

Emancipation’s Diaspora: Race and Reconstruction in the Upper Midwest

Leslie A. Schwalm

(Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2009.

387 p. Cloth, \$65.00; paper, \$24.95.)

In 1862 the proliferation of civilian relief organizations in St. Louis made that city a gateway to the North for African Americans who had escaped slavery or been freed by conquering Union armies along the lower Mississippi River. Facilities that treated the sick and that educated, clothed, and fed the ragged masses disembarking from crowded steamboats conveyed to these people a sense that they had indeed arrived in the Promised Land.



By all accounts, St. Louis was considered the safest “camp” of the three that increasingly received these former bondsmen and bondswomen. At the same time, city slaves, fugitive slaves, and even former slaves who possessed official certificates of freedom remained vulnerable to being kidnapped and sold back South. Even farther north, some white Iowans viewed their own communities as a proper setting for black relocation, but many of their neighbors vehemently rejected the idea. Deep within Union territory, surrounded by Union guns and whites who likely had husbands, fathers, and sons in blue uniforms, black freedom was an uncertainty.

This was the paradox that evolved when black emancipation resulted in black migration, and with it came, as author Schwalm notes, “a national public politics of race.” Her remarkable book examines the conflict between the two normally aligned principles—emancipation and migration—in Iowa, Wisconsin, and Minnesota. It is well known that most residents of the Upper Midwest supported the struggle to hold the Union together, and, in time, eradicate the institution of slavery. Their lack of enthusiasm at the prospect of African Americans, especially those recently freed, moving into their communities is not as commonly known.

Incited by the Democratic Party press, many northerners grew apprehensive about the increasing power being concentrated in the federal government and the rising inflation of the wartime economy. Some midwesterners saw black relocation as one more aspect of the cost of war: They argued that federal aid for fugitive slaves was depriving more worthy (read: white) citizens of needed support. Such sentiment, argues Schwalm, was illustrated by Minnesota reactions to the U.S.-Dakota War of 1862, including complaints of “inadequate relief for white victims, slow and ineffective

military retaliation, and the ultimate insult of Lincoln’s offer of clemency to all but 38 of the 307 Dakota and Metis who were convicted by a military commission.”

“That sense of betrayal,” she wrote, “was sharpened by the belief among white settlers that even while their needs were ignored, large sums of public funds were being spent to support fugitive slaves in the South.” In fact, at the two other relocation encampments—Cairo, Illinois, and Helena, Arkansas, both located at river’s edge—living conditions were abysmal. Inmates were subjected to constant flooding, poor sanitation, rat infestation, and, on occasion, physical assaults by civilians and soldiers alike. Nonetheless, white fears of southern black migration would unalterably change life in the Upper Midwest, as some citizens justified their worst impulses about the impact of emancipation.

Schwalm’s research of the extent, as well as the overt and subtle forms, of racism that existed in the Upper Midwest is exhaustive. Indeed, this book might challenge conventional beliefs about this free-soil region, where twenty-first-century politics would convey racial tolerance between blacks and whites. Relying on an impressive array of manuscript collections, newspapers, census data, diaries, letters, army records, and memoirs, Schwalm makes a case that is undeniable. Although the text primarily focuses on Iowa (and in this regard should be viewed as an important companion to Robert Dykstra’s *Bright Radical Star*), the author follows the experiences of freed slaves migrating into Minnesota and Wisconsin. The book is especially strong in bringing into focus the lives of black women, particularly when they follow their soldier husbands to assignments in the Deep South or stand in defiance of their clergymen, the most powerful men in their communities.

The strength of the book, however, lies only with its evidence that racism existed. Relying as heavily as Schwalm does on the antiblack Democratic press to characterize the thinking of opinion makers begs the question: Was there a unique character to racism as expressed in the Upper Midwest? It must not be forgotten that Democrats were in the minority in the region. How much was racism a factor in keeping the black population relatively small there? What does it mean that Wisconsin and Iowa had opposite policies on black enlistment? And though the black men of Iowa, Minnesota, and Wisconsin attained suffrage before the ratification of the Fifteenth Amendment, why were the methods of attaining this right different? In the end, I highly recommend the book, not only for its content but also for the questions it inspires.

