

Skinner, Inc., Boston, Massachusetts

# "Please Remember": The African Americana Collection of Avis and Eugene Robinson

by Jeanne Schinto  
Photos courtesy Skinner, Inc.

A collection of African Americana assembled by Avis Collins Robinson, an artist, and her husband, Eugene Robinson, a reporter, editor, foreign correspondent, and Pulitzer-Prize-winning columnist for the *Washington Post*, was sold in the Boston gallery of Skinner Inc. on February 9.

The approximately 300 lots spanned an epic range of African American experiences. As Eugene explained in a lecture he gave at one of the previews, he and his wife were intent on creating a collection of representative items that supplied a sweeping narrative showing that, in his words, "There is no American history without African American history. It simply doesn't exist." He elaborated on that theme in a catalog essay: "Men and women of African descent arrived on these shores well before the *Mayflower*, and on every day since they have played a central role in the making of America."

Eugene gave Avis, who could not attend the lecture, credit for being the duo's principal collector. "She was the one with the eye and the nose and the feeling in her fingers," he told his audience. However, there were some pieces that uniquely spoke to him. One was a framed front page of Frederick Douglass's newspaper the *North Star*, published in Rochester, New York, on April 28, 1848. "I'm a newspaper guy," he said. "And just to see that, [Douglass's] name up in the corner, is the kind of thing I find energizing and renewing and validating at a time when I feel a little bit put upon by personalities who do not need to be named. It's a reminder of the power of the free press and the truth."

At the auction, a phone bidder paid \$10,455 (including buyer's premium) for the single sheet. The price was the third-highest achieved at the sale.

During his lecture, Eugene recounted being a TV commentator on the night Barack Obama was elected our first African American president. In the few minutes he had before going on the air after the victory was announced, he called his parents to rejoice in the news. Continually he reflects on how much the world has changed, not only since the slavery years but even since his parents and his in-laws were born in the early 20th century. "We need to remember history in all its fullness, not just the bold-faced names but all the extraordinary 'ordinary' people who built this nation," he said. "Once you understand the power of physical objects to tell that story in a visceral, sometime heartbreaking way, once you realize that, you end up with a collection."

The sale, arranged in roughly chronological order, offered horrific artifacts of the slave trade: shackles, collars, restraints, branding irons, whips, leg irons, yokes, and chains. Ambrotypes, tintypes, cabinet cards, cartes de visite, and a small number of daguerreotypes served as illustrations of the Civil War and Reconstruction years and a bit beyond it. Press photos dominated the section devoted to the civil rights struggle. There were printed and manuscript documents, broadsides, maps, and books from all periods. Also included were items relating to figures in sports and entertainment (George Foreman, Louis Armstrong, Jimi Hendrix); children's dolls and toys; textiles, including clothing; ceramics; musical instruments; and a group of late 19th- and early 20th-century carved figures, masks, and other artworks from the Ivory Coast and elsewhere in West and Central Africa. The final lot was a 2008 Obama campaign poster.

The catalog cover lot was a cased quarter-plate (4 1/4" x 3 3/4") tintype of a young African American woman reading. It was reminiscent of the iconic frontispiece of Phillis Wheatley's *Poems on Various Subjects, Religious and Moral*, published in Boston in 1773, showing the 19-year-old author in profile with a hand to her cheek. The photo sold to an Internet bidder for \$6765 (est. \$500/700).

Nine of the top 30 lots were photographic images. They included a cased quarter-plate tintype depicting what was believed to be an African American Confederate soldier



An archive of materials relating to the slave-trading DeWolf family of Bristol, Rhode Island, sold for \$12,300 (est. \$500/700).

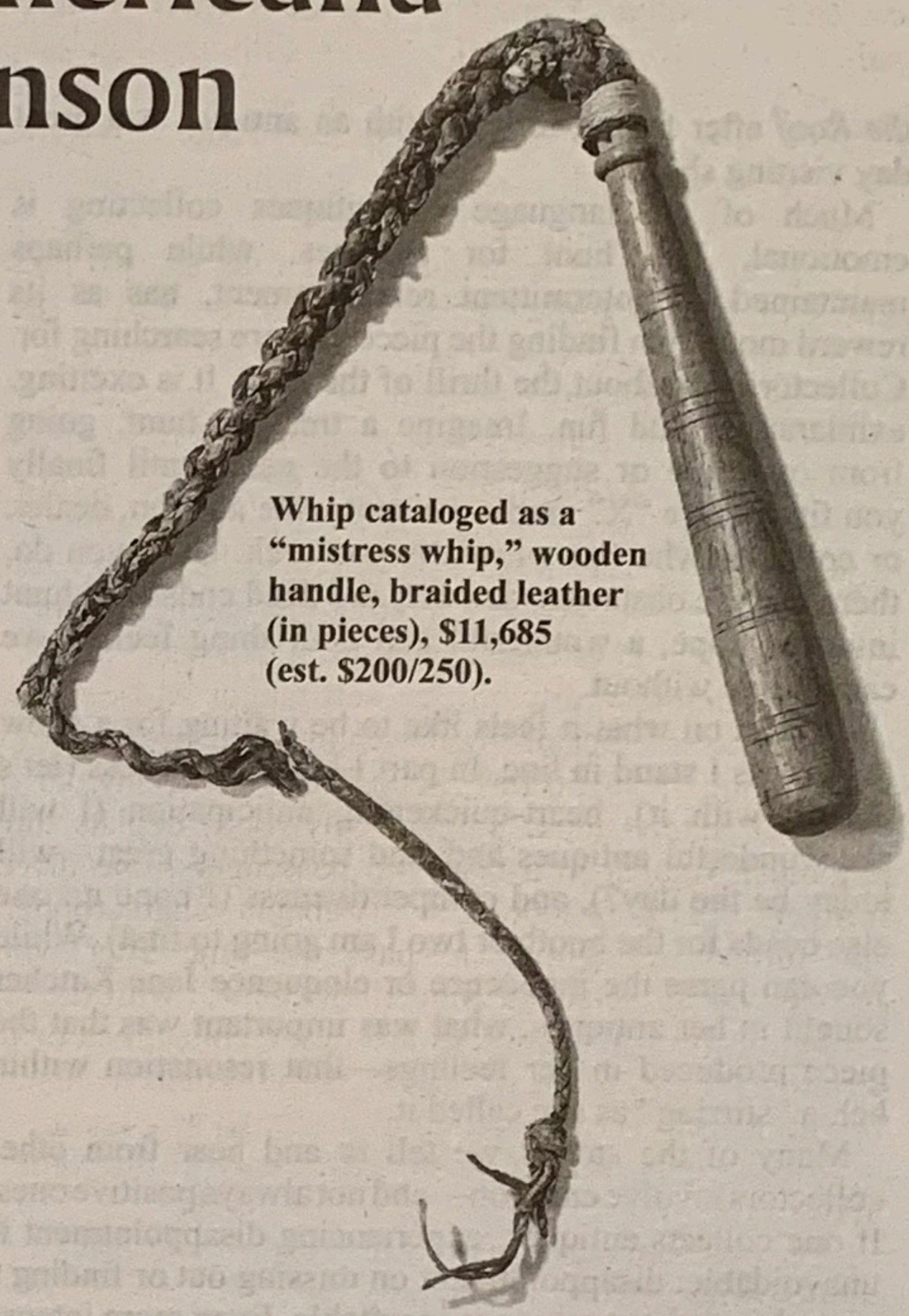
## "There is no American history without African American history."

