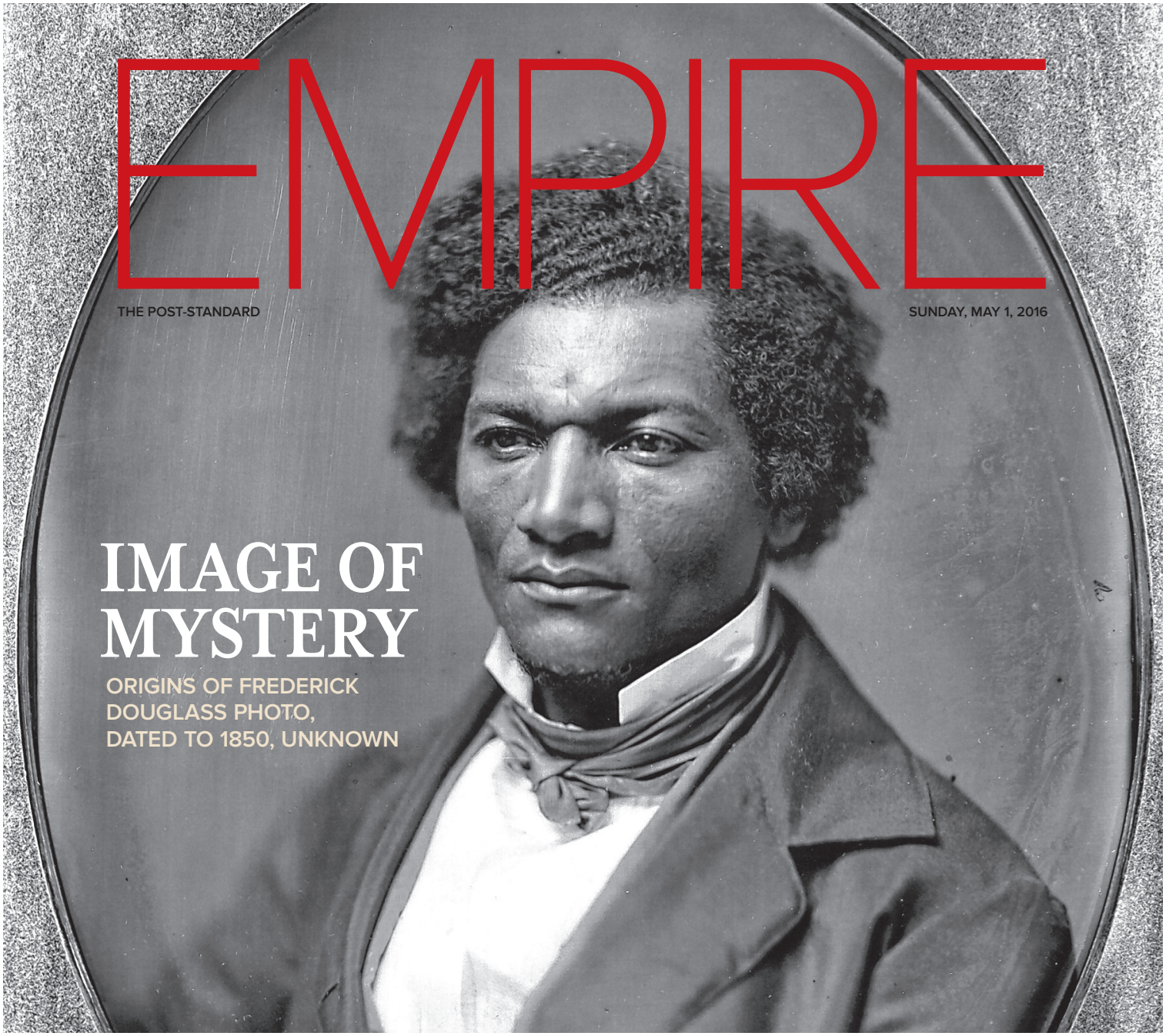
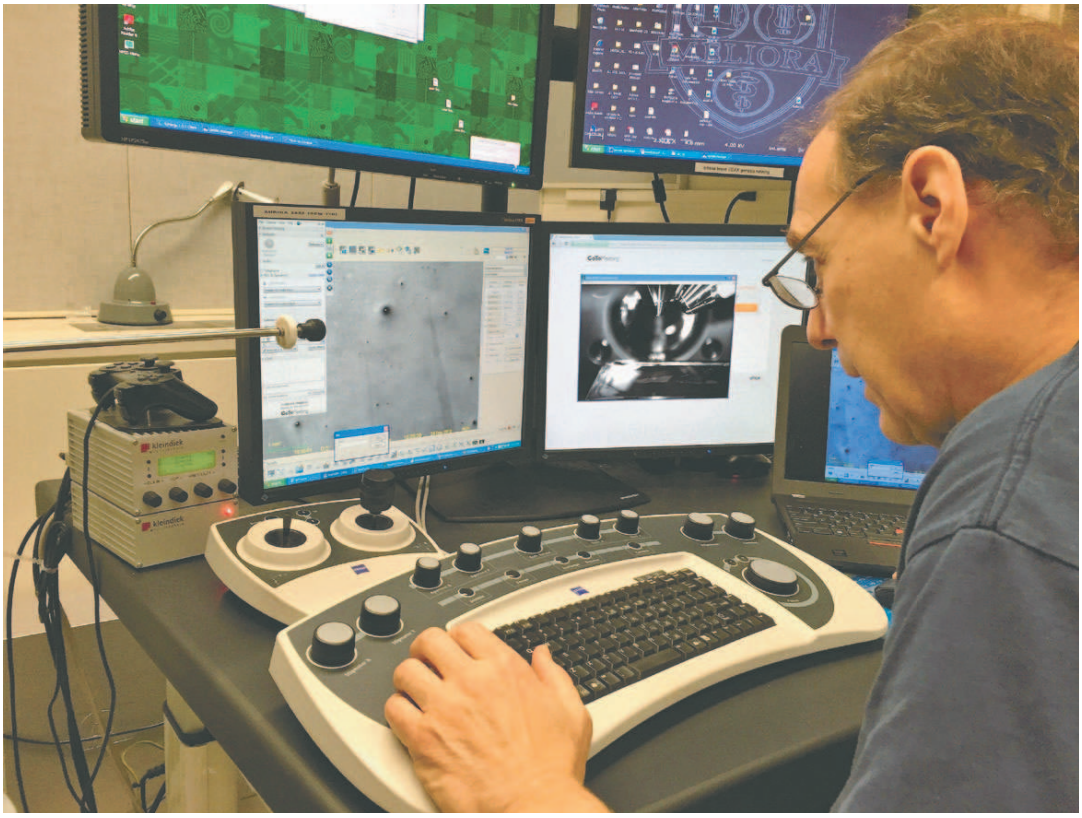


