

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 the Civil War. Serving as a handyman and janitor, he was considered to be a critical member of the Oxford community, but this does not necessarily mean that he was respected as an equal. In the public sphere, Peter Bruner's contemporaries paid little attention to his historical significance. Bruner is characterized in neutral or derogatory terms due to the anxiety and racism that white middle and lower class men felt towards African-Americans because newly emancipated African-Americans were seen as competitors on the job market during Reconstruction. However, his devotion, in the private sphere, to his daughters' education enabled historians to inform their understandings of the Civil War and Reconstruction and to publicly hail Bruner's significance as a former slave and a self-emancipator. Historical sources illustrate how the Oxford community reduced Bruner to a mascot-like figure who was not able to socially or economically climb despite his efforts. Yet, his devotion to his daughters' education began a trend where generations of his family received the quality education and opportunities he did not have, and his daughter recorded Bruner's time as slave and Civil War soldier, which is now invaluable to modern interpretations of the antebellum period, Civil War, and Reconstruction.

The advertisement for Peter Bruner's autobiography promised "A thrilling tale of days before the Civil War, of hardships endured,...of life as it was lived by a young colored boy who preferred running away to whippings, who often ran in the wrong direction with consequent

reactions.”¹ While this advertisement romanticizes Bruner’s struggles, his early life in Kentucky demonstrates the cruelty and hypocrisy of the Old Northwest. Peter Bruner was born in 1845 to his estranged slave mother and his master, John Bell Bruner, in Winchester, Kentucky.² Shortly afterwards, he was separated from his mother when he and his sister were sent to their master’s brother, Joe Bruner, in Irvin, Kentucky.

Bruner was born when the Old Northwest Territories of Kentucky and Ohio were paradoxical as they witnessed brutal racial prejudice and violence throughout the 1820s to the 1860s, despite these states’ policies being supposedly racially conscious. Ohio’s constitution declared freedom for all peoples, while Kentucky limited the commercial expansion of slavery. These policies supposedly would “militate against the worst abuses in the name of race.”³ However, Louisville started lynching before the Civil War, and Cincinnati saw the worst violence towards African Americans during the 1840s. Yet, Ford argues that Louisville and Cincinnati had the “most influential antislavery politics.”⁴ Cincinnati was vital to the formation of the Republican Party during the 1850s, while Louisville pushed its case for emancipation in Kentucky. Louisville may not have been successful, but it housed with one of the most organized African-American communities, which successfully kept Kentucky a member of the Union.⁵ Yet, Louisville stood alone as the rest of Kentucky continued to practice slavery miles away from the city limits.

¹ Flyer for Bruner’s Autobiography, *A Slave’s Adventures towards Freedom*, 11 December 1925, Box 1, Folder 78, Faculty Files, Walter Havighust Special Collections and Archives, Oxford, Ohio.

² “Peter Bruner.” Find a Grave. Find a Grave: Peter Bruner (accessed November 17, 2018).

³ Bridget Ford, *Bonds of Union: Religion, Race, and Politics in a Civil War Borderland* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2016), 89.

⁴ Ford, xii.

⁵ Ford, xii.

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 Even if an individual did vouch for Bruner, he would not have been able to obtain freedom papers. Furthermore, Ohio enacted strict laws that sought to discourage the massive settlement of African-American populations along the Ohio River during the late 1820s. Approximately forty years after the fact, African-Americans were forced to comply with Ohio’s Black Laws, which required African-Americans to “register their names and pay small fee to the township, provide certificates of their freedom to local courts, and secure a \$500 bond to guarantee their ‘good behavior.’”⁹ For Bruner, it would have been impossible to live in Ohio even if he had successfully reached the border due to Ohio’s restrictive laws. Regardless, Bruner did not complete his mission; his first attempt towards freedom was a failure. Bruner was sent to the jail and was forced to reveal his true identity after

⁶ Peter Bruner, *A Slave's Adventures Toward Freedom. Not Fiction, but the True Story of a Struggle*. (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina, 2000), 13.

⁷ Bruner, 26.

⁸ Bruner, 27.

⁹ Ford, 93.

he was whipped by the local magistrate and was returned to his master after two weeks in the prison in Lexington, Kentucky.

