

The Levi Coffin House on State Road 27 in Fountain City was the headquarters for the Underground Railroad.

# The Underground Railroad in Indiana

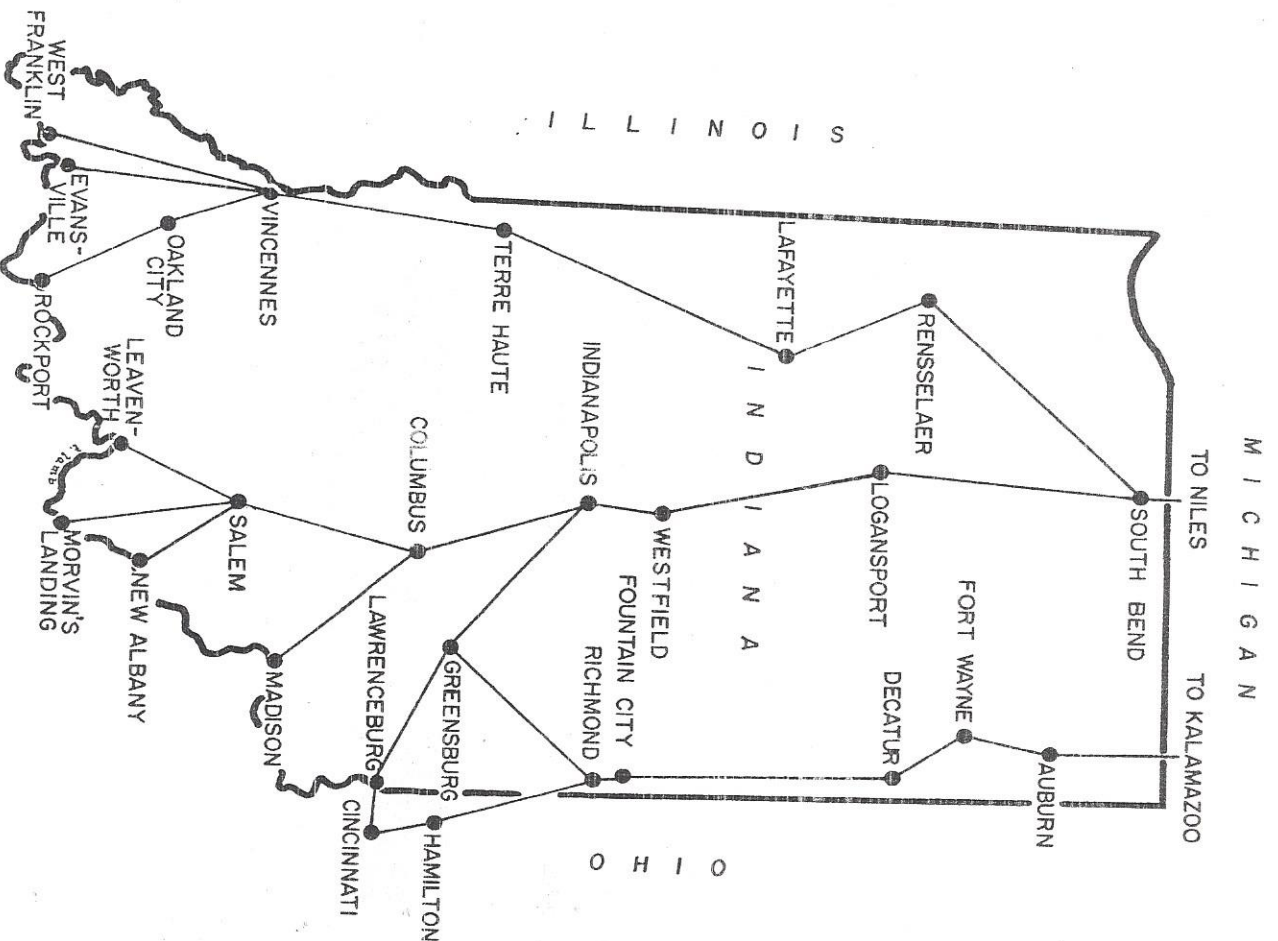
by ARVILLE L. FUNK

IN THE PERIOD just before the Civil War, one of the most interesting institutions that ever existed in Indiana was the so-called "Underground Railroad." The Underground Railroad, or the U.G.R.R., as it was known as, was the secret method of conducting Negro slaves to freedom in northern Michigan and Canada who had escaped from the Southern states.

