



Black Slaveowners: Free Black Slave Masters in South Carolina, 1790-1860

Larry Koger

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Most Americans, both black and white, believe that slavery was a system exclusively maintained by whites to exploit blacks, but Larry Koger's authoritative study reveals the extent to which African Americans played a significant role as slave masters in the peculiar institution. By examining South Carolina's diverse population of African-American slaveowners, Koger demonstrates that free African Americans widely embraced slavery as a viable economic system and that they--like their white counterparts--exploited the labor of slaves on their farms and in their businesses.

Drawing on the federal census, wills, mortgage bills of sale, tax returns, and newspaper advertisements, Koger sheds light on the nature of African-American slaveholding, its complexity, and its rationales. He describes how some African-American masters earned their freedom but how many others--primarily mulattoes--were unfamiliar with slavery's dehumanization because they were born of free parents.

Koger reveals the caste system that existed within the antebellum African-American community--one in which prosperous mulattoes and African Americans of lighter skin sought to separate themselves from those held in bondage. Koger challenges the notion that most African-American slaveholders were benevolent owners who purchased the freedom of relatives. Instead he shows that while some did buy family members and other slaves for humanitarian reasons, African Americans in South Carolina acquired slaves primarily because they had little access to other sources of labor and because they viewed slaveowning as a means of elevating themselves above the masses.

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