

# Levi Coffin and the Underground Railroad

BY L. MAREN WOOD



Figure 1. This 1891 painting shows Levi and Catherine Coffin helping fugitive slaves to safety. Painted by Charles Webber, a friend of the Coffins, it shows the Underground Railroad and the work of abolitionists as far more romantic than it really was. Why might northern whites have wanted to remember the Underground Railroad in this way?

The Underground Railroad was an informal connection of people and homes across the United States that helped fugitive slaves — slaves who had escaped plantations in the South — reach safety in the North, Canada, and to a lesser extent Mexico and the Caribbean. It was not an actual railroad but a series of paths that slaves followed from one home to another. In keeping with the idea of a railroad, though, the people who helped the fugitive slaves were called “conductors” or “station masters” and their homes were referred to as “stations” or “depots.” Station masters provided slaves with food, clothing, and a place to rest. Sometimes a conductor accompanied the fugitive slave, but most often the station master simply provided the fugitive with directions to the next station.

Although very few men and women succeeded in escaping slavery, those who did — and the men and women who helped them — have captured the imagination of Americans ever since.

## Fugitives, slave hunters, and abolitionists

African Americans in slavery had always struggled to be free. Before the Revolution, when all of the colonies permitted slavery, most fugitive slaves hid in communities located in swamps, forests, or mountains. Beginning in the 1770s, northern states abolished slavery, and by the 1830s, slavery was illegal throughout the North and in the British colonies of Canada. By 1810, slaves from the South who reached the North, particularly in the cities of New York, Boston, and Philadelphia, could live as free men and women.

At the same time, federal law had always required free people to return fugitive slaves to their owners. The 1793 Fugitive Slave Act made it a federal crime for any free person to assist a fugitive slave. Slave hunters hired by masters or working in hope of rewards tracked down fugitives and returned them to the South. But many northern states passed laws that overrode or undermined the federal law. They prevented marshals from arresting slaves, and they required that any captured fugitive must have a trial before a jury to determine whether he or she was truly a slave. Northern juries often sided with fugitive slaves regardless of the evidence, effectively granting them emancipation.

Some free people in both the North and the South helped slaves escape to the free states. By the 1830s, an abolitionist movement was growing in the North. Men and women who opposed slavery formed societies to raise public awareness of the brutalities of slavery, publishing newspapers and pamphlets, making speeches, and petitioning Congress to abolish slavery. While most abolitionist societies were in the North, a minority of Southerners also believed that slavery was wrong and formed abolitionist societies in their communities.

In this atmosphere, the Underground Railroad was born. Although many people opposed slavery, only a relative handful were devoted enough to the cause to help fugitive slaves escape their masters. But the abolitionist movement helped to create an environment in the North where fugitive slaves could live as free people.



Figure 2. This map shows some of the many routes taken by fugitive slaves on the Underground Railroad.

## Sectional tension and the Fugitive Slave Act

As the abolition movement grew, though, so did slaveholders' anger at what they saw as northern attempts to undermine their property rights. Southern states outlawed abolitionist societies and banned their publications. As part of the Compromise of 1850<sup>1</sup>, the Fugitive Slave Act was toughened. People who harbored fugitives could be fined or imprisoned. Fugitive slaves were denied all rights under the law; if captured, they were returned immediately to slavery. Thousands of African Americans who had been living as free persons in the North were suddenly at risk of being captured and returned to slavery in the South. In the South, but also in parts of the North where people were sympathetic to

slavery, participants in the Underground Railroad faced mob violence if they were found out.

In most of the North, though, the Fugitive Slave Act backfired. Riots broke out in Boston and Philadelphia when slave hunters arrived and attempted to take runaways, and often free men and women as well, back to the South. Northerners who had turned a blind eye to the realities of slavery now saw them playing out in their own communities. Instead of assuring that more fugitive slaves were returned to southern masters, the 1850 Fugitive Slave Act rallied more northerners and sympathetic southerners to the cause of fugitive slaves. Despite the risks, more people were now willing to assist fugitive slaves and find them safe passage to Canada, where they would be beyond the reach of federal marshals and slave hunters.

