

Ohio, Hamilton County  
Reply of H. N. Wilson<sup>1</sup> of College Hill to the UGRR Circular  
April 14, 1892

Mr. Siebert,

I enclose my hastily prepared paper which has been done under many interruptions. I should copy it but there is dangerous illness in the family nearest me so that I cannot take the necessary time today and trust you will pardon the crude way in which it is sent to you. You may care to use any of the material--if so all right. Do just what you think best in the matter. I presume you have the "Reminiscences of Levi Coffin" who was the pioneer as well as the foundation of the UGRR in Western Ohio and Eastern Indiana. "Uncle Levi"<sup>2</sup> and "Aunt Katie"<sup>3</sup> should indeed be "patron saints" of the colored people. I

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<sup>1</sup> H. N. Wilson of College Hill, letter to Wilbur H. Siebert, April, 14, 1892, *Wilbur H. Siebert Collection* (Columbus, OH: Ohio Historical Society Collection). H.N. Wilson was Harriet Nesmith Wilson (1825-1920), lifelong educator who moved with her abolitionist family to College Hill in the late 1840s. She chose to write a letter to Dr. Siebert in 1892 telling the story of the underground railroad in College Hill. She signed her letter H.N. Wilson. Dr. Siebert assumed that the letter was written by a man. He writes, "Often when spending a week end at home, H.N. Wilson missed some article of his clothing that had been given a needy wayfarer." Must Miss Wilson have thought that her letter would be taken more seriously if Dr. Siebert assumed she were a man? See Wilbur Henry Siebert, *Mysteries of Ohio's Underground Railroad* (Columbus, OH: Long's College Book Co., 1951), 46.

<sup>2</sup> "Aunt Katie" was Levi's Coffin's wife Catherine Coffin. She joined the Women's Anti-Slavery Sewing Circle founded by Garrisonian abolitionist Sarah Otis Ernst in 1841. See Stacey Robertson, *Hearts Beating for Liberty: Women Abolitionists in the Old Northwest* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2010), 177. The sewing Circle met in Coffin's and Ernst's living room and was a way for white women to educate themselves by listening to the reading of abolitionist newspapers and discussing the issues of the day as they sewed. At that time, there were few opportunities for women to take public leadership. The Women's Anti-slavery Sewing Circle was responsible for sewing and repairing many of the garments needed to clothe and disguise many on their journey to freedom and kept in the Coffin's store. They also sponsored an "Antislavery Fair" to raise funds for the movement. In the 1830s there was a "Colored Ladies Anti-Slavery Sewing Circle" in Cincinnati. In 1848, Black and white women cooperated and put on a combined anti-slavery fair in Cincinnati.

<sup>3</sup> Levi Coffin, a Quaker born in North Carolina, was known as the "President of the Underground Railroad." He and his wife moved to Cincinnati in April, 1847 from Newport, now Fountain City, Indiana where he and his Quaker community had been active in aiding freedom seekers. In Cincinnati he opened a free labor store at 6th and Elm which sold only items not produced by slave labor. He joined the interracial Vigilance Committee and turned his store and home into a station on the Underground Railroad which served freedom seekers like the Escape of the 28 through College Hill. In the *Reminiscences of Levi Coffin, The president of the Underground Railroad* (1876) 304-312, Levi Coffin recounts the Escape of 28 from Boone County through College Hill and on to Canada. The 28 posed as a funeral procession and safely found their way to College Hill where they were harbored.

knew them both quite well and you may rely on his statement as “gospel truth.”

Speaking of my brother, J.G. Wilson<sup>4</sup> at Farmers’ College, Murat Halstead was a student here at that time but from his early training and surroundings was not in the work of the Underground R.R. I think Oliver W. Nixon<sup>5</sup> now of Chicago, was one of the young Quakers mentioned. Most of the active ones at that time are dead. Our present President Harrison<sup>6</sup> was also here at that time. If you have any special questions and I can answer them, I will do so if you so desire. I met Mrs. Downs in the city yesterday P.M., whom I do not know, but she made herself known to me and told me that you wished for some information etc. I told her that I left my paper on my desk, having fully determined to finish them but was suddenly called to come to the city to oblige a sick friend. Wishing you success in your arduous undertaking I am,

Respectfully,  
H. N. Wilson

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<sup>4</sup>Joseph Gardner Wilson was born in Acworth, New Hampshire on December 13, 1826. He attended Cary’s Academy 1840--1842; graduated from Marietta College (Ohio) in 1846, he was a professor at Farmers’ College in 1849. He went on to graduate Cincinnati Law School 1852 and admitted to the bar; moved to Oregon Territory in 1852 and started practicing law in Salem, Oregon; Clerk of Territorial Legislature 1853; prosecuting attorney of Marion Co. 1860-1862; associate judge of state Supreme Court 1864-1866 and 1868-1870; Marietta College LL.D. 1865; Republican; was elected to 43rd Congress of the United States and served from March 4, 1873 until his death in Marietta, Ohio July 2, 1873.

<sup>5</sup>The parents of Oliver Nixon (Farmers’ College class of ’48) and his brother William Penn Nixon (class of ’53) were the first Quaker family in North Carolina to emancipate their slaves. They then became antislavery pioneers and moved to Newport, Indiana, a Quaker settlement. Newport (now Fountain City) had an anti-slavery library, newspaper and Tract Society, a school for free blacks and fugitives and a free produce store to encourage the purchase of goods produced by free labor. (Hough-Nixon papers, Quaker Archives, Earlham College) The Newport meeting was affiliated with the Indiana Yearly Meeting of Anti-slavery Friends which from 1843-1857 and supported them in taking a strong stand against slavery and for working with others to end slavery.

<sup>6</sup>Benjamin Harrison was the grandson of President William Henry Harrison and great-grandson of Judge John Cleves Symmes. He attended Farmers’ College for three years but left Farmers’ College to graduate from Miami University in 1852 because his fiancé’s father, Dr. Rev. John W. Scott, resigned from the Farmers’ College faculty and moved to Oxford, Ohio to teach. After graduation, Ben studied law and in 1853 married Caroline Lavina Scott. They moved to Indianapolis where he started his law practice. In the Civil War he served as Brigadier General of volunteers. He was a Republican and had abolitionist views. He served as President 1888-1893 after defeating incumbent President Grover Cleveland.

