

Thomas Roderick Dew Biography

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Biography

Thomas Roderick Dew (1802-1846), one of the earliest and ablest defenders in America of slavery, articulated the proslavery argument that dominated the Southern mind during the 30 years before the Civil War.

Thomas Dew, the son of a wealthy planter, was born in King and Queen County, Va., on Dec. 5, 1802. He graduated from William and Mary College, and, after traveling in Europe and studying in Germany, he took the chair of political law at William and Mary in 1827. His major scholarly interest was political economy, and most of his published writings were in that field. In 1832 he became president of William and Mary, a post he held until his death in 1846.

In 1831 the bloody Nat Turner slave rebellion in Southampton County, Va., sparked the most intense critical discussion of slavery in the antebellum South. The Virginia Legislature vigorously debated the subject of slavery for a year, and motions for its abolition were only narrowly defeated. Prior to this, Southern intellectuals, following the lead of Thomas Jefferson, had generally treated slavery as a necessary evil, to be tolerated only until the problem of dealing with an unassimilable free black population could be resolved. Many Southerners were adherents of the American Colonization Society, which advocated gradual emancipation and colonization of freed slaves in Africa; this proposal figured prominently in the Virginia debate.

Dew had first contributed to the sectional controversy by publishing *Lectures on the Restrictive System* (1829), attacking the protective tariff. Now, in his *Review of the Debate in the Virginia Legislature of 1831-1832* he argued that colonization was economically impossible. He stated that the South's only alternatives were abolition, with the free slaves remaining and becoming "the most worthless and indolent of ... citizens," or a continuation of slavery. He advocated the second course, strongly defending slavery on historical, economic, and theological grounds. He concluded, "It is the order of nature and of God that the being of superior faculties and knowledge should control and dispose of those who are inferior."

Dew's theories, developed and expanded, became staples of the proslavery argument that dominated the South politically for the following decades, finally generating the secession movement and the Civil War. Dew contracted pneumonia while on a trip and died in Paris on Aug. 6, 1846.