

Free State of Jones: Three cheers!

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Written and directed by Gary Ross; story by Leonard Hartman

“We stood firm to the Union when secession swept as an avalanche over the state. For this cause alone we have been treated as savages instead of freemen by the rebel authorities.”—Newton Knight, July 15, 1865

From 1863 to 1865, Newton Knight (1837-1922), a white, antislavery farmer in Jones County in southern Mississippi, led an insurrection against the Confederacy. Inspired by Knight’s life and struggle, *Free State of Jones*, written and directed by Gary Ross, is a fictional account of an enormously compelling, but little known chapter in American history.

Soon after the election of Abraham Lincoln in November 1860, the Southern slave states began to secede from the Union. South Carolina seceded on December 20, 1860, followed by Mississippi on January 9, 1861.

Ross’s *Free State of Jones* opens with a scene of a bloody battle in which Newton Knight, strongly played by Matthew McConaughey, is a medic with a Mississippi Confederate infantry unit. The sequence does not spare us from the horror and butchery of war.

Very quickly, we learn of Knight’s dissatisfactions, apparently brought to a head by the passage of the “Twenty Negro Law”—part of the Second Conscription Act—by the Confederate Congress in October 1862. That law exempted from military service one white male for every 20 slaves. It was passed in direct response to the Emancipation Proclamation first announced by Lincoln in September 1862. The Confederate authorities were fearful of a slave rebellion, especially with so many white males absent from home in the army. Newt explains he “is tired of helping them [the planters] fight for their damn cotton.”

Knight decides to abandon the Confederate army. His close friend Jasper Collins (Christopher Berry), a fellow deserter, militantly proclaims that the Twenty Negro Law “makes it a rich man’s war and a poor man’s fight.” This, of course, was a well-known adage popular with poor whites in the South.

In his historical guide to the film, Ross notes that “Jasper was more ‘book smart’ than Newt, and it was he who originally informed him of the Second Conscription Act and its clause exempting slaveowners from the draft... The Confederacy instituted the first wartime draft in US history, and poor boys were the ones being taken.”

Now a deserter, Newt is shocked by conditions facing those left behind in Mississippi during the war, mostly women and children suffering under the severe and corrupt tax demands of the Confederate Army. Their farms are being raided and pillaged of livestock, food and household goods, leaving them in danger of starvation.

These legal thefts galvanize Knight’s opposition to the Confederacy. It transforms him (and many others), in Ross’s words, “from a deserter who did not want to fight into a rebel who made war on the slavocracy.”

In the course of defending the property and belongings of a farmwoman and her three small daughters, Newt is chased and mauled by an attack dog. Seriously wounded and now a wanted man, he eventually finds his way into the swamps, where he joins a small group of runaway slaves. One of the latter, Moses (movingly performed by Mahershala Ali), is still locked in a barbaric slave collar—an iron ring around his neck with nearly foot-long spikes jutting from it.

One of most vicious pursuers of the escaped slaves and chief local confiscator of farmers’ property is Lieutenant Barbour (Bill Tangradi). He and his superior, the dogged Colonel Elias Hood (Thomas Francis Murphy), are intent on hunting down and hanging the deserters, who are beginning to damage the war effort through their seizure or destruction of Confederate supplies.

The defeat of Southern forces in July 1863 at Vicksburg, Mississippi at the hands of troops under Ulysses S. Grant swells the ranks of Confederate deserters.

Newt eventually leads a company of more than one hundred runaway slaves, ex-soldiers and other pro-Union dissidents. Their signal advantage is their ability to hide in the swamps, where conventional fighting methods are useless and the Southern cavalry cannot pursue them. They are further aided by sympathetic local women, such as Rachel (Gugu Mbatha-Raw), who was the former slave of Knight’s grandfather.

Thrown together by the tumultuous events, Rachel and Newt fall for one another. By that time, Knight and his wife Serena (Keri Russell) have separated. An atmosphere of genuine equality prevails between Rachel and Newt, the mixed-race couple. His antislavery creed is summed up by his observation that “You cannot own a child of God.” Rachel meanwhile proves adept at collecting food and information and passing through enemy lines.

After Newt and his company drive the Confederates out of Jones County (and other portions of southeastern Mississippi), the region becomes known as the “Free State of Jones.” Knight publicly proclaims a number of principles, including that “No man shall stay poor so that another man can get rich.” His forces continue to fight the Confederate troops without any substantial help from the Union army.

In April 1865, the Civil War ends and slavery is abolished. However, under the new president, Andrew Johnson, the old plantation owners are welcomed back and the plantation system is restored virtually intact. Freedmen (the ex-slaves) are required to work on a plantation and their children, including Moses’ son, are kidnapped from their families and forced to labor in the fields as “apprentices.” A new period of struggle looms.

Free State of Jones also features several scenes, inserted into the principal strand of the narrative, dramatizing the trial of Newt and Rachel’s great-grandson, Davis Knight, who in the late 1940s is charged with miscegenation (because he is at least one-eighth black) for marrying a white woman.

The film touches on a number of aspects of Knight’s later life that are beyond the scope of this review. But at least one should be mentioned: his efforts from 1871 to 1873 to organize an integrated school. When objections were raised to his own mixed-race children attending, he burned it to the ground.

This is an extraordinary story and, at its best, extraordinarily represented. Some of the most pressing issues in US history and present-day American life—social inequality, above all—emerge organically from the events depicted. And, therefore, as we will explain below, *Free State of Jones* has aroused the outrage of many critics and the reactionary advocates of racial politics. They have all been stung by this forceful

presentation of class as the essential foundation of modern society.

