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AA MS 08 N. T. Swezey's Son & Co. Tin Sign Finding Aid

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**N. T. SWEZEY'S SON & CO. TIN SIGN
AA MS 8**

**Mapcase Drawers: 1
Linear Feet: 2.5**

**By
Christina E. Walker**

**Portland, Maine
May 2014**

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Administrative Information

Provenance: The N. T. Swezey's Son & Co. Tin Sign was donated by Dietlind Vander Schaaf in 2002. He recovered the sign from the basement of his aunt's house in Brunswick, Maine. The sign was purchased in the 1980s by his aunt at a flea market in Michigan.

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Cite as: N. T. Swezey's Son & Co. Tin Sign, African American Collection of Maine, Jean Byers Sampson Center for Diversity in Maine, University of Southern Maine Libraries.

Restrictions on access: This collection is open for research.

Historical Note

N. T. (Noah Terry) Swezey (1814-1888) was a flour merchant in New York City. He ran a successful business for over forty years at 176 South St., and was one of the founders of the New York Produce Exchange. This is a metal reproduction of a sign used by the company to advertise Northwest Consolidated Milling Company flour which used an African American stereotype image.

The original audience of this advertisement would have been familiar with this portrayal of African American children. The image of the African American child relies on racist stereotypes that were frequently depicted on advertisements, postcards, and other ephemera from about mid-nineteenth century into the early decades of the twentieth century. Typical features of this racist caricature of black children, often referred to as "pickaninnies," were bulging red lips, large white eyes, disheveled hair and ragged clothing. These images frequently include certain props, such as watermelon and fried chicken. The children were shown ravenously devouring these food items, symbolizing the "pickaninnies'" poverty and animal-like appetite. In this advertisement the black figure watches longingly as the white figure eats a slice of white bread, presumably made with the advertised flour. Such depictions also worked to reinforce stereotypes about African American parents' being neglectful and forgetting to feed their children.

The presentation of a white child next to a black child makes use of another common early advertising gimmick. The historian Larry Vincent Buster writes, "The most derogatory representations of blacks in advertising, postcards, and other illustrations established the dichotomy between black and white, translating it into evil vs. good, dirty vs. clean. In its more benign forms, the idea played out as a charming joke, intended to capture the attention of white consumers and make them smile" (35). In this tin sign, the contrast extends beyond the skin color of the two children; the darkness of the black

child's skin is also used to draw the consumer's attention to the light, airiness of Northwest Consolidated Milling Company's flour.

Reference

Buster, Larry Vincent. *The Art and History of Black Memorabilia*. New York: Clarkson Potter Publishers, 2000.

Description of the Collection

The N. T. Swezey's Son & Co. Tin Sign is a reproduction of an advertising poster; the original production date is unknown. It depicts the figure of a black child standing behind and slightly below the figure of a white child. The white figure is sitting on a container of the Northwestern Consolidated Milling Company's flour and is holding a slice of white bread. Both children have flour stains on their hands; the black child also has a white handprint on his cheek. Next to the children is an open flour sack. The text in the upper left hand corner reads: "Only Perfect Flour Makes Perfect Bread." The text on the right reads: "N.T. Swezey's Son & Co. Flour; 224 Produce Exchange, New York; Telephones, 63 Broad/971 " " [meaning 'Broad']." The sign measures 12.5 inches by 17 inches.