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PETER WEBB
Slave-Freeman-Citizen

of Tompkins County

New York

By Sydney Gallwey

1960

Printed for the
DeWitt Historical Society
of Tompkins County, Inc.
Ithaca, New York

Notes and Acknowledgments

This brief work is dedicated also to the pioneer Negro families who ventured much to begin a new way of life among 'strangers' in our county. There is much more than this to tell of their pioneering. Much also is lost. However, despite its handicaps, this may serve as an introduction to an unexplored area of our county history. May others take up the torch and search. It is there for him who seeks.

I am grateful to Mrs. Edith Fox for knowledge of the Charles F. Mulks Papers in the Regional History collection at Cornell University. My sincere thanks to William Heidt, Jr., who has done much to start me in this endeavor. As curator of the DeWitt Historical Society and Museum, he has been an invaluable aid. He has been and still is a guiding spirit to me. And I cannot forget the graciousness of Mrs. Mabel Webb Van Dyke in granting me an interview into the history of her noble family. Even at this date, she at ninety years is a great inspiration to all who find themselves in her presence.

I hope, in the not too distant future, to add other brief works to what will become a gathering together of the history of the Negro in Tompkins County.

SYDNEY H. GALLWEY.

Ithaca, New York
September 1, 1960.

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101 EAST GREEN STREET
ITHACA, NEW YORK

Slave

The name of Peter Webb is unknown to many residents of this county. That he was first a slave, then a freeman and citizen who had bought his own freedom, perhaps is even less known. Nonetheless, known or unknown, he was one of the few who gained a final triumph over a slavery; it was personal to Peter Webb. This he did before the ultimate abolition of slavery in New York State. There may have been others who pursued the same course, but as far as the county records determine, he is the only one who bought his freedom.

On July 4, 1827, all slaves held in New York State were set free by a statute enacted in 1799 which provided for gradual abolition of slavery over a period of the next twenty-five years.

However, sixteen years before this day of freedom in 1827, Peter expressed his desire for freedom. He could not wait. So finally, almost nine years before the freedom year of 1827, in December of 1818, the following was recorded in the Town Clerk's Office at Speedsville, New York:

“This is to certify that I have this day agreed to discharge my man, Peter, known by the name of Peter Webb, from all further servitude as a slave; that he is free to act for himself as a free man from this time forward. Witness my hand with the above date.

“(Signed) John Jas. Speed.

“I certify the above to be a true copy of the original in all respects.

“Moses Cass, Town Clerk.”

Somewhere in Mecklenburg County, Virginia, during the year 1792 or thereabouts, Peter was born. It is presumed that here he lived as a boy, and though he was a slave, all about

him tended to make him a man at the age of thirteen years when he was brought to Caroline. He knew how he had been born and he knew in what condition he had been born. But his father he never knew; his mother was taken from him and sold into slavery in Georgia; he heard and saw of her no more. He was old enough to remember. No one, not even a slave, could forget the separation of family and loved ones.

And he also remembered on some night, how the slaves talked excitedly and with fervor of how they hoped and waited for their day of freedom. All of them would put small packs on their backs; as they cried and shook hands, they sang:

Oh, de land I am bound for,
Sweet Canaan's happy land I am bound for,
Sweet Canaan's happy land I am bound for,
Sweet Canaan's happy land,
Pray, give me your right hand.

Oh, my brother, did you come for to help me;
Oh, my brother, did you come for to help me;
Oh, my brother, did you come for to help me;
Pray, give me your right hand.

And on and on they sang, including sisters, other relatives and friends, 'way into the night:

Oh, de land I am bound for,
Sweet Canaan's happy land I am bound for,
Sweet Canaan's happy land I am bound for,
Sweet Canaan's happy land,
Pray, give me your right hand.

Other nights in the cabin when they were allowed to sing and pray, they expressed an earthly desire to be a part of "A Great Camp Meetin' in de Promised Land"—the "Promised Land" of the North:

Oh walk togedder, childron,
Don't yer get weary,
Don't yer get weary,
Walk togedder, childron,
Don't yer get weary,
Dere's a great camp meetin'
in de Promised Land.

