THE FREE NEGRO IN ANTE-BELLUM LOUISIANA

by H. E. Sterkx

The Free Negro in Ante-Bellum Louisiana is a well-documented study of an important but often overlooked subject. The author has dug deeply into original sources in order to bring to his readers an understanding of the problem of the free Negro in pre-Civil War America—a problem that is a crucial one for understanding one of the forces that drove America to the war.

Louisiana is perhaps the best place to study this problem. That state's free Negro population originated and acquired much of its status during the Colonial period, with the promulgation of the French and the Spanish Codes of the eighteenth century—both of which contained liberal emancipation provisions—which assured the increase of the free Negro class.

Dr. Sterkx demonstrates the various ways by which Negroes could be freed during the Colonial period, and shows how many of these practices were carried over when Louisiana became a state. As a result free Negroes enjoyed many civil liberties not granted to them in other parts of the South, and had more religious, educational, and economic opportunities than in other areas.

Despite, or perhaps because of, the status of these black people, the state's white establishment was more and more desperate to ship the whole Negro population elsewhere. When legislation and colonization schemes failed to remove free Negroes, hostile whites resorted to extra-legal methods to achieve their goals. In the 1850s, with the intensification of the Abolitionist movement and rumors of slave insurrections in other parts of the South, Louisianans were goaded into taking action as private citizens in order to remove the free Negro class violently. Some migrated under such duress; however, the majority remained to play a minor role in Confederate Louisiana.

No aspect of the life of Louisiana's non-slave black population is overlooked by the author. This is a thorough, scholarly, yet lively work that will be enjoyed by a wide readership.

About the Author. Born in Alexandria, Louisiana, H. E. Sterkx is a graduate of Louisiana State University (B.A. and M.A. in History) and earned his Ph.D. at the University of Alabama. His teaching experience includes 23 years at the University of Tampa. Presently he is Professor of History at Auburn University in Montgomery. He is the author of numerous articles and one previous book.

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