

YOUR GUIDE TO THE

Underground Railroad

HAMILTON COUNTY, INDIANA WESTFIELD, INDIANA

North Central Station to America's Underground Railroad

"I looked at my hands to see if I was the same person now I was free. There was such a glory over everything. I felt like I was in heaven."

-Harriet Tubman, Conductor on the Underground Railroad

Compelling stories about enslaved people who risked everything to escape bondage and find their way to freedom have been retold in narratives and in film. Some communities played a key role in that fight.

Westfield's unique religious background and geographic location made it the unofficial "North Central Station" on the Underground Railroad.

Throughout the mid 1800s, numerous Westfield town founders and community leaders proudly and publicly shared their anti-slavery sentiments, and their convictions made them well-known to former enslaved "passengers" who worked their way north to Canada.

That support was not without controversy, even in this peaceful community. For those who sought refuge here, and for the residents who helped them on their way to freedom.

WESTFIELD'S ROLE

There were eight documented Underground Railroad Stations in Westfield, although historians believe there may have been more. Because of the dangers associated with harboring "fugitive slaves," locations were kept secret but many involved in the activity knew where they were.

What is known is that Westfield was part of the Central Route, which came through Louisville, Madison, Columbus and Indianapolis and then Westfield, where it likely continued north through the Indiana towns of New London, Logansport, Plymouth and South Bend. Many Westfield residents opened their homes to runaway and freed enslaved people. They hid them from slave catchers and provided them with food and clothing. Women were just as active in the Underground Railroad as men.

QUAKER MIGRATION

Quakers were among the earliest champions of civil rights. Quakers led the movement to free enslaved people and ban the African slave trade. In order to join the Friends Society, members had to free enslaved people and make provisions to help them become self-sufficient. When southern states forced freed slaves to leave the areas in which they worked and move elsewhere, North Carolina Quakers collected money and helped them move 600 miles northwest to the free areas of Ohio and Indiana.

Many southern Quaker families moved north as well, to where slavery had been abolished. As a result, farming communities sprang up around Indiana, mostly in Hamilton, Grant, Marion, Morgan and Rush counties. It was often called the "Little Quaker Migration." Indiana Quakers – many from Westfield -- paid for lawyers and went to southern states to win back the freedom of enslaved people who were kidnapped and forced back into slavery.

ASA BALES FAMILY

In 1834, Asa Bales, Simon Moon and Ambrose Osborne founded Westfield, named after Bales' church in Surry – the Westfield Monthly Meeting Society. Like many Quakers who did not approve of slavery, Asa and his wife Susannah, moved from their home in Surry, N.C. to Indiana in 1822, first settling in Mooresville. In 1832, they moved north, building a log cabin on a wooded lot on what later became Union Street in Westfield. That year, they opened the community's first business, a general store at the intersection of what is now Main & Union street.

Asa Bales was a spirited trailblazer. He and his wife, who did not have children of their own, took in orphans, and opened their home as a school. He founded the Westfield Monthly Meeting, originating from the White Lick Monthly Meeting of the Friends Society in Morgan County, which also met in the Bales' log cabin. They were educators and visionaries. Bales also led in the fight against slavery.

Bales subscribed to anti-slavery newspapers, such as the Protectionist and the Free Labor Advocate and Anti-Slavery Chronicle, and he joined the Liberty Party, a political party supporting abolition. He advocated for public lectures, which denounced slavery, and encouraged other residents to help "fugitive slaves" make their way to freedom into Canada.

ASAPH HIATT FAMILY

Carpenter Asaph Hiatt specialized in building window sashes. He and his wife, Sarah, moved to Westfield from Fayette County in 1835 and built an 18-by-20-foot log house. Years later they added on to the house, more than doubling its size, and then built a framed barn, which became a safe haven for enslaved people and was part of the Underground Railroad. In 1841, Hiatt became the first official minister of the Richland Monthly Meeting. According to the Polis Center research, the Richland Meeting advocated for prison reform, equality of the sexes, temperance, peace and the abolition of slavery. Although not as vocal as the Westfield Friends, meeting minutes show frequent references to: "African Committee" and "Committee on the people of color."

