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## Freedom Libraries: The Untold Story of Libraries for African Americans in the South

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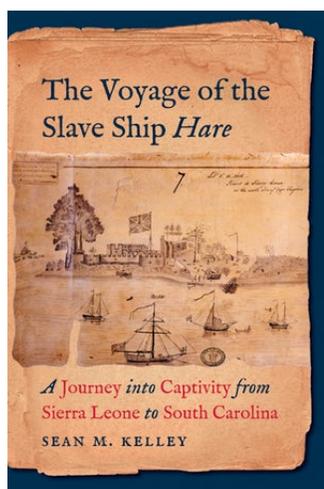
Each letter was clearly written, and easily understood. Gideon served as a Second Assistant Engineer on the USS Powhatan. Beginning his military service in Norfolk, in 1853, traveling around the seas to Japan to return in 1856 to Cape Town, Gideon wrote letters to his dear wife, Lide. Many letters were hundreds of words, copious topics that included all his adventures and the adventures of his shipmates. Each letter was dated and covered a particular span of days and months. Topics of great interest were explored, such as “An Island of St. Helena”, “At Hong Kong”, “ Goes ashore to see rebel chief Chen Alin but is denied”, “Captain Abbott sent ashore with 14 boats full of presents for Emperor of Japan”, “Return to Shanghai”, and “Cape Town”.

One particularly interesting entry, “You ask me how I look, and How much I weigh. Well, I think when I’m shaved clean and my head cropped short I’m pretty good looking...” (p.183)

Recommended for public and academic libraries, 253 pages. Notes & Bibliography, page 198-247, Online resources 247 and 248.

*Carol Walker Jordan, Ph.D. MLIS*

**The Voyage of the Slave Ship Hare: A Journey into Captivity from Sierra Leone to South Carolina.** Sean M. Kelley. Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2016. ISBN 978-1-4696-5476-8 (Pbk.: \$27.95); 978-1-4696-2768-7 (Hardcover: \$30); 978-1-4696-2769-4 (Ebook: \$19.99). 304 p.



Sean M. Kelley tells us “this book reconstructs the voyage of a single Rhode Island sloop that carried captives from Sierra Leone to South Carolina in 1754-55. It seeks to answer a seemingly straightforward question: who were the Hare captives?” He goes on to share that although the purchased and sold captives consisted of twenty-eight men, twenty-five women, twelve girls, and seven boys, no names were ever recorded. This question, “who were they”, drove his research to build this book.

Kelley provides a look at the slave trade which is painful to read and horrific to recall: see chapters , “ The Port”, “The Crew”, “Long Knives, “ Traders and Captives”, “Passages”, “The Sale”, “Town and Country”, “Shipmates and Countrymen”, and finally “Remittances”. These sections contain Kelley’s vast research collected from documents, archival materials and various interviews on the topic of slave trade in the United States.

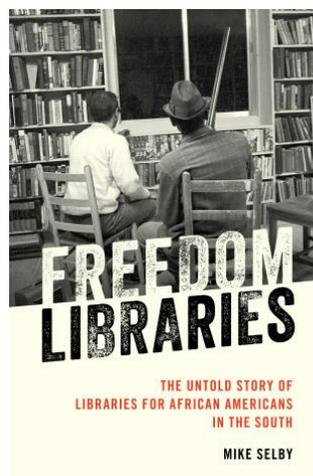
One excerpt to share:

“...many of the details of the Hare’s crossing are unrecoverable, we can fill in some of the blanks by examining other voyages. Illness was common to all slave ships, with “fluxes”, or gastrointestinal diseases, the most prolific killers, one observer described a lower deck so covered with the blood and mucus...it resembled a slaughter house, small pox ravaged a number of ships...rape by crew members was a common occurrence, other forms of non-sexual violence on voyages occurred ...advisable to bring an attack dog on the voyage” (p109). Kelley proves very helpful through the Illustrations, the maps, the charts and tables giving a deeper understanding of the experiences and lives of the captives of the Hare.

