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WEEDEN HOUSE

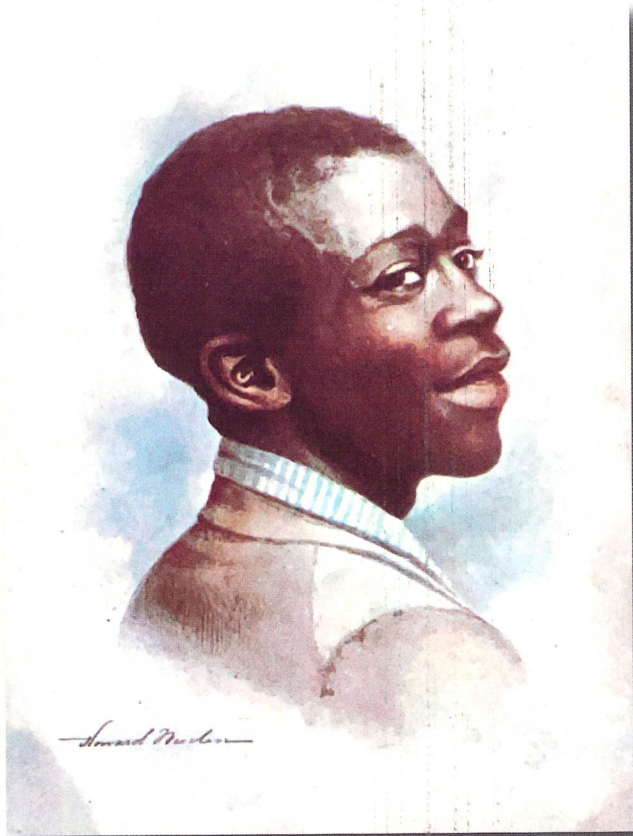
Weeden House

STORY BY ERIN COGGINS PAINTING BY AMANDA OWENS

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Portrait of the Banjo Boy painted by Howard Weeden.

As Weeden House director, Gina James, walks through the Victorian home at 300 Gates Ave., she always lingers a little longer in one of the upstairs rooms to admire her favorite artwork in the collection — “The Banjo Boy.”

The young African-American boy in the painting is John Rucker, a local shoe shine boy noted for his display of rhythm and song while conducting his business at market held on the Huntsville square. He not only attracted the crowd, he attracted artist Howard Weeden who invited him to sit for a portrait.

“I love the smile on his face. You can see all the details even the vein in his forehead,” James said. “He looks so happy and you know he probably did not have much to be happy about at the time. He was homeless. I look at that photo and want to know who were his parents, did he have children, what exactly happened to him. It is my favorite in the entire house.”

Through historical research, James does know that when the Al Fields Minstrel show came through Huntsville, they snatched up Rucker for his talent and he went on to a successful career of entertaining.

Weeden’s work of Rucker is just one of many of her artworks depicting African-Americans. Born in 1846, the Huntsville artist gained international recognition of her watercolor paintings of formerly enslaved freed people. She also wrote poetry in the regional Black dialect.

“She really had a knack of painting what was around her,” James said. “She painted those she would see in the neighborhood, at church, who worked in her home or neighbor’s homes. People often brought people over for

her to paint as well.”

As a hobby Weeden would copy poems written by others onto blank pages and illustrate the margins with her own artwork. In searching for more poems to illustrate, she came across “De Massa ob de Sheepfol” written by Sarah Pratt McClean Greene, first published in 1884. Weeden felt a powerful connection to the poem and produced a hardbound, illustrated book for the poem. For the cover, Weeden painted a portrait of a local former slave to indicate the black dialect of the poem. People who saw the drawings were impressed. So, when Weeden travelled to Chicago in 1893 to for the World’s Colombian Exposition, she was astonished to see how others were painting African-Americans.

“She was astonished at how African-Americans were being painted as cartoons or Uncle Remus types,” James said. “So, she decided to come back and continue to paint them the way she knew them—the people she grew up with and respected.”

