H-Net Reviews
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Nick Salvatore. *We All Got History: The Memory Books of Amos Webber.* Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 2006. 464 pp. $25.00 (paper), ISBN 978-0-252-07440-0.

Lea VanderVelde. *Mrs. Dred Scott: A Life on Slavery's Frontier.* Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009. Illustrations. viii + 480 pp. $34.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-19-536656-3.

Jean Fagan Yellin, ed. *The Harriet Jacobs Family Papers.* 2 vols. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2008. Illustrations, maps. lxxxi + 929 pp. $100.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8078-3131-1.

Reviewed by Douglas Bristol (University of Southern Mississippi)
Published on H-CivWar (January, 2010)
Commissioned by Matthew E. Mason

Documenting the Lives of Ordinary African Americans in the Nineteenth Century

Some of the best work in the historical discipline has been painstaking reconstructions of African American lives. A few notable books successfully cast a wide net, telling the story of a pivotal moment or explaining the legacy of generations. However, most studies of ordinary African Americans in the nineteenth century focus on the commonplace and a limited number of individuals.[1] All three of the works reviewed belong to the latter category since they are biographical. These were challenging books to write because of the scarcity of records available for documenting the lives of ordinary African Americans in the nineteenth century. As a consequence, the reviewed works embody the strengths and weaknesses of social history told on a smaller scale.

These scholars make important contributions to the task of writing more complex, and therefore more accurate, histories of African Americans. To reconstruct the lives of three African Americans who were both ordinary and extraordinary, they examined new sources that also have relevance for understanding major developments in nineteenth-century America. Lea VanderVelde dramatically presents the life of Dred Scott's wife, Harriet, against the backdrop of military outposts in the old northwestern frontier and the historic U.S. Supreme Court case that bears her husband's name. As a legal scholar and as the director of a project to document the freedom suits of St. Louis, VanderVelde is well qualified for the difficult task of writing the biography of an illiterate, largely undocumented woman caught up in a lawsuit that caused a historic ruling by the U.S. Supreme Court. Fortunately, she has the benefit of being the first historian to use the diary of Harriet's frontier master, Lawrence Taliaferro, and to compare the three hundred freedom suits beside the Scotts' that her team uncovered at the courthouse. VanderVelde contends that the larger significance of Harriet's story is that it reveals the human element of the legal drama. Moreover, she places Harriet at the center of the controversial lawsuit by arguing that the washerwoman was the driving force behind the original freedom suits filed by the Scotts.

Nick Salvatore had a different task as a biographer. He chose to decode the cryptic "Thermometer Record and Diary" of Amos Webber that he uncovered in Harvard's Baker Library while he was researching industrial workers. In addition to being a noted labor historian, Salvatore is also a distinguished biographer. His memorable study of Eugene Debs (*Eugene V. Debs: Citizen and Socialist* [1982]) won the Bancroft Prize of the American Historical Association, and more recently, he has written a well-received biography of the Reverend C. L. Franklin, the activist Detroit minister whose daughter was the noted singer, Aretha Franklin (*Singing in a Strange Land: C. L. Franklin, the Black Church, and the Transformation of America* [2005]). In explaining his study of Webber, a free black janitor who lived in Philadelphia and Worcester, Massachusetts, Salvatore argues that Webber kept a diary to assert his self-worth, reinforcing the important lesson that literacy fueled black resistance. Salvatore also maintains that we need to understand men like Webber because "his life, for all of its quiet firmness and unspectacular valor, reveals more sharply than the lives of many more famous people how the web of daily inter-

action, association, and commitment bound individuals one to another" (p. 321). Relying on an extensive survey of archives and published research, he impressively pieces together evidence to document the hitherto unknown Webber's presence at the trials of abolitionists, his service as one of the early black noncommissioned officers in the Union army, and his prominent leadership in black fraternal orders and veterans' organizations after the Civil War.

Jean Fagan Yellin worked over a decade to collect and edit the family papers of Harriet Jacobs. Documenting the life of "the only woman known to leave papers testifying to her life in slavery," the two volumes of the Jacobs' edited papers and accompanying CD-ROM are informed by Yellin's extensive research (p. xxix). After proving that Jacobs wrote the slave narrative *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl: Written by Herself* (1987), which Yellin edited, Yellin went on to become Jacobs's biographer (*Harriet Jacobs: A Life* [2004]). For the many who have read *Incidents*–a book popular with undergraduate surveys–but who knew little about Jacobs's long life as a free woman, the papers reveal a surprising tale that includes her brother's travels around the world as a sailor and his own slave narrative along with Jacobs's work on behalf of abolition and former slaves during the Civil War and Reconstruction. Yellin argues that these papers also offer an unprecedented context for understanding a slave narrative. Yet success at providing readers with detailed accounts often comes at the expense of addressing larger developments in nineteenth-century America.

