

= Levi Coffin =

Levi Coffin (October 28 , 1798 ? September 16 , 1877) was an American Quaker , abolitionist , and businessman . Coffin was deeply involved in the Underground Railroad in Indiana and Ohio and his home is often called " Grand Central Station of the Underground Railroad " . He was nicknamed " President of the Underground Railroad " because of the thousands of slaves that are reported to have passed through his care while escaping their masters .

Born in the Southern United States , Coffin was exposed to and developed an opposition to slavery as a child . He followed his family and immigrated to Indiana from North Carolina in 1826 following a persecution of the Quakers by the slave @-@ holders . In Indiana he quickly became a local business leader as a merchant and farmer . The wealth he accumulated allowed him to become a major investor in the Richmond branch of the Bank of Indiana where he served as director during the 1830s . His position in the community allowed him to provide most of the funds necessary to supply food , clothing , and transportation for the Underground Railroad operations in his region .

At the urging of friends in the anti @-@ slavery movement , he moved to Cincinnati in 1847 to operate a warehouse selling only goods produced by free labor . Despite making considerable progress with the business , the venture was unprofitable and he was forced to abandon the enterprise in 1857 . Throughout the period , he continued to assist hundreds of runaway slaves by lodging them in his Ohio home . After slavery was abolished following the American Civil War , Coffin traveled around the Midwestern United States and abroad to France and Great Britain where he was instrumental in forming aid societies to provide food , clothing , funds , and education to the freed slaves . He retired during the 1870s and wrote an autobiography that was published a year before his death .

= = Early life = =

= = = Family and background = = =

Coffin was born on a farm near New Garden in Guilford County , North Carolina on October 28 , 1798 , the son of Prudence and Levi Coffin Sr. He was the family 's only son and had six sisters . Coffin 's father was born in Massachusetts during the 1760s and emigrated from Nantucket to North Carolina where he farmed land among a community of Quakers . The family was greatly influenced by the teachings of John Woolman who believed that slaveholding was not fair . Coffin 's parents probably met Woolman in 1767 during religious meetings near their New Garden home with other non @-@ slaveholding Quaker families . Coffin 's cousin , Vestal Coffin , also probably attended the meeting . Vestal was one of the earliest Quakers to help slaves escape North Carolina , beginning as early as 1819 .

Coffin grew up working on his father 's farm and received little , if any , formal education . He was frequently exposed to slaves throughout his childhood and sympathized with their condition . According to his own account , he became an abolitionist at age seven when he asked a slave who was in a chain gang why he was bound . The man replied that it was to prevent him from escaping and returning to his wife and children . The event disturbed Coffin who often considered the possibility of his own father being taken from him in a similar fashion . By age fifteen , Coffin was helping his family assist escaping slaves by taking food to those hiding on his farm . As the repressive Fugitive Slave Act became more rigorously enforced , the family began conducting their assistance to slaves with greater secrecy and doing most of their illegal activities at night . Scrutiny of the abolitionists only worsened with the passage of the 1804 Black Laws . By the early 1820s , Quakers in North Carolina were being openly persecuted for the assistance they were suspected of providing to runaway slaves .

= = = Move to Indiana = = =

In 1821 , Coffin and his cousin started a Sunday School to teach slaves to read the Bible . The plan was short @-@ lived though , as slaveholders soon forced the two to close the school . As the persecution worsened , thousands of Quakers began to leave North Carolina for the Northwest Territories where slavery was illegal and land was cheap . There was already a large Quaker community there and they had been influential in the passing of constitutional bans on slavery in Ohio and Indiana . In 1822 Coffin accompanied his brother @-@ in @-@ law Benjamin White on his move to Indiana . He stayed in Indiana with the Whites for about a year before returning to North Carolina . He carried back with him reports of Indiana and its prosperity . He was convinced that Quakers and slavery could not co exist and decided that he himself would move to Indiana .

