

*The Untold Life of Peter Lee***Holly Metz****Hoboken, NJ: Hoboken Historical Museum, 2019****132 pages****ISBN: 9781733129008****DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.14713/njs.v5i1.201>**

Holly Metz follows up her book on Hoboken, *Killing the Poormaster*, with another local history: *The Untold Life of Peter Lee*. In this volume, Metz attempts to piece together the story of a man who was enslaved by the Stevens family in the nineteenth century. The narrative which emerges, however, raises more questions than the scant historical documentation of Lee's life can answer. The queries posed by Metz which remain unresolved include: Did Silvia and Nancy, Peter's grandmother and mother, know that Elizabeth Stevens intended for them to be freed? Did the Stevens family manumit Peter during gradual emancipation and, if not, why not? Questions such as these ultimately leave the reader feeling unsettled, maybe even angry. This is perhaps exactly what is necessary for citizens of New Jersey, and the United States, to feel in order to honestly interrogate the history of enslavement in this state and the nation. One of Metz's last questions is: "How can we go forward carrying a history we haven't fully examined or weighed?" (96) Metz leaves the responsibility for contemplating this important truth in the minds of each reader.

Despite the questions Metz cannot substantiate, the book continues the important conversation about enslavement in New Jersey, which includes recent titles by James Gigantino and Graham Russell Gao Hodges. It also initiates a significant dialogue about the Stevens family and slavery. The book makes plain that the Stevens' were involved in the slave system as investors in the slave trade, owners of numerous enslaved people, and investors in a copper mine that used slave labor. While the Stevens family earned much of their income from land ownership, Metz estimates that they accumulated just under \$900,000 (in 2018 money) in a single year of slave

trading. (8) It is noteworthy that a portion of the Stevens family fortune was earned through the buying and selling of humans who were viewed as property. This wealth helped the family establish the town of Hoboken and Stevens Institute of Technology.

While the implications of Metz's book are far-reaching, it was a very personal book for her to write. The prologue describes how she was "perplexed" by a plaque recognizing Peter Lee's work for the Stevens family. Encountering this unusual memorial compelled Metz to spend the next six years excavating the few details of Lee's story that exist. Using the first-person voice in the prologue is engaging, but Metz makes the unusual decision to continue in this manner throughout the book. While using the first person offers an intimate glimpse into the process of archival research, at times it brings the focus of the narrative to the researcher rather than concentrating on Lee as the primary subject. It feels, sometimes, less a book about Peter Lee than a book about Metz searching for Peter Lee.

Constructing a story centered upon Lee might have appeared unsustainable given the dearth of documentation. However, greater attention to historical context could have filled gaps and depicted Lee more firmly within the environment of his times rather than representing him as a name being traced through various records. There are numerous places where the narrative could have benefitted from a broader discussion of historical context. Unfortunately, there are also places where misinformation undercuts the discussion of context. For example, Frederick Douglass' 1855 memoir *My Bondage and My Freedom* is described as his first autobiography. (73) However, Douglass was already well known by then thanks, in part, to the success of his 1845 autobiography *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass*. Even more problematic is the uncited claim that Edwin A. Stevens served as an elector for Southern Democrat John Breckinridge in the presidential election of 1860 without explanation of the sectional complexities of that four-

way race. (68) Election returns in the *Hudson County Democrat* and the *New York Times* show that Stevens did not serve as an elector. Stevens did, however, support the local Democratic Party whose platform endorsed states' rights and referred to abolition as treason.

The Untold Life of Peter Lee closes with an analysis of the obituaries of Lee and stories circulated about him by the Stevens family. Metz points out that these narratives caricature Lee as a hapless slave who never wanted to leave the family, in the same way that early minstrel shows and stereotypes like Zip Coon reinforced notions of inferiority and helped uphold the system of segregation. Sadly, Peter Lee's human dignity was ignored first by enslavement and, later, through denigrating caricatures. Yet, his labor supported a family who founded a town and a university. Metz reminds readers that Peter Lee climbed the hill to work at Castle Point each day. The contributions of Lee, and all of those enslaved by the Stevens family, need to be remembered. Thankfully, Metz has started the process of recognizing their work.

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