First Fruits of Freedom: The Migration of Former Slaves and Their Search for Equality in Worcester, Massachusetts, 1862-1900

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Review

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Chains of Migration, Community Building, and the Pursuit of Freedom

“At the same time that the first contrabands began to trickle into Worcester,” Janette Thomas Greenwood writes, “Worcesterites made their way to North Carolina to help Horace James and others ‘make a new South’” (48). Greenwood’s monograph centers on the relationships formed by these movements of people between New Bern, North Carolina and Worcester, Massachusetts in a time period not usually associated with black migration northward. Greenwood rightly points out that our understanding of black migration rests too heavily on the Great Migration of the twentieth century, and indeed, Civil War-era black resettlement remains an understudied aspect of African-American history. While the absolute numbers of this earlier movement pale in comparison to the Great Migration, as a first major exodus of freedpeople, this nineteenth-century migration is significant and deserves study in its own right. Greenwood’s work represents a step in this direction. She uses migration between New Bern, a North Carolina city occupied by Federal troops early in 1862, and Worcester as a frame to understand broader historical themes of race and power. Worcester, she maintains, was “a small stage on which the larger national drama over the meaning of freedom played out” (9).

Greenwood’s story of black freedom begins before the outbreak of the Civil War. She seeks to understand why Worcester seemed to embody the myth of free New England by looking at its history of radical abolitionism and the importance of local leaders like Thomas Wentworth Higginson and Horace James. She also examines the role of African Americans in Worcester society, especially as abolitionists fighting for full civil rights. The passage of the Fugitive Slave Act
in 1850 radicalized black and white abolitionists. White cooperation in protesting against the recapture of runaway slaves led many black Worcesterites to view the Civil War with high expectations of emancipation and their own civil rights. Greenwood’s contextualization is essential to understanding postwar experiences; Southern migrants joined an established black community, one that included former slaves, within Worcester. These factors all influenced Worcesterites’ participation in the Union Army.

Greenwood’s arguments are largely rooted in the experiences of the 25th Massachusetts Volunteer Regiment, formed in Worcester County in September 1861. Greenwood details how these soldiers and black North Carolinian fugitives “forged strong personal bonds that formed the foundation of migration networks to the North during and after the war” (28). Contrabands’ unshakeable loyalty to the Union and their belief in the goal of the war to end slavery radicalized many soldiers in the 25th Massachusetts, and in the face of white disloyalty, many soldiers in the 25th Massachusetts were especially impressed with black allegiance. Under the leadership of Horace James, a staunch abolitionist, chaplain of the 25th Massachusetts, Superintendent of the Poor for North Carolina, and later Superintendent of Negro Affairs for the District of North Carolina, Worcester soldiers helped establish schools for contrabands. These schools, coupled with soldiers’ personal ties, drew additional Worcesterites to New Bern as teachers and aid workers. It was Lincoln’s appointment of Edward Stanly as military governor of North Carolina’s occupied areas in 1862, however, that provided the turning point in black-white relationships in New Bern and the surrounding countryside. In the face of Stanly’s efforts to enforce antebellum laws, especially with regards to educating African Americans, soldiers and teachers developed stronger alliances with blacks to defy Stanly. As a result of these growing connections, the first New Bern contrabands migrated to Worcester.

At the crux of Greenwood’s work is this two-way, mutually-reinforcing movement of people between Worcester and New Bern. Worcesterites brought a specific vision of New England, one characterized by middle-class mores and notions of community and social reform. In this vein, James established a freedmen’s community on Roanoke Island modeled after a New England village. Worcesterites thus shaped black perceptions and expectations of freedom. Additionally, their personal relationships opened migratory networks when freedom in North Carolina fell short of freedpeople’s hopes, initiating a wave of black emigration to Massachusetts.
The second half of the work, therefore, focuses on black experiences in Worcester. Through a careful analysis of military records, censuses, newspapers, church records, Freedmen’s Bureau records, and city and county records, Greenwood follows specific migrants and teases out the dynamics of individual relationships. Unlike many social histories and urban studies, *First Fruits of Freedom* is primarily a story about people. Greenwood explores where Southern migrants lived and offers hypotheses for why they chose certain neighborhoods. Additionally, her use of individuals to explore the emergence of groups such as the Citizens Equal Rights Association and the Colored Republican Protective Association in the 1890s is helpful in explaining the shift of many black Worcesterites towards more radical strategies of advancement. Her analysis of black institutions like the southern-style Mount Olive Baptist Church and the AME Zion Church is particularly insightful in detailing both continued connections to the South and community life in Worcester.

Greenwood is careful to avoid portraying Worcester as a utopia of racial equality, despite successes of the initial wave of migrants. She examines how the promise of free New England devolved into a familiar tale of inequality. As new generations of black Worcesterites came of age lacking the white patronage of their predecessors, blacks stagnated economically. Denied access to industrial jobs and most government positions, their conditions deteriorated. Ultimately, Greenwood argues, Worcester only approached the myth of free New England for the first arrivals who had personal connections to the white elite. Those without such relationships found themselves on the margins of society and the economy; aspirations of autonomy foundered against the reality of a small community that lacked sufficient resources. By the turn of the century, subject to *de facto* Jim Crow, African Americans in Worcester were unable to create a self-reliant community within the larger city, though they retained their ties to the South and their identity as North Carolinians.

Greenwood seeks to fill an important historiographical gap with this work. She joins a growing group of scholars including Michael Johnson, Elizabeth Pleck, and Leslie Schwalm in this effort, and her book advances our knowledge of both early migration and the ways freedpeople understood emancipation and the processes through which they attempted to make it meaningful. Of most value in this study is Greenwood’s successful unification of examinations of black freedom in a community before, during, and after the Civil War. The segregation and discrimination black Worcesterites faced is all the more tragic
given Worcester’s legacy of abolitionism. Greenwood also focuses on the interconnectedness of the North and the South rather than on the divisions between the regions, complicating David Blight’s argument in *Race and Reunion* (2001) that a reconciliationist vision of the war based on white brotherhood was essential to reunite the country. Her analysis of the human ties between the regions suggests an emancipationist vision could have led to a reunion that allowed for racial equality.

Greenwood’s work represents an initial step towards a fuller understanding of black migration and freedpeople’s hopes for freedom. It suffers from a lack of nuanced class analysis, however, and given the class tensions of established northern black communities during the Great Migration, one wonders if similar conflicts arose in Worcester. Additionally, efforts by black Worcesterites to welcome and acclimate southern migrants appear decidedly middle-class, creating an image of a single, united black community ready to assist North Carolinians. Finally, Greenwood follows African Americans from New Bern to Worcester without exploring their initial move to New Bern. A more detailed examination of how they arrived in this southern urban area and their experiences there may have altered her analysis of their northern urban experience. Overall, however, this book makes a valuable contribution to the growing scholarship on black experiences of freedom. It will undoubtedly point scholars toward further study of black migration and urban struggles for freedom in the post-emancipation nation.

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