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978-1-107-07303-6 - Rethinking American Emancipation: Legacies of Slavery and the Quest for Black Freedom

Edited by William A. Link and James J. Broomall

Excerpt

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Introduction

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It is American iconography. On January 1, 1863, Abraham Lincoln issued the Emancipation Proclamation, a bold presidential war measure indicating a dramatic shift in the rationale for fighting the Civil War and a promise of future freedom for 4 million enslaved Americans. Yet the document marked just a beginning. Only after the spring of 1865, when the North's military victory toppled the South's powerful slaveholding class, were the enslaved guaranteed liberation. Freedom's future was far from certain, however. Long after January 1863, the significance of both the Proclamation and emancipation assumed new meanings. During the ensuing generations, African Americans explored freedom, even while the nation hoped to rebuild itself and the government attempted to reconstruct the South. Events would ultimately demonstrate that, despite the sweeping power of Lincoln's Proclamation, the struggle over freedom and the problem of coercion defined emancipation's wider legacy. Ultimately, as historian Laura F. Edwards observes in her Epilogue to this volume, freedom's journey "was a long one, because slavery's influence was so pervasive."

Rethinking American Emancipation: Legacies of Slavery and the Quest for Black Freedom contains nine essays that reconsider the origins, impact, and meaning of the end of slavery. It relies on several generations of rich scholarship about emancipation that has documented how the Civil War became a violent struggle to end the world's largest and most powerful system of slavery.¹ The destruction of slavery has become a central element in our understanding of how the cataclysmic Civil War helped to remake American society. During the war years, both Abraham Lincoln and Frederick Douglass framed slavery's death as the catalyst for

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a national “rebirth.” “This revolutionary – *regenerative* – conception of the war,” writes historian David Blight, “launched black freedom and future equality on its marvelous, but always endangered, career in American history and memory.”²

Collectively, the essays in this volume constitute a complex portrait of emancipation and its aftermath, thereby demonstrating new ways of considering the sources of slavery’s demise. Was emancipation accomplished by political and military policies from above, or by self-emancipation from below? How important were slaves’ actions versus those of Congress, the president, and military authorities? Even after slavery formally ended in 1865 with the Thirteenth Amendment, freedom’s boundaries remained fluid and contested. Slavery’s destruction engendered fierce struggles over how emancipation unfolded and what its implications were for the United States. In fundamental ways emancipation was a turning point that Americans have had to “confront or deflect” since 1863.³

The book’s central focus is on the former slaveholding states, but it also considers the implications of freedom beyond their borders. Reconstruction-era policies reshaped the American West, and those policies were connected to what occurred in the South. *Rethinking American Emancipation* is defined temporally in the Civil War era, though the volume’s final section on memory brings the narrative into the twentieth century. It is our contention that only with a wide lens do national patterns in realizing emancipation become visible, whereas only through case studies can we witness the ways in which people and local communities directed definitions of freedom to meet specific demands. The essays herein, though diverse in subject, ultimately offer a broad but not exhaustive survey of emancipation’s meanings and an examination of the challenges of and the contests over the realization of freedom.

The year 1863 neither began nor ended the fight over black freedom: rather, Lincoln’s presidential order constituted but one voice in an era of revolutions that shaped the nineteenth century. As historian Thomas C. Holt observes, “actual emancipation exposed the difficulty of applying” anti-slavery ideology “to radical transformations in the social relations of culturally different populations.”⁴ With emancipation, he continues, came the rise of an “explicitly racist ideology that gained a hitherto unprecedented intellectual and social legitimacy,” which undermined universal freedom.⁵ Emancipation, however remarkable, left many questions unanswered and did not assure permanent change. Rather, the next half-century became a period in which the contours of freedom were

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defined and redefined, as black and white Americans struggled over emancipation's meanings and consequences.

