

# Episode 5: Pete Smith with David Heighway

## Transcript:

**Easton:** Welcome everyone to yet another episode of This Is Problematic, a Conner Prairie podcast.

**Hannah:** I'm Hannah

**Easton:** and I'm Easton.

**Hannah:** And today we're joined by our good friend David Heighway, again, our Hamilton County historian. Here to dive into another part of the story of William Conner and the community in which he lived.

**Easton:** Yes, we're joined here by our favorite troublemaker and

**David:** That's great way to phrase it.

**Easton:** And today, we're going to be taking aim at a very real legendary figure that's been overlooked as a part of William Connor's lore story. We're talking about Pete Smith, a free black man and a pillar of Noblesville community.

**Hannah:** We're going to go ahead and give today's episode a rating of P.G. The reason that we've asked David to be here with us today is because he was the pioneer in finding the story of Pete Smith. So Easton and I will take you through a very brief overview of who Pete was. And we're going to dive into it with David and find out how he found him, what he knows about him, and that Easton is going to talk a little bit about his work recently, trying to find more because unfortunately, the story is a little sparse. Do you want to start us off with who Pete was?

**Easton:** Yes, for sure. So what we know about Pete is that he worked with community members in Noblesville during one of the many malaria outbreaks. Pete Smith actually helped a man whose wife had passed away. And he, like many farmers, were entrenched in the struggle to feed everyone in town, including themselves. And this is all while William Connor was jacking up corn prices to make more money. Pete Smith served as kind of a bridge between the settlers and the members of the Lenape community who he lived alongside.

**Hannah:** Shall we give a very short background story to what we know, where Pete came from and who he was before we tell him more of his story? We know he was born free, correct?

**David:** As much as we can tell that, that is one of the things that was stated. But we'll get into why that's questionable.

**Hannah:** Okay. So we believe he was born free. We do not know where. We do not know when. And we do not know his parentage. But we do know that he lived here on the White River and the same geographical area as William Connor and where our museum Conner Prairie is located today here in Hamilton County, Indiana.

**Easton:** Pete is actually in the center of a dispute that took place between the settlers and the members of the Lenape community around a pair of shoes.

**David:** Basically what it is, is that the pioneers had arrived at the spot, which was called Horseshoe Prairie, by the way, and had set up housekeeping and there'd been a bunch of things going on with that. And one of them who was a member of the Shirts family. Basically, this was a woman who had been around helping her neighbors, doing some things like that. And of course, I mean, this is the wilderness. So her shoes got very, very muddy. And that night when she went to bed, she just left them outside of the cabin. I mean, this is this is the middle wilderness. You can leave that stuff out there. Now, she got up in the morning, the shoes were gone. And this is problematic in a big way because the closest place to buy any new shoes is Connorsville and Brookville way down on the Whitewater. Now, there are shoemakers in the community, and they could have come up with something rough for her to wear, maybe some moccasins or something. But that's really not what she needs. She needs those shoes back. The immediate thought is that it was the Lenape. It was the natives that were still in the area that had taken the shoes. And the immediate response, as it was in those days, was kind of like, well, let's go get them back. Now, that's when Pete Smith stepped in. He stepped up and he said, Okay, I think I know what happened. I'm going to ask you to do nothing. Do not do not have any sort of attitude. Do not do anything at all. Just leave it to me and just go with that. And so what happened is that's fine, they went through the day. They went to bed next morning, she got up the shoes were back at the house. So they were there and people said, what did you do? And he said, don't ask. He literally said that, you know, I know what I'm doing. I know what's happening back here. We don't want to push this any further. You have your shoes. We're done with this.

**Easton:** Don't worry about it.

**Hannah:** Shoes are taken care of.

**David:** Mm hmm.

**Easton:** Yeah. He kind of stepped out then as an unlikely hero and kind of shows how he ended up becoming such a beloved member of the community between both sectors of the community. And unfortunately, being beloved wasn't enough to save him. So, as we all know, William Connor was involved in land dealings with Kentucky plantation owners. And he began a lot of political ventures. And there was an slaver who came to do some dealings with him from Kentucky. This enslaver saw Pete went back south to obtain a writ and return to take Pete away as his property. At that point, the townsfolk were, of course, so fond of Pete that they begged William Connor to stop this guy from Kentucky. Like, you know, don't, don't, don't take Pete away from us. Public outrage escalated to the point where a great many believe that they would have lynched the enslavers. But William Connor, elected to follow the law rather than interfere and told the townsfolk to follow suit. So Pete Smith was taken away in what has been told as early 1821, and William Connor did nothing to stop it. And for a while that's been as far as the story has gone. If you've visited the Connor House,

you know, that's usually the story you hear is that, you know, we don't know what happened to him. But thankfully, new developments courtesy of some old training documents we found while cleaning out the vault, as well as some wonderful historians and scholars putting together new information, have proven that there is mention of an escape around a man named Peter in Wayne County, Indiana. And so we wanted to take aim and see if that actually could be our Pete Smith.

