Southern Enlightenment: Reform and Progress in Jefferson's Virginia

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Washington University in St. Louis

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WASHINGTON UNIVERSITY IN ST. LOUIS

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Southern Enlightenment:
Reform and Progress in Jefferson’s Virginia

by

Scott Taylor Morris

A dissertation presented to the
Graduate School of Arts and Sciences
of Washington University in
partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree
of Doctor of Philosophy

May 2014

Saint Louis, Missouri
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Abbreviations

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<th>Abbreviation</th>
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<tr>
<td>ACS</td>
<td>American Colonization Society</td>
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<tr>
<td>EAI</td>
<td>Early American Imprints (followed by index number)</td>
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<td>HSP</td>
<td>Historical Society of Pennsylvania</td>
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<td>Papers of Thomas Jefferson Digital Edition</td>
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<td>Thomas Jefferson</td>
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<tr>
<td>VMHB</td>
<td>Virginia Magazine of History and Biography</td>
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<td>WMQ</td>
<td>William and Mary Quarterly</td>
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Acknowledgements

One thing that drew me to the study of history was the importance of remembering the history of my own life, the “genealogy of the present.” There are many people who shaped the outcome of this project. My advisor, David Konig, has displayed the virtues of patience and positive attitude. Just as importantly, his deep knowledge helped lead me to formulate a successful project. One takes a risk in going to graduate school by pledging to work with one person who is at that point a stranger. I won in that gamble. My committee members, Iver Bernstein, Peter Kastor, and Randy Calvert, were not just readers, but also offered learning opportunities at multiple points over the years. I became a better teacher by working with them. Wayne Fields is a teacher of more than literature, although he is also unparalleled in that. He could find the profound questions in anything. Some gems have always stood out in my mind, such as the difference between the merely “picturesque” and the truly “sublime.” He has also been an inspiring figure in how to live life through its trying times and in taking on projects outside of the academic environment, such as installing a floor. I truly miss working with him.

My studies began at the University of Alabama, and I still look back fondly on my time there. Tony Freyer was a very positive and learned advisor who helped me keep moving up the path, and Forrest McDonald helped solidify my interest in the Founding generation by advising my undergraduate thesis. Material support for my research in Virginia and Philadelphia came from the Lynn Cooper Harvey American Culture Studies Fellowship at Washington University. The Tennessee Governor’s School for International Studies and my teachers, then colleagues, Blanche Deaderick, Ruth Dunning, and Larry Torres, helped lead me in the process of becoming a teacher.
People who trod with me through this process and provided welcome camaraderie include Matt Stewart, Nick Miller, Steve Schrum, John Aerni-Flessner, Aaron Akins, and Charity Rakestraw Carney. Others who have stood by me over the years include Michael Stefan, Virginia Halliburton, Moses Katz, Jamie Kitson, and my grandfather, the late Bill Taylor. Finally, my education began before I first walked into Kindergarten. My parents, Cerez Morris and the late Steve Morris, provided everything I needed to achieve whatever I wanted.

Scott Taylor Morris

Overland, Missouri
April 23, 2014
Dedication

To my mother, Cerez Taylor Morris
ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

Southern Enlightenment: Reform and Progress in Jefferson’s Virginia

by

Scott Taylor Morris

Doctor of Philosophy in History

Washington University in St. Louis, 2014

Professor David Konig, Chair

This dissertation posits that in the five decades following the American Revolution, there was a movement among the elite of Virginia’s rising generation to envision a future different from the path that would ultimately take the state toward the retrenchment of slavery and even secession. This younger generation, claiming the legacy of Thomas Jefferson, demonstrated that the liberal side of the Enlightenment had a life in Virginia that went beyond the Founders’ generation, and that the Enlightenment in the South offered possibilities for social and political reform. The primary types of reform animating liberal elite reformers in this generation were those requiring state action organized through the political process, and they included such reforms as the promotion of internal improvements, public education, the gradual abolition of slavery, and the democratization of the state itself. Although these reformers did not succeed in fundamentally changing the trajectory of Virginia’s future, they attempted to offer an alternative, while at the same time confronting their own ambivalences and the realities of a society that was becoming more overtly proslavery.
Introduction

The Enlightenment, Liberalism, and Conservatism in the South

In the South they are
fiery
Voluptuary
indolent
unsteady
independant
zealous for their own liberties, but trampling on those of others
generous
candid
without attachment or pretensions to any religion but that of the heart.

Thomas Jefferson, *Letter to the Marquis de Chastellux, September 2, 1785* ¹

When Jefferson wrote his list of the characteristics of southerners to the Marquis de Chastellux, he was comparing a list of corresponding characteristics that he observed in northerners. Both sides had their strengths and weaknesses. Northerners, who were favorably compared in their “cool” and “laborious” personas, and who were “jealous of their own liberties, and just to those of others,” were also “chicaning,” and “superstitious and hypocritical in their religion.” Jefferson liked the generosity and unpretentious religion that he saw in the South, but he also deprecated the “trampling” of the liberties of others and the indolence and unsteadiness that he believed resulted from the reliance on slave labor. He was beginning to formulate his ideas about the necessity of changing the very constitution of southern society.

Chastellux was one of the French correspondents with whom Jefferson shaped his inquiries in his manuscript of *Notes on the State of Virginia*, especially on the peculiar effects

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that the institution of slavery had on his society. It was Chastellux to whom Jefferson confessed his fear that the criticisms of slavery in the Notes could “produce an irritation which would indispose the people towards the two great objects I have in view, that is the emancipation of their slaves, and the settlement of their constitution on a firmer and more permanent basis.”

Jefferson’s anxiety about his role in the necessary end of slavery was a lifelong dilemma, for which he has been the subject of controversy ever since. Although he expressed antislavery sentiment there and elsewhere, his failure to either emancipate his own slaves or to give further public advocacy has called into question his sincerity on the most fundamental moral question of his time.

This study reflects on Jefferson’s legacy on slavery and a range of other political and economic reforms less through his own work and more through his legacy as perceived by his younger protégés in Virginia. When Jefferson expressed his wish for eventual emancipation to Chastellux, he also offered one the reasons that led to his own reticence in addressing the question himself. Even though he feared wider publication of his Notes in Virginia, Jefferson reported that he had “printed and reserved just copies enough to be able to give one to every young man at the College [of William and Mary.] It is to them I look, to the rising generation, and not to the one now in power for these great reformations.” He similarly told the English abolitionist Richard Price that “the young men of Virginia under preparation for public life” in Williamsburg were under the tutelage of George Wythe, “one of the most virtuous of characters, and whose sentiments on the subject of slavery are unequivocal.” Jefferson encouraged Price to direct his “exhortation” to these students, whose role in the future of slavery could prove

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2 TJ to Chastellux, June 7, 1785, in Waldstreicher, 67-70.
4 TJ to Chastellux, June 7, 1785, in Waldstreicher, 67-70.
“decisive.” Jefferson did indeed provide copies of the Notes to Virginia’s elite college students, and they would imbue themselves in his political and social worldview at Williamsburg for over two decades thereafter. Whatever Jefferson’s personal failings were in pursuing his prescriptions for reform, some among the younger generation of elite leaders would look to him as the avatar of reform in Virginia.

It was this engagement with the younger generation that puts Jefferson at the center of this story more than his intellectual and political compatriot President James Madison. Although Madison would be an influential figure in the life of Edward Coles, the final subject of this study, it was Jefferson who actively cultivated both personal connections and intellectual mentorship of a range of Virginia’s rising young elite. That they would continually cite Jefferson’s influence in their reform projects, including antislavery advocacy, in the decades between the French Revolution and the emancipation debate of 1832, is significant in assessing Jefferson’s legacy as a reformer beyond his own career in office.

This study posits that Jefferson’s faith in these protégés points to a broader movement in Virginia to envision a future for the state different from the path that would ultimately take it toward the retrenchment of slavery and even secession, in what Louis Hartz called the “Reactionary Enlightenment.” This younger generation demonstrated that the liberal side of the Enlightenment had a life in Virginia that went beyond the Founders’ generation, and that the Enlightenment in the South had active contention over its meaning for society. “The Enlightenment” as an era is an especially capacious one, both in terms of ideological breadth and chronological length. Henry May’s The Enlightenment in America categorizes four phases that

bring some order to the expressions of Enlightenment in the early United States, and elements of each of them apply to the subjects of this study, including the more radical “Revolutionary Enlightenment.” It is this fact that demonstrates that a more diverse intellectual and political climate existed than the post-Nat Turner antebellum South would later allow. For the subjects in this study, “Enlightenment” would hew closer to the liberal reformist side than it would to the more conservative, hierarchical side. Still, the two sides were not always clearly separate or even distinct. Taxonomies of race, gender, and class were very much in the minds of liberal reformers who, like Jefferson, could not always escape the confining bounds of the Enlightenment’s need to categorize and systematize human relationships. But they also held onto the liberating potential of Enlightenment thought, which posited that human rights and a willingness to reform society for the public good were worthy goals that justified bending old rules. Young Virginians educated at William and Mary were more likely to look to Condorcet or William Godwin than to Edmund Burke in that regard. 

Notions of promoting the public good could also be imbued with paternalism and an inability to grasp the rising significance and motivations for democratic politics among non-elite men. Edward Coles went the farthest of anyone in this study by defining enlightened reforms as ending slavery, protecting free African Americans, establishing public education and internal improvements, and making a more humane criminal justice system. Yet for him and the reformers in this study, liberal ideas were often worth implementing, but primarily through the agency of the elite. The intellectual potential of liberal reform sometimes clashed with the

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8 One recent work that highlights the liberating possibilities in the Revolutionary Enlightenment is Lynn Hunt’s *Inventing Human Rights: A History* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2007). Bishop James Madison, the central figure in chapter one below, used the phrase “human rights” in his work. See p. 40 below. The most recent work on Jefferson’s ideas of progressive politics and the improvement of human ideas on government is Ari Helo’s *Thomas Jefferson’s Ethics and the Politics of Human Progress* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2013).
realities of the social order they wanted to protect and reform gradually. Through occasional hesitations and equivocations, the liberal reformers could not maintain the momentum that might transform the broader society in the ways they might have hoped, but their interest in societal progress also complicates the ideological solidarity of the Virginia Republicans. While a large part of the Republican elite held a limited-government agrarian outlook, the liberal reformers were willing to use to the state for facilitating such change. They hoped to eventually make Virginia a prosperous agricultural society that bolstered the economy of the Union as well, even culminating eventually in a free labor economy. Nonetheless, ideas can be eclipsed, and the retrenchment of slavery after 1832 would submerge loftier visions of an improving, evolving society.

Although the Enlightenment in the South, like the movement as a whole, cannot be traced to a single beginning, the Virginian William Byrd’s election to the Royal Society in 1696 demonstrates the engagement that some colonial elites had with the new discourse emergent in Europe from the earliest days. Byrd, however, could not foresee that members of his class would within decades lead a revolution, and in some cases, question the institution of slavery, which undergirded much of the social order itself. To go beyond discoveries in natural science in order to reevaluate the bases of the political and social order was the next stage that Enlightenment reformism sought to reach, and doing so in a slave society was a uniquely challenging project. This is what set the Southern Enlightenment apart from the regional variations that inspired different, if related, questions in New England and Europe.

“Southern Enlightenment” seeks to understand the experience of the Enlightenment in the distinct geographic and social contexts of Virginia from the rise of the first post- Revolutionary generation in the 1790s to the retrenchment of slavery after the 1832 emancipation debate. The
late eighteenth century and early nineteenth century offered a window of intellectual possibilities for change, which makes the extreme conservatism of the later antebellum South reactionary rather than an unchallenged continuation of an old worldview. Jefferson was an American *philosophe*, and his development as such in a slave society is widely studied. What is less studied, however, is the collective experience of his younger protégés who came in contact with liberal and skeptical thought in the Enlightenment. In this context, the term “liberal” encompasses both the classical definition related to the economic and social philosophy of Adam Smith and the more literal definition of openness to change in thought and practice for humane purposes. Liberal thought took some root in the South, even if the Enlightenment more broadly also contained within its thought its own seeds of conservatism, which could appeal to those wanting to protect the hierarchy in a slave society. Reformers motivated by liberal ideas sought to establish public education and publicly funded economic development, and ultimately to begin the removal of slavery. By 1832 a reactionary movement would begin to coalesce and turn reform toward more repressive ends.

That Revolutionary leaders such as Arthur Lee and George Mason before Jefferson questioned the premises of slavery, even if in a limited way, indicates a dramatic departure from the intellectual culture of William Byrd’s Virginia, wherein such questions scarcely even existed. If the Revolution did not end with the Treaty of Paris, what form should it continue to take? An intellectual shift such as this is a necessary prerequisite for any reform that is not forced on the elite from below. The Founding era left open such unfulfilled possibilities that would require the engagement of the next generation. Michael O’Brien’s magisterial synthesis of intellectual culture in the nineteenth-century South offers a conservative portrayal of the Southern Enlightenment, represented primarily by John Taylor of Caroline. This conservative bent in the
culture was powerful, but its dominance was not assured. Jefferson’s and Madison’s lesser-known and younger protégés in the post-Revolutionary era were raised in an environment in which different visions of the future were possible. They were among the first to consider whether a social order without slavery was desirable or possible. That question was tied to several that potential reformers could ask in the decades following the Revolution, and Enlightenment thought offered diverse possibilities.

The primary types of reform animating liberal elite reformers in the rising generation were those requiring state action organized through the political process. This is distinct from other types of reform, such as evangelical movements that envisioned remaking the hearts of individuals, or private associations that organized autonomous citizens. State action was the locus for such reforms as internal improvements, primary and higher education, the gradual abolition of slavery, and the democratization of the state itself. None of these could at any point have been considered *fait accompli*, and some of them were threatening enough to spur a vision of conservative reform that would blunt the force of change, especially in the constitution of 1830. State action had the power to produce transformative change in society, although the liberal reformers could not always muster the level of enthusiasm that others could. In the realm of education, liberal reformers tended to favor public appropriations for secular schools. In the absence of these, they largely failed to establish the kinds of educational footholds that new religious groups were eager to do privately, thus ceding much of the expansion of education to a conflicting worldview. The removal of slavery was most pronounced in terms of failing to achieve substantial change in the absence of a collective state plan. Private emancipation had

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been legalized in 1782 and then curtailed after Gabriel’s Rebellion in 1802. After 1806, the law itself made individual manumission much more difficult by requiring the removal of the freed people from the state, thus making a political solution a necessity to remove slavery. Fear of freed slaves was one part of reversing the trend of individual manumission, but so too was the idea that a universal plan had to be created by the state to solve the problem satisfactorily for everyone. Persons such as St. George Tucker and Thomas Jefferson Randolph devised what they saw as feasible plans for such a purpose, but absent the democratic movement to enact statewide change, they perceived little that could be done as individuals, including freeing their own slaves.

Several cross-currents complicated the drive for reform. Elite reformers had to navigate disparate interests across class lines that only increased with the rise of democratic politics in the Republican era. On slavery, many of the elite did not want to abolish the institution that gave them their wealth. Non-slaveowning western Virginians could be mobilized to break the slave power, but a rising class of small farmers had some desire to secure slave wealth themselves. Public education and internal improvements also faced questions of who would benefit and who would pay. What was more accepted, however, was the idea that the state of Virginia possessed the power to act for the improvement of society. It was possible for Republicans to support a restrictive states’ rights platform on the national level and to still favor substantial public works and reforms on the state level. States’ rights was an element of the Republican ideology that had reactionary overtones, but it was not a certain marker of conservatism at the state level. St. George Tucker, for example, a proponent of states’ rights constitutionalism, nonetheless supported the development of the regional and national economies beyond Virginia’s borders
through internal improvements and expanding markets. Similarly, Ari Helo argues, “Given Jefferson’s numerous suggestions about progressive taxation, the distribution of vacant lands to the unemployed, public funding for a large-scale emigration of slave children, and establishment of a public elementary educational system, it is equally difficult to consider him an advocate of only minimal government.”

Following Jefferson’s cultivation of the younger generation, many of the individuals who appear in this dissertation were educated at a single institution, the College of William and Mary, and they continued their careers either in or near the elite Republican political circle known as the Richmond Junto. State senator Joseph C. Cabell and General John Hartwell Cocke were lifelong friends and political allies who engaged in several long-term reform projects. Among those who were educated with them was Benjamin Watkins Leigh, who turned the Republican political philosophy toward conservative reform and a heightened southern sectional identity. That side would emerge as the dominant paradigm after 1832. Edward Coles was the most successful reformer on the cause of preventing the spread of slavery, although he had to leave Virginia in order to attempt it. His intervention in Virginia’s 1832 emancipation debate was significant, however. Thomas Ritchie, while not a William and Mary graduate, was nonetheless the publisher whose gave voice to all of these individuals in his influential reformist newspaper, the *Richmond Enquirer*. What each of these individuals shared in common, especially the liberal reformers, was their belief that they carrying out what they saw as the Jeffersonian legacy in their engagement with the contentious reform movements of the following two decades.

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11 Helo, 14-15.
The chapters are arranged topically, with some chronological progression beginning with the education of this new generation of leaders. Chapter One, “‘The Gospel of Equality and Fraternity’: Bishop James Madison and Teaching Enlightenment at the College of William and Mary,” examines that hub of Enlightenment thought under the tutelage of Bishop James Madison, St. George Tucker, and George Wythe from 1790 to 1812. The institution brought together an intellectual community that inculcated a Jeffersonian worldview and led a generation of Virginia’s leaders to see themselves as reformers through its celebration of Revolutionary politics and an Enlightenment worldview that saw rational institutions as instigators of progress. Bishop Madison stands at the center of this chapter, since he was as at least as influential as Tucker and Wythe in the education of students, but has not received the same historical attention. Madison was averse to rigid dogma and was an avid scientist, and he was a cleric for whom Jefferson held the highest esteem. Recommended as a teacher by Jefferson, Madison was beloved by the students who learned Enlightenment science and moral philosophy from him in the era of the French Revolution. Although Madison did not cross the line into complete religious skepticism or political radicalism, he did challenge orthodoxies in both, and the climate of his college allowed his students to go further than he did in questioning traditional beliefs and conservative politics.

Chapter Two, “‘The Argument Is Closed Forever’: The Fate of Enlightenment at William and Mary,” examines the intellectual and political development of the students under Bishop Madison’s care, and it introduces Joseph Cabell and John Hartwell Cocke. The chapter also charts the transformation of the College’s intellectual and political climate after the death of Bishop Madison in 1812. Bishop Madison allowed a culture of skepticism and radical politics to thrive in Williamsburg, and his students demonstrated their willingness to embrace such radical
philosophers as William Godwin and to express antislavery sentiments. After Bishop Madison’s death, the College did not immediately transform, but it did begin to evolve toward a more conservative culture, culminating in the reactionary proslavery administration of Thomas Dew in the 1830s. Bishop Madison’s death was the catalyst that led Jefferson to renew his interest in establishing the University of Virginia as a remedy for the increasingly sclerotic intellectual activity in Williamsburg.

Chapter Three, “‘The Idea Is Not Chimerical’: The Struggle for Public Education,” begins the topical focus on reform projects launched in Virginia after the young college students rose to positions of authority in the state. This chapter also introduces Thomas Ritchie, who was a contemporary of Cabell and Cocke, and who established what would become the most influential reformist newspaper in Virginia, the Richmond Enquirer, which was also Jefferson’s favorite newspaper. Jefferson wrote, “I read but a single newspaper, Ritchie’s Enquirer, the best that is published or ever has been published in America.” The Enquirer began a campaign for expanding educational opportunities from its inception, and it would be the medium through which Jefferson would express his plans for public education. Jefferson and his allies would compete not only with those who did not want to pay for a public school system, but with those who favored a highly centralized public school system. Charles Fenton Mercer, a Federalist who shared many reform goals with his Republican opponents, nonetheless often conflicted with them over the means. The inability to resolve such ideological quandaries would be part of the failure to establish a comprehensive education system beyond the University of Virginia.

12 TJ to William Short, Sept. 8, 1823, in LOC, http://memory.loc.gov/cgi-bin/query/r?ammem/mtj:@field(DOCID+@lit(ws03117)) .
Chapter Four, “‘The Perpetual Improvability of Human Society’: Internal Improvement and Economic Development,” examines the use of public/private partnerships to facilitate economic development that would comport with Republican aims. Even as Republicans were hostile to the Bank of the United States, they established a state-run Bank of Virginia that would offer similar benefits, but would be governed by the state to operate in the public interest. They sought the expansion of trade that more bank currency could facilitate, while at the same time they sought to prevent excessive speculation, the concentration of wealth by too few private capitalists, and an unregulated, unstable money supply. The bank would in turn provide financing for the state to undertake ambitious projects for internal improvement, including Joseph Cabell’s dream of traversing the Appalachian Mountains entirely by canal, connecting the Ohio River to Chesapeake Bay. Although Cabell’s project was never fully completed, much was accomplished, and the development of trade with public works was perhaps the most immediately successful of the reform movements.

Chapter Five, “‘The Democratick Spirit of Her Principles’: Democracy, Slavery, and the Future of Virginia,” highlights the ways in which democracy and reform were deeply in tension as the elite considered changes that would deeply affect their own way of life, namely the constitutional revision of 1829 and the emancipation debate of 1832. The most extensive study of this debate is in Alison Freehling’s *Drift Toward Dissolution*. This chapter goes beyond that study by looking at the debates through the perspectives of Thomas Ritchie, Joseph Cabell, and John Hartwell Cocke. Ritchie had a long history of publishing antislavery essays, and he was the most consistent of the three in advocating the justice of democratization as well. Cabell and Cocke confronted those debates as elite liberal reformers whose material interests strongly conflicted with their ideals, but their reactions complicate the usual correlation of the elite
planter class with conservatism. Cocke believed that the declining dominance of liberal elite slaveowners such as himself reduced the possibilities for the reform of slavery, as more small slaveowners gained power. Even if this view of his fellow elites was overly optimistic, he retained the elite mindset of Enlightenment reformism that had at times a difficult relationship with democracy. Joseph Cabell resisted further democratization, but his notes reflect a studied consideration of Jefferson’s justifications of emancipation. Their old college colleague B.W. Leigh represented the winning side on slavery, however, as he succeeded in turning reform in the direction of protecting slave wealth. For Leigh’s side, claims of property rights would trump all other claims, a problem that Cocke recognized and tried to counter.

The sixth and final chapter, “‘The Black Race Were Not Inferior’: Edward Coles and the Southern Enlightenment,” studies the motives and plans of Edward Coles, arguably Virginia’s most successful reformer on the most fundamental problem of slavery. Since the West was where the future of the country would be determined, its regional alignments would matter, and it was through Edward Coles and other migrants that Virginia had a stake in Illinois, and in a larger sense the nation. Coles attributed his antislavery disposition to the teachings of Bishop Madison, and as Governor of Illinois, he also received President Madison’s blessing for his work. Coles maintained his Enlightenment identity, acting as a secular abolitionist in a time when religious motivations had come to predominate. His efforts on those lines and his interests in other types of reform make him a representative icon of the possibilities and limits of the Southern Enlightenment. Although he supported colonizationists, his personal notes indicate he believed in innate racial equality given equal environmental factors. Coles worked to be a pragmatic actor with an idealistic mind. That he had to leave Virginia to make his greatest achievement shows that the fundamental reform of slavery faced an uphill climb there, but it also
shows that Enlightenment antislavery had serious intellectual roots and was not always an ephemeral dream in the generation that followed Jefferson and Madison. Coles superseded the passivity of waiting for collective action on slavery by manumitting and supporting his own slaves before joining in the political fray over slavery. After his success in preventing Illinois from legalizing slavery in 1824, he turned his voice back to Virginia. In 1832, Thomas Jefferson Randolph, Jefferson’s grandson and self-styled bearer of his legacy, offered an abolition proposal, the most famous of the debate, which had a direct link to Bishop Madison’s community through the intervention of Edward Coles, who had actually suggested the proposal, almost verbatim. Coles believed he was fulfilling the legacy of Jefferson and Madison, and while he alone could not constitute that legacy, he did show that it could inspire action on America’s most intransigent moral crisis.

**Historiography**

The historiography of the early American South as a region has understandably been dominated by three primary topics: slavery, conservatism, and religion. The crucible experience of the South’s regional identity was the Civil War, perpetrated by a master class that sought the ultimate affirmation of a slave-based society, allowing no challenges to the status quo. It is on this definition of the region that historians have written much on the regional nature of slavery, conservatism, and religion, and likewise “Southern Enlightenment” seeks to contextualize the experience of the Enlightenment in a southern slave society before the militant proslavery turn of the 1830s. Study of the Enlightenment as a movement within specific local and topical contexts
has been reviving in recent times, which provides an opportunity to explore this less-acknowledged alternative in southern culture.\textsuperscript{13}

The institution of slavery undergirds the study of essentially all other forms of social and intellectual life in the antebellum South. Michael O’Brien’s award-winning intellectual history of the antebellum era, \textit{Conjectures of Order}, states as much in its assessment of the surprising breadth of intellectual life in a region popularly believed to be anti-intellectual and largely devoid of advanced thought. The elite southerners appearing in O’Brien’s account are sophisticated thinkers, worldly, and engaging directly with the currents of thought emergent in their modern world, yet the subtext of so much of their thought was a deep concern for the maintenance of slavery. Between 1810 and 1860, he writes, “Southerners were aware that worlds could be made…. They retained a revolutionary frame of mind and, therefore, when they began to think that the United States was no longer a thing they could control, many among them did not hesitate to destroy it and make another world.”\textsuperscript{14}

O’Brien’s work begins just at the later edge of the Enlightenment era. A relatively limited part is devoted to this Late Enlightenment phase, which was “inclined to be individualist, skeptical of society, hopeful of human intelligence, and wary of human passion. Its figures included John Taylor, Isaac Harby, Thomas Cooper, Henry Clay, William Harper, and the young John C. Calhoun; their writings mostly ran from the 1810s to the early 1830s.”\textsuperscript{15} A segment on political thought examines “the Southern Enlightenment’s most vigorous exponent and critic, John Taylor.” For the most part, O’Brien’s subjects were involved in “the transition from a late

\textsuperscript{15} Ibid., 11.
Enlightenment, to a Romantic, then to an early realist sensibility…. Conservative visions of modernity predominate in O’Brien’s account of the nineteenth century, inviting further consideration of more revolutionary outlooks in the preceding decades. John Taylor’s agrarianism did not necessarily reflect the liberal frame of mind of young reformers who also took their principles from the Enlightenment.

Published within a year of *Conjectures of Order*, Eugene Genovese’s *The Mind of the Master Class* also assesses the worldview of the elite class in the first half of the nineteenth century, and it bears remarkable parallels in its presentation. Like O’Brien, Genovese finds that the master/slave relationship permeated elite thought, even though discussion of slavery was not usually overt. Indeed, the irony of the unspoken relationship was what gave the elite the leisure to think and write. Genovese also notes the engagement with modernity, although seeing somewhat more discordance than O’Brien. In his focus on the antebellum understanding of history, Genovese contributes a useful frame by positing the conflict of two traditions – classical culture and Christianity, which have clashing visions of cyclical and linear time. Both O’Brien and Genovese contribute different angles to the problematic coalescence of conservatism and modernity in the antebellum South.

In writing their works, O’Brien and Genovese pushed against the trend which has avoided intellectual history in recent years, yet O’Brien’s effort went as far as being a Pulitzer Prize finalist. Both explicitly defend from the beginning their choice to write an intellectual history of the elite. Genovese argues that the elite do possess a disproportionate opportunity to shape their society, for which they remain worthy objects of study. Recent intellectual histories

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16 ibid., 7.
of the eighteenth-century American South tend to be focused on the major Founders such as Jefferson. Richard Beale Davis wrote prolifically about a wide scope of intellectual life in the South in the eighteenth century, but his encyclopedic style generally avoided any analytical frame that would place intellectual life in a larger historical narrative. Davis’s lacunae and the success of O’Brien and Genovese in writing synthetic treatments of the nineteenth century elite worldview indicate that there is room for a study of the Enlightenment in the South that seeks to understand the possibilities of more liberal worldviews in that slaveholding region.

“Southern Enlightenment” examines the decades prior to the periods covered by O’Brien and Genovese. The 1810s and 20s are generally treated as the breaking point for the development of the antebellum reaction and vociferous regionalism, and that process has attracted attention. The closest works to this particular project are Virginius Dabney’s *Liberalism in the South* and Clement Eaton’s *The Freedom-of-Thought Struggle in the Old South*, both published by 1940, and Phillip Hamilton’s recent *The Making and Unmaking of a Revolutionary Family*. Eaton and Dabney offer introductory chapters that indicate a more liberal climate among the southern aristocracy in the Revolutionary and early national eras. They were inclined to religious skepticism and tolerance, political reform, and even in a number of notable cases, antislavery sentiments or actions. Dabney organizes this early period into the categories of political liberalism, religious freedom, education, slavery, and literature. In each, Dabney identifies individuals who advocated or enacted ideas contrary to tradition and orthodoxy. The chapters offer leads on numerous individuals who espoused some form of liberal thought, although they

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are written without footnotes. Eaton develops a more analytical account that argues that the reaction against aristocratic liberalism came about from the inverse of Jefferson’s diffusion theory on the eventual disappearance of slavery. Instead of westward expansion thinning the slave population, as Jefferson expected, the expansion of democracy and the opportunity for wealth to the west diluted the Jeffersonian aristocracy and its genteel tolerance for freethought and antislavery sentiment. Eaton devotes only one chapter to the Revolutionary era aristocracy and its liberal dispositions, but he offers much to consider on the changing trajectory of southern history. John Hartwell Cocke’s assessment of the emancipation debate offers striking parallels to Eaton’s thesis on the social dynamics that retrenched slavery in southern society. Phillip Hamilton’s study of the Tucker family studies the profound generational shift that occurred from the reformist antislavery liberalism of St. George Tucker to the conservative politics and disillusionment of his progeny. The factors at work in their lives were affecting the reformers in this dissertation as well, with varying results.

Henry May brings the South to a limited extent into his synthesis The Enlightenment in America. May’s subjects resemble O’Brien’s later writers, leading him to characterize the South as a region with aristocratic skepticism, a “stoic” outlook that saw flaws in its social makeup but few alternatives. They accepted slavery even without believing the extreme justifications that developed later, and they believed in a loose deism that was far from the religious certitude that later dominated the region. May briefly covers radicals, mainly linking their visibility to rising partisanship in the 1790s, and he rightly identifies their decline after 1800. He correlates the increasing rigidity of proslavery thought with the increasing reach and rigidity of evangelical religion. Devout piety could not tolerate the moral compromise of owning slaves while it was wrong. Those of Enlightenment sentiments who held out into the 1820s had an increasingly
difficult time exerting influence in any kind of institution or public discourse, further diminishing the extent of liberal thought. May’s categories apply usefully to the types of ideas discussed in Williamsburg in Bishop Madison’s time and that survived, if in more subdued forms, in the nineteenth century among his students.20

Several recent works speak further to the transitional trends to which May alludes in the early nineteenth-century South. Lorri Glover’s *Southern Sons* explains the new ways of educating elite boys locally rather than sending them to northern or even European colleges. Ironically, the expansion of education furthered the insular culture which many parents wanted to inculcate in their sons. The generations coming of age in the 1790s through the 1820s had the difficult task of following a generation with a very auspicious legacy, and their prickly sense of honor combined with a more provincial outlook helped to bring about cultural divergence from the Revolutionary era. Bishop Madison’s college sought to prolong the spirit of the Revolutionary era, but after his death, his college’s culture began to look more typical of the regional schools that Glover describes. In a related vein, Christine Heyrman’s *Southern Cross* documents the rise of evangelicalism in the South beginning in the 1790s. Bishop Madison preached a rationalistic and enlightened religion that countered the rising evangelical culture. He was successful with many of his students, although his efforts could not revive his church against the tide of religious enthusiasm he disdained. An elite core would in large part be working against the broader cultural trends at work in Virginia.21

In addition to the competition brought by other cultural forces, liberal ideas had to contend with the decline of the material conditions in which they flourished. Susan Dunn’s

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20 May’s categories of “Revolutionary” and “Didactic” Enlightenments most cover this period.
recent *Dominion of Memories* reflects on the challenges to Virginia’s old order brought about by exhausted soil, economic decline, and the prosperity to the west. Enlightenment optimism cannot as easily survive in a society’s decline.\(^2\) Yet economic problems also could offer a spur for reform, as Joseph Cabell and John Cocke pushed for the internal improvements that would facilitate trade and offer alternatives to the weakening slave agriculture system. Dunn’s work, like Hamilton’s, shows the fears and frustrations rising among the Virginia elite of the period, which is a useful contrast to the vision of reformers trying to seek a new path in adverse economic conditions.

Virginia between 1790 and 1832 was a society facing choices on how it would approach the future. The rise of the reactionary South certainly was related to the pressures of northern abolitionists denouncing slavery and the violence of such events as Nat Turner’s rebellion, but it also resulted from a reaction to homegrown liberal thought that was born in the Enlightenment. Jefferson’s protégés brought his visions for the future into Virginia politics during his retirement, linking his legacy to a long timeframe in the state. In seeking secular universal education and at least questioning the premises of slavery, he and many of his contemporaries tried to imagine a different future for Virginia. Their failure to produce that outcome should not obscure their efforts in that brief window of time during the Age of Revolution and Enlightenment.

Chapter 1

“The Gospel of Equality and Fraternity”
Bishop James Madison and Teaching Enlightenment at the College of William and Mary

“What a change has since taken place!” Such was the observation of abolitionist William Goodell about the College of William and Mary in 1852. The college that in 1791 had granted an honorary Doctor of Laws degree to the English abolitionist Granville Sharp, the force behind James Somerset’s challenge to slavery in Britain in 1770, had indeed been transformed in the nineteenth century.1 As in the rest of the South, the proslavery reaction had swallowed not only radical thought but even much freedom of thought. Goodell’s observation is significant because it highlights what appears should have been highly anomalous in a slave society: the celebration of an abolitionist at an elite institution. The presence of such thought at the College is well known through the works of George Wythe and St. George Tucker, the eminent jurists who taught there, but a wide range of Enlightenment thought was inculcated there as well.

The president of the College, Bishop James Madison, taught liberal ideas that echoed Jefferson’s worldview in the era of the French Revolution, and his students, who remembered him as exceptionally influential, became a disproportionately large part of the rising generation of Virginia’s political leadership. Bishop Madison, along with Tucker and Wythe, inculcated the principles of Enlightenment in the lesser known generation that followed Jefferson and the Bishop’s cousin, James Madison, Jr. Benjamin Watkins Leigh, a College graduate and conservative politician, observed in 1830 “that the students of our set at William and Mary have

exhibited more than a common stock of merit in professional and political life.”\textsuperscript{2} Not all would follow a liberal reformist path, but they were the generation in whom Jefferson would invest his hope for the future, and their education with Bishop Madison and St. George Tucker was one basis for this optimism. Madison’s teaching and the formative experiences of the rising generation demonstrate the deep tensions at work in the Enlightenment reformist worldview between ideals of change and the material realities of elite wealth. Leigh turned his vision of reform toward a reaction against liberalism, but some of Virginia’s most ardent liberal reformers in the political sphere came from Bishop Madison’s college. They trod a difficult path, wherein ideas expressed with a radical flair contained caveats that tried to envision progress tempered with caution.

In the 1790s, Thomas Jefferson’s alma mater was likely the most philosophically liberal elite institution in the South, and the education of the sons of slaveowners highlighted one of the paradoxes of the Enlightenment as a movement: Elites who questioned the premises of slavery or social hierarchy had the difficult position, as did many European Enlightenment aristocrats, of criticizing the systems that gave them their wealth and power. The generation of sons educated during the years of the French Revolution under Bishop Madison’s tutelage would be the last to engage closely with liberal and radical thought, and for many of them their ultimate drift into passivity would allow other voices to become the dominant discourse, thus highlighting weaknesses in Enlightenment thought for forcing social change. Many of these students would rise to prominence in Virginia and national politics, including President John Tyler. They would not necessarily see themselves as rejecting the principles that they learned in their youth, but those principles could yield widely to accommodate the existing system. Paternalism offered a

means of ameliorating social relationships without fundamentally changing them. Orderly change led by the elite remained their priority for social change, and the ways in which they understood this can further explain what Daniel Walker Howe called “the strange passivity of the American Enlightenment.”

College faculty may shape the worldview of their students to varying degrees, but at the College of William and Mary, single faculty members could be quite influential among a student body numbering at most in the dozens and beginning at younger ages than those in the twenty-first century. Thus any college president was involved enough to know his students well, but for many William and Mary students, Bishop Madison was a figure beloved enough that his death in 1812 inspired the formation of a secret student society bearing his name. It was Madison who introduced them to the key intellectual and moral questions of their time, but the loyalty to him derived from more than his intellectual offerings. One student wrote that the Bishop’s disposition was “placid and indulgent,” and that he strove “with indefatigable zeal to open and expand the mind of the student…. In his opinions of every kind, he is liberal and indulgent. The priest is buried in the philosopher for he embraces no opinion that philosophy will not justify.” His former student President John Tyler recalled that “his manner… was kind and parental, and his reproval offered in the gentlest tones,” such that no one at the college “failed to acknowledge him as a second father.” Others used words such as “amicable,” “cheerful,” and “unassuming.” Such kindliness made an impression on others as well, including his cousin President Madison, who always held him in high regard for his “intellectual power and diversified learning,” his

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3 Daniel Walker Howe, “Religion and Education in the Young Republic,” in McClay, Figures in the Carpet. Howe applies the question to the rapid escalation of religious involvement in education while secular educational projects such as the national university faltered.

“benevolence,” “courtesy,” and devotion to “our Revolution, and to the purest principles of a Government founded on the rights of man.” The memories of him in this light lasted decades. William Wirt in 1829 recalled a visit in which Bishop Madison asked which college he had attended. Wirt admitted he had never been a student at any college, at which time a “shade of embarrassment flitted across [Madison’s] countenance – but he recovered in an instant, and added most gracefully – ‘upon my word, you furnish a very strong argument against the utility of a college education.’ – Was not this neatly said, and very much in the style of Bishop Madison?”

Although Wythe and Tucker were immensely influential at the College, the full nature of education there must also be understood through the mind of Bishop Madison. Paternalistic guidance, in this most practical and familial sense, was built in to the model of education at William and Mary.

Madison’s career began at the College as an undergraduate student, where he graduated in 1771 and later studied as a law student of George Wythe. His disposition and intellect led his career to ascend rapidly thereafter to the College presidency. At age 24 in 1773 he was appointed professor of natural philosophy and mathematics at the college, and after being ordained an Anglican priest in England, he was elected president in 1777, despite being two years shy of the age of 30 as required by the College rules. This meteoric rise was also aided by his ideological commitments that coincided with the rising Revolutionary tide that would diminish the influence of tory-inclined faculty in Williamsburg.

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6 Excerpt from The Memoirs of William Wirt, “Presidents Papers,” WM.
It was in Madison’s youth as a student at the College that his lifelong attitudes on church and politics were formed, as was evidenced by his student oration published in 1772 for the Rev. Samuel Henley, then professor of moral philosophy. At the time, Henley and other faculty were embroiled in the larger colonial dispute over the propriety of bishops named by the king coming to preside in America, a proposal that was widely controversial and feared across the colonies. Henley’s affinity for Madison’s essay was connected to his own rejection of the call for an American bishopric, which eight members of the faculty favored. Madison’s disquisition combined whiggish political theory with a strong statement about the power of established300(137,692),(279,713)religion and its necessary limits. Locke’s *Second Treatise of Government* provided the theoretical basis for opposing unlimited power and extolling the virtues of the people’s will. What most animated the argument, however, was a strong statement on the value of a “free Toleration, in Matters of Religion.” Although the civil and religious had become “almost inseparably dependent on each other,” their original connection had come about, based on Locke’s theory, as a means “only for the Preservation of civil Interests.” Madison quoted Locke’s early formulation of freedom of thought: “if Truth make not her Way into the Understanding by her own Light, she will be but the weaker for any borrowed Force, Violence can add to her.” Following Locke’s lead, Madison contended that for progress of the mind in reason or religion, “Restriction cramps its Progress.” While the civil power necessarily had to maintain good order, such power did not rightly extend into the interior of the individual. All

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ideas, even those “subversive of all moral Obligation,” could be subjected to public scrutiny, for in the end those most reasonable and desirable would triumph from their own merit.\footnote{James Madison, \textit{An Oration, in Commemoration of the Founders of William and Mary College, Delivered on the Anniversary of Its Foundation, August 15, 1772}, EEAI 12444, 9-14.}

Madison praised Holland and England as examples of places that had thrived for their tolerant practices. This was not a completely revolutionary statement on liberty, but it did fit in the climate of 1772. Nonetheless, Madison’s formulation gives a glimpse of a worldview that he would preach for the rest of his life. For an Anglican, a practicing member of the state church, Madison could be seen as spurning the establishment history of his own church, but compared to other European inquisitions he referenced, England had succeeded in being tolerant. What should be supported in religious terms was the common latitudinarian practice of the Anglican Church of the time, avoiding disputes on dogma, even though Madison’s strident defense of freedom of thought probably did exceed the actual practices of England at the time. Madison called on his readers to shun the “bigot-rage” and allow full liberty of the mind under the civil authorities. Most radical, if left unstated in the essay, was the fact his argument stood with Henley in opposing an American bishop. That Madison was ordained three years later and chose to keep his vows in Virginia despite the travails of the Revolution indicates that he did maintain a belief in the sanctity of the Anglican Church as well as the freedom of conscience he had espoused. His early wrestling with these church/state issues prefigured his future efforts to develop a comprehensive worldview that integrated revolutionary liberty, religion, and politics.

