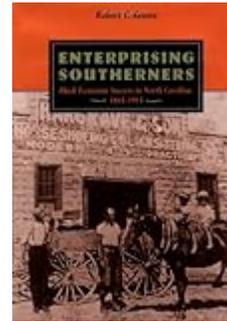


H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Robert C. Kenzer. *Enterprising Southerners: Black Economic Success In North Carolina, 1865-1915.* Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1997. xvi + 178 pp. \$30.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8139-1733-7.



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Enterprising Southerners: Black Economic Success in North Carolina is an excellent work which details the life of black entrepreneurs and property owners from the dawn of freedom to 1865. In all historical periods there are blacks who think and act like free people. This book is a systematic documentation of the development of enterprise, property and the education of children in North Carolina's black society during the period.

Kenzer starts his analysis by examining the source of landownership among the freedmen. Although most blacks acquired enough money to purchase land, some were also given land by their former masters. Some slave masters specified in their wills that, after their deaths, the land should be sold to their former slaves. In some cases, whites tried to block the deeding of land to former slaves by their masters. When this was done, there were cases where blacks took the issue to court and won judgments that granted them the land.

Kenzer has an excellent discussion about the relationship between landownership, free blacks prior to emancipation, and mulattos. He notes that free blacks had already started a tradition of land ownership, and thus owned most of the land right after the dawn of freedom. Mulattoes also play an important role in the analysis. It must be remembered that any black who was not ebony-black was a mulatto. It is a term which is therefore in-

clusive of blacks with mixed blood, as well as blacks who were clearly of African descent but who were of a lighter skin color. Thus, *mulatto* does not mean, at this point in history, blacks who simply "looked white." Many blacks who were the offspring of a white slave owner and a black woman were granted freedom by their father.

The mulattoes' ownership of land prior to emancipation creates significant differences in the data reported by Kenzer, and allows interesting studies "within race," albeit the data are sometimes difficult to analyze. After examining data prior to and following emancipation, he notes, "Even with the nearly insurmountable problems of trying to link 1860 and 1870 manuscripts, it appears that at least half of the 1870 black landowners may have been antebellum freedmen. Furthermore, these antebellum freedmen owned a substantial share of all of the land owned by blacks in 1870" (p. 14).

Kenzer presents a unique view of black enterprises in North Carolina because he gives a strong consideration to credit ratings. What emerges is a picture of a community that understood the relationship between wealth creation, business enterprise, and living well in American under difficult circumstances. The reader is given a glimpse of management issues faced by black enterprises of that time period. Some enterprises advertised simply as enterprises, never mentioning that fact that they were

black. Kenzer also concludes that, although the firms were rated by whites, there is not an indication of bias. Some firms were written up as being outstanding, while other ratings reflected the idea that the business person was not good. It is obvious that blacks were engaged in all types of enterprises during this time period. Partnerships with white enterprises, as expected, were not prevalent during this time period.

Perhaps the greatest contribution that Kenzer's work makes is the impact of enterprise and landownership on the education of children and political participation. W.E.B. Dubois and August Gill, in their 1911 book *The College Bred Negro*, documented the fact that black business owners had developed a tradition of sending their children to college. This effect was also seen in Charles Johnson's 1937 book, *The Negro College Graduate*. Kenzer presents vivid examples of this historical process and reminds us that, when the thousands of immigrant whites were being processed through Ellis Island in New York, black entrepreneurs had already developed a tradition of educating their children. Thus we are introduced to Henry Taylor's younger son Robert, who was the first black to graduate from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology and was valedictorian of his 1892 class. His analysis also reminds us of the important role that historical black colleges, especially the private ones that existed before they were taken over by the state, played in setting the stage for success in America. Although those colleges

and universities are still playing that role today, most of the emphasis is on black students at previously white colleges. But Kenzer's analysis informs us of the historical success that these colleges and universities played in launching careers. The link between business enterprise and college success also reminds of the important historical link between the two. The book gives us a hint why today black southerners who are grounded in this self-help tradition continue to enjoy educational and property success, while those in northern cities, whose parents followed the factories, have tended to depend upon the larger society for their educational success.

Enterprising Southerners should be read by all interested in American history, enterprise, family, and overall racial and ethnic relations. Prior to the 1960s, research on black Americans reflected both success and failure. Since then, most of the research has been on failure. This is a welcome work which testifies to success during a difficult time in American society. It should also be read by all Americans who are interested in thinking and acting like free people during this historical period.

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