

## Nashoba: Frances Wright's Civilizing Mission

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Nashoba: Frances Wright's Civilizing Mission

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In Spring 1826 Frances Wright founded the Nashoba Community in order to advance human civilization in American society. Wright wanted Nashoba to civilize the country of America by eradicating the corrupt institution of slavery within its boundaries. To achieve this goal, the Nashoba Community would provide a model for the gradual abolition of slavery. At Nashoba slaves would labor to buy their freedom, while receiving an education, and then they would be removed from the country. By providing slaves – and their children – with an education, Wright hoped Nashoba would also develop African-Americans' civilization. Wright's civilizing mission at Nashoba had two targets – the country of America and the African-American people. But, this paper will focus on Wright's attempted civilization of her second target – African-Americans. Also, this paper will consider a group that Wright decided against targeting for civilization – Native Americans. This paper will include the story of the rise and fall of the Nashoba, investigating Wright's efforts to civilize African-Americans and her non-effort to civilize Native Americans within the community.

Although Wright designed Nashoba to give all the African-Americans there a civilizing education, she thought former slaves would forever remain uncivilized. Wright did not allow for the former slaves' integration into American society. Wright believed that slaves' descendants could be civilized and incorporated into American society. Because of this, she thought colonization could eventually be stopped. In the case of Native Americans, Wright thought that they were savages and they could not become civilized enough to be American citizens anytime soon. As a result, they had no place in her civilizing experiment at Nashoba – there was little hope for them. This brings me to my thesis: The Nashoba Community was Frances Wright's experiment in civilizing African-Americans, but she thought only future generations of African-Americans could become civilized, which meant as Nashoba went on the slaves were treated

more and more paternalistically - their generation was very uncivilized - and Wright did not allow for their incorporation into American society; Native Americans could not be civilized so Wright did not include them.

Using the theme of civilization, we can begin to understand why Wright excluded Native Americans from Nashoba and why Nashoba treated black slaves the way it did. In 19<sup>th</sup> century Euro-American culture – Wright’s historical context – the dominant ideology of civilization was used by whites to understand themselves in relation to “The Other” – whether that was Native Americans or African-Americans. In his book *Education for Extinction* David Wallace Adams explained how the concept of civilization informed whites’ thinking about themselves and Native Americans. He wrote, “The word was civilization. European and American societies were civilized; Indians, on the other hand, were savages.”<sup>1</sup> The civilization tradition served to a) explain Native Americans’ difference and b) to place whites on a higher level than Native Americans. Adams’ summary of the idea of civilization within the context of 19<sup>th</sup> century America is especially informative:

The basic idea was that all societies could be classified on a scale marking the various stages of man’s evolution from savagism to civilization... The idea of civilization embodied within itself one of the most cherished ideas of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the idea of progress. History, from this perspective, was largely the story of man’s progressive evolution toward civilized perfection. This progression was both inevitable and desirable, for civilization,..., gave expression to man’s noblest sentiments.<sup>2</sup>

In summary, the ideology of civilization espoused the colonialist narrative that humans’ advancement from savageness to civilization through history was a positive development.

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<sup>1</sup> David Wallace Adams, *Education for Extinction: American Indians and the Boarding School Experience* (Lawrence, Kansas: University of Kansas Press, 1995), 12.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid*, 13.

According to the civilization tradition, civilized, white societies represented the height of human progress, while other societies remained stuck in the uncivilized past. Though Adams focused on the civilization narrative's impact on white folks thinking about Native Americans, it also informed their reflections on African-Americans. In contrast to civilized, white American and European societies, African-Americans were also uncivilized. And, this civilization tradition had a real world impact through white reformers' actions toward Native Americans and African-Americans. In the case of white Americans' attempts to civilize Native Americans through education, Adams argued that the idea of civilization "was prescriptive. It told philanthropists what Indians must become...to what end they should be educated."<sup>3</sup> Wright did not try to educate Native Americans – she considered them a lost cause – but she hoped that over time they would become civilized. Wright did try to educate African-Americans though and the ideology of civilization provided the cure for their affliction – becoming civilized.

During the "old anti-slavery movement" groups supported gradual emancipation and the education of African-Americans. Take for example the New York Manumission Society, which was "among the largest and most important anti-slavery groups in this period, and its approaches in the black community were often emulated elsewhere."<sup>4</sup> The New York Manumission Society founded the African Free School in 1787 for "The education of blacks seemingly ill equipped for the ordeal of freedom and the responsibilities...of a well-defined social order. Society felt that slavery often left blacks with an incomplete cultural identity, and easy prey for the immorality and criminal tendencies they associated with the class position of the former slaves."<sup>5</sup> Although

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<sup>3</sup> Adams, *Education for Extinction*, 12.

<sup>4</sup> John L. Rury, "Philanthropy, Self Help, and Social Control: The New York Manumission Society and Free Blacks, 1785-1810," *Phylon* 46 (1985): 231.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid*, 231.

the New York Manumission Society's reasoning for educating did not explicitly rely on the civilization ideology – it had deep undercurrents of it. They thought educating African-Americans was necessary for their integration into mainstream American society. African-Americans needed to be taught how to responsibly use their freedoms so that they did not resort to criminality. Like the reformers dealing with Native Americans, the New York Manumission Society was trying to use education to mold African-Americans in the image of civilized, white Americans. The “old anti-slavery movement” was before Wright's time, but she clearly shared a lot of its ideals. And thus, Wright was not super progressive on the issue of slavery – the Nashoba Community was a moderate solution to the problem of slavery. By analyzing the Nashoba Project as Wright's civilizing mission we can better understand her lack of dealings with Native Americans and her management of African-Americans.

