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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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In the introduction to his book, Professor Bogger asserts that "until twenty years ago there was little effort to analyze [free blacks'] predicament from their own vantage point" (p. 1). *Free Blacks in Norfolk* is an attempt to paint a fuller picture of the antebellum experience of free blacks in a Southern, urban environment. The book is tantalizing in many ways, but is ultimately unsatisfactory for a number of reasons.

Bogger posits an early nineteenth-century Norfolk which afforded free blacks, if not equal rights, then something quite close. Black merchants sued whites for debt and, *ipso facto*, were accepted as credible plaintiffs' witnesses in court. African Americans held monopolies on certain profitable trades, such as barbering, and engaged in competition with white mechanics in others, sometimes earning incomes substantial enough to own considerable amounts of real and personal property. Some black Norfolkians, Bogger asserts, were wealthy enough--and callous enough--to buy and hold slaves for other than charitable reasons. According to Bogger, free black folk in Norfolk in 1800 had every reason to hope that the full benefits of the Revolution and its ideology would soon be extended to them. All that ended, according to the author, in about 1805 when Norfolk's economy began to sour and whites began to perceive free blacks as the cause for all their social and economic ills. Professor Bogger then proceeds to relate the story of how free blacks in Norfolk survived white antagonism and hatred "in the shadows."

Therein lies one of the problems for this book. Bogger insists that blacks were forced out of, or denied access to, trades which might have been profitable. But his evidence doesn't support his argument. In Chapter Three, "Declining Employment Opportunities," Bogger avers that immigrant whites invaded even the barbering trade (pp. 67-68). However, this did not happen, by the author's own admission, until 1858. Draymen, too, the author asserts, rapidly lost power in the years 1805-1860, but Bogger notes that black draymen staged a successful strike in 1826 and effectively fixed prices in 1840, and that, again, whites did not enter the trade until the late 1850s. These sorts of statistics and anecdotal evidence serve only to blunt what might be a more subtle and trenchant discussion/argument about black viability in the antebellum free market.

Blacks, Bogger insists, were unwilling to sit back and passively accept their economic lot. More than a few turned to arson, according to the author. These are important assertions of active African American resistance to their plight in Norfolk, but Bogger cannot back the assertions up. He has to note, "Of the two suspects charged with arson, both were black, but neither was convicted. Thus it cannot be proved that blacks were the perpetrators of the crime" (p. 102). (No noting of the irony of this either!) This is not to say that the thought is not tantalizing and plausible. It is just that it would have been nice to have had a substantive base.

Bogger is on shakier ground still when he examines the lower end of the black economic spectrum. He mentions briefly the Overseers of the Poor and the alms house and black contacts with both. He notes that when the Overseers bound out poor blacks and black orphans, they rarely (if ever) bound them out to the "better" trades. But he does not compare how black children fared to how poor white orphans were treated, or how black orphans and poor were treated elsewhere. In his discussion of the alms house, Bogger baldly insists that "Slaves, of course, were not admitted" (p. 128). This simply is not true. Slaves were admitted to many poor houses in Virginia, including Norfolk. Bogger notes that few blacks went to the poor house and that the "charity hospital was ... a place of last resort" (p. 128). But the author attributes this more to black pride rather than the ability of blacks to continue to keep working when the economy forced many to visit these institutions. Nor does he compare blacks to whites in these (or any) situations, but records show that in 1838, 130 whites lived in the poor house, while only twenty-four blacks resided there.

There are other, smaller irritations that suggest that Bogger is not familiar with the times or the economics of the times. For instance, he calls a debt of thirteen pounds, six shillings in 1798 "small." But that was a substantial debt in 1798, indeed in 1830, and might well have led many men to "embarrassment," court, and debtors' schedules.

It is errors such as these which outweigh the good points of the book. Professor Bogger has amassed some interesting statistics on the early free black population of Norfolk, especially on those who were manumitted and those who chose to emigrate to Liberia. Ultimately, however, the positives do not outweigh the negatives. Bogger, too, was ill-served by his editors, who allowed the book to go to press with numerous repetitive sections and irritating typographical and grammatical errors.

Perhaps the biggest problem with the work, though, is that it is essentially a reworking of Bogger's 1976 dissertation. Since that time an extraordinary number of works on the black South have been produced, but the author has not availed himself of many of these. The Genoveses do not even appear in the bibliography. Too, since then, a great number of primary sources have been uncovered in Virginia. Employing a combination of the two might easily have made this a stronger, more substantive contribution to the literature.

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