Gwine to mourn an' nebber tire,
Mourn an' nebber tire,
Mourn an' nebber tire,
Dere's a great camp meetin'
in de Promised Land.

In the secret prayer meetings, especially when someone confessed religion, it was only complete if Thomas Vess, blacksmith and slave, were there to sing his special blessing:

Oh, Peter, go ring dem bells,
Peter, go ring dem bells,
Peter, go ring dem bells,
I heard from heaven today.

I wonder where my mother is gone,
I wonder where my mother is gone,
I wonder where my mother is gone,
I heard from heaven today.

I heard from heaven today,
I heard from heaven today,
I thank God, and I thank you too,
I heard from heaven today.

And early, he heard the story of the confession of a slave to one of the Christian missionaries:

Lord, I want to be a Christian
In-a-my heart, In-a-my heart,
Lord, I want to be a Christian
In-a-my heart.

In-a-my heart, In-a-my heart,
Lord, I want to be a Christian
In-a-my heart.

The verses continued: Lord, I want to be more loving, In-a-my heart, etc.; Lord, I want to be more holy, In-a-my heart, etc.; I don't want to be like Judas, In-a-my heart, etc.; Lord, I want to be like Jesus, In-a-my heart, etc.

Learning from the Book of Revelations, they sang this Spiritual in their midnight meetings and sometimes at work.

I'm gwine to tell you 'bout
de comin' ob de Saviour;
Fare-you-well, Fare-you-well.

I'm gwine to tell you 'bout
de comin' ob de Saviour;
Fare-you-well, Fare-you-well.

Dar's a better day a comin';
Fare-you-well, Fare-you-well;
When my Lord speaks to His Fader;
Fare-you-well, Fare-you-well.

Says Fader, I'm tired o' bearin',
Fare-you-well, Fare-you-well.
Tired o' bearin' for poor sinners;
Fare-you-well, Fare-you-well.

Oh, preachers, fold your Bibles;
Fare-you-well, Fare-you-well;
Prayer-makers pray no more;
Fare-you-well, Fare-you-well.

For de last soul's converted;
Fare-you-well, Fare-you-well;
For de last soul's converted;
Fare-you-well, Fare-you-well.

In dat great gittin' up mornin';
Fare-you-well, Fare-you-well;
In dat great gittin' up mornin';
Fare-you-well, Fare-you-well.

But there were also Hard Trials:

De fox hab hole in de groun',
An' de bird hab nest in de air,
An' ebryt'ing hab a hiding place,
But we, poor sinner, hab none.

Now ain't dat hard trials,
great tribulation,
Ain't dat hard trials
I'm boun' to leabe dis world.

And when they got too hard to bear:

Oh Lord, O my Lord! Oh my good Lord!
Keep me from sinkin' down,
Oh my Lord, Oh my good Lord,
Keep me from sinkin' down,
Keep me from sinkin' down.

I tell you what I mean to do,
Keep me from sinkin' down,
I mean to go to hebben too,
Keep me from sinkin' down.

So did young Peter grow amidst slavery and the songs of slaves. The song of "Sweet Canaan Land" had fed his soul and he too sang of "A Great Camp Meetin' in de Promised Land." And his youthful heart knew the words of "Oh, walk togedder, childron, Dont yer get weary" . . . , and what they meant to his fellow slaves. The religion of an African homeland was planted deep in his soul, but yet he might learn to sing "Lord, I want to be a Christian in-a-my heart." And he would long for "de comin' ob de Saviour" and "dat great gittin' up mornin' " . . . Every day, almost every hour, every minute had been "Hard Trails" and "great tribulation, especially since his mother was gone into a faraway place to serve a new master. And remembering, he cried to that Christian Lord: "Oh Lord, Oh my Lord; Oh my good Lord! Keep me from sinkin' down. Keep me from sinkin' down. I tell you what I mean to do, . . . I mean to go to hebben too . . .

