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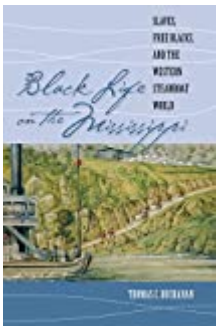

Thomas C. Buchanan. *Black Life on the Mississippi: Slaves, Free Blacks, and the Western Steamboat World.* Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004. xv + 256 pp. $32.50 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8078-2909-7.

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What Mark Twain Forgot to Mention

Thomas C. Buchanan's excellent new book, *Black Life on the Mississippi: Slaves, Free Blacks, and the Western Steamboat World*, starts from a simple series of interlocking premises that go something like this: the Mississippi River and its network of tributaries–what Buchanan calls the "pan-Mississippi world"–was the central infrastructure of the Old Southwest, the Midwest, and the Great Plains. With the invention of the steamboat in the 1810s, a significant portion of the nation's commercial and passenger traffic moved up and down this network, a geographical area that spanned both slave and free states. African Americans, slave and free, did much of the work on these steamboats. Q.E.D., there is a worthwhile study to be written on the role of these black river workers in the nineteenth century. As the author points out, black watermen and sailors on the Atlantic have received attention from historians in recent years, but black workers on America's extensive inland waterway system have not.[1]

Centered on the steamboat, Buchanan's book has a natural chronological and geographic scope. It begins with Robert Fulton in 1811, but the story really picks up steam in the 1840s. Emancipation and Reconstruction bring changes, but it is the increasing dominance of the railroad in the post-Reconstruction South that sends the steamboats into decline and insignificance by the 1890s. The pan-Mississippi world that Buchanan describes has an amazing reach, a vast and ungainly circle through the center of the nation, running all the way from Pittsburgh to St. Paul to Kansas City to Shreveport, New Orleans, Mobile, Memphis, Nashville, and Lexington. Buchanan looks at the working lives of the black men and women who traveled these river routes because "African American steamboat workers connected slave and free black communities through their jobs and thus were vital to building a pan-Mississippi African American culture" (p. 16).

Black Life on the Mississippi builds on an impressive and imaginative body of primary sources. A number of slave narratives, most prominently the recollections of William Wells Brown, and WPA ex-slave interviews provide an inside view of life on the Mississippi. Buchanan also employs newspapers, drawing especially useful information from runaway slave advertisements. Planta-

tion records explain the role that slave work on steamboats played in the region's economy. Where Buchanan moves beyond the expected range of sources is by using a wealth of court records. When a slave was killed or escaped while leased to a steamboat captain, chances were good that there would be a lawsuit. Free blacks and slaves took advantage of federal admiralty laws that extended into America's waterways and gave them legal standing not enjoyed by most of their contemporaries. And during Reconstruction, newly confident steamboat workers often took their employers to court.

With these sources, Buchanan fulfills his goal to illustrate "the way in which slavery in the West was shaped by its link to the western river system and its workers" (p. 16) and to explain "the work experience of African American river workers, their pan-Mississippi world, and the actions they took to better their condition" (p. 17). The book's first chapter gives an overview of this pan-Mississippi world, a place where getting crops to market came to rely on the steamboat system. While we may tend to think about Huck Finn and Sam Clemens going up and down the Mississippi River when we think of steamboats, Buchanan reminds us that steamboats also plied the eastern waters up the Ohio River system all the way to Pittsburgh, followed the Mississippi River as far north as St. Paul, brushed the West on the Missouri River to Kansas City, and brought goods and passengers into deepest east Texas on the Red River.

Chapter 2 narrows the scope from the entire pan-Mississippi world to the confines of the steamboat itself. By the 1830s, steamboats had begun to take their classic "wedding cake" form. To navigate the rivers, steamboats had only a shallow hold where cargo was stored. The deck was used to stack more cargo, primarily cotton bales, and as the accommodation for the poorest passengers and the crew. Above this was the boiler deck, combining the main cabin and staterooms, and next was the "hurricane deck" to house officers, with the pilothouse topping it off. The challenges and rewards of steamboat work varied by how far from water-level one was. While all African-American workers were susceptible to disease and violence, deckhands and roustabouts were also likely to be crushed by cargo, knocked overboard into the swirling river, or frostbitten. For such dangers, they received slightly higher pay than some of the cabin workers. Cabin workers were less likely to have a cotton bale fall on them while eating their lunch, but they did have to deal with white passengers on a constant basis, providing plenty of opportunities for casual violence. Balancing out the abuse from passengers were the tips cabin workers received, which could often amount to several dollars per voyage, the difference between the workers' wages and a living wage. Since the steamboat strove to provide luxurious travel accommodations to its passengers, it created niches for some highly skilled and well-paid black workers, such as barbers and chefs. Barbers were in a particularly advantageous position since they were not actually part of the steamboat crew but rather rented out space and worked for themselves. Many barbers seem to have combined steamboat and land-based businesses, earning quite a handsome income.

