

The Retreats of Reconstruction: Race, Leisure, and the Politics of Segregation at the Jersey Shore, 1865-1920

David E. Goldberg

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The explosive effects of Reconstruction were not limited to the South's political and economic development. In *The Retreats of Reconstruction*, David E. Goldberg attempts to show how conflict over racial equality and economic power also played out at the Jersey Shore. The transformation of the coast from a genteel retreat into a hub of mass consumption in the 1880s generated new issues that intersected with the ongoing conflict over the status of African Americans, Goldman argues.

With the Civil War over, proprietors urged white tourists to enjoy the throng of cheap amusements rapidly concentrating along the coastline. African Americans flocked to the region as well, both as tourists and to find work in hotels and restaurants. For the most part, white visitors were not content to share the beaches with African Americans and increasingly asserted their "right" to segregated leisure spaces in the new consumer-driven economy.

Amidst these competing demands, a series of accommodations emerged to regulate race relations and reduce social tensions. White proprietors attempted to establish "voluntary" rules to enforce segregation. In Asbury Park, for example, public notices urged black workers and tourists to "please refrain" from using the beaches and boardwalk during the "fashionable hours of the day." But African Americans resisted and leveraged their economic power and the common law to protect their jobs and maintain access to integrated public spaces. Even after Mayor James Bradley ordered police to restrict black tourists from Asbury's public and commercial areas in the

summer of 1893, African Americans continued to engage in protests to “institute a more democratic form of market capitalism that defended the rights of all consumers.”

To quiet further conflict, Goldman argues, an informal social contract was negotiated. In exchange for consenting to Jim Crow, black business leaders were offered the opportunity to build up their own leisure enterprises, serving black patrons. Segregation was thereby cast as an expression of white generosity, not racism and prejudice. For African Americans maintaining the bargain “strengthened the bonds of Jim Crow” and the “logic of the *Plessy* decision” even if it allowed for black business development and occasional victories.

In both Asbury Park and Atlantic City, segregation lasted well into the twentieth century, sometimes producing surprising outcomes. After World War II black night spots and jazz clubs thrived as residents and tourists of both races “crossed the color line” to enjoy renowned performers like Sam Cooke, Billie Holiday, and Sammy Davis, Jr. The white boardwalk economy, meanwhile, entered a period of steep decline as middle-class white families spent their leisure dollars elsewhere. Even as historically segregated commercial and leisure venues finally opened their doors to all races in the 1960s, the boardwalk economies collapsed, leading to unrest in Asbury and further decay in both cities.

The Retreats of Reconstruction is an important contribution to New Jersey history and our understanding of this iconic region. The book is vigorously argued and clearly written. Goldman is creative and insightful in his use of the historical evidence to demonstrate that segregation was sustained at the shore not through violence or the law but by more subtle means. He also writes convincingly of the moral, social, and economic costs that segregation imposed. In essence, segregation required that black leaders forgo demands for equal access and integration in exchange for business development and incremental improvement. Segregationist compromises allowed

white leaders to ignore the festering social and economic problems present in impoverished black neighborhoods that eventually proved disastrous to all residents.

Despite its many strengths, the book is not without flaws. The study lacks sufficient political, economic, and demographic background about New Jersey and the region. This makes it difficult to evaluate how Goldman's conclusions fit into larger national and statewide trends. In addition, the account sometimes relies too heavily on abstractions such as "free labor ideology" and the "wages of whiteness" as motivating forces for white northerners without sufficient exposition as to how these terms applied to the politics of the New Jersey coastline.

Goldman concludes by raising a number of important issues. "In treating beach resorts as private enterprises, rather than as actual cities," he writes, "local officials were able to ignore social problems, environmental concerns, or racial boundaries that did not directly threaten future profits." As Atlantic City struggles to recover from its latest crisis and Asbury appears to be in the midst of a remarkable comeback, it is worth pondering whether this pattern still endures long after the official end of Jim Crow at the Jersey shore.

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