Richard Heath Dabney:  
A Virginian in Indiana, 1886-1889

Howard F. McMains*

The young Virginian went west reluctantly in 1886, but Indiana University had offered Richard Heath Dabney an appointment to its faculty and he had accepted. For three years he would live in Indiana as an estranged southerner, academic historian, and civil service reformer who believed that honest men in this world have a duty to speak out and a work of leadership to perform. In time, however, his loathing for a university president he thought a "rascal" and contempt for "Hoosierdom in general" would leave him discontented. When his beliefs and discontent prompted him to speak out about unsavory aspects of Hoosier politics during the 1888 election, the professor from Virginia became controversial. To many persons in Indiana he became simply "that man Dabney."

Richard Heath Dabney was a Virginian by heritage rather than birth. His grandfather was Thomas S. G. Dabney, a planter descended from over a century of Virginians. After suffering financial losses in the early 1830s, Thomas Dabney moved his family and slaves to Mississippi, where he established Burleigh, a four-thousand acre plantation. With advanced farming methods and five hundred slaves, he made Burleigh into an operation

---

* Howard F. McMains, a resident of Noblesville, Indiana, received the Ph.D. degree in history from Indiana University and has written on early twentieth-century American history. He wishes to thank Professor Robert H. Ferrell of Indiana University, Bloomington, for reading an earlier version of this article.

1 Richard Heath Dabney to David Starr Jordan (telegram), June 8, 1886, Indiana University Board of Trustees' Minutes, June 8, 1886 (Indiana University Archives, Bloomington).


INDIANA MAGAZINE OF HISTORY, LXXXII (December, 1986). "1986, Trustees of Indiana University.
RICHARD HEATH DABNEY, 1888

Courtesy Indiana University Archives, Bloomington
supporting his large family in luxury. Unfortunately he co-signed notes for a friend who became bankrupt during the Civil War, and in 1866 creditors sued Dabney and sold Burleigh at auction. Dabney kept an interest in the plantation and for years worked to pay his debts, often facing poverty to do so. When he cleared them in 1882, he moved sadly to Baltimore, a city "full of poor Virginians made poor by the war," where he died in 1885 at the patriarchal age of eighty-seven.3

Just before Thomas Dabney went to Mississippi in 1835, his wife had borne him a son whom they named Virginius. Educated at Burleigh by tutors, Virginius Dabney then attended school in Richmond, traveled for a year in Europe, and studied at the University of Virginia. After college he moved to Memphis where he practiced law and married. In 1860 his wife died giving birth to their son Richard Heath. Virginius Dabney served in the Confederate army, remarried following the war, and during the 1870s and 1880s operated boys schools in Virginia, New Jersey, and New York City. In the 1880s he also worked as an editorial writer for a New York newspaper and wrote The Story of Don Miff, a successful novel. He never lived the antebellum planter's life of his father, though in his "often unpractical attitude toward life" he aspired to do so.4 His son Heath Dabney later displayed traits of both his grandfather and father.

Although he spent little of his youth in the Old Dominion, it was inevitable that Heath Dabney would attend the University of Virginia. His best friend at the university was a Presbyterian parson's son, Thomas Woodrow Wilson. The two remained in touch for years, even after Wilson became President. After receiving an M.A. in 1881 Dabney taught for a year at his father's New York Latin school and then studied in Europe at Munich, Berlin, and Heidelberg. In Berlin his lifelong tendency to outspokenness appeared: when the historian Heinrich von Treitschke made pronouncements about the United States with which Dabney disagreed, Dabney described them as nonsense. He was never to suffer fools gladly.5 He enjoyed himself in Germany, claiming he went a year without drinking water, and that he washed down the abundant food "with the foaming 'Solace of

---

3 Susan Dabney Smedes, Memorials of a Southern Planter, edited by Fletcher Green (1887; reprint, New York, 1965), xxxi-xliii; Thomas Dabney to Emmeline Dabney Walker, December 8, 1882, ibid., 285.
4 Dictionary of American Biography, s.v. "Virginius Dabney"; Virginius Dabney, Across the Years: Memoirs of a Virginian (Garden City, N.Y., 1978), 2-3. The latter is an autobiography by Richard Heath Dabney's son, who was named for his grandfather.
5 Virginius Dabney, Across the Years, 29.
Gambrinus' in whatever quantities . . . were dictated by the thirst of the moment." His last five months in Germany were spent at Heidelberg to work on "the home-stretch" for his Ph.D. in history. After he finished his degree in 1885, he returned to New York and began to search for a teaching post. In March, 1886, he gave lectures at Washington and Lee College that were published two years later as *Causes of the French Revolution.*

Heath Dabney worked hard for a degree that few Americans possessed at that time because he believed it would make it easier for him to obtain a teaching position. His friend Wilson, then at Bryn Mawr College, advised him that a Ph.D. was "almost indispensable" in obtaining a position because history was taught "in such a ridiculously, such a shamefully small number of colleges in this country." He also promised to alert Dabney if he heard of any position becoming available. As it happened, a position came searching for Wilson instead. David Starr Jordan, a young biologist who had become president of Indiana University in the Midwest's hinterlands at Bloomington, approached Wilson saying that he sought an academic specialist in history for his faculty. When Wilson turned down his offer Jordan confidentially asked him to recommend "some young and rising man, who has the right kind of stuff in him." Wilson immediately recommended his friend and fellow Virginian with a Heidelberg degree.

