

### Cwbr Author Interview: Unequal Freedoms: Ethnicity, Race, And White Supremacy In Civil War-era Charleston

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## Interview

# CWBR AUTHOR INTERVIEW: UNEQUAL FREEDOMS: ETHNICITY, RACE, AND WHITE SUPREMACY IN CIVIL WAR-ERA CHARLESTON

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Interview with Jeff Strickland, Associate Professor of History at Montclair State University

Interviewed by Zach Isenhower

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*Civil War Book Review (CWBR)*: Today the Civil War Book Review is pleased to speak with Jeff Strickland, Associate Professor of History at Montclair State University. Today we get to talk about his most recent book, *Unequal Freedoms: Ethnicity, Race, and White Supremacy in Civil War-Era Charleston*. Professor Strickland, thank you for joining us today.

**Jeff Strickland (JS)**: Hi Zach, it's an honor to speak with you.

**CWBR**: Obviously immigration gets a lot of attention in American history and obviously so does race, but in Charleston you find an intersection of both that often gets overlooked. Why do you think that is?

**JS**: Well I think that in part it has a lot to do with the way that historians treated Charleston, and mainly that social history following trends of the profession has only received significant attention more recently. That includes the role of immigrants, for example in Charleston, and African American history as well. That doesn't mean that historians aren't treating it, it is just that it still seems to take a back seat to political history in particular, and then also I think to a certain extent economic history. So the intersection I think nationally and perhaps even internationally is a more recent trend, to look at immigrants and

African Americans together.

**CWBR:** Germans and Irish started arriving in the 1840s, and that's also just when racial divides in Southern society were really hardening, so how was that relationship early on? Were they initially immigrants that is rather sympathetic towards the situations of African Americans?

**JS:** I think that, reflecting trends elsewhere for example in New Orleans, the Irish and African Americans had more tensions than [between] any other immigrant group. That trend is prevalent in Charleston, however there are these exceptional relations between the Irish and African Americans. But there is definitely more of a class tension between those two groups, especially when it comes to free blacks, but even to a certain extent slave laborers, who were competing with Irish laborers for employment throughout the city. Germans however, were decidedly middle class and primarily shopkeepers. So there wasn't that sense of economic competition that led to tensions. Therefore, it allowed for even more exceptional behavior, social and economic.

**CWBR:** That actually brings me to a side-note you made in the book. I was wondering if you could talk about the fact that, just in terms of sources, you found--I think as would be expected--a little bit better record of German immigrants and what they were doing because they are a little better off when they arrive, as compared to Irish immigrants. But then a lot of the time you say that when you *do* find Irish immigrants, they are doing some of the same things and adhering to some of the same patterns. I was wondering if you could talk about that a little bit?

**JS:** Yes, so for example German and Irish immigrants as slaveholders were underrepresented when compared to white southerners. Then when you compared Germans and Irish, then actually the Germans were even less represented. So there are Irish slaveholders in the city, even though the overwhelming majority of Irish immigrants are in fact working class. And then when it comes to shopkeepers for example, I found a few instances of, for example, selling liquor to the slaves. So the few Irish shopkeepers that did exist, some of them were getting into trouble for violating city laws concerning selling liquor to free blacks and to slaves. Germans were doing that to a much greater extent, but from a standpoint of basic business practices, they were equal opportunity salesmen.

**CWBR:** So what was it about urban slavery particularly that sort of created the opportunities for these unusual interactions?

**JS:** I think that when you think about the sheer numbers of individuals who are living in Charleston, I'd say between 1850 and 1860 say 40,000 to 48,000 people, you have a lot of people living in a relatively small space geographically. So there were lots of different types of jobs that slaves and immigrants would work in and there were also lots of storekeepers in and around the city. So I think that there are any number of possibilities for those sorts of relationships. Also from a residential standpoint, what you find is that Germans and Irish are going to live in the same buildings and sometimes in the same households. And the same is true of free blacks, and even in some cases of course when you have a slaveholder and their slaves, they might live in the same spaces. So I think that historians have long talked about this micro-segregation of a place like Charleston. That white and African Americans lived very close to each other throughout the city, yet it was often a class sort of situation where elites were living in the big houses and slaves in their quarters or in the case of free blacks, in shanties or in alleyways. The same was true of immigrants. You had very successful immigrants who were living in homes that they'd built, and in other cases Irish immigrants, laborers for example, also living in shanties. There's the sense that throughout the city on a daily basis, people are interacting from both races--white and black--and also immigrant groups as well.

