

***On the Threshold of Freedom: Masters and Slaves in Civil War Georgia.* By Clarence L. Mohr (1986) Athens: University of Georgia Press, pp. xxiii + 397, ISBN 0-8203-0941-9 (paperback) \$35.00 U.S.**

Professor Clarence Mohr has been the chair of the Department of History at the University of South Alabama since 1998 and re-released his work *On the Threshold of Freedom* in 2001 through the Louisiana State University Press. Originally published in 1986, *On the Threshold* was selected as the 1987 winner of the Avery O. Craven Award from the Organization of American Historians. Mohr is a long-standing professor of history and a prodigious writer with dozens of articles, anthology entries, reviews and six books with three books in progress. In *On the Threshold*, Mohr argues the war and the crisis of the South made Southerners enemies of slavery and facilitated its demise beyond the direct effects of emancipation and the loss of the war itself. He discusses the end of slavery and the challenges of antebellum events and the war on slaveholding society in Georgia.

On the Threshold is a deeply researched and complex text charting the changes in slave culture as the slaves evolved to become multi-generation African Americans in a static pre-war plantation culture developing complex cultural expressions in religious and social settings through the chaos and upheaval of the war where plantation life itself was uprooted and the social order destroyed. A central theme in Mohr's book focuses on the shift from the static plantation life to a dynamic, urban, industrial life as a result of the "refugeeing" of the seaboard slaves and their masters. Mohr's book is broken in to three major sections discussing the white reactions to slave rebellion, the stretching of slavery to the point of chaos, and various attempts at reform and what he refers to as "Confederate emancipation."

The first section examines Southern reaction to the Harper's Ferry uprising which fed a general paranoia throughout the South and especially in Georgia. Defensive and suspicious Southerners became openly hostile to any outsiders, especially, Mohr notes, any Northerners who asked too many questions. Politicians in Georgia benefited from this atmosphere of distrust and fear and they fanned the flames of concern for political gain leading to tacit approval of an increasingly violent society that directly threatened slave equilibrium. Georgia slave-owners were cognizant of their tenuous position and Mohr describes them as openly fearful of revolts and uprisings. After a rash of arson in Georgia towns, the violence expanded and even political efforts were made to remove all free blacks from Georgia or re-enslave them. As the federal army seized control of the sea islands, blacks, slave and free, began enlisting in the Union Army to fight their former masters.

An encroaching Union Army; violence, spurred by fear and sanctioned by the state; and the unsettling of the plantation society introduced chaos and uncertainty into the lives of the white and black citizens of Georgia. This is the second main theme in Mohr's text as he charts the antebellum solidification of slave culture as a distinct Afro-centric culture and the tenuous hold on order held by the slave owners. When war forces the plantation owners to decamp and flee to the interior of Georgia, the slaves see, for the first time, that the power of the slaveholder is not absolute. Additionally, many slave-owners are unable to reestablish plantations in the interior, mainly, Mohr argues, because of wild land speculation and outrageous price gouging by fellow Georgians. This forces plantation refugees to flee to the industrial areas of Georgia and slaves become laborers in the industry of war: hospitals,

munitions, mining, metal, etc. Mohr's strongest and most detailed research is found in a seventy-page fifth chapter examining slaves' roles in wartime industry.

Mohr's third section discusses the changes in the slave system and largely failed attempts at reform of the slave laws in Georgia. Building on evidence presented in the previous two sections, Mohr describes the cumulative effects of war on the white population, the unsettling effects of refugeeing, the impact of religion, and the deeper, strategic issues faced by the Confederacy. The society of fear was maintained by confident, white plantation owners and politicians who became white soldiers generally stationed in Georgia at the beginning of the war. As the whites began to leave, the power and strength behind the threat of violence left with them. In Mohr's weakest section, he describes this shift in power and strength as the beginning of the end of slavery. He ties this to the opening of abolitionist and reform sentiment among the clergy who supported notions of black literacy and the legitimization of black marriages. As the war drew to its inevitable conclusion, Mohr notes that foreign intrigue prompted Jefferson Davis to consider emancipation in exchange for Anglo-French recognition in the hopes of drawing the North to the peace table. Mohr's interpretation of the debate over arming the slaves would later be echoed by Robert E. Bonner in *Mastering America* as Mohr says, "At its deepest level the debate over arming the slaves involved a search for Southern identity and a quest for national purpose" (p.275).

Mohr's argument is forceful and backed by solid, but disconnected evidence. It is clear he did his best research and analysis on the slave involvement of the wartime industry. He describes the slave participation in the wartime industry as vital and unheralded. In fact, slave presence in industry with artisans was vital only because Georgia had no other choice. There

was no available pool of white labor from which to draw and there was a surplus of slave labor produced by the refuging of the sea island plantations. Further, the evidence Mohr examines and copious tables he presents are drawn from incomplete sources which present a risk to his analysis. His work represents a solid entry in the quantitative school of history, but the gaps in the data leave too much to the imagination to build such a definitive case. Further, he closes with his weakest argument on the amelioration of slavery in Georgia. His strongest premise was his reliance on political will and religious support but he is forced to admit that no significant legislation was passed on the topic prior to the end of the war.

Regardless, the argument is informative and highlights several often overlooked sections of southern wartime economy, namely industrial labor and the impact of refugees. The text is ideal for serious scholars in Civil War social, economic, or political history and offers data that is worth reviewing. In the fourteen years since the original publication, it may be worth re-examining the data and investigating potentially new sources of data for support or augmentation to his primary argument that societal upheaval drove the South toward emancipation as much as the war did. *On the Threshold* is a dense but well-written book that greatly serves the study of the South and of the Civil War.