

# Organizing Freedom: Black Emancipation Activism in the Civil War Midwest

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## Review

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**Harbour, Jennifer R.** *Organizing Freedom: Black Emancipation Activism in the Civil War Midwest*. Southern Illinois University Press, 2020. PAPERBACK. \$27.00 ISBN 9780809337699

Jennifer R. Harbour provides us with a finely tuned multilayered exploration of black women's activism in the antebellum and Civil War eras. Harbour contends that Illinois and Indiana, two states that African Americans immigrated to seeking economic, social, and religious opportunities proved steeped in racial conflict. The dreams, hopes, and ambitions of Black people soon encountered the capriciousness of white racism and the restrictive covenants of black codes that circumscribed Black life. As stringent anti-Black laws, rapidly developing as the Black population increased, took on the hue and caste of the slave states, Black people were left out of the body politic. Freedom, at best fragile in Illinois and Indiana, proved elusive. African Americans, whether fugitives, escapees, or settlers making a fresh start seeking to carve out their regional identity in these Midwestern states would prove to be a challenge. Wedged between the legal system of enslavement in southern states, and in some cases, fugitives coming through the Underground Railroad in Illinois and Indiana fleeing for their lives, and the tentative freedoms that these Midwestern states offered, were some of the causal factors spearheading Black women's activism.

In these states, Black women forged a path of stiff resistance. Facing a daily struggle of economic survival, limited mobility and opportunities, they created a multifaceted agenda of sacred and secular activism. While partly dictated by gender conventions such as the founding of Black churches, ad hoc community projects, and establishing schools, Black women activism was chiefly propelled by the crippling racism that impacted all of Black community life. Some Black women activists worked jointly with their husband, like Mary and John Jones, or Moses Dickson and Mary Elizabeth Butcher, and H. Ford Douglas and Sattira Douglas (although Sattira Douglas was often viewed as a leader in her own right) in groups of political activism. Other

Black women activists such as Polly Bass, Mary Elizabeth Johnson, and Sylvia Artis were also recognized as leaders in the community.

By engaging in sacred and secular activism, black women activists were developing a forceful critique of American racist practices. Illinois and Indiana were merely the lens by which they examined the parallels of societal practices of racial discrimination. High on the list of black women's activism was the abolition of slavery and so inextricably linked to the enslaved that mutual benefit societies, self-improvement associations, church auxiliaries, schools, clothing drives, and community fund-raisers were all tied to the abolitionist movement. Concomitantly, the Underground Railroad had many waystations in black communities where fugitives could find sanctuary. Black women were critical in stabilizing the Railroad's functioning, and providing logistics, clothing, medical care, and food.

The cross-fertilization of the abolitionist movement placed Black women's activism at pivotal junctures and contacts with national and local leaders. H. Ford Douglass, John Jones, Mary Jones, Sattira Douglas, Frederick Douglass, Henry Highland Garnet, Mary Ann Shadd Cary, Martin Delany, and Charles Lenox Remond were in contact and those living outside of the region would make stops and give lectures on abolitionism and its importance in the Black freedom struggle. These crosscurrents between the Northeast, Canada, and the Midwest acquainted Black women activism's trajectory with the broader emancipatory goals that African Americans were seeking.

The Emancipation Proclamation and the Civil War caused activists to refocus and continuously redefine their freedom in profound ways. As Black communities mobilized around the war effort, many saw the Emancipation Proclamation (1863), as freedom for Black people, and men who were enlisting saw combat tied to their masculinity, dignity and finally, citizenship rights, which they had fought for throughout the antebellum era. While African American men fought in the Civil War facing unequal pay, clothing issues, weaponry problems, and overall racism in combat, black communities having lost a major wage earner for the families and communities, suffered as well. But on the home front, the war mobilized Black women activists and caused them to expand their political efforts to include petition drives, nurses and caregivers in hospitals, camps, and wherever space could be found. Continuing their abolitionist work, Black women activists provided for fugitives and got them to the next station on their journey safely. Black women activists also were wage earners, frequently the sole earner in the family,

making monies to feed their families. The scope and breadth of Black women's activism speak to the double impact that war and its aftermath would play in the ongoing struggle for freedom. Harbour has done very well in centering her critique on this extraordinary quest for emancipation and citizenship rights.

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