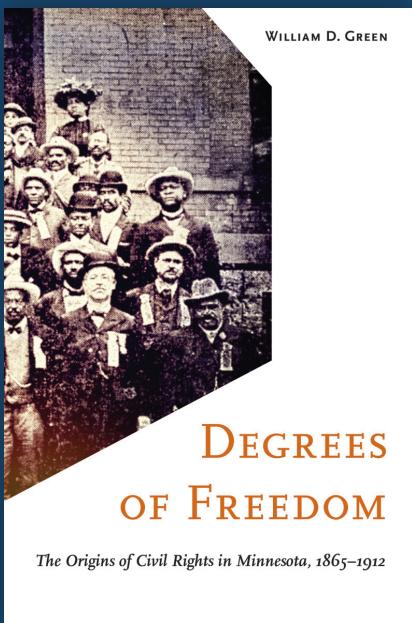




HOGNANDER MINNESOTA HISTORY AWARD WINNER

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**Degrees of Freedom:
The Origins of Civil Rights
in Minnesota, 1865-1912**

by William D. Green

UNIVERSITY OF MINNESOTA PRESS



The Friends, as the Library of Congress-designated Minnesota center for the book, organizes the year-round, statewide activities of the Minnesota book awards.

ABOUT THE BOOK

Spanning the half-century after the Civil War, *Degrees of Freedom: The Origins of Civil Rights in Minnesota, 1865-1912* draws a rare picture of black experience in a northern state and of the nature of black discontent and action within a predominantly white, ostensibly progressive society. Green reveals little-known historical characters among the black men and women who moved to Minnesota following the Fifteenth Amendment and delves into the delicate balance of power between black activists and the state's progressive white society. Within this absorbing, often surprising, narrative we meet "ordinary" citizens, like former slave and early settler Jim Thompson and black barbers catering to a white clientele, but also personages of national stature, such as Frederick Douglass, Booker T. Washington, and W.E.B. Du Bois, all of whom championed civil rights in Minnesota. And we see how, in a state where racial prejudice and oppression wore a liberal mask, black settlers and entrepreneurs, politicians, and activists maneuvered within a restricted political arena to bring about real and lasting change.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Why did the author choose the title "Degrees of Freedom?"
2. Who were the "race men" of Minnesota and why were they so important? Did their roles change over time? Why or why not?
3. Who were the "white patrons" described in the book? Did they have a positive or negative impact on black progress in Minnesota? How did their views and understanding of the black situation in the state compare to that of the race men?
4. Why does the author focus on barbers as key figures in the black community in Minnesota? What did they do?
5. Why was the creation of the black press in Minnesota so important? What did the editors/publishers do? What did the papers provide?
6. How were the cities of Minneapolis and St. Paul different from each other? How did their ethnic and political composition affect black progress in the state? Do they remain different throughout the time period examined?
7. Who was Booker T. Washington and why was he a hero to many whites and to some blacks? Why was he controversial? Did he help or hinder the movement in Minnesota?
8. Who was W.E.B. DuBois? Why was he a hero to many and an anathema to others? How did he and Booker T Washington disagree about the direction of civil rights movement? Why did he create the Niagara Movement?
9. What role did black Minnesotans play in the creation of the Niagara Movement and the creation of the NAACP? Why were both controversial?
10. Assess the place and position of Minnesota's black citizens in 1912, when the book ends. What has changed? What has not?
11. Which Minnesota men would you list as most important to the progress of black citizens in the state during the 1865-1912 time period? Why?



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

A professor of history at Augsburg College and the former superintendent of the Minneapolis Public Schools, William D. Green is also the author of *A Peculiar Imbalance: The Fall and Rise of Racial Equality in Minnesota, 1837-1869*. He has published many pieces on history and law, including work in *Minnesota History* and *The Journal of Law and Politics*, as well as editorials in the *Star Tribune*.

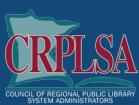
28TH ANNUAL

MINNESOTA BOOK AWARDS

The Minnesota Book Awards is a statewide, year-round outreach program of The Friends of the Saint Paul Public Library in partnership with the Saint Paul Public Library and the City of Saint Paul.

