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Loren Schwenger. *Appealing for Liberty: Freedom Suits in the South.* Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018. x + 428 pp. \$39.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-19-066428-2.

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Loren Schwenger's *Appealing for Liberty: Freedom Suits in the South* examines a broad history of freedom suits using a source set of 2,023 suits brought by 4,601 plaintiffs primarily in the Upper South, Louisiana, and Lower South from the years 1779 to 1863. As Schwenger points out, "With a few exceptions, historians have failed to delve deeply into these suits or to focus on the families that filed them and the common law or chancery courts that processed them, or to uncover the full import of family histories among those held in bondage. They have for the most part ignored trial testimony, the backgrounds of lawyers and witnesses, as well as of plaintiffs and defendants, and the critical role played by African American women in presenting detailed genealogies of slave families" (p. 11).

Such an expansive source set allows the author to compare and study freedom suits on a broader level than previously possible. As he states, "This book includes discussions of the laws and court decisions regarding freedom suits as well as consideration of the changing attitudes of white Americans toward freedom and free blacks; equally importantly, it seeks to illuminate the lives of unknown slaves and free persons of color ... who filed freedom suits, to trace how they fared in the course of their pursuit of justice, and to explore the significance of their suits to our understanding of the period between the American Revolution and the Civil War.... The narratives of both those who gained their freedom and those who failed to do so, and the issues their suits raised, shed new, bold, and timely light on race relations in America and on African American culture, on liberty and law, on the courts and their representatives, and on sectionalism and the coming of the Civil War" (pp. 2-3). This signifi-

cant undertaking was possible because of the decades of work that have gone into accessing and studying these documents by Schwenger and the other project participants.

Schwenger is a professor emeritus of history at the University of North Carolina, Greensboro, where he taught for forty years. He was director of the Race and Slavery Petitions Project (RSPP) from 1991 to 2009, which compiled data from 2,975 legislative petitions and 14,512 county court petitions as part of the Digital Library on American Slavery. This project provides an easily accessible source set online with a wealth of information from many different archives. It was one of the earliest digital history projects to focus on slavery, but it is comparable to work undertaken later, such as the Virginia Memory Legislative Petitions Digital Collection, St. Louis Circuit Court Historical Records Freedom Suits Project, and O Say Can You See: Early Washington, D.C., Law & Family project. Schwenger is also the author of several other books, including the Lincoln Prize-winning *Runaway Slaves: Rebels in the Plantations* (1999), coauthored with John Hope Franklin.

Using the extensive source set and work of the RSPP, Schwenger threads detailed stories into his chapters, which are structured by the various challenges and issues faced by plaintiffs in freedom suits. These descriptive and often complicated narratives enrich and enliven the legal histories from the archives with rich details on legal restrictions and difficulties. As Schwenger points out, the stories in the freedom suits are largely untold, probably because of how pre-twentieth-century legal documents are organized and accessed in archives even to this day.

Despite this, as he states, “the disclosures of illegally held slaves and free persons of color provide the largest single collection of contemporary and real-time testimony of enslaved African Americans in the South.” He explains that the records are limited because of the legal structures and restrictions on people of color testifying but that the freedom suits still “unveil a great deal about state laws, the workings of common law and chancery (or equity) courts, slaveholders’ wills and deeds, term slavery, descendants of white and Indian women as well as free women of color, the question of residency, the journey toward freedom through self-hire and self-purchase, run-aways, African American families, and lawyers and their slave clients” (p. 4).

Schwenger has already made an immense contribution to current and future historians through the RSPP, and this book is one of many projects that will benefit from these efforts and impressive amount of data. The importance of these documents is well known despite the difficulty of accessing them, because, as he describes, they are “the best source of real-time, firsthand information available to historians from the southern slaves’ perspective” (p. 7). With these sources, he was able to begin the book and focus several chapters on women of color, since, as he notes, the paternal ancestry was not the first consideration in the documentation for the suits. He uses this broad source set to illustrate the necessity of interracial cooperation for the freedom suits to be successful, especially for testimonies and supporting documentation for the cases.

Using the extensive dataset gathered from the RSPP, he also provides considerable detail on the variety of paths for a freedom suit through the legal system, including the complexities of granting freedom from wills and deeds and the difficulties faced by people enslaved for a term limit. The data from the project allows him to conclude that freedom was granted more often than expected, as was similarly concluded by Lea VanderVelde in *Redemption Songs: Suing for Freedom before Dred Scott* (2014). In addition, he describes and includes examples of freedom suits brought by indigenous peoples, the detailed family histories that the suits can provide, and the wide variations for freedom suits depending on the location and time period of the cases. Like Edlie L. Wong (in *Neither Fugitive nor Free: Atlantic Slavery, Freedom Suits,*

and the Legal Culture of Travel [2009]), he notes the effects of travel and residency on freedom suits, the importance and considerations of family ties for people seeking their freedom, and the complexities of the cases and of the freedom that followed. In addition, the tensions of having laws that both upheld slavery and sometimes allowed freedom from slavery are discussed throughout the book; as he describes, “Only by upholding the laws that governed slavery could slavery be protected, and perpetuated, even if, ironically, those laws also sometimes freed slaves by virtue of questionable or plainly illegal acts on the part of their owners, as in many of the cases involving residency” (p. 168).

With such a large data and source set to consider, the book is focused on the freedom suits for its information and would have benefited from considering other sources (both primary and secondary) to provide further context. Without this, and because of the limitations of the legal perspectives and descriptions, the examples provided sometimes mask the brutality and violence of the overall system of slavery and society (which should always be kept in mind despite the assistance for freedom suits from some white people that Schwenger mentions). In addition, information on the creation and scope of the source set would have been useful, especially to know more about the choices behind the spatial and temporal limits of it and whether the archival research for it was comprehensive.

Overall, this is a seminal contribution to the profession, and much further work can and should be built upon this and the immense source and dataset provided by Schwenger and the RSPP. Additionally, other projects should be modeled on this work to provide access to the vast amount of court cases and petitions, including freedom suits in such areas as the northern United States and further types of legal documents. As Schwenger has shown, there are many understudied and underutilized sources in archives, and there are a plethora of primary source materials that have not been seen or studied by contemporary scholars. His publication and previous decades of work show the great potential for providing access to and gathering large datasets from archives, which allowed for this thorough history on the complexities and various avenues of freedom suits.

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