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# HISTORY



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# The Letters of Louden S. Langley

*Edited by* JAMES FULLER

Louden S. Langley was an African-American born to a large farm family in Huntington, Vermont. Educated and articulate, Langley posted many newspaper editorials decrying the colonization schemes of the mid-1800s, the evils of slavery, and the unjust treatment of black soldiers by the Union army during the Civil War. In 1855 he sheltered a fugitive slave in his home on Lincoln Hill in Hinesburg, Vermont. In 1863 he enlisted into the 54th Massachusetts Volunteer Infantry Regiment where his two brothers also served. During his tenure in the Union army he rose to the rank of Sergeant-Major,<sup>1</sup> the highest rank available to a black soldier at the time. After the war he returned<sup>2</sup> to the Charleston, South Carolina, area where it is assumed that he worked for the betterment of others of his race less fortunate. He is buried at the National Cemetery in Beaufort, South Carolina. Except for minor spelling corrections, the unusual language usage, and punctuation of his letters are preserved.

## COLONIZATION

One of the many schemes perpetrated against African-Americans was the colonization of friendly African or Central American countries. Liberia, on the west coast of Africa, and the modern day Honduras-El Salvadorian areas of Central America were but two of the desired destinations<sup>3</sup> for these hapless souls. Even President Abraham Lincoln supported the ideas of payments to the slavemasters as compensation for emancipation and relocation out of the country of southern slaves and freemen alike. Although many thousand newly freed blacks were relocated through these programs, the idea of colonization was promoted mainly by whites and was not popular among the free black population. Descendants of colonization still live in Liberia to this day.

*The Green Mountain Freeman*  
Montpelier, Vermont  
27 April 1854

Mr. Editor: Having received the paper you sent me, though not till quite recently, owing to the infrequency of my visits at Hinesburg, allow me now to say a few words to the public, through the columns of your paper, touching the prosperity of the Colonization Society.

I shall bear down against them without ceremony, nor does it require any. Sir, my attachments for a good policy towards all those whose color is identified with my own, will forever make me the antagonist of that Society. The small increase of the population of that Republic, by emigration from the United States, is alone enough to justify my last illusion. Even in a quarter of a century there have been sent out to that Republic only seven or eight thousand emigrants from the United States.

If the Society is actuated with such a love for my people, let men so interested, and every other, cease their efforts in behalf of that Society, (for their labor is in vain, so far as regards to the triumph of their policy,) and lend their influence in favor of giving us "liberty and equal rights" in the land of our birth. But they know very well that if colored people are equal with their "white fellow citizens" that their influence would be stronger for the immediate abolition of Slavery in the District of Columbia, (that is there tolerated, and with shame we may say it, before the very eyes of foreign ambassadors) as well as other places where Congress has a constitutional right to govern.

Mr. J. K. Converse[sic], Secretary of the Society,<sup>4</sup> in his report made in A.D. 1850, says that there were a few colored people in the vicinity of Burlington, whom he thought would go to the new Republic. Let me say to the Secretary that I am quite confident that no colored people in Burlington have gone or will ever go to Liberia. The majority of the emigrants from the United States are liberated slaves, who are compelled by the laws of free America to leave their native land; and even some of those, rather than go to that Republic, have been known to make their way north, under the pretense of going to Liberia after their arrival here.

The writer should warn all people whose color is identified with his own, to resist, with more than usual energy, the extraordinary efforts now made by the Colonizationists, inasmuch as they are founded on the most unjust prejudice against all the men of our race. What say you, Mr. Editor! Are you in favor of Colonization! If you are, my language is plain.

Hinesburg, Vt.  
L. Langley

## SLAVERY AND THE JUSTIFICATION OF WAR

In 1855, Loudon Langley housed a fugitive slave from the island of Cuba at his home in Hinesburg, Vermont. Cuba, a mere 90 miles off the coast of Florida, was still under the rule of the Spanish. The United States wanted to obtain Cuba and attempted several times to purchase the island from Spain. Each offer was refused. Many southern politicians saw the acquisition of Cuba as an opportunity to increase the number of slave-states. By the late 1850s and early 1860s, internal events commanded the undivided attention of the United States government. Consequently, the "Cuban Question" would not be resolved until the conclusion of the Spanish-American War.

