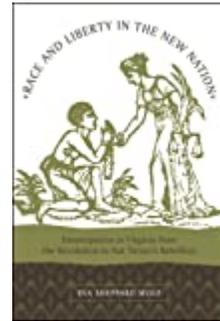


Eva Sheppard Wolf. *Race and Liberty in the New Nation: Emancipation in Virginia from the Revolution to Nat Turner's Rebellion.* Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2006. xix + 284 pp. \$45.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8071-3194-7.



Reviewed by Douglas R. Egerton

Published on H-SHEAR (October, 2008)

Commissioned by Stacey M. Robertson (Bradley University)

From Revolution to Reaction

As the American Revolution dawned, Virginia was home not merely to the largest number of African Americans of any new state, but it also boasted a large number of reformers, white and black alike, who desired an end to unfree labor. Wealthy planter Robert Carter created a schedule by which he freed his slaves, and attorney St. George Tucker published a lengthy plan for gradual emancipation, as did Fernando Fairfax, who combined his scheme with the forced removal of freedpersons. Such slaves as Harry Washington abandoned Mount Vernon with John Murray, the Earl of Dunmore, only to return as black Loyalist Corporal Washington. Yet despite black flight and white manumission, by the war's end in 1783, there were 105,000 more slaves in the state than in 1776, and by the time Nat Turner swung from a tree in 1831, state leaders were well down the intransigent road of positive good theory. Why this promising story did not turn out better has been examined by numerous historians and biographers, but few have waded into the sources as deeply as has Eva Sheppard Wolf. As a result, *Race and Liberty in the New Nation* stands with Midori Takagi's

Rearing Wolves to Our Own Destruction: Slavery in Richmond, Virginia, 1782-1865 (2002) and Robert McColley's classic *Slavery and Jeffersonian Virginia* (1978) as one of only a handful of studies that all scholars interested in early national Virginia will wish to read.

As the book's subtitle suggests, Wolf's wide-ranging analysis moves far beyond a general discussion of white Virginian attitudes toward race, although that, too, can be found here in private correspondence, public speeches, and newspaper editorials. What makes Wolf's study so revelatory, however, is her use of archival records regarding individual applications for manumission. By moving beyond the often-cited, if ultimately hollow, words of alleged antislavery politicians, such as Thomas Jefferson and James Madison, Wolf demonstrates how Virginia's common people worked to rid themselves of a labor system that gave the lie to the new nation's claims to be a country in which freedom and equality were inalienable rights.

Although early on Wolf emphasizes the impact that

revolutionary ideals had on unfree labor, her careful analysis of manumission deeds reveals that region and religion helped to shape the patterns of manumission. During the 1780s, manumitters disproportionately tended to be Quakers, Methodists, and Baptists. Older tidewater counties, where the soil was damaged by tobacco production, were more likely to foster manumissions than were the fresh lands of the frontier. Urban masters were also more inclined to free individual slaves than were rural slaveowners, although towns and cities tended to reverse gender trends. That is, on the countryside, men were slightly more likely to be manumitted than were women. Perhaps the most revealing of Wolf's data lies in the transformation of manumissions over the decades. During and shortly after the war, revolutionary idealism spurred slaveholders into action. Most such documents included a statement explaining why a slave was being manumitted, and early on these professions tended to include egalitarian expressions. By the late 1780s, however, the tone of the documents suggested that promises of future emancipation were being used to prod bondpersons into working harder. A few pragmatic masters even regarded the liberation of the few as being critical to the continued enslavement of the many. As Richard Drummond Bayley admitted, to "forever shut the door of the hope of freedom" for individual slaves, "however meritorious" his or her conduct might be, would only encourage bondpersons to run for liberty or sharpen a scythe in hopes of achieving mass freedom through revolt (p. 65).

By the mid-1790s, as the fresh lands of western Virginia increasingly became settled and the potential of sale of surplus bondmen into the southwestern territories grew, patterns of manumission in the state took on yet a third pattern, in which individual slaves, and usually house servants, were liberated as a reward for years of special service. Most of all, masters assumed the mask of benevolence by allowing favored slaves to purchase their own freedom. Here, Wolf's data supports Tommy L. Bogger's investigation of free blacks in Norfolk (*Free Blacks in Norfolk, Virginia, 1790-1860: The Darker Side of Freedom* [1997]), where 39 percent of manumissions in the 1790s were the result of self-purchase. Undoubtedly, some whites who allowed their trusted bondpersons to buy their own liberty continued to harbor antislavery ideals yet lacked the resources to liberate large numbers of slaves. But many masters drove a hard bargain. The slave Solomon, valued at seventy-five pounds in the estate of Abel West, finally purchased his freedom for the higher price of eighty-eight pounds (roughly three hun-

dred dollars).

