HISTORY

Founded in 1817 as an auxiliary of the Washington-based American Colonization Society, the Maryland State Colonization Society's primary functions were to gather funds for the parent society and to recruit colonists for the American Society's settlement, Liberia, founded on the West African coast in 1822.

Until 1827 the Maryland Society was a loosely organized group of regional and county societies, all reporting their successes and failures to the national headquarters in Washington. This loose organization ended in 1827 when the most prominent Maryland colonizationists met in Baltimore to unite the scattered local groups into a single society. Success in this undertaking, and a generally favorable reception from both pro- and anti-slavery factions in the state, prompted the Maryland General Assembly to vote the American Colonization Society an annual grant of $1,000 with the provision that the money be used to send free Negroes from Maryland to Liberia. Failure to use the money resulted in the grants being suspended two years later.

Colonization reached its lowest ebb in Maryland in 1830-1831, and the State society might have died altogether had it not been for the perseverance of its leaders and the circumstances of the summer of 1831. In August of that year Nat Turner, a free Negro, led an abortive slave rebellion in Virginia. Although only token success was achieved by Turner and his followers the revolt sparked fears of massive slave uprisings throughout the South. The legislatures of the slave states immediately placed severe restrictions on the individual slave's freedom of movement within each state and sought to prevent future manumissions.

The Maryland General Assembly, favorably impressed with the Maryland Society's intention to eradicate slavery from the state through the colonization of the free Negro population, moved to reinvigorate the Maryland State Colonization Society. At the same time – to protect the state's white population from any possible repetitions of the Turner affair – the General Assembly incorporated the Society as a state-subsidized organization, pledging to furnish $200,000 over the next twenty years to transport willing free Negroes to Liberia. The grant was to be held in a state-managed fund, on whose Board of Managers would be a representative of the Society. To locate eligible emigrants, the Assembly ordered each county to take a census of its free Negro population and send the results to the headquarters of the Society in Baltimore. Should any free Negro hesitate to return to his "homeland," the law, with certain exceptions, limited Negro residence in the state and provided for forcible expulsion at the end of the time limit.