

# Slavery On The Periphery: The Kansas-missouri Border In The Antebellum And Civil War Eras

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## Review

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**Epps, Kristen** *Slavery on the Periphery: The Kansas-Missouri Border in the Antebellum and Civil War Eras*. University of Georgia Press, \$59.95 ISBN 9780820350509

### Slavery on the Borderlands

Slavery has been called the original sin in American history, and there have justifiably been hundreds of studies, books, and treatments of its many nuances and intersectionalities. It continues to be in many ways *the* American conversation. One shortcoming in the historiography of American race-based slavery, however, has been the dearth of more detailed examinations of slavery in geographic areas outside of the primary Confederate states. Western Pennsylvania, for example, was involved in slavery well into the 1830s, and visitors to museums and libraries there can now see this more carefully documented. But it is only recently that this has occurred, and it remains an ongoing inquiry (ex. visit the Heinz Museum in Pittsburgh).

In a similar way, there have been many accounts of the political violence in the border regions of Kansas and Missouri prior to and during the Civil War, but little scholarship in comparison on the topic of how slavery actually functioned and grew there. Kristen Epps has attempted to address this shortcoming in her detailed treatment of slavery in the border region between Kansas and Missouri. Although written primarily as history, Epps is very comfortable with interdisciplinary tools and attempts to balance the story with both micro and macro perspectives, often using the semantics of sociology and social science. This includes analysis of “contested spaces,” considering the “functions” of slavery, and the formation of frontier and race-based identities.

The author draws on an impressive number of local, but pertinent sources, ranging from newspapers to letters and personal records. Census data, as one might expect, is also important to the narrative. Epps is able to weave together individual stories of families and small groups of slaves and place them within

the much broader growing regional conflicts that many Civil War aficionados are quite familiar with in the broader Civil War narrative. Whether it be Samuel and Jane Harper, who immigrated to Canada after being freed in John Brown's 1858 raid, or the often untold stories of "conductors" and "stationmasters" along the Underground Railroad, Epps commands details and specific examples to guide the reader inside the causes and effects of "Bloody Kansas" and the border warfare that would define the region for several decades.

Epps has a solid appreciation for the complexities of slavery, slave ownership, and the nature of the slave economy. Although the slave markets in the Kansas-Missouri border region functioned quite differently in some ways from those in New Orleans, or Richmond, they none-the-less demonstrated again the economic power of slavery that, wedded with capitalism even on small and local scales, made the structure so difficult to destroy outside of a terrible war.

Epps also has sensitivity to singular agency and motive. Although many details and emotions of individual actors cannot be recreated decades later, the author does not shy from appreciating what they may have been, based on the available empirical evidence and this is a worthy accomplishment—forging a voice years later for those who were allowed no voice, or left no trace of it.

This is a well-written, well-researched work on a very specific and needed topic that adds significantly to the story of race-based slavery in America. The scope, which includes the Civil War era, is inclusive, but the narrative is rich and remains focused. The work is likely to stand the test of time and remain meaningful to related studies.

*Jack Trammell is associate professor at Randolph-Macon College, and recent author of The Richmond Slave Trade, and A Short History of Richmond.*