election. See Mitchell to Lincoln, October 20, 1864, and Usher to Lincoln, May 18, 1863, both in Lincoln Papers; Mitchell to Simpson, October 31, 1864, Matthew Simpson Papers, Library of Congress.
could beat him to the punch. The two had quarreled for months over control of the colonization budget, prompting the Senate to launch an investigation into the use of its appropriation and eventually imperiling the jobs of both men. Following the Senate request, each man accused his adversary of stealing the records in the other’s possession while hoarding those still in his own possession. In any case, Mitchell departed the White House with a collection of colonization papers in hand, leaving behind a short note promising their return to the Executive Office. Though he retained his position until Congress rescinded his budget that July, he never claimed his receipt.

Historians of the Civil War era have long labored to explain the apparent disappearance of colonization from Abraham Lincoln’s political lexicon shortly after he signed the Emancipation Proclamation on New Year’s Day 1863. Less than a month prior, the president openly solicited Congress’s support for an extensive colonizationist agenda, announcing his wishes to find a separate home abroad for the slaves freed by the impending Proclamation. Yet from January 1, 1863, onward Lincoln never again uttered the word colonization in a public setting.

The conventional interpretation suggests that the Proclamation initiated a paradigm shift in Lincoln’s personal beliefs on race and slavery, culminating in the abandonment of his longstanding colonization “hobby,” as he often referred to it. Recent scholarship has challenged the notion that this shift coincided directly with Lincoln’s signature on the Proclamation. It may now be safely asserted that Lincoln continued to seek out locations abroad for the freedmen well into 1863, first in finalizing the Ile a Vache contract and later through Mitchell’s project in British Honduras. Still, the discrepancy of timing


around January 1, 1863, is exceedingly pronounced in Lincoln’s own pen. Before the Proclamation, Lincoln’s papers contain dozens of letters, speeches, contracts, and memoranda on colonization, including the infamous August 1862 address where he unsuccessfully pitched the scheme to a deputation of freedmen at the White House. Yet his Collected Works contain only four scant direct references, all administrative in nature, to colonization dated after the Proclamation. 10

It is not difficult to interpret the shift in Lincoln’s papers as evidence of his diminishing colonization interests, and many if not most historians currently subscribe to this explanation. 11 The rapid decline of colonization references after New Year’s Day 1863 intuitively suggests that Lincoln was indeed backing off colonization. But closer scrutiny should put that notion to rest. Evidence abounds of Lincoln’s continued interest in colonization for some time after this date, though very little is in his own handwriting. 12

These post-emancipation resettlement efforts, and particularly the British Honduras scheme, may actually illustrate a little-noticed reorientation of Lincoln’s colonization strategy rather than its long-imagined abandonment. He indicated as much in his December 1, 1862, message to Congress, hinting at the protests of the “Spanish American Republics” against the recent Chiriquí venture in Panama. At the same time, this message was not an abandonment of colonization but rather a redirection of efforts.

10. See Collected Works, 6:178, 7:164, 7:241, 7:417. A fifth example is not included in the Collected Works but bears Lincoln’s signature. This document is an authorization to two British colonial agents permitting the recruitment of freedmen emigrants for projects in British Honduras and Guyana, approved by Lincoln in June 1863. It is probably the most significant surviving post-Emancipation Lincoln document, as it was likely the last serious colonization venture to receive the government’s direct sanction. See James Mitchell to Hodge and Dickson, June 11, 1863, as approved by Lincoln, June 13, 1863, Records of the Slave Trade. British records contain a second copy. See Foreign Office Records 115/394, National Archives of the United Kingdom.


though, Lincoln expressed his intent to enter into agreements with “the several States situated within the Tropics, or having colonies there” concerning “the voluntary emigration” of individual freedmen, not unlike the path he pursued with British Honduras for at least another year.\(^{13}\) These foreign governments theoretically would add stability, in contrast to the dubious land claims and unscrupulous businessmen that had plagued previous colonization contracts. An emphasis on individual emigration would also alleviate the logistical difficulties of mass transport, particularly at a time when the navy could ill afford to divert ships for colonization purposes.

This new approach differed greatly in scale and method from the Chiriqui venture, though it shared Lincoln’s longstanding insistence on voluntary participation and his broader interest in continuing to resettle the freedmen abroad. It should thus be viewed as a continuation of his earlier policy, albeit through means modified by experience.\(^{14}\) Still, colonization after the Emancipation Proclamation is poorly documented relative to the large “contract colonies” of the previous fall. Its virtual absence from Lincoln’s own records remains the most formidable obstacle to a more complete understanding of this policy, and, by extension, Lincoln’s racial views. Why, then, such a sparse paper trail?

