Slavery, Sovereignty, and Empires: North American Borderlands and the American Civil War, 1660–1860

John Craig Hammond

The Journal of the Civil War Era, Volume 4, Number 2, June 2014, pp. 264-298 (Article)

Published by The University of North Carolina Press
DOI: 10.1353/cwe.2014.0028

For additional information about this article
http://muse.jhu.edu/journals/cwe/summary/v004/4.2.hammond.html
REVIEW ESSAY

Slavery, Sovereignty, and Empires
North American Borderlands and the American Civil War, 1660–1860

JOHN CRAIG HAMMOND

In the century framed by the Seven Years’ War and the American Civil War, the United States forged a vast but contested empire for slavery on the North American continent. In 1760, plantation slavery on the North American continent was confined to Britain’s five southernmost colonies. And while Britain, Spain, and France vied for dominion on the North American continent, Native Americans continued to control the continental interior west of the Appalachians. A century later, the United States exercised sovereignty over the core of the North American continent; the enslaved population of what was now the United States had increased from less than four hundred thousand in 1760 to nearly 4 million in 1860; plantation slavery was thriving from Virginia across the vast southern interior that stretched from Georgia to Texas; and the United States had supplanted Europe’s Caribbean colonies as the main source of slave-produced commodities in the Atlantic World. In many ways, the 1860 election pivoted on the question of whether the federal government would use its powers to keep the United States on the “high-road to a slave empire,” as Abraham Lincoln quipped to William Seward. The transformation of the North American continent in the century between the Seven Years’ War and the American Civil War was nothing short of remarkable; slavery and empire stood at the heart of that transformation.1

How did an independent United States emerge as the dominant power on the North American continent? How did the United States become the Atlantic World’s preeminent empire for slavery? While historians have, of course, addressed these questions, for a long time their answers remained separated by historiographies that removed the United States from the broader history of the Americas and the Atlantic World and then subsumed the history of slavery’s growth and expansion on the North
American continent into the inevitable expansion of the United States. Historians then divided the history of the United States into largely distinct colonial, early national, and antebellum and Civil War periods. In turn, they severed the expansion of slavery and empire in colonial North America from that of slavery and the United States after 1776. Likewise, by dividing this history into distinct early national and antebellum phases, historians overlooked the important continuities that connected the expansion of slavery and empire from the 1760s into the 1850s. The fragmentation of American history into narrow, specialized fields such as political and social history similarly narrowed the analyses of historians interested in slavery and expansion. By severing the political history of slavery and expansion from frontier and African American history, historians analyzed the expansion of slavery in the United States as a domestic political matter, determined by internal political factors such as the sectional makeup of major political parties.2

Since the turn of the twenty-first century, however, the historiographies of slavery, politics, and empire have changed profoundly and increasingly overlap in both subject matter and chronological scope. Historians now analyze American slavery as a dynamic, Atlantic, imperial, and continental institution that both underwent profound changes and exhibited important continuities from the colonial period through the Civil War. Slaves and free people of color are treated as political actors who shaped the local, national, and imperial politics of race and slavery. African American history is framed as not just the search for freedom and integration into the mainstream of white American life but also a series of broad, hemispheric struggles for autonomy, self-defense, and self-determination.3 Whereas political historians once divided the politics of slavery in the United States into distinct early national, antebellum, and Civil War eras, they have increasingly joined these periods by focusing on struggles between slaveholders and others over the deployment of state power to protect and promote—or to attack and abolish—slavery. In addition, historians have shown how developments in the Atlantic World continuously shaped the politics and geopolitics of slavery in British North America and then the United States.4 Finally, the emergence of the United States as a continental power was once the domain of political and diplomatic historians who tended to treat the expansion of the United States across the North American continent as inevitable. But a generation of scholarship on Native American history, frontiers, and empire has led historians to analyze the expansion of the French, Spanish, and British empires and the United States as contingent and contested at every turn. Collectively, these works suggest that the ability of an empire to deploy state power in the many borderlands of North
America determined how and to what extent a single state or empire’s sovereignty prevailed over citizens, subjects, and conquered peoples.5

These historiographies—ranging wide over once distinct chronological periods, regions, and topics—are increasingly in conversation with each other, providing a propitious moment for synthesis that allows historians to assess the broader implications of these works. When analyzed collectively, they encourage historians to address fundamental questions centering on the expansion of slavery and empire on the North American continent. Drawing on these works, this article focuses on the long, contested histories of slavery and sovereignty in the many borderlands of North America from the 1660s through the American Civil War. Particularly, it examines the contested uses of state power to establish, consolidate, and protect both slavery and sovereignty in borderlands.6 It treats planters as a powerful class determined to use state power to maintain mastery over slaves as persons and sovereignty over slavery as an institution, even if they frequently squabbled among themselves over the best way to achieve those ends. It analyzes the United States as one of several states and empires vying for sovereignty and supremacy over the peoples and places of the North American continent and focuses on the significant continuities that linked the expansion of slavery and sovereignty in British North America and the United States. It also focuses on the ways slaves, free people of color, Native Americans, white settler groups, partisan rivals, and rival sectional and imperial powers challenged slaveholder and state efforts to expand, establish, and consolidate slave societies in borderlands. Finally, it treats the Civil War as something other than an irrepressible conflict between distinct sections or as the contingent outcome of a collapsed second-party system. Instead, it analyzes the sectional crisis of the 1850s, disunion, and then civil war as part of a broader conflict that pitted free labor imperialists against proslavery imperialists. In doing so, it frames the American Civil War as an imperial war that was the culmination of two centuries of local and imperial conflicts caused by challenges to both slavery and sovereignty in the shifting borderlands of the North American continent.

Imperial conflicts were endemic on the North American continent from the 1660s through the 1860s. Borderland disputes—involving white settler groups, African American slaves, Native American nations and confederacies, and rival imperial powers—frequently ignited these conflicts. These borderland and imperial conflicts invariably resulted in the drawing and redrawing of borders, and were frequently caused by and resulted in the expansion and consolidation of slavery. From the 1660s through the 1860s, a shifting amalgamation of Native American confederacies, imperial powers, and nations staked conflicting claims of sovereignty to the frontiers,
borderlands, and contested spaces of the North American continent. The borders of those states and empires were in constant flux, as was the presence, significance, and stability of slavery, along with the security of slaveholders’ property rights. In borderlands and other contested spaces, the expansion and stabilization of slavery often advanced with efforts to turn titular claims of sovereignty into effective control and governance. Whenever slavery expanded into the borderlands of North America, conflicts ensued and the boundaries of slavery and sovereignty shifted. While significant changes marked the history of the North American continent from the 1660s through the American Civil War, so did important continuities involving imperial conflicts centering on state support for the consolidation of slavery and sovereignty in the many contested borderlands of North America.  

As an imperial conflict that grew out of borderland clashes involving slavery and sovereignty, the American Civil War had deep roots that stretched back to the beginnings of the English empire and African slavery on the North American continent. From the 1660s through the American Civil War, no North American power expanded as extensively as the British Empire and then the United States. Both readily used state power to protect slavery, bolster slaveholders’ claims of mastery, strengthen claims of sovereignty in borderlands, and conquer new territory to protect slavery in already established colonies or states. The United States became the preeminent North American and Atlantic World empire for slavery in the nineteenth century because it derived from the dominant empire for slavery of the eighteenth century.

In the early 1600s, rivalries between Spain and the emerging nation states of western Europe fostered English, French, and Dutch efforts to establish settlements in North America. By the 1650s, European settlement north of Mexico consisted of outposts in Puritan New England, French Canada, the Dutch Hudson and Delaware River Valleys, the English Chesapeake, and Spanish Florida. While European imperial states made immense territorial claims and assertions of sovereignty on the North American continent in the early seventeenth-century, in reality European states exercised only nominal power over their colonies and even less over the Native American tribes and nations that surrounded these settlements. The enslavement of Africans existed in each of these European settlements. Yet there was little distinctive about that slavery, which was simply the most permanent form of unfree labor in a world where bound labor of some sort seemed ubiquitous to Europeans, Africans, and Native Americans. Indeed, in the first century of European settlement on the North American mainland,
the bound labor of indentured Europeans and Native American captives remained more common than the permanent enslavement of Africans. In the two regions where the enslavement of Africans was most prevalent—the English Chesapeake and the Dutch Hudson Valley—there were perhaps nine hundred African slaves in the Chesapeake and five hundred in New Netherlands at mid-century. Finally, through the mid-seventeenth century, slavery and bound labor were intended as much to discipline the lower orders as they were organized systems of labor used to maximize production and profit or social systems that aggrandized would-be planter-patriarchs.  

