

**Edward T. Whitney, "Reminiscences," March 1884**

(keywords: Edward Tompkins Whitney, Seth Boyden, John W. Draper, Thomas R. Whitney, Martin M. Lawrence, Jeremiah Gurney, George N. Barnard, D. D. T. Davie, Mathew Brady, Abraham Bogardus, Andrew W. Paradise, Charles A. Seeley, Henry Hunt Snelling, and Samuel Dwight Humphrey, James Wallace Black, John Dunmore, James F. Gibson, Silas A. Holmes, Alexander Gardiner, Jacob F. Coonley, Timothy O'Sullivan, history of the daguerreotype, history of photography.)

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**REMINISCENCES.**

BY E. T. WHITNEY.

A paper read before the Photographic Section of the American Institute at their last meeting.]

MY EARLIEST recollections of the daguerreotype date from 1840. I was visiting a friend in Newark who showed me a daguerreotype case with what looked like a plate of polished steel in it, and stating at the time that it was his likeness. I looked and looked. Finally, by many turns an[d] twists, I caught the shadow. The likeness was good, but perfectly black. It was taken by Seth Boyden, the great inventor. I afterward sat for him in his observatory at Newark; the time of sitting was 15 minutes; result—some black dots on a white vest, but no likeness. Prof. Draper made the first daguerreotype in 1840. It was a likeness of his mother, with her eyes closed. The sitting occupied one hour. In 1841, my cousin, Thos. R. Whitney, an engraver, had opened a gallery in the granite building, corner of Broadway and Chambers Street, with a Mr. Knight. They asked me to sit for a specimen picture. The result was tolerably good. About this time M. M. Lawrence and J. Gurney, both jewelers, took up the business. In 1844 I, too, left the jewelry business and took instructions of Mr. Lawrence, and in 1846 moved to Rochester, N. Y., and opened a gallery. Thus three New Yorkers left the jewelry business, lured by the more fascinating daguerreotype. How well I have loved photography, the record of the past thirty-seven years will testify.

That year (1844) bromine was introduced. Up to this date the fumes of iodine alone were used to sensitize the plate. Bromine at first caused much trouble by flashing over the plate and fogging the image. To overcome this we constructed a glass box with a glass fan in it, the place under the coating-box having a hole in the bottom, covered by a slide. When the bromine was wanted, the slide was drawn, and the fan was then used to draw up a small portion of the vapors into the coating-box. By closing the slide we had just enough stored to coat one plate. But this troublesome and uncertain remedy was overcome when it was found that lime would hold the bromine and give off the fumes slowly. Before this we experimented with "closed doors" each morning before admitting sitters, and often after admitting them, thinking all was right, would discover that we had to dismiss them with excuses about the weather, etc. Thus, through much tribulation we

at last emerged under a clearer sky: but complete success was not attained until we galvanized the plates with pure silver before buffing.

In 1848, I made the first exhibition of sun pictures ever seen in the United States at a state fair, held in Syracuse, and, the same year, with the assistance of Mr. G. N. Barnard and Mr. D. D. T. Davie, organized the first convention for the promotion of the art. Although I was in a western city, I longed for the city of my birth, and to keep pace with the improvements constantly being made, and twice a year came to New York. In those days it was a tedious journey, over strap rails, in danger of “snake-heads” or rails coming through the bottom of the car; but I always felt repaid for my trouble. I had access to Brady’s and Gurney’s galleries, although operators were enjoined to secrecy by their employers, and the dark-room was as exclusive as a Free Masons’ lodge.

My first return visit to New York was in 1847. Brady’s rooms were on the corner of Broadway and Fulton streets; Mr. M. M. Lawrence was a few doors below; Mr. J. Gurney still lower, near Cortlandt street; and Mr. A. Bogardus, corner of Barclay and Greenwich streets. All of these men were making fine daguerreotypes, better work than I did at that time; but with a determination to excel, I applied myself closely to business for one year, and the pictures before you this evening are the result. They were made to compete with Brady and Root at the World’s Fair to be held in London, but owing to delay on the railroad the pictures arrived too late. They were on exhibition August, 1881, at the convention of the Photographic Association of America, held at the American Institute. The editor of the Photographic Times remarked in that journal: “It was refreshing to be afforded an opportunity of examining a large and fine collection of daguerreotypes which, by the thoughtfulness of E. T. Whitney, visitors were enabled to do. These were taken by this artist in 1848, and were as fresh and vigorous as when first taken. What a pity it is that this lovely process has now fallen into disuse.”

