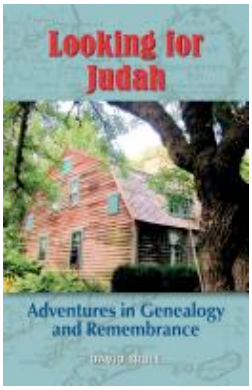
Looking for Judah

Adventures in Genealogy and Remembrance

DAVID BRULE



On this genealogical adventure, the author encounters a close relative, a man of another race, and together they set out to find mutual ancestors that link them to the black slaves of a Tory pastor, to a Narragansett tribal leader, to the son of a prominent white family, and to an endearing mixed-race grandmother who finally brought them together. This is an American tale in red, white, and black.

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Stories of ancestry, place, and race

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ISBN 978-1-63490-126-0

Published by BookLocker.com, Inc., Bradenton, Florida.

Printed on acid-free paper.

This is a work of historical fiction, based on actual persons and events. The author has taken creative liberty with many details to enhance the reader's experience.

BookLocker.com, Inc.
2015

First Edition

Chapter 1

The Portrait in the Den 1973

It all seemed to begin on a hot August afternoon in 1973. I found myself in a quiet home on Pleasant Street. The home belonged to granduncle Douglas Smith. The kitchen was spotless, the den still faintly smelled of cigar smoke. Shelves were lined with baseball mementos, for Uncle Doug was something of a celebrity in these parts.

A baseball phenomenon when he and the sport were young, he had gone from high school and the family farm to playing in the new Fenway Park in 1912, as a relief pitcher for the World Series-bound Boston Red Sox. He didn't make the Series team, having been shipped out to the Minors at season's end. He was to spend a decade pitching up and down the Eastern seaboard before retiring from the game. He had lived out his life in this house, in a quiet residential neighborhood, not a mile from the homestead where he was born. And now we had the task of going through his things.

When his legs finally gave out at the age of eighty-three, it was time for the retirement home, though his mind was still sharp. Since he had no children, it fell to us to get him to a safe place for his final days. We had wheeled him up the walk to the rest home and another old timer taking the sun on the veranda had recognized him and had called out to him. Doug's face had beamed at that, and the winning smile of the old days flashed over him as he touched his cap just as he would have when he walked off the field after one of his victories.

So now there we were, in the immaculate home, looking just as he had left it days before. The clock still ticked on the mantelpiece, old photographs of his dogs still guarded his den.

Pete and I were getting ready to start removing his effects prior to selling the place, for it was sure that he'd not be back. Pete, by the way, was actually my aunt. Her real name was Elizabeth, a name which I was to discover in later years was part of the naming pattern in family lore. A lovely name, but few in the family by that name were blessed with good fortune, as I was also destined to discover.

Now, how Aunt Pete came by her boy's nickname, no one knows for sure. One likely possibility for the nickname was that her parents were hoping their first-born would be a boy. Regardless of gender, fairly soon she was expected to take on all the farm chores as would an eldest son. I'd say that formed her character, because she became a no-nonsense, tough customer. She was as feisty as anyone in this family, the heaviest smoker, the best at swearing and cursing, she could hold her whiskey and drink any challenger under the table. Besides being able to cuss and drink with the best of them, she was my godmother, which meant something in those days.

So a bond between us had formed early on. She was also the keeper of the family oral history, the only one of her generation with the inquisitive mind and interest to listen and to remember the stories of the old people of the family who came before us. And that linked the two of us together forever.

That day in August we made our way through a lifetime of Douglas's accumulated belongings. Luckily he was one of those who saved everything and kept his souvenirs in mint condition. There were letters from the Great War, baseball clippings, post cards and calling cards, photographs of forgotten men in top hats and straw boaters, pictures of lovely women with impossibly narrow waists, ungainly hats and ample bosoms.

A year or two earlier, in this very den, an old man had sat primly in the now empty wooden rocker. The left arm that fired the most feared fastball in this part of the state rested quietly, holding a cigar that he raised once in a while to make a point as he re-told his old stories to the reporter who had come up the walk to pay a call. Doug's feet in old fashioned high top lace-up shoes, remained side by side barely moving as he rocked.

He traveled back in time once again that day to the turn of the century when, luckily for him, he discovered early that he loved the game of baseball, and that no one could hit his blazing pitches.

He went from playing ball in the pasture below the barn to pitching for town teams, unbeatable with his brothers making up most of the infield. My grandfather Alan, nicknamed Abe, was his catcher, brother Clint was third baseman, brother Butch played second, and oldest brother Billy was manager.

