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Elizabeth Dalton
Lindenwood University

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George Sibley's Convictions Concerning Slavery

Elizabeth Dalton

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George Sibley's Convictions Concerning Slavery

In nineteenth century America, a question arose that challenged the relations between neighbors. Culminating in a Civil War, during which brother fought against brother, son against father, over how limited the federal government should be in issues regarding states rights. At the forefront of the debate was the question of slavery. Slavery was becoming a question of morality, of whether or not the black man deserved the same universal rights as the white man. This issue divided a country and states such as Missouri, Kentucky, and Maryland found themselves in a conflict that threatened to tear each individual state's stability.

Important individuals in these Border States became instigators of differing opinions such as George Sibley, who founded Linden Wood College, a school for women in 1827, were expected to take a position on this divisive issue.¹ George Sibley's opinions concerning the enslaved Negro were not radical. They did not call for immediate emancipation nor continued repression of the slave. His convictions were typical of a Whig, rather similar as those opinions of a Presbyterian, and were debated by numerous people. Ultimately, Sibley's views concerning slavery were a reflection of his conservative

¹Charles C. Jones, *George Champlin Sibley: The Prairie Puritan, 1782-1863*, (Independence Missouri: Jackson County Historical Society, 1970) 238-245.

politics. He understood that emancipation was inevitable but did nothing to further propel the change. Instead, he supported the American Colonization Society in hopes of discarding the problem in hopes of removing the black man from American society. His views of this issue are reflected in his various writings and are influenced by various people, political parties, religion, and exceedingly, by his conservative nature.

One of Sibley's family members was no stranger to questioning the morality of slavery. As early as the late 1700s, there were anti-slavery movements, of which, Sibley's grandfather, Samuel Hopkins was a vital part.² Hopkins published a book in 1776 entitled, "In a Dialogue Showing It to be the Duty and Interest of the American States to Emancipate All Their African Slaves," claiming that his colony, Rhode Island, had more slaves in its borders than any other of the British colonies. Hopkins thought of the American slave as a weapon of survival for colonists' struggle for political freedom from Britain. He understood that if the colonists freed the Negro, they would become fighters for the American cause as an expression of gratitude. He continued to fight for abolition through the 1770s and contributed to the Rhode Island anti-slavery position.

²Charles C. Jones, *George Champlin Sibley: The Prairie Puritan, 1782-1863*, (Independence Missouri: Jackson County Historical Society, 1970), 10.

Sibley made a career out of Indian relations in the late 1700s and the early nineteenth century. During which, he met and married Mary Easton, a socially outstanding woman of her age of fifteen.³ She agreed in 1815 to the lifetime career that she had, "eminently undertaken, to make me [Sibley] happy."⁴ Although she had agreed to make Sibley a proud husband, her views on certain issues, such as slavery, were very different than those of her husband's. Mary Sibley equated slavery as a moral issue.⁵ In her diary, she makes references to the various articles that she had written for *The Observer*, a religious newspaper published by Elijah Lovejoy that eventually was regarded as abolitionist propaganda. On February 16, 1834, Mary wrote that she had penned an article for *The Observer*, referencing her opinion concerning slavery as she hoped that, "the stain on our national character be removed."⁶

Mary Sibley thought that a master should teach their servants the ways of the Bible. She took it upon herself to teach their, at one point, six slaves to read and initiated

³ Charles C. Jones, *George Champlin Sibley: The Prairie Puritan, 1782-1863*, (Independence Missouri: Jackson County Historical Society, 1970), 113-114.

⁴ Charles C. Jones, *George Champlin Sibley: The Prairie Puritan, 1782-1863*, (Independence Missouri: Jackson County Historical Society, 1970), 113, taken from George Sibley letter to Samuel Sibley, August 20, 1815, Sibley Mss.

⁵ Mary Sibley Diary, circa 1832, Mary Ambler Archives, Lindenwood University, February 16, 1834.

⁶ Mary Sibley Diary, circa 1832, Mary Ambler Archives, Lindenwood University, February 16, 1834.

schooling for her slaves.⁷ Mary felt a moral obligation to end slavery yet because there was no end in sight, she settled for some type of education of her servants. George and Mary seemed to agree that emancipated slaves should have the skills needed to progress themselves and their family in society, thus counteractively enabling said society's progress. Mary, however, seemed to view this proposed quasi-assimilation into American society as one that concerned missionary work.