The size, scope, and purpose of both slavery and empire on the North American continent changed dramatically in the latter half of the seventeenth century. Around mid-century, Oliver Cromwell’s Protectorate and then the restored Stuart monarchs shunned the freelance privateers, adventurers, and religious malcontents that had dominated early English attempts at colonization. In their place, Cromwell and the Stuarts sought to establish permanent colonial settlements in the Caribbean and North America to serve a host of imperial, domestic, and ideological needs. Older settlements and the new colonies they founded would be more directly under the control of the English state and expected to generate revenue. They would also be more heavily dependent on the labor of enslaved Africans. The scope, purpose, and location of these settlements also led to a host of imperial rivalries and borderland conflicts involving Native American nations, Spanish and French imperialists, and enslaved African Americans capable of flight and rebellion. In English and then British North America, imperial rivalries and borderland threats would lead to the tremendous expansion of empire and slavery.  

From the 1650s through the Seven Years’ War, English and then British imperial policy supported both the territorial expansion of its empire in North America and the growth of slavery. Commercial wars against the Dutch in the 1650s and 1660s allowed English merchants to muscle their way into the lucrative trade in slaves and slave-produced cash crops, giving imperial officials a vested interest in overseeing slavery’s growth in North America. Commerce related to slavery—whether the slave trade itself, the production and transportation of cash crops, or the provisioning of Caribbean slave colonies by the empire’s mainland colonies—soon accounted for the bulk of economic activity in Britain’s Atlantic empire. Likewise, customs duties on slave-produced crops and the slave trade provided a growing source of revenue for the Crown. Would-be planters and merchants constantly fought for favored access to the power and resources of the British Atlantic empire, but imperial policy and expanding Atlantic
commercial networks generally met expectations that the British imperial state would support planter and merchant efforts to expand and secure colonies dependent on the use of slave labor. Planters and would-be planters in British North America would enjoy unparalleled state support for their efforts to establish slave-based economies, access to the colonial Atlantic World’s preeminent empire for slavery, and a measure of autonomy that allowed them to develop and govern their slave societies as they saw fit.10

Britain’s mainland slave colonies, then, developed within an empire that provided ample financial, military, social, legal, and economic support for merchants, planters, and officials who sought to establish or consolidate colonies dependent on the labor of enslaved Africans. Imperial policies cultivated the growth of plantation economies in North American borderlands by offering generous land grants to would-be planters with capital and labor. State-financed negotiations, treaties, gifts, and trade provided temporary peace with Native Americans. With the royal family and other leading imperial officials heavily invested in the transatlantic slave trade, imperial policy facilitated the transformation of mixed, coerced labor for whites, blacks, and Indians into the permanent enslavement of Africans and their descendants. Dependent on custom duties, the Crown promoted the production of slave-produced cash crops through bounties while the empire provided ready markets—whether in the Caribbean or in London—for staples, stores, and cash crops. Imperial officials also supported efforts to establish new borderland colonies such as the Carolinas and then Georgia to protect established cash-crop-producing colonies. When war threatened to disrupt transatlantic trade or destroy fragile borderland slave societies, imperial officials used naval resources to protect transatlantic commerce and military resources to defend colonial slave societies that were most vulnerable to invasion and slave rebellion. In the slave colonies of British North America, offices, titles, and positions of authority went exclusively to the planter class, legitimizing their position at the pinnacle of colonial society while facilitating access to imperial officials and influential London merchants who directed the use of state power and commerce in the empire. Finally, the empire provided a racial and legal system that deemed slaves chattel property while permitting colonial planters to devise racialized and gendered slave codes most suitable to their local circumstances.11

The Chesapeake demonstrates how would-be planters, on the periphery of the Caribbean-centered English Empire, relied heavily on state power and access to England’s burgeoning Atlantic empire to establish the first slave society on the North American mainland. Beginning in the 1660s, a substantial number of Barbadian merchant-planters and English imperial
officials with ties to the Caribbean settled in the Chesapeake, where many became important colonial and imperial officeholders. Carrying enslaved Africans with them to Virginia and aggressively acquiring more once they arrived, they granted themselves immense head-right land claims. As officials, representatives, and slaveholders with deep knowledge of the plantation revolution that had reshaped Barbados in the 1650s, they helped write Virginia’s first set of slave laws in the 1660s and 1670s. They did so not in anticipation of a future plantation society but to protect their already substantial investments in slave labor. Drawing on their connections to Caribbean merchants and planters, they turned to the provisioning trade and relied heavily on the labor of enslaved Africans to produce staples and stores for Caribbean islands given over to sugar monoculture. They used their Caribbean connections and the wealth generated by the provisioning trade to purchase small lots of African slaves upon their arrival in the Caribbean, eventually creating an important secondary slave trade that carried as many as six thousand slaves from the Caribbean to the Chesapeake from 1670 through 1700. Another group of officeholders—this one moving in the circles closest to Virginia governor and leading slaveholder Sir William Berkeley and possessing ties to influential London merchants—turned to tobacco. These would-be planters drew on their ties to London to place orders for slaves directly with Royal African Company merchants who otherwise would have foregone the Chesapeake for more lucrative Caribbean markets. The limited supply of slaves sent to Virginia, along with the limited number of men who possessed the wealth and connections needed to procure them, meant that the overall number of slaves in the Chesapeake remained small in the seventeenth century. But by the 1690s, a group of well-connected officeholders had drawn on the resources of the English empire to establish a small but thriving plantation society on the periphery of the English Atlantic.12

Though slavery and commerce grew steadily in the 1680s, the imperial wars that stretched from 1689 through 1713 left Virginia’s still fragile plantation society susceptible to invasion and slave rebellion while exposing its tobacco and provisioning trades to privateering and piracy. The colony’s planter elites called on their extensive connections in London, which included influential merchants and imperial officials on the colony’s payroll. Virginia’s merchants and agents convinced the Lords of Trade and the Admiralty to assign a quota of merchant ships to the Chesapeake trade, to provide naval protection for merchant ships that carried tobacco across the Atlantic, and to protect the Chesapeake from attack by providing naval patrols along the Chesapeake Bay’s entrance to the Atlantic. Because the planters who produced sweet-scented tobacco were also the leading
imperial and colonial officials in the region, they were able to determine whose tobacco would make its way onto the strictly regulated annual fleets that sailed from the Chesapeake. Connected planters swiftly used this power to shut out small producers, more tightly tying tobacco production to the use of permanently enslaved Africans. Likewise, planters already invested in the provisioning trade to the Caribbean used their offices to supply the English fleets present in the Chesapeake until 1713. While increasingly monopolizing the production and sale of tobacco, provisions, and naval stores, planters also sought to increase the supply of slaves carried to the Chesapeake. In the 1690s, Virginia's planter class worked closely with English merchants to lobby Parliament to end the Royal African Company's monopoly on the slave trade. Parliament opened the trade in 1698, and over the next decade the number of independent traders carrying slaves directly from Africa to the Chesapeake increased substantially. By 1720, the twenty-six thousand slaves in Virginia comprised roughly 30 percent of the colony's population.13

