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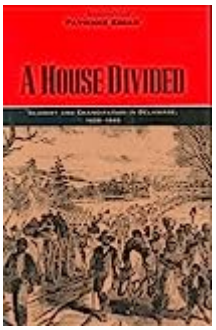

Patience Essah. *A House Divided: Slavery and Emancipation in Delaware, 1638-1865.* Charlottesville and London: University Press of Virginia, 1996. xi + 217 pp. $29.50 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8139-1681-1.

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Dealing with a state that has too often been ignored by studies of slavery and emancipation, Patience Essah's book, *A House Divided: Slavery and Emancipation in Delaware, 1638-1865*, provides a thorough and perceptive view of the patterns of bondage, freedom, agriculture, religion, and politics that defined race relations in Delaware for more than two centuries. Against the backdrop of slavery in other parts of the western hemisphere, Delaware was an oddity. It resisted the wave of legislative emancipation that swept through neighboring states such as Pennsylvania and New York after the American Revolution. Moreover, at no time were there ever enough slaves in the state to end the institution violently as in Haiti, nor enough slaveholders to warrant Delaware casting her lot with the Confederacy during the 1860s. Interestingly, however, many of the elements present in other slave states and societies, from Enlightenment ideology to sometimes Draconian slave codes, co-existed in Delaware, thus providing an intriguing case study in political interest and economic necessity.

In many ways, Delaware, situated on the border of the free North and slave South, was a historical microcosm of American society. Quakers and other abolitionists in the northern county of New Castle greatly influenced the antislavery impulse of that part of the state, which had much in common with Pennsylvania. Slaveholding Maryland–and the rest of the South–had more of an impact on the southern county of Sussex. The middle county, Kent, was perpetually torn by these forces, to the extent that political stalemates over slavery were more often the rule than the exception. Depending on the political tenor of the times, the demands of the economy (especially whether tobacco or wheat was on the ascendancy), and the ebb and flow of race relations, Delaware tended to mirror her northern neighbors.

Immediately following the American Revolution, voluntary emancipation became an irreversible trend, resulting in a free black population that would account for eighty-nine percent of the state's African-American population by 1850. Ironically, slavery survived its economic utility in Delaware, especially among whites who did not want to see equal citizenship, particularly voting rights, given to manumitted slaves in such a factious political environment. Racism, deeply ingrained in the state's culture, would not allow the legislature officially to ratify the Thirteenth Amendment until 1901.

Essah does a fine job using statistics to sketch the impact of racial demography on the policies of Delaware. She gives numerous examples of the kinds of gradual emancipation measures that the state's slaveholders used to get rid of excess bonded labor while at the same time utilizing indentured ("half-free") blacks during their most

productive years. Later in the book, the author correctly focuses much of her discussion on the free black community, given that this segment of the African-American community eventually outnumbered slaves nine to one. Abolitionism has a central place in the book, and attempts by blacks to build institutions separate from white control are discussed at length. Like the many contradictions that shaped Delawarean society, free blacks lived in a paradox. Those who could not find jobs or housing were labeled "idle" and "lazy"; those who started independent churches and sought land ownership and an education were too "uppity."

The only problematic features in Essah's book relate to source materials and perspective. Secondary materials weigh in quite heavily in her notes. There is some usage of period newspapers and court documents, but much of her discussion, especially early, is simply a synthesis of previously published information. It is surprising that the author did not interrogate the primary sources concerning free blacks more thoroughly. There are no church records, diaries, narratives, or other significant materials from this group cited in the work (other than a few petitions). It is extremely doubtful that these items do not exist; yet, if that were indeed the case, Essah could have mentioned this up front as a limitation of her study. Except for court records, the slave's voice is virtually silent in the book. We are left with only speculation about how their daily lives.

Overall, Essah has produced a very valuable work on slavery, race, and political culture in the shifting demographic and economic life of a slave society. Delaware's peculiar experience as a colony that "accidentally" became a house divided by slavery and a state that could not wholly embrace legislative emancipation gives us insight into the forces at work throughout all modern slave societies.

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