

Book Reviews and Notices

The Underground Railroad in Western Illinois, by Owen W. Muelder. Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Co., 2008. vii, 191 pp. Illustrations, maps, notes, bibliography, index. \$45.00 cloth.

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Owen W. Muelder acknowledges in the preface to his study of the Underground Railroad in western Illinois that "the primary difficulty facing anyone who examines the history of the Underground Railroad is one of reliable verification" (1). Most of the freedom seekers were not themselves literate, and the free black and white abolitionists who helped them seldom risked keeping written records. Muelder has tried to evaluate the sources available to him—newspaper articles, county histories, and historical monographs, among others—critically. He acknowledges that academic historians often regard county histories, for instance, as unreliable, but without them, those of us attempting to study the Underground Railroad would have few sources of any kind.

One of the monographs Muelder employs frequently is his father Herman R. Muelder's *Fighters for Freedom: A History of Anti-Slavery Activities of Men and Women Associated with Knox College* (1959, 2005). As befits the major role Galesburg played in the Underground Railroad in western Illinois, the most prominent actors in both books are George Washington Gale, Jonathan Blanchard, Samuel G. Wright, and other Presbyterian and Congregationalist clergy and laypeople associated with the founding of Galesburg and Knox College.

Owen Muelder's approach is to quote these actors directly, believing that the language "is moving and often . . . truly eloquent," giving us "a sense of the time and place as well as the sensibilities of the writers in ways that are lost through paraphrasing" (2). This has the merit of allowing readers to evaluate these sources themselves for possible sentimentality or exaggeration.

In his first chapter, Muelder defines "western Illinois" as the Military Tract set aside as land grants to veterans of the War of 1812, a rough triangle of counties bounded by the Rock River on the north, the Illinois River on the south and east, and the Mississippi River on

the west. Subsequent chapters describe routes and stations in Adams, Hancock, McDonough, Fulton, Peoria, Knox, Stark, and Bureau counties, approximating travels freedom seekers might have undertaken along the so-called "Quincy Line" through Galesburg and Princeton to Chicago. In western Illinois, as in Iowa, freedom seekers hid not just in basements or root cellars but in places as varied as "the rafter beams of a covered bridge, a remote cave, a tree hollow inside a forest grove, or tall prairie grass or corn fields" (15), as well as garrets, attics, and, in at least one case, a church belfry. A final chapter describes the use after 1850 of steam railroads, chiefly the Chicago, Burlington & Quincy, to transport freedom seekers concealed in freight cars.

The folklore of the Underground Railroad suggests that agents did not know each other well, if at all. Muelder argues persuasively that, at least in western Illinois, that is not true. Many of them came together in Farmington on October 1, 1838, to organize the Illinois Anti-Slavery Society. "There can be no doubt about the fact that these freedom fighters knew each other very well. . . . Their friendship, loyalty, and common commitment extended a network across the Mississippi River to southeastern Iowa, where their comrade, Asa Turner, was doing the same kind of work" (81-82). Other Iowa Underground Railroad operatives known to the western Illinois Congregationalists were their coreligionists Rev. William Salter in Burlington and Rev. John Todd in Tabor, as well as the Anti-Slavery Friends in the Quaker settlement of Salem.

Iowa readers might wish that Muelder had broadened his definition of "western Illinois" somewhat to include the so-called "Rock River Course," a route likely followed by freedom seekers crossing from Clinton County in Iowa and heading for Beloit, Janesville, or Milton in southern Wisconsin. Also, several counties, including Mercer and Henry, although located within the Military Tract and with several "stations" indicated on Muelder's very helpful map of the Underground Railroad in west central Illinois (33), have no chapters of their own in the text. Iowa readers might turn instead to Glenette Tilley Turner, *The Underground Railroad in Illinois* (2001), for the story of Iowa abolitionists conveying two freedom seekers named George and Sam from Missouri to Samuel McClure's house northeast of Sunbeam in Mercer County (55).

Owen Muelder deserves our thanks for compiling from many sources his narrative of the Underground Railroad in western Illinois. Iowans and others can now visualize more fully the later experiences of freedom seekers who crossed Iowa in the late 1840s and 1850s in their valiant bid for freedom from bondage.