

The Escape of the 28

The story of the successful escape of twenty-eight "Freedom Seekers" from Boone County, Kentucky through College Hill and on to Freedom in Canada



(Thanks to Sylvia Rummel, a descendant of Rev. Jonathan Cable for this picture of Rev. Cable and Levi Coffin with an unidentified group)



©Betty Ann Smiddy and Diana Porter

Escape of the '28'

In the early years of the 19th century, Denmark Vesey and Nat Turner led rebellions against the institution of slavery. However, most resistance to slavery took the form of running away. At first it was younger, stronger men who emancipated themselves and set off to walk to freedom. As word got back about the best routes north and as free black communities north of the Ohio River were large enough to support a network of assistance, more groups began to escape. An interracial network in Cincinnati, known as the Underground Railroad, continued to grow and be more capable of successfully assisting larger groups in their flight. Newspapers referred to these escapes as “slave stampedes.” One of the largest and best documented flights to freedom began on April 2, 1853¹ named by Levi Coffin as “The Company of Twenty-Eight Fugitives.”²

It started in Petersburg, in Boone Co., Kentucky. John Fairfield,³ a white man, and a slave rescuer for hire, engaged in the subterfuge of buying poultry for market for several weeks in an area of the county.⁴ Being white and in Kentucky, he was assumed to be pro-slavery and initially the slaves believed that also.

“On Sunday last week, about twenty slaves belonging to citizens of Boone county, escaped from their masters. They belonged to different individuals, and so well was the plan of escape matured, that at last accounts, nothing had been heard of them. They were without doubt aided by Abolitionists of Ohio or Indiana. The people of Boone county, a may well be supposed, are justly excited and indignant at this new and heavy outrage upon their rights.”
from the Louisville Daily Courier, April 11, 1853.

¹ Fitch Reed, letter to Wilbur H. Siebert, March 23, 1893, Wilbur H. Siebert Collection (Columbus: Ohio Historical Society).

² Levi Coffin, *Reminiscences of Levi Coffin*, (Cincinnati, OH: Robert Clarke & Co., 1880), 304–311. <http://docsouth.unc.edu/nc/coffin/coffin.html>

³ Levi Coffin, *Reminiscences of Levi Coffin*, (Cincinnati, OH: Robert Clarke & Co., 1880), 428–446. <http://docsouth.unc.edu/nc/coffin/coffin.html>
John Fairfield was a Virginian who although he grew up around slavery, despised the institution. He was one of a small number of abolitionists that was willing to go into southern states to bring out slaves. He was often hired by former slaves there to free their relatives in the South.

⁴ Merrill S. Caldwell, “A Brief History of Slavery in Boone County, Kentucky,” June 21, 1957.

When they learned he was their friend, they paid him for his help with the little money they had accumulated from making baskets, selling their produce and eggs or what they were allowed to keep when they were “hired out.” On a rainy Saturday night April 2, 1853,⁵ a group of twenty-eight, most from the same community with many fleeing from the Parker and Terrill families,⁶ ran away hoping their absence would not be discovered until church time later on Sunday morning. They must have walked north along the ridge to Taylor’s Creek and then followed the creek to a place on the Kentucky shore, across from Lawrenceburg, Indiana where they met John Fairfield.

One of the “freedom seekers” was identified in the newspaper as Washington Parker. Washington, “belonging to Harvey Parker,⁷ was quite a favorite with his master and all who knew him, and had every privilege of a white man. He rode the best horse and saddle there was on the farm, with perfect impunity, and had several acres of land at his disposal for cultivation; and on Sabbaths was one of the best dressed and sauciest looking fellows at church”⁸ and now he was on his way to a new life in Canada.

Three skiffs⁹ were tied northeast of Petersburg on the banks of the Ohio. All crowded aboard these stolen skiffs and carefully made their way across the swift current of the rain-swollen river. Fairfield had no compunction for stealing the skiffs and according to Levi Coffin, Fairfield said “slaves are stolen property, and it is no harm to steal boats or anything else that will help them gain their liberty.”¹⁰

⁵ Louisville Daily Courier, April 11, 1853.

