

**WILLIE
LEE
ROSE**

**Slavery and
Freedom**

EDITED BY WILLIAM W. FREEHLING

SLAVERY
AND FREEDOM

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SLAVERY AND FREEDOM

Willie Lee Rose

Edited by
William W. Freehling

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*For C. Vann Woodward
and William George Rose*

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Preface

Neither the author nor subject of the following essays demands introduction. A writer celebrated for delicate renderings of the American experience here reconsiders a celebrated episode in our history. But two perspectives may illuminate the nature and shape of these pieces. The essays should be seen as a beginning turned by the fates into a culmination. Mrs. Rose's essays should also be read as beginning from—and yielding a fresh culmination of—a generation's writings about black bondage.

The subject of slavery and freedom has long been Mrs. Rose's prime professional preoccupation. Her interest grew out of her first book, *Rehearsal for Reconstruction*.¹ Her preliminary essays for this volume, written shortly after *Rehearsal* was published, were nurtured by close relationships with other historians preoccupied with antebellum southern slavery. Her ambition was to take these pieces, penned before others wrote their books, and expand her words, in the light of friends' publications, to synthesize a generation's findings.

Mrs. Rose's generation, like all others, began with the preceding generation's conclusions. The pivotal volumes, for those beginning research in the early 1960s, were Kenneth Stampp's *The Peculiar Institution* and Stanley Elkins's *Slavery*.² The two studies, while different, had much in common. Stampp and Elkins both portrayed harsh slaveholders. Neither saw benevolent paternalists. Elkins likened slaveholders to Nazi concentration camp guards. Stampp saw them as hardfisted capitalists.

Both additionally shared a sadness about how much human po-

Preface

tential such masters could warp. Elkins called the Sambo stereotype of shuffling, childlike dependents all too true. Stampp, while denying that most slaves were Sambos and stressing day-to-day resistance, also emphasized black losses. North American slaves, he wrote, were by and large robbed of African culture and not permitted a white man's sensibility. They fell "between two cultures" into a pit of culturelessness.

Stampp and Elkins also shared a timeless view of slavery. Neither saw the institution as evolving and changing. Elkins, significantly, saw the shock of the voyage from Africa as so lasting as to warp slaves living generations later. Stampp, no less significantly, wrote as if the thirty years from 1830 to 1860 were a model for the way slavery had been generations before. Neither saw much variation, over time or space, in an institution peculiar not least for being so constantly oppressive.

In the years when Mrs. Rose was working out her views, her generation was disavowing this inherited viewpoint. The master, no longer SS guard or remorseless money-grubber, was re portrayed as a patriarch, sometimes harsh, sometimes benevolent. The slave, no longer Sambo or cultureless, was redescribed as a cunning conniver, sometimes culturally creative, sometimes mastering the master. The institution, no longer unchanging, was redescribed as evolving toward a rather self-serving paternalism above and remarkable achievement under adversity below. The combination of masters becoming more scrupulous and slaves becoming more autonomous added up to an institution becoming significantly less dismal.

Mrs. Rose considered the stress on change to be the most important revision. In this respect her generation never seemed to her critical enough of past writers. Her insight into slavery's evolutions went with the territory she made her own in *Rehearsal*. The story of the Sea Islands of South Carolina, where slavery first collapsed during the Civil War and Northerners first imposed a new order, had to be told as a drama of becoming. In the process of relating that evolution, Mrs. Rose became aware of possible earlier and later changes. "Almost never," she noted over a decade ago in an unpublished fragment, "has the institution of slavery been treated as an evolving institution, very different in the seven-

teenth century from what it became in the eighteenth, and eventually in the nineteenth century. In fact most studies of slavery are static in their conception, resting squarely upon the one period where most of the evidence survives, the thirty years preceding the Civil War. Somehow the idea of the passage of time and the sense of change must be interjected into this history if it is to become meaningful history, as opposed to sociology."³

Mrs. Rose's attempt to take the history of slavery beyond sociology led her to project a time frame of unprecedented scale. She planned to begin earlier than most historians of mid-nineteenth-century slavery and to end later than any of them, eliminating arbitrary division between centuries and between antebellum and postbellum history. *Rehearsal* was partially premised on the conviction that the first moment of freedom threw much light on slavery. She would now lengthen the perspective by studying the freedmen's participation during every moment of Reconstruction.

