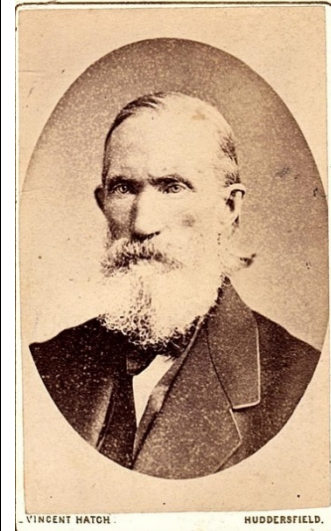


Chapter 195– Southern Intellectuals Now Defend Slavery As “A Positive Good”



Dates:
1776 Forward To
The 1850's

- Sections:**
- Sectional Tensions Over Slavery Trace Back To Colonial America
 - Southern Defenses Ramp Up As Expansion Of Slavery Is Threatened
 - The South Goes On The Offense With Their “Positive Good” Claims
 - Hammond’s *Two Letters On Slavery* Attacks The Abolitionists
 - Pseudo-Science Supports Claims Of Black Inferiority

Date: 1776 Forward

Sectional Tensions Over Slavery Trace Back To Colonial America

The rising tension over slavery raised by the “*Tom*” novels is woven into the fabric of America’s political history from the Colonial period to the Civil War. At times it is center stage, a poisonous snake ready to strike at the very stability of the Union – only to recoil itself and slip back into the shadows as its enemies and defenders find momentary accommodations to enable its continued presence.

These accommodations allow the Union to form at the 1787 Constitutional Convention.

By that time, the Northern colonies have begun to wean their economy of dependence on slavery and are pondering ways to entirely rid themselves of their remaining 50,000 Africans. In Philadelphia, a few delegates – men like Gouverneur Morris of New York and Luther Martin of Maryland – join hands in labeling slavery “dishonorable to the American character.” This sounds the earliest political notes favoring emancipation.

Meanwhile the wealth of the South already hinges on the expansion of slavery, and any threats to that outcome are met by stiff resistance. Thus Rawlins Lowndes of South Carolina observes:

Negroes are our wealth, our only natural resource. Yet behold how our kind friends in the North are determined soon to tie up our hands, and drain us of what we have.

In the face of criticism, Southern slaveholders initially adopt a defensive posture. George Mason, places blame for the “infernal traffic” on British merchants – and goes on to cite its ill effects on society as a whole.

This infernal traffic originated in the avarice of British merchants, and they checked the attempts of Virginia to put a stop to it... Slavery discourages arts and manufactures. The poor despise labor when performed by slaves. They prevent the immigration of whites, who enrich and strengthen a country. They produce the most pernicious effect on manners.

James Madison regards the practice as a stain on the Constitution.

I think it wrong to admit in the Constitution the idea that there could be property in men.

Thomas Jefferson acknowledges the moral corruptions inherent in the master-slave relationship.

The whole commerce between master and slave is a perpetual exercise of the most boisterous passions, the most unremitting despotism on the one part, and degrading submissions on the other... Indeed, I tremble for my country when I reflect that God is just: that his justice cannot sleep forever.

But, like other Southern aristocrats of his era, the future President is forever able to rationalize his involvement in slavery as an inevitable dilemma – one lacking any and all ways out.

Slavery is like holding a wolf by the ears – one can neither safely hold him, nor safely let him go.

Date: 1820 – 1850’s

Southern Defenses Ramp Up As Expansion Of Slavery Is Threatened

Challenges to slavery – dormant for decades as America focuses on surviving against foreign threats -- reappear in 1820 “like a fire bell in the night,” as Jefferson says at the time.

This threat comes in the form of the Tallmadge Amendment opposing the introduction of slavery in the new state of Missouri. After the bill passes in the House, backed by the Northern majority, a crisis is averted only through the political acumen of Henry Clay in crafting the Missouri Compromise – with its 36’30” demarcation line, extending the creation of new “Slave States” west through the Louisiana Purchase territories.

From this time forward, Southern arguments on behalf of slavery gradually take on a sharper edge.