This contested narrative has largely been lost among public audiences and in popular culture. Few commemorations and little discussion of slavery's legacy marked the sesquicentennial of the Emancipation Proclamation.⁶ Triumph, not tumult, Edward L. Ayers argues, continues to shape a national storyline that reconciles "the great anomaly of slavery with an overarching story of a people devoted to liberty."⁷ The tenor of Ayers's 1998 observation still rings true. As the essays collectively suggest, the persistence of "unfreedoms" and the lingering legacy of slavery followed the Thirteenth Amendment. Much of emancipation's aftermath involved a struggle over its meaning, as competing narratives became constructed around memories of slavery, freedom, and Civil War. The popular American narrative that posits 1865 as the end of slavery and the beginning of freedom has obscured lingering "unfreedoms" such as convict leasing, persisting racial violence, and peonage in the postbellum American South. The assumption that slavery ended and freedom began at the Civil War's end also obscures how later global emancipation movements inform our own national narrative. Further, the continuation of racial, ethnic, sectarian violence and oppression across the globe demonstrates there is little justification for a narrative of inevitable moral progress beginning with nineteenth-century emancipation movements.⁸

Part of the popular misunderstanding of emancipation's legacy is rooted in the binary between freedom and slavery. Indeed, freedom's very definition is rooted in its antithesis, slavery.⁹ This dichotomous formula sets clearly defined boundaries for freedom and slavery but also disallows for the ambiguities of the lived experience, the persistence of "unfreedoms," and the uncertainty of citizenship in unequal societies. Indeed, as Frederick Cooper, Thomas C. Holt, and Rebecca J. Scott point out, freedom is a "social construct, a collectively shared set of values reinforced by ritual, philosophy, literary, and everyday discourse."¹⁰ Thus, time and place shape freedom and further highlight its malleability. In the postbellum American South, as historians have widely recognized, unfettered freedom did not follow political emancipation for African Americans. Instead, many African Americans struggled against violence, feared reenslavement, endured painful memories of slavery, and clashed with white supremacists over the rights of citizenship. At the same time, African Americans also celebrated their freedom by constructing social movements and organizations that promoted emancipation. For a time at least, countervailing forces determined post-Civil War freedoms. These

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struggles are quite familiar to historians who have been, David Brion Davis once contended, “less content with theories of progressive currents washing away the dregs of an evil past.”¹¹

Historians have long challenged a celebratory view of American freedom. Invaluable studies by David Brion Davis, James M. McPherson, Eric Foner, and Ira Berlin, among others, emphasized the problem of freedom, which defined many of the scholarly debates from the 1960s into the early twenty-first century.¹² “Freedom has always been a terrain of conflict,” Foner writes, “subject to multiple and competing interpretations, its meaning constantly created and recreated.”¹³ A host of scholars, seeking to understand the lived experience of emancipation, have discarded the binary of slavery versus freedom, focusing instead on conflicts over freedom. These studies revealed, Rebecca Scott notes, the “complex interactions among former slaves, former masters, and the state.”¹⁴

New scholarship, encouraged by the work of the University of Maryland’s Freedmen and Southern Society Project, systematically documented slavery’s destruction and ensuing debates over freedom.¹⁵ Scholarly contributions that consider the problem of freedom continue to offer important perspectives demanding that we recognize emancipation’s limitations. For example, the recently published edited collection, *Slavery’s Ghost*, asserts that scholars must consider “how ideas about racial authority circulating in the mid-1800s shaped the material and conceptual limits to African American autonomy and indicate just how narrow and precarious the passageways out of slavery proved to be for enslaved workers in the rural South.”¹⁶

Recently, historians such as Thavolia Glymph, Susan Eva O’Donovan, Jim Downs, and Hannah Rosen have demonstrated that emancipation introduced not only freedom but also danger and tragedy, thereby creating a historiographical shift deemed by some “new revisionism.”¹⁷ This scholarship has emphasized a darker story of emancipation, often highlighting victimhood and suffering.¹⁸ Jim Downs, a prominent voice from this camp, recently called for new research “to more rigorously interrogate the forces of racism in shaping the African American experience, examine the suffering and challenges former slaves confronted, and fearlessly admit that some slaves made problematic decisions that need to be contextualized, not used to prop up racist assumptions made a century ago.”¹⁹ Although this scholarship continues to examine broadly the problem of freedom, these historians re-center the discussion by giving readers a grim view of how emancipation unfolded on the ground. There are limits to what new revisionists can explain, however. This perspective has,

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at points, neglected how struggles coexisted with successes. Yael Sternhell has recently urged historians to approach the Civil War with uncertainty and realism while also simultaneously appreciating the liberation of 4 million Americans as a “tremendously positive outcome of the war.”²⁰

