Indication of the attitude of Virginia colleges toward the institution of slavery, 1800-1860

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INDICATION OF THE ATTITUDE OF VIRGINIA COLLEGES TOWARD the INSTITUTION OF SLAVERY 1800--1860

by

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Ballagh, James Curtis  
**History of Slavery in Virginia**  
Baltimore -- 1902

Bledsoe, Albert Taylor  
**An Essay on Liberty and Slavery**  
Philadelphia -- 1856

Bruce, Philip Alexander  
**History of University of Virginia**  
New York -- c. 1920 Volume I  
Volume III

Dew, Thomas R.  
**The Pro-Slavery Argument**  
Philadelphia 1853

Dodu, William Edward  
**Statesmen of the Old South**  
New York -- 1924

Jeter, Jeremiah Bell  
**Recollections of a Long Life**  
Richmond, 1891

Munford, Beverley B.  
**Virginia's Attitude toward Slavery and Secession**  
New York -- 1909

Robertson, Archibald Thomas  
**Life and Letters of John Albert Broadus**  
Philadelphia -- 1901

Ryland, Robert  
**Origin and History of The First African Church**  
**The First Century of the First Baptist Church of Richmond, Virginia**  
Richmond, -- 1880
Smith, William A.
Lectures on the Philosophy and Practice of Slavery
Nashville -- 1856

Taylor, George Braxton
Virginia Baptist Ministers -- Volume III
Lynchburg -- 1912

Tucker, St. George
A Dissertation on Slavery
Philadelphia -- 1796

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New York -- 1915

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Sketch of Edward Coles
Chicago -- 1882

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Nathaniel Beverley Tucker
Richmond College Historical Papers -- June 1917

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New York 1892

The William and Mary Quarterly
Volumes 6, 14
It was natural that the Virginia colleges should concern themselves with the all important subject of slavery in the sixty years interval of the widespread discussion which culminated in one of the most bitter and distressing struggles that the United States has ever experienced. For had not Virginia always taken the foremost stand in any matter concerning the South's welfare, and was not her heart-felt anxiety representative of all her fellow states? Logically, the opinions of high minded, cultured college professors in her first colleges were influences which were not disregarded by Virginians and by the entire South, but were recognized as being those of the states at large and best for the South politically, economically, and morally. Further, the younger, mentally efficient men, who were being graduated from colleges to become the outstanding leaders of their day, had views of their own, open, firm, and with the combined effect of their professors' influence said what they thought and believed to be best for the prosperity of the entire United States.

First we shall consider the three outstanding denominational educational institutions of the time: Randolph Macon, the Methodist college at Ashland; Hampden-Sydney, the
chief seat of learning of the Presbyterian believers; and
Richmond College, located in the city yet to become the
capitol of the Confederacy and a college upheld by the
baptists of the state.

In the case of Randolph Macon, if we be guided by the
very marked opinion of the President of the coll<
around 1850, it could readily be said of this institution
that it advocated slavery first and last. 1 For in 1856
Dr. William Smith published his book of lectures on the
slavery question, in which he upheld that this practice was
undoubtedly God's chosen way of managing the world. He
insists "that slavery is right -- or that the great abstract
principle of slavery is right because it is a fundamental
principle of the social state. Domestic slavery, as an in-
stitution is fully justified by the condition and circum-
stance of the African race in this country." 2 That slavery
was becoming more and more practical, 3 he is positive, and he
asserts that "the ascendancy which certain popular errors on
the subject of African slavery have acquired, and the extent
to which they imperil the peace of the country, if not the
very liberties of the whole republic," 4 is wrong.

