

Slaves, Slaveholders, and a Kentucky Community's Struggle toward Freedom

Tom Barber
tbarbe6@lsu.edu

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

Recommended Citation

Barber, Tom (2019) "Slaves, Slaveholders, and a Kentucky Community's Struggle toward Freedom," *Civil War Book Review*: Vol. 21 : Iss. 4 .

DOI: 10.31390/cwbr.21.4.04

Available at: <https://repository.lsu.edu/cwbr/vol21/iss4/4>

Interview

Slaves, Slaveholders, and a Kentucky Community's Struggle toward Freedom

Fall 2019

Leonard, Elizabeth D. *Slaves, Slaveholders, and a Kentucky Community's Struggle toward Freedom*. University Press of Kentucky, 2019. \$50.00 ISBN 9780813176666

Interview by: Tom Barber

Civil War Book Review (CWBR): Today the Civil War Book Review is pleased to speak with Elizabeth D. Leonard Gibson Professor of History emerita at Colby College. She is the author of several books including *Men of Color to Arms! Black Soldiers, Indian Wars, and the Quest for Equality* and *Lincoln's Forgotten Ally: Judge Advocate General Joseph Holt of Kentucky*. Today we are here to talk with her about her book, *Slaves, Slaveholders, and a Kentucky Community's Struggle toward Freedom*, which won the Thomas D. Clark Foundation's Medallion Award. Professor Leonard, thank you for joining us today.

Elizabeth D. Leonard (EL): Thank you so much for having me.

CWBR: Your book is primarily told through the eyes of two Kentuckians, Joseph Holt (a former slaveholder) and Sandy Holt (a former slave). What brought you back to Joseph's life, and what led you to write about Sandy?

EL: I had, as you had mentioned, written the biography of Joseph Holt. And, although it's a very long book about a very long life, I was still puzzling over what the forces were that drove him, Joseph Holt, to make this switch from being a slaveholder and committed to slavery and Kentuckian and so on, to being so strongly in favor of emancipation and also black civil rights and political rights even after the war. So, I was grappling with that question still and then I worked on that other book that you mentioned, *Men of Color to Arms!*, and I started thinking about how one does research on black soldiers and it occurred to me: "Gee wouldn't it be interesting to know if I could find a black soldier from the Civil War period in this amazing database that is available to us through the Internet, through the National Archives, of black

soldiers.” And I was absolutely, with complete certainty, able to find this one man Sandy Holt, who I had known from my research on Joseph Holt. And then I started thinking about the different ways that the two of them worked towards the same ultimate goal in the war and I wanted to see how that affected them; the community they both came from; and, what happened to them after the war. And, I thought it would not just be interesting weaving together of these two stories, but as I’m sure you detected, part of what the book is about the research process itself; and, how it’s just one kind of research to study a prominent white figure who was literate and left a huge paper trail, and it’s another kind of research to study other people who were part of his community who left us very different kind of records. So, I wanted to tell their stories, but also talk about the process of how one does that.

CWBR: We’ll start with the guy who left an immense paper trail. Rather than framing Holt as Lincoln’s ally, which he becomes later in the book, you look closely at Holt’s journey from slaveholder to abolitionist. I thought it was a particularly powerful example—especially for the present—of someone changing their mind, someone acting mature enough to understand that their actions might be wrong. Can you tell us a little bit about what experiences shifted Joseph’s perspective on the matter of slavery? And why so many people in his community veered away from that path?

EL: Well he came from a community, and a family, of diehard Confederates and he had left. People for whom slavery, as it had been for him, was a pillar of their existence and their wealth and everything else, and he had grown up with that. And I don’t think he questioned it for the longest time, until he became more and more involved in politics in the 1850s and went to Washington and left that community. He already had some separation from his community when he moved to Washington, but he still was pretty strongly in favor of—or at least not opposed to slavery in any sort of powerful way. In the fall of 1860, when things were starting to disintegrate, he was often more likely to criticize the abolitionists for causing trouble, and being extremists and stirring up this mess, than he was to criticize anybody else. But, I think there was a degree of shock that he experienced with his very rational, highly educated lawyer’s mind, maybe, when the Southern states started to secede. And it occurred to him: “My goodness, they really are going to destroy this country to protect this institution,” which he had been sort of moving away from anyway. But, I think that was the first great shock, was to see that slavery was more important than the nation to people that he had grown up with and the community he had grown

up. And then I think as the War continued, as blacks ran away from slavery and began to serve in the U.S. Army with such courage, and possibly no great end for themselves, also became really significant factors for him. He also had a lot of black people in his life that he became very attached to personally and came to see in new ways as his life continued. He was already separate from slavery, but his family remained where they were. Their conditions didn't change. He had one aunt who was an emancipationist—or at least she kind of liked Lincoln and she thought that diehard Confederates were crazy, but the rest of the family thought she was nuts. And it was very hard to heal the breach that hurt that family during the war.

