

*Marjory Stoneman Douglas recalls the Anti-Slavery Abolitionists in her family*

Interviewer: I sense a feeling of outrage...

Marjory Stoneman Douglas: Oh complete outrage; I'm furious at all that kind of thing. My people, my father's people, were a long line of English and American Quakers, and they were also abolitionists. My father's family were some of the leading people in the abolitionist movement before the Civil War. And my great-great Aunt Katie, let me see now, great-great aunt; my grandmother's, well it would be her aunt or her sister, but anyway, my great-great Aunt Katie was married to a man named Levi Coffin. The Coffins were all Quakers who came from Nantucket, and my people were both North Carolina and Virginia, along that line. They went west before the Civil War, the Quakers did, to Ohio and Illinois and Indiana because they didn't want to bring up their children any longer in slave-owning states. And my aunt Katie and Uncle Levi Coffin were the people who saved the life of Eliza crossing the ice. You see, nowadays people don't seem to believe that those stories were true, and they think, Harriett Beecher Stowe, she made up a lot of that; she didn't at all. She lived in Columbus, and she knew all the stories of slaves escaping across the river into those free states, and my Aunt Katie and Uncle Levi were very prominent in the Underground Railroad, so that Eliza crossing the ice was a truly woman; her name was Harris. Her husband had escaped and gotten into Canada, and she was threatened with being sold down South, so she ran across the ice and men were chasing her on horseback, and she got on the ice with the baby, and the man on the Ohio side, yes I guess it would be, saw her coming, and she got, of course the men on horseback were completely baffled by the river and the ice, and the man helped her ashore and took her immediately to my Aunt Katie and my Uncle Levi's house, where they had across the line in Indiana, where they had one room, I don't know if it was underground or not, but it was a nice, comfortable, clean warm room where they could put up escaped slaves. And so, Aunt Katie, the baby was sick, naturally, you could imagine, with all that. She had Eliza there for a couple of weeks, and took care of her and of the baby, until another two or three more escaped slaves were brought up from down river by William Beard, who was a friend of Uncle Levi and Aunt Katie. William Beard was the father, you know, James and Mary Beard were the historians, well it was his father who was a great Quaker abolitionist and in the Underground Railroad. So, when William Beard brought some people up to the Coffins, they put them up for overnight, and

the next night, Uncle Levi would hitch up the wagon and the men would be disguised with women's clothes and veils, and he would take them up to the next stage in the Underground Railroad, and they finally got up to Canada, to Chatham in Canada, where they were safe. And later, William Beard and Great Uncle Levi went up to Chatham themselves to see how the people were getting along. So these two tall Quaker men in their funny clothes and their funny hats walked down the streets in Chatham, and the doors opened and all the people came out who recognized them. And there was Eliza Harris, who'd found her husband, and the baby was a little boy, and they had a great jollification, you know. It was wonderful, they were all safe after all that, and Uncle Levi, you see the English Quakers and the American Quakers were very much in touch with each other, and the English Quakers not only refused the weavers, but refused the cotton that was sent over to England from the South. They refused to use the cotton that had been done by slave labor. So, Uncle Levi was sent through the Southern states to buy up what they call "free cotton," that is, cotton that was raised on plantations of free people. Maybe for a little plantation there was not more than one bale of cotton, but Uncle Levi would buy that, and he set up a free labor cotton gin in Louisville, Kentucky, and when it was ginned, it was sent up the river on a labor, free labor, steamboat to Columbus or Cincinnati or whatever was on the river there, where it was sent to England as free labor cotton that had never been touched by the hands of a slave, and the weavers in England had free labor cotton in England and could produce free labor cotton for the English trade. It was more expensive, but it was free. You see, people don't remember how much of that kind of work was done before the war, and how much Harriet Beecher Stowe knew about all that. She got that story of Eliza crossing the ice from my Aunt Katie, you know, so I know it's true. I read somewhere that said that Harriet Beecher Stowe didn't know anything about it, she spent her summers in Maine, she didn't know anything about it; she did too! She went up and down the river and got all these stories, every one of them, true as true. The book wasn't written very well, and probably the death of Uncle Tom and all that was exaggerated and over dramatized, but in my mind, the basic facts were true. And that's what people don't realize now. So that's in the background of my hating the Ku Klux Klan, and the lack of running water in the black houses of Coconut Grove, that's all part of the same thing. It's all part of this over discrimination, you see, that we've had. Here I've lived all my life, well, it isn't the old South that I've lived in, but I'm a Damn Yankee at heart, you see, still. (laughs)