Sphex Club of Lynchburg
Jan. 26, 2023

"What Demi-god Hath come so near creation?"
19th century developments in Lynchburg

By Joe Stinnett

This is my fifth Sphex speech and my second in a row with a Shakespeare quote as title. The last one was about the search for life in outer space, and this one doesn't have much to do with Shakespeare either. More about the title later but I think it will soon become obvious because I am going to talk about 19th century photography, "focusing" mostly but not only on Lynchburg. You *will* be relieved to learn that this will also be my shortest Sphex effort … because it recently came to my attention the speeches are supposed to be less than an hour.

Mary Brice (or Bryce), 1853

This is a photograph of Mary Brice, an enslaved Lynchburg woman who worked at Point of Honor in the 1850s. This photo of her is owned by the Library of Congress. It's an outstanding image, a window into a time machine. Obviously, she and the photographer took some care with its creation. Her clothing and head scarf are neat and carefully arranged. Her pendant has been colored with metallic gold. Her expression is determined, resolute even, although that may have had as much with having to remain motionless for 15 seconds as it did with her state of mind.

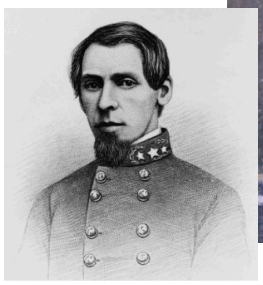
Like many of you I suspect, I've been aware of this photo since it came to light several years ago. Thinking about a topic for my speech tonight, I began to wonder who photographed Ms. Brice, and how? In what medium? As John Cook said in his speech last fall, these speeches take some twists and turns as we prepare them, and what I found out led me to my topic tonight: The advent of commercial

photography in Lynchburg in the 19th century and especially daguerreotypist Peter E. Gibbs, who photographed Ms. Brice and was its primary but far from only practitioner here.

Peter Gibbs, maybe

Gibbs was from Richmond and by the late 1840s had mastered the art, science, and business of the seemingly-miraculous new technology of the daguerreotype, patented in France in 1839. These were the first commercially available photographs, produced on thin copper plates coated in silver and treated with various chemicals. This might be a photo of him. It's on several genealogy web sites and identified as Peter Gibbs, but I couldn't confirm this. He's buried in Richmond. I contacted the person who posted this photo on the Find A Grave site but the only confirmation he or she had of the identity was that "it was in several places online identified as him." Both photos are stamped "Peter Gibbs" and "Lynchburg,"and I notice that the drape his arm is resting on is similar to the one in Mary Brice's photo. I'll discuss this photo a bit more later in the speech.

Gibbs took hundreds of photographs in Lynchburg. While most are unidentified today, and none I've seen have the power of Mary Brice, I was able to locate a few that surprised me, including this one from the VMI archives in Lexington.



Samuel Garland Jr., 1855

This mild-mannered-looking fellow was a member of the Lynchburg white elite: future Confederate Samuel Garland Jr., a namesake of the old Garland-Rodes public elementary school here. The larger photo is an 1855 daguerreotype of him taken by Peter Gibbs. Today, we have a different opinion of him than did local officials who named the elementary school for him

way back when. Nearly half of the city's population was enslaved in the years before the Civil War. Garland looks like a mild-mannered poet, but he was keeping keeping six men and four women in bondage in 1860, some in their teens, according to the U.S. census. Garland "held a general's rank" during the Civil War and was killed in battle in 1862. He had graduated from VMI in 1849 and this daguerreotype is in the VMI archives. The smaller image is a better known engraving of him from 1861 I found on, of all places, the Walmart web site, which I think says something about how these Lost Cause pictures have been turned into commodities.

In the 1850s slavery was as integral to the small city of Lynchburg as its hills. The city was a prosperous tobacco, transportation and market hub for Piedmont Virginia. Enslaved people did most of the physical labor that created all the wealth. It's easy to see why white people in Lynchburg could afford to keep multiple daguerreotype studios busy. The city was once reputed to be the second wealthiest per capita in the United States.

"We hear a great deal said about 'Big Richmond,' 'Little Petersburg,' and 'aristocratic Lynchburg,' " wrote a local resident in 1856. With fine buildings set on hills, it reminded a northern reporter of Albany, N.Y. Mr. and Mrs. Samuel Garland were among the leading white aristocrats: His 1856 wedding was described as one of the most brilliant social events ever held in Lynchburg, according to Al Chambers' *Lynchburg: An Architectural History.* Their last winter of peace was one of "unprecedented gaiety" and grand costume balls, one featuring revelers dressed as lower-class Irish.[1] … OK, enough about him for now, let's look at a daguerreotype of someone not from Lynchburg.

Many daguerreotypes, but not all, were just head-on portraits. This one, of one of the best-known women of the 19th century, is from a national studio, and this is a bit of her writing. Sam Garland had a library in his home here and I wonder if it

---

[1] Letter to the editor, *Daily Virginian,* August 15, 1856, first quotation; Tripp, N. Wayne, "Lynchburg during the Civil War," *Encyclopedia Virginia*; *Daily Virginian,* May 3, 1865, reprinted from *Washington Chronicle*; Federal Census Population Schedules, 1860, Lynchburg and Campell County, Va., slave schedules; Charles Blackford, *Annals,* 149-151; *African Repository 23* (1847), 307; Susan Blackford, *Memoir,* second quotation.

included her books … Anyone know who it is?

"Nay, my friends, don't curse poor Mr. Seth Woodroof, because he does the horrible, loathsome work of tearing up the living human heart, to make twine and shoe-strings for you!" (1852)

It's Harriett Beecher Stowe, who wrote *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, which depicted the horrors of slavery in the South. After critics said the situation really wasn't as bad as she described, she published another book, *The Key to Uncle Tom's Cabin*, in 1853 citing hundreds of sources, including a couple of pages devoted to reprinting and discussing slave advertisements from the Lynchburg newspapers. I had no idea what she looked like until I saw this image, and had not envisioned a thoughtful young woman who looks like a college student. The shades and tones and details really are representative of the time-traveling magic of photography. Is photography reality? No, but sometimes it's as close as we can get 170 years later. These are some of her comments on Lynchburg slave dealer Seth Woodruff. (SAY THIS MAYBE: Which prompted Ellen to wonder if the photo was of Seth Woodruff's wife, haha.)

This final decade before the Civil War was also the height of the daguerreotype's popularity. The process was invented by Louis Daguerre, a French painter, set designer and theatrical producer. He was among multiple people who spent years in the 1820s and 1830s working on the chemistry and optics of preserving pictures that were essentially a complex group of shadows cast by sunlight and focused through a lens. Other early attempts involved paper, but Daguerre worked with a piece of copper roughly the size and thickness of a playing card, coated with a silver solution, then polished and buffed to a brilliant

Louis-Jacques-Mandé Daguerre, 1844

shine. The emulsion — the light-sensitive coating — was also very fragile. The daguerreotype plates had to be brushed and wiped with a soft cloth a couple times during the process to prepare them for the next step, resulting in the “wipe marks” you see on many images.

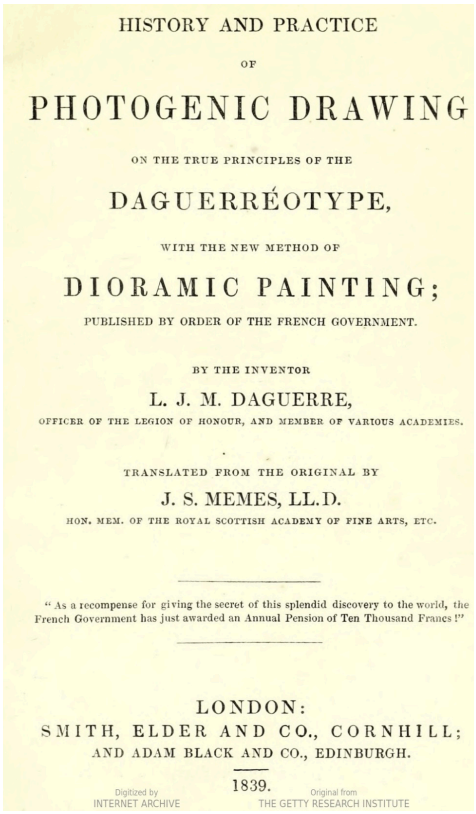
Daguerre’s process was announced to the French academies in March 1840. The process was so revolutionary that the French government bought the patent from him with an award of 10,000 francs, and shared the method with the world. By September, daguerreotype “operators” were taking images in New York City. By March 1840, daguerreotypists were working in America’s French city, New Orleans.

“The invention of M. Daguerre is, undoubtedly, the most important of the age to the fine arts. The Painter’s pencil falls before this triumph of science! Nature is made to delineate herself.”

Samuel Hobart, The Daily Virginian,
Lynchburg, July 16, 1840

By July 8, 1840, 15 months after it was patented, the process had arrived in the backwoods of Piedmont Virginia between Amherst and Lexington, according to the first reference to “daguerreotype” I found in the old Lynchburg newspapers. A man named Samuel Hobart was spending the summer season at “Buffaloe Sulfur Springs” resort in western Amherst County and wrote to the paper describing the process and offering to photograph — they didn’t call it that yet — people from Lynchburg who made their way out there. I would love to know more about Mr. Hobart but was unable to find anything. He referenced a pioneering New York City daguerreotypist in his letter, a French optician, and wrote that he was using the optician’s refinements to Daguerre’ s methods.

You could say Daguerre’s book was the first of countless photography manuals:



HISTORY AND PRACTICE

OF

PHOTOGENIC DRAWING

ON THE TRUE PRINCIPLES OF THE

DAGUERRÉOTYPE,

WITH THE NEW METHOD OF

DIORAMIC PAINTING;

PUBLISHED BY ORDER OF THE FRENCH GOVERNMENT.

BY THE INVENTOR

L. J. M. DAGUERRE,

OFFICER OF THE LEGION OF HONOUR, AND MEMBER OF VARIOUS ACADEMIES.

TRANSLATED FROM THE ORIGINAL BY

J. S. MEMES, LL.D.

HON. MEM. OF THE ROYAL SCOTTISH ACADEMY OF FINE ARTS, ETC.

