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Contact: Jenny Keegan
225.578.6453 / jenniferkeegan@lsu.edu

How German Immigrants Influenced American Emancipation
LSU Press to Publish Abolitionizing Missouri in April 2016

Baton Rouge—Historians have long known that German immigrants provided much of the support for emancipation in southern Border States. Kristen Layne Anderson’s *Abolitionizing Missouri*, to be published by LSU Press in April, is the first analysis of the reasons behind that opposition as well as the first exploration of the impact that the Civil War and emancipation had on German immigrants’ ideas about race. Anderson focuses on the relationships between German immigrants and African Americans in St. Louis, Missouri, looking particularly at the ways in which German attitudes towards African Americans and the institution of slavery changed over time.

Anderson suggests that although some German Americans deserved their reputation for racial egalitarianism, many others opposed slavery only when it served their own interests to do so. When slavery did not seem to affect their lives, they ignored it; once it began to threaten the stability of the country or their ability to get land, they opposed it. After slavery ended, most German immigrants accepted the American racial hierarchy enough to enjoy its benefits, and had little interest in helping tear it down, particularly when doing so angered their native-born white neighbors.

Anderson’s work counters prevailing interpretations in immigration and ethnic history, where until recently, scholars largely accepted that German immigrants were solidly antislavery. Instead, she uncovers a spectrum of Germans’ “antislavery” positions and explores the array of individual motives driving such diverse responses. In the end, Anderson demonstrates that Missouri Germans were more willing to undermine the racial hierarchy by questioning slavery than were most white Missourians, although after emancipation, many of them showed little interest in continuing to demolish the hierarchy that benefited them by fighting for black rights.

Kristen Layne Anderson is assistant professor of history at Webster University in St. Louis, Missouri.

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Southern History / Slavery Studies

To request a review copy or set up an interview with the author,
please contact Jenny Keegan at jenniferkeegan@lsu.edu.

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