

## A STATION OF THE UNDERGROUND RAILROAD.

BY W. D. WALDRIP,

*Head of Department of History, Richmond High School.*

[A paper read at the annual meeting of the History Section of the Indiana State Teachers' Association, Terre Haute, May 5, 1911.]

THE story of the early happenings of the old town of Newport, Indiana, shows directly the relation between well-kept local history and general history. As the heading of my paper shows, this is to be an account of a station of the Underground Railroad, and all can readily see the importance of that great movement to the history of our country. The station I am to describe was the most famous of all the depots, so famous as to be called "The Union Depot" of the Underground Railroad. Had the local history of this place been studied and preserved as it should have been, much of value would have been added to our knowledge of the growth of feeling against slavery.

The town of Newport is in Wayne county, about eight miles north of the city of Richmond, in the well-known Whitewater valley. This town was in the main settled by North Carolinians, who had left their homes on account of the shadow of the hated institution, and had settled in the territory dedicated to freedom by the Ordinance of 1787. The name of Newport, Indiana, was made hateful to every slaveholder south of Mason and Dixon's line, and the name of Levi Coffin was hated above all names by the slave-hunters of the South.

In the year 1840 Arnold Buffum, a Massachusetts Quaker, visited Newport, preaching the doctrine of abolition. His visit led to the organization of several anti-slavery societies. The first State Anti-Slavery Society held its meeting at Newport, and delegates from various southeastern counties were in attendance. Daniel Worth, of Newport, was the first president of this State society. This man made Newport a name in anti-slavery agitation. In 1842 the agitation reached such a height that the peace-

ful New Garden congregation split in two parts, and we have the unusual picture of Quakers in a division over the question of slavery. A few years later a number of prominent English Quakers visited Newport, and could not be led to believe that a Quaker church would split over this question, as they naturally supposed that all Quakers were anti-slavery people. All their work was done with the main branch of the church, and they turned the shoulder of scorn upon the anti-slavery section of the denomination.

Yet too often, when the Underground Railroad is mentioned, we think only of the name of "Coffin," and in Wayne county we are accustomed to think that Levi Coffin and his wife, "Aunt Katy," were the only prominent members of this great movement, but such is not the case. Many men and many women gave a lifetime of effort to this work. In connection with this work the author has had occasion to trace the journeys and routes of fugitives, and only the call of duty led him back to the subject. It is in the realm of probability that a map could be made, showing all the stations in the great system that led through eastern Indiana and western Ohio, and even the houses where the slaves stopped could be located. An inquisitive person can trace, in a broad line, such a route from the Ohio river to Canada, and locate all the places where the stops were made. This would be a very interesting topic of research, and one that is only open to history for a few more years, and then all such knowledge will have passed into the undisputed realm of tradition.

Many obscure people helped in this work, and many men in and around Newport seemed to have had as much share in the Underground Railroad as did Levi Coffin. This statement is not made to detract anything from the fame of Mr. Coffin, but to give credit to such people as deserve it. Many houses in Newport sheltered fugitives, and it is reckoned that more than three thousand passed through the Union Station alone. In this connection it might be stated that this Union Station, this home of Levi Coffin, is still standing in a fair state of repair. Some years back Mrs. William Scott, of Boston, tried to start a fund to buy and preserve this historic place.

This house was shown to me and many stories told to me about these trying times by the venerable and interesting Quaker minister, John Wright Johnson. John Wright Johnson was a nephew of Mr. Coffin and lived in the house at the time when so many slaves were on the move northward. Mr. Johnson died last year at the age of ninety-two. It is with regret that I say that much of his valuable first-hand knowledge passed away with him. Much that this paper contains comes from him, aided by further research.

In this house, as in most other stations, there were no secret passages and hidden pits for places of concealment. A close examination of the old Coffin home shows that the only place of concealment was a small room, next to the rafters, so small that only four or five people could lie down in the room. The opening to this room was so small that only one person at a time could crawl through. The entrance to this room was concealed by an enormous bedstead. True, there is a deep pit in the cellar, but, to the sorrow of the romantically minded ones, this was dug to allow a weakened spring to furnish water for the house.

