

Silas W. Brewster - Early Hannibal Merchant & Abolitionist

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The subject of our narrative is Silas W. Brewster, a direct descendant of the Rev. William Brewster who sailed with fellow Pilgrims from England on board the "Mayflower", arriving off Cape Cod on November 21, 1620. Rev. William Brewster served as the minister of the new Plymouth Church and as such presided over the first Thanksgiving celebration.

As for Silas W. Brewster, he was born January 4, 1813, in the Town of Mexico, Oswego Co., NY, the son of Judge Elias and Lucretia Brewster. As a young man, Silas became involved in the anti-slavery movement starting in 1835, when he assisted Ransom Goss Williams of Colosse in publishing materials for the Anti-slavery Society.

In this period, the slavery question often created divisions in families when different members held opposing views. The Brewster family was no exception. Silas' father

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Judge Elias Brewster and Silas' uncle Dr. Sardius Brewster strongly supported the concept of slavery, both legally and Biblically. This, of course, strained family relations.

To make matter worse, Silas had a sister Lucretia who married James Caleb Jackson, a local farmer and staunch Abolitionist. His oratory on the anti-slavery issue became so eloquent that by 1837, he was in spirit no longer a farmer, but rather the Oswego County Agent for the State Anti-slavery Society. James was also a close associate of Garret Smith of Peterboro, a staunch Abolitionist and wealthy land owner

who sheltered fugitive slaves and gave 40-acre plots of land to Blacks.

Fortunately for family relations, as the anti-slavery view became more accepted by the general population, Judge Elias Brewster and Dr. Sardius Brewster began to re-evaluate their proslavery convictions. Eventually, they both were converted to the idea of emancipation of the slaves.

In 1836, Silas W. Brewster and George Deming opened a general goods store on the southwest corner of the Hannibal Village Square. In more recent times, it was the



S.W. Brewster & Son Dry Goods Store located on the southeast corner of the Hannibal Village Square as it appeared in the 1870s. The building was destroyed in a major fire on October 22, 1942.

location of the former Cook's Manufacturing Jewelers. Mr. Brewster soon became sole proprietor. Silas started in business with a capital investment of \$2,500 and allowed \$300 a year for living expenses for his family. This went on for five years. By steadily building up his business, his sales had increased to \$6,000 in 1845. He kept on until his enterprise was one of the most successful in Oswego County.

Coinciding with the opening of his store in Hannibal, Silas also built his home and barn nearby on Cayuga Street. The barn is long gone, but the house, greatly modified, still stands and is currently the home of Mr. and Mrs. Robert Simmons.

Silas was a leading member of the Hannibal Congregational Church to which he was the largest contributor. On December 25, 1858, he was elected Deacon for life. In 1870, the Hannibal Congregational Church was dissolved and the Hannibal Presbyterian Church was established in its place. On July 25, 1870, he was made a member and Elder in the newly organized Presbyterian Church. He was also Clerk of the Church and Session from 1870 until 1881.

Silas W. Brewster no doubt exerted much influence in the passage of the following resolution regarding the issue of slavery by the Hannibal Congregational Church on

March 25, 1843:

Resolved, that the institution of slavery is an evil of the greatest magnitude, alike cruel, unjust and oppressive to the slave and detrimental to the master, conducive of unmixed evil to the country and an abominable sin against God, and as such ought speedily to be abolished and that as Christians we can in no ways countenance or uphold it, but deem it our duty in all suitable ways to exert our influence, and use our endeavors to put an end to it in the land. Resolved that the foregoing...resolution be published in the New York Observer and Evangelist."

Being one of Hannibal's most active Abolitionists in Hannibal, his home and store regularly served as stations of the Underground Railroad assisting fugitive slaves in their flight to Canada and freedom. William H. Wiggins, a Brewster employee, acted as ticket agent while Silas paid the bills.

The best account of Underground Railroad activities in Hannibal was detailed by Grace Hawkins in her high school graduation speech in 1912. "In it, she related how Dr. Dillon F. Acker, when a small boy was playing "I spy" with his friends in the barn owned by Silas W. Brewster. This barn was located in back of the house where Robert Simmons now



The former home of Silas W. Brewster on Cayuga Street in the Village of Hannibal has undergone several additions and modifications over the years. The section with the chimney and the gable end facing the street is the original structure. It is currently the home of Robert and Gloria Simmons.

resides. Acker knew of a hole in the corner of the haymow and went there to hide. He began moving some of the hay from the place when to his surprise he uncovered one of the fugitive slaves that Mr. Brewster was helping to escape.

It is also said that the younger generation sometimes performed plays such as "Jack the Giant Killer", "Bluebeard" and Cinderella" in the Brewster barn. The proceeds on one occasion went to purchase a rocking chair for a former slave, "Uncle Jerry", who lived on the outskirts of the village.

In 1857, Alvan Worster built a three-story brick store building on the southeast corner of the Hannibal Village Square. A few years later, he ran into financial difficulty and Silas Brewster acquired the building, whereupon he moved his dry goods store operations to that location.

Silas had three sons, Elias Walden, James Birney and Wadsworth Jackson Brewster. The oldest son, Elias Walden, became a lawyer and eventually moved west where he became Deputy Secretary of State for the then Territory of Colorado. The middle son, James Birney died in 1861, at the young age of seventeen. In 1869, Silas W. Brewster took his youngest son, Wadsworth Jackson, into his dry goods business as a partner. As a result, the enterprise became known as "S.W. Brewster & Son."

Upon the death of Silas on September 13, 1882, his son, Wadsworth Jackson Brewster, inherited control of the business under the name of W.J. Brewster & Co. Silas W. Brewster and his wife Mary are both buried in the family plot in the Hannibal Village Cemetery.

Questions:

1. On a current map, locate the location of where the dry goods store and the Brewster home would have existed.
2. How far are they from where you live?
3. How much money did Silas Brewster use to start his dry goods store? Who was his first partner?
4. Use a currency converter to determine the value of that amount in today's dollars.
5. Did everyone in the family agree with Abolition? How did it strain family relationships?
6. In your own words, what did the resolution regarding the issue of slavery by the Hannibal Congregational Church say?
7. Who was Grace Hawkins and what did she have to say?
8. How many children did Silas have and what did they become as adults?
9. Can you find any other information about Silas Brewster and his involvement with the Abolition Movement? If so, what information can you obtain? (Old newspapers, articles, census, directory, letters?)