

Scalawag A White Southerner's Journey through Segregation to Human Rights Activism by Edward H. Peeples and Nancy MacLean (review)

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Ohio Valley History, Volume 18, Number 4, Winter 2018, pp. 100-102
(Review)

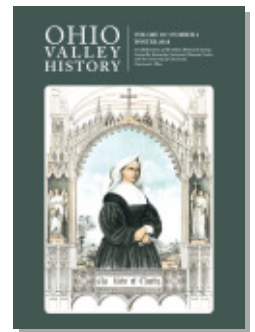
Published by The Filson Historical Society and Cincinnati Museum Center

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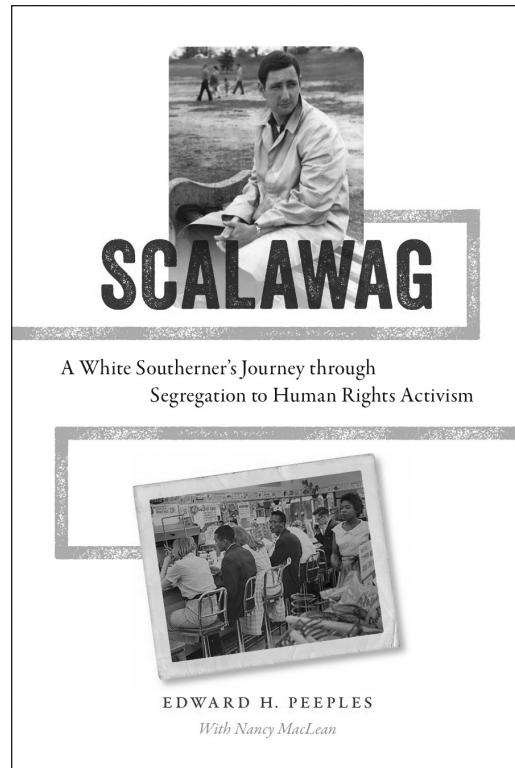
Edward H. Peeples, with Nancy MacLean

This book is one of the best memoirs ever written about the South. The author, Edward H. Peeples, is a white man from Richmond, Virginia. He grew up in the rigidly segregated society of the 1930s and 1940s, but he began to question the racial orthodoxies he learned from his family, the church, and society at large. He tells a story of early private doubts, followed by increasing defiance. By his

teenage years, he had started rebelling against the customs and practice of racism, and in adult life, he became a civil rights activist and a well-known specialist in the field of public health. “Scalawag” is a nineteenth-century term that was used to ridicule white southerners who defied the status quo, and as such, it is a fitting title for this volume. Peeples tells a riveting story of transformation.

The origins of his rebellion can be found in his family. His father dominated the household without being able to provide for his wife and children, and he terrified everyone with his violent temper. Yet he believed in white supremacy and male supremacy. How was it, young Ed asked himself, that these twin supremacies did not translate into economic security or happiness for the family? His mother, Lula Peebles, managed to support her offspring with her meager income as a hairdresser. She was devoted to her children, even if she did not agree with Ed's evolving political views. His grandmother, his father's mother, lived in Lowcountry South Carolina and believed deeply in the Lost Cause culture, which he describes as filled with "indignation and melancholy" (6). The family somehow concealed the presence of William Brisbane, the prominent slaveholder-turned-abolitionist, in its genealogy, something that Peebles discovered well into adulthood.

The author gives a blunt account of the class prejudices that working-class whites of his generation had to face. In the world of his youth, these children were not encouraged to attend college or hope for anything beyond trade school. Many of his high school teachers deflated the aspirations of students from the "wrong" neighborhoods, and the local Protestant churches did not preach an egalitarian vision; instead, they shored up the existing hierarchies of class, race, and gender. But with his mother's encouragement, Peebles enrolled in college at the Richmond Professional Institute, now part of Virginia Commonwealth University. There, a door opened. A gifted teacher named Alice Davis, a sociologist, encouraged her students to think for themselves and challenge wrongdoing, which affected Peebles profoundly. His increasing awareness of injustice led him to participate in the campaign to desegregate the



Edward H. Peebles, with Nancy MacLean. *Scalawag: A White Southerner's Journey through Segregation to Human Rights Activism*. Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2014. 248 pp. ISBN: 9780813935393 (cloth), \$30.00.

city's restaurants. He went on to a long career in activism. Along the way, he met a number of famous progressives, including Eleanor Holmes Norton, Doug Wilder, Eleanor Roosevelt, and Martin Luther King. He became involved in the years-long effort to desegregate the public school system in Prince Edward County, Virginia, and he assisted in disaster relief in the Gulf South. For many years, he played an active part in city politics in Richmond.

In addition to these accomplishments, Peebles had a long career in academia, as a scholar and teacher. He received a doctorate at the University of Kentucky in Lexington, an experience he thoroughly enjoyed, but he continued to speak out against bigotry. When he met basketball coach Adolph Rupp by chance at a gas station, Peebles

asked when the team would start recruiting black athletes; Rupp scowled and gave a noncommittal reply. Peeples served for several decades on the faculty at Virginia Commonwealth University, where he taught medicine and sociology until 1995. He had a talent for friendship, and he forged lasting alliances with progressive academics, civil rights activists, and later, with feminists and gay rights activists. Nonetheless, throughout his life he had to fend off verbal abuse and physical attacks from white reactionaries. Some of his own relatives shunned him, and for that reason he found it especially comforting to learn that his family tree included William Brisbane. His life reminds us, among other things, of the fierce resistance to desegregation; the role that local people, white and black, played in bringing it to an end; and the high price that some of them paid for their activism.

Peeples is not very interested in two-party politics, and he says little about the national

political scene, even as the Republican Party in the 1960s and 1970s embraced the racism he had grown up with a generation earlier. By the time of Richard Nixon, the party of Lincoln had turned into one that used code words to oppose racial equality. The reader wonders if national events affected Peeples in some way, if only to deepen his commitment to civil rights. But this is not to take anything away from this remarkable book. Peeples keeps the focus on his principal theme of race and all that racism has done to harm black southerners and cripple white southerners. The narrative is exceptionally honest, and it is written in clear, compelling prose. *Scalawag* is an invaluable primary source for historians that is also ideal for course adoption in classes on southern history, the history of the family, urban history, the history of the civil rights movement, and the history of human rights.

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