in uniform, full length. In January 2010 the same photo had sold at Cowan's Auctions for \$999. At this sale, it achieved nearly ten times that, going at \$9225 to a bidder on the phone. Another quarter-plate image of a Civil War-era African American soldier shown full length in an unspecified military uniform sold to a different phone bidder for \$5535. The description in the catalog said it was a daguerreotype, but an addendum revised it to read tintype.

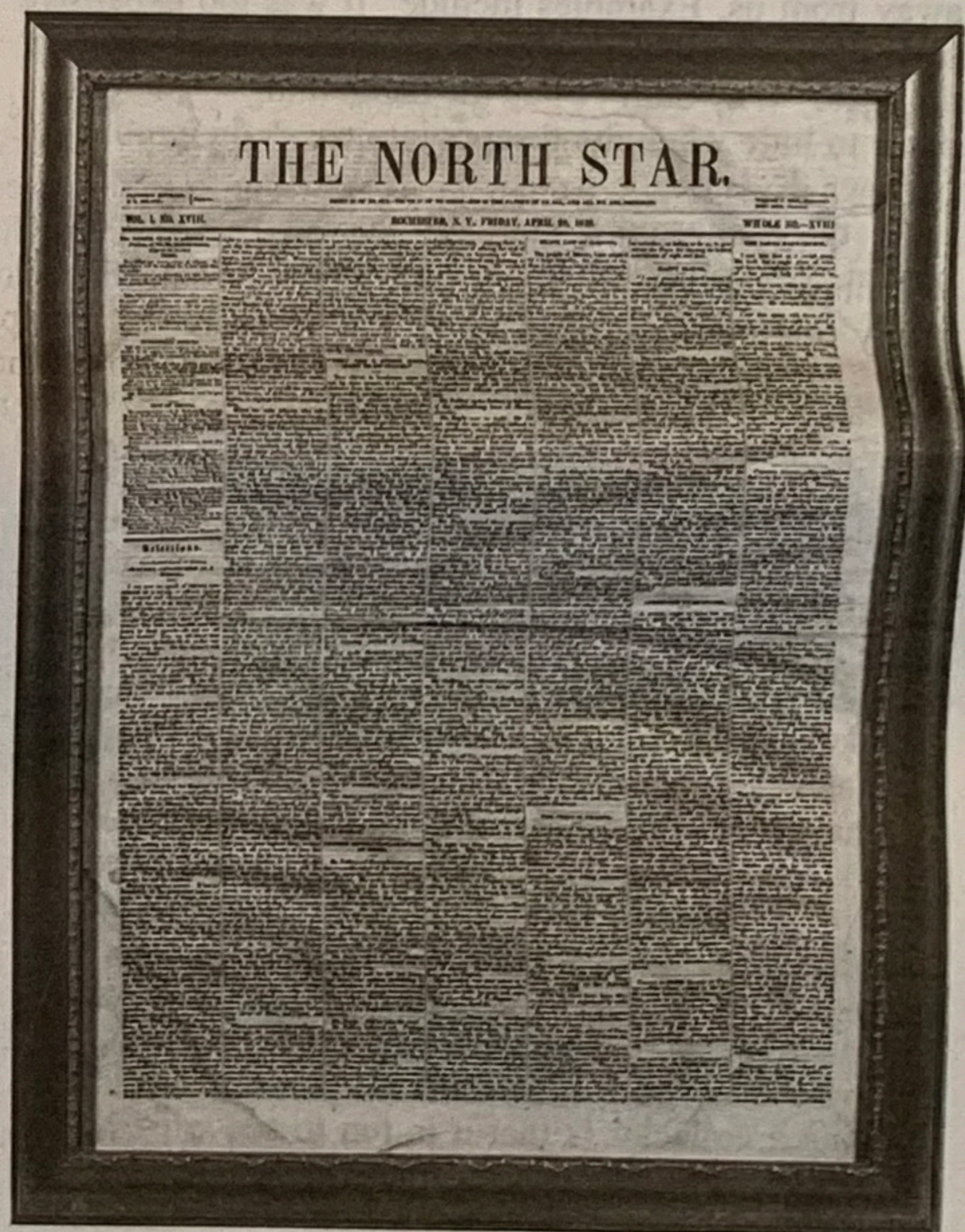
Previewers noted that a large percentage of the photography in the sale had rubs, dents, scratches, "wipes," and other types of damage. That would not be surprising to Ross J. Kelbaugh of Marriottsville, Maryland, who began collecting African American photographs in the early 1970s and published *Introduction to African American Photographs 1840-1950: Identification, Research, Care & Collecting* in 2005. "African American photographs in all formats very often have condition problems," his book says. That reality "speaks to the life experience of many black people and the low regard others have had for their photographs until recently." Photography collectors who specialize in other kinds of content can afford to be fastidious about condition, but, according to Kelbaugh, "The scarcity and importance of [African American] subject matter should far outweigh any physical problems the image has suffered."

