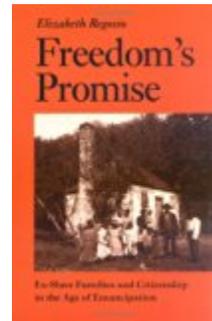


Elizabeth Regosin. *Freedom's Promise: Ex-Slave Families and Citizenship in the Age of Emancipation*. Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 2002. Notes + sources cited + index. \$55.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8139-2095-5; \$19.50 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8139-2096-2.

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Family Stories Often Told and Too Seldom Heard: The Pension Claims of African Americans

In *Freedom's Promise*, Elizabeth Regosin guides readers through African Americans' efforts to define the institution of the family during the transition period from slavery to freedom. *Freedom's Promise* uncovers, through military pension claims filed by the families of African-American soldiers, African Americans' activism in shaping their own citizenship by applying for military pensions, delineating familial relationships, and telling their family histories. Through these processes, former slaves constructed their citizenship, adding to the legal framework established by the Civil Rights Act and the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Amendments (pp. 7, 22, 85). Moreover, Regosin finds within the pension files themes of "identity, displacement, assimilation, resistance," which are echoed in anti-lynching efforts, the work of W. E. B. Du Bois, and the Civil Rights Movement of the twentieth century, and suggests that pensioners' files and the narratives they contain can be placed alongside such examples of African-American activism (pp. 7, 184-185).

Freedom's Promise is engagingly written and presents readers with a concise background of the military pension system inaugurated in 1862 to provide families of deceased soldiers or veterans with a pension, if the claimant could prove their relationship to the soldier. It demonstrates that as African Americans pursued pensions, disparities emerged between the lived experiences of African-American families and the idealized family relationships held by white society and incorporated into the pension regulations (p. 148). Building on scholarship that documents the expansion of government in-

volvement in the nineteenth-century family, the author notes that the federal government, by legalizing slave marriages and extending the right to pensions to African Americans, offered African Americans the rights of citizenship and required that they conform to established ideas about the family.[1] At the same time, the act of filing a pension required African Americans to define and describe their family relationships. The result, according to the author, is two distinct yet related stories. One details the challenges faced by African Americans as they attempted to meet definitions of family relationships as defined by white middle-class Americans in the second half of the nineteenth century, complementing recent scholarship on African-American families.[2] The other reveals how former slaves recounted their experiences and viewed family relationships in the aftermath of emancipation, adding to the research that details how the transition to freedom shaped gender roles, property ownership, and family relationships among African Americans (p. 16).[3] *Freedom's Promise* explores these two related processes through a sample of one hundred pensions of mostly former slaves, giving emphasis to claims filed shortly after the end of the war and to those that were the most complicated. The sample includes mostly the claims of wives, children, and parents of African-American soldiers who fought for the Union because, the author notes, those claims yielded the most information on family relationships.

Organized thematically, *Freedom's Promise* examines the process of securing a pension, conflicts over

claimants' surnames, competing understandings of marriage, the status of dependents, and the rights of parents. The author effectively uses individual cases to illuminate the collective experiences of African-American families. For example, the claim of Harriet Berry, an illiterate widow of a Union soldier, is used to explore the pension process and the lived experience of the claimant. The Berrys had married as slaves in North Carolina and seized their freedom by fleeing to Union-controlled territory in Virginia. Harriet's husband enlisted and died in Union service. The claim Berry filed in 1878 is used by the author to reveal the factors that shaped former slaves' claims. These included assumptions about slavery's impact on the slave, the fact that slave families lacked legal sanction, the influence of slaves' owners in their lives, and the presence of slave communities (p. 30). Through the Berry claim, Regosin shows how former slaves struggled to establish their public identity, from their names to proof of marriage. The author considers how government prejudice that favored material evidence over oral testimony affected claimants, along with the assumption that literacy indicated moral character and the undue influence accorded to white testimony. The author concludes that the claim of Harriet Berry reveals a period of transition in which a former slave was "at once an insider and an outsider in free white society, no longer a slave but not quite a full citizen," and shows how former slaves adjusted to "an alien social, cultural, political, economic, and legal milieu" (p. 52).