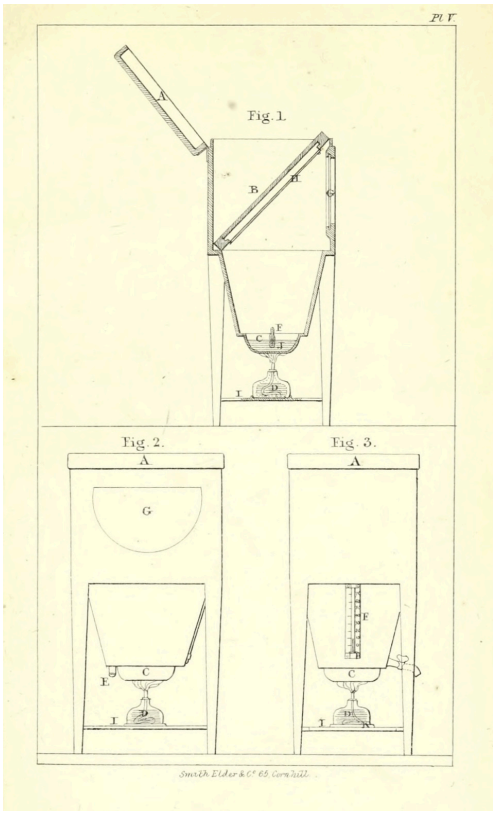
"As a recompense for giving the secret of this splendid discovery to the world, the French Government has just awarded an Annual Pension of Ten Thousand Francs!"

LONDON:

SMITH, ELDER AND CO., CORNHILL;

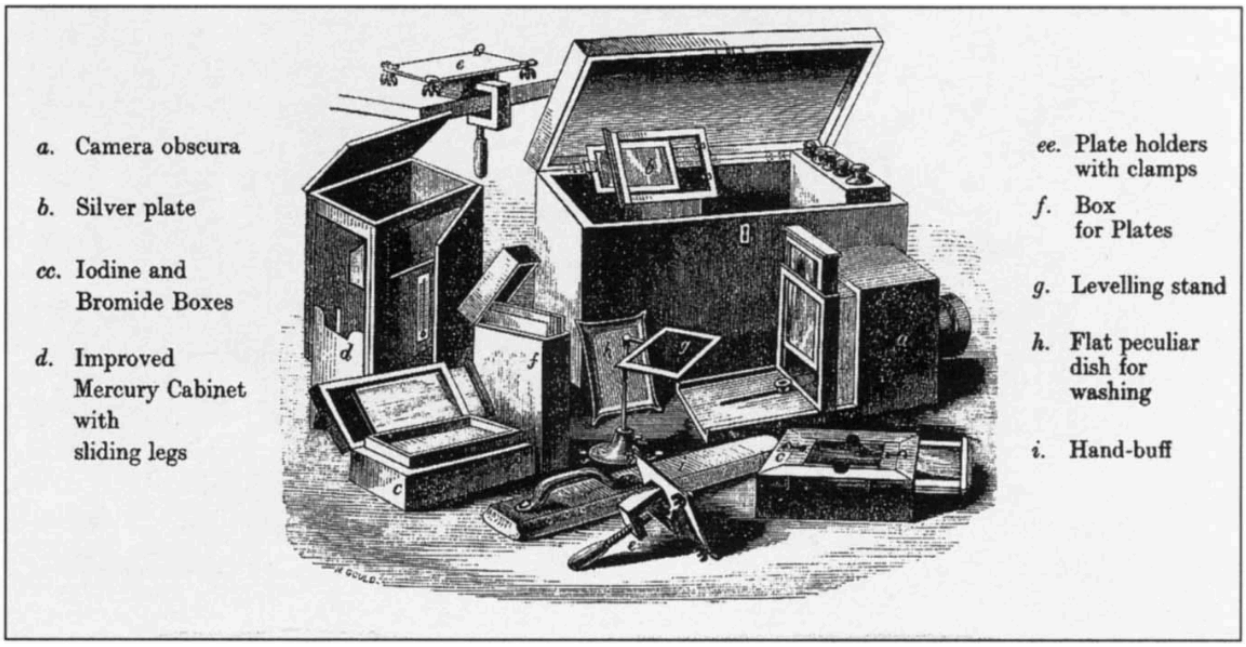
AND ADAM BLACK AND CO., EDINBURGH.

1839.



This is from London, 1843, believed to be first image of photographer at work with his dag camera. I think those may be camera lenses or lens caps he's holding. The box camera had no shutter so you had to begin the exposure by removing the lens cap, then replaced it to end the exposure.

"Jabez Hogg and Mr. Johnson," London, 1843, is believed to be the first image showing a photographer at work.



Daguerreotype starter kit, 1843

By this same year,1843, aspiring photographers could purchase their whole setup.

The first record I found of a commercial photographer in Lynchburg in Lynchburg was an ad from 1844 for daguerreotypist James Burney, who may have been here only a year or two. The early daguerreotypists moved around a lot and frequently formed and dissolved partnerships. Others here in the 1840s were Hamilton & Adams; Charles F. Hamilton; W.A. Retzer, and finally, the J.H. Whitehurst firm, which had grew from its Richmond roots to a national concern with about 20 photographers on staff and affiliations with more, including Peter Gibbs. Daguerreotypy was a relatively inexpensive business to get started in, and like other crafts, young people aspiring to learn could apprentice themselves to professionals.

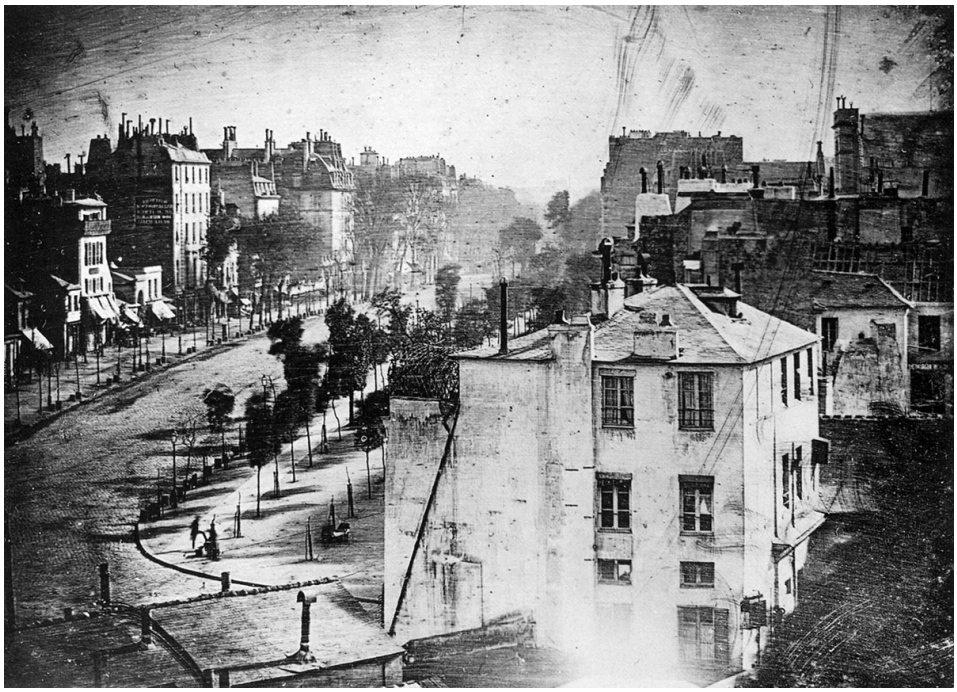
The new techniques required skill and care. We all know how easy it is to take a photo today. But many of them are far from artistic. The best photographers, like Gibbs, had a good eye, but they relied mostly on their recently-learned technical

ability to produce their images. The author of an 1849 book[2] on commercial daguerreotypy had some advice that stands up today for most any creative practice, or craft in general.

“Impatience is a great drawback to perfect success, and combined with laziness is a decided enemy. … There is no profession or trade in which a slovenly manner will not show itself, and none where its effects will be more apparent than this.”

— Henry H. Snelling, The History and Practice of the Art of Photography, 1849

: This shows the Boulevard du Temple in Paris, taken by Daguerre himself from his window. It is believed to be the first daguerreotype (1838) showing a human being.



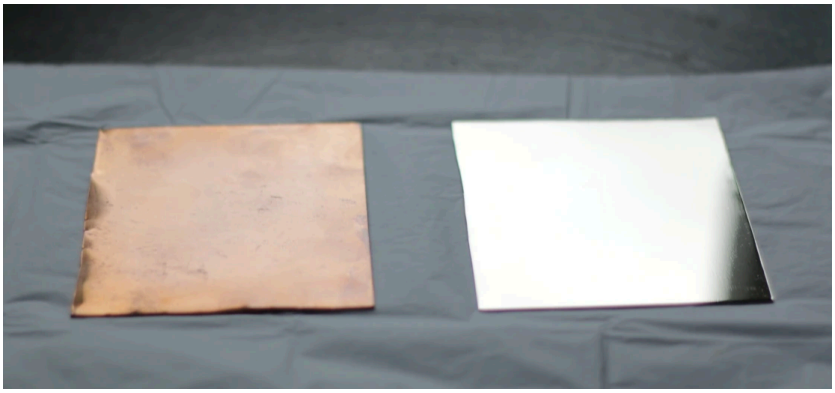
Paris, 1838, from Daguerre’s window. Where is everybody?

The daguerreotype plates even when silvered and treated with chemicals were not very light-sensitive compared to modern cameras, where exposure times are

[2] The History and Practice of the Art of Photography, by Henry H. Snelling. Published BY G. P. Putnam, 155 Broadway, 1849.

measured in 100ths and 1000ths of a second. Daguerreotype exposure times could be as long as 30 minutes in the early 1840s depending on the light. Bromide fumes were added to speed the process, which meant the plate could be fully exposed in a minute or so, which they later got down to about 15 seconds by the 1850s. Nonetheless, a long time to remain still, making most subjects appear pretty solemn. On the plus side, the plate's light sensitivity was so poor that the sitter could blink with no problem because a blink didn't last long enough to even register on the plate. The early daguerreotypes of Paris streets, like this ones, puzzled people because the streets appeared to be deserted. Actually, unless the street was very crowded or a couple of people were standing still, the process wouldn't pick them up because as they weren't in one place long enough for their reflected light to register on the plate. In Daguerre's 1838 image here, the only humans visible are a shoe-shine man and his customer in the lower left, because they remained in the same place for at least several minutes.

