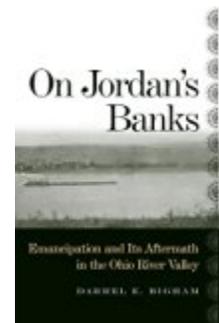


H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Darrel E. Bigham. *On Jordan's Banks: Emancipation and Its Aftermath in the Ohio River Valley*. Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2005. x + 458 pp. \$45.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8131-2366-0.

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Detailed, Restrained Analysis of African Americans at Two Great Divides

In his latest work, Darrel Bigham offers readers an ambitious overview of blacks' lives before, during, and after the Civil War in the counties in the states contiguous to the Lower Ohio River Valley (Kentucky, Ohio, Illinois, Indiana). Written in a straightforward, matter-of-fact style, *On Jordan's Banks* will both greatly enlighten the general, "lay" portion of its targeted audience and serve as the standard academic source on many of its Ohio Valley topics for the indefinite future. On the other hand, it may well leave large numbers of others, especially contemporary scholars, at least somewhat frustrated in its muted argument about the Lower Ohio region's overall black history and its African American residents' mid- to late-nineteenth-century experiences relative to those elsewhere.

Bigham's writing style is similar in approach and tone to an earlier school of African American historiography that primarily concerned itself with filling in the basic story of blacks' lives throughout American history. This school, associated with such luminaries as Carter G. Woodson, Herbert Aptheker, John Hope Franklin, and Benjamin Quarles, established a strong foundation for today's modern African American scholarship and, not insignificantly, undermined many of the negative stereotypes propagated by mainstream pre-World War II scholars.[1] In this regard, Bigham's work follows in the footsteps of many of the most towering figures in black history.

Bigham notes in his prologue that prior scholars have

approached the African American history of the Ohio Valley in a very limited, uneven fashion. In part this has resulted from studies that have centered on cities alone; this has created a perspective that has been "virtually silent regarding African Americans who lived on the Ohio's [rural] banks" (p. 5). Related, state-level studies, meanwhile, have been restricted in their coverage of Ohio River patterns within their political boundaries alone. "As a consequence" Bigham observes, "almost all of them lack comparative perspectives—overlooking, for example, regional variations created by geography and culture. This omission is especially ironic, given the centrality of the Ohio in the development of these states" (p. 7). The current work, he indicates, will take a broader view, emphasizing both the differences and similarities from one side of the river to the other. It will also fill in many important gaps as it proceeds.

On Jordan's Banks: Emancipation and Its Aftermath in the Ohio River Valley, as its full title suggests, places its greatest emphasis on emancipation in the Ohio Valley during the Civil War and the years immediately following. Two of the book's twelve chapters examine the antebellum era; two focus on the chaotic Civil War dynamic; the remaining eight consider the redefinition of African Americans' lives in the decade or so after emancipation. In approaching his subject matter, Bigham alternates between descriptive analysis north and south of the Ohio as he proceeds from topic to topic. At times the comparisons occur within a single chapter, at other times chapters are devoted to one or the other's story. The

main focuses of analysis include demography and population shifts; formal as well as informal race relations; the swirling forces unleashed by the Civil War; the political and civil rights definition and redefinition of African Americans' rights after 1865; and the postbellum emergence of new patterns related to black families, churches, communities, and education.

Several strengths of the study come immediately to mind. Perhaps first and foremost, the author delivers on his promise to fill out the story of Ohio Valley African Americans in its less studied rural settings. Bigham often approaches his topics county by county. While prospective readers might imagine this leads to a degree of tedium (there are twenty-five counties on each side of the river, after all), it does help illuminate one of Bigham's central assertions: that both similarities and differences are readily apparent the more closely one examines specific matters. One of the greatest continuities concerns slavery's influence, across time periods, south of the Ohio, and the less stifling yet clearly demeaning, bitterly racist influences in the northern bank counties. Despite white residents' common cultural backgrounds throughout the Ohio Valley region, slavery left an extremely large imprint to the south. This could be seen after the Civil War, for example, in patterns pertaining to familial independence. While census takers in 1870 found most northern bank blacks living in two-parent, autonomous households, a very high proportion of blacks in Kentucky river counties continued to reside in white households. By 1880, the African American presence in white Kentucky households had significantly diminished, but remained notable nonetheless.