Courtesy of Onondaga Historical Association



Ralph Wiegandt, research conservator and visiting scientist in the Department of Physics and Astronomy at the University of Rochester, performs an optic analysis of a daguerreotype of Frederick Douglass. The only known full-plate daguerreotype of Douglass is on loan to the university from the Onondaga Historical Association in Syracuse. (Courtesy of University of Rochester)

Picture this

THE MYSTERY BEHIND AN EXTRAORDINARY PHOTO OF FREDERICK DOUGLASS

By Rick Moriarty
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Researchers at the University of Rochester are trying to solve the mystery surrounding an extraordinary photo of a young Frederick Douglass and how it wound up in Syracuse.

The Onondaga Historical Association loaned the full-plate daguerreotype of Douglass, a rare example of 19th-century photography, to the River Campus Libraries at the University of Rochester in late January.

Researchers at the university, home to the Frederick Douglass Institute for African and African-American Studies, asked to borrow the photograph so they can analyze it for clues to where and when it was made.

There were many photographs taken of the famous abolitionist during his 77-year lifetime, including nine known daguerreotypes. In fact, Douglass was one of the most photographed persons of his day.

However, the historical association's photo is unusual because, at 6½-by-8½ inches, it is the only known full-plate daguerreotype of Douglass, an escaped slave who became one of the nation's most prominent abolitionists.

Yet mystery surrounds the image. The Syracuse Public Library gave it to the historical association in 1954, but no one knows when or where it was made, or even when and how the photo came into the library's possession.

