

THE GLORY ROADSeptember 20, 1999Robert J. Watkins

In the best tradition of the Club, I assigned a title to this paper which obscures its precise subject matter. Without further delay, I will tell you that it concerns the "Underground Railroad". The members of this learned society are familiar, I'm sure, with that term and have at least a vague idea of what it was. However, I have quietly been conducting a rump survey for the past several months from which I conclude that many people living in this area - particularly the young - associate the term more with the New York City subway system than what it actually was.

What it was has been described as a "system of back roads, swamps, waterways, hidden shelters, tunnels and forests by which slaves moved from slaveholding states to freedom in the roughly 40 years before the Civil War". Some historians maintain that the term "Underground Railroad" originated with an event that occurred in this area. In 1831, a slave named Tice Davis swam the Ohio River near Cincinnati and escaped. His owner, a Kentuckian, was quoted in one of the Cincinnati newspapers as grumbling, "The damned abolitionists must have a railroad by which they run off slaves."

Whatever the source of the term, the Underground Railroad was in reality an improvised and largely informal network of very brave people - black and white - who met escaping slaves and helped them to freedom. Some of the bravest of those people were here, for Cincinnati and surrounding counties on the Ohio River were principal entry points for the fugitives. A dedicated abolitionist who lived here was the nominal "president" of the Underground Railroad and had a hand in aiding hundreds of escaping slaves. But there were many others - including some who were or were to become members of The Literary Club - who played a role in helping slaves travel the "Glory Road" to freedom.

From the earliest days of the Republic, a slave running away from his master was not an uncommon event. Not many of these escape attempts were successful, however, primarily because there was no support group to aid the fugitives once they had reached the supposed

refuge of a "free" state. Nevertheless, the loss of slaves in border states Virginia, Maryland and Kentucky, in particular - was sufficient that the new Federal government in 1793 enacted the first of the Fugitive Slave Acts. These Acts, which were continually amended until the final one in 1850, provided legal authority for a slave-owner to pursue an escaped slave into free territory, to seize him (with the assistance of police authorities sometimes) and to take him before a Federal or state magistrate. If the slave-owner could prove ownership, he would be awarded a warrant to remove his "property" back to the territory from which he had fled.

Ohio added its voice to upholding the rights of slave-owners by enacting the so-called "Black Laws" in 1804 - just one year after Ohio had been admitted to the Union. These laws provided that anyone who harbored or secreted slaves or who obstructed their owners from reclaiming them could be fined from \$10 to \$50 for each offense. Ohio's original "Black Laws" and their successive amendments were not repealed until 1849. They had been enacted largely because of pressure from Kentucky whose slave-owning landholders were becoming increasingly frustrated by the loss of their property into adjoining states. (As an aside, slavery was indeed a fact of life across the river; Boone County alone had 438 slave owners in the early 1850's.) By 1815, the trickle of runaway slaves into Ohio had become a serious economic problem for these Kentucky landholders as antislavery friends of the fugitives directed and aided their escapes at numerous points along the Ohio River.

From its very early days Cincinnati was an outpost of freedom for fugitive slaves. It also became the "union depot" from which the various lines of the Underground Railroad diverged northward to safety. As a flourishing young town in 1819, Cincinnati included an influential congregation of Quakers and some four hundred free blacks; both groups were to provide the seeds of early antislavery activity. But, where did the slaves come from and how did they get here?

The same Ohio River which separated Cincinnati from the nearby states of Kentucky and Virginia also provided steamboat connections with the "deep" South. Hard as it may be to believe, planters from the states of Mississippi, Alabama and Louisiana utilized Cincinnati as a summer resort beginning about 1825. The attending servants they brought with them on these holidays were

frequently coaxed away by local free blacks. Additionally, slave deck hands on the riverboats often escaped during night freight-handling operations and were taken into hiding by free blacks who lived near the docks.

Numbers of slaves swarmed across the Ohio when it was frozen over. Harriet Beecher Stowe, then living in Cincinnati, heard a story about one crossing and incorporated in UNCLE TOM'S CABIN the tale of Eliza crossing the river with her child by leaping from one block of ice to another. During the summer months, the Ohio River was shallow enough in places, New Richmond, for example, that adults could wade or swim across with a minimal amount of effort.

Escaping slaves in Louisville occasionally followed the ingenious - and often dangerous - tactic of stowing away in boxes on riverboats headed for Cincinnati. There seemed no end of ways that fugitives reached Cincinnati and other Ohio River towns. Once there, the burden devolved upon their friends and sympathizers - white and black - to receive them and send them on their way to freedom.

