

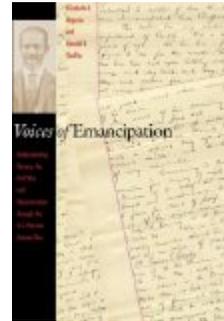
H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Harriet C. Frazier. *Runaway and Freed Missouri Slaves and Those Who Helped Them, 1763-1865*. Jefferson: Mcfarland, 2009. 224 pp. \$45.00 (paper), ISBN 978-0-7864-4678-0.

Elizabeth A. Regosin, Donald R. Shaffer, eds. *Voices of Emancipation: Understanding Slavery, the Civil War, and Reconstruction through the U.S. Pension Bureau Files*. New York: New York University Press, 2008. xi + 217 pp. \$65.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8147-7586-8; \$23.00 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8147-7587-5.

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Runaways and Veterans

Most historians of antebellum slavery agree that fugitive slaves were central rather than incidental to the region's landscape. Most scholars also agree that black troops helped to preserve the Union and end U.S. slavery. What is often missing from these generalities, however, is the detailed human story. Both these books help provide this missing element as well as broader commentary on relations between slave laws and national governments. Readers of this review will probably have history books on their shelves with references to the 1820 Missouri Compromise, the 1854 Kansas-Nebraska Act, Dred and Harriet Scott, and John Brown. These prominent events and personalities shaped antebellum Missouri. Contemporary Missourians are raised on tales about the limited importance of slavery in the state, the benevolent nature of border-state slavery compared to slavery in the Deep South, and the prominent role of abolitionists in challenging the institution and helping slaves to escape to freedom.[1]

Harriet C. Frazier, a retired law professor who has written local histories on lynching, capital punishment, and slavery in her native state, provides an alternative approach to both antebellum political history as well as popular beliefs. Her subject is delineated on page 1: "This book tells the story of how those who could shake off

their slavish yokes and of the help they received from others, including at least two foreign governments." Although runaways, abolitionists, and international relations are pursued throughout the book's ten chapters, these central topics are examined in three distinct and important chapters.

Slaves who absconded from their owners are treated in chapter 5, "Runaways." It analyzes more than one hundred Missouri newspaper advertisements and stories involving at least two hundred runaways between 1808 and 1860. These runaways—or what I prefer to call self-emancipators—were mainly men aged between eighteen and fifty who left on their own during the pleasant weather months. One such man was Anthony who escaped in early October 1807 wearing a blue coat and pantaloons, and bearing an R brand on his cheek. There were some women escapees: Catherine ran away with her two children while pregnant with a third child. Frazier draws several conclusions about slave flight. State laws failed to prevent runaways as demonstrated by their constant rewriting of legislation from the first slave laws passed in 1804 through the 1850s. (This was also true for anti-runaway legislation in seventeenth-century Virginia.) The prevalence of runaways overturns the myth of contented slaves. In Missouri, "slaves had the opportu-

nity to vote with their feet, and thousands left their owners” (p. 19). This opportunity was primarily geographic: the state’s four free borders made it “the runaway capital of American slavery” (p. 167).

Those who helped slave runaways are the focus of chapter 7, “Abolitionist Prison Inmates.” It examines the Register of Inmates at the Missouri State Penitentiary in Jefferson City between 1837 and 1865. The forty-two convicts found guilty of grand larceny of slave theft are listed in the book’s third appendix by name, age, birthplace, place of conviction, date of prison entry, length of sentence, and type of discharge. Virginia-born John Whitman served his full sentence of two years from May 1846 to May 1848. African American Eliza Sly, also from Virginia, was sentenced to five years, but was pardoned after eight months. New Hampshire-born William Knapp was less fortunate: sentenced to six years, he died in prison. According to the author, these convictions point to a large “chasm” between prisoners and the “average” state citizen (p. 126). Another major conclusion is that the incompatibility between the large number of runaways and the relatively small number of convicted “slave thieves” refutes the myth of the outside instigator coming in and disturbing the slaves’ tranquility.