For even then, Peter knew someday he would go there. His "Sweet Canaan Land" and his "Promised Land" were in the North where all his fellow slaves meant to "walk togedder" and not get weary. "Togedder" they would keep from sinkin' down. in their secret prayer meetings, convened by secret songs unknown to their masters and even in prayer meetings where the master or his representative was present, they sang and prayed and planned.

OLD SHIP OF ZION

Many a slave, no doubt some of young Peter's acquaintances, found their way to the North on the "Ole Ship of Zion," whose charted course lay on the famous Underground Railroad:

Come along, come along,
And let's go home;
O glory, Hallelujah!
'Tis the old ship of Zion,
Hallelujah!
'Tis the old ship of Zion,
Hallelujah!

Little did young Peter know that his course to freedom in the North would be charted in another way. But it must have seemed a righteous act of providence that chose him to go North, even though he was still a slave after his arrival in what was to become Caroline in Tompkins County. And the man who had been directed by this divine providence was John James Speed, who had bought him at the expensive price of a dollar a pound, Peter weighing ninety pounds and thus costing Speed ninety dollars.

The Speed family, of English descent, settled on the James River in Virginia. A branch of the family moved from this area to the Roanoke River country and located in Mecklenburg County, Virginia, near the Carolina border in August, 1802. Dr. Joseph Speed, in 1804, with a party of several southern gentlemen prospected the lake country of Central New York. In the party of seven or eight were Dr. Speed, John J. Speed, a Mr. Clingman and the Patillos. Augustine Boyer on his way to Maryland met the party coming up from Virginia. In April, 1804, John J. Speed bought of Samuel W. Johnson 1,875 acres, and Mr. Clingman purchased several hundred but he never came to live in Caroline.

The Speeds came to Caroline in the spring of 1805. Four came first in the persons of Dr. Joseph Speed, John his brother, and John J. Speed with his brother William. They settled in close proximity to the Dutch and the Yankee settlements, as they were called, the former at Slaterville, now locally called Tobey's. (C. F. Mulks, 1879). William, brother of John J., died on his way back to Virginia the next year.

Before leaving Virginia, John J. Speed had been a merchant in the buying and selling of slaves. In 1805, he brought four slaves whom he registered in the Tioga County Clerk's office as Fanny, 15; Peter, 13; Ezekiel, 19, and Maria, 12. The Peter aged 13 was the Peter Webb who is the subject of this story.

Young Peter, as well as other slaves who were taken north

by the Speed family, did not have to travel with the added weight of chains to burden his footsteps. He was free to walk and perhaps did much of the way. There may have been others, children and the aged, who came with them and who had to ride.

OH, FREEDOM!

Oh . . . freedom! Oh . . . freedom!
Oh . . . freedom over me!
An' befo' I'd be a slave,
I'll be buried in my grave,
An' go home to my Lord an' be free.

Arriving to view his new home, he could see nothing but large stretches of woodlands. Soon, he along with other slaves was ever busy cutting the lumber for buildings and helping to make the new land look like home. He worked very hard and there was so much work to be done that even the blessed day of Sunday was a workday.

Still, he found time to go to the prayer meetings that were held on the different plantations on Sunday evenings. There the old hymns and spirituals were sung, brought from Virginia by their African-American forebears, from wherever a black man had been, for they were brought as if they were a part of their own souls. And, indeed, they were.

Children became quiet, at least most of the time. as they listened to the older slaves, as one family, releasing all its pent-up religious feelings from a life of earthly subservient toil to the praises of their God, shouting for joy and stamping their feet, clapping their hands until it felt as if the old building would lift itself right up and fly on to Heaven. But, except for the loud "Amens" and the cries of "Thank you, Jesus," a hush fell upon the voice of every singer during testimonial time. That was the moment when a black man could tell everybody how much he loved God; how many trials and tribulations He had brought him through; and how he just couldn't "make it" or "carry his burden" without Him. But he knew that some one of these days God would leave his Great White Throne and come down to earth. He would speak and set all his children free as they were born of Him free. He would raise up His Hand. All would be silence, and everybody black, every last slave, would rise up and be free.

