

ABSTRACT

MARY BOYCE HICKS

James McDowell and the Virginia Slavery Debate of 1831-1832

Under the direction of DR. JOHN INSCOE

James McDowell (1795-1851) was a planter and politician who resided primarily in Rockbridge County, which lies in the Valley of the Blue Ridge Mountains of western Virginia. Because he was from the western part of the state, McDowell was not as involved in the elite social classes found in the state's Tidewater or Piedmont, where slavery was far more prevalent than in the mountains. He was elected to the state House of Delegates (1831-35) and then, in 1841, was elected governor, serving a single term. In 1831, Virginians underwent a major debate over the future of slavery in the state. Triggered by Nat Turner's insurrection, this series of hearings were meant to discuss this evil—slavery. McDowell was a major player in these debates, which ultimately accomplished little. He was an excellent orator and delivered a speech that was recounted and lauded long after the debate took place. My thesis focuses primarily on this debate and McDowell's contribution. What was discussed at this debate and why was so little ultimately accomplished? What parts of McDowell's background and his constituents contributed to his opinions, as expressed in his highly-lauded speech during the debate? Further, how did McDowell's status as a slave-holding westerner affect his opinion on slavery and free blacks? Finally, how did this debate influence the perception of slavery and impact the course of slavery in Virginia up to the Civil War?

INDEX WORDS: James McDowell, Virginia Slavery Debate of 1831-1832, Nat Turner, slavery, free blacks, Virginia, antebellum life in Virginia.

JAMES MCDOWELL
AND THE VIRGINIA SLAVERY DEBATE OF 1831-1832

by

MARY BOYCE HICKS

A Thesis Submitted to the Honors Council of the University of Georgia
in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree

BACHELOR OF ARTS

in HISTORY

with HIGH HONORS

Athens, Georgia

2010

©2010

Mary Boyce Hicks

All Rights Reserved

JAMES MCDOWELL
AND THE VIRGINIA SLAVERY DEBATE OF 1831-1832

By

MARY BOYCE HICKS

Approved:

John Inscoe
Dr. John Inscoe
Faculty Research Mentor

May 6, 2010
Date

Approved:

Stephen Mihm
Dr. Stephen Mihm
Reader

May 6, 2010
Date

Approved:

David S. Williams
Dr. David S. Williams
Director, Honors Program Foundation Fellows and
Center for Undergraduate Research Opportunities

May 7, 2010
Date

Approved:

Pamela Kleiber
Dr. Pamela B. Kleiber
Associate Director, Honors Program and
Center for Undergraduate Research Opportunities

May 7, 2010
Date

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

My initial interest in this project was born out of a personal search for family history. Along the way, I discovered James McDowell, my great-great-great-great grandfather, and I became fascinated by his life and opinion on slavery in a world where slavery dominated every facet of life.

Through the Honors Program I was able to select my own topic and spend two semesters researching, discovering more about McDowell and the politics of that time. During those semesters I took trips to the Southern Historical Collection at the University of North Carolina and the University of Virginia Special Collections Library, where I am grateful to have accessed many of his personal papers. The experience of holding a document that is almost two hundred years old, written by my ancestor, was exciting and inspiring, and it pushed me forward in my research. Along the way, I discovered that our family held some information and books on McDowell as well. I am thankful to my great aunt, Sarah Tomlinson, and grandmother, Jane Branson, for taking an interest in my project and providing me with those materials. Of course, without the support of my parents, none of this would have been possible either.

My heartfelt thanks goes to Dr. John Inscoc, my faculty mentor, who guided me in this process. He directed me to a vast number of sources, proofed multiple edits and was the expert opinion weighing in on many of the issues presented in my thesis. Thanks Dr. Inscoc for caring about your students and going the extra mile to help another learn more about history and writing. Thanks also to my reader, Dr. Stephen Mihm.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS.....	v
CHAPTERS	
1 INTRODUCTION.....	1
2 JAMES MCDOWELL, VIRGINIA STATESMAN.....	4
3 ROCKBRIDGE COUNTY, MCDOWELL’S HOME.....	8
4 “CURRENT EVENTS”.....	12
5 THE GREAT DEBATE.....	20
6 MCDOWELL’S ADDRESS.....	26
7 EPILOGUE.....	34
WORKS CITED.....	36

CHAPTER 1 INTRODUCTION

A future speaker of the U.S. House of Representatives visiting the home of the elderly James Madison in 1832 found him thrilled by the speech of an up-and-coming representative from Lexington, Virginia.¹ In the midst of a stressful and emotional debate on slavery in the Virginia Legislature, Representative James McDowell had risen to the stage and delivered a speech touted for its eloquence and its attack on slavery from an economic and public safety perspective. His speech marked the beginning of his career as a politician and his emergence as a well-known figure on the slavery issue. He gained the praise of newspapers, western Virginians and aging presidents such as Madison. The future speaker, Robert C. Winthrop, wrote McDowell's daughter later speaking of "a speech which he made... and of which ex-President Madison spoke to me in the highest terms when I visited him."²

The Virginia slavery debate of 1831-1832 fits into a narrow window of Southern history in which white slave owners were willing to publicly address the toxic nature of slavery. For years they had quietly lamented to one another of the evils of slavery, but never before had they held a debate that had the potential to change the outcome of slavery. Soon thereafter, Southerners would find themselves on the defensive, beginning to portray slavery as a part of the natural order, practically a God-given right. But within this moment of time, Virginians at least allowed slavery to be put on trial in the legislature. Much of their willingness to open the debate

¹ James Glen Collier, *The Political Career of James McDowell: 1830-1851*. (Chapel Hill: PhD Thesis, 1963), 67.

² Sally Campbell Preston Miller. *Memoir of James McDowell, LL. D., Governor of Virginia*. (Baltimore: John Murphy & Co, 1895), 163.

came from their fear of slave insurrection after approximately 59 whites were killed by slave Nat Turner and his rag-tag band of militants in Southampton County.³

So the legislature met, debated whether to even hold a debate and at last began a forum of discussions on slavery in Virginia. The legislature was filled with tension; easterners sought to protect their rights as slaveholders and protectors of the Old Dominion while westerners hoped to gain the political power they lacked and rid the system that caused the disparity. As the debate raged on, McDowell silently took it all in until finally, prodded by his family, he approached the podium and made his mark. He recognized that this was a chance to use his well-honed oratory skills to make his own mark on history and vault his political career to a new level.

More than simply making a name for himself to further his own career, though, McDowell hoped to bridge the gap between the east and the west. His hometown of Lexington itself bridged the two regions—based in the Valley in the middle of the state—and as a slaveholder himself he understood the easterners’ desire to maintain their primary and most trusted source of wealth. Still, he felt closely tied with the west and with many of his non-slaveholding constituents, who wanted their political interests served just as fully as those of the powerful Tidewater. Because his life is recorded both through his letters and his speeches, McDowell serves as a case study of someone who intimately felt the tension that threatened to (and later would) divide the state while still standing up to protect the rights of westerners and the state as a whole from the potential havoc wreaked by slavery. McDowell’s involvement in this debate was significant and would set the tone for his political career. His thoughts, as

³ There is some debate over the actual number of people killed, ranging between 55-61. James Glen Collier reports 55, while in his collection of materials on the rebellion, Historian Kenneth Greenberg reports that “no more than 57 to 60 whites” (*Nat Turner: A Slave Rebellion in History and Memory*. (Oxford University Press, 2003). I use 59 as an approximation.

revealed in his speech, reflect the ambivalence and complexity of a Southerner slaveholder's interests in the wake of Nat Turner and the short push to abolish slavery.