On October 28 , 1824 , Coffin married long @-@ time friend Catherine White , the sister of his brother @-@ in @-@ law . The ceremony was held in the Hopewell Friends Meetinghouse in North Carolina . Catherine 's family is believed to have been involved in helping slaves escape , and it is likely she met Coffin in this activity . The couple postponed their move to Indiana after Catherine became pregnant with Jesse , the first of six children , who was born in 1825 . Coffin 's parents moved to Indiana in that year . He and his new wife and son followed them and moved to Newport (now called Fountain City , Indiana) in 1826 .

= = Underground Railroad = =

= = = Indiana = = =

After moving to Indiana , Coffin began to farm a tract of land . Within a year of his move he opened a general store . In his later years , he credited his business success with granting him the ability to become heavily involved in the costly enterprise of the Underground Railroad . Although the term " Underground Railroad " did not come into use until the 1830s , the organization was operating in Indiana by the early 1820s . According to Coffin 's own account , not long after moving he discovered that his home was on a line of Underground Railroad stops . There was a large community of free blacks near Newport where fugitive slaves would hide before continuing north . Often , they were recaptured because their hiding place there was well known . Coffin made contact with the black community and made it known to them that he would be willing to hide runaways in his nearby home to better protect them .

He first took fugitive slaves into his new home in the winter of 1826 ? 1827 . Word of his activity quickly spread throughout the community . Although many had previously been afraid to take part , upon seeing his success at avoiding problems they soon joined him . The group formed a more formal route whereby the fugitives could be moved from stop to stop until they reached Canada . Coffin referred to the system as the " mysterious road " . As time progressed the number of escaping slaves increased . Coffin estimated that on average he helped one hundred escape annually . Coffin 's home became the convergence point of three major escape routes from Madison , New Albany , and Cincinnati . The runaways gathered at his home and at times two wagons were required to transport the escapees further north . Coffin would move them from his home to the next stops during the night . His home saw so many fugitives pass through , it became known as the " Grand Central Station of the Underground Railroad . "

Coffin 's life was frequently threatened by slave @-@ hunters and many of his friends feared for his safety . They tried to dissuade him from his activities by warning him of the danger to his family and business . Coffin , however , was deeply moved by his religious convictions and wrote of these fears later in life saying :

After listening quietly to these counselors , I told them that I felt no condemnation for anything that I had ever done for the fugitive slaves . If by doing my duty and endeavoring to fulfill the injunctions of the Bible , I injured my business , then let my business go . As to my safety , my life was in the hands of my Divine Master , and I felt that I had his approval . I had no fear of the danger that seemed to threaten my life or my business . If I was faithful to duty , and honest and industrious , I felt that I would be preserved , and that I could make enough to support my family .

His business had a period of poor performance . Neighbors who were opposed to his activity boycotted his store . The population of Indiana was quickly growing however , and the majority of the new immigrants supported the anti @-@ slavery movement and Coffin 's business began to grow . His prosperity continued and he made a substantial investment in the Bank of Indiana when it was first established in 1833 . He soon became the director of the Richmond branch of the bank . In 1836 he built a mill and began to produce linseed oil from flax he grew on his farm . Coffin built a new two @-@ story brick home in 1838 and had several modifications made to his house to create better hiding places for the slaves . A secret door was created in his maids ' quarters where up to fourteen people could hide in a narrow crawlspace between the walls . The space was often used when slave hunters came to Coffin 's home in search of runaways .

During the 1840s pressure was brought to bear on the Quaker communities that helped escaping slaves . In 1842 leaders of the Religious Society of Friends , the Quaker Meeting to which Coffin belonged , advised all their members to cease membership in abolitionist societies and end activities assisting runaway slaves . They insisted that legal emancipation was the best course of action . The following year they disowned Coffin and expelled him from their group because he continued to take an active role in assisting escaping slaves . Coffin and other Quakers who supported his activities separated and formed the Antislavery Friends . The two groups remained separate until a reunification in 1851 .

