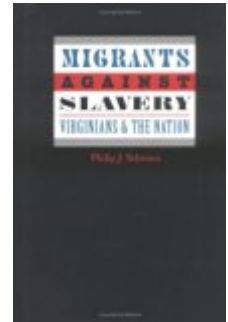


**Philip J. Schwarz.** *Migrants Against Slavery: Virginians and the Nation.*

Charlottesville and London: University Press of Virginia, 2001. xii + 250 pp. \$38.50, cloth, ISBN 978-0-8139-2008-5.



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## Migrants Against Slavery in Black and White

Philip J. Schwarz, Professor of History at Virginia Commonwealth University, is no stranger to the topic of slavery in Virginia. His two previous books, *Twice Condemned: Slaves and the Criminal Laws of Virginia, 1705-1865* (Baton Rouge: LSU Press, 1988) and *Slave Laws in Virginia* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1996), address the relationship of slavery to the legal system of Virginia. His present book examines a different aspect of slavery, namely black and white Virginians who migrated from the Old Dominion and slavery to the Old Northwest, other parts of the North, and to Canada, between 1750 and 1860.

Some Virginians successfully fled from slavery and began new lives while others did not. Migration was important because of its impact not only on Virginia but also on the nation. One need only think of Dred Scott and Anthony Burns to realize the impact Virginia-born slaves had on antebellum American politics and the growing sectional controversy. There is more to this story though than Dred Scott and Anthony Burns. Professor Schwarz explores the lives of Virginians,

both famous and obscure, who contributed to the national debate over slavery and anti-slavery. What he finds is a dual process of identity formation, one individual and one national. As they migrated from slavery, former Virginians, black and white, shaped a new identity for themselves in free territory. This process of migration also shaped the larger national identity as the nation wrestled with its jarring contrasts of freedom and slavery which defined the North and the South.

Another theme of this book is the shifting frontier of slavery. Schwarz does not address the Turner thesis as directly as do David Hackett Fischer and James C. Kelly, who argue that the frontier was a safety-valve for the institution of slavery.[1] Schwarz asserts that the frontier may also have been anti-slavery, or to put it another way, a safety-valve for freedom (my phraseology). He offers the possibility that the expanding free frontier, especially the states of Pennsylvania, Ohio, Indiana, and Illinois, may have counterbalanced an expanding slave South by offering the enticement of freedom and a better life to fugitive slaves and free blacks from Virginia. Within Vir-

ginia, there were also frontiers of freedom, such as during the Civil War when Union armies approached slaveholding districts and offered safe refuge for fugitive slaves.

The book is divided into two parts. In the Introduction, Schwarz lays out his thesis on the importance of migration from Virginia. He cites statistical evidence that illustrates the large numbers of Virginia-born free persons, both white and black, who lived outside the state, particularly in the North. In the first three chapters, Schwarz discusses the experiences of the fugitive slaves as a group and the impact their migration had on Virginia and the nation. The next four chapters discuss individual migrants and their families and the degree of success they had in escaping from slavery as well as the impact their departure had on Virginia. Schwarz discusses the lives of several Virginians: George Boxley, a white man who fled after an aborted 1816 slave conspiracy; the Gilliams, a free family of color who left Virginia for a better life and a new identity; the former slaves of Samuel Gist who had to migrate to Ohio after their emancipation and the struggles they encountered in their new homes; and the families of Dangerfield Newby, a freed slave who wished to liberate his enslaved family but lacked the money to do so. In the hope of liberating his family, Newby joined John Brown's raid on Harpers Ferry but he died in the attack. A brief conclusion then summarizes the major arguments of the book.

Schwarz's study includes whites, free blacks, and fugitive slaves. He argues that the migration of each group, out of state and away from slavery, hurt Virginia. By the 1850 and 1860 censuses there were several hundred thousand such migrants. White Virginians typically migrated from east to west or south to north, heading toward free territory such as the states of Ohio, Indiana, or Illinois. Some whites left because they were opposed to slavery, some left for economic gain, while still others sought "white land" where they

would not be surrounded by blacks. Schwarz asserts that the loss of these whites decreased the free population of the state and thus deprived Virginia of representation in the House of Representatives in Washington, D.C., which also reduced the political power of the state within the nation.

The departure of these migrants also lessened the opposition to slavery within Virginia. This is particularly true with regard to George Boxley, whom many white Virginians suspected of lending a helping hand to an 1816 slave conspiracy. Boxley escaped from Virginia and the law and fled to Ohio and Indiana, where he assisted runaway slaves and taught children the principles of abolitionism. His distance from Virginia, though, rendered him ineffective in the struggle against slavery.

Free blacks were another important group of migrants. The number of free blacks in Virginia doubled between 1810 and 1860. Many free blacks remained within the state, yet some chose to leave. A number of free blacks believed that their "political and civic status would not improve in the Old Dominion" (p. 69). Free black migrants sought "black land," farmland for themselves away from whites, but they often ran into land-hungry white settlers who did not want them in the area. Free blacks also left Virginia because of declining economic opportunity, hostility from whites (especially after the Nat Turner revolt in 1831), as well as the 1806 law that forbade freed slaves from remaining within Virginia for more than one year after their manumission. Many free blacks though settled in Ohio and Pennsylvania, including the former slaves of Samuel Gist. The former Gist slaves encountered racial hostility from their new white neighbors in Ohio and racial discrimination from their Virginia trustees. Schwarz notes the problem of dependency that the former Gist slaves faced. White trustees, such as William Fanning Wickham, saw themselves as benevolent paternalists, whose duty it was to care for their charges and make decisions for them be-

cause they believed the freed slaves incapable of managing their own affairs. Those former Gist slaves who remained on these settlements continued to face dependency at the hands of their Virginia trustees, while those who left the settlements for jobs elsewhere in Ohio gained a measure of independence.