One early example rests with Thomas Roderick Dew, son of a planter, who graduates from William & Mary in 1820, teaches metaphysics and economics there, and eventually serves as President of the college from 1836 to his death in 1846. Dew’s contribution comes in the form of his lengthy *Commentary on the Virginia Debate To End Slavery In 1831-32*.

This remarkable debate occurs in the Virginia state legislature in response to Nat Turner's rebellion, where 58 whites are slaughtered by a band of slaves, followed by hundreds of reprisal executions of blacks. The impetus are some forty public petitions which focus on cleansing the state of all Africans, first by freeing the slaves and then shipping them back to Africa. A select committee studies the issues and reports out two resolutions to be voted on by the full body.

One, offered by William Goode, calls for outright rejection of any proposals to emancipate the slaves. The other, from Thomas Jefferson Randolph, asks that a formal plan leading to emancipation be prepared. Actual debating occurs from January 10-25, 1832.

Those favoring emancipation tend to reside west of the Blue Ridge, where personal wealth is less dependent on slavery. They argue that the institution "undermines virtue and morality in the community," makes a mockery of white laborers who work the land with their own hands, reduces privileged families to lives of "idleness and extravagances," and retards the modernization and diversity of the Southern economy. It also leaves the entire white population perpetually vulnerable to more murderous acts of revenge by the Africans living in their midst.

As expected, opponents cite their 5th Amendment rights against government seizure of their property without fair value compensation. They contend that slavery was handed to them by the British, along with the duty of being good stewards in perpetuity, and they have succeeded. In exchange for their labor, the Africans are well cared for, free from worry, and generally happy with their current state.

In rebuttal, William Ballard Preston (later Secretary of the Navy) asserts that slaves are human beings and, as such, should not be treated as "property." Others join in, questioning whether children should be born into slavery, and whether emancipation alone will reduce the risk to all whites of future terror attacks.

The debate ends on January 25, 1832, with a decision to acknowledge the concerns raised in the petitions, but table any further action in regard to emancipation.

Thomas Dew's *Commentary* on this debate provides the framework going forward for all who argue that slavery is a "positive good" for society in general and indeed for the slaves themselves. Thus:

- *Slavery is sanctioned in the Bible: God's chosen people owned slaves and Christ never condemned the practice.*
- *From Greece to Rome to England and America, slavery has been integral to creating great civilizations.*
- *The Africans are inherently inferior to whites and are thus suited to the menial labor they are assigned.*
- *In exchange for this labor they are fed, clothed and protected for life by their paternalistic owners.*

Dew, who owns only one slave his entire life, further concludes that emancipation would cripple the economy of Virginia, and that neither colonization nor assimilation are feasible options.

Date: Spring 1852

The South Goes On The Offense With Their “Positive Good” Claims

Dew’s themes are soon reinforced in Congress by John C. Calhoun of South Carolina, most notably in his famous February 6, 1837 speech in the Senate.

I hold that in the present state of civilization, where two races of different origin, and distinguished by color, and other physical differences, as well as intellectual, are brought together, the relation now existing in the slaveholding States between the two, is, instead of an evil, a good—a positive good.

I hold then, that there never has yet existed a wealthy and civilized society in which one portion of the community did not, in point of fact, live on the labor of the other.

I appeal to facts. Never before has the black race of Central Africa, from the dawn of history to the present day, attained a condition so civilized and so improved, not only physically, but morally and intellectually...I may say with truth, that in few countries so much is left to the share of the laborer, and so little exacted from him, or where there is more kind attention paid to him in sickness or infirmities of age.

I turn to the political; and here I fearlessly assert that the existing relation between the two races in the South, against which these blind fanatics are waging war, forms the most solid and durable foundation on which to rear free and stable political institutions

The Southern “intellectual community” – made up largely of academics, clergymen and literary figures – weigh in behind Dew and Calhoun with a range of lectures and pamphlets which reinforce their assertions.

