Despite these measures there was poor response to the Colonization Society's efforts to collect colonists. The state's white population, who had been canvassed for contributions during the summer and fall of 1832, offered little aid. Nonetheless, 144 colonists were sent to Liberia on December 9, 1832. High hopes of success were soon dashed by reports from members of this first group that the Liberians took advantage of them and treated them little better than the native Africans.

Confronted with this evidence, the Maryland Board of Managers decided to chart a course independent of the American Society by founding a separate colony for Maryland's Negroes. Hiring Dr. James Hall, formerly a physician in the employ of the American Society at Monrovia, Liberia, to head the expedition to establish the new colony, the Maryland Society first acquired twenty acres at Cape Palmas, West Africa, on February 14, 1834. Called Maryland in Liberia at Hall's suggestion, the new colony centered around the town of Harper, named after General Robert Goodloe Harper, a prominent Marylander and an ardent supporter of the colonization ideal.

The American Colonization Society, dependent upon the support of the state societies, disapproved of the Maryland enterprise because it would dry up one source of funds. It also set a dangerous precedent, which the Pennsylvania and New York Societies took advantage of, to found a settlement at Bassa Cove later in 1834, a move that was emulated in 1836 by the Louisiana and Mississippi Societies – co-sponsors of a colony along the Sinou River.

Very quickly the Maryland Society learned at first hand the constant monetary problems of the parent organization. The colonists at Harper, secure in the knowledge that the Society would come to their aid in any real emergency, ignored the principle that agriculture was to be the mainstay of the colony's existence and relied on the easier life of trading with passing ships and the native Africans. As a result, the colony survived precariously on relief shipments until the most dire threat of famine spurred the people into making a real effort at farming.

The colonists prior to being accepted for emigration had to have proof that they were hard-working and industrious, and pledge that they would abstain from the use of alcohol. With a certain sense of pride, Dr. Hall had reported that the colony had been purchased from the native chiefs without the use of "ardent spirits."

By 1836 the colony had weathered its first crisis and was, at least, a going concern. Meanwhile, the Society, in 1835, began the publication of the Maryland Colonization Journal both to stave off insolvency and to publicize the aims of the colonizationists and thereby counteract the stories spread by abolitionists who pictured colonization as a guise under which the free Negro would be re-enslaved and shipped to Georgia.