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Seizing the New Day: African Americans in Post-Civil War Charleston

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Book Reviews *Seizing the New Day - African Americans in Post-Civil War Charleston*

Wilbert L. Jenkins. Indiana University Press, Bloomington, 1998. xvi + 238 pp., bibliographical essay, notes, appendix, and index. \$29.95 (cloth)

In this volume, Jenkins promises correctives to the traditional story of the African-American experience during reconstruction. Where the standard accounts treat regional or state-wide patterns, he focuses on local history; where predecessors have emphasized the political experience of freedmen, he concentrates on the social and economic; and where other historians have too often treated post-war African Americans as a homogeneous group, he reveals the wide diversity within that community. The volume consists of seven chapters which treat in turn: 1) the nature of slavery in Charleston, 2) the immediate impact of manumission, 3) the struggle for economic independence and security, 4) the quest for education, 5) the effects of emancipation on family and community life, 6) the establishment of independent churches, and 7) the efforts (sometimes violent, sometimes political) community members made to protect and enhance their new freedom.

It is in the realization of his first objective that Jenkins is most successful. This is, first and foremost, a local history which thoroughly documents the triumphs and tragedies, successes and failures, and hopes and disappointments of African Americans during the first few years of freedom in Charleston. Charleston's African Americans enjoyed their greatest successes in those arenas where defining freedom was least dependent on white approval or cooperation - family and religion. For example, family life "achieved a degree of stability by 1870. Of black adults living in all-black households, the percentage of those who were married was in fact strikingly close to the percentage of married white adults living in all-white households" (p. 96).

While politics may have been over-emphasized by some writers, Jenkins presents no comprehensive discussion of the subject. Yet, politics, in one way or another, was an important tool in the quest to achieve social and economic freedom. While it is recognized as such in many of the chapters, the emphasis clearly lies elsewhere. Voting, for example, is discussed only briefly in a single paragraph on page 145 where one learns simply that "freedmen were encouraged to register and vote."

Jenkins third corrective, a focus on the heterogeneity of the African-American community, is very effectively. The free black population in Charleston had always been large, ranging up to as much as 20 percent of the total African descended population. Predominantly mulatto, this group included both laborers, who were poorly treated, and a very small, but wealthy, elite, members of which often owned slaves themselves. At the war's end, former slaves in Charleston were joined by an influx of freed agricultural laborers. Although often united, these various subgroups were frequently divided by social and economic distinctions, and intraracial bickering was one of the factors which led to the collapse of the Republican Party in the city.

In an epilogue, Jenkins briefly treats the unraveling of Reconstruction and the erosion of economic status and civil and political rights in the late 19th century. "Blacks in Charleston and throughout the South took one step forward and two steps backward. The gallant struggle of

black Charlestonians to acquire first-class American citizenship represented their first civil rights movement" (p. 163).

This is a carefully researched, tightly written, and logically organized volume that makes good use of a wide range of primary sources. It joins a growing literature on the post-emancipation experiences of former slaves that can provide a richer context for archaeological interpretation.