

# **A Biography of R.L. Dabney** ©1994

**by John Thomas Cripps**

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**[Content of Lecture after the Introduction:]**

**This evening I wish to speak on an exemplary Southern Gentlemen - Scholar, Soldier, and Preacher of the Gospel - Robert Lewis Dabney. It is appropriate that we know something of this man since we have chosen to name our Sons of Confederate Veterans Camp after him.**

**One of the reasons that we chose to name our camp after Robert Lewis Dabney is because this is a man nearly forgotten - yet a man of immense importance - a man that all, Southerners and Yankees alike, ought to be familiar with.**

**R.L. Dabney is a man worth remembering - and a man whose works are worth studying. How many of you have heard of Dr. Dabney? How many of you had heard of him before I introduced you to him?**

**How many of you have heard of Generals Lee and Jackson? Of course, all of you. Well this man ranks with those generals as one of the greatest Americans that ever lived. And yet - he is virtually unknown today. When I mention to folks (even SCV members) the name of our camp, the majority ask, Who is he?**

**Well, this evening we are going to look at this man, and we shall see why he is a man worth remembering. Now, I would like to have three or four lectures to discuss Dr. Dabney so that we could amply scratch the surface of the man. It is almost an injustice to take one lecture and attempt to give a summary of his life.**

**There were giants in the earth in those days - and Dabney was one of them. A giant of a man in knowledge, ability, and faith.**

## **Family**

**R. L. Dabney's father, Charles was from French Huguenot descent. It was said that he was a descendant of the great historian J. H. Merle D'Aubigne who wrote the "*History of the Reformation of the Sixteenth Century.*"**

**Charles Dabney was a Presbyterian elder, a farmer and a local magistrate. He had formally been a Colonel in the Militia. Charles had eight children - 4 boys and 4 girls. Robert Lewis was the sixth child - the third son. He was born 5 March 1820 in Louisa County in Central Virginia. He was probably named after his uncle Robert Lewis Dabney.**

## **Appearance**

**Curtis Ray Vaughn in his biographical sketch of R. L. Dabney gives this description of him: He**

was 6' tall, originally slender, but in middle manhood - stalwart and powerful. His complexion was dark, his hair a dark - silky brown, broad brow, deep set black eyes, large nose and flowing beard.

### Summary of Abilities

Dabney was one of the most versatile men you will ever hear or read of. I will give you some of the many talents that his two biographers list:

As Sons of Confederate Veterans some remember him as the Chief-of-Staff for Stonewall Jackson during the Valley Campaigns. Many know him as the official biographer of Stonewall Jackson - appointed by Stonewall's wife to write that great work. A few may even know him as the author of *"A Defense of Virginia and the South."*

He is known in theological circles mostly for his theological writing skills, his teaching skills, and for his preaching abilities. Vaughn writes, *"As a speaker he was direct, plain, clear in thought, and always moved by strong convictions, and frequently eloquent in a high degree."*

Dabney was a Presbyterian of the Old School. And as a preacher he had but few peers in the pulpit of his day. It is said that his sermons were crammed full of thought. "His speeches in the courts of the church were always weighty in logic - and on occasions when he deemed the truth or the church to be in danger from the policy or intrigue of mistaken men, the torrent of argument and passion flowed, fused like the iron and the white heat from the crucible of a furnace.

He was a Calvinist. His biographer says of him, *"...he was not only a Calvinist in name, but in fact, that he knew why he was a Calvinist."*

As a teacher he taught history, systematic and polemic theology, and sacred rhetoric at Union Theological Seminary in Virginia. He spent 30 years teaching there - and was considered one of the greatest seminary professors of all time.

Beside being counted among the top theologians ever - He was also an extraordinary philosopher. Many in his day considered him to be the premier philosopher of this continent - ranking him even above Jonathan Edwards. Perhaps only a few know of the extraordinary skills of this teacher and preacher. We could spend hours talking of his accomplishments in these areas.

R.L. Dabney had an incredible understanding of politics. His biographer calls him a "Democrat of the Calhoun stripe" - not to be confused with the Democrats of today. He was a conservative (in the old sense of the word) - and he came under much fire for his conservative views in a day - similar to ours - a day of liberal thinking.

He was an excellent farmer - taking care of his mother's farm after his father died, and then caring for his own farms throughout life - even the 700 acre "Red Hill" estate. He was a capital mechanic - skilled in the use of tools. He was a surveyor - learning the art of surveying as a teenager.

Further, he was an architect. Without any formal instruction in that art - he drew up plans for churches and houses. He possessed carpentry and masonry skills - building 2 homes himself - at "Stony Point" and "Hampden-Sidney." And believe it or not - he even made his own furniture.