Greg French of Jamaica Plain, Massachusetts, a dealer who has a personal collection of African American images considered to be among the finest in the world, concurs with Kelbaugh. A frequent lender to institutional exhibitions, French owns the earliest known photographic portrait of Frederick Douglass. It is a sixth-plate (3 1/4" x 2 3/4") daguerreotype dating from the mid- to early 1840s. But he also has what he describes as "a quarter-plate daguerreotype of a couple that is so badly rubbed you can hardly see the subjects. Yet I have it because their body language is so exquisite. They're young and they're fluid. It's a pose you just never see." As French notes on his website ([www.gregfrenchearlyphotography.com](http://www.gregfrenchearlyphotography.com)), "While I have a critical eye for condition and reject many daguerreotypes on this basis, I'm a big believer that content, historical data, and even artistry can trump condition issues."

Two additional photos of soldiers fetched only \$431 and \$492 respectively. These images may have been held back from achieving more not only because they weren't as visually strong as the ones that brought four figures



Whip cataloged as a "mistress whip," wooden handle, braided leather (in pieces), \$11,685 (est. \$200/250).



A phone bidder paid a within-estimate \$10,455 for a framed front page of Frederick Douglass's newspaper the *North Star*, published in Rochester, New York, on April 28, 1848.

but because of questions about their subjects' race. One was cataloged as "possibly a mulatto or creole man," not African American; the other was not assigned a race and did not look dark-skinned.

"That's the age-old question for collectors: are they or aren't they [African American]?" said French. "I am constantly asking others for their opinion. These [the two photos that sold for three figures] I'd pass around among my friends, and we'd all disagree, no matter our respective ethnicity. Even African American collectors [of African American images] get caught up in the 'mixed race' discussion," added French, who is white. "There are disagreements among collectors. And the bottom line is, we'll never know."

The sale's top lot, going to an unidentified bidder in the room for \$12,300, was an archive of material from the slave-trading DeWolf family of Bristol, Rhode Island. The single carton contained legal documents, both printed and manuscript, dozens of photographs, a journal, and other historical items dating from the 18th through the 20th centuries. For more information about the DeWolfs, see the 2008 documentary film *Traces of the Trade: A Story from the Deep North* ([www.tracesofthetrade.org](http://www.tracesofthetrade.org)).



Bidders rejected a wooden chest filled with approximately 90 pairs of rusty shackles (est. \$8000/10,000), but they competed vigorously for an implement cataloged as a "mistress whip." Presumably this is a whip intended to be used by a woman. Contemplating the length of braided leather with a wooden handle, to say nothing of holding it, is an unsettling experience, to say the least. The whip sold to a phone bidder for \$11,685 (est. \$200/250). After the DeWolf archive, that was the second-highest-priced lot of the sale.

Of the more recent material, a single lot of two press photos of Martin Luther King Jr. achieved \$4613 (est. \$500/700). One of the images shows Dr. King at a press conference during which he announced that his organization had adopted a resolution for the U.S. to consider withdrawing troops from Vietnam; the other shows him marching to the courthouse in Montgomery, Alabama, with the Reverend Ralph Abernathy, John Lewis, and James Forman. Numerous batches of press photos of other news events went for much less.

A contemporary artwork by self-taught Mose Ernest Tolliver was another of the newer lots that became a top seller, going at \$6150 (est. \$200/250). The triangular oil on board (likely house paint on plywood) depicts three cartoonish figures in a bus: two passengers, one driver. Tolliver (1919/20-2006), an Alabama sharecropper's son, turned to painting to pass the time after being disabled by an accident. Signed "Mose T," with the "S" written backward, his works are in the collections of the Birmingham Museum of Art in Birmingham, Alabama, the Smithsonian Institution, and the former Corcoran Gallery of Art (whose collections are now under the care of the National Gallery of Art).

This was Skinner's first African Americana auction, and the first single-owner African Americana sale that I have covered in 14 years of reporting for *M.A.D.* The Robinsons are both in their early 60s. The next generation of African Americana collectors is starting to emerge. Of the 248 lots that were sold, 162 (65.3%) went for under \$500. So there was plenty of starter material for newcomers to buy, especially in the category of historical documents. Among those paper lots were a manuscript letter concerning the sale of "Grandmother's Negroes," written in Nicholasville, Kentucky, on December 13, 1841 (\$86); an 1835 letter from a farmer in Jackson, Tennessee, to a plantation owner in South Carolina regarding the purchase of "a family of Negroes" (\$246); and a slave merchant's shipping record dated 1818 (\$277). Books, posters, many of the dolls, and group lots of photos were also within reach of collectors on a budget.