\textbf{The Ecclesiastical Madison: Christian Rationalism}

Although his greatest legacy came from his teaching, his guidance of the renamed Protestant Episcopal Church, led by bishops of American origin, also came at a pivotal time in
the history of that denomination. He was consecrated the first Bishop of Virginia by the
Archbishop of Canterbury in 1790, being the third to receive this sacrament in England rather
than Scotland, as the first American bishop had to. Madison’s impeccable Revolutionary
credentials (he had commanded a student militia company\(^9\)) and his Republican politics were
distant from the tory air that had hung over the church. Jefferson referred to his tenure as bishop
approvingly, noting he was a good “whig,” unlike the “tory” who succeeded him.\(^{10}\) The
Episcopal Church nationally had been seeking to Americanize the old Anglican Church in the
1780s, by assembling in conventions, naming their own bishops, and establishing an American
Book of Common Prayer in 1789. The new method used for Bishop Madison’s elevation to the
episcopacy also helped in this process, as he was chosen by election of the clergy and laity rather
than by the loathed royal appointment, which had stoked so much fear and that he had opposed
in the colonial era. Indeed, this was one of the praises of his ministry in his 1812 obituary, which
declared that he was elected by “the unanimous suffrage of his EQUALS” to lead a church free
from bigotry and intolerance.\(^{11}\)

Bishop Madison as a teacher integrated his theology and his politics in ways that left a
wide opening not just for natural science, but Enlightenment social and political critiques to enter
his college. His religiosity was highly latitudinarian, and his teaching of philosophical skepticism
to students led some to doubt whether he really adhered to a traditional belief in Christianity at
all. Jedediah Morse met Madison in 1786, observing that he was “very sociable, sensible and
philosophical, and a curious naturalist,” but he also complained that Madison did not offer

\(^9\) Virginia Gazette, August 22, 1777, p.2.
\(^{10}\) TJ to William Duane, Jan. 22, 1813, PTJDE. Jefferson was referring to the Rev. John Bracken, who is further
referenced below on p. 61.
\(^{11}\) “Presidents Papers,” WM: The phrase “rational Christian” is attributable to Jefferson himself, who informed
Benjamin Rush that his religious views would be agreeable to both the “rational Christian or Deist.” TJ to Benjamin
Rush, Sept. 23, 1800, PTJDE.
lectures on divinity, require public prayers, nor had he admitted any divinity students to the college since 1779, when Jefferson’s curriculum reform eliminated the chair of divinity. Indeed, Madison’s perception of the value of Christianity more closely resembled Jefferson’s than it did the rising evangelical or traditional theologies, and as such, visible displays of piety or specific beliefs were less important than the social utility promoted by religious values.

A famous theologian and philosopher of the time whose scientific, religious, and political projects resembled Madison’s and also interested Jefferson was Joseph Priestley, who sought to synthesize a diverse range of ideas into a cohesive whole. That Madison approved of not only Priestley’s scientific and political projects but also his religious outlook indicated just how tolerant Madison’s religious worldview was while remaining within the rubric of revealed Christianity. Writing to Jefferson in 1800, Madison praised a Priestley book that Jefferson had sent him, *A Comparison of the Institutions of Moses With Those of the Hindoos*, which extolled Christian revelation as the most sublime source of morality, despite what some cosmopolitan voices had to say about the similarities in other religions. Priestley’s works became the basis of modern Unitarianism, although he did not see himself as departing from Christianity but instead restoring its original and uncorrupted form. Revelation and the existence of miracles gave

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12 Colonial Williamsburg Foundation, [http://research.history.org/Historical_Research/Research_Themes/ThemeReligion/Madison.cfm](http://research.history.org/Historical_Research/Research_Themes/ThemeReligion/Madison.cfm); A younger contemporary, Bishop William Meade, remarked, “It has been asserted that Bishop Madison became an unbeliever in the latter part of his life, and I have often been asked if it was not so. I am confident that the imputation is unjust. His political principles… may have subjected him to such suspicion. His secular studies, and occupations as President of the College and Professor of Natural Philosophy, may have led him to philosophize too much on the subject of religion, and of this I thought I saw some evidence in the course of my examination; but that he, either secretly, or to his most intimate friends, renounced the Christian faith, I do not believe, but am confident of the contrary.” Bishop William Meade, *Old Churches, Ministers, and Families of Virginia*, 2 vols. (Baltimore: Genealogical Publishing Company, 1966; originally published Philadelphia, 1857), 1:29, quoted by the Colonial Williamsburg Foundation above; John Jennings, *The Library of the College of William and Mary in Virginia, 1693-1793* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1968), 77.

evidence of the existence of a God that was not distant in the deistic sense, but that God was also forgiving and not concerned with damnation in the way that more orthodox theologies would have it. Despite the official doctrines of his church, Bishop Madison’s disposition comported with Priestley’s worldview on multiple levels.

The early eighteenth-century English Bishop Thomas Wilson was another theologian who could be identified as an exemplar in Madison’s eyes, in this case for his sense of the practical importance of religious values. Although specific thoughts about him were not recorded, Madison recommended his collected works and noted approvingly that President Washington possessed a copy inscribed to him by Wilson’s son.\textsuperscript{14} Wilson’s career and reputation indicate what appealed to Madison. As the Bishop of the isolated island diocese of Sodor and Man, Wilson extended a level of religious toleration almost unprecedented in relatively tolerant England, allowing Roman Catholics to attend his services and dissenters to stand at the communion, as opposed to the customary kneeling. Quakers “loved and respected him.” Beyond his exceptional provision for spiritual liberty, he provided for the poor, dispensing medicines and establishing parochial libraries and schools in the Manx language for a people who had had scarce access to literacy before. When offered a move to the diocese of Exeter, a much wealthier bishopric and thus more personally lucrative, he reputedly told Queen Caroline, “I will not forsake my wife and children because they are poor,” and he remained with the poorer Manx.\textsuperscript{15}

Wilson’s works were more popular in the decades after his death than his obscurity would suggest today, with numerous volumes and reprints appearing in England in the latter half of the century. Part of them emphasizes the necessity of living up to ideals in life rather than

\textsuperscript{14} “Presidents Papers,” WM.
simply professing them, or ensuring that one did not live as a “Christian without Christianity.”

One editor of his dialogue between a missionary and an Indian asked metaphorically, “What signifies a Mechanic’s having a Fine Sett of Tools; if he does no Work with them?”

Delivering the gospel to natives was one way, but the missionary himself warned that it was better not to adopt the religion at all than to profess it and live an uncharitable life. Ideals of benevolence and sympathy were an integral part of Enlightenment moral philosophy, especially in the work of Adam Smith that Madison taught in Williamsburg, and Wilson’s theology, which emphasized good works as the essential outgrowth of religion, offered a correlation between Christianity and secular philosophy that fit with the Bishop’s Christian rationalism.

Despite his affinity for Wilson, Madison’s strong sympathy with the French Revolution and seemingly lukewarm piety could make his ecclesiastical position appear to be merely a sinecure or a necessary adjunct of his role in the church-owned college. His efforts on behalf of a beleaguered diocese indicate otherwise, however. His elevation to bishop carried with it no salary, but it did have onerous travel duties, which he met, that required his visitations in parishes all across the commonwealth. His elected successor, John Bracken, declined the promotion for that reason. Madison also called diocesan conventions to muster parish vestries for a revival of the reserved kind of piety that characterized the Episcopal Church, and to reinforce the church against the Methodist tide that was dramatically growing in membership. At the 1793 convention the Bishop prescribed “plain but judicious pamphlets” that would counteract the enthusiastic emotionalism of the Methodists and other proselytizers, of whom he claimed there were “two kinds of enthusiasts; the one seems to be composed of men of a warm imagination,

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16 Thomas Wilson, *A Dialogue: Representing the Delusion, the Danger, and, the Mischief, of Being Christians Without Christianity* (Sherborne: Cruttwell, 1775), 4.
strong passions, and little or no judgment…. The other is composed of men more ignorant, but active and indefatigable.” Madison saw their dreams and visions as “wild notions” that misled the flock and obscured the true meaning of the Scriptures. For those drawn away from “their maternal church,” the “evils flow from want of information.”

For Bishop Madison, a proper balance was necessary between the warmth of emotion and the cerebral guidance of the mind, but the mind was certainly the final arbiter. For the mind, he sought “devotional tracts, such as would inspire and keep alive the spirit of a warm but rational piety.” He did not, however, neglect the personal appeal of relationships in holding the church together. One of his favorite prescriptions for the parishes was recommending family prayer, a practice promoted by Bishop Wilson’s publications. His call for distribution of free prayer books to the poor certainly bore the imprint of Wilson’s works. The parish clergy also held the responsibility of visiting the homes of parishioners in order to build the kinds of personal connections that the new sects had been so successful in building. Madison’s call for his clerics to cross class lines to serve the less privileged indicates his awareness that his religious tradition was being undermined by its own elite origins, but he had little means to force his vision on a demoralized clergy that had lost much of its prestige in the Revolution. The bulk of Madison’s time was devoted to teaching and managing the College, but the decline of the Church during his tenure was beyond his control given his limited resources and his notion that rationalism rather than revivalism was what would succeed in the new America.

Although Bishop Madison could reconcile Christianity with secular knowledge and remain a faithful servant of his church, a more orthodox cleric like Jedediah Morse (a

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17 “Presidents Papers,” WM.
18 Ibid.
19 Ibid.
“Blockhead,” as Madison referred to him to Jefferson\(^{20}\) could nonetheless have a firm basis for consternation about the lack of divine teaching occurring at the college. Madison’s aversion to doctrinaire religion and his embrace of, or at least interest in, some of the more radical strains of Enlightenment thought allowed a student culture that exceeded Madison’s own limits on “dare to know.” One of Madison’s graduates in the 1790s, Isaac Coles, who was later the private secretary for Presidents Jefferson and Madison, wrote that the “spirit of skepticism which so much prevailed & which every student acquired as soon as he touched the threshold of the college is certainly the first step towards knowledge; it puts the mind in a proper state not only to receive, but also to receive correctly. That it leads to Deism, atheism &c I will acknowledge, but on the same grounds we may object to reason.”\(^{21}\) Another student, Joseph Cabell, who would later be one of Jefferson’s political protégés and a key ally in establishing the University of Virginia, went even further in 1798: “[O]n Moral, Political, and Religious subjects, my fellow-Students continue to display the same freedom and liberality of opinion, the same independence of investigation, the same defiance to old-fashioned precepts & doctrines they formerly did. There is not a man among us that would not enlist himself under the banners of a Paine or a Volney. There are some (of which number I have the honor to be one) who even border on the gloomy verge of Atheism, as it is called, & who would say to a Deist what think you of an Uncreated first cause.”\(^{22}\) The opening of the religious mind worked in tandem with a willingness to re-imagine political and social structures, and similarly, religious questioning would increasingly come into disrepute as other forms of conservatism arose when Madison was gone.

\(^{20}\) Madison to TJ, Feb 11, 1800, *PTJDE*.


The Didactic Madison: Scientist and Educator

One reason Madison’s students could exceed him in questioning traditional worldviews was the very content of the natural science he taught. Madison, like his fellow member of the American Philosophical Society Benjamin Rush and the famed Joseph Priestley, had to confront the philosophical collision between natural science and his religious worldview, and finding reconciling explanations animated much of their work. Materialism as a philosophical theory became increasingly tenable as natural science delved into even the workings of the mind and challenged the long-held biblical chronologies of geologic time. Madison sought the middle way in teaching his students, by assigning William Paley’s *View of the Evidences of Christianity* and George Adams’ *Lectures on Natural and Experiment Philosophy*, which integrated a denunciation of materialism into its scientific analysis. One student wrote that Madison “extols and recommends him continually.” At the center of Adams’ critique was the seemingly necessary assumption underlying materialism that the soul was organic, and thus fully mortal. Shelton Watson, the student, wrote that instead of Adams’ abstruse arguments, he eagerly awaited Benjamin Rush’s *Essays, Literary, Moral and Philosophical*, which came from a perhaps more lucid synthesizer of natural science and ideas of the soul. Even if Bishop Madison could not keep all of his students in the orthodox Christian fold, he did work to prevent natural science from becoming the sole lens through which knowledge of the soul could be acquired, even as he devoted much of his attention to the workings of the material world.

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23 Madison to J.H. Cocke, Jan. 23 1801, Cocke Papers, UVa.; Madison was elected to the APS a year before Jefferson in 1785; Austin H. Clark, “Science in the Old Dominion,” *Bulletin of the Medical College of Virginia* 34 (Dec. 1937): 25.
That caveat aside, Madison also saw no form of knowledge as completely separate from the investigation of natural science, and his studies thereof comprised much of his teaching and his scholarly connections across the nation and the Atlantic. He considered no scientific question as completely foreclosed by the explanation of the Scriptures. This was most true for his long collegial relationship with Thomas Jefferson. The two exchanged notes on experiments and observations occasionally from the time of the Revolution until Madison’s death in 1812. Jefferson’s philosophy was well known at the College, and Madison noted in 1786 and again in 1789 that the *Notes on the State of Virginia* were read avidly there, exciting the students’ “Spirit of Philosophical observation.” Jefferson’s nephew Peter Carr was also entrusted to Madison’s tutelage, due in part to Madison’s outlook. In the same letter conveying Carr’s success, Madison noted the open question on how water had affected the Blue Ridge Mountains, but averred excessive speculation without more evidence: “I agree with you entirely, that it is better to believe Nothing, than what is wrong.”

Indeed, given such perspectives held in common, Jefferson recommended Madison to others as a teacher “of great abilities.” Madison was happy to explore scientific questions with Jefferson with an open mind, eschewing doctrinaire answers even on a topic as religiously loaded as the deluge.

Madison’s range of scientific inquiry was nearly as prolific as Jefferson’s, including geology, surveying, archaeology, astronomy, chemistry, technology, and magnetism, the last of which was especially important given the College’s experimental apparatus. In the 1770s some faculty launched an effort to make Williamsburg a center for American scientific research, a possibility that Madison was happy to cultivate. In 1773 Madison joined with George Wythe, among others, in forming the Virginia Society for the Promotion of Useful Knowledge, which

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26 Madison to TJ, Dec. 28, 1786; Madison to TJ, Feb. 10, 1789, *PTJDE*.
27 TJ to Ralph Izard, July 17, 1788, *PTJDE*.
had as corresponding members such luminaries as Benjamin Franklin, Benjamin Rush, and David Rittenhouse. Although the society declined during the Revolution, Madison’s work kept the College a hub of scientific research, acquiring the *Encyclopaedia*, an orrery, and an experimental magnet, and he sought to keep it engaged in a national discourse, publishing four articles in the *Transactions of the American Philosophical Society*. In 1804 Madison proposed giving an honorary doctorate of divinity to the Rev. Samuel Miller, author of the ironically titled 1000-page *Brief Retrospect of the Eighteenth Century*, which surveyed an immense body of knowledge synthesized in the Enlightenment, especially on science and technology. For Madison, an American undertaking such a task was especially worthy of praise, and he would recommend the book to his students.

It was Madison’s scientific work that primarily formed the basis of his national reputation, but his synthesis of science, religion, and politics would be the key influence that shaped his acceptance of a politically charged campus that would influence his students in their long political careers. In 1786 Madison wrote to Jefferson, “I hope the best Supporters to our Republic will go forth from our University, & that with the Assistance of Science, Time will only serve to her more & more Stability. Sure I am, & I believe you will rejoice to hear it, that ye Spirit of Republicanism is infinitely more pure as well as more ardent in the rising Generation than among any other Class of Citizens.” Jefferson had shared such sentiments about the connection of learning and republicanism as well, writing to the president of Harvard College in 1789 that more expansive learning “is the work to which the young men, whom you are forming, should lay their hands. We have spent the prime of our lives in procuring them the precious

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29 Madison to Samuel Miller, July 23, 1804, “Presidents Papers,” WM.
30 Madison to TJ, Dec. 28, 1786, *PTJDE*.  

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blessing of liberty. Let them spend theirs in shewing that it is the great parent of science and of virtue; and that a nation will be great in both always in proportion as it is free." Madison shared Jefferson’s faith in the progress that could be developed through science and philosophy in a republic that educated its citizens. He would go farther than Jefferson in his integration of a spiritual vision with it, however, as he sought to portray the progress of freedom as part of the fulfillment of the Christian millennium.

A Political Theology of Republicanism

Bishop Madison’s predominant focus on natural sciences and secular moral philosophy was not lost on his students, who made full use of his spirit of free inquiry, even if their deism and atheism went farther than he would prefer into religious skepticism. The students were not necessarily more radical than the venerable Bishop in their political worldview. Madison came to espouse a theology that also fit with a larger political vision, which was vehemently Jeffersonian Republican and imbued with a type of secular millenialism that led, paradoxically it would seem for an establishment clergyman, to continuous support for the French Revolution. Rather than focusing on a distant Apocalypse as the redemptive moment for mankind, the present Revolutionary age was the moment leading to fulfillment of divine will through political means, a democratic society held together by Christian charity and virtue.

These abstractions of theology were not the only influence on Madison’s political worldview, however. The fulfillment of a vision would come to dominate his political sermonizing, but in the 1780s, suspicion of centralized power left him feeling uncertain about the future, which put him in good company with some of the highest levels of statesmen in Virginia.

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31 TJ to Joseph Willard, March 24, 1789, *PTJDE.*
In 1784 the Rev. Madison joined with his cousin James Madison, Jr., Patrick Henry, John Breckinridge, several of the Lees, and other highly notable names in forming the Society for the Preservation of Liberty in Richmond for the purpose of publishing useful political information that was deeply republican in character. Madison would soon share his suspicion of a new federal constitution with some other members of his Society, though he was not a reactionary anti-federalist, instead seeing benefits as well as perils. In the first decade or two, the proposed constitution would restore national credit, protect contracts, and give more “Stability and Vigour” to state governments. The structure, however, portended “a certain Tyranny” within twenty years because of the blending of executive and legislative functions, which countered the necessities of a “democratic” government.

By the 1790s Madison quickly identified with the Republican faction and at times found even his cousin’s and Jefferson’s positions too accommodating to President Adams’ foreign policy. A prayer he offered as bishop in 1798 decried the “Irreligion, Profaneness, and Impiety” of the looming war against France, for God’s will was for Americans to be “a people who should teach to the Nations of the Earth, a Knowledge of their rights and the Means of Securing them.” The Alien and Sedition Acts provoked Madison’s assent to the Kentucky Resolution despite his concern that the states were not a perfect check on the federal government, given their diverse interests and the fact that “they are not all equally enlightened upon Political Affairs.”

Only upon the election of Jefferson to the Presidency in 1800 would Madison feel safer about the future of the Republic, rejoicing in the “pure & enlightened Views of our excellent


33 Madison to Thomas Madison, Oct. 1, 1787, “Presidents Papers,” WM.

President.” Before the election Bishop Madison wrote to his cousin about “the most bigoted, illiberal resolutions” being issued against Jefferson by Virginia Presbyterians, and he surmised that their rigidity might fail to hold their own people. To help facilitate such an outcome, he wrote to Jefferson offering to publish a discourse proving “that the true [Christian] must be a good Democrat.” He argued that the Christian “Religion rightly understood, & carried into full Effect, would establish a pure Democracy over the World. It’s main Pillars are—Equality, Fraternity, Justice universal Benevolence.” Although the Bishop was not as prominent as some others on the national political scene, he and his college became occasional fodder for the Federalist opposition to tie Jefferson to suspect religious beliefs. Jefferson was offended in particular by a pamphlet “forging conversations for me with Mazzei, Bishop Madison &c which are absolute falshoods without a circumstance of truth to rest on; falshoods too of which I acquit Mazzei & Bishop Madison for they are men of truth.” In 1802 a report of a student riot in Williamsburg, exaggerated to include closure of the College, appeared in Boston’s *Columbian Centinel* and *The Connecticut Courant* to demonstrate the “blessed effects of the modern, or Jeffersonian system of religion.” Bishop Madison wrote a response, published in the *Virginia Argus*, denying the severity of the disturbance and addressing the “Jeffersonian system of religion.” For that, “the college knows not what that system is.” The College was instead proud of Jefferson and taught “principles of government which have their foundation in the imprescriptible Rights of Man, which the God of Nature has consecrated, which the revolution of

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35 Madison to ?, Dec. 16, 1802, “Presidents Papers,” WM.
36 Madison to James Madison, Jr., Oct. 9, 1800, *PJMDE*.
37 Madison to TJ, Feb. 11, 1800, *PTJDE*.
38 TJ to Benjamin Rush, Sept. 23, 1800, *PTJDE*. In one pamphlet in which Mazzei was allegedly recorded speaking with Jefferson, Jefferson and the Rev. Dr. John B. Smith saw a decayed church building. Smith said, “I am astonished that they permit it to be in so ruinous a condition.” Jefferson rejoined, “It is good enough, for him that was born in a manger!” *Serious Considerations on the Election of a President: Addressed to the Citizens of the United States* (1800) EAI 37835.
America made known to the whole world, and which the people of this rising empire will never abandon.”

The theological underpinnings of Madison’s political worldview appear best in a sermon he delivered on the national thanksgiving day declared by President Washington in 1795, in which Madison connected the rhetoric of the French Revolution with divine virtues. He asked the congregation,

How was the human race to be restored to their inherent rights, rights, which the God of nature consecrated at the birth of every individual? How was the dignity of man to be vindicated? How were those sentiments of equality, benevolence and fraternity, which reason, and religion, and nature enjoin, to reassume their sovereignty over the human soul, and to dash against the heads of usurpers the chains, the burthens, the oppressions, which had so long brought down the grey hairs of the multitude with sorrow to the grave?… This favoured region, favoured indeed of heaven, is America.… It is in America, that the germs of the universal redemption of the human race from domination and oppression have already begun to be developed; it is in America, that we see a redintegration of divine love for man, and that the voice of heaven itself seems to call to her sons, go ye forth and disciple all nations, and spread among them the gospel of equality and fraternity.

By the time the Bishop offered this sermon, the Reign of Terror had turned some sympathetic Americans away from the French cause, but he continued, saying that “increasing energy should accelerate the great and glorious revolution, which it has already effected in America, which it has commenced in Europe, and which will not be arrested in its progress, until the complete restoration of the human race to their inherent rights be accomplished, throughout the globe.” Echoes of Rousseau appeared in his vision that God’s “will is the general happiness,” and he used an emergent phrase denoting radical universalism, “human rights.”

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40 The Virginia Argus, Wed., May 5, 1802, “College Papers,” WM.
41 “Redintegration” is an archaic term meaning “Re-establishment, renewal, or restoration (of a condition, quality, relationship, etc.), Oxford English Dictionary.
Madison’s political theology had a radical flair that nonetheless carried a moderate caveat. “Fraternity and equality” were words inextricably linked to the radicalized French Revolution, and Madison sought to uphold them as ideals that would not overturn the social order in as dramatic a fashion as had occurred in France. A footnote in the published version of the Bishop’s thanksgiving sermon offered explication of the “term, Equality,” which “seems to be in the wane; it has its enemies even in America.”  

For the true theory of equality, William Brown’s work *An Essay on the Natural Equality of Men* posited an explanation that lay between those favored by the “wild enthusiasts for liberty” and “the servile and tyrannical abettors of arbitrary power.” Brown argued a classical liberal formulation, in which “the right of property should be sacredly maintained.” It had an almost Burkean tone in its emphasis on true equality actually being the basis for social order and subordination to legitimate authority. As society consisted of individuals with naturally differing levels of ability and skills, some naturally should hold authority. All persons had equal obligation to promote the general welfare according to their respective stations. The balance came, however, in the assertions that all individuals were entitled to just compensation for their work, and that all persons have certain natural rights, including slaves the right to liberty. Indeed, “slavery should be deemed the greatest of human evils…. The names of master and slave all claims of duty, all voluntary offers of affection, and exhibit man to a state of hostility, where power is the only right, and terror the only obligation.” The exercise of power should follow instead Rousseau’s “Contrat Social,” in which “No member is subject to another, considered as a member, but every member is subject to the whole in its

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43 Ibid., 8.  
45 Ibid., 81.  
46 Ibid., 87-88.
Brown’s theory is one that emphasized order and obedience to law, but it was unequivocally a type of republican liberty that did not countenance slavery. Although Bishop Madison was not known for presenting antislavery ideas directly, his teaching did lead some students to question the institution in ways that reinforced Tucker’s and Wythe’s objections.

Despite Madison’s unwillingness to dwell upon particularly controversial topics such as slavery, or to countenance the intense irreligiosity of the French, his sustained sympathy for the Revolutionaries could understandably set a different example than his more cautious caveats. In 1795, only months after the Thermidorean Reaction against Maximilien Robespierre, Madison wrote to Senator Henry Tazewell lamenting the rising problems of both the U.S. and France. “How it comes to pass, that Virtue being the Soul of a Republic, all Republics, notwithstanding, hate & persecute Virtue. A Republic really seems to me to be a kind of Saturn, or Cannibal; it begets virtuous Children for the Sake of devouring them. Take Care that you do not fall into such Jaws. What a remarkable Proof of the above Idea, is Greece! America will soon follow the same Track. France has pursued very much the same.”

While praising President Washington as being above the machinations in the government, Madison so loathed the Federalist program that he would stand by France, despite its travails, in his thanksgiving sermon that same year.

Racial Ambivalence: Madison and Slavery

Whether or not slavery was at the forefront of Bishop Madison’s mind as much as it was Jefferson’s, like Jefferson he was both sympathetic with the need for eventual emancipation and ambivalent about the equality of non-white peoples. Besides his college giving an honorary

47 ibid., 90.
degree to the abolitionist Granville Sharpe, two of Madison’s students took ideas learned from their student days into their careers as antislavery leaders. John Hartwell Cocke remained in Virginia as a colonizationist who believed that he was serving the best interest of his freed slaves, and Edward Coles became the activist antislavery governor of Illinois. William Brockenbrough would take ameliorative action in his future career as a judge. Like Jefferson, Bishop Madison could not be called a leader in the removal of slavery, as he was not a regular advocate, nor did he free the slaves belonging to the College, but he did favor, at least in the abstract, a means of reimagining the future in such a way that emancipation could occur with good order, and his students were aware of that.

Making sense of racial differences in the world of emerging science and old prejudices was one of the intellectual challenges facing Jefferson and Bishop Madison on this question in the 1780s. One European’s work in particular sparked new interest in the issue. When the Marquis de Chastellux published an account of his American travels, it included a letter to the Rev. Madison with a prominent footnote that celebrated the emancipation bill in the legislature, mistakenly attributed to his “son” James Madison, Jr. Despite the error, it appears Chastellux was interested in the solution to the slavery question, and likely discussed it with Jefferson in Paris, who was writing *Notes on Virginia* when he penned a letter to Chastellux musing on the differences between the North and South, which he was coming to see was distinguishable through the institution of slavery. Chastellux was at least one voice Madison and Jefferson heard in common in the 1780s asking them to consider the role of slavery in Virginia society.

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While emancipation was an ideal, racial concerns gave pause to both as they developed their notions of the origins of race. Madison worked with the Linnaean Society, which was increasingly facilitating natural classification as a way of organizing humans into naturally inherited hierarchies.\(^50\) The study of Native Americans, past and present, was seen as instructive not just for understanding the Natives, but African Americans as well within the Great Chain of Being. Whether supposed flaws and advantages of a race were inherited or changeable was an especially interesting question. In 1786 Madison wrote to Jefferson on a case of a Native American changing color. While albinos had been known among them, what intrigued Madison in this instance was the fact he was changing color over time.

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\text{[He] for near two Years past, has been gradually whitening. It began on his Breast, and has transfused itself throughout the whole Body to the Extremities. Above half his Hands and Fingers and half his Feet and Toes are yet of the Indian Colour and his Face pied. The Skin on the other Parts is become a clear English White with } \textit{English Ruddiness}. \text{ The Complexion and Colour of his Skin is even clearer and fairer than most white Persons with whom he has been compared. He has had no Sickness but has continued all the while in good Health.} - \text{The Fact being so well authenticated, I thought it worth your Perusal… I doubt whether this gradual Conversion, together with the Ruddiness acquired, be mentioned by any one. It differs remarkably in the last particular from what the poor Black experiences.} - \text{It seems as if Nature had absolutely denied to him the Possibility of ever acquiring the Complexion of the Whites.}\(^51\)
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Madison was considering what was an open question in European biology of the time about visible racial characteristics transforming over time into the ideal white form.

This matter of what would become of the race of freed Africans was of central importance and appeared in other communications with Madison. In 1804 Dr. John Lettsom, an English abolitionist and long-time scientific correspondent with Madison thanked him for sending a pamphlet on emancipation of American slaves, possibly the “Dissertation” by St.


\(^51\) Madison to TJ, Dec. 28, 1786, \textit{PTJDE}.
George Tucker. Lettsom detailed a racial theory designed to assuage fears of race mixing and to further justify gradual emancipation. Reflecting on the recent Gabriel’s Rebellion, Lettsom spoke to a concern that had lived in Madison’s mind, along with most white southerners’ minds, for decades. One of Madison’s relatives had expressed concern about slave rebellion in 1779 during the Revolution, when he had sought a musket from Madison’s brother for defense against “the Hostile Intention of our Sable Neighbors.” The fear had returned in the 1790s, when one of Madison’s reasons for opposing war with France, aside from his ideology, was his fear of the rebellion in Haiti spreading to the U.S. The presence of French troops in America would inflame the possibility, since “There is not a Slave in the Country, but is like a Grain of Powder. The first Moment for collecting those scattered Grains would be seized.” Lettsom’s response to these fears was that “perpetual slavery is impolitic and dangerous,” but so would be “their immediate and complete freedom.” The gradual emancipation advocated in Madison’s pamphlet was the answer.

For Lettsom, the arguments for emancipation from the justice of liberty and public security were obvious. The fears for racial mixing under political equality were what were most troubling and what his theory could solve. While he believed that a gradual process would allow the cultivation of independent habits among the freedmen, he wrote, “I confess I feel a prejudice in favour of my White brethren, and consequently a bias against a near alliance with our Black fellow-creatures, and would wish that the blood of the Whites should not be contaminated with that of the Blacks… This mixture will, however, ultimately cease, because the issue of this union, at length, assumes the character of mules, and cease to breed or propagate.” The kind of

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52 John Madison to Col. William Fleming, April 5, 1779, “Presidents Papers,” WM.
53 Madison to Henry Tazewell, Jan. 1797, in Gwaltney, 90.
notion Madison had described earlier of individuals changing color did not point to the mutability of race. No amount of interbreeding or other physical changes would diminish either Europeans or Africans in the long term, as both were created separately like horses and donkeys, and both races would necessarily continue to exist since their mixed offspring could not reproduce after a number of generations. For Lettsom, this was not a slight to Africans, for “as the Supreme has been pleased to constitute human beings of different colours and structure, we ought each to embrace the other as brethren, and equally favoured children, of one beneficent parent.” Allowing liberated slaves to remain among whites with the inevitable intermarrying that would occur would not pose a danger because “by ceasing to propagate, the old varieties remain in their pristine peculiarities.”  

Lettsom, unlike Jefferson and most other southerners who sympathized with liberation, was fairly sanguine about the ability of freed slaves to coexist with their former overlords in America. Bishop Madison’s thoughts on this theory do not appear to have survived, but the discourse points to the kinds of racial concerns he considered in his understanding of gradual emancipation. The reproduction of interracial offspring, which was common in plantation society, might have given pause to accepting the viability of Lettsom’s racial theory on reproduction, at least in the near term. Lettsom’s suggestion, however, demonstrates the wide degree of uncertainty and wild prognostications in European thought on the biological realities of race.

Although slavery was not central to Madison’s teaching, his thoughts on the subject did create a lasting legacy. Edward Coles himself attributed the principles that led to his success in the political fight against slavery not to his observations on the plantation in childhood or to

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55 Ibid., 580-582.
religious conversion, but to the teaching he received from Bishop Madison. Coles’ experience indicates that it was possible to learn principles at the College sincere enough to result in action. What he possessed that many of his classmates did not was a dedication to pursue action even as the broader society was becoming more hostile to it. As their society became more democratic around them, as the revolutionary principles of the 1790s indicated it should, the elite would have to convince a larger part of the population that parting with slaves was the right course of action. Coles was willing to do that, even if in a new battleground in Illinois. His compatriots would increasingly keep such sentiments to themselves, but Bishop Madison at least offered them the intellectual foundation needed for a challenge to the old order.

See chapter 6 below.
Chapter 2

“The Argument Is Closed Forever”
The Fate of Enlightenment at William and Mary

Just as the culture of William and Mary cannot be understood without the teaching and leadership of Bishop Madison, the political culture of post-Revolutionary Virginia cannot be fully understood without considering the education provided at William and Mary. Indeed, it was an institution that educated a large number of Virginia’s political leaders both during the Revolution and in the succeeding half-century. The College produced a majority of the members of the Revolutionary Committees of Correspondence and Safety, Virginia’s signers of the Declaration of Independence, and delegates to the Federal Convention in 1787, as well as a majority of the governors, U.S. Senators, and state supreme court justices before the emancipation debate in 1832. ¹ Although the culture of the College cannot stand for the entire political culture of the state, it can claim a place of influence. Many of Virginia’s future leaders were exposed to liberal and even radical ideology and antislavery sentiment. Not all of them carried those ideas through the future, but this education offered the foundation for a liberal worldview.

Bishop Madison’s contemporaries were the graduates of the pre-Revolutionary days who, like him, used ideas gained in their establishment education to overthrow the establishment. This chapter focuses on the next generation, Bishop Madison’s students, who lived in a campus

culture that was easily more radicalized than the one that raised the graduates of the pre-
Revolutionary years. At the apogee of the Radical Enlightenment, the 1790s offered young
students the opportunity to read the most incisive social criticisms written in the century, to see a
revolution in France even more sweeping than their own, and to fight a domestic political war
over the future of the Republic. With gusto, future state leaders would celebrate victories of the
Jeffersonian persuasion and decry the abuses of Federalists. They would also confront the specter
of slave rebellion and consider how their fervor for liberty could coexist with what supported
most of their livelihoods. The hopes and contradictions of Jefferson’s worldview were replicated
broadly among the sons of elite, and campus culture in Williamsburg highlights many of the
tensions that elite liberalism had to confront, then and thereafter. The decline of this liberal
culture after Bishop Madison’s death in 1812 would eventually mirror the reactionary turn that
swept the state as a whole in the following decades. Students, especially those in the 1790s,
questioned much about their world, including religion and slavery. Even though one did not
necessarily have to follow the other, by the 1830s, questioning something as fundamental as
religion became as unsafe as questioning slavery, and the College ceased to challenge the
dominant worldview in both.

Philosophy and Practice: The Challenge of William Godwin

Perhaps the writer who most challenged existing worldviews in the 1790s was the
“English Jacobin” William Godwin, whose reception as a philosopher well represents the tension
on campus between caution and radicalism. Bishop Madison’s thought certainly demonstrated
this, although hewing more toward the cautious side. For his students, the radical could be more
pronounced. Bishop Madison was leery of Godwin’s most extreme claims, although Madison’s
own sweeping optimism in part mirrored Godwin’s revolutionary sentiments. Godwin’s Enquiry
Concerning the Principles of Political Justice, like Madison’s favored treatise on equality by William Brown, appeared in 1793, and it quickly became a publishing sensation in England. Godwin diverged from the French Jacobins in the sense that he disdained violence, even if used to overturn ossified social structures, but he did oppose Edmund Burke’s view that traditional social hierarchies were desirable; thus the French Revolution was still seen as a progressive event. Godwin’s work was not a practical political treatise, however, as much as it was a sweeping philosophical reimagination of what the ideal society should be. His extreme optimism about human nature and the anti-authoritarian strands of his thought were radical enough to presage such later movements as philosophical anarchism. Slavery was not directly in Godwin’s sphere of concern, but it is difficult to imagine a way of reconciling it with his philosophy, and he adamantly favored the political and economic rights of women, such that his wife was Mary Wollstonecraft, the famed author of A Vindication of the Rights of Woman.

Godwin’s work posed a real challenge to students who professed to take him seriously and best demonstrates the philosophical boundaries reached by students and faculty at the College. Bishop Madison had a conflicted relationship with Godwin’s ideas, reading them and commenting on them, but also resisting their ultimate implications. Madison had asked for a copy of Political Justice from Senator Henry Tazewell, and he corresponded with Jefferson about the truths and excesses he saw in Godwin. “The old-fashioned Divines look out for a Millennium; the modern Philanthropist for the epoch of infinite Perfectibility. Both equally distant, because equally infinite.—The Advancement of Man to this State of Perfection, is like those two Geometrical Lines, which are continually approaching, & yet will never touch. Condorcet appears to me the ablest, & at the same Time, equally as visionary as Godwin, or any

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other.—I cannot agree with Wishaupt, that the Time will arrive, when no Government will be necessary, because that Time, upon their own Hypothesis, is infinitely distant.” Here Madison expressed his belief that true Christianity is what could produce “a pure Democracy over the World.” It was a statement of visionary sympathy but not of boundless faith, somewhat more restrained but not in opposition to his 1795 thanksgiving sermon that praised the French Revolution. Madison did choose to express more reservations to his students, one of whom wrote that Madison “much disliked and feared” the “innovating principles” of Godwin. Despite Madison’s cautions, the students did widely engage with Godwin’s ideas in the 1790s.

Joseph Cabell, the future Jefferson political ally and reformer, was a devoted student of Bishop Madison in the late 1790s, and his travels as a student included dining in England with the famed writer. Shortly after he completed his studies, he reported, “They say that there are a few Rusty Cats [Aristocrats] among the students. Of this I’m not certain. But the political principles of the greater part of the Students are purely Democratic. Rousseau seems to be the standard book on politics, & of consequence the government of the People the great desideratum with us. Democrats we have in abundance, some moderate, some warm, and some red hot…. On the subject of Morals there appears to be less of Godwin’s opinions advanced than formerly, & more silence and moderation generally displayed.” Although Godwin’s time at the center of attention faded by 1800, the devotion on campus to Republican politics still ran “red hot” with Madison’s approval, and the atmosphere was conducive to students questioning their readings of the Enlightenment’s most revolutionary texts.

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3 Madison to TJ, Feb. 11, 1800, PTJDE. “Wishaupt,” referring to Adam Weishaupt, was a founder of the Bavarian Illuminati, which, like Godwin, professed to believe in the perfectibility of man.
4 “Letters from William and Mary College,” VMHB 29 (April 1921): 147.
5 May, The Enlightenment in America, 247.
Godwin was integral in Cabell’s philosophical correspondence and travel at the turn of the century. One of his correspondents, Benjamin Watkins Leigh, wrote about his interpretation of the philosopher in 1801. The whole philosophy could be distilled to one statement: “Truth is omnipotent: therefore, man is perfectible.” Leigh was not entirely enamored with Godwin, both because he did not share such a sweeping optimism about human nature, but also because he found his methods of philosophical argument lacking. His objections did not extend to finding Godwin too radical, however, as he “presents no dangerous principles.” Cabell evidently had a higher opinion, for he took the opportunity to dine with the “celebrated writer” during his tour of Europe in 1804. Cabell wrote half of his journal record on the appearance and countenance of Godwin, noting favorably his personal characteristics, which tended to moderation in all ways. “He never interrupts others. When he opposes in reply what has been said, it is done indirectly and very respectfully.” His mild nature made him “not very affable nor very silent…. In short Mr. Godwin is a plain, decent, modest, smiling, & agreeable little man.” Cabell was disappointed that Godwin lacked knowledge of natural sciences, but in keeping with Godwin’s specialty, they did discuss the “sciences which depend on human actions.” The only political discussion recorded was Godwin’s disbelief in the political betrayal alleged against Aaron Burr, whom he believed had done “good things.” He did have “anxiety” over the allegations of the murder of Alexander Hamilton, however. Part of Godwin’s allegiance to Burr might have been based on Burr’s opinions on the rights of women and his respect for Godwin’s late wife Mary.

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Wollstonecraft, of whom Burr owned a portrait. Cabell’s sympathies to her cause would be tested soon after his return to Virginia.

Godwin’s visit was likely the highlight of Cabell’s contact with radical and liberal circles in Europe, but he also met the French philosopher Volney and the political economist Dupont de Nemours in Paris at the invitation of James Monroe, who was negotiating the Louisiana Purchase. Cabell did not record their conversation, but he did note that Volney’s “countenance was exactly that of a philosopher, and the most dignified I ever beheld.” Cabell also met the President of the French Senate, François de Kellermann, who told him that Franklin and Voltaire had been in the same room, adding that “the Americans had set the example of regeneration to mankind.” He hoped that this “would be followed throughout the world.” Indeed, at this point after Napoleon’s ascension, Revolutionary liberty was still claimed as part of the Napoleonic ethos. Through the other parts of the journey, Cabell took the occasion to gather more intellectual material in both politics and technology. Touring factories, seeing canal locks and a steam engine, and meeting with Dr. Edward Jenner, the developer of the improved smallpox inoculation, Cabell gathered practical information, which would inspire his later efforts to improve Virginia, and he acquired literature to take home. Forty-seven volumes of Voltaire went back with him from France. The atmosphere led him to muse in his journal about “Liberty – it is not an Atlantic, an African, or an Indian Ocean, that can stop her course, or retard her progress, she wings her flight along the grand horizon of the Universe.”

Cabell returned to Williamsburg to practice law and meet his future wife, the adopted daughter of his professor, the esteemed jurist St. George Tucker. Tucker would be the one to

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challenge him to live up to a principle that could fit with Godwin or Wollstonecraft regarding the
treatment of his future wife. What followed was a demonstrative case of the power of cultural
norms, especially paternalism, to persist over contradictory ideas, and it would represent the kind
of inertia that would hamper more radical attitudes on other matters, such as race. In October
1806, Cabell wrote to Tucker assuring him that Mrs. Tucker had approved, and now he was
asking him to take on the “venerable title of Father, instead of the endearing term of Friend.”