As the enslaved African population of Virginia grew, so did slave flight into the borderlands, along with planter fears of slave conspiracy and insurrection, Spanish invasion from the sea, and French and Native American incursions from the west. Officials addressed these fears by mobilizing the white population in defense of slavery and racial subordination. They provided increased funding for the militia, clarified Virginia's racial hierarchy, and brutally punished slaves suspected of plotting rebellion. Planters addressed the problem of flight by negotiating treaties that offered bounties to Cherokee and Iroquois hunters who returned slaves they captured in the Blue Ridge Mountains. The colony also hired smaller bands of Indians to serve as slave catchers in the Great Dismal Swamp. As part of a broader imperial project to bolster British authority in the backcountry, Virginia planters issued land grants to encourage Scottish, Irish, and German Protestants to settle along the Blue Ridge Mountains. Virginia planters expected these settlements to prevent slave flight into the backcountry and protect the expanding plantation regime from attacks by Native Americans allied with the French or Spanish. The growth and consolidation of slavery in Virginia from the 1660s through the 1730s was inseparable from the ability of planters to exercise a large degree of autonomy in governing their colonies and policing slavery. It was also facilitated by their ability to draw on the powers of the state and the resources of Britain's transatlantic empire.16

While Virginia demonstrates how masters drew on the powers of the state and the resources of the empire to establish plantation regimes on the periphery, South Carolina and Georgia illustrate how borderland and
imperial threats to core territories engendered the rapid expansion of slavery and sovereignty into North America’s borderlands. The Carolinas were created in the 1660s as part of the restored Stuarts’ efforts to create a continuous English empire along North America’s Atlantic coast, a grand imperial design that included English conquest of New Netherlands and the establishment of colonies in New York, New Jersey, and Pennsylvania. South Carolina was a slave colony from the start. Its Fundamental Constitutions promised each settler “absolute Power and Authority over his Negro Slaves,” along with 150-acre headrights for every slave carried to the colony. Many early settlers hailed from the Caribbean or possessed ties in the broader English Atlantic. Carolinians immediately entered into the provisioning trade with the Caribbean, which also supplied would-be planters with an additional source of slaves. From the 1670s through the 1710s, African American slavery and the provisioning trade coexisted with the Indian fur and slave trades, with the Indian slave trade providing an additional commodity for Caribbean markets. In the 1710s, however, the Tuscarora and Yamasee Wars saw raids come within a few miles of Charles Town, demonstrating that Native Americans threatened South Carolina’s borderland plantation economy. Planters, fearing that continuing Indian wars could destroy the development of plantations, promptly seized control of the colonial assembly and imposed strict regulations on the Indian trades. The assembly also shifted the colony’s finances to benefit plantation slavery. Whereas the assembly had previously financed the Indian trade, the planter-dominated assembly instead financed the expansion of plantation slavery by issuing and loaning paper money secured with “negroes” and land. With paper money and credit, security from Indian wars, and the development of rice as a viable cash crop, the plantation economy boomed; by 1739 there were upward of thirty thousand enslaved Africans in the colony. By then, South Carolina planters—living among recently enslaved Africans and positioned between Native Americans who were seeking alliances with the French in Louisiana and the Spanish in Florida—feared that their volatile borderland slave society had become especially susceptible to war and invasion, slave flight and rebellion, and collapse.15

South Carolina planters, imperial officials, and Parliament thus readily supported MP James Oglethorpe’s design to protect South Carolina with a garrison colony in Georgia. There, slavery would be prohibited as a protective measure against slave flight, revolt, and invasion, and as a moral matter to prevent idleness among whites. In 1733, it became official Spanish policy to offer refuge to any Carolinian slave who fled to Spanish Florida. Parliament responded by funding 90 percent of the costs of populating and governing Georgia in its first two decades and by stationing a
seven hundred–soldier regiment in the colony. The outbreak of war with Spain in 1739 posed immediate threats to South Carolina, and imperial officials committed additional troops and naval support for Oglethorpe’s invasion of Spanish Florida. Oglethorpe’s invasion failed to expel the Spanish from St. Augustine, but it forced Spain to accept British claims of sovereignty in South Carolina and Georgia. With Georgia seemingly secured from Spanish threats by the early 1740s, would-be Georgian planters—many of them planter-merchants from South Carolina and the Caribbean—fought for Crown control of the colony and the elimination of the Georgia Trustees’ limitations on slavery and land ownership. They obtained both Crown control and open access to land and slaves by 1752. They then worked with the royal governor to negotiate land cessions from Native Americans, to institute a headright system to amass land, to revise the slave code so that planters could exercise complete mastery over slaves, and to import shipments of slaves, mainly through the secondary trade with the Caribbean. A group of sixty or so planters immediately emerged as Georgia’s planter-merchant elite. By the 1760s, they had engrossed immense tracts of land and increasingly engaged in the transatlantic slave trade, routinely receiving shipments of upwards of 250 slaves directly from Africa. The Seven Years’ War slowed migration to Georgia, but at war’s end British officials negotiated another land cession from the Creeks, which set off a new settlement boom. With an abundance of land and access to the well-established transatlantic trade in slaves and commodities, slavery and settlement boomed: between 1750 and 1775, the enslaved black population increased from six hundred to fifteen thousand, while the white settler population increased from three thousand to over thirty thousand.16

The need to protect South Carolina and the establishment of a plantation regime in colonial Georgia illustrates the larger relationship between state power and the expansion of both colonial slavery and imperial sovereignty in the British Empire. From the 1660s through the Seven Years’ War, the growth of plantation regimes in borderlands exacerbated colonial fears of slave rebellion and resulted in frequent wars with Native Americans, who resented encroachment on their lands and sovereignty. Larger imperial rivalries on the North American continent and in the Atlantic World informed understandings of these localized borderland conflicts. In turn, borderland tensions often erupted into larger imperial conflicts where the British state intervened to protect vulnerable plantation colonies from the threats that seemed to lurk in the borderlands. Intervention by the British imperial state directly led to the expansion and consolidation of colonial sovereignty and slavery in the Chesapeake, the Carolinas, and Georgia. In 1660, there were perhaps two thousand African slaves in New England,
New Amsterdam, and the Chesapeake. In 1700, the population of enslaved Africans in British North America was approaching thirty thousand. By 1750, slavery was firmly entrenched in British colonies stretching from the Chesapeake to the Georgia frontier. In the following two decades, the enslaved population of British North America nearly doubled from 245,000 to approximately 460,000, while effective British sovereignty extended to the Appalachians.\textsuperscript{17}

Imperial support and access to a commercial empire centered on slavery meant that slavery, sovereignty, and empire would develop in dramatically different ways in the French, Spanish, and British dominions of North America. Initial state support for Louisiana resulted in the rapid expansion of slavery and the consolidation of planter and state authority. From 1719 through 1731, the French Company of the Indies transported between six thousand and seven thousand African slaves to Louisiana, a place where no independent slave trader would go, given the distance, cost, and risk. The Company also built the infrastructure to support commerce and a plantation economy, while the French imperial state transported white servants and soldiers and provided land grants to planters, subsidies for tobacco, and the Code Noir's legal structure for a plantation regime. But in 1729, Natchez Indians, angered by French incursions on their territory and autonomy, attacked the plantation settlement at Natchez. The Natchez Indians killed the majority of French officials and settlers and killed or kidnapped Natchez's African slaves. The plantation settlements north of New Orleans collapsed and the already fragile plantation regime throughout Louisiana weakened further. When the bankruptcy of the company in 1731 led to Crown control, French imperial officials and merchants nearly abandoned their colony in the Lower Mississippi Valley. After 1731, Louisiana officials and planters exercised almost complete autonomy in governing their colony. Planters also had access to slaves through purchase from French and British ports in the Caribbean and access to Caribbean markets for the sale of provisions to islands dependent on sugar monoculture. But French imperial officials proved unwilling to invest anything more than the barest of resources in Louisiana. With hostile Native American nations and Spanish and British colonies surrounding Louisiana, African slaves successfully resisted forced submission to the harsh discipline of a plantation regime. While France continued to claim dominion over the entire Mississippi Valley, it never again controlled anything more than New Orleans and its immediate hinterland. Likewise, plantation slavery languished; in 1750 there were fewer than five thousand slaves in French Louisiana; in 1770, there were fewer than six thousand. A plantation regime and a modicum of effective imperial sovereignty would not emerge.
in the Mississippi Valley until the 1780s, when Spanish officials placed the resources of the state at the disposal of Louisiana’s would-be planters.

