

Unequal Freedoms: Ethnicity, Race, and White Supremacy in Civil War-Era Charleston

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Review

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Strickland, Jeff *Unequal Freedoms: Ethnicity, Race, and White Supremacy in Civil War-Era Charleston*. University Press of Florida, \$84.95 ISBN 9780813060798

Ethnicity Complicated White Supremacy in Civil War Era Charleston

In *Unequal Freedoms: Ethnicity, Race, and White Supremacy in Civil War-Era Charleston*, historian Jeff Strickland complicates the traditional racial portrait of the antebellum South by exploring the differences among the region's white residents. Instead of seeing them as divided solely by class, he focuses on ethnic divisions in his study of Charleston. Although the city was home to whites from a range of European countries, immigrants from Ireland and Germany constituted the largest portion of the foreign-born white population. As such, he maintains, it is essential to understand how these non-native-born whites viewed their place in society and how their aspirations for inclusion changed over the course of the tumultuous middle part of the nineteenth century. Situated between white southerners and black southerners, he argues, Irish and German migrants represented a "barrier" between white and black Charlestonians in the antebellum era. Over time, the migrants, particularly the Germans, rose socially and economically. By the end of Reconstruction, having increasingly joined the middle and upper classes, they assimilated into the ranks of the city's native-born white population to become white southerners who shared the same views about blacks and the need to embrace white supremacy. Interactions among these groups, Strickland contends, "defined social, economic, and political developments in Civil War-era Charleston" (2).

Strickland recounts the transformation in seven chapters, the first three of which cover the antebellum era. Chapter one provides a demographic portrait of Charleston in the decades prior to the start of the Civil War. Like many other southern coastal cities, Charleston had a black majority, though the percentage declined over the 1840s and 1850s as whites arrived in greater numbers. Drawn

from the North as well as Europe, the new residents had a profound impact on the city, altering its composition and physical layout as well as its racial order. The second chapter examines the complicated and sometimes contradictory nature of relations between immigrants and enslaved and free blacks. In contrast to the plantation districts in the city's hinterland, Charleston's grocery shops and backroom bars, many owned by German proprietors, provided relatively safe spaces where non-elite whites, often immigrants, and blacks socialized and engaged in illicit trade. These relationships undermined the racial hierarchy and white solidarity. At other times, however, tensions between immigrants, particularly the Irish, and blacks erupted into violence as the groups competed for housing and employment.

In the 1850s, as both the sectional crisis and nativism mounted, white Charlestonians came to view the immigrants in their midst with increasing suspicion, fearing that they held anti-slavery sentiments. Chapter three chronicles the city government's efforts to police the immigrants' interactions with slaves by prohibiting the sale of alcohol in groceries. When German shopkeepers ignored the ban because it severely curtailed their profits, the authorities imposed harsh punishments on the violators. In spite of their perceived lack of commitment to southern slavery, several hundred German and Irish immigrants in Charleston fought for the Confederate cause once the Civil War began, though many served in the militia which allowed them to remain close to home. The book devotes very little coverage to the Civil War. In fact, surprisingly only five of the book's 292 pages discuss the wartime period. And yet, events during this period must have left deep impressions on the tumultuous state of race relations in the post-war period.

The second half of the book explores the economic, social, and political impact of the Civil War and emancipation in Charleston. Chapter four examines the tumult in the city's labor market as the population exploded in the years after the war's end. Competition between and among freedpeople and immigrants pushed down wages but simultaneously resulted in new opportunities for the city's laboring classes, often to the dismay of white southern employers. At the same time, peace brought entrepreneurs of all ethnicities and races new chances for prosperity. German immigrants and their southern-born children fared particularly well in the post-war pursuit of profit, expanding their commercial investments and purchasing land and plantations. The conflict between blacks and immigrants was not limited to the economic realm. Indeed, as chapter five relates, racial tensions in the city escalated, particularly after 1870, as blacks laid

claim to the civil and political rights imbued by the post-war amendments. Freed people displayed particular resolve in commemorating their freedom with annual parades through the city. These rituals reflected black Charlestonians' claims not only to public space but also to full citizenship. Chapter six traces the post-war history of the *Schuetzenfest*, a festival organized annually by the German immigrant community, which, like the black parades, held important cultural and political significance. Though it began as a celebration of German culture that attracted white as well as black attendees, the festival evolved into a "platform for white supremacy in the early 1870s" (209). The rise of the festival also marked the assimilation of middle-class and elite German immigrants into mainstream white southern society. The final chapter charts the rise of Charleston's Reconstruction-era municipal political system and its balkanization along racial, ethnic, and class lines. As the electorate broadened to include freedmen and growing numbers of naturalized Irish and German immigrants, conflict over control of the local government intensified. Most of the city's majority black population supported the Republican Party while most of the city's white population, including the Irish and Germans, joined the Democratic Party. German immigrants displayed their growing political influence several times in the late 1860s and 1870s when they threatened to throw their support behind the Republicans in municipal elections, and thus undermine racial unity, before securing concessions from the local Democratic leadership. In the wake of South Carolina's "redemption" and the attendant political violence, the Republican Party in Charleston dissolved, sharply reducing black residents' access to political power while augmenting the German and Irish immigrants'.

Strickland's well-researched study offers a valuable contribution to our understanding of the urban South's racial and ethnic diversity in the mid- and late nineteenth century. His portrait of Charleston's population undermines the simplistic black-white binary often associated with southern race relations in this era and illustrates the complexity and dynamism of the racial order both before and after the war. Strickland's argument that middle-class and elite Germans improved their position in Charleston, achieving "white" status after the Civil War is compelling and well supported by his evidence. His argument regarding Irish and German immigrants' status in the antebellum period is less convincing, however. For example, while it is clear that the two groups were not regarded as the social equals of white southerners prior to the war and that many immigrants became the proprietors of bars and groceries who made money through the illegal sale of liquor to and illicit trade with slaves and free blacks, it does not

necessarily mean they served as a “buffer” between black and white southerners, as Strickland contends. Instead, it suggests that the immigrant proprietors placed a premium on improving their economic plight and were willing to contravene laws that stood in their way of that pursuit. In spite of this criticism, the book is recommended for those interested in the history of the nineteenth-century urban South.

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