1 - Dr. R. E. Blackwell, President now of Randolph Macon,
writes in a letter of March 12, 1929 the following: "In the following years which shows that those who graduated at the college
were in many cases certainly in favor of emancipation."
2 - Smith, William A., Lectures on the Philosophy and Practice
of Slavery - page 11.
3 - Ibid., page 23
4 - Ibid., page 14
Further: "It is entirely obvious that a government, to secure the highest amount of happiness to its subjects must be adapted to their social and moral conditions. This can only be effected by the ratios in which the antagonistic elements of liberty and of slavery shall enter into the composition of the government."¹ "They are not," he continues, "in point of intellectual and moral development, fitted for that measure of self government which is necessary to political sovereignty."²

Dr. Smith relied consistently and in all faith on the Bible, for, he says, of course we all recognize the full moral authority and teachings of the Scriptures, in that a man has the right to do that which he considers right to be done.³ He quotes from Romans XIII, 1-7 to this effect: "Let every soul be subject unto the higher powers. For there is no power but of God: the powers that be are ordained of God. Whosoever, therefore, resisteth the power resisteth the ordinance of God."⁴ Thus he argues that the white man is ordained of God in capacity of master to the slave.

Hampden-Sydney College seems to have been a liberal-minded institution. Although the Presbyterian church, by which the college was founded and backed, divided in the slavery controversy, Hampden-Sydney's views point mostly

¹ - Ibid., page 50
² - Ibid., page 182
³ - Ibid., page 132
⁴ - Ibid., page 135
to the sponsoring of emancipation of the slaves. Although there is evidence that the students at times shared the prevailing economic ideas of the south, "at Hampden-Sydney College, Virginia, the students resolved unanimously not to wear the 'protected' clothing of the north. Programs of debates and orations at the college show that the slavery question was an important one which was debated by the students intermittently from 1800 to 1860. Many of the most prominent anti-slavery men of the state were Hampden-Sydney graduates. William Ballard Preston, afterwards Congressman and secretary of the Navy under President Taylor, was an advocate of the anti-slavery movement, as was another Hampden-Sydney man, William H. Broadnax. In a debate in the Virginia House of Delegates on January 19, 1832, Mr. Broadnax said: 

"That slavery in Virginia is an evil and a transcendent evil it would be idle and worse than idle for any human being to doubt or deny. It is a mildew which has blighted in its course every region it has touched.

1 - Dodd, Statesmen of the Old South -- page 127
2 - Dr. Joseph Dupuy Eggleston, at the present time President of Hampden-Sydney College, says of the matter in question, in a letter of February 21, 1929: "To me the evidence is clear that the prevailing opinion at Hampden Sydney from 1776 -- when the college opened -- to certainly as late as 1835 -- was against slavery. Indeed the prevailing opinion was against it after that, but the agitation of the Abolitionists of New England, which began about 1830 to 1835, proved a great handicap to those who were in favor of emancipation."
3 - Munford, Beverly B., Virginia's Attitude toward Slavery and Secession - page 46
4 - Ibid., page 47
from the creation of the world."¹

Philip A. Bolling, also of Hampden-Sydney, who was with Broadnax and Preston in their fight, speaking in this came debate on January 25, said:

"It is vain for gentlemen to deny the fact that the feelings of society are just become adverse to slavery. Moral causes which produce that feeling are on the march and will on until the groans of slavery are heard no more in this else happy country. Look over this world's wide page -- see the rapid progress of liberal feelings -- see the shackles falling from nations who have long writhed under the galling yoke of slavery. Liberty is going over the whole earth, hand and hand with Christianity."²

William C. Rives, who, after finishing at Hampden-Sydney, became a well known political figure and member of the United States Senate, in closing his speech whereby he attacked slavery, said on February 6, 1857:

"I feel that I sin against no principle of republicanism, and against no safeguard of Southern rights and Southern policy when I frankly say in answer to the interrogatory of the gentleman from South Carolina,³ that I do regard slavery as an evil -- an evil not uncompensated, I know, by collateral effects of high value on the social and intellectual character of my countrymen; but still in the

¹ - Ibid., page 92-93
² - Ibid., page 95
³ - Referring to Mr. Calhoun
eye of religion, philanthropy, and reason, an evil.¹

