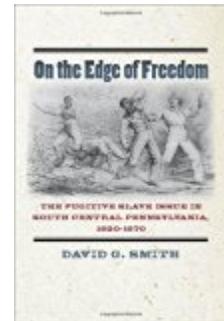


David G. Smith. *On the Edge of Freedom: The Fugitive Slave Issue in South Central Pennsylvania, 1820-1870*. New York: Fordham University Press, 2012. xiv + 324 pp. \$70.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8232-4032-6.

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## Race and Freedom on Pennsylvania's Borderland, 1820 through Reconstruction

In a provocative, well-researched study of race and freedom in south central Pennsylvania, David G. Smith reveals how African Americans in Adams, Cumberland, and Franklin counties truly lived “on the edge of freedom” during the half century from 1820 to 1870 (p. 1). Focusing on the fugitive slave issue, Smith unveils the contradictions that emerged along the Mason-Dixon Line as many white Pennsylvanians, especially businessmen and merchants in towns close to the border, sought to compromise with southern planters and supported the return of fugitive slaves, even as most African Americans and a large number of rural whites, notably, many Quakers, denounced slaveholding and rallied to help fleeing bondspersons. Drawing on a wealth of primary sources, including letters, speeches, petitions, legislation, court records, and a range of nineteenth-century newspapers, particularly the *Gettysburg Star*, the *Gettysburg Compiler*, and the *Adams Sentinel*, he vividly describes a fascinating—and often very disturbing—antebellum borderland where free blacks, fugitive slaves, and their antislavery white allies encountered enormous challenges stemming from deep-rooted racism, economic ties to southern planters, and ordinary white workers’ fears of heightened job competition from emancipated blacks. Looking at events after the early morning shots at Fort Sumter, Smith adeptly reveals how the Civil War transformed the fugitive slave issue in this region into the contraband question as racist white leaders capitalized on ordinary whites’ disdain for “escaping slaves who congregated near the border” (p. 3). With uncertainty sur-

rounding the meaning of African American freedom during the Reconstruction era and a competitive labor market, Smith points out that for many white laborers in the borderland region, emancipation raised the specter of a massive influx of freedmen and freedwomen. Not surprisingly, he contends that the area became fertile ground for “discrimination, attempted lynchings, [and] massive Ku Klux Klan rallies” that reflected the virulent racial strife that scarred this landscape in the years after the Civil War (p. 4).

Criticizing late twentieth-century scholars for having “marginalized the fugitive slave issue,” Smith compellingly returns it to center stage as he demonstrates how the fate of runaways and the unique conditions of south central Pennsylvania required distinct, pragmatic radical antislavery strategies (p. 5). He contends that this borderland setting produced an abolitionism that differed significantly from the Garrisonian movement in New England, which emphasized confrontation and moral suasion through public lectures that invariably drew the ire of southern slaveholders, sowed the seeds of controversy in northern communities, and fueled anxieties among law-and-order whites. Such overt confrontation, explains Smith, would not have worked in counties neighboring the slaveholding South; he emphasizes that abolitionists living so close to the Mason-Dixon Line judiciously opted for “alternative tactics such as the petition and using the law” (p. 72). He suggests, moreover, that such initiatives put them on a “continuum

that started in the 1780s,” a decade that had witnessed a flurry of Pennsylvania petitions and freedom suits (p. 70). In Smith’s discussion, the early actions of the Pennsylvania Abolition Society, Benjamin Lundy’s antislavery campaign, and the *Prigg*, *Finnegan*, and *Auld* kidnapping cases loom very large. According to Smith, the trial of Finnegan, the slave hunter who seized Kitty Payne and her children in 1845, served as a key transitional moment in borderland antislavery and abolitionists’ use of the law. Smith shows that in the 1840s free soilism underpinned practical court-based abolitionism to such an extent that antislavery lawyers pleading cases asserted, albeit erroneously, that “Pennsylvania was historically a land of liberty” (p. 87).

