

THE REV. SAMUEL PETERS, L L. D.

of HEBRON, CONN.

LOYALIST.

HIS SLAVES

AND

THEIR NEAR ABDUCTION.

1787.

F. C. BISSELL
1899.

FOREWORD.

The following description of the man and his personal characteristics, from the pen of his nephew, the late Ex-Governor John S. Peters, of Hebron, may be of interest.

"Dr. Peters had an unusually commanding personal appearance. He was full six feet high, remarkably erect, of a large and muscular body, but not fat; his eyes were blue, and his face strongly marked by the small-pox -- a disease of which he became the subject soon after he went to England. In private intercourse he was animated, even loquacious; and the great amount of anecdote which he had at command, rendered him a most entertaining companion. He had an uncommonly active mind, and had acquired a large store of varied information. He had an iron will as well as an iron frame; and whatever he undertook he pursued with a spirit of indomitable perseverance. His ruling passion perhaps was ambition; but though he made some noise in the world, he probably never reached any high point of distinction to which he aspired. As a preacher, he held a highly respectable rank -- his sermons were written with care, and delivered in a manly and impressive manner. He loved kings, admired the British Government, and revered the Hierarchy. He aped the style of an English nobleman -- built his house in a forest, kept his coach, and looked with some degree of scorn upon republicans; hence the fierce opposition he had to encounter from the Whigs of '74. In his domestic and private relations, he was everything that could be desired."

THE REVEREND SAMUEL PETERS AND HIS SLAVES.

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The Reverend Samuel Peters was certainly an unique figure in the ranks of the American Tories of the Revolutionary period. Sabine, in his American Loyalists says, "The loyal conduct and imprudence of Dr. Peters involved him in many difficulties, and perhaps no clergyman of the time was more obnoxious."

He was celebrated in poem as well as prose; Trumbull, in his "McFingal" refers to him thus,

"From priests of all degrees and metres,

T'our fag-end man, poor Parson Peters."

Whatever else may be said of him, it is very evident that there was no love lost between him and the patriots of that date, among which he rightly classed the Trumbulls, and often refers to them in his voluminous letters yet extant. One of these dated London, February 11th, 1787, to Dr. Nathaniel Mann, merchant at Hebron, Connecticut, says, "I wrote you x x x by the November Packet a full account of everything that had occurred, and sent my Fower (of Attorney) to you and your father to re-claim and possess my land, as movables are passed away with Jonathan Trumbull, one of the greatest curses Connecticut ever met with; my lands are restored to me x x x x, as I have been well informed, by the sovereign State of Connecticut after abusing them and the buildings twelve years." And again in the same letter, he says, "John Trumbull, the little painter cannot with all his virulence harm me in that world to which I tend."

Samuel Peters was a descendant of Sir Jonathan of Exeter, England (born 1509); through William, a merchant of Boston, who was a brother of the celebrated Rev. Hugh of that city, afterwards Cromwell's Chaplain. William the merchant had Captain William, who had John, who was the father of the Rev. Samuel. He was born in Hebron, Nov. 20th, 1735, graduated from Yale in 1757, ordained Deacon, March 11, 1769, and priest August 5th of the same year in London.

Returned to America soon after and was rector of the church at Hebron till the Fall of 1774, when he fled to England, residing there till 1806, when he returned to this country. Regarding his title of L. L. D. he says in his letter of May 8th, 1786, "S. P. is created L. L. D. at Cortona University in Tuskany, near Rome, the most famous in all Italy. He would not be D. C. at Oxford because Inglis was."

After his return he traveled in the West for a time and finally settled in New York City, where he lived in poverty and obscurity until his death in 1826. His body was brought to Hebron and buried in the old cemetery of the Church of England, by the graves of his wives. In 1840 his body was removed to the new cemetery in that village, where a monument was erected to his memory

by his grandson. The inscription upon the monument may be of interest:

Here Rests
until the Resurrection
the body of
The Rev. Samuel Peters, L. L. D.
who was born in Hebron,
November XX, MDCCLXXXV, O. S.
and died in New York,
April XXIX, MDCCLXXXVI, A. AE. S. XCI.
He was ordained in England
Deacon and Priest, A. D. MDCCLIX
and
while residing in that country
after the Revolution
was elected
though
on account of
those troublous times
not consecrated
Bishop of Vermont,
His life was full of adventures,
adversities and trials
which he bore with fortitude,
patience and serenity.
This monument
is erected to his memory
by his grandson
Samuel Jarvis Peters of New Orleans,
A. D. MDCCCLXII.