From the time Heath Dabney came to Bloomington to interview with Jordan, he was dubious about his chances of being given the position. He afterwards believed, incorrectly, that President Jordan "saw something about me . . . that he didn't like." Jordan in fact saw much about the brash young man that he did like. Although Jordan did offer the position to another, when that man declined, Jordan and the trustees of Indiana University offered it to Dabney. Nonetheless, Dabney wrote to Wilson that "the Hoosiers have treated me in a manner which we Southerners, with our effete notions of honor and straightforwardness, would call anything but high-toned." If another position had been available, he would not have accepted Indiana,
WOODROW WILSON as he appeared during the late 1880s

Courtesy Princeton University Library
DAVID STARR JORDAN, PRESIDENT OF INDIANA UNIVERSITY, 1884-1891

Courtesy Indiana University Archives, Bloomington.
but, as he also noted to Wilson, "places are scarce."\(^\text{12}\) Announcement of his appointment appeared immediately in Bloomington: "Prof. Dabney of the University of Virginia [sic] has been chosen as one of the Professors in the Indiana University."\(^\text{13}\) Heath Dabney would never feel comfortable at the university, in Bloomington, or among "the Hoosiers."

Indiana University had been a quiet school since the 1820s. Men with clerical backgrounds dominated the small faculty, while classical languages, mathematics, and moral philosophy dominated the curriculum. During Dabney's first year he noted a clamorous newspaper article charging the university with such a "slavery to flat orthodoxy . . . [that] no man but a reverend can become a professor."\(^\text{14}\) He was amused and sent the clipping to Wilson, who thought it a polemic "rattler."\(^\text{15}\) Jordan, however, after his appointment in 1884 began to lessen clerical influence and to bring Indiana University into what its official historian has described as "the main stream of the new education of late nineteenth-century America." By the mid-1880s the university was broadening its curriculum to emphasize science, professional studies, and American national culture, and Jordan encouraged this trend.\(^\text{16}\) A contemporary Bloomington editor said that Jordan "has the true idea of a University . . . [and] is making the effort to draw to this Institution . . . a body of teachers . . . who may be truly regarded as masters in their various departments."\(^\text{17}\) In 1885 the board of trustees created a department of history as part of its new curriculum, and Jordan saw in the young Virginian precisely the sort of academic master that he sought for his expanding faculty.\(^\text{18}\)

By chance Dabney came to Bloomington at a time of physical as well as academic change. In 1883 fire had destroyed the old campus at the end of College Avenue on Bloomington's southern edge. The trustees had begun anew east of town on a wooded knoll they called University Park. In 1886 only Wylie

\(^{12}\) Dabney to Wilson, June 19, 1886, *ibid.*, 300-301; Indiana University Board of Trustees' Minutes, June 7, 1886; President's Reports and Reports to Legislative Committees, November, 1887 (Indiana University Archives, Bloomington).
\(^{13}\) Bloomington *Saturday Courier*, June 19, 1886.
\(^{14}\) *Ironclad Age*, n.d., quoted in Bloomington *Saturday Courier*, February 12, 1887.
\(^{15}\) Wilson to Dabney, February 17, 1887, Papers of Woodrow Wilson, V, 462. The editors of Wilson's papers say it is impossible to identify the article Wilson thought a "rattler," but that cited above is doubtlessly the one Dabney sent to Wilson.
\(^{16}\) Clark, *Early Years*, 131, 215, 263.
\(^{17}\) Bloomington *Semi-Weekly Telephone*, September 24, 1886.
\(^{18}\) Clark, *Early Years*, 219.
INDIANA UNIVERSITY'S OWEN HALL (LEFT) AND WYLIE HALL IN DUNN WOODS IN 1885

Courtesy Indiana University Archives, Bloomington.
and Owen Halls sat atop the knoll in the raw setting. To Dabney the scene was hardly comparable to the University of Virginia's stately seat or Heidelberg's antique pile.