One of Hampden-Sydney's alumni who was strongest for the emancipation of slaves was the well known Edward Coles, a native Virginian but afterwards second governor of Illinois. Mr. Coles left Virginia in 1818, greatly disliking slavery and violently opposed to holding those he had inherited, and settled in Illinois. Here he used his influence to try to prevent the recognition of slave holding.²

The tale of the freeing of his slaves, who were devoted to their master, is a touching one. With them all "save two old women, too old and infirm to support themselves, who remained in Virginia, but were supported by him during their lives,"³ Coles set out from his native state for Illinois, where he liberated them all, giving each person a certificate to prove his freedom.⁴ "He persistently opposed slavery through the press and by personal correspondence, and was instrumental in forming anti-slavery societies in fifteen counties in Illinois. He suffered much annoyance on account of his strong anti-slavery views."⁵

Mr. Coles' views must have been shared by many of his

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¹ - Munford, Virginia's Attitude toward Slavery and Secession - page 97-98
² - Tyler, Lyon Gardiner, Encyclopedia of Virginia Biography Volume II, page 204
³ - Washburn, F. B., Sketch of Edward Coles - page 47
⁴ - Ibid - pages 47-52
⁵ - Tyler, Encyclopedia of Virginia Biography, Volume II, page 204
associates while at Hampden-Sydney.\(^1\)

George Addison Baxter, President of the College in 1835, wrote *An Essay on Abolition of Slavery*, in which he, too, advocated freedom of slaves.\(^2\)

Richmond College, which around 1840 was becoming one of the big Baptist strongholds of the South, likewise had a diversified opinion of the slavery question. Richmond College was the training place of many of Virginia's foremost Baptist preachers, and Dr. Jeter says that there were conflicting views on the slavery subject among Southern as well as Northern Baptists.\(^3\)

Dr. John A. Broadus, who attended Richmond College, tells a little episode of how

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1 - Dr. Eggleston, President of Hampden-Sydney, continues in his letter of February 21, 1929:
"The leaders here in College -- such men as Samuel Stanhope Smith and John Blair Smith, our first two Presidents; Archibald Alexander and Jonathan L. Cushing, two later Presidents; John Holt Rice, the Founder of the Union Theological Seminary here in 1832; and others -- were strongly for gradual emancipation of the slaves. Naturally their attitude had a profound effect on the students.

"Another Hampden-Sydney man, J. R. Gamble, was very strong against slavery. He was a native of Frederick County, Virginia, graduated from the College in 1816, and went to Missouri, where he was Governor at the outbreak of the war. He was not only against slavery, like so many prominent Virginians; he was also against secession. "It is perfectly evident that these prominent leaders -- and others -- were but the voices of many other Hampden-Sydney men who held the same views."

2 - *National Cyclopedia of American Biography* - Volume II page 24
3 - Jeter, Jeremiah Bell, *Recollections of a Long Life* - page 230
while traveling in a stage he got to talking with a young lady from the orth about slavery and other sectional subjects. "Upon slavery," he says, "in general and in particular, she was very Northern and I intensely Southern, but we agreed to disagree, and got on pretty well." 1 So he must have favored slavery. Still many men did not. Thaddeus Herndon, who was a brother of Richmond College's first graduate, Richard Nutt Herndon, and very probably reflected his views, showed himself firm in his convictions concerning slavery, for the possession of his slaves became so repulsive to him that he freed all of them and spent much money in providing for their comfort and welfare. 2

Dr. Robert Ryland, who was the first president of Richmond College when it was founded in 1832, had long found slavery, as it existed in all the Southern States, a burden to his mind. It was "not that he believed it to be a sin, but that some grievous sins were closely and constantly connected with it." He regarded the separation of the colored families as glaring wrongs. 3 Dr. Ryland was a great preacher, and in 1841 became pastor of the First African Church in Richmond, where in dealing with the negroes of his congregation he became more and more opposed