These "friends and sympathizers" were, up until the late 1840's, without much organization or leadership. Such success as they had depended upon the ingenuity and resourcefulness of individual whites and free blacks, rather than upon anything which could be called an organized system. In 1847, however, organization of a sort arrived in Cincinnati when Levi Coffin and his family moved here from the small village of Fountain City in Southeastern Indiana. For some 20 years prior to the time he moved here, Coffin had assisted fugitive slaves in his home town and had even smuggled some fugitives back there in his carriage when returning from occasional visits to Cincinnati. In this way, he became acquainted with the local antislavery leaders in Cincinnati and how they functioned.

Coffin organized what he called a "Vigilance Committee" shortly after he arrived in Cincinnati. It consisted of both black and white members and its meetings were held at Coffin's home. The Vigilance Committee incorporated into its membership a group called the "Anti-Slavery Sewing Society" which had been formed a year or so earlier to gather and re-make clothing for needy refugees. Mrs. Coffin moved into a leadership

position in this Sewing Society and it met at her home each week and kept its supply of garments there. It's tempting to snicker about the contributions of something called an "Anti-Slavery Sewing Society", but to do so would be to underestimate the vital importance of clothing before the days of cotton mills and the sweatshops of Southeast Asia.

"Organization" was the key thing which Levi Coffin contributed to the antislavery movement in Cincinnati. It was under his direction that specified routes were established for conveying fugitives north through the city. He was also responsible for coordinating Cincinnati's routes with those in counties farther north so that continuous routes were established to safety in Canada and a few small settlements on the south shore of Lake Erie. On each of these routes "stations" or places of hiding were designated - usually homes of antislavery sympathizers. To get the fugitives from one station to another, certain people were designated as "conductors"; their task was perhaps the most hazardous of all for if they were caught, they could be, and often were, assessed substantial fines and civil penalties for their actions. As an illustration of these risks, one John Van Sandt of Glendale was part of an activist group in that village. In April, 1842, he was transporting 9 slaves when slave catchers intercepted him and retook 8 of them. The slaveowner sued Van Sandt for the value of the one slave who escaped and for the costs of recapturing the other eight. After an extended trial the unfortunate Van Sandt paid a civil penalty of \$1200 - a not inconsiderable sum in 1842.

Coffin's mercantile business suffered considerably as a result of his Underground Railroad activities, yet there is no record of his ever complaining. Clearly, for him, his crusade was a moral imperative. In addition to his leadership role in the Vigilance Committee, he collected money for the numerous expenses it incurred such as the hiring of enclosed carriages, the buying of shoes and clothing, canal boat and railway tickets and so forth. Many citizens who could not risk the direct service of aiding the fugitives contributed generously to the cause. Coffin himself is reputed to have given some \$50,000 of his own money; other local business and professional people - given the name "stockholders" - are estimated to have contributed an additional \$100,000 as a group. Among these "stockholders" were such well-known citizens as Salmon P. Chase and Thomas Emery - both early

members of The Literary Club - and John J. Jolliffe, a prominent lawyer who often defended fugitive slaves in court.

It is easy over a century and a half later to underestimate the hazards which the antislavery forces faced and the extent of the forces arrayed against them. Slaves were valuable property and their owners did not take lightly their attempts to escape. Cincinnati and the other ports of entry along the Ohio River became localized conflict arenas between the opposing forces. There were many unprincipled men along the Ohio River who found man-hunting to be an exciting and profitable business. There were also spies - sometimes even free blacks - who tried to penetrate the operation and discover the location of stations along the various routes. Levi Coffin's papers disclose two such attempts, both of which were foiled. His punishment for the black spies was both direct and effective: he turned them over to the free blacks in his own organization who - in his words - "beat the miscreants terribly". The people who operated the stations and transported the fugitives were, quite naturally, hated by the slaveowners and the latter occasionally offered large rewards for their injury or even their assassination. Rarely were the intended victims intimidated by such threats, however, and so well were they protected by their local friends that only infrequently were they harmed.

