
Reviewed by Nicholas Cox

Published on H-CivWar (May, 2023)

Commissioned by G. David Schieffler (Crowder College)

From the introduction of enslaved African Americans in 1619 to the abolition of slavery in 1865, the enslaved were vulnerable to the environment in which they labored, while their labor changed the environment in which they lived. As David Silkenat puts it succinctly in the introduction to his latest monograph, “enslaved labor remade the landscape” (p. 1). This point might not sound like a radical thesis, yet it bears noting that there has been very little work done on the ways in which environmental history and the history of slavery and abolition have intersected. This volume resolves a notable historiographic absence in the literature of slavery as well as in American environmental history.

Since the 1960s, American historians have taken African American history, particularly the histories of slavery and abolition, as well as environmental history as serious venues of inquiry, but rarely have these fields been in dialogue. In the past sixty years, African American history has been the more seamlessly synthesized into the history of the United States, certainly to a much greater degree than environmental history, which rarely gets the same coverage in survey textbooks, course offerings, or works of public-facing scholarship. The histories of slavery and abolition have included regional studies; labor studies; examinations of free black life, the lives of enslaved women, violence, and slavery's relationship to capitalist development, and so very much more. There have been, however, fewer significant works of environmental history of the nineteenth century compared to the twentieth, but while several have focused on the Civil War, industrialization, particularly energy production, as well as urbanization, few have investigated the intersection of slavery and the environment.[1] Silkenat brings these two historiographies together and demonstrates that the environmental history of slavery is not a simple matter of evaluating the impersonal forces of the South’s ecology on enslaved men and women. One of the book’s strengths is demonstrating how much of the environment itself was subject to the very human actions of enslavement and enslaved labor.
In a volume of seven thematic chapters, Silkenat takes readers on a tour of the environmental history of slavery and the soil, human-animal interactions, forestry, riverside slavery and labor-intensive levee maintenance, extreme and quotidian weather events, rice cultivation and the great American swamps of the South, and, in a culminating chapter, the impact of the Civil War, abolition, and emancipation on the environment. Each chapter is subdivided into sometimes obvious, but sometimes very surprising subtopics, all deftly chosen to efficiently give readers the information most likely to answer our questions about slavery and the environment. Somewhat schematically, Silkenat is careful to address how the enslaved changed the land while the land changed them, chapter by chapter. This schema, however, is quite useful for anyone who wants to mine information from the book about the impact of the environment on the enslaved, or vice versa.

Although the close examination of soil exhaustion by cotton production and the ecological harm done to land and laborers by rice cultivation are topics well covered in previous labor histories of slavery, the chapter on the enslaved and the forest is worth the price of admission alone. Not only does Silkenat trace out the familiar story of southern planters constantly hungering for fresh soil to till in their quest to expand first tobacco, and then cotton, but the soil chapter includes an unexpected and richly detailed, original examination of enslaved laborers extracting gold, coal, and other ore in the antebellum South. In the discussion of the ecological impact of animal husbandry on the land, while examining pigs, cattle, horses, and mules as one might expect, Silkenat also carefully examines the role that hunting and fishing played in supplementing the diets of the enslaved. These activities also provided them with the ecological knowledge of the land essential to establish the maroon colonies, which he discusses in other chapters on forests and swamps. A close examination of enslaved hunters and their dogs, contrasted with fugitive slaves pursued by bloodhounds, balances the utility and companionship of dogs to the enslaved versus the sheer terror that dogs represented for others.

Once again on historiographically familiar territory when discussing marronage, Silkenat nonetheless mines a rich body of African American slave narratives, memoirs, and publications about life in the swamps and forests. Generally regarded as places where the enslaved secured tentative, and occasionally durable freedom from plantations as an act of resistance, Silkenat chooses to take a different view and turns our attention to the way that fugitives transformed these landscapes, carving out their homes away from the lash and hounds of the plantations from which they escaped. And, in the chapter on forests and slavery, Silkenat consciously balances portraying the wild lands as sites of escape against their long history as sites of grueling, enslaved labor clearing trees to make land for crops; harvesting timber for fuel, construction materials, and shipyards; and ultimately, the backbreaking labor of turpentine production that, like cotton production, would continue to occupy African American laborers in the South long after abolition.

Historians of secession and the coming of the Civil War have long noted that the South’s primary motivation for secession was, of course, the preservation of slavery. And yet, should any secessionist take Abraham Lincoln at his word that the federal government had no interest in interfering with slavery in the southern states, the South knew very well that the Republican Party and Lincoln had committed to ending slavery’s expansion into the West. Silkenat observes that soil exhaustion led slaveholders to press for western territory required for the expansion of cotton planting. There was an ecological imperative driving secession that gets little attention when historians focus on race and politics. And so the war came. During the collapse of slavery due to a rise in self-emancipation and work stoppages, as well as armed conflict, much of the ecologically impactful labor
performed by the enslaved in maintaining levees, controlling the careful flooding and draining of rice fields, timber harvesting, and all the other forms of coerced labor that transformed the land largely ceased, making the environmental impact of slavery all the more observable.

Silkenat’s tracing of this impact of war and abolition in a final chapter on emancipation’s ecological impact is a singular achievement, really tying the thematic chapters together and confirming that slavery and the enslaved changed the land, and that freedom would change the American environment as well. The preceding chapters certainly prepare readers to accept that the enslaved, as Silkenat writes, “in claiming control over their own labor ... refused to engage in the environmentally destructive processes that had defined the enslaved frontier” (p. 169).

The thematic chapters provide readers with a depth of analysis that richly incorporates African American primary sources, synthesizes the histories of slavery with environmental scholarship, and offer readers a tightly focused examination of the role that soil, rivers, forests, animals, and swamps played in the lives of slaves. Yet, it is impossible in a series of thematic rather than chronological chapters to avoid repeating the book’s core arguments or revisiting many of the basic historical events of the colonial, revolutionary, antebellum and Civil War eras more than once through the book. This makes a thorough read of the book occasionally marred by repetition of arguments and coverage of events. While some topics such as soil exhaustion, rice cultivation, or marronage may have been given a great amount of attention by previous scholars of slavery and agriculture, this volume will be of enormous value in bringing these topics to the attention of students, laypersons, or environmental historians who spend too little time in the nineteenth century. Historians of slavery and abolition will also be richly rewarded by taking environmental history seriously in their reconceptualization of the history of slavery.

Note

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


URL: https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=58456

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