

“A Veteran Photographer,” 24 August 1894

(keywords: Henry Earle Insley, Samuel F. B. Morse, George W. Prosch, Mathew B. Brady, history of the daguerreotype, history of photography)

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A Veteran Photographer.—Writing in the *Philadelphia Inquirer*, an ex-editor says:

An old man died in an out-of-the-way town in New York, one day last week, who was one of the pioneers of an art that is unknown to the present generation, and is only half remembered even by old fellows such as I. His name was Henry E. Insley, and he was associated, as long ago as 1839, in New York city, with S. F. B. Morse, in developing the art of portraiture invented by Daguerre. Morse had learned the process from Daguerre, in Paris, and in connection with Insley, who was a broom maker in the Bowery, and George W. Prosch, an instrument maker in Nassau Street, he opened a Daguerreotype Gallery on Broadway, at the corner of Liberty Street, fifty-five years ago. The gallery did not pass the experimental stage so as to be ready for business until the summer of 1840, and it was closed in the autumn because long sittings and short days made the process impracticable as a profitable business at the outset. As many as twenty minutes were required for a single impression, and even then the chances were that the plate would be faulty. At first it was almost impossible to get a portrait with eyes, the blinking of the sitter serving to obscure the visual organs of the subject to such an extent as to obliterate them. Insley resumed business in 1841, and as improvements in the art of daguerreotyping rapidly followed each other it soon became remunerative. In the course of a few years so many devices had been adopted that “ten minute sittings” were boldly promised to people who desired to have their pictures taken by the new process.

It was a trying ordeal even after the art had obtained general acceptance, as I can testify from personal experience. Facing the camera in old John Keaggy’s gallery in the early fifties required as much nerve as confronting the frowning cannon in the deadly breach ten years later. But it was not long—not more than fifteen years—until daguerreotyping was completely supplanted by photography, and now the art of Daguerre in its original form has a historic interest that seems almost as far away as that which pertains to the charming miniatures on ivory which are now found only in the cabinets of our older families or in the collections of the curious.

I have known many photographers in my time—Brady, Fredericks, Gurney, Sarony and Gutekunst among them—and without attempting it none of them has ever failed to impress me with the extent of his personal acquaintance. This characteristic of all the photographers of the past, to whose galleries well-known people were attracted, was due, I think, to the nature of the business. Until the invention of instantaneous photography, sitting before a camera continued to be something of an ordeal. I can imagine even Daniel Webster leaning upon the comforting Brady for support during a ten minutes’ sitting and

shaping the subsequent gratitude into a life-long friendship. A photographer in the old day appealed to the imagination of his sitters, and they, in turn, especially if they were notabilities, found favor with the man who could make their lineaments live forever. Times change, and men and illusions change with them. There can never be another Insley or Brady, because the kodak and the snap-shot have disillusioned those of us who used to face the camera under the spell of the blue glass of a photographer's gallery with fear and trembling. I am sorry the change has come, because I like the old ways, especially when something like sentiment attached to them, for there was a melancholy pleasure in getting your picture taken and feeling much as if you were being led out to be shot.

[End of text.]

EDITOR'S NOTES:

See also the obituaries for Insley in *Anthony's Photographic Bulletin* (New York) 25:9 (1 September 1894): 285¹; *Appletons' Annual Cyclopaedia and Register of Important Events of the Year 1894* "new series" vol. 19 (New York: D. Appleton and Company, 1895): 582.²

A ca. 1839 daguerreotype portrait of Insley—now in the collection of the Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art—is viewable on the museum's web site, *Developing Greatness: The Origins of American Photography, 1839–1885*.³ The portrait of Insley is included among several Insley family daguerreotypes in Jane L. Aspinwall, "Henry Earle Insley: Artist and Entrepreneur," *Daguerreian Annual 2007* (Cecil: The Daguerreian Society, 2008):76–87. See also Keith F. Davis and Jane L. Aspinwall, *The Origins of American Photography : from Daguerreotype to Dry-plate, 1839–1885* (Kansas City: Hall Family Foundation, 2007): 12–17; Joan M. Schwartz, "The Enigmatic Henry E. Insley," *History of Photography* 16:1 (Spring 1992): 70–72; Roy Blankenship, "Henry Earle Insley: Pioneer Photographer," *South of the Mountains: The Historical Society of Rockland County* 29:1 (January–March 1985): 16–21.

1. http://www.daguerreotypearchive.org/texts/P8940001_INSLEY-OBIT_ANTH_1894-09-01.pdf
2. http://www.daguerreotypearchive.org/texts/P8950002_INSLEY-OBIT_APPLETONS_1895.pdf
3. <http://www.nelson-atkins.org/art/Exhibitions/DevGreat/CollectionDatabase.cfm?id=51000>

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