

Scarlet and Black: Slavery and Dispossession in Rutgers History**Maria Fuentes and Deborah Gray White, eds.****New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2016****222 pages****ISBN: 9780813591520****DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.14713/njs.v5i1.161>**

For the past several years, colleges and universities in the United States (along with a growing number in Europe) have been examining their past participation in the oppression of various marginalized groups. I know from experience that this is no easy task. Between 2013 and 2015, I served as the Research Director of the Princeton and Slavery Project, which was intended to uncover Princeton University's involvement in slavery. At some point in 2015, I became aware that our neighbors in New Brunswick were beginning a similar project. I also recall scoffing in disbelief when I heard that they were planning to publish a book about their findings in 2016 as part of Rutgers University's 250th anniversary. But publish they did. I am delighted to report, too, that this book, *Scarlet and Black, Volume I: Slavery and Dispossession in Rutgers History*, constitutes an informative, insightful, and comprehensible compilation of seven essays about the (regrettable) history of New Jersey during the colonial period and the early American republic.

Edited by Marisa J. Fuentes and Deborah Gray White, *Scarlet and Black* features admirably readable prose and a unified tone, which is especially impressive considering that, with one exception, every chapter lists multiple coauthors. Yet, each chapter is distinct and self-contained enough to stand on its own, providing educators at both the high school and college levels with the opportunity to use excerpts to teach often-ignored components of New Jersey's early history. Educators with that purpose in mind should pay particularly close attention to the first and fifth chapters. The first chapter, titled "I am Old and Weak...and You are Young and Strong," chronicles how settlers in New Jersey displaced the Lenape Indians. Paired with Chapter 7 – a relatively short essay explaining how land-grant colleges profited from the dispossession of Indian

land in the west – this chapter serves as a critical reminder that many in colonial New Jersey built their farms, towns, and schools on land with disputed ownership.

The fifth chapter, titled “And I Poor Slave Yet,” presents a similar case about historical erasure. Using a fascinating array of primary source materials, the four authors of this chapter sought to reconstruct the everyday life of black people (both enslaved and free) in New Brunswick during the early republic. According to the authors, New Brunswick “provided relatively favorable conditions for runaway fugitives heading farther north.” (94) Perhaps in response, the town constructed a jail (or goal) to confine recaptured slaves and punish unruly free blacks. Despite New Brunswick’s determination to uphold its racial hierarchy, however, the town had fairly “relaxed policies” regarding the segregation of its black and white residents. (113) Indeed, New Brunswick may have been unique among towns in the vicinity in that all its residents worshipped at the same churches and buried their dead in the same cemeteries. As a result, this chapter sheds light on the variability of the black experience in antebellum New Jersey. For instance, unlike its counterparts in Newark and Princeton, the black community in New Brunswick did not have its own church to serve as its communal focal point. Instead, it formed a group called the African Association to finance a school for black children and promote other forms of racial uplift.

Not surprisingly, those interested in the history of Rutgers itself will also find plenty to digest in *Scarlet and Black*. Four of the book’s seven chapters present evidence to corroborate its central premise that Rutgers (or Queen’s College, as it was called before 1825) “would never have existed without the institution of slavery.” (57) This evidence is convincing. Using estate records and newspapers, the authors connect seemingly every early trustee and major donor to the institution of slavery. Even the college’s namesake, Henry Rutgers, was a slaveholder. At the same time, the authors made a commendable effort to explain that these college leaders – despite their

common involvement in slavery – subscribed to varying notions of antiblack racism. In the process, they proved quite adept at simplifying some difficult topics, like the tenets of the Dutch Reform Church and the ideological underpinnings of the movement to colonize free blacks.

Of course, *Scarlet and Black* is hardly flawless. For instance, the authors relied too heavily on one book – James Gigantino III’s *The Ragged Road to Abolition: Slavery and Freedom in New Jersey, 1775-1865* (2016) – to recount the history of slavery in antebellum New Jersey. On numerous occasions, I also found myself wishing that the authors would have presented their points in chronological order, rather than jump back and forth in time. Most problematically, though, the authors provided precious little information about the college’s student body. This is a glaring omission. After all, the students at Rutgers were the primary beneficiaries of the college’s exploitation of slave labor. It seems likely that the students, as a privileged class in colonial and antebellum America, left behind ample sources, such as diaries, autograph books, correspondence, and alumni materials, which could provide new perspectives on the college’s involvement in slavery, as well as Indian removal, colonization, and abolitionism.

But perhaps those themes are going to be covered in Volume II. We’ll likely know soon enough, given that it took the editors and authors only eight months to conduct this “preliminary investigation.” (161) In the meantime, they have already made a considerable contribution to this field of scholarly inquiry. The Raritan was not the Mississippi. Nevertheless, *Scarlet and Black* makes it clear that the college on the banks of the Raritan played a key role in reinforcing “the theological and scientific racism that provided the ideological and spiritual justification for the free labor of Africans, the absolute power of slave owners, and the separation of the races.” (1)

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