

The Underground Railroad in Indiana

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ABSTRACT: Stories about the Underground Railroad have been spun out of fact and fiction. Many individuals claimed to be a part of it because of the importance it gained after emancipation. Indiana too had its own story of its involvement in the Underground Railroad, which included individuals and groups of all sorts. Blacks and whites participated in it separately and together to aid fugitive slaves escaping the South in search of freedom in the North. The network of stations and routes which comprised the Underground Railroad in Indiana assisted those slaves who made it across the Ohio River on their way to safety and new life as free people.

*"Ho the car emancipation,
Moves majestic through the nation"*

-song from 1850s, Levering, Historic Indiana

A vast network of stations and routes, called the Underground Railroad, helped fugitive slaves escape to freedom after they traveled the most difficult part of their journey. People came together to develop this network for the specific purposes of helping fugitive slaves and of defying the law of the land. However, the Underground Railroad was not organized; instead, it was improvised by the people who offered their help to the fugitive slave. In Indiana, the people who helped came from all walks of life, from different races, from different classes, and from different sexes. They helped for many reasons, some reasons more selfish than others. Many blacks helped in the Underground Railroad because they felt a "duty" to help other members of their race, for they knew the dangers and hardships of slavery. Some whites, too, felt it their duty to help, but because of divine reasons. Individuals helped to provide clothing, concealment, food, and passage to the next station. The impact of the Underground Railroad on the communities that provided stations varied. Sometimes, it split the community into fractions; other times, it brought communities together.

BLACK INVOLVEMENT IN THE UNDERGROUND RAILROAD

In Indiana, many different kinds of people offered assistance to fugitive slaves. Both blacks and whites often worked together to help. In many accounts of the Underground Railroad, black

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assistance was said to be minimal; however, they had a huge hand in the operations that ran through Indiana. Blacks of all classes and sexes united to help fugitives. In general, working class blacks were more likely to participate directly in slave rescues and in protecting slaves, whereas middle class blacks raised funds for supplies and organized the works.¹ Black communities along the Ohio River were of special importance because they helped the fugitive slave gain the most ground. They made sure the slave crossed the river safely and sent word to other stations that some "cargo" (slaves were called this on the railroad to conceal their identity) was being sent to them. The station houses in these communities gave the fugitives shelter and food, and sometimes clothing, until the routes were safe to be sent north.²

The best known black activists in the Underground Railroad resided in Jefferson County, Indiana, around Madison, along the Ohio River. A preacher, Chapman Harris, was "utterly fearless" in helping fugitives because he was "large and powerfully built."³ Another leader in that community was Elijah Anderson. He used his cabin as a station for the Underground Railroad, and he went into Kentucky to rescue and help escaping slaves. However, soon after he started helping in Kentucky, he was apprehended during a trip and sentenced to a term in the state penitentiary at Frankfort (KY), where he died.⁴ Two other leaders from Madison, Henry Thornton and Griffith Booth, suffered attacks from pro-slavery mobs and groups. Eventually, Booth moved to Michigan, where he continued his work for the Underground Railroad.⁵ One of the most prominent black leaders of the Underground Railroad in Indiana was George Baptiste, also from Madison. Because of threats and mobs, he moved to Detroit, where he became a major figure in the connections there.⁶

Individuals were not the only ones that participated in aiding fugitive slaves. Many black organizations and groups helped develop and administer plans and schemes. In Portland, Indiana, the "Masonic lodge of coloreds" developed plans for aiding and concealing fugitives. They made sure that the next station was open which usually was Greenbrier, run by George Evans. Other black organizations, such as black churches, lent their support and aid to fugitive slaves by

1. Foner, Philip S. *History of Black Americans* (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1983), 510.

2. Thornbrough, Emma Lou. *The Negro in Indiana Before 1900* (Indiana Historical Bureau, 1957), 41.

3. Thornbrough, 41.

4. Thornbrough, 41, 42.

5. Thornbrough, 42.

6. Thornbrough, 42. Foner, 481.

collecting money for expenses or providing their homes as a stations.⁷ They saw their help both as obeying God and his preaching and as helping others of their own race.

Some blacks helped out in other capacities on the Underground Railroad. Black abolitionists, especially, made it very difficult for slave hunters and masters to recover their former property.⁸ They led many hunters and masters to obscure areas to fetch their property, or they played ignorant to the whereabouts of a fugitive slave. The black abolitionists concealed the fugitives so well that they could not be discovered by anyone, black or white, in the community. Other blacks, usually middle class and very literate, used their oratory skills in lectures across the state of Indiana to invite people to join the side of anti-slavery and to help in the Underground Railroad. Even these orators faced grave danger because they were sometimes beaten to death, arrested, and always threatened.⁹ Settled fugitive slaves also became part of the railroad; however, their contributions are often considered less than those of free blacks.¹⁰ They felt more of an obligation and a desire than other blacks to help those in the same position that they once were.