Meanwhile in Spanish Florida, white settlers lacked reliable access to the slave trade and imperial officials evinced little interest in developing a plantation economy. Spanish imperial policy instead sought to maintain St. Augustine as a strategic military post, force Native Americans into mission towns, and undermine the British Empire in North America by attacking slavery in South Carolina. Spain claimed titular sovereignty over a vast swath of the southeast, but with Spanish officials unwilling to finance anything more than the nominal defense of St. Augustine, a half-century of Native American and Carolinian raids into the southeast borderlands confined effective Spanish sovereignty to St. Augustine and its immediate hinterlands. Not until Britain took possession of East and West Florida in the 1760s would slavery and a degree of effective imperial sovereignty begin to grow there.

The inability or unwillingness of French and Spanish officials to place the powers of the state at the disposal of would-be planters meant that slavery and effective imperial sovereignty languished in Spanish and French North America. In 1770, both Florida and the Mississippi Valley remained largely under the control of Native Americans. Further illustrating the role of the British Empire in fostering the growth of slavery in colonial North America, there were almost seven times as many slaves in Britain’s northern colonies in 1770 (forty-seven thousand) than there were in Florida and Louisiana (seven thousand).

At the end of the Seven Years’ War the colonies of British North America seemed secure, stable, and primed to expand into the interior of the North American continent and the newly won colonies of East and West Florida. Many subjects—especially in the southern colonies—fully expected that the British Empire would continue to grant them a large degree of autonomy while devoting the resources of the British imperial and commercial state to the expansion of both slavery and effective sovereignty into the borderlands.

Those colonial subjects would be profoundly disappointed. Beginning in 1763, Parliament, the Crown, and imperial officials undertook a host of measures to centralize their immense and decentralized North American empire. Imperial efforts to govern Britain’s sprawling North American empire more effectively had little to do with slavery directly. Instead, British officials sought to govern a motley, sprawling collection of colonies and narrow-minded provincials who had proved themselves incapable of governing themselves and respecting the broader interests of the Empire.
Nonetheless, the host of measures adopted by imperial officials seemed to attack the interests of planters while undermining their mastery over slaves as persons, their sovereignty over slavery as a provincial institution, and their right to govern their colonies as they saw fit.

The Proclamation of 1763 cut off planters from new western lands while Indian policy now seemed to favor Native Americans over planter-speculators. The *Somerset Decision* (1772) appeared to condemn slavery’s existence in the empire and suggested that Parliament and British courts—rather than planters and colonial governments—could determine a slave’s legal status. Changing economic and monetary regulations favored British merchants against colonial planters who had devised ingenious measures to exempt land and slaves from merchants seeking to collect on colonial debts. By vetoing colonial efforts to regulate the slave trade, the Crown claimed control of an important aspect of the institution from local planters. Meanwhile, the Intolerable Acts demonstrated that Parliament assumed its right to dispense with colonial elites altogether, an utterly intolerable situation to southern planters who believed that local control of their colonies was both a right and a necessity. Slave unrest grew throughout the colonies with the ongoing conflict between their colonial and imperial masters. In 1774 and 1775, planter doubts about the viability of remaining in the British Empire spread rapidly in the wake of widespread rumors that British officials would free and arm slaves to put down the colonial rebellion. Lord Dunmore’s 1775 proclamation confirmed these rumors, accelerating the movement for independence in the southern colonies. Overall, the host of measures intended to reform the empire after 1763 instead seemed to undermine planters’ autonomy and mastery in personal, provincial, and imperial realms.20

By 1775, then, independence from the British Empire had become a necessity for many southern elites for two reasons that involved slavery. First, British imperial officials now threatened to use the powers of the imperial state to confine and disrupt slavery in the colonies rather than using it to expand and protect the institution, as they had done in the past. At the same time, colonial planter elites feared their continued presence in the British Empire would soon result in the loss of their autonomy and mastery: their power to govern slaves, lesser free whites, and their colonies as they saw fit. Taken collectively, British actions seemed to herald a reversal of the previous century’s imperial policy on slavery, expansion, and colonial self-government by a planter elite. When moving for independence, aggrieved southern planters looked—not just to the future—but to a somewhat imagined past where they had enjoyed a modicum of equality within the British Empire, a measure of influence over imperial decision
making, and a large degree of autonomy to govern their slaves and colonies. A bewildering variety of motives drove the movement for independence in each colony, but unifying them was a desire to regain the colonial autonomy and right to self-government within the broader British Empire that Patriots had enjoyed in the past. For southern planters, that meant the right to govern their slave societies as they saw fit. It also meant that any larger union they were a part of would recognize their equality and autonomy while providing them with the support necessary to grow, protect, and govern their slave societies.

Historians have rightfully focused on the profound changes independence and revolution unleashed in the United States, on the North American continent, and in the Atlantic World. But in the long history of American slavery, continuity in the underlying forces that drove the expansion of empire and slavery over the previous century prevailed over the social, political, and economic changes that followed American independence and revolution. The British Empire in North America from the 1650s through 1770 was characterized by the rapid expansion and consolidation of colonial slavery, local autonomy, and imperial sovereignty. Provincial planter elites—heavily dependent on access to the British Empire and the use of state power to protect slavery—drove expansion and consolidation largely in response to the demands of Atlantic markets and borderland threats emanating from Native American nations and confederacies, potentially rebellious slaves, and rival imperial powers. Similarly, the history of the United States from independence through the American Civil War would be marked by the rapid expansion of American sovereignty and slavery, along with a large measure of local autonomy, into the borderlands of the North American continent. Much of this expansion and consolidation would be driven by a more powerful, more autonomous planter class that deployed state power to protect slavery from borderland threats. Politically dominated by slaveholders, an independent United States would continue the practices, processes, and political structures that had fed the vast expansion of empire and slavery over the previous century.

The rapid expansion of slavery, empire, and effective sovereignty under an independent United States would be accelerated by two important factors that shaped the broader histories of slavery and sovereignty in the Atlantic World and on the North American continent from the 1750s through the 1850s. First, the United States gained independence in the midst of a long series of borderland and imperial conflicts on the North American continent between the Seven Years’ War and the War of 1812. From a long continental and imperial perspective, the main effect of the American War for Independence was to intensify the borderland conflicts
and imperial rivalries that were endemic in eastern North America from the 1660s through the 1760s. American independence added another imperial power to the North American continent; it freed white settler groups from the imperial restraints that had kept them out of the trans-Appalachian West; and it encouraged new alliances between Native Americans and Spanish and British imperial officials who sought to check the expansion of the United States. Second, American independence added new ideological and racial dimensions to borderland conflicts and the struggle for continental supremacy. White colonists understood the imperial conflicts of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries as a struggle that pitted liberty, embodied by the Protestant British Empire, against the tyranny and despotism of Catholic France and Spain. American independence shifted popular understandings of these imperial struggles and borderland conflicts in important ways, increasingly framing them in terms that pitted white republicans of the New World against European monarchists and their black and Native American allies.22

From the 1760s through the 1810s, the trans-Appalachian West, the Gulf Coast, and the Mississippi Valley became heavily contested imperial, racial, and ideological borderlands. In those borderlands, Native Americans nations, white settler groups, and African American slaves contributed to intensified imperial rivalries where Britain, France, Spain, and the United States sought to maintain, regain, expand, and consolidate their dominions on the North American continent. These powers forged something like an imperial settlement in the aftermath of the Napoleonic Wars, but peace proved temporary. The breakup of the Spanish Empire in the 1810s created new republics such as Mexico and Texas, and strengthened Indian confederations, including the Comanche Confederation. From the 1810s through the 1840s, struggles between Comanche raiders, Anglo-Texan slaveholders, and Mexican federalists and centralists produced chronic instability in the Texas-Mexican-Comancheria borderlands. This drew the attention of American officials who feared that instability in the borderlands of the dissolving Spanish Empire invited British expansion—especially if it offered Britain an opportunity to undermine the United States. At the same time, the great slave rebellion on Saint Domingue in the 1790s, a series of slave revolts in the British Caribbean beginning in the 1810s, and the abolition of slavery in the British Caribbean in the 1830s created an entirely new set of maritime borderlands inhabited by a nation born in a slave rebellion and a mighty empire that had abolished slavery within its own dominions and pushed for emancipation elsewhere.23

