H-Net Reviews
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Eva Sheppard Wolf. *Race and Liberty in the New Nation: Emancipation in Virginia from the Revolution to Nat Turner's Rebellion.* Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2006. xix + 284 pp. $45.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8071-3194-7.

Reviewed by David Gellman (Department of History, DePauw University)
Published on H-Law (July, 2007)

The More Things Change … The Triumph of Colonial Racism in Early National Virginia

Some slaveholders had their faith in slavery shaken by the spirit of liberty, but the American Revolution failed to shake white Virginians' commitment to slavery. Eva Sheppard Wolf's book *Race and Liberty in the New Nation* would seem to be telling us what we should already know in charting Virginia's commitment to its fundamental source of white wealth and status. But Americans, with good reason, continue to be disturbed by the paradox of slaveholding founding fathers like Jefferson and Washington enacting a radical experiment in republican liberty. Thus we treat the story of slavery in the new republic as one of tragic contingency (if only they had acted on their principles!), tragic inevitability (try though they did, what choice did they really have?), or an unstable mix of both. Wolf offers a tremendous service by providing a ground-level view of emancipation in Virginia that walks the reader chronologically through the law and practice of emancipation from 1776 to 1832. This approach provides readers with a clear view of the self-limiting nature of liberty in the new nation's most important state. Virginia's commitment to slavery was recurrently contested and debated; but the contest always ended the same way, with the refusal by white Virginians to embrace collectively a racially egalitarian future. This result had less to do with the hypocrisy of its Olympian political leaders than a more widespread "failure of imagination" (p. 87) born of interest, fear, and racism. If there was a struggle for Virginia's and America's soul, it was never fought on a level field. Virginia clung as a state to the institution that had defined it as a colony.

Wolf's narrative takes place under a tent held up by three poles, the Revolutionary War, Gabriel's Rebellion, and Nat Turner's Rebellion. She devotes only minimal space to describing these events–even though each represents a dramatic moment of violent black resistance that forced whites, powerful politicians and ordinary citizens alike, to think carefully about the place of slaves in Virginia society. Wolf is more interested in the deliberations that emerge from crises than the crises themselves. Her approach is sensible and efficient, given the existence of extensive scholarship on these events. Moreover, Wolf proceeds on the assumption that through the more ordinary process of drawing up manumission papers and drafting laws we see white and, to a lesser degree, black ideas about race and slavery most clearly revealed.

The impact of a disruptive war and its egalitarian ideology on slavery was limited but also highly revealing. The Revolution simultaneously stimulated "liberal" inclinations and "conservative reflexes" (p. xi). Thus, Virginia's small Quaker population put natural rights rhetoric into practice, encouraging and ultimately insisting upon manumission within their sect, and pushing judicial and legislative authorities to legitimize their emancipations. Methodists, officially establishing themselves as a church in 1784, initially demanded that their members make plans to free their slaves. Some Baptists also expressed opposition to slavery. Virginia's political leaders banned the slave trade, although Wolf casts this measure in exclusively self-interested terms. Thomas Jefferson toyed with ideas for gradual emancipation laws, but brought no such measure before the provincial or state legislature. Slaves themselves, meanwhile, availed themselves in large numbers of the offer of Virginia's last royal governor of freedom to runaways from patriot masters. But in Wolf's account, the signal accomplishment of the era was the 1782 "act to authorize the manumission of slaves." This law, which remained on the books until 1806, was a sharp departure from the laws that preceded it and those that would follow: masters wishing to free female slaves between eighteen and forty-five and males between twenty-one and forty-five could do so, without seeking individual approval by the legislature. Significantly, the law contained no provision demanding that freed former slaves leave the state. Yet the law did not attempt a systematic, state-sponsored program of emancipation, channeling emancipation exclusively through private individuals under certain defined conditions.

The law's limitations notwithstanding, the 1782 manumission law allowed whites to free their slaves and blacks to buy their freedom, thus fostering the emergence of much larger free black communities than existed in the colonial period. In the cleverest analysis in the book, Wolf investigates how, for whom, and to what extent the 1782 law reshaped behavior. While Wolf estimates that ten thousand African Americans gained their freedom through the aegis of this law, this is significantly less than other estimates. More importantly, she suggests that the breadth and ideological significance of the emancipations during this period has been overestimated by previous historians. Wolf samples manumission documents in eight counties in various regions to reach the conclusion that only in the first decade after the law went into effect can it be concluded that most masters freed their slaves out of a principled renunciation of slaveholding. Half the deeds from this period express antislavery ideas and 70 percent of emancipations covered every slave of a particular master, an action which indicates, according to Wolf, a sincere disdain for the institution. Wolf also finds that manumitting slaveholders tended to be part of particular communities taking antislavery action, sometimes based on religion (e.g., pockets of Quakers or Methodists), but sometimes bound together by secular ideological or social affinity, especially on Virginia's eastern shore.