Dear Sir:

Your letter received several weeks since should have been answered at an earlier date, had not a press of other duties prevented me from doing so. The subject of your inquiry is one in which our family in the ante-bellum days were deeply interested and some of them took an active part in the work, but their life work is ended and they have received their reward. Were they here to tell what they saw and participated in during all these years, it would be far more satisfactory and interesting than aught I write as I was in the city school, coming home only



**The Greek Revival style Wilson House at 1502 Aster Place**



at the close of each week. My brother, Rev. D.M. Wilson, was a student several years during the '40's at what was then Cary's Academy<sup>7</sup>, the first educational institution established on

College Hill. He was of the stuff of which martyrs are made casting his first vote, in the township where we lived, as a "hated abolitionist"<sup>8</sup> with only one other brave enough to cast a similar ballot and that other was Mr. Van Zandt<sup>9</sup> whose famous trial in the Cincinnati Courts for "harboring and secreting runaway slaves" was one of the sensations of the times and for which he was imprisoned and heavily fined, which sent him forth a comparatively poor man from his once pleasant home near the present site of Glendale. During my brother's student life on

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<sup>7</sup>Cary's Academy for Boys, later called Pleasant Hill Academy, was founded in 1832 by Freeman Grant Cary in his home, now at 5651 Hamilton Ave. (National Register of Historic Places). The school continued to grow, with new buildings clustering about Hamilton and Belmont Aves. It finally was so large that in 1845, a board of trustees was chosen to build on the Cary Academy and open a college. The brick Farmers' College was built on what is now the site of the College Hill Recreation Center. Many sons of abolitionists studied at the Academy and Farmers' College. When James G. Birney moved to Cincinnati in 1836 to publish the anti-slavery *Philanthopist*, he enrolled his sons in the Cary Academy.

<sup>8</sup> Rev. David Morrison Wilson was born March 6, 1819 in Charleston, New Hampshire. He was educated at Farmers' College, Woodward College (original Woodward High School) and graduated from Lane Theological Seminary in 1847. He would have been old enough to cast his first vote in the 1840 election but it would have been his vote cast for the Liberty Party in the 1844 presidential election that would have marked him as a "hated abolitionist." The Liberty Party, the anti-slavery third party that in 1844 nominated former slave-holder and *Philanthopist* editor James G. Birney as their presidential candidate, drew away sufficient votes from the Whigs to deny their candidate, Henry Clay, the election and James Polk became president.

<sup>9</sup>John Van Zandt, also spelled Van Sandt, was a farmer that was caught in 1842 transporting a wagonload of escaping slaves from Lane Seminary in Walnut Hills to his home near Glendale. He was defended by Salmon P. Chase before the Supreme Court. Van Zandt, who lost the case, died a pauper due to court fees and fines in 1847 before the trial was over. So did the slave owner that sued him. Van Zandt was immortalized as the character John Von Trompe in Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. John Van Zandt's son, Nathan attended the Cary Academy and Farmers' College.

College Hill and his three years course at Lane Seminary<sup>10</sup>, Walnut Hills, also a prominent station of the Underground R.R., he had many opportunities for giving aid and succor to the fleeing fugitives. Were his journal of those days now available it would give much interesting and important information in regard to the ways and means then used to carry on the work. Though laboring as a missionary in Syria for fourteen years, his longest and hardest work was done in Tennessee, where he helped to have equal civil and religious privileges granted to all citizens irrespective of color or previous condition, but he died a few years since without seeing his great desire accomplished. His only son is now a professor in Marysville College, where higher educational privileges are granted to all. My sister, Mrs. M. J. Pyle<sup>11</sup> was for many years a teacher in the Ohio Female

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<sup>10</sup> Lane Theological Seminary was founded in 1829 to teach Presbyterian ministers. Freeman Cary's father, William Cary, had offered free land in College Hill to open the seminary, but the Kemper land in Walnut Hills was chosen to be the site. The seminary opened with no tuition as it was a Manual Labor School. The "Lane debates" in 1833 and 1834, were organized by Theodore Weld and influenced the thinking about slavery in the nation. There were two debate sessions, each lasting 18 days. The first debates were held behind closed doors, the second was open to the public. It pitted those advocating colonization (sending former slaves back to Africa) vs. immediate emancipation. It also brought the question of the right of students to have free discussion, a 1st amendment issue. After the 1834 session the Lane students followed their conscience and founded, without the permission of seminary trustees, a school to teach African-Americans to read in Cumminsville in the Hall of Free Discussion. For the statement signed by 51 of the "Lane Rebels," see "Lane Seminary: Defense of the Students," *The Liberator*, January 10, 1835, <http://www.oberlin.edu/external/EOG/LaneDebates/RebelsDefence.htm>. Salmon P. Chase attended these debates as did Harriet Beecher. In the aftermath of the debates, students at seminary were dismissed, as were one professor and one trustee. Some of the "Lane Rebels" continued to teach in their makeshift school, but 32 of the students left Cincinnati for Oberlin College, a liberal and integrated university located in Lorain County, OH.

<sup>11</sup> Mary Jane Wilson was born February 10, 1823 in Charleston, New Hampshire. She married Rev. George Washington Pyle, who was born Aug. 12, 1813 outside of Philadelphia, PA. into a Quaker family. He trained as a carriage maker and was working in North Carolina when he was converted during a camp meeting and decided to become a minister, joining the Presbyterian faith. Barely literate, he struggled to learn at Jacksonville Seminary (Jacksonville, Illinois, later renamed as Illinois College) while supporting himself in his trade. His room in college was over that of the Seminary's president, Rev. Edward Beecher, a brother of Harriet Beecher Stowe. Pyle graduated from Illinois College, B.A. 1840, and M.A. 1843. He also studied at Lane Seminary where he received his license to preach. He was a minister at a Presbyterian church in Reading, a city about eight miles from Cincinnati where he met Mary Jane Wilson, who with her family, had a farm in Reading before they moved to College Hill. They married in Reading Nov. 2, 1843 and in 1844 moved to Monticello Female Institute in Godfrey, Illinois where he took up his post as Chaplain. He died there Jan. 22, 1846 after a short illness, leaving Mary Jane with their son Theodore (born Oct. 21, 1844 and pregnant with their son George W. Pyle, Jr. Mary Jane and her sons returned to College Hill. Mary Jane became one of the original teachers at the Ohio Female College which was next door to the Wilson family home. She was very involved in anti-slavery and temperance work in College Hill. She died on Oct. 12, 1887 and is buried in Spring Grove Cemetery in Cincinnati.

