
Reviewed by Christopher R. Waldrep

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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.

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