In response to the national controversy stirred in 1852 by *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, several of these works are compiled by the Charleston firm of Walker, Richards & Co. into a 512 page book titled *The Pro-Slavery Argument*. Four treatises are featured in the book:

- *Commentary on the Virginia Debate on Slavery (1832)*, by the academician, Thomas Roderick Dew.
- *Memoir on Slavery (1837)*, by the jurist, Chancellor William J. Harper.
- *Two Letters On Slavery In The U. S. Addressed To Thomas Clarkson, Esq. in 1845*, penned by James Henry Hammond, the budding “fire-eater” politician from South Carolina.
- *The Morals of Slavery (1852)*, an essay from the novelist, Dr. George Gilmore Simms.

While the “slavery as positive good” strain flows through each essay, it is Hammond’s emotional defense – laced with the self-exoneration from personal misdeeds common to many masters – that jumps dramatically from the pages.

Date: 1845

Hammond's *Two Letters On Slavery Attacks The Abolitionists*

James Hammond regards himself as the logical successor to John C. Calhoun for his unwavering defense of slavery and of the superior society it facilitates across the South.

He ascends to prominence in South Carolina first through a conniving marriage into wealth and then a legal practice that launches him into Calhoun's Nullifier Party in 1828. From there he will go on to serve in the U.S. House (1835-36) – where he is first to propose the “gag rule” tabling anti-slavery petitions – then as state Governor (1842-44), and finally as a U.S. Senator (1857-60).

Nothing so riles Hammond as the abolitionists, domestic and foreign – and editors of *The Pro-Slavery Argument* choose to highlight this topic by reprinting his *Two Letters On Slavery* directed in 1845 to the famous English emancipator, Thomas Clarkson. Along the way here, Hammond chooses to openly announce many charges leveled at slaveholders by abolitionists, and then attempt to brush them aside. But in doing so, he acknowledges the litany of horrors endured by those enslaved.

As for chains and iron, they are rarely used; never I believe except in cases of running away.

As to willfully selling off a husband or wife or child, I believe it is very rarely done, except when some offense has been committed demanding “transportation.”

But your grand charge is that licentiousness in intercourse between the sexes...necessarily arises from slavery.. I do not intend to admit that this charge is just or true. ..I will say that I wish the subject could be avoided...I will not deny that some intercourse of the sort does take place. It's character and extent, however, are grossly and atrociously exaggerated.

Hammond goes on to assure Clarkson, falsely, of his propriety toward those slaves in his care.

I freely acknowledge my obligation as a man to treat humanely the fellow creatures to whom God has entrusted to my charge.

He closes with the contention that, despite the misguided accusations of the abolitionists, the South's slaves inhabit a virtual “Eden,” free from troubles, and far better off than the laboring classes in England's factories and mines.

And to sum up all...I believe our slaves are the happiest three millions of human beings on whom the sun shines. Into their Eden is coming Satan in the form of the abolitionists...(and) I affirm that in Great Britain the poor and laboring classes of your own race and color, your fellow citizens, are more miserable and degraded, morally and physically, than our slaves.

As sectional conflicts in the 1850's, James Hammond takes his place among the South Carolina "Fire-Eaters" who lobby for secession. His Senate speech of 1858 – "Cotton Is King" – develops his "mudsill theory" of civilizations and adds another chapter to the "positive good" lexicon.

Sidebar: Some Leading Proponents Of The "Slavery As A Positive Good" Defense

Those Southerners touting the "positive good" thesis tend to mirror their opponents in New England – another fervent band of clergymen, academics, literary men, and a few politicians, all prone to airing their beliefs with the hope of shaping public opinion.

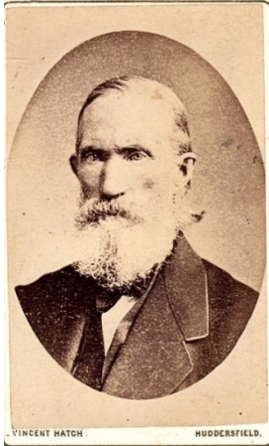
Both are relatively tight knit groups. Dew and Beverly Tucker are colleagues at William & Mary; Tucker's circle includes Simms, Holmes, Ruffin and Hammond; Hammond's legal tutor is Harper; Holmes corresponds with Thornwell, Bledsoe, Simms and Fitzhugh; DeBow's *Review* becomes a go to periodical for the group as a whole.

