

# CONNECTICUT FREEDOM TRAIL STATEMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE



## ABSTRACT:

The Thomas Lyon House in Greenwich, Connecticut is the site where Peter John Lee lived when he escaped from slavery in Virginia in 1830. For six years Lee was living and in the employ of the Lyon family when he was induced to cross the Byram Bridge into New York State and consequently kidnapped by “blackbirders” and sent back to Virginia. The abduction resulted in a series of newspaper articles and became one of the New-York Committee of Vigilance’s first efforts in helping fugitive slaves. In 1844 the Committee reported via a newspaper article, “Peter John Lee has “stolen himself” again and, with their assistance, continued on into Canada.

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## STATEMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE:

On December 3, 1836, the *Columbian Register* reprinted an article from the *Stamford Sentinel* entitled “Outrage and Kidnapping.”

The *Register’s* story explained, “An industrious colored man, who has been for some months in the employ of Seth Lyon, Esq. residing a few rods this side of Byrum Bridge<sup>i</sup>, and who has been living in that neighborhood for some years, was unsuspectingly induced, by an acquaintance of his belonging to Rye, to leave Mr. Lyon’s for a few hours that evening and accompany him to Sawpitt, a distance of about a mile. As soon as he had crossed the bridge, then being in the State of New York, he was seized by ten or a dozen ruffians, bound, thrown into a wagon, and driven off towards New York.” The article concludes that Justice [Seth] Lyon of Greenwich and Justice Brown of Rye have written to the Mayor of New York<sup>ii</sup> about the arrest of Lee.

Subsequent articles established that the name of the kidnapped man was Peter John Lee, also known as Henry, and that he was an escaped slave from Northampton, Virginia<sup>iii</sup>. From the examination of census documents, land records and newspaper accounts, Lee had been living with the Lyon family it appears, on the family’s homestead (built by Thomas Lyon in the 17<sup>th</sup> century) since 1830. Lee was apprehended on November 20, 1836, with a warrant issued by the governor of Virginia to the governor of New York that was three years old. No magistrate’s hearing had been conducted, since that was not required in such cases in New York until 1840. A hearing was a requirement in Connecticut that is why Lee had to be enticed across the border.

*The First Annual Report of the New-York Committee of Vigilance for the year 1837* re-printed an article from the *New York Sun* about the event. The treasurer of the committee was David Ruggles, a noted black abolitionist<sup>iv</sup>. He recounted the event in the journal *Philanthropist* (January 27, 1837) stating he hoped he would “never be carried off like Peter John Lee”. Honorable William Jay (jurist and abolitionist, son of John Jay, the first Chief Justice) wrote that the seizing of Peter John Lee was an outrage on decency and humanity and continued by lamenting Lee’s loss of liberty and consignment to hopeless slavery<sup>v</sup>.

A letter dated 18 July 1844 from W. Johnston, the secretary of the New-York Committee of Vigilance, was published in the December 1844 issue of the *Emancipator and Weekly Chronicle*. Entitled “The Man Who Stole Himself” it recounts both the first escape of Lee with seven others in a boat, and the second escape accompanied by thirteen other runaway slaves, again by boat.

The article states that after Lee was captured the first time, he was tried in Richmond, Virginia and sentenced to death, presumably for the theft of the boat; the governor commuted his sentence and he was returned to his owner. On the second escape, Lee and his comrades sailed their boat as far as Cape May, New Jersey, where they were pursued by a revenue cutter and forced to beach the boat and escape into the woods. At least eleven, including Lee, made it to New York and the protection of the committee who saw them to safety in Canada.

In the mid 1920s, the Thomas Lyon House was moved across U.S. Route 1 to its present location – still on the original property that was owned by Thomas Lyon during the late 17<sup>th</sup> century. The house is on the National Register of Historic Places and owned by the Town of Greenwich.

- i. The eastern side of the Byram River borders Greenwich, Connecticut. The Byram River has been a recognized natural boundary separating New York from Connecticut since 1683.
- ii. Cornelius Van Wyck Lawrence, a Jacksonian democrat, was the first popularly elected mayor of New York City; he served from 1834-1837.
- iii. Northampton is on the western tip of the Delmarva peninsula in Virginia. This location explains why Lee had access to boats.
- iv. David Ruggles (1810-1849) was born in Connecticut as a free black man and lived and worked in New York. He was a writer, printer, and opened the first African-American bookstore. He fought for jury trials for fugitive slaves and gave them legal assistance.
- v. “Abduction of Peter Lee,” *Philanthropist*, March 3, 1837.