An insight into masters as something akin to "fathers" also came naturally to an historian of the transition from slavery to freedom. In *Rehearsal*, Mrs. Rose traced out how unreconstructed southern masters and reconstructing northern missionaries shared tendencies to patronize blacks as childlike. She suspected that such paternalistic thought and behavior must be a key to an understanding of slavery no less than of Reconstruction.

An historian alive to change necessarily saw constant paternalism as constantly changing. She intended to explore how benevolence grew to fruition and thereby made slave treatment more patriarchal. She would investigate how emancipation frustrated patronizing planters and thus led stymied "fathers" to bring Reconstruction on themselves. She would describe how the act of playing children during slavery both evolved toward and partially limited the success of freedmen after the war.

Her essays on these evolutions, presented to historical conventions and passed on to her colleagues for comment in the mid and late sixties, paralleled the way others were moving. While she was reconsidering her essays, historians such as Eugene D. Genovese, James Roark, and Leon Litwack were completing massive publications on similar conceptions.⁴ It was not a question of her influencing them or them influencing her, although influences flew

Preface

both ways. More centrally involved was the tendency of an entire generation to move, more or less together, toward a fresh conception of historical truth.

If, on the question of evolution over time, Mrs. Rose was moving further than her generation, on the question of how much slaves were servile children she was moving more cautiously. Her essay on servility in *Rehearsal*, viewed in the context of her later writings on bondage, rehearsed what was to come. Although she emphasized, as the post-Stampp-Elkins generation inevitably emphasized, black creativity, culture, and refusal to be patronized, she could not go as far as Genovese, Lawrence Levine, or Herbert Gutman in minimizing psychological dependency.⁵ Her blacks, while hardly Elkins's Sambos, necessarily *had* to be a little damaged by such overweening patronizers.

It was all so ironic. As slavery grew more benevolent in the 1800–1840 period, it also grew more closed; slave treatment became better as slave emancipation became more difficult. No less ironically, as slave treatment ameliorated, servile dependency worsened; heavy-handed patronization could suffocate human autonomy as easily as could heavy-handed lashings. Mrs. Rose believed that her friends, when softening the Stampp-Elkins view of unrelieved oppression from above, had missed the irony of better becoming partially worse for those below. In her big book, she meant to help her generation see that even creative and resourceful dependents could not emerge from slavery *totally* independent.

Her book was destined to assume a shorter form. On August 5, 1978, Mrs. Rose suffered a severe stroke. Despite her remarkable recovery, ambitious new research and writing were, at least in the immediate future, no longer feasible. But what could be done, what she desired to help accomplish, was to prepare already written essays for publication. For once, her generation would offer a small new book on slavery.

The paradox is that this little collection of pieces is being published at an appropriate moment to exert a large impact on slavery studies. In the several years since Mrs. Rose lost power to further her evolving ironies, fellow historians have been evolving toward her preliminary positions. Ira Berlin, who won Mrs. Rose's praise

Preface

for telling the history of free blacks in changing terms of time and space, has recently applied the same technique to enslaved blacks, just as she believed everyone must.⁶ Stanley Elkins, who Mrs. Rose thought had hold of an unbalanced fraction of the truth, has recently moved from an emphasis on damaged Sambo to a call for a model balancing servility and creativity.⁷ Kenneth Stamp's recent reformulations also move toward that more balanced view of victimization and resistance.⁸ Eugene Genovese too has been publicly excoriating those who accuse him of celebrating black counterculture at the cost of minimizing stifling oppressiveness.

The next assignment, for the next generation, may well be to trace out, in still more subtle forms, the evolving dialectic between patronization and dependency, damage and resistance, Sambo and Nat Turner. That assignment may well be carried out best not by ideologues who would formulate unchanging abstractions but by scholars of multiple decades and locales, sensitive to changing nuances of time and space. Such new localists may avoid the current balkanizing trap of local history. They may instead mine local archives in the spirit of *Rehearsal for Reconstruction*, always relating local and specific findings to national and general arguments.

If so, those who follow will find Mrs. Rose's essays the ideal starting place. She will relish future advances. For an historian so alive to irony and evolution, there can be few more satisfying publications than a collection of essays, written precociously early, published inadvertently late, which point out fresh ways to continue traveling.