The main safeguard of runaway slaves was the old Anglo-Saxon idea that each man's house is his castle. The old Quakers knew this well, and would allow no one to enter a house in search of fugitives without a warrant, and by the time a search warrant could be secured the slave was many miles away. The most interesting bit of information of Mr. Johnson's entire story was that Mrs. Harriet Beecher Stowe had visited Newport twice, once while he was at the home of Mr. Coffin, and once in after years. He asserted that much of the information about slave life, and particularly the story of Eliza, was secured by Mrs. Stowe at Newport. If this is true, it is a point of much importance to the biography of Mrs. Stowe and of some importance to history in general. Mr. Johnson seemed to be very sure of his statement and repeated it a number of times to various people. Dr. Hough, of Fountain City, who probably knows more about Newport and its anti-slavery history than any other living man, says that Mr. Johnson is mistaken, or that his memory is in error. So a letter was sent to the son of Harriet Beecher Stowe, asking if his

mother was ever at Fountain City or Newport. His answer was very interesting and to the point, so I shall presume to quote at length from his letter:

"In regard to your questioning concerning Mrs. Stowe and Uncle Tom's Cabin, I can not make definite answer. With regard to the story of the visit of Mrs. Stowe to the house of the old Quaker, Mr. Coffin, you know as much as I do, and that is nothing at all. I doubt, if Mrs. Stowe was still living and in possession of her faculties, if she would remember anything about it. She always said herself that the original of Eliza was a young woman and her child who were taken off the place of old Van Sant at night by Professor Stowe and Henry Ward Beecher. Yet I think it by all means probable that there was a foundation to the story and it was not made up entirely of whole cloth. I do not know that Mrs. Stowe was ever in Indiana. She was in narrow circumstances for eighteen years after the marriage to my father and had heavy cares. She would not have gone to Indiana without reason. Can you locate either of her brothers, Charles or William, in that State as ministers of the Presbyterian Church? If you can, you have established the probability of a visit to that State, made by her; otherwise it is improbable that she ever made such a visit. If she did visit Indiana before writing Uncle Tom's Cabin, it was when she had no more idea of writing the book than of paying a visit to the moon.

"I can not help you in this matter. You know the recollections of old men consist for the most part of Wahrheit und Dichtung. Old men dream dreams and young men see visions, and that gets history in a devil of a mess. If one of Mrs. Stowe's brothers were living near or about the place in question, you have shown cause for her being there, but if no such cause exists, I think you will have to regard the whole matter as an old man's vision and a young man's dream.

"To show you how unreliable people are,—when my mother wrote her introduction to the illustrated edition of Uncle Tom's Cabin, she told about being in Washington in 1862 and hearing Lincoln speak those words about the war continuing 'Till for

every drop of blood drawn with the lash, there shall be one drawn with the sword, and all the treasure heaped up by three hundred years of bondsmen's unrequited toil, etc.' 'Why, mother,' I said, 'Mr. Lincoln did not utter those words for years afterwards, and how could you have heard them before he spoke them?' But you might as well argue with a stone—she stuck to it that she heard them uttered in 1862 and it had to be printed in the book that way. That is the reason that the historians have to spend so much time hunting around in dark cellars for black cats that aren't there and never were.

"In the public library that I patronize here in the city, I have a fiction card and a card for works of science. I insist they put all histories on my fiction card; there is nothing in the world that will lie like facts, unless it is figures.

"David said in his haste, 'All men are liars.' I guess he was trying to write a history about something. Even when it comes to the New Testament, how can we be sure that just two thousand swine drowned themselves in the lake, when the devils came out of the crazy man and entered into them. Who counted them, and were there not among them some small pigs that ran about so fast that you could not count them?

"Very truly yours,

"CHAS. EDWARD STOWE."

Evidently Mr. Stowe does not think very much of the reliability of history in general and local history in particular, but I have promised myself the work of following up the clue in the records of the Presbyterian Church at my earliest convenience. From this report many say that Levi and Catherine Coffin are the prototypes of Samuel and Rachel Holliday, so well portrayed by Mrs. Stowe. Further relation of Newport and Levi Coffin to Uncle Tom's Cabin can be traced more easily. The story of Eliza is so well known that the mentioning of the name is sufficient to bring the story back to your mind at once. The man who helped Eliza up the bank of the Ohio river at Ripley, Ohio, was the Rev. William Lacey, of Newport. He belonged to a secret service who patrolled the banks of the Ohio river, watching for runaways. He told a few people, his own brother not

being among the few, how he watched her cross from the Kentucky side with her pursuers in close chase. When she reached the river she hesitated a moment, but seeing her capture was sure, she clasped her child more closely, and leaped from one cake of ice to another. At times she seemed lost, but would put the child on the next cake of ice and would drag herself onto the same and continue her journey. Finally, nearly frozen, clothing wet to the skin and entirely exhausted, she reached the Ohio side and was helped up the bank by this Newport preacher. She was taken along the Ohio branch of the railroad, and, being a valuable slave, was hotly pursued, and so, as was the custom, was sent over to the Indiana side and was at the Coffin homestead for several days. Here she was named Eliza by Mrs. Coffin. She was sent on to Canada, and was seen here by Mrs. Coffin years later, on a visit to Canada. This much of the story seems to be true from all documentary evidence, notwithstanding the statements in Mr. Stowe's letter. Probably what has misled him was that his mother put the character of some well-known negro woman into the story of Eliza, but the slave woman who made the trip across the ice was without doubt sent through the Newport station.

