

### Black Freedom in the Age of Slavery: Race, Status, and Identity in the Urban Americas

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#### Recommended Citation

Brunson, Takkara (2021) "Black Freedom in the Age of Slavery: Race, Status, and Identity in the Urban Americas," *Civil War Book Review*. Vol. 23 : Iss. 2 .

DOI: 10.31390/cwbr.23.2.09

Available at: <https://repository.lsu.edu/cwbr/vol23/iss2/9>

## Review

**Brunson, Takkara**

**Spring 2021**

**Marks, John Garrison.** *Black Freedom in the Age of Slavery: Race, Status, and Identity in the Urban Americas*. University of South Carolina Press, 2020. PAPERBACK. \$29.99 ISBN 9781643361239 pp. 234

*Black Freedom in the Age of Slavery: Race, Status, and Identity in the Urban Americas* examines the social and cultural worlds of free people of color in the period between the wars for independence in the United States and in Spanish America (1770s-1850). John Garrison Marks focuses on how persons of African descent negotiated racial dynamics in the urban Atlantic world. He argues that “free people of color, in their efforts to achieve social distinction, earn money, and build lives for themselves and their families, challenged racial norms and subtly called into question the logic of white authority in the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Americas” (2).

Marks’s major intervention stems from his comparative and transnational approach for understanding the local histories of race and slavery in two major port cities: Cartagena, Colombia and Charleston, South Carolina. Both urban centers maintained ties to the Caribbean and wider Atlantic world through trade, including the disembarkation of enslaved Africans. Slavery was integral to the economy of Charleston, resulting in a larger enslaved population than that which existed in Cartagena during the period of study. By the eighteenth century, Cartagena served primarily as a commercial, military, and administrative center for the Spanish Crown. The lack of a plantation-or mining-based economy in Caribbean New Granada, as well as the existence of “well established routes to freedom” for enslaved persons, resulted in the majority of Cartagena’s African-descended population being emancipated or freeborn (8). Persons of African descent formed a majority of the population in both cities.

The governments of Caribbean New Granada and South Carolina took divergent approaches to managing Black freedom. Still, racial logic operated in similar ways as whites questioned Black people’s capacity for freedom and equal citizenship rights. Marks traces how

patriot leaders of New Granada tied the end of slavery to the independence cause as many advocated for abolition. However, white leaders assumed Blacks would fall into lives of vice and vagrancy once freed. As such, they established free womb laws and an apprenticeship in order to control the transition from slavery to freedom. In contrast, white South Carolinians sought to maintain slavery in perpetuity. Thus they endeavored to eliminate pathways towards freedom for enslaved men and women after 1800. Their largely successful measures included laws that required individual slaves be manumitted only through legislative approval and that prohibited free people of color from entering the state. Despite these restrictions in both cities, enslaved persons achieved freedom through self-purchase, flight (especially in Cartagena), and through sexual relationships with white men (in Charleston).

Residents of both port cities experienced changing perceptions of Black freedom during the Haitian Revolution. Marks explores the impact of the news that circulated on white elite fears of racial violence and ideas of freedom among free populations of color. Many whites struggled to control the flow of information regarding the Haitian Revolution and other slave rebellions. Charleston businessmen maintained trade with Saint Domingue throughout the 1790s and early 1800s. Local newspapers documented events during the rebellion. In both Cartagena and Charleston, ship workers and dockworkers helped maintain Black communication networks and shaped wider Atlantic discourses. News of Black freedom spurred rumored and actual rebellions that connected regions of the U.S. South, as well as cities throughout New Granada. Marks traces a shift in racial consciousness in which free and enslaved African descendants increasingly viewed themselves as members of a diasporic Black community that merited freedom and citizenship rights.

At the same time, the opportunities afforded to many free people of color came at the expense of racial solidarity. After analyzing the legal and political dynamics that shaped Black strategies for achieving freedom, Marks shifts into an in-depth study of the social lives of free persons of color. First, he considers how labor shaped opportunities for African descendants to obtain social recognition and financial stability. In both cities, skilled work as tailors, barbers, masons, and carpenters allowed privileged free persons of color to distinguish themselves from the enslaved and Black popular classes. They claimed respectability as prominent citizens of their local communities. Many used their economic advantages to secure a degree of financial stability for their families when they purchased land and occasionally slaves (those in Charleston

sometimes purchased family members) and established businesses. Local dynamics also informed the decisions free people of color made to achieve recognition. In Charleston, economic competition with white and enslaved laborers challenged the stability of skilled Black workers. In Cartagena, free artisans of color joined the city's voluntary militia to boost their social status. New Granada thus afforded some free Blacks' recognition from the state while free persons of African descent living in Charleston emphasized their shared interests with elite whites.

Labor, legal status, skin complexion, and association membership factored into how free persons of African descent asserted their respectability in Cartagena and Charleston. Marks compares the nature of organizations established by free men of color. In Charleston, a select group of male artisans formed mutual aid associations. These associations affirmed the social standing of their members, helped cover medical and funerary costs, and promoted the behavioral standards of respectability. Such organizations occasionally limited their membership to mixed-raced men of European heritage; they challenged white attitudes that tended to deny Black people respectability. By the 1800s, free men of color promoted racial uplift through voluntary associations. Such organizations contrasted with those formed in Cartagena, which included the *cabildos de nación* formed in Spanish America. *Cabildos de nación* allowed Africans and African descendants to organize along ethnic lines while creating alternative social hierarchies in their local neighborhoods. Cartagena's militia men also petitioned the Crown for legal privileges afforded to white militiamen for themselves and their families. Marks demonstrates that free men of color utilized these institutions to challenge racial hierarchies rather than to launch political campaigns or protests.

Marks concludes with a brief chapter on godparents and social networks. He uses baptismal records from the early 1800s to consider how free and enslaved persons of African descent developed "ties of fictive kinship" across class and legal status (155). He shows that many enslaved parents appointed free persons of color—especially free women of color—to serve as godparents for their enslaved children. In Cartagena, parents tended to appoint a free woman of color to serve as their child's godmothers. Men occasionally served as godfathers. Black parents in Charleston were more likely to appoint both men and women to serve as godparents. Marks explains that enslaved and free persons of African descent living in both cities used Christian rites like baptisms to foster community. Many likely appointed godparents who

could enhance the social standing of their children. This chapter raises interesting questions for future inquiry: How did the selection of godparents blur class boundaries among persons of African descent? How did they reflect long-standing relationships that unified women and various families in local communities? Such questions point to the successes of Mark's comparative approach for examining local histories of race and slavery.

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