

The Dorr War: Thomas W. Dorr Addresses the People of Rhode Island

Author: Thomas W. Dorr

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Annotation:

The most significant political innovation of the early nineteenth century was the abolition of property qualifications for voting and officeholding. Following the English principle that voters had to have a stake in the community, the American colonies generally required citizens to own a certain minimum amount of land in order to qualify to vote. Aspirants for public office were required to meet higher property qualifications. In South Carolina, a representative had to own at least five hundred acres of land and ten slaves. A number of colonies also imposed a religious test. In Connecticut, New Hampshire, New Jersey, and Vermont, no atheist, Jew or Roman Catholic could hold public office.

By 1860, however, only two states, Rhode Island and South Carolina, still imposed property qualifications for voting, while another five states--Delaware, Georgia, Massachusetts, North Carolina, Pennsylvania, and Rhode Island--restricted voting to male taxpayers. All other states and territories had adopted universal white manhood suffrage--a sharp contrast to England, which only with Reform Bill of 1832 gave most middle-class men the right to vote.

In most states, the transition from property qualifications to universal white manhood suffrage occurred gradually, without violence and with surprisingly little dissension. In Rhode Island, however, the issue provoked an episode known as the "Dorr War."

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Fellow Citizens,

We desire...to disclaim, in the outset, any design or desire of offering the slightest disrespect to the memory, or the character of our predecessors, who first established that scheme of government, into which we are now anxious to carry the work of reformation. If any pride of ancestry may be indulged in this country, the people of Rhode Island may honorably exult in those noble forefathers, who abandoned their native home, and again, their adopted land, and encountered the dangers of a savage wilderness, for the sake of that great experiment of Religious Liberty, in the blessings of which we all participate....

Nor is the business, fellow-citizens, in which we are engaged, a mere narrow party-affair, got up to promote the sordid views of personal aggrandizement. The aspect of our assembly, composed, as it is, of men of all the political divisions in the State, affords sufficient evidence to the contrary....

We begin by inquiring whether it be consistent with the spirit of the Declaration of American Independence, and becoming the character of Rhode Island Republicans, any longer to acknowledge the charter of a British King as a Constitution of civil government?...

The Charter is farther essentially defective in having affixed a certain Representation to each town for all time to come; thus making no provision for the changes that might happen.... The town of Jamestown, for instance, sends one Representative to every 18 freemen...and the city of Providence but one Representative to every 275 freemen.... An

inequality of representation like this is too unjust to be much longer tolerated.... This inequality of representation has had the effect of placing the majority of the qualified voters in this State, under the control of the minority....

Strange as it is, the State of Rhode Island, so far famed for Religious liberty, seems to have become insensible to the claims of Political liberty. It is the only State in this great Republican Confederacy in which the People have not limited the power of their Legislature by a written Constitution; the only State in the Union in which the People suffer a fair and equal representation of their interests to be defeated by a rotten borough system....

We contend then That a participation in the choice of those who make and administer laws is a Natural Right; which cannot be abridged nor suspended any farther than the greatest good of the greatest number imperative requires....

It is...objected to the doctrine of a natural right of suffrage, that Minors and Females are excluded from political privileges.... The restriction upon minors does not conflict in the least with any natural right; it acknowledges their rights, and only decides the period at which they shall commence and be exercised....

With regard to the exclusion of women from the exercise of political power, we are far enough from denying to them the possession of natural rights. It is well known that they formerly exercised the elective franchise in one of the States of this Union--New Jersey; and now that they have ceased to do so, the suspension of their rights rests, not upon any decree of mere force, but upon a just consideration of the best good of society, including that of the sex itself. Their own assent, it should be added, confirms this arrangement of their natural protectors; and being fully aware that the dignity and purity of their sex, character and example would be soon impaired in the conflicts of party strife, they have wisely consented to forego the nominal exercise of political power, and to rule mankind by the only absolute authority which is consistent with their greatest happiness....

Are those citizens who by an extension of suffrage would be admitted to vote, such a class of persons as are unfitted by their character to participate in the political privileges which they claim? We wish this question to be fairly met. Enough has been said in vague and general terms, about "unwholesome citizens," "persons not to be safely trusted," "without property and vicious"--about "protecting the sound part of the community against those who have nothing at stake in society".... Let those who use this language come out and say, if they will venture the assertion, that the body of traders and mechanics, and professional men, and sons of landholders, are the base and corrupt persons who are aimed at in these sweeping denunciations.

Source: Gilder Lehrman Institute

Additional information: Thomas W. Dorr, "An Address to the People of Rhode Island"