

Samuel F. B. Morse, "Letter to Henry Hunt Snelling," 5 December 1848

(keywords: Samuel F. B. Morse, Henry Hunt Snelling, Alexander S. Wolcott, John William Draper, Robert Walsh, Jr., history of the daguerreotype, history of photography.)

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Manuscript letter:

Samuel F. B. Morse to Henry Hunt Snelling dated 5 December 1848.

(Transcription by Walter R. Benjamin, 1910.)

POKEEPSIE, [Poughkeepsie, New York—edit.] *Dec. 5th, 1848.*

My dear Sir : Your favour of Dec. 4th finds me so overwhelmed with cares of a most absorbing character, that it is with the greatest difficulty I can find a minute to answer your polite inquiries.

All that I think necessary to state in relation to my connection with photography is an incident or two which may be interesting to your readers. Daguerre's splendid discovery was announced to the world in 1838 [1839—edit.] while I was in Paris for the purpose of presenting to the Scientific world my Electro magnetic Telegraph. Its astonishing results having an important bearing on the arts of Design arrested my attention. The process was a secret and negotiations were then in progress, for the disclosure of it to the public, between the French Government and the distinguished discoverers. M. Daguerre had shown his results to the King and to a few only of distinguished savans, and by the advice of M. Arago, had determined to wait the action of the French chambers, before showing them to any other persons. I was exceedingly desirous of seeing them but knew not how to approach M. Daguerre who was a stranger to me. On mentioning my desire to Robt. Walsh, Esq our worthy consul, he said to me, state that you are an American, the inventor of the Telegraph, request to see them, and invite him in turn to see the Telegraph, and I know enough of the urbanity and liberal feelings of the French, to insure you an invitation.—I was successful in my application and with a young friend since deceased the promising son of Edward Delavan, Esq. I passed a most delightful hour with M. Daguerre, and his enchanting sun pictures. My letter containing an account of this visit and of these pictures, was the first announcement in this country of this splendid discovery. I may here add the singular sequel to this visit. On the succeeding day M. Daguerre paid me a visit to see the Telegraph and witness its operations. He seemed much gratified and remained with me perhaps two hours ; two melancholy hours to him, as they afterwards proved, for, while he was with me, his buildings including his Diarama [Diorama—edit.], his studio, his laboratory, with all the beautiful pictures I had seen the day before, were consumed by fire. Fortunately for mankind, matter only was consumed, the soul and mind of the genius, and the process were still in existence. On my return home, I waited with impatience the revelation of his process, and after the French Chambers had voted him his reward, I was among the first if not the first to obtain the work which revealed the process, and to commence the Daguerreotype pictures. My object more immediately was to furnish my studio with studies from nature. I think my attempts to take portraits were the first attended with any success. I thought it necessary then to

place the sitter in strong Sunlight, the very first attempts I still have. They are with the eyes closed. Others at this time were experimenting, Mr. Wolcott, and Prof. Draper, and perhaps some others, and it would be difficult to say to whom is due the credit of the first Daguerreotype portrait. If mine were the first, other experiments soon made better results, and if there are any who dispute that I was first I shall have no argument with them. For I was not so anxious to be the *first* to produce the results, as to produce it in any way. I esteemed it but the natural carrying out of the wonderful discovery, and that the credit was after all due to Daguerre.

The above I think all that is necessary to state in regard to my connection with the Daguerreotype. I lay no claim to any improvements. Since my attention has been absorbed in other matters, many of my pupils have carried the manipulation to very great perfection.

Excuse this hurried sketch and Believe me with respect,

Yr. Mo. Ob. Servt, [your most obedient servant—edit.]

Sam. F. B. MORSE.

To Hunt Snelling, Esq., 205 Broadway, N. York.

[End of text. Corrections by current editor to 1910 transcription are bracketed.]

EDITOR'S NOTES:

This transcription is provided in "Morse and the Daguerreotype," *Collector: A Magazine for Autograph and Historical Collectors* (New York) 23:7 (May 1910): 76–77. The publication is a trade journal for the autograph and historical paper dealer, Walter R. Benjamin, who offered for sale this manuscript letter (and two others) on page 82 of the publication:

Morse , Samuel B. Promoter of the telegraph. ALS, 3pp, 460, 1848. Extremely fine letter describing his connection with Daguerre and the daguerreotype. He speaks of himself as "the inventor of the telegraph," etc.	\$10.00
ALS, 4to, 1867	\$3.00
ALS, 8vo, 1862	\$1.00

This letter is in response to an inquiry made by Snelling in preparation for his book published the following year. A portion of Morse's letter appears in Henry Hunt Snelling, *The History and Practice of the Art of Photography, Or, The Production of Pictures Through the Agency of Light* (New York: G. P. Putnam, 1849): 7–8. This title is also available in reprint: Henry H. Snelling, with an introduction by Beaumont Newhall, *The History and Practice of the Art of Photography* (Hastings-on-Hudson, N.Y., Morgan & Morgan [1970]). Also available on *Google Books*. (<http://books.google.com/books?id=cHACAAAAYAAJ>)

Morse described his visit with Daguerre in *New-York Observer* 17:16 (20 April 1839): 62.¹ Robert Walsh, Jr., also visited Daguerre and provided account in *New-York American* (New York) 21:7300 (22 May 1839).² (Morse's statement regarding Walsh being the American Consul in Paris can be misleading. Walsh was indeed living in Paris in 1839, but he was not then the American Consul; Walsh assumed that position in 1844.)

An earlier manuscript letter by Morse, to Jonas Edwards, is provided in the Archive: *EWER INDEX S8410001: Samuel F. B. Morse to Jonas M. Edwards, "I am indeed gratified to learn that you are meeting with success," ca. late 1841 or early 1842.*³

1. http://www.daguerreotypearchive.org/texts/N8390002_MORSE_NY_OBSERVER_1839-04-20.pdf
2. http://www.daguerreotypearchive.org/texts/N8390003_WALSH_NY_AMERICAN_1839-05-22.pdf
3. http://www.daguerreotypearchive.org/texts/S8410001_MORSE_EDWARDS_1841-1842.pdf

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