

# A Second Look: 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

*The Bone and Sinew of the Land* depicts the Northwest Territory as a place where African Americans “integrat[ed] America’s first free frontier.” Historian Anna-Lisa Cox asserts that what she calls the Great West—Illinois, Indiana, Michigan, Ohio, and Wisconsin—has a hidden, albeit brief, history as a site of equality and freedom for Black pioneers (xvii). This engaging book provides a brief introduction and an innovative approach to studying antebellum African Americans, their lives, and their activism in these increasingly hostile states. Cox is a non-resident Fellow at Harvard University's Hutchins Center for African and African American Research, and the author of *A Stronger Kinship: One Town's Extraordinary Story of Hope and Faith* (Lincoln: Bison Books, 2007), a history of the interracial community of Covert, Michigan. *The Bone and Sinew of the Land* both grows out of Cox’s earlier work and contributes to the expanding field of studies of northern Black activism.

In preparation for this book, Cox conducted extensive primary and secondary research, and it is well-grounded in current scholarship in the field. Perhaps because she is a trained historian whose work appeals to a popular audience, the book mixes trade and academic elements. The book’s body is made up of nine narrative chapters, most of which center around a case study of the activities and background of particular Black pioneers. While the chapters are vividly written and bring the reader into the past, the narratives incorporate authorial imagination; this is jarring when blended with academic endnotes and historiographical claims. There is no note to the reader explaining the methodology and narrative choices. Cox’s writing style is delightfully clear, but some unorthodox grammar and style elements, including quite a few paragraphs that are one sentence in length, further contribute to an informal tone.

Cox opens the book with an excellent map and table of the communities she studies, and categorizes African American rural landowners based on their property holdings. The table (which lists people by location but not name) does much of the heavy lifting of proving Cox's claims about the pervasiveness of Black landholding in the rural Great West. This is the case because while the stories she develops can all be tied back to the map, her discussion ranges more broadly than one would anticipate from the book's initial framing. In the introduction Cox indicates that her chief focus is on landowning farmers in these rural places, and many of the chapters reveal the origin stories of a fraction of the landholders she located in census and archival records. Nevertheless, the chapters frequently offer urban stories, as well as extended discussion of the national and even international contexts for such issues as antislavery movements and racial prejudice's development. More names and details of the individuals pinpointed on the map would have been welcome.

Cox's chief historiographical claims are that scholars have vastly undercounted antebellum Black farming settlements in the Great West and underestimated their importance. She argues that some farmers only briefly held land, but they still matter since these farming communities prove that African Americans were talented and persistent enough to ascend the economic ladder as and after they moved to the Great West. In its historiographical claims, this book tends toward generalization. For example, Cox critiques other scholars' readings of African Americans' rights in the region, taking issue with what she depicts as their claims that discrimination there was so daunting that it kept African Americans away. Still, the book ultimately supports the historical consensus that Black people who fought to make lives in the Great West before the Civil War did so despite incredible obstacles.<sup>1</sup> Cox argues that African Americans came to the region in increasing numbers, claimed farms, and worked toward rights even as their rights came under fire. According to Cox, over time African Americans' neighbors met their prosperity with physical and political hostility, but still they worked and succeeded.

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<sup>1</sup> Among others, Cox cites the following works, all of which document both the presence of African Americans in the region and the difficulties they faced there: Stephen Middleton, *The Black Laws in the Old Northwest: A Documentary History*, Contributions in Afro-American and African Studies (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1993); Stephen Middleton, *The Black Laws: Race and the Legal Process in Early Ohio* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2005); Leslie A. Schwalm, *Emancipation's Diaspora: Race and Reconstruction in the Upper Midwest*, John Hope Franklin Series in African American History and Culture (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2009); V. Jacque Voegeli, *Free but Not Equal: The Midwest and the Negro During the Civil War* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1967); Dana Elizabeth Weiner, *Race and Rights: Fighting Slavery and Prejudice in the Old Northwest, 1830-1870*, Early American Places (DeKalb: Northern Illinois University, 2013).

Whether newly free or descended from those long free, land claims were central to these African Americans' citizenship conceptions.

Each of the nine chapters is entitled with a quotation from the Declaration of Independence or the U.S. Constitution, and is rooted in a place and time. Chapter 1 focuses on the Grier family in Gibson County, Indiana in 1818, and reveals Black pioneers' experience of breaking the wilderness for farming, even as they resisted efforts to establish slavery in Indiana. Cox provides a clear sense of freedom and slavery's westward expansion in the Early Republic. Chapter 2 argues that the Northwest Territory was a singular place because of its free status and what Cox deems equal voting rights for Black and white men. This chapter is broad and devotes much to the national scene and general Revolutionary-era freedom ideas; therein, Cox places the Northwest Ordinance in the context of northern emancipation. Cox's reading of the Ordinance and the right to vote is central to her argument about the Great West as initially a place of Black opportunity that later lost its way. She highlights the Ordinance's provision that men aged twenty-one or older who owned fifty or more acres of land could vote, and argues that contemporaries saw this as a race-blind statute. Cox asserts that measures to explicitly disfranchise African Americans prove their earlier enfranchisement. While theoretically this voting right existed under the Ordinance, evidence that Black men then voted is lacking.<sup>2</sup> Scholars usually regard this fifty-acre requirement as disfranchising most men rather than enfranchising Black ones. Further, Congress excluded nonwhites from voting in the Northwest Territory in 1808, and all five of these states disfranchised non-whites in their constitutions.<sup>3</sup>

