

Portraits of Dennis Doram, Jr. and Diademia Doram, c. 1839

These are oil-on-canvas paintings in plain wooden frames with faint red tiger stripe graining. One is a bust view of an African-American man wearing a dark suit with a white shirt and cravat. The other is a bust view of an African-American woman wearing a dark dress with a large extended lace collar, and a long gold chain around her neck that connects to a watch in her pocket. The artist is Patrick Henry Davenport.

Background Information

Dennis and Diademia Doram were two of Kentucky's most famous free African Americans. Dennis was born into slavery in Danville in 1796, to Lidia, a slave and daughter of Thomas Barbee. His father was another of Barbee's slaves. It is believed that Dennis' father was a Native American.



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(Dennis Doram) & 2 (Diademia Doram) • 29.25" H x 23" W x 0.75" D

According to his master's will, Dennis was to be provided with an education—in addition to reading and writing, he was to be “taught as much of arithmetic [sic] as shall enable [him] to understand accounts”—and freed at age 31, which provided him with a chance to succeed in various business ventures. Dennis Doram owned a rope factory and a hemp business and helped found the Caldwell School for Women in Danville. By 1840, a year after the portraits were painted, he had several thousands of dollars in the bank and owned hundreds of acres of land.

Diademia Taylor was born in 1810. Her freedom was purchased in 1814 by her father, a free African American, who moved her from St. Louis, Missouri, to Kentucky. Dennis and Diademia married in 1830 and had 12 children, including one who fought with the United States Colored Troops in the Petersburg Campaign during the Civil War.

Significance

In the 30 years prior to the Civil War, Kentucky profited heavily from the slave trade, shipping over 80,000 slaves south. In 1860, the slave population in Kentucky was 211,000; free African Americans numbered only 11,000.

It was rare for African Americans to attain the wealth and social status of the Dorams. Free African Americans did not have the same rights as white citizens. In 1807, Kentucky passed a law preventing free African Americans from other states from entering Kentucky and forbidding free African Americans from Kentucky to return to the state once they left. They were required to carry “free papers,” which required annual registration and a fee. Free African Americans could be arrested for violations that did not apply to whites, such as “keeping a disorderly house,” visiting with slaves, owning more than one firearm, selling alcohol, and defending themselves against attacks by whites. In Kentucky, free African Americans were denied the right to vote and the right to legal redress.

Despite these restrictions, the Dorams prospered and attained a social status unimagined by most African Americans of the time. The Doram portraits are believed to have been the only paintings of African Americans done by Danville artist Patrick Henry Davenport.

Related Resources

- Learn about the restrictions imposed on free African Americans in antebellum Kentucky at the Kentucky Encyclopedia (Web Edition). <http://www.kyenc.com/entry/a/AFROA02.html>
- Discover the history of Kentucky portraitists, such as Patrick Henry Davenport, in a Filson Historical Society newsmagazine. *The Filson*, Vol. 10 No. 3. "Lessons in Likeness: Portrait Painters in Kentucky and the Ohio Valley 1800-1920," Estill Curtis Pennington, 2010. <http://www.filsonhistorical.org/pdf/magazine/FilsonMag-V10N3-Fall10.pdf>
- Read about the Doram portraits' restoration process conducted by the McKay Lodge Conservation Laboratory in Oberlin, Ohio. <http://www.paintingsconservation.com/kentucky.html>