*Green Mountain Freeman*  
Montpelier, Vermont  
8 February 1855

Mr. Editor: Allow me to relate, in the column of your paper, a story recently made to me by a gentleman named Phiseau. This gentleman was nineteen years a slave in the Island of Cuba, and came to this country in 1840. I am personally acquainted with him, and his statement can be relied upon, as an authentic account of the exertions of the U. S. Cabinet to court Spain, so as to gain her good will relative to the Cuba question, that the destiny of that fair Isle is similar to that of Hayti.

He said his business was to go from the city of Havanna to his master's farm in the country every morning to take care of the cattle and horses as well as the other animals at that place, also to bring into the city at night a quantity of coffee. After his arrival at the farm one day, he was informed by a friend that a meeting among the slaves was that day secretly to take place. He took one of his master's horses and went to the meeting. He said that there [were] two or three fellows present whom he suspected of being unfriendly to the cause, which prevented him from taking an active part in the affairs of the day. It was the unanimous voice of the meeting that they should designate some deserted part of the country, but in a convenient place, for digging either a great cellar or hole, for the purposes of secreting arms and gunpowder, and other utensils of war, preparatory to a rebellion. Each one that assisted in carrying arms to their magazine was, of course, instructed to convey them secretly, and without the knowledge of their most intimate friends. Unfortunately, for the meeting, the suspected persons, (slaves) to which I before alluded, proved fatal to their plans and preparations, and the plan which the meeting had advised to be adopted was prevented by the persons above mentioned; when, if permitted to succeed, all the Spanish power of arms, both in Europe and America, yea, and her allies too, could never have checked.

The above can, as I have before said, be relied upon as a fact, and an authentic account. Now I always entertained the conviction, even

before the above fact was communicated to me, that the Island of Cuba - that Queen of the Antilles and brightest jewel in the Castilian crown, is just as much destined to be the development of the black race as that Hayti (Hay-te) should be governed by them. In spite of all that has been said or done, or that can be, by those pirate expeditions, and in spite of all the vigilance, united, of England, France and the United States, Cuba is destined to the descendants of the children of Africa, and when the sign comes right, it will pass into their hands, and the Southern States and Europe will find it best to hold their peace.

Suppose you, my readers, that an equivocal number of colored men, that is, as the Lopez expedition,<sup>5</sup> should ever land on the shores of that fair Isle, how long do you think it would remain a dependency of Spain? I have given it as my opinion, that in less than two months the Island of Cuba would be in possession, and under the government, of those who they now hold in bondage, an institution of bondage, too, that half-civilized nations are becoming heartily ashamed of. Then away with that cruel prejudice against color, which the Whig and Democratic principles represented in the Baltimore platform, alone cultivate.<sup>6</sup>

Now, in case a rebellion should ever happen among the slaves of Cuba, as I am quite confident there will, I presume there are many who will be influenced by prejudice to condemn both the actions and movements of the blacks, on the same ground that we condemn the actions of the Haytians, in regard to the seizure of property, and the immensity of the seizure. But let us look at the facts, and just consider that war is war, and that peace is peace, and that it was no worse, nor so bad, for the Haytians to seize the property of their masters, and drive them into exile, in time of war, than it was for the latter to claim both the body and service of the former, in time of peace. I am no advocate of war, I mean an unjust war; and as bad as I hate war, I hate tyrants and tyranny worse. Yes, I go further, and I say, that every nation has a God-given right to rebel against any laws, unjust laws, that the tyrants may deem fit to make and enforce, on the grounds that they are acting without the approbation of their people, and the Higher Law, which commands us, as the Hon. Mr. Smith<sup>7</sup> said, "to do unto others as we would that others should do unto us," and who, but lunatics and insane persons, can say, justly say, but what he does? If any man of men can do so, let them speak.