Though Mary was his wife, one might assume that they spent as much time together as apart throughout their marriage. Throughout some of Sibley's Common Place books, Mary is mentioned in passing. She is always traveling by herself to visit friends in St. Louis or he, by himself, to go to Whig conventions or various other places in the United States.⁸ Thus, it can be understood that the two's views on the subject are very different. Mary Sibley might have influenced George Sibley's eventual emancipation of their slaves before emancipation was made legal, and his eventual recognition of the severity of the issue.

Sibley's divisive views on slavery reflect the debate within the Presbyterian Church, of which he was a prominent member, at the time. During the Antebellum era, there were

⁷ Charles C. Jones, *George Champlin Sibley: The Prairie Puritan, 1782-1863*, (Independence Missouri: Jackson County Historical Society, 1970), 232.

⁸ Sibley's Diary, circa 1859, Sibley Mss. Missouri Historical Society Archives.

separate views regarding religious opinion concerning slavery among Protestant leaders. Some preachers made it known that slavery was indeed a sin as stated by one that, "no man can rightly reduce another man to slavery."⁹ They wanted those of the religion to admit that slavery in its present state was very much conflicted and morally wrong, thus they demanded, "the speediest possible remedy."¹⁰ These leaders believed that slavery was absolutely a moral issue and wanted the Presbyterian Church to acknowledge owning slaves as sinful behavior.

Other leaders of the church believed that slavery was merely a political issue and the church should not offer any opinion concerning the ordeal. As stated in *The Presbyterian Magazine*, "the condition of slavery is a question concerning civil rights and the relations of capital and labour and is therefore essentially a political not a religious question."¹¹ These people thought that the church should have no opinion concerning slavery. Slave holding was not at all immoral as, in their thoughts, that specific issue was not to be debated within the church. The church had no control over the abolitionist movement because the issue was in the hands of each individual state of the Union.

⁹ Van C. Rensselaer, *The Presbyterian Magazine*, vol. 57, Philadelphia: Joseph M. Wilson, 1858, (66).

¹⁰ Van C. Rensselaer, *The Presbyterian Magazine*, vol. 57, Philadelphia: Joseph M. Wilson, 1858, (66).

¹¹ Van C. Rensselaer, *The Presbyterian Magazine*, vol. 57, Philadelphia: Joseph M. Wilson, 1858, (67).

Coinciding with the ideology that slavery was not a moral issue, other leaders of the Presbyterian Church believed that the slave holder should only emancipate his slaves if it was determined that the slave can provide for himself and his family by enabling a productive skill. In *The Presbyterian Magazine*, one pastor states that, "no slaveholder has the moral right to keep his slaves in bondage if they are prepared for freedom, and he can wisely set him free."¹² These divisive issues culminate in one religious journal of the time. If a group of individuals could agree on the specifics of their faith in a God, yet could not agree on a substantial issue of slavery puts into perspective how varied the views of Presbyterians were. This gives heed to the increasing tension between all of those living in the Union.

George Sibley remarks numerous times throughout his life that he believed that slavery was not a matter of virtue.¹³ Thus, it can be assumed that he agreed with the view held by some Presbyterians that slavery was an issue to be decided by the various state governments. Sibley also remarks how the black man is subordinate to his master and cannot fully

¹² Van C. Rensselaer, *The Presbyterian Magazine*, vol. 57, Philadelphia: Joseph M. Wilson, 1858, (529).

¹³ Charles C. Jones, *George Champlin Sibley: The Prairie Puritan, 1782-1863*, (Independence Missouri: Jackson County Historical Society), 1970, 238.

assimilate into society.¹⁴ Thus, it seems that the only answer as to why he freed his slave Baltimore and his wife was that he felt that the two could be positive additions to society. Therefore, Sibley, also agreed with the opinion of those within the Church that felt that the slave should be freed if he had the tools to advance himself as a skilled worker.