One might wish for more explicit statements of how these books contribute to African American history; nonetheless, it is likely that the authors would agree on a few broad conclusions. The first is that, no matter how humble they were, nineteenth-century African Americans strove valiantly "to resist domination and assert their independence" (VanderVelde, p. 2). For example, VanderVelde opens her book with a telling encounter between Harriet Scott and two white reporters from *Frank Leslie's Illustrated Newspaper*. Harriet challenged the right of the white men to bother her husband: "What's the white man after that Negro for? Why don't the white man tend to his own business" (p. 9)? Although only VanderVelde cites the burgeoning subaltern literature, all three scholars underscore the need to document the ways ordinary African Americans asserted the right to control their own lives.[2]

These scholars also emphasize the limits that nineteenth-century white oppression placed on black autonomy and the tensions that resulted.[3] According to Salvatore's research, Webber witnessed startling demonstrations of virulent northern racism when more than a thousand, mostly Irish, white men attacked Philadelphia's African American community in 1842. He was also present for extreme black responses to white violence, such as two black mutinies that occurred while he was a sergeant in the Massachusetts Fifth (Colored) Cavalry. Salvatore concludes that Webber had a sanguine view of whites based on his own moral code. Noting the passing of John Jacob Astor, then the wealthiest man in America, Webber judged the white man succinctly: "May he rest; It looks doubtful" (p. 224).

Since both Harriets were enslaved and female, their experiences further underscore the vulnerability of African Americans, but they do so in markedly different ways. While Harriet Jacobs chose to live in an attic room for seven years rather than submit to the lewd advances of her master, Harriet Scott chose to remain a slave under a benevolent master rather than to risk dying a free woman in a harsh Minnesota winter. Likewise, Jacobs welcomed publicity after gaining her freedom, while Scott avoided the limelight. The explanations that VanderVelde and Yellin offer for the decisions made by the two Harriets, in turn, shed new light on how African American women responded to oppression based on their gender and their degree of literacy.[4]

The limitations of the methods used to document ordinary African Americans become apparent in two different ways. At one extreme, VanderVelde's close attention to Taliaferro's battle as an Indian Agent to protect the rights of the Dakota or to the legal arguments of freedom suits omits Harriet from sections of her own biography. VanderVelde's attempt to fill gaps by examining the records of people associated with Harriet ends up telling the reader more about white people than about this singular black woman. At the other extreme, the thoughtful annotation of the Jacobs' papers often fails to link events in the life of Harriet Jacobs with broader developments in American history.[5] Salvatore's method spans the two approaches, focusing on Webber and placing him in the context of larger events. Striking this balance requires Salvatore to feature his analysis of evidence prominently in *We All Got History*, offering detailed explanations of what he found probable and qualifying his conclusions.

As a result, method also influenced how these books were written. VanderVelde's emphasis on writing a flowing narrative engages the reader more than Salvatore's careful analysis. Yellin and her fellow editors also used a light touch, making it easy to pick up one of the volumes and read it at any point. In addition, the historical record

dictated that these books would be organized in peculiar ways. The first half of VanderVelde's biography chronicles Harriet's life from her arrival in Minnesota as an adolescent servant in 1835 to her decision as a twenty-eight-year-old St. Louis washerwoman to sue for her freedom in 1846. The second half is more of a legal cliffhanger, with well-intentioned but preoccupied white attorneys successively taking over Harriet and Dred's case. Ironically, although Harriet had the better legal claim to freedom than Dred, having been manumitted by Taliaferro in free territory, her attorneys agreed to combine the two cases and focus only on Dred's condition. VanderVelde notes this legal legerdemain as a factor in Harriet being overlooked. Webber's diary presented Salvatore with a similar obstacle to research: Webber wrote no entries for the 1860s even though he served in the Union army and became preoccupied with Republican politics. Hence, Salvatore's portrait of Webber is truncated in the middle without noticeably shortening the 443-page book.

Jacobs's circumstances also determined the extent of records at different points in her life. For example, only one of the twelve parts of the edited volumes relate to Jacobs's experiences as a slave. Parts 4, 5, and 6 fulfill Yellin's goal of providing a context for understanding a literary classic and the author who wrote it. At other points, the three hundred documents gathered from seventy-eight archives depict Jacobs as an activist and as a loving member of her family. Yellin and her colleagues provide exemplary guidance to readers through an introduction, a timeline, biographical sketches, section overviews, a family tree, and a detailed index. Moreover, the Jacobs' papers, along with the two biographies, are well illustrated with maps and portraits of significant individuals.