Wolf's diligent research appears to demonstrate the "ambivalence" of the revolutionary generation regarding race and slavery (to borrow a chapter title), but does this ambivalence itself reflect changing attitudes within the state, given the fact that so very few Africans or African Americans were freed before 1776? Early on, Wolf takes polite exception to the views of Gary B. Nash (in *Race and Revolution* [1990]), Ira Berlin (in *Slaves without Masters: The Free Negro in the Antebellum South* [1974]), and this reviewer (in *Gabriel's Rebellion: The Virginia Slave Conspiracies of 1800 and 1802* [1993]), all of whom have written that if Virginia's 1782 private manumission act did not indicate that most planters envisioned an early end to slavery, it was nonetheless an accurate barometer of gentry unease with unfree labor. Wolf, by comparison, argues that as many manumissions, and especially those of the 1790s, did not arise from egalitarian thought, the emergence of a free black community did not, as Nash has suggested, "provide an indication of antislavery sentiment" in Virginia.[1] True enough, yet the fact is that the number of freed blacks rose to roughly twenty thousand by 1800, and whatever the intent, this meant that state residents were presented with the reality of a society that was no longer divided by simple lines of slavery and freedom.

Gabriel's conspiracy in the summer of 1800 "further eroded support for emancipation." Although a number of studies have chronicled the laws passed by the assembly in the wake of the failed uprising, Wolf emphasizes that the legislation indicated not merely a desire on the part of planter-politicians to restore the old colonial controls that had generally been ignored in the decades after the Revolution. The laws, rather, were designed to see that Virginia's racial system was not "undone, both by the collusion between free and enslaved blacks to overturn white society and by a collusion between blacks and sympathetic whites." Since earlier statutes drew legal distinctions along lines of freedom or enslavement, legislators now had to decide whether to treat free blacks as liberated chattel or as white people. The response was to regard them "more like slaves," barring them from carrying weapons, denying them a basic education, and forcing them to "register with local officials and carry certificates of freedom" (p. 120). To the extent, however, that Wolf is correct in her analysis, this suggests that Nash was right in arguing that the rise of free blacks indicated that many white Virginians envisioned a more egalitarian society. Those who did simply lacked political power.

Turner's bloody rebellion and the subsequent debates over gradual emancipation and colonization finally brought an end to "Revolutionary-era dreams of a free Virginia" (p. 208). In taking this position, Wolf wades into a very old debate and disagrees with Alison Goodyear Freehling, who argued that the 1831-32 legislative discussions marked a "fresh start" for antislavery in Virginia.[2] Basing her analysis "more on language and discourse than on [Freehling's] voting blocs," Wolf concludes that in the end, the assembly was far more interested in "preventing rather than encouraging emancipation" (p. 233). Although three more decades remained before the guns of Fort Sumter, the failure of the legislature to enact a bill for immediate emancipation and colonization (by a vote of seventy-three to fifty-eight) doomed the state to four years of Civil War.

Wolf's bibliography reveals the extent of her impressive primary source excavation. Wolf waded through leg-

islative petitions from thirty-five counties, county court records from a dozen more, will books, personal property tax records, deed books, registers of freed slaves, church records from twenty-eight parishes or associations, and twenty-two manuscript collections, including the voluminous American Colonization Society papers. Her often illuminating, discursive notes appear where they belong, at the bottom of the page. But her index, which often fails to list slaves or whites who manumitted slaves by name, disappoints.

Notes

[1]. Gary B. Nash, *Race and Revolution* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1990), 18.

[2]. Alison Goodyear Freehling, *Drift toward Dissolution: The Virginia Slavery Debate of 1831-1832* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1982), 167.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

<https://networks.h-net.org/h-shear/>

Citation: Douglas R. Egerton. Review of Wolf, Eva Sheppard, *Race and Liberty in the New Nation: Emancipation in Virginia from the Revolution to Nat Turner's Rebellion*. H-SHEAR, H-Net Reviews. October, 2008.

URL: <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=22864>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.