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## **Interview**

### **CWBR AUTHOR INTERVIEW: AIMING FOR PENSACOLA: FUGITIVE SLAVES ON THE ATLANTIC AND SOUTHERN FRONTIERS**

**Clavin, Matthew J.**

**Fall 2016**

Interview with Matthew J. Clavin, author of *Aiming for Pensacola: Fugitive Slaves on the Atlantic and Southern Frontiers* Interviewed by Tom Barber

Civil War Book Review (CWBR): Today the Civil War Book Review is happy to speak with Matthew J. Clavin, associate professor of history at the University of Houston and author of the 2009 book *Toussaint Louverture and the American Civil War: The Promise and Peril of a Second Haitian Revolution*. Today we get to discuss his new book *Aiming for Pensacola: Fugitive Slaves on the Atlantic and Southern Frontiers*.

CWBR: When did fugitive slaves begin aiming for Pensacola and why?

Matthew J. Clavin (MC): I think I may have footnoted in the book because sometimes you don't want to make extreme claims about concrete proof. But when in the early 16th century when the Spanish first traveled along the Gulf of Mexico past present day Pensacola, this is when you had Esteban the Moor. And as they passed Pensacola and Esteban was on that ship as were a dozen or so black servants who also served as soldiers and explorers and pioneers, but two men from their journey as they got to Pensacola and they stopped and they met with some Indians, but it was a Creek shipwright if memory serves and an African slave disappeared. For many years it was sort of claimed that these people were killed by the Indians or something like that but there was no evidence of that whatsoever based on the Spanish documents. It's just as likely that this Creek/Spanish sailor and this enslaved African sailor for the Spanish, did they just sort of abandon the vessel and disappeared into the Pensacola wilderness? So arguably early 1500s was the first time not only did you have a

slave possibly escape, but it was a slave with a white man. Which you know is sort of the whole crux of the research that I've spent years exploring. Pensacola for many centuries just had a habit of attracting runaway slaves, runaway servants but it also served as a launching point from which servants and slaves would escape. So, I think the thing I'm really amazed with, and what always fascinated me about the project, was that continuity over time. So maybe that didn't happen in the early 1500s, maybe these runaways were in fact just some Indians killed them or kidnapped them. But definitely, when you start to have large settlements in the 18th century for sure, and definitely into the 19th century, there's just such a long trend of Pensacola being sort of the focal point of runaway slaves.

CWBR: Now it's good that you bring that up because part of this continuity it seems in the book is this idea of interracialism and its role in defining these relationships. So could you briefly define what interracialism is and what drew you to interpreting Pensacola through this lens?

MC: Yeah it's so hard to define race and it's arguably even harder to define interracialism, so I'll try. Anytime you start to research and write a project there's always this profound secondary literature that provides a whole bunch of context and a lot of ideas that infuse and inflect your thinking. In the last ten to twenty years there's been a lot of discussions of abolitionists and radicals and otherwise. President Lincoln, by the end of the Civil War, these predominantly white men, very wealthy-elite, often times highly educated they come around on the issue of racial equality. Some people it's more inherent than others and I don't repute that ever taking place. I think it happened for sure, but what I think of interracialism, the way I define it is, black and white people in this case, but it can be other racial groups as well and ethnic groups but certainly along the Gulf Coast in Pensacola in particular what I find is there are black and white people living side-by-side, working side-by-side, drinking side-by-side, running away from their masters or employers side-by-side. So it doesn't mean they are best friends necessarily--it doesn't even mean they get along necessarily all the time, but for whatever reason they coexist. Maybe that's another way to view it, they coexist and the society around them can be binary, it could be completely racialized. One group is enslaved and unfree and the other group is completely free. Nonetheless you will find instances not just in American history, in Southern history, but in world history. All these examples, particularly along the waters you find black and white people coexisting very well together. Sometimes it's a bonafide friendship, sometimes it involves sex and reproduction but often times

it's just camaraderie. And I think there's different forms of interracialism, but I view it as groups of people who look differently but they get along for whatever reason.

