

### A Free Man of Color and His Hotel: Race, Reconstruction, and the Role of the Federal Government

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## Review

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**Gelderman, Carol** *A Free Man of Color and His Hotel: Race, Reconstruction, and the Role of the Federal Government*. Potomac Books, \$27.50 ISBN 978-1-59797-833-0

### Digging Deeper into Reconstruction

James Wormley was a wealthy and well-connected hotel owner in the nation's capitol from the time of the administration of Ulysses S. Grant through that of Chester A. Arthur. In this informative and engaging brief volume, Carol Gelderman tells the story of that *Free Man of Color and His Hotel* and of the complex interplay of *Race, Reconstruction, and the Role of the Federal Government*.

The first Wormeleys in America arrived in Virginia from England in the 1630s. They were the "fifteenth generation descended from Sir John de Wormele of Hatfield" (3). They established themselves as one of the leading families of the colony, and resided in an elegant colonial manor called Rosegill. At the time of the first U.S. Census in 1790, they owned 320 slaves. Then the good fortune of the family dissipated, and their name might have been forgotten, save for two Wormeley children who were born to an "unidentified colored woman" (6). The colored branch of the family dropped an "e," moved to Washington, worked hard, and began to flourish.

So much so that Lynch Wormley, an enterprising free man of color who entered the Washington workforce in 1814 as a hackney driver, was able to accumulate enough wealth to acquire the "Liberia Hotel" thirty years later. It was Lynch's ninth son, James, who established the renowned "Wormley Hotel" in 1871. The hotel was located in "the most fashionable area of the city" not far from the Executive Mansion (21). It offered a very fine restaurant, barber shop, wine room, reception parlor, and livery stables. Among the luminaries who chose to stay at the "Wormley" were British novelist Anthony Trollope, Generals

Winfield Scott and George McClellan, Emperor Dom Pedro II of Brazil, Lord Coleridge the Chief Justice of England, Vice President Schuyler Colfax, and historian Henry Adams. James Wormley knew Senator Charles Sumner very well, and respected him because of his advocacy of civil rights. After the senator's death in 1874, Wormley commissioned a portrait of him for the hotel's "Sumner parlor."

But of course, the hotel is best known to history for the infamous "Wormley Agreement" that purportedly was fashioned there to resolve the impasse concerning the contested presidential election of 1876 between Republican Rutherford B. Hayes and Democrat Samuel J. Tilden. Historians have used what may have happened at the Wormley as a useful way to crystallize the denouement of the federal government's commitment to use the army to enforce the provisions of the 14th and 15th Amendments and protect the rights of the people who had been slaves. Supposedly, among other things, Republican politicians agreed to remove the troops that remained in the South in order to secure Democratic acceptance of the election of Hayes.

Professor Gelderman deftly explains and illustrates the complexity, corruption, chicanery, confusion and violence that made it all but impossible to determine which candidate had actually won the electoral votes of the key states of South Carolina, Florida and Louisiana. In fact, there is even some disagreement about whether a deal was really brokered at the Wormley hotel to settle the dispute. According to Gelderman, the federal government's abandonment of Reconstruction and of black rights was set in motion long before the election of 1876. The Supreme Court seemed determined to narrow those rights, or perversely to transfer them from vulnerable people to powerful businesses. So, whether a deal was cut at the hotel didn't really matter. In her view, "all of this would have happened whether or not there had been a Wormley meeting, agreement, bargain, compromise - by whatever name it is known" (108).

James Wormley died in 1884, leaving a very impressive estate for his family, even as the racial climate continued to worsen. His son sold the hotel in 1893. Gelderman speculated that he "surely sensed the inevitable outcome of the near-total disenfranchisement of Negroes that had occurred in the nine years since his father's death." The family and the country had taken a remarkable journey since Lynch Wormley first arrived in Washington during the presidency of James Madison, when the city was still "one of the principal slave markets in

the nation" (8).

In the epilogue, Gelderman reviews the more recent contested election of 2000 between Republican Bush, and Democrat Gore, as well as some controversial decisions of the Rehnquist and Roberts Courts, and also the growing economic inequality in the United States. She concludes that the "period we live in today is alarmingly similar to the last quarter of the nineteenth century" (125).

Woven into this well-crafted narrative is a wonderful chapter on the U.S. Centennial Exhibition that took place in Philadelphia in 1876; as well as chapters detailing the corruption of the Grant Administration, and the remarkable transformation of the city of Washington that took place under the leadership of Alexander Shepherd. Professor Gelderman has done some impressive research in Wormley family records and in Congressional documents, but for the most part this book is based on secondary sources. Still, scholars will learn a great deal about the Wormley's, and I don't believe that anyone has explained the tumultuous history of Reconstruction with greater clarity, in so few pages.

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