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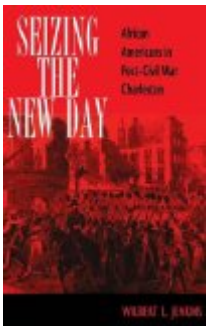
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

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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Published on H-Urban (September, 1999)

Charlestonians of both races, as Wilbert Jenkins explains, understood the drama of emancipation in the American city most identified with the reactionary defense of slavery. Whether free before the Civil War or freed by it, black Charlestonians signaled their aspirations for citizenship and a dignified life by flouting the many demeaning constraints imposed upon them before the War. The waterfront park known as the Battery, from which blacks had been excluded before the War, quickly became a "testing ground" (p. 134), with white youths trying to drive away black youths who retaliated with brickbats. Unreconstructed whites, in turn, projected their own discontent by ostentatiously ignoring institutions that represented blacks' new status. "They pass by on the other side, and mutter curses as they hear the children sing," remarked Francis Cardozo, a leading black educator, regarding the attitude of unrepentant "Rebels" toward black schools (p. 87).

Local African Americans built an element of provocation into their elaborate celebrations of Union victory and emancipation. On April 14, 1865, four years to the day from the surrender of Fort Sumter [and also the day of Lincoln's murder], the slave-turned-war hero Robert Smalls used the same Confederate steamer that he had commandeered to federal lines back in 1862 to transport three thousand black Charlestonians to a ceremonial raising of the Union flag over the fort. At the ceremony, which featured speeches by William Lloyd Garrison and other northern abolitionists, Major Martin Delaney, the highest ranking black Union officer, stood alongside the son of Denmark Vesey, executed leader of the aborted 1822 slave insurrection. With black troops prominent among the occupying forces and local blacks in control of the mansions and plantations of rebel masters who had fled, this linking of Smalls and Delaney to Vesey emphasized to blacks their latent power in a city where by 1870 they would be in a majority, amid a region where blacks outnumbered whites by more than 2-1. Such ceremonies disabused whites of any remaining delusions of black submissiveness. The spirit of Vesey had survived decades of surveillance, auction blocks, and repression.

In a graceful, efficient style, Jenkins conveys the atmosphere of resentment and barely-contained violence that pervaded Reconstruction Charleston. From the perspective of an academic reader, the most significant feature of this book -- which is based upon careful analysis of census data as well as upon documentary research -- is the closeness with which its subject matter and conclusions adhere to concerns and interpretations that prevail at present in Reconstruction historiography overall. Jenkins's main concerns are to understand how blacks experienced emancipation and Reconstruction in Charleston and to trace the private and collective efforts of blacks to build community institutions and to give practical content to freedom, despite the indifference or animosity of most whites. Like most recent writers, he admonishes readers to recognize but not overemphasize "the very bleak record of failures in the era of emancipation and Republican rule" (p. 162). Black Charleston made undeniable strides during the dozen years between the Union occupation of the city in 1865 and the Redeemer victory in 1877. Many of these accomplishments endured through the subsequent era of disenfranchisement and segregation and came to provide a foundation for renewed effort to attain full citizenship and a better life in the twentieth century.

After an overview of the circumstances of both slaves and free blacks in antebellum Charleston and a narrative of the drama of emancipation, Jenkins devotes the bulk of his book to thematic discussions of the dimensions of freedom and citizenship, as black residents understood these. With the Carolina economy in turmoil on account of the War and the destruction of the slave-plantation system, making a living presented the most pressing problem for Charlestonians of both races. Charleston, of course, had a long tradition of black artisans, both free and slave, as well as a deep-rooted black elite of merchants, successful artisans, and property owners (almost all of whom were mulatto, the author notes). While visible and influential, however, the black artisan and business sectors remained small and embattled throughout Carolina's economic malaise. Most black Charlestonians, whether freeborn or freedmen, had worked as laborers or domestics before emancipation and would continue to do so. For this reason, in his chapter on the economy, Jenkins emphasizes issues relevant to the working classes: the failure of land reform, the influx of rural blacks into the town, the activities of the Freedmen's Bureau, the threat of the Black Code, and attempts by longshoremen and other workers to organize, even across racial lines.

Endemic poverty hampered efforts to provide universal schooling for black children. Yet the presence of an educated, pre-war elite, along with the intense, if short-lived interest of the Freedmen's Bureau and northern benevolent societies, helps to account for the surprising fact that by 1890 Charleston achieved the lowest black illiteracy rate among the fourteen largest southern cities. Jenkins's findings regarding black family structure largely confirm recent studies of other cities and regions: upon emancipation, Charleston's freedmen moved quickly to legalize marriages and establish nuclear or stem families. Migration and poverty helped to account for the average black household size exceeding that of whites in 1870, 7.9 to 6. As elsewhere, large numbers of unmarried adult blacks lived in white households as domestics, while over three times as many black women worked for wages as white women.

