



2015-008

David S. Cecelski, *The Fire of Freedom: Abraham Galloway and the Slaves' Civil War*. Chapel Hill: Univ. of North Carolina Press, 2012. Pp. xx, 326. ISBN 978-0-8078-3566-1.

Review by Michael W. Coffey, North Carolina Office of Archives and History (mike.coffey@ncdcr.gov).

The Fire of Freedom examines the life and times of Abraham Galloway, a former slave, abolitionist activist, Union army spy, political organizer and orator, army recruiter, and postwar North Carolina state legislator. Galloway's brief life is used here to explore the transformation of the African-American world from slavery to freedom in eastern North Carolina during the Civil War and Reconstruction. Independent historian David Cecelski builds upon his earlier research¹ to argue that "Galloway's war had little to do with that of Grant or Lee, Vicksburg or Cold Harbor. It had nothing to do with states' rights or preserving the Union. Galloway's Civil War was a slave insurgency, a war of liberation that was the culmination of generations of perseverance and faith. Ultimately, it was the slaves' Civil War" (xi).

Cecelski proceeds mostly chronologically, focusing on specific aspects of Galloway's evolution from freedman to abolitionist adventurer to political leader. Galloway was born in 1837 in Smithville (modern Southport), a village on the Cape Fear River, to an enslaved mother and a white father who openly acknowledged his paternity. Galloway's owner (not his father) apprenticed him as a brick mason, a valuable trade in the growing seaport of Wilmington, where the master's family had relocated. In 1857, Galloway escaped by ship to Philadelphia and from there, with the help of the northern abolitionist network, to Kingston in the present-day province of Ontario, Canada, where he joined a growing exile community of escaped slaves. He traveled back and forth between Canada and the United States and met many important radical abolitionists. These connections led him to travel to Haiti in early 1861, ostensibly to visit a colony of ex-Canadian blacks. In reality the trip had a different goal. Inspired by the events at Harpers Ferry and by the activities of the pro-slavery "filibuster" movement, several radical abolitionists, including John Brown Jr., had decided to use Haiti as a base for an invasion of the coastal south. Galloway's mission was to seek support among the Canadian expatriates and the Haitians themselves. The idea never got beyond the early planning stages, however, and Galloway returned to the United States shortly before the outbreak of the Civil War.

During the war, Galloway became a spy for Union general Benjamin F. Butler and operated in southeastern Virginia and eastern North Carolina. He accompanied Butler to New Orleans and continued his intelligence work for the Federals in the Mississippi Valley. There he became disgusted with Federal enforcement of local fugitive slave laws. In Virginia, Butler was allowed to pursue his own course in dealing with fugitive slaves, but in the Deep South "Lincoln hoped that Butler might find a middle ground that would alienate neither northern abolitionists nor southern planters" (54). The experience further radicalized Galloway.

Operating at a disadvantage in unfamiliar territory, Galloway disappeared on a mission to the Vicksburg area and was reported as captured, but eventually reappeared in eastern North Carolina. Precisely what happened to him in Mississippi and how he reached North Carolina remain a mystery. He settled in New Bern, a coastal port in the Union occupation zone. There he played the roles of "grassroots organizer, ... coalition builder, and ... inspiring orator" (67) among the growing population of runaway slaves who flocked into the region. He became known for his passionate advocacy for black political rights, a hot temper, and a strong sense of honor. "Ironically, Galloway possessed many of both the best and worst traits attributed to the most capable Rebel commanders: their courage and sense of dash and daring ... but also

1. In *Waterman's Song: Slavery and Freedom in Maritime North Carolina* (Chapel Hill: U North Carolina Pr, 2001), chap. 7, "A Radical and Jacobinical Spirit: Abraham Galloway and the Struggle for Freedom in the Maritime South."

their pride, temper, rigid sense of honor, and quickness to take offense.... [H]is sense of manhood ... was a far cry from that expected of a southern cavalier” (69), especially in his equal working partnerships with female African-American activists.