⁶ By comparing 1853 vs. 1854 slave tax lists, Boone Co., Ky., it can be inferred that the owners were Richard Parker, Harvey Parker, Fannie Parker and G. or W. P. Terrill. Bridget Striker, Boone County Public Library.

⁷ *Daily Cleveland Herald*, April 16, 1853.

⁸ *Brooklyn Circular* (Brooklyn, NY), unsigned article, April 23, 1853.

⁹ The American Anti-slavery Society also kept skiffs at crossing points.

¹⁰ Levi Coffin, *Reminiscences of Levi Coffin*, (Cincinnati, OH: Robert Clarke & Co., 1880), 306. <http://docsouth.unc.edu/nc/coffin/coffin.html>

On the way across, the overcrowded skiff containing Fairfield sank. He led those from his boat, struggling in thick mud and sand, wading



(The abandoned Skiff, F. E. Hunter, 1850 © Museo Thyssen-Bornemisza, Madrid)

with them through the remainder of the distance in cold, waist-high water to the Indiana bank, where they joined the others of their group.

The band followed the bank of the Ohio River from Indiana into Cincinnati. The delay of waiting for passengers of the sunken skiff cost them precious time and when daylight came they could not enter Cincinnati, for their wet and muddy appearance would give them away. Fairfield hid them hungry and cold in the overgrown wet ravines below the mouth of the Mill Creek, while he went into Cincinnati to request aid.

Fairfield went to a friend of his, John Hatfield,¹¹ a black barber and steamboat steward, whose home was on 5th Street between Race and Elm. A deacon of the Zion Baptist church,¹² Hatfield was the leader of Cincinnati's Vigilance Committee that watched out for the rights of free blacks and with his wife Francis and daughter Sarah, assisted many fleeing slavery. Hatfield sent for their mutual Quaker friend,

Levi Coffin, and the Vigilance Committee. They all came quickly; as such a large group of fugitives would be in danger of discovery.

Together with Fairfield, they formed this plan – two coaches would be hired from a specific German stable in the city while the fugitives were taken from their hiding places in buggies. A procession was to be formed with the buggies and coaches, as if going to a funeral, and slowly move along the road towards Wesleyan Cemetery¹³ in Cumminsville, the first integrated cemetery in the Greater Cincinnati area. Once there, they were to skirt the edge of the cemetery and take Colerain Pike until they reached the road going up into College Hill. There, they would find black families to hide them.

Rev. Jonathan Cable, a Free Presbyterian minister, abolitionist and “stockholder” in the Underground Railroad, who lived near Farmers’ College¹⁴ would make the arrangements in College Hill. Hatfield’s buggy was to depart from the funeral procession in Cumminsville and go straight to Cable’s house to notify him that a group was coming.

While the coaches and buggies were being procured and volunteers assembled, Hatfield’s family and neighbors put together hot coffee and food to be taken directly to the fugitives, as they were hungry and cold. Blankets, too, were taken and while they ate, the plan was explained to them. One woman had an infant that was crying and suffering much from the cold and rain. She wrapped the baby tightly to her with a blanket. The women rode in the carriages, which were closed, and the men walked along side.

All proceeded as planned with the cortege. The buggies and coaches made it safely up the muddy College Hill road, “but, sad to relate, it

¹¹ Nikki Taylor, *Frontiers of Freedom: Cincinnati's Black Community, 1802–1866* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2005) John Hatfield was a free black born in Pennsylvania in 1804. The Hatfield family left Cincinnati in 1855, settling in Amherstburg, Canada, across from the mouth of the Detroit River.

¹² Then located on 3rd street, between Race and Elm.

