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Cesar and Lowis: The Rest of the Story

When I first published the story of Cesar and Lowis in HML for the June 2004 edition, many people contacted me, asking, "So then what happened, after they were rescued?"

September 27, 1787 will always be one of the most significant dates in Hebron's history. Cesar and his family were seized by David Prior on September 26; by September 27, the town went into full action.

Residents concocted a ruse to save the family, and a complaint was sworn out by Elijah Graves, the local tailor, stating that Cesar left town with clothes ("mostly worn", Graves' complaint admitted) he had not paid for. An unidentified resident sped on horseback to Tolland County to have the Tolland County sheriff sign off on the arrest warrant.

According to records still available today, John Gilbert, the Tolland Country Junior Constable, was clearly charged on September 27, by Elihu Marvin, Hebron Justice of the Peace, to bring back the family: "Fail not but due service and Return make according to Law." With warrant in hand, Gilbert and six Hebron residents rode furiously by horseback to reach the docks of New Haven. Cesar, Lowis and seven of their children were being loaded onto the boat. Their eighth child, James, had apparently escaped along the journey. Gilbert specifically documents that he did not bring back James.

One can only surmise that Elihu Marvin was among the six residents who accompanied Gilbert on the rescue. He 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, "whipped five stripes on the naked body." The family, of course, never endured the public whipping; Elijah Graves stepped forward and agreed to take them 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."

Much has been said about the celebratory return on September 27 and 28, records of which still exist 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 joined by other Hebron residents at Fuller's Inn to celebrate the return of Cesar and his family.

Cesar and Lowis 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 Lowis 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."