

The Abduction, Rescue, and Emancipation of Cesar and Lowis Peters

Our country has been divided on many issues at different times in history. But never has an issue so divided America as that of slavery. Slavery was formally abolished in Connecticut in 1848, but the memory of that social ill will most likely never be totally forgotten.

Long before Abraham Lincoln spoke the words "...this country, dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal..." the citizens of Hebron rallied together and demonstrated their belief in the equality of all people. It's the story of Cesar, and it's a story that's been told before. But it can never be retold enough.

The history of Cesar Peters, his wife Lowis, and their children is factually based. Original documents in the Hebron Town Clerk's office bear witness to most of the story; the remaining original documents are available to the public at the Connecticut State Library. The abduction and rescue of Cesar and his family by southern slave traders occurred in 1787, 46 years before Prudence Crandall opened her school for African American girls in 1833 in Canterbury, and 65 years before Harriet Beecher Stowe published *Uncle Tom's Cabin* in 1852. The abolitionist sentiment associated with New England in general, and Connecticut in particular, was clearly demonstrated in this small rural town in the late 18th century.

Like most slaves, Cesar took the last name of his owner, so he is referred to as "Cesar Peters." Not much is known about his early life, other than he had been purchased in Boston by Mary Peters of Hebron, mother of the Reverend Samuel Peters. According to various letters, Mary, in a moment of anger upon hearing that Cesar had married – without her permission – a black woman named Lowis, "sold" Cesar and Lowis to her son.

Samuel Peters, uncle to the future Governor of Connecticut, John S. Peters, sided with the Loyalists (Tories). When his home was raided by locals in 1774 and he was threatened with tar and feathering, Peters fled Hebron to live in England. He left Cesar and Lowis in charge of his home and property. According to testimony given by David Sutton, who was subsequently appointed by the Connecticut Courts as Cesar's "legal guardian," after Samuel Peters left Hebron for England, "said Cesar lived in his House, and conducted his Business with Prudence, until said Peters' lands were taken and leased out by the State of Connecticut; at which time said Cesar and his Family were turned off and supported themselves comfortably for about five or six years, without any assistance from this said Master, or his Estate, except the Privilege of Firewood." Even after he had been thrown out, Cesar continued to return to Peters' lands, building fences, repairing damage by tenants, and carefully maintaining the Peters' property.

Such loyalty was not repaid kindly. After the war ended, Reverend Peters apparently found himself in financial straits due to the state's claim for back taxes on the property, and decided to sell his assets. It's unclear if Peters realized this sale included "Old Cesar", his wife Lowis, and their eight children James, Doris, Salle, Iri, Susanna, Ziba, Lowis and Cesar. Sutton's affidavit stated that he had seen a letter from Peters to "one Mr. Buckingham in which he wrote to said Buckingham to tell Doctor Man not to sell his Negroes; but to let them Remain in Status quo."

Nevertheless, David Prior, a South Carolina landowner, sailed to Norwich to claim Cesar and his family, and hired a gang of men to go collect them. The gang arrived in Hebron on a day in which the men were out on militia training (the war hadn't been over that long and wartime skills were still believed to be needed.) Hebron women fought as best they could to keep the gang from loading up

Cesar, Lowis and the children, but to no avail. As the wagon pulled away, with Cesar and his family bound in chains, the women ran off to get their husbands and sons, demanding that these neighbors be returned. The issue of color was never an issue, according to the primary documents.

A “Council of War” was immediately held; it was decided that Elijah Graves, the local tailor, would swear out a complaint that Cesar was guilty of “theft.” After all, by golly, when he was seized by the slave traders, he was carried off wearing clothes he had not paid for! Graves contended that Cesar had taken “one Blue Broadcloth Coat with White Mettle Buttons worth Six Shillings”, as well as a pair of “corduroy britches partly worn, worth three shillings.” There were a few other items of clothing, also “partly worn,” for a total debt of Eighteen Shillings. On September 27, 1787, the exact same day as Graves swore out his complaint, Elihu Marvin, Justice of the Peace, authorized John Gilbert, the Junior Constable of Tolland County, to arrest Cesar and his entire family for the purported theft. The warrant included telling language “Fail not but due service and Return make according to law.”

