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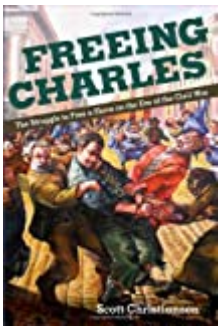
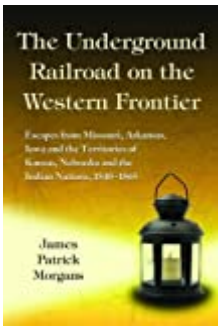


Scott Christianson. *Freeing Charles: The Struggle to Free a Slave on the Eve of the Civil War.* Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2010. Illustrations. xii + 214 pp. $65.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-252-03439-8; $24.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-252-07688-6.



James Patrick Morgans. *The Underground Railroad on the Western Frontier: Escapes from Missouri, Arkansas, Iowa and the Territories of Kansas, Nebraska and the Indian Nations, 1840-1865.* Jefferson: McFarland, 2010. 231 pp. $55.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-7864-3791-7.

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Commissioned by Matthew E. Mason (Brigham Young University)

New Frontiers for the Underground Railroad

These two new books on the Underground Railroad testify to the ongoing scholarly and popular interest in the Liberty Line. Both Scott Christiansonâs *Freeing Charles* and James Patrick Morgansâs *The Underground Railroad on the Western Frontier* are pioneering efforts that treat previously neglected aspects of the Underground Railroad. Christianson tells the dramatic story of the escape of a single slave from Culpeper County, Virginia; his capture in Troy, New York; and his ultimate rescue from his captors. Christianson makes a good case that the rescue of Charles Nalle (ca. 1821-75) is one of the greatest but unknown in American history. By contrast, Morgans has compiled the details of hundreds of escapes from the tier of states lying west of the Mississippi River and the territories to their west and offers an overview of Underground Railroad activities in this vast region.

Christianson has done prodigious work in recreating the life of Nalle. Like the vast majority of slaves, Nalle

was illiterate, and although he did acquire a smattering of education as a free man, he never left any memoir or account of his journey from slavery to freedom. Nalle apparently never even told his children of his escape and rescue from slavery. Thus Christianson has had to piece together an account of Nalleâs life from deed books, bills of sale, and the family papers of his owners. Drawing as well on the extensive newspaper publicity that Nalleâs escape generated, Christianson has supplemented these sources with accounts of slavery in central Virginia and the accounts of other fugitive slaves to paint a vivid portrait of Nalleâs world.

The impetus for Nalleâs escape came when his wife and children, who lived on a nearby plantation, were manumitted following her ownerâs death in 1855. Because Virginia law stipulated that freed slaves had to leave the state, Kitty and her four children decided to relocate to Washington DC, about seventy-five miles from Stevensburg, Virginia. But Nalleâs hopes of being able to visit his family were quickly dashed. His owner, Blucher Hansbrough, told Nalle to find a new woman. Only after news came in 1859 that Kitty was desperately ill did Hansbrough relent and give Nalle and a fellow servant named Jim Banks a one-week pass to visit Washington. Once in Washington, Nalle and Banks made a bid for freedom, taking advantage of Underground Railroad contacts to board a ship for Philadelphia. He ultimately settled in the vicinity of Albany, New York, where he hoped his wife and children would join him.

Ironically it was Nalleâs efforts to become literate that proved a grave danger to himself. A local lawyer and staunch Democrat named Horatio Averill apparently intercepted a letter to Nalleâs family and then informed his owner of the fugitiveâs whereabouts in exchange for reward money. This disclosure led to Nalleâs arrest on April 27, 1860, in Troy, New York.

Nalle was rescued not once but twice from Hansbroughâs agents and U.S. marshals by a crowd that may have numbered one thousand people. By far the most prominent person in this crowd was Harriet Tubman, who physically helped to pull the shackled prisoner free of his captorsâ grasp. When Nalle was recaptured across the Hudson River in West Troy, it was Tubman again who spearheaded the effort to successfully rescue Nalle. A badly battered and bruised Nalle fled west along the Erie Canal toward Canada but returned to Troy after friends purchased his freedom for $650. There his family was reunited with him.

Christianson does an excellent job of conveying the details of Nalleâs escape and of establishing this eventâs importance in the history of Troy. He also does a commendable job of connecting Nalleâs journey from slavery to freedom to the broader context of slavery and the Underground Railroad, although occasionally these connections seem a bit forced. In cases where national figures played a vital role in Nalleâs rescue, such as with Tubman, Christianson shows a sure hand in integrating these figures into his account. He has done a neat piece of detective work in discovering that William Still, the famed Underground Railroad agent in Philadelphia, assisted Nalle in escaping from Philadelphia. (Still recorded his name as âNole.â) However, the authorâs inclusion of a chapter on John Brownâs raid on Harperâs Ferry on the basis that Nalle may have seen Brownâs body pass through Troy on its way to its final resting place in Elba, New York, leads his narrative to take a circuitous detour.

