

**Samuel C. Busey, "Early History of Daguerreotype in the City of Washington," read 1898, published 1900**

(keywords: Samuel C. Busey, Mrs. Fulham, James Miles Wattles, François Gouraud, John Plumbe, Jr., Samuel F. B. Morse, John William Draper, Alexander S. Wolcott, Blanchard B. Paige, John Golden, Daniel Wolf, Solomon Nunes Carvalho, Nahum S. Bennett, Charles H. Venable, Samuel C. Mills, S. Rush Siebert, Mathew B. Brady, Jesse H. Whitehurst, Marcus A. Root, William W. Metcalf, Philip Haas, George R. West, John H. Clark, Gannis, Langenheim, history of the daguerreotype, history of photography)

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EARLY HISTORY OF DAGUERREOTYPY IN THE CITY OF WASHINGTON.

By Samuel C. Busey, M. D.

Read before the Society, November 7, 1898.

It has been asserted that the jugglers of India were in possession of a secret by which likenesses could be taken by the action of sunlight, and that the alchemist, at an earlier date, discovered some chemical process by which sunlight impressions could be made on glass, but all authenticated experiments in photographic research have been within the present century. In the later years of the last century, Mrs. Fulham published the account of a process by which she claimed that words might be written by the action of sunlight upon the chloride of gold, and in 1802 Wedgewood and Sir Humphrey Davy published their experiments to fix images by the action of sunlight. Neither of these publications attracted any attention, and nothing further in this line of investigation seems to have occurred until M. Niepce [Niepce—ed.] began his researches in 1814, but failing to secure any result, in 1829 formed a partnership with M. Daguerre, a distinguished artist and chemist. The story is told that about this time a lady called upon M. Dumas and inquired of him "if it was possible that the pictures seen in the camera could be caught and made permanent," to which he replied, "it was not impossible," but no such method had been discovered. Madam Daguerre accepted the opinion of M. Dumas, and expressed her pleasure in the conviction of her husband's sanity, whom she had feared was going mad, because of his sleepless nights and constant experiments "with complicated apparatus and noxious chemical preparations," to discover some method of fixing camera images.

It is worthy of note, also, that as early as 1828 James M. Wattles, at the "New Harmony School," Indiana, made a series of experiments which convinced him of the "practicability of producing beautiful solar pictures," but abandoned his investigations because of lack of chemical knowledge and suitable material.

It is to be regretted that young Wattles, then only sixteen years old, should have been compelled to suspend his experiments when so near the completion of the discovery. But for the "adverse circumstances" it seems most probable America would be entitled to the honor of the discovery of the art of Daguerreotypy, as it is of its application to portraiture.

The secret of the art of Daguerreotypy was given to the world by an act of the French Government, signed by King Louis Phillipe, June 15, 1835. Soon after this act Daguerre communicated to his friend, Professor S. F. B. Morse, the method of his discovery for making "sun pictures." Immediately thereafter Morse established in the city of New York "his palace of the sun," where he prosecuted his experiments in the process and is believed to have made the first daguerreotype in America in September, 1839. Later, during the fall of the same year, M. Francis Gourand [Gouraud—ed.], a teacher direct from Daguerre, arrived in New York, bringing with him many exquisite specimens of the art, and the most approved apparatus for teaching the wonderful discovery. After a very successful experience in New York, he went, in March, 1840, to Boston, where he was equally successful. The art had not, however, at this date been applied to living subjects. During the periods of Gourand's lectures and teaching tours in the cities of New York and Boston, Professor Morse, with his friend and associate, Professor John W. Draper, was continuing his experiments in application of the art to portraiture, and the claim of making the first portrait in America is accredited to Professor Draper, though by some to Mr. E. A. Walcott [Alexander S. Wolcott—ed.], who was engaged at the same time in the same line of experimentation, but neither knew of the labors of the other in that line of work.

