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Review: Slaveholders on Guard

Reviewed Work(s): Slave Patrols: Law and Violence in Virginia and the Carolinas by Sally E. Hadden

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Yet *Affairs of Honor* is an impressive first book, worth reading for its many insights, and joins several recent imaginative books on the political culture of the early republic. It may not attract a general audience, but it already has provoked debate among historians of the era.

### Slaveholders on Guard

Walter Johnson, *New York University*

*Slave Patrols: Law and Violence in Virginia and the Carolinas*. By SALLY E. HADDEN. Harvard Historical Studies, 138. (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2001. Pp. xii, 340. \$35.00.)

Sally Hadden's *Slave Patrols* fills an important gap in the historiography of American slavery. A comparative study of one of the slave South's most commonly recognized and yet heretofore understudied institutions, *Slave Patrols* ranges widely over time and space, tracking the history of state-sponsored slave discipline in Virginia and the Carolinas from the seventeenth century to the nineteenth. It is a deeply researched, directly (if sometimes peculiarly) argued, and truly interesting book that should become the standard text for those who wish to learn more about slave patrols and the military history of southern slavery.

The book begins with an institutional history of slave patrols: how they were organized, charged with responsibilities, regulated (in the matter of providing for substitutes, for example), and remunerated. Like their Caribbean antecedents, Hadden argues, North American patrols evolved out of the slave catching and disciplining functions of colonial militias. For most of the seventeenth century, she further maintains, the patrols and pass laws that later came to characterize the slaveholders' regime were more often used to track the movements of Indians and even Euroamericans (who, according to laws in both Virginia and North Carolina, had to obtain a pass proving they were neither indentured nor in debt before boarding a ship out of the colony). A series of slave insurrections in the first quarter of the eighteenth century and the attenuation of Spanish, French, and finally British threats to the sovereignty of American slaveholders combined to focus the attention of colonial lawmakers on providing a public disciplinary apparatus to control slaves when they were out of the reach of their masters. "As other threatening groups receded in the distance," Hadden contends, "the only remaining menace to the white community was slaves, which a subgroup of the militia—patrols—was specifically designed to control" (p. 47).

Much of the first part of the book is a comparison of the paths by which the patrols “developed” toward the model of state-appointed and paid patrols that characterized the antebellum period. “The length of time between the first effort to control slaves and the formal institution of patrols in each colony depended upon several variables: first date of settlement, size of slave population, overall population, threatened insurrections, and geographic area and density of settlement” (p. 39). Hadden’s account of the institutional evolution of slave patrols is unabashedly teleological, and she occasionally seems to be evaluating the capacity of southern lawmakers speedily to take the type of action that the argument of *Slave Patrols* implies they should have done at any given moment. South Carolinians “inexplicably” (p. 23) stopped paying patrols at just the moment that Hadden’s argument suggests they should have wanted them most. Although they finally “acknowledged” (p. 26) the need for a state-sponsored patrol, Virginia lawmakers “likely deferred” (p. 23) its introduction because of the colony’s small slave population. The North Carolina legislature, by contrast, “likely . . . considered the population density of North Carolina and realized” (p. 36) that a patrol appointed by the county courts might be more effective than one by the militia. What is missing for statements like these, which mistake the effects of historical analysis for the causes of historical action, is any real consideration of what it was that southern lawmakers and patrollers themselves thought they were doing when they set up patrols, volunteered for service, divided up beats, and started harassing slaves.

There is plenty of evidence about what policy-makers and slaveholders thought, but it comes in the second part of *Slave Patrols*, where Hadden freezes the stopwatch timing the race toward the perfectly evolved patrol and investigates the fascinating everyday history of patrolling. The argument in the book that will be most often cited is the contention that slave patrols were not simply composed of non-slaveholding white men out to test the prerogatives of (racial) mastery for themselves. Through careful reconstruction of the patrol and census records, Hadden shows that as many as two-thirds of early patrollers in eighteenth-century Norfolk County, Virginia, and as many as one-half of Amelia County, Virginia, patrollers were slaveholders, as were all of their captains. Noting that one of the functions of the patrol was to keep unruly (read: poor) white men away from slaves and citing a good deal of evidence beyond her detailed findings in Virginia, Hadden shows that prominent white men often played a leading role in patrolling.

