

## NOTES ON THE MAJOR WHITMAN PHOTOGRAPHERS

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*John Plumbe*: 1809–1857, born and raised in Wales. He was a railroad surveyor and one of the first advocates for a transcontinental railroad, which became his lifelong enthusiasm; photography was for him a way to make money to support his railroad schemes. He wrote *Sketches of Iowa and Wisconsin* (1839) after moving to Dubuque in 1836. He learned photography in Washington, D.C., began his work in 1840 in Philadelphia, opened the United States Photographic Institute in 1841 in Boston, and by 1845 this innovative merchandiser had a chain of studios in fourteen cities (including Dubuque, Louisville, and Cincinnati) headquartered in New York. He took the earliest photographs of the U. S. Capitol and the earliest photographs of slaves. He developed a process called the “Plumbeotype,” which claimed to be a method of reproducing daguerreotypes on paper (but which really involved hiring artists to make lithographs), and he developed ways to color daguerreotypes. His Broadway studio—the Plumbe National Daguerrian Depot—was unexcelled in its collection of daguerreotypes of famous people, and WW often visited, where perhaps he had one or both of his 1840s daguerreotypes taken. In September 1846, Whitman said (in the *Brooklyn Daily Eagle*) of Plumbe’s daguerreotypes that it was “hardly possible to conceive any higher perfection of art, in the way of transferring the representation of that subtle thing, *human expression*, to the tenacious grip of a picture which is never to fade!” Whitman went on to celebrate how “Plumbe’s beautiful and multifarious pictures all strike you . . . with their *naturalness*, and the *life-look* of the eye—that soul of the face!” WW saw Plumbe in July of that year at the gallery. He was so successful that the *New York Herald* called him the “American Daguerre,” but in 1847 Plumbe, whose attention had been more on railroad schemes than on his studios, sold his New York gallery and soon went bankrupt; in 1849 he followed the gold rush to California. He committed suicide in Dubuque in 1857.

*Gabriel Harrison*: 1818–1902, born in Philadelphia, raised in New York. He was deeply involved with the theatre as an accomplished actor and manager; he also wrote and painted. He was a close friend of Edgar Allan Poe and of the actor Edwin Forrest, whose biography he wrote. From 1848 through the 1860s, he was a key figure in Brooklyn’s art life, founding the Brooklyn Dramatic Academy in 1853. He learned the daguerreotype process in John Plumbe’s New York gallery, worked as chief operator for the well-known Daguerrean Martin Lawrence (at which time WW wrote in the *Daily Eagle* that Harrison’s plates were “perfect works of truth and art”), and then opened his own Brooklyn gallery in 1852, where he won some major international awards, and where two years later he shouted to a passing WW to come up and have his picture taken. WW called Harrison “Wild and unpruned as nature itself,” which allowed for his genius in spontaneous observation, but his wildness, WW said, was nicely “held in check by an organically correct eye for purity in form, color, and the symmetry of things.” Harrison was one of the ten or so best-known names in New York photography at mid-century; he was a flamboyant figure whose democratic sympathies were quite Whitmanian—he singlehandedly fought the formation of the American Daguerre Association, founded by prominent photographers to set a high standard of “good taste” in their profession. If there had to be a fraternal

organization, Harrison argued, it would have to be democratic and its tastes could not be aristocratic: "If we are to have a society for the good of *all*, why not invite all to come in? Why not invite the fifty cent man as well as the dollar or two dollar man? Let the corner stone of the institution be democratic. With such we will have union!" Late in his life, WW recalled that Harrison "has always been a good friend," and WW remembered the hot July day in 1854 when he was walking by Harrison's gallery, with the photographer standing at the door "looking at the passers-by. He cried out to me at once: 'Old man!—old man!—come here: come right up stairs with me this minute . . . Do come: come: I'm dying for something to do.'"