CWBR: You focus a lot on communities. Let's switch to Sandy for a second. Like you mentioned before, in a lot of ways your book is really an open question about the difficulty of documenting the lives of enslaved people and later freed people. So can you tell us a little about your journey to figure out the lives of Sandy Holt and many of the other men in Company A?

EL: I had done that book about black soldiers in the Indian wars, which obviously had components of it. Their service in the Indian wars came out of their service in the Civil War, so I was doing some work on Civil War soldiers for that book too just for the beginning of it. And then I had this student, a black student, from a poor family in Arkansas who wanted to do her family history. We struggled together to do her family history and she knew she was the descendant of slaves. And we were comparing, as we were struggling in this independent study we were doing together, what her experience of trying to trace her family history was like versus my experience of trying to trace my family history, which was so easy. And I not only had these digitized records, I had lots of physical stuff from my family that had been handed down and then there were stories. And she didn't have any of that stuff. Absent that stuff it was so hard. So it made me feel even more intensely determined to see—because I didn't want to give up. I didn't want to think: "Okay, that's why people don't black history or slave history as much. And, oh well! Too bad! How sad?" I thought there must be ways. And through my work with her and through my work on that other book, I started really finding ways that while I couldn't necessarily, I couldn't say a journal or letters that Sandy Holt had written to describe his experience because he was not literate and neither were most of the men in his unit in the 118th USCT, but there were things like pension records and there were service records and there were letters that commanders had written to say what was going on with the different and so on. So, I just had to go at it from a different perspective entirely. And it was really an interesting

experience of being a detective, which I think historians are anyway, but this was a very different kind trail to follow with enormous excitement and joys and running up and down the hall whenever I would find anything because each little tidbit was so precious. And I was fortunate that as I was doing Joseph's biography where I had all of these records to work with, I had somehow thought: "I'm just going to keep track of the names of these slaves. I just want to know their names, so I can have this sense of the community he lived in." And having done that, without ever anticipating writing this book was also very helpful because it gave me a roster of people whose names I could pursue and get little bits of stories that I could piece together.

CWBR: So, you just mentioned the third character in the book is Kentucky as a community and Holt's birthplace. How do the stories of both Joseph and Sandy help us understand antebellum Kentucky better?

EL: Well certainly that particular part, basically Breckinridge county, that part of Kentucky was a mixed-race community with people on different sides of the racial divide whose lives were intensely, closely intertwined, and dependent on each other and very intimate. And there were—while there was this terrible, grotesque institution that characterized—that was at the heart of that community—we shouldn't forget that were also real ties of affection and concern and interest at the same time, which makes things much more complicated because it's easier to think that they just hated each other, but that wasn't really true. There were really deep connections of affection and then the War comes and blows this community apart and people go off in all different directions to respond to the War.

And then, many of them—I was fascinated that so many of the former veteran black soldiers went right back. And I thought: "Well, why would you ever go back?" Some of it was these ties of affection, some of it was the lack of any other possibility of course. And what I struggled with writing the post war part of the book because I was trying to balance this sense of reconciliation, that you do see among the parts of the community that have had this rupture. So there's this sense of reconciliation, but it's really important to romanticize that. It's not like everybody came back together and lived happily ever after; and, the slave owners were sorry and they made sure that the slaves did well and thrived in the postwar period. That's not at all what happens. Sandy was poor before the war. His whole family remained poor. And, I think if I tracked down his descendants now, it's not unlikely that they would still be poor and marginalized.

But there were these moments of grace that I found really touching. And, I tell that story of a wedding at the Holt family homestead between two former slaves, watched over by the diehard Confederate, white brother of Joseph Holt and how everybody was there and it was a wonderful and happy day, in order to balance that possibility of reconciliation with the reality of the horrors of postwar life in Kentucky, which was difficult for everyone but certainly most difficult for the former slaves. And maybe most, most difficult for the former black veterans because they were so reviled by the Confederates, more so than any slaves had been.

CWBR: Let's talk a little bit about the experiences of the black veterans you chronicled. Before reading your book I was somewhat familiar with this notion of fatigue work—black soldiers being assigned to guard duty and things like that and not necessarily being assigned to direct combat. You spend a great amount of detail on these duties, and probably one of my favorite parts of the book, is your description of this Dutch Gap Canal. What was the project? And how did it continue to haunt soldiers who participated in its construction?

EL: There were many whites who believed that black soldiers would never be able to fight and that they wouldn't be good in combat, so they ended up being deployed in many cases to do this kind of back-breaking labor like digging this—opening up this oxbow in the James River—this big ditch basically to shorten the length of the river. It was hugely tiring labor that was also extremely, extremely dangerous, and I think we sometimes lose sight of that when we think of black soldiers having so often been given shovels instead of rifles. But many of them, not only got wounded by enemy fire in that and other similar kinds of work, but they were also subject to diseases that they carried with them the rest of their lives. And it's not surprising that almost everybody that I could trace in Sandy Holt's unit, ended up applying for a pension because of injuries and illnesses that they sustained in this kind of work and that really went on and on for the rest of their lives. And many of them died, really kind of awful deaths, as consequences of these diseases and injuries that they had sustained.