If the university's appearance was disappointing to Dabney, so, too, was his experience with President Jordan, a man that he described, with some justification, as "a snake-in-the-grass and a hypocrite of the rankest kind." After accepting his position Dabney found that the trustees had reduced the salary which Jordan had offered. The salary issue was not to the president's credit. Jordan's response to Dabney's irritated inquiry was curt: "I could not help [the matter]. It was that—or no election." But then Jordan might have stood up to the trustees, who had dismissed Dabney's predecessor and used part of Dabney's proposed salary in their settlement with him. In addition to the salary issue Dabney resented Jordan's suggestion that "conscientious" faculty attended chapel regularly and the president's refusal to support him in a cheating case involving a Bloomington belle. And when Jordan wrote an article for the university bulletin describing the history curriculum, Dabney inserted a dissenting footnote as "a defiance to Jordan."

Despite his disappointments and difficulties with Jordan, Dabney's professional endeavors were generally successful during his years at the university. Dabney brought modern historical study to the university and was eager to discuss his ideas about history with his classes and the public. When he arrived in Bloomington in September, 1886, townspeople were surprised to find that he was "quite a young man." Several days later he gave a public lecture about English influence on eighteenth-century French thought and duly impressed his large audience with his "firm convictions and clear ideas." He opened his classes with lectures on "History as a Science," reflecting training he had received from such historians as Treitschke, for he was impressed with what he called "the German scientific spirit for rigid

---

19 Ibid., 137-40, 222.
20 Dabney to Wilson, January 25, 1887, Papers of Woodrow Wilson, V, 435.
21 David Starr Jordan to Richard Heath Dabney, June 26, 1886, #9582, Dabney and Davis Family Papers (Manuscripts Department, University of Virginia Library, Charlottesville, Virginia), Box 4. Hereafter cited as Dabney Papers.
22 Indiana University Board of Trustees' Minutes, June 7, 1886; Wilson to Dabney, November 7, 1886, Papers of Woodrow Wilson, V, 384.
23 Virginius Dabney, Across the Years, 29; Clark, Early Years, 222; Dabney to Wilson, May 22, 1888, Papers of Woodrow Wilson, V, 728.
24 Bloomington Semi-Weekly Telephone, September 10, 1886.
25 Indiana (University, Bloomington) Student, XIII (October, 1886), 21: Bloomington Semi-Weekly Telephone, September 14, 1886.
accuracy. When he addressed the Indiana College Association in Indianapolis in 1888 on “Methods of Instruction in History,” his paper elicited much discussion.

Dabney's major accomplishment at Indiana University was the development of the history curriculum. His predecessor, John G. Newkirk, had taught several one-term courses, starting with French and English history for sophomores. At the time of his appointment Jordan encouraged Dabney “to experiment some, and manage your final courses after you have tried a year.”

Dabney's response was to rearrange Newkirk's offerings into an orderly list of seven European history courses by dropping some existing courses and adding others. He began his curriculum with two terms in European intellectual history for sophomores and a new course in the French Revolution, his particular interest at this early time in his career. By 1888 he had developed a logical program of courses on the pattern of German universities and the Johns Hopkins University in Baltimore, institutions in the forefront of modern, scientific historical study. For sophomores he taught “General History of European Civilization,” an introductory course divided between two terms in intellectual history and one in the history of rationalism. For juniors he arranged a three-term sequence on the “History of Special Nations” (Greece, Rome, England) and for seniors a sequence entitled “History of Special Periods” (Decline and Fall of Rome, Reformation, French Revolution). He also catalogued several American history courses, but James A. Woodburn, who was to teach them, was on leave to do doctoral study at Johns Hopkins. Dabney, in fact, taught the various courses on the history schedule alone most of the time he was at the university. When Andrew White, president of Cornell, visited Bloomington, he said that the history curriculum was “the best arranged of any in this country.” A local newspaper commented that White’s remarks were “a very high compliment to Dr. Dabney to whose efforts it is due.” Dabney's appointment to the faculty, therefore, marked the real beginning of “an organized, separate program of history in the university.”

---

25 Bloomington Semi-Weekly Telephone, September 14, 1886; Richard Heath Dabney to Virginius Dabney, November 27, 1887, Box 4, Dabney Papers.
26 Indiana Student, XV (January, 1889), 75.
27 David Starr Jordan to Richard Heath Dabney, June 26, 1886, Box 4, Dabney Papers.
28 Indiana University, Fifty-Ninth Annual Catalogue . . . 1888-1889 (Bloomington, Ind., 1889), 20-21.
29 Bloomington Saturday Courier, October 6, 1888.
30 Clark, Early Years, 220.
THE VIEW OF BLOOMINGTON FROM THE INDIANA UNIVERSITY CAMPUS IN THE LATE 1880s

