



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

Karolyn Smardz Frost

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It was the day before Independence Day, 1831. As his bride, Lucie, was about to be “sold down the river” to the slave markets of New Orleans, young Thornton Blackburn planned a daring—and successful—daylight escape from Louisville. But they were discovered by slave catchers in Michigan and slated to return to Kentucky in chains, until the black community rallied to their cause. The Blackburn Riot of 1833 was the first racial uprising in Detroit history.

The couple was spirited across the river to Canada, but their safety proved illusory. In June 1833, Michigan’s governor demanded their extradition. The Blackburn case was the first serious legal dispute between Canada and the United States regarding the Underground Railroad. The impassioned defense of the Blackburns by Canada’s lieutenant governor set precedents for all future fugitive-slave cases.

The Blackburns settled in Toronto and founded the city’s first taxi business. But they never forgot the millions who still suffered in slavery. Working with prominent abolitionists, Thornton and Lucie made their home a haven for runaways. The Blackburns died in the 1890s, and their fascinating tale was lost to history. Lost, that is, until a chance archaeological discovery in a downtown Toronto school yard brought the story of Thornton and Lucie Blackburn again to light.

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