

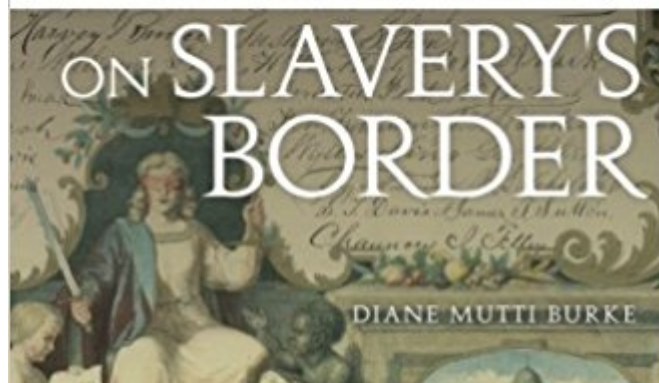
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On Slavery's Border: Missouri's Small-Slaveholding Households, 1815-1865



Missouri's Small-Slaveholding Households, 1815-1865



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On Slavery's Border: Missouri's Small-Slaveholding Households, 1815-1865. By Diane Mutti Burke (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2010). Pp. 413. Paper, \$24.95.

At first glance, antebellum Missouri should share little in common with the steep slopes of Appalachia. Despite differences in topography, climate, agriculture, and population, however, prior to the Civil War, the two regions shared similar characteristics in their use of slave labor on small-holdings. Small-holders often worked alongside their slaves in the house or field, and typically found diverse uses for their labor or hired slaves out to neighbors. While these practices have been chronicled in Appalachian historiography, small-holdings have been largely ignored in other parts of the South. In her ambitious *On Slavery's Border: Missouri's Small-Slaveholding Households, 1815-1865*, Diane Mutti Burke helps fill this void.

As Mutti Burke shows, Missouri presented an ideal place for small-holders to settle. Its close proximity to free-states kept large planters uninterested, even in absentee owning, allowing room for smaller upcountry ambitions to sprawl. Small-holders came to improve their social and economic lot, and found both easier in a region of other holdings like theirs. Owning even one slave provided social and economic capital. It was not long, Mutti Burke contends, before “the thousands of westward migrating slaveholders far surpassed their original intentions of replicating the eastern small-slaveholding paradigm, and instead created a distinctive slave society in which small slaveholders reigned supreme” (51). In the years immediately preceding the Civil War, she argues, it was these small-holders, and not planters, that became Missouri powerbrokers.

On Slavery's Border differs from earlier works on slavery by examining the experience of both owner and enslaved, as well as the interaction between the two. As Mutti Burke explains at the outset, “the intimacy of small-slaveholding household relations makes it illogical to concentrate on one race or the other” (8). This welcome approach allows readers a

very well-rounded window into the world of small-holdings, which Burke presents through the framework of the household. Inside the ‘big house,’ whites made decisions that they hoped would improve their lives, influenced primarily by economic reasoning. In their society, they hoped to pass their wealth to future generations and “launch their children into the slaveholding class” (88). While her separate examinations into the lives of owner and enslaved are revealing, even more so are her discussions of their interactions. The complicated and ambiguous relationship between master and slave is even more so on small-holdings.

Despite their close proximity, blacks and whites still maintained segregated space. Mutti Burke expertly describes family life for slaves, arguing that small-holdings meant more interaction across plantation boundaries. She demonstrates that this increased contact resulted in more abroad marriages, thus influencing traditional gender roles, as abroad husbands “could provide their wives and children with only limited economic assistance, physical protection, and emotional support” (207). Slaves utilized their abroad connections as an information pipeline and were well informed because of their location in a border state. Segregated spaces in the home carried over into specific conduct in the community, though many slaves attended funerals, church services, and other community functions.

Some authors have argued that the quality of a slave’s life was closely linked to the size of his master’s holding, but Mutti Burke disputes any claim that small-holdings resulted in a benign form of slavery. Certainly the proximity allowed for a broad spectrum of experiences and emotions, but these ranged from sympathy to hatred and cruelty, and in no way was Missouri slavery “better” than anywhere else in the South.

Sources abound for recreating the Missouri small-holder perspective, and Mutti Burke has made excellent use of manuscript collections, government documents, newspapers, and church records. While some may criticize her use of the WPA narratives and Pension Claims in recreating the enslaved experience, Burke is meticulous in cross-referencing these with each other and autobiographies from former slaves such as William Wells Brown to decipher the truth. She sensibly refuses to reject either the positive or negative depictions in these sources, and readers are treated to an accurate depiction of how varied

the enslaved experience could be. By focusing on the rural “Little Dixie” area of Missouri between the Missouri and Mississippi Rivers, Mutti Burke certainly leaves room for future scholars to explore border slavery in its urban environments. Those scholars, along with anyone studying Missouri, the political-economy of the border states, the antebellum South, or small slaveholdings, will find *On Slavery's Border* a welcome addition to the historiography and excellent resource.

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