

FREEMAN'S CHALLENGE:

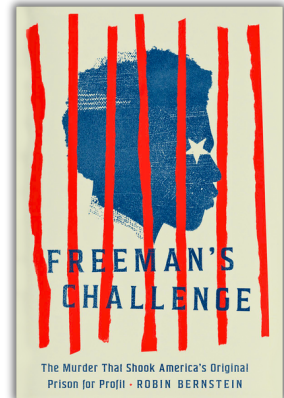
THE MURDER THAT SHOOK AMERICA'S ORIGINAL PRISON FOR PROFIT

An award-winning historian tells a gripping, morally complicated story of murder, greed, race, and the true origins of prison for profit.

In the early nineteenth century, as slavery gradually ended in the North, a village in New York State invented a new form of unfreedom: the profit-driven prison. Uniting incarceration and capitalism, the village of Auburn built a prison that enclosed industrial factories. There, "slaves of the state" were leased to private companies. The prisoners earned no wages, yet they manufactured furniture, animal harnesses, carpets, and combs, which consumers bought throughout the North. Then one young man challenged the system.

In *Freeman's Challenge*, Robin Bernstein tells the story of an Afro-Native teenager named William Freeman who was convicted of a horse theft he insisted he did not commit and sentenced to five years of hard labor in Auburn's prison. Incensed at being forced to work without pay, Freeman demanded wages. His challenge triggered violence: first against him, then by him. Freeman committed a murder that terrified and bewildered white America. And white America struck back—with aftereffects that reverberate into our lives today in the persistent myth of inherent Black criminality. William Freeman's unforgettable story reveals how the North invented prison for profit half a century before the Thirteenth Amendment outlawed slavery "except as a punishment for crime"—and how Frederick Douglass, Harriet Tubman, and other African Americans invented strategies of resilience and resistance in a city dominated by a citadel of unfreedom.

Through one Black man, his family, and his city, Bernstein tells an explosive, moving story about the entangled origins of prison for profit and anti-Black racism.



"Provocative, robust... Robin Bernstein's compelling narrative provides insight not only into the institution of the prison in the United States, but also into the lives of those whose newly experienced dreams of freedom were crushed by evolving intersections of punishment and racial capitalism."

— **Angela Y. Davis**, author of *Are Prisons Obsolete?*, distinguished professor emerita, University of California, Santa Cruz

"In this narrative tour de force, Bernstein offers a riveting and heartbreaking account of one Afro-Native adolescent's refusal to be broken by an inhumane New York prison."

— **Tiya Miles**, author of *All That She Carried: The Journey of Ashley's Sack, a Black Family Keepsake*, winner of the National Book Award

"Bernstein's deftly written story of the progression of racism—of William Freeman's audacious resistance to this new unfreedom—is a triumph."

— **Ibram X. Kendi**, author of *Stamped from the Beginning: The Definitive History of Racist Ideas in America*, winner of the National Book Award



Robin Bernstein is the Dillon Professor of American History and Professor of African and African American Studies and of Studies of Women, Gender, and Sexuality at Harvard University. She is the author of *Freeman's Challenge: The Murder that Shook America's Original Prison for Profit* (University of Chicago Press, 2024) and *Racial Innocence: Performing American Childhood from Slavery to Civil Rights* (NYU Press, 2011), which won five prizes.

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