

# Interpretive Center planned for Levi Coffin House

By RACHEL E. SHEELEY - Associated Press - Saturday, November 1, 2014

**FOUNTAIN CITY, Ind. (AP)** - The all-volunteer Levi Coffin House Association took a leap of faith in 1998, purchasing what was then an apartment house just to the north of the Levi Coffin House State Historic Site.

The group, which has operated the site at 113 U.S. 27 N. since it opened to the public in 1970, passed up two opportunities to buy the building, known as the Seybold-Price House. The time had come to lay the groundwork for a future interpretive center and additional parking.

“We tell people all the time it has been a dream,” said Janice McGuire, who has served as president of the association since 1989. “The first years of the association, the folks kind of eyed that property, being the obvious place for a parking lot, for additional space.”

The effort to transform the existing Seybold-Price House into a multi-million-dollar interpretive center has begun with ground-breaking organized by the Indiana State Museum and Historic Sites in conjunction with the association.

The project budget is \$3.2 million, with commitments for nearly 70 percent of that amount received. The project is scheduled to be complete in 2016, just in time for the celebration of Indiana’s Bicentennial, the Palladium-Item reported (<http://pinews.co/1wFtstY>).

The Levi Coffin House was built in 1839 by anti-slavery activists Levi and Catharine Coffin. The house included a hidden room under the eaves often used for hiding escaping slaves and an indoor well in the basement so those observing the house could not tell if the family increased its water usage when travelers were in residence.

During the 20 years the Coffins resided there, the home became known as the Grand Central Station on the Underground Railroad, a loose network of anti-slavery supporters which assisted escaping slaves. Levi Coffin became known as the president of the Underground Railroad. The Coffins aided more than 2,000 men, women and children on their flight north to freedom. Best known among them was the real-life “Eliza,” whose story is told in the book, “Uncle Tom’s Cabin.”

“Levi truly felt the good Lord was watching over him because he was doing the Lord’s work,” McGuire said. “I think the good Lord’s been watching over this building and given it all the right owners down through the years.”

After 1847 - when the Coffins moved to Cincinnati so Levi Coffin could operate a wholesale warehouse that offered goods to stores that sold items made by using free, not slave, labor - their former home served as a hotel, a restaurant and a residence.

Few changes were made to the building and when the state acquired it in 1967, it did not take a major overhaul to return it to the home in which the Coffins resided and rescued escaping slaves. Today, the house is one of the best-documented and important Underground Railroad sites in the United States. It is a registered National Historic Landmark.

The new 5,156-square-foot, state-of-the-art interpretive facility will dramatically increase accessibility to the Levi Coffin House, said Tom King, president and CEO of Indiana State Museum and Historic Sites.

“This national treasure stands as a reminder of courage and conviction not just that displayed by Levi and Catharine, but also (by) those whose desire for freedom and dignity led them to escape the burden of slavery,” King said.

Susannah Koerber, senior vice president of Collections and Interpretation with the state museum and historic sites, said, “When the center opens in two years, visitors will have the opportunity to explore what Levi Coffin called the ‘Mysterious Road.’ They’ll review the conscious choices made by those whose stories are told through a dynamic exhibition and consider how they might have responded themselves.”

The new center will feature the exhibition “Souls Seeking Safety: Bringing Indiana’s Underground Railroad Experience to Life.” It will put the Coffins’ work in national context and share the voices and experiences of the freedom seekers. It also will explain how individuals battled the economics that supported slavery through the Free Labor movement, a precursor for today’s Fair Trade efforts, and Levi Coffin’s significant work in this area.

In addition to the new exhibit, there will be an orientation area, expanded gift shop and offices.

The building will provide an opportunity for year-round programming, something not possible now. The house is only open weekly from June to August, and Saturdays only in September and October.

A practical feature of the new center that will be welcomed by association volunteers and visitors is restrooms. Right now, the Coffin House has only one restroom. More than 2,000 students visit the house on field trips each year.

