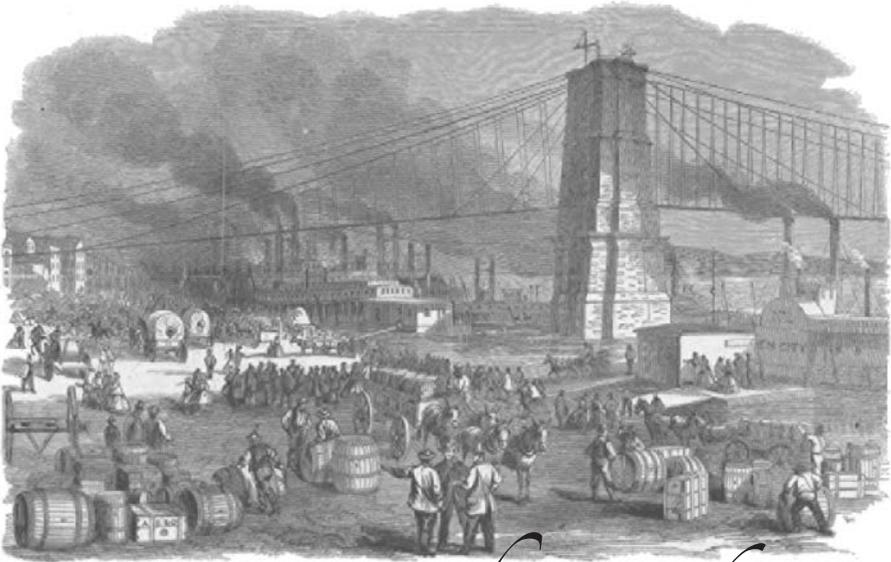


NIKKI M. TAYLOR



Frontiers of Freedom

Cincinnati's Black Community,

1802–1868

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Introduction

“I THOUGHT UPON coming to a free State like Ohio, that I would find every door thrown open to receive me, but from the treatment I received by the people generally, I found it little better than in Virginia.”¹ In fact, “I found every door closed against the colored man in a free State, excepting jails and penitentiaries, the doors of which were thrown wide open to receive him.”² These are the words of John Malvin, the only African American to leave an extant record of his life experiences in Cincinnati in the 1820s. He had been born free in Virginia and settled in Cincinnati in 1827, at the height of its transition from a frontier town to a city. Like so many other Americans, Malvin undoubtedly was drawn to Cincinnati by job opportunities and hopes of social and economic freedom.

Located on the Ohio River at the nexus of the North, the South, and the West, Cincinnati presented a wealth of opportunity in the nineteenth century. The city emerged as a force in manufacturing and became the national leader in pork packing and steamboat construction in the mid-1820s. Cincinnati became the leading supplier of manufactured goods for most of the South and the West, earning the reputation of “Queen City of the West.”³ People seeking jobs and other economic opportunities left the Northeast and upper South and flocked to Cincinnati in this era of prosperity. In less than fifty years, Cincinnati transformed itself

from a village to a booming city, rivaling older, more established cities in population growth. By 1850, Cincinnati was the sixth-largest city in the United States, having a population of more than 115,000.⁴ The black population was 3,237, making it one of the ten largest free black communities in antebellum America.⁵

Cincinnati was a city full of promise, but for African Americans that promise was betrayed. For most of the nineteenth century, African American settlers must have quickly sobered to the fact that, although Cincinnati was in a free state, they would enjoy only limited freedom and citizenship. The framers of the Ohio state constitution prohibited slavery in 1802, but not out of compassion for African Americans; that same body restricted suffrage to white men. If that were not sufficient ammunition against the state's black population, the notorious Black Laws that followed shortly thereafter in 1804 and 1807 ended any doubts about whether white lawmakers wanted blacks—fugitive or legitimately free—living in the state. These laws severely proscribed black immigration into the state and excluded African Americans from several rights of citizenship. In the ensuing decades, a series of additional legislative assaults denied blacks civil rights—including the right to testify against whites or to serve on juries—and relegated them to an inferior status. In addition to these legal disabilities, black Cincinnatians were plagued by frequent acts of racial violence. From 1829 through the late 1840s, there were four major mob attacks directed against African Americans in the Queen City. Only Philadelphia rivals this figure in the antebellum period. Mobs were so frequent and virulent in antebellum Cincinnati that the city was called “Queen City of Mobs.”⁶

Given such a racial climate, John Malvin's initial optimism quickly turned to disappointment and disillusionment. Within two years of his arrival in Cincinnati, he followed the course of scores of African Americans who had found the city too hostile and migrated to another part of the state. Malvin's residence in Cincinnati, although brief, underscores the limits of African American freedom in the nineteenth century.