The foregoing summary of the history of the introduction of Daguerre's discovery into this country<sup>1</sup> is preparatory to the study of the history of the introduction of the art into this city, to which my attention was called by a letter from Miss Ida M. Tarbell, a contributor to McClure's Magazine, New York City, requesting a statement of my earliest recollection of the business of Daguerreotypy in this city, and of my knowledge of a shop in the Capitol in 1848, in which daguerreotypes were taken. My recollection was limited to the location of such an establishment in an upper story of the building occupied by M. W. Galt & Brother, or of the adjoining building on Pennsylvania avenue, west of the Indian Queen, now Metropolitan Hotel. Mr. William Galt informs me that it was "over Todd's store, the store next (east) to that of Messrs. M. W. Galt & Bro., at about 1848 to 1851, and was carried on by a man by the name of Plumbe." To this Mr. Samuel C. Mills adds the statement that about 1840 John Plumbe, jr., conducted such an establishment "in what was then known as Concert Hall, a building belonging to W. B. Todd, on the north side of Pennsylvania avenue, between Sixth and Seventh streets northwest, and now a part of the Metropolitan Hotel." Mr. Mills recollects having seen exhibited on the curb line, in front of the building, "a large frame containing pictures of the 32d (1851-53) Congress." Plumbe was succeeded by Blanchard P. Paige, and Paige by John Golden as lessee. Mills learned the art under Paige, and in 1805 bought of Paige "Plumbe's old gallery," and carried on the business "for a year or two." In 1856 there were in active operation a number of galleries in this city.

The first published reference that I can find to Daguerre's process, in this city, is the following advertisement in the National Intelligencer of April 8, 1842:

"Daguerre's Magical Pictures from Paris, representing the wonderful effects of day and night, invented by Mons. Daguerre six years before his Daguerreotype, brought to the United States of America by M. M. Maffy and Lonati, and exhibited at Carusi's Assembly Room, for a few nights only, having been exhibited in New York, Philadelphia, Boston, Baltimore and Charleston, with the most enthusiastic approbation.

"The exhibition will open Monday, April 11, 1842, with three Spirited Pictures.

“The admired and unrivaled interior of the Church of St. Etienne Du Mont, at Paris, representing a Midnight Mass.

“The magnificent view of the City of Venice, on a Festival Night, and the charming Valley of Golden, Switzerland, with the crumbling of a mountain, an historical occurrence.

“Open every night. Exhibition to commence at quarter to 8 o’clock. Admission, 50 cents.”

National Intelligencer, April 8, dtwif, 1842.

In the Washington Directory and National Register for 1846, “compiled and published by Gaither and Addison,” which, with other useful information, contains the “names, residences and employment of citizens” of this city at that date, I find the following:

“Plumb’s Daguerrian Gallery (Concert Hall Building), on Penn. Ave., between 6th and 7th Sts.” Page 69.

“Wolf, Daniel, daguerreotype rooms, cor. Penna. Ave. and 7th. Entrance cor. 7th and C Sts.” Page 88.

Among the advertisements, in the same volume, I find the following, printed in black ink on pale yellow paper:

“PLUMBE  
“NATIONAL DAGUERRIAN GALLERY,  
“And  
“PHOTOGRAPHIC DEPOT,  
“Founded 1840.

“Awarded the medal, Four First Premiums and Two Highest Honors, by the Institutes of Massachusetts, New York, and Pennsylvania, for the most beautiful Colored Daguerreotypes and best apparatus.

“CONCERT HALL, PENNSYLVANIA AVENUE,  
“WASHINGTON.

“251 Broadway, New York.

“75 Court street, Boston.

“136 Chestnut St., Philadelphia.

“205 Baltimore street, Baltimore.

“56 Canal street, New Orleans.

“127 Rue du Temple, Paris.

“32 Church street, Liverpool.

“Broadway, Saratoga.

“Market street, St. Louis.

“Main street, Dubuque.

“Jefferson st., Louisville, and

“Main street, Newport.

“Portraits taken in any weather, in exquisite style.”

The following opinions of the press are selected promiscuously from an (almost) indefinite number:

(From the National Intelligencer.)

