

### The Untold Story of Shields Green: The Life and Death of a Harper's Ferry Raider

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## Review

**King, William S.**

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**DeCaro, Jr., Louis A.** *The Untold Story of Shields Green: The Life and Death of a Harper's Ferry Raider*. NYU Press, 2020. HARDCOVER. \$28.00. ISBN 9781479802753 221 pages

*What the hand, dare seize the fire?* - William Blake

The record of this story yields only sparse outline: in the middle of the decade of the 1850's a black man living in Charleston, South Carolina—the jewel of the Southern cotton empire, and the premier city of its burgeoning influence—gained the aid of a crew member on a cotton-trading vessel bound for New York City. Whether a slave or a free man, DeCaro finds the record uncertain, but he had a recently deceased wife and an infant son. Supposed to be in his mid-twenties, slight of stature but well built, he had a spare beard and sharply etched African facial features.

As a stow-a-way he reached New York, where, no doubt aided by the underground railroad, he was whisked promptly from its piers. To lessen the chances of re-capture under the provisions of the Fugitive Slave Law enacted by Congress as part of the Compromise Measures of 1850, he was probably spirited northward via Albany across the northern tier of New York State. Arriving in Rochester, he could have sought refuge at the domicile of Frederick Douglass, an active station on the underground-railroad.

Such may be garnered from reading DeCaro's interesting new book, *The Untold Story of Shields Green*; undertaken, the author says, to restore in some sense "the life of...[a] man who lived." This is DeCaro's fifth offering related to John Brown—one them being *Fire from the Midst of You: A Religious Life of John Brown* (NYU Press) and another, *Freedom's Dawn: The Last Days of John Brown* (Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc.). DeCaro is also the conductor of a blog on all-things-John Brown. A Christian minister, he is associate professor of Church History at Alliance Theological Seminary in New York City. With a two-decades involvement in

research into John Brown, he is well established with a niche in what has been called “the John Brown Literature;” a literature, as the author sees it, in need of re-framing for the 21<sup>st</sup> century. American historiography, he sees, has been tainted by pro-slavery propaganda, and those of his interest entombed within its mire. His mission is to raise them by an historically verifiable examination to their true worth and stature in the American concordance.

In the telling, the fugitive was not long in Rochester, but settled in Canada West, in St. Catherine’s, not far from the border with New York; also, the home of Harriet Tubman. In the entire Province of Ontario up to 30,000 fugitive slaves had made their home since 1850, admixed with black professionals, tradesmen, and farmers. Finding work waiting tables, Green returned to Rochester sometime in 1858, having printed a new business card under the name “Shields Emperor.” He promised to clean clothes, even fine silks, “in a manner to suit the most fastidious, and on cheaper terms than anyone else.” He called himself Shields Green, exchanging that purportedly for Esau Brown, but referred to himself as “Emperor”, supposedly from having his ancestry traceable to royal lineage, although DeCaro discounts that. Residing with Douglass, his host described him as a man of few words, whose speech was singularly broken, “but his courage and his self-respect made him quite a dignified character.” A contemporary chronicler wrote the “overseer’s lash had cut deeply into his soul.

DeCaro’s research adds somethings that are new for the un-catechized readers, offering stimulating suppositions, as he ruminates through the record. His assignments however often interfere with the coherence of his presentation, and although rich in material selection, seemingly betrays the author’s lack of penetration. Some of this involves discussion of his subject’s actual age, his status, slave or free, and in which direction he may have originally fled. DeCaro offers up Harrisburg, Pennsylvania; disclosing details of black life in that city, in direct line, as it happened, from Harper’s Ferry via Chambersburg, with 13,000 blacks in its environs. Centrally located and in easy communication with Philadelphia and points east, as with the West via Pittsburgh and on to Cleveland. DeCaro’s eye turns up intriguing details, although doing little to substantiate directly the individual he is attempting to extricate, “hidden in the shadows of the past.”

