

2001

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Recommended Citation

Oakes, James (2001) "Larry Eugene River's "Slavery in Florida": A Review Essay," *Florida Historical Quarterly*. Vol. 80: No. 2, Article 6.

Available at: <https://stars.library.ucf.edu/fhq/vol80/iss2/6>

Larry Eugene River's *Slavery in Florida*: A Review Essay

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Slavery in Florida: Territorial Days to Emancipation. By Larry Eugene Rivers. (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2000. xvi, 370 pp. List of figures, list of maps, preface, abbreviations, notes, bibliography, index. \$29.95 cloth.)

Serious scholarly investigation of slavery in Florida began with the 1973 publication of Julia Floyd Smith's *Slavery and Plantation Growth in Antebellum Florida, 1821–1860*. In her own way Smith was a pioneer. She was the first to lay out the basic contours of slavery's history in Florida, and she grounded her narrative on extensive use of archival records, census data, travelers' accounts, legislation, and even slave narratives. Her focus was restricted to the American slaveholders who poured into middle Florida after 1821 and who thereafter extended the southern frontier of the cotton belt. She framed her book within the literature of the time, which meant—among other things—the ongoing debate over the relative brutality of slavery in Brazil and the American South and, more importantly, the question of slavery's efficiency and profitability. Smith emphasized the entrepreneurial orientation of the slaveholders, arguing that they succeeded in building efficient plantation bureaucracies that became more productive over time. And although she included an entire chapter on the slave trade within Florida, she was inclined to view the masters as rather more benevolent than cruel.

In other ways, however, Smith's book was outdated even at the moment it came into print. Sterling Stuckey and Lawrence Levine

had already published pathbreaking articles on slave culture, and John Blassingame's monographic study of the slave community had been in print for three years. Yet, Smith had little to say about slave culture or the social life of the quarters. She was sympathetic to the plight of the slaves but relatively uninterested in their own perspective on "the peculiar institution." She had almost nothing to say about the slaves' culture, other than that they were "superstitious." Within a couple of years, classic books by Levine, Eugene Genovese, and Herbert Gutmann would complete the reorientation of slavery studies. As a result, the history of slavery in Florida has never had the full-fledged state study it deserves.

Until now. Larry Eugene Rivers's *Slavery in Florida: Territorial Days to Emancipation* fills in many of the gaps left by Smith's book. Rivers's research base is impressively broad. His coverage of slavery in East and West Florida is more extensive than Smith's, and at the same time his examination of the cotton plantations of Middle Florida—where most slaves and slaveholders lived—is richer and more finely grained. Like Smith, Rivers skimps on his coverage of slavery in Spanish Florida before 1821, but unlike his predecessor, Rivers carries his story through the Civil War and emancipation. And perhaps most importantly, Rivers includes an entire chapter on the relationship between African Americans and the Seminole Indians, arguing provocatively that the Second Seminole War was, in effect, a slave rebellion—perhaps the largest slave rebellion in American history. The cumulative effect makes *Slavery in Florida* one of the finest of the many state studies of slavery that have been published.

Rivers has little to say about slavery under the Spanish. By page 8 of *Slavery in Florida*, readers have already reached 1821, the year Spain ceded the territory to the planters of Middle Florida. But Rivers has much more to say about the antebellum *legacy* of the Spanish. He notes that under Spanish law the slaves had more protection than under English and American law. They could own property, for example; and Spanish slaves were more likely to win their freedom, in part because escape was so easy. After 1821, slavery in East and West Florida retained several distinctive attributes. Indigo persisted in East Florida long after it died out in lowcountry South Carolina, but as in Carolina, slaves cultivated indigo under the task system rather than in gangs. Rivers believes that the relative absence of large cotton plantations made slavery somewhat looser for the slaves than in Anglo-dominated Middle

Florida. Slaves in East and West Florida enjoyed a wider range of occupations, they were more likely to live in cities such as Jacksonville, St. Augustine, and Tampa, and they were more likely to be hired out. Nevertheless, by 1860, only about one in four of Florida's slaves lived in the East or the West. In Middle Florida, American planters replicated the system of slavery familiar to the cotton belt of the antebellum South.

Indeed, one of the phrases that recurs throughout the book is that slavery in Florida reflected the patterns found elsewhere in the antebellum South. "Within the Middle Florida cotton kingdom," Rivers writes, "slavery flourished in a manner not too dissimilar from other affluent segments of the Old South." Most of Florida's cotton was grown in this region; most of the state's slaves lived and worked in Middle Florida. The patterns that Rivers discerns—the growing cycle of cotton, the gang system, the plantation hierarchy of overseers and drivers—will be familiar to historians of the Old South. If *Slavery in Florida* makes a contribution here, it is in the author's separate chapter on the small farms and plantations of Middle Florida. This is a subject slighted by most surveys of southern slavery and of slave life. Even so, Rivers's findings are not unexpected. On smaller farms and plantations, slaves and masters worked more closely. Slaves, both men and women, were employed in a wider range of activities. Though cotton was still the major crop, small farms devoted a greater proportion of their land and energies to subsistence crops. Yet, despite these differences, Rivers reminds us that masters were still masters and slaves were still slaves.