Despite the opposition , his desire to help the runaway slaves only increased . Catherine organized a sewing society who met at the Coffins ' home to produce clothing to give to the runaways . Other aid was sought from neighbors and those sympathetic , but unwilling take the fugitives into their homes . Through these activities he was able to procure a steady supply of goods to assist in the operations efforts . Over the years he came to realize that many of the goods he sold in his business were the product of slave labor . Through traveling he learned of organizations in Philadelphia and New York City that only sold goods produced by free labor . He began to purchase stock from the organizations and marketed them to his fellow abolitionists , though the products were sold for almost no profit .

The free labor proponents in the eastern United States wanted to create a similar organization in the west . The members of the Salem Free Produce Association approached Coffin to see if he would be interested in managing the proposed Western Free Produce Association . At first he declined , saying he lacked the money required to fund the venture , and that he did not want to move into the city . In 1845 a group of abolitionist businessmen opened a wholesale mercantile business in Cincinnati . The Free Produce Association raised \$ 3 @,@ 000 to help stock the new warehouse with goods . Different groups continued to pressure him to accept a position as the new business 's director , claiming there were no other western abolitionists qualified to manage the enterprise . Reluctantly , he finally accepted , but agreed to only oversee the warehouse for five years , in which time he could train someone else to run it .

= = = Ohio = = =

Coffin moved to the Cincinnati area in 1847 , where he took over the management of the venture . He rented out his Newport business before leaving and made arrangements for his home to continue serving as an Underground Railroad stop ; he intended to return to Newport after fulfilling his obligation in Cincinnati . His first task was working with the eastern organizations to set up a steady supply of goods for the business . The most constant problem to plague the enterprise was the poor quality of its goods . Coffin had frequent difficulty procuring free goods that were produced with the same quality as those produced by slave labor . Because the goods were inferior in quality to his competition , he had a difficult time finding purchasers for the goods . The problem plagued the business for years , and as a result the enterprise was in a constant financial struggle .

The problem caused Coffin to begin to travel into the south to seek out plantations that did not use slave labor , but he met with only limited success . He located a cotton plantation in Mississippi where the owner had freed all his slaves and operated by paying them as free laborers . The plantation was struggling financially because they had no equipment to automate the cotton

production . Coffin helped the owner purchase a cotton gin that greatly increased their productivity and provided a steady supply of cotton for his association . The cotton was shipped to Cincinnati where it was spun into cloth and sold . Other trips to Tennessee and Virginia were less successful , although he did succeed in spreading the word about the movement . Despite his constant attention to the business , the poor supply of cheap and quality free labor products proved insurmountable , making it impossible for Coffin to return to Indiana or locate a replacement to run the company . The company had stayed in business primarily through the financial support of wealthy benefactors . Coffin sold the business in 1857 after deciding it would be impossible for the business to remain profitable .

Cincinnati already had a large anti-slavery movement who had violent conflicts with slavery proponents in the years before Coffin moved to the city . He purchased a new home at the corner of Elm and Sixth streets . He continued to be active in the Underground Railroad , setting up a new safe house in the city and helping organize a larger network in the area . At first he was very cautious about helping slaves until he was able to find people he could trust in the community , and the community came to trust him . Coffin moved several times during his life in the city , and finally came to reside on Wehrman Street . It was a large home and rooms were rented out for boarding . With the many guests coming and going , the home was an excellent place to operate an Underground Railroad stop without arousing much suspicion . Catherine created costumes and when fugitives arrived they would be dressed as butlers , cooks , and other workers . Some of the mulattoes were even able to pass as white guests . The most frequently used disguise was that of a Quaker woman . The high collar , long sleeves , gloves , veil , and large brimmed hat could completely hide its wearer when their head was tilted slightly downward .