After the mid-1790s, however, manumission assumed a different, and, to historians of ancient and modern slavery outside of North America, quite familiar pattern whereby individual slaves gained their freedom for special considerations or as a means of securing loyalty. This pattern was compatible with strengthening slavery, manumission being used by masters to create individual incentives for loyalty or performance. Moreover, Wolf finds that manumission deeds, even in the earlier phase of manumission, far from expressing a belief in natural rights, referred to the slaves as "my" and "mine," thus underscoring the masters' possessive claims even in the act of granting freedom. Other important findings from her eight-county sample include the conclusion that one in twelve manumissions under this law was the result of slave self-purchase, and that black men were more likely to be manumitted in rural areas, while it was more common among black women in cities. These gendered patterns reflected, in part, the opportunities of rural enslaved men and urban enslaved women to take advantage of self-hire labor markets to raise money for self-purchase. In any event, only a tiny percentage of masters freed any slaves, and those who did increasingly did so for reasons other than conscience. Simultaneously, the ardor for equality in this world as an affirmation of equality in the next cooled precipitously amongst Methodists and Baptists.

Whatever the motivation of Virginia's manumitters, white Virginians found themselves bedeviled by the racial implications of emancipation. Wolf covers more familiar ground in examining the racial logic of Jefferson's desire to couple emancipation with deportation and St. George Tucker's glacially gradual plan for abolition. The author's central point is that the growth of the free black population in Virginia had a blowback effect; as the free black population increased and as the Tidewater economy declined, fears of "social disorder" emerged (p. 113). The revolutionary violence of St. Domingue and the exposure of Gabriel's plot against Richmond further fanned the flames of fear. Free blacks and the manumission law itself became targets, indeed scapegoats, of reaction. In 1806 the Virginia legislature averted by a mere two votes a total prohibition of manumission, instead opting for the Jeffersonian formula of linking any further emancipations to exile. Virginia's twenty-four-year experiment with, by their own historical standards, liberal manumission law came to an end.

The new manumission regime had two effects–a decrease in emancipations and the creation of a class of illegal aliens within the free black community. As in our own times, whites intermittently enforced laws against their vulnerable, marginalized illegal neighbors. For free blacks, their color had a legal meaning that ensured their vulnerability and created painful dilemmas. The story of Samuel Johnson drives home the precarious position of black families under these legal conditions. In 1811, Johnson garnered thirty-eight white men in Fauquier County to support a waver from the legislature that allowed him to stay in the state once he had purchased his freedom. Johnson filed several subsequent unsuccessful petitions, with even larger numbers of white signatories, on behalf of his wife and children, whom he also purchased but could not free. Thus, his family lived in "semifreedom" (p. 144) and were still Johnson's property upon his death.

The two concluding chapters of Wolf's study make clear that it was not the plight of people like Samuel Johnson that a developing cohort of antislavery politicians had in mind when, during the late 1820s, they began to question the role of slavery in Virginia. Rather, eastern elites themselves introduced slavery into the debate over a new state constitution in 1829 in order to counter western impatience with the disproportionate political power of the Tidewater. Easterners feared western efforts to

expand the franchise by eliminating property holding requirements, so that far more white men in the west could vote. They also feared plans to reapportion the legislature to reflect white populations, which would have deprived the eastern regions of Virginia of the population advantage gained from its large number of slaves. Wolf indicates that conservatives beat back the call for electoral reform by raising the specter of abolition and by asserting that the egalitarian rhetoric of westerners, taken to its logical ends, would enfranchise free blacks, as well as women. Thus, according to Wolf, the defense of slavery forced eastern conservatives to refashion the ideals of the American Revolution as dedicated to the preservation of property rather than the extension of liberty. The twofold effect of this ideological retrenchment was to blunt the western constitutional agenda and to inspire amongst many westerners an incipient free-soil philosophy that made them even more hostile to slaveholder interests.

Nat Turner's Rebellion delivered one more shock to Virginia's body politic that in 1831 and 1832 provided a final opportunity for Virginians to consider whether emancipation might reshape the state's future. Predictably, the problem of what the state should do with its current population of free blacks and the future increase that emancipation threatened, framed the debate and ultimately short-circuited it. Few white Virginia politicians saw the natural rights of black people as a major consideration. Legislators divided largely on sectional lines as to whether a gradual emancipation scheme freeing the offspring of current slaves violated the property rights of slaveholders. Western critics of slavery emphasized that the institution harmed economic and political development, preventing Virginia from realizing its full potential as a dynamic and virtuous society dominated by free white farmers. Ironically, a debate centered on slavery as a practical, not a moral, problem produced nothing but impractical plans that would have stretched out the emancipation process as late as 1910 and was undermined by the consensus of pro- and antislavery legislators that free blacks should be deported. A pervasive consensus on race thus ensured even the contemplation of conservative reform would produce complete inaction. In the thick of the age of Jackson, the eastern elite's colonial commitment to race-based slavery won the day in Virginia.