Few historians have even considered an alternative theory to the conventional wisdom of Lincoln’s declining interest in colonization, though Mitchell’s receipt from the Executive Office directly suggests one: Lincoln’s colonization records became so sporadic after January 1863 at least in part because they were removed from government files and remain missing to this day.

\(^{13}\) Abraham Lincoln, Annual Message to Congress, December 1, 1862, *Collected Works*, 5:520.

\(^{14}\) The terminology surrounding what constituted “colonization” and “emigration” policies is somewhat difficult for historians to navigate. The two terms were used interchangeably (and somewhat carelessly) to describe policies with a shared purpose of resettling the freed slaves, though differing greatly in method and scale. The matter was further complicated by the politically treacherous association of the term *colonization* with the American Colonization Society, which used an “emigration” model of chartered ships to its main project in Liberia. Lincoln’s 1862 address described the referenced resettlement policies as “emigration, with a view to such colonization as was contemplated in recent acts of Congress.” In a similar vein, Mitchell’s bureau was formally known as the “Emigration Office,” though the enabling statute referred to the “colonization of colored people of African descent.” For the purposes of this article, *colonization* is broadly defined to encompass all freedmen’s resettlement policies pursued by Lincoln under the auspices of this statute, even as the exact character and strategy of these policies changed between its adoption in July 1862 and repeal two years later.
The evidence for this explanation is actually strong, albeit little explored. Newspapers across the country ran Mitchell’s obituary when he died in 1903 at the age of eighty-five.15 His postwar ministry carried him to rural Mt. Zion, Georgia, where he established a small theological seminary and spent his last days as its headmaster. But as far as the press was concerned, his passing signified the dwindling number of living people who worked in the Lincoln White House. How little they knew that Mitchell’s death also portended the impending loss of another tie to Lincoln. Mitchell still had the colonization papers he retrieved in 1864, as well as a trunk containing the majority of papers from the Emigration Office, all carefully preserved for some forty years to be handed over to historians, as his will stipulated: “I wish my African and Colonization books and State papers to pass into the hands of Robert, as a trusted individual, in hopes that Sooner or later a personal memoir will be compiled therefrom, illustrative of God’s wonderful Providence and mercy to this nation in the troubles of the past, when the negro question dominated all others.”16 Sadly his nephew Robert—or James Robert Mitchell—never acted upon the request, and the papers disappeared shortly thereafter.17

The existence of a large, untapped box of Lincolniana is the stuff of every Civil War historian’s imagination, though barring an unexpected rediscovery in a long-forgotten hiding place the Mitchell trunk will almost certainly prove elusive to modern researchers. However, it need not be cloaked in complete obscurity, as he left behind multiple clues about the trunk’s content during his lifetime.

The bulk of the collection likely consisted of papers of the Emigration Office dating from early 1863 to its discontinuation on July 2, 1864,  


17. James Robert Mitchell was the son of Mitchell’s older brother John. He was born in Illinois in 1861. According to the 1900 Census, he was living with his wife Louise (b. 1866) and son Robert H. Mitchell (b. 1888) in Evansville, Indiana, where the Mitchell family originally settled after emigrating from Ireland. See “Twelfth Census of the United States,” Pigeon Township, Evansville City, Vanderburgh County, Indiana, Enumeration District 84, Sheet 10. Mitchell was also survived by his sister-in-law Anna Mitchell (1854–1937) and her daughter Mary Edward Mitchell, both of whom lived with him in Mt. Zion. Anna’s obituary in 1937 made note of her relation to James, the “commissioner of colonization during Abraham Lincoln’s administration.” See “Mrs. Mitchell, 83, Ex-Atlantan, Dies,” Atlanta Constitution, September 10, 1937.
including almost all documents pertaining to the British Honduras project.\textsuperscript{18} Most were routine correspondence between Mitchell and John Hodge, colonial agent for the crown-sanctioned British Honduras Company, which was set to transport, house, and employ the freedmen emigrants that its agents and Mitchell’s office intended to recruit. He also likely possessed a report on the colony from J. Willis Menard, an African American clerk in the Emigration Office who traveled to British Honduras with Hodge in August 1863 to inspect the proposed site for the government.\textsuperscript{19} Owing to the loss of Mitchell’s files, Menard’s investigation is only known today from the U.S. Consulate records in Belize City indicating the party’s arrival and a short essay about the visit written by one of the other investigators Menard brought with him.\textsuperscript{20}

