

Stidum Portrait

Painting a picture with words, historical novel reveals a compelling family link between America's first black portrait artist and Timen Stiddem.

By Dave Emmi

About a year ago I was strolling through a local book warehouse and came across old historical texts published in the mid 19th century. Upon closer examination, I saw that one of these books contained a speech given in 1877 by Charles Janeway Stillé, then the Provost of the University of Pennsylvania. Stillé was accepting, on behalf of the Pennsylvania Historical Society, a Portrait of Sweden's Queen Christina. The event was no doubt related to the Centennial celebrations associated with the birth of the United States, and the portrait of Queen Christina was meant to symbolize the first Swedish settlement in America, the New Sweden Colony, and the Swedish contribution to the new burgeoning country.

The Stillé speech was interesting, and I was curious as to what had become of the portrait of Queen Christina presented on that day. I inquired at many of the regional historical institutions and I eventually found it at the Pennsylvania Historical Museum. In the process, I also came across two other portraits in storage, those of abolitionist Stephen Smith and his wife Harriet Lee Smith. The artist of the Smith portraits was James Stidum, a surname I immediately recognized as being

associated with the New Sweden Colony. These discoveries lead to research that had source materials from five different countries and I wrote of my discoveries in the recently published novel, *Black Slave-White Queen, and Colors Between: Discovering America's First Black Portrait Artist.* The novel has been gaining attention here and in Scandinavia. Among other topics, the book makes an argument that James Stidum was the first black portrait artist in U.S. History. The novel also discusses why this information is important to us today, and for those who wish to obtain a copy, simply visit my website at www.daveemmi.net.



But rather than penning a promotional article for the book, I thought I might discuss some of my findings relating to the Stidum line. Much of this material did not make it into the book and I thought the Timen Stiddem Society might particularly enjoy hearing about this material.

A number of Stedham family members were slave owners in Delaware and Maryland. Slavery in the United States is a complicated, multifaceted, and emotionally charged topic that does not lend itself well to a short newsletter article. The maximum denigration to a human being was inherent in slavery, yet, it was a legalized institution in America for

Book cover of Dave Emmi's recently published historical novel, *Black Slave-White Queen, and the Colors Between* (right).

Portrait of abolitionist Stephen Smith painted by James Stidum, America's first black portrait artist (opposite page).

All images in this story courtesy of Dave Emmi





The Stidum portrait of Harriet Lee Smith, wife of Stephen Smith the abolitionist, in storage at the Pennsylvania Historical Society in Philadelphia.

over two hundred years. The institution had long been outlawed in Western Europe, and in these religious times, lawmakers were well aware of the story of Moses' flight from slavery in Egypt (Africa). There were also strong abolitionist movements and the vast majority of the population was not slave owning. However, for those who owned large plantations, slavery provided the most economically optimal means to harvest the land and it was a legal and highly profitable business practice. Perhaps somewhat similar to the hiring of illegal aliens in America today, the practice was frowned upon by the populace, but given a wink and a nod by governing authorities. For an in depth view into slave life, William Still's "The Underground Railroad" (1872) is a source of hundreds of slave narratives and provides a reader with a good idea of what slaves had to endure in the United States during the 19th century.

One of the most profound discoveries in my research was the identification of a large class of discreetly hidden biracial individuals in northern Maryland, Delaware and southeastern Pennsylvania. White slave masters took many liberties with their slave property, and sexual relations between the two were not socially accepted, but were also not uncommon. During these times, slaves were cataloged on the same inventory lists as farm animals, and sexual relations with a slave were thought of as being tantamount to bestiality. Fathering children with a slave was

seen as shameful behavior, and slave masters went to great lengths to hide their parentage of these children. Frederick Douglass, who was also biracial, stated, "I say nothing of father, for he is shrouded in a mystery I have never been able to penetrate. Slavery does away with fathers, as it does away with families. Slavery has no use for either fathers or families, and its laws do not recognize their existence in the social arrangements of the plantation."

Denying parentage was also necessary to ensure that legitimate white children secured full inheritance rights to land and property. Finally, in those days vital records were kept in churches and not government offices. Blacks were not allowed as members in these white churches, so birth records for most blacks simply do not exist at this time. Therefore, correlating Stedham ancestry to a "non-white" during this period relies almost solely upon circumstantial evidence. However, some of this circumstantial evidence is fairly compelling.