Time doesn't permit a description of all the Underground Railroad routes which fanned out from Cincinnati. I would like to describe one for you, however, which was called the "Walnut Hills route". Slaves arriving in Cincinnati would be taken by sympathetic antislavery friends to the "attractive suburb" of Walnut Hills (remember, we're talking the 1830's). There they were harbored by Harriet Beecher Stowe and other abolitionists, many of whom were associated with the nearby Lane Seminary. From here, they would be taken to the home of Thomas Butterworth, a Quaker who lived a little south of Foster's Crossing in Warren County. Mr. Butterworth and his wife, Nancy, housed the runaways in their back room until they could be moved on to Lebanon, a noted Quaker town. From here, the route led through Xenia, Springfield, Urbana, Bellefontaine, Kenton, Findlay, Bowling Green and Perrysburg and then to steamers which crossed Lake Erie to Canada. Movements between stations were usually made at night and were not on any fixed schedule. Conductors

would operate as conditions permitted, with the runaways remaining in their hiding places until the time for the next move.

Occasionally, a particular route might become inoperative because of the sickness of a station-keeper or the nearby presence of slave-hunters seeking to recapture runaways. Coffin anticipated such problems by having alternative routes available. Going back to our example, if the easterly route through Walnut Hills proved to be unavailable, the runaways would often be taken through College Hill to Glendale or through Cheviot to Dunlap and then from either of those places to Hamilton and Darrrtown in Butler County. From these Butler County sites, they could be taken over Ohio routes to Lebanon or Wilmington or even through Fairhaven into Indiana. The point is there was a network of routes throughout the state, with each route having alternate stations. Even had law enforcement officials in Ohio been willing to enforce the Fugitive Slave Law or their own state's "Black Laws" aggressively - and many were not, for a variety of reasons - it would've been extremely difficult for them to shut the system down completely.

You may be wondering just how - after all these years - there can be such a good record of the routes of the Underground Railroad and such a good history of the people who were involved in it. It was, after all, a clandestine operation and NOT the type of thing which people of the time would have committed to writing. The answer to that question is a matter of some interest in itself. In 1891, a 25 year-old young man by the name of Wilbur Siebert began teaching American history at The Ohio State University in Columbus. He was appalled to find that the textbook his undergraduates were using contained only six lines about the Underground Railroad. Yet, many of his students knew something about the subject, being the descendants of people who had been involved in it. He asked these students to give him the names and addresses of their parents and grandparents so he could send them questionnaires about their experiences and reminiscences.

Grouping their responses by counties, he was able to work out the travel routes of the fugitives from station to station clear up to Lake Erie. Then, on his vacations, he supplemented his correspondence by field trips with a horse and buggy through Ohio counties, one

east-west tier after another. He met with the old residents and recorded their anecdotes. At the same time, he gathered newspaper articles, letters and old photographs of station operators and conductors. The material was bound into several large volumes and placed with The Ohio Archeological and Historical Museum in Columbus - now the Ohio Historical Society.

The anecdotes recorded in this material are priceless and present quite often a humorous balance between the hazards involved in the work of the Underground Railroad and the zeal and enthusiasm with which its workers approached their tasks. They offer, I believe, a means of understanding the motivations of Underground Railroad participants, and I'd like to tell you about a few of them.

Ripley, Ohio was a strong abolitionist center and it is estimated that about 3000 runaway slaves were processed through there. The Rev. John Rankin, a Presbyterian minister and militant abolitionist for 40 years, led the antislavery forces in the small town. He had a house at the top of a high hill overlooking the town and lights in the windows of the house served as a beacon to escaping slaves who knew of his abolitionist activities. One of Rev. Rankin's sons told Prof. Siebert the following story which illustrates what the Underground Railroad was all about: A slave family consisting of husband and wife and seven children lived on their master's farm near Dover, Kentucky, a few miles southwest of Ripley. The mother, following instruction and promises of assistance from friendly abolitionists, decided that her family should stop being slaves and take the road north. She sent her husband off first, with instructions to make his way to Canada and prepare a home for the family. Then she, with an infant child, set out in the dead of night a few weeks later for Rev. Rankin's home in Ripley. She reached it and was promptly forwarded north to meet her husband.

Four years later, this same woman returned for her six other children. She came back to Rev. Rankin's house and was fitted out in man's clothing. So dressed, she returned to Dover, hid near her former master's house and actually talked with some of her children in preparation for their escape. After dark one night, she set out with all of them, plus an infant granddaughter, and the party was ferried across the Ohio River by a sympathetic white man. The little contingent was directed to the house of

an abolitionist sympathizer in Ripley named Thomas McCague who took them in. Since infants were sometimes a problem to move because of their propensity to cry at awkward times, a daughter-in-law of Mr. McCague brought her own baby to the house and exchanged it for the black baby which she then took from the house. The black infant was returned to the real mother later than night. The entire party of runaways was then taken to the Rankin house and forwarded to Canada within a day.