One somewhat amusing attribute of George Sibley was his friendship with avid abolitionist, Elijah Lovejoy. Lovejoy was a notorious publisher of the anti-slavery newspaper, *The Observer* where his and other abolitionists' opinions were published repeatedly.¹⁵ His well-versed ideology eventually culminated with his death. During the 1830s, Sibley subscribed to *The Observer* yet, as the anti-slavery propaganda began to heavily mount, Sibley's conservative views on slavery were threatened leaving an ultimatum between Lovejoy's friendship and complete ignorance of the issue of slavery as a moral one. In a letter to Sibley from Lovejoy, Lovejoy confidently assumes that Sibley will conform to his abolitionist views and emphasizes that slavery is in fact, a moral issue equating slave owners to

¹⁴ Charles C. Jones, *George Champlin Sibley: The Prairie Puritan, 1782-1863*, (Independence Missouri: Jackson County Historical Society), 1970, 284.

¹⁵ Merton L. Dillion. 1999. Elijah Lovejoy. In *Dictionary of Missouri Biography*, edited by Lawrence O. Christensen, William E. Foley, Gary R. Kremer, and Kenneth H. Winn. 503-505. Columbia Missouri: University of Missouri Press.

sinners.¹⁶ In response to Lovejoy's confident appraisal of Sibley's opinion on slavery, Sibley replies by letter, cancelling his subscription to *The Observer* as, "so much in *The Observer* is seriously injurious to the cause of truth religion and sound philanthropy."¹⁷ He continues, acknowledging that many Christians, not just himself, have different ideas about slavery than Lovejoy and he could not longer subscribe to a radical newspaper filled with ideas concerning the abolitionist mission. When the question of the morality of slavery is presented to Sibley, he reacts by avoiding the issue and lessening a friendship.

Even though George Sibley is known throughout St. Charles as the founder of now present day Lindenwood University, he was also active in local politics as well and attempted election for state level politics.¹⁸ When the question arose of Missouri's application for statehood, Sibley acknowledged that the issue of the greatest importance was the slavery question. Sibley did not oppose slavery, but in 1819 he favored the exclusion or restrictions on slavery in Missouri. He favored this to further preserve the Union's stability as, "the exclusion of slavery from a new state would save it from great trouble and possible

¹⁶ "To George Sibley from Elijah Lovejoy," Lindenwood Collection, Missouri Historical Society, Box 65, File 0054. April 27, 1837.

¹⁷ "To Elijah Lovejoy from George Sibley" Lindenwood Collection. Missouri Historical Society, box 65, File 0054. June 12, 1837.

¹⁸ Charles C. Jones, *George Champlin Sibley: The Prairie Puritan, 1782-1863*, (Independence Missouri: Jackson County Historical Society, 1970), 244-251.

division in the future."¹⁹ Eventual division of the Union was an opinion that Sibley carried with him throughout the rest of his life.

Sibley was an active member of the newly founded Whig party and an dedicated supporter of Henry Clay. The party was not long lasting as it was full of members who, like Sibley, had different opinions as to what direction the party should forward itself. One staunch division was the choice of the proper candidate to head the party to the presidential election in 1842. Most members advocated for Andrew Jackson, whereas others supported Henry Clay. Also, the issue of slavery contributed to the party's demise as it could not settle on an answer to the increasingly *important* question of the issue of slavery and constantly avoided the issue. In fact, in the Whig Almanac of the years of 1838-1868, there is no absolute reference to the party's general opinion concerning the Negro question though there is detailed information of the party's other positions such as the question of a National Bank and foreign relations.²⁰

¹⁹ Charles C. Jones, *George Champlin Sibley: The Prairie Puritan, 1782-1863*, (Independence Missouri: Jackson County Historical Society, 1970), 238-240.

²⁰ *The Tribune Almanac for the Years 1838-1868, Inclusive; Comprehending the Politician's Register and the Whig Almanac, Containing Annual Election Returns by States and Counties, Lists of Presidents, Cabinets, Judges of the Supreme Court, Foreign Ministers, Governors of States, &c, with Summaries of Acts of Congress, and other Political Statements*, vol. 1, New York: The New York Tribune, 1868.

Sibley ran for election to Missouri's state Senate three times through 1833 and 1844.²¹ His differed ideologies were appreciated but never won him the majority of the vote. During his campaign in 1840, Sibley lightly and quickly addressed his audience remarking about the issue of emancipation, "Abolition- this silly, though mischievous humbug, never has received, nor ever can receive, the least support or countenance from me."²² Sibley acknowledges this subject but then brushes it off as of little to no importance. This is reminiscent of his party's attempted ignorance of the issue.