Courtesy Indiana University Archives, Bloomington.
Dabney also gained a reputation beyond the classroom. On Field Day in 1888 there was a baseball game between faculty and students in which Dabney played third base. The student newspaper teased beforehand that a base-stealing senior might "hurl him into all the vortexes of the French Revolution." Nonetheless, the faculty won, and people talked about the game and its athletic hero: "Did you see Dr. Dabney make that home run?"31

He settled less easily into the town of Bloomington, a town "which," he wrote to his aunt, "I like as well as I expected, but which is by no means the garden spot of the world." He did find agreeable accommodation at Emma Dennis's rooming house on South College Avenue. His landlady was "an exceedingly plumpsome and amiable old person [who] has relatives in the South," and his fellow boarders were congenial members of the faculty. He remained at Dennis's rooming house for the entire three years he was at the university because the situation was as pleasant as one could find "in such a place as Bloomington."32 His room cost two dollars a week, and the board three, which he thought reasonable.33

If Dabney's lodgings were agreeable to him, the town of Bloomington and its inhabitants were not. He complained to Wilson that there was not one gentleman "in the Virginia sense" among the town's thirty-four hundred residents.34 When two aunts moved from Baltimore to Dakota Territory to be Indian missionaries, he said he could "sympathize" with their going "beyond the pale of civilization to live in a cold bleak climate among brutal savages."35 His letters contain frequent aspersions on life in Hoosierdom, and even after nearly three years he lamented "the hard fate of having had to live in Indiana so long."36

After only a few months in Indiana, Dabney encountered unexpected and unwanted controversy. President Grover Cleveland had appointed his uncle, Dr. Thomas Smith Dabney of New Orleans, to the pension office. An uproar followed when Grand Army of the Republic veterans charged that he had been a guard at the notorious Andersonville prison and had "'probably' amused himself by shooting at prisoners whose claims for pensions he had now been called to examine." The doctor had been born in

---

31 Indiana Student, XIV (April, 1888), 118; Bloomington Saturday Courier, June 9, 1888.
32 Richard Heath Dabney to S. D. Smedes, October 26, 1888, Box 5, Dabney Papers.
33 Dabney to Wilson, January 25, 1887, Papers of Woodrow Wilson, V, 435.
34 Dabney to Wilson, November 6, 1886, ibid., 381-82.
35 Dabney to S. D. Smedes, February 12, 1887, Box 4, Dabney Papers.
36 Dabney to S. D. Smedes, May 15, 1889, Box 5, ibid.
1850, and he denied serving in the Confederate army. Nonetheless, Indianapolis’s Republican newspaper screamed about Thomas Dabney’s appointment and ran a long, lurid article detailing “Andersonville’s Horrors.” In Bloomington Heath Dabney found himself in the midst of the uproar over his uncle’s appointment. When the town’s sympathetic Democratic editor interviewed him, he said that the charges were all monstrous lies. And he reiterated his uncle’s statements about not serving in the Confederate army and securing the pension position through an honest civil service examination. This bloody-shirt incident increased the discomfort Heath Dabney felt living among “the Hoosiers” and foreshadowed newspaper assaults on him two years later.

Given Dabney’s antagonism toward both Jordan and the state, he naturally thought about seeking a new position. He was not consoled by a friend’s assurance that “the administration of your institution . . . is no worse than that of most other state universities.” He agreed more readily with his friend’s judgment that “there is no end to rascality” and that university presidents were “men whose forte is evasion, trickery and dissimulation, by some called tact.” Dabney’s engagement to Mary Amanda Bentley of Richmond, Virginia, during the 1886 Christmas recess restricted his search for a new position because he wanted to have an adequate salary before marrying since neither he nor his finance possessed other income. In early 1887 Wilson suggested that there might be a position at Bryn Mawr College, but this post at “Johanna Hopkins” had less potential and salary than Dabney already had at Indiana. Dabney concluded he should “stick to what I have got.”

Later in 1887 Dabney heard a rumor about a more attractive position: Professor George Frederick Holmes might retire from the University of Virginia. He had reason to believe that Holmes, “a friend,” wanted him to be his successor. He wrote excitedly to Wilson to keep “mum” about his aspirations until Virginia announced Holmes’s retirement. Wilson replied hopefully about Dabney’s good “chances for the chair.” Dabney was eager, but Holmes did not retire. Another possibility was a new
RICHARD HEATH DABNEY (SEATED) ON THE PORCH OF EMMA DENNIS'S BOARDINGHOUSE IN THE FALL OF 1888. BEHIND DABNEY ARE (LEFT TO RIGHT) HIS WIFE MARY BENTLY DABNEY, EMMA DENNIS, FRANKLIN F. GUNN, ASSOCIATE PROFESSOR OF ENGLISH, GREEK, AND LATIN, AND HENRY B. MITER, PROFESSOR OF RHETORIC AND ELOCUTION

Courtesy Dabney and Davis Family Papers (#8652-c), University of Virginia Library, Charlottesville.
chair at the University of the City of New York. His father sent him an advertisement about the position from the New York Times, but this opportunity also proved to be elusive. In a letter to Wilson Dabney lamented, “So I suppose I must remain a Hoosier for at least another year.”

