



A dimly lit basement with a blue cabinet, a large black pot on a wooden stump, and a stone wall.

UNVEILING THE UNDERGROUND RAILROAD

Indiana's cog
in the secret
network that
helped slaves to
freedom

The basement at the Levi Coffin House in Fountain City was said to be a safe haven for hundreds of fugitive slaves on their journey to Canada. A member of a tour group listens to tales of the Underground Railroad before entering.

By Nick Werner, OI staff

Photography by Frank Oliver, OI staff

William Bush arrived in Indiana in a wooden box shipped from North Carolina.

That's one version of his escape from slavery, says his great-great granddaughter, Eileen Baker-Wall. The story goes that abolitionist Levi Coffin received the box at his Wayne County home and gave its cargo the surname "Bush" because of the beard that grew on William's face during transit.

Another version says Bush paid a barge worker \$75 for passage up the Mississippi River from the state of Mississippi.

Census records say Bush arrived in Newport, now called Fountain City, between 1840 and 1850. He was born around 1800. His slave name was McKis-sick or McKenzie.

"It's not like *ancestry.com*," Baker-Wall said. "Nobody wrote anything down."

Bush found freedom through the Underground Railroad. He kept secrets about his past to avoid recapture. Few details are certain except that Bush became a successful blacksmith and lay veterinarian, and wore wooden shoes in his shop to protect his feet.

Those shoes, the only known artifact from Bush's life, are displayed at the Levi Coffin House in Fountain City. The house is one of Indiana's best-known historic sites and is a National Historic Landmark. The two-story, Federal-style brick home was built in 1839. It's called the "Grand Central Station" of the Underground Railroad. Coffin, who operated the safe house with his wife, Catharine, claimed to be the railroad "president."

While elements of the Underground Railroad and its passengers remain a mystery, the once-secret network is no longer underground.

The Coffin House is one example of many opportunities Hoosiers have to learn about Indiana's Underground Railroad heroes, from "passengers" such as Bush who risked their lives for freedom, to "conductors" such as the Coffins who offered assistance. Communities from the Ohio River to Lake Michigan keep the history alive by promoting driving tours, maintaining and preserving historic sites, planting roadside historical markers, encouraging research and developing interpretive programs.

The DNR is involved, too.

Eileen Baker-Wall holds wooden shoes that belonged to her great-great grandfather, a slave who found freedom through the Underground Railroad. Baker-Wall volunteers at the home of Levi Coffin, the person in the painting.





“PEOPLE ROMANTICIZE THE UNDERGROUND RAILROAD. BUT IT WAS NOT ROMANTIC. IT WAS BRUTAL AND SCARY.”

—Jeannie Regan-Dinius, DNR

In 1999, the agency’s Division of Historic Preservation & Archaeology (DHPA) helped establish the Indiana Freedom Trails (IFT), a statewide volunteer organization that is documenting the state’s Underground Railroad activity. The DHPA’s website also offers a list of Underground Railroad sites and other resources.

As the Underground Railroad receives more attention, its inspiring and heartbreaking secrets unravel.

HOOSIERS’ ROLE

In 1842, James L. Thompson was helping two runaway slaves from Kentucky named Lishe and Lige. Bounty hunters found him around the Muscatatuck River in southern Indiana.

Thompson and his wife Sally led the Underground Railroad in Washington County.

One bounty hunter knocked the abolitionist to the ground with a pistol and threatened to kill him. Thompson replied, “Shoot if thee wants to; I have but one time to die and if thee feels thee can afford to be the cause of that death, fire away.”

The men spared Thompson but returned the slaves to Kentucky. Lishe escaped again and found freedom.

Such accounts fascinate Jeannie Regan-Dinius, the social historian in DHPA who leads DNR efforts to understand and promote Indiana’s Underground Railroad history. She gives about 30 presentations every year on the subject.

“We’ve had gun battles and shootouts and kidnappings and riots,” Regan-Dinius said.

The Underground Railroad was not a railroad, a road, or even a specific route. Nor was it underground in the literal sense. The Underground Railroad did not involve building tunnels or secret passages. It was a constantly changing network of people, not paths.

“It’s people helping people,” Regan-Dinius said. “It’s not just the hidey holes and things like that. People gave food and clothes and medical care.”