Christianson demonstrates a good grasp of where his work fits into the larger debate about the significance of the Underground Railroad that has emerged over the last decade or so. He clearly takes issue with such scholars as Larry Gara (*The Liberty Line: The Legend of the Underground Railroad* [1961]) and, more recently, John Hope Franklin and Loren Schweninger (*Runaway Slaves: Rebels on the Plantation* [1999]), who have questioned whether the Underground Railroad ever transported many slaves to freedom. Siding with Stanley Harrold (*Subversives: Antislavery Community in Washington, D.C., 1828-1865* [2003]) and Fergus Bordewich (*Bound for Canaan: The Underground Railroad and the War for the Soul of America* [2005]), Christianson argues that âby the 1850s the Underground Railroad was an integral part of the struggle against slaveryâ that had developed âsophisticated networks and routes to move fugitive slavesâ (p. 147). At least on the eastern seaboard, Christianson has demonstrated through Nalle, the Underground Railroad was far more than just a legend.

Morgans likewise makes arresting claims for the significance of the Underground Railroad on the western frontier, which he defines as the states of Missouri, Arkansas, and Iowa; the territories of Kansas and Nebraska; and the Indian Nations. Agreeing with the proposition that slavery needed to expand in order to survive, Morgans argues that the Underground Railroad derailed slavery along the western frontier, and ultimately, nationally. He writes: âThe escapes of bondspersons in the Kansas Territory and western Missouri changed the whole equation of expanding into the west. This stifling of the expansion of slavery helped to ultimately sow seeds for the destruction of that horrible institution in the

United Statesâ (p. 188). Although Morgans never explicitly extends his argument to claim that the Underground Railroad caused the Civil War, it would be a logical inference to do so.

Unfortunately, Morgans does not convincingly support his rather striking thesis. Even aside from the question of whether the survival of slavery was contingent on its expansion, Morgans does not provide the kind of evidence that would lend credibility to his thesis. He observes that forty-one thousand fugitives escaped from slavery in Missouri between 1860 and 1863. However, this figure tells us nothing about how many fled their bondage before the outbreak of hostilities in 1861, when the Civil War disrupted the routines of life and made escape vastly easier. Morgans likewise disputes the estimate that Kansas never had more than two hundred slaves within its boundaries, but even if one accepts his largely anecdotal evidence, it is difficult to believe that Kansas ever harbored a slave population.

Morgans succeeds much better in achieving the more modest aim of his book, namely, âto detail as many freedom escapes as possible along the liberty line on the western frontier of the United States.â (p. 189) His book reflects extensive research into primary and secondary sources. If a fugitive slave has left a trace in history, Morgans seems to have found it.

As inclusive as *The Underground Railroad on the Western Frontier* is, it would be helpful if the book were more analytical and provided more context. Morgans begins his book with a discussion of escapes from Kansas. In this chapter, however, Morgans neglects to provide the reader with some crucial basic information, such as how many slaves lived in Kansas and where they lived in the territory. An analysis of the major escape routes out of Kansas, rather than retelling many anecdotes about such escapes, would also have been helpful.

This book also suffers from some organizational problems. Chronologically it would have made sense to begin the book with a discussion of slavery and escapes from slavery in Missouri, which entered the Union in 1821, some thirty years before Kansas was even organized as a territory. As Morgans points out, it was not until the development of hemp culture in western Missouri in the 1850s that anyone dreamed of trying to bring slaves into adjacent regions of Kansas, where hemp, a product typically associated with slave labor, could also be grown. The possibility that Kansas might have succeeded as a slave state would have seemed much more likely if the chapters on Missouri had preceded a discussion of Kansas.

Morgans has written a book that is quite comprehensive in documenting escapes along the western frontier in the decades before the Civil War. He also makes some interesting points about escapes from the frontier, such as that fugitive slaves fleeing Arkansas often made their way west to Indian Territory, where they believed they would be better treated. But he has left considerable room for a work that offers a better overview and analysis of Underground Railroad operations on the western frontier.

Citation: Thomas Mainwaring. Review of Christianson, Scott, *Freeing Charles: The Struggle to Free a Slave on the Eve of the Civil War* and Morgans, James Patrick, *The Underground Railroad on the Western Frontier: Escapes from Missouri, Arkansas, Iowa and the Territories of Kansas, Nebraska and the Indian Nations, 1840-1865.* H-CivWar, H-Net Reviews. October, 2010.

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