

The Fire of Freedom: Abraham Galloway & the Slaves' Civil War

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Review

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Cecelski, David *The Fire of Freedom: Abraham Galloway & the Slaves' Civil War*. University of North Carolina Press, \$30.00 ISBN 978-0-8078-3566-1

Rebellion and Leadership for the African American Community

In *The Fire of Freedom: Abraham Galloway and the Slaves' Civil War*, David S. Cecelski pieces together a decade of research from dozens of archives, museums, and libraries to bring readers the little known and little documented story of Abraham Galloway, a man who escaped bondage to help destroy the system of slavery. Galloway was born in Smithville, North Carolina, a village at the mouth of the Cape Fear River, in 1837 to Hester Hankins, an enslaved woman owned by a Methodist family, and John Wesley Galloway, a white boatman distantly related to his mistress. Little is known definitively about Galloway's early life beyond his apprenticeship as a brick mason at the age of ten or eleven. Once he learned his trade, he hired his time from his then owner, a master builder. Determined to secure his freedom and perhaps fearful of possible sale, Galloway, along with another enslaved man, stowed away on a northern-bound vessel in 1857. He disembarked in Philadelphia, but the workings of the fugitive slave law, which threatened the rendition of fugitive slaves from free states to slave states, prompted his escape to Kingston, Canada, where the law provided full rights of citizenship. During his residence in Canada, Galloway occasionally returned to the northern United States to deliver abolitionist speeches. In January 1861, after the secession of the Deep South, Galloway traveled to Haiti, ostensibly to join an agricultural colony of US and Canadian blacks but probably to assist in a plot to raid the US South and incite a slave rebellion. With the nation on the brink of war, Galloway returned to the US in early April 1861 to serve as a spy and to assist the abolitionist cause inside the Confederacy. While the particulars of Galloway's service as a spy are little documented, he likely scouted landing sites, recruited slaves to pilot Union vessels, infiltrated Confederate camps, and facilitated the escape of fugitive slaves to Union lines. Confederates captured Galloway during operations against

Vicksburg in early 1862. He managed to escape and return to North Carolina where, after late 1862, he took a more public role, serving as a grassroots organizer, coalition builder, and political speaker. In these capacities, he helped to recruit black men for the Union army. Galloway continued at least occasional clandestine operations for the Union. Cecelski relates Galloway's infiltration of Point Lookout, a Union prison camp in Maryland, to ascertain the extent of Union sympathies, an endeavor that ultimately resulted in the enlistment of a regiment of "Galvanized Yankees." Toward the latter years of the war, Galloway shifted his attention to securing voting rights and political equality in the postwar Union, a demand that he took to the White House in a meeting with the president, to the North in speaking tours, and to the occupied South in churches, mass meetings, and conventions. After the war, Galloway participated in the Equal Rights League and statewide conventions to protest former Confederates' attempts to resubordinate former slaves during Presidential Reconstruction. After a brief hiatus, Galloway returned to political activism with the onset of military reconstruction by campaigning for the Republican party, serving in the constitutional convention, winning office as a state senator, and acting as presidential elector. Though much of the book focuses on Galloway's public life, Cecelski also notes Galloway's marriage to Martha Ann Dixon, a slave until the arrival of General Ambrose E. Burnside's forces in Beaufort in 1862, and the birth of his two sons. Galloway died unexpectedly in 1870 at the young age of thirty-three.

The Fire of Freedom charts Galloway's inspiring life chronologically. Within his narrative, Cecelski repeatedly returns to several themes that position his book within current trends in the historiography of the Civil War and Reconstruction.

First, Cecelski highlights African Americans' militancy and defiance. Radical, militant abolitionists relied not just on "moral suasion," but also on physical force, to eradicate the institution of slavery. In this way, Cecelski concentrates on a lesser known strand of the abolitionist movement and emphasizes divisions among abolitionists. Galloway's conflicts with his more moderate colleagues become especially evident in Cecelski's accounting of Galloway's postwar political activism. Many black leaders in North Carolina adopted a conciliatory posture during Presidential Reconstruction, focusing on securing their rights to their livelihood and deemphasizing voting rights and civil rights. It was this moderation that likely motivated Galloway's brief withdrawal from politics.

Second, Cecelski emphasizes African Americans' organization and mobilization. He highlights Galloway's role in bringing slaves to freedom, in recruiting men for the Union cause, and in mobilizing voters during Reconstruction. Cecelski roots the necessity for this organization in African Americans' clear understanding that their goals and those of the Union leadership diverged and therefore that they ultimately had to rely upon themselves. Throughout his life, Galloway repeatedly counseled the value of self-reliance and independence. Free blacks and former slaves under Union occupation developed their own institutions during the war years and then built upon these institutions in the postwar years. In this way, wartime mobilization in occupied areas facilitated and indeed enabled postwar mobilization.

Third, Cecelski emphasizes that African Americans served as planners and strategists in their own right, refusing blind deference not only to their masters and mistresses but also to Union authorities. Galloway never "confused the Union's cause with the cause of black freedom," recognizing the racial prejudice of white northerners and the shallow, at best, support for racial equality of the white northern political leadership. (157) Galloway and other African Americans acted on their own agendas during the war, allying with the Union when it suited their purposes and pushing the Union toward their own goals. Galloway had ample reason to condemn the vagaries of Union policies. During the campaign against Vicksburg, Galloway likely witnessed the expulsion of fugitive slaves from Union lines and the abandonment of "confiscated" slaves as Union forces withdrew. Under Union occupation in coastal North Carolina from 1862 to 1865, Union officials closed black schools, complied with the fugitive slave law, arrested blacks who drilled for self protection, treated blacks with contempt, and impressed former slaves as military laborers. With black enlistment well underway in 1863, blacks also condemned the failures of Union authorities to defend black prisoners of war against Confederate atrocities. When Union authorities failed to act in concert with blacks' goals, Galloway and others protested. Cecelski recounts one telling example in which Galloway refused to assist in black recruitment until extracting at gunpoint a promise, subsequently broken, of equality in the ranks.

A final theme, that of the participation of black women in the freedom struggle, is less developed throughout the book. Cecelski stresses that Galloway worked with black female activists "as equals" and especially highlights his collaboration with Mary Ann Starkey, a former slave in New Bern, North

Carolina, until their falling out over financial matters in late 1865. (69) Cecelski focuses on black men's services to the Union army as spies and military laborers and on black men's demands for the vote. Galloway and many of the black leaders covered in the book condemned slavery as a system that denied black men ownership of their bodies, their wives, and their children and justified citizenship and political rights on the basis of black men's contributions as soldiers in the Union army. Cecelski leaves much of this discourse unexamined. As a result, the depiction of the slaves' Civil War in the person of Galloway is notably masculine. In the postwar years, however, Cecelski recounts Galloway's support for bills to grant women's suffrage and to protect women against domestic violence and abandonment.

Throughout, Cecelski demonstrates the ways slaves claimed the war as their own, not as a war to save the Union as it was, but as a war to save a different kind of Union, one committed to the principles of freedom that included both blacks and whites. *The Fire of Freedom* presents not the brother's war but the slaves' war, a story of the war not centered on white military commanders or white political leaders fighting for state's rights or the preservation of the Union but on slaves and free blacks who took their fate in their own hands and challenged the Union to fulfill its highest ideals.

Susanna Michele Lee teaches in the History Department at North Carolina State University. She has two forthcoming books, one on post-Civil War southern citizenship and another on civilians in Virginia during the Civil War.