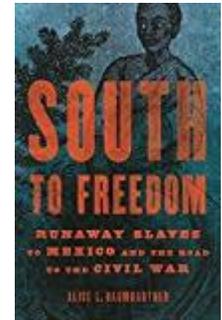




Alice L. Baumgartner. *South to Freedom: Runaway Slaves to Mexico and the Road to the Civil War.* New York: Basic Books, 2020. Maps. xi + 365 pp. \$32.00, cloth, ISBN 978-1-5416-1778-0.



Reviewed by Patrick Kelly (UTSA)

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Historians of the Texas-Mexican borderlands have long understood that the presence of an anti-slavery republic located on the other side of the Rio Grande profoundly shaped the trajectory of the peculiar institution in the United States, especially the Lone Star State. Rosalie Schwartz's pioneering 1975 monograph, *Across the Rio to Freedom: U.S. Negroes in Mexico*, remains the foundational work on this subject. More recently, Sarah Cornell and James Nichols have examined the importance of runaway slaves seeking freedom in Mexico.[1] The latest addition to this growing field of borderlands scholarship is Alice Baumgartner's *South to Freedom: Runaway Slaves to Mexico and the Road to the Civil War*, the subject of this review.

Beautifully written, *South to Freedom* discusses the entangled histories of the United States, Texas, and Mexico during the Civil War era. The first section of her book adds nuance to our understanding of the role of slavery in the increasingly fraught relations between Anglo settlers in Texas and Mexican officials in Saltillo and Mexico

City as the cotton economy moved westward from the US Gulf South across the Sabine River in the 1820s. Andrew J. Torget has covered much of the same ground, especially in his excellent discussion of the struggle between pro and antislavery factions in Saltillo, the state capital of the combined states of Coahuila y Tejas.[2] Baumgartner's contribution to this story is her focus on the powerful antislavery currents within the national government located in Mexico City. This emancipatory impulse culminated in a decree by Santa Anna during the Texas Revolution declaring all Texas slaves fleeing into Mexican lines free. Baumgartner is skeptical about this decree, viewing it not as a principled act but the Mexican president's attempt to enhance his national power. Whatever his motives, the mere fact that Santa Anna believed his policy of freeing enslaved Texas slaves would be popular demonstrates the deep antipathy felt toward this institution by the vast majority the Mexican people.

After the Texas Revolution, Mexico's Congress abolished slavery in that republic once and for all.

More provocatively from the US point of view, in March 1849 the Mexican Congress passed a law declaring “the slaves of other countries” would be “free by the act of stepping on the national territory.” This so-called freedom principle was later inscribed into Article 1 of the liberal Mexican Constitution of 1857, ratified, as Baumgartner smartly notes, the same year that the US Supreme Court’s notorious *Dred Scott v. Sandford* decision declared African Americans noncitizens. Despite the unrelenting demands of US and Texas authorities before the Civil War, Mexico City also flatly refused to consider “for a moment,” lamented one US secretary of state in the early 1850s, any extradition treaty that would return fugitive slaves to captivity north of the Rio Grande (p. 181). A signal achievement of this book is that Baumgartner offers the respect and recognition Mexico deserves but seldom receives from Civil War historians for its steadfast refusal to back down on its emancipationist policies in the face of intense US pressure. As she concludes, “On the issue of slavery, Mexico’s policies, however numerous and varied, were consistent in one respect: they would not permit slavery to expand unchecked” (p. 45).

Through intensive archival work in US and Mexican archives, *South to Freedom* tells the story of the enslaved individuals in Texas and Louisiana, men such as Peter Saens, who shrewdly employed the antislavery policies of Mexico to gain their freedom. (Remarkably, with the permission of state officials in Saltillo, Saens returned to Texas and successfully smuggled his brother back across the Rio Grande to work in northern Mexico.) Once in Mexico, she notes, the experience of the fugitive slaves was complex. When Texans crossed the border in hoping to recapture their runaways, “ordinary Mexicans took up arms against kidnapers because fugitive slaves defended the frontier, added to the labor force, and formed part of the local community” (pp. 180-181). Life in Mexico, however, was not easy for these new arrivals. Very few spoke Spanish, and most did not fancy a cuisine based on tortillas, rice, and beans so be-

loved by Texans of all races and ethnicities today. Many escaped slaves settled in or near the military colony located near Piedras Negras, and fought with the local militia in the constant skirmishes with the Comanche and Lipan Apache raiders that plagued Mexico’s extraordinary violent northern frontier. Others were forced to seek low-paying and often exploitative employment on “haciendas and in households” where they “were often the only people of African descent on the payroll, leaving them no choice but to assimilate into their new communities” (p. 175). Despite these hardships, their descendants live in northern Mexico until this very day.

