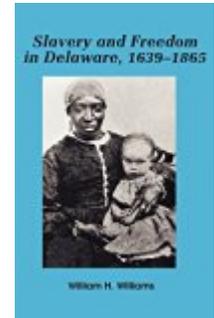


William H. Williams. *Slavery and Freedom in Delaware, 1639-1865*. Wilmington: Scholarly Resources, 1996. xvii + 270 pp. \$50.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-8420-2594-2.



Reviewed by David Libby

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Delaware historian William Williams' study, *Slavery and Freedom in Delaware, 1639-1865*, is one of two recent books to address the previously under-reported history of slavery in Delaware. As the only non-Southern state that retained the practice of slavery by the beginning of the Civil War, it is somewhat surprising that no scholar has taken up this subject before. However, Williams does an admirable job in researching and writing an excellent state study of slavery.

Williams traces Delaware's slave system to its source. Beginning with the Dutch period, Williams focuses on the origins and development of a slave system that does not necessarily fit most notions of slavery in either the colonial or antebellum years. At times, Williams pursues themes to their logical conclusions, and thus does not follow a strict chronology, but he does not generalize across time, or read evidence backwards. Rather, Williams begins by addressing the experiences of the first slaves to arrive from the Middle Passage and their ordeal of becoming culturally as well as geographically acclimated to Delaware. Because the study is sensitive to both locality and time, it is

an important contribution not only to the history of Delaware, but also to the history of slavery.

Williams is conscious of the daily realities that made slavery in Delaware little different from slavery elsewhere. He includes an important discussion of the work the slaves did, as staples changed from lumber, to tobacco, to various grains. Delaware slave owners expressed a greater concern for their slaves than did other masters throughout the state's history. However such concern was borne of negative stereotypes and attitudes towards Africans and African-Americans.

Slavery and Freedom in Delaware illustrates the survival of slavery in a region where slavery's economic significance was already in decline by the late eighteenth century. Yet Delaware's power structure never mustered the political will to eradicate the practice from the state. In addition, through much of Delaware's history, the state had a significant free black population. Williams has not ignored the presence or the contribution of free blacks in antebellum Delaware, and thus the

title of the study, *Slavery and Freedom* is very appropriate.

Delaware's unique situation as a northern state with an active (but declining) slave system suggests that it was a microcosm of the national debate on slavery. In the late eighteenth century, Delaware's Quaker and Methodist slaveholders began to see the sin of slavery and manumitted the slaves they owned. At the same time, the state retained slavery because of the political influence of slave owners who defended their practice on bluntly racist grounds. But the slaves took advantage of the state's proximity to other free states and liberated themselves by flight. Within the state, an active political and social debate continued between abolitionists and defenders of slavery up to the Civil War. However, as Williams has painfully illustrated, Delaware did not have the will to end its peculiar institution, despite its decreasing economic significance.

While Williams has done an excellent job at illustrating most aspects of slavery in Delaware, I have one major quarrel with his interpretation. In his discussion of slave folklife, Williams suggests that Delaware's slaves were so insular from other major African and African-American populations that they were totally alienated from their cultural heritage. While the small size of the African-American community limited the kinds of social and cultural contacts that slaves and free blacks in Delaware could cultivate, such isolation, as Ira Berlin and others have illustrated, did not stamp out their cultural heritage. Emphasizing religion, Williams agrees with Jon Butler's "spiritual holocaust" theory that suggests the process of enslavement and the Middle Passage severed any cultural connections with the African past. For evidence he points to an absence of evidence, which can be interpreted in a number of ways. However, it is precisely because slave folklife was by nature subversive that slaves left very little evidence of its existence, lest it be discovered and punished. Williams does not deny the existence of a folklife

among the slaves--in fact, he describes it quite well. But he finds little African influence. Unfortunately, Williams bases his later discussion concerning the development of a free black community on his assumptions about the absence of African influences in their culture. Thus, if the reader does not accept the initial argument, what follows is unacceptable as well.

Still, *Slavery and Freedom in Delaware* is a rigorously researched and well written study of one of the most peculiar elements of what is normally considered the South's "peculiar institution." This study is a corrective to a near absence of scholarship on slavery in Delaware. But of equal significance, by focusing on a state not usually identified with the South--indeed one that all would agree is exceptional--Williams has provided us with a deeper understanding of American slavery.

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