

# H-Net Reviews

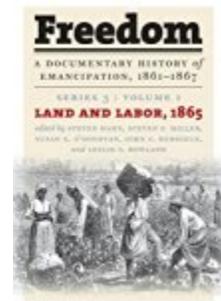
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Steven Hahn, Steven F. Miller, Susan E. O' Donovan, John C. Rodrigue, Leslie S. Rowland, eds. *Freedom: A Documentary History of Emancipation, 1861-1867: Series 3, Volume 1: Land and Labor, 1865*. Freedom, a Documentary History of Emancipation, 1861-1867. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2008. xxxiv + 1073 pp. \$85.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8078-3147-2.

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Commissioned by Christopher R. Waldrep



## Freedom

Self-congratulation is not a widely-praised practice among book reviewers. However, this work's thousand pages of small print, containing around three hundred documents and supporting substantive footnotes, provide some justification. The range of the documents, and the viewpoints and places represented, make the task of synthesis difficult and necessarily subjective. These caveats notwithstanding, the 1865 volume of the *Freedom* series, dealing with the central issues of land and labor, merits sustained study. One cannot imagine scholars dealing with Reconstruction nationally, or the post-bellum history of any southern state, without close attention to this work.

The rationale for this venture is familiar from the four previous series volumes and several shorter topical works. Wartime emancipation generated a gigantic volume of government documents dealing with the military, Federal policy, and the southern white reaction to the dissolution of their social structure. Scattered like nuggets are documents presenting an African American viewpoint, mostly mediated through government officials but sometimes in the unmistakable voice of the freedpeople themselves. Locating the fifty thousand documents collected by the project, scattered across twenty-five record groups in the National Archives, surpasses the capacity of any historian. Tracing the paper trail of a single episode, the endorsements and references to different of-

ficials, represents an immense task. Federal policy toward emancipation was determined by innumerable actors, and simply determining what happened—which letters were and (apparently) weren't answered—is a real contribution to the legal and social history of the nation. For these reasons, the Freedmen and Southern Society project is likely the most ambitious documentary editing project in existence, certainly the most important for southern history.

Legal historians will probably find this collection more useful as raw material than for commentary on nineteenth-century law. There is evidence on contract practices, on law enforcement, even on African American attitudes toward legal authority, but legal scholars will likely mine it themselves. For this reader, the take-away message of the documents is the astonishing diversity of the local stories. In the aftermath of the war, the direction of President Andrew Johnson's Reconstruction policies took months to emerge, and army and Freedmen's Bureau officers created ad hoc policies with only the vaguest ideas of the legal ramifications. Some initially backed confiscation of leading Confederates' land, while others were so unnerved by the tales of insurrection that they became tools of the local white elite. One aspect seems clear: the contemporary southern complaints of army and Bureau officials as naïve proponents of the freedpeople find little support here. One Bureau agent rec-

commended a penal colony in every county, “where all incorrigibly idle, vagrant, and vicious negroes should be set at work with a chain on the leg and a bayonet in the rear,” which would “settle the labor question in a month” (p. 908). Often as not Bureau men come off as insensitive. The subcommissioner for Georgia, Davis Tillson, spoke of the freedmen’s “dense ignorance, their entire inability to understand or comprehend the meaning of freedom” (p. 294). Mississippi’s Bureau officials add that “if they are ignorant and stupid,” slavery was to blame (p. 154). Then again, many officers were appalled by slavery’s legacy for white behavior, especially the propensity toward violence. One document describing sexual abuse featured outraged marginal comments from superiors, “food for h—l” and the like (p. 633).

It is no easy task to untangle a pattern from this mass of evidence. Overall, Eric Foner’s conceptualization of the Freedmen’s Bureau as mediating between southern whites and freedmen, and acting upon northern beliefs in free labor and contracts, is substantiated here. The Bureau did mitigate the rigor of repressive army behavior toward the freedmen. The Bureau leadership did move, early and forcefully, to stop racially discriminatory army pass systems. When local officials intervened on behalf of the freedpeople, Bureau head O. O. Howard backed them, save on the crucial land redistribution issue, on which he was directly overruled by the president. If one diligently traces the footnotes (alas, provided in even smaller print), Howard’s personal inclinations become clear. He generally pushed his subordinates toward civil rights.

