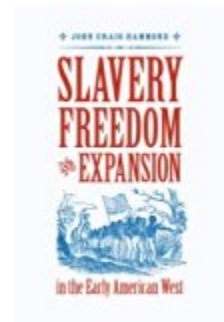


# H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

John Craig Hammond. *Slavery, Freedom, and Expansion in the Early American West*. Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 2007. xiii + 245 pp. \$39.50 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8139-2669-8.

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## Did Popular Sovereignty Work After All?

The Republican Party of the 1850s insisted on Congress's right to decide whether a territory would be slave or free. Many Americans at the time disagreed. Southerners, particularly after the *Dred Scott* decision in 1857, thought Congress had no such power. Even before *Dred Scott*, Stephen A. Douglas had asserted that the correct principle, which he, too, would come to defend on constitutional grounds, was nonintervention by Congress or popular sovereignty. Popular sovereignty was supposed to mean that settlers of a territory would decide whether to have slavery. Long accounted as a failure because of the turmoil popular sovereignty created in Kansas Territory, the maligned concept may be making a comeback. First, James L. Huston, in his new biography of Douglas (*Stephen A. Douglas and the Dilemmas of Democratic Equality* [2007]), argues that popular sovereignty did work. Now, John Craig Hammond's *Slavery, Freedom, and Expansion in the Early American West* looks at the earliest American territories. Although Hammond begins to use the term "popular sovereignty" by the book's end, he is primarily concerned with the period from the creation of the Southwest and Northwest territories to the Missouri Crisis of 1820, several decades before "popular sovereignty" was the common term.

The use of the phrase "popular sovereignty" may be a bit anachronistic, but Hammond's work wisely steers historians away from a general approach to territorial history, which has been that of the Republicans—a concentration on what the federal government did. Republicans of the 1850s made much of the Northwest Ordi-

nance of 1787, especially Article Six, which prohibited slavery. Hammond closely examines the issue of slavery expansion into the Southwest, Louisiana Purchase, and Northwest. In his telling, the federal government could not mandate freedom if settlers did not want it. First, Congress removed the Article Six prohibition in the Ordinance for the Southwest Territory in 1790. In Hammond's opinion, proslavery triumphs in this period were the result not of a national slave power conspiracy, but rather of a weak federal government competing with other empires for the loyalty of the West. Maine Congressman George Thatcher sought to apply Article Six to Mississippi Territory but was defeated for fear that the settlers there would succumb to British or Spanish blandishments. When Congress enacted restrictions on slavery in newly acquired Louisiana, the residents threatened disunion and Congress let those restrictions lapse. Upper Louisiana was organized without mentioning slavery. "As of 1805, the institution existed in what would become Missouri by force of local law and territorial statute, rather than by territorial ordinance, as was the case in other territories where slavery was permitted" (p. 57). When New York Congressman James Tallmadge made his famous effort to make gradual emancipation a condition of Missouri's admission, Missourians were outraged. They had come to see slave owning as the route to prosperity and upward mobility. In Missouri's case, the contest between the territory and the federal government became national, but the result was the same: Congress gave in to western settlers' insistence on slavery.

The contest was different in the Old Northwest. There, slave owners repeatedly made efforts to introduce slavery and failed. Hammond gives less credit to Article Six than to the settlers. In Ohio, although a small number of Virginians sought to introduce slavery, politicians generally vied to prove their antislavery credentials. Slavery came to be seen as the accompaniment of an aristocracy that would lord over poor white settlers as much as black slaves. The proslavery movement, led by territorial Governor William Henry Harrison, was even more determined in Indiana but equally unsuccessful. Freedom so triumphed in Indiana—as well as Ohio and Illinois—that settlers there created an “antislavery past for themselves” (p. 137). They remembered that they had settled in the Northwest Territories because the region was free—not because of cheap land with good titles. Even Harrison, as he moved to the national political stage after the War of 1812, bragged about his antislavery credentials. This new antislavery legend of the Northwest Ordinance figured into the debates over Missouri. Northerners sought to extend congressional prohibition to Missouri and Southerners resisted. Hammond concludes that Congress had always needed the cooperation of settlers to prohibit slavery. That was only forthcoming in the Northwest. It would not happen in Missouri and the conflict over the territories would only grow more severe.

While I found the discussion of the Southern territories and Indiana fascinating, I thought Illinois got short shrift. In addition, Hammond makes passing mention of

Tennessee but does not develop it sufficiently. Organization sometimes seemed counterintuitive. Hammond’s chapter about Missouri precedes those on the Northwestern states of Ohio, Indiana, and Illinois. The narrative then returns to Missouri. In addition, while most chapters follow the interplay between territorial settlers and national politicians over whether the territory will have slavery, the chapter on “Slaveholding Nationalism and Popular Antislavery Politics” is more thematic, covering how settlers in the Old Northwest came to form their antislavery memory. The final chapter about the Missouri Crisis turns more eastward—to why northern Jeffersonian Republicans sought to exclude slavery from Missouri and how Northerners and Southerners reacted to the possibility of exclusion. Here, the narrative begins to move away from the tension between western settlers and eastern politicians and toward the more familiar North/South sectionalism.

Despite these criticisms, Hammond has written an important book that gives agency to westerners. Hammond’s well-written monograph should certainly be read by anyone interested in slavery in the territories before 1820. It can be read alongside Matthew Mason’s recent book (*Slavery and Politics in the Early American Republic* [2006]), which examines the growing controversy over slavery from the American Revolution to the Missouri Compromise. Together, they indicate a promising trend toward new examinations of slavery expansion in the early Republic.

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