

Levi and Catharine Coffin

Essay prepared by IHS staff

As a youngster growing up in North Carolina in the early 1800s, a Quaker child came face-to-face with the institution of slavery. One day while he was out with his father chopping wood by the side of a road, a group of slaves, handcuffed and chained together, passed by on their way to be sold in Georgia, Alabama, and Louisiana. Questioned by the young boy's father about why they were chained, one of the men sadly replied: "They have taken us away from our wives and children, and they chain us lest we should make our escape and go back to them." After the dejected company had left the scene, the youth wondered to himself how he would feel if his father were taken away from him.

The incident by the side of the road marked the first awakening of Levi Coffin's sympathy with the oppressed, which, he observed in his memoirs, together with a strong hatred of oppression and injustice in any form, "were the motives that influenced my whole after-life." Coffin, who moved to the Indiana town of Newport (Fountain City today) in 1826 and became an important merchant there, acted on his beliefs. From his simple eight-room house in Wayne County, and with the help of his devoted wife, Catharine, he managed over the next twenty years to offer a safe haven to thousands of African Americans fleeing slavery's evils on the "Underground Railroad" along major escape routes leading from Cincinnati, Madison, and Jeffersonville. "Seldom a week passed," said Coffin, "without our receiving passengers by this mysterious road. We found it necessary to be always prepared to receive such company and properly care for them." Coffin's efforts won for him the designation "President of the Underground Railroad" and for the Coffins' home the title "Grand Central Station" on the path for slaves eventual freedom in the north and Canada. One of the refugees who found shelter in the Coffins' home was later immortalized as the character Eliza, the heroine of Harriet Beecher Stowe's classic novel, *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. Levi and Catharine Coffin are supposedly depicted in the book as Simeon and Rachel Halliday.

This year marks the thirtieth anniversary of the restored Levi Coffin House as a state historic site under the Indiana State Museum System. Placed on the National Register of Historic Places in 1966 by the United States Department of the Interior, the Coffin house was purchased by the state in 1967 and leased to the Wayne County Historical Society. The Society, after generous donations from the community and the Lilly Endowment, renovated the structure and opened it to the public as a museum in 1970. Today, volunteers from the Levi Coffin House Association offer tours of the Federal-style brick home built in 1839 (the Coffins' fourth home in Newport). The home's fireplaces, floors, doors, and most of the woodwork are original. The furnishings all predate 1847 and as nearly as possible are typical of the time period and those of a Quaker family.

Levi Coffin was born on 28 October 1798 on a farm in New Garden, North Carolina, the only son of seven children born to Levi and Prudence (Williams) Coffin. Because his

father could not spare him from work on the farm, the young Levi received the bulk of his education at home, under instruction from his father and sisters. His home schooling proved to be good enough for Coffin to find work as a teacher for several years. He shared with his relatives an abhorrence for slavery. "Both my parents and grandparents were opposed to slavery," Coffin noted in his reminiscences, published in 1876, "and none of either of the families ever owned slaves; and all were friends of the oppressed, so I claim that I inherited my anti-slavery principles."

While he was still a teenager, Coffin had his first opportunity to offer assistance to a slave. Attending a corn husking, the fifteen-year-old Coffin noticed a group of slaves brought to the husking by a slave dealer named Stephen Holland. While the other whites in the party dined, the Quaker boy remained behind to talk with the slaves and to "see if I could render them any service." He learned that one of the slaves, named Stephen, was freeborn and a former indentured servant to Edward Lloyd, a Philadelphia Quaker, but later had been kidnapped and sold into slavery. Thinking fast, Coffin arranged with a "trustworthy negro, whom I knew well," to take Stephen the next night to his father's house. After learning the particulars of the now slave's case, the elder Coffin wrote Lloyd of his former servant's plight and eventually Stephen was liberated from slavery in Georgia.

In 1821, with his cousin Vestal Coffin, Levi Coffin ran a Sunday school for blacks at New Garden where the slaves were taught to read using the Bible. Alarmed slave owners, however, soon forced the school to close. Coffin, who married Catharine White, a woman he had known since childhood, on 28 October 1824, decided two years later to join his other family members who had moved to the young state of Indiana. Establishing a store in Newport, Coffin prospered, expanding his operations to include cutting pork and manufacturing linseed oil. His business success led to him being elected director of the State Bank's Richmond branch.

Even with his busy life as a merchant, Coffin was "never too busy to engage in Underground Railroad affairs." In fact, his business success aided him immeasurably in helping slaves to freedom. "The Underground Railroad business increased as time advanced," he said, "and it was attended with heavy expenses, which I could not have borne had not my affairs been prosperous." Also, his thriving business and importance in the community helped deflect opposition to his Underground Railroad activities from pro-slavery supporters and slave hunters in the area. Questioned by others in the community about why he aided slaves when he knew he could be arrested for his activities, Coffin told them that he "read in the Bible when I was a boy that it was right to take in the stranger and administer to those in distress, and that I thought it was always safe to do right. The Bible, in bidding us to feed the hungry and clothe the naked, said nothing about color, and I should try to follow out the teachings of that good book."

The fearlessness the Coffins displayed in offering assistance to the fleeing slaves had an effect on their neighbors. Levi Coffin noted that those who had once "stood aloof from the work" eventually contributed clothing for the fugitives and aided the Coffins in forwarding the slaves on their way to freedom, but were "timid about sheltering them

under their roof; so that part of the work devolved on us." Fugitives came to the Coffins' home at all hours of the night and announced their presence by a gentle rap at the door. "I would invite them, in a low tone," said Coffin, "to come in, and they would follow me into the darkened house without a word, for we knew not who might be watching and listening." Once safely inside, the slaves would be fed and made comfortable for the evening. The number of fugitives varied considerably through the years, Coffin noted, but annually averaged more than one hundred.

In 1847 Coffin left Newport to open a wholesale warehouse in Cincinnati that handled cotton goods, sugar, and spices produced by free labor. The enterprise had been funded a year earlier by a Quaker Convention at Salem, Indiana. Coffin and his wife continued to help slaves via the Underground Railroad while living in the Ohio city. Both during and after the Civil War, Coffin served as a leading figure in the Western Freedmen's Aid Society, which helped educate and provide in other ways for former slaves. Working for the freedmen's cause in England and Europe, Coffin, in one year, raised more than \$100,000 for the Society. In 1867, he served as a delegate to the International Anti-Slavery Conference in Paris. He died on 16 September 1877 in Cincinnati and is buried in that city's Spring Grove Cemetery.