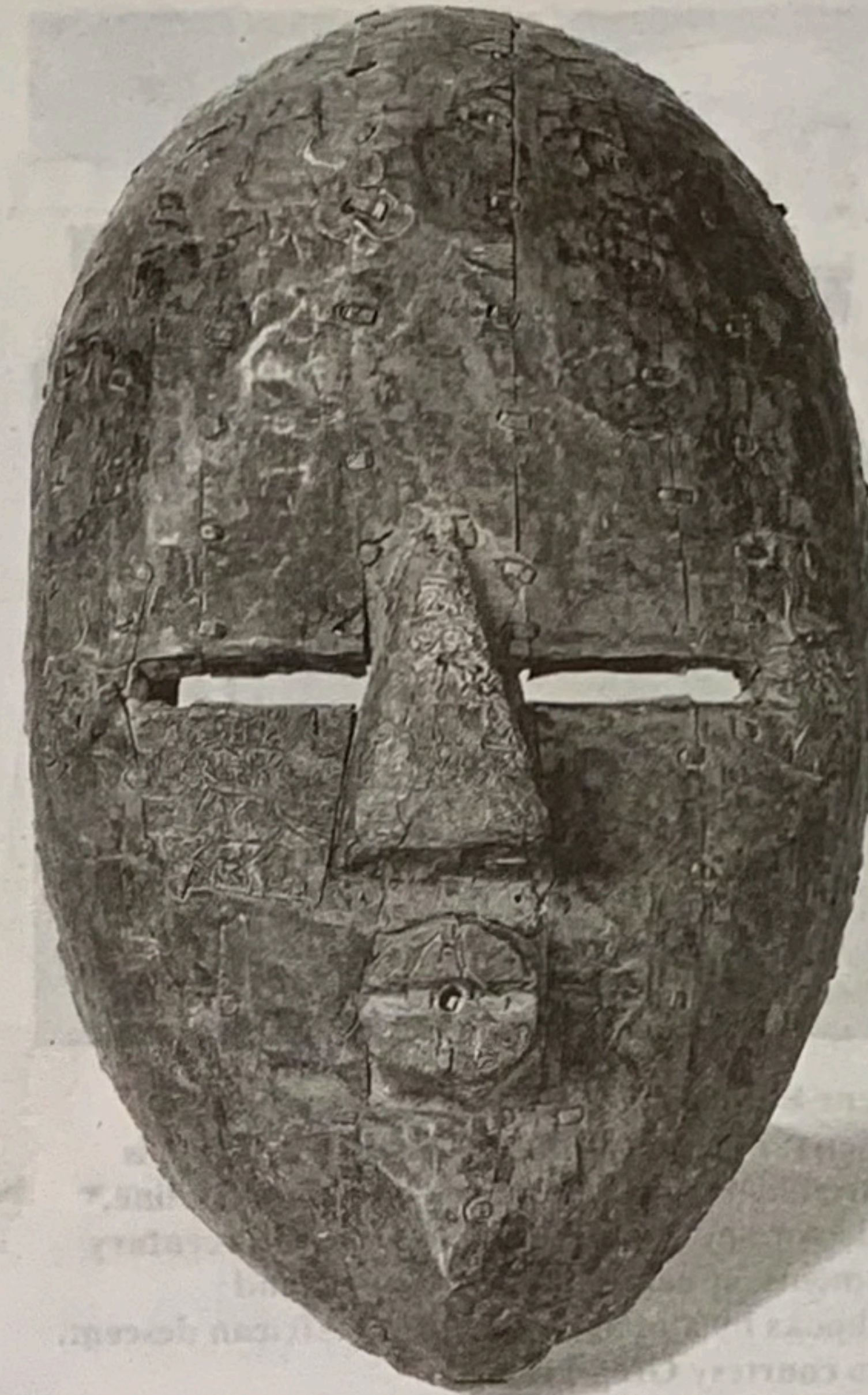
In addition to the live auction, Skinner ran an online-only sale of 200 more lots from the collection from February 1 to 12; the sell-through rate was approximately 50%. Among the most successful items were a first edition of *Twelve Years a Slave* by Solomon Northup, published in 1853 (\$6150); an archive of papers from the Boardman, Starbuck, and Folger families of Nantucket, Massachusetts (\$5228); and a circa 1900 stockinette doll—a missionary rag baby—attributed to Julia Jones Beecher, Harriet Beecher Stowe's sister-in-law (\$3075).

LaGina Austin, director of Skinner's department of appraisals and auction services, was the specialist in charge of the sale. Besides representatives from Washington, D.C.'s National Museum of African American History and Culture, who were bidding in the room, Austin counted approximately 26 other educational and cultural institutions participating as phone bidders, absentees, and online. "There was international interest, as well as local—and everything in between," she said.

For more information, contact Skinner at (617) 350-5400 or via its website ([www.skinnerinc.com](http://www.skinnerinc.com)).



From left to right: LaGina Austin, director of appraisal and auction services for Skinner; Eugene Robinson; Alona Wilson, director of collections and exhibits for the Museum of African American History, which has locations in Boston and Nantucket; and Skinner president and CEO Karen Keane. The sale's title, "Please Remember," was derived from a comment by Avis Robinson's mother, who once told her daughter that she hoped the contributions of her generation of African Americans would not be forgotten.



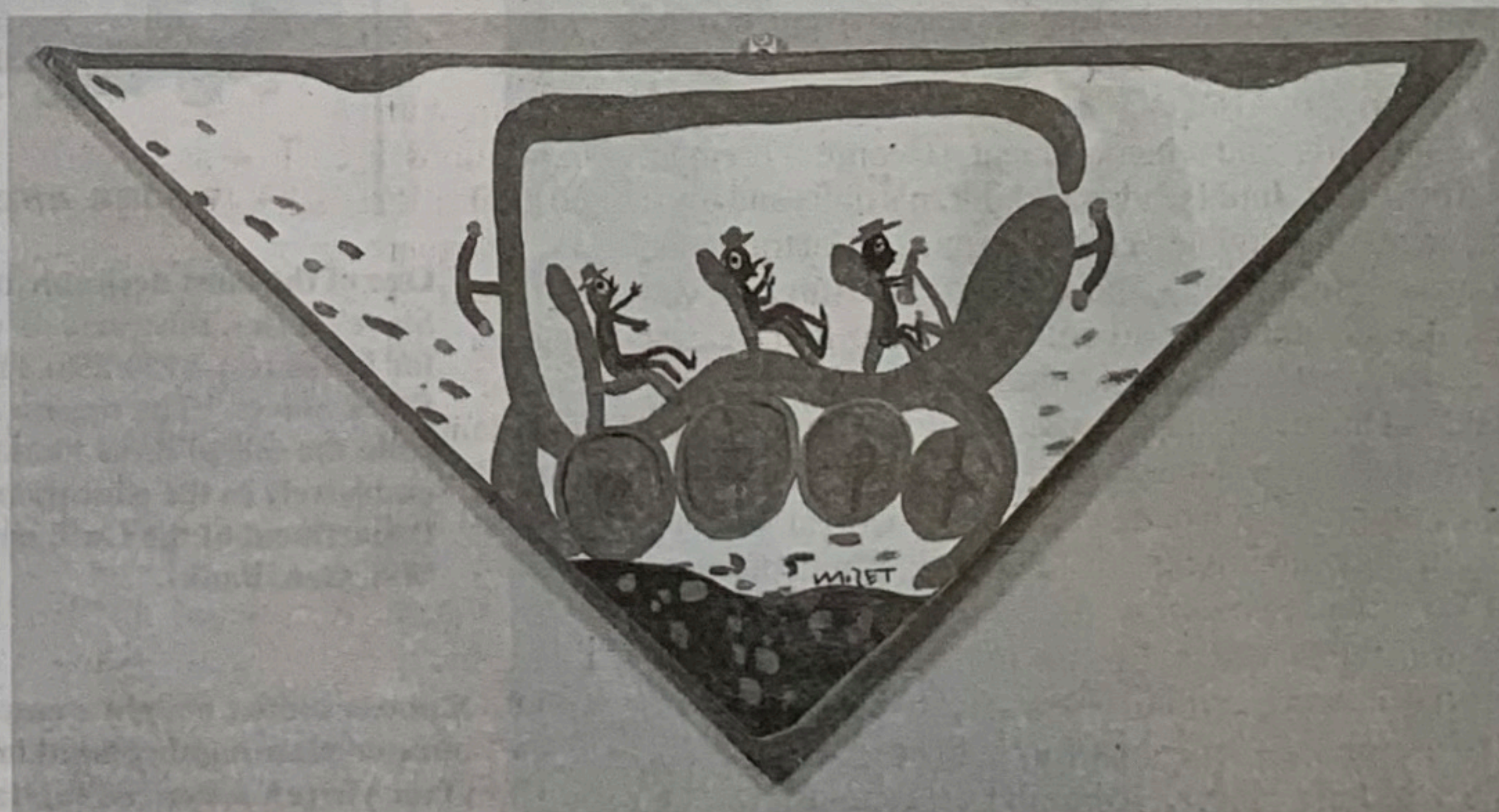
A 14" x 8" x 5" copper mask, cataloged as 19th-century West African, sold to an Internet bidder for \$2952 (est. \$400/600).



