Foreword

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If the family is the building block of society, it is also the keystone of historical understanding. Nowhere is this more evident than in the study of black people who were free in the slave societies of the Americas. Often the product of relationships between slaves and free people of various admixtures of African, Native American, and European descent, the free blacks' familial origins and subsequent domestic connections determined their legal status and shaped, in large measure, their social standing. No one has made this point more forcefully than Paul Heinegg, who, during the last twenty years, has meticulously constructed and reconstructed the genealogies of free people of color in Virginia, North Carolina, Maryland and Delaware. Now, with this expansion of his earlier book on North Carolina and Virginia, Heinegg has extended his work to South Carolina. Taken together, Heinegg provides the fullest discussion of the familial origins of free people of color in the Anglophone colonial South.

Heinegg's work has been of inestimable value to genealogists eager to trace their family roots and to historians equally desirous of mapping the design of colonial society. Indeed, by revealing the ubiquitous domestic connections of people of European, Native American, and African descent, Heinegg has joined the often disparate concerns of genealogists and historians to unearth portions of the long hidden history of Southern free people of color. Along the way, he has noted how free people of color helped define Southern society, for the free people's peculiar place also reveals much about the history of black slaves, white free persons, and Native Americans, both free and slave.

Heinegg's studies of free black families bear with particular force on the period when the South was a society-with-slaves. During those years--prior to the advent of the staple producing plantation, tobacco in the Chesapeake and rice in the Carolinas-- the line between freedom and slavery was extraordinarily permeable. Various peoples of European, African, and Native American descent crossed it freely and often. In such socially ill-defined circumstances, white men and women held black and Indian slaves and white servants, and black men and women did like. Peoples of European, African and Native American descent--both free and unfree--worked, played, and even married openly in a manner that would later be condemned by custom and prohibited by law.

Such open relations have long been known to students of the colonial past, but Heinegg's genealogies--by the weight of their number and by their extraordinary detail--make evident their full complexity and expose their extraordinary intimacy. Everywhere whites, blacks, and Indians united in both long-term and casual sexual relations, some coerced and some freely entered. That mixing took place at the top of the social order, where white men of property and standing forced themselves on unwilling servant and slave women, often producing children of mixed racial origins. But Heinegg maintains such relationships produced a scant one percent of the free children of color. Inter-racial sex was far more prevalent at the base of colonial society, where poor and often unfree peoples--mostly slaves and servants of various derivations -lived and worked under common conditions. Indeed, as Heinegg demonstrates, most free people of color had their

beginnings in relations between white women (servant and free) and black men (slave, servant, and free). These relations, moreover, often represented long-term and loving commitments. It was precisely the lowly origins of free people of color--outside the ranks of the propertied classes--that condemned free people of color to poverty and excluded them from "respectable" society in the colonial South. The poverty of their parents--particularly their black fathers--denied free children of color the patrimony and the allied connections necessary for social advancement.

Such egalitarian intermingling ended with the advent of the plantation. Legal proscriptions on sexual relations between white and black, particularly between white women and black men accompanied the transformation of the colonial South from a society-with-slaves into a slave society. As Heinegg observes, with the prohibition on inter-racial sexual unions, mixed race children became illegitimate by definition and could be bound out for upwards of thirty years. Their mothers, if servants, received additional terms of servitude. During their captivity, the term of service of both mother and child could be extended for any one of a number of offenses. As a result, free people of color spent a large portion of their lives in the service of others. "In some instances," as Heinegg concludes, "the indenture laws virtually enslaved a person for life."

The punitive prohibitions of inter-racial sexual relations was soon followed by the legislative restriction or outright ban on manumission. As the door slammed shut on black freedom, slaves had their privileges curtailed--most prominently, the right to trade independently. Their inability to trade freely all but eliminated the opportunity to purchase their own freedom and that of family and friends. Likewise, free blacks found their legal rights circumscribed. In various colonies, they were barred from voting, sitting on juries, serving in the militia, carrying guns, owning dogs, or testifying against whites.

Still, the society-with-slaves left its imprint on the slave society that was created in the wake of the Plantation Revolution. "Families like Gowen, Cumbo, and Drigger who were free in the mid seventeenth century," writes Heinegg, already "had several hundred members before the end of the colonial period." These free people of color struggled against the new tide of proscription and disfranchisement. Heinegg's work measures their uneven success.

Many free people pieced together stable, even comfortable lives for their families. The key to their material success, like that of others in the American colonies, was property ownership. Accumulating wealth required years of hard labor and the iron discipline of under consumption. Even then, free people of color needed assistance. Here Heinegg's work points to the connections of free people of color with kinsmen and neighbors (white and black) who could provide access to property by loaning money, securing bonds, or simply testifying to good character. These linkages often extended outside familial relations, hence often beyond Heinegg's genealogical grasp, but his work provides important suggestions as to where they could be found.

By the middle of the eighteenth century, a small cadre of property owning free people of color had emerged in the Southern colonies. Even as slaveholders tightened the noose of

proscription and exclusion, these landed, prosperous free men and women made their presence felt. With increasing frequency they appeared in the court, protecting themselves and their property. To assure their legitimacy, many sought out churches to register their marriages and baptize their children, often traveling great distances to do so. While preoccupied with the safety and success of their own families, they sometimes assisted their less fortunate brethren, helping to protect them from unscrupulous men and women who sought to transform free people of color into slaves, either through legal chicanery, illegal subterfuge, or outright force.

Still, most free people of color remained desperately poor, and the prosperity of the propertied minority was fragile and susceptible to rapid erosion. Their marginality, in turn, put all free people at risk and on the move. One of the signal contributions of Heinegg's work is to trace the movement of free people, as they searched for security and opportunity. Heinegg identifies several patterns, the largest of which was the migration from the areas of dense slaveholding settlements--where free people of color originated in the seventeenth century--to the frontiers of the eighteenth-century South. For example, members of the oldest free black families--the Carters, Copes, Driggers, and Johnsons--who had their beginnings in tidewater Virginia, could be found in outlying areas: northeast North Carolina, western Virginia and Maryland, and isolated portions of Delaware. In these recently settled places, Heinegg observes, "Neighbor depended heavily upon neighbor, and whites may have been more concerned with hostile Indians and harsh living conditions than they were with their neighbors' color."

This physical mobility speaks to another less visible migration, the silent escape from the stigma of blackness. Heinegg's genealogical excavations reveal that many free people of color passed as whites--sometimes by choosing ever lighter spouses over succeeding generations. Even more commonly, they claimed Indian ancestry. Some free people of color invented tribal designations out of whole cloth. Here Heinegg, entering into an area of considerable controversy, explodes what he declares the "fantastic" claims of many so-called tri-racial isolates. Yet, only a small portion of the free black population found refuge in either European or Indian ancestry. Many more free people of color, rather than escape blackness, they were engulfed by it as slaveholders usurped their freedom and forced them into slavery.

Whichever direction free people of color migrated or however they maintained their precarious freedom in the American South, Paul Heinegg's work is an indispensable source to understand their travail. Like his earlier books, this expanded edition, *Free African Americans of North Carolina, Virginia and South Carolina*, opens yet new avenues to explore the lives of free people of color.