He was an inventor who actually had some patents He was a political economist. *"Dr. Dabney may*

*be justly regarded as a great laymen in this science. He devoted to it only a small portion of his time and efforts; but he carried his vast energies and profound philosophic powers into the study...He became an able teacher and writer in this department."* He condemned the popular policies of protectionism in his day - being a "free-trader." He condemned paper money and wrote papers on coinage.

And let it not be misunderstood - Robert Dabney was a patriot. *"Love of country burned strongly in the bosom of Robert L. Dabney." "He loved...his county, his State, the country of the Constitution of the United States. He mourned the trampling of that Constitution into the mire under the influence of commercialism and greed by the dominant section."*

*"He hated abolitionism, but he was for the Union as long as to be so was consistent with honor, as long as he could be Pro-Union, and not be a traitor to his native sovereign State; he recognized State sovereignty as imbedded in the Federal Constitution."*

He was a poet - and you can find several examples of his verse in his biography by T. C. Johnson.

We already said he was Jackson's adjutant - but he was also a chaplain during the war - and he was a soldier. These two skills were exemplified in the statement of one of Jackson's officers - *"The parson isn't scared of Yankee bullets and he preaches like hell."*

Pre-eminently - he was a mighty man of God - and a mighty preacher of the Gospel. And that's what I choose personally to best remember him as.

### Brief Sketch of his Life before the War.

We don't have the time to dwell on the finer points of Dabney's life - but it is important for us to hit some of the highlights:

In September 1833 - when Robert Lewis was only 13 years of age - his father died (at 48 years). Even though Charles was the eldest son - Robert was the son who took care of his mother. He greatly loved his mother - and often sacrificed for her well-being. He cared for her to the end of her life.

His early education was in the country schools that were created through joint-efforts of his father and some of his neighbors. He was well-trained in these preparatory schools, learning even Latin and Greek - as well as - arithmetic, algebra, geometry, and surveying.

In 1836, at age 16, he entered Hampden-Sidney College where he spent the next year and 4 months. It was during this time that Dabney was converted to Christianity. There was a small revival at the school - and he was one of the students that came under the gracious influence of the Spirit's working. We must make note that the studious Dabney ranked #1 in his class.

Well, he left College before entering his Senior class - so that he could return to the farm and help his mother. She had become burdened with debt and Robert saw his sense of responsibility and was willing for the sake of his mother - for a time to forego his education.

After two years on the farm and briefly teaching school (walking eight miles a day) - he entered the University of Virginia. This was December 1839. There he attended for the next 2 1/2 years till 1842 - receiving his Master of Arts Degree - now at age 22.

**One memorable event from this time is a story often repeating about the murder on campus of Professor Davis - head of the Law School. *"Young Dabney was filled with horror and indignation at the deed."* And he was appointed to arrest the murderer and was honored to do so.**

**Here he began his friendship with Dr. William S. White, Stonewall Jackson's pastor. After graduating, he returned to the farm to help his mother and teach school. Here he stayed another 2 years.**

**In November 1844, after turning down several notable job offers - he entered Union Theological Seminary to study for the ministry. Union Seminary was located also at Hampden-Sidney. Once more, Dabney ranked #1 in his class.**

**He was licensed to preach on May 4, 1846 (by West Hanover Presbytery) at age 26. He labored for one year in his home county of Louisa as a home missionary. He felt that his county was destitute of true Gospel preaching.**

**In July 1847, he was called to the pastorate of Tinkling Springs Presbyterian Church. The church was composed of Scotch-Irish. In a letter written in July of that year - Dabney describes his congregation as such: *"The Scotch-Irish are the most inflexible people in the world when they are right, and the most vexatiously pig-headed and mulish when wrong, on the face of the earth."***

**It was at Tinkling Spring - located incidentally in Augusta County - that he met his wife - Miss Margaret Lavinia Morrison - daughter of James Morrison - a Presbyterian minister. They were married March 28, 1848. He called it *"the first and last love affair of my life."* (28 years old).**

**He bought a little farm in 1849 called "Sleepy Hollow." With much energy he turned the rundown farm into a profitable endeavor. After a while he sold his farm - and two miles away bought 120 acres. Here he built his own stone cottage. He built this house in part - of the stone cut out of the rock on which his house was founded. By using that as his quarry - he made room for a cellar of suitable proportions.**

