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978-1-107-01337-7 - Freedom in a Slave Society: Stories from the Antebellum South

Johanna Nicol Shields

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## Freedom in a Slave Society *Stories from the Antebellum South*

Before the Civil War, most Southern white people were as strongly committed to freedom for their kind as to slavery for African Americans. This study views that tragic reality through the lens of eight authors – representatives of a South that seemed, to them, destined for greatness but was, we know, on the brink of destruction. Exceptionally able and ambitious, these men and women won repute among the educated middle classes in the Southwest, South, and the nation, even amid sectional tensions. Although they sometimes described liberty in the abstract, more often these authors discussed its practical significance: what it meant for people to make life's important choices freely and to be responsible for the results. They publically insisted that freedom caused progress, but hidden doubts clouded this optimistic vision. Ultimately, their association with the oppression of slavery dimmed their hopes for human improvement, and fear distorted their responses to the sectional crisis.

Johanna Nicol Shields holds a BA, MA, and PhD from the University of Alabama. She taught at the University of Alabama in Huntsville (UAH) between 1967 and 2007 and is the founding director of the UAH Humanities Center. She has won numerous awards for teaching and research, including UAH's Alumni Association Distinguished Faculty Award. Shields has held research awards from the American Association of University Women and the National Endowment for the Humanities. Her work has been published in the *Journal of the Early Republic*, the *Journal of Southern History*, *Southern Cultures*, *Alabama Review*, and *Mississippi Quarterly*. She is the author of *The Line of Duty: Maverick Congressmen and the Development of American Political Culture, 1836–1860* (1985), which won the Ralph Gabriel Prize awarded by the American Studies Association and Greenwood Press.

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# Freedom in a Slave Society

*Stories from the Antebellum South*

JOHANNA NICOL SHIELDS

*University of Alabama in Huntsville*



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*For Nick, Anna, and Katherine – the heart of my life*

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## Preface

The Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library in Springfield, Illinois, owns a copy of *The Flush Times of Alabama and Mississippi* in its collection of the president's memorabilia. Written by Joseph Baldwin, a southerner just a few years younger than Lincoln, this book chronicles the comic misadventures of lawyers, and Lincoln liked it very much. One summer's day, I turned the book's pages under the watchful eye of the library's curator, looking for notes in the great leader's hand. Sadly, there were none. But, halfway through the book, smudges from fingers marked the margins of about twenty pages, where a reader held the book open. I felt a thrill – almost a shiver – when I realized that my hands probably were touching Abraham Lincoln's fingerprints.<sup>1</sup>

This copy of *Flush Times* came to the Presidential Library by way of its later owner, Henry Whitney, who explained how Lincoln made those marks. A lawyer, Whitney rode circuit with Lincoln in Illinois, seeking clients. Many years later, Whitney recalled that Lincoln often sat in his hotel room with friends and read aloud from *Flush Times*, a “series of sketches” by a lawyer who also rode circuit in the West. The book was published in 1853, but Lincoln's copy was from the ninth printing, issued in 1854 in both New York and London. The fingerprints I saw plainly marked Lincoln's favorite tale, “The Earthquake Story.” According to Whitney, Lincoln read this hilarious story so many times that he loosened the pages where it lay. Lincoln himself told Baldwin, when they met during the Civil War, that *Flush Times* was “one of his classics,” which pleased the ambitious author a great deal.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> The curator, James M. Cornelius, was responsible for supervising anyone who handled Lincoln's book. Without his generous assistance, I would not have realized that the smudges I was seeing appeared at Lincoln's favorite story. The most useful recent version is *The Flush Times of Alabama and Mississippi: A Series of Sketches*, intro. by James Justus (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1987, c. 1853).

<sup>2</sup> Baldwin wrote his friend and son-in-law John Felton that “Abe and I grew very pleasant and spent an hour together in the White House very cosily.... He says he is always quoting me when he gets facetious (probably to restore gravity to his guests.” Baldwin to Felton, November 1, 1863, in Lester-Gray Collection of Documents filmed from material loaned by Robert M.