*James Wallace Black: 1825–1896.* He was an outstanding Boston daguerreotypist who learned the trade in 1845 and became a partner of J. A. Whipple (one of the real pioneers of early photographic processes) from 1856 to 1859; in 1860 he opened his own gallery on Washington Street, the "photography row" of Boston, where over seventy galleries operated; Black's studio was described in contemporary accounts as "a wilderness of rooms, upstairs, downstairs and in the lady's chamber, evidently patterned after the style of Boston streets." He was a partner in the camera supply house of Black and Batchelder. He is famous for taking the first aerial photograph in America when he ascended over Boston with a camera in a hot-air balloon in 1860, the same year he may have photographed WW in Boston. He became official photographer of the Boston Police Department and was a guiding force in the National Photographic Association; in the 1870s, he was seriously injured in an explosion of a magic lantern, which he had been instrumental in developing as a means for photographic display.

*Mathew Brady: 1823?–1896,* born in Warren County, New York. He became a jewel case manufacturer in New York, where he heard Samuel F. B. Morse and John W. Draper lecture on the art of the daguerreotype in 1839, the year the daguerreotype process became known, and he learned from Morse's experiments with the process. By 1844 he had opened "Brady's Daguerrian Miniature Gallery" at Broadway and Fulton Street in New York, across from Barnum's Museum, and in the next ten years he won most of the major national and international awards for excellence. He tried opening a Washington, D.C. studio in 1849, but it quickly failed. His famous *Gallery of Illustrious Americans* was published in 1850, and in 1858 he successfully opened his opulent Washington, D.C. studio, called the "National Photographic Art Gallery," and he turned his attention away from the dying art of the daguerreotype and toward the emerging art of photography. He opened his most opulent gallery—complete with emerald colored skylights—on Broadway in New York in 1860. When the Civil War broke out, he convinced Lincoln and others of the value of photographing battles and camps, and a "photographic corps" made up of Brady and his assistants set out to follow the fighting, taking thousands of photographs of battle scenes and military personnel. He was nearly killed at Bull Run, where he was lost for days. The project nearly destroyed him financially; he could not convince Congress to purchase his huge Civil War collection, and by the 1870s he was in severe financial trouble. He maintained his dwindling Washington photography business, but lost his fame and prestige; his eyesight, never very strong, worsened. In 1892, he was run over by a horsecar in New York, and he never fully recovered. Because of his poor eyesight, Brady seldom operated a camera, particularly in studio conditions.

The photos of WW by Brady, then, are really by operators within Brady's firm (the best of whom, until 1862, was the manager of his Washington studio, Alexander Gardner), and when most of the Brady photos of WW were taken, Brady was at the war front. But WW knew Brady: "We had many a talk together," WW recalled, and he remembers discussing with the photographer about how different ancient history would seem if only there had been three or four photographs of the great figures—it would be "a history from which there could be no appeal." WW admired Brady's "many fine pictures," but was disappointed that none of Brady's photographs of Lincoln was effective.

*Alexander Gardner:* 1821–1882, born and raised in Scotland. He came from an educated and politically active family, followers of Robert Owen and his scheme of founding small socialized agricultural communities. Trained as a chemist and jeweler, serving for awhile as a Glasgow newspaper reporter, Gardner came to the United States in 1856, perhaps planning to live in an Owenite community on the Iowa frontier where several of his friends and family had migrated. Instead, he ended up working in New York for Mathew Brady, who was shifting from daguerreotypes to the new wet-plate photography which Gardner was expert in; in 1858, he became manager of Brady's new Washington gallery, which he left in 1862 after a number of disputes with Brady. He was an outstanding business manager and a very talented photographer; he ran Brady's Washington gallery as his own independent business, and his departure marked the beginning of Brady's long decline. After a few weeks as photographer for the Army of the Potomac, he opened his own gallery on Pennsylvania Avenue in 1862, then moved around the corner from Brady in 1863. He and Brady both had conceived of the idea of constructing a photographic history of the Civil War; both led teams of photographers to take pictures of battles; both issued albums of the War experiences. The competition between them became fierce. In 1867 Gardner closed his gallery and traveled West with the Union Pacific Railroad to photograph the Kansas frontier, driving a small horse-drawn darkroom. Back in his Washington gallery, he made portraits of official groups, including the various delegations of Indians in Washington during these years. WW, who worked in the Indian Bureau in 1865, wrote in an 1870s notebook, "This forenoon the chiefs are being photographed at Gardner's establishment on the avenue. They appeared just before noon in all their warpaint, bear's claws, and eagle's feathers, with much scarlet cloth, and fringe, and made a strange and impressive group, waiting in the ante-rooms." WW was more continually respectful of Gardner than of any other photographer; Horace Traubel records WW's affection and admiration in 1888 (six years after Gardner's death): "W. thinks Gardner, in Washington, has so far done the best portraits of him. He always refers to Gardner with great respect and says beautiful things always of that particular Gardner picture, the 1863 picture, which he gave me. . . . 'Gardner was a mighty good fellow—also mightily my friend: he was always loving: I feel near to him—always—to this day: years, deaths, severances, don't seem to make much difference when you have once loved a man: Gardner was a real artist—had the feel of his work—the inner feel, if I may say it so: he was not a workman—only a workman (which God knows is a lot in itself, too!)—but he was also beyond his craft—saw farther than his camera—saw more: his pictures are an evidence of his endowment.'" Later, WW explained Gardner's love of *Leaves* to Traubel, who notes that Gardner was no "chance non-literary friend": "He went strong for Leaves