CWBR: In addition to this concept of interracialism, one of the more causative factors you use is region, it figures pretty heavily in Pensacola and you'd already mentioned the Atlantic world. So how did Pensacola's place, within the Atlantic world, and later along the Southern frontier, empower inhabitants to challenge slavery and official support for slavery?

MC: Geography is crucial to this story and as I watched and lived in Pensacola, now I live in Houston Texas, I'm no stranger to hurricanes and the threats of hurricanes. Hurricane Matthew just swept through, and you're reminded repeatedly that you can have the greatest of intentions, resources, and people etc., but if a massive climatic event visits your neighborhood or colony or state you're futile to resist. Anyone who knows Pensacola's history, knows there were multiple attempts to make it a great Spanish port. Particularly in the very beginning, and it was the weather of all things, it was the hurricanes that kept Pensacola from being the first permanent European settlement in North America and eventually it was St. Augustine. St. Augustine is in the eye of the storm often times, but for whatever reason in the 16th century people who settled in St. Augustine were lucky and avoided these storms, they weren't able to do that in Pensacola. So for Pensacola's history after the 1500s still, to get colonized, to become an important port and all these things, colonization came in and fits and starts, but it was never completely successful.

I would make the argument that Pensacola doesn't become really economically viable until the early 19th century with the advent of the U.S. Military and they made Pensacola a military town, a military base, and even today anyone familiar with Pensacola knows it's inseparable from the military-industrial complex. So prior to the U.S. Government coming in, Pensacola was very, very frontier and it's a unique way of viewing Pensacola because it's on the waterfront, it's on the water's edge, it's at the edge of the Atlantic world, so it's a lot of things at the same time but from a North American point of view it's on the outskirts. It's a liminal territory, it has a very difficult time developing and maturing whereas Mobile, Alabama--New Orleans in Louisiana these places take off by late 18th century, and Pensacola never quite equals them in maturation. I think it's that immaturity, it's that liminality that enables things like race and slavery to not take root as deeply here as they do in

neighboring places. One thing, whenever I talk about my book in Pensacola, I need to make it clear to people that this is not the promise land for African descended people, I mean slavery is on the books in the British period, the Spanish period and the American period. It is not what I would call a safe haven, nevertheless compared to Mobile, Savannah, Georgia and New Orleans it does offer things to slaves or fugitives that these other places don't.

CWBR: Throughout your book, because it covers the Colonial era all the way up to the Civil War, you make use of slave advertisements to great effect. In some instances, you are able to recover the experiences of people who have otherwise left no written records. So tell us a little bit about your encounters with these sources and how they shaped your thinking about the topic and the ultimate outcome of the book itself?

MC: This goes back years to when I was in graduate school and it was late 20th century, the very beginning of the turn of the 21st century and it was only then that recognized historians not only did they use slave narratives and runaway slave advertisements, but they considered them a crucial, vital source of information. Whenever I teach the early America and antebellum periods, even the colonial world, it's not just the English colonies and the present day United States, it's the French colonies, the British colonies, the Spanish colonies they all have runaway advertisements. And it was a great mistake of slave owners. As historians we are so thankful that they have these runaway slave advertisements because they're undeniable proof of slave resistance for sure. But they're also, I view them, as mini-biographies and they provide incredible physical descriptions of slaves, any scars they might have, whether their teeth had been filed down or rotted out, their hairstyles. In Pensacola there were runaway slaves with tattoos because they had served in the U.S. Navy. It's really pretty mind blowing. Many years ago, ten to fifteen years ago, when I first was browsing 1820-1830 addition of the *Pensacola Gazette* microfilm for a lecture I was working on and what blew my mind--and I was very familiar these advertisements all over the Atlantic world particularly in the antebellum South, but what blew my mind regarding the *Pensacola Gazette* was one of the very first--maybe the first issue--I ever saw there were eight runaway slave advertisements on the front page of their local newspaper. Pensacola never numbered more than a couple of hundred or just 1000, maybe 2000 people, in the early 19th century. And for you to have eight runaway advertisements and a total of fifteen runaway slaves, proportionally, that's an incredible number. As I remember being on the microfilm machine I went from issue, to issue, to issue and it didn't change; and, and six months later