1 - Robertson, Archibald Thomas, Life and Letters of John Albert Broadus - pages 100-101
2 - Taylor, George Braxton, Virginia Baptist Ministers - Volume III - page 281
3 - Ryland, Robert, Origin and History of the First African Church in Richmond, Virginia - pages 252-253
to slavery. Often Dr. Ryland had his young ministerial students of the college in turn officiate for him in the afternoon services. ¹ It is quite believable that these young men were moulded by Dr. Ryland and thought as he did in regard to the slavery question. After the thirteenth amendment was passed, he said earnestly, "The negroes are now all free, and I am heartily glad of it, though I say nothing of the agencies and methods by which the event was accomplished. They are our fellow-men -- our fellow-citizens -- and many of them our fellow-Christians. Let us treat them in the spirit of our common Christianity." ² In the majority Richmond College points toward the anti-slavery opinion, but still had she not trusted Southern opinion and been in sympathy with the pro-slavery group of thinkers, at least so far as support of that economic system was concerned, why did she invest her endowment money in Confederate bonds during the war, a loss which has never been paid? ³ Undoubtedly there was a diversity of opinion as was the case almost everywhere in the South.

We find the two large undenominational Virginia colleges of the period of agitation less influenced by denominational considerations. In the religiously inclined

¹ - Ibid., - page 254
² - Ibid., - page 272
³ - Jeter, Recollections of a Long Life - pages 222-223
colleges the question which had faced the people was whether or not a slave holder could be a missionary, but both William and Mary College at Williamsburg, and the University of Virginia, located in Charlottesville, were free from denominational restraint and thought as they liked independent of Baptist, Methodist, or Presbyterian influence, except as the individual student was of one or other household of faith. These denominational colleges had split on the slavery question, and hence the two opinions prevalent at the colleges which mirrored their views. But in the case of William and Mary and the University of Virginia, the sentiments expressed by the leaders of these two colleges were not dependent primarily on religious influences, but were clearer reflections of social and economic influences, perhaps in ascendency over the denominational school of thought.

During the early part of the nineteenth century, Thomas Jefferson's was the foremost prevailing opinion at the University of Virginia, and he, being the great far-seeing man he was with his rational mind, favored freedom for the slave class. His was the faculty's view as a whole, during the years up to about 1850, when we find many people changing their views in regards slavery. The University reflected Jefferson's spirit in political creed and freedom from sectarianism. His extravagant love of

1 - Bruce, History of University of Virginia, Volume III. Footnote, page 263.
freedom and desire for happiness for individuals were, as he saw it, two ends to all government and acquisition of knowledge. Jefferson hated tyranny, and it was this feeling which "led him to draft the bill to put a stop to the further importation of slaves"; he also favored a second bill that would have brought about manumission "had the public favored such."1 "Nothing," he wrote in 1820, "is more certainly written in the book of fate than that these people are to be free; nor is it less certain than that the two races, equally free, cannot live in the same government. Nature, habit, opinion, have drawn indelible lines of distinction between them."2 In 1824, he urged the establishment of a colony on the coast of Africa to set the negroes free from the whites,3 and in his original plan for the Northwest Territory, he had wanted states admitted after 1800 to be prohibited to hold slaves.4 Slavery not only destroyed the best morals of a people but their industry, also,5 said Jefferson, and insisted that "this blot on our country increases as fast or faster than the white population."6

1 - Ibid., page 7
2 - Munford, Virginia's Attitude toward Slavery and Secession, page 75
3 - Ibid., - page 75
4 - Bruce, History of University of Virginia - page 8
5 - Ballagh, History of Slavery in Virginia, page 128
6 - Ibid., page 24
When the University of Virginia was begun in 1821, Jefferson required his principles to be taught. 1 John Hartwell Cocke, who assisted Jefferson in founding the University, thought slavery a curse to his state. He tried in 1821 to have Congress pass a law to send the Southern negroes back to Africa. He thought slavery the cause of all great evils in the land, and that posterity could not come until the cause of its lack was removed. 2

