

Scraping By: Wage Labor, Slavery, and Survival in Early Baltimore

Philadelphia, October 30, 2009



The Program in Early American Economy and Society of the Library Company of Philadelphia will hold its Eighth Annual Conference on Friday, October 30, 2009, 2-7 pm., at 1314 Locust Street, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania.

Seth Rockman's recently published study, *Scraping By*, brings to life the enslaved mariners, white seamstresses, Irish dockhands, free black domestic servants, and native-born street sweepers who navigated the low-end labor market in booming post-Revolutionary Baltimore. In the city's variegated workforce, race, age, family structure, and gender were crucial markers of economic opportunity and vulnerability. Baltimore's emergent capitalism also featured many slaves earning wages and white workers performing arduous labor for inadequate pay. Rockman analyzes the material experiences of these workers, how they found work, translated labor into food, fuel, and rent, and navigated underground economies and social welfare systems. He also explores what happened when they failed to find work or lost their jobs. His rich accounts of day laborers and domestic servants illuminate the history of early republic capitalism and its consequences for working families. Rockman's study is a powerful addition to scholarship about the hidden labor of capitalist economies where the unpaid and mundane, but vital, tasks of sewing, washing, feeding, provisioning, and boarding were an important complement to the backbreaking work of making Baltimore.

This conference will feature a discussion of Rockman's important new book, organizes around three thirty-minute presentations by Mary Ryan, Michael Zuckerman, and David Roediger, plus a response by Seth Rockman, followed by what promises to be a lively audience discussion. Copies of presentations will be posted by October 10, 2009 on the PEAES website, where you can also register in advance for the conference: www.librarycompany.org/Economics. For more information contact Cathy Matson, PEAES Director, at cmatson@udel.edu.