Newly discovered documents in Lincoln’s handwriting naturally generate historical excitement, and there is reason to believe that Mitchell’s trunk contained several of them. Mitchell’s original appointment letter from Lincoln has not been found, though a secretary’s copy survived.\textsuperscript{21} As early as October 1863 an Interior Depart-

\textsuperscript{18} One surviving memorandum from Mitchell to Lincoln indicates that he forwarded “the correspondence of Messrs Hodge and Rolls, relating to Honduras, and the Claims of the British Colonies” to the White House and asks for the president’s attention to their contents, possibly relating to War Department obstruction of their efforts to recruit black colonists. Neither referenced letter is among the surviving Interior Department records from Mitchell’s office or in Lincoln’s papers. See Mitchell to Lincoln, Memorandum on Colonization, June 1864, Lincoln Papers.

\textsuperscript{19} Menard achieved historical distinction of his own right shortly after the Civil War by becoming the first African American elected to the House of Representatives, though Congress refused to seat him after a white candidate challenged the results. Menard’s investigation for the Emigration Office was widely known at the time of his election to Congress in 1869, and several period accounts indicate that he filed “an able report of British Honduras,” including a letter offering to forward his findings to the president and newspaper descriptions of his findings. He also praised the colony in a letter to an American Colonization Society official and announced his eventual intent to settle there. His actual report has never been located though. See “Washington, from an occasional correspondent,” The Anglo-American Times, January 2, 1869; Menard to Lincoln, September 16, 1863, Records of the Slave Trade; Menard to William McLain, undated letter filed November 1863, Incoming Correspondence, Domestic Letters, American Colonization Society Papers, Library of Congress.

\textsuperscript{20} Charles Babcock, British Honduras, Central America: A Plain Statement to the Colored People of the U.S. who Contemplate Emigration (Salem, Mass.: C. Babcock, 1863); Charles Leas to William Seward, Dispatch No. 60, August 20, 1863, “Despatches from U.S. Consuls in Belize, British Honduras,” General Records of the Department of State, RG 59, T 334, National Archives.

\textsuperscript{21} Two versions of Lincoln’s appointment of Mitchell dated August 4, 1862, may be found in Records of the Slave Trade.
ment clerk reported back to Usher that Mitchell claimed to have papers in his office “from the President covering the whole Colonization scheme,” though the unyielding commissioner adamantly refused to divulge their contents. Mitchell did not trust Usher, whom he would later accuse of colluding with Pomeroy to “cook up his fraudulent accounts” out of the colonization fund.  

At least one of these papers is known from other existing versions, including an order signed by Lincoln on June 13, 1863, authorizing Hodge and other British agents to commence the recruitment and transport of freedmen emigrants to Belize. Secretarial copies of the order were retained in Interior Department files and transmitted to Lyons at the British Legation, but the original in Lincoln’s handwriting has not been found. It never left Mitchell’s possession and was last seen in 1904 when a reporter transcribed it while viewing the contents of the trunk.  

Other materials in the collection become a necessarily speculative matter, though Mitchell continued to interact regularly with Lincoln. Two months after first obtaining Lincoln’s approval for the British Honduras project, the Emigration commissioner met with the president again to discuss its status. Lincoln reportedly informed Mitchell of Seward’s opposition to the project, which still required State Department approval of the British government’s proposed terms of emigration. Frustrated by this inaction and in possession of a request from Lyons to commence the recruitment of colonists, Lincoln ordered Seward to give his assent. Pressed further by Mitchell, the president also reportedly confirmed that colonization “was still the policy of the Administration” as of August 1863.  

Later that November Mitchell arranged for a meeting between


24. James Mitchell (interview), “Lincoln and the Negro,” St. Louis Daily Globe-Democrat, August 26, 1894. As with any post-assassination reminiscence of Lincoln, the late date of this interview cautions against assigning it too much authority. Two letters to newspapers from Mitchell in 1863 seem to corroborate this particular conversation. Both appeared shortly after the reputed meeting date and mentioned the State Department’s recent finalization of the emigration agreement with Britain. See James Mitchell, “The Colored People of the United States,” The Methodist. August 19, 1863, in Records of the Slave Trade and “Negro Emigration and Colonization,” The New York Observer, September 10, 1863. Mitchell’s story also finds support in a message that Seward sent to Lyons the same week as the reported meeting, informing the British Legation that its canvassers could commence the recruitment of black emigrants. See Seward to Lyons, August 10, 1863, in Papers Relating to Foreign Affairs, Accompanying the Annual Message of the President (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1864), 620.
the president and a delegation of African Americans from Reverend Henry Highland Garnet’s church. Though the meeting ostensibly covered a federal grant request to the black abolitionist African Civilization Society, Mitchell viewed the organization as an ally for future colonization work.25