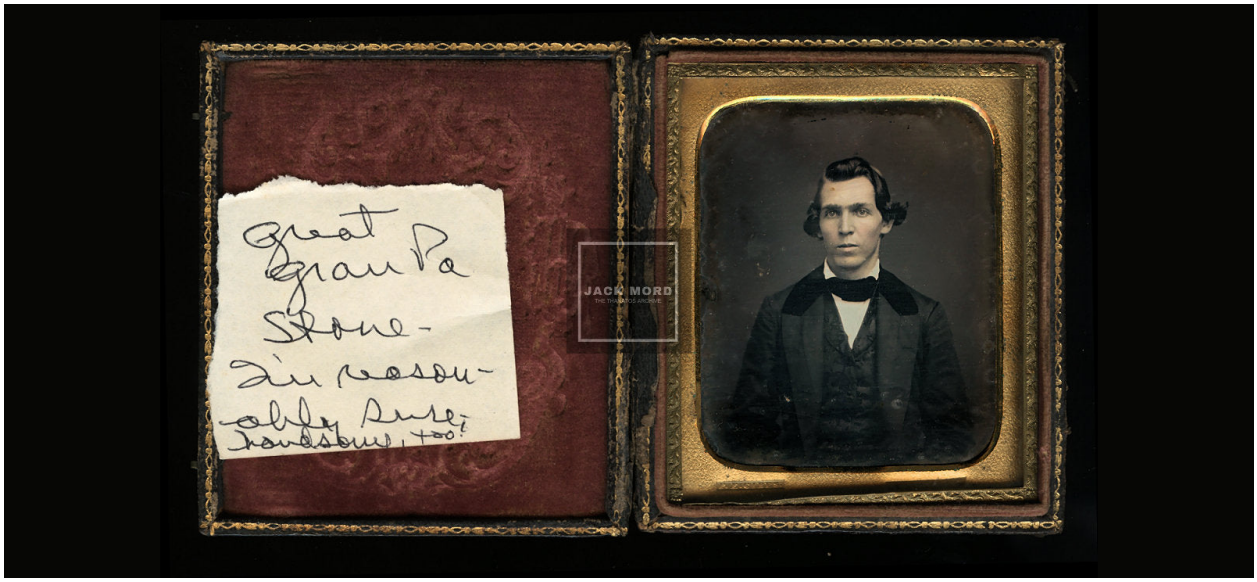
Daguerreotypy could be more like chemistry than art for much of the process. The treated plate had to be exposed to fumes of iodine which reacted with the silver coating to form an "emulsion" that was sensitive to light. The now light-sensitive plate was carefully inserted into the back of the camera box, and the lens was opened for the long exposure, so a long neck brace for subjects was part of the daguerreotypist's standard kit. After the lens was closed, the fun wasn't over. Next, the daguerreotype artist removed the plate and its wooden slide from the camera and exposed it to heated fumes of mercury, which "developed" the image. In addition to bromide, the process involved other chemicals including gold chloride and sodium thiosulfate.



I used to process film and make prints years ago. I can still remember the first time I saw an image "come up," going from a blank piece of white paper to a fully-

formed black and white photograph in the developer bath, but also how my hands smelled after dousing the print in "fixer," called "hypo," which fixed the image onto the paper. This was the same chemical solution, sodium thiosulfate, which Daguerre used, but the rest of the daguerreotype process was completely different from film photography.

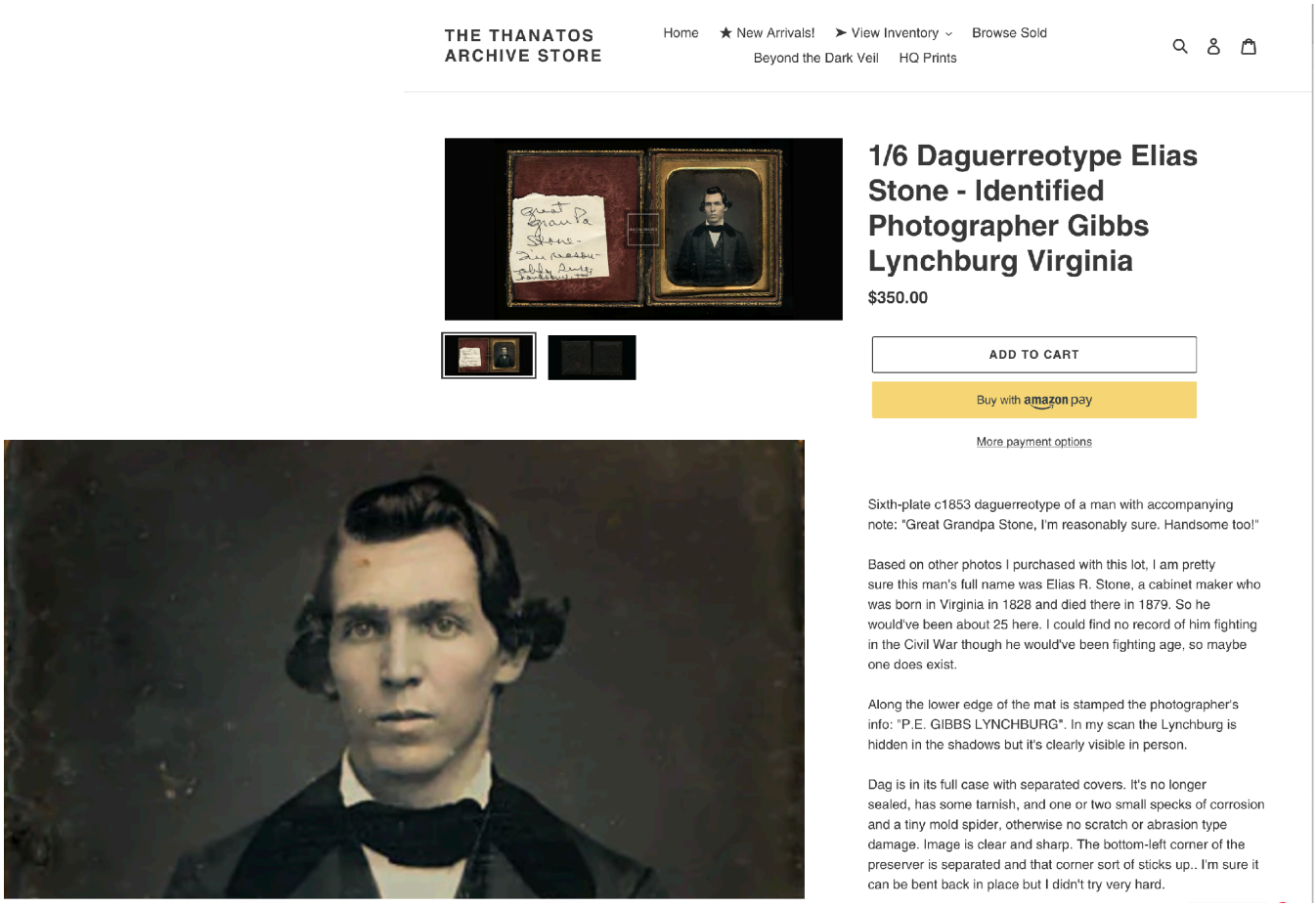
The daguerreotypes were made in various standard "plate" sizes based on how the original piece of copper plate was cut up. A whole plate measured 6.5 by 8.5 inches. Mary Brice's picture was a quarter-plate, which meant the daguerreotype measured 3.25 x 4.25. The smallest plate was 1.5 x 1.34, a "sixteenth-plate." That seems small, but lockets and other jewelry with these little pictures were frequently advertised by the Lynchburg daguerrotypists. Daguerrotype portraits in small cases became keepsakes. They were unique objects because there was no negative involved. They couldn't be reproduced endlessly like a film photograph.



By Peter Gibbs, ca. 1853

The same year he photographed Mary Brice, 1853, Peter Gibbs took this sixth-plate 2.75 x 3. 25 inches, or 7 x 8 cm) image of a man believed to be Elias Stone, a cabinet maker. I love his gaze, and his hair, which reminds me of vintage photos of myself, haha. (Rub hand over head). Apparently this was kept by Stone's family, and like many old family photos, eventually no one was sure who it was. However,

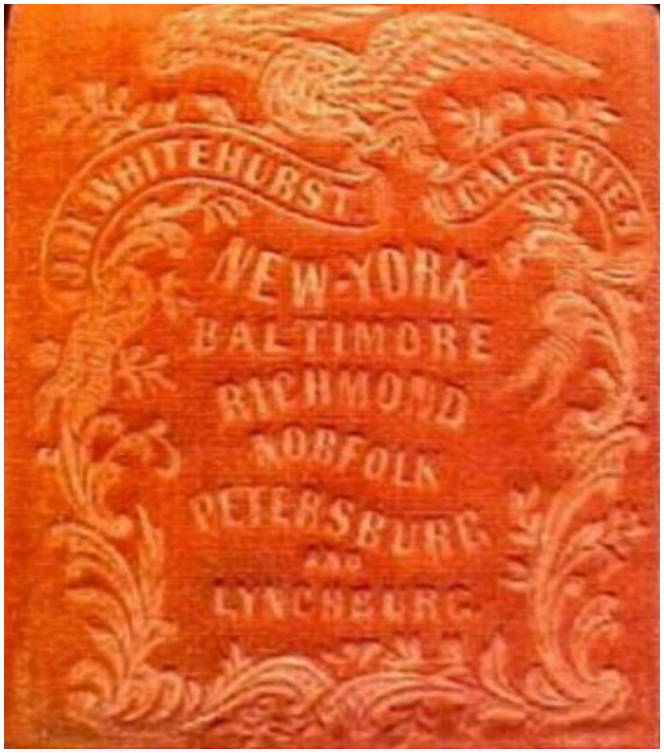
it was found with a little note inside: “Great Grandpa Stone — I’m reasonably sure. Handsome too.” (I blew it up so you could see his face but didn’t have a high-resolution original to work with so this looks kinda soft, the original image would have been sharper.) This next slide also gives you an idea of how daguerreotypes are now priced, $350 for a nice, identified one, like this.



Some sell for as little as $25, for a small, unidentified, random person, but into the multiple $1,000s for an identified person of historical interest. The Library of Congress acquired the Brice daguerreotype from a New York vintage photography dealer, who bought it from a collector in Norfolk.

If you walked into Gibbs’ daguerreotype gallery on Main Street in Lynchburg at the “sign of the flag,” you could get your photo taken for as little as $1.50, or go all out and spend $25 for a larger image in a fancy frame or case. Now, $1.50 in 1855

was worth about $37.50 in today's money, and $25 was roughly the equivalent of $875. The whole thing with the various sizes and costs reminds me of the old kids' school photos we used to buy, with the small daguerretypes analogous to but even more expensive than wallet-size school photos cut from an 8x10 sheet.