LEVI T. PENNINGTON FAMILY

One of the most dramatic oral history accounts of this Underground Railroad station comes from Louis Talbert, a former enslaved person, who not only escaped bondage several times but also helped dozens of others escape to freedom. Talbert traveled to Westfield in search of Micajah White, whom he'd met at Union Liberty Institute in Richmond. Talbert needed help rescuing his sisters from enslavement in Kentucky. White was sympathetic to Talbert and his family, but he also knew the danger of helping enslaved people in the south. He was a newlywed and worried for his safety. He declined to make the trip to Kentucky but directed Talbert to Levi Pennington's house on what is now Hoover Street for assistance.

The Penningtons, members of the Anti-Slavery Friends, operated a station on the Underground Railroad, but Levi Pennington tried to discourage Talbert from traveling to Kentucky, also telling him it was too risky. Talbert wouldn't be dissuaded, however, and he confided his plans to yet another area resident – Nathan Willits, who agreed to help.

Willits made a grave mistake by talking aloud of their plans to travel by train from Indianapolis to Madison and then into Kentucky to the plantation from which White had escaped. As Talbert walked to the train station to meet Willits, his former enslaver and a posse of slave catchers found him. Talbert was taken back into enslavement and paraded through communities throughout Kentucky, as the enslaver tried to make an example of him. Talbert later was sold for \$7 (the low amount a reflection on Talbert's flight risk) and was boarded on a steamboat from Kentucky headed south, where he was to be sold along with other enslaved people.

Talbert, however, escaped again. In the middle of the night just after the boat had crossed into the mouth of the Mississippi River, Talbert jumped into a small boat tied to the back of the steamboat. Another enslaved person on board cut the ropes, and Talbert was free again. He paddled in the dark to Kentucky, where he dodged slave catchers and again found his way back to Levi Pennington's house in Westfield.

While the home was razed many years ago, stories continue through the generations of Louis Talbert, who found a safe haven along the Underground Railroad.

ROBERT TOMLINSON FAMILY

Robert Tomlinson came to Westfield from North Carolina in 1837. A family member recalled Robert telling how two men came to the house looking for lodging. Tomlinson knew they were slave catchers, but he knew better than to deny them a place to stay.

That same evening, while Robert Tomlinson was doing chores, he discovered runaway enslaved people hiding in a straw stack outside the house. Tomlinson went about his chores making trips from the house to the barn, carrying one bucket of slop for the hogs and another bucket of food from the kitchen, which he left for the enslaved people.

Once the slave catchers were asleep, Milton Tomlinson, the oldest of the 10 Tomlinson children, led the enslaved people across Dismal Swamp, the area around US31 and SR38, named for a swamp on the east coast. Robert's wife, Lydia, gathered up warm clothes to help them survive the bitter cold, and even took her daughter's shoes to give to a 4-year-old, who had escaped without shoes or stockings.

MICAJAH WHITE FAMILY

Micajah "M.C." White was not only influential because his uncle was noted abolitionist Levi Coffin, but also because he was a leader in the Indiana Anti-Slavery Society, where he promoted independent political action. He provided speaker forums to advocate freedom for enslaved people in the area.

In the mid-1840s, Frederick Douglass was scheduled to speak in Noblesville. White traveled to Pendleton to meet Douglass and other speakers, to bring them to Noblesville. During the lecture there, however, trouble erupted. Spectators, angered by the freedom speeches, attacked the speakers. They threw eggs at them, and a riot broke out. White tried to rescue Douglass, but he too was beaten and two of his teeth were knocked out during the melee. Douglass was too badly wounded to speak in Noblesville, and never made it to Hamilton County.