“Plumbe’s Daguerreotype Miniatures are decidedly the most perfect specimens of the art ever produced in this city. We have just seen an admirable likeness of Speaker Davis, which, apart from its fidelity, is unexceptionally the most artistic picture we have ever seen, and fully realizes all that the most fastidious can desire.

“We would recommend such of our friends as desire a counterfeit presentment of their features to make application to Professor Plumbe, at Concert Hall, Pennsylvania avenue.”

(From the United States Journal.)

“The Plumbe National Daguerrian Gallery, at Concert Hall, is an establishment whose superior merits are deserving the notice of all who feel an interest in the progress of the beautiful art of Photography; particularly those who wish to obtain elegant and life-like portraits of themselves or friends.

“Professor Plumbe has brought this wonderful art to a wonderful degree of perfection where further improvement seems problematical.

“The Professor’s Gallery has been recently fitted up in elegant style, and its walls covered with a large number of new pictures, including those of many members of Congress and other distinguished individuals.

“We are pleased to learn that this ingenious artist is now engaged in taking views of all the public buildings in Washington, which are executed in a style of elegance that far surpasses anything of the kind ever seen. It is his intention to dispose of copies of these beautiful pictures, either in sets or singly, thus affording to all an opportunity of securing perfect representations of the government buildings, whose intrinsic value is hardly exceeded by their worth as specimens of the most wonderful art ever discovered.”

(From the New York Journal of Commerce.)

“The pictures of Plumbe are remarkable for their fidelity and distinctness, and delicacy of color. In saying that the Professor stands at the head of the Photographic art in this country, we but endorse an opinion universally prevalent.”

(From the New York Morning News.)

“Plumb’s Portraits.—The distinguishing points in this artist’s pictures are the distinctness with which every feature is produced on the plate, and the happy arrangement of lights and shades which render the whole figure so prominent, that seen in a strong or subdued light, the beauty and exactness of the picture are equally apparent.”

(From the New York Tribune.)

“A delight for after-years.—In after-years to retain in our possession the likeness of some one who has been beloved by us, is a delicious, even while sometimes a melancholy, pleasure. Such a pleasure can any one enjoy who patronizes Professor Plumbe, the celebrated Daguerreotype artist in Broadway. His pictures stand unrivaled by any in the world.”

(From the New York True Sun.)

“To those who love.—How cold must be the breast that does not love. How fickle the heart that wishes not to keep the memory of the loved for after-times. Such cold and

fickle hearts we do not address; but all others we advise to procure miniatures of those they love, at Professor Plumb's life-copying Daguerreotype establishment.

"Portraits taken in fair and cloudy weather at all hours.

"Perfect satisfaction warranted in all cases."

In the Washington Directory and Government Register, for 1843, compiled and published by Anthony Reintzel, there is no reference to any Daguerrian Gallery in this city, but in the Washington Directory and Congressional and Executive Register for 1850, compiled and published by Edward Waite, the following is found:

"Plumbe's Daguerrean Gallery, Concert Hall, W. side  
Pa. av, btw. 6 & 7 sts."

Also the following advertisements:

"Daguerrean Gallery, &c.

"PLUMBE NATIONAL GALLERY.

"Concert Hall, near Brown's Hotel.

"The proprietor of this well-known, highly popular, and long established Emporium of Photography, in order to keep pace with the rapidly increasing and extensive patronage, has found it necessary to make many new arrangements and additional improvements in the several departments, all of which tend to class this establishment with the most complete in the Union, possessing such facilities and advantages as to enable the proprietor to turn out specimens of the Daguerrean Art, which are pronounced by competent judges superior to any produced.

"By the addition of Mammoth Camera Apparatus and powerful Lenses, of an improved construction, lately imported from Germany and France, at considerable cost, the proprietor is also enabled to introduce Photographic Portraits of the largest size and of as unique finish as have ever been taken. The style of these Portraits cannot fail to induce a decided demand, and for family groups must be greatly admired.

"In the Chemical Department, many important improvements have been developed, which greatly facilitate the 'Sittings,' and give an exquisite tone and finish to the Picture.

