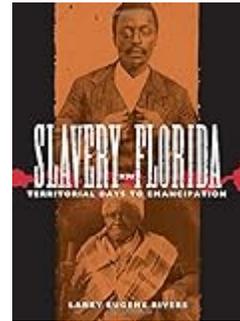




Larry Eugene Rivers. *Slavery in Florida: Territorial Days to Emancipation.* Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2000. xvi + 369 pp. \$29.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8130-1813-3.



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Published on H-Florida (May, 2002)

A Not So Peculiar Institution

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Scholars of Florida have traditionally worked on the margins of historical fields. With its Spanish past largely ignored by Latin Americanists and its British past equally overlooked by scholars of the United States, only a handful of colonial historians have been able to attract attention to Florida's early history and create rather than follow scholarly debates. Scholars of the antebellum era face a different problem; one that has nonetheless resulted in their similarly marginalized status. With few exceptions, studies of nineteenth-century Florida have struggled to reshape the central debates in U.S. or Old South historiography. Although its geographic locale and political history place Florida at the southern edge of the South and an early member of the Confederacy, the state has not been a central figure in Southern historiography and is practically ignored in national studies. *Slavery in Florida: Territorial Days to Emancipation*, by historian Larry Eugene Rivers of Florida A&M University, attempts to rectify this oversight. By placing the history of the Florida's "peculiar institution" squarely into the mainstream of modern slave scholarship, Rivers ef-

fectively reminds us that in the nineteenth century the American South included the state of Florida and that slavery in this state was not so peculiar.

This volume is the first synthetic overview of slavery in the state of Florida since Julia Floyd Smith's *Slavery and Plantation Growth in Antebellum Florida* (1973). Smith's book primarily focused on the experiences of the large slaveholders in Middle Florida, what amounted to the cotton belt experience in Florida. Smith explored a range of economic and legal issues, various aspects of plantation management, the sale and marketing of cotton, and the expansion of the plantation system as a whole.[1] In the subsequent three decades, the field of slave scholarship has shifted away from the world masters made to explorations of how slaves survived their ordeals and created communities and cultures of their own. In a task that is long over due, Rivers brings the history of Florida up to date by providing a wide-ranging social history that prioritizes the variety of slave experiences. This approach eschews an overarching interpretive thesis for a plethora of detailed stories. In Rivers's words, he has "not intended to use this study simply to test a

specific idea, concept, or interpretation.” Instead, *Slavery in Florida* provides a synthetic “portrait of how enslaved blacks fared in antebellum Florida” (p. xiv).

Rivers divides his research into chapters that cover most of the standard topics in modern slave scholarship: family life, religion, living conditions, black-white relations, resistance, and the Civil War and emancipation. Other chapters examine topics more particular to the history of Florida. Rivers provides an historical overview of the Spanish periods, compares the large and small plantations in Middle Florida with the quite distinct experiences in East and West Florida, explores the experiences of free blacks, and examines interactions between African-American slaves and neighboring Creek, Seminole, and Mikasuki Indians. As a whole, this is by far the most in-depth monograph on slavery in Florida from 1821, the start of the territorial period, until the end of the Civil War in 1865. Anyone interested in understanding Florida’s antebellum past will want to look through this book. Rivers has drawn upon what appears to be nearly every available type of primary source, and he integrates the interpretations of countless modern scholars of slavery and Florida history.

Scholars might be surprised to discover how well the experiences of masters and slaves in Florida parallel those in the rest of the Old South. Rivers, with few exceptions, refrains from exploring the peculiarities of Florida’s “peculiar institution.” Instead, he repeatedly asserts how his research confirms the conclusions of many other recent historians. For example, Rivers explicitly echoes Herbert Gutman when he contends “slaves in Florida differed little from servants elsewhere in their attempt to establish familial relationships.” (p. 105). He verifies the conclusions of John Blassingame and a host of other scholars who demonstrated how “raising a family, establishing kinship ties, practicing religious beliefs, and socializing sustained slaves in their struggle to endure the emotional and physical stress of bondage.” (p. 162). He buttresses Ira Berlin’s claim that slaves combined African and Christian religious practices into a “syncretism amalgam,” (p. 123) and he follows Drew Gilpen Faust’s argument that white women found slaveholding too burdensome during the Civil War. In short, Rivers emphatically and repeatedly reminds his readers that “slaves in Florida differed little from servants elsewhere” (p. 105).

This volume does more than place the experiences of Florida squarely into the core of slave scholarship. In a few instances, Rivers challenges conclusions that are routinely repeated by others. Nowhere is this more true

than in his assertion that the Second Seminole War was “what probably constituted the largest slave uprising in the annals of North American history” (p. 219). Rivers effectively demonstrates the participation of hundreds of fugitive slaves and black Seminoles, who he states were still maroons, in the war. Rivers chooses not to challenge the conventional definition of slave rebellion, however, in this discussion. Instead, he stresses that the historian’s neglect to understand the war as a slave rebellion is compounded by its relatively large number of enslaved participants. This needs further explanation. Any definition of “slave uprising” that includes the Second Seminole War would also include, at the very least, the American Revolution, War of 1812, and American Civil War. Rivers’s contribution, therefore, may not necessarily be about the peculiarities of a particular historical event in Florida, but rather in regard to the ways in which slaves and fugitive slaves used disruptions within dominant American society to pursue their own goals. At the same time, Rivers comes close to turning some of the free black Seminole participants back into slaves. As Katja May and others have shown, many black Seminoles descended from slaves but were not maroons in the traditional sense. Through the intermarriage and adoptions of parents and their own birth into matrilineal Seminole clans, these black Seminoles were fully Seminole. Their participation in the war may have had more to do with their kinship ties and village responsibilities within Seminole society than the goals of emancipation and freedom that motivated Southern slaves.[2]

Such criticism should not deter teachers and students of Florida’s past from reading *Slavery in Florida*. Although the volume follows trends in slave scholarship more than challenge them, Rivers provides a much-needed overview of the institution in antebellum Florida. Readers will appreciate the volume’s breadth and accessibility, and they will come away with a clearer understanding of why Florida should not be seen as a marginal figure in the Old South.

Notes

[1]. Julia Floyd Smith, *Slavery and Plantation Growth in Antebellum Florida, 1821-1860* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 1973).

[2]. Katja May, *African Americans and Native Americans in the Creek and Cherokee Nations, 1830s to 1920s* (New York: Garland Publishing, Inc., 1996). See also J. Leitch Wright, Jr., *Creeks and Seminoles: The Destruction and Regeneration of the Muscogulge People* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1986), 95-7.

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Citation: Andrew Frank. Review of Rivers, Larry Eugene, *Slavery in Florida: Territorial Days to Emancipation*. H-Florida, H-Net Reviews. May, 2002.

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