

H-Net Reviews

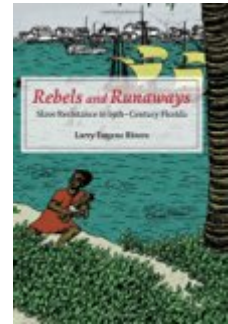
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Larry Eugene Rivers. *Rebels and Runaways: Slave Resistance in Nineteenth-Century Florida*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2012. Illustrations. 221 pp. \$55.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-252-03691-0.

Reviewed by Philip Smith (Texas A&M University)

Published on H-Florida (April, 2013)

Commissioned by Jeanine A. Clark Bremer



New Horizons of Resistance

In *Rebels and Runaways*, Larry Eugene Rivers gives readers a valuable companion to his earlier *Slavery in Florida: Territorial Days to Emancipation* (2000). In his newest book, Rivers provides added evidence for the central role of blacks in Florida's antebellum history. The past few decades have been a treat for Florida scholarship. Kathleen Deagan, Jane Landers, Daniel Schafer, James Cusick, Rivers, and a host of others have opened up Florida history in new ways. What Deagan found in the dirt at Fort Mose and what Landers found in the archives of Seville and Havana tell us what black Floridians knew all along, that learning about their history is crucial to a deeper understanding of Florida history. Rivers writes with the pace and polish of John Hope Franklin, and indeed Rivers's book took inspiration from Franklin's *Runaway Slaves: Rebels on the Plantation* (1999, with Loren Schweninger). This earlier study of runaways and Landers's *Black Society in Spanish Florida* (1999) are precedents for Rivers's new book on the methods and impact of resistance by the enslaved in Florida.

For those less familiar with Florida history, Rivers provides an excellent summary in his introduction which gives context to Florida's colonial, territorial, and early statehood periods within southern history, including the distinguishing characteristics of Florida as an Atlantic and Caribbean place. Throughout the book, he catalogs resistance of the enslaved, from smaller to larger acts with different degrees of risk to the rebels and runaways as well as degrees of threat to slaveholders and other

whites. The early chapters of *Rebels and Runaways* describe a range of resistance stacked in order of intensity. The author starts with "conservative resistance," acts that avoided the likelihood of the harshest punishments and that had the goal of gaining concessions from slaveholders. Even in describing categories of less dangerous resistance, Rivers adeptly reveals the dependency of slaveholders on those who produced their wealth. Feigning illness and indisposition took advantage of patriarchal notions, and stealing was an act of defiance as well as an act of pride since what was stolen was in fact produced by the labor of the enslaved.

Following chapters examine increasingly dangerous levels of resistance, including running away. One of the more interesting parts of the book is Rivers's analysis of the reasons why bondspersons ran away. Evidence for this type of resistance is hard to come by, but Rivers does an excellent job of comparing available information for Florida with data from other states.

Of course, the highest level of resistance was rebellion, and this is where Rivers extends a powerful argument from his previous book, claiming that the Second Seminole War was essentially a slave rebellion. Among historians, there has been no strong denial of Rivers's claim, but there has been some objection to it. Is it an exaggeration to claim that the Seminole Wars, the first and second, were essentially slave rebellions? Did white military leaders try to manipulate Congress into support-

ing an Indian war by making them fear it was or could become a wider slave uprising? This is where Rivers shines. It is well known that the enslaved escaped and lived among Indians in Florida. Some were free and lived in maroon communities. Some were free and took part in tribal leadership. Some may have lived in varying degrees of relatedness or subjection to Indians. But one thing is clear, both blacks who had escaped slavery and Indians who resisted removal knew what to expect from whites. Their interests were clearly united in a resolve to resist.

There is abundant evidence that whites in Florida, citizens and soldiers, feared that what happened in Haiti might happen here, in the part of the United States closest to possible Caribbean and Atlantic provocation. Even if it could be shown that the number of blacks fighting with Indians was smaller than estimated, that would not change the fear among whites. White Floridians and white Americans manufactured their own reality out of their fears. There was nothing unreal about those fears. To this must be added Florida's Spanish legacy of providing a sanctuary for escaped bondspersons and for arming them to defend their freedom. In colonial Florida, citizenship and color were more fluid than in the English colonies and in the early Republic. Attitudes and expectations persisted among Florida's old black population, as is brilliantly documented in two new books by historian Frank Marotti, *The Cana Sanctuary: History, Diplomacy, and Black Catholic Marriage in Antebellum St. Augustine, Florida* (2012) and *Heaven's Soldiers: Free People of Color and the Spanish Legacy in Antebellum Florida* (2013).

Rivers distinguishes between conditions of enslavement in old East and West Florida, with their colonial urban centers, and the new Middle Florida created during the territorial period. This is where slavery was much more like the cotton belt slavery of Georgia and Alabama. Cotton thrived in Middle Florida, attracting large numbers of immigrants to the new US territory. Within a decade, the Middle Florida population overwhelmed the old colonial centers, and political power shifted away from the coastal regions. Rivers is an expert on Middle Florida, having spent much of his career in Tallahassee, and he appropriately distinguishes between slave resistance in Middle Florida and in the old Spanish centers.

After expertly synthesizing a vast amount of information, Rivers expands his theme by locating Florida as part of the Atlantic and Caribbean worlds. This is important because, as he writes, "Florida's runaways differed from their southern counterparts in another and nearly unparalleled manner. Many East and West Florida fugitives possessed an Atlantic worldview or at least a sense that freedom lay either across the water or through the use of water" (p. 164).

For many of Florida's enslaved, escape was a maritime process. Escape by water could lead north, but most likely it led south and even to havens among the islands. Just as enslaved Americans in other places fled north, assisted by the Underground Railroad, a good many fled south to sanctuary in Spanish Florida. In the antebellum era, that flight southward continued into the lands of Indians who boldly resisted removal, to the Bahamas, or to other places over the horizon.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

<https://networks.h-net.org/h-florida>

Citation: Philip Smith. Review of Rivers, Larry Eugene, *Rebels and Runaways: Slave Resistance in Nineteenth-Century Florida*. H-Florida, H-Net Reviews. April, 2013.

URL: <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=36761>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.