"The Photographic arrangements are such, too, as obviate the heretofore unpleasant methods of sitting; for, by the combination of large Graduating Sky and Side Lights, a most complete artistic effect of beautifully blended lights and shadows is the result; thereby doing away entirely with the ghostly hues, distorted visages, and murky impressions ordinarily taken, and giving instead roundness of figure, bold relief, and general lifelike appearance, which constitute the qualities of perfect Daguerreotypes.

"The repented failures and inconveniences heretofore materially affecting the taking of Children's Miniatures are entirely overcome. Such can now be produced in perfection in a second or two of time.

"Portraits and Miniatures finished in a variety of styles, and every effort made to please. The public are solicited to visit the 'Plumbe Gallery,' and inspect the numerous beautiful specimens of art.

"B. P. PAIGE."

"Daguerrean Galleries, &c.

"S. N. CARVALHO'S

"Gallery of Ivory and other

“DAGUERREOTYPES,  
“AT THE ODEON.  
“Corner of 4 ½ st. and Penn. ave. and 205 Baltimore st.  
“Baltimore.  
“N. B.—Cloudy days the best time for adults.”

“BENNET’S  
“DAGUERREAN GALLERY,  
“Pennsylvania avenue, one door east of Gilman’s Drug  
“Store, Washington.  
“Daguerreotypes taken by a new Sky Light arrangement, in a superior manner.”

“C. H. VENABLE’S  
“DAGUERREAN GALLERY,  
“Corner of 7th street and Pennsylvania avenue,  
“Washington.

“Pictures taken in cloudy as well as clear days. Likenesses of the sick, aged, or deceased, taken at their residences. Paintings, Statuary, and Daguerreotypes copied. The most agreeable expression of the features should be retained to insure a truthful likeness.  
“The public are respectfully invited to call and examine specimens. Whether they wish Pictures or not, we shall at all times be happy to see them.”

In the further prosecution of the inquiry, I reproduce the letters of Mr. Samuel C. Mills and Mr. S. Rush Seibert, which are important contributions to the history of the introduction of Daguerreotypy into this city. Neither Mr. Metcalf nor Mr. Paige, who might, perhaps, have supplied additional information, have chosen to answer my inquiries. I do not know that Mr. Paige is living.

“October 10th, 1896.

“Dr. S. C. Busey,

“Dear Sir: Your favor of the 1st inst. reached me in due time, and would have been acknowledged earlier but for the press of business, and an effort to obtain some data that would be of value.

“Personally I have no positive information—all I know is that John Plumbe, jr., was in Washington somewhere in the early 1840, and conducted a Daguerreotype gallery in what was then known as “Concert Hall,” a building belonging to W. B. Todd, on the north side of Pennsylvania avenue, between Sixth and Seventh northwest, being now a part of the Metropolitan Hotel, and owned by the heirs of the late J. Y. Davis and M. H. Stevens. I remember as a boy seeing on exhibition on the curb line in front of the building I have mentioned a large frame containing pictures of the 32d Congress, each one made on a 1-4 size plate. Mr. B. P. Paige, now a hotel keeper in Long Island, N. Y., came with Mr. Plumbe and succeeded him. Subsequently Mr. John Golden leased the business under Mr. Paige, and afterward opened a Photograph Gallery (Daguerreotypes having become obsolete) over Dodson’s carpet store, corner Market space and Ninth street northwest. In 1856 I learned the Daguerreotype business under Mr. Paige at Plumbe’s old gallery, and

in 1865 bought Paige out, and continued the business for a year or two. At the time I learned the business there were in active operation a number of galleries in the city—Brady, Whitehurst, Root and Gannis, Bennett, Venable, and possibly others. There is now living in this city Mr. W. W. Metcalf, a dealer in real estate, No. 1331 F street northwest, residence 1531 Vermont avenue northwest, who is older than myself, and who was in the business long before I was, and who I am sure will be able to give you a better account than I could. Mr. Blanchard P. Paige is also now living, and I think the New York city directory would give his address, and would give particulars unknown to me. I forgot to mention that a man by the name of Phillip Haas<sup>2</sup> was experimenting and possibly making the Daguerreotype about the time John Plumbe first came to Washington.

