

Artisans in the Upper South: Petersburg, Virginia 1820-1865

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Review

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Barnes, L. Diane *Artisans in the Upper South: Petersburg, Virginia 1820-1865*. Louisiana State University Press, \$37.50 hardcover ISBN 9780807133132

Labor History and the Upper South

Artisans in the Upper South is a fine work of labor history which makes contributions that at the same turn probes critical issues in the fields of slavery, family history, urban studies, and gender as well. L. Diane Barnes's study offers a comprehensive analysis of how artisans in Petersburg, Virginia, negotiated the many obstacles they confronted in the decades before the Civil War. She argues convincingly that skilled workers in this comparatively small but growing industrial city embraced many of the same values as artisans in the North yet the dominance of slavery and agriculture in the Old South represented a chasm that divided the worlds of these workers.

In a series of well-organized chapters based upon meticulous research, Barnes demonstrates how artisans lived within the industrializing, and surprisingly modern, city of Petersburg. By the 1830s, the burgeoning textile and iron industries, as well as construction, and most significantly, tobacco manufacturing, attracted thousands of white workers from across the region as well as overseas. Significantly, by the 1840s this expanding workforce also included a very large percentage of free black and slave laborers. Wealthier, elite white artisans built institutions like the Petersburg Benevolent Mechanic Association that sought to promote solidarity among artisans and offer the usual benevolent services such organizations provided during the antebellum period. Challenging the traditional "declension model" found in much labor history over the past thirty years, Barnes describes how a number of these craft workers enjoyed increasing economic power despite the unpredictability associated with the market revolution. These men and their families embraced an individualistic, capitalist ethic that seems to have characterized most members of the broader nineteenth-century American middle class. Going even further, Barnes maintains

that so many artisans accepted bourgeois ideals that studies of the middle class “should be expanded to incorporate those middling workers who never quite attained middle-class status, but formed a new working class in the antebellum South” (70). What did distinguish these craftsmen from their northern counterparts, however, was a defining commitment to slavery and white supremacy.

According to Barnes, artisans in Petersburg, and by implication across the South, desired to obtain slaves in an effort to enhance their own status and economic position. Those unable to enter the ranks of southern slaveholders, the vast majority of craftsmen, viewed slave and free black labor as unfair competition that represented a dire threat to them as citizens living in a slaveholding republic. Only their economic and political dependence upon the planter class prevented these men from engaging in the same type of rioting and workplace confrontations that so often erupted between white and black workers in northern cities. Conversely, Barnes argues that despite legal and social discrimination, free black artisans in Petersburg enjoyed a more secure economic position than did blacks living in the North. Statistical and anecdotal evidence suggest the relatively fluid race relations in Petersburg offered more financial opportunities for African Americans, both free and slave.

Artisans in the Upper South is a welcome addition to a small but growing number of historical studies published over the past five years that show that in many respects the gulf separating the North and South during the antebellum period was not as wide as many of us have long believed. To be sure, the institution of slavery and its direct influence upon southern race relations created a barrier between the two regions. Yet in terms of how southerners negotiated a changing economy or internalized a striving, bourgeois *mentalite*, Barnes’ study complements the work of Michelle Gillespie, Frank Towers, Jonathan Daniel Wells, and others. It offers a thoughtful analysis of important trends in the antebellum South and should be required reading for anyone interested in the subject.

Frank J. Byrne is associate professor of history at the State University of New York at Oswego. He is the author of Becoming Bourgeois: Merchant Culture in the Antebellum and Confederate South (2006).