In early 1863, Governor John A. Andrew of Massachusetts dispatched his friend Edward Kinsley to eastern North Carolina to investigate the possibility of recruiting local blacks into the Union army. Kinsley soon learned he would have to deal with Galloway if he hoped to accomplish anything. At a clandestine meeting in the attic of activist and former slave Mary Ann Starkey’s boarding house, a frequent dining spot for Union officers, Galloway and his associates forcefully expressed their concerns about black enlistment:

Before the African-American leaders would support Union army enlistment, they wanted assurances that the War Department would outfit and pay black soldiers the same as white Union soldiers. They wanted the Union army to provide housing, provisions, and employment for their families while they were on duty, schooling for their children, and care for their elderly and infirm. The black leaders also sought a pledge that Union leaders would compel the Confederacy to treat any captured black soldiers as prisoners of war, not as fugitive slaves, which would lead to their reenslavement, or as traitors to the Confederacy, which would lead to their hanging. (78–79)

After Kinsley agreed to help, Galloway persuaded some six hundred men to enlist in what became the 1st Regiment North Carolina Colored Volunteers (later the 35th US Colored Troops). Eventually, two more infantry regiments and an artillery regiment were recruited in North Carolina. The process did not run smoothly, however: Galloway and various Union officers involved in the effort were harassed and impeded by racist officers who found the very idea of black military service outrageous.

By early 1864, Galloway had become well known within African-American circles. He figured prominently in a series of articles on conditions among the black communities in eastern North Carolina and southeastern Virginia published in a New York newspaper, the *Anglo-African*. In April 1864, he led a group of black North Carolinians to Washington to personally present President Abraham Lincoln and Congress with a petition demanding voting rights.

Galloway was elected as North Carolina’s representative to the National Convention of Colored Men of the United States, chaired by Frederick Douglass. The convention met in Syracuse, New York, in early October 1864, in a tense atmosphere engendered by protests from anti-black whites. Douglass appointed Galloway (the lone southerner) to its four-man executive board. Two major addresses enumerated African-American grievances since the inception of slavery, praised the often thankless service of black soldiers, called for full political equality for blacks with whites, and advocated a postwar alliance between African-Americans and Republicans. During both his trips to the North, Galloway spoke to black audiences in several cities.

After the war, Galloway continued to expand his role as a leader among North Carolina’s African-Americans, emphasizing suffrage, public education, and resistance to white southerners bent on restoring the old political, social, and labor order. During the 1865 state constitutional convention in Raleigh, which sought to circumscribe the rights of African-Americans, Galloway participated in a rival convention of black leaders across town. He later played a role in the 1868 constitutional convention and was elected to the North Carolina General Assembly. As a state senator, he “addressed the most fundamental rights of freedmen and freedwomen,” voting for both the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Amendments. “He introduced a successful bill to help former slaves hold on to land and homes given them while in bondage even if they did not have written title, and he backed several measures to curtail the Ku Klux Klan, including a bill to create a state militia to combat white terrorism.... [He] steadfastly advocated for labor rights.... More than any other elected leader in North Carolina, Galloway also fought for women’s rights” (209–10). In these and other ways, Galloway seems very modern in his thinking, but Cecelski cautions that he

should not be seen as ahead of his time. He had emerged out of an African American intellectual culture deeply committed to egalitarian values and a revolutionary struggle for freedom. That culture of slave resistance had arisen over generations in the maritime districts of the American South.... [I]f Galloway embodied the spirit of democracy and black radicalism that emerged onto the world stage in the Reconstruction South, he

certainly did not invent it. That tradition grew from a collective experience. He translated and enlarged it, and it would surely outlive him. To his credit, he found within himself the strength of will and the raw courage to carry that collective vision of racial justice and political equality out into a world that was not ready for it. (211)

Galloway's life and career were cut short when he died suddenly in 1870. Many details of his story are undocumented, which often makes his activities hard to trace, especially during the antebellum era and the early years of the war. Though Cecelski meticulously assembles the relevant surviving references in reconstructing Galloway's life, he must often resort to speculation to fill the many gaps in the historical record. That said, he compensates for these problems by skillfully using Galloway's life as an entry point into the historical setting of his times and achievements. In particular, he brings to life the bustling world of urban African-American social, cultural, and political life in eastern North Carolina at a time of dramatic change. While not directly concerned with major military battles and campaigns or the world of the common soldier, *The Fire of Freedom* illustrates an important aspect of the Civil War and its impact on American society. It also rescues an undeservedly forgotten figure from obscurity. For these virtues, it deserves a wide readership.