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Calarco Out With His Eighth Book on the Underground Railroad

With his eighth book on the Underground Railroad, Tom Calarco can fairly lay claim as today's most prolific Underground Railroad author, and perhaps one of the most so ever.

Specializing in biographical works and localized regions of Underground Railroad activity in New York State, Calarco has now moved west into rich historical territory with his *The Search for the Underground Railroad in South-Central Ohio*.

The Ohio Underground Railroad was first catalogued statewide by Wilbur Siebert in his 1898 landmark, *The Underground Railroad from Slavery to Freedom*. Calarco's latest is a deeper dive into the network, personalities, and events of the especially active abolitionist hotbed around Ripley and Red Oak, Ohio, along the Ohio River bordering Kentucky.



Tom Calarco

A steadfast researcher, Calarco has stocked his book with decades of photographs, maps and bibliography.

Tom Calarco won the Underground Railroad Free Press Prize for the Advancement of Knowledge in 2008, the year that the annual Free Press Prizes were first awarded.

IN THIS ISSUE



Following in Wilbur Siebert's footsteps, Tom Calarco gives us the deepest map yet of a key region of the Ohio Underground Railroad. 1



An Underground Railroad route near downtown Chicago is rediscovered, restored and memorialized. 1



For a while, a North Carolina county was a bustling Underground Railroad nexus. 2



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Chicago's Little Calumet Underground Railroad Freedom Trail

One of an occasional series on Underground Railroad sites and people

By Katherine Newman

This article first appeared in the July 25, 2018, edition of *The Chicago Citizen*.

The Little Calumet Underground Railroad Project recently hosted its first Walking the Freedom Trail hike in Beaubien Woods near the Little Calumet River. The hike was led by Tom Shepard and Larry McClellan who walked participants through the woods and told the story of the thousands of escaped slaves who came through the forest on their journey to freedom.

"Out here in the far south side, thousands of escaped slaves came through during the mid-1800s before the Civil War. They were freedom seekers coming up to Chicago and going either into Chicago or moving on to where they would be free up in Canada, or points eastward where the bounty hunters didn't go like Pennsylvania and New York," said Shepard.

During this time, the area was home to several Dutch farmers who had immigrated to the United States. They were also abolitionists. One in particular, Jan

Ton, opened his farm to freedom seekers as a safe house.

"What we are hoping to do is recreate a little bit of the trail that the freedom seekers might have taken back in the 1850s or so, and we are out near the site of the Jan Ton Farm, who was the principal safe house operator and conductor of what is known as the Underground Railroad at the time," said Shepard.

The Little Calumet Underground Railroad Project is a fairly new organization that just came into existence at the end of [2017]. Coincidentally, at the same time this organization was forming, the Cook County Forest Preserve was looking for a new way to breathe life into Beaubien Woods, which is one of the most underutilized forest preserves in Cook County [Illinois], according to Shepard.

"The Cook County Forest Preserve has embarked on improving and highlighting the Beaubien Woods Forest Preserve because it is one of the least used forest preserves in the county. Our timing was just

perfect because we began our effort about the same time they were looking for something to spark a flame at Beaubien Woods Forest Preserve," said Shepard.

A possible pavilion and a memorial to the Underground Railroad in Beaubien Woods are being discussed by the Cook County Forest Preserve, which is in favor of setting up trail markers for people to take self-guided tours of the path the escaped slaves might have taken on their journey to freedom.

"It was a perilous journey and when you use your imagination to think about what they went through to be able to gain their freedom, it's just remarkable, and that's what we want to depict," said Shepard.

"We won't ask them to take off their shoes but they will get an idea of what it had to be like for people who braved all the dangers and the treachery on foot coming up hundreds of miles from down south, up through Illinois, and then finding their way to our little area here on the far south side."

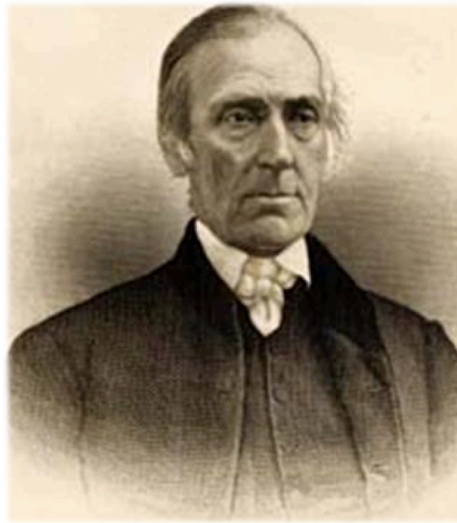
The Underground Railroad in Piedmont North Carolina

Author McKay Whatley, a lifelong resident Randolph County, North Carolina, where the following took place, is an attorney and has been mayor of the town of Franklinville for 20 years. *Free Press* published a previous article by Mr. Whatley, "North Carolina's Mendenhall Plantation," in our May, 2014, issue.

