

### The "Colored Hero" of Harper's Ferry: John Anthony Copeland and the War Against Slavery

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## Review

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**Lubet, Steven** *The "Colored Hero" of Harper's Ferry: John Anthony Copeland and the War Against Slavery*. Cambridge University Press, \$27.99 ISBN 9781107076020

### Oberlin Resolve: Dying for a Holy Cause

In *The "Colored Hero" of Harper's Ferry: John Anthony Copeland and the War Against Slavery*, Steven Lubet provides readers with an impeccably researched study of John Anthony Copeland and his death for a "holy cause" in the raid on Harper's Ferry (192). In a well-written and insightful work, Lubet culls information from a wide range of primary sources, including personal correspondence, speeches, court transcripts, and newspaper reports, to shed light on people, events, and circumstances that shaped Copeland's ideological development, strengthened his radical abolitionism, led to his fateful participation in John Brown's attack on the federal armory, underpinned his rejection of what newspapers dubbed his "Negro Confession," and steeled his commitment to the cause of black freedom on the eve of his execution (162). With brilliant storytelling and careful attention to relationships and exchanges between a multitude of actors pursuing their personal and broader political agendas, he reconstructs the complex, tension-filled political landscape of antebellum America as he documents events leading up to the assault on the arsenal. While recognizing Brown's instrumental role, Lubet unveils the agency of Copeland and other lesser-known participants, adeptly putting them on center stage with their larger-than-life leader.

Lubet explores Copeland's family background and enriches his scholarly contribution with an analysis of conditions affecting free blacks in antebellum North Carolina where Copeland was born. Focusing on the state's increasingly harsh Black Laws and the ever-present risks for North Carolina free blacks of being kidnapped and sold into slavery in the Deep South, he describes the Copeland and Jones families' journey to Ohio in 1843 and their settlement in

Oberlin, a biracial town that had emerged as a vibrant antislavery center and a key Underground Railroad terminus with established links to Chatham, Canada's "Black Mecca" to which Oberlin conductors often guided fugitive slaves (100). Chatham also became the adopted home of James Monroe Jones, an expert gunsmith who crafted weapons for John Brown and influenced Copeland.

Lubet uncovers abolitionist and proslavery information networks that connected towns, places, and people throughout the antebellum North, effectively revealing the impact of such events as the Wakarusa War, John Brown's rescue of eleven Missouri slaves, and the Dred Scott decision on Oberlin antislavery militants like Copeland and on their adversaries, particularly Ohio Democrats intent on enforcing the Fugitive Slave Law of 1850. Against this backdrop, Lubet weaves a story of remarkable antislavery resolve clashing with the interests of self-serving supporters of President James Buchanan who were determined to apply fugitive slave legislation in an antislavery hotbed such as Oberlin and quash abolitionists' appeals to Higher Law. He revisits the famous Oberlin Rescue, stressing that it inspired Brown and noting that he was most impressed by the resolve of Oberlin's blacks. He cogently argues that it was Copeland who spirited the fugitive slave John Price to Chatham. He contends that after the two men arrived, Gunsmith Jones informed Copeland of John Brown's visit to Canada and the legendary Chatham convention that had taken place a few months earlier.

Lubet details the Oberlin Rescue's aftermath, emphasizing the trials of the leading participants, the Oberlin Felon's Feast that saw antislavery militants, including Charles and John Mercer Langston, defiantly celebrate resistance to the Fugitive Slave Law, and John Brown's speech in Cleveland in March 1858 in which he boldly promised before a large audience that included Copeland and Lewis Sheridan Leary "to continue rescuing slaves from the South" (126-7). Lubet argues that these incidents informed the decisions of Copeland and Leary to travel to the Kennedy farm in Maryland to meet Brown. He stresses, however, that until the morning before the attack, these two black militants believed that they had been recruited for a slave rescue similar to the one Brown undertook in Missouri and described in his Cleveland address. Noting the importance that Brown attached to the participation of armed black men in the fight against slavery, Lubet suggests that the involvement of Copeland and Leary was crucial; they brought Brown's small force more in line with his vision of a model army, which needed significant black representation.

Describing John Brown's unit's departure from the Kennedy farm, its occupation of the armory, the seizure of Hall's Rifle Works, hostage-taking at Colonel Lewis Washington's residence, and the casualty-ridden force's defeat by Colonel Robert E. Lee's troops, Lubet focuses on the actions of Copeland, Leary, and Brown's other men, highlighting their roles and revealing their agency. He provides a more balanced assessment of the raid than traditional interpretations that have tended to focus mostly on Brown and have not dealt adequately with the contributions of other participants, particularly the five blacks. In light of Lubet's recognized expertise in legal history, it is no surprise that his analysis of the subsequent trials serves as the capstone of his work. He meticulously documents moves by prosecutors and defense attorneys as well as Judge Richard Parker's statements from the bench. He portrays Charlestown as "filled with loathing and fear" and guarded by the Virginia militia that had been ordered to patrol the streets by Governor Henry Wise who was determined to manage a crisis that threatened slavery and made headlines across the divided nation (170). Reviewing the trials of Copeland and Shields Green through the lens of race, Lubet exposes the unequal treatment that the two black militants endured in the courts, on death row, on the gallows, and even in regard to the disposal of their bodies after their execution. His analysis is well-documented and truly gripping.

*The "Colored Hero" of Harper's Ferry* is a timely and valuable addition to the historical literature. A concise, easy-to-read work, it is a rich resource for scholars of African American and Civil War history. The book's length, endnotes, and bibliography make it ideal for use in upper-level undergraduate courses and graduate seminars. It should also appeal to a broad range of serious, general readers of American history.

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