Reflecting the trends of the past generation, Rivers devotes considerable attention to the cultural life of the quarters. "Slaves in Florida," he notes, "differed little from servants elsewhere in their attempt to establish familial relationships." Yet, *Slavery in Florida* does not romanticize the history of the slave family. Because Middle Florida only developed as a plantation district after 1820, it was populated largely by slaves who were imported by means of the interstate slave trade. Middle Florida's slaves had their families disrupted in the very process of settlement. Rivers examines wills and estate inventories to show that only 16 percent of slaveholders in the 1820s had enough slaves to constitute family units. By 1860, the figure had risen to 29 percent. Thus, even at the end of the antebellum era, slaves interested in forming families were often compelled to marry across plantations, a situation fraught with the

potential for still further disruption of family life. Not surprisingly, slave runaways were disproportionately spouses who went off for short periods to be with their husbands, wives, and children.

To cope with the harshness of slavery and the disruptions of family life, slaves turned to religion and community for solace. "In Florida, as in other areas of the slave South," Rivers notes, "a mixture of Euro-Christian and African religious practices helped bond servants to endure many trials and tribulations and assisted in making life more bearable." Rivers does not ask the difficult question raised by this observation: if culture and community made slave life "more bearable," did it not thereby strengthen the system of slavery itself? This is not merely a theoretical question.

Rivers has done a fine job of documenting the intellectual struggle among masters over the effects of the slaves' conversion to Christianity. Some worried that the religion made the slaves rebellious, while others insisted that it made them more docile. On the evidence presented in *Slavery in Florida*, Afro-Christianity probably reinforced the manifold tendencies toward both resistance and docility among a large and varied slave population. Few slaves passively imbibed the condescending strictures toward subservience preached at them by their white ministers. But some slaves were undoubtedly becalmed by the messages they drew from the Bible, while others were stirred toward greater resentment of their condition. Rivers may go a bit too far, however, in concluding that religions afforded African Americans "a type of freedom within the confines of slavery that the master could not always touch."

When he turns to the subject of material conditions and the physical treatment of slaves, Rivers finds in Florida "many similarities to the southern situation generally." The law of slavery in Florida, for example, "mirrored other southern states" in its failure to delineate specific standards of treatment for slaves. Nevertheless, the slaves were adequately if minimally fed, housed, and sheltered. Although "cruel and unusual punishment" was banned in the 1820s, whipping was still the most common method of physical punishment meted out to Florida slaves.

Rivers is somewhat less successful in his examination of "social interactions between whites and blacks." This is a grab-bag chapter that touches on a number of different topics—slave literacy, sex, drinking, gambling. Rivers argues that these myriad contacts between whites and blacks reveal the degree to which masters were "dependent" on slaves. But by focusing on "interactions," Rivers

confuses "contacts" with social relations, thus eliding the crucial distinction between "dependency" and "power." Nor does he make a good case for "two-way cultural diffusion of blacks and whites in Florida." This becomes especially clear in the next chapter on "social interaction among blacks." Here Rivers shows that a disproportionate number of Florida's slaves came from lowcountry South Carolina and Georgia, areas where African customs had survived more than elsewhere in the South. Hence Florida's slaves brought with them certain traditions of African music, dress, wedding traditions, and funeral rites. That these cultural forms were noticeable and distinctive among the slaves suggests the limits of a "two-way cultural diffusion." In any case, *Slavery in Florida* does not offer any extended examination of the slaveholders' culture, thus offering its readers no basis for its claim of cultural diffusion.

Slavery in Florida uncovers a pattern of slave resistance, both before and during the Civil War, that will be familiar to students of southern slavery generally. Most slaves were neither submissive nor rebellious. Depending on the circumstances, they could become uncooperative, shirking duties, feigning illness, stealing from the "master's" hog pen, illicitly learning to read. Occasionally they became more overtly dissident, fighting with the overseer, running away, and during the Civil War, running to Union lines to escape from slavery altogether. Rivers is particularly good on the degree to which slaves were put to work in the service of the Confederacy even as slavery itself was collapsing.

The most original contribution of *Slavery in Florida* is Rivers's important and powerful discussion of the relations between blacks and Indians in antebellum Florida. Long before 1821, Florida had been a refuge for runaway slaves from the United States and before that, the British colonies. Over the years, fugitive blacks forged an alliance with the Seminole Indians, who were themselves refugees from farther north. By the nineteenth century, "blacks and Seminoles allied with each other and with the Spanish in resisting incursions of Anglos into Florida." To be sure, the Seminoles subjected runaway blacks to a form of "vassalage" that whites interpreted as slavery. But over time, maroons were absorbed into Indian society, often intermarrying and thus forming a distinct community of Black Seminoles. Some blacks even became trusted advisers to leading Seminoles. Settlements of Black Seminoles in turn attracted still more runaways. According to Rivers, this so

infuriated white slaveholders that it was at least partially responsible for the Second Seminole War that began in December 1835.

As war fever heightened, leading Black Seminoles persuaded Indians and perhaps as many as one thousand slaves to join in the military alliance against whites. In Rivers's view, the Native Americans and the Black Seminoles "had launched quite possibly the largest slave rebellion in United States history." Relentlessly pursued by the U.S. military, it was the Black Seminoles who eventually betrayed the alliance by agreeing, in 1838, to surrender in return of a promise of safe passage to the West. The Seminoles, infuriated by the betrayal, "took their revenge where they could." The alliance of Indians, black maroons, and slaves collapsed. The white planters emerged victorious and more powerful than ever.

Rivers's analysis of Indian-black relations effectively synthesizes the scholarship of others. His contribution is to incorporate their work into the larger history of slavery in the state. In so doing, Rivers persuasively demonstrates the significance of one of the most distinctive features of Florida slavery. This, along with the exemplary research upon which his monograph is based, raises *Slavery in Florida* well above the level of most state studies. From now on, the history of slavery in Florida begins with the scholarship of Larry Eugene Rivers.