

Educated for Freedom: The Incredible Story of Two Fugitive Schoolboys Who Grew Up to Change a Nation

Jane E. Dabel

California State University, Long Beach, jane.dabel@csulb.edu

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

Recommended Citation

Dabel, Jane E. (2021) "Educated for Freedom: The Incredible Story of Two Fugitive Schoolboys Who Grew Up to Change a Nation," *Civil War Book Review*. Vol. 23 : Iss. 2 .

DOI: 10.31390/cwbr.23.2.12

Available at: <https://repository.lsu.edu/cwbr/vol23/iss2/12>

Review

Dabel, Jane E.

Spring 2021

Duane, Anna Mae. *Educated for Freedom: The Incredible Story of Two Fugitive Schoolboys Who Grew Up to Change a Nation.* New York University Press, 2020. HARDCOVER. \$30.00 ISBN 9781479847471 pp. 240

This well-researched and fascinating book explores the lives of two of the most prominent graduates of the New York African Free School (NYAFS), James McCune Smith and Henry Highland Garnet. Both attended the NYAFS in the early 19th-century and then became two of the most famous Black activists the city had ever known. By tracing the lives of Smith and Garnet, Duane illustrates the debates that leaders had over the future of Black America while also demonstrating how disempowered populations fought for their rights in the decades before the Civil War.

The book explores the separate paths that Smith and Garnet followed, emphasizing how they were impacted by their time at the NYAFS. Though the two men were educated together as children, their careers and ideologies took very different trajectories in their adult lives. Smith would rely heavily on his scientific training to help care for Black New Yorkers, arguing that they would ultimately gain equal rights in the US. By contrast, Garnet used his pulpit to support a Black-led “back-to-Africa” movement as an international form of revolutionary resistance (108).

The book begins with a thorough discussion of the history of the NYAFS. Founded in 1787, the School’s white teachers and benefactors (including Alexander Hamilton and John Jay) bristled against the idea that Black people would someday be citizens. As a result, the School aligned itself with the American Colonization Society (ACS), whose white leaders argued that Black people should “return” to Africa. This contentious political stand spurred a parent-led boycott against the School in 1833. Ultimately, the ACS withdrew its funding from the NYAFS and it was subsequently subsumed into the New York public school system. Meanwhile, in the aftermath of the bloody anti-abolition riot of 1834, the New York Colored Orphan Asylum

(NYCOA) and its School emerged as the primary institution of Black education funded by white abolitionists.

After leaving the NYAFS, Smith moved to Scotland to continue his education and became the first African-American man to earn a medical degree. Upon returning to New York City, he became a lifelong supporter of the NYCOA and the children who resided and were educated there. For Smith, the best way for African Americans to achieve self-reliance and independence was to remain on their native soil of the United States and invest in building opportunities for the future of African-American children (162).

Meanwhile, Garnet survived a harrowing escape from slave catchers and then struggled to find an American college that would accept African Americans. He ultimately moved on to the Oneida Institute to continue his studies, graduating in 1839. Garnet would go on to become a minister, husband, father, and political leader. He is perhaps most famous for his 1843 “Address to the Slave of the United States of America,” which he delivered at the Convention of Colored Citizens in Buffalo. In his fiery speech, Garnet embraced colonization as a way of promoting uplift for African Americans.

Duane situates her analysis within the historiography of African American abolitionism and activism. Most notably, she relates her work to Manisha Sinha’s *The Slave’s Cause: A History of Abolition* (2016). In particular, Duane emphasizes the accomplishments and contributions of abolitionists from diverse backgrounds, including the roles played by African-American women and children in fighting for equality.

One of the most impressive contributions of Duane’s fine book is her exploration of how some Black abolitionists like Garnet viewed slavery as intertwined with global capitalism and argued that slavery could not be abolished without “major changes in the circulation of wealth” (142). This discussion of Garnet’s critique of slavery and global capitalism builds on recent studies like those of Edward Baptist, Sven Beckert, and Seth Rockman.

Duane’s book is a valuable contribution to the history of African American abolitionists in the 19th-century North.

Jane E. Dabel is a Professor of History at California State University, Long Beach. She is the author of A Respectable Woman: The Public Roles of African American Women in 19th-Century New York (NYU, 2008).