of Grass—believed in it, fought for it. . . . Gardner was large, strong—a man with a big head full of ideas: a splendid neck: a man you would like to know, to meet.”

*William Kurtz:* 1834–1904, born and raised in Germany. He went to London after serving in the German army, left to fight in the Crimean War, returned to London and became a lithographer, studied and taught art, then became a sailor. A ship he was serving on wrecked on its way to California; the crew was saved, and Kurtz made his way to New York, where he retouched photographs. During the Civil War, he joined the Seventh Regiment, and then in 1865 opened a gallery on Broadway in New York and in 1874 opened on Madison Square the gallery that would make him famous. He developed the “Rembrandt” style (he referred to it more modestly as “Shadow Effects”), a unique method of lighting the subject to create striking patterns of light and shade. This approach for the first time allowed the subtle contours of a face to show up in a photograph, and the increase in facial character was dramatic. He used a device covered with tinfoil to illuminate the shadowed areas of the face so that shadowed surfaces would be revealed in the photo. His work signaled a turn away from the fully lighted face, and the Rembrandt style influenced many other photographers, most of whom could not control it as effectively as Kurtz. In the 1880s, he turned his attention to color reproduction of photographs, and soon after WW’s death he perfected a method of color halftone reproduction. WW, in an 1869 notebook, records Kurtz’s name and the address of his Madison Square studio; several very striking portraits of WW were done by Kurtz in the 1860s, then again (with the Johnston children) in the 1870s.

*Seybold and Tarris:* Nothing is known about this Washington, D. C. firm, except that WW recorded its address in his notebooks sometime during 1869: “Mr. Leybold J. C. Tarris 424 Penn av. bet 4th & 6th sts.” In the *Washington Chronicle* of 9 May 1869, WW wrote about the best photos of himself, and noted that “Messrs. Seybold & Tarris, on the Avenue, below Sixth, have a good head, just taken, very strong in shade and light.” Around the same time WW makes notes for a poem to illustrate Tarris’s photo of him: “for part in L of G / Collect the good portraits—Kurtz’s head with eyelids drooping / Tarris’s head / Make poems to match.” The notes for the poem suggest a deeply shadowed portrait: “(photograph’d / by Mr. Tarris) / From Shadows, deep & dark I peer Out / On Nature, on my comrades dear / Curious / Peering from / Tell, how, forth from those shadows peering. . . .”

*Moses P. Rice and Sons:* Washington, D.C. photographic firm; Rice was friendly with Mathew Brady later in Brady’s career when many other friends had abandoned him. Little is known about the firm; Rice took the well-known photos of WW and Peter Doyle.

*G. Frank Pearsall:* Around 1872 he opened a studio on Fulton Street in Brooklyn, where he took several remarkable photographs of WW, including one of the most familiar likenesses. An artist and photographer, he was once the chief camera operator at Jeremiah Gurney’s famous gallery in New York. As late as 1885, WW was clipping ads about Pearsall’s gallery, though he did not talk much about him.

