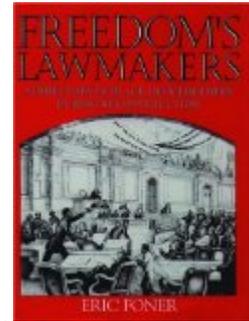


H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Eric Foner. *Freedom's Lawmakers: A Directory of Black Officeholders during Reconstruction.* New York: Oxford University Press, 1993. xlv + 290 pp. \$75.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-19-507406-2.

Reviewed by Christopher R. Waldrep (Eastern Illinois University)
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This is a wonderful book. Columbia University professor Eric Foner, author of *Free Soil, Free Labor, Free Men*, *Tom Paine and Revolutionary America*, *Nothing But Freedom: Emancipation and Its Legacy*, and *Reconstruction: America's Unfinished Revolution*, has produced a reference book every university library in America will want to own.

Of the 2,000 African Americans who served in federal, state, and local offices, Foner has found 1,465 for this book. Many of these men are difficult to pin down, emerging from obscurity to take office for one term and then retiring to anonymity. Compiling biographical information about such obscurities requires herculean research in unindexed manuscript censuses, military pensions records, and business records. As Foner points out in his excellent introduction, until the 1960s historians did not even attempt such research, condemning black lawmakers as subhuman without research. Aside from deplorable racism, often these early historians simply did not get their facts right. Scholars claimed most black delegates to the Georgia constitutional convention were illiterate when, in fact, twenty-two of thirty-seven could read and write. Historians simply did not do the basic research—probably because they saw no need. They “knew” all they needed to know about black lawmakers: because they were black and some had been ex-slaves, they must have been ignorant, corrupt, and incompetent.

But since the 1960s many historians have begun to collect information on such topics as black policemen in New Orleans, blacks in the Louisiana legislature, Charleston's African-American politicians, and black Reconstructionists in Tennessee, but no one has published a prosopographic study covering the entire South. Foner

builds on the work of scholars like Thomas Holt and Charles Vincent but adds original material and an introduction designed to lionize these “forgotten protagonists.”

As Foner concedes in his introduction, he was not able to find information on every black officeholder and some of what he did find is not entirely complete or even accurate. For example, his entry describing the famous black Mississippi sheriff Peter Crosby gives his birth and death dates, tells of his army service, but most of the entry merely rehashes the 1874 Vicksburg riot. This actually contributes little to what is already known about Crosby as a person, the point of the book. Accounts of the 1874 riot already exist in many sources, including Foner's own *Reconstruction*.

Foner does not consistently use the sources available to him, admittedly a tall order when looking for 2,000 virtual unknowns in often unindexed source material. Although he consulted the census for many entrants, Foner skipped it for Crosby, relying instead on William C. Harris's *Day of the Carpetbagger*, Congressional reports on the Vicksburg riot, and Crosby's military pension file. Although Foner gives Crosby's birth date as 1846, the 1880 census and one of the Congressional reports Foner uses list it as 1843. Inconsistent use of the 1870 census leads Foner to conclude that George Boyd's dates are unknown, when, according to the 1870 census, he was born in 1821 and had \$2,000 in property. Omissions of basic factual information make the tables in the introduction a bit dubious.

Sometimes Foner's information on the offices these men held is just as incomplete. *Freedom's Lawmakers* says Crosby served as Warren County treasurer in 1873

when actually he began serving in that post in 1872. This is an important point since some historians have suggested that Crosby was not dishonest—yet he served as treasurer during the notorious corruption of Vicksburg’s Charles Furlong regime (1867-1873). And Foner never mentions Crosby’s earlier service as coroner and ranger. He claims Crosby was part of the black group that seized power in Warren County in 1872 but that takeover actually occurred in 1873. Had he consulted the 1880 census he would have found Crosby with his wife and two sons living at Brunswick Landing in Warren County as a farmer.

It may also be that more typographical errors exist in this book than in *Reconstruction*. After all, it must be painfully tedious to proofread a biographical dictionary. Thus, Janet Sharp Hermann’s *The Pursuit of a Dream* is fully cited repeatedly but Buford Satcher’s *Blacks in Mississippi Politics, 1865-1900* is just as often cited only as Satcher, *Mississippi* and left out of the bibliography altogether. And the publication date for *Leading Afro-Americans of Vicksburg* is 1908 is one entry (p. 26) and 1980 in another (p.206).

Such quibbles are just that, quibbles. This is a mar-

velous book that beckons further research. The fact that this book is incomplete makes it more exciting, not less. Still more work needs to be done—a fact not altogether clear to readers of the encyclopedic, exhaustive, and (as my students insist!) exhausting *Reconstruction*. Much can be learned about Reconstruction simply by paging through the fascinating entries in *Freedom’s Lawmakers* at random.

As Foner notes in his introduction, *Reconstruction* was an unprecedented experiment in interracial democracy. Foner’s directory of the participants in that experiment is a tool every historian of Reconstruction will want to have—and will have to have. Foner has run down obscure people in census records, military pension files, Harvard’s Dun and Company credit rating ledgers, colleagues’ notes, and unpublished dissertations.

My main objection has nothing to do with Foner’s editing, proofreading, or inconsistent use of his sources, it is the price. Oxford University Press is charging \$75.00 for this 200-page book. Obviously, this is intended for libraries only and reference collections at that. The price is outrageous, but it must be paid, for this book is indispensable to any student of the reconstruction.

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