

The Gospel of Freedom: Black Evangelicals and the Underground Railroad

Richard Newman
Rochester Institute of Technology, rsngsm@rit.edu

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Recommended Citation

Newman, Richard (2023) "The Gospel of Freedom: Black Evangelicals and the Underground Railroad," *Civil War Book Review*: Vol. 25 : Iss. 2 .

DOI: 10.31390/cwbr.25.2.05

Available at: <https://repository.lsu.edu/cwbr/vol25/iss2/5>

Review

Newman, Richard

Spring 2023

Turley, Alicestyne. *The Gospel of Freedom: Black Evangelicals and the Underground Railroad.* University Press of Kentucky, 2022. HARDCOVER. \$40.00 ISBN: 9780813195476 pp. 298, index.

In *The Gospel of Freedom*, Alicestyne Turley offers a critical reappraisal of the religious dimensions of the Underground Railroad, particularly the role played by enslaved people and Black evangelicals in creating vibrant freedom networks in the Upper South. Though she focuses mostly on Kentucky, Turley argues that Black itinerants of the gospel remained an important part of the Underground Railroad nationally. Indeed, taking aim at an older generation of scholars and public history professionals who privileged white activist voices, Turley argues we still have much to learn about black activism in the formation of a clandestine freedom network. With that in mind, she focuses on black as well as white reformers who “organized networks of slave escape” between the mid-eighteenth century and Civil War era. The result is a book that is both informative and ramifying (1).

Turley’s book comes at a propitious moment in the study of the Underground Railroad. Recent work by scholars has both extended and deepened our understanding of the way that African Americans shaped the contours of the Underground Railroad. Alice Baumgartner’s *South to Freedom* vividly illustrates the alternate pathways of Black freedom seeking that led African Americans into Mexican territory. Andrew Diemer’s gripping book, *Vigilance*, offers an insightful new analysis of William Still’s virtuosity as the leader of the famed Underground Railroad station in Philadelphia. And Andrew Delbanco’s award-winning *The War Before the War* illuminates the myriad ways that African Americans made fugitivity itself a potent part of antebellum American culture and soul searching. Indeed, it is hard not to agree with Manisha Sinha, who has argued that late-antebellum society was defined not simply by sectionalism but a host of “fugitive slave rebellions” that began in the South with brave escapes by African-Americans and ended in the North with a series of civic confrontations over the meaning of

American freedom.¹ In short, we know much more about both Black fugitivity and its impact on American politics, law, literature, and society than even just a few short years ago.

But gaps remain, and Turley's book shows that Kentucky was a critical pathway of the Underground Railroad for generations of freedom seeking African Americans and radical white abolitionists. In fact, Turley's most important claim is that Black religious leaders played a key role in making Kentucky a viable pass-through locale for generations of African American freedom seekers. Identifying several pathways to liberty (including routes leading to Ohio, Indiana, Illinois, and even western Virginia), Turley makes clear that Kentucky deserves to be seen as a major crossroads of the Underground Railroad—a place on par with Pennsylvania, New York, Indiana, and Ohio. Especially for those teaching in K-12 classrooms and undergraduate history courses, Turley's book offers a welcome analysis and compilation of stories on the Black evangelical network shaping freedom networks in Kentucky and beyond.

Although Turley emphasizes the critical nature of Black evangelicalism in Kentucky's underground during the nineteenth century, she begins her book with an extended examination of antislavery's expanding roots in the trans-Mississippi region in the mid-to-late eighteenth century. Following the movement of evangelical religion from the Atlantic seaboard to the North American interior following the First Great Awakening, she surveys the rise of an antislavery ministry in the American backcountry that included both Black and white itinerants of the gospel. Enslaved preacher Harry Hoosier travelled with Methodist ministers Freeborn Garretson and Francis Asbury into the frontier South, possibly including Kentucky. Adopting the Wesleyan line that slavery was antithetical to revealed religion, Hoosier, Asbury, and Garretson swelled the ranks of early antislavery advocates in the South as well as the North. Nevertheless, abolitionist policies faced a steep hurdle even in communities where evangelicals had vowed to fight bondage. By the time Kentucky became a state in the 1790s, "many white churches became so weakened by pro-slavery forces that they simply vanished or were rendered ineffective" (77).

