

IN CELEBRATION OF

Black

HISTORY MONTH

FROM INTROSPECTION TO HEALING: THE TWILIGHT PROJECT AND THE RICHES OF LOCAL ARCHIVES

As the school year began in Middlebury in September 1889, children were invited to attend a performance of "Uncle Tom's Cabin," produced by G. P. Stetson. The April 28, 1893, edition of the *Ann Arbor Argus* declared that "Mrs. Harriet Beecher Stowe, the immortal authoress of the world famed drama," had given her approval for Stetson's production because he had adhered more closely to the original text than other production companies. Nevertheless, Stetson's "mammoth production" featured "two comical Topsy's...ferocious bloodhounds, two brass bands...[and] the celebrated Lone Star Quartet," and, according to the poster, two comical lawyers, jubilee singers, a steam calliope, Eva's miniature pet pony, and a street parade – hardly a faithful dramatization of Stowe's novel. "Tom shows" freely incorporated minstrel set pieces for popular appeal and dramatic effect. (Fig. 1)

Minstrel entertainments such as this appeared routinely in Middlebury throughout the late-19th and early-20th centuries. They reenforced negative white racial attitudes toward Black Americans and contributed to what W. E. B. Du Bois called "double consciousness" within Black self-awareness. Thanks to the exuberant collecting of Henry L. Sheldon, we can study such documents that advertised past minstrel shows, lectures, concerts, circuses and sporting events,

many of which we today would regard as problematic. The students in my remotely taught 2021 Winter Term course, "Histories of Struggles: Middlebury, Town and Gown," the first Twilight Project course, sampled such ephemera digitized by the obliging archive staff at the Henry Sheldon Museum, now a Twilight Project Community Partner, as well as digitized sources archived in Special Collections at the Davis Family Library.

The Twilight Project is a Middlebury College initiative that encourages and supports research into the college's and town's pasts that probe difficult moments. The project maintains that deep examinations of our complicated pasts of exclusion, marginalization and discrimination invite introspection that will foster healing in the present and result in change for the future.

Just as students at Rutland High School asked their school to jettison "Raiders," its mascot, and Quaker Oats decided to abandon Aunt Jemima as a logo – both actions the result of deep introspection and reflection – Twilight Project Fellows immerse themselves in research that beckons personal reflection and greater understanding.

The students in my 2021 Winter Term course undertook research projects that induced reflection resulting in deeper awareness. Through the interdisciplinary lenses of Black Studies,

From the Sheldon Museum Archives: This is a three-part series addressing the presence of Black Americans in early Addison County. Two weeks ago, we introduced the topic and shared relevant documents available at the Sheldon's archives; last week we told a story of Middlebury Black resident Prince King; today we outline the Twilight Project and explain how Middlebury College students are using local archives to research difficult moments of local history.



Fig. 1 — Uncle Tom's Cabin performance, 1889.

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which employs intersectionality — how race, gender, sexuality, power, class, the law and other social categories intersect to explain discrimination and privilege — in analysis, and History, which foregrounds change over time, my students investigated challenging moments from the College's and the town's pasts, using the archives of the Sheldon Museum and of the College. Their projects probed pejorative racial attitudes conveyed in minstrel shows and in advertisements that used cheap, offensive stock images, such as the tableau of grasping, wide-eyed Black boys, slapped on ads for myriad consumer goods that bore no connection to the product itself, but merely grabbed the attention of and amused the consumer (Fig. 2); Governor William Slade's (1844-46) anti-slavery thought; the recruitment and retention of Black faculty at the College; the evolution and effect of "Whiteness Studies" at Middlebury; the experiences of student-athletes of color; race and Public Safety; and the College's support of students with disabilities. These and other current Twilight Projects are not designed to wag a finger at the town or the College, but rather — to paraphrase Prof. Emeritus Darlene Clark Hines (Northwestern University) — to

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Fig. 2 — Advertisement for Graphite Elastic Paint.