Despite highlighting the opposition from businessmen and racist whites, Smith stresses the achievements of antislavery forces—at least into the early 1850s. Indeed, it was after 1826, the year when Pennsylvania enacted a new law to prevent southern slaveholders’ unlimited “‘right of recaption’ to recover fugitive slaves,” that south central Pennsylvanians fashioned political and legal strategies to prevent the kidnapping of African Americans, to undermine the effectiveness of planter advertisements for runaways, and to neutralize masters’ payments of attractive rewards to slave catchers (p. 19). In *On the Edge of Freedom*, we also see how antislavery activists engaged in the practice of interrogation, forcing candidates for political office to declare their positions on the slavery question. Following what Smith reveals to have been very effective petitioning and several well-publicized prosecutions of kidnappers, slave catchers found themselves in a riskier environment and planters’ runaway advertisements in borderland newspapers diminished. He shows that the south central Pennsylvania petition campaigns in the late 1820s, notably, those denouncing slavery in the nation’s capital, helped to set the stage for the famous New England antislavery petitions during the Gag Rule controversy in the 1830s. Smith sheds light on the development of the Underground Railroad during these years and reminds us that it was in the late 1820s that the legendary J. W. C. Pennington “appeared as a cold and wet runaway slave” at William and Phoebe Wright’s house in Adams County, beginning his journey to New York City where he would help countless other freedom seekers build new lives on free soil (p. 26). He brilliantly describes how the topography and road networks of borderland Pennsylvania naturally directed many escaping slaves toward Adams, Cumberland, and Franklin counties as they fled northward to New York, New England, and Canada, ensuring that bor-

derland Pennsylvania residents would have to deal with the fugitive slave issue in one way or another—even as politicians sought to hammer out compromises at the national level.

Despite applauding Stanley Harrold’s work on steadily increasing antebellum borderland violence in *Border Wars: Fighting over Slavery before the Civil War* (2010), Smith portrays a different landscape characterized by varying levels of turmoil. He contends that south central Pennsylvania experienced fluctuating rather than escalating tensions between proslavery and antislavery forces. Remarkably, he notes that support for escaping slaves “lost momentum” in the mid-1850s despite the success of court actions against unscrupulous slave catchers and petitioning that contributed to Pennsylvania’s enactment of a stronger personal liberty law in 1847 (p. 9). This lull in abolitionist fervor is particularly noteworthy when it is juxtaposed against the impact on Pennsylvania’s borderlands of the Kansas-Nebraska crisis and such fugitive slave dramas as the Shadrach rescue, the Christiana riot, and the Anthony Burns rendition, which Smith stresses attracted much interest in the North and the South and received considerable attention in borderland newspapers. Black antislavery militants in south central Pennsylvania must surely have resented their white neighbors’ mid-1850s backsliding on the fugitive slave issue, which perhaps explains Smith’s finding that the area’s whites and blacks often petitioned separately.

In tracing hesitancy in borderland antislavery, Smith also portrays whites’ political sentiments as shifting rather gradually away from their embrace of colonizing blacks to solve the region’s alleged race problem. Examining such vacillation, he focuses on Thaddeus Stevens’s transition from advocating colonization to embracing antislavery and becoming an outspoken Conscience Whig. Smith suggests that Stevens “solved his dilemma” of choosing between abolitionism and colonization on political grounds and realized his goals by championing antislavery just as anti-Masonry also faded in the 1830s (p. 69). Although Smith’s analysis of Stevens’s political calculation is interesting, it incorporates speculation and he also relies on secondary literature to support his conclusions.

Smith’s most significant contribution to the historical literature lies in his elucidation of south central Pennsylvania’s practical antislavery movement, especially borderland abolitionists’ effective petitioning and commitment to court action to prosecute kidnappers. His illustration of white Pennsylvanians’ hesitation in dis-

tancing themselves from colonization and his demonstration of how they were tempted by calls to repeal the stronger personal liberty law during moments of strident race baiting are nuanced. Making the fugitive slave issue and the contraband question central to the nineteenth-century borderland narrative, Smith emphasizes that there was not just one Pennsylvania and that “subtleties, shades, and variations” shaped life and liberty in the south central counties (p. 9). African Americans and white abolitionists along the Mason-Dixon Line had to craft unique strategies to achieve their goals. Lastly, Smith’s exploration of “race and retaliation” during the Confederate invasion of Pennsylvania underscores the need for further scholarly investigation of the African American borderland experience during the Civil War (p. 191).

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