

The Debate of 1832

The General Assembly convened in 1831 to hear Governor John Floyd's annual message, which urged the Assembly to address the current crisis so as to quell the fears of the citizens and to restore order and safety to the Commonwealth. His address called for funds for the removal of free blacks from Virginia and for the houses to discuss what further action should be taken. As a result of Governor Floyd's address, a special committee was formed by the speaker of the House of Delegates to discuss the revolt of the past summer and present the house with possible solutions to the problem. The first week of the assembly saw numerous proposals for the colonization of free blacks and on December 14, William Henry Roane of Hanover presented a petition from the Society of Friends which proposed the abolition of slavery through the gradual colonization of slaves in Africa. This proposal sparked intense debate between the members of the house and divided Tidewater delegates and those from the heavily agricultural "southside" of the James River.

By a vote of 93 to 27, the House of Delegates voted to refer the petition to the special committee for further review. This vote was a very encouraging one to Virginians who hoped and prayed for the abolition of slavery because the house was finally opening itself up for debate of the issue. On January 2, 1832, a proposal was sent to the special committee by Charles J. Faulkner, a Valley representative, suggesting the gradual emancipation of slaves which guaranteed slave holders rights to the slaves they owned at the time. The committee, weighted with slave holding easterners, struck down the proposal. This was the beginning of a gradual ascent towards debate of gradual emancipation.

On January 11, 1832, Piedmont Delegate William O. Goode, a southsider, argued that debate on emancipation placed all of Virginia in grave danger because of the threat posed by blacks watching the actions of the Assembly. He proposed a resolution to table discussion for the safety of the Commonwealth. A counter-resolution was proposed by western Piedmont delegate Thomas Jefferson Randolph proposing a state-wide referendum on gradual emancipation so that the people of Virginia could decide the issue rather than the members of the Assembly, who held a disproportionate stake in the institution of slavery. If the majority of the citizens were for abolition, the process would begin with all slaves born on or after July 4, 1840, becoming the property of the Commonwealth. They would be hired out by the state until enough money had been raised to provide for their removal from the country.

Newspapers and citizens alike, who longed to see their state rid of both slavery and blacks, lauded the debate sparked by these two proposals. It was the first time that the abolition of slavery had been openly and publicly debated in Virginia and the newspapers overflowed with editorials concerning the debate. Factions in the House of Delegates emerged quickly, with conservatives who wished to slow any process of emancipation representing mainly the Piedmont and Tidewater and abolitionists pushing for complete and gradual removal of slaves coming from Trans-Allegheny and the Valley. A group of moderates stood in the middle and held the deciding votes necessary for either of the two sides to prevail.

James H. Gholson, a southside Piedmont delegate presented the conservative arguments to the house, contending that slavery was an eastern interest that should not be trampled on by westerners. He stated that the conditions under which slaves lived were adequate, healthy, and conducive to good relations between the slave and his community. He claimed that the Southampton rebellion was

an isolated and solitary incident which did not require the radical overhaul of Virginia's economy and society. Valley delegate James McDowell and others attacked this conservative position by pointing out every man's desire for liberty and freedom and by pointing out the inconsistency of the conservative stance which wanted to cease debate on the issue because of the possible insurrection which might occur among the very slaves about whom they claimed the most ideal living conditions.

These arguments were volleyed back and forth between the conservatives and the abolitionists. The abolitionists were eventually able to convince enough fence-sitters of the practicality of the plan and the session closed with the passage of a statement supporting the exploration of possible colonizing of slaves. The mood in the Commonwealth was one anticipating abolition. That mood would change by the next fall, a result in large part of the essay on slavery published by William and Mary professor Thomas R. Dew at the close of the 1831-32 session.