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A House Divided: Slavery and Emancipation in Delaware, 1638-1865

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A House Divided: Slavery and Emancipation in Delaware, 1638-1865

Patience Essah, 1996. *A House Divided: Slavery and Emancipation in Delaware, 1638-1865*. Charlottesville and London: University Press of Virginia. xi + 217 pp. Tables, notes, index. \$29.50 (cloth).

Delaware, being a small state, has often been overlooked by researchers dealing with broad national trends and processes. Until recently, this has been the case with respect to the history of slavery and emancipation as well. Essah's volume corrects this, providing a thorough analysis of the patterns of bondage, freedom, agriculture, religion, and politics that comprised race relations in the state for more than 200 years.

Delaware was an oddity in a number of ways. It did not join the wave of legislative emancipation that swept through the states to its north in the late 18th century. There were also never enough slaves in the state to have possibly ended the institution violently, nor enough slaveholders to warrant Delaware joining the Confederacy. However, many of the elements present in other slave states, from Enlightenment ideology to Draconian slave codes, co-existed in Delaware, thus resulting in a case study in political interest and economic necessity.

Racial demographics and their effects on policy are presented in detail. Gradual emancipation is presented as a means by which slaveholders were able to eliminate excess bonded labor, while at the same time they made use of indentured ("half-free") workers.

The free Black community, that came to outnumber those enslaved, receives considerable attention. Abolitionism is also considered, as are African-American attempts to build institutions separate from white control.

Overall, this is a valuable work on a slave society experiencing economic and social change. Delaware, as a border state, presents a microcosm of the processes present in adjoining states, both north and south.