Chapter 3 returns to the Griers in Indiana in 1818, and the story of their challenges as they brought more and more acres under cultivation. Prejudice against African Americans grew in the 1820s and 1830s, and the colonization movement spread to the Great West as well as elsewhere in the nation. Slavery's power endured there, especially since her main focal states—Illinois, Indiana, and Ohio—shared borders with slave states. Illegal enslavement was present in Indiana and Illinois via so-called indentures, and activists worked tirelessly to root it out. Cox highlights the collaborations of Black plaintiffs and white attorneys against indentures in

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<sup>2</sup> Paul Finkelman, "Slavery and the Northwest Ordinance: A Study in Ambiguity." *Journal of the Early Republic*, 6, no. 4 (1986), 360, note 36. Cox also cites this article.

<sup>3</sup> Alexander Keyssar, *The Right to Vote: The Contested History of Democracy in the United States* (New York: Basic Books, 2000), Table A.5, p. 354; Christopher Malone, "Race Formation, Voting Rights, and Democratization in the Antebellum North," *New Political Science*, 27, no. 2 (2005), 178, note 3.

Indiana; still, many Indiana and Illinois courts upheld them. Chapter 4 moves into southern Illinois in 1819 and profiles the deadly, brutal salt industry there. Its potential for massive profits meant that saltworks owners willingly broke the law to hold others as bonded laborers. Cox uncovers the enormous challenges to buying one's own freedom in a frontier environment; she tells of people she names "freedom entrepreneurs" who bargained for and earned money to secure their freedom and that of their loved ones (65). She also notes the pervasiveness of biased "Black Laws" that people ushered in across the Great West along with statehood, in an effort to keep Black populations small. Illinois' laws were the worst of the lot and had severe consequences for Black freedom.

Chapter 5 moves south into Robertson County, Tennessee in 1838, and introduces the long-free Lyles family. They exemplify how some free families first migrated to the edges of slave states, and from there to the Great West. Cox links Blacks' forcible evictions from Tennessee with violent revolutions against slavery like Nat Turner's revolt, with colonization, and with the growth in radical abolition in the East. When their neighbors forced them out, the rural North appealed to many free Blacks more than did expatriation. Setting up independent farms was very expensive, and these families' financial circumstances varied. Some were impressively wealthy, which translated to large landholdings in Ohio, among other places. Chapter 6 focuses on Cincinnati in 1841, and has as its narrative thread the race riots there in 1829, 1836, and 1841 that targeted the city's prosperous Black communities. Cox's discussion of African American men's actions for self-defense brings in New Orleans as well as how the Great West antislavery movement grew to include petitions for rights and the Black Convention Movement. These activities took place in the context of escalating anti-abolition violence.

Chapter 7 goes to Randolph County, Indiana in 1847, and its main subject is education, via examining the Union Literary Institute. Therein, Cox gives the broader history of free Black schooling and mob attacks on schools, and also discusses prominent Black Ohio landowners' work for educational rights. In this time, farmers in the Great West increased their activism in the Black Convention Movement, even as their neighbors sought to remove them from communities, in part due to the prosperity landed farming enabled. Chapters 8 and 9 stay in rural Indiana and return to the Lyles Family, with focal incidents in 1851 and 1861. Both chapters are framed around that family's self-defense efforts, first against the Fugitive Slave Law and second to protect their property rights. Cox explores the impact of tightening laws on rural Black

communities and their many security threats. Both federal and state laws were hostile to their rights, as exemplified in the strongly anti-Black Indiana Constitution of 1851 and the impact of African Americans' lack of the right to testify against white people in court. Cox argues that free Black farmers had a significant impact on the larger economy, and notes that Ohioans elected John Mercer Langston as a town clerk in Ohio in 1855 (before he could vote), even as prejudice's rot ate away at Blacks' prosperity. African Americans fought in a war for their own rights for decades, and as soon as they could, enlisted in the Civil War from across the region. During the war, their anti-Black neighbors often supported local Copperhead politicians.

The conclusion reflects on the Great West after the Civil War. In wartime, these Black communities suffered ongoing violent attacks, and in combat, their men died to secure liberty. In her discussion of the 1870s, Cox mingles the joy Black pioneer men felt at casting their first votes after the Fifteenth Amendment with the devastating arrival of the Ku Klux Klan in Ohio in 1878. This leads Cox to ask, why are most of these rural Black communities now gone? She argues that some reasons for departure may have been "benign," such as people taking up opportunities in cities, but since many of these Black farmers were deeply attached to their lands, she posits they likely were forced out (205). Whether via violence, environmental racism, lack of infrastructure or access to loans, or various forms of exclusion, many were the methods by which Great West residents could have destroyed rural Black communities. Cox maintains that nevertheless historians must consider rural Black pioneers, whether they pursue the history of rights or of how people built prosperous lives in the face of staggering odds. Her brief book raises intriguing questions about northern Black people's impact on the antebellum United States.

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