



August 2020

North East Historical Society Board of Directors

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We have been doing our best to keep the museum running during these trying times. Our plans for new displays this spring fell through thanks to Covid-19. The man that owned the items that we had planned to borrow has lent the items out to help the efforts to combat the spread of the virus.

So we have found another place to borrow something to display. We have the carvings of Ross Peters on display. Some of you may remember Mr. Peter's carvings we had on display about 15 years ago. The man is now in his 90s and still is carving. The items we have now not only consist of individual carvings, but scenes that are very intricate and clever. He has quite a sense of humor too! You need to stop in and have a look.

We are open our usual hours (4:30-8:30 Fridays & Saturdays) and with all the pandemic precautions recommended to keep everyone safe.

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## Ramsey's Ruse

In the past I have heard of several instances of runaway slave stories occurring in North East. There are several places in North East which are said to have been stops on the Underground Railway. None of these claims can be verified, of course, because this was a clandestine business with serious consequences if discovered.

The few stories that seem to be true came to light some time later in history. After the slave trade had been abolished and prosecution for helping these fugitives had ceased, those who helped could be given credit for their good deeds.

This is one of those stories, and it is about a North East man named Robert Ramsey. Robert was born in Huntington, PA, sometime in the early 1800s. He came to Erie County in 1828 where he worked as a cabinetmaker with a Mr. Gallagher in Erie. In 1829 he married Miss Prudence Force. A year or two after his marriage, he settled in North East to carry on his trade. He lived here until 1850 when he moved to New Wilmington, Mercer County, PA, where he died in 1885. This story was brought to light after his death.

It begins when a Mr. Russell of Belle Valley, who was a constant suspect in the runaway slave hiding-process, received one such slave. Since he was always suspected when a fugitive was thought to be nearing Erie County, he felt it was necessary to move this man as soon as possible. He quickly hitched up his fastest horse and headed for North East, staying on back roads, arriving early in the morning when the sky was still grey.

Here he met with Dr. Smedley, a known abolitionist, and asked him for help with secreting and

moving the fugitive. Knowing the authorities would be checking in this area also, the doctor called on Robert Ramsey and William Durand to see what could be done. Ramsey suggested a daring plan.

There had been a man in the borough who had died the day before. In these days the undertaker was often a cabinetmaker. Ramsey was to make a coffin for the deceased and be in charge of the funeral. "Now," Ramsey said, "I will go to the house and arrange for the arrival of our friend and once inside the house I will bear him off in triumph, even if all the marshals in the state were surrounding the building." Ramsey talked to the lady of the house about what he wished to do and, rising above her grief, she told him he was at liberty to carry out his plan. The runaway was secreted in a closet and all parties returned to their houses as if nothing had happened.

About noon two marshals came into town, having been told by neighbors of Mr. Russell that Russell would most likely be found in the vicinity of North East. Ramsey was in his shop working on a casket in which to lay the remains of the deceased North East man. If the marshals had known better, they would have noticed the casket was of a size a good deal larger than needed for the deceased man.

Once he had the casket completed, he took it to the house of the deceased. About an hour later Robert Ramsey, William Durand, and Philetus Glas drove up to the house, backed up the wagon and filed slowly in. Now, as it happened, they were not far from the house of James Smedley where there was a detective lounging. After the three gentlemen had been in the deceased's house for a few minutes, Ramsey came out and, in a most solemn manner, asked the detective for assistance to carry out the casket. He explained the services were not to be held in the house as was the custom at that time.

They carried the body out, reverently laying their hats off. Once loaded on the wagon, they thanked the detective for his assistance, and soon the fugitive was on his way to the waters of Lake Erie and heading for freedom. As far as anyone ever knew the detective was never made aware that he was guilty of aiding the escape of the very person he was watching for.

Robert's obituary, which appeared in *The Erie Morning Dispatch* of March 34, 1885, mentioned that he was the last survivor of his band of "Underground Railroad conductors." It listed the following members names in addition to Robert's: Dr. James Smedley, Ephriam Smedley, Philetus Glas Sr., Deacon Kingsbury, Gilbert Belnap, and William Durand.

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This little tongue-in-cheek article appeared in the November 16, 1933 issue of the North East Breeze.

### ***NEAR RIOT AT KELLER'S THEATER***

*At 3:45 Tuesday afternoon's crowd of about 600 children who had been given tickets to the Buster Brown matinee at Keller's Theater stormed the doors, all trying to get in at once. No fatalities have been reported, and in fact the kids all seemed to have a good time. Souvenirs were given to each one at the close of the show.*

**We ask for your support in the Erie Gives drive this year on August 11th. We just incurred a large expense to fix the air conditioning in the museum. It was a double problem because when we had fixed the air handler inside the building, the outside unit was vandalized within the first week it was running. Altogether we incurred over \$1,000 in repairs.**

### **What you need to know:**

**Day and Time:** Checks will be accepted on Monday, August 10. The online event takes place on Tuesday, August 11. You have 12 hours to make your donation between the hours of 8 a.m. and 8 p.m. EST.

**Participating Nonprofits:** Your organization must be a 501(c)(3), serve Erie County and either be a member of [The Nonprofit Partnership](#) or have an Agency Endowment with The Erie Community Foundation to participate in Erie Gives.

**Gift Amount:** The minimum gift is \$25. There is no limit to the amount of money you may give. There is no limit to the number of organizations you can donate to in a transaction.

**Credit Cards:** Only Visa, MasterCard and Discover will be accepted. The credit card processor charges a nominal fee per transaction. The Erie Community Foundation does not receive any fees. Sorry, credit card gift cards will not be accepted.

**Checks:** Donors can write a check for their Erie Gives donation.

- Checks must be made out to The Erie Community Foundation.
- All check donations must be accompanied by a [Check Donation Form](#).
- Checks must be delivered to The Erie Community Foundation (459 West 6th Street, Erie, PA 16507) no later than Monday, August 10, 2020.

**Prorated Match:** The Erie Community Foundation and the North East Community Foundation will enhance donors' gifts by providing a prorated match to each gift made to a nonprofit.

**Your Receipt:** You will receive an email receipt of your gift, which you should retain for tax purposes. Unless you choose to remain anonymous, your donor information will be sent to the appropriate organizations.

**When will the Nonprofits receive your donation:** Due to COVID-19, we will not host our annual Check Distribution Day at the Erie Zoo. This year, all Erie Gives donations will be mailed to nonprofits.

**For more information or to download a donation form go to: [ERIEGIVES.ORG](http://ERIEGIVES.ORG)**