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Holding Lincoln's book was exciting but unsettling. As a historian, I knew that Baldwin subtly defended the South and slavery, while Lincoln defeated the South and ended slavery. Rather typically, Baldwin had inserted slavery into "The Earthquake Story," where a "servant" Jo uttered a key line before a group of lawyers. The African American called one lawyer "Mas" (for master) and he spoke in crude dialect.<sup>3</sup> Why would Lincoln, who hated slavery, find Baldwin's work so funny that he read it aloud many times?

That is an important question without an easy answer. Because people laugh quickly, without thinking, Lincoln may not have reflected about his amusement. Nonetheless, Baldwin and Lincoln shared many ideas. They were both inspired by American possibilities. Convinced that free men were making a great society, they saw western lawyers as crucial to the process. Lawyers, however, were not angels, and Baldwin constantly made fun of the way they aimed high and fell short. Because their aspirations were generally constructive, and they were persistent, the lawyers' foibles were amusing. Baldwin and Lincoln had abiding faith in the civilizing mission of the law, so they laughed at temporary setbacks.<sup>4</sup>

Although Baldwin meant to amuse, "The Earthquake Story" used wild exaggeration to teach an ethical lesson: how lawyers could correct one another without diminishing any man's freedom. The story was a brilliant fragment within a sketch called "Cave Burton, Esq., of Kentucky" in which circuit-riding lawyers played an instructive practical joke on the title character. Burton was a loudmouth, a "monstrous demagogue" who told juries long-winded stories that appealed to their emotions rather than the facts of law. He

Lester (film made by the New York Public Library in 1949). Baldwin went to the White House to get a pass to visit in Virginia, which he was denied. Whitney apparently got Lincoln's book from William Hearndon, and Whitney's son passed it on to the state of Illinois. Whitney's account is in his *Life on the Circuit with Lincoln* (Boston: Estes and Lauriat, 1892; reprint, Caldwell, ID: Caxton Printers, 1940), 185; he also writes that Baldwin was one of Lincoln's favorite authors; *ibid.*, 177. M. L. Houser and Esther Cowles Cushman, *Abraham Lincoln, Student: His Books* (Peoria, IL: Priv. Print. by E. J. Jacob, 1932), 24, note that the book was in the collection of the governor when they wrote and that the pages of Lincoln's favorite story showed its "hard usage."

<sup>3</sup> "The Earthquake Story" begins on page 162 of *Flush Times* and, rather than ending, fades into the larger story that frames it. His fingerprints indicate that Lincoln read to the end of the larger story, "Cave Burton, Esq., of Kentucky"; Jo speaks, 175.

<sup>4</sup> See Robert A. Ferguson, *Law and Letters in American Culture* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1984) for a discussion of how Lincoln, Baldwin, and others of their generation represented a Ciceronian model of the law in a changing era. Long before I saw Lincoln's copy of *Flush Times*, I was struck by the similarities between his legal experiences and those of Baldwin when reading David H. Donald's prize-winning biography *Lincoln* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1995). A more recent prize-winning study that links Lincoln to his southern heritage, but contrasts his ideas with those of slaveholding southerners, is Orville Vernon Burton, *The Age of Lincoln* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2007). An extended discussion that places Burton's claims in the context of southern intellectual history is Eric Arnesen, Bertram Wyatt-Brown, Stephen Berry, David Moltke-Hansen, and Vernon Burton, "Forum on *The Age of Lincoln*," *JHS* 9 (September 2009): 309–372.

