

### To Walk About in Freedom: The Long Emancipation of Priscilla Joyner

Diane Miller Sommerville  
*Binghamton University*, [dianesommerville@gmail.com](mailto:dianesommerville@gmail.com)

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## Review

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**Emberton, Carole.** *To Walk About in Freedom: The Long Emancipation of Priscilla Joyner*. W.W. Norton & Company, 2022. HARDCOVER. \$28.95 ISBN 9781324001829 pp. 242

*To Walk About in Freedom: The Long Emancipation of Priscilla Joyner* is a beautifully written chronicle of one woman's journey from slavery into freedom. Though short in length—roughly 200 pages of text—it poignantly and effectively conveys the essence of emancipation as lived by one biracial woman raised by a white, slaveholding mother figure who refused to divulge the identity of Priscilla's Black father. In addition to being deprived of the knowledge of her parentage, Joyner was also denied the embrace of the Black community until after the war when her mother, for unstated reasons, sent the twelve-year-old off to Freedom Hill, North Carolina, an enclave of newly freed men and women that enveloped Priscilla, giving her, for the first time, the loving bonds of kinship and belonging. She had finally found her people which allowed her to build a life of meaning and joy. Thus began her long journey into freedom which underscores the main argument of the book: Emancipation was not a single moment but rather a process, and a process that was very individual.

By relying on a largely overlooked interview conducted during the Great Depression by members of the Federal Writers' Project (FWP), Carole Emberton traces the life of Priscilla Joyner through her own telling as a way to examine the experience of the first generation of freedpeople, what Emberton calls the charter generation. At age eighty, Priscilla reluctantly shared her recollections of living during slavery times, the Civil War, Reconstruction, and the Jim Crow era. Emberton readily concedes what other historians note, that these interviews are flawed sources: They raise questions of representativeness and credibility given the racial dynamics of the interviewers and their subjects and the possibility of faulty memory. Yet, Emberton convincingly asserts, they remain indispensable in mining the "thoughts, feelings, dreams, desires, fears and sorrows" of newly emancipated people (xxii). No other source compares.

Still, gaps and silences in Joyner's narrative required some deft pivoting to other sources and methods to fill in the missing pieces, including the use of "disciplined imagination," the act of leaning on the stories of other charter members to overlay the thin or missing parts of Joyner's life. For example, in the absence of Joyner's thoughts about marriage and her wedding day, Emberton turns to the narrative of Sena Moore who, at age eighty-three, recounted her own nuptials including a vivid description of her wedding dress. Emberton ponders Moore's recollection of the dress and interrogates it for meaning. In an incredibly evocative and moving passage, Emberton teases out the joy and playfulness in Moore's memories of that momentous occasion that nearly seven decades' time could not dull.

While Emberton argues that Joyner and others of that charter generation found joy in forging attachments, creating families, and building lives, she carefully balances the celebration of kinship and community with the harsh reality of living with the consequences of slavery and its legacy of racial hatred and oppression. Joyner's husband Lewis worked as a sharecropper in an economic system that initially promised autonomy but transformed into an exploitative scheme that trapped rural African Americans. The Joyners also faced the threat of racial violence. It may not have been coincidence that Priscilla and Lewis, parents of sons, left North Carolina after the lynching of a Black man in 1887 for allegedly attempting to assault a white girl. Like thousands of other African Americans fleeing the South amidst the Great Migration, the Joyners sought refuge in an urban area, Suffolk, Virginia, that held the promise of better wages, greater security, and independence. There, the hardworking Joyner family scraped and saved and became homeowners, an extraordinary feat for Black families in the Jim Crow South.

Joyner's story also offers a glimpse into the complications and challenges facing a mixed-race household before the Civil War. Scholarship in the last few decades has established that interracial intimacy was not nearly as uncommon as once was thought to be the case. So it shouldn't be surprising to learn that Priscilla's mother, Ann Eliza Joyner, a white woman from a slaveholding North Carolina family, who had married Rix Joyner, also from a slaveholding family, had conceived a child with a man of color during her marriage. The 1860 census listed four children in the Joyner household: two white girls older than Priscilla, Priscilla, a 'mulatto,' and a younger white boy. Priscilla's father might have been a slave, or he may have been a free Black man. Priscilla's mother never divulged his identity, which caused Priscilla considerable pain throughout her life.