Rethinking American Emancipation demonstrates that triumph and tragedy, along with success and sadness, co-existed as African Americans considered the meaning and legacy of emancipation. By focusing not on single events but rather the challenges associated with freedom, the authors portray emancipation as a contradictory, uncertain process that included diverse manifestations ranging from slaves’ wartime acts of resistance and sabotage, to African Americans’ invocation of emancipatory internationalism to advance labor causes in the early twentieth century. On the one hand, this volume builds on scholarship that has envisioned emancipation within the context of a long freedom movement that began under slavery, flowered during the American Civil War, and concluded during the civil rights movement of the 1960s. Emancipation, as Martha S. Jones maintains, should be seen as a process in which Lincoln’s Emancipation Proclamation “becomes but one moment in an elaborate scene that included Congress, the military, and enslaved people.”²¹ This intellectual tradition has gained renewed strength with the call for a “long civil rights movement.”²²

On the other hand, *Rethinking American Emancipation* also emphasizes how competing movements, moments, and memories reshaped the narrative of a long emancipation. Many black Americans, for example, interpreted the Emancipation Proclamation and the Thirteenth Amendment as just part of a larger global struggle against slavery that began in the eighteenth century. Recognizing that the destruction of slavery defined the Civil War, African Americans insistently articulated this view through memorializations, speeches, and public events. Conversely, the psychological devastation of slavery continued to evoke strong memories as some African Americans feared reenslavement.

Freedom remains central to emancipation’s story, but what does that concept mean and to whom? As Laura F. Edwards observes in her Epilogue, “individual conceptions of emancipation and the state’s policies led in unpredictable directions.” Freedom involved unprecedented interaction between African Americans and the federal government on the ground, as freedpeople pressed military officers with complaints ranging from labor disputes to marriage contracts. The essays in this collection, working from varied perspectives, help us to understand the subject’s complexity. The authors explore *which* emancipation moments gained

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the most importance to *different* historical actors, and how these emancipations were eventually assigned new meaning through memory.

Rethinking American Emancipation also seeks to broaden our understanding of the political dimensions of emancipation. While the state had been an important actor throughout the first half of the nineteenth century, Civil War and emancipation marked turning points in the state's role. The Union military provided the most important example of the state's new reach. During the war, military intervention in congressional elections directed the outcome of key political races. After the war's end, the federal military was the single most important force promoting African Americans' citizenship. But the military was also large and diverse, with mixed motives and different effects. Several authors in this volume reveal the complicated lived experiences of, and interactions among, African Americans, Union soldiers, and white citizens. Each group shaped and understood differently life without slavery and, collectively, they gave final meaning to emancipation. Non-state actors, such as freedpeople and women, influenced the political language and style of men. Their claims on liberty, in other words, directed political actions. On the other hand, several scholars in the volume stress the state's importance in shaping freedom. As Steven Hahn recently observes, the Civil War and emancipation created a "political force with its own imperial dimensions: a new American nation-state."²³ A number of our authors take seriously how the state's expanded power pushed the freedom struggle during the Civil War but also contributed to a burgeoning cultural imperialism in the postbellum era, evident in military policies in the American West.

The long memory of slavery continued to shape postwar freedoms. Indeed, the continued construction of memories of emancipation brings discussions of freedom deep into the twentieth century. These more contemporary concerns demonstrate the struggles over who defines the past and for what uses. Narratives of slavery and freedom powerfully defined how individuals remembered and ultimately used emancipation to shape their lives. Memories shifted over time but slavery continued to cast a long shadow over the lives of blacks and whites.

Rethinking American Emancipation is organized into three categories: "Claiming Emancipation," "Contesting Emancipation," and "Remembering Emancipation." Part I, "Claiming Emancipation," considers initial demands for freedom. Rather than a culminating moment in time, emancipation requires a broader view. As Yael A. Sternhell notes in Chapter 1, during the war years hundreds of thousands of African Americans pursued acts of self-liberation by striking out on

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Southern roadways and creating their own liberation movement. Although emancipation is often imagined “as an event of mythic proportions,” she contends it was “first and foremost a complex lived experience, a daily reality that took multiple, shifting, and often contradictory forms.” Acts of self-liberation explicitly demonstrate the personal dimensions to the transition between slavery and freedom. But that is only one dimension to emancipation. Interactions between the US Army and African Americans in the war’s immediate aftermath suggest how a developing political partnership helped to chart the murky waters of the post-Civil War South. For those slaves who remained on Southern plantations, Gregory P. Downs notes in Chapter 2, freedom came gradually in the months after Appomattox as the Army spread across the countryside. For Downs, then, freedom became a claim about status, an acknowledgment of “acquired rights,” and a promise of future action.

