

Gardner, "Early History of Photography," paper presented 4 May 1886

(keywords: John B. Gardner, William Lewis, William H. Lewis, Richard A. Lewis, 142 Chatham, Alexander S. Wolcott, John Johnson, James R. Chilton, Samuel F. B. Morse, Jeremiah Gurney, Roche, 189 Broadway, 707 Broadway, Edward White, 187 Broadway, Edward Anthony, Anthony Prize, Abraham Bogardus, George W. Prosch, Alexander Becker, 201 Broadway, 264 Broadway, 411 Broadway, Becker & Piard, Augustus Morand, Ormsbee, history of the daguerreotype, history of photography)

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PHOTOGRAPHIC SECTION OF THE AMERICAN INSTITUTE.

May 4, 1886.

President NEWTON in the chair.

The *Secretary* announced the receipt of the usual photographic journals contributed monthly to the Section, also a manuscript statement of the photographic history of the Lewis Brothers, by H. J. Lewis.

The Chairman of the Executive Committee announced that the programme of the evening was a stereopticon exhibition by the Lantern Committee, and a talk concerning the early daguerreotypists of New York City, with an introductory paper by the *Vice-President* of the Section. That the same subject would probably be continued at the next regular meeting, June 1st, together with such other matter as might be deemed advisable by the committee.

The following paper was then read by Mr. J. B. GARDNER.

Mr. President and Gentlemen: In our discussion on the "Early History of Photography" at the last meeting, we had time simply to restate the history of such writers and experimentalists as naturally lead up to the first development of the art, and its recognition by the leading civilized nations of the world. We now come to its practical introduction into New York City. And when it was first employed for its commercial value, Messrs. Draper, Morse, and Prosch had fully established the fact that it was a practical art, and predicted that the time was not far distant when it would be universally patronized, and that fortunes were awaiting all who should become expert in it. It was no wonder, therefore, that chemists and artists, mechanics and tradesmen, lawyers and clergymen, should abandon their old employments to better their fortunes in this new field of labor. But time has proven that seven-tenths of all this motley crowd failed in their adventure, and thus the art has drifted into hands who expect from it, at most, only a respectable means of living.

The first daguerreotype rooms (so far as we can learn) in the City of New York were opened to the public at the northwest corner of Chambers street and Broadway, in 1840, by Messrs. Walcot [Wolcott—ed.] & Johnson, and on their cash book is recorded the first sale of a daguerreotype portrait in this city.

Some further particulars may be gleaned concerning this firm from an extract from a statement by H. J. Lewis to the photographic section, dated April 6th, 1886. This

statement also gives a brief account of the Lewises, father and sons, in respect to their contributions to the art. Mr. Lewis says: "William Lewis, and William H. Lewis (his son) made the first camera used for taking likenesses as a business by the Daguerre process; also coating box, mercury bath, and head rest. These were first used by Walcot & Johnson on the corner of Broadway and Chambers street. * * * These gentlemen charged for a picture on a plate 2 x 2½ inches, in a plain case, five dollars, and at this price these wonderful pictures were in great demand; but, owing to the difficulties attending an untried business, many times they were not successful in producing a shadow a day. Iodide of silver, though forming the basis of the picture, required some other agent to quicken the action of the light. These new beginners in what as yet was only an experiment, were not deterred by difficulties. Having at times produced tolerable pictures, they resolved to find some agent to quicken and at the same time produce a more pleasing tone. To accomplish this they consulted with Dr. Chilton, a noted chemist in those times, and by his advice they were induced to experiment with chloride of iodine, which he prepared for their special purpose. With this, in combination with the vapor of iodine, they finally succeeded in making pictures in much less time and with greater certainty and success.

"They next tried to improve their work by producing more harmonious effects of light and shadow. Hence they cut a circular opening through the roof and built a circular room revolving on a railway at the pleasure of the operator. With these improvements they made their business a success. In the height of their prosperity, however, they sold out (to good advantage) to a Mr. Van Loan, whose son continued in the business for many years.

"They then went to London, where they engaged in the same business with a Mr. Baird [Beard—ed.], and were even more successful, if report be true, in the Old than in the New World.

"W. and W. H. Lewis continued making apparatus in a building on the corner of Elizabeth and Hester streets, which place they established in 1843, where they were honored with the patronage of the daguerreotypists throughout the country. All the demands for improved apparatus were supplied, and, as the business extended, they endeavored by increasing their facilities to meet its wants. At 142 Chatham street they carried on an extensive business forty years ago, and under varying circumstances continued in the business until Mr. Lewis, Sr. (my father), reached the age of eighty-six years." Mr. Lewis further says: "I have spent the greater portion of my life in this business, working for my father and brother and in conducting business for myself. My son, William H. Lewis, is a manufacturer and inventor at the present time of photographic apparatus, and my brother, R. A. Lewis, is, and has been, a portrait photographer for many years."