CHAPTER 2 JAMES MCDOWELL, VIRGINIA STATESMAN

James McDowell was born on October 13, 1795 at Cherry Grove in Rockbridge County, Virginia to James and Sarah Preston McDowell, their youngest child and only son. His great great-grandfather, Ephraim McDowell, was the pioneer settler of Rockbridge County and his mother's grandfather, John Preston, was an original settler of adjacent Augusta County. These two Scotch-Irish families, both meaningful to the history of the country, finally merged with the birth of McDowell and his sisters. Both families had a strong history of military and political involvement, giving themselves to public service and their communities. James' two elder sisters, Susan and Elizabeth, married William Taylor, a lawyer and member of Congress, and Thomas Hart Benton, who became a senator from Missouri, respectively. His uncle was Virginia Governor James P. Preston; his aunt married Governor John Floyd and was the mother of Governor John B. Floyd. Clearly politics were a great part of his genealogy and of his upbringing.⁴

Cherry Grove was a thriving plantation with numerous families of slaves who farmed the land and raised the animals there. McDowell's daughter wrote that he "unconsciously availed of his opportunities. Here his mind was steeped with a sense of the beautiful all around, the spell of which rested upon him ever afterward."⁵ He was encouraged to develop his mind from a young age, a passion inherited from his mother. She apparently created her own political understanding by reading newspapers and her opinions differed greatly from her husband's: she being a staunch

⁴ Collier, 1.

⁵ Miller, 18-19.

Republican; he was a Federalist. His mother's political interests influenced James. His daughter would later write that her father "took no little pride in saying on the stump, that his mother had taught him his earliest lessons in politics, and had framed his political creed for him."⁶ James' father, sensing that his son would not be a farmer, sought to encourage his mind and sent him to a local classical school, then to a boarding school in the home of Rev. Samuel Brown in Brownsburg. He was remembered by his classmate, Brown's son James, as one who because of his character would look out for the younger boys and by Samuel as "one of the most diligent and successful in the school."⁷

Classmates, such as the younger Brown, foreshadowed his career of oration. He wrote, "I have heard the young men remark that he would be a fine speaker when he grew to be a man."⁸ After his schooling there, he attended Washington College in his hometown of Lexington, where his father was a trustee. After a year, he transferred to Yale. On his way to New Haven, his ship was captured by an English privateer, who released him upon learning that he was only a schoolboy.⁹ After just a year at Yale he sought admission to the College of New Jersey (soon to become Princeton), where he spent two years, which he considered the most pleasant of his educational career. He excelled in Latin and was considered the best writer in the college. When he graduated, he gave the salutatory address in Latin. Dr. John McLean wrote that he was "held in great respect by his classmates and other fellow-students; and, while yet at college, he gave the promise of attaining to some high position in public life. He here exhibited those traits of integrity, firmness and honor which won for him the respect of all to whom he was known."¹⁰

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Ibid., 21.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Collier, 2.

¹⁰ Miller, 23-24.

McDowell finished his educational career back in Rockbridge County studying law under Chapman Johnson of Staunton. During this time he married his cousin, Susanna Smith Preston, on September 7, 1818. He was twenty-three years old, she eighteen. Susanna was the granddaughter of General William Campbell of Revolutionary War fame and the great-niece of Patrick Henry. Together they would have ten children, nine of whom survived to adulthood.¹¹

As a gift upon his graduation from Princeton, in 1816 McDowell's father gave him a two thousand acre tract of land in Bourbon County, the blue-grass region of Kentucky.¹² After finishing his law studies, he moved his new family—by this time Susanna had borne their first son—to this tract, which was twelve miles outside of Lexington (Kentucky). Their house there was called “The Military” and contained only a small log cabin house.¹³ As his childhood had been marked by academic study and not practical agriculture experience, he struggled to master the art of farming, until his discontent and lack of farming skills caught up to him. By 1821 he had made plans to move to Missouri, securing lands with the aid of his brother-in-law, Thomas Hart Benton. After being stricken with “the fever of that region,” or malaria, in early 1822, both McDowells felt an overwhelming desire to move back to Virginia. Their time in Kentucky lasted only two years and neither James nor Susanna McDowell would ever return to the Military, though they spoke fondly of it to their children. To aid their move back to Virginia, James's father purchased for his son a 500 acre tract of land near Lexington, Virginia, upon which McDowell built Col Alto, his primary residence for the remainder of his life. His daughter wrote of their house, the “new dwelling was built on the crest of the hill, having the town of Lexington

¹¹ Collier, 3.

¹² Miller 24.

¹³ Ibid.

full in view, and commanding a prospect which, for range and variegated beauty, was, perhaps, without parallel even in that picturesque region.”¹⁴

Because he remained averse to farming and enjoyed the practice of law only slightly more, James sought a new outlet for his intellect and energies. Of his distaste for the practice of law, he told his wife, “Other men may be, but I do not know how *I* can be an honest man and a lawyer.”¹⁵ Without taste for any other pursuits, McDowell “drifted” into politics.¹⁶ He began his career by serving in many local capacities, becoming a trustee of Washington College and a justice of the peace. One accomplishment during this period was the securing of a town water system and turnpikes that connected Lexington to other communities. During this time, he also pursued his religious faith, committing himself by entering full communion into the Presbyterian Church. He took his faith very seriously and sought to impart it and a strong moral standard upon his children. The Minister of their Presbyterian church in Lexington, Dr. John Leyburn, said that “He was for putting all honor of God and all lowliness on ‘his erring, guilty creature man.’”¹⁷ He had a “parliamentary grace” about him and little sense of humor.¹⁸ In 1831 he ran for the Virginia House of Delegates and was elected, where he remained until 1835.

¹⁴ Miller, 28.

¹⁵ Miller, 27.

¹⁶ Collier, 6.

¹⁷ As quoted by Miller, 158.

¹⁸ Collier, 7.

CHAPTER 3 ROCKBRIDGE COUNTY, MCDOWELL'S HOME

Nestled in between two major mountain ranges, Rockbridge County did not boast the elite, old money easterners but was not the rugged, largely undeveloped frontier like its western neighbors. Rockbridge's particular situation colored McDowell's opinion and his vote, since he took seriously the interests of his constituents. With a population of just over 14,000 in 1830, Rockbridge was one of the smallest counties in the Valley.¹⁹ The Valley was defined by its location in between the east and the west; it was bordered by both the Blue Ridge Mountains and the Allegheny Mountains. During the Revolutionary War, the county supplied hemp to the cause, which greatly increased the slave presence in the area. When the war ended, the demand for hemp decreased and locals turned to wheat, which, along with tobacco, were the primary products of the county.