“I regret, my dear sir, that my information is so meagre, but cheerfully respond by sending such as I have.

“Yours very truly,

“SAMUEL C. MILLS.

“P. S.—Prof. Morse, of Telegraph fame, was also a pioneer in the Daguerreotype, as also a gentleman named Page, an Examiner in the Patent Office, now deceased.”

“613 15th street.

“Washington, D. C., October 19, 1896.

“S. C. Busey, M. D,

“Dear Sir: I am in receipt of your note of the 13th inst. requesting me to prepare a statement of my recollections of Daguerreotype making in its early day. In reply thereto I have to say that I commenced working at preparing Copper Plates for use in the production of pictures thereon in Philadelphia during the winter of 1839 and 1840, when, as far as I know, there were but four persons in that city who had sufficiently mastered the difficulties to produce a salable likeness. I continued my efforts in endeavoring to make copper plates more sensitive to light, but with little encouragement toward success. On the 13th of January, 1841, I started from Philadelphia for this city. During the winter of 1842 and 1843 Mr. George West was trying experiments to produce Daguerreotypes in a room on the north side of E street northwest, near Seventh street. In that room I think the first copper plates were silvered in a battery for that use in this city, and the first Daguerreotypes on silver plates made. Silvering the surface of the copper plates and adding a quickener to the iodine coating made the discovery announced by Daguerre and Neiper in 1835 at once a success, and many persons were in haste to embark in the new field. Among them was Mr. John Plumbe, who opened a gallery in what was then called Todd’s rooms, on the north side of Pennsylvania avenue, between Sixth and Seventh, over W. B. Todd’s hat store. The year I do not call to mind. He continued there until about 1849, I think. He disposed of his gallery to Mr. Blanchard P. Paige, who had been engaged with him for some time, and who continued making Daguerreotypes. At the time of Mr. Paige’s purchase Mr. N. S. Bennett had a Daguerreotype gallery a few doors west, on the same avenue, in a building which was on the east side and adjoining L. D. Gilman’s drug store. During the winter of 1851 and 1852 I negotiated with him for the purchase of the gallery for Marcus A. Root and John H. Clark, who immediately obtained possession and refitted the skylight and rooms, and there produced many fine specimens of the Daguerrean art. Between 1840 and 1854 I endeavored to keep pace with the frequent announcements of new processes and discoveries in this country and Europe, making trials in each as reported, while at the time continuing in the production of

negatives on glass with a sensitive albumen film. Many minds were centered upon the finding of some composition which would hold enough silver to produce a sensitive covering upon glass, upon which to make a good negative. In 1853 Mr. James A. Cutting, of Boston, came to this city for the purpose of applying for a patent for the use of collodion for a coating upon glass on which pictures can be made. He obtained the use of a dark room in the Root & Clark establishment, and there prepared the plates for the first negative made upon a collodion film in this city. These plates were exposed in a camera upon the Smithsonian building. Copies or prints therefrom, I think, were in the Patent Office until the fire of 1876.

“Between 1853 and the 4th of July, 1854, when Mr. Cutting was awarded a patent, great strides had been made in many parts of this country in the making of gun-cotton for use in collodion. It was immediately made a success, and Daguerreotypes were laid aside in many establishments, although I continued to make them at intervals between 1840 and 1874, at which time I made the last in Japan. As I do not know the object of your inquiry, I am at a loss to know upon what part of this prolific subject to write about. If I have included in the above any points you wish, I can upon further information perhaps give them.

“Truly, etc.,

“S. RUSH SEIBERT.”

“613 15th street.

“Washington, D. C., October 26th, 1896.

“S. C. Busey, M. D.,

“Dear Sir: In reply to your second note of inquiry, which contained a request for information upon certain points, the following is as I remember them: Mr. George West was the first man to make salable Daguerreotypes in 1842 in Washington, D. C. At that early day no doubt others were trying to make them. I did not know if they were. There was no gallery open at that time except the West gallery in E street.