"Woman with painted ribbon," by Peter Gibbs, ca. 1840s, Chrysler Museum, Norfolk

To say people wanted these images and were willing to pay for them is an understatement. In 1843 after a financial downturn, a New York correspondent wrote that only beggars and "the takers of daguerreotype" were prospering in that city. J.H. Whitehurst, who started in Richmond, also had studios in New York, Baltimore, Lynchburg, Staunton, and Petersburg. Peter Gibbs worked with the Whitehurst firm off and on, moved to Lynchburg in the late 1840s, but remained affiliated with Whitehurst. The Whitehurst establishments produced more than 60,000 photographs through the 1860s. Here's a photo of the interior of one of his standard cases. The daguerreotype is one of Gibbs' pictures from the 1840s. I don't know who she is, but could guess Gibbs took it at the Whitehurst studio in Norfolk since it is owned by the Chrysler Museum there. We do know the identity of this next man:

Dressed for a Richmond costume party, 1847.
Whitehurst Gallery, Richmond

It's not a Gibbs photo, but it was produced by the Whitehurst studio in Richmond in 1847, the same year Gibbs left Richmond to seek his fortune in Lynchburg. Phillip Doughtery here is dressed, apparently for a costume party, as a "mountain man" from out West. This image is part of the Virginia Museum of Fine Arts collection. I couldn't believe this was real when I ran across it. It's the most highly-colored daguerreotype I've seen. I assume the bird was stuffed — or sedated. The colors have faded so I boosted them a little so you can see them.

Adding color was a profitable upcharge for the daguerrotypist, but normally only a touch or two, not this paint-by-numbers explosion.

Mary Brice's pendant is hand-colored in gold. This may have been done by Peter Gibbs himself, or more likely an assistant. Gibbs began advertising this service the same year the photo was taken, 1853, presumably at his studio at "the sign of the flag" on Main Street. Adding color to the daguerreotypes was another laborious process. The

color itself came from various metal powders which were carefully laid onto the finished image with a brush. Then, to fix them, the silvered copper plate had to be carefully heated until the powder melted but not heated so much that the plate itself was damaged. Some daguerreotypists hired artists who specialized in this fine brush work.

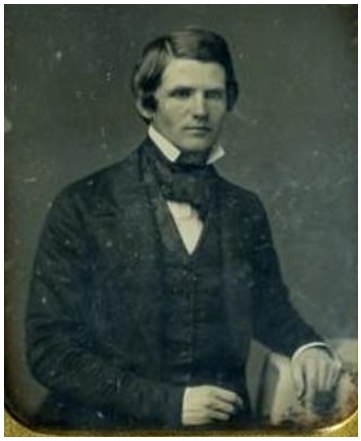
It's a wonderful photograph. I think her expression is piercing, like that of many daguerrotypes due to the long pose, and a bit quizzical. Like "what's next?" Very clear details of her clothing. The little finger on the right hand in the photo is really long, like maybe it was broken at some point. And someone paid a little extra to get the little bit of gold added. It's a great glimpse of a real person who somebody cared enough for to go to the time and expense of having this photo made, but at the same time kept enslaved in a Virginia society where adults and children were bought and sold like livestock, children taken from their families to be sold away, the whole thing endorsed by the Lynchburg white power structure.

But then, I wondered if just maybe Mary Brice paid for this image herself and that my white knee-jerk privileged reaction after a lifetime of living around here is that 'oh, some white person must have paid for her photo, how nice.' " When I contacted Charles Isaacs, http://www.charlesisaacs.com/artists/images.php/1/ Talbot, the photographic art dealer in New York who sold the image to the LOC, he told me it came from a collector in Norfolk. The dealer's notes indicate it was included in the estate of the Payne family of Lynchburg and sold by an estate liquidator in 1995. David Bryce Payne owned Point of Honor from 1848 to 1857.

He was a book merchant who owned the D.B. Payne bookstore here.

What this lady had to prevail over during her lifetime, reflected in this image, I can't really comprehend as a privileged white person. This image, fittingly, is the centerpiece of the web page for *Silent Witnesses: The History of Enslavement in Lynchburg, Virginia,* a collaborative project of the Legacy Museum of African American History and the Lynchburg Museum System.

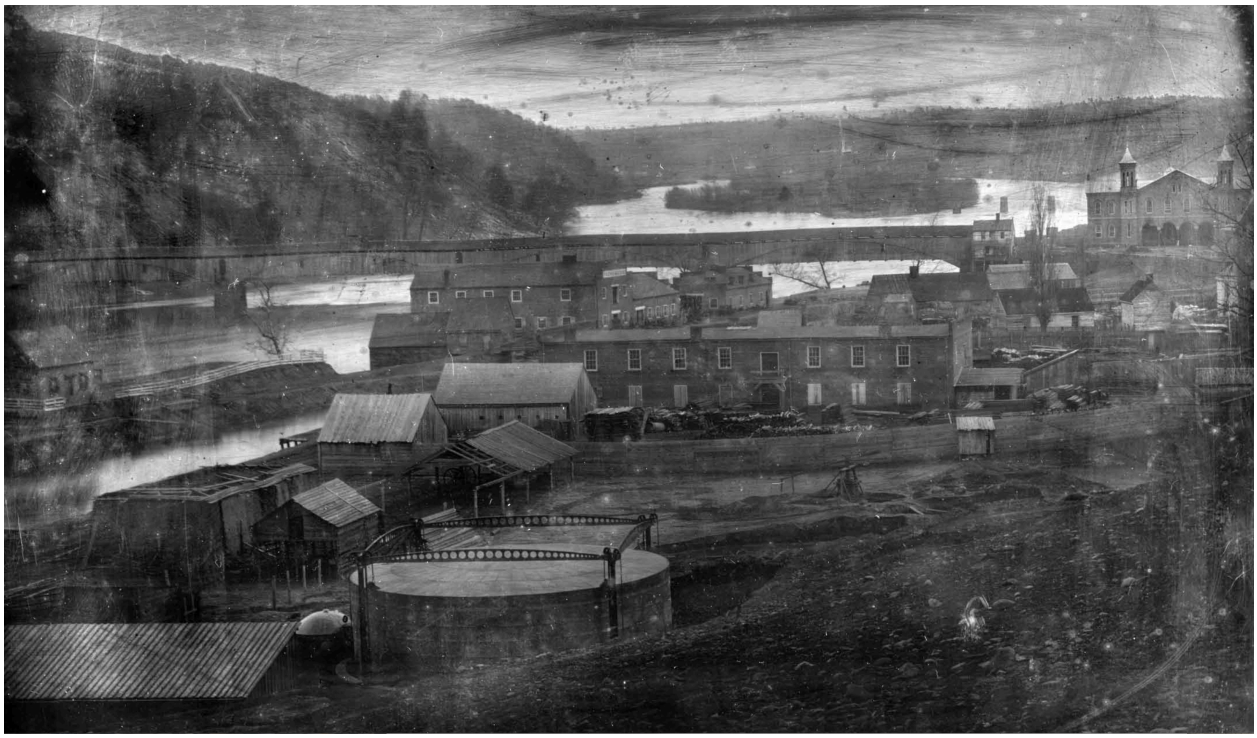
I found far more details about daguerreotypist Peter Gibbs than Ms. Brice, from old advertisements, census records, and his surviving daguerrotypes, as well as a web site devoted to early photography. But he is not well-documented in books and research papers and museums. By the 1850s, there were hundreds if not thousands of daguerreotypists working in the United States.


Peter Gibbs, maybe

In addition to photography, these early photographers were also masters of overstatement. By the early 1850s Peter Gibbs was claiming he had built "one of the largest and most admirably arranged operating rooms in the Union and can now say, without fear of contradiction, that he has one of the largest and best arranged establishments in this country." This sparked a response from one of his competitors, Minnis & Tanner of the Lynchburg Photographic Picture Gallery, who said their conscience would not allow them to claim their own facilities were even the best in Virginia, but added they were "unrivaled in their art, in bringing out 'the features of the human face divine."

Gibbs also said that post-mortem cases were "promptly attended to" … which I imagine was a must when photographing dead bodies. I shouldn't joke about it, many of the post-mortem daguerreotypes I have seen are of young children and it's more understandable when you stop to think that their loved ones likely had no pictures of the deceased when alive, young or old, because photography was so new.

Most daguerrotypists photographed people only. That's where the business was: Ownership of an inexpensive, lasting, relatively exact image of a loved one or yourself or your family was something new in human history. Daguerrotype landscapes, or any daguerrotypes taken outside, were unusual. However, Peter Gibbs was advertising this service in Lynchburg in 1854: "Views of private residences and other buildings and scenery of every description, accurately taken."



The reference to "buildings and scenery" makes me wonder if Gibbs could have taken yet another historic Lynchburg daguerreotype, this one, around the same time he photographed Mary Brice: Gibbs photographed her in 1853, she worked at Point of Honor, and this image of the riverfront was captured between 1852 and 1854, apparently from the front yard of Point of Honor. His studio on Main Street was only a few blocks from both Point of Honor and the riverfront. We may never know for sure though.

This picture is believed to be the oldest image ever taken of Lynchburg. It was donated to the Valentine Richmond History Center in the 1960s, but not identified as Lynchburg until about 15 years ago. It was likely photographed between 1852,

when the train depot was completed, and 1854, when the bridge across Percival's Island was completed.

I want to credit Nancy Marion and her story in the 2009 edition of Lynch's Ferry for much of my information about this photo — and this copy of the photo itself — as well as Alicia Petska's 2009 story in The News & Advance. The large round structure was a natural gas tank that fueled gas streetlights, another 1800s technological advance. All that remains of the covered bridge is the pylons, one of which supports the Langley fountain today. The large brick building with three bays in the background was the brand-newVirginia and Tennessee Railroad terminal.

I love this photograph, so much detail. It's dark and has some flaws, who cares when you're looking into a time machine? Talk about capturing a moment, from 1853, holy cow! Looking at it reminds me of the scratches and static on an old blues song, poorly recorded, but with the power of the music as vivid as ever if you only listen for it.

When this photo was taken, Gibbs had been in Lynchburg since 1847, moving here at age 31 with his wife and young son, to establish a daguerreotype studio in rooms across Main Street from the Franklin Hotel and to offer instruction in daguerreotypy.

In 1848, Gibbs became an "agent" for the Whitehurst firm, which began enlarging a new gallery for him with a skylight. Whitehurst claimed that he pioneered the use of skylights in daguerrean studios in the United States, and that the Lynchburg studio would produce "pictures, superior to any exhibited in this section of the country." The new Daguerrean Gallery in Lynchburg featured what by 1849 Whitehurst was calling "the largest SKYLIGHT South of the Potomac." Apparently this wasn't just any old skylight, but was constructed to "graduate the light to any decree necessary to ensure a perfect likeness." Skylights were key to providing enough light to produce an image on the treated plate because flash powder wasn't invented until 1862, and flash bulbs not until 1887.

I would compare the 1850s to the early days of television 100 years later when folks would stand on the street outside a store to watch a tv on display in the window. Gibbs staged a free exhibition in 1851 at his studio on Main Street of the Whitehurst firm's daguerreotype portraits of national notables including President Millard Fillmore, Franklin Pierce, Stephen Douglass and several other famous people who are now mostly forgotten. I've seen several of them and they are pretty dull photos in my opinion, so instead, let's look at another, not-Lynchburg-related, daguerreotype with a bit more joy and flair and value.