At the time of his flight to England he says that he owned about twenty slaves, and in his first letter written to this country after the declaration of peace, dated July 20th, 1783, to his brother and sister at Hebron, he says "After a separation of nine long years, and a cessation of hostilities, which ought never to have commenced, between England and America, I venture to write to you for the first time to let you know that I live to pray for you and bless you." And he expresses his solicitude for the slaves: "Where are Caesar, Lois, Theodorus, Pomp and his wife? And in letter of Feb. 14, 1785, he says, "Where and how lives honest Pomp" "It seems to me that Cesar might be better tenants than Mr. Brown, who used my house and lands, not as my tenant but as tenant of the State of Connecticut, who had seized it out of my hands, and then demanded £ 30 of me because the taxes were more than he expected." X x x x x "As to Cesar, Lois and the negroes, their case will be perfect freedom by your laws very soon, and if they are hereafter permitted by your State to be my property again, Cesar and Lois shall be free by my law." And a little later the same year he writes, "I hope Cesar and Pomp and their families are well," in fact he always expresses the kindest interest in them.

But it seems that smarting under the claims which were made against his attorneys for debts which he declared he never owed, he did give orders to have the slaves sold; for in the sworn statement of Dr. David Sutton, made to the General Assembly in 1788, when the slaves made petition for freedom, Dr. Sutton says that he had "heard Mr. John Mann (Peters' attorney) say that he believed he must turn out one of said negroes to settle an execution in favor of Col. Eiderkin." And Peters himself says, in his letter of March 22nd, 1788, "As to the negroes, I have told him my mind was not to have them slaves provided my creditors did not multiply with the wants of your neighbors so as to set aside my intentions."

So it appears that he gave a qualified order, at least to his attorneys, John and Nathaniel Mann, of Hebron, to sell the slaves. This they did to one David Prior of South Carolina, who came up the Thames River in a sailing vessel to a point a few miles below Norwich, and getting a team, accompanied by seven or eight men, drove across the country the 25 miles or so to Hebron, where the slaves lived on one of the farms owned by Peters. This was in September 1787, and whether it was so planned or not, the day was that of general training, so dear to the heart of every man and boy of those days, and there was hardly a man in the neighborhood to resist the abduction of the slaves, all being at East Haddam, and not returning till late in the evening. The slaves consisted of one family, Cesar and Lois, his wife, and eight children, James, Doris, Sally, Ira, Susannah, Liba, Lois, and Cesar, the youngest a baby in arms. Preparations were made as speedily as possible for the return trip, though we may well imagine the slaves themselves could hardly have been expected to take an interest in expediting it, and the women of the neighborhood doing everything they could, cutting the harnesses and placing all possible obstructions in the way of a start. In the words of an eye witness, they "laid violent hands on said family, bound some of them in irons and threw them into a wagon and drove off with great precipitation, whilst their cries and shrieks were shocking to human nature; as

your deponent was an eye witness to this scene it left such an impression on his mind as is not worn out to this day."

Another witness says "The agents of Mr. Peters were then present and one of them, namely, the young man, held a drawn sword in his hand and by his words and gestures fully indicated to me that he would make use of it upon such as made the least attempt to relieve the sufferers, as he used strong imprecations to that purpose."

And still another witness says "Nathaniel Mann was then present and held a drawn sword in his hand and as I attempted to go into the house from whence the negroes were taken he shook the sword over my head and charged me with great anger in his countenance not to go in upon my peril." This last witness was Patience Sutton, a near neighbor, and may have been one of those who helped out the harnesses and hinder the progress of the abductors.

It was well nigh evening before they started for Norwich, with the women and children in the wagon and the men and boys tied together behind. The slaves did everything they could to hinder progress, one of the older boys managing to escape before many miles had been gone over, and after dark, the father, as he walked behind the wagon, managed slyly to pick up a stone now and then from the roadside and put in the wagon to add to the weight and thus delay.

