

Wilmot M. Chapman, "Our First Photographers," March 1896

(keywords: A. T. Goodell, John Plumbe, Jr., William H. Butler, John William Draper, James R. Chilton, Samuel F. B. Morse, 7 Bowery, 251 Broadway, Mathew B. Brady, 187 Broadway, Anthony Edward & Clark, Jeremiah Gurney, 189 Broadway, Abraham Bogardus, 217 Greenwich, James L. M. Scovill, Robert H. Vance, history of the daguerreotype, history of photography)

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Our First Photographers.

Plumbe Led the Rest—Samuel F. B. Morse One of the Earliest.

TO THE EDITOR OF THE SUN—*Sir*: In reading of the recent death of the veteran photographer, M. B. Brady, in which it was claimed he was the father of photography in this country, I feel it is only justice to correct some of the statements, so I consulted Dr. A. T. Goodell, who began his career as a photographer in 1843 in this city, and obtained some facts which may interest your numerous readers.

In the year 1840–41, a short time after Daguerre had invented the process of taking pictures bearing his name—the daguerreotype—John Plumbe, Jr., William H. Butler, S. Draper [John William Draper—ed.], James R. Chilton, and Samuel F. B. Morse, the inventor of telegraphy, opened a place at 7 Bowery to experiment in taking pictures by the Daguerre process. They used only a side light. It occurred to John Plumbe, Jr., that a skylight would bring about better results, and he leased the upper floors of 251 Broadway, corner of Murray street, where the Postal Telegraph building now stands, and opened Plumbe's National Gallery, employing twelve operators and Mrs. Thomas, an artist, taking 400–500 pictures a day at from \$3 to \$8 each. At that time M. B. Brady was manufacturing daguerreotype cases at 187 Broadway.

Plumbe's phenomenal success with the top light led many others to embark in the business, among which were Anthony, Edward & Clark, 247 Broadway, J. Gurney, 189 Broadway, and A. Bogardus, 217 Greenwich street. J. M. Scoville [Scovill—ed.] started in the manufacturing of stock for galleries, and Brady still made cases, but in about 1845 or 1846 he opened a gallery at his factory, 187 Broadway.

Thus it appears that Plumbe was the first photographer in this country. He opened galleries in all the principal cities in the United States, in London, and Paris, and made a fortune. Dr. Goodell, who was Plumbe's head operator, opened his own place at North William and Chatham streets, selling it out to go to California in 1849, around Cape Horn, and when he became stranded, after various ups and downs, his training with Plumbe enabled him to take charge of R. H. Vance's gallery in Sacramento, the price for one daguerreotype being a half ounce of gold dust, worth about \$8. From the old Daguerre process, so successfully improved and enlarged by Plumbe and his operators, all of whom became prominent, grew the albumen process on glass, the collodion process, then dry plates, and so on. Plumbe opened two galleries in Washington, one of

which was in the Capitol building, and took the pictures of all the prominent men of the day.

WILMOT M. CHAPMAN.

[End of text.]

EDITOR'S NOTES:

The article was reprinted in *St. Louis and Canadian Photographer* (St. Louis) 14:3 (March 1896): 114.

Despite the incorrect assertion that "Plumbe was the first photographer in this country," the article provides some useful details.

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