

Elusive Utopia: The Struggle for Racial Equality in Oberlin, Ohio

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Review

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Kornblith, Gary J. and Carol Lasser. *Elusive Utopia: The Struggle for Racial Equality in Oberlin, Ohio.* Louisiana State University Press, \$48.00 ISBN 9780807169569

Elusive Utopia is a history of race relations in Oberlin, Ohio from its founding in 1833 through the early 1920s. It is the culmination of decades of study by its authors Gary J. Kornblith and Carol Lasser, both of whom are emeritus professors of history at Oberlin College. Their new book offers a significant widening of scope in our understanding of Oberlin in several ways. First, it expands the investigation of race relations in Oberlin beyond a focus on the progressive interracial college for which Oberlin is famous, taking into consideration the trajectory of race relations in the larger town. Second, the book's chronology expands beyond the Antebellum Era, when the school and the town surrounding it were abolitionist strongholds, to look at how understandings of race and social justice changed through the Civil War and into the early twentieth century. This widening of scope allows a different perspective on both the town's unique history of race relations and the shifts in those relations on a larger scale in the American nation through the nineteenth century and into the twentieth. Instead of a snapshot of a school founded on enlightened racial understandings during the antebellum period, the reader is presented with a more nuanced history of race relations in this northern town known for its antislavery sensibilities that shows how, although the decline came later, there was a retreat from the egalitarian vision for which Oberlin was so famous in its early years.

In the chronological narrative of the book, readers will learn about how the town grew out of a communitarian impulse, its early antislavery bent, and the growth of its black community and how black and white citizens lived together. The book tackles the abolition movement in the town and major events such as the famous Oberlin Wellington Rescue, an act of resistance against the Fugitive Slave Law of 1850, and John Brown's raid on Harpers Ferry. It investigates how the struggle for racial equality progressed during and immediately after the

Civil War and analyzes the challenges that the black community faced in this struggle during the Reconstruction Era and beyond. Among those challenges were the rise of scientific racism and the concurrent differentiation of the races that took place in Oberlin as well as the larger US and the shift of the reformist ethos away from racial justice in favor of a temperance movement that encouraged a new class consciousness both within and outside of the town's black community. These changes, Kornblith and Lasser argue, helped to lead to the swing away from the more radical black politics of the nineteenth century to the politics of respectability that many black elite leaders embraced in the twentieth century. Bolstering their narrative of change are statistics and demographic studies of the town as well as narratives of individual and collective experiences in Oberlin.

Elusive Utopia is an impressive, comprehensive history of race relations in Oberlin. The book will be of value to readers interested in the town's history and inhabitants in a very general sense, but it is also an important contribution to our understanding of the shifting racial landscapes of the United States. It sheds light on the forces that led even the most progressive regions during the nineteenth century to regress with regards to racial justice into the twentieth century.

Angela F. Murphy is Professor and Chair of History at Texas State University. She is the author of The Jerry Rescue: The Fugitive Slave Law, Northern Rights, and the American Sectional Crisis (Oxford University Press, 2014) and American Slavery, Irish Freedom: Abolition, Immigrant Citizenship, and the Transatlantic Movement for Irish Repeal (Louisiana State University Press, 2010).