

“Stray Leaves from the Diary of the Oldest Professional Photographer in the World,” February 1906

(keywords: Josiah Johnson Hawes, Albert Sands Southworth, Washington Allston, John Cheney, Seth W. Cheney, history of the daguerreotype, history of photography)

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EWER ARCHIVE P9060001

Published in:

Photo Era: The American Journal of Photography (Boston) 16:2 (February 1906): 104–107.

STRAY LEAVES FROM THE DIARY OF THE OLDEST PROFESSIONAL
PHOTOGRAPHER IN THE WORLD

Four years ago, on Aug. 7, 1902, there died at Crawford, N.H., whither he had gone for rest, Josiah Johnson Hawes of Boston, the oldest living professional photographer in the world. He was ninety-four years old, and did his own posing, developing, and printing until the last. He had been associated with the process of Daguerre from the time of its introduction into America in 1840. He built the first photographic studio with a skylight ever erected in this country. He sat at the cradle of photography and helped to rock it into life. He saw photography developed from modest beginnings into a popular science, then into a world-embracing industry, and finally its recognition as a fine art. He was part of this wonderful growth and development for sixty years—an experience that seldom falls to the lot of man.

We have recently been favored with some Mss. copy from an autobiography which we reproduce here through the courtesy of Dr. E. S. Hawes of the Brooklyn, N. Y., Polytechnic School.

“I was born February twentieth, 1808, in the town of East Sudbury, Mass. (now called Wayland). Seventeen years of my early life were spent on a farm. I was then apprenticed to a carpenter, and learned the carpenter’s business, until I was twenty-one, and spent two years as a journeyman carpenter.

“Happening one day to come across an ordinary oil painting which I was admiring, a friend of mine asked me to close one eye and look at the picture through my hand with the other eye. The surprising change which took place, from its being an ordinary flat canvas to a realistic copy of nature with all its aerial perspective and beauty, so affected me, that from that time I was ambitious to become an artist. I purchased books, colors, and brushes, and commenced the study of art.

“I practiced miniature painting on ivory, likewise portraits in oil, landscapes, etc., with no teacher but my books.

“About this time—1840—the excitement of the discovery of the daguerreotype took place; and some specimens of it which I saw in Boston changed my course entirely. I gave up painting and commenced daguerreotyping in 1841.

“My partner, the late Mr. Albert S. Southworth, and myself built a studio and carried on the business in Boston for the next twenty years. We had the reputation of making as fine daguerreotypes as were made by anybody. Some of them were very large ones—20 x 24—probably the largest ever made on silver plates.

“From 1841 to 1854 we made daguerreotypes only. After that the daguerreotype was given up for the photograph.

“As I was one of the first in the business, I had the whole field before me. In the early period of the art, all daguerreotypes of buildings taken from the ground were smaller at the top than at the bottom, the lines sloping inwards. In order to correct this, I made a camera with the holder for the ground glass and the plate frame suspended from a universal joint which could be set at any angle sufficient to correct the lines. This camera my partner and I used for ten years before any one else could make a picture with the lines of architecture parallel. This camera also had a holder made at the same time, the same as is now called the curtain holder (a device which has since been patented). The somewhat celebrated combination of lenses called the Dallmeyer lens, I made and used fifteen years before it was known under its present name. It was used for copying Washington Allston’s sketches on copper plates sufficiently silvered and the paintings of Gilbert Stuart. These plates were then engraved by John Cheney, following the lines of the daguerreotype.

“I think I made the first stereoscopic picture made in America. I am sure it was the first made in Boston.

“My partner and I received the gold medal of the Massachusetts Charitable Mechanics Association for a reflecting stereoscope. We likewise procured patents in this country and in Europe for a method of making stereoscopic pictures by two movements, lateral and perpendicular, which was thought to be an improvement on a single movement. Any one can test the idea for himself by looking at a landscape where there are many horizontal lines, by turning his head on one side so as to raise one eye a little above the other. He will perceive the stereoscopic effect.

