



**Carroll Van West, ed.** *Trial and Triumph: Essays in Tennessee's African American History*. Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 2002. xv + 432 pp. \$24.95 (paper), ISBN 978-1-57233-204-1.



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## A Heavy History

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This thick and informative anthology provides easy access to twenty-two articles first published in the *Tennessee Historical Quarterly*. Taken together, the essays are clear and carefully circumscribed snapshots of African-American history in Tennessee from frontier settlement through the Civil Rights Movement. These scattered images successfully suggest, as editor Carroll Van West notes in his brief introduction, “the way to new narratives of Tennessee history itself” (p. xii). The book provides more insight into the “way” other authors might follow than into the final narratives that might emerge. In pieces, the works are very successful. Taken together, they are intriguing, loose fitting, and a bit unsatisfying.

The book’s great merit is its weight, both literal and intellectual. It is a significant tribute to its editor and publisher that so many essays were included. Unlike many state-based article collections, this one truly offers a panoramic view. The number of authors, the range of their academic interests, the diversity of their insights, and the complexity of the emerging vision are all laudable. Perhaps the same spirit of generosity and modesty

that informed these decisions shaped the brief introduction and prefatory paragraphs. These suggestive efforts leave much of the work of synthesis to the reader.

Despite the rather limited claims of the introduction, one might say that these essays offer more than simply the way to new narratives of Tennessee history, but instead suggest the limits of some current models of African-American and national historiographies. Most clearly, several essays suggest ways of understanding space, memory, frontiers, and segregation.

Through narratives like Lisa C. Tolbert’s “Murder in Franklin: The Mysteries of Small-Town Slavery,” this volume suggests that slavery in small towns and farming districts without plantations “was qualitatively different” from models of plantation or urban slavery (p. 40). Relying upon both a Franklin murder trial transcript and quotes from Harriet Jacobs’s description of town life in North Carolina, Tolbert suggests that small towns provided a strange mixture of freedom and intimacy. Hiring out, living out, and utilizing public spaces all mirror, in part, the fine descriptions of urban slavery in Nashville and Memphis in this volume, partic-

ularly in Marius Carrier Jr.'s "Blacks in Pre-Civil War Memphis," Mechal Sobel's "They Can Never Both Prosper Together: Black and White Baptists in Antebellum Nashville," and Kenneth W. Goings and Gerald L. Smith's "Duty of the Hour: African American Communities in Memphis, 1862-1923." But, as Tolbert points out, in a small town this freedom of movement took place in an atmosphere where slaves were often well known and lacked the cover of anonymity. This combination of risky intimacy and partial freedom eludes some of the models of urban and plantation slavery. As Tolbert notes, small towns were not outliers in the antebellum period but instead were an important part of the social, economic, and legal fabric of communities. Other essays in this volume—including Gary Edwards's "Slaves and Masters in Antebellum Madison County" and Larry McKee's "Archaeological Study of Slavery and Plantation Life in Tennessee"—suggest alternative spaces where communities may have been forged and where conflicts took shape.

In "Stand by the Flag: Nationalism and African American Celebrations of the Fourth of July in Memphis, 1866-1887," Brian D. Page offers another intriguing glimpse at the fluidity and complexity of African-American life in Tennessee. Page describes the way that Fourth of July celebrations became "a rite of identity, history, and memory for African Americans" in the Civil War's aftermath, while many local whites ignored the holiday (p. 185). During these holidays African Americans "were able to carve out a space for their own past in American history," Page argues (p. 198). As black political power in Memphis waned, control of the celebration and of the spaces moved into the hands of white political leaders. Page's fine study of memory is complemented by Richard A. Couto's "Race Relations and Tennessee Centennials," a complex discussion of commemoration and politics.

In "Darwin School and Black Public Education: Cookeville in the Decade of the *Brown* Decision," Wale R. Kharif challenges current models of segregation. Kharif's essay suggests the interesting nature of segregation in areas with relatively small African-American populations. In Cookeville, a fire at the local African-American school actually speeded the desegregation process. Financial constraints, relatively weak customs of segregation, and habits of integrated local sports all helped propel the relatively quiet desegregation of the schools. Although Kharif's work examines an era a century distant from Tolbert's, it shares an ambition to question existing models. Kharif's article contrasts powerfully with Jane N. Adamson's "Few Black Voices Heard," a study of the

violent struggle against segregated schools in Clinton, Tennessee, where in 1957 Bobby Cain became the first African-American of the twentieth century to graduate from a white public high school in the South.

