

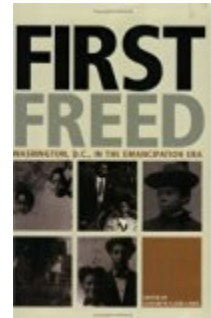
H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Elizabeth Clark-Lewis, ed. *First Freed: Washington, D.C. in the Emancipation Era*. Washington: Howard University Press, 2002. 218 pp. \$23.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-88258-207-8.

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African Americans in the District of Columbia were the first to be freed. An April 1862 Act of Congress compensated slave holders for releasing enslaved people from bondage. *First Freed: Washington, D.C. in the Emancipation Era* is a collection of articles and essays that not only describes the events immediately before, during, and after this emancipation, but also emphasizes the agency of African Americans who actively sought freedom, established community organizations, and defined the parameters of their citizenship.

The contents of this collection evolved from a 1992 conference held in Washington: “First Freed: A New Look at Washington, D.C., in the Age of Emancipation.” Twenty-two scholars from the United States and abroad presented papers examining the contributions made by African Americans to the social and cultural fabric of Washington during the years between 1861 and 1900. The participants shared a common interest in documenting the ways in which African-American identity, culture, and social life were products of self-determination, not simply by-products of the ways in which enslaved and free African Americans reacted to racism during this period. The conference presentations relied on local historical records from African-American churches, newspapers, and civic associations. Focusing their attention on local history and community life enabled the conference participants to document the African-American experience in terms more complicated—and richer—than those suggested by the more common focus on the results of white oppression.

One interesting side effect of this approach to African-American history was that the conference generated enormous community interest. Amateur histori-

ans and community members with a personal interest in the conference subject matter presented their own reflections, collections, and knowledge about the history of Washington’s African-American community. As Elizabeth Clark-Lewis notes in her introduction, community members, family researchers, oral historians, and collectors engaged in a dialogue with scholars about the failure of other published histories of Washington to adequately document the full complexity of the African-American experience. This dialogue influenced the scholarship produced by this conference, and several of the published articles acknowledged the impact of local resources on their work. Unfortunately, the volume does not include any recollections or histories written by community members. These might have provided an interesting counterpart to the scholarly articles contained in the book.

The seven articles published in *First Freed* are organized in three sections. The first section documents the transition from slavery to freedom. The second section describes the immediate aftermath of emancipation. The final section, a single article, places the experience of emancipation in Washington into the larger context of the African Diaspora. Taken as a whole, the volume succeeds in at least two ways. First, by emphasizing the African-American community’s active role in achieving emancipation and defining African-American citizenship, the contributing scholars broaden our notion of American political discourse and ask us to consider the complexity of American identities. Second, while the articles contribute to our larger understanding of African-American history, they also document the details of daily life in the nation’s capital.

Regina Akers’s article, “Freedom without Equality:

Emancipation in the United States, 1861-1863," provides an excellent description of the larger political context in which the terms of emancipation were discussed. At the same time, her article demands that we pay attention to class divisions and social attitudes that complicated relationships between free blacks and emancipated slaves. Richlyn Goddard's piece, "Henceforth and Forever Free: The African American Press and Emancipation in the District of Columbia," reclaims small and short-lived newspapers as part of the larger history of the African-American press. She documents the ways in which the black press contributed to the political philosophy of the black community and, therefore, more generally to the political atmosphere of the city. She convincingly describes the ways in which one copy of a newspaper might be handled by numerous people, arguing that low print runs did not necessarily indicate limited influence.

David Taft Terry's article is a useful introduction to the volume's second section. It details the experience of African Americans in the years immediately following emancipation, demonstrating that the community was economically successful, socially viable, and educated. He argues that Washington's African-American commu-

nity members viewed themselves as a linchpin in the larger struggle for freedom, a test case for citizenship. Emancipation Day parades—a source of great scholarly and community interest at the original conference—are the focus of an article by Craig A. Schiffert, "Stepping towards Freedom: An Historical Analysis of the District of Columbia Emancipation Day Parades, 1866-1900." Schiffert describes these events as "one of the most emotionally and politically charged spectacles of late nineteenth century African America" (p. 112). He argues that African Americans used the event to demonstrate the boundaries of their citizenship and to openly critique the political system.

First Freed makes a valuable contribution to African American history in general and to Washington, D.C.'s history in particular. Although scholarly in tone and intention, the book is a wonderful resource for secondary school teachers. Its essays raise important questions about the relationship of local history and community-specific histories to a larger American history. By emphasizing the story of emancipation—rather than the story of the Civil War or federal politics—its contributors complicate our notion of how history evolves and which stories must take precedence in our analysis of the past.

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