

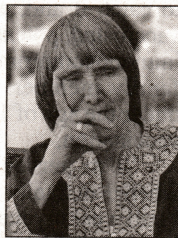
# Abolition and adventure in 1850s Vermont

## "This Ardent Flame"

### The Wings of Freedom, Book Two

Beth Kanell  
Gale, 2021

**T**his Ardent Flame" is the second volume of Beth Kanell's three-part series, "The Wings of Freedom." Like the first volume, "The Long Shadow" (reviewed here in 2018), it concerns the abolition movement in northern Vermont. And like its predecessor, it presents a nuanced, historically accurate alternative to romanticized tales of Vermont's place in the Underground Railroad. Time has passed; it is now 1852. The determined, delightfully described heroine Alice Sanders is 17. Her father's sheep farm has greatly expanded. Her indomitable mother still works ceaselessly at the tasks of running the household and supporting her family's abolition work. Alice's oldest brother, William, is grieving for his dead baby and his wife's inability to get over the loss. Her two other brothers, Charles and John, have gone to California in search of gold. Alice greatly misses her best friend, Jerushah Clark, who died of rheumatic fever, and is upset because Jerushah's mother unjustly blames Alice for the girl's death. That situation complicates the return of Jerushah's older sister Caroline, who was born deaf and sent to the School for the Deaf in Hartford when she was 6. Alice, who quickly learns to finger-spell and gradually becomes competent in ASL, finds a good friend in Caroline, who has become a teacher of the deaf. She is less sure she likes Almyra Alexander, the 14-year-old niece of the local minister, who has come to stay in North Upton because her mother is ill. Friends or irritants, the two young women introduce Alice to city sophistication she has not encountered before—not just abolition, but hoop skirts, temperance, and voting rights for women, the last shocking to Alice's conservative mother.



### One-Minute Book Reviews

Laura Stevenson

Never far from the front of Alice's mind, however, is Solomon McBride, the attractive young man who helped her drive her freed-slave friend Sarah north 18 months ago, when Sarah was in danger from a bounty hunter. Is Solomon Alice's beau, as the stagecoach driver, who delivers the mail to North Upton, teasingly calls him? Certainly, his correspondence is regular enough for the stagecoach driver to notice. But he doesn't know that Solomon, now an assistant to William Seward, senator for New York, is also secretly carrying apprenticeship papers signed by Joseph Gilman, the owner of the large and prosperous mill in nearby St. Johnsbury. Matthew Cranford, Caroline's brother, is a foreman at the mill; he gets the papers from Gilman and passes them secretly to Alice, who in turn passes them to Solomon in what seems to be a romantic correspondence. These signed papers allow a Black man whose name can be written into the appropriate spot (purposely left blank) to travel to Vermont in relative safety. And, as Alice finds out in a message slipped into her pocket during a chance meeting between Solomon and herself (dominated by her mother) abolitionists have purchased Sarah's injured brother and are sending him north. Despite the papers, it's a risky

trip, because the passage of the Fugitive Slave Act has made it very dangerous for any Black man to travel. Can Alice and her friends help him make the journey?

Like "The Long Shadow," this book constructs a splendid human context for political and social history. Readers learn of abolitionists' disgust at the hard-fought presidential election that made Franklin Pierce a candidate on the 49th ballot—a position, Solomon claims, he owes to his willingness to get the necessary Southern votes by condoning slavery. They learn of Seward's presence and the slow pace of presidential elections. They follow Alice on her first train trip, and they see her dignity in her first interview as a teacher. They see the difficulties behind the temperance movement when it threatens to ruin the inn on which Matthew and Caroline's family depends. And always, the portrayal of unceasing housework, friendship, and the difficulty of a woman's place in an ambivalent courtship reminds us wonderfully of the everyday life in mid-19th-century Vermont.

