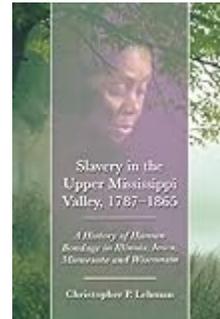




Christopher P. Lehman. *Slavery in the Upper Mississippi Valley, 1787-1865: A History of Human Bondage in Illinois, Iowa, Minnesota and Wisconsin.* Jefferson: McFarland, 2011. 228 pp. \$45.00 (paper), ISBN 978-0-7864-5872-1.



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A Sketch of Slavery in the Northwest

Few people likely consider the extent of slavery and enslaved African Americans in the Upper Mississippi Valley. Historian Christopher P. Lehman offers readers a glimpse into this under-examined world prior to emancipation. Lehman introduces his study by asserting that he seeks to illustrate the historical importance of slavery in the Upper Mississippi in relation to the economies and politics of the states that emerged in that region, the role of the federal government in the practice of slavery there and the effects of the region's slavery upon not only the slaves but also local and national ethnic relations (p. 4). That is quite a task to complete in 202 pages of text divided into seven chapters covering four states from their territorial stages to the end of the Civil War. Lehman admits in his introduction that slavery in the Upper Mississippi Valley differed from slavery in the southern states and that the institution never became central or crucial to agriculture and the economy of the region, and thus very few bonds people ever toiled for owners there (p. 2). Yet slavery in several forms did exist in an area that fell under both Article VI of the Northwest Ordinance

banning the importation of slaves and the later 36°30' Missouri Compromise line, which likewise banned slavery north of the line, except in Missouri. This fact raises important questions about the nature of the sectional divisions that led to the Civil War, as slavery was not a completely abstract issue for the four states Lehman analyzes, namely, Illinois, Wisconsin, Iowa, and Minnesota.

The first chapter looks at slavery in the area that became the Northwest Territory and the early territorial phase of the region. While examining the presence of people of African descent among early European and white American explorers and settlers of the Upper Mississippi Valley, Lehman lays the foundation for his book's most important contribution by stressing the importance of the federal government's decisions that led to slavery's spread into the region. Lehman convincingly argues that the federal government aided and abetted the spread of slavery into the region, against the wishes of the majority of the population there and the federal government's own written policies. Two events sent the federal government in this direction: Congress's

decision to allow the president to appoint governors and other federal officials in the territories that would make up the Upper Mississippi Valley; and the election of George Washington, a slaveholder, as the nation's first president. According to Lehman, Washington refused to enforce the ban on slavery in the Northwest Territories, and he and subsequent presidents appointed slaveholders or proslavery men to federal positions there, men who were also unlikely to enforce the ban. Likewise, the federal government further aided the spread of slavery into the Northwest Territories by allowing U.S. army officers to bring slaves with them as servants while stationed at federal forts in the Upper Mississippi Valley, a subject worthy of its own monograph. The federal government further encouraged such practices by supplementing an officer's pay to cover the costs of maintaining a slave on the frontier. The government also afforded this perk to federal appointees, such as judges in the territories.

Lehman then proceeds to examine slavery in Illinois, Wisconsin, Iowa, and Minnesota in individual chapters. This approach succeeds in allowing the reader to see the particular political and economic dynamics taking place in each territory, and later state. The federal government appointed slave owners or former slave owners to powerful positions in all four territories. Many of these names are familiar to scholars of the era, such as Ninian Edwards who served as the first governor of the Illinois Territory. Similarly, Wisconsin's first territorial governor, Henry Dodge, owned slaves, though he later freed them while in the Badger State. Iowa's first two territorial governors, Robert Lucas and Richard Chambers, each owned slaves at one time and had strong ties to the slave South. Even Minnesota had a proslavery territorial governor in Willis A. Gorman, who appointed one of the territory's lone slave owners, Sylvanus Lowry, as adjutant general of the territory. All these federal appointments followed the precedent set by John Adams's appointment of proslavery Virginian William Henry Harrison, who owned black indentured servants while presiding over the territory as its first governor. Lehman argues that all these men significantly influenced each territory's attitudes toward slavery and avoided enforcing federal laws that prohibited slaveholder migration with the acknowledgement of their superiors in the federal government.