Tom Hunter, museum collection curator for the association, said the daguerreotype was misidentified as a photograph of Syracuse abolitionist Jermain Wesley Loguen when it was held by the library. Loguen, who, like Douglass, was born a slave, bore a resemblance to Douglass and was a well-known abolitionist and pastor of Syracuse's African Methodist

CONTINUED ON PAGE 4

The Onondaga Historical Association owns the only known full-plate daguerreotype of Frederick Douglass. The daguerreotype — a photograph chemically created on a piece of metal — was the world's first successful photographic process. It was introduced by French artist Louis Jaques Mande Daguerre in 1839. (Courtesy of University of Rochester)

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 3

Episcopal Zion Church.

However, the historical association's executive director at the time, the late Richard Wright, quickly realized that the photo was of Douglass, not Loguen, Hunter said.

The daguerreotype — a photograph chemically created on a piece of metal — was the world's first commercially successful photographic process. French artist Louis Jacques Mande Daguerre introduced the process in 1839. For the first time, middle-class families who could not afford the services of a portrait artist could have their likeness recorded.

Each daguerreotype was a unique image, made by exposing a highly polished copper sheet coated with light-sensitive silver iodide to an image from a camera lens. Cheaper glass plate negatives replaced the technology in 1860, but during their 21-year run, daguerreotypes produced extremely high-resolution images that even today's best digital cameras can't match.

Because daguerreotypes were expensive to make, most photo studios divided the standard 6½-by-8½-inch copper plate into halves or quarters, resulting in a smaller image.

The full-size daguerreotype of Douglass is stunning for its detail. Appearing very dignified in a black jacket and tie and white shirt, Douglass is looking slightly away from the camera, as if contemplating his rising public stature. Slight blemishes can be seen on his face. Long whiskers are visible on his chin. Even blood vessels in the whites of his eyes can be seen.

The camera's lens was so tightly focused on Douglass' face that his right shoulder is out of focus, an intentional technique used by master portrait photographers. One can even see the reflection in his eyes of the studio skylight that provided just the right amount of illumination to his face.

No one knows how the photograph wound up in Syracuse.

Born Frederick Bailey on a plantation in Maryland in February 1818, Douglass was separated from his mother, a slave, early in his life and never knew his father, who was white. He was raised as a slave but was sent at the age of 10 to live in Baltimore with a relative of the plantation's owner.

In 1838, at the age of 20, he disguised himself as a sailor and boarded a train in Baltimore that took him to New York City. Upon his arrival, he declared himself a free man. To avoid slave hunters, he changed his last name to Douglass.

He taught himself to read and write and began giving speeches on the evils of slavery, calculating that to talk about slavery was to help kill it. He traveled extensively throughout the North and went to England for two years to speak about his experience as a slave (and to avoid fugitive-slave hunters in the United States). He eventually settled in Rochester, a hotbed of the abolitionist movement, and lived there for 25 years — longer than anywhere else he lived.

During the Civil War, Douglass helped to recruit free blacks to join the Union army and urged President Lincoln to issue the Emancipation Proclamation.

After the Civil War and the end of slavery, Douglass moved to Washington, D.C., where he held several government positions. He died there in 1895 at the age of 77 and is buried in Rochester's Mount Hope Cemetery, the same cemetery where his long-time friend, women's rights advo-

cate and abolitionist Susan B. Anthony, is buried. Douglass made several trips to Syracuse, the first one in 1843 when he spoke to a gathering in Fayette Park. In August of 1850, he lectured on the evils of slavery during a stop at Syracuse City Hall on his way to the Fugitive Slave Law Convention in nearby Cazenovia.

A quarter-size daguerreotype taken at the convention, held Aug. 21 and 22, shows Douglass sitting at a table, surrounded by many other people. It is the only one of the nine known daguerreotypes of Douglass to be precisely dated.

Douglass was 32 when he attended the event and looks about the same age in the historical association's full-plate daguerreotype. Could the portrait have been taken during the same trip? Ralph Wiegandt, research conservator and visiting scientist in the Department of Physics and Astronomy at the University of Rochester, doesn't think so.

Wiegandt said he believes the image mostly likely was made around 1850, judging from Douglass' approximate age in the photo. However, he said it is very unlikely that it was taken in Syracuse.

The daguerreotype was still a new and expensive technology in 1850, and Wiegandt said no one in Syracuse would have had the equipment and expertise to make such a high-quality portrait. Only studios in big cities like Boston, New York and Philadelphia had the wherewithal to take such a photo, he said.

