

and opinions that vicariously inform the reader of experiences in a way otherwise unattainable.

Of the travelers represented in these accounts, three used the Wilderness Road gateway to Kentucky; nine traveled by way of the Ohio River; and one escorted relatives down the Ohio and returned to Virginia by way of the Wilderness Road. As settlement in Kentucky is proclaimed to be the theme of this book, it should be noted that five of these travelers were motivated by other reasons and had other destinations. Another among them, a slaveholding Virginia plantation owner, expected to relocate to Kentucky but later decided to settle in slave-free territory north of the Ohio.

Of the thirteen accounts, ten have been previously published in full, two are excerpted from the original manuscripts, and the source of the thirteenth is not listed. Only four of the accounts come with any editorial doc-

umentation to help the reader better understand the travel experiences described. Their role here seems to be as appendixes rather than as "edited" centerpieces of the volume.

The "numerous letters and oral histories" and secondary accounts the dust jacket says were used to support the book's introductory essay are cited in the inconveniently located endnotes. A formal bibliography would have been most helpful as a survey to the available literature. With the aid and suggestions of the publisher's editors, this volume might have become a welcome addition to the shelf of books on this important aspect of westering American history.

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Front Line of Freedom

African Americans and the Forging of the Underground Railroad in the Ohio Valley

By Keith P. Griffler

(Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2004. Pp. xvi, 169. Map, illustrations, notes, bibliography, index. \$35.00.)

Fleeing for Freedom

Stories of the Underground Railroad As Told By Levi Coffin and William Still

Edited by George and Willene Hendrick

(Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, 2004. Pp. xi, 209. Map, illustrations, notes. Paperbound, \$14.95.)

Long a story with a grip on the American imagination, the history of the Underground Railroad (UGRR) has recently attracted intensified interest. Programs like Conner Prairie's *Follow the North Star* and the opening of the National Underground Railroad Freedom Center in Cincinnati attest to this renewed focus on the story. With this renewal has come a needed reappraisal.

Much early work on the UGRR centered on white "conductors" (perhaps in some part as an exercise in expiation of white guilt over slavery) or attempted to identify houses that were "stations" along the circuitous pathway to freedom. Historians and restorationists soon realized that if every house with a basement or hidden room which adherents claim once hid fleeing slaves actually performed that noble function, the South would have been emptied of the victims of the "peculiar institution."

Keith P. Griffler's important, well-written account, *Front Line of Freedom: African Americans and the Forging of the Underground Railroad in the Ohio Valley*, is part of welcome recent efforts to focus on the role of African Americans in the UGRR. "African American fugitives who were whisked away," he notes, ". . . were no more than minor characters" (p. 3) in many previous tellings. This "received tradition" of viewing the UGRR through the prism of the white experience ignored the fact that it was "an interracial movement . . . [that]

took the form of white activists working not alone but in concert with African American communities" (p. 8). With black participants' stories spotlighted, Griffler aptly likens the UGRR to underground resistance movements that spring up among subjugated peoples elsewhere. In this case the front line was not occupied France of World War II, but the areas along the Ohio River where predatory slave hunters (often working hand-in-hand with local authorities) shared the landscape with freedom-seeking African Americans.

As an example, Griffler relates how Francis Scroggins, a free northern black woman, whisked away an escaping female slave with her master on their heels. Scroggins later led her charge out the back door of a safe house as the angry slave owner tried to break down the front door. Such efforts were white-hot sparks of controversy in river communities, and the author ably profiles the tension—and sometimes the violence—that the UGRR engendered. The book also discusses those who went "behind enemy lines," the Midwest's own Harriet Tubmans. Individually or in groups, these interracial "special forces" went into the South to rescue slaves, often with the active support of the enslaved in the area.

Griffler does not diminish the important work of whites in the movement. As he points out, the UGRR was a smart, organized effort carried out by people of both races. Perhaps the best known white leader,

one who long symbolized the movement, is Levi Coffin, “president of the Underground Railroad.” Coffin’s *Reminiscences* forms part of another new book about the UGRR, *Fleeing for Freedom: Stories of the Underground Railroad*. Edited by George and Wilene Hendrick, the book abridges Coffin’s famous work along with William Still’s *The Underground Railroad*, both seminal texts. The Hendricks’ introduction provides a valuable overview of the UGRR and of the lives of Coffin and Still.

Coffin’s *Reminiscences* is, of course, an important work from which grew much of the public’s perception of the movement. In it, Coffin traces his commitment to abolitionism and his involvement in the UGRR. He also tells the often heartbreaking stories of the escaping slaves, including the about-to-be-captured Margaret Garner, who killed her own child rather than “see it taken back to slavery” (p. 91). The editors’ deft condensation of the 700-plus-page work retains its essence while making it more accessible.

Less well-known than Coffin, William Still was the son of former slaves, a successful Philadelphia businessman, and a skilled organizer of

the UGRR in the East. He kept notes of his activities and the people he encountered, and they formed the basis for his book, originally published in 1872. Prominence in this abridged version is given to the “Christiana tragedy” in Pennsylvania, including the killing of a pursuing slaveowner and the ensuing “treason” trial, but the work also contains smaller, more personal stories. Among them is the fascinating tale of Ellen Craft, who escaped bondage in Georgia by disguising herself as a white planter and bringing her husband William along as her servant. The Crafts eventually migrated to England, where they taught in an agricultural school before returning to America to establish a school for blacks in South Carolina.

Taken together, these works, one old, one new, shed light on the African American experience in the Underground Railroad.

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