About a half-mile east of Newport stands the home of Mr. Hough, who was also prominent in the fight against slavery. Here occurred one of the exciting incidents of the history of the little town. Escaped slaves whose masters were not on their trail frequently worked in Newport for a year at a time, mingling with the free negroes who were in the neighborhood. One night fifteen slave-hunters, led by a man from Richmond, galloped into Newport, making dire threats unless the particular slave for which they were searching be given up. By chance this slave was not at Mr. Hough's home on this particular evening, so Mr. Hough detained the men until the slave could get into town and hide. After a thorough search the slave-hunters went back to Newport and began the second search. The slave was inside a house that was so near the street that several times he could have reached out and touched his master. A bugle call had been given and free negroes began to assemble, armed with shotguns,

knives and clubs; and many other anti-slavery men came, until there was quite an excited crowd. One Kentuckian being thoroughly enraged, made some very wild threats and was covered by a shotgun in a negro's hands. The two sides waited for the opening shot that should signal for the general battle. Rather exciting for a town full of Quakers. Some declared they would have that negro if they had to burn Newport, but others decided that the negro was not worth enough to cause the loss of their own precious lives, and they finally left without the slave. This was the most determined attempt ever made in Newport to capture a runaway slave.

Informers had but scant courtesy at the hands of the Quakers. No harm was ever actually offered them, but life was made so uncomfortable that they soon left the vicinity, although a few secret friends of slavery were left until the Civil War.

An interesting phase of the work was a sewing society formed at Newport to prepare clothing for runaways. Often the slaves were shoeless and almost naked, and this society spent many hours in preparing clothing for their unbidden but not unwelcome guests. Needing money to purchase those things which they could not make, this society made rag carpets, hats, bonnets and other kinds of hand work, and sold them to get money to buy the needed articles. Such women as Bulah Puckett, Elizabeth Stanton, Elizabeth Lacey, Keziah Hough, and many other women were members. Women are still living in this State who as girls were members of this society.

One favorite story of Mr. Johnson was of the largest company that ever passed through his uncle's home on their way north. The party was gathered together in Kentucky and journeyed to the Ohio river at night. They were ferried across by a friendly white man near the town of Madison. While in Union county a group of their masters caught up with them and fired repeatedly at them, wounding several. They succeeded in escaping through the growing corn and reached an underground station at Hicklin. Here, without dressing their wounds, they were placed in two wagons and hurried north. They traveled this way two nights until they reached Levi Coffin's home. Mrs.

Coffin was awake, and hearing the sound of wagons, arose and went to the door. She spoke to the men in charge and said, "What have you got there?" A driver replied, "All Kentucky." "Well, bring all Kentucky in," was her reply. They were brought in, fed and warmed. Coffin then made one of his characteristic speeches: "Seventeen full-grown darkies are about as much as the cars can bear at one time. You may switch off and put your locomotives in my stable and we will water and feed them." This party was worth about \$20,000 in any slave market, but to Mr. Coffin they were so many poor, destitute men. Later in the day Dr. Way and Dr. Stanton, two well-known abolitionists, were called in to remove bullets and shots from the bodies of four of the runaways. Clothing was furnished for all seventeen by the sewing society before mentioned. They were badly in need of clothing, as they were almost naked from their trip through the woods and corn fields. After two days' rest, they were started for the home of John Bond, in the Cabin Creek settlement, but early the next day, Acquilla Jones, of Richmond, rode to Newport, bringing the information that slave-hunters were in force at Richmond. This news was sent to John Bond, and he forwarded the same to the station in Grant county. Here the negroes were resting, thinking themselves secure in this rather sparsely settled section of the country. But the fugitives were scattered in various homes until the hunters lost trail. True to report, these hunters came to Newport by ones and twos, purporting to be cattle and horse buyers. There were three sets of hunters in this party, and two of them followed the fairly well-known trails to Canada. The third remained in Wayne county for a while. Exasperated by their failure, this third party started for Newport, threatening to burn Mr. Coffin's home and kill all negro lovers in the town. Warning was hastily sent to the town, but the old Quaker was not much frightened, and did not even take the trouble to guard his property. This party is supposed to be the one that declared for the first time that there must be an Underground Railroad and that Levi Coffin must be the president of the road. Soon after that, Mr. Coffin began to re-



ceive letters addressed to the President of the Underground Railroad.

