

Raymond Lavertue on Dorr and the Anti-Slavery Movement

Dorr underwent a total transformation. He gradually moved from being a colonizationist who argued that the best condition, the best thing that could happen for slaves would be to transport them to Africa. He thought conditions there would be better than they were in the Middle Atlantic states. He thought that...he made a tremendous argument for the settlement of the city of Liberia and he thought that Liberia and the capital, Monrovia, would eventually become a magnet for the oppressed people and particularly the oppressed blacks of the world; much like America had become a magnet for the oppressed people of England, and then other European countries. He thought, he envisioned a grand migration to Monrovia. And he saw it becoming a flourishing seat of civilization. He wasn't of the thought that they were just shooting people off, shipping freed slaves off to some, into exile. He thought it would develop into quite a flourishing haven for them and that they would be better off. He also thought that the slave owners in the South, many of them wanted to free their slaves, but a lot of the slave laws of the individual states required that if you did free a slave, the slave had to leave the state. And the settlement of Monrovia would give those more benevolent slave owners the opportunity that they needed to free their slaves.

So from 1834 you have him as a colonizationist, that was January of 1834, that Spring, Dorr goes into the Rhode Island General Assembly and begins getting involved in a number of other projects. And you don't hear much about slavery from him until 1836, when he introduces a resolution to abolish not only slavery, not only slavery but the slave trade itself in the District of Columbia. And he called it a "national evil" that slavery was allowed to exist and that the slave trade existed and was carried on in the nation's capital. Like a lot of Dorr's resolutions, more progressive resolutions, it was defeated resoundingly.

In February of 1836, Dorr gets involved in a very interesting scenario. He's still a member of the General Assembly, he's only thirty years old at this time, and he gets involved in a debate, in the General Assembly, with Benjamin Hazard, who is this wizened, longtime member of the General Assembly and is essentially, has been Dorr's nemesis since Dorr became a member of the General Assembly in May of 1834. Hazard introduced a series of resolutions and a piece of legislation in February 1836 into the Rhode Island General Assembly that would essentially prohibit Rhode Island anti-slavery societies. Now we've moved away from colonization societies and we're talking about actual abolitionists who want to eliminate the, and free the slaves whatever the consequences are.

There were a lot of anti-slavery societies from around the country who were sending mailings, pamphlets and various publications into the South. And the Southern states and the Southern legislatures saw this as an extremely dangerous scenario. That the Northern states and the abolitionists were potentially going to foment slave insurrection in the Southern states. And the Southern states began to send memorials to state legislatures in North. And they sent a series of them to the Rhode Island General Assembly, asking

that the states legally prohibit Rhode Island abolitionists from sending these mailings into the South. And Dorr immediately rose to oppose Benjamin Hazard on these resolutions. Hazard introduced three or four resolutions, but the final piece of his package was a law that would criminalize any mailing or publication that even hinted at the idea of slave insurrection as a solution to slavery. The country, in 1831, it was still, the South was still reeling from the Nat Turner Rebellion in which he rose up and about 56 whites were killed. It was sort of a random uprising and that put the South in a state of paranoia.

So Dorr in response to Hazard's acquiescence to the Southern memorials to the legislature asking them to deal with the Northern abolitionists, Dorr immediately rose in response and he used a dual argument. He said, at some point he said, "I'm not technically an abolitionist," but he made it very clear that he sympathized with what the abolitionists were attempting to do. He didn't think they would be successful. This is 1836 now, so he's not quite a colonizationist anymore nor is he an abolitionist. He didn't think the abolitionists would be successful, in fact, he thought they would probably do more harm than good, because with the mailings pouring in and the South in a state of fearful paranoia, the potential existed for slave owners to treat their slaves more severely, to enact tougher slave codes and slave laws. Dorr essentially thought the abolitionist movement would backfire. He thought the abolitionists were well-intentioned and he thought if there were a chance of success that he would join them heartily. He called...but his key argument, along with the moral evil of slavery—and he thought slavery was a blight, he used the term "blight," not just on slaves themselves but on slave owners. He thought that it degraded both classes.—But his key argument in opposing Hazard's resolutions on silencing the abolitionists was that it was an infringement of freedom of speech and freedom of expression. And that this ran counter to everything that Rhode Island had stood for and been founded on. Roger Williams came here, he was exiled from Massachusetts with, the founding platform of his whole philosophy was freedom of expression, freedom of conscience. So, Dorr opposed Hazard not on the grounds that slavery should be abolished, but on the grounds that those resolutions were silencing people who had a right to say what their conscience led them to say.