From independence through the Mexican War, the multiplicity of threats from Native Americans and from European powers still harboring
slavery, sovereignty, and empires

279

imperial ambitions in North America amplified slaveholders’ fears that the American union was susceptible to sectional, regional, and racial divisions. Britain’s supposed eagerness to incite slave rebellions as a means to destroy the United States and its booming trade in slave-produced commodities only added to these fears. Fearful American planters saw jealous imperial rivals supposedly stirring up trouble with Native Americans, African American slaves, and white settler groups in the expanding borderlands of the United States. Those planters would repeatedly use the powers of the federal government to establish effective American control wherever American sovereignty remained weak and contested, and wherever they feared that rivals encouraged slave rebellion and flight along the margins of the empire forged by the United States. As had happened under the British Empire, challenges to slaveholder mastery and sovereignty in borderlands frequently involved slaves as both property and as potential agents of rebellion. Likewise, largely autonomous borderland slaveholders in places such as Georgia, the Natchez Country in Louisiana, and Texas called on the federal government to back their efforts to assert American sovereignty in the borderlands and prevent slave flight and rebellion. Like their British predecessors, American territorial officials and the federal government answered slaveholders’ demands.24

At least until the Mexican War, however, slaveholders did not possess some grand vision for creating an empire for slavery. Instead, the difficulty of securing property in slaves in the midst of larger geopolitical struggles, Native American resistance to expansion, and the ever-present threat of slave flight, theft, and rebellion created a seemingly never-ending series of borderland crises from the 1770s through the 1840s. American officials and policymakers responded to these crises in a haphazard, piecemeal fashion, much like their British predecessors. Slave flight and the theft of slaves illustrate how these processes played out. Slave escape invariably led to demands that state power be used to recover runaways and prevent the flight of others in the future. State sovereignty was predicated on the ability of the state to secure the property of its subjects or citizens. Indeed, American slaveholders could not imagine American sovereignty apart from security for their property in slaves. In turn, the federal government repeatedly faced demands that its powers be deployed to protect property in slaves from flight, theft, and rebellion in the areas where it remained most vulnerable: the borderlands between rival empires and in the emerging borderlands between slavery and freedom. While slave flight and theft along with fears of rebellion continued largely unabated in nearly every borderland where slavery existed from independence through the Civil War, a few examples illustrate the broader processes that led to the
expansion of both slavery and sovereignty under an independent United States.25

Throughout the southern backcountry, borderland skirmishes and raids that began with the Seven Years’ War continued largely unabated through the Imperial Crisis, the War for Independence, and into the 1790s. By then, Native American warriors who raided white settlements had adopted the practice of killing whites while systematically targeting blacks for capture. Native American warriors found ready buyers for black captives in Indian nations, in white settlers unconcerned about title, and in merchants who resold the captives in Natchez, Louisiana, and West Florida, and as far away as Cuba. At the same time, slaves fled for freedom in the confused borderlands of the Southeast. The owners of captured and fleeing slaves turned to the state for relief. As one Georgian planter complained mere months after Congress met for the first time in 1789, “The present situation of this Country from the depredations of the Indians on one quarter—& the insidious protection afforded the Spaniards to our run away Negros on the other—are of so alarming & serious a nature—-as to threaten this flourishing state with ruin and depopulation, unless timely protected by Congress!” In response to demands such as these, American territorial, Indian, and military officials devoted much of their official business to pleading with Native Americans to recognize the sovereignty of the United States. Demonstrating the relationship between slavery, sovereignty, and stability for slavery, nearly every treaty negotiated with Native Americans in this period included a clause requiring them to “deliver . . . negroes, and property taken” from American citizens. More broadly, from the 1790s through the 1850s, Congress repeatedly appropriated funds to pay bounties to Native Americans who returned slaves claimed by American citizens, reimburse American citizens who lost property in slaves to Indian raids and wars, pay for slave rendition expeditions into Florida, and station the U.S. military in borderlands where property in slaves remained most vulnerable. In the process, the borderlands of slavery and sovereignty became bordered lands where the sovereignty of the United States and property in slaves became more secure in law, if not always in practice.26

In other borderlands, slaves quickly recognized that nearby territories offered at least the possibility of freedom. When William Claiborne arrived to govern Louisiana in 1804, he immediately encountered angry French planters whose slaves had fled to New Spain in response to rumors that the Spanish would free any slave who made it out of American Louisiana. Claiborne needed to placate angry French planters wary of slavery’s future under the United States, and to prevent those slaveholders—now American citizens—from launching an independent slave-recovery excursion into
New Spain. Claiborne hastily began negotiating with Spanish authorities for the slaves’ return, and this eventually led to three-way negotiations among Spanish officials, the United States, and Caddo Indians. Over the next five years, Claiborne and other Americans negotiated with Spanish authorities and Caddo Indians to prevent the continuing flight of Louisiana slaves into disputed territory, where their presence threatened to set off an international incident between Spain and the United States. The negotiations resulted in Spanish and Caddo commitments to return runaway slaves, and Claiborne’s efforts consolidated American sovereignty and provided greater security for Louisiana slaveholders. Slaveholders in borderlands elsewhere feared slave flight, slave rebellion, and the theft of slaves by Native American warriors, rival imperial powers, and white settlers. They too fully expected the state to address the loss of slaves and prevent slave rebellion. In the process, borderlands became bordered lands; the once contested sovereignty of the United States ultimately prevailed; and property in slaves became more secure.27

Andrew Jackson’s actions in the War of 1812 and his subsequent invasions of Spanish West Florida further illustrate how slaveholders used state power to consolidate slavery and sovereignty. During the war, Jackson defeated and scattered the Red Sticks (who had long stood accused of stealing slaves) and then, to secure the Georgia backcountry, forced a massive land cession on the Creeks. He also defended Louisiana from an invasion in which it was fully expected that the British would incite a slave rebellion and slaves were already suspected of conspiring to rebel and flee to Choctaw territory. Jackson’s wartime pursuits reflected his longstanding concerns that agents of British monarchy and imperialism—assisted by savage Indians and rebellious slaves—would destroy slavery, American sovereignty, and white male mastery in the southern borderlands.

Jackson’s wartime victories drove the immediate threats to American sovereignty and slavery out of titular American territory and into Spanish West Florida, where Jackson set his postwar sights. Jackson justified his Florida invasions by his obligation to protect American sovereignty and slavery from the “savage foe” and the “lawless band of negro brigands” who found shelter in Florida and support from British and Spanish agents. He subsequently sought to recover runaway slaves; capture or destroy bands of fugitive blacks; chastise Native Americans who permitted blacks to find refuge in Florida; hang British merchants who supplied “Negroes and Indians”; and, finally, destroy the growing “Negro Fort” that promised to become a massive maroon settlement threatening the southern interior’s new and fragile plantation regime. Jackson’s wartime actions and subsequent invasions of West Florida placed the southeast borderlands that
had been heavily contested since the Seven Years’ War squarely under American rule. With European powers driven out of the southeast and with Native American nations weakened by the War of 1812 and its aftermath, slaveholders would use the powers of the federal government to acquire Florida for Indian Removal and in the long Seminole Wars in Florida. The same imperatives that drove Jackson first as a general and then as president would later lead to Texas Annexation and the Mexican War. More broadly still, the same underlying processes that drove the expansion of slavery and sovereignty in British North America—slaveholders using state power to protect borderland slave societies from imperial rivals, their Native American allies, and potentially rebellious slaves—intensified after the United States joined in the struggle for imperial control of North America.  

