

# The Bone and Sinew of the Land: America's Forgotten Black Pioneers and the Struggle for Equality

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## Review

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**Cox, Anna-Lisa.** *The Bone and Sinew of the Land: America's Forgotten Black Pioneers and the Struggle for Equality*. PublicAffairs, \$28.00 ISBN 9781610398107

When considering African-Americans, historical narratives of western expansion over the past few decades often follow the patterns and politics of the slave trade. The accompanying story of abolitionist rhetoric is likewise usually circumscribed to urban areas. Anne-Lisa Cox, whose exhibition on the power of place is displayed at the National Museum of African American History and Culture, seeks to, in her book *The Bone and Sinew of the Land*, unify the threads of expansion and abolition through a study of black citizenship in the Northwest Territories in the initial decades of the nineteenth century. Drawing from census records and a multitude of secondary sources, Cox recreates the likely lifestyles of black pioneers west of the Ohio River, arguing that this migration of African-Americans of various circumstances was motivated by a desire for the full citizenship privileges afforded by property ownership.

The Northwest Ordinance of 1787, which created the region in question, is notable for its ban on slavery, though many white settlers who relocated there brought with them their bondpeople due to a lack of enforcement or legal exemptions. This did not deter the 63,000 African-Americans, well more than the threshold of 60,000 required for statehood, who relocated to the future states of Ohio, Michigan, Wisconsin, Illinois, and Indiana at the turn of the 18<sup>th</sup> century as laws for manumitted slaves displaced large numbers of freed people (3). Among these migrants were Charles and Keziah Grier, a formerly enslaved African-American couple who owned 40 acres along the Patoka and Wabash Rivers which Charles had purchased in 1815. Charles was manumitted when his ownership passed to a preacher, while Keziah was brought to the territory as an enslaved woman from South Carolina. The book's nine chapters are filled with episodes concerning the Griers and others like them, such as the Lyles, who dealt with restrictive black codes and legal barriers to their well-being. Although this new territory beckoned many

African-Americans, especially in contrast with the Louisiana Territory, the northwest was no haven. Settlers contended with legal loopholes to bondage, such as laws that prohibited slavery but allowed lifetime indenture, stipulations that complicated enslaved people's efforts to purchase their freedom, and French settlers were still allowed to own chattel.

Cox succeeds at adding unheard voices and new experiences to our understanding of the antebellum northwest by following the story of the Griers and the Lyles, but several digressions into past circumstances impacting the main narrative at times detract from their individual stories. This additional context is by no means negative and is essential to understanding the era in which Charles and Keziah lived. Meticulous research into the types of Africans-Americans and the various nationalities of white settlers in the Northwest Territories, however, does not match the lack of differentiation among indigenous people, who are referred to merely as Native Americans throughout the book. Though this is only a minor blemish, when combined with terms like wilderness and frontier, it serves to perpetuate the stereotype of an untouched land, diminishing the preexisting economic exchange patterns and settlements of those who called the land home for generations prior. Cox's central thrust is the drive for citizenship and the network of black settlers who encouraged their urban counterparts to experience the freedoms of subsistence farming and land ownership. Sometimes such invitations were written, while others were part of the clandestine operations of the Underground Railroad. The reclamation of these lost stories fills a gap in the public memory of the pioneer era.

With this study, Cox offers us a new perspective and a valuable synthesis of black antebellum expansion. *The Bone and Sinew of the Land* captures the interplay of the politics of abolition, antislavery, colonization, and black determination. Her work and research are a useful resource to the academy as well as laypersons due to its colorful storytelling and meticulous recreation of the circumstances, emotions, and daily experiences likely experienced by a vast array of African-Americans, in addition to its documentation of their interactions with individuals of disparate backgrounds. Indeed, they were all motivated by their pasts in addition to their dreams of a future where an African-American could attain political office in a free election (5).

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