

H-Net Reviews

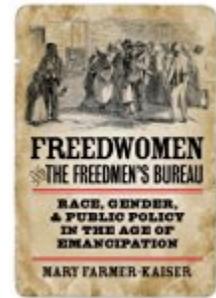
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Mary Farmer-Kaiser. *Freedwomen and the Freedmen's Bureau: Race, Gender, and Public Policy in the Age of Emancipation*. New York: Fordham University Press, 2010. xiv + 275 pp. \$80.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8232-3211-6; \$26.00 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8232-3212-3.

Reviewed by Miranda Fraley

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Commissioned by Antoinette G. van Zelm



Negotiating Freedom: African American Women's Experiences with Freedmen's Bureau Agents

In her new study, Mary Farmer-Kaiser explores the complicated relationships between the Freedmen's Bureau, particularly its local agents, and newly freed African American women. She focuses on how gender shaped bureau agents' interactions with freedwomen in ways both advantageous and detrimental. She shows how freedwomen's abilities to couch their demands within the context of the gendered worldviews of agents often determined the success of their cases. She illuminates how women's roles as mothers, wives, and reputable community members influenced the amount of assistance they received from bureau agents. While acknowledging the many shortcomings of the Freedmen's Bureau, Farmer-Kaiser concludes "bureau men awarded freedwomen benefits and protections unavailable to freedmen. In the end, the men who led and served the bureau acted both on ideological impulses and, quite often, in response to freedwomen's agency to enforce the public policy of early Reconstruction" (p. 13).

Farmer-Kaiser examines bureau leaders' dual, and sometimes conflicting, policy goals of promoting the development of a southern free labor economy based on the sanctity of contracts and establishing a new social order buttressed by legal marriage among former slaves and nuclear families headed by African American men. Then, she analyzes the everyday interactions between local bureau agents and African American women.

Farmer-Kaiser examines how freedwomen's gender

influenced agents' decisions in awarding or denying them material relief. Her research shows that while often refusing assistance to freedmen, agents strove to help women with small children even as the amount of food and other aid dwindled. She demonstrates how issues of gender affected both the enforcement of the bureau's official policies concerning employment and the resolution of contract disputes between freedwomen and employers. She points out that agents generally refused to enforce vagrancy laws against freedwomen whom they considered respectable though unemployed.

Farmer-Kaiser's discussion of the issue of women's right to the custody of their children when threatened by apprenticeships to whites, the claims of fathers, and economic hardship reveals both the determination of many freedwomen to reclaim their children despite extreme difficulties and the power of the obstacles they often faced. Farmer-Kaiser also assesses the significance of bureau agents' efforts to provide freedwomen with access to legal redress for crimes committed against them.

Farmer-Kaiser's extensive research in the Freedmen's Bureau records, particularly for the states of Texas, Georgia, Virginia, and Louisiana, is evident throughout this work. She uses these sources both quantitatively and qualitatively, impressively supporting her arguments. Although it might have been helpful to readers if Farmer-Kaiser had included more quotations from local bureau agents' records, she has clearly done an excellent job of

employing primary-source material to reveal important aspects of the relations between freedwomen and the bureau.

This work is also valuable because the author addresses several critical historiographical issues. Farmer-Kaiser contributes to the understanding of how nineteenth-century ideas about gender and race influenced the meanings of freedom for African American women in the South. Her analysis of the various roles that the Freedmen's Bureau played in the lives of freedwomen adds substantial insights into the history of this

federal agency. She also engages in long-standing historical debates concerning the importance of the Freedmen's Bureau, its significance to Reconstruction, and the character and efficacy of its service to freedwomen and freedmen.

Freedwomen and the Freedmen's Bureau will interest scholars of southern women's history, African American history, and Reconstruction. It also has much to offer readers intrigued by the study of public policy, legal history, and the many intersections between the family and American politics.

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