Using the theme of civilization to analyze how Wright tried to reform America would probably be less informative. There was consensus that white American and European societies were civilized and that other societies were uncivilized. But, people disagreed about what progress for these civilized nations looked like. What made a society civilized was vague itself. Back then a lot of people thought Christianity made Western society civilized, but Wright abhorred religion and thought it prevented human progress. In her autobiography Wright wrote about Shaker communities, “Christian fanaticism and subjection were the means employed to stultify the intelligence and hold the physical man submitted to the will of others.”<sup>6</sup> In order to analyze Wright's attempted reformation of the country of America you would most likely need a more specific theme. For example, in her 2004 thesis Renee Stowitzky used the theme of

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<sup>6</sup> Frances Wright D'Arusmont, *Life, Letters and Lectures 1834/1844* (New York: Arno Press, 1972), 26.

freedom to understand all the different ways Wright tried to improve American society.

Therefore, I will just use the idea of civilization to understand Wright's thinking about and actions toward Native Americans and African-Americans.

This concludes the introduction of this paper so I am now going to provide a brief roadmap for how the rest of this paper will go. The first part this paper will provide an account of Wright's childhood background. The second part of this paper will explore Wright's pre-Nashoba views of White Americans, Native Americans, and African-Americans. I will give an account of why Wright thought white America was the most advanced civilization in human history. I will then contrast this view with Wright's belief that Native Americans were "savages." Finally, I will explore what Wright thought should be done to redress this. Next, I will discuss Wright's view that African-Americans were uncivilized and what she proposed to do about this. The third section of this paper will investigate Wright's plans for Nashoba. It will also consider how her earlier views influenced her blueprint for the community. The fourth section of this paper will survey the actual community and what transpired there. It will look at Wright's exclusion of Native Americans. Then, it will scrutinize Wright's treatment of African-Americans at Nashoba. The fifth section will examine the downfall of the Nashoba community. It will inspect what went wrong there. The final section will be conclusions.

By examining Frances Wright's early life, we can see some of the influences that would eventually lead her to found Nashoba to civilize black slaves. By the age of two both of Wright's parents had died. But, James Wright – her father – had been a reformer and Frances Wright would grow up to share some of his liberal views. Growing up in London, Wright

received a classical education.<sup>7</sup> As a child Wright was obsessed with reading in her pursuit of “Truth.” Wright strongly desired to learn the “Truth” about morality and social organization.<sup>8</sup> In her autobiography Wright remembered that also “her sympathies were powerfully drawn toward the suffering of humanity.”<sup>9</sup> Then, at sixteen Wright discovered America – a country where the “True” way to organize a society had been discovered and social ills had been cured. In her autobiography Wright recalled, “From that moment she awoke, as it were, to a new existence...There existed a country consecrated to freedom, and in which man might awake to the full knowledge and full exercise of his powers.”<sup>10</sup> So, as a teenager Wright came to the conclusion that America was the future of human progress.

At the tail end of her childhood Wright went to stay with her Uncle James Mylne - the Chair of Moral Philosophy at the University of Glasgow. There, Wright picked up beliefs in democracy and utilitarianism and a strong disliking for the slave trade and capitalism – lifelong views of hers.<sup>11</sup> She was influenced by the intellectual current of “philosophic radicalism,” which reflected American Revolutionary-era ideals.<sup>12</sup> So, from Wright’s childhood we can see some ideas that would become important in her Nashoba experiment – her belief in American civilization, anti-slavery leanings, and her desire to help the oppressed.

In 1818 Wright set off to see the great civilization of America for herself. In her *Views of Society and Manners in America*, a book made up of letters from her 1818-1820 visit, Wright

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<sup>7</sup> John Egerton, *Visions of Utopia: Nashoba, Rugby, Ruskin and the “New Communities” in Tennessee’s Past* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1977), 14.

<sup>8</sup> D’Arusmont, *Life, Letters and Lectures 1834/1844*, 12.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid*, 10.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid*, 11.

<sup>11</sup> Celia Morris Eckhardt, *Fanny Wright: Rebel in America* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1984), 13-14.

<sup>12</sup> Gail Bederman, “Revisiting Nashoba: Slavery, Utopia, and Frances Wright in America, 1818-1826,” *American Literary History* 17, no. 3 (2005): 438-440



had much praise for American society. Through an analysis of these writings we can see how Wright's experience of America led her to conclude that America was truly the height of human civilization. She wrote of Americans "With arms in their hands respecting the voice of a government which their breath created and which their breath could in a moment destroy! There is something truly grand in this moral restraint, freely imposed by a community on itself." She believed that American democracy "gave expression to man's noblest sentiments." The American people exercised their intellectual, moral, and political capabilities through their participation in American democracy. Clearly, Wright admired the self-discipline Americans exhibited in the use of their political freedoms. Additionally, Wright was impressed by how well-educated Americans were, commenting upon "the universal spread of useful and practical knowledge."<sup>13</sup> In her autobiography Wright recalled that these observations of America led her to conclude that it was "the country in which human progress was rendered at once safe and certain by the nature of its institutions, and the condition and character of its people."<sup>14</sup> And thus, the American people's capacity for intellectuality, morality, and political involvement – proven by their maintenance of democracy – made their society the most advanced on the planet.

In contrast to white, civilized Americans, Wright thought Native Americans were brutal "savages." She wrote that "savage" Native Americans held "A lower place in creation than men, who, to the proud spirit of independence, unite the softer feelings that spring only within the pale of civilized life."<sup>15</sup> Clearly, Wright made sense of Native Americans using the civilization narrative. As a result, Wright concluded that Native Americans were uncultured brutes

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<sup>13</sup> Frances Wright D'Arusmont, *Views of Society and Manners in America* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1963), 64.

<sup>14</sup> D'Arusmont, *Life, Letters and Lectures 1834/1844*, 20.

<sup>15</sup> D'Arusmont, *Views of Society and Manners in America*, 106.

incapable of deep human emotion. In addition to being unfeeling, Wright thought that Native Americans were ignorant. She wrote, “Filth and sloth are in their cabins, sometimes superstition, but very rarely knowledge, in their minds.”<sup>16</sup> She went on to say, “The increase and spread of the white population at the expense of the red is, . . . , the triumph of peace over violence.”<sup>17</sup> So, not only were Native Americans uncultivated, they were violent. Wright blamed the Native Americans for the violence between them and white Americans. Native Americans were a remnant of the vicious past, while white Americans embodied hope for a more peaceful future. Compared to civilized, white Americans – enlightened and moral – Wright thought Native Americans were heartless, unintelligent, and dangerous – a threat to modern society.

