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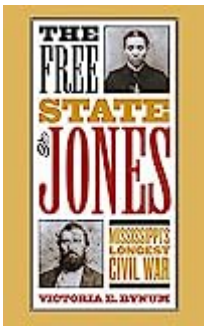
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Victoria E. Bynum. *The Free State of Jones: Mississippi's Longest Civil War.* The Fred W. Morrison Series in Southern Studies. Chapel Hill and London: University of North Carolina Press, 2001. xvi + 316 pp. $29.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8078-2636-2; $22.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8078-5467-9.



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Published on H-South (January, 2002)

Race, Gender, and the Contested Memory of the Free State of Jones

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In her new book, Victoria E. Bynum demonstrates that our knowledge of Mississippi's legendary Free State of Jones, like so much else associated with the Civil War that has inspired contention and controversy, has been shaped as much by the agenda of those who have attempted to tell the story as by actual events. This much is known: in the fall of 1863, in the Piney Woods region of southern Mississippi, Confederate deserters led by Newton Knight organized an anti-Confederate guerrilla band that eventually dominated its community and, according to legend, proclaimed Jones County's independence from the Confederacy. To deal with the Jones County rebellion, Confederate authorities dispatched two cavalry expeditions into the region that launched devastating attacks upon, but were unable to completely quell, Knight's band of deserters. After the war, members of the Knight Company participated in Reconstruction politics and a mixed-race community emerged with Captain Knight as the focal point.

Beyond this, the record is more muddled. An 1880 courthouse fire destroyed records that could have shed light on the subject. Prominent accounts of the Free State of Jones, such as James Street's novel *Tap Roots* (1943), which was made into a 1948 movie, two books by children of Newt Knight, and a 1984 study by Rudy Leverett, offer significantly different takes on the virtues and motives of "Captain Newt", his followers, and the Free State of Jones. To Street and Thomas J. Knight, whose book *The Life and Activities of Captain Newton Knight* was published in 1935, Newt and his followers were gallant, principled defenders of a community that had had enough of the Confederacy and its "rich man's war but poor man's fight." Aware of the racial sensibilities of Southern readers, however, both played down Captain Knight's sexual relationship with a slave and the postwar mixed-race community over which he presided.

In her *The Echo of Black Horn* (1951), however, Ethel Knight made the miscegenation issue a central one in order to discredit her father. Published as a response to the release of *Tap Roots* and her brother's work, Ethel Knight's book portrayed her father and his company as traitors to their community, their race, and the

Lost Cause who were motivated merely by greed and the prospect of plunder. In *Legend of the Free State of Jones*, the first book on its subject to be published by an academic press, Leverett, a descendent of one of Newt Knight's victims, echoed Ethel's portrayal of the Knight Company as a criminal band that victimized good, law-abiding southerners.

In *The Free State of Jones*, Bynum, a professor of history at Southwest Texas State University whose "ancestors were deeply involved on both sides of the conflict" in Mississippi's Piney Woods, provides a balanced and compelling chronicle of the Free State of Jones, the Knight Company, and the mixed-race community (xi). Bynum skillfully connects the story and those who have endeavored to tell it to broader social, cultural, and political developments. Bynum demonstrates that underlying the story were enduring conflicts over race, gender, and class in southern society that traced back to before the American Revolution. She illustrates how, in the first round of a long struggle to defend their yeoman society against the encroachments of a slave-based commercial economy, ancestors of the Knight Company were active in the Regulator Movement of the 1760s and 1770s. They then carried an antiauthoritarian impulse west to Mississippi, along with a healthy republican suspicion of wealthy planters.

Bynum skillfully examines how experiences on the raw southwestern frontier before, during, and after the War of 1812 further fostered an egalitarian spirit, distrust of the wealth of slaveholders, and a sense of nationalism among the families who would ride with Captain Knight. Between the founding of Jones County in 1826 and the Civil War, however, slaveholding families increasingly became prominent in the community, and divisions over the Confederacy would reflect a widening "gulf between this region's nonslaveholding yeomanry and a rising class of slaveholding farmers, planters, and merchants."(69) Especially insightful is Bynum's description of how these divisions were further fueled by conflicts over religion, particularly efforts by the slaveholding cultural elite to use the Leaf River Church to promote their ideal of true womanhood. Issues of gender and the critical role women played in supporting the Knight Company are continual themes in Bynum's analysis.