**\*Music\***

**Hannah:** Okay. So a couple of things I think we may want to hammer out before we get into the new developments. One of them is the question of what did the law at this time look like? What was the quote unquote law that William Connor was following?

**Easton:** So the fugitive slave act, as we know it went into actual legitimate practice in 1850, but it was based on an agreement that had been around since the 1700s. So if there was a legal writ involved, then anyone could claim anyone as property. Of course, if you look back, there are instances where people were taken where people were defended. Since it wasn't an official law, it was more of an agreement. You wouldn't see much compromise in the Southern states, but you would see more compromise in the Northern States. But Indiana, of course, as we know, is a mixed bag.

**Hannah:** And that's where Indiana gets complicated. Right? The state's kind of a gray area and that most people think Indiana no slavery.

**Easton:** Mm hmm.

**Hannah:** And whilst the Constitution technically did bar slavery, there were enslaved people held here still by the French down at Vincent and by some individuals. There was back and forth with William Henry Harrison in the early days of statehood about whether Indiana would be an enslaving state or not. And this kind of continued through the 19th century as we see people coming up into this space and removing people and taking them with them into enslavement, similar to Pete So I think that's a good a good short overview of the environment in which Pete was living here in Indiana. I think also an important thing to hammer at this point would be if we're talking about him living with the Lenape community. We are going to do another episode about Mekinges and dive into that story a little deeper, but we should talk about where they were at this point in time. So 1818. The Treaty of St Mary's was signed. That treaty includes a signature by William Connor, who was an interpreter on the treaty, and it removed the Lenape people west of the Mississippi, and it included the removal of William's first wife, Mekinges, and the six children he had had with her. And so we are talking about this experience of Pete being in the aftermath of that removal in early 1821. So that kind of frames the environment in which this was all taking place.

**David:** Actually, there's a part of the story that all these little fragments and we'll be getting into that some more. There's one where supposedly the Lenape were still there and we're still having issues with it. But Connor spoke up and said basically, well, if you folks object, it's going to involve soldiers. And that that put the kibosh on that really fast. So but once again, pieces, parts, little bits and pieces everywhere we go there so...

**Hannah:** Then I think what we want to hear right now then is how you found Pete and how did this story begin to come to light?

**David:** Well, it's interesting. As Hamilton County historian, I've always had a thing about finding the lost stories, the forgotten people. There's an amazing amount of people here who maybe had an impact at one point in time, had some sort of really interesting nuances to their life and then just vanish from the pages of history. Working now, for instance, in Carmel on a guy who was a classical music composer in the mid 20th century, working on a woman named Nellie Lior, who was an art teacher who may have taught most of the famous illustrators that came out of the Hamilton County area. So we've got a lot of things like that. And it's because these stories are really kind of detective stories as much as anything else. You'll find a piece here and a piece there. And so what you got to do is start pulling all of the pieces together. And that's basically what I started to do with all Pete. He's mentioned briefly in an 1879 history, in 1880 history. There is a letter that has some brief mentions of him and a couple of newspaper articles that are interviews. All of these are reminiscences of people, and the earliest one we've got is 1879. So we're talking well over 50 years after the events happened there. It's actually happened to the people's parents.

So it's a question, first of all, just simply collecting all of these together and kind of seeing where they mesh, where they don't mesh. For instance, the 1879 story says that the man's name was Bill Allen, which is kind of out of the blue. That one... I have some other theories as to why they might have picked that name. But the thing is, is Augustus Finch Schertz, who is the son of some of the people that actually worked with Pete Smith, he's the one who uses the name Pete and Smith in a couple of different spots in some of the various articles that he writes. And that's how we at least have a name to begin with. And then start you start comparing the stories, the ones about the shoes, the ones about, you know, the malaria and some different things like that and kind of see, okay, are there even bits of this that kind of match up together and how much of it is kind of way off on a thing? And of course, it's all very offhanded in the way it's often treated in these things, and they use a lot of words that we don't use anymore in reference to Pete. And so you have to be kind of, okay, we're going to have to change some phrasing here because we don't speak that way anymore.

And so as a result, that's kind of how you collect those bits of information. And once again, unfortunately, you can't really footnote it. You can simply say that this was a reminiscence from 1896 and which is hardly a footnote, but at least it says, okay, there's enough that says that the man existed. There is enough that says that this is probably fairly valid what we're reading. But unfortunately it's not something that would make historians happy. It's not something that you could submit to the Indiana magazine history or any sort of peer reviewed journal because there's just not enough. It's interesting it's important. But...

**Hannah:** I think it's so important to point out, though, to anyone listening who maybe does have concerns about those, the scholarship issues, that this is not uncommon in the work of people doing African-American history, because there wasn't the impetus and the desire to write down a lot of the documents and scholarship that we have be that newspaper records or obituaries or gravestones or any of these things that we would use and consider these kind of solid, quote unquote pieces of historical evidence. They're often missing. And so, like David has done, you do sometimes have to get a little bit more creative to be able to find these stories and find these people.