Antebellum Missouri—whether in textbooks or in the popular imagination—is usually situated within the continental United States. Frazier offers an important international dimension. Fugitive slaves sought refuge in Spanish Florida until that state’s annexation to the United States in 1821. Fugitive slaves began to arrive in Mexico after that nation’s abolition of slavery in 1829. The “runaway’s imagined destinations” can be traced through various diplomatic maneuvers between the United States and foreign nations (p. 106). The most famous of these in Missouri concerned John Anderson, the subject of chapter 6, “Slave John Anderson and Canadian-English Justice.” Slave-born Anderson (*nee* Jack Burton) stabbed Missouri slaveholder Seneca T. P. Digges before fleeing six hundred miles northward crossing the Canadian border. He relocated to England and emigrated to Liberia in West Africa, after which he disappeared. Frazier’s main point is not only to establish the critical importance of an international border of freedom alongside a national border of slavery, but also to insist that justice for the freedom-seeker was frequently unavailable in Missouri.

The author is to be commended for writing a well-documented, readable, and interesting historical account of slave laws and their resisters that should both inform more familiar narratives of antebellum border-states’

politics as well as correct some of the myths still resonant in the local imagination. Indeed, Frazier belongs to a broader radical tradition of protesting man’s inhumanity to man that stretches back into the courtyard of Missouri’s State Penitentiary. An outsider reading this local history must not only doubt the basic humanity of those who held slaves but also find shocking “the community’s intense anger toward anyone accused of slave stealing” (p. 140).

This book, however, has its weaknesses. Legal records reveal human stories, but they also reduce the historical record to surviving documentation that invariably reflects the majesty of the law and the insignificance of its subjects. Furthermore, it is not at all clear that Missouri was the runaway capital. The passage of the 1850 Fugitive Slave Act was in response to frequent runaways from Maryland, Virginia, and Kentucky—all bordering slave as well as free states. Finally, the failure of this book to situate itself within the broader historical literature on topics like the myth of the happy slave, slave runaways advertisements, and international border disputes over slavery gives this book a provincial and almost dated feel to it. This is a pity because it mounts a persuasive brief for slavery in Missouri as being guilty as charged.

According to one reliable source, some 8,344 black soldiers served in the Union army from Missouri.[2] Peter Grumer, a former slave who had been manumitted, served in the 67th United States Colored Infantry (USCI). Slave-born Milton Denny enlisted in the 65th USCI at Benton barracks, St. Louis, Missouri, in January 1864. James Henry served in the 60th USCI (Regosin and Shaffer, pp. 42, 51, 87) The sources for these black enlistees are the U.S. Pension Bureau Files organized under Record Group 15 in the National Archives. In 1862, the U.S. Congress assigned the U.S. Pension Bureau to administer pensions to soldiers and sailors disabled by their wartime service. In 1890, Congress broadened its pension mandate to cover any disabilities acquired by former service personnel. It is the experiences of ex-slave soldiers as revealed through these pension files that is the central focus of Elizabeth A. Regosin and Donald R. Shaffer, professional historians at St. Lawrence University and Upper Iowa University respectively, who have written previously on the post-emancipation black experience.

The central objective of *Voices of Emancipation* is to expose readers to a sample of the Civil War pension files of ex-slaves in order to learn more about their individual and personal experiences during slavery, wartime,

and the postwar era. Working backward, I would divide the book into four discrete sections. First, the index lists claimants by name. This should help genealogists as well as scholars researching individual black soldiers. Second, the appendix reproduces nine complete sample documents, all of which are depositions from special examinations. Veteran Frank Nunn, who fought for the 86th USCI, as well as widow Mary Jane Taylor whose husband Samuel Taylor fought in the 45th USCI, were among those interviewed. These depositions inquired into the validity of a claimant's application; they are valuable because the voices are unedited.

