

HONORING HARPERS FERRY AND THOMAS LOVETT

Part 2: Centuries of Visionary Leadership Tied to the Hill Top House Hotel



Robert Harper, George Washington, John Brown, Thomas Lovett and countless others were visionaries who created and helped shape the town of Harpers Ferry since 1751. That creative vision included the arrival of the first successful American railroad and the education of former slaves in one of the earliest integrated schools in the United States, Storer College.

The Hill Top House Hotel is inexorably connected to that visionary history. As A. Mercer Daniel, law librarian at Howard University, wrote about the meaning of Hill Top House Hotel for people throughout the United States and worldwide, "Before the advent of the automobile and during the early history of the hotel business and before the coming of the great hotel chains, the Hill Top House was well known. During its most successful years, the American Automobile Association and the B&O Railroad recommended its services to its customers. During this time, Harpers Ferry was a progressive town and many of the industries of the town were dependent upon the hotel trade. If you were on train No. 5 of the B&O Railroad as it passed through the tunnel under Maryland Heights, over the bridge that spanned the Potomac River and stopped at the station at Harpers Ferry, you would glance to the West and see etched against the sunset sky the Hill Top House. Solid as the Rock of Gibraltar standing as a monument to Thomas S. Lovett."

The hotel was a sought-after destination, because Thomas S. Lovett, an African-American man born into the surreal world of slaveholding Virginia five years before the election of Abraham Lincoln, was one of the greatest entrepreneurs and hoteliers this country has ever known.

He was born in 1855, the fifth of 11 children born to Sarah Weaver and William C. Lovett. His maternal grandmother, Marcia Weaver, was "given" her freedom. His family fled north to Maryland during the Civil War but returned to Harpers Ferry in what became West Virginia after the war to operate the Lockwood House, a boarding facility for students and faculty for Storer College.

It is no mundane feat to amass the equity capital and bank debt, as well as the skillsets to architect, contract, build, market and manage a hotel on a world-class scale. To do so only 23 years after the Civil War, as a 33-year-old African-American, however, was stunning.

Utilizing the experiences he gained while working for his father William at the Lockwood house as well as the education he received from Storer,



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— A. MERCER DANIEL —

and feeling the spiritual significance of Harpers Ferry, the relatively young Mr. Lovett viewed the confluence of the Potomac and Shenandoah Rivers and commented, "Here, where the martyrdom of John Brown took place, I will build my hotel." Sadly, however, his teacher-father William did not live long enough to enjoy his son's business opening in 1888.

Harpers Ferry became a popular summer resort for people from Washington, Baltimore and surrounding areas. African Americans visited "The Ferry," in particular, because it was — and continues to be — considered sacred ground. The Hill Top House Hotel was linked to important milestones in African-American history. According to Lynn C. Lewis, Thomas Lovett's great grandniece, in the *Spirit of Jefferson* (Feb. 14, 2008), "Because of the Lovett family's long residence in Harpers Ferry, and its long-term association with Storer College, members of the family also were involved in the meetings called by W.E.B. Dubois in 1906 and 1907 to establish the Niagara Movement." The Niagara Movement was the forerunner of what has become the NAACP.

The movement's second meeting, the first to be held on U.S. soil, took place in Harpers Ferry from August 15 to 18, 1906, at the campus of Storer College. During the gathering, attendees



walked from the site of the historic fort where John Brown's quest to end slavery reached its bloody climax. Once there, they removed their shoes and socks to honor the hallowed ground and participated in a ceremony of remembrance.

Meetings of the Niagara Movement were held in the Hill Top House Hotel, as well as on the Storer College campus. Lovett, a Storer College graduate, supported the Niagara Movement and helped with the planning and coordination of events associated with its 1906 and 1907 meetings.

In 1888, the year of the Hill Top House's founding, a B&O Railroad advertisement aimed this veiled comparison to Mount Vernon at DC's Black community: "The visitor to Harpers Ferry is doubly paid, for he not only feels the thrilling impulses which come from a contemplation of the movement of the first martyr of a true and not a spurious American freedom, but the natural beauty of the place appeals strongly to the most refined and exalted part of his being."

The Hill Top House's "doubly paid" guests included Alexander Graham Bell, Pearl S. Buck, W.E.B. Dubois, Bill Clinton, Mark Twain, Woodrow Wilson, Calvin Coolidge and Carl Sandburg, who included it in a poem. The hotel became THE place to go for Washington, DC's

elite to relax.

The hotel burned and was rebuilt two times; in 1926, the Lovett family sold the property. By the 1950s, Harpers Ferry was struggling to maintain its allure as a tourist attraction after itself suffering devastating fires and floods. Seeing the largely-abandoned town as an opportunity for education and interpretation of John Brown's raid and Civil War history, the National Park Service began to acquire large portions of the town, and, in 1963, the Harpers Ferry National Historical Park was designated and opened to the public.

As those who live and try to run businesses in Harpers Ferry know, despite the popularity of the Park and the Appalachian Trail, which runs through the town, tourism has never again reached the heights that it enjoyed when the legendary Mr. Lovett ran the Hill Top House.

Creating a successful business in Harpers Ferry requires vision and a deep regard for the history of the area. SWaN purchased and decided to rebuild the Hill Top House Hotel to a modern-day interpretation of its former owner's vision out of love of the area and all that it offers, as well as a deep respect for the hotel and its founder and their role in the history of the United States.

SWaN continues to work towards recreating the Hill Top House Hotel into the luxurious destination hotel it once was and contributing to the revitalization of tourism and business in Harpers Ferry and Bolivar.

Hopefully, someday, we will experience again what A. Mercer Daniel described, when you look "...over the bridge that spanned the Potomac River and stopped at the station at Harpers Ferry, you would glance to the West and see etched against the sunset sky the Hill Top House" standing strong as a monument to Thomas S. Lovett.

Please sign up to learn more about the Hill Top House Hotel and the site plans at www.hilltophousehotel.com



HILL TOP HOUSE HOTEL
HARPERS FERRY, WV