Accelerating slavery’s great expansion in the United States even further, American independence came in the midst of a period when demand for slave-produced commodities increased at an unprecedented rate, just as the Atlantic plantation complex’s eighteenth-century core began to unravel. Atlantic slavery began its greatest period of growth in the 1760s, and the transatlantic slave trade peaked with more than seven hundred thousand slaves sold into the Americas in each decade between the 1780s and the 1810s. After the Seven Years’ War, growing Atlantic demand for sugar, coffee, tobacco, and cotton produced a broad, hemispheric trend that saw more slaves, producing more cash crops, in places marginal to the eighteenth-century Atlantic plantation complex. The Seven Years’ War, the American War for Independence, the great slave rebellion on Saint Domingue, and the wars of the French Revolution repeatedly disrupted growing transatlantic commerce in slaves and commodities. These disruptions, however, failed to reverse the larger trend of expanding empires, forcing more slaves to produce more cash crops in newly settled regions. Slave rebellion and emancipation in the French and then British Caribbean challenged these trends, but they also encouraged planters elsewhere to accelerate the expansion of plantation operations in places such as Spanish Cuba and in the once-peripheral borderlands of the North American continent, including the southern interior, the Gulf South, and the Lower Mississippi Valley. Broad, long-term trends and processes—continuing borderland conflicts and imperial rivalries, autonomous planters using the powers of the imperial state to shore up and expand slavery, and growing Atlantic demand for slave produced commodities—all meant that slavery, sovereignty, and empire would continue to expand together under an independent United States, much as they had in Britain’s North American empire in the previous century.
But if American independence produced significant continuities, it also contributed to significant changes that would challenge empires for slavery throughout the Atlantic World. At the turn of the eighteenth century, diverse and diffused antislavery groups began cohering into a transatlantic, Anglo-American antislavery movement. When white colonists used a natural rights philosophy to oppose British measures during the Imperial Crisis, they inadvertently unleashed a powerful ideological basis for opposing slavery that joined once diffused religious and Enlightenment reservations against slavery. At the same time, the division of the British Empire in the 1780s, soon followed by the wars of the French Revolution, encouraged some Britons to challenge slavery’s place in a reconfigured British Empire. The French Revolution added another powerful ideological dimension to growing transatlantic antislavery movements, while the massive slave uprising on Saint Domingue demonstrated that slaves could overturn slave societies when the master class was divided. Finally, the great imperial crises that shook the French, Spanish, and British Empires from the 1770s through the 1820s created a series of free soil borderlands that gave slaves, free blacks, and their allies a place from which they could attack slavery in word and deed.30

Like the century that preceded it, the century stretching from the Seven Years’ War to the American Civil War would be an age of empires and slavery, but it would also become an age of antislavery movements, emancipation, and abolition. The great expansion of antislavery and abolitionist movements, including the abolition of slavery in the northern states and in much of the Caribbean, would add an important antislavery element to the borderland conflicts and imperial rivalries that had been intensifying on the North American continent since the Seven Years’ War. From the 1780s through the Civil War, slaves, states, and empires abolished slavery in every region surrounding the southern states, leaving southern slaveholders surrounded by potentially hostile powers, free black and enslaved agents of abolition, and free soil borderlands that invited slave flight. Though slavery and sovereignty would continue to advance together in the nineteenth century, their advance would be more contentious, more heavily contested, and more rife with conflict.

Southern slaveholders understood that antislavery ideologies and movements most menaced slavery in borderlands when slaves, abolitionists, and antislavery groups had access to state power and protection. From the 1780s onward, groups as diverse as Ohio farmers and free blacks and Quakers from Philadelphia would use state power to abolish or prohibit slavery’s expansion across a vast swath of the North American continent. Antislavery ideologies and the disruptions introduced by the War for
Independence allowed northern slaves and whites to begin the process of abolition in the northern states. Meanwhile, from the 1780s through the 1810s, white settler groups in the Northwest gained control of their territorial governments and then worked with antislavery allies in Congress to prohibit slavery in Ohio and Indiana and to ensure its extra-legality in Illinois. The abolition of slavery in the northern states and its legal ban from the old Northwest turned the region stretching from Pennsylvania to the confluence of the Mississippi and Ohio Rivers into a vast borderland between slavery and freedom.

Those free soil borderlands both invited slave flight and encouraged criticism of the South’s increasingly peculiar institution. Freedom was by no means assured for blacks who fled north, but free-state whites frequently resented the intrusion of armed slavecatchers more than they disliked the presence of free blacks and fugitive slaves. In addition, free and enslaved blacks, along with well-meaning whites, violently resisted slavecatchers’ efforts to recover fugitive slaves, won a growing number of freedom claims by relying on the free states’ legal status as free soil in the 1810s and 1820s, and impelled select northern states to pass personal liberty laws in the 1840s. When southern slaveholders forced a new fugitive slave law through Congress in 1850, northern blacks and their white allies grew even more militant in their demands that southern laws on the rendition of fugitive slaves were null and void in the free territory of the northern states. Territorial expansion created additional borderland conflicts between slavery and freedom. Northern whites had fought against slavery’s expansion on and off since the 1780s. In 1819–20 those actions and ideologies came to a head when a broad coalition from the North sought to impose a plan of gradual abolition on Missouri and to exclude slavery from all states and territories “hereafter admitted to the union,” including the remainder of the Louisiana Purchase and any future acquisition of Florida and Texas. The Missouri Controversy demonstrated that the northern states could be an imperialistic antislavery rival for control of the North American continent: a rival that would readily use federal power to confine slavery to its present limits, enlarge the dominion of free white labor, and force gradual abolition on unwilling whites in borderland slave societies.31

Rebellion and abolition in the Caribbean created additional borderland problems for slaveholders. The Saint Domingue rebellion was only the first in a series of revolts that struck the Caribbean. Revolts in Barbados, Demerara, and Jamaica in the early nineteenth century came immediately after Parliament debated abolitionist petitions. Planters in the United States watched these events closely, drawing immediate connections between political debates and slave rebellions. But while American
slaveholders did their best to suppress abolitionism at home, they could
do nothing to retard emancipation in the British Caribbean. British eman-
cipation in the 1830s created a new set of maritime borderlands where
an independent black republic and British imperialists sat offshore from
the Atlantic and Gulf Coast slave states. By the 1830s, slaveholders feared
Britain would use its emancipated Caribbean islands and Haiti as recruiting
grounds for black soldiers, who would then be used to invade the southern states and incite a massive slave uprising. By the late 1830s, southern slaveholders saw themselves increasingly threatened by antislavery move-
ments at home and by the Caribbean’s free black emissaries of abolition,
with both groups allegedly backed by all the might of the British Empire.32

In the early 1840s, however, the most immediate borderland threat to
American slavery abruptly shifted from the Caribbean to Texas, as leading southern statesmen drew a straight line from British abolition in the Caribbean to alleged British interest in creating a free labor Texas. Southern politicians as diverse as Robert Walker, John Tyler, and John Calhoun now alleged that British imperialists would use a British-allied Texas to organ-
ize Native Americans, emancipated Texas slaves, and runaway American slaves into an invasion force that would lay waste to American slavery from Louisiana to Virginia. Slaveholder expansionists responded to this newest borderland threat by adopting an aggressive, proslavery imperial-
ism that sought Texas annexation and the acquisition of northern Mexico to the Pacific. In justifying annexation and acquisition, expansionists relied on old borderland and imperial concerns about British meddling with Native Americans and African slaves. They also joined these to new
notions of Anglo-Saxon superiority and the redemption of the remainder of the continent still in the hands of Native Americans, Spaniards, and Mestizos. According to both northern and southern expansionists, racially inferior Native Americans and Mexicans who fought the devastating “War of a Thousand Deserts” in northern Mexico over the previous two decades had decimated the once bountiful region. In contrast, U.S. expansion to the Pacific, would secure slavery in the United States while allowing for racially superior Anglo-Saxons to bring peace and civilization to the teeming wilderness of northern Mexico, just as American slaveholders in Texas had allegedly done over the previous two decades. Expansion to the Pacific would also ensure that Mexican California would fall under American rather than British jurisdiction.33

Victory in the U.S.-Mexican War confirmed the United States’ position as the continent’s dominant imperial power, seemingly settling the border-
land conflicts and imperial struggles that had pitted the republican United States against the monarchical British and the weak American republics
under their influence. Increasingly, however, notions of Anglo-Saxon racial superiority and manifest destiny enjoyed pride of place in both northern and southern visions of an expanding American empire. And though white northerners and southerners agreed on Anglo-Saxon superiority and the United States’ destiny in the broader Americas, they disagreed profoundly about the place of racial slavery in their visions of an expanding American empire. Consequently, in the 1850s the United States became an empire increasingly divided by antagonistic imperial visions for the broader Americas.34

