

The Underground Railroad in Hendricks County

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All students of the slavery controversy between the states know something of the workings of the Underground Railroad. Only a few know that Hendricks County, Indiana, had any particular part in this very interesting work of aiding Negroes to escape to Canada. Practically all of these activities took place in the decade preceding the Civil War, and many of those who took part in this work did not care to talk about it, even in later years.

There was trouble over the rescue of slaves by their masters for many years. Then, in 1850, Congress passed the famous amendment to the Fugitive Slave Law. Under this measure, any citizen was obliged, if requested, to join in the capture of fugitive slaves. Those who believed in helping to free run-away slaves were called abolitionists. The feeling between these and slave owners had been aggravated by slave-dealers kidnapping free negroes and selling them. People who were conscientiously opposed to slavery were very much concerned about such happenings, and, of course, they did not want to help in recapturing slaves.

Before 1850, there had been little organized opposition to slavery in the north. One direct result of the new federal regulations in regard to fugitive slaves was the organization of the Anti-Slavery League. This was a secret organization, having money back of it, with which to employ men to promote ways for slaves to reach freedom. They laid out routes towards Canada and directed slaves along them. Though this was in direct opposition to federal law, many people were willing to take the risk for the cause which they believed to be right. Eastern abolition agents took the lead in organizing Underground Railroad routes as they came to be called. Most of the workers in this anti-slavery enterprise were stationed along the Ohio River to help slaves get started on friendly routes towards freedom. There were many routes from the Ohio northward, some of which were used more often than others, depending on conditions.¹

Some of the routes were variations of more important routes. Probably, two or three of the less frequently used routes passed through Hendricks County. It is probable that

¹ Logan Esarey, *History of Indiana* (Indianapolis, 1918), I, 625-628.

nearly all refugees passing through this County crossed the Ohio river below New Albany. The roads on the west side of the state seemed to converge at Niles, Michigan. One of the main routes went by way of Terre Haute, Bloomingdale and Lafayette. Another went by way of Brownstown, Bloomington, Westfield and Logansport. The west side of Hendricks County seems to have been supplied with refugees that came by way of Bloomingdale, or some other point along the same route. Those who passed through the east side of Hendricks County evidently came by way of Bloomington and Mooresville through Plainfield and then on north to Westfield. We do not know just where the Plainfield stations were. As this place has always been a strong settlement of Friends, there were probably several stations in the vicinity.

People who took part in this work were inclined to keep the information concealed, even after the trouble had passed into history. Only at two places in Hendricks County do we know just how the stations were equipped for concealing the refugees. In the *Reminiscence of Levi Coffin*, "Reputed President of the Underground Railroad," he gives in detail his work with runaway slaves at Cincinnati and near Richmond, Indiana. He explains how they were cared for and transported. Col. Cockrum in his *History of the Underground Railroad* tells stories of much the same kind in regard to the care of these unfortunates on his father's Pike County farm, and about helping them on their way northward.² He also relates interesting stories of how slaves were started on their road to freedom by agents working south of the Ohio river.

Near the little town of Hadley in Hendricks County, Addison Coffin, a relative of Levi Coffin, and Nathan Hadley helped in this work.³ Mr. Coffin was very active. He kept a station and acted as a conductor.⁴ W. B. Newlin of Pecksburg states that his father visited Addison Coffin just at the close of the Civil War, when he heard from him stories of the Underground Railroad.⁵

Probably the most used station in this county was what was known as "The White House," some three miles west of

² Col. William M. Cockrum, *A History of the Underground Railroad* (Oakland City, Indiana, 1915), 10-13; *ibid.*, map, 8.

³ *Danville Republican*, March 30, 1933. See for an article, "I Told You So."

⁴ *Directory of Hendricks County* (Danville, 1874), 199.

⁵ *Danville Republican*, March 30, 1933.

Danville.⁶ Mr. Coffin is said to have taken Mr. Newlin to this house in order to show him the secret hiding place. This house was built in 1852 by Charles Rice who came from Ohio. He selected a farm on a high ridge, partly covered with large sugar trees and other fine timber. The place selected for the house commands a view of the surrounding country for many miles north, east and south. The timber was mostly west and northwest of the house. The house still stands but is in very poor condition. It is built colonial style with both east and south fronts. At the time of its construction, it was presumed that what is now the St. Louis division of the "Big Four" Railroad would pass near by on the south of the house. For this reason, the house was built so that the south front would face the railroad.⁷ The east front faced the public highway. On this side of the house are two long rows of pine trees that can be seen for miles. The house is about two miles west of Danville.

It is possible that Mr. Rice wanted the house so placed that it could be seen by those coming from the south, particularly from the vicinity of Hadley, then called *Mimosa*. It is said that a light was kept burning at night in a window where it could be seen for a long way. The ell shaped house was built with the arms fifty and fifty-two feet. The rooms are twenty feet square. There is a hall and stairway in the center on the south side which is twelve feet wide. There is another stairway in the east wing. The upper floor is so arranged that there is no communication between the east and south wings. Mr. Rice always kept a number of negroes to work for him. The men were quartered in one upper wing and the women in the other. Extra negroes about the place would not have attracted much attention among the neighbors.