Ross should be congratulated for his honest and meticulously well-researched work of this little-known saga. Virtually all the deviations from the historical record have been done in the interest of condensing or making comprehensible the critical facts and developments.

Insofar as there are artistic weaknesses, they are bound up, in the first place, with the *objectively difficult* task of transforming dense, complex and titanic events into convincing dialogue and drama. There are moments when the needs of exposition protrude somewhat crudely. The politics, in other words, has not been entirely dissolved in the poetry.

Ross has clearly and consciously attempted to do and say something important here, propelled to one extent or another by the malignant social polarization in contemporary American life. However, the director's sincerity cannot by itself overcome all the problems lodged in his past, rather formulaic film work (*Pleasantville*, *Sea Biscuit*, *The Hunger Games*) and his own political history as a Democratic Party liberal (working on Ted Kennedy's 1980 bid for president and consulting on the campaigns of Michael Dukakis and Bill Clinton, in 1988 and 1992, respectively). The level of artistic and cinematic seriousness is not consistently at the highest and most penetrating.

Nonetheless, the viewer feels the unmistakable commitment of the cast and crew to the project and its content. McConaughey has the talent and skill to carry the weight of the movie. Ali as Moses has a powerful screen presence and Mbatha-Raw as Rachel is restrained and elegantly intense. Berry as Jasper is also noteworthy.

The nonfiction work, *The State of Jones*, by Sally Jenkins and John Stauffer, was actually inspired by Ross's screenplay and the research that had gone into it. Their book provides significant social and historical background to the events. The authors explain, in an understatement, that the "historiography of Southern Unionism is comparatively sparse."

Jenkins and Stauffer write that thanks to "King Cotton," the "slave trade constituted a larger piece of the American economy than even the railroads or manufacturing." Mississippi was the largest cotton-producing state. This accounted for the fact that the "most common division was between rich and poor... On the eve of the Civil War, Jones County was an island of poverty in a sea of cotton-and-slave based wealth." In fact, the county's population had the lowest percentage of slaves in Mississippi.

Knight, they remark, realized "that he had more in common with the slaves he had met in the swamps, who treated him better and showed him more humanity, than the Confederate authorities who claimed to be his countrymen."

Last week, the *New Orleans Times-Picayune* reprinted a fascinating March 20, 1921 interview with Newton Knight conducted one year before his death. Knight, 84 at the time, recounted how Mississippi's politicians had voted for secession but Jones County residents opposed it. "Then next thing we know they were conscripting us. The rebels passed a law conscripting everybody between 18 and 35. They just come around with a squad of soldiers 'n' took you."

Describing his unit's military feats, Knight continued, "There was a lot of skirmishin' that you couldn't properly call battles... But we had 16 sizable fights that I remember, and we lost 11 men. I never kept track of how many wounded. I used to treat their gunshot wounds myself. There were a number of them." This was obviously a man of immense principle, courage and leadership ability.

The struggles of the Knight company are not well known. In the South, this episode obviously cut across the reactionary, nostalgic rubbish about the "Lost Cause." Nothing terrified the post-Civil War elite in both North and South than the possible unification of poor whites and poor blacks.

The anti-aristocratic, democratic sentiments of Knight and his fighters were legendary. During the 1930s, B. R. Sumrall, a relative of one of the members of Knight's band, told a Works Progress Administration (WPA) interviewer that the Mississippi anti-secessionists feared that if the South

seceded, "England would take... advantage" of the dissension and the American people "would be again under the British yoke." Company members were required to repeat the phrase "I am of the Red, White and Blue" before entering camp.

Ruby Huff, another descendant of one of Knight's Confederate deserters, wrote an account for the WPA, in which she commented, wonderfully: "Sometimes this spirit of the South [i.e., herself] gets so unsouthy as to want to clap my hands and say three cheers for the most daring troop that ever tramped the Southern soil—the Deserters."

("Telling and Retelling the Legend of the 'Free State of Jones,'" Victoria E. Bynum, in *Guerrillas, Unionists, and Violence on the Confederate Home Front*, edited by Daniel E. Sutherland, 1999)

As noted above, *Free State of Jones* has troubled the critics and infuriated the foul fraternity of identity and race politicians. The central and entirely spurious argument is that Ross's film is merely another "white savior" narrative.

Charles Blow, op-ed columnist for the *New York Times*, asserts, for example, that Ross's film "emphasizes white heroism and centers on the ally instead of the enslaved." Another *Times* article cites the remark of Kellie Carter Jackson, an assistant professor of history at Hunter College, that Hollywood "has a hard time divesting white men from the center of the universe," and "If it's really about Knight being an ally, then shouldn't McConaughey be the supporting actor and not the lead?"

The conception that Knight and, by extension, the entire Northern Army were nothing but "allies" of the slaves is preposterous, and insulting. Newton Knight and his black comrades grasped what today's wretched upper-middle class racials cannot: that the slaves and the poor farmers had a common social interest in the revolutionary overthrow of the Confederacy and the smashing of its economic and political structure.

One of the most revealing comments comes from Erin Whitney at ScreenCrush. She laments, first of all, that *Free State of Jones* "tells its story with ignorance and colorblindness." Colorblindness is now an epithet for these elements! One almost cannot believe one's eyes as Whitney goes on to complain: "This is not a Civil War movie about race; it's one about class disputes and sympathizes with white people."

Yes, to its infinite credit, Ross's work is not centered on race, but rather "class disputes," and it sympathizes with all the suffering, black and white! Hurrah for that!

The fact that *Free State of Jones* disturbs and frightens these rotten elements is one of the most compelling arguments in its favor.



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