

**Seth Rockman.** *Scraping By: Wage Labor, Slavery, and Survival in Early Baltimore.* Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2009. xii + 368 pp. \$25.00, paper, ISBN 978-0-8018-9007-9.



**Reviewed by** Brian Luskey

**Published on** H-SHEAR (June, 2009)

**Commissioned by** Caleb McDaniel (Rice University)

If we are to understand the rapid ascension of Baltimore, Maryland, to prominence in the early Republic, we must know Irish immigrant Michael Gorman and people like him. Gorman spent many a day in the 1810s standing in the shallow waters of the city's harbor, "knee-deep" in the "sulphurous muck" dredged by a hulking apparatus known as the "mudmachine" (p. 76). If Gorman and his peers had not shoveled this muck into boats for transportation to a nearby landfill, large commercial vessels would have run aground at the harbor's entrance. The city's stunning economic growth, in no uncertain terms, depended on the mudmachinists. As transatlantic trade increased in 1815, the wages Gorman earned helped him keep his family afloat and make payments on a small house that he had purchased the year before. Yet, by the end of the decade, it had become clear that he would not profit to the extent elites did from his "grueling, filthy" labor (p. 76). Getting work on the mudmachine became more difficult as it became tied to partisan allegiances. Gorman lost his property and died destitute in 1832 after

residing in the city's almshouse for more than nine years.

Gorman is representative of the thousands of laboring men and women who populate Seth Rockman's *Scraping By*, an engagingly written and persuasively argued exploration of the social relations, legal regulations, and cultural assumptions that capitalism produced in Baltimore between the 1790s and 1830s. Stories like Gorman's showcase Rockman's impressive ability to marshal scraps of evidence from wage books, tax rolls, court documents, census manuscripts, city directories, newspaper advertisements, and almshouse records to craft both finely rendered portraits of individual workers and a compelling analysis of the challenges they faced as they tried to survive in an economic and social system that limited their autonomy.

Baltimore was the demographic marvel of the early Republic, rising from obscurity at the turn of the nineteenth century as regional agricultural producers decided to plant wheat instead of to-

bacco for surer profits in West Indian and European markets. Baltimore became a center not only of milling and manufacturing but also of the carrying trade. Its population in 1840 (102,313) was seven and one-half times as large as it had been in 1790 (13,503). Rural- and foreign-born whites as well as free people of color crowded into urban neighborhoods in search of work on the waterfront, in manufacturing establishments, and in private homes. Seven out of ten household heads paid no taxes because they did not own forty dollars worth of property. Throughout this period, black Baltimoreans accounted for 20 percent of the city's population. By 1840, German immigrants accounted for another fifth. While these statistics demonstrate the diversity and rapid change of Baltimore's population, many hired slaves moving between rural masters and urban renters went uncounted in decennial returns, helping to explain the misleadingly low numbers of slaves counted by census takers after 1820.

In Rockman's account, the only people who enjoyed autonomy in early Republic Baltimore were people with capital. They "could best assemble, deploy, and exploit the physical labor of others. The early republic's economy opened up new possibilities for some Americans precisely because it closed down opportunities for others" (p. 3). Capitalism in the early Republic was not "a synonym for market exchange," he explains, but rather "a political economy that dictated who worked where, on what terms, and to whose benefit" (p. 5). Skilled carpenters trying to staff building projects with brawny, disciplined men and bourgeois women hoping to underscore claims to refinement by hiring domestic servants were among those "committed to seeing labor in all its guises as a largely undifferentiated market commodity, one for which the deserving men and women who were guiding Baltimore's boomtown growth should have the widest number of options" (p. 110). Capitalists sifted through those options in the hopes of selecting a "better worker--someone more diligent, more quick, more respect-

ful"--while also keeping the labor pool large and diverse, since any pair of hands might do in a pinch (p. 103).

Baltimore's capitalist economy provided a multitude of choices to prospective employers. It was not in a transitional stage, "maturing" from a heavy reliance on slave labor to a clearer emphasis on wage labor.[1] The well-to-do weighed hiring or purchasing slaves who lacked mobility but who might increase masters' costs during hard times. White laborers could be fired more easily but also might leave for better wages before the job was done. Rockman's evidence proves that getting rid of slavery was not in the interests of capitalists, who gladly employed white and black people, free and enslaved, on the same job sites for identical wages. White workers did not like these arrangements and gave voice to their displeasure, but they did not have the power to cord off workplaces in order to protect the prerogatives that they associated with whiteness.[2] If they did not like working with free or enslaved African Americans, white laborers could go elsewhere, although they would likely have to forfeit payment of their wages if they left before a contract expired.

Rockman carefully disaggregates various groups of workers and explains the reasons why they experienced this undifferentiated labor market differently. Many slaveowners understood their human property as investments, hiring out slaves because "the return on a year's hire could exceed the revenue of an outright sale" (p. 57). Term slavery--a condition that promised bondpeople freedom after a period of years--was conditional upon slaves' ability to pay substantial sums that would fund masters' future purchases of slaves. Masters hoped that term slaves would be more obedient workers, reluctant to attempt an escape that might jeopardize the agreement. Some of the consequences of this practice are illustrated in the experiences of Beverly Dowling, a slave who contributed to his master's scheme for "serial

labor exploitation” as he worked to make himself free (p. 60). In 1833, he agreed to pay his master two hundred dollars for freedom and immediately made good on half of the debt from savings he had managed to accrue while hired out as a personal servant (minus the lion's share of the wages his master had already taken from him). Dowling sold oysters, shined shoes, and waited tables on a steamer in a herculean effort to pay the other half. Because he did not pay what he owed on time, Dowling was arrested and sold to a slave trader as his master tried to profit from ownership one last time. Only after his freedom suit wended its way through the courts in 1837 could the industrious and persevering slave count himself legally “free.” Now broke, he could work in a city where vagrancy laws forbade workers’ idleness and curfew statutes limited the number of jobs people of color could accept.