Many of Ripley's free blacks were part of Rev. Rankin's followers. But, one was not. His name was John Parker and, although he greatly respected Rev. Rankin, he did not think it proper to ask white men to help liberate slaves from their Kentucky masters. He had once been a slave there himself, but purchased his freedom and moved to Ripley where he became the owner of a large foundry. Parker did not limit himself to passively aiding slaves who were able to make it to the Ohio shore. He had no hesitation about actually helping them escape from their Kentucky owners and bringing them to Ohio to be forwarded to Canada. In an 1892 interview with a Cincinnati newspaper, Parker estimated that under his leadership over 1000 slaves had been plucked from bondage in the Bluegrass State.

Logan County and Bellefontaine, which I mentioned earlier, (and to which I have often alluded in previous Literary Club papers) were hot-beds of Presbyterian Covenanters who were strong abolitionists. These folks had established a small college called Geneva Hall about 10 miles north of Bellefontaine and were instrumental in influencing the students there to engage in the work of the antislavery movement. In 1851, thirteen slaves who had been recaptured by slave-hunters near Bellefontaine were released by legal action with the help of a sympathetic judge. They were immediately taken under the care of the Geneva Hall forces who hid them in various places. A week later the runaways were reassembled and taken in two covered wagons to Sandusky, some 90 miles away. Their escorts were ten large students, disguised and armed as hunters. The students told those who asked that they had thirteen deer in the wagons which they were taking to friends in Sandusky. When bystanders asked to see the deer, they were told to "stand back". Naturally, this aroused some suspicion and some accusations of criminality, but no one was sufficiently brave to attempt to prove this with ten armed men at the ready. Fortunately, there was no telegraph to alert slave-

hunters and by a series of day and night forced marches, the party reached their destination and embarked the fugitives to Canada. The students returned to Geneva Hall, it is reported, "in considerable glee".

One of my favorite stories concerns Mrs. Elizabeth Piatt, whose country home known as "Mao-O-Chee" was south of Bellefontaine and near the village of West Liberty. She was the wife of Judge Benjamin Piatt, of the prominent Cincinnati Piatt family, and was both an ardent abolitionist and an early feminist. In spite of her strong abolitionist leanings, she respected her husband's judicial office (even after he had stepped down from the bench). She would not permit fugitive slaves to be hidden in her barn if he was on the premises. How were conductors transporting runaways to know the status of her situation? Very simply. There was a cast iron figure of a black child with hand extended in her front yard. (It was a decorative hitching post.) If that extended hand bore an American flag, then Mrs. Piatt was alone and could shelter fugitives. If the flag was missing, however, the conductors passed on to the alternate station with their charges. Mrs. Piatt, I should note in passing, was the mother of Donn Piatt and the aunt of John James Piatt, both of whom were later to become members of The Literary Club.

I'll conclude story-telling time with one last anecdote, which involves a notable slave case tried in Cincinnati. In October, 1853, a fugitive slave was brought before a U.S. Commissioner named C.C. Carpenter in a second-story room of a building on Court Street. The defendant's counsel were Rutherford B. Hayes, a name familiar to The Literary Club, and John J. Jolliffe. At the conclusion of the hearing, Commissioner Carpenter began to deliver his judgment as to whether or not the fugitive should be returned to his master in the South. He did this in a low and deliberate voice, which required the audience's closest attention. There was some abolitionists standing behind the defendant, who sat at a table between his master and the marshall. As people leaned forward to hear the judgment, the defendant scooted his chair back, then rose from it and stepped backward. One of the white abolitionists set his own hat on the defendant's head and the latter sidled over to where a group of black spectators stood. By easy stages, he then worked his way out of the hearing room and down the stairs into the street. He walked across the canal (now Central Parkway) and made for Avondale; the sexton

of the black cemetery there was an acquaintance and provided him with a hiding place.

The principals in the hearing - including his lawyers - were stunned when they discovered the defendant's absence and they attempted - unsuccessfully - to find him. Levi Coffin and his friends supplied a female disguise for the fugitive and moved him into the basement of the Congregational church on Vine Street. Here he remained until he could be forwarded to Canada.

But for Prof. Siebert's resourcefulness in tapping the recollections of living men and women while incidents were still fresh in their minds, most of the history of the Underground Railroad in Ohio would've been lost. In developing nations, where literacy considerations sometimes make written records impossible, the gathering of "oral history" is commonly done by academics today, but Prof. Siebert was certainly a pioneer. I had the great privilege of meeting him in 1953, when I was a student at Ohio State and he was 87 years old. We talked briefly about some of the operations of the Underground Railroad in Bellefontaine and his knowledge and recall were still encyclopedic.

