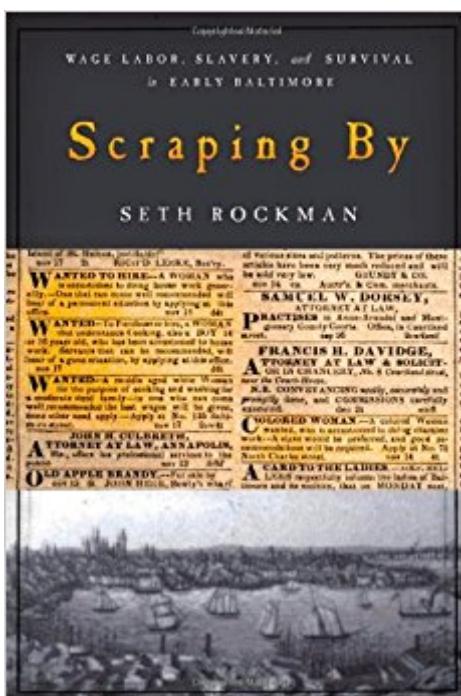


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Scraping By: Wage Labor, Slavery, And Survival In Early Baltimore (Studies In Early American Economy And Society From The Library Company Of Philadelphia)



Synopsis

Enslaved mariners, white seamstresses, Irish dockhands, free black domestic servants, and native-born street sweepers all navigated the low-end labor market in post-Revolutionary Baltimore. Seth Rockman considers this diverse workforce, exploring how race, sex, nativity, and legal status determined the economic opportunities and vulnerabilities of working families in the early republic. In the era of Frederick Douglass, Baltimore's distinctive economy featured many slaves who earned wages and white workers who performed backbreaking labor. By focusing his study on this boomtown, Rockman reassesses the roles of race and region and rewrites the history of class and capitalism in the United States during this time. Rockman describes the material experiences of low-wage workers—how they found work, translated labor into food, fuel, and rent, and navigated underground economies and social welfare systems. He also explores what happened if they failed to find work or lost their jobs. Rockman argues that the American working class emerged from the everyday struggles of these low-wage workers. Their labor was indispensable to the early republic's market revolution, and it was central to the transformation of the United States into the wealthiest society in the Western world. Rockman's research includes construction site payrolls, employment advertisements, almshouse records, court petitions, and the nation's first "living wage" campaign. These rich accounts of day laborers and domestic servants illuminate the history of early republic capitalism and its consequences for working families.

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Customer Reviews

"Graceful, engaging work." -- History Wire - Where the Past Comes Alive "Scraping By is an impressive, eloquently written study that provides a seminal history of Baltimore's working class, and makes a fine addition to the already outstanding list of titles in the Studies in Early American Economy and Society series." -- Maryland Historical Magazine "Scraping By is about breaking new ground: the often nasty, unhealthy labor essential to Baltimore's growth as a boomtown from the 1790s to 1830s. Rockman breaks new ground himself in studying 'low-end laborers': slaves, free blacks, European immigrants, and the native-born who struggled to cobble together a few days' ill-paid toil... Highly recommended." -- Choice "A creative treatment of an intriguing and important topic... The effort to make slavery history a part of labor history, and vice versa, is commendable, effective, and overdue." -- Peter H. Wood, Duke University "Scraping By offers an entirely new way of understanding the early republic. Through a combination of prodigious research, keen insight, and graceful, lively prose, Seth Rockman brings to life the labor and laborers who built early America from the cobblestones up. Here are workers free and enslaved, male and female, black and white, immigrant and native born, all struggling to attain the basic wherewithal of survival in a boomtown of their own making. This is no local story but a fresh paradigm, nothing less than the future of American social history." -- Jane Kamensky, Brandeis University "The economy of the Early Republic has long served as a kind of Rorschach test for American historians, with some perceiving a world of unprecedented opportunity and upward mobility and others a class-ridden society riven by inequality, exploitation, and conflict. In this exhaustively researched and vividly rendered book, Seth Rockman reminds us that these competing visions represent two sides of the same coin, that the ability of some Americans to prosper hinged on their ability to mobilize and exploit the labor of others, including enslaved and free people of color, women, indentured servants, immigrants, and others excluded from the full promise of American freedom. Scraping By is essential reading for anyone interested in American economic history." -- James T. Campbell, Stanford University "Seth Rockman has written a powerful book... Scraping By is an ambitious, impressive, and fully realized piece of work that will engage and educate scholars, teachers, citizens, and activists. The book will take its place on the shelf beside the classics of early American labor history, written by Ira Berlin, William B. Morris, Gary B. Nash, Billy G. Smith, Laurel Thatcher Ulrich, and Alfred F. Young." -- Marcus Rediker, *William and Mary Quarterly* "Seth Rockman has written a book to be reckoned with... This is a terrific book, at times abrasive, which deserves a wide audience. That would include undergraduates, for whom Rockman's vivid writing and clear argument should resonate, especially within an economic climate that is forcing millions more to scrape by." -- John BezÃ-s-Selfa, *American Historical Review*

Seth Rockman is an assistant professor of history at Brown University and author of *Welfare Reform in the Early Republic*.