By 1864, with budgetary uncertainty imperiling his own career, Mitchell turned to his political connections for self preservation.26 That November he appears to have successfully enlisted Lincoln’s help in his mounting disputes with Usher, who used the recent repeal of the colonization fund as a pretext to rescind Mitchell’s salary. Almost all of Lincoln’s correspondence from the case has been lost though, some in a fire that claimed the records of Attorney General Edward Bates, and likely much of the rest due to the disappearance of Mitchell’s files.27 These papers conceivably included Lincoln’s directives to Bates about the case, including what were likely Lincoln’s last written words on colonization given their late date.28

The lost Mitchell papers were voluminous, or more so than the scanty and disorganized assemblage of Emigration Office files that eventually made its way into the National Archives.29 Mitchell described them in

25. Garnet, long a supporter of the black repatriation and emigration movement, was also actively assisting Hodge with the recruitment of emigrants to British Honduras at the time of the meeting. The requested grant was never issued as the African Civilization Society’s membership consisted mostly of northern free blacks, believed by some including Usher to fall outside of the colonization fund’s statutory scope. That the meeting intended to further colonizationist goals may be seen in the attention it received from the American Colonization Society, which watched Garnet’s request with interest and had long desired access to the same fund. See LeVere, et al. “Address to the President of the United States,” November 5, 1863, Lincoln Papers; John Orcutt to William McLain, November 17, 1863, Incoming Correspondence, Domestic Letters, Colonization Society Records.

26. Mitchell appears to have convinced Senator James H. Lane of Kansas to include a statutory reorganization of the Emigration Office in his 1864 proposal to establish a domestic freedmen’s “colony” in western Texas. Lane’s bill tasked Mitchell with overseeing this project, apparently intending the Emigration Office to function as a civilian version of what would become the military’s Freedmen’s Bureau. Congressional Globe, 38th Cong., 1st sess., 674; Mitchell to Ulysses S. Grant, February 16, 1871, Records of the Slave Trade.

27. Bates to Lincoln, November 30, 1864, Lincoln Papers. Bates’s surviving letter implies that Lincoln asked him for an opinion about retaining Mitchell as Emigration Commissioner after Congress suspended his salary. It references an earlier request by Lincoln, apparently lost in the fire, though a secretary’s note from the attorney general’s mail log implies that Lincoln wrote Bates on Mitchell’s behalf. See Sebastian N. Page, “Lincoln on Race” American Nineteenth Century History, 11–1, n. 27.

28. See Mitchell to Lincoln, September 2, 1864, and October 20, 1864, Lincoln Papers.

29. The surviving Emigration Office papers are presently located in Records of the
an 1871 letter to President Ulysses S. Grant. “Be so kind as to give me a
hearing whilst I state that I find a number of papers in my private files
which belonged to the Office of Emigration whilst I acted as Commis-
sioner therein,” apparently seeking assistance in returning them to the
government. The contents, which he cased up and carted away in late
1864, were sufficiently numerous and interspersed with his personal
papers as to require outside assistance in sorting and copying. Grant
evidently declined to offer help.30

Though the Methodist ministry eventually pulled Mitchell away
from the colonization movement, he carried the Emigration Office
papers with him to each new assignment, even enlisting them for oc-
casional political correspondence. His obituary from the Methodist
conference indicates that he was “acquainted with six of the presidents
of the United States.”31 Not long after he wrote to Grant in 1871, Mitch-
ell received a curious letter from Charles Sumner. The Massachusetts
senator was in a heated battle with Grant over the proposed annexation
of Santo Domingo, partially intended to serve as a home for former
slaves, and wished “to know any opinions expressed by President Lin-
coln on colonization or empire in the West Indies.” Mitchell answered
with an eleven-page “brief” drawn from his old Emigration Office
papers. Though lost with the trunk, the answer was summarized in the

Slave Trade. They were held by the Interior Department until 1911, whereupon they
were transferred to the Library of Congress and then the National Archives. See *Annual
Their contents after May 1863 pertain primarily to the extended feud between Usher and
Mitchell. They include records about Mitchell’s disputed salary for 1864 and Usher’s
rebuffed demands for access to the Emigration Office papers pertaining to the British
Honduras project, though only a handful of transcribed letters from the project itself.
See, for example, Hodge to Mitchell, October 25, 1863, Records of the Slave Trade. These
papers were retained by Usher when Mitchell removed his own files, though curiously
the Secretary of the Interior did not transmit them to Congress with his report of March
11, 1864, despite repeatedly insisting that he had delivered the “entire correspondence of
the Department on the subject of colonization” when pressed by skeptical Senate inves-
tigators. See *Congressional Globe*, 38th Cong., 1st sess., 12; *Senate Executive Documents*, No.
55, Ser. 1238, 39th Cong., 1st sess.; and Usher to Lincoln, June 29, 1864, Lincoln Papers.