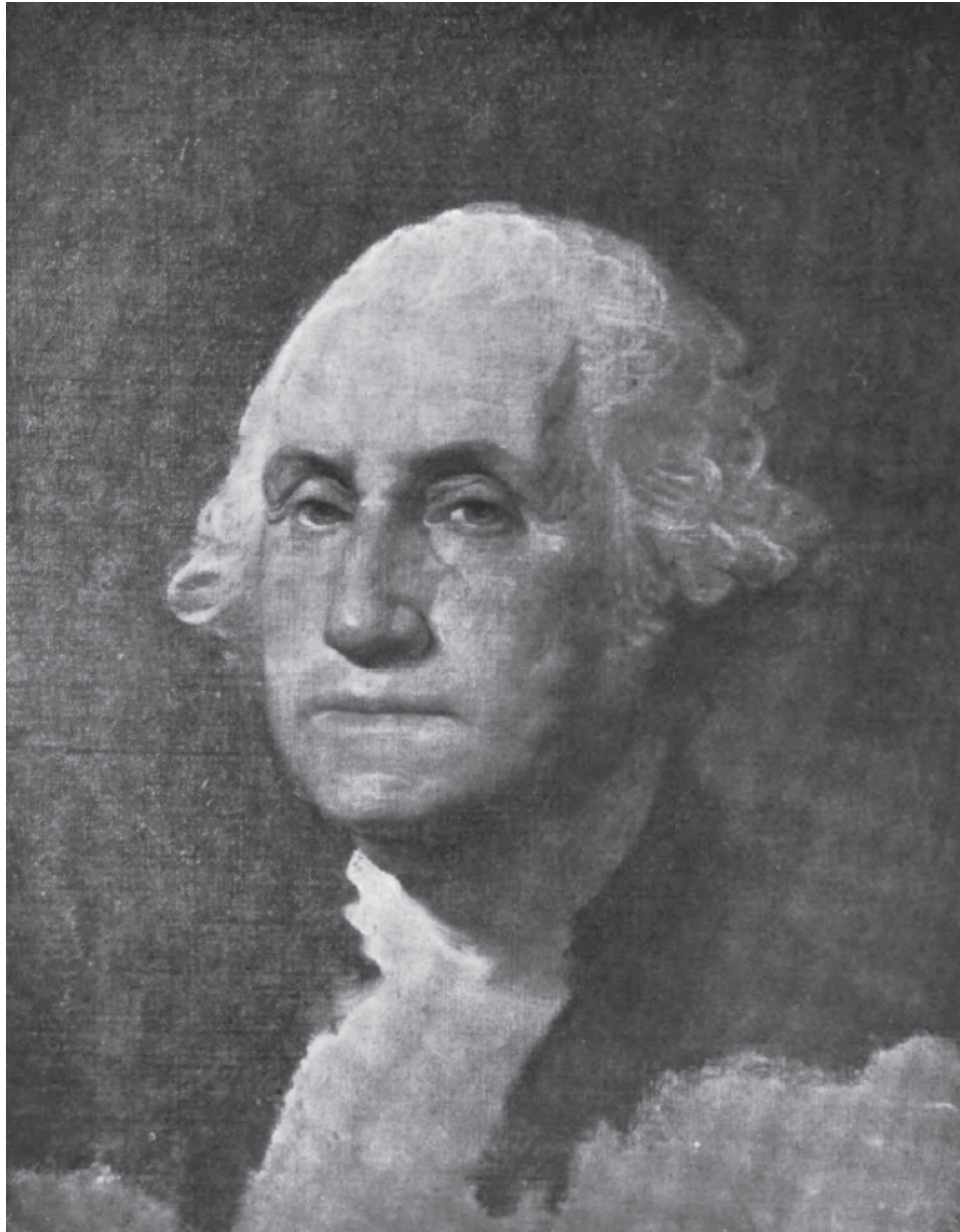
“We were also the originators of the multiplying camera.