By the time he reached high school he was striking out upwards of twenty batters a game. He chuckled in his rocking chair, remembering how his mother Elizabeth, a stern Scottish Calvinist from Aberdeen, tolerated no breaking of the Sabbath, keeping all family members sitting quietly in the kitchen on a Sunday reading the Bible, with nothing to break the silence except the ticking of the clock of a hot summer day. She did make an exception however, for her darling Doug, who was allowed to go outside to practice with Abe. He pitched hard, burning the ball into his brother's mitt, the regular whoosh and thwack resounding time after time.

It wasn't long before the Red Sox came around looking at this prospect. They liked what they saw, and brought him right out of high school to the new Fenway Park as a relief pitcher, in July of 1912. He worked three innings and did a good job, as he liked to tell it, but the Sox had so much power in those days, with the likes of teammates Tris Speaker, Harry Hooper, Duffy

Lewis and Smokey Joe Wood, that Doug was shipped out to a farm team right after his first game, and before the World Series.

He never got back to Fenway. His eyes always darkened when he reached that part of the story. He had been released by the Sox suddenly in 1913. The Boston papers reported that it was because of a "bad heart." He never told us the real story, and I wouldn't find it out until years later. Needless to say he and his brothers became die-hard Yankees fans, always rooting for those arch-enemies of the Red Sox, and somewhat of a contradiction and a rarity in this part of Massachusetts.

Now he was miles away in a rest home, far from his beloved house on Pleasant Street, beginning the last few weeks of his long life.

Pete and I went back to boxing up the belongings, each quiet and lost in our own thoughts. The venitian blinds had been drawn almost closed against the August heat, giving the dark interior a semblance of coolness. Through the motes floating in a beam of sunlight that had filtered in, I first saw it.

There it was: a family portrait in a neat dark oak frame. The group posed, frozen in time, looking directly at the camera. At first I recognized no one in the photograph, although bit by bit as the faces came into focus, I recognized the familiar over-sized ears of my grandfather Abe. But he was only ten years old in the picture.

My gaze moved to the man sitting sternly next to his wife. Massive hands, high cheekbones, sharp goatee, something about his eyes. He had a straight-backed self-satisfied look, with his wife and five sons arranged for the camera. I had never seen this portrait before. Pete caught me staring at the old gent in the picture.

"That's Judah" says Pete. "He's your great-grandfather"

I kept staring. Judah and I had never set eyes on one another before this. He was the man who, in 1882, had bought the homestead along the river that I was now living in. He was the one who had founded the family, and yet I had never seen an image of him before, even though I now lived in his house. His eyes locked on mine, aloof as if challenging me to try to figure him out, to penetrate the enigma he was about to pose.

"He was…*different."* says Pete. She went on:

*"*This is the story I got from my grandmother Elizabeth, that's her next to Judah. But what I'm going to say, you can't tell anybody ever. I'd get in trouble with the whole family. They made us all promise never to tell. And now you've got to promise too. But I can't go to my grave and have the story be lost about where we come from."

My eyes widened as she revealed the family secret buried since Judah's death in 1929, when the conspiracy of family silence began. And I never did tell anybody for more than thirty years, even after Pete's death, that is until about a year ago, when things started falling into place.

Chapter 4

Rebecca Jeffrey (1781-1850)

We are waiting quietly in front of the fire, still in Joseph Jeffrey's Rhode Island house. The dusk has now settled on the mill pond outside the window. Flames flicker on faces, on walls behind. Joseph has spoken, and left us there. The room remains quiet, each of us lost in thought. I have heard of the custom of the Talking Stick for the one who wishes to speak. There is none. It would be better if we got one, next time. Pine crackles in the fire, sparks rise up the ancient throat of the chimney. The heartbeat of the Narragansett drumming still sounds, low, constant, distant.

A woman steps forward, she is carrying a Talking Stick in her right hand. She stands before the fire, warming, and facing us. She is tall and dignified, a dark blue dress reaches the floor; the collar rises up tight under her chin. A bright red shawl is draped about her; jet- black hair, braided in a single tress, hangs to her waist over her right shoulder. Her nose is straight and well-formed, her mouth firm, her eyes dark. Glints of humor are hidden in the corners of her features… She speaks:

"I am Rebecca Jeffrey. I am pleased to be in my great-grandfather's house again. I am pleased to see you have come here to meet me, and that you heard our call to you to come home again. Those of you, even our great-grand children's children have heard us and have come to renew our proud history. It is high time. We do not want our story forgotten. We do not want our story twisted.

