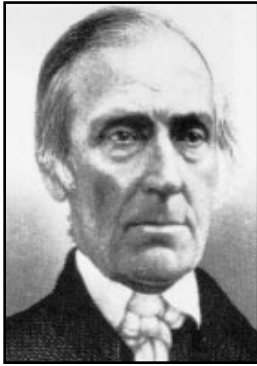


# WABASH VALLEY

P R O F I L E S

A series of tributes to hometown people and events that have shaped our history.

## Levi Coffin



**P**roclaimed the unofficial “president” of the Underground Railroad, Levi Coffin has secured a permanent niche in Indiana history. However, nearly all Hoosier historians overlook Coffin’s important, if brief, Vigo County residency.

Born Oct. 28, 1798, in New Garden, N.C., Coffin was raised a Quaker. In the summer of 1822, he aided his future brother-in-law Benjamin White and the White family in their relocation to Wayne County, Ind. Coffin stayed in Richmond to teach school through March 1823. Then, carrying gold and silver coins, he embarked on a hazardous journey by horseback to explore western Indiana and visit other Quakers from North Carolina who had settled near Mooresville and on Turman Creek in Sullivan County. Levi bought 80 acres in Morgan County and survived a ferocious storm near Greencastle before reaching Terre Haute, where he deposited his money with Ambrose Whitlock and Williamson Dunn at the U.S. Land Office.

En route to Sullivan, Coffin encountered Moses Hoggatt at the Quaker settlement seven miles south of Terre Haute. Introduced to elder William Durham, Coffin was urged to remain and start a school. In less than two days, Durham and Coffin had secured enough eager subscribers to make the venture worthwhile. The Quaker school was an instant success. Many children could not attend classes during the farming season, so Coffin founded the first organized Sunday school in Vigo County at the Honey Creek Quaker Meeting House. Children from all denominations were welcome. It, too, was well attended.

Coffin departed Honey Creek in September 1823 to return to North Carolina. On Oct. 28, 1824, he wed Catharine White and, with their first child Jesse, settled in Wayne County, Ind., in 1826. Levi built a modest home in what is now known as Fountain City (then called Newport), manufactured linseed oil and sold pork. The enterprises were very successful. During the ensuing 13 years, the Coffins erected three more homes in Newport, each larger than the preceding one. Between 1827 and 1847 they aided at least 2,000 fleeing slaves in their quests for freedom. Harriet Beecher Stowe’s *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* is founded upon the Coffins’ momentous endeavors. By 1840, the fourth Coffin home — built in 1839 — was known as “Grand Central Station” of the Underground Railroad. It is now a museum and state historic site.

The Coffins resumed clandestine anti-slavery activities after moving to Cincinnati in 1847. The alliances Levi established in western Indiana endured. Vigo County Quakers were instrumental in aiding fugitive slaves during the antebellum. Before his death Sept. 16, 1877, in Cincinnati, Levi published *Reminiscences*, reflections upon his childhood, his residency in Vigo County and his long devotion to human rights. This week area residents celebrate the fight for civil rights in the United States in conjunction with the observance of Martin Luther King Jr.’s birthday.

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