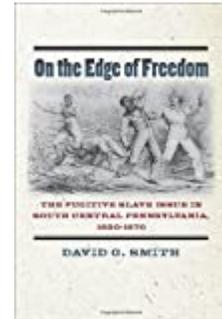




David G. Smith. *On the Edge of Freedom: The Fugitive Slave Issue in South Central Pennsylvania, 1820-1870.* New York: Fordham University Press, 2012. xiv + 324 pp. \$70.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8232-4032-6.



Reviewed by Joel Fishman (Duquesne University)

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Commissioned by Charles L. Zelden (Nova Southeastern University)

David G. Smith investigates the fugitive slave issue in south central Pennsylvania—the counties of Adams, Cumberland, and Franklin—during the four decades that preceded the Civil War. His objective is to evaluate the war's effects on the counties once the fighting commenced. In this well-written work, which began as a PhD dissertation, Smith provides a detailed history of the reaction to slavery in these areas bordering on the Mason-Dixon Line, the first place where fugitive slaves gained their freedom above Maryland and where activists worked politically to petition and use the legal system to assist fugitive slaves. This work is based on a variety of sources: newspapers, first-person recollections, antislavery society records, census data, letters and diaries, legal and legislative records, and local histories.

In his introduction, Smith points to the problems associated with such a study, reviewing various historians' interpretations of the fugitive slave issue. In chapter 1, he describes the region under study as a rural area, composed of a sizeable minority of Germans among the Scotch Irish and English populations. Excluding Philadelphia and Pittsburgh, the three counties had nearly 16 percent of the rural African American population in Pennsylvania (p. 17). There was little record of fugitive slaves before passage of the 1826 personal liberty

law, and only twelve writs in Adams County between 1827 and 1834. Smith maintains that the Underground Railroad appears to have involved more women, more secrecy and more black and white cooperation than some historians have believed (p. 27). The leading African American communities along the Pennsylvania border provided the most assistance to runaway slaves. But many slaves ran away without any assistance. The escape routes were primarily based on geography; slaves were able to move more easily from Maryland to Pennsylvania along certain routes. Smith describes the various routes and notes who helped the slaves, like William and Phoebe Wright and their children, some of the most important figures in the Underground Railroad in south central Pennsylvania.

Chapter 2 deals with Thaddeus Stevens, the leading Radical Reconstructionist, in his early career as an antislavery lawyer in Adams County in the late 1830s. Antislavery sentiment developed differently in south central Pennsylvania than in the Upper North. There were strong political and moral overtones in Pennsylvania, and far less emphasis on the abolitionist thought of William Lloyd Garrison and his followers. Smith agrees with historian Richard Current (*Old Thad Stevens: A Story of Ambition* [1942]) that Stevens was a politician first and

his commitment to antislavery early in his career appears weaker than recent biographers have portrayed (p. 41). Stevens lived in Adams County, and later moved to Lancaster in 1842, but still owned substantial property, often gave speeches in the area, and was on the board of Pennsylvania College in Gettysburg. Smith discusses Stevens's role as an antislavery lawyer who represented fugitives until 1829. Stevens started out as a supporter of the temperance movement but eventually moved to the fugitive slave movement in 1836 and spoke in favor of fugitive slaves at the Constitutional Convention of 1837, but officially voted against enfranchisement. Similar in position to Samuel Chase in Ohio, Stevens adopted the slavery issue as he became a "Conscience Whig" in the 1840s. Smith concludes the chapter with nineteenth-century observations on Stevens's actions that Stevens's antislavery position was a political decision to help forward his own position, observations that correlate with Current's perspective.

In chapter 3, Smith discusses antislavery petitioning in south central Pennsylvania. Between 1835 and 1844, the act of petitioning Congress by hundreds of societies raised the attention level of the issue of slavery, though the immediate effects of petitioning were not easily gauged. Petitioning had a long history in Pennsylvania, with Quakers petitioning against slavery in the 1780s. In the 1820s, Benjamin Lundy led further petitions against slavery in the District of Columbia, with at least one early petition from Adams County in 1828 and additional petitions sent to Congress in 1829. Smith argues that the petition tactics in Pennsylvania influenced the later Massachusetts campaigns and were critical to the expansion of antislavery sentiment throughout the country by the mid-1840s. Lundy also recruited Garrison to the antislavery cause. The petitioning campaign that Congress rejected increased northern sympathy for the abolitionists. Within the state, the Gettysburg African American petition of 1846 was similar to petitions in New York and Massachusetts.

In chapter 4, Smith centers his discussion on slavery issues in the courts between 1847 and 1851 where the south central Pennsylvania antislavery movement attempted to win cases against fugitive slave kidnapping. Ever since the Abolition Act of 1780, Pennsylvania adjudicated cases dealing with fugitive slaves and kidnapping. An 1826 personal liberty act helped fugitive slaves argue their cases in court but was declared unconstitutional in the US Supreme Court case of *Prigg v. Pennsylvania* (1842). Nonetheless, the Pennsylvania Abolition Society worked to keep slaves from being kidnapped and

enslaved. This group was national in that it had representatives in other states. Smith shows that between 1810 and 1840, the number of slaves living in south central Pennsylvania fell by somewhere between 40 and 60 percent.

