

Beyond Slavery's Shadow: Free People of Color in the South

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Recommended Citation

Wilson, Evelyn L. (2022) "Beyond Slavery's Shadow: Free People of Color in the South," *Civil War Book Review*: Vol. 24 : Iss. 3 .

DOI: 10.31390/cwbr.24.3.11

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.lsu.edu/cwbr/vol24/iss3/11>

Review

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Summer 2022

Milteer Jr., Warren Eugene. *Beyond Slavery's Shadow: Free People of Color in the South.* The University of North Carolina Press, 2021. PAPERBACK. \$29.95 ISBN 9781469664392 pp. 257

Anyone who still believes that in America before its Civil War, all people considered white were free while all people considered black were not, will be enlightened by this carefully documented exploration of people who were raced black but who were not enslaved. Anyone interested in learning more about this understudied population will be delighted by the depth and scope of the material Warren Milteer has unearthed and included in this work. Milteer has expanded the two-tiered imagery of a hierarchical pre-Civil War South with white people on top and people of color at the bottom and has warned, on pages 254-255, that accepting a simplified analysis of southern life prevents a full appreciation of the diversity experienced by southerners before 1865. Their reality was much more complicated.

Milteer presents evidence of free people of color present in each of the colonies which later would become a part of the United States of America. On page 14, he reports that free people of color were woven into the colonial world's social fabric. For more than a century, free people of color and people raced white lived as neighbors, worked together, prayed together, and fought together. Free people of color provided important services to their communities and were valued for their contributions.

Using archival records, court records, contemporary newspapers, and other resources, Milteer has provided specific examples of property ownership, occupations, and litigation involving free people of color. Rather than generalize, Milteer identifies by name those individuals who substantiate his claims. In addition to the general index typical of an academic work, Milteer has included an index of names that covers thirteen pages. The earliest Africans brought to the colonies against their will worked alongside Europeans and Native Americans as indentured servants. After their periods of indenture were complete, members of these groups were free, and many chose to intermarry. The children of these relationships would form a

category of people distinct from those considered white and distinct from those held in slavery. These free people of color were joined by others, some of whom came to the colonies already free. Others, who were enslaved, either purchased, earned, or were given their freedom.

Milteer tracked the growth of the number of free people of color, citing those state statutes that regulated the process of emancipation, and tracked the efforts by those he labelled “proslavery radicals and white supremacists” to circumscribe the freedoms of free people of color. Some state legislators went beyond limiting the citizenship rights of free people of color and sought to exile free people of color from their respective states. They argued that the relative freedom free people of color enjoyed worked to undermine arguments in support of slavery. Free people of color and their white allies spoke against these restraints, but other white politicians acquiesced to the demands of the radicals. On page 103, Milteer explained: “proslavery and white supremacist lawmakers could bring into their coalition legislators who were primarily interested in controlling the poor.” This coalition of legislators would reshape the social landscape through exclusion and separate but unequal treatment. Free people of color were subjected to taxes white people did not pay. They were restricted in their movements and in their occupations. They were excluded from schools and set apart in churches. The advocates of white supremacy created spaces inaccessible to people of color and privileged white people through segregation.

For Milteer, the Nat Turner Rebellion in Southampton County, Virginia, was a critical turning point. The rebellion provided an excuse for proslavery radicals and white supremacists to accelerate their efforts to disadvantage free people of color. Their aggressions included home searches, confiscation of guns, destruction of property, arbitrary arrests, and a slew of legislation further threatening the freedom of free people of color. On page 60, Milteer reminds the reader that the original constitutions of North Carolina, South Carolina, Maryland, and Virginia did not mention racial categories, nor did they privilege white men over black men with respect to their rights and responsibilities. North Carolina allowed free black men to vote until 1835, and Tennessee restricted their vote only a year earlier.

Milteer’s work sheds light on a relatively unknown topic in the history of the United States. He presents in vivid detail a population few people know even existed. His work is an important read to fill this gap in knowledge.

Warren Milteer, Jr. earned his Ph.D. from the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill and now teaches History at the University of North Carolina at Greensboro. His earlier book, *North Carolina's Free People of Color, 1715-1885*, was published in 2020. This is his second book.

Evelyn L Wilson, J.D., Ph.D. has written about Louisiana's Supreme Court Justices during Reconstruction and about desegregating Louisiana's law schools. She is currently writing about free people of color in West Feliciana Parish, Louisiana. ewilson@sulc.edu.