**David:** I mean, I have looked for solid information. Obviously the 1920 or 1820 census is one that where you would go ahead and hopefully find something. There are actually three African-Americans listed in the 1820 census for what was called Delaware County, which of course was that large section of land that had just been purchased or well taken with the Treaty of St Mary's. One of them is very clear. He's buried up to the north and west. He was actually with Jackson in the war of 1812 so we know about him. There was a middle aged well 50 year old woman that was with a family called the Thorpe family who actually was the reason why Thorpe's Creek is named down in fissures. They eventually moved to what is now Madison County though, so we know about her. And then there's one more kind of adult male, but it's hard to tell. Unfortunately, the person who wrote the information down just didn't bother to be very clear about what's going on. It looks like it may a transient but that's it's not clear. I have blown this thing up as large as I can from a visual point of view. And it just gets to a bigger, bigger smear and it just it doesn't happen. And so as a result, we have those three people. So we know they were in the area, but none of them really sort of except for the one that we can't identify would fit Pete Smith so that there's nothing in the census records. And of course, the thing is he might... Well number one I mean, he's out in the middle of nowhere, so he probably wouldn't he might not be included anyway, although William Connor was included. So and a lot of those early settlers were included. Also, if there was any reason why he wanted to keep a low profile, obviously, if somebody is going around catching everybody and kind of saying, so who are you and where you're from? And it's kind of like, nope, I ain't talking to this guy. So get away as fast as I can. So who knows? There's that kind of a thing there.

**Hannah:** I feel like we often ignore us while we hear this a lot with William Connor story, you know, he was going back and forth Philadelphia all the time, so people did move around as well. So maybe he was at town for the day or doing business or I mean, anything could have been going on if it's just him and the rest of the family isn't with him, it makes it so hard to track one individual person. It's so much easier if they have people around them that you can also look for. So.

**David:** Exactly.

**Hannah:** I wonder if that is him though, on the census.

**David:** It's like I say, it's just one more little piece for the file there and something to think about. It's and of course, the thing is, when we're talking to a Delaware county that's like 25 counties in central Indiana, it's a huge space. So that doesn't define anything at all. But at least we know that there were African-Americans in the area. So we have that. So we have that right there.

I keep hoping that we're going to run across something in the Connor papers, that there might be something in even just for instance, there was recently donated to Connor Prairie a wallet that had a bunch of his receipts in it from his old business. I don't know if any go back quite that far. I keep waiting for them to be digitized so I can dig through them on the Internet. That's the way I spend my days. But I'm kind of hoping that something's there. I mean, because he supposedly, according to the stories, Smith and Connor did have dealings. There was financial interaction between them. And you write this down, you have to write this stuff down to keep your books straight. So, you know, just the casual mention of Pete or something like that or this other trapper or something, just just some kind of connection or somebody that isn't defined in any other sources that you have. I keep hoping that there's going to be some tiny little tidbit. Of course, William Connor was not noted for his paper trail. So...

**Hannah:** He was a terrible record keeper.

**David:** Well, that might have been practical on his point. Yeah. I mean, if you're playing kind of sketchy games, you don't want a lot of paper trail there, so.

**Easton:** Right.

**Hannah:** Well, I, I cannot remember at this point. It must be something you mentioned in your article because I can't think of anywhere else. I would have heard this, but I have heard of the possibility that William Connor sold corn from Pete's land after his departure.

**David:** Oh, yeah. That's in the stories.

**Hannah:** So that is in the stories.

**David:** That is absolutely something. He put that stuff on a flat boat and basically what it was is that that first winter had been so bad, they'd gotten in debt to Connor. They could not get their own food. So they were literally buying it from him. For like a dollar a bushel or something. I mean, it's insane price in those days.

**Hannah:** He was way hiking them up

**David:** Oh lord, I mean, there was just no other source eater to starve. Then of course, after and that Smith had actually been helping them grow it and actually had stayed on after the Native Americans had left and was continuing to work the land which tells me that, yeah, he was planning to become a resident here. Well, after he got taken, then Connor just basically takes that field, which of course nobody has a claim to now puts it on a flat boat, sends it down to Indianapolis. So.

**Hannah:** So he not only didn't help him, but he also financially benefited from not helping him.

**David:** You know...

**Hannah:** I mean, that's an important part of the story, I think, especially for us, like talking about Conner Prairie and William's story, an important part to acknowledge. I at this point, I think we can turn to Easton if you want to talk a little bit and then we can kind of just get into a phone conversation at the end, but do you want to talk about the work you've been doing and what you've been trying to find?

