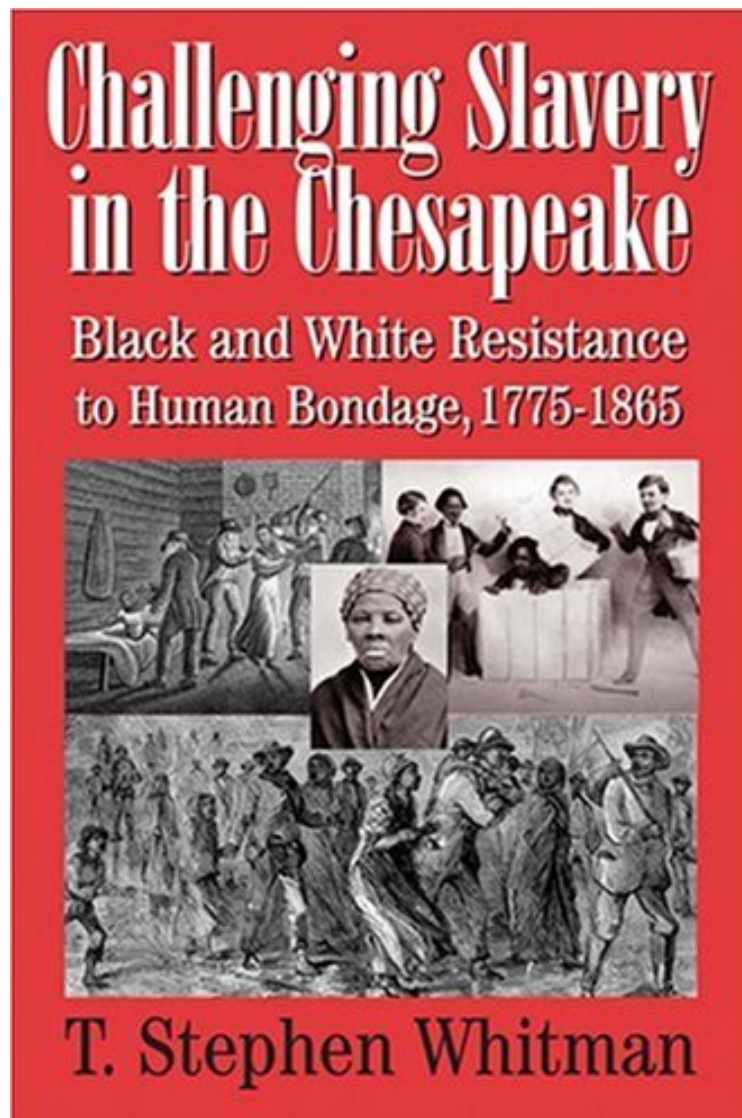


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## Challenging Slavery in the Chesapeake: Black and White Resistance to Human Bondage, 1775–1865

*T. Stephen Whitman*

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**T. Stephen Whitman : Challenging Slavery in the Chesapeake: Black and White Resistance to Human Bondage, 1775–1865** before purchasing it in order to gage whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised Challenging Slavery in the Chesapeake: Black and White Resistance to Human Bondage, 1775–1865:

4 of 4 people found the following review helpful. The Chesapeake region's slow and difficult movement from slavery

