



3-15-1991

## Free Men in a Slave Society

Francis Feeley

Follow this and additional works at: <https://dc.swosu.edu/westview>

---

### Recommended Citation

Feeley, Francis (1991) "Free Men in a Slave Society," *Westview*: Vol. 10 : Iss. 3 , Article 7.  
Available at: <https://dc.swosu.edu/westview/vol10/iss3/7>

This Nonfiction is brought to you for free and open access by the Journals at SWOSU Digital Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Westview by an authorized administrator of SWOSU Digital Commons. For more information, please contact [phillip.fitzsimmons@swosu.edu](mailto:phillip.fitzsimmons@swosu.edu).



# FREE MEN IN A SLAVE SOCIETY

(A Book Review by Dr. Francis Feeley)

DES HOMMES LIBRES DANS UNE SOCIETE ESCLAVAGISTE, LES OUVRIERS DES SUDEA ETATS-UNIS, 1830-1861, by Michel Cordillot (Annales litteraires de l'Universite de Besancon, 1990), 253 pages, 130 francs (\$30).

Michel Cordillot was born in 1951 in Migennes (France). He teaches United States History at the University of Paris VIII-St. Denis. He is currently working with a group of scholars on a biographical dictionary of French exiles and political immigrants in the United States, 1848-1914, and will be a co-editor of the volume to be published in the United States in 1991 under the title LIBERTY AND A BETTER NEW WORLD: ESSAYS IN THE HISTORY OF THE FRENCH-AMERICAN RADICALS AND LABOR ACTIVISTS. He is also the author of

LA NAISSANCE DU MOUVEMENT OUVRIER A BESANCON (Paris: Les Belles

Lettres, 1990) and the editor of a ten-volume documentary collection titled LES REVOLUTIONS DU 19e SIECLE. DU COUP D'ETAT A LA IIIe REPUBLIQUE, 1852-1872 (Paris: Edhis, 1988).

Michel Cordillot has written a book about a subject that is so obvious that up till now it has gone virtually ignored by historians of the antebellum South. DES HOMMES LIBRES DANS UNE SOCIETE ESCLAVAGISTE (translated FREE MEN IN A SLAVE SOCIETY) is a history of the "free" white labor force in the Southern states before the Civil War.

The thesis of Professor Cordillot's book is that the non-African American labor movement in the slave states between 1830 and 1861, though small in number and poorly organized, asserted a significant influence that weakened the dominant slave-owning class in the years before the Civil War. Racial solidarity among white citizens of all social classes was indispensable for maintaining what the author calls "the ideological hegemony" of the small slave-owning oligarchy.

Using the minutes from union meetings of printers and cigar-makers, Cordillot argues that Southern workers frequently challenged the power of the Southern oligarchy and were supported in doing so by their national union organizations. Although no Southern trade union openly supported the Abolitionist movement before the Civil War, union solidarity on the national level brought Southern industrial workers in contact with their Northern counterparts on a regular basis. Between 1852 and 1860, for example, the National Typographical Union met eight times. Three of their national conventions