*George C. Potter:* A Washington, D.C. photographer. WW recalls him as “not a Leaves of Grass man, but friendly to me.” In 1890, WW says Potter “is now in Phila-

delphia,” and in an 1870s notebook WW records his address as: “Geo. C. Potter 1220 Cherry st. Phil.” When Potter took his well-known early 1870s photo of WW, he was, WW recalls, “a young man.” So it is likely that the early 1880s photos of WW by “Potter and Co.” in Philadelphia are by the same Potter, since he clearly moved his studios there by that time.

*Jeremiah Gurney and Son:* Gurney was a jeweler in Saratoga Springs, New York, who once traded a watch to a customer for a daguerreotype camera and became fascinated with its possibilities; he opened a jewelry shop in New York City and offered daguerreotype services in the shop. He was one of the earliest American daguerreotype operators, starting his business in 1840 (he advertised his gallery as “the oldest and most extensive establishment in the world”), and he was a pioneer in the use of paper photographs in the early 1850s, though he continued taking daguerreotypes well into the 1860s after they had generally gone out of fashion. He was Mathew Brady’s main competition for top awards at photographic contests, and in the late 1840s and early 1850s was considered the premier daguerreotypist in America. In 1852 he was severely ill from one of the common occupational hazards of daguerreotypists—breathing mercury vapors. In an 1853 newspaper article, WW, who had just visited Gurney’s gallery, wrote of his impressions: “A thousand faces? They look at you from all parts of the large and sumptuously furnished saloon. Over your shoulders, back, behind you, staring square in front, how the eyes, almost glittering with the light of life, bend down upon one, and silently follow all his motions. . . .” Gurney’s New York gallery on Broadway, opened in 1858, was described in contemporary accounts as a “photographic palace.” He was famous for his use of side-lights to make his sitters seem more youthful by washing out their wrinkles. In 1865, he caused a furor when he managed to get photographs of Lincoln’s corpse as it lay in state in a New York hotel; the negatives were seized and destroyed by Secretary of War Edwin Stanton. His gallery was kept in operation into the twentieth century by his son Benjamin. (In August 1878, WW sent copies of his books to a Benjamin Gurney at Sarony’s gallery; it’s possible that the younger Gurney was associated with Sarony for awhile until taking over his father’s studio.) In a notebook from the early 1870s, WW records the name of “V. M. W. Horton photo operator Gurneys”—this may be the name of the actual camera operator who took the early 1870s Gurney photos of WW.

*George G. Rockwood:* He was managing editor of a newspaper in Troy, New York; in 1853, he took up photography and moved to St. Louis. By 1859 he had a studio on Union Square in New York where he was an originator of the *carte de visite* photographic fad that would sweep the country; these small inexpensive photos became something like the nation’s first trading cards, and Rockwood’s first one was of Baron Rothschild. During the Civil War, he traveled as a warfront photographer. It was estimated that by 1881 Rockwood had personally photographed 113,000 sittings, perhaps a record. In 1883, at the opening of the Brooklyn Bridge, he became the first photographer to successfully photograph moving objects *from* another moving object (a tugboat).

*Napoleon Sarony:* 1821–1896, born in Quebec. Named after Napoleon I, who died the year Sarony was born. His family moved to New York when he was ten; he worked for Currier & Ives in the 1840s, ran a lithographic firm (making reproduc-

tions of daguerreotypes) and later a daguerreotype gallery in New York in the 1850s, went to Europe to study art in 1858, joined his photographer brother Oliver in London and then operated a gallery in Birmingham; in 1864 he returned to New York, where he opened his own gallery, and ten years later he opened a second, opulent one on Union Square. His gallery was the most famous of the 300 photographic studios in New York in the 1870s. He was a flamboyant character, barely over five feet tall, who dressed in his father's Hussar uniform topped off with a fez; he was a celebrity who photographed other celebrities, especially actresses and actors (40,000 of them by a *New York Times* estimate). His cabinet card portraits became immensely popular, the nineteenth-century equivalent to baseball cards or fan magazines. Sarony paid some of his celebrity-sitters royalties for his sale of their portraits, but less well-known sitters would pay *him* for the publicity they received when they were added to his catalogue. He was well-known among artists and writers. His unique photos were signed with the trademark large Sarony red script signature, and were immediately recognizable because of his distinctive lighting and settings as well as his special paper which produced a tone very much his own. He developed a "posing machine" that held the sitter's body in comfortable positions for long periods of time, leading to a pleasing lack of stiffness in his subjects; he became known for breaking the conventions of photographic posing. Despite his overwhelming success as a photographer, he remained a frustrated painter: "all my art in the photograph I value as nothing." In an 1878 letter to Harry Stafford, WW wrote about his day at Sarony's studio: "I have been down this forenoon to Sarony's, the great photographic establishment, where I was invited to come & sit for my picture—had a real pleasant time."