At the same time, from within the Union a host of new borderland threats emerged to challenge slaveholder mastery over slaves and blacks as persons and their sovereignty over slavery as an institution. Northern resistance to the rendition of fugitive slaves, free and enslaved blacks’ more assertive challenges to slavery, Bleeding Kansas and John Brown’s raid, and the emergence of a Republican Party that sought to divorce the federal government from slavery while halting its expansion all pointed in dangerous directions for slaveholders who had long fought to use state power to maintain racial subordination and slavery. Just as white northerners and southerners disagreed over the place of slavery in an expanding continental empire, they also disagreed over the degree to which the federal government was obligated to protect slavery, the property rights of slaveholders, and the racial order on which southern society rested. At their core, the great sectional conflicts of the 1850s would center on the place of racial slavery in the United States’ advancing empire. They also centered on the proper use of state power to protect slaveholders’ rights and interests, especially in the numerous borderlands between slavery and freedom that had proliferated in the 1840s and the 1850s.35

Thus, in the 1850s, slaveholders sought “perfect security for slavery” from the numerous borderland, sectional, and partisan challenges to slavery that had multiplied and grown ever more threatening since the U.S.-Mexican War. Among other things, “perfect security” meant a strengthened Fugitive Slave Law that would use the coercive and legal might of the federal government to ensure that slave state law on the capture and rendition of fugitive slaves prevailed throughout the Union. “Perfect security” also required repeal of the Missouri Compromise and the use of federal power to force slavery into borderland territories such as Kansas, which were only marginally suitable for slavery and where the majority of the white population opposed it. Once the Dred Scott decision opened all federal territories to slavery, slaveholders sought a federal territorial slave code that would use state power to provide perfect security for slavery in the territorial borderlands of the far West while promising that slavery would follow
the flag into any territories the Union acquired in the future. By the late 1850s, leading southern statesmen who followed the logic of the *Dred Scott* decision expected that the Supreme Court would next rule that free state bans on slavery violated slaveholders’ Fifth Amendment property rights, granting slaveholders unfettered rights throughout the Union. The *Dred Scott* decision, too, promised to preserve the racial order against “Black Republicans” who allegedly sought to overturn the racial subordination on which slavery rested. With these measures, “perfect security for slavery” would prevail in the free states and in the borderlands between slavery and freedom as the sovereignty, laws, and racial order of the slave states would reign supreme through the entire Union.36

The domestic measures slaveholders sought in the 1850s—in effect, the nationalization of slavery through the imposition of slaveholders’ property rights and slave state sovereignty and law on the free states and federal territories—seems novel and extreme. But in many ways, this was simply a continuation of slaveholders’ longstanding efforts to use state power to provide perfect security for slavery wherever it seemed threatened. Slaveholders’ demands in the 1850s were simply their responses to the proliferation of free soil borderlands and antislavery groups, movements, political parties, and imperial rivals within the Union since the 1840s. Indeed, the perfect security for slavery they demanded from northern whites and the federal government in the 1850s differed little from what they had sought from Native American nations, imperial rivals, and imperial governments over the previous two centuries: protection for their property in slaves and access to state power to maintain mastery and racial subordination. As their predecessors had done on the North American continent for the better part of two centuries, the most aggressive southern sectionalists of the 1850s simply sought to turn borderlands into bordered lands where slaveholder mastery and sovereignty—backed by state power—would prevail. The main difference between the 1850s and previous decades was that now the greatest threats to slavery came from whites within the Union rather than from slaves, Native Americans, or rival imperialists from without.

The same concerns about proliferating free soil borderlands and antislavery sectional and imperial rivals directed foreign policy in the 1850s. Fears that Britain would impel Spain to abolish slavery in Cuba—placing another threat to American slavery in the Caribbean—furthered an imperial vision of slavery’s “natural development” through rapid expansion into the South’s Caribbean borderlands. By the late 1850s, leading spokesmen for southern sectionalism increasingly asserted that the South had become a distinct imperial power, separate from the northern states and destined by race to conquer the tropics. The domestic and foreign measures they
sought, while largely continuations of their efforts to use state power to protect slavery from borderland threats, were now underwritten by a self-consciously proslavery imperialism that demanded aggressive expansion and consolidation, not only to protect slavery and slaveholders but also to bring the benefits of racial slavery to the broader Americas.37

The demands slaveholders had unleashed on the North since Texas annexation catalyzed once diffuse notions of free labor into a cohesive free soil ideology. In turn, the proponents of free labor would develop a free soil imperialism that was as aggressive and as dependent on state power as the South’s vision of an empire for slavery. In challenging the South’s invasion of free Kansas, William Seward promised slaveholding imperialists that the North’s free labor insurgency “will henceforth meet you boldly and resolutely here [in Washington]; it will meet you everywhere, in the Territories and out of them, wherever you may go to extend slavery. It has driven you back in California and in Kansas, it will invade you soon in Delaware, Maryland, Virginia, Missouri, and Texas. It will meet you in Arizona, in Central America, and even in Cuba.” For free soil imperialists such as Seward, the “expansion of the empire of free white men” would be realized through government “intervention in favor of free labor and free States.” Free soil imperialism—like all imperialisms—would be heavily dependent on the use of state power. State power and the federal government’s vast reserves of western land would foster the development of railroads that would connect the “naturally” free soil west with markets in the East and ports on the Pacific. State power would grant 160-acre homesteads in territories where Native Americans would be removed by federal power and slavery would be excluded by federal law. State power would also be used to fund voluntary emancipations in the border states and the transportation of free blacks to Central America (where, under the protection of the United States, they would be used to block both British and proslavery southern designs on Central America). Above all else, Republican control of the federal government promised that the powers of the state would no longer be used to prop up what Republicans saw as the greatest impediment to a free labor empire: the archaic, aristocratic, and naturally degenerative system of slavery in the South.38

Ultimately, the sectional debates and conflicts that stretched from Texas annexation to the secession crisis of 1860–61 all came back to two questions. The first was an old one: how would state power be used to protect slavery in the borderlands, keep blacks in slavery, and prop up the slaveholding classes and southern whites who were slavery’s main beneficiaries? The second question, this one emanating from the North, had devastating implications for slaveholders: Should state power be used to
keep the United States on the “high-road to slave empire”? Or should it now be used to forge a free soil empire that would provide no assistance to slaveholders beyond the minimal constitutional requirements found in the fugitive slave and three-fifths clauses, while containing slavery to its present borders and offering federal funding for state-level emancipation coupled with colonization?

In the elections of 1860, northern voters answered those questions by electing a Republican president and a Republican majority in the House. Southern slaveholders now faced situations that bore striking resemblances to the Imperial Crisis of the 1770s. From their foundings, both the British Empire and the U.S. government had acted—far more often than not—to protect and promote the interests of slaveholders. Slaveholders not only exercised a large degree of autonomy in governing their individual colonies and states, they also repeatedly used state power to protect slavery from borderland threats and prop up the beneficiaries of slavery and racial subordination. In 1776 many southern slaveholders believed the British Empire had not only outlived its usefulness but posed an active, hostile threat to slavery. In 1861, much the same seemed true of the United States.