As with the New England set, the hard-hitting rational prose is complemented by the often more accessible and emotionally moving work of the novelists and poets. If John Greenleaf Whittier often hits the mark for the abolitionists, William Grayson does the same for those ready to believe that enslaving the Africans is ordained in Heaven:

*For these great ends hath Heaven's supreme command
Brought the black savage from his native land,
Trains for each purpose his barbarian mind,
By slavery tamed, enlightened, and refined;
Instructs him, from a master-race, to draw
Wise modes of polity and forms of law,
Imbues his soul with faith, his heart with love,
Shapes all his life by dictates from above.*

Date: 1830's – 1840's

Pseudo-Science Supports Claims Of Black Inferiority



Orson Squire Fowler (1808-1887)

The conviction that blacks are a different and inferior species is consistently used by the South to justify enslavement.

Ironically it is two Northern men who reinforce the beliefs.

One is Dr. Samuel Morton, born in Philadelphia in 1799, who helps found the Pennsylvania Medical School after earning an advanced degree from Edinburgh University in Scotland. His passion is the study of the human anatomy, and he accumulates what is regarded at the time as the world's largest collection of skulls, going all the way back to the Egyptian era. After measuring his specimens, he publishes reports stating that white skulls are larger (82 cubic inches on average) than black skulls (78 cubic inches), and draws two conclusions from his findings.

The first challenges the accepted biblical story that all humans descended from a common set of "parents," Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden. Instead Morton argues for what becomes known as "polygenism" – the idea that the races originated as different species, each suited to, and evolving within, their own "provinces" of the globe.

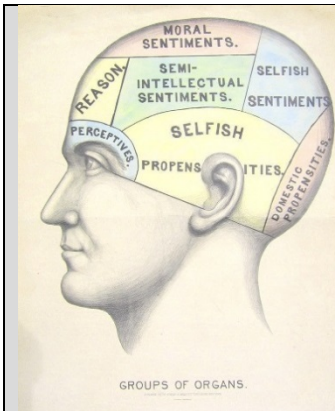
His second conclusion is that the various species differ in terms of their potential to thrive – with Caucasians having greater skull capacity, hence larger brains, inherently advantaged over Negroes, with their smaller crania.

Morton's landmark work, *Crania Americana; or, A Comparative View of the Skulls of Various Aboriginal Nations of North and South America: To which is Prefixed An Essay on the Varieties of the Human Species* comes out in 1839 and earns him the reputation as "father of American physical anthropology."

A second "scientist" often cited by pro-slavery supporters is Orson Squire Fowler who grows up in Coshocton, New York and graduates from Amherst College in 1829, intent on becoming a minister. While in school, however, he meets Henry Ward Beecher, later a famous clergyman, and together they become fascinated by the emerging "science" of phrenology. It originates with an Austrian physician, Franz Gall, who concludes that examining facial shapes can predict human intelligence and other traits. Thus a skilled phrenologist would explore the contours of a patient's head in search of telltale "bumps" – the bump of superior knowledge or artistry, benevolence or avarice, veneration or hope, combativeness or conjugality.

Beecher eventually dismisses this notion, but Fowler embraces it wholeheartedly, abandons his interest in the ministry and, with help from his brother and wife, becomes the leading American practitioner of phrenology.

Like Morton, Fowler “discovers” racial tendencies from his studies and publishes them in 1843 in *Heredity Descent*, which asserts that the “coarse hair of the negro signals coarse fibers in the brain,” hence poor verbal skills and other traits best suited for nursing children or acting as servants.



Sidebar: Orson Fowler’s Phrenology Phenomenon

The “science” of phrenology is no laughing matter to Orson Fowler’s contemporaries, and he is able to parlay his lectures and his *American Phrenological Journal* into celebrity status for himself and a thriving business to boot.

Between 1838 and 1854 he opens clinics -- first in Manhattan, later in Philadelphia, Boston and even London – where, for \$1.00 to \$3.00, a visitor can receive insights into their own personal “bumps” and associated implications.

A Typical Phrenology Map

Those who stop in for an exam and a reading run from average pedestrians to the sophisticates of the period, among them Ralph Waldo Emerson, Horace Greeley, Oliver Wendell Holmes, Brigham Young, John Brown, Walt Whitman, Clara Barton, James Garfield and the educator, Horace Mann, who declares phrenology “the greatest discovery of the age.”

