

Book Review
History 740
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Life in Black and White: Family and Community in the Slave South. By Brenda E. Stevenson. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996, pp vii-457.)

Loudoun County, Virginia is located adjacent to Fairfax County, Virginia and not awfully far from Baltimore, Maryland and Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. Brenda E. Stevenson chose Loudoun County as the focus of her study on black and white families in the slave south. Some of the South's notable politicians hailed from Loudoun County; James Madison, James Monroe and a host of other notables. Madison and Monroe hid the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution in the county during the War of 1812. Monroe composed his famous doctrine at his plantation, Oak Hill, in Loudoun County (p. ix). According to Stevenson, this county was important because it was a key location and representative of most southern regions. It was typical of the antebellum south because of its slave society, free black population and evidence of diverse cultural, religious, and political, and social traits.

Stevenson enlightens and expands upon the importance and relevance of family life in the South from the period following the war for independence up to the Civil War. Her book is divided into two parts: one dealing with white society and its cultural values, mores and behaviors related to the family and the other dealing with their counterparts, free and enslaved black families. Stevenson points out that whites and blacks alike valued and protected their respective families, albeit in different ways. She argues that one's societal status was directly related to race, class, gender, and culture, and she argues that while family was of great significance

to all strata of Loudoun society, one's family could be threatened depending upon one's societal level. Whether black or white, Stevenson says one's race was the most influential factor governing southern communities and family life (p. xii). In fact, she successfully contrasts the effects of the community and its values, particularly in regard to family and gender roles, on the slaveholding, ruling white class and the less fortunate free blacks and slaves.

In part one of the book, white society is described including information about groups of people who chose to settle in Loudon County, their religious and ethnic backgrounds and the ideologies that united and separated them. Stevenson painstakingly studied the private papers of numbers of Loudoun families to uncover evidence that illustrates the gender roles, courtship, marriage, parenting and divorce habits of white residents. The personal stories Stevenson chose to recount were interesting but did not add anything new to already known accounts of gentle southern society. In the chapter on *Gender Convention and Courtship*, statements like, "Letters were especially important in long-distance relationships," (p. 57) or "For those couples who lived closer to one another, courting was easier to manage," (p.58) are not interesting or groundbreaking. When one continues to read through to the end of part one, it is certainly more entertaining because of the personal stories but much of the information is common knowledge and it adds nothing new to the study of white southern society. It does serve to provide a stark contrast to the realities faced by free and enslaved black families of Loudoun County.

Here the book takes a turn and Stevenson does break new ground in her study of the effects of community on the family dynamics in Loudoun County's black

society. She disproves the accepted notion that most black families were surprisingly stable, usually monogamous and headed by a male. Stevenson shows evidence that many slave families did not have a nuclear structure with a paternal figurehead. She believes that evidence does not exist to support the idea that slaves even aspired to this family model. She says that because of all the community forces acting upon slave and free black families, the southern black family had to be adaptable. She also points out that many families were matrifocal for a variety of reasons. Defining people of color was based upon matrilineal descent and slave children were more often able to stay with their mothers for at least the first portion of their lives. For these reasons, the author believes that the role of the mother was more influential in the southern black slave family.

Black families in Loudoun County, whether in bondage or free, had many community factors working against their stability and longevity, but free blacks were more likely to have a paternally based nuclear family. Stevenson points out that most free blacks aspired to this family arrangement and were more likely to be successful because they could legally marry and have legal rights over their offspring unlike slaves. In slave society many families were broken up because spouses may not reside or work in the same locations, families were often divided and sold separately. There are records indicating that children as young as five years old were sold apart from their mothers. Male and female ratios were not equal and out of necessity, some women did not mind sharing husbands. For all these reasons, the author points out that many black families often relied on non

family or extended family to fulfill the roles of guiding, nurturing and raising the younger generation.

Stevenson makes two bold conclusions about black family life in Loudoun County. The first is “...extended family membership and flexibility were at the foundations of most functional slave families, not monogamous marital relationships.” (p. 256) The second is slave husbands were not patriachs. Both of these claims will certainly lead to further investigations into the dynamics of slave families in the antebellum period. These claims are contrary to the accepted notion that slave families were nuclear, stable (in the sense of lifelong commitment even if separated) and patriarchal. Stevenson does bring new, but controversial evidence into the historian’s frame of reference.

Brenda Stevenson set out to prove that in the slave south, one’s family could be threatened depending upon one’s societal level. In fact, she successfully illustrates that numerous communal forces acted upon free and slave families that affected the ways in which their families were organized. She clearly ties the impact of these forces to the fact that blacks, being less powerful in society, could not control the circumstances that led to their familial variations. Whether black or white, Stevenson concludes, one’s race was the most influential factor governing southern communities and family life. This reader wonders if Loudoun County was really representative of the entire south. Its geographic location coupled with its diverse community may not offer the best representation of the slave south, especially the Deep South. Nonetheless, this book is enlightening and controversial and a must read for any student investigating slave society in Virginia.