I am an ancient one. I was born in 1781. My life began in Lyme, on Nehantic tribal lands on Black Point. My father was

George Jeffrey the younger, son of my grandfather who was also named George Jeffrey, son of Joseph. Grandfather was born near here, before this house was built, by his father. He was born on these Nehantic and Narragansett lands in 1718.

We Nehantics moved about with the seasons, as did all tribes near us: the Pequots, Mohegans, Narragansetts. We are all related, one way or another, through marriage or blood.

My grandfather George moved away from here back to Nehantic Reserve lands in the 1730s. It was best for us to live in our own towns, in Lyme, East Haddam, and Black Point. My father was born in Lyme in 1750, he married my mother Sarah there in 1779, and he had many children, besides me. I remember now my brother Joseph, named for great-grandfather, my brother Asa, my sisters Abigail and Huldah. There may have been others, but I don't remember them all, at my age.

At least three times a year we moved on the paths of the ancestors, and came back to the Narragansett church on this reservation, especially for this August Gathering, just as you have come here now.

This is where we always met our cousins the Montauk, the Pequot, the Narragansett. Even the Mohegans came, some of their past treacheries now avenged, but it would be a long time before true peace was settled between us. It was probably best that our family no longer lived here though. There were too many jealousies and bad feelings lingering over Tom Ninigret, the Anglican minister Joseph Fish, and the Anti-Sachem Party. The families who did not trust Tom the Sachem any longer had hard feelings against us, since we had always been a part of the Ninigret family's Council. I must admit, they may have had reason, because Tom created many problems for the tribe.

Back in Connecticut we lived on our lands on Black Point in Lyme during the summer, and in the winter we moved further inland to the Gungy tract, where my father and his father had tribal claim to hunt, harvest wood, and winter over there. Even then, we were constantly pressed by the whites who wanted more and more land, who used their land badly, and never had enough.

We had by then understood the meaning of their sickness for fencing in their lands. Too bad many of the Nehantics were willing to sell, even though it was against our custom. How can you sell land that you do not own? But we had debts, we wanted English goods, and our Nehantic population was dropping, with so many seeking work off the reserve. So there were few left to complain. Many of us left our tribal lands to work in cities or to find land to farm. Some of us from the tribe just leased tribal lands to the English and held a mortgage on that land. We expected to reclaim it one day, but sometimes after many years had passed, the whites felt they had paid enough and that they had ownership. We lost land there piece by piece.

Many Nehantic felt they needed to get entirely away from the land-hungry whites. They followed the Mohegan leader Samson Occum to Brothertown in Oneida country in New York where the Iroquois nation gave sanctuary to all tribes from here who wished to move away from the Europeans. My brother Asa went there. I stayed in Lyme and East Haddam, it was what I was meant to do.

In 1798, I decided to marry William Mason. I will tell you, I knew right off when I first saw him that he would be a good mate. His father was Cooley Mason, born in Branford in 1754. One of Cooley's wives was Clorinda Robbins. He married her in 1781. My husband William, son of Clorinda, was born in East Haddam. His descendants still live there.

He was a handsome man, tall and strong, and we lived well in Lyme. When my father George died he left us some money and some land. We were able to use that to keep William's business of building wagons and wheels going.

Just the same, we felt the ways of our fathers slipping away, along with the lands. By the time we were married in 1798, there were hardly more than thirty people left living on the Nehantic reservation at Black Point.

Later, the ones left on Black Point accepted to sell the last tribal lands, but retained tribal claims to the Nehantic burial ground there, which the Town of Lyme accepted to protect in perpetuity. Even though we were heart-broken to sell our last land, we knew that at least the ancestors would dwell in peace in their cemetery lands forever.

Many Nehantics were gone to Brothertown, many lived in towns, many married outside the tribe, to whites or blacks. The officials started calling us "Free People of Color". I didn't mind so much, for we had always been free, never slaves, at least in the Jeffrey family. They began calling us "mulattos" too. They used all those other terms so they wouldn't have to call us Indians. We were baptized as Indian in the church in Lyme, but they started calling us other names, because they wanted our lands. If they didn't count Indians, then Indians didn't exist. With those other names, we were becoming invisible to them.

Many of us Jeffreys did not put up with their ways of making us invisible. Asa, his children, and descendants got involved with groups to help us keep our churches, to bring back our kinsmen who were taken away. My own father helped Cuff Condol get his freedom back in 1787. My brother Joseph married Cuff's daughter Melinda, and later helped emancipate Herod Brooks in 1814. He bought him back from slavery in

that year. Later Herod married my sister Abigail. That was one way to get a husband!

