

Freebooters and Smugglers: The Foreign Slave Trade in the United States After 1808

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Review

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Obadele-Starks, Ernest *Freebooters and Smugglers: The Foreign Slave Trade in the United States after 1808*. University of Arkansas Press, \$34.95 hardcover ISBN 9781557288585

America's Illicit Foreign Slave Trade

Perhaps the long shadow of W.E.B. Du Bois has dissuaded some scholars from engaging in a fresh examination of the illegal slave trade to the United States. Du Bois, in his seminal *The Suppression of the African Slave-Trade to the United States of America, 1638-1870* (1896), argued that the importation of African slaves to the United States was a national issue that persisted through the Civil War. Ernest Obadele-Starks, associate professor of history at Texas A&M; University-College Station and Texas A&M; University at Qatar, has now taken up the task of fleshing out and expanding Du Bois's original argument. Where Du Bois emphasized the founding generation's complicity in the slave trade, Obadele-Starks demonstrates that the federal government possessed neither the power nor the disposition to impair smuggling and was complicit in the spread of slavery. While Du Bois argued that the 1850s was the zenith of the illegal trade, Obadele-Starks sees the trade between 1810 and 1850 as significant. In arguing for the continued persistence of the illegal trade, Obadele-Starks believes smuggling helped perpetuate slavery and, by extension, exacerbated the sectional conflict.

In 1808 the Abolition Act, which outlawed American participation in the foreign slave trade, went into effect. The law was the result of compromise, with the most glaring provision stipulating that any captured African slaves should be sold for the benefit of the state and the informant. In essence, the various states became slave importers who had a built in incentive to enforce the law just enough to earn revenue, but not too much so as to squelch the trade altogether. Not surprisingly, most early smuggling centered on the recently acquired territory of Louisiana. The Lafitte brothers built a slave smuggling empire that

they hid behind their goodwill in New Orleans and their wine importing business. They and other smugglers depended on informal alliances with the American military and the notoriously corrupt New Orleans Customs House to look the other way whilst large numbers of Africans arrived in the Pelican state. Slaves were too important to the economy to enforce any crackdown. The book's description of New Orleans as a raw frontier society that rejected any significant regulation is right on the mark, although a more thorough description of slave trading through New Orleans before 1808 would have provided useful context.

For reasons not altogether clear, the focal point of smuggling shifted from New Orleans to the region surrounding Galveston, then a part of Mexico. The Mexican government did even less than its American counterpart to suppress the trade and perhaps this *laissez faire* attitude was too much for smugglers to resist. In contrast to the previous section, the book does a nice job providing background on the trade through Mexico and includes a useful discussion of the rivalry between various smugglers. The trade became so ubiquitous in the area, Obadele-Starks argues, that part of the reason Texans broke free from Mexico was to prevent Antonio Lopez de Santa Anna from meddling with it. Once Texas established its independence, it needed slave labor so much that it had no incentive to interdict smuggling.

It is at this point that the book diverges in unexpected ways and makes a number of dubious claims. Obadele-Starks argues that the annexation of Texas "energized free and enslaved Africans" in their efforts to resist slavery and the foreign slave trade and that these efforts "reflected the maturation of political consciousness" (119). Both assertions are questionable, particularly because the author uses examples of slave runaways to Mexico as evidence for his claims. Unfortunately, his examples are unclear whether the escaped slaves were enslaved Americans or Africans and there is no discussion of how running away—normally an individual method of resistance—morphed into a political statement. The book then maintains that California figured prominently in the extension of the illegal slave trade but provides slim evidence to that end. Obadele-Starks cites two Africans who worked on a steamship bound for the gold fields and the presence of four people who claimed African nativity residing on the California coast.

In another curious twist, the book then links slave smuggling to filibustering expeditions. John A. Quitman, for instance, wanted to annex Cuba and seems to have stocked his four plantations with African slaves. But the ties between

filibusters and the illegal slave trade are sketchy at best. Obadele-Starks presents "indisputable evidence of the strident attempts made by proponents of the foreign slave trade to support invasion plots" (148). But the example provided in this instance was James H. Callahan, who led a force that attacked Piedras Negras, a town known for harboring runaway slaves. The link between capturing runaway slaves and promoting the illegal African trade is unclear and it seems that many filibusters concerned themselves with expanding the territorial limits of slavery. Any involvement in the foreign slave trade appears only to be of secondary importance.

Near the end of the book, Obadele-Starks returns to a more effective argument. It is well known that some white southerners agitated to reopen the foreign slave trade, but their efforts failed to gain traction. In contrast, though, New York merchants came to depend on the foreign slave trade more than ever in the 1850s. Despite the efforts of James Buchanan's administration to suppress the trade, a number of New York businessmen financed illicit trading activity. The book effectively shows how a significant number of Northerners made profits from slavery because northern courts looked the other way when it came to enforcing the Abolition Act.

Obadele-Starks provides a useful account of smuggling that is prodigiously researched and creatively uses fresh sources like consuls' records. But the book does not measure up to its predecessor, to which it will inevitably be compared. Obadele-Starks mentions that a "low end" estimate of the illegal trade was 3,500 annually (9), briefly discusses the discrepancies in slave manifests, and then concludes that as many as 786,500 illegal slaves entered the United States between 1808 and 1863 (10). These estimates are too important to relegate to the discussion of a few lines and a more thorough presentation of the manifests, their significance, and how to interpret them would have been welcome. In attempting to overturn the conventional wisdom, Obadele-Starks needed convincing and abundant evidence. And while the author concludes that the illegal slave trade played an "important role in the perpetuation" of slavery, the heavy reliance on anecdotal and unclear evidence prevents this reviewer from fully accepting such a sweeping claim (193).

The book suffers from other shortcomings as well. It provides no meaningful discussion of who bought African slaves, why they did so, and the cost differential between enslaved Americans and Africans. A noticeable portion of the prose is redundant or vague, such as the paragraph where Obadele-Starks

twice mentions that the United States gave up all claims to Texas in the Adams-Onís Treaty (57) or the paragraph that opens with one sentence about the Brazos Valley in Mexico and then lurches into a description of slavery in Maryland and Virginia (61). In the end, the book is somewhat akin to the Abolition Act—a noble effort that does not quite live up to expectations.

Robert Gudmestad is an assistant professor of history at Colorado State University and the author of A Troublesome Commerce: The Transformation of the Interstate Slave Trade (2003). He is currently writing a history of the influence of steamboats on the antebellum South.