ESSAY REVIEW

From Slavery to “Freedom”:
A Review Essay


Not a single literary fragment survives today that was written by a person of African ancestry in either Philadelphia or Prince Georges County, Maryland, prior to the American Revolution. Reconstructing the black experience in those two places from the ink and paper remains of wealthy white men is, therefore, a creative act commanding the skills of archaeologist, cultural anthropologist, historical demographer, and, perhaps most importantly, novelist. Discovering what “really” happened, in the quantifier’s sense, is a prodigious task; communicating an understanding of how the principals experienced that “reality” is an awesome endeavor demanding a separate set of talents and skills.

In the 1970s, Eugene Genovese and the late Herbert Gutman established frameworks for social historians of the Afro-American past who would face anew such problems of evidence and interpretation. They suggested that the same approach could, and should, be used to study the black experience in slavery and freedom; they insisted that people impoverished and oppressed by an unconscionable labor system and a legacy of racial bigotry were not just victims, but played decisive roles in their own lives and in the creation

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of an autonomous culture; and they advised framing studies of Afro-American history over long sweeps of time to minimize gaps in the historical record and to discern better the relationships among continuities and subtle changes that cumulatively reflected black consciousness across generations. Both of the books reviewed here are profoundly influenced by the theoretical reconceptualization of Afro-American history in the 1970s; both share in the accomplishment of the goals set by recent theoretical innovators in the field.

Allan Kulikoff is a committed quantifier. Indeed, it is difficult to imagine that there is much left to count in the records of Prince Georges County that bears in even a remote way on his subject—although his samples certainly could be expanded and multiplied, and the data could be manipulated in a variety of ways to reach strikingly different conclusions. Whether we need, for example, nine pages of data (pp. 54-63) and seven charts to sustain the contention that “the rate of household formation declined during the eighteenth century . . . because the supply of inexpensive land diminished”—a point long known and uncontested by historians of other eighteenth-century colonies—is a question of judgment and balance, but clearly Kulikoff’s book stands as an abridged encyclopedia of demographic information about the peoples—black and white—of Prince Georges County, c.1680-1780.

Tobacco and Slaves is essentially a work of creative synthesis, which “extends” (p. 14) the existing literature on the social history of the seventeenth-century Chesapeake into the next century, filters it through a historical materialist prism that grants demography and economy a “privileged role” (p. 16) in causation and change, and generalizes from Kulikoff’s research in one county, and that of other researchers and model-builders for the same and other counties, to the eighteenth-century Chesapeake as a whole. The scholarship of Lois Carr, Paul Clemens, Rhys Isaac, Gloria Main, Russell Menard, and Lorena Walsh provides some of the research bricks and most of the theoretical mortar with which Kulikoff’s edifice is built.


3 Paul G.E. Clemens, The Atlantic Economy and Colonial Maryland’s Eastern Shore: From Tobacco to Grain (Ithaca, 1980); Rhys Isaac, The Transformation of Virginia, 1740-1790 (Chapel Hill, 1982); Gloria L. Main, Tobacco Colony: Life in Early Maryland, 1650-1720
This is not to say that the book is only derivative. Indeed, Kulikoff's characterization of social relations and change is not compatible with most of the best recent work on the eighteenth-century Chesapeake. It is not at all clear that his findings for Prince Georges County apply across the board to the Chesapeake places and peoples written about by Richard Beeman, Timothy Breen, Jean Lee, Edmund Morgan, and Anita Rutman and Darrett Rutman. In any event, we should probably take seriously Kulikoff's warning that many or most of his findings should be seen as "tentative" (p. 14), especially, but not exclusively, as he seeks to apply them outside Prince Georges County. And the book's title is not to be taken literally; it really is not about "culture" at all, adds only detail to existing understandings of the tobacco trade, and has a research base that really ends about twenty years earlier than the title suggests. Indeed, if the story really was carried through the Revolution to 1800, free blacks might be expected to receive more than cursory treatment in an epilogue.

The half-century before the Revolution is the central focus of the book; and its argument is that "the kind of familial, class, and race relations found in the antebellum South first developed in the Chesapeake region between 1720 and 1770" (p. 14). For blacks, virtually all of whom were slaves between 1700 and 1775, Kulikoff discerns a three-stage process of change, beginning with a period of "deterioration" between 1660 and 1690, which was marked by stringent racial laws, rapid growth in the black population, and direct importation of slaves from Africa. This was followed, c.1690-1740, by an era of heavy slave imports, which in turn disrupted life within the black community and resulted in heightened social conflict among blacks.
From about 1740 to 1790 importation of slaves declined, and the lives of blacks improved materially.

According to Kulikoff, the harshness of slavery was mitigated for slaves by the patriarchal values of their masters, improved gender ratios, the creation of an Afro-Chesapeake culture that included synthesis of African and evangelical religions, establishment of comparatively stable family relations, and enhanced black autonomy on increasingly large plantations. Unfortunately, his sources furnish Kulikoff little insight into the values, beliefs, and emotional perceptions of the slaves he studies. Even runaway advertisements, of which almost half offer clues to the motives for escape, really attest to the master’s, rather than the slave’s, perception of why someone would run the risks of fugitive status. Perhaps the steady increase in escape attempts after 1745, simultaneous with what Kulikoff identifies as improving conditions for the enslaved, provides the best testament to the mental world of Prince Georges County blacks. Such lust for freedom despite the real and imagined tribulations of running away; the prospect of abandoning conjugal relations, kin, and life-long friends; and the very real limitations of “freedom” in the North—all conform nicely with Gary Nash’s depiction of Afro-American mentality in eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century Philadelphia, and contribute to the establishment of a historical context for the Afro-Philadelphian culture studied by Nash.