I cannot close this part of my subject without alluding to the valuable aid and instruction I received from Mr. A. W. Paradise, who was Mr. Brady’s right-hand man so many years, and who afterward became my partner in business. Also to the courtesy extended to me by Brady and Gurney, in whose galleries I was accorded access. You will remember that in those days we had no conventions, no journals, and it was a great privilege to get into the dark-rooms and be posted on the improvements of the day. About 1850, Prof. Seeley, Mr. Snelling, and Mr. Humphrey, each started photographic journals.

But we have done with the past. The beautiful daguerreotype is no more called I for. The lessons it evoked of patience and endurance were needful to fit us for the still greater trials before us in making photographs.

In 1850, after teaching Brady and Gurney in New York, Mr. J. W. Black, of Boston, came to Rochester with Mr. John Dunmore, and taught me photography. It would be impossible for me to describe the hopes and fears of that eventful week of instruction, and the joy of success after many trials. I gave up daguerreotypes and was charmed with photography. I will not attempt to enlighten you upon making photographs. You have passed from the necessity of making your own gun-cotton as we had to, from making gutta-percha bottles and trays to hold your solutions, from albuminizing your paper— all these articles can now be bought; you have passed from the long sittings with wet plates, and now with the dry plates and rapid shutter take your sitter unawares, thus securing a life-like expression. What more do you want? Tact, taste, and skill: tact, to interest your sitter and seize the right moment for expression; taste, to arrange suitable surroundings; and skill, to complete the work. How are these to be obtained? When you find any one making better work, getting better prices and better expressions than you do, find out the

secret of his power. Furthermore, read the journals, attend the conventions and these meetings, and by persistent efforts elevate the art and get remunerative prices for your work.

The first year the solar camera was introduced there was great rivalry between Brady and Gurney as to who should make the largest and best solar print for the American Institute Fair. Unknown to each other both were working in different ways to accomplish the object. Fortunately, I happened in New York at this time, and went from one gallery to the other to witness the operation at the same time keeping the secret. Brady prepared his paper for a life-size group of three. He floated his paper in an immense tank of gutta-percha, 7 feet long by 5 feet wide, on a "silver wave" that cost \$100. Gurney spread his silver on the paper with wads of cotton. His subject was a life-size figure of a lady. Brady's group took the prize.

In 1859, my health becoming impaired by use of cyanide, causing constant headache and weak eyes, I went to Norwalk, Conn., to recruit. In three weeks I recovered my health and decided to sell out in Rochester. Leaving a successful business, I returned to New York, opened a gallery at 585 Broadway with Mr. A. W. Paradise, also one in Norwalk, Conn. When the war broke out, Mr. Brady asked me to take my operator, Mr. Woodbury, and go into the field and make photographs for the Government of the scenes of the war. We went. Our first pictures were taken after the battle of Bull Run. We had a large covered wagon with two horses, and a heavy load of glass, apparatus, chemicals, and provisions. Arriving at Manassas, we took possession of a deserted cottage making views of the fortifications, the battle-field, etc., until one morning a regiment came along. The colonel rode up with the pleasing intelligence that we were outside of our lines, and liable to capture. You may be sure we did not waste much time in harnessing the horses and joining the regiment as it moved to a safer place. We spent the winter taking views of the fortifications around Washington and places of interest for the Government. But time will not allow me to go into detail of views taken at Yorktown, Williamsburgh, White House, Gaines Hill, Chickahominy, Seven Pines. During the seven days' retreat from before Richmond to Harrison's Landing, photographs were taken of James River from a balloon. At some other time, if desired, I may try to do justice to those times and scenes. Mr. Woodbury and myself were not the only ones connected with Brady in getting pictures of the war scenes. All honor should be given to Barnard and Gibson, Holmes, Gardiner, Coonley, and Sullivan. We endured the hardships of the camp, the difficulties of getting transportation, the sickening sights of the dead and dying, the danger of capture—and for what? To perpetuate for history the scenes of war, refusing to stop by the way to make portraits for money, which many were doing. These negatives Brady eventually sold to the Government for several thousand dollars.