For a lot of involved Hoosiers, there was little planning. A person in need appeared, and they decided to help, on the spot. Although there are legends about secret compartments being specially constructed in houses, there was no time to do so.

The network involved whites and blacks. Some whites, such as Coffin, morally opposed slavery. Other whites were ambivalent about the morality issue but participated because they thought slave labor gave the South an unfair economic advantage over the North.

Historians have documented Underground Railroad activity in every Indiana county, according to Regan-Dinius.

Quaker settlements in Wayne, Randolph and Henry counties were heavily involved. Conductors existed in many denominations, including African Methodist Episcopalian (AME), Presbyterian, Unitarian and Congregationalist.

The Underground Railroad was most active from about 1830 to 1865. The earliest known record of its activity in Indiana dates to 1824, although Regan-Dinius says it undoubtedly existed before.

Slaves entered Indiana by crossing the Ohio River, usually by swimming or by boat. When the river was frozen, slaves walked across.

Some escaped slaves settled in Indiana, despite facing hostility. State law forbade blacks from voting or attending public schools. An 1831 law required black settlers to register with county authorities and post a \$500 bond to ensure good behavior.

Conditions for blacks in Indiana and other free states worsened with the passage of the federal Fugitive Slave Act in 1850. The law required every citizen to detain any black person assumed to be a slave.

One consequence of the law was that fewer escaped slaves settled in Indiana. Instead, the state became a thoroughfare to Canada. Unfortunately, few made it there.

“People romanticize the Underground Railroad,” Regan-Dinius said. “But it was not romantic. It was brutal and scary. More slaves were caught than ever made it. I’ve seen estimations that more than three-quarters of the people who tried to leave came back. They were beaten. They were branded as runaways and sold someplace else. Sometimes their legs or feet were broken.”

OHIO RIVER HEROICS

Elijah Anderson didn’t wait on slaves to show up.

Anderson, a free black man, lived in the Georgetown neighborhood of Madison. The city’s location near a shallow section of the Ohio River made it an ideal crossing point. New Albany and Evansville were also crossing points.

With almost 300 black residents in the 1800s, Georgetown became an Underground Railroad hotbed. Anderson was one of several Georgetown conductors, including George DeBaptiste and William J. Anderson (no relation). Another well-known black conductor, Chapman Harris, lived in the nearby countryside.



(Top) Eleutherian College, founded in 1848 near Lancaster, was the first college in Indiana to accept students regardless of race or gender. Eleutherian is Greek for liberty. (Bottom) Legend says slaves would take refuge in this cave along Big Creek, just north of Lancaster and Eleutherian College, as they went north. Today the partially collapsed cave is difficult to find.



“I FALL IN LOVE WITH THIS BUILDING EVERY TIME I COME OUT HERE.”

—David Harden, president, Historic Eleutherian College Board

At night, Anderson led missions into Kentucky to free slaves. His notoriety grew, and slaveholders offered a \$1,000 bounty for his capture. He was arrested in Kentucky in 1856. He died mysteriously in prison in 1861.

Anderson's home still stands. It is a two-story brick row house on Walnut Street. Unlike Coffin's house, Anderson's is inhabited. It is closed to the public.

Several whites in the area also were involved in the anti-slavery and Underground Railroad efforts, forming the Neil's Creek Anti-Slavery Society, based out of Lancaster, north of Madison.

In 1848, the society founded Eleutherian College, a National Historic Landmark. It was the first college in Indiana—and the second in the country after Oberlin College in Ohio—to accept students regardless of race or gender.

The hilltop college exists today, a three-story limestone building with a massive first-floor meeting hall and upper-level classrooms. A dormitory burned in the 1800s, according to David Harden, president of the non-profit Historic Eleutherian College Board.

The board owns the college and is restoring it with help from the DHPA and the Jeffris Family Foundation.

“Eleutherian is Greek for liberty,” Harden said.

Enrollment peaked at about 200 students, and about 10 percent were black, Harden said. It is unclear how many of the black students were born free and how many had escaped slavery.

Eleutherian was not a college in the modern sense because it also offered a primary and secondary school. It became a public school in the 1880s and lasted until the 1930s. The building has been empty since.

The college is on a narrow county road surrounded by hilly fields of tobacco and corn. It hosts about six public events each year, from concerts to art exhibits to presentations on slavery and civil rights. Harden led a tour last summer.