The central plot-line of Nash’s story—from slavery to freedom to oppressive racism over a period of about 100 years—is well known for the North in general and for Pennsylvania in particular, but not specifically and in detail for Philadelphia. This oversight is striking because of the universally acknowledged centrality of Philadelphians to the larger stories, but it is brilliantly rectified in Forging Freedom. Not only does Nash contribute an essential chapter in the chronicle of Afro-American life, but he casts the tale in ways that provide innovative twists on and novel insights into previous portrayals of the black quest for freedom in North America.

Undeterred by the fact that “not a single document remains to inform us how Philadelphia’s slaves and free blacks might have viewed their world as the colonial era drew to a close” (p. 36), Nash makes black consciousness a central focus of the book. He utilizes records generated by criminal courts, census-takers, tax collectors, ministers, overseers of poor relief, newspaper editors, and philanthropists to reconstruct not only the collective demographic and economic realities of black life, but to compose plausible accounts of how individuals comprehended their experiences. Nash’s creative artistry in breathing life into shadowy figures so long buried beneath historiographical eulogies to a handful of white Philadelphians—Franklin, Paine, Peale, Rush, Wilson—is awesome.

Among the writers of the past two centuries whose work on northern
blacks has led them to postulate group consciousness, Nash's contribution is distinctive not just for its artistry and detail about Philadelphia. It carries a line of interpretation to an extreme unmatched in any previous account published during the eighteenth century or since. Where others—including eighteenth-century officers of abolition societies, late nineteenth-century black writers such as W.E.B. Du Bois, and more recent historians including Edward Turner and Leon Litwack—have been reserved or even negative about the mixed meanings of "freedom" for blacks during the Revolutionary era, Nash is optimistic to a fault. Where others have tended to see the cup of liberty for northern blacks in the late eighteenth century as half empty, Nash always finds it half full. No doubt this tendency reveals something about the comparative personalities of the authors in question and a thing or two about the politics of writing about race at the various times each interpretation was generated. More important, though, is the way it attests to Nash's heroic attempt to transcend anachronisms and appreciate the experience of emancipation on the terms of those who lived through it.

The bottom line to Nash is that in the face of severe limitations on freedom—poverty, discrimination, thwarted opportunities for self-realization—not a single soul ever asked to be re-enslaved. However constricted the achievements of Revolutionary-era emancipation may appear to us from a historical perspective that comprehends the resurgent racism of the nineteenth century, the horror of black poverty in the twentieth century, and the fitful progress made since the 1950s, those are not contexts within which black Philadelphians perceived their world. The only truly meaningful context for them was the immediate past of their lives as slaves. And to recently emancipated Philadelphians, according to Nash, freedom was unequivocally a blessing, undisguised and unmitigated by the very real limitations and problems of freedom.

There are other clues, neither ignored nor dismissed lightly by Nash, that the transition to freedom caused severe emotional distress for some, but it is unclear how many. Rising numbers of suicides, a strong tendency to re-indenture oneself (and one's children!) for extended terms, and the necessity for many to solicit poor relief at least part of the time—all imply conditions in which it must have been difficult to appreciate freedom, at least every day. As Nash rightly observes, the custom of indenturing black children until age twenty-eight in most cases could be, and by implication

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could have been, viewed as tantamount to re-enslavement for a significant minority of "free" blacks. According to Nash, "if George Bryan, the leader of the wartime movement to legislate slavery out of existence, was correct in believing that only one in three black children survived to the age of twenty-eight, then this was primarily a system of providing cheap labor for white masters rather than a means for training youths for citizenship" (p. 77). If Nash is correct that many blacks "leaped the boundary separating slavery from freedom and never looked back," it is also clear, as he tells us, that "others . . . had to bide their time" (p. 78). Perhaps Nash is right to question whether the Pennsylvania Abolition Society exaggerated how many blacks were "governed by fear" (p. 115) in the late eighteenth century, but fear, insecurity, and at least episodic depression are not unwarranted reactions to the conditions that Nash describes. Perhaps Nash projects his own values and optimism onto the hypothetical ragman, "who made daily decisions with existential meaning that we can only guess at—which streets to walk, when to set out, when to quit work. Though he had to endure poverty, the ragman did not have to withstand the insulting comments of a boss, maintain a schedule set by somebody else, and face layoffs during an economic downturn" (p. 153). Maybe. I certainly hope the ragman saw his life that way; but if he did, the ragman shared an ethic—about absence of bosses and layoffs, and setting your own schedule in trade for a lower standard of living—that may be more common among late twentieth-century academics than working-class people of the eighteenth century.

There can be no doubt, however, about the optimism reflected in the accomplishments of black Philadelphians in the decades following the Revolution—including the establishment of churches and other institutions, the strides in self-education, and the growth of a black middle-class community. There is no more comprehensive and readable account of this process of accomplishment in print; nor, in light of the limitations imposed by the surviving documentary record, is it likely that a better one is on the horizon. The decision to take the story through two transitions—out of slavery and then into the racial conflict of the antebellum era—was a wise one, which necessarily supersedes any attempt to delineate the lives of black Philadelphians in slavery and freedom—in the colonial and early national eras—as separate episodes rather than as part of a continuous historical process. The portrayal of black Philadelphians as people of competence and impressive achievement reflects not only the reality of their history, but helps correct tendencies to see oppressed peoples exclusively as victims. Likewise, the presentation of black history as an integral part of the other "histories" of America, which incorporates analyses of politics, culture, race, gender, and social structure, makes this a model book by one of our most talented and accomplished historians of early America.

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