Chancy Brown,
by Augustus Washington, 1857

This is a man named Chancy Brown, originally from North Carolina. By 1857, he was living in West Africa, and was sergeant-at-arms of the Senate of Liberia. He was photographed by Augustus Washington, a pioneering Black daguerreotypist from Connecticut who had also moved to Liberia. Mr. Brown looks proud to be living in a free country, unlike where he came from. I love the sash and epaulet he's wearing. His sash also holsters a sword you can barely see. This daguerreotype is now owned by the Library of Congress.

Now, back to Lynchburg:

By 1854, competition was getting hotter and Gibbs tried to combat an apparent belief in Lynchburg that his pictures were too expensive, declaring that he had been taking images priced at $1.50 to $20 and "shall continue to take them as low as any house in this place." Among his competitors for Lynchburg's custom was the

Minnis & Co. Lynchburg Photographic Picture Gallery which I mentioned earlier. Advertising their ability to "bring out the features of the human face" on the polished "tablet," they headlined one of their advertisements with this Shakespeare quote, more or less:

"Is this fair Portia's counterfeit I see before me?
What demi-god hath come so nigh creation?"

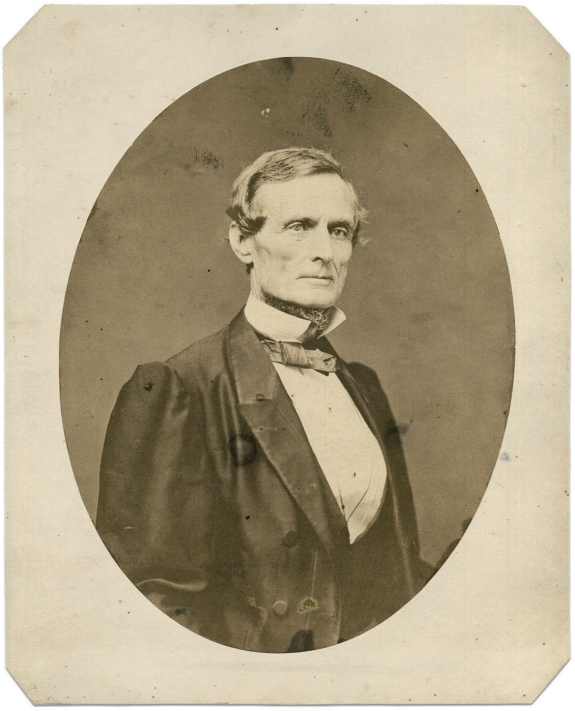
The actual lines are from The Merchant of Venice, Act III, Scene II, when Bassani picks up a small painting of Portia.

"What find I here?
Fair Portia's counterfeit! What demi-god
Hath come so near creation? Move these eyes?"

George W. Minnis had studios in Richmond, Petersburg, and Lynchburg, and like Gibbs ran frequent ads in the Lynchburg newspaper. The Shakespeare quote wasn't his only literary reference. This is another one:

Gather the Rosebud where you may
Old Time is swiftly flying;
And that same flower that blooms today —
To morrow may be dying.

That is from a 1648 poem by Robert Hedrick, "To the Virgins, to Make Much of Time." The text that accompanied the poem in the Lynchburg advertisement was also deadly serious, urging Lynchburg citizens to come get a photograph of themselves or family members immediately because "delays are dangerous," meaning, get your loved ones' photos taken today, because they might die tomorrow — although Minnis would be happy to photograph their corpse as well. I don't know whether Minnis was still operating his Lynchburg studio during the Civil War, but his business was active in Richmond taking pictures of Confederates. Here's one from his studio there:



Jefferson Davis, Minnis studio, Richmond

Salt print by Minnis and Cowell of Richmond, Va. John O'Brien Collection.

By 1856, the daguerreotype was not so new any more, as photographers improved the technology for producing images. Gibbs and his family moved back home to Richmond where he had already resumed working, making not only daguerreotypes but ambrotypes. These were similar to daguerreotypes, but the image was captured on a small, chemically-treated plate of glass instead of metal. Their main advantage was they were less expensive to produce than daguerreotypes and did not have the same, sometimes annoying, mirror-like reflective quality. Like daguerreotypes, they did not involve a negative so couldn't be reproduced except by copying onto another ambrotype.

This is a Gibbs ambrotype (next page) and case I found for sale on eBay, with a mat stamped "Ambrotype by P.E. Gibbs Richd." It's a nice image with a bit of color on her cheeks and hands. It's on a piece of glass a little thinner than a window pane, framed in metal, and backed with a black card the same size, making the clear areas of the image appear dark. The daguerreotypists made a big deal about the quality of their cases, and I thought this photo's case was really spectacular, inlaid with mother of pearl. It's dated 1855. By 1860, daguerreotypes had mostly been replaced by ambrotypes, which were named for James Ambrose

Cutting. Gibbs purchased the rights to “Cutting’s Patent” for producing ambrotypes for Richmond in 1857.

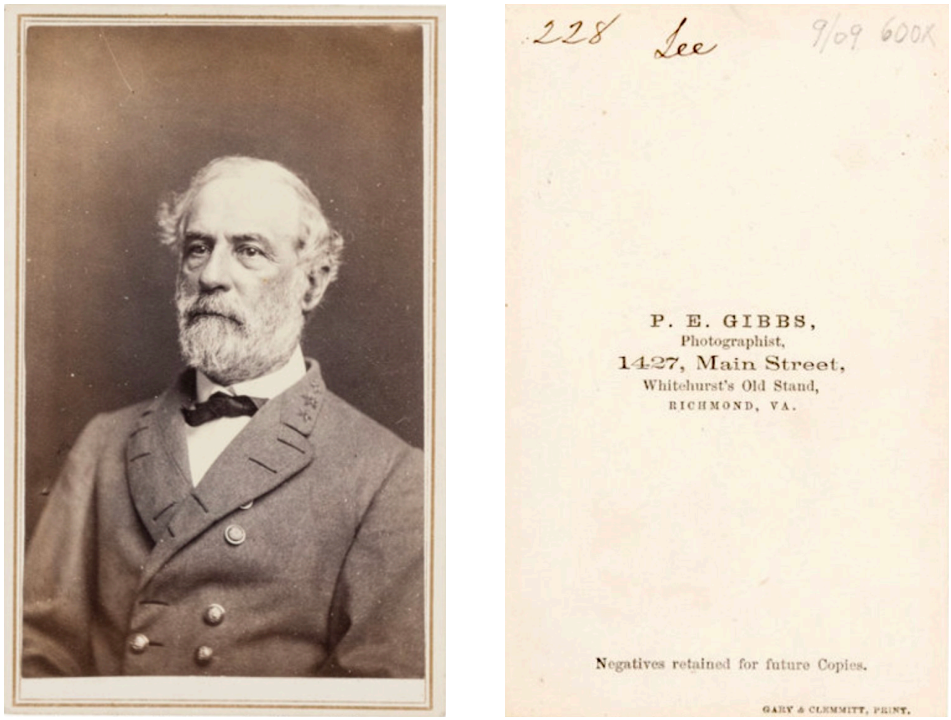
1855 ambrotype, with mother of pearl case, from Peter Gibbs’ Richmond gallery.

While researching this paper I made an effort to locate an actual daguerreotype at the local antique stores. You can see how essential the black backing is for ambrotypes here. They can be difficult to distinguish from daguerreotypes without disassembling them. I found some ambrotypes downtown, which the guys in the shop assured me were daguerreotypes — they weren’t trying to trick me, they just didn’t know — and mentioned several times that someone had recently paid them $1,000 for a daguerreotype picture of his mother. Wow, whoever bought that must be really old if his mom was born pre-1860, I thought, then realized because my hearing is so bad, the dealer probably said great-great-grandmother, not mother, or more likely, it wasn’t actually a daguerreotype. I bought a couple of ambrotypes, which I too thought were daguerreotypes until I took them apart, and a tintype, for $15. This is one of those, with and without the black cardboard behind it. It looks like a negative but it isn’t.

The next “development” in 19th century photography was the tintype, basically an image on a thin piece of chemically-prepared dark iron. It could be developed and finished much more quickly. They were called tintypes because manufacturers used tin snips to cut out the little iron plates from larger sheet. The one on the right is of my great-great grandparents, John and Julia McBride, who had a farm where Linkhorne Forest is today. The middle one was in my mother’s stuff with no names but I assume it’s from around here. The one on the left I bought downtown. I found

no evidence Peter Gibbs made tintypes.

The last image I could find that Gibbs had anything to do with was this one.



Gibbs wasn't the original photographer. This photo of R.E. Lee was taken by Julian Vannerson, also from Richmond, in 1864. Vannerson produced this by an even more modern process than ambrotype or tintype, yielding a negative image on glass, which could then be copied multiple times as a positive, onto treated paper. Using a negative that could be printed repeatedly as a positive revolutionized photography, much like digital did more than 150 years later.

Sometime after 1864, Gibbs, who was now calling himself a "photographist," copied Vannerson's negative image of Lee onto a positive paper print to create a *carte-de-visite* he could sell from his shop on Main Street in Richmond. Collecting these celebrity *carte-de-visites* became a craze in the 1860s and '70s. I also think the *carte-de-visite* was part of Peter Gibbs' career transition from photography to graphic arts in general, because by 1880, when he was 64, he was listed as a "pattern maker" in the census.That could mean one of two things: making patterns to cut cloth for garments, or what I think is more likely given Richmond's

factories, preparing drawings used to make patterns from wood for precise casting of metal parts.

By the 1880s and 1890s, “cabinet cards,” like these from the A.H. Plecker studio in Lynchburg, had become the preferred form of commercial portrait photography in Lynchburg and most everywhere else. They were paper prints mounted on card stock so they could be displayed in a cabinet or on a shelf.

These two are my grandfather, John Feagans, and his soon-to-be bride, my grandmother, Julia Bondurant, around 1899. (My mom liked these so much that

John Feagans and Julia Bondurant, Plecker studio, Lynchburg, 1899

about 20 years ago she had them copied onto glass, colored, and inserted into a little folding case, making them vaguely resemble something even older than they are.) They were married this same year, 1899, and lived on Forest Road not too far from where we are tonight.

The cabinet card on the right is part of the Randolph Lindsay Simpson African

Cabinet cards, ca. 1880, from Lynchburg in the Library of Congress and Yale University collections. Sadly, they are unidentified.

American collection at Yale University. It was taken around 1880 by the A.H. Plecker studio here. He appears to be holding a Bible, so possibly a minister. Same for the woman, from the Edwards Excelsior Gallery here at 804 Main Street, taken between 1875 and 1889. She's in the Library of Congress collection of cabinet cards. I am lucky to have multiple photos of my own family and ancestors — but since these are unidentified, I wonder if their family of descendants even knows these images exist.