An occupational cabinet card (4 1/4" x 6 1/2") showing a group of what appear to be hotel workers realized \$2952 (est. \$200/300). They are holding teapots, trays, and other "tools" of the hospitality industry.

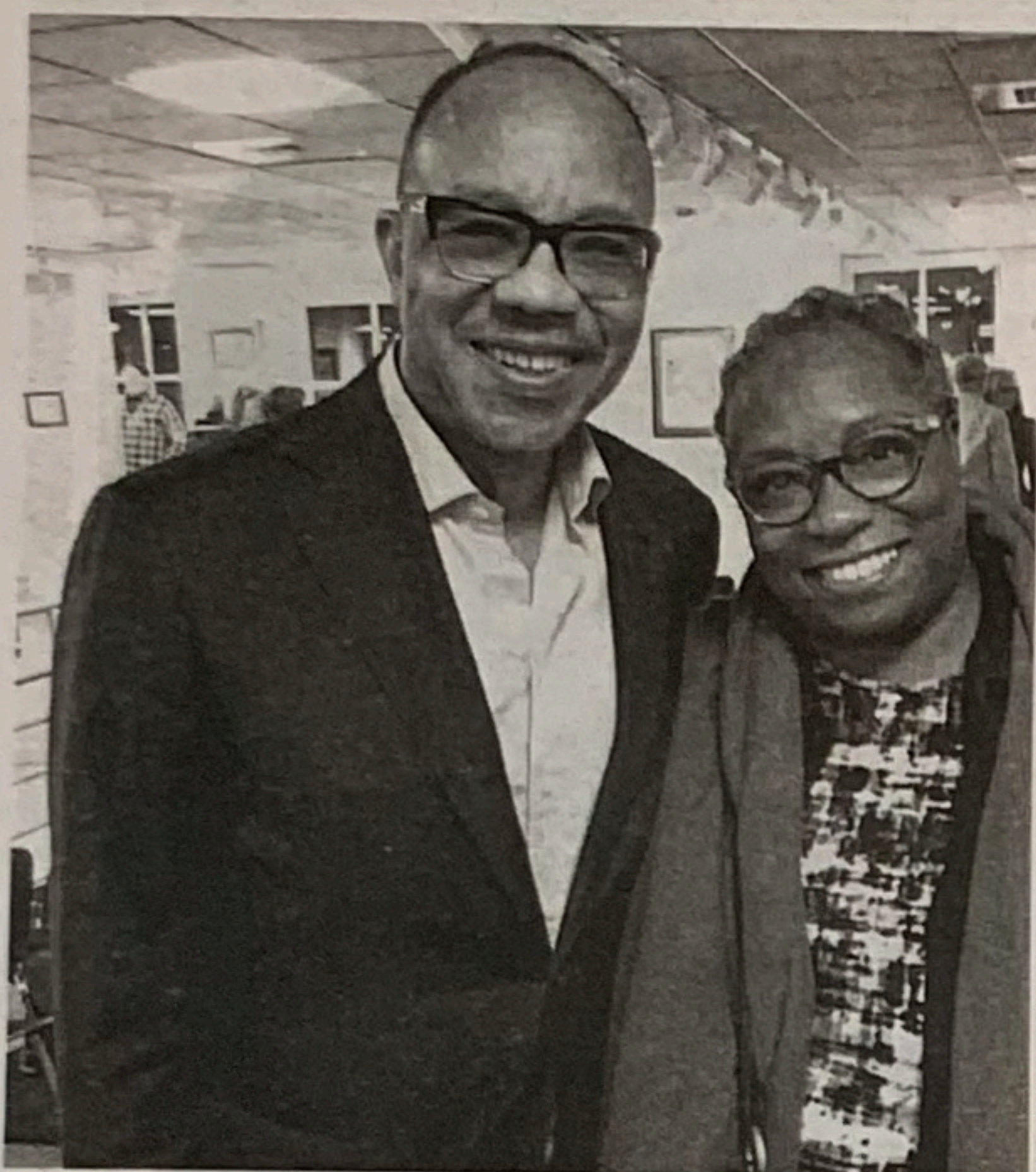


A phone bidder paid \$7380 (est. \$800/1200) for a framed broadside announcing a "\$100 REWARD" for Isaac Churcher, described as being "about 45 years of age" with a "swarthy complexion" and a possible head wound received in a previous arrest attempt. It was issued by the sheriff of Elmira, New York, and dated September 6, 1843.



This untitled oil on board by Mose Ernest Tolliver (1919/20-2006), 16 1/4" x 33 1/2", sold for \$6150 (est. \$200/250).