William and I had five children, Rebecca, George, Eunice, Judith, and Amos. Judith was born in Lyme in 1800; she was destined to move up to Deerfield with her husband John Mason Strong, her children and grandchildren. She is here with you now, with us. John Mason Strong was one of William's kinsmen. In the 1870s, they moved up the river to Deerfield and lived out their lives in that valley. By the 1830s, we too moved up the river to Hartford with Amos. We lived in a nice frame house until the end. Amos took good care of us in those last years between 1830 and 1850.

So, as I said, the Nehantics who stayed in Lyme agreed to sell the last tribal farm lands, but not that sacred place, our cemetery at Black Point, where the ancestors' bones are lying. Those people still living on the reserve needed to get some money to finish their days. It was a very sad time. But I have joy in my heart for I know that some of you here will go back to Black Point to remember, to pray, and to sing over the graves of our fathers and mothers. I ask you to do that. They will rejoice when you return to find them.

But we Nehantics are still here, I can see our people in you that have come this day to Joseph's house. We Jeffreys, we Nehantics are still here, in you. That is a great comfort to me.

I'll leave you now. I've said what I wanted to say to you. Now I know our story will not be lost. But one more thing I want you to remember: all of you here come from the First People. We have the noble, warrior bloodlines of the Nehantic, Montauk, Pequot, and Narragansett. We have worked with Frederick Douglass, fought in the Massachusetts Glory Regiment, helped Susan B. Anthony, Reverend Beman and

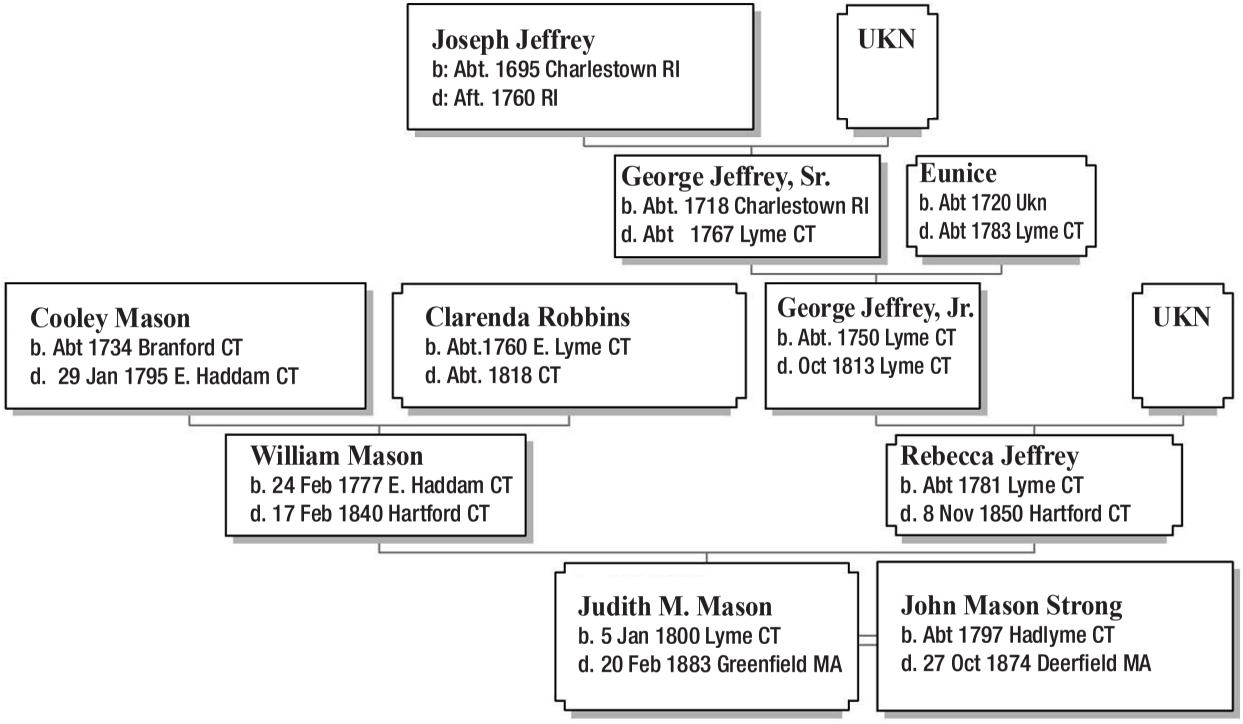
many others, to help our people, to be of service to others. We have always been Free People.

