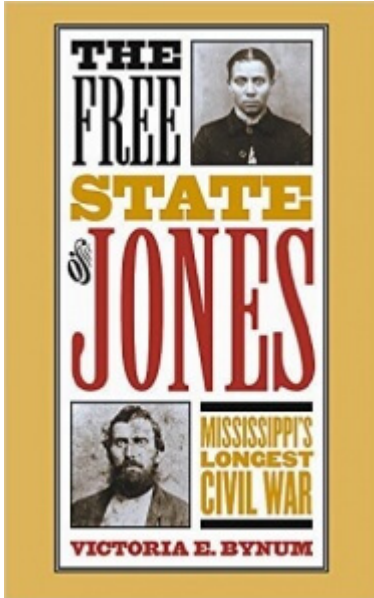




The Real Rebels: A Review of Free State of Jones with Reflections on Lost Causes

Posted on July 12, 2016 by Mark Lause

I can feel a certain sympathy for people who get hoodwinked into fighting for a Lost Cause that could never be worthy of the blood and treasure spent on its behalf. After all, as a child of the Cold War, my own closest brush with toting a gun to war came during Vietnam. In that conflict, the government, both political parties, the military, the media, the universities, the corporations, and the entire power structure insisted that the triumph of a Vietnamese effort to control of their own country would start toppling dominoes that would end in Anytown, U.S.A. By the end, most Americans actually doubted this. In hindsight, there's no real issue as to whether the power structure of the people were correct, though some feel obligated to pretend otherwise.



Free State of Jones, by
Victoria Bynum

Responses to the *Free State of Jones* by Gary Ross, and starring Matthew McConaughey, Gugu Mbatha-Raw, and Mahershala Ali demonstrate that such denials of experience can last a long time. The movie offers a fictionalized version of the revolt of poor Southerners against the Confederacy in Jones County, Mississippi. Newton Knight worked on medical duties at the front until his disgust with the war inspired his desertion and return home. “Captain” Knight held that title for his role as the leader of guerilla forces that successfully made parts of southern Mississippi a no-go zone for Confederate tax gatherers and conscript officers. It is based on Victoria E. Bynum’s superb historical account *The Free State of Jones: Mississippi’s Longest Civil War* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2002), and aims to be much more truthful than Hollywood’s first attempt at the subject in 1948, *Tap Roots*.

Free State of Jones directly confronts the issues of class and race that *Tap Roots* downplayed or avoided. This fact, in part, explains the mixed reviews.

A movie is not a documentary, of course. The page dedicated to *Free State of Jones* at “[History vs. Hollywood](#)” provides a useful corrective, and I would urge everybody who liked the movie to read Bynum’s book.

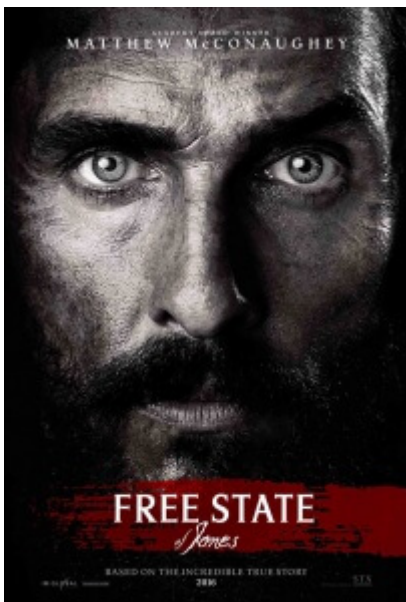
The set battle scenes (including civilians employing a battery against trained troops) provide an emotionally gratifying and crowd-pleasing symbol of the triumph of enthusiastic victory over tyranny. In reality, the success of the revolt in Jones reflected the weakness of the

Confederate authorities as much as the bravery and determination of those rebelling against them. Too, the love story between Knight and the slave Rachel or the depicted fraternization among black and white victims of the Confederacy is, of necessity, a matter of guesswork, but its presentation in the film rings true.

What the critics get wrong

Charles M. Blow's widely touted view in the *New York Times* essentially dismisses the film as another entry to the "white savior" genre. However, the movie clearly depicts African Americans as saviors of Newt Knight. Their role is not that of bit players but as vital characters that move the story forward. As was true across the South, Confederate deserters heading into the hills or swamps found clusters of runaway slaves already present and would scarcely have done as well as they did without black assistance.