The story of every single enslaved individual who crossed the Rio Grande in search of freedom is one of phenomenal courage and resilience in the face of long odds. Baumgartner’s attempt to connect the issue of runaway slaves who crossed south across the Rio Grande to the origins of the Civil War, however, is unconvincing. For one thing, it is unclear how many fugitives crossed the Rio Grande. Baumgartner estimates the number at “between three and five thousand,” but does not offer any evidence of how she arrived at this figure (p. 4). Baumgartner attempts to link the issue of slaves escaping to Mexico to the Wilmot Proviso, the Compromise of 1850, and the Kansas-Nebraska Act, yet in her discussion of these momentous events the issue of fugitive slaves seeking freedom in Mexico at times disappears from her story altogether. Southerners were offended by the abolition of slavery in Mexico, as well as much of the rest of the Spanish-American republics in the New World by 1860, but there is scant evidence that the issue of runaway slaves from Texas was at the forefront for regional politicians such as John C. Calhoun who bitterly opposed the Wilmot Proviso’s prohibition on the expansion of slavery into any territory acquired by the United States from Mexico. It is unclear from this book how the origins, passage, or consequences of the Kansas-Nebraska Act of 1854 were a product of the South’s concern over the issue of Texas slaves

seeking freedom in Mexico. Slaves crossing the Rio Grande certainly posed an irritant to US-Mexican relations. Yet, despite its provocative title, this book does not establish a strong causal relationship between this issue and the origins of the Civil War.

A far more successful argument is Baumgartner's contention that Mexico's abolition of chattel slavery laid a trap that ensnared US slaveholders after the US victory in the Mexican-American War. [3] As she notes, the enormous area of land captured from Mexico marked the "first time that that the United States had ever incorporated territories where slavery was explicitly abolished, and Northern politicians argued that Congress had no authority to reestablish the practice." "This argument," she continues, "forged a dangerous alliance between Northern Democrats and Northern Whigs that Southern politicians feared would bring an end to slavery" (p. 147).

In ways that Civil War historians have often ignored, then, Baumgartner demonstrates that the fact that the system of African-based slavery had already been legally abolished in the territory seized from Mexico played a key role in establishing the political, legal, and moral position of the free-soil Northerners who in the 1850s would coalesce into the Republican Party. Kevin Waite's recent exploration of the determined attempt by Southerners to replant slavery in the territory seized from Mexico offers a nice complement to Baumgartner's book.[4] As she argues, the fierce opposition of free-soilers to the efforts of Southerners to "extend slavery into the former Mexican territories ignited a sectional controversy—that is, a controversy between North and South—that would lead to the overturning of the Missouri Compromise, the outbreak of violence in Kansas, and the birth of a new political coalition, the Republican Party, whose success in the election of 1860 led to the US Civil War" (p. 6). In this sense, her book is quite persuasive in its insistence that

"American' histories of slavery and sectional controversy are, in fact, Mexican histories too" (p. 13).

Notes

[1]. See Sarah Cornell, "Citizens of Nowhere: Fugitive Slaves and Free African Americans in Mexico, 1833–1857," *Journal of American History* 100, no. 2 (2013): 351–74; James David Nichols, "The Line of Liberty: Runaway Slaves and Fugitive Peons in the Texas-Mexico Borderlands," *Western Historical Quarterly* 44 (Winter 2013): 413–33, and *The Limits of Liberty: Mobility and the Making of the Eastern U.S.-Mexico Border* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2018).

[2]. Andrew J. Torget, *Seeds of Empire: Cotton, Slavery and the Transformation of the Texas Borderlands, 1800-1850* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2015).

[3]. Andrés Reséndez has demonstrated that the Native American slave trade existed in Mexican territory involving individuals captured in the United States before and after 1848. See Andrés Reséndez, *The Other Slavery: The Uncovered Story of Indian Enslavement in America* (New York: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2016).

[4]. Kevin Waite, *West of Slavery: The Southern Dream of a Transcontinental Empire* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2021).

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