Weeden’s good friend, Elizabeth Price, sold Weeden’s paintings at her music studio in Nashville. In 1895, Price travelled to Germany to study music and



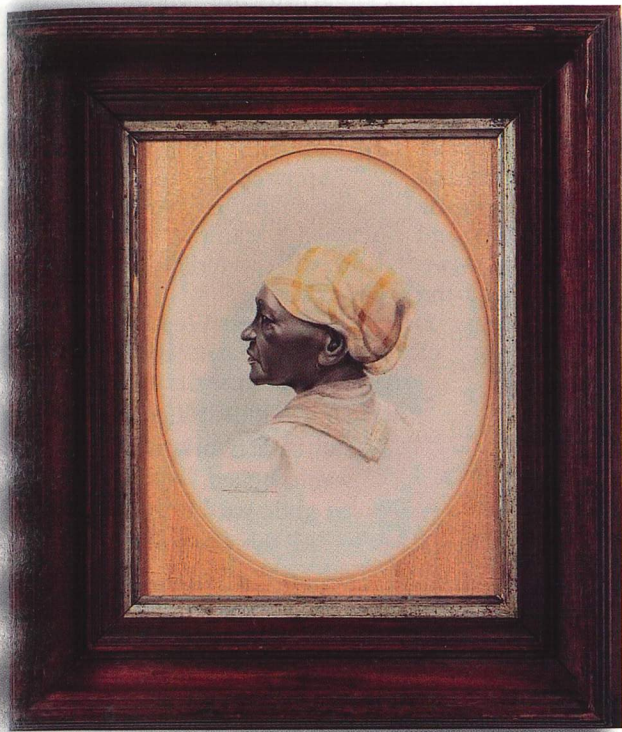
“Because of her vision, she had to hold the canvas right at her nose.”

GINA JAMES



Portrait of formerly enslaved African-American man painted by Howard Weeden.

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*Pictured (top left) portrait of Frances Bell;
Pictured (top right) portrait of Howard Weeden;
Pictured (bottom) portraits of former enslaved men painted by Howard Weeden.*

took seven of Weeden's portraits along. The Europeans were impressed with Weeden's work, especially her depictions of Black Americans.

"The Europeans brought Howard international popularity," James said. "They would travel to America and on to Huntsville to find Howard Weeden and were surprised to see that she was a woman; a small, frail white woman at that."

Weeden's real-life brilliance in her artwork is what James refers to as

amazing. Weeden was severely near-sighted. James says her parents took her to a doctor in Nashville who referred to her vision issue as one of the most severe he had seen.

"Because of her vision, she had to hold the canvas right at her nose," James said. "Even with this, she mastered watercolor, oils and charcoal. To help get the fine, delicate details, she used brushes with only three hairs."

James sees the wonder in all of Weeden's paintings. She says Weeden began painting as a way to support her family after the Civil War. Her father, a doctor and cotton planter, died before she was born. The Union soldiers commandeered the home during the war, causing Weeden, her mother, her sister and their servants to flee to her other sister's home in south Alabama for the duration of the war. When they returned, the house was in disarray and the family went into survival mode.

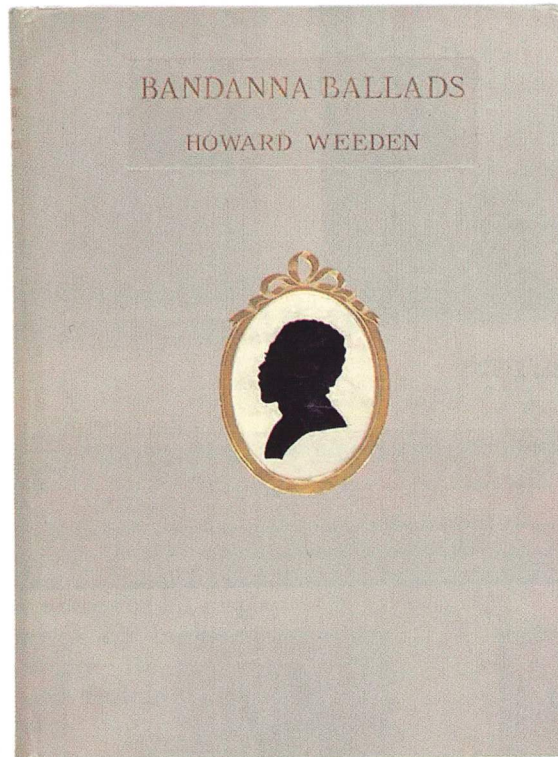
"She started painting dinner cards with intricate floral designs as well as hand painted note cards for money to support her family," James said.

The bulk of her earnings came from publishing four books—an accomplishment that Weeden did not set out to do. The first, "Shadows on the Wall," was published in 1898 and is the shortest of the four. Her longest book at 50 pages, "Old Voices," was written just a year before her death.

"Howard's first book is my favorite

because it contains what I consider to be two of Weeden's best works," James said. "In each of her books, she writes in dialect of the speakers. She has a wonderful way of not only capturing her subject via art, writing a poem about each piece but amazingly, she also gives a snapshot into time."