Downs’s attention to a statist vision of freedom prefaces William A. Blair’s explanation of military interference in local elections during the Civil War.²⁴ Politically, although the Proclamation was a decisive act of wartime presidential power, it hardly marked an end to struggle. The political efforts that eventually yielded the Thirteenth Amendment, Blair explains, rested, in part, on military intervention in local elections and hard-nosed political tactics. Remarkably, these episodes have been almost entirely neglected in the scholarship, yet provide important context for the political dimensions of the freedom struggle.

Part II, “Contesting Emancipation,” considers clashes over emancipation’s definition. After the Civil War, the entirely new social landscape disquieted white Southerners. Allison Fredette, in Chapter 4, takes us to the contested terrain of Kentucky and Virginia to examine marriage patterns. Within the white household, black freedom threatened male mastery and undermined female authority. As Fredette contends, homes became contested spaces in which whites struggled to redefine their pre-war position or maintain an antebellum social order. Her border-state case studies illuminate contrasting reactions to the transition from slave to free households. Beyond the household, violence became a regular, if tragic, feature across the South and into the western territories. Justin Behrend examines a little known electoral contest in Concordia Parish, Louisiana, in 1876. African American men and women seized wartime opportunities and made powerful claims on citizenship, demanding legal protection and exercising new rights. Yet the long memory of slavery continued shaping postwar freedoms. Behrend maintains that fears were so great among black voters that many claimed a Democratic victory

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would literally mean their reenslavement, and intensified the stakes in the election. Freedpeople considered the ballot to be a key bulwark in keeping slavery in the shadows.

Carole Emberton, in Chapter 5, shifts the conversation away from the problem of freedom to the problem of coercion. By examining the complex reactions to the Modoc War and the Colfax Massacre, Emberton gauges “popular understandings of the implications of emancipation and Southern Reconstruction for the nation’s advancing imperial endeavors.” As she points out, the Civil War and Reconstruction were “part of a longer, and in some minds, darker history of territorial expansion and conquest.”

“Remembering Emancipation” composes Part III. Memory, historian Bruce Baker explains, “is the organic, continuous connection of a people with their past.”²⁵ Each of the contributors in the volume’s final section engages this organic connection by considering how narratives of slavery and freedom powerfully defined how individuals remembered and ultimately used emancipation to shape their lives. In Chapter 7, “African Americans and the Long Emancipation in New South Atlanta,” William A. Link takes us to Atlanta, Georgia, which represented the archetypal New South city. Link posits a counter-narrative to Grady’s Atlanta founded upon a New South future and an Old South past by weaving together a complex array of African American institutions and voices that emphasized black equality and advancement that came with emancipation but also pointed out slavery’s legacy of continued racism. Complex claims on emancipation’s meaning played out across the American South, the Caribbean, and Central America, as Paul Ortiz contends in Chapter 8. Between the 1820s and 1920s African Americans observed not one, but many different emancipation celebrations. In the antebellum era, free black communities celebrated Haitian Independence, British West Indian Emancipation, as well as key battles in the Latin American Independence Wars, which eventually led to the abolition of slavery in South America. This essay further unveils the rich traditions of Black Internationalism in the commemoration of emancipations, as well as the opposition of black working-class communities to the growing shadow of American imperialism in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

John Stauffer shares Ortiz’s long view of emancipation and its competing claims. In Chapter 9, “Remembering the Abolitionists and the Meanings of Freedom,” Stauffer observes that in the twentieth-century abolitionists (black and white radicals whose most passionate desire was

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the end of slavery) and emancipationists (liberals whose most passionate desire was the preservation of the Union) have been uncoupled to promote sectional reconciliation. By so doing, popular audiences, filmmakers, and scholars have deemphasized social change as a process stemming from a continuous interaction between people at the margins and those in the seats of power. By conjoining abolitionists and emancipationists, Stauffer posits emancipation as a social revolution but also an ongoing process.