You are here because you came after us, but you are of us. You will remain strong. You will be proud. You will stand tall, it is your lineage, you will carry the honor of your ancestors."

She stood fierce and erect. Her eyes blazed, then softened. Her defiant mouth curved in a hint of a smile.

After she had moved back into the shadows, we saw the Talking Stick she had left, leaning against the fireplace stones. A bright ribbon on it held the strong feathers of the red-tailed hawk, the delicate red feathers of the cardinal, brilliant blue of the jay and the yellow shaft of the flicker. They shifted slightly in the glow of the fire light.

Joseph Jeffrey – Judith M. Mason



Chapter 12

Incident in Hebron 2010

Week by week and month after month the friendship and deeper understanding of family connectedness between Donald and me was growing. We began regular meetings at cousin Barbara's welcoming living room to discuss new discoveries, new connections, to read and revise new chapters and adventures in the unfolding family journey.

Layer by layer we peeled back the years, sometimes methodically, sometimes jumping from one anecdote to another depending on intuition and inspiration. Questions and mysteries remained: Where were the records of Judah's father? Why was Betsy listed as *"Name Cannot Be Known"* ?

Why did racial descriptions on the census vary from black to mulatto to white, often for the same person? I was still wrestling with what I was actually seeking in this process of continual discovery, but it was sure that one aspect of the family story was becoming clearer and clearer: the fateful issue of skin color, and its impacts on our lives over the generations.

Donald and I had clearly a common ancestral lineage: we both descended from a mutual great grandmother, Betsy Strong, who had lived out her life within seven miles of where we both now lived. She was a black woman, or was she? She was Indian, or was she? In one census she was even called white, after being called black ten years before. She died as an "African". What was really going on then, and did it matter?

Whatever the situation, Donald and I are linked by blood, DNA, geography and destiny. Yet we are from culturally different worlds. I was coming to realize that a part of the story I was pursuing, besides trying to unravel the genealogical

twists of our mutual family, was the unconscious effort to place our lives side by side to try to discern what different had happened to us.

Did racial difference really shape our lives? Of the four siblings, Judah, Sarah, Solomon, and Charles, only my great grandfather Judah moved into the white world, whereas his three siblings, including Donald's great grandfather, remained in the colored, black, mixed-race world. We were learning how different their life experiences were, and how, as the siblings moved into their later years, their worlds were separated, their worlds became so radically different, so defined by their times, so harshly structured by the sociopolitical imperatives of a racially divided nation.

As the underlying theme of exploring our racially different existences came more into focus, an interesting opportunity for learning something new, plus the possibility of an new family chapter, a new adventure, revealed itself. Donald received an invitation from the Hebron Historical Society in Connecticut to attend a premiere screening of a film based on an incident in Hebron just after the Revolutionary War. The incident involved two maternal ancestors of Donald's: Cesar and Lois Peters. Donald's great-grandmother was Mary Anne Peters of Hebron.

Curiously enough, back at the Fiddlers' Gathering to honor John Putnam, early in this genealogical adventure, we got involved in a conversation with one elderly gentleman by the name of Peters, a member of the interconnected black families attending the reunion of Putnam's descendants. In his late seventies, tall, high cheekbones, ponytail and relaxed manner, we spent time that day talking about both his youth and later his time in the armed services in France. Offhandedly he had mentioned the oral histories handed down in the Peters family: he thought he was descended from slaves who had lived in

Hebron, Connecticut, but he didn't know much more. He also had said that family history linked him to the ill-fated Pequot nation of southern Connecticut.

Barbara had gotten on the trail, sensing a story and a potentially fascinating historical episode. She quickly uncovered the story of Cesar and Lois Peters, and linked this gentleman to his ancestors. The family oral history had proved true. The new discoveries by Barbara however, also linked Donald to both Cesar and Lois through his mother Bernice. The African-American side of our family was quickly taking on added depth and perspective.

The story of Cesar and Lois, best related in the account by Rose and Brown in their book *Tapestry,* published by the New London County Historical Society in 1979, described the Hebron incident which was to be celebrated in a documentary film directed by a young NYU Film School graduate who was born and raised in Hebron.

The basic storyline is summarized as follows:

The Peters couple were what we could call "faithful" slaves of one Reverend Samuel Peters of Hebron, just before, and during, the Revolutionary War. Peters himself, the slaveholder,was a Tory and very much against the men who called themselves Patriots and who were partisans in the revolt against the King. As the Revolutionary War evolved, the pressure grew on all the Tories in New England, and like many other Loyalists, Rev. Peters fled to England. But before leaving the country, he promised Cesar, Lois, and their children their freedom as long as they looked after the house and property he was leaving behind. So Cesar, Lois, and their five children lived in the Peters house during the war years, grateful to be earning their freedom.