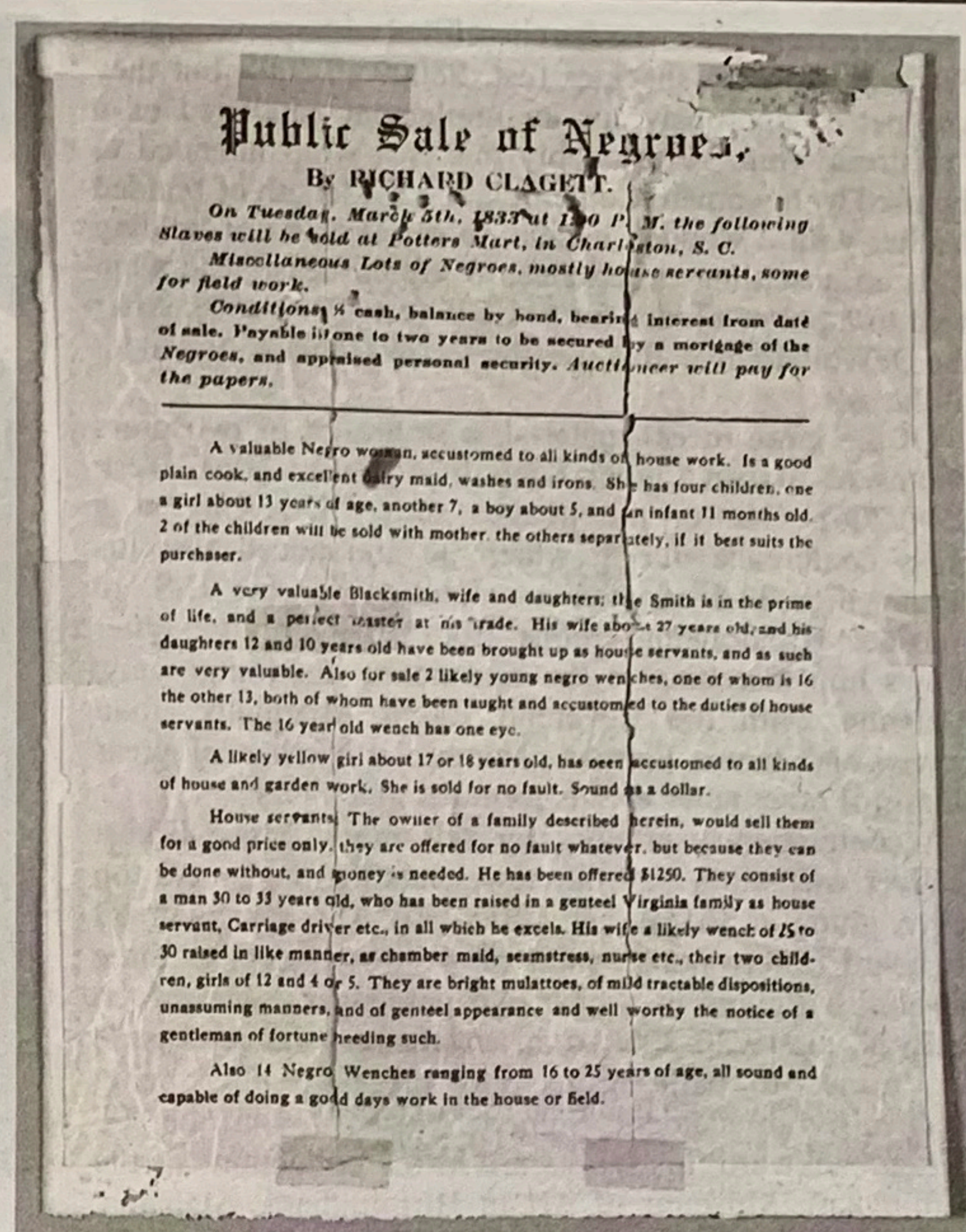
Eugene Robinson gave a lecture at one of the previews; he titled it "Power to the Past." He is pictured here with lecture attendee Linda Cline, a collector and curator of 19th- and 20th-century documents, ephemera, photographs, and cookbooks by and about people of African descent. Photo courtesy Greg French.



A cased carte-de-visite-size image (4" x 2½"), cataloged as an ambrotype but likely a tintype, sold to a phone bidder for \$1968 (est. \$400/600). The subject was described as a "Female Slave with White Infant in a Baby Carriage." There is no proof that she was a slave, however, and if it could be proven, the photo would have been all the more sought by collectors.



A carte de visite cataloged as "Black Nanny Holding a White Baby" sold to a phone bidder for \$554 (est. \$200/250). The photographer was identified in print on the card as Pedro da Silveira of Rio de Janeiro. Eugene Robinson, who was the South America correspondent for the *Washington Post* from 1988 through 1992, wrote a book about race in Brazil, *Coal to Cream* (1999).



