

Perspectives From Afield and Afar:Israel on the Appomattox: A Southern Experiment in Black Freedom From the 1790s Through the Civil War

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Feature Essay

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Ely, Melvin Patrick *PERSPECTIVES FROM AFIELD AND AFAR:Israel on the Appomattox: A Southern Experiment in Black Freedom from the 1790s through the Civil War*. Alfred A. Knopf, \$35.00 ISBN 679447385

A pocket of Promised Land

Challenging antebellum assumptions

Some historians have argued--or at least, assumed--that the 1830s was a turning point in Southern race relations. In that decade, the South moved from a place that thought twice about the goodness of human bondage to one that considered slavery a positive good. Before the 1830s, many Southerners, most famously Thomas Jefferson, had believed slavery was a necessary evil, a burden to white and black alike. In time, they believed, the institution would die out, provided Southerners controlled the pace of emancipation. A change came--historians have contended--with Nat Turner's revolt and the rise of abolitionism in the North, after which Southern whites made life increasingly hard for African Americans.

Melvin Patrick Ely challenges many of our preconceived notions about African American life in the antebellum South. Ely, Professor of History and Black Studies at the College of William and Mary, has explored American race relations before in his book, *The Adventures of Amos 'n' Andy: A Social History of an American Phenomenon* (New York: Free Press, 1991). In his insightful new book, **Isrl on the Appomattox**, Ely contends that for antebellum Virginians, color barriers were often very fluid. Life in Virginia did not exist upon a dichotomy of free and slave or black and white. Ely argues that a discrepancy existed between white racial ideology and the way whites actually treated African Americans on a daily basis. He separates the rhetoric from the reality by showing that white Virginians often did not obey the letter of the law when it came to curbing black freedom. Although white people did not consider free black Virginians equal to them, their attitude was mostly one of live and let

live.

Isrl Hill, founded in 1811, was a free black community located in central Virginia in Prince Edward County. Its history began in 1796, when the 26-year-old Richard Randolph freed the slaves who would make up the first occupants of Isrl Hill. Because of legal delays, however, his former servants did not win their freedom until 1810. Free black people tended to live in urban areas, but Isrl Hill was nestled in a rural, mostly African-American county. Even though two-thirds of Virginians were white and 90% of blacks in the state were slaves, the people at Isrl Hill, Ely shows, lived about as freely as any antebellum African Americans could.

The author is mostly concerned with day-to-day life in Prince Edward County. He has done much research (his endnotes comprise 140 pages of small print text) to construct his story, which relies heavily on unpublished primary sources. Much of his information comes from court records, which reveal not just the legal practices of the community, but also its social makeup. A case involving the supposed sexual assault of a white woman by a black male, for example, tells us that white courts did not have a knee jerk reaction to such accusations; it also suggests that interracial sex was not unknown or necessarily even frowned upon. Prince Edward County, Ely asserts, was not a place given to hysteria about the thought of interracial sex.

For Professor Ely, life in antebellum Virginia was not one of rigid slave patrols or the treating of free black people as little more than slaves. He takes on such historians as Ira Berlin, who, in his work *Slaves Without Masters: The Free Negro in the Antebellum South* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1974), argues that whites wanted to keep African Americans as close to bondage as possible. Ely, however, does not see antebellum white-black relations as a declension model, whereby conditions for African Americans worsened from the Revolution to the Civil War. Even so, Ely does not discount the power of white supremacy or the prevalence of the slave culture in Prince Edward County. In many ways, the cooperation between whites and free blacks resulted from whites' security in knowing that the vast majority of African Americans remained enslaved. As long as free blacks did not challenge the status quo, whites recognized their right to exist at Isrl Hill.

Since white Virginians were not intent upon undermining free blacks, Ely limits the use of such terms as black resistance. Although he emphasizes the

accomplishments of free African Americans, he shows that they did not define themselves merely in opposition to whites, and white supremacy certainly did not govern every aspect of Virginia life. Unlike slaves, the free blacks at Isrl Hill lived much as ordinary white Southerners did. Prince Edward County was not so much a battleground as it was a neutral zone, where black and white people worked together, sued each other, had sex with each other, and where free blacks could win white peoples' respect.

Nevertheless, the races did not exist on a level of true equality. After the 1800 Gabriel Prosser conspiracy, Virginia passed a law that required newly freed slaves to leave Virginia within one year or face re-enslavement. Free blacks faced limitations on their freedom in other ways. Most were not literate, nor did most own property. They could not vote or bring a suit against a white man in court. Even so, Ely shows, the Virginia legal system often issued decisions that were as colorblind as any court of its day. And the Nat Turner slave revolt, he argues, did not lead to the wide-scale repression of free blacks.

In 1836, Isrl Hill suffered a worse blow in the form of Colonel James Madison, a proslavery ideologue who argued that Isrl Hill was a deteriorating community. Madison wrote, as many proslavery advocates did, under the assumption that African Americans--if left to themselves and without white supervision and support--would fall into decline. Ely shows that Madison's accusations were far from the truth. He wrote in the proslavery environment that affected Virginia in the 1830s, but his motivations were probably personal and economic in nature. Madison was a man suffering from financial woes and was angered to see blacks at Isrl Hill make good, which they continued to do well into the 20th century.

Ely's book is compelling, well-written, and thoroughly researched. The author knows Isrl Hill and Prince Edward County inside and out, and his study is clearly a labor of love. Ely treats the people he examines--whether the free black Sam White or the emancipationist Richard Randolph--humanely and carefully. The text is brimming with names, summaries of court cases, and anecdotes about local inhabitants. Given its copious amounts of detail, however, Ely sometimes leaves the reader wanting less description and more analysis. Ely also makes Isrl Hill feel too isolated at times from historical events. Since free black Virginians could not vote, politics intrude only occasionally into his narrative. And if Ely is to emphasize reality over rhetoric in evaluating Southern race relations, then Virginia's decision to secede in 1861 seems a wholly irrational one. Perhaps it

was. But if white and black benefited from a live and let live relationship, then whites should not have feared the Republican Party. Apparently, whites thought differently and often acted differently. Furthermore, since the Civil War did not emancipate free black people, the last chapter of Ely's book feels anti-climactic. And the fact that Confederates wanted to use free blacks as little more than menial laborers in the war effort suggests the lack of respect that some whites had--despite what Ely describes in earlier pages--toward the free black community. Because of the limited role free blacks played in the Confederacy, his pages devoted to the Civil War and postwar period prove less satisfying than earlier chapters.

Since **Isrl on the Appomattox** questions many historians' notions about antebellum black life, some readers naturally will challenge Ely's findings. Some might wonder whether a free black community in a state in which only 10% of its African-American population was not enslaved tells us more about black Southern life than plantation studies do. They might also question his assertion that whites were not necessarily fearful of race mixing or that proslavery opinion did not crystallize in the South until after the Mexican War. If historians may not always agree with him, Ely certainly has asked the right questions. On the whole, he has written an impressive work of social history that challenges many of our assumptions concerning white and black Southern life in the antebellum period. It forces us to reconsider much of our knowledge about an often examined period in United States history.

Colin Woodward is a Ph.D. candidate at Louisiana State University, Baton Rouge. He is finishing a dissertation that examines the racial attitudes and policies of the Confederate army toward slavery and African Americans during the Civil War.