

Gleanings of Freedom: Free and Slave Labor Along the Mason-Dixon Line, 1790-1860

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Review

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Grivno, Max *Gleanings of Freedom: Free and Slave Labor along the Mason-Dixon Line, 1790-1860*. University of Illinois Press, \$50.00 ISBN 978-0-252-03652-1

Exploring Labor along the Mason-Dixon Line

Max Grivno, assistant professor of history at the University of Southern Mississippi, has written an ambitious and fine-grained analysis of rural life and labor in northern Maryland that addresses important questions about “the evolution of race, class, and labor regimes in the early national and antebellum United States” (6). *Gleanings of Freedom: Free and Slave Labor along the Mason-Dixon Line, 1790-1860* seeks to be “a history of the entire rural workforce” in several Maryland counties along the Pennsylvania border (3).

In particular, Grivno’s examination of economic change and challenge facing residents of northern Maryland is deeply illuminating. Grivno charts how “slavery’s expansion” in that region from 1790 to 1820 “was driven by the migration of planters from the tobacco counties of the Chesapeake” (38). That era of prosperity and speculation witnessed a chronic shortage of free labor, a decline in the availability of indentured servants, and the concomitant rise of slaveholding. It was also a period of great uncertainty—tobacco cultivation, despite the best attempts of those westward migrating Chesapeake planters, never really took hold.

Thus, farmers experimented as they searched for an economically viable commodity: livestock raising, corn, wheat, and even produce for truck farming. Commercial wheat production, according to Grivno, “had deep roots along Mason and Dixon’s Line” with farmers in both Pennsylvania and northern Maryland growing wheat for the market since the days of the American Revolution (29). After 1790, the region’s farmers “plunged headfirst into the churning but rising waters of the international commodity market, paying little

heed to their growing dependence on foreign markets and their lengthening lines of credit" (34). That bubble economy continued to expand into the 1810s, bringing with it higher commodity prices, greater wheat production, and higher agricultural wages. Unfortunately, the Panic of 1819 would hit the region incredibly hard, permanently depressing commodity prices and wages and as well ushering in an era of great economic uncertainty. Here, Grivno's work shines. He has done a meticulous job of focusing his lens tightly on the local, particular, and individual. He captures the legal, social, agricultural, economic, and cultural fluidity of life in northern Maryland after 1819 vividly. As well, he is particularly sensitive to the impact those contingent forces had upon everyone: landowners, skilled workers, itinerant laborers, free blacks, slaves, and even women and children. Better yet, he insistently links those experiences to regional, national, and even international forces—commodity networks that stretched to Baltimore and far beyond, the rising debate over slavery and freedom in the U.S., the seemingly ceaseless mobility of laborers, the power of the interstate slave trade, and even the emergence of class and racial conflict.

Grivno's analysis largely hews to a post-1819 declension model with slavery becoming a "statistical nub" by 1860; the increasingly "desperate struggle for survival" waged by rural laborers after 1820; and the "clarified racial distinctions" and decline in status of free blacks as free labor became the norm (16, 21, 58). Ultimately, Grivno argues that a combination of the vicissitudes of wheat economy, the seasonal labor demands of mixed agriculture and truck farming, the proximity of free territory, employers' wavering commitment to slavery, and the ultimate inflexibility of slavery as a labor system led to gradual decline of slavery in the region.

Although slave labor clearly declined from 1820 to 1860 in northern Maryland, sorting out causation remains extremely difficult. In particular, Grivno's insistence on the role of "the relatively inflexible system of slavery" in leading to the institution's demise there remains debatable (7). Further, he argues that northern Maryland farmers, "convinced that slavery was an outmoded, inefficient form of labor extraction and...an impediment to recovery," agreed with a "growing chorus of writers [who] posited a stark dichotomy between slavery and free labor that locked these institutions in an almost Manichaeian struggle for supremacy" (19). Grivno forcefully demonstrates that landowners and hirers gradually shifted to free labor after 1820 as they wrestled with declining commodity prices, but does not convincingly demonstrate that more than a handful of farmers made that shift because of misgivings about slavery.