Recommended for academic, public, and archival libraries. There are 290 pages, with Appendices I, 2 and 3. Notes on page 217, Bibliography on page 249 and Index on page 281 to 290.

*Carol Walker Jordan, Ph.D., MLIS*

**Freedom Libraries: The Untold Story of Libraries for African Americans in the South.** Mike Selby. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2019. ISBN 978-1-5381-1553-4. 193 p. \$36.00.



In this monograph of library history, public librarian and author Mike Selby provides a comprehensive account of the “freedom libraries” that were established for African Americans in the United States during the civil rights movement. As with other aspects of social life during the Jim Crow era, African Americans throughout the South and in other parts of the country were systematically denied the

right to equitable library services. Originally an initiative of the Mississippi Freedom Summer Project, freedom libraries were established in multiple states as a means of combatting this injustice. Regrettably, this aspect of the civil rights era was largely forgotten with the passing of time. The purpose of this book is to tell the story of these freedom libraries and to raise awareness about their significance in the struggle for racial equality.

As much as possible, this study recounts the origins and locations of each library and describes the people involved with operating them, the types of books and materials that were provided, the policies that governed them, the public programs/outreach initiatives offered to patrons, and how individuals associated with these libraries responded to hostility. Nearly half of the book is devoted to examining the development and history of the freedom libraries in the State of Mississippi, no doubt due to the number of libraries that were established there and the availability of sources. The second half of the book discusses the freedom libraries that were planted in Alabama, Philadelphia, New Orleans, and Arkansas.

Arguably the greatest attribute of *Freedom Libraries* is the quality of research that informs the book. In addition to an extensive list of secondary works that provides broader context, this history was reconstructed from an exhaustive corpus of primary sources. This diverse array of primary source materials includes newspaper and magazine articles, various ALA publications, state and federal government reports, diaries and autobiographical accounts, oral history interviews, unpublished manuscripts, archival materials, and correspondence. Selby is to be commended for the impressive breadth and depth of research invested in this work.

As a practicing librarian, the author offers more than a masterfully researched study. He frequently analyzes the history of these freedom libraries and the agency of those involved through the lens of library science theory and practice. In describing patrons' initial reluctance to use the newly established freedom library in Laurel, Mississippi, for instance, Selby astutely interprets their hesitation as "the severest and most acute library anxiety" (p. 31). These professional insights allow general readers the opportunity to examine developments from the perspective of a librarian, providing them with a more nuanced understanding of this chapter of library history.

There are two main criticisms of this book. While the author's enthusiasm for this neglected chapter of civil rights history is laudable, his propensity for exaggeration is not. This study contains multiple hyperbolic assertions that arguably undermine the significance of the freedom libraries of the 1960s and public libraries in general. The freedom libraries are described as "the spine that the whole [civil rights] movement rested on" (p. xii). In another place the book states that, "Many milestones in young people's lives help initiate them into the adult world, none more important than a library card all one's own" (p. 1). Since unsubstantiated claims such as these do not properly

convey the vital function that libraries and other information centers serve in society, practitioners should refrain from making them.

The last chapter of the book lists a series of conclusions for practicing librarians to contemplate. The first conclusion argues that the history of these unique libraries discredits the conventional wisdom that public libraries can only survive and thrive in environments that offer political stability and a secure tax base (p. 149). The ephemeral nature of the freedom libraries, however, suggests otherwise. Some of the libraries described in this book (namely, the libraries in Alabama and New Orleans) did not endure past a few months. In making this argument, the author does not attempt to reconcile this particular theory with the reality, leaving the reader confused by this inconsistency.

Though worth noting, these criticisms do not discredit the overall quality of this book. In producing this exhaustively researched study, Selby's aim was to rescue the history of America's freedom libraries from obscurity and raise awareness about their unique role in combatting racial inequality during the civil rights movement. He may rest assured that he has accomplished both of those goals. Scholars and general readers of both civil rights history and library history will find *Freedom Libraries: The Untold Story of Libraries for African Americans in the South* an informative read and a worthy addition to the literature.

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