

Standard Bearers of Equality: America's First Abolition Movement**Paul J. Polgar****Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2019****342 pages****ISBN: 9781469653938****DOI: <https://doi.org/10.14713/njs.v9i1.318>**

Polgar's *Standard Bearers of Equality* seeks to uproot and reshape the narrative of slavery and abolition in the American North from one focused on conservative pessimism to a movement dedicated to creating a biracial crusade to eliminate slavery and vanquish white prejudice. The architects of America's first abolition movement, according to Polgar, had the active participation of people of color, making them committed to supporting Black legal and political rights, albeit gradually. In this way, Polgar challenges almost two decades of scholarship that painted slavery's slow death in the North as a painful, conservative compromise that did not fulfill the true vision of the American Revolution nor uphold the standards that future generations of abolitionists in the 1830s articulated.

Standard Bearers of Equality is then an original contribution to the growing field of scholarship related to abolition in the North. Polgar illustrates clearly that blacks had a major role in the first abolition movement, which his "study spotlights" by illustrating the "close bonds forged between black and white activists—through both a shared grassroots activism and an ideological affinity" (10). This highlighting of the biracial character of the movement challenges the way that prior historians have understood race within the context of postrevolutionary abolitionism from a fixed commodity to one that is "multivalent, frequently shifting, and continually challenged" (14). This constant reimagination of the northern racial construct allowed whites and blacks to fight not only for the enforcement of gradual abolition laws but also challenge the ways in which white prejudice could interfere with the creation of political rights for those recently freed from bondage.

Polgar is careful to illustrate how this flexibility of racial construction gradually ended as definitions of race hardened. By the 1820s, whites increasingly faced with socioeconomic transformations in northern cities, growing northern free black populations, rising numbers of slaves in the South, and an escalating racial strife ended their experiment with most notions that blacks could become equal to whites. The simultaneous rise of the American Colonization Society solidified this new ideology as northern whites increasingly saw little leeway to improve black conditions aside from wholesale exportation of black bodies. While other historians have tracked this shift from gradualism to colonization and eventually to immediatism, Polgar is quick to note that the later Garrisonian attacks against the colonizationists have colored historians' perceptions of the long-standing conservative gradualism that they represented. Instead, Polgar articulates that colonization, while it did take some essentials of gradualism, actively buried any notion of biracial cooperation that had been the lifeblood of the first abolition movement. The immediate abolitionist attacks against colonization therefore lumped all pre-1830 white attempts at abolition together and branded them colonizationists—the progressive movement Polgar seeks to uncover in his work had those who sought to reignite that biracial cooperation as the villains who had buried that prior history for decades afterward.

In his effort to transform historical perceptions of gradual abolitionism, Polgar is successful. Digging through well-trodden records, Polgar illustrates the other side of the coin that many historians have not highlighted—how white abolitionists did reach out to the free and enslaved black community on a regular basis and engaged with them on crafting freedom. In addition, Polgar illustrates how the work of abolitionist groups created new opportunities and hope for enslaved blacks fighting for freedom themselves, as well as in securing citizenship rights in the new nation. With these citizenship rights, for political participation and for the protection of person

and property, the first abolition movement set the stage for battles over important issues like fugitivity in the antebellum period. The legal protections blacks advocated for and achieved in this time period to their own freedom, the legal protection of that freedom, and the hope that the state would continue to advance that freedom were critical components of the abolitionists' gradual nature.

For scholars of New Jersey, Polgar's work is important, as African Americans and white abolitionists paid close attention to the efforts of the New York Manumission Society and the Pennsylvania Society for Promoting the Abolition of Slavery. These two major societies based in Philadelphia and New York had taken an active interest in New Jersey for decades, as the Garden State had no abolition society of its own until 1793 and after the early 1810s, once again when the state's society collapsed. Of course, New Jersey is a different place than Pennsylvania and New York, with a different history, a different set of players, and a different set of factors that influenced its people. For that reason, some of Polgar's arguments have a harder time transposing to New Jersey, though to be fair, New Jersey is not his main focus. His arguments, however, do force a reexamination of the historical construction of race in New Jersey as well as the first abolition movement in the Garden State. Slavery in New Jersey is still well understudied in comparison to its neighbors, and a new generation of historians would do well with testing Polgar's argument on the local context of New Jersey to see if it bears the same fruit as it does in New York and Pennsylvania. In some ways, it will. But in others, since all history is local, the local contours of the state will force different conclusions.

In sum, Polgar's work is a fresh take on a topic of increasingly important historical value to scholars of the mid-Atlantic, the North, and New Jersey. Polgar creates a new paradigm for future scholars to examine. Those who follow him would do well to reexamine their assumptions

about race in this pivotal historical moment and determine a truer role of the confluence of race, slavery, and abolition in this time.

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