"I'm unfamiliar with that level of mastery in Syracuse in 1850," he said.

Wiegandt cannot say for sure, but he suspects that the photo might have been taken in the studios of Southworth & Hawes in Boston. The studio's partners, Albert Sands Southworth and Josiah Johnson Hawes, operated from 1843 to 1863 and are considered one of the first great masters of photography in America.

Wiegandt said Southworth and Hawes were among the few photographers who had the knowledge and equipment in 1850 to capture the image of Douglass. And he said many details about the image point to them:

■ Douglass is glancing into the distance instead of directly at the camera — a portrait technique the Boston studio was known for.

■ The critical focus on Douglass' face is evidence of the kind of portrait lens that Southworth and Hawes would have used and the obvious desire of master photographers to focus attention on their subject's face.

■ The lens is positioned a little below center line, so that the camera is looking slightly up at Douglass, another common practice by Southworth and Hawes.

■ The photo's exposure made Douglass' white shirt look super bright and his black jacket somewhat gray, but also produced perfect skin tone. That's something lesser photographers would have had trouble producing because few had experience at that time shooting portraits of African-Americans, Wiegandt said.

A search of the studio's records, which are kept at the George Eastman Museum in Rochester, has turned up no record of a "sitting" with Douglass. However, Wiegandt said the studio would have had good reasons not to keep a record of the sitting.

Douglass was a fugitive slave until supporters in England purchased his freedom for $711 in 1846. If the photo was shot while he was still a fugitive slave, Southworth and Hawes might have wanted to protect Douglass and those around him, including any supporter who may have paid for the sitting, Wiegandt said.

Douglass sailed back to Boston in 1847, providing another opportunity for his photo to be taken in that city. However, even though he was then legally free, Southworth and Hawes may still have been concerned about hosting him and the notoriety surrounding him, Wiegandt said.

Douglass gave a quarter-size daguerreotype of himself to Susan B. Anthony. However, Wiegandt said it cannot be assumed that Douglass gave the photo now owned by the Onondaga Historical Association to someone in Syracuse. In fact, it is possible that someone other than Douglass paid for the sitting as his "sponsor" and owned the photo, he said.

The daguerreotype Douglass gave to Anthony is now owned by the Chester County Historical Society in West Chester, Pa. It, too, is on loan to the University of Rochester and is displayed next to the Onondaga Historical Association's daguerreotype in a glass case in the rare books and special collections room of the university's Rush Rhees Library.

About the only thing that is known for certain about the photograph is that it was taken before 1854. That's the year that an engraving made from the daguerreotype was published in the book "Autographs for Freedom" in Auburn. The engraving, a laterally reversed image of the daguerreotype, was made by prominent engraver John Chester Buttre.

Since daguerreotypes were unique images — there was no way to make a copy of one like you would make a print from a negative — Buttre would have had to have the one of Douglass in his possession when he made the engraving.

"Wherever Buttre was, he had the daguerreotype with him," Wiegandt said.

He said the next step in the university's research is to look at what prominent person in Syracuse might have come into possession of the daguerreotype and search for some reference to it in that person's family correspondence.

"This fantastic daguerreotype didn't just appear in Syracuse," he said.

This daguerreotype shows a gathering of people at the Cazenovia Fugitive Slave Law Convention in Cazenovia in August 1850. The African-American man sitting at the table is Frederick Douglass, an escaped slave and prominent abolitionist. The man standing behind him at the center of the photo with his left arm raised is abolitionist Gerrit Smith.

The historical association's loan agreement with the university expires Oct. 1. When it is returned, Hunter said the association plans to put it on public display at its museum on Montgomery Street. The association and the university are collaborating on a grant application to cover the $4,770 cost of an argon-filled display case that will keep the metal plate and the amazingly detailed image it contains from oxidizing.

Hunter said he anticipates strong public interest in the rare photographic artifact when it goes on display.

"We're gathering more information than we've known in the past," he said. "Even if we don't have all our questions answered, I think it will engender a lot of interest in the community."

NEXT WEEK: They shoot . . . they score! And, oh, the Syracuse Gray Wolves — some in their 50s, most in their 60s and 70s, and at least one each in his 80s and 90s — have fun playing senior ice hockey twice a week at Cicero Twin Rinks.