Women faced patriarchal condescension from employers and workingmen alike as they attempted to find work outside of the home to ensure personal and familial survival. Seamstresses pressured employers for “*living wages*”—a phrase coined by a Baltimore lawyer writing in support of their campaign (p. 148). Women hucksters sent petitions to municipal authorities to protest their exclusion from public markets, citing the paucity of other employment options for women and their desire “to obtain a scanty subsistence for themselves and families” (p. 100). Rockman crunches the numbers to show that, in 1810, between 10 and 20 percent of Baltimore households were headed by women, but employers had a vested interest in fostering “the presumption of female dependence,” because it “justified the secondary wages that in turn guaranteed it” (p. 133).

Rockman’s central conclusion is that capitalists were revolutionary historical actors who curtailed the agency of working people by thinking of and using both free and enslaved laborers as interchangeable commodities.[3] That argument encourages him to make an equally bold historio-

graphical contribution to the study of class in the early Republic. He defines “class” “as a material condition resulting from the ability of those purchasing labor to economically and physically coerce those performing it—and to do so under the social fiction of a self-regulating market that purportedly doled out its rewards to the deserving in accordance with the laws of nature” (p. 11). Rockman does not describe class entities emerging around a “shared consciousness, identity, or politics percolating from working people themselves” (p. 11). Rather, class is a vital tool historians can use to expose the dynamics of material and cultural power in American society.

Material inequality benefited capitalists and severely circumscribed workers’ control over their lives. And yet economic and legal power was not sufficient for anxious nineteenth-century elites. They made claims for the legitimacy of the social order that they had created by distinguishing their own success as a manifestation of superior talents, habits, and character traits. Economic power had indispensable rhetorical and ideological components. Baltimore’s poor often tried to engage in the market on more independent footing by peddling goods, operating a laundry, scavenging, or using the assistance of charitable institutions and the almshouse to keep body and soul together. “Being poor” was “hard work,” Rockman affirms in the title of the book’s sixth chapter. The causes of poverty were clear to laboring Baltimoreans—a scarcity of jobs, inflated prices for small quantities of necessary items, and African Americans’ desire to buy family members out of bondage all played a role. But slaveowners, merchants, and almshouse commissioners rewrote workers’ stories about being poor, disparaging their pretensions to agency and citing laziness, improvidence, and intemperance as the underlying explanations for economic inequality.

Rockman contends that poor people’s ventures into the market for reasons other than wages were not evidence of a “nascent en-

trepreneurism,” a quest for wealth (p. 127). Sending one’s children into the streets to gather wood chips or old rope was a means for survival, not a path to economic independence. Nevertheless, Rockman describes workers’ “makeshift” strategies for survival as being based on “two cardinal virtues of the early republic’s capitalist culture—delayed gratification and a willingness to work oneself harder in order to better the circumstances of family members” (p. 158). The culture of capitalism was so pervasive that it provided the script for workers’ struggles to survive even as capitalists took it as an article of faith that poor men and women did not strive. The “social fiction” that workers refused to work hard was powerful because the powerful perpetuated it. It made material inequalities seem legitimate, social and economic mobility for poor people rare, and laborers’ ingenuity and industry useful to elites. While bourgeois employers championed self-fashioning—Frederick Douglass embarked on his quest for “self-made manhood” in Baltimore’s streets—they also believed in a more important “truth”: laborers needed to exhibit industry, perseverance, and other winning character traits to make bosses rich. Rockman brilliantly shows that capitalists not only regulated who could work where and for what, but also defined ambition in ways that ensured workers’ continued struggles with poverty.

#### Notes

[1]. For an opposing view, see Barbara Jeanne Fields, *Slavery and Freedom on the Middle Ground: Maryland during the Nineteenth Century* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1985), 57.

[2]. For an assessment of race and violence on late antebellum Baltimore’s waterfront that reveals the ways in which partisan political conflict limited white workers’ ability to coerce employers to fire African American shipcaulkers, see Frank Towers, “Job Busting at Baltimore Shipyards: Racial Violence in the Civil War-Era South,” *Journal of Southern History* 66 (2000): 221-256.

[3]. For an account of the nineteenth century’s “great transformation” that identifies capitalists as revolutionaries, see Michael Zakim, *Ready-Made Democracy: A History of Men’s Dress in the American Republic, 1760-1860* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003). For the commodification of slaves, see Walter Johnson, *Soul by Soul: Life Inside the Antebellum Slave Market* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999). Rockman seconds Johnson’s concern that social historians’ focus on the “agency” of their subjects imposes “a liberal notion of selfhood, with its emphasis on independence and choice” that was at odds with the realities faced by most workers in the early nineteenth century. See Walter Johnson, “On Agency,” *Journal of Social History* 37 (2003): 115.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at <https://networks.h-net.org/h-shear/>

**Citation:** Brian Luskey. Review of Rockman, Seth. *Scraping By: Wage Labor, Slavery, and Survival in Early Baltimore*. H-SHEAR, H-Net Reviews. June, 2009.

**URL:** <https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=24171>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.