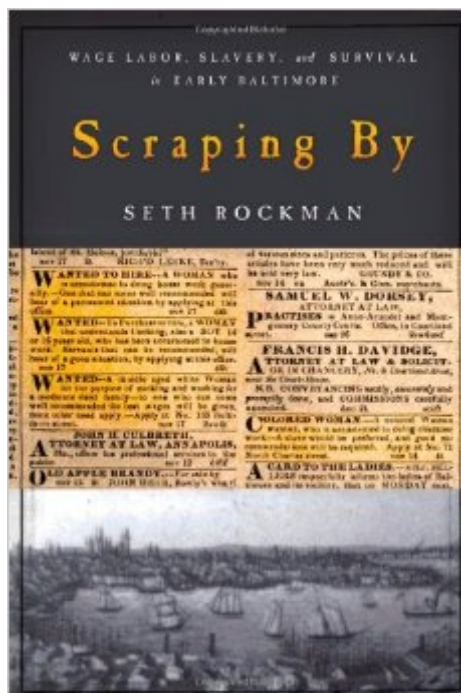


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# Scraping By: Wage Labor, Slavery, And Survival In Early Baltimore (Studies In Early American Economy And Society From The Library Company Of Philadelphia)



## Synopsis

Enslaved mariners, white seamstresses, Irish dockhands, free black domestic servants, and native-born street sweepers all navigated the low-end labor market in post-Revolutionary Baltimore. Seth Rockman considers this diverse workforce, exploring how race, sex, nativity, and legal status determined the economic opportunities and vulnerabilities of working families in the early republic. In the era of Frederick Douglass, Baltimore's distinctive economy featured many slaves who earned wages and white workers who performed backbreaking labor. By focusing his study on this boomtown, Rockman reassesses the roles of race and region and rewrites the history of class and capitalism in the United States during this time. Rockman describes the material experiences of low-wage workers—how they found work, translated labor into food, fuel, and rent, and navigated underground economies and social welfare systems. He also explores what happened if they failed to find work or lost their jobs. Rockman argues that the American working class emerged from the everyday struggles of these low-wage workers. Their labor was indispensable to the early republic's market revolution, and it was central to the transformation of the United States into the wealthiest society in the Western world. Rockman's research includes construction site payrolls, employment advertisements, almshouse records, court petitions, and the nation's first "living wage" campaign. These rich accounts of day laborers and domestic servants illuminate the history of early republic capitalism and its consequences for working families.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

This beautiful book dusts off the forgotten everyday struggles of the down and out in early Baltimore. Seth Rockman has unearthed a whole world of street scrapers, seamstresses, mariners, ditchdiggers, dockworkers, domestic servants, woodcutters, rag pickers, mudmachinists, hucksters, and pilferers; black and white; enslaved and (apparently not all that) free; all bound together in that they "lived poor." In his digging, Rockman has found and polished two gems that deserve notice: first, he's not writing about skilled laborers, but the working poor. Historians tend to study skilled workingmen's struggles at shop-floor level, but Rockman has dug beneath ground level here, literally in the case of the diggers, dredgers, and mudmachinists who performed the "dangerous and disgusting" work of unmuddying Baltimore Harbor. The working poor are not easy to find in the archives--they almost might be called undocumented workers--but Rockman has made a lot out of a little here. Second, Rockman is sensitive to the unrecognized work of women. Working-class women perform the "hidden labor of capitalist economies," Rockman explains. While there is no wage for such work, Rockman duly addresses the labor early Baltimore women performed when they birthed, raised, fed, sheltered, provisioned, laundered for, and bathed the city's men. Baltimore women apparently also ran a few rollicking speakeasies out of their apartment kitchens. This is profoundly honest history. Rather than imposing any teleological class consciousness on his subjects, Rockman draws his motley bunch together into a working class by what he calls their "common commodification and the ensuing circumstances of material insecurity." He provocatively suggests, then, that "class struggle was trying to meet the rent and scavenging for firewood to stay warm during winter."

I really enjoyed this discussion of urban slavery, and I appreciated that Rockman put the discussion within a multi-faceted discussion of labor rather than just slave labor. It was an excellent read, and probably the best book on urban slavery out there.

This book will prove fascinating to anyone interested in the history of ordinary people. Rockman has done quite a bit of detective work to unearth lives that were barely recorded, mining almshouse rolls and jail records. Inevitably, it's hard to get a real sense of what these people were like as individuals from such fragmentary sources, but Rockman does as good a job as possible of reconstructing the details of their lives. He does occasionally lapse into less than transparent academic jargon, but for the most part the book is engaging and well written.

I recently read Seth Rockman's *Scraping By*, with surprise and delight. *Scraping By* is simply the

best study of wage labor that I have read. Particularly helpful for me was Rockman's discussion, of race, labor and working class culture. Reading this fine account of Baltimore's, enslaved mariners, mud machine operators, white seamstresses, Irish dockhands, free and enslaved black domestic servants, and native-born street sweepers brought to mind E.P. Thompson's, *The Making of the English Working Class* and Sean Wilentz's *Chants Democratic New York City & the Rise of the American Working Class 1788-1850*. What I found most remarkable in *Scraping By*, was Rockman's ability to recover the lives and aspirations of a hitherto largely ignored group, day laborers or per diem workers, here they truly come alive. While Thompson and Wilentz can rely on political pamphlets of the early 19th century, autobiographical accounts, and related literary sources to gain their insights, Rockman faced and overcame a more daunting challenge. Day laborers, enslaved and free, rarely have a voice in labor history; Rockman has made certain they will no longer remain in the margins of labor history. His brilliant use of the newspapers of the era and his impressive array of data from the early business, census and tax records support his study superbly and make his work unique. Fortunately for the reading public, Rockman's *Scraping By* shares with Wilentz and Thompson, that unique ability to write well and honestly about working men and women without resorting to academic jargon or as E.P. Thompson once put it "the enormous condensation of posterity." This is by far one of the best books on labor history ever!

A great book. It is well researched and tells an important story. It animates the world of wage labor in Baltimore especially the life of the dredgers.

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