

Arts (/Arts/)

# Then & now: Photographer Sara K. Lyons spotlights Howes Brothers' houses

By STEVE PFARRER  
Staff Writer

Thursday, August 31, 2017

The more things change, the more they stay the same.

Well, not exactly the same. But a photo exhibit at Historic Northampton shows that some parts of the city don't look much different than they did more than 100 years ago, even as tree cover has come and gone and dirt roads have given way to asphalt.

For "Reframing Northampton," which runs through Oct. 1, Greenfield photographer Sara K. Lyons plumbed the archives of the Howes Brothers, the traveling photographers from Ashfield who, in the late 1800s, recorded thousands of images of people in front of their homes and businesses, from western and central Massachusetts to Connecticut and Vermont.

After looking through more than 700 black-and-white pictures the three brothers took in Northampton, Lyons identified about 50 of the residences today and contacted the owners about restaging the images.

Thirteen families responded, and Lyons, this past spring, captured their images in color, in front of the same homes the Howes Brothers photographed between 1886 and 1902.

It's a small but absorbing exhibit, as you sort through the changes each "then and now" portrait reveals: a sapling grown into a stately tree; the formal, unsmiling images and dress of the people from the late 1800s compared to the casual demeanor of today's residents; an open porch replaced by a closed one.

What's also compelling is how much the small-town ambience of Northampton in the late 1800s is still evident in the modern photographs.

"I was amazed at how many of these places didn't look that radically different," Lyons said during a recent interview at the gallery. "I was expecting some pretty dramatic changes, but I didn't find them."

Indeed, Lyons said that after she looked at all 700 of the Howes Brothers' original images from Northampton — "I'm a glutton for punishment," she said with a laugh — her follow-up research showed that nearly all those homes are still inhabited.

Perhaps the most striking difference is how much more tree cover there is in town today. Most of the pictures from the late 1800s, such as one of 103 Oak Street in Florence, show park-like landscapes, with open meadows and pastures behind and to the sides of houses, dotted with solitary trees or thin copses.



By contrast, in the updated picture of 103 Oak Street, trees and greenery abound in the frame, also featuring five members of the Gaffney family. There is a large maple tree that, in the older photo, is just a slender sapling with a few leaves.

Staff at Historic Northampton, which over the last several years has invited artists to exhibit original work inspired or connected to items in the museum's archives, say Lyons' show is a welcome contribution toward an important museum goal: preserving a visual record of the residents and architecture of Northampton.

### **A unexpected discovery**

Lyons, a former Hadley resident who teaches photography at Greenfield Community College, said the inspiration for her exhibit was sparked in part by pictures she saw in 2015 by Solomon Butcher, a Nebraska photographer who depicted homesteaders in the state in the late 1800s. Lyons discovered Butcher's work while she was doing an artist's residency that summer in the Cornhusker state.

Back in the Valley later that year, she was investigating Historic Northampton's archives for a friend who was thinking of doing a separate exhibit, on cutlery. She came across the Howes Brothers' work by accident.

"I had never seen these [photographs], and I didn't know much about them," she said.

But Lyons, who also teaches art at Four Rivers Public Charter School in Greenfield, was reminded then of the Simon Butcher photographs she had seen in Nebraska, and she later proposed "then and now" photos to the trustees of Historic Northampton.

Using the Google Earth program, she was able to get a peek at what many of the city residences in the old images look like today. Then she wrote letters to about 50 of the homeowners after getting their names from the Hampshire Registry of Deeds, asking if she could photograph them and their homes.

To each of the 13 families that said "yes," she sent a copy of the original Howes Brothers image of the house to give them a sense of what she was looking to do. She didn't intend to duplicate the original photos, but she did want to capture the same basic aesthetic.

The composition of the Howes Brothers' photos "is really quite good," she said. "They appear pretty static, but the way people are framed against the houses is very thoughtful." She notes that slight blurs in some photos, from children or the pets they hold moving, adds interest.

Lyons' pictures offer some continuity to the old ones. In a Howes Brothers image of a home at 20 Nonotuck Street, what appears to be a family of three — a woman, a young girl and a man — pose in front of the home, and the man, looking a bit dandified in a boater and bowtie, has a bicycle proudly propped in front of him (the Howes Brothers asked people to pose with some of their favorite possessions or pets).

In Lyons' picture of the same house — now with changes that include a larger but enclosed porch — two women and a man pose in front of the house, and the man, Stephen Eldredge, holds a mountain bike in front of him.

And at 185 Chesterfield Road in Leeds, where many more trees can be seen today than in the 19th-century picture, seven members of the modern-day Mott family posed for Lyons with two fine-looking horses — whereas the original image featured three children, a woman, a dog and a cat (the cat apparently did not comply with requests to face the photographer).

Lyons says she learned a bit of history about some of the houses from the current homeowners who knew the background; it would be interesting, if possible, to expand the photo-matching project to other houses in the city, she added.

"I'm sure there would be more good stories there," she said.

**Steve Pfarrer can be reached at [spfarrer@gazettenet.com](mailto:spfarrer@gazettenet.com).**

***"Reframing Northampton" is on view at Historic Northampton through Oct. 1. The gallery will be open on Friday evening, September 8, 5 -8 p.m. for Northampton's Arts Night Out. In conjunction with this exhibition, Sandra Matthews, Associate Professor Emerita of Film and Photography at Hampshire College, will give a public talk on the history of portraiture in photography on September 9 at 2 p.m. This talk will be at Historic Northampton and is free and open to the public. For visiting hours and other information about the museum, visit [historicnorthampton.org](http://historicnorthampton.org). Sara Lyons' website is [saraklyons.com](http://saraklyons.com).***