

## Review: Emilie Amt, *Black Antietam: African Americans and the Civil War in Sharpsburg*

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**Emilie Amt, *Black Antietam: African Americans and the Civil War in Sharpsburg*. Charleston, SC: History Press, 2022. Kindle Pp. 218. \$11.49. ASIN B0BFVRD82B**

Sharpsburg is a picturesque mountain town in Maryland. Passersby might easily imagine that its quaint brick and stone churches, symmetrical Georgian-style homes, and town square have not changed much since Confederate general Robert E. Lee's failed attempt to conquer the area in the Battle of Antietam. Historian Emilie Amt demolishes these nostalgic notions by recovering forgotten Black experiences. In doing so, Amt joins other Appalachian scholars who have resisted "Affrilachian" erasure. In *Black Antietam: African Americans and the Civil War in Sharpsburg* she capably shows how nineteenth-century Sharpsburg was far more diverse than the predominately white town it is today. In 1860, approximately 1 in 7 Sharpsburg residents were Black, a far cry from the 97.9% white, non-Hispanic population documented by the 2020 census. In this way, *Black Antietam* contributes to growing Affrilachian scholarship challenging stereotypes of historic Appalachia as a white monoculture while recovering Black experiences that are often underrepresented on library shelves laden with countless titles about politics, economics, and military maneuvers during the U.S. Civil War. In short, Amt's *Black Antietam* offers something new by investigating the U.S. Civil War's September 1862 Battle of Antietam from the perspective of Black men, women, and children.

In the post-war era, African Americans in Sharpsburg founded civic organizations and constructed their own Methodist Church that also hosted a Freedman's Bureau school. However, the Black population in Sharpsburg and its environs dwindled during the late-nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Until now, historians took little notice. Black perspectives went missing in white-centered narratives and were further obscured by "Lost Cause" propaganda. In Amt's words, "Such neglect and erasure of Black memories of Antietam in the written record means that most of them are now irretrievable." (157) Thankfully, her skillful research recovers some African American perspectives while her talented storytelling makes *Black Antietam* accessible to a wide range of readers.

Amt is well-positioned to write this study. Yet, her path to recovering lost voices in the Maryland hills is unusual if not inspiring for telling local history. Amt trained as a medievalist with a specialty in women religious—abbesses, prioresses, and nuns—in 12<sup>th</sup> and 13<sup>th</sup> century England. With a long career as a history professor at Hood College in Frederick, Maryland, Amt turned her investigative talents to her neighborhood around 2010. She wanted to know more about the enslaved Black people who once worshipped where she does at St. Mark's Episcopal Church in Lappans, a hamlet just a few miles from Sharpsburg. Amt has since painstakingly reconstructed the Black experience in Washington County by combing newspapers, personal journals, land records, census records, and even preserved store ledgers. Despite the breadth and depth of her research, there are occasions when no primary sources remain. In those instances, Amt's familiarity with this region allows her to draw on circumstantial evidence. She reasonably considers parallels from the nearby market towns of Williamsport along the C&O Canal and Boonsboro along the original National Road (U.S. Rt. 40) to show ways vibrant Black communities existed in each of these places. *Black Antietam* exemplifies the ways by which clever researchers can recover forgotten communities.

Amt is a talented writer. In six chronologically ordered chapters, she threads together multiple human accounts to create a cohesive narrative. Her style is that of a storyteller who can easily quote primary sources without disrupting the flow of a captivating—and troubling—account. This approach makes her somewhat similar

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to popular historians like the late David McCullough whose true gift was synthesizing academic studies in a way that made them accessible to a general audience. However, Amt is even more rare. She is an academic historian capable of writing a study of first impression that offers useful signposts to fellow scholars while also being a good read for non-specialists wanting to understand local history.

From the very first page, *Black Antietam* humanizes the Affrilachian experience. It first introduces Hannah Arter and her twelve-year-old son Jared as they watch Confederates march past their one-room log cabin in Harpers Ferry *en route* to Sharpsburg. Other perspectives include the Rev. Daniel Ridout, a circuit riding pastor of the African Methodist Episcopal Church who ministered in the region around South Mountain; spouses Hilary and Christina Watson; and the county's wealthiest Black man, Thomas Barnum. Photographs from the Library of Congress and Sharpsburgh Museum of History enhance Amt's superb storytelling helping illustrate historic sites in authentic rather than romanticized ways.

Readers unfamiliar with the region learn about unique challenges free and enslaved Black people faced before, during, and after the Battle of Antietam while living in a border state. Amt takes time to contextualize small scale slavery in mountain Maryland as distinct from more familiar accounts of plantation life on the coastal plains of the cotton South. For instance, though most white residents in the Sharpsburg area were Union loyalists, a prominent white minority supported the Confederacy. Furthermore, freed Black people were constantly terrorized by the fear of kidnapping or being claimed as allegedly escaped slaves to be transported south. Washington County's sheriff based in nearby Hagerstown continued to arrest and jail alleged fugitive slaves even after the practice was outlawed by Congress. The variety of sources used to illuminate the Black experience are the fruits of over a decade of research.

The possibilities for teaching *Black Antietam* are numerous. Amt's methodology in researching Sharpsburg history offers a model for APUSH students also enrolled in AP Capstone considering projects based in local history research. The chapters alone offer a treasure trove of potential excerpts for teachers constructing practice document-based questions for AP or Paper 1 prompts for IB History of the Americas. One of the book's appendices provides a driving tour itinerary for historic sites around Sharpsburg. This is an excellent resource for schools in the greater Washington, DC region: teachers could plan a field trip using Amt's outline as a starting itinerary complemented by other regional resources such as the U.S. Park Service staff at Antietam Battlefield. However, strangely no maps are included—a noticeable oversight throughout the book. Teachers might supplement this shortcoming or could turn it into a creative and practical opportunity to develop geography skills by having students construct maps of their own. Other appendices preserve rare primary sources increasing accessibility to researchers and teachers.

Each summer, hundreds of tourists traverse the hills and mountains around Sharpsburg. They visit historic Harpers Ferry and Shepherdstown in West Virginia, hike segments of the Appalachian Trail, and oftentimes visit Antietam National Battlefield. There they may encounter ongoing public debates surrounding an inaccurate statue of Confederate general Robert E. Lee erected by wealthy Marylander William F. Chaney in 2003. However, visitors are unlikely to find much about historic Black communities in the area. Fortunately, *Black Antietam* succeeds in Amt's stated goal to recover the experience of African Americans in Sharpsburg. This well-written book makes new contributions to Affrilachian and Civil War scholarship. It is a welcome resource for regional history teachers and should be required reading for park rangers at Antietam National Battlefield.