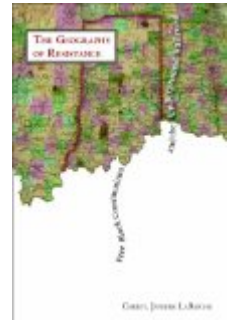


Cheryl Janifer LaRoche. *Free Black Communities and the Underground Railroad: The Geography of Resistance.* Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 2014. xviii + 232 pp. \$25.00, paper, ISBN 978-0-252-07954-2.



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Documenting the Underground Railroad's history in the Border South (Delaware, Maryland, Kentucky, and Missouri) has long presented historians with significant difficulties. A paucity of primary source documentation has resulted in a Railroad narrative skewed toward the stories of prominent benefactors' contributions to the Railroad network and the narratives of exceptional slave escapes. This effort to expose the horrors of black enslavement by highlighting freedom seekers' actions is traced to Benjamin Drew's *A North Side View of Slavery. The Refugee: or the Narratives of Fugitive Slaves in Canada. Related by Themselves, with an Account of the History and the Condition of the Colored Population of Upper Canada* (1856). During the Civil War and Reconstruction, Reverend William M. Mitchell of the Ohio Vigilance Committee and William Still of the Philadelphia Vigilance Committee penned works that extended published knowledge of escape and assistance methods. But by 1898, Harvard historian Wilbur Siebert's *The Underground Railroad from Slavery to Freedom* placed the actions of

benevolent Quakers at the center of Railroad scholarship. For more than sixty years, Siebert's narrative set the tone for discussion of the Underground Railroad. Inspired by the social and political upheavals of the 1950s and 1960s, historians worked to unseat the Siebert interpretation. Exemplified by Larry Gara's *The Liberty Line: The Legend of the Underground Railroad* (1961), new works recentered the Railroad narrative on black freedom seekers whose flight in turn provoked the antislavery work of kindly Quakers. Gara's work headlined scholarship including two biographies of black Railroad leaders: Earl Conrad's biography *Harriet Tubman: Negro Soldier and Abolitionist* (1942) and Charles Wesley's biographical essay of Richard Allen in *Negro History: Essays in Negro History by a College President* (1969). Since the most recent turn of the century, studies have documented escapees' flight within the South, and have deepened knowledge of contacts made in the North and the western borderlands. Headlining these are John Hope Franklin and Loren Schweninger's award-winning work on escaped

slaves in the South, *Runaway Slaves: Rebels on the Plantation* (1999), and Keith P. Griffler's *Front Line of Freedom: African Americans and the Forging of the Underground Railroad in the Ohio Valley* (2004).

In an inspiring new study, Cheryl Janifer LaRoche explains that, while this voluminous historiography presents an excellent view of the Underground Railroad and its operations in the North, along with urban abolitionist centers in the Border South, it has yet to capture the fullest extent of Railroad networks in the rural regions of the Ohio River valley. Adding to the latest trend in the study of the Railroad, LaRoche's work centers on antebellum settlements established by free blacks, escaped freedom seekers, and white homesteaders. Tying archaeological site analysis to family narratives in support of historical documentation, *Free Black Communities and the Underground Railroad: The Geography of Resistance* demonstrates the extent to which rural villages significantly supported the Underground Railroad network. These settlements were not traditional "stations," for instance, the home of prominent Ohio abolitionist John Rankin. Instead, these sites were the Ohio River valley's caverns, iron forges, and small farms linked together by free and "fugitive" blacks and whites living in close proximity to larger, more prominent abolitionist towns. In essence, revealing the obscure pathways that black freedom seekers once traveled requires reading the "land as a document," noting the significant role this "geography of resistance" played in the Railroad's daily operation (p. ix). To do this, LaRoche suggests an important and novel methodological consideration: combining analysis of the archaeological record, material culture, family narratives, individual interviews, and extant primary source documents. Oral traditions, family narratives, and archaeological evidence elucidate memory of how Quakers, Methodists, and Baptists supported free black settlements in southern Illinois, Indiana, and Ohio.

Several key examples illustrate LaRoche's complex methodology. To retell the story of the free black settlement at Rocky Fork, Illinois, LaRoche relies on extant oral traditions and archaeological evidence to support the limited primary record. Located three miles to the west of the abolitionist urban center at Alton, several building foundations and the reconstructed Rocky Fork African Methodist Episcopal (AME) Church preserve evidence of generational settlement dating to the 1830s. Two prominent white families, the Spauldings and the Hawleys, sold land to several black families, and after 1829, continued to sell land in spite of the state's black codes. Among these black families, AME presiding elder William Paul Quinn, the black itinerant preacher, established the region's first congregation. Influential in the formation of the AME Church in Brooklyn, Illinois, in 1838, and the Lower Alton AME Church in the following year, Quinn linked black settlements in southern Illinois into the 1850s. According to oral histories, escaping blacks found in these networks the resources necessary to make their northward passage from the upper South. Traveling up the Mississippi River to Piasa Creek and Rocky Fork, or entering Illinois at Alton, freedom seekers journeyed through southern Illinois north to Chicago. Similarly, a small graveyard remains as the only evidence of the free black settlement of Lick Creek, established in southern Indiana in 1817. While historical scholarship has shown the link between Lick Creek's residents and the strong Quaker influence in Indiana, LaRoche's work reveals that Reverend Quinn was also active in the region, establishing AME denominations that in turn supported the Railroad network.