Between February and May 1836, Dorr released a public address, a public invitation for Rhode Island abolitionists to come to the Newport State House in June of 1836 and speak before the General Assembly and air their grievances. And on the very day that they were gathered outside, numbers and numbers of, and the number isn't clear, but a lot of people gathered to speak and voice their concerns about not just the right to address abolition, but just to have their say in front of the General Assembly. Benjamin Hazard basically introduced another resolution and some of his allies, to get the hearing postponed, again, until October 1836. So while however many people are gathered, waiting to be heard, they've now been told they were going to be silenced and not get their chance. And Benjamin Hazard said, "Let them put it in writing and submit it, and we'll put it into the Journal of the General Assembly." Dorr, I think in a hint, in a foreshadowing of what was to come, tried to outmaneuver Hazard by securing the use of the State House the next day so that the people he had invited by a public proclamation could have their time to speak. And

he introduced a resolution into the General Assembly asking for the use of the Newport State House for one day, possibly a few subsequent days, so that anyone who wanted to be heard, could be heard. And unfortunately, again, the General Assembly, led by Benjamin Hazard, the old nemesis, voted down Dorr's resolution and the abolitionists were not, did not have their chance to speak against Hazard's resolutions. So that brings us up to October 1836.

By 1837, Dorr has lost his seat in the Rhode Island General Assembly. It wasn't related to his position on abolition or freedom of speech. But he's out of the legislature, but he's not out of involvement in the public debate over the issue. And at some point between 1836 and 1837, and it's not clear when or how the transformation occurred, Dorr has essentially become an abolitionist. In 1837, he gets an invitation from James G. Birney, the corresponding secretary of the American Anti-Slavery Society, asking Dorr if he would be an agent for the American Anti-Slavery Society. And Dorr's reply was that, "while I sympathize with the cause completely and I see the abolition movement as the last hope for our enslaved countrymen, I think that my best, the best use of my talent is here in Rhode Island working on the suffrage movement." So, again you see the transformation from a colonizationist, to someone who thinks abolition has no chance and can possibly do more harm than good, to someone who thinks it's the last, best hope for our enslaved countrymen. And Dorr continues, while he says he wants, he needs to stay in Rhode Island and work for the suffrage movement and help the disenfranchised, which becomes his ultimate destiny, and why we're here talking about him, he becomes intimately involved with, essentially, the giants of the American abolition movement. By December 1838, Dorr has made a complete transformation from colonizationist to full-fledged abolitionist who thinks that it's the last hope for Americans and for what he calls his "enslaved countrymen." At that point, December 1838, Dorr's involvement with the anti-slavery movement, at least actively and publicly, subsides as he turns his attention towards running for Congress as a Democrat in 1839. What he would have done as a member of Congress, a Northern, anti-slavery Democrat in Congress in 1839, we can only speculate on but I think it would have been very interesting. And then in 1840, the suffrage movement begins and Dorr's time is occupied for the next couple of years with that. And that essentially dominates the last fourteen years of his life until he dies in 1854.

But it's interesting that unlike Lincoln—right through his presidency into the Civil War, Lincoln is still talking about the colonization movement. Lincoln never became what you would consider an abolitionist. He was searching for any solution. Dorr arrived at the solution and I think the process is interesting. Unfortunately, we don't know what happened. Probably, Dorr was open to new ideas. People think he was dogmatic and unchangeable and unyielding. And that's very far from the truth. As we see, he was open and receptive to new ideas and he became involved with the people from the American Anti-Slavery Society. And he was obviously convinced that abolition was the way to go. And it eventually paid dividends, but not for another 23 years.