

# THE STORY OF ELIZA HARRIS

MID 1800S

----- *Levi Coffin* -----

A devout Quaker and dedicated abolitionist, Levi Coffin (1798–1877) is credited with helping over 3,000 fugitives escape from slavery via the Underground Railroad. In his memoirs, published in 1876, Coffin described the escape of Eliza Harris, supposedly the real-life model for the character of Eliza in Harriet Beecher Stowe’s novel *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*.

## **THINK THROUGH HISTORY: Recognizing Bias**

Why might Coffin have written these reminiscences, and how does an understanding of his motives help you to evaluate these narratives as historical evidence?

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Eliza Harris, of “Uncle Tom’s Cabin” notoriety, the slave woman who crossed the Ohio River, near Ripley, on the drifting ice with her child in her arms, was sheltered under our roof and fed at our table for several days. This was while we lived at Newport, Indiana, which is six miles west of the State line of Ohio. To elude the pursuers who were following closely on her track, she was sent across to our line of the Underground Railroad.

The story of this slave woman, so graphically told by Harriet Beecher Stowe in “Uncle Tom’s Cabin,” will, no doubt, be remembered by every reader of that deeply interesting book. The cruelties of slavery depicted in that remarkable work are not overdrawn. The stories are founded on facts that really occurred, real names being wisely withheld, and fictitious names and imaginary conversations often inserted. From the fact that Eliza Harris was sheltered at our house several days, it was generally believed among those acquainted with the circumstances that I and my wife were the veritable Simeon and Rachel Halliday, the Quaker couple alluded to in “Uncle Tom’s Cabin.” I will give a short sketch of the fugitive’s story, as she related it.

She said she was a slave from Kentucky, the property of a man who lived a few miles back from the Ohio River, below Ripley, Ohio. Her master and mistress were kind to her, and she had a comfortable home, but her master got into some pecuniary difficulty, and she found that she and her only child were to be separated. She had buried two children, and was doubly attached to the one she had left, a bright, promising child, over two years old. When she found that it was to be taken from her, she was filled with grief and dismay, and resolved to make her escape that night if possible. She watched her opportunity,

and when darkness had settled down and all the family had retired to sleep, she started with her child in her arms and walked straight toward the Ohio River. She knew that it was frozen over, at that season of the year, and hoped to cross without difficulty on the ice, but when she reached its banks at daylight, she found that the ice had broken up and was slowly drifting in large cakes. She ventured to go to a house near by, where she was kindly received and permitted to remain through the day. She hoped to find some way to cross the river the next night, but there seemed little prospect of any one being able to cross in safety, for during the day the ice became more broken and dangerous to cross. In the evening she discovered pursuers nearing the house, and with desperate courage she determined to cross the river, or perish in the attempt. Claspings her child in her arms she darted out of the back door and ran toward the river, followed by her pursuers, who had just dismounted from their horses when they caught sight of her. No fear or thought of personal danger entered Eliza's mind, for she felt that she had rather be drowned than to be captured and separated from her child. Claspings her babe to her bosom with her left arm, she sprang on to the first cake of ice, then from that to another and another. Some times the cake she was on would sink beneath her weight, then she would slide her child on to the next cake, pull herself on with her hands, and so continue her hazardous journey. She became wet to the waist with ice water and her hands were benumbed with cold, but as she made her way from one cake of ice to another, she felt that surely the Lord was preserving and upholding her, and that nothing could harm her.

When she reached the Ohio side, near Ripley, she was completely exhausted and almost breathless. A man, who had been standing on the bank watching her progress with amazement and expecting every moment to see her go down, assisted her up the bank. After she had recovered her strength a little he directed her to a house on the hill, in the outskirts of town. She made her way to the place, and was kindly received and cared for. It was not considered safe for her to remain there during the night, so, after resting a while and being provided with food and dry clothing, she was conducted to a station on the Underground Railroad, a few miles farther from the river. The next night she was forwarded on from station to station to our house in Newport, where she arrived safely and remained several days.

Other fugitives arrived in the meantime, and Eliza and her child were sent with them, by the Greenville branch of the Underground Railroad, to Sandusky, Ohio. They reached that place in safety, and crossed the lake to Canada, locating finally at Chatham, Canada West.

In the summer of 1854 I was on a visit to Canada, accompanied by my wife and daughter, and Laura S. Haviland, of Michigan. At the close of a meeting which we attended, at one of the colored churches, a woman came up to my wife, seized her hand, and exclaimed: "How are you, Aunt Katie? God bless you!" etc. My wife did not recognize her, but she soon called herself to our

remembrance by referring to the time she was at our house in the days of her distress, when my wife gave her the name of Eliza Harris, and by relating other particulars. We visited her at her house while at Chatham, and found her comfortable and contented.

Many other fugitives came and spoke to us, whom we did not recognize or remember until they related some incident that recalled them to mind. Such circumstances occurred in nearly every neighborhood we visited in Canada. Hundreds who had been sheltered under our roof and fed at our table, when fleeing from the land of whips and chains, introduced themselves to us and referred to the time, often fifteen or twenty years before, when we had aided them....

Source: *Reminiscences of Levi Coffin, The Reputed President of the Underground Railroad* by Levi Coffin (Cincinnati, Ohio: Western Tract Society, 1876), pp. 147–150.

**THINK THROUGH HISTORY : ANSWER**

Some may feel that Coffin could have written these reminiscences of Eliza Harris in order to portray his work on the Underground Railroad as one of the sources of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, the most famous novel of the 19th century. Students should evaluate these narratives as historical evidence with considerable care, since the wide renown of Stowe's fictional version likely influenced Coffin's recounting of these events a quarter of a century later. But because Coffin helped so many slaves escape via the Underground Railroad, his account is not without historical value.