



Black Life on the Mississippi: Slaves, Free Blacks, and the Western Steamboat World

Thomas C. Buchanan

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All along the Mississippi--on country plantation landings, urban levees and quays, and the decks of steamboats--nineteenth-century African Americans worked and fought for their liberty amid the slave trade and the growth of the cotton South. Offering a counternarrative to Twain's well-known tale from the perspective of the pilothouse, Thomas C. Buchanan paints a more complete picture of the Mississippi, documenting the rich variety of experiences among slaves and free blacks who lived and worked on the lower decks and along the river during slavery, through the Civil War, and into emancipation.

Buchanan explores the creative efforts of steamboat workers to link riverside African American communities in the North and South. The networks African Americans created allowed them to keep in touch with family members, help slaves escape, transfer stolen goods, and provide forms of income that were important to the survival of their communities. The author also details the struggles that took place within the steamboat work culture. Although the realities of white supremacy were still potent on the river, Buchanan shows how slaves, free blacks, and postemancipation freedpeople fought for better wages and treatment.

By exploring the complex relationship between slavery and freedom, Buchanan sheds new light on the ways African Americans resisted slavery and developed a vibrant culture and economy up and down America's greatest river.



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