

Dr. Erik J. Chaput on Race and the Dorr Rebellion

(Erik, could you talk a little bit about how race factored into the Dorr Rebellion?)

Race played a very significant role in the Dorr Rebellion. Unfortunately, in broader narrative accounts of the antebellum period that have been written in the last ten years or so that have mentioned the Dorr Rebellion, the issue of race has been left out of these accounts. But when you look closely at the summer and the early part of the fall of 1841 in the run-up to the People's Convention in Providence, race played a major role.

African-Americans, primarily living in the city of Providence, gravitated towards the Rhode Island Suffrage Association. Black Rhode Islanders had been disenfranchised since 1822 and the rhetoric coming out of the Rhode Island Suffrage Association about the rights of the people, the people's sovereignty, the right to vote, rights of citizens, all Americans as citizens—this was language that, very much, black Rhode Islanders keyed into and wanted to become connected with this organization. And early on they did play a role in a lot of the functions that the Rhode Island Suffrage Association put on in the in the spring of 1841 and the summer of 1841.

But as you get into August when it comes time to vote for delegates to the People's Convention, blacks in Providence are prevented from going to the voting booths and casting a ballot for delegates, and immediately black Rhode Islanders become concerned that the Suffrage Association and the delegates who were finally selected to this People's Convention, which was going to take place in the fall, were going to include a white-only clause in their constitution; that they were going to take the very broad rhetoric of the people's sovereignty and the rights of the people and make it for white people only.

Also, really what we would call today race-baiting, a series of articles started to appear in the *Providence Journal* under the pseudonym Town Borne. Historians believe it to be actually Samuel Ames as the author of these articles, and Ames also happened to be Thomas Wilson Dorr's brother-in-law, and Samuel Ames who had very little concern for the black community in Rhode Island. But what he wanted to do was really to rev up the tensions and to put the black community, and the Suffrage Association, and the abolitionists in Rhode Island at odds and to really start a fight. And he was very good at doing that in these very sarcastic and incendiary articles that he wrote in the *Providence Journal* under the pseudonym Town Borne.

When the People's Convention does begin, it is quite clear that most of the delegates are leaning towards a white-only clause. In the middle of the convention a very moving, articulate, elegant petition comes to the convention floor and is handed to Thomas Dorr by a young black minister named Alexander

Crummell, who later will go on to become one of the foremost black intellectuals in the 19th century. Crummell brought this petition on behalf of several blacks living in the city of Providence, including a man named Ichabod Northup. And in this petition Providence's black community really talks eloquently about citizenship, and in terms really that we wouldn't see again until we have a serious debate over citizenship during what we call Radical Reconstruction—the debate over the fourteenth amendment. They're really talking about the issue of a color-blind democracy and what citizenship means and why they deserve to be a part of this new constitution that's being drafted in this convention, and they warn the convention that they're going to be potentially labeled as hypocrites for putting a white-only clause into that document. Unfortunately for the black community, at the end of the day a white-only clause is inserted into the People's Constitution.

Thomas Dorr, the abolitionist Dorr, fought very, very hard against this but lost. The black community, for all the right reasons, looked to Dorr as an ally in the Convention. This is a man who received endorsements when he ran for Congress in 1837 and 1839 from William Lloyd Garrison's *The Liberator*, from Nathan Rogers' *The Herald of Freedom*, probably the two most prominent abolitionist newspapers in the country; he was a member of the Rhode Island Anti-Slavery Society, he sat on the executive committee of that society, Dorr attended multiple conventions in New York City for the American Anti-Slavery Society. He was a well-known commodity within New England abolitionist circles, and they very much thought they had an ally in Dorr. And they did, he worked hard for their cause. He did believe that they deserved the right to vote, that labeling the People's Sovereignty for white people only was indeed hypocritical and against the Declaration of Independence in the ideology it really was the underpinning of the Rhode Island Suffrage Association.

End of the day though, Dorr loses, but he does achieve two significant victories, I think, within the convention. Despite all the opposition to black voting that is going on in the People's Convention, the first thing that Dorr is able to achieve is a provision in the People's Constitution that provides jury trials for fugitive slaves. The later part of the 1830s and as you get into the 1840s, the fugitive slave issue in the United States is becoming a major constitutional and political issue. Many states, many northern states that is, had adopted what they called "personal liberty laws". Dorr, a trained attorney and a known abolitionist, no surprise that he pushed to provide for some basic legal protections for suspected fugitives, so that certainly people who were indeed not fugitives would not be wrongfully accused and sent into slavery in the South.