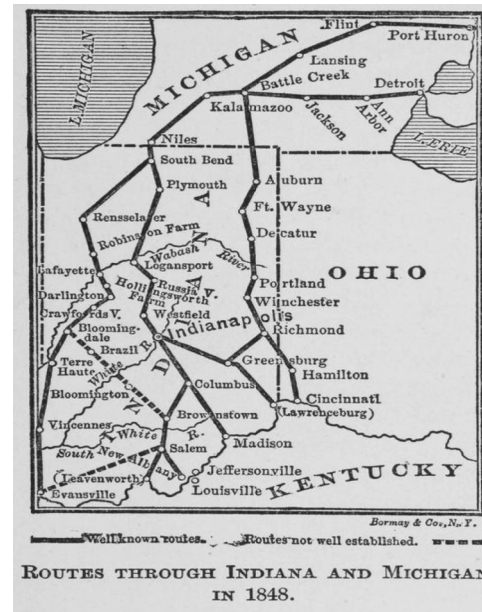
¹³ Methodist–Episcopal burying ground at that time.

¹⁴ On Belmont Ave.

was a funeral procession not only in appearance, but in reality”¹⁵ for when they arrived at College Hill, the suffering baby had died and would be buried in a College Hill cemetery¹⁶ the next day.

In the meantime, the “noble ladies of College Hill”¹⁷ had gotten together with Rev. Cable and decided what clothing and shoes would be necessary. Some travelers had lost their shoes in the mud and many were underdressed for the weather and this long journey. Their thin clothes were already ripped from going through woods and hiding in the overgrown ravines. Rev. Cable drove to Levi Coffin’s house, as it was the storeroom for the Anti-Slavery Sewing Society and picked up the necessary clothing. Coffin and Cable went to purchase shoes. The anti-slavery families of College Hill donated whatever additional clothing was needed.

Rev. Cable and black families of College Hill hid the fugitives as preparations were made. Their number once again was twenty-eight¹⁸ as another fugitive had arrived during the night and joined their company.¹⁹



Their route was decided-- first they would go through Hamilton to West Elkton²⁰ and then through Eaton and Paris to Newport (Fountain City), Indiana where Coffin had previously lived.

As evening approached, they assembled in the house of the black college caretaker where Rev. Dr. Robert Bishop read a psalm and then,

(1848 map courtesy of the New York Public Library)

“kneeling ... 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.”²¹

This large group set off on their journey in three covered wagons each drawn by two horses. In pursuit were three men, slave catchers, from Boone County. The slaveholders offered a reward of \$9,000 for capturing the group and \$1,000 for a lead on their location. They offered this much since one of the fugitives was said to have been purchased for \$12,000²² just eight months before, one was Washington

¹⁵ Levi Coffin, *Reminiscences of Levi Coffin*, (Cincinnati, OH: Robert Clarke & Co., 1880), 309–310. <http://docsouth.unc.edu/nc/coffin/coffin.html>

¹⁶ There were two cemeteries across the township line from College Hill at that time, Gard Cemetery on North Bend Rd. and Cary Cemetery at the corner of Hamilton and North Bend Road (the Kroger's parking). Probably the infant was buried at Cary Cemetery, since the Cary's were abolitionists.

¹⁷Levi Coffin, *Reminiscences of Levi Coffin*, (Cincinnati, OH: Robert Clarke & Co., 1880), 304–311. <http://docsouth.unc.edu/nc/coffin/coffin.html>

¹⁸The *Liberator* (Boston, MA), April 20, 1853 reported that there were three small children, five young women and eleven young men. Many other letters to Wilbur H. Siebert also contained various numbers of participants in this escape. This has led to speculation that Coffin had exaggerated the number involved in this escape to bolster the abolitionist cause. Levi Coffin also tells in his account of this escape that their journey went smoothly and they arrived “with little delay”. We chose to use many sources to expand on Coffin’s telling of this story.

¹⁹Harriet N. Wilson, Letter to Wilbur H. Siebert, April 14, 1892, Wilbur H. Siebert Collection (Columbus:Ohio Historical Society)

²⁰ A.T. Maddock, Letter to Wilbur H Siebert, September 10, 1894, Wilbur H. Siebert Collection (Columbus:Ohio Historical Society). At West Elkton the station keepers were Jesse and John W Stubbs and John Maddock. Solomon Tolbert had a large covered spring wagon used in transporting fugitives.

