Newspaper accounts, court records, and investigative reports clearly document that early nineteenth-century Pennsylvania women were accused, tried, and convicted of crimes and that they spent time in prisons and penitentiaries as a result. While their existence was recorded, their voices rarely were. In *Troublesome Women: Gender, Crime, and Punishment in Antebellum Pennsylvania*, the first book of Erica Rhodes Hayden, the author shares what she discovered through extensive research on the “lived experiences” of women in Pennsylvania between 1820 and 1860 (p. 6). Rejecting notions of women as passive victims of the system, her work sheds light on how these women acted with agency and empowerment to shape their circumstances, with attention to the intersection of race, gender, ethnicity, and social class and the broader historical period.

Early chapters examine the activities and motivations of women charged with petty infractions and more serious crimes, such as murder and riotous behavior during the period. Their experience in the court system is also examined. Later chapters deal with women’s experience while incarcerated, contrasting treatment received in large state penitentiaries with that provided in poorly developed rural jails. Finally, she examines female-focused efforts to reform convicted women. Throughout the work, Hayden sheds light on what women did rather than just on what was done to them. Whether by discussing the methods by which accused women used societal norms to avoid conviction or highlighting how women convicts actively resisted the penal system, she demonstrates that women were active agents, rather than passive victims, in their interaction with the criminal justice system.

In researching this book, Hayden reviewed over six thousand cases originating from sixteen rural and urban counties. Through her exploration of their stories, she shares available women’s voices liberally. These voices coupled with detailed appendices providing statistics on female demographics in penitentiaries add to our understanding of both the women and the criminal justice
system in which they interacted. As a result, the book makes a unique contribution to the literature on women and criminality in Pennsylvania during the antebellum era.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at https://networks.h-net.org/h-pennsylvania


URL: https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=56534

This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.