

Slavery's Borderland: Freedom and Bondage Along the Ohio River

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Review

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Salafia, Matthew *Slavery's Borderland: Freedom and Bondage Along the Ohio River*. University of Pennsylvania Press, \$55.00 ISBN 978-0-8122-4521-9

An Important New Look at the Ohio River Country

In the first installment of his magisterial *The Road to Disunion*, William Freehling reminded his readers that “change was omnipresent, varieties abounded, [and] visions multiplied” in the antebellum North and South.¹ Written over two decades ago, Freehling’s work implored scholars to discard the shallow characterization of two monolithic sections that were diametric contradictions of one another. Rather, he urged historians to consider the many shades of gray that existed within each region. Perhaps no section of the antebellum United States witnessed as much graying as did the border between slavery and freedom that ran from the Kansas-Missouri frontier, up the Ohio River, along the Mason-Dixon Line, and finally to the mouth of the Delaware River. In recent years several excellent studies have answered Freehling’s challenge and broadened our understanding of this diverse borderland, including the works of Nicole Etcheson, Patience Essah, Christopher Phillips, Stanley Harrold, William C. Harris, Diane Mutti Burke, Max Grivno, Mark Geiger, and Aaron Astor. With *Slavery’s Borderland: Freedom and Bondage along the Ohio River*, Matthew Salafia adds his name to that impressive list.

Salafia focuses on the counties in Ohio, Indiana, and Kentucky that bordered the Ohio River and argues that the inhabitants of this region, although separated by the boundary between freedom and slavery, actually had much in common. This common thread began with a shared ancestry that dated back to the first settlers hacking through the wilderness of Kentucky and was actually strengthened during the antebellum period by commercial networks forged by traffic on the Ohio River. Whereas most historians see the Ohio River as a rigid boundary between competing labor systems and ways of life, Salafia considers the border “an abstraction that was both decisive and elusive.” (p. 3) While the

growing sectional conflict of the 1850s pushed most northerners and southerners to adopt hardened attitudes and consider their distant American cousins as enemies, the people of the Ohio River borderland condemned extremism, searched for compromise, and celebrated their history of accommodation.

Different labor systems separated Kentucky from Ohio and Indiana, yet abolitionism never took root on the southern periphery of the Old Northwest. Whites on both sides of the river shared a commitment to a powerful form of racism that was made stronger in the Lower North because the boundary between slavery and freedom was so amorphous. Enslaved persons fled Kentucky and African Americans worked on both banks of the river, but they often discovered that life on the northern side of the river was not totally different from their experiences in the northerly reaches of the slave South. According to Salafia, wage labor and chattel slavery appeared remarkably similar to the inhabitants of the Ohio River Valley, and fears among white Ohioans and Indianans that a continuous wave of African Americans would overrun their states helped embed white racism and resulted in second-class status for blacks who called the Lower North home.

Throughout eight topical chapters Salafia chronicles the development of the Ohio River Valley from several angles. The author draws on a wide array of sources, including manuscripts, court records, travel accounts, slave narratives, and census records to probe the complex political economy of the Ohio River borderland. Salafia traces the region from the prehistoric period all the way through the onset of the Civil War, but the bulk of the book centers on the Ohio River borderland from the passage of the Northwest Ordinance in 1787 through the secession crisis of 1861. Salafia finds fault with the traditional viewpoint that the Northwest Ordinance clearly divided the free soil of what eventually became Indiana and Ohio from the slave territory of Kentucky. Rather, the key antislavery provision of the ordinance did not free slaves already in the Northwest Territory and included no enforcement clause to prevent future residents from arriving with their slaves. It would be up to future settlers, not a Congressional decree, to define the border. Over time those settlers did not create a region of competing interests but instead “forged economic, social, and political connections that crossed the Ohio River” and grew stronger as the sectional crisis escalated. (p. 65) During the territorial phase Ohio and Indiana both utilized unfree systems of labor, which Salafia labels indentured servitude in Ohio and chattel servitude (a mixture of slavery and indentured servitude) in Indiana. Thus, the distinction between slavery and freedom along the border was

quite blurry from the very start. Not until these two states applied for statehood did they officially ban slavery, but according to Salafia this antislavery stance was rooted in a desire to create more opportunity for whites who would not have to compete with chattel slavery rather than an ideological conviction about the depravity of the peculiar institution.