I renew to you, Mr. Editor, the wish that this may appear in your columns.

Louden S. Langley  
Hinesburg, Jan., 1854

EQUAL TREATMENT

Firmly grounded as an abolitionist, Langley joined the Union army to fight

against the system of bondage that held four million blacks as slaves in the South. By the war's end 152 black men would serve for the state of Vermont. The first large group of fifty-two men was mustered into federal service in December, 1863. As there were not enough black men in the whole state to fill a regiment,<sup>8</sup> these men were assigned to the 54th Massachusetts Volunteer Infantry Regiment, already in service at the Sea Islands off the coast of Charleston, South Carolina. While white recruits were paid at the rate of \$13.00 per month, plus a clothing allowance of \$3.50, black men were paid only \$10.00 per month, with \$3.00 deducted for clothing. To add to the inequity, promised enlistment bonuses, or bounties, were denied the black recruits. Despite Vermont's long standing pride in being the first in the nation to abolish slavery by action of its state constitution, the needs of these sons of Vermont and their families were ignored. Even the promised additional pay of \$7.00 per month by the State Legislature was refused the men for a time.<sup>9</sup>

*The Weekly Anglo-African*  
New York  
30 January 1864

Park Barracks  
New York, Jan. 23, 1864

Mr. Editor: The members of the 54th Mass. (from Vt.), now stopping in one of the Park Barracks, have received, and duly appreciate, the copies of your valuable paper that you kindly sent them this p.m., and desire me to express to your their thanks for the same. The *Anglo-African* contains much information with reference to the existing U. S. Regulations for the enlistment of colored troops, which they had not seen in print. Nine-tenths of the boys had been informed by selectmen, who were very anxious to fill their town quotas, that the colored recruits received from the U. S. the same pay and bounty as the white recruits. The writer had warned and told all those who had been thus informed, that such was not the case; but the boys preferred to believe the misrepresentations with which the officers (either from ignorance or a love of falsehood) had filled their ears.

They had confidently expected to receive the seventy-five dollars that the U. S. pays their white recruits until a couple of hours before their departure, when we were ordered to "fall in," after which we were informed by Lieut. Phillips, the officer in charge of us, the real facts of the case.

The intelligence, as might have been expected, was received with (I am sorry to state it) much cursing and swearing, accompanied with the declaration that they never would have enlisted had they been truly

informed, and that they would not leave the camp until they had been paid the seventy-five dollars. The officers, apprehensive of more trouble, deemed it expedient to resort to more falsehood, so we were told that we would be paid as much as any recruits, and that our pay had been sent to our regimental headquarters, at which place we would be paid on our arrival there.

This course, it was alleged, was necessary, because we were going to a regiment from another State. This falsehood the boys believed and took courage, until to-day, when, with the aid of your paper, I have convinced them that what I had previously told them was true. I verily believe that but for the reconciling remarks of Lieut. Phillips, the boys (although having no arms) would have shown a spirited resistance to marching. Not only Capt. J. F. Brannan, but Maj. W. Austin[sic]<sup>10</sup> positively stated falsehoods with reference to our pay. But let the sin rest where it belongs on the U. S. government and not on its officers. The latter were between two fires, the honor of the State, and the requirements of the National government. Both must be preserved, and hence personal honor must be sacrificed.

The boys feel somewhat down-hearted, but hope for the best, and have *some* faith in the justice of Congress.

And now, Mr. Editor, I would ask what can, *what ought* to be thought of a government that asks, yea, even urges and *forces* men into its service, under a most horrid system of injustice, and thereby compelling its official agents to resort to falsehood, rather than be under the dire necessity of shedding the blood of its own soldiers, to enforce a compliance with its ungodly and cruel requirements? And, Mr. Editor, may we hope that Congress, for the sake of the *honor of the country*, and for the sake of the families of a portion of its able and true defenders, will soon remove this disgraceful distinction from the military statute of this great nation?