In the movie, Newt Knight nudges these deserters to reconsider their racial assumptions, but what really forces the point is their comradeship with African Americans in their status and active resistance. When Newt decides to address the question publicly among his band, he chooses not to do so himself, but questions his black comrade, Moses Washington, a composite of figures which surely did participate in the Jones County revolt.



Poster for *Free State of Jones* (2016)

In reality, of course, while the scholarly rediscovery of "whiteness" as a cultural function has undeniable merits, we need to emphasize that the invention of the white race

represented a top-down process, imposed by law. One of the first original capital crimes promulgated in colonial Virginia threatened English settlers with death should they run away to live with the Indians. A few decades later, the same authorities applied “Black Codes,” mandating the different treatment of African and European subjects. There were good reasons for this. Neither king and country or Jesus or race could keep English settlers eager to live more than a short while from lighting out for the nearest Indian town. Not only has evidence of interracial mingling before the “Black Codes” survived, but, had it not been widespread enough to make the owners seem a bit less secure, they would have probably not bothered making it illegal.

American history is not just a record of what took place in the lines of white-dominated settlement. It’s not just the European colonies or the United States. From the onset, native peoples who avoided extermination or removal took to the hills or retreated into the marshes and swamps, forming maroons that also came to shelter runaway slaves and self-exiled whites discontented with their marginalization in the U.S. This had been going on for years in the Deep South, most dramatically in Florida, but certainly reflecting practices elsewhere along the Atlantic seaboard and the Gulf of Mexico. Seeing the history of race in the Americas as something strictly institutional and two-dimensional ignores the reality of such alternatives.

But the strongest criticism of *Free State of Jones* comes from those defending a comforting “Lost Cause” mythology for Southern whites. These mythologies grew in the wake of the war, creatures of the Democratic Party acting on behalf of the “Redeemer” Bourbon dynasties that returned to power after the demise of Reconstruction. It ignored or misrepresented the entire question of slavery in favor of a fanciful slogan “states’ rights” against the feared tyrannies of a central government.

“States’ rights” doesn’t bear up to serious thought either. In its “original intent,” the natural rights theory vests human beings with rights, while human political institutions are regarded as tools. The government, the courts, the military—none of these have any more “rights” than a screwdriver. More practically, over the decades when the Southern political machines dominated the country, one of its central concerns had been imposing a Federal Fugitive Slave Law on Northern states that had long decided against slavery. Even today, those railing against Big Government are actually objecting to Federal responsibility in one area, while they will whine endlessly about the weakness of that government on other matters. It’s a way to avoid addressing the particulars and policies.

In the end, the “Lost Cause” came to center on an almost religious adulation for the heroism of the Confederate soldiery and their political leaders—the very people restoring their

power in the wake of Reconstruction. Of course, those gray-haired elder statesmen resuming their authority across the South in the 1870s and 1880s had initiated a war that cost nearly a million Americans in an effort to destroy the United States order to save that oh-so-lucrative institution of enslaved labor. So the bronze statues would have to wait a bit until there were fewer one-legged veterans hobbling about.

So the iconization of the Southern volunteer becomes the oldest and most reliable cornerstone of “the Lost Cause,” an essential dimension of popular interest in the Civil War. It must, of necessity, owe less to history—the effort to understand the past—so much as “heritage”—the production of marketable nostalgia for things like Southern identity and martial “glory.” Not surprising then, the handful of people with whom I sat in a darkened theatre to see *Free State of Jones* provided a vast contrast with the audiences that packed into *Gettysburg*, including rows of uniformed reenactors.

The myth of the Southern volunteer

Nothing entirely explodes the myth of the Southern volunteer as what happened in places like Jones County.

The “Lost Cause” folks have explicitly denounced *Free State of Jones*. To state the obvious, when the arbiter of “real history” becomes the comfort of heritage, we are surely in trouble. But this is really a matter of witnessing for the, like denouncing global warming or evolution or anything that makes the denouncer uncomfortable.

The brutal fact is that secessionists didn’t care a good damn for any Southerners not in the elite. Only four of the thirteen Confederate states even had the fig leaf of an election. Yes, thirteen states—look at the flag. Given the secessionist concept of sovereignty, what they advocated had nothing to do with the people or any modern idea of self-determination. As far as the government in Richmond was concerned, Missouri and Kentucky constituted Confederate states. When their armies passed through, the confiscated farm produce and property as taxes and kidnapped unarmed white civilians as conscripts. This concept of sovereignty did not rest at all with the people and did not grow from any sense of the will of the people. And this was really no more outrageous in Missouri as in the western part of Virginia, where the state government had seceded despite the unwillingness of the people. Where the authorities did permit a referendum on secession, it came only after the political machines had made the decision or after the war was underway.