Gradually however, we find this anti-slavery thinking at the University changing. After Jefferson's death, there was a movement toward pro-slavery, and little by little the views of the college became entirely opposite to those of Jefferson which had swayed the University since its beginning. Albert Taylor Bledsoe, Professor of Mathematics, presents this pro-slavery argument, which the faculty held, in his book, An Essay on Liberty and Slavery, published in 1856. "We intend," he says in introduction, "no appeal to passion or to sordid interest, but only to the reason of the wise and good. And if justice, or mercy, or truth, be found at war with the institution of slavery, then, in the name of God, let slavery perish. But however guilty, still let it be tried, condemned, and executed according to law, and not extinguished by a despotic and lawless power more terrific than itself." 3 He urged, thus we see, not a

1 - Bruce, History of University of Virginia, page 15
2 - Ibid., page 157
3 - Bledsoe, Albert Taylor, An Essay on Liberty and Slavery, page 12
blind groping in either direction, but a systematic trying out of slavery, to determine whether the goods or evils resulting from this institution were more weighty. This problem was one of adjusting the public and private order, and Bledsoe says that the trouble is that the abolitionists cannot comprehend the slave nature. "Things now," writes he, "are running smoothly and if the negro race should be moved by their fiery appeals, it would only be to rend the tear in pieces the fair fabric of American liberty, which, with all its shortcomings and defects, is by far the most beautiful ever yet conceived or constructed by the genius of man." Slavery was forced upon us by Great Britain, and to abolish it was not an easy thing to do, for it was an experiment.

Bledsoe said that the great leaders of the abolitionists were waging a fierce battle against the constitution of their country. Seward had taken an oath to support the constitution, and yet he was violating the clause: "No person held to service or labor in the state, under the laws thereof, escaping into another, shall, in consequence of any law or regulation therein, be discharged from such service or labor, but shall be delivered up on claim of the party to whom such service or labor may be due." The author

1 - Ibid., pages 40-42
2 - Ibid., page 228
3 - Ibid., pages 302-303
Further says that "although we desire harmony and concord for the State of the Union, we shall never seek it by a surrender of the Constitution or the decisions of the Supreme Court." 1 He begs in conclusion that the United States keep abiding by God's Almighty Power, and thus to prosper as before. 2

William and Mary College at Williamsburg was one of the country's oldest colleges, and we find that it was attended more widely than any other Virginia college. Of course the denominational institutions drew the strongly religiously inclined men into their doors, but many of the great political figures of Virginia attended this college.

The majority of men whose views can be quoted seem to have been in favor of emancipation, but this does not necessarily mean that this side of the question was better supported. Both opinions were widely held. Thomas Jefferson, the founder of American Democracy was a student at Williamsburg; likewise was John Marshall, the Interpreter of the Constitution, who wrote in 1826: "I concur with you that nothing portends more calamity and mischief to the Southern States than their slave population" 3 also did James Monroe, who in 1829 declared himself in favor of the equal rights of men. 4

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1 - Ibid., page 382 (Chase and Seward did not favor the constitution at this time and wanted to change the fugitive slave law contained therein.)

2 - Ibid., page 383

3 - Lunford, Virginia's Attitude toward Slavery and Secession, page 88

4 - Ibid., page 89
"Both George Wythe and St. George Tucker, who stood at the head of the law department from 1779 to 1804, were advocates of the emancipation of the slaves, and their teachings no doubt had much to do with producing that spirit of philanthropy so prevalent in Virginia until the sudden onslaught of the abolitionists."¹ In fact George Wythe had liberated his slaves as early as the close of the Revolution.²

"St. George Tucker, Jefferson's contemporary, felt like him that the Divine Providence would aid and smile upon the emancipation of slaves. 'But human providence forbids' he says 'that we should engage in a work of such hazard as a general and simultaneous emancipation.' He thought that the slaves should be prepared for their future condition, and the plan he urged was that of abolishing slavery, without emancipating the slaves. He did not favor Jefferson's colonization plan because he considered the expense to be too heavy. But what he hoped for was to induce emigration, and he asserted that after sixty years of his plan's origin, it would have taken such effect that at least two thirds of the negroes would have disappeared.³ Tucker calls attention to the fact that Article I of the "Bill of Rights" says that "all men are by nature equally free and independent." Should we defy so sacred a truth? He adds that

¹ - The William and Mary Quarterly - Volume 14 - page 82
² - Munford, Virginia's Attitude toward Slavery and Secession, page 102
³ - Bollag, History of Slavery in Virginia - pages 133-134
although reason, justice, and religion condemn slavery, they must acknowledge that it dates back almost universally to the Greeks and Romans, even, in fact, to the early Jews and Egyptians. Furthermore, Great Britain was responsible for the presence of slaves in the States.  