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also had “animal appetites” and never got enough to eat or drink. While he and other lawyers were at a hotel one night, Burton’s friends ordered a feast: three barrels of fresh oysters, condiments, and whiskey. They told Burton the treat was being prepared in the kitchen, then they tricked him into telling an extravagant tale while they slipped, one at a time, from the room. During “The Earthquake Story,” they ate every last oyster. Baldwin entertained with a moral. Taking advantage of Burton’s gluttony and demagoguery, his friends taught him to attend to facts.<sup>5</sup>

In one simple line, Baldwin’s slave revealed what Burton’s friends were up to. When Burton realized that one of them was eating oysters, he rushed to the door and told Jo to “get mine ready this minute.... Be quick, Jo, old fel.” “Hat in hand, Jo said, ‘Why, Mas Cave, dey’s all gone dis hour past; de gem’men eat ebery one up.’” In a quick stroke, Baldwin put a black waiter where he belonged, making slavery seem natural. But Jo’s name signaled his significance, because Baldwin signed his letters “Jo,” an abbreviation for Joseph and an alternate spelling for his nickname, Joe. Jo told the truth, yet he served the purposes of free men. So, to answer my own question: Lincoln laughed at the antics of circuit-riding lawyers, and he probably did not pause when he spoke, in dialect, the line of a black slave.<sup>6</sup>

*Freedom in a Slave Society: Stories from the Antebellum South* treats eight white writers who, like Joe Baldwin, deliberately placed themselves between a changing region and a nation of readers. I explore pervasive tensions within their world. I want to answer questions like the ones that bothered me when I held Lincoln’s copy of *Flush Times*. How did these writers incorporate slavery into freedom so well as to satisfy readers around the country? What do their intellectual accomplishments, and their failures, say about the sectional cultures that produced the Civil War? To answer such questions, I examine six men and two women, each of whom lived at least a dozen years in Alabama between the 1830s and the Civil War. Historians call their rapidly growing region the Old Southwest. In order to emphasize these writers’ belief in their society’s great potential, I have chosen to call it the rising South. All of these women and men believed in liberty, especially their own, but slavery stunted their freedom to choose. Hoping to fathom the deep ethical dilemmas of a modernizing slave society, I study them and the stories they told.

Like Lincoln, each of these men and women was ambitious. Like him, they lived in towns, mingling with middle-class citizens. Five of the male writers were lawyers and journalists, each of whom held public office. The one planter also wrote for newspapers, and friends tried to make him Alabama’s governor. The two women, a teacher and a single person who lived with her parents, relied on writing because custom limited their public speaking. But print was the common medium through which all of these individuals exercised influence. Like Baldwin, they expressed themselves, entertained readers, offered

<sup>5</sup> “Cave Burton,” in *Flush Times*, 155.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 172.

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lessons, and, hopefully, made money. They wrote fiction, poetry, and history, publishing in the Southwest, the Southeast, or the North. Although unfamiliar in the twenty-first century, Caroline Hentz, Johnson Hooper, Augusta Evans, and Joseph Baldwin sold thousands of books in the nineteenth century. Albert Pickett, Alexander Meek, William Russell Smith, and Jeremiah Clemens were best known in the South, but they, too, were widely read.

In *Freedom in a Slave Society*, I argue that these writers expressed a variation on a familiar American theme of individual liberty. Like most middle-class people, they understood freedom to mean self-determination – the ability to make choices about their lives. Investing mostly their talents, they sought personal, professional, and political independence as other ambitious people around the country did. Along the way, they advocated middle-class values to improve their slave society, and they applied the same values in explaining the Southwest to outsiders. Their popularity suggests that many American readers found inequality an acceptable product of freedom, despite sectional differences about slavery. In the end, however, these authors exposed profound tensions between freedom and slavery, and those tensions had self-destructive consequences. Although their successes were impressive, these men and women also showed the ethical dilemmas of their class.

These eight authors described how the white people of the rising South built good lives. They laughed at their shortcomings or moralized about errant folk who should mend their ways. Only one author, the northern-born Hentz, wrote a long defense of slavery, and she knew its opposition. Time and again, the others extolled freedom's possibilities and minimized slavery, despite their commitment to it. Like Lincoln, they were influenced by a West that seemed to have a stunning future. Only by grasping their wholly American hope – and its powerful undertow of anxiety – can we know writers like Baldwin, comprehend why northerners like Lincoln read their books, and recognize the impulses that led them into war.