there were six runaway slave ads on the front page. Over the course of twenty, thirty, forty years, it's almost impossible to find an issue of the *Gazette* that doesn't have a runaway slave ad. So I'd make the argument that if you want to understand specifically Pensacola history during this time period you cannot ignore these runaway slave ads. Not only can you not ignore them but you have to make sense of them. I teach students all the time when you write a paper, or do research, you really want to make it primary source driven, something original, something new. Secondary sources are great, and you can have the greatest topic, but if you can't find a primary source then you're going to have a difficult time and this is a perfect example of me just stumbling across these advertisements and the lightbulb went off above my head like I got to tell this story. No one's told this story, no one's really considered these sources and maybe they did for New York City, but they didn't do it for the Deep South. I just took the ball and ran with it, so it's awesome as a historian to have the topic, or the thesis, grab you and you feel like the you're vehicle to tell the story but you're not really doing it, it's the sources telling their own story.

CWBR: With these sources I found it interesting because looking at it from slave advertisements, you're able to see U.S. officials throughout the early and antebellum period considered the national project as one committed to the spread of an empire of liberty. So how did Pensacola's place in the Atlantic world and along the Southern frontier suggest that liberty was far from the United States' national project? And here I'm thinking especially of the role of Britain, which often found itself protecting or trying to expand the freedom/autonomy bonds people secured for themselves or the actions.

MC: I would definitely contend that there may have been from Thomas Jefferson down, an argument to be an empire of liberty, but as Adam Rothman and others have shown, that what really happens late 18th early 19th century, at least in the Southwest all the way to Texas, is certainly the complete opposite. And it's an empire of slavery concerned with making money and profit at the expense of African American slaves. It's a brutal narrative, it's hard to discuss and talk about, but it's a vital piece of American history. In those very pivotal years, you see slavery take deep hold across the southern United States and we all know how it ends in the civil sectionalism and Civil War etc. The thing about Pensacola is it's Spanish officially until 1821, so Spain and the Spanish colonies vary in their degrees of racial thinking, of racism, of laws. But certainly on the Spanish frontier of Cuba and Spanish Florida the laws were very lax regarding slavery. Slavery existed in great numbers, and to a great extent, but laws existed

where Spanish slaves were still recognized as human beings. They're not considered chattel and they are legally owned by someone, but they have legal redress and church redress. So there are options for African descended people in the Spanish world that are not available in the British world and eventually the American world. Pensacola has this heritage that doesn't fade and one of the neatest things I've ever found about Pensacola is during the American Civil War in the 1860s there is still, forty years after annexation by the United States, there's a former Spanish diplomat who lives in Pensacola and when the Union troops invade the town he puts his Spanish flag above his house. So forty years after Spain has forfeited it's claim to Pensacola there are still residents there who have that cultural heritage of maybe not being as racialized as their English or American neighbors, that's a very important thing. I think you have this empire of slavery, it sweeps over Pensacola in the early 1800s, mainly it's Andrew Jackson, the War of 1812, and the Seminole War etc.--Andrew Jackson was a big agent in all this change. Then after the war ended, and you get into the 1820s and 1830s, you have a real struggle of slave owners who are authorized by the law and government to spread their way of life, which is slavery and white supremacy, and to imprint it on Pensacola. And make no mistake about it they try to make Pensacola just as racialized, just as unequal, just as slave based as every port town in the South. I would argue, however, they're not very successful. They're certainly successful to some extent, slavery is legalized and existed through the Civil War. That being said, the number of fugitive slaves demonstrates that it wasn't a complete victory for slave-owners and their way of thinking. You had mentioned the British, Britain and the United States, during the Age of Revolution, had a little game of back and forth where they both tried to prove which were the real freedom fighters. You see it in the American Revolution with Dunmore's Proclamation, you see it in the War of 1812 with Cochrane's several proclamations for Indians and slaves to get their freedom, to get land, get all sorts of stuff for joining the British. And certainly from the point of view of Pensacola's history it's the British who are the freedom fighters. Now you can find other places where the British are anything but freedom loving people regarding African American slaves. But from Pensacola's point of view and black Pensacola's point of view during the American Revolution, during the War of 1812, the British are their allies and that will only change when the British depart following the War of 1812.