O He sees all you do,
and hears all you say . . .
My Lord's a-riding all the time.

When I was down in Egypt's land,
My Lord's a-riding all the time.
I heard a mighty talking 'bout
the promis'd land,
My Lord's a-riding all the time.

Come down, come down, My Lord,
come down,
My Lord's a-riding all the time;
And take me up to wear the crown;
My Lord's a-riding all the time.

O sinner, you had better pray,
My Lord's a-riding all the time;
It looks like judgment ebery day.
My Lord's a-riding all the time.

Young Peter's religion meant something to him because he knew that it had and would still bring him through hard times. And it gave him hope that he really would be free. He believed it in his heart.

When a little older, Peter became a member of the Baptist Church of Brooktondale. But he still kept his religious experience with his own people. In the 1820's, he was a member of a group of slaves and freemen who met in Ithaca so that they might be able to worship and sing together in the manner to which they were accustomed. Though he was a Baptist, and his family after him, he aided in the organization of the African Methodist Church at Ithaca in 1833.

Freeman

As the years passed, some of the farmland began to be productive. On some, there were corn and potatoes; on others there were vegetable gardens, pastures, hay fields; also a dairy and grain fields. Of course, some of the land was considered wild and unprofitable.

Nevertheless, there was much to be done by the slaves, espe-

cially during the spring and summer months. During the winter, there was not as much to do, and some of them were able to hire out and earn modest wages for themselves.

They fared considerably better than they had in their former homelands in the South, for their diet was more varied. Because of the much colder climate, they had more and warmer clothing.

Peter became of age in 1811 and on that day he decided to do something about the idea of freedom which had never let his soul rest. His master, John James Speed, Sr., looked upon the face of this proud and determined black man. Speed surely knew that the slaves eventually would be set free in New York State, but Peter did not know this. Nonetheless, Peter was not refused as Speed saw his advantage. Whatever other thoughts passed back and forth between the two are embedded in a time and a place different from ours. But there was an agreement.

Peter was to work two more years in servitude, and then be permitted to purchase his freedom for the sum of three hundred, fifty dollars plus interest. He had to be free so that he might go where he could earn the required amount plus the interest. After serving the two years, he went to work in Harford Mills and later as a hostler in Ithaca.

How long it would take, he did not know. All that he knew was he would do it. That great day came in December, 1818. And there was no prouder man than Peter was when he could say that with his own black hands he had earned three hundred, fifty dollars principal and thirty-four dollars interest.

Through perseverance and hard work, he had won his freedom. From that day in 1811, when he told his master that he wanted to be free, until his day of freedom had been seven long years. They had been seven long years of endless days and endless nights. But they did end. God had granted that they should end and that one more black man be able to say: "I am free. Before all men, I have proven I am equal. The grimy sweat of toil has flowed from my brow and mixed with the tears I have shed, though now my tears are turned to joy. And there is no one, no there is no one who can now or ever take my freedom away from me. It is my right by God!"

And Peter looked back over those seven long years. The work he had done did not pay much, but it was honest labor and for what better purpose than buying his own freedom. In this,

there was the will and determination of a man and not a slave. But, would he be accepted as a man and not as a slave. Would the genuineness of that acceptance match the generousness of the tips given into his hands while working as a hostler in Ithaca. This was the real test of freedom. And Peter was now a man, equal before the law, not a slave. He would test this freedom. He would make it work.

Citizen

As is customary with men who have achieved a degree of success, Peter decided to get married. And he had made up his mind as to whom. On one of the neighboring plantations there was a certain slave girl. She had been brought to Caroline in 1805 when she was but a child of eight years. Her name was Phyllis. She was owned by General Harper of Virginia and had accompanied him here on a visit. The law allowed the owner of a slave to bring him into the state and again take him out if he did so within six months. Otherwise, he became free by operation of the law. This is how Phyllis gained her freedom.

