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Published online: 06 Feb 2014.


To link to this article: http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/0144039X.2013.878618
sole jurisdiction in disputes over fugitive slaves. Thus, the lawyers argued, Prigg and his associates should not have been subject to Pennsylvania law when they sought to recover Margaret Ashmore’s slaves.

*Prigg v. Pennsylvania* therefore hinged on questions of state versus federal authority. But it also pitted the rights of slaveholders to the preservation of their property against the rights of free African Americans concerned with preserving their liberty. On both counts, those on the side of personal liberty lost. Nine justices with distinctly different perspectives on the case all ruled in favor of John Prigg, declaring Pennsylvania’s Personal Liberty Law of 1826 to be unconstitutional.

By 1842, however, escalating tensions between abolitionists and slaveholders prevented even a unanimous Supreme Court ruling from ending legal conflicts over the return of runaway slaves. Baker points out that *Prigg* was by and large a failure, with northern judges ignoring the decision and stubbornly continuing to base their own rulings in fugitive slave cases on state laws. Northern authorities, for their part, used the ruling as an excuse to withdraw their assistance from slaveholders seeking to recapture their fugitive slaves. Sectional conflict after the *Prigg* case continued to intensify, with abolitionists livid at the court’s decision and slave owners equally incensed over northerners’ response to it.

Despite its solid grounding in legal history and constitutional theory, Baker’s book is highly readable and will appeal to an audience beyond those well versed in the intricacies of American law. Baker is masterful at putting his readers in the moment, showing how lawyers and judges at the time viewed their legal options, based on both precedent and the politics of the day. Because the Landmark Law Cases and American Society series as a whole is deliberately aimed at a general readership, its editors have decided not to include footnotes or endnotes. They have opted instead for a lengthy bibliographical essay at the conclusion of the book. Scholars will no doubt find this choice somewhat frustrating. Nevertheless, this book is a must-read for historians interested in sectional conflict in the antebellum USA, as well as for legal scholars concerned with the issue of divided jurisdiction within the history of American jurisprudence.

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http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/0144039X.2013.878617


The accepted historical narrative of the role of antislavery between the Revolution and the Civil War is one in which, despite a brief abolitionist impulse in the 1770s and 1780s, the antislavery movement faltered in the face of constitutional protections of slavery, powerful southern slaveholding politicians and northern white racism until it was rescued by radical abolitionists in the 1830s. These two books, in very different ways, challenge this understanding of the role of antislavery thought and politics in the nineteenth century and, in doing so, present a good case for rethinking this period of American history.

In *Contesting Slavery: The Politics of Bondage and Freedom in the New American Nation*, John Craig Hammond and Matthew Mason contend that the years between the Revolution and the 1830s should be considered on their own terms, rather than merely as a prelude to the sectional crisis. While the
early republic is often regarded as a period in which slavery was not that significant to political debates, the essays in Contesting Slavery seek to demonstrate that, in fact, slavery was central to politics at the local, state, regional and national levels. However, this does not mean that there is a simple narrative of slavery and antislavery that can be told; the story is actually rather complicated. As Peter Onuf explains in his foreword to the book, ‘the struggle over slavery was not the central, overarching narrative of American national history before 1840: there were instead many different, interdependent narratives, and slavery was important to all of them’ (p. xiii). The 13 essays in Contesting Slavery seek to begin to uncover exactly when, where and in what ways slavery and antislavery played a role in these narratives. Bringing these diverse and sometimes microhistorical chapters together are a Foreword by Peter Onuf and a Commentary by James Oakes. These sophisticated analytical overviews provide a valuable wider lens that contextualises the details of the individual essays. As such, this edited collection has a coherence that is often lacking from similar works.

Each essay in Contesting Slavery delves into the archival record and provides evidence that anti-slavery thought was far from absent from politics in this period. As several of the essays demonstrate, however, sentiment alone was rarely enough to move people to join the antislavery movement. Matthew Mason explains that while ideas were a crucial starting point, slavery had to have a direct impact on a voter’s life (or on his pocketbook) to make him strike against it. Similarly, Eva Sheppard Wolf outlines the relationship between antislavery and free labour ideologies, pointing out that moral arguments against slavery were less convincing to northern whites than were arguments about the economic value and personal dignity that came with free labour. It seems that pragmatism was often more important than ideology, especially on the political stage. Even for those men who considered themselves opposed to slavery, maintaining a strong union took precedence. Rachel Hope Cleves demonstrates that although Federalists condemned slavery because ‘its brutalization of masters infected the Union with a dangerous tendency toward civil violence’, their ‘ideological commitment to social order led to the subordination of antislavery to the preservation of union’ (p. 220). As Robert Parkinson explains, Southern slaveholders in the first Congress were able to draw upon this desire for union in order to dismiss all abolitionism as treacherous. They were so successful that a half century later, as Edward Rugemer demonstrates, slaveholding congressmen only needed to point to slave insurrections in the Caribbean to convince their peers that the gag rule was the only way to prevent abolitionists from inciting the slaves to rebellion in the USA. Indeed, the essays by David Ericson, Brian Schoen and George William Van Cleve demonstrate the various ways in which the federal government acted in slaveholders’ interests and was actively committed to protecting slavery.

