

**Memoirs of Elisha Oscar Crosby; reminiscences of
California and Guatemala from 1849 to 1864. Edited by
Charles Albro Barker**

ELISHA OSCAR CROSBY

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GUATEMALA FROM 1849 TO 1864

Edited by Charles Albro Barker

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The writer has very little to say directly about himself. From his silences, a reader would never know that he was a family man, responsible not only for his own but also for his dead brother's dependents. Yet he does reveal himself indirectly. He could hardly have lived differently from the way in which he wrote about his life—with zest, with intelligence, with sufficient detachment to appreciate men and events quite foreign to his earlier experience, and with sufficient earnestness to make and to defend large judgments of public morality and policy. He made his observations in important places—in New York, in California during and after the gold rush, and, as minister of the United States commissioned by Lincoln, in Guatemala City. x Although at no time a man of great prominence or power, he was for at least thirteen or fourteen years very active in affairs, and his *Reminiscences* open new views into the life of California, into state-making, into land policy, into the conditions and politics of Central America, and into the Negro and Caribbean policies of the United States at the crucial moment of the first Republican victory and descent into Civil War.

BEGINNINGS IN NEW YORK STATE AND CITY

I WAS born on the 18th of July 1818, in the Town of Groton Tompkins County, N. Y. My Father was a farmer in moderate circumstances. I was the second of four boys; there were also three girls younger than myself. My fathers name was Samuel Crosby. My mothers maiden name was Mehitable Spaulding, daughter of Edward Spaulding, of the town of Summer Hill Cayuga County, N. Y. and sister of E. G. Spaulding of Buffalo, N. Y. My grandfather Samuel Crosby came from Dutchess County N. Y. He died in the Town of Groton N. Y. and is buried in the old cemetery two and a half miles east of Groton Village.* My father removed to Kansas, and lived with my sister Mary, wife of O. P. Gun[?], a civil engineer who was engaged upon the R. R. of that State.

A local historian, who evidently was well informed, says that Crosby had both a paternal and a maternal ancestor who were in Plymouth Colony in the 1630's. His family, like many New England families, was early and leading in the settlement of central New York. *The Bay of San Francisco*, II, 108.

In 1843, I was admitted Attorney of the Supreme Court of the State of N. Y. The Chief Justice at that time was Samuel Nelson, who was afterwards one of the Justices of the Supreme Court of the United States. The same month and year I was admitted a Solicitor in Chancery. The Court of Chancery was then one of the most respected tribunals in the State and presided over by Reuben Hyde Walworth the Chancellor, who signed my Diploma on the 18th day of July 1843, my birthday, and my 25th year of age.

GUATEMALA IN CIVIL WAR DIPLOMACY

When my appointment to that mission was under consideration, before and at the time of the inauguration of Lincoln in 1861 the plan had been conceived by old Francis P. Blair, Benj. Wade, Charles Sumner, Preston King, U.S. Senator from New York, Mr Seward* & some others to effect an arrangement if possible, with the governments of Central America for the colonization of the free blacks of the Southern States and thereby to inaugurate an easy outlet for them to some neighboring country, convenient to the ports of the Southern States, for their establishment under a free government, similar to the colony of Liberia, and where they could be more or less under the protection of the U. S. Government. It was thought, by such an arrangement, if it could be effected, that a very large surplus of the black population of the South could be disposed of and that many Southern men were disposed to relinquish their slaves, either voluntarily or for such moderate compensation as the Government or individuals might be disposed to make them, in furtherance of this plan, and that the slave population would be so much reduced by this movement that a compromise might be effected by which the rebellion then impending would be either averted or greatly modified. It was one of the schemes [by] which the incoming administration had a view to prevent, if possible, the disasters that followed the consummation of the Rebellion. The carrying out of this plan was one of the secret instructions given to

