

“The Sewell Hepbron Story: Civil War Repercussions in Kent County”
By Kelly Biringer

Visitors to Kent County do not come to see old Civil War battlefields. The expansive open space in the county did not host any skirmishes or play home to droves of battle-related deaths.

There was a passionate conflict, however — philosophical and social battles were fought during the war all over the area.

A division between Union and Confederate sympathizers caused this clash, over the issues of slavery and states’ rights. Evidence of the split can be found through the experiences and first-hand accounts of local residents.

Sewell Stavely Hepbron of Still Pond is a perfect example.

The Stavely-Hepbron genealogy traces hundreds of years back on the Eastern Shore to Henry Stavely and the year 1594. The first Hepbron in Maryland, however, was James Hepborn (the Hepbron name has various spellings), transported to Maryland in 1655, according to Frank Snowden Hopkins, a Hepbron descendant, in his historic account of the family history.

In this line of descendants falls Sewell Stavely Hepbron, a prominent 19th century farmer.

Born Dec. 15, 1806, Hepbron, son of John Hepbron and Mary Redgrave Stavely, was someone who could have been described as a “good” citizen, a solid member of the community, a pillar of society. He was well read, religious, owned land, was involved in the county’s agriculture, and took an interest in politics.

Despite this, by the end of the Civil War, Hepbron would be arrested twice.

“Roll call: the Civil War in Kent County, Maryland” by Walter J. Kirby and Lanetta W. Parks explains that both his arrests were for the “general charge of ‘disloyalty.’”

A man who was unwavering in his belief that he was within his rights to own slaves, Hepbron faced trouble during the Civil War and Reconstruction.

Maryland was a border state that remained under Union control during the war but where the ownership of slaves was permitted. Because the state surrounded the national capital, its legislature did not have the option to vote to secede, even though many of its citizens felt the state should join the Confederacy. During this time, martial law was declared and the writ of habeas corpus (the right to a fair trial to avoid illegal imprisonment) was suspended.

With agriculture dominating its economy, and the farm industry bolstered by slave labor, social turmoil in Kent County was inevitable. “Maryland, a middle temperament, 1634-1980” by Robert J. Brugger describes the problem well:

Maryland by the mid-nineteenth century had become a sectional nether land, a mix of free and slave economy, Northern and Southern culture. The state partook of both Yankee ‘go-aheadism’ and Cavalier leisure gave itself completely to neither. Cambridge, Easton, Chestertown, Annapolis, and southern Maryland nestled themselves in the ways of the past and on the surface might have been tidewater towns or tobacco lands anywhere in the South;

Westminster, Frederick, Hagerstown, and Cumberland continued to grow, prosper, and boast of their advancing fortunes.

As Union troops moved in, residents on the Eastern Shore were torn between the support of the Union and the support or opposition to slavery.

Hepbron's troubles during the war were a result of this problem.

Chestertown resident Eleanor Noble, a great-great-granddaughter of Sewell Hepbron, had heard some things about his Civil War arrests.

"He was suggesting to young people that they not sign up for the [Union] draft," Noble says.

She also suggested another possible reason for his arrests: "I also heard that he had unfriendly neighbors that told stories."

Hepbron's problem with the government likely stemmed in part from the enlistment of slaves – without their owners' permission — by the Union army.

A number of recruiting stations were set up around the area, "Chesapeake Bay in the Civil War" by Eric Mills, noted: "... the Bureau of Colored Troops established recruiting stations at Baltimore, Annapolis, Leonardtown, Havre de Grace, Chestertown, Queenstown, Oxford, Princess Anne, and eleven other locations. Ultimately six regiments were raised and more than 8,700 Maryland blacks served."

Two of Hepbron's own slaves, Alexander Brim and Chas. Hopkins, both 31, enlisted for service on Oct. 1, 1863.

An article from the *Kent News* of Oct. 3, 1863 reported that

Officers from Baltimore, with authority from Colonel [William] Birney, came to our town on Friday evening of last week, and remained until Wednesday morning last, during which time they recruited and sent away about three hundred negroes, nearly all of them slaves. These, added to the number previously taken from the neighborhood of Eastern Neck, make a total of about four hundred from our county alone. No discrimination was made between loyal and disloyal owners, but the slaves of both were taken alike, certificates of enlistment being given in all cases when demanded, though it was understood that only those who could establish their loyalty would receive compensation. But few slaveholders in this community have escaped loss, while many farmers are left without a single serviceable hand.