**Permit to get a little ahead for a moment. Note well Dabney's patriotism...During the first year of the war - Dabney sold his estate at "Stony Point" for \$4000 - lent the money to the Confederacy, and lost it all without regret, as it went to the services of his country. This was not inherited but earned - and in present day dollars - by conservative estimate - this estate probably had a \$250,000 to \$300,000 value. How many today would be willing to do such a thing for their country.**

**One Saturday - as Robert Dabney was in his corn-field - with the hired help planting corn - his wife sent for him to come up to the house. Who do you suppose - she asked - has been elected Professor in Union Theological Seminary? Who, inquires Dabney. She said - You are!**

**He was greatly perplexed. He preferred to stay in his own sweet home - with his church and school - but he was greatly urged from several quarters to go no matter what his feelings - even though his congregation desired that he stay.**

**He left the matter to the judgment of Presbytery and ultimately the decision was made that he ought to go to the Seminary. So, after seven years of pastoring at Tinkling Spring he returned to Union Seminary - this time as a professor.**

**He would spend 30 years there - from age 36 to age 66 except for a brief interval during the war.**

He was an excellent and highly devoted professor. He held up high ideals to his students. He raised money, worked for improvements in the institution. Here at Hampden-Sidney Dabney built a second home.

Now, before we move on to look at Dabney during the war - permit me to point out two last events of notice that occurred at this time.

Dabney was to eventually have six children - all boys. In 1855 tragedy struck his household. In November - his second son died of diphtheria in his arms. I did not know much about the disease until reading studying Dabney's biography. It is a terrible disease of the throat - where your throat slowly swells to where you can't talk - then swells more to your can't breathe.

Dr. Dabney held his small boy in his arms and helplessly watched him die of suffocation. He writes about it in a moving letter to his brother Charles. And let me tell you - if you heart is ever cold and in need of a good melting - read that letter. But that was not all - the next month his oldest son Bobby died of the same disease. He had lost two out of - at that time - three of his children within a few weeks.

The other thing I wanted to mention is the offers that Dabney had to go North:

In 1860, he was offered the pastorate of the prominent 5th Avenue Presbyterian Church in New York City. It was the greatest Presbyterian Church in the country at that time. The infamous Pastor James W. Alexander had died and they sought Dr. Dabney as his replacement. (Gardiner Spring).

Also about this time he was offered a professorship at Princeton Seminary - due to the death of Dr. J.A. Alexander. This is a position that would have brought him worldwide fame. There are letters in his biography from the eminent Dr. Charles Hodge practically begging him to take the position - but he declined. He did not desire to leave his little obscure Virginia Seminary. His loyalties were with his native land.

To those of his beloved Seminary and to Dr. Wilson, *"He declared that the Abolitionists would probably have forced the country into a war between the sections before he could get a fair start at Princeton; and that he could not side with the fanatics and usurpers against his own state and people."*

*"Dr. Wilson expressed surprise at this view as to the imminence of war. He in common with the mass of Southerners at the time saw nothing of the kind close ahead."* But Dabney knew that it was inevitable and impending. Yet he tried everything in his power to stop it.

He published an editorial entitled "Christians, pray for your Country." He preached and published sermons and articles on peace-making - even circulating them in the North - but he did not really seem to expect his efforts to bear fruit.

Dabney wrote on April 20, 1861 - as he foresaw the approaching evils of the *"...mountainous aggregate of enormous crime, of a ruined Constitution, of cities sacked, of reeking battlefields, of scattered churches, of widowed wives and orphaned children, of souls plunged into hell..."*

### Life during the War Times

Dabney, as we have said was a constitutional union man - as long as - in his judgment - honor permitted.

When Lincoln proceeded to usurp power to coerce sovereign States, he at once ceased to be a Union man. Resistance to usurpation became then a sacred duty. The South had a good and righteous cause.

In Dabney's view our statesman botched things badly. He felt they acted without foresight and prudence. He said we ought to have been armed to the teeth for defense - before throwing down the gauntlet of war.

*He said "Our fathers should have made their stand against Free Soil in 1820, instead of joining the wretched Missouri Compromise; we were strong then, and should have settled the point once and for all. Again, our enemies came near electing their man in 1856, we should have taken warning, and spent the interval of Mr. Buchanan's weak, pacific administration in arming effectually. Neglecting this, we should have remained quiet when Lincoln went in, and employed the respite at last in arming thoroughly."*

But things were otherwise and so Dabney, though disapproving of the management of the affairs of his state and section, and though he had as long a possible been a Union man - was proud to be one of the sturdious patriots and servants of his State and the Confederacy.