Because of the risks, participants kept their activities secret, and almost no one kept records. No single person knew all of the participants; each station master knew only where the next station was, who lived there, and whether there were any other stations in the area. Slaves learned of the Underground Railroad through their own informal networks — from someone they knew who had escaped slavery or from someone who had tried to escape but failed, or through second-hand accounts of people in their neighborhood who might help them to freedom. Because of its informal and secret nature, much about the Underground Railroad is still unknown to historians. Most of what we know comes from stories told after the Civil War, when former slaves were finally safe.

## Levi Coffin



Figure 3. Levi Coffin's house in Fountain City (formerly Newport), Indiana, is now a state historic site.

One North Carolinian, Levi Coffin, dedicated his life to helping enslaved men and women escape slavery. He and his wife Catherine claimed to have helped some 3,000 men and women flee slavery. Because of his efforts, Coffin became known as “the President of the Underground Railroad.”

Levi Coffin was born in New Garden, in Guilford County near present-day Greensboro. His family were members of the Society of Friends (Quakers), who opposed slavery. As a child, Coffin was taught that slavery was wrong, and because he lived in North Carolina, he had many opportunities to see the brutalities of slavery at work. As a young man, Coffin had the opportunity to assist fugitive slaves.

In 1826, frustrated by life in a slave state, Coffin and his wife Catherine left North Carolina and moved to Newport, Indiana (now Fountain City). Indiana was a free state, and Newport was home to a number of Friends as well as fugitive slaves. Newport was also bustling town at the intersection of several main roads. The town's centrality and the fact that it was peopled by blacks and whites who opposed slavery made it a key location for men and women fleeing slavery. In his autobiography, Coffin wrote that a new fugitive slave came to his home almost every week.

In 1847, the Coffins moved to Cincinnati and opened up a warehouse so that he could sell goods made by free laborers, not by slaves. In Cincinnati, Coffin continued his efforts to help fugitive slaves. After the Civil War, Coffin helped raise money in Europe and the American North to help African Americans establish business and farms after their emancipation. He died in Cincinnati in 1877.

Many other men and women also worked tirelessly to help fugitive slaves, and some historians argue that Levi Coffin exaggerated his accomplishments and that his fame was not entirely deserved. William Still, a free black man in New Jersey, earned a similar title — “Father of the Underground Railroad” — and in his own autobiography, praised the courage of the fugitives themselves, who risked far more than the white abolitionists who helped them.

## A story of the Underground Railroad

In his autobiography, published after the Civil War, Levi Coffin wrote of his work in helping fugitive slaves. He also told how he first became involved in helping slaves escape to freedom. In this excerpt from his autobiography, Coffin tells the story of two fugitive slaves, Jack Barnes and Sam, and how his efforts to help them established the model of the Underground Railroad.

- Read the excerpt<sup>2</sup> from Levi Coffin’s memoirs

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### On the web

#### William Still

<http://www.undergroundrr.com/foundation/about.htm>

A short biography of William Still, a New Jersey abolitionist known as the “Father of the Underground Railroad.”

#### American abolitionists

<http://www.sog.unc.edu/programs/civiced/resources/docs/Abolitionists.pdf>

Through decades of strife, and often at the risk of their lives, brave people joined forces as anti-slavery activists and fought for justice despite powerful opposition. In this lesson from the North Carolina Civic Education Consortium, students will explore the American abolitionist movement through reading, discussion, and analyzing various primary source documents.

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### Notes

1. See <http://www.learnnc.org/lp/pages/5329>.
2. See <http://www.learnnc.org/lp/editions/levi-coffin/>.

## About the author

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The Underground Railroad, painted by Charles T. Webber, 1891. This image is believed to be in the public domain. Users are advised to make their own copyright assessment.

### Figure 2 (page 2)

Image from <http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Undergroundrailroadsmall2.jpg>. This image is believed to be in the public domain. Users are advised to make their own copyright assessment.

### Figure 3 (page 3)

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