

Edward Coles: Forgotten Antislavery Hero

I began my research into Edward Coles looking for information on a Virginian who freed his slaves. That was all I knew of the man. As I read about Edward Coles, I came to realize he was much more than just someone who emancipated his slaves. He was influential man who was linked to some of most historic men in American history. He was someone who insisted America live up to the ideals listed in the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution and pushed many of the founding fathers to do the same. He fought for freedoms and legislative protections for slaves and led one of the first successful campaigns to mobilize large numbers of Americans to oppose slavery.

Edward Coles was born in Albemarle County, Virginia to John Coles II and Rebecca Elizabeth Tucker Coles in 1786. The Coles family was a prominent family in Virginia, owning a plantation with about 70 slaves. The Coles' social circle included connections to the most prominent Virginians in American history. Edward Coles' father, John Coles, was brother in law to Patrick Henry. John Coles' niece was Dolley Paine Todd, who went on to marry James Madison. The Coles plantation was a few hours ride from Thomas Jefferson's Monticello and James Madison's home at Montpelier. Though not as well off as their esteemed neighbors, the Coles family was considered a prominent Virginia family deeply entrenched in the slave culture of Virginia at this time. As Edward Coles put it "I was born in the very bosom of negro slavery" (Ress 22).

The schooling of Edward Coles consisted of private tutors who focused on arithmetic, Latin and French. Coles would go on to attend college at Hampden-Sydney College. Coles

found Hampden –Sydney College academically unfulfilling because of the college’s new focus on theological studies. Coles had no plans to become a preacher and desired classes on mathematics and surveying, which the college then did not offer. Coles decided to attend the College of William and Mary. It was here that Coles became serious about academics and delved into the writers of the Enlightenment whose work provided the intellectual underpinnings of the American Revolution. It was at the College of William and Mary where Coles’ “attention first awakened to the state of master and slave” (Ress 26). Coles recounts the specific teacher that awakened his attention; Bishop James Madison, President of the college and second cousin to the President James Madison. Bishop Madison was not a radical and never openly spoke of opposition to the backbone of Virginia’s economy, slavery. But his focus on the writings of Locke, Paine, and Rousseau helped Coles form his ideas about America’s true ideals.

The importance of Bishop Madison as a decisive figure in Edward Coles’ life was heavily stressed in the books *Governor Edward Coles and the Vote to Forbid Slavery in Illinois* and *Crusade Against Slavery: Edward Coles, Pioneer of Freedom*. Bishop Madison is portrayed as second father to his students, which included Coles. President John Tyler, a classmate of Coles and student of Bishop Madison would later recall, “No one who attended the college at the time he presided over it has failed to acknowledge him as a second father.”

The Bishop helped Coles marry an enlightenment vision of a life of reason with religious faith. (Ress 27). The Bishop taught that if God dictated morality, reason revealed it, and logic demanded virtue of governments and men (a very liberal view for a southern Episcopalian

Bishop at this time). Bishop Madison stressed to his students that they must resist corruption, vice and tyranny and to strive for virtue (Ress 27). Coles picked up the Bishop's call to strive for virtue. Coles believed the pursuit of virtue was only possible when men were free to choose to pursue it. Coles believed that in a true republic all men must have the same chance to pursue virtue. Thus began Edward Coles' call to end slavery.

Though Bishop Madison ignited Coles abolitionist spirit, he himself could never go as far as Coles in his antislavery feelings. Bishop Madison, as President of the College of William and Mary, owned and sold slaves that belonged to the college. And just as many in the south at this time, the Bishop's view of slavery slowly changed over time. Fear of slave revolts was running rampant through the south. The question of slavery and how to end it was not an easy question to answer. Coles recalled the Bishop's answer when he asked the Bishop how he could lecture on the rights of man and hold slaves at the same time- how can a man be a property of a another man? The Bishop answered "that it could not be rightfully done and that slavery was a state of things that could not be justified on principle and could only be tolerated in our country, by our finding it in existence and the difficulty of getting rid of it"(Ress 29). I believe the Bishop's view sums up the majority of the south's view when it came to slavery at this time.

