

“Ordinary people truly imbibed the principles of the American Revolution”

An interview with Victoria Bynum, historian and author of *The Free State of Jones*—Part 2

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This is the second part of a conversation with Victoria Bynum, the author of *The Free State of Jones: Mississippi's Longest Civil War* (2001), a work that inspired the recent Gary Ross film.

The book and film tell the story of the insurrection against the Confederacy led by Newton Knight, a white, antislavery farmer in Jones County in southern Mississippi from 1863 to 1865.

Part 1 was posted July 12.

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David Walsh: This is a two-part question. Your book, *The Free State of Jones*, does not begin in 1863, but discusses the processes that made the Knight Company possible, tracing them back in particular to events that took place in the Carolinas before the American Revolution. Could you speak a bit about the influence of the Regulator Movement [a protest movement in the Carolinas in the 1760s against corrupt government], and perhaps explain what it was?

Related to that, you write: “But before the nineteenth century—and especially before slavery became firmly entrenched in the Carolina and Georgia back-countries—racial identity was more fluid, even negotiable in some cases.” And later, “the bifurcation of racial identity into discrete categories of black and white was a long and ultimately illusory process.”

Victoria Bynum: That statement points to the intersection of race and class among the colonial underclass before the dramatic rise and consolidation of slavery following the American Revolution. When I first began my doctoral research for “Unruly Women” in North Carolina records, I was struck by the number of interracial marriages that went unnoticed, and even unnoted insofar as race, in colonial records.

More and more, later on, racial differences were noted in court records of property and marriage, while laws specifically forbidding the mobility of free people of color and interaction between whites and people of color (even in “bawdy houses”) were proscribed by law during the 1820s and especially the 1830s. We are seeing during those years the rigid institutionalization of both slavery and identification of one’s civil rights, or lack thereof, along lines of race. And yet, race-mixing continued, requiring that white people with any known African ancestry be defined as “black” in order to protect the fiction that slavery was based exclusively on race.

The Regulator Movement, which occurred in the 1760s, was an uprising of white men of property who felt their economic independence slipping away. They especially resented corrupt “courthouse rings” of lawyers, planters and merchants, representative of North Carolina’s emergent economic elite.

This was an early stage of capitalistic development that threatened

propertied farmers and led to an uprising against the corruption associated with county government. What was so interesting to me, as I did my research, was just how many of the Jones County fighters against the Confederacy turned out to be descendants of North Carolina’s Regulators.

A direct link between the neighboring South Carolina Regulator Movement and “fluid” racial identity appears in the person of a light-skinned, mixed-race individual named Gideon Gibson. Gibson was both a slaveholder and a Regulator. Because of his Regulator activities, he was accorded a level of respect usually reserved in white society for white men. As racial lines hardened, many descendants of families like the Gibsons were forced to move west in order to remain “white.”

There appears always to have been a small class of free people of color in the American colonies. At first, most laborers were white indentured servants. But by 1680, Africans were being brought over mostly as slaves. There’s a period of about 60 years during which black slavery replaced (mostly white) indentured servitude.

By 1680, it had become more profitable to purchase slaves than to bring over indentured servants. Life spans were increasing by mid-century, so if you bought a slave, he or she was likelier to live a full life, and you were likely to get a return on your investment. In an earlier period, indentured servants were lucky if they lived through the terms of their indenturement. Why bother then to buy a slave? You just brought over an indentured servant, white or black, he or she died, you collected his or her “freedom dues” [the payment an indentured servant received at the end of his or her term]. Then you brought over more servants. This brutal system of labor led, of course, to the more brutal system of chattel slavery.

Joanne Laurier: Can you speak about the influence of the American Revolution and the War of 1812 on the Jones County insurrectionists?

Victoria Bynum: On the basis of extensive research, I came to the conclusion that the American Revolution and the War of 1812 were important “nationalizing” events that truly impacted the consciousness and ideological orientation of many of the ancestors of the Jones County Unionists.

Some of the most critical bodies of records in this regard are the territorial records of 1812-1815 for Mississippi and Alabama. The surnames of core members of the Knight band kept coming up, as did the names of some of the most prominent supporters of the Confederacy as well.