Then came secession, war, and conscription, which most Jones County men, including Newt Knight, initially submitted to. Adding to a continually growing body of scholarship that documents significant class conflict in the wartime South, Bynum demonstrates how by late 1862 resentment of conscription among nonslaveholding yeoman families, and particularly toward exemptions for slaveholders contained in the "Twenty Negro Law," had grown to the point that desertion became a major problem. After suffering through the siege and surrender of Vicksburg, so many from the Jones County region deserted that the Confederacy decided to send forces to the area to deal with the problem. The murder of the Confederate officer responsible for the effort to round up deserters, allegedly by Newt Knight himself, in October 1863 led to the formation of the Knight Company and touched off civil war along the Leaf River.

After her excellent description of the broader forces and specific events that provoked Jones County's inner civil war, Bynum offers an intriguing analysis of how women and slaves contributed to the Knight Company's operations, the factors that shaped their efforts, and how memories of their roles reflected postwar agendas – providing further evidence of the critical links between military operations and the social context within which they take place. This analysis continues through Bynum's compelling account of the cavalry raid of Colonel Robert Lowry into the Jones County region and the efforts of the Knight Company, with the assistance of their female and slave allies, to defend their community from Lowry's operations.

The clash between Jones County's yeomanry and the rest of Mississippi's white power structure did not end in 1865, however, as members of the Knight Company and their supporters expected to play a prominent role in the postwar South. Knight and his men entered politics and, Bynum points out, began the process of shaping the memory of the Free State of Jones by staking their claim to leadership on an image of themselves as heroic defenders of their yeoman community against an illegitimate Confederate government. Bitter pro-Confederate Mississippians, as part of their campaign to redeem the South, attacked this image of the Jones County deserters and instead portrayed the Knight Company as a band of degraded poor whites for whom the war had simply provided an opportunity to indulge their proclivity toward lawlessness and violence. Although the question of Reconstruction was ultimately settled, Bynum shows that Mississippi's "redemption" did not eliminate class conflict within Jones County, as sons of Knight Company members would play prominent roles in Populism.

As the conflict over the Knight Company's memory and the role of its members in Mississippi politics raged, Newt Knight added another twist to the story by estab-

lishing a mixed-race community with his white wife Serena, a former slave named Rachel, and the children he fathered with both women. How this community survived and prospered and the trials (literal and figurative) its descendants endured as they lived their lives within the racial order of the post-Reconstruction and twentieth-century South is a fascinating story, and one that Bynum tells with skill and perceptiveness.

This is a work of value to anyone with an interest in the interplay of race, gender, and class in Southern history. However, military historians will be disappointed that Bynum did not devote more attention to the Knight Company's operations. They may also wish Bynum had attempted something in the way of comparative analysis that would place the operations of the Knight Company in the context of guerrilla operations in the Civil War in general, an aspect of the war that has received increased attention from Civil War scholars in recent years. Others may finish the book wishing that Bynum had devoted a bit more space to the political maneuvering that led to the proclamation of Jones's County's "independence."

These are minor quibbles, however. Overall, this is an excellent book and Bynum deserves much praise for her ability to negotiate the minefield of myth and legend to produce a study that not only makes a tremendous contribution to scholarship but is a compelling read as well. Thoroughly researched, thoughtfully argued, well written, and unfailingly interesting, Bynum's work further demonstrates the potential of local studies to shed light on broader forces that have shaped the American past. It deserves attention from those interested in the Free State of Jones, the Civil War in history and memory, and the enduring impact of race, class, and gender on Southern history.

Citation: Ethan S. Rafuse. Review of Bynum, Victoria E., *The Free State of Jones: Mississippi's Longest Civil War*. H-South, H-Net Reviews. January, 2002.

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