

Antislavery and Abolition in Philadelphia: Emancipation and the Long Struggle for Racial Justice in the City of Brotherly Love

Angela F. Murphy

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

Recommended Citation

Murphy, Angela F. (2012) "Antislavery and Abolition in Philadelphia: Emancipation and the Long Struggle for Racial Justice in the City of Brotherly Love," *Civil War Book Review*. Vol. 14 : Iss. 1 .

DOI: 10.31390/cwbr.14.1.09

Available at: <https://repository.lsu.edu/cwbr/vol14/iss1/31>

Review

Murphy, Angela F.

Winter 2012

Newman, Richard (ed.) and Mueller, James (ed.). *Antislavery and Abolition in Philadelphia: Emancipation and the Long Struggle for Racial Justice in the City of Brotherly Love.* Louisiana State University Press, \$39.95 ISBN 978-0-8071-3991-2

New Perspectives Antislavery and Abolition

In *Antislavery and Abolition in Philadelphia*, Richard Newman and James Mueller have provided a welcome edited collection on the antislavery movement in Philadelphia. Contributors to the volume make a strong case for the centrality of Philadelphia abolitionists, black and white, in the struggle for racial justice in the Atlantic World. It is thus both a local history depicting the efforts of some of the earliest antislavery activists in North America and a broader history that touches on issues important in the transnational antislavery movement.

Several themes run through the collection, giving it cohesion. One is the relationship between black and white activists in the movement. The volume highlights their unique contributions, the ways in which they cooperated with one another, and the limits to that cooperation. A second thread running through the collection is the tension between gradualist and immediatist impulses as the antislavery movement arose during the Age of Revolution and matured in the early nineteenth century. A third emphasis of the book concerns the importance of the above era. Instead of beginning, as many abolitionist histories do, with the rise of immediatism in the 1830s, many of the essays highlight events leading up to that point, giving less attention to the abolitionists of the Antebellum Era. A major point of the collection is that earlier activists have not been given their fair share of attention and that the study of abolitionism needs to go back further. Quakers, members of Pennsylvania Abolition Society (PAS), and leaders of the growing free black community of Philadelphia during the period of northern emancipation thus receive a great amount of attention throughout the book. Finally, as mentioned above, there is a strong transatlantic dimension to the

collection, with many of the chapters discussing Philadelphia abolitionism within the context of the broader transnational movement against slavery.

A number of distinguished scholars have contributed to the volume. Ira Berlin authors the single chapter in the first section of the book, "Liberating Philadelphia." In it, he outlines the general history of the black experience in Philadelphia, grounding his descriptions in the larger history of the Black Atlantic World. His chapter touches on many of the topics that follow in the collection, and it serves as an excellent introduction to what follows.

The second section of the book, "Black and White Abolitionist Movements in Emancipating Philadelphia," focuses on the major players that arose in the movement against slavery in Philadelphia before and during the period of northern emancipation. David Waldstreicher discusses the Quaker origins of the antislavery movement, asserting the cosmopolitan nature of Philadelphia Quaker reform efforts, placing the development of their antislavery ideology in a larger imperial context. His chapter also includes an interesting discussion of Benjamin Franklin's interactions with early antislavery intellectuals and his ambivalent position on the movement. Julie Winch follows with a chapter on the experiences of and activism within the Philadelphia black community as its members sought both personal and political freedom. Richard Newman discusses the first major antislavery society of the city, the PAS, emphasizing its importance in launching an abolitionist movement in North America while acknowledging the limitations imposed by its conservatism. Like Waldstreicher, Newman emphasizes the cosmopolitan nature of the activities of these early activists. Gary Nash contributes a chapter on race and citizenship. Through the lens of two Philadelphians – one white (Tench Coxe) and one black (James Forten) – he traces evolving ideas about black rights and citizenship that accompanied emancipation in Philadelphia. This second section anchors the book, giving the reader snapshots of the early struggle for racial justice in Philadelphia, and the challenges faced by reformers promoting racial uplift, from various viewpoints.

The third and final section of the book, "Shades of Freedom," contains chapters that help to flesh out the picture of Philadelphia abolitionism. W. Caleb McDaniel meditates on the changing nature of antislavery cosmopolitanism, tracing the way in which antislavery activists moved from a cosmopolitan critique of nationalism to an attempt to reconcile patriotic sentiment with the idea of being a "citizen of the world." In his treatment of this broad intellectual

trend, McDaniel highlights the rhetorical contributions of both black and white Philadelphians. His piece helps to give dimension to the arguments about the cosmopolitan nature of Philadelphia abolitionism made by other contributors to the book. Dee E. Andrews follows with a discussion of the relationship of Philadelphia churches to the abolition movement, arguing that concerns about the church's institutional health guided the various responses and approaches in both black and white churches. Heather S. Nathans' chapter moves the reader to the topic of theater, providing an illuminating look at the way in which issues concerning race, slavery and antislavery played out on the stage in Philadelphia. The final chapter, by Elizabeth Varon, is the only one grounded in the antebellum period. She discusses underground railroad activity in the city, pointing out contradictions that seemed to arise out of the effort to aid fugitive slaves: the tension between secrecy and the desire for publicity among activists; the strong threads of both antislavery and anti-abolitionist sentiment evident in the Philadelphia conflicts engendered by aid given to fugitives; and the way in which fugitive slave policy promoted both a black determination to assert their rights in Philadelphia and an emigrationist current among those free blacks who felt their best chance would be to leave the United States.

In *Antislavery and Abolition and Philadelphia* Newman and Mueller have put together a strong collection of work on the antislavery movement in Philadelphia. Its emphasis on the Atlantic context of Philadelphia antislavery, its illumination of the importance of this early period of antislavery activity, and its dedication to exploring the contributions of both black and white reformers are strengths of the book. It must be noted, though, that those wanting a comprehensive picture of the local antislavery movement in Philadelphia will likely be disappointed. There is no discussion of the Garrisonian Pennsylvania Anti-Slavery Society or its influence, and although the colonization movement is discussed in several of the chapters, none of the authors give more than passing attention to the debates within and activities of the Pennsylvania Colonization Society. Even so, the collection is an important one that should be of great interest to students of African-American history and the antislavery movement. Each contribution helps to advance our understanding, not just of Philadelphia abolitionism, but of abolitionism in the Atlantic World and of race relations in the early American republic.

Angela F. Murphy is the author of American Slavery, Irish Freedom: Abolition, Immigrant Citizenship, and the Transatlantic Movement for Irish Repeal (LSU Press, 2010). She teaches history at Texas State University, San

Marcos.