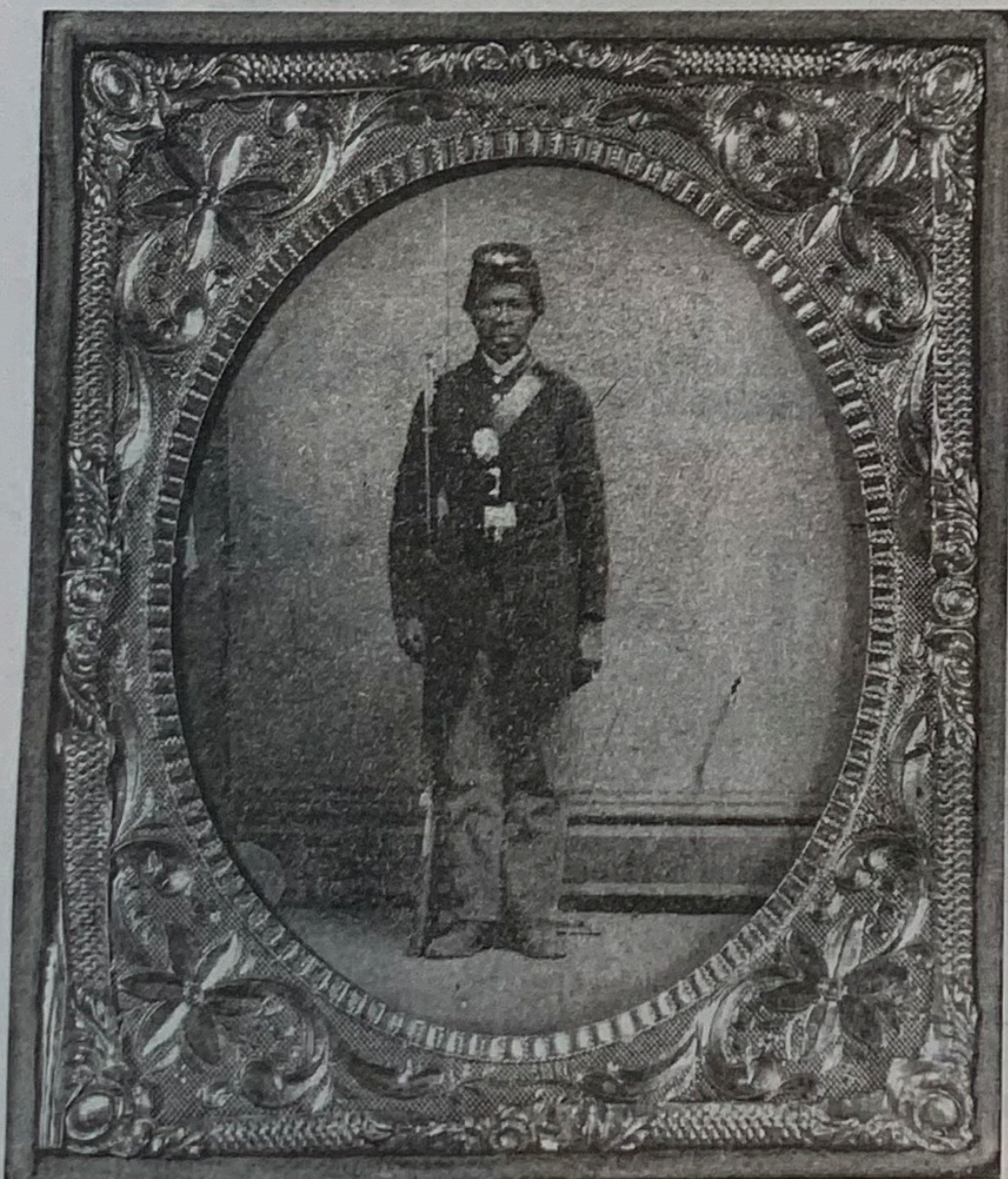
An Internet bidder paid \$2583 (est. \$150/250) for an 11" x 8½" broadside announcing a "Public Sale of Negroes, by Richard Clagett" on March 5, 1833, in Charleston, South Carolina. One "lot" is described this way: "A very valuable Blacksmith, wife and daughters; the Smith is in the prime of life, and a perfect master at his trade. His wife about 27 years old, and his daughters 12 and 10 years old have been brought up as house servants, and as such are very valuable."



One of the most desirable images of the so-called "White Slave" series, this carte de visite sold to a phone bidder for \$1968 (est. \$150/250). The title reads: "White and Black Slaves." The reverse says: "The nett [sic] proceeds from the sale of these Photographs will be devoted exclusively to the education of colored people in the Department of the Gulf, now under the command of Maj. Gen. Banks."



A well-known carte de visite of two well-dressed men, one white, one black, sold to a room bidder for \$1353 (est. \$200/400). The photographer's name, place of business, and a date are printed on the reverse: "C.R. Rees & Co., Richmond, Virginia, 1868." So it's post Civil War, but is the black man the white man's assistant? Or is this truly a relationship of equals? The image doesn't provide the answer.



A phone bidder bought a cased quarter-plate hand-colored image of an African American soldier for \$5535 (est. \$500/1000). Cataloged as a daguerreotype, it appears to be a tintype or ambrotype.