Schwarz hypothesizes that had they stayed in Virginia, free blacks may have pressed to retain their rights, but at the cost of a subordinate socioeconomic status as well as the risk of physical violence. A good example of a free person of color (Schwarz's term) who believed he would fare better outside Virginia was George T. Gilliam. Born of a white father and a black mother, Gilliam was one-fourth black but appeared to be white. In Virginia, the law considered him to be black. He owned land, slaves, and enjoyed connections to the local gentry through his father. Following the Nat Turner revolt in 1831, Gilliam moved to Pennsylvania, and then to Illinois, and eventually to Missouri. When he left Virginia, he left his black identity behind and began passing as a white man, something he could not do in Virginia. His children also entered white society, particularly those of his second wife, who was white. To his children of this latter union, George Gilliam was a respected white doctor and abolitionist. This belief was the product of a conscious effort by Gilliam to limit the number of people who knew of his African-American roots. To achieve this passing into white society, George Gilliam had to leave Virginia.

Virginia slaves who wished to run away from their masters had two advantages lacked by slaves in states further south. First, Virginia was the oldest slave society in America, which gave slaves a tradition of running away as well as knowledge about how best to accomplish their goal. Free blacks, especially sailors, and an active Underground Railroad operation within the state helped spirit slaves out of Virginia. Second, Virginia's geography was an important factor. Vir-

ginia was near northern states such as Pennsylvania and Ohio. It is no surprise then that those two states had the highest percentage of accused runaway slaves between 1850 and 1860. Natural geographic features, such as rivers, also offered slaves, particularly in urban areas such as Richmond, a water route to free cities such as Philadelphia and New York.

Despite those advantages, Schwarz notes that most slaves remained in Virginia before the Civil War. It was one thing to wish for freedom. It was something else to obtain it. Fugitive slaves had to find the right route to freedom, establish good communications with those who would aid their escape, and take advantage of special opportunities, such as war, transportation improvements, and changes in the laws of northern states. A number of slaves followed family members to freedom. Some slaves, however, fled alone, leaving behind their loved ones. Wishing to reunite their families was a powerful motive for both fugitives and freed slaves.

Fugitive slaves presented a very real problem to their slaveholders and to the nation. A fugitive slave represented an economic loss to the slaveholder, a legal problem for the owner and Virginia, which in turn involved other states, and an act of self-will by the slave. The slave thus displayed agency and humanity when he or she ran away, a troubling development for a slaveholder. The slaves' actions revealed the impact fugitives could have on the "national drama concerning race and slavery--an impact out of all proportion to their numbers" (p. 40). The problem of runaways led Virginia and other southern states to pressure the federal government to pass fugitive slave laws in 1793 and 1850. Northern resistance to these laws only heightened the fears of slaveholders, who worried that fugitive slaves might be lost forever. As a result, sectional tensions over the issue of slavery rose appreciably after 1850 as two sections, one free and one slave, yet both American, stood facing one another. The efforts of

fugitive slaves to forge new identities apart from slavery compelled the nation to examine its own split identity.

Philip Schwarz has written a clear, convincing account of the important role these migrants against slavery played in the history of Virginia and the nation. The book cuts across disciplinary and methodological lines as Schwarz utilizes sources for legal and political history, as well as social and family history. This book is thoroughly researched with court and legal records, tax records, census records, as well as family papers and histories. Schwarz also mines existing scholarship from monographs, articles, theses, dissertations, and conference papers to complement his primary research. This book would make an excellent choice not only for courses in southern history or the history of slavery, but also for a course on historical methods.

Having praised the book, I do have a few quibbles. First, there is no map of Virginia in the book. For a study that makes geography an important factor in explaining why Virginians migrated against slavery, this seems a curious omission. A map with county names and important topographical features that illustrates the distances and terrain that slaves would have encountered would be a welcome addition. Second, Schwarz mentions the lack of evidence to explain white migration against slavery. "We cannot regularly determine exactly which of the migrants from Virginia to free soil acted by conviction rather than by necessity or interest" (p. 8). This lack of specific evidence applies most particularly to non-slaveholding whites, who often left few records of their lives. One solution that might help overcome this dilemma is one which Schwarz mentions only briefly. Residents of the northwestern counties of Virginia took advantage of the Union Army's occupation in 1861 to vote to secede from Virginia and form the state of West Virginia, which entered the Union in 1863. Perhaps there are newspaper editorials or letters of the principals behind this se-

cessionist movement which would shed light on the motives for this wartime migration against slavery. These two quibbles aside, this is a fine book which every student of the antebellum South and slavery ought to read.

#### Notes

[1]. David Hackett Fischer and James C. Kelly. *Bound Away: Virginia and the Westward Movement*. Charlottesville and London: University Press of Virginia, 2000.

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