During the vacation of the summer of 1861 - he served as Chaplain. On June 13, he wrote, *"It has been customary to speak of camps as schools of temptation and evil. And there is too much in them to pain the Christian's heart and to try the graces. But our camps are places of much prayer, and afford many shining examples of Christian consistency..."*

After a while, he had a long attack of camp fever and had to return home.

In March 1862, General Jackson writes to Dabney (General Jackson's wife was related to Dabney's wife) to try to secure him on his staff. On April 8, Jackson wrote him again this time requesting Dabney to take a position as his Chief-of-Staff - his rank was Major. He wrote, *"Your duties will require early rising and industry."*

Well, Dabney went to visit General Jackson the middle of April without horse, uniform, or arms. His chief *"purpose was to show General Jackson how unfit"* he was for the post offered, *"and to get a chaplaincy again."*

But Jackson was master - he overruled all objections. He allowed Dabney two days to devour the large volume on Halleck's "Articles of War" - and put him in office.

Military life was very trying to Robert Dabney. During his first days - Dabney wore a black Prince Albert coat to which he had been accustomed, a beaver hat, and the usual dress of a Presbyterian clergyman - and also he had an umbrella.

Some of the men started to rib him saying - *"Come out from under that umbrella" "Come out! I know you are under there - 'fraid you'll get wet?"*

Jackson's attention was attracted and he asked one of his men what was going on. He said that some of the men were ribbing Major Dabney about his umbrella and dress. Jackson looked



annoyed for a moment - then gave the word - "*Gentlemen, Let us ride!*"

He dashed through the woods as hard as a horse could be driven for about half a mile - with his staff - of course - following. Then he headed back to the column without a word. Meanwhile Dabney's umbrella had been reduced to tatters by branches - his hat was mangled - and an officer immediately gave him a cap. A couple of days later he finally got his ill-fitting uniform.

At first - Jackson's other staff officers poked a lot of fun at Major Dabney - a Presbyterian preacher without formal military training - elevated to Chief-of-Staff. But he was soon to prove his worth and the officers came to respect him.

Colonel Grigsby of the Stonewall Brigade said - "*Our parson is not afraid of Yankee bullets, and I tell you he preaches like hell.*" You see, Dabney would assume his military duties Monday-Saturday - but he would preach on the Sabbath.

In June 1862 at Port Republic - Dabney's quick thinking and bravery saved Jackson's ammunition trains from being taken by the Union forces. Jackson and some of his officers were caught by surprise by Yankee calvary - and only managed to escape by galloping at full speed over the bridge to his men awaiting at the other side.

Two of his officers were captured and Dabney would have been if he had not been quick to retreat in the opposite direction. It was then that he became aware that Jackson's ammunition trains were in danger. Without ammunition - Jackson's army would have met disaster. Well, Dabney ran across Confederate Captain Moore with his fifteen riflemen.

He placed them strategically - then overtook Carrington's battery - new organized - ill-equipped and badly-trained who was in retreat. Dabney rallied them and with his small infantry and artillery fired upon the Yankee calvary and bravely held them at bay until Jackson arrived and retook the bridge and town.

Major Dabney had almost single-handedly averted disaster for the entire army. He only admitted this heroic action 30 years later in a letter to a friend in 1892 that he had been the one.

He never referred to himself in his work on Jackson - he only referred to the incident as a work of one of Jackson's officers.

After Port Republic - at Gaines' Mill - he once again did an essential service - without getting any credit for it for some years. He covered up his name so as to not report his fellow staff officer for incompetency. Jackson wrote his official report of that battle without ever knowing just how he won it.

Well, Dabney was still half-sick after joining Jackson - and his health broke down under the severe conditions of marching with General Jackson.

Again - a long terrible spell of camp fever set in which brought him "near to death's door." Chief-Surgeon Walton pronounced that he would never be fit for service and would die if he should go back.

He was forced to resign - and Jackson approved it only with great reluctance. General Jackson told Dr. Samuel Morrison that he considered Dabney the most efficient officer he knew - that he

was very much pleased with him as his adjutant, and knew of no one that could fill his place.

Shortly after his resignation - while himself lying sick in relapse - he lost a third son to diphtheria. Thomas Price Dabney "Tommy" died on November 8, 1862.

While lying at home, crippled by ill-health and having little teaching to do - he conceived the plan of fighting for the Confederacy with his pen. His object was *"to rebut the slanders of the Yankees against our institutions."*

He believed that moral support was as necessary to the Confederacy as military support. He wrote *"A Defense of Virginia and the South"* during this time. It was sent successfully through the Yankees blockades and was to be published in Europe - with the hope that it would stir up some Southern sympathies. But since it wasn't politically correct - it was never published there - but later published in this country.