In one of the strongest essays of the collection, Donald Ratcliffe explains that by the 1830s, southern slaveholders had been so successful in removing slavery from mainstream debates that even those northerners who considered themselves antislavery could not only reject abolitionism as radical, but also could lend their support to politicians and political parties that were undoubtedly proslavery without feeling any contradiction. After all, Ratcliffe points out, antislavery was not incompatible with racism, respect for property rights in slaves, or a refusal to interfere with slavery where it already existed.

Of course, not all antislavery thinkers fit this mould, and Richard Newman’s close reading of the correspondence between Thomas Jefferson and free black Benjamin Banneker reminds us of the significant role played by blacks in both the antislavery and abolitionist movements. Due to its explicit focus on politics, it is somewhat understandable that this collection’s attention to the role of free blacks and slaves (and women, for that matter) in these narratives is minimal, but future work on antislavery in the early republic must include a broader range of historical actors like Banneker.

Banneker challenged Jefferson’s claim that blacks were too morally degraded to be citizens, and argued instead that it was white slaveholders who were in need of ‘moral uplift’. In particular, Banneker drew upon the Bible to make his point, citing Exodus when he declared that ‘He that stealeth a man and selleth him... shall surely be put to death’ (p. 84). However, as Molly Oshatz makes clear in Slavery and Sin: The Fight Against Slavery and the Rise of Liberal Protestantism, the Bible was actually
more helpful to slaveholders wishing to justify their institution than to antislavery or abolitionist Christians wishing to condemn it. While religion seems to be almost entirely absent from the political issues so well analysed in Contesting Slavery, Oshatz demonstrates – in her fascinating book – that theological disputes in the nineteenth century were just as influenced by slavery as politics.

Slavery and Sin charts the rise of liberal Protestantism from the Revolution to Reconstruction, and argues that the antislavery debates caused a theological crisis that was only resolved by emancipation. Because the Bible explicitly sanctioned slavery in the abstract, it became impossible for antislavery moderates to reconcile their faith with their morality without substantively changing the nature of their religious understanding. Over the course of six chapters that unfold roughly chronologically (although most of the book considers the antebellum period), Oshatz demonstrates that the slavery debates gave rise to a liberal Protestant theology which understood God’s revelation to be unfolding throughout history, believed moral actions to be historically and socially contingent, and claimed that the ultimate source of truth was shared experience rather than a literal reading of the Bible.

As well as using the Constitution to convince the federal government to defend slavery (for example, by implementing the gag rule, allowing slavery’s expansion into the West and returning fugitive slaves, as the essays in Contesting Slavery attest), slaveholders were also able to use the Bible to challenge those who argued that slavery was sinful. In the eighteenth century, Oshatz explains, religious opposition to slavery was based not on its sinfulness in the abstract, but on the way it was practised in North America. While it was clear that the Bible sanctioned slavery in general, it was harder to prove that it condoned the Atlantic slave trade or slavery based upon racial discrimination. However, by the antebellum period, both biblical proslavery and radical abolitionism changed the terms of the debate to ‘the sinfulness of slavery in itself’ (p. 42). Moderates, who are the subject of Oshatz’s study, found themselves caught between these two extremes, and as such have been considered by historians as weak and cowardly, unable to take the ‘correct’ position of the abolitionists: that slavery was innately sinful and all slaveholders sinners. Oshatz attempts, fairly successfully, to redeem these men, who, like many of the antislavery figures in Hammond and Mason’s collection, did not want to risk disunion, although for Oshatz’s men it was the unity of the Protestant Church, rather than the nation, that was at stake. They hoped to use ‘moral suasion’ to this end, and as Oshatz points out, ‘the fact that they failed miserably in this effort should not lead us to write off their honest hopes as mere cowardice’ (p. 57) because ‘no religious argument, no matter how righteous or persuasive, could have brought a timely and peaceful end to slavery’ (p. 59). The pervasive white racism detailed in Contesting Slavery did not help either, for moderates realised that although the Bible did not sanction it, race-based slavery made the institution more, not less, acceptable to northern whites. Instead, they argued that morality was historically contingent, and by the time of the Civil War, could claim that God had indeed revealed his will.