Secessionists justified their action based on alleged violations of their “rights” by a Lincoln administration that had not even taken power when the process began. So we have

Gettysburg giving voice to a Confederate in the movie's tableaux of Winslow Homer's "Prisoners from the Front." The Federals clearly have some trouble with his accent when the man insists that they fought to protect their "rats," but that film does not explore the concept or its implications, while *Free State of Jones* makes it central.

Every state of the Confederacy contributed actual volunteers—white as well as black—to the specific Union forces. If one sees mention of the Seventh Virginia, the question has to be asked whether we mean the regiment in the Union Army or the Confederate Army. The Confederacy never had the benefit of a Seventh Ohio and (excluding Southerners temporarily residing in the state) probably not really a seventh Ohioan. But the numbers in specifically designated Southern regiments in blue grossly understates the contribution of Southern arms to the defeat of the Confederacy, because many joined units identified with other states.

Early on, with politicians, press and pulpit beating the drum for war, many Southern whites did volunteer, but the unexpectedly massive bloodshed of the battlefields dampened enthusiasm by the Spring of 1862, when the Confederacy turned to conscription to fill its ranks. (The Union followed in 1863, but relatively far fewer draftees made it to the front in the Federal armies.) As part of that, "the twenty Negro rule" exempted those with enough slaves or enough responsibility for maintaining the institution from having to bear arms for it. What this made the conflict recalls the title of David Williams' 1999 study, *Rich Man's War: Class, Caste, and Confederate Defeat in the Lower Chattahoochee Valley* (University of Georgia Press, 1999). Scholars have been revisiting how we need to think about deserters from a cause not worth the fight.

Too, that cause looked increasingly lost as the war unfolded. If a volunteer went to war to protect their home and firesides, what was to be their course when Union arms prevailed and occupied their homes and firesides—usually with nothing like the dire consequences predicted? Tens of thousands from Missouri, Kentucky, western Virginia, Tennessee, southern Louisiana, the Atlantic coast and elsewhere simply began to fade away. By 1864, an entire company of Federal militia in Missouri would be known as "the Reb company" because they had started the war on the other side.

The example of Jones County goes much farther. In the movie, we meet Newt Knight on the battlefield of Corinth, Mississippi in a setting that looks more like a World War I, with men in trenches preparing to go over the top. New arrivals from home—particularly Newt's drafted nephew—carry stories of the hardships imposed on the people by the military authorities. Increasingly, the men in gray drifted home.

We're really not talking about exceptions so much as the rule.

Consider this. Soldier demographics for the Confederate Army are not available due to incomplete and destroyed enlistment records, but the Federal authorities kept track of the big numbers that surrendered in April and May, 1865. These amounted to 25,000 on April 9 around Appomattox Court House, around 30,000 on April 26 at Durham Station, North Carolina, 10,000 on May 5 at Citronelle, Alabama, and an allegedly 43,000 on May 26 at Shreveport, Louisiana. Larger numbers existed only on paper. If the Confederacy actually had the tens of thousands men in Georgia and Florida, Sherman would have probably had a much tougher time and the thousands claimed on the Red River actually amounted to a few hundred or less, eventually turning themselves in on June 23. So that accounts for about 110,000 of enlistment numbers that ran as high as 1,227,890.

So where were the rest?

Some 258,000 Confederates deaths managed to get recorded, along with a bit over 194,000 wounded, though this figure isn't important to us in this because they weren't necessarily taken out of the war. Certainly, a lot of that 1.2 million figure reflect multiple enlistments—someone joining more than one unit in the course of the war—but the numbers of supplemental militia and home guard—or of those conscripted by an army on its way to battle—are hazy if not nearly invisible.

That leaves the largest single component of the Confederate military missing. It leads us to wonder whether most of the participants in those strange later Confederate Memorial Day parades were men who had shown more sense than Jeff Davis, Robert E. Lee and the lot of their "betters." Certainly, the Southern counties sporting what was once almost a mandatory statue of the local Southern volunteer in "the war" may have actually many more draftees than volunteers—or even more volunteers for the Union than the Confederacy.

