

The 1858 Oberlin-Wellington Rescue: A Reappraisal. By Roland M. Baumann.
(Oberlin, Ohio: The Oberlin College Archives, 2003. xii, 52 pp. Paper, \$9.95.)

On September 13, 1858, thirty-seven ardent abolitionists rescued fugitive slave John Price before Kentucky slave catchers could return him to bondage. The rescue was completed without violence, and within days, Price was removed to Canada. To scholars of the mid-nineteenth century and the Civil War, the Oberlin Wellington Rescue is an event of incredible importance. Some declare that dedicated abolitionists made Oberlin the town that started the Civil War. While Roland Baumann would not go as far as to give Oberlin this title, he does recognize the importance and unique character of the people of Oberlin, the rescue, and the subsequent trial of those involved and how these events effect the local and national discussion of slavery. *The 1858 Oberlin-Wellington Rescue: A Reappraisal* written by Roland M. Baumann, Archivist and Adjunct Professor of History at Oberlin College, provides a basic narrative of the events of 1858-1859, while focusing on the underlying theme he sees as essential to the incident and the town's reaction. In addition, Baumann addresses the motivations of the participants, the degree of organization that existed among the rescuers, and the significance of the event. While his attention to these points feeds the traditional historiography of the rescue, his main thesis looks at Oberlin's unique character and brand of abolitionism. He argues that Oberlin's evangelical based beliefs in the abolitionist movement created an environment and people that were unique in their worldview.

Baumann focuses on Oberlin's underlying "distinct variety of abolitionism" which "included principles of religious and political pacifism which set Oberlinians apart from social reformers and political partisans on a national scale." (Pp. 2) Baumann believes that the traditional view of the Oberlin-Wellington Rescue as a riotous or violent event is incorrect. Instead he argues that despite the fact that the rescuers were armed, there was never an intent by rescuers to resort to violence. The presence of weapons was merely an attempt at intimidation. Baumann even suggests that the guns may not have been loaded. This essential non-violence is in stark contrast to the anti-slavery approach of other radical abolitionists such as Frederick Douglass and John Brown. Unlike Brown who saw violence as inevitable, and bloodshed as a necessary evil in emancipation, abolitionists in Oberlin were pacifists. They saw the abolition of

slavery as the product of a more evangelical and moral society, and the only means to this end was political and non-violent.

While the author does a fine job at supporting his central thesis, he leaves the reader hoping for more detail and context in which to understand the rescue. One area in which this is especially true is the period after the rescue, and through the end of the trial. We learn the eventual outcome of the trial and the events that led to the bargaining of the rescuer's freedom, but the book needs more detail here. Another example is the trial of two of the rescuers, Simeon M. Bushnell and Charles H. Langston. While Baumann is clear as to what the trial essentially involved, "whether the rescuers had a right to resist the law and whether the responsibility of the federal government was to protect the right of every man to his personal liberty" (Pp.20), the reader is left to wonder how this argument played out and how much of that argument was based on evangelical or moral concerns.

Despite this minor criticism, Baumann does an excellent job with both his analysis and his subject matter. His argument is clear and concise and he touches on many of the areas impacted by the rescue and its subsequent publicity. One example of how the rescuers transcended into both the state and national discussion is Roeliff Brinkerhoff. Brinkerhoff, editor of the *Mansfield (Ohio) Herald*, and dedicated abolitionist, traveled to the Ohio Republican Party convention in 1859. He and other Oberlin-Wellington rescue allies were successful adding a repeal of the Fugitive Slave Law of 1850 to the party platform. More than the efforts of any individual, the Oberlin-Wellington rescue and the courageous and far-reaching activities of its participants helped to bring the issue of slavery into the national discussion.

Baumann is also successful at showing the agency exhibited by African-Americans during their participation in the rescue. Of the thirty-seven accused of taking part in the rescue, twelve of the rescuers were African-American. One such rescuer is Charles H. Langston, who Baumann emphasizes throughout the book. Langston is symbolic of all that was frightening to slaveholders about Oberlin in the mid-nineteenth century. He was a former slave who was educated at Oberlin, and a leader in the Ohio State Anti-Slavery Society. It was at the urging of Langston that John Price was taken to freedom and not simply turned over to local authorities. In addition to Langston, Baumann argues throughout the book, that in this small Western Reserve town both free blacks and fugitive slaves were treated with a different level of respect than any other area in the mid-nineteenth century United States. Baumann shows that this was true not only with the College, but even independent of the institution. The people of

Oberlin truly believed in equality and conducted all aspects of their daily life in this manner. As Baumann points out, in Oberlin blacks, “worked as shopkeepers and blacksmiths along Main street” (Pp.3). This is in stark contrast to the rest of the North that required blacks to live on the periphery of society.

In all, *The Oberlin-Wellington Rescue: A Reappraisal* is successful in its aim to show the unique character of Oberlin’s reform movement and how this motivation helped stay a violent clash at the rescue of John Price. In addition, Baumann offers an interesting discussion of the events of the day and the political impact of the rescue and trial. For anyone interested in Oberlin, Nineteenth Century Ohio history, or the Western Reserve’s abolitionist tradition, this is an important book.

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