

# Emancipating New York: The Politics of Slavery and Freedom, 1777-1827

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## Review

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**Gellman, David N.** *Emancipating New York: The Politics of Slavery and Freedom, 1777-1827*. Louisiana State University Press, \$45.00 hardcover ISBN 9780807131749

The End of Slavery in the North: New York and Virginia

David N. Gellman, *Emancipating New York: The Politics of Slavery and Freedom, 1777-1827*

Eva Sheppard Wolf, *Race and Liberty in the New Nation: Emancipation in Virginia from the Revolution to Nat Turner's Rebellion*

New York and Virginia were the largest and most influential free and slave states, respectively, in the antebellum era. They also formed the axis for the Democratic Party, which ruled for most of these years. It thus seems appropriate that in the same year, Louisiana State University Press would publish books on how the one became free and the other stayed slave in the early national period. Moreover, these books make a natural pair in that they illuminate similar themes, including the contested legacy of the American Revolution for slavery and the importance of ulterior motives to making antislavery an ongoing political concern. They also both demonstrate the value of state-level history.

David Gellman takes on a story—the abolition of slavery in the state of New York—about which many historians know the broad outlines. Indeed, by such means as exhibits at the New-York Historical Society, a larger segment of non-historians have recently acquainted themselves with these outlines. But amazingly enough, Gellman is the first to relate that story in book-length form. He does so admirably, in part because he has an unusual ability to turn a phrase. Beyond the style, his close attention to local debates published in newspapers and other venues fully reveals the contests leading to emancipation in New York. He works wonders particularly with the scanty records of the relevant legislative debates, which rarely if ever provide us the text or even the substance of the

speeches legislators gave. Gellman fleshes out the contours of the debates by close and astute analysis of the roll call votes.

The most significant finding this analysis yields is that the political power of slaveholders within New York declined significantly between the 1770s, when the issue of abolition first appeared in New York politics, and 1799, when the legislature enacted gradual emancipation. (In 1817, the legislature hastened this process by fixing 1827 as the final date for complete abolition in New York.) Though never an outright majority, the New York slaveholders—a large and politically skillful minority—had nevertheless defeated repeated attempts at emancipation. By the late 1790s, however, a population boom in northern and western New York, where there were very few slaveholders, and an accompanying reapportionment and expansion of the lower house of the legislature reduced the slaveholders to a dwindling minority with fewer allies. This development is of such fundamental significance, in fact, that the reader is left wanting more of the social history behind it, which Gellman alludes to but does not fully develop. In contrast, other passages, in which Gellman offers a literary discussion of the black image and voice in newspaper debates and a forced application of the construct of memory to the post-1799 period, constitute trendy tangents that distract rather than illuminate.

Power politics is at work in this narrative well beyond debates focused directly on slavery. Gellman traces how seemingly unrelated concerns—a host of partisan disputes, the political and moral economy of maple sugar production, among others—involved slavery as a weapon and furthered the determination of many New Yorkers to remove it from their state. Ubiquitous and persistently relevant, Gellman aptly summarizes, slavery's entry into the political discourse of national and state life remained unavoidable (91). Because of the particular dynamics of these ulterior debates, that was true in New York even in the 1790s, when political usages of slavery were muted on the national level.

Gellman's focused attention on one state yields valuable insight and rich detail that has eluded students of national developments willing to accept a more limited understanding of this particular state. By the same token, however, Gellman's own footing is most secure when traversing the local terrain. While he offers useful observations on the significance of New York in the antebellum era, his assertions that abolition in New York possessed primary national importance in the early national period carry little force. New York's emancipation act, Gellman declares, guaranteed the emergence of a historically

rare and protean slaveless democracy in the half of the United States that lay north of the Mason-Dixon Line (1). To support this notion, he is content to point out other scholars' attention to the state. But why should we consider New York rather than Vermont (the first to act, in its state constitution of 1777) or Pennsylvania (the first to achieve gradual emancipation by statute, in 1780) or New Jersey (the last state to abolish, in 1804) as the crucial link in the creation of the North as a section? Historians believing New York to be the center of the universe is not enough to make it so.

Eva Sheppard Wolf, for her part, engages a better-known story but also offers fresh insights and new levels of detail. Many historians have scrutinized the reaction of white Virginians to the antislavery impulses of the American Revolution. They have recounted a tale in which those impulses reached their peak with a massive wave of individual manumissions in the late eighteenth century, followed by an accommodation with slavery in the nineteenth century. The characters in this narrative are the elite slaveholders of Tidewater and Piedmont Virginia, and its main arc is the opportunity they lost—if they had only acted more courageously, some argue, they could have achieved abolition in Virginia. Wolf challenges that story by expanding the cast of characters and changing its chronology.