Tucker’s prompt reply began with a promising tone, asserting that there could never be a
“repugnance” on Cabell’s part that could cause him to decline. He did, however, have two
preconditions for his blessing: First, he sought assurance that his daughter, Polly Carter, would
meet full acceptance by the Cabell family. The second was motivated by the “sad reverses of
fortune that I have too often seen among Ladies in Virginia.” Polly came from the wealthy Carter
family, and as such she had income from an estate belonging to her late uncle Edward Carter,
which would under the law of coverture pass to her husband’s control upon marriage. Tucker, as
an attorney and judge, was pointing out that he saw firsthand the numbers of women who were
widowed with nothing because of their husbands’ loss of their estates, either accidentally or
otherwise. Tucker’s proposal, identical to the one he demanded of his first son-in-law, John
Coalter, was simply that “previous to her Marriage her whole Fortune shall be settled upon her
and her heirs – thereby securing to her an Independence through Life, without wishing to abridge
you of the full enjoyment of the rents, profits, & Interest of whatever money there may be in the
hands of the Administrator….” Tucker assured Cabell that this proceeded “from no personal
distrust.” It was simply an “honorable & disinterested” way of protecting Polly in the same way
his daughter Fanny was protected in her marriage. Tucker was seeking from his future son-in-
law a pre-nuptial agreement.

9 Joseph Cabell to St. George Tucker, Oct. 26, 1806; St. George Tucker to Joseph Cabell, Oct. 28, 1806, “Cabell
Cabell was restrained in his response, but he was not pleased. He assured his family’s acceptance, but on the matter of the marriage settlement, he was “in a situation truly painful and delicate.” If he agreed, he would have the appearance of a “humiliated dependent,” and there “would be an odious and embarrassing separation of interests between me and my wife.” He pled the need to have the property for whatever circumstances might arise in which his family would need flexibility with the funds. Although he claimed that he understood Tucker’s request came not from distrust, his words nonetheless indicated that his sense of honor recoiled at the idea that he could leave his wife without sustenance. Cabell then wrote to his brother, Governor William Cabell, relaying the story along with a friend’s observation that Tucker had “intrinsic merit” but “is in some things an odd kind of man.” In a “private interview” with Polly, Cabell told her of her father’s demands, and she responded in “a flood of tears,” saying, “I know nothing, & think nothing of such matters. Your heart is all that I desire.” His brother’s advice was to “not relinquish an inch” because marriage settlements were generally wrong in principle and were “degrading in the estimation of our fellow citizens.” Indeed, he felt so strongly about it that he would renounce “any woman” or even “any Angel” before submitting to such humiliation.¹⁰

Tucker was not relinquishing his ground either, and he sought to further explain his motivations to Cabell. He did not invent this idea, as he had signed such an agreement with his own first wife. As to Cabell’s fear that an inheritance beyond his control would weaken authority over his children, Tucker claimed that experience proved that not to be true, but the primary reason for the request was one that should have appealed to an admirer of radical thought: “the inequality and injustice of our laws in respect to females.” Tucker proceeded to detail the

immense restrictions of coverture, as if Cabell did not already know them: A woman’s property at the instant of marriage became subject to her husband’s debts; if widowed she had only one-third of what remained for her sustenance, and upon remarriage nothing would be left for future children. That was the entire basis of Tucker’s argument. Unequal laws could render moot the good intentions of a husband. Cabell responded, “I agree perfectly with you as to the injustice & inequality of our laws.” The contingencies that Tucker feared, however, were too remote of a chance to justify the affront to his honor that would be implied by his inability to protect his wife himself. Neither wanted the impasse to last, and in the end it was Tucker who relented, with a compromise that a will be signed immediately after the marriage.11

Tucker’s compromise left his principle far more reduced than Cabell’s, for a will could be changed at any time by its author, thus negating the certainty Tucker sought for the protection of his daughter’s estate. He had to confide the faith that Cabell sought after all. The admirer of Mary Wollstonecraft’s husband had fought vehemently against the one sure legal remedy that mitigated one of the most unfair aspects of coverture law, and Cabell tapped into an old and stubborn part of southern culture in the form of manly honor in order to do it.12 Radical philosophy proved too malleable when confronted with another cultural value that had wide support. It certainly suited Cabell’s material interest to gain control of his wife’s estate, but rather than framing the problem as such, he and his brother easily thought in the cultural frame of personal honor and paternalistic protection that best claimed that interest. Existing ideals that ascribed equality to women were interpreted in frames that ultimately did not reach the liberating levels advocated by Wollstonecraft, an advocate of equality even within marriage. One friend

11 St. George Tucker to Joseph Cabell, Nov. 3, 1806; Joseph Cabell to St. George Tucker, Nov. 7, 1806; St. George Tucker to Joseph Cabell, Nov. 9, 1806; Joseph Cabell to St. George Tucker, Nov. 10, 1806; “Cabell Family Papers,” UVA.
12 For an overview of honor culture see Bertram Wyatt-Brown, Southern Honor: Ethics and Behavior in the Old South (New York: Oxford University Press, 1983).
who had written to Cabell earlier explained, “I am pleased to see in young men a spirit of Gallantry & attachment to Ladies. For it is this which softens and refines the manners, and gives an additional spur to all good and virtuous assertions. This Spirit ought especially to be encouraged in all free & republican Governments, inasmuch as it tends to preserve an equality between the sexes (the opposite of which is ever characteristic of savages), and also as it promotes unions & marriages, the utility of which is abundantly evident.”13 Virtuous refinement and manners between the sexes were what truly elevated women’s status rather than an actual material basis in equality. As in William Brown’s treatise on equality, the term could be moderated far from what the most radical exponents of the time could advocate.

**Antislavery Sentiment in a Slave Society**

If women’s rights had a tenuous hold in practice, the plight of slaves also lay in the conflict between ideals and action. The faculty of William and Mary had a strong bloc of anti-slavery sentiment. Bishop Madison shared such sentiments, but he was not alone on the faculty for imparting such thought. George Wythe and St. George Tucker also opposed the most regressive institution in their society. Wythe lost his life in 1806 to a jealous grand-nephew who was angry at the reduction of his inheritance when Wythe freed his slaves. In 1790 Tucker asked his law students if there was “due consistency between our avowed principles and our practice” regarding “those unfortunate people,” and in 1796 he published a proposal for a gradual abolition of slavery.14 Bishop Madison, however, directly received the credit for inculcating antislavery principles from one of the most effective early political advocates against slavery, Edward Coles (who is the subject of chapter six). There were many institutions and ideas being reevaluated in

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the Revolutionary era, but the highest standard of radicalism alongside gender equality was
whether one could support personal liberty across racial lines. The entrenchment of slavery and
conservatism in the South easily displays an aura of inevitability, especially given its size and
scope and the cataclysmic way in which it ended, but it was not entirely unchallenged within the
elite class that perpetuated the system.

One of Virginia’s most outspoken future critics of slavery was John Hartwell Cocke, who
became a lifelong friend of Joseph Cabell while classmates at the College. Cocke’s evangelical
turn later in life added to the fervor with which he approached the colonization movement, which
he believed was the most benevolent way to achieve emancipation. His renewed religious
convictions were not the source of his antislavery views, however, which were clearly in
evidence during his time as a student. His notes on the works of Hugo Grotius, taken while in
Bishop Madison’s class, speak critically of Grotius’ casuistry on justifiable enslavement. It is not
clear whether the criticism came from Bishop Madison or Cocke’s own beliefs, but given
Edward Coles’ recollections, Madison would not have objected in any case. Cocke wrote,
“Grotius says if an individual can alienate his liberty, why may not a whole people… It is absurd
to say a man can give himself away, or were it possible he could not give away his children who
are born free.” In notes on Grotius’ theory of war, including the doctrine of enslavement in a just
war, Cocke wrote, “Whatever light we view it, the right of making slaves is null and void, and
the words slavery and justice are reciprocally exclusive of each other.” Although not
commenting on race directly, Cocke was also critical of a common canard about slaves’
industriousness. “Societies of men which labour in common are remarked for indolence, why
then are we surprized to see the unfortunate slave, slow and lazy in the performance of their only
Task?” His notes on moral philosophy also taught a note of humility: “It is the servants that
maintain the rich man not he the servants.” He made no notes on how to extricate a society from slavery once it existed, but for someone whose education was supported by the fruits of slave labor, it was a clear rejection of the legal and political theory that had given rise to the system.15

A yet more famous graduate of Bishop Madison’s course attributed his lifelong antislavery views to his readings at the College. Lt. Gen. Winfield Scott, who developed the “Anaconda” plan that ultimately helped to defeat the Confederacy, wrote in 1843 to T. P. Atkinson in Virginia about his opinions on current slavery controversies and the origin of his views:

In boyhood, at William and Mary College, and in common with most, if not all, my companions, I became deeply impressed with the views given by Mr. Jefferson, in his ‘Notes on Virginia,’ and by Judge Tucker, in the Appendix to his edition of Blackstone's Commentaries, in favor of a gradual emancipation of slaves. That Appendix I have not seen in thirty odd years, and, in the same period, have read scarcely any thing on the subject; but my early impressions are fresh and unchanged. Hence, if I had had the honor of a seat in the Virginia Legislature in the winter of 1831-2, when a bill was brought forward to carry out those views, I should certainly have given it my hearty support.16

Scott’s recollection is significant given not only his siding with the Union in the Civil War, but the fact that his own presidential campaign faltered over southerners’ suspicion of his feelings on slavery. That he would cite his education above decades of subsequent experience suggests the potential durability of the ideas at the College. Because of its core of devotees of the liberal Enlightenment, it was the only elite institution that cultivated a sustained interest in antislavery thought in Virginia’s leadership class between the Revolution and the formation of the American Colonization Society, which contained an antislavery contingent.17

15 “Cocke Family Papers,” Box 1, UVA.
17 More on the ACS appears hereafter in chapter five.
Having abstract antislavery thoughts would naturally invite questions on what could be done about them. Doubtlessly many students who harbored such views maintained them passively, but they did spark further debate on whether slaves could assert their natural rights. One of Joseph Cabell’s correspondents in his student days in the late 1790s wrote on the abstract rights due to oppressed classes. William Brockenbrough, later a state legislator and judge, wrote, “For this reason, that Liberty affords him the means of procuring to himself Happiness, for this reason ought our negroes to enjoy Freedom, and for this reason it has been said that they would be perfectly right in obtaining it by turning upon their masters.” Brockenbrough, like most of his class, feared the disorder of rapid social change, and with an apparent reference to Haiti, he modified his strong statement by asking, “have they a right to desolate the World, have they a right to convert a scene of peace into a scene of Havock & Bloodshed, have they a Right to exterminate from these States every Vestige of Virtue & Science, and to bring back an age of Barbarism & Darkness? Anger would prompt them to do it, a Thirst for Revenge would prompt them to do it.” He indicated in the latter words a sense of why such results would be expected to occur, echoing Jefferson, but in the end the dire consequences meant that asserting their just liberty through force was inappropriate. It was precisely the formulation that advocates such as Tucker would use to justify gradual emancipation. After the accumulated injustices of slavery, African Americans would understandably be unable to restrain violence against their former masters, and that was a scenario, like the bloodshed in Haiti, that could not be allowed. Their legitimate right to assert their liberty was checked by the inevitable destruction that would counterbalance it. Brockenbrough’s tone, however, was sympathetic to the need of a solution. After a slave revolt scare in 1802, Brockenbrough sided with the slaves whom he thought were unjustly accused. He asked, “How are the Prospects of this Republic obscured, & its Glory
tarnished by this infernal System of Slavery. I fear that the Evil will not be cured for half a century to come.”

His prescient prediction aside, Brockenbrough echoed Jefferson’s notion of the “wolf by the ears,” wherein the institution should be removed, but not through any agency of slaves. In the elite antislavery worldview, the elites bore the entire burden of solving the problem, and they could not do so until a political majority was willing to enact a plan that would prevent freed slaves from disrupting the existing society. This kind of predicament, in addition to the ever-precarious financial status of the College, helps explain why Bishop Madison did not manumit the contingent of slaves who supported the College on its endowment plantation.

The Decline of William and Mary

When Bishop Madison died in 1812, the college culture began to experience more pronounced change, such that Jefferson began to renew his plans to establish the University of Virginia. Madison, along with Tucker and Wythe, had done much to keep the small town of Williamsburg a relevant academic and institutional site, despite the loss of the state capital. One of Madison’s other duties was serving as president of the Hospital for Insane Persons, where he experimented with more ostensibly humane and enlightened treatments for the mentally disturbed, similar to his colleague to the north, Benjamin Rush. Madison envisioned the town remaining a capital of science, even pursuing the possibility of getting the proposed national university located in Williamsburg because of its established facilities and distance from the

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urban distractions harmful to youth. The new leadership in 1812, however, portended the end of Madison’s vision. The Rev. John Bracken, who was elected bishop but did not serve, but who did thereafter take over as president of the College, was not universally impressive. One observer wrote that he “looks more like a tavern keeper than a divine – Indeed, I am told he has nothing divine about him but his name.”

Dr. Philip Barraud, a Williamsburg physician, predicted “the Death blow to William and Mary.” Jefferson held no higher opinion, complaining the following year about the “simpleton Bracken.” His inadequacies demonstrated the need to “liberalize our legislators so far as to found a good academical institution.” Jefferson saw the whole state of education as deplorable, with “a parcel of petty fogging academies” that could barely teach. Their failures were “sufficient to starve out real science, which is accordingly totally extinct in this state.”

This was a long fall from the praise he had conveyed for Bishop Madison as a teacher and scientist, and it renewed his interest in reforming Virginia’s educational establishment with some of Madison’s former students.

Bracken’s controversial reputation likely began decades earlier when he led the conservative faction resisting Jefferson’s 1779 curriculum reforms at the College. Bracken had lost his position with the grammar school, but his friends on the Board of Visitors then offered him a new professorship in the College and gave him a Doctor of Divinity degree. Bracken’s high standing in the Church and his long experience at the College made him appear the logical choice to succeed Bishop Madison as president, but whatever Bracken’s merits as an academic, his tenure unfortunately overlapped with the War of 1812, which put a severe strain on the

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19 Madison to John Lettsom, Oct. 26 1803, in Memoirs of the Life and Writings of the Late John Coakley Lettsom, 1:204. Madison extolled the benefits gained from the cold baths he decided to administer to patients, finding that it shocked them out of the problems they were suffering; Madison to Edmund Randolph, Jan. 31, 1790.
20 Samuel Mordecai to Ellen Mordecai, May 25, 1812, “College Papers,” WM.
College’s attendance and finance, and for which he was ill-prepared to cope. By 1814 the Visitors obtained his resignation and rescinded the requirement that the president be an ordained clergyman.\textsuperscript{22}

In the midst of this change in leadership, the religious climate did not change as quickly at the College. Shortly before Madison’s death in 1812, future bishop William Meade observed before his ordination as a minister in Williamsburg that a literary society at the College had discussed “Whether there be a God,” and “Whether the Christian religion had been injurious or beneficial to mankind.” Meade still found the College to be “the hotbed of French politics and religion” and for years thereafter “in every educated young man of Virginia” whom he met, he “expected to find a skeptic, if not an avowed unbeliever.”\textsuperscript{23} The shift toward a more reactionary education in religion or in politics was not instantaneous, however, and would not be complete until the installation of Thomas Dew as president in 1836. Bracken’s tenure was short enough that it would be difficult to locate a lasting cultural change there. His successor, John Augustine Smith, had a much longer, more contentious tenure.

Smith was the first layman named president under the newly loosened rule, having come from a medical background.\textsuperscript{24} He was not known to be devout, although he did attempt reverse the popular image of Williamsburg as an irreligious place. A Christian publication of the time, the same which would prevent Thomas Cooper’s hiring at the University of Virginia, blamed the College’s decline on its religious heterodoxy, and by 1828 it would call for a “a change in the management of public schools now established, or Christians must unite and build up others on

\textsuperscript{23} Meade, \textit{Old Churches, Ministers and Families of Virginia}, 1:29.
\textsuperscript{24} WM Special Collections, “John Augustine Smith,” http://scdb.swem.wm.edu/wiki/index.php/John_Augustine_Smith
truly Christian principles.”25 Upon Smith’s arrival his remarks on the College were hailed by the Richmond *Enquirer* as the mark of “a vigorous and liberal mind,” and his potential to improve the College was much desired in order to stanch the increased flow of Virginia’s students to such undesirable locales as Yale and Princeton, places inhabited by Federalists and Presbyterians. Smith defended the College in his 1814 remarks in part by drawing upon the legacy of Bishop Madison. He accused Christian critics of declaring Madison a hypocrite by imputing irreligion to someone who upheld the highest standards of piety and knowledge. “If [Madison] was a hypocrite, nought save omniscience can say who is not.” Smith did offer a nod to the critique of Madison’s light touch in student discipline, saying that “nature had infused into his composition rather too much of the milk of human kindness for the station which he occupied.” In any case, Madison’s character and devotion to the College were beyond question, and Smith treated Madison’s reputation as synonymous with that of the College.

Moving forward, Smith did offer two changes to mollify religious qualms. First was his plan to reintroduce a professorship of divinity, with a temperately argued claim that an educated gentleman should have “some knowledge of the rise, progress and effects of religion.” He also promised to rigidly curtail the raucous student behavior that had gained a wider reputation, despite the fact that such behavior existed on other campuses across the country. “It has been frequently indeed remarked to me, that young Virginians were absolutely uncontrollable; that they sucked in with their mother’s milk, such high spirited notions, as to be ever after ungovernable. On this subject, however, I feel no great apprehension, for if the professors cannot restrain, they can at least expel.” Smith’s greatest departure from Bishop Madison in his introductory speech was the place at which he laid blame for the troubled student behavior. It

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came from “the fever that was produced by the French Revolution,” during which “nothing was heard of in this country, but Liberty and Equality.” Youth took these ideas as exemptions from parental and collegiate authority, but Smith hoped that the “phrensy has passed over.”

Even though Smith had “a vigorous and liberal mind,” he was among those who supported an Enlightenment epistemology but increasingly repudiated its radical phase in the 1790s. He sought social order while still maintaining a subdued religious rationalism, but despite his efforts to make the College more friendly to believers, his own reputation as a deist persisted, leading a state legislator to attribute the College’s continuing low enrollments in part to that fact. Smith defended himself and the College to the legislature by asserting a claim of academic freedom that nonetheless excluded those most inimical: atheists and monarchists. Outside these most extreme examples, which he indicated he would not countenance, he cautioned legislators who would be too restrictive: “In a country, indeed, where there is any sort of liberality, the most effectual, and I believe, the only way to render unfounded and mischievous opinions popular, is to persecute them.” The solution was to

Let Professors alone, and they are sure to differ sufficiently among themselves, in their opinions and doctrines. Having no objection to a little argumentation, they engage in their bloodless contests with great alacrity, and carry them on with quite enough of eagerness and pertinacity. Truth is thus elicited, and the men of the world look on, smile – and reap the benefit.

The experience of the Church of England showed that trying to suppress deism only made people more interested in it. Smith made the case that the College deserved more support from the state, including its request to move to Richmond, without undue interference into its academic workings motivated by the old reputation for skepticism and dissipation. With a hint of

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26 *Enquirer*, Nov. 24, 1814, p.3.
27 *Richmond Enquirer*, Feb. 22, 1825, p.4. The *Enquirer’s* editor Thomas Ritchie changed the masthead of the newspaper to include “Richmond” after the War of 1812.
sarcasm, he asked for the same breadth of privilege and “kindness and indulgence” as was given to road, bridge, and canal companies seeking approval for their various new charters.28

Smith made reasoned arguments for the changes that the College Board of Visitors sought, but his unyielding personality was less politically astute than his words might suggest. Indeed, Smith would succeed primarily in creating a more acrimonious climate on campus and in the legislature after the failure of the relocation effort. The expulsions he threatened in his introductory speech in 1814 did take place after later disturbances, which set him apart from Bishop Madison in students’ eyes. More problematic for his career, however, was his increasing alienation from the Board of Visitors and other faculty members, and in 1826 he resigned under pressure with the College again in dire straits. His new chair of divinity also failed due to lack of student interest, and the position was again eliminated.29 Smith’s legacy for the intellectual culture of the College does not appear to have departed dramatically from Bishop Madison’s, as his teachings on moral philosophy had a mildly rationalist bent. Smith told his students that “everything which happens is the will of the deity, but that the deity governs by general laws, and follows what we call the course of nature.”30 Yet in openly rejecting the tenets of the Radical Enlightenment, Smith placed himself in what historian Henry May calls in the early nineteenth century the “Didactic Enlightenment.” Smith largely kept the College as a place intellectually distinct from the deepening evangelical culture of Virginia, but it was far less likely to challenge the social order. Even if Smith did possess an intellectual commitment to resist the conservative drift of the broader culture, the economic precariousness of the College’s foundation would have undermined his ability to be too iconoclastic.

Smith’s successors accelerated the trends away from the Enlightenment of Bishop Madison’s era. The Episcopal Church in Virginia had taken a more evangelical turn after Bishop Madison’s death, and in 1826 Bishop Richard Channing Moore wanted to revive the Church’s role in the College, thus pushing for the nomination of the Rev. William Holland Wilmer. Over the return of orthodox religion, one student complained, “Farewell to thy greatness, mother of the great of Virginia, since a priest is to be thy governor.”

Wilmer’s regular prayer meetings and calls for conversion took a different approach from Smith’s in suppressing the vices of campus culture. His short tenure was ended by his death in 1827, and the Rev. Adam Empie then continued a pious, if controversial tenure for other reasons. Empie allowed a modest number African Americans to receive sacraments at Bruton Parish Church in Williamsburg, and his membership in the American Colonization Society caused consternation among some locals, but despite these controversies, the Visitors and the legislature supported his presidency until he accepted a call to lead St. James Church in Richmond.

Thomas Roderick Dew, like John Augustine Smith, was a religious layman, but he had the most decisive role of any president since Bishop Madison in shaping the intellectual and political climate at the College. When the abolitionist William Goodell looked back at a changed William and Mary from the 1850s, Dew was the one person who could represent the transformation. Dew was a precocious scholar, much as Bishop Madison had been, assuming a professorship at age twenty-three in 1826. Dew learned moral philosophy from the relatively more conservative President Smith before his graduation in 1820, and he continued to use many of the same sources as had been used even by Bishop Madison, including Adam Smith’s Wealth

of Nations, albeit to different ends. Dew became an academic pioneer as one of the earliest lecturers in America on American history as a distinct course, and his intellectual stature made him known well beyond the College. He recast the Revolutionary legacy young Virginians inherited by portraying the American Revolution as a movement led by southerners for conservative ends.\textsuperscript{33} Perhaps most importantly, he was one of the first systematic defenders of the scriptural basis for slavery, arguing for it as a necessary force for social order. His account of the emancipation debate in 1832 laid the intellectual groundwork for more strident proslavery ideologies to come and was influential far beyond his educational duties.\textsuperscript{34}

In 1836, his inaugural year, Dew gave an address at the opening of the college that aggressively tapped into the counterrevolutionary fears surging through the South in the 1830s, and it pointed to the confluence of religious orthodoxy and proslavery sentiment that had finally overturned not only the skeptical and reformist environment that was nurtured by Bishop Madison, but even the relatively tolerant administrations that succeeded him. Dew announced, “Never were the opinions of the world more unsettled and more clashing than at this moment. Monarchists and democrats, agrarians and aristocrats, slaveholders and non-slaveholders, are now in the great field of contention.” The overall bent of his defense of college education in the end was directed to the students who were “slaveholders, or the sons of slaveholders.” While exhorting them to enhance their minds for the benefit of those they would govern, Dew also saw a mission in defending slave society against the “meddling spirit of the age.” One declaration on the formation of good character stood out among the lengthy admonitions on dissipation and vice that could be expected in a raucous college environment: the secular philosophical culture that


\textsuperscript{34} More on this appears hereafter in chapter five.
had existed at the college in the 1790s had been banished for good. “Avowed infidelity is now considered by the enlightened portion of the world as a reflection both on the head and the heart…. The Infidel and the Christian have fought the battle, and the latter has won the victory. The Humes and the Voltaires have been vanquished from the field, and the Bacons, Lockes, and Newtons have given their adhesion. The argument is closed forever, and he who now obtrudes on the social circle his infidel notions, manifests the arrogance of a literary coxcomb, or that want of refinement which distinguishes the polished gentleman.” Dew, in lauding the figures of the early Enlightenment who downplayed the antireligious potential of their philosophy, sought to claim the legacy of the Enlightenment from those who were not just religiously skeptical, but socially liberal. Locke’s revolution protected property, not human rights. To reinforce the point, Dew also offered to waive tuition for anyone seeking to become a minister of the gospel, a departure in itself from the bishop who had trained no divinity students.  

In this new college culture, philosophical and religious skepticism was tied to unsafe social opinions, especially those on slavery. Bishop Madison’s college allowed a spirit of inquiry wherein ideas of reform could enter the consciousness of students, but that culture was on increasingly tenuous ground upon his death.

**Democracy and the Elite**

The 1790s were the high tide for tolerance and acceptance of radical thought in Virginia, and Bishop Madison succeeded in inculcating much in the way of the Jeffersonian vision of the future among his students, the rising generation of the elite. What would become one of the key problems as they moved into the political world was the role of their elite status in a rising

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democratic culture. In their fathers’ society, convincing the elite alone to support a plan of change might have been enough to effect it, but Cabell, Cocke, and Coles were entering a democratic age that would require more public engagement than the kind of angst over slavery that Jefferson revealed in his closed-circle communications. In one revealing letter of 1799, Isaac Coles inquired after a classmate, Arthur Lee, who had taken his “Democratic principles so far as to make the common mechanicks and apprentices of Norfolk his intimate friends.” Coles heard that “he would sometimes attempt to declaim in this [society]…. He resembles a ship in a tempestuous ocean without a rudder.”36 Despite advocating democratic principles, the elite sons had not quite come to want to live them in practice or to “declaim” them among common people. Antislavery sentiment tended to wait patiently for orderly legal action, as Bishop Madison indicated to Edward Coles was necessary. None would be forthcoming without broad public support. The larger public had begun to turn against antislavery policies after the turn of the century, but it was not because there was a lack of institutional support for the ideas within the next generation of elite leaders. Their passivity mirrored Jefferson’s own passivity on the matter, which he held in part because he expected the next generation to provide the solution. Providing education to the citizenry could be one way of having enlightened democracy, but it would not be an easy reform to implement either. In reality, Bishop Madison taught revolutions of the mind rather than how to lead one in the world. The two were not unconnected, but they were left to people like Cabell, Cocke, and Coles to make a reality. These subjects of reform, among others, would only become more controversial in the two decades following the loss of Bishop Madison.

36 “Glimpses of Old College Life,” 160.
Chapter 3

“The Idea Is Not Chimerical”

The Struggle for Public Education

Joseph Cabell’s generation faced a challenge that would seem daunting: to live up to the auspicious achievements of their fathers’ generation in the Revolution.¹ Jefferson held hope in the younger generation continuing their enlightenment, but it was not an easy task. One of Cabell’s contemporaries, William Wirt, reflected a sense of this challenge in a series of essays by “The Old Bachelor,” who sought to “awaken the taste of the body of the people for literary attainments; to make them sensible of the fallen state of intellect in our country, compared with the age even of the revolutionary war; to excite the emulation of the rising race, and see whether a groupe [sic] of statesmen, scholars, orators, and patriots, as enlightened and illustrious as their fathers, cannot be produced without the aid of such another bloody and fatal stimulant.”²

Maintaining an enlightened public mind would be seen as the most important project for the rising generation of reformers in the Republic, since it would undergird every other kind of necessary reformation. How to achieve it would pose substantial problems for Virginia’s reformers, however.

The University of Virginia looms large in the history of education in America, and as one of the three great achievements Jefferson identified in his life for posterity, its history understandably dominates the study of education in Jefferson’s philosophy and Virginia’s development. The success in establishing the University, however, can overshadow what was a

² Wirt, *The Old Bachelor* (Richmond, 1814), 69.
long-running effort to build a comprehensive school system and what can rightly be called failure in that process. Jefferson’s plan for a public school system, first proposed in 1779, and elaborated upon in his *Notes on Virginia*, became the inspiration for an act passed in 1796 that allowed counties to tax their citizens for the purpose of operating primary schools. The unwillingness of the rich to tax themselves locally for this purpose, however, rendered the act virtually null. Jefferson did establish a vision, nevertheless, that his younger protégés would pursue for decades. For them, poverty was a social problem that needed remedy with enlightened education. It could improve the conditions of citizenship as it reduced social stratification and disharmony. Nonetheless, the vision eventually founded on ideological tensions that were never fully resolved. Three central problems recurred in the political debate that did at one point come close to establishing a comprehensive system. The source of funding, the locus of authority, be it local or central, and the role of clerical teachers were each problems that defied easy solutions in the generally applauded ideal of creating an enlightened citizenry.³

**William Godwin Redux: The Teaching of James Ogilvie and Thomas Ritchie**

In 1804 Joseph Cabell’s friend and former classmate Isaac Coles wrote exuberantly to him about a new newspaper being published in Richmond called *The Enquirer*. What was so exciting about it was its publication of articles by their own young colleagues launching their careers in public discourse and politics.⁴ It was a voice for Republican-minded Jeffersonians in a state that did still have a Federalist bent among the elite in Richmond.⁵ The paper would serve not only as an important partisan voice; it was a locus for the reform movements that would occupy Jefferson’s protégés in the pre-Nat Turner era. Jefferson himself later identified the paper

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⁴ Isaac Coles to Joseph Cabell, Nov. 1, 1804, “Cabell Family Papers,” UVA.
as his favorite source of news. He told William Short, “I read but a single newspaper, Ritchie's Enquirer, the best that is published or ever has been published in America.”

The *Enquirer* is significant in assessing educational efforts not just because it advocated wider access to schooling, but because it saw itself as an educational source for its readers. The founder and editor, Thomas Ritchie, was part of Cabell’s generation, born in 1778 in Tappahannock, also home of the Brockenbroughs, whose family included his cousins John and William Brockenbrough. Although the details of Ritchie’s own education do not survive, he did receive a typical classical education in his youth before briefly studying law with Spencer Roane and then medicine in Philadelphia. Finishing neither, Ritchie preferred to return to Virginia to work as a schoolmaster with the Scottish expatriate James Ogilvie, who though born into an aristocratic family, was according to George Tucker, “a democratic Scotchman and an enthusiast in French politics and philosophy.” It is through Ogilvie’s career that a glimpse of Ritchie’s ideas before his publishing career started can be seen.

Ogilvie turned his enthusiasm in radical politics to the service of oratory and teaching, and his among his young pupils he counted Thomas Jefferson Randolph, Francis Walker Gilmer, William Cabell Rives, William Wirt, and Winfield Scott, each of whom except Randolph and Wirt went on to study with Bishop Madison. Ogilvie worked as a tutor and schoolmaster at several academies in Virginia during a career lasting from the 1780s to 1816. Ritchie taught

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6 TJ to William Short, Sept. 8, 1823, LOC, [http://memory.loc.gov/cgi-bin/query/r?ammem/mtj:@field(DOCID+@lit(ws03117))](http://memory.loc.gov/cgi-bin/query/r?ammem/mtj:@field(DOCID+@lit(ws03117))).
8 Mutersbaugh, 15-17, 88.
9 Notes in *PTIDE*, Ogilvie to TJ, July 3, 1795 and May 24, 1811. The note does not cite the source for Thomas Jefferson Randolph’s tutelage with Ogilvie, but a letter to Randolph from TJ on Nov. 24, 1808, asks Randolph to “present me affectionately to Mr. Ogilvie,” who did tutor in the village of Milton near Monticello; LOC, [http://memory.loc.gov/master/mss/mtj1/042/1000/1049.jpg](http://memory.loc.gov/master/mss/mtj1/042/1000/1049.jpg).
with Ogilvie before launching the Enquirer, and he published some of Ogilvie’s material in his paper. Ogilvie’s work represents the most groundbreaking effort in Virginia in the 1790s to reform the practice of elementary and secondary education from an Enlightenment perspective, and his career reflects on Ritchie’s subsequent interest in the subject and draws further connections between Jefferson, his protégés, and the philosophy of William Godwin.

Like Bishop Madison, Ogilvie also had an intellectual relationship with Jefferson, who supported Ogilvie’s efforts in improving the education of Virginia’s next generation. In 1795, when serving as a “Proffessor of Humanity and Belles Lettrs in the Fredericksburg Academy,” Ogilvie sent a letter to Jefferson introducing himself and seeking Jefferson’s attendance at a public examination of students that would demonstrate Ogilvie’s vision of enlightened education. He believed that religion, philosophy, arts, and education in the Old World had been “deeply infected with the maladys which the injustice and oppression of Europe diffused so widely,” and that fact led him to reject the “Prescriptive system of education” in favor of teaching through experimentation. His explanation of his approach likely appealed immediately to Jefferson, since it connected to Jefferson’s notion that learning more broadly was the next stage of achievement necessary for young citizens in the Republic. Ogilvie asked, “From whom can we expect the amendment and reformation of education?” He lamented that theoretical philosophers such as Locke, Helvetius, and Rousseau had failed to effect substantial change, and the celebrated “Technical Teachers” of the age remained “darkened by the dogmas of Antiquity.” Ogilvie’s solution was “to blend Theory and Practice” and “speculation and experiment” in a way that might promote the enlightened reformation of education. The public displays of erudition of students were an integral part of his program to promote education widely and not merely as a

11 The “prescriptive system” also could have been an implicit attack on the more orthodox religious and theoretical climate of northern colleges from which Jefferson sought to distance Virginia’s students.
tool of private social advancement for a few students. “The design I am prosecuting is not so much a matter of private as of public concern and I look for the countenance and cooperation of my enlightend and patriotic fellow-citizens.”

Not all citizens were so enlightened, as one critic in Fredericksburg complained that the examinations were “a piece of florid plagiarism” by “a vain and presumptuous pedant.” Ogilvie in turn denounced the complainer as “a malignant defamer” who showed “singular proof of mental imbecility.”

Although some among the public were unenthused, Jefferson’s friend Mann Page, who was the president of the trustees of the Fredericksburg Academy, lent his imprimatur to Ogilvie’s request by forwarding the letter with his own appeal to accept the invitation. Jefferson responded with apologies that he could not attend, although he wrote, “if any thing could ever induce me to sleep another night out of my own house, it would have been… the education of our youth.” This was not the last opportunity, however, as Jefferson attended Ogilvie’s lectures occasionally thereafter. In 1806 Jefferson wrote to Ogilvie indicating that he had been given free access to the library at Monticello. Shortly thereafter Jefferson sent him an unspecified copy of a publication about Johann Pestalozzi’s pedagogy, which he said might provide Ogilvie “some new ideas.” Pestalozzi’s growing celebrity was one testament to its quality, wrote Jefferson, but another was the fact that the geologist and philanthropist William Maclure had engaged Joseph Neef, a French practitioner and advocate of the Pestalozzi method, to come to America to teach it. Jefferson’s interest in Ogilvie’s project was personal, since he also invited Ogilvie to dine with him “with one or two of [Ogilvie’s] young friends.” Maclure, before launching a wide-

12 James Ogilvie to TJ, before July 3, 1795, PTJDE.
13 Quoted in the PTJDE, Mann Page to TJ, July 3, 1795.
14 Mann Page to TJ, July 3, 1795; note on trustees in PTJDE.
15 TJ to Mann Page, Aug. 30, 1795, PTJDE.
ranging international diplomatic and scientific career, had lived in Milton, not far from Monticello, where Ogilvie tutored Thomas Jefferson Randolph before Randolph’s move to Philadelphia.

Pestalozzi, a Swiss educator, wrote of enlightened methods of teaching based in part on Rousseau’s writings, and quickly became well known in Europe. The text that Jefferson sent to Ogilvie was likely an analysis by Daniel Chavannes called *Exposé de la Méthode Élémentaire de H. Pestalozzi*, which was published in 1805 and listed in Jefferson’s library. The overarching purpose of Pestalozzi’s new method fit perfectly with Ogilvie’s stated desire to reform prescriptive education. Joseph Neef, who recapitulated the Pestalozzi method in an 1808 book that Jefferson also owned, wrote, “My pupils shall never believe what I tell them because I tell them, but because their own senses and understandings convince them that it is true.” Pestalozzi developed a comprehensive theory of learning that integrated intellectual, moral, physical, and emotional development that emerged from children’s self-discovery rather than rote learning. Self-discovery was not directionless, but through cultivation the human faculties were most capable of reaching their full potential. Humanistic religion and social harmony were as much goals as the achievement of intellectual objectives. During the short-lived Helvetian Republic, from 1798 to 1803, Pestalozzi advocated progressive taxation, equality of citizenship, and publicly funded education. After the return to power of more conservative Swiss oligarchs, Pestalozzi lost public funding for his school and he had to continue his work privately. His project, however, had enduring interest in the early United States and has had a long legacy, lasting in educational theory through the present day. After running a school in Philadelphia,

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20 Silber, 133-150, 156-157.
Maclure and Neef would later teach at Robert Owen’s utopian community in New Harmony, Indiana.\(^{21}\)

William Godwin was a more significant philosopher, however, in the origins of Ogilvie’s philosophy, and Godwin’s connections explain how Ogilvie became a peripherally controversial figure during Jefferson’s presidency in the way that Bishop Madison unintentionally had. Ogilvie reportedly taught Godwin’s *Political Justice*, and he even exchanged some correspondence with Godwin. When Godwin wrote to Ogilvie in 1797, Ogilvie was already involved on the Republican side of the emerging political battles, and he would soon speak out against the Alien and Sedition Acts. Godwin’s work had never been acceptable to Federalists, and his letter to Ogilvie became part of the national partisan battle with Federalists when it was published in Washington’s *National Intelligencer* in 1802. The letter contained nothing controversial in itself, but its existence proved a link between Ogilvie and Godwin, and by extension Jefferson’s allies. Godwin praised Ogilvie’s intellectual proclivities and told him that work like his would be the source from which “the melioration of human institutions must proceed.”\(^{22}\)

Ogilvie produced two substantial publications that further reveal his philosophy of enlightened reform and the influence of Godwin. A copy of Ogilvie’s pamphlet *Cursory Reflections on Government, Philosophy and Education*, published in Alexandria in 1802, was kept in Jefferson’s personal library.\(^{23}\) The theory brought together each of the “three great moral agents” of society, namely government, philosophy, and education, to argue that the improvement of each would amplify the advantages in the others. Each of the three agents, he

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\(^{23}\) Pollin, 441.
contended, had to “move with regularity and energy… in order effectually to advance the happiness of mankind,” and weakness among any of the three would make the others less effectual. Ogilvie left no doubt on the origins of this idea. He stated that Godwin’s *Political Justice* was the source of his whole argument, and the United States was the place in which the potential was most prepared for an improved society. “A proposal to rebuild the tower of Babel would not be more chimerical, than an attempt to revive in America a system of political, territorial or commercial monopoly.” Reform to achieve further equality of opportunities, information, and property ownership were possible in the United States because of the “freedom of innovation and enquiry” that existed and the fact that it was not a manufacturing country.

These necessary political conditions were insufficient without the availability of enlightened education, however. Society needed independent philosophical schools to teach from “reason, benevolence and justice,” not “authority and custom.” Liberty in the political realm and in the mind required mutual reinforcement. “The happiness of every nation will therefore be proportioned to the number, ability and ardour of the minds employed in the pursuit of knowledge…” and the “extent to which the spirit of active innovation and reform, is not only protected by the laws, but cherished and cultivated by the opinions, customs and practice of society.” To this end, a society must have “general adoption of a comprehensive and philosophical plan of juvenile education,” since each generation presented an opportunity for “enlightened and energetic instructors” to control prejudices to end error.

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24 Ogilvie, 6.
25 Ibid., 37, 15.
26 Ibid., 8.
27 Ibid., 37-39.
28 Ibid., 9, 17.
Ogilvie critiqued certain social conditions that should be remedied through the provision of education. Acknowledging the poverty that other educational advocates would address, Ogilvie wrote that before knowledge could be readily imparted, “a facility of procuring the means of comfortable subsistence must exist.” He also believed that girls needed schooling as well as boys because the notion that women’s intellect was inferior was “abhorrent.” Slavery too was a practice “unhappily” introduced in Virginia because it presented “temptations to indolence, sensual dissipation and apathy.” Godwin taught that “government and law derive their origin from the ignorance and prejudices of mankind and have an inevitable tendency to perpetuate, and aggravate the evils they are instituted to counteract.” Education was the best means to overcome such tendencies, and ultimately once social harmony was established, the end of the need for government would be the best, even if a remote outcome. Ogilvie lamented that his religious skepticism generated most of the popular resistance that he encountered, but his own ardor made him look like a missionary for the radical Enlightenment.

Ogilvie later continued his correspondence with Jefferson after he began to transition from teaching to public political orations during his final years in the United States. When he still lived in Milton, Ogilvie gave lectures in Charlottesville for which he was paid by subscription. When he invited President Jefferson, he waived his subscription fee, but Jefferson was evidently impressed enough that he sent a complete set of Cicero’s works to Ogilvie in gratitude. As Ogilvie toured the country delivering his orations, Jefferson helped him make connections, and he gave advice on his topics. He supported Ogilvie’s critiques of the clergy, who were more “directed to the maintenance of the artificial structure of their craft” than to “the

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29 Ibid., 23-26.
30 Ibid., 40.
31 Ibid., 35.
inculcation of morality,” and he recommended that he write a speech on the “benefits of the union, and the miseries which would follow a separation of the states.” Ogilvie’s discourses on republicanism were welcome in America, but Jefferson feared that his planned return to England to promote such ideas was fraught with risk.\footnote{\textit{J} to \textit{Ogilvie}, June 21, 1808, LOC; \textit{J} to \textit{Ogilvie}, Aug. 4, 1811, LOC.} Jefferson’s warning was prescient, for Ogilvie did later return to Britain and committed suicide there in 1820. It was a tragic end for Virginia’s most prominent link to trans-Atlantic radicalism.

