

'Lost' works offer new portrait

Book on Weeden uncovers artist's forgotten writings

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Most longtime Huntsvillians have heard of Howard Weeden, whose sensitive poetry and paintings recorded the post-Civil War era in this city's history and whose home is a museum at 300 Gates Ave.

Most know that Weeden was a woman (Maria Howard Weeden) who, in the manner of the time, disguised her gender in her published work.

But very few know that



Maria Howard Weeden

Weeden also wrote a variety of pieces under the pen name Flake White. Thanks to a new book compiled by two local Weeden scholars and fans, the lost

writings are available for all to read.

"Lost Writings of Howard Weeden as 'Flake White'" was a labor of love for Sarah Huff Fisk and Linda Wright Riley. Both are excited about uncovering a forgotten side to this artist and writer, who was quite well-known in her day.

"At one time, she was thought of as the most famous poet and artist in Alabama," Riley said. In fact, she said, for many years Howard Weeden Day was celebrated in the state on April 12, the day she died. Tuesday marks the 100th anniversary of her death.

Riley and Fisk spent months traveling and poring over crumbling copies of the *Christian Observer*, a Presbyterian paper based in Manassas, Va., in which Weeden published under a pen name for 30 years. The paper is still published.

Weeden's pen name, Flake White, came from a once-popular artists' paint. It is not as popular today, since the pigment is poisonous.

Riley added, "We had no idea we would find scores of



Glenn Baeske/Huntsville Times

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pieces by her."

For Riley, who portrays Weeden in the annual Maple Hill Cemetery strolls, new facets of the writer/artist's personality and talent were revealed.

"The sophistication of her style, even in 1866, was very surprising. She wrote of history and fashions," Riley said.

Fisk said, "The (lost) writing was so different. Instead of featuring the Civil War, this writing was more or less imagi-

nary."

Both Riley and Fisk said the Weeden they uncovered was not the "shy, little person" she had been considered by some, but a person with a strong voice, especially coming from a woman at the time in Huntsville.

Fisk, who is 90, said her fascination with Weeden and her work began many years ago in an encounter with Elizabeth Price, a friend of Weeden's and 20 years her junior.

"I was in the Huntsville Country Club with Mrs. Elizabeth Price in the 1940s. She opened a portfolio of Weeden's drawings, and I was entranced," Fisk said. That passion continues to this day.

In 1962, Fisk and co-author Dr. Frances Roberts published "Shadows on the Wall, The Life and Works of Howard Weeden."

Although the new collection focuses on Weeden's literary works, many think first of her paintings, her sensitive watercolor portraits, many of former slaves.

Weeden didn't get rich off her artwork. Some portraits sold for \$5 and others for as little as a quarter. Although that

Want more?

"Lost Writings of Howard Weeden as 'Flake White'" authors Sarah Huff Fisk and Linda Wright Riley will give a 30-minute program about discovering Flake White on Wednesday at noon in the Huntsville-Madison County Public Library, 915 Monroe St. This free event is part of the library's Bicentennial Brown Bag Lunch Series.

On April 19 from 1 to 4 p.m., the authors will be signing their new book at the Weeden House Museum, 300 Gate Ave.. Refreshments will be served and free museum tours given.

The book is available for purchase at the Weeden House, Burritt on the Mountain - A Living Museum, the Huntsville Museum of Art, Harrison Brothers Hardware, Lawren's Gift Shop and Shaver's Books.

sum had greater buying power in those days, it was an extremely modest price.

According to Riley, there is no evidence that anyone who wrote for the *Christian Observer* was paid for his or her work.

Riley and Fisk found more than 50 Weeden pieces in that paper and published 41 in their book.

"It was so hard to find them," Fisk said. "You could overlook one in a heartbeat."