



PROJECT MUSE®

*No Mercy Here: Gender, Punishment, and the Making of Jim
Crow Modernity* by Sarah Haley (review)

Margaret Garb

Journal of Southern History, Volume 83, Number 3, August 2017, pp. 710-712
(Review)

Published by The Southern Historical Association

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/soh.2017.0205>

the JOURNAL OF
SOUTHERN
HISTORY

August 2017 • Vol. LXXXIII, No. 3
Published Quarterly by the
SOUTHERN HISTORICAL ASSOCIATION

➔ *For additional information about this article*

<https://muse.jhu.edu/article/666392>

relationships. Loyalty could not be taken for granted, and it was not a simple dichotomy; rather, loyalty was measured by degrees. With so much in flux, even loyalty among so-called anti-Confederates was unpredictable; and after losing to conservatives in 1865 and 1866, they turned to the federal government for help in securing control of local politics. Though the military was an important presence, it was Freedmen's Bureau agents who "became the conduit of federal power for mountaineers of all races," and they forced white anti-Confederates to accept black men as their political partners in a national Republican Party (p. 90). This alliance reshaped the landscape of western North Carolina and turned the region into an enclave of seemingly solid Republican support.

Republican power was not as solid as it appeared, however, and the second half of *Reconstruction's Ragged Edge: The Politics of Postwar Life in the Southern Mountains* untangles the many strands of its demise. The twin forces of violence and regional development retied the connections between white supremacy and the future of the region. Nash's careful uncovering of how these forces joined race and progress may be his most significant contribution. Republicans did not break ties with their black allies outright, but as they fought for internal improvements, especially long-awaited railroads, their biracial coalition crumbled under the pressures of bipartisan cooperation. "Ku Klux Klan assaults and intimidation began the process," Nash writes, "and a market-oriented New South would finish it" (p. 150). Progress is not necessarily positive, and social justice turned out to be a price most mountaineers were willing to pay in order to secure a spot for their region in a changing economic order. African Americans in the mountains and across the South suffered the consequences of their onetime allies' gradual repudiation.

At its heart, this book is about power. Wartime hostility among white communities, class tensions, racial conflict, and jurisdictional contests meant that power remained up for grabs through the postwar period, especially as inter- and intraparty loyalties shifted. The shape and trajectory of these power struggles were slightly different in the mountains than in other parts of the South, but they were not wholly dissimilar. These mountain communities were on the edge of Reconstruction, as the title suggests, and there were limits to how much influence they wielded at the state level. But it is at the edges that we can discern the shape of the whole. A broader look at the region, by incorporating mountain communities in other states in the southern Appalachians would have made Nash's claims stronger, but even so, *Reconstruction's Ragged Edge* fills a hole in our collective understanding of the era. Appalachian scholars will find this book to be a valuable addition to Reconstruction scholarship.

University of Maryland, College Park

CAITLIN VERBOON

No Mercy Here: Gender, Punishment, and the Making of Jim Crow Modernity.

By Sarah Haley. Justice, Power, and Politics. (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2016. Pp. xviii, 337. \$34.95, ISBN 978-1-4696-2759-5.)

In Georgia in 1884, Ella Gamble was arrested, tried and convicted for arson, and sentenced to life in prison. Gamble was sent to the convict labor camp

owned by Chattahoochee Brick Company and worked for no pay. By the 1870s, the convict lease system was a major source of revenue for the state. Gamble was later transferred to Milledgeville, where she likely was leased to a railroad company, working alongside hundreds of men and women sentenced for crimes ranging from petty larceny to murder. Gamble likely faced sexual abuse and violence while incarcerated. She suffered from cancer and ultimately was freed when state officials showed “mercy” for her condition after twenty years of hard labor. Gamble was one of hundreds of African American women imprisoned, often on flimsy charges, tortured, and abused in Georgia’s brutal prison system. Her story, and those of many others, is detailed in Sarah Haley’s *No Mercy Here: Gender, Punishment, and the Making of Jim Crow Modernity*, a troubling and deeply researched account of the convict leasing system in prison labor camps and on chain gangs, and of the representation of incarcerated black women in popular culture.