\textbf{The Enquirer and “The Rainbow” Speak for Education}

Thomas Ritchie’s earliest description of his mission avowed an active role for the press in informing the public discourse, preferably free from the control of public officials, echoing Jefferson’s own attempt to establish an independent newspaper to rival the \textit{Virginia Gazette} in the 1760s. He championed the Jeffersonian doctrine of a press free from the English tradition of freedom limited by laws of seditious libel, and the \textit{Enquirer} sought to be a critical voice without abusing its freedom through scurrilous or unduly personal attacks.\footnote{\textit{Enquirer}, Aug. 11, 1804, p.3.} It also sought to go beyond the explicitly political and offer a broader source of enlightenment to the public. Ritchie wrote that he wanted to “lead them to admire and imitate the efforts of genius; to spread before them the great principle of science, and to give them ‘a sense exquisitely keen’ to all those ever-varying delights, over which Literature presides.”\footnote{\textit{Mutersbaugh}, 86.} “\textit{Let us establish schools wherever we can – bring learning as we have attempt’d to bring justice, as near as possible to every man’s door – aid the press where the press aid the people – establish Libraries and learned societies in our towns – and scatter \textit{books} and literary \textit{excitements} over the face of the country.”\footnote{\textit{Enquirer}, May 12, 1809.} The \textit{Enquirer} would publish news and specific proposals for this purpose for decades, as well as providing
occasional literary publications such as the “Old Bachelor” series by St. George Tucker, Dabney Carr, and William Wirt. The series purported to teach “eloquence” along the lines of articles from the long-famous *Spectator* in England, and was reprinted in book form.\(^{37}\) Ritchie’s newspaper aspired from the inception to be more than a simple news aggregator like many American newspapers were. Although many of the newspaper’s articles were unsigned or pseudonymous, the involvement of such persons as Tucker and Wirt and Jefferson’s personal endorsement suggest that the *Enquirer* was a respected source among the Republican elite.

Ritchie’s connection of literary and scientific achievement and Republican politics fit well with the Jeffersonian perspective shared by Cabell and others from the William and Mary class.

The *Enquirer*’s first extensive series of editorial essays came from “The Rainbow,” which was a “Literary Compact, recently formed by a society of gentlemen in the city of Richmond” assembled to publish a series for educational purposes. Although they did not leave written evidence of a tightly organized intellectual circle like New York’s contemporary Friendly Society, they did organize as a community of Republican lawyers and teachers in the Federalist-dominated Richmond area, and they met not just in print but in person.\(^{38}\) Started by James Ogilvie, the Rainbow included as members Wirt, John and William Brockenbrough, Peyton Randolph, and historian Skelton Jones.\(^{39}\) The group’s name denoted the “varied hues” of the “diversity of amusing topics” that would appear in the form of “moral and miscellaneous essays” that would divide the “‘rays of science’ into all their native and beautiful colors.”\(^{40}\) Twenty Rainbow essays appeared in the first year of the *Enquirer*’s run, offering commentary on such topics as the French Revolution, celibacy, luxury, and “the Illusions of Fancy.”

\(^{37}\) The Old Bachelor (Richmond: Enquirer Press, 1814), “Advertisement”.
\(^{38}\) *Enquirer*, Sept. 5, 1804, p.3.
\(^{39}\) Hubbell, 141; *Enquirer*, Aug. 11, 1804, p. 3.
\(^{40}\) *Enquirer*, Aug. 11, 1804, p. 4.
Two of the “Rainbow” essays spoke directly to the cause of expanded access to schools, and they bore the imprint of Ogilvie’s perspectives on the value of enlightenment and the necessity of addressing poverty in the improvement of society. Essay X, “On the Establishment of Charity Schools,” published in 1804, was likely written by Ritchie himself. In it, Ritchie constructed an argument that echoed Jefferson’s justification for public schools, namely that people of genius should not be obstructed by their poverty. Ritchie began by referring to the typical appeals to sensibility that elicit compassion for the poor. While good in nature, such appeals did not always yield the necessary change to alleviate problems, since “too frequently is the ‘tear forgot as soon as shed.’” And even when compassion was not forgotten, emotion too easily learned to accommodate rather act usefully against problems. Ritchie staked a claim on principles of justice that transcended law and custom. “No man in society stands alone,” he wrote. “There is not an individual, who has not drawn out and fastened his lines of connection to innumerable others, by which like the divergent rays of a spider’s web, he communicates and receives ten thousand sensations.” Thus, any gifts that can be offered by an individual and are not offered are unjust deprivations to society. “Should a man, whose endowments are rare, admirable and extensive, whose wisdom might enlighten the ignorance of his country men, and ‘scatter plenty o’er a smiling land,’ should such a man be doomed to languish under the labours of the oar, and perish amid the damps of a mine?... In this sense, morality may be defined the economy of the general happiness.”

Ritchie’s utilitarian claim of general happiness worked in conjunction with an argument about the allocation of surplus resources in society. “Every civilized society produces more than enough for the subsistence and comfortable accommodation of its members.” With the advent of

41 Hubbell, 143. Hubbell’s identification of Ritchie as likely; Enquirer Oct. 20, 1804, p.4.
machines and industry, the collective labor of society yielded more than each of its individuals
needed, and much of the surplus remained in the hands of a smaller number of individuals. The
“friend of Society” could rightly ask, “Shall it go to the support of an useless number of servants
in the Houses of the rich? Shall it maintain splendid equipages, or raise magnificent palaces?
Shall it minister to the follies of the young, or the vices of the old… Or can it receive a more
useful destination?” Ritchie maintained that the interest of justice, and not merely sympathy,
should lead attention to the conditions of the poor in a society that had sufficient wealth for
amelioration. In comparing other cultural practices to the present, Ritchie noted that some
societies were more brutal, such as the Spartans, who would expose unwanted children to an
early death. “‘Tis true that civilized society, does not murder the children of the wretched, yet
how often does she subject them to imbecility and disease, by frequent abstinence, and
insufficient support!” In order for a society to be truly civilized, it had a standard to meet that
was higher than simply surpassing the Spartans. “Unfortunate children” could have intellectual
constitutions “as complicated and subtile, as those of the rich.” Despite latent potential
everywhere, “We have thus a simple picture of the intellectual condition of the poor; of mind
struggling in its very birth for the means of unfolding its finest energies.” His summary was
emphatic: “Let Society fulfill the Claims of the Poor.”

After establishing the philosophical claim of justice, Ritchie claimed that an “adequate
cure” already was known for this problem, although he denied that he had the opportunity in his
essay to approach practical questions. One such question stood as a key problem for the
educational reformers in the following decades. Whether a “legislative provision” or “individual
contribution” would better suffice, he did not offer an answer. But public enlightenment could
overcome the “selfish passions of other men” if the enlightened would not “indulge a premature
despair.” The essay’s conclusion indicated that Ritchie and like-minded readers felt that their goal had great inertia to overcome. Ritchie, however, ended with a soaring metaphor that showed a sense of hope in perseverance: “The aeronaut, who now soars among the clouds, would never have ascended above the earth, if the aspirations of his fancy had not long before anticipated the researches of reason.”

William Brockenbrough, Cabell’s college friend who had written letters critical of slavery, penned another Rainbow essay, “On Public Schools,” which developed a more practical proposal than Ritchie’s piece had. “I know that it is visionary to suppose that the whole of a people can ever become philosophers, but it is surely not chimerical to suppose that they may in their infancy be taught the elements of knowledge, and inspired with a desire of acquiring more than they possess.” He hoped that a “love of knowledge would become the national taste.”

Brockenbrough departed from the abstraction of arguing for justice, as Ritchie had, and argued instead that the Scottish system of parish schools “enlightens the cottage of the indigent peasant, and calls forth genius from her secret recesses.” Universal literacy, along with widespread ability to write and do arithmetic resulted in a higher level of industriousness and dramatically lower crime rate than other places in Britain or Europe. Indeed, even Adam Smith in *Wealth of Nations* credited Scottish schools with much of Scotland’s prosperity.

Brockenbrough presented caveats from the Scottish example as well. While an enlightened people would be more vigilant of their rights than an ignorant people, Scotland did not have the opportunity to escape the hierarchy of king, lords, and priests, but it did not disprove the advantages of education for republican citizens. Furthermore, the Scottish schools taught the catechism of the national church, which led to a “bigotted preference of certain forms of worship.” If instead children learned from moral lessons and “Grecian, Roman, English, and
American history, the bigotry of the Scotch would be avoided, the mind would be left free to form its own religious and political opinions.” Brockenbrough addressed the question of a practical approach by answering in favor of public spending for schools. He noted that an “enlightened foreigner regrets that there is in the United States a national prejudice against the encouragement of literature by government.” Although private ventures would be welcome to provide general education, “there is no reasonable ground for supposing that an object of such magnitude can be accomplished by the liberality of individuals.” Because of this practical reality, Brockenbrough could “see no reason why the whole community should not contribute to the improvement of the whole.” For a specific plan, he revisited the public school plan proposed by the Committee of Revision in 1779. Since every county in Virginia already bore “considerable burthens for the support of the poor,” there was an opportunity to redirect such money for “improving the minds, and training up to virtuous habits the children of the poor.”

Brockenbrough did suggest that a limit on spending apply to the salaries of teachers and professors, in that they should not receive any from the state. Citing Adam Smith’s concerns, “a salary would operate only as a premium for indolence and negligence.” Public facilities should be provided, however, and the teachers who inhabited them would best be paid through counties or some other form of local subscription. Brockenbrough, while forcefully advocating public spending, recognized that the allocation of funds would be arguably the most difficult part of expanding education in parsimonious Virginia. By supporting the locality to provide for education, especially for teachers, he advocated a system that was most politically palatable, both in practical politics and in Republican ideology, and yet also most likely to fail in practice.42

42 Hubbell, 144. Hubbell’s identification of authorship; Enquirer, March 23, 1805, p.4.
Broad statements on the necessity of education tended to have boys as the assumed beneficiaries because they needed enlightenment for being future citizens. The *Enquirer* did, however, extol the intellectual abilities of women, especially in the context of what has been called “republican motherhood.”

Ritchie, in a Rainbow column on the education and prudent marriage of women, wrote that women’s unequal attainments did not necessarily reflect unequal abilities. What he did offer was advice on what kinds of learning would enhance the feminine graces that women offered society. Women did not need an education “as solid as that of a man,” but neither “should it be as a superficial as that of ordinary women.” History would provide examples to liven imagination and virtue, and natural science would enhance the appreciation of natural beauty. Intellectual curiosity and social grace were both desirable in women, who, Ritchie recommended, would ideally enter marriage with an approximate degree of equality with their husbands in terms of wealth and refinement. The happiness of both would benefit from such parity.

While Ritchie saw improved female minds as a path to more harmonious social relationships, William Brockenbrough, echoing James Ogilvie, went farther in arguing specifically for institutional access for women to enlightened education. To offer such, he wrote, was keeping with “the spirit of the American revolution” that “has in some degree destroyed that unjust inequality, which the laws of England have created between the sexes.” The laws were the first source of inequality, and Virginia had made some progress on that front. “The superiority which was insolently assumed by the male sex, has almost entirely vanished before the light of reason, while the legislature of our state, by the single act of annihilating the right of the eldest

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44 *Enquirer*, April 6, 1805, p. 4.
son to inherit all the property of his father, and of dividing it equally amongst all his children, has 
blasted the germ of family pride, and solemnly recognized the principle, that the male and female 
sex are equal.” There was still “as much to blame and to commend,” but the abolition of 
primogeniture had provided an example of the kind of reform that would end “unjust partiality” 
in the law. The remaining unequal laws of property in marriage still proved a substantial injustice 
to women, as did the lack of guaranteed custody rights for mothers to children upon a father’s 
death, since he could offer guardianship to someone else. The tendency of Virginia men to “roam 
from flower to flower” demonstrated that they could make no claim on superior virtue.45

Brockenbrough’s argument for equality was not unlimited. Elaborating a version of the  
“separate spheres” notion of gender distinction, he noted that he was not calling for full political 
rights, even though there were “many cogent reasons” with “great propriety” that could justify 
women’s suffrage. Leaving women out of the political arena denied certain rights but it also 
abjured them of certain duties that were not fitting. He did make a strong claim, however: “All 
that I at present contend for is, that the women ought to have the same civil rights as the men, 
and that the legislature ought to extend the same opportunities of intellectual improvement to the 
one sex as to the other.”46

Brockenbrough found the neglect of women’s education, like civil rights, to be indicative 
of attitudes more pernicious than frugality. The legislature’s “total silence” on the matter of 
schooling suggested that they perhaps believed “the Mahometan notion that women have no 
souls,” or the “still more romantic opinion, that nature has inspired them with such an over-
proportion of genius that the labour of the teacher is to them a matter of supererogation.” The

45 Enquirer, Oct. 13, 1804, p.4. 
46 Ibid.
“supineness” of public school improvement for boys was bad enough, but it could not justify the complete lack of any public academies and the few private ones that accommodated girls. The family was where evidence of intellectual equality and social inequality were most apparent, however. In early childhood, boys and girls both demonstrated equal mental capacities, and “in those families in which education is not an object of attention, the equality continues through life.” Access to education was the true marker of distinction, for “in a family of a different description, the pride & partiality of the father soon begin to display themselves in the different conduct observed towards his son and daughter.” A father imagines his son “as the defender of freedom in the senate” who is thus cultivated while his daughter languishes. Such observations led Brockenbrough to proclaim, “It is Education not Nature which creates the difference between the sexes.” The women of the French Revolution, as well as Mary Wollstonecraft and Anna Seward, provided the necessary proof of capabilities. The necessary conclusion was a classic statement of “republican motherhood”: “Improve the minds of your daughters, and they will make their sons heroes and patriots.” For the social equality of women and improvement of society as a whole, the state bore an obligation to educate citizens of both sexes. Another of the Rainbow series by an anonymous author followed Brockenbrough’s strong claims by reinforcing the “republican motherhood” argument and positing that there is no “reason why those acquirements should degrade the lady into a pedant, which elevates the man to the character of a gentleman.”47 That three of the Rainbow authors devoted their columns to the interests of women points to a broadly liberal, or in Brockenbrough’s case even a radical view, among the association, both on the rights of women and the necessity of education broadly conceived that surpassed anything Jefferson had to say on the subject.

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47 *Enquirer*, Dec. 8, 1804. Hubbell could not identify this author signed with this symbol: ☞
The Governors Implore

Ritchie and Ogilvie were not lone voices in the push for public schools in the early years of the nineteenth century. Jefferson’s closest political ally for his educational projects in the rising generation was state Senator Joseph Cabell, thirty-five years his junior, and the senator for Albemarle County. Even before his election to the senate, Cabell paid attention to educational legislation and any mention by Virginia’s governors advocating the topic, and as early as 1801 he began saving notes in anticipation of his future efforts. The arguments advanced by Virginia’s governors in the first years of the nineteenth century sound strikingly modern in the twenty-first century. They reflected the ideals of the enlightened and rational mind being raised through cultivation, as had been theorized at least since Locke. But they went further in asserting the need for such in a broadly democratic base. Citizenship needed to be exercised, at least universally by white men, not only with enlightened care, but also with economic opportunity. Concentrated wealth in the hands of some should not preclude a chance of improvement for those without. The meritocratic claim at the heart of Jefferson’s school legislation, which called the promotion of the most talented students, remained part of the discourse of its proponents thereafter.

Governor James Monroe gave the first extensive call to the legislature that Cabell recorded in 1801, noting the inadequate implementation of Jefferson’s 1796 public school law and defending its importance. Monroe drew upon republican theory and the importance of citizenship in having widely available education, but in an apparent nod to the recalcitrance that hindered the implementation of schooling, he also tried to downplay the amount of effort necessary for taxpayers to expend. His defense of the necessity of public education predominated nonetheless. He told the legislators, “In a government founded on the sovereignty of the
people… knowledge should be diffused throughout the whole society and for that purpose the means of acquiring it made not only practicable but easy to every citizen.” This was not merely an ideal in the abstract, sought only by those with the enlightened self-interest and means to afford it. Ignorance among the people was the corrupting influence in a republic, and as such, education should not only be an individual duty, but it “ought to be provided by the government itself.” The education of a citizen provided attentiveness to all the rights, interests, and duties that benefited the society as a whole.48

Monroe’s argument appealed as well to more narrowly defined self-interest, especially for the wealthy elites who would fund much of the system and who already paid for individual education at home. The substantial amounts of money spent on individual tutors would, if pooled together, provide the inclusive system that also conferred social benefits on the children of the rich who were already being educated. The contention that political harmony would be created by education derived not only from ideas but from the socialization processes from which all youth could benefit. Local schools would foster the Enlightenment ideal of social harmony, as they would draw the youth of the country into society together by means whereof they would become acquainted and form friendships, which would remain thro’ life; friendships which would equally promote the social harmony of the state, and the comfort and happiness of the individuals who compose it.

Local schools would also enable children to attend higher levels of education while continuing to live with their parents, thus assuring the moral oversight that was notoriously known to be lacking in the academies of the time. The offspring of the wealthy therefore would reap from the investment rather than simply contributing to a charitable system in which they

48 Governor’s messages on education, “Cabell Family Papers,” box 1, UVA.
had no interest. In another nod to parsimony, Monroe claimed that money spent on education would supplant the need for a standing army, which would inevitably be needed by a government held together by force rather than the bonds of citizenship. Moreover, he pointed out that the system did not have to be so extensive as to prepare every citizen to be able to hold every office in the state. Even the most elementary provisions would give a foundation for individuals to act as good citizens. Monroe concluded that the provision in the 1796 school for counties to initiate the school system themselves was inherently flawed. No county had implemented it, and he asked why something the legislature had rightly considered so important had been enacted with such a contingency. In 1802, Monroe reminded the legislature of his call to action, but he was only the first of many to confront a lethargic response, despite his perceptive appeal to the self-interest of elite legislators.  

Monroe’s successor as governor, William Cabell, brother of Joseph, issued his own plea for reinforcement of the school law in 1806. He deferred speaking on the great benefits to “Individual happiness” to focus instead on “its influence on the national character,” which yielded “indisputable evidence of its vast influence in promoting a spirit of industry, adventure and enterprize.” In a related vein to Monroe’s claims on social harmony, Cabell claimed that education was the most effectual means of “preventing the commission of crimes than any other expedient that has ever been resorted to in any country.” In an 1808 message, Cabell returned to the argument that expectations could be reasonably limited, but that the necessity of providing of education was not. “It could not be expected in any country, that every man should be a philosopher; but the elements of learning should be brought within the reach of every, even the poorest citizen, and this can only be accomplished by the aid of government.” Here too he

49 Ibid.
grounded the claim in the evidence of social utility. “It constitutes one of the great pillars on which the civil liberties of a nation depend.”

Governor John Tyler, Sr., provided the last defense of educational expansion before the disruption caused by the War of 1812, which would inadvertently present an opportunity to shift the political landscape on school funding at the war’s end. Tyler was encouraged by a visit from Jefferson in Richmond in 1809, and he willingly became the public voice of Jefferson’s interest. It was Tyler’s request that finally yielded some practical results. Tyler targeted what was likely the greatest obstacle to building the schools, which was not philosophical. His tone was the most pained of any of the governors before him, as he spoke of the “melancholy” and “mortifying picture” that demonstrated the reality of their languor. “So fatal is that apathy which prevails, or so parsimonious a policy has insinuated itself among us, that year after year, is permitted to pass away, without a single attempt to attain so great and so indispensible an object… Would not an enlightened stranger, if he were making a tour thro’ this state, readily conclude, that in the general passion for war, which pervades almost the whole civilized world, we had for want of an enemy at our gates, declared an exterminating war against the arts and sciences?” Virginia’s government was one “where every citizen is entitled, by a free suffrage, to rise to importance, in proportion to his wisdom and integrity, without the aid of family connections, wealth, or fictitious grandeur.” Referring to the passing generation of the Founders in Virginia, Tyler noted that “Those venerable sages had been wisely and virtuously educated, and knew full well how to estimate their rights.” In his call for action, there was perhaps a touch of exasperation: “I am sure the idea is not chimerical.”

50 Ibid.
52 Governor’s messages on education, “Cabell Family Papers,” box 1, UVA.
Despite giving an extensive plea, Tyler demurred offering a specific plan of his own for reforming the school law. “This might be deemed arrogant in me as I have already perhaps exceeded the bounds of my constitutional duty, and those marked out by my predecessors.” He confined his specific recommendations to already existing institutions, especially the College of William and Mary, from which “sprang so many ornaments to our country.” While the buildings there were “large and commodious,” he lamented that the funds were insufficient for establishing any new professorships in such subjects as anatomy and chemistry. The lack of certain subjects forced too many students to “quit their native state, and seek in foreign countries what our own state denies them.” The subsequent loss of wealth and the fact that students bring back “sentiments and manners not congenial with republican simplicity” made the need for higher education in Virginia that much more urgent.\(^5\)

The Legislative Quandaries

The years following the War of 1812 were the most contentious and the most productive legislative years for the development of Virginia’s public schools. Indeed, little else substantially new would be accomplished between the foundation of the University of Virginia in 1819 and the foundation of a modern primary school system in 1870. Many private institutions, some with public assistance, would flourish in the meantime, and the issue would not disappear from public discourse. As the debate peaked in the 1810s, however, a combination of excessive parsimony and philosophical disagreements about the locus of authority in public education would result in the failure of two divergent visions of statewide primary education, championed respectively by Jefferson and the Federalist legislator Charles Fenton Mercer.

\(^5\) Ibid.
The governors’ messages on education were not completely ineffectual, even if they did not result in the large projects they sought. The first substantial legislative achievement after the passage of Jefferson’s school law of 1796 was the appropriation of the state Literary Fund in 1810 after Governor Tyler’s message. Precedent for using state funds for education had existed before on a limited basis. In 1802 the legislature authorized counties to use funds gained from the seizure of Anglican church properties and other royal lands for the purpose of paying for educating the poor. A few locales did so, or held lotteries that supported an academy. The results were provisions for some poor children through limited offers of charity rather than a permanent system. Governor James Barbour, Charles Fenton Mercer, and Joseph Cabell each sought the establishment of the state Literary Fund for the purpose of widening the disbursal of money. With a state-appointed agent of the Fund in each county, the potential existed to establish schools more assiduously than the county courts, which had ignored the opportunity granted in 1796.54

When Joseph Cabell was nominated to be the Fund agent for Nelson County in 1811, he received a circular letter extolling the benefits of education in striking terms. After decrying the violence that prevailed in Europe, where an unnamed zealot “immolated the happiness of his subjects on the altar of his passions,” the letter exclaimed, “The history of mankind sufficiently evinces that ignorance has been a primary cause of all their calamities. It is then by widely diffusing the rays of intellectual light; by giving every facility to the culture of the mind; by carrying instruction into the cottages of the poor, that we are to continue the most favoured people under Heaven.”55 Cabell declined the post because of his frequent absence from the

55 Circular letter, June 29, 1811, “Cabell Family Papers,” UVA.
county, but he recommended a replacement who told Cabell that he believed in the “advantages of Education.”

Whatever goodwill greeted the foundation of the Fund was limited by its relatively small endowment and the outbreak of the War of 1812. Governor James Barbour complained in 1812 that the “Republican legislature has never since the first moment of its existence contributed one cent to an establishment of this kind.” After the war Jefferson would return to an active, if somewhat concealed, role in agitating for further educational development, and Senator Cabell would become his foremost agent. They were not alone in considering the further development of the Literary Fund, however. In 1815, with the end of war news, Ritchie turned the Enquirer back to the topic of school development, beginning with the lead: “We shall soon have occasion to retouch it and put it to the citizens of Richmond, Norfolk, etc., why they have so long suffered geniuses to wither or run wild in the streets!” The column considered the success of the Lancastrian School of Belfast, which was part of a movement to establish schools for the poor that implemented an economy of scale. Older pupils trained younger ones, thus reducing the expense for trained teachers. Indeed, the public examinations there demonstrated great strides in learning “done at an expense so trifling.”

The legislature in the same year called for a report from the Literary Fund directors on recommendations to move forward. In 1816 Governor Wilson Cary Nicholas sent Cabell a circular letter to solicit input for a report on expanding the educational system from the primary to the university level. Nicholas wrote, “The great cause of Literature and science is not local in its nature, but is an object of interest to the whole human species… It cannot fail to excite

56 Robert Rives to Cabell, Aug. 17, 1811, “Cabell Family Papers,” UVA.
57 Maddox, 50.
58 Richmond Enquirer, Sept. 27, 1815, p.4.
59 Maddox, 54.
pleasing emotions in every enlightened American, to perceive that Virginia has taken this subject under its patronage, and devoted a fund to its accomplishment, which is annually increasing."\(^{60}\)

The Literary Fund was growing, but it was also inadequate to implement the full range of schools that advocates wanted. Although there was one major boost to the Fund after the war, it was still not enough to accomplish everything needed for comprehensive education. The money was appropriated before there was a plan to use it. The struggle to found the University of Virginia would thus result in a contest between higher and primary education that would ultimately force legislators to choose their priorities. The report of the Literary Fund directors in 1816 recognized as much, writing that “they are not so sanguine as to believe that [a comprehensive plan] can be carried into effect at once to its full extent, without a considerable augmentation of their funds.”\(^{61}\)

In the legislative ferment that followed, Jefferson’s plan for schools would compete with Charles Fenton Mercer’s plan, which like Jefferson’s had a comprehensive vision, but a very different structure. Mercer succeeded in a major expansion of the Literary Fund after the war by ensuring that the federal government’s repayment of war loans would go into the Fund rather than back into the state treasury, which meant that as payments accrued, the Fund would swell from only $50,000 to over one million dollars when the full debts were paid.\(^{62}\) The ready availability of money with the avoidance of direct taxation meant that legislators would have more incentive to address the philosophy and goals of expanding schools without offending their constituents’ frugality.

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\(^{60}\) Nicholas to Cabell, May 30, 1816, “Cabell Family Papers,” UVA.

\(^{61}\) Richmond Enquirer, Dec. 10, 1816, p.2.

\(^{62}\) Maddox, 55.
In February 1817, the *Enquirer* published Jefferson’s letter to Peter Carr outlining his preferred plan of education, which offered nothing new on the idea of primary schools, which he maintained should be locally established. The letter did outline in detail the middle level of professional and philosophical schools, which would promote useful trades and would be a necessary filter to find the best students to send to a new university. Mercer also introduced his plan in 1817, which would establish a state board to oversee the building and administration of primary schools statewide. Mercer was a Federalist who hoped that the program would blunt the emerging interest in democracy and create a more docile populace, although his motives did not dissuade the large segment of the public that favored more primary schools. Mercer’s partisan attachments to his bill damaged its chances as much as his broader philosophical disputes. He attempted to have new banks established to receive the Literary Fund, and he sought to locate the proposed university in a western town, distant from the Tidewater Republicans. His bill passed the House of Delegates, but Cabell gutted the bill in the Senate near the end of the session. Recognizing that the funding existed only for Mercer’s primary schools or a new university, Cabell chose the university with Jefferson’s backing, deferring to the future the hope for locally controlled primary schools. With Mercer’s bill dead, Cabell succeeded in establishing the University of Virginia in Charlottesville.

64 Douglas Egerton, *Charles Fenton Mercer and the Trial of National Conservatism* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1989), 116-128; Cameron Addis, *Jefferson’s Vision for Education* (New York: Peter Lang, 2003), 33-53; Other interpretations focus on the idea that Jefferson and Cabell wanted to protect the elite, which is why they prioritized the University over Mercer’s primary school plan. See Maurizio Valsania’s *Nature’s Man: Thomas Jefferson’s Philosophical Anthropology* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2013), 100. Valsania attributes Jefferson’s resistance to Mercer’s bill to seeing it as “visionary, ill-timed, and ineffective,” but the remainder of this chapter below argues that political centralization and the locus of authority in Mercer’s bill were a substantial problem. For some of Jefferson’s supporters, Mercer’s bill was potentially authoritarian rather than progressive.
The Public Good and Limited Government

Jefferson, in his twilight years, wanted the establishment of a university more than any other goal, and he felt compelled to make a choice. Jefferson, Cabell, and Ritchie were also motivated, however, by ideological resistance to the centralization that Mercer’s plan embraced. The locus of authority was continually a crucial problem for the Republicans suspicious of the power of government. Resistance to governmental power is virtually synonymous with Jeffersonian politics, but the history of educational advocacy demonstrates that that resistance did not necessarily correlate with resistance to facilitating public action. The Republican reformers’ position can in part trace its roots back to William Godwin and Thomas Paine. In 1805 Ritchie published an editorial that built upon an important concept defined in Paine’s Common Sense, wherein he drew “his ingenious distinction between society and government.” Quoting Paine, he wrote that the two organizations “are different in themselves, and have different origins. Society is produced by our wants, and government by our wickedness. Society is in every state a blessing; government, even in its best state, but a necessary evil.” This fact was a starting point rather than an ending point for Ritchie, who sought to identify the useful purposes of government. “What physicians are to the human body, government is to society at large. Each of them supplies us with antidotes for existing evils.” A Lockean conception of the restraint of destructive passions was one such antidote. Protecting the rights of individuals from the infringements of other individuals was easier to identify in the legitimate purview of government.65

What was more complicated was delineating a positive role for government. Since both
governments and individuals possessed power, they existed in opposition to each other. “What is
given to the one, is subducted from the other.” Government officials relied on the labor of others,
and “commercial privilege” granted by the state benefited one person at the expense of another.
As a rule, the tasks that individuals could accomplish on their own were best left to them.
Government “cannot even make a public establishment, that is obviously designed for the public
good, such as erecting a school or digging a canal, without every moment incurring the
reproaches of individuals, that it is officiously doing what they themselves had better have
attempted to perform.” This was not a reason to assume that there was no positive role, however.
Ritchie recognized that the line could be difficult to draw between giving the government “the
energy which its functions demand” and “every right, to which each individual is entitled.” In a
free government, “each individual gives up that precise quota of his own rights which is
necessary to carry into effect the proper end of that government.” For Americans, there was a
much greater latitude of individual autonomy than in other societies because Americans had a
society that functioned better than others under despotism. Individuals and their associations
through society should be allowed to accomplish what they can, but Ritchie acknowledged, “In
one point of view indeed [government] exceeds the powers of the physician and assumes a more
positive character. When it digs canals, clears the beds of rivers, opens roads or executes any
work of great public importance, it then appears to us under the form of a great productive
labourer. In every other case, it brings together the whole force of the society for removing some
evil or disorder: but in this case it concentrates its force for the production of some great benefit,
which an individual would want the power or the inclination to effect.”

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66 *Enquirer*, June 14, 1805, p.3
Such was the question that was always at stake, between individual liberty and the public good. Just as William Brockenbrough in 1804 advocated public schools while expressing hesitation for the state to pay the salaries of teachers, Ritchie would later make a similar argument against Mercer’s school bill because of its centralized authority over teaching rather than because he rejected public educational facilities. Ritchie published and praised the report of Literary Fund directors in 1816 who recommended implementing a comprehensive school system. Ritchie’s preface named the arts and sciences as the “means of preserving that blessing, which gives a value to every other, we mean our liberties.” The positive role of the government was clear: “it may furnish the school-house, the apparatus, the library, the instrument which requires expense – it may go so far as to furnish a certain proportion of the salary of the Professor – but, it ought not to pay more than a certain part of that salary – nor ought it to exercise any but the most general superintendance over the schools thus established.” This concern mirrored Godwin’s critique of public education as it existed in Europe. Godwin used the term “public” to include such schools as the Church of England’s Sunday schools, but for most examples, he saw public authorities using education to assert the validity of their institutional hierarchy rather than promoting freedom of the mind.67

When Jefferson was explaining his school proposal to Cabell in 1816, he wanted the authority to be as decentralized as it could be. The ward was the level at which primary schools should be organized, and the county should pay the tuition for the indigent with public funds. The ward had its own public interest just as other levels of government did. It could be seen “by dividing and subdividing these republics from the great national one down through all its

subordinations, until it ends in the administration of every man’s farm and affairs by himself.”  

In this view, as in Godwin’s, a centralized administration portended a potential tyranny of the mind, even while education itself was a public good to be encouraged.

Liberty of conscience was one of the animating principles of the Godwinian and Jeffersonian perspectives, and in both one of the dangers of the state determining the school curriculum was the possibility of the state establishing religious indoctrination. Before Jefferson’s primary school proposal went to the legislators in 1817, some of his allies saw the political necessity of removing a clause that excluded from teaching “ministers of the gospel of any denomination” and the accompanying note that explained that it would “avoid jealousy from the other sects.”

Ritchie had addressed the fear of clerical teachers as early as 1804, when he critiqued part of St. George Tucker’s Commentaries on Blackstone, wherein Tucker advocated the utility of a public assessment supporting local clergymen offering elementary instruction in public schools. Ritchie attacked the idea on multiple fronts. He affirmed great respect for Tucker, even calling him an “enlightened man,” but Tucker’s own principles of freedom of religion contradicted his proposal. If supporting clergymen with public money was unconstitutional for the sole purpose of teaching religion, it was equally unconstitutional if supporting religion was only a side effect of another more legitimate goal. “It is certainly the right, and perhaps the duty of the Legislature to make laws that provide for the instruction of the people. But certainly this right does not authorize them to combine the instruction of the people with the establishment of a religious system.” Even if the question were solely one of social utility rather than constitutionality, religious morality was not essential. Ritchie pointed out that “a complete

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69 Cabell to Chairman of the Committee of Schools and Colleges, Dec. 13, 1817, in Cabell, Early History of the University of Virginia, 96.
skeptic on religious subjects may possess every social virtue,” even though religion could be a useful check in the conscience of others. The history of schism and conflict over dogma in churches was nonetheless a contradicting factor for social harmony and a clear reason why clerics and public school teachers should not be one and the same. Ritchie’s argument showed that publicly funded clerics were a debate that remained unsettled after the defeat of Patrick Henry’s plural establishment bill and the enactment of Jefferson’s Statute for Religious Freedom.

Besides the call for secular teaching, the vision of a decentralized public education system was based on philosophy emanating from some the most radical thinkers of the Enlightenment. In proposing that secular education be widespread for the purposes of citizenship, Jefferson, Ogilvie, and Ritchie, among others, believed that enlightened perspectives would spread in conjunction with personal liberty and an ever-improving society. Jefferson’s young assistant in building the faculty of the University of Virginia, Francis Walker Gilmer, maintained his connections with James Ogilvie long after he ceased to be his student. Gilmer was among the last students to study with Bishop Madison, and he shared Ogilvie’s Enlightenment proclivities, which could assure Jefferson that the University at least would continue to enlighten those who received higher education. Late in Jefferson’s life, however, the experiment seemed to be in danger, when the elderly former president broke down emotionally while addressing student rioters at his university. If the Enlightenment was in danger there, there were few other institutions left in which to look.

70 Enquirer, June 6, 1804, p.4; June 9, 1804, p.4; The excerpt from Tucker was Note M in the Appendix of vol. 1, part 2.
72 Malone, The Sage of Monticello, 466.
Chapter 4

“The Perpetual Improvability of Human Society”
Internal Improvement and Economic Development

When William Wirt wrote The British Spy in 1803, his “spy” commented not only on the literature and manners to be observed among Americans, but the shortcomings to be found, especially in Virginia. His readers learned that although the American colonies had achieved an astonishing rise, Virginia still lacked an important source of “solid grandeur… the animating soul of a republick,” namely “public spirit.” The most important object for too many Virginians was “to grow rich,” which infected the councils of state and caused there to be “no great publick improvements.” Despite the great wealth of the state as a whole, “her roads and highways are frequently impassable, sometimes frightful – the very few publick works which have been set on foot, instead of being carried on with spirit, are permitted to languish and pine and creep feebly along, in such a manner that the first part of an edifice grows grey with age and almost tumbles in ruins, before the last part is lifted from the dust.” Noting the inadequacy of Virginia’s educational facilities as well, the spy gloated that the knowledge “will afford an opportunity of exulting in the superiority of our own energetick monarchy over this republican body without a soul.”

Wirt was not the only one who complained of badly maintained highways and the concomitant weakness of civil society. When Joseph Cabell was travelling to Williamsburg to propose to his future wife in 1806, he noted that courting was made more difficult by stagecoaches that failed to “keep out rain from the wardrobes of young men bound on amorous

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expeditions” and by bad roads that made for an “uncomfortable stage.” Although he found that the difficulty of maintaining roads in sparsely populated land was understandable, he eventually came to embrace Wirt’s idea that a republic needed “energy” to develop its resources. Just as in education, the idea that the state should take an active hand in promoting economic development was not taken for granted in the Capitol. Nonetheless, Joseph Cabell, Thomas Ritchie, and John Hartwell Cocke took an active interest in promoting not just ideas of development, but implementing them through public/private partnerships. As Ritchie had argued for schools, the state could and should augment the efforts of the private sector when it proved inadequate to a task. For the reformers who were Jefferson’s allies, the state could take a productive lead in establishing stable banks that operated in the public interest and in facilitating the building roads and canals. Society would benefit from the public application of enlightened self-interest.

The idea that progress was a characteristic of human societies, especially in the material realm, was problematic in eighteenth-century American thought. For Jefferson, the prospect of becoming a society that was urbanized with a substantial manufacturing class was an ominous and undesirable outcome, and his protégés would similarly resist turning into a European society, characterized by rich decadence on the one hand, and seething poverty on the other. The increase of wealth, however, was desirable in a healthy society, and the facilitation of trade was a worthy endeavor. Jefferson believed that the expansiveness of American land offered an opportunity to build an agricultural society, and perceiving abundance in the material world would lead his protégés to promote development as a means of enriching society generally rather than simply preserving the wealth of the elite. Promoting commerce was promoting agriculture, and in this,

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2 Joseph Cabell to Wm. H. Cabell, Oct. 23, 1806, “Cabell Family Papers,” UVA.
young reformers pushed beyond the conservative agrarianism of older Republicans such as John Taylor. In this process, an intellectual reckoning with the role of slavery in an expanding agricultural society would remain relatively inert unless events would bring it to the surface. Many discussions of economic development in the 1800s and 1810s would leave slavery in the shadows, which likely contributed to the optimism that reformers would express, but there would be hints that some perceived the necessity of expanding Virginia’s economy in order to transition to a free labor system in the future.4

Despite the Founders’ history of ambivalence about European-style economic change, others felt optimism that progress was on the rise when Ritchie established the *Enquirer* in 1804. When Isaac Coles told Cabell about the formation of the Rainbow, which had lauded education, he also told Cabell, who was still touring European advancements,

> Your native state is rapidly progressing, our legislature has of late adopted a more liberal & extended policy, which if it should continue, will in the course of some years, raise us to an eminence, perfectly unexampled in the history of nations. Many improvements have been made since you left this, & many more are proposed. A line of Stages have been established from Richmond, & Fredericksburg, to the west country beyond our mountains – a Turnpike road will very shortly be formed at least to Staunton, from the Capitol. James River is about to be rendered navigable in all its branches, & the bars below Tide Water, will be removed, so as to permit vessels of three, or four hundred Tons, to load at Rockett [Landing].5

These were only the beginning of what young reformers sought to accomplish in turning Virginia into a more prosperous and yet still agricultural society. Their ideas about progress used elements of liberal Enlightenment political economy to push the Virginia Republicans toward a gradual embrace of public development with a greater interest in the economic development of the Union. They would advocate the development of the private economy with

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4 An analysis of the critiques and relative silence on slavery and the ruptures that reopened debate appear in the following chapter.
5 Isaac Coles to Joseph Cabell, Nov. 1, 1804, “Cabell Family Papers,” UVA.
the assistance of public institutions and regulated in ways that served the public interest. They would also, however, try to ensure that Virginia led this process without conceding the role to the federal government.  

Money and the Philosophy of Improvement

Ritchie was among the most optimistic about the opportunities presented to Virginians for economic development at the beginning of the nineteenth century. He began his publishing career by embracing the progressive perspective of William Godwin and the “New Philosophy” over the restrictive philosophy of Thomas Malthus, who had published his *Essay on the Principle of Population* in 1798. In introducing an excerpt from Malthus, Ritchie wrote,

the doctrine of the perpetual improvability of man… is so consolatory & delightful, so strongly supported by the combined results of historical analogy and moral analysis, and by the most liberal and comprehensive views suggested by the history, structure and prospects of human society, that it will not be readily abandoned by any person, who has ever examined it impartially and espoused it with sincerity. The hope of a happy immortality in ‘another and a better world,’ is not more precious in the estimation, or more delicious to the feelings of a sincere christian, than the doctrine of the perpetual improveability of human nature and society.  

Ritchie did praise the intellect of Malthus and suggested that his strictures offered important caveats for the enlightened mind to take into account. An optimistic outlook was valid and desirable, but it had to account for complexities in the application of policy. Malthus taught that “mere disinterestedness & benevolence, or in other words, good intentions, unenlightened by a comprehensive knowledge of the consequences, immediate and remote, likely to result from our actions, may produce effects as pernicious and deplorable as extreme selfishness or depravity.” The excerpt Ritchie then printed was “Of the Direction of Our Charity,” which

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6 For St. George Tucker’s view on the expansion of national commerce see Konig, “St. George Tucker and the Limits of States’ Rights Constitutionalism,” 1302-1317.

praised the offering of sustenance to the poor, but only if it was done without promoting vices that perpetuated an individual’s poverty. Malthus claimed that voluntary charity produced better outcomes in this regard than did the public outlays through the English Poor Law.\(^8\) Virginia’s Poor Law, given that slavery controlled a large part of the impoverished working class, did not suffer the same kind of pressure that the English system did with the unemployed and underpaid.\(^9\) Whether this distinction was clear to Ritchie is difficult to tell, but for him and others in the Rainbow, material improvement could extend throughout the white segment of society through the benefits first of education, and then through the enlightened application of the knowledge gained from it.