Rather than simply revisiting how *unfree* African Americans were in Cincinnati, this book charts the emergence and maturation of the black community in this particular urban context. Specifically, it examines the process by which a transient population of former slaves developed into a self-conscious black community. This study follows black Cincinnati as it moved from alienation and vulnerability in the 1820s toward collective consciousness and, eventually, political self-respect and self-determination by the 1840s. History demonstrates that racism and dis-

crimination never prevented African Americans from imagining and demanding freedom in words or action. Black Cincinnatians used various strategies to expand the frontiers of freedom, including assisting fugitive slaves to freedom, emigrating to cooperative settlements, and agitating for access to public schools and the repeal of repressive laws. This community expanded its boundaries beyond Cincinnati, forged coalitions with other black communities in the state and nation, and built alliances with local abolitionists.

This book is framed between two legislative moments that settled the question of black citizenship at the state and federal levels. The Ohio constitution laid the legal foundation that denied black Ohioans the privileges of citizenship throughout the antebellum era, while the Fourteenth Amendment to the U.S. Constitution conferred those rights upon all African Americans. *Frontiers of Freedom: Cincinnati's Black Community, 1802–1868* chronicles alternating moments of triumph and tribulation, courage and fear, pride and pain in the history of this black community. It tells the story of collective consciousness and moments of collective accommodation. It speaks of a vision of freedom that was constantly being redefined. More than anything, it chronicles the resilience of Cincinnati's black community from 1802 through 1868.

African Americans' definition of freedom is born and shaped by a specific set of local circumstances. In *The Story of American Freedom*, Eric Foner posits that "freedom has been used to convey and claim legitimacy for all kinds of grievances and hopes, fears about the present and visions of the future."⁷ Hence, freedom is a symbol of American aspiration closely connected to notions of equality, justice, and even democracy. But freedom does not have a fixed definition because its meaning changes with its context. The sociopolitical and racial-economic climate determines how African Americans imagine, define, articulate, and pursue freedom in a given moment or context. Because the nature and extent of racism and oppression differ from one generation to the next and from one community to the next, black freedom in antebellum Cincinnati did not have the same meaning as it did in Charleston or New York. Place is, indeed, a critical lens through which to understand the African American freedom experience. And Cincinnati was certainly no typical nineteenth-century city, by any means.

Historian Henry Louis Taylor Jr. contends that nineteenth-century Cincinnati had a "dual personality, a schizophrenic northern and southern personality occupying the same urban body."⁸ Although such a dual personality was typical of other border towns that stood between slave

and free states, Cincinnati was different. It also had a third personality—a western one. Cincinnati assumed three intersecting identities: northern in its geography, southern in its economics and politics, and western in its commercial aspirations.

Cincinnati was a northern city not simply because it was located above the Mason-Dixon Line, but because the majority of its early settlers hailed from the Northeast.⁹ These settlers brought values and institutions with them, contributing to the northern character of the city. Yet with a river only half a mile wide separating it from the South, Cincinnati also assumed a southern character. Although “Cincinnati was located on the ‘Frontiers of Freedom,’ . . . the dark ramparts of slavery, with towering walls and stormy battlements, overshadowed the ‘Queen.’”¹⁰ Cincinnati’s economy was dependent on the peculiar institution. The city’s merchants and manufacturers supplied southern slaveholders with food and goods for their enslaved workforce. This trading relationship was so critical to the city’s economy that the business and merchant classes that governed Cincinnati went to great lengths to ensure that southern economic interests were protected in the city by routinely returning fugitive slaves to their owners and by arresting those who harbored them. Additionally, they tolerated and sometimes even encouraged antiabolitionist mobs. The city’s dependence on trade with the slaveholding South made it the northernmost southern city.

Just as surely as Cincinnati was the northernmost southern city, it was the easternmost westward-looking city. In the nineteenth century, the West symbolized boundless, uncharted economic opportunity.¹¹ Cincinnati’s business leaders aimed to make it the premier western commercial city, a goal that was not difficult to achieve because it was the transportation gateway to the West. In the first half of the nineteenth century, most people traveling to the far West had to travel through Cincinnati via the Ohio River. By 1848 Cincinnati boasted several roads, canals, and railroads that linked the city to St. Louis, Memphis, Lake Erie, Indiana, Lexington, and Pittsburgh, facilitating commerce.¹² In many ways, the Queen City of the West lived up to its name. One contemporary person writing in 1848 observed, “In truth, with the exception of Pittsburgh, there is no city in the West or South that, in its manufacturing capabilities, bears any approach to Cincinnati.”¹³ Cincinnati’s leading citizens also hoped the city would craft a distinct western identity and culture. One woman encouraged Cincinnatians to mold a regional cultural identity: “We should foster Western genius, encourage Western writers, patronize Western publishers, augment the number of Western readers,

and create a Western heart."¹⁴ In many ways a western identity was forged in Cincinnati.

