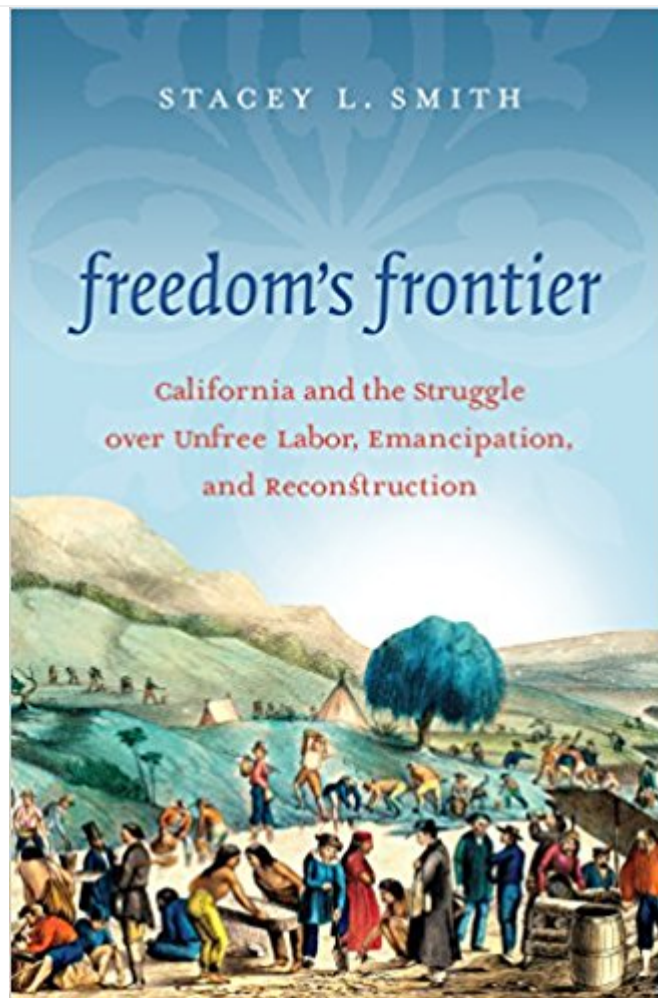


# {essays in history}

The Annual Journal produced by the Corcoran Department of History at the University of Virginia

## Freedom's Frontier: California and the Struggle over Unfree Labor, Emancipation, and Reconstruction



Volume 47 (2014)

### Reviewed Work(s)

*Freedom's Frontier: California and the Struggle over Unfree Labor, Emancipation, and Reconstruction.* By Stacey L. Smith (Chapel Hill: University of California Press, 2013). Pp. 344. Cloth, \$39.95. Ebook, \$39.99.

Stacey L. Smith begins *Freedom's Frontier* with an 1856 court case involving the “kidnapping” of a young female house servant named Shasta by an African-American abolitionist. Although it took place in a free state, the servant’s owner Oliver Wozencraft was able to win the case and consign Shasta to her former bondage. For historians nurtured on conventional accounts of the sectional crisis, the Shasta case seems like just another “fugitive slave on free soil” incident among many (1). Yet this case took place in California and, as it turns out, Shasta was a Native American captive taken in 1851 by Wozencraft during a federal military campaign against the state’s Yuki Indian tribe. Involving an array of ethnicities and interests, this opening anecdote underscores Smith’s larger goal of excavating the complex intersections between race and labor on early California’s dynamic, multiethnic frontier.

In her introduction, Smith argues that historians cannot truly understand the pivotal issues of nineteenth-century America – sectional crisis, civil war, emancipation, and reconstruction – without considering how the Far West helped to shape antebellum and postbellum America. This continental outlook places her work within a stream of recent scholarship that attempts to incorporate the American West (particularly California) into the larger story of the Civil War era.<sup>[1]</sup> Unlike previous studies, however, Smith approaches her subject with the social historian’s impulse for questioning past assumptions and challenging grand narratives. Rather than simply casting California as a free soil, pro-Union state (as most scholars have done), Smith traces “the rise of a dense tangle of unfree labor systems – most real, some imagined – that undermined and unsettled free-state status” (2-3). Not simply content with examining the Far West for its own sake, Smith assigns California a central role in the remaking of American race and labor relations after the Civil War.

