

of industrialization, the Swansea copper history is little known. The authors argue that this is in part because of the complexity of its corporate history. Throughout its time as a copper center, Swansea was host to a large number of different corporate entities and partnerships, many of them ephemeral, but the book manages to guide the reader through this complexity with a deft hand. The perspective shifts effortlessly between the internal organization of the work processes and the technology in the Swansea smelters; the social impact of the industry on the local community; the role of merchant capitalists in organizing the value chain; and the export of copper wares, technology, and know-how in the form of miners and engineers from South Wales and Cornwall to Latin America, Africa, and the Pacific in the nineteenth century.

Overall, this well-written and deeply researched book is highly recommended. *Swansea Copper* makes important contributions to diverse fields such as the history of globalization, industrialization, technology, labor, and capitalism. The book masterfully combines a focus on the local history of the Swansea copper industry with its role within the international commodity chain, and the result is a nuanced and powerful history that is a novel contribution to the global history literature.

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The Overseers of Early American Slavery: Supervisors, Enslaved Labourers, and the Plantation Enterprise. *By Laura R. Sandy.* New York: Routledge, 2020. 412 pp., 8 B/W illus. Paperback, \$42.36. ISBN: 978-1-03-223707-7. doi:10.1017/S0007680523000600

Reviewed by Jennifer Oast

“[L]ike one of the patriarchs, I have my flocks and my herds, my bond-men and bond-women, and every soart [*sic*] of trade amongst my own servants, so that I live in a kind of independence on every one, but Providence” (William Byrd II, Virginia planter, 1726).

As much as colonial American slave owners like William Byrd II loved to imagine themselves as the patriarchs of old, ruling benignly over a small kingdom of their own making, today historians well understand that plantation slavery was a capitalist enterprise poorly dressed in a paternalist guise. While historians such as Eric Williams led the

way with books like his *Slavery and Capitalism* (1944), there has especially been a turn toward connecting slavery with the development of American capitalism in the last decade with works such as Calvin Schermerhorn's *The Business of Slavery and the Rise of American Capitalism, 1815–1860* (2015), Edward Baptist's *The Half Has Never Been Told: Slavery and the Making of American Capitalism* (2016), Sven Beckert and Seth Rockman's *Slavery's Capitalism: A New History of American Economic Development* (2018), and Jennifer L. Morgan's *Reckoning with Slavery: Gender, Kinship, and Capitalism in the Early Black Atlantic* (2021).

Laura Sandy's *The Overseers of Early American Slavery: Supervisors, Enslaved Labourers, and the Plantation Enterprise* fits squarely into this historiographical emphasis on the business of slavery. William Byrd II leaves out the overseers who managed his plantation so that he could spend his time in leisure. Byrd was not alone—Sandy asserts that plantation overseers have been overlooked and denigrated by their contemporaries as well as modern historians. Overseers had a poor reputation as lower-class men who cheated employers and abused slaves. Sandy states that historians rarely look past these stereotypes about overseers, ignoring their histories as they focus attention on either the plantation owners or their slaves. The stigma against overseers “has persisted in both popular depictions and scholarly works regarding American slavery” (p. 2).

Laura Sandy sees past the stereotypes of eighteenth-century overseers, exploring their identity and importance to the plantation system in Virginia and South Carolina, the two main slave societies in colonial America. Sandy explains that colonial overseers were drawn from a large swath of society—while some were poor men who may have started as indentured servants themselves, others were professional managers or sons of other plantation owners undertaking a gentlemanly apprenticeship. Others were skilled artisans who taught their skills to slaves and oversaw their work in forges, spinning rooms, and naileries, often with the consequence of being unemployed as soon as the enslaved became proficient at their crafts.

