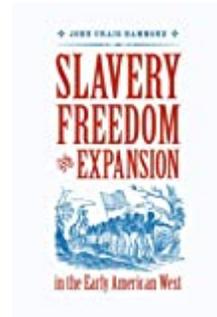




John Craig Hammond. *Slavery, Freedom, and Expansion in the Early American West.* Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 2007. xiii + 245 pp. \$39.50 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8139-2669-8.



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Slouching toward Missouri

Scholarship on American slavery and politics has traditionally turned either to the revolutionary and constitutional era, or to the antebellum and Civil War period. These are logical choices, to be sure. One was the era when slavery and the nation became inextricably fused, creating the great American paradox that has attracted some of the most subtle and searching scholarship in U.S. historiography. The second was the period that saw the collapse of both the nation and slavery; surely there is no more dramatic episode of American history. But what happened in between?

An awful lot, says John Craig Hammond in this fine monograph. His study joins with recent work by Adam Rothman, Matthew Mason, and Robert Pierce Forbes to focus on slavery during that “dynamic but mysterious middle period in the history of American slavery,” as Rothman puts it, which was long neglected, but has since become fertile pasture for the cultivation of these ambitious dissertations, now books.[1] The only surprise is that the field should have lain fallow for so long.

Consider matters from the perspective of 1790. Congress had banned slavery from the Northwest Territories, and “American slavery was largely confined to the Atlantic states,” Hammond observes, its future “in many ways uncertain” (p. 2). Just thirty years later, by 1819, “the United States presided over an “empire for slavery” in the West” (p. 3). Here lies the problem Hammond’s book unpacks: “What,” he asks, “explains the peculiar expansion of both slavery and freedom through 1819, and what accounts for the supposedly sudden emergence of the slavery expansion question in the Missouri Controversy” (pp. 3-4)?

The answer, in a word, is geopolitics. Until the War of 1812, the United States faced the danger “of a split between the Atlantic states and the trans-Appalachian West,” giving westerners “extraordinary influence over federal policy.” Exploiting “the weakness of the federal government in the West,” settlers were able to extract almost whatever concessions they wanted from the federal government (p. 6). And what they wanted in the Southwest was slavery. Only when the danger of an

East/West split ended with the War of 1812 could the national battle over slavery emerge in its full fury. The key to understanding this process, Hammond holds, lies not in Washington, but in the West itself: "the decision to permit or exclude slavery became ... a local question," he insists. "Whether in the Northwest or the Southwest, local popular politics" reigned supreme (pp. 6-7). Popular Sovereignty, in other words, existed in practice long before Stephen Douglas came along to propose it as national policy.

Beginning in the Southwest and moving, chapter by chapter, territory by territory, into the Northwest, Hammond sets out to prove his case. He is at his best in the book's early chapters, where he persuasively shows how "the weakness of the federal government in its western borderlands ... greatly amplified the influence that westerners could exercise" (p. 11). Confronting a territory populated by former loyalists, French and Spanish citizens, and land speculators whose loyalty to the Union was minimal at best, beset by Spanish plotting, Napoleonic adventures, and British conspiracies, Congress and federal agents in the Southwest hastened to assure wary settlers that the United States would protect their human property. Drawing on personal correspondence, local newspapers, and congressional records, Hammond does an outstanding job tracing how settler demands shaped congressional debates in Washington. Slavery would be, Hammond concludes, "the cost of union" (p. 14).

Hammond follows this process at work in Mississippi and Louisiana, where slaveholders "exploit[ed] the weaknesses of the U.S. government" to advance their interests, and then in Missouri, where whites' political and economic equality was founded on slavery, before turning his attention to the Northwest (p. 51). Fearing that the Northwest Ordinance's ban on slavery "retarded the region's growth and stunted economic development," local politicians sought to introduce slavery to the territory (p. 106). Repeatedly thwarted by popular opposition, however, these proslavery advocates were eventually forced to renounce and denounce their plans. The source of this popular opposition remains somewhat vague until chapter 7, which examines how "debates about slavery," along with "rituals such as Fourth of July celebrations, political contests, and "boosterism," produced a broadly antislavery political culture in the Northwest (pp. 127, 137-138). Here, the subject shifts from politics to political culture: "a popular ideology that celebrated the virtues of free society while denouncing slavery" (p. 148). If free blacks or escaped slaves participated

in those debates or festivals, however—or played any role whatsoever in the creation of this political culture—we find no traces of it here.

Geopolitics reemerges in the book's final chapter. With the War of 1812 over, and "the West ... unquestionably secure," northern Republicans finally felt comfortable exerting their long-suppressed desire to restrict slavery from the West (p. 152). Now it was southerners who took up the threat of dis-Union. "What was once a conflict between eastern and western interests now became a battle between the free North and the slave South" (p. 162). The resectionalization of U.S. politics was complete, and so it would remain for the next 45 years (or 189 years, depending on your math).