Although some might argue that Cincinnati's personalities were at odds with one another, Cincinnati was not a city at war with itself—its southern identity fighting against the northern one.¹⁵ In fact, all three of its identities coalesced, forging a unique urban culture and a wealth of opportunities for white citizens from all walks of life. Nineteenth-century Cincinnati was a crossroad of opportunity for whites, but for African Americans it was the crossroad of the worst aspects of northern, southern, and western culture. In Cincinnati, a southern racial code, northern segregation and discrimination,¹⁶ and western frontier mob violence¹⁷ combined, with dire results for African Americans. They endured economic repression, racial segregation and exclusion, and the denial of civil rights compounded by extreme and frequent mob violence.

Cincinnati's distinct geographical location and sociopolitical and racial-economic conditions created an urban culture that profoundly affected the process of community-building among African Americans. Conditions there determined how quickly African American residents moved from a population of transients to a self-conscious community with stable institutions. Although the black population grew steadily, community-building was a slow and difficult process. Racist economic and social conditions, the constant threat of kidnappers or slave catchers, and mob violence led to a period of transience and instability, which delayed community cohesion and stability. Cincinnati's distinct urban culture also influenced black communal organization. The organization of this community differed from that of other nineteenth-century free black communities. For example, in other black communities of that period, the church typically was the most important black institution—it was not only a spiritual, social, and educational space but it was also the breeding ground of protest and activism. Historians of antebellum free black communities have assumed that every black community followed the same pattern, with the church at the center, but African American communities were shaped and organized according to their specific social and political needs and conditions. The situation in antebellum Cincinnati fostered an alternate model of community organization, with the black school at the center. Black public schools not only provided the community with a political, social, and educational space, but also were centers of protest and activism between 1849 and 1873. This book does not necessarily de-center the black church from its historical importance in Cincinnati or any other community; certainly, black schools could

never fill the role of the black church. But it does suggest that the black church in Cincinnati could not completely satisfy this community's deepest yearning between 1849 and 1873: intellectual enlightenment, equality, citizenship, and educational self-determination.

Black Cincinnatians lived at the dangerous intersection of several American frontiers, including the frontiers of slavery and freedom. This book examines what the meeting of these frontiers at this peculiar junction meant for them and for the quality of their freedom. Cincinnati, Ohio, was an unusually tough soil on which to build a community, but African Americans slowly planted themselves in it and refused to be uprooted. Although the essential themes in this book are the ways in which African Americans defined and claimed freedom and asserted citizenship, there are other lessons about resilience, self-determination and collective dignity. If nineteenth-century black Cincinnatians teach us nothing else, they should teach us that freedom is not just a state of being, but a state of striving.

This book is an attempt to amplify voices that have long been muted, to put flesh around census data, to weave a story out of traveler's observations, to illuminate agency from public notices, and to resurrect a community from singular voices. When this project began as a graduate study at Duke in the late 1990s, several people warned of the immeasurable difficulties of retracing the footsteps and rediscovering the experiences of black Cincinnatians in the nineteenth century. With limited formal education and few public forums for self-expression, black Cincinnatians either did not produce or did not leave many written records of their community. Autobiographical voices like John Malvin's must, then, ring out in thunder tones. Despite the scarcity of sources written by or about African Americans, other records demonstrate that black Cincinnati was every bit as resolute and conscientious as other free black communities, if not more so.

A dearth of a broad base of black institutional records has also hampered efforts to get inside Cincinnati's black community. Few of the black churches or mutual aid organizations preserved institutional records in this period. Much of the evidence relating to these institutions came through the careful statistical records of the Ohio Anti-Slavery Society (OAS). Other bits and pieces of data were gleaned from travelers' accounts.

Cincinnati government did not fare any better at preserving the historical record of African Americans. Cincinnati municipal and criminal court records, the staple of any historian of nineteenth-century America,

burned in a courthouse fire in 1884. Although some volumes of county registers or other log books survived, entries that include African Americans were few and far between. Institutional records of city infirmaries or orphanages are usually good sources to find African Americans, but in Cincinnati they were excluded from such places. Census takers routinely undercounted and misrepresented black residents; city directory compilers were even worse. There are moments of deafening silence in this text that are a function of the dearth of sources. This book, therefore, depends very heavily on the legislative record in its depiction of the sociopolitical climate in which African Americans lived, and in gleaning bits of social history from legal cases.