Just as suggestive is Hadden’s discussion of the geography of patrolling. She notes that patrol beats were often shaped by the physical features of the landscape: creeks, rivers, and swamps were difficult for mounted patrollers to cross, and so these often formed the practical

boundary of the area covered by any given militia company. As Hadden shows, these boundaries, defined out of the daily practice of patrolling, were often reworked as county lines—the boundaries of counties to which many antebellum slaveholders would pledge an allegiance greater than that to which they owed their nation or even their state. State (and county) sovereignty in the South, however, often ended at the mouth of a slaveholder's driveway (though apparently not that of a non-slaveholding white suspected of trading or consorting with slaves), and Hadden chronicles a set of fascinating disputations about whether patrollers should be allowed to chase slaves onto their owners' property, most of which concluded that they should not. Aware of the way that patrollers traveled through the landscape, traveling and runaway slaves stayed off the roads during the early hours of the night, taking cover in roadside woods or swamps until the early hours of the morning when the patrollers (many of whom, Hadden suggests, drank on the job) made their way to bed. When they were flushed and chased, these slaves sometimes made for the woods, the swamps, or even the county line. Other times they ran for home, convinced that their owners' expansive definition of the rights of property would shield them from the state-sponsored discipline of the slave patrol. Though it is not the stated purpose of *Slave Patrols* to make such an argument, the evidence is suggestive of the process by which the pattern of white rule was formed out of the practicalities of patrolling. The southern landscape both shaped and was shaped by the interplay of resistance and counterinsurgency that defined the daily life of the patrol.

The book concludes with chapters that trace the upsurge in patrolling activity that came with threats of slave revolt, the American Revolution, and the Civil War. Although it is framed by the peculiar argument that the presence of slave patrols (that is, the presence of an ongoing paramilitary counterinsurgency campaign) contributed to slaveholders' "complacency" (p. 140) in ordinary times rather than indexing its opposite, this section of the book provides a series of interesting case studies of the way that southern lawmakers responded to military challenges (real or imagined) to their power: by increasing the number of patrols and broadening their authority. In a way, these chapters bring the book back to the interplay of external and internal threats with which the early chapters on the patrolling function of the militia began: to the dilemma of a ruling class trying to balance its dependence on a potentially (and often actively) insurgent labor force with its fight to track an independent course through national and international politics. Read this way, *Slave Patrols* represents an important (if perhaps unwitting) contribution to the reconfiguration of southern history as military history that began with John Hope

Franklin's 1956 classic, *The Militant South*. Sally Hadden's *Slave Patrols* casts new light on old questions while suggesting, though not exhausting, new ones; it is quite worth reading.

### The Promise of Equality

Joseph J. Ellis, *Amherst, Massachusetts*

*Jefferson's Pillow: The Founding Fathers and the Dilemma of Black Patriotism.*

By ROGER WILKINS. (Boston: Beacon Press, 2001. Pp. 163. \$23.00.)

*Jefferson's Pillow* is a highly personal and deeply poignant meditation on America's founding generation by a respected leader in the modern Civil Rights movement. The title derives from Thomas Jefferson's recollection of his first conscious memory, being carried on a pillow from his family's Shadwell plantation by a black slave. The pillow motif could be pushed even further, since one of Jefferson's last conscious utterances—a mumbled request to adjust his pillow the day before he died—was also answered by a slave, his trusted servant Burwell. The imagery of both scenes makes the point that Roger Wilkins wants to contemplate, namely, that there is an intimate connection between the most revered founders of the American republic and the most despicable institution in American history.

This is hardly news to most readers of this journal, who know that the work of David Brion Davis, Winthrop Jordan, and Edmund Morgan has made slavery and racism a centerpiece in the story of the American Revolution and that the more recent work of Ira Berlin and Philip Morgan has transformed our understanding of slavery in its formative eighteenth-century context. Nor will specialists on the political culture of the revolutionary generation find much new in Wilkins's treatment of Thomas Jefferson, George Mason, James Madison, and George Washington, as they danced their collective minuet with liberty on one arm and chattel slavery on the other. Nevertheless, *Jefferson's Pillow* is an important book, deserving of scholarly notice and robust professional discussion, in part because of Wilkins's fiercely independent conclusions and in part because of what they tell us about the current state of thinking about the Founding Fathers in that expansive region beyond the groves of academe.

The autobiographical sections of *Jefferson's Pillow* actually frame the pointed questions that Wilkins-as-historian wants to answer: "Can I embrace founders who may have 'owned' some of my ancestors? Can I try to see them in their complexity and understand them—even identify with