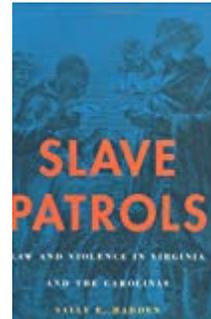




**Sally E. Hadden.** *Slave Patrols: Law and Violence in Virginia and the Carolinas.* Harvard Historical Studies. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2001. xi + 340 pp. \$35.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-674-00470-2.



**Reviewed by** Laura Croghan Kamoie (Department of History, American University)

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## The History, Methods, Composition, and Legacy of Southern Slave Patrols

The History, Methods, Composition, and Legacy of Southern Slave Patrols

In *Slave Patrols: Law and Violence in Virginia and the Carolinas*, Sally E. Hadden examines the public regulation of slavery through slave patrols in Virginia and the Carolinas between the early eighteenth century and the Civil War. Hadden sets out the following goals: to “better understand how the laws of slavery actually applied to slaves” (p. 2); to “flesh out our understanding of how slave laws were actually enforced, day to day” (p. 2); to “test the long-held, though unproven, view that patrols were composed of the poorest whites of Southern society” (p. 3); and to examine all of these questions comparatively across the South by focusing on the three eastern seaboard states that had the longest tradition of employing slave patrols and thus offer “a stable view of how patrols functioned through multiple decades, wars, and slave revolts” (p. 3). Hadden offers a well-written and thoroughly researched work that combines legal and social history to address these questions.

Hadden begins her analysis with the founding of the colonies and finds that all three had similar motivations

for establishing slave patrols. As slave populations increased and the threat of foreign invasion loomed, southerners saw a need for racial control above and beyond what individual slave owners could do. In other words, fear drove southerners to institute community policing in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries, and continued to motivate them to refine, expand, and fund patrols through the Civil War. Due to its Caribbean influence, early black majority, and threats from Native Americans and the Spanish, South Carolina established the earliest formal patrols by 1704, followed by Virginia by 1727 and North Carolina by 1753. By the American Revolution, “the main contours of patrols became evident” (p. 40) and “remain[ed] largely unchanged until the Civil War” (p. 31).

While offering some interesting contrasts, Hadden more often finds similarities between the activities, powers, composition, and community interest in slave patrols in the three states she studies. The strong evidence of similarity enables Hadden to make a number of fundamental conclusions about southern culture and society as a whole across a large chronological scope. Building on

the work of Bertram Wyatt-Brown, Hadden uncovers the pervasive southern approval of public racial control and (sometimes even mob) violence to define social norms and maintain the social order by almost any means necessary (pp. 68, 90).[1] Hadden complicates Wyatt-Brown's work on the concept of honor by showing that slaveholders' honor sometimes challenged community policing by pitting masters, who felt insulted at the implication that they needed assistance disciplining their slaves, against officially appointed white patrollers (pp. 130-131). She interestingly notes the many ironies involved here: slave owners fully believed in the need for slaves to have passes, yet some individual slave owners believed "that they (or their slaves) were above such limitations" and neglected to write them (p. 111); some masters went so far in protecting their own honor that they sheltered their rule-breaking slaves, and sometimes even slaves belonging to neighboring plantations, rather than allowing patrollers on their property to conduct searches, "creating an ironic conspiracy of masters and slaves hoodwinking patrollers" (p. 131).

Wealthy slave owners consistently resisted not only serving on the patrols themselves, which is not that surprising, but also refused in their capacities as legislators to approve many pieces of legislation that would have strengthened the scope of authority and effectiveness of the patrols in policing slave behavior (pp. 64-66, 70, 74, 82, 99). Hadden explains why: "patrols, by their very nature, were communal, intrusive in the master-slave relationship, and implied that the individual alone could not adequately control his bondsmen" (p. 70). Hadden effectively explores the complicated psychology of southerners' fear of slavery and slave rebellion. English newspaperman William H. Russell described the fear that most southerners felt but hesitated to admit to themselves: "[t]here is something suspicious in the constant never ending statement that 'we are not afraid of our slaves.' The curfew and the night patrol in the streets, the prisons and watch-houses, and the police regulations prove that strict supervision, at all events, is needed and necessary" (p. 172).