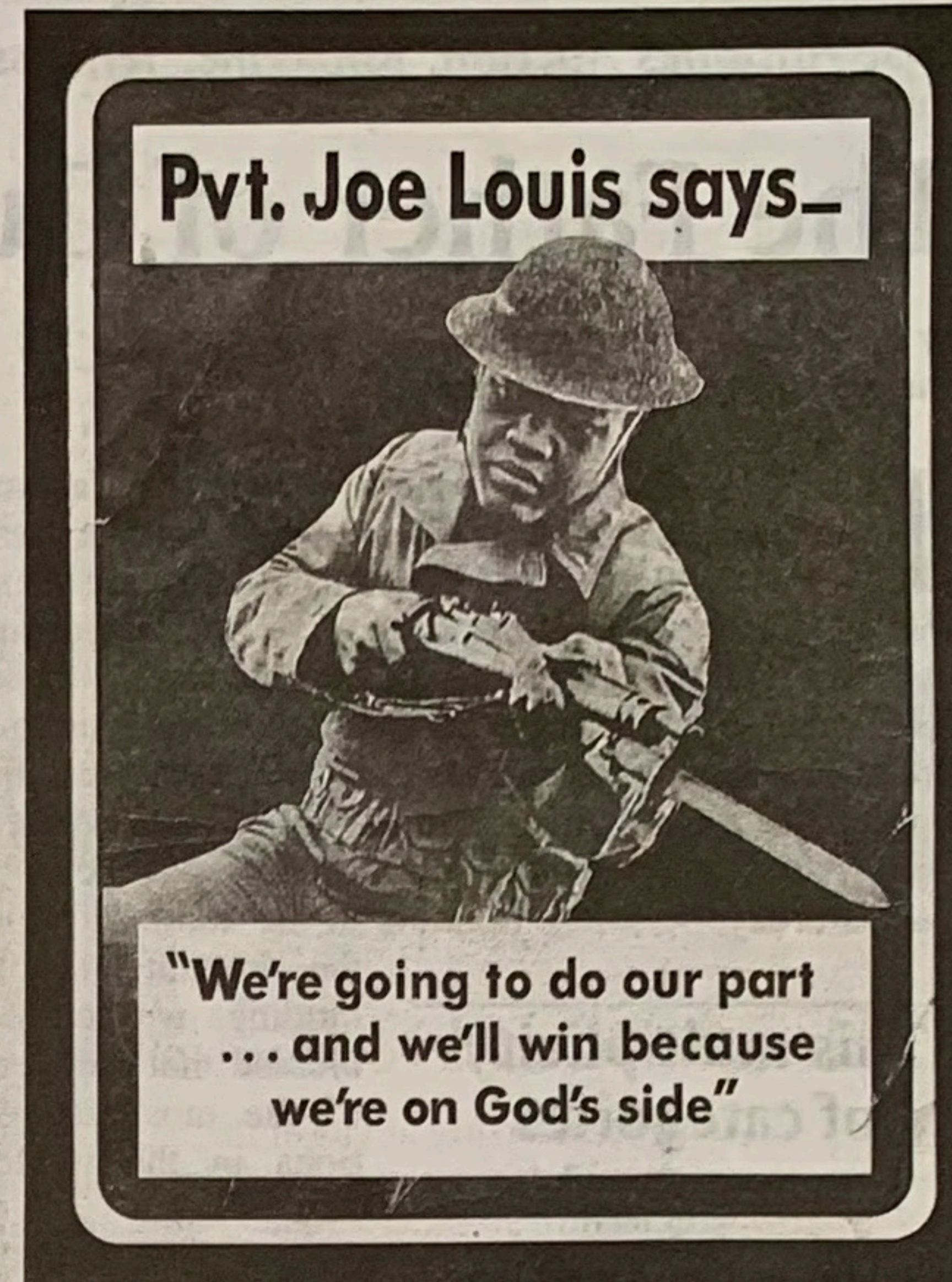
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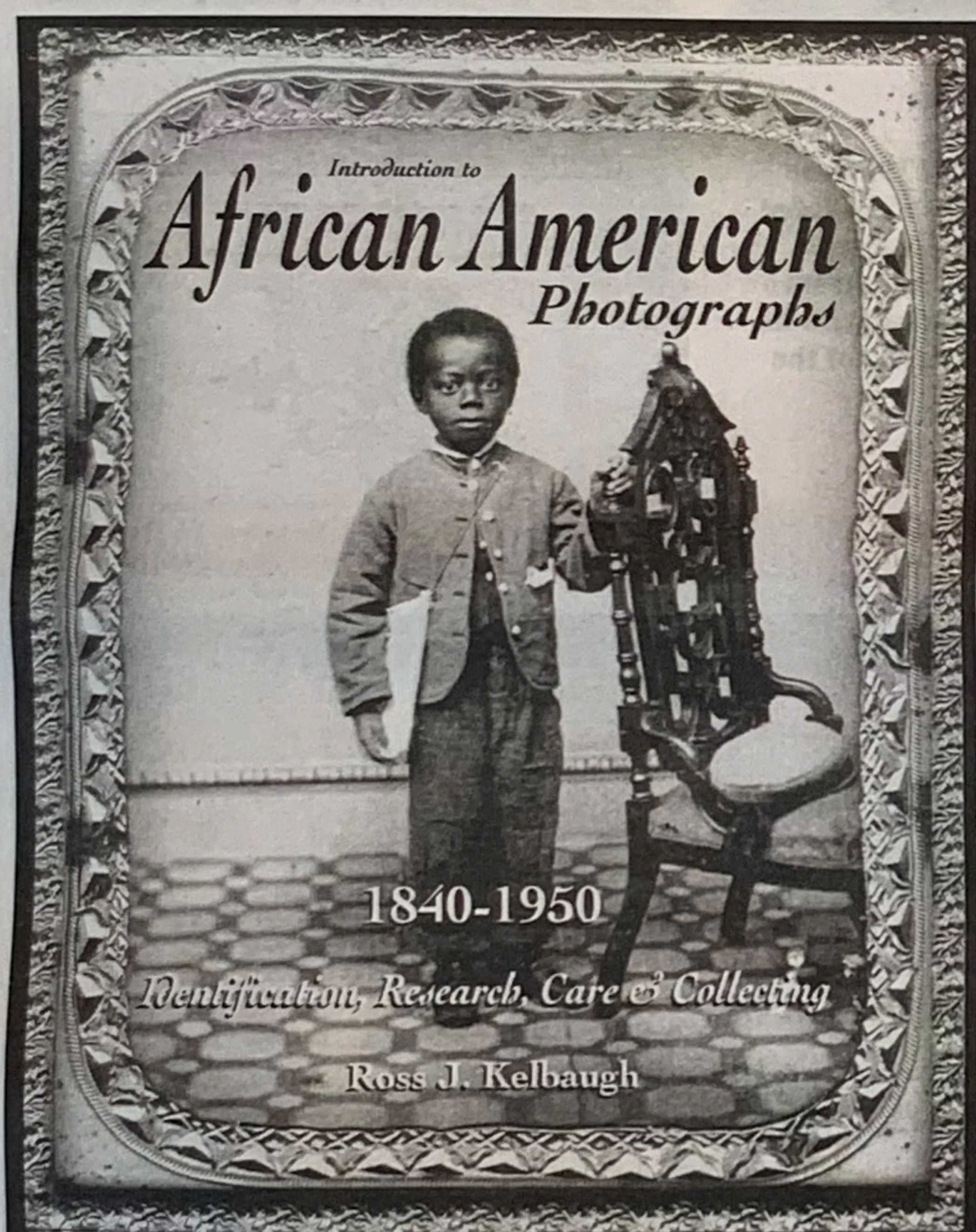
A cased quarter-plate hand-colored tintype of what is believed to be an African American Confederate soldier sold for \$9225 (est. \$800/1200).



This cased quarter-plate tintype of a young woman reading sold for \$6765 (est. \$500/700).



A 24 1/4" x 17" World War II recruitment poster featuring boxer Joe Louis sold for \$3444 (est. \$600/800).



Copies of Ross J. Kelbaugh's 2005 *Introduction to African American Photographs 1840-1950* can be found online from several sellers.



Two identical posters from Shirley Chisholm's 1972 U.S. presidential campaign sold in one lot for \$1476 (est. \$200/400). In 1968 Chisholm became the first African American woman elected to Congress; she represented New York's 12th Congressional District (Brooklyn) for seven terms. She was the first African American candidate, man or woman, to run for a major party's nomination for president.



A 23" tall stockinette missionary rag baby or rag doll, attributed to Julia Jones Beecher of Elmira, New York, sold in the online-only portion of the sale for a within-estimate \$3075. Beecher made dolls in the period 1893-1910. Included in the lot were extra clothes.



Two press photographs featuring Martin Luther King Jr., alone and pensive in one and marching in a group with other civil rights leaders in the other, achieved \$4613 (est. \$500/700).