In order to resurrect this community, institution by institution, person by person, this book relies heavily on sources of autobiographical memory. Autobiographies by John Malvin, John Mercer Langston, Austin Steward, Levi Coffin, Eliza Potter, and several slave narratives were indispensable. With the exception of Eliza Potter, all of these authors wrote one or two decades after they lived in Cincinnati. Although the limitations posed by memory are obvious, the benefits of such sources are that these writers often fixed their autobiographical memories on moments that had historical significance for the larger community. John Malvin, for example, recounts living in Cincinnati during the 1829 riot; Langston recalls the 1841 riot; and Levi Coffin frames his autobiography after the 1850 Fugitive Slave Act.

This study also relies on community memory, or a history that is collectively shared and preserved through oral tradition. Peter Clark, Benjamin Arnett, and William Parham all relied on oral testimonies to reconstruct the histories of the Black Brigade, the African Methodist Episcopal (AME) Church, and the Masonic lodges, respectively. For example, although Rev. Benjamin Arnett, an AME minister who wrote the history of the Cincinnati church in 1874, did not personally witness the emergence of the AME Church, he learned this history from elder church members and previous ministers who did. Essentially, such people were the treasure-keepers of the church history. Each of their accounts of the early history of the AME Church becomes part of the community's collective memory.¹⁸

Any history of free blacks living, as black Cincinnatians did, on the edge of slavery would not be complete without a discussion of the Underground Railroad. Because assisting fugitive slaves was illegal and sometimes elicited mob violence, those who helped were naturally reluctant to leave records of their activism. Consequently, it becomes very

difficult to reconstruct the inner workings of this activity. The chapter on the Underground Railroad relies heavily on fugitive slave narratives, the autobiographies of white abolitionists, and the letters, news clippings, and interviews in the Wilbur H. Siebert Collection. Ohio State University professor Wilbur Siebert collected oral testimonies from participants and their descendants in the 1890s—more than twenty-five years after emancipation ended its necessity. Although the passage of time made people feel less vulnerable about acknowledging their involvement in the system, time also had a detrimental effect on the memories of many Underground Railroad agents. Despite its shortcomings, the Siebert Collection is indispensable.

Nineteenth-century community studies tend to be histories of the black elite. Historians are bound by records, and literacy gave the black elite the advantage of being able to construct and preserve the historical record. Although much of this study covers that segment of the African American community, some space is devoted to the black lower classes. Lafcadio Hearn, who wrote extensively on this class in Cincinnati in the 1870s, left rich ethnographic editorials based on his observations. The chapter entitled “The Shadows” is a synthesis of that body of evidence. Naming this chapter “The Shadows” and placing it at the end of the book was not an oversight, but a deliberate, symbolic attempt to relegate these people to the same place they historically occupied in society. It is not the place of the historian to provide a corrective to history by integrating the shadow people into the narrative more fully than reality allows. Also, because the book is organized chronologically and because the evidence for that chapter comes from the 1870s, it is only natural that this chapter should be the last. Nonetheless, it is only fitting that the shadow people should have the last word.

Finding black women’s voices, however, proved to be more difficult.¹⁹ Most historical records exclude them altogether; others privilege black men. For example, black Cincinnati’s institutional records predominantly reflect a male leadership corps in the community. Black men acted as ministers of churches, officers of the colored orphanage, trustees of the colored school board, teachers at black schools, editors of the black press, and presidents of emigration societies, school funds, and mutual aid organizations. In such positions, black men were the keepers and shapers of the historical record—a record that largely obscures the work and contributions by black women. Because institution-building is such an important element in community growth, black women’s absence from the record might lead to misguided conclusions about their contri-

bution in building communities. Even in the extant municipal and government documents, it is hard to rescue women from the record. City directories include names, ages, places of birth, and occupations of the “heads of household.” In antebellum American society, head of household was a designation reserved almost exclusively for men. For census takers, women could not be heads of household, even when it was clear that there was no man in the home or when women were the primary breadwinners. Consequently, it was not until the 1860 U.S. Census that the occupations of female heads of household were recorded somewhat consistently.

For the most part, this is a chronological study, yet certain themes are dominant in some chapters. The organizational thesis is that 1841 is a watershed moment for this community. The rest of the story is shaped around that moment. Before 1841 black Cincinnati was a fragile, unstable community that was struggling to find its voice. Then, a major rupture nearly devastated and divested this community of its resources, but it slowly regained its confidence, facilitated with the help of allies. After that defining moment in 1841, the black Cincinnati community matured internally and began to articulate a vision of freedom that was linked to equality, self-determination, citizenship, and the elective franchise.