A GUIDE TO BANKING ON FREEDOM

Whether you are reading Banking on Freedom for a class, as part of a reading club, or just because, these questions will help guide you through the book, highlight some of the book’s main points, and help you think actively as you read.

Introduction

What role does homeownership in the American Dream, individually and across generations? What are the individual and generational tolls of the foreclosure, especially for historically disadvantaged groups like African Americans and women?

Who do you think bears the most responsibility for the subprime mortgage crisis: investors who purchased mortgage-backed securities; investment banks that bundled and sold mortgage-backed securities; lenders who created and marketed the subprime loans; or customers who utilized the loans? Explain.

What are some of the various kinds of options available to manage, save, and invest money today other than big, formal national banks like Bank of America or Chase? How has the diversity of options helped people build financial literacy and accumulate wealth? How have some of the options exploited some, especially poorer Americans?

Chapter 1 “I Am Yet Waitin’: African American Women and Free Labor Banking Experiments in the Emancipation-Era South, 1860s-1900

What motivated military officers to create the Freedmen's Funds and the three free labor banks? What were the disadvantages of these experiments for freedpeople? Were there any advantages for freedpeople in general and freedwomen in particular? Explain.

What were some economic strategies Black women depositors used at the Freedman's bank? How did these strategies both call attention to and work around the economic limitations Black women faced?

Unlike today's federally insured bank deposits, in the past depositing your money in a bank entailed some risk. Should the government have played any role in helping depositors who lost their money with the Freedman's Bank? Explain your reasons.

What challenges did people face getting refunds? Describe the various strategies they used to try to recover their own and their loved ones' refunds. Was it worth trying to get back the refunds, especially the very small ones? Why do you think so?


The introduction to this chapter is a work of creative nonfiction, also known as evocative history, in which the author had to imagine some details of individuals' lives based on scant archival evidence. Look in the endnotes on pages 210-11. What kinds of evidence did Garrett-Scott use to tell the stories of Lizzie Draper and W. M. T. Forrester?

Consider the kinds of sources available to research the lives of enslaved and freedpeople. Many of the documents about their lives come from other people and institutions. What are the limitations of this evidence in telling African Americans' stories? How does the author read these biased sources against the bias grain to recover some elements of the Black experience?

Discuss the important roles of the Black church in early Black communities as political, social, cultural, and economical institutions. What were some limitations Black women faced in the church? How did they work around, even overcome, these restrictions?

The section on the St. Luke Society includes some Biblical references. In a sermon calling for formalizing of the African Methodist Episcopal Church, Rev. Daniel Coker declared, “[W]e shall see our brethren come flocking to us like doves to their windows. And we[,] as a band of brethren, shall sit down under our own vine to worship, and none to make us afraid.” In discussing Black women's early labor organizing, Garrett-Scott writes, “Women turned their own ploughshares into swords.” Discuss the experiences of enslaved and newly freed Black women in relation to the Biblical references of Isaiah 60:8 (for “doves to windows”) and Isaiah 2:4 and Joel 3:10 (for “ploughshares into swords”).

How did Black women build up the Independent Order of St. Luke (IOSL) and
other societies? How did secret societies like the IOSL serve Black women from different socioeconomic backgrounds?

Discuss the differences in vision and leadership style between William M. T. Forrester, Rosa Bowser, and Maggie Lena Walker. What were the merits and shortcomings of each leader?


What barriers did Blacks interested in opening banks or getting into the banking industry face? What solutions did they devise to work around these limitations?

Was the “veneer of civility” an effective way to manage race relations in the Jim Crow South? Explain. Is it similar to modern-day colorblind racism? Explain. (As an introduction, see a short video about colorblind racism at: www.youtube.com/watch?v=uQkJnLSPfSj)

How did the St. Luke Bank respond to the realities and circumstances of its customer base? How effectively did it navigate the tensions between its ideals and the economic realities it faced? Explain.

Discuss women at every level of the St. Luke Bank organization: shareholders, directors, employees, and customers. How do you think other factors beyond gender and race—such as class or social status, age, and education—complicate the relationships between women connected to the bank?

How did the state use laws and regulations to disempower Black communities, banks, and businesses? Were there any advantages to the new laws and regulations for Black communities, banks, and businesses? Explain. What short- and long-term effects do you think these bank closures had on Black individuals, communities, and businesses?

Chapter 4 Rituals of Risk & Respectability: Gendered Economic Practices, Credit, and Debt to World War I

Describe the present-day financial options available to poor, working-, and middle-class Americans (e.g. pawn shops, pay-day and title loans, second-chance bank accounts, lottery, casinos, etc.)? Should these options be closely regulated or even eliminated? Explain.

How did the St. Luke Bank use its “productive potential” to improve Black women’s economic lives? Consider the present day. What role should financial institutions like banks play in people’s everyday lives?

What are some stereotypes you have heard about how different racial and ethnic groups handle money? About women? How might these assumptions affect people's access to credit, financial literacy, and wealth building?

Describe the various roles Black women carved out for themselves in the relatively masculine world of extralegal finance, such as playing the numbers and gaming houses.

In what ways was risk understood in racial terms? in gendered terms? in both racial and
How would you define the New Negro? What historical, cultural, and economic factors gave rise to the New Negro? How were the experiences of New Negro Woman unique?

Discuss the possibilities and perils Black Wall Streets faced. How did Black entrepreneurs take advantage of racial segregation? How did segregation adversely affect Black enterprises?

Describe tensions between the old guard of the IOSL and its younger generation of workers. How did generational differences as well as professional rivalries shape the conflict between Maggie Lena Walker, Lillian Payne, and Lelia Williams Bankett?

Describe how Blacks participated in the investment boom that gave the Roaring 20s its name. What were they able to accomplish? What experiences and options did Black investors share with other Americans? What was different? What about for Black women in particular?

Consider the St. Luke Finance Corporation as a case study. To what community needs did the finance company try to respond? Was it successful in meeting those needs? Explain.