In closing, allow me to say that it is impossible to give one's experience without frequent allusions to the pronoun "I." It is not my wish or intention to inflict upon you a panegyric of myself, but by my experience, my trials, to inspire you with patience and perseverance in your work. Let progress be your watchword. As I remarked, you have all the requisites for making good work; now use brains. As Mr. Bogardus has given you thirty-seven years behind a camera, I have given you thirty-seven years before it, behind it, and sometimes under it (i.e. when caught in the rain); and with it in the valleys, by water-falls, on the mountains, on the ice-bridge at Niagara, on the lakes, on the ocean, in the camp, on the battlefield, in a balloon, and in the chamber of death. I have always found it truthful, and I never made a picture with it that I would not be willing to show my mother. Brother photographers, what a field you have before you! Be faithful, occupy

it, and, should you not get rich, you will have the satisfaction I possess, of feeling that you did the best you could to elevate the art.

[End of text.]

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**EDITOR'S NOTES:**

An abbreviated version of this text was provided five year later in E. T. Whitney, "Reminiscences," *International Annual of Anthony's Photographic Bulletin* (New York / London) (June 1889): 279–81.<sup>1</sup>

Whitney incorrectly states the introduction of bromine was in 1844. In the US, Robert Cornelius began using bromine about May 1840; wide-spread use of bromine began in 1842. Regarding the use of bromine in the daguerreotype process, see also John F. Goddard, "Valuable Improvement in Daguerreotype," *Literary Gazette; and Journal of the Belles Lettres, Arts, Sciences, &c.* (London) No. 1247 (12 December 1840): 803.<sup>2</sup> See also Jabez Hughes, "The Discoverer of the Use of Bromine in Photography: a few facts and an Appeal," *British Journal of Photography* (London) (15 December 1863): 487–88.<sup>3</sup>

For the 1881 exhibition notice mentioned by Whitney, see: "Exhibits - Fourth Notice," *Photographic Times and American Photographer* (New York) 11:128 (new series no. 8) (August 1881): 342. (The text may have been issued separately under a special issue, "Photographers' Association of America: Fourth Day's Proceedings; August 1881" but is collated immediately after the standard monthly issue noted.)

Among the names mentioned are: Edward Tompkins Whitney, Seth Boyden, John W. Draper, Thomas R. Whitney, Martin M. Lawrence, Jeremiah Gurney, George N. Barnard, D. D. T. Davie, Mathew Brady, Abraham Bogardus, Andrew W. Paradise, Charles A. Seeley, Henry Hunt Snelling, and Samuel Dwight Humphrey, James Wallace Black, John Dunmore, James F. Gibson, Silas A. Holmes, Alexander Gardiner, Jacob F. Coonley, Timothy O'Sullivan,

1. [http://www.daguerreotypearchive.org/texts/P8890001\\_WHITNEY\\_INT-ANNUAL\\_1889-05.pdf](http://www.daguerreotypearchive.org/texts/P8890001_WHITNEY_INT-ANNUAL_1889-05.pdf)
2. [http://www.daguerreotypearchive.org/texts/P8400004\\_GODDARD\\_LIT\\_GAZETTE\\_1840-12-12.pdf](http://www.daguerreotypearchive.org/texts/P8400004_GODDARD_LIT_GAZETTE_1840-12-12.pdf)
3. [http://www.daguerreotypearchive.org/texts/P8630001\\_HUGHES\\_BRIT\\_JOURN\\_PHOTOG\\_1863-12-15.pdf](http://www.daguerreotypearchive.org/texts/P8630001_HUGHES_BRIT_JOURN_PHOTOG_1863-12-15.pdf)

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