

### From Slave to Statesman: The Life of Educator, Editor, and Civil Rights Activist Willis M. Carter of Virginia

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## Review

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**Heinrich, Robert and Deborah Harding.** *From Slave to Statesman: The Life of Educator, Editor, and Civil Rights Activist Willis M. Carter of Virginia.* Louisiana State University Press, 2016 \$35.00 ISBN 9780807162651

There may never be an adequate assessment of the depth and breadth of the harm done to the character and soul of the United States of America because of slavery. There may also never be a precise manner of describing the full impact of that horrible institution's inhumanity or a means of comprehending its vile perversion of even the most basic concepts of justice. Fortunately, in the aftermath of slavery, there were African Americans like Willis M. Carter whose life of dauntless courage and towering excellence gave his contemporaries reasons to hope that America was finally prepared to embrace people of such drive and talent as welcome citizens.

In the book *From Slave to Statesman: The Life of Educator, Editor, and Civil Rights Activist Willis M. Carter of Virginia*, authors Robert Heinrich and Deborah Harding present a robust analysis of the life and times of this dynamic African American who battled against the suffocating social boundaries prescribed for blacks in the late nineteenth century. Born into bondage like his contemporary, educator and indomitable self-help advocate Booker T. Washington, Willis M. Carter proved that his enslaved origins were no deterrent to his capitalizing upon every opportunity made possible by freedom.

Working with Carter's quite interesting but very lean memoir, Heinrich and Harding illuminate the essentials of Carter's life while skillfully placing him within the context of that delicate season of hope for African Americans during post-Civil War Reconstruction. Their examination reinforces the general truths about slavery's undeniable violation of human decency and dignity while also revealing the system's vast internal complexities that exacerbated its intensely dysfunctional reality. Noting that Carter was unsparing in his condemnation of slavery, the authors also point out that he possessed fond memories of his owners, the Goodloe family,

who treated Carter and his kin with a brand of kindness that was unusual by the standards of the antebellum South. Even so, kindness was no substitute for emancipation and Carter never accepted occasional comfort as a compromise for freedom.

The authors' meticulous attention to detail in describing the sociopolitical and economic challenges facing African Americans during Reconstruction is built upon a discussion of the obstacles that blacks had faced from the time of the nation's founding. The wide lens they use to survey slavery's toxic impact as it crept across the growing United States is eventually narrowed to provide relentless scrutiny upon Carter's home state of Virginia. Such an examination is critical, especially given the massive role Virginia played as a supplier of slave labor to antebellum southern states. Ensuring that this point is underscored, the authors mention that none other than Thomas R. Dew, one of the most ardent pro-slavery ideologues of the antebellum period proudly proclaimed that Virginia was "'a negro raising state for other states'" [12].

Heinrich and Harding offer numerous examples to illustrate slavery's brutal intrusiveness into every aspect of African American life. This was particularly true when it came to blacks' desires and efforts to cultivate their minds. The slave-owners of Willis M. Carter's childhood were absolutely determined that blacks would never obtain the cognitive skills for any endeavors beyond the daily grind required for servile manual labor. As former slave and prominent abolitionist Frederick Douglass observed in his 1845 masterpiece *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass*, slavers understood quite clearly that blacks obtaining education was a direct threat to the survival of America's system of bondage.

Like Mr. Douglass and other blacks who never ceased trying to peer through the intellectual darkness that had been imposed upon them, Willis M. Carter seized every chance to enrich his mind. Authors Heinrich and Harding gift the reader with the raw essence of Carter's resolve to become educated by letting his words speak loud and clear when he declared that "With the courage and resolution of a Julius Caesar, I determined to confront all difficulties and in the event of my not having an opportunity to enter school I would make my way to a classical education, by private study" [24].

The most inspiring yet troubling sections of *From Slave to Statesman* are the authors' chronicling of the outstanding progress that African Americans made during Reconstruction while white supremacists sought to negate every aspect of their citizenship. While not as well-known as luminaries like Booker T. Washington [founder and leader of the famed Tuskegee

Institute], W. E. B. Dubois [visionary intellectual and eventual editor of the NAACP's *The Crisis* magazine], or Ida B. Wells [intrepid anti-lynching crusader], the authors place Willis M. Carter on a par with them in recognition of his determined fight to advance the overall fortunes of African Americans in post-Civil War Virginia [especially in Staunton where he lived].

With the Civil War making emancipation an accomplished fact, Carter and his African American contemporaries devoted their energies to ensuring that blacks could exercise the rights and privileges of citizenship that had been so ruthlessly denied during bondage. Namely, they wanted an education, they wanted control of their own lives and spaces, and they wanted to vote. Interspersed with their examination of the creative means by which Carter and other blacks sought to achieve their aims, the authors counterbalance those discussions with details foreshadowing the doom which ultimately became the fate of Reconstruction's short-lived season of democratic aspiration.

As the carnage of the Civil War faded into memory and ex-Confederates rose to power in the new order, white supremacists implemented every legal and administrative tool at their disposal to disenfranchise Carter, his fellow black Virginians, and African Americans across the South. In Virginia, the Republican Party compounded the trouble by not only losing its ardor for fulfilling Reconstruction's bold vision but eventually aligning itself with the interests of segregationists.

Carter hoped that his work as an educator, a newspaper editor, upstanding husband, father, and overall positive role model for his community would serve as proof positive that he was as capable as any of his white contemporaries to model good citizenship. It did not matter. For those intent on restoring the status quo ante, there was no level of achievement that justified letting Carter and other African Americans wield political influence without punishment.

As Jim Crow segregation extended its malevolent influence across the South, Carter and other black leaders fought harder to resist the broad assault upon their citizenship and humanity. Indeed, they had no choice. Increased incidents of lynching and emboldened efforts to simply ignore the Constitution's Fifteenth Amendment [that had legalized voting for black men] demanded taking any action that could delay disaster. Without the vote, Carter and his fellow black leaders understood all too well that white supremacists would shove African Americans into an updated version of slavery's horrors.

Carter and his colleagues appealed directly to officials in Richmond, signing their names to a document that articulated the general advantages for all citizens if blacks were allowed to maintain access to education and the ballot. Their reasoned argument highlighted the economic and social benefits of blacks being more, not less, equipped to fulfill their roles as educated income earners and voters. The reasoning was sound, but those being petitioned were not interested in rational discourse. They were after power and getting it demanded stripping African Americans of their civil rights and keeping them silent and terrorized, a condition that persisted well into the middle of the twentieth century.

By elevating the life and achievements of Willis M. Carter of Virginia, authors Robert Heinrich and Deborah Harding have added a valuable record to the scholarship of Reconstruction. Their careful examination of Carter's brief memoir effectively illustrates the journey of a courageous man who was determined to exercise his rights as an American citizen. While the narrative is sometimes slowed by editorial explanations analyzing the process of research versus assessing the findings within the larger tapestry of the period, such detours do not detract from the fine quality of the authors' work. The diligent care Heinrich and Harding exercise in bringing full recognition to Willis M. Carter's contributions as an educator, editor, and civil rights warrior serves as an inspiring but sobering reminder that, for many in America, full citizenship has been an elusive quest that's often been obtained at the cost of blood.

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