Wright thought Native Americans would go extinct before they ever became civilized enough to participate in American democracy and she was okay with this. Wright callously referred to Native Americans as “a wasting remnant that must soon disappear with the receding forest.”<sup>18</sup> She thought Native Americans were bound to “exist only in traditionary lore or in the wild tale of some wild genius.”<sup>19</sup> She believed that white American’s continued growth at the expense of Native Americans’ existence was net beneficial – it was the advance of civilization cleansing the country of savageness. Wright blamed Native Americans’ circumstances for this – not their race. Wright thought it possible that Native Americans could assimilate into civilized American culture way down the road. Wright explained, The savage is not brought within the pale of civilized life in a day, nor a year, nor a generation: ages are required to mold him by imperceptible degrees.”<sup>20</sup> This was highly unlikely though. Wright used evidence to back up

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<sup>16</sup> D’Arusmont, *Views of Society and Manners in America*, 110.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid*, 106.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid*.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid*, 113.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid*, 111.

her point; she argued, “It is invariably seen that the savage when removed into the centre of a civilized world acquires a taste for the coarser indulgences that he finds within his reach, before he can be taught to engage in irksome employments that promise only moderate and future good. Industry and temperance are virtues of calculation, and the savage is unused to calculate.”<sup>21</sup> To Wright, Native Americans were simply too savage to integrate into civilized America – this was empirically true. She wrote, “With scarcely an exception, the Indian, on emerging from the savage state, sinks, instead of rising in the scale of being.”<sup>22</sup> Thus, Native Americans were not self-disciplined enough to responsibly exercise their freedoms. Although Wright gave a harsh assessment of Native Americans and their fate, she professed to care for them. Wright confessed, “The position of the Indian youth, as an alien and an orphan, among his American guardians and playmates strikes me as singularly affecting.”<sup>23</sup> Though Wright may have been sympathetic to the plight of Native Americans, she thought their race would die out before it became civilized. Clearly, the civilization narrative had Wright convinced that Native Americans’ demise was both inevitable and desirable.

On the scale of civilization Wright thought that black slaves were somewhere in between white Americans and Native Americans. As a result, she believed that black slaves were uncivilized and unfit for American society, but she had hope that future generations of African-Americans more removed from slavery could join America’s democracy. During Wright’s trip to America she saw free African-Americans in the south and commented, “It is undoubtedly true that the free negroes of Maryland and Virginia form the most wretched and consequently the most vicious portion of the black population. The most casual observation is sufficient to satisfy

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<sup>21</sup> D’Arusmont, *Views of Society and Manners in America*, 112.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid*, 110.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid*, 112.

a stranger of the truth of this statement.”<sup>24</sup> Wright thought African-Americans were unsophisticated not because of their race, but because of the history of slavery in America. She explained, “the European of a less humane age degraded the African below the human standard.”<sup>25</sup> When compared to white Americans, Wright thought African-Americans were less developed beings. First African-Americans’ intellectual capabilities were not as advanced as white Americans. Wright explained that whites had “laid the benumbing hand of oppression on” the African-American man’s “intellect.”<sup>26</sup> Second, in contrast to virtuous white Americans, African-Americans were unscrupulous. Wright wrote that African-Americans were not “compared with the American population, a moral people.”<sup>27</sup> She specifically criticized African-Americans’ “indolence and thoughtless forgetfulness of the morrow.”<sup>28</sup> Wright thought African-Americans were lazy and undisciplined. She explained, “It is always thus that man, emerging from the savage or the slavish state, seizes on the indulgencies and the tinsel of luxury, before he discovers the value of those higher enjoyments, derived from the acquirement of knowledge and the cultivation of refined and elevated sentiment.”<sup>29</sup> Slavery had made African-Americans unenlightened and unruly. As a result, they obsessed over their pursuit of their ignoble desires. Strike three for African-Americans was their lack of political involvement. Wright argued that historically African-Americans’ “political ambition” had “been usually found deficient.”<sup>30</sup> But, she explained that African-Americans’ “minds can, as yet, scarcely feel the value or understand the meaning” of their political rights. So, Wright found African-Americans deficient in the three

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<sup>24</sup> D’Arusmont, *Views of Society and Manners in America*, 268.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 43.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, 44.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*

categories that where civilized white excelled – intellect, morals, and politics. Therefore, Wright concluded that African-Americans were unequipped for participation in American democracy.

But, because African-Americans were just uncivilized – not “savages” like the Native Americans – Wright thought they could engage in American democracy much sooner. Wright saw them becoming proper democratic citizens in the future. She explained that the African-American “may, in time, be rendered a useful member of society.”<sup>31</sup> As proof, Wright cited examples of free African-Americans who had “risen to considerable wealth and respectability, particularly, . . . , in the New England states.”<sup>32</sup> But, Wright was unsure how long it would take African-Americans as a whole to become civilized. While some African-Americans in the North did well, the “condition” of African-Americans in the South was deplorable.<sup>33</sup> The main reason for this was former slaves’ inability to handle freedom. Wright argued, “To their untutored minds, the gift of freedom is only a release from labour. Poor, ignorant, and lazy, it is impossible that they should not be soon vicious.”<sup>34</sup> So, the freed slaves in the South faltered because they thought freedom meant they did not have to work. But, Wright knew that African-Americans could become civilized based on success stories in the North. From this, Wright concluded that because of their enslavement slaves could not just be freed.