What made the prospect of a third year at Indiana University tolerable to Dabney was his marriage. After his engagement to Mary Bentley he felt compelled to defer the wedding for “an indefinite period” because of his salary. He perhaps said little about his engagement on campus, but in spring, 1887, there was “a rumor that Prof. Dabney will return with a handsome bride next September.”

He did spend a month in Richmond during that summer, but his marriage did not take place until June 14, 1888, by which time his salary had increased to the fifteen hundred dollars he considered necessary. After visiting Dabney’s father in New York the couple arrived in Bloomington early in September to hearty congratulations from university friends. A local account described Mrs. Dabney as “a very pleasant lady” who would be “very popular among her new acquaintances.”

Dabney continued to live at Dennis’s rooming house, where he rented more space to accommodate his new bride. He wrote to his favorite aunt, Susan Dabney Smedes, that “Mary and I have fitted up a little bower where we are happy in spite of Hoosiers and Hoosierdom.” He went on to describe the sitting room, which contained two chairs purchased with Aunt Sue’s ten-dollar wedding gift—“and very pretty ones they are,” he assured her.

Heath Dabney’s marriage and professional prospects seemed auspicious for his third year at Indiana, but ahead lay conflict, for he felt compelled to speak out on Yankee misconduct during the 1888 election. Dabney was a liberally trained academic who absorbed many of the mugwump reform impulses of the GilDED Age, but only within the limitations set by his southern background. Dabney was born in 1860, and he believed the tragedy of his life had been the Civil War. Writing to his aunt he said that “it seems as though it were impossible for our family to recover from the terrible calamities brought on us by the war.”

---

43 Dabney to Wilson, April 1, 1888, Dabney to Wilson, April 2, 1888, ibid., 716-17, 724.
44 Dabney to Wilson, January 27, 1887, ibid., 438.
45 Bloomington Telephone (formerly, Semi-Weekly Telephone), May 24, 1887.
46 W. P. Trent to Woodrow Wilson, June 5, 1887, Papers of Woodrow Wilson, V, 514; Bloomington Telephone, July 10, 1888.
47 Indiana Student, XV (October, 1888), 5; Bloomington Telephone, September 14, 1888.
48 Dabney to S. D. Smedes, October 26, 1888, Box 5, Dabney Papers.
49 Dabney to S. D. Smedes, February 12, 1887, Box 4, ibid.
The war had bankrupted Thomas Dabney's friend and thus led to the foreclosure on Burleigh in 1866 and the family's subsequent "calamities." Heath Dabney was therefore sensitive to "war issues." He believed that political parties had to dissolve to bring about sectional reconciliation. Republicans, he wrote, "must lay down their arms" and "cease to wave the bloody shirt," but in Bloomington he saw no indication that this would happen. As long as Yankees considered southerners to be traitors, he believed the South must remain solid, regardless of what became of civil service reform, the labor question, or the silver question. His interest in reform filtered through his obsession with "war issues."\(^5\)

The family's view of Reconstruction had a Bourbon cast that young Heath accepted. Susan Dabney Smedes wrote in her remarkable book about her father Thomas, *Memorials of a Southern Planter* (1887), that in the mid-1870s Mississippi citizens decided it was "unmanly and stupid to submit to . . . aliens and the misguided African element." She described "financial bankruptcy and social degradation."\(^5\) Corruption years earlier had produced a higher state debt than Reconstruction, but that mattered little to planters seeking to reestablish privileged positions. Heath Dabney was delighted with Aunt Sue's book, which received good reviews and went through several American and English editions. "Hurrah, hooray for Aunt 'Snicks'!!! She su't'ny do take de cake," he cheered.\(^5\) With his sense that recent history had caused his family "terrible calamities," he felt as if he were in enemy territory in Bloomington, where a generation after Appomattox he lamented "the war and the troubles it has brought on us all."\(^5\)

At Thanksgiving dinner given in 1887 by a fellow faculty member, he found himself talking loosely to a sympathetic spirit. Another guest was Gustaf Karsten, professor of Romance languages and a recent arrival in the United States from the University of Geneva. Karsten had visited Baltimore, "where he was charmed with the Southerners he met." After his arrival in Bloomington "his supreme scorn for Hoosiers and Yankees has steadily increased," Dabney reported to his father. Following the Thanksgiving festivities, the two went to Karsten's lodgings and,

---

\(^5\) Dabney to Wilson, November 6, 1886, *Papers of Woodrow Wilson*, V, 381-82.


