

### Aiming For Pensacola: Fugitive Slaves On The Atlantic And Southern Frontiers

Neal Polhemus

Follow this and additional works at: <https://repository.lsu.edu/cwbr>

---

#### Recommended Citation

Polhemus, Neal (2016) "Aiming For Pensacola: Fugitive Slaves On The Atlantic And Southern Frontiers," *Civil War Book Review*: Vol. 18 : Iss. 4 .

DOI: 10.31390/cwbr.18.4.31

Available at: <https://repository.lsu.edu/cwbr/vol18/iss4/26>

## Review

Polhemus, Neal

Fall 2016

**Clavin, Matthew J.** *Aiming for Pensacola: Fugitive Slaves on the Atlantic and Southern Frontiers*. Harvard University Press, \$35.00 ISBN 9780674088221

### Resistance and Interracialism on the Southern Frontier

Matthew Clavin's *Aiming for Pensacola* fills an important fissure in the literature about slave resistance in the Deep South. Clavin argues that despite the fact that slavery was entrenched in the culture of the Deep South, enslaved African Americans actively resisted the regime that held them captive and the white supremacist ideology which undergirded the institution. Clavin's work provides a strong counter narrative to the dominance of the Underground Railroad as the primary avenue for fugitive slaves attempting to secure freedom during the antebellum era. Pensacola was an important destination for runaways because of the seaport's reputation as an enclave for harboring refugees. As a culturally diverse Atlantic port, Pensacola's numerous commercial industries and public works projects employed large numbers of free and captive African men and women. Clavin mines court records, correspondences, personal memoirs and particularly underutilized runaway slave advertisements to excavate from the slavery archive detailed biographical portraits of fugitives. For example, from 1821 to 1861, Clavin recovered evidence of over 300 fugitive bondspeople who escaped in the vicinity of Pensacola. While the runaway slave advertisements illustrate one of the resources available to slaveholders to recover fugitives, it is also Clavin's most important evidence of Pensacola's multiethnic population that aided and harbored fugitives and more broadly the long tradition of slave flight and maroonage on the Southern frontier.

Clavin's earlier work on the influence of the Haitian Revolution on US slavery and abolitionism provided the author a solid foundation for exploring the ways in which bondspeople pursued freedom on the Southern frontier. As a work situating slave resistance in the Deep South within the Black Atlantic world, Clavin successfully escapes the limiting confines of the nation by navigating and

positioning the contours of West African ethnic and cultural heritages at the forefront of his narrative. Pensacola was a marginal port on the edge of South, but Clavin argues that the comparatively limited commercial activities did not diminish Pensacola's relationship with larger political currents of the Atlantic world. In contrast to bustling international hubs like Charleston or New Orleans that flourished throughout the early nineteenth century, Pensacola remained relatively isolated and as a result posed many challenges to establishing a large-scale plantation complex. Sailors, dockworkers, soldiers and enslaved artisans formed the core of the port's multiethnic laboring class. Within this community, interracial cooperation was common. Refugees tapped into that resource upon arriving in Pensacola which contributed to the tradition of slave resistance in the region. By focusing on a small seaport on the edge of the Atlantic world, Clavin contests long-standing notions of quintessential Southern landscapes.

Florida was for much of its history a contested space where political instability provided captive Africans with a place to seek new lives outside of bondage. Established in 1738, Fort Mose, located north of Saint Augustine, was the first free-black settlement in the US. In the aftermath of the tumultuous War of 1812, Pensacola's slave population relocated to the Negro Fort outside the city. At the fort and at Prospect Bluff, captive Africans formed maroon communities. Marronage increased dramatically in the 1810s as many runaways found refuge with the indigenous population. On the southern frontier, Clavin argues that Native Americans and runaway slaves formed a short-lived political alliance against a common enemy – US imperialism and the entrenchment of the plantation regime across the Deep South. Clavin shows how General Jackson's destruction of the Negro Fort destroyed any future large-scale frontier alliances between people who challenged US hegemony and rapidly accelerated Pensacola's integration into the region's plantation economy.

