INTRODUCTION

Richmond, December 1831

William Osburne Goode still had reason to be optimistic. It was true that his motion to reject the abolitionist petition had been overwhelmingly defeated. It was also true that his motion had provoked a heated debate, and true that a debate over such mundane procedural matters was highly unusual for the legislature. Yet ultimately, Goode knew his defeat signified nothing. The petition calling for the emancipation of Virginia’s slaves, along with another less contentious one advocating the removal of the free black population, was simply referred to the Select Committee on the Coloured Population. And, as Goode well knew, the select committee consisted almost entirely of slaveholders, the majority of whom represented Tidewater and Piedmont counties.

Goode had objected to delegate William Roane’s efforts to read aloud the contents of the two petitions before he referred them to committee. The first of these memorials came from Roane’s constituents in Hanover County and called for the removal of all black Virginians, free and slave, in order to redress the increasing imbalance between the white and black populations. The second petition was considerably more inflammatory and openly advocated the gradual emancipation and removal of the slave population. This memorial had been forwarded by the Society of Friends, an organization with a proud history of abolitionist activities. Roane’s attempt to read these petitions was contrary to the normal procedure in the House and his rashness annoyed Goode. This was neither the time nor the place to discuss such a sensitive matter, so Goode put forth a motion to refer the petitions directly without the reading. At this point Vincent Witcher, veteran delegate from Pittsylvania County, questioned the relevance of the petition from the Society of Friends. Witcher believed that it was beyond the scope of the select committee to consider emancipation. Roane disagreed, and a spirited debate over the jurisdiction of the select committee erupted in the House. By the end of the day, Goode had amended his initial motion and called on the legislature to reject outright the abolitionist petition from the Society of Friends. It was this motion that had been overwhelmingly defeated.¹

William Goode was a quintessential representative of the tobacco planter class that had provided Virginia’s political leadership since colonial times. As a young man, he had studied law at the College of William and Mary and then returned to his native Mecklenburg County to open a practice. By 1831, he owned seven slaves and a hundred acres of land bordering the Roanoke River. Upon his father’s death, Goode moved into the family plantation, “Wheatland,” and

¹ *Journal of the House of Delegates and Richmond Enquirer*, December 15 and 17, 1831. See also the Virginia Legislative Petitions, Hanover County, December 14, 1831 and Society of Friends (Charles City), November 24, 1831, Library of Virginia. An interesting synopsis of the Goode’s actions is found in a letter from John Thompson Brown to his wife Mary, dated December 14, 1831, in the Brown, Tucker, Coleman Collection, Swem Library, The College of William and Mary.
cultivated tobacco, wheat, and timber. Here, deep in Southside Virginia, Goode formed an intellectual alliance with his eccentric, Charlotte County neighbor, John Randolph. Together, along with Nathaniel Macon of North Carolina, they organized and chartered Randolph-Macon College in 1830. This small college, initially located in Mecklenburg, would eventually become a bastion of proslavery ideology under the direction of President William A. Smith. Goode had used his influence in the legislature to obtain a charter for the college. Originally elected to the House of Delegates in 1822, by 1831, Goode was serving his eighth consecutive term and was the senior of two representatives from his Southside county.  

His years of experience in the General Assembly assured him that issues were not decided in a day, especially during the opening weeks of the legislature. Goode had confidence in the political process and in his ability to manipulate it. Still, talk of emancipation concerned him. Since the violent slave uprising in August, open criticism of slavery had flourished throughout the Old Dominion. Many citizens had signed petitions calling on the General Assembly to legislate against a variety of nefarious evils associated with the institution. Goode considered such talk irresponsible and any action or debate by the delegates dangerous. He believed that discussing emancipation would give credence to the fear wrought by insurrection and encourage “the African population of the State” to further rebellion. A challenge to slavery would threaten the security of the Commonwealth.

William Goode was not alone in holding this opinion. Twenty-seven other delegates had voted in support of his motion to reject the Friends’ petition. However, the preponderance of
Richmond Enquirer, December 15, 1831. The vote on the motion, which was made on December 14 was reported with a brief summary of the debate in the December 15 edition of the Enquirer. On the 17th, the paper published a more comprehensive transcript of the debate.

Goode’s chief opponent during this preliminary debate was William Brodnax of Dinwiddie County. Brodnax also owned slaves and a plantation in the Piedmont region. Yet he candidly expressed doubt about the morality of human bondage and its future in Virginia. “Let me ask,” challenged Brodnax, “is there one man in Virginia, who does not lament that there was ever a slave in Virginia?” He decried slavery as “the greatest curse that God in his wrath ever inflicted upon a people.” Such strange remarks from a slaveholder may be seen as an anomaly, but such rhetoric was commonplace in Virginia. In the land of Jefferson, people who owned other people often condemned their situation. Brodnax’s statements were unusual not because he lamented the evils of slavery, but because he was ready to consider action against the institution.

In December 1831, Brodnax was not alone. In fact, had William Goode foreseen the eventual course that emancipationists’ arguments would take, he may have been less confident. Brodnax merely argued that the delegates should discuss the future of slavery in Virginia. Other delegates, like Charles Faulkner and William Ballard Preston, possessed more radical ideas. They believed that the public safety necessitated the abolition of slavery in Virginia. This radical emancipationist argument threatened not only slavery, but traditional beliefs about the role of government and the sanctity of property as well.

Still, Goode’s optimism was well-founded. Emancipation had been discussed before but to no avail. Brodnax, in his speech against Goode’s motion, had invoked the legacy of Thomas Jefferson. But Jefferson, like Goode and Brodnax, had been a slaveholder. Slavery was ingrained deep into the structure of Virginia society. As a result, Virginians often struggled intellectually with the paradox of freedom founded upon a system of bondage. They had always found justification for this paradox in the past. And William Goode had no reason to believe that they would not do so again.

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6 Richmond Enquirer, December 17, 1831.