However, while he was in England, Peters fell into debt and went back on his word. He sold Cesar, Lois, and children to a slaveholder, one David Prior from South Carolina, in 1787. This man was determined to travel up to Connecticut to claim his newly acquired slaves and bring them back to his plantation in the south. He arrived by ship at the port of New Haven and made his way up to Hebron.

Cesar and his family had been well integrated into Hebron society for years and were highly respected as true members of the community. The townspeople would certainly have challenged the slave-holder over his intentions of making off with the black family but for the fact that all the able-bodied men were away from town that day, drilling with the militia . So they were unaware that Cesar and his family were being trundled up into a wagon for the journey to the ship waiting in New Haven and ready to sail for the South.

According to reports, Cesar tried to resist, but under threats of the slaver's posse he had to gather up the family's belongings and get into the wagon for the journey to the port. They shed many tears along the way and tried every ruse they could think of to slow the wagon down, including trying to add what stones they found along the way to make the wagon heavier.

When the Hebron militiamen returned and heard what had happened, they set out in hot pursuit, arriving at the dockside just as the ship was making ready to sail. The slaveholder posed a dilemma however, showing the townspeople a bill of sale for the black family. But the Hebron men had worked up a contingency plan. One Elijah Graves, the Hebron tailor, claimed that Cesar was making off with clothing he had not yet paid for, and that prompted the officer of the militia to arrest Cesar on the spot, to be brought back for trial to Hebron, to answer for the crime of stealing clothing.

The details of the supposed crime of course were slightly different. Cesar had indeed ordered a waistcoat and breeches from the Hebron tailor, on credit, as was the custom of the time. He had agreed to pay off the debt of the cost of the clothing by working for the tailor, bartering his labor for the clothing. The problem was that the debt hadn't yet been worked off, and Casar had left town, and therefore he was in legal trouble and should be arrested.

The slave-holder, not only having been outwitted by some Yankee ingenuity, but also being quite outnumbered by the armed militia, acquiesced, and the black family headed back to Hebron.

A trial ensued, in which Cesar was found guilty of absconding without paying his debt. He was ordered to remain in Hebron indefinitely while he worked off his debt as he had initially agreed. Arrangements were made so that the debt of labor would take a really long time indeed.

The crux of the trial however, hinged on the testimony of Elijah Graves, who had to testify under oath that in fact the clothes in question were indeed "stolen" by Cesar. The black man's fate, as well as that of his family, depended on Graves, as he wrestled with his conscience. Would he swear that the clothing was stolen or would he falter by testifying that perhaps all of this was just a ruse, or a case of an uncertain memory? The pressures were tremendous for an ill-educated man of strong principle. At that time a man's word often times was his most cherished possession.

In fact, he did testify that the clothing was stolen, and the slaver went back to South Carolina empty-handed. Cesar and his family remained in Hebron for the rest of their lives, living in the Tory Peters' house.

This story was just asking to be recounted on film. So the afore-mentioned native son of Hebron, a budding cinematographer, chose the subject as his thesis project for his degree in film. The invitation to attend the screening arrived at Donald's home, and we were determined to go to the ceremony at the premiere.

Donald was inspired by the convergence of circumstances involving his ancestor, and he began preparing what he would say at the ceremony, and he asked me to go with him. The three of us headed south to Hebron that day, Donald, his son Shannon, and me.

The car that day of course was full of talk. We didn't often have Shannon with us on these genealogical excursions, so we spent a lot of the time getting him caught up with Barbara's latest discoveries and our latest efforts at connecting the dots. We were on a beeline to Hebron.

Soon enough, we found the high school where the screening was to take place. A magnificent modern building, it looked more like a university than a public high school. We concluded that Hebron had to be one rich community indeed.

We approached the reception table of the Hebron Historical Society, where Donald and Shannon introduced themselves as descendants of Cesar and Lois Peters and that they had been contacted about attending. We were told that surely there was a section where the Peters descendants were seated.

First disappointment. Nothing was organized for the Peters family. We found three seats off to the side of the auditorium and waited for things to happen. I did find the Chairwoman of the Historical Society to tell her we were there, and knowing that Vickie Welch, a published, professional genealogist who had done a lot of research on the Jeffrey family of the Nehantic/Narragansetts was somewhere in the hall. I asked the

Chairwoman that she let Vickie know that we were looking for her. Welch had been crucial in our genealogical research. Her massive book *And They Were Related To…* was a treasure trove of information about the Jeffery family, and numerous related families of color throughout southern New England. She was also instrumental in preserving the Peters home in Hebron, and thus saving it from destruction. Unfortunately, we were not to meet that day.