**Easton:** Yes. So this story is now told in as much detail as we can manage, thanks to the documents from the Indiana Historical Bureau in August 1821, there's a documented slave escape that involves Samuel Todd of Kentucky, who sued William Beulah and Andrew Hoover in Wayne County, Indiana. A fugitive slave named Peter was arrested in 1825 after fleeing a Kentucky plantation, and he was afterwards rescued by Quaker men while being held. And Todd demanded \$500 for his loss of property. This is the story, as it is told in the Wayne County, Indiana court records. August of 1821 this Peter fellow escaped from the Kentucky plantation and ran all the way to Indiana. While Peter had escaped in 1821. It's not certain how long he had been living in Wayne County. It was long enough for him to establish himself. By the time he was found just north of Richmond, he had

changed his name to George. So we have a George Stella also sometimes known as George Sheldon or Shelton with a T, so a D and a T. Peter had come to Wayne County after the 1820 Census and hadn't purchased any property. So no known records existed to where he called home or if he potentially attempted to return to Noblesville. If this really is who we think it is or who we hope it is. In the spring of 1825. Samuel Todd, half brother to First Lady Mary Todd Lincoln, who is part of a slaveholding plantation powerhouse sent two agents to Wayne County to claim Peter as his. So, Peter was arrested by a man named John Milliken, an agent of Samuel Todd's. On June 18th 1825, this being four years after his escape from Kentucky. It was at this time when Milliken went to the Justice of the Peace, seeking approval to take Peter back to Kentucky that a group of anti-slavery civilians saw Peter and broke him out of jail with, quote, bodily force and violence. In direct spite of Todd's claim in the role of plaintiff while accounts differ between parties, very few newspaper articles have survived from this time during the 1820s. There exists a common understanding of what happened that day. So one article claims that while the fugitive was sitting near an open window, someone gave a signal for the fugitive to jump out of the window backwards. Thereupon, he made a rush to escape and one of the agents seized him. When the author's father, through an impulse of the moment and believing all such agents to be kidnapers seized the agent. One of Milligan's peers by his shoulders and threw him flat on his back. And after the daring escape, Mr. Sheldon Peter escaped all the way to Canada, a South Bend Tribune article from July 16th 1921 titled Men Sacrifice for Principle, talks about how Thomas Buehler found an 1888 newspaper clipping recalling his grandfather. This is William Beulah and his role in George or Peter's rescue, and it was considered to be a daytime underground railroad operation. So this article explains how Peter was found, despite being so far from Kentucky. According to a story from family members involved, it was a judge, David Hoover, who employed a man named James Railroad into law. And Reardon happened to be from the same area of Kentucky that Samuel Todd had lived. And Peter had been in this, of course, Indiana settlement for years. When Reardon recognized him and wrote back to Todd in Kentucky after Pete was arrested, Judge Hoover's father and brother-in-law intervened to help him escape most interestingly, we have a slightly alternative story that's a found among the mill records, land deeds and other financial papers. And this is all handwritten from the biography of David Beulah, which was William's son rather than his grandson. And this is dated back in May 22nd, 1896. And this is titled The History of an Old Pioneer. Samuel Todd sent to slave catchers to Richmond, Indiana, to apprehend George Shelton, who we think and hope is Pete Smith, a black man who was driving an ox sled lumber wagon for a man named Abel Thornberry. He was caught on Pearl Street, where the First Methodist Church now stands, and taken to the office of a John Finley while waiting to try the rights of property. Someone named Old Cory went down to Centerville for James Reardon to plead for the Kentuckians to take Peter away. So Peter was sitting under the window on the North side of the office, of course, this being the jailhouse with one of the catchers at his side and another leaning back his chair against the door on the south side of the building. So he motion to this guy. Daniel would have been nine years old at the time. So he motions to this nine year old, you know, leaning against the door to come to him. And when this Daniel fellow went to him, George said, go into the kitchen and bring back a poker stick. He had seen a good one at breakfast. This is thought to be a little incognito signal between him and the people planning to rescue him. So as Daniel went to the door and got out onto the street, he looked back through the office door to him. At that time, the fugitive made a jump backwards the window being up, and the slave catcher caught his legs and pressed it against the windowsill to hold him. And Peter said, For God's sake, don't break my leg. William Beulah, who was at the office at the time, caught the catcher by the back of his neck and threw him onto the floor. And the fugitive was then pulled. This is a human tug of war game happening right now. Pulled out of the window by both black and white

liberators alike. In the end, his father had to pay \$1,000 for the fugitive, which is about \$28,000 today, and 500, which is about \$14,000 today in cash for the suit. And friends helped him pay the charges. But that was a lot of money back then. We have talked a lot about what Pete Smith was potentially being taken away from when William Connor allowed him to be stolen from his family and friends. But we also haven't given a lot of context to what he was going towards potentially. Samuel Todd, I'm not even sure how to say he just he had a massive operation. It is very likely that if this were Pete and he did successfully run away, it just speaks to his ingenuity and has his own intelligence. In the end, after this breakout, Peter was long gone with no other recourse. Of course, Todd, Samuel Todd sued Beulah and Hoover for his loss of property.