**CWBR:** At the same time though these interactions are defined by a social hierarchy. Where to immigrants end up fitting, what role do they fulfill in that hierarchy?

**JS:** One of the things that I talk about falls on social theory, which is the idea of a middle-man minority. This concept suggests that immigrants who are middle class and potentially sort of unable to reach that southern aristocracy, will act as a buffer between those African Americans below them--both slave and free--and those elite white southerners above them, many of them in fact slaveholders. In doing that, acting as a social buffer, perhaps it actually relieves tension between those two groups that might otherwise be more intense. You can't read a travel account or travel narrative from the nineteenth century in which a European visitor for example arrives in Charleston, and they don't call it a cosmopolitan place. They recognize there's something different about it. The presence of these immigrants and slaves seems unique to them. And of course you could go to New Orleans and find something very similar, but the fact that this was happening in

South Carolina, and as we mentioned earlier, it doesn't seem to have been treated all that much historically or by historians, was very surprising to me when I embarked on the project.

**CWBR:** The tensions you mention seem to have been at times pretty high. There was a real need by elite white southerners to impose some order and control on this and in a way it almost seemed like they turned to immigrants as a way of funding the police that they need to control the rest of the city, including the slave population. Is that fair impression?

**JS:** Yes, what ends up happening is that nativist movements that are taking place throughout the country also show up in Charleston. So white southerners recognize that immigrants--they indicate that immigrants are undermining the slavery system. In so doing they begin to come down on [immigrants] very harshly, in the form of arrests, imprisonment, and high fines. Fines that would in many cases exceed annual earnings. So that was one thing, and then at the same time what you find are examples of Germans and free blacks, and also slaves--in fact some Germans admit this later--that they were keeping slaves as concubines, and even going as far as to suggest that they did so because white southern women didn't want anything to do with them. This is something for a German to write about in the 1870s, with no shame, and to get published in a national German-American journal, seems I think a bit odd. So there's this sense that the Germans and the Irish were doing things that they shouldn't have been doing. That the laws were very clear that they shouldn't sell liquor to slaves for example, that they shouldn't trade with slaves, and yet they continue to do it. And I think that has to do with those numbers that I mentioned earlier that it was a very difficult thing to in fact police. What you see in the 1850s is that the police force continues to grow in size. Policing becomes very aggressive as the stranglehold on slavery tightens throughout the 1850s.

**CWBR:** In that context I found it sort of surprising that even before the Civil War a lot of immigrants, while they're resisting the conventions of white supremacy, and they're really taking some of the brunt of at least the financial aspect of this crackdown, their politics seem very difficult to pin down. They seem to support a lot of Republican policies before the war, but they also support Stephen Douglas and the Kansas-Nebraska Act. What do you think was going on before the war?

**JS:** I think that before the war there is this whole question of necessity and whether or not if you were in fact antislavery, that you would even express it. If there were--and I think that there were Germans who were unionists and did not agree with the institution of slavery--they weren't going to say it publicly for fear of being run out of town. I also think that there was a sense even before one might arrive, that you would have to abide by that. Either express your support for the Democratic party and slavery, or stay quiet, but there was no room for an abolitionist German or Irish immigrant in the city. There were examples of Germans and Irish immigrants assisting slaves in running away. When they were captured they were dealt with pretty severely. So I think that there's that going on. In the wake of the war you begin to see trends toward the Republican party that exist elsewhere in the country. So a shift to the Republican party in the late 1860s was very opportunistic for the Germans in Charleston. They had difficulty breaking into the Democratic party in town. So if they couldn't overtake it, which is ultimately what they did, they were going to go ahead and become involved in the Republican party. I think that it's not all that surprising, I guess, given that they were in a slave society, that wasn't going to tolerate any sort of opposition.