Before the American Civil War, opposition to the institution of human slavery took many forms. In the 18th and early 19th centuries, Quakers and other thoughtful people opposed treating human beings as property on religious, philosophical, moral and ethical grounds. Some formed groups or "manumission societies" to urge individuals to free slaves; others raised funds and organized groups of "freedmen" to return to Africa through "colonization societies"; others promoted the outright legal and governmental prohibition of slavery as "abolitionists." Randolph and Guilford counties, the heart of North Carolina's "Quaker Belt," had examples of all of these organizations. But by 1835, that kind of individual action had gradually come to be prohibited by new state laws put forward by slave owners to protect their increasingly valuable investment in slave property. It became illegal to free slaves, or for freed slaves to move freely around North Carolina, and this promoted clandestine resistance to slave laws by brave local residents who cooperated to smuggle runaway slaves to free states in the North. When the Fugitive Slave laws were passed by Congress seeking to force the return of escaped slaves from free states, the slave-smuggler's network was extended all the way to Canada. This cooperative network supporting the escape of southern slaves to freedom became known as the "Underground Railroad," despite the fact that the system began operating years before the time actual steam-powered trains were invented.

The "Underground Railroad" was, first and foremost, secret. That was what it took to protect the people who helped slaves escape, as what they did was against the law, punishable by prison and fines, and, in fact, the punishments increased almost yearly from the early 19th century to the Civil War. The secrecy of it all makes it very difficult to document. There are very few direct sources of information on Underground Railroad activities in North Carolina, and only one makes a tangential connection to Randolph County: that is the actual route taken by Elisha Coffin (1779-1872, who built my house in Franklinville), with his sister and his father in March 1822, and de-

scribed in detail in the autobiography of his first cousin Levi Coffin (1798-1877).



Levi Coffin

From Levi Coffin's book it is clear that escaped slaves knew to head generally for the Quaker heart of North Carolina. Escaped slave advertisements collected by the University of North Carolina's Loren Schweining clearly show that eastern North Carolina slave owners assumed that escapees headed west. Fugitives coming through Randolph County might have gone toward the Friends meeting houses, or toward individual Quakers, but sooner or later they ended up around New Garden, where the Quaker families descended from Nantucket emigrants of 1771 pretty much headed up the Underground Railroad in North Carolina. The Nantucket Quakers (including Levi, Bethuel and Elisha Coffin) were the majority of the active participants in the North Carolina Manumission and Colonization Society, which was organized in 1816 and pursued fitful activities until 1832. Some of the largest slaveholders in the area, such as General Alexander Gray, were supporters of the organization until the state's constitution of 1835 made such activities illegal.

The Coffin family, like most other local Quaker families, was seeing most of its younger generation emigrate West. Some of this was due to the availability of cheap vacant land in the "Northwest Territories" (Indiana, Illinois, Ohio, Michigan, Wisconsin and part of Minnesota); some of it was the desire to get their children away from the dominant slave-holding ethic. No matter what local Quakers taught their children about the equality of human nature and the evil of slaveholding, the law of the land and the culture of their neighbors promoted and

protected the ownership and exploitation of Negroes. It was a conflict that could only be resolved by leaving North Carolina. By 1818, so many residents of Randolph County, North Carolina, had relocated to Indiana that a Randolph County was created there in memory of the "old country." One of Bethuel Coffin's daughters had already moved her family to Indiana, and Bethuel himself would soon follow.

It is a glaring omission that Levi Coffin's autobiography (*Reminiscences of Levi Coffin*)

Please go to Piedmont, page 3, column 1

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fin, the Reputed President of the Underground Railroad: Being a Brief History of the Labors of a Lifetime in Behalf of the Slave, with the Stories of Numerous Fugitives, Who Gained Their Freedom through His Instrumentality, and Many Other Incidents. Cincinnati: Robert Clark & Co., 1880) has not been more used as a source for antebellum North Carolina history. The entire book has been made available online by the University of North Carolina-Chapel Hill library. The first chapter of Coffin's book recounts a number of incidents of slave mistreatment which nurtured his abolitionist views, and at least three appear to have involved legal action, which could be confirmed from historical records.