Laura F. Edwards, in her Epilogue, explores some further implications of freedom and unfreedom. Why should historians assume, she points out, that a straight line existed “between *individual* efforts to end slavery or to achieve freedom and the *legal* abolition of slavery?” Slavery could not end until the legal and constitutional structure supporting it changed radically. Enslaved people forced the matter, insisting, through their actions, that the political structure confront the “depth and breadth of the legal issues involved and difficulties of eradicating slavery” from the law. Yet even the adoption of the Thirteenth Amendment, though ending slavery, brought only a half-freedom for slaves. The continued force of the past institutionalization of slavery was difficult to eradicate.

The recent release of the motion picture *Lincoln*, focusing on the political fight to pass the Thirteenth Amendment, gripped popular audiences and thrust the struggle to end slavery into the public conversation. Historians offered mixed reaction. Some praised the film, taking note of historical authenticity, while others were disturbed by an oversimplification of the role of black abolitionists or charged the writers with an overreliance on outdated scholarship.²⁶ The struggle over freedom continues to incite debate and elicit contrasting reactions.

Rethinking American Emancipation focuses attention on an array of historical actors and their competing claims on freedom. Moving chronologically forward, the essays suggest emancipation as a dynamic process, though this is not a progress-driven story. Strides toward freedom did not always mean success, as political setbacks and racial violence, especially, contested the entitlements of universal citizenship. This emphasis on process places our work in an evolving historiographical discussion that looks to an array of factors, contingencies, and individual efforts that ultimately produced emancipation. It is a story that is both heartening and disturbing, as Americans continued to struggle over their future without slavery.

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1. See especially James M. McPherson, *The Struggle for Equality: Abolitionists and the Negro in the Civil War and Reconstruction* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1964); Joel Williamson, *After Slavery: The Negro in South Carolina during Reconstruction, 1861–1877* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1965); Leon Litwack, *Been in the Storm So Long: The Aftermath of Slavery* (New York: Vintage, 1979); Ira Berlin et al., eds., *The Destruction of Slavery*, in *Freedom, A Documentary History of Emancipation, 1861–1867*, ser. 1, vol. 1 (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1985); Eric Foner, *Nothing but Freedom: Emancipation and Its Legacy* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1983); Ira Berlin et al., *Slaves No More: Three Essays on Emancipation and the Civil War* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1992). Steven Hahn, *A Nation under Our Feet: Black Political Struggles in the Rural South from Slavery to the Great Migration* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2004); Thavolia Glymph, *Out of the House of Bondage: The Transformation of the Plantation Household* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008); Stephanie McCurry, *Confederate Reckoning: Power and Politics in the Civil War South* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2010); and Bruce Levine, *The Fall of the House of Dixie: The Civil War and the Social Revolution That Transformed the South* (New York: Random House, 2013).
2. David Blight, *Race and Reunion: The Civil War in American Memory* (Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2001), 18.
3. Blight, *Race and Reunion*, 18.
4. Thomas C. Holt, “‘An Empire over the Mind’: Emancipation, Race, and Ideology in the British West Indies and the American South,” in J. Morgan Kousser and James M. McPherson, eds., *Region, Race, and Reconstruction: Essays in Honor of C. Vann Woodward* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1982): 283–331 (quotation on 283).
5. Holt, “An Empire over the Mind,” 284.
6. On this subdued mood, see Steven Hahn, “The Emancipationist Century: American Slavery, American Freedom, and the Distance between Them,” *The New Republic* (26 May 2014), www.newrepublic.com/article/117620/problem-slavery-age-emancipation-reviewed (accessed July 21, 2015).
7. Edward L. Ayers, “Worrying about the Civil War,” in Karen Halttunen and Lewis Perry eds. *Moral Problems in American Life*, (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1998), 145–166: esp. 156.
8. David Brion Davis, *The Problem of Slavery in the Age of Emancipation* (New York: Knopf, 2014), 336. Also see Peter Kolchin, “Reexamining Southern Emancipation in Comparative Perspective,” *Journal of Southern History* 81, no. 1 (February 2015): 7–40.
9. *Oxford English Dictionary*, s.v., “Freedom.” David Brion Davis pushes the point further, positing: “Because slavery has long epitomized the most extreme form of domination and oppression, it has served as a metaphor for rejecting almost every deprivation of freedom (including ‘enslavement’ to sex, greed,