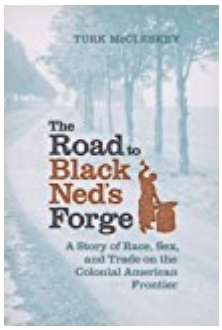
H-Net Reviews
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Turk McCleskey. *The Road to Black Ned's Forge: A Story of Race, Sex, and Trade on the Colonial American Frontier.* Early American Histories Series. Virginia: University of Virginia Press, 2014. x + 324 pp. $29.95, cloth, ISBN 978-0-8139-3582-9.



Reviewed by Kim Todt

Published on H-SAWH (May, 2015)

Commissioned by Lisa A. Francavilla (The Papers of Thomas Jefferson: Retirement Series and Jefferson Quotes & Family Letters)

For many years, scholars have focused their study of race relations on the American frontier on the dynamic between English colonists and Native Americans. Only recently have they included African Americans within the framework of such studies, and, with notable exceptions, these studies have had more to say about the actions and beliefs of slave owners than of enslaved people or freedmen. With *The Road to Black Ned's Forge*, Turk McCleskey endeavors to ameliorate the scholarly inattention that the role of African Americans on the early frontier has endured.

McCleskey divides his book into three sections and, during the course of his narrative, shifts the focus geographically from southeastern Pennsylvania to Augusta County, Virginia. Part 1 establishes a foundational background about the colonial frontier and the Euro-Americans who began to inhabit it. McCleskey looks closely at the rise of Thomas Shute, an early eighteenth-century farmer, mine operator, and proprietor of a stone quarry. These were all ventures characteristic of the period to exploit Pennsylvania's natural resources and gain wealth. By 1730, increased Irish and German immigration into Lancaster County placed pressure on the ability to acquire additional land at affordable prices. Land speculators in Virginia offered residents of Lancaster County opportunities to purchase large tracts of land. However, the acquisition of less expensive land required a consistent labor force and even Quakers like Shute turned to slavery. Shute continued to explore investment opportunities outside of farming and mining. He established a lucrative shipping trade between Philadelphia and Charleston, and employed his son, Joseph, as ship master and factor for the family trade.

In addition to the Philadelphia-Charleston trade, the younger Shute found success with shipping to the Bahamas and investment in cargoes from Europe. He gradually increased his holdings in small to mid-sized vessels and real estate in and around Charleston. By 1749, however, he had met with commercial collapse, declared bankrupt-

cy, and left Charleston a ruined man, returning to his boyhood home in 1750. Shute arrived in Philadelphia to reclaim the family homestead after his father's death.

In part 2, McCleskey recounts the story of Edward Tarr, assiduously piecing together the details of Tarr's early life. Tarr, known as Black Ned during his enslavement, first appears in extant records in 1732, when his master Andrew Robeson offered him for sale at the age of twenty-one. The same owner advertised for Ned's capture in 1739 when Ned was twenty-seven. Ned may have developed his skills as an ironworker from a subsequent owner, John Hansen, or prior to his acquisition by Hansen. By 1745, Hansen had sold Ned. McCleskey concedes it is unclear when Thomas Shute, the yeoman entrepreneur of Lancaster County, eventually purchased Ned.

In October 1748, Shute had executed a will with provisions that allowed Tarr to purchase his freedom from Shute's estate. The terms of Thomas Shute's will provided that Tarr could achieve his freedom by paying Shute's estate in installments of six pounds per year for six years. Any lapse or default in payment would allow Shute's executors to sell Tarr to a new master. Tarr purchased his freedom within three years, and by 1754, when he acquired his own tract of land, he became Virginia's first black landowner west of the Blue Ridge Mountains. He was the only blacksmith in the general area and his business became a landmark on the Great Wagon Road from Philadelphia to the Carolinas.

Tarr was also married to a "Scotch woman." Despite Virginia's ban on interracial marriages, county officials did not prosecute Tarr, and McCleskey suggests three reasons for this. First, Tarr appears to have exploited a legal loophole. While both Pennsylvania and Virginia punished couples in an interracial marriage, if Tarr and his white wife had married in Pennsylvania, they may have emigrated before Pennsylvania's officials could prosecute them. The couple avoided any penalties in their former colony and a Virginia court could not punish them for a crime committed in Pennsylvania. Further, Tarr's white neighbors may have overlooked his marriage because he provided valuable services as a blacksmith to the nascent community. Finally, the region lacked a well-developed culture of slavery, which would have created immutable barriers to such a marriage. Instead, Tarr prospered in his new community. He joined the local church and was one of over one hundred congregants signing a call for a new minster to the community's meetinghouse. His blacksmithing business thrived, and he received commercial credit from Augusta County men suggesting the trust community members had in him and his business.

