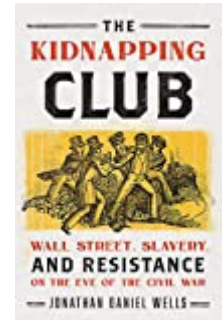




**Jonathan Daniel Wells.** *The Kidnapping Club: Wall Street, Slavery, and Resistance on the Eve of the Civil War.* New York: Bold Type Books, 2020. 354 pp. \$23.75, cloth, ISBN 978-1-56858-752-3.



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In late December 1836, David Ruggles, one of New York City's leading African American activists, responded to a knock at his front door to discover outside two policemen and a waiting mob. The officers—Daniel Nash and Tobias Boudinot—were seasoned kidnapers and far from New York's finest; their hangers-on included Joseph Michaels, recently a crewman on the slave ship *Brillante*. Ruggles had impaired the *Brillante's* operations, threatening Michaels's livelihood. This gang of New Yorkers, united by their ties to slavery, sought revenge for Ruggles's efforts to make the city inhospitable to the institution. When Ruggles refused them entry, Nash and company obtained a warrant from New York's High Constable premised on Ruggles's having caused a riot in investigating the *Brillante*, but which (Ruggles believed) painted him as a fugitive from bondage, exposed him to sale into slavery, and thereby aimed to rid the city of him for good. Though Nash, Boudinot, and Michaels ultimately failed in that goal, Ruggles nevertheless faced conviction for resisting arrest and a confinement intended to rebuke his efforts to bring to light New York's connections to slavery.

In this moment, two iterations of New York City faced off. On one side stood arrayed the forces that Ruggles termed New York's "Kidnapping Club." At its narrowest, this appellation denoted a loose ring of law enforcement officials (including Nash and Boudinot), judges like city recorder Richard Rikers who sanctioned their actions, and professional slave catchers from the South with whom they collaborated. For well over a decade, they abused their authorities to persecute the city's Black population, overstepping the law's demands in pursuit of profit and Southern favor. Their legal and extralegal efforts ensnared an unknown (but considerable) number of African American men, women, and children whom they helped disperse into bondage. More broadly (as the circumstances surrounding Ruggles's arrest reveal) New York's Kidnapping Club could be construed as encompassing the entire pro-slavery apparatus of New York City: a rigidly pro-slavery legal system, sys-

tematic oppression of the Black community, and even active participation in the Atlantic slave trade.

Opposed to these concentric political and economic circles stood men and women like David Ruggles. Though slavery had long been formally abolished in Gotham, the city's Black population continued to struggle against its legacies. Layered atop the systematic denial of the full rights of citizenship and economic opportunities were the harassing campaigns of the Kidnapping Club. Lacking legal recourse and marginalized in the city's political life, Black New Yorkers confronted what Jonathan Daniel Wells terms "a true Goliath, a potent, systematic enemy that believed Black bodies were cheap and expendable" (p. 8). In response, Ruggles, New York's Black community and their assorted allies mobilized directly against the kidnapers, even as they waged an ongoing campaign for recognition and rights.

Wells's *The Kidnapping Club: Wall Street, Slavery, and Resistance on the Eve of the Civil War* is the latest in a series of titles that, through the abduction of free people of color in the antebellum United States, explore the rapacity of slavery-fueled capitalism and the national precarity of Black freedom.[1] Where other studies begin with a single incident and work outward, Wells uses the sheer scale and shamelessness of the Kidnapping Club's activities to prove a broader point: New York's rise as America's preeminent commercial and financial center came accompanied by strong ties to slavery. The book abounds in moments of high drama; heart-wrenching abductions and miscarriages of justice manifest in all of their tragic detail. But they appear as part and parcel of a struggle for the soul of America's first city. Expansive economic ties to the South incentivized New Yorkers' accommodation of slavery long after their own iteration of the institution had withered—an impulse reinforced by national political alliances, the minutiae of ward politics, and widespread racial antipathy that collectively inured

local leaders against empathy for the city's Black population. As a result, the city's judicial, police, and media apparatus enthusiastically lent their services to slaveholders rather than upset the (Big) applecart.

In Well's telling, moreover, Boudinot, Nash, Rikers, and their cohorts represented only the more public face of New York's Kidnapping Club. An assortment of pro-slavery edifices leveled a host of threats against the city's African American residents. As the cotton kingdom waxed in the 1820s and 1830s, the value of human property surged. Even as New York merchants sought access to the South's agricultural bounty, booming slave markets incentivized enslavers' pursuit of fugitives to the city. The price of slaves in Savannah, Natchez, and New Orleans not only made it worth slave catchers' while to scour the city, but (when coupled with minimal legal repercussions), actively encouraged the kidnapping of free people. Until the early 1840s, enslavers' property rights overwhelmed Black New Yorkers' civil rights, denying supposed slaves even a modicum of due process. And New Yorkers' ties to bondage extended well beyond American borders, as men, ships, and money flowed out of the city into the illicit Atlantic slave trade.

