

# Soul Liberty: The Evolution of Black Religious Politics in Postemancipation Virginia

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## Review

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**Meyers Turner, Nicole.** *Soul Liberty: The Evolution of Black Religious Politics in Postemancipation Virginia*. University of North Carolina Press, 2020. PAPERBACK. \$29.95 ISBN 9781469655239 pp. 232

In *Soul Liberty: The Evolution of Black Religious Politics in Postemancipation Virginia*, Yale religious studies professor Nicole Meyers Turner designates the black church as the birthplace of black political activity. Turner utilizes a wealth of denominational meeting minutes, government documents and newspaper articles to craft a well-researched religious history. This history is grounded in the actions of black Virginian churchgoers' quest to achieve a multifaceted form of freedom and autonomy which Turner dubs, 'soul liberty.' Religious institutions, the black Baptist churches of Virginia in particular, functioned as safe spaces for communal, social, and political exploration. Baptist conventions featured committees on foreign affairs, missions, and education. A few of the primary objectives of said conventions were to engage in racial uplift, establish a sense of communal identity, and of utmost importance, to evidence black mens' capacity for political participation at the national, state and local levels.

*Soul Liberty* not only functions as a much-needed addition to the field of postbellum religious history, it also contributes to a lack of recent scholarship on the Reconstruction era that uses religion as a source for critical historical analysis. This work exposes the tenuousness of the post-emancipation political world in which blacks navigated. Many of the advancements black Christians achieved came as a result of their tactfulness as voters and their ability to make political alliances with friends and enemies. Traditional historians of Reconstruction such as Eric Foner and W.E.B Du Bois have already recognized the arguments made by those in opposition to giving black men the right to vote. One of the most salient of these was that black men did not possess the mental capacity to vote as rational actors in their own interests. Turner highlights the political intelligence of black voters by studying their voting trends during the Readjuster Movement.

That former Confederate General William Mahone recognized the importance of black church networks for political canvassing and mobilizing an effective coalition in his successful senate run is quite telling. As Reconstruction came to a close, black Virginians found their former Republican allies leaning more towards Funder Democrats who favored paying off all of the state's debts dating back to the enslavement of blacks. Readjusters were in favor of paying an adjusted debt. Mahone relied on building relationships with black ministers to create a sturdy alliance of western farmers, black and white manual laborers, and former Confederates who had an interest in paying adjusted debts. The outcome of the Readjuster alliance resulted in tangible rewards for blacks: patronage positions, banning of the whipping post, and the establishment of an insane asylum for blacks.

Gender is a prevailing theme throughout *Soul Liberty*. Echoing the work of Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham and Elsa Barkley Brown, Turner asserts that women played a pivotal role in shaping sociopolitics. Although they could not vote, women often held their own auxiliary conventions alongside the men, and they raised substantial sums of money to build new churches. Black women of the North came as missionaries to teach Virginian women various domestic skills. Other women accompanied their male counterparts to the polls to spot and protect them from malicious citizens hellbent on allowing them to vote. And others even attempted to create small preaching spaces for themselves. Gender becomes most relevant in Turner's analysis of gender and the education of black preachers. Turner argues that black aspirations of increased educational opportunity resulted in a conscious compromise of church power structures from more egalitarian to male-dominated. In order to look the part of true citizens, black churches yielded to Victorian gender ideals and sought the rise of black male ministers above all others. Partnerships with white denominations and missionaries resulted in the spread of Victorian domestic ideologies that gave women fixed, domestic roles and beckoned black men to operate outside of the home as the main breadwinner.

*Soul Liberty* envisages the post-emancipation black church not just as a necessary institution, but an active agent in influencing the political lives of its members. Churches used annual gatherings to document church growth, build social bonds, and prepare men for the political sphere. The networks created out of church associations transformed into viable political power that insiders and outsiders recognized. What is perhaps most laudable about the project is Turner's innovative use of digital mapping technologies to document the real mapping

practices of black Christian communities. This project is concise but effective in revealing the political impact of the early black church after emancipation.

**Shakeel Harris** is a doctoral student at Louisiana State University in the History Department. His research interests are grounded in the intersections of the Civil War, religion, race and gender. He holds a Master of Divinity degree from Duke University.