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TWILIGHT

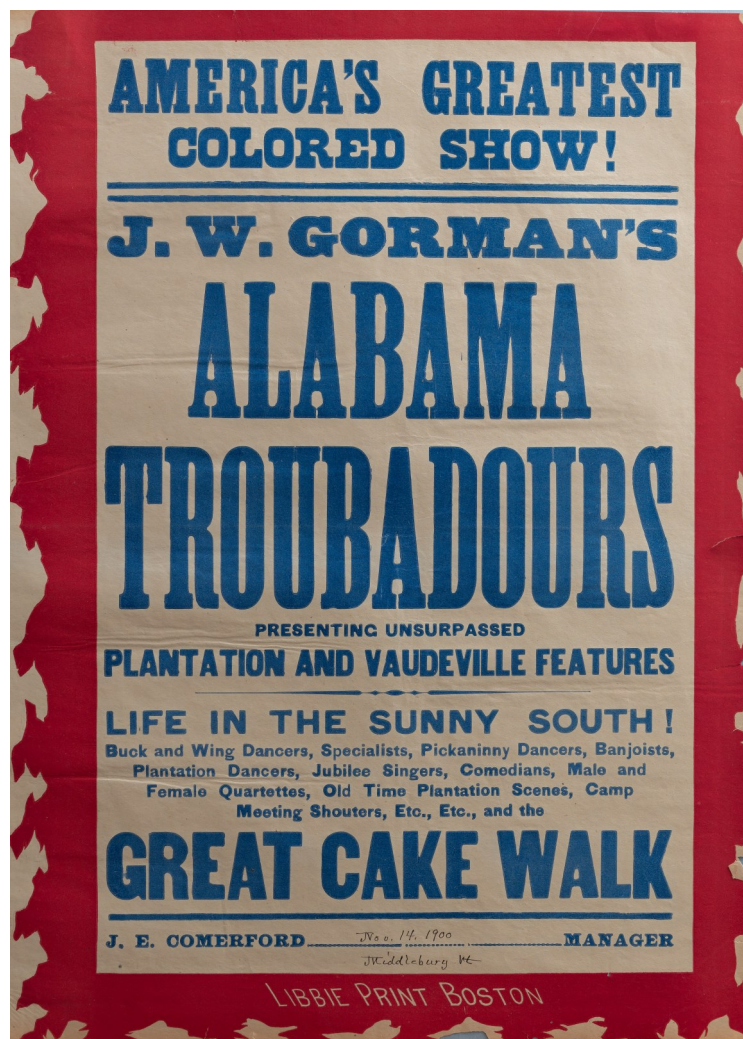
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look critically at our past to improve our future.

Middlebury College and the town have much of which to be proud. The college was the first American college to confer

an honorary degree on an African American, Lemuel Haynes (1804); the first to confer a bachelor's degree on a student of African descent, Alexander Twilight (1823); the first to confer degrees on women — Mary Chellis, a white woman, in 1886, and Mary Annette Anderson, a Black woman from Shoreham, in 1899 — well ahead of most of its New England peers. The town, too, can boast worthy accomplishments in confronting race and gender: in 1804, Supreme Court Justice Theophilus Harrington denounced the sale of an enslaved man; in April 1834, several town residents joined more than eighty Vermont men and women from across the state to launch the Vermont Anti-Slavery Society right here in Middlebury; and Middlebury is the home of women's education pioneer, Emma Hart Willard.

Twilight Projects are not intended to find fault with Middlebury College or with the town, but rather to contribute to our students' immersive learning to prepare them to lead "engaged, consequential and creative lives" through critical inquiry into local histories and their relationships to broader social forces. (See more about the Twilight Project at middlebury.edu/office/twilight-project/project-description).



*J.W. Gorman's Alabama Troubadours, Nov. 14, 1900.
Courtesy of Henry Sheldon Museum Collection*

Contributed by William B. Hart. He is Professor Emeritus of History, the former Director of the Black Studies Program, former Co-Director of the Twilight Project, Middlebury College, and a past member of the Henry Sheldon Museum Board of Trustees.