College<sup>12</sup> and if we were living could give you vivid pictures of the



workings of the Underground R.R., for but a few who travelled by it to College Hill, but who were encouraged by her words of cheer and aided by her helping hand, but she died in 1887, being almost the last one who actively participated in those stirring scenes. A

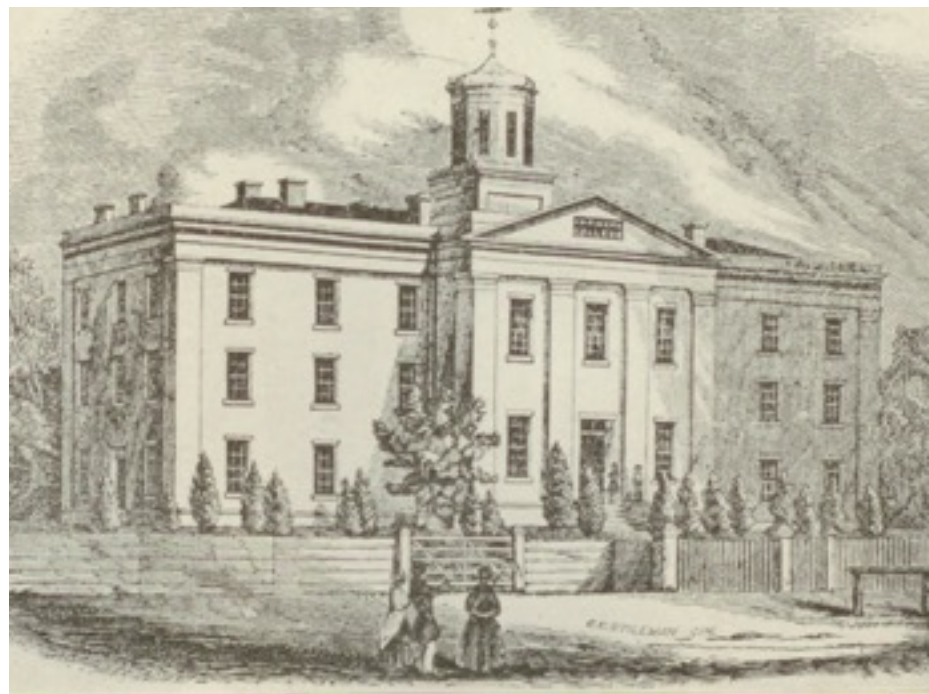
younger brother, J.G. Wilson, after his graduation at Marietta College, spent several years at a professor at Farmers' College, and were he living could tell of many exciting episodes, from the singular devices and disguises used to get the fugitives secretly housed while here, and safely away--no easy task as many of the students of those days were from the southern states and members of slaveholding families, while others were from the rural districts where pro-slavery and democratic principles made them more bitter in their prejudices than those born and bred south of Mason and Dixon's line, and always accustomed to the peculiar institution.

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<sup>12</sup>Ohio Female College in College Hill attracted young ladies of parents who supported the education of women such as Florence Birney, daughter of abolitionist James G. Birney. Students could enroll in the preparatory program, earn a four-year degree or even a two-year graduate degree. Mary Wilson Pyle was the matron and Botany professor at the college which was next to her home and close to the Farmers' College. Supreme Court Justice John McLean was the first president of the Board of Trustees. Judge McLean was anti-slavery and one of two dissenting opinions in the infamous 1857 Dred Scott Supreme Court decision. Samuel F. Cary, brother of Freeman G. Cary, also served on the first board.

The position of College Hill only six miles from the city on a high eminence making it a point of observation from the surrounding country, the only direct road leading to it being a narrow, dusty turnpike up the steep hill: the only conveyance being an omnibus, which, with all other vehicles, could be seen for a long distance. The two educational institutions located on the hill drew students from far and near, while nearly all the families residing on the hill were connected in some way with the two

colleges, all helping to make it a very suitable place for anything requiring secrecy and prompt action, but in some way never fully explained or understood, fugitives had begun coming,



through whom or by whose influence was never known--having come they were cared for and sent on their way rejoicing, others followed and thus the work continued to grow and increase until it became quite a heavy financial burden on the few who so long carried on the work. Though the fugitives were not really led by a cloud by day or a pillar of fire at night, yet a protecting power certainly led them by strange and devious ways to the long wished for haven. They seemed gifted with a kind of magnetic power, which, with their grips and pass words, drew those of

different localities together, making them choose the least travelled ways and the deep shadowed ravines and valleys lying on each side of our beautiful hill, soon seemed to be the popular route chosen by the wayfarers.

A few colored families lived in small cabins in the



sequestered places<sup>13</sup>, were stopping places until the benevolent people of the Hill could be secretly notified, “that more people had come, and that help was needed.” Stealthily creeping along to the well known house of Mr. G<sup>14</sup>, a tap on the window would arouse him. After a whispered consultation they would proceed to Mr. C’s<sup>15</sup> and Mr. W’s<sup>16</sup> and the sturdy gray haired men who knew no such word as fear and were equal to every emergency

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<sup>13</sup> In the 1850 census, there were a number of households of people of color living in the hillsides of College Hill. On Hamilton Avenue, Henry Blue from Kentucky, lived with his wife and son. In the outskirts of College Hill, at the beginning of Kirby Rd, were at least four households of free persons of color, in the "sequestered places" referred to. One of the families was Charlotte and William Barkshire, once enslaved in Boone County, KY. In a cottage on Professor's Row, were the Sexton, Phillip Younger and his family. These three families, all probably active on the UGRR, must used this network to leave College Hill for Canada after the enactment of the Fugitive Slave Law as they all appear in the 1851 census in Chatham, Upper Canada

<sup>14</sup>Mr. G is possibly Alanson Grant, the owner of the omnibus and the postmaster who lived across the street from Farmers' College or his brother Josiah. Both Grant brothers are related to President Ulysses Grant.

<sup>15</sup> Mr. C was probably Free Presbyterian minister Rev. Jonathan Cable “a trusted worker on the Underground Railroad” (Levi Coffin’s Reminiscences) and lived a few blocks from Farmers’ College. Freeman Cary also lived a few blocks from Farmers’ College.

<sup>16</sup> Mr. W. was Possibly one of the Witherbys who lived on Belmont Avenue not far from Farmers’ College. Thomas Branch Witherby married Mercy Van Zandt, first cousin to Alice and Phoebe Cary.