Although certain regulations and terms were set for "negro recruitment," including compensation for loyal slaveholders who allowed their slaves to enlist and promised freedom to slaves of rebels or disloyal masters, an editorial in the *Kent News* from Oct. 10, 1863 said that compensation was not given and that this enlistment greatly hurt the county:

It was known here a week ago that the President had issued an order directing a stop to be put, at least for the present, to the abduction of slaves in Maryland. The large number of negroes taken from our county has most

seriously obstructed agricultural operations, and a further depletion of labor would be hurtful in the extreme. ... With reduced crops, and necessary economy on the part of the farmers generally, all branches of trade, deriving their support primarily from this source, must consequently suffer to a corresponding extent...

No further evidence is needed of the unfairness and injustice of the system of negro 'recruiting' which has been practiced in this State ... But what has become of the two-thirds who were found unfit for military duty? It is certain that they have not been returned to their owners; ... It is evident, therefore, from the manner in which the whole affair was conducted, that it was carried on without the least regard to the laws regulating enlistment, or to the rights of the persons whose property, to the extent of at least two-thirds of all that was taken, has been so unnecessarily sacrificed.

Frank Snowden Hopkins, in his family historical account, "Hepburn Family of Kent County, Maryland," a 60-page description of the family, only briefly mentioned the arrests.

He said only that Hepbrun "was so emotionally identified with the cause of the Confederacy and so outspoken in his views that he was imprisoned for a time," although his "family records do not show" how long he was held. Only a sentence notes Hepbrun's problem with the law.

There is no record of the exact occasion that brought to him the label of "disloyal."

Hepbrun was never officially charged. But, he was arrested twice – at least one such was well documented.

The Jan. 7, 1865 edition of the *Kent News* said that he was "arrested by military authority and taken to Baltimore a few weeks ago, was released on Tuesday upon taking the oath of allegiance, and giving \$2,000 bond to report for trial when so ordered."

On file at the National Archives, Washington, D.C., letters written by Hepbrun to the Provost Marshal of Baltimore during and after his imprisonment, underscore his problems with federal officials and shows the impact to his family and finances.

On Jan. 8, 1865 he wrote:

"I have been from my house and family five weeks much against my personal interest having yet grain in the field which is damaging for want of gathering in, and my farming operations [sic] generally will suffer much the coming year by my prolonged absence have done. I now ask you most respectfully to let me go home ..."

Another letter written April 17, 1865 from Still Pond, after being released on "parole," speaks of President Abraham Lincoln's assassination. He had heard of the news at the post office and felt "consternation and alarm... the whole crowd without respect to party." Hepbrun refers to it as a "dreadful calamity"

Hepbrun was forced, as part of his "parole" to write these letters as compensation for his wrongs, and as a means of keeping in touch with federal officials.

Hepbron's request to be released from his "parole," in the same letter, was turned down the following week with a note that "this is a bad time to release Mr. Hepburn [sic] from parole."

The bad timing no doubt referred to the presidential assassination.

However, a month later, on May 25, Lt. Col. John Woolley, the provost marshal, recommended that Hepbron "be released entirely from parole and on taking oath of allegiance be removed from the roll of prisoners."

It was apparently approved.

Although Hopkins' family history does not speak at length about Hepbron's arrests, it goes at length to defend his character.

"Yet in his relations with his slaves he seems to have tried to follow standards of decency and kindness, and to consider their wishes and welfare to the extent he thought feasible," Hopkins wrote.

His war-time arrests were not the last of his worries.

Hepbron filed a suit, in 1870, against Richard T. Turner, of Chestertown, who had written a letter to Gov. Thomas Swann claiming that Hepbron had kidnapped "a colored child from its parents some time in 1866," reported the Dec. 3, 1870 edition of *the Kent News*.

The trial "created great interest" and the "arguments of counsel were listened to with deep attention," the *Kent News* reported.