Presently, the writer/director arrived on stage. Young, fresh, intelligent, he received an enthusiastic reception from the audience. It began to dawn on me that this was a favorite son from Hebron, a recent graduate of this very high school, and before long it became clear that this event was really about *him.*

The film was an excellent 50-minute docudrama, well directed and produced with local actors and townspeople playing the key roles in the story. The black actors however had next to no speaking roles and basically filled the space that should have evoked something of the character and spirit of the black family. Another disappointment.

The drama of the film in fact focused on the struggle of conscience of one white man, Elijah Graves, who held the Peters family's fate (and the destiny of their descendant Donald) in his hands. The trial on film reached its foregone conclusion. The Peters family stayed in Hebron, and the slaver, infuriated, returned home to the South empty-handed.

The house lights came on to thunderous applause, the three of us sat in silence and looked at one another. Donald shrugged. The youthful director appeared on stage, buoyed by the reception, and like any Academy Award winner, began the litany of thanks to Those Who Made It Possible. The actors stood up together and were applauded, black and white. The

film crew, the editors, the family of the director were all acknowledged. He said his final thanks and prepared to leave the stage. We exchanged more dubious, or rather, dismayed looks. Then he changed his exit path, returned center stage saying he needed one more opportunity to extends his thanks to…

…his MOTHER! More wild applause, which shortly faded. Good boy, he remembered to thank his mom. Then a black woman's strong voice bellowed from the audience:

"What about the Peters family? We all traveled here for this, what about US?" The young director asked the family's descendants to stand, but to our dismay the whole hall rose in a standing ovation, submerging the Peters family in the anonymity of the crowd - the crowd having effectively made them disappear.

The hall emptied, and we were left standing there still looking at one another, shaking our heads and wondering what had just happened. We drove all the way for this? We had anticipated this event for weeks and it came to THIS? Sure, the film was technically well done, the acting solid, the crisis of conscience well portrayed. But it was all one-dimensional. Cesar and Lois remained background figures, their personalities barely sketched, their fearful, later thankful, expressions stereotyping the image of blacks as viewed by whites. The film fell into a fateful trap of helping whites feel good about themselves for helping black folks.

Undeterred, and ever so slightly masking his frustration at not being able to express what he had been preparing to share as a descendant of Cesar and Lois, Donald strode up the aisle and out into the lobby, his scroll of the family tree in his fist, determined to take matters into his own hands.

I scouted up and down the lobby hall, expecting a reception ceremony, a gathering of people, a chance to meet the young director. Nothing organized came into sight, at least nothing we were invited to. Clusters of whites discussed sociably, separate groups of blacks chatted. Donald, with Shannon and me close behind, approached an elderly black gentleman, introduced himself, shared his background and relationship with Cesar and Lois, and the connection was made.

Before long more and more descendants of the Peters gathered around and the impromptu family reunion began. Shannon warmed to the discussion; I was blended in easily, without reservations. Shannon and Don went over the genealogy, and I became engrossed in a conversation with a fellow musician about our styles, repertoires. No hint of a notice of our contrasting skin color, no questions about how I fit into the picture.

We moved from group to group for an hour, speaking with Black families up from New York City, or upstate New York, others from Connecticut, Rhode Island. We seemed to be the only travelers down from Massachusetts. Donald voiced again and again his astonishment that no one was given a chance to speak for the Peters family, that very little recognition was given to the people who should have been central to the drama. Donald was convinced his destiny would have been totally different if Cesar and Lois had been sold down the coast to the Carolinas.

"I wouldn't be here today" echoed in his mind and in his talk, in our conversations.

The groups thinned, people headed outside and away to their destinations. Shortly, we found ourselves standing alone miles away, at the Peters house. Cesar and Lois actually did

inherit the home from Master Peters, in spite of himself. We seemed to be the only ones who had made the trip from the film screening to this house, set well out of town in a farming district.

Rectangular, two-storied and solidly built, it stood staunchly on a small rise facing woods, with its back to the fields. The house had recently been saved from destruction, was quite empty and locked up tight, so we made our way around the outside, peering in windows, and imagining the events that might have occurred there, events that had influenced the Peters' life there. A fine colonial home, with large windows, it was not at all the 1700s saltbox home of the Jeffrey variety back in Charlestown, Rhode Island nor of the Deerfield style.