Many years later, the author Mark Twain visits Fowler and his MD wife at their London venue, using a false identity to “test” the accuracy of their assessment about his personality. His recounting goes as follows:

I made a small test of phrenology for my better information. I went to Fowler under an assumed name.

When I entered his office, Fowler received me with indifference, fingered my head in an un-interesting way, and named and estimated my qualities in a bored and monotonous voice. He said I possessed amazing courage, an abnormal spirit of daring, a pluck, a stern will, a fearlessness that were without limit.

I was simply astonished at this, and gratified, too; I had not suspected it before. But then he foraged over on the other side of my skull and found a bump there called "Caution." This bump was so tall, so mountainous, that it reduced my "Courage" bump to a mere hillock by comparison.

He continued his discoveries...and found a CAVITY in one place where a bump should have been in anybody else's skull...He startled me by saying that that CAVITY represented a total absence of a "Sense of Humor!"

I was hurt, humiliated, resentful, but I kept these feelings to myself. At bottom I believed

his diagnosis was wrong, but I was not certain. In order to make sure, I thought I would wait until he should have forgotten my face and the peculiarities of my skull—and then come back again and see if he had really known what he had been talking about, or had only been guessing.

After three months I went back again, but under my own name this time, heralding my arrival with a card bearing both my name and my nom de guerre. Once more he made a striking discovery—the CAVITY was gone, and in its place was a Mount Everest—figuratively speaking - 31,000 feet high, the loftiest BUMP OF HUMOR he had ever encountered in his life-long experience! Again, I carried away an elaborate chart. It contained several sharply defined details of my character, but it bore no resemblance to the earlier chart.

These experiences have given me a prejudice against phrenology which has lasted until now. I am aware that the prejudice should have been against Fowler, instead of against the art —

But, I am human, and that is not the way prejudices act.

Proponents Of The “Slavery As Positive Good” Argument			
Name	Dates	Profile	Writing
James H. Thornwell	1812-1862	Presbyterian minister & Calhoun of the Church	Pro-slavery sermons (1830’s forward)
Thomas R. Dew	1802-1846	Prez Wm & Mary	<i>Commentary on Virginia Debate on Slavery</i> (1832) <i>The Pro-Slavery Argument</i> (1852)
N. Beverly Tucker	1784-1851	Law professor & novelist	<i>The Partisan Leader</i> (1836) <i>The Pro-Slavery Argument</i> (1852)
John C. Calhoun	1782-1850	Political leader of South	<i>Slavery: A Positive Good</i> speech (1837)
William J. Harper	1790-1847	US Senate from SC 1826	<i>Memoir on Slavery</i> (1838)
George F. Holmes	1820-1897	Professor	Letters & journal articles (1840’s forward)
James H. Hammond	1807-1864	House 1835-36 Gov of SC 1844-46 Senator 1857-1860	<i>Two Letters On Slavery</i> To Clarkson (1845) <i>The Pro-Slavery Argument</i> (1852) “Cotton Is King” speech (1858)
J. D. B. DeBow	1820-1867	Publisher	<i>DeBow’s Review</i> (1846 forward)
William G. Simms	1806-1870	Novelist & historian	<i>The Sword and the Distaff</i> (1852) <i>The Pro-Slavery Argument</i> (1852)
George Fitzhugh	1806-1881	Social theorist	<i>Sociology for the South, or, the Failure of Free Society</i> (1854) <i>Cannibals All!, or Slaves Without Masters</i> (1857)
Josiah Clark Nott	1804-1873	Physical anthropology Eugenics	<i>Types of Mankind</i> (1854) <i>Indigenous Races of the Earth</i> (1857)
William J. Grayson	1788-1863	Poet, US House 1833-37	<i>The Hireling and the Slave</i> (1855)
Edmund Ruffin	1794-1865	Planter/soil scientist	<i>Slavery & Free Labor Compared</i> (1855)
Albert T. Bledsoe	1809-1877	West Point, minister, lawyer	<i>An Essay On Liberty And Slavery</i> (1857)