Seth Rockman's *Scraping By: Wage Labor, Slavery, and Survival in Early Baltimore* examines the economics of the working class in early republic Baltimore. The book speaks to economic history, social history, labor history, the history of the South, and gender history. Rockman wants to know what life was like for the average person in the early republic and how that differed from the groups historians typically examine in this period. Rockman argues, "Early republic capitalism thrived on its ability to exploit the labor of workers unable fully to claim the prerogatives of market freedom." Rockman structures his work around examinations of different types of work, from drudgery, like on the mud machine, to women's work, in the form of sewing and domestic service, to the options available to the poor. While much history of the early republic focuses on the new opportunities, Rockman demonstrates that, in Baltimore, the employers were the most opportunistic, relying on a combination of free and slave labor from men, women, and children. Rockman's analysis of women's work offers a counterpoint to the usual narrative of Republican Motherhood. He writes of female labor, "Reputation could trump both skill and demographic background as a qualification for hire." Rockman continues, "The creation of knowledge around women was particularly problematic in a patriarchal culture that reduced female character to sexual chastity and condoned misogynistic violence against 'disorderly' women." After a woman had secured a job and navigated the intricacies of the gendered system, she still might not receive a decent wage. Rockman writes, "Women acting collectively in the early republic had to carefully navigate the gender boundaries of American society." Arguing from the position of motherhood enabled some women to make claims on government. Even then, however, their options were limited in a society that continued to view men as the primary wage earners and considered women's work a temporary measure until they married. Rockman's discussion of slavery in Baltimore draws heavily upon Walter Johnson's capitalist examination of chattel slavery. Rockman argues against historians such as Gordon Wood, Joyce Appleby, and David Walker Howe who argued that political democratization and economic prosperity went hand-in-hand in the early republic. Rockman relies on tax records, letters, and job advertisements for his source base. He frequently writes that the individuals upon whom he focuses left very few records as most did not earn enough in their day-to-day living to appear on the tax records. Payroll records often

omitted the names of employees as well.

By uncovering history of the working poor, Rockman provides not only a window into the development of capitalism in the early American Republic, but also a moving portrait of a group of people whose lives and labor are too often overlooked. This is a carefully researched and clearly written book that should be required reading for anyone who has ever relied on the labor of others.

I recently read Seth Rockman's *Scraping By*, with surprise and delight. *Scraping By* is simply the best study of wage labor that I have read. Particularly helpful for me was Rockman's discussion, of race, labor and working class culture. Reading this fine account of Baltimore's, enslaved mariners, mud machine operators, white seamstresses, Irish dockhands, free and enslaved black domestic servants, and native-born street sweepers brought to mind E.P. Thompson's, *The Making of the English Working Class* and Sean Wilentz's *Chants Democratic* New York City & the Rise of the American Working Class 1788-1850. What I found most remarkable in *Scraping By*, was Rockman's ability to recover the lives and aspirations of a hitherto largely ignored group, day laborers or per diem workers, here they truly come alive. While Thompson and Wilentz can rely on political pamphlets of the early 19th century, autobiographical accounts, and related literary sources to gain their insights, Rockman faced and overcame a more daunting challenge. Day laborers, enslaved and free, rarely have a voice in labor history; Rockman has made certain they will no longer remain in the margins of labor history. His brilliant use of the newspapers of the era and his impressive array of data from the early business, census and tax records support his study superbly and make his work unique. Fortunately for the reading public, Rockman's *Scraping By* shares with Wilentz and Thompson, that unique ability to write well and honestly about working men and women without resorting to academic jargon or as E.P. Thompson once put it "the enormous condensation of posterity." This is by far one of the best books on labor history ever!

This book will prove fascinating to anyone interested in the history of ordinary people. Rockman has done quite a bit of detective work to unearth lives that were barely recorded, mining almshouse rolls and jail records. Inevitably, it's hard to get a real sense of what these people were like as individuals from such fragmentary sources, but Rockman does as good a job as possible of reconstructing the details of their lives. He does occasionally lapse into less than transparent academic jargon, but for the most part the book is engaging and well written.

I really enjoyed this discussion of urban slavery, and I appreciated that Rockman put the discussion within a multi-faceted discussion of labor rather than just slave labor. It was an excellent read, and probably the best book on urban slavery out there.

A great book. It is well researched and tells an important story. It animates the world of wage labor in Baltimore especially the life of the dredgers.

New book as advertised.

The book arrived in excellent quality, but the contents of the books are rather dull.

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