She and Peter must have known each other as playmates but more importantly they had shared common experiences in slavery. And perhaps, upon occasion, Peter even shared with her more—his dreams of freedom some day and how he longed for that day. He wanted to prove to all that he was equal even though his skin was black. He wanted to have a family. He wanted children—children to whom he could tell his dreams. He prayed that it would be so. And God heard his voice.

So Peter and Phyllis were bonded together in marriage about 1819. And this was a real marriage, with a minister, not like the kind of “marriages” that had been forced upon his people in the South. But here, in this new state, some of the slaves were married by ministers and others by the justices of the peace.

They moved into a log cabin a little way up the creek and over the hill from the Big House, as it was called, the residence of the master and his family. Their farm was located near a log cabin village where the Speed slaves lived. Close by was a graveyard surrounding the Speed family graveyard where the slaves were buried. And so on the plantation, the slaves lived, and worked, died and were buried. The presence of springs named the area Spring Farm. A dense shrubbery or thicket, a

sign of the times, now covers the last vestige of their earthly sojourns.

The center of life in the Webb household was the Holy Bible. It was used for reading scripture and followed by prayers every night. And not a night was ever missed.

This Bible of the Webbs was taken from the Old Speed homestead within the last few years, by some persons who had rented it for a few months. It is a great loss, not only to the remaining members of the family, but to the history of a prominent family of our county, a family whose head, Peter Webb, deserves to be recognized as one of our first Negro pioneers.

When Peter and Phyllis were married, the only name she had previously owned, Phyllis, became Phyllis Webb. It had become so when Peter secured his manumission paper. He had refused to take the name of his master, as was a common practice among slaves. His freedom meant to him that he should have his own name, for he had proven his right to such a name. He had proven his trust that he could support himself, and that he was not afraid of hard work in reaching his goal. He had done it, not as a servant or as a field hand, but as a man—a black man.

Eleven children were born to them. Some of them died early in life and there is no record of them left. However, the records do show that the second child was Frederick M., who was born on February 15, 1822. Perhaps most of his life was spent working on the one-hundred-acre farm that Peter owned, as did the other of the Webb children, and it is presumed that they availed themselves of whatever school was provided.

Frederick married in 1852. His wife was Lucina Barton of Union, Broome County. They lived on a forty-acre farm in Caroline. She was born in 1830 and died in 1906. She and her family were not slaves but Free Negroes who had intermarried with native Indians.

There were eight children, six of whom died at an early age. In 1853, Frederica was born; in 1855, Jemie; in 1861, Sarah M.; however, by the census of 1870, their names had disappeared from the record. It is believed that they were three of the six who died at an early age. The two remaining were Simon Peter, born in 1859, and Mabel L., born in May, 1870. Simon Peter died in 1932, and Mabel L., who is Mabel Webb Van Dyke, a resident of Caroline, is the last survivor of this great family. Her brother remained a farmer all of his life, but she attended the Ith-

aca Conservatory of Music and became a successful teacher of music.

On December 16, 1893, Frederick Webb died. He was buried in Caroline, in what is today Bethel Grove Cemetery. He was 71 years, 10 months and 1 day old. He and his family were members of the Baptist Church of Brooktondale and, as he, were members of the Republican Party.

Mabel L. married Lemuel Van Dyke five years later, and lived at the old Speed homestead which her father had bought in 1870. His purchase of these seventy-five acres brought these words for an early historian of our county: "Verily, the times have changed."

James Webb was born February 11, 1823. His wife's name was Julia Ann and she was born in Seneca County September 5, 1832. Webb was a farmer in Caroline Center and owned his farm of twenty-five acres. The census of 1865 lists Charles Edwards as his stepson. He died at the age of 94 and his wife died December 12, 1892, in her 60th year. They are buried in Bethel Grove Cemetery.

John Henry Webb was born February 22, 1843. His wife's name was Clara Ann and she was born in Seneca County in 1833. Their children were: son William L., born October 7, 1869, and a daughter Jennie L., born in 1863. They had another son Richard whose dates are not known, but he was in Ithaca for a time and then moved to Syracuse. The census records show that in 1860, John lived with his parents and was married by 1865. After the death of his father, in March of 1866, his mother made her home with him. He was the owner of a farm of thirty-five acres in Caroline. Son William L. died on February 3, 1891, at the age of 22; Clara Ann died April 25, 1888, at the age of 55; the date of John Henry's death is not known. All except Richard are buried in Bethel Grove Cemetery.