*Henry Ulke and Brothers:* Ulke was a German immigrant artist-photographer whose Washington studio became known for its series of portraits of the various Secretaries of the Interior. In 1857, Ulke introduced painted backgrounds into American photography, and their use would overwhelm portrait photography for the next quarter of a century.

*Phillips and Taylor:* Little is known of this Philadelphia firm that made the famous "Butterfly" portrait of WW. Examination of Philadelphia city directories by the National Portrait Gallery staff produced no evidence that Henry C. Phillips and William Curtis Taylor ever were partners. In 1880, WW wrote a letter to "W. Curtis Taylor photo. 914 Chestnut St." In 1889 he referred to the portrait as the "Phillips & Taylors Butterfly Photo," but when Horace Traubel tried to track down the negative for use in the 1890 *Leaves*, he apparently started at Gutekunst's studio: "Called at Gutekunst's today. Found they did not have the butterfly negative. Afterwards traced it to Broadbent and Taylor's, who will look it up." Samuel Broadbent (1810–1880) was a Connecticut-born portrait painter who learned daguerreotyping from Samuel F. B. Morse; after working in the South, he opened Broadbent and Company in Philadelphia in the 1850s. He was a partner with Phillips from 1870 to 1874, then was a partner with Taylor from 1875 to 1879. He may be the missing link between Phillips and Taylor; whatever he is, his response about reproducing the butterfly portrait did not please WW, as Traubel recalls: "Broadbent today said he wanted forty dollars for six hundred butterfly prints. W. cried: 'Broadbent may crack his knuckles for his forty dollars: I could not think of it: the book is already costing more than I calculated for.'"



*Edy Brothers:* This was a London, Ontario, photographic studio; they took several photographs of WW while he was in Canada visiting his friend Dr. Richard Maurice Bucke, a well-known Canadian psychiatrist and superintendent of an insane asylum in London. WW at times admired these lesser-known photographers more than the famous ones; Bucke once sent WW a photo of himself taken in London (possibly by Edy Brothers), and WW was impressed: "this is taken by some little man with no reputation at all. It seems to me these little fellows beat our city men: some of the strokes of these out-of-the-way fellows are masterly. . . . The city photographers like things toned down, polished, in the mode."

*Bartlett F. Kenny and W. Shaw Warren:* Boston photographers who photographed WW in 1881. Little is known about them.

*Charles H. Spieler:* He was a Philadelphia photographer who appears often in WW's daybooks and conversations beginning in 1876; WW records his address as: "Ch H Spieler / Photographer / 722 Chestnut / top floor / son Jacob." In that year he photographed WW's niece, Mannahatta, and would eventually photograph several members of WW's extended family, and then WW himself in the early 1880s. Clearly Spieler and his son Jake were close friends of WW; in 1888, WW told Traubel about Spieler: "Spieler has the fine German make-up: I like it much: large body—not heavy—black hair, good eyes, frank. And Spieler's son was very kind to me—considerate—I liked the boy, too. Spieler made the photo used in the Centennial Edition. Very few liked it, but it has virtues. . . . I favored the man, approved his methods."

