

Embattled Freedom, Journeys through the Civil War Slave Refugee Camps

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Review

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Taylor, Amy Murrell. *Embattled Freedom, Journeys through the Civil War Slave Refugee Camps*. University of North Carolina Press, \$34.95 ISBN 9781469643625

This book is an example of the movement in recent years in the publication of books on the American Civil War. For many years, scholars and civil war buffs wrote about the battles of the war and biographies of leading generals and politicians. Then along came the so-called “new military history,” the linking of the military and the social. More recently, scholars, though not usually Civil War buffs, have studied under-reported areas of the war: why the war was fought the way it was, and how the contribution of such groups like women and African-Americans provides an insight into the war’s meaning. Rarely do young historians delve into topics that the likes of historian Bruce Catton once looked into. Very often such writing is viewed as not providing the kind of complicated new insights that historians now demand.

Associate Professor of History at the University of Kentucky, Amy Murrell Taylor has produced a fine example of the latest approach to the study of the Civil War. She views the conflict, not from the perspective of who won or lost, rather through the eyes of those who experienced it. For too many years, scholars, particularly those of the lost cause, have insisted that the Civil War was an example of conflict over states’ rights. Slavery was at best passed over. Freedom for blacks happened, of course, but it was something to be considered as a given rather than something to be studied.

Then it became clear that the “invisible” men and women, who were always there but usually unnoticed, actually presented insights into what was happening between 1861-1865. At first it was simply a matter of acknowledging African Americans as co-fighters in the war, then realizing that there were many of them in battle, though anti-racial animosity kept them on the fringes as much as possible. Then their presence became too obvious to ignore, and their important roles as workers in the trenches indicated their presence. Even then, the recognition of continual prejudice against them over-shadowed any thought that they were active participants.

However, more than anything else, it became an accepted fact that, once the Union won the war, freedom for African Americans came immediately.

Professor Murrell devotes this book to a study of how the war did not bring freedom immediately to the slaves, rather, as she phrases it, “Freedom had to be searched for and found.” (p.1) Slaves could not remain on the plantation and have their freedom given to them. They had to travel throughout the war-torn South to eke out something that they had never had before—the right to control their own lives. After all, Federal law continued to insist that slavery was acceptable, because the constitution said so.

So, the enslaved people had to move and keep moving, and usually this meant movement to refugee camps that were set up for them. Here they had to develop their own freedom because nothing was guaranteed them except continued discrimination.

Murrell uses the stories of three individuals/families to make her point about searching for freedom. Edward and Emma Whitehurst escaped to Hampton, Virginia and began to make it as storekeepers. Eliza Bogan tried to make a new life in Helena, Arkansas in the most awful of physical situations, and a preacher named Gabriel Burdett tried to push for a productive life in Camp Nelson, Kentucky. Murrell follows these individuals through a variety of situations including life in slave refugee camps. Their stories demonstrate one disappointment after another, making it through one problem only to suffer because of another. The stories Murrell tells indicate how difficult it was to ever get the freedom that these people were searching for. Both southerners and northerners seemed to go out of their way to throw road blocks in the way of these often desperate former slaves. Murrell has done excellent research in following the disappointing travel of African Americans from what historian John Hope Franklin once called “Slavery to Freedom.”

This is an important book because it shows clearly that, despite Civil War mythology, the conflict did not result in immediate freedom. The former slaves had to fight for all they achieved, and then they ran into the Jim Crowism of the late nineteenth, early twentieth centuries.

Murrell ends this book most effectively when she points out that Preacher Gabriel Burdett, like so many other former slaves, never lost hope to be free from “the yoke of bondage and oppression.” But like so many others who allegedly won their freedom in the Civil War, “his

time—their time— in the Civil War refugee camps, it turned out had only been a beginning.”
(p.347)

John F. Marszalek is William L. Giles Distinguished Professor Emeritus of History, Mississippi State University. He is the author of over fifteen books and three hundred articles and book reviews. His latest book is Hold On With a Bulldog Grip, A Short Biography of Ulysses S. Grant. He is presently the Executive Director and Managing Editor of the Ulysses S. Grant Presidential Library, Mississippi State University.