“When you have 60 kids ride a bus for an hour (to get here), you know what they have to do,” McGuire said. “What we’re most excited about is public restrooms.”

McGuire and other association members have held onto the dream of more restrooms and an interpretive center for more than 15 years.

“We just needed more room,” McGuire said.

With the 1998 purchase of the Seybold-Price House at 201 U.S. 27 N., the state was able to provide the historic site with 17 vehicle and bus parking spaces. The town of Fountain City vacated the street at the rear of the property as part of that project. The association continued to rent the apartments in the Seybold-Price House until the building’s mortgage was paid.

In 2002, the Department of Natural Resources debuted initial plans for an interpretive center that would make use of three historic exterior sides of the Seybold-Price House in the construction, a detail that remains part of the plans today.

The project received a \$1 million federal Transportation Enhancement Project grant in 2003 and another grant from the National Park Service’s Underground Railroad Initiative.

Earlier this year, the Levi Coffin House Association took another financial chance and purchased the property at 205 N. U.S. 27, McGuire said. It is the first residence north of the Seybold-Price House and it will serve as the construction offices. After the interpretive center is complete, the grounds will provide a green space buffer between the museum and surrounding properties.

The process has moved slowly but steadily over the years, toward the upcoming ground-breaking.

Reaching this point is a personal success for McGuire and her family, as well.

During America’s Bicentennial in 1976, Janice McGuire and husband Bob attended Fountain City’s many celebratory events. McGuire remembers telling family friend and Coffin House advocate Henry Macy that she and her husband would be interested in volunteering with the association.

Within days, Macy was paying them a visit at their home and inviting Bob McGuire to attend a board meeting. He came home from that meeting elected board president. “We hadn’t volunteered that first minute,” Janice McGuire recalls.

During his presidency, the association sought someone to regularly operate the home and serve as secretary-treasurer. Bob McGuire’s nominee, his wife’s sister, Sandra Jackson, took the role.

Bob McGuire served as association president until 1989, when his father became ill. Janice McGuire took her husband’s place on the board, and was subsequently elected president.

The sisters, Janice McGuire and Sandra Jackson, their husbands, their children, their parents and their friends have dedicated many hours to the Coffin House.

The sisters didn’t set out to become fixtures at the house, but their passion for the Coffin family history has kept them there.

“We’ve met so many people from all over the country involved in research,” McGuire said. They also have met many Coffin family members, each one proud of the heritage.

They have repeated the Coffin family story across the country and countless times in the rooms of the Fountain City historic site. The house would not be the success it is today without its loyal volunteers, who also have repeated the Coffin family story to many guests, McGuire said.

“It is unique for us to be a totally volunteer group and to have the responsibility of the day-to-day operations of a state historic site,” McGuire said.

In 2016, when the interpretive center opens, its operation will be handled by the state. The association will cease its day-to-day operation of the site, but will remain involved as a friends group.

Since the idea of an interpretive center was first broached, interest in the Underground Railroad and Levi Coffin has increased. For example, the house was open to visitors just three hours a day during 20 days in July. More than 600 visitors from 28 states and several foreign countries crossed the threshold. The historic site welcomes more than 6,000 students and adults in a year.

Each visitor has to make the Levi Coffin House a destination. They do not just happen upon it, McGuire said. The historic site has no sign on Interstate 70 (it doesn’t meet the state standards for tourist site sign yet) and the volume of possible stop-in tourists traveling U.S. 27 North isn’t that great.

“It still amazes me,” she said. “Fountain City isn’t the easiest place to find.”

Although the dream is starting to materialize, McGuire is as realistic about the coming two years as she is for the need for public restrooms at the site.

Actual work on the center, she said, likely won’t begin until spring 2015 despite the upcoming ground-breaking. And then there will be months of construction to navigate.

“We still have a long road ahead of us,” McGuire said.