“We had many celebrated men and women of the time as our customers, among them Daniel Webster, Rufus Choate, Governor Boutwell, Judge Shaw, Ralph Waldo Emerson, Jennie Lind, Kossuth, Oliver Wendell Holmes, Longfellow, Dickens, Channing, and in fact almost every Bostonian of note, as well as many foreign celebrities.”

In September, 1901, we wrote of Mr. Hawes as follows:—

“The PHOTO ERA is glad to pay this tribute to his worth here, because of the distinguished services he gave to the art of photography. The generation of great men and women who knew him, profited by his knowledge and marveled at his art-beautiful, are passed and gone. He was the last link in the long chain connecting the past and present of photography. But his memory will live in the hearts of those who delight to make pictures and who honor the profession of which he was such a distinguished member.”

[Editor’s note: The following graphic—from a daguerreotype by Southworth and Hawes—appears as the issue’s frontispiece.]



[caption:]
Copy of Gilbert Stuart's Washington
made fifty-three years ago
Josiah Johnson Hawes

[End of text.]

EDITOR'S NOTES:

A previous article about Hawes appears in the same publication. See "The Past and Present: Death of Josiah Johnson Hawes," *Photo Era* 7:3 (September 1901): 119.¹

Also informative is the illustrated article, "A Famous Photographer and His Sitters," *Demorest's Family Magazine* (New York) 34:5 (April 1898): 134–135, 156.²

Hawes mentions copying the drawing of Washington Allston. The daguerreotypes served as the basis of the engravings in the volume published posthumously, Washington Allston, *Outlines & Sketches* (Boston: S.H. Perkins, 1850). The folio volume consists of engravings by John and Seth W. Cheney. The preface of the volume provides this information:

The Outlines and Sketches contained in this Volume, are a part of those found in Mr. Allston's Studio, in Cambridge, Massachusetts, after his death, in July 1843.

They consist in great part of compositions, hastily sketched in chalk, and never carried further; among them, however, are a few Outlines in umber, on canvass, which although more carefully done, should not be considered as finished Outlines, since they were intended merely as a ground work on which to paint. The sizes of the figures, in the different compositions, vary, from that of life, to a few inches in length; and where it was necessary to reduce them for engraving, the daguerreotype was used, by which the image was conveyed to the engraver's plates, prepared for that purpose, and there fixed by tracing the line through the silver."

BOSTON, JANUARY 1, 1850

A notice of in *Spirit of the Age* (New-York) 1:12 (22 September 1849): 190-91 provides additional information:

WASHINGTON ALLSTON.— . . . The engravings are made by the Messrs. Cheney, from the daguerreotype plates executed by Mr. Southworth, and are pronounced by the most competent judges to be not only correct transfers of the outlines, but to preserve perfectly the spirit and feeling of the originals.

The present editor has a specific interest in daguerreotype-derived graphics including methods used. The remark that "the image was conveyed to the engraver's plates . . . and there fixed by tracing the line through the silver" is perhaps the most descriptive of any known text.

1. http://www.daguerreotypearchive.org/texts/P9010001_HAWES_PHOTO-ERA_1901-09.pdf

2. http://www.daguerreotypearchive.org/texts/P8980001_HAWES_DEMOREST_1898-04.pdf

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URL: http://www.daguerreotypearchive.org/texts/P9060001_HAWES_PHOTO-ERA_1906-02.pdf

Document author: Gary W. Ewer

Creation date: 2009-09-30 / Last revision (proofread): 2009-10-14

Citation information: *Photo Era: The American Journal of Photography* (Boston) 16:2 (February 1906): 104–107.

Prepared from: original issue in the collection of Gary W. Ewer. Also available from *Google Books*. (<http://books.google.com/books?id=BjOAAAAMAAJ>)

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