Buchanan's third chapter studies the relationships between steamboats and African-American families. As with so much of this book, this topic is full of contradictions. Many of the slaves who were "sold down the river" made that terrible journey in chains on the deck of a steamboat. Buchanan demonstrates that not only were slaves from Kentucky transported this way, but quite a number from Virginia were moved overland to Wheeling and then loaded onto steamboats bound for New Orleans or the Red River. At the same time that steamboats were ripping apart some slave families, they allowed others to keep in touch and find long-lost relatives as steamboat workers carried messages and news over long distances. Steamboat work and the money it earned provided a much better standard of living for many free black families than would have been possible on land, and some slaves were even able to save enough money from their work to buy themselves and their families.

In chapter 4, Buchanan examines the role steamboats played in helping slaves to escape. While it is no surprise that steamboats were active in the Underground Railroad (mixed metaphors notwithstanding), what stands out in this chapter as much as the temptation to escape slave steamboat workers faced, is the temptation their owners faced in deciding whether to lease them to steamboat captains. Slave owners knew that their slaves would have opportunities to disembark in free states or jump ship in some other way, but the profit they could realize in leasing slaves to steamboat captains was often great enough to overcome their reservations.

Chapter 5 amplifies the concerns whites had about how the river's relative freedom could affect slaves by studying the Madison Henderson Gang. Henderson, a slave originally from Virginia, and his three free black colleagues used steamboat careers as a platform for robbing and murdering up and down the Mississippi River for a few years before being executed in St. Louis in 1841. Working largely from the gang's confessions writ-

ten while awaiting execution, Buchanan argues that they adopted an identity as "rascals" and tried to make their way through the pan-Mississippi world on their own terms. While Buchanan has a lively tale to tell here, his assertion that the "rascal" had become a distinctive form of black masculine identity would probably require a much broader study than this to prove. It does, however, illustrate the level of analysis Buchanan brings to what might otherwise be a thrilling but intellectually unexceptional series of events.[2]

Emancipation and its aftermath coincided with an overall decline of the steamboat world, largely because of the expansion of the railroad network in the South during and after the Civil War. Buchanan makes a plausible argument that African-American crewmen played an important part in the campaigns for control of the western waterways during the Civil War, serving in combat long before African Americans were permitted to enlist in the army. The confusion of war also provided more opportunities for slaves to escape along the river. During Reconstruction, African Americans had a much stronger legal position from which to fight abuse and discrimination, but the broader range of options now available tended to discount what had been the advantages of steamboat work while not lessening many of the disadvantages. "Steamboats and their workers," Buchanan observes, "were no longer viewed as beacons of hope and liberation" (p. 155). By 1880, although there were fewer steamboat workers, more of them were black. But these were remnants of a dying industry as steamboats came to be used for excursions and nostalgia of the sort evoked by Mark Twain's famous 1883 account.

As should be clear, *Black Life on the Mississippi* is an excellent and important account of a part of southern history and African-American history that has unaccountably been poorly served. It would work well in a variety of classroom settings. I could easily imagine it being read in an undergraduate seminar on African-American history, labor history, or a variety of other specialized areas; like the steamboats in the pan-Mississippi world it describes, Buchanan's book links several historiographic areas together. The contradictions it points out–the freedom to travel balanced against the harsh discipline of life on the river–would make it work well in a graduate class as well. I feel obliged to point out a few shortcomings, but these are quite minor. At one point, Buchanan suggests that local courthouses, if searched, might turn up more lawsuits like the ones he found at the state and federal level, and it is disappointing that this lead was not followed up, but we may perhaps hope to see an article or other work in future that would use some of these resources. I also thought the discussion of the "rascal" identity of Madison Henderson and his gang was relatively undeveloped and fit uneasily into the larger work. Nonetheless, this is a work that historians in a variety of fields, the general public, and even the late Mark Twain could read with profit and interest.

Notes

[1]. David S. Cecelski, *The Waterman's Song: Slavery and Freedom in Maritime North Carolina* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2001); and W. Jeffrey Bolster, *Black Jacks: African American Seamen in the Age of Sail* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1997).

[2]. Though not writing in reference to African-American masculine identities, Edith Kellogg Dunton did consider "The Rascal As Hero" in *The Atlantic Monthly* 86, no. 513 (July 1900): pp. 135-138.

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