

# Catherine Coffin

*Fountain City, Wayne County*

September 10, 1803 – May 22, 1881



Photo: *Documenting the American South*, at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

Born September 10, 1803 in Guilford County, North Carolina, Catherine White married Levi Coffin on October 28, 1824. The couple moved to Newport (the present day town of Fountain City), Wayne County, in 1826.

From their house in Wayne County, Catherine Coffin and her husband, Levi, offered safe haven to thousands of African-Americans fleeing slavery on the “Underground Railroad for twenty years. The house sat along major escape routes leading from Cincinnati, Madison, and Jefferson to eventual freedom in the north and in Canada. “One of the refugees who found shelter in the Coffins’ home was later immortalized as the character Eliza, the heroine of Harriet Beecher Stowe’s classic novel, *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*. Levi and Catharine Coffin are supposedly depicted in the book as Simeon and Rachel Halliday” (IHS website).

Catherine was as dedicated to the effort of helping the escaping slaves as her husband. She provided food, clothing and shelter to those who came to their home. She organized a sewing society that met at their home to produce clothing to give to the runaways. Though many neighbors were unwilling to take the fugitives in, they did provide a steady supply of goods to assist in the ongoing operation. Though records were not kept, historians estimate that the Coffins helped approximately 2000 escaping slaves while they lived in Indiana. Catherine Coffin died on May 22, 1881, in Cincinnati, Ohio.

Placed on the National Register of Historic Places in 1966 by the U.S. Department of the Interior, the Coffin house was purchased by the state in 1967 and leased to the Wayne County Historical Society. The Society, after generous donations from the community and the Lilly Endowment, renovated the structure and opened it to the public as a museum in 1970.

- For more information about Catherine Coffin, go to: <http://www.indianahistory.org/our-collections/reference/notable-hoosiers/levi-and-catharine-coffin#.WLRpum8rLIU>.
- For more information about *Writing Her Story*, go to: <http://www.in.gov/icw/2440.htm>.

*Additional and more detailed references available at the end of Women’s History Month*

INDIANA  
COMMISSION  
for women  
*Writing Her Story*