

Virginia Waterways and the Underground Railroad

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Recommended Citation

Trammel, Jack (2018) "Virginia Waterways and the Underground Railroad," *Civil War Book Review*: Vol. 20 : Iss. 2 .

DOI: 10.31390/cwbr.20.2.19

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.lsu.edu/cwbr/vol20/iss2/19>

Review

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Spring 2018

Newby-Alexander, Cassandra L. *Virginia Waterways and the Underground Railroad*. History Press, \$21.99 ISBN 9781625859631

The past several years have seen a new energy and heightened scholarly attention to many diverse aspects of American race-based slavery. Details of the economic complexities of the slave trade, for example, have been studied intensely. This general movement has brought many new and old conversations into the mainstream—some for the first time—and reemphasized the centrality of slavery to the American experience before, during, and after the Civil War. However, there still remain many myths, problematic archetypes, and stereotypes associated with American slavery and its component parts. Perhaps the greatest of the myths are those that persist about the system itself.

The myth of slave passivity should have died long ago, yet Professor Newby-Alexander reminds us in her book *Virginia Waterways and the Underground Railroad* of the radical role human agency and intellect played in slave resistance in new and compelling ways. Her research and the subsequent book are an exploration of the myriad and creative ways that those trapped in slavery actively imagined and acted on their desires to escape in spite of the elaborate system set up to prevent them from doing so.

Newby-Alexander uses the waterways to freedom in Virginia theme to actually tell a much broader story about race-based slavery and escape. This story includes myriad elements, ranging from official policies restricting slave movement that constantly evolved at the capitol in Richmond to the generational family legacies relating to long-planned and carefully arranged slave escape attempts. The overall impression the reader is left with suggests that slaves were often much less passive than traditional narratives suggest, and that there may have been a significant ongoing propagandized attempt by Southern authorities to dismiss the scale and scope for the sake of keeping public calm.

The reality as the author reports it in Virginia was that escape or the attempt at escape was a routine, daily, widespread occurrence, and that waterways like the James River and its canal system which were the mass transit system of the day before the railroads were the logical geographic point of contact. They were the social and economic spaces where transients had a better chance of escaping notice and enlisting unofficial aid. Ships on countless rivers, inlets, and harbors of all shapes and sizes from around the globe were constantly going to and fro on such waterways, and whether the attempt was elaborately planned or completely impulsive, to be near the water was to literally be near to freedom.

Newby-Alexander outlines what begins over time to have the feel of a quasi-police state—and not always just in the South—that went to draconian lengths to differentiate between white and black; free and slave; legitimate or illegitimate. The number of “accidental” arrests of authentic free blacks is part of this drama: no one of color, or perceived to be of color, was ever safe. In such a climate an escape mentality was inevitable, just as the paranoia presented by wary authorities was a product of an obsessive race-based system, as well.

Shining through it all, Newby-Alexander makes clear, is human will. The myth that blacks were accustomed to slavery by an innate temperament implodes when confronted with the facts of the escape legacy, which included a great deal of organized help through the Underground Railroad. The author outlines the story up through the Civil War and beyond.

Newby-Alexander is an established scholar and the text is supplemented with endnotes although the choice of publisher and audience is intended to bring this story to a more general audience. Nonetheless, this should be considered a scholarly work, with notable research and use of primary sources. It adds to the literature on American race-based slavery and includes unique content, as well as episodes and information more widely known in the escape narrative. Overall, it is a noteworthy contribution that comprises both a good read and interesting scholarship.

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