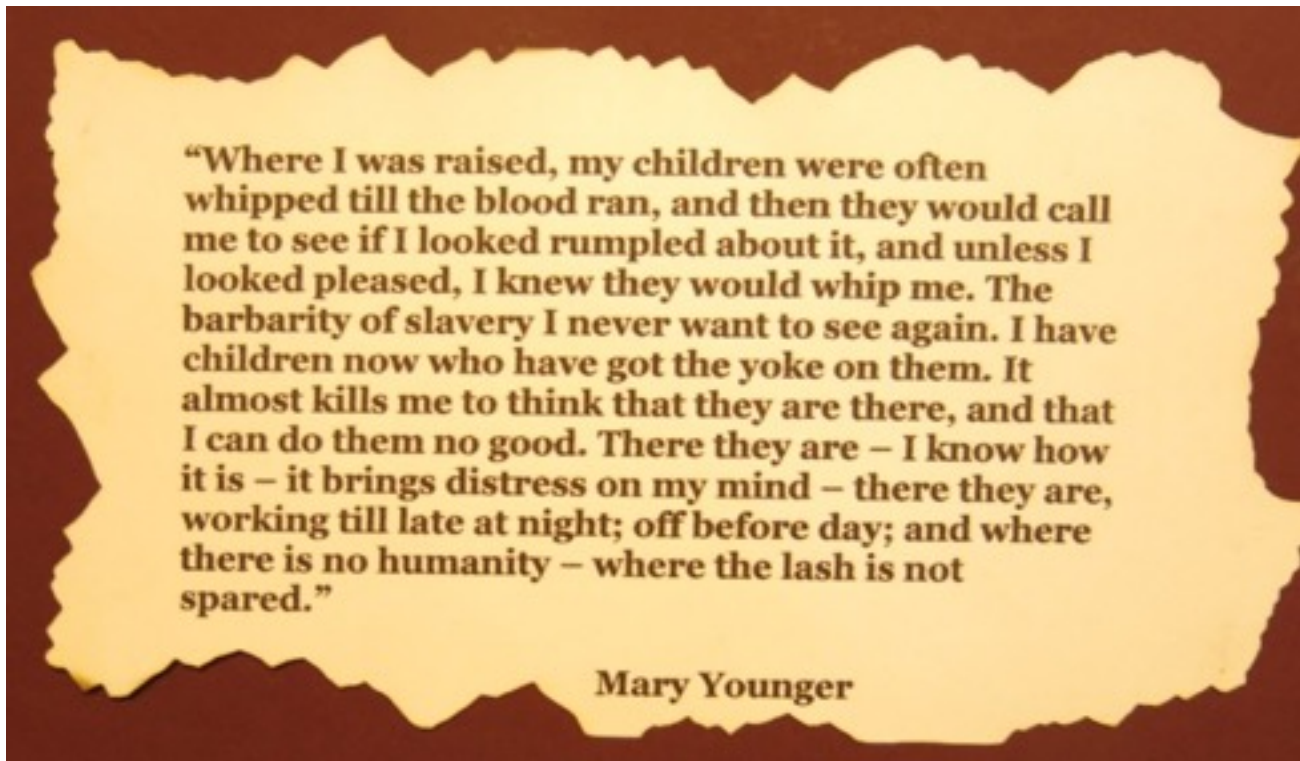
would leave their beds and go out into the darkness and have all of the newcomers provided with temporary quarters before the morning dawn. Many times did the tired but kind hearted women, though weary with the toils and cares of the previous day, leave their couches to help arrange safe hiding places, prepare food for the hungry and clothes for the almost naked, for in that plight were many who came through the briers and bushes which necessarily bordered the Underground R.R. There are names of true hearted, unselfish men and women on the unwritten records of that road, but their reward is sure from him that said "Inasmuch as you have done it unto one of the least of these, etc." Some of these kind hearted women did it without the hearty co-operation of their husbands. Two such bearing names well known and honored have long since gone to their reward.

The runaways of those days were generally of the brighter<sup>17</sup> and better sort of slaves, possessing tact and energy which made them dare to risk everything to gain their freedom. Some who lived in the free states had been freed by their masters and then sent North, and had made homes and friends among the whites, yet often either the husband or wife would lack the necessary papers from their former master. The hated "Fugitive Slave Law" was a new terror to them. We had one such case on College Hill that of quite an intelligent colored man, with a kind

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<sup>17</sup>Miss Wilson uses "bright" three times in this letter, always to describe light skin complexion. It was easier for a light-skinned freedom seeker to blend in predominately white environments, so they often were successful in their attempts to escape slavery. "By 1850 biracial Blacks made up 10-15% of the total Black population, 37% of all free Blacks and 8% of slaves." See Leonard M. Baynes, "If It's Not Just Black and White Anymore, Why Does Darkness Cast a Longer Discriminatory Shadow Than Lightness? An Investigation and Analysis of the Color Hierarchy," in *Mixed Race America and the Law: A Reader*, ed. Kevin R. Johnson (New York: New York University Press, 2003), 264.

hearted wife<sup>18</sup>. He was for some years a janitor at the College



and by his uniform politeness, fidelity, and industry, commanded the esteem, not only of the students, but of the residents of the Hill. They were well posted in the workings of the road, which brought so many of the race from the land of bondage and were

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<sup>18</sup> The “Janitor” and his wife that Harriet Wilson referred to, were probably Mary and Phillip Younger, the sexton of Farmers’ College Chapel found in the 1850 Millcreek Township Census, Hamilton Co., Ohio (August 12, 1850):

**Phillip Younger** born Va., age 60, occupation:sexton (Farmers’ College Chapel was the only church in Pleasant Hill in 1850 where he could have worked) **Mary Younger**, born Va., age 50. **Rebecca**, age 24, born Va., **Mary**, age 8, born Tn., **William**, 7, born Tn., **Thomas**, age 5, b Tn.

Harriet’s letter reveals that the “janitor’s wife” had no papers and, that the couple felt unsafe and left after the passage of Fugitive Slave act. Mary Younger had no papers and left after the 1850 Hamilton Co census as they appear in a local Chatham, Kent Co., Canada Directory where Philip Younger is listed as “grocer.” In the 1861 Canada Census, Chatham, Kent Co. they are enumerated as:

**Phillip Younger**, age 78, born US, gardener, Church of Scotland, **Mary**, age 56, **Mary A.**, age 18, **Thomas**, age 16, **Isaiah**, age 3

Harriets recounting a part of the 1853 “Escape of the 28” sorry claims the large group gathered before the journey northward in in the sexton’s living room and received a prayer of blessing for the journey but Dr. Bishop. It is possible that Harriet, in her 70’s, confused the Younger family with the next Farmers’ College Sexton who would have been there when the “Escape of the 28” came through College Hill. Both of these families of color must have taken part at different times in the interracial network of “agents” and “conductors” in College Hill that made the Ohio Underground Railroad of the 1840’s and 50’s so successful.