Other essays that suggest the fluidity and complexity of race and slavery in Tennessee include Anita S. Goodstein's "Black History on the Nashville Frontier, 1780-1810" and Loren Schweninger's "Doctor Jack: A Slave Physician on the Tennessee Frontier." Goodstein's article in particular provides interesting case studies of the mix of control and freedom in frontier slavery. The important and still often-overlooked role of gender in shaping the experience of African-American women is evident in both Beverly G. Bond's "Every Duty Incumbent Upon Them: African American Women in Nineteenth-Century Memphis" and Elisabeth I. Perry's "The Very Best Influence: Josephine Holloway and Girl Scouting in Nashville's African American Community." These essays discuss both the actions of women and the role of gender in shaping societal norms and symbols.

These essays, and others in the collection, suggest that close study of African-American history in Tennessee might reinvigorate not only Tennessee's history but also African-American and Southern history more broadly. The particular geographical, economic, and demographic conditions in Tennessee tend to push scholars away from over-reliance upon plantation models. While there are good reasons for the importance of plantation records in shaping the modern historiography of slavery, these essays suggest that paying close attention to models suggested by small towns and other spaces is necessary to form a complex and compelling view of the institution. These essays are, by and large, not about anomalies but about situations that, despite their relatively common-place status, confound some of the more widely held models of slavery. It is at this point that the collection is most in need of an overarching voice to guide the reader toward new frontiers of analysis and synthesis. Instead of merely complicating old models, it may well be that these essays suggest pathways for new and better models of slavery, and the book would be well served if the introductory remarks asserted this more clearly. While these essays do, as the introductory remarks state and several contributors echo, provide record of previously overlooked voices, they also do more. They offer starting points for thinking about how to analyze—and not just celebrate—what those voices tell us.

Other essays apply good work done in the field to Tennessee cases with satisfactory, if not always surpris-

ing, results. Bobby L. Lovett's "Nashville's Fort Neglect: A Symbol of Blacks' Involvement with the Union Army" and Kenneth B. Moore's "Fort Pillow, Forrest, and the United States Colored Troops in 1864" both contribute to scholarship on the roles African Americans played during the Civil War. Paul David Phillips's "Education of Blacks in Tennessee during Reconstruction, 1865-1870" and Dorothy Granberry's "Origins of an African American School in Haywood County" provide solid studies of educational developments. Christopher M. Scribner's "Nashville Offers Opportunity: The *Nashville Globe* and Business as a Means of Uplift, 1907-1913" studies the Washingtonian ethic of individualism, race pride, and business success. Michael Webb's "God Bless You All— I Am Innocent" is a compelling narrative of the Chattanooga lynching of Ed Johnson. In the post-World War II era, Cynthia Griggs Fleming's "White Lunch Counters and Black Consciousness: The Story of the Knoxville Sit-ins" and Linda T. Wynn's "Toward a Perfect Democracy: The Struggle of African Americans in Fayette County to Fulfill the Unfulfilled Right of the Franchise" both provide case studies of the Civil Rights Movement.

There are, of course, areas that are not discussed at

length in these essays. Other essays might make more of Goings and Smith's discussion of "divisions in the African American community" (p. 231). The lack of an essay on Reconstruction or Jim Crow-era political organizing is a bit puzzling, and readers might also wish for discussions of interactions between African Americans and Native Americans. But the collection does not promise comprehensiveness, and it delivers a wider variety than readers might expect.

One minor annoyance is that one has to flip to the back of the book to find out when any given essay was first published. Given the changes in historical scholarship, the distinction between a 1979 and a 1996 essay is often significant; a future edition might note the publication date in the introduction to each essay.

For classroom teachers this volume is an interesting way to challenge students' understanding of African American history. For researchers it provides a glance at the paths future work might illuminate, and the tantalizing possibility that within Tennessee's African-American history lie new ways of understanding the state, the region, and the nation.

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