I saw this next one, an ambrotype, on an auction site after I had basically finished preparing tonight's presentation but it was so striking and thought-provoking I had to include include it. A collector paid about $1,500 for it.

I'll read the description: "Hand-tinted, sixth-plate ambrotype of a female slave,

possibly a nurse, posed with two white children, taken ca. 1858, photographer unknown. Removing the brass mat reveals the mother standing behind, steadying her daughter's head. Found in Lynchburg, VA."

In 1900, Kodak introduced the Brownie box camera, which cost $1 and enabled most anyone to take their own snapshots on film, ending the early era of photography.

SOURCES

Hathi Trust Digital Library
Chris Steele's Pioneer American Photographers, 1839-1860
The Library of Congress: Chronicling America
Library of Virginia: Virginia Chronicle
The Historic New Orleans Collection
Lynch's Ferry Magazine / Jones Memorial Library
Charles Isaacs Photographs /Christopher Warren Fine Photographs
The Met / The National Gallery / Cowan's Auctions

THE END

SPHEX CLUB OF LYNCHBURG

JOE STINNETT
JAN. 26, 2023

"WHAT DEMI-GOD HATH COME SO NEAR CREATION?"

19TH CENTURY DEVELOPMENTS IN LYNCHBURG

Mary Brice (or Bryce), 1853.

Peter Gibbs, maybe

Samuel Garland Jr., 1855

“Nay, my friends, don’t curse poor Mr. Seth Woodroof, because he does the horrible, loathsome work of tearing up the living human heart, to make twine and shoe-strings for you!” (1852)

Louis-Jacques-Mandé Daguerre,
1844.

“The invention of M. Daguerre is, undoubtedly, the most important of the age to the fine arts. The Painter’s pencil falls before this triumph of science! Nature is made to delineate herself.”

Samuel Hobart, The Daily Virginian,
Lynchburg, July 16, 1840

HISTORY AND PRACTICE

OF

PHOTOGENIC DRAWING

ON THE TRUE PRINCIPLES OF THE

DAGUERRÉOTYPE,

WITH THE NEW METHOD OF

DIORAMIC PAINTING;

PUBLISHED BY ORDER OF THE FRENCH GOVERNMENT.

BY THE INVENTOR

L. J. M. DAGUERRE,

OFFICER OF THE LEGION OF HONOUR, AND MEMBER OF VARIOUS ACADEMIES.

TRANSLATED FROM THE ORIGINAL BY

J. S. MEMES, LL.D.

HON. MEM. OF THE ROYAL SCOTTISH ACADEMY OF FINE ARTS, ETC.

"As a recompense for giving the secret of this splendid discovery to the world, the French Government has just awarded an Annual Pension of Ten Thousand Francs!"

LONDON:

SMITH, ELDER AND CO., CORNHILL;

AND ADAM BLACK AND CO., EDINBURGH.

1839.

Fig. 1.

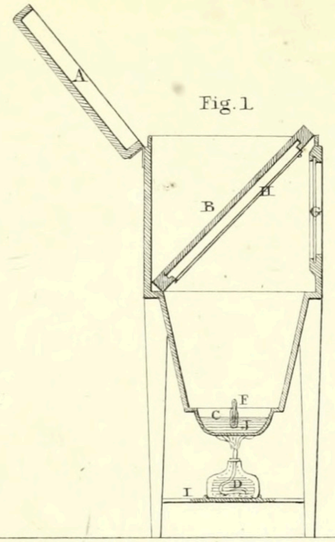


Fig. 2.

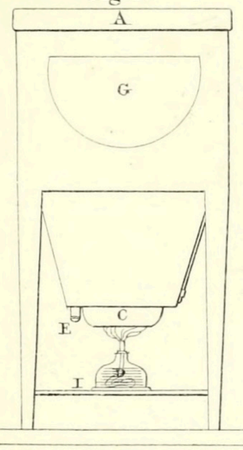
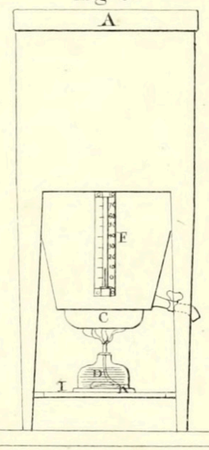
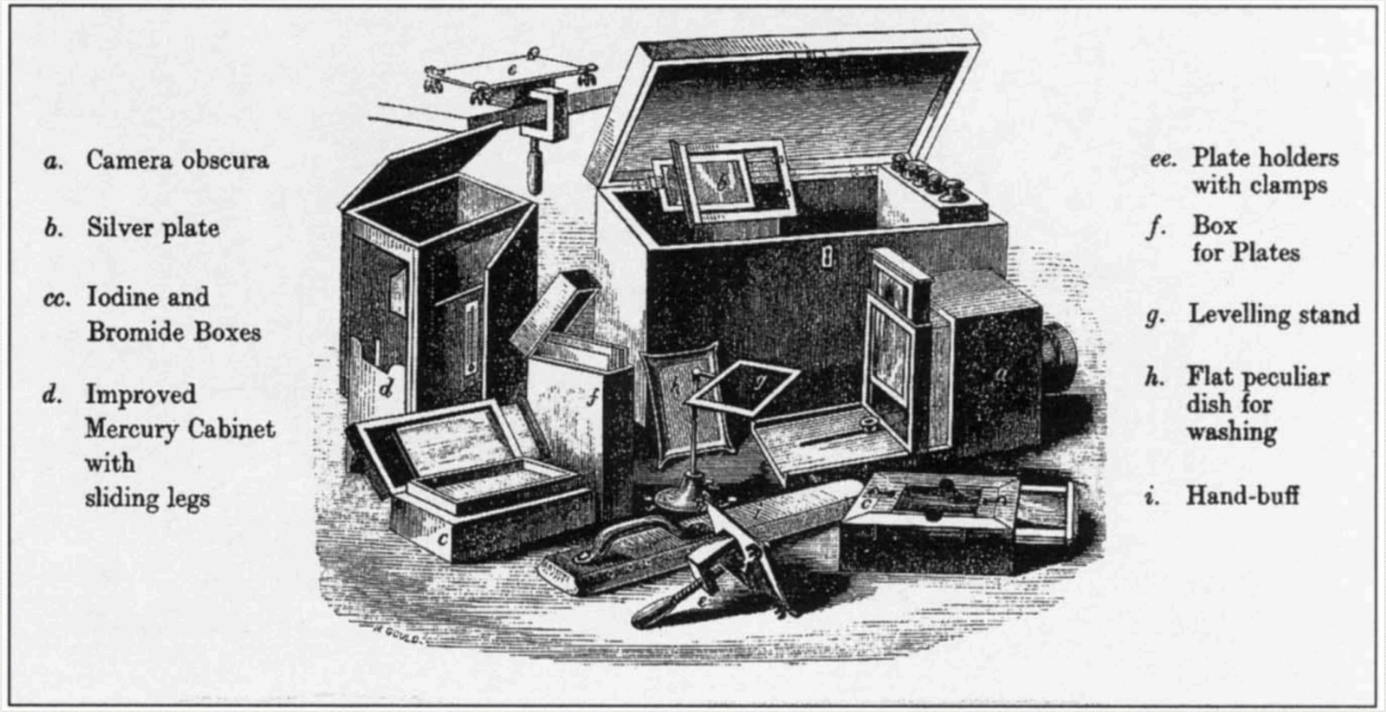


Fig. 3.

