

# The Glory Cloak: A Novel of Louisa May Alcott and Clara Barton

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## Review

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**Griffler, Keith P.** *Front Line of Freedom: African-Americans and the Forging of the Underground Railroad in the Ohio Valley*. University Press of Kentucky, \$35.00 ISBN 813122988

Ferrying across the river

Forgotten conductors rediscovered

For generations, white Quaker activists have remained at the center of the story of the Underground Railroad. Whether operating the routes to freedom along the eastern seaboard, or through the Ohio River Valley, Quakers have been cast as the leading characters in the clandestine operations that provided the means of escape for thousands of enslaved African-Americans before the Civil War. The reality, however, is far more complicated and, in fact, the daily workings of the Underground Railroad was more a product of African-American efforts, both free and enslaved, than of any other means. Keith Griffler's contribution to this history is both refreshing and compelling, highlighting the major role that African-Americans in Ohio, individually and communally, played in the ferrying of freedom seekers from Kentucky, Virginia, and other slave states to freedom in the North. Utilizing scores of primary sources, contemporary newspaper articles, memoirs and autobiographies, **Front Line Of Freedom** reveals in detail the important roles African-American's played, sometimes in cooperation with, but often without, white anti-slavery activists and Underground Railroad operatives.

The Underground Railroad, a term used to describe the system and networks of people, places, and modes of transportation that functioned, either singularly or in cooperative arrangements, to assist runaway slaves to secure freedom in non-slave states and Canada, had been in existence in varying forms since the earliest days of slavery in America. By the 19th century, this system had begun to expand to include more active participation by radicalized white anti-slavery activists and some Quakers. Consequently, this underground movement, as

Griffler correctly identifies it, became more high profile, and as anti-slavery sentiment gained more support, financially and politically, the operations of the Underground Railroad became more widely known and feared. Southern slaveholders, particularly those living in Border States like Kentucky, Virginia, and Maryland, became more alarmed by what appeared to be a more collective and active resistance to the system of slavery from their Northern neighbors.

The Ohio River was once a border between slavery and freedom. It not only constituted a means of passage out of slavery, but it was also a passage away from and a formidable barrier to freedom. For fugitive slaves seeking liberation, traversing the great river required the use of a boat, and knowledge of the safest places to land and hide once the crossing was made was often the difference between a successful escape and failure. One desperate enslaved woman, who would later become the inspiration for Harriet Beecher Stowe's character Eliza in Uncle Tom's Cabin, nearly drowned herself and her infant child when she crossed the river during the winter by jumping from one ice flow to another to elude pursuing slave catchers. Such dramatic attempts for freedom energized the region's underground networks, reifying their sense of urgency and obligation to aid those slaves racing for a chance to live independent and free lives.

For those who took the risk and found their way across the river, permanent freedom was often fraught with insecurity and instability. Slave catchers were constantly on the lookout, patrolling the shoreline and river towns in search of fugitives, competing for bounties. As Griffler argues, Ohio was not the Promised Land, and in fact was quite inhospitable to fugitives and local freeborn African-Americans. Facing systemic racism, and in some cases physical violence fed by racist attitudes, freedom seekers and native born free African-Americans in Ohio struggled to support themselves and their communities in an increasingly oppressive environment. Ultimately, whether through outside pressure or their own needs for economic survival and security, black Ohioans established separate black neighborhoods, some within larger cities like Cincinnati, others in smaller segregated towns elsewhere. It was in these separate communities that the underground movement took root and planted itself firmly, often providing fugitive slaves the only means of eluding capture. Here, in these border communities, the front line of the Underground Railroad provided effective escape routes, and in effect subverted slavery across the river by waging its own version of war.

Griffler argues that these African-American underground operatives faced the risks of exposure, and punishments, far more often than most white activists. Levi Coffin, for example, one of the most notorious white Underground Railroad agents in Ohio, felt secure in his position as a wealthy, privileged member of Cincinnati society. His social and economic relationships helped shield him, affording him access to the best legal advice and protection available, when needed. African-Americans, rich and poor, could not depend on these same networks of support. When the Fugitive Slave Act was passed as part of the Compromise of 1850, the homes and businesses of African-Americans were subject to search and seizure at anytime, resulting in some free African-Americans being hauled off into slavery on the word of a slave catcher or unscrupulous master looking to claim black people as their property. White households rarely faced such intrusion or threats to their liberty. From race riots that destabilized African-American communities, to all white anti-slavery meetings, black anti-slavery activists often operated in isolation and under the most oppressive of conditions.

As slaveholders intensified their efforts throughout the mid 1850s, both legally and illegally, to seek the return of their absconded property, antagonists to slavery such as John Rankin, Levi Coffin, John Parker, and many others struggled to counter the horrific consequences of the Fugitive Slave Act's unprecedented power. Mutual aid and support between whites and blacks became increasingly more common and important. The survival of the anti-slavery cause and the struggle for freedom depended upon it. While the **Front Line's** central thesis revolves around African-Americans, it also reveals the intricate interracial web of cooperation that became the hallmark of the Underground Railroad.

**Front Line Of Freedom** also reveals in stark reality the discriminatory forces that coalesced both before and after the Civil War to erase the memory of the contributions of African-Americans in their own liberation and that of their enslaved brothers and sisters. Underground Railroad histories, published by former white abolitionists in the late 19th century, served to further obscure black activism. Memories of African-American participation in the underground movement became lost amid the celebratory accounts of white bravery; prominent Quakers like Levi Coffin, for instance, wrote myopically about their own successful careers as Underground Railroad stationmasters, while ignoring the roles that their African-American neighbors and colleagues played in the battle for freedom. Through the vehicle of Underground Railroad drama, many

of these post-Civil War reminiscences celebrated the moral victories of white abolitionists, with only an occasional nod to African-American contributions. Wilbur Siebert, an historian and professor at Ohio State University, wrote a book about the Underground Railroad in 1898. Though Siebert was fortunate to have interviewed many people who had themselves been participants in the underground movement, the great majority were white. By not interviewing African-American participants, and by identifying some black activists as white, an important research opportunity was missed, reinforcing the ongoing process of historical amnesia. The front line African-American operatives, however, were often completely unknown to Underground Railroad operatives further along the lines to freedom. Their names remained obscured by virtue of lack of knowledge of their existence, not racism.

Griffler provides the reader with many stories and vignettes of escapes and rescues, near captures and re-enslavements, highlighting the role of free blacks in this clandestine network. Relying on mostly published escape narratives, newspaper accounts, and some manuscript material, Griffler weaves into his overview of the Ohio Underground the names and stories of numerous black and some white agents whose stories have been long forgotten or ignored. This is not a definitive work on Ohio's Underground Railroad network. While Griffler offers new names to the Underground Railroad roster, he also, unfortunately, neglects to mention some others. More detailed research into primary sources to verify some of these stories would have also added to this work. This does not detract, however, from the overall purpose and value of this book. Any addition to the scholarship on the Underground Railroad is welcome.

**Front Line Of Freedom** may be a useful template for students and scholars looking to examine the inner workings of the Underground Railroad in other communities. As Griffler has demonstrated, by looking at some of the same research sources used to highlight the actions of white Underground Railroad operatives, the presence of African-American agents can be found. In the past, these same sources have been used to obscure and overshadow the role of freedoms seekers in their own liberation, the efforts of free blacks in Cincinnati and scores of other river communities, as well as operators further North along the freedom path to Canada. We no longer need to rely on the myth and mysteries of the Underground Railroad. The real facts are there to be uncovered, offering students of the history of slavery and freedom ample resources to explore one of the most important subversive, yet righteous movements in our nation's history.

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