The Johns Hopkins University
April 15, 1981

William W. Freehling

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Willie Lee Rose

Remarks on Editorial Procedure

Although I have never met Don E. Fehrenbacher, and although he knows nothing about my editorial work, he has unintentionally aided in editing this volume. Professor Fehrenbacher's publication of David Potter's manuscripts has served as a model of collegial responsibility. He has also elegantly indicated how troubling difficulties in that responsibility should be resolved.

When working with a manuscript by an author who could no longer apply helpful finishing touches, Fehrenbacher defined the editor as the author's "surrogate in the publication process." The author, if given the opportunity, "might have decided to revise or even rewrite." But as editor, Fehrenbacher confined himself "to minor corrections and alterations of the kind that constitute refinement rather than revision of a text."¹

Fehrenbacher's crisp distinction between refinement and revision established for me a salutary line between small matters of style and large matters of substance. Accordingly, my pen has only occasionally intruded on Mrs. Rose's drafts, and only to accomplish those small deletions, little reorganizations, and slight rephrasings a manuscript receives in the final publication process, so that the argument emerges more clearly. I am aware that Mrs. Rose might have somewhat changed certain arguments in unpublished essays written years ago on subjects about which much has subsequently been published. But I have been at pains to maintain the integrity of the argument as the author drafted it.

In the process of final retouching, I have had one advantage denied Professor Fehrenbacher. He was working with a deceased

Remarks on Editorial Procedure

colleague's papers. I could consult an author wonderfully alive to nuances of language. Mrs. Rose herself suggested some delicate improvements when I or Andrea Mattei read her the original drafts. She also corrected some indelicacies in my alleged improvements. She was, in short, partly her own editor, and her original draft is the better for her latest efforts.

One essay required a variation on my editorial role. Mrs. Rose projected for this volume an essay on ex-slaves during Reconstruction to parallel her piece "Masters without Slaves." Three versions of "Blacks without Masters," all written in the 1960s, survive in her files. All make the same points. But no one draft presents the argument as efficiently as do the best parts of all three versions, taken together. I have accordingly linked the three essays into one. To ease linkages, I have added transitional sentences here and there. Still, "Blacks without Masters" is 95 percent of the time word for word from Mrs. Rose's pen. And the analytical framework is entirely as she sketched it.

W. W. F.

Contents

I Slavery

- 1 The Impact of the American Revolution on the Black Population 3
- 2 The Domestication of Domestic Slavery 18
- 3 Childhood in Bondage 37
- 4 The Old Allegiance 49

II Freedom

- 5 Masters without Slaves 73
- 6 Blacks without Masters: Protagonists and Issue 90

III Reviews of a Generation's Views

- 7 An American Family 115
- 8 Killing for Freedom 124
- 9 Off the Plantation 137
- 10 What We Didn't Know about Slavery 150
- 11 The New Slave Studies: An Old Reaction or a New Maturity? 164

IV Views on the Sources

- 12 An Analytical View of the Documentary Sources 179
- 13 A Bibliographical Introduction to the Sources 190

Notes 201

Index 218

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I

Slavery

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The Impact of the American Revolution on the Black Population

This essay began as a lecture at the University of Utah, Salt Lake City, and at Weber State College, Ogden, Utah, during 1975-76, as part of a bicentennial series assessing the American Revolution. A revised version was published in Larry Gerlach, ed., Legacies of the American Revolution (Logan, Ore., 1978), pp. 183-97. The essay is here reprinted with only a few slight verbal changes.

When I was first asked to give my impressions of the impact of the American Revolution on the black population, I must admit that I wondered what might be said, silently confessing to myself the doubts implied by an editor of a prominent black magazine who recently asked me, bluntly, whether there was any good reason why blacks should celebrate this bicentennial. I reflected that once, long ago, in 1852 to be precise, the famous black abolitionist Frederick Douglass had been asked to speak on the Fourth of July in Rochester, New York, and that he had mused aloud why he, of all men, should have been asked to do any such thing. "Fellow citizens, pardon me," he begged; "are the great principles of political freedom and justice, embodied in that Declaration of Independence, extended to us?"¹ Speaking as an escaped slave, in a period when slavery was still alive and thriving, Douglass in asking the question was suggesting the answer.

Considering the intervening 200 years, the slow development of the promise of the Declaration, and the incomplete realization, even now, of that promise for black America, the editor's question of me seemed not unreasonable, and Douglass's answer of 1852 not entirely inappropriate, even these 124 years later. But it then occurred to me that if this were true, that blacks still had no reason to celebrate, then perhaps nobody has a reason to celebrate. By such a standard American liberty would have failed the test of twentieth-century problems.