So this is when we get into family tradition. The tradition said that William hid himself for some time, so he dipped off the grid but ended up attending court when he realized that the proceedings would have gone on in his absence and he would lose property over the damages by law. So the men went to the capital, Indianapolis, in 1825 for the trial. This first Monday of November. The judge for the Indiana district was Benjamin Park, who was unfortunately a pro-slavery man. So true justice was not going to be done there. So because lawyers made repetitive motions to have the case settle out of court. But of course, Judge Park was not going to let that happen. He overruled each motion and kept the trial alive with no witness testimony or evidence surviving. The only certainty is that Todd won both cases. So the judge ordered both men to pay the plaintiff to recover his own debt and cost a grand total of \$1,500, which is about \$42,242 today. The amounts were paid, but the slave had already escaped his bondage, proving that fugitives had friends among the Hoosier population.

So comparing the accounts with the court records, it appears that Daniel's memory was more in line with what actually transpired. But the court records have a lot in terms of an accurate timeline and logically consistent dates. Samuel Todd, if anyone was curious about the end of his story, of course, that's Mary Todd Lincoln's Half-Brother ended up being a private of the Virginia Confederate Regiment and was killed in the Battle of Shiloh April 6th or seventh in 1862 years and years later. So I want to take a breath now because that was a lot. And I know I've thrown a lot at you. I've got this kind of pseudo criminal minds web in my head and on boards and papers here. But I really want to know what you think about this whole thing.

**David:** Mm hmm. What I think? I. It's really plausible. One of the things that strikes me with the stories about Pete Smith here in Hamilton County is his competence and his abilities, because that's the main part of the thrust of a lot of the stories is the fact that the pioneers get into a situation they don't know what to do. He moves in. He knows what to do. He knows how to deal with the situation. And he can take action in a relatively decent way, a appropriate way, and able to really deal with that kind of situation. So the idea that he got down, they snagged him, took him down to Kentucky, and eventually he figured, okay, I'm going to get north again. There's nothing they can do I know what I'm dealing with. The thing is, is that if he was a trader here in Hamilton County four years before any of this occurred. This is a guy who knows how to work his way through the backwoods. This is a guy who knows how to get from point A to point B and survive. So as a result. Yeah, I mean, he's in his worst trouble whenever he's running into other people. You know, that's the problem there. And of course, he has no resources there. So literally, he has no money. He has nothing. So he has to figure out how he's going to get from one spot to another. And there's other stories like that in the local area where somebody arrives here, say excuse me, on the Underground Railroad. And the problem is, is that there's somehow somebody finds out about them. That's always the problem. You think you'd get to central Indiana and it's kind of like nobody's going to worry. Nobody's going



to come up here and find this out. Well, no, they do. Apparently, they look at thousands of dollars of what they consider money and figure that, yeah, it's I'm going to go up there no matter what. The thing is, is that and the thing is, Pete Smith would have been worth a lot of money. You read the descriptions of him. He's very intelligent. He's very physically adept. You know, that's why I think in the first place, he was even kidnaped to begin with. Somebody saw this guy and said he's really got his act together. You know, he's going to be really good for my plantation and which, of course, is horribly wrong. But nevertheless. So Smith Smith, like I say, is is a competent individual. He's somebody who really knows how to deal with the situation. He can't deal with, you know, society itself coming down on him. And that's how he gets into these situations is that it's, you know, the whole legal and political system that he's trying to fight right there. But let him get on his own. Let him get out in the woods there. He can move. He can do what needs to be done. So that's why I imagine there probably I can see this being Pete. I can see Pete eventually figuring out a way get off the plantation or could get up to Wayne, Wayne County and get some rest. And unfortunately, he nearly gets caught again. That's one reason why, of course, he'd be terrified of having his leg broken.

**Easton:** Yeah,

**David:** Because he's on the move. You know, he's on the move. So he needs he needs to keep himself in shape. He needs to keep all of his things together. And then, as I say, once this situation happens, he realizes, okay, it's not safe here. We're going to go all the way. We're going to go all the way up to Canada.

**Hannah:** There are a couple of things I'm thinking at this point, thinking of this this research moving forward. One of them is it would make sense to me as well that he did know the area, like you said, because Richmond had a strong Quaker presence. It was a large black community as time moved forward. And so perhaps he was aware that that was a safer space to put himself in than Hamilton County would have been. That would take some knowledge of the environment of the settlement of people. Also, there are a couple of things I'm pondering now at this point as we have this conversation. One of the things we've discussed is a way of trying to hammer out is this Pete or not is figuring out William Connor's relationship to these individuals, to Todd, to Arden. I mean, we have found bits and pieces that suggest they could be in some ways in business dealings with each other that could really help us hammer out, is this him or not? The other thing you just said that made me think is the value we know how much of a value they were putting on him and his labor. And so that might be a way to figure out how old he would have been. He would have been in the same physical shape as the Pete that we know. So those could all be pieces that help us moving forwards with trying to figure out this story. Those are just things that were coming to mind as we were talking.