Lexington, the largest town in Rockbridge and site of McDowell's home, was the site of Virginia Military Institute and Washington College (now Washington and Lee University). Lexington in the 1820s was a village of about 800 people. Nearby was a busy valley turnpike that paralleled the Blue Ridge Mountains. The people there were mostly Scotch-Irish Presbyterians, of which McDowell was also an adherent. The town desired greater regional prominence; Rockbridge County elites were fairly well connected to their eastern counterparts. With Washington College attracting sons of easterners along with a local school for girls, Rockbridge and specifically Lexington were unique in their many ties and contact with

¹⁹ Robert D. Mitchell, "The Settlement Fabric of the Shenandoah Valley, 1790-1860: Pattern, Process, and Structure," in *After the Backcountry* ed. Kenneth E. Koons and Warren R. Hofstra. (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 2000), 34.

easterners, which created their understanding—and desire—for their lifestyles. The increased contact with eastern Virginia meant that Rockbridge residents gained in their familiarity and closeness with the much older and more ingrained eastern slavery.²⁰ Interestingly, slavery in Rockbridge took root and grew precisely when the topic of slavery was commanding greater and greater national attention.²¹

The 1830 census revealed that there were 10,465 whites in Rockbridge County, with 381 free blacks and 3398 slaves. This meant that nearly one in every five residents was a slave, which was significantly more than other Valley counties.²² Whites in Rockbridge held beliefs about slavery similar to those in the rest of the Upper South: slaves were a necessary part of the economy and a sound investment. Every plantation differed on the scale between paternalism between master and slave and brutalities such as whipping to slaves. For an unknown reason, Rockbridge did have a “shockingly” high death rate of slaves and no other county in the Valley “possessed a more vigorous or expansive slave economy.”²³ Between 1800 and 1830, the number of slaves in Rockbridge grew 500%, while the average for other Valley counties was 120% growth through 1830. Only one other county west of the Blue Ridge boasted similar numbers, Kanawha County. The growth in tobacco planting was the primary reason for the growth along with an increase in iron manufacturing and mastery. Slaves were a sure investment in a world where many others were a great risk.²⁴

²⁰ Fitzhugh Brundage. “Shifting Attitudes Towards Slavery in Antebellum Rockbridge County.” In *Proceedings of the Rockbridge Historical Society*, edited by Larry I. Bland. Lexington: United Book Press, 2003, 338.

²¹ Brundage, 339.

²² Ellen Eslinger. “‘Sable Spectres on Missions of Evil’: Free Blacks in Antebellum Rockbridge County, Virginia,” in *After the Backcountry* ed. Kenneth E. Koons and Warren R. Hofstra. (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 2000), 195.

²³ Brundage, 334.

²⁴ Brundage, 337.

Rockbridge was home to many free blacks, most of whom were engaged in unskilled labor. Still, in 1830 the state of Virginia had 47, 349 free blacks, 86.6% of whom lived east of the Blue Ridge, so the population in Rockbridge was almost insignificant relative to the rest of the state. The population of free blacks in Rockbridge declined after Nat Turner; whites became very suspicious of free blacks, especially those that were preachers, and the county saw an out-migration during the 1830s as well as a decline in free blacks who had begun their lives as slaves before being manumitted.²⁵ Even with the small population, residents of Rockbridge felt threatened by free blacks and in 1826 founded the Rockbridge Colonization Society, a chapter of the American Colonization Society. James McDowell was listed in the Lexington Union as the group's vice president.²⁶ Their main concern was addressing the issue of free blacks and wanting to remove them to Africa. The group sent two petitions to Richmond with their recommendations on how to deal with free blacks. The first came in late 1827 and asked for a small tax specifically to fund colonization; it had ninety-seven signatures. The statement declared that free blacks were "separated by an impossible barrier from political privileges & social respectability, and untouched by the usual incentives degraded in sentiment" and thus "they must be our natural enemies, degraded in sentiment and debase in morals."²⁷ Following Nat Turner's Insurrection another petition was sent to Richmond, a standard preprinted from the Colonization Society of Virginia.²⁸

As an early member of the Rockbridge Colonization Society, McDowell's "interest in the welfare of the slave was a combination of humanitarianism and the decided belief that Virginia

²⁵ Eslinger, 196.

²⁶ Collier, 28.

²⁷ Eslinger 198.

²⁸ Ibid.

and the South would profit from the expulsion of the Negro.”²⁹ In some of his personal notes, he mentioned the idea of placing a \$1.00 tax on free Negroes used to transport them to Liberia. In addition, he suggested that owners would not be allowed to free their slaves unless the slave agreed to be exported within a year. Still, he did not believe in instantaneous emancipation, feeling it bad for the Virginia economy and bad for the slave. His best efforts, though, were severely restrained by the lack of funds available to colonization groups such as his.³⁰

²⁹ Collier, 28.

³⁰ Collier, 28.

CHAPTER 4 “CURRENT EVENTS”

The Virginia slavery debate came about because of specific circumstances within the state that cleared the way for legislators to introduce the idea of gradual emancipation of the slaves. The most obvious impetus for the debate was Nat Turner’s Rebellion. But, talks on internal improvements and a recent Constitutional Convention had exposed the ever-growing geographical rift within the state, a rift which would shape the debate and the legislature right up to the Civil War. McDowell’s specific circumstances, especially his home of Rockbridge County and his constituents, also set the stage for him to be an important player within the debate.

One political issue of importance to Virginians early in the nineteenth century was internal improvements, specifically the building of roads and improving water sources. Prominent Virginians such as George Washington had proposed the idea to join by canal the James and Great Kanawha Rivers, which would boost trade within the state and add a new dimension to the ability to transport goods such as coal and iron ore. This project was executed by the James River Company, a privately-held company, until 1820, when the Virginia General Assembly transformed it into a state owned and operated enterprise.³¹ The James River Company still built a seven-mile canal and improved navigation, but the eastern-dominated Assembly refused to allocate the proper funds necessary for the maintenance and construction needed to complete the task. Eastern delegates would not benefit from the canal’s usage as much as westerners, who would enjoy lower shipping costs at faster rates; thus the easterners opposed

³¹ Allison Freehling. *Drift Toward Dissolution: The Virginia Slavery Debate of 1831-1832*. (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1982), 16.

any legislation that would underwrite the costly construction. The Assembly's refusal meant that the Trans-Allegheny "remained commercially isolated from the Tidewater and Piedmont, an isolation that would have crucial consequences for the subsequent three decades of Virginia history," according to historian Allison Freehling.³² Thus, the discussion on internal improvements—and lack of funds allocated by the Assembly—exacerbated an issue that would define the slavery debate as well as the history of Virginia—the growing rift between east and west. The pattern was in place: eastern elites generally opposed extensive internal improvements while the growing commercial manufacturing class and westerners favored internal improvements and high tariffs to keep manufacturing domestic.³³

Much of the expansion of power for easterners throughout the eighteenth century can be attributed to the continued soil exhaustion from years of tobacco planting. Tidewater planters sought virgin lands on which to continue their successful growing of the plant. Throughout the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, wealthy planters expanded to new growing areas, which in turn increased the slave population and trade. By 1830, slaves generally outnumbered whites in the Tidewater and Piedmont regions by more than three to two, making up 60 to 70 percent of the population.³⁴ The Tidewater and Piedmont, with its colonial institutions and values, held the majority of Virginia's wealth and the majority of seats within the Virginia legislature.