ever ready and willing to lend a helping hand to all such and frequently there would be several concealed in his humble house, which was indeed a veritable “Cave of Adullam”<sup>19</sup> to them, they did everything so wisely and so well that no “outsiders” suspected them of being engaged in such a work. Originally from South Carolina, the wife had been given her freedom, but without her “Free Paper.” After the enactment of the fugitive slave law, which sent alarm and consternation into hundreds of such families, they lived in a constant state of fear and dread of what might come to them. The kind old master was dead and the spendthrift sons needed money and would not be conscientious as to how it was obtained, so they felt they were no longer safe to remain where the grasping and unscrupulous heirs could seize her, so to the regret of all on the Hill, they reluctantly went to Canada, where after a few years both succumbed to the severity of the climate and died of consumption. “In the published “Reminiscences of Levi Coffin”, p 304 to 309, he speaks of John Fairfield<sup>20</sup> the Virginian, who did efficient work as conductor of numerous trains over the Underground R.R. He was on the Hill several times, making this a sort of “function” but was very careful not to be seen or known by any outsiders, so, of course, his calls were very brief. To despoil the slaveholders seemed to be his impelling motive, but it was said that he never lost a single passenger of the many that he brought from all parts of the South, but engineered all the trains “safe across the line into

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<sup>19</sup> Cave of Adullam is a Biblical reference to a stronghold in which David hid himself from King Saul. It was used at the time this letter was written to refer to a small group of political outsiders looking to overthrow the status quo.

<sup>20</sup>Jonathan Fairfield as a boy already hated slavery and he left Virginia as an adult to live in Ohio. Levi Coffin asked Fairfield if he'd had any worries about breaking the laws of horse stealing and slave stealing which were punishable by death. Fairfield answered with a firm “no”, “I would steal all the slaves in Virginia if could,” he said. He was always armed and is said to have his cloaks made for him with seven pockets for pistols. He became a very successful slave rescuer for hire. Fairfield had a home in Cabin Creek, a Black settlement north of Newport, Indiana. See Tom Calarco, *People of the Underground Railroad* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 2008), 115.

Canada.” My sister, Mrs. Pyle<sup>21</sup>, saw the large (28) company mentioned in those pages when they were hurriedly gathered, scared and trembling into the janitor’s house, waiting for the wagons to come to take them across the Ohio boundary into the safer Quaker settlements in Indiana. Some daring students from those peaceful homes had with others, made all the necessary arrangements<sup>22</sup> and with youthful ardor and courage were on the alert to “see them off,” yet careful not to be seen or known by any of their fellow



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<sup>21</sup>Mary Jane Wilson Pyle must have brought her experience living in the Alton, Illinois area to her teaching and abolitionist work in College Hill. While her husband, George W. Pyle, Sr. was a student at Illinois College, the 1837 riots at Alton, Illinois occurred, just a few miles away. Rev. Elijah P. Lovejoy was an abolitionist who published *The Alton Observer*, an anti-slavery newspaper, and who, like James Birney, had been chased from city to city by anti-abolitionists. A Presbyterian, his newspaper was also against Catholicism and pro-temperance. He was also a close friend of Rev. Edward Beecher. Unfortunately for Lovejoy, his printing press continued to be attacked and was broken and thrown into the nearby river. As a response, Lovejoy and Beecher called for a state anti-slavery convention to be held in Alton in Oct. 1837. Mary Wilson’s husband, George Pyle was a cosigner of the call for the convention. During the convention both pro and anti-slavery supporters were present and spoke. The abolitionists were drowned out by the pro-slavery followers which had packed the meeting. The resolutions that finally passed were all proslavery and Lovejoy was asked to leave town and to cease publishing his paper. Shortly after the convention, a new printing press was delivered to Lovejoy, a riot ensued and Lovejoy was shot five times and died within an hour, just a day before his thirty-fifth birthday, Nov. 7, 1837. A trial was held, but no one was found to be responsible for his killing. Beecher wrote a book about the riot and the abolitionists had a martyr. Against this emotional background, Pyle surely would have hardened his resolve and deepened his commitment to anti-slavery work. After his marriage and his return to the Alton area to work and live in the years right after Rev. Lovejoy’s death, Rev. Pyle and his wife Mary Wilson Pyle would have also been well-versed in this important event in history of the anti-slavery movement.

<sup>22</sup> We have identified at least eight strong, anti-slavery Quaker students were enrolled at Farmers’ College during the years 1847-1853, all from families who were members of the Indiana Yearly Meeting of Anti-Slavery friends. This was the “come-outer” yearly meeting connected to Levi Coffin and his abolitionist work in Indiana. We have copies of letters written by Oliver and William Penn Nixon from Farmers’ College to their parents in Newport describing visits to Levi Coffin here in Cincinnati. (Quaker archives at Earlham College, Hough-Nixon Collection) William Penn Nixon was a student at Farmers’ College in 1853 when the 28 escaped through College Hill.

Elihu Beard from Salem, Indiana was the son of UGRR conductor William Beard. Elihu left a diary of his senior year at Farmers’ College, which was published in 1999. See Elihu Burritt Beard, *A Diary for 1849: A Year in the Life of a College Student on the American Frontier*, ed. Barrett Thomas Beard (Port Angeles, WA: Nut Tree Press, 1999). It is also available as Kindle edition through Amazon from Morris Publishing of Kearney, NE, <http://www.amazon.com/Diary-1849-Elihu-Burritt-Beard-ebook/dp/B00GNIJB94>.

Both Daniel Hough and Nathan Doan, Oliver Nixon’s roommate who went on to teach in the integrated school in Harveysburg, Ohio, were from Newport, Indiana and had grown up in an active Underground Railroad community. See Dr. O.N Hough, “Un-named Anti-Slavery Heroes of Old Newport,”<sup>23</sup> September 1905, Box 2, Folder 5, Hough-Nixon papers, Earlham College, Quaker Archives. The paper was read before Wayne County Historical Society and was also published in the *Indiana Magazine of History* 3.3. (1907): 133-143.

students. The dangers to be avoided added yet to their interest and excitement. Cautiously and singly the inmates had been gathered and with darkened windows and watched doors, there was (sic) no signs of what was transpiring within. The



venerable Doctor Bishop<sup>23</sup>, the Scotch Divine and scholar, so long president of Miami University, but in his last years connected with Farmers' College, was in the crowded room, his towering, patriarchal figure reminding one of the prophet Elijah, in his own peculiar impressive manner he read an appropriate psalm and then kneeling in the midst of that motley group, in a most fervent prayer, he implored the protection and the blessing of the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, who led the children of Israel out of Egyptian bondage through the waters of the Red

Sea and the dangers of the wilderness, into the Promised Land, that He would likewise give the helpless ones then assembled, keep them safe from the dangers and the detention by the way and bring them to the land where they would be free.

Smothered expressions of "Pres de Lord" "Dats so" were heard on all sides and with the excitable peculiarities of their race several sprang to their feet examining, "Dat prayer will keep us safe. De Lord Bless him." "We will get through all right."

