

Organizing Freedom Black Emancipation Activism in the Civil War Midwest

Jennifer R. Harbour

“Jennifer R. Harbour deftly teases out everyday acts of bravery in the black communities of Illinois and Indiana in their pursuit of emancipation as a conscious, concerted, collective, and ongoing action. With vivid examples she reveals men, women, and children not only surviving in a threatening environment but also defining the terms of freedom as something greater than the absence of slavery. This is an important contribution to Underground Railroad, abolitionist, and Civil War studies.”

—Leigh Fought, author of *Women in the World of Frederick Douglass*

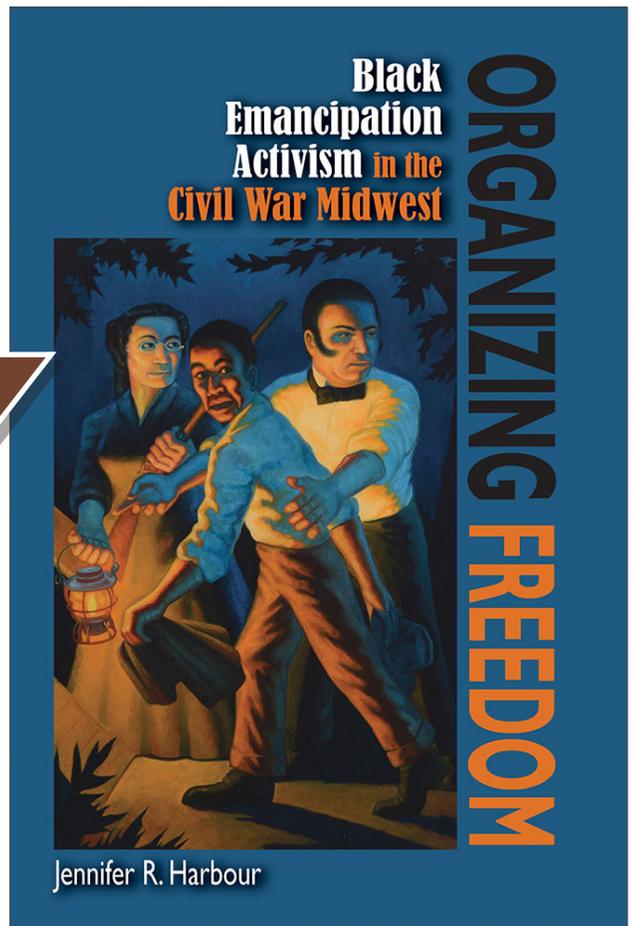
Freedom made tangible in Illinois and Indiana

Organizing Freedom is a riveting and significant social history of black emancipation activism in Indiana and Illinois during the Civil War era. By enlarging the definition of emancipation to include black activism, author Jennifer R. Harbour details the aggressive, tenacious defiance through which Midwestern African Americans—particularly black women—made freedom tangible for themselves.

Despite banning slavery, Illinois and Indiana share an antebellum history of severely restricting rights for free black people while protecting the rights of slaveholders. Nevertheless, as Harbour shows, black Americans settled there, and in a liminal space between legal slavery and true freedom, they focused on their main goals: creating institutions like churches, schools, and police watches; establishing citizenship rights; arguing against oppressive laws in public and in print; and, later, supporting their communities throughout the Civil War.

Harbour’s sophisticated gendered analysis features black women as being central to the seeking of emancipated freedom. Her distinct focus on what military service meant for the families of black Civil War soldiers elucidates how black women navigated life at home without a male breadwinner at the same time they began a new, public practice of emancipation activism. During the tumult of war, Midwestern black women negotiated relationships with local, state, and federal entities through the practices of philanthropy, mutual aid, religiosity, and refugee and soldier relief.

This story of free black people shows how the ideal of equality often competed against reality in an imperfect nation. As they worked through the sluggish, incremental process to achieve abolition and emancipation, Midwestern black activists created a unique regional identity.



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Acknowledgments

Introduction

1. Free Black Communities and Black Codes

Illinois and Indiana are terrifically important sites of geopolitical debate and conflict from the 1840s through the end of the Civil War. This chapter looks at education and religion, the two most important loci of antebellum communal growth. African Americans living in the Middle West in this period are supposedly free, but they are hardly at liberty, so this chapter analyzes their understanding of solid structural foundations.

2. Legal, Educational, and Religious Foundations

The Midwestern black experience at this time is unique because African Americans insist on linking their emancipation to the creation of their own institutions—or least ones that are free from white encroachment. By highlighting the importance of schools and churches founded and led by their own people, activists elevate the freedom to worship in their own churches and to educate their own children to a new level.

3. Antebellum and Wartime Emancipation Activism

As regional activists continue to dig in their heels, they remain committed to total emancipation. This follows the trajectory of Midwestern black activism as the sectional crisis develops. Much of what is happening on the federal scene is mirrored in the small settlements in Indiana and Illinois—black Americans sought to define citizenship on their own terms. For blacks who chose to remain in these emerging places, emancipation had to occur on local and regional levels as well.

4. Black Soldiering and Emancipation Activism

Each black man who serves on the battlefield, in the camps and in the trenches, embodies a whole family and an entire community rather than just one individual. Although African American men hope to gain full access to a national, democratic superstructure, they also have a great deal to lose by leaving their families. Black men and women cannot secure rights without first gaining reasonable access to food, shelter, and clothing for themselves and their communities.

5. Black Women's Wartime Political Culture

African American women are found in places where scholars have never expected them—right in the middle of the war. This chapter explores clusters of free African American women who offer service to black communities in distinctive ways. The achievements reflected in this war work convey an elaborate web of meanings for black women.

Conclusion

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