

Gender and the Jubilee: Black Freedom and the Reconstruction of Citizenship in Civil War Missouri

Christopher Bonner

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

Recommended Citation

Bonner, Christopher (2016) "Gender and the Jubilee: Black Freedom and the Reconstruction of Citizenship in Civil War Missouri," *Civil War Book Review*: Vol. 18 : Iss. 3 , Article 16.

DOI: 10.31390/cwbr.18.3.17

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.lsu.edu/cwbr/vol18/iss3/16>

Review

Bonner, Christopher

Summer 2016

Romeo, Sharon *Gender and the Jubilee: Black Freedom and the Reconstruction of Citizenship in Civil War Missouri*. University of Georgia Press, \$59.95 ISBN 9780820348018

From Slavery to Citizenship

In May 1864, Jane Ciss walked into a provost marshal's office in St. Louis hoping that she could be officially recognized as contraband of war. Ciss and two soldiers of the USCT testified before Union Captain Charles Hills that Ciss's owner was "most of the time in the bush," taking part in the Confederate guerilla effort in Missouri (84). Because of her owner's evident disloyalty, Hills granted Ciss government protection as a contraband. With that new status, Ciss then appealed to another Union officer in Warrenton, Missouri to secure the freedom of her children, who were still in the possession of her disloyal owner. This is one of the dozens of stories of black women's activism that Sharon Romeo tells in her compelling new book, *Gender and the Jubilee*. Ciss's story points to key elements of the history of emancipation. It was a halting and individualized process, especially for black women, and especially in the border states. These women's personal experiences of enslavement and liberation were tied to larger military and political transformations in the period. And black women seized legal opportunities to change their circumstances through the Union army. *Gender and the Jubilee* is a history of African American women who understood the particular legal context of wartime Missouri and used it to create new legal identities and to take part in the process of constructing black citizenship.

Through the distinctive experiences of black women in the distinctive border locale of Missouri, Romeo makes important points about African American politics and emancipation across the United States. She explores the roots of black legal consciousness in antebellum Missouri, including the proximity between free and enslaved in St. Louis and the prevalence of freedom suits in the state. Black people far beyond Dred Scott "learned to navigate the court system"

(14) and were thus well prepared for the opportunities the Civil War presented. Romeo illuminates important connections in nineteenth-century black politics, showing that war and emancipation did not produce rigid breaks in activist ideologies and tactics.

Many black women in Missouri remained enslaved throughout the war because they could not enlist and were not deemed sufficiently useful to be contrabands. Subsequent chapters examine these women's efforts to reshape or to end their enslavement through military courts. Black women sought recognition as contrabands, sought benefits as wives and widows of Union soldiers, and told their stories in pursuit of a different legal status – they sought citizenship as a path out of slavery. Romeo offers probing analysis of black women's testimony through Union army records and Civil War pensions. She crafts a human portrait of emancipation that captures individual women's politics and desires and dreams.

Much of that evidence involves black women testifying against their owners, as Jane Ciss did in May 1864. That testimony often blended women's protest of their enslavement with evidence of their owners disloyalty. That disloyalty made those individual women's stories legally and militarily meaningful to Union officers. Romeo shows how the war created opportunities for African Americans to gain direct access to the federal government, and how black women created practical aspects of a new civic identity during the war. African Americans presented themselves to the government, through the army, as people with legitimate claims on federal authority, thus sketching the terms of black citizenship before the passage of the Fourteenth Amendment. The book thus emphasizes the opportunities of emancipation – black people could reposition themselves within the American legal system. But among the stories of black women using military courts are a number of examples of injustices unpunished. In the same month that Jane Ciss testified, Thomas Farrell, a Confederate sympathizer, hit Charlotte Ford, a free black woman, in the back of the head with a brick. Ford appealed to a military court and Farrell was convicted and sentenced, but almost immediately afterwards Farrell was released by order of a Union officer who "disapproved of the proceedings" (88). Charlotte Ford's story is not as deeply analyzed as Jane Ciss's. But a fuller exploration of such stories might help capture both the opportunities and the limitations of legal change in the era of emancipation.

Romeo's book is a concise, readable, and important addition to the literature on emancipation. She complicates the longstanding narrative of slavery to freedom by showing how black women moved from slavery to citizenship. Black women created a new legal identity in direct response to the circumstances of their enduring wartime enslavement. Many understood that they could only win freedom through an individual, tangible connection to federal authority. *Gender and the Jubilee* will appeal to scholars and advanced students interested in the complexities of emancipation, the nature of federal law and authority during the Civil War, and the varieties of African American and women's politics that emerged during the nineteenth century.

Christopher Bonner is Assistant Professor of History at the University of Maryland, College Park. He is at work on a book about free African Americans and the politics of citizenship in the antebellum North.