Undergraduate Research Opportunity

Limits of Black Wealth in America, 1865-1915

Prof. Calvin Schermerhorn
History

Hours required p/week: 6
Credits anticipated: 2

This URE focuses on the obstacles African-descended Americans faced in accumulating and passing down tangible wealth. It begins at Emancipation in 1865 when most Black Americans transitioned to a nominally free labor market, although most faced significant constraints. This project seeks to understand what were the possibilities for income after centuries of slavery and how and why Black workers remained behind white counterparts, earning between 40 to 50 cents on the dollar compared to white workers. Compounding the income gap was a series of Jim Crow laws including convict leasing schemes and prohibitions on political participation, movement, and property ownership, which all affected the possibilities for building wealth and passing down advantages to the next generation. One of the big questions of this research is the extent to which structural features of the American economy were infused with racial constraints and white supremacy.

Research assistant’s duties:
The Research Assistant will devote several hours per week to uncovering secondary sources (books, scholarly articles, dissertations, book chapters, and so on) and analyzing them for patterns. That will culminate in a final paper discussing the value and limitations of such sources to understanding the subjects under investigation. Along the way there will be smaller assignments including outlines. A once-weekly check-in over email or by phone/skype is required.

Required skills or qualifications:
Researcher will have excellent organization, written, and communications skills and preferably a background in the general history of this period, including (but not limited to) an overview of African American history of the Reconstruction and Jim Crow eras.

Skills student will acquire:
At the end of the course, the Researcher will be familiar with the best practices of historical documentary research and analysis as part of a larger research project. The Researcher will help move two chapters of a larger book project from concept to concrete drafts using a variety of primary source or the raw materials of history, and emerge with an inside view of how historical research is done.