Grivno also argues that landowners and hirers, largely in response to great economic insecurity after 1820, “grafted the most attractive elements of free labor onto the peculiar institution” as part of a doomed effort to adapt slavery to those emerging economic realities (20). For Grivno, the ideas taken from free labor included use of cottagers, term slavery/delayed manumission, slave self-hire, short-term slave hiring, and a variety of other flexible hiring arrangements. Again, Grivno sees any adoption of flexible labor arrangements as implicit evidence of a desire to abandon slavery. But were those adaptations really taken from free labor, and were they actually evidence of a faltering commitment to the peculiar institution? Those management techniques were used in many other parts of the South, even places where nearly half the population was enslaved, without ever weakening slavery or even truly attenuating slaveholders’ control over slaves. Taken together, those adaptations could just as easily be seen as evidence of the powerful endurance and suppleness of the peculiar institution—it was easily adapted to fit the particular labor needs in any given location (urban, rural, mixed agriculture, large-scale cash crop production, small farms, and the like).

For example, Diane Mutti Burke’s *On Slavery’s Border* examines small slaveholding households in another border state, Missouri. Those counties, home to small slaveholding and a mixed agricultural economy, were also just across the Missouri or Mississippi Rivers from free territory. Burke’s conclusions for Missouri suggest a possible alternative explanation for what Grivno details—slavery, although on its way to becoming an insignificant percentage of the labor force by the beginning of the Civil War, nonetheless powerfully shaped local culture, even in places where it witnessed a precipitous decline in the nineteenth century.

Despite that, Grivno’s focus on the failure of tobacco as a cash crop in northern Maryland may capture something important and generalizable about slavery along the border: the success or failure of cash crops such as tobacco may have played a significant role in the shaping of labor regimes. Census data from Missouri, Maryland, and northern Kentucky border counties suggest that, in places where tobacco continued to be cultivated for the market (even as part of mixed agriculture), slavery remained a more significant part of the labor force. By 1860, those Missouri border counties all grew some tobacco and had slaves comprising eight to almost thirty percent of the population. In Kentucky, northern border counties from Louisville east had slaves comprising from less

than one percent to a third of the population—tobacco cultivation represented the key distinguishing characteristic—counties with larger slave populations grew tobacco (<http://mapserver.lib.virginia.edu/index.html>).

Grivno additionally asserts that landowners and hirers in the region, even before the Panic of 1819, often had qualms about slavery. The evidence, however revelatory about the chronic labor difficulties northern Maryland farmers struggled with, does not clearly support such a claim. For instance, in the last two decades of the eighteenth century, Otho Holland Williams experimented frequently with his workforce, employing German redemptioners, tenant farmers, and slaves. Grivno asserts, however, that “despite his [Williams’s] misgivings about slavery, Williams resolved to restructure his workforce around a resident manager who would oversee an expanded force of slaves” (27). Grivno carries the notion of support for slavery as shallow-rooted into the nineteenth century when he argues that the “severity of the economic downturn [after 1819] caused some slaveholders to question their commitment to slavery” (73). Much of the evidence from northern Maryland does indeed show hirers and landowners struggling to adjust to changing market conditions by experimenting with new labor arrangements, but not necessarily repudiating slavery in any way. For example, Grivno details Frisby Tilghman’s frequent attempts to sell off or hire out surplus slaves, but such actions do not necessarily demonstrate that his confidence in slavery had been shaken (74-75).

Gleanings of Freedom represents a valuable and fresh examination of the lives of people—landowners, skilled workers, itinerant laborers, free blacks, slaves, women, and children—in one region. Grivno’s work asks and raises important questions about slavery, race, and class. His book also insistently and effectively connects those lives and experiences to much greater forces at play in nineteenth century America. In conclusion, Max Grivno has written a thickly descriptive and nuanced account of the “evolution of race, class, and labor regimes” in Maryland from just after the American Revolution up to the Civil War (6). His book, based upon voluminous research in a wide array of document streams that are very difficult to sift through, represents an ultimately successful and challenging intervention into an emerging field examining history along slavery’s border.

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by the University of Virginia Press in October 2012.