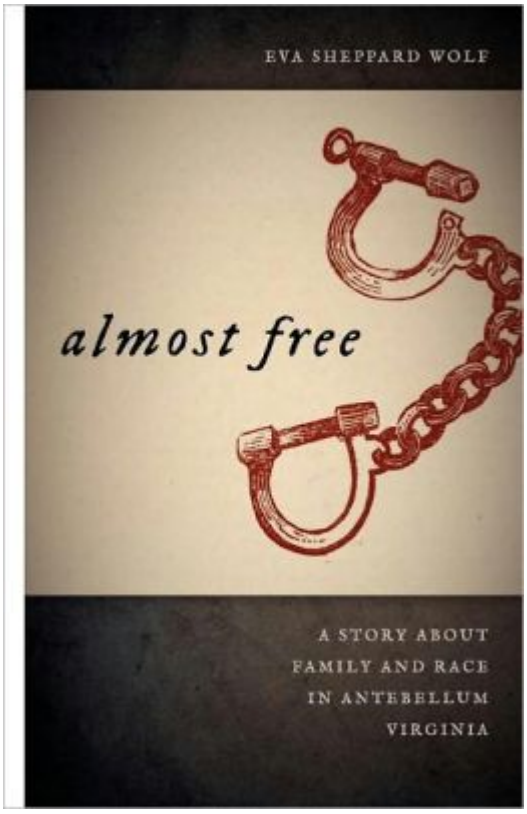
Legally Free, Unable to Live Freely



The struggle for freedom was a perilous one for enslaved Virginians. Once gained, freedom was precarious, both for newly freed people and for their families. Beginning in 1645, Emanuel Driggus began a forty-year journey to free himself, his six natural children, and two foster daughters. Driggus was adept at courting the patronage of great planters and at negotiating deals with them to protect himself and his family. Driggus arranged fixed-term indentures for some of his dependents and outright purchased the freedom of others. He gained his own freedom in 1652. Driggus's strategy revolved around his growing livestock operation; he raised horses, sheep, cattle, hogs, and chickens, and he used the courts to ensure that his neighbors, white and black, recognized his ownership of his stock. By the 1660s, Driggus was married to an English woman named Elizabeth and had leased a plantation where he bred horses and grew tobacco. Though some of his children remained enslaved, Driggus's future looked bright. He continued his efforts to secure the freedom of his remaining enslaved progeny.

Eva Sheppard Wolf, Almost Free: A Story about Family and Race in Antebellum Virginia. Athens and London: University of Georgia Press, 2012. 192 pp., $19.95.

In *Almost Free: A Story about Family and Race in Antebellum Virginia*, Eva Sheppard Wolf's tale of the struggles of nineteenth-century Virginian Samuel

Johnson to win freedom for himself and his family, I could hear the echoes of Emanuel Driggus's experiences reverberating through the 200 years that separated them. Like Driggus, Johnson used connections with powerful white Virginians to access the court system, to secure his freedom, to record his ownership of real property, and to lobby for the freedom of members of his family even in the face of laws that discouraged it. And like Driggus, the records for Samuel Johnson's life are sparse. Both men left no personal records such as diaries or letters; instead their lives must be traced through petitions, deeds, and other legal sources. Wolf skillfully weaves together a narrative of Johnson's life, tracing his triumphs and defeats as he sought both freedom and a meaningful place in his community of Warrenton, Virginia. The man who emerges from Wolf's patient search through the archives, had, she writes, a "keen attentiveness to the law and to doing things in a proper, socially accepted way." Johnson also "yearned for legitimacy—a socially and legally secure place for his family and himself in his homeland of Virginia" (53).

Wolf expertly places Johnson's striving for freedom and acceptance in the context of how race was both understood and lived in nineteenth-century Virginia. The experience of race was not monolithic; as she notes, Johnson and his family show "how race operated … as something people themselves created and re-created in their multiple interactions with one another" (3). In 1802, Johnson brokered an agreement to purchase himself from his owner, an agreement facilitated in concert with other white men. After Johnson paid the agreed-upon $500 in 1812, he then faced the daunting task of gaining legislative permission to remain in Virginia, since the law required that manumitted people leave the state within six months. To that end, Johnson amassed an impressive array of signatures from influential white Virginians to support his petition to remain, which the legislature then granted. Many more petitions followed. As Johnson worked to buy his daughter Lucy's freedom, he also sought legislative permission for her to remain as well. For these petitions, he also marshaled the witness and support of many white Virginians. Wolf is careful to make sure readers understand that whites supported these petitions in part because their efforts on behalf of a "well-deserving free man of color made the whole social system, with its entrenched and legally recognized categories and hierarchies, appear more just" (72). Antebellum Virginians of all colors lived race in complex ways.

Samuel Johnson lived race in a context in which his family and his place in the community mattered most to him. In 1815 he was able to purchase his wife, Patty, and their two children (only their daughter Lucy lived to adulthood), and the remainder of his life was spent attempting to legally guarantee freedom for Lucy and her children. In this effort, though, Johnson's ties to his community and the networks of support he had so painstakingly built among white Virginians failed him. Though he manumitted Lucy, she never received permission to remain in the state. Freedom was a precarious business for the Johnson family. Though Lucy was technically free, she could not remain in Virginia legally, though she stayed and raised her own family, marrying twice. But her position was always uncertain, and her presence tolerated only at the

sufferance of a white community that looked the other way. As Wolf writes, "[r]ace had legal meaning but was not so much a social or legal structure as something individuals themselves made, over and over again, as they worked, talked, loved, struggled …" (51).

Wolf's insights about race fit neatly in the historiography of race and freedom in the antebellum South, a world we now understand should not be divided too simplistically into white and black, slave and free. In the spaces between these categories, people built lives for themselves that expressed race with sometimes surprising complexity. This is not perhaps a completely fresh observation; historians such as Joshua Rothman and even Wolf herself have written excellent monographs on this topic. But what Wolf has done in *Almost Free*, admirably, is explain complicated issues of race through an absorbing human story in a manner that will be accessible to undergraduate students. The book is smoothly written and eminently teachable.

The Johnson family's story again demonstrates the limits of freedom. After Johnson's death in 1842, Lucy, her husband, and their children left Virginia, fearing that they would be re-enslaved if they remained without Johnson to protect them. The two things Johnson had struggled for—freedom for his family and their place in the community—were in the end mutually exclusive. In order to preserve their freedom, his descendants had to leave the community that Johnson had so valued. Johnson's experience is similar, again, to that of Emanuel Driggus's seventeenth-century life. Driggus, too, never succeeded in completely freeing his family. At least two of his daughters remained enslaved, and at the time of his death around 1674, Driggus himself might have been re-enslaved. Two men, two centuries apart, spent their lifetimes struggling for a place of freedom and community, and both ultimately experienced the ways in which race both created and dismantled opportunities. As Wolf writes,"[b]lack men could become legally free in antebellum Virginia, but they could not live freely" (125).

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