Several compelling threads emerge from this account. First, Hammond explains how the East/West division of the Early Republic turned into the North/South division of the antebellum period. Slavery was the key, and Hammond guides us through the process by which "the Northwest had become as much "North" as it was "West" (p. 126). The contempt easterners had once shown for western frontiersmen was taken up by Ohioans looking down on Kentucky, and soon by northerners looking down on the South more generally, which over time came to be seen as backward and immoral. In this regard, Hammond offers a sort of prehistory of free soil ideology. Where Eric Foner began his story in Jacksonian America, Hammond traces that worldview back to the 1790s and early 1800s, when antislavery advocates in Ohio and Indiana first gave voice to the idea that slavery hinders economic and social development. A country "worked by freemen instead of slaves" was "more valuable than any Country ... cultivated by Slaves," they insisted, as they celebrated the dignity of those who "ow[e] their bread to their own labor" (pp. 125, 128).

Throughout, Hammond questions the antislavery credentials of Federalist politicians. In recent years, the Federalist Party—once shunned as a bastion of reactionary conservatism—has undergone a profound makeover. Prominent Federalists like John Adams, Alexander Hamilton, and others have been extolled in best-selling biographies; even Timothy Pickering—crusty Hamilton conspirator, Washington hater, and New England secession mongerer—has been rescued by Garry Wills ("*Negro President: Jefferson and the Slave Power* [2003])! Slavery has been key to this makeover, of course. As new research delved into the racism of Thomas Jefferson's Republican Party—and into the private life and public statements of its founder—Federalists began to look a

whole lot better.

Hammond is not drinking this Kool-Aid. It was northern and western Republicans, he insists, who led early antislavery politics, even as Federalists—with Pickering in the lead—provided “unqualified support for slavery expansion” (pp. 22-27, 45). “Committed northern Republican support,” he concludes of Indiana, “best explains why Congress failed to suspend Article VI,” the article of the Northwest Ordinance that prohibited slavery or involuntary servitude (p. 110).

Though this is a useful counterpoint to recent scholarship, what remains puzzling here is the tension between, on the one hand, the rescue of northern Republicanism, and, on the other, the insistence that the West was the critical site for the politics of slavery. If, as Hammond avers, the federal government seemed “unable or unwilling” to permanently exclude slavery from the Northwest, how do we account for that “committed northern Republican support” which has now become responsible for protecting the Northwest from slavery (p. 126)?

Hammond’s local-centric argument works magnificently for the Southwest, but it may have run into trouble when it crossed the Ohio River. “Congress would not give its sanction to the introduction of slaves,” observed one Indiana politician in 1809, somewhat undermining Hammond’s case, even if “a majority of the citizens of the territory [were] in favor of it” (p. 112). The same was true for Illinois, where proslavery sentiment ran even higher, and where congressional action was key. “Ultimately,” Hammond concedes, “Congress and Article VI prevented Illinois from entering the Union as a slave state” (p. 122).

Notice the language here: Congress, which “failed to suspend” Article VI, or prevented Illinois from becoming a slave state. Throughout the second half of his book, Hammond insists on “the immediacy of slavery’s threat to the Northwest,” where principled antislavery advocates battled against “slaveholders [who] were secretly plotting to overturn Ohio’s constitutional ban on slavery” (pp. 138, 155). This is, indeed, what gives the narrative its dynamism: the local politicians and activists who dramatically block slavery’s expansion into the territory, “saving Indiana from slavery” (p. 121). Hammond tells this story with verve, and yet I could not help thinking that, framed this way, the “problem” of why slavery did not expand into the Northwest—like the problem of why

Congress failed to suspend Article VI—is highly overdetermined. This may, in fact, be something Hammond recognizes on some level. Detailing the efforts of proslavery advocates to open the Indiana territory to slavery, Hammond finds himself running into a wall. “It is something of a mystery,” he confesses, “why Congress failed to suspend or overturn Article VI” (p. 108).

The mystery may be less puzzling than it appears, however. To be sure, Hammond quotes a lot of panicked fears about “an uncontrollable expansion of slavery across the West” (p. 155). This material, like so much else in this book, is fascinating—all the more when one realizes that it was from such rhetoric and such debates that Abraham Lincoln’s theories about a house divided would germinate. But are these fears persuasive? Not too long ago, such outbursts were viewed as expressions of Americans’ “paranoid style.” Although historians today wisely shy away from that conceptual tool, that hardly means we have to take the fears of early Republican antislavery advocates, however courageous and noble they were, at face value.[2]

It is surely, however, a testament to the quality of Hammond’s research—and to his sense of fairness as a historian—that I can quibble with his argument based on the material he presents. In my reading, at least, the abundant evidence in this book suggests there was no chance the Northwest could have been opened to slavery: not just because of the emerging antislavery political culture Hammond describes so well, but more important because Congress simply would not have allowed it. Perhaps Congress has always had more power than it knows: not a bad lesson to recall, when you think about it.

Notes

[1]. Adam Rothman, *Slave Country: American Expansion and the Origins of the Deep South* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2005), x; Matthew Mason, *Slavery and Politics in the Early American Republic* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2006); and Robert Pierce Forbes, *The Missouri Compromise and Its Aftermath: Slavery and the Meaning of America* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2007).

[2]. See esp. Richard Hofstadter, *The Paranoid Style in American Politics, and Other Essays* (New York: Knopf, 1965); and David Brion Davis, *The Slave Power Conspiracy and the Paranoid Style* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1969).

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