Legend and documents abound with various stories of Cesar and his son weighting down the wagon with stones to slow the gang’s travel; son James even managed to escape, further slowing down the entourage as they searched briefly for him. Cesar was confident that his friends and neighbors were on their way to rescue them. And indeed they were, armed with all the legal documents needed to bring the family home. As the story goes, the Sheriff and six Hebron men arrived near the loading dock in Norwich, just as Cesar was about to give up all hope. The rescue was accomplished in the nick of time, and Cesar’s “salt tears were frozen on his face” as he saw the Hebronians coming to his aid.

Much has been said about the celebratory return on September 27 and 28, and original records documenting that return can be found at the Hebron Town Clerk’s office. But what is most significant is that the rescuers clearly included the rescued family in the celebrations. There are notations about “Refreshments for ourselves and prisoners at Norwich” (“7 Breakfasts plus 8* Negro Breakfasts plus Bitters, at a cost of 16 shillings); “Ditto on Road” (at a cost of 4 shillings); and yet again “Ditto at Mr. Fullers” (at a cost of 19 shillings, 9 pence.) Roger Fuller provided a detailed bill to the Town for the “refreshments” purchased at his inn in the center of town upon the group’s return: a bowl of toddy, some brandy, 8 ½ pints of cherry rum, 3 additional pints of cherry rum, and a quart of pure rum. That amount of alcoholic consumption would indicate that the victorious group was probably joined by other Hebron residents at Fuller’s Inn – right in the center of Hebron – to celebrate the return of Cesar and his family.

Of course, there’s always humor in any story, and this one is no different. According to official documents, upon their return, the men submitted their “expenses” to the Hebron Selectmen (including all the booze), but the Selectmen respectfully declined to reimburse the liquor bill.

One can only surmise that Justice of the Peace Elihu Marvin was among the six residents who accompanied Gilbert on the rescue. He personally certified that on September 27, the exact same day of the rescue, the “defendants” pled guilty, and were fined £15, 2 shillings, 11 pence for damages, or, if they could not pay the fine, “[be] whipped five stripes on the naked body.” The family, of course, never endured the public whipping; Elijah Graves stepped forward and took the family in for two years’ servitude in exchange for the damages and court costs. In return, Graves agreed to provide clothing for the entire family “so they may be comfortable in all seasons of the year during said term of time.” Also, Graves agreed that Lowis, who was still nursing young Cesar Jr., be exempted from any type of hard physical labor.

Cesar and Louis and their children (two more would be born after the rescue) settled down in a small house close to Holbrook Pond. In 1789, at the end of their servitude to Tailor Graves, they applied for emancipation from the Connecticut General Assembly, sitting in New Haven at that time. According to the 1789 deposition of David Sutton, their “guardian”, Cesar had been unable to do much work since his rescue, “being badly hurt as I understood by irons being put on his wrists.”

Others in the community also came forward, giving depositions in support of the Peters’ bid for freedom. Silvester Gilbert, a member of the Hebron Board of Selectmen, personally testified that after Cesar and Louis were sold to David Prior, and subsequently rescued, he had seen a letter a letter from Reverend Samuel Peters to one Mr. Buckingham, “directing Buckingham to tell Mr. Mann (Peters’ Hebron attorney) to let his former Negroes remain where they were, and according to the best of my remembrance, not to sell them.”

Elijah Graves testified that he had been a neighbor of the Peters’ for more than 15 years, “during which time [I] have observ’d but few if any of the common Vices of Mankind in them.” Graves went on to declare that he was an eyewitness to the original capture of Cesar and the family: “An armed force of seven or eight men laid Violent hands on said Family, bound some of them in irons and threw them into a waggon ... whilst their Cries and Shreiks [sic] were shocking to humane Nature; it left such an impression on [my] mind as is not worn out to this day.”