“The new empire is at last fairly launched,” announced the *New York Times* as the seceding states formed the Confederacy in February 1861. After a decade of serving as de facto imperial rivals engaged in countless borderland disputes, the Union and the Confederacy did what imperial states on the North American continent had always done; they went to war. The Civil War would extend the borderlands of slavery and sovereignty deep into a Confederacy whose ability to use state power to maintain slavery was devastated by the demands of war. As had happened in so many previous imperial conflicts in North America, slaves fled to the borderlands created by invading armies and offered assistance in exchange for freedom. As Union wartime policy increasingly tied victory to the destruction of slavery, the Union employed state power to destroy slavery wherever invading Union armies and fleeing slaves created borderlands. Slaves and soldiers then turned those borderlands into bordered lands where state power would uphold their freedom. With that, slaves and soldiers began the process of destroying one of the longest running slave regimes in the Americas. Imperial rivalries had fastened chattel slavery on the North American continent; an imperial conflict would prove the institution’s undoing.39

Certain themes and continuities emerge by taking a long view of the expansion of slavery and imperial sovereignty on the North American continent. From the 1660s through the 1860s, North American borderlands
were inherently unstable and fraught with conflict. Competing Native American nations, European American settler groups, and European and American imperial states all staked claims of titular sovereignty in those borderlands. All sought to turn their claims into effective sovereignty to gain autonomy for themselves, advantage over their rivals, and supremacy over conquered peoples. With so many competing groups, and with the states that made claims to the borderlands often unable to govern them effectively, conflicts in and over the borderlands of North America were endemic. Slavery entered into borderland conflicts wherever the institution existed or wherever slaveholders wished to see it expand. The resolution of those conflicts invariably resulted in slavery’s expansion and consolidation or its contraction and destruction.

Because slavery and sovereignty were so intertwined in the borderlands, the deployment of state power proved crucial in determining how, where, and to what extent slavery and sovereignty expanded. As slaveholders understood, borderland slave societies were especially fragile, held together by the state’s swift deployment of violence and terror, and sustainable only when state power was used to maintain slavery and prop up its beneficiaries. Slaves recognized that the presence of nearby borderlands and safe havens, along with the weakness of the state on the fringes of empire, allowed for flight and rebellion. Furthermore, because slaves were often the most valuable and mobile pieces of property to be found in borderlands, banditti, Native Americans, and rival white groups often stole slaves. Likewise, in periods of war, rival powers offered slaves freedom in exchange for military assistance while extending promises of plunder in slaves to white and Native American military recruits. The insecurity of property in slaves and the close connections between sovereignty and property led white settler groups to demand that state power be used to secure their chattel property. As a result, imperial states frequently asserted their sovereignty in borderlands by working to secure property in slaves from rival borderland groups, by preventing and suppressing slave conspiracies, and by attacking rival imperial powers that threatened borderland slave societies. Thus, in the 1730s British officials created Georgia to protect South Carolina and in the next decade launched an invasion of Spanish Florida. A century later, the United States annexed Texas and conquered the northern half of Mexico in part to protect slavery from antislavery British imperialists, slave-stealing Native Americans, and African American slaves who fled into the Texas-Mexican borderlands. More broadly, white settlers used the powers and resources of the state to consolidate and secure volatile borderland slave societies. Borderland slaveholders, then, depended on the power of the imperial state to protect
slavery even as they demanded a large degree of autonomy to govern their slave societies as they saw fit. Conversely, in borderlands where empires proved unable or unwilling to deploy enough state power to consolidate slavery and empower a planter class—most notably in French Louisiana and the Northwest Territories of the United States—slaves and others beat back the institution’s territorial advance and consolidation.

Though slavery and sovereignty expanded rapidly and in tandem, their expansions were frequently challenged. The weaknesses of the state on the fringes of empire, along with the presence of imperial rivals and safe havens across borders, made slave flight and rebellion a persistent problem in the borderlands of slavery and sovereignty. Native American nations—though often deeply dependent on the enslavement and captivity of others—resisted the expansion of slavery and sovereignty from Virginia in the 1670s to Texas in the 1840s. Slaves, free blacks, and Native Americans, then, challenged slavery’s expansion as they sought to preserve or gain a degree of autonomy and control over their own lives. The centrality of slavery to imperial conflicts and expansion also facilitated the rise of a diverse array of antislavery movements. Antislavery partisans and malcontents, along with rival sections and empires with their own designs on North America, challenged slaveholders’ efforts to use state power to secure and expand slavery. Importantly, conflicts between proslavery and free labor imperialists almost always originated in borderlands, whether those borderlands were in the Louisiana Purchase in 1804, Missouri and the trans-Mississippi West during the Missouri Crisis, Texas in the 1830s and 1840s, or Kansas and the Caribbean in the 1850s. The fortunes of abolitionists, antislavery movements, and antislavery partisans vacillated between the American Revolution and the American Civil War, to be sure. But these groups challenged virtually every move by slaveholders to expand and consolidate an empire for slavery.

Above all else, a focus on the expansion of slavery and sovereignty into the borderlands challenges historians to situate the American Civil War in the larger saga of slavery’s growth, expansion, and demise in the Atlantic World and on the North American continent. The American Civil War was many things; it was also the culmination of two centuries of slavery’s growth and expansion, along with two centuries of intertwined imperial and local conflicts in and over the borderlands of North America. From the expansion of the English empire in North America that began in the 1660s through the American Civil War, political and geopolitical conflicts in the borderlands of North America were continuously shaped by struggles over the expansion and consolidation of sovereignty and slavery, struggles that involved an ever-changing cast of empires, states, and colonies, white
settler groups, Native Americans, and African Americans. And in the end, it was an imperial conflict waged in and over the borderlands that led to slavery’s destruction in the American Civil War.

NOTES

Earlier versions of this article were presented at the 2012 Society of Historians of the Early American Republic Annual Conference and Princeton University's 2012 conference, Jeffersonian Democracy: From Theory to Practice. In addition to thanking the participants of those two conferences, I would like to acknowledge the assistance of Bob Bonner, Nic Wood, Dave Nichols, Matt Mason, Chris Childers, Scott Heerman, Paul Doyle, and the anonymous readers from the Journal of the Civil War Era.


6. For borderlands as “sites of imperial rivalry” and the transition from borderlands to “bordered lands” through the “power politics of territorial hegemony,” see Adelman and Aron, “Borderlands to Borders.” For the limits of imperial sovereignty, see Benton, *Search for Sovereignty*.

7. For “titular” and “effective” sovereignty, see John Reda, “Joining the Union: Land, Race, and Sovereignty in the Illinois Country, 1763–1825” (PhD diss., University of Illinois at Chicago, 2009). Historians have rightly emphasized the significant discontinuities and differences between the empires of Britain and the United States on the North American continent. But like Christopher Tomlins, *Freedom Bound: Law, Labor, and Civic Identity in Colonizing English America, 1580–1865* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), and Aziz Rana, *The Two Faces of American Freedom* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2010), this article argues that important continuities joined the two. Rana’s and Tomlin’s excellent work tends to minimize how conflicts in borderlands led to the expansion of both slavery and sovereignty. Furthermore, in these works, Native Americans and African Americans too often become the subjects of white ideologies and the recipients of white actions rather than being analyzed as important historical agents in their own right.


---

294 JOURNAL OF THE CIVIL WAR ERA, VOLUME 4, ISSUE 2
19. Richter, Before the Revolution, 212–38; Blackburn, American Crucible. Population figures are taken from Berlin, Many Thousands Gone, table 1, 369–70.


24. For borderland slaveholders using state power to assert American claims of sovereignty by protecting against slave flight and rebellion in borderlands, see Adam Rothman, Slave Country: American Expansion and the Origins of the Deep South (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2005); Bonner, Mastering America; Sexton, Monroe Doctrine, 15–84; Ericson, Slavery in the American Republic; Hammond, “Slavery, Settlement, and Empire.”

25. For the differences between antebellum imperialists who sought to create an ever-expanding empire for slavery and early national expansionists who responded to immediate and localized borderland conflicts, see Bonner, Mastering America; Sexton, Monroe Doctrine; Stagg, Borderlines in Borderlands.


30. For syntheses of the literature on revolution, rebellion, antislavery movements, and abolition, see Blackburn, American Crucible; Davis, Inhuman Bondage, 141–267; Drescher, Abolition, 91–332; Rugemer, “Slave Rebels and Abolitionists.”


33. Rugemer, “Robert Monroe Harrison”; Haynes, Unfinished Revolution, 177–273; DeLay, War of a Thousand Deserts, 226–96. For the political contingencies that placed pro-slavery expansionists in power, see Kornblith, “Rethinking the Coming of the Civil War.”


37. Ibid., 168.