Despite Bruner's first failed attempt, Bruner continued to try to leave Kentucky, but he continued to fail due to the mob mentality and infrastructure of Kentucky society and legal codes outside of Louisville. After a second runaway attempt that resembled the first, Bruner fled for freedom again with a friend this time. Others joined them as they met other slaves throughout their journey. However, their attempts were pointless as "some five or six men came and captured them all but [Bruner] and [he] escaped by taking refuge under some bushes," but Bruner was discovered napping shortly afterwards.¹⁰ Ford states that in Kentucky or Ohio "a fugitive from slavery confronted a similar peril: mobs of armed, angry white who quickly banded together in pursuit of runaways."¹¹ Similarly, a runaway slave, Henry Bibb, was betrayed by friends in Cincinnati and clubbed by a mob that brought him back to the city's magistrate. "Mobs in rural Kentucky and industrializing Cincinnati and Louisville sought the same ends: rigid control of people of color and defense of slave property, which they achieved through guns and violence."¹² Due to the harsh laws against African-Americans who were seeking freedom in the North and Kentucky and Southern Ohio's motivations to capture fugitive slaves, Bruner would not be able to gain his freedom until Kentucky slaveholders began to be held accountable by the Union, and Bruner was able to join the Union Army.

Despite Kentucky being a slave state, it was a member of the Union, which was largely due to the strong political support for the Republican Party in Louisville. Bruner lived in a state

¹⁰ Bruner, 32.

¹¹ Ford, 104.

¹² Ford, 104.

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.

While African-Americans, like Bruner, did obtain their freedom through their self-
emancipation and participation in the war effort, African-Americans faced racism and ridicule as
second-class citizens. From the Reconstruction era through the early twentieth century, they were
used as a means of relieving white middle and lower classes' frustrations and most were not able
to move up the economic ladder despite their aspirations and belief in education. Roediger
argues that it is too extreme to say that Reconstruction caused African-Americans to be enslaved
again, but they would struggle through harsh political and social conditions that were "moves
'back toward slavery.'"²³ Jacqueline Jones concurs as she emphasizes how African-American
and white labor were never equal post-Reconstruction. She states that "for virtually all blacks
regardless of the region of the country or the economic sector..., upward mobility within the
workplace was restricted by the intransigence of employers and the hostility of white workers."²⁴
African-Americans were still confined to menial labor after the Civil War.

Bruner's career following being mustered out of the army in 1866 was a series of menial
jobs with little chance for social mobility. He was a handyman in the community of Oxford,
Ohio and would be the janitor at Miami University and the Western Female Seminary. Bruner
remembers cleaning up after a fire in the women's college as the beginning of his career serving
college communities.²⁵ Self-described as "a college-bred man," Bruner was considered to be a
staple of the Oxford community, but he was never able to escape his circumstances as a
laborer.²⁶ On June 1891, *The Oxford Ladies Collegian* recounts when Bruner grounded off a part

²³ Roediger, 22.

²⁴ Jacqueline Jones, *American Work: Four Centuries of Black and White Labor* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1998), 302.

²⁵ Bruner, 50.

²⁶ Alumni News Letter, 11 December 1925, Box 1, Folder 78, Faculty Files, Walter Havighust Special Collections and Archives, Oxford, Ohio, 5.

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 facetiously elevated to the status of the nobility, while he cleans after the students every day.²⁸ Bruner’s experiences align with Roediger’s and Jones’ arguments that emancipation was difficult and African-Americans lacked the opportunities to seek higher positions beyond menial labor. Specifically, Jones contends that African-Americans believed that education was the means in which they would successfully build a career; however, this proved to be simply untrue despite African-Americans’ efforts.²⁹ While Bruner only briefly attended lessons, he carried his belief in the importance of education throughout his life and passed this on to his daughters.

Jones contends that racism denied African-Americans the ability to socially climb, but Lott goes further by explaining that middle and lower class white men ridiculed African-Americans as a means of dealing with their frustration with having to share the job market. While Jones states that “even relatively egalitarian labor unions enforced the ironclad dictum that black people should never rise above their appointed station,” Lott contends that the study of blackface minstrelsy shows not an “absolute white power and control than of panic, anxiety, terror, and pleasure” that dates as early as the mid-nineteenth century to the 1920s.³⁰ According to Lott, culture was associated with race and whites struggled to understand and properly explore their feelings and desires, which was oftentimes associated with fascination over black bodies.³¹

²⁷ *Oxford Ladies Collegian*, June 1891, Box 1, Folder 78, Faculty Files, Walter Havighust Special Collections and Archives, Oxford, Ohio, 156.

²⁸ *The Miami Student* February 1905, Box 1, Folder 78, Faculty Files, Walter Havighust Special Collections and Archives, Oxford, Ohio, 155.

²⁹ Jones, 307.

³⁰ Eric Lott, *Love and Theft: Blackface Minstrelsy and the American Working Class* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), 7.

³¹ Lott, 6.

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.

