This captivating book takes readers on an illustrated tour of the black railroad experience from slavery to Amtrak. With almost 200 images -- many never before published -- Theodore Kornweibel, Jr., examines the significant contributions of African Americans to the building, maintenance, operation, and profitability of the American railway system.

The history of American railroads, Kornweibel makes clear, cannot be separated from African American history. For over a century, railroading provided the most important industrial occupation for blacks. Brakemen, firemen, porters, chefs, mechanics, laborers -- African American men and women have been essential to the daily operation and success of American railroads. The connections between railroads and African Americans extend well beyond employment. Civil rights protests beginning
in the late 19th century challenged railroad segregation and job discrimination; the major waves of black migration to the North depended almost entirely on railroads; and railroad themes and imagery penetrated deep into black art, literature, drama, folklore, and music.

Kornweibels visual presentation of this rich history brings to life the hundreds of thousands of blacks who toiled for decades on Americas great rail systems. Each chapter of text focuses on a different occupation or railroading experience, some peculiar to blacks. Together, the evocative images and the complementary essays supply a comprehensive and powerful survey of the social, cultural, political, and economic influence of African Americans on railroads and of railroads on the black community.

Few today recall the importance of blacks to the American railroad industry, even though most black families have railroading ancestors. These stories of hardship and heroism, exploitation and endurance, anger and artistry illuminate a rich heritage and fascinating chapter in American history.


Theodore Kornweibel Jr. has produced an outstanding work with this book. At almost 600 pages and with numerous illustrations, he has put together an exhaustive exploration of how the history of African Americans and the railroads are intertwined.

For roughly a hundred years the railroads were a major part of the American economy and, as Kornweibel documents, a major player in the lives of African Americans from the days of slavery to the present, for both good and evil. It would be fair to say that no one can really claim a thorough understanding of the railroads in this country without considering their history with regard to African Americans, and that no one can fully grasp how African American history has been shaped in this country without looking at the role of the railroads. It also throws an unflattering light on the struggles between Capital and Unions - and how both found common ground in institutionalizing racism. Beyond that, one need be neither a railroader or African American to appreciate how this book contributes to understanding the full tapestry of America's history.

This is not ancient history. Kornweibel encountered resistance in doing his research from major railroads today, whose corporate ancestors employed slave labor in building lines that are still in use, and who do not want the legal or moral issues to be brought up at all. Kornweibel, with the use of pictures and stories, also documents how railroads, racism, and popular culture intersected. Yet, railroads also used to be large employers of African Americans, led to the creation of an African American middle class, and enabled the great migrations that still have effects on current
events. It's a story that has not really been told - until now. There are many villains, and a very few heros.

With the assortment of excellent photos and other images, with the thorough documenting of the role of race in the various railroad skills and crafts, with the exploration of socio-cultural aspects following from this hitherto neglected subject, Kornweibel has done a remarkable job. Every chapter has numerous citations of much original material he uncovered. This work should become a standard academic reference and the inspiration for further exploration of this subject.

Another book that would supplement the revelations Kornweibel has produced is "Sundown Towns: A Hidden Dimension of American Racism " by James W. Loewen. Just as Kornweibel has documented the intricacies of race and railroading, Loewen has uncovered the dirty secret of America - that there was a large-scale 'ethnic cleansing' style purge of African Americans from towns determined to be white only. It's a form of American Apartheid that is still largely unacknowledged - and still being practiced in some locales.

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