

# Then and Now: History Center to display old artifacts

DONNA ESCHENBRENNER, Correspondent 1:49 p.m. EDT May 27, 2015



(Photo: Provided photo)

They were both born into slavery sometime in the 1790s. His name was Peter Webb, and her name was Phyllis; her maiden name is unknown.

He was brought to Tompkins County by John James Speed, a Virginia slave merchant who settled in Caroline in 1805. She was brought here from North Carolina as a child by slave merchant Robert Hyde.

Peter signed an agreement with Speed, arranging that he would later purchase his freedom, an agreement he fulfilled with a payment of \$384 (\$350 plus \$34 in interest) on March 18, 1818.

Peter and Phyllis got married in 1819, even though she was still a slave. She would be freed in 1827, when the law abolishing slavery in New York state went into effect. They had 11 children, only a few of whom survived into adulthood.

One of them, Frederick Webb, in a just and fitting irony of history, was able to purchase the Speed homestead and 75 acres of the original thousand-acre Speed tract. Descendants of the Webbs have lived there ever since.

This old photograph of Peter and Phyllis Webb is part of The History Center's collection, and unfortunately it's only a copy. Based on the evidence we have, the original image was a daguerreotype, probably taken in the mid to late 1840s.

Daguerreotypes, the very earliest kind of photograph, were invented in France in 1839. The technology quickly became popular, and daguerreotype galleries opened in cities all over the world. Hillick's Natural Miniature Gallery on State Street was one such place in Ithaca. Daguerreotype images were exposed on silver, giving them a reflective quality like a mirror.

Daguerreotypes represent the earliest photographs in our collection. Some of them will be on display in a new exhibit opening Friday, June 6 from 5 to 8 p.m. with "Local History Matters — Early Treasures of the Collection." They are a small sampling of the many things that we will show highlighting the diverse nature of our holdings.

The material culture of history is as varied as the people who live in a community. Objects from cookware to coverlets, from paintings to petticoats, all tell the story of the people who came before us. History museums collect many things that don't always seem obviously historical, but these artifacts reflect the myriad aspects of everyday life and teach us about how our predecessors lived, how they worked, what they wore, and what kind of people they were.

This exhibit will feature some of the oldest things in our collections and represents the many different kinds of things that we preserve. It will help us show the many ways there are to tell the story of our local community.

The photograph of the Webbs is included in the exhibit because of the importance of their personal story and their part in the context of the larger Tompkins County story. This photograph and this family's history helps us convey the important record of people whose stories have not

often been told, some who came here as slaves, some who came later and prospered, all who helped build the county.

Then & Now appears monthly in The Ithaca Journal and is provided by The History Center in Tompkins County. Donna Eschenbrenner is the archivist at The History Center.