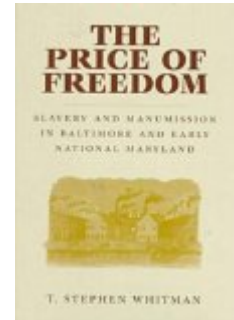


T. Stephen Whitman. *The Price of Freedom: Slavery and Manumission in Baltimore and Early National Maryland.* Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1997. 238 pp. \$35.95, cloth, ISBN 978-0-8131-2004-1.



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Ever since the early works of Genovese, Blassingame, and Berlin, to name but three historians of the genre, historians of the African American experience in the antebellum era have worked to fashion a better understanding of the relationship(s) between masters and slaves and between whites and free blacks, and, more important, to establish and explore black agency in these relationships. This study has produced many weighty tomes, some of which are excellent, notably *Roll, Jordan, Roll*; many were less so. Moreover, too often these works, Genovese's included (more than a little ironic now), suffered from being informed by and infused and suffused with twentieth-century political dogmas to try to explain eighteenth- and early-nineteenth century events and consciousness which, to my mind anyway, often rendered theses and conclusions suspect. How nice, then, to read Stephen Whitman's study of class and race--bereft of jargon and political cant--which captures the true subtlety of the relationships between blacks and whites during a time of rapid social, economic, and political change.

Whitman chose to focus his study of slavery and manumission on an urban area, the thriving industrial and port city of Baltimore. Recent debates about the "Southernness" of Baltimore and "the 'failure' of urban or industrial slavery [as] a given," make this study all the more remarkable and timely, for Baltimore, according to the author, appears to have been an anomaly: an urban area in which slavery thrived at the same time manumissions increased. In Whitman's opinion, the spread of slavery, industrial and urban growth, and selective manumission coexisted and reinforced one another, showing that studies which have focussed on the "failure" of urban slavery need to be reexamined.

As industrialization, manufacturing, and port activity increased in Baltimore, factory owners, shipbuilders, and mechanics found it increasingly desirable to have a work force upon which they could count and, conversely, which they could dispose of when not needed. The needs of Baltimore's entrepreneurs coincided almost exactly in time with those of plantation owners and farmers in Baltimore's environs, who wished to maximize

profits in their human chattel by shipping their unskilled slaves to city factories during lulls in the rhythms of planting and harvest, or hire out their skilled slaves for profit. The result was an increase in the number of slaves in Baltimore from less than 1000 to well over 4000 by 1810. But, Whitman notes, at almost the same time, the free black population soared from less than 200 to nearly 10,000! Moreover, this occurred at a time when both the courts and the legislature conspired to make manumission very hard indeed for both master and slave. What produced this situation and, more important, what led from it?

Professor Whitman avers that the needs of both rural and urban slavemasters to maximize their profitability led to a new concept, "term slavery," in which "men [and women]...were slaves 'for a term of years,' after which they would be free, as provided for by a manumission by deed of will" (p. 51). Indeed, for many slave-owners, term slavery seemed to offer a cure for many of the "ills" of slavery. Masters, ever worried about runaways, believed they could curb that tendency in their chattel by promising freedom at some later date. Manufacturers whose livelihoods depended upon slaves needed those without Luddite tendencies; slaves given a promise of manumission would presumably work harder with less tendency to industrial sabotage. And, masters with guilty consciences over slavery, but who might be penalized economically by immediate emancipation, could salve their guilt and maintain their economic stability through this system. All such owners had reason to consider term slavery as advantageous to themselves, advantageous to slaves, and in keeping with the republicanism engendered by the Revolution: A man worthy of his freedom worked for it.

Term slavery worked for both "sides" in Baltimore, possibly more so for slaves than for masters. A slave not content with his work arrangement, or the possibility of sale, could and did argue against the terms. If the master ignored his/

her views, running away was not only a possibility, but a likelihood. And the runaway slave could blend easily into the growing free black population of Baltimore. This fact alone gave pause to many a slaveholder. Still, according to Whitman, the pause was just that, for many slaveholders who freed their slaves on terms bought others to replace them immediately. Thus was slavery perpetuated while manumissions rose.

The "price of freedom" was costly indeed. Freedmen having bought themselves--and perhaps other family members--had little money left for living, let alone for the acquisition of real property and household goods. The white majority therefore deemed these folks reprobates and vagabonds, or worse, and firmly believed that they could not compete, let alone succeed, in a white society. The "price of freedom," then, was an enhanced, more virulent racism.

Whitman set a reasonable goal with this book, and none should criticize him for that; it IS, after all, a small monograph. Moreover, he has accomplished quite well what he intended. He has made judicious use of the wide array of available records and is willing to concede when the records do not allow for substantive conclusions and judgments to be made. Still, in the give and take of the relations between blacks and whites portrayed by Whitman, all seems to be business; the violence inherent in slavery is missing here, or dismissed as averse to slaveholders' interests. Was there none of the crime and violence in Baltimore that existed in other slaveholding locales? Surely there are court records, criminal and civil, such as the courts of Oyer and Terminer in Virginia, which could shed light on the more volatile aspects of Maryland slavery. Finally, Baltimore may not be unique. For instance, mechanics in Petersburg, Virginia, were acquiring slaves at precisely this same time while the number of slaves in Virginia as a whole was dropping. Other Southern industrial cities may show the same pattern, and they are deserving of further study.

While these are important issues, the lack of attention given them does not detract from an excellent area study. Steven Whitman is to be congratulated for his contribution to the literature of antebellum slavery, manumission, and race and class relations.

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