\(^5\) Dabney to S. D. Smedes, January 30, 1888, Box 5, Dabney Papers.

\(^5\) Dabney to S. D. Smedes, February 12, 1887, Box 4, *ibid.*
encouraged by generous quantities of wine, "damned the Yankees with great zeal until after two A.M."54

Discontented by both Hoosierdom and the by the rascally Jordan, Dabney committed in November, 1888, the deed which made him notorious in Indiana. He decided to write to The Nation, a genteel national magazine that supported mugwump reforms, "in the interest of political science and of good government" and described election abuses in Bloomington. The presidential contest between incumbent Democrat Grover Cleveland and Republican Benjamin Harrison was no Sunday school picnic in pivotal Indiana, and Dabney thought, with reason, that there had been corruption.55 Shortly after he had arrived in Bloomington in 1886, Dabney had heard allegations that "boodle" amounting to some five thousand dollars had been spent by the two parties to buy votes in the fall election in Bloomington and surrounding Monroe County. After the elections Dabney wrote to Wilson about the corruption and commented that it seemed "the noble Hoosier has an inalienable right to sell his vote."56 Because Dabney thought hushing up such abuses would not lead to reform, he decided in 1888 that it was "high time that honest men should speak out."57

The story, as he related it to The Nation, was a saturnalia of corrupt practice. He calculated that there were thirty thousand "floaters" in Indiana who sold their votes to the highest bidder and there were two hundred of them in Bloomington out of a voting population of seven hundred. "The magnitude of the evil is apparent," he said. It was his observation that a controversial recommendation by Republican national treasurer William Dudley of Indiana regarding blocks of five (i.e., one trusted Republican escorting five floaters to the polls and paying them off) was "almost literally an order to the Republican 'workers.' " He recounted methods by which Republicans organized and paid floaters, including holding some overnight at the office of "the leading Republican paper of the county," namely the Bloomington Telephone, in order to shepherd them in blocks of five to the polling place on election morning. He claimed to have witnessed Republican workers passing Republican ballots into the hands

---

54 Dabney to Virginius Dabney, November 27, 1887, ibid.
55 For state politics in the 1880s, see Clifton J. Phillips, Indiana in Transition: The Emergence of an Industrial Commonwealth, 1880-1920 (Indianapolis, 1968), 1-30.
56 Dabney to Wilson, November 6, 1886, Papers of Woodrow Wilson, V, 382.
57 Richard Heath Dabney to James A. Woodburn, November 28, 1888, Woodburn Papers (Lilly Library, Indiana University, Bloomington).
of "two filthy negroes." However, he noted: "It must not be supposed . . . that negroes are the only purchasable voters in these parts. The Hoosier floater is but too frequently neither negro nor foreign, but your genuine freeborn American sovereign." Although he did say both parties had sinned, the burden of his charge was against "that Grand Old Party of Great Moral Ideas." 58

The Grand Old Party reacted angrily to Dabney's article. The Indianapolis Journal, published by the adviser to victorious Republican candidate Benjamin Harrison, responded first: "Negroes in Indiana vote the Republican ticket without money . . . What seems to worry the amiable educator most is that the Democrats couldn't buy them. Better stick to your books, Professor, and let politics alone." 59 Dabney did not take this first editorial reaction seriously: "I . . . can afford to ignore the snarling of these journalistic curs . . . I shall not ask the advice of the Journal." 60 A typical rejoinder from the state's Republican county press was the sneer of the Rising Sun Recorder at "The Professor by the euphonious name of Dabney, imported from old Virginia to enlighten the Hoosiers." The federal grand jury should interview him at once, its editor chuckled, for "he has knowledge of the kind that grand juries dote on." 61 The Journal returned to the attack some days later when it asserted that Dabney's letter was "a libel on Indiana, and could only have had its origin in malice or ignorance. It might have been both, for he came from Virginia and has not been long a resident of the State." The paper stated pointedly that his "interest in political science and good government must be of recent birth, or the country would have heard from him before he left Virginia in indignant protest against the wholesale frauds and disenfranchisement of colored voters which have been practiced there for years." 62

Dabney's harshest critics resided in Bloomington and their spokesman was Walter S. Bradfute, editor of the Bloomington Telephone, whom Dabney had implicated in the chicanery. Born in Ohio in 1862, Bradfute was younger than Dabney and like the latter was an immigrant to the Hoosier state. 63 His first re-