Salafia devotes a couple of chapters to the experiences of enslaved and free African Americans who lived and worked in the Ohio River Valley. The close-knit ties between whites in Ohio, Indiana, and Kentucky produced an onerous, even dangerous, environment for African Americans. In the aftermath of the Missouri Compromise, politicians in these states made a conscious decision to promote commerce across the sectional border and to regulate racial boundaries in order to muffle potential sectional conflict. Maintenance of the African American population became the key to intersectional harmony: black laws in Ohio and Indiana kept most African Americans from advancing upward in society; whites in the border region called for strict enforcement of the Fugitive Slave Law; and in extreme instances, like the Cincinnati Riot of 1829, whites relied upon vigilante justice to signal that the Lower North was anything but a Garden of Eden for blacks. The realities of the black experience in Indiana and Ohio led many Kentucky slaves to weigh carefully the risks and benefits of flight. Escape attempts usually only occurred after some cataclysmic event, like a severe beating or the sale of a loved one, because most African Americans “concluded that freedom did not offer all the privileges that slavery denied, nor did slavery deny all the privileges of freedom.” (pp. 168-169) Through his investigation of the borderland’s African American community, Salafia demonstrates how nebulous the dividing line between slavery and freedom could be for blacks as well as whites.

Much of Salafia’s argument can be read as a response to Stanley Harrold’s *Border War: Fighting over Slavery before the Civil War*, which portrays the border region as a place of near endless conflict in the three decades before 1861. Whereas Harrold depicts the border as an inelastic meeting place of slavery and freedom that produced violence and hatred, Salafia’s border is a place marked by accommodation and conciliation. Salafia utilizes county-level economic data to show that on the eve of the Civil War, the political economy of both sides of the river was remarkably similar. According to Salafia, the close economic and political connections constructed during the antebellum period led political leaders in Kentucky to eschew secession and the people of the southern counties of Indiana and Ohio to push for some compromise to rescue the nation

from the grips of Civil War in 1861. Salafia's discussion of the breakup of the Union, however, seems a bit hurried. He does not really wrestle with the fact that the majority of the people of Ohio and Indiana opted to support the Union cause and tends to neglect the reality that Unionists within the Kentucky legislature expended considerable energy to prevent the Bluegrass State from joining the secession movement. It is likely that at the crescendo of the sectional crisis the story of the border region was more nuanced than either Salafia or Harrold suggest. No doubt most of the people in the Ohio River Valley hoped for a peaceful settlement of the national crisis up until the bombardment of Fort Sumter, but a strong fealty to the Union pushed many Ohioans and Indianans to call for the subjugation of Kentucky once it adopted a policy of neutrality in the spring of 1861. Likewise, a potent identification with the Confederacy also provoked a sizable number of Kentuckians to consider disunion the most viable alternative during the secession crisis. In this instance Salafia's focus on the counties bordering the Ohio River tends to skew the larger response to the breakup of the Union in Ohio, Indiana, and Kentucky.

Nevertheless, Salafia has produced a first-rate study of the Ohio River border. His book adds complexity and depth to the story of the antebellum United States and he convincingly argues that most people within this borderland gazed across the Ohio River and saw collaborators and partners rather than mortal enemies. No longer should historians be content to portray the Ohio River as a well-defined line that marked a point of stark contrast between the sections. Thanks to the careful work of Salafia, the border has been colored with several additional shades of gray.

Michael Robinson is an assistant professor of history at the University of Mobile. He is currently revising a manuscript entitled "Fulcrum of the Union: The Border South and the Secession Crisis, 1859-1861."

¹ William W. Freehling, *The Road to Disunion. Vol. I: Secessionists at Bay, 1776-1854* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990), vii.