

How slavery helped forge a democracy

Book explores plantation economy and its role in uniting the states

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By CHARLES EALY / The Dallas Morning News

BLACK HISTORY MONTH

Slave Nation is not your typical history of the American Revolution. Rather than revel in the glorious outburst of liberty that is so often stressed to schoolchildren, civil rights lawyers Alfred and Ruth Blumrosen work to show that the preservation of plantation slavery played just as important a role.

After all, "Give liberty to us white people or give us death" isn't quite a clarion call.

And for some historians, such an approach to the events surrounding 1776 will be anathema. But the Blumrosens document how an English court decision in 1772 sent shock waves through the Southern colonies and ignited what had been only a smoldering desire for freedom. It helped drive Virginia, the Carolinas and Georgia to join their Northern brethren in declaring independence.

Specifically, the Blumrosens cite the English case of the American slave James Somerset, who sued his owner, Charles Stewart, during a visit to London and won. The case turned on whether the owner had the right to force Mr. Somerset back to America, where Mr. Stewart planned to sell him. The case has been widely hailed by some historians as the beginning of the end of slavery in England and a key point in the rise of the anti-slavery movement there.

In fact, it's the focus of Steven M. Wise's new book, *Though the Heavens May Fall: The Landmark Trail That Led to the End of Human Slavery*, which is also being released this month. So the Blumrosens aren't alone in emphasizing the case, even though other historians have downplayed its importance.

But the Blumrosens are more interested in the case's reverberations in the American South, which feared that British legal developments would lead to the end of slavery here and the ruination of the South's plantation economy. This was reason enough, the authors argue, to spur Southern slaveholders to join the more rebellious Northern colonies, specifically Massachusetts, in what was at first primarily a tax revolution.

The Blumrosens analyze the role that the slavery question played in the writing of the Declaration of Independence and contend that there would have been no revolution to create one nation if such Massachusetts leaders as John Adams had not accepted the Southern position on slavery.

They also look at the drafting of the Northwest Ordinance, which provided that new American territories north of the Ohio River would be slave-free zones. This meant that the new states of Ohio, Indiana and Illinois would be in the no-slave zone, a crucial development that later helped the North beat the South in the Civil War almost a century later.

With such a focus on the blight of slavery, it would be easy to overlook the positive developments in early American history, and the Blumrosens are clearly aware of the dangers. They acknowledge that the Founding Fathers settled "many principles in their day in ways which we have good cause to applaud. They freed the world from the domination of monarchy, struggled toward a notion of democracy which is still unfolding, embraced principles of intellectual, political, and religious liberty" and helped secure the nation's future by giving new states equal footing.

But, as the Blumrosens remind us, the Founding Fathers did all this "on the backs of generations of slaves."

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Slave Nation

How Slavery United the Colonies & Sparked the American Revolution

Alfred W. and Ruth G. Blumrosen

(Sourcebooks, \$24.95)