The west room on the main floor is the one that contained the secret closet where fleeing slaves were hidden. This large room had a fireplace in the west end that was built entirely within the outer wall of the house, but instead of the usual presses or closets on either side of the fireplace the west wall of the room was solid and the lines on either side just even with the fireplace. This made it appear to

⁶ Charles Rice bought eighty acres of Edward Strange and his wife Polly in 1862. The record gives the date of the deed as Jan. 30. On Sept. 1, 1862, Caleb M. Embree deeded another tract of land to Mr. Rice, but the "White House" was built on the eighty acres purchased of Mr. Strange and wife. See Hendricks County Deed Records, Book 16, p. 96, for description of the eighty acres and date of purchase.

⁷ Danville *Republican*, March 23, 1933.

one in the room, that the fireplace and chimney were built outside the outer wall. The spaces on either side of the fireplace were plastered on the outer side of the wall of the room to make them warm. There was left a room about three feet wide and twenty feet long only partly divided in the middle by the chimney of the fireplace. The only way to reach this long narrow partly divided room, it seems, was through a hole in the back of the fireplace where bricks could be easily removed when no fire was burning, then replaced after used as an entrance to the secret room. If those on guard feared a visit from searchers, a fire would be built to allay all suspicion.

There could have been a trap door into this secret room from the room above, but people who claim to have known the house years ago say there was no such entrance. Others who visited at this house as children in later years and played in this upper room do not know of any entrance to this space.

It is possible to picture the quiet of the house on a dark night, with a candle dimly burning in the window. Then there would be a stealthy knock at the door and a group of fleeing slaves, guided by Addison Coffin, or some of his friends, would be admitted. After a hurried conversation, the negroes would be told to crawl into the secret room and would be given food and maybe a candle for light. If there was danger of pursuit, a fire would be hastily built in the fireplace. After a day or two, perhaps, when the guests were rested and it was safe to proceed farther, they were invited to leave the hiding place and were outfitted with clothing and other necessities for further travel. Then, under the guidance of Mr. Rice, or some of his helpers, they were conducted to the next station.

The nearest station to the north that is known was on the farm of Thomas Burgess. This farm was later known as the Job Hadley farm. Mr. Burgess was the father of Tracy (Burgess) Hadley, wife of Job Hadley.⁸ Mr. Hadley, with many others of the same name were of the Quaker faith and belonged to the anti-slavery element. The members of the Burgess family were also Friends. The Hadleys came from North Carolina, but the Burgess family

⁸ *Indiana History Bulletin* (1924), Nos. 11-12, Vol. I. Thomas Burgess purchased the forty acres (part of Sec.15, Tp.17, R1W) on which the barn is located from Samuel Warwick on Feb. 5, 1853. Hendricks County Deed Records, Book 16, 143.

came from Virginia. Thomas Burgess owned one hundred acres of land lying mostly in a large swamp, known as "Seven Mile Prairie," in the northern part of Hendricks County, about three miles north and east of what is now Lizton. This town was then the village of *New Elizabeth*. In 1865 (and probably for some years before), Job Hadley owned 245 acres on the south and east of the Burgess land in the lowest part of the swamp.⁹ Mr. Hadley later owned all of this land. The first that is known of Mr. Hadley in this locality is when he came to survey the land.

An old lady once told the writer, that, when a girl in her early teens, she had heard people say they thought slaves were routed to this farm from Plainfield and other stations, on their way to Canada. This old lady lived near Lizton all her life.¹⁰

On this farm is an old frame barn which was built before the Civil War. It is much the same now that it was then, and in it fugitive slaves are supposed to have been hidden. This barn was built with a wooden floor in the driveway. There were stalls for the stock on either side. The hay from the mow was thrown down into the driveway for feeding. In the floor was a trap door to a cellar or basement that had no outside communication. Trash and hay hid this door except when in use, so a stranger would never notice it. In later years, this cellar was used as a storage room for potatoes and other things. Theodore Ogden, who lived on this farm in recent years, told the writer that he tore out the wooden floor and filled the cellar with dirt, as it had become unsafe. This barn is about three and a half miles northeast of Lizton and, therefore, about twelve miles from the "White House" built by Charles Rice. This secret barn-basement just described was situated quite like the basement in the Cockrum barn at Oakland City, Indiana, as described by Col. Wm. M. Cockrum.¹¹ The proof is not positive, but almost so, that this was the secret hiding place of one station of the Underground Railroad. Westfield and Russiaville were probably the next main stations, with perhaps two or three minor stations to be passed *en route* from the Cockrum Station, near Oakland City, to the station main-

⁹ Map of Hendricks County, 1865.

¹⁰ Mrs. Sara Leach Duzan who was born in 1847, and died in 1935.

¹¹ Cockrum, *op. cit.*, 19. See also 71, 81, 89, 137, 167, for references to the Cockrum barn-cellar.

tained on the old Rice farm northwest of Danville, Indiana.¹²

This is a chapter in local history of which little is now known, but about which much could have been learned if some interested persons had collected the data some thirty or forty years ago. This was an issue on which most people had very decided opinions. Those who were interested in helping the runaway slaves went into the work "heart and soul" and took many risks. It has ever been so when great moral issues have reached the crucial stage.

¹² Westfield is some twenty or more miles northeast of the Burgess place. It is located in the next Quaker settlement where a station of the Underground Railroad was located. Colonel Cockrum mentions none of the stations in Hendricks County, nor does he trace any route through this County. The stations in Hendricks County may have been used when other routes were inconvenient or when they were considered more dangerous. It was good policy to have secret routes that could be used instead of main routes to throw pursuers off the trail.