White's anti-slavery sentiments also were shared by other family members. An uncle left him \$100 in his will for the sole purpose of aiding or assisting destitute fugitive enslaved person. Of course, his Uncle Levi Coffin was a staunch abolitionist, and so was his mother. One of the favorite local stories often shared about the White family follows:

White's mother, Louisa White, ran an inn. One evening in 1850, a fugitive enslaved person was brought into her establishment; Louisa escorted her to an upper room to hide. Not long after, two men came in asking for lodging. It was apparent to Louisa that the men were slave catchers searching for the woman she'd just hidden upstairs. Louisa served the men, not saying a word. She knew the fugitive enslaved person could not stay in the inn without being found, so she dressed the woman in a bonnet and veil for cover. Together, the two women allegedly walked out of the tavern without raising any suspicion. Louisa then took the woman to her son's horse drawn carriage, which then took them to the farm and on to freedom.

ANTI-SLAVERY MOVEMENT CAUSES TENSION

Quakers, known for their peaceful ways, faced a moral and ethical dilemma in the mid-1800s: while they were staunch opponents of slavery, they also embraced a passive lifestyle. Assisting enslaved people to freedom, harboring fugitive enslaved people, and speaking out against slavery all were in contrast to their lifestyle.

Asa Bales not only welcomed enslaved people into his home, he was among other Quakers in Westfield to openly advocate for anti-slavery laws. He testified in Indianapolis on behalf of the Anti-Slavery Friends and raised money to defend those arrested for assisting enslaved people to freedom, rescuing others from enslavement.

Many Quakers, including Bales, believed it was their duty to fight aggressively for the abolition of slavery. Others thought activism was too radical, and that assisting runaways was illegal. It was this conflict that caused a fracture in the Westfield Monthly Meeting Society.

In 1843, Bales and other abolitionist left the Society and created the Yearly Meeting of the Anti-Slavery Friends in nearby Eagletown, just west on what is now known as State Road 32. Bales built a meetinghouse, and gradually more Quakers joined the Anti-Slavery Friends. In 1844, when the Westfield Wesleyan Methodist Church was founded and joined the Anti-Slavery movement.

THE RHODES FAMILY STORY: A COMMUNITY PROTECTS

Enslaved people John and Luann Rhodes escaped from slavery in Missouri in 1837, and made their way to Hamilton County. There they met Owen Williams, a staunch abolitionist who helped the couple and a daughter settle about seven miles north of Westfield. They shed their slave names - Sam and Maria Burk - had two more children in their new home and eventually purchased 10 acres of land. Continuing freedom did not come easy for the couple as their former master continued to pursue them in Indiana.

According to oral history, their former master - whose name was Vaughn -- discovered where they were living after distributing handbills offering a reward for their capture. Slave catcher and dogs were sent to bring the family back to Missouri, and the couple and their family barely escaped during the middle of the night with the help of the Bakers. They fled into Illinois but were then captured and imprisoned there. Underground Railroad agents broke into the jail and freed the family, then helped them return to Westfield.

However, their former enslaver once again tracked them down. Assisted by two other Missourians and two local constables, Vaughan approached the family's cabin in the middle of the night and demanded they surrender. The Rhodes barricaded themselves in their home, staving off capture until early morning when Williams and other sympatric neighborhoods heard their cries and helped bring the incident to a legendary stand-off.

The family surrendered when the pursuers eventually pried the door from its hinges. Rhodes then sent for a neighbor, claiming an outstanding \$50 debt, which the fugitive enslaved person promised to hand over to his former Enslaver. Vaughan wanted the money, so he let Rhodes go. Not long after, Rhodes returned with an estimated 150 people who were prepared to

protect the family using pitchforks and other farm implements, and the bounty hunters left.

Westfield had a widespread reputation of its staunch abolitionism, so Vaughn and his men went to Noblesville seeking a summons to get Rhodes to Noblesville for surrender.

