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On the Edge of Freedom: The Fugitive Slave Issue in South Central Pennsylvania, 1820-1870

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Review

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Smith, David *On the Edge of Freedom: The Fugitive Slave Issue in South Central Pennsylvania, 1820-1870*. Fordham University Press, \$70.00 ISBN 978-0-8232-4032-6

A New Study on the Importance of the Fugitive Slave Issue

Most historians view slavery's role in the antebellum sectional crisis from the perspective of the institution's expansion. After the war with Mexico and the drama encapsulated in David Wilmot's proviso, proslavery advocates and Free Soilers fought over slavery's expansion into the territories and these debates, politically motivated violence, and failed compromises dramatically bolstered sectional difference and pushed the nation to the brink of war. Oftentimes the fugitive slave question is understood as supplemental to the territorial expansion of slavery because of the Fugitive Slave Law's ancillary relationship to the Compromise of 1850. David G. Smith makes the case that the fugitive slave issue, south central Pennsylvania's role in which was nationally recognized, was just as responsible for the sectional divisiveness of the 1840s and 1850s as was slavery's extension into the territories.

Smith argues that the conflict created by and over fugitive slaves was a consistent theme throughout a half century of sectional divisiveness, war, and then reconciliation. As such, the author maintains that the issue is central to understanding the antebellum sectional crisis and the Civil War and he very capably defends this assertion through an examination of the fugitive question in Pennsylvania's Adams, Cumberland, and Franklin Counties. Smith seamlessly weaves this history of south central Pennsylvania into the larger national narrative. He notes that as it fueled these fires, the fugitive slave question, specifically Pennsylvania's non-enforcement of the Fugitive Slave Law and the state's evasive personal liberty laws, was also seen as the political point upon which compromise could be met and disunion could be averted. Smith does not end with the coming of the war but notes the continued influence that the

fugitive slave controversy had on the relationship between the warring halves of the nation during the conflict and in its aftermath.

South central Pennsylvania is a solid region in which to examine the fugitive slave issue because as a result of its mountains and valley, hundreds of northbound fugitive slaves were funneled through this area, which had very strong economic, social, kinship, and political ties to the South. Many of the fugitives remained in this borderland and joined communities wherein some of the residents were supportive and others were hostile and threatened the fugitives' tenuous freedom. Smith uses the editorial sparring in the newspapers, legislative petitions, and various meetings to illustrate these conflicting sides; *On the Edge of Freedom* is in part about these divided communities and the impact that the fugitive slave discussion had on people of different genders, races, classes, and ideological and political identifications.

As a result of the region's divisive politics and non-resistive religious influence, Smith argues that the region's antislavery advocates used unique methods of political engagement that differed from, for instance, those employed further to the west or in Boston. They were far less confrontational and instead relied on tactics such as legislative petitions, lecture campaigns, agitation for legislation like personal liberty laws, and using the courts. These petitions were particularly important because, as Smith reminds us, the women and African descended people who signed them had few alternative options with regard to political engagement. Interestingly, Smith also argues that the abolitionists in these rural areas, supported by organizations like the American Anti-Slavery Society and the Pennsylvania Anti-Slavery Society, should be viewed as part of a centuries long rural protest movement in the United States, although this is a point should be explicitly dealt with more explicitly through the work.

Smith should be commended for his extremely useful and interesting appendices. He provides charts to display the information in the region's fugitive slave advertisements that he references and also transcribed the several legislative petitions from the work. These allow his reader to make their own examination and comparison of the documents, a useful opportunity that is not typically granted. Further, his introduction warrants attention as it provides excellent historiographical coverage; even those who are non-specialist will be able to understand Smith's larger contributions to the field.

While Smith does make note of the Quaker and Mennonite influence in this region of Pennsylvania, an examination of some of the different denominations' positions, their ministers' sermons, and contextual commentary from the parishioners on the fugitive slave issue would have provided an additional layer to this story. The slavery question divided the Methodists, Presbyterians, and Baptists during the 1830s and 1840s and one cannot help but wonder how south central Pennsylvania's churches, with presumably divided congregations, would have handled an issue as delicate as fugitive slaves.

At times the author does problematically blur the line between fugitive slaves specifically and rebellion or antislavery violence more broadly. For instance, while John Brown launched his unsuccessful raid on Harpers Ferry in order to essentially create fugitive slaves, I would argue that Brown himself, as a white abolitionist actively fomenting and participating in a rebellion, was more inflammatory to the South than his goals were. Smith might make a better case for focusing on the fugitive slave aspect of this ordeal.

Additionally, while I found Smith's coverage of the fugitive slave issue during the war to be very insightful, particularly his characterization of the Confederates' Gettysburg Campaign as serving in part as a "slave hunt" to replace Virginia's absconding slaves, the final chapter on the post war period is probably unnecessary, at least formatted as it is. In it Smith demonstrates that after the war the situation in south central Pennsylvania became worse for its black residents, as death, capture, or relocation during the war, and migration and death afterward, reduced their local support system. This discussion is essentially on the impact of Smith's earlier arguments and would work better organizationally in a conclusion or as an epilogue.

Despite my very minor criticisms *On the Edge of Freedom* is a thoroughly researched, informative, and engaging piece of scholarship. Through this work David G. Smith uses a methodical examination of the long lasting fugitive slave issue in a divided community to present a fresh perspective on the antebellum United States' struggle with the institution of slavery. It would be invaluable for anyone teaching courses in African-American history or the Civil War Era at the university level, and is also recommended for both academic and lay audiences interested in the causes of the Civil War, the fugitive slave question, antebellum Northern society, and the Civil War more generally.

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