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<sup>23</sup> Dr. Rev. Robert Hamilton Bishop was a Scottish Presbyterian abolitionist minister who was a professor at Transylvania University in Kentucky where he taught James G. Birney. There, Bishop opened a sabbath school for black children and helped established the first black Presbyterian Church in Kentucky. He became the president of Miami University and served on the Lane Seminary Board of Trustees before he came to Farmers' College in 1845. He was forced to resign at Miami because of his stance on slavery and states' rights. He served on the board of Lane Seminary during the Lane Seminary Debates. When he came to Farmers' College, he brought with him his close friend and Miami Professor, Dr. Rev. John W. Scott who held similar views.

On another occasion when a similar company was gathered together, Mr. Pyle saw John Fairfield for the first time. He came into the room and held up a small lancet of a peculiar make and asked if any one present had ever seen it before. A woman sprang to her feet claiming, "That was my husband's, where is he?" The man had found his way to Canada and meeting John Fairfield and knowing of his work of "running the slaves" gave him the lancet, asking him to show it to every party of refugees being sure that his wife in time would make her way north and would thus learn where he was. Many such incidents could be given....It is a mystery never fully solved, how slaves from so many different localities could surmount so many perils and difficulties, through swamps, and forests, especially through thickly settled districts. The Polar Star was their guide during the night and a natural instinct when traveling during the day, yet they would meet at certain named points and be taken on together. Some self-reliant, cool-headed students trained to "plain living and right doing" by Quaker parents were in College and were faithful and efficient helpers in the "secret service" which was carried on without the help of "Telegraph or Telephone." A word, "look" or gesture was often the only signal that "Prompt help was needed" and it required much executive ability and tact as well as self-denial and labor to carry the "human freight" on through so many impending dangers.

All sorts of expedients were resorted to--men were sometimes dressed as women or women as men. Some were carried in barrels, others were hidden in bags of hay or grain, etc. The dangers most feared when leaving here were the toll gates and covered bridges over the Great Miami River at Hamilton as the "Southern Sentiment" was very strong there and all through Butler County. Many of the toll-keepers were known to be pro-slavery men who might not be adverse to

receiving a moneyed reward for helping masters get back their own property as all slaves were being considered, but never was one fugitive of the many who passed by our Hill retaken. When they once reached the non-combatant settlements of the Indiana Friends they were comparatively safe. It is somewhat remarkable that during those years of disturbance and excitement, none of the houses on College Hill were ever searched by the “Minions of the law” though frequently there were well grounded fears that such would be the case. One hot Sunday evening word came to College Hill that officers properly armed and equipped were coming to search for a number of runaways supposed to be in hiding here. They were scattered among several families and the unknown news was soon known to all. They were hurried consultations and planning. The wife of the College President<sup>24</sup> opened a trap-door leading from her large kitchen into a secret receptacle made for storing winter fruit, etc., and found that her guests could be safely stowed away there, and concealed by the carpeted floor. The women being “entertained” by our family were terribly frightened declaring “that they would die rather than be taken and carried back.” Though quite large in size they were ready and willing to crowd through a small aperture into a dark cellar where they would be safe. Some were stowed away under the hay, and it is said that a “valuable buy” was secreted in a dark place in the belfry of the College where all possible precautions had been taken and all felt that an ordinary search would not reveal them, they settled

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<sup>24</sup>Freeman Cary was the President of Farmers’ College from 1847-1854. Farmers’ College was founded in 1845 by Freeman Grant Cary to allow the students in his Cary Academy to continue their education. Many sons of abolitionists attended Farmers’ College in its early years. (James Birney, William Beard, John Van Zandt, Jessie Stubbs, Horace Bushnell, Jonathan Cable) It attracted strong anti-slavery faculty such as Rev. Dr. Robert Bishop and Dr. John Witherspoon Scott. In April 1846, abolitionist E.M. Gregory was elected chairman of the board of directors and Mt. Healthy abolitionist Charles Cheney became the secretary. On September 1st, 1853, Freeman Cary resigned from the presidency of the Faculty and became the Superintendent of the newly formed department of Scientific Agriculture and Horticulture. Farmers’ College flourished in the 1850’s and grew to have over 300 students.

down to patiently await the result, but it was a great relief to hear that the expected searching party had turned back to the city. They came to the toll-gate a mile below College Hill and told the toll man their business and asked for information as to suspected parties, etc. He was a clever man but a Democrat, and in sympathy with the South, yet was ignorant of his close proximity to the hated route. He told them that he really believed that there was no place on the Hill where a runaway could be concealed. The men believed the assertion and turned back and thus we were relieved of the indignity and danger of an "official search." Yet at the time there were some thousands of dollars worth of "human chattels" on and around the Hill. Children belonging to the protecting families were early taught to be reticent, to be "know nothings" regarding such matters, never by word or look to hint of such arrival of "guests" and even those sometimes brought along with fugitives seemed to be burdened with an unnatural sense of responsible silence seldom whimpering or crying aloud. The large rewards offered for valuable runaway slaves seldom caused them to be arrested and returned to slavery. Only very unprincipled, brutish men would stoop to such work. All others seemed to feel that such "gain" would indeed be "blood money."

A young and bright mulatto, so trusted by his master as to be hired out on a river steamer earning large wages for him, learned that owing to financial embarrassment of his owner, there was a possibility of him being sold, ran off while the boat was at the wharf and found his way to College Hill, reaching the house where we lived in the wee small hours of the night. A young man who knew of his coming went to the city in the morning and saw large handbills giving a minute description and offering \$500 reward for information that would lead to his capture. They did not get the desired information, and he was



happy not to get money in that way. To show the peculiar difficulties attending the coming and going of the colored people from College Hill, frequently those in hiding were slaves of those having sons in College. An old colored woman while working in our kitchen saw the nephew of her Kentucky master at our table in the dining room, but he did not see her. She was a good cook and hired out at a country hotel, so prepared everything as usual Saturday night, even to dressing chickens for breakfast, then tied up a few things and joined a company making their way to freedom. Being unable to keep up with them she lay down and rolled down to the river where skiffs were in waiting. She reached the Ohio side in a sadly dilapidated condition. When she came to us she was wearing a dress given by the mother-in-law of one of Ohio's most noted Democratic politicians. All had to be very careful to efface every mark by which the donators could be identified were the slaves retaken.

Frequently when at home on Saturday and asking for some article of clothing, I would receive the reply, "Gone to Canada." The ruling principle which seemed to actuate the majority of the fugitives causing them to run away was the fear of being sold south. Some of them seemed to regard their "Massa and Missis" with affection and they seemed to hate to leave them, but the fear of what might be impelled them to get away.

