Bibliographical Essay
Historical Controversies: Antebellum United States
by Chris Calton

It's very difficult to do justice to any bibliography for the Civil War or antebellum years. There is no other period of American history that has so many books written about it. The following bibliographical essay will cover only those books I found particularly useful during the course of this past season, but it is far from a complete list.

General Histories

There are a few standard histories that serve as the best starting point for the antebellum and Civil War years. The most well-known book on the antebellum years through the Civil War is James McPherson’s *Battle Cry of Freedom* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988). It is considered the gold standard for this history with good reason, and it should not be overlooked. McPherson is weak on economic analysis, but his scholarship is among the most well-organized, thorough, and concise accounts of the war and its prelude.

My personal favorite book on the period, from antebellum through reconstruction, is Jeffrey Rogers Hummel’s *Emancipating Slaves, Enslaving Free Men* (Chicago: Open Court, 1996). There is a newer edition out than the one I own, and I don’t know if any changes were made. Hummel is a libertarian historian and Austrian economist, so his account of the war and the years surrounding it stands as probably the only one-volume source that closely reflects my own interpretation of this history. His economic analysis is far better than other general histories, though he only devotes a single chapter to the Union and Confederate economies. The most valuable part of his book are the bibliographical essays that follow each chapter. For those interested, Hummel also has some fantastic articles that can be read at Mises.org.

There are other general works on the Civil War that do not do any justice to the antebellum period. I’ll incorporate those into my bibliographical essay for next season, but even for people who are primarily interested in the war, the McPherson and Hummel book are worth giving attention to because it is very difficult to have a reasonable understanding of the war without also having an understanding of the political conflicts that precipitated it.

For the pre-war period, there are three historians who I would be remiss not to include even though I don’t adhere to any of their perspectives rigidly. The first is William Freehling and his two-volume *The Road to Disunion* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990). Freehling’s work is important because it deals with the sectional disputes going all the way back to the Revolutionary War. Even if you don’t agree with his conclusions, Freehling does offer important arguments regarding the centrality of slavery in the early republic’s political disputes, including the nullification crises.

The other two historians who have standard works on the antebellum years are David Potter, for his book *The Impending Crisis, 1848-1861* (New York: Harper & Row, 1976), and John Ashworth’s *The Republic in Crisis, 1848-1861* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2012), which is a distillation of his two-volume *Slavery, Capitalism, and Politics in the Antebellum Republic*. I have not read the larger work, but *The Republic in Crisis* is a wonderful and concise overview of the period. Ashworth is a non-orthodox Marxist historian, which is to say that he focuses on the conflict as primarily economic.
Potter’s work is a standard history that is of primary importance because so many histories you read on this period are building off of his analysis.

For those who might be inclined to dismiss Marxian historians such as Ashworth, I would encourage you to read Hans Hoppe’s wonderful essay “Marxist and Austrian Class Analysis,” which is helpful in understanding where we might benefit from Ashworth and other Marxist analyses of history, and what fallacies we should be wary of.

The Gold Rush

There is little to say here. The episode on California’s Gold Rush is predominantly narrative, and aside from the general history books cited above, I almost exclusively used H.W. Brands’ *The Age of Gold: The California Gold Rush and the New American Dream* (New York: Anchor Books, 2002). Brands doesn’t offer much in the way of analysis or interpretation – he’s primarily a storyteller – so the analysis of the importance of various events is entirely my own. Brands is a fine historian, but his books are popular for their entertainment value more than their scholarship.

Slavery and the Fugitive Slave Act

Since I decided against devoting any episodes to slavery itself, I will not be listing any of the important works on slavery as an institution, the slave trade, or the lives and culture of slaves, but there are, of course, a great number of wonderful histories on slavery. For those interested, it may suffice to list foundational authors such as Eugene D. Genovese, Philip Morgan, Edmund Morgan, Hugh Thomas, and James Oakes (again, this is an entirely incomplete list).

Of possibly greater interest might be the debate over slavery as a capitalist institution. For more serious scholars, Mark Smith’s *Debating Slavery: Economy and Society in the Antebellum South* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1998) gives a useful historiographical overview. Most famous would be Robert William Fogel and Stanley Engerman’s *Time on the Cross: The Economics of American Slavery* (Boston: W.W. Norton and Company, 1976). This book transformed the debate from a largely Marxist interpretation that slavery or the Old South was not capitalist, but rather pre-capitalist, and instead argued that slavery was capitalistic. It is a seminal work in quantitative history, as well (Fogel being a Nobel Laureate for his pioneering work in quantitative history), which is distinctly anti-Misesian.