*George C. Cox:* 1851–1903, born in Princeton, New Jersey. He is not a well-known figure in photographic histories, but his portraits are outstanding, and he was once considered one of the finest portrait photographers in America. He catered to the wealthy, and thus did not enter the mass market reproduction business of better-known photographers. He opened his New York studio in 1883, four years before photographing WW, and ran the studio until 1897. He was a friend of many artists, including Saint-Gaudens, who had plans to make a bust of WW, and who probably arranged for WW's photographic sitting with Cox so that he could have photos to work from for the bust (which was never completed). WW had surprisingly little to say about Cox, except that he liked the "laughing philosopher" photo immensely and that he considered Cox the "premier exception" among photographers because he paid WW royalties for the sale of his photographs. Jeannette Gilder, recounting the time that Cox photographed WW, wrote in *The Critic* that Whitman "was not sitting to an ordinary photographer. Mr. Cox's photographs are no more like the conventional photographs than an oil-painting is like a chromo. One of their beauties is that the sitter's head is not made stiff and unnatural looking by being held in a vice; and the negatives are never retouched. All the lines and wrinkles show in the finished picture. Moreover, the 'subject' is not posed against a background of painted waterfalls, *papier-mâché* cabinets or other properties." Gilder goes on to suggest that these photographs of WW were quite important for Cox: "Mr. Cox thinks the Whitman photographs will be his masterpieces, and I shouldn't be surprised if they were, for he never had a better subject. . . ."

*Frederick Gutekunst*: 1831–1917, born and raised in Germantown, Pennsylvania. He was a well-known Philadelphia photographer and innovator in photoduplication techniques, mastering many of the early processes of photoengraving; his gallery had presses that allowed for large volume reproductions of photographs. His “Imperial Galleries” on Arch Street opened in 1856 and remained under his control until his death. Like Sarony in New York, Gutekunst focused his business on celebrities and compiled the world’s largest collection of celebrity cabinet card portraits. His 1865 photo of Ulysses S. Grant is generally considered the best Grant image. WW often took advantage of Gutekunst’s abilities to duplicate and print photos cheaply; he ordered thousands of copies from him, and had photos of his parents duplicated by his gallery. WW rated Gutekunst “on top of the heap” of photographers, and sent Gutekunst complimentary copies of his publications as early as September 1876. When he received some photos from Gutekunst in 1888, WW said, “They are first-rate: they satisfy my sense of photographic righteousness. . . .” Still, WW had some reservations about Gutekunst’s overall portraiture skills, and criticized some of his results.

*Frank P. Harned*: He was a Camden photographer, the brother of Thomas B. Harned (a Camden lawyer, WW’s good friend, Horace Traubel’s brother-in-law, and eventually one of WW’s literary executors). Frank Harned tried his hand at photographing Sidney Morse’s bust of WW, and WW found the effort “totally a fizzle.” WW liked him – “Frank has *kindness* as a first quality” – but did not like his photos: “I don’t know why – never do.”

*Thomas Eakins*: 1844–1916, born and raised in Philadelphia, where he spent his entire professional life. He was trained as a painter at the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts, then went to Paris to study from 1866 to 1869. Back in Philadelphia, he taught, painted, sculpted, and photographed for the rest of his life, studying anatomy at the Jefferson Medical College in 1870, then teaching at the Pennsylvania Academy beginning in 1873 (and continuing until 1886, when controversies over his insistence on nude modeling and on the importance of dissection led to his dismissal); in 1875 he completed his famous “Portrait of Professor Gross (The Gross Clinic),” which shocked contemporary viewers but has come to be one of the most respected American realistic paintings. In 1887–88, Eakins painted his well-known portrait of WW; WW liked the way Eakins “sets me down in correct style, without feathers,” and said, “I like the picture always – it never fades – never weakens.” Even though many of his friends disliked the portrait, WW maintained his affection for it, admiring its realism, the way Eakins saw “not what he wanted to but what he did see.” The painting for him was “strong, rugged, even daring.” Eakins often used his photographs as documentation for his painting and sculpture, but recently they have been viewed as a significant contribution to photographic art and to the development of photography as an art. He began photographing in the late 1870s, and in the 1880s he worked with Eadweard Muybridge on his photographic studies of motion, using very short exposures to capture animals and humans in motion. He brought his camera to WW’s home in 1891 and made some of the last and most memorable images of the poet. WW felt a real affinity for Eakins: “Oh! there is no doubt Eakins is our man!”



*Samuel Murray*: He was one of Eakins's most talented students and shared a studio with him in Philadelphia. A sculptor who accompanied Eakins on trips to WW's Camden home, he later accompanied the New York sculptor William O'Donovan to WW's home when O'Donovan was working on a bust of WW. Murray's photographs of WW may well have been used to aid O'Donovan in his work.

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