to freedomBy Paul HaspelTo challenge the institution of slavery in the Chesapeake region must have seemed an impossible thing in those antebellum days. After all, slavery had existed in the region since the first slave ship had docked at Jamestown, Virginia, in 1619 – “before the Mayflower.” And yet there were those brave souls who did fight back against the “peculiar institution”; and their campaign was ultimately successful. In “Challenging Slavery in the Chesapeake,” historian T. Stephen Whitman of Mount Saint Mary’s University chronicles the stories of those who dared to confront the political and economic monolith that was slaveholding. The book’s subtitle -- “Black and White Resistance to Human Bondage, 1775-1865” -- makes clear Whitman’s intention of showing the broad-based nature of anti-slavery activity in the Chesapeake region. And the 1775-1865 timeline, appropriately, takes the reader from the first battle of the American Revolution through the last battle of the American Civil War. There is a fine sort of symmetry in that. Whitman defines the Chesapeake region as encompassing the states of Virginia, Maryland, and Delaware – a designation with which some readers might take issue. While Delaware certainly fits geographically with Maryland and Virginia – the three states often appear together on maps, along with the city of Washington, D.C. – the majority of the First State’s population, centered around Wilmington, has always looked to Philadelphia and the Delaware Valley, rather than south toward the Chesapeake. State maps set forth geographical designations, but don’t always capture the sociological realities of a region. That being said, I do acknowledge that in Delaware’s two southerly counties of Kent and Sussex during the antebellum era, the slaveholding economic and social order held power in a manner comparable with the neighboring counties of Maryland’s Eastern Shore. Whitman makes clear that opposition to slavery among Chesapeake-area whites was often “inspired by religious feeling. The Quakers were foremost, though Methodists also figured in the argument, particularly in Delaware and on Maryland’s Eastern Shore” (p. 49). But African Americans were always foremost in the fight for freedom, and the struggle could take many different shapes. In both the American Revolution and the War of 1812, a number of African Americans served with the British forces, responding to British offers of freedom in return for service to the British cause; and at the end of both conflicts, “The British navy honored promises of freedom to black allies by transporting them out of the United States” (p. 101). Yet these dramatic episodes of wartime resistance were not by any means the only way in which African Americans fought back against the injustice and cruelty of slavery. Baltimore in particular had a large population of free African Americans, and “Building and supporting churches was only part of a wider effort by many free people of color to pursue ‘uplift,’ a comprehensive effort to improve individual and community morality, to attain respectability, and thus to testify against slavery and race prejudice” (p. 150). Yet the odds against these brave African Americans, whether enslaved or free, were long indeed: as Whitman points out in a chapter titled “The Two Underground Railroads,” “If striking out for freedom in the North, with or without the assistance of the underground railroad, became the dream of untold thousands of African Americans in the Chesapeake, the corresponding nightmare was the ever-present threat to free blacks of being kidnapped and sold as slaves in the Deep South” (p. 168). The underground railroad from South to North, from slavery to freedom, is the one that we Americans like to think about; it fits with our national narrative of American history forever moving forward toward a more perfect union, a more truly free society for everyone. To think about a second underground railroad that goes the other way – in the wrong direction, for the wrong cause – is not something we want to think about, though Steve McQueen’s recent film version of Solomon Northup’s “Twelve Years a Slave” has done much to remind Americans that that too is part of the history, and needs to be part of the conversation. A final chapter, “Civil War and the Destruction of Slavery,” chronicles the end of the “peculiar institution” in the Chesapeake region. The Chesapeake, like the United States generally, was divided by the Civil War; Virginia seceded and joined the Confederacy, while Maryland and Delaware remained with the Union as “border states,” slave states that did not secede. Accordingly, the campaign against slavery took different shapes in the lower and upper Chesapeake. In secessionist Virginia, “The Civil War...like the American Revolution,...featured the same triangular conflict [among] rebel masters, disaffected slaves, and armies of outsiders trying to crush the revolt” (pp. 221-22). In unionist Maryland and Delaware, by contrast, the momentum of military and political events of the Civil War quickly undid the hopes some whites held of holding on to slavery in return for their loyalty to the Union; and “Recruitment of slaves from October 1863 onward sounded the death knell of slavery....Even conservatives...became emancipationists” (pp. 218-19). “Challenging Slavery in the Chesapeake” is a well-written, well-researched treatment of a difficult subject. Illustrated with helpful maps, paintings, and photographs, Whitman’s book reminds us that nothing in the movement from tyranny toward human rights is inevitable or pre-ordained.

A chronological account of nine decades of antislavery activity in Maryland, Delaware, and Virginia, culminating in the Civil War. Challenging slavery could entail negotiating for freedom by manumission; grasping freedom by flight or insurrection; or uniting with external allies in the American Revolution, the War of 1812, or the Civil War. Free black people also undermined slavery as workers, worshippers, teachers, and writers. Whites who aided black freedom seekers also played their part.

About the AuthorT. Stephen Whitman is an assistant professor of history at Mount St. Mary's University and the

author of *The Price of Freedom: Slavery and Manumission in Baltimore and Early National Maryland*.