Coles states the Bishop admitted to him slavery was wrong and America needed to move in that direction but, "right now, it was the law and America is a nation of laws. America is a republic where citizens can change the laws but it is also a republic where citizens were obliged to obey the laws" (Ress30). Coles could not reconcile the laws allowing slavery with his beliefs, "People should not tolerate a state of things that are in direct violation of their great

fundamental doctrines. I cannot consent to hold property I have no right to and which was not and could not be property, according to my understanding of the rights and duties of man – and therefore determined that I would not and could not hold my fellowman as a slave” (Ress30).

In 1808 Coles’ chance to put his beliefs into action arose. Coles’ father had died and he inherited a nine hundred acre plantation in Virginia and twenty slaves. Coles immediately began floating the idea of freeing his slaves and hiring them to work on his plantation as freed men. Friends and family did not take kindly to this idea. Coles’ action would create problems for his friends and neighbors. Coles’ act of manumission might create unrealistic expectations among slaves on neighboring plantations that would be freed. This could create anger and resentment among the slaves and among the elite social circle with which the Coles family associated. Also at issue was Virginia law; all freed slaves were required to leave the state of Virginia. Coles would have to pay the expense of moving his newly freed slaves, which would cost him his entire inheritance.

Given the problems associated with freeing his slaves in Virginia, Coles began to look to the Northwest Territories where slavery had been banned by the Ordinance of 1787. Instead of following his plans of emancipation, his brother encouraged him to become President James Madison’s private secretary, a job Coles’ brother Isaac was stepping down from. Encouraged by James Monroe to take the job, Edward Coles decided to delay his manumission journey and accept the job.

Coles worked for Madison as private secretary for six years, from 1809 to 1815. During this time Coles held to antislavery convictions and tried to enlist the help of President James

Madison and Thomas Jefferson to the cause. Coles was unsuccessful in trying to convert President Monroe to the antislavery cause. He continued to lobby President Madison throughout his life, trying to convince him to free his slaves in his will. Coles was unsuccessful.

Unable to convert President Madison to his antislavery cause, Coles turned to a letter writing campaign to Thomas Jefferson, seeking Jefferson's endorsement for a plan for gradual emancipation. Jefferson complimented Coles on his convictions and seemed to endorse a plan for gradual emancipation; "Yet the hour of emancipation is advancing, in the march of time. It will come; and whether brought on by the generous energy of our own minds; or by the bloody process of St Domingo," Jefferson tried to dissuade Coles from emancipating his slaves ; "In the meantime are you right in abandoning this property and your country with it? I think not. The laws do not permit us to turn them loose, if that were for their good." Jefferson refused to join Coles' crusade for gradual emancipation. "This enterprise is for the young; for those who can follow it up, and beat through to its consumption. It shall have all my prayers, and these are the only weapons of an old man."

Coles remained resolute in his dream to emancipate his slaves in the Northwest Territories. In 1815 Coles quit his job as private secretary to President Madison and traveled to the Illinois Territory. Illinois was in the process of creating its state constitution, a requirement to join the Union. Coles attended the state Constitutional Convention to make sure Illinois was going to be a free state.

The issue of slavery proved to be a difficult issue at the convention. Illinois was populated by mainly backcountry farmers from Virginia and the Carolinas and settlers from the

new states of Kentucky and Tennessee. The attitudes and politics they carried into Illinois were the attitudes and politics of the South. Settlers from the south who had come to Illinois continued to bring their slaves with them. Also, salt mines in southern Illinois depended on slave labor. Proslavery delegates argued the salt mines would be forced to close without the work of the slaves. Furthermore complicating the issue was the fact that Illinois settlers did not like the Northwest Ordinance of 1787 dictating the slave status of the state to them. They wanted the people of Illinois to decide. "The people here are utterly regardless of ordinances and will take up the subject in their own hands, and say they will make a treaty with Congress as an independent state" wrote Elias Pym Fordham, a delegate at the state constitutional convention (Ress 65). The constitution passed in 1818 and was intentionally ambiguous when it came to slavery. It stated neither slavery nor involuntary servitude shall *hereafter* be introduced into this state, slaves remained allowed to work the salt mines and there was no language in it that outright forbid slavery in Illinois. Illinois would become the only state formed from the old northwest territory that did not ban slavery in its new constitution (Ress 74). The state's new constitution drew complaints from national politicians. Congressman James Tallmadge from New York complained of the constitution's ambiguity when he stated it did not sufficiently ban slavery (Ress 80).