To be clear, in the cases of both Native Americans and African-Americans Wright thought their inferiority to white Americans stemmed from their worldly circumstances – not race. As a result, she thought that under the right conditions Native Americans and African-Americans could eventually rise to the level of the white man. Wright thought education would

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<sup>31</sup> D’Arusmont, *Views of Society and Manners in America*, 268.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid*, 44.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid*.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid*, 269.

be instrumental in this pursuit. Wright did not consider educating Native Americans. But, in the case of African-Americans Wright said, “Were the whole race emancipated, their education would necessarily become a national object.”<sup>35</sup> Education offered slaves a way to advance toward becoming civilized. Gail Bederman summarized Wright’s views on the subject, “Perhaps generations of benevolent education would uplift the negroes in the United States. Perhaps not.”<sup>36</sup> Wright believed that African-Americans could reach the level of white Americans and education could help, but even with education’s assistance, she thought this would take time.

After her 1818-1820 visit to America, Frances Wright and her sister returned to Europe for a few years. Then, in September 1824 the Wright sisters returned to America to join Marquis de Lafayette – who had gotten to know Frances after her book was published. During Wright’s second trip to America she became obsessed with slavery and its degradation of African-Americans. In a letter written in October of 1824 from Richmond, Virginia, Wright explained how her mind would “ever wander” from the “pleasing and polished society” by “contrasting the condition of the proud and accomplished master with that of the debased and injured slave.”<sup>37</sup> In the same letter she confessed of slavery that: “...I cannot write on this subject, and yet it preys so continually on my mind that I find it difficult to write on any other...”<sup>38</sup> Clearly, slavery really weighed upon Wright’s conscious. She worried about the harm that the institution inflicted on slaves’ psyche.

Then, In the fall of 1825 Frances Wright published *A Plan for the Gradual Abolition of Slavery in the United States Without Danger or Loss to Citizens of the South*. Wright’s “Plan”

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<sup>35</sup> D’Arusmont, *Views of Society and Manners in America*, 269.

<sup>36</sup> Bederman, “Revisiting Nashoba,” 443.

<sup>37</sup> Cecilia Helena Payne and Julia Garnett Pertz and Frances Wright, *The Garnett Letters* (Payne-Gaposchkin, 1979), 21.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*

called for the creation of a model farm where slaves would work to buy their freedom, with the help of united labor. That summer Wright had visited Robert Owen's utopian community New Harmony and thought that "there was something in the system of united labor, as there in operation, which might be rendered subservient to the emancipation of the south."<sup>39</sup> Wright drafted the "Plan" because of the "immensity of the evil" of slavery and because she believed that down the road it could lead to "disunion, bloodshed, [and] servile wars of extermination."<sup>40</sup> Wright created her "Plan" because she wanted to preserve civilized America and improve it, but also to civilize African-Americans. Wright's "Plan" called for the education of black slaves. Wright explained that "the parents will be gradually brought to understand, in weekly evening meetings, the object of the establishment and taught orally (in simple language) the necessity of industry, first for the procuring of liberty, and afterwards the value of industry when liberty shall be procured."<sup>41</sup> Wright planned to teach the adult slaves the purpose of the community in order to further it. She also wanted to teach them about the importance of working hard in pursuit of their liberty and continuing to do so once they had earned it. Here it is clear that Wright was trying to use education to remedy the laziness of African-Americans that she was worried about. Wright regulated their behavior to ensure that it conformed to the standards of mainstream America. She even threatened punishment for slaves that failed to comply with her standards of conduct. She wrote that "Any deficiency of exertions, or other misconduct, may also be explained to them as charged to their account, and binding them to a further term of service."<sup>42</sup>

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<sup>39</sup>Cecilia Helena Payne and Julia Garnett Pertz and Frances Wright, *The Garnett Letters* (Payne-Gaposchkin, 1979), 40.

<sup>40</sup> Frances Wright, "A Plan for the Gradual Abolition of Slavery in the United States Without Danger or Loss to Citizens of the South," *Genius of Universal Emancipation*, June 8, 1825, 8.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid*, 7.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid*, 8.

Obviously Wright was serious about slaves adhering to her and white America's code of conduct. She was trying to fix what she thought of as their bad tendencies and make them proper members of American society. In reality, she was trying to mold them to fit in white American culture. However, Wright's "Plan" called for their colonization once they had received an education and earned their freedom.

Though her community was supposed to prepare slaves for white America, it would remove them from the country once they became free. This was because the first generation, at least, would not be civilized enough to join American society. But, Wright hoped that slaves would not have to continue to be colonized. She wrote that "It must be remembered, also, that with the same facility that the door of colonization is opened, so also can it be closed. Whenever and wherever the improved system of black labor shall appear of value, it may be continued by retaining (on the footing perhaps of tenants, removable at will) as many, and no more, than the property can employ."<sup>43</sup> She reminded the people reading her "Plan" that slaves could easily stay in America. They could provide much needed labor on former slave plantations in the South. At first the Nashoba community would have to colonize free slaves because of their low condition, but over time as they progressed they might be able to join Americans society. The "Plan" explained how Wright would help African-Americans by trying to civilize them so that they could eventually participate in American democracy.

Colonization lined up with Frances Wright's beliefs about civilization, but the main reason she included it in her plan was to earn public support for her "Plan." The previous year Wright had visited Monticello to see Thomas Jefferson – one of her heroes.<sup>44</sup> In a November 12,

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<sup>43</sup> Wright, "A Plan for the Gradual Abolition of Slavery in the United States," 8.

<sup>44</sup> Eckhardt, *Fanny Wright: Rebel in America*, 84.



1824 letter from Monticello, Wright wrote that: “The prejudice...against a mixture of the two colors is so deeply rooted in the American mind that emancipation without expatriation...seems impossible.”<sup>45</sup> Based on this, it seems that Jefferson convinced Wright of the necessity of colonizing freed slaves white Americans’ prejudices prevented the integration of freed slaves into American society. If colonization was not a part of Wright’s “Plan,” then it would have been much less appealing to the public.