Haley uses Georgia’s prison system to make an argument about intersectionality, the “mutually constitutive role of race and gender in constructing subject positions, technologies of violence, understandings of the social order, and the construction and application of the law” (pp. 4–5). Though scholars often toss around such abstract jargon, Haley buttresses it with impressive evidence, illustrating and documenting the horrifying “gendered racial violence” of Georgia’s carceral system (p. 15). She uses crime and punishment to detail the ways the carceral system “exposed and enforced the radical otherness of the black female subject,” thus reinforcing a stable gender identity for white women (p. 5). The carceral system defined black women as violent and primitive, the opposite of the domestic, passive white woman. Race and gender identities, intertwined with systemic violence, produced new versions of white and black womanhood—all immersed in white supremacy.

Terrible conditions in convict labor camps did not go unnoticed. By the turn of the twentieth century, leaders of the National Association of Colored Women (NACW) launched a prison reform campaign. Like other Progressive-era reformers, they investigated prison conditions, published reports, and gave public lectures. They aimed to reform prison labor and to transform public images of black womanhood. The middle-class black women who campaigned to end convict leasing contended that black women prisoners were punished by tools of “white supremacist *patriarchal* terror” (p. 122). The NACW was motivated by self-interest as its members “realized that black women were bound up in a symbolic matrix of negative representation” that tied their fate to that of imprisoned black women (p. 122). The campaign ended with legislation shifting punishment from privately run prison labor camps to publicly run chain gangs. Despite the NACW’s good intentions, their achievement can hardly be viewed as penal reform.

What is problematic in an otherwise powerfully researched book is Haley’s turn to fiction—what she calls “speculative accounting”—to recount the inner lives of incarcerated women (p. 62). Haley presents a vivid portrait of Adeline Henderson and Nancy Morris, who, the historical record shows, spent nine years together working in the coke ovens of the Dade County Coal Mines and another three years in the fields at Camp Heardmont, an all-female convict labor

camp, before Henderson died. The problem is there is no evidence to support Haley's account of their strong feelings for one another.

In the current political moment when truth has become a rare and valued jewel, historians should hold tightly to evidence and stick to interpretation and analysis grounded in archival sources. Without evidence for our claims, we are nothing more than sham artists professing to "make America great again." That is the problem with film-ready fictionalized accounts of real suffering. The persistent racism and sexism of the nation's penal system, whose history is so well documented in *No Mercy Here*, deserve the truth.

Washington University in St. Louis

MARGARET GARB

From Slave to Statesman: The Life of Educator, Editor, and Civil Rights Activist Willis M. Carter of Virginia. By Robert Heinrich and Deborah Harding. Foreword by Henry Louis Gates Jr. Antislavery, Abolition, and the Atlantic World. (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2016. Pp. xx, 160. \$35.00, ISBN 978-0-8071-6265-1.)

Born enslaved on the Locust Dale plantation in Albemarle County, Virginia, Willis McGlascoe Carter led a remarkable life. His twenty-one-page memoir, written in the 1890s, called *A Sketch of My Life and Our Family Record*, illuminates the life and times of an activist who stood firm in his convictions that black Americans were entitled to the same rights as white Americans. His story was exceptional because he had been afforded the opportunity to read and write when only about 5 percent of enslaved people were literate.

Carter claimed that his owner, Ann Goodloe and her family, treated the enslaved people at Locust Dale kindly and with respect, with families mostly kept together without the constant fear and threat of being sold. Carter was well aware of his ancestral roots, tracing his lineage back to his great-grandmother. He was the first of eleven children born to Rhoda and Samuel Carter. Throughout his life, Willis Carter pursued education and economic opportunity. Eventually he attended Wayland Seminary and completed his studies in 1881. When he married Serena Bell Johnson, he chose a mate who was also involved in racial uplift work. Both of them worked in the Staunton, Virginia, school system and endured economic ups and downs throughout their lives. Willis Carter taught in Staunton for twenty years, eventually becoming principal of a school. As editor of the *Southern Tribune*, later renamed the *Staunton Tribune*, he operated under the masthead motto "Justice to All." Carter's leadership extended beyond Staunton; his activism in various organizations ranged from president of the National Memorial Association, to commissioner for Staunton for the Cotton States Exposition in Atlanta, to head of the Negro Protective Association of Virginia. He was also active with the Virginia Conference of Colored Men in Charlottesville and the Negro Education and Industrial Association of Virginia.

Carter's activism during a time of violent and virulent race relations is well documented by authors Robert Heinrich and Deborah Harding. This slim