This book asks readers to take seriously the ideas of people who lived in pre-Civil War Alabama, where no one much expects to find worthwhile literature. For years, Alabama's auto license plates carried "Heart of Dixie," taking their cue from the old song "Dixie", a minstrel tune that Lincoln loved.<sup>7</sup> In truth, antebellum Alabama was the "land of cotton," but it held more than planters and their slaves. Increasingly, historians of the Old South study the middle classes and intellectuals and find evidence of modernity in the region. This book adds to that scholarship by integrating the social history of popular writers with their ideas, which were more like those of other Americans than Alabama's reputation suggests.<sup>8</sup>

<sup>7</sup> On the popularity of "Dixie" in the North and South, see Coleman Hutchison, "Whistling 'Dixie' for the Union (Nation, Anthem, Revision)," *ALH* 19 (Autumn 2007): 603–628, but it was David Moltke-Hansen who first alerted me to Lincoln's fondness for the song.

<sup>8</sup> The notion that southern writing was the product of the planter class has been closely related to historical interpretations that stress the hegemony of slaveholding planters. For a clear statement of this view, see the essay by Eugene D. Genovese and Elizabeth Fox-Genovese,

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## METHODS AND ORGANIZATION

In selecting writers for this book, I made judgments that readers should know. Because I wanted to examine people who reached a broad public, I selected men and women who published at least one book of poetry, fiction, or history – genres generally understood as literature – and I excluded authors who primarily wrote polemics or who principally published scientific or religious works. These standards left out interesting characters like the erudite educator F. A. P. Barnard, humorist John Gorman Barr, racial theorist Josiah Nott, and the influential Baptist cleric Basil Manly. But eight subjects seemed right for credible generalizations without sacrificing depth. Popular literature required authors to attempt coherence, for readers expected motives and action, character and conduct to be connected. Particularly in fiction and history, writers created human beings. Inevitably, authors transcribed more of their inner subjectivity than they knew. By the same token, they revealed more than they intended about their surroundings.

My decision to study popular authors had unintended consequences. Class was never a criterion, but it turned out that only one of these eight people was a planter, that none came from the lower class, and that all of them lived in towns. That all of them were white was unsurprising: there was almost no chance for a black person living in Alabama to produce a book. In 1833, not too long before Joe Baldwin migrated from the Shenandoah Valley, an enslaved man named James Williams was forced to leave his family in Virginia and move to Alabama, where he served as driver to more than a hundred of his absentee master's slaves. At one point, Williams lived not far from Baldwin, but they inhabited different social universes. The enslaved man was abused by a drunken overseer and made to beat his fellow slaves. In 1838, after Williams escaped, he narrated his experiences for the American Anti-Slavery Society in Boston. He could not write, but his editor copied "his manner, and in many instances his precise language." Williams's narrative underscores the unconscious omissions and deliberate erasures of southern white writers.<sup>9</sup> Stories like his found an audience, but an educated white woman, Harriet Beecher

"The Cultural History of Southern Slave Society: Reflections on the Work of Lewis P. Simpson," in J. Gerald Kennedy and Daniel Mark Fogel, eds., *American Letters and the Historical Consciousness: Essays in Honor of Lewis P. Simpson* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1987). The historian most responsible for disentangling the study of southern intellectual history from claims that the South was not modern is Michael O'Brien, most importantly, his *Conjectures of Order: Intellectual Life and the American South, 1810–1860*, 2 vols. (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004), but also the earlier statements in *Rethinking the South: Essays in Intellectual History* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1988). The most forceful assertion of the importance of the town-dwelling middle class is Jonathan Daniel Wells, *The Origins of the Southern Middle Class, 1800–1861* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004).