The Constitutional Convention of 1829 represented the crest of the pressure coming from westerners and the clearest signal of the growing political turmoil between the geographical regions. Throughout the eighteenth century, easterners had dominated the government. They held two centuries worth of establishment and economic power, along with great social prestige. They

³² Ibid., 17.

³³ Ibid., 22.

³⁴ Ibid., 19.

did not always share the same interests, as rural and urban elites were markedly different from one another, but the threat of losing power caused them to form careful bonds to protect their political clout. With the dawn of the nineteenth century and the westward expansion, a new group of Virginians began push for more political representation. The west now demanded recognition in the government, with different ideas about who should be represented. With the eastern Blue Ridge Mountains and the western Allegheny Mountains creating mountain-size barriers in the middle of the state, “the state’s topography was as if custom-designed to yield pitched battles and uneasy compromises between eighteenth- and nineteenth-century conceptions of republican government,” according to historian William Freehling.³⁵ The distinguishing characteristic between those who wished to keep the power in the hands of an elite few and those for more egalitarian government came down primarily to where in Virginia one called home: Westerners desired a more egalitarian system of representation whereas Easterners worked hard to maintain their legislative power.

Part of the momentum for the westerners’ call for a more egalitarian system came from the Deep South. In 1819, Alabama entered the Union with a constitution that gave voting rights to all white men and the legislature’s apportionment was based on a one-man, one-vote system. Thus enfranchisement was based entirely on race, not on property or status in society. By the mid-1830s, Mississippi, Tennessee and Arkansas had all adapted very similar measures, with Georgia close behind.³⁶ The “Old Dominion,” Virginia, refused to crumble to such measures, calling them a “mobocracy.” Only gentlemen were worthy of voting rights; the wealthy, intelligent and educated felt that only the wealthy, intelligent and educated of society should

³⁵ William Freehling. *The Road to Disunion: Secessionists at Bay, 1776-1854.* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990), 164.

³⁶ Ibid.

have the governing power. Slaveholders who were used to dominating over their slaves found it natural to dominate poorer whites as well. These men had the notion that their apportionment was still democratic as seats were allocated by population, using the 3/5ths clause, where all slaves counted as three-fifths of a white person, to give weight to their owners but not count as much as a white. Of course, eastern slaveholders had an exceptionally large amount of power and thus complete control over the state's politics, including matters of where the money went. As non-slaveholding people began to fill the western part of the state, they began to demand the egalitarian rights of the lower south.³⁷

The tension built and at last the Constitutional Convention was called in 1829. The convention did faintly foreshadow the slavery debate: although seemingly a question of representation, the contest for democracy in Virginia would prove to be a contest over slavery. Westerners, though, did not attack slavery at the Convention. They directly attacked the apportionment that so limited their interests in matters of government and political power, although that apportionment was intimately linked to slavery. Ultimately, the eastern elite proved they were a force not easily shaken. The Convention, in a close vote of 55-40, where 54 of the 55 were easterners, voted in a revised constitution. The new measures reduced the property minimum for white voters from \$50 to \$25, which increased the franchised population from one-half to two-thirds of white male Virginians, still very far from a democratic system. One major point of debate had been whether to use 1820s or 1830s census numbers for the basis of apportionment. Because the population of the west had grown 500% since 1790, faster than the rest of the state put together, apportionment according to the later census was certainly in the west's interest, which before the Convention had two-thirds fewer delegates in the lower house

³⁷ Henry Wilson, *The Rise and Fall of the Slave Power in America*. (Houghton, Mifflin, and Co.: Boston, 1872), 164.

than did the east. In this matter, though, the east won out and the new constitution called for use of 1820's numbers.³⁸ Additionally, the Convention-adapted Constitution still gave the selection of the governor to the legislature, as opposed to popular election. McDowell, while not a member, closely followed the convention and attended some of the hearings, very sympathetic to the west and its attempt to gain proper representation.³⁹ The Convention, while accomplishing a small amount for the west, revealed but did not address the chasm between the east and the west. Historian William Freehling explains that within "that pristine moment of hatred, grandees and commoners knew what history would take 30 more years to reveal—that Virginia, the pivotal state in the middle of the South, could not forever find a middle way."⁴⁰ The Convention was the first real indicator of where battle lines were drawn in the state of Virginia, revealing the political clout of the eastern population and foreshadowing where Virginians would line up two years later to debate the issue of slavery itself.

Though Virginians were always aware of the threat of a population where slaves increasingly outnumbered whites, never did that fear resonate more profoundly than after Nat Turner's Rebellion. The rebellion came out of Southampton County, Virginia, which is located on the border of North Carolina and is in the eastern part of the state about two hundred miles away from Rockbridge County. Nat Turner was a slave from Southampton County who believed from birth that he was destined for something greater than the back-breaking, dehumanizing labor of slavery. Turner's sense that he was "a prophet of the Lord and that he was guided by Divine inspiration" grew into a reality when he, in the wee hours of the morning on August 22,

³⁸ Allison Freehling, 77 and William Freehling, 170 and 176.

³⁹ Collier, 42.

⁴⁰ William Freehling, 173.

1831, gathered four co-conspirators and launched an attack.⁴¹ The day would be “very noted in Virginia,” wrote Governor John Floyd in his private diary.⁴² The rebels began right at home—slaying the four white adults, their own masters—and set on their way, before returning to kill an infant they had forgotten. As they journeyed through the countryside, they continued to kill whites and gather other slaves to join their insurrection. All said and done, the physical damage was the loss of sixty-one whites and property across the area ruined. Turner managed to keep himself hidden in the woods for weeks until, with Virginians completely unnerved at the thought of this criminal still on the prowl. On October 30, 1831, Nat Turner was finally found. Shortly thereafter, he was put on trial, found guilty of murder and executed.⁴³ Over one hundred slaves would be killed or executed by the end of the trials. The Richmond *Whig* stated that “another such insurrection would be followed by putting the whole black race to the sword.”⁴⁴ Jane Randolph, the wife of Jefferson’s grandson Thomas Jefferson Randolph, was horrified over the insurrection and said it “aroused all my fears which had nearly become dormant, and indeed have increased them to the most agonizing degree” and asked her husband to move west.⁴⁵

The intangible effect would be far greater reaching. As word spread across the state and across the South, fear took residence in the hearts of white slave owners and their families. As McDowell would later state, the fear was any and every household might contain a Nat Turner.⁴⁶

Governor Floyd proposed that the issue was with free blacks, especially those that were

⁴¹ Wilson, 190.

⁴² Charles Ambler, *The Life and Diary of John Floyd, Governor of Virginia, an Apostle of Secession and the Father of the Oregon Country* (Richmond: 1918), Webroots.org <http://www.webroots.org/library/usabios/ladojf05.html> (accessed March 29, 2010).

⁴³ Collier, 25.

⁴⁴ Wilson, 191.

⁴⁵ Quoted by Louis P. Masur, “Nat Turner and Sectional Crisis,” in *Nat Turner: A Slave Rebellion in History and Memory*, ed. Kenneth S. Greenberg, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 154.