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A CONVERSATION WITH WILLIAM D. GREEN

Degrees of Freedom picks up where your previous book, *A Peculiar Imbalance*, left off. What initially inspired you to explore this aspect of Minnesota history? Did you expect it to become a multi-book project from the outset?

I felt that it was a history that needed to be told, and in “telling” it, I hoped to offer a way to address contemporary racial matters using history as a means for context. Soon after beginning my work on *A Peculiar Imbalance*, I realized that the book would only prompt more questions. In a sense, *Degrees of Freedom* is about a wholly separate interracial experience which bridged the past with more contemporary issues. To do that story justice, I knew I needed to write a new volume. I can foresee a third volume that focuses on Minneapolis during the first two decades of the 20th century.

Could you describe some of the research you undertook in writing these books? What challenges did you encounter in the process?

I had to rely on newspapers, governmental documents, letters, memoirs and various private collections. The history was there; it was a matter of knowing how to adjust my sight to see it. In this area of history there are a lot of gaps that need to be filled in. The biggest challenge I faced was being humble and true to the subject rather than giving into the conceit of hero-worship.

What do you hope readers will take away from *Degrees of Freedom*?

I hope readers reassess for themselves their sense of “privilege” and “power.”

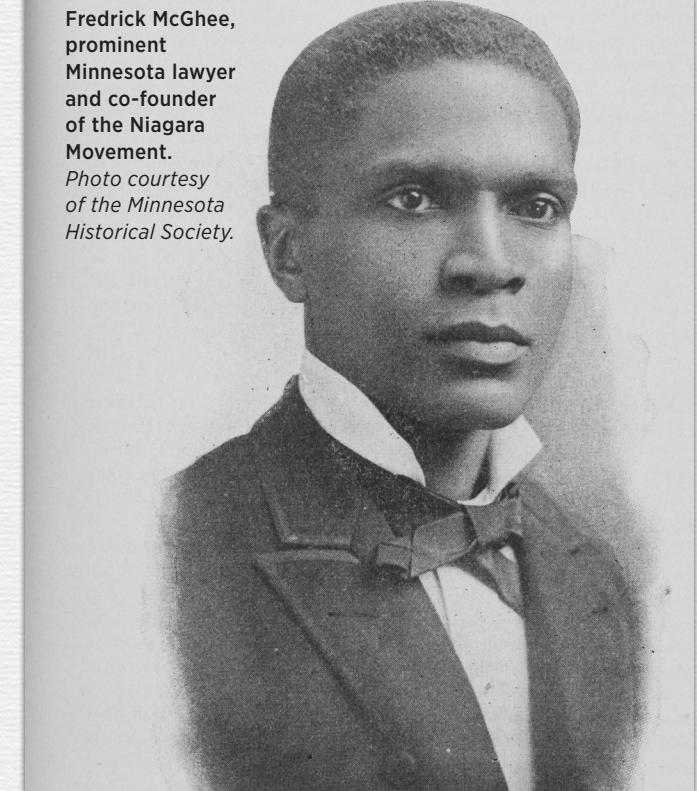
When and why did you decide to become a historian? What do you enjoy most about teaching history in your current role at Augsburg College?

I have been interested in history since I was a kid. My parents indulged my interest by taking me to sites and museums, introducing me to people I later came to realize were historical figures (W.E.B. Dubois, Martin Luther King, Thurgood Marshall).

Teaching history is best for me when I can see students make connections in their lives with the past, when I can see that they have gained insight, when their insight affirms for me hope in our future.

Fredrick McGhee, prominent Minnesota lawyer and co-founder of the Niagara Movement.

Photo courtesy of the Minnesota Historical Society.



Tell how you came to reside in Minnesota and how the particular community in which you live has affected your work as a writer.

I came to Minnesota for college and quickly found that few ever said a word about their own past. At first, I thought they were withholding valuable information. I learned, rather, that they had simply dismissed it. It seemed, no “credible” educator valued Minnesota stories and that the “authentic” history had to be boring and irrelevant. I thought I could do better. It was at least worth a try. I learned that to connect with people, I had to employ the age-old approach of telling stories. In this, history becomes a communal effort.

What are you working on now?

I'm working on a couple projects. In one, I examine Minnesota during the period of Reconstruction as it struggles to integrate immigrants, blacks and farmers into a new economy. The other project examines the establishment of a liberal political tradition in early Minnesota.