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Race and Rights: Fighting Slavery in the Old Northwest by
Dana Elizabeth Weiner (review)

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Webster countered that he rose “to defend the East,” and orderly, rational settlement (163). Though Webster won more style points, Van Atta concludes that, at least temporarily, the preemptionists won the day.

As with states’ rights, the slavery controversy remained interwoven with the question of the public lands, and slavery as a political issue became especially prominent in the years after the war with Mexico and the Mexican Cession. In the 1850s, the doctrine of popular sovereignty, sometimes called “squatter sovereignty,” helped bring on vicious armed conflicts, especially in the territory of Kansas (239). Once the Civil War broke out, leaving Lincoln and Congress without significant southern opposition, they could pass the Homestead Act of 1862, granting 160 acres to heads of household, and the Morrill Land Grant College Act to promote higher education throughout the nation.

Securing the West features a number of helpful population maps, as well as tables illustrating the sectional distribution of key votes in Congress. It is solidly researched, well written, and cogently argued. In all likelihood it will not garner much of an audience outside of specialists, which is really a shame. The history of public land policy lacks the excitement of studies of the wars against Native Americans and cannot hope to match the inherent drama of works on American slavery. Yet what Van Atta has ably demonstrated is that one cannot really understand either of those topics without grasping just how inextricable land policy was from both of them.

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Dana Elizabeth Weiner, *Race and Rights: Fighting Slavery in the Old Northwest*. DeKalb: Northern Illinois University Press, 2013. 327 pp. \$38.00.

In *Race and Rights* Dana Elizabeth Weiner examines how Americans in the Midwest responded to slavery and racial discrimination from 1830 to 1870. Her monograph focuses on four states: Ohio, Indiana, Illinois, and Michigan. Her central argument is that blacks and whites launched an organized movement to advance civil rights and do away with the remnants of slavery that lingered in defiance of the Ordinance of 1787. They also wanted slavery abolished in the country at large. While this book reminds readers of many well known topics from the Old Northwest Territory, Weiner makes

a unique contribution by highlighting the role of women, including black women, in the fight for civil rights. Readers will complete this book knowing much more than the obvious: that women labored to end racism and slavery. They will read biographical sketches of white and black female “activists” that fought for racial equality in the states.

Weiner starts *Race and Rights* by establishing the conservative character of the Old Northwest. Whites in many parts of the United States, including the South, saw the potential for financial gain in the Northwest Territory. They came into the area with the single motive of driving out indigenous inhabitants and building states to advance the interest of white men. Whites, however, did not always agree on slavery. Some believed slavery would be vital to their prosperity. “Others believed local slavery would diminish the value of white men’s toil” (14). Proslavery migrants ignored Article VI in the Ordinance of 1787 which prohibited slavery. They persuaded leaders in the federal and state governments to accept the interpretation that Article VI was a prospective law. It prevented new slaves from being brought into the region but left slaves already there in bondage. Weiner also makes it clear that the states adopted an intricate system of indentured servitude, which made black servants de facto slaves.

From this, it can be seen that the status of African Americans in the Old Northwest divided whites. Those who favored slavery also supported laws that denied African Americans fundamental citizenship rights. These Black Laws included denying African Americans the ability to offer testimony against whites in court. Whites who opposed slavery joined the activists Weiner discusses in this book. She keeps a tight focus on these twins—“antislavery and anti-prejudice activists” throughout the work (12). The abolition and civil rights reform movements started in the 1830s. Abolitionists organized local and national antislavery organizations. Activists launched a petitioning movement to urge state legislators to abolish the Black Laws in the states. Both groups sent out lecturers to spread an anti-slavery and anti-prejudice message.

As would be expected, whites who supported slavery and the Black Laws opposed abolition and civil rights reform. Whites in the Old Northwest did not have a direct interest in slavery; however, the midwestern economy was inextricably tied to the South. Weiner writes that whites wanted to maintain their “economic exchange with their native region and were hostile to African Americans, most likely out of a deeply ingrained bias as well as an interest in preserving these trade relations” (49). Slaveholders, for this

reason, could rely on supporters to pass laws inhospitable to blacks. Mid-western lawmakers also adopted legislation favorable to travelers seeking to carry slaves through free states. Local authorities also supported slaveholders when attempting to capture and remove runaways. “From the perspective of slaveholders and their sympathizers,” Weiner writes, “national concord depended on them being able to move through the north with ease—even with their slaves” (49). Activists in the Old Northwest faced the formidable challenge of resisting the Black Laws and opposing slavery.

Many of the men, both black and white, involved in nineteenth century reform, are well known. Women, however, have not been given their just due as activists in the fight for freedom and civil rights. Here is where Weiner is at her finest: she introduces and expands our knowledge of some of the women in the movement for reform. Mary Brown Davis “was a founding member of both the Illinois Female Anti-Slavery Society and the Peoria Female Anti-Slavery Society” (81). Josephine S. Griffin ignored the women who criticized her as a “lecturer,” in contrast to an abolitionist, solely because of her sex. Abby Kelley gave antislavery lectures and was also an agent in an abolition society. Weiner shows that black women also engaged the struggle for civil rights reform. Mary Ann Shadd Cary, educator and lawyer, edited the *Provincial Freedom*. Frances Ellen Watkins Harper attended the Philadelphia meeting in the Black Convention Movement in 1855. Edmonia Highgate was a speaker at the 1864 convention in Syracuse.

In sum, this is a well written book about “race and rights” in the nineteenth century. Weiner carefully illustrates that African Americans and their allies launched a movement against slavery and racial prejudice. She makes a significant contribution by highlighting women as activists. She covers a forty year period in this work, and her greatest challenge is managing this material. Readers will find instances where the book seems repetitive. Nevertheless, this is surely a welcome addition to the field, and it furthers our understanding of how Americans managed social and political reform before and after the Civil War.

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