

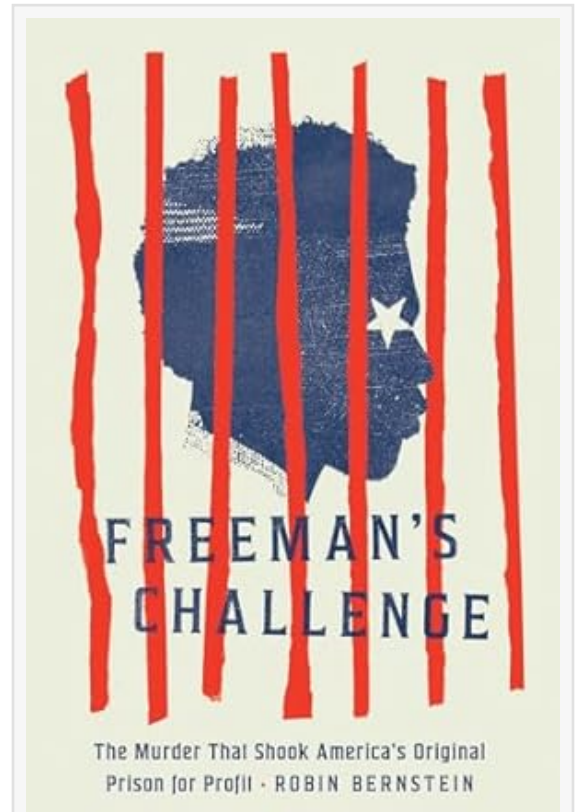
Harvard Historian Uncovers the Story of William Freeman and the Original Prison For Profit System in New Book

Award-winning historian Robin Bernstein tells a gripping, morally complicated story of murder, greed, race, and the true origins of prison for profit.

LOS ANGELES, CA, UNITED STATES, May 2, 2024

/EINPresswire.com/ -- In 1840, Afro-Native teenager William Freeman found himself convicted of horse theft he insisted he did not commit, and sentenced to five years of hard labor in Auburn State Prison in New York. It was the first-ever for-profit prison, and it was in this oppressive environment that Freeman dared to challenge the system. Incensed at being forced to work without pay, Freeman demanded wages. His challenge triggered violence: first against him, then by him. Freeman committed a murder that terrified and bewildered white America. And white America struck back—with aftereffects that reverberate into our lives today. "Freeman's Challenge: The Murder That Shook America's Original Prison for Profit" by the Dillon Professor of American History at Harvard University, [Robin Bernstein](#), tells an explosive, moving story about the entangled origins of profit-driven prisons and anti-Black racism. Published on May 2, 2024, by [The University of Chicago Press](#), Freeman's story reveals how the North invented this unjust prison system half a century before the Thirteenth Amendment outlawed slavery "except as a punishment for crime"—and how Frederick Douglass, Harriet Tubman, and other African Americans invented strategies of resilience and resistance in a city dominated by a citadel of unfreedom.

Drawing upon her expertise as a Professor of African and African American Studies, Bernstein masterfully traces the roots of our modern prison-industrial complex back to Auburn's shadowy corridors. Inmates were forced to manufacture goods ranging from carpets to combs, from silk to barrels—working in silence while forbidden from even looking at each other's faces. When



"Freeman's Challenge: The Murder That Shook America's Original Prison for Profit" by Dr. Robin Bernstein

Freeman dared to demand fair compensation for his labor, he faced severe punishment including beatings, whippings, and torture. But this isn't just a book about the origins of carceral labor; it's a crucial contribution to the broader labor history of America. Freeman's resistance marks one of the earliest calls for fair prison wages—he wasn't opposing labor itself but what amounted to slavery, as he received no compensation for his work.

Tiya Miles, author of "All That She Carried: The Journey of Ashley's Sack, a Black Family Keepsake" says, "'Freeman's Challenge' is itself a challenge, presenting a bold new argument about the Northeastern roots of an exploitative carceral labor system and the racialized ideology of criminality that followed the formal end of slavery."

Bernstein's work exposes the dark, 200-year legacy of carceral labor that originated within New York's borders, masterfully illustrating the evolving perceptions surrounding the term "slavery" in relation to prison labor. Her thorough research traces the shift from the once-proud acceptance of this term in the North to its modern-day condemnation. She asserts that to call carceral labor anything other than slavery would be to try and erase history and deny the fact that currently incarcerated people are doing dangerous jobs for a few cents an hour.



Robin Bernstein, Dillon Professor of American History at Harvard University

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Bernstein's heavily researched and deftly written story of the progression of racism—of William Freeman's audacious resistance to this new unfreedom—is a triumph.”

Ibram X. Kendi, historian and author

Author and civil rights activist Angela Y. Davis praises "Freeman's Challenge" as, "A provocative, robust, and rigorously researched interrogation of the historical meaning of imprisonment. Bernstein's compelling narrative provides insight not only into the institution of the prison in the United States but also into the lives of those whose newly experienced dreams of freedom were crushed by evolving intersections of punishment and racial capitalism. By disengaging the emergence of the prison from what has become its inevitable partner—'rehabilitation'—Bernstein deftly reveals the deep connections between imprisonment, racism, and the development of the capitalist economy."

Through Bernstein's penetrating analysis, we confront the root of oppression within our criminal

justice system. She explains how the prosecution at Freeman's trial spun narratives that intertwined race with criminality, deflecting attention (and responsibility) from the exploitative practices of Auburn. These narratives permeated the trial and became entrenched in US culture, perpetuating harmful notions such as the myth of inherent Black criminality and providing justification for the racialized mass incarceration that followed.

Compellingly written and thought-provoking, this timely and necessary story of Black resistance against the nexus of incarceration, racial capitalism, and slavery is an essential read for anyone seeking to understand the complexities of our modern prison system and dismantle the deep-seated systems of oppression that still haunt us today.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Robin Bernstein is the Dillon Professor of American History and Professor of African and African American Studies and Studies of Women, Gender, and Sexuality at Harvard University. She is the author of "Freeman's Challenge: The Murder That Shook America's Original Prison for Profit" and "Racial Innocence: Performing American Childhood from Slavery to Civil Rights," which won five awards.

ABOUT THE BOOK

"Freeman's Challenge: The Murder That Shook America's Original Prison for Profit," published by The University of Chicago Press on May 2, 2024, exposes the origin of America's dark for-profit prisons and tells the story of the Afro-Native rebel, William Freeman, who ignited the fight against racial capitalism.

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