It was while at Douglass’ that Green met Brown. That may have been toward the second week of April in 1858, as Brown began finalizing his Harper’s Ferry “scheme” and during one of his several trips to and from Kansas. Suffice it to say that the convergence between the elderly

white man and the young black man could not have been greater. Douglass relating, “John Brown saw at once what ‘stuff’ Green was made of, and confided to him his plans and purposes. Green easily believed in Brown, and promised to go with him whenever he should be ready to move.”

Divided into six chapters with an epilogue, in his second chapter, *Emperor Enlisted*, DeCaro’s sleuthing has misread an intriguing possibility that should be the pith of his story. This is after recounting the well-known meeting between Brown and Douglass in a stone quarry outside Chambersburg, Pennsylvania, taking place over two days in the third week of August, 1859, a meeting Douglass remarked that was “in some sense a council of war.” Eight weeks before Brown consummated his “demonstration” at Harper’s Ferry; this was a meeting with two other individuals present—Shields Green, whom Douglass had brought as a recruit to the plan, and John Henry Kagi, Brown’s lieutenant and a talented journalist and strategic thinker—where, try as he might, Brown failed to persuade Douglass to join him in the “raid” as co-leader. When Douglass finally told Brown, he could not countenance such an action, he turned to Green, whom he expected to return with him to Rochester, but is surprised to hear him say, “I b’leve I’ll go wid de ole man.”

The entire success of the plan, in Brown’s view, depended on the co-operation of Douglass, who along with Harriet Tubman, would ensure the adherence of dozens of expected black recruits. In my own work on this subject, I have ventured a supposition. That after this ill-fated meeting with Douglass, Brown and Kagi arranged for another meeting with black leaders from Philadelphia and Chambersburg, and perhaps elsewhere, to meet at an undisclosed location “near Chambersburg,” where Frederick Douglass was urged to attend. This assembly may have been in Mont Alto, on the western slope of South Mountain, about twelve miles from Chambersburg. This conjecture can be based on Brown’s connections there; he reportedly was a worshiper in its Emmanuel Chapel, where he set up Sunday school classes for “negro children,” and may have contracted some work in an iron mill near there. One or more buildings may have been at his disposal. Osborne Anderson, the only black recruit to make it through from Canada (there were five verified black recruits all told whose stories DeCaro recounts in brief), indicates, in his *A Voice from Harper’s Ferry*, which DeCaro elevates as his standard, that some unspecified “friend” was sent down to the Kennedy farm to accompany Shields Green to the mysterious location, “whereupon a meeting of Capt. Brown, Kagi and other distinguished

persons, convened for consultations.” Douglass received a letter saying in part, “We think you are the man of all others to represent us, and we severally pledge ourselves that in case you will come right on we will see your family well provided for during your absence.” It has been intimated that Brown waited for Douglass to appear, and it was a profound disappointment when he didn’t. Brown’s daughter Anne, who was at the Kennedy farm, Brown’s headquarters before moving on to Harper’s Ferry, describes this meeting as “the missing link” in her father’s movements; a concatenation DeCaro fails to apprehend.

As John Brown labored through the summer and fall of 1859 to inaugurate his great work of emancipation, his expectation of a sizable number of black recruits, chiefly from New York and Philadelphia, and Canada, had been disappointed. Only with this knowledge can commentary on what happened at Harper’s Ferry begin to assume its proper orientation, but few “discerning students of the Harper’s Raid” ever realize this.

Does Louis DeCaro seize the fire? Shields Green accountably did! The story is told that instead of escaping from Harper’s Ferry, he joined John Brown in the engine-house and thus united with him in martyrdom. We hear DeCaro is working on another book on John Brown.

*William S. King is an independent scholar and author of To Raise Up a Nation - John Brown, Frederick Douglass and the Making of a Free Country (Westholme Publishing, 2013), and Till the Dark Angel Comes - Abolitionism and the Road to the Second American Revolution (Westholme Publishing, 2015). He has completed work on a new book, In the Cause of Liberty - William Blake, Thomas Paine, Jean-Paul Marat & Revolution in the 18<sup>th</sup> Century. He can be reached at [joyboy260@gmail.com](mailto:joyboy260@gmail.com)*