Since Fogel and Engerman, historians have generally argued that slavery and the Old South were capitalistic, and this kind of negative perspective of “the history of capitalism” is fashionable in history currently. A recent popular example would be Edward Baptist’s *The Half Has Never Been Told: Slavery and the Making of American Capitalism* (New York: Basic Books, 2014). I do not consider this a very good analysis – it’s laden with anti-capitalistic bias and the writing is pretentious – but it’s also not useless as a history of the Louisiana sugar plantation culture. An alternative book, written by a libertarian historian, is John Majewski’s *Modernizing a Slave Economy: The Economic Vision of the Confederate Nation* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2009), which looks more at Confederate socialism.

None of these books were used for this past season, but I feel they are interesting enough to mention for a Mises Institute audience. Although historians generally place slavery and the Old South within a capitalist framework, their parameters for the term are never clearly defined. For what it’s worth, in the Misesian framework, the Old South would be an interventionist market economy, whereas the
Confederacy would be a wartime socialist economy, as Jeffrey Rogers Hummel points out. In the Hoppean framework, vis-à-vis *A Theory of Socialism and Capitalism*, slavery as an institution would qualify as distinctly socialist.


In the fugitive slave episodes, I also discussed three more well-known works that were written before the Civil War itself. The first, of course, is Harriet Beecher Stowe’s *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, as well as her lesser known non-fiction follow-up, *A Key to Uncle Tom’s Cabin*. The latter book is the documentation for her novel, which can be very useful but also includes a lot of personal testimony. The other book I cited was Solomon Northup’s memoirs *12 Years a Slave*. Each of these books is long out of copyright and can be purchased from various publishers. Of them, *12 Years a Slave* is the only one I consider really worth reading for the interested layperson. There is also a movie adaptation that I enjoyed, and I don’t remember any real historical problems with the movie, but I never looked deeply into it.

With the exception of my own scholarship on Lysander Spooner and American anarchism, I have not heavily studied the abolitionists. The one work I did use a great deal for the podcast was Aileen Kraditor’s *Means and Ends in American Abolitionism: Garrison and His Critics on Strategy and Tactics, 1834-1850* (Chicago: Elephant Paperbacks, 1989). First published in 1967, this book placed William Lloyd Garrison at the center of the abolitionist movement. I found it particularly useful for the episode devoted to the election of 1856 because it covers the history of the Liberty and Free-Soil parties leading up to the Republican Party.

Another book worth mentioning, which I read for its relevance to American anarchism, is Lewis Perry’s *Radical Abolitionism: Anarchy and the Government of God in Antislavery Thought* (Ithica, NY: Cornell University Press, 1973). I find Perry to be a terrible writer, and the book is a slog to get through. However, it is unique research of a faction of abolitionists who were anarchists, focusing on pacifist socialists influenced by Leo Tolstoy. I did not reference it for the podcast, but it is another book that may be of interest to a Mises Institute audience.

Additionally, Lysander Spooner’s writings, such as *The Unconstitutionality of Slavery*, *In Defense of Fugitive Slaves*, and all three *No Treason* pamphlets are of relevance. Frederick Douglass’ autobiographies can be inexpensively purchased from various publishers, and the writings of William Lloyd Garrison are likewise easy to obtain. All of these are worth reading, both for their historical significance as well as their relevance to libertarianism.

**Kansas and John Brown**

I pulled largely from two wonderful books on the Kansas territory, in addition to the general books cited at the start of the essay and a handful of books focusing on John Brown specifically.

The best book on Kansas I’ve found is Nicole Etcheson’s *Bleeding Kansas: Contested Liberty in the Civil War Era* (Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas, 2004). It’s very well written and researched, making
it a wonderful balance of readable and educational. The other book I used, which is also
well-researched but is more concise and focused more on the historically significant rather than the
narrative, is Michael E. Woods’ *Bleeding Kansas: Slavery, Sectionalism, and Civil War on the
Missouri-Kansas Border*. Both of these are fine books for an overview of the Kansas controversy, and
they do a good job at overcoming some of the historical confusion that came from the sensationalist
press in both the North and the South during the 1850s.

There is no shortage of books on John Brown, so I will confine myself to the ones I found most useful
when working on the podcast scripts, and these are some of the more recent works on John Brown, as
much of the older scholarship by historians such as James Malin and Allan Nevins has, I think, been
well critiqued (which is not to say that these are not still valuable histories, just that their ultimate
conclusions about Brown are questionable).

