

Peninsula Diary Mayo Hayes O'Donnell

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The Daguerreotype

Since we wrote recently of the gift of a number of daguerreotypes of Sylvester and James Ohio Pattle, trappers, "surgeons extraordinary" and adventurers of the early 18th century, we have received from a reader some information concerning the inventor and the process used in making of these early photographs which may be of interest to other readers.

The daguerreotype was born on Monday afternoon, August 19, 1839, in Paris. On that day the French Academy of Science, acting under government orders, held a special meeting to furnish the public with full information for making daguerreotypes. The secret has been purchased for the common good, from the inventor, Louis Jacques Mande Daguerre.

The public was ready for photography, and the news spread around the world as quickly as railroads and steamboats could carry it.

Just when the first photograph was made in the United States has long been a matter of conjecture, according to the George Eastman House. Samuel F.B. Morse, in the New York Journal of Commerce for Sept. 28, 1839, stated that "the merit I believe belongs to Mr. D.W. Seager of this city, who has for several days had some results at Mr. Chilton's on Broadway." The exact date can now be established. The George Eastman House has acquired a letter from Seager, to the manager of the American Institute, stating that he is sending to the Institute, for preservation, the daguerreotype which he took in New York City on Sept. 16, 1839. Unfortunately, it is not known what happened to this daguerreotype.

There is a picturesque story, related by the brother of George W. Prosch, a pioneer photographer in America, that just as the ship in which Seager was sailing for London was leaving the dock, a friend throw him a copy of Daguerre's instruction manual. Was it this choice by a nameless friend, of a bon voyage gift which brought photography to the United States? This is the question asked in recent issue of Image, the publication of Eastman Co.

In the Eastman House collection, there is an autographed letter by D.W. Seager in which he claims to have taken a daguerreotype on Sept. 16, 1839. "I have

seen...nothing to compare." He tells the American Institute. No earlier record exists.

The letter dated Nov. 7, 1839, reads: "Gentlemen: Allow me to present to the American Institute a specimen of the daguerreotype which I produced in the month of September and exhibited at your last fair. My first result was on 16th September last, and though nearly eight weeks have elapsed I have seen nothing, not even an original, with which to compare results. This little specimen will serve to mark the progress of the art, the process of which is generally known, but simply consists in cleansing..."

When photography was first given to the world in 1839, Francols Arago suggested that the daguerreotype process might be used to record the moon. Daguerre's primitive technique was not equal to the task, but within a decade heavenly bodies were recorded with a certain amount of success.

Samuel Dwight Humphrey, for example, obtained a series of exposures of the moon in Canandaigua, New York, in 1849. He used an ordinary portrait camera.

In the same year, experiments were begun at Harvard College Observatory with the 15-inch refracting telescope. With this instrument, relates an article in Image, an image of the moon several inches high could be obtained. This first daguerreotype is now lost. But many others were taken at Harvard by the Boston daguerreotypist John Adams Whipple. He was awarded a medal for them at the Crystal Palace International Exhibition in London in 1851

A typical example, dated 1852, has been lent to Eastman House by the Harvard College Observatory. Like an ordinary portrait daguerreotype, it is enclosed in a velvet-lined leather case; it measures 3 ¼ x 4 ½ inches, reports Image.