With her “Plan” done, Wright began to take steps toward the its realization. In the fall of 1825 Frances Wright rode to Tennessee to begin her experiment in gradual emancipation. George Flower – a “Quaker abolitionist” and her partner in the endeavor – accompanied Wright on her journey.<sup>46</sup> Andrew Jackson took Wright and Flower to cheap, available land in West Tennessee. The land had just opened up with the government’s removal of Native Americans from it. Before it had been “the hunting grounds of the Chickasaw Indians.”<sup>47</sup> With Jackson’s help Wright bought 300 acres of the land in October 1825 from John Overton. She would go on to buy 2000 acres of the land located fifteen miles outside of Memphis along the Wolf River.<sup>48</sup>

Wright’s understanding of Native Americans according to the civilization narrative justified her taking advantage of the sale of Native Americans’ stolen lands for cheap. She believed Native Americans were left over from the savage past and that civilized whites’ taking over of their lands was human progress. And therefore, Wright’s purchase of the land taken from Native Americans did not keep her up at night. In fact, “There is no evidence Wright

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<sup>45</sup> Payne and Pertz and Wright, *The Garnett Letters*, 30.

<sup>46</sup> Lane, Margaret, *Frances Wright and the ‘Great Experiment’* (Totowa N.J.: Rowman and Littlefield, 1972), 21.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid.

<sup>48</sup> Egerton, *Visions of Utopia: Nashoba, Rugby, Ruskin and the “New Communities,”* 21.

herself thought much about its previous owner.”<sup>49</sup> The concept of civilization “served as a legitimizing rationale for the hegemonic relationship that had come to characterize Indian-white relations. In this connection, it served as a compelling justification for dispossessing Indians of their land.”<sup>50</sup> In this part of the Nashoba story the “colonialist nature of Wright’s project becomes most visible.”<sup>51</sup> Wright used her philosophy of civilization to justify her imperialist take-over of land just hijacked from Native Americans.

After acquiring land, Wright next purchased eight slaves from Nashville – “Willis, Jacob, Grandison, Redick, Henry, Nelly, Peggy, and Kitty.”<sup>52</sup> Then, Robert Wilson, a man from South Carolina, who had been left slaves, but did not want them, brought down seven women to Nashoba.<sup>53</sup> With these slaves’ arrival in Spring 1826, the Nashoba Community officially kicked off. In the beginning Wright and Flower struck found the balance between giving the slaves freedom and teaching them American values in the “Plan.” Of course, the slaves had to complete the “grueling task of bringing the uncleared, untilled, acres into cultivation in time to produce the necessary crops for the autumn market.”<sup>54</sup> But, they also had “Sunday evening classes and built a room large enough so the blacks could dance twice a week.”<sup>55</sup> Early on Wright saw her civilizing project succeeding in the South Carolina slaves. When they came to Nashoba Wright remarked that they were “lazy.”<sup>56</sup> But, after a few formative months in the community, they were laboring “cheerfully and steadily.”<sup>57</sup> The South Carolina slaves took care

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<sup>49</sup> Bederman, “Revisiting Nashoba,” 449.

<sup>50</sup> Adams, *Education for Extinction*, 12.

<sup>51</sup> Bederman, “Revisiting Nashoba,” 449.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*, 450.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>54</sup> Perkins and Wolfson, *Frances Wright: Free Enquirer*, 146.

<sup>55</sup> Eckhardt, *Fanny Wright: Rebel in America*, 120.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*

of Nashoba's washing and sewing. They also labored in the fields, "rolling logs and clearing swamp and bush in the burning sun."<sup>58</sup> In addition to giving them a new work ethic, Wright thought Nashoba had made the South Carolina slaves more well behaved. At first, Wright complained of their "bad habits that slavery typically bred—lying, petty thievery, quarreling, and 'among each other...the use of abusive language.'"<sup>59</sup> But, as time passed Wright saw their reformation. Based on this, Wright concluded, "we can carry gradually all our views into effect for their employment, comfort, and instruction."<sup>60</sup> The community was succeeding in instilling a good work ethic and morals in the South Carolina slaves. And, as a whole the community successfully managed to construct the buildings necessary for life there and clear enough acres for an apple orchard, corn, and cotton.<sup>61</sup> With the successful improvement of slaves, building of cabins, and farming, Wright's civilizing project was off to a promising start.

At the start of Nashoba, Wright and Flower used a hands off approach with the black slaves. Limiting their control over the slaves, Flower and Wright hoped that they would become responsible persons largely on their own. As a result of this philosophy, "they did not use the lash, nor did they intimidate the slaves with an overseer's presence."<sup>62</sup> According to George Flower, the white members of Nashoba advised the slaves on their work, but for the most part they tried to leave them alone. Wright and Flower hoped for "habitual industry voluntarily arising amongst the people themselves, induced by advice and example."<sup>63</sup> So, they also tried to guide the slaves to becoming self-disciplined by leading by example. Using these tactics, Wright

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<sup>58</sup> Lane, *Frances Wright and the 'Great Experiment'*, 22.

<sup>59</sup> Eckhardt, *Fanny Wright: Rebel in America*, 120.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid*, 121.

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid*, 120.

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid*, 121.

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid*.

and Flower tried to remedy slaves' "laziness" and remake them into hard workers. More than influencing slaves' work ethic, Wright and Flower were trying to shape them into self-motivated, responsible individuals ready for freedom. Flower explained, "By slackening the hand of authority over them, until it is totally withdrawn, it is believed that they will not only be well disposed and industrious, but prudently managing and wise."<sup>64</sup> Flower and Wright were the chaperones of the slaves' journey of growing into model citizens. When the slaves strayed from the right path, Wright and Flower corrected them. They did this with non-physical punishment, which they only had to use once during Nashoba's beginnings. Wright wrote that it was a "bad case of theft, malice, and obduracy in one of the Nashville girls." First, Wright and Flower tried to reason with her, but failed. Next, they resorted to isolating her, giving her only bread and water. After this, "her obduracy gave way and we were enabled to release her," Wright recalled.<sup>65</sup> Though Wright and Flower tried to avoid punishing the slaves, they would if they had to. Wright and Flower were trying to civilize the slaves, and thus they felt compelled to disincentivize slaves' uncivilized behavior. Therefore, Wright used her civilizing mission to justify reprimanding the slaves. In its beginnings, Wright and Flower tried to lead the slaves to responsible personhood by mainly leaving them alone, but also by leading by example, advising them, and punishing them if they had to. Wright's civilizing mission okayed this benevolent paternalism at Nashoba, which was less harsh than a slave plantation.