**CWBR:** It seems like they stayed even more under the radar, so to speak, during the war, when you have some of them volunteering for service.

**JS:** Absolutely. I think that's one of the reasons that for a long time people sort of assumed the Germans were good Democrats before and after the war. But what you really begin to realize is that they volunteered for local service, sure, and of course some did actually fight outside of the [Confederate] Home Guard, but those individuals who had property signed up for the Home Guard and stayed close. Or just stayed out of the conflict altogether. So there was without question support for the Confederacy, and you're going to find that especially among folks who support white supremacy, who support slavery, but there were also individuals who wanted nothing to do with it and some of them left town, going back to Germany, and some of them went North to avoid it. I think to a lesser extent some Irish were doing the same sorts of things. And the Irish were trying to avoid conscription. I think that's also a sign that there's clearly dissension within the city.

**CWBR:** As difficult as the war was, it seems like Reconstruction really ends up being a catalyst for German and Irish immigrants, if not breaking in socially yet, really breaking in economically or moving upward I should say. At the same time their interests are very quickly reorienting away from any kind of common

ground with black Charlestonians and towards the interests of white southerners. I was wondering if you could talk about the role that emancipation plays in this shift?

**JS:** Absolutely, what I found was that very quickly we being to see German and Irish politicians who were upwardly mobile were really drawn to the Republican party while at the same time in 1868, for example, we have sort of straight-out Democratic white supremacist ticket that [immigrants] were in many ways turned off by I think. Although you'll see some names on the municipal ticket, with that failure on the local, state, and national level in 1868, Democrats recognize that they were going to have to enlist support from moderate Republicans. So basically that's what ends up happening in Charleston. Not only are they going to try to attract German and Irish immigrants over to the Democratic party, they're also going to try to attract some moderate African Americans, which they do a handful. But what the Germans did in particular was when the nominating conventions were being held with each municipal election, was that they were really well organized. In many ways they shaped the formation of those tickets. Whenever those traditional white supremacist Democrats tried to regain control, the Germans would threaten to throw their support to the Republican party. Many white southerners and white Charlestonians resented that fact. They weren't sure if the Germans really meant it or not, and I do think that they did. They were much more moderate, and I think less white supremacist in 1868-1870 than perhaps they would become by 1876.

**CWBR:** Of course at the same time African Americans are asserting their rights as much as possible. But all these economic barriers, which sort of eased for immigrants after the war, really crash down on African Americans. They can't get credit, and maybe can start business but most fail I think within the first couple of years. So a lot of their exercising of their rights ends up sort of being--these Fourth of July parades are emblematic of that. I was wondering if you could explain why these public demonstrations were so critical?

**JS:** Alright so with emancipation African Americans and German and Irish immigrants as well gain access to public thoroughfares, the public space that had previously largely denied them. So African Americans on the Fourth of July are really turning out to express their emancipation, to express their freedom. At the same time white southerners have decided that they don't want to be part of those same celebrations, that the Fourth of July, that Independence Day represents, in

their view, emancipation now. So of course we had Emancipation Day as well, but this is something that is taking place on the day that they formally would have shown up. So basically the streets of downtown Charleston were decidedly the space of African Americans. It was very unique and that trend lasted throughout Reconstruction and in some cases African Americans were showing up in large numbers even after Reconstruction. I think that story, when I think about that black Charlestonians today would be interested to know that the Fourth of July was their day, and that white southerners and that white southerners really stayed away.

**CWBR:** And then critically there's another festival in town. You'll probably have to correct my pronunciation, but what was the *Schuetzenfest* for the German community?