Bruner’s experiences demonstrate these primarily male, white college students’ conflicted feelings of contempt and curiosity towards African-Americans. College students understood Bruner as a mascot, or a “pet” as he is described in a picture taken between the years 1881 and 1883.³² Also, his picture is randomly included in the 1906 *Recensio*, which relays the results of the Delta Zeta sorority’s election results. Students were expected to know him, but he was never given public recognition for his service in the Civil War or his years as a slave. Rather, he was a figure, adorned with Dr. Thompson’s suit and hat that greeted students. Bruner was pseudo-mascot that students loved the idea of but refused to acknowledge his importance to history or simply as an individual. It is not until he is in his nineties that he is dubbed “Mayor of the Day,” but even this moment is feigned and long overdue.³³ The public, particularly the predominantly working class men, did not recognize his historical importance and characterized him in demeaning or neutral terms.

Despite Bruner not being appreciated by the public during his lifetime, his dedication to his private life, specifically his daughters’ educations, allowed for his life to be publicly remembered and valued by historians after his death. Despite his devotion to the Oxford

³² Untitled Photograph, Box 1, Folder 78, Faculty Files, Walter Havighust Special Collections and Archives, Oxford, Ohio.

³³ Bob White, “Peter Bruner, Born in Slavery, Was Oxford’s ‘Mayor for A Day,’” *Oxford Citizen*, April 1938, 1.

community, Bruner was a family man. He had four daughters and infamously fought for their right to education. In consideration of the disadvantages as an illiterate man and his belief in the power of education, he pushed for his daughters to be educated despite their skin color. Bruner recalls “the directors told the teacher not to teach them and so they were sent back home, because they were colored. But they later were compelled to teach them.”³⁴ While Bruner is modest in his account, he refused for his children to be denied a chance to learn. It was through this fervent push for his posterity’s education that his daughter, Carrie, was able to write down her father’s life. Furthermore, Bruner’s tenacity and passion for education “served as a stimulus for his grandchildren and great-grandchildren” as his descendants have bachelor’s degrees, some have master’s and doctoral degrees, and a few have served as college faculty members.³⁵

While Bruner would have been proud to simply have seen how successful his family has become, his personal devotion to his children’s education enabled the public to appreciate his historical significance after his death. Due to the prejudice of the postbellum North, Bruner was never recognized for his service in the Civil War or the hardships he faced as a slave. But he has inspired plays, like “The One Called Peter” in Winchester, Kentucky to remind individuals of the cruelties associated with slavery.³⁶ Also, his autobiography has been stored through the “Documenting the South” series as one of the richest accounts of life for slaves who found freedom during this era. Peter’s account is vital to historians as they are able to get a first-hand account that would otherwise be lost. His bravery as a runaway who became a Union soldier can also help to dispel popular perceptions in modern culture and historiography that credit Lincoln’s

³⁴ Bruner, 51.

³⁵ Bob White, *Oxford Citizen*, 1.

³⁶ “The One Called Peter,” 23 February 2001, Box 1, Folder 78, Faculty Files, Walter Havighust Special Collections and Archives, Oxford, Ohio, 1.

presidency as the primary, if not sole reason, for slave emancipation. Bruner's story assigns agency to slaves as they used their cunning and preserved to rebuild their lives as free individuals. While this freedom was not absolute, individuals like Bruner demonstrate the importance of slaves taking back their lives and navigating the difficult laws associated deeply rooted in prejudice throughout the nineteenth and early twentieth century.

Peter was a former slave who never rose to any occupation beyond menial labor. However, his spirit was tenacious, and he did accept the status quo. He liberated himself as he finally reached the Union Army and enlisted. While he was not totally aware of the political circumstances that enabled him to successfully enlist and he was a second-class citizen in contrast to white officers, he chose to leave his master and seek freedom. His tenacity carried on throughout his life as he continued to labor in the Oxford community and never lost sight of the importance of education for his family. He sought to comfort others "struggling men and women" who might need "some inspiration."³⁷ Bruner understood the difficulty of living in a prejudiced era where white men perceived the emancipation of African-Americans as frightening and repulsive. He was not able to complete his education or have a career outside of manual labor, but he understood the importance of family and education. His devotion to his private life outweighed the little respect that the Oxford community had for him. While he was a 'pet' to Oxford public, he was a father and a grandfather who gave his children the chance to learn to write. In turn, his daughter was able to record her father's experiences which has shaped historical understandings and will continue to develop historiography in the future. Bruner serves as a reminder as to the hardship of slaves, the importance of liberty, and how well-formed

³⁷ Bruner, 7.

personal conviction outweigh any source of popularity or attention one can receive during their lifetime.

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