30. Mitchell to Grant, February 16, 1871, Records of the Slave Trade. No indicator
of a response appears in John Y. Simon, ed., *The Papers of Ulysses S. Grant* (Carbondale:
Southern Illinois University Press, 2009). Mitchell also wrote to President Andrew
Johnson in 1865, urging him to revive colonization, though no response has been found.
LeRoy P. Graf and Ralph W. Haskins, eds., *The Papers of Andrew Johnson* (Knoxville:

31. L.D. Ellingon, “James Mitchell,” *Minutes of the Thirty-Seventh Annual Session of the
Georgia Conference of the Methodist Episcopal Church* (Dalton, Ga.: A. J. Showalter, 1904),
Atlanta Constitution many years later. The document, which Mitchell told the newspaper “now lies before me,” reportedly contained a detailed synopsis of Lincoln’s thoughts on the British Honduras project and other similar Caribbean partnerships with Great Britain.32

Toward the end of his life Mitchell received an occasional visitor seeking anecdotes about Lincoln, which he related with the aid of materials in his collection. A lengthy interview granted to the St. Louis Daily Globe-Democrat in 1894 makes several references to specific dates and events that only could have been recollected with the aid of a diary and other documents from the colonization files. The diary was last in the possession of Mitchell’s niece, who used it to write a short biography of him at the time of his death.33

The last recorded sighting of Mitchell’s trunk occurred in 1904, a year after his death, when a reporter from the Macon Telegraph was permitted to examine its contents. Though the newspaper’s report must be evaluated cautiously, given the overt racism of its time and context, it confirms the historical value of the missing documents: “Until a year or more ago James Mitchell resided in Georgia and among his memorabilia are ample proofs of the interest that President Lincoln took in the work of the commissioner in behalf of the emigration of freed negroes from the United States.”34 The brief account mentioned “things Mr. Mitchell has left on printed records,” including a transcript of the June 13, 1863, authorization for the British Honduras project bearing Lincoln’s approval. Mitchell’s collection, so carefully carted around the country during his lifetime and left to the next generation with explicit instructions that it be prepared and made available to historians, has not been seen since.

It would be unduly speculative and even irresponsible to suggest that the lost Mitchell papers contain evidence that would otherwise establish a detailed record of Lincoln’s colonization interests into the final days of his life. The small glimpse of their contents that Mitchell and others left behind suggests no such smoking gun but rather a diverse volume of letters, notes, and memoranda that may help to close the gaps in Lincoln’s sporadically documented—though indisputably

33. “Lincoln and the Negro,” St. Louis Daily Globe-Democrat, August 26, 1894. Based upon the surviving fragments in his niece’s biography, Mitchell’s diary appears to have been sufficiently detailed to explain his unusual tendency of referencing dates many years after they occurred. The diary has since disappeared with the remainder of the collection. See Mary Edward Mitchell, Memoirs of James Mitchell: Statesman, Educator, Minister (1906; reprint, Mt. Zion, Ga.: Mt. Zion Seminary, 1939).
34. “Lincoln and Segregation,” The Macon Telegraph, September 13, 1904.
existent—colonization work after the Emancipation Proclamation, particularly that which occurred in 1863 and early 1864.

The records’ existence at one time is also a cautionary tale against the basic assumptions that have typified much of the research into Lincoln’s colonization policies and particularly those of his late presidency, suggesting instead that this topic remains a fertile territory for future investigation. Mitchell’s files contained a fuller accounting of the British Honduras project than we currently know and likely some insight into the politics behind the repeal of colonization funding in 1864—an event long acknowledged and yet seldom elaborated upon, save to note that it happened. The files also caution against the dismissive treatment frequently accorded to the Attorney General’s ruling on the Emigration Office from November 1864, as Lincoln almost certainly contributed more to that discussion than its sole surviving memorandum in Bates’s hand. These and other mysteries from Mitchell’s trunk tend to suggest a more complex and less certain picture of Lincoln’s ideas about the future of the freed slaves.

Of similar significance, the lost Emigration Office papers signify the enduring character of Lincoln research and remind us of the perils of interpreting too much from Lincoln’s perceived silence. Perhaps a dusty trunk will emerge from an attic one day to share the remaining secrets of colonization. In the meantime, historians can and should take comfort in the knowledge that our understanding of Lincoln is anything but complete.