Yet antislavery's declension had two surprising impacts on the development of the UGRR in Kentucky, according to Turley. First, as antislavery advocates fled to the margins and

¹See Alice L. Baumgartner *South To Freedom: Runaway Slaves to Mexico and the Road to the Civil War* (New York, 2020); Andrew K. Diemer, *Vigilance: The Life of William Still, the Father of the Underground Railroad* (New York, 2022); Andrew Delbanco, *The War Before the War: Fugitive Slaves and the Struggle for America's Soul from the Revolution to the Civil War* (New York 2018). Manisha Sinha, *The Slave's Cause: A History of Abolition* (New Haven, 2016), 322, 299.

borderlands of the state (for instance, in regions nearest Ohio), where they established dissenting outposts that freedom seekers could exploit. And second, white religious officials charged with overseeing African American worshippers often left Black congregations alone. “In this way,” she observes, “many reformed white churches became responsible for producing resistance to slavery through the passive creation of Black religious congregations and leadership” (77). In short, Black religious figures filled the void left by chary white reformers and filled sacred spaces with news and information about the underground network to freedom unfolding across the state.

Turley’s focus on unheralded as well as well-known activists on Kentucky’s underground adds to the book’s utility, especially for educators seeking to connect the dots of Black freedom networks regionally and nationally. Thus, while she offers insights on three of the most famous freedom seekers from Kentucky (Lewis and Harriet Hayden and Josiah Henson), Turley also examines the critical but nearly forgotten freedom work of Elisha Winfield Green and the Reverend George Dupuy, both of whom had been enslaved before securing their liberty in Kentucky before the Civil War. Using their status as preachers and members of the Baptist Church to travel through various parts of the state relatively unfettered, they helped facilitate freedom for others. Green and Dupuy were not alone in their transgressive activities. Israel Campbell, who had been born in Kentucky bondage but escaped from nearby Tennessee in 1847, also established “safe havens” for freedom seekers in the Upper South (210). Though he eventually settled in British Canada, Campbell organized Black congregations in Kentucky and used his religious connections to spread word about the Underground Railroad among enslaved African Americans. Even though they might be under the watchful eye of whites, Black preachers like Green, Dupuy, and Campbell helped fugitives find freedom in Ohio, Indiana, Illinois, and other northern locales. Indeed, as Turley notes, their stories “indicate that there may have been many black religious communities and religious leaders that operated independently of white community endorsement, conditions that supported the presence of an ‘underground’ information and freedom network” in Kentucky (152).

As Turley shows, Black evangelicals from Kentucky helped shape much more than underground protest activities in antebellum culture. During the Civil War, they became a ramifying public presence in debates over Union emancipation policy and the use of Black troops. In Boston, Lewis Hayden wasted little time in linking Black freedom to the war effort. A

few weeks after the Confederate attack on Fort Sumter, Hayden “called upon Governor [William] Andrew to organize a Black Massachusetts military unit to join the war effort” (223). Roughly two dozen black Kentuckians served in the Massachusetts 54th and 55TH regiments during the war, a fitting tribute to generations of African Americans from the state who had fought for freedom in clandestine ways. The same might be said of Turley’s book: as she notes, it was inspired by her great-grandparents “Moses” and Susan Turley, who were heirs to the freedom struggles she examines.

Richard Newman, Rochester Institute of Technology, is the author and/or editor of seven books on American history and African American history, including Freedom’s Prophet: Bishop Richard Allen, The AME Church, and the Black Founding Fathers (NYU Press Classic Edition Reprint, 2022).