One of the most famous art and poetry pieces is in "Shadows of the Wall." The piece, titled "Mother and Mammy" tells the story of "two moms"—the one who birthed and the one who raised. The poem is accompanied by a watercolor of Frances Bell, considered to be the



Pictured, Banana Ballad's book cover; published in 1899 by Howard Weeden.

Mammy in Howard's work.

"Frances was the nurse for the children next door to the Weeden home and she was used as a model for several of Howard's poems," James said. "I have researched the census record and she was found as head of her home on the Freedman's census around 1870. I would love to research her and her family to learn more about her life. I'd like to not only tell the story of Howard Weeden, but to get to know her subjects, their lives and share their history as well."

One of the most famous art and poetry pieces is in "Shadows on the

Weeden's painting of Mammy connects Huntsville to the epic film "Gone with the Wind." The Weeden House displays a letter from the movie's producer David Selznick thanking Weeden for her authentic portrayal of attire worn by slaves during the Civil War.

"Apparently the costume for the movie's famous character of Scarlett's beloved Mammy was based on Howard's watercolors of Mammy," James said.

Besides Weeden's work being displayed in the historic home, the architecture itself is a time capsule into

Huntsville's Victorian era. The staircase is original as is the front stained-glass window, trim and front doors.

"All the work of the staircase and the trim around the front window are hand done. The craftsmanship tells show much about the time and work put into this home," James said.

A tour of the home allows visitors to venture into all the rooms in the home. James lingers a little more in the yellow parlor and the front living room to reveal the close ties these rooms have to Weeden.

"The yellow parlor was the room Howard chose to work. She chose this room because of the light that came through the west window," James said. "It was bright in the evening and helped her poor eyesight. The front living room is where Howard lost her battle with tuberculosis in 1905."

James says tourists often ask if the home is haunted. She likes to tease them with the idea that it is haunted by Weeden's artist friend, William Frye. Frye instructed Weeden when she was younger as his studio was only a couple of blocks away. James says according to a couple of biographies of Weeden, Frye may have inspired Weeden's interest in drawing faces, figures and flowers from real life. Frye, who had the habit of licking his paintbrush after changing the color of his paints, slowly lost his mind due to lead poisoning. A portrait of Frye hangs over one of the house's fireplaces.

"When I started working here, I would go through and turn off all the lights at closing time," James said. "As I would go to drive off, I would see that the upstairs bedroom light was come on. I was like 'it is haunted.' After a couple of weeks, I realized that something in the system when turned off triggered the light to come on. So, the home is not haunted. It's just a fun tale to tell."

There are all types of stories to be found inside the walls of the Weeden home. Besides the Weeden family who occupied the home from 1845-1956, the home was the residence of John McKinley prior to serving as Associate Justice of the U.S. Supreme Court and of banker-planter Bartley M. Lowe, the first president of Huntsville Bank. But it is Weeden's story that inspired the Twickenham Historical Preservation Association to ensure that the home is kept as an historical landmark.

"The Weeden House is owned by the city of Huntsville, but is leased to the Twickenham Historical Preservation Association. The House opened as a museum in 1974," James said. "We rent the home for events like weddings and receptions to earn money to keep the house maintained and open to the public."

To continue to serve the city of Huntsville, the Weeden House partnered with Huntsville City Schools to open the home to all third-grade classes in the system. James says it is always a fun day for the students as she sets up a history hunt throughout the home to teach students Weeden's story.

"The objective of educating the students that visit the Weeden House is primarily to emphasize that they can overcome anything by looking into the life of Maria Howard Weeden," James said. "She was such an overcomer of her hardships. I want the students to know that they can do the same. I also want them to realize that history and important people are in their own back yard."

James says she conducts ten tours a week and about fifty percent are tourists or those researching Huntsville as a potential home and the other fifty percent are already residents that just discovered that the Weeden House exists. Despite the reason of those old Victorian doors opening to tour guests, James sets out to tell Howard's story with passion and pride.

"Howard should be studied as a mostly self-taught artist with extreme circumstances in her life," James said. "She was extremely nearsighted, very humble, suffered from tuberculosis

and still created masterpieces of art and poetry and should be studied as one of the first people to portray freed African-Americans as true-to-life subjects. To put it simply, she was an incredible artist in a humble Southern town that produced work that transports people to another era." ①

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WEEDENHOUSEMUSEUM.COM



Pictured, front door of the Weeden House Garden & Museum.