I cannot enumerate in detail the inventions and improvements due to the Lewis family; but I will say they have used their best endeavors in advancing the interests of the art. I think few will fail to thank them for their invention of the solid glass corner holder, the nitrate of silver bath holder, and the bellows camera, as each of these are in use wherever the photographic art is practiced.

During the same year (1840), Mr. J. Gurney says his attention, while engaged in the jewelry business, was called to the new art by Professor Morse, from whom he received in a pamphlet all the requisites for making the daguerreotype. He says: "I immediately employed an optician by the name of Roche, who made for me a lens, a camera box, a mercury bath holder, and a coating box for iodine. With these, and a small box of French plates, I commenced experimenting at my private residence, and thus soon convinced

myself that I had so far mastered the art as to justify renting a room on the second story of the building 189 Broadway. My sign at the doorway was a frame of four small daguerreotypes, and the first I believe ever exposed for this purpose on Broadway. It was perfectly astonishing to see the multitudes who stopped to look at these pictures and one perhaps in a thousand would rush up-stairs to know something more about this new art. But it usually resulted in the knowledge, simply, that they went away with five dollars less in their pockets, in exchange for a shadow *so thin*, that it often required the most favorable light to detect that it was anything more than a metallic looking-glass. In fact people had to be taught how to look at the picture, or ten chances to one they could never see it. And it often happened that the operator himself failed to find a light in which it was visible. He might, perhaps, discover a shirt-bosom, but nothing more. This was a period in the art when it might be called interesting. Interesting I mean, when the fever of excitement and disappointment had passed away, and some new dodge had been contrived that might possibly obviate former difficulties. Here was a wide field for inventive genius—a school in which to learn patience, to exercise both the reason and the imagination, and to cultivate the organs of combativeness and secretiveness to their fullest extent. It was but a short time before chloride of iodine and bromine compounds were introduced. With these compounds we were enabled to make pictures in one tithe of the time required when iodine alone was used, and beside this, they were much more pleasing to our patrons. The art now began to grow rapidly in public favor. Taking this tide at its flood, I was soon assured of my financial success. And I spared neither money nor pains to establish my reputation in the art. That I did not labor in vain, is proved, I think, from the fact that my work was brought into competition with the work of the foremost men of the times, and subjected to competent critics, who awarded to me, without knowing upon whom they were bestowing the honor, a most valuable prize offered by Mr. Edward Anthony, who was at that time, and who has ever been, ‘the noblest Roman of us all.’

“So far as I know, it was the first prize ever offered for superiority in daguerreotype art. It was an expensive silver pitcher, with an engraved portrait of Daguerre on one side and Niepce on the other. During my photographic career, which is now some forty-six years, I have, to meet the demands of my customers, three times changed my place of business. I first moved to the corner of Leonard street and Broadway, then to 707 Broadway, and finally to the Fifth avenue, corner of Sixteenth street. Here I remained some four years, and then disposed of my place to my son Benjamin. I then went to Paris, but after a year or two I began to grow weary of the wonders of the world abroad, and hence returned to my own native city, where I resolved to spend the remainder of my life in the quiet of retirement. But this was a silly resolution, for one is never so unhappy as when deprived of his accustomed work. And now, though I have thrown off the responsibility of conducting business on my own account, I am content in finding quite sufficient to fully occupy my time in the profession of my choice, and in a gallery second, perhaps, to none in the world.”

At the close of the reading, by request, Mr. A. BOGARDUS took the speaker’s stand, and said :

Mr. President, Ladies and Gentlemen: I had no intention of speaking on this subject this evening, and therefore what I may say must be regarded as purely extempore. My first teacher of the daguerreotype art was George W. Prosch.

In November, 1846, I commenced business at the corner of Greenwich and Barclay streets, where I remained fifteen years. I then removed to Broadway, corner of Franklin

street, where I remained ten years; then to Broadway and Twenty-seventh street; and after five years I moved to my present location (Broadway and Eighteenth street), which I have occupied for the last ten years.

Some of the early daguerreotypists I remember, were Messrs. Gurney, Brady, Lawrence, Becker, Piard, Insly [Insley—ed.], Weston, Horsley, Edwards, Anthony, Clark, Plumb [Plumbe—ed.], Lewis, Bogart, and Walsh. There were some few others, but I cannot recall their names at this present moment.