Plantation owners were constantly looking for good overseer candidates because of high turnover. Most overseers only wanted the position until they had saved enough money to start their own small plantations. In addition, plantation owners frequently fired overseers for failing to balance the demands of patriarchy and profit. The difficulty of the overseer's role was tied up in this tension; while they were responsible for the well-being of enslaved workers, overseers were also expected to produce a profitable harvest. These goals were frequently contradictory, and the whip was a tool that overseers were required to master. Sandy asserts

“the overseer bore the brunt of the disappointments and anger felt by planters, slaves, and wider society,” leading to the poor reputation of overseers (p. 193). Sandy explores the contracts and salaries of colonial overseers in detail. Initially, some overseers received a share of the crop in lieu of wages. Therefore, the better the harvest, the higher their income. Gradually plantation owners shifted to set wages, in large part because the share system incentivized the overseer to push enslaved workers past their limits, since he only had a short-term interest in their well-being, whereas the slaveowners faced substantial losses if slaves were worked to death.

In an innovative chapter on enslaved overseers, Sandy asserts that often where enslaved men are called drivers in the records, they really had the responsibilities of overseers. They became more common over time because their characters were known, they could not quit, and, importantly, they cost less than a hired white overseer. Rather than a salary they received privileges like better living conditions and protection for their families. Sandy might have applied more of her analysis of the problems faced generally by overseers to Black overseers. How did they handle slave resistance and punishment? Did the slaves they supervised accept them, or were they living in a terrible middle ground between white owners and their fellow slaves? Another revealing chapter explores white working women on plantations: the wives of overseers and other female supervisors of slaves. Like overseeing men, they were often criticized by plantation owners, but Sandy successfully shows how many worked in overseeing partnerships with their husbands, contributing to the management of plantation enterprises by overseeing slaves working in dairies or spinning rooms, for example, or by serving as plantation midwives.

Finally, Sandy explores how white overseers handled the crisis of the American Revolution. They were resented by neighbors because of their exemption from military service, but if they chose to join the army, their employers castigated them for leaving the plantations unprotected. Those who stayed faced terrible dangers because plantations were targeted by both armies for plunder, and they were required to maintain order among slaves who were increasingly restless, especially when the liberating British armies were nearby. She argues that overseers, including enslaved overseers, were one reason why “the foundations of slavery, while shaken by the war, did not actually collapse” (p. 284).

The Overseers of Early American Slavery is an important contribution to the literature on the business of eighteenth-century slavery as well as to our understanding of working-class southern white men and women in that period. Based on deep research into colonial and Revolutionary plantation records and relevant secondary sources, it demands

that historians re-envision the role of overseeing in early American history.

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Washington at the Plow: The Founding Farmer and the Question of Slavery. *By Bruce A. Ragsdale.* Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2021. x + 358 pp. Hardcover, \$29.95. ISBN 978-0-674-24638-6.

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Reviewed by Stuart Leibiger

There are many fine books about George Washington and slavery. Likewise, there are excellent studies of Washington as a scientific farmer and businessman. In *Washington at the Plow: The Founding Farmer and the Question of Slavery*, Bruce A. Ragsdale, former director of the Federal Judicial History Office at the Federal Judicial Center, combines in a single authoritative monograph these two topics that cannot be understood apart from one another.

Embarking on a career as a Virginia planter in 1759, writes Ragsdale, “Washington aspired to be an enlightened landowner, committed to innovation and experiment, drawing on the knowledge found in British agricultural treatises” (p. 21). In adopting “the New Husbandry,” Washington joined a trans-Atlantic community of agriculturalists dedicated to modeling and disseminating scientific farming techniques to smaller farmers.

By 1766, explains Ragsdale, Washington began to free himself of British consignment merchants by replacing labor-intensive tobacco planting with wheat farming. Surprisingly, the switch to wheat increased Washington’s investment in and commitment to enslaved labor, leaving him “by 1775 more deeply invested in slavery than ever before” (p. 76). Agricultural improvements at Mount Vernon required the enslaved workforce to follow advanced farming techniques necessary to cultivate and process wheat that were typically performed by hired white laborers.

Regarding British policy prior to the Revolution as an economic as well as a political threat, Washington not only diversified his crops but also found alternative markets. As an example, Ragsdale cites the mill