

Carroll Yesteryears

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Rare Photos Document the Black Experience

By Frank J. Batavick

Archival photos remind us of long-lost streetscapes and rural vistas and depict both famous and ordinary people in wardrobes fitting their times. The Historical Society of Carroll County is a rich resource for these photos, but most of its portraits feature subjects who are solidly middle or upper class and White, creating an unintended but distorted view of the past. This is especially true for Black citizens because of the dearth of photos of the county's African American population in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. However, there is one exception: the photography of Louis H. Dielman of New Windsor.

First, some background: For a local boy, Dielman sported an enviable résumé. After serving as the town pharmacist, postmaster, town commissioner, and justice of the peace, he enjoyed brief stints at the Maryland State Library in Annapolis and the Enoch Pratt Free Library in Baltimore. He then became the second editor of *Maryland Historical Magazine* (1910-1938), executive secretary of the Peabody Institute (1911-1942), chairman of the Maryland Historical Society's library committee (1914-1943), co-founder and first President of the Maryland Library Association, and the co-creator of the Dielman-Hayward Card File. It contains biographical information on over 400,000 Marylanders and is housed in the Maryland Center for History and Culture's research library in Baltimore. Oh, and Louis also liked to take pictures.

Dielman's family owned the town's popular New Windsor Hotel which later became the Dielman Inn. As a photography enthusiast, Louis documented small town life from about 1890 to 1910. The prized feature of his photos is that he preferred to shoot people rather than scenery, and besides using the hotel's guests as subjects, including their frolicking children, he sought out African Americans to pose for him. Some of his strongest images are of the Black kitchen help at the hotel as they prepare a Maryland-style meal. He also gave us an image of an elderly Black couple. The husband, bent with age, sits on a chest in the foreground. His wife stands behind on the porch of their log cabin. Whether he was free or slave at the time of the Civil War, the old man's weary face betrays the harsh wages of second-class citizenship that was his ultimate reward.

Because of the exposure time required for cameras 125 years ago (it could take up to 20 seconds to capture an image), Dielman's photos are stilted by today's standards. Nevertheless, they portray the expressions, clothing, and honest work of his subjects.

Dielman developed his own photographs. That's not surprising for a pharmacist trained as a chemist. Along with the county historical society, New Windsor Heritage is the proud conservator of the pictures, as well as the glass photographic plates used to print them.

We don't have any photos of Baltimore subjects taken by Dielman, so we assume he practiced his hobby only while a town resident and, after moving to the city, when visiting his family on weekends. In 1942, at the ripe old age of 78, Louis retired from his positions of authority in

Baltimore. He returned to his beloved New Windsor and the then-defunct inn where he lived until his death on March 4, 1959. Dielman spent the remainder of his 95 years working on what he termed his “morgue” of Maryland names and birth and death anniversaries. He also conserved and curated artifacts from town history. Today they form the core of New Windsor Heritage’s museum collection.

Frank J. Batavick is a member of the Historical Society of Carroll County’s board of trustees and New Windsor Heritage.

Credit for all photos: *Courtesy of New Windsor Heritage*



Aunt Susie cleaning a mirror, an image whose deft composition and natural lighting owe not a little to Vermeer’s “Young Woman with a Water Jug.”



Photo is labelled "George Cromwell, 17 June 1893." With his crooked walking stick and a kit bag on his belt he is a compelling subject for Dielman.



New Windsor Hotel staff plucking chickens behind the hotel. The parts would no doubt be fried "Maryland style."



Charles and Adelaide Mine on the outskirts of town in Mt. Olivet Orchard. The trellis, kitchen garden, wash tub, scrub board, and white picket fence infuse the portrait with the details of daily life.