<sup>9</sup> *Narrative of James Williams, an American Slave, Who Was for Several Years a Driver on a Cotton Plantation in Alabama* (New York: Published by the American Anti-Slavery Society, 1838), xix; Electronic Edition, <http://docsouth.unc.edu/fpn/williams/williams.html>.

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*Preface*

Stowe, converted them into a best-seller. By studying popular authors, my selections reflected the market's bias.

I did not deliberately select writers for race, or class, or gender, but I did choose a geographical setting, for I was curious about the understudied intellectual life of the Southwest. That choice evolved. Originally intending to draw from several states, I modified the design when finding unexpectedly prolific authors from Alabama. Moreover, these eight represent other states, because early Alabama, like Illinois, was a crossroads. Hooper, Baldwin, and Hentz migrated as adults from North Carolina, Virginia, and Ohio, respectively; a New Englander until her marriage, Hentz also lived in North Carolina, Kentucky, Georgia, and Florida; born in South Carolina, Meek lived during the Civil War in Mississippi; born in Georgia, Evans lived there and in Texas until she was an adolescent. Clemens was the only native-born Alabamian among these writers, and only three died in the state. These writers illuminate a complex social reality.

Some practical considerations influenced my composition. To avoid a text too littered with unfamiliar people, I put scholars' names only in the notes. I quote writers at greater length than historians usually do, because, ultimately, writing was an art, and, without knowing the art, commentary hangs in thin air. Compared to, say, *Moby Dick* or *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, *Flush Times* is no longer a famous book. As a historian, I ground my interpretations of literary texts in writers' experiences more than I rely on theory (although the curious may find some theoretical issues in the notes).

This book traces how writers put abstract ideas to work, trying to pin down the slippery meanings they assigned to freedom. By mixing biography and history with literary analysis, I show the interaction of events and ideas. These writers interpreted individual motives and social conduct in an informal way. They meant to be accessible, which is why Lincoln was happy to read *Flush Times* aloud. Because they were talented, if not great, writers, they made their world come alive. In thousands of pages, they observed the short life of a rising South. I exploit their creativity while measuring their successes and their failures.

Eight authors do not appear alone in this book; they are surrounded by a large cast of town-dwelling southern white people. My purpose in discussing these others was to show how authors' ideas reflected experiences that were shared. Moreover, in order to make a reasonable claim that these eight writers represent other southerners in ways that transcend authorship, I want to show how much their experiences and ideas were rooted in social existence. So, to an unusual extent, writers' parents, spouses, children, cousins, friends, and even a few enemies appear as subjects in this book. They are not my primary concern, but they are more than minor figures in the complex social fabric of the rising South I portray.

*Freedom in a Slave Society* has an introductory chapter that introduces key ideas and summarizes important influences on the writers of the rising South. It sets the stage for the braided narrative that follows. Like all braided

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narratives, this one combines stories with analysis, but I treat eight subjects, each of whom, with family and friends, gets roughly equal attention in at least two, and more often three, different chapters. In each instance, I have tried to give a writer's experience and his or her work sufficient depth for a reader to retain a sense of the subject's individuality. Partly because this method runs the risk that the reader can't see the forest for the trees, the opening chapter focuses on the forest.

Part One considers how Alabama's writers understood middle-class ethical standards about self-determination and applied them to real and imaginary relations with community, family, and friends. Mentioning slavery mainly where they did, I focus on the social relations of white people and on writers' efforts to advance themselves. Chapter 2 introduces three writers as they launched their careers using talent as a social asset. Convinced that persuasion produced public action through voluntary commitments, they saw themselves leading a free people. Chapter 3 discusses four more writers, focusing on how families bred independence despite the inequalities within them. And Chapter 4 analyzes writers' friendships as evidence of their conviction that voluntary relations best connected free people.

