Sick from Freedom: An Unusual Perspective on the Civil War and Reconstruction
DOI: http://dx.doi.org/10.1128/jmbe.v14i1.582


In Sick from Freedom: African-American Illness and Suffering during the Civil War and Reconstruction, Jim Downs provides a clearly written, concise, extensively documented, and unusual perspective of the Civil War through Reconstruction. It also stands out because of the breadth and depth of coverage in economic, social, political, medical, and personal areas. The onset of legal emancipation brought with it an avalanche of interacting questions and problems which ultimately involved the entire nation and resulted in massive numbers of deaths. These questions and problems included:

- How could poorly educated freedpeople, with limited experience, compete with whites for the minimal number of jobs available?
- If freedmen pursued their goals to flee plantations in pursuit of jobs or to join the Union Army, how could they continue to provide for members of their extended families who remained behind or traveled with them?
- With the collapsing plantation system and the lack of jobs/wages, how could the freedpeople afford shelter, food, and medical care or even consider education? These problems were only increased by the dangers of enforced migrations through a war-torn nation that was battling outbreaks of smallpox, cholera, and dysentery.
- Could the freedpeople who had resources find medical facilities that were able to provide trained personnel willing to dedicate their already overtaxed time and resources to treating this population? This was especially pertinent since, at the time, African-Americans were thought to have different susceptibilities to, and responses to, diseases and were thought to be unable to care for themselves in the long term.
- Since the medical facilities and other resources were dedicated primarily to whites and secondarily to promoting a healthy workforce, what would be done for innumerable children, elderly, incapacitated, and/or injured freedpeople? This was especially a problem because freedpeople were thought to be at risk for becoming totally dependent if care was provided and would die if care was denied.
- The majority of these questions, while left unconsidered by many local, regional, and national officials, did capture the interest of many volunteer organizations, particularly from the North. The responses provided by the volunteer organizations and a few governmental agencies were frequently too little, too late; and the needs of the freedpeople were poorly communicated. Unfortunately the majority of these questions and problems were also applicable to Native Americans, who were concurrently being resettled away from their traditional homes to inhospitable regions of the country. The consequences for Native Americans mirrored those of the freedpeople.

Down's book, with a writing style similar to that of Shelby Foote in The Civil War: A Narrative, is a pleasure to read and has an incredible number of resources (over 750 endnotes) plus an extensive bibliography and a well-organized index. In dealing with the broad, sweeping impacts of the Civil War and emancipation, the book's content is much more historical, sociological, and anthropological than biological or microbiological. The diseases discussed, though not a main focus of the book, do demonstrate the impacts of malnutrition, social strife, and war on an entire country. They also highlight the misconception that the former slaves were physiologically different from the white population. It would make a very effective book for use in a seminar series, as supplemental reading (springboard for discussion) in a multidisciplinary course for upper-level undergraduates or graduate students, or for honors program participants.
REFERENCES


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