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Review of: Black Property Owners in the South, 1790-1915, by Loren Schweninger

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Reviewed by Peter Rachleff

In the last three decades, an intellectual revolution in American history has urged us to “listen to the inarticulate,” to tell the stories of “anonymous” Americans. This call launched a search for new primary sources that has yielded remarkable results.

Interpretation has required scholars to go beyond the “depth” of their primary sources to take into account the “breadth” of the historical context, to place the often-microscopic evidence that they have unearthed and examined within a larger framework. This process is not only difficult, but it is also rife with controversy. Historians who understand context differently will often “read” the same primary sources differently.

African American history has been at the heart of these developments. The search for sources has been one of the great intellectual challenges of scholarly work in that field. Meanwhile, the continuing salience of race in American culture has made the interpretation of these sources an even more complex procedure, as the understanding of context has varied widely.

Black Property Owners in the South graphically typifies these historiographic trends. Loren Schweninger has conducted one of the most impressive searches for sources ever seen in this field. He painstakingly examined the Manuscript Population Census returns for 1850, 1860, and 1870, searching for every black owner of more than $100 of property in the fifteen slaveholding and former slaveholding states plus the District of Columbia. He also consulted tax assessment lists for South Carolina and Louisiana (where black property ownership was most significant), plus wills, probate records, estate inventories, land deeds, mortgages, diaries, manuscript collections, local newspapers, private correspondence, and the like. It is not surprising that his project has taken him almost fifteen years to complete.

Schweninger presents a well-documented account of black achievement in the face of great odds. Most remarkable are the stories of slaves
who accumulated property and bought their own freedom and that of their families. Schweninger shows that the center of black property ownership shifted over time from the privileged "free people of color" of Louisiana to ex-slaves and their descendants in the Upper South. The more slavery receded into the past, the more the traditional divisions between the formerly free and the formerly slave, between the light-skinned and the dark-skinned, declined. This much is clear, and it contributes to our understanding of the black experience.

At another level, however, Schweninger's analysis is suspect and controversial. Based on the very small group that achieved property ownership, he contends that African Americans "valued, as did most whites, independence, legal redress, and the ownership of property" (p. 93); that they manifested "energy, industry, and business acumen" (p. 101); that property owners "were largely "self-made" men" (p. 225); and that the African American experience overall was characterized by "an unceasing determination to become landholders" (p. 236).

These contentions fail to take into account two fundamental elements of the historical context: institutional racism, on the one hand, and the importance of collectivism within African American culture, on the other. Schweninger's explanation for the declining fortunes of the descendants of prosperous free blacks is that "some of the heirs did not possess the same drive and business acumen as their forebears" (p. 113). He offers little consideration of how racism might have circumscribed their opportunities. He also fails to consider the ways that racism reinforced the cultural traditions of collectivism brought from Africa. Black "capital formation" often involved the pooling of resources through mutual benefit and aid societies, and even individual property accumulation was often a means to a collective end—to purchase and emancipate slave family members or to create social space away from white interference. Schweninger's downplaying of this collectivism undermines his interpretation of the very evidence he has worked so hard to assemble.

Black Property Owners in the South will contribute much to ongoing discussions, particularly in light of the current debates about affirmative action and African American advancement—or lack of it—within American society. But its conclusions must be used very carefully.

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