⁴⁶ James McDowell. *Speech of James McDowell, Jr. (Of Rockbridge) In The House of Delegates of Virginia on the Slave Question*. Second Edition. (Richmond: Thomas W. White, 1832).

preachers and traveled to various farms propagating their messages, supposedly full of rebellious content.⁴⁷ The Richmond *Whig* and the Richmond *Enquirer* agreed with the governor's statements.⁴⁸ Their fears were somewhat unfounded. Historians today believe that slaves, especially young ones, did not maintain Christian faith as Turner did and "this non-Christian majority of Virginia slaves resisted bondage individually and without divine inspiration," according to historian John C. Willis.⁴⁹ Slaves would find small methods of resistance rather than planning and launching brutal, murderous attacks on their owners as Turner did. Clearly, Nat Turner brought hysteria and damage, both physically upon Southampton and emotionally across Virginia and the Southern states. Statesman and historian Henry Wilson would later write of this event that "portions of the community were thrown into panic, and the thrilling cry of the affrightened people, in peril of their lives and imploring protection, day after day filled the ears of the governor of that great commonwealth."⁵⁰

Beyond the fear that settled deep into the hearts of Virginians, though, the Nat Turner insurrection gave further credibility to those who were anxious about the institution of slavery and gave enough reason to formalize their discussions against it. Even slave owners understood the need to bring the debate to the legislature and discuss the slave problem. Governor John Floyd noted in his diary that "The Eastern members, meaning those east of the Blue Ridge Mountains, wish to avoid the discussion, but it must come if I can influence my friends in the Assembly to bring it on. I will not rest until slavery is abolished in Virginia."⁵¹ So, just over

⁴⁷ Collier, 23.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 24.

⁴⁹ John C. Willis. "From the Dictates of Pride to the Paths of Righteousness: Slave Honor and Christianity in Antebellum Virginia," in *The Edge of the South: Life in Nineteenth-Century Virginia*, ed. Edward L. Ayers and John C. Willis (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 1991), 39.

⁵⁰ Wilson, 191-2.

⁵¹ Diary of John Floyd.

three months after Nat Turner's Rebellion, the Virginia legislature would begin to face the problem of slavery with more courage and force than ever before.

CHAPTER 5 THE GREAT DEBATE

A highly anticipated legislative season convened on December 5, 1831, a regular meeting that would be sure to address at least in part the slave question. Throughout the fall, newspapers from the North and South had speculated on what would come from the Virginia General Assembly following Nat Turner. Many of the representatives elected to serve in that legislature were young and energetic, ready to tackle the issue of slavery and make their mark on history. The representatives came from four regions: the Tidewater, which encompassed the sea to the fall line; the Piedmont, from the fall line to the Blue Ridge Mountains; the Valley, which lay between the Blue Ridges and the more western Allegheny Mountains; and the Trans-Allegheny, which encompassed all of Virginia west of the Alleghenies. Those from east of the Blue Ridge were generally of old-line families and had serious interests in slavery to protect. Present in the house were 133 delegates, who owned 1,131 taxable slaves, or slaves over twelve years of age. James Bruce of Halifax had the most slaves numbering at sixty-nine; McDowell had four.⁵² The Tidewater and Piedmont delegates possessed 1,029 slaves while the rest of the delegates had 106.⁵³ The proportions of slaves owned by the delegates from the four regions generally were true to the proportions owned by their constituents in the 1830 census: the Tidewater with 185,457 slaves, the Piedmont at 230,861, the Valley with 34,772, and the Trans-Allegheny with 18,665 slaves. The white population was fairly evenly divided, although the Piedmont had 30

⁵² Collier, 49.

⁵³ Ibid.

percent and the Valley 19.4 percent. The rest were in the west or the Tidewater, with approximately a quarter of Virginia's whites in each.⁵⁴

On December 6, Governor Floyd addressed the Assembly, calling for revision of the laws to preserve "in due subordination" the slave population and suggested their removal, even as he did not suggest any practical plan.⁵⁵ Following the governor's speech, the House appointed a special committee to consider any proposals introduced in the legislature relating to the insurrection or the status of free blacks. There were thirteen members of the committee debate: seven from the Piedmont, three from the Tidewater, two from the Valley and one Trans-Allegheny representative.⁵⁶ Clearly, the committee was sectionally weighted although it would not be unanimous in its opinions on slavery or the direction the House should take.

The first representatives to speak spoke mainly of colonization of free blacks and the restrictions on occupations of free blacks and slaves. Their proposals were referred to the committee for review. The committee was chaired by William H. Brodnax, a slaveholder himself and representative of Dinwiddie County of the heavily enslaved Piedmont region. He had been a militia commander during the Turner insurrection and had gathered thousands of troops and rushed to the scene only to find nothing to conquer.⁵⁷ On the committee representing the non-slaveholding minority was Charles J. Faulkner, from west of the Blue Ridge. He presented to the committee his proposal for gradual emancipation of the slaves, which was tabled by the pro-slavery committee. The public followed the committee's actions closely as the legislature maintained attention from all of Virginia and much of the nation. Virginia newspapers, reporting on the discussions within the committee and the opening of the official debate, "boldly presented

⁵⁴ Allison Freehling, 269.

⁵⁵ Wilson, 192.

⁵⁶ Freehling, Allison, 125.

⁵⁷ Freehling, William 184.

emancipation schemes that a short time before would have been heralded as the work of a fanatic.”⁵⁸

The debate could have remained in the hands of the slavery-oriented committee had it not been for a political maneuver by Representative Thomas Jefferson Randolph, the grandson of Thomas Jefferson and a western Piedmont abolitionist. The strongly anti-emancipationist Representative William Goode inquired into the progress of the committee, which reported back that it would present their recommendation in a week. Goode, however, could not wait and moved that the committee be dismissed, thus completely tabling further emancipation considerations. In his motion, he suggested that it was “not expedient to legislate on the subject.”⁵⁹ Randolph, however, proposed that the subject of the expediency of gradually emancipating the slaves be put to a vote. Randolph’s plan was to emancipate slaves born after July 4, 1840 once they reached a particular age, loosely based on his grandfather’s plan of gradual emancipation and that of northern states.⁶⁰ His suggestion, hotly contested and a point of discussion throughout, touched off the debate, which began on January 16, 1832.⁶¹

Three distinct groups soon emerged—conservatives, moderates and abolitionists. Conservatives, sixty in number, generally hailed from the Tidewater and Piedmont areas and saw no need for immediate discussion of the emancipation of slaves. Abolitionists, with fifty-eight in their ranks, primarily represented western counties, including some of the Valley and Trans-Allegheny. Moderates realized the eventual need for emancipation but did not see fit to deal with

⁵⁸ Collier, 50.

⁵⁹ *Richmond Enquirer*, as quoted by Collier, 52.

⁶⁰ Allison Freehling, 129.

