

Ashesh Nepal

Dr. Christopher Lehman

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The Federal Government's Role in Shaping African American Slavery in Minnesota

When thinking about slavery in America the first thing that comes to our minds are the southern states and their plantations. Most of us have a notion of the Northern states being free from slavery while the South is the sole perpetrator and beneficiary of this cruel system. Due to this notion Minnesota being a northern state on the surface may seem to have had little to do with slavery and for the most part being disconnected from this practice. The book *Slavery's Reach: Southern Slaveholders in the North Star State* challenges this notion and shows the several economic ties Minnesota had with Southern slavery and how it was not always a free state. In this paper, I will be referencing this book to discuss how the Federal Government contributed to African-American slavery's presence in Minnesota by appointing several enslavers as governing members and through its pro-slavery laws at the federal level.

While the Democrat party was in power, the president was able to appoint officials for all federal territories which included Minnesota. Lehman states, "From 1853 to 1861, the Democratic Party, which supported the extension of slavery to territories across the country, controlled the White House, and appointments by Franklin Pierce in 1853 and James Buchanan in 1857 produced legislative, executive, and judicial reinforcement for proslavery Minnesotans" (Lehman, 27). Having such proslavery officials made the state more friendly towards enslavers and later on when Minnesota was officially classified as a Free state the few anti-slavery policies were never implemented. Having appointees from the federal level from a pro-slavery party was

influential to the locals who typically did not want slavery in Minnesota. These officials used their positions to ensure that slavery remained entrenched, even in a region where it might have otherwise been less prevalent

Another way the federal government was significant in shaping slavery in Minnesota was through its laws. In the book it is stated, “On March 6, 1857, the Minnesota legislature was in the penultimate day of its legislative session when the federal government legalized slavery in the territory. The Supreme Court ruled in *Dred Scott v. Sandford* that the practice was legal in all federal territories” (Lehman, 31). The passing of such laws encouraged slave owners from the South to come to Minnesota and created a harsher environment for those who were enslaved. The legalization of slavery in Minnesota underpinned a surge in pro-slavery sentiments and activities, effectively creating a culture that tolerated and even embraced the institution. Moreover, the federal government's tacit endorsement of slavery in the territory sent a powerful message to its residents.

In conclusion, the federal government had a major impact on shaping slavery in Minnesota. The federal government appointed pro-slavery officials who made the region more friendly to enslavers and also passed laws that explicitly legalized slavery. The pervasive impact of federal policies and rulings, as highlighted in *Slavery's Reach: Southern Slaveholders in the North Star State*, underscores the far-reaching consequences of the federal government's involvement in shaping the course of slavery in Minnesota.

References

Lehman, Christopher P. *Slavery's Reach: Southern Slaveholders in the North Star State*. Saint Paul, MN Minnesota Historical Society Press, 2019.