In those early years of the art there was no time for idleness, and every man must row or be swept away in the rapids.

The diligent, however, were always rewarded for their labor, and could therefore reasonably hope to acquire both fame and fortune. Can such a hope be indulged now with our present scale of prices?

The daguerreotype required great care, skill, and expert manipulation; but when made right, it was the finest picture ever taken with a camera; and for durability, compared favorably with any other species of sun drawing since introduced.

But, Ladies and Gentlemen, I will not detain you longer, for I see in the audience an older, if not an abler soldier than myself—one who in the early days of the art was always in the front ranks and in the thickest of the fight, clearing the way for those that followed him. In my judgment he has made some of the best daguerreotypes ever taken in this country, or perhaps in any country; I hope, therefore, we shall now have a word or two from our venerable friend, Alexander Becker.

Mr. BECKER responded by saying that public speaking was quite out of his line, and he must therefore ask the indulgence of the audience if he attempted, in a conversational way, to relate a few facts respecting his early practice in the art.

It was in 1842 I took my first lesson of J. Langenheim, who at that time had daguerreotype rooms in the Merchants' Exchange, Philadelphia. In the spring of 1843 I removed to this city (New York) and brought with me the first large lens ever used here. It was intended for making pictures seldom called for in those early days of the art; but it was none the less useful in making the sizes most in demand, for it would take these more perfectly than the smaller lenses that were in common use. Thus a fact was demonstrated that many daguerreotypists soon learned to take advantage of, and though they might never expect to make pictures larger than $4\frac{3}{4} \times 5\frac{1}{2}$ inches, they used lenses designed for $6\frac{1}{2} \times 8\frac{1}{2}$ plates.

One of the first lessons I learned while in Philadelphia, was the necessity of having the temperature where we were working not below 60 degrees F., or above 90; and it was often no easy matter to overcome the difficulty. It was this difficulty that induced me to leave my first employer in this city. He, like many others in the business, could not understand why the temperature should interfere in making good work, and insisted on ascribing other causes for all kinds of failures.

With a temperature of 70 degrees F., and a strong light, I had little fear of being unsuccessful, even in those early days of the art; but in the absence of either of these, good pictures were the exception rather than the rule. The first daguerreotype work that I did in New York was for Mr. Edward White, who was in the business at 187 Broadway. After a brief engagement, I commenced business for myself at the corner of John and Nassau streets, where I remained till 1845. I then moved to 201 Broadway, under the firm of Langenheim & Becker; here I took the agency of Voigtlander's lenses and Louis Becker's chemicals. After a time the firm was changed to Becker & Piard.

After remaining some seven years at 201 Broadway, the firm moved to 264 Broadway. In 1857 I moved to 411 Broadway, the firm of Becker & Piard being dissolved in 1856. In 1859 I sold my business to Mr. A. Morand, and commenced the manufacture of my patent revolving stereoscope. In 1853 I devised a plate holder for making four pictures on a plate, so arranged that the exposed part of the plate should be in the center of the field of the camera.

The principle involved in this device was patented in 1856 by a Mr. Ormsbee, who claimed a royalty from the photographers, but was finally defeated by proof of my priority. I believe too I was the first who used (and after introduced to C. C. Harrison) a diaphragm between the lenses, and this improvement has now come into general use.

Defunct and buried with the daguerreotype art, rests in my garret, machinery for cleaning and polishing plates that quite eclipsed all hand work, and would no doubt have superseded all other methods then known, had not the collodion process at the time of this invention been publicly announced to the world. The practice of the daguerreotype art always furnished the most exhilarating stimulant for my inventive proclivities, and the thousand and one anxieties and defeats I then experienced are now only remembered as a pleasant dream.

At the close of the statements of Messrs. Bogardus and Becker (of which the above are only a part) concerning their personal history in the daguerrean art, it was announced that, owing to the absence of the Chairman of the Lantern Committee, Mr. A. D. Fisk had, during the progress of the meeting, been induced, by special request, to obtain from his photo stock house at 26 Beekman street, a choice collection of slides, and would endeavor to entertain the audience for the remaining portion of the evening.

[End of selected text; final nine paragraphs not transcribed. All content related to the daguerreotype herein provided.]

EDITOR'S NOTES:

In Gardner's opening remarks, he mentions a previous discussion, "Early History of Photography." The transcript of the paper is provided in 17:8 (24 April 1886): 248-51.¹

1. http://www.daguerreotypearchive.org/texts/P8860002_GARDN-1_ANTHONY_1886-04-24.pdf

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