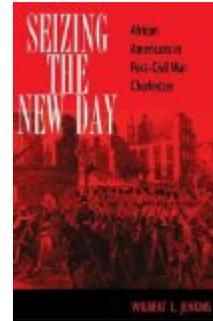


# H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Wilbert L. Jenkins. *Seizing the New Day: African Americans in Post-Civil War Charleston*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1998. xvi + 238 pp. \$29.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-253-33380-3.

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## One Step Forward, Two Steps Back

In his introduction, Wilbert Jenkins promises correctives to the traditional story of the black experience during Reconstruction. First, where the standard accounts treat regional or state-wide patterns, he will focus on local history. Second, where predecessors have emphasized the political experience of the freedmen, he will elucidate the social and economic. And third, where scholars have too often treated post-war Negroes as a homogeneous group, he will reveal the wide diversity within that community.

It is in the realization of his first objective that Jenkins' contribution is most obvious and most valuable. *Seizing the New Day* is, first and foremost, a local history which thoroughly documents for Charleston, South Carolina, the triumphs and tragedies, successes and failures, and hopes and disappointments of blacks during the first few years of freedom. At the national and state levels, the general nature of this experience has been well told by Eric Foner, Leon Litwack, and Joel Williamson among others.[1] This monograph, however, provides detail and nuance which is simply not possible in general histories.

Jenkins accomplishes this in seven tightly written, logically organized chapters which treat (1) the nature of slavery in Charleston, (2) the immediate impact of manumission, (3) the struggle for economic independence and security, (4) the quest for education, (5) the effects of emancipation on family and community life, (6) the establishment of independent black churches, and (7) the efforts (sometimes violent, sometimes political) blacks

made to protect and enhance their new freedom.

Charleston's blacks enjoyed their greatest successes in those arenas where defining freedom was least dependent on white approval or cooperation—family and religion. Despite obvious hardships and the perceptions of many contemporary observers, the black family had “achieved a degree of stability by 1870. Of black adults living in all-black households, the percentage of those who were married was in fact strikingly close to the percentage of married white adults living in all-white households” (p. 96).

The winning of religious freedom, however, was the most clear-cut achievement. Charleston's blacks, associating white churches with the Old Regime, seized emancipation as an opportunity to sever ties with white denominations and establish churches of their own. White ambivalence speeded the process, and organized religion was soon completely bifurcated along racial lines. These black churches “became the central institution within the black community of Charleston ... and their leaders became the nucleus of black community life, providing sacred services to blacks but functioning also as a social, economic, and political institution within the black community” (p. 132).

In other areas, the benefits of freedom were more ephemeral. Economic independence was crucial. Most blacks were eager to work, willing to save money, and hungry for land; but the circumstances and politics of the post-war era made prosperity illusive. The mass mi-

gration of rural blacks into Charleston at war's end depressed the labor market. The Black Code and white hostility circumscribed choices. Free land, of course, never materialized. The Panic of 1873 undermined a powerful black labor movement and depressed wages. Despite black acceptance of capitalist ideals and great perseverance in the pursuance of same, high unemployment rates became a reality by the end of the period.

Education was a very high priority for post-emancipation blacks in Charleston. They aggressively politicked for free public schools, and scraped and saved to provide the books and supplies which even the tuition-free institutions required. "Indeed, some of the sacrifices freedpeople made to obtain literacy after emancipation are unprecedented in American history" (p. 75). The necessity of such sacrifices increased with the passage of time, because Northern humanitarian groups and the Freedmen's Bureau cut back their programs and worsening economic conditions exacerbated black poverty. Never wavering in their thirst for learning, black school enrollments by 1870 were comparable to white, and black illiteracy was down to 54.4 percent.