There is an interesting letter on Pg. 278 of his biography where a Northerner who was a Southern sympathizer writes to him comparing the war to the atrocities of the French Revolution. And indeed Dr. Dabney referred often to the Jacobin principles of Lincoln and his cabinet.

On May 10, 1863 Stonewall Jackson died. Mrs. Jackson employed R.L. Dabney to write her husband's biography. The remainder of 1863, most of 1864, and the early part of 1865 were spent in writing this masterful work. He finished his work shortly before the surrender at Appomattox.

He used great exertions to get materials -visiting Mrs. Jackson and General Lee's army after its return from Gettysburg. He got access to official records in Richmond, and so forth.

After Gettysburg in 1863, Dabney was greatly agitated over the prospects of the Confederacy. He felt that it was time for the South to make great sacrifices. He had several suggestions and tried to have them reach the ears of Davis and Lee through influential friends.

In short, he knew if the South was to win - it had to have the help of England and France. *Contra mundum....*

Well, in the spring of 1865 he is found preaching in Petersburg - while back at Hampden-Sidney his hospitable home was sheltering wounded and broken-down soldiers.

He came back from Petersburg with the retreating army - hid himself in Buckingham, after Appomattox to escape being carried off to a Northern prison. When he came back to Hampden-Sidney - he found his wife and children safe - but his home pillaged.

### **Dabney after the War**

*"The fall of the Confederacy was epochal in Dabney's life. Under the old order he had grown up; by it he had been, as a most impressive personality, mightily moulded. He loved its activities, habits and modes of thought. Under it he had already won a large and noble success in life. He was passionately attached to it, for the truth and justice and benevolence which, he believed, underlay and informed it."*

He loathed with all his strength the coming "order." Time doesn't permit to go into the horrors of reconstruction. They were indeed dark and awful years. He said that *"Universal change and*



*unrest were the order of the day. The bottom rail was on top, while 'old master' stumbled over the clods, and his soldier son drove broken-down army horses to the plow, and planned emigration and how to take care of the old folks. Friction between the races were universal."*

*"Thievery and disregard of property rights were ever provoking it; fences were burned, corn-houses broken open, the very gardens and sweet potato patches were appropriated by the new sovereigns, by night."*

All this was clear to Dabney's mind on the day of surrender. He foresaw the atrocities. Writing to his mother on Feb. 15, 1868 he said, *"It is true that I have a great advantage over most people here - that the evidently approaching ruin of the country is no surprise to me. I always foreknew it, and do not see it a particle more clearly now than when General Lee surrendered. I see the people around me now very blue, almost thunder-struck; and not a few, who the year of General Lee's surrender, told me that I was committing a great sin by looking on the dark side, are now, like rats, trying to run away from the sinking ship."*

Many Southerners were emigrating to other countries. R.L. Dabney too thought long and hard about emigrating and had justified it in his own mind. He considered South America and preferably New Zealand. He wrote many people along these lines including General Jubal Early and the imminent theologian Patrick Fairbairn of Scotland. He seems however, to have given up this idea about 1869.

In that year he purchased a 200 acre farm "Red Hill" in Amherst County. In 1870 he published "Sacred Rhetoric".....

In 1871 he published "Systematic Theology." He wrote many articles that were published. In 1875 he wrote, *"The Sensualistic Philosophy of the 19th Century considered."*

Due mainly to health he resigned his chair at Union Seminary in 1883. There were other reasons as well - mainly the decay of his native surroundings. He accepted the chair of Mental and Moral Philosophy in the University of Texas - at Austin.

In 1890 he had a brush with death - his sons gathered with mind full of the overshadowing probability of his death. The devoted nursing of his eldest son, Charles - who was then President of the University of Tennessee - probably prolonged his life as much as the skill of his physicians.

In the late 1880's, Dr. Dabney developed an astigmatism and eventually glaucoma. Surgery at Baltimore in 1886 proved unsuccessful. From 1886 to 1889 his sight became dimmer and dimmer until the light went out absolutely.

He did not give up on life. He employed a private secretary to write at his dictation and to read for him that he might continue his studies.

He resigned the University in 1890 but his resignation was refused - and he continued teaching until 1894. At that time he continued until his death traveling and lecturing at various schools.

On Monday, 3 January 1898 after completing a brief sketch of the life of his teacher, colleague, and friend, Dr. Francis S. Sampson, he was seized with an acute illness. Four hours later at 11:00 PM he was dead.

**He was buried back at Hampden-Sidney University in Virginia. The giant had died and was soon to be forgotten - and now a century later - he is still for the most part - still forgotten.**

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