The Joyner household was fraught with tension and discord, even before Priscilla's birth. In fact, Priscilla had been born after Rix had been banished from the Joyner home. The birth of a mixed-race child made Ann Eliza extremely vulnerable: Her husband could claim adultery, and if successful, she would lose her property and children; Priscilla would likely be bound out as an apprentice. The "colored people" in the neighborhood, aware of Ann Eliza's predicament, offered to take Priscilla, providing Ann Eliza a way to hide the fruit of her illicit affair. But she adamantly refused and instead faced her husband upon his return and offered him a deal: She would not contest ownership of her two slaves that he had sold illegally if he would allow Priscilla to remain in the home and raise her as his, a peculiar arrangement indeed. Despite the negotiated settlement, marital and family dysfunction ensued when a resentful Rix refused even to speak to Priscilla and, more damaging, used his white children in a proxy war against Priscilla whom Rix instigated to launch a campaign of cruelty against their mixed-race sibling. Rix's death as a Confederate soldier did not end their abuse, which Ann Eliza was unable or unwilling to control, and which may have been a factor in her decision to send Priscilla to live with a Black family. Ann Eliza's story takes another strange turn when in 1866, a year after Rix's death, she gave birth to a second mixed-race daughter, Ida, whom she sent to live with a Black family in the next county. While the interracial Joyner family may not be representative of antebellum race relations, it does reveal the complexity of racial dynamics and provides a deeper understanding of the fallout of such arrangements, including the emotional cost to a biracial child.

Just as fascinating as Joyner's life story is the life of her FWP interview that Emberton carefully reconstructs in a final chapter. Roscoe Lewis, a Black professor from Hampton University, and Thelma Dunston, a Black teacher, had conducted the interview with Joyner, which was to be included in a publication called *The Negro in Virginia*. But only a few lines of the interview appear in the book published in 1940, and what does appear is distorted by the heavy editing (and perhaps fabrication) of the editor, Eudora Ramsay Richardson, who ignored any reference to interracial sex and instead chose to miscast Ann Eliza as Priscilla's kind and generous mistress in an effort to propagate the Lost Cause narrative of slaveholding benevolence. Lewis published an article based on Joyner's interview in 1959, but the full interview was hidden away in Roscoe's personal papers until brought to light in a published collection of Virginia interviews in the late 1970s, though it was largely ignored until Carole Emberton breathed new life into her story.

Carole Emberton has delivered a gem. In *Priscilla Joyner*, she gives us one woman's story as she journeyed from slave times through freedom. Emberton is adamant, however, that Joyner's story is just one of many and cautions that we should resist the temptation to use Joyner's experiences as a stand-in for others of the charter generation. Instead, she offers that Priscilla's story conveys "the texture of individual experience and the power of a single life to amplify the contours of history" (206-07). Emberton does so without romanticizing or victimizing her subject. Priscilla Joyner struggled, suffered, loved, and persevered. She formed attachments and rooted herself among her people after a childhood in which she faced abuse, torment, and loneliness. She nursed sick children and buried them. She made the house on Second Avenue a home, and there she grew old all alone. *To Walk About in Freedom* offers a glimpse of what freedom meant to one woman, a journey that was at once exceptional and common. The book offers new insights into the history of emancipation while offering a master class on the mining and reimagining of archival sources.

*Diane Miller Sommerville, Professor of History at Binghamton University, SUNY, is a historian of the nineteenth-century South and author of Aberration of Mind: Suicide and Suffering in the Civil War-Era South (2018), a Lincoln Prize finalist. She is currently working on a study of southern women suffering from post-partum disorders. She can be reached at sommervi@binghamton.edu*