



Aiming for Pensacola: Fugitive Slaves on the Atlantic and Southern Frontiers

By Matthew J. Clavin

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In the decades before the Civil War, the small number of slaves who managed to escape bondage almost always made their way northward along the secret routes and safe havens known as the Underground Railroad. Offering a new perspective on this standard narrative, Matthew Clavin recovers the story of fugitive slaves who sought freedom by?paradoxically?sojourning deeper into the American South toward an unlikely destination: the small seaport of Pensacola, Florida.

Geographically and culturally, across decades of rule by a succession of powers?Spain, Great Britain, and the United States?Pensacola occupied an isolated position on the margins of antebellum Southern society. Yet as neighboring Gulf Coast seaports like New Orleans experienced rapid population growth and economic development based on racial slavery, Pensacola became known for something else: as an enclave of diverse, free peoples of European, African, and Native American descent. Farmers, laborers, mechanics, soldiers, and sailors learned to cooperate across racial lines and possessed no vested interest in maintaining slavery or white supremacy. Clavin examines how Pensacola's reputation as a gateway to freedom grew in the minds of slaves and slaveowners, and how it became a beacon for fugitives who found northern routes to liberation inaccessible.

The interracial resistance to slavery that thrived in Pensacola in the years before the Civil War, Clavin contends, would play a role in demolishing the foundations of Southern slavery when that fateful conflict arrived.

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Editorial Review

Review

During the past fifty years, historians have gained an understanding of slave escape networks that existed in the United States prior to the Civil War. Usually the historians focus on the slaves who went from the Upper South into the North and Canada. By centering on events in and around Florida's Gulf-Coast port city of Pensacola, **Clavin** convincingly demonstrates the similar importance of slave escape on the South's southern periphery. In the process he provides striking examples of interracial cooperation within an international Atlantic context. (Stanley Harrold, author of *Border War: Fighting over Slavery before the Civil War*)

Just when some have declared the idea of slave resistance passé, *Aiming for Pensacola* brilliantly illustrates the political sophistication of the enslaved in taking advantage of social geography, abolitionist allies, and military conflicts to become architects of their own freedom. **Clavin** does nothing short of redefining the history of the underground railroad and spells out its forgotten emancipatory legacy. (Manisha Sinha, author of *The Counterrevolution of Slavery*)

Clavin traces Pensacola's unique status as a pseudo-refuge from the colonial period through the Civil War. In addition to a groundbreaking perspective, the book offers a lively, engaging narrative that makes it appropriate for general readers as well as scholars. (S. C. Hyde *Choice* 2016-04-01)

About the Author

Matthew J. Clavin is Associate Professor of History at the University of Houston.

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Lorraine Wheat:

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