

Slavery on Trial: Race, Class, and Criminal Justice in Antebellum Richmond, Virginia

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Review

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Campbell, James M. *Slavery on Trial: Race, Class, and Criminal Justice in Antebellum Richmond, Virginia*. University Press of Florida, \$59.95 hardcover ISBN 9780813030913

The Law and Slavery in Richmond

In *Slavery on Trial*, James Campbell explores how race, class, gender, and above all, status were contested in the criminal justice system in Richmond, Virginia. Campbell, a lecturer in American history at the University of Leicester, argues against the idea of a lawless Old South, where informal forms of justice based on the cult of honor supplanted formal law. Building on the work of Laura Edwards, Sharon Block, Christopher Waldrep, Walter Johnson, and Ariela Gross (among others), Campbell examines the ways in which a legal system established in part to maintain certain racial, class, and gender hierarchies was subverted by slaves, free blacks, poor whites, and white women, who could, at times, use the legal system to their benefit. While he is quick to point out the myriad ways in which the legal system discriminated between whites and blacks, freemen and slaves, and men and women, Campbell also clearly demonstrates that the legal system in Richmond often backfired on its architects.

Richmond emerges in *Slavery on Trial* as a relatively modern, urban space. Campbell notes that Richmond, unlike most Southern cities, attracted a significant immigrant population, and that resulting heterogeneous population complicated the city's social order. Richmond's population growth between 1830 and 1860 enhanced fears of crime and violence, pushing city leaders to expand the local criminal justice system. Richmond's industrial development during the antebellum period also enhanced the growth of robust legal institutions over more informal systems of justice present in the rural South. Indeed, at times, Richmond appears more akin to Northern antebellum cities than its Southern urban brethren.

Slavery on Trial demonstrates a careful and thorough reading of Richmond's antebellum court records. Campbell skillfully navigates around the city's complex legal system, noting the various ways in which race, class, gender, and status manifested themselves in Mayor's, oyer and terminer, Hustings, and Circuit courts. Through this study of lower court records, Campbell is able to capture criminal justice as it existed on the ground, rather than rely on appellate court records as some historians have done.

Campbell supports his nuanced argument about how race, class, genders, and status were encoded and contested in Richmond's legal system with well-chosen examples drawn from the court records. He misses several opportunities, however, to more fully explore some of his examples and thereby humanize the process. Few individuals emerge in *Slavery on Trial* as fully-fleshed actors. While Campbell was restricted by the fragmentary nature of many of these court records, other historians, notably Laura Edwards and Walter Johnson, have demonstrated that it is possible to use similar sources to describe the choices and experiences of individual actors.

Despite this short-coming, *Slavery on Trial* provides a meaningful addition to our understanding of the antebellum Southern legal system. Its most important contribution is in its assessment of how Richmond's urban setting informed and transformed the legal system, both in its design and in its implementation.

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