



Alice Elizabeth Malavasic. *The F Street Mess: How Southern Senators Rewrote the Kansas-Nebraska Act.* Civil War America Series. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2017. 280 pp. \$90.00, cloth, ISBN 978-1-4696-3647-4.

Reviewed by Ginette Aley (Kansas State University)

Published on H-FedHist (March, 2019)

Commissioned by Caryn E. Neumann (Miami University of Ohio Regionals)

Particularly evident in current times, political rhetoric can be a powerfully effective tool to manipulate popular perceptions or rally a political base toward support for an agenda, especially a legislative one. During the antebellum era, most notably after passage of the Compromise of 1850 and its highly controversial Fugitive Slave Law compelling northerners to acquiesce to slave catchers, the nascent Republican Party could point toward evidence of a darker and more dangerous level of power—a bona fide Slave Power conspiracy. This expression served to fuel the engine of Republican ideology. According to historian Alice Elizabeth Malavasic, it represented a key rhetorical shift about the Slave Power, apparently rooted in former president Martin Van Buren's denial of the Democratic Party's nomination in 1844 after he opposed Texas annexation, from a mainly partisan attack on the power of Southern Democrats to alarmist charges that a conspiracy of power—a slavocracy—actually existed. However, this distinction would seem to overlook prior implications of a conspiracy among slave owners to mute discussion and debate when Congress instituted the gag rule in 1836 after thousands of antislavery petitions were submitted protesting slavery.

Malavasic's *The F Street Mess: How Southern Senators Rewrote the Kansas-Nebraska Act* is a

tightly focused study seeking to delineate the southern slave interest's perceived versus actual power and influence in government (or, the Slave Power thesis), as well as the political maneuvering that culminated in the 1854 Kansas-Nebraska Act and repeal of the Missouri Compromise line. Not surprisingly, Malavasic finds that the Slave Power was in fact real and resided in a particular group of men who came to wield considerable power in the Senate in the 33rd Congress. The four friends and political allies (and mentees of John C. Calhoun)—Senators David Rice Atchison of Missouri, Robert M. T. Hunter and James Murray Mason of Virginia, and Andrew Pickens Butler of South Carolina—"messed together" in Washington, DC, by sharing a home on F Street from 1853 to 1856. Given chronic housing shortages in Washington, such boarding arrangements, called messes, were not at all unusual. For the "F Street Mess," close proximity enabled the strategizing to rewrite and pass what started as the Nebraska bill, repeal the restriction on slavery, and manipulate President Franklin Pierce while influencing the bill's author, Stephen A. Douglas (whom Malavasic mistakenly suggests wrote a postwar account yet could not have done so because he died in 1861) (p. 10).

Although at times tedious and slow, *The F Street Mess* succeeds in recreating the immediacy

of coordinated efforts by Atchison, Hunter, Mason, Butler, and Douglas (and, by influence, Calhoun) leading to and through the rewriting of the Kansas-Nebraska Act and transforming it into a piece of legislation centered on slavery expansion and popular sovereignty. Readers experience how “the Mess had taken a thirty-four-year-old measure enshrined in principle [the Missouri Compromise] and magically ‘superseded’ it by the yet untested theory of ‘popular sovereignty’” (p. 111). We can, for example, almost feel Douglas’s outrage at being labeled a traitor as a result of his role as the bill’s author. And this channeling of not only the Slave Power but also the pushback against it as found in the debates, speeches, and correspondence engaged here represents the compelling aspect of Malavasic’s approach to the material. She has carefully unpacked a major moment in US history, one that brought Americans to the brink of war. On the other hand, the often narrow focus on these men and the evolving legislation engenders a longing for a glimpse of the forest, even the sky, because the trees alone do not tell the whole story.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at <https://networks.h-net.org/h-fedhist>

Citation: Ginette Aley. Review of Malavasic, Alice Elizabeth, *The F Street Mess: How Southern Senators Rewrote the Kansas-Nebraska Act*. H-FedHist, H-Net Reviews. March, 2019.

URL: <https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=53454>



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