

Photographer Unknown, *Studio Portrait of a Woman* (tintype, 19th century) Rick Bell Family Fonds (RG 63) <https://dr.library.brocku.ca/handle/10464/3631>

Researched by Lauren Robertson



This is a tintype of an unidentified woman. Tintypes were a commonly used and relatively inexpensive form of photography on metal and were often used for portraiture. In her book *The Tintype In America 1856-1880*, Janice G. Schimelman explains that “single portraits were the most common” and that “the character of the individual had to be strong enough to carry the portrait” (Schimelman 2007, 194). As we see in the photograph, the woman portrayed is of great character, strong and reflected well in the tintype itself. As her eyes pierce through the images' grainy, blurry qualities, it makes the viewer feel almost they are the ones enduring the pressure of being photographed.

This beautiful photograph was taken in the late 19th century (likely between 1860-1890), and it is from the collection of the Brock University Library's Archives & Special Collections (Rick Bell Family Fonds RG 63). The Rick Bell Family Fonds is a rich collection of material relating to Black history in the region of Niagara. In this collection we can find adoption certificates, certificates of labour and the deaths of those in the family, as well as this tintype (just one of 27) of a girl whose relationship to the family is still unknown.

In the photograph itself we see a young African American woman standing with her body rotated $\frac{3}{4}$ to her right, her face angled perfectly straight towards the camera. She wears a long white dress, which stops only a couple inches from the ground, showcasing her dark heeled boots. Her right arm is propped upon the back of a chair by her elbow and her left arm drapes against her side, the hand attached holding a small purse in front of her body. As for the dress itself, it has long sleeves, traditionally modest of the time period with its collared neckline and fitted waist.

According to an article written by Patricia K. Hunt, about the documentation of black women's clothing in the 19th century, it was said that black women were often portrayed/depicted in clothing styles related to their occupation, when really, we see that they had followed the changing trends of women's fashion just as closely as white women. Hunt goes on to write "Their adoption of current fashions in both asserted their affluence and assimilated into mainstream American society" (Hunt 1992, pg 463-464). In our photograph, we can see a correlation to this statement, as the woman is wearing a beautifully crafted dress, which is a reflection of the trends in women's clothing of the era. The gaze she makes towards the camera seems challenging, oozing confidence and power, which is one of the most impactful parts of this photograph.

This photograph was found in the Rick Bell Family Fonds collection, which was donated by Rick Bell, an African American firefighter in St Catharines. This collection is one of the most extensive and detailed pieces of Black history that Brock University owns, and although the identity of many people in the collection's photographs remain unknown it is still incredibly important for its documentation. In this collection we can see the monumental history of people of colour in Niagara, showcasing their freedom of slavery and their triumphs in 19th century society.

Kattawe Henry, who held the position of Human Rights and Anti-Racism Advisor at Brock University in 2021, stressed the importance of exploring and learning from this collection: "Quite often, folks feel as though we need to 'segregate' learning of Black histories to February, the coldest, shortest month of the year, and fail to question how anti-Blackness has impacted our histories every day, every year, all year throughout our history" (St Denis 2021).

References and Further Readings

Brock University Archives & Special Collections, "The Rick Bell Family Archives." (online exhibit)https://exhibits.library.brocku.ca/s/rick_bell_family/page/welcome

Hunt, Patricia K. "Clothing as an Expression of History: The Dress of African-American Women in Georgia, 1880-1915." *The Georgia Historical Quarterly* Vol 26 no 2 (Summer 1992): 459-471.

Schimelman, Janice G. *The Tintype in America, 1856-1880*. Philadelphia: *Transactions of the American Philosophical Society*, 2007.

St Denis, Maryanne. 2021. "New online exhibit highlights Brock's Rick Bell collection." *The Brock News*: <https://brocku.ca/brock-news/2021/02/new-online-exhibit-highlights-brocks-rick-bell-collection/>

