

1831-1832 Virginia General Assembly Debate over Slavery

Important Contributors

Delegate James McDowell

James McDowell was a delegate from the Valley and nephew of Gov. John Floyd who gave an important anti-slavery argument during the Debates of 1831-32. Gov. Floyd dismantled the arguments of conservatives who attempted to write off the Southampton insurrection as an isolated and confined incident. The conservatives had been stressing the safety of the state and the contentment of the slaves throughout the Commonwealth. They had said that the debate in the Assembly was encouraging slaves to revolt and that debate should cease immediately.

Del. McDowell argued that slavery was inherently dangerous and that it should be abolished for the sake of the whites in the Commonwealth. His arguments were well received in the media and helped sway some members of the Assembly. Del. McDowell later served as Governor from 1842-1846.

Charles Faulkner

Charles J. Faulkner was a delegate from the Valley who offered a defense of the anti-slavery position by positioning himself on the radical side of the abolitionists platform. He argued against any proposal which would have the Commonwealth purchase slaves from their owners, saying that that subverted the authority of the state to rid itself from the threat to public safety. He called on the Assembly to abolish slavery and take ownership of all slaves for the purpose of shipping them to an African colony.

John Chandler

John A. Chandler was a member of the Virginia House of Delegates from Norfolk County, who was opposed to slavery and delivered a speech in support of gradual emancipation in the Commonwealth. His argument was clear and concise and won support both inside and outside of the Capitol building.

Thomas Jefferson Randolph

Thomas J. Randolph, a delegate from Albemarle County and grandson of Thomas Jefferson, played a key role in the debates of 1831-32. His proposal of the post nati plan of gradual emancipation sparked much debate in the house. The plan called for male slaves twenty-one and older and all female slaves eighteen and older to become the property of the Commonwealth on July 4, 1840. The slaves would then be hired out by the state until they had paid their way back to Africa. The plan was lauded for the advantages it gave to the Commonwealth, but was attacked by Thomas Dew and others for its impracticality and great scope.

Thomas R. Dew

Thomas R. Dew was a professor and later president of the College of William and Mary who wrote an influential and well-known review of the 1831-32 debates. Born on December 5, 1802, in King and Queen County at Dewsville, his family's plantation, Dew went on to receive bachelor's and master's degrees from William and Mary. He completed his education in Europe and took a position at his alma mater. He argued the conservative position in the debate and chastised those members of the Assembly who would bring abolition to the floor of the house so soon after the Southampton insurrection. He argued that the issue should not even be addressed in public debate. His defense of the

institution of slavery was a strong one cited by future defenders until the Civil War.