Laying that question aside for a moment, I began to think further about the meaning of the entire Revolutionary epoch for slaves, and indeed for all those left out on the first round of freedom. In the most general terms, the answer is simple: ideas long circulating in the Western world were given a concrete reality in a new government, ideas that moved slowly but very surely toward a great enlargement of human freedom, at first for a few, later for many, as our ideas of the relationship between freedom and property slowly changed. But that would be to defer too much to the future, beyond doubt, and my task is to assess the more immediate effects of the Revolution.

What convinced me that something might be said to good effect was the sudden thought that this was really the question Chief Justice Roger Brooke Taney felt obliged to answer back in 1857, in the famous Dred Scott case: whether a black man, even if free, could really be a citizen of the United States, endowed with the right to bring his case into federal court. It must be believed that Justice Taney thought he understood the frame of mind of the Founders and their world when he came out with a thumping "no," and declared that our government was formed by white men, for whites only, and that such rights as even free blacks enjoyed were mere courtesies, and further, in the line that which the white man was bound to respect," and further yet, that "this opinion was at that time . . . universal in the civilized portion of the white race. . . ." ² He spoke less than a hundred years after the Declaration of Independence, and sixty-nine years after the Constitution was formed. Although he was, of course, interpreting the Constitution, his generalizations apparently refer to

the dominant attitudes of the entire Revolutionary generation, and it has not been hard for historians now, or indeed for lawyers then, to show that the Chief Justice was mistaken in so summarily dismissing the impact of Enlightenment ideas, natural law, the concept of the essential worth of man, on both whites and blacks in the late eighteenth century.

Justice Taney lived in a period when a reaction against natural rights had affixed to southern blacks a more difficult legal position than they had had in the Revolutionary period. There were restrictions on free blacks that had not existed earlier, and for slaves the chances of becoming free had become much dimmer. It is true that there were also laws requiring masters to provide decently for their chattels, and restraining them from cruel punishments and other barbarisms that marred the laws of the eighteenth century. No doubt these laws were frequently ignored, but the owner who did so was scouting public opinion, and there seems little doubt that life in a physical sense was becoming more bearable for most slaves in the nineteenth century. A new position for slaves was crystallizing, so that a slave might be regarded with more benign paternalism, almost *because* he could no longer hope for eventual emancipation.³

Ironically, an age of expanded liberties for whites had witnessed the rationalization of the slave system, making it harder for slaves to become free (even if their masters desired to emancipate), to learn to read, or open their minds in any way. It would almost appear to be a historical trade-off, in which the society at large indicates by law a will to secure decent order and some humanity on the plantations in return for some assurance that slaves would not become free men and trouble society at large. Roger B. Taney, victim of his own time-frame, failed as a historian in sensing the very different spirit of Revolutionary times, no matter how ambivalent attitudes on race in that earlier period can be proven to have been. Might not the passage of another century, with new views of property and freedom, allow a clearer perspective on how blacks were involved in the Age of Revolution, and what it meant to them?

This might be an appropriate place to recite the exploits of black men and women in the Revolution—Crispus Attucks and the

Boston Massacre, Phillis Wheatley's poems about liberty, the black soldiers who served in various sectors of the war—to tell of the black men who served as spies, scouts, pilots, sailors, laborers for the patriot's cause, or perhaps to tell of the Battle of Rhode Island in August of 1778, where a black regiment figured prominently and served bravely.⁴ No. We shall hear a lot about these matters, no doubt, in the coming months, and much that we hear will of necessity be speculative, perhaps pious and therapeutic. Black participation is hard to assess, for a reason that indicates why Justice Taney's period is so very different from the Revolutionary era. In the Revolution blacks were for the most part integrated into white units, because they were freely accepted as substitutes, and accepted by many of the colonial governments as volunteers on the same basis as whites, and also, one supposes, because blacks were less alarming to the whites of that period when not concentrated in units.