The value of LaRoche's methodology again emerges in her use of the archaeological record in support of the primary record regarding Miller Grove, Illinois. Indenture records, receipts of one-thousand-dollar bonds paid to the county by freedpeople, marriage certificates, and wills reveal that free blacks inhabited the region. Yet

LaRoche suggests that landscape features including nonnative yucca plants and a cemetery remain as indications that free and escaped slaves inhabited the settlement. Settled in 1844, the core free black community at Miller Grove descended from men and women emancipated in Hardeman, Marshall, and Henry counties in south-central Tennessee. Miller Grove was connected to the nonsectarian benevolent society, the American Missionary Association (AMA), as revealed by the correspondence of white abolitionists and Bible salesmen James West and James Scott Davis. Sponsored by the AMA, West and Davis traveled extensively in southern Illinois, spreading the organization's missionary work while connecting the settlement to the AMA's efforts to extend the Railroad network throughout the Ohio River valley. As revealed by letters sent by West and Davis to New York, as many as seventeen other antislavery activists operated in southern Illinois, facilitating freedom seekers' movements in the region.

With LaRoche's methodological insights, the involvement of free blacks and whites in the Underground Railroad network in southern Illinois and Indiana is revealed more fully. Study of a much better documented region, southern Ohio, also benefits from LaRoche's work. Several highly active Railroad routes traversed the area, as freedom seekers escaped primarily from Greenup County, Kentucky, and Cabell County, Virginia, toward southern Ohio's iron furnaces in the state's Hanging Rock region. While Ironton served as the prominent abolitionist urban center, Poke Patch, the predominantly black settlement, was perhaps the most active Railroad center in the region. LaRoche explains that as many as three Railroad lines converged at Poke Patch, drawing to the settlement freedom seekers from Ironton, Burlington, and Rio Grande. Assisted by the settlement's residents, more than two hundred received food and lodging. In southern Ohio, the iron furnace region distinguished Poke Patch from free black settlements in southern Illinois and Indiana, as the area's ironmasters often doubled as abolition-

ists. Wealthy industrialist John Campbell featured prominently among this number, as two free black men lived at the Campbell residence in Ironton. Campbell conspired with Gabriel Johnson and James Ditcher, members of the black secret organization the "Order of Twelve," to move "fugitives" about the region from Ironton to Campbell's furnaces. There, many freedom seekers sought employment or refuge prior to continuing northward. LaRoche echoes earlier researchers Siebert and Griffler who indicated that Ditcher was responsible for the transportation of up to three hundred freedom seekers across the Ohio, eighty of whom traveled through Poke Patch. Documentation of Poke Patch supports the claims based on oral and narrative accounts made on behalf of Rocky Fork and Miller Grove, explains LaRoche, demonstrating how geographical proximity between rural and urban sites aided the Underground Railroad network.

Although LaRoche's compelling work incorporates some historical speculation to support the intermarriage of such widely disparate primary source bases, her most significant contribution to historical study is the example this methodology provides for the study of similar historical subjects. An emergent framework in the study of African American history presents four great migrations of blacks in the United States: the Middle Passage of the eighteenth century, the domestic slave trade of the first half of the nineteenth century, the Great Migration of the first half of the twentieth century, and the global passages of the second half of the twentieth century.[1] Adding nuance to this trend, LaRoche suggests that readers rethink black migration in the antebellum era, providing a compelling counter-narrative to black migration during the domestic slave trade. Escape from bondage and the formation of maroon communities (settlements of escaped Africans and African Americans who had repudiated completely the institution of perpetual enslavement) provide hallmarks of black agency, LaRoche claims, as maroon communities "began the progression

to free black settlements and the Underground Railroad” (p. 103). In few places outside of the Border South did the geography of resistance operate more strongly than in the Great Dismal Swamp, located on the boundary dividing eastern Virginia and eastern North Carolina. Recognized by the national park service as a result of historical archaeologist Daniel O. Sayers’s groundbreaking work, the extent to which maroon communities in the Great Dismal Swamp functioned as the first stop on the long journey to freedom until the end of the Civil War remains as yet fully explored by historians. Small black and triracial settlements on the fringes of the swamp functioned like those cited in the Ohio River valley cited by LaRoche, and researching them has presented historians and archaeologists alike with similar source difficulties. Perhaps the most compelling case for the geography of resistance is the way in which it lives on, continuing to protect full revelation of the Underground Railroad’s operations from the investigations of present-day researchers.

Note

[1]. For an in-depth discussion of these migrations, see Ira Berlin, *The Making of African America: The Four Great Migrations* (New York: Viking, 2010).

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