

African Diaspora Archaeology Newsletter

Volume 8

Issue 4 September 2005

Article 5

7-1-2005

Slavery in the American Mountain South

Wilma A. Dunaway

Virginia Tech University, wdunaway@vt.edu

Scott Hancock

Gettysburg College, shancock@gettysburg.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarworks.umass.edu/adan>

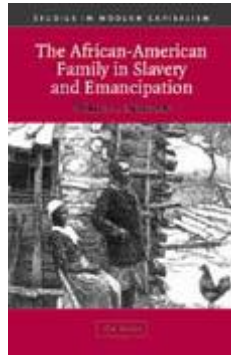
Recommended Citation

Dunaway, Wilma A. and Hancock, Scott (2005) "Slavery in the American Mountain South," *African Diaspora Archaeology Newsletter*: Vol. 8 : Iss. 4 , Article 5.

Available at: <https://scholarworks.umass.edu/adan/vol8/iss4/5>

This Book Reviews is brought to you for free and open access by ScholarWorks@UMass Amherst. It has been accepted for inclusion in African Diaspora Archaeology Newsletter by an authorized editor of ScholarWorks@UMass Amherst. For more information, please contact scholarworks@library.umass.edu.

Book Review



H-NET BOOK REVIEW

Published by H-Tennessee, <http://www.h-net.org/~tenn> (February, 2005) and H-Slavery, <http://www.h-net.org/~slavery> (June 2005).

Wilma A. Dunaway. *Slavery in the American Mountain South*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2003. xi + 352 pp. Illustrations, maps, notes, bibliography, index. \$70.00 (cloth), ISBN 0-521-81275-5.

Reviewed for H-Tennessee by Scott Hancock, Departments of History and African American Studies, Gettysburg College.

Beyond Filling in the Gaps

Amid an unceasing flood of scholarship that one might think had inundated nearly every inch of ground, Wilma Dunaway finds mountains of dry land. This work does more than fill in a few overlooked gaps. Dunaway combines the personal and the economic by examining the lives of blacks and whites alongside the labor mechanisms of the Mountain South's plantations and businesses, and concludes that slavery's grip on the Mountain South was pervasive and intense. Dunaway defines the Mountain South as stretching from western Maryland to northern Alabama, and from the Appalachian foothills of western Virginia to their counterparts in eastern Kentucky and Tennessee. Small plantations--characterized by Dunaway as small slaveholding farms -- were easily outnumbered by this area's non-slaveholding farms; nonetheless, by the antebellum era, slaveholders had established a firm hegemony over Appalachia's economic, social, and political resources. Comfortably ensconced within the southern capitalist market, slaveholders in many respects mirrored their contemporaries in other regions that were defined as slave societies.

But the Mountain South differed significantly from the rest of the South in more than just its variable terrain of extensive plateaus, long valleys, and rugged, worn mountains. African-American laborers, the vast majority enslaved, performed diverse tasks -- a pattern ostensibly not unique. In most of the American South, slaves were found to have different vocations. But in the Mountain South, because of the relatively high proportion of small plantations--another distinctive characteristic -- each individual slave often did far

more than one job. Slaves were required to work in the field, frequently under the watchful eye of their master--as opposed to the more ubiquitous overseer typical in much of the South--before moving on, sometimes in the same day, to other skilled or unskilled tasks. Also atypical was the proportion of black workers allocated to nonagricultural labor, such as mining and tourism; despite being only about 15 percent of the adult population, black workers made up 30 percent or more of the nonagricultural workforce in many areas of the Mountain South. In all types of labor, slaves typically worked in the task system as opposed to the gang system. Dunaway's impressive geographical range and depth of research, which are brought out chiefly through statistics (which would have at times been more digestible in table form), are overwhelming evidence both for the distinctiveness and for the connectedness of the Mountain South relative to the whole of the American South.

