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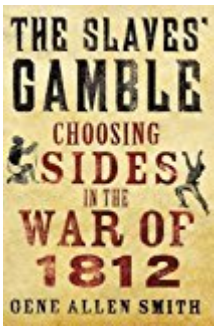
Gene Allen Smith. *The Slaves' Gamble: Choosing Sides in the War of 1812.* New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013. xiii + 257 pp. $27.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-230-34208-8.



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In *The Slaves' Gamble*, Gene Allen Smith tackles a seemingly simple question in early American history: "why did some free blacks and slaves side with the United States during the War of 1812, and why did others join the British, the Spanish, the Native American tribes, or maroon communities?" (p. xi). Smith discovers a complex and multifaceted answer. Tracing the service of many African American men from colonial times through the War of 1812, the author finds that moments of international conflict gave free and enslaved black men a chance at freedom if they chose wisely.

Smith opens the book with the story of HMS *Leopard* stopping USS *Chesapeake* in 1807. He explains that three of the four sailors whom the British captured were black men claiming to be Americans. The *Chesapeake-Leopard* affair seemingly had little to do with race, but Smith argues that race was "central ... to the history of the subsequent War of 1812" (p. 2). War gave African American men an opportunity to choose their own futures; during several flash points in history, Smith demonstrates, free and enslaved blacks had a brief chance to determine their own destiny.

Smith successfully traces African American agency during early colonial conflicts. African American men, Smith notes, started to serve during colonial times. Beginning in the early seventeenth century, the colony of Virginia armed African Americans to defend the colony against Native Americans; however, that practice ended by 1639. Similarly, in 1654, Maryland required free and enslaved blacks to serve in the militia. South Carolina also used slave labor to defend itself during Queen Anne's War (1702-13). In the War of Jenkins' Ear (1739), the Spanish offered freedom to any blacks who would help defend St. Augustine from the British. War and the military, Smith shows, allowed black men a "means of advancement" (p. 10). Additionally, the exchange of freedom for military service frightened many slave owners. One of the best examples of this trepidation was witnessed on November 7, 1775,

when Lord Dunmore of Virginia offered freedom to any slave who would join the British fight.

Next, Smith examines African American engagement in conflicts in the Great Lakes borderlands and in the maritime world before the War of 1812. He introduces the curious case of the slave Peter Denison. In Detroit, Catherine Tucker indentured her slave Denison to Elijah Brush. At the conclusion of a yearlong contract, Brush granted Denison freedom, but Tucker had demanded her slave back. This became a complex battle for personal sovereignty. Eventually, Denison was enslaved again, but gained some independence as a member of the black militia that protected Michigan from the British. Early in the War of 1812, American General William Hull surrendered Detroit and Denison was taken prisoner. Eventually, a free black named Peter Dennison appeared to live in Sandwich, Canada. Smith suspects that this is the same person. This example demonstrates how a man navigated a hostile landscape to seek his personal freedom and how a slave could negotiate his freedom during times of war.

The War of 1812 brought new opportunities for free and enslaved African Americans to seek personal liberties. Smith highlights the British invasion of the Chesapeake region and its effect on the local African American population. He suggests that sometimes "slaves started fires ashore to get the attention of overcautious British patrols, while other times they [African Americans] barged into a British camp offering information regarding a community or American Forces" (pp. 88-89). The Chesapeake Campaign created turmoil for the young American Republic, but also brought opportunities to its African American community. However, not all blacks sought freedom from the British. Smith uses the example of Charles Ball to illustrate the complex nature of African American agency. Ball was a fugitive slave who lived free in Maryland and was sent with a party to retrieve runaway slaves from the British. The American group met with the British to negotiate the return of American property, and at the conclusion of the meeting a British officer asked Ball to join the British to become free. Ball proudly proclaimed his independence (although he was a runaway slave). Unfortunately, years later a slave catcher recognized Ball and returned him to Georgia. Ball gambled on his freedom, because he believed he would not be forced back into slavery. This ill-fated case study provides an interesting insight into the nature of African American freedom during the war.

In the next chapter, Smith continues to discuss the active involvement of the British in southern states, where the British proactively sought out African American slaves to join their cause, thereby disrupting American society and economy. Eventually, Smith explains, the British moved south and landed at Cumberland Island, Georgia, where many slaves flocked to their military camp. One case includes the unfortunate story of Ned Simmons, the slave of General Nathanael Greene, who lived during the American Revolutionary War but remained in bondage after the conflict. When the British arrived in early 1815, Simmons and many other slaves went to the British side to join the Colonial Marines. However, when the British left they stripped Simmons of his rank, weapon, and freedom, as he was returned to the Americans as property. Thus, Simmons remained a slave until 1863, when the United States Navy arrived in Florida. Again Simmons sought out his freedom; he was granted it in the last months of his life.

The author wraps up his examination of African American agency in war with the Battle of New Orleans. Andrew Jackson's rag-tag army used one of the largest African American units before the American Civil War. Smith illuminates the complex nature of race in Louisiana. One of the case studies he uses is the story of Jordan Noble, a former mulatto slave, who was a drummer boy at the Battle of New Orleans in 1815. During the

American Civil War, as a free black, Noble joined the Confederacy to defend New Orleans, but when the United States Army arrived in the city, he joined a company of free blacks who became known as the 1st Louisiana Native Guard. Noble's story highlights the intricate web of war, race, and freedom.

As a well-written and extensively researched project, ***The Slaves' Gamble*** deserves attention. It attempts to tackle a seemingly simple question with a complicated answer. Understandably, it took Smith almost fifteen years to complete this project because it was difficult to track down African American primary sources. In the end, he compiles an impressive amount of sources and stories that had largely been forgotten by mainstream history. Ultimately, Smith argues that during times of conflict, African Americans had a chance for freedom, but they had to gamble with their own lives in order to obtain it. Their opportunities, he shows, were based on region and specific circumstances. Overall, ***The Slaves' Gamble*** will be a great book to use in undergraduate and graduate classes, because it adds vibrant information to the historiography of early American slavery and military history.