

The Underground Railroad in Pekin...

With all of the events surrounding the War of 1812 Bicentennial, let us not forget the 150th anniversaries of the Civil War, the Emancipation Proclamation and the role that Pekin played in the anti-slavery movement during the latter half of the 19th century. In September 1862, President Abraham Lincoln issued a preliminary Emancipation Proclamation that declared that all slaves shall be free in states that were in a state of rebellion during the Civil War. One hundred days later as the fighting continued, on January 1, 1863 Lincoln issued the official Emancipation Proclamation that stated “that all persons held as slaves are, and henceforward shall be free.” While this document did not actually end slavery in America, it did work to reshape the purpose of the Civil War that would over time successfully see that every man and woman in the United States indeed became “free.”

Nine years prior in September, 1853, Thomas Root of Pekin along with more than 60 other Niagara County leaders called on the people of Niagara County, regardless of political party to support the nomination of those who would be in favor of repealing the fugitive slave law and in favor of “free discussion.”



Thomas Root was an early Cambria pioneer who represented the Town of Cambria as Town Supervisor twice, and was Justice of the Peace for over 40 years. In 1848, he built a 1 ½ story frame house on the south side of Upper Mountain Road that served as a station on the Underground Railroad. Root is said to have “frequently assisted fugitives toward freedom in Canada” and along with a neighbor by the name of Marvin Robinson, in winter would transport sleigh loads of provisions to fugitives in the St. Catherines area.

According to his obituary, “any poor fugitive applying for his aid was seated at his table for meals and treated with the same courtesy that any wealthy or cultured guest would have received.” Thomas Root would have been the type of guy that would give you the shirt off of his back if you were cold, and brought you dinner when you could not provide it for yourself. He died at age 85 and was buried in the Root family plot (section 46) across the road from the house he built, at Mount View Cemetery.

In 1992, the Root home, which is now owned by our very own Deputy Town Historian, Gail Reinbird and her husband Dan, received one of the Underground Railroad “stations” sculptures from the Castellani Art Museum at Niagara University as part of a public art project. The locations for the sculptures were selected because of their role in the Underground Railroad or influence on the abolitionist movement in the Niagara region. The Castellani features a permanent exhibit on the Underground Railroad and the public art project.



As we approach the 150th anniversary of the Emancipation Proclamation, remember this important role that early members of your community played in bringing freedom, respect, and tolerance to all members of society. The Root home and Underground Railroad sculpture can be found at 3106 Upper Mountain Road in Pekin, NY. Stay tuned for the Spring Newsletter in which we will examine the role of Cambria in the Civil War.

In other news...

In July, Niagara County's 10th District Legislator David E. Godfrey presented a \$2,200 check to the Cambria Historical Society for the purchase and placement of an historical marker to commemorate the War of 1812. The marker is being manufactured by Catskill Castings, using the original forms used to make the blue and yellow historical markers seen all over New York State. The historical society is anticipating an installation date in November and will be placed at the Demmin Farm on Ridge Road near the corners of Baer and Church Roads.

Do you have any Pekin or Cambria recollections? If you have any stories, memories, photos, or other materials that you would like to share with the town historian or the Cambria Historical Society please contact us via email at historian@townofcambria.com, or by phone at 716.433.0387.

You may also visit the historical society's web site at www.cambriahistoryniagara.org or "Like" us on Facebook. Meetings are held on the third Wednesday of the month at 7pm at the Cambria Historical Hall on the corner of Lower Mountain Road and Route 425.

--Brooke Genter, Cambria Town Historian