Black communities and settlements existed and grew up commonly along the routes of the Underground Railroad. Clarksburg, Rushville, Westfield, and Madison had large black communities which also constituted as large depots on the railroad to freedom. This connection of black communities with the Railroad suggested that "runaways tended to seek out members of their own race and that many of them [fugitive slaves] remained in Indiana, instead of pushing northward."¹¹ "Fugitives often passed through that place [Newport] and generally stopped among the colored people," Levi Coffin, a white abolitionist, testified in 1828, after he moved to Newport, Indiana.¹²

WHITE INVOLVEMENT IN THE UNDERGROUND RAILROAD

Whites in Indiana helped on the Underground Railroad for many reasons: some were benevolent, others were selfish. Motivated by benevolence, religious people and sincere abolitionists offered their assistance. Evidence of this concern for doing good was the abolitionists associated with the Society of Friends, or the Quakers. One of the best known Quaker agents of the railroad was Levi Coffin, who was a former Southerner. He moved to Indiana after he married and quickly became involved in anti-slavery issues, including Indiana's connections to the Underground Railroad. However, he wasn't alone in his task of helping fugitive slaves because he employed the help of many blacks, such as

William Bush, William Davidson, and James Benson, to assist him. Men and women of other religious backgrounds also aided in the railroad because they felt it was part of "obeying God's command to 'feed the hungry and clothe the naked.'"¹⁴ The women involved were of special importance because they often supplied the house to conceal the fugitives and fed and clothed them. They formed groups, or auxiliaries, that would sew all the clothing and bedding material in order to make the fugitive more comfortable at that particular station.¹⁵

Other whites participated in the Underground Railroad when they felt that their community in Indiana was being encroached upon by slave hunters and masters. After the passage of the Fugitive Slave Act of 1850, professional slave hunters increased their presence in southern Indiana.¹⁶ Not until citizens felt that their daily life was trampled on did they become concerned with this act and the Underground Railroad. Before then, many white, southern Hoosiers felt indifference toward slavery as long as it was restricted to the South. However, the hunters aroused whites to help in the anti-slavery movement because the slave hunters' work showed little of the "so-called patriarchal and dignified aspect of slavery."¹⁷ These particular whites helped fugitive slaves only to spite the slave hunters and the masters who tore their community apart looking for their property.

DUTIES IN THE UNDERGROUND

Those who aided the Underground Railroad performed many duties, depending on their involvement. The conductors were responsible for getting the fugitive slaves to the next station or for rescuing them by going south, as Harriet Tubman and others did. They arranged transportation for the fugitive(s) by boat, railcar, wagon, foot, or horse. Once the fugitive slave was at a station, the station master(s) made hiding spaces in barns, cellars, houses, and crawlspaces to conceal and shelter the slave. They also cooked food for and fed the fugitive slaves. The station master and his wife provided clothing and protection for them until they could be transported to the next station, usually ten to thirty miles away.¹⁸ One white station master described the scene of receiving fugitive slaves:

Negroes came trembling across the Ohio in the dead of night, shoeless and ill-clad, to the homes of free Negroes or of their white deliverers.¹⁹

Another part of the conductor's job was to make sure that the routes of the Underground Railroad were in order.

7. Thornbrough, 43.

8. Foner, 479.

9. Levering, Julia Henderson. *Historic Indiana* (New York: Knickerbocker Press, 1909), 286.

10. Siebert, Wilbur H. *The Underground Railroad: From Slavery to Freedom* (New York: Arno Press, 1898, reprint 1968).

11. Thornbrough, 44.

12. Foner, 480. Coffin, Levi. *Reminiscences of Levi Coffin* (Cincinnati: Robert Clarke Company, 1898, original print, 1876).

13. Thornbrough, 43. Coffin.

14. Conklin, Julia S. "The Underground Railroad in Indiana," *The Indiana Magazine of History* (June 1910) 63-74, 64.

15. Conklin, 67.

16. Esary, Logan, Ph.D. *A History of Indiana from 1850 to 1920* (Bloomington: Indiana University Bookstore, 1918, reprint 1935), 624.

17. Hart, Albert Bushnell, LL.D., ed. "Slavery and Abolition 1831-1841," *The American Nation: a History* Vol. 16 (New York: Harper and Brothers Publishers, 1906), 228-9.