me by the President at the time I waited upon him for his direction before sailing for Guatemala. I thought then and I think now that the destiny of the negro in the south would be either annihilation or emigration to some part of tropical America, that they never can remain a distinctive race in the United States,* and I entered into that scheme, therefore, with great interest and enthusiasm; for I am satisfied that if some of the vast tracts of country in Central America that are now comparatively lying waste, could have been secured for the colonization of the negroes who voluntarily wished to emigrate there, under the patronage and protection of the United States Government they would in a very short time develop themselves and their new country more rapidly than they can 89 in any other way. Very soon after my arrival in Guatemala I commenced sounding President Carrera and such of his advisers as I thought proper to approach on the subject and also some of the leading men in the State of Honduras particularly Señor Alvarado, who was an influential man in that Government at that time; but I found them without exception eminently hostile to any such emigration to their country and colonization there. I represented to them this:—that a district of country bordering on the Bay of Honduras, in the Department of Vera Paz, that was very sparsely inhabited by aboriginal Indians, and a great deal of it wholly vacant, thousands of square miles in extent could be assigned for such colonization, the new colonists to become citizens of the Republic after such time as they might think proper, the same as foreigners were made citizens of the U. S. and that by this arrangement, they would be increasing the population and the wealth, and strength and commerce of their country and adding to its prosperity. They could make their own regulations in regard to the colonists, the same as they had made regulations for the colonization of Belgians a colony of whom had once been admitted to the country in that very vicinity but which had failed on account of the difference in climate between the home of the Belgians and their new home in the tropics. A great many of them died off and the others only escaped by dispersing to the interior on the highlands where the temperature was modified by the elevation. The City of Guatemala is 4500 ft above the level of the sea, and the temperature is exceedingly delightful, the thermometer ranging between 50 and 80; and has not varied from that as appears from the register in the College, for the last hundred years.

The Belgians when they sought those salubrious regions of course recovered themselves. It was thought by Mr. Blair and others that the negroes who might migrate from the U. S. going from the Southern States climate to those points in Central America, the transition of climate would be very slight and the climatic influence on them would amount to nothing. At first some of the officials of the country seemed to entertain the proposition with 90 favor; but Carrera from the very first and Guardiola, then President of Honduras, and most of their immediate advisers, opposed it *in toto*.*

Their argument was, that a very considerable number of English speaking negroes thus introduced could not be assimilated with their already mixed population and the number that would be likely to come would very soon create a balance of power in their hands as against the remainder of the population of the whole state and that for reasons of personal safety and the perpetuation of their own government in their own way under the Spanish forms and customs,—this plan would not work; these new colonists would gradually introduce a new order of things that would eventually lead to an open rupture between them and the native races. They put the question to me “If the U. S. want to colonize the free blacks on territory by themselves, why dont they appropriate some of their own sparsely populated territory to this purpose and keep them themselves?”—A question which I must confess I found very difficult to answer. That scheme met with such prompt and general opposition and the events of the Rebellion transpired 91 with such rapidity that the project for the colonizing the free blacks was abandoned. If it

could have been consummated, I have no doubt it would have been one of the ways in which a compromise could have been made by the Government of the U.S. with the slave holders of the south to have so far reduced the slave population by process of emancipation & purchase or compensation that a more peaceful method of solution of the difficulty would have been arrived at.* I am inclined to think now in the cause of humanity & progress for the blacks if the Government of the U. S. had availed itself of the offer that was made to annex St. Domingo to this country, and open up that country to the colonization of free blacks, it would have been one of the wisest and most salutary measures that could have been adopted by our Government for the amelioration of the condition of the blacks. We have no territory capable of producing successfully the universally used commodity of coffee, neither have we any tropical possession where thousands of the people of the U. S. can resort and be under their own flag & government, for sanitary purposes. Many other tropical productions that are largely consumed in the U. S. have to be procured from other nations and I think it was a very short sighted policy on the part of our government not securing that splendid possession when it was offered to President Grant for a mere nominal consideration.* There are half a million people in the U. S. who ought to reside in the tropics for sanitary reasons and no more delightful country exists on the face of the earth than that Dominican part of the island.

The five men to whom Crosby attributes the conception of his mission in behalf of a colonizing project represent all the important variations of antislavery politics and thought. In descending order of moral leadership, Senator Sumner, the chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, Secretary of State Seward, and Senator Wade, respectively from Massachusetts, New York, and Ohio, represent the northern anti-slavery impulse as it fed into the Republican Party. Blair and King had both been strong Jacksonian Democrats; Blair was of Virginia and Kentucky origin, and King from New York. Both supported Van Buren in the Free Soil movement of 1848, and Lincoln in 1860. Sumner and Wade of course became leaders of Radical Republicanism, extreme in Negro equalitarianism as well as otherwise. Blair was to return to the Democratic Party, in reaction against the Radicals; and Seward, in continuing with President Johnson after the collision between him and the Radical Congress, proved also to be a moderate. King, the least of the five men, died in 1866.