In the meantime the men of the town arrived home from training and were told what had happened in their absence. A council of war was speedily held and a plan decided upon to re-capture the slaves, for they had no idea of allowing them to be kidnapped in this way. In order that this might be done under the color of law they hit upon this method to accomplish their purpose. Elijah Graves, a tailor and near neighbor of the slaves, had been making clothes for Cesar, and these clothes Cesar had taken in Mr. Grave's absence, so Graves went before Elisha Marvin, Justice of the Peace, and swore out a warrant against Cesar and Lois and the eight children "all negro persons," complaining "that they did in said Hebron, on the night next after the 24th day of September inst. feloniously steal and carry off, the following articles, one blue broadcloth coat, with white buttons worth six shillings lawful money, one pr. of corduroy breeches partly worn, worth three shillings lawful money, one corduroy vest part finished, worth two shillings and six pence lawful money, one pr. flowered knee buckles worth three shillings lawful money."

This was placed in the hands of the local constable for service, and with a posse of six of the foremost citizens of the town he started on horseback, after midnight, in pursuit. They pressed their horses at the top of their speed over the twenty-five miles of stony and hilly road, the sparks flying from their horses' heels and lighting the darkness of the night, as one of the pursuing party was fond of relating in after years, and passed through Norwich in the early morning just as the people were getting up. The party of slaves were overtaken a few miles below there, the old father of the family with the salt tears frozen on his cheeks

after his all night tramp behind the wagon. When the constable read the warrant to Cesar, Prior the kidnapper said, "What, Cesar, you been stealing?" "Dat's none of your business." was the reply. It is to be presumed that the occasion of capture was a joyful one for both capturers and captured.

In connection with this night ride the bill of the local inn-keeper which was afterwards taxed in the costs in the case, is interesting. "Mr. Roger Fuller, act. of expense in Graves' action against Cesar Peters etc., 1 bowl tody, 10d., 1 gill of brandy Cd., 8 and 1-2 pints of cherry rum, 11s. 4d., 3 pints of cherry rum, 4s., 7 horse baits 1s 9d., one quart rum, 1s 4d. Total 19s, 9d."

Under the item of "refreshments at Norwich, Sept. 27, 1787," are also taxed as costs "7 breakfasts 7sh., 8 negroes breakfasts 5s, 7 horses bait 2sh. 4d., bitters 1s. 10d," which with the item of "refreshments on road 4s" leads us to conclude that the comfort of the inner man was abundantly looked out for. The constable charges "To Norwich to take said thieves, self and six attendants, 4s 10 sh.," and the total costs of the capture and trial were 7s 2sh. 11d.

In Justice Court, September 27th, 1787, before Esquire Marvin, "The bodies of the within named negroes, except James," who had escaped from Prior before the pursuers came up, were brought before his "Worship" by John Gilbert Jr., constable, and they were all found guilty and sentenced to pay damages 12, fines 16, and costs 17, 2sh. 11d, "or to be whipped five stripes on the naked body each." November 10th, 1787, application was made to the same court "for the above sd. delinquents to be assigned in service according to law for the payment of the above sd. damages, fines and coats," and they were all assigned "unto Elijah Graves of sd. Hebron in service for and during the full term of two years from this time, he taking said negro woman under the incumbrance of her youngest child, and of clothing the whole of them so as they may be comfortable in all seasons of the year during said term of time and delivering so at the end of the same."

It would appear that Peters did not really approve of the selling of the slaves after all, for he writes to his agents November 13th, 1787, "I hope you will not have sold Cesar before this time x x x I wish Cesar might not be sold but he must obey you if he intends to secure my friendship."

The General Assembly, at its session of January 1789, upon the petition of the slaves, emancipated Cesar and Lois and their eight children and another slave named Pomp Mendo, and Peters writes from London in June of that year "as to Cesar and Lois, I ever meant to set them free, and also their children before or when I died. They are welcome to it now, as it has more than fulfilled the law of my mother and my solemn promise to her. If they behave amiss I shall be sorry. You have power to turn them off my lands, on which they can claim no right, since the Assembly has freed them on their own petition. As to Cesar bringing forward a suit vs. you, for selling him, it seems a visionary scheme, but all things but justice succeed in your country, especially when against me x x x. If Cesar, since his emancipation, cuts timber, sue him and let him pay for his folly in slavery again."

This family of emancipated slaves continued to reside in Hebron, taking the family name of their former master, and the late Ex-Governor John S. Peters, of that town, used to refer to them as his "colored cousins."

An article from the HARTFORD COURANT of July 24, 1789.

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Hartford, July 24.