Chapter 2, the story of Jack Barnes, is a fascinating account of one of Levi Coffin's first efforts to smuggle an escaped slave to freedom, and the fact that he enlisted his uncle and first cousins as co-conspirators illustrates the close-knit family nature of the Underground Railroad activities. Jack Barnes had fled "the eastern part" of North Carolina after the heirs of his owner refused to follow his will's instructions to grant Barnes his freedom "for faithfulness and meritorious conduct." Barnes reached the vicinity of New Garden Friends meeting in the fall of 1821, boarding and working for members of the Coffin family. In March 1822 he "received the news that the case in court had been decided against him. The property that had been willed to him was turned over to the relatives of his master, and he was consigned again to slavery. The judge decided that the deceased owner was not in his right mind at the time he made the will. [Jack] was not to be found, and [the heirs] advertised in the papers, offering one hundred dollars reward to any one who would secure him till they could get hold of him, or give information that would lead to his discovery. This advertisement appeared in the paper published at Greensboro."

Putting Jack into hiding, Vestal and Levi Coffin devised a plan to smuggle him to Indiana in a travelling party of Coffin relatives.

"Bethuel Coffin, my uncle, who lived a few miles distant, was then preparing to go to Indiana, on a visit to his children and relatives who had settled there. He would be accompanied by his son Elisha,

then living in Randolph County, and by his daughter Mary. They intended to make the journey in a two-horse wagon, taking with them provisions and cooking utensils, and camp out on the way... The road they proposed to take was called the Kanawha Road. It was the nearest route, but led through a mountainous wilderness most of the way. Crossing the Dan River, it led by way of Patrick Court-House, Virginia, to Maberry's Gap, in the Blue Ridge mountains, thence across Clinch Mountain, by way of Pack's Ferry on New River, thence across White Oak Mountain to the falls of the Kanawha, and down that river to the Ohio, crossing at Gallipolis.

"This was thought to be a safe route for Jack to travel, as it was very thinly inhabited, and it was decided that my cousin Vestal and I should go see our uncle, and learn if he was willing to incur the risk and take Jack with him to Indiana. He said he was willing, and all the arrangements were made..." [pp.34-35]

This trip was less than two years since 43-year-old Elisha Coffin had purchased the mill and several hundred acres of land on Deep River that later became Franklinville, North Carolina. He either had just been or was about to be elected a Justice of the Peace of the Randolph County Court of Pleas and Quarter Sessions (the equivalent of a modern County Commissioner), so it was truly a legal and political risk for him to make this trip. But my purpose here is to focus on the route from North Carolina to Indiana rather than on Elisha Coffin or the rather thrilling adventure of Levi Coffin, who was forced to follow the Coffins on horseback to thwart the efforts of a slave-catcher who appeared on their trail. It is an interesting aspect of modern scholarship of the Underground Railroad, as promoted by the National Park Service and dozens of local historical societies in northern states, that all the maps of "routes" out of the slaveholding states completely ignore the route from central North Carolina to Indiana and Ohio called by Levi Coffin as the "Kanawha" Road. In fact, most "maps" of the Underground Railroad only clearly define the route after it reaches a free state and starts toward Canada.

There is an Internet-published record ("The Kanawha Trace Waybill") which documents an almost identical route from New Garden to Ohio. Its first stop ap-

pears to go west toward Winston-Salem instead of north to the Dan River.

The only Piedmont North Carolina museum interpretation of the Underground Railroad of which I am aware is at Mendenhall Plantation, in Jamestown, Guilford County. A false-bottomed wagon from the Centre Friends Meeting community some 15 miles southeast is the museum's primary artifact of the Underground Railroad, and it too confirms the importance of the Kanawha route. The wagon was preserved by Centre historian Joshua Edgar Murrow (1892-1980), grandson of Andrew Murrow (1820-1908), who with his foster brother Isaac Stanley (1832-1927), used the wagon to transport runaway slaves to Ohio on the Kanawha Road.



The False-Bottom Wagon

Given the numerous primary sources and confirmation of this route from the heart of the Piedmont to Ohio and Indiana, and the confirmation of its regular use in Underground Railroad activities, why is it not listed on the National Park Service websites and maps? Neither is it common knowledge here in North Carolina, and I think both omissions stem from a common source—the fact that the antebellum history of Guilford and Randolph Counties, and its Quaker inhabitants, does not follow the popular "Gone with the Wind" narrative of the antebellum South. Our region was another story, not the romantic lost world of the plantation gentry, but a Shadow South of abolition and manumission activities, of industry and internal improvements, and of steady moral and political opposition to the status quo. Our history is much more nuanced and interesting than the standard black and white (or blue and gray) textbook version, and our culture is lessened by the fact that we forget and ignore the work and sacrifices of the men and women who fought against heavy odds to change the fundamental basis of the society they lived in.