This restricted approach to abolitionism is rather remarkable as Sibley numerous times throughout his Common Place books that slavery would eventually cause a divide through the United States.²³ Yet, in his campaign speeches he glosses over the important issue. It was though in efforts to secure votes, he avoided the pressing issue as a political strategy that is still used in present day politics. These speeches are misleading though, as Sibley did assume direct opinions of slavery in the 1820s and what should be done about the issue, eventually freeing a slave and participating in the American Colonization Society.

²¹Charles C. Jones, *George Champlin Sibley: The Prairie Puritan, 1782-1863*, (Independence Missouri: Jackson County Historical Society, 1970), 246-254.

²²George Sibley Campaign Speech, circa June 1840, George and Mary Sibley Collection, box 0001, file 7, Mary Ambler Archives, Lindenwood University.

²³Charles C. Jones, *George Champlin Sibley: The Prairie Puritan, 1782-1863*, (Independence Missouri: Jackson County Historical Society, 1970), 240.

Sibley was a great supporter of the American Colonization Society, perhaps as a result of associating himself with the Presbyterian Church.²⁴ He expressed these views in the Missouri Intelligencer in 1820 saying,

"So long as there are blacks among us, so long I think they ought to be held slaves. So soon as they are freed, so soon, I think they ought to be sent out of the state and out of the United States."²⁵

This view of returning slaves to Africa was rather normal. In 1844, Sibley took the freed slaves of the deceased Thomas Lindsay, to New Orleans to be shipped to Liberia via the American Colonization Society, in accordance to Lindsay's willed request. The freeing of slaves at one's deathbed seemed to be rather traditional. In an American Colonization Society Journal, it was noted that a Mrs. Ann Harris freed ten slaves through the Liberia movement after she passed.²⁶

This was a conservative solution for any Southerner who sought to free his slaves as they, "found in colonization the means of removing them from white society and thereby escaped possible censure from neighbors who disliked having free Negroes in their community."²⁷ Furthermore, the colonization movement

²⁴ Charles C. Jones, *George Champlin Sibley: The Prairie Puritan, 1782-1863*, (Independence Missouri: Jackson County Historical Society, 1970), 232.

²⁵ Charles C. Jones, *George Champlin Sibley: The Prairie Puritan, 1782-1863*, (Independence Missouri: Jackson County Historical Society, 1970), 241.

²⁶ *The African Repository and Colonial Journal*, vol. XIII, no. 5, May 1837, (144).

²⁷ Charles C. Jones, *George Champlin Sibley: The Prairie Puritan, 1782-1863*, (Independence Missouri: Jackson County Historical Society, 1970), 233.

allowed Sibley to maintain his conservative ideology. This movement served as a middle ground for Sibley and the political divisiveness, as he did not agree with abolitionists or those who believed that nothing should have been done concerning the issue of slavery. It also could be assumed that the colonization movement served as one that allowed Sibley to come to terms with moral issues with the subject. Though he maintained that slavery was not a morale issue but a political one, his stance on the colonization movement allowed him to still regard the black man as inferior yet still support gradual emancipation.

Sibley discontinued his diary in his later life but it is known that he emancipated his slave Baltimore and his wife, Rachel in 1859, while still sighting that, "the best position for the Negro for their own good, is that of domestic slavery and strict subordination to the white race."²⁸ It was as though, Sibley, as he had made evident since the 1820s, had known that widespread emancipation was inevitable. His prediction of Union division reached its zenith at the start of the Civil War. He understood that slavery was an issue that divided a country, thus, in order to salvage his United States, he supported the Union but died before the end of the war in 1863.

²⁸Charles C. Jones, *George Champlin Sibley: The Prairie Puritan, 1782-1863*, (Independence Missouri: Jackson County Historical Society, 1970), 284 taken from Sibley's Diary, September 1, 1859, Sibley Ms.

George Sibley lived during a time period that is still debated today. How much the question of slavery contributed to the Union's dissolve in the 1860s has plagued historians to this day. Sibley felt it to be an issue of so much importance that he prophesized an eventual conflict would result out of continued heated disagreement. Even though he realized its importance, he still did not take any initiative to resolve the problem. He continued to think that the black man was subordinate to his master yet he supported the Union during the Civil War. His opinions of slavery privately seemed to dictate his actions yet publicly were ignored, all of which were influenced by various organizations and people around him. He found solace in the American Colonization Society as an answer to his debate within and continued to stand on the outskirts of abolition, acknowledging its contribution to the divided country but refusing to further propel the stagnant issue.

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