As James Ogilvie wrote, “knowledge is power, and as we extend it, we extend also our power to control and regulate the phenomena and energies of material and moral nature.”\(^10\) That control of material nature would occupy much of Ritchie’s attention during his career, making trade and financial policy central topics in the *Enquirer*. His belief in the benefits of commerce appeared in another citation of Malthus, although in this case a refutation. Ritchie introduced James MacIntosh as the most eloquent author to repudiate Burke’s denunciation of the French Revolution, and who wasbanished to a post in India in retaliation. MacIntosh wrote an address that claimed that commerce was the reason Europe had ceased to experience famines like those still being endured in India. Although Malthus argued that population was outstripping supply, he failed to see that the ability to move food to varying places of need obviated much of that threat. The expansion of commerce throughout the world offered such clear benefits. Ritchie denounced “the effects of British ambition & British tyranny” in India, but at the same time

\(^8\) Ibid., 2.
argued that they had introduced improvements to their “agriculture and commerce,” even if such may not have yet “atoned for the injuries which they have inflicted.”11 With material progress occurring worldwide, Ritchie did not see the future through the Malthusian lens.

Ritchie’s early perspective lay in the intersection of such progressive optimism and the economic teachings of Adam Smith, which would increasingly stand in contrast to the rise of proslavery political economy in the nineteenth century. In a piece celebrating the work of the Marquis de Condorcet, whose “Historical Outlines of the Progress of the Human Mind” was sold in most of Virginia’s bookstores according to Ritchie, he extolled the example set by the ill-fated French Revolutionary. Condorcet advocated a system of public education (although he also wanted teachers paid a public salary “in order to save them from the humiliation of the individual fees of their pupils”), and he theorized “his beloved principle that mankind was perfectable in infinitum.” His economic philosophy, unlike earlier French theorists, was admiring of Smith’s Wealth of Nations. Condorcet himself wrote, “Smith was the teacher of a mysterious science, whose improvements the tyrants were greatly desirous to stop, for they were interested to prevent their subjects from sounding the depth of publick economy.” Condorcet claimed that the French Revolution elevated Smith’s ideas to their rightful place, providing the “comforting divinity of the devotees of liberty, and the antidote of that destructive art, which under the name of finance, formerly overturned the foundations of publick happiness, and undermined the sacred principles of equality.”12

Ritchie probably saw the British East India Company and other mercantilist bêtes noires from the American Revolution as corollaries to Condorcet’s disdained practices of royal finance,

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11 Enquirer, Nov. 5, 1805, p.4.
12 Enquirer, Aug. 15, 1804, p.4.
all of which exercised unfair economic privileges. Smith’s work was taught as a suitably Republican text at William and Mary, and it would provide Ritchie with much of his theories of banking and improvement. Smith, despite his future laissez-faire reputation, did formulate legitimate activities for the state in ensuring the protection of the public good within free markets. The realm of finance was one of Ritchie’s first targets, and concurrent with the Rainbow, he ran a series of essays that he wrote to assimilate the ideas of Smith on banking as a way of defending the recently established Bank of Virginia. Ritchie noted that most of his readers did not possess Wealth of Nations in their libraries, but he implored, “When the strange words ‘stock and capital’ first salute your eye, do not pause and throw the paper down in despair or with disgust, as if the subject lay beyond the reach of your comprehension… If there be any part of political science, which is peculiarly interesting and curious, that branch is political economy.”13 Ritchie’s goal was to promote a well regulated banking system that returned some of its profits to the public coffers as a means of economic development that was thoroughly compatible with Republican ideals. Private corporate power would not be allowed to threaten the liberties of individuals or the collective public interest of the state.

Ritchie’s first essay in 1804 sought to define useful capital in a context that connected it to tangible goods and labor rather than a solely speculative or fictive wealth unconnected to real productivity, which was a common fear associated with paper money. “The stock or capital of a country consists of this immense mass of provisions, raw materials, or manufactured work, or any part of it which has a certain value in market; or for which some other person would be willing to give some other commodity in exchange.” Capital was distinguishable between active and dead based on whether it was being used to “put labor into motion,” and the capital itself

13 Enquirer, Aug. 1, 1804, p.4.
could be money or any tradable commodity, such as corn. The true productive capacity of active
capital was based, however, in the extension of credit. If everyone expected to be paid the instant
they produced something, they would necessarily be idle much of the time, thus rendering much
of a society’s active capital inactive. Ritchie argued that the merchant-based credit available
from Richmond merchants was offered at such a rate of interest per month that it was in practice
illegally usurious, and it thus diminished potential trade. Individuals able to draw a line of credit
from a bank at an annual rate of six percent had more active capital available to trade, especially
if loaned through the Scottish practice of accepting piecemeal repayments of debt. Smith extolled
the ability to repay in installments that proportionally lowered the interest with each payment.
With actual productivity enhanced by the activation of capital, the wealth of the whole society
could increase. Through this argument, Ritchie sought to assuage the fears of an agrarian
society about the dangers of financial institutions, pointing instead to the tangible benefits for
production that resulted from a stronger currency and credit system.

Ritchie’s next defense was to explain the usefulness of paper money and its validity in
relation to actual specie. The Bank of Virginia was chartered to possess $1,500,000 in specie that
could allow three times that amount in circulation on paper notes. Since any given individual
could be certain of claiming specie, it would sustain the value of the notes. It was the natural
function of the bank, since as Ritchie noted, “Confidence is the very soul of credit.” The bank
would augment the active capital available in the state by extending credit in a controlled fashion
beyond the actual specie in their hands. Ritchie also sought to demystify the means by which
bank stockholders would profit. The limits on usury interest and the bank’s ability to issue notes
would necessarily limit profits. He printed an excerpt from Smith’s chapter “Of the Division of

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14 Enquirer, July 28, 1804, p.3.
Stock,” which explained the benefits of divided risks in expending capital.\textsuperscript{15} Here too, Ritchie was building a case that the bank would operate in the public interest by restraining the desire of investors to overextend the bank’s credit and thus run the risk of harming its customers and the larger economy.

Ritchie addressed several objections that had arisen to the establishment of the bank, which emanated from Republican concerns about centralized power and centered especially on the bank’s privileging of certain people above others and offering a means of corruption for citizens and their leaders. Even if a bank was advantageous to the economy, its geographic locations suggested to some that the benefits were also limited. With branch banks located only in Fredericksburg, Norfolk, and Petersburg, critics feared that the ability of distant merchants and farmers to secure credit where their reputations were unknown could be difficult. Ritchie averred that it could be a concern, but ultimately he argued that merchants would form partnerships to extend credit farther throughout the state. The state had banned unchartered banks in 1785, but the charge that the Bank of Virginia would exercise an unjust monopoly was untrue. Since stock could be purchased by anyone, and the benefits would be widely accessible, it served a needed purpose.\textsuperscript{16}

Even if the benefits were accepted, however, certain objections had to be answered. Traditional republican ideology feared the rise of “luxury,” and Ritchie contended that speculators and “idle and luxurious capitalists” would not disproportionately profit from the system. Those who possessed that much capital already had opportunities to invest in other stock companies that were building roads and canals, and persons who were investing to fund their

\textsuperscript{15} \textit{Enquirer}, Aug. 1, 1804, p.3-4. A correction was published on Aug. 8, 1804, p.3, showing the capital of the Bank of Virginia being the $1.5 million figure.

\textsuperscript{16} \textit{Enquirer}, Aug. 8, 1804, p.3.
retirement could hardly be seen as funding luxury. Ultimately, the bank would extend its credit only to those practicing productive industry, and bank investors would also want to fund such productivity because it would be more profitable than spending their money on “heedless prodigality.” Even so, a modest increase in luxury was an acceptable evil when accompanied by increasing wealth, and the public projects that expanded roads and canals just as easily gave more access to refinements and “the artificial wants of life” that people would enjoy. In the end, this was not a Hamiltonian vision of manufacturing. It was “the ruling interest of our country; the interest of the cultivators of the earth,” that benefited from the bank, although it did portend well for Virginia to increase its carrying trade, hopefully supplanting the northern merchants who dominated Virginia’s external commerce. Virginia could thus carry out its own process of development without the need for northern capital or an unwelcome shift to the Hamiltonian or European model of industry.

The Bank of Virginia received its charter from Ritchie’s Republican political friends only months before he began publishing the Enquirer. As Ritchie’s extensive argument reflects, the decision to found a bank and to structure it in its particular form were both controversial. A party that vehemently opposed the foundation of the Bank of the United States at the national level had to create an institution on the state level that fulfilled some of the same objectives as the national bank while remaining safe from any pernicious tendencies. It needed to protect republican ideals while facilitating the growth of agricultural commerce. Jefferson’s means of accommodation with the Bank of the United States would mirror the banking priorities shown in Virginia. In 1803 the President wrote to Secretary of the Treasury Albert Gallatin stating that he was “decidedly in favor of making all the banks Republican,” by appointing Republican directors and

17 Enquirer, Aug. 15, 1804, p.3.  
18 Enquirer, Aug. 25, 1804, p.3.
shifting funds to politically friendlier branches. The public/private model implemented in the Bank of Virginia would also stay under Republican control, and it became the pattern for future internal improvements initiated by the state. Private capital would fund much of the stock, and the private shareholders would receive profits, but the state would maintain a superintending role, and it too would benefit from the returns of profits.

The question of exclusive privilege that Ritchie addressed had been an issue in earlier contests over the establishment of banks. The only bank chartered by the Virginia legislature and successfully established before 1804 was the Bank of Alexandria in 1792. Its capital was only one-tenth the amount allowed for the Bank of Virginia, but it too was an object of suspicion. Even more controversial was the legislature’s approval of the establishment of a branch of the Bank of the United States in Norfolk in 1795.20 The concern for monopoly and privilege appeared in the Virginia Declaration of Rights of 1776, whose section four provided, “That no man, or set of men, are entitled to exclusive or separate emoluments or privileges from the community, but in consideration of public services.” The Bank of Alexandria, controlled by Federalist directors, had been attacked as being such an unconstitutional monopoly.21 A statewide banking monopoly with private capital might seem to violate this principle as well, but the state ensured that the directory of the Bank of Virginia would remain predominantly under the control of the state’s favored choices, and thus operate in the public interest. Top Republicans, such as James Semple and Littleton Waller Tazewell, had to actively lobby the legislature to overcome its deep hesitancy, and they succeeded in part by placing Abraham Venable, a respected Republican and U.S. Senator, at the head of the bank. Directors were

required to have become citizens by 1783, thus excluding British-born Federalists and other foreign trading interests. Sales of shares were limited for any given individual in order to prevent too much concentration in too few hands.22

The role of the state in the governance of the bank, while reassuring to some, presented problems for others. Federalists were the most obviously offended at the structure. The state treasurer, a Republican, was granted the power to vote a large proportion of votes for the directors, while private shareholders were limited in the number of votes they could cast regardless of the size of their share. In practice, Joseph Cabell noted, the state treasurer appointed all directors. Tazewell wrote that some Norfolk merchants feared “a set of Jacobin directors under whose democracy the Bank must suffer.”23 One Federalist complained, “It was the intention of the Legislature, to make it a state engine for state purposes, and if you are so weak as to assist in its erection, it will be converted into an engine for your oppression.” Given the Federalist leanings of many wealthy merchants, they believed that without the state’s control they could have secured control of the bank through owning more shares.24 Of course this was part of the reason the state’s Republicans gave the state control of the bank’s board, an arrangement that helped them gain the support of farmers. Among the motivations for establishing the bank initially was a fear of Federalist machinations in the national capital. In 1801 St. George Tucker wrote to Governor Monroe about an alleged Federalist conspiracy to subvert the ascension of Jefferson to the Presidency. Among the precautions, he suggested the foundation of a state bank to provide a source of capital within the jurisdiction of Virginia, given

23 Quoted in ibid., 42; Malone’s research indicates that a more direct role for state administration was tempered in the legislative process, but does not clarify that the state’s shares still had disproportionate influence. The method for allotting votes to the state appears in An Act for Incorporating the Bank of Virginia (Richmond, 1804), EAI 7666, p. 8, 10-11. No individual other than the state could cast more than 30 votes. Cabell’s note is in the “Cabell Family Papers,” Notes on Banks, “Analysis of Tazewell’s Speech,” box 7, UVA.
24 Starnes, 32-33.
that the Bank of Alexandria had gone into the boundaries of the District of Columbia.\textsuperscript{25} Such was another motive to strictly curtail Federalist influence in the bank while strengthening the state, but the questions were not limited to Federalists.

Ritchie, despite his close ties to the Republican administration, actually criticized the state’s ability to vote its shares disproportionately, although he might have been motivated primarily by his fear of centralized power in any hands, as in the case of schools. He did not criticize the requirement to diffuse ownership of stocks widely. He suggested that the superintendence of the judicial system was sufficient.\textsuperscript{26} Nonetheless, his enthusiasm for the bank and his loyalty to the Republican program ensured his continued support. In a move to mollify Federalist concerns and gain their trust for investment, however, Ritchie supported a plan approved by the bank’s Republican allies to appoint a small minority of Federalist directors to broaden the appeal of the bank, which had the contradictory effect of alienating a number of more conservative Republican legislators who were already suspicious of banks and were certainly more frightened by any concessions to Federalist financial interests. The plan did succeed in overcoming Federalists’ fears, and the necessary investments in the bank rapidly secured its capitalization. Ritchie also demonstrated that while he was an ardent Republican, he would work with those who supported his common cause. This was the first of many times he would side with the liberal faction of the party, even though he also attempted to downplay such internal disputes in the public forum of the \textit{Enquirer}.\textsuperscript{27}

Despite the controversies, hopes were high for the economic potential going forward. Isaac Coles told Joseph Cabell that in conjunction with internal improvements, “The bank of

\textsuperscript{25} Note in the \textit{PTJDE}, From James Monroe, Jan. 6, 1801.
\textsuperscript{26} \textit{Enquirer}, Aug. 15, 1804, p.3.
\textsuperscript{27} Mutersbaugh, 170-175.
Virginia has given so great a spring to industry, to agriculture & commerce, that I am assured, that in the course of a few years, I may expect to see east India-men fitting out at the Port of Richmond. These are the golden dreams which we are now permitted to indulge.”28 The early years did show positive economic results outside the Embargo and the War of 1812. The structure of the bank, based on the Scottish model that Ritchie had advocated, consisted of a central bank with branches and a large capitalization rather than smaller independent banks. The approach gave it a stability that prevented any bank failures in Virginia in 1819 when a panic caused numerous failures in other states.29

The success of the bank only created interest in establishing more banks. Westerners in particular favored expansion since they were not in proximity to the existing branches of the Bank of Virginia, and in general the increasing demand for credit made the original capitalization seem insufficient. One proposal written by Henry Banks, a Republican merchant, in 1811 argued for an expanded system of independent banks in a way that reinforced Ritchie’s idea of banks operating in the public interest. He professed to have supported the original charter of the state bank, but it was only a beginning rather than an end. Not only did unmet financial needs remain, but the state had established a monopoly that maintained certain “opulent” people with special privileges. Citing section four of the Declaration of Rights, Banks charged that increasing the capital of the Bank of Virginia would “increase the power and privileges of an unpopular monopoly,” when they should instead “suffer the enterprize of our citizens, at Lynchburg and elsewhere, to be as free as the air that they breathe.” The directors’ policies,

28 Isaac Coles to Joseph Cabell, Nov. 1, 1804, “Cabell Family Papers,” UVA.
29 Starnes, 28-29, 37.
according to Banks, were unfair to some borrowers, and the exclusivity of their power was thus not serving the public interest.\textsuperscript{30}

Although the legislature had heard proposals to increase the capital of the Bank of Virginia, Banks argued that it was an illegitimate plan unless done with consent of the shareholders, who were not fairly represented and who might not want to change the terms on which they bought their shares. He promoted competition from new banks as the solution, claiming that “the general interests of society will be best secured and promoted by rival institutions.” Although this was a direct challenge to the justice of the state’s banking monopoly, it still assumed that any independent banks would owe obligations to the public interest, including a share of the profits and public oversight. “Let the directors render regular statements of the gains of the institution to the auditor, treasurer, or to some other public functionary… The overplus of the profits ought to be divided between the public and the stockholders, upon reasonable principles.” Banks claimed that it was a just principle because the state already had the power to establish a bank in which it owned all of the capital and profits, even though he argued that a private establishment had advantages.\textsuperscript{31}

The legislature agreed to an expansion of banking policy, although in a direction keeping with the existing pattern of protecting the public interest. An alternative between Henry Banks’ plan and the proposed expansion of the Bank of Virginia was to establish a second state bank. It too would be a “mother bank” with branches connected to the parent institution with a large capital base. The Farmers’ Bank of Virginia was chartered in 1812 offering five new branches,

\textsuperscript{30} Henry Banks, \textit{Observations Designed to Shew the Propriety of Establishing an Independent System of Banking} (Richmond, 1811) EAI 22243, 14-15, 18. Banks’ politics are addressed in Joseph I. Shulim, “Henry Banks: A Contemporary Napoleonic Apologist in the Old Dominion” \textit{VMHB} 58 (July 1950): 336; While he was initially a Federalist, he became a Republican during the Jefferson administration, and he defended Napoleon Bonaparte in the \textit{Enquirer} as upholding revolutionary values.

\textsuperscript{31}Ibid., 5, 10.
including two in the west, that would expand credit for farmers while paying dividends to the state. This charter was more explicit than the Bank of Virginia’s charter in securing the state’s control; the majority of the directors of the Farmers’ Bank were appointed directly by the state legislature or its designee, codifying what had been the reality in practice in the Bank of Virginia.

Although the Republican establishment signaled its continued acceptance of the benefits of state-controlled banks in 1812, the banks’ interest could still cause clashes that appeared to threaten even the state that created them. In 1816 Jefferson wrote to George Logan, “I hope we shall take warning from the example [of England] and crush in its birth the aristocracy of our monied corporations which dare already to challenge our government to a trial of strength, and to bid defiance to the laws of their country.”

A recent incident that was likely in his mind involved the Bank of Virginia blatantly defying the judicial process of the state. The bank, which like other banks had suspended specie payments during the War of 1812, was still resistant to resumption of specie payments in 1816, but the legislature was less patient and enacted a statute allowing a suit for unredeemed bank notes. One customer who was denied redemption of $1,000 in notes turned to the courts for relief, but he had difficulty finding an attorney willing to take on the bank. When he secured counsel, he obtained a summons against the president and directors of the bank, who refused to appear in Superior Court. The Henrico County Sheriff in Richmond came to collect on a writ of distringas, which compelled the bank to post financial security that its officers would appear in court. The bank’s president, the prominent Republican Dr. John Brockenbrough, still refused, and the sheriff in turn took the president, “led by the arm, without

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32 Starnes, 43-44.
33 *Enquirer*, Feb. 18, 1812, p.2;
34 TJ to George Logan, Nov. 12, 1816, LOC, [http://hdl.loc.gov/loc.mss/mtj.mtjbib022651](http://hdl.loc.gov/loc.mss/mtj.mtjbib022651).
any further opposition, out of the door of the bank.” The sheriff then “closed the door of the bank and put the key in his pocket.”\textsuperscript{35} This show of public authority failed to tame the bank, however. The bank’s staff by the next day had reopened the building and conducted business without any approval from the sheriff or the court, and the bank promptly filed countersuit against the plaintiff for $10,000 in damages for lost business. The original plaintiff not surprisingly began seeking to compromise, despite his legitimate claim under the law.\textsuperscript{36}

The fact that the suspension of specie payments was likely protecting the solvency of the bank probably blunted any recriminations for the incident, despite the blatant defiance of legal process. The stated will of the legislature was ignored, presenting perfectly the danger that Jefferson denounced, but with the bank continuing to provide revenue and remaining stable, the legislature would not have much incentive to punish its allies in the directory. After the plaintiff accused Ritchie of treating his story unfairly, Ritchie responded by pointing out that he regularly published opposing views on the specie problem, and he needled the complainant by saying, “We bow before the ‘majesty of the law’ as devoutly as any one… We are very far from claiming for the Banks any irresponsibility to the majesty of the laws – to that tribunal they should, in common with all other corporate institutions, be perfectly amenable – but, we are also far from supposing, that extraordinary situations may not be found, where an individual may be disposed to waive his legal rights in consideration of the times.”\textsuperscript{37} Later that year, after extensive debate printed in the \textit{Enquirer}, the legislature bowed to the economic reality and took the banks’ side by suspending the specie resumption act.\textsuperscript{38}

\textsuperscript{35} \textit{Richmond Enquirer}, Jan. 16, 1816, p.3; Starnes, 53.
\textsuperscript{36} \textit{Niles’ Weekly Register}, Jan. 27, 1816, 9:370.
\textsuperscript{37} \textit{Richmond Enquirer}, Jan. 20, 1816, p.3.
\textsuperscript{38} \textit{Richmond Enquirer}, Nov. 16, 1816, p.3.
In 1817 the legislature further considered whether to force the banks to resume specie payments, but there was debate between the ideal of regular specie payments and the reality of the risk posed, when banks elsewhere were also withholding specie under threat of a panic. One bank resuming without others doing the same would run the risk of a run on its reserves. The legislators, despite their legal power over the banks, recognized that the banks existed in a national economy that could be difficult to control.\footnote{Notes on Banks, “Analysis of Tazewell’s Speech,” box 7, “Cabell Family Papers,” UVA.} Jefferson’s preferred solution, as he told Joseph Cabell and President Madison, was to have the national treasury issue notes as currency backed by the credit of the federal government and its power to tax. Although seen as a radical proposal at the time, it described a practice that only came to be much later in the century.\footnote{Malone, The Sage of Monticello, 143-146.} For Republican defenders of Virginia’s banks, a hard money policy was one way of controlling speculation, unstable currency values, and the portent of a financial aristocracy, while still reaping the benefits of liquid currency for economic development. As Ritchie had argued, a well regulated money supply could finance both public and private productivity without giving private capitalists the ability to aggrandize themselves.

Senator Joseph Cabell had not begun his legislative career when the Bank of Virginia was founded, but he too devoted much of his attention to the state’s banking system during his career, which was closely connected to his development of internal improvements. Although he was well aware of national economic issues, Jefferson’s advice on the national treasury was beyond his purview. He had to regulate the banks upon which Virginia relied for its finance, and his notes indicate the pragmatic approach that characterized the Republicans’ approach to banking during Jefferson’s retirement. Although supportive of using banks for economic development, Cabell, like Jefferson, always considered the problems that could be wrought by banks. When
comparing English and French banks to the preferred Scottish form, he wrote, “The people pay the piper. But they neither hear the music, nor join in the dance.” In 1811 Cabell asked John Taylor of Caroline for a copy of an unspecified essay on banking. Taylor replied with his motivations for taking on the issue, writing, “The eagerness with which both our political parties ran into banking, induced me to review the subject, from a curiosity to discover whether an irresistible pecuniary battering ram, was equally favourable to conflicting political principles, and if not, which foe had over-reached the other.” Although he was likely most animated about the recent expiration of the charter of the first Bank of the United States, Taylor’s barbs made no distinction. “Banks (and I am sorry for it) appear to me to be nothing but an ingenious contrivance to enrich a few at the expense of many.” His fear was founded especially on the example set by Europe, where “The English government now is ‘an aristocracy of capitalists.’” Although the Republicans thought that they could control the Bank of Virginia, Taylor’s image of a “battering ram” must have given Cabell pause. Taylor’s perspective only represented one side of the issue in Cabell’s mind, however.

Cabell also heard from William Duane, the Republican editor of the Philadelphia *Aurora*, who offered a more moderate view: “All I can say on the Banks generally – they are salutary kept within bounds, the nice point is to determine those bounds; – for if they pass the bounds like a torrent they sweep all before them. In your state their progress should be very slow.” Duane’s prescription was to abolish limited liability, thus “making the Estates of the Stockholders responsible. If that precaution be not taken, you may as well open the door to a gang of highway robbers. Banking conducted with this responsibility will be better than all the oaths and clauses of laws you can make.” On the advantages of credit, Duane saw mixed results, with prices being

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41 Notes on the Farmers’ Bank of Virginia, box 8, “Cabell Family Papers,” UVA.
42 John Taylor of Caroline to Joseph Cabell, Aug. 2, 1811, Notes on Banking, box 7, “Cabell Family Papers,” UVA.
made more volatile by too much credit.\footnote{William Duane to Joseph Cabell, June 16, 1811, Notes on Banking, box 7, “Cabell Family Papers,” UVA.} Cabell also inquired about the structure of Pennsylvania’s banking establishment, with questions derived from Virginia’s existing structure. Duane was more sanguine about this specific example than banking generally, and his description demonstrated clear parallels with Virginia’s system. He informed Cabell that the Banks of Pennsylvania and Philadelphia both had substantial state investments. The state’s motives for taking shares were to reduce the need for tax revenue and to support public improvements. The state had succeeded in rescuing two canal companies from speculators, which was “a model for other states.”

Part of Duane’s acceptance derived from the exercise of public authority over those two institutions. The legislature appointed a portion of the banks’ directors, although the state treasurer did not exercise any control over the banks other than those of an “accountant.” Direct legislative oversight of the banks could be problematic, as legislative committee members who went to inspect the vaults often lacked any competence to discern judgments on the gold ingots or charts laid before them. Duane, however, had served as one of the state’s appointed directors, and he felt that their effect was useful because there was a “presumption that these directors appointed by the state would report any abuse to the legislature and put the charter in jeopardy.” Cabell had asked whether public transparency, or “publicity,” of the banks’ accounts put them at risk of damaging the public’s confidence in them, but Duane was unequivocal in the principle. The “want of information and a kind of quackery which taught to involve every thing in mystery, threw a veil over banking; and it appeared dangerous to expose what few could comprehend; but banking is no longer a secret, it is known to be a well managed operation of credit.” Duane also saw diffused banking power as preferable to a single large institution, of which the Bank of
England was the most pernicious example. It was “instituted by the Whigs to overwhelm the Tories, but the effect was to overwhelm themselves and the nation too.”

Duane’s advice comported with Cabell’s ambitions more than Taylor’s, and he would continue to explore controlled banking expansion, striking a balance between the need for credit in a developing economy and the need for the public power to remain superior to private financial power. The state could not entirely extricate itself from national financial issues, however. Cabell, like Jefferson, saw potential national policies that could stabilize the nation’s financial system without increasing the leverage of the second Bank of the United States. He noted that the U.S. Constitution gave to Congress the power to coin money and to regulate its value, and it thus had the power to compel the state banks to pay specie. Congress instead had drawn loans from state banks, which prevented them from being able to pay specie. In order to regularize the national money supply, Cabell believed that Congress should “prohibit the state Banks from issuing notes under a certain sum,” which would “preserve a due proportion of specie in the country.”

Regardless of whether Congress would exercise its proper powers in securing a solid national currency or medium of exchange, Cabell thought that Virginia had to maintain a healthy banking establishment to the extent that it had control. After the war, he considered the advantages and disadvantages of varying bank arrangements and concluded that the question of whether banks were “useful or pernicious will be decided according to the future management of them. But the question of whether Virginia will have them is already decided.” Rather than reject banking in principle, it needed to be directed to the public good. “Our situation as a member of

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44 William Duane to Joseph Cabell, Aug. 20, 1811, Notes on Banks, box 7, “Cabell Family Papers,” UVA.
45 Notes on Banking, “Has the Legislature the Constitutional Power to establish Banks,” box 7, “Cabell Family Papers,” UVA.
the Union exposes us to most, if not all of the evils of Banks. We should therefore participate of
the benefits more directly than thro’ the banks of the other states.” Cabell concluded that the
state should augment its existing bank capital by $2,000,000, as a substantial, but controlled
expansion of the money supply.46 In the two decades following the foundation of the Farmers’
Bank, the legislature would charter other small state banks to further expand credit, especially in
the west, while declaring illegal any organizations operating as banks without a charter. And in
keeping with precedent, the profitability would redound in part to the state. It would not be until
the 1830s that the state would begin to shift from this Republican model of banking to a more
independent system with a general banking law, which fit with the national trend toward general
incorporation statutes.47 The Virginia Republicans’ suspicion of centralized power led them to
approach banking as a practice that required the state to assert public interests over the power of
private capitalists to centralize power in their own hands. Part of the public interest was directing
capital into public infrastructure projects known as “internal improvement.”

**Internal Improvement**

Among William Duane’s advice to Joseph Cabell was the idea of requiring any new
chartered banks in Virginia to construct a “great road in a solid broken stone turnpike” and a
“stone bridge over the river contiguous to the place.” It would be a useful payment for the
privilege of a charter and would promote development. This “should be your great plan… good
passable roads…that alone will render every Estate within 20 miles of it double the present
value, because roads open the access to markets and to settlements, which save labor… and gives
that time a value which is now wasted during half the year by impassable roads.”48 Although

46 Ibid.
47 Starnes, 59-62, 80.
48 William Duane to Joseph Cabell, Aug. 20, 1811, Notes on Banks, box 7, “Cabell Family Papers,” UVA.
Virginia’s banks would not be charged with this particular responsibility, the state would begin to take the lead in expanding improvement projects, and the state’s banks would provide much of the necessary capital.

Private efforts to improve rivers and build roads had been attempted and sometimes completed by private companies since before the Revolution. The Potomac River was an early object of hope for expansion. George Washington had participated in efforts to improve it beginning in the 1750s, with the hope of eventually connecting with the Ohio’s headwaters. The organizers’ slow pace and funding difficulties then met the disruption of the Revolution, but their effort resumed thereafter. Jefferson observed that the route was in competition with routes that would go through New York, and he hoped that Virginia would take advantage of the fact that “the trade of the Ohio… is nearer to Alexandria than to New York by 730 miles.” For that reason he urged Washington to make his efforts publicly known in order to secure support for a tax to publicly fund the project. Washington demurred on the idea of public funding, believing that it would not succeed in Virginia, but he continued to seek private funding for the project. While Washington was president of the company, there was much interest and investment, but it still proved inadequate to overcome the tremendous technical challenges posed by the river. The company did succeed in some modest improvements that allowed farm produce to travel down the river when water levels were optimal, generally three months each year.\textsuperscript{49} Washington also had a guiding hand in the Dismal Swamp Company, which began constructing a canal to connect Virginia and North Carolina in the 1790s, although in this too Jefferson urged him to seek public

\textsuperscript{49} A. Glenn Crothers, “The Projecting Spirit: Social, Economic and Cultural Change in Post-Revolutionary Northern Virginia, 1780-1805” (PhD diss., University of Florida, 1997), 103-152.
funding.\textsuperscript{50} The James River and the Potomac companies received charters in 1785 in which the state took a minority stake, which established a precedent for mixed enterprises that would become the pattern for Virginia’s internal improvements.\textsuperscript{51}

Early Virginia’s roads had a public maintenance system, although it was very limited in what it could provide. Counties organized construction and maintenance of rudimentary roads that often lacked the benefits of pavement or easy connections to other counties. Keeping unimproved roads in good enough condition to allow wagon travel and trade was frequently difficult and beyond the means or will of county courts. Public turnpikes were built connecting some towns in the 1790s, but they struggled with insufficient provisions for local maintenance and funding as well.\textsuperscript{52} Before the War of 1812 there were only eighteen private turnpike charters granted, concentrated mostly in northern Virginia and around Richmond, and nearly half of them failed.\textsuperscript{53}

Given the minimal successes of local road construction and private infrastructure development, state-supported internal improvement became another unceasing target for Ritchie’s reform proposals during his career at the \textit{Enquirer}. In 1807, in an editorial recommending a series of new economic reforms, he made the case for a positive public role in development:

\begin{quote}
Can any one doubt that the present defects of our population, of \textit{individual} enterprize and wealth, exacts greater interference from the government, than would be required under a more advanced stage of society? In a word, that there are certain general institutions,
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{51} Crothers, 69.
\textsuperscript{52} Crothers, 168-185.
which it becomes the legislature to encourage by its sanction if not by its resources: to supply with spirit if not with money? – Such as Schools, navigable Canals, and roads &c.

The interest in publicly funded internal improvement had recently been active on the federal level, spurring extensive debate on the constitutionality of federal action and sectional jealousies over benefits.\textsuperscript{54} Ritchie noted disapprovingly that Jefferson had advocated a constitutional amendment for including “the great purposes of the public education, roads, rivers, canals and such other objects of public improvement with the constitutional enumeration of federal powers.” For Ritchie, the principles of ’98 continued to be suspicious of federal action, but not of the concept of public facilitation of development at the state level. Federal internal improvement “is not only less adapted to the very purposes for which it is designed than a state system; but it is productive of a consolidation of state powers.”\textsuperscript{55}

In keeping with his argument for a banking establishment, Ritchie emphasized that the state of Virginia had an interest in such projects not only for commerce but for agriculture. The agricultural republic needed to modernize while keeping its agrarian character. Making property in land liable for debt was one necessary reform to improve conditions of credit while also doing away with another “semi-semblance of a landed aristocracy.” Ending primogeniture and entail was a necessary step, but not the last. Promoting agricultural commerce was another necessary advancement. Just as some advocated defense spending to protect ports and merchant shipping, Ritchie wrote that “our government” had practical duties it needed to undertake. The “true kind of encouragement which it should give to the farmer, consists in clearing his way to a market; and thus diminishing the expence of transportation, and enhancing the value of his produce.” His provincial argument against federal improvement did not preclude a cosmopolitan outlook. He

\textsuperscript{55} \textit{Enquirer}, Apr. 14, 1807, p.3.
urged the state to look at “the experience of Europe and the New-England states,” including a detailed description that he included of successful turnpikes in Scotland. Citing Condorcet, he argued that toll roads offered the fairest means of financial maintenance, putting most of the burden on those who benefited from the road.\textsuperscript{56}

The specific plan for creating these projects contained the public/private partnership that had governed the Bank of Virginia and would dominate the state’s future internal improvements. Although Ritchie had criticized the extent to which the state governed the bank, he did not object to ensuring that corporations acted in the public interest. In this case he argued that private charters should be granted with partially private investment, but that the state had a necessary role in venturing part of the start-up capital for construction to make up for insufficient private capital. The state’s partial ownership offered not just necessary capital, but necessary restraint. Any new companies “ought not to be too privileged.” They should not possess “such an exclusive monopoly as to prevent the establishment of similar institutions, when the public interest required it.” A bridge company, for example, should not preclude the construction of another bridge. Another necessary condition was that their “profits ought not to be so exorbitant as to grow oppressive upon the public.” Ritchie proposed that the private investors should be entitled to dividends “higher than the ordinary rate of profit; because these are young institutions which particularly require the spirit of enterprise, and because enterprise is a virtue, which does not sufficiently thrive among us.” Nonetheless, it was just to impose a “maximum of profit” on private shares which should be “made redeemable by the government.” The legislature should eventually “convert what belongs to privileged individuals into the property of the whole.”\textsuperscript{57}

\textsuperscript{56} Ibid.  
\textsuperscript{57} Ibid.
Ritchie’s advocacy did yield results. As in the case of educational funding, some efforts were made to implement a system of improvements before the disruption of the War of 1812, and also as in that case, Charles Fenton Mercer offered a bipartisan cast to the effort. In December 1812, Mercer made a proposal to establish an improvement fund with revenues from the state banks. Ritchie and other Republicans opposed the effort at that time in order to fully fund the defense effort against the British. At the end of the war in April 1815, Mercer asked Governor Wilson Cary Nicholas, who supported his efforts on internal improvements, to contact “the Richmond papers, and especially, the Enquirer,” to secure their support for renewing the plan.  

Ritchie needed no prodding, as he enthusiastically supported the system that emerged in the two years after the end of the war. In September 1815, Ritchie published an editorial that linked his advocacy of public education with the need for infrastructure development as a comprehensive vision. He asked, “Have the Americans no water-courses to clear? No Canals to construct? No Roads to form? No Bridges to erect?” With the news of the war necessarily receding, Ritchie stated his intent to renew his call for reform and to stop any decline relative to other growing states. “We call upon the Virginians to arouse from their lethargy… Without a vigorous effort, she must fade into a star of the second or third magnitude.”

Governor Nicholas made the improvement effort a centerpiece of his message to the legislature in December 1815. The benefits of improvement were two-fold: “As a bond of Union, it stands pre-eminent; and, as a source of wealth and prosperity, it cannot be rivaled by any enterprize the State could engage in.” Nicholas, unlike Ritchie, sounded sympathetic to nationally funded improvements, such as an inland waterway between Massachusetts and Georgia, but the union to which he referred here was as much the disparate regions of Virginia as

58 Egerton, Charles Fenton Mercer, 100-101.
59 Richmond Enquirer, Sept. 20, 1815, p.3.
it was the nation. He emphasized that the plan should move forward “with a determination to extend its advantages to every part of the State,” which would be necessary to secure support not just from the west, but from the Tidewater, which already had access to water routes. Nicholas’ most ambitious plan, which had been explored in a report by John Marshall, a stockholder in the James River and Potomac Companies, called for improvement of the James River to its source with a turnpike connecting to the improved Greenbrier and Kanawha Rivers. From there the Ohio River was the route to the west.\(^{60}\)

This proposed connection revived the great ambition harbored by the Potomac’s early promoters, and it attracted significant interest. Henry Banks, in his plea for more bank financing, saw the expansion of capital as being necessarily related to expanding access to the Ohio: “Let Richmond import largely. Let proper communications by land and water be made, and it will then be found that the western retailers will flock to this place; and Richmond merely enjoying the advantages which belong to its position, will become the rival of Philadelphia or Baltimore in many things, and their superior in others.”\(^{61}\) Governor Nicholas referred to the state’s role in financing this vision, as both Ritchie and Mercer had pointed out before the war. The state’s stocks in its banks and its already-existing river companies provided a pool of capital that needed to be redirected to a larger vision. Ritchie staked out a far more politically ambitious position that called for direct tax funding beyond the state’s dividend income. Rather than allow the wartime taxes to expire, he wrote, “let us have the taxes, that we may have the \textit{improvements}. Who will flinch from his public duty to catch at a phantom – \textit{popularity} – which will but cheat your grasp?”\(^{62}\)

\(^{60}\) \textit{Richmond Enquirer}, Dec. 5, 1815, p.3; Rice, “Internal Improvements in Virginia,” 125-128.


\(^{62}\) \textit{Richmond Enquirer}, Dec. 5, 1815, p.3.
The House of Delegates’ improvement committee published a report shortly after Nicholas’ address that presented the philosophical case for state-funded improvements that echoed Ritchie’s perspective, although lacking his tax funding proposal. Economic benefits were one advantage they advocated, but so were the strengthened “cords of social union” and the “generous feeling of patriotism, which is ever ready to exclaim at the contemplation of an extended scene of public improvement ‘I love my country, because she is worthy of my affection.’” More importantly the committee saw a necessity in preserving Virginia’s status in the nation, as the west was beginning a transformation. “Beyond the Allegany, an unexpected Revolution threatens the Atlantic States in general, the accomplishment of which will create new interests and views in that flourishing and important section of America, and bar, forever, the hope of re-uniting it by commercial ties to the markets of the East.” Virginia had an obligation both to the state and the Union to establish a solid connection to the Ohio as “the best means of arresting the progress of this revolution” and keeping the east tied to the west politically and economically. Virginia led the nation to independence, they argued, and thus Virginia should continue to give “that independence stability, by confirming the union, upon which it rests.”

The committee introduced the theory of finance that would guide the future of state improvements. They downplayed Ritchie’s interest in projects financed by direct tax revenue, although not necessarily in principle. They believed that given the successes of earlier private ventures with public subscriptions on the lower James and in the Dismal Swamp, the private sector could still show sufficient initiative on more ambitious projects with more dedicated state involvement. One advantage the state offered was the ability to hire an experienced engineer to survey and coordinate construction. Earlier companies had lacked the resources to keep a

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professional director permanently engaged. The committee proposed placing the dividends from state bank stocks and the state’s shares of the existing river companies in a Fund for Internal Improvement to be managed by a new Board of Public Works. The board would spur private investment by offering to invest public funds in approved projects only after a portion of the private funds had first been secured. Reflecting Ritchie’s earlier recommendations, the state would cap private profits, although it would also attempt to guarantee a minimum rate of return for a limited time as well. The board would not have independent authority, but it was intended to provide coordination and guidance better than piecemeal legislative action.  

Jefferson, like Ritchie, saw the interrelationship of infrastructure and educational expansion, even if he was not as emotionally invested in the infrastructure side, but he ventured some opinions on the new plans of improvement. A week after the improvement committee’s report appeared, Jefferson wrote to Charles Yancey, the delegate from Albemarle County, “I am a great friend to the improvements of roads, canals, and schools. But I wish I could see some provision for the former as solid as that of the latter,—something better than fog.” The state’s Literary Fund had already established a large pool of funds for the coming school debates, but the plans for infrastructure financing were still proposals rather than enactments. Jefferson also told Yancey that he favored a greater regulatory role for the state in directing improvements of watercourses. He complained that Fluvanna County had recently authorized a dam near the mouth of the Rivanna River that would interfere with navigation from upstream, and under the law they had the power to do so. Counties should not be able to make decisions that affected

\[\text{\footnotesize 64 Ibid.}\]
traffic from outside their borders.\textsuperscript{65} Jefferson had been involved in a venture to improve the Rivanna River in Milton near his watermills, which increased the access of boats to products from Monticello and beyond, and he considered it one of his more significant legacies.\textsuperscript{66} It was perhaps a less herculean effort than the projects that had begun on larger rivers, but Jefferson’s friendliness toward internal improvement would soon be remembered by the legislature.

