Sharon Romeo’s book begins with the story of Charlotte McNeil, an African American woman who sought and received help from the military police to regain custody of her daughter held against her will by a white couple in St. Louis, Missouri in 1862. Romeo offers many such examples of the struggle of enslaved women to use the upheavals of the Civil War to claim rights for themselves and their children. She makes a new and valuable contribution to the modern historiography which emphasizes the role of enslaved people themselves in achieving emancipation. Gender and the Jubilee illustrates the courage and determination which African American women showed in seeking help from the Union Army and military courts despite entrenched civilian opposition and unsympathetic responses from many army officers. The book is well researched and a pleasure to read, and makes excellent use of case studies to support the author’s propositions.

Missouri has received relatively less attention than other slave states in the history of the Civil War and Reconstruction. Yet it had striking characteristics of its own, notably in the contrast between its major city, St. Louis, and its rural areas, where slaveholdings were relatively small but widespread, particularly in the area known as Little Dixie. Slaves made up just 2 percent of the population of St. Louis, 28 percent in Little Dixie. There were 115,000 slaves in the state recorded in the 1860 Census. It was “deeply invested in the institution of slavery” (12), as Romeo says, and the home of Dred Scott, whose case allowed Supreme Court Chief Justice Roger Taney to declare African Americans ineligible for citizenship in 1857. The state’s civil courts continued to deny legal rights to enslaved people throughout the war.

In August 1861, martial law was declared in Missouri and the military were enabled to override the civil courts. For the first time, enslaved people could apply with hope of success to the Union Army and its Provost Marshals for protection against abusive owners. The world did not change overnight, since slave-owners continued to demand the power they had always held over their slaves and to claim the support of the civil police and some military officers. But a fundamental change had been made in the relationship between enslaved people and the state, and the erosion of slavery was under way. Romeo’s main purpose is to demonstrate the ways in which African Americans began the process of freeing themselves. Many fled their owners, either to St. Louis or to neighbouring free states. Eight thousand enslaved men enlisted in the Union Army in St. Louis and thereby gained their freedom. Their wives and families were not freed as a result but many women followed their husbands to army encampments and many more used the Confiscation Acts to report their owners as disloyal and were “confiscated” by the army.

Women whose menfolk escaped to enlist in the army were frequently abused by their owners as a result and the army saw the need to protect them to avoid discouraging enlistment. They used military courts to claim protection for themselves and custody of their children and to achieve military recognition of their marriages, to secure legal status for their families, and as the basis of pension claims if their husbands
were to be killed. In March 1865, as the war was ending, martial law also ended in Missouri and authority was returned from the military to the civil courts. But slavery was abolished in the state and a new constitution giving African Americans the right to testify in civil courts was ratified by Missouri’s (white) voters in June 1865.

Romeo uses illustrative examples rather than statistics to support her propositions. The numbers of African American women directly involved in the actions she describes must have been small in a state with 115,000 slaves, and she makes little mention of Little Dixie, where most slaves lived and which was a significant focus for Aaron Aster in his study of *Rebels on the Border: Civil War, Emancipation and the Reconstruction of Kentucky and Missouri* (2012). But relevant statistics are hard to find and Romeo’s examples are well chosen and well described to make her point that these enslaved women had taken the opportunity to “transform domestic disputes with slave owners into military matters,” and to assert their legal status in advance of emancipation (123).

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