

**Comments on *Scraping By:*
*Wage Labor, Slavery, and Survival in Early Baltimore***

By Michael Zuckerman, The University of Pennsylvania

**For the Eighth Annual Conference of the
Program in Early American Economy and Society
Library Company of Philadelphia
October 30, 2009**

At first, it was just a weird, preposterous conceit. After all, Seth Rockman teaches at one of the leading universities in the land. He gets a plump paycheck every month. He has tenure and a TIAA retirement account. He will never have to do a day of manual labor as long as he lives. He is hardly a hard-luck loser scraping by. So why did I keep thinking of him as someone very like the men and women he studied?

The very notion was nonsense. But I couldn't make it go away. The more I tried to imagine the research that this book required, the more enamored of it I became.

One image drew me back to it again and again. Like his laborers, Rockman had to have been a scavenger. He too must have depended on fortuitous finds. He too must have set off on a host of wild goose chases. He too must have felt, too often, that he was searching for needles in haystacks. It was easy to envision him parched and hungry for a little low-hanging historical fruit where there was none.

And like his laborers, Rockman had to have worked a good deal harder than his peers for more meagre returns. As he says, work in - and as I am saying, work about - the underground economy is labor-intensive. We may term those who toil there casual laborers, but there is nothing casual about the jobs they do. They don't make ends meet if they don't work assiduously.

And like his laborers, Rockman could not have worked alone, no matter how atomized the scholarly labor market may be. He was not dependent on others for survival itself, as his workers were, but he could hardly have carried off his endeavor without the contributions of friends and the generosity of strangers. In his acknowledgments, Rockman thanks well over a hundred people in their own name and hundreds more in anonymous aggregates. Like his laborers, he depended heavily on informal exchange: with his teachers and students, with librarians and curators at half a dozen historical societies and archives, and with commentators and audiences at a host of conferences and seminars.

And the parallels proliferate. Just as Baltimore's laborers too often succumbed to the siren call of the lottery, Rockman rarely resists the lure of a scholarly sort of gambling. His readiness to resort to speculation and supposition appears in the "might"s and "maybe"s that dot his efforts to fathom the motives of men and women who left no evidence of their actual state of mind. Just as those wage workers were unable to regularize their lives and simply seized every opportunity that presented itself, Rockman often had to forego systematic analysis and improvise makeshift expedients to deal with the data that came to hand. The more I thought about Rockman's entire enterprise, the more I thought about the men who worked on the mudmachine. Its demands were so brutally difficult that they deterred all but the hardest or foolhardest. Though the analogy was only an analogy and though Rockman worked in milieus of creature comfort that the mudmachinists could only have fantasied, he was to my mind one of the toughs.

Of course, he had to be tough. To carry this study off, he had to specify the forms of lives that were essentially formless and improvisatory. More than that, he had to identify the shape of lives that were generally shifting and evanescent.

We have known since the pioneering urban histories of the Seventies just how transient city populations of the nineteenth century were. But Scraping By is the most satisfying account we have ever had of what those vast majorities who merely passed through actually did before they moved on, and why they had to move on. Rockman takes up the challenge that was tacit in those demographic tours de force. Where they were ultimately shallow, for all their implications, Scraping By is deep and revealing. Where they were gestural, Scraping By is often humanly moving.

Its evocative power is the more remarkable because Rockman dispenses here with all the elements on which writers rely to engage the affections of their readers. This is history with neither characters nor story. Rockman rejects the paradigms that provided poignancy and point in older accounts of the working classes, and he has very little to put in their place.

The old labor histories of this period held together, and held the attention of their readers, by making workers a cohesive class with a common consciousness. Rockman does not draw on that dramatic trope because his common laborers did not share ideas or interests. Race, gender, religion, and nativity all pulled them apart. And Rockman never denies their differences or the passion with which they degraded, abused, and fought one another. He knows them all too well. Indeed, he observes wryly that it was exactly in opposition to such crippling conflicts among the motley mass of workers that the labor aristocrats of the day constructed their identity.

The old labor histories also held together and held their readers by the artistry and resonance of the tales they told. We now take for granted their once-novel narrative arcs. We teach them in our undergraduate surveys of the era. With the assurance that comes of long familiarity, we tell our students of the decay of apprenticeship, the de-skilling of artisanal labor,

the coming of the factory girls, and the technological transformations that made those changes possible. Rockman does not draw on those dramatic dynamics either, because they did not touch the workers of whom he writes. In his relentless realism, he abjures all the scripts and scenarios that might elicit the sympathies of his readers. He does not deal dolefully in traumatic declensions from idyllic pasts. He does not appeal achingly to the lost arts and mysteries of ancient crafts. He does not invoke customary rights aggrieved. He reminds us, instead, that the mass of Baltimore's wage-earners were lifelong manual laborers. They never suffered the erosion of an accustomed way of life. They never engaged in heroic acts of resistance to save what was precious in what they once had. They did the day-in, day-out drudgework that made the wheels of the economy turn, and they endured the risks and pains that it required. They are not the stuff of story.