⁶¹ William Freehling, 182.

the issue at that time. These men came from all over the state except the Trans-Allegheny counties and would be important in making a majority for either side with thirteen delegates.⁶²

Samuel McDowell Moore, a distant cousin of McDowell's and another Rockbridge representative, opened the discussion by asserting that the ignorance demanded for slaves by their owners was immoral and that slavery caused young Virginians to consider any form of manual labor degrading. The next day, January 12, James H. Gholson of Brunswick answered Moore with his strong defense of the institution. He himself had sixteen slaves, and in his speech he explicitly compared the female slave to a brood mare. Because a female, whether horse or person, he argued, was limited in her working abilities during gestation, her master's only recompense was the ownership of her offspring. To continue ownership of a slave's child was a natural right, he said.⁶³ He concluded that none of the present members of the legislature were responsible for slavery and the slaves were happy as they were. The problem in Virginia, he said, lay in free Negroes and their removal would bring peace without trouble. Gholson's sentiments of desiring a lily-white Virginia were common. Indeed, as Historian Patricia Hinkin notes, "when antislavery politicians in Virginia, unquestionably conservative in their attitudes, talked about emancipation they talked about emancipation with deportation; when they dreamed of a Virginia without slavery, they dreamed of a Commonwealth without the Negro."⁶⁴ Still, large slaveholders were not yet ready to get rid of their greatest source of wealth and political power.

Colonel Brodnax entered the debate with his conclusions based on the committee's discussions. He acknowledged that everyone in Virginia lamented the very existence of slaves. "Every intelligent individual," he said, "admits that slavery is the most pernicious of all the evils

⁶² Allison Freehling, 159-160.

⁶³ Collier, 54.

⁶⁴ Hinkin, Patricia. *Anti-Slavery in Virginia 1831-1861*. (Ann Arbor: University Microfilms, 1975), 123.

with which the body politic can be afflicted.”⁶⁵ He called slavery a “mildew which has blighted every region it has touched, from the foundation of the world.”⁶⁶ Still, he was opposed to a system of emancipation that interfered with private property, brought down its value or emancipated a slave from an unconsenting master. He declared that government representatives who brought any such measure would be ousted from their post and the people of Virginia would fall into disunity.⁶⁷

Rebutting Brodnax’s argument, Charles Faulkner, who was at the time minister to France, spoke of the practical need to emancipate the slaves as it would be the rescue of the state from the inevitable doom it faced. He claimed that the property rights touted by Brodnax and Gholson were not “absolute” but were in fact dependent on the “acquiescence and consent...of society.”⁶⁸ Those against emancipation were so dramatic in denouncing them that they were proving themselves to be rash and over the top. “If slavery can be eradicated,” he said, “in God’s name let us get rid of it.” “Spare us the curse of slavery,” he said, which in his opinion, “banishes free white labor.” He did, though, desire a mild, gradual form of emancipation, recognizing the shock to the economy that an all-at-once emancipation would bring.⁶⁹

The debate raged on. Representative Wood suggested that gentlemen founded the country and to remain gentlemen and live lives of luxury, slavery was a necessity.⁷⁰ The select committee reported on January 16th that it would be inexpedient for the legislature to pass any measure related to the abolition of slavery. McDowell’s cousin, William B. Preston, suggested a simple word change on the subject of whether the legislature found reason to bring emancipation

⁶⁵ Wilson, 193.

⁶⁶ Ibid.

⁶⁷ Wilson, 198.

⁶⁸ Freehling, Allison 145.

⁶⁹ Wilson, 199-200.

⁷⁰ Wilson, 202.

and the slavery question to debate. To replace the word “inexpedient” he proposed “expedient.” Preston also contended that the problem was a problem of color and were the slaves white the issue would be different.⁷¹ Representative George Summers from western Virginia chimed in with anti-slavery sentiments. Speaking of his region’s desire to keep slaves and slavery far away from them, Summers said “we cannot desire to see our mountains blackened with the slave, or that the fresh grass of the Valley should wither beneath his tread.”⁷²

⁷¹ Collier, 56.

⁷² Wilson, 203-205.

CHAPTER 6
MCDOWELL'S ADDRESS

McDowell listened closely to all of these speeches and ardently prepared a response he was not sure he would actually give. He received letters from constituents urging him to employ his oratory skills and deliver a speech. J.W. Paine of Lexington wrote him of his desire for a “home where my children would never be visited with the evils of slavery.” He also commented:

We are ready here...to go any length in the bounds of reason and prudence to effect a relief from this overwhelming evil—your colleague [Samuel McDowell] Moore, is gaining great applause here for his boldness and decision in this cause—you must speak your mind on it at a proper time, and be not afraid of your constituents carrying you out on this score.⁷³

He ended by adding, “We feel here as if this was a question of life or death and await the result with painful anxiety.”⁷⁴ McDowell, though, “stood awe-struck before the expectations of the public and the magnitude of the matter in hand, and allowed one after another of his compeers to take the floor till nearly all had spoken.”⁷⁵

After an extended silence, McDowell finally took the stage. He began the speech with trepidation, seeing that before him sat all of Virginia as an audience.⁷⁶ His daughter would later report that as he left home on the morning of January 21, the tenth day of the debate, he told his wife, “Well, Susan, you would not let me off from a speech on the abolition resolutions. I am going to make it this morning. In an hour somebody will come back to tell you that your husband

⁷³ J.W. Paine to James McDowell, January 16, 1832, “James McDowell Papers” UNC Southern Historical Collection, Chapel Hill.

⁷⁴ Ibid.

⁷⁵ Miller, 56.

⁷⁶ Collier, 57

has disgraced himself by an ignominious failure.”⁷⁷ Though she apparently would worry over her husband for three hours, other women came rushing to tell her that her husband’s speech had been anything but an “ignominious failure.”⁷⁸

McDowell opened with a discussion on why he really lamented even having to enter the debate, preferring to remain silent on the issue, “I would not open the lips which discretion should seal, were it not that the question we are discussing, and the discussion itself, have brought a crisis upon the country.”⁷⁹ Slavery, McDowell said, was an evil, yes. But even more so, it was an evil so interwoven into the wealthy Southerner’s lifestyle that it was both incorrigible and unreachable. He challenged, as his cousin did, the word “inexpedient” in the committee’s summarizations. His thorough knowledge of the Constitution and American history allowed him to use historical examples to dispute those who felt that it was not their duty to deal with slavery.⁸⁰ To those who considered that the legislative body was not authorized to decide the slavery question, he answered that only the founders had the ability to deal with it, as it was less of a problem then and there were far fewer slaves. But, precisely because the founders had fewer slaves, McDowell argued, the only reason they could have advocated for emancipation would have been moral, and not the public safety concerns they held today. Thus, the founders did not make it their duty to emancipate the slaves as they felt no moral burden to do so. He briefly mentioned, as well, that the country was founded upon the principles of freedom and then they continued a system that enslaved an entire race of people.⁸¹

⁷⁷ Miller, 57.

⁷⁸ Ibid.

⁷⁹ *Speech of James McDowell, Jr. (Of Rockbridge) In The House of Delegates of Virginia on the Slave Question*. Second Edition. (Richmond: Thomas W. White, 1832). Hereinafter cited as McDowell, *The Slave Question*.

⁸⁰ Collier, 60.

⁸¹ McDowell, *The Slave Question* 7.

