



Word by Word: Emancipation and the Act of Writing

Christopher Hager

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One of the cruelest abuses of slavery in America was that slaves were forbidden to read and write. Consigned to illiteracy, they left no records of their thoughts and feelings apart from the few exceptional narratives of Frederick Douglass and others who escaped to the North—or so we have long believed. But as Christopher Hager reveals, a few enslaved African Americans managed to become literate in spite of all prohibitions, and during the halting years of emancipation thousands more seized the chance to learn. The letters and diaries of these novice writers, unpolished and hesitant yet rich with voice, show ordinary black men and women across the South using pen and paper to make sense of their experiences.

Through an unprecedented gathering of these forgotten writings—from letters by individuals sold away from their families, to petitions from freedmen in the army to their new leaders, to a New Orleans man's transcription of the Constitution—*Word by Word* rewrites the history of emancipation. The idiosyncrasies of these untutored authors, Hager argues, reveal the enormous difficulty of straddling the border between slave and free.

These unusual texts, composed by people with a unique perspective on the written word, force us to rethink the relationship between literacy and freedom. For African Americans at the end of slavery, learning to write could be liberating and empowering, but putting their hard-won skill to use often proved arduous and daunting—a portent of the tenuousness of the freedom to come.

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