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Tommy L. Bogger. *Free Blacks in Norfolk, Virginia, 1790-1860: The Darker Side of Freedom.* Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1997. xiii + 264 pp. $35.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8139-1690-3.

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Tommy L. Bogger argues that early in the nineteenth century the free black community in Norfolk, Virginia saw its economic opportunities decline and that this subsequently led to a despair for the future. Prior to this dramatic transition, free blacks lived as integrated members of the urban economy, enjoyed the legal protections of local courts, earned wages as skilled artisans and semi-skilled laborers, participated in land speculation, and arranged the purchases of enslaved family members and neighbors. This golden age of opportunities for free blacks came to an abrupt halt in 1805. The optimism that characterized the free black community in 1800 turned to despair by 1850.

Bogger mined a wealth of records to uncover the free black experience in Norfolk. He analyzed a diverse array of local records, including deed books, wills, guardian accounts, legislative petitions, circuit court records, church records, and birth, death and marriage records. As a result, he presents an account that effectively balances statistical findings with short yet insightful examples. This method allows him to give voice to the under-explored segment of Southern society that Ira Berlin studied fourteen years ago. Unlike Berlin, however, Bogger stresses the changing status of the free black community and the ways in which free blacks interacted within a specific community.[1] The results are engaging. He reconceptualizes, among other issues, the life of free blacks in general, the process of manumission, the nature of the southern economy, and the meaning of freedom in the antebellum South.

Most free blacks, Bogger writes, either bought their own freedom or were born of free black parents. The humanitarian, revolutionary, and religious rationales behind freeing slaves did not significantly affect Norfolk. Rather than events of "love and affection" (p. 12), manumissions were financial transactions that usually resulted from the initiatives of African Americans themselves. Blacks who did not obtain freedom directly through self-purchase often relied on the aid of kinsmen or hired third-party agents to act as their intermediaries. Other free blacks entered Norfolk as outsiders, hoping to use the port town as a "springboard to freedom" (p. 21) or to enter a vibrant free black community. Through these means, Norfolk's free black population grew from sixty-one in 1790 to 352 in 1800. By 1830, the free black population reached 928.

When the nineteenth century began, Norfolk's free black community had reason for optimism. They successfully sued white clients for unpaid debts, participated as land speculators, testified against white defendants, and worked as barbers, sailors, draymen, and other skilled and semi-skilled workers. A few even owned slaves, although most did so for humanitarian reasons. Bogger's examples of free black inclusion are often startling and rather convincing. As the free black population saw its numbers skyrocket, however, they saw the sources of their social status destabilize. By 1850, free blacks had to fight to keep jobs that they had once monopolized, they had less opportunity to own their own land, and they saw the law increasingly restrict their lives. As Norfolk's economy stagnated, free blacks discovered that their seemingly stable social position was precarious. They increasingly needed to take jobs that had the dual problem of being underpaid and physically dangerous. Norfolk's free black population found their access to the legal structure all but gone. The ability to sue and testify against whites became harder, and proving one's free status became more onerous. Over time, "blacks who attained freedom had to maintain constant vigilance so that they would not be deprived of it" (p. 98). Free blacks had become slaves without masters.

Bogger attributed this transition to three forces. First, in 1805, white attorneys stopped representing free black creditors, thus leaving their former clients without means of protecting their finances and free status. Second, in 1806, Virginia responded to its growing perception that the free blacks threatened the social order by mandating that all newly manumitted blacks must leave

the state. The Haitian Revolution and Gabriel Prosser's Rebellion helped white Norfolk justify this legal enactment. Third, the arrival of European immigrants into Norfolk in the first decade of the nineteenth century increased economic competition and limited the opportunities for free blacks. Recent immigrants replaced free blacks in desirable occupation.

Free blacks, whether in families or as individuals, increasingly lived on the periphery of Norfolk in the nineteenth century–theirs was a "life in the shadows" (p. 120). Although not spatially distant from the white community, free blacks lived in a segregated world. The Jim Crow structure that C. Vann Woodward argued did not emerge until after Reconstruction existed in antebellum Norfolk.[2] Only the grog houses and some brothels catered to a biracial clientele. In addition to this segregation, free blacks also lived in overcrowded tenements, faced health hazards that white society frequently ignored, and ate an irregular diet. Despite their unsavory living conditions, free blacks found ways to "make daily life pleasant" (p. 131). They took advantage of the opportunities the ports provided, used horse racing as a diversion, and participated in community parades. They celebrated holidays, provided for the education of their children, and went to church. Still, even in the church, the oppressive reality of Southern society followed the free blacks. "Religion for blacks," Bogger explains "was far from being simply a refuge or a retreat from reality … for impinging on the churches were all of the social, racial, legal, economic, and philosophical issues of the day" (p. 150).

Bogger explains that the free black community best displayed their creative adaptations when they created "meaningful relationships and stable families" (p. 103). A shortage of men altered the shape of the free black family, with husbands usually being significantly older than their wives and free blacks occasionally marrying slaves. Several free blacks actually owned their spouses as a means of circumventing the 1806 law that mandated that freed blacks needed to leave Virginia. Black slave owners, although occasionally influenced by status and economic concerns, usually owned fellow blacks for humanitarian reasons.

Even as their lives worsened, most free blacks in Norfolk resisted the colonization movement. Within this familiar story of rejecting Liberia as a viable alternative to freedom in the United States, Bogger presents a perspective too often obscured. The precarious position of free blacks made the prospect of rejecting the efforts of white emigration agents a dangerous one. "It was not an easy task, or even a wise move," he writes "for free blacks to look the white man straight in his face and give him an unequivocal no" (p. 44). The ability to resist pressure tactics was compounded in Norfolk because Reverend William H. Starr, the pastor of Norfolk's black Methodist church, was the city's agent. He often relentlessly pursued clients/parishioners until he obtained verbal agreements that the free blacks had little intention of keeping. This furthered the belief among white society that blacks were unable to keep their word. For those who chose to leave, however, the free black community served as a source of assistance. They provided cash, temporary residences, and emotional support. Still, the general response to colonization indicated that free blacks believed that Norfolk was their home.

The central thesis–that the status of free blacks declined in the nineteenth century and this led to a sense of helplessness–seems to overstate the evidence and betray Bogger's intended perspective. Perhaps as a single entity, Norfolk's free black community experienced decline, but it is not clear how many individuals saw their own status diminish. Bogger explains how blacks monopolized the barber profession until 1850 when whites, for the first time, entered the field. The end of this monopoly clearly represented a loss to the free black community. Yet the number of black barbers in this transition actually increased. Three black barbers served all of Norfolk in 1800 and in Bogger's own words "by 1860, although the number of black barbers had grown to ten, five whites had also entered the field" (p. 67). Slaves who became unskilled laborers experienced an increase in liberty and status, even if they had little hope of becoming skilled laborers.

Bogger's tight argument and persuasive evidence makes it difficult to deny the decline of the free black community in Norfolk, Virginia. The economic, legal, and social freedoms accorded to free blacks after the American Revolution dissipated when their economic position was weakened by immigrant competition and white society became convinced that they threatened Norfolk's social order. Free blacks were not always slaves without masters, but in the course of the first half of the nineteenth century it became increasingly difficult to enjoy their freedom.

Notes:

[1]. Ira Berlin, *Slaves Without Masters: The Free Negro in the Antebellum South* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1974).

[2]. C. Vann Woodward, *The Strange Career of Jim Crow* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1957).

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