The early graduates of William and Mary were, most of them, inclined toward this viewpoint. However about 1829, when the "brutal onslaught" of the abolitionists came, a reaction occurred, and most men turned to the anti-slavery group of thinkers for their new ideas.

John Tyler, President of the United States, was of this opinion early, for he said in Congress in 1820: "Slavery has been represented on all hands as a dark cloud. But exclude this property by the exercise of an arbitrary power; shut it out from the territories; and I maintain that you do not consult the interests of this Union."  

Bishop William Meade, a scholar of William and Mary, stated: "We are confident that slavery has injured all." While another graduate of the college, Benjamin Watkins Leigh, in 1829 wrote his opinion of the question thus: "I wish indeed that I had been born in a land where domestic and

1 - Tucker, St. George, *Dissertation on Slavery* - pages 30-41
2 - Ibid., page 87
3 - Ibid., page 100
negro slavery is unknown. The evil of slavery is far greater to master than to slave."1

After 1823, "with almost equal ability the benefits of slavery socially, politically and economically, were maintained by Thomas R. Dew, professor of History and Economy from 1826 to 1846 and by Nathaniel Beverley Tucker, son of St. George Tucker, professor of Law at William and Mary from 1834 to 1851."2

Dew thought it profitable to raise slaves and thus ridiculed the ideas of Jefferson in regard to human equality, slavery, and emancipation. 3 His opinions are strongly set forth, and he argues thus: That everywhere one looks he sees this negro race, a race vastly different in color and habits and differing greatly in the scale of civilization, increasing and growing rapidly, until "they have become intertwined with every fibre of society." How can they now be separated when they live together as master and servant? This question of slavery involves the whole strata of society, for "that which is the growth of ages may take ages to remove."4 "We have not formed our opinion lightly upon this subject," he continues, "we have given to the vital question of abolition the most mature and intense consideration

1 - Ibid., pages 89-90
2 - The William and Mary Quarterly - page 185
3 - Dodd, Statesmen of the Old South - page 136
4 - Dew, Thomas R., The Pro-Slavery Argument - page 287
which we are capable of bestowing, and we have come to the conclusion that every plan of emancipation and deportation which we can possibly conceive, is totally impracticable." The attempt to carry out these plans can only increase all evils resulting from slavery. 1 Dew's argument was widely read and discussed and found many sympathizers in the South.

"Nathaniel Beverley Tucker's position on the slavery question was made clearly known in a lecture before his law class at William and Mary in December, 1834. He based his defense on the system of domestic slavery on the necessity of forcing those to labor who are unable to live honestly without labor. 2 He believed that slavery was the divinely decreed destiny of the negro race."3

William B. Giles, ex-governor of Virginia, who had studied law under George Wythe at William and Mary, seconded Dew by publishing in 1829 similar doctrines to those of Dew, though not as unanswerable as his. 4

Thus we look back over the prevailing opinions at these five leading Virginia Colleges and see that both sides of

1 - Ibid., page 292
2 - Woodfin, Maude Howlett, Nathaniel Beverley Tucker, page 20
3 - Ibid., page 22
4 - Dodd, Statesmen of the Old South - page 136
the question were advocated feelingly almost equally. While the writer of course realizes that this survey of the colleges' opinions of slavery is but the beginning of a wide subject and not at all exhaustive in treatment, it would seem that the denominational Virginia colleges favored emancipation of the slaves from 1830 to 1860 more than did the state institutions.