Charleston blacks were less intimidated by white violence than was generally true throughout the South. Indeed, blacks aggressively used violence, as well as political action, to protect and extend the new privileges of freedom. In a successful sit-in campaign to integrate the city's street cars, in full-fledged riots attempting to obliterate the lingering effects of slavery, and in individual retaliation for insults or abuse to black women, Charleston's Negroes clearly held their own. The author concludes that "The incidents of racial violence in Charleston during the Reconstruction period suggest that freedmen had adjusted to the new social order better than had whites" (p. 152).

In pursuance of his second goal, avoiding an overemphasis on politics, Jenkins has perhaps succeeded too well. Although politics, in one way or another, was an important tool in the quest to achieve social and economic freedom and is so recognized in each of the chapters, there is no really comprehensive discussion of the subject. Black voting, for example, is discussed only briefly in a single paragraph on page 145 where one learns simply that "freedmen were encouraged to register and vote." A chapter on this subject would have been an informative addition.

By the same token, a more thorough discussion of black soldiers could have been elucidating. There has been some confusion regarding the number and the du-

ration of use of Negro troops during Reconstruction.[2] The generalization, drawn from one incident in 1865, that "Throughout the Reconstruction Period in Charleston, black soldiers were active participants in many racial clashes, often as the aggressors" is probably wide of the mark (p. 139).

Jenkins third corrective—to focus on the heterogeneity within the black community—is very effectively done. The free black population in Charleston had always been large, ranging up to as much as 20 percent of total Negroes. Predominantly mulatto, this group included both laborers, who were treated scarcely better than slaves, and a very small wealthy elite, who often owned slaves themselves and supported the Confederacy. Charleston's slaves, mostly domestics, were joined at war's end by a huge influx of black agricultural laborers from the hinterland. Thus, there was a diverse black population: the lighter-skinned *freeborn*, both middle class and elite, and the darker-skinned *freedmen*, urban and rural.

Although often united, these black subgroups were frequently divided. "Blacks from the antebellum free black elite were scornful of the recently freed blacks, who in turn were distrustful of them. House servants thought themselves better than field hands, and blacks who were not very prosperous envied the well-to-do. There were also tensions between established city dwellers and rural migrants" (p. 107).

And the impact of freedom varied somewhat from group to group. The freeborn middle class, for whom emancipation and Black Code brought a loss of status, provided political leadership which was often antithetical to the interests of the freedman majority. Skin color and status often determined which schools blacks attended and which churches they joined. Curiously, rural freedman pursued education more aggressively than their urban brethren. And intraracial bickering was one of the factors which led to the collapse of the Republican Party in the city.

In an epilogue, Jenkins briefly treats the unraveling of Reconstruction and the erosion of economic status and civil and political rights in the late nineteenth century. "Blacks in Charleston and throughout the South took one step forward and two steps backward ... The gallant struggle of black Charlestonians to acquire first-class American citizenship represented their first civil rights movement" (p. 163).

*Seizing the New Day* is a good book, carefully researched, logically organized, and clearly written. The

author has utilized a wide variety of primary sources including records of the Freedmen's Bureau, Freedmen's Savings Bank, and American Missionary Association, and he has made particularly effective use of the population schedules of the United States manuscript censuses for the period. He has used the latter to compile a number of revealing tables on free blacks, slaves, residential distribution, education, employment, marriage, etc. This methodology is an excellent model for others who would study change at the local level in this fascinating period of American history. And the volume is handsomely illustrated with well-chosen photographs, drawings, and maps.

*Seizing the New Day* is an worthwhile addition to the growing shelf of books which emphasize the important role that blacks played in shaping the changes which came with emancipation.

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[1]. *Reconstruction: America's Unfinished Revolution, 1863-1877* (New York: Harper and Row, 1988); *Been in the Storm So Long: The Aftermath of Slavery* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1979); *After Slavery: The Negro in South Carolina During Reconstruction, 1861-1877* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1965).

[2]. See John Hope Franklin, *Reconstruction: after the Civil War* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1961), 35-36; and James E. Sefton, *The United States Army and Reconstruction, 1865-1877* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1967), 52-53, 97-98.

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