Leonard L. Richards


Who Freed the Slaves? The Fight Over the Thirteenth Amendment is a compelling narrative history of the political maneuvering to pass the 13th Amendment to the United States Constitution outlawing slavery “except as a punishment for crime.” Leonard Richards is a master storyteller who resuscitates the historical role played by a largely forgotten congressman from Ohio, James Mitchell Ashley, in guiding the passage of the amendment. Throughout the book Richards is at pains to minimize the role of Lincoln, whom he casts as a conservative Republican not interested in ending slavery and who works at all costs to keep the Border States in the Union. If Lincoln is not the person who should be celebrated for ending slavery in the United States, Richards finds an alternative in James Ashley.

Ashley was a dyed-in-the-wool radical abolitionist. As a boy he travelled with his itinerant preacher father through the slave states and from a tender age was shocked by the “peculiar institution.” As a young man, Ashley violated the Fugitive Slave Law, aided slaves as they escaped north into Ohio, advocated for northern school desegregation, and supported voting rights for African Americans and women. He was also a man of his times. He did not believe in equality, thought miscegenation abhorrent, was anti-Catholic, and flirted with emigration as a solution to the “problem” of free African Americans. Disaffected by the shift in the Democratic Party to appease southern slaveholders, Ashley joined the newly formed Republican Party winning office in 1858.

By the time Ashley arrived in Washington in 1859 he was committed to ending the power of the slaveocracy in national politics. The sectional crisis and outbreak of war in April 1861 gave him his opportunity. As Chairman of the House Committee on Territories in 1861, Ashley proposed that the Confederate states should no longer be considered states but territories under the
control of Congress. Slavery would be abolished and land redistributed to the freed people. Deemed too radical by Lincoln the plan was never carried out. Following Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamation in 1863 that freed slaves in rebellious states but not loyal states, Ashley pushed forward with an amendment to the Constitution to end slavery once-and-for-all. His first attempt in the summer of 1864 failed to carry the necessary two-third majority needed. The amendment's failure was due to the votes of free-state and border-state Democrats who maintained that the war was to preserve the Union and not end slavery. Not deterred, Ashley successfully targeted several lame duck northern and border-state Democrats to switch their votes or abstain when the amendment was reconsidered in early 1865. Often told as a triumphal narrative, the 13th Amendment passed by a razor's edge of two votes in January 1865.

In writing an engaging history aimed at a popular audience, Richards hopes to correct what he views as the commonly held belief that the Emancipation Proclamation freed the slaves and that Lincoln is responsible for ending slavery in the United States. In Richards' telling Lincoln is a reluctant emancipator at best. Instead it was white abolitionists like Ashley who pushed, cajoled, and maneuvered around the President who finally ended slavery. Aimed at a non-academic audience, one wishes Richards had taken a more expansive view to the question posed in the title. In a book filled with contextualization and backstory, the slaves' self-emancipation is only briefly touched on. Arriving in the tens of thousands to Union lines, escaped slaves forced a hesitant Lincoln's hands. Another potential answer to the question is not a Republican but one of the lame duck Democrats targeted by Ashley, Samuel S. Cox. When Cox heard that Jefferson Davis had promised to free slaves who joined the Confederate army, he was convinced that northern Democrats could no longer support the mantra of "the Union as it was, and the Constitution as it is." Cox convinced eight other Democrats who voted nay in June 1864 to abstain in January 1865. Secretary of State William H. Seward later claimed that Cox more than any other representative contributed to the amendment's passing. In the end, the decisions made by Abraham Lincoln, his generals, radical Republicans like Ashley, peace and war Democrats, and the slaves themselves all contributed to the passage of the 13th Amendment.

Readers of the *Journal of Global Slavery* will take much from this compelling history of the political hurly burly that led to the end of chattel slavery in the United States. Although the story of James Ashley can at times be lost in the broad contextualizations that occur throughout the book, they provide key background and insight into the complicated and messy world of nineteenth century U.S. politics. Lastly, *Who Freed the Slaves?* is a stark reminder of the