The assembly also quickly enacted a law that banned free blacks from settling in Illinois without a certificate of emancipation and passed another law that prohibited slave owners from bringing their slaves to Illinois for the purpose of setting them free, unless the owner posted a hefty bond (Ress 74). Coles, unaware of these laws, believed Illinois was destined to

become a free state and decided Illinois would be his final destination for his manumission plan.

By the spring of 1819, Coles and his seventeen slaves were on their way to Illinois. In one of the most powerful selections from the book *Governor Edward Coles and the Vote to Forbid Slavery in Illinois*, Coles described the moment he told his slaves they were going to be free. “The effect upon them was electrical. They stared at me and then at each other, as if doubting the accuracy or reality of what they had heard. In breathless silence they stood before me, unable to utter a word but with countenances beaming with expressions that no words could convey, and which no language could describe. As they began to see the truth of what they had heard, and realize their situation, there came on a kind of hysterical giggling laugh. After a pause of intense and unutterable emotion, bathed in tears, and with tremulous voices, they gave vent to their gratitude and implored the blessing of God on me.” Coles then gave the newly freed slaves their own land for farms in Illinois.

Unbeknownst to Coles, there was a movement forming in Illinois to allow slavery. A proslavery movement was planning on amending the state constitution to allow slavery. Coles decided he must take action to stop this movement and decided to run for governor of Illinois in 1822. Coles ran against another antislavery candidate and two proslavery candidates. Coles received a third of the vote, which was enough to win the office of governor. Unfortunately for Coles the Lieutenant Governor and legislature were all controlled by proslavery candidates.

Once in office, the movement to call a Constitutional Convention to rewrite the Illinois Constitution continued. Coles met the movement head on with his first speech to the state

legislature. Coles told the legislature "I earnestly recommend to the legislature that just and equitable provisions be made for the abrogation of slavery in the State" (Ress 100). Coles' direct attack on proslavery forces made him the de facto leader of the antislavery forces within Illinois.

Coles' time as governor was focused on fighting the proslavery movement in Illinois. Coles organized the opposition to the convention, donated his salary as governor to purchase pamphlets describing the horrors of slavery, and enlisted the help of his powerful friends, which included Nicholas Biddle, to purchase a newspaper in Illinois. He published antislavery articles in the newspaper under pseudonyms in Illinois' newspapers. Coles was deeply engaged in the antislavery struggle and concluded it was "necessary that the public mind should be enlightened on the moral and public effects of slavery." Coles' campaign was successful and in a statewide vote on August 2, 1824, the call for a new Constitutional convention was defeated.

Coles continued his crusade for better treatment and more humane laws for blacks but continued to suffer harassment from the legislature. Madison County officials brought a suit against Coles, claiming he never paid the bond that was required when he freed his slaves. The case would make it to the state Supreme Court, who cleared Coles from paying the two thousand dollar penalty. The 1824 referendum victory proved to be the last political victory of Edward Coles' career. After completing his term as governor, he failed to win a seat into Congress as an anti-Jackson candidate.

The importance of Edward Coles and his campaign to keep Illinois a free state remains a little known but significant event in antebellum America. I believe Edward Coles' anti-slavery

campaign was one of the first in America and one of the first direct referendums concerning slavery. Vermont banned slavery in 1777 and Ohio in 1802, based on acts of Constitutional Conventions. Pennsylvania's legislature banned slavery in 1780. Massachusetts' emancipation came through court cases which decided the state constitution declaration that "men are born free and equal" effectively banned slavery in the state. Not until the election of 1860 would there be a direct referendum on slavery like there was in Illinois.

The knowledge I have gained about the history of Edward Coles can easily be translated into my classroom lessons. The story of Edward Coles provides a good prompt for a discussion about what one is willing to give up for his moral convictions and having the courage to follow your convictions. This could be done through analysis of the correspondence between Coles and Thomas Jefferson and a discussion concerning Jefferson; did he prize his style of life more than his moral convictions?

Works Cited

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