Onward to Chicago: Freedom Seekers and the Underground Railroad in Northeastern Illinois

Michelle Norello
Louisiana State University, mnorel1@lsu.edu

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Recommended Citation
DOI: 10.31390/cwbr.26.2.15
Available at: https://repository.lsu.edu/cwbr/vol26/iss2/15
Review

Spring 2024

Norello, Michelle


Larry A. McClellan, drawing on a breadth of archival sources, brings an invigorating narrative to freedom seekers in Northeastern Illinois. McClellan’s compelling account tells the “complex and deeply human stories of freedom seekers” while underscoring “that the Underground Railroad did not shape the movement of freedom seekers.” Rather, as McClellan contends, their movements “gave shape to what became the networks known as the Underground Railroad” (7). McClellan uses the term “freedom seekers” to define the individuals, families, and groups who sought liberation from chattel slavery. Such individuals made courageous choices to escape enslavement, to liberate themselves, and “seek freedom where they could find it” (5). Many came to Chicago through alternate routes. Freedom seekers came north overland through Indiana, some on foot or horseback while others traveled by stagecoach or train by the 1850s. Over time, definite networks developed in the region. As McClellan argues, “the eventual well-established networks were the result of responding to the movement and the expressed need for assistance coming from freedom seekers” (13). The choices made by these individuals challenges interpretations from the 1870s forward that the “work of the Underground Railroad in and around Chicago” was an overwhelming white venture” (12).

McClellan’s Onward to Chicago contributes significantly to the literature of the Underground Railroad. Contending and expanding upon the historiographical contributions of Jennifer Harbour, Deirdre Cooper Owens, Keith Griffler, Cheryl LaRoche, Fergus Bordewich,
Karolyn Smardz Frost, Veta Smith-Tucker, among others, McClellan traces the movement of freedom seekers and the networks of response to that movement. And “over the past twenty years, in the national literature of the Underground Railroad, little attention is paid to the impact of events in Illinois and particularly in Chicago” (8). The popular narrative also poses a common issue: stories of the Underground Railroad use the “encounter with freedom seekers as the occasions to tell heroic and romanticized stories of white abolitionists” (6). By focusing on the networks within Chicago and “the emphasis on the wholeness and agency of enslaved persons” (7), this innovative study is a contrast to traditional historiographical narratives; a case that McClellan illustrates convincingly.

By exploring the movement of freedom seekers and the networks of the Underground Railroad, McClellan emphasizes the significant changes in journeys and encounters over time. Beginning with the period of 1800-1838, we are provided with an understanding of state formation, the emergence of early communities in Chicago, and how freedom seekers acted on their own. By doing so, they received assistance from individuals and from Black settlements in Brooklyn and Philadelphia. Throughout this period, freedom seekers who resided in predominantly white farming regions and small towns encouraged those with antislavery opinions to create, organize, and provide aid. In turn, networks developed, and the “networks of response that would become the Underground Railroad were emerging within Black communities and, increasingly, among white activist” (45).

From 1838-1854, networks of assistance developed among white abolitionists along with the independent movements of freedom seekers. As freedom seekers continued to move, over time statewide antislavery societies emerged across the Midwest along with several local groups within Illinois. Chicago progressed as a “point of refuge” for freedom seekers, and a small group
of young white abolitionists under the leadership of Dr. Charles and Louisa Dryer communicated regularly with their counterparts across the region. Independent freedom seekers continued to create networks, leading to an increasingly organized assistance. In 1848, the completion of the I&M (Illinois and Michigan) Canal allowed greater movement throughout the Illinois River Valley, and Chicago showed visible leadership by people of color. Individuals like John and Mary Richards, Richardson Jones, the Isbell’s, and others in the Chicago region connected with the work of other African Americans across the state along with the aid of white activists. Once railroads from Detroit to Chicago were completed, rapid movements toward Canada opened more options for freedom seekers.

In the years leading to the Civil War, northern Illinois saw an expansive establishment of support networks among Black communities and churches. Churches created outlets of support for freedom seekers and many families became involved. While independent travel continued, several freedom seekers used rail lines to move across the region into Chicago, onward to Detroit. While southern slaveholders in search of their slaves impacted the work of the Underground Railroad, the organized kidnapping of the late 1850s at times brought attention to the movement of freedom seekers in Chicago. Despite slaveholder’s many efforts to avert freedom for their slaves, individuals created highly adaptive and effective networks to circumvent this “peculiar institution.”

McClellan creates a captivating narrative in his timeless work Onward to Chicago. With a lively account of individual freedom seeker experiences, McClellan demonstrates how the Underground Railroad “had been a remarkable journey,” changing the lives of thousands who “moved to and through the region in the decades before the Civil War.” Each life represents the “diversity of freedom seekers, traveling as individuals, in family groups, in both large and small
parties committed to their common safety and success” (207-8). Their incredible devotion, bravery, and adaptability through this region creates a significant contribution to the larger narratives of the Underground Railroad.

*Onward to Chicago* thrives in making the case that the initiative and determination in the actions of families and individuals seeking freedom is part of the fuller picture of American slavery. McClellan also successfully pushes back against the traditional romantic white abolitionist narrative in his account; *Onward to Chicago* emerges as an effective work because of it. In the process, McClellan’s monograph gives us a model for the future of Underground Railroad studies, and his work is a compliment to any historian’s repertoire.

Michelle Norello (*mnorel1@lsu.edu*) is a combined MA/PhD student at Louisiana State University. Her research focuses on 19th Century America with an emphasis on the Civil War and soldier experiences.