**Easton:** Yeah. Ya'll don't know how much it means to me. That Ya'll actually legitimately considering my theories, because in the spirit of some of those bits and pieces, we did kind of find out that Samuel Todd married James Raraden sister so he had a relationship with his agents, you know, the people he was sending. He wasn't just sending a random guy up the street. He was sending people he trusted to track these people down. Unfortunately, and it breaks my heart to say, I would love to be like, yes, this is absolutely 100% for sure. And we had this conversation as we were driving over here today.

It's incredibly hard to nail down if this George fellow was Pete Smith and not just because he changed his name, because changing your name was somewhat common back then. But all that we

could really say here is that records of black folk were never taken down with particular seriousness at this time. A lot of white historians decide what was worth writing down and what wasn't worth writing. And then, of course, he does, of course, change his name. Some of the spellings could have been errors or they could have been legitimate. It just makes it harder to deduce the true identity. If it was Pete Smith, there would, of course, be plenty of explanation as to why he ran only months after being originally taken. I mean, that takes some you know, that takes some knowledge and some courage there for sure. And like we said, we don't know if he actually did make an attempt to come back to Noblesville, as many of his Lenape friends and family would have likely been removed by the time he ran again, or if he simply felt that returning to Connor's land was just too great a risk there.

One detail that does stand out to me is that this Peter fellow was discovered driving a carriage. So as you know, I'm trying to find what little bits I can and do research about carriage driving, and we don't know if that would have been in his skill set. It could have it may not have been when you're thinking of like a private coachman who reports directly to his employer or the employer staff, those are the commanders of the stables. They tend the horses. They usually do a lot. They talk to employees. They have to learn how to read and write and do basic business processes on their own because the master doesn't want to do all that. And where necessary, a coachman was, you know, the driver of household vehicles, depending on how rich the person is. That you're working for in a great house. This would have been a specialty in more modest households that a coachman would have doubled as the stable hand or groom. It's important to know that he wasn't a private chauffeur. He was transporting lumber for someone. I tried to look up if there was any sort of connection, but I couldn't find anything there. It's just a lot of a lot of weird twisting dead ends and not that much there.

**Hannah:** I was just going to say something about his escape from Kentucky as well. From the academic scholarship we engaged with for the first piece of Promised Land is proving one of the points quite a few scholars made as that single young man were much more likely to flee than men with families are obviously older gentlemen. And so given that Pete would not have had those familial ties it does make me question as well if he would have been more likely to run because he wasn't leaving a family behind in Kentucky.

**David:** Yeah. Actually, the thing about him you know, driving the wagons and things like this, one thing that strikes me from the stories about Smith himself is his self-possession. I mean, this is a guy who knew he was in charge and could deal with situation. I mean, the pioneer said basically he just sort of walked out of the woods one day. Literally, they're getting in there. What do they do? They get into a storm immediately. All their dinnerware gets smashed. They have no clue as to what they're doing. They're in an abandoned Lenape village. That's about all that they've got and they're flailing. They they're screwing it up. Pete Smith walks out of the woods and says, Do you guys need some help? You know, and just starts to walk them through it and kind of says that, okay, here's some things you can do. Here's we can learn how to, you know, get the stuff planted. Okay. You're having problems with the malaria. For some reason, it didn't affect him. They got in there, they got hit with the malaria and killed the woman and just laid everybody else down flat. For some reason, he was good. So he just whatever it was, for some reason, he had it together there. So it's there's constantly that sense of a guy who is in charge, competent, self-possessed. He knows what he's doing. So I am feeling that once he ended up down in Kentucky, his brain is going you know, he's probably thinking, yeah, right now, give it give me a week here. Okay, we're going to we're going to

get the lay of the land. We're going to figure out what's going on. And I am going to I'm going to bug out of here just as quick as I can figure it out. So and like I say, so even though he kept getting thrown these curveballs with getting caught and things like that. I just see this as a guy who's, who's extremely competent and, and just like I say, very, very smart. And so that's that seems to be the one thing that kind of rolls through both of the stories is somebody who knows what the heck he's doing and is willing to use that So he would have made a great pioneer if they wanted to keep him there.

**Easton:** Oh, yeah. Yeah.

**\*Music\***

**Hannah:** I think that brings actually up one of the questions you put down here about what could have been different had William put his foot down to save Pete. Like, are there any examples you've heard of in the area where settlers were successful at preventing people from being taken back in the way that are taken in the way that Pete was? And what his life may have looked like had he been able to stay in Hamilton County? I know that's very speculative, but just curious what your thoughts are.