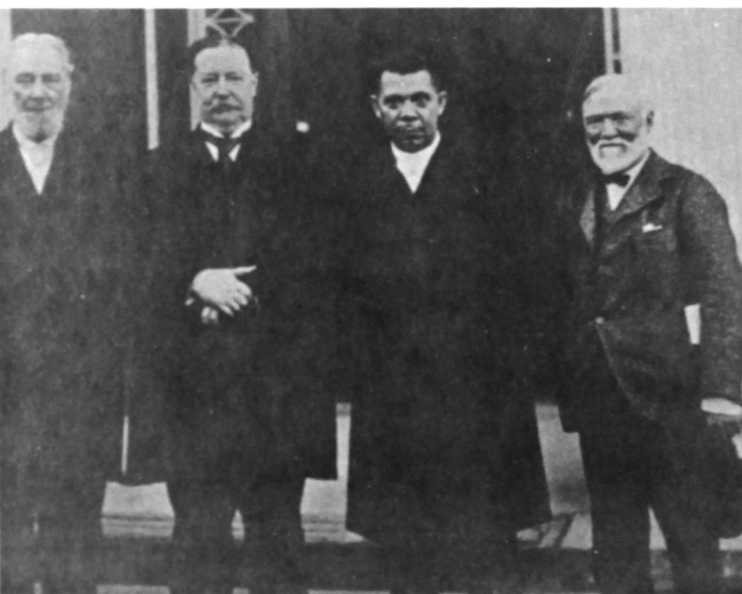


Photo reproduced by Mr. Bryan Brady

were held in cities south of the Mason-Dixon Line; the last prewar convention was held in Nashville in 1860. Regular contact at national meetings seems to have generated a culture of resistance among the printers: local unions were encouraged to struggle for higher wages, a shorter work week, and more control over hiring (a closed shop system). Unfortunately, there are no records of unofficial discussions held in the course of these national conventions, but Professor Cordillot points to signs that would indicate that Abolitionist values were communicated at these national gatherings of printers. In December, 1860, for example, the *MOBILE DAILY ADVERTISER* reported that a printer had been expelled first from Natchez and then from New Orleans for publicly espousing the Abolitionist cause. Were tenacious acts of dissent such as this one signs of a vibrant and defiant Southern labor movement? Perhaps not, but it was positive evidence that the National Typographical Union, while remaining silent on the question of slavery, did not actively stifle dissent among Southern members who opposed slavery.

Professor Cordillot turns to the second trade union, the minutes of whose meetings have been preserved from before the Civil War. The Cigar-makers Union of Baltimore was organized in 1856, and they sent a delegate to the national convention in New York, where fifty representatives from nine states (three of which were slave states) gathered to discuss strategies for a national organizing campaign. By 1861, the Baltimore local had a membership of 1071. One year before, they had allied with a dozen other trade unions in the city to reform the Baltimore Trades' Assembly. Needless to say, the existence of these labor organizations was perceived as a challenge to the local oligarchy. In March 1860, they had collected \$168.75 for striking shoemakers in Lynn, Massachusetts. In September of the same year, they participated in a meeting celebrating the Italian revolutionary Giuseppe Garibaldi. Entering the recession of the winter 1860-1861, the Baltimore cigar-makers' Union not only voted

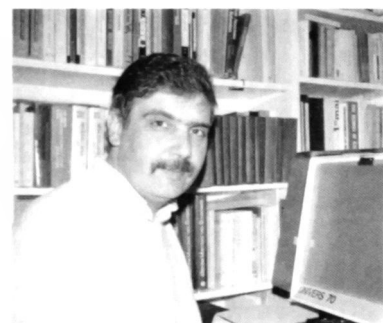
to collect financial aid for its unemployed members, but commissioned a study to determine the causes of the crisis in their industry and possible solutions.

Cordillot suggests from his study of the minutes of these labor union meetings and sporadic accounts in local newspapers the existence of a cosmopolitan subculture among organized Southern workers in opposition to the slave-owning oligarchy which dominated official plantation culture. The picture he has put together for us so far, he suggests, is only the "tip of the iceberg." Future research, he believes, will provide scholars with a better understanding of the immanent debacle of the Southern oligarchy before the first shot was fired at Fort Sumter.

The book closes with a brief quotation by Horace Greeley which in 1853 portended ill fortune for the slave states: "Each free worker who moves to the South is a nail in the coffin of slavery." It is unfortunate that most Southern workers were as much against the slaves themselves as they were against slavery. They perceived slaves as "capital assets" used against wage labor rather than as human beings who were potential allies in a struggle for a new society. In hindsight, it may appear strange that the "enemy of their enemy" was not their friend, but Professor Cordillot draws a convincing portrait, well documented from hard-to-find sources, that non-African American labor was challenging the authority of slave-owners—not their right to own slaves but their right to continue to exist as a separate social class, insinuating its elitist values and its medieval *Weltanschauung* into all strata of Southern society.

The author concludes his book by inviting more research into this almost unexplored aspect of the antebellum South: the goals and desires of "free men" in a slave society.

*DR. FRANCIS FEELEY is a professor in the SOSU Social Sciences Department, where he oversees the French Student Exchange Program. \**



Michel Cordillot