A story of Mr. Coffin's appearance before the grand jury of Wayne county will help to explain how difficult it was to detect the work of this underground railroad. Mr. Coffin was summoned before the grand jury at Centerville, to answer for violating the fugitive slave law, although how a State grand jury could inquire about the violation of Federal statutes is hard to understand. When asked by the foreman if he knew of any cases of assault and battery or outbreaks near Newport, he answered that they were nearly all Quakers and were peaceable people. Then a prominent friend of slavery who was on the jury took up the questioning. He asked Mr. Coffin if he knew of any violation of the fugitive slave law in Newport. Mr. Coffin said persons often passed through his neighborhood who said they were slaves, but he did not know how true their statements were, as Indiana law did not presume that a slave could tell the truth. He then asked if Mr. Coffin was not guilty of hiring free colored people, who had not given bond and security as the law required. Mr. Coffin answered, "I presume I am guilty of violating that statute, for I am in the habit of hiring help whenever I need it and ask no questions." One of the jury asked if Mr. Coffin knew of any case in the county where the requirements of this law had been fulfilled, and it was shown that the law was a dead letter in southeastern Indiana. Then Dr. Way was called in and asked about the party of seventeen that had been at Newport and at whose place they had stopped. "At Levi Coffin's," was the answer of the doctor, and then told that he had helped to dress their wounds. He was asked, "Did you know they were slaves escaping from their masters?" The doctor answered, "We had no evidence, except their own statements. They said they were slaves from Kentucky, but their evidence is worthless in law in this State." This was the last legal proceedings in that section against anti-slavery people.

But, on the other hand, there was a rather notable proceeding brought by these Quakers against the slaveholders. The law of Indiana protected people from slavery if the master attempted to

live in Indiana. A slave could be taken through the State if the master did not make any purchases amounting to location. If he did locate, the slaves were free. A Dawes family from Maryland was traveling through Indiana to Missouri, and sickness compelled them to stop at Winchester. Being tanners, they found a tanyard in Winchester that could be bought at a great bargain. The terms agreed on were very satisfactory, but the thought occurred to them that if they located in Indiana they would lose their slaves, so they decided to go to Cincinnati and sell the slaves across the river, and then come back and close the contract. Before they started, however, they bought a lot of tanbark and furniture, which was, by Indiana law, location, and the moment they did so the slaves were free. The party started for the South and were followed to Newport by Dr. Hyatt, from Winchester, who told the story to a crowd at Newport. This group went to 'Squire Curtis and Mr. Coffin swore out a kidnaping warrant, which was given to Constable John Hunt to serve. The constable summoned a posse of ten and started in pursuit. At midnight the men of the party were arrested near the Ohio line and were brought back to Newport. As the minimum penalty for kidnaping was \$500 fine and two years in the penitentiary, the slaveholders were quite willing to make out papers of emancipation and avoid trouble for their unwitting offense.

As Dr. Hough so well says, there are many unnamed anti-slavery heroes of Newport, and these need considerable place in a paper of this size. Eli Osborn was quite celebrated by one little incident of the raid before mentioned, when the free negroes and the slave-hunters came so near to exchanging shots. One of the Southerners told Osborn that he would fight him a single combat, but he told the man that he was a man of peace, but if he would get down off his horse he would play him a game of marbles. This story was repeated to me by Linden Osborn, his son. This son, who was one of the conductors of the railroad, told me a number of interesting stories of his trips. He is the only man living in Newport that actually took a share in the work of helping runaways. He is a man past eighty years of age, very deaf,

but his eyes still kindle with fire when the stirring days are recalled to him.

