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The silhouette of a slave woman named Flora has resided at the Stratford Historical Society for years. Sandy Rutkowski, assistant director of the historical society, explains that Flora's silhouette was taken in a way of keeping tabs on her. Flora's silhouette and bill of sale are now on display at the Smithsonian Institution's National Portrait Gallery. — Melvin Mason photos



## From Stratford to the Smithsonian

Slave silhouette at historical society gets nationwide stage

By Melvin Mason  
 Editor

in December of 1796, moving from Milford to Stratford. But she is not moving of her own accord. Flora is black and she has been sold by a woman in Milford to Asa Benjamin and

**H**ow much can you tell about a person by seeing a silhouette?





**I** A blackened drawing against a white background. The eyes are not really visible and it can be difficult to make out just how someone looks.

It turns out the people at the Stratford Historical Society can tell a lot about a silhouette drawing, one created in Stratford near the end of the 18th Century that now has a temporary home at the Smithsonian Institution.

The woman's name is Flora. She is a 19-year-old woman

Hannah Plant Benjamin of Stratford for 25 pounds sterling.

Sandy Rutkowski, assistant director for the Stratford Historical Society, said the silhouette of Flora was not made out of any love or desire for Flora. Instead, it was done to make sure she could be found if she escaped.

"It's not because they [the Benjamins] liked her so much. It was because she was their

- see *FLORA* on page 8A

## Flora –

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property," Rutkowski said. "Life was like that in Stratford. Even though [slavery] wasn't like in the South, there were still slaves."

If Flora ran away from her owners, the Benjamins could have placed the silhouette image of Flora in a newspaper in the hopes of having her returned. If she died or was sold, it would be unnecessary.

The Stratford Historical Society had Flora's silhouette for years without knowing what they had. It was found in a drawer, folded up in the lower levels of a house, Rutkowski said.

"Somebody probably donated it and the people taking care of this stuff probably didn't know about preservation," Rutkowski said.

Even as Flora's silhouette was somewhat deteriorated, it was still an important piece of history for the Smithsonian's National Portrait Gallery.

Asma Naeem, curator of prints, drawings and media arts for the gallery, said she was blown away when she first saw Flora in Stratford.

"The first time I saw her, I was speechless," said Naeem, who developed the idea for the silhouettes as portraits exhibit known as "Black Out: Silhouettes Then and Now" for the gallery. "It's so rare to find a portrait of an enslaved

person and number two, it's even rarer to have one of an enslaved person in the 1700s," Naeem continued.

Rutkowski recalled Naeem being stunned.

"I'm so used to seeing her over 25 years," Rutkowski said. "We've had her forever here. She [Naeem] said 'we have to have her. She's going to be the highlight of our exhibit.'"

Naeem explains that silhouettes were used in the pre-photography early 1800s as a quicker and less expensive picture than an oil painting. While oil paintings could cost between \$25 and \$100 and takes months to finish, silhouettes usually cost four for \$25.

In her research, Naeem found that silhouettes were pretty much everywhere in 1800s America.

"What I found was that silhouettes were kind of a craze for Americans when people could not afford oil paintings of themselves," Naeem said. "We have very few portraits of enslaved people period in our country. Because portraits were made of the powerful and the wealthy."

The Smithsonian and the Stratford Historical Society worked out an arrangement. Flora will stay with the Smithsonian in the "Black Out" exhibit until March 2019 and then then tour with other exhibits for two more

years. As thanks, the Smithsonian worked to conserve Flora, repairing some of the areas of loss and to lighten some of the areas darkened by age. She is also now in a glass mat and frame, along with her bill of sale.

"That took a while," Naeem said. "It was a painstakingly slow process. We wanted to respect the process."

Naeem said she wanted the exhibit to tell how enslaved people lived. And finding Flora helps with that.

Naeem says she sees a lot when she looks at Flora. She notes her head and her chin being down, evoking the despair she must have felt knowing her life in servitude would continue.

"We can project what we think was going through her mind," Naeem said. What must have been going through that young lady's mind as her silhouette as she was being traced and transferred as a piece of property."

Before Flora's placement in the Smithsonian, she had already been used in other media. Her face was used in books, magazines, newspapers like The Wall Street Journal and the Washington Post and on the BBC.

"It's so demoralizing, so dehumanizing. I see the sense of hopelessness," Naeem said. "At least we get to tell her story and so many others. We get 1.3 million visitors [per year] in the portrait gallery. So we're grateful to the Stratford Historical Society for lending her to us. I consider her a national treasure."

Rutkowski said she's proud that something found in Stratford will be viewed by millions and more will be taught about slaves in the United States. But she is hopeful to learn more about Flora, who died 19 years after her sale at age 38 on Aug. 31, 1815.