In a second-floor classroom, an illegible signature scrawled into a doorframe is dated “1858.”

“I fall in love with this building every time I come out here,” Harden said.

Some members of the Neil's Creek Anti-Slavery Society were also Underground Railroad conductors, including the Hoyt and Tibbets families.

Megan Brown grew up in Lancaster. It wasn't until she returned in 2000 to take care of her mother that she realized the old home she grew up in—once owned by anti-slavery activist Samuel Tibbets—was a safe house.

“I love it,” she said. “I just wish more people knew it.”

The Indiana Historical Bureau dedicated a roadside historical marker at the property in 2006.

The Tibbets home is one of seven sites in Lancaster and Madison that are part of the National Underground Railroad Network to Freedom Program, a National Parks initiative aimed at preserving, interpreting and commemorating Underground Railroad history.

The Georgetown neighborhood became the first Network to Freedom District, allowing for the work of the community to be recognized.

The Coffin House is also part of the Network to Freedom, as are sites in Greensburg and North Vernon. Indiana has 24 sites or programs listed in the Network to Freedom.

Lancaster is also one of three “gateway sites” on the Southeast Indiana Trails to Freedom driving tours, produced by the Indiana Underground Railroad Coalition in cooperation with the Indiana Office of Tourism Development. The tours start along the Ohio River and move inward, visiting historic sites along the way.

NOT JUST THE QUAKERS

Bethel AME is the oldest predominantly black church in the Crawfordsville area. The sanctuary, a one-story, wood-framed structure, dates to 1892. The original church, from 1847, serves as a classroom and meeting area off the back of the sanctuary.

Under that 1847 section is a cellar. Church members believe slaves hid there, although no concrete evidence has been found.

The John Allen Speed log cabin was another suspected Underground Railroad site in Crawfordsville.

Speed, a Scottish settler, was an early supporter of Bethel AME, encouraging members to build the church next to his cabin. In 1990 the Speed Cabin was reconstructed a few blocks southeast of its original location, on the grounds of Lane Place, a 19th century mansion that serves as headquarters for the Montgomery County Historical Society.

These days, Bethel AME has a racially diverse congregation of about 20.

Member Vicke Hudson-Swisher's family has attended since at least 1924, when her grandmother joined at age 17. Hudson-Swisher is the church's historian. Some of her ancestors came to Indiana through the Underground Railroad.

“Our church history is so rich,” Hudson-Swisher said. “It's indescribable.”



(Top) Bethel AME church in Crawfordsville was founded in the middle 1800s and is rich in history and involvement with the Underground Railroad. Today its racially diverse congregation numbers about 20. (Bottom) Rev. Mindy Mayes leads a Sunday service at Bethel AME church. Some of the historic structure is in disrepair. The church has received a grant from Indiana Landmarks to help with the cost of upkeep.



“THERE WAS SOMETHING THAT CAME BEFORE YOU, AND IT’S NOT DEAD. IT’S STILL IN YOU.”

—Rev. Mindy Mayes, Bethel AME

The church preserves that history, even though its membership is small and money is scarce. It received a grant from Indiana Landmarks to address problems with the building. Another Crawfordsville church, First Christian, has partnered with Bethel AME to provide volunteer labor to paint and repair the roof and siding.

AME congregations across Indiana served as Underground Railroad stations.

Indiana is home to 46 AME churches. And, according to Rev. Mindy Mayes of Bethel AME, about half are old enough to be considered historic. Bethel AME in Crawfordsville is one of at least six AME churches in Indiana on the National Register of Historic Places. The others are in Terre Haute, Richmond, Indianapolis, Attica and Madison. The Attica and Madison churches no longer have congregations.

The Madison Church is owned by Historic Madison, Inc. The organization has returned the church to its historic appearance. It now hosts African-American history programs.

Bethel AME in Indianapolis was known as the “Indianapolis Station.” The original building burned in 1862. The fire is believed to have been set by slavery supporters. The second church, built in 1867, is still used.

Services at Bethel AME probably haven’t changed much in almost 170 years. The message of love and charity is the same; the church sings traditional hymns, mostly without instruments; lighting is provided by the large windows; visitors are welcome.

