



Slavery on Trial: Race, Class, and Criminal Justice in Antebellum Richmond, Virginia (New Perspectives on the History of the South)

James Campbell

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By the mid-nineteenth century, Richmond was one of the preeminent industrial centers in the South, with a level of criminal activity that reflected its size. *Slavery on Trial* examines more than 7,000 criminal cases recorded between 1830 and 1860, ranging from sensational murders to minor misdemeanors.

Although the criminal justice system in antebellum Virginia was explicitly designed to support slaveholders' rule, James Campbell reveals that, in practice, trials and punishments sometimes subverted elite interests. Rather than serving as an unproblematic prop of the slave regime, law enforcement and court proceedings in Richmond revealed class, race, and gender tensions.

Campbell shows that considerations of race and slavery infused every criminal case in Richmond, even when slaves were not directly involved as victims or defendants. He also considers the relationship between judicial processes and social, cultural, and political developments in the city.

Slavery on Trial is a sobering portrait of the administration of racially constructed laws. It exposes the contradictions inherent in antebellum Southern law, and examines the implications those contradictions had for slaves, free blacks, poor whites, immigrants, and women.

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