

# The Story of the Levi Coffin House

## Summary

The Levi Coffin House was an important "station" on the Underground Railroad because it was the home of Levi and Catharine Coffin from 1839 to 1847 in Newport (now Fountain City), Indiana. The two-story house is a modified Federal style brick home. In addition, the brick-floored kitchen and spring-fed well are located in the basement. Levi, a well-known Quaker abolitionist, and his family had left North Carolina because of their opposition to slavery. Hundreds of fugitive slaves were harbored and aided by the Coffins while living in this house.

## The Story

The site is now the Levi Coffin House State Historic Site. It was the home of Levi and Catharine Coffin from 1839 to 1847. Levi was born in Guilford County, North Carolina in 1798. The Coffins were Quakers and did not believe in slavery, but Levi grew up seeing the horrors of slavery first hand living in a slave state. As many Quakers and others were doing, he and Catharine left North Carolina in 1826 because of their opposition to slavery and settled in Newport (now Fountain City), Indiana. Levi opened a mercantile store and carried a general line of goods. They soon realized that little was being done to help the fugitive slaves who were passing through the area on their quest for freedom. Many people were afraid to become involved because they feared the federal Fugitive Slave Law, the first of its kind enacted in 1793 that made it illegal to help the runaway slaves. Levi, however, felt that it was a moral issue that far outweighed the fact that there were laws against it.

The Coffins let it be known that they would do whatever necessary to help the fugitives. Eventually, three important routes of the Underground Railroad merged at the Coffin's home. In addition to providing shelter to the runaways, any medical needs would be tended to by Levi's friend, Dr. Henry Way. The ladies of Newport met often at the Coffin home to do sewing so that a supply of new clothing was always available for the fugitives, as well. When it was safe, the fugitives would be forwarded to the next "station." In the twenty years the Coffins lived in Newport, they helped over 2000 fugitive slaves and, to Levi's knowledge, not one was ever recaptured.

The Coffin's home was also a gathering place for anyone involved in the abolition movement. At one time, Arnold Buffum lived with the Coffin's while he was editor of an anti-slavery publication called "The Protectionist." The printing press was housed above Levi's store,

In 1839, after being in Newport for thirteen years, the Coffins had this house built for their family with the expectation of living there the rest of their lives. Many features of the house were likely included in order to facilitate their work in harboring the fugitives. However, in 1847, they were persuaded to move to Cincinnati in order to open a wholesale business to deal in free labor products like cotton and sugar which were not produced with slave labor. They retained ownership of the house in Newport for many years while hoping to return, but by 1860 had not and so they sold the house at that time and lived the rest of their lives in Cincinnati. There they also continued the work of opening their home to the fugitive slaves. In 1876, persuaded by his friends to do so, Levi wrote his book, *Reminiscences*, which chronicles his lifelong work, and has become an important source of information about the Underground Railroad.

This site has had a dual significance to the Underground Railroad. First, it was a major "station" due to its location on and near important routes through eastern Indiana and western Ohio. Second, it was the home of Levi Coffin who was one of the most well known and respected "conductors" and Quaker abolitionists. His work was not limited to aiding and harboring the enslaved on their escape to freedom, but also included his important work in the free labor movement as well as with the freedmen's aid societies after the Civil War.

## Bibliography

- Buckmaster, Henrietta. *Let My People Go: The Story of the Underground Railroad and the Growth of the Abolition Movement*, 3rd ed. New York: Harper & Brothers, 1941
- Coffin, Levi. *Reminiscences of Levi Coffin: The Reputed President of the Underground Railroad*, Chicago: Cincinnati Western Tract Society, 1876. Reprint, Richmond: Friends United Press, 1991
- Coffin, Levi, Newport, to Jesse Coffin, Mt. Pleasant, 5 January 1841. Quaker Collection Lilly Library, Earlham College, Richmond.
- Holliday, Joseph E., "Freemen's Aid Societies in Cincinnati, 1862-1870." *The Cincinnati Historical Bulletin* 22 (July 1964): 169-185.
- Siebert, Wilbur H., *The Underground Railroad from Slavery to Freedom*. New York: The Macmillan Company, 1898. Reprint 1899.
- Thornbrough, Emma Lou. *The Negro in Indiana before 1900: A Study of a Minority*. Indianapolis: Indiana Historical Press, 1957, First Indiana University Press Edition, 1993.
- Newspaper Articles:
- "Funeral of Levi Coffin." Cincinnati Daily Times Star, Wednesday evening, September 19, 1877.
- "Tribute to Memory of Friends of Negro." Newspaper Clippings of Cincinnati Vol. 1, p 133, Cincinnati Public Library.