Later, the Rhodes family went to the Williams home, had breakfast and took a horse drawn carriage to Noblesville. On their way, they were approached by the slave catchers. But, the Anti-Slave Quakers and members of the nearby African-American Roberts Settlement blocked their path. Asa Bales addressed the crowd, and Daniel Jones leapt into the wagon containing the Rhodes family, slapped the reins and steered the horses to Westfield. The crowd detained Vaughan and his men, and by the time they caught up with the wagon, the Rhodes were gone. One account says the bottom of the wagon fell out, and the Rhodes ran, hiding in a haystack at the Tomlinson Farm and then in a swamp on Aaron Lindley's property. Asa Bales wrote to an Anti-Slavery Newspaper saying that when they caught up with the horse drawn carriage in Westfield, the content of the wagon had changed and an entirely white family was now in it.

Vaughn later brought a civil suit against Williams, Bales, David Anthony and others who blocked his way, demanding compensation for his loss of enslaved people. Allies formed the John Rhodes Association and raised \$600 to provide for the men's defense. The case ultimately made its way to the U.S. District Court in Indianapolis in May 1845 and became a landmark case. The jury ruled in favor of Williams and the others, and validated the Rhodes' claim to permanent free status.

The court ruled in favor of the Rhodes since their former enslaver had them in Illinois for over 6 months, then noticed his mistake and sold them quickly to Singleton Vaughn in neighboring St. Louis area. When the Rhodes noticed, they walked off and had every right to do so, as Illinois, of course, was a free state. After spending 6+ months in a free state, you were free.

PLACES TO VISIT RELATED TO THE UNDERGROUND RAILROAD

These homes are now private residences, but as you walk up and down Union Street north and south of State Road 32, you will notice many historic homes in the area and know that many of these provided shelter for these fugitive enslaved people. Here are a few other spots to see and learn more about the anti-slavery activities of Westfield:

Westfield Washington Historical Society

130 Penn St.

www.wwhs.us

(317) 804-5365

Call or visit the web site for operating hours of this volunteer-managed museum.

Anti-Slavery Friends Cemetery

(Former Asa Bales Property)

432 North Union St.

Asa and Susannah Bales operated Westfield's first Underground Railroad station, and opened their home to fugitive enslaved people, providing them shelter and food and often nursing them back to health. The Bales' barn was larger than most in the area and was built of a frame, with a secret cellar underneath. The Bales hid enslaved people in the cellar, which also had a trap door usually covered with straw. Asa Bales sold some of his land to the Anti-Slavery Friends in 1843 for a church and cemetery. The Bales were the first to be buried there just two years later, in 1845; both Asa and Susannah died in 1845 during a cholera epidemic in Westfield. The Anti-Slavery Friends Cemetery is just south of their former home along Union Street, which is near the Asa Bales Park, which the Town of Westfield opened in 1997 in honor of the town founder and humanitarian. Also, nearby on Hoover Road (location uncertain) was Levi Pennington's home.

Martha Doan Memorial Garden

(Former site of the Westfield Friends Cemetery)

200 Block of South Union St.

Site of the first Westfield Friends Church and old Westfield Friends Cemetery, the land was donated by Simon Moon. There is a plaque with a partial list of Friends buried here at the park. You can find gravemarkers, although they're in rough shape, all the way in the back. It was named after Martha Doan (1872-1960), member of the Westfield Monthly Meeting.

Asa Bales Park

SR 32 and Union St.

Location of: Rhodes Incident State Historical Marker

In 2008, the Indiana Historical Bureau dedicated a marker at Asa Bales Park, which is located on the northwest corner of SR 32 and Union Street in downtown Westfield. The actual incident took place north of the community but you can read about the encounter here in this beautiful park.

Eagletown Cemetery

(Former site of the Eagletown Friends Church)

17731 Eagletown Road

(six miles west of downtown Westfield on SR 32)

Directions: Take SR 32 west from US 31 North to the Eagletown sign; then North on Eagletown Road and then west on Washington Street; north on Maryland Street.

Former home of the Eagletown Friends Church, which was founded by Asa Bales in 1843 after the church fractured over the degree to which anti-slavery activism should involve the church. Many church founders buried here.

Check out Hamilton County Historian David Heighway's history stories at the Indiana State Library's blog where we borrowed some of his content blog.history.in.gov.