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FIRST-EVER PORTRAIT OF PIONEER CIRCUIT RIDER UNVEILED

By Susan Keaton, GCSRW Communications Director

It took a photographic restoration expert, a forensic artist, several historians and archivists and a skilled portrait painter to give a face to the legend of Rev. Helenor Alter Davisson.

Rev. Christopher M. Shoemaker, who has researched Davisson's life and ministry as the first woman known to have been ordained in The United Methodist tradition, said that the only recorded description of her appearance is that she had "raven black hair and deep blue eyes."

An Alter family descendent, William O. Henry, had the only known photograph, a portrait of Davisson with her first husband, John Draper, which had been reproduced as a "carte de visite" to give to friends as gifts. However, more than a century of exposure and wear had essentially erased Davisson's face from the memento, Shoemaker said.

The first step toward seeing what Davisson might have looked like was to have the photo professionally restored. Shoemaker said that work by the Conservation Center for Art and Historical Artifacts in Philadelphia resulted in a little more of Davisson's face – a piece of one eye and part of her nose – coming into focus.



Next, Shoemaker asked a well-regarded forensic artist – Harvey Pratt of the Oklahoma State Bureau of Investigation – to recreate the missing visage. Pratt produced a drawing that offered the first glimpse of what Davisson might have looked like. Next, Shoemaker commissioned a portrait artist, Clay Michael Powers, to make a formal rendering.

But the story doesn't end there.

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Powers spent three months researching portrait styles of the mid 1800s before he ever put brush to canvas, hoping to recreate the colors, brushstrokes and style of the era, when itinerant portrait painters travelled the countryside memorializing residents.



The restored carte de visite shows how little detail was available to the artists. (Photo courtesy of William O. Henry)

Meanwhile, archivists at the American Textile History Museum, examining the original carte de visite and the clothing and textiles in the photo, came to an unexpected conclusion: Even though the carte de visite was made in 1860s, the original photo was taken around 1845. That meant that though Pratt had recreated Davisson's face as a woman in her 40s (as she would have been in 1860), she actually was about 20 years younger in the photo. So in addition to getting the proper colors, style and detail, Powers reversed the aging process when painting the portrait.

Davisson's hairstyle could be seen clearly in the photo, but Powers had to bring out details in her lace collar. He also added a gold button to the collar, following the fashion of the day when collars could be removed from dresses, even though the button could not be seen in the photograph. The artist could see a small pin on the dress itself, however, and he wondered what it might be.

The likely solution to that mystery became clear when Alter family members told Shoemaker that Davisson was thought to have had a child who had died in infancy, making it likely that the pin was a *momento mori*, a piece of jewelry containing a lock of a deceased loved one's hair. Such pins were popular in that era, especially to memorialize children, and would always have been worn in a formal portrait, Shoemaker said.

Once all that was explained in an Aug. 24 commemoration ceremony, Shoemaker and Bishop Michael J. Coyner pulled away a drape to reveal the depiction of Davisson. The crowd, which included several Alter family descendents, oohed and aahed before bursting into applause.



Dr. Richard Stowe, Indiana Conference Historian, looks on as Rev. Christopher M. Shoemaker and Bishop Michael J. Coyner reveal the portrait.

Shoemaker said the portrait will be displayed at the World Council of Methodism’s museum at Lake Junaluska, N.C. It will be unveiled there during a United Methodist Women’s international event Sept. 6.

(You can read more about Davisson’s life and ministry [here](#)).