**David:** Well, it's kind of interesting because, yeah, I love speculation like that, by the way. It's kind of fun to really sort of, you know, a little, little theorize there. Like I say, he would have been, of course, very competent, very well possessed of the things. Okay. 1821-22. Okay. So he stays on for some reason. Maybe Connor just keeps his mouth shut or he doesn't arrive on the scene or something like that. Or the locals just finally decide you know, to deal with the slave catchers in the way they were planning to in the first way. There would be all sorts of other legal problems with that. But Smith would have stayed on, probably would have found something a little bit isolated, perhaps just to make sure that that doesn't happen again. 1828, we've got George Boxley coming into the county. George is from Virginia and he is charged with helping a slave revolt. This is a, this is a white guy. He was in war of 1812 and some different things like that. But he was charged with actually helping encourage a slave revolt, which is a capital crime, by the way, in Virginia at that point in time. He manages to escape from jail, ends up here in Hamilton County up in Adams Township. His cabin actually has just been restored. So you've got George Boxley actually he's coming in in the 1820s. He's got a young man with him named Thomas Murphy who stays in the county as well. Murphy worked with actually with William Conner in the stores occasionally and did some things like that. So you get Murphy, you've got Pete, you've got all those folks kind of starting in there. And then in the 1830s you've got the Roberts settlement getting to start there. And they did pretty well for themselves to begin with. But having somebody like Pete Smith, particularly somebody, you know. A place that he would then feel safe, I think we would start to hear some really interesting stories about him, because as time went along, as I say, the African-American community start to feel very comfortable with what they were doing. We had the Underground Railroad. 1864 we actually had an African-American who ran for political office here in Hamilton County Township Trustee over in Washington Township, and came in second in a group of three, which caused panic down in Indianapolis. There like how can you elect a black guy now, so. So they were if they were panicked about that. So even though as you're getting up in the fifties and sixties, Smith would have been older. I'm figuring that he's probably a little younger than William Conner because he seems to be very physically adept. And by the 1830s, Conner is no spring chicken. He's, he's he's had his day.

**Easton:** Crotchety old man.

**David:** Yeah. Well 30, 70 moves up to Noblesville there so so he's got that. So I have a feeling that Smith probably would have started to make himself known. Probably would have started to, to, to make some noise there and dealing with people like when Frederick Douglass came through the area in the 1840s. You know they I'm sure they would have had very interesting things to say to each other.

Now of course the thing is Smith being competent, skilled with working with Native Americans and things like that might have eventually within the next ten years or so kind of said, okay, I feel relatively safe now, but there's more opportunities to the West you know, they're opening up the Oregon Trail, they're there, they're starting to move out there and they're doing all sorts of stupid stuff and killing each other. You know, maybe I can go out there and prevent some bad things from happening. So there's also that possibility as well, somebody who is as skilled, I mean, languages. Obviously, he speaks Lenape. Obviously he's very competent in that sort of a thing. And that's probably something that helps him in the wilderness here. He's probably good with all sorts of Native American sort of universal languages and lingua franca kind of things where they can communicate back and forth. He might even know some other languages as well. Early on there, you got French and you've got other things. There was actually a French trapper just north of here up toward Start Town, one of the Brunet family. And we're, of course, down at Vincennes there.

**Hannah:** It was speculated on how William built the first cabin, right?

**David:** Huh?

**Hannah:** They speculate Bruyette helped William build the first cabin here.

**David:** Oh, absolutely.

**Hannah:** So he would have been all tied in with that time.

**David:** Bruyette had, you know, connections all up and down the White River Valley. He was very, very, hes another one who's very competent, by the way. And it's funny when people talk about William Connor being this great intrepid pioneer, and I'm going Bruyette was here long before you were he was working with the Native Americans. He made a huge success for himself. His house is still there Vincennes, you know. Come on, Connor, you were Johnny come lately. Let's be honest. Okay, so. So yeah. So you've got Bruyette here, you know, you've got other traders and trappers and you've got this other stuff going on. So. So like I say. And then, of course, you've got the ultimate example, which is, of course, Jean Baptiste du sable up in Chicago where you're literally starting cities. You know, the thing was Sable. Sable, I'm not sure how to pronounce it. My French is not very good,

**Hannah:** That was pretty good!

**David:** Okay. But right. So he he of course, creates the city of Chicago. He creates a settlement that eventually becomes Chicago. And there's no reason why Smith who is fully as competent, as fully as as possessed, fully, fully knowledgeable about things like this, couldn't have done something similar.

**Hannah:** And we I mean, and our wild world of speculation, who knows what he did if and when he got to Canada, if this individual is himself, the sky was the limit. I mean, like you said, he was smart, he was capable. He could have gone on to lead a full life. We can certainly hope so.

**\*Music\***

**Easton:** Do you have any advice for any history buffs that might be listening who might have some historical curiosities that they want to explore themselves? I'm also lowkey asking for myself.

