

More Information on Karolyn Smardz Frost

Karolyn Smardz Frost is Executive Director of the Ontario Historical Society and holds a BA in Archeology, a master's in Classical Studies and a PhD in Canadian History, Race & Slavery. In 2004-5, she held a postdoctoral fellowship at York University, where she still teaches courses in Toronto historical research. Karolyn is internationally recognized for her work in multiculturalism and anti-racist education through archeology and public history.

In 1985, Karolyn founded the Toronto Board of Education's Archeological Resource Centre where, over a ten year period, more than 100,000 school children and members of the public helped uncover and preserve their own city's past. The pilot project that year was the excavation of the home of Thornton and Lucie Blackburn, fugitive slaves who have been designated Persons of Historical Significance in Canada and of state historic significance in Kentucky based on Frost's research.

I've Got a Home in Glory Land, is the first entirely original fugitive slave biography since the 19th century. In 2007 it won the Governor General's Award for Non-Fiction. It is the fascinating account of young Thornton Blackburn and his bride Lucie who chose an audacious plan of escape to Canada on the Underground Railroad rather than accept Lucie's fate of being sold "down the river" to the brutal and sexually exploitive slave markets of the Deep South. Like most ex-slaves the Blackburns were illiterate so left no written biographical account and would probably have remained unknown were it not for Frost's detective work and extensive research using period documents and narratives of the period to construct the story.

The journey to freedom for the Blackburns, begins in Louisville, Kentucky on the day before Independence Day 1831, when they risk everything to board the steamboat *Versailles* and convince the captain that they are free people. They are taken to Cincinnati where they catch a stagecoach for Detroit, Michigan. The Blackburns' owners later sue the proprietors of the *Versailles*, a case that continued for fifteen years and went all the way to the Supreme Court of the United States. In Detroit, the Blackburn's freedom proved to be short lived. They were discovered, arrested and convicted as fugitive slaves. Their subsequent escape to Canada was marked by the violence of the first race riots in the City of Detroit, known afterwards as the "Blackburn Riots of 1833."

Their arrival in Canada was met with demands for extradition, but Canada's lieutenant-governor freed the Blackburns in a landmark case that set the precedent for all fugitive slave disputes between Canada and the U.S. until the civil War.

By the time of their deaths just before the turn of the century the Blackburns had become a well-to-do and respected Toronto couple, staunch friends of the fugitive slave community in Ontario and lifelong opponents of racial oppression. Their story of courage and commitment is a legacy brought to life by Karolyn Smardz Frost. We are pleased to welcome her to Huntsville to share with us a compelling moment in our history.