One of the residents of our hill was made an anti-slavery man by seeing a strong, black man roughly dragged from the cars at Cumminsville by a U.S. Marshall and carried back to slavery. One of the last fugitives who came to College Hill, was a smart active young fellow who had made his way to one of the small stations on the Hamilton and Dayton R.R. Opening the car door he confronted his master with an officer. Springing back he tightly held the closed door until the train was under full

headway, then jumped and ran for life and liberty. The pursuers dared not follow him and endeavored to have the train stopped, but the train men refused and they were carried on the next station several miles distant. Meanwhile the fugitive was making his unknown way over the Hill. Coming to some men at work cutting wood, he threw himself upon their mercy and told his story. They directed him the best way to College Hill, telling him that he would find kind people there who would help him.

Sometime after the pursuing party came to the same men, asking if they had seen a black fellow, etc. The men professed to have not seen anyone answering the description and skillfully evaded all their questions. Finally the master said “We may as well go home. Jim is too smart for us to catch him” so they reluctantly retraced their way, minus the \$100 dollars worth of flesh and blood which they had hoped to take with them. He was forwarded on, but the work had become too well known and the peculiarly difficult circumstances attending it in College Hill, it was deemed wiser to have it carried on by other less exposed routes so in the years immediately preceding the civil war, there were comparatively none coming to the Hill yet those interested in the cause of human rights did their part financially to help on the work and when the great conflict came, when our country was made to suffer so fearfully for the sins of the parents and the framers of the government our hill did not escape the terrible “baptism of blood” which marked our bravest and best as martyrs laying down their lives in southern battlefields. My noble brother<sup>25</sup> was one of the first to lay down his life, the victim to that spirit which would gladly have perpetuated the fearful curse of slavery for ages to come.

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<sup>25</sup>Jesse Parsons Wilson died 2/28/1862 south of Nashville, Tennessee, near Murfreesboro in the Battle of Stones River. He was killed during a night ambush while he was on picket duty. He was Captain in the 4th Regiment of the Ohio Volunteer Cavalry.

An incident which came under my personal notice was that of a bright colored girl, belonging formerly to a member of Congress from Missouri and who had spent several seasons in Washington with her master and mistress. The former was quite intemperate and finally became fearfully so, when unable to go out the slave was made to get him liquor and wait upon him. This her mistress forbade her doing, so between the two she had a fearful time. Her mistress told her husband that the girl should not wait on him, that she would have her sold when they reached home. The girl heard the threat so while the boat lay at a Cincinnati wharf, she stole secretly away, starting up the street not knowing where she was going. She met a kind looking woman and told her what she had done. She took her to a nice colored family, for a few days until the search would be over and finally secured her a good place a few miles from the city. She had been there several years when I knew her and was industrious, faithful and quite happy, until a lady from near the girl's old home in Missouri came out there with some company from the city, and recognize her as the slave of her neighbor, who had mourned her loss and had made diligent search for her, but all in vain. The lady assured her that she would not let them know of her present home, but the poor girl was so fearful and anxious that she was miserable and unhappy all the time, fearing lest someone for a expected reward would stealthily kidnap her and carry her back into slavery. She dared not step out of the door after dark or be left alone in the house at any time. The continual strain and anxiety was too much for her, and her health failed, so to save her life means was provided by her friends and she was sent to Canada to swell the colored population in the Queen's dominion.

## The Wilson Family History

The Wilson house was an active station on the UGRR until at least 1852. In the 1850 census, in addition to the parents were four adult children, three grandchildren, Aunt Peggy, and an unrelated young man (either a boarder or family employee). Of the family- Mary Jane Pyle, David, Joseph and Harriet were all active participants and their participation was mentioned in Harriet's letter. Another son, Jesse, fought and died early in the Civil War.

The large Wilson family came from Acworth, New Hampshire, and traces their line to Rev. John Wilson, first minister in Boston. They came west in 1828 after months of traveling by wagon, canal, steamer and flatboat, settling first in Columbia. Samuel built them a house and farmed, the boys chopped wood to earn money, Sally worked for a tailor, and Peggy, Sally's widowed sister, made and sold quilts. After a few years, it was time to try another community for "Glad we were to leave Columbia (today Columbia-Tusculum) where society was low and a grog shop at our very door."

In 1831 they purchased a rundown farm from an estate in Sycamore Township, near Reading, Ohio. The seven children helped however they could. The farm was 166 acres, only partially cleared and contained a log cabin. At a camp meeting Sally became converted to Presbyterianism in 1835, joining the Reading Presbyterian Church. The rest of the family joined this church by 1840 taking the temperance pledge and speaking out against slavery. While George Pyle was a student at Lane Seminary, he served for three months as the pastor of the Reading Presbyterian Church. Daughter Mary Jane married George Washington Pyle moved with him to the Illinois. The Wilson family was criticized for their abolitionist views and

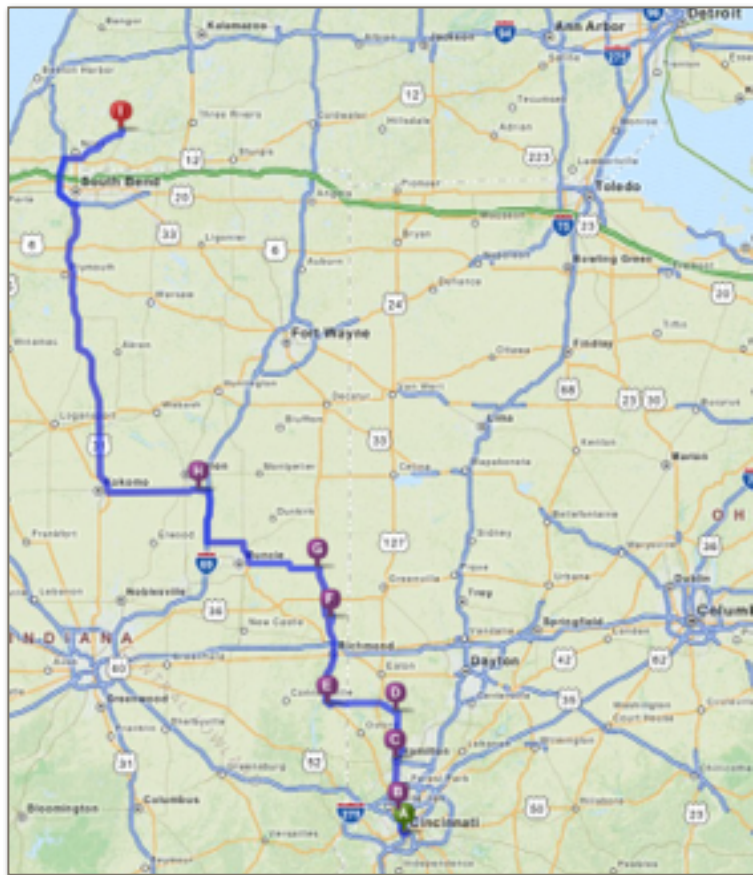
after a string of bad luck, they decided to move to College Hill. The Wilsons bought land from Freeman Cary and stayed with him until their house was built (1849), incorporating the tiny cabin already on the property.