Despite the interest level, information on the libel case is even scarcer than information about the arrests. But it is known that he won the suit.

The Circuit Court of Kent County removed the case to Dorchester County at Turner's request. The jury favored Hepbron, awarding him \$1,000 in damages.

There are no records at the Kent County Courthouse, and neither Hopkins, nor local relatives Noble and Francis Lamb, who is connected to the Hepbrons' through the Maslin line, ever heard of it.

As often was the case, following the war and emancipation, families that owned slaves downplayed their ownership.

After Hepbron's death in 1879, his son Rev. Sewell Hepburn — who changed the spelling of his family's last name from "Hepbron" to "Hepburn" — defended his father's ownership of slaves:

Father was a slave owner. This to my mind, was not to discredit however repulsive this declaration may be to many of my readers, saturated with the present day thought and teaching. Such books as 'Uncle Tom's Cabin' written by fanatics, who at the time of writing had never been south of the Mason and Dixon Line and who being guided by their prejudice drew largely upon their imagination, have painted a picture of the time that is most misleading. There were masters and masters, some it is true, were hard and unmerciful. They happily were most decidedly in the minority.

Hepburn said that their slaves were happy, well fed and well clothed, and that his mother Martha "was the slave in our family."

In his accounts, he did not mention his father's arrests or the libel suit.

The 1864 “Commissioned Slave Statistics, Kent County, Maryland” shows that Hepbron owned 15 slaves ranging in ages 1 to 43 at that time. Among them were Deanan Lyons, Alexander Brim, Chas. Hopkins, Emma Hopkins, Alfred Lyons, Foston Lyons, Emory Lyons, Hanable Lyons, Augusta, Hannah Snowden, Anna Snowden, Maria Snowden, Bergin, Jeff, and Nathen.

The blacks closest to his family, however, included a free African American named Henry and his slave wife Hannah.

Henry and Hannah seem almost part of the family in first-hand accounts. Hepbron’s 1837-1853 letters, to his brothers Thomas and James, document his decision to move his family west and live in Missouri for a period.

Most letters start with an update on everyone’s health, and Hepbron often mention Henry and Hannah. In a June 18, 1837 letter to Kent County relatives, his first after arriving in Missouri, Hepbron describes their trip and talks about the death of Hannah’s infant child and the burial.

A Dec. 25, 1840 letter also describes the births of “negro children” and refers to the mothers, one being Hannah, who had twins.

He often mentions his slaves in health reports and local happenings to his family back in Kent County.

The reality of the slave trade stood out in harsh contrast to the domestic familiarity. In an Aug. 7, 1843 letter, he mentions buying a farm in Missouri: “After living in New London for two years, carrying on my business I saw that the best thing that I could do was to purchase a farm and move on it. I gave \$2,000 for the farm on which I now live with crops, cattle sheep, hogs, etc. letting the man have of which I purchased it a boy and girl, John and Rachel, for \$250 paid at this time ...”

The family also took a long route on their way to Missouri to be “careful to stay always in slave territory in order not to run the risk of being set upon by abolitionists,” Hopkins wrote.

Kent County’s social division resonated in family life as well. In a Jan. 8, 1844 letter, Hepbron asks his brother to find out if his wife Martha Maslin Hepbron had been made an heir by Titus Maslin, a recently deceased uncle of Martha’s.

“Martha says she does not expect anything as her Uncle Titus told her many years ago that no slaveholder should ever have a cent of his,” Hepbron wrote.

Titus Maslin’s will does indeed completely ignore Martha.

Hepbron was a man whose life is a string of contradictions as seen through the looking-glass of the present. He was a slaveholder with strong opinions on his right to own slaves as property. First-hand writings, however, defend his character.

But during the Civil War he was a prime example of just how deeply social schism churned the emotions of people here. Families, farmers, soldiers, slaves – all of them felt the shock of the great debate about slavery, in an area that was not quite southern and not quite northern.

Hepbron, the great-grandfather of Academy Award winner Katharine Hepburn, was just a farmer of modest means, one of many in the small county of Kent on Maryland’s Eastern Shore.

This article was originally written for a Kent County News publication, Tales of Kent County. Kevin Hemstock contributed to this article.