As elsewhere, Charleston's black schools and politics became intertwined with its black churches, probably "the central institution within the black community" to emerge during Reconstruction (p. 132). Charleston whites pointedly made no effort to retain blacks as full members of their churches, but even had they been more accommodating, "most blacks would have deserted white churches anyway," Jenkins explains in an enlightening chapter on the creation of separate churches. White churches "epitomized the old slave regime" (p. 118). Blacks perceived in an indepen-

dent church "a structured social forum and psychological outlet, a refuge in a hostile white world" (p. 128).

Jenkins's last chapter recounts the Charleston version of the familiar story of individual and collective violence as an inexorable, corrosive element in Reconstruction. Despite their large numbers, political consciousness, and willingness to meet force with force, black Charlestonians had little hope of preserving their political gains after the withdrawal of the federal military presence in 1877. Over years of clashes, anti-Reconstruction whites had demonstrated themselves to be unyielding in their determination to stifle independent black political activity and to intimidate Republicans of both races and unlimited in their willingness to use aggression to achieve these aims.

By sticking closely to standard themes in current Reconstruction historiography -- which after all is mainly rural in focus -- and by treating Charleston more or less as a typical episode in Reconstruction, Jenkins may slight the interurban and international comparisons that this particular city brings to mind. From the colonial and antebellum periods, Charleston inherited characteristics that shaped emancipation and its aftermath and that invite comparative analysis with the Caribbean port cities with which Charleston had historic ties. For black Charlestonians, the relevant legacy of the antebellum city might include a strong consciousness of color gradations, even though, as Jenkins explains, outside observers often perceived the mulatto-black division to be more rigid than it was in reality. Historical qualities of white Charleston possibly relevant to the black experience in Reconstruction might encompass the relative weakness of the white merchant and artisan classes and their apparent subservience to the region's plantation families, who loomed over the city's economic and social life. These points suggest how much Jenkins might gain from a look at British Caribbean ports in Jamaica or Barbados, as well as from explicit comparison to New Orleans, a larger, more diverse, more powerful city, but like Charleston a place with historic ties to the Caribbean and with a mulatto elite even more established than that of the Carolina port.

Likewise, Jenkins notes that as a vassal of King Cotton, Charleston stagnated after the Civil War. He makes little use, however, of the vigorous discussion among urban historians concerning the varied rates of development of cities in the postbellum South. From the standpoint of the urban South overall, one intriguing aspect of Jenkins's account is that while educational and religious institutions flourished among African Americans in Reconstruction Charleston, commerce and finance seem to have developed hardly at all. Building upon models worked out by urban scholars such as Don H. Doyle [1], one might hypothesize that in the New South, black business thrived where white business thrived and for parallel reasons. Along these same lines, Jenkins would benefit from engagement with the debate set off by Howard Rabinowitz's account of the urban setting of segregation, ***Race Relations in the Urban South, 1865-1890***.[2] Scholars have come to presume that Southern urbanization was a key element in the emergence of formal segregation and in the spread of lynching and other forms of ritualized anti-black violence. Further, Jenkins's account of efforts to form interracial unions along the Charleston waterfront would benefit from engagement with recent studies of race and labor in the urban South.[3] Finally, a glance at other Deep South cities and at Border cities such as Baltimore and Washington --where pre-war divisions between slave and free and between black and mulatto also shaped notions of class and status among African Americans after emancipation -- might illuminate his examination of class and color consciousness among Charleston blacks.

In sum, as an urban history of emancipation and its aftermath, ***Seizing the New Day*** suggests

more than it settles. The urban dimension of Reconstruction remains a gap in both American urban history and in Reconstruction history. On the other hand, Jenkins's book deals with so many aspects of Reconstruction historiography in a clear, concise manner that it should make an effective reading for relevant segments in classes on the Civil War period, the South, and African-American history. For those interested in Charleston itself, the book offers a vivid, thoughtful narrative of a momentous episode in local history.

Notes

[1]. Don H. Doyle, *New Men, New Cities, New South: Atlanta, Nashville, Charleston, Mobile, 1860-1910* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1990).

[2]. Howard Rabinowitz, *Race Relations in the Urban South, 1865-1890* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1978). Also, Kenneth W. Goings and Gerald L. Smith, "'Unhidden' Transcripts: Memphis and African American Agency, 1862-1920," *Journal of Urban History,* Vol. 21, n. 3 (Mar. 1995), 372-94.

[3]. Especially Eric Arnesen, *Waterfront Workers in New Orleans: Race, Class, and Politics, 1863-1921* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991).