On a November morning with light snow falling outside, Mayes delivered a fitting sermon for a church with deep ties to the past. She drew from scripture about Lois and Eunice, the grandmother and mother of the early Christian leader Timothy. The sermon touched on the theme of respecting your heritage while welcoming the future.

“There was something that came before you, and it’s not dead,” she said. “It’s still in you.”

A SENSE OF PRIDE

Baker-Wall became curious about what came before her as a high school student in Richmond. With encouragement from a teacher, she began to ask about her family’s past.

Immediate family members discouraged her from digging into their slave history. A great-aunt, however, answered many of Baker-Wall’s questions and even gave her Bush’s wooden shoes.

The shoes surprised Janice McGuire, president of

the Levi Coffin House Association, when she first held them. The association owns and operates the Levi Coffin House.

“I thought they would be rough and splintery,” she said. “But they’re not.”

The shoes represent freedom from slavery as well as any other vestige from that time. In those shoes, Bush was free to work on his own terms, to finally reap the rewards of his labor, and to build a better life.

A modern headstone at Bush’s gravesite identifies the man as a “Slave” who “Assisted Levi Coffin with the slaves flight from bondage to freedom.” Baker-Wall said the men’s relationship is unclear but it’s plausible they were close friends.

“I hope they were,” she said.

The Coffins left Newport in 1848 for Cincinnati. They are estimated to have helped 2,000 slaves during their two decades in Indiana. In his memoir, “The Reminiscences of Levi Coffin,” published in 1876, Coffin described a night when 17 slaves were in the house.

Most slaves probably stayed in the comfortable basement kitchen. But when necessary, Coffin hid his guests in the attic and in a cubbyhole in his bedroom.

McGuire said Coffin operated with relative impunity, confident that God and his Quaker neighbors would protect him.

“Threats were made against his life,” McGuire said. “Threats were made to burn his house down. But he felt he was doing God’s work and that the good Lord would watch over him.”

Bush went on to father 11 children and own land before dying in 1898.

“He was quite old,” Baker-Wall said.

Wayne County marked the end of the line for his trip on the Underground Railroad, and five generations of his descendants have made their home there.

Baker-Wall retired from a career in education a few years ago and began volunteering at the Coffin House as a docent.

“Today I have a real sense of pride,” Baker-Wall said. “It would have been precarious for him to stay here because the Fugitive Slave Law would have been in force. I would have gone to Canada.”

If you visit the Coffin House, you might get to hear Baker-Wall tell her family’s history in person.

Explore the Underground Railroad. Appreciate its heroes. And be grateful you don’t have to travel it inside a dark box. ■



(Top) Tourists leave the historic Levi Coffin House in Fountain City. When necessary, Coffin hid escaped slaves in the attic and in a cubbyhole in his bedroom. (Bottom) The Levi Coffin House is full of beautiful historic furniture and history. The site is open June through October. Group tours may be scheduled during the off-season based on availability of guides.





WAS THERE SLAVERY IN INDIANA?

Indiana was a free state, right?
Sort of.

Indiana was part of the Northwest Territory. The law that established the territory in 1787 prohibited the expansion of slavery. It did not, however, free slaves of people who had been Indiana residents before 1787.

“I can tell you, there were slaves all over the place,” said Jeannie Regan-Dinius, a social historian for the DNR Division of Historic Preservation & Archaeology.

In 1805 the Indiana Territory House of Representatives circumvented the 1787 law by saying slaves could be brought into Indiana as indentured servants. Blacks either agreed to the indenture contract or were taken back South and re-sold.

When Indiana reached statehood in 1816, the state’s constitution banned slavery. Furthermore, Indiana State Supreme Court rulings in the 1820s outlawed indentured servitude.

Nonetheless, farmers in southern Indiana continued a tradition of renting Kentucky slaves to work their fields. The Hoosier farmers paid the Kentucky slaveholders, and the slaves never saw a penny.

“That’s slavery,” Regan-Dinius said. ■

Learn more at dnr.IN.gov/historic/2798.htm, IndianaFreedomTrails.org, nps.gov/subjects/ugrr/index.htm, IndianaMuseum.org/explore/levi-coffin-house and jchshc.org



The John Speed Cabin is now located on the grounds of the Montgomery County Historical Society in Crawfordsville.