Of course, Rockman would still like to vivify his account and make it pulse with people. He would still like to capture lives. But he cannot. He can name names, but he can do no more. Few of his laborers stayed around long enough to tell compelling tales. The few who did were by definition atypical. And he can not even get inside the experience of the atypical few. The records are not remotely rich enough. His brief renderings of James Richardson, Aaron Bunton, Equilo, and Christian Baum are not portraits. They are the merest of silhouettes. They convey only the structural plight these men faced and the choices they might have had. In that sense, they are not anchored in real people at all. Their names are just pretexts to discuss the situation and prospect of generic types. Rockman does not digress when, say, his discussion of Equilo veers off incidents in the lives of other slaves. He was talking more about slaves than about Equilo to begin with.

So what is to be said for Scraping By? Or better, what does Scraping By say? And why does it say what it says so eloquently, despite Rockman's austere self-denial? Why does it engage us so compellingly, though it spurns story and character alike? How does it alter our understanding of its time and place?

I've left myself too little time for these questions, and not least because there are too many answers to them. But I do want to suggest, too briefly, a few. One is very basic, though no less breathtaking for that. The others are more daring. They make Rockman's mental labor as dangerous in its way as early 19th-century manual labor was in its. They transgress taboos. They open issues that many would sooner see stay closed.

Most elementally, Rockman puts labor back in labor history. Scraping By is about digging and hauling and sewing and washing. It is not about rhetorics of resistance or union organizing. It remains resolutely with the desperate struggle to find work and hold on to it that preoccupied workers. It does not rise to the theorization of agency and the analysis of negotiation that have preoccupied historians of late.

More fundamentally, Rockman's relentless emphasis on men and women who were by our lights marginal to the economy of the early republic reveals to us that they were not marginal at all. Their remuneration was assuredly meager, but that did not mean that the work they did was peripheral. Just the opposite. As Scraping By makes manifest, it was invaluable. The toil of the men who drove the mud machine and of the women who did domestic service marked the very center of the city's infrastructures of production and reproduction.

In focusing as he does on the allegedly marginal, Rockman refuses the economic history that is all bloodless laws of supply and demand. He affirms instead a political economic history

that attends to the social relations of power. He reminds us of the unfreedom of the great majority of the manual laborers of early Baltimore and of the keenness of their employers to keep it that way. And he insists that, so far from preventing the coming of capitalism, this failure of a free market in labor was ingredient in it. Disparities in power were not only the norm but also the foundation of capitalism as it actually emerged in America. Failures of market freedom were not temporary or transitional. They were the very nature of capitalism, and the condition of the wealth that it enabled some men to amass.

Devastating detail by devastating detail, Rockman exposes a vivifying array of inconvenient truths about the reality on the ground of the capitalism that has been, as Michael Moore says, the love story of our time. (And, as Moore does not say, of no time but our time. Americans were never infatuated with it at any earlier time. They were, at best, ambivalent about it. Very few Americans ever really wanted to live in the world that free market fantasists theorized. Fewer still ever found it lovely.)

So let me at least allude to a few of these truths. I can't elaborate them here, but I can assure you that, in Scraping By, they all arise directly and disturbingly out of evidence that Rockman develops richly and luminously. I offer them in a ragged motley of over-simplified bullet points, just to put them on the table. Maybe we'll talk about them at the length they deserve during discussion. At very least, they should give you some sense of what's at stake in all this.

Wage labor was not a stepping stone to independence. It was a lifelong condition. Wage workers lived their lives a step from the poorhouse. A male laborer couldn't earn enough even to support himself, let alone a family. A female couldn't earn even as much as a male. The free

market didn't liberate any of them. It actually increased their dependence on government charity. The poor couldn't survive without charity.

Wage labor was not free labor. The dichotomy of slave and free labor was a false one. Most formally free laborers were legally unfree in their various ways. To treat their unfreedom as self-owned freedom required a specious set of social fictions. To conceive the contracts between employers and employees as the voluntary engagements of equally free-willed parties required an equally specious set of legal fictions. Masters had no commitment to the free-labor ideal. They actively perpetuated the continuum of unfreedoms that provided them what they actually wanted, an abundance of hands who cost them little and could be coerced. Unfree labor was modern, not pre-modern or aberrant. The most highly capitalized industries were the ones most likely to employ slaves and indentured servants. Capitalism came to Baltimore long before a quite without a free market in labor.

Prosperity and privation were two sides of the same coin. The rise of some was predicated on the exploitation of others, and such exploitation was the way to wealth in the early republic. Owning and employing labor was vastly more lucrative than performing it, no matter what apologists and sycophants said about the Protestant ethic. The opening of opportunity for some depended on the closing of opportunity for others. The story of American freedom was, no less, the story of American constraint. If Rockman does not accord his workers any consequential agency, it is not simply because he cannot come up with any substantial evidence of their ideas and values or their aspirations and anxieties. It is also because he doesn't think they had much agency. His insistent focus on work and on the majority of the men and women who did the work of the city enables him to see and to show what John Stuart Mill saw and said a

long time ago: that the mainstream of our history is the history of work "performed by those who have no choice."