

Making an Anti-Slavery Nation: Lincoln, Douglas, and the Battle over Freedom

Stephen Hansen

Southern Illinois University - Edwardsville

ISSN 0003-4827

Copyright © 2018 State Historical Society of Iowa. This article is posted here for personal use, not for redistribution.

Recommended Citation

Hansen, Stephen. "Making an Anti-Slavery Nation: Lincoln, Douglas, and the Battle over Freedom." *The Annals of Iowa* 77 (2018), 199-201.

Available at: <https://doi.org/10.17077/0003-4827.12507>

Hosted by [Iowa Research Online](#)

Looking for Lincoln in Illinois: A Guide to Lincoln's Eighth Judicial Circuit, by Guy C. Fraker. Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press. xiii, 130 pp. Illustrations, maps, appendix, bibliography, index. \$21.95 paperback.

Reviewer John A. Lupton is the executive director of the Illinois Supreme Court Historic Preservation Commission. He was formerly an assistant editor on *The Papers of Abraham Lincoln* and has written extensively about Lincoln as a lawyer.

Guy Fraker's new book is the third in a series that offers guided tours of Lincoln sites in Illinois. Specifically, Fraker leads us around central Illinois on the Eighth Judicial Circuit during the height of Lincoln's circuit-riding practice. The guide provides valuable information about highways, roads, and streets, including a key to different types of markers and wayside exhibits. Many illustrations show readers the people and places Lincoln experienced. Fraker demonstrates that Lincoln's time on the circuit served two important purposes: building a substantial law practice while also creating a network of political operatives.

Fraker does not delve into scholarly issues related to Lincoln's law practice, but this book is not meant for that. The purpose is to hold the reader's hand while Fraker points out many Lincoln sites in a very well-done driving and walking tour of Lincoln's circuit law practice. The book provides tidbits about some of Lincoln's cases and personal interactions—not enough to know full details, but enough to whet the appetite. As a result, a larger "For Further Reading" section would have been helpful to direct readers to some of those cases. Surprisingly absent were the two *Papers of Abraham Lincoln* publications on Lincoln's law practice. The four-volume book edition, particularly, has two in-depth tours of Lincoln's circuit. Minor quibbles aside, Fraker succeeds in giving readers a taste of what life was like on the circuit with Lincoln, whose practice mirrored that of many attorneys in the Midwest.

Making an Antislavery Nation: Lincoln, Douglas, and the Battle over Freedom, by Graham A. Peck. Urbana, Champaign, and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2017. ix, 264 pp. Maps, appendix, notes, index. \$34.95 hardcover.

Reviewer Stephen Hansen is emeritus dean and professor of history at Southern Illinois University Edwardsville. He is the author of *The Making of the Third Party System: Voters and Parties in Illinois, 1850–1876* (1980).

In this study of the rise of antislavery politics, Graham A. Peck uses Illinois as the context for examining the political conflict over slavery from the Northwest Ordinance in 1787 to the election of Abraham

Lincoln in 1860. Peck's well-written and insightful analysis argues that Lincoln's ideas and leadership wedded the concept of freedom with national expansion and economic opportunity into a compelling antislavery ideology for the Republican Party. While not attempting to provide a major reinterpretation of the formation of the Republican Party, Peck offers a useful, lively, and discerning study of the evolution of antislavery politics.

Peck, professor of history at Saint Xavier University in Chicago and writer, director, and producer of a documentary on Stephen A. Douglas, examines antislavery politics using Illinois as a microcosm for the nation. He argues five major points: (1) antislavery politics cannot be properly understood without recognizing that slavery was a constant issue in American politics since the Northwest Ordinance of 1787; (2) the role of Northern Democrats as political centrists in the Sectional Crisis has not been fully appreciated; (3) Northern Democrats, even though political centrists, were essentially proslavery; (4) the ability of Lincoln and the Republican Party to link antislavery with nationalism was key in transforming the antislavery movement into a major political party; and (5) secession was the culmination of a fundamental conflict between slavery and freedom, deeply rooted in American history, and not the result of a failure to compromise in the 1850s.

Peck does an excellent job of describing the paradoxes and contradictions of antislavery politics in Illinois. He does so by deftly arguing that economic interests, racial attitudes, religious convictions, and definitions of freedom all shaped antislavery politics but with varying degrees of emphasis. He explains, for example, how the motives of antislavery voters in 1824 who rejected an attempt to make slavery constitutionally legal in Illinois differed from those of the antislavery voters who defeated the Democratic Party in 1854 in the wake of the Kansas-Nebraska Act. In 1824 voters were concerned primarily with slavery's degradation of labor along with a racist concern about bringing more African Americans into the state. In 1854 antislavery voters focused more on the future of Free Soil in the territories and the broken promise of the Missouri Compromise. Peck's nuanced description of antislavery politics in Illinois illustrates well the nation's complex and uncomfortable history of slavery, race, and politics.

Another strength of Peck's book is his explanation of how Abraham Lincoln framed antislavery politics. Peck argues that Lincoln "turned the moralism of abolitionists into the duty of the nation" (178). More specifically, he maintains that Lincoln transformed antislavery into a nationalistic purpose by arguing that universal freedom was the guiding principle of the nation. According to Peck, Lincoln's ability to link

antislavery with national values, expansion, and promise made a compelling ideology in the Free States that transformed the United States into an antislavery nation in 1860.

Peck's analysis could have been strengthened by explaining more fully his use of the terms *slavery* and *freedom*. The way Peck juxtaposes these terms implies a twenty-first-century meaning that seems to discount the nineteenth-century proslavery view that white slaveowners' political, social, and economic freedom depended on the enslavement of African Americans. Closely related to this issue is Peck's insistence that slavery had been a central political issue for the nation since 1787. It's doubtful that a majority of the people living in the antebellum United States saw it that way. Even Lincoln didn't become motivated by slavery as a political issue until the Kansas-Nebraska Act of 1854. Lastly, Peck could have benefited from better use of electoral data. His aggregated voting results broken down by geographic region add little to the analysis, a problem that could have been easily addressed by using already existing township- and county-level voting data.

Regardless of these reservations, Peck has provided a useful and interesting framework for understanding antislavery politics in Illinois and in the nation. His argument that Lincoln and the Republicans fused a view of the past with the issues of the present and a vision for the future into a powerful nationalistic antislavery ideology is compelling and insightful. Scholars and students of the Midwest and of the Sectional Crisis will find this book an important addition to the literature on antislavery politics.

Rebels on the Border: Civil War, Emancipation, and the Reconstruction of Kentucky and Missouri, by Aaron Astor. *Conflicting Worlds: New Dimensions of the American Civil War*. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2012, 2017. viii, 332 pp. Illustrations, maps, tables, notes, bibliography, index. \$35.00 paperback.

The Loyal West: Civil War and Reunion in Middle America, by Matthew E. Stanley. Urbana, Champaign, and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2017. xi, 268 pp. Illustrations, maps, appendix, notes, bibliography, index. \$95.00 hardcover, \$24.95 paperback.

Reviewer Kevin M. Gannon is professor of history and director of the Center for Excellence in Teaching and Learning at Grand View University. He is working on a continental history of the Civil War era.

The American Civil War was a many-faceted conflict, but one common thread runs through the various strands of the era's conflict: in an es-