

Peter John Lee/Thomas Lyon House . . . 1836

PETER JOHN LEE, THE MAN WHO STOLE HIMSELF.

We insert with much pleasure the following letter from Mr. Johnston, the secretary of the New York committee of vigilance.

New York, July 18, 1841.

My Dear Sir, As you take a deep interest in every event connected with the cause of the suffering slave, I know you will feel gratified to hear that the operations of the New York committee of vigilance are extending, and securing the blessings of liberty to many fugitives from southern bondage. Among many very interesting cases of escape which I might relate, I select one, which, taken in all its bearings, illustrates the nature of slavery, its deleterious effect on the free States, the ardent love of liberty in the slave, and the overruling providence of God in behalf of the oppressed.

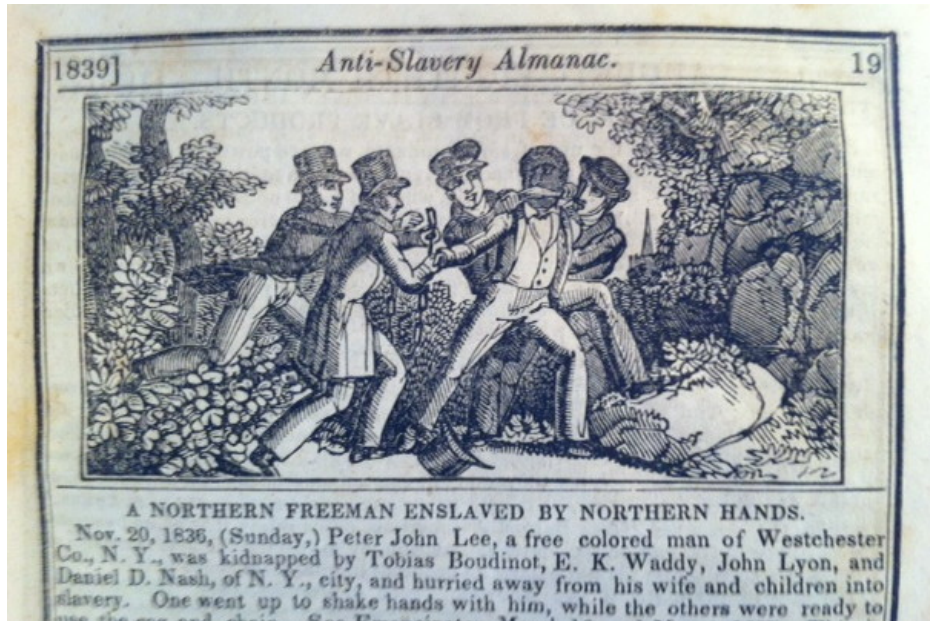
About fourteen years ago, seven slaves escaped from Virginia in a boat, and arrived safely in the State of New York. One of them, Peter John Lee, settled in a village in the State of Connecticut, near the borders of New York, married, and being employed in a very respectable family, considered himself perfectly safe. He bore a good character for industry, and became quite a favorite in the neighborhood. A family was growing up about him, and he appeared as happy as his humble circumstances could make him. Seven years passed away, and he had almost forgotten the misery of slavery. But the slaveholders were not disposed to lose their property so quietly. Being informed that some of their slaves were in New York, they obtained a requisition from the governor of Virginia to the governor of New York, for the apprehension of these seven men as fugitives from justice, charging them with stealing a boat. The description of the men in this infamous document was so indistinct that any seven colored men might have been arrested and sent to Virginia, or indeed 70 times 7, had not the vigilance committee discovered and exposed the villainy. This document, however, was signed by the governor of New York, and placed in the hands of some of our slave-hunting officers. After some time they discovered the man we have referred to, hired a carriage, and laid in wait for him to decoy him into the State of New York, Connecticut being out of their jurisdiction. At length they hired a man to tell him a friend wished to see him at a certain place. When he came, four officers arrested him, threw him into a vehicle, securely gagged and handcuffed and drove off to New York; from thence he was hurried to Virginia, leaving his wife and family helpless and destitute, and on his arrival at Richmond was tried and condemned to be hung, with three others charged with the same offence; but as slaves are not so valuable dead as alive, an earnest solicitation was made to the governor, who pardoned them and handed them over to the tender mercies of the masters. Thus we supposed to be the end of the matter.

Seven years passed away, and Peter John Lee and his comrades were only remembered among the cases of oppression we had endeavored to relieve. At length a statement appeared in the public papers, that a boat containing fourteen men had been discovered at sea, and chased by the boats of a revenue cutter. If the inquiry should be made, why a solitary boat at sea should be chased, instead of being inquired into and assisted, the answer simply is they were colored men; the keen eye of the United States officer, who could never discover a slaver on the coast of Africa, could clearly perceive these men were in pursuit of liberty, and immediately sent two boats in chase of them, to force them back to slavery. Finding they were pursued, they pulled with all their might, and, having no other chance of escape, they ran their boat ashore near Cape May, under the fire of the revenue cutter's boats, which were close upon them. None were wounded; they sprang into the surf, against the shore, and fled to the woods, hotly pursued by the seamen, leaving boat, clothes, and provisions, a booty to the enemy; they were dispersed in the flight, and never again collected the fourteen together, though all escaped. The vigilance committee, having read this account, judged they should soon hear something further of these fugitives. Nor were they disappointed. After having snored in the woods it seems they collected in small parties, and travelled to New York. At length eleven of the number were under our care, and forwarded to Canada.

From the account of these men, it appears that Peter John Lee, whose arrest and return to slavery we have mentioned, acted as captain of this company. His former escape, and the enjoyment of liberty, stimulated him to make another effort to shake off the chains of slavery, and gain the lost blessings of freedom, in which he has happily succeeded, not only for himself, but for thirteen of his oppressed fellow-men. They are all fine athletic fellows, worth, at the present low state of the market, 700 dollars each, making a loss of 3,000 dollars. Such is the precarious nature of that property which, stimulated by the love of liberty, can make to itself wings and flee away, or, more literally, take to itself a boat and sail away.

Yours truly,
J. Scoble, Esq.

W. JOHNSTON.



Location of Thomas Lyon House in 1836, Greenwich, CT