Louden S. Langley  
A Colored Vermont Recruit

Pay for the black soldiers was equalized to that of the whites in the summer of 1864, but not until after the humiliation of swearing an oath that they were not previously held as slaves prior to April 19, 1861. Not until 1865 did those black Union soldiers who were once slaves gain equal pay status.

Louden S. Langley wrote other accounts of battles for equality during his years of service. These letters were published in *The Burlington Free Press*<sup>11</sup> and *The Weekly Anglo-African*.<sup>12</sup>

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> To accept this promotion, Langley transferred from the 54th Massachusetts to the 33rd United States Colored Infantry. A regiment raised from the nucleus of the 1st South Carolina Volunteer Infantry Regiment, African Descent. This regiment had the distinction of being the very first "experiment" of using African-American soldiers in the eastern theater of operations.

<sup>2</sup> Both the 54th Massachusetts Regiment and the 33rd United States Colored Infantry were stationed in the Sea Islands off the coast from Charleston.

<sup>3</sup> Desired by whites.

<sup>4</sup> Reverend E. K. Converse was a Burlington minister and educator. As Secretary to the Colonization Society in Vermont, he wrote that colonization would rid the nation of poor and despised blacks, encourage slave owners to emancipate their slaves, and provide a nucleus of black clergy to spread the gospel to the "Dark Continent."

<sup>5</sup> Narciso Lopez was a Cuban soldier-of-fortune who led several unsuccessful invasion attempts using mercenary adventurers, known as "filibusters" (from the Spanish *filibustero*, meaning pirate). He raised the majority of his men from the New Orleans area where the Governor of Louisiana, John Quitman, supplied him with material and moral support. After a failed attempt in May, 1850, Lopez was put on trial for violation of the neutrality laws. Quitman threatened to use the state militia in preventing the arrest of Lopez by federal marshals. The government dropped the charges after it became clear that no southern jury would convict him.

Lopez attempted to invade Cuba again in 1851 but was captured by the Spanish and was publicly garroted. Fifty other American prisoners were executed including the son of the U. S. Attorney General John Crittenden.

<sup>6</sup> After the conclusion of the Mexican War, the Whig party was splintered along geographic boundaries. The northern or "Conscience Whigs" were anti-slavery, whereas the southern or "Cotton Whigs" were pro-slavery.

A temporary reconciliation occurred in 1850 when all sides rallied against secession while at the same time the party drafted for the 1852 election a platform taking no firm stance against slavery. By 1852, however, the split was irreconcilable. The Whig candidate, General Winfield Scott, lost by an overwhelming margin.

More inaction during the Kansas and Nebraska crises caused the party to completely dissolve into what are now Republican and Democratic parties.

<sup>7</sup> Believed to be referring to Joseph Smith, founder of the Mormon Church.

<sup>8</sup> An infantry regiment consisted of 1,000 men and officers. According to the census of 1860, there were but 709 African-American men, women and children in the entire state.

<sup>9</sup> In all fairness however, the State had money problems at the time and a few white troops were also not paid. Though lessening the taint of discrimination (when taken in context of the whole) this reality did not help the plight of the colored soldier.

<sup>10</sup> Major Austine was a regular army officer assigned to Vermont to recruit and muster new volunteer regiments. It was Austine who, in the November 11, 1863 edition of *The Rutland Herald* announced "that colored recruits may be received on the same terms as others and will be duly credited to the quota of the State, though placed to serve in the colored regiments raising in other states."

<sup>11</sup> "Letters from our soldiers," *Burlington Free Press*, 22 March 1864.

<sup>12</sup> Founded in 1859, *The Weekly Anglo-African* was published in New York City. It was the second most-read black newspaper in the United States. After the Emancipation Proclamation it encouraged black men to join the Union army and published many letters from battlefields and base camps alike. Its founder and publisher, Robert Hamilton, died in 1865, and the newspaper folded by the end of the year. Few issues have survived.