It was in south central Pennsylvania that several important fugitive slave cases, including *Prigg*, came from. The *Prigg* case led to the 1847 personal liberty law that forbade local agents from assisting slave chasers and forbade the use of local jails to hold slaves. This not only meant that the catchers had to carry the slaves back to Maryland or Virginia without any local assistance but also permitted locals to bring kidnapping charges against the slavers. Smith reviews several cases from the mid-1840s that became widely publicized in newspapers in Pennsylvania as well as in other states.

In chapter 5, Smith discusses the passage of the Compromise of 1850 which nationalized the fugitive slave issue. He notes the importance of newspaper reporting in Adams County with its three papers: the *Compiler* that had Democratic leanings and favored southern policies; the *Sentinel* that supported Whig policies; and the *Star and Republican Banner* (Stevens owned it) that supported temperance and was antislavery in its reporting. In the debates over the Compromise of 1850, Stevens used his knowledge of fugitive slave issues along the Pennsylvania border to argue Free Soil doctrine for the new territories.

In a short chapter 6, Smith recognizes that fugitive cases were still coming before the courts following *Prigg*, but the reporting of cases decreased in all three of Adams County's newspapers. In its place, the newspapers reported more on the Kansas-Nebraska controversy, the creation of the Republican Party, and local state controversy in the various state elections between 1856 and 1860.

In chapter 7, Smith discusses the political controversies of 1859 and 1860. First, he examines a slave case involving Mag Palm that kept the fugitive slave issue alive. Smith then turns to the role of the newspapers in promoting political parties. Interestingly, John Brown had a base in Chambersburg, in Franklin County, for several months before he moved to Maryland to plot his attack on the Harpers Ferry arsenal. In south central Pennsylvania, Brown's failure resulted in several of his men being captured; but more important, it led to growth in political strength as the Republican Party merged with both the Whig and Know-Nothing parties. Anyone opposed to the southern-leaning Democrats joined the Republican

Party. The Republican Party won the October gubernatorial election and Abraham Lincoln went on to win Pennsylvania in November by 5,640 more votes than Andrew Curtin had won the governorship. In response to Lincoln's victory, the Democrats moved to repeal the state's personal liberty laws in an unsuccessful effort to preserve sectional peace. The Democratic tactic was to show that antislavery Republicans could be placed on the defensive against the fugitive slave issue. In 1861, another petition drive sought to repeal the personal liberty laws that had been incorporated into the new 1860 Penal Code. The more than one hundred petitions presented to the General Assembly, Smith argues, "offer a rare glimpse of antislavery and pro-colonization support at something approximating the grassroots" (p. 164). The petitions supporting colonization, repeal of the personal liberty law, and restrictions on African Americans outnumbered four to one petitions supporting the personal liberty law and African Americans. In 1861, meetings supporting the Union took place in Pennsylvania and other states in support of the Crittenden Compromise, but its failure to pass Congress helped lead to southern secession.

Once the war began (chapter 8), Smith argues, the fugitive slave issue actually grew as southern fugitives, called "contrabands," came into Pennsylvania. Local Democrats successfully used this issue to win political support for their antiwar agenda. Adams County, for instance, failed to support Stevens's programs and switched to a Democratic congressional representative in the 1862 election. South central Pennsylvania Democrats wanted a short, limited war with return to the status quo. They opposed the immigration of African Americans from other states and did not want them serving

as volunteers or militias against southern armies. In the 1863 gubernatorial election, south central counties once again voted Democratic. The Democrats continued their antagonistic policies toward African Americans even after Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamation. Adams County backed the Democratic candidate for president, George McClellan, in 1864 though the state went Republican.

Following the war (chapter 9), Smith finds that African American hopes for equality were "stymied by conservatism, war weariness, racism and anti-black rhetoric, significant demographic shifts, and the effects of wartime dislocations" (p. 199). African American supporters moved westward, soldiers given war bounties also left the region, core abolitionists living in Adams County grew older or died and declined in numbers, and the region kept close ties to the South. Later in the early decades of the twentieth century, the Ku Klux Klan maintained a presence in Gettysburg and Jim Crow policies were implemented in the area.

The work contains nine appendices relating to the text, including selected fugitive slave advertisements, the 1828 south central Pennsylvania petition opposing slavery in the District of Columbia, the 1847 Gettysburg African American petition, the 1846 Adams County petition, and the 1861 personal liberty laws. A bibliography of only primary sources is provided, but secondary sources can be found in the footnotes.

Smith has written an absorbing work relating the political, social, economic, and legal history of antebellum Pennsylvania that will serve as an important work for future research on the period and the state.

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