No, the real meaning of the Revolution for America's black people was more subtle, and rests more on the vigorous circulation of the idea of freedom, the new opportunities the general disruption of society afforded, and most particularly on the important social and demographic changes that came out of the struggle between the British and their obstreperous colonials. Yet it is interesting to note in passing that, just as the combatants did eighty-five years later in the Civil War, both the British and the Americans were increasingly ready to call on blacks as soldiers, and hazard the possibility of an insurrection, as the going got rough. By Taney's time men apparently had forgotten what part black soldiers played in the Revolution, and three years after the Dred Scott decision a war began in which black men were ultimately asked to prove themselves as fighting men in special separate units, sometimes, alas, as cannon fodder. The black man of the Revolutionary era was at least dignified by the assumption that he would be a regular fighting man. Reflecting on how poor a conception Taney had of the difference between the 1850s and the spirit of '76 has caused me to appreciate more the advantage of a 200-year perspective on the earlier period.

The most immediate and significant consequence of the Revolution for blacks was the formation during the Revolutionary

epoch of a large free black community.⁵ How New England, under the impulse of Revolutionary zeal, provided for emancipation is a well-known and praiseworthy chapter of our history. With only a blush or two for the hesitations of Connecticut and Rhode Island, where slavery was a larger economic factor than in its other states, New England had by 1790 only 3,763 slaves to report to the new federal census, out of a population of 16,882 blacks. By 1810 the number of slaves remaining was just 418, in Rhode Island and Connecticut, which had taken gradual measures.⁶ The urgings of blacks themselves, the interpretations of courts favorable to freedom, the new constitutions—all these contributed to the success of the cause now actively pursued by an increasingly vigorous new antislavery movement. The Middle Atlantic states proved more hesitant to act, with New York and New Jersey entirely resistant to emancipation through the Revolutionary period. Pennsylvania joined Rhode Island and Connecticut as a gradualist state. There seems no reason to doubt that the great thrust of this movement owed its main impulse to the workings of the ideals of the Revolution on the minds of both black men and women and their owners.

But the black population of the North was numerically of small significance when compared to the thousands who lived and worked to the south in the tobacco colonies. Therefore it is to Maryland and Virginia that we must look to see the ideals of the Revolution in contact with the most stubborn economic facts of life. In these states the most important accomplishment of the Revolutionary era was the formation of a large free black community in the midst of slavery. Before the Revolution the number of free blacks in these states was negligible, and most of them were the mulatto offspring of mixed unions; surprisingly often they were the children of white mothers and black fathers, and therefore born free. White fathers who disliked seeing their black children grow up as slaves also contributed to this population, but less than one might imagine on the eve of the Revolution because a law of Virginia in force for fifty-nine years prior to its reversal in 1782 made manumission by will or deed illegal. Maryland, the only colony with a conveniently dated (1755) pre-Revolutionary census, had then only 1,817 free blacks,

constituting only 4 percent of the black population. Eighty percent of those 1,817 were mulattoes. This picture can serve reasonably well for other southern states. Ira Berlin, in his excellent book on the subject, produces convincing evidence that the number of free blacks was small in each state and that of these a very few were of purely African extraction.⁷

Over the three decades from 1770 to the end of the eighteenth century, the free black population increased at a remarkable rate, not only in New England, where we have seen general emancipations, and in the Middle Atlantic states, where the pattern of gradual emancipation prevailed, but even more remarkably in the Upper South, where the black population was actually concentrated. Virginia and Maryland accounted for well over half of all the slaves owned before the Revolution. Feeling the impulses of the Revolution early, they showed an increase in manumissions before the war started, and showed approximate percentage increases in free blacks before 1790 of 609 percent and 340 percent respectively. By 1810 over 23 percent of Maryland's slaves were free. Virginia, holding so many thousands of slaves, could count only a 7 percent increase of free blacks by that time, but this percent amounted to a larger number of free blacks than in any other southern state except Maryland, and came numerically to 30,570 souls; Maryland had over 33,000. This growth represented in Virginia, the overwhelmingly largest slave state, a surging growth in the free black population, rising from the year 1782 when the liberalized manumission law was passed (overturning a law and a policy of fifty-nine years' duration prohibiting private manumission). Free persons of color increased by 1790 to 12,766, to 20,124 by the end of the century, and to 30,570 in 1810.⁸

Leaving aside for the moment the circumstances, and by whose volition these blacks became free, we should mention that these figures cannot include the tens of thousands of slaves who fled to the British, many thousands of them never returning. When the center of the war shifted to the South after 1778 the British systematically took off slaves in groups of hundreds at a time. Benjamin Quarles estimates that the British carried away in their final evacuation perhaps 4,000 or more from New York, the same number from Savannah, from Charleston 6,000 and from York-