The range of behavior evident in these documents counteracts one concern raised by all such collections, that of editorial selectivity. One would be hard-pressed to identify a prevailing bias, beyond the emphasis on African American agency; the editors clearly sympathize with the freedpeople’s dawning recognition that the Yankees weren’t going to act on their priorities (p. 70). Still, numerous letters from planters suggest well-meaning, baffled people presiding over a taxing transition. The explanatory essays that grace the front of the volume and the various topical chapters are even-handed, almost too much so. They are models of concision, and they call readers’ attention to choice documents, but perhaps the editors could have engaged the current literature on emancipation more explicitly. There are probably philosophical differences between historians and documentary editors on interpretive latitude, editors tending to write for the ages rather than engage in transient debates. Still, selection of documents must have been guided by a sense

of what they meant and why they mattered. Even specialists may have difficulty distinguishing what the authors think are the crucial implications, in terms of current scholarship.

Several themes did suggest themselves. The tendency in some writing toward crop determinism is not strongly supported here. There was local variation, but the specific demands of cotton production or other individual crops do not seem the crucial factor. Also, the withdrawal of freedwomen from fieldwork, so prevalent in the modern literature, is not much in evidence in the 1865 documents. Then again, the emphasis in Susan O’Donovan’s *Becoming Free in the Cotton South* (2007) on the harshness of emancipation on some single women is borne out well. Planters “shunned women with numerous dependent children” in the editors’ words, and government officials endlessly puzzled out what to do about them (p. 603).

Scholars of the postwar period in all the southern states should mine these volumes. Various observers interpreted social behavior in ways that struck me as insightful, even astonishing. In one South Carolina episode, black troops were used to induce freedmen to sign contracts, reportedly winning planter praise (p. 583). Readers can contextualize local studies in terms of how the freedmen acted elsewhere, and how state and Federal officials were responding. Furthermore, the volume hints at firestorms to come; the evidence documents unusually racist behavior by Bureau officials in Memphis, and also conflict between black Union troops and Irish police. There is also evidence from New Orleans of arrests of a group of bi-racial dockworkers on strike (p. 592). The editors do not comment on the implications, but given the race riots in both places the following year, this evidence takes on special interest. So do the army speeches extolling confiscation, and black complaints of official abuse from Pulaski, Tennessee, soon-to-be home of the Ku Klux Klan (p. 739).

The volume ends with the insurrection scare at the end of the year. This episode illustrates the themes of the book well, on the complexity of the black response to emancipation. It is clear that the insurrection fears were overblown, and that the planter elite were using the talk of “forty acres and a mule” to justify remobilizing local militias and enforcing harsh Black Codes. Some Bureau agents also suggested freedmen were talking this way simply to intimidate planters. Still, there was some fire behind all the smoke, which is an intriguing dimension of the volume. Considerable martial drilling occurred.

One freedman approached a Bureau agent for permission to raise a company to punish violence in a neighboring county. Scattered political organizing was going on in rural areas, and freedpeople were discussing their grievances in striking ways. In Mississippi, there was talk of a Bureau confiscation decree, fastened with a biblically resonant four seals, to be broken on January 1, 1866 (p. 897). More alarmingly, one Union officer received an anonymous but friendly letter, warning him to get his family out of Memphis: "My people more specially soldiers is of the opinion no white person is a true friend to the colored race and their idea is to make a bold strike for this country and get the Land under the rule of colored people" (p. 884). The editors provide a facsimile of the letter, which looks genuine, and it suggests the moral complexity of what is going on. To their credit, the authors do

nothing to sanitize their evidence, which speaks highly of their scholarship.

One could go on examining interpretive threads, but the point is clear. This is a well-chosen collection, meticulously edited. Those having some experience in this sort of work can only marvel at the exactitude. I don't recall seeing an editing error in the whole book, nor a factual mistake, a performance suggesting the quality of the work. Such pains are particularly useful with letters from freedpeople just acquiring literacy; apparently unintelligible documents suddenly make perfect sense in the context of surrounding materials. Leslie Rowland and her colleagues deserve much credit from the profession for this difficult and important work of scholarship. It is a must for any substantial college library.

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