“I left this city late in 1846 to go on a survey for the Republic of Texas, and while there in the field the Mexican War commenced, and the surveys were stopped. I returned to this city in 1848, having given instructions in Daguerreotyping to one man in New Orleans, one in Natchez, and one in St. Louis, and upon my arrival here I found Mr. John Plumbe and others having galleries. The date of his commencing I do not know. I have no recollection of a gallery having been opened in the Capitol building for making Daguerreotypes. In 1851 Mr. Langenheim, of Philadelphia, came here and made Daguerreotypes of several Senators and others. Among them was my friend Sam Houston. Langenheim at the same time made Daguerreotypes of several of the public buildings, including the Capitol, showing the progress made to that date in the Senate wing. Mr. T. U. Walter, the architect, had him come here for the purpose. I have a lantern slide copied from that Daguerreotype. Mr. Langenheim had a dark closet assigned him in the Capitol building temporarily. About 1859, and after the making of albumen negatives had progressed, a Mr. John Wood was employed at the Capitol and had a room fitted up for the business and made albumen negatives and prints from them, showing the progress made in construction from time to time of the building. I knew him well, but not as a Daguerreotypist. Have no knowledge of the Daguerreotyping there as a gallery business.

“Truly, etc.,

“S. RUSH SEIBERT.”

The foregoing facts and circumstances seem to prove conclusively that the credit of the introduction of the art into this city is due to John Plumbe, jr., but the exact date of its introduction is not so definitely determined. It was not earlier than 1843. Mills and Seibert fix the date several years earlier, about 1840, which does not seem probable, because the art of sunlight portraiture had not been perfected at this earlier date, and Plumbe, in his advertisement of his gallery in Concert Hall, refers to “the four first premiums and two highest honors” awarded to him by the “Institutes of Massachusetts, New York and Pennsylvania, respectively,” which could not have been obtained as early as 1840.

1. Contribution of Mrs. D. T. Davis to McClure’s Magazine, entitled “The Daguerreotype in America,” published in November, 1896

2. Lithographer, north side Pennsylvania avenue, between First and Second streets west, in 1843.

**[End of text. For clarity, original footnote asterisks have been replaced with numbers.]**

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**EDITOR’S NOTES:**

Samuel Clagett Busey, M. D., was president of the Medical Society of the District of Columbia. Busey wrote on various subjects over the course of several decades.<sup>1</sup> See also Samuel C Busey, *Pictures of the City of Washington in the Past* (Washington, D.C.: W. Ballantyne & Sons, 1898).

This introductory summary portion of this text contains several inaccuracies and must be used with caution. Of particular value, however, are the recollections of original practitioners.

The misspelling of Niepce’s name may originate with Thomas Dick. See Thomas Dick, *The Christian Philosopher: or, The Connexion of Science and Philosophy* vol. 2 (Philadelphia, E. C. & J. Biddle, 1850): 245. Curiously, the daguerreotypist William Shew also uses the same incorrect name in “Photography,” *Pioneer: or California Monthly Magazine* (San Francisco) 2:1 (July 1854): 34–40.<sup>2</sup>

The *McClure’s Magazine* article referenced is D. T. Davis, “The Daguerreotype in America,” *McClure’s Magazine* (New York) 8:1 (November 1896): 4–16.<sup>3</sup>

The author’s mention of “Daguerre’s Magical Pictures” references a traveling exhibition of dioramic paintings. It is unlikely that these paintings were the production of Daguerre himself.

1. <http://openlibrary.org/a/OL316728A/Samuel-C.-Busey>

2. [http://www.daguerreotypearchive.org/texts/P8540006\\_PIONEER\\_S\\_PHOTOG\\_1854-07.pdf](http://www.daguerreotypearchive.org/texts/P8540006_PIONEER_S_PHOTOG_1854-07.pdf)

3. <http://www.daguerre.org/resource/texts/davis/davis.html>

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