Reviewed by William D. Green, associate professor of history at Augsburg College, Minneapolis, presently on leave. The

author of *A Peculiar Imbalance: The Fall and Rise of Racial Equality in Early Minnesota* (2007), he is working on a history of civil rights in Minnesota during the second half of the nineteenth century.

North Woods River: The St. Croix in Upper Midwest History

Eileen M. McMahon and
Theodore J. Karamanski

(Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2009. 338 p. Paper, \$24.95.)



This social and environmental history of a place—the St. Croix River Valley—grew out of a historic resource study commissioned by the St. Croix National Scenic Riverway. Admitting that “the St. Croix is not a large river . . . nor a great river in terms of its impact on the development of the United States,” the authors take a refreshingly realistic stand on the significance of their subject. That said, they convincingly claim that “the St. Croix Valley encapsulates the history of the Upper Midwest.” This makes the book useful not only for interested readers and local historians but also for anyone anxious to understand the broader dynamics that shaped the region’s past.

Opening with an examination of Dakota life in the 1600s, *North Woods River* ably lays out the complicated dynamics that brought Ojibwe people to the region alongside French-speaking fur traders. The conflict and collusion that resulted transformed the landscape as well as those who lived on it. The arrival of Americans led to coercion and Native land cessions in 1837. Nonetheless, Dakota people persisted in their use of the St. Croix River Valley until the 1862 war, and some Ojibwe never left. In an all-too-short section, the book shows how the latter persevered until the establishment of federally recognized reservation lands across Burnett County, Wisconsin, in 1934. Today, the St. Croix band of Lake Superior Ojibwe operates casinos in both Turtle Lake and Danbury, Wisconsin, and is the largest private employer in the area.

Turning to the rise of the logging industry, the work chronicles the transformation of the St. Croix—and tributaries such as the Snake, Kettle, Sunrise, Namekagon, Tamarack, and Apple rivers—by European Americans. As “rivers of pine,” these streams for decades provided the means of transport and processing (through water-powered saw mills) for millions of board feet. By the 1890s, fire and over-

logging denuded the watershed, leading to the industry’s eventual undoing.

Meantime, agriculture emerged as the next draw for American-born and foreign-born settlers alike. Farming proved to be an especially difficult way to make a living off the land, whether settlers clustered together, like the Swedish emigrants who found their way to Chisago County, Minnesota, in the midnineteenth century, or spread out across the denuded landscape of the valley’s upper reaches in the early-twentieth century.

Tourism—largely confined to the scenic Dalles area near Taylors Falls during the nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries—began replacing agriculture throughout the region by the 1930s. The Civilian Conservation Corps and the Works Progress Administration drove this change by building a variety of parks and recreational facilities throughout the St. Croix watershed. Eventually, marketing a “North Woods” lifestyle to automobile tourists turned the attention of locals back toward the river itself. In the 1960s and 1970s, Minnesota and Wisconsin politicians banded together with Northern States Power Company (a major landowner along the river) to establish a National Scenic Riverway on both the Upper and Lower St. Croix.

Organizing the book along these lines creates strengths and weaknesses. The topical approach allows the authors to offer welcome analytical depth without losing readers in a morass of names and dates. Yet it obscures the significant chronological overlap between all of these dynamics. Understanding them as simultaneous would better illuminate how they shaped the complicated worlds inhabited by the St. Croix Valley’s many residents. Furthermore, scattered mistakes—such as the assertion that Minnesota Territory and the state of Minnesota shared the same boundaries, and the misspelling of Somerset, Wisconsin, on multiple maps—mar an otherwise solid book.

Despite these issues, *North Woods River* pulls together the latest scholarship and sports clean and concise prose. It is a welcome replacement for James Taylor Dunn’s compelling—but dated—*The St. Croix: Midwest Border River* (1965) and deserves the attention of anyone interested in the history of the Upper Midwest.

Reviewed by Michael J. Lansing, assistant professor of history and director of the environmental studies program at Augsburg College, Minneapolis. His research interests include western history, environmental history, gender history, and public history. He is currently working on a book about the Nonpartisan League in the North American West.



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