Another son, of whom very little is known, was Samuel E., who was born in Caroline in 1829.

Sarah A. Webb was born in 1836. She married Lewis Henry Smith, who was born in the county in 1835, probably in Ithaca. They had two children: Charles Frederick Smith, born in 1860, who, after the death of his mother, lived with Frederick M. Webb until he reached the age of 21; and John A. Smith, born in 1859. Charles Frederick became the father of the late Cora Hooper of 216 Cleveland Avenue, Ithaca. When Sarah died, Smith married Laura J. Patterson, the daughter of Cruty and

and John Patterson. Laura J. was also a granddaughter of Prince De Plessis, who served in the American Revolution and lived in early Danby. During the Civil War, Smith was a private in Co. B, 26th U.S. Colored Troops, enlisting December 28, 1863, and being discharged August 28, 1865.

These are the only names of the children of Phyllis and Peter that have been found in the records.

* * * *

And so perhaps, this story will cause the name of Peter Webb to be more generally known by the residents of this county. In his time, his struggle to attain "life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness" from slavery to emancipation in one lifetime was a noteworthy achievement.

In writing of Peter Webb, the most famous of the Speed slaves, Charles F. Mulks, an early historian of Caroline, states: "These facts about old Peter Webb are all matters of well authenticated, reliable tradition. He and his former master were always attached friends and Mr. Speed used to visit the family of his former slave, after leaving here, but returning to visit old friends and neighbors. He (Speed) last visited in the summer of 1860."

Some of "these facts about old Peter Webb" of which Mulks wrote are: "... there was an abolition and anti-slavery meeting at Cortland where Mrs. Speed and Peter Webb were by some reason of chance. Mr. Speed made some remarks in which he favored gradual abolition. He said that he had himself once been a slaveholder and had freed his own slaves. Peter arose and remarked that he had formerly been one of Mr. Speed's slaves and that Mr. Speed had given him his freedom, but not until he bought and paid him for it and earned the money with his own hands to do it with. This turn in the discussion was unexpected and Mr. Speed was real taken down by it."

But Mulks also wrote: "John J. Speed, Sr., was a noble man of honorable true traits of character and a very devout Christian. In all my inquiry or search I have never heard a word of detraction against him." (And the author feels called upon to add that it was also the same for Peter Webb, as for his former master, perhaps even more so because of his former enslavement.)

In this 'strange' relationship between master and slave, then between former master and former slave to the status of man to man, it may be added that Speed, though a slave dealer, be-

came attached to Peter and had kept him instead of selling him.

On February 27, 1878, Mulks wrote that Peter's wife "survives in her 84th year." Peter had died in March, ~~1896~~, aged ¹⁸⁶⁶ 76. His burial place has no doubt been hidden by the changing landscape. It is remarkable that so little is known of the earthly sojourn of two people, two ex-slaves, who contributed so much to our county history.

To get a glimpse of the greatness and strength of character of these former slaves who became citizens, one has only to look into the face of the granddaughter, Mabel Webb Van Dyke, who now resides at the home of Bradford Bailor in Brooktondale. No doubt she knows of the many questions that troubled Peter Webb. His early youth had been close to the thoughts of African freedom which still had kindled hopes in the hearts of his fellow slaves. And surely, he had known the revolt and revenge that slavery bred, and which formed the surroundings of his youth.

Slaves could not always speak the thoughts they felt in their hearts and souls, but they could always sing about them. And these songs were their very own. God knew what they were singing about. The "comin' ob de Saviour . . ." would not be long. And in the long "dark of night," they sang with fervent hope:

O Freedom, O Freedom,
O Freedom over me!
Before I'll be a slave
I'll be buried in my grave,
And go home to my Lord
And be free.

And so it was for Peter.