Hadden is also able to use the similarities that she finds in the patrols of Virginia and the Carolinas to make conclusions about their composition and activities. While there were local variations, patrollers were usually white men between the ages of sixteen and sixty chosen either from militia muster or tax rolls to serve terms on specific "beats." Though urban patrollers sometimes had additional responsibilities, patrollers generally had three principal duties: searching slave quarters,

dispersing slave gatherings, and safeguarding communities by patrolling the roads. Based on statistical analyses of two Virginia counties, Hadden finds that the men appointed to perform these duties "conform[ed] to the middle-status groups of their respective communities" (p. 97). They "were a representative cross-section of citizens—rich, poor, and in between" (p. 102) who, she proves in a useful analysis, differed from other authority figures in southern society who might also attempt to control slaves.

Therefore, alluding to the debate over the class origins of racism, Hadden apparently sees southern racism as neither originating from the top-down nor from the bottom-up. She contrasts her middle-class conclusion with that of Eugene Genovese, who put most of the onus on lower-class whites (p. 90), but doesn't explicitly play out the full meaning of her findings for this debate. Given the continued importance of this question for the twentieth century—see, for example, Michael Honey's work on race relations among southern workers [2]—this seems a missed opportunity given the centrality of patrol composition to her work. Her conclusions here could also use further refining on the issue of the role of overseers. She notes that overseers were not only the first line of defense before patrollers, but also that southern society increasingly turned to overseers to fill the patrols (pp. 81, 99, 129-130). Indeed, overseers' work on patrols was so important that southerners gave them exemptions from military service at the beginning of the Civil War (p. 175). So who were these overseers that were playing increasingly important roles on the patrols? From what class did overseers come? The triangular relationship between slaves, masters, and patrollers that Hadden uncovers seems very similar to the one Genovese found between slaves, masters, and overseers in *Roll, Jordan, Roll*. [3] Exploring this further would have strengthened her conclusions on the class composition of the patrols.

Hadden proves that southerners, across time and space, needed and wanted slave patrols in their communities. Southerners were willing to commit resources for patrols and some individuals nearly made careers out of patrolling, even taking positions in what developed as the urban South's first police forces. She also proves that "patrols constituted [such] an important presence in the lives of black and white Southerners" (p. 72) that whites, seeing patrols "as their true instrument of 'law enforcement'" (p. 216), reformulated them into vigilante groups like the KKK during Reconstruction, and ex-slaves could speak in detail about patrol activities and individual patrollers when interviewed in the 1930s.

What she cannot prove for lack of source material, however, is the effectiveness of slave patrols at actually regulating slave behavior. She does show that patrols discovered some rebellious plots and that slaves learned survival skills to thwart patrollers, but she cannot analyze the comparative effectiveness of patrols in the various states she studies. Southerners repeatedly expressed their belief in the effectiveness of patrols (62, 85), but in times of crisis, planters also said they did not believe that patrols could stop determined runaways from stealing themselves (p. 163). She concludes that “it [is] impossible to characterize all patrols, everywhere, as either habitually ineffective or habitually conscientious” (p. 69). Slaves themselves were really the only ones who could shed light on this question, and certainly slaves did not reveal at the time when they had gotten away with something nor brag to white WPA interviewers during the 1930s that they had done so. It is therefore difficult to determine how extensively slave life and culture were shaped by the work of the patrollers. Hadden’s work lays important groundwork for future research on this topic.

This book will appeal to those interested in southern history, race relations, and the history of American police forces. The book’s readability would make it appropriate

for undergraduate students; teachers may be especially interested in assigning the Epilogue, analyzing the transformation of patrols into the Klan, in undergraduate surveys. Hadden makes an important contribution to what she rightly identifies as a little-studied aspect of southern history. Patrols represented both the institutionalized public role in regulating slavery and, as important, a source of solace and confidence for whites in southern society’s ability to safely and effectively continue its reliance on the institution of slavery. She is strongest when analyzing how slave patrols worked at the local level and on a daily basis, and effectively connects the influence of laws to people’s everyday lives.

Notes:

[1]. Bertram Wyatt-Brown, *Southern Honor: Ethics and Behavior in the Old South* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1983).

[2]. Michael K. Honey, *Southern Labor and Black Civil Rights: Organizing Memphis Workers* (Urbana, Ill.: University of Illinois Press, 1993).

[3]. Eugene D. Genovese, *Roll, Jordan, Roll: The World the Slaveholders Made* (New York: Random House, 1976).

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