

The Fight for Interracial Marriage Rights in Antebellum Massachusetts

Mary Beth Sievens

Follow this and additional works at: <https://repository.lsu.edu/cwbr>

Recommended Citation

Sievens, Mary Beth (2015) "The Fight for Interracial Marriage Rights in Antebellum Massachusetts," *Civil War Book Review*: Vol. 17 : Iss. 4 .

DOI: 10.31390/cwbr.17.4.16

Available at: <https://repository.lsu.edu/cwbr/vol17/iss4/15>

Review

Sievens, Mary Beth

Fall 2015

Moulton, Amber D. *The Fight for Interracial Marriage Rights in Antebellum Massachusetts*. Harvard University Press, \$45.00 ISBN 9780674967625

Setting the Pattern for Civil Rights Battles of the Nineteenth Century

In this thoroughly researched and compelling book, Amber Moulton presents an in-depth examination of the antebellum campaign to end the interracial marriage ban in Massachusetts. Moulton analyzes the arguments, strategies, and historical contingencies that led to the campaign's success in 1843 as well as the arguments and strategies of the campaign's opponents, both of which laid the groundwork for future civil rights battles in Massachusetts and throughout the United States. Moulton examines the coalitions of reformers involved in the campaign and introduces her readers to activists that most scholars have not studied. She does an excellent job of placing Massachusetts's interracial marriage ban and the campaign to repeal it in a broader context of antebellum debates over the meaning of race, citizenship, and equality in a society opposed to slavery but still overwhelmingly committed to white supremacy.

Moulton analyzes the complex ways that the conflation of emancipation with amalgamation and the rising tide of anti-amalgamation sentiment in the press and popular culture of the antebellum era affected the arguments and strategies of reformers working to repeal the interracial marriage ban. A nuanced and compelling analysis of activism based on equal rights arguments enables Moulton to demonstrate convincingly that, in contrast to claims made in existing scholarship, African Americans participated in the movement to legalize interracial marriage in large numbers and significantly shaped the movement's message and strategies. Her analysis also illuminates the pitfalls associated with the equal rights argument, especially given the strident anti-amalgamation tone struck in the press and even in the state legislature when reporting on and debating measures related to the interracial marriage ban. White women

petitioning for repeal of the ban were attacked by press and legislators alike for promoting interracial sex. The harassment of female petition signers (which included being called before the Massachusetts General Court to publicly affirm their support for interracial marriage) caused some activists to abandon the movement. Ultimately, however, opposition based on anti-amalgamation sentiment led to a refashioning of the movement's arguments. Moulton explains on p. 106: In the face of continued and potentially violent opposition, activists for interracial marriage rights were faced with a quandary: how would they maintain the support of cautious abolitionists... or recruit new women to the cause, when they knew that critics might easily deploy anti-amalgamation attacks against them? Was the movement destined to dissolve because white women, the foot soldiers of social reform, were simply too vulnerable to anti-amalgamationists? To regain credibility and create new opportunities for activist recruitment, reformers had to make interracial marriage palatable to reform women. They would do this by melding equal rights and moral reform ideologies to shape a new appeal founded on Christianity, republicanism, and morality.

This new argument foregrounded the moral imperatives of marriage rights, maintaining that allowing interracial marriage would protect the virtue of women and children's right to economic support. Reformers argued that the interracial marriage ban rewarded unscrupulous men who seduced women of a different race and then abandoned them, leaving the children born from these unions without any legal means to compel support from their fathers. Drawing uncomfortable parallels between these effects of the interracial marriage ban and southern slave owners' sexual exploitation of slaves, activists grounded their arguments in the familiar territory of moral reform efforts to strengthen the normative male-headed free northern family.

The decision to reshape arguments in favor of repealing the interracial marriage ban led to a groundswell of support, resulting in increased numbers of petitions in favor of repeal. However, Moulton argues that even this new-found support was not enough for repeal to succeed in the first several years of the 1840s. Popular anxiety regarding amalgamation remained strong in spite of the coherent message and increased numbers of the reform movement. As Moulton claims on p. 132, it was not until November and December of 1842, when the fate of fugitive slave George Latimer became a cause célèbre in Massachusetts that "discourses of equal rights, moral reform, and a strong sense of anti-Southern Yankee sensibility united to affect" the repeal of the interracial

marriage ban. In the fall of 1842 Latimer and his wife fled to Boston from Virginia, followed closely by James Gray, who claimed ownership of Latimer and who had Latimer arrested and jailed. Latimer claimed that he had been emancipated in his late mistress's will, which Gray had destroyed. Activists organized a public campaign to secure Latimer's release, emphasizing the power that slaveholders such as Gray could wield over public officials and legal processes in the free state of Massachusetts. In this particular moment of popular outrage over northern acquiescence to southern slaveholders' demands, activists were able to present the interracial marriage ban as yet another example of northern collusion with the slave South. On page 145, Moulton argues that linking repeal of interracial marriage with the passage of a Personal Liberty Law made it possible for Massachusetts residents to view repeal as a way to define free northern society against the South: "Thousands of citizens, who shared no existential interest in interracial marriage, nevertheless interpreted the movement as a way to protest the national power of slaveholders and to create a sense of Northern identity." This coincidence of interests among moral reformers, African Americans demanding full citizenship rights, and ordinary citizens wishing to distinguish their free society from the slave South carried repeal of the interracial marriage ban to victory in February 1843.

Moulton follows her narrative of the repeal campaign with an exploration of further interracial efforts. She briefly analyzes political movements in Massachusetts to integrate public transportation, schools, and the militia as well as a growing body of interracial literature before turning her attention to the proliferation of anti-amalgamation legislation and policy in much of the rest of the nation. Moulton presents the quite reasonable argument that the modest successes of interracial activists generated a backlash among Americans who perceived the threat these successes posed to white supremacy. A rash of interracial marriage bans and segregation measures passed throughout the northern states in the 1840s and 1850s, revealing the scope of interracial anxiety throughout the North and confirming Moulton's argument regarding the centrality of historical contingencies specific to Massachusetts to the repeal of the ban in that state. While interesting and important, this chapter is less compelling than the rest of the book, if only because it lacks the tightly-focused narrative underpinning Moulton's examination of the repeal movement.

Moulton's book is a first-rate history of a movement that reveals the complicated relationships among equal rights and moral reform ideologies, white supremacist thought, and northern society's evolving relationship with slavery

and the South. Its nuanced analysis of the arguments and strategies of both sides of the interracial marriage debate and of how they changed in response to one another makes this a must-read for scholars interested in African American history, civil rights, and the history of marriage.

Mary Beth Sievens is Chair of the History Department at the State University of New York Fredonia. She is the author of Stray Wives: Marital Conflict in Early National New England and is currently working on a project analyzing how the growth of consumer culture in the early nineteenth century affected family relationships.