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Front Line of Freedom: African Americans and the Forging of the Underground Railroad in the Ohio Valley

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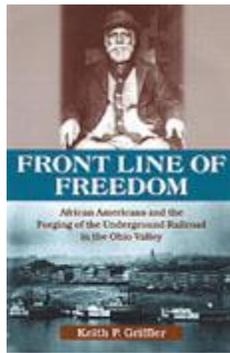
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Book Review



H-NET BOOK REVIEW

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Keith P. Griffler. *Front Line of Freedom: African Americans and the Forging of the Underground Railroad in the Ohio Valley.* Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 2004. xvii + 169 pp. Illustrations, maps, notes, bibliography, index. \$35.00 (cloth), ISBN 0-8131-2298-8.

Reviewed for H-CivWar by Thomas C. Buchanan, University of Nebraska at Omaha

Antislavery from the Bottom-Up

Bold, imaginative, and important, Griffler's short masterpiece will join the front line of classics on the antislavery movement. Focusing on the north bank of the Ohio River, Griffler is the first person to do an exhaustive regional study of African-American participation in the Underground Railroad. Until I read Griffler, I thought that James and Lois Horton had done all that was possible in this area, but I was very wrong.[1] Griffler uncovers new evidence, makes innovative interpretations, and is wonderful at weaving shards of evidence into a compelling story.

Griffler's argument is simple and elegant. He argues that African Americans were disproportionately involved in the most difficult, dangerous, and violent elements of the antislavery movement. Free black communities took root along the Ohio River with historic ties to the slave community downriver. These small communities, with Cincinnati at the center, participated in the "frontline operations" of the antislavery movement. Away from the river, whites became more involved in what Griffler calls "support operations" (p. xii). Within this broad interpretative framework, Griffler enriches his story by being sensitive to the changing dynamics of race relations, both within the antislavery movement and in the wider northern society. While he reveals interracial abolitionist activities, Griffler demonstrates that white racism prevented such collaboration from being widespread, leaving the highly motivated African-American community at the center of the fight against slavery. Racist attitudes by white abolitionists, however, were far less dangerous to the community than the more violent racism of ordinary northern whites. Griffler shows that northern African Americans' radical political consciousness was forged

in part through a struggle with the majority of northern whites over their right to reside on the front lines. The great drama of this book is the remarkable success that this poor, disenfranchised group of fledgling Americans had in keeping the underground movement going despite intense pressure from pro-slavery whites on both banks of the river. The themes of the book are nicely integrated with events at the national level, suggesting the broader significance of *Front Line of Freedom*. By enraging slaveholders and helping the cause of the Fugitive Slave Act of 1850, the movement ensured that slavery would remain in the public consciousness during the years leading up to secession. Furthermore, Griffler suggests that African Americans in the Ohio Valley remained politically active during the era of the Civil War. By joining the Union army, African American men from the Ohio Valley helped transform the clandestine secrecy of the antebellum movement into a public fight for mass liberation.

Griffler deftly weaves themes and analysis into a loosely chronological framework that reveals changes over time in race relations and the abolitionist movement. In an early chapter, aptly titled "No Promised Land," the author shows how early settlement of African Americans in Cincinnati coincided with the passing of the state's black laws. Many whites wanted African Americans out, but in the race riots of 1829, the author argues that Cincinnati's African Americans won an important battle over hundreds of lower class whites and established their right to have a "beachhead of freedom" on the edge of slavery (p. 32). In the 1820s and early 1830s they also began helping runaways before white abolitionists got involved to any great degree. By the 1840s, white antislavery societies were organizing all over the West, but Griffler stresses the reluctant commitment of these activists to African-American civil rights in the North and he argues that they were reluctant to join with African Americans. The examples of men like Calvin Fairbanks and John Fairfield suggest that interracial efforts to help fugitives did happen on the frontline, but Griffler finds these to be unusual cases.

Griffler's primary research is very impressive. He uses the papers of some two dozen abolitionists, twenty newspapers and periodicals, scores of slave narratives, and a variety of other publications from the era. These sources reveal many previously unknown people and events that pertain to his subject and who have often been reduced to demographic statistics in earlier books on the region. The core of his research involves Cincinnati's African-American community, but his work extends to Pittsburgh's Monongahela House and down river to Indiana's small free black enclaves. The regional design of his research is appropriate since so many of the region's African Americans knew each other. His methodology also allows for both the rural and urban dimensions of the movement to be revealed. Study of a single community would not have allowed for such textured analysis.

Despite the strengths of this book, it should be noted that Griffler does not try to provide overall coverage of the African-American experience along the north bank of the Ohio. Topics such as work, culture, class relations, housing, and gender relations are not fleshed out, despite the fact that such matters may be readily addressed through his sources. The author perhaps thought they would distract from his main thesis -- and they very well might. There is an underlying theme in this book that fighting slavery and racism were the *only* elements of African Americans' consciousness and that being on the frontline of

freedom was the only reason African Americans would want to live in Cincinnati or other front line communities. Griffler sets out to study antislavery activism in conjunction with the growth of African-American communities but the only thing he shows that they experienced in these communities was racism. This is a minor plea for additional historical context. Where are the grog shops of Little Africa? Were there economic opportunities in cities like Cincinnati that encouraged African Americans to stay? What was the gender division of labor in the African American community? How did that inform activism? I believe that showing the diversity of African-American experiences in the Ohio Valley would only serve to underscore the remarkable political unity that he so richly documents.

If Griffler has not fully captured the experience of African Americans in western communities, he surely is correct to highlight their role in escape networks. This is the best study of the Underground Railroad (a term Griffler persists in using) since Larry Gara's *The Liberty Line*.^[2] Gara overturned Siebert's classic thesis that white operatives shuttled passive blacks to freedom and called for the story to be told from the perspective of the runaways. Now Keith P. Griffler has resuscitated the role of northern communities, without making the slaves passive by any means, and placed proper emphasis on African Americans who lived on the north bank of the Ohio River. I think this remarkable story should be printed in paperback, with a larger font, and sold to the masses at the National Underground Railroad Freedom Center. I would prefer a more useful index too, but that is a minor quibble with an outstanding book.

Notes:

[1]. James Oliver Horton and Lois E. Horton, *In Hope of Liberty: Culture, Community, and Protest among Northern Free Blacks, 1700-1860* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997).

[2]. Larry Gary, *The Liberty Line: The Legend of the Underground Railroad* (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 1961).

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