"We hear from Hebron, that on Sunday the 24th June, last, the Rev'd Mr. Samuel Peters was married to the delicate and amiable Miss Abigail Gilbert, daughter of Samuel Gilbert esq; of that place --- and that on the 14 of Instant, July, about 11 o'clock at Night, this pleasant Bride, departed this Life, (by an Illness, termed by the Physicians an improper Chorea Sonata Viti) after 5 days Illness, to the inexpressible Grief of her Consort, Parents, Brethern and Acquaintances; and on Sunday the 16th inst. her Remains were interred in St. Peters' Church in Hebron. Upon which Occasion there appeared a very great concourse of People, in whose Countenances appeared the greatest Disappointment, Consternation, and Lamentation ever seen in Hebron. The Rev'd Mr. John Tylor of Norwich performed the Duties of the Day, and the Funeral Obsequies; being 12 Days between the Nuptials and the Silent Grave.

Her Curtains that were made of the Gold and Silver Thread, to adorn her Lodgings, are furled up being changed for a Napkin and a Winding Sheet, spun by the Spider and the Worm---the Marriage and festal Days were begun and carried on with proper joy and solemnity; but---their end is Death, without Dancing, or a merry Mood.

Men dying once they
die no more,
The Groom has Time to
think and Death
explore."

The sequel to this sad tale so quaintly told, is the following inscription no less quaint, taken from her gravestone in the old cemetery of St. Peter's Church on Godfrey Hill in Hebron, on land that was deeded to the "Society for the Propagation of the Gospel in Foreign Parts," by the Rev. John Bliss, "first dissenting minister in Hebron," in 1734:

"Here is interred ye
Corpse of Mrs. Abigail
Peters a second Con
sort of ye Revd Mr. Sam
uel Peters a Daughter

of Samuel Gilbert
 Esq by Mrs. Abigail his
 wife born January 31st
 1752, and married June
 25th 1769 and died July 14th
 1769 a Wedding Chan
 ged to Lamentation ye
 Greatest Greif in all
 Creation a Mourning
 Groom in Desperation."

It is said that this epitaph was written by the "Mourning Groom" himself and it is easy to believe from a familiarity with his composition and figures of speech that such may have been the case.

quotations from unpublished letters.

Oct. 24, 1766. "Mr. Lockwood's opinion of my letter (to Mr. Tyler) is pleasing; it seems that he approves of its sense and language. As to his opinion concerning my abilities, it is of no consequence; but I would remind him that Dr. Styles imputed the History of Connecticut to me, which is deemed here to be the best English extant. The reason of this contrariety of opinions is, Styles thought he should do me hurt by imputing the History to me, and Lockwood thinks he can lessen me by denying me the honor of a good thing, in his opinion. Envy is the rottenness of the bones."

Feb. 12, 1787. "If Dr. Pomeroy yet lives I beg my respects may be offered him, as well as to Mr. Lockwood, whose prejudice against my abilities arises from his envy to the Church of which his education precluded him from knowing anything about. Yet he is a sensible man and a good scholar and would make a figure in the literary world if he had not confined his studies to Andover and did not look up to Dr. Ezra Styles for wisdom and candour."

April 16, 1787. "We have sent you two Bishops, White and Provost, on the same principle that God gave Saul to be King over a gainsaying people, to divide and ruin your church with different systems in an Episcopal line, as are in your States--half Presbyterian and half Episcopal, half nothing and half infidels."

Aug. 13, 1787. "I apprehend your country is not worth one penny, but I shall go and see it next year, notwithstanding Dr. Styles and others in your country say I wrote the History of Connecticut, and those characters in the Magazine, without any

kind of proof, and yet will not allow me capable of writing the letter to Mr. Tyler, which is not so well done as the History."

Regarding his coolness towards Inglis, with whom he would not take a degree at Oxford, he says in letter of Sept. 4, 1787,- "Charles Inglis, an Irish Taylor, sold for his passage from Belfast to Philadelphia about 1754 and afterwards rector of New York, is appointed Bishop of Nova Scotia by the Grace of George, in compliment to his American born subjects whose loyalty deserved it for acting like the crane when she put her head into the fox's mouth to pull out a bone from his throat. Dr. Seabury, the Archbishop says, would have been appointed Bishop of N. S. instead of an Irishman, but for his defection which sin has been imputed to all natives of America, on whom England says they cannot depend, only when they are hewers of wood and drawers of water."