²¹ Harriet N. Wilson, Letter to Wilbur H. Siebert, April 14, 1892, Wilbur H. Siebert Collection (Columbus:Ohio Historical Society)

²² \$1,200 would be a more typical price for one adult slave.

Parker, a favorite with his master, and another was a Baptist preacher,²³ who surely knew how to read.

“The Aurora (Ind.) Standard tells a story of a slave in Boone Co., Ky., who had learned to read, and had succeeded in obtaining a copy of ‘Uncle Tom’s Cabin,’ which he read by stealth to his fellow slaves. The glowing pictures given of the sympathy and aid received by George and Eliza, in their escape from Kentucky to Canada, so operated on their imaginations, that 25 of them ran off on the evening of the 2d April, and, so far as we have heard have not been recaptured. What adds to the baseness of the act on the part of several of these runaways is, that they were the property of a minister of the gospel of Christ!.... Altogether the facts in this case go to show, in a most affecting manner, the pernicious tendency of novel reading upon slaves.”²⁴

The night the fugitives arrived in Newport, Indiana, their pursuers stayed in Castine, Indiana. If the wagon drivers hadn’t taken a longer road from Paris accidentally, they might have been apprehended. The slave catchers narrowly missed them at Newport having lost their trail in Eaton; that night the fugitives changed their route and went to Cabin Creek in Randolph Co., Indiana for their safety.²⁵

Cabin Creek was a settlement of over 100 black, mulatto and a few interracial families. They were mostly from Guilford County, North Carolina and many had a relationship with the Quakers at Newport, Indiana. Cabin Creek was the perfect hiding place. In 1824, a tornado struck the area and caused enormous trees to make an impassable cluster of timber, making it difficult to access. John Fairfield had settled in the Cabin Creek community and opened up a store on

Barrack’s Corner when he first left Virginia.²⁶ After spending more than a week in the free black community of Cabin Creek, the “28” had a glimpse of their future life in Canada. Having eluded the slave hunters, they were ready again to travel.

The group had with them 52 rounds of ammunition acquired along the way along with guns, pistols, knives and clubs. If accosted they would fight for their freedom rather than going back to angry masters. Fairfield’s overcoats were “intentionally loose fitting to conceal a belt holding seven revolvers. The wide openings for the pockets cut high on the garment, actually had no pockets”²⁷ so that he could “withdraw his weapons unperceived.”²⁸

Each night they were further along their way, at a different station with fresh horses and a new conductor. Fairfield was with them still. They moved through Indiana and into Michigan, where they spent the night in Coldwater among Wesleyan Methodists, rather than with the usual Quakers. At Cambridge, Michigan they were met by Fitch Reed.²⁹

Reed took them with four wagons from his house, starting at sunset, and arrived at Ypsilanti before morning where the group stayed with Asher Aray, an African-American conductor, and William W. Harwood. That night Aray drove them to Detroit. Alerted to their arrival by John M. Coe, another African-American conductor who went ahead of them by train, 200 people gathered to greet them in Detroit.

²⁶ Penny Ralston, “The Cabin Creek Settlement: The Historical Study of a Black Community in Randolph County” Honors paper for Purdue University, 1971. <http://cardinalscholar.bsu.edu/handle/handle/192133>

²⁷ Carol E. Mull. *The Underground Railroad in Michigan* (Jefferson, North Carolina: McFarland & Co. 2010), 132.

²⁸ “‘Freedom’s Railway’ Reminiscences Of The Brave Old Days Of the Famous Underground Railroad Line,” *Detroit Tribune*, Jan. 7, 1886.

²⁹ Fitch Reed, letter to Wilbur H. Siebert, March 28, 1893. Wilbur H. Siebert Collection (Columbus: Ohio Historical Society).