It looked relatively comfortable, echoing the pre-Revolutionary style of a country house belonging to an upper middle -class farmer. At one point we were joined in our solitary ambulation by a relatively scholarly gentleman, sporting an Irish wool walking hat and a pipe set at a jaunty angle. He too was a descendant of Cesar. He and Donald fell into a discussion regarding the various aspects of the Freemasons. He was of the Prince Hall Lodge, an exclusively black lodge, while Donald had joined the Grand Lodge of Massachusetts, the Blue Lodge.

Donald had broken the mold by not joining the black lodge of the other, and by insisting on joining his own local, heretofore all-white lodge.

Shannon and I continued our walk around the home, discovering an underground passage or possibly an escape route leading away from the cellar to the edge of the field. We spent time musing on the lives of those who had lived there, inspired by the capacity of old houses such as this to set loose the imagination of some spirits like us. We observed the house

in silence, drawing forth the messages emanating from the ancient walls.

Presently, Donald and his new-found debating partner rounded a corner of the house, still talking lodges and and dueling over Freemason secrets. Donald was clearly not enjoying the tenor of the man's prodding. We helped change the subject, talking of Cesar's life in speculative terms.

Eventually we drifted to the car, pointed north to Massachusetts, and rode home. A few miles out of Hebron the talk resumed and Don clearly needed to get something off his chest.

"This was such a strange day. It started out with a real sense of excitement, and I'd say it ended with no small sense of disappointment. You know when I heard of the planned showing of a film that depicted my great, great, great, great grandfather Cesar Peters and his family's close brush with southern slavery, I was really excited about all this.

"That whole thing about no special seating for those of us descended from Cesar was one disappointment. I just was going to have to be satisfied to sit there and wait for this memorable moment in my life to unfold on the screen.

"To say I was disappointed would be an understatement. It was pretty evident that the film was not about my three times great grandfather Cesar, but it told the story of the man who struggled with his conscience about telling the truth or telling a lie. The truth would have sent the entire Peters family into slavery, and a lie would save them.

"A great story of morality, but not what I was led to expect. In telling the story on film, the Peters family didn't receive much attention. It seems to me that if a man had to struggle with his conscience about the fate of a black man, free or not, then it stands to reason that this black man must have

been a worthy human being. It would have added to the movie that something of the nature of this family was depicted.

"During the drive to Hebron, I thought about what I might say should I get the chance to speak. It is not every day that you have the opportunity to come face to face with your past. If the lie had not been told, my family and I would not exist. I did not get the chance to speak but the feelings are still there, and just as strong."

At that point, Shannon, a bit exasperated, interrupted, saying:

" Dad, it just doesn't work that way, you would've been here one way or the other… you can't imagine that just one incident out of a whole ton of other events would've made for a different reality for us or our family…"

Don responded. "Look, I know I'm making this speech to just the two of you, the way I would've said it if I had the chance. But I'm convinced I wouldn't be here if not for Cesar, and if not for the man who struggled with his conscience and did the right thing."

He continued.

"You know, when we were standing in front of Rev. Peters' house, where Cesar was a slave, I was given a stark lesson in the difficult life lived by slaves in contrast to their white masters. The house occupied by Rev. Peters was of a fine colonial style of the time. In the back portion of the house is the ramshackle quarters where the slaves, where WE lived. Those quarters were built of mismatched scrap boards where the wind could get through, and the cold New England winters must have been unbearable.

"I'd say 'Thank you!' to the descendants of the man who struggled with his conscience and perhaps told a lie to save Cesar.

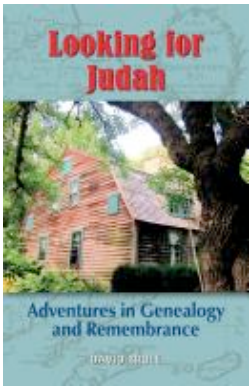
"And to my great great great great grandfather I'd say 'Thank you Cesar, for being worthy!'

Donald looked at me with an uncharacteristically stern look.

"That's what I would have said to all of them if I had the chance.

Did you get it all down? Because that's what I want in the book."

I did get it all down. And it is in the book.



On this genealogical adventure, the author encounters a close relative, a man of another race, and together they set out to find mutual ancestors that link them to the black slaves of a Tory pastor, to a Narragansett tribal leader, to the son of a prominent white family, and to an endearing mixed-race grandmother who finally brought them together. This is an American tale in red, white, and black.

Looking for Judah