Even with the tacit sanction of slavery in the Upper Mississippi Valley, southern slave owners did not flock to the region with large numbers of slaves, certainly due in some respects to the legal uncertainty of the institution in the Old Northwest and above the Missouri Compromise Line. A shift in federal policy toward enforcement

of those laws would have meant a tremendous economic loss in human property for owners. Plus, more reliable profits could be found on the cotton frontier for slaveholders. As a result, slavery in the valley remained very minor and centered on two types of slave labor, domestic service and mining.

Slave domestic service took on a variety of modes in the Upper Mississippi Valley and was likely the most common form of slave labor in all four states. As mentioned above, soldiers had slaves with them in the forts lining the frontiers, including such future notables as Zachary Taylor and Jefferson Davis. One of those slave servants, Dred Scott, would meet his future spouse while stationed at Fort Snelling with his owner, Dr. John Ferguson, an army surgeon. Wisely, Lehman keeps Scott as a recurring figure in his narrative, bringing him to the fore when he enters the historical stage. Likewise, southerners who purchased land in the valley often brought a servant or two, in their migration northward. Lehman frequently argues that these slaves had great symbolic value as a sign of wealth and aspirations to live a "southern lifestyle" in the Midwest (p. 57). Perhaps many of these landowners simply wanted the extra labor needed to deal with maintaining a nineteenth-century household. Minnesota's experience with enslaved domestic servants took a different shape; Lehman suggests that only a handful of slaveholders, outside of the forts, lived there. Instead, the territory held a few resort hotels that welcomed vacationing southerners (and their servants) taking steamboats (often manned with slaves) up the Mississippi River to escape the summer heat of the South. Here Lehman successfully argues how slavery influenced the economy of a territory or state. Resort owners and towns needed revenue sources and southerners with their coterie of servants delivered much-needed money into the local economy. Still, Lehman misses an opportunity here to compare these resort hotels with those in Saratoga Springs, New York, or Newport, Rhode Island, places known for hosting southerners and their slaves on vacations.[1]

Lead mining also attracted slave owners to the Upper Mississippi Valley. Lehman shows how people in the Upper Mississippi Valley traversed their borders seeking new economic opportunities and shifting their labor resources to meet their needs. As lead mining entrepreneurs moved their endeavors from northwestern Illinois to southwestern Wisconsin and northeastern Iowa, they took their slave labor with them. The employment of slaves in mining remains an under-examined subject for scholars and unfortunately Lehman does not

go into much depth on the topic. Lehman provides no exact numbers, or even estimates, of how many slaves worked in the lead mines. What were their daily lives like in the mining areas? Were they closely supervised, or were they living "quasi-free" lives? Here again, he perhaps could have compared the employment of slaves in lead mining to their use in salt mining, a topic historians have examined recently.[2]

While Lehman makes a powerful argument for how federal government officials violated laws and allowed slavery to persist in the Upper Mississippi Valley, his work raises several concerns. He claims that these territories and states were rife with slaves and proslavery sentiments in several significant ways. Lehman notes that by 1860, "slavery had become extremely pervasive in Illinois at this time" (p. 176). Yet the evidence that he presents instead suggests that minute numbers of tiny pockets of slavery existed in the Upper Mississippi Valley. For the most part, he rarely gives exact numbers and provides no charts or tables for readers to gain a sense of the scope of the slave population in the valley. It would seem that the reason slavery managed to exist at all in the region was that these pockets remained small and isolated, contributing to the local economy without heinously violating the burgeoning free soil ideology and largely racist white majority sensibilities developing in the Midwest prior to the Civil War. At the same time, the white citizens of the valley had real examples of slavery or black

indentured servitude in their states to serve as tangible evidence of what they wanted to prohibit in the western territories, fueling the vitriolic discourse that led to the Civil War.

Overall, the book is useful for a general audience wishing to gain some background on slavery in the Midwest and for graduate students and historians looking to start their investigations on the topic and gain ideas for further research. The book contains no archival research beyond a few local newspapers. Most of the study appears built on published histories printed in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries and contains minimal sourcing. The book also lacks any maps. The latter two issues might have been the publisher's decision. In the end, the book offers a sketch rather than a portrait of slavery in the Upper Mississippi Valley.

Notes

[1]. John Hope Franklin, *A Southern Odyssey: Travelers in the Antebellum North* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1976).

[2]. John E. Stealey III, *The Antebellum Kanawha Salt Business & Western Markets* (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 1993); and John A. Jakle, "Salt on the Ohio Valley Frontier, 1770-1820," *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 59, no. 4 (December 1969): 687-709.

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