18. Esary, 624.

19. Levering, 284.

The Underground Railroad in Indiana

Levi Coffin stated, "The roads were always in running order, the connections good, the conductors active and zealous, and there was no lack of passengers."²⁰ There were many routes that fugitive slaves followed in Indiana. Two of the routes came from Evansville, leading to Princeton, Vincennes, Bloomington, and Michigan City, or to the Wabash River through Terre Haute and Lafayette. Rockport, along the Ohio River, had lines running north to Morgantown, Mooresville, Plainfield, and Noblesville. One of the main routes started from Leavenworth, New Albany, or Madison to Indianapolis, north through Westfield to Logansport, leading to Plymouth and South Bend, and to the Michigan state line. The final well-traveled route ran along the eastern border of Indiana. It started either at the Ohio River at Madison or Vevay to Greensburg. Once it reached Fountain City (Newport), other routes connected there and ran north through Winchester, Portland, Decatur, Fort Wayne, Auburn, and sometimes to Michigan.²¹ Of course, variations to these routes were necessary in order to keep the slave hunters and masters from finding the fugitive slaves. The rivers and its tributaries of Indiana made these variations possible. In all, more than thirty stations on the Ohio and the Mississippi Rivers helped slaves escape to freedom.²²

IMPACT ON COMMUNITIES

The communities and individuals gained in some ways and suffered in others because they aided and supported the Underground Railroad activity. Communities gained unity and diversity in their citizenship. Blacks and whites united in the same town or city for this cause because of their belief in helping fugitive slaves. This was one anti-slavery "organization" in which both blacks and whites functioned harmoniously.²³ They had to unite because their activity was forbidden and illegal, and it was necessary to keep the activity secret. Otherwise, many people would suffer harsh accusations and severe punishments. They helped to plan and coordinate routes and stations so that slaves would be able to get to safety quickly. They spoke out equally on the evils of slavery and the need for abolition and they also collected money to fund the Underground Railroad. Fountain City (Newport) and Westfield were examples of communities that were able to unite in this cause and become safe havens for fugitive slaves.

Other communities split because of the activity of the Underground Railroad. Sides for and against the activity developed in many Indiana communities since a majority of Hoosiers were indifferent to slavery and didn't care to become

involved in the work of the railroad.²⁴ This caused problems for those individuals who involved themselves in the railroad. Many church goers, especially among the Quakers, felt uncomfortable while in church because they received taunts and insults for their involvement.²⁵ Individuals also received threats to their own life and family, and often suffered damage to their property by those who opposed their efforts. The communities socially ostracized them, and in many cases, forced them to leave town. Some left for another town in Indiana and others left to go live in Michigan.

The North and the South punished those involved in the Underground Railroad differently. In the South, the agents were looked at as thieves and their punishment, if they were caught, was usually death.²⁶ On the other hand, punishments in northern states varied, depending on the sympathy of the state. The most basic punishment was a fine, "not to exceed \$500" and / or imprisonment, "not to exceed 60 days."²⁷ The agent of the Underground Railroad might also be sued by the slave hunter or master for compensation of the lost slave (property).²⁸

Because help in the Underground Railroad was illegal and dangerous to both the agents and the fugitives, much folklore and embellished stories developed around its activity. However, a system for aiding runaway slaves who reached northern states did exist. People of all races, classes, sexes, and religions offered their support and time to help slaves escaping from slavery. Their work was minuscule compared to the distance that the slave traveled before reaching the agents, but they helped to direct the fugitive to places of safety along the routes of the Underground Railroad in Indiana. The stations aided them until they could be "forwarded" by conductors. After reaching the middle of the state or so, the fugitive slaves then decided either to settle or to continue northward.

Evidence points out that the Underground Railroad's purpose was twofold. First, it actually helped fugitive slaves seek freedom from slavery, and many people strictly stuck by this purpose while they were agents. However, the second purpose was much more selfish. Some individuals helped only because slave hunters and masters interfered with their daily lives in their communities. It was the first purpose for which the Underground Railroad desired to be remembered. In Indiana, the Underground Railroad provided the opportunity for both whites and blacks to unite under a common goal and was evidence that the unification can work to make things better for others. It represented to fugitive slaves a hope for the future.

20. Conklin, 65. Coffin.

21. Esary, 627-8. Thornbrough, 40-1.

22. Hart, 228.

23. Foner, 509.

24. Esary, 628.

25. Siebert, 49.

26. Conklin, 64.

27. Siebert, 48.

28. Siebert, 48.