

Jonathan Daniel Wells on his new book, *The Kidnapping Club*

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Jonathan Daniel Wells' *[The Kidnapping Club: Wall Street, Slavery and Resistance on the Eve of the Civil War](#)* exposes the role of Wall Street, powerful judges, politicians, lawyers and police officers in kidnapping African-Americans and sending them South to enslavement, showing the way that New York's powerful kept slavery and the slave trade alive. It also tells of the resistance to this practice. Chad Pearson interviewed him about the book and its insights for labor history.

You have written a thought-provoking and well-researched study about a topic with which I suspect few of us are familiar. My first question is: How did you get interested in the question of antebellum slave kidnapping?

I was fortunate enough to deliver the Lamar Lectures at Mercer University in 2017 and for the topic of the lectures I focused on the shifting opinion of the antebellum North on the Constitution's Fugitive Slave Clause. During that research I kept coming across references to what Black abolitionist David Ruggles called "The Kidnapping Club," and I wanted to find

out more on Richard Riker, Tobias Boudinot, Daniel Nash, and the others Ruggles implicated.

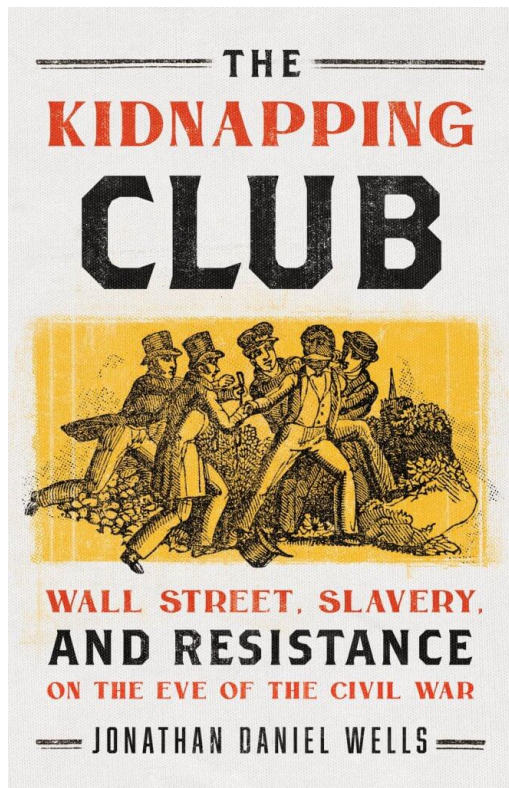
I think folks are well aware of Solomon Northup's memoir *Twelve Years a Slave*, but through Ruggles' eyes I was able to uncover details about the kidnapping club that had been lost to history.

You write about kidnapping broadly. In fact, you highlight both domestic and Atlantic world kidnapping. My sense is that most historians know about the Atlantic slave trade but are probably less aware of the New York Kidnapping Club. Can you tell us a bit about why this organization was so important?

Unfortunately for Black people in antebellum New York, the city was deeply and fundamentally conservative when it came to race. In fact, New York, in large part because of Wall Street's ties to the South via the cotton trade, was the most proslavery, pro-South city north of the Mason-Dixon Line. Political and legal authorities cared little about the welfare of the city's 16,000 or so Black residents, and this indifference allowed the kidnapping club to operate with little fear of reprisal.

For much of the 1830s, Riker, Boudinot, Nash and others terrorized the city's Black community, including children like Henry Scott, who was seized from his school as a runaway.

Understanding the nefarious machinations of the kidnapping club in antebellum Manhattan, of course, does nothing to diminish the horrors of southern slavery, a crime inflicted against human rights that will live in infamy. But the fact that the kidnapping club operated in New York, antebellum America's burgeoning metropolis, means that the story of the nation is as much about the denial of freedom as it is about freedom itself.



Can you describe the work of the kidnapppers? What types of strategies did they employ to achieve their goals?

Often Boudinot and Nash, and other police officers and marshals, would approach someone they suspected of being a runaway and claim that the arrest was prompted by an accusation of petty robbery or some other relatively minor crime. Then, once at the police station, they would reveal the true reason of the arrest on suspicions of being a fugitive. The Constitution required northern states to return runaways, and Boudinot and Nash were only too willing to comply.

Throughout, you gave agency to victims of kidnapping and document the heroic activism of the Kidnapping Club opponents. One of the most important figures in your study is David Ruggles. You write that “Ruggles would likely have relished the suggestion that he was the Frederick Douglass of antebellum New Your City.” Why did you make this comparison?

As Graham Hodges points out in his great biography of Ruggles, a study that was crucial to my understanding of Ruggles and antebellum New York, Ruggles and Douglass actually

knew each other and Ruggles may even have had an important influence on Douglass' abolitionism.

Given that this blog is popular with labor historians, please explain how your book changes our understanding of the labor history of antebellum New York City. How does your study differ from, say, Sean Wilentz's influential *Chants Democratic*?

Chants Democratic is deservedly a classic study. It is a great book! But there is little about race in *Chants Democratic*, and of course racial ideology was fundamental to white working-class identity, as historians such as David Roediger have shown. And *Chants Democratic* also ends before politics really heats up among the working class in the 1850s and 1860s. New York's white working class, especially the Irish, resented job competition with Black laborers, and whites provided the electoral power behind the Democratic Party and its conservative racial ideology. Remember that the political parties have switched their identities over time; for example, Donald Trump and his ilk would have eagerly joined the antebellum New York Democratic Party. One of the most important points of *The Kidnapping Club* is that race and class need to be analyzed and discussed together.

You draw comparisons to today's Black Lives Matter Movement. Certainly, institutionalized racist violence is nothing new. As I was reading your book, I was also thinking about ICE kidnappings of immigrants. Can you talk a little bit about some of these comparisons?

This is a really interesting comparison. After the 1850 Fugitive Slave was passed the federal government stepped up efforts to enforce runaway renditions, much to the consternation of northern state officials, who resented the impingement on their rights to keep slavery out of their state borders. So, ironically, we see the development of a powerful northern states' rights ideology, a point that historian Michael Woods has recently emphasized, that led to widespread resentment among white northerners who joined the Republican Party. So, just as today we see a battle between so-called "sanctuary cities" and ICE enforcement, in the antebellum era similar tensions emerged between the federal and state governments over the enforcement of the Fugitive Slave Law.

Finally, can you tell us about your approach to the writing process itself?

I tend to write every day, or at least most days, because I've found that the more time I leave in between writing, the harder it is to get back to it mentally. So I try to write most days, even if it is just a few paragraphs. I don't set daily writing goals, but I do find that once I start I can write for an hour or two before my mind starts to wander and then I know

it's time to put the project aside for a time.

Author



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Chad Pearson is professor at University of North Texas. *His work includes Capital's Terrorists: Klansmen, Lawmen, and Employers in the Long Nineteenth Century* (University of North Carolina Press, 2022) and *Reform or Repression: Organizing America's Anti-Union Movement* (University of Pennsylvania Press, 2016).