The legislature enacted the improvement committee’s plan soon after their report, and its implementation went into effect quickly. Among the initial list of directors appointed by the legislature was Jefferson, who declined the post. Charles Fenton Mercer was also appointed in recognition of his long advocacy for the project.\textsuperscript{67} In 1817 the board appointed an engineer, Loammi Baldwin of Massachusetts, who began river surveys before returning to lead Boston’s improvement projects. A talented French engineer, Claudius Crozet, recommended by Winfield Scott, would assume the role in 1823. His surveys kept alive the most ambitious hope harbored for public works, namely the desire to bridge the Alleghany Mountains with an all-water route from the Kanawha to the James. Crozet found that the Cheat River, which flowed atop a high mountain, offered a water source that could, with sufficient effort, be diverted to connect the two sides.\textsuperscript{68} While smaller projects were undertaken, much of the grand plan of improving the James to its source lingered in the planning stages in the 1810s and 1820s.

Joseph Cabell made the James and Kanawha canal his favorite project after the foundation of the University of Virginia. He became chairman of the Senate’s internal


\textsuperscript{66} Proposed Agreement with the Directors of the Rivanna Company, 1810, \textit{PTJDE}.

\textsuperscript{67} \textit{Richmond Enquirer}, Feb. 15, 1816, p.3; June 15, 1816, p.3.

improvement committee in 1821.69 By the 1820s, railroads had become a viable alternative to canals, although as Crozet calculated, at that point building a railroad along the James would actually be more expensive than a canal.70 In the long term, however, Cabell led Virginia’s improvement efforts away from the increasing viability of the railroads, instead keeping the canal as the central goal. Cabell’s motivation was not a resistance to technology, as he had eagerly investigated steamboats and other river-taming technologies as they emerged, but he drew upon an old fear of monopoly as a reason to resist the primacy of railroads. In 1828 he told Nicholas Trist that he had succeeded in blocking “the impudent effort of the Baltimore Rail Road party to take possession of our route to the Western Waters, and to substitute a detestable monopoly, for the glorious highway we have so long sought to establish.”71 Private citizens could send their own boats through canals with publicly regulated tolls, but the railroad did not appear to offer so much freedom. As with the banking issue, protecting the public interest from monopolies and concentrations of private power was paramount in this Republican vision of internal improvement. Sunken cost was perhaps another motivator, as investors in the Dismal Swamp and James River canals both wanted to continue the viability of their projects rather than turning to a new method that would potentially redirect trade away from the existing routes through Virginia.72

Although the expense of work on the James and Kanawha kept the project moving only in small segments in the 1820s, the interest and optimism continued unabated. Ritchie regularly published the reports of the Board of Public Works as well as articles on new technologies and proposals. When Claudius Crozet changed his calculation and supported the construction of a

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69 Joseph Cabell to JH Cocke, March 10, 1821, “Cabell Family Papers,” UVA.
70 Hunter, Claudius Crozet, 43-44.
railroad west from Richmond in 1831, however, Cabell was not inclined to relinquish his favored water route, and he eventually ushered Crozet out of the office of engineer.\textsuperscript{73} Cabell succeeded in reviving the stalling canal venture in 1832 by convincing the legislature to reorganize it into the James River and Kanawha joint-stock company, in which the state would own three-fifths of the shares.\textsuperscript{74} Cabell left the legislature for the last time in 1832, and he spent the remainder of his life working in concert with his close friend John Hartwell Cocke as executives for both the canal project and the University of Virginia. They remained committed to the two forms of improvement, the economic and the intellectual, during the rest of their careers.

Nonetheless, Cabell’s miscalculation on the future of transportation would contribute to Virginia’s relative decline in economic vitality. It was not, however, a failure of ambition or of what William Wirt had earlier called “public spirit.” Virginia’s system of mixed public/private banking had constricted the supply of credit relative to some other states, but it also weathered the Panic of 1819 much better than those states. The mixed enterprise of internal improvement also offered advantages, although like the matter of public schools, it required a dedication to raising large amounts of public funds that the legislature had a difficult time sustaining. Many among the wealthy planter class were hesitant to commit large amounts of money to transportation projects that would largely benefit western Virginia and larger parts of the Union. Ritchie, Cabell, and Cocke, among others in that class, however, looked beyond narrow interests and hoped to make a canal that would bind together a larger republic. Even when they opposed federal institutions for development purposes on principle, they believed that Virginia should undertake its own projects for the public benefit. Their efforts boosted commerce, if less than

\textsuperscript{73} Langhorne Gibson, \textit{Cabell’s Canal: The Story of the James River and Kanawha} (Richmond: Commodore Press, 2000), 100-105.

\textsuperscript{74} Ibid., 114.
had been hoped, but the most difficult transformations for them to confront with a public spirit
would be in the nexus of democracy and slavery.
Chapter 5

“The Democratick Spirit of Her Principles”
Democratic, Slavery, and the Future of Virginia

William Wirt’s “British Spy” noted yet another feature of Virginia society that would draw attention of reformers at the most contentious level. Certain material realities and political ideals lay at the center of what would become Virginia’s most difficult dilemmas. The Spy wrote, “I remember well enough that I am in Virginia: that state which, of all the rest, plumes herself on the democratick spirit of her principles. – Her political principles are, indeed, democratick enough in all conscience. Rights and privileges, as regulated by the constitution of the state, belong in an equal degree to all citizens… Nevertheless, there exists in Virginia a species of local rank, from which no country can, I presume, be entirely free.” Differences in “wealth and intellectual refinement” led inevitably to “circles of society, strongly discriminated… And one of these causes exists in full force in Virginia, for, however, they may vaunt of equal liberty in church and state, they have but little to boast on the subject of equal property. Indeed there is no country, I believe, where property is more unequally distributed than in Virginia. – This inequality struck me with peculiar force, in riding through the lower countries on the Potowmack.” There stood “stately aristocratick” palaces in contrast with many “little smoky huts and log cabins of poor, laborious, ignorant tenants. And what is very ridiculous, these tenants, while they approach the great house, cap in hand, with all the fearful trembling
submission of the lowest, feudal vassals, boast, in their court yards, with obstreperous exultation, they live in a land of freemen, a land of equal liberty and equal rights.”

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The Spy also reflected on the lackluster talents in Congress and in Virginia’s legislature. In those bodies he had “heard great volubility, much good sense, and some random touches of the pathetick; but in the same bodies I have heard a far greater proportion of puerile rant, of tedious and disgusting inanity.” They lacked general knowledge, the “habit of close and solid thinking,” and they did not “aspire at original ornaments.” These deficiencies caused them to “pour out, easily enough, a torrent of words, yet these are destitute of the light of erudition, the practical utility of just and copious thought, of those novel and beautiful allusions with which the very scenery of the country is so highly calculated to inspire them.” The Spy excused them to an extent, based on the rarity of eloquence in all civilizations, but it was nonetheless an indictment of unfulfilled potential in Virginia’s political culture. 2 The Spy, who had extolled “public spirit,” pointed to an incomplete revolution in Virginia that needed further cultivation.

The nexus of unequal property, politics, and slavery would be the most divisive set of issues for the reformers who championed works of public spirit. Even if public education and internal improvements faltered in their implementation, Republican reformers succeeded in affirming the principles in significant legislative enactments. When movements arose to further democratize the political system or to begin the removal of slavery, the bar for reform was much more difficult to cross, and some were unwilling. Thomas Ritchie risked his political capital to advocate for both. Joseph Cabell in these cases was more hesitant. His friend and ally John Hartwell Cocke, however, eagerly promoted his own efforts to remove slavery. It was on these

1 Wirt, The British Spy (1804), 6-8, 27.
2 Ibid., 27-28.
topics that their elite status and self-interest came most directly into conflict with their reformist ideals and could confuse their understandings of what constituted progress. In Cocke’s mind, rising democracy was one of the changes that was perpetuating slavery. For the most part, elite antislavery sentiment concerned itself with the welfare of white society and the social and economic health of the republican project. There was among some white reformers sympathy for the liberty of African Americans based in humane ideals from the Enlightenment, but another perhaps stronger impetus for them was the tacit realization that a modernizing prosperous society could not fully develop in the midst of slavery. With their zeal for reform tempered by lingering racial antipathy and the passivity of gradualism, antislavery elites ultimately could not compete with the vociferous voices of proslavery reaction that offered supposedly easier solutions to the instabilities of slavery. Once the challenge to slavery reached its apex in 1832, the reactionaries advocated a stricter regime of slave management, and they tapped into deeply ingrained ideas about property rights to solidify their claims to moral legitimacy.

**Elite Politics and the Movement for Democracy**

The division between elite slaveowners and white yeomen and between east and west had been a problem in Virginia’s political sphere since at least the Revolution. Several elite families tended to dominate Virginia politics, and by the 1820s, some Virginia newspapers complained of a cabal of Republican elites who quietly dominated all political decision-making in Richmond. It was a “Junto” of which Joseph Cabell’s brother William and Thomas Ritchie were said to be members, and it was this connection that most demonstrates Ritchie’s importance as a public voice and an influential political actor. Whether the Junto actually existed as a cohesive
organization was and still is a disputed claim.\textsuperscript{3} What is clear, however, is that a number of elite leaders, many of whom were related to each other, remained highly influential in the dominant Republican Party throughout the period between the Revolution of 1800 and the constitutional convention of 1829-1830. At the very least, their persistent influence in the leadership class gave them the appearance of a clique, in which certain ideological priorities generally overlapped.\textsuperscript{4} It was a deeply elitist structure that nonetheless accommodated heterodox ideological thinking, as Ritchie’s presence attests.

At the head of the alleged Junto was Judge Spencer Roane, who had assisted Ritchie, his cousin, in founding the \textit{Enquirer} in 1804. Dr. John Brockenbrough, the president of the Bank of Virginia and Ritchie’s cousin, was also Roane’s brother-in-law. Ritchie married into a politically important family by his wife, Isabella Foushee, the daughter of Dr. William Foushee, who was said to be a Junto member and had been president of the James River Company from 1789-1818.\textsuperscript{5} Wilson Cary Nicholas, who governed during the most productive legislative session on education and internal improvement and was the father of Thomas Jefferson Randolph’s wife Jane, was said to be one of the Junto’s founders along with Roane. The political and social circles in which Ritchie lived were inherently elitist, but Ritchie, like Jefferson, would support further democratization of the political system, even as many among the elite class would come to resist it.

Virginia’s 1776 constitution had established a disproportionate system wherein the west did not have sufficient legislative representation for its growing population, and the suffrage was

\textsuperscript{4} Ibid. This points out that the newspapers making the claims were doing so for political advantage rather than because any evidence actually existed of an organization. These opponents tended to be more favorable to federal policy than the reigning states’ rights Republicans.
\textsuperscript{5} Mutersbaugh, 56-57, 194.
limited to freeholders. Westerners had pushed for reform for decades before the convention of 1829 was finally called. In 1816 when western delegates met in Staunton to agitate for a constitutional convention, Ritchie expressed his sympathy for the principle that they deserved equal representation in a republic, although he felt that they did not have the authority to call a convention unilaterally. What the legislature owed them, however, was a public referendum for calling a statewide convention. The Junto, with Ritchie foremost among them, tended to admit the justice of the western claims more than the eastern political class generally would. Jefferson had expressed his sympathy with the Staunton Convention, and his proposed constitution with more equal representation from 1776 became a source of justification for western advocates.

Joseph Cabell represented an exception to the reformers’ perspective on constitutional reform, ironically based in part on his support for internal improvement. In 1825 Cabell expressed a rare criticism of Jefferson when writing to John Hartwell Cocke, saying that “Mr. Jefferson’s support of both the Staunton Conventions appears to me to be the most unfortunate part of his political life.”9 When the statewide convention was approaching in 1829, Cabell published a letter justifying the disparity of political power between east and west. Virginia’s geographic divisions were an unavoidable fact, which separated the state into areas either “congenial to the increase of the black population,” or “auspicious to the multiplication of the whites.” With divergent property interests, the power of taxation had to be guarded. The very system of internal improvement that Cabell had been building was also a danger, since “if let loose from the proper restraints it might level the distinctions of property.” Since the east had more of the wealth, it had an interest in protecting it, but he still maintained his plans for

7 Mutersbaugh, 392-393.
9 Cabell to J.H. Cocke, July 7, 1825, “Cabell Family Papers,” UVA.
development: “Denying to the federal government the power of making roads and canals, a liberal system of internal improvement on state account could alone save us from becoming a comparative waste, in the midst of communities adorned by all the arts of civilized life.” Even though he was happy for improvements to benefit the state as a whole, Cabell’s main concern was preserving the control of the landed elite over the process.

Cabell also disdained the emerging practices of democracy in his own political campaigns. His stature enabled him to resist the common touch that was increasingly becoming necessary in electoral politics. In his last successful campaign, he boasted to Cocke about how he defied the expectations of voters with honesty about his unpopular views: “I vindicated the Tariff, vilified the nullifiers, & spoke with the utmost scorn & contempt of the practice of riding from house to house, telling the people that I relied on their intelligence to root out such degrading practices.” He asked them, “Do you desire to turn me into a dog & put a collar around my neck, inscribed with the words, ‘This is Andrew Jackson’s Dog’?”

Cabell’s longstanding leadership in reform projects for the public good did not extend to relinquishing elite control over the process. The new constitution and its compromise that preserved much of the elite’s power showed a side of Cabell that was decidedly conservative, but when the opportunity to reform slavery arose soon thereafter, he was willing to consider it. The liberal elite faced their greatest moral and economic challenge in what to do with their human property.

**The Failures of Elite Antislavery Sentiment**

When Joseph Cabell’s friend William Brockenbrough expressed a partial sympathy with the rising slaves in the Haitian Revolution, he pointed to the problem that would most haunt elite

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slaveowners with antislavery sentiments. The desire to remove both slavery and slaves without disrupting the social order was an immensely difficult proposition, hindered especially by that desire to see the freedmen leave. The colonization movement that arose had multiple motivations, the basest of which was removing free African Americans in order to remove any disruptive influences on those who remained slaves. There were also some slaveowners who saw colonization as an opportunity to free their own slaves without having to establish them in freedom in Virginia. John Hartwell Cocke’s career as a colonizationist fits into the latter category. His belief that the elite would offer the most liberal support for emancipation reflected a lasting strain of antislavery sentiment among some elite slaveholders, but it also showed a misplaced faith in who would succeed in Virginia’s best opportunity to begin dismantling slavery before the Civil War.

The Haitian Revolution, which resulted in widespread death and destruction in the 1790s, was seen as a warning to many American slaveowners about the dangers of slave rebellion. Its depredations, along with those of the French Revolution, gave pause to many who might not have been counterrevolutionary before. But as the example of Bishop Madison and the culture of William and Mary showed, support for the French Revolution could survive the trials of Thermidor. Likewise, Haiti would not necessarily make all citizens proslavery. Gabriel’s Rebellion in 1800 did bring the feeling of threat much closer to home, however, and as a result, Virginia severely curtailed its manumission law in 1806, requiring that provisions be made to send any newly freed slaves outside the state.\footnote{Eva Sheppard Wolf, \textit{Race and Liberty in the New Nation: Emancipation in Virginia from the Revolution to Nat Turner’s Rebellion} (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2006), 46-47. Wolf argues that the rate of manumission before this does not directly reflect the extent of antislavery sentiment, as it was used for disciplinary purposes as well.} But reformers who looked outside Virginia and perceived the superior development of free states had to confront the reality that slavery was
among the factors limiting Virginia’s growth. Although the connection was not always spoken, it
could not have been lost on those who frequently compared Virginia’s development to other
states, and the alliance between the nationalist Charles Fenton Mercer and some of Virginia’s
Republican reformers on the colonization movement suggests that they saw a common cause in
quietly removing slavery. Although silence generally prevailed on slavery among the elite,
George Tucker and one of Thomas Ritchie’s writers were willing to make clear the connection
between underdevelopment and the presence of slavery. Their economic rationalist critique,
based in the superior viability of free labor, would be convincing to some economic liberals, but
it would not carry the same persuasive moral weight that the arguments based in humanity would
carry in the global abolitionist movement.

In 1801 in the aftermath of Gabriel’s Rebellion, St. George Tucker’s younger cousin and
student George Tucker wrote an open letter to the legislature advocating a colonization plan for
the purpose of gradual emancipation. Published in Richmond, the letter called upon the state to
work with the federal government to find land, preferably to the west of the Mississippi or in
Georgia’s Indian territory. Tucker argued that this was the best plan both for practical reasons
and because selling Virginia’s slaves into slavery in the West Indies was not a humane option.
Tucker saw an urgency in the project not just because of the recent events that threatened the
safety of white society, but because the Enlightenment itself was a trend that would force a
reckoning with slavery eventually anyway. He wrote, “There is often a progress in human affairs
which may indeed be retarded, but which nothing can arrest,” and part of that movement
included “the advancement of knowledge among the negroes of this country.” As more people
learned to read and write, they continued to spread knowledge, and with that came awareness of
the “love of freedom,” an “an inborn sentiment, which the God of nature has planted deep in the
heart.” Tucker believed that the time for this was not far afield, since African Americans would actually advance much faster than whites, since they had begun farther behind. The “multiplication of our towns tend a thousand ways to enlighten and inform them,” and the perpetual “discussion of natural rights favors speculation and enquiry,” eventually defying the “arbitrary institutions of society.” Countering the legislative proposals for further repression, Tucker argued that there was not one source of enlightenment, such as literacy or communication, that they could “materially check” among slaves once they were being propagated in the wider society.\(^\text{13}\)

Just as the mind could not be permanently chained, neither could the body be forever managed by repressive laws. Tucker claimed that as public opinion had turned toward more humane treatment of slaves, there was no way for Virginia to legislate a harsher regime that would be just or effective. If the law allowed the “free indulgence of cruelty and revenge,” it would only make “one little tyrant more tyrannical” and “make thousands of slaves impatient and vindictive.”\(^\text{14}\) After affirming that he believed the interests of humanity pointed toward liberty, he concluded by turning back to the future of white Virginia, saying, “by a rule of eternal justice, the tyrant who lives in fear is himself a slave.” The improvement of Virginia generally was hampered by the lack of free labor. He argued that “from the days of Homer, it has been admitted that a slave does but half the work of a free man; and consequently, that no country can attain a great height in manufactures, in commerce, or in agriculture, where one half of the community labours unwillingly, and the other half does not labour at all.” The transition needed to be gradual because of the sudden dislocation of the workforce, but he was confident that new

\(^{13}\) George Tucker, *Letter to a Member of the General Assembly of Virginia* (Richmond: H. Pace, 1801) EAI 818, 5-7.
\(^{14}\) Ibid., 9.
white settlers would come in to seek opportunities, and then white industriousness would improve, since “Idleness would no longer be a prerogative of a white skin.” It was a reform project that could not be undertaken by the scattered agency of individuals. He found rather that “It is the legislature alone which can prepare the public mind for the great effort the occasion demands.” Ten years later in a pamphlet advocating river improvements, Tucker explicitly attributed lagging economic development in Virginia to slavery, which consigned “one half of the community to idleness, and the other to reluctant labor.” Even the soil exhaustion and waning tobacco crops that were already enervating the economy were attributable primarily to the labor system. Other reform efforts on economic issues before 1832 would not be as open as Tucker was about the problems of relying upon slave labor, but reformers who frequently made comparisons to development in free labor states could not have escaped considering Tucker’s critique.

The Enquirer did not publish frequently on the topic of slavery between a brief flurry in 1805, when slavery was debated in the legislature, and the Missouri Crisis in 1819, perhaps reflecting a lack of news, but perhaps also because Ritchie was not inclined to give voice to proslavery ideas. Generally only occasional reprints of colonization society news would appear. Ritchie was not ardently antislavery, but when the topic did arise, he generally expressed sympathy for antislavery ideas, culminating in his support for a gradual emancipation act in 1832. Ritchie did have a personal stake in slavery, albeit less than his fellow elites. He held a between one and five slaves at a given time to help him print the Enquirer. In the earliest appearance of the topic in 1804, he published a “Vindication of Virginia,” written by another

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15 Ibid., 19-21.
16 George Tucker, A Letter to a Member of the General Assembly of North Carolina on the Navigation of the Roanoke and Its Branches (Richmond: John O’Lynch, 1811), 18.
17 Mutersbaugh, 75.
author, that defended the three-fifths slave representation, but based on an argument unflattering to the productivity of the slave system. In it, the writer cited Albert Gallatin’s *View of Finances* to claim that the “labour of five slaves is computed to be equal to that of three freemen.” It was only slightly better than George Tucker’s formulation, and given Ritchie’s advocacy of economic development, it was not a favorable statement for the economic rationality of slavery. Later he reprinted an announcement of a new book, *The Portraiture of Quakerism*, by Thomas Clarkson, “the great friend of the oppressed Africans,” who “agreeably explains the whole temporal & spiritual system of that useful and worthy society,” and he also published a description of the British government’s arguments against the slave trade.

Ritchie penned an editorial denouncing South Carolina’s resumption of the Atlantic slave trade in 1805, which mixed humanitarian feelings with what was his greatest concern, the damage that an expansion of slavery could do to his political ideals. He began, “‘AFRICANS FOR SALE,’ ‘PRIME CONGO NEGROES,’ or similar exhibitions, still continue to disgust our eye, as we glance over the Charleston prints.” Referring to the captives as “this abused race of men,” Ritchie identified “a spirit of gain” which drove the southern slave merchants to seek their “peculiar prey.” Ritchie stated that the injustice of the slave trade did not need to be recapitulated, but he suggested that some “enlightened inhabitant of Charleston” should calculate the whole number of slaves imported, which would show both the diminished value of slaves and the “nefarious means” that were involved in their trading. Although Ritchie’s complaint about diminished values pointed to an interest in maintaining slave wealth, he was nonetheless adamant that the practice resulted in the expansion of the slave population to the detriment of all

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18 *Enquirer*, June 30, 1804, p.3.
19 *Enquirer*, April 14, 1807, p.4; *Enquirer*, Sept. 5, 1806, p.3.
involved.\textsuperscript{20} The following year, Ritchie obtained the numbers he sought, pointing out the enormous expansion of the slave population in South Carolina, which was “fatal to the security of the whites,” and showed “the inhumanity of dooming 27,882 fellow-beings to endless slavery, and of consigning the relations of most of them in their own country, to the bitterness of an eternal separation.”\textsuperscript{21}

Ritchie was especially animated by the damage that slavery did to the trans-Atlantic revolutionary project. Even though he did not always address the role of slavery in his reform projects, Ritchie’s framing of slavery in this way does reflect an awareness that slavery was a detriment to his vision of an improving society. Echoing Jefferson’s original draft of the Declaration of Independence, he wrote, “We execrate the abominable policy of the mother Country, which originally introduced the Africans into these colonies, and yet the people of South Carolina are now in the pursuit of this same abominable policy.” Republicanism in America needed to serve as an example, “Yet even this model appears marred and disfigured by the institution of slavery; a slavery which one of those free states so far from striving to diminish, is striving to exasperate.” The example that South Carolina was setting was thus counterproductive. “They have furnished every European master with a topic of ridicule upon the boasted virtue of republics: and every subject with a miserable consolation in the midst of their oppressions.” The “oppressed inhabitants of Europe” needed to be confident that their exertions to overthrow monarchies would yield happier societies, and with the French Revolution receding, the United States was the last exemplar. Ritchie advocated a national ban on the slave trade once allowed in 1808, but in the meantime, he called upon the Virginia legislature to ban

\textsuperscript{20} Enquirer, June 28, 1805, p.3.
\textsuperscript{21} Enquirer, March 4, 1806, p.3.
all imports of slaves into Virginia from any source, including citizens from other states moving in with their own slaves.\textsuperscript{22}

Later that year, Ritchie published a more comprehensive critique of slavery in Virginia by an author named “Joseph,” who cited Jefferson’s \textit{Notes on Virginia} as a source. Like Ritchie’s editorial, it expressed mixed motivations, with the strongest being the dangers posed to Virginia’s free citizens, but it was nonetheless a rather pointed attack that demonstrates how a white antislavery perspective could accommodate deep ambivalence while still making a strong case. The preface noted the “extreme delicacy” of criticizing slavery, and it lamented that “It has been the peculiar misfortune of this topic to be considered by many, as improper for general public examination.” Joseph posed a rhetorical question about popular opinion on the negative effects of slavery and then posited an answer: “if it is asked ‘in what does the evil consist,’ a great majority, even of the reflecting part of the community, have no other answer to give, than that ‘it is wrong that one man should hold another in bondage.’” Even if the statement was more a rhetorical device than a reflection of widespread public sentiment, Joseph nonetheless argued that he had detected a change in Virginia that merited analysis:

it was a source of pleasure to believe that, for several years past, the public opinion in Virginia, on this subject, had been gradually submitting to a revolution, which he then thought was demanded not only by humanity, but also by prudence. He rejoiced to anticipate a period which seemed fast approaching, when other doors of emancipation than those that are now open, would be unlocked to this unhappy people, through which they might advance, in greater numbers, to the condition of freemen.\textsuperscript{23}

\textsuperscript{22} \textit{Enquirer}, June 28, 1805, p.3. Because Ritchie’s personal papers do not appear to have survived, “Joseph’s” identity would be difficult to trace, but given the liberal predilections of “The Rainbow,” it could have been a member of their circle.

\textsuperscript{23} \textit{Enquirer}, Oct. 8, 1805, p.3.
Joseph was the critic who most explicitly linked Virginia’s lagging development on multiple levels to the practice of slavery. Although silence would generally prevail on slavery in the *Enquirer* in the succeeding years, Joseph identified the other projects that reformers most wanted to undertake. Virginia had fallen behind by “a surprising and disgraceful distance” in the “the race of individual prosperity,” despite possessing great natural resources. Public roads were insufficient, the laws still were entangled with too much “English jurisprudence,” education was “barbarously neglected,” and slavery was “checking the increase of her white population, opposing almost insurmountable obstacles to the improvement of her agriculture, and endangering every moment her peace and safety!” Joseph even claimed, without explanation, that Virginia’s black population was the main impediment to implementing the 1796 public school act. Virginia had contributed as much as any state had to American liberty, but in improving its own society it had been weighed down by “impotence,” with slavery as the central problem. The usual refrain of the problem being “beyond the reach of human remedy” was an insufficient claim to dampen a patriotic effort to address the “stupendous calamity.”

Joseph aimed to assess the dangers that he perceived in both leaving slavery intact and in furthering a process of emancipation, which would necessitate choosing between a harsher permanent slave regime or a clear post-emancipation plan. He claimed that a speech in the House of Delegates in favor of overturning the existing law of personal manumission actually did present some valid questions. (The speech was from Alexander Smyth of Wythe County, a place named for Jefferson’s mentor, a man who would soon be murdered for his antislavery actions and opinions.\(^\text{24}\)) The central concern was what could become of the relationship between the

races as slaves left their bondage, and the possibilities fell into four categories. The first two categories considered possible levels of equality, both socially and politically. The first category was social equality, which meant that racial mixing would result in the loss of “all distinction of color and organization,” which ultimately was an undesirable outcome for a posterity with a “dull and uniform complexion.” Joseph argued that in realistic terms, white prejudice would prevent such mixing, rendering the possibility “among the last and least mischiefs to be apprehended from emancipation.” The second possible category consisted of races kept “distinct but equal in their rights.” Because the same white prejudices that existed against interracial procreation would hold against black legislators or judges, civil equality would not be a viable outcome. Such prejudices, even if they might be “condemned by an enlightened and humane philosophy,” nonetheless existed to “our misfortune and embarrassment” to such an extent that “the exterminating hand of time itself may never be able to eradicate them.” Although Joseph did not condemn civil equality in principle, he made clear that he did not see it as a realistic outcome in any circumstance short of a bloody revolution.

The third and fourth categories involved differing levels of inequality. The third category questioned, “Can the blacks remain distinct, and politically unequal? In this condition we may suppose them to possess and enjoy every right and immunity equally with the whites, except a voice and agency in the formation and execution of the laws, and the right to keep and bear arms.” This had been the actual practice for the “friends of emancipation in Virginia,” but it was a course that frightened many: “We are warned of its dangers by being told that if we give to slaves an imperfect freedom, they will demand, and struggle with violence to obtain, the most perfect equality.” Opponents of emancipation cited the example of Haiti to claim that freed persons instigated the broader uprising of slaves, which Joseph observed was further inflamed by
the “rash and impolitic” decision by the French National Convention to announce that slavery would end in its entirety in the future. It was not the best method for placating people who lived under a slave regime that he believed was far crueler than Virginia’s. This fact was not a reason to oppose emancipation, but it did point to the need for a measured rather than a “rash” policy. Joseph also noted the fact that slaves did not outnumber whites in total in Virginia, which meant that a Haitian-style revolution would not be a substantial danger while pursuing partial liberty and gradual emancipation. Partial liberty, while insufficient by American ideals, would still leave the freed population in a better condition than common people in “nine tenths of the world,” and thus they would see that revolt would not be in their self-interest.

Joseph made another observation to bolster his case that freedpeople living in Virginia did not pose a more fundamental threat than those remaining in slavery. Even though they might have more opportunity to conspire for dangerous purposes in freedom than those still enslaved, the difference was relatively small because the legal restrictions on slaves’ behavior, such as traveling without passes or assembling in large numbers, were already poorly enforced. He found that “these provisions are so much at variance with the feelings of our citizens, that in many parts of the state, they are merely a dead letter.” Just as other vices that might be legislated against, the reality rarely matched the law: “As well might it be expected that duelling, gambling, and the use of spirituous liquors would be abolished by multiplying penal acts against them, as that indulgence to our slaves should be prevented by legal restrictions which the hearts of our citizens will not allow them to enforce; for so long as our humanity preponderates over our fears, so long will those laws be very partially and feebly executed.” Legislators had the political incentive to enact strict laws, but even they were “among the first violate” them as private citizens because of
“feelings of humanity.” Joseph argued that repression was what supported the social order in slavery, and Virginians were for the most part too humane to maintain it as it would need to be.

The consideration of repression led to the final category of altering slavery, which consisted of leaving it in its existing state. This course, however, was not static and necessitated new action as well, since the security of white society still had to be guaranteed. Joseph here made a seemingly counter-intuitive argument for an antislavery writer, but in the end he used it to bolster the case for ending slavery. He called for the imposition of the more stringent restrictions on slave activities and private manumission, and the ban on all new slave immigration, but he noted that such correctives would not sufficiently yield the security that people wanted. Communications among slaves could never be fully suppressed, and the effect of continued slavery would, as Ritchie had argued, undermine the liberty of white society as well. He asked, “Shall the sublime enthusiastic sentiment of liberty be uttered only in whispers, and the patriotic song that animates and diffuses the spirit of freedom, be seen only in secret, lest the celestial fire with which they are pregnant should be communicated to the materials of our destruction?” In the absence of any other plan, a harsher regime of slavery would be necessary, but it was hardly a desirable outcome. It was in this light that Joseph’s comment on the failure of public education might be understood. George Tucker claimed that the spread of knowledge was dangerous for maintaining a slave society, but it was also a movement that could not be stopped or confined to one race. Joseph implied that liberty and enlightenment must be suppressed for all in order to suppress the liberty of slaves, which posed a much larger barrier than the mere parsimony that the school reformers disdained.

Like Tucker, Joseph did consider the possibility of colonization as an expedient, but unlike most other antislavery Virginians who came after him, he had a more realistic view of its
feasibility. Finding a place to free slaves outside the U.S. was preferable, but if the only option were to sell them to other slave states, the welfare of white Virginians would justify it. Joseph appeared to be open to consideration of plans “consistent with our own safety, of liberating them amongst us,” but his argument was frequently tempered by the sense that removal would be the most politically acceptable option. He presaged Jefferson’s diffusion theory in saying that whether slaves were colonized or sold to other states, the lessening of relative numbers of slaves would help to remove “the obstacles to the future emancipation of those who would remain amongst us.” A per capita tax on slaves, an idea the legislature would revisit in 1832, would be a legitimate way to fund state action in this removal process.

Ultimately Joseph did not prescribe a single course of action, since his openness to a biracial, if unequal, society was a difficult proposition, but so was large-scale colonization. He hoped for progress in his lifetime, but he feared that unless his suggestions were heeded, the problem would last “till another Moses shall arise, who, aided by the power of the omnipotent Jehovah, and without a frantic opposition from us, shall conduct this unfortunate race of men, in one vast emigrating host, through the opening waters of the Gulph of Mexico to the conquest and possession of the West-Indian islands, or… to their native latitude in South America.” Virginia’s colonizationists would later take on this project, but it would prove to be as chimerical as Joseph feared for the purpose of effecting emancipation. Nonetheless, during Jefferson’s presidency, “Joseph,” George Tucker, and Ritchie all believed that slavery was a threat to the republican project and even to the spread of enlightenment itself, at least for white Americans.

The Missouri Crisis in 1819 brought slavery to the forefront of federal politics in Virginia and thus back to the pages of the *Enquirer*. As had been the case in the internal improvement debates of the preceding years, jealousy for states’ rights overrode other competing interests in
Ritchie’s political calculations, and the case of Missouri was no different. His constitutional case rested on the fact that the Louisiana Territory treaty guaranteed all the “rights, advantages and immunities of citizens of the U.S.” The emphasis placed on the word “advantages” distinguished the argument somewhat from the claims that would later be made in such cases as *Dred Scott*, and it focused instead on the right of a state’s citizens to determine the policy for themselves rather than an absolute federal right to take slaves anywhere. Since citizens in existing states had the legal right to transport slaves to other states where they were permitted, the state of Missouri should have the same legal power to allow the “advantages” offered by slave labor. If it did not possess that choice, it would not be equal to other states. The other claim asserted the unfairness of allowing slavery in the territory of Missouri and then revoking it once established. Despite these defenses of the utility of slavery and its legal justification, Ritchie made reference to the diffusion theory to justify the expansion of slavery. If the “exportation of slaves from the Atlantic states” were cut off, then more slaves would remain there, “and their condition is not ameliorated as fast as the natural course of events would direct. You do not lessen the evil of slavery; but you make it bear more heavily upon a smaller space.” The claim could only be seen as antislavery in the most passive sense, but the conclusion revealed an emerging sense of defensiveness in Ritchie’s view of national politics that overrode any latent antislavery feelings: “It is a struggle of Eastern prejudice against southern principles.”

The following year Ritchie immersed himself in the contradictions of the problem by publishing a proslavery column for the purpose of diminishing sectional animosity and arguing for diffusion for the purpose of abolition. The column by “An Inquisitive Slave-holder” defended the biblical sanction of slavery, but Ritchie offered an introduction that both indicated that he

25 *Richmond Enquirer*, Feb. 25, 1819, p.3.
disagreed with it and that it deserved to be heard. Ritchie had long been willing to publish dissenting views from his own in the paper, and in this case he repeated his original principle, “Let the Press be free.”

It may too have the good effect, desired by the author, of softening down some of those fiery enthusiasts to the East, who cite the bible, without reservation, as an authority on all occasions for charging the southern people with inhumanity – and who seem to have forgotten that the evil of slavery has been too common; not confined to ourselves alone, but even found among the ancient Hebrews – by what mysterious dispensations it was so permitted, it is not for us to presume to conjecture. – We protest, however, in our own name, and of that of so many others, that we do not vindicate servitude; we wish no slave had touched our soil; we wish it could be terminated. As republicans, we frankly declare before our God and our country, that we abhor its institution; but what then is the question now? Is it not a curse, not chosen by our forefathers, but imposed upon them, and entailed upon ourselves? And does not every man, unless he is a fanatic, conceive how difficult it is for us to be rid of it, in a manner consistent with our future peace and tranquility? – As to the extension of slavery beyond the Mississippi, it is miserable cant; it would tend to soften the evil and to accelerate its abolition.26

That the positive use of the word “abolition” immediately preceded a proslavery essay points to the evasiveness of Ritchie’s antislavery feelings when confronted with sharper antislavery attacks from outside. The diffusion theory was certainly a passive deferral of action to a time, left undefined, when emancipation would be an easier process. Ritchie and Jefferson were not alone in the Missouri debate in looking toward the theory for relief.27 Congressman John Tyler, a former student of Bishop Madison, defended diffusion for the purpose of future emancipation.28 The idea of diffusion offering greater political opportunity was not entirely farfetched, given the example that had been set by the northern states. Each of the states north of Maryland had had slimmer proportions of African Americans, and some had even used gradual acts of emancipation that were still ongoing. It was certainly a plan that preserved most of the interests of the slaveholder over those of the slave, but it appeared to be grounded in

26 Richmond Enquirer, Feb. 10, 1820, p.2.
27 TJ to John Holmes, April 22, 1820, LOC; see Lacy K. Ford, Deliver Us From Evil: The Slavery Question in the Old South (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 74.
28 Ford, 74. President Madison also accepted the theory.
demonstrable political experience, at least for those who did not recognize the power of population growth and the new cotton economy. George Tucker had denied the viability of diffusion in his 1801 treatise, writing that population growth negated the unassisted dispersal of slaves from Virginia.\footnote{Tucker, \textit{Letter to a Member of the General Assembly of Virginia}, 11.} That his criticism was correct did not prevent others from clinging to it as the easiest escape.

While diffusion offered a very passive means of diluting slavery, its more active corollary was colonization, which was launched as an organized national movement in large part by the erstwhile Federalist reformer Charles Fenton Mercer. The history of the colonization movement has been subject to a wide range of interpretations, but given the wide range of motivations involved, it is difficult to characterize. There is little doubt that racial antipathy drove many colonizationists, who were eager to whiten the society of free citizens, and thereby reinforce racialized slavery. Even those who saw it as an instrument of emancipation were happy to see a whiter society result, although there were exceptions, which Edward Coles would later demonstrate. Mercer approached a gradual removal of slavery from a desire to eventually promote a free labor economy without a large restive underclass. Like his ally Henry Clay, he hoped to promote economic modernization, and like other National Republicans he saw federal action as necessary to facilitate it. His conservative social inclinations drove his advocacy, but a common purpose allowed an alliance with such people as the Rev. Robert Finley, the Presbyterian minister from Princeton who had antislavery proclivities and has often been cited as the principal founder of the American Colonization Society. Finley did lead the organization in
the early years, but it was Mercer who gained the support of the federal government in the project and was an early instigator, including in Virginia.\(^{30}\)

Mercer’s actions, like his earlier antagonisms with Virginia Republicans, would stir dissent from states’ rights advocates such as Ritchie who otherwise were friendly to the concept of colonization if done privately or by the state. Like many other high-profile colonizationists, Mercer was not open with the idea that the end of slavery was the ideal goal. Given the increasing opprobrium that could be heaped upon abolitionists, it was not surprising that colonizationists with antislavery feelings would be more circumspect. The deep distrust shown by many proslavery citizens toward colonizationists, especially those in the Deep South, indicates that their activities could at least be perceived as unfriendly to slavery. Mercer himself asserted that the Society “recognized the constitutional and legitimate existence of slavery,” but South Carolinians such as Senator Robert Hayne were unconvinced, warning that the removal of free persons of color “was but the first step toward another great object.”\(^{31}\) The treatment given to the Rev. Adam Empie, the president of William and Mary in the late 1820s, showed that Virginians involved in the Society could be suspect on slavery even before the proslavery surge of the 1830s.\(^{32}\)

After Mercer had moved to Congress from the House of Delegates, he learned about the secret exchange between President Jefferson and Governor Monroe after Gabriel’s Rebellion in which the two considered relocating the conspirators outside the U.S. The secrecy of the


\(^{31}\) Ibid., 147-151. Egerton contends that the American Colonization Society “was indeed an antislavery organization, although not an abolitionist one.” Eric Burin’s *Slavery and the Peculiar Solution: A History of the American Colonization Society* (Gainesville: University of Florida Press, 2005) also explores the destabilizing aspect of colonization on slavery.

\(^{32}\) See ch. 2 above, p. 66.
correspondence reflected its politically sensitive nature, but it also demonstrates that Jefferson and Monroe saw the project as a viable one. Mercer then applied the idea to a vexing problem that followed the abolition of the slave trade. In Georgia, state law required that illegally transported slaves would be taken and sold into slavery by the state. Mercer’s Slave Trade Act provided federal funds for an African agent and transport cost for illegal captives to be resettled in Africa. Though narrow in scope, in practice President Monroe’s agents used it to support larger colonization projects, including the unplanned acquisition of Liberia and further settlement there of others who were not illegally captured. Monroe’s tacit interest in promoting Liberia as a colony pointed to the potential of a wider colonization project that could support emancipation.\textsuperscript{33}

Although it had been relatively quiet on slavery before 1819, the \textit{Enquirer} had occasionally reprinted news about the American Colonization Society beginning in 1817, and in 1819 it reprinted a letter from the president of Haiti inviting colonization there.\textsuperscript{34} Also in 1819, Ritchie published a story on the foundation of the Virginia branch of the Society in Fredericksburg, which was launched by Mercer with assistance from Judge William Brockenbrough. Meeting in the Episcopal Church, the leaders of the “humane scheme” were “happy to learn” that they had corrected the “wrong impressions” of the free African Americans in attendance and gained their “favorable feelings.”\textsuperscript{35} If that was true, it did not represent the feelings of many African Americans who would have preferred fuller freedom in America, but it did present a seemingly hopeful beginning for the Society in Virginia. It also points to an antislavery wing of the predominantly elite Episcopal Church even after Bishop Madison’s death and the presence of emancipation-friendly sentiment among other Virginia colonizationists. The

\textsuperscript{33} Egerton, 149.

\textsuperscript{34} \textit{Richmond Enquirer}, Nov. 23, 1819, p.4.

\textsuperscript{35} \textit{Richmond Enquirer}, June 8, 1819, p.4.
Bishop of Virginia William Meade, who was first ordained a minister by Bishop Madison, actively supported the ACS and delivered an Independence Day oration in Winchester in 1825 that asserted a bolder vision for colonization. The Society, he stated, hoped to convince the state legislatures and the U.S. Congress that there was “a way by which, with safety and advantage, they may henceforth encourage and facilitate that system of emancipation which they have almost forbidden.” They hoped “greatly to lessen, if not entirely remove, at some distant day, one of the most tremendous evils that ever overhung a guilty nation upon earth.”  

