

STATE HISTORICAL
SOCIETY OF IOWA

IOWA DEPARTMENT OF CULTURAL AFFAIRS

The Annals of Iowa

Volume 73 | Number 3 (Summer 2014)

pps. 276-279

Necessary Courage: Iowa's Underground Railroad in the Struggle against Slavery

Jennifer Harbour
University of Nebraska--Omaha

ISSN 0003-4827

Copyright © 2014 State Historical Society of Iowa. This article is posted here for personal use, not for redistribution.

Recommended Citation

Harbour, Jennifer. "Necessary Courage: Iowa's Underground Railroad in the Struggle against Slavery." *The Annals of Iowa* 73 (2014), 276-279.

Available at: <https://doi.org/10.17077/0003-4827.12123>

Hosted by [Iowa Research Online](http://iowa-research-online.org)

mott's telling, this competence set them up as rivals with the bench and bar and paved the way for their decline in the late nineteenth century. Finally, antebellum Sangamon County jurors were the connection between individuals and the legal system. Although paternalistic, they were not patriarchal; instead, they controlled trial outcomes in a way that corresponded with the expectations of local justice and local culture.

On the whole, McDermott paints a compelling portrait, even if it is uncertain whether the experience of Sangamon County reflects the circumstances of other midwestern states. Indiana, for example, gave the legislature power to abolish its grand juries in its Constitution of 1851, and proposals to reform the institution were rife in other states during the later antebellum years. It is unclear whether Illinois had the same debate when rewriting its constitution in 1848. Also, the widespread debate over the respective powers of judge and jury surely influenced Sangamon County jurists, but if so we do not learn about it here. These quibbles should not detract from the significant contributions McDermott has made to our understanding of the antebellum jury in law and practice. Anyone who wants to understand the history of this vital democratic institution must begin with her work.

Necessary Courage: Iowa's Underground Railroad in the Struggle against Slavery, by Lowell J. Soike. Iowa and the Midwest Experience Series. Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2013. 275 pp. Maps, illustrations, notes, suggested readings, index. \$24.95 cloth.

Reviewer Jennifer Harbore is assistant professor of black studies at the University of Nebraska–Omaha. Her Ph.D. dissertation (University of Iowa, 2008) was on African American political culture and the settlement of the antebellum and wartime Midwest.

Scholars of the antebellum Midwest, the Underground Railroad, and famed abolitionists such as John Brown will welcome this detailed account of Iowa's role in the destruction of slavery. As these scholars know all too well, the history of Iowa (and its surrounding "free" and border states) is complex and frustrating. Slavery was not legal in states like Iowa and Illinois, but citizens of those states also made sure that oppressive "Black Codes" not only discouraged but penalized African American settlement. To the south, slavery was legal in Missouri, although slaveholders made up less than 10 percent of white families in that state. To complicate matters more, invalidation of the Missouri Compromise in the U.S. Supreme Court's Dred Scott decision in 1857 offered no immediate hope of citizenship for African Americans anywhere in the United States. Furthermore, the rights of slaveholders

were protected everywhere they traveled, everywhere they set up towns and schools, everywhere they breathed.

As Lowell Soike argues in *Necessary Courage*, Iowans who defined themselves as either abolitionist or antislavery understood the realities of the fight brewing across the midwestern states. The Fugitive Slave Act of 1850, passed just three years after the highest court in the land, for only the second time in American history, had declared an act of Congress unconstitutional, now meant that northerners, westerners, slaveowners, antislavery activists, abolitionists—in fact, all Americans in every corner of the nation—were now complicit in the capture of fugitive slaves, whether they wanted to be or not. That brought an explosion of antislavery sentiment in states like Iowa, where citizens resented the encroachment of the Southern aristocracy and the proslavery Congress alike. Although Soike does not go to great lengths to explain the vast differences between the antislavery and abolitionist movements (and every mode of thought in between), the situation in Iowa was such that ordinary citizens were now making decisions about whether they wanted to willingly hide fugitive slaves in their cornfields or turn them in for bounty and provide succor to the Southern cause. In his painstakingly researched and detailed work, Soike shows how these Iowans were now forced to reconcile their feelings toward the Peculiar Institution and take an explicit stand. When it came to John Brown, whose travails in Iowa and elsewhere in the West occupy one tightly woven chapter, Iowans were again sharply divided as to his character and motivations.

Yet this book is not really about slavery or even slaves. What has kept historians so simultaneously intrigued and confounded since the passage of the Thirteenth Amendment is that the war “over” slavery had very little to do with real, substantive equality for African Americans. That was left to blacks themselves, who actually welcomed changes in the Midwest’s political economy, as those changes provided new formulations for empowerment. Soike seems unfamiliar with the latest developments in African American historiography, which has lately posited that blacks were consistently proactive in pursuing their own interests in the development of towns, neighborhoods, schools, and churches in the new states of the Midwest. (At one point Soike dismisses the so-called myths surrounding the codes of quilts and the Underground Railroad. Although little research exists to support the theory that quilts conveyed actual travel and escape information to fugitives, a discussion of the social behaviors surrounding the quilting myths themselves seems warranted in a book on the Underground Railroad.)

African Americans came to Iowa with a justifiable skepticism of the sincerity of whites, but Soike's descriptions of the white Underground Railroad "conductors" place a greater emphasis on the altruism of whites than on the fears of blacks. Soike's discussion of the Fugitive Slave Act is nuanced and descriptive, but it lacks a three-dimensional quality because it focuses too much on the actions of whites—and men—rather than on the cultural process of emancipation as a whole. The last few paragraphs of the book offer encouragement for other scholars who might want to plow through the remaining vast archival treasure trove to discover more about blacks who wanted to "live free and unfettered in Iowa" (212), but one wonders why Soike himself chose not to spend more time imagining the black emancipation experience alongside that of proslavery Germans or abolitionist Quakers, both of whom are addressed here so well.

Soike's command of the history of Iowa, its counties, people, roads, historical sights and markers, and even myths is expansive. This work provides a much needed corrective to Civil War historiography, in which midwestern states have long been ignored or misunderstood. Moreover, those who practice or are interested in public history will easily recognize Soike's command of genealogy, American memory (or lack thereof), and white Iowans' understanding of what the Civil War meant to and for them specifically. Finally, this meticulous tome performs an act of history that is of the utmost importance to students of the past: it gives a voice to those people who no longer have one. To that end, scholars of local and state history in particular will appreciate Soike's handling of the evidentiary material. I have no doubt that someone will find their ancestors in this book and be impressed by their courage and cunning, to use Soike's terms. Although the analysis might have been strengthened by a more discursive approach to white supremacy and white racism in the Midwest, it is still a major contribution to scholarship on Iowa, the Underground Railroad, and the (mostly white) "conductors" who risked so much to ensure their own vision of a free Iowa.

Lowell J. Soike won the State Historical Society of Iowa's Benjamin F. Shambaugh Award, recognizing *Necessary Courage: Iowa's Underground Railroad in the Struggle against Slavery*, as the most significant book on Iowa history published in 2013. — Ed.