²³ *The Underground Railroad in Darke County, Ohio*. Wilbur H. Siebert Collection (Columbus: Ohio Historical Society), 322–325. “Slave-preachers” were common in Boone County and would have been taught to read the Bible (Bridget Striker, Boone County Public library).

²⁴ *Brooklyn Circular* (Brooklyn, N.Y.) unsigned article, April 23, 1853.

²⁵ *The Underground Railroad in Darke County, Ohio*. Wilbur H. Siebert Collection (Columbus: Ohio Historical Society), 322–325.

STOCKHOLDERS OF THE UNDERGROUND R. R. COMPANY Hold on to Your Stock!!

The market has an upward tendency. By the express train which arrived this morning at 3 o'clock, fifteen thousand dollars worth of human merchandise, consisting of twenty-nine able-bodied men and women, fresh and sound, from the Carolina and Kentucky plantations, have arrived safe at the depot on the other side, where all our sympathising colonization friends may have an opportunity of expressing their sympathy by bringing forward donations of ploughs, &c., farming utensils, pick axes and hoes, and not old clothes; as these emigrants all can till the soil. N.B.—Stockholders don't forget the meeting to-day at 3 o'clock at the ferry on the Canada side. All persons desiring to take stock in this prosperous company, be sure to be on hand.

Detroit, April 19, 1853.

By Order of the
BOARD OF DIRECTORS.

(Courtesy of Bentley Historical Museum, University of Michigan)

Abolitionists in Detroit printed a handbill asking for donations of farming supplies for the group. So many of those already living in Windsor needed clothing, meat, flour and other supplies. Fitch Reed's Wesleyan Methodist group raised three wagons full of necessities and took them to the English Barracks in Windsor where they were distributed the next day.

A newspaper article of the time said, "We were informed of their coming by anti-slavery telegraph, just fifteen hours before their arrival, so that we knew within ten minutes of the time that they would arrive."³⁰ By 1853, the Underground Railroad was capable of moving "self-emancipators" quite efficiently and safely north through Indiana and Michigan and on to their new lives in the settlements in Canada.³¹

Fairfield telegraphed Windsor that they were ready to cross. As they were loaded on forty sailboats³² and pushed off from the banks of the Detroit River, they spontaneously raised their voices and sang with joy "I am on my way to Canada where colored men are free"³³ and shot off their firearms. When they arrived in Canada, some dropped to their knees praising God. At 8 a.m., April 19, 1853 when the ferryboats started for the day, the station keepers crossed the Detroit River and joined the celebration.

Fairfield is reported to have said at this moving site, "This scene has doubly paid me for risking my life, my liberty, and my fortune for God's very poorest of the poor."³⁴

³⁰ *The Liberator* (Boston, MA) April 20, 1853.

³¹ Bryan Prince, *I Came As A Stranger* (Toronto, Ontario: Tundra Books 2004). The Chapter "Learning to Live in Liberty" describes the early settlements in Ontario.

³² *The Liberator* (Boston, MA) April 20, 1853.

³³ Poem by Joshua McCarter Simpson (1820–1876)

³⁴ Tom Calarco, et al. *Places of the Underground Railroad: A Biographical Dictionary*. (Santa Barbara, CA: Greenwood 2011), 117.

Laura Haviland,³⁵ a dedicated worker on the Underground Railroad and friend of Fairfield and Coffin witnessed their arrival. She had spent three weeks in College Hill in the late winter of 1851³⁶ and had taught for a semester at Zion Baptist Church in Cincinnati. She was in Canada in 1852-1853³⁷ teaching for the Refugee Home Society eight miles from Windsor. Laura Haviland is pictured here holding slave restraints to educate others about the inhumanity of slavery.



(Courtesy of Bentley Historical Museum, University of Michigan)

³⁵ Wilbur H. Siebert, *The Underground Railroad from Slavery to Freedom* (New York: MacMillan Co., 1898) 154.