Judge Brockenbrough, who had sympathized with slaves’ desire for liberty in 1800, would take on an ameliorative role toward slavery as a Virginia Supreme Court justice. The practice of amelioration was not necessarily antislavery and could even serve to justify the institution, although in Brockenbrough’s case it might reflect the legacy of antislavery sentiment in his youth. He offered the lone dissent in the 1827 case *Commonwealth v. Turner*, which overturned an indictment for cruelty toward a slave. The majority ruled in favor of the master’s authority, despite the brutality involved, since they found that the law offered no means of controlling it as written. Brockenbrough did not deny the legal status of property in a slave, but he contended that there were countervailing rights as a person. Comparing the legal protection of a slave to that of other dependents such as servants, children, or pupils, he wrote, “I apprehend, his person was protected from all unnecessary, cruel, and inhuman punishments. I see no incompatibility between this degree of protection, and the full enjoyment of the right of property.” The law could offer this paternalistic remedy, but he also argued that there was a pragmatic interest to recognizing legal protections. He asked, “with respect to the slaves, whilst kindness and humane treatment are calculated to render them contented and happy, is there no

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danger that oppression and tyranny, against which there is no redress, may drive them to despair?” Three years later, Brockenbrough’s cousin Thomas Ruffin would take a definitively different path and rule in the widely cited North Carolina decision *State v. Mann* that the authority of masters was absolute, setting further precedent against Brockenbrough’s argument.37 Brockenbrough’s dissent did not fundamentally challenge slavery, but it was the only voice in the upper judiciary willing to ascribe humanity to Virginia’s enslaved people.

For those who sought anything more than amelioration, the colonization movement would remain the primary locus of liberal reform for slavery in Virginia in the 1820s. Brigadier-General John Hartwell Cocke took the antislavery sentiment of his youth and translated it into action more than most Virginia slaveholders would in the nineteenth century. The death of his wife in 1816 led to a religious conversion that would certainly contribute to his fervency, but given the continuity of his feelings on slavery, the change did not remove him from the trends of elite antislavery activity rooted in part in the liberal Enlightenment. Cocke’s views on effecting emancipation show the shortcomings of the elite’s fixation on colonization and their failure to grapple with the democratization of slaveholding. General Cocke did not hold public office, although his rank and close personal friendship and political alliance with Joseph Cabell on education and internal improvement made him an influential citizen and a valuable observer of slaveholding society.

Mercer wrote to Cocke in 1818 to notify him of his appointment as a vice president of the ACS, and to describe how he came to be interested in Jefferson’s ideas on colonization. In 1816, when a fellow delegate in an intoxicated state spoke of the secret sessions of the legislature held...
after Gabriel’s Rebellion, Mercer expressed great interest in learning about the resolutions to inquire for federal help “in procuring a fit situation, in which, to colonize our slaves.” Mercer stated that the idea was not completely new to him, as he was aware of Jefferson’s “eloquently advocated” ideas on the matter in Notes on Virginia, but Mercer took the knowledge of the legislature’s earlier debates as an inspiration to seek others in organizing colonization and seeking federal aid.\(^{38}\) Cocke would come to embrace the colonization movement not just as a distant remedy for slavery but for his own means of effecting the emancipation of his slaves. A year earlier when he feared imminent death, he wrote a will explaining why he was not manumitting his slaves then. He believed, as did Jefferson, that “indiscriminate Emancipation” led to ill effects for many of those not prepared for freedom, and the “views of humanity regarding only the Slaves themselves, forbid the practice.”\(^{39}\) This kind of paternalism led the General to begin educating favored slaves and grooming those he felt would most benefit for eventual manumission and settlement in Liberia. He deeply believed that they would benefit from this type of liberation, although the choice remained his rather than theirs.

The final stages of this project in Liberia occurred in the 1840s and 50s, a moribund remnant of the peak of Virginia’s antislavery movement in 1832. In August 1831, the Turner Rebellion brought a terror to the slaveholding regions much greater than the failed plot in Gabriel’s Rebellion or the distant Haitian Revolution. The event instigated the final hearing for a proposal of emancipation in the legislature, and it caused a rupture for the complacency enjoyed by elites with antislavery sentiments. General Cocke had been cultivating his chosen remedy

\(^{38}\) Mercer to J.H. Cocke, April 19, 1818, “Cocke Family Papers,” UVA.

already, but others such as Ritchie and Cabell were confronted with the need to respond. Cocke made no secret of his analysis to his close friend Cabell or to his other correspondents.

In an analysis Cocke wrote for the Rev. R.R. Gurley of the ACS soon after the rebellion, he explained what he saw as the problems of colonization and why emancipation sentiment had faltered in Virginia. Gurley had sent him a suggestion that the funds of the ACS should be spent only for transporting “emancipated Slaves” rather than already free people who could pay their own way. Cocke was agreeable to the promotion of emancipation, and he wrote extensively about what he saw as the hopes and dilemmas of the project. He distinguished between the domestic slaves with whom he believed he had a familial relationship and the field workers who lived in a state of “abject ignorance” such that they could not count to twenty. The relevance of the distinction was that Cocke believed only the domestics and skilled mechanics possessed the skills and discipline needed to sustain themselves independently. An inconvenient fact for his project, however, was that there was “a very general unwillingness amongst our House servants to accept their Freedom on the condition of going to Africa.”40 It would be one of the sad ironies of Cocke’s colonization project that the individuals he most liked were those he goaded to leave America, but such was the conceit of racial paternalism.

Nonetheless, Cocke’s analysis of the socioeconomic changes in Virginia in his lifetime led him to believe that large slaveholders such as himself offered the best hope for creating a “liberal scheme” of emancipation. He argued, however, that the numbers of such estates had declined since the Revolution due the abolition of entail and the steady march of bankruptcies and emigration. The rising middle class of slaveholders were those whose self-interest in slave

40 JH Cocke to ?, Sept. 23, 1831, “Cocke Family Papers,” UVA. The recipient was unnamed, but it was likely Gurley, who had asked for Cocke’s thoughts on emancipation and colonization on Sept. 14.
profits could least be overcome by liberal plans of removal. Those who did not own fertile land
but who owned a few slaves employed in profitable pursuits, especially in towns, were most
resistant to losing their profit source. The great landowners, Cocke believed, could afford to give
up their slave contingents without sacrificing their ultimate profitability. Only to the west of the
Blue Ridge could all classes more easily unite in a plan of emancipation. The rebellion had
created a new opportunity, however, and Cocke observed, “It may be safely assumed that if
means could be devised of paying, at moderate valuation for all the slaves in Virginia, and
removing them to Africa, and placing them there in circumstances of tolerable comfort, that the
owners who would acquiesce in the measure would be a thousand to one who would oppose it.”
This was the ideal outcome, but “the impossibility of bringing the Community to such a test
practically renders it nugatory to introduce such a speculation, except as it may serve to show the
change which has taken place in the public mind on the subject of Slavery.” Such a sudden and
complete process was only a theoretical possibility rather than a practical one, but it suggested to
him the realistic possibility of a gradual emancipation and colonization act passing the
legislature. Like George Tucker in 1801, Cocke looked toward the state to provide leadership,
but at that point their “leading politicians” had offered “but two examples of disinterested
patriotism” on the subject, so private ventures would need to continue as well.41

The subsequent debates in 1832 on a gradual emancipation act would bolster some of
Cocke’s analysis, but many of the slaveowners’ delegates would be more resistant to the
challenge than Cocke surmised. Still, there were other voices from within the elite class that
were willing to explore the question again. Thomas Ritchie, as one of the foremost political
voices in the state, was one person who represented the apparent shift in the public mind in 1831.

41 Ibid.
In the 1820s, the *Enquirer’s* coverage of slavery still maintained the sectional defensiveness and attachment to states’ rights that it had shown in the Missouri Crisis, although there were still exceptions. In 1826, the paper announced the foundation of the Kosciusko School in New Jersey, which was the bequest of Thaddeus Kosciusko for “liberating enslaved Africans” and providing them an education with “the decided approbation of Mr. Jefferson.” Only months later, Ritchie took a different tone and attacked the *National Intelligencer’s* praise of federal appropriations for colonization as unconstitutional, while agreeing with their disdain for the Presbyterian Synod of Ohio’s denunciation of slavery. Ritchie complained of the “Congress of Visionaries” taking up slavery debates, among other intrusions into states’ rights. He wrote, “Let us look to our own maternal institutions for help and countenance, in whatever relates to our internal prosperity, rather than to any other quarter – at least until the authority to interfere has been conferred in the constitutional way by the parties to the compact.” He still argued for Virginia undertaking its own efforts in education and internal improvements. In 1831 he would similarly argue that Virginia should find its own way to end slavery.

The *Enquirer’s* coverage of the Turner Revolt and the subsequent emancipation debate revealed both fear and optimism for a potential solution. Ritchie was as willing to blame northern abolitionists as any proslavery reactionary. An article reprinted from the Albany, New York, *Argus*, quoted an “incendiary publication” that purported to be a white man justifying the Turner Revolt. Denouncing such publications, the *Argus* wrote, “The gradual abolition of slavery, and the melioration of the condition of its objects, is the exemplary labor of the philanthropist: The excitement of that part of our Southern population which, under the colonial policy and the acts of antecedent generations, are subjected to servitude cannot be called philanthropy, since it

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42 Richmond Enquirer, Sept. 5, 1826, p.4.
43 Richmond Enquirer, Nov. 28, 1826, p.3.
results in violence and is even more injurious to people who are urged to rebel.” Governor John Floyd considered asking the Governor of Massachusetts for the extradition of William Lloyd Garrison and Isaac Knapp, and he privately groused that the Union would be in danger if such “conspirators” were not countered. His approach was similar to Ritchie’s in that it was sectionalist but also reformist. He resolved privately that the removal of slavery was the best solution, writing in his journal, “Before I leave this Government, I will have contrived to have a law passed gradually abolishing slavery in this State, or at all events to begin the work by prohibiting slavery on the West side of the Blue Ridge Mountains.” Soon thereafter he wrote, “I am preparing a message to the General Assembly. It will be ultra States Rights.” The governor would ultimately be more circumspect in his public advocacy of the emancipation project, although he did quietly signal his support to western legislators. Floyd supported internal improvement and preferred a free labor system, but he was alarmed by the strident proslavery resistance to the debate.

Unlike the governor, Ritchie took a public stand, but he faced a backlash that he was not willing or able to resist. His positions were not extreme, but for vociferous defenders of slavery, no public questioning could be broached. Ritchie celebrated the debate, exclaiming, “The seals are broken, which have been put for fifty years upon the most delicate and difficult subject of state concernment.” He did not stand alone in this moment, as he reprinted parts of editorials from both the Norfolk Herald and the Charlottesville Advocate that called for legislative action to effect the “gradual, systematic and discreet means to reduce the mass of this evil.” In the midst of increasing rancor, as he had done before, he lauded the freedom of the press in

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44 Richmond Enquirer, Oct. 18, 1831, p.2.
47 Richmond Enquirer, Jan. 19, 1832, p.3.
addressing a difficult issue, and he commended the emancipation debate to “a cool jury of our
countrymen, and fearlessly abide the issue.”

The *Enquirer* published a large volume of the legislative debates and letters that reflected
all sides of the issue, but even-handedness was not sufficient for reactionary interests, especially
when the editor himself took the opposite side. Benjamin Watkins Leigh, a college friend of
Cabell and Cocke, published his proslavery letter of “Appomattox” in the *Enquirer*, which
established his burgeoning role as a proslavery theorist. Leigh’s letter proved Ritchie’s almost
unlimited willingness to print dissenting views, since Leigh urged readers to cancel their
subscriptions to newspapers that fomented social instability through criticizing slavery, an
obvious attack on the *Enquirer* itself. Ritchie’s preface mocked Leigh’s use of the “liberty of the
Press for the purpose of extinguishing that liberty. He calls upon us to lend him a stick
wherewith to break our own heads.” In the same issue, Ritchie published a letter from a self-
identified slaveowner from tobacco country who praised the *Enquirer* for drawing the
opprobrium of proslavery reaction in opening the emancipation debate. Even if some
slaveowning readers were happy that the *Enquirer* fomented the debate, it was a risky position,
and Ritchie’s apostasy led one South Carolina fire-eater to denounce him as an “apostate traitor,
the recreant and faithless sentinel, the cringing parasite, the hollow-hearted, hypocritical
advocate of Southern interests… who has scattered the firebrands of destruction everywhere in
the South.” Once the legislative session ended and emancipation failed, Ritchie bowed to the
pressure and assumed a permanent silence on the reform of slavery.

48 *Richmond Enquirer*, Feb. 4, 1832, p.3.
49 Ibid.
A degree of silence would be at stake in Joseph Cabell’s involvement as well. General Cocke’s friend Cabell was at the heart of the debate by being in the House of Delegates during the emancipation debate session. Cabell had left the Senate after a long career looking to focus more on administering the James River Canal and the University of Virginia, but he decided to return to the legislature to advocate for a renewed push on the canal, converting it to a state-supported joint-stock company.\textsuperscript{51} He did not anticipate the upheaval over slavery that would come to dominate the session, but Cocke would not let him forget to consider a new path on slavery. Cabell’s reaction was muted, although he did appear to consider the possibilities open at the time. Cabell’s comparative reticence toward his good friend on the issue suggested a deep ambivalence about taking action, even though he offered indications that he thought that it was reasonable and comported with Jefferson’s legacy.

In October 1831, after learning of the extent of the Turner Rebellion, Cabell wrote to Cocke that he saw no activity among his slaves that should cause uneasiness, although he feared that if another insurrectionary incident occurred in their vicinity it could make their situation “perilous.” Security measures such as substituting white ferrymen for black ferrymen should be done when possible in order to stymie communication.\textsuperscript{52} Cocke responded and took the opportunity to urge consideration of the type of bill that would appear in the House of Delegates. He included a circular petition that he found in Richmond and was being “favorably received” in the surrounding counties, and it called for a program for the removal of slavery. It began by asserting the right of citizens to speak on the subject, even though there had long been “circumspection in the exercise of this right” in order to preserve the peace. The petitioners reviewed census data showing the relative increase of the black population, and they asserted

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\textsuperscript{51} Cabell to J.H. Cocke, Aug. 30, 1831, “Cabell Family Papers,” UVA.
\textsuperscript{52} Cabell to J.H. Cocke, Oct. 4, 1831, “Cabell Family Papers,” UVA.
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that voluntary manumissions would surrender numerous slaves if there were a means to colonize them in freedom elsewhere. Cocke elaborated on his hope for a slave tax of one dollar per capita in order to finance the colonization of more than their yearly population increase. It would stop the growth of the institution, and it would prepare an asylum “for when the public sentiment shall be prepared for general emancipation.” Cocke saw the project as keeping with Cabell’s original mission, saying, “I hope you will take up this great subject as well as that of internal improvement.” ⁵³

Cabell’s notes indicate that he parsed and considered the proposals before the legislature. He did not record his opinions on all of the particular questions, but he did note the questions at stake. Among them were “the obstacle from the right of property, the expense to be encountered… the policy of their removal,” and “the necessity of applying all our disposable funds to effect this object.” In a brief sketch on the invasion of property rights, he noted that the legislature had had the legal right to take property with indemnity for 200 years, and it was sanctioned by judicial actions and the federal and state constitutions. The power of the state to buy slaves post-nati fit with the power to regulate the descent of property as the state had done by banning entail. He kept a tally of petitions based on the particular remedies they advocated, ranging from only removing already free people to plans for gradual emancipation. What Cabell most emphasized in his notes was a letter that Jefferson had written on the subject in 1824. Quoting the letter, he wrote, “Their estimated value as property, in the first place (for actual property has been lawfully vested in that form, and who can lawfully take it from the possessors?) at an average of two hundred dollars each, young and old, would amount to six

⁵³ J.H. Cocke to Cabell, Oct. 29, 1831, “Cabell Family Papers,” UVA. The petition in the Cabell Papers Box 23 entitled “To the General Assembly of the Commonwealth of Virginia, the Memorial of the undersigned citizens of the County of ___ most respectfully showeth” is not labeled as coming from Cocke, but its content fits his description.
hundred millions of dollars, which must be paid or lost by some body.” The important conclusion followed, however: “After detailing his plan Mr. Jefferson says, ‘In this way no violation of private right is proposed.’” [emphasis original] Jefferson had proposed limiting the colonization process to those emancipated after birth, which he thought could be done through “voluntary surrenders,” the funding of which he concluded “would not amount to more, annually, than half our present direct taxes.” For Cabell, Jefferson’s approbation carried considerable weight.54

But despite Cabell’s favorable analysis, in the midst of the debates in early 1832, General Cocke noted a disagreement with Cabell on the subject. Since they had recently met in person, Cocke only referred to the “wide difference of opinion between us.” Unfortunately, neither ever wrote about the basis of the disagreement, but given the discrepancy between Cabell’s notes and his actions in the legislature, the basis of the disagreement might have been on the urgency or political expediency of acting in the present. Cocke also pointed to this possibility in saying that he regarded “the late public discussion of the question of future emancipation as decisive of the affirmative of the matter.”55 Two weeks later he praised the compromise plan being sought by General William Brodnax, who “has demonstrated the practicability at an expense absolutely insignificant” by beginning only with the annual increase of the population, which Cabell himself had considered. Cocke critiqued a key “error” in Brodnax’s approach, however, in conceding broad property rights in slaves. Cocke believed that the offspring of slaves should “be given up without compensation,” since the public good required it. He also lamented the other political ideologies he saw as standing in the way, saying that “we can’t get along in this great

55 J.H. Cocke to Cabell, Jan. 31, 1832, “Cabell Family Papers,” UVA.
work, with the Straight-jacket which our State rights Gentlemen have put upon us. We must have the aid and the Genl. Government.”

It was on this latter point that Cabell was willing to go on the record in the legislature. He presented a petition from the voters of Nelson County calling for an amendment to the federal constitution to allow appropriations for colonization, including the power “to purchase slaves and transport them likewise.” Given Cabell’s aversion to pandering to his voters, it is reasonable to infer his concurrence. It also comportted with Jefferson’s support for such an amendment in his 1824 emancipation letter that Cabell had studied. On the actual votes on the legislation before the House, however, Cabell voted no. The exact reasons can only be conjectured, but it was not likely due to proslavery ideology or an extreme jealousy of abstract property rights. He certainly did not share the fervor of his friend General Cocke, but Cocke’s goading and the legacy offered by his political mentor Jefferson both point to a failure of will or a deep wave of ambivalence in the face of heated opposition and his own self-interest. With his beloved canal project on the line in the same session, Cabell was ultimately not interested in fighting the emancipation battle, and he succumbed to the same passivity that Jefferson had lamented in his own generation.

Although General Cocke would continue his colonization effort privately for decades to come, the battle on the state level was largely over in 1832, and some who disdained slavery felt the need to look for alternatives elsewhere. Garritt Minor soon thereafter wrote to Cabell, an “old friend,” to say that he was considering moving to western Virginia because “this part of the state is declining. The Transalleghanies are rising. The black population (curse the firebrands of your

56 J.H. Cocke to Cabell, Feb. 14, 1832, Cabell Family Papers,” UVA.
58 Ibid., 109-110.
house) will forever be a bar to the improvement of lower Va.” Minor offered a gloomy outlook that mixed a range of current issues: “I never did expect to see such times as have fallen lately on us. The reckless discussions in your body about our slaves & free negroes, the nullifying & bullying course of some… the pertinacious adherence to the vile tariff & American system… the nonchalance with which the dissolution of the Union is spoken of; and many other monstrous opinions & acts present an awful prospect. We are old & may not live to see much evil. I fear nay I know they will come!” Opposing both the state’s rights firebrands and the Clay nationalists made for an inconsistent ideological critique, but his comments on slavery pointed to a feeling of helplessness on the future. The debate was “reckless,” but at the same time, slavery was destroying the prospects he saw for his children in eastern Virginia.\textsuperscript{59}

The emergence and eventual triumph of a well-articulated theory of proslavery ideology was one of the negative outcomes of the emancipation debate. General Cocke was perceptive in his observation that the theory of property was being too little challenged among their class. Thomas Jefferson Randolph’s plan foundered in part because its opponents seized upon a conception of property rights that required compensation for any incursion upon property, even unborn children of slaves who would come to be property in the future. To be deprived of the profit from them was an unjust deprivation. Benjamin Watkins Leigh took the lead with Thomas Dew in formulating a positive defense of slave property rights as a foundation of republican virtue.\textsuperscript{60} The vociferousness of their defense and its easy appeal to slaveowners’ self-interest overtook the more tepid pleas of antislavery colonizationists and muted scruples of Jefferson’s protégés.

\textsuperscript{59} Garritt Minor to Cabell, March 9, 1832, “Cabell Family Papers,” UVA.
\textsuperscript{60} An extensive analysis of this theory appears in Christopher M. Curtis, Jefferson’s Freeholders and the Politics of Ownership in the Old Dominion (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 134-153. Alison Freehling’s Drift Toward Dissolution: The Virginia Slavery Debate of 1831-1832 (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1982) offers a thorough account of the debates and legislative proposals during the session.
By 1836 Leigh openly disavowed the legacy of the Founders on slavery, including his own teacher, St. George Tucker. In a speech to the U.S. Senate against antislavery petitions, he reflected upon the recent debates in Virginia and essentially dismissed the plans of Tucker and Jefferson as ill-founded. Leigh asserted that the questioning of slavery was settled: “This disposition continued, until the impracticability of effecting a general emancipation, with incalculable mischief to the master race, and danger of utter destruction to the other, and the evils consequent on partial emancipations, became too obvious.” The famous plans that were cited offered no binding precedent: “Mr. Jefferson suggested a scheme; and the gentleman under whose care and direction my mind was instituted in the science of the law – I mean the elder Judge Tucker – proposed another plan for the purpose… but I think the authors were chiefly intent on devising a feasible plan, and did not bestow much attention to the question, by what authority such a plan, if practicable in itself and expedient, was to be accomplished?”61 It was true that Tucker himself had begun to doubt the practicality of his emancipation plan later in life, but to deny both Tucker’s and Jefferson’s authority to propose a change was truly a repudiation of Bishop Madison’s version of the Enlightenment in which Leigh was educated.62

As the humanitarian side of antislavery sentiment diminished relative to the self-interest side of promoting white economic development, it lost its moral counterweight to what had always been the self-interest of proslavery masters. The immediacy of profit from one’s human property was an easier appeal to self-interest than the abstraction of a future free labor transformation. Colonizationists for the most part stood on the same philosophical ground as proslavery advocates such as Leigh when they accepted a racial hierarchy and when they

conceded extensive property rights in people. Some like General Cocke, who believed deeply that his colonization schemes were humane means of effecting emancipation, were sincere in seeing a moral cause behind their work, but its premises were deeply flawed. The fact that some Virginians like “Joseph” were willing to live in a biracial, if unequal, society indicates a slim counterfactual possibility that beginning a process of colonization could have eventually eased the way into a more realistic gradual emancipation at home, even if such an outcome would have been inadvertent. But after 1832, the defensiveness over public criticism of slavery led to the virtual end of free speech on the subject, and people such as General Cocke tended to pursue their ventures privately. In 1840 he increased his commitment by establishing a second plantation in Alabama called Hopewell in order raise funds to send more of his slaves to Liberia, but that project was not where the future lay. The elite Virginian who was most willing to see African Americans live in freedom on a more equal footing with white citizens was Edward Coles, but he felt the need to leave Virginia in order to seek it.
Chapter 6

“The Black Race Were Not Inferior”
Edward Coles and the Southern Enlightenment

The career and accomplishments of Edward Coles represented both the highest potential and the practical limits of elite Enlightenment reform in a slave society, especially within the circle of Virginia’s Republican reformers. Coles was instrumental in one of the pivotal moments in curtailing the spread of slavery in the United States, and unlike many in the emerging religious abolitionist movement in the nineteenth century, he maintained an aversion to slavery rooted in a relatively secular worldview derived from his liberal Enlightenment education at William and Mary. Coles saw himself as a protégé of Jefferson and Madison, perpetuating what he saw as their legacies not only on slavery, but on building an enlightened republican society. One antislavery publisher in Illinois who was originally from New Hampshire complained of Coles’ enduring attachments to the Virginia Republicans. Coles possessed “an inveterate and unconquerable prejudice against ‘Yankees,’” and in politics, “‘the South’ was all in all to him. The Richmond Enquirer was his Bible, and Father Ritchie his oracle. Southern statesmen only, appeared to be in his view as having a right to the management and control of public affairs.” Reflecting that fact were his endless references to his service as secretary for President Madison.¹ Coles saw no contradiction between this southern orientation and a strong hostility to slavery. The first inspiration for his reform ideas before he knew Jefferson and Madison,

¹ Hooper Warren, May 3, 1855, in Clarence Alvord, Governor Edward Coles (Springfield: Trustees of the Illinois State Historical Library, 1920) 339. The chapter title “The Black Race Were Not Inferior” comes from Edward Coles “Sketch on Emancipation,” “Coles Family Papers,” HSP. Coles’ motives can be called secular because he only had two substantial religious references in his collection of literature, one of which was a clipping praising Benjamin Franklin’s dictum that religion was useful for public virtue; the other of which mocked the pretense of some New England Protestants to exclusive piety. Coles Scrapbook 1, “Coles Family Papers,” HSP.
however, was his education under Bishop Madison. Coles gave credit for his antislavery principles to the teachings of Bishop Madison, and Coles’ subsequent action on those principles demonstrated that the antislavery thought emanating from William and Mary carried a seed that could grow into real action on that most fundamental question.

In order to act upon his principles in his own life by freeing his slaves, Coles felt compelled to leave Virginia, but he did not relinquish his voice there. In 1832, Thomas Jefferson Randolph’s emancipation bill was derived almost entirely from a proposal sent to him by Coles. Coles maintained what he saw as a pragmatic interest in the colonization movement, but at the same time he sought to expand legal protection for free African Americans and saw race as a less divisive force than did his peers. Coming from a paternalistic political culture, he never became entirely comfortable with frontier democracy, and after a brief political career advocating not only antislavery policies but other wide-ranging public works like his Virginia contemporaries, he withdrew to private life, although leaving a lasting legacy. Understanding his career as an Enlightenment reformer requires examining his other political priorities as well, which included protecting free African Americans, establishing public education and internal improvements, stabilizing the state banking system, and making a more humane criminal justice system.

**The Limits of Antislavery Sentiment in Virginia**

By the time Coles liberated his slaves in Illinois in 1819, he could have cited any number of inspirations, such as his experience on the plantation or the religious conversions that had inspired some manumissions in his parents’ generation, but it was his education with Bishop Madison that Coles identified as the decisive factor. He wrote in an autobiography after retiring from politics that reading political essays in Madison’s course was where his “attention first
awakened to the state of master and slave.” Coles, like virtually everyone who noted their feelings about Bishop Madison, expressed nothing but admiration for him. He was “not less distinguished for his extensive learning & profound knowledge of all subjects, than for the goodness & purity of his character.” His “peculiar meekness of deportment, & philanthropic feeling,” along with the fact that Coles’ family had long known the Bishop, were the qualities that enabled the younger Coles to feel “emboldened” to press him on more difficult philosophical questions, both in class and privately. Bishop Madison’s liberal principles and practical evasions would comport closely with the pattern that Jefferson himself would demonstrate on slavery.

When Coles asked about the rights of slaves during Madison’s lecture on the rights of man, Madison showed a “peculiarly embarrassed manner,” and he “frankly admitted it could not be rightfully done, & that slavery was a state of things that could not be justified on principle, & could only be tolerated in our country, by our finding it in existence, & the difficulty of getting rid of it.” Madison’s discomfort in the subject likely reflected the logical pointedness of Coles’ questions about the need for immediate action. Given the history of antislavery thought at the College, it was not due to the subject itself being entirely unusual. Coles, who told “a few” of his “brother Collegians” about his emancipation plans, would ask Bishop Madison both in class and privately, “was it right to do what we believed to be wrong, because our forefathers did it?” He further pressed the point that expediency was not a sufficient reason for contradicting one’s own highest principles, and in this case, finding a way of “getting rid of our slaves” would be easier than getting rid of the “King of our forefathers” had been. Madison’s response was that he concurred with Coles “in theory,” but he felt he could not offer manumission to his slaves. Instead, the Bishop said that he “was anxious… for the Legislature to make provision for the
abolition of Slavery in the State.”

It was similar to one of the evasions that Jefferson would use to Coles himself years later. An individual granting liberty was not preferable without a collective solution. Slavery should be removed, but it existed in the law, and in a republic the law needed to be changed in such a way as to protect from societal dislocations, whether real or imagined. In this common formulation, slavery and slaves both had to leave, although Coles’ phrasing of “getting rid of our slaves” did not reflect his own supportive treatment of free African Americans, another area in which he exceeded his preceptors.

Bishop Madison’s refusal to act unilaterally was not unusual, and the reaction of Coles’ family showed other reasons why someone with a disposition to free his slaves might avoid doing so without a larger societal consensus. Coles resolved that he would not own slaves while at William and Mary, but it was not an immediate problem while his father was alive. Coles kept secret from his father his intention to free the slaves that would be bequeathed to him. After Coles inherited his share of the family’s human property, he made known to his mother and siblings that he intended to free them. They were universally opposed, and offered to him “all the usual arguments in favor of slavery, & against individual action being beneficial to the slave.” Their opposition did not indicate that they took personal offense. Instead, they suggested that had he made known his aversion to owning slaves, his father would have substituted other property to compensate him, thus preserving his full share of the wealth. Coles was willing to deny this pecuniary gain, however, because had he done so, he would have effectively been selling his slaves back to the family. Liberation was the only outcome he sought.

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2 Edward Coles, “Autobiography,” “Coles Family Papers,” HSP. The comment about the “brother Collegians” was in Coles’ “Sketch of the principle circumstances connected with the Emancipation,” “Coles Family Papers,” HSP.
His family posed other difficult questions that would ultimately explain his decision to leave Virginia. Without another profession, he would still need to rely upon the produce of a farm to maintain the lifestyle of a gentleman. Furthermore, both he and his slaves faced legal impediments in effecting any manumission plans. The freedpeople would be forced to leave Virginia, which he did not want them to do without sustenance. He considered freeing them in his will and paying them like employees during his life, but some among his family and the neighbors told him that such a practice would render him “odious,” because giving such benefits to slaves amongst others without them would inspire jealousy and resentment that was detrimental to social order. Finding land in a free state on which they could all start anew would be the necessary solution. Coles’ brothers asked him to keep his intentions secret from his slaves so that it would not spread discontent, and he did so. Before he could carry out his plan, he sought to provide “ameliorating alterations in their treatment,” but he did not foresee how many years of public service would intervene before he could finally arrange his journey of emancipation.³

His call to public service came through his family connections, which led him to associations with Jefferson, Madison, and Monroe. Coles was the younger brother of Isaac Coles, Joseph Cabell’s college friend, and succeeded him as personal secretary for President Madison in 1809. The younger Coles had been planning his sojourn west when his brother secured him the position with Madison. Coles expressed hesitation, but he accepted the appointment at the urging of James Monroe, who suggested that accepting the position would help him prepare for his move to a free state, especially in terms of becoming a politically active citizen. Monroe was aware of Coles’ intentions, because he told Monroe of his desire to leave

³ Ibid.
Virginia and its “peculiar state of society,” but Monroe advised him first to “associate with non-slave holding people,” who would be like those in the Northwest Territory and “whose habits & customs were so different” from what he had been accustomed. Coles could learn from this exposure as well as gain political connections to influential people from the region. Monroe’s apparent approval of Coles’ emancipation plan made him more sympathetic than Coles’ family, and their relationship would later lead President Monroe to offer Coles a convenient federal patronage office in Illinois. Monroe’s political advice would also prove prescient, as Coles faced opposition not only from proslavery southerners in Illinois, but also some northern antislavery rivals.

When Coles worked for President Madison, he developed a lifelong friendship with the President and his wife that fulfilled Monroe’s promise that the Madisons would trust him “as a son.” Coles found that he could speak freely with Madison about his principles and the plan to free his slaves, and Madison was open enough that Coles could needle him over the presence of slaves in the federal district. Coles would upon “seeing gangs of Negroes, some in irons, on their way to a southern market” pointedly tell the President that it was fortunate they were not with a visiting foreign minister, and were “thus saved the deep mortification of witnessing such a revolting sight” in a nation that should be more observant of the rights of man. Coles found that Madison “never justified or approved” of slavery and had “sound, pure, & conscientious” principles, although “the force of early impressions, the influence of habit & association, & a certain train of reasoning , which lulled in some degree his conscience, without convincing his

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4 Ibid.
judgement,” caused him to continue holding slaves.⁵ Coles would continue to return to the subject with him for the rest of Madison’s life.

It was while Coles was working with Madison in Washington that he initiated his famous correspondence with Jefferson on the topic of renewing a public stance against slavery. Jefferson responded sympathetically, revealing both his own passivity and his approval of Coles’ principles generally. Although Jefferson’s response was not all he had hoped, Coles nonetheless made public use of the letter in his battle against slavery in Illinois a decade later. Despite the passivity and failures of both Jefferson and Madison on slavery, Coles would strive to claim their legacies for antislavery purposes, a project of which both seemed to approve. Coles’ initial letter to Jefferson even made improving his legacy part of the request. The letter, written in 1814, began in reference to the “subject of such magnitude, & so beset with difficulties,” the “general emancipation of the Slaves of Virginia.” Coles stated his belief that the Founding generation was best suited to devise a plan for “gradual emancipation,” which would be a necessary corollary to their earlier achievements for the “rights of man.” Coles seemed to recognize the immense political difficulty of this project and acknowledged one reason Jefferson might demur: “I hope the fear of failing, at this time, will have no influence in preventing you from employing your pen to eradicate this most degrading feature of British Colonial policy.” Coles tried to reduce the burden he was imposing by asking Jefferson not to personally lead the political movement, but to offer his voice, with an eye especially toward his future legacy. Jefferson’s opinions would be that much more “prized and influential” once he had been “taken from us by the course of nature.” Even if he alone could not solve the problem of slavery in his lifetime, his words would

⁵ Ibid.
continue to offer an “irresistible influence… which will be the creed of your disciples.” Coles himself being one of those disciples, it is likely he envisioned the influence being very meaningful to others in his generation who had read Notes on Virginia and had shown openness to the liberal climate of Williamsburg.

Jefferson’s response was both sympathetic and guarded, fitting into a more ambivalent historical legacy than Coles wanted, but still offering him enough to claim Jefferson for the antislavery side in his own future work. In one sense, Jefferson endorsed Coles’ project by flipping the claim of generational responsibility, positing that Coles’ generation had always been where the most hope had lain, for they had received “their early impressions after the flame of liberty had been kindled in every breast,” although the silence he had witnessed among the young had dampened his hope. But in claiming such, he called upon Coles to remain in Virginia to “come forward in the public councils,” and “become the missionary of this doctrine truly christian.” Of course in this call, Jefferson himself was abdicating the responsibility that Coles sought to impose, saying that his earlier views on the subject, such as those in Notes on Virginia, were already well known. He also revealed his disinterest in facing the intensity of resistance that had always come with the assertion of any antislavery policies. Reflecting on his legislative service before the Revolution, he lamented the “grossest indecorum” that was heaped upon Richard Bland, who proposed extending legal protections to slaves, and who had questioned the right to hold slaves under English law. Jefferson had seconded the motion, but he indicated to Coles that that was a moment in which the indignant resistance of slaveowners stung him sufficiently to dampen his public voice thereafter. At age 71, Jefferson told Coles that “This

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6 Edward Coles to TJ, July 31, 1814, in WMQ 7, no. 2 (1927): 97-98.
enterprise is for the young,” and “It shall have all my prayers, & these are the only weapons of an old man.”

Jefferson praised Coles’ principles, but the more complicated part for his legacy came in the part in which he cautioned Coles on his personal manumission plan. He asked, “are you right in abandoning this property, and your country with it? I think not.” The argument that Coles could better benefit the cause of antislavery in Virginia was the positive side, but the other side was the notion that Coles’ slaves would be better under his ameliorative care than if he would “turn them loose.” Jefferson felt that many freedpeople who had been unprepared for freedom became “pests in society by their idleness, and the depredations to which this leads them.”

Jefferson’s paternalistic attitude was projecting this fear on Coles, who had not written in his initial letter that his plan included establishing his freed slaves on their own farms rather than simply “turning them loose” in the west. Whether this fact would have softened Jefferson’s admonition is unclear, but it reinforced the image of Jefferson’s antislavery ideas being tempered by a level of racial ambivalence to which Coles was less willing to succumb. Coles’ final response poked his much respected elder in much the same way he had done with President Madison near the slave auctions in Washington. Coles again parried the generational responsibility, saying that even Jefferson’s words alone would be a weapon that could be wielded to great effect. He bluntly pointed out that the aged Benjamin Franklin’s final political project was working for abolition in Pennsylvania. Coles also argued that it was the Founders who “are the only persons who have it in their power effectually to arouse & enlighten the public sentiment, which in matters of this kind ought not to be expected to lead, but to be led; nor ought

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it to be wondered at that there should prevail a degree of apathy with the general mass of mankind, where a mere passive principle of right has to contend against the weighty influence of habit & interest.”

Although Coles needled Jefferson on his evasions, he nonetheless was pleased overall by his response, which he showed to President Madison, who suggested that he make copies of the letter for future use. Coles also noted that Jefferson had shown his response to some other “young & talented men,” whom he urged to “‘associate’ & form a ‘phalanx,’ to eradicate, what he called, this ‘mortal reproach to us,’ ‘our present condition of moral and political reprobation.’”

Although Coles did not record the extent to which he was involved in such an “association,” he would gradually begin to take on the role of attempting to enlighten the public himself in the succeeding years. Coles traveled down the Ohio River in 1815 after leaving President Madison’s service in order to find his new home, but events in Russia led Madison to implore Coles to go to Russia on a diplomatic mission. Coles resisted, but after sufficient cajoling, he agreed to help Madison and would use the time learn about Russian serfdom. Finding the condition of serfs to be “infinitely of a milder & less oppressive character” than that of American slaves, Coles published his observations in the *Richmond Enquirer* in 1817, hoping to suggest at least a path of amelioration to Virginia’s slaveholders. His article in the *Enquirer* asserted that “the situation of a Russian vassal is an enviable one when compared with that of the most favored of our slaves.” The serfs had the protection of being bound to the land, which reduced their being subject to trafficking, and the “feelings and usages of the country so completely check the control of master” as to result in a milder type of servitude. The serfs exercised some degree of labor for their own benefit, and their condition was improving “as the

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12 Coles, “Autobiography,” “Coles Family Papers,” HSP.
young nobility in general are more enlightened, and entertain more liberal sentiments than their fathers.” One such sign of more improvements to come was the action of the emperor, who had decreed the “gradual though speedy emancipation” of the vassals of Estonia.¹³ Coles later recalled that his tour convinced him of the superiority of American republicanism because of the rampant poverty and oppression he saw in Europe, but American slavery remained as the greatest blot on the republican project.¹⁴ Although his attack on slavery in the Enquirer was more subtle, he nonetheless hoped to send that message to the figurative “young nobility” of Virginia.

Once Coles returned from Russia, he finally succeeded in arranging his move to Illinois. While visiting in the summer of 1818, he spoke against the effort to allow slavery in the constitutional convention that was then meeting in Kaskaskia, and he acquired the land that would sustain him and his emancipated slaves. When Coles and his entourage boarded the boat on the Ohio River to go west in 1819, he had not told his slaves of his plan. He took care not to tear them away from attachments at home if they chose not to go, offering to find substitutes from his brothers’ slaves. He left two infirm elderly women under the care of his mother in Virginia, but everyone else was “not only willing but anxious to go.”¹⁵ Coles obviously reveled in the memory of the emancipation day years later, recalling the full setting of a “lovely April day” with the “verdant foliage of spring just budding out on its picturesque banks.” It was a “scene both conducive to & in harmony with the finest feelings of our nature,” which made it the ideal time to make his announcement. Calling them together on deck, he “proclaimed in the shortest & fullest manner possible, that they were no longer slaves, but free – free as I was, & were at liberty to proceed with me, or to go ashore at their pleasure.” He then recalled, “The

¹³ Richmond Enquirer, Dec. 13, 1817, p.3.
¹⁵ Coles, “Sketch of Emancipation,” “Coles Family Papers,” HSP.
effect on them was electrical. They stared at me, & at each other, as if doubting the accuracy or reality of what they had heard. In breathless silence they stood before me, unable to utter a word, but with countenances beaming with expression which no words could convey, & which no language can now describe.”

After the truth of Coles’ statement became clear, and after they had recovered from the “intense & unutterable emotion, bathed in tears,” one man named Ralph Crawford told Coles that “he had long known [Coles] was opposed to holding black people as slaves,” and that he expected that Coles would eventually give them their freedom. He did not, however, expect it so soon. That everyone chose to leave Virginia with Coles suggests that along with Crawford they had at least some awareness that they might have a better future in Illinois and could trust Coles’ unstated intentions. Despite Coles’ lifelong involvement with slavery, there was a still a powerful lesson to be learned that day, however. Subsequent conversations revealed to Coles the terror that slavery could impose on people held even by someone as ultimately benevolent as himself. He learned that the expressions of joy were in part relief because someone had told them on the river that Coles’ antislavery feelings might simply mean he planned to be rid of them by selling them down the river to New Orleans. Being sent to permanent banishment in the yet harsher regime of the Deep South was certainly a common occurrence for slaves being sold out of Virginia. It was in this “state of hope and fear” that Coles vindicated their hope on that sunny morning on the Ohio River. No one chose to leave the entourage, and all would avail themselves of Coles’ aid in establishing a new life in Illinois.