CWBR: Tell us a little about Negro Fort, which was a military outpost constructed by fugitive slaves, between Pensacola and St. Augustine. And if you

would, describe its community and what it represented to slaveholders looking in from the outside.

MC: I'm glad you mention that because it's the next book I'm wrapping up now, it's a narrative account of Negro Fort because it's distressing as a historian when you read that story and it's only in the last ten years since the first monograph on it just came out a couple of years ago. When you hear that story and you realize it's not in any textbook, that no American students have been taught about Negro Fort since the early 19th century, it's mind blowing--no pun intended because the Fort is ultimately blown to smithereens. But for people who don't know, during the War of 1812 the British, mostly of out desperation began offering slaves freedom if they would join the British marines. The Colonial Marines they were called. That being said there were many British soldiers, officers in particular who became abolitionists, as we would call them today. I'm not sure we'd exactly term them as that but they were anti-slavery on an interracial level. They embraced slaves who joined the regiments; and, so what happens during the War of 1812--everyone increasingly knows about this happening in Maryland, Virginia, and Washington D.C.--but it also all over Florida and Georgia. Ultimately in the War of 1812, the British recruited several hundred black [men] slaves mostly from Florida, but also from the southern frontier of the United States. They flocked to Pensacola, Port St. Joe, to wherever the British were and ultimately the British move them to a place on the Apalachicola River maybe twenty miles from the Gulf of Mexico. These slaves and Indians build a very massive fort, pretty much the largest man made the structure between Pensacola and St. Augustine. Ultimately there is a brigade there of about 200 soldiers, and that's in 1813/1814, and ultimately in 1815 when the British evacuated Florida they left not just the 200 British Colonial Marines--these black soldiers in the Fort but also their families--and increasingly hundreds and hundreds of slaves from Spanish Florida and the southern United States flocked to this sanctuary. For at least a year, you have a free black community living in Spanish Florida and they're self-sufficient. They're hunting, fishing, trading with the handful of Indians there, and maybe most importantly, the military arsenal they had there was unthinkable for the time. Never in the history of the world have hundreds and hundreds of fugitive slaves been given the arsenal they had. Not to mention they stole so many boats and ships from Pensacola, and other southern port towns, they also had like an informal navy. These slaves they got on the water and controlled the Apalachicola River from the American border down to the Gulf of Mexico. So it really is, in the history of



American slavery, an incredible symbol of black freedom and for me it was unbelievably interesting because ultimately there were just a handful of guys who controlled this fort. And the lieutenants, colonels, and the Colonial Marines, in the Fort were from Pensacola. Some of them we don't think were born in Pensacola. They probably came from Louisiana. There is a man in charge at one point his name is Garcon, a French name, and they referred to him as a French Negro, so we could suspect he's definitely from New Orleans, maybe he's from Haiti originally, and perhaps knew about the Haitian Revolution. It's just at the tail end of the Age of Revolution, you have these black soldiers in Negro Fort and they're willing to fight to the death and ultimately Andrew Jackson—really without governmental approval—he Oks Edmund Gaines and it's a joint of Army-Navy operation. They attacked the fort from the north and south. Very few Americans fought in the so called battle of Negro Fort, but hundreds of Creek Indians joined the Americans and they battled with the slaves for several days. When it's all set and done about five U.S. soldiers were killed. We don't have any statistics on the Indian casualties, but then the fort is blown to smithereens. And it's debatable, did 100 slaves die? 300? We're not sure. We know a lot of slaves escaped before the ultimate explosion but that is, I would argue, a very important turning point in the history of American slavery because for a while there was hope for fugitive slaves. As late as 1816 if you can get to Negro Fort you could be free and once that fort is destroyed for southern slaves their prospects of freedom have just decreased exponentially. So I do think it's a very important moment in time that we need to do a better job of educating people about.

CWBR: As you mentioned earlier there's a lot of people who escaped from Negro Fort. So in spite of national and local governments endorsement of slavery, and the legal protections offered to slave-owners, what factors strengthened interracial alliances throughout Florida's territorial period leading up to the Civil War? And if you could take a moment what type of people helped fugitive slaves during the territorial period?