Even as opportunistic slaveholders, profiteering policemen, and professional slave catchers prowled the city, New York's Black population found little succor among their neighbors. Protests against discrimination in public spaces, pleas for relief and justice in the face of kidnapping, frustrations with the city's policing processes, and, increasingly, agitation against the reach of the slave power were, at best, brushed off. Mobs persecuted individuals; destroyed Black homes, businesses, and places of worship; and regularly (and often violently) disrupted events in the city promoting the abolition of slavery. In so doing, members of the white working class vented their frustrations—especially when the wealth accrued in the cotton trade failed to trickle down to them. Respectability

politics provided scant relief for African Americans; only practical measures, including Ruggles's Vigilance Committee, offered any protection from the pressures imposed by slavery's handmaidens. Heroic as they were, the efforts of Ruggles and his allies made limited progress against the steady headwinds of New Yorkers' self-interest.

By the late 1840s, the comity between enslavers and the city's mercantile class had shifted from a point of pride to an embarrassing necessity, from asset to liability. The Fugitive Slave Act and the roiling strife that surrounded it spilled from the streets of Manhattan onto a national stage. While the New York police enforced the law more willingly than did many of their Northern counterparts (applauded by financiers possessing significant cotton interests), African American resistance to their efforts and the escalation of slavery-produced frictions accelerated the very sectional strife New Yorkers had mitigated by serving as slavery's handmaidens. In the end, Manhattan succumbed to the broader national struggle. While the city's merchants proclaimed their fealty to King Cotton up to (and, in some cases, beyond) Fort Sumter, they could not contain the unfolding conflict spurred by the Kidnapping Club and the resistance offered by Ruggles's successors. Though the New York Draft Riots revealed the ongoing reality of anti-Black violence in the city, the comity between enslavers and New York businessmen had been definitively shattered by secession and war.

*The Kidnapping Club* offers an arresting picture of Black life in antebellum New York and a sobering antidote to the dichotomy of a "slave South" and "free North." Drawn heavily from periodicals and New York City municipal records, kidnappings, abductions, and other outrages emerge in finely textured accounts, even as the leading figures of New York's African American resistance receive three-dimensional portraits. Necessarily for a narrative history, many of Wells's broad themes receive considerably more specialized treatment elsewhere. Recent works like John Harris's study of

New York's involvement in the transatlantic slave trade and Christopher Bonner's examination of Black New Yorkers' push for citizenship, for example, provide more-precisely focused lenses for examining these phenomena.[2] The fine-grained nature and rich detail of this study, moreover, leave the reader wanting more in areas treated with greater generality. That New York's mercantile community was deeply entwined with the slave South, for example, has been acknowledged by scholars from Phillip Foner to Sven Beckert. But because the narrative is so intricately woven elsewhere, a deeper exploration of these ties—complete with the arresting and highly personal anecdotes that define the rest of the book—would enrich a theme often imbued with determinative weight.

Taken as a whole, *The Kidnapping Club* offers a compelling look at the myriad ways in which human bondage infiltrated America's premier city at the moment of its emergence as America's commercial and financial colossus. Business interests, political ties, and a strict interpretation of local and national laws governing people of color combined to give slavery surprising influence in a nominally free city. This book demands the reader reconsider their preconceptions regarding the scope of American bondage. As Wells demonstrates, for all that sectional tensions threatened to fracture the antebellum United States, a surprising harmony was possible where interests converged. *The Kidnapping Club* is a welcome addition to the ongoing debates over slavery's relationship to American capitalism, and Wells offers the sort of nuanced, multivalent, and deeply human approach necessary to bring such an important topic to a wider audience.

#### Notes

[1]. See, for example, Adam Rothman, *Beyond Freedom's Reach: A Kidnapping in the Twilight of Slavery* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2015); W. Caleb McDaniel, *Sweet Taste of*

*Liberty: A True Story of Slavery and Restitution in America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2019); and Richard Bell, *Stolen: Five Free Boys Kidnapped into Slavery and Their Astonishing Odyssey Home* (New York: 37Ink, 2019).

[2]. John A.E. Harris, *The Last Slave Ships: New York and the End of the Middle Passage* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2020); Christopher Bonner, *Remaking the Republic: Black Politics and the Creation of American Citizenship* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2020).

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