The single best book I’ve read about John Brown, which I named a number of times during the podcast,
is Robert McGlone’s *John Brown’s War Against Slavery* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2009).
This is simply a fantastic piece of scholarship and analysis. It utilizes sources that were unavailable to
earlier Brown scholars, gives an incredibly sound overview of the historiography about Brown, and
places John Brown and his actions in very clear context. More than it just being a good book about
John Brown, this is an example of how historical scholarship should be conducted.

McGlone’s focus is on the question of John Brown’s sanity, and he takes a modern interdisciplinary
approach to the history by analyzing all of the records about John Brown’s life and deeds in light of the
modern fourth version of the Diagnostic and Statistical Manuel of Mental Disorders. He also provides a
historical overview of psychological diagnoses and their use in legal defenses so that the reader can
have the full context of the original claim that John Brown was insane. Even if the sanity question isn’t
interesting to you, McGlone’s work still stands as the best analysis of John Brown’s life and actions.

The other biographical work of Brown that I found particularly helpful was Tony Horwitz’s *Midnight
more for its focus on narrative – it does not add anything new to the scholarship on Brown. It also has
a useful appendix that lists all of the people involved in the raid on Harpers Ferry – Brown’s men and
townspeople – and whether they were killed, captured, or escaped. For people that just want to read
about Brown without worrying about the heated scholarly debates, this is a great source that doesn’t
take any strong stance for or against Brown, but simply tells the story. This is a commercial history and
should be treated as such.

Two other books that I found helpful in the Harpers Ferry episodes were Edward J. Renehan Jr’s *The
Secret Six: The True Tale of the Men Who Conspired with John Brown* (Columbia, SC: University of South
Carolina Press, 1997) and Steven Lubet’s *John Brown’s Spy: The Adventurous Life and Tragic Confession
of John E. Cook* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2012). Although I’m leaving out a lot of histories
about John Brown because they are so numerous, I found these two books to be worthwhile because,
to date, they are the only books that cover John Brown’s benefactors (*The Secret Six*) and any of John
Brown’s raiders (*John Brown’s Spy*), though there are still no works focusing on any of the raiders other
than John Cook. Both of these works supplied wonderful information that I used in the Harpers Ferry
episodes.

**Dred Scott and the Elections of 1856 and 1860**
For the Dred Scott episode, I found Paul Finkelman’s *Dred Scott v. Sandford: A Brief History with Documents* to be wonderful. I cannot comment on the constitutional legality of the decision; Finkelman says the Dred Scott ruling was an example of originalism, which strikes me as specious, but I am not a legal scholar. Nonetheless, his overview of the events and the context of the court battle is concise and thorough. The majority of the book contains relevant historical documents, including the full opinions of the court on the decision.

The Dred Scott episode also cited some of the history found in the book I used primarily for the election of 1856: John Bicknell’s *Lincoln’s Pathfinder: John C. Frémont and the Violent Election of 1856* (Chicago: Chicago Review Press, 2017). This book was conveniently published only weeks before I recorded the episode on the 1856 election. It’s a wonderful and easy to read book, but the author’s focus on narrative seems to have led him to include things that I found to be entirely irrelevant, such as an entire chapter on the conflicts with the Souix in Nebraska. It was interesting history, but his attempt to tie it into his analysis of the political contest struck me as forced and irrelevant. As previously mentioned, I also used Kratidor’s *Means and Ends in American Abolitionism* as a useful analysis of the prelude to the Republican Party.

For the election of 1860, another conveniently timed new publication came in handy. Michael Holt’s most recent work *The Election of 1860: A Campaign Fraught with Consequences* (Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas, 2017) served as a very well-organized and informative overview of the election. Importantly, it incorporated elements of the 1860 election that were not related to the slavery controversy, such as the scandals in the Buchanan administration, which places Holt’s analysis in better context than other overviews of this election. Additionally, the book contains helpful appendices regarding the ballot results, the party platforms, and Lincoln’s inaugural address.

**Filibustering**

The filibustering episodes are the most overlooked events in the antebellum history. In the general histories of the prelude to the Civil War, James McPherson’s *Battle Cry of Freedom* is the only one that bothers mentioning them, but he presents them as if they were solely motivated by slavery and southern nationalism, which is an overcorrection of the alternative mistake of presenting them as having nothing to do with slavery and the sectional crisis.