Major M. M. Lacey, of Newport, is another man who remembers personally of these times. The following story is told in the major's own words: "In about 1843, when a very small boy, I was playing in the barn, and by chance jumped from a high beam down in the mow of hay. The result was astonishing, as I sank until almost covered up, and it was equally astonishing to others, for no sooner had I landed than I found myself mixed up in a squirming mass of something very much alive. The hay seemed alive with shining eyes and black faces. The interview was very short and contained no apologies from either side. The first thing was to tell mother, who told me for the first time the story of slavery. She told me that under no circumstances must I tell any one what I had seen, and it was well that such a command was made, for the same day, while playing along the road, three strange men came riding by and they asked me if I knew a man by the name of Levi Coffin. Of course they knew all about him, and after many other questions, asked me if I knew where any strange negroes were hid. I must have answered them in a hesitating way, and one of the men pressed me closely in questions, and finally pulled out a roll of bills and offered me \$100 if I would tell him where any negro was hid. I was only eight years old and much frightened, but at least kept the faith."

Thus not even from children could knowledge of this mysterious railroad be secured.

There was an organization of young men who obligated themselves for certain duties in the aid of the colored people. Sometimes they would hire speakers, sometimes they would do scout duty. One duty which required steadfastness of purpose was to take turns in riding to the negro settlement beyond Spartansburg to teach in the Sabbath school. Such young men as Moses Hough, Daniel Hill, Thomas Woodard, Calvin Thomas and others carried on this kind of work.

One of the most prominent workers was Pusey Graves. He was an earnest, brilliant man, and spent his life in the fight against slavery. He was a candidate for Congress on the Liberty

ticket in 1844, at the time James G. Birney ran for the presidency. He made a very thorough canvass in a then hopeless cause, and was often greeted with abuse and stale eggs. He often traveled with an eloquent negro by the name of Lester, and the two made many speeches together. The Richmond Palladium in 1844 had several accounts of his speeches, but always mentioned them in terms of contempt.

Further claim to honor is made by the Quakers of old Newport for some of their numbers in connection with the candidacy of Henry Clay in 1844. Henry Clay was to appear in Richmond in the fall of 1842 and try to swing Indiana into the Whig column. The Quakers of the New Garden church, near Newport, headed a petition to Mr. Clay, asking him to show his attitude on the slavery question by emancipating his slaves. Over two thousand names were secured in this petition, and then the trouble was to present the petition. The Whigs, wishing to prevent the presentation of the petition, refused to allow the Abolitionists to see Mr. Clay until he appeared on the platform in the afternoon. Then the managers asked for any petitions that might be ready to present to Mr. Clay. One powerful Quaker by the name of Hiram Mendenhall struggled to the platform carrying a petition. He was bloody and bruised by the mob-like actions of the crowd, but presented the petition, which Mr. Clay refused to take, although it was read to him by one of the men on the platform. Mr. Clay made answer: "Go home, go home, mind your affairs of the North, and we of the South will attend to ours!" [For a full account of this episode see this magazine, Vol. IV, No. 3, pp. 117-128.] The report of this was carried to the Abolitionists in the East and was one more cause for the large vote of Birney in that campaign. The vote of Birney in New York State was large enough to draw strength from Mr. Clay, and thus elect Mr. Polk. Many men say that this happening was the cause of Mr. Clay's defeat. However, this may be far-fetched, and it is probable that this assertion should be placed along with those other assertions, such as the length of Cleopatra's nose, or the heavy dew on the morning of the battle of Waterloo. But the incident at least had a bearing on this most important campaign, and it is of note that

one New York paper, in commenting on the election, said, "We are at home, Mr. Clay."

The free negroes should not be passed with mere mention, as they were decidedly active in the cause. They were not trusted fully by the Friends on account of some well-known infirmities of character, but did their best for the cause. Their settlements at Cabin Creek and Spartansburg were often searched by slave-hunters without the formality of a search warrant. The most famous of all these free negroes was Lewis Talbert, who made many trips South to pilot to Canada his less fortunate brothers. He led away more than \$40,000 worth of property. At one time he attended school at the Union Literary Seminary, of Greenville, Ohio. While here a group of Kentuckians came to Richmond in hunt of him. This news was carried to Newport and from there a ride was made on a stormy night to Greenville, and Talbert again made his escape. Finally he was captured, escaped and was never heard of again, probably being captured and killed by his captors, who wished to make an example of him.

Quite an honor roll might be given, besides the numerous names already mentioned, of those who took a place in these exciting times, but their names would not be of particular interest here. But their deeds live after them, and much credit must be given the unnamed heroes who endured trials and hardships that they might aid the oppressed. Their names should be placed on the honored rolls of those who stood true in the cause of human liberty.

Now the exciting days of slave hunts are passed and gone, and this one time Quaker town, the Union Station of the Underground Railroad, before that road disbanded through lack of passengers, once the most hated town throughout the South, has gone to sleep to dream over the noble lives and adventures of her past, which make her one of the most historic towns in Indiana.