The oldest brother, Theophilus Wilson was very involved in the anti-slavery movement, but never lived in College Hill. In 1836, he wanted to become a minister. His father refused so in March 1837 he left home and bought Congress-land in Mercer County, Ohio. Here, abolitionist Augustus Wattles had already established an African American farming community and Underground Railroad station, Carthagenia, in 1835. Wattles had both attended and taught at Lane Seminary and was a friend of Theodore Weld and was the Ohio Anti-Slavery Society representative in charge of education for free blacks in Ohio. Carthagenia had a mixed-race Manual Labor School founded by Wattles. Theophilus later left Carthagenia in 1843 purchasing the town site of New Corydon, Jay Co., Indiana. He also bought the grist and saw mills there, opened the first store, a tannery and was the first postmaster. He later became a state Senator, representing Jay and Randolph counties. He returned to Cincinnati, buying property in Avondale in 1855, although he kept land in Indiana. He spoke at the Golden Wedding Anniversary of Levi and Catherine Coffin in 1874, recounting working with Levi at the Colored Orphans Asylum. He also served as executor of Levi Coffin's will and as a trustee of Catherine Coffin estate and pallbearer at her funeral.

## **“Come-outers” cooperate to support Freedom Seekers on their way to Canada**

By 1841, a significant number of Quakers in Indiana, Ohio, and Iowa, opposed slavery strongly enough to support “radical abolition” and reject colonization and gradual emancipation. They started to work with non-Quaker abolitionists from other anti-slavery churches which was not approved by the church elders. This brought a warning to the leaders and by 1843, fourteen meetings formed the Indiana Yearly Meeting of Anti-Slavery Friends, a “come-outer” sect. These midwestern meetings worked closely together to transport freedom seekers along the “Quaker Line,” encourage free black farmers, establish black settlements and to found the integrated Union Literary Institute. They sent many of their sons to Farmers’ College in College Hill, Ohio where they could study and be ready to alert the next UGRR “station” when necessary.

In 1847, Levi Coffin moved to Cincinnati where he joined the interracial Vigilance Committee and worked with the leaders from Zion Baptist Church. The Quakers created a route north from Cincinnati connecting six anti-slavery Quaker meetings. It is documented that the Vigilance Committee assisted many escapes along this route, such as the 1847 Perry Sanford escape from Kenton County to Cassopolis, Michigan, the site of the so-called “Kentucky Raid” which influenced the passage of the Fugitive Slave Law and the 1853 Escape of the “28.”



There were also “Come-outers” in the Baptist, Presbyterian, and Methodist churches in the West. Rev. Jonathan Cable in College Hill, like Rev. John Rankin in Ripley, was a Presbyterian minister in the new “Free Presbyterian” synod. The

Quakers and the Presbyterian route went to Cassopolis, where they connected to the Wesleyan Methodists, who led Freedom Seekers on to Canada. Laura Haviland, a Wesleyan Methodist, often visited Levi Coffin and spent three weeks in College Hill in 1851. Laura Haviland and Henry Bibb met the “28” as they crossed over into Canada. The “Come-outers” planned and supported many successful escapes to Canada and were instrumental in assisting in purchasing land and creating communities in Upper Canada.

letter on map	<b>“Come-outer” Route to Canada</b>	Miles to next stop
a.	Riverfront or Union Baptist Church, Cincinnati	7.6 miles
b	Farmers’ College (at least eight members of the Indiana early Meeting of Anti-Slavery Friends studied at Farmers’ College between 1847-1855, the years that College Hill was on an active route)	15 miles
c.	Hamilton, Ohio (Coffin often stayed with friends 4 miles from Hamilton)	14 miles
d.	Elk Creek Meeting, West Elton, Ohio (Ind. meeting of Anti-Slavery Friends) Lewis Stubbs, son of Jesse Stubbs, was a student at Farmers’ College in 1853 at the time of the Escape of the 28 through West Elton.	22.5 miles
e.	Salem Meeting in Liberty, Indiana (Ind. meeting of Anti-Slavery Friends) William Beard who transported through College Hill was a member of this meeting. His son Elihu, attended Farmers’ College in 1849-50.	27 miles
f.	Newport Meeting, Newport, Indiana (Ind. meeting of Anti-Slavery Friends)	16 miles
g.	Cabin Creek/ Cherry Grove Meeting (Ind. meeting of Anti-Slavery Friends) Cabin Creek meeting was near Cabin Creek, a black settlement where Jonathan Fairfield had a store.	54miles
h.	Deer Creek Meeting, Gas City/Jonesboro (Ind. meeting of Anti-Slavery Friends)	145 miles
i.	Youngs Prairie Meeting, Cassopolis, Michigan (Ind. meeting of Anti-Slavery Friends)	145 miles
	From Cassopolis, the route used the Wesleyan Methodist to Detroit	170 miles



Phillip and Mary Younger, their daughter, Rebecca, and grand children were a part of a group of free colored families that lived in College Hill before the Fugitive Slave Law forced many to go to Canada for protection. The Youngers went to Chatham-Kent Upper Canada in 1851 with the Henry Blue, the Charlotte and William Barkshire, and other families. Both Phillip and Mary gave interviews to Benjamin Drew: *A North-Side View of Slavery. The Refugee: or the Narratives of Fugitive Slaves in Canada. Related by Themselves, with an Account of the History and Condition of the Colored*

*Population of Upper Canada:*

“Before I came here, I resided in the free States. I came here in consequence of the passage of the Fugitive Slave Bill. It was a hardship at first; but I feel better here--more like a man--I know I am--than in the States. I suffer from want of education. I manage by skill and experience and industry--but it is as if feeling my way in the dark.”

***Phillip Younger***

In the 1860 Canada census, Isaiah Younger was 3 years old but he was born in Chicago. This c. 1890 photograph is from the Vivian G. Harsh Research Collection of Afro-American History and Literature of the Chicago Public Library. Written on the back was only “The Younger Family.” Is this Isaiah Younger and his family?