Robert E. May is the leading expert on American filibustering, and has a handful of books on the subject. The only one I’ve read is his most recent work, *Manifest Destiny’s Underworld: Filibustering in Antebellum America* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2002). This book is only worth reading if you’re already relatively familiar with some of the more significant filibusters, as he focuses on historical arguments and misconceptions and doesn’t follow any logical chronology, so his analysis is confusing if you’re not already well versed in the history. In short, this is good scholarship with no narrative.

There is also a recent book by David C. Keehn titled *Knights of the Golden Circle: Secret Empire, Southern Secession, Civil War* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2013). Keehn’s focus is the group that grew out of the filibusters of the 1850s and was explicitly focused on southern expansion and slavery. However, only the first chapter of the book deals with the pre-secession years, and the Knights of the Golden Circle never actually engaged in any real filibustering. Instead, they played a role in secession and the war. The book is significant, however, in highlighting the importance of including the filibusters of the 1850s in the story of the sectional crisis.
For Cuba, I singularly used Tom Chaffin’s *Fatal Glory: Narciso López and the First Clandestine U.S. War Against Cuba* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1996). For Nicaragua, the primary book – which is incredibly well-written and researched – is Stephen Dando-Collins’ *Tycoon’s War: How Cornelius Vanderbilt Invaded a Country to Overthrow America’s Most Famous Military Adventurer* (Cambridge, MA: De Capo Press, 2008). This is a narrative driven book, but it is also a wonderful contribution to the scholarship. A book on the subject that I have not read (as it was only released three days prior to my writing this bibliographical essay) is Michael Gobat’s *Empire by Invitation: William Walker and Manifest Destiny in Central America* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2018). I obviously cannot comment on the scholarship, but perhaps it demonstrates a trend that historians are starting to recognize the relevance of the American filibusters.

Additionally, you can easily find the three primary accounts of the Nicaragua filibusters. This would be William Walker’s own propagandizing memoirs *The War in Nicaragua*. Of additional use are Charles Doubleday’s own account *Reminiscences of the “Filibuster in Nicaragua* and James Jamison’s *With Walker in Nicaragua*. Of the three, only Walker was around for the entire war, and his memoirs are largely accepted as being written as a recruitment tool, but they are all important sources and can be purchased cheaply over the internet.

**Secession**

I ended the season with the first wave of secession only. I will cover the second wave of secession in the coming weeks as part of the third season of the podcast. Thus, the sources here relate only to the first seven states to secede.

With the exception of Florida, every Confederate state has at least one book devoted to its secession movement. I have not read them all, and the ones I have read stick to largely similar themes. Of particular note is Manisha Sinha’s *The Counter-revolution of Slavery: Politics and Ideology in Antebellum South Carolina* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2000). I am not a huge fan of Sinha, but the book is not unimportant. The focus on South Carolina is central because the state was the leader in the secession movement in many regards. It also highlights the important element of South Carolina’s weeks as the only seceded state and how it was prepared, even prior to secession, to form a Confederacy with the other slave states.

Another useful book is William Barney’s *The Secessionist Impulse: Alabama and Mississippi in 1860* (Tuscaloosa: The University of Alabama Press, 1974), which looks at two of the other significant Deep South secession movements. William Freehling and Craig Simpson also co-edited a book on the Georgia secession movement titled *Secession Debated: Georgia’s Showdown in 1860* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992). Georgia is important because prior to Virginia’s secession, it was the largest and most industrialized of the Confederate states.

I also found Charles B. Dew’s *Apostles of Disunion: Southern Secession Commissioners and the Causes of the Civil War* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2001) to be incredibly helpful in highlighting the centrality of slavery as the motivation for secession. He incorporates documents from the secession commissioners that are often overlooked. His introduction is also a sober account that mirrors my own intellectual experience of being raised in the Deep South and being sympathetic to the narratives about general state’s rights and the tariff as a cause for secession, only to find that the
evidence so overwhelmingly supports the slavery thesis for southern secession. It’s a short book and only useful for people who wish to see supporting evidence for the slavery thesis.

One final book that I used somewhat for the secession episodes and one that will apply more significantly to the early episodes of next season is David Detzer’s *Allegiance: Fort Sumter, Charleston, and the Beginning of the Civil War* (New York: Harcourt, Inc., 2001). The early chapters of the book provide a useful overview of Charleston, South Carolina prior to secession, which I predominantly used for introductory narration.

I have certainly left out books that are relevant to this history, either because I have not read every book on the subject (an impossible task) or because I did not find them particularly useful when working on the scripts. The sources listed here are meant only to give listeners a starting point to check my claims, and aside from oversights or small claims that I made from memory or old lecture notes, everything said in season two of the podcast should be found in one or some of the listed books.