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*Washington Brotherhood: Politics, Social Life, and the
Coming of the Civil War* by Rachel A. Sheldon (review)

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Prospect Bluff numbered in the hundreds, and although they were closely allied with the British and their community survived for fewer than two years, Millett convincingly places them within the same category of *grand marronage* as the well-documented and more closely studied examples across the Western Hemisphere. Moreover, as did their Caribbean and South American counterparts, the maroons of Prospect Bluff played a vital role in the negotiation of some of the most important ideas of the era: political inclusion, republicanism, natural rights, and liberty.

Scholars of North American slavery and slave resistance are indebted to Millett for this fine study. *The Maroons of Prospect Bluff* removes the need to speculate about what might have happened had large numbers of American slaves fled their enslavers, formed an autonomous community, and undertook a forceful stand in opposition to their oppression. Here, richly documented and compellingly argued, is that rarest story of North American slavery: a detailed analysis of successful communal slave resistance.

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Washington Brotherhood: Politics, Social Life, and the Coming of the Civil War. By Rachel A. Shelden. (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2013. Pp. 296. \$34.95 cloth)

It is a common lament among politicians of both parties that the extreme polarization of Congress is at least in part attributable to a lack of socializing across the aisle. Mississippi Republican Trent Lott, who served in both the House and Senate between 1973 and 2007, bemoaned the loss of the bipartisan culture of the late twentieth century, when dinner parties were politically integrated and “late-night

games of gin rummy” knew no party bounds. “My job was to pour the bourbon and light the cigars” he recounted in 2010. If only the nation’s elected representatives could get to know each other personally, he suggested, Congress might operate more smoothly.

If the argument holds true that extracurricular collegiality will reduce partisanship and aid the functioning of the federal government, then the 1850s Congress should have operated like a well-oiled machine. As Rachel Shelden reveals in her highly illuminating study of Washington political culture in the 1840s and 1850s, no group of men were more collegial than the Whigs, Democrats, Know-Nothings, and Republicans who shared an intense associational culture after work hours, and were far more united in political debate than the highly suspect (and revised) official *Congressional Record* would lead one to believe. During the antebellum era, congressmen of opposing parties frequently “paired off” so they could skip important votes without skewing the outcome, men of different sections dined and drank to excess at parties virtually every night of the week, and a great deal of congressional debate was understood by all involved as “buncombe”: histrionic political theater of little real significance, designed to bolster support back home. Yet given the political breakdown that led to secession, few would argue that Congress in the 1850s was any less dysfunctional than our own.

Indeed, as portrayed by Shelden, Congress during the antebellum era was so dysfunctional that elected officials quickly concluded that the only way to accrue power was outside the Capitol building. The floor of Congress was loud, disorderly, and inefficient, with absent congressmen, rules that encouraged brief, pointless meetings, and lengthy speeches delivered for personal gain and ignored by all. But social life in Washington offered countless opportunities for forming coalitions and accruing power, and Shelden brilliantly illuminates the contours of this previously invisible social world, where layers of relationships were forged in churches, Masonic temples, temperance societies, bars, and the boarding houses where most members lodged. The few wives in residence held outsized power, and etiquette held

clear political significance. Sheldon's analysis of the social character of political power in this decade is some of the most significant to appear since Elizabeth Varon's *We Mean to be Counted: White Women and Politics in Antebellum Virginia* (1998).

One of the great strengths of Sheldon's novel account of Washington's social and political culture in the 1850s is that it helps explain why so many national politicians were unable to deal with important national questions regarding slavery in the territories, and also why they were unprepared for secession. The caning of Charles Sumner by Preston Brooks made little impact on the political class in Washington, she argues, because violence was a daily part of the morally lenient culture of the capital city. Elected officials shared a code of silence about drinking, gambling, and womanizing that strengthened cross-sectional bonds and would have horrified the American public, as Sumner's caning did. Within the Washington social bubble, northerners and southerners could, and did, threaten one another on the floor of Congress, only to meet over dinner the same night. Were it not for this intense associational culture, the Compromise of 1850 might never have been possible, and the Kansas-Nebraska act equally unthinkable. If congressmen could compromise, why couldn't their constituents?

One could quibble with a few of the assertions here, such as Sheldon's connection between Abraham Lincoln's involvement with the "Young Indians" during his congressional term and his views of secession as president, or how extensively Lincoln's congressional speeches were reported. But *Washington Brotherhood* offers compelling reading for anyone interested in the political culture of the 1850s.

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