**JS:** The *Schuetzenfest*, early on before the war, was literally just a moment to bring the Germans together, and the German rifle clubs, and just have a weekend festival where they went out to the *schuetzenplatz* and had target competitions and had various games for children and for adults on the grounds, and then later they would celebrate with a dance. This was a very popular festival before the war, but only really among the Germans. In the late 1860s, after the war has ended, the Germans decide to start this festival again, and indicative of their acceptance by white southerners, by white Charlestonians, they begin to invite white and black Charlestonians to this festival. It very quickly increases in popularity. I think one newspaper called it the Mardi Gras of Charleston by the 1870s. So it was really a success, and the presence of African Americans in that space I think was very important early on. It said something about the Germans' moderation and their lack of acceptance of the sort of white supremacist platform. But, again reflecting trends elsewhere, by the end of Reconstruction you begin to see that the Germans are putting up fences, that they're not issuing tickets to a great extent to African Americans anymore, and that some of the various events that take place--amusements so to speak--during the actual *Schuetzenfest* are inherently racist, including blackface minstrelsy and other sorts of amusements. That's what they called them, "amusements."

**CWBR:** Did white southerners sort of become involved with this [*Schuetzenfest*] out of a combination of rejecting Fourth of July celebrations and being attracted perhaps--being former Confederates, former soldiers--to the martial aspect of parading and shooting, or did they just very explicitly, plainly see with this festival an opportunity to drive a wedge between German immigrant

community and freed blacks?

**JS:** Sure, so one of the things that the Germans do is they need permission from the military to hold this particular parade that begins through the streets of Charleston, and then makes its way to the *schuetzenplatz* grounds. That means that they're going to be marching through the streets with weapons. They receive permission because they argue that it's a cultural festival and they were doing it long before the war and it has nothing to do with the Confederacy. However white rifle clubs, once they see that the Germans are doing this, begin to incorporate and reorganize. They really see this as an opportunity to get out there like they were before the war and to display their martial prowess. So yes, they very clearly recognize that they're not going to be able to do this on the Fourth of July, but they can surely do it on the *Schuetzenfest* weekend. So I think it was a very explicit display of white supremacy, in large part because you don't see African American rifle clubs in these parades. It's purely reserved for whites.

**CWBR:** So by the end of Reconstruction, by 1877, the city's politics kind of seem to mirror the national controversy. And this theme that we saw before the war seems to reemerge with Germans often supporting Republican policies but they're tending to vote the other way still, and really the cost seems to fall on the African American community. So do ethnic communities in the South, when they look at the African American community, do they see a potentially ruinous battle in trying to resist to any greater degree white supremacy in Charleston, with Federal support eroding, do they simply retreat out of self-preservation, or is this a more profound new sense of self-identification more deeply with native-born white southerners?

**JS:** I think that it could've gone a different way, but it didn't. So as they begin to very clearly recognize that their economic and social and to a certain extent political success will lie with white southerners, that that association is much more beneficial to them than any sorts of alliances that they have historically had with the African American community, they begin to really establish stronger ties with white southerners. I think it's also a numbers game. In many cases if you look at the age demographics of Germans and even the Irish immigrants, by the mid-to-late 1870s you notice that first generation that the parents have begun to die off. So this is largely a second generation ethnic American community of Germans and Irish, who seem to be much more socialized to their southern identity than their parents were. I guess from that standpoint it's not that surprising but I also think that the fact that they were so

upwardly mobile, that they do identify less with the plight of working class African Americans, who have found restrictions to that same mobility basically impossible to crack through. I shouldn't say impossible because of course there were handfuls of successful African Americans who were doing quite well, but in large part you actually see in some cases African Americans are losing presence in certain skilled occupations, that they had been doing for decades if not generations. By the 1870s you begin to see that they're being excluded from those same types of jobs. In a sense it's one of the sources that's very good for revealing this kind of information.

**CWBR:** Well it's a fascinatingly complex dynamic, I really enjoyed reading it. Professor Strickland, I appreciate you taking the time to chat with us about your most recent book, *Unequal Freedoms: Ethnicity, Race, and White Supremacy in Civil War-Era Charleston*.

**JS:** Thank you very much, Zach, it's been a pleasure.