One of the many slaves Coffin helped to escape was Eliza Harris . The girl had escaped the south and crossed the Ohio River on a winter night when it was frozen over . Barefooted and carrying her baby , she was exhausted and nearly dead when she reached Coffin 's home . He provided her with food , clothing , new shoes , and shelter before helping her to continue on her journey to freedom in Canada . Harriet Beecher Stowe was living in the city at the time and was well acquainted with the Coffins . The story so moved her she retold it in part in her book Uncle Tom 's Cabin . Levi and Catherine Coffin may have been the Quaker couple she refers to in her book .

Coffin 's role began to change as the American Civil War approached . He made a trip to Canada in 1854 to visit the community of escaped slaves that was living there and offer assistance and he helped found an orphanage in Cincinnati for blacks . As soon as the war broke out in 1861 , he and his group began to prepare to help the war 's wounded . Although as a Quaker , he was opposed to war , he did support their cause . He and his wife spent almost every day at Cincinnati 's war hospital helping to care for the wounded . They prepared large buckets of coffee and distributed it freely to the soldiers and took many into their home .

Coffin helped form the Western Freedman 's Aid Society in 1863 to offer assistance to the slaves freed during the war . As Union soldiers moved into the South , some slaveholders shot their slaves , while others abandoned them , leaving them without food or shelter . Coffin 's group began collecting food and goods to be distributed to the former slaves . Coffin petitioned the government to create the Freedmen 's Bureau to offer assistance to freed slaves . Coffin was also involved in helping freed slaves after the war in establishing businesses and getting educations . As leader of the society , he traveled to Great Britain in 1864 to seek aid . His advocacy there led to the formation of the Englishman 's Freedmen 's Aid Society .

= = = Death and legacy = = =

After the war ended , Coffin raised over \$ 100 @, @ 000 for the Western Freedman 's Aid Society to provide aid to the free blacks . The society provided food , clothing , money , and other aid to the newly freed slave population in the United States . In 1867 he attended the International Anti-slavery Conference in Paris . Coffin did not enjoy being in the public eye and considered his job as begging for money , which he thought to be demeaning . He recorded in his book that he gladly gave up the position once a new leader for the organization was found . He was concerned about

giving money freely to all blacks , some of whom he was believed would never be able to care for themselves unless adequate education and farms were provided to them . He believed the society should only be giving their limited resources to those who were best able to benefit from them . The society continued to operate until 1870 , the same year blacks were guaranteed equality in constitutional amendment .

With the war over , the passage of the Fifteenth Amendment , and slavery illegal , Coffin lived the rest of his life in retirement . He later recorded in his book that " ... I resign my office and declare the operations of the Underground Railroad at an end . " He spent his final year writing a book about the activities of the Underground Railroad and his life . The book , *Reminiscences of Levi Coffin* , was published in 1876 and is considered by historians to be one of the best firsthand accounts of the activities of the Underground Railroad . He died on September 16 , 1877 at around 2 : 30pm in his Avondale , Ohio home . His funeral ceremony was held in the Friends Meeting House of Cincinnati . The *Daily Gazette* recorded that the crowd was too large to be accommodated and hundreds had to remain outside . Four of his eight pallbearers were free blacks who had worked with Coffin on the Underground Railroad . He was interred in the Spring Grove Cemetery in an unmarked grave . On July 11 , 1902 , African Americans in Cincinnati erected a 6 feet (1 @. @ 8 m) tall monument over Coffin 's grave in his honor .

Coffin 's home in Fountain City , Indiana was purchased by the state of Indiana in 1967 and restored to its original condition . It is now a National Historic Landmark and is open to the public for tours .

Coffin was first referred to as the " President of the Underground Railroad " by a slavecatcher who said , " There 's an underground railroad going on here , and Levi 's the president of it . " The title became commonly used among other abolitionists . Modern historians estimate that Coffin helped more than 2 @, @ 000 slaves escape , although Coffin himself estimated the number to be around 3 @, @ 000 . Once questioned about why he aided slaves , Coffin said " 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 . " Another time he simply said , " I thought it was always safe to do right . "