Joseph Wain Case testified that he had known Cesar and his family for 30 years, and attested to Cesar’s morals. He stated that he was also an eyewitness to the seizure of the family: “It exhibited such a scene of Cruelty as was unparallel to anything I had ever seen. . . Deponent Further says that [I have] often conversed with Mrs. Mary Peters the former owner of said Negroes that she had a note against her son Samuel Peters of a Hundred and Ten pounds for said Negroes and that she should never to receive anything thereon as she intended that the Negroes should be free and agreed with her son at the time of their sale to the same purpose as she always said.”

It was not only men who offered testimony in support of Cesar and Louis’ emancipation. Patience Graves testified that she too was an eyewitness to the seizure, “and that Nathaniel Man” (Rev. Peters’ nephew and named power-of-attorney in Hebron) “was then Present and held a Drawn Sword in his hand and as I attempted to go into the house from whence the Negroes was [sic] taken, he shook the Sword over my head and Charged me with great anger in his countenance not to go in upon my perrel.”

In addition to all the personal testimony, the town also officially took action on the emancipation request. Selectmen Elijah Kellogg, Silvester Gilbert, John H. Buell, and Joel Jones issued a “Selectman’s Certificate” stating “Know all whom it may concern that we the Subscribers, Selectmen for the Town of Hebron, well acquainted with Cesar, Servant to the Rev. Saml. Peters, and cannot say anything respecting his Morrels but that they are good, and that he has the Character of being a sober, honest, industrious fellow.”

In reviewing several other petitions for emancipation by Connecticut slaves in the late 1700’s available at the Connecticut State Library, there are nowhere near as many depositions from local residents in support of a particular request. Therefore, it comes as no surprise that the Connecticut General Assembly, in the face of such overwhelming testimony as to the cruelty of Cesar and Louis’ seizure by Prior and his gang of men, and the support of the Hebron community, declared them and their eight children emancipated from slavery and forever free.

Interestingly, the Peters family moved to Colchester following their emancipation, where Cesar sued David Prior (by then a resident of Lebanon) for £1000 in damages for Prior's unlawful seizure of the family. Cesar eventually withdrew the lawsuit, and the family moved to Tolland, where Lewis died on December 18, 1793. Shortly thereafter, Cesar married the widow Sim, and they moved to Coventry, where they are listed in the 1800 census, with five in their household.

By 1803, Cesar and Sim had moved back to Hebron, and David Mann deeded land to Cesar in 1806 for the sum of \$20. Cesar died in Hebron on July 4, 1814. Three of his grandchildren enrolled in Hebron Center School in 1824, and the Peters family remained a vibrant part of the community for the next century. In 1958, a Peters step-descendant, Bill Johnson, and his wife, Connie, played the roles of Cesar and Lewis in Burton Moore's play, "Quest for Home" celebrating Hebron's 250th birthday. Bill has since passed away, and Connie now lives in Hartford. Their daughter still resides in Hebron.

Original Peters' descendants still thrive, including Patricia Peters Troutman in Morris, Connecticut. A Peters Family Reunion was held in Hebron in 2000.

The old foundation of Cesar and Lewis' home is believed to be on private property on Wall Street. It would make a nice field trip for students, because the story of Cesar's abduction, and his rescue by the townsfolk, is true.

While there is ongoing controversy about the role of New England in the slave trade, Hebron remains a standout for its "dedication to the proposition that all men are created equal."

* Eight Negro breakfasts were for Cesar and Lewis, and six of their eight children: Doris, Salle, Iri, Susanna, Ziba, and Lewis. James had escaped on the trip down to Norwich, and young Cesar Jr. was only 4 months old, according to official Hebron Town Birth Records.

Donna J. McCalla, the author of this article, is a Past President and Historian of the Hebron Historical Society. Our thanks also to Carla Pomproicz, Hebron Town Clerk, for assembling the primary sources used for this article.