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<sup>64</sup> Eckhardt, *Fanny Wright: Rebel in America*, 121.

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*

Although the Nashoba community started off well, it soon fell on hard times. In July of 1826 Frances Wright became seriously ill and had to leave for New Harmony. Then, George Flower left Nashoba for good, which would hurt the community's chance for success going forward. Flower was the one in charge of running the farm and directing the slaves' work – Nashoba needed his expertise. These problems arose from “the laborious and demanding work the punishing climate, and the sobering realization that making a utopia is infinitely more complex than imagining one.”<sup>66</sup> But, not one to give up easy, Frances Wright kept pushing forward.

Her serious illness bringing her face to face with her mortality, Wright wrote a “trust deed” for Nashoba in December of 1826. She created a board of trustees so Nashoba could continue without her, if it had to. In her “trust deed” Wright confirmed that the purpose of the community was still “for the benefit of the negro race.”<sup>67</sup> However, Wright's “trust deed” opened up Nashoba to white folks. Wright wrote that Nashoba was “founded on the principle of community of property and labour; presenting every advantage to those desirous, not of accumulating money, but of enjoying life, and rendering services to their fellow creatures; these fellow creatures, that is the blacks here admitted, requiting these services by services equal or greater, by filling occupations which their habits render easy, and which, to their guides and assistants, might be difficult or displeasing.” So, now white people could come to Nashoba to enjoy communal life and aid the black slaves. And, they would not have to manual labor. The black slaves' “habits render[ed] easy” was the intense physical labor required to maintain the

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<sup>66</sup> Egerton, *Visions of Utopia: Nashoba, Rugby, Ruskin and the “New Communities,”* 22.

<sup>67</sup> Frances Wright, “Deeds of the Lands of Nashoba, West Tennessee,” *The Oriental Herald and Colonial Review* (1824-29): 240, <https://play.google.com/books/reader?id=ohxUAAAACAAJ&printsec=frontcover&output=reader&hl=en&pg=GBS.PA240>

farm. In Wright's own words, the community would "continue to impose the harder tasks of labor...upon the present generation of slaves."<sup>68</sup> For whites the upkeep of the farm "might be difficult or unpleasing," so they were excused from it. Wright described the whites as "guides and assistants" indicating their removal from the slaves' manual labor. New whites at Nashoba would assist with the civilization of the slaves. But, Wright contended, "No life of idleness, however is proposed to the whites."<sup>69</sup> However, her next sentence was, "Those who cannot work, must give an equivalent in property."<sup>70</sup> Therefore, whites could actually pay money to avoid work. This "led to the creation of a non-laboring group of whites and to the concomitant emergence of a class structure in which...particularly those who were still slaves, were at the bottom."<sup>71</sup> Wright thought whites needed to grow more civilized by becoming independent of slave labor; however, whites could remain idle and live off black slaves' labor at Nashoba. The civilization of black slaves must have been more pressing. After all, the whites were already civilized, while the black slaves were uncivilized. Wright explained, "Gardening or other cultivation of the soil; useful trades practiced in the society, or taught in the school; the teaching of every branch of knowledge; tending the children; and nursing the sick—will present a choice of employments sufficiently extensive" for white folks at Nashoba.<sup>72</sup> If whites chose to work at Nashoba, then they had numerous options for employment. For example, they could school the children at Nashoba – an option unavailable to the black slaves. And thus, in contrast to the free whites – given the freedom to decide what they did at Nashoba – the black slaves – retaining the

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<sup>68</sup> Wright, "Deeds of the Lands of Nashoba, West Tennessee," 242.

<sup>69</sup> *Ibid.*, 243.

<sup>70</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>71</sup> William H. Pease and Jane H. Pease, "A New View of Nashoba," *Tennessee Historical Quarterly* 19, no. 2 (June, 1960): 105, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/42621476>.

<sup>72</sup> Wright, "Deeds of the Lands of Nashoba, West Tennessee," 243.

status of property – were forced to continue doing the manual labor required for the maintenance of the community.

Wright also used her “deed trust” as a platform for criticizing colonization and emancipation societies for their neglecting of the importance of civilizing black slaves so they could become productive members of American society. Wright attacked colonization societies for propping up the institution of slavery by removing unwanted slaves. She denounced emancipation societies for wanting slaves’ freedom before they were educated, “In the members of the emancipation societies...I conceive their views, respecting the moral instruction of human beings to differ essentially from my own. This moral instruction I hold to be of greater importance than the simple enfranchisement from bodily slavery; inasmuch as the liberty of the mind, and the just training of the thoughts and feelings, can alone constitute a free man, and a useful member of society.”<sup>73</sup> Because of their uncivilized minds slaves could not properly exploit their freedom. Therefore, Wright demanded that slaves receive “moral instruction.” Whether or not she knew it, Wright was advocating for remaking the black slaves in the image of white Americans. Though Wright was trying to help the slaves, she was imposing white America’s values upon them. Wright’s “deed trust” offers a great look into the theory behind Wright’s treatment of black slaves – they had to be civilized – taught American character – before they joined society.

In May 1827 Frances Wright fell ill yet again, but this time she travelled to Europe to recover her health and also fundraise for Nashoba. But, during Wright’s absence the Nashoba Community would fall to pieces. The public would learn of the white Nashoba trustees’

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<sup>73</sup> Wright, “Deeds of the Lands of Nashoba, West Tennessee,” 242.

transgressions against the black slaves there. Without Wright to run the community peacefully, the white Nashoba trustees threw it into chaos.