Part Two considers writing as a form of public discourse about the past and future of a rising South. It treats the challenges of writing for a print medium where self-determination and slavery often clashed, rhetorically. Chapter 5 analyzes the competition among several authors to write histories reconciling freedom and slavery, and it assesses how the effort to attract northern and/or southern readers affected their writing. Chapter 6 analyzes three writers' portrayals of slavery as they faced a divided readership. Treating the dialogue between white and black characters, I unearth writers' anxieties about freedom and slavery.

Part Three shows the destructive results of these anxieties in the late antebellum political crisis and war. Chapter 7 considers self-determination and democracy in three writers' assessments of politics. Unspoken fears that slaveholders' desires for mastery might run amok increased these writers' sensitivity to antislavery politicians, but those fears also exaggerated their response to other southerners. They debated who was most dangerous: radical southern nationalists or conservative Unionists. Using writers who supported or opposed the Confederacy, Chapter 8 shows them reevaluating the possibilities for self-determination as events spiraled out of control during the Civil War. An Epilogue briefly suggests the postwar influence of the writers of the once rising South.

Writing was action that connected Alabama's authors to other people. Because these writers were respected in their communities – elected to office or honored with material and symbolic rewards – I argue from strong evidence that their town-dwelling neighbors accepted their ideas. I suspect, but can less conclusively demonstrate, that many other educated southerners – planters and prosperous farmers, and townspeople across the South – also admired them and shared their ideas. Certainly, many thousand sympathetic consumers

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*Preface*

bought their books. I began here by wondering what Lincoln thought when he read *Flush Times* aloud. In recent years, scholars have learned much about publishing, and they have learned something about books' circulation. But we may never know just where nineteenth-century books were bought and which ordinary people read them. After considering sales, reviews, and notices, I make careful claims about readers, aware that evidence is missing except in exceptional cases – like that of Abraham Lincoln.

The idea of a rising South did not entirely die when slavery did, but it was significantly changed, and these popular writers anticipated the terms of that transformation. As white Americans resumed the business of self-determination after the Civil War, economic issues displaced social reform, and the northern majority eventually abandoned the former slaves to a southern fate. Shaken by war, middle-class optimism about self-determination diminished when evolutionary theory raised questions about human nature. And, in the 1870s, industrial labor conflict and agrarian unrest began to disturb middle-class hopes for harmony among classes. Racism and fear of big government played a role in the retreat of northern reformers, but the logic of self-determination was also at play, for, given freedom, black people were supposed to take care of themselves. When white southerners called for a “New South” in the late nineteenth century, the ideas of Alabama's writers were reborn. Once again, southerners joined self-determination with inequality – this time in ways that northern Americans accepted.

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Johanna Nicol Shields

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several questions about Tuscaloosa that only he could have answered. Bertram Wyatt-Brown provided sympathetic criticism about earlier portions of this work. Ann Webb gave me the benefit of her scholarship on Alabama's planter families, usually sandwiched into conversations about our own families.

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## Abbreviations

ADAH	Alabama Department of Archives and History
AHR	<i>American Historical Review</i>
AL	<i>American Literature</i>
ALHist	<i>American Literary History</i>
AQ	<i>American Quarterly</i>
AR	<i>Alabama Review</i>
DBR	De Bow's Review
DUL	Duke University Library
HEH	Henry E. Huntington Library, San Marino, California
HSP	Historical Society of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia
JDBH	John De Berniere Hooper Papers
JER	<i>Journal of the Early Republic</i>
JHS	<i>Journal of the Historical Society</i>
JSH	<i>Journal of Southern History</i>
LC	Library of Congress
MDAH	Mississippi Department of Archives and History
MissQ	Mississippi Quarterly
NYHS	New York Historical Society
SLM	Southern Literary Messenger
SQR	Southern Quarterly Review
UA	University of Alabama
UNC	University of North Carolina (Chapel Hill)
USAHI	United States Army Military History Institute, Carlisle Barracks, Pennsylvania
UVA	University of Virginia