Bellefontaine was my home during boyhood. Our family farm was located just a few miles from Mrs. Piatt's home, to which I just referred, and near the tiny crossroads community of Pickrelltown. This community was heavily populated with Quakers (it still is, although they prefer to be called "Friends"). These folks were extremely active in abolitionist endeavors, including the Underground Railroad. Many of them acted as station-keepers and conductors and the community was considered as a satellite for the even larger abolitionist group in Bellefontaine, some 7 miles away.

When I was a boy, there was an elderly black woman named Ida Hicks (or "Idey" as she referred to herself) who lived in a small house in the village. She was the grand-daughter of a slave family who had escaped to Canada via the Underground Railroad. My late father, a school teacher and president of the local Historical Society for several years, once told me that he remembered a number of black families in the area who also were descendants of fugitive slaves. I had never thought to ask the question: "Why did these people come back from Canada to a little farm community in Western Ohio?" Prof. Siebert's materials provide a possible

answer. In the years before the Civil War, it is estimated that over 10,000 slaves escaped to lower Canada from the United States. While they were free and safe there, many of them really had no way to make a living. There simply weren't enough jobs in an area that was still basically agricultural and thinly populated. So, many of them reversed their migration and came back to the U.S. after the war had ended. Quite naturally, some of them sought out the people who had treated them well during their flight to Canada. And, apparently, many of these people helped them again. In Pickrelltown, for example, the Quakers employed them, gave them housing and, sometimes, even a small piece of land they could call their own. When they became too old to work, they became virtual wards of the Quakers who provided them with basic necessities until their deaths.

Idey Hicks had several children, some of whom settled in the area around Bellefontaine. Her descendants are still there, and like the descendants of other former slaves, they continue to diversify and enrich communities along the by-gone Underground Railroad.

What particular relevance does the Underground Railroad have for our country and, particularly, for Cincinnati at this time? For us, here in Cincinnati and Southwestern Ohio, the immediate significance involves the new planned national museum to be called the "National Underground Railroad Freedom Center". You've probably read about or heard about the plans for this in the media. The museum will be what is called "a museum of reflection" - an education center which provides compelling experiences that will inspire a new understanding of a momentous period in our history. (The Holocaust Museum in Washington is such a museum.) The Freedom Center will be built between Vine and Walnut Streets near the Ohio River. The land and building will cost about \$45 million, but an additional \$35 to \$45 million will be sought for programs, equipment and endowment. Funds will be sought from both the public and private sectors and about \$25 million has been raised to date, I understand. Procter & Gamble has made available the on-loan services of its Vice President for Public Affairs, Ed Rigaud, to act as the Center's president and CEO. His governing board is composed of leaders from business, education, religion, media, entertainment and government. The Center is scheduled to open in 2003 and, as former state senator Stan Aronoff (who's no stranger

to getting things built in Cincinnati) has said: "Corporate Cincinnati is going to make sure this happens." That has been underscored, I think, by the commitment of John Pepper, Procter & Gamble's recently retired CEO, to spearhead the fund-raising effort nationally.

On a nationally basis, the proposed museum makes two significant points for blacks and whites, respectively: First, for blacks, and particularly for young blacks, it will demonstrate that their ancestors prior to the Civil War were NOT satisfied living in slavery and that many of them seized control of their lives and did what they could to achieve freedom in the face of daunting obstacles. Some historical interpretations are to the contrary, namely, that slaves were more or less content with their status and would not have sought freedom but for the interference of meddling abolitionists. But, the Freedom Center's stated objective is to enable visitors to see the fugitive slaves as the agents of their own liberation, using their own skills, wits, desire and strength to "cross over River Jordan into Canaan land".

The second point is of importance for whites who must deal with what are, in essence, accusations against the overwhelming majority of the white population prior to the Civil War. The Freedom Center will illustrate that not every white person accepted the institution of slavery and, indeed, that many whites either rejected slavery as evil, or could not turn away when actually presented with a person in need. In doing so, these people risked their reputations, their money and their own freedom without any expectation of reward other than their own moral satisfaction.

In a time when our nation tries to come to grips with the black-white racial issue (too-often unsuccessfully), it seems appropriate that we reflect on a historic era illustrating that members of the two races did once work together to achieve a common goal and that they can do so again.