58 The Nation, November 22, 1888, 412. For the blocks of five controversy, see Phillips, Indiana in Transition, 27.
60 Dabney to James A. Woodburn, November 28, 1888, Woodburn Papers.
61 The Rising Sun (Indiana) Recorder, December 14, 1888.
63 Charles Blanchard, ed., Counties of Morgan, Monroe, and Brown, Indiana (Chicago, 1884), 554.
response was to describe Dabney's letter as "the kind of news that the farther away from home it gets the better it reads." He wondered how Dabney could detect electoral violations in Indiana but be "stone blind to the wholesale robbery, bulldozing and intimidation" of blacks in Virginia who attempted to vote a Republican ticket. Who was this Dabney that criticized Hoosier politics? "From Virginia, sah." The same day the Journal printed a letter from Bloomington signed merely "W." Noting that Dabney was from Virginia, "whose soil is red with the blood of freedmen," and "an imported addition to the faculty... a disciple of Calhoun and Cobden," the writer concluded meanly that Dabney's "presence here is endured, but never enjoyed."

These articles caught Dabney by surprise, even though he realized that "those of us who refuse to keep our mouths shut must... expect a certain amount of abuse from the professional politicians." But the Telephone's broadside and the Journal's anonymous letter shook his poise. He wrote to his colleague James A. Woodburn, a Bloomington native then on leave at Johns Hopkins, for assistance. Woodburn jumped into the fray. "I... am a native of Indiana 'Sah'-born on the soil of Bloomington, I am glad to say," he wrote to the Ohio-born Bradfute. He discussed the election reform issue at length and asked the editor to give it serious consideration.

Dabney's own letter to Bradfute was a bit more choleric. It was, he said, "a matter of supreme indifference to me whether or not my actions meet with the gracious approval of the Telephone." His letter to The Nation was not about "whether the customary beverage of Southerners is the hot and reeking gore of their former slaves, but whether wholesale bribery was practised in Indiana." As an Indiana resident, taxpayer, voter, and teacher, he said he felt "entitled to discuss the election methods of this, my adopted State."

Letters went back and forth. Bradfute responded acidly that he would address Dabney "without compliment of personal respect." He raised the false and irrelevant bloody-shirt allegation that Dr. Thomas Dabney had been a guard at Andersonville, and he demanded that Dabney turn attention to corruption and

---

* Bloomington Telephone, November 30, 1888.
* Indianapolis Journal, November 30, 1888. Richard Cobden was an English advocate of free trade and a favorite target of protectionist Republican orators.
* Dabney to James A. Woodburn, November 28, 1888, Woodburn Papers.
* Dabney to Woodburn, December 1, 1888, ibid.
* Bloomington Telephone, December 18, 1888.
* Ibid., December 4, 1888.
JAMES ALBERT WOODBURN, 1886

Courtesy Indiana University Archives, Bloomington.
violence in Virginia.70 Bloomington's Democratic newspaper de-
defended Dabney as truthfully reporting incidents during the elec-
tion. And a southern newspaper called articles in Indiana's
Republican press a "crusade of filthy blackguardism against Prof.
Dabney," whose Virginia background gave them a pretext for
launching diatribes.71 So it went until anxiety over Dabney's let-
ter had spent itself. While Dabney's critics never addressed his
specific allegations, the state legislature did pass an election re-
form law in 1889, due in part to the national publicity Dabney
given to corrupt election practices during the infamous 1888
election.72

Indiana heard yet more from "that man Dabney" after the
election. On January 8, 1889, at the Jackson Day dinner in
Bloomington Dabney gave a talk titled "Corruption in Poli-
tics."73 Walter Bradfute sneered that Dabney addressed only
Democrats because "the man who shakes hands with a buzz-saw
needs no warning a second time."74 Furthermore, Dabney and
other faculty members (including President Jordan) signed a pe-
tition in January calling for a tariff reform convention to meet
in Indianapolis on Harrison's Inauguration Day, and he ad-
dressed a civil service reform meeting on campus.75 He also spoke
at an evening session of the state civil service reform association
in Indianapolis. The session, with about fifty members in attend-
ance, met in "the pleasant parlor" of the Plymouth Congrega-
tional Church and was addressed by several speakers. Professor
Dabney was certainly the best known of the speakers. His sub-
ject was universal suffrage and the civil service.76