Usually, they went into hiding near their homes, but they could turn up where not expected. As a small Federal force that had taken Fort Smith advanced on the Confederate rear guard, hundreds of men, still wearing Confederate uniforms and insignia emerged from the woods and took up positions extending the Union line. The more events brought reversals in the field, the more it emboldened such deserters.

In Jones County, they organized, sought to establish contacts with the Federal armies and requested cooperation. *Free State of Jones* does not present an unwarranted celebration of the Union either. The Federal planners left Southern bands like Knight's high and dry, partly out of strategic considerations but also because they politically preferred to deal with

the old planter class rather than demanding newcomers

The Betrayal of Southern Insurgents

About an hour and forty minutes into the movie, it starkly presents the Federal government's absolute betrayal of Southern insurgents against the Confederacy Reconstruction, leaving about forty minutes for a noble effort to present the Reconstruction and its failures. Unfortunately, the movie's unwillingness to slather the audience in comforting lies about the triumph of virtue, it presents the audience with another half an hour of painful truth about the fate of a generation that had sacrificed so much and had hoped to leave a much better legacy to us.

This could only be the most problematic part of the movie, because Reconstruction unfolded unevenly over the uneven social and political terrain of the defeated Confederacy. It became a remarkably top-down bureaucratic process imposed by Washington to create state governments with which it could function. Serious students of the period know that the role of the people in this entire process is usually underplayed if not essentially ignored. So they will enjoy scene of election day in Jones County where the mostly black Union League marches through their Mississippi community singing "John Brown's Body."

To the surprise of the participants, a few white ex-Confederates joined them, including a minor character named Jim. He entered the story before Corinth, where he prattles madly about amidst the slaughter about Southern boys "dying with honor." His quite evolution in the background of the movie reflects the way that experience provides hope for those who can engage in the most lunkheaded talk at one point. In another respect, though, Jim's sense of honor proves so much more real than that whatever scrap of metal the Democrats might have raised in front of the country courthouse.

The Union League touches on what could be one of the unifying themes in Southern—and national—history in the face of civil war. These organizations began among secret associations of Southern white Unionists. Driven into exile, they formed public leagues in Northern communities. Some of these eventually became elite gentlemen's club. Most naturally won those of their countrymen more eager to turn the war into a full revolution, so they became part of a broad base supportive of Radical Republicanism. The Federal armies carried these organizations back into the South, where they took root among the freed people, becoming mass organizations with real strength after the war.

Painfully, though, the votes of the Jones County Union League—registered and cast at such risk—are mostly discarded. The local Democratic machines did this. And the nationally

dominant Republican Party at Washington did little more than make a peep of protest in the course of campaigning for office.

The filmmakers did provide some sense of progress. From near the start of the movie, we get glimpses of the effort of the 1948 trial of Davis Knight. The great-grandson of Newt and Rachel looked “white” but had enough mixed blood to make him “colored” and to place his marriage to Junie Lee Spradley, a “white woman” a violation of state law. The movie draws back to that moment several times, before ending it with an unfolding of the case and Davis’ sentencing to five years in prison. The scene closes as he and his wife are publically stating their love for each other as he’s taken off in handcuffs. We are then informed that Mississippi authorities dropped the case, realizing that a Federal appeal would be harder on the idiotic state law than those being prosecuted.

Sweet. But this judicial vindication of a couple’s love hardly lifts much of the weight of Reconstruction’s betrayal.

Yet, *Free State of Jones* isn’t gratuitously dropping that burden on us. Oft quoted in connection with this film, Mississippian William Faulkner wrote, “The past is never dead, it isn’t even the past.” In the hours after seeing the movie, I heard about the further murder of black civilians by white police in Baton Rouge and Minneapolis. Last summer—almost a year ago now—the campus police at my university shot and killed Samuel Dubose for not having a license tag on the front of his car, while driving through a neighborhood in the process of gentrification adjacent to campus. Since, we’ve heard from Texas.

The question is whether good film presents us a prettified view of the past or challenges us to realize that we are yet living with that past—and that, however comforting the desire to ignore it, we continue to pay a price for failing to own it. We owe the makers *Free State of Jones* a serious debt for giving us the opportunity to do that.

Mark Lause has written a number of books on the Civil War era, including *“Free Spirits: Spiritualism, Republicanism, Radicalism.* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2016); *Free Labor: the Civil War and the Making of the American Working Class.* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2016.) ; *Price’s Lost Campaign: the 1864 Invasion of Missouri.* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2011) ; *The Collapse of Price’s Raid: the Beginning of the End in Civil War Missouri.* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2016)

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