Regarding James Stidum, my book lays out a strong circumstantial case supporting his Timen Stiddem ancestry. After the historical paper trail is presented, I then discuss the rare link between Swedish colonists and portrait artists in the Delaware Valley at that time. The Hesselius family, and in-law Adolph Wertmüller, were among the few portrait artists in the area during the 18th and early 19th centuries, and the Hesselius family was related to the Stedham family through the Stalcop line. Paints, brushes, palates, canvas and other items needed to portrait paint were unique luxury items that few people possessed in those days. It was rare for a white to have these items, and almost unheard of for a black to possess them. This atypical characteristic found in Swedish settlers at the time tightly corroborates the consistent historical record that leads to the highly probable conclusion that James Stidum was a descendant of Timen Stiddem.

The historical record only refers to James Stidum as "non-white" or "negro." However, another black artist, Alfred B. Stidum, who was also born in northern Maryland, appears in the Delaware Valley a few years later and is identified as a mulatto in historical documentation.

There are more intriguing links regarding the Stidum line and the antebellum move-

Tobacco storehouse on the Sassafras River in Kent County, Maryland. James Stidum lived within a few miles of this location, which hasn't changed much over the years since he was alive.



ment, and a few black Stidums appear to be national heroes. First, James Stidum exemplifies that black Americans were breaking down the barriers of slavery long before the onset of the Civil War. Second, we see that at least two black Stidums enlisted in the "Colored Regiment" of the Massachusetts 54/55th. The sons of Frederick Douglass also served in these regiments. Sergeant William Stidum of the Massachusetts 55th Colored Regiment died in battle on James Island, S.C., on July 2/3, 1864. Later that month, Reverend Stephen Smith conducted a mass in Cape May, N.J. attended by Mrs. E.A. Stidum, the wife of the fallen Sergeant, in recognition of the sacrifice of this brave American. Edward Stidum is also listed as a volunteer in this Colored Regiment. The 1989 movie "Glory" starring Denzel Washington and Matthew Broderick documents the history of this famous army unit.

The formation of the United States as a

slave society was a catastrophic error that resulted in the bloodiest conflict in the history of the nation. The institution was wreaking havoc in both free and slave states. Swedish novelist Fredricka Bremer visited the United States in 1849/50 and stated, "Ah, the curse of slavery, as the common phrase is, has not merely fallen upon the black, but perhaps, at this moment, still more upon the white, because it has warped his sense of truth, and has degraded his moral nature." The Stidum family seems to have worked closely with Stephen Smith, the family of Frederick Douglass, and several other famous abolitionists, to rid the country of the uncivilized institution that was tearing the nation apart. William Stidum also gave the ultimate sacrifice in the interests of "liberty, freedom and justice for all"—the established tenets of the United States—that were espoused in 1776 by the Founding Fathers, but were subsequently denied to millions of Americans.

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Press Release – "Black Slave-White Queen, and Colors Between: Discovering America's First Black Portrait Artist"

New novel provides stunning information identifying America's first black portrait artist – James Stidum



Along forgotten speech and old portraits stored in a museum warehouse prompt this trans-Atlantic historical detective story, unmasking the core of New World colonialism, while revealing America's first black portrait artist. The architectural formation of the United States is uncovered, triggering compelling thought about systemic cultural values and their implications for the future. A full Swedish translation is also included.

During the Centennial Celebration of the birth of the USA a portrait of Sweden's famous Queen Christina was presented to the Pennsylvania Historical Society in recognition of the first Swedish settlement in America, the New Sweden Colony (1638-1655), and the many later Swedish contributions to the new emerging nation. This portrait was kept in a museum storage warehouse and while searching for its location, two tangentially related portraits were also discovered. The latter two portraits were

of the famous abolitionist Stephen Smith and his wife Harriet Lee Smith. An initial misidentification of the artist of these paintings had left the museum with little to no information regarding the identity of the artist other than that he was a "noted Negro painter." Once the artist's true name, James Stidum, was identified, it was quickly surmised that James Stidum was also a descendant of New Sweden colonist Timen Stiddem.

This Old World to New World bi-racial story is summarized by discussing what relevance this past history has on our culture today. Eighteen pages of graphics, detailed endnotes from four different countries, and a full page sequenced Swedish translation is also included in the bound text. Kathleen Foster, the curator of American Art at the Philadelphia Museum of Art, said of the discovery of the portraits, "This is very exciting, an encouragement to everybody at every historical society."

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