

The Retreats Of Reconstruction: Race, Leisure, And The Politics Of Segregation At The New Jersey Shore, 1865-1920

Angela F. Murphy

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

Recommended Citation

Murphy, Angela F. (2017) "The Retreats Of Reconstruction: Race, Leisure, And The Politics Of Segregation At The New Jersey Shore, 1865-1920," *Civil War Book Review*. Vol. 19 : Iss. 2 .

DOI: 10.31390/cwbr.19.2.10

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.lsu.edu/cwbr/vol19/iss2/5>

Review

Murphy, Angela F.

Spring 2017

Goldberg, David E. *The Retreats of Reconstruction: Race, Leisure, and the Politics of Segregation at the New Jersey Shore, 1865-1920.* Fordham University Press, \$28.00 ISBN 9780823272723

Race and the Right to Consume

The Retreats of Reconstruction by David E. Goldberg traces the rise of *de facto* segregation in the leisure spaces of the Jersey Shore in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The book, a revision of Goldberg's award winning dissertation, illuminates the complexity of black and white approaches to racial access to northern boardwalks, beaches, baths and businesses by focusing on how debates about segregation and integration played out against the backdrop of a changing free market economy that was increasingly focused on consumption, especially in these places of leisure. Relying largely on promotional materials and editorials in northern newspapers, Goldberg shows the way in which Jim Crow restrictions slowly developed in the decades after the Civil War, and he illuminates the role that white and black consumers, businessmen, and local leaders played in the emergence of segregated leisure spaces in the North.

The book begins with a discussion of how both white and black northerners framed their arguments regarding segregation in the context of consumer power. White business leaders on the Jersey shore claimed that they needed to honor social mores regarding racial boundaries in order to appease white consumers, while black activists who pressed for integration in the years after the Civil War argued that they had the "right to consume" and that racial restrictions were, in fact, an infringement on the free market. Local officials wanted to avoid racial conflict as well as honor the emancipationist legacy of the Civil War, and so they were reluctant to enforce strict rules regarding segregation. The result of this situation was that business leaders encouraged social segregation by posting signs that made requests or suggestions about racial access to certain areas. In

taking such a position, they appeased neither black consumers who wanted equal access nor white tourists who wanted more sharply segregated spaces. The amorphous policies on the Jersey shore led to a wave of black consumer activism demanding integration, which in turn led to white appeals to social etiquette to justify segregation. By the turn of the century unofficial segregation policies proliferated and black activists changed their strategy from one that promoted integration to an emphasis on boycotts of white businesses. In doing so they, in effect, sanctioned the idea of “separate but equal” by promoting black-owned businesses and encouraging regulations that would ensure their profitability and safety.

Thus by the 1920s, Goldberg argues, black and white elites had together helped to create a consumer driven culture that acknowledged *de facto* segregation as a norm. According to his analysis, the emphasis on the right to consumption had ultimately aided the cause of segregation as black activists ceased their demands for integration and withdrew to their own spaces. Their emphasis on consumer rights, rather than on social justice, had become a trap that distracted them from demands for full social equality with equal access to all spaces.

Goldberg’s work is an important contribution to our understanding of American race relations in the decades after the Civil War. Not only does it develop our understanding of how segregation became entrenched in the northern states, it shows that the emergence of *de facto* segregation in places like the Jersey Shore cannot solely be explained by a simple acknowledgement of white racism. Goldberg’s research demonstrates that racial politics were intricately intertwined with the rise of a consumer-oriented economy and were defined by competing ideas about free enterprise and the right to consume.

Angela F. Murphy is Professor of History at Texas State University and is the author of American Slavery, Irish Freedom: Abolition, Immigrant Citizenship, and the Transatlantic Movement for Irish Repeal (LSU Press, 2010) and The Jerry Rescue: The Fugitive Slave Law, Northern Rights, and the American Sectional Crisis (Oxford University Press, 2015).