As Jones County’s ancestors migrated across the southwestern frontier, their names appear over and over on frontier petitions sent back east to the federal government. In proclaiming their need for federal assistance, many of these petitions quoted directly from the Declaration of Independence in citing the principles of representative government in their demands.

The petitions' signers called on the federal government to abide by its contract with the people. And *they* were the people. They wanted counties created, they wanted judges sent out so that they could have an adequate court system, they wanted troops sent to help them fight Indians. As Jeffersonian farmers, they believed they had superior claims to the land. At the same time, some petitions describe US soldiers as being worse than the Indians. Such complaints presage later complaints about the Confederacy, with frequent charges that US soldiers were pillaging their settlements.

In these petitions are clear indications that early frontier common people developed anti-authoritarian attitudes, or perhaps more accurately, a mistrust of authority, based on their experiences moving west. For their part, government authorities frequently referred to the common folk of the frontier with undisguised contempt.

Reading these records, it struck me that ordinary people truly imbibed the principles of the American Revolution. These were not just frontier followers or "rabble"—many of their families would become important figures in Jones County long before the Civil War. They believed in a nation in which their lives would (or should) be made better by reproducing "civilization" through county governments on the frontier. They were imbued with Jeffersonian agrarian ideals that insisted on the "virtues" of small producers; they saw themselves as expanding the nation as well as their own prosperity.

Fifty years later, it would not be a great leap for the children of these veterans of the American Revolution and the War of 1812 to view the Confederacy as a corrupt, illegitimate government, one that threatened to destroy the nation through secession.

Despite excellent academic studies of the Southern yeomanry, popular culture often conflates small landowners who owned no slaves with impoverished "poor white trash." In the 19th century, white poverty was dismissed as the result of defective genes, the class structure of Southern society largely ignored. This is still true today. And yet, as historians have tirelessly pointed out, propertied yeoman farmers vastly outnumbered both slaveholders and propertyless poor whites.

JL: You explode the myth of Knight as a mere "hyper-secessionist" and demonstrate that he was a pro-Union fighter. He also seems to have been genuinely color-blind, in spite of the super-charged times.

VB: Newt Knight was very unusual in his social behavior; he openly lived among his mixed-race family members for the rest of his life.

In relation to the myth of Knight Band members being "hyper-secessionists" rather than Unionists, I found much the same stereotype presented in literature surrounding Warren J. Collins, the brother of Jasper Collins, who led a similar revolt in Texas against the Confederacy.

Such literature condescendingly presents Unionists as mere "good old boys" who were so rebellious that they could not even obey the authority of those leaders to whom they should have deferred. As a result, Southern Unionists are reduced to little more than poor white boys "on a tear." It fulfills the old stereotype that Southern white boys just like to fight, that they're "touchy" about authority. You can't say anything to them, they're always ready to put their fists up, or pull out a gun.

In my work, I have tried to expose the good-old-boy trope for what it is—an effort to paint backcountry Southern Unionists as non-ideological simple folk who didn't want to fight for either side, and just wanted to be left alone. There's a certain amount of truth to that: they did want to be left alone, but it wasn't true that they didn't support either side. They took a clear stand for the federal government and the Union.

The *Free State of Jones* represents one of many popular movements against the Confederacy that occurred throughout the South. Take the role of women, for example. There were so many more ways that women resisted Confederate forces than by picking up guns. I love the scene in the movie, *Free State of Jones*, where Newt teaches three little girls how to shoot a gun. But women also poisoned bloodhounds with red pepper

and broken glass. They were more likely to pick up a fence rail and knock a Confederate soldier over the head than to have a gun handy. They met deserter hunters at their own front doors to convince them their hidden men were nowhere around. The history of these inner civil wars is full of rich details.

DW: You write in *The Free State of Jones* that the Collins family, so prominent in the Jones County events, "personally disapproved of slavery but did not believe that the federal government could constitutionally force its end. By the same token, they did not believe that the election of Abraham Lincoln provided constitutional grounds for secession."

As far as can be determined, what were the social views of the most radical members of the Knight group? Toward slavery, toward abolition, toward equality of the races?