Unfortunately, Oshatz argues, the antislavery moderates did not receive credit for these ideas from the next generation; rather, emancipation made what had been radical startlingly obvious: slavery was a sin. Until recently, it seems, historians have come to similarly inaccurate conclusions about the role of antislavery thought in the years before 1840. While antislavery men were not the radical abolitionists many of us wish they had been, this does not mean that they were weak, that they condoned slavery or that there was a racist consensus that prevented conflict. Both Contesting Slavery and Slavery and Sin force us to rethink the ways in which conflicts over slavery played out in the first half of the nineteenth century: just because these men were pragmatic, and often had other priorities, does not mean that they did not debate slavery frequently and with vigour. As Peter Onuf puts it in his Foreword to Contesting Slavery, ‘Americans contested slavery even when they thought they were arguing about other issues—precisely because slavery was so vitally important to regional and national prosperity’ (p. xvi). There is much more work to be done on the contests and conflicts over slavery, particularly at the local level and including the antislavery activity of women and African Americans in the early nineteenth century, but these two excellent books are important contributions to the growing field of antislavery studies.

Walter Johnson’s *River of Dark Dreams* is a major new interpretation of the antebellum Mississippi Valley. Wide-ranging and sophisticated, it excavates the lived experience of planters, slaves, and non-slaveholding whites in the Deep South with rare skill. *River of Dark Dreams* also charts an alternative trajectory for the history of the Deep South in the 1850s. Instead of focusing on the sectional disputes that have usually defined ‘the coming of the Civil War’, Johnson illuminates the international designs of a group of Southern commercialists and filibusters. Their ‘dark dreams’ of a proslavery empire in the Caribbean typified the glorious future that Southerners imagined for themselves and their way of life – not the bloody, truncated future that they achieved.

The first half of *River of Dark Dreams* offers a sweeping interpretation of Mississippi Valley society. As in his award-winning *Soul by Soul: Life Inside the Antebellum Slave Market* (1999), Johnson’s method is essentially metonymic: focused readings of events, sites and institutions reveal the lineaments of an entire society. In *River of Dark Dreams*, one especially rich point of access to the world of the Mississippi Valley is the steamboat. By linking inland cotton plantations to coastal ports and global markets, riverine steamboats helped make the economic fortunes of the Deep South. But these vessels were also key features of the social and cultural imagination. As symbols of progress, they inspired a rapturous aesthetics of technological modernity – a ‘steamboat sublime’ – in travel literature about the Valley (73). Steamboats were also sites of social and racial disorder, places where neat distinctions between rich and poor, black and white were sometimes blurred. Most suggestively, Johnson reads the frequent steamboat ‘accidents’ of the antebellum period not as anomalies but as by-products of the Deep South’s reckless pursuit of profit. Such violence went hand in hand with the planters’ ‘full-throttle capitalism’ (135).

The cotton plantation offers another entrée into the world of the Mississippi Valley. In recent years, Johnson has helped lead a rethinking of the way scholars discuss slavery, charging that concepts such as ‘power’ and ‘agency’ have come ‘unmoored’ from actual historical experience (9). He attempts to place the history of slavery on firmer ground in *River of Dark Dreams* by peeling away scholarly abstractions and grasping bondage in something like its essence: as ‘a history of bare-life processes and material exchanges’ (9). Getting down to fundamentals means, first of all, attending to the material contexts that shaped slaves’ actions. Thus, Johnson starts with the cotton plantation itself, as both an ecological unit – a ‘way of organizing nature’ – and a planned space – a ‘way of organizing labor’ (154). These preliminaries lead him to a series of subtle and fascinating, if somewhat disconnected, insights: about the mingled pain and pride of enslaved people’s labor; the ritual functions of their food; the politics of visibility and aurality on the cotton plantation; the dynamics of slaves’ interactions with animals and so on. Running through these various observations is the idea, which Johnson has developed elsewhere, that enslaved peoples’ ‘agency’ was not a pure state but an ambiguous contingency, ‘structured in dominance’ if never fully reducible to it (214).

In the second half of *River of Dark Dreams*, Johnson dramatically widens the historical frame by situating Mississippi Valley cotton production in the global economy. From the plantation, to the levees of New Orleans, to the brokerages of Liverpool and Le Havre, Johnson tracks the flow of cotton through every stage of its life as a commodity. Credit flowed in the opposite direction, from British banks back into the cash-poor Mississippi Valley. By the 1830s, this circulation had transformed the region into an economic dynamo. Despite their prosperity, however, Valley planters were haunted by the twin specters of financial and racial catastrophe. When the prices of land and