Her attentions center on non-elite Virginians both black and white. She depicts the role black Virginians both slave and free played in manumissions. But whites below the rank of planters play the largest role. She offers a useful reminder—necessary because of the many historians who have insisted that early national politics were a top-down affair (a self-fulfilling prophecy that flows from their focus on the elite)—that Virginia's politicians could achieve nothing without the consent of their constituency. Using a wide array of sources to examine that constituency's racial fears and other proslavery sentiments, she concludes that Virginia culture in general, not a failure of leadership by the elite, kept Virginia a slave state (x). On the other hand, Wolf emphasizes the importance of culture in a more top-down fashion by demonstrating the power of individual personalities to promote or to suppress emancipation in a particular community—or in other words, the power of local opinion leaders to cultivate or discourage a true culture of manumission (78, 61).

Wolf modifies the typical chronology of the Virginia story by arguing that the 1820s and early 1830s, not the 1780s and 1790s, constituted the apex of Virginia antislavery. She submits that the Revolution bequeathed to white

Virginians not antislavery alone, but rather ambivalence. The competition between commitments to natural rights and property rights, as well as between general racial fears and attachment to particular black people, combined to create this thoroughgoing ambivalence. The way that the Revolution affected slavery in Virginia, then, was to combine liberal impulses with conservative reflexes (35). The ideas of the Revolution, then, created only sporadic debate over slavery in Virginia; it was only when antislavery sentiment became tied to the achievement of distinct political ends that attacks on slavery carried enough weight to spark a sustained and coherent response (xii).

A struggle for power between western and eastern Virginia, which began in earlier decades but exploded in the 1820s, bound antislavery sentiment to political self-interest. In its inception, this sectional struggle had nothing to do with slavery, for the western counties did not begin in any antislavery vein. Ironically enough, it was the slaveholders, and not their opponents, who injected into the discussion the issue of slavery (187) by their hysterical reaction to westerners' call for a more equal white suffrage and greater weight in the legislature. In these calls, eastern slaveholders perceived a threat not only to the added representation their slaves gave them under the existing constitutional formula, but also to their slave property itself from a nonslaveholding rabble. Planters' intransigence, together with heightened racial fears after Nat Turner's 1831 revolt, convinced westerners that slavery threatened their safety and perpetuated their own oppression in Virginia politics. The result, both in the Virginia Constitutional Convention of 1829-1830 and in an 1831-1832 debate directly over emancipation, was the most public, focused, and sustained discussion of slavery and emancipation that ever occurred in the commonwealth (196).

Much as Wolf wants to remove elite planters from center stage, here again the behavior of the planters is the fulcrum on which so much turns. Their extreme touchiness—which she explains (in a wonderful example of how to link national and local events) in light of the growing national threat to slavery they perceived in the aftermath of the Missouri Crisis of 1819-1821—wedded antislavery to what had constituted a simple power play from the west. And planter hysterics are not only causal; they (quite appropriately) are how she measures the severity of the respective threats to slavery posed by the eighteenth-century proponents of manumission and the nineteenth-century westerners. Wolf's narrative, then, reveals a dialogue between the elite and non-elites, but does not deliver the desired knock-out punch to the notion that

leadership matters a great deal.

By locating the antislavery impulse almost exclusively in the arena of power politics, both of these historians deliberately downplay to the point of insignificance, really the importance of the ideology of the American Revolution. Wolf subjects the antislavery legacy of the Revolution to a particularly severe beating, in part by revising the number of manumissions downward. Against the standard estimate of 15,000 manumissions in Virginia between 1782 and 1806, Wolf posits a range of 8,000 to 11,500. Given this, Cassandra Pybus's reduced estimates of American slaves fleeing their bondage during the Revolutionary War, and James A. McMillin's increased numbers for Africans imported into America between 1783 and 1808, based on the numbers alone the Revolution has fallen on hard historiographical times.

These two historians' sallies against the Revolution do not end there. Wolf argues that the percentage of manumissions inspired by Revolutionary ideals was also lower than is traditionally accepted. Gellman insists that the variety of partisan adjuncts necessary to achieve abolition in New York complicates the standard view of the American Revolution as a catalyst for antislavery and northern abolition (139). Their convincing narratives do illustrate that the Revolution did not by itself produce an effective antislavery movement in either state. But no matter their motives, the rhetoric of antislavery agitators in both states drew powerfully upon the ideology of the Revolution. Wolf shows that proslavery men also appealed to the Revolution, to be sure. But the fact remains that before the era of the Revolution, opposition to slavery was marginal at best throughout the Western world let alone in Virginia or New York. Taking these two books together, then, we might best conclude that the American Revolution was necessary but not sufficient to produce the American Civil War.

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