But McDowell stated that he did not approach the slavery question from a moral stance, knowing that it would not move the hearts of slave owners who cared little for the moral issues brought up in the institution and not feeling particularly morally burdened for the slaves either. Instead, he reminded them that if they are paralyzed by fear, they are not really free. Virginians hold the “birthright of citizenship in a free community,” but, he asked, is this birthright truly valuable when “the retention of it has paralyzed the energies of the State and planted at every hearth the instrument of domestic massacre?”⁸² Slavery was the enemy of a healthy and thriving Virginia economy, he said. He presented the picture of the perfect Virginia, with healthy, abundant lands and an economy that allows everyone to live the lifestyle they desire. He then denounced this ideal, especially and particularly because of the bonds that slavery puts on the white man just as much as the slave.⁸³ Though McDowell believed in property rights and held four slaves at the time of the debate, he proceeded to make a strong argument in favor of the right of the state over the rights of the individual. Since the state is instituting and upholding slavery through runaway slave laws and various codes, the state has the right to replace or change the institution. “The private property, therefore, which a State allows to be held by its citizens, must consist with the general end for which the State itself is created; must be held under the reserved and necessary condition that it is not to be productive of public disadvantage.”⁸⁴

Although he disagreed with Randolph’s idea of setting an arbitrary date, McDowell agreed with his idea of the gradual emancipation of slaves. “I answer frankly that there can be no other mode than that of keeping down or diminishing the increase of slaves by a gradual

⁸² Ibid 9-10.

⁸³ Ibid.

⁸⁴ Ibid., 11.

liberation and removal of them.”⁸⁵ His involvement with the Colonization Society shows in his speech, as he did not believe in simply emancipating the slaves, but after freeing them to carry out somehow export them to Africa. If an owner declined to surrender their slaves voluntarily, the state would purchase them. McDowell was at least vaguely aware of the exorbitant cost of such an idea, and he mentioned that if the state did not have the means to purchase them, then they would be seized by the state in favor of the public good.⁸⁶ His statement was radical and he knew the implications of introducing the idea that the state’s rights could ever be greater than the rights of the individual. But, the climate of fear in Virginia meant that McDowell could push the point that her legislature needed to take action. When else would slavery be so imminent a danger and thus subject to discussion than in that particular moment of history? Perhaps the danger presented to the public demanded such an action from the government. The government, after all, was created to protect the people it governed.⁸⁷ He said that it was “the right and duty of every community to qualify, limit and prescribe the terms on which property shall be held by its citizens, and, therefore, the duty of the citizen to submit his property, at all times, to this reserved right of control in his government.”⁸⁸

Though these sentiments had been echoed lightly prior to McDowell’s speech, his remarks were comprehensive and very direct in their attack of slavery. His speech infuriated conservative representatives, who cited “legal impediments to McDowell’s proposals, and predicted civil war if such an idea was incorporated into a plan of emancipation.”⁸⁹ Governor Floyd, McDowell’s uncle, wrote in his private diary on the day of McDowell’s speech, “The

⁸⁵ Ibid., 14.

⁸⁶ Ibid.

⁸⁷ Ibid., 17.

⁸⁸ Ibid., 16.

⁸⁹ Collier, 63.

debate in the House is growing in interest and I fear engendering bad and party feelings. It must be checked in erratic tendencies.”⁹⁰

Hearing many members of the House claim that the slave actually appreciated and needed slavery since it offered security, food and clothing, McDowell asserted that a slave would desire freedom over continuing to be with his master in almost all cases. He said that although slaves were generally treated well, at least according to their owners, the slave, given a choice, would choose to be free. He boldly asserted that though the slave is not the same as a white man, he is still a person and has all the functions of a human, especially in his range of human emotions.⁹¹ He audaciously insisted that even if a man were to take away every “avenue of knowledge” and “cloud [his mind] with artificial night,” the slave would still yearn to be free. A household with slaves would never be safe, he claimed:

Who that looks upon his family with the slave in its bosom, ministering to its wants, but knows and feels that this is true—who but sees and knows how much the safety of that family depends on forbearance, how little can be provided by defense? Sir, you may exhaust yourself upon the schemes of domestic defense, and when you have examined every project which the mind can suggest, you will, at last, have only a deeper consciousness that nothing can be done. The curse which in combination with others, has been denounced against man as a just punishment for his sins—the curse of having an enemy in his household—has come upon us. We have an enemy there to whom our dwelling is at all times accessible—our persons at all times—our lives at all times and that by manifold weapons, both visible and concealed.⁹²

Slavery was an evil not only because it endangered those sharing a household with slaves, but also because it had the potential to so divide the nation. It could, McDowell suggested, create a major rift in Congress. He speaks hauntingly of what should happen should the Union divide over the issue of slavery, of the “vindictiveness of a ruptured brotherhood.”⁹³ It would be

⁹⁰ Diary of John Floyd, January 21, 1832.

⁹¹ McDowell *The Slave Question*, 19-20.

⁹² *Ibid.*, 20-21.

⁹³ *Ibid.*, 22.

impossible for the slaveholding and non-slaveholding interests not to eventually collide. “Let this Union which... is worthy not only of the loyalty of our principles but the loyalty of our affections too, let it be given up... be handed over to separate and disunited States for their care and preservation, and what, I ask you, is to be the consequence?”⁹⁴

McDowell declared that the Nat Turner rebellion was no “petty affair,” referencing the hysteria throughout Virginia afterwards. There remained, he felt, “the suspicion that there might be a Nat Turner in every family.”⁹⁵ With the slaves continuing to increase in numbers, at least according to McDowell, Virginia would soon find herself in a situation where the numerical superiority of the slaves would lead to “inevitable danger to the public safety” as the “dangers of the slave population mainly arise upon its excess over the white population.”⁹⁶ Due to tobacco soil exhaustion, though, slavery would prove to be actually on the decline during this period.

McDowell then turned to a more regionally based argument. He spoke in defense of westerners and their justification for their political involvement in slavery, as slavery affected the lives of westerners just as much as easterners. If slavery was such an evil as it was declared to be, the west had a great interest in protecting itself from that and the situation in which the east now found itself. To close his remarks, McDowell pushed for the expediency of the decision and insisted that something be done about “The Slave Question” or it be to the great detriment of Virginia and perhaps the country.⁹⁷

The speech was immediately the subject of much conversation. The editor of the Richmond *Whig* reported that McDowell’s speech “at once placed him in the front rank of the talent and eloquence of Virginia. Friend and foe of the cause which he supported, agree in its

⁹⁴ Ibid.

⁹⁵ McDowell, *The Slave Question* 28-29.

⁹⁶ Ibid., 30.

⁹⁷ Ibid., 31-33.

high merit.”⁹⁸ Historian Hermann Eduard Von Holst said the debate was “carried away” by McDowell and his assertion that “unless the evil were now attacked by legislative means, its removal would have to take place amid convulsions” or not without major political ramifications.⁹⁹ One of McDowell’s constituents, Joseph Bell, wrote him that “The Whig speaks in high Commendation of your Speeches; I long to see them,” referencing his main speech and some other comments he made toward the end of the legislative session. Some spoke of publishing them all in a separate pamphlet, Bell reported.¹⁰⁰ Historian Henry Wilson wrote in 1872 that “the most eloquent and effective speech of this great debate was made by James McDowell... It was a masterly portrayal of the ruin and demoralization wrought by slavery in his native state.”¹⁰¹

Even with all of the attention generated by the speech, praising McDowell mainly for his eloquence and ability to orate, very little legislative action actually came from the debate. On January 25, 1832, votes were taken on the various resolutions that were presented. For slavery’s opponents, the strongest word would come from Bryce’s preamble to the select committee’s report, which denounced slavery but awaited further legislative action on the development of public opinion.¹⁰² Governor Floyd was concerned over the anger in the legislature and confided in his diary that “The debate is stopped but the members from the South side of the James River talk of making a proposition to divide the State by the Blue Ridge Mountains sooner than part with their negroes, which is the property of that part of the State.”¹⁰³ On February 16, the House

⁹⁸ Miller, 63.