McCleskey contends that the French and Indian War brought irreversible changes for both Tarr and his local community. Fear of Indian attacks prompted Tarr to leave Augusta County for Pennsylvania in 1757. In the spring of 1759, Tarr returned to a changed Virginia but his domestic arrangements no longer met with tolerance. Another woman had come to live with Tarr and his wife, and Tarr faced charges of harboring a common disturber of the peace. Additionally, the court indicted Tarr for retailing strong beer without a license. Amid such difficulties, Tarr relocated to Staunton—"the westernmost town in colonial Virginia" (p. 1).

In 1761, Hugh Montgomery, a white man from North Carolina, complained to two magistrates that he had purchased a slave named Edward Tarr from Joseph Shute in Pennsylvania. Montgomery sought the magistrates' approval for seizing the runaway slave. Tarr responded by citing Shute's will and producing the receipts for payment for his own freedom. While the magistrates ruled in Tarr's favor, they required both men to appear at the next court session and ordered Tarr to pay a five-hundred-pound security against his appearance. Montgomery never reappeared and the judges certified Tarr's freedom. As

McCleskey aptly suggests, it was Joseph Shute's fraud that linked Tarr to the rest of Augusta County's black population, and Montgomery's challenge of Tarr's status as a free black inhabitant obliquely caused reservations about all frontier free blacks.

In part 3, McCleskey examines how the changes to Virginia's frontier, particularly those in relation to labor, affected Tarr. The settlements in which Tarr initially resided west of the Blue Ridge included few enslaved or free African Americans. White indentured servants, convicts, bound children, and family dependents comprised the preponderance of the labor force in Augusta County. Over time, as frontier farmers turned with more frequency to slavery as a labor source, Tarr's status as a free man acquired additional layers of racial and social complexity. Small frontier farmers of Irish heritage purchased a disproportionately large number of slaves and the isolation on the frontier meant whites exercised a closer surveillance over their slaves than in eastern Virginia.

McCleskey contributes important insights into mobility on the frontier with analysis that includes consideration of landholding patterns, sociopolitical identity, and the spread of slavery. Established trading networks on the frontier for the general retail trade in consumer goods provided a physical map and a commercial model for subsequent slave purchases and redistribution. For Tarr, mobility at various times facilitated an interracial marriage, brought customers to his forge, and expedited an escape from imminent Indian threat. As McCleskey argues, mobility initially fostered frontier toleration for free black men but, over time, augmented mobility altered such toleration.

McCleskey's findings suggest that a more tolerant attitude existed toward free blacks in colonial Virginia than some historians have recognized. Most of the evidence for this relative toleration is found in communities in peripheral areas of Virginia. However, when anomalous individuals like Tarr succeeded, as he did for years west of the Blue Ridge, he embodied a resilient identity for free blacks and whites alike. McCleskey offers illuminating cultural and historical contexts for comprehending a black frontier. His narrative is strengthened by descriptive passages on, for example, the physical process of eighteenth-century ironworking, the varying development of slavery within Virginia, the influence many cultures had in shaping slavery in Augusta County, and the implementation of corporal punishment during the period. McCleskey also adds several appendices, including a detailed listing of the imports and exports between Charleston and Philadelphia transported in Shute-owned vessels from 1732 to 1738, Tarr's tax obligations from 1752 through 1772, and an estimate of the number of free people of color in Augusta County.

McCleskey's ***Road to Black Ned's Forge*** is an impressive work of research and interpretation. It makes significant contributions to studies of race relations on the American frontier, the colonial merchant class, Indian warfare in Virginia, and the introduction of slavery west of the Blue Ridge Mountains during the eighteenth century.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at https://networks.h-net.org/h-sawh

Citation: Kim Todt. Review of McCleskey, Turk. *The Road to Black Ned's Forge: A Story of Race, Sex, and Trade on the Colonial American Frontier.* H-SAWH, H-Net Reviews. May, 2015.

URL: https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=42400