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Douglas R. Egerton

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Review

Egerton, Douglas R.

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Myers, Amrita Chakrabarti *Forging Freedom: Black Women and the Pursuit of Liberty in Antebellum Charleston.*. University of North Carolina Press, $39.95 ISBN 978-0-8078-3505-0

Forging New Ground in Antebellum Charleston

Sophie Mauncaut, once enslaved in French Saint Domingue, arrived in South Carolina with her owner, Josephine Catreuille. Toward the end of her life, Catreulle freed Mauncaut. That was not uncommon, since slaveholding women tended to liberate favored domestics, typically as recompense for a long lifetime of devoted service. Not surprisingly, the majority of these favored few were women, and by the time the antebellum era began, free women of color outnumbered their male counterparts in most southern cities. Freedwomen in other parts of the antebellum South have been the subjects of important studies in recent years, but not Charleston. The miniscule sample available to scholars, perhaps, has played a role in this oversight. On the eve of secession, roughly half of Maryland's black population and three-quarters of Washington City's African Americans had been emancipated. By comparison, South Carolina's freed population stood at a paltry 2.4 percent of blacks in the state. Most of these resided in Charleston, and a majority were women, such as Mauncaut. Amrita Chakrabarti Myers' richly-documented *Forging Freedom* provides a vivid portrait of their lives.

As residents of the state most determined to retain, protect, and expand chattel slavery, Charleston's free women of color lived a most precarious existence. Their very survival depended on cultivating the favor of powerful and politically-connected whites. They struggled to appear respectable while laboring long hours in low-paying jobs in hopes of remaining solvent. As women, their occupational opportunities were more proscribed than were those of free black men, who in 1860 labored in a variety of jobs, some of them high-paying, skilled trades. By comparison, 57 percent of freed women tended to

be tailors, seamstresses, mantua makers, and dressmakers. Another 37 percent washed laundry and cleaned houses. Long denied any clothing beyond one or two shabby dresses, however, many free women draped themselves in silks, laces, and even pearls. City authorities, Myers observes, were unenthusiastic about such visible presentations of status and freedom, and in 1822, following Denmark Vesey's failed plot, the City Council denounced such displays as "subversive of that subordination which policy requires to be enforced" and begged the state assembly to enforce the 1740 Negro Act's ban on respectable clothes (116).

In 1820, the Carolina legislature slammed shut the door to freedom. Worried about the growth of the free black population, which had increased after the revolution in Saint Domingue, planter-politicians banned even private manumissions. As Myers observes, however, many Charlestonians evaded the law by willing those slaves they wished to manumit to a friend or reliable relative "in trust." These provisions typically allowed the bondwomen in question to live and work as they wished, to pocket their earnings, and essentially live as free people. Such trusts, of course, depended on the goodwill of the new owner, and in the eyes of the state, these black women remained chattel. Just how precarious their existence was became clear in 1859, when legislators debated whether to reenslave free blacks as a class. In a few cases, white men who had placed their enslaved mistresses in trusts relocated their mixed-race children to free states. But those adult women unchained in this fashion after 1820 were not legally free and could not leave South Carolina's borders.

Many of those who appear in these pages did enter into long term relationships with their masters. Others were born free, a few were runaways from the countryside who hoped to blend into Charleston's black community, and still others hired themselves out to city residents and were able to put enough aside to purchase their liberty prior to 1820. As Myers points out, "there was no archetypal free black woman" (74). Once freed, a handful purchased black slaves. In Virginia, where liberated bondpersons had to quit the state within twelve months, freed people often bought their spouses so that their families could remain intact, and Myers indicates that was sometimes the case in Charleston too. More often, however, these were successful women of color who purchased slaves to assist them in their pastry shops and garment businesses. Unfortunately, Myers does not make clear that the vast majority of these women were mixed-race, a significant fact in a city where prosperous freemen had

formed the exclusive Brown Fellowship Society in 1790 and refused to describe themselves as “black." Myers, for example, suggests that slaveholder Ann Penceel inherited a sizeable estate upon the death of her husband, tinsmith William Penceel, because William was able to pursue a “more lucrative occupation than free women of color" (130). Unmentioned here is that Penceel, a member of the Brown Society, was rewarded with $1000 by the state and exempted from the Free Negro Tax for the role he played in bringing down the Vesey conspiracy. Curiously, neither William nor Ann Penceel, nor many of the fascinating people who fill these pages, appear in Myer’s too-brief index.

Douglas R. Egerton is Professor of History at Le Moyne College. His books include He Shall Go Out Free: The Lives of Denmark Vesey *and* Year of Meteors: Stephen Douglas, Abraham Lincoln, and the Election That Brought on the Civil War. *He can be reached at egertodr@lemoyne.edu.*