On July 28, 1827 James Richardson's logs of the Nashoba Community were published in the *Genius of Universal Emancipation*. First, Richardson's logs provided incontrovertible evidence of harsh actions against the black slaves – contradicting the community's founding principles. He noted, "Two women slaves tied up and flogged by James Richardson in the presence of Camilla and all the slaves. Two dozen and one dozen on bare back with a cowskin."<sup>74</sup> Using the lash, the white Nashoba trustees replicated the brutal realities of the plantation life for the black slaves at Nashoba. Richardson also wrote, "The slaves shall not be allowed to receive money, clothing, food, or indeed anything whatever from any person resident at, or visiting this place...the slaves shall not be permitted to eat elsewhere than at public meals."<sup>75</sup> Thus, the white Nashoba trustees had stripped the black slaves of all the freedoms they had previously enjoyed. In contrast to their earlier hands off approach, the white Nashoba trustees now aggressively controlled the black slaves. In his journal, Richardson recalled, "Dilly having given utterance a day or two ago, to some grumbling at having so many mistresses, James Richardson stated to them, that it is very true they have many mistresses as well as many masters, and that in all probability, they will soon have many more of both; as every free person who shall reside here whether black, white, or brown, will be, in some sort, their master or mistress; that this is just the difference between a free person and a slave."<sup>76</sup> Instead of downplaying the difference in status between the free individuals at Nashoba and the black slaves, the white Nashoba trustees now emphasized it. Understandably, the black slaves were

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<sup>74</sup> Egerton, *Visions of Utopia: Nashoba, Rugby, Ruskin and the "New Communities,"* 24.

<sup>75</sup> Ibid.

<sup>76</sup> Ibid, 25.



upset by the white Nashoba trustees' exercise of authoritarian control over them. In this case, Dilly complained about having to answer to so many different people. On top of this, the white Nashoba trustees took the slaves' children away from them. Richardson wrote, "Reprimanded Willis for having tried to interfere between Lolotte and one of his own children."<sup>77</sup> Obviously, the slaves were angry about losing custody of their children. In this instance, Willis tried to care for his child, for which the white Nashoba trustees punished him. Using speeches, the white Nashoba trustees justified their severe management to both themselves and the slaves – they were civilizing them. Clearly, during Wright's absence, the white Nashoba trustees acted contrary to her original intent. Instead of readying the black slaves for freedom by giving them a certain degree of autonomy, the white Nashoba trustees inflicted their dominance on them. From Nashoba's conception it contained within it inherent tensions. First, Wright was trying to give the black slaves a measure of freedom to prepare them independence. But, the black slaves remained property. Additionally, Wright was trying to change them into responsible American citizens. And thus, within Wright's idea for Nashoba there was an implicit struggle between freeing the slaves and controlling them. Evidently, the white Nashoba trustees went overboard – rigorously controlling the black slaves to shape them into proper civilized persons – effectively ransacking the slaves' freedoms.

Although Wright was not there for the white Nashoba trustees' looting of the slaves' freedoms, she was complicit in it. First, Wright was present when the trustees "agreed that slaves who neglected their duty would be treated 'according to the slave system.'"<sup>78</sup> Although Wright probably did not anticipate how far Richardson would take this, she sanctioned the use of

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<sup>77</sup> Eckhardt, *Fanny Wright: Rebel in America*, 144.

<sup>78</sup> *Ibid*, 145.

physical force against the black slaves. Second, in a letter to Richardson, Wright criticized his irresponsible decision to publish the logs, but not his maltreatment of the black slaves.<sup>79</sup>

Therefore, Wright gave implicit approval of Richardson's actions. Originally, Wright's civilizing mission justified educating the slaves and allowing them limited autonomy, but it later warranted stringently superintending the slaves and deploying corporal punishment to control them.

While these sections from Richardson's logs documented the white Nashoba trustees acting opposite the community's foundational principles, they did not upset the public. This ill-treatment of slaves was the norm on many Southern slave plantations. However, Richardson's log from June 17, 1827 infuriated the public. It read, "Met the slaves—James Richardson informed them that, last night, Mam'selle Josephine and he began to live together; and he took this occasion of repeating to them our views on color, and on the sexual relation."<sup>80</sup> James Richardson was white and Mam'selle Josephine was a woman of color. After their interracial sexual relationship came out, "a storm of indignation and hostility quickly followed."<sup>81</sup> In the 1820's South interracial sex was taboo. As a result, Richardson's openness about being intimate with a woman of color led to quick and vicious public condemnation. In the *Genius of Universal Emancipation*, "Mentor" called Nahosba "one great brothal, disgraceful to its institutors, and most reprehensible, as a public example, in the vicinity."<sup>82</sup> One Memphian explained that he "would not be surprised if Miss Wright should, one of these mornings, find her throat cut."<sup>83</sup>

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<sup>79</sup> Payne and Pertz and Wright, *The Garnett Letters*, 30.

<sup>80</sup> As cited in Egerton, *Visions of Utopia: Nashoba, Rugby, Ruskin and the "New Communities,"* 26.

<sup>81</sup> Egerton, *Visions of Utopia: Nashoba, Rugby, Ruskin and the "New Communities,"* 26.

<sup>82</sup> William and Jane Pease, "A New View of Nashoba, 106.

<sup>83</sup> Lauren Elizabeth Nickas, "Conceiving Happiness: Frances Wright and the Nashoba Experiment," *West Tennessee Historical Society Papers* 17, (2008): 116.

