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Review of Antislavery and Abolition in Philadelphia: Emancipation and the Long Struggle for Racial Justice in the City of Brotherly Love.

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Antislavery and Abolition in Philadelphia: Emancipation and the Long Struggle for Racial Justice in the City of Brotherly Love. Ed. by Richard Newman and James Mueller. (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2011. xii, 260

The roots of Antislavery and Abolition in Philadelphia stretch back to the early 2000s, when work on the construction of Philadelphia's National Constitution Center revealed that the site had been the location of the homes of several African Americans during the late eighteenth century. Prompted by the local black community, the National Park Service instigated public engagement and scholarly work on Philadelphia's antislavery history. That initiative has at long last led to the publication of this volume. The editors hope that the nine essays will underscore the centrality of urban areas—especially Philadelphia—to the antislavery movement. Compared to many collections like this one, the essays in Antislavery and Abolition in Philadelphia are tightly focused. There is also a conversation going on here. The essays refer frequently to each other, highlighting connections that readers might miss. While the essays fail to make the case that Philadelphia deserves more credit for its role in the abolitionist movement, they do clarify the remarkable ways that the city's antislavery communities advanced the cause of human freedom.

Inevitably, some of the pieces are more interesting than others. Gary Nash's analysis of writings by James Forten and Tench Coxe lays out roads taken and not taken in the post-revolutionary era. Forten insisted on African Americans' right to full participation in American life. Coxe, though, was more representative of early national trends. Once a racially progressive Federalist, Coxe became an apologist for race-based citizenship when he became a Jeffersonian Democrat. Nash's essay is a useful corrective to recent writings that downplay racism and proslavery sentiment among Jeffersonians and Jacksonian Democrats. W. Caleb McDaniel builds on the oft-remarked transatlantic links between reformers to show how these networks helped create new identities and new arguments among American abolitionists. His most surprising finding shows how Philadelphia abolitionists' international connections fostered their integration into national reform networks. Many American activists met each other for the first time while abroad. Besides its original argument, McDaniel's essay deserves kudos for being free from the special pleading that surfaces from time to time in these essays. It employs Philadelphians as a case study of antislavery cosmopolitanism, but it does not make a case for their exceptionalism in this respect.

In some ways Philadelphia's experience was distinctive, of course. Chief among the merits of Richard Newman's piece on the Pennsylvania Abolition Society (pas) is its treatment of how its Philadelphia roots shaped its response to changes in American reform culture. His discussion of the pas's struggles with issues of black character during the years of the American Colonization Society's rise nicely complements Nash's essay. Elizabeth Varon's essay shows how Philadelphia abolitionists' self-image propelled them to heroic action to assist fugitives in escaping from slavery. Both Varon's piece and Heather S. Nathan's essay on race and slavery on the stage foreground how abolition contended with the city's notoriously pro-southern orientation, a topic that might have been addressed in the other essays. As a result, this volume does not tell us as much as it might have about how Philadelphia antislavery navigated the wider, usually hostile, world. Nevertheless these essays are worth the attention of scholars working on reform and abolition. And if the editors' wish that tourists buy this book in an Independence Mall giftshop comes to pass, so much the better. They will learn much about slavery, abolition, and Philadelphia that they will not pick up on the History Channel.

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