

# Beacons of Liberty: International Free Soil and the Fight for Racial Justice in Antebellum America

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## Review

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**Abbott, Elena K.** *Beacons of Liberty: International Free Soil and the Fight for Racial Justice in Antebellum America*. Cambridge University Press, 2021. PAPERBACK. \$29.99 ISBN 9781108798457 pp. 336.

Elena K. Abbott's *Beacons of Liberty* is one of the most original contributions to the history of the American antislavery movement, and antislavery thought more broadly, in the last decade. Abbott precisely traces the influence of free-soil havens on antislavery activism and thought in the United States. By free-soil Abbott means places where slavery did not exist or had been legally abolished. The author convincingly demonstrates that places of freedom, which included but were not limited to Upper Canada, Haiti, Mexico, and Sierra Leone, that are usually found on the periphery of anti-slavery studies, should be front and center for a number of reasons. As Abbott explains on page four, "free-soil havens developed into practical models of black freedom, offered concrete destinations where free and self-emancipated people could anticipate legal protection and equal standing, and became potent symbols of liberty in the fight against American slavery." Abbott demonstrates that analysing where Black men and women chose to travel, or, in many cases, flee to, sheds light on the meaning of freedom during this period. What did free society look like to Black Americans? What were the most important aspects of such a society?

Abbott's story spans roughly fifty years. It begins in the 1810s with African American activist Paul Cuffe and his involvement in the British colony of Sierra Leone, and concludes with Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamation in 1863. One of the highlights of Abbott's study is the centrality it gives to important figures like Cuffe who have been somewhat neglected in existing scholarship. Another such individual is James C. Brown. Although he lived in the free state of Ohio, Brown, a black man, was one of many who became subject to intensifying racial violence in the state in the late 1820s. Brown led a group of Black Americans from Ohio to Canada, where they formed what would later be known as the Wilberforce Colony. Often overlooked as a free-soil destination, Canada plays a crucial role in *Beacons of Liberty*. While places like post-revolutionary Haiti had long presented an example of a post-emancipation society, Upper Canada was a "particularly important experiment in black

freedom” as, unlike Haiti, which had a black majority population, Canada presented the opportunity for anti-slavery reformers to demonstrate that free black men and women could prosper amongst a majority—white population (79). Though Abbott laments that life for Black Americans in Canada may not have reached the level of equality they may have hoped for, she notes that it remained an ever-popular destination, most notably in the late 1830s and onwards for fugitive slaves seeking freedom.

Focusing on the role of free-soil havens in the abolitionist imagination allows Abbott to provide fresh perspective on a number of stalwart subjects. This includes the abolition of slavery in the colonies of the British empire in 1833, the growth of the colonization movement in the United States, the implementation of the Fugitive Slave Law in 1850, and the publication of Harriet Beecher Stowe’s *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* in 1852. Abbott’s story is also an inherently transatlantic one, and she seamlessly weaves both her subjects and ideas across various borders, and in doing so places the spotlight on the mobility of Black Americans. Abbott illuminates the story, for example, of Samuel Ringgold Ward. A prominent anti-slavery orator, Ward escaped from slavery in Eastern Maryland and settled in New York before relocating to Canada. He then travelled to Britain where he spent a number of years, and finally settled in Jamaica. An understanding of the role and meaning of free-soil havens is crucial to understanding Ward’s story—by living in New York, Canada, Britain, and Jamaica, Ward experienced four different free-soil havens. One of Abbott’s central arguments is that no free-soil haven was the same—ideas and models of freedom were influenced by constantly evolving geo-political circumstances. Abbott ultimately succeeds in highlighting both the complexities as well as the significance of free-soil havens.

Elena K. Abbott is based in Seattle and received her PhD from Georgetown University. Abbott was awarded the Harold N. Glassman Distinguished Dissertation Award in the Humanities.

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