Bigham also clearly points to other noteworthy regional patterns. One concerns the interconnected histories of cities directly across the Ohio River from one another: most clearly, Cincinnati and Covington, and Newport, Kentucky along with Louisville and Madison and Jeffersonville, Indiana. The regional economies and proximity of each grouping seems to have had a moderating effect on the social and racial patterns of one another. In several regards the Covington, Newport, and Louisville urban centers seemed less dominated by slavery and more open to northern patterns than other Kentucky areas. Another distinctive pattern concerns the presence of plantation slavery in western Kentucky and the hesitance of African Americans to settle in the counties directly across the river in corresponding parts of Indiana and Illinois.

Despite these intriguing examples of how one bank of

the Ohio affected the other, one question remains unanswered: was there *an* Ohio River Valley African American identity or experience in the mid- to late nineteenth century? This is no small issue for two reasons. First, as American historians have increasingly focused on regional identities, the question of the Ohio River Valley's cohesiveness has become a matter of much conjecture. Broadly, it appears that the region's identity was strongest during the era of riverboat travel and became less coherent and cohesive after the mid-nineteenth century as transportation and economic developments blurred the region's distinctive character. The second reason to focus on the Ohio Valley question is Bigham's own stated goal of providing a more cohesive regional black history.

Admittedly, to a degree, Bigham *does* create a stronger Ohio River identity for blacks residing in the river counties of Ohio, Indiana, and Illinois than most prior historians have done, viewing them on many occasions as collective groupings. His discussion of Kentucky's river counties is also far more detailed and cohesive than the discussion found in Marion Lucas's recent *History of Blacks in Kentucky* (1992). And micro-level contrasts and similarities abound in *Jordan's Banks*.

Nonetheless it is often hard to discern the most meaningful cross-river differences and similarities from those that are less critical. In part this seemingly reflects Bigham's stress on detailed county-by-county and/or multi-county-by-multi-county units of analysis. These tend to privilege subtle differences over broad, sweeping regional patterns. Compounding matters is the author's limited use of chapter openings and closings that might help the reader separate the wheat from the chaff. The reader, in effect, is left on his or her own to deduce the book's more important themes, as was done above in order to present the points about cities' moderating influences on one another and the seeming impact of plantation slavery in certain Kentucky sub-regions on their cross-river northern counterparts. Those expecting a work that centers around a small number of carefully drawn, well-honed themes or a strong, thesis-driven analysis will be sorely disappointed.

Relatedly, many contemporary historians will be frustrated by Bigham's limited efforts to place Ohio River patterns in the broader contexts of other regions' and the national experience related to issues covered in *On Jordan's Banks*. In the author's defense, his discussion occasionally does incorporate the related work of distinguished scholars like Leon Litwack, David Blight, and

William Freehling—and to very good effect. Bigham, however, makes no consistent effort to compare his findings with those of recent scholars on family, community, political, and civil rights issues in other regions during the Civil War Era (broadly defined), North or South. In an important sense, this represents a lost opportunity to further define the distinctive character of blacks' experiences on both banks of the Ohio, on the one hand, and as a cohesive regional group, on the other. There are simply few reference points with which to compare Ohio Valley African Americans' history with that, say, of the Old South or the Northeast.

In sum, Bigham's *On Jordan's Banks* makes many important contributions to our grasp of the African American experience in the Ohio Valley. The author's work

provides solid, foundational scholarship in the tradition of Woodson, Franklin, and Quarles. At the same time, more emphasis on the distinctiveness—and/or lack of distinctiveness—of Ohio Valley's mid to late-nineteenth century black history would help further delineate and deepen our understanding.

Note

[1]. See, for example, Carter G. Woodson, ed., *Journal of Negro History*, vols. 1-20 (1916-1936); Herbert Aptheker, *American Negro Slave Revolts* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1943); John Hope Franklin, *From Slavery to Freedom: A History of American Negroes* (New York: Knopf, 1947); Benjamin Quarles, *The Negro in the Civil War* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1953).

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