

# I've Got a Home in Glory Land: A Lost Tale of the Underground Railroad

**Karolyn Smardz Frost**

Thomas Allen Publishers, Toronto, ON, 2007

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It's not every day that the publisher of a book has a personal connection to the subject matter. But Karolyn Smardz Frost's *I've Got A Home In Glory Land* has just that. Karolyn's book describes the life and times of Lucie and Thornton Blackburn, fugitive African Americans from the slave state of Kentucky. Synchronicity can be said to have played a major part in the research, writing and publishing of the book. The Canadian publisher is one notable example. Patrick Crean of Thomas Allen Publishers lives in a house built by the Blackburns for the Jackson family, other fugitives from slavery.

Patrick Crean also suggested the title of the book, which are lyrics in the traditional American spiritual *Do Lord*:

*I've got a home in Glory Land that outshines the sun,  
Way beyond the blue (horizon).  
Do Lord, O, do Lord, O do remember me.*

Descendants of the Jacksons were present at the book launch in February, 2007 and led the audience in the song.

The story of Lucie and Thornton had all but been forgotten when their story was rediscovered by Karolyn in 1985. While carrying on an archaeological dig on the site of Toronto's old Sackville Street school, she uncovered remnants of a house. The house had belonged to the Blackburns, a wealthy couple of African heritage. And using her professional research skills, Karolyn started to piece together the story from fragments of information scattered across Ontario and the northern United States. Twenty years of searching graveyards, archives, newspapers, church papers and court records, as well as listening to family recollections, allowed Karolyn to provide the context, if not always the details of the couple's lives. The Blackburns are typical of most African American slaves in that only fragments of information can be found about them.

Thornton Blackburn was born in Maysville, Kentucky in 1812. Maysville is located in the northwest part of the state on the mighty Ohio River. The free state of Ohio was visible from the river's shore. His mother was Sibby Blackburn, a slave. The young Thornton was described as a "yellow boy" with "light" eyes. His father was likely Sibby's owner Robert Smith, a member of the state legislature at one time.

Like many slaves, Thornton was separated from his mother as a boy. He was sold to George Morton in nearby Washington, Kentucky. Thornton was bought as a present for Morton's three year old grandson. Fourteen years later, Thornton was relocated to Louisville, Kentucky. Here he was hired out to a merchant providing delivery, porter and drayage services in the riverfront city.

During his time in Louisville, he met an attractive woman named Ruthie. She was owned by George Backus whose company did business with Thornton's employer. Ruthie, who was older than Thornton, described herself as a "full blooded Creole from the West Indies." She later would change her name to Lucie.

The young couple eventually married. However, trouble appeared when Backus died and Ruthie was a prime target for sale "down the river" to the New Orleans' slave markets. In order to evade this fate, the Blackburns escaped from Kentucky on July 3, 1831. With forged documents, they made their way by boat and stagecoach, settling in Detroit. Through Karolyn's meticulous research, we learn that the Blackburns were the cause of the first race riots in the Michigan city. The Kentucky owners found the Blackburns and had them arrested which resulted in the Blackburn Riot of 1833. With the help of others, Lucie and Thornton escaped and made their way across the Detroit River to Canada and freedom.

The Blackburns moved to Toronto, where Thornton, using his equestrian skills and business experience, opened the first taxi cab company in the city. The Blackburns prospered and became well-to-do members of the province's African Canadian community. They were heavily involved in the abolitionist movement, the local church and were well known because of their standing in the community. An article published in a leading African American newspaper *The New York Age* described Thornton, "Old Blackburn ... is a venerable fixture of Toronto. He is over 85 years of age and healthy. He resides on Eastern Avenue. He used to be a hack driver, and laid up a considerable fortune. He is now retired and lives in opulence with his swarthy lady."

Thornton died on February 26, 1890. Almost five years later, Lucie passed away and was interred with her late husband in the Necropolis, a cemetery in downtown Toronto. They had no children and their story faded from our history.

Karolyn has managed to create a narrative from the pieces of information that she has uncovered. She fills in the missing parts with the stories and recollections of contemporary slaves and events. Her writing style allows the story to flow as forcefully and smoothly as the Ohio River that carried the Blackburns to freedom. The personal story of Lucie and Thornton's love leads readers into an understanding of the American chattel slavery system, the Underground Railroad, the abolitionist movement and Toronto's early African Canadian society.

*I've Got A Home in Glory Land* fulfills the last words of the chorus of the old spiritual: *O do remember me*. Karolyn Smardz Frost has ensured that the lives of Lucie and Thornton Blackburn will be remembered from now on.



**Peter Meyler**