

Stratford History - Always Amazing

By David Wright, Editor
Stratford Historical Society's
UPDATE

Flora's Silhouette Visits Washington

The Town of Stratford has many treasures; some not that well known even in town. One of Stratford's somewhat "hidden" treasures is a silhouette of a slave girl named Flora which has been hanging on display at the Stratford Historical Society for many years. Recently, the Smithsonian Institute in Washington, D. C. has taken in keen interest in Flora's silhouette. The Smithsonian has had Flora's silhouette carefully evaluated, packaged and sent to Washington D.C. for restoration work and temporary display.

The Stratford Historical Society owns the Flora silhouette. To the best of our knowledge, and the knowledge of the experts at the Smithsonian, it is the only slave silhouette of this type still in existence. "The silhouette is of a young woman known as Flora who was sold as a slave in 1796, 12 years after the state had voted for gradual manumission. According to a bill of sale dated 1796, Asa Benjamin, of Stratford, purchased a nineteen year old slave girl named Flora from Margaret Dwight of Milford for the sum of twenty-five pounds ster-

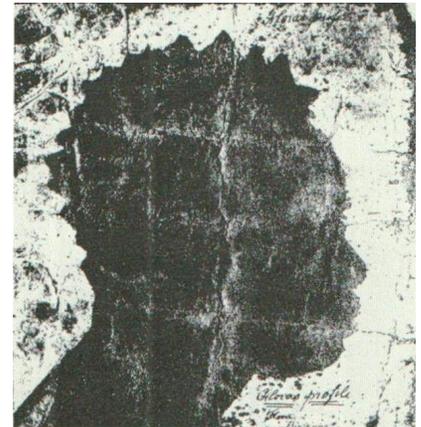
ling. Accompanying the bill of sale was a silhouette, drawn on a 14x13-inch piece of cut paper and colored with brown ink by an unknown, and probably untrained, artist. The silhouette was likely traced from a candle shadow and then filled in, and may have been sketched specifically for this transaction. According to the Benjamins' records, Flora died on August 31, 1815." (Foregoing from the [PBS.org](http://www.pbs.org) website entitled "Africans in America").

Having your silhouette drawn was a very popular way of creating a portable, shareable keepsake for friends and family in the 18th century. Silhouettes could be mechanically reproduced and, in so doing, enlarged or reduced in size. However, in the slave trade in New England, silhouettes were used as a method of "inspecting" a potential slave prior to purchase. To remove some of the "stain" of the slave trade, slaves could be bought and sold in New England on the basis of their appearance in a silhouette.

For Flora, having her silhouette drawn was, likely, very traumatizing. First of all, she would have known she was about to be marketed for sale and torn from the people she knew and cared about. Secondly, Flora would have understood that

her "worth" as a person was being judged on the basis of her silhouette's appearance. Lastly, Flora would have known that should she ever attempt to escape her enslavement, her silhouette would be used to track her and return her to her owner.

For more information pertaining to Flora, and to follow reports of her silhouette's display in Washington, go to <http://flora.stratfordhistoricalsociety.info>.



Flora's silhouette from "In Pursuit of Paradise"