

Sweet Freedom's Plains: African Americans On The Overland Trails, 1841-1869

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Review

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Moore, Shirley Ann Wilson *Sweet Freedom's Plains: African Americans on the Overland Trails, 1841-1869*. University of Oklahoma Press, \$29.95 ISBN 9780806155623

The Long Trail to Freedom

Over 500,000 Americans went west on the Oregon, California, and Mormon Trails between 1841 and 1869. And although popular representations of these westering folks would have you believe otherwise, not all were of European background. Enslaved African Americans and free blacks also made the overland journey; perhaps as many as 15,000 took to the trails, although their exact numbers will probably never be known. As Shirley Ann Wilson Moore elegantly shows in her new study, placing the experience of African Americans at the center of a study of western emigration requires a “reconceptualization of the emigrant narrative.” (5) This reconceptualization is long overdue and with this work Moore has made a significant and vital intervention in western history and U.S. history as a whole.

In order to understand why and how African Americans made the journey west, we must first appreciate the conditions under which black men and women toiled in the nineteenth century. With broad strokes, Moore paints a picture of black life in the antebellum U.S. Slavery, black codes, violence, and punishment constricted black lives whether they lived in Texas, Kentucky, or Tennessee. For slaves and free blacks, there were ample reasons to inspire the trek overland. Occasionally, the desire to convey the similarities of overlanders leads Moore to collapse differences between and among African Americans. For example, she states, “African Americans who headed west on the overland trails, free or enslaved, did so for similar reasons... All made their way with caution, acutely aware of the conditions surrounding them yet with an abiding conviction that their lives would be changed for the better once they stepped out on the trail.” (53) Presumably, black travelers had different goals and expectations when they

headed west as overlanders, and not all may have greeted the move with such enthusiasm. This is a small grievance, however, as Moore herself gives ample evidence throughout the text of the diversity of black overlanders.

Scholars of African American history will find much to admire in *Sweet Freedom's Plains*. Moore complicates our understanding of the peculiar institution by providing vignettes of slave life that have not been given adequate attention in previous studies. The stories of slaves forced on the Mormon Trail by their owners or those of the slave hunters who patrolled the jumping-off towns along the Missouri River, make for great reading but also remind us of the ways slaves and slavery shaped the overland experience. Indeed, the book is overflowing with examples that enrich our understanding of black life, free and slave. One of the most intriguing stories is that of cartographer T.H. Jefferson, reputedly the eldest son of Sally Hemmings and Thomas Jefferson, who, in 1849, published a detailed map and guide of the California Trail. A champion of western emigration, Jefferson offered the traveler meticulous descriptions of the flora and fauna as well as practical advice to assist the uninitiated or “greenhorn.”

The overland journey could be dangerous but it was always laborious. Moore provides fascinating accounts of the ways in which African Americans “shouldered the daily work of the trails.” (122). This meant that slave and free, men and women, drove oxen, herded cattle and sheep, hunted for game, hauled heavy cargo on their backs, and cooked the meals that sustained the overlanders. This work could mean the difference between a party that survived the trail and one that did not. In a particularly insightful chapter, “Life, Death, and Acts of Kindness,” Moore confronts the issue of violence on the trails. Contrary to the lurid tales told by newspapers and fear mongers, the number of Indians killed by emigrants was higher than the number of emigrants killed by Native Americans. Between 1840 and 1860, 462 Native Americans died at the hands of emigrants and 362 emigrants were killed by Natives on the overland trails. (131) As this chapter makes clear, African Americans harbored anti-Indian sentiments just as white emigrants did, and some became accomplished “Indian fighters.” It is refreshing to find such a forthright discussion of these conflicts.

One of the most significant contributions of *Sweet Freedom's Plains* is its discussion of slave agency. The reader gains a new appreciation of the intricate and obstacle-strewn path many slaves took to freedom. The story of Howard Estes, is but one example. Estes, a Missouri slave, is offered an opportunity to

buy himself from his owner for \$1000 if he will drive a herd of cattle from Missouri to California. Estes earned the price of his freedom papers in the California goldfields only to have his master renege on the deal after receiving the money. He spends years working to buy himself, and his wife and children who he had left behind in Missouri. Stories like these remind us that the trails themselves did not always lead to freedom; the journey to manumission could continue long after black overlanders reached their destination, even if they landed in a free state.

Moore also includes the stories of slave women who traveled the trails, many of whom would set up businesses in the West after they earned their freedom. Those unfamiliar with the story of the midwife and philanthropist, Biddy Mason, will be fascinated by her convoluted road to freedom. Forced on the trail from Salt Lake City to California by her Mormon master Robert Smith in 1851, Mason gathered vital intelligence about the possibility of freedom in California from a black teamster she met on the trail. Smith, however, had plans to keep Mason and his other slaves in bondage until he could sequester them to Texas where their status as slaves would be more secure. Mason finally earned her freedom in California courts in 1856, after horse and mule trader Robert Owens, and other African American Angelenos, tipped off local sheriffs that Smith had hidden Mason and his other slaves in the Santa Monica Mountains. The history of the trails is much richer here given Moore's attention to gender.

A tremendous amount of careful research provides the foundation of this book. Moore consulted an impressive array of diaries, letters, journals, maps, and western reminiscences, in addition to conducting her own oral histories with the descendants of black overlanders. The expansive bibliography is a fantastic resource for anyone interested in exploring this topic further. Moore's attention to such a diverse array of sources allows her to weave a complex narrative and move overland history far beyond the simple stories of a few well-known pioneers.

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