Smith dedicates the bulk of her monograph to recovering practices of bound and semi-bound labor during the years between the Compromise of 1850 (which allowed California to enter the Union as a free state) and the outbreak of the Civil War. Peoples involved in these systems of unfree labor include: African-American slaves brought west by southern slaveholding migrants; contract workers such as Chinese “coolies” and Chilean and Sonoran “peones;” Asian and American Indian women who became commodities in the region’s lucrative sex trade; and Native American children like Shasta who were forced to become housebound dependents of adopted white parents. A free state on paper, Smith concludes, California remained an unfree state in actuality.

These structures of compulsive labor existed due to the predominantly pro-southern makeup of early California’s political apparatus. Although constituting only a small segment of California’s white population, southern Democrats (popularly known as the “Chivalry” or “Chivs”) quickly captured the state’s political and legal offices following statehood, passing a statewide fugitive slave law in 1852 and ensuring support for the perpetuation of slavery in the Far West. However, the Republican Party in California eventually challenged this southern domination. Taking advantage of a weak Democratic Party divided by the sectional crisis, Republicans seized control of the governorship in 1861 and the state legislature during the following year. Forming an alliance with free-soil Democrats, the new Republican leadership rode the crest of antislavery sentiment initiated by the Emancipation Proclamation and the Thirteenth Amendment, dismantling much of the state’s proslavery legislation and curtailing the Indian slave trade and female sex-trafficking. Despite these efforts little was done to endorse full suffrage or civil rights, anticipating the lukewarm reforms of the Reconstruction era.

Smith ends her study with a twist. Surprisingly, she points out, the antislavery impulse of the Civil-War era significantly informed the anti-Chinese movement of the late-nineteenth century. The same Republicans who challenged California’s bound and semi-bound labor systems worried that increased rights for blacks would encourage unrestricted Chinese immigration, in the form of contract labor and prostitution, and would revive other practices of slavery in the state. These fears had unintended consequences, for when Democrats regained control of the state legislature they successfully rejected the Fourteenth

and Fifteenth Amendments (which California did not ratify until the mid-twentieth century). , California Republicans would ultimately lead the charge in Congress to pass the federal Page Law of 1875, which prohibited the importation of Chinese labor and concubines and became the prototype for the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882.

Because of its regional reconsiderations and larger implications for national history, Smith's study is an important addition to the history of the Civil War and Reconstruction. Like Heather Cox Richardson's *West from Appomattox*, Smith's book projects issues of race, gender, and labor across the entire length of the continent, integrating regions we long thought peripheral into the mainstream of American history.<sup>[2]</sup> "When we set our sights on the Pacific Coast," Smith explains, "it becomes clear not only that the struggle over slavery was a truly national story, encompassing North, South, and West, but that the Far West played a critical role in remaking the post-Civil War nation" (3). Most importantly, Smith utilizes a rich archive of neglected legislative and court records to recover the tragedies and triumphs of individuals living in a region of contradiction. Grounded in historical lives and oozing with contemporary resonance, *Freedom's Frontier* is social history at its very best.

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<sup>[1]</sup> See Leonard L. Richards, *The California Gold Rush and the Coming of the Civil War* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2007); Glenna Matthews, *The Golden State in the Civil War: Thomas Starr King, the Republican Party, and the Birth of Modern California* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2012); and John W. Robinson, *Los Angeles in Civil War Days, 1860-1865* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2013).

<sup>[2]</sup> Heather Cox Richardson, *West from Appomattox: The Reconstruction of America after the Civil War* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007).



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