"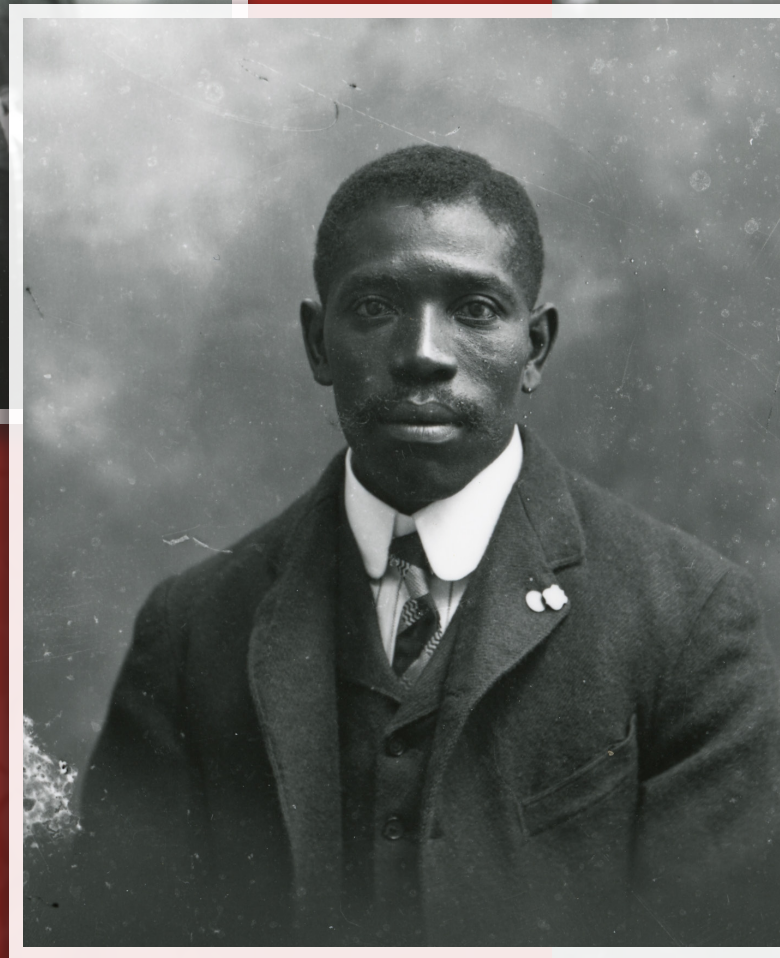It is evident that the great cheapness and universality of pictures must exert a powerful, though silent, influence upon the ideas and sentiment of present and future generations."

Frederick Douglass

Lecture on Pictures, December 3, 1861

ABOVE:
Portrait of Mary Richardson, about 1880
Courtesy of the Newburyport Public Library Archival Center

RIGHT:
Portrait of Edward Richardson, about 1880
Courtesy of the Newburyport Public Library Archival Center

Pictures with Purpose

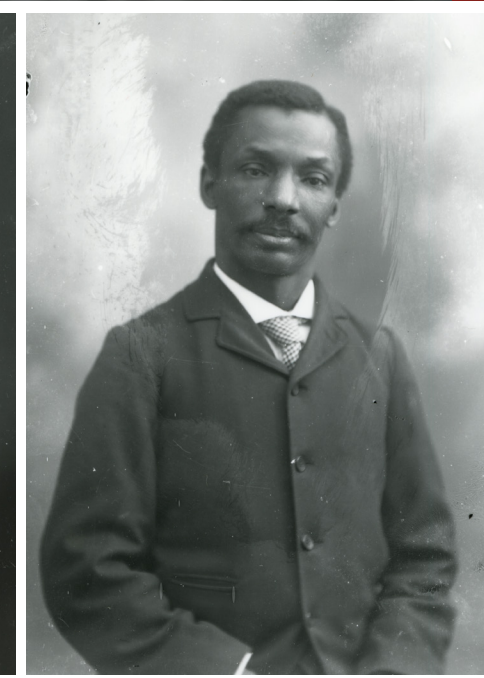*19th-Century Studio Photography Empowered Black Americans*

IN THE 19TH AND EARLY 20TH CENTURIES, MANY PHOTOGRAPHY STUDIOS OPERATED on State and Pleasant Streets in Newburyport. The photographs shown on this sign are part of a collection of glass plate images—white, Black, and Asian-American people of all ages—that were recovered in a basement on Liberty Street around 2003. During the early years of photography, most photographers specialized in portraits. While many of the subjects are unknown, some of their images have names written on them, including Edward and Mary Richardson.

Around 1867, eight-year-old Edward Richardson moved to Newburyport with his family. His father Adolphus Richardson worked as a mariner and his mother Julia Marie Sephrona (Davis) Richardson managed the household. Seven siblings were born over the next dozen years. In 1879, Edward married Mary J. Johnson and their studio portraits may have been taken around the time of their marriage. According to census records, Edward and Mary moved to Haverhill, where he worked as a laborer and a teamster who drove a job wagon. In this era, teamsters often worked 70 to 100 hours per week for low pay. Edward and Mary's first baby died as an infant in 1880, and their second son Charles was born. Mary died of breast cancer in 1910 at the age of 54. It is currently unknown when Edward died.

Studio photography held a particularly powerful meaning and significance for Black Americans within a larger society that often disparaged them. The great abolitionist Frederick Douglass, who once spoke at the Prospect Street Church in Newburyport, had about 160 studio portrait photographs taken of himself, and wrote that the great democratic art of photography was a "social force" and now available to even "the humblest servant girl." Dressed in fine clothing, Black people consciously shaped their own images and identities for their families and communities, visually countering negative mainstream stereotypes such as those evoked in derogatory blackface minstrel shows so popular in Newburyport during this time. Performances in City Hall featured white musicians who, with their faces painted black, caricatured the singing and dancing of Black people with racist songs. In contrast, the studio portraits seen here reflect the pride and dignity of Black Americans. *Text by Geordie Vining, Kabria Baumgartner, and Cyd Raschke (2023)*

BACKGROUND AND ABOVE: Portraits of Black Newburyporters, about 1880
Courtesy of the Newburyport Public Library Archival Center

State Street, Newburyport, about 1880
Photograph by H.P. Macintosh, Courtesy of Getty Museum, Gift of Weston J. and Mary M. Naef