**David:** Oh Okay

**Hannah:** Especially in these areas that are so hard to.

**David:** Mm Hm.

**Hannah:** To find out.

**David:** Yeah, well, we're lucky today. There are so many more sources for information, so many more databases digitized online, things like this. So you've got a chance to really crunch some information and work some big things that they didn't have. I didn't have 25 years ago. So, so there is a lot of things there and to not give up and to, you know, do some it's detective work basically you've got to play your hunches, you've got to look at something and say okay what would be kind of a natural sort of offshoot of this? Where might I find a little bit more information? I was doing some work on actually what was the first murder in Hamilton County, which also happened around this time period. That was up, and Strawtown that was in 1821 as well. And incredible as it sounds, I found a version of it in a history of Illinois and had kind of gone okay, that makes no sense whatsoever, but one of the persons who had been involved had moved, had worked with somebody from Illinois who said, Hey, this is a really neat story. Let me tell it to you. And it had, like I said, nothing to do with the people in this was McLean County, Illinois. And but it's kind of like, no, this is strong town in the 1820s so there's a lot of that kind of information out there. And you gotta weigh it all. I mean, you got to be the good historian and you've got to look at it and sometimes you're going to raise your eyebrows and say, Oh, don't tell me that happened. So and there's stuff like that in this county themselves. There was one thing, for instance, where there was an event in Westfield where supposedly an African-American man took a shot at some white women. And other historians, and I have looked and said, No, that didn't happen. No, no, no. This was in the 1880s and you know, African-Americans did not shoot at white women, but that, that didn't happen. So that was a mistranslation and or somebody adding a bit of story to it or something like that. So that's, that's what's going on with that. I mean, you got to be rational about this stuff. And, you know, the truth is stranger than fiction. But at the same time there's just some things that didn't happen. So and that's one of them right there.

**Hannah:** And use common sense of timeline like the reason. The reason I do feel somewhat hopeful about what we've laid out today, being part of Pete's story is just the timeline. You know, it's the right kind of timings like if you're following your gut. Whereas if it said this man, Peter, had escaped in 1819, yeah, you could rule that out because you can't escape before you're so some of it is using common sense to right like following that. Do you think we've missed any important paths to traipse

down in the story or we've not talked about anything that you felt like was important in telling his story?

**David:** Not really. I think like I say, that's, that's kind of about it. As I say, it's check your sources. Like I say, a lot of these are white guys who are in their seventies who are writing this down many years later. Their attitudes are not going to be either appropriate at or oftentimes looking the right direction. But they might have a tidbit that you can use there. I mean, the only thing really missing from the story, regrettably, except for the stuff that you found, which is actually court records, God forbid, is in fact hardcore legal stuff, census records, court records, land records, something that, you know, has gone through some sort of legal process to mean that it does have some hardcore validity or absolute primary source because newspapers are sort of a primary source. But actually, I'll be doing a program at the library here fairly soon about media literacy and being able to translate knowing something about the popular culture of the time period and the assumptions that they make. I was just you was an example with one of the people there where they were talking about an African-American an event that happened, and they have one of the characters speaking as though he's in a minstrel show. This was actually an educated lawyer who later went on to become a judge out West and I'm kind of going, Nope, that didn't happen. That person did not speak in that fashion ever in his life. So you do have some things like that to look at.

**Hannah:** I guess while we talked about this with the Kent Brown story that we told was Dr. Fletcher, which was 1890s. But you do go through these periods like that kind of era of yellow journalism and these really crazy trumped up tales. And so you'd also obviously have to be careful of that. Are people telling tales to sell papers or are they telling good journalism? And ours is somewhere in between. You know, are they taking some facts and throwing some fiction in there just to make a buck or...

**David:** or fulfill certain images that they have, because sometimes you get the little of that with the Pete Smith story is that you have these white people who are assuming that this black person is thinking in a certain way, and that's what they're used to. And of course, he's servile. They think he's servile and they think that, you know, he would naturally deferred all this stuff. And I'm going, this guy was so competent, he didn't need to defer to anybody. So as a result, it's kind of like, yeah, you've got that filter that you're dealing with, unfortunately. So...

**Hannah:** Well, hopefully things will continue to show up in the archives and we might be back for Pete Smith Part two at some point.

**Easton:** Yes, we sincerely hope so. The work's not done, but we thank you for coming here and telling us all about it.

**David:** Happy to be here.

**Hannah:** We would like to point out that part of this project has been, of course, including more of this story in our grounds and the daily story that we tell on the ground, including Pete Smith's story more prominently in the William Conner House, to ensure that people are hearing more about himself and Mekinges. We'll talk about that more in her episode but to tell the wider story beyond just William Conner himself. So thank you so much.

**David:** You're welcome. Good to talk to you

**Hannah:** Always. Thanks for joining us. For another trip through problematic history, you can find us on Apple Podcasts, Spotify, and in all your normal podcast places. Until next time.