The Indianapolis address was a bit on the pallid side, per-
haps showing that Dabney had become more pessimistic since
the election. He introduced his topic by saying "the grim logic"
of the Civil War proved the Constitution was not a panacea and
the Founding Fathers were fallible. Faith in free government
was not sufficient to cope with "the grave moral evils of the time,"
among them the condition of the civil service as effected by uni-
versal suffrage. He attacked rotation in office (the "spoils sys-
tem") as mistakenly derived from the idea that one man's politi-

cal opinion was as good as another's, and thus rotation be-

70 Ibid.
71 Unidentified clipping, Woodburn Papers.
73 Bloomington Saturday Courier, January 12, 1889.
74 Bloomington Telephone, January 11, 1889.
75 Bloomington Saturday Courier, January 26, 1889; February 16, 1889.
76 Indianapolis Journal, January 24, 1889; Indianapolis Sentinel, January 24, 1889.
came an extension of universal suffrage. The ballot box could not be a remedy because there was no such thing as equal justice: "Men are born neither free nor equal." Freedom resulted from individual exertion and the gift of society and state. Civilization was based on inequality and differentiation, and "to force . . . equality is an attempt . . . to destroy civilization." Thus there was no natural right to vote or to hold civil service office: "the alleged government of the people, by the people, and for the people bids fair to become a government of the floaters, by the wire-pullers, and for the plutocrats." He concluded that there must be "some sort of class government," and that men fitted in character and training for public duties should be that governing class. This governing class would be an aristocracy of the best, most honest, capable, industrious, and patriotic men in the country—in short, men such as himself. He urged state election reform and the extension of nonpartisan civil service examinations to more federal offices to help improve the quality of government and the bureaucrats who served in it. 77

As life has a way of doing, change began to overwhelm Dabney's bucolic life in Bloomington, and with change came tragedy. Three weeks after his Indianapolis address he received word from the University of Virginia's Board of Visitors that they had appointed him adjunct professor of history as of October 1. On February 21, 1889, he resigned from Indiana University, effective August 1. Bloomington's Democratic newspaper ran a gracious announcement of Dabney's selection and commented that "his election to the position" had been "a complete surprise." 78 Walter Bradfute, ever caustic toward Dabney, claimed he had "secured a position through his relatives . . . in a Virginia college." 79

His appointment animated his spirits, and he wrote a sharp resignation letter to the board of trustees. He tore into their tenure policies and charged them with destroying faculty morale by making capricious appointments. And he left no doubt as to his feelings about the president, noting "the invincible repugnance which I feel at being subordinated to such a man as Dr. Jordan." He did comment favorably on the faculty's freedom to teach their subjects and on the general curriculum. He also stated he would

77 Richard Heath Dabney, "The Influence of Universal Suffrage upon The Civil Service," Virginius Dabney Papers, #7690-r (Manuscripts Department, University of Virginia Library, Charlottesville, Virginia), Box 1, "Speeches and Notes for Speeches of R. H. Dabney."
78 Bloomington Saturday Courier, February 23, 1889.
79 Bloomington Telephone, February 26, 1889.
leave "some" of his students "with genuine reluctance." The trustees accepted his resignation.

Heath Dabney spent his last weeks in Bloomington anticipating his move to Virginia. At the end of February he escorted his wife to Louisville, "from whence she goes east for a visit with her folks." Mary Dabney was pregnant, and Heath desired her confinement to be with her parents in Richmond. He busied himself with classes, occasional lectures, and revisions to his civil service reform address which he was to present in August to a chautaqua in Georgia. In mid-May he wrote Aunt Sue that he was "delighted at the prospect of getting out of Hoosierdom and back into Old Virginia." While he mentioned his "loathing" for Bloomington, his emphasis was on the promise of the future: "I acquiesce in the results of the war and am content to be a citizen of the United States; I love the whole South; but I passionately love Virginia."

But then tragedy struck. His wife had borne a daughter on May 12, and a series of telegrams indicated Mary Dabney was not recovering satisfactorily. Heath was especially concerned about being so far away from her because his own mother had died in childbirth. On May 16 another telegram urgently advised him to go to Richmond. He rushed from Bloomington that night but did not reach his wife's bedside until an hour after her death. After the funeral in Richmond Dabney did not return to Bloomington. His colleagues arranged to ship his possessions to Virginia and to conduct his classes for the brief remainder of the term. President Jordan even taught the senior French Revolution course. Dabney's years in Indiana had ended sadly, with the world seeming to him "but a dark valley and the history of man but a fleeting show."

Richard Heath Dabney taught at the University of Virginia for forty-nine distinguished years, including many as graduate dean, until his retirement in 1939. He died in 1947. In all the years after he left Indiana Dabney never recalled his three years in Hoosierdom fondly. In later life he spoke about his problems in Indiana with his son by his second marriage, Virginius, himself a prominent writer and Richmond editor. In Bloomington
there are no visible reminders that he began his long career at Indiana's new University Park campus. Yet he did make a lasting and significant impact on the university and on the state of Indiana. He developed the history curriculum at Indiana University on the basis of modern pedagogy, and his revelations in The Nation made election reform inevitable in Indiana. As a Virginian, historian, and reformer living reluctantly in Bloomington, Richard Heath Dabney practiced a precept with which he admonished his Indiana University students: "we should never forget... we have duties to perform and a work to do in this world."

---

n6 Bloomington Saturday Courier, June 8, 1889.