MC: I think we mentioned the frontier and the geography for sure but I also think it's just economic. What you're going to have for the most part is a lower class/working class alliance. And in Pensacola, like many southern port towns, you have black slaves working side by side with free white men and often times they have the same positions, trades, and skillset. Having those similar occupations will convince you very easily that you two are equal. As I mentioned before, the law might say or recognize you as being very unequal, a

slave owner may recognize you as being unequal but for the workers they look at each other, possibly depending on the climate culturally and socially speaking, you see it on occasion these men look at each other as equal. They go to these liquor stores, taverns at 3 o'clock in the morning and they're drinking and doing all these things they shouldn't be doing at 3 o'clock in the morning, but race doesn't seem to matter here. As I mentioned before, typically when people discuss interracialism and when they point to it, they point to elite white northerners and poor black slaves from the south. What I find in Pensacola is working class whites, working class blacks seeing themselves as a collective group as late as the Civil War. One thing that is very important to this whole thing is the U.S. military and I'm certainly one of the historians who argues that the U.S. military has a pivotal role in building an empire of slavery. The military puts down slave revolts, the military/navy is used to return fugitive slaves to their owners. There is no denying that the federal government is very much involved in spreading slavery, yet in Pensacola you find the opposite. You see that for sure, but you also see something else that's oppositional where you have, in Pensacola, a labor shortage with so few workers that slaves are forced to do everything. But what's fascinating are these leased slaves, they've been leased to the military, they don't live with their owners. Often times their owners are in New Orleans. They don't live anywhere near their owners, and so they live in a military town, they work at the Pensacola Navy yard, or work at one of the adjacent forts--they live in barracks for goodness sake with white sailors. So is it any surprise that they work together all day, drink together in the evening, sleep in the same government funded building and they both, free white workers and black slaves, at the navy yard get healthcare for goodness sake in the territorial state period. There are all these powerful forces trying to convince these people that they're actually kind of equal. And one of the neatest things I found, there's many things I found fascinating, is that there's anecdotal evidence/testimony that in Pensacola, because of the power of the Federal Government, that slave testimony was allowed throughout the territorial antebellum periods when it was not even thinkable elsewhere. Unlike most parts of the South, for a slave to testify against a white person, a black cook on a U.S. naval ship or some sort of black enlisted man on a U.S. naval ship, he was allowed to testify against whites in the early 1800s. So there's an example of the U.S. military if anything, subverting, white supremacy and the institution of slavery. So for me that really demonstrates a Pensacola exceptionalism that you just don't find anywhere else, or if you do find it in another military town it's a very rare occurrence.

CWBR: Your book also argues that Pensacola served as the southern line of the Underground Railroad so can you describe that a bit? And talk about some of the more prominent conductors on this southern line of the Underground Railroad.

MC: Right, and this where you get to what is your definition of the Underground Railroad? For some people it's a strict constructionist argument where the Underground Railroad is an organized network of people predominantly in the North and they orchestrate the escape of slaves to the North and Canada. Tom, I just don't see it like that, and quite frankly a lot of people don't anymore. Even slaves who are assisted by organized abolition groups in the North by the 1830s/40s/50s often get to the North on their own. They escape by themselves or with family members or friends. They have no help, no assistance and if they're lucky enough by the grace of God to make it to the upper south or to cross the Ohio River to cross the Mason-Dixon Line, then and only then, can they anticipate having someone help them. You got to be careful when talking about the Underground Railroad, people want to think that abolitionists, normally they picture a white man almost going into the South and helping slaves escape, and that just almost doesn't happen. So Pensacola really helps us redefine the Underground Railroad, and what I find, like you said there are sort of two types. You have a slave who gets on a boat in Pensacola and gets out of town and he doesn't care where you take him and how you get him out. And people who are allowing slaves to get on their boat and stow away; and, I'm sure sometimes they don't know it but there's too many examples of people knowing. People being hauled to court because they help slaves escape from Pensacola and these aren't card carrying members of abolition societies. Sometimes they're ship captains so desperate for a crew that they will accept anybody, black or white, free or enslaved. They're subverting slavery but they're not abolitionists, so I see that a lot. Typically, in Pensacola that's what you have, slaves working alongside people on the docks who, through some combination of charisma and luck, talk their way onto a ship and they never return to Pensacola. And much less common you do have several people from the North who are crazy enough to risk their own lives to help slaves escape. The most famous example is Jonathan Walker. He's a white ship captain from New Bedford, Massachusetts which is the Mecca of the Underground Railroad in the North. He's a poor man and he reminds me of John Brown. He ends up on the Gulf of Mexico--he's in Mobile, Pensacola, New Orleans, he's back and forth. He's even on the eastern shore of Mexico for a while. Eventually he ends up working for a railroad company in