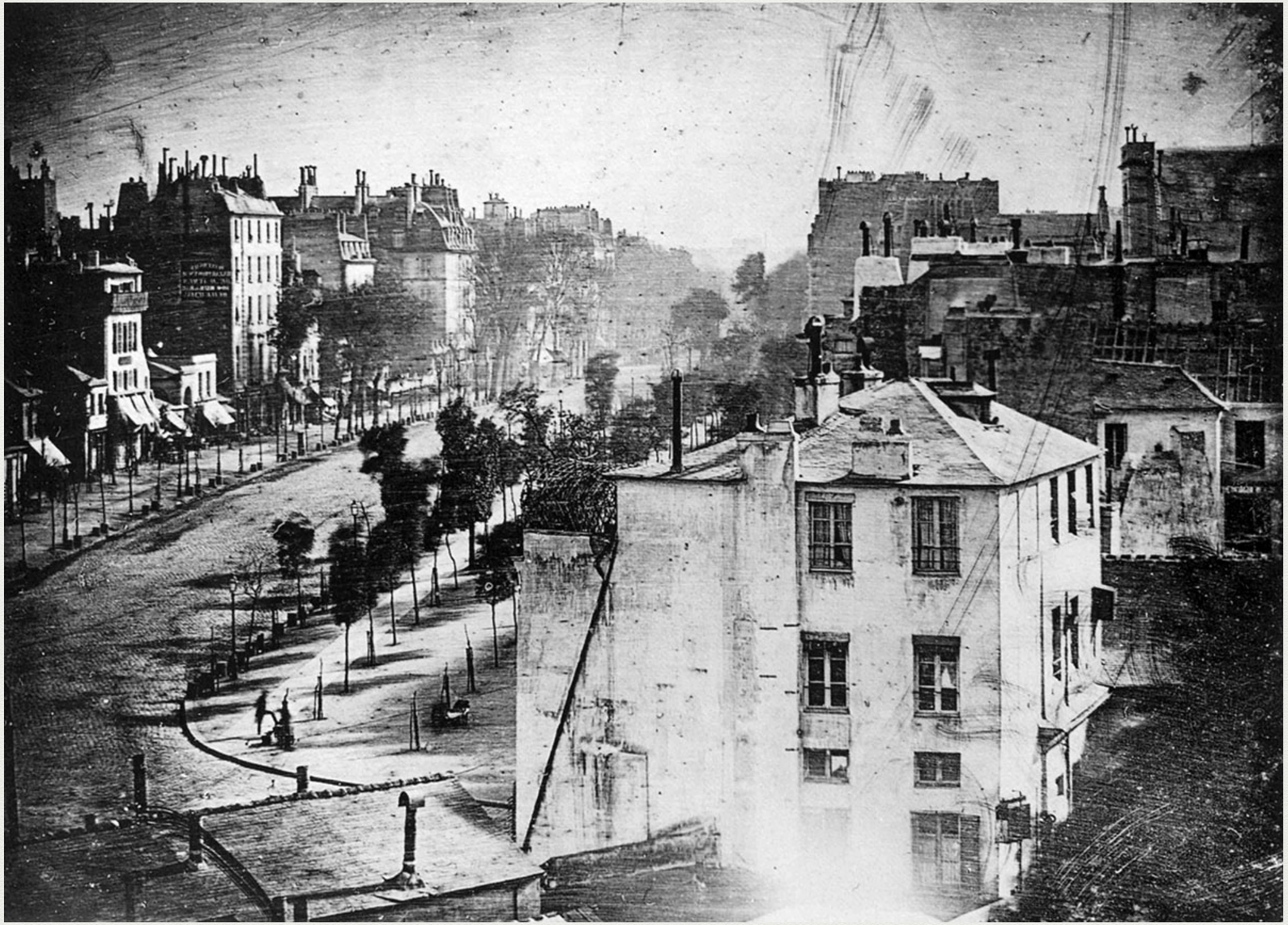


Smith Elder & Co 65 Cornhill

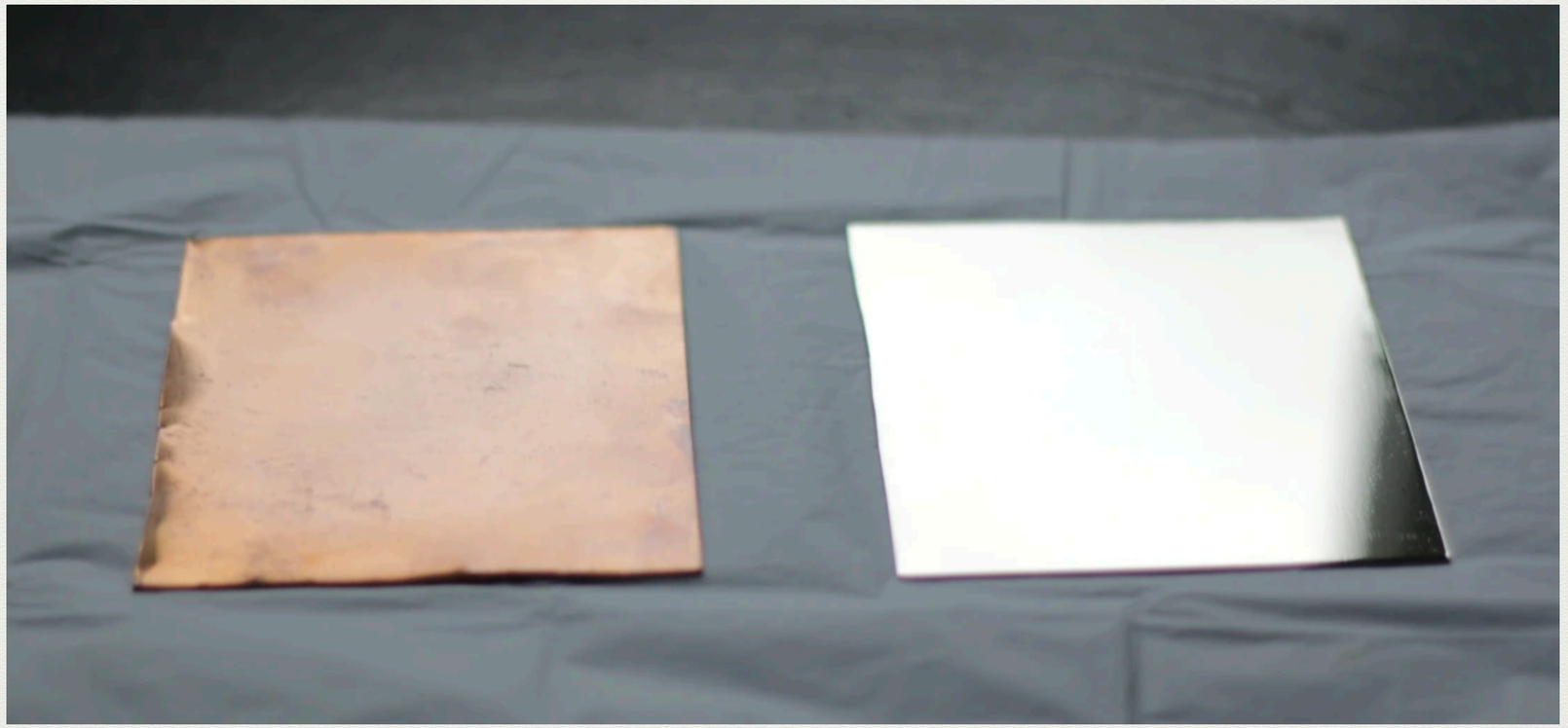
“Jabez Hogg and Mr. Johnson,” London, 1843, is believed to be the first image showing a photographer at work.

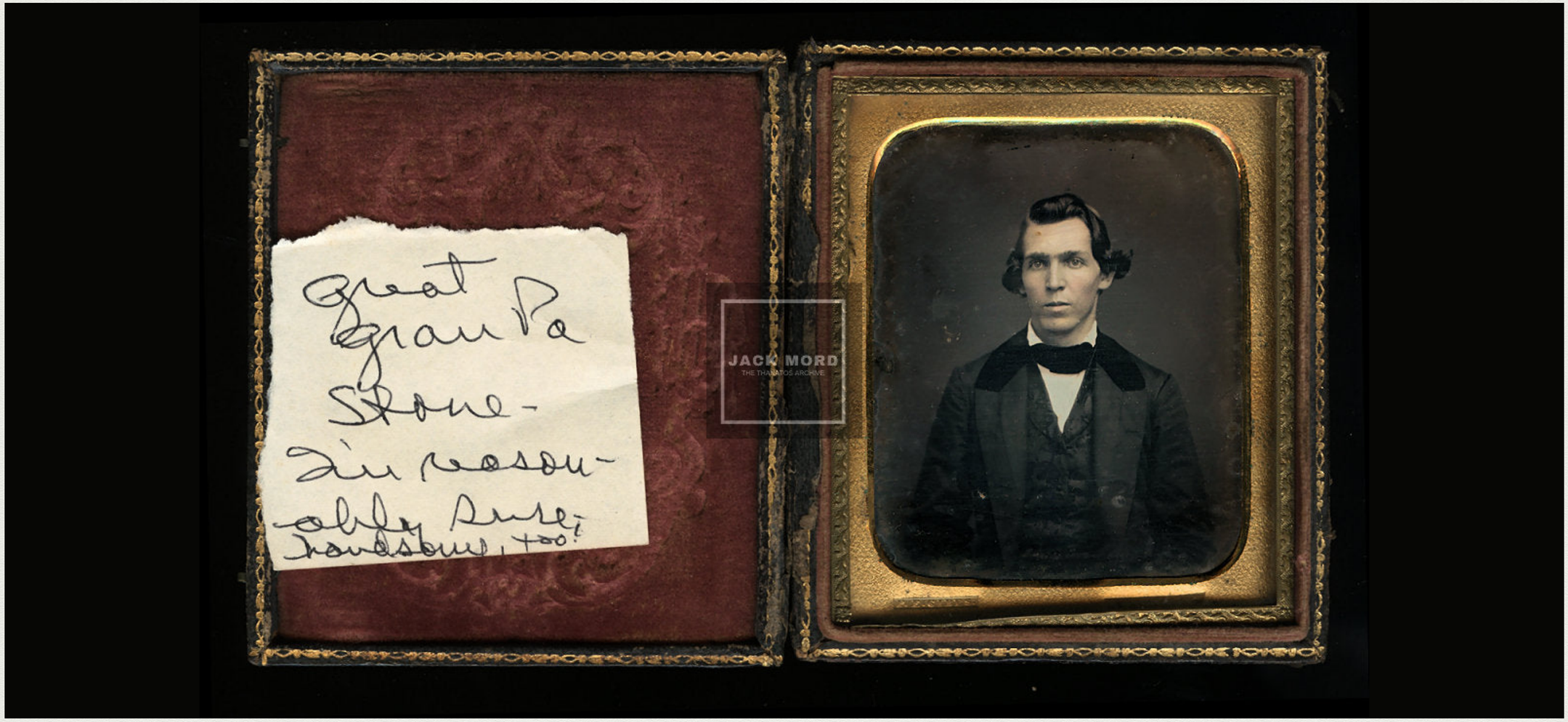


Daguerreotype starter kit, 1843.



Paris, 1838, from Daguerre's window. Where is everybody?





By Peter Gibbs, ca. 1853

1/6 Daguerreotype Elias Stone - Identified Photographer Gibbs Lynchburg Virginia

$350.00

ADD TO CART

Buy with amazon pay

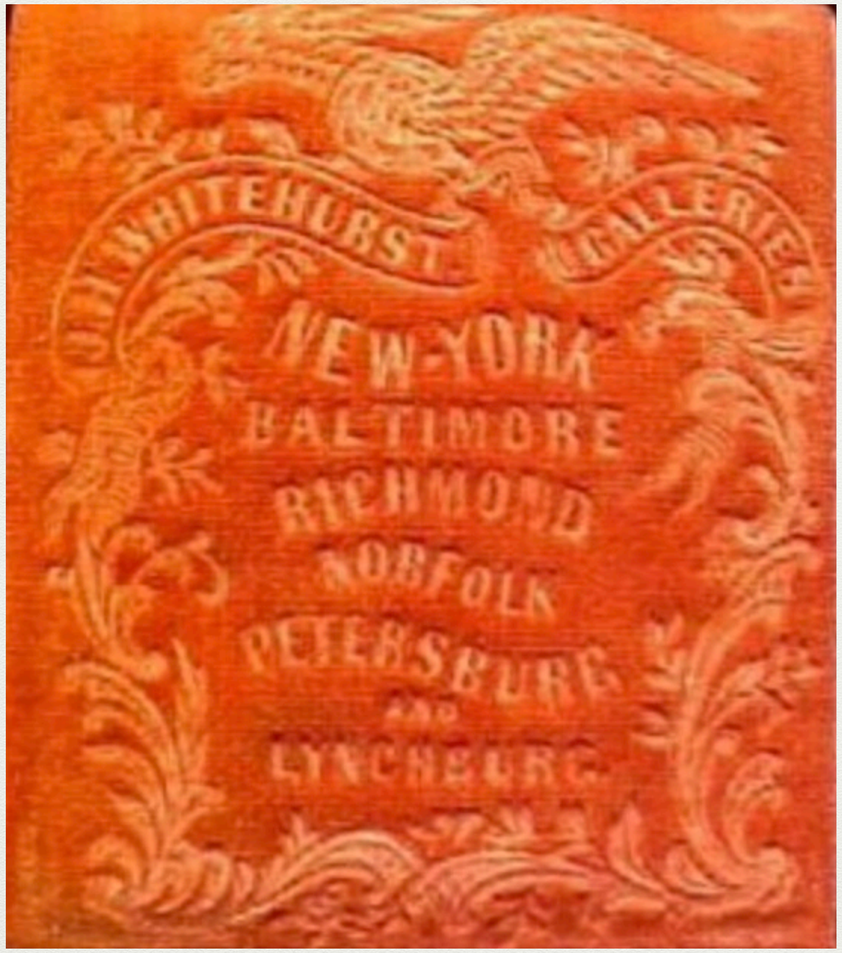
More payment options

Sixth-plate c1853 daguerreotype of a man with accompanying note: "Great Grandpa Stone, I'm reasonably sure. Handsome too!"