³⁶ Laura S. Haviland, *A Woman's Life-Work: Labors and Experiences of Laura S. Haviland* (Cincinnati, OH: Walden and Stowe, 1882), 114.
<http://archive.org/details/womanslifeworkla01havi>.

³⁷ Wilbur H. Siebert, *The Underground Railroad from Slavery to Freedom* (New York: MacMillan Co., 1898) 210.

The Sandwich Baptist Church³⁸ opened its doors for a dinner, reception, and celebration held in Fairfield's honor, but having had a \$500 bounty dead or alive on his head, he probably did not attend. Henry Bibb, a former slave who escaped to Canada and founded the first black Canadian newspaper, *The Voice of the Fugitive*, witnessed their arrival and wrote about it in his paper.³⁹

Soon, the Hatfield family who themselves had assisted this group and many others to freedom, left for Canada and opened the first hotel for blacks in Amherstberg. John Hatfield got TB and "left this county for Australia saying he would rather die in Australia a poor man than to live in this country [Canada], a disenfranchised American."⁴⁰

John Fairfield is thought to have died in 1856 during a slave insurrection at a Tennessee ironworks factory. There was a white man present who was caught trying to escape and was given 900 lashes as punishment. But perhaps John Fairfield, a master at disguises when helping others to escape, put on one of his many disguises and lived his life under a new persona.

While some who sought their freedom in Canada have stayed for generations, many chose to return to the U.S. at the Civil War's end.

"The Escape of the 28" is one of the most documented stories of the network to freedom and one which details the interracial collaboration of the Underground Railroad. May we be inspired by the courage, compassion and commitment of the men and women, black and white that made this escape possible and be moved to reach across the many barriers to support all those who seek freedom and equality in our world today.

³⁸ In 1821 many blacks had settled in the Sandwich Towne area of Windsor, Ontario, Canada and in the 1830's they built a Baptist Church which still serves the black community and holds services in Windsor today.

³⁹ "Good News From Slavery" *Voice of the Fugitive*, May, 1853.

⁴⁰ From the undated obituary of his daughter, Sarah Chandler, who died in Los Angeles, CA., 1921.



Joshua McCarter Simpson

(1821-1877)

Dr. Joshua McCarter Simpson was born in Brookfield Township, Morgan County, Ohio in 1821. He was raised by a white gentleman. At an early age, Joshua developed the desire for a good education. He attended School at Bennett's Abolitionist School at Big Bottom and at age 19 he walked to Oberlin where he graduated during the 1840's. After graduating from

college, Joshua made his home in Zanesville, Muskingum County, Ohio. He practiced herbal medicine, was an abolitionist leader, and Underground Railroad Conductor, a civic, religious and community leader, and anti-slavery poet.

Image and biography created by the late Henry Burke

I'm on my way to Canada

by Joshua McCarter Simpson (1860)

(Sung to the tune of Oh! Suzannah!)

I'm on my way to Canada that cold and dreary land,
The dire effects of slavery I can no longer stand,
My soul is vexed within me more To think that I'm a slave,
I'm now resolved to strike the blow for freedom, or the grave.

Oh, righteous father, wilt thou not pity me,
And aid me on to Canada, where colored men are free.

I heard the Queen of England say If we would all forsake
Our native land of slavery and come across the lake,
That she was standing on the shore with arms extended wide,
To give us all a peaceful home beyond the rolling tide.

Farewell old master, that's enough for me,
I'm going straight to Canada where colored men are free.

Grieve not my wife, grieve not for me, Oh, do not break my heart
For nought but cruel slavery would cause me to depart,
If I should stay to quell your grief, your grief I would augment,
For no one knows the day that we asunder may be rent.

Oh, Susannah don't cry after me,
I'm going up to Canada where colored men are free.

I served my master all my days, without a dime's reward,
But now I'm forced to run away to flee the lash abhorred,
The hounds are baying on my track, the master just behind,
Resolved that he will bring me back before I cross the line.

Oh, old master don't come after me
I'm going up to Canada where colored men are free.