⁹⁹ Quoted by Miller, 64. She refers to his work as Von Holst’s *United States*, which is taken to mean his principal work of an extensive history of this period in U.S. History, *Constitutional and Political History of the United States*.

¹⁰⁰ Joseph Bell to James McDowell, February 15, 1832. “James McDowell Papers,” UNC Southern Historical Collection, Chapel Hill.

¹⁰¹ Wilson, 205.

¹⁰² Collier, 68.

¹⁰³ Diary of John Floyd, January 25, 1832.

passed a bill appropriating money to go towards the deportation of willing free blacks and manumitted slaves, which was wholeheartedly supported by McDowell, but it was rejected in the Senate. Before the legislature adjourned on March 21, the members revised the slave code, placing further restrictions on slaves, including preachers and religious assemblies.¹⁰⁴

Yet the lack of legislative action did not hamper the conversation and the concern of Virginians on the slavery issue. Newspapers continued the debates just as citizens chatted amongst themselves over what the future would hold for the institution. The moment for legislative action, though, had passed.

¹⁰⁴ Collier, 69.

CHAPTER 7 EPILOGUE

After losing his seat in the legislature in 1835, McDowell moved back to Lexington until running for governor. He was elected in 1840 and in 1841, he began his three year term. After serving as governor, he was elected to the U.S. House of Representatives, to replace the late William Taylor, where he served until his death in 1851. McDowell passed away from poor health after a trip home in inclement weather and a broken heart after losing his wife and a daughter within months of one another. He died six weeks after his daughter's death.

Upon his death, a Presbyterian minister made these remarks at his funeral, which took place in Washington:

His tall, erect and dignified form was a fitting tabernacle for the noble spirit that dwelt within. With a height sense of honor, chastened by religious sentiment, and sustained by Christian integrity: with a modesty as profound as his merits were exalted; and with gifts and acquirements fitting him for the highest stations in civil life; he would have remained in private to his dying day, rather than have sought preferment by any of the sorry arts, alas! too common among politicians. If his fellow citizens called him to public station, he was grateful for their confidence, and he devoted faithfully to their service his great abilities ...¹⁰⁵

He did not live to see the Civil War, though politicians whose stances were similar to his did not fare well in politics as the South became staunchly supportive of slavery. Those who had even dared to criticize slavery and spoke out in the debate were reminded of and chastised for their

¹⁰⁵ Junkin, David Xavier. "The Christian statesman: a discourse occasioned by the death of the Hon. James McDowell, late governor of Virginia, pronounced in the F. Street Presbyterian Church, Washington City, Sabbath morning, September 14, 1851," "James McDowell Papers," University of Virginia Special Collections Library, Charlottesville.

words and lost public appeal. McDowell himself always longed for a U.S. Senate seat that he never gained, partially due to his rigid anti-slavery stance during this debate.

Never again did Virginia so widely discuss the possibility of a system of emancipation. Northern abolitionists made their voices louder and louder until the South began to push back in defense of slavery, calling it a necessary evil and then finally a positive good for the society, both blacks and whites. Of course, the issue rose and the pressure mounted until it exploded and brought on the Civil War. Unique in the rhetorical history of slavery in Virginia is the Virginia Slavery Debate, where politicians put slavery on trial and newspapers pondered a Virginia without slavery and even perhaps without slaves. McDowell's background as both Rockbridge County resident and slaveholder made him a unique and interesting figure, apart from his speech which shook up status quo and sparked more debate.

Virginia could not bring herself to free her slaves. The east proved its dominance was too strong for a small but determined west. The west would have its way, though, when it in 1863 seceded from Virginia and sided with the abolitionist North, establishing itself as its own state. The Valley region, continually torn between east and west, ultimately stayed with Virginia. Of course, the South would lose the war and the slaves would be emancipated. Virginia, along with the other Southern states, would miss her chance to take action and have her legislature determine the future of slavery, or the future of Virginia in general. Had the representatives during the slavery debate known what the future held, would they have emancipated the slaves on their own? Perhaps. But the fierce opposition to proposals and speeches such as McDowell's indicates such a dependence on slavery that perhaps only a devastating war was the means for which the slaves to be freed.

WORKS CITED

Primary Sources:

Ambler, Charles H. *The Life and Diary of John Floyd, Governor of Virginia, an Apostle of Secession and the Father of the Oregon Country* (Richmond: 1918), Webroots.org <http://www.webroots.org/library/usabios/ladojf05.html> (accessed March 29, 2010).

Joseph Bell to James McDowell, February 15, 1832. "James McDowell Papers," UNC Southern Historical Collection, Chapel Hill.

Junkin, David Xavier. "The Christian statesman: a discourse occasioned by the death of the Hon. James McDowell, late governor of Virginia, pronounced in the F Street Presbyterian Church, Washington City, Sabbath morning, September 14, 1851," "James McDowell Papers," University of Virginia Special Collections Library, Charlottesville.

J.W. Paine to James McDowell, January 16, 1832, "James McDowell Papers," UNC Southern Historical Collection, Chapel Hill.

McDowell, James. *Speech of James McDowell, Jr. (Of Rockbridge) In The House of Delegates of Virginia on the Slave Question*. Second Edition. Richmond: Thomas W. White, 1832.

Miller, Sally Campbell Preston. *Memoir of James McDowell, LL. D., Governor of Virginia*. Baltimore: John Murphy & Co, 1895.

Wilson, Henry. *The Rise and Fall of the Slave Power in America*. Boston: Houghton, Mifflin, and Co., 1872.

Secondary Sources:

Brundage, Fitzhugh. "Shifting Attitudes Towards Slavery in Antebellum Rockbridge County." In *Proceedings of the Rockbridge Historical Society*, edited by Larry I. Bland. Lexington: United Book Press, 2003.

Collier, James Glen. *The Political Career of James McDowell: 1830-1851*. Chapel Hill: Ph.D. Thesis, 1963.

Eslinger, Ellen. "'Sable Spectres on Missions of Evil': Free Blacks in Antebellum Rockbridge County, Virginia," in *After the Backcountry* ed. Kenneth E. Koons and Warren R. Hofstra. Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 2000.

- Freehling, Allison. *Drift Toward Dissolution: The Virginia Slavery Debate of 1831-1832*. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1982.
- Freehling, William. *The Road to Disunion: Secessionists at Bay, 1776-1854*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1990.
- Greenberg, Kenneth S., ed. *Nat Turner: A Slave Rebellion in History and Memory*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003.
- Mitchell, Robert D., "The Settlement Fabric of the Shenandoah Valley, 1790-1860: Pattern, Process, and Structure," in *After the Backcountry* ed. Kenneth E. Koons and Warren R. Hofstra. Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 2000.
- Willis, John C.. "From the Dictates of Pride to the Paths of Righteousness: Slave Honor and Christianity in Antebellum Virginia," in *The Edge of the South: Life in Nineteenth-Century Virginia*, ed. Edward L. Ayers and John C. Willis. Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 1991.