The portion of the book examining the economic and labor aspects of slavery in the region builds a solid base for Dunaway's challenge to historians to rethink the list of attributes that has been constructed to delineate slave societies from societies with slaves. The Mountain South, according to Ira Berlin's definitions, does not exhibit the typical characteristics of a slave society, and in many respects does not fit with the rest of the American South. And yet, Dunaway convincingly demonstrates that the region was dominated by slavery. Her argument hinges in part on accepting that geology should be the critical variable deciding how historians define a region, as opposed to political, social, or other organizing constructs. For instance, many of the counties that are integral to her argument for slaveholding hegemony are on the periphery, such as in western Virginia. I find her argument reasonable. Geological differentiation did affect the world of antebellum farmers and laborers, and it is at least as justifiable, if not more so, as any other organizing features employed by historians seeking to uncover patterns and linkages within a region.

Throughout the region, Dunaway finds a persistent and interconnected slave culture similar in most respects to the rest of the American South. Primarily through the use of WPA slave narratives, which contained a disproportionate number of narratives from ex-slaves who were not freed until young adulthood, as opposed to the bulk of narratives which were typified by ex-slaves freed as children, Dunaway demonstrates slave culture's heavy reliance on oral traditions. There is a high degree of consistency with other public records, and, perhaps more importantly, with other black oral traditions in the South. The oral traditions helped maintain relationships between kin, and memory of kinfolk. Slaves found multiple ways to sustain family networks in the face of slaveholders' threats to sell troublesome family members, which were sometimes carried out. Family also provided a kind of base of operations for resistance in light of the disproportionate rate of punishment in the Mountain South. Slaves were punished most frequently for "non-economic" resistance, such as verbal disrespect, and at a higher rate than their southern counterparts in other regions, due to the preponderance of small plantations and slaveholders' heightened sensitivity about challenges to their authority. Dunaway argues that instead of interpreting nonviolent resistance within James Scott's paradigm of the weapons of the weak, wherein overt acts of resistance are detrimental in the long run, historians should also consider Ghandi's -- and Martin Luther King, Jr.'s -- view that offensive nonviolence empowers and humanizes the dominated.

This portion of the book dealing with slave culture and resistance adds an important, though less revelatory, dimension. Dunaway has a bit of a tendency to set up straw men here; invoking the shortfalls of Elizabeth Fox-Genovese's one statement from a twenty-year-old article about the inability of slave families to provide a base of resistance seems unnecessary. A wider reading in the wealth of secondary material on slave culture may have deepened the analysis; this weakness is highlighted by the bibliography's heavily weighted tilt toward readings in economics and labor. This may have helped flesh out a provocative point made in the conclusion that more historians are exploring (but, despite raising the issue, Dunaway does not): slave culture was not simply resistance and was not always successful in shielding slaves from the complex and harmful effects of an often harsh labor regime. Nonetheless, her examination of slave culture, families, and resistance in the Mountain South is not flawed, and perhaps does not reveal new insights about slave culture so much as make a useful and important contribution by bringing a neglected region into an existing historiography. And Dunaway certainly does not commit the error of the old culture and community school that privileged the former and the latter so far above the work regime that labor and economics nearly disappeared from the consideration of slaves' lives. Wilma Dunaway's work should push historians to complicate and broaden what is considered a slave society.

Finally, Dunaway notes that "to publish all the information from sources, methods, and quantitative evidence would require publication of a third volume." Therefore, she has helpfully included the Website address (http://scholar.lib.vt.edu/vtpubs/mountain_slavery/index.htm), which contains tables, a list of slave narratives, drawings and photographs, and "a detailed discussion of methodological issues" (p. 14). The tables are helpful, though some could have been easily incorporated and better utilized in the text, as many of the drawings were. The maps in the book are actually better utilized than the geographical information on the website, which consists of a list of all of the counties by state, and one simply drawn map. Even though there is not yet enough to require an additional volume, it would have made for a lengthy but not unprecedented appendix, especially given the wealth of illustrations the website provides. Dunaway also includes links to the complete WPA narratives, and direct links to the full text of three of the narratives referenced in the book. The discussion of methodological issues is currently not posted on the website (or at least was inaccessible at the time of this writing). In sum, the website is of some utility and is in keeping with the positive direction of scholarship that makes so much information available for other researchers.

Copyright (c) 2005 by H-Net, all rights reserved. H-Net permits the redistribution and reprinting of this work for nonprofit, educational purposes.