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16 Coles, “Autobiography,” “Coles Family Papers,” HSP.
17 Ibid.
Coles and his new neighbors settled in Edwardsville, in Madison County, where Coles gave each family 160 unimproved acres for what he called payment for services rendered. They would need to find employment in Edwardsville or St. Louis to help fund the initial development of their land, but it would constitute a substantial freehold once developed. Coles also offered to employ them when possible to help in this process. The land was not an insignificant grant for Coles, who came from a wealthy family but had received only one-tenth of that wealth, much of which he had just relinquished from human bondage, but one benefit of the move to Illinois was the opportunity to start over on more affordable lands. The new state of Illinois was not as free as the north/south dichotomy would suggest, however, and Coles would find a political mission in attacking the kind of de facto slavery that still existed there. It was one reason that his slaves, if they knew anything of Illinois before leaving Virginia, would have known that the soil of Illinois did not automatically confer freedom. Coles would feel called to exercise exactly the kind of move into the public tribunals that Jefferson had implored him to do in Virginia, and he would eventually face such attacks as the “grossest indecorum” visited upon Richard Bland and others who would challenge slavery in the slave states.

Coles’ views on race indicate a greater level of egalitarianism than most of his white contemporaries. His actions in helping his former slaves establish new lives and then live as his neighbors speak much about his willingness to see African Americans live as free citizens. They were familiar to him, however, and might not necessarily reflect a broader vision of what he would want to become of freed slaves on a larger scale. Coles did not write extensively on what outcome he envisioned for a broad emancipation, and he did support colonization proposals, but

\[18\] Ibid.
one idea he would continue to revisit, including in his correspondence with the retired President Madison, was the fact that his former slaves were proving their industry and good citizenship. He also did not see such a successful exercise of freedom as unique to that small group. Answering the racial concerns of southern whites was one of the greatest problems faced by antislavery reformers, and Coles hoped to reduce racial antipathy as a way to promote antislavery policies and protect the rights of freed people.

Coles did not leave a systematic statement of his racial views, and given the realities of nineteenth-century America, there were probably limits to his sense of racial equality by modern standards, but he did offer clear evidence of a willingness to live in a biracial society. One glimpse of his idea of the natural origin of racial difference appeared in a set of extracts he took from Oliver Goldsmith’s *History of the Earth and Animated Nature*, published in 1774. Comparing the differences among human racial groups to the differences among animal species, Goldsmith wrote, “Of all animals, the differences between mankind are the smallest… nothing in the shape, nothing in the faculties, that shows their coming from different original; the varieties of climate, of nourishment, & custom, are sufficient to produce every change.” Goldsmith speculated on temperature having an effect on changes in skin color and believed that “accidental deformities may become natural ones.”

Goldsmith, in a section that Coles did not include in the extract, did write that white skin was the ideal and original color of man, but this common ancestry combined with the effects of environment did not mean that Africans had innately different characteristics. Although it classified racial differences and could be seen as hinting at environmental determinism, it was more suggestive of cultural distinction and was far from the

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19 “Edward Coles Papers,” PUSC.
emergent proslavery theory of polygenesis, which held that Africans were a separate species from Caucasians. That Coles’ extract focused on the commonalities among humans points to a willingness to prioritize the humane side of Enlightenment thought over its hierarchical taxonomic science.

Coles’ only direct reference to racial characteristics in his autobiography was a comparison of Ralph Crawford, one of his “mulatto” slaves, to a white flatboat pilot who was clearly the inferior character. The white man was “so drunken & worthless” that Coles had to put him ashore and pilot the boat himself. Crawford, by contrast, demonstrated “as much judgement & economy as any one, even of the glorious Saxon race, could have done.”

Coles also had high hopes for the rest of his former slaves, whose good behavior and success he believed would help “promote the universal emancipation of that unfortunate & outraged race of the human family.” The stakes were high, but he told them that they had the ability “to show that the black race were not inferior to the white, and were equally qualified to enjoy all the blessings, and perform all the duties incident to freedom.”

The land that he was granting to each family would, he hoped, not only give them economic sustenance but would also improve their “self esteem & their standing in the estimation of others.” After the emancipation announcement, he took the opportunity to offer “advice,” saying that their behavior would have implications for others whose “masters believed they were incompetent to take care of themselves, & that liberty would be to them a curse rather than blessing.” He was in a sense challenging them to disprove Jefferson’s missive. If the freed people could thrive as yeomen, they would not only gain the self-respect promised by the Jeffersonian ideal, they would make it possible for others to do the same.

21 Coles, “Autobiography,” “Coles Family Papers,” HSP.
22 Coles, “Sketch of Emancipation,” “Coles Family Papers,” HSP.
Madison signaled both approval and a sense of cautious resignation about the high hopes that Coles held about the new settlers. In 1819 shortly after their arrival in Illinois, Madison wrote, “We congratulate you much on the various successes of your western career… You are pursuing, I observe, the true course with your negroes, in order to make their freedom, a fair experiment for their happiness. With the habits of the slave, and without the instruction, the property or the employments of a freeman, the manumitted blacks, instead of deriving advantage from the partial benevolence of their Masters, furnish arguments against the general efforts in their behalf.” Madison was well aware of the effort Coles was making to ensure that the freedpeople began a productive life, but he lamented, “I wish your philanthropy would compleat its object, by changing their colour as well as their legal condition. Without this they seem destined to a privation of that moral rank & those social blessings, which give to freedom more than half its value.”

Self-respect was one thing, but Madison seemed less sanguine than Coles about the respect that could be gained across the color line merely by working as good yeomen. President Monroe did not elaborate on the project but did say, “It will give me sincere satisfaction to be able to promote your views, in any way, that I may be able, taking real interest in your welfare.” His gesture of support was to offer a remunerative appointment to the federal land office in Kaskaskia.

Coles did offer to support his former slaves’ relocation to Liberia if they would choose to go, but none of them ever accepted the offer. Coles demonstrated his willingness to live and work with them as neighbors in Edwardsville, so he was not simply seeking an opportunity to displace them. He instead found it difficult to understand their willingness to remain in a society where the racial prejudice against them seemed so unrelenting. When he would make the offer,

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23 James Madison to Coles, Sept. 3 1819, “Edward Coles Papers,” PUSC.
they indicated that they were “so happy & content where they are, that they seem reluctant to change their situation.” Coles hoped that “with further reflection, and a better understanding of what their condition would be there, compared with what it is here, that they may yet be disposed to emigrate.” It was an overly optimistic view of the comforts that Liberia would actually offer, but he never stopped believing that it would offer a better opportunity to live in greater dignity. In 1844 he still urged Robert Crawford, who had since become a clergyman, to go to Liberia and write about it with the aim of encouraging emigration, but Crawford was still not inclined to give up his farm and church. Coles lamented “the disadvantages & indignities to which they & their posterity would be subjected to in this country, & the advantages they would have, & the ennobling position they would occupy, in a country exclusively their own.”

Even though Coles told them that “the black race were not inferior to the white,” after his political tribulations he seemed to lose confidence that white Americans would ever work to elevate the “degraded” slave population, and by the 1840s he thought that the best opportunity for both races to improve would require living in their own societies.

The analysis of Coles’ racial views must also take into account his political activities, which dominated his residency in Illinois in the 1820s. The de facto presence of slavery and a large, restive proslavery faction in what was ostensibly a free state made the issue of slavery potentially combustible, and Coles saw that as an opportunity to arrest the spread of slavery in America. Coles ran successfully for governor in 1822, gaining a plurality of votes in a four-way race fought on several issues but with slavery as a distinguishing factor among the candidates. With two candidates known as being proslavery, Coles won by only half of a percentage point in part by splitting the proslavery constituency. This was not merely the luck of the long ballot,

26 Coles, “Autobiography,” “Coles Family Papers,” HSP.
however, since Coles’ positions on internal improvement and the state bank also gave him some political advantage across the political divide on the slave question. The future of slavery was not the driving issue in the campaign, although one candidate did propose calling a constitutional convention, which was known to be a specific goal of the proslavery side. Slavery as an issue was relatively dormant in the campaign, but voters knew that its volcanic danger lay just below the surface.27

The Illinois constitution allowed the governor only one term, and Coles was eager to achieve a lasting resolution on slavery while he had the opportunity. In his first address in office he surprised the legislature and the public with the boldness of both his attack on slavery as it still existed in the state, and his extensive proposals for a slate of public works and development. Although there had been latent awareness of slavery in the campaign, Coles ignited a political firestorm that would provoke the proslavery faction to initiate a convention referendum. Although it was a risky move, Coles knew that the proslavery legislative majority was inclined to take such action eventually, and he hoped to use his position to mobilize the public decisively against it. He succeeded, leaving a legacy of national importance.

The words of Coles’ first address to the legislature were direct and unequivocal, even if the tone was not deliberately antagonistic. In it he declared that notwithstanding the provisions of the Northwest Ordinance, “slavery still exists in the State.” He blamed Virginians who had brought their slaves with them, claiming to bring with them their “rights and liberties.” This practice had gone unchallenged despite the intent of the Ordinance. The legislature had a duty to abolish this remnant of slavery, and it also needed to “prevent the kidnapping of free blacks – a

crime… perpetrated with impunity in our State.”

Coles took on slavery directly rather than waiting for the proslavery side to organize and potentially succeed with the momentum on their side. It was a calculated risk, based in the belief that the public as a whole was not as proslavery as their representatives suggested. The legislature had an overwhelming proslavery majority, as was reflected in the vote for the constitutional convention, wherein a 2/3 majority voted for the referendum to call a convention.

Coles used his position as governor to educate the public on the real purpose of the convention, which was to offer a platform for the proslavery side to achieve their single-minded purpose. Although Coles was not always adept at the cultural practices of frontier politics, he did display a level of savvy that succeeded in winning the battle. He complained to Nicholas Biddle about the dangers of antislavery criticism from outside the state, seeing it as counterproductive. Any “dictatorial language” from “leading newspapers in the Atlantic cities” threatened “to arouse the feelings of state pride, and state rights, and that natural love of unrestrained liberty and independence, which is common to our countrymen, and especially to our frontier settlers.”

Coles instead worked to cultivate the antislavery movement entirely within Illinois, which included donating his gubernatorial salary to the cost of publication and buying the Illinois Intelligencer to serve as a counterpoint to the multiple proslavery newspapers. Coles wrote numerous antislavery columns in the Intelligencer in opposition to the convention referendum. The result was a 16-percentage point victory against the referendum, thus turning the tide permanently against a movement to legalize slavery in Illinois. Coles returned repeatedly to his call to better protect free African Americans, but the proslavery legislature was in no mood to

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28 “Governor’s Message,” Scrapbook 1, p.7, “Coles Family Papers,” HSP.
29 Coles to Nicholas Biddle, Sept. 18, 1823, typescript, “Coles Papers,” WM.
30 A full account of Coles’ political career in Illinois appears in Leichtle and Carveth, Crusade Against Slavery. The slavery debate appears particularly on pp. 101-130.
improve their status, even if the public turned against their bid to legalize slavery. Coles would even face what he called “the persecution” for his action, when he was charged with violating the state’s new requirement to post a bond for all free African Americans brought into the state, even though the law had been passed after he settled his freed slaves in Edwardsville.\(^{31}\) It took a long legal battle to prove the legality of his actions, but even though he won that fight and the larger fight over slavery, his other projects would not as easily come to fruition.

Coles’ subsequent advocacy of colonization was the most complicating factor in understanding his views on race, but there is another unique source he left that has been untapped in analyses of his worldview on this and other politically charged topics.\(^{32}\) Coles made two scrapbooks during his residency in Illinois that collected articles that he found significant on his favored topics, which included not only his own speeches but also news and opinion that spoke to issues of race, slavery, and other types of political reform. The books were not haphazard collections of news; rather they were assembled with care and consideration, since he made a handwritten index for the articles he selected and generally grouped articles by topic. The selections in the scrapbooks bolster the case that Coles’ interest in colonization was politically motivated, and much of his antislavery reading included articles that supported rights for free African Americans, reflecting a broader view of racial equality as an ideal that went beyond merely supporting his own former slaves as exceptions.

That Coles was against slavery was clear. His scrapbook on slavery contained much on the evils of the institution, but what the scrapbook revealed further were his relatively liberal

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\(^{31}\) Coles, “Autobiography,” “Coles Family Papers,” HSP.

\(^{32}\) Leichtle states that Coles was a colonizationist, which was attributable to the common “racist paternalism” of the time, 128. This is only partially true and does not fully explain his motives. While there was an air of paternalism in Coles’ attitudes, he did not see colonization as a social necessity; it was rather a political necessity for whites that he also thought would be appealing to African Americans. The Coles scrapbooks, which are only lightly referenced by Leichtle (p. 118), offer more of these complicating factors as described below.
racial views and his interest in finding antislavery arguments being made in the South. Coles showed particular interest in a series of articles reprinted from Virginia’s *Alexandria Gazette* reflecting the “Views of the Benevolent Society of Alexandria for Ameliorating and Improving the Condition of the People of Color.” As a Quaker society, they began from a more radical position than most in their society, and one of their recurrent themes that drew Coles’ interest was their description of freed slaves who successfully sustained themselves where they had been freed.\(^{33}\) One analysis of manumission in South America introduced the topic by arguing that “the dangers to be apprehended from the present system of slavery in our country, are far greater than any that may be expected from emancipation.” The Spanish colonial laws offered means for slaves to buy their freedom even before the revolutions, and the famed Alexander von Humboldt had documented villages of freed slaves producing for themselves. The Bolivarian revolutions had led to larger emancipations, and those people were proving to be “steady and industrious.”\(^ {34}\)

The Quaker society also defended the Haitian Revolution by seeking to debunk the specter of terror cited by proslavery Americans. Situating the violence within the larger context of the French Revolution, the article contended that the violence that occurred was spurred primarily by royalists who were engaged in reactionary defense. The slaves upon the universal emancipation continued to work on the plantations, living industrious lives rather than fueling internecine political violence. The author pointed to the possibility of American slaves being

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\(^{33}\) This was a Quaker society that published in Alexandria and sent petitions to Congress. Pennsylvania Society for Promoting the Abolition of Slavery, *Centennial anniversary of the Pennsylvania Society, for Promoting the Abolition of Slavery, the relief of free Negroes unlawfully held in bondage, and for improving the condition of the African race* (Grant, Faires & Rodgers, printers, 1876), 77.

\(^{34}\) “On the treatment and manumission of slaves in South America,” Scrapbook 2, p.52, “Coles Family Papers,” HSP.
colonized in Africa as a condition of emancipation, but it was an unnecessary expedient given that historical precedent provided no necessity for it.\textsuperscript{35}

One article showed what might have been the inspiration for Coles’ original plan to pay his slaves like employees, but it also made a firm statement in favor of innate racial equality. It began by describing Joshua Steele’s plantation in Barbados in the 1780s, where slaves worked independently as tenant farmers and could not be punished by overseers; rather they imposed self-discipline through their own courts. The success of the experiment showed the deficiencies of unpaid labor, but it also showed that the undesirable behaviors attributed to African slaves came from their status rather than their racial origin. The editorial comments pointed out that the slaveowner “is apt to imagine that the state of torpor in which he sees them, is the natural character of the Africans, instead of reflecting that it is the result of the \textit{condition} in which he is placed.” William Wilberforce had referred to whites who had been rescued from slavery in North Africa as exhibiting similar deprivations of mind and spirit, being “abject, servile, and brutish… If then, such is the natural effect of slavery upon the human mind, let us no longer impute to the negro the fault of his degradation, while the blame more properly attaches to those of our own nation who have reduced him from the dignity of freedom, to be the mere creature of another’s will.” At the very least, slaveowners could begin such an ameliorating process as Joshua Steel’s in order to prepare a path for emancipation, leaving aside fears of racial inferiority.\textsuperscript{36}

Coles also received the \textit{Genius of Universal Emancipation}, an antislavery paper from Baltimore that generally advocated colonization as a means for promoting emancipation. Coles’ selections from this paper, however, did not focus on colonization; rather they too tended to

\textsuperscript{35} “On the causes and effects of the revolution in St. Domingo,” Scrapbook 2, p.54-56. “Coles Family Papers,” HSP.

\textsuperscript{36} “On the means of preparing slaves for Emancipation,” Scrapbook 2, p.61, “Coles Family Papers,” HSP.
include arguments favorable to the ability of free African Americans to stay where they were. One speech Coles saved in 1826 advocated for a gradual abolition bill in Maryland. The author conceded that if colonization were judged necessary for abolition to succeed, he would support it. Colonization was not, however, part of his plan, and he asserted that there was no need for it to be. He said, “It will not be denied but that a large portion of the heavy labor in the city of Baltimore, is performed by free negroes; and we all know many free negroes, who are honest, industrious, worthy citizens; and if all the negroes in the state were free, a much larger proportion of them would sustain that character.”

Although solving the slavery problem was his animating goal, Coles also pursued an ambitious course of reforms for Illinois similar to his old Virginia colleagues. His aversion to slavery was part of a comprehensive vision of modernization that would promote free labor with other forms of progress. In both his legislative speeches and his scrapbook ideas, he demonstrated a belief in the power of the state to promote economic development and to foster enlightenment among the citizenry through education and penal rehabilitation. The need for transportation on the burgeoning frontier was obvious to many, but Coles also wanted to create the civilizing institutions that Virginia was striving to build. While the resistance of a parsimonious elite was not such a problem in Illinois, frontier democracy was not necessarily ready for the financial cost of an enlightened society either.

When Coles came into office, Illinois was facing two economic problems that required action. Besides the need for transportation, the monetary system was a constant problem, as it was in Virginia and the rest of the United States’ fragmentary financial system. Illinois already

had a state bank, but it had failed to regulate its issuance of paper money, resulting in unstable and unreliable currency values in the state. Coles, like the Virginia Republicans, sought to implement a stable, regulated currency through the state bank. Coles reported that the value of the state bank’s currency had fallen to only one-fourth of its nominal value. In his 1825 address to the legislature, he echoed Joseph Cabell’s focus on “publicity” in the Bank of Virginia’s dealings and called for “a strict examination into the manner in which the Bank [of Illinois] has been conducted,” as well as further policy changes “for restoring the credit of the paper of the Bank.”

Subsequent addresses pointed to their success in curtailing excess paper currency and bolstering its value by burning one-third of the outstanding notes, which restored them to three-fourths of their nominal value. Even this problem had ties to the slave question beyond the broader economic problems posed. One effect of the currency depreciation had been to lend credence to the argument that allowing an influx of slaves would likewise mean a necessary influx of capital. Coles did not address this facet directly, but his management of the state’s financial problems likely helped his arguments against the expansion of slavery.

Stabilizing the money supply of Illinois was not only a means of protecting the economy, but it was also a means of reinforcing the credit available to the state to finance the other projects that Coles wanted to begin. Illinois, situated between America’s greatest rivers and Lake Michigan, offered ideal opportunities for water-based internal improvements that were not nearly as technically challenging as Joseph Cabell’s plan to traverse the Appalachian Mountains by water. Coles announced his desire to see both the Wabash and Illinois Rivers connected to the Great Lakes by canal, thus linking through the Great Lakes to the Erie Canal and the trade of

38 “Governor’s Message,” p.3 (in enclosed pamphlet), in Scrapbook 1, “Coles Family Papers,” HSP.
39 “Governor’s Message,” p.12 and 29, in Scrapbook 1, “Coles Family Papers,” HSP.
New York. He collected Jefferson’s writings on the benefits of internal improvement, although he had fewer scruples than his Virginia counterparts about drawing upon federal support, given that Congress still owned much of the land in Illinois. He called for some of that land to be devoted to paying for improvements that would also benefit the Union, but independent of federal action, he sought the state of Illinois to begin financing canal projects.  

The legislature chartered the Illinois and Michigan Canal Company, but failed to follow Coles’ preferred method of a state-financed canal. Eastern capitalists could fund the canal, Coles argued, but their interests were not entirely aligned with those of the state, which would require future regulation from the legislature. For road construction too, Coles sought public development, with an eye toward fair taxation. He deplored the exemption of non-residents from local labor obligations or taxes that supported roads. Given the fact that absentee landowners were often wealthy, they too should be obligated to help maintain the infrastructure that added value to their properties.  

For popular enlightenment, Coles attempted to lay the foundation for a public school system. One of his scrapbook musings exclaimed, “In the nineteenth century, a new power bears sway. – The Schoolmaster is abroad (Hear, Hear!) I will trust more to him, armed with his primer, than to the soldier with his bayonet.” On this subject too, Coles collected Jefferson’s writings, such as the letter on the ideal form of education that had appeared in the *Enquirer* in 1817 that had inspired the school acts in Virginia. The federal government’s substantial land grants for education would provide much support for schools in the future, but as Coles pointed out to the legislature, a “superabundance of land” meant that the land grants would not yield sufficient revenues for many years to come. In the meantime, he called for the state to make

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41 “Governor’s Message,” in Scrapbook 1, p.6, “Coles Family Papers,” HSP.
42 “Governor’s Message,” in Scrapbook 1, p.13, “Coles Family Papers,” HSP.
43 Scrapbook 1, p.55, “Coles Family Papers,” HSP.
44 Ibid., 47.
provisions for new schools. In 1825, Illinois began a brief experiment with a public school system, certainly supported by Coles, but enacted perhaps in spite of him, given his rocky relationship with the proslavery legislature. The law required that 2% of all state revenues be devoted to schools, and a school district could be established by any county court upon petition by a majority of voters. Popular opposition to the power to tax for schools almost immediately caused the evisceration of the act. One observer wrote that it was the poor who most argued against it, as they “feared that their children would be educated and wholly unfitted for work on the farm; the very class which the law was intended to benefit opposed it most bitterly.” The following year the legislature amended the law to make paying taxes for schools voluntary, by “free will and consent, first had and obtained in writing.” It would be another thirty years before Illinois would move to establish a public school system.

Governor Coles pursued one other reform that was also motivated by Enlightenment ideals but would gain little traction in the legislature. Following the lead of figures such as Philadelphia’s Benjamin Rush, Coles wanted the state to construct a penitentiary as a means of promoting the certainty rather than the severity of punishment for crimes. He even went so far in his final message to the legislature as to denounce the use of the death penalty. The use of a penitentiary would obviate the need for “that sanguinary and exterminating code, which gives to aggregated man a power which nature, it is acknowledged, has not given to individual man, of deliberately depriving of life, and sending from time to eternity a fellow-being, who, however wicked, is defenceless, and can be rendered harmless, and made useful to himself and to others.” Coles collected statistics and information on penal reform from Europe and the United States.

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45 “Governor’s Message,” p.7 (in enclosed pamphlet), in Scrapbook 1, “Coles Family Papers,” HSP.
One piece he saved stated, “It is knowledge and an enlightened conscience after all, and not punishment merely, that is to reform the guilty.” Another clipping from the French writer Madame de Stael reported that when Emperor Leopold II abolished the penalty of death in Tuscany, rather than “increasing offences by the mildness of his legislation, the prisons were empty during several months successively; a thing never before known in that country.”

Coles’ idealism perhaps remotely inspired the legislature, which approved a penitentiary in Alton in 1827 after Coles left office, and they finally outlawed flogging and the pillory in 1831.

Coles’ Voice Returns to Virginia

Coles both kept track of the political news of Virginia and was himself news in Virginia, cited by his favored Richmond Enquirer. One of Coles’ first democratic gestures as governor was to reject the honorific title given in an Illinois newspaper of “His Excellency” as reminiscent of monarchism. Coles declared, “Our State Constitution gives to the person exercising the functions of the Executive the appellation of Governor, a title which is specific, intelligible, and republican, and amply sufficient to denote the dignity of the office.” He announced that such antirepublican titles were increasing in popular use, and it needed to stop. He continued, “It is a practice disagreeable to my feelings and inconsistent, as I think, with the dignified simplicity of freemen, and to the nature of the vocation of those to whom it is applied. And having made it the rule through my life to address no one as His Excellency, or the Honorable, or by any such unmeaning title, I trust I shall be pardoned for asking it as a favor of you, and my fellow Citizens generally, to apply them to me.”

The announcement drew the immediate applause of Jeffersonians. A letter in the Enquirer thanked him for the move, declaring that Virginians also

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47 Scrapbook 1, p.26-29, 70, “Coles Family Papers,” HSP.
48 Illinois Department of Corrections, “A Short History of Illinois Corrections,” http://www2.illinois.gov/idoc/aboutus/Pages/History.aspx
49 Illinois Intelligencer, Dec. 10 1822.
rejected the “absurd pomp, derogatory to the spirit of our institutions.” Coles was adamant about the principle more broadly, publishing a letter in the Enquirer denouncing a British minister for referring to the President as “Excellency,” based on the same grounds.

Such symbolic attention soon yielded to the dispute over the future of slavery in Illinois. It received one substantial reference in the Enquirer, in which Ritchie praised Coles while demurring on the implications of his project for Virginia and the nation. Ritchie first offered a history, saying, “Edward Coles is a Virginian; formerly Secretary to Mr. Madison… a man of pure and honorable feelings – of which perhaps, no stronger testimony can be given than that, disapproving of holding slaves, he set all his slaves free, and transported them to the state of Illinois, where he has settled them upon his own lands and made the most enthusiastic efforts for their prosperity and ease.” Offering little comment on the actual debate, Ritchie opined about Coles, “Perhaps a purer politician is not to be found in the U.S.” With the passions of the Missouri Crisis lingering in the memory, Ritchie adhered to his strict states’ rights platform and declined to comment on the merits of the debate, saying, “Let us at least keep aloof from it… Let us remember Missouri.” It was typical of Ritchie’s general hesitance to offend proslavery readers in the 1820s, while still offering a sympathetic mention of Coles’ principles.

Coles took note especially of items that were critical of slavery that appeared in the Enquirer in the years leading up to the emancipation debate in 1832. Although Ritchie avoided making pronouncements directly on the topic before the Turner Revolt, he did occasionally provide space to critical voices. In 1824, he published an extensive letter arguing that the Virginia Bill of Rights applied to free African Americans and men of any color because of their

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50 Richmond Enquirer. Feb. 20, 1823, p.3.  
51 Scrapbook 1, “Coles Family Papers,” HSP.  
52 Richmond Enquirer, April 4, 1823, p.3.
inherent human rights. In attacking a provision passed by the legislature to allow freemen to be
sold outside the United States as slaves upon conviction of a crime, the author disclaimed that he
was attacking the status of existing slaves. His argument was sufficiently pointed on the
application of human rights across racial lines, however, that it could have easily appeared to be
a veiled attack on slavery. There was no crime that could cause a person to be banished from the
protection of the United States and Virginia constitutions, and once a person had been divested
of a state of slavery, it could never be justly restored. His conclusion alluded, despite his
disclaimer, to his disdain for slavery itself by lauding the actions that the United States and the
world had taken to suppress the slave trade and “to diminish the number of slaves, and the evils
of slavery, throughout the world.” Virginia had been “enlarging her resources for internal
improvement, for the promotion of the arts and sciences,” but she had also been “condemning
her sable sons for petty offenses” to permanent hereditary slavery, which was a contradictory
“shame” for the state.53

In 1825, Coles pulled from the Enquirer a lengthy letter praising the potential of the
American Colonization Society to facilitate further emancipation of slaves. The letter by
“Opimius” from Fairfax County acknowledged the southern resistance to improper criticism and
interference from northern abolitionists and critics during the Missouri Crisis, but it asserted that
slaveowners should not aim such resistance toward the colonization movement, as they had been
doing. Unlike abolitionists, colonizationists did not attack property rights, but they did promote
an avenue for more voluntary emancipations. Southern firebrands were damaging the Union and
obstructing what was a real opportunity to gradually end slavery without infringing on owners’

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53 *Richmond Enquirer*, Dec. 23, 1824, p.1; also in Scrapbook 2, “Coles Family Papers,” HSP.
On this subject, Coles saw an opportunity to argue for gradual emancipation during the Virginia constitutional convention in 1829. He saw a memorial from citizens of Staunton to the convention calling for gradual emancipation, and he penned a letter himself to join the call. Published in the *Enquirer* under the pseudonym “Jefferson,” the letter criticized James Monroe’s statement that emancipation and colonization were impossible if done without the aid of the Union. Coles argued that Jefferson’s plan of gradual emancipation of the offspring of slaves could be done in such a way as to pay for their transit and not deprive their owners of existing property. He argued that just as white indentured servants had crossed the Atlantic on a promise of future labor, so too could African slaves pay for their journey to freedom with their future labor.

1829 was not the time that emancipation would gain political traction, but Coles’ intervention in the emancipation debate in late 1831 would yield the most politically viable proposal to end slavery in Virginia that would appear before the Civil War. Seeing the ferment that had arisen after the Turner Rebellion, Coles again decided to make use of his connection to Jefferson’s legacy and contact Jefferson’s grandson, state Delegate Thomas Jefferson Randolph. Coles’ letter would display his sense of pragmatism about what was most politically feasible in Virginia that would still achieve eventual full emancipation. Here he again saw colonization as a crucial expedient and did not hesitate advocating it as the most likely path to victory among white citizens. The evidence that Randolph found Coles’ argument convincing was that his bill, the one that was the most radical and the most hotly debated, was virtually the exact plan offered by Coles.

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54 *Richmond Enquirer*, Nov. 25, 1825; also in Scrapbook 2, “Coles Family Papers,” HSP.
55 *Richmond Enquirer*, Nov. 7, 1829, p.3; also in Scrapbook 2, “Coles Family Papers,” HSP.
Coles told Randolph that he was glad Randolph had inherited the principles of his grandfather, and that the present moment was the most opportune time to bring legislation forward to make good on those principles. Stating the underlying principle, Coles wrote that the “relation of master & slave is unnatural, & in the spirit of the age, & in the nature of things, cannot endure.” He then pointed to the practical arguments that would perhaps animate more support for action among the public. Coles commented on the economic arguments against slavery, stating that “slave labour has almost ceased to be valuable,” and he echoed ideas that the exhaustion of Virginia’s agriculture had to do with slavery. He also restated the old fears about racial conflict. Contradicting the old diffusion theory, he stated that population growth was a danger, and given that other states would soon ban imports of slaves, race war and extermination were potentially inevitable.56

Coles urged Randolph to propose a bill that would “restore to the one colour their rights, to the other their consistency.” The features he outlined were those that would enter the legislative debate that followed. He proposed that the costs of colonization could be made negligible in much the same way Jefferson had, stating that there “should be a small capitation levied on the coloured population, free & slave, for the purpose of creating a fund to be applied exclusively to the transportation of Free Negroes, & such slave as may hereafter be emancipated.” Slaveowners should see the gradual process as a means of encouraging good behavior, since the meritorious slaves could be freed first, and others could then be freed without fear. Again echoing Jefferson, he argued that it should be a voluntary plan for present slaves, and the children of slaves would be emancipated by the state. Coles posited one specific detail: “say for instance that all children born after Jan 1 1840 should be given up when they reach the age of

56 Extract of letter of Coles to TJ Randolph, Dec. 29, 1831, “Coles Papers,” PUSC
21.” If legislature was afraid to do it, they should be implored to send the question to a public vote.  

The date of January 1, 1840, was the exact date chosen by Randolph.

Although Coles was not physically present in Virginia during its great dispute over slavery, his voice was nonetheless present through the legislation of Thomas Jefferson Randolph. It was a plan built for political feasibility that did not achieve its ends. Coles did not see colonization as inherently immoral, but his compromise embodied the moral quandary he faced. He was someone who told his freed slaves that “the black race were not inferior,” and believed that they had a right to live in America. But he also believed that asserting that right would never allow for universal emancipation in the South. Of all of Coles’ humane projects both as Governor of Illinois and as a native son of Virginia, he achieved complete success in only two, which were the liberation of his own slaves and the defeat of the plan to legalize slavery in the constitution of Illinois. They were legacies that would have lasting effects, however, both personally for the individuals who gained their freedom and for the nation, which preserved freedom north of the Ohio River. Coles’ political career ended with his term as governor. After losing badly in a race for Congress, he moved to Philadelphia in 1831, where he married a wealthy young woman and worked in business for the rest of his life.  

Neither his personal style nor his Enlightenment reformism were well suited to frontier politics, and he found the intellectual and social climate of Philadelphia much more congenial. Edward Coles’ political career was short, and it was imbued with the moral compromise of colonization, but it also represented the more humane ideals that could be found among the elite in the Southern Enlightenment.

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57 Ibid.
58 Leichtle, 148-149.
Conclusion and Epilogue

Jefferson, in his forecast, had anticipated [slavery]as the “rock upon which the old Union would split.” He was right... The prevailing ideas entertained by him and most of the leading statesmen at the time of the formation of the old Constitution, were that the enslavement of the African was in violation of the laws of nature; that it was wrong in principle, socially, morally and politically. It was an evil they knew not well how to deal with; but the general opinion of the men of that day was, that, somehow or other, in the order of Providence, the institution would be evanescent and pass away... Those ideas, however, were fundamentally wrong.

Confederate Vice President Alexander Stephens,
“Corner Stone” speech, March 21, 1861

The failure of the emancipation bill in 1832 was the last realistic opportunity for Virginia to begin charting a different course away from not only the inhuman subjugation of slavery, but from a course of development that would further isolate the South from the very ideals of a democratic society. Each of the principal characters in this study lived for several decades beyond 1832. Their experiences showed how their ideals could be submerged by the generational shift occurring around them. In their own youth, they displayed much optimism about the possibilities of improving Virginia society, and while their enthusiasm cooled over time, they did not necessarily abandon their principles. Ultimately, however, their compromises, especially on slavery, undermined the potential of their vision.

As years passed after the failure of emancipation, Thomas Ritchie’s own family was divided. One of the starkest generational divides on the proslavery reaction was apparent between Ritchie and his son, Thomas Ritchie, Junior. In 1846, the younger Ritchie, who had taken over as editor of the Richmond Enquirer, got himself involved in duel with a rival

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newspaper publisher, John Hampden Pleasants, a longtime Whig editor and competitor of the Democratic *Enquirer*. Ritchie had claimed that Pleasants intended to publish an abolitionist newspaper in Richmond, which Pleasants flatly denied. Pleasants’ history on the subject was actually no different from that of Thomas Ritchie, Senior, in that both had endorsed the need for an emancipation act in 1832, but Pleasants made clear that outside his advocacy of gradual reform, motivated by the protection of the safety of white citizens, he had no common cause with the incendiary term of abolitionism. After an exchange of volleys in the newspapers, Pleasants challenged the younger Ritchie to a duel, in which Ritchie killed him. Ritchie went on trial and was acquitted. In a sense, the younger Ritchie assailed the principles of his own father, and at the same time silenced one of the few remaining voices with any critical words to say on slavery.²

Thomas Ritchie, Senior, continued to be a respected voice in the Democratic Party, and he did advocate other views that sought to moderate some of the more reactionary tides around him. Even while remaining staunchly in the states’ rights camp, he also remained a unionist, praising the Compromise of 1850 late in life, and his last will and testament, given before his death in 1854, ended with a statement of his political principles that denounced the nativist turn in national politics. He implored posterity, “Let us not deny to the inhabitants of other lands a free asylum into our own shores; but let us confine ourselves to the operation of natural causes. In this way we may best acclimate the emigrant to our free institutions.” That was the penultimate claim before the need to preserve “the Rights of the Union and the Rights of the States.”³

Joseph Cabell continued his administrative roles in the University of Virginia and the James River Canal project after he left the legislature for the last time after the emancipation debate. In 1853 a communication with Edward Coles suggested that Cabell still held some antislavery sentiments, despite his failure to act on them when he had the opportunity. Coles wrote to Cabell expressing his happiness that “you approved of my publication, & thought it conclusive in showing Mr. Jefferson to have been the author of the Ordinance of 1787. I was the more pleased at your approbation & flattering commendation of my publication.” Coles had continued his lifelong project of claiming Jefferson’s legacy for the antislavery cause, even though by this point he recognized that Jefferson’s name no longer carried the weight it once had. He recognized this “from the fact of some of my Southern friends having said that it did not add to the reputation of Mr. Jefferson to prove he was the originator & author of the Ordinance for the government of the Northwestern territory.” Apparently Cabell was happy to celebrate the credit Coles attributed to Jefferson in keeping slavery out of the old Northwest.  

4 Cabell died in 1856.

John Hartwell Cocke continued his emancipation and colonization projects as private ventures until they became impossible to carry on during the Civil War. Despite his cordial relations with a number of northern antislavery activists, he sided with his native state in the secession movement, but what he would lose during the war would leave him embittered and questioning the purpose of his life’s work. His son, Confederate Brigadier-General Philip Cocke, broke under the strain of command and committed suicide in December 1861. After that tragedy, the elder General Cocke began to convince himself that the war to protect slavery was really worth it in the end. A diary thick with questions about proslavery ideology showed that he was

4 Coles to Cabell, May 26, 1853, typescript, “Coles Papers,” WM.
coming to accept some of the claims that slavery should justifiably remain in the South. The strains of war and labor conscription on the plantations that financed his colonization schemes were also unraveling the basis of his lifelong project to end slavery on his own terms. Facing the idea that the sacrifice of his son might have been in vain, he chose instead to repudiate decades of effort he had made against slavery and gradually to make himself embrace the validity of the Confederate cause. He lived to see slavery abolished, but it came in a form he never envisioned.⁵

Thomas Jefferson Randolph also lived through the war, having stayed with Virginia through secession. Near the end of his life in 1875, he wrote a memoir attempting to hold onto an antislavery legacy for his grandfather and himself that claimed no contradiction with his support of the Confederacy. It was a combination of claiming the benevolence of the elite Virginia slaveowner, and an expression of blame for northern abolitionists in reversing the progress of the South’s own peculiar abolitionism. Randolph reflected on his early life and his connections to the enslaved people who lived around him, and he learned early that slaves had “the double aspect of persons, and property; the feelings for the persons were always impairing the value as property.” It was that favorable sentiment to the people that “gave me a disgust to the whole system and made me an abolitionist.” Even though he referred to himself as an abolitionist, he also implied that both he and his grandfather could live with the institution as long as they did because their gentility softened the hard edges of slavery that northern abolitionists denounced. Relating a memory from his childhood, he wrote, “On riding with Mr. Jefferson when president we met a Negro who bowed to us. Mr. J returned the salute, I did not; he turned to me after we had passed and asked if I permitted a Negro to be more of a gentleman than myself.” Courtesy seemed to compensate for captivity. Randolph believed that this was not atypical of Virginia’s

⁵ Coyner, 552, 564-571.
leading statesmen. He asked Jefferson how so many of them acquired their refinement, and Jefferson told him that it was due to their education in Williamsburg, which had “the finest school of Manners and Morals that had ever existed in America.”

Randolph placed the blame for the Civil War on the antislavery activists of the North. He framed Lincoln’s election as a “popular despotism of which the slave states were to be the victims.” The political system was not the only source of antagonism. He denounced *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* as vehemently as any proslavery writer, calling it “a foul and atrocious libel upon the slave holders of the Southern States, and… garbage suited to the appetite of sectional hate.” But the libel in itself was not the primary problem; rather “It performed its part, in retarding and preventing the gradual abolition of slavery.” Randolph was adamant on this claim, also boasting that Tennessee and North Carolina would have irrevocably committed to abolition before 1860 if not for “the establishment of anti slavery societies at the North in 1835.” There was a crucial distinction that explained the problem: “Southern abolitionism was an appeal to the Master; was peaceable reform in the hands of those exposed to its difficulties and inconveniences and degrees of transition. Northern abolitionism was an appeal to the slave inciting servile insurrection with all its horror.” It was this northern abolitionism that brought out the worst in the South by giving “rise to the pro slavery party, whose fanaticism and folly in the slave states form another to the instances in history of a temporary madness seizing the public mind.” Randolph’s faith in the resilience of southern liberalism after 1832 was overconfident, but it also reflects a belief that Virginia’s liberal reformers were a serious political force in the early decades of the nineteenth century.

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7 Ibid., 2-3.
8 Ibid., 8-9.
9 Ibid., 58-59.
After Edward Coles retired from politics, his role on the national stage faded, but his standing in Illinois history did improve. Coles County was founded in 1831, the same year he would leave for a different life in Philadelphia. Decades later, despite the fact that Coles still lived in Philadelphia, he would inadvertently make a great sacrifice for the Confederacy. His son had taken more after the other members of the Coles family than after his father, and before the Civil War, Roberts Coles had moved to Enniscorthy in Virginia, where the Coles family estates were, in order to make a living from slave-based agriculture. The elder Coles had not even known that his son had joined the Confederate Army when he learned that his son had been killed at the Battle of Roanoke Island in 1862. Coles had followed a very different path from Cocke and Randolph, casting his lot with a northern antislavery movement. In 1860 Coles went with a fellow aging Virginian and Jefferson protégé, Nicholas Trist, to vote for Abraham Lincoln. When the President-elect traveled through Philadelphia on his inaugural journey, he met Coles and told him that he was still revered in Illinois. Lincoln surely recognized that Coles’ legacy had contributed to his own free soil politics. Coles lived to see the abolition of slavery, and he died in 1868.\(^\text{10}\)

By the time the secession movement swept up Virginia in 1861, Coles’ generation had largely been eclipsed by younger generations that were not as moved by the appeals to the Founders in the ways that Coles had hoped. Joseph Cabell might have lauded Jefferson’s supposed role in the free soil Northwest Territory, but many Virginians did not. When Thomas Dew declared in 1836 that skeptical thought in any realm was a threat to slavery, he pointed to the closing of the mind that would undermine the spirit of reform that might have led Virginia in a different direction. Education and internal improvement offered some of the institutional

developments necessary for a modern free labor economy, but they needed to be followed by emancipation. The failure of emancipation was a failure of Virginia’s elite, but it was not monolithically so. The conservative elite triumphed and began the process of repression that would further retrench slavery, but they had to fight some members of their own class in order to do it. Jefferson’s protégés took what they saw as his legacy in the reform of their society’s institutions to create what they hoped would be a different future. Their failure on the most fundamental part of that reform should not obscure the fact that they did offer an alternative, a path rooted in a better side of the Enlightenment.
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