Since Indiana was bordered on the south by the slave state of Kentucky and was on the direct route to Michigan and Canada, it became the center of the

## in Indiana

U.G.R.R. activities in the Midwest. Although the U.G.R.R. movement was in operation as early as 1825, it became much more important after the passage of the Fugitive Slave Law of 1850. This law required the Northern states to return any escaped slaves to their masters. Even though the 1850 law was unpopular with most of the northern residents, local law officials were forced to help the federal marshals arrest and bring to trial the violators of the law. Thus, after the enactment of the 1850 law, the anti-slav-



ery groups were forced to go "underground" and create a secretive organization to transport the escaped slaves to freedom.

A well-known Indiana abolitionist, Levi Coffin, a merchant at Newport (now Fountain City) in Wayne County, became the leader of the anti-slavery group in Indiana and became known as the "President of the Underground Railroad." It is estimated that Coffin alone sheltered and transported more than 2,000 escaped slaves to freedom. The moving spirit behind the U.G.R.R. was the Anti-Slavery League composed mainly of members of the Society of Friends or Quakers. Coffin was a leader in the Friends Church and organized many of his "depots," or stations, around the Quaker communities.

There were three major routes of the U.G.R.R. in Indiana. In the western sector, there was a route from the crossing places near Evansville, through Terre Haute, Lafayette, and South Bend to Niles, Michigan. In the center of the state, there was a route from the various crossings near New Albany, through Columbus and Indianapolis, then north to South Bend and, also, with the destination of Niles, Michigan. In the eastern part of Indiana, there was the third route extending from the Ohio River crossings near Lawrenceburg and Cincinnati, through Richmond, Newport, Fort Wayne and Auburn, ending at Kalamazoo, Michigan. This third route was the one on which Coffin centered most of his work. Each route had various "depots" or stations, usually about 20 miles apart and located on isolated farms where the slaves could be sheltered, fed, and moved secretly at night by wagon on to the next "agent" or station.

Indianapolis and Marion County, because of their locations on the center route, became very important in the U.G.R.R. movement. The headquarters for the U.G.R.R. in Marion County was

the Hiram Bacon farm located in Washington Township in the northern part of the county. Today, the Bacon farm is within Indianapolis in the vicinity of the present governor's mansion.

Indiana was active in the U.G.R.R. for approximately thirty-five years and Coffin was the leader for twenty of these years. In 1847, he moved back to Cincinnati where he kept up his anti-slavery work until the middle of the Civil War period. Even after the U.G.R.R. closed, Coffin performed much humanitarian work among the freed Negroes of the South.

In a speech to members of the anti-slavery group, after the Civil War had ended, Coffin expressed the feeling of success with the Underground Railroad. In a "stockholders'" report, he said: "The roads were always in running order, the connections were good, the conductors active and zealous, and there was no lack of passengers."

With the coming of the Emancipation Proclamation in January, 1863, there was no further use of the U.G.R.R. and it passed into the pages of history. However, here in Indiana, there is a very interesting reminder of this chapter in our history. Still standing today, in Fountain City, is a large, old two-story brick house located on State Route 27 which was the residence of Levi Coffin. It once bore the proud title of "Grand Central Union Station of the Underground Railroad."

#### ARVILLE FUNK

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## Poisonous Snakes of Indiana

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A FEW straggling remains of three poisonous species of reptiles remain in Indiana: The Copperhead, the Timber Rattler and the Massauga. The surviving species are confined, in the main, to those areas not well-adapted to agriculture.

The poisonous species appear to be destined for extinction since their broods are small, six to twelve in number, and since there is a vigorous crusade being waged against their existence.

The surviving poisonous species of Indiana belong to a group known as pit-vipers and can be quickly distinguished from nonpoisonous varieties by three general characteristics: (1) a pit between the eye and nostril, (2) a slit-shaped pupil in the eye (the pupils of the nonpoisonous species are round), and (3) fangs, a pair of long, curved hypodermic needle-like teeth in the anterior end

of the upper jaw. These three characteristics, in fact, identify all the poisonous species of the United States with the exception of the coral snake of the South.

Many old traditions have grown about snakes, such as stealing milk from cows, swallowing their young for protection, charming people, the story of the old, traditional hoop snake of the South and committing suicide in captivity. It should suffice here to state that none of these old allegations bear scientific investigation.

Poisonous reptiles have a sheer confidence in their fangs both as defensive and offensive mechanisms. They kill their prey with the fangs and may utilize the same weapons in an engagement with a belligerent adversary. The reptile is not compelled to strike to sink the fangs, but strikes as a matter of expediency to cover distance. The lightning strike, about one-half the length of the body,

