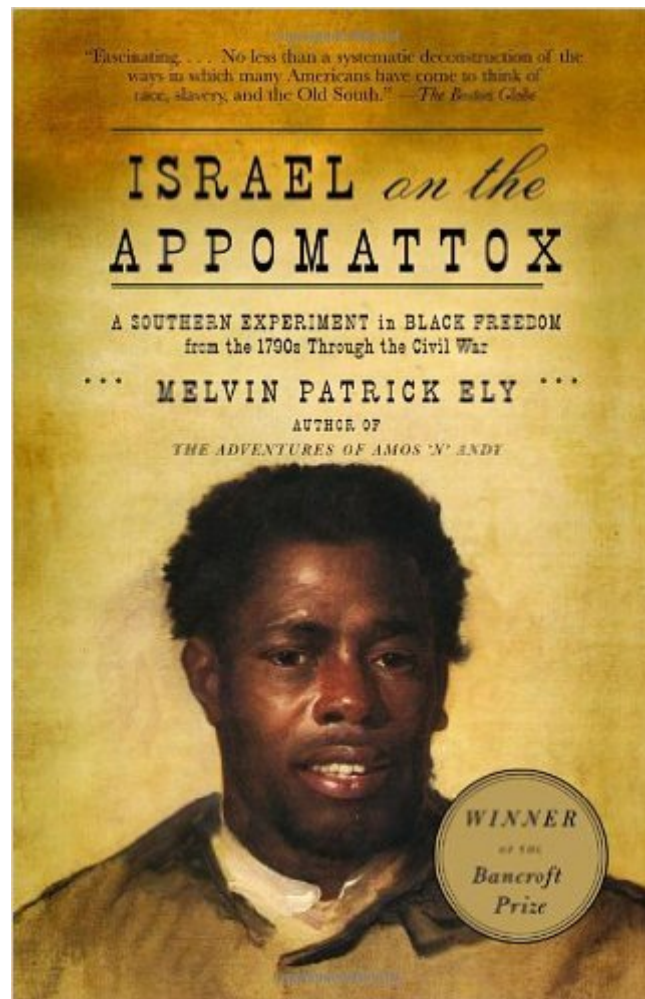


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Israel On The Appomattox: A Southern Experiment In Black Freedom From The 1790s Through The Civil War



Synopsis

WINNER OF THE BANCROFT PRIZEA New York Times Book Review and Atlantic Monthly Editors' ChoiceThomas Jefferson denied that whites and freed blacks could live together in harmony. His cousin, Richard Randolph, not only disagreed, but made it possible for ninety African Americans to prove Jefferson wrong. Israel on the Appomattox tells the story of these liberated blacks and the community they formed, called Israel Hill, in Prince Edward County, Virginia. There, ex-slaves established farms, navigated the Appomattox River, and became entrepreneurs. Free blacks and whites did business with one another, sued each other, worked side by side for equal wages, joined forces to found a Baptist congregation, moved west together, and occasionally settled down as man and wife. Slavery cast its grim shadow, even over the lives of the free, yet on Israel Hill we discover a moving story of hardship and hope that defies our expectations of the Old South.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

The subject of this history is Israel Hill in the early 19th century, a settlement in Virginia of free African Americans, former slaves who had been emancipated in their former owners' will. The book explores various aspects of lives in this community: land ownership, chosen occupations, relations with the law and with their neighbors. It is a good and worthy history; I'm glad I read it, as I learned much. It is also a story very much worth telling. The discussion of how many of these men were drawn to the profession of piloting river shipments was particularly interesting. The modern reader

will doubtless be struck by how frequently these individuals were able to assert their rights. The law was certainly not colorblind, and they were discriminated against in many fundamental and structural ways. But the book also shows many instances wherein the freed men and women were able to bring suits and win them, or to be acquitted from unjust charges. Although discrimination was embedded in many aspects of the law, it was nevertheless the case that many a judge and jury would believe the word of a black man with a reputation for honesty over a white man with a reputation for venality. Would-be readers should be aware, however, that the book is quite detailed. Numerous cases like those referenced above are described, and it can take a fair amount of reading to go through the examples that serve the author's point. If I have one small criticism of the book, it's in the number of times the author feels compelled to point out that things back on Israel Hill weren't always the way that we modern audiences tend to assume from Pre-Civil War Virginia. He's certainly correct, but we have no way of knowing what future generations will assume about that time.

Anyone who did not already believe that the reality of race in the South was always more than just what meets the eye, should read this book. It describes the lives and socio-cultural patterns of a small town of free blacks in the Piedmont area of Virginia during the antebellum South, and their interaction with whites as those interactions are largely determined by white attitudes, institutions, and patterns of thought and behavior. It turns out that one of Thomas Jefferson's cousins, Richard Randolph, at the age of 21, who was committed to the idea that slavery was an unmitigated evil, bequeathed nearly 400 acres of land to his nine top slaves. After a number of intra-family complications, not the least of them being that a great deal of incest went on within the Jefferson family, or that Randolph himself died at the age of 26, eventually the land did indeed end in the hands of about 90 of his slaves. Being one of the few pre-Civil War cases in which the approximately 500,000 freed blacks actually began life with a semblance of equality at the starting line, "Israel Hill" became one of the first test cases of whether a truly free independent black community could actually survive in freedom. I do not think it gives away the punch line to suggest that not only did they, and many others less well-known and less well-endowed survive, but they also thrived, well into the 20th Century.

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