Freedom's Promise finds in the collective experience of African-American pension applicants a considerable disjuncture between the standards of familial relationships that had to be met to secure pensions and the experiences of African-American families. The volume places these in the larger context of all pension applicants. Difficulties, for example, arose when naming practices in slavery conflicted with expectations in freedom, complicating public identity and former slaves' ability to prove their family ties (p. 77). Considerable differences existed between how claims officials understood marriage laws and the reality of marriages in slavery. Conflicts arose between pension laws that prioritized conjugal relationships over parent-child bonds, based on the white family model, and the reality of slaves' experiences and community structures (pp. 152-153). The claims examined in *Freedom's Promise* also indicated a shift from matriarchal to father-centered families, at least among fatherless claimants seeking to establish their legitimacy and secure a pension (pp. 137-138), but the author notes that the absence of claimants' fathers "gives emphasis

to the centrality of the slave mother's position, a position buttressed by the laws of slavery, the predilection of the masters toward matrifocality, and the practices of slave culture" (p. 147). The author concisely relates these findings to scholarships on Civil War pensioners, finding that African Americans had more difficulty securing pensions than white applicants and that some of the difficulties faced by African Americans in proving marriages and parental dependence were similar to those faced by white applicants (pp. 79, 159-160).[4]

Freedom's Promise is valuable to readers interested in issues of slavery and freedom, African-American history, the history of the family, and issues of citizenship in the nineteenth century. Through a close reading of pension files, Regosin uncovers and reconstructs textured examples of the diversity of African-American families in both slavery and freedom. *Freedom's Promise* should encourage further research into the individual and family histories of African Americans who were, through their activism and engagement with the federal government, as Regosin writes, storytellers. *Freedom's Promise* is at its best uncovering these stories, blending narrative and analysis in an accessible text, appropriate for research and teaching. Doubtless, some readers will take issue with the insertion of the first-person in the text, finding it obtrusive, while others will deem it effective in bringing the reader along as the author listens to, and analyzes, the family histories of former slaves during Reconstruction. In either case, as *Freedom's Promise* shows, the stories of families documented in African-American pension applications are narratives of citizenship, and worth hearing.

Notes

[1]. Peter W. Bardaglio, *Reconstructing the Household: Families, Sex, and the Law in the Nineteenth-Century South* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1995); Michael Grossberg, *Governing the Hearth: Law and Family in Nineteenth-Century America* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1985).

[2]. John Blassingame, *The Slave Community: Plantation Life in the Antebellum South* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1972); Herbert Gutman, *The Black Family in Slavery and Freedom, 1750-1925* (New York: Pantheon, 1976); Laura Edwards, *Gendered Strife and Confusion: The Political Culture of Reconstruction* (Urbana: University of Illinois, 1997); Noralee Frankel, *Freedom's Women: Black Women and Families in Civil War Era Mississippi* (Bloomington: University of Indiana Press, 1999).

[3]. Dylan Penningroth, "Slavery, Freedom, and So-

cial Claims to Property among African Americans in Liberty County, Georgia, 1850-1880," *Journal of American History* 84. no. 2 (September 1997): pp. 405-435 and *The Claims of Kinfolk: African American Property and Community in the Nineteenth-Century South* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2003); Leslie A. Schwalm, *A Hard Fight for We: Women's Transition from Slavery to Freedom in South Carolina* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1997); Melvin Patrick Ely, *Israel on the Appomattox: A Southern Experiment in Black Freedom from the 1790s Through the Civil War* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2005).

[4]. Donald R. Shaffer, " 'I Do Not Suppose That Uncle Sam Looks at the Skin': African Americans and the

Civil War Pension System, 1865-1934," *Civil War History* 46 (June 2000): pp. 132-147; Theda Skocpol, *Protecting Mothers and Soldiers: The Political Origins of Social Policy in the United States* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1992); Amy E. Holmes, "'Such Is the Price We Pay': American Widows and the Civil War Pension System," in *Towards a Social History of the Civil War: Exploratory Essays*, ed. Maris A. Vinovskis (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), pp. 171-195; Megan J. McClintock, "Civil War Pensions and the Reconstruction of Union Families," *Journal of American History* 83 (September 1996): pp. 456-480. See also Shaffer, *After the Glory: The Struggle of Black Civil War Veterans* (University Press of Kansas, 2004).

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