VB: That's a very good question. Here's the problem. Jones County elected a "cooperationist" delegate, John H. Powell, to the Mississippi state convention in January 1861. As a cooperationist, Powell was against seceding from the Union simply because Abraham Lincoln had been elected. The cooperationists wanted to "cooperate" further with the North, perhaps effect a new compromise over slavery.

The pro-secessionist forces, however, believed that Lincoln was no better than the abolitionists, that he was a secret abolitionist linked to John Brown. They wanted to secede and, obviously, they won the day in Mississippi and throughout most of the South.

But we really don't know for certain what the men who voted for Powell thought. If Jasper Collins believed that the US Constitution did not allow the federal government under Lincoln unilaterally to abolish slavery, he was in line with Lincoln, who did not believe that Congress had the constitutional right to abolish slavery either. Lincoln was no abolitionist then, but he did believe that Congress could limit the expansion of slavery into the territories. Containment of slavery was Lincoln's answer.

Pro-secession slaveholders knew as well as Lincoln did that containment of slavery spelled doom for the institution. The North would gain greater power in Congress with western free states. Eventually, slaveholders would have nowhere to go with an expanding population of slaves, nor would they have access to fresh lands. It's certainly possible that Jones County's Unionists knew this, too—and welcomed it as an end to slavery.

I think it's safe to say that core Unionists in Jones County disliked—maybe even hated—slavery. Though I've seen no evidence they were abolitionists, the fact that they did not own slaves supports their decision to oppose secession and to fight against the Confederacy.

Incidentally, in 1892, Newt Knight made an interesting statement during a casual interview with a reporter. Asked about his Civil War exploits, in hindsight Newt expressed the wish that the nonslaveholders had risen up and killed the slaveholders rather than being "tricked" into fighting their war for them.

DW: Did the Unionists in Jones County *not* own slaves simply for economic reasons, or were there also ideological, political sentiments involved?

VB: That is the big question, one that I've never quit asking. I always turn to the Collins family for evidence because its members so consistently resisted owning slaves, and because they all supported the Union. It appears that their resentment of slavery was based on a self-conscious identification of ideological class interests.

I certainly don't see the Unionism of the core Knight Company members as a knee-jerk reaction to economic devastation. These individuals didn't simply turn against the war and the Confederacy out of concern for their families; they opposed secession from the beginning.

JL: Your research has revealed the more or less direct, personal connection between the Knight Company and the Collins group in Texas and the birth of the Populist and Socialist parties in the region. Could you please speak about this?

VB: That connection was a fascinating and surprising aspect of my research. I learned from an independent researcher that Jasper Collins and his son founded the one and only Populist newspaper in Jones County, the *Ellisville Patriot*.

Through newspaper research, I discovered that Jasper, his son and a nephew became delegates to the 1895 People's Party [Populist] convention. I've never found a reference to Jasper Collins making the transition from the People's Party to the Socialist Party, but several of his younger kinfolk did. In 1915, shortly after Jasper's death, several of his relatives ran for local offices in Jones County on a Socialist ticket.

Now, move over to Texas, and you have Jasper Collins's brother, Warren J. Collins, the Civil War Unionist who headed his own deserter band in the "Big Thicket" of East Texas. Warren ran as a Socialist for office in 1910 and 1912. He was an outgoing and outspoken socialist who enthusiastically supported Eugene V. Debs.

I suspect that Warren Collins traveled the same Populist route to Socialism in Texas as did his Jones County kinfolk in Mississippi. I've learned that some of my own Bynum relatives—those who were Unionists and who intermarried with the Collinses—also became Populists and Socialists.

I believe it's probable that Newt Knight would also have joined the Populist and Socialist political movements after his participation in Radical Reconstruction if not for the notoriety of his interracial family. The defeat of Reconstruction and the victory of white supremacy derailed Newt's chances of winning office and cut short his political career.

All in all, I'm grateful that Gary Ross and Hollywood appreciated the historical and political relevance of this story, for we've suffered the effects of "Lost Cause" history for far too long. Today more than ever we need history grounded in deep research and not in the political rhetoric of racialists from either the 19th or the 21st century.

Concluded



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