These books contribute to studies of African American resistance in the nineteenth century that pay attention to racial barriers and violence. They break new ground by documenting how slaves used legal briefs and literacy to reclaim their independence. Finally, on some level, all three underscore the importance of gender. Just as VanderVelde and Yellin demonstrate that the two Harriets illuminate different aspects of the lives of black women, Salvatore emphasizes how all-male fraternal, military, and political organizations shaped the identity of Webber. When regarded separately, it becomes clear that each scholar makes his or her own distinct contribution as well. Salvatore's research on black fraternal groups is so extensive and insightful that it deserves special attention from the reader.[6] Likewise, VanderVelde makes an original contribution to the history of slavery in the old northwestern frontier in addition to persuasively claiming that Harriet initiated the Dred Scott case. Yellin's work shines as well. As the product of twenty-two years of research, it will likely prove definitive for scholars of Jacobs and of slave narratives.

The shortcomings of these works are largely unavoidable sins of omission that are far outweighed by their achievements. Before faulting VanderVelde, Salvatore, and Yellin for occasionally missing the bigger picture, the reader needs to consider the type of projects they tackled. Writing the social history of ordinary African Americans is a task for clever, persistent researchers willing to sift through and interpret fragmentary evidence. These scholars bring Amos Webber, Harriet Jacobs, and Harriet Scott back to life, which recommends their books to readers who want to get to know these remarkable individuals as well as those who seek to understand the experience of nineteenth-century African Americans from the bottom up.

Notes

[1]. Synthetic works that capture the experience of ordinary African Americans include: Leon Litwack, *Trouble in Mind: Black Southerners in the Age of Jim Crow* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1998); Ira Berlin, *Generations of Captivity: A History of African-American Slaves* (Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2003); and Steven Hahn, *A Nation under Our Feet: Black Political Struggles in the Rural South from Slavery to the Great Migration* (Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2003). For the range of approaches to documenting the lives of ordinary African Africans, see Edwin Adams Davis and William Ransom Hogan, *The Barber of Natchez* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1954); Juliet E. K. Walker, *Free Frank: A Black Pioneer on the Antebellum Frontier* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1983); Paul E. Johnson and Sean Wilentz, *The Kingdom of Matthias* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994); Julie Winch, ed., *The Colored Aristocracy by Cyprian Clamorgan* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1999); John Hope Franklin and Loren Schweninger, *In Search of the Promised Land: A Slave Family in the Old South* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006); and Douglas Walter Bristol Jr., *Knights of the Razor: Black Barbers in Slavery and Freedom* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2009).

[2]. For example, VanderVelde cites Gayatri Chakrovty Sivak, "Can the Subaltern Speak?" in *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*, edited by Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grosssberg (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1988). She also draws on articles from legal jour-

nals, such as Lucie E. White, "Subordination, Rhetorical Survival Skills and Sunday Shoes: Notes on the Hearing of Mrs. G.," *Buffalo Law Review* 38, no. 1 (1990): 1-58. By contrast, Salvatore announces in his introduction to *We All Got History* that he shunned the "current trend among some historians to borrow from literary theory" (p. xv).

[3]. For more on the need to strike this balance, see Kevin K. Gaines, *Uplifting the Race: Black Leadership, Politics, and Culture in the Twentieth Century* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1996); Joanne Pope Melish, *Disowning Slavery: Gradual Emancipation and Race in New England, 1780-1860* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1998); and Patrick Rael, *Black Identity and Black Protest in the Antebellum North* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2002).

[4]. On black literacy in the nineteenth century, see Heather Andrea Williams, *Self-Taught: African American Education in Slavery and Freedom* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2005).

[5]. For an example of a different approach to contextualizing slave narratives, see David W. Blight, *A Slave No More: Two Men Who Escaped to Freedom, Including Their Own Narratives of Emancipation* (New York: Harcourt, 2007). For overviews of antebellum slave narratives as a genre, see William L. Andrews, *To Tell a Free Story: The First Century of Afro-American Autobiography, 1760-1865* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1988); and Charles T. Davis and Henry Louis Gates, eds., *The Slave's Narrative* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985). For an overview of postbellum narratives, especially those written by black veterans, see David W. Blight, *Race and Reunion: The Civil War in American Memory* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2001).

[6]. Those interested in black fraternal organizations should also see Martin Summers, *Manliness and Its Discontents: The Black Middle Class and the Transformation of Masculinity, 1900-1930* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004).

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: Douglas Bristol. Review of Salvatore, Nick, *We All Got History: The Memory Books of Amos Webber* and VanderVelde, Lea, *Mrs. Dred Scott: A Life on Slavery's Frontier* and Yellin, Jean Fagan, ed., *The Harriet Jacobs Family Papers.* H-CivWar, H-Net Reviews. January, 2010.
URL: http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=25311

This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.