CWBR: I found Sandy's journey to receiving his pension especially gut wrenching. What was his journey to getting his pension? How did black soldiers' individual fights for a pension anticipate many of the challenges African Americans would face with the government bureaucracy in the twentieth century?

EL: That's an interesting question. Well, it was long, hard slog to get a pension. Particularly if you were not well connected, could not hire a lawyer, weren't literate, hadn't preserved the papers—or hadn't been able to preserve the documents that you were supposed to show that justify giving you a pension and so on. And a lot of veterans in their postwar poverty struggled with alcoholism, which was a common consequence for veterans white and black, from the War because alcohol was so often used medicinally, and opiates as well. Because of other physical problems and health problems that they had on top of the ones they had gotten in war, sometimes they were treated by the pension bureau as if they were unreliable actors, and they were doubted maybe in ways that white veterans were not. But, I found it interesting that they would so often band together and help each other out, these black veterans. So when I was looking at all of these pension records, including Sandy Holt's pension record, they gave depositions for each other over and over again and that was a really interesting indication of the kind of support they needed to build for each other in the absence of support from the white community. But they also had, in some cases, support from members of the white community as well. And I think the cynical way to understand that is to think: "Well, of course the whites who were in Sandy's community and knew him well, and maybe they really thought he was a good guy and deserves his pension." Maybe they actually they just didn't want to have to deal with him themselves, so they wanted the government to pay for him; they wanted him off their backs. But, I think in many cases the nature of the depositions suggests that if you had a patron, someone who stood by you—particularly someone who was white—that could enhance your likelihood of getting a pension. But even so, he constantly had to reapply and constantly had to be re-examined physically and constantly had to explain himself. So, it was really a hard slog. And when he was finally granted it—I believe his wife was granted a pension on his behalf, but he was already dead. He just slogs along and slogs along and slogs along until he finally dies. It's not a particularly happy story and that was true for so many of them. And then of course there were so many who would not even have been able to apply.

CWBR: You mentioned earlier some veterans returning, black veterans, returning to Kentucky. Was that the majority?

EL: I think a majority returned to Kentucky, of the men that I studied, a majority returned to Kentucky at least for a while. But, Kentucky was in so much turmoil after the war, having been a Union state, but with these profoundly pro-Confederate strains, and some have said it was

a postwar Confederate state. That Kentucky was so divided, and after the War, really so bitter over emancipation, whites were so bitter—that really it seemed like it had been a Confederate state. There was a lot of violence, a lot of turmoil, a lot of anger, among whites at these black veterans. And many of them drifted further north, particularly to Indiana, and beyond, to get away from that violence and maybe have a little more opportunity.

But, again, I sort of wondered why would anyone go back at all? And then you think: "Well, don't most people want to stay where their life is?" Or, where the people are that they know and the community where they grew up and the friends that they have. And what kind of options did they have? Sandy Holt may well have wished that he could go someplace else, but he didn't have a lot of skills. He certainly didn't have money and he had these ties and he knew he could stay where he was more safe perhaps, or more comfortable, than if he tried to move away. So I think it was a mix, but a lot of them did head north as soon as they could because the War was sort of over, but not really, in Kentucky for quite a long time.

CWBR: Finally, what surprised you the most working with these sources? What were some of your "greatest hits"? What did you find most surprising going through this?

EL: I think of two things. One is just that there were these glimpses of reconciliation and meaningful connection among people who were so alienated from each other or whose power relations were so troubling to me. And yet, there were these glimpses of reconciliation between the blacks and the whites in that community. I thought the whole story, which I also talk about there, and I also talk about in the biography of Joseph Holt, of his long, hard road back to being reconnected with his white family. And that it took really, the next generation of the family to be able to bring him back into the fold. I thought that was really interesting, and so painful to study and to feel my way through that alienation that they felt. But as a scholar, to me the most surprising or satisfying aspects of this book, of doing the research for it, was actually being able to find as much stuff as I did. There was a point, early on when I was working on this book, where people were suggesting to me: "Why don't you just write it as a novel? There's never going to be enough material that is true to any stable historical record. Stable and ample historical data. So just write a novel that captures the picture." But I'm too much of a historian, I'm really just too bound to the documents to be able to do that, but I thought maybe I'll never be able to write this book. But, I found that you can. And it made me want to say to other scholars "Don't let yourself off the hook easily." And say: "Well, there's no documents." There's always

stuff. You just have to be creative and maybe try a different angle or dig a little deeper. And I really loved naming the names of people. We so often talk about slavery and slaves, in the past tense, as this sort of collective identityless group of sad folks that we are glad not to see enslaved. I really enjoyed getting to know them. Even what little I could get to know about each person and knowing their names and know who they married and knowing the names of their children and knowing that this one was at the wedding and beginning to flesh out these stories that made them so real.

CWBR: Well on that note of optimism, Professor Leonard I appreciate you taking the time to sit with us to discuss your most recent book *Slaves, Slaveholders, a Kentucky Community's Struggle toward Freedom*.

EL: Well, thank you so much.