

The Peter Mott House

Curators: multiple

Curation: permanent

Museum Website: <https://www.petermotthouse.org/>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.14713/njs.v10i1.355>

The story of the Peter Mott House is a play in three parts. The first part is the story of Peter Mott, an agent on the Underground Railroad. The second features the community of Lawnside, Camden County, that fought to save the house from destruction and historical oblivion. The third focuses on that community's commitment to ensuring future generations know about Peter Mott, the perseverance and resilience of those who escaped the bonds and horror of slavery, and the ingenuity of those who helped to make that freedom possible.

Part I: The Story

Peter Mott was born between 1800 and 1810 in Delaware to a Virginian father and a mother from Maryland. He likely escaped bondage around 1830, making his way to New Jersey and freedom. In 1833, he married Eliza Thomas, and 11 years later purchased the first of three lots in what was then called Free Haven. He built a two-story house, and it is from this house Peter and Eliza Mott provided refuge for those escaping slavery. Some of the freedom seekers settled in and around Free Haven, also known as Snow Hill. Others traveled on to other stops along the Underground Railroad. The Motts were pillars of the community. They attended Mount Pisgah A.M.E. Church, where Peter served as pastor and became the first Sunday School superintendent. Though he died in 1881, his remarkable story lived on through the oral history traditions of the community now called Lawnside.

Part II: The Community

Lawnside, the only historically African American incorporated municipality in the northern United States, has been a refuge for African Americans since the late 18th century. Founded in

1840, the town was initially called Free Haven because it served as a stop along multiple routes of the Underground Railroad. After Peter Mott's death, the house remained a residence into the 1980s, but by 1989 it had become so dilapidated that it was near collapse.

A Lawnside resident and descendant of William Still, often referred to as the "Father of the Underground Railroad," played a crucial role in saving the Peter Mott House from destruction. At a community meeting in 1992, Clarence Still informed residents that a developer was planning to tear down the house to make way for a townhouse development. Alarmed at the prospect of losing the house, concerned residents quickly organized and formed the Lawnside Historical Society. Racing against time, they convinced the developer to transfer the deed to the society. What followed was an expensive restoration project. The society worked tirelessly to raise money for the extensive renovations. The house was in such poor condition that it needed to be temporarily moved so the crumbling foundation could be rebuilt. In 2001, against all odds, the Peter Mott House and Underground Railroad Museum was dedicated and opened to the public.

Part III: The Future

The Peter Mott House sits in a cul-de-sac of townhomes. The narrow two-story house is elegant in its simplicity. Though small by today's standards, at the time it was built the size of the house indicated the owner was a person of means and a leader in society.

On the day I visited, Peter Mott, portrayed by Keith Henley, was outside greeting visitors. In the sitting room, one of only two rooms on the first floor, there were a few pieces of period furniture along with folding chairs for visitors. C. Joyce Fowler, vice president of the Lawnside Historical Society, welcomed our group and told the story of Peter Mott, the history of the house and the community, and how the house was saved. A short video, "The Best Kept Secret," started with a striking story about an interaction between a teacher and student. The teacher went around

the room asking each student about their ethnic background and its history, but when she got to the student from Lawnside she said, “You have no history.” The Peter Mott House is a rebuke to the sentiment expressed by that teacher. Her taunt to that child underscores the devastating impact of racism on our understanding of the American story. After the video, the group went into the kitchen where there was a built-in cabinet believed to have been built by Peter Mott, a display of artifacts uncovered during an archaeological dig, and objects owned by William Still. The basement and second floor are not ready for visitors, but the society plans to open them at some point.

In addition to house tours, the society offers lectures and community events such as outdoor movies and open mic nights. However, the primary focus of the society is youth education. The society offers an Underground Railroad Youth Camp in the summer, and school groups visit regularly. On the day I visited, teenagers from the NAACP Camden County Youth Council were volunteering. Just a few weeks prior, the society hosted a panel discussion on the importance of teaching Black history, especially at a time when there are campaigns to erase that history through tactics like curriculum restrictions and book bans.

Before I left, I spoke with Mr. Henley, the historical reenactor. He spoke about how moving it is to portray Peter Mott, and his dedication to ensuring all Americans know his story. He fears that efforts to distort Black history will result in young people never knowing the truth about our country’s history, and without truly knowing who we are we will “never see each other and understand each other.”

The Peter Mott House and the community of Lawnside are here to ensure no teacher will tell a Black student, “you have no history.” As Mr. Henley said, “Our ancestors can show the way. We have a story to tell.”

Meg Sharp Walton
Principal, Sharp Consulting
Executive Director, Monmouth County Historical Commission