By taking into consideration a half-century sweep, from 1776 to 1832, and by viewing it as a period of prolonged transition, Wolf's work on slavery in Virginia would seem to mirror the project of Richard S. Newman and others who view the same period as a transformative one in the history of northern abolitionism.[1] Defenders of slavery and critics, whites and blacks, worked out their ideas and strategies in real time, in reaction to unfolding events, interests, and political structures, not simply in response to a clear set of identified, albeit problematic, Revolutionary principles. In Wolf's case, ironically, she has to make this argument by repeatedly making reference to Revolutionary principles, measuring words and actions by the presence or absence of egalitarian and libertarian language. While she does show us Virginians responding to external events such as the War of 1812 and the Missouri Crisis, her argument might be stronger, and her portrait more textured, if she more frequently looked beyond the boundaries of conventional politics and expanded the range of voices that reflected on the meaning of race or recorded the presence of blacks, slave and free, in the Old Dominion. As it is, the Revolution is the measuring stick for ideology, despite Wolf's efforts to provide a story more deeply grounded in a changing social landscape.

Still, Wolf mounts an intriguing challenge to historians who have claimed that the Revolution had a powerful impact on thinking about race and slavery. Her emphasis on conservatism provides nuance to works by William Shade, Dickson Bruce, and Robert McColley.[2] Wolf locates slavery and race closer to the heart of political conservatism in Virginia than does Bruce. In building on these previous perspectives, she interrogates claims by historians such as William Freehling, Gary B. Nash, and Duncan Macleod regarding the relative intensity of revolutionary liberalism, as well as casting doubt on whether oppressive ideas about race were really a response to the inability of the Revolutionary generation in the South to dismantle slavery.[3] Colonial era habits of mind remained a crucial instrument of power in Wolf's account, merely tuned up for a new era. Throughout the half century that she examines, the persistent refusal by whites to accept the possibility of large numbers of free blacks and free whites living amongst one another, even on unequal terms, vanquished even the most cautious antislavery arguments.

Like Edmund Morgan long before her, Wolf maintains that Virginia's story is emblematic of the nation's [4]. But in the period that Wolf's study focuses upon, there are limits to this formulation. Western Virginians may have become increasingly skeptical of slavery's political and economic value, but in the North during this period, a succession of states actually abolished slavery. To be sure, northern emancipation was deeply flawed, reflecting, as well as leading to, intense legal and cultural expressions of racism. But in the north, advocates of black disfranchisement as the corollary of abolition,

men like Martin Van Buren, were architects of a new, modern politics, not apologists for a colonial order as in Virginia. In any event, to test the Virginia paradigm would require Wolf to frame her work in more explicitly comparative terms, looking north, south, and west of the Chesapeake, not only to see how Virginia's approach to emancipation stacked up, but also to see if Virginians drew meaningful comparisons between themselves and other states. Along these lines, Wolf also might have made much more of the ways that national westward expansion underwrote Virginia's conservatism, by creating a profitable demand for Virginia's slaves.

Ultimately, Wolf's study raises broader questions about how ideology relates to substantive legal change and what the social costs of ambivalence are. These questions have direct relevance to two of the most crucial issues facing the United States today–immigration and climate change. Virginians tolerated the presence of a despised minority of free people whose status was legally ambiguous and presence in many cases a downright violation of the law. At least some Virginians, from the Revolution forward, recognized slavery itself to be a ticking social time-bomb. Sporadic outbreaks of ambivalence over the world they had made in the previous century reinforced racist phobias, but produced few concrete collective actions. Wolf thus provides us with a story in which surprisingly little changes over fifty-plus years. Virginians refused to solve their illegal alien problem or their dependence on slave labor. In retrospect, what white, or for that matter, black Virginians thought would happen in the long run–whether they believed the racial order forged in colonial times could last–remains unclear, despite Wolf's penetrating investigation of legal, political, and social history.

Notes

[1]. Richard S. Newman, *The Transformation of American Abolitionism: Fighting Slavery in the Early Republic* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2002).

[2]. William Shade, *Democratizing the Old Dominion: Virginia and the Second Party System, 1824-1861* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1996); Dickson D. Bruce Jr., *The Rhetoric of Conservatism: The Virginia Convention of 1829-30 and the Conservative Tradition in the South* (San Marino: The Huntington Library, 1982); and Robert McColley, *Slavery and Jeffersonian Virginia* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1964).

[3]. William W. Freehling, "The Founding Fathers and Slavery," *American Historical Review* 77 (1972), 81-93; Gary B. Nash, *Race and Revolution* (Madison: Madison House, 1990); and Duncan J. Macleod, *Slavery, Race, and the American Revolution* (London: Cambridge University Press, 1974).

[4]. Edmund S. Morgan, *American Slavery, American Freedom: The Ordeal of Colonial Virginia* (New York: Norton, 1975).

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the list discussion logs at:
http://h-net.msu.edu/cgi-bin/logbrowse.pl.

Citation: David Gellman. Review of Wolf, Eva Sheppard, *Race and Liberty in the New Nation: Emancipation in Virginia from the Revolution to Nat Turner's Rebellion.* H-Law, H-Net Reviews. July, 2007.
URL: http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=13414

Copyright © 2007 by H-Net, all rights reserved. H-Net permits the redistribution and reprinting of this work for nonprofit, educational purposes, with full and accurate attribution to the author, web location, date of publication, originating list, and H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online. For any other proposed use, contact the Reviews editorial staff at hbooks@mail.h-net.msu.edu.