Annihilation or emigration seems an unrealistically drastic estimate of the Negro problem, either as of 1861 or of 1878, when Crosby was writing. Quite naturally he does not explore the third alternative implicit in his statement, namely, that the Negroes remain in the United States, not as "a distinct race," but as a race in process of assimilation, whether biological, cultural, or both biological and cultural. Crosby's estimate, realistic or unrealistic as the case may be, closely accords with that of President Lincoln, who always drew back at the thought of assimilation between the races, and whose ideas of Negro equality with the whites were limited to certain inalienable human rights. In his annual message to Congress of December 3, 1861, the President urged colonization for such free Negroes as wished it, and for all Negroes emancipated, whether by force of Union arms in the Confederate South or by the hoped-for abolition by law and federal compensation in the loyal border states. On the following August 14, he addressed a committee of free Negroes at the White House. He urged the advantages of racial separation for both whites and blacks, and he spoke quite specifically of Central American colonization, with reference to the Chiriqui district of Panama and its supposed deposits of coal. And again, in the annual message of December 1, 1862, a month before the final Emancipation Proclamation, Lincoln declared for the colonization policy, and said, "I cannot make it better known than it already is that I strongly favor colonization." (John G. Nicolay and John Hay, *Abraham Lincoln, Complete Works* [New

York, 1894], II, 102, 222-25, 274). For a historical discussion of Lincoln's efforts, including the actual transportation of four hundred odd Negroes to Haiti in 1863, and the failure of the venture by 1864, see Nicolay and Hay, *Abraham Lincoln, A History* (New York, 1890), VI, chap. xvii. There is an informed, unsigned letter on the subject in the *Nation* (New York), L (Jan. 30, 1890), 91-92. William P. Pickett discusses "Abraham Lincoln's Solution" in *The Negro Problem* (New York, 1909), Bk. II, chap. vii; the whole book is an argument for colonization as the true solution of the Negro problem of the twentieth century. For a Negro scholar's review of the question, see Charles H. Wesley, "Lincoln's Plan for Colonizing the Emancipated Negroes," *Journal of Negro History* (Lancaster and Washington), IV (1919), 7-21.

The printed diplomatic correspondence of 1861 and 1862 confirms Crosby in his statement that the colonization idea met rebuffs everywhere in Central America. Yet the refusals of all five of those states did not become definite until the summer and fall of 1862; and Crosby himself wrote, on May 6 of that year, in terms of the merit of the plan and of his hope that it might succeed (letter to Seward, in United States Department of State, *Papers Relating to Foreign Affairs, 1861-1862* [Washington, 1863], pp. 881-82). One month later, June 6, 1862,

Crosby reported to Seward that he had had conversations with the agents of a New York company, and that those gentlemen on return to the United States could supply much information about Guatemala. They were interested in "introducing free negroes from the United States to be employed upon their works, as well as to open settlements on the adjacent lands which can be secured for a small price." Again, as late as November 21, 1862, Crosby wrote the Secretary of State that conversations with an official of Honduras indicated that that country appeared likely to make a "more satisfactory arrangement" for Negro colonization than any other country in Central America. But by that time all were making official refusals, and Crosby's correspondence on the subject terminated with a letter from Seward, January 19, 1863, which said that the United States would not force colonization, either on the Negroes who might go or on the foreign countries where they might settle. (From passages from unprinted letters in the National Archives, supplied by Mr. Almon R. Wright.) See N. Andrew N. Cleven, "Some Plans for Colonizing Liberated Negro Slaves in Hispanic America," *Journal of Negro History*, XI (1926), 35-49.

Crosby's is the only evidence known to the editor that Lincoln's policy of colonization had a first phase as a way of avoiding or limiting the outbreak of war. This phase necessarily ended with the attack on Sumter. The second phase, which Crosby does not note as such but which is plain in the diplomatic correspondence and in the President's messages, is that of looking for a way out of the social tensions anticipated from emancipation and Union victory, a phase of social policy which Lincoln never quite surrendered. Crosby has this purpose in mind when he speaks of how colonization would have eased the troubles of the Reconstruction period.

For a historical discussion of this controversial matter, see Joseph V. Fuller, "Hamilton Fish," *The American Secretaries of State and their Diplomacy*, ed. Samuel F. Bemis (New York, 1928) VII, 129, 141-47, 161-63.

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