The third section of the book, and its heart, consists of four chapters on the usage of the pension files for understanding slavery, the military experience of soldiers, postwar patterns, and marriage and the family respectively. Thus, chapter 2 draws on the pension files to reveal the similarities of military discipline experienced by all Civil War soldiers as well as the differences for black soldiers regarding recruitment, family members joining their enlistees, limited combat roles, prisoners of war, and postwar service. Denny, from Missouri, recalled the tedium of army routine: "We had dress parade in the morning, reverse arms at a funeral, and fired a salute in the grave" (p. 52). Cuffee Simmons reported that the 128th USCI had "skirmishes," but we "were in no battles"; while Fort Pillow survivor Allen James testified that he "was not treated like the other prisoners" (pp. 65, 70). Chapter 3 uses the pension files to highlight postwar economic patterns of labor, property ownership, poverty, mortality, and preindustrial time sense among ex-slaves. Some lived precariously: Henry recalled that since he had lived in Centralia, Missouri, he had "worked for so many people at odd jobs I can hardly name them all" (p. 88). Others were more stable: Kitt Mitchell owned fifty acres of land, "all paid for" in Jacksonboro, South Carolina (p. 95).

The introduction is the fourth section and it explains the origins of the pension system, the limitations of the files as historical documents, and the authors' selection criteria. The authors' point concerning the limitations of pension files—"reductionist by their very nature"—is essentially correct (p. 5). The same could be said of the legal records examined by Frazier. Regosin and Shaffer's selection criteria are a little more debatable. Their decision to include pension files to "allow former slaves to speak for themselves" is persuasive, especially in the appendix files. Indeed, I would hope that they plan to put some of these pension files online in order to meet their stated objective of reaching a broader audience. Less con-

vincing is their criterion that the "document be novel in nature" (p. 6). The content of these documents, and the authors' comments, add new details but not much more for those familiar with the enormous outpouring of slave and emancipation studies over the last two decades.[3] In addition, those who have worked through the records of the Southern Claims Commission (Record Group 217) as well as the Bureau of Refugees, Freedmen, and Abandoned Lands (Record Group 105) would be less impressed with the authors' claim for novelty.

There are specific limitations to the usage of these ex-slave pension files. The information on slave families and their obstacles from the trans-state slave trade in the pension files described in chapter 1 is repeated in chapter 4. The claim that pension files reveal that black soldiers did not experience much combat overlooks the obvious fact that those who died on the battlefield would not be claimants (some thirty-six thousand black soldiers made the ultimate sacrifice) while widows made unlikely war reporters. The description of the harsh conditions of Mexico faced by black troops transferred at the war's end is silent on the importance of Mexico as a refuge from U.S. slavery to a previous generation of slaves since the 1829 abolition of slavery in that nation.[4] Most important, the authors fail to capture the fundamental divide in *values* between the government and veterans. The former cared about the cash nexus and preventing fraudulent claims; the latter wanted their just rewards for work, service, and risking their lives.

Despite their limitations, both books provide us with some compelling details concerning the human experience of runaway slaves, wartime service, and postwar survival. Moreover, both works point to the importance of the changing nature of national government in the lives of Americans of African provenance. In the border-states, freedom was precarious, unless one could cross international borders—whether Florida before 1821, Mexico after 1829, or British Canada after 1834. With the passage of the 1850 Fugitive Slave Act in the United States, the protection of southern slavery gained the support of the national government. More than a decade later during the Civil War, black troops who fought for the Union eventually experienced a degree of equality in pension policy that local and state policies would take generations to emulate.

Notes

[1]. One of my in-laws from Missouri once tried to persuade me of the benevolent nature of slavery.

[2]. Ira Berlin, Barbara J. Fields, Steven F. Miller, Joseph P. Reidy, and Leslie S. Rowland, eds., *Slaves No More: Three Essays in Emancipation and the Civil War* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 203.[3]. For some of these studies, consult the annual bibliographical supplements published in the journal *Slavery and Abolition*. For instance, the December 2008 edition con-

tains nearly five pages of secondary writings published on the antebellum South in 2006 and 2007.

[4]. Jeffrey R. Kerr-Ritchie, "Fugitive Slaves across North America," in *Workers across the Americas: The Transnational Turn in Labor History*, ed. Leon Fink (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 365-385.

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