

Sailing to Freedom: Maritime Dimensions of the Underground Railroad, ed. Timothy D. Walker. Amherst and Boston: University of Massachusetts Press, 2021. 230 pp. \$27.95. Paperback ISBN: 9781625345929. \$90. Hardback ISBN: 9781625345936.

Sailing to Freedom: Maritime Dimensions of the Underground Railroad, edited by Timothy D. Walker, sheds light on an important topic of American history which has been up to now more or less completely overlooked by historians of African American history as well as by maritime historians despite its major relevance for both fields.

The book comprises ten chapters written by historians who are either specialists for regional (African American) history along the American East Coast ranging from the Carolinas to New England or the wider context of the history of the land-based Underground Railroad and African Americans escaping slavery at large. As only one of the authors contributing to the book and the editor are dedicated maritime historians, the book has more to offer as a study on African American history and escaping slavery than as a contribution to maritime history.

The first two chapters provide an overall discussion of the maritime dimensions of the underground railroad including a detailed overview of the historiography of the subject and a discussion of whether maritime escapes from slavery to freedom should be understood as part of the underground railroad at all or if the term should be limited to escapes via land routes with their complex networks of stations and conductors. The following eight chapters look at the subject from the point of view of the various ports along the Eastern Seaboard organized by geography from South to North beginning with South Carolina and ending with New Bedford, Massachusetts, in southern New England. Given the nature of the maritime routes and the fact that for most maritime escapes the actual journey onboard a ship was the least risky and least eventful part of the whole journey, roughly half of these eight chapters focus on the process of preparation for the journey, the actual boarding of the ship, and attempts by local authorities to prohibit enslaved persons to stow away on vessels while the other half focuses on the arrival and what comes after, including attempts by slave owners to regain their property as well as actions taken by mariners and shipowners to avoid liability for having supported escape and consequently being banned from future use of ports in the southern states.

While such structure provides an easy-to-understand framework for the whole book and allows each of the eight geographical chapters to have a highly detailed and nuanced analysis drawn from specific individual escape stories, this structure results also in chapters being somewhat repetitive and often more focused on individual stories than the larger picture. The tenth and final chapter, written by Megan Jeffreys, finally describes maritime escape strategies based on runaway slave advertisements and thus is, besides the introductory chapter, the only chapter that does not deal with a specific regional history but provides a more holistic perspective on escapes from slavery via the ocean.

The geographic structure with its many examples of individual escapes seems to be both the strongest and the weakest aspect of the book. The strongest, because this approach allows individual stories to be at the center of the book and the weakest, because the overall picture might

get lost as in a case of not seeing the forest for the trees. A brief concluding chapter would have helped to avoid this issue and at the same time provided a chance to bring together the most valuable insights of the individual chapters into one comprehensive conclusion.

From the point of view of a maritime historian—and this reviewer is a maritime historian—probably the strongest points of the book are the detailed analyses showing up in several chapters explaining how many maritime skills were available to several of the enslaved people fleeing the South, as this is a skillset normally not to be expected to exist within the enslaved African American population of the southern US. Directly related to this and equally important seems to be the discussion of the whaling industry as a potential place for employment after escape from slavery, which is discussed by Len Travers in his chapter on people of color. While the existing historiography on New England whaling rarely fails to mention that people of color made up a sizeable group among the crews of the whaling ships, it is normally only rarely discussed why they joined the whaling crews. Embarking on a ship bound for the Pacific and not to be expected back in port prior to the conclusion of a two- or three-year journey was a near guarantee that even the most stubborn slave owner would have given up all attempts to recover his property and thus whaling was not only an industry that allowed them to make a living but also to ensure that a successful escape from slavery ended in permanent freedom.

Altogether Timothy Walker and his co-authors need to be lauded for bringing the maritime dimension of the underground railroad to the attention the topic deserves as sailing to freedom was an important element of escapes from slavery overall. Despite the minor criticisms mentioned above, the book can easily be praised for providing detailed, careful, and convincing analyses as well as individual escape stories illustrating the different patterns and structures of the maritime underground railroad. Consequently, the book can be easily recommended to historians of African American history as well as to maritime historians. Due to its sometimes repetitive nature it might not be the best recommendation for a general readership looking for an easy read on the subject, but for the serious professional historian as well as for students of the respective subjects it needs to be recommended without much limitation.

With a suggested retail price of \$27.95 for the paperback issue it is moderately priced for an academic book and the quality of print and illustrations is what is to be expected for such a book. The price of \$90.00 for the hardcover version on the other hand seems to be on the pricey side and exclusively aiming for institutional customers like academic libraries.

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