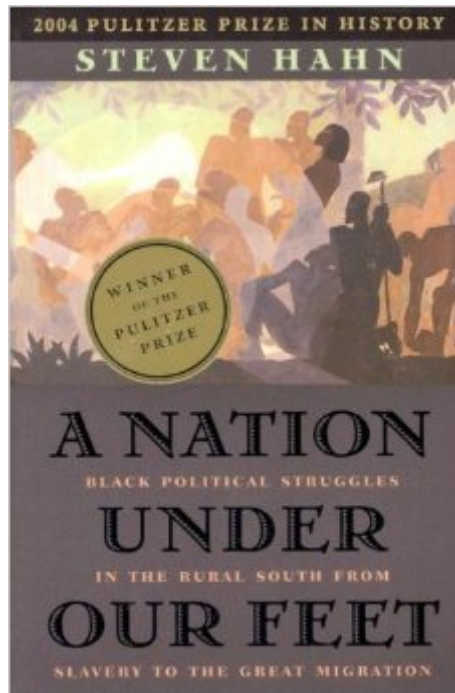


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A Nation Under Our Feet: Black Political Struggles In The Rural South From Slavery To The Great Migration



Synopsis

This is the epic story of how African-Americans, in the six decades following slavery, transformed themselves into a political people--an embryonic black nation. As Steven Hahn demonstrates, rural African-Americans were central political actors in the great events of disunion, emancipation, and nation-building. At the same time, Hahn asks us to think in more expansive ways about the nature and boundaries of politics and political practice. Emphasizing the importance of kinship, labor, and networks of communication, *A Nation under Our Feet* explores the political relations and sensibilities that developed under slavery and shows how they set the stage for grassroots mobilization. Hahn introduces us to local leaders, and shows how political communities were built, defended, and rebuilt. He also identifies the quest for self-governance as an essential goal of black politics across the rural South, from contests for local power during Reconstruction, to emigrationism, biracial electoral alliances, social separatism, and, eventually, migration. Hahn suggests that Garveyism and other popular forms of black nationalism absorbed and elaborated these earlier struggles, thus linking the first generation of migrants to the urban North with those who remained in the South. He offers a new framework--looking out from slavery--to understand twentieth-century forms of black political consciousness as well as emerging battles for civil rights. It is a powerful story, told here for the first time, and one that presents both an inspiring and a troubling perspective on American democracy.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

Every now and then one reads that political history has fallen on hard times. And there is some truth to this. Much political history seems awash in a sea of detail, accounts of endless intrigues and bureaucratic machinations whose overall significance is unclear, while regression coefficients run amuck. Surely, a reader may be tempted to think, Michael Holt's 1296 page history of the Whig Party tell us more than anyone would possibly want to know about the subject. Steven Hahn's new book is very different. Twenty years ago he published "Roots of Southern Populism," a brilliant monograph on postbellum white Southern farmers. Now after two decades this new book fully confirms the promise of his first book. It helps, of course, that Hahn cares about his subject and makes sure that we care as well. Hahn tells the story of black Southern politics from the last decade of slavery to the civil war through Reconstruction. Then he goes on about the next two decades before disfranchisement when African-Americans sought to maintain their positions with alliances with the Virginia Readjusters in the 1880s and the Populists in the 1890s. But surely we already know the basic contours of the story. Do we really need to be told that African-Americans were not just passive subjects but actively sought their own political ends? But Hahn provides much more than this. For a start he provides a much larger definition of politics than other writers might. He looks at the kinship networks, the importance of church and school, the significance of labor, and the value of community. Notwithstanding the wide unity of African-Americans he takes special care to discuss differences over region, strategy and especially class.

Steven Hahn's history "A Nation Under Our Feet" (2004) tells an inspiring and broad story: how rural Southern African Americans took steps towards political empowerment as a group beginning with the period of slavery and continuing through the Great Migration to the Northern states beginning early in the Twentieth Century. Hahn is a Professor of American History at the University of Pennsylvania, and his book received, and justly so, the Pulitzer Prize, the Bancroft Prize and the Merle Curti Prize in Social History. The purpose of Professor Hahn's study is to show how African Americans from their earliest days in the South attempted to organize to take control of their own destiny. The book challenges the view of many historians that African American political activism was predominantly only a reaction to white oppression and to the unwillingness of Southern whites to have African Americans assume a full role in political life. Professor Hahn's book is arranged chronologically in three broad Parts. Part I covers African American political activity during the pre-Civil War and Civil War period. He describes how blacks, even in the condition of slavery, used their position to wrest concessions from the slaveholders, including the right to farm their own plots, to make limited sales of produce, and to visit neighboring plantations. He describes the growth of an

informational network during these years, an early commitment to education to literacy, and the beginnings of a political organization. These early efforts intensified during the Civil War with the advance of Union Armies in the South, the defection of many slaves, and the service of Southern African Americans in the Union Army.

I suspect that Steven Hahn's "A Nation Under Our Feet" (ANOUF) was originally and primarily intended for a collegiate-level academic audience, perhaps in a history course studying slavery in the United States and its aftermath. However, it almost certainly received a much wider than intended audience when it won the 2004 Pulitzer Prize in History. Indeed, that is the reason I read the book, as I try to read the Pulitzer Prize winning history book every year, to expand upon the very minimal grounding in history that one receives in today's U.S. educational system. So, the "non history major" perspective is the one from which I am reviewing this book. Although ANOUF is pretty dense and does resemble a typical academic tome, with long paragraphs and voluminous footnotes, the compelling subject matter and Steven Hahn's prose elevate it far above the typical sleep-inducing history book that only finds a home on dusty college library shelves. I can surmise several reasons why the Pulitzer panel chose to honor it: the importance of the subject matter (black politics from before emancipation to the great migration north); the painstaking research that Hahn put into the project (by reading this book, you get the condensed wisdom from what appears to be hundreds of other books and documents that Hahn studied); and the quality of Hahn's writing, which manages to present detailed descriptions of events in a fairly engaging manner. It's not the page turner that "The DaVinci Code" is, but the subject matter is far more important. ANOUF aims to describe how blacks in the South, especially the rural South, practiced politics both during and after slavery.

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