Clearly, Richardson's public proclamation of interracial sex lit a fire under the public. It violated the antebellum South's social norms on sex – an act reserved for intra-racial married couples. He declared his engagement in interracial sex outside of marriage. With this Richardson added public condemnation to Nashoba's already long list of problems. And thus, "What had been intended as an economically sound and feasible alternative to slavery was about to end as another bankrupt utopia. The published logs...hastened its death."<sup>84</sup>

Feeling the reverberations of Richardson's actions across the Atlantic, Wright drafted her "Explanatory Notes Respecting the Nature and Objects of the Institution of Nashoba, and of the Principles on which it is Founded" on her way back to America in December 1827. In her "Explanatory Notes" Wright provided a theoretical defense of Richardson's actions. First, Wright clarified Nashoba's purpose – "The principles on which the institution is based are those of human liberty and equality, without exceptions or limitations, and its more special objects the protection and regeneration of the race of colour, universally oppressed and despised in a country self-denominated free."<sup>85</sup> Clearly, Wright tried to reiterate that Nashoba was about improving the "condition" of African-Americans. Next, Wright argued for "racial amalgamation" as the cure to America's racism. Her "Explanatory Notes" read, "The mixture of the races is in nature, the only question seems to be, whether it shall take place in good feeling and good taste, and be made at once the means of sealing the tranquility, perfecting the liberty of the country...or whether it shall proceed, as it now does, viciously and degradingly, mingling hatred and fear

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<sup>84</sup> Egerton, *Visions of Utopia: Nashoba, Rugby, Ruskin and the "New Communities,"* 26-27.

<sup>85</sup> Frances Wright, "Explanatory Notes Respecting the Nature and Objects of the Institution of Nashoba, and of the Principles on which it is Founded," *The Oriental Herald and Colonial Review* (1824-29): 252, <https://play.google.com/books/reader?id=ohxUAAAACAAJ&printsec=frontcover&output=reader&hl=en&pg=GBS.PA252>.

with the ties of blood.”<sup>86</sup> Here, Wright attacked the numerous Southern slave-owners taking advantage of their slaves behind close doors. She called for a change – public acceptance of people of different races freely engaging in sexual relations. Wright thought this would greatly improve race relations in America. By supporting interracial sex, Wright – in effect – defended Richardson’s actions. Of course, this only worsened negative public perceptions of Nashoba – the community’s radical leader advocated for interracial sex.

But, Wright never had the chance to implement the principles in her “Explanatory Notes.” She arrived at Nashoba in early 1828 to find all the white Nashoba trustees gone. At this point in Nashoba’s life, “The idealistic dream of a new community was gone; all that remained was a loose association of individuals.”<sup>87</sup> After a few rough and lonely months, Wright left Nashoba behind in June 1828. She became involved in the making of a newspaper – the *New Harmony and Nashoba Gazette*.<sup>88</sup> Wright left someone at Nashoba to oversee the black slaves. So, for over a year the black slaves continued to labor without freedom, status as a person, or any idea of what the future held for them. However, in 1830 Wright finally admitted defeat and colonized the Nashoba slaves. Wright realized that people would not heed her example for a better America, so she decided to directly change their hearts and minds by giving lectures throughout the rest of her life. Wright took the thirty-one slaves to Haiti where the country’s president – Jean Pierre Boyer – had agreed to help them get settled.<sup>89</sup> This marked the end of Wright’s experiment at Nashoba in model community construction and emancipation.

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<sup>86</sup> Wright, “Explanatory Notes,” 258.

<sup>87</sup> Egerton, *Visions of Utopia: Nashoba, Rugby, Ruskin and the “New Communities,”* 28.

<sup>88</sup> Ibid.

<sup>89</sup> Ibid, 30.

Obviously, in the end, the Nashoba Community failed. During the community's existence the slaves "had attended only a few days of school at Nashoba, and their work had not produced enough money to pay for their upkeep, much less to repay Miss Wright for her original investment."<sup>90</sup> Nashoba ended in financial ruin and fell way short of its original goals. But, the Nashoba Community remains an important part of Memphis's history and a lot can be gleaned from the brief existence of Frances Wright's model farm. Wright's Nashoba was a bold attempt to provide a model for the abolition of slavery and the creation of a better society. Wright left American society behind and went out on her own into the woods to give America an example of what it ought to be. Yet, Nashoba was aimed at reaching "civilized perfection," which excluded groups like Native Americans and former slaves. The ideology of civilization provided reason for Wright's exclusion of "savage" Native Americans and founding the community on land taken from them. In the case of African-Americans, this ideology justified Wright's rejection of immediate emancipation in favor of gradual emancipation – black slaves needed time to become civilized and fit for freedom. Civilization thinking was also part of the reason behind Wright's colonization of slaves. She thought former slaves incapable of ever participating in American democracy, but had hope for later generations. But, the Nashoba Community colonized slaves in large part to gain public support. During the 1820's the majority of Americans supported colonization.<sup>91</sup> Wright was trying to appeal to Southern slave-owners so that after they saw Nashoba's success they would emulate it on their farms and by this process slavery would slowly cease to exist on American soil. But, back on the 19<sup>th</sup> century narrative of civilization, it first justified educating the black slaves and giving them restricted freedom. However, later in the

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<sup>90</sup> Matthews, "Frances Wright and the Nashoba Experiment: A Transitional Period in Antislavery Attitudes," 50.

<sup>91</sup> *Ibid*, 37-38.

community's life the civilization tradition was used to explain the intense monitoring of the slaves and the infliction of physical punishment on them. As time went on, the community's treatment of the black slaves progressed from mild paternalism to tyranny. And thus, Wright's attempted civilization of the black slaves gave rise to the white Nashoba trustees' authoritarian rule over them. In considering Wright's try at educating the black slaves, which is usually thought of as benevolent, we must remember that education is a form of violence on a person's being. Wright thought black slaves unsuited for American society and she was trying to change them into proper citizens. But, Wright did profess to care about African-Americans and tried to help them in this way. Although it failed because of mismanagement resulting in financial struggles and public disapproval, Frances Wright's Nashoba Community was a real attempt at gradual emancipation and colonization when most of the nation favored that as a solution to slavery. Soon after Nashoba's demise, with William Lloyd Garrison's creation of the *Liberator* newspaper in 1831, the nation began moving towards immediate abolition.

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