The second thing that Dorr was able to achieve, and this came out the eleventh hour in the People's Convention, is he got a clause into the document that mandated that the white-only clause would have to be revisited—that in the first election after the formation of the People's Government, the issue would go out to the voters as a referendum and it would vote it up or down. And that was mandatory, there was no way to get around it, it was built right into the documents. The General Assembly, the new General Assembly under the People's Constitution, would have to do this. Dorr looked at this clause and he knew it

was really the best that he could do. And he hoped that New England abolitionists would see that he worked hard for their cause. He did indeed fail but he managed to salvage a little bit and in a year or two down the line he could perhaps eliminate that notorious white-only clause.

Unfortunately, though, the New England abolitionist movement was not interested in waiting, they believed that what had happened in the People's Convention was so, so wrong, that it needed an immediate response. And who shows up in Rhode Island to protest this document? Abby Kelley from Millbury, Mass., just North, up what is now Route 146 from Providence going toward Worcester. A very young Frederick Douglass comes to protest against the People's Constitution. Abby Kelley's future husband Stephen Foster from New Hampshire, along with another man named Parker Pillsbury, another prominent abolitionist from New Hampshire. They all travel to Rhode Island and participate in six anti-slavery conventions that are held throughout the state. And these conventions are designed to protest against the People's Constitution—to speak out, to say what had gone wrong in the People's Convention, that these delegates had taken very lofty ideals and had trampled upon them. Unfortunately for these abolitionists, as hard as they worked, and some of them risked their own lives in the winter of 1841 as you get into the early part of 1842—Abby Kelley had an ice ball thrown at her head, Frederick Douglass in one of his later memoirs that he wrote in the 1890s talked about riding in the Jim Crow car in the freezing cold—so, for considerable risk to their own personal safety, the abolitionists came to Rhode Island, but it was all for naught. The People's Constitution was overwhelmingly adopted in late December 1841 by nearly 14,000 Rhode Islanders with only about fifty against.

So, the majority of the population, that is the white population, of the state certainly did not listen at all to what the abolitionists had to say, but as you get into 1842, the issue of race still continues to play a major role in the Rebellion. As the springtime, as you get into April and May, especially when Thomas Dorr journeys to Washington D.C., after he's inaugurated as the "People's Governor," and has his parade through the streets of Providence and he goes to Washington to meet with president John Tyler, Dorr really gets a lesson in sectional politics and he gets a lesson also in the role of race in America at that point in time. White Southerners had this somewhat irrational fear that Dorr was going to spread his doctrine of the right of the people to alter or abolish their form of government all across the country, and by doing so Dorr was going to incite slave revolts. So, in this sense, Dorr came across as a white Nat Turner. This was of course absurd. Dorr had no intention whatsoever of leading a slave revolt, he was not a John Brown, but the white South—especially a lot of Southern politicians, including John Calhoun and William Preston of South Carolina—painted Dorr as a dangerous demagogue who was going to do just that. They reminded John Tyler of Dorr's time in the Rhode Island Anti-Slavery Society, his role on certain committees with the American Anti-Slavery Society and the annual meetings in New York. And this wasn't long ago, this was just in the later part of the 1830s, and all of Dorr's activities as an abolitionist got brought back up again and connected with his current movement to revise Rhode Island's archaic governing structure. But in the hands of a very skillful politician like William Preston from South Carolina, as I said, or John Calhoun,

Dorr came across as a demagogue and as a dangerous abolitionist, as a radical. And they were able to get to John Tyler and really paint Dorr as someone that he needed to stay away from. And John Tyler wanted nothing to do with Dorr, he didn't come out to aid Dorr at all.

Other major Democratic politicians, at this point Democratic senators, such as Levi Woodbury from New Hampshire, Silas Wright from New York, in private expressed their affinity for what Dorr was doing but in public they would never come out and support him. Both Woodbury and Wright were looking to get the Democratic Party nomination potentially in 1844, and supporting Thomas Dorr would ruin them certainly in the minds of the white South. And so that was simply not an option for them to support Dorr openly. And so as May rolls into June the issue of race still continues to play a role. Black Rhode Islanders are so angry at being shut out of the People's Convention, being shut out literally of the People's Constitution, that they decide that they're going to support the Law & Order side, that they're going to support the Charter authorities. And they did this in exchange, in the hopes that in the fall of 1842 when a new convention would finally be called by the Rhode Island General Assembly that they would indeed get the right to vote, and that is exactly what happened. There was a referendum on whether or not to allow blacks into the body politic in Rhode Island in the fall of 1842. And they do receive—gain back, I should say, the right to vote, and this becomes the first time and only the time in the antebellum period where blacks who had previously had the right to vote and had it taken away, had regained it. So, as a direct result, really, of Thomas Dorr's actions and the rebellion itself, black Rhode Islanders in a very roundabout way do achieve what they had wanted all along and that is the right to vote, though it came from a group of people that they did not initially turn to for support. Initially, once again, they were turning towards the Suffrage Association and Thomas Dorr who were talking eloquently about the rights of the people and what that meant.