

Book Review: Frey, Sylvia R. *Water from the Rock: Black Resistance in a Revolutionary Age* (Foreword by Manisha Sinha). Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2025. Xxi+379 pages. Paperback, \$24.95.

In *Water from the Rock: Black Resistance in a Revolutionary Age*, Frey, professor emerita of history at Tulane University, examines the origins of black resistance to slavery during the American Revolution, which created occasions for challenging a system that white southern slaveowners felt justified to perpetuate and maintain. Originally published in 1991, the book is reprinted as a paperback, with a new foreword by Manisha Sinha, professor of American history at the University of Connecticut. Sinha posits that “the reprinting of this book could not be timelier” (p.xi) coming on the eve of the semiquincentennial (250 years) of the American Revolution.

Frey’s well-researched book serves as a much-needed rebuttal to efforts to rewrite history. She argues convincingly about the connections between British strategies for defeating the South during the Revolutionary War and the hope of freedom those strategies gave to the slaves.

Frey discusses how southern whites’ fears of slave insurrections engendered by a growing slave population and the need to maintain a social order of whites’ superiority and blacks’ inferiority led to the creation of slave codes and slave laws that “sharply curtailed slave mobility, limited their personal liberties, and prescribed severe punishments for a large number of ‘criminal’ offenses” (p.15.) However, slaves resisted their dehumanization and created a separate black culture built on a sense of identity and an “awareness that their strength derived from kinship and family solidarity” (p.31.)

Frey also examines the role of Christianity in furthering the belief of slavery as ordained and approved by God. Although white slaveowners “feared the radicalizing effects of

Christianity on their slaves” (p.25) with Anglican preachers’ assurance that Christianity did not alter the social order, more slaveowners allowed slaves to be proselytized.

Frey asserts that by the time of the American Revolution, “the church, the courthouse, and the plantation house were the central institutions of patriarchal control” (p.26) resulting in a social order of dominance that left slaves in a brutal system that they wanted to escape. The slaves’ wishes for freedom from slavery mirrored the desire of the southern whites for independence from Britain, making the slaves susceptible to the hope of freedom by siding with the British in defeating southern whites and winning their freedom.

However, Frey convincingly argues that “neither British policy nor practice involved actual emancipation” (p.328.) However, the use of slaves by the British and the humanizing properties of Christianity “raised the most effective challenge to the ideological structures that sustained the slave system” (p.392.) A revolutionary spirit among blacks paved the way for civil rights movements and liberation movements across the black diaspora.

One of the strengths of this book is its range of African American history in the South. Utilizing evidence from birth lists, ration rolls, estate censuses, plantation business records and advertisements for runaway slaves, Frey gives compelling proof of family solidarity among slaves. She uses documentation from historical sources overlooked by earlier historians to present counterarguments that prove the “American Revolution was a war about slavery, if not a war over slavery” (p.45.)

A second strength is the extensive documentation on the history of the role of Christianity in maintaining the plantocracy in the South, particularly the impact of the abandonment of antislavery programs by white Methodists and Baptists missionaries who needed the favor of

white slaveowners to advance their proselytizing in the South. This is a great read for individuals wanting to understand how and why blacks came to embrace Christianity's liberatory aspects.

A third strength is Frey's use of British army sources and the narratives of former blacks, free and slave, who served with the British and were often manumitted at the end of the Revolutionary War. She presents a history of the use of blacks and Native American tribes by the British and Americans in the South, proving that the "American Revolution marked a turning point in the history of slavery and of the South" (p.326). Their strategy "signaled thousands of slaves to declare and claim their freedom" (p.326.) Their readiness to enter into an open rebellion against white slaveowners fueled a spirit of resistance that served as a precursor to the early abolition movement and the civil rights movements across the black diaspora.

A weakness is the sheer amount of data in the book, with each page containing lots of information. It is a book more for academics than for laymen. There are hundreds of footnotes, underscoring the vast amount of work that went into producing Frey's arguments. This book is needed today, as a reminder that freedom is never given; oppression and domination must be resisted by individuals who recognize their inherent humanity and the inalienable rights of liberty, freedom, and equality in a free society. I would recommend it for graduate courses in Race and Ethnic Relations, African American History, Afro-Caribbean History, and for anyone who studies the effects of law, religion, and culture on the creation of social identities and social movements.

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