

GEORGE MOSES HORTON: CRAFTING VIRTUAL FREEDOM THROUGH POETRY

TEACHER TOOL 2: AN OVERVIEW OF VIRTUAL FREEDOM

The terms “nominal slaves,” “virtually free slaves,” and “quasi-slaves” apply to legally enslaved people who, with the support of their owners, exercised many personal liberties compared with most enslaved people. Historian Loren Schweninger, in *Black Property Owners in the South, 1790-1915*, notes that some of these “virtually free” slaves “melted into the free Negro population, living and acting as free persons of color and acquiring real estate and other property.”¹ “Nominal slaves” typically lived in urban areas where they worked as artisans, fishermen, waiters, and domestic servants. Many also operated small businesses such as laundries, barbershops, and produce stalls. Some of them were able to rent, or even purchase, real estate and were able to retain much of their earnings. This is a significant departure from the realities of most enslaved people, who labored arduously to build the wealth of their owners with little but minimal sustenance in return.

“Nominal slaves” were required to give a percentage of the proceeds from their work to their owners, making the arrangement mutually beneficial. Many slaves who were “quasi-free” were able to direct their own day-to-day lives and could essentially move around in their communities as they pleased. However, as legally enslaved people, “nominal slaves” could never feel at ease. Their circumstances could change in an instant for a variety of reasons: their businesses could be taken, all of their savings instantly demanded, or they could be sold to a new owner in a different area or state.

Schweninger notes, “While the precise number of these masterless slaves remains a matter of speculation, contemporaries in some cities believed they represented a sizable population group, at least as large as the legally free Negro population.”² There are few historic records illuminating the experiences of “virtual slaves.” Schweninger explains that “as their livelihoods depended upon secrecy or deception or, at the very least, a tacit illegal agreement with a prominent white slaveholder, it is extremely difficult even to identify much less uncover information about such slaves.”³

¹ Loren Schweninger. *Black Property Owners in the South, 1790-1915*. (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1990), 34.

² *Ibid.*, 35.

³ *Ibid.*, 37.

SUGGESTED READINGS

Franklin, John Hope and Loren Schweninger. *In Search of the Promised Land: A Slave Family in the Old South*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2006.

Koger, Larry. "Black Masters: The Misunderstood Slaveowners." *Southern Quarterly*, Winter 2006.

Koger, Larry. *Black Slaveowners: Free Black Slave Masters in South Carolina, 1790-1860*. South Carolina: University of South Carolina Press, 1995.

Schweninger, Loren. *Black Property Owners in the South, 1790-1915*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1990.

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