

Slaves, Slaveholders, and a Kentucky Community's Struggle toward Freedom

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Review

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Leonard, Elizabeth D. *Slaves, Slaveholders, and a Kentucky Community's Struggle toward Freedom*. University Press of Kentucky, 2019. \$50.00 ISBN 9780813176666

Elizabeth Leonard's latest work in a long line of impressive scholarship is a love letter of sorts. In 2012, she won the Gilder Lehrman Lincoln Prize for *Lincoln's Forgotten Ally: Judge Advocate General Joseph Holt of Kentucky* (University of North Carolina Press, 2011). In that book, Leonard offered a compelling portrayal and analysis of the life of Joseph Holt, who was initially a Kentucky Democrat and slaveowner until he became Lincoln's trusted advisor and supporter of abolition. In this new work, Leonard returns to the Holt's story, this time to enlarge our understanding of Kentucky, enlistment for black men, and the arduous process of emancipation itself. Along the way, Leonard deftly handles the economy, military strategy, interpersonal relationships, enslaved people as commodities, Presidential, state, and federal power, soldier's wives and families, abolitionism, and the Pension and Freedman's Bureau, among many other crucial wartime topics.

Dr. Leonard divides the book into three easily digestible sections. Part One ("Once a Slaveholder") returns to Joseph Holt's life and offers a sympathetic portrait of a man who eventually rejected the chattel slavery which characterized his boyhood home and early adult life. It is not entirely clear why Holt made the personal decision to reject his home state and people, but Leonard notes that Holt's family feared, even as a young child, that he would move to a Northern state because of his hatred of human bondage. Leonard's synthesis truly shines in her simultaneous scrutiny of Kentucky, Holt, Lincoln, emancipation, and black soldiering – all of which are difficult to define because they are branches of the same Union tree -- divergent enough to warrant meticulous analysis. As with so many areas of inquiry in the Civil War, things are not always as they seem, and personal allegiances shifted and adapted as a revolutionary cultural shift engulfed America. In this analysis, Leonard stresses the importance of

understanding how a border state defined itself as daughter to a nation that could not and would not be broken under any set of circumstances. Of course, this would lead Lincoln – and Holt himself – to claim that no situation was as grievous as the sanctity of the Union, not even slavery. So despite the fact that these two powerful men supported emancipation, they did so only as a matter of expediency in preserving the Union, while four million enslaved persons in the south waited and watched.

Leonard explains that Holt, like so many other famous white men, left an abundance of primary sources regarding his life and career, while the lives of the formerly enslaved and free people he served have few associated sources. As in her other books, Leonard spent innumerable hours in archives ranging from The Library of Congress to the smallest newspaper repository in Kentucky collecting the evidence necessary to write Part Two. This section examines slave life, black soldiering, and the soul-searing search for citizenship rights as viewed through the individual lens of Sandy Holt, former slave to the great barrister himself. Proceeding from a military history of the 118th United States Colored Infantry regiment, Leonard discusses enlistment rhetoric and recruitment as well as white Kentuckians' understanding of their changing status of slaveowners and the local and political landscape regarding the progress of the war and its leadership. In this deep dive into what might seem like minutia regarding a tertiary war topic, Leonard pointedly illuminates the ways in which historians have long ignored states that were neither “slave” nor “free,” neither “north” nor “south.” What emerges from this well-deserved chastisement is a fresh interpretation of a war and state we thought we all knew already. Leonard uses records relating to disease, contraband women, inequitable pay, and labor (free and enslaved) to create a mini community study of the 118th's black soldiers, Sandy Holt among them, whose commitment to their freedom claims were every bit as unfaltering as Joseph Holt's Union advocacy.

Part Three (“War's End and Returning to Kentucky”) draws some key conclusions about the war's aftermath on the Bluegrass State and its people. Sandy Holt grew old and filed for a pension that detailed great physical debasement and pain. At the same time, Leonard argues, so many other formerly enslaved and free blacks succumbed to the mercy of the Freedman's Bureau, so poorly planned and executed as to cause fresh horror for African Americans who had survived – and fought valiantly in – the war. Joseph Holt was given his due as a privileged white man, but he, too, experienced fresh hell as a witness to Reconstruction, the assassination of his

dear friend Lincoln, the ensuing John Wilkes Booth trial, and the shadowy rise of the KKK and white supremacy throughout the south. In a nod to her storied appraisal of women's and gender roles á la *Yankee Women* (W.W. Norton, 1994) and *All the Daring of the Soldier* (W.W. Norton, 1999), Leonard digs up the records of Sarah Holt, Sandy's spouse, and their daughter Georgia. Searching for black women's primary sources involve not only the proverbial needle in the haystack, but painstaking patience given the youthful age of the topic altogether. In their applications for pension funds relating to Sandy's service, Leonard makes clear the muddy waters of black womanhood. After the war that gave and took away in such great equal measure, Sandy's wife and daughter made a life for themselves as free people, yet labored tirelessly as laundresses and servants, a condition that would bind black women for the next American century.

Upon first glance, Dr. Leonard's work appears to tangle with the story of Kentucky and one of its great sons, Thomas Holt, Judge Advocate General of the United States. This may be a story she already started to tell, but it is a welcome epilogue nonetheless. Our greatest task in understanding (and especially teaching) the Civil War is not in its causes, conditions, or even ferocity, but in its infinite intricacies. How did a young country find itself in this place – where slaveowners in Kentucky finally relinquished and supported black enlistment so they themselves could avoid becoming soldiers, all the while swearing fealty to the Union? Why would two intelligent, learned men choose a conceptual entity (the Union) over real human beings? The Union was composed of people, was it not? For historians of the slavery, emancipation, and black experience, the answer is simple: yes, white men and women fought the war over slavery, but hardly ever took note of the actual slaves themselves. In her analysis of the somewhat parallel lives of Thomas Holt and Sandy Holt, Dr. Leonard perfectly illustrates the vexing truth for historians – we think of everything in this period as being “black” and “white” because we understand the power of slavery, racism, and white supremacy, but the most meticulous research only reveals more grey. Leonard wrote the love letter, perhaps, for every person in this book who had a story to share.

~ Jennifer Harbour is an Associate Professor of Black Studies and Women's Studies at the University of Nebraska Omaha. Dr. Harbour's book, Organizing Freedom: Black Emancipation Activism in the Civil War Midwest will be published in April 2020 by Southern Illinois University Press.