Based on other photos I purchased with this lot, I am pretty sure this man's full name was Elias R. Stone, a cabinet maker who was born in Virginia in 1828 and died there in 1879. So he would've been about 25 here. I could find no record of him fighting in the Civil War though he would've been fighting age, so maybe one does exist.

Along the lower edge of the mat is stamped the photographer's info: "P.E. GIBBS LYNCHBURG". In my scan the Lynchburg is hidden in the shadows but it's clearly visible in person.

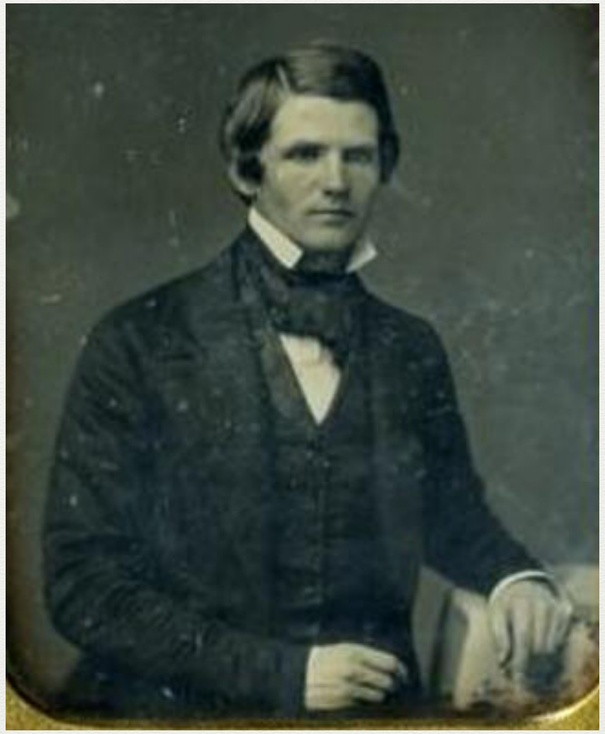
Dag is in its full case with separated covers. It's no longer sealed, has some tarnish, and one or two small specks of corrosion and a tiny mold spider, otherwise no scratch or abrasion type damage. Image is clear and sharp. The bottom-left corner of the preserver is separated and that corner sort of sticks up.. I'm sure it can be bent back in place but I didn't try very hard.



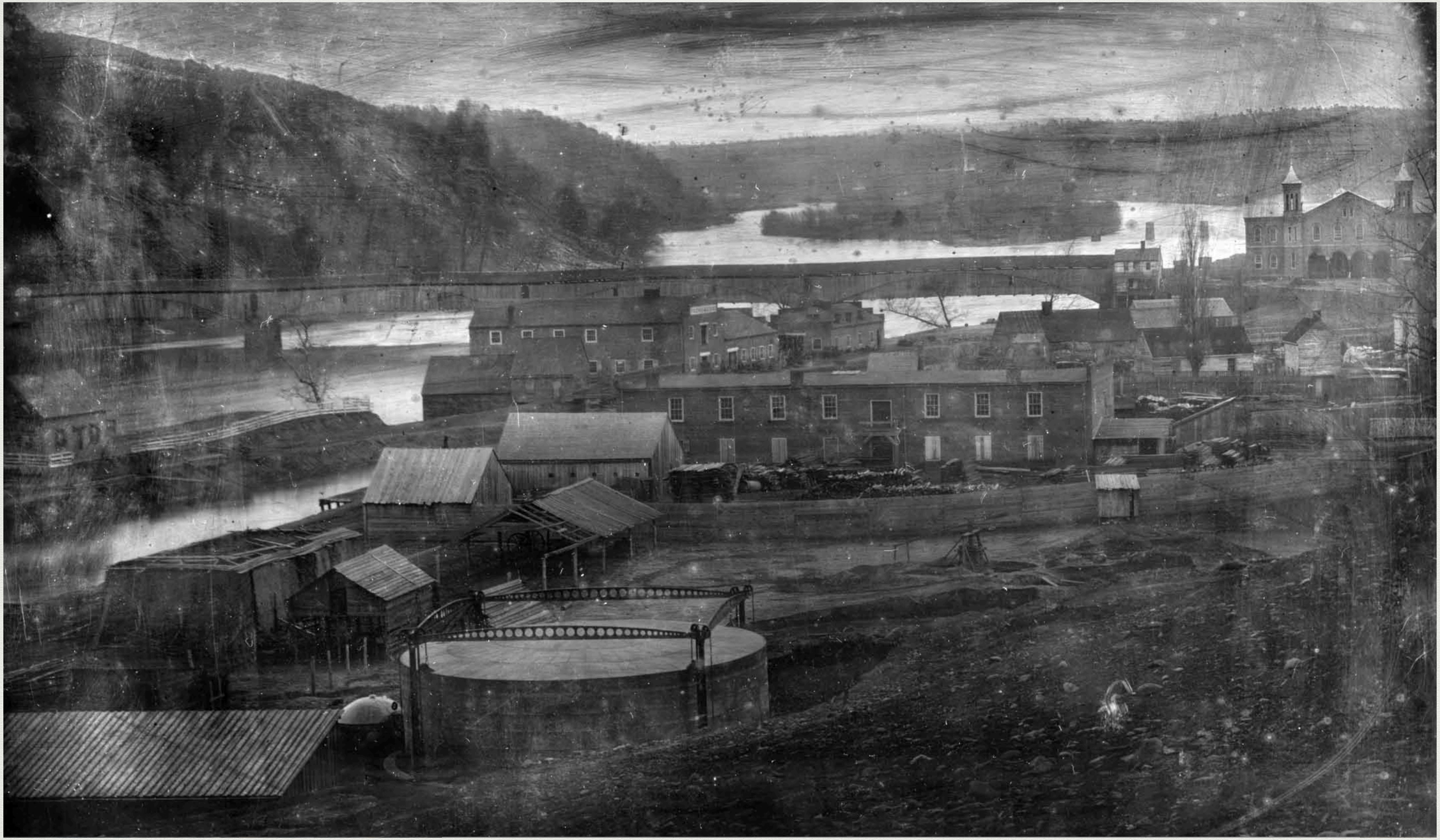
“Woman with painted ribbon,” by Peter Gibbs, ca. 1840s, Chrysler Museum, Norfolk.

Dressed for a Richmond
costume party, 1847.
Whitehurst Gallery, Richmond

Mary Brice (or Bryce), 1853.



Peter Gibbs, maybe



Chancy Brown,
by Augustus Washington, 1857

“Is this fair Portia’s counterfeit I see before me?
What demi-god hath come so nigh creation?”

1854 advertisement

Minnis & Co. Lynchburg Photographic Gallery

Gather the Rosebud where you may
Old Time is swiftly flying;
And that same flower that blooms today —
To morrow may be dying.

1854 advertisement

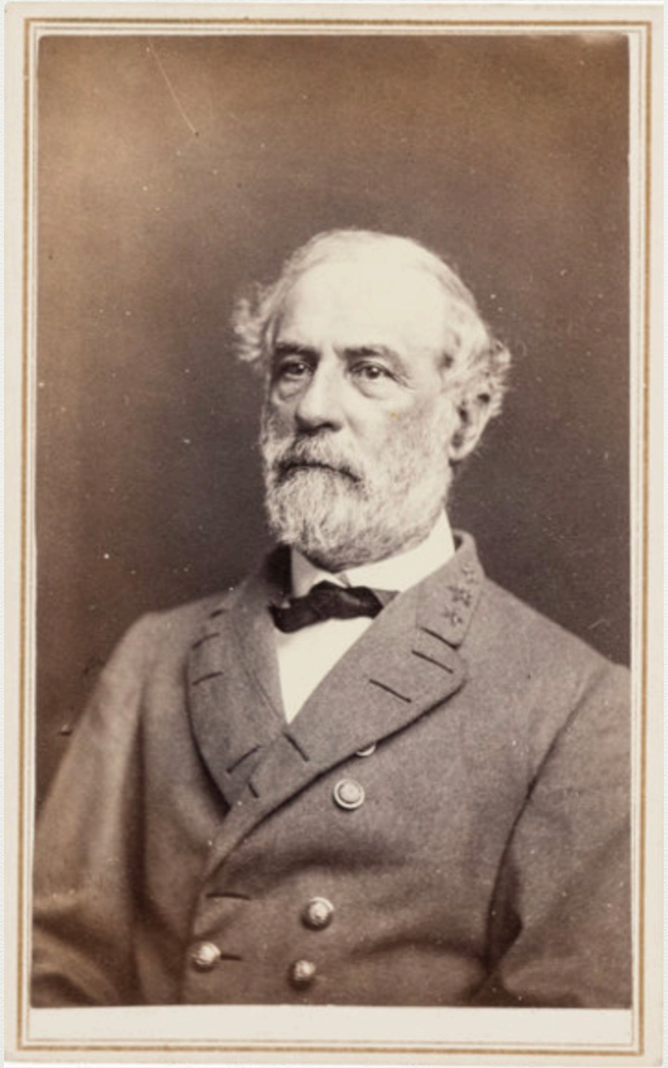
Minnis & Co. Lynchburg Photographic Gallery

Salt print by Minnis and Cowell of Richmond, Va. John O'Brien Collection.

Jefferson Davis, Minnis studio, Richmond

1855 ambrotype, with mother of pearl case, from Peter Gibbs' Richmond gallery.

Strange but true: Tintypes are photos on pieces of iron.



228 Lee 9/09 600K

P. E. GIBBS,
Photographist,
1427, Main Street,
Whitehurst's Old Stand,
RICHMOND, VA.

Negatives retained for future Copies.

GARY & CLEMMITT, PRINT.

John Feagans and Julia Bondurant,
Plecker studio, Lynchburg, 1899.

Cabinet cards, ca. 1880, from Lynchburg in the Library of Congress and Yale University collections. Sadly, they are unidentified.

SOURCES

Hathi Trust Digital Library
Chris Steele's Pioneer American Photographers, 1839-1860
The Library of Congress: Chronicling America
Library of Virginia: Virginia Chronicle
The Historic New Orleans Collection
Lynch's Ferry Magazine / Jones Memorial Library
Charles Isaacs Photographs /Christopher Warren Fine Photographs
The Met / The National Gallery / Cowan's Auctions

THE END