The port of Pensacola gradually assimilated into the white vision of the Deep South during the decades before the Civil War. Slavery and a rigid racial hierarchy was codified by the ruling white elites that governed the city. However, Clavin shows that because of Pensacola's geographical isolation on the edge of the Atlantic world, the port remained an important destination for runaways and refugees that challenged the institution of slavery. Pensacola's maritime industry and industrialized laboring class provided distinct opportunities for captive Africans to challenge their bondage and seek out freedom. Captive African Americans worked as skilled laborers, carpenters,

artisans, bricklayers and blacksmiths in Pensacola's expanding urban economy. The owners of Arcadia Manufacturing Company, a water-powered cotton mill, employed over one hundred captive Africans and drew laborers from as far away as the Chesapeake. Pensacola entrepreneurs experimented with various forms of bonded and free labor. Consequently, captive Africans challenged dominate servile ideologies by proving they were as reliable and capable laborers as their white counterparts. Clavin brings to light the ways in which Pensacola was a proving ground for innovative labor strategies that challenged the foundation of Southern slavery and its eventual demise.

Pensacola's long tradition of marronage and slave flight continued to serve as a haven for refugees during the Civil War. Captive African Americans from neighboring states headed for Pensacola to take up arms and commence the full-scale assault on the institution of slavery. Those who congregated in Pensacola comprised a diverse array of Southern society. Some were radical abolitionists. Others were less committed to freeing the four million slaves in bondage across the South. Regardless of their status or commitment to ending slavery, runaway slaves continued to find allies in Pensacola who supported their bid for freedom as the Civil War raged. Hostility towards slavery was not limited to the bonded men and women of the Deep South. Poor white sailors and farmers took up arms and joined with their black neighbors to combat the Confederacy. The tradition of interracial resistance was tightly interwoven into the fabric of Pensacola's multiethnic culture.

In early 1861, Pensacola's Naval Yard and neighboring fortifications fell to the Confederacy. However, Fort Pickens, guarding the entrance to Pensacola, remained the only possession of the United States for the duration of the war in Florida. Consequently, as the Civil War raged, Fort Pickens became a beacon for captive Africans across the Southern frontier to escape towards. Many of the refugees enlisted in the service of the US Army and fought valiantly against the Confederacy. In Pensacola, Clavin argues that black and white soldiers united in an "interracial band of brothers" committed to the eradication of the Confederacy (p. 163). Throughout the Civil War, enslaved people and the Federal troops stationed in Pensacola collaborated in the pursuit of two intertwined goals; emancipation and the destruction of slavery.

Clavin deserves accolades for positioning a seaport located on the Southern frontier and on the edge of the Atlantic world within larger debates on US slavery and the role enslaved African Americans played in shaping outcomes

and the nation's institutions. In line with much recent work on Atlantic seaports, by the likes of Alejandro de la Fuente, Matt D. Childs, Christopher Schmidt-Nowara and Michael D. Thompson, Clavin's work exposes Atlantic seaports as vital in the construction of slave systems and the resistance slave's provided in determining the construction of those vile regimes. By arguing for the role poor whites had in aiding and abetting fugitives in Pensacola, Clavin makes an implicit argument for the class struggle that played out in the years leading up to the Civil War. At times Clavin tends to flatten the complexities of interracial relationships and the inherent racial tension in forming multiethnic coalitions. Too often, Clavin misses opportunities to explain the strategies enslaved African Americans utilized in negotiating the power and violence that underpinned the Deep South's racially stratified regime. However, this quibble does not detract from his larger, well-articulated and well-documented thesis on Pensacola as a haven for fugitive slaves and beacon of freedom in the Deep South.

*Neal D. Polhemus is a Ph.D. candidate at the University of South Carolina. His dissertation is entitled "A Culture of Commodification: Hemispheric and Intercolonial Migrations in the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade, 1660-1807." He has published articles in Atlantic Studies and History in Africa.*