

1787: The Abduction and Rescue of Cesar

Our country has been divided on many issues at many 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.

At a recent meeting, some Hebron women, most life-long residents, began reciting the Gettysburg Address, spontaneously and in perfect unison. "...this country, dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal..."

Long before Abraham Lincoln spoke those words, 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. Perhaps it can never be retold enough.

The legend of Cesar is factually based; original documents in the Hebron Town Clerk's office bear witness to most of the story. Like most slaves, Cesar and his family took the last name of their owners, so he is often referred to as "Cesar Peters." Not much is known about his early life, but in 1739, the Hebron Board of Selectmen issued a "Certificate," noting that Cesar was a "Servant to the Rev. Samuel Peters." The Selectmen also stated that they couldn't "say anything respecting his Morrels [sic] but that they are good, and he has the Character of being a Sober Honest Industrious fellow."

Samuel Peters, uncle to the future Governor of Connecticut, John Peters, would ultimately side with the Loyalists (Tories) and in 1774, fled Hebron to live in England. He left Cesar in charge of his home and property. According to testimony given by David Sutton, who was subsequently appointed by the 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. When the war ended, Reverend Peters apparently found himself in financial straits, 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, a South Carolina landowner showed up in 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, the women ran off to get their husbands and sons, demanding that this respected, longtime Hebronian be returned.

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"! By golly, he 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 (what a coincidence), Elihu Marvin, Justice of the Peace, authorized the Sheriff of Tolland County to arrest Cesar and his entire family for the purported theft, including the language “Fail not but due service and Return make according to law.”

Legend abounds with various stories of Cesar and his son weighting down the wagon with stones to slow the gang’s travel, confident that their 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, Hebron men arrived at the loading dock in Norwich, just as Cesar was being loaded onto a boat. The rescue was accomplished in the nick of time.

Of course, there’s always humor in any story, and this one is no different. According to official documents, the men decided to celebrate all the way back home, and drank many pints of Cherry Rum and Brandy. Upon their return, they submitted their “expenses” to the Hebron Selectmen (including all the booze!), which the Selectmen respectfully declined to reimburse. Cesar and Lowis pleaded guilty to the theft charges and, because they had no assets, were “sentenced” to serve Tailor Graves for a period of two years. (However Graves was also required to provide clothing for the entire family during this period “so as they may be comfortable in all seasons of the year.”)

The old foundation of Cesar and Lowis’ 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.”

It was a moment in time, a moment that has uniquely defined Hebron, and an event for which we, 217 years later, can all be proud.

Donna J. McCalla is the current President of Hebron Historical Society. Our thanks to Carla Pomrowicz, Hebron Town Clerk, for assembling the primary sources used for this article. HHS is the owner of record of the Old Town Hall, located on the Hebron Green. As a result of Connecticut House Representative Pam Sawyer’s long-standing commitment to historic preservation, the Historical Society was the recent recipient of a much-needed grant for restoration and preservation of this valuable icon.