

# The Geography of Resistance: Free Black Communities and the Underground Railroad

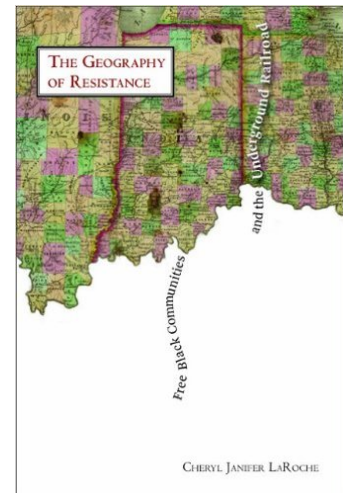
Cheryl Janifer LaRoche

2014

University of Illinois Press, Urbana, Chicago, Springfield, Illinois

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Cheryl Janifer LaRoche writes in *The Geography of Resistance: Free Black Communities and the Underground Railroad* that “Escape as a response to slavery predated the formation of the nation. (3)” To back this up she notes “the subject of fleeing from service first appeared in the colonial record in 1629. (3)” Her well-researched and well-written book explores the role of free African Americans in creating escape routes and establishing communities that provided safe havens for those leaving bondage from slave states. She provides new information that further breaks down the paternalistic myth of the Underground Railroad that it was only benevolent whites creating the means and routes for downtrodden Blacks to escape. LaRoche achieves this by focusing on four small African American communities and the remnants of their past. The communities are Rocky Fork and Miller Grove in Illinois, Lick Green, Indiana, and Poke Patch, Ohio. They are all found in close proximity to the Ohio River, the border between the free states and the slave states.



LaRoche explains her work this way,

Combining three strands, I weave together, history, archaeology, and landscape studies to yield an untold story that transcends the limits of each discipline. Archaeology and landscape studies undergird oral traditions and church histories that expand and give nuance to the narrative. Archaeology, mapping of settlements, and relying on the landscape itself underpin my argument and fill out the skeleton from written documents, oral tradition, and institutions such as the Black church and Masonic fraternities (15).

Since the story of slavery is the story of people, the author highlights a number of those involved in freeing African Americans. The most prevalent in her work is William Paul Quinn, the fourth bishop of the African Methodist Episcopal Church. The six foot three inch, 250-pound circuit rider was a formidable proponent of providing the church as an anchor for free African American settlements. He was instrumental in spreading the church into the south and west of

the United States. This included Illinois and the Rocky Point area prior to 1840. A church provided a place to meet, plan and take action in moving migrants north through free states and into Canada. Quinn presided at both the 1846 and 1853 AME conventions held in the Queen's Bush, so he knew well the situation of African Americans in Ontario.

The book explains the interaction and interconnections between the Black churches, white abolitionists, Prince Hall Freemasons, the American Missionary Association and other organizations. But all this activity stems from Africans "stealing themselves". They of course followed waterways, ridges, trails, pathways or any other feature of the landscape that would help carry them away from their slaveholders. LaRoche writes:

The landscape evokes the memory of Black rural communities once dotting the countryside. Elements of the landscape provide a few more pieces of the puzzle that fill the gaps between escapees' flight from slavery and the re-emergence of the successful few who made it out of the South (157).

Her research also found the importance of iron works locations as part of the escape routes. This was particularly evident for Poke Patch, Ohio, which is found in one of the most developed iron-producing areas in the north. Because of the dangerous working conditions and the ironmaking culture of African Americans, Blacks were often employed in the foundries and at the forges in the free states. Enslaved Africans had also worked in iron production in southern states such as Maryland. Some Africans had been found to be skilled iron makers and had learned the trade before being captured and transported to America.

LaRoche mentions some of the earliest escapees, known as maroons, the name thought to have evolved from the Spanish for wild or feral animal. She writes,

Maroon communities functioned as the diaspora's first free Black settlements. Whether in Midwestern hills, the Great Dismal Swamp, the Florida Bayou, or the remote regions of Cuba, Brazil, or Jamaica, communities of escaped slaves proclaimed their right to be free. Maroon communities began the progression to free Black settlements and the Underground Railroad (103).

However, the book does not include much information about the role of First Nations people in helping Africans escape slavery. This is one shortfall in the book since these Native Americans provided the first safe havens for Africans in America. The author notes that, "Between the foundation of the Constitution in 1778 and 1860, legislators would enact thirty-eight national acts, propositions, bills, and Indian treaties, excluding the Black Codes, in an effort to control escaping slaves. (4)" The British had tried to have both the Wyandots and Six Nations return African escapees long before the time of the American Revolution. In the chapter about Lick Creek, she does mention the prominent Indiana mixed African and Native American Roberts

family of Lick Creek, and that Quakers followed established First Nations' routes from North Carolina to the Northwest.

One welcome addition to this study of the Underground Railroad is the inclusion of the importance of Canada in the war against slavery, starting with the antislavery law of 1793. A number of stories that make up part of Ontario's history are noted throughout the book. One of the most famous is that of John Anderson. After being sold away from his wife and child, he escaped but was cornered by slave catchers, including his owner. In the struggle, he stabbed and killed the slaveholder. Anderson managed to make his way to Alton, a neighbouring town of Rocky Fork, Illinois, and then to Upper Canada (Ontario). Eventually, he was arrested and charged with murder in Brantford. His case created a sensation and changed British law when he was set free.

Harriet Tubman, who "could not trust Uncle Sam with her people (122)" and "began taking them all the way to Canada (122)", and Henry Bibb who founded the *Voice of the Fugitive* newspaper are both included. Mary Ann Shadd Carey's newspaper, the *Provincial Freeman*, and its slogan "Self reliance is the true road to independence" are noted. The author also lists the major Black communities in Ontario, such as Buxton and Dresden, and Nova Scotia's Shelburne and Birchtown.

La Roche describes the hardship of African Americans in their struggle for a life free of slavery and harassment with the reminiscence of Jermain Loguen, a prominent abolitionist and bishop of the AME church. After reaching the free state of Indiana, a Black man told him, "There is no place in the States that you can be safe. To be safe, you must get into Canada. I am sorry to say that the only power that gives freedom in North America, is in England. (162)" The *Geography of Resistance: Free Black Communities and the Underground Railroad* adds valuable new insights into the story of the migration of African Americans. It broadens the knowledge of a people who were fugitives in their own country, and it will allow future researchers to uncover other places of refuge for these African Americans.



**Peter Meyler**