

Peter Bruner: Novel in Death, Not in Life

By Kaylie Schunk*

Despite his circumstances as a slave, Peter Bruner relentlessly fought for his freedom. After several attempts to escape, Bruner found refuge in Oxford, Ohio following his service in

Approximately one-hundred and twenty miles away from Louisville, Bruner and his sister arrived in Irvin, Kentucky where their master planned “to break [them] in” like horses.⁶ Bruner spends his formative years in Irvin where he is beaten senselessly by his drunkard master. After years of abuse, a teenaged Bruner refused to accept his fate as a slave and began his plot to escape in the early 1860s. Unbeknownst to Bruner, the mob mentality of Kentucky slavecatchers and the restrictive laws in Kentucky and Ohio would not have enabled him to successfully escape regardless of his efforts.

He left by nightfall, but he “happened to go the wrong road.”⁷ Traveling deeper into Kentucky, Bruner assumed the false identity of Dick Kieth, a free man, as he hitched rides and was served his supper in Lexington. However, a man inquired about Bruner’s true identity and “wanted [Bruner] to show him [his] free papers.”⁸

that was divided in its views on race and how to handle slavery. Kentucky's complicated and divided political standards enabled Bruner to start his final, successful attempt towards emancipation. Bruner's owner was imprisoned due to him "sympathizing with the rebels."¹³ While Kentucky was a slave state, it was a member of the Union, and Kentucky citizens began to be held accountable for their actions during the Civil War epoch. Taking advantage of this opportunity, Bruner worked in town and made a sizeable income for himself. After his master was released, he offered Bruner "half [that Bruner had] made on the farm" and half of the profits from the wood he had sold.¹⁴ But he refused. He saw his owner's vulnerable position, took his earnings, and fled to Camp Nelson, a Union Army camp. While Bruner was not aware of the political divisions that led to his master's incarceration and his opportunity to leave the tanyard, Bruner recognized that this was his opportunity to leave, and he understood that the Union Army was the vehicle that was necessary for his permanent emancipation.

Bruner represents the importance of the military for African-Americans' self-emancipation, but once again, Bruner was unaware of the political circumstances of the war as he was only admitted to the army when the Union needed the additional troops. According to David Roediger, historians have departed from W.E.B. Du Bois' "self-emancipation" thesis, which assigned agency to slaves as their "general strike" enabled them to acquire their freedom.¹⁵ Slaves were able to work as a community and used the upheaval of the years before and during the Civil War to obtain their freedom. Contrary to the historical narrative in popular media and scholarship that proclaims President Abraham Lincoln as the 'Great Emancipator,' Roediger agrees with Du Bois that African-Americans' self-emancipation was the primary

¹³ Bruner, 41.

¹⁴ Bruner, 42.

¹⁵ David Roediger, *Seizing Freedom: Slave Emancipation and Liberty for All* (Brooklyn: Verso, 2014), 4-5.

reason for slaves successfully obtaining their freedom, not Lincoln and the Union's federal government.¹⁶

Furthermore, Roediger points to African-American Union soldiers as vital to the Union's success and enabled the perception of American citizenship to be expanded beyond white, male ability. Simply, the Union Army needed numbers, which enabled slaves like Bruner to be enlisted after being initially turned away for his skin color. However, African-American soldiers and their self-emancipation provided meaning to the Union's cause. Barbara Fields argues that "preserving the Union without abolishing slavery would have ultimately been exposed as 'a goal too shallow to be worth the sacrifice of a single life.'"¹⁷ African-American soldier's self-emancipation provided a moral motivation for the Union to fight.

Additionally, Douglas Baynton and Roediger complicate Du Bois' self-emancipation thesis by stating that African-American soldiers also enabled the social norm of citizens being limited to white, healthy males to be expanded to African-American men, women, and immigrants.¹⁸ The percentage of Civil War veterans with disabling injuries was staggering. Through the attendance of women nurses and the assistance of African-American soldiers, citizenship expanded to those who could contribute to the betterment of the Union and nation, not just able-bodied white men. "Making the claim to be 'not disabled' (and therefore fit to exercise the intelligence, rationality, and strength that were presumed necessary for republican citizenship) was the price of the ticket for claiming rights."¹⁹ The self-emancipation of African-American soldiers is novel as these men were able to organize themselves to claim their rights

¹⁶ Roediger, 7-8.

¹⁷ Roediger, 6.

¹⁸ Roediger, 12-13.

¹⁹ Roediger, 13.

during political upheaval and a demonstration as to how to redefine social norms. These men enabled other marginalized groups to begin claiming rights.

Yet, Bruner's story complicates Roediger's and Du Bois' assertions. Bruner states that "if I could only make it to that place...Camp Nelson... I would be all right."²⁰ He certainly understands that the military, specifically the Union Army, is vital to his liberation. However, his enlistment is contingent on whether or not the Union wanted African-American soldiers. Bruner states that he is relieved because last time he had arrived to Camp Nelson he was turned away because "this was a white man's war."²¹ Therefore, Bruner certainly had agency, but he was also limited to what the white commanding officers decided. Furthermore, his 'abled-body' is only used for menial tasks. Bruner guards pigs and tends to the sick as a nurse. While he did witness much violence, Bruner was not fighting on the frontlines. This complicates the notion of the African-American soldiers providing a moral motivation to the war. While the Union soldiers could point to their African-American comrades in arms, they were not equals. This aligns with Ford's notion that the middle and upper classes required slave labor for "a host of personal services to establish and support their class standing."²² While Bruner was not enslaved during his military service, he and his colored regiment were assigned menial tasks that enabled the Union to properly deal with their moral and practical concerns. However, this continued African-Americans to be considered second-class workers, which continued to be a problem throughout Bruner's lifetime and for the majority of African-Americans during the postbellum period.

²⁰ Bruner, 32.

²¹ Bruner, 43.

²² Ford, 121.

of his finger to make ice cream for the female students. Yet, they did not show concern for his well-being. They only “miss[ed] the use of his two hands.”²⁷ Furthermore, he is patronized in *The Miami Student’s* February 1905 issue as “The Knight of the Dust-Pan and Broom” where he

Specifically, black minstrelsy enabled the “formation of a self-consciously white working class” through the shows’ ability to cross racial lines and allow white men to deal with their feelings of jealousy, fear, and also repulsion. The white working class did not know how to properly handle the entrance of African-Americans into the workforce as they were both seen as a threat and objects of fascination.

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Works Cited