Pensacola and he leases, or his employer leases slaves, to work on the railroad and Jonathan Walker is tasked with being the overseer, or employer, of these black men. And he's pretty much run out of town because he treats these black men as equal. He pays them equally, he welcomes them to his house, they dine at his kitchen table with his wife and children. On the weekends they hang out, they go to the same church, they sit under trees and just have long conversations; and, ultimately four of these slaves ask him to help them escape. On the day of the escape several more show up and so Walker and all these slaves get on a boat--they all worked at the U.S. Navy yard--and they try to make their way to the Bahamas. So here's another example, they're not trying to get to Canada or the North, they're trying to get to any place that may welcome these people as free men. And as they get to Key West, they were less than a day away from their destination when they were in fact caught by a wrecking ship that reported it to a U.S. Naval captain close by who brought them back to Pensacola. So to answer your question I think there's ordinary men who work on the water that help these slaves escape, but definitely every once in a while you find an actual abolitionist who happens to be in Pensacola and when the opportunity arises he helps the slaves to escape. I will mention one last name: Columbus Jones. I make a big deal about Columbus Jones because he is the most typical of slaves who tried to escape on the Underground Railroad. He gets on a boat, again he works at the U.S. Navy yard, and it's possible the black crew welcomed him onboard. It's even possible the captain escorted him to New England knowing he was escaping. But when he gets to Massachusetts and a lot of stuff happens, all hell breaks loose, the law gets involved, the captain is put in jail, there's a fight on the ship, and Columbus Jones is ultimately captured and returned to Pensacola. But moral of the story is when he was in New England abolitionists did everything in their power to help this guy win his freedom. But this help only came weeks after he risked his life to get on a boat and travelled more than a thousand miles. So the Underground Railroad is a complex thing and to define it is just as difficult as defining race and interracialism.

CWBR: How did the Civil War produce a set of circumstances both familiar, and different, for fugitive slaves? And, how did the Civil War differ from other conflicts in the opportunities, and risks, it provided for both fugitive slaves and their southern allies?

MC: During the American Revolution, or any place there's war and instability, conflict added a tendency to spark slave unrest because there's an opportunity to be seized. So certainly in the American Revolution you see a

spike in the number of fugitive slaves, but what's unique about the American Revolution is never at any point during that conflict in Pensacola did either of the warring parties offer freedom to slaves officially. So what then stands out is both the War of 1812 and the American Civil War, where you have invading parties that are literally offering freedom to anyone who can escape and reach their lines—if you're a young military aged man join the armed services. In the War of 1812 you have the British under Alexander Cochrane, there's lieutenant colonel Edward Nichols, there's a guy named George Woodbine and it's official British policy that fugitive slaves will be given their freedom and guns and uniforms if they so desire. Same thing in the American Civil War, it takes a couple of years, but by 1863 any fugitive slave in South that joins and fights in the U.S. armed services will become free men, so it's really similar in that regard. The huge difference, however, is the British will lose the War of 1812, they don't hold onto Pensacola--now hundreds of slaves will escape from Pensacola--but it's a whole different ballgame in the Civil War where the Union Army is going to win this war and slavery is going to be extinguished across the entire United States. So when slaves see the opportunity during the Civil War, the numbers are even greater and the results are incredibly greater to the benefit of slaves. So the Civil War is this unbelievably violent episode, and you don't want to romanticize it, but for slaves just as it had been during the War of 1812, it's an opportunity to win your freedom. And if you know the story, and the history of American slavery, those opportunities rarely if any exist.