

***“Artist Brown Very Ill,” 3 March 1893***

(keywords: James Sidney Brown, 181 Broadway, Mathew Brady, John H. Fitzgibbon, Richard A. Lewis, history of the daguerreotype, history of photography)

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## **ARTIST BROWN VERY ILL**

### *THE OLD DAGUERREOTYPYER A PUBLIC CHARGE IN BELLEVUE.*

He Was Once Well Known in New York, and Was the Friend of Napoleon III.,  
Samuel F. B. Morse, and Other Famous Men.

A white-haired man, whose back was bent with age and whose clothes had seen much wear, clambered stiffly down the narrow stairs of the brick building at 50 Fulton street at 6 o'clock on the morning of Washington's birthday and tottered along in the storm that made out of doors dismal at that hour. He slipped on the slushy crossing, and before he had gone very far fell on his face. He was found by a policeman lying nearly insensible, with blood flowing from two bruises above his temple. An ambulance took him to Bellevue Hospital, where the old man, dazed by his severe fall, could give no account of himself. He was considered insane by the doctors, and placed in ward 26 as a patient suffering from dementia. The doctors could find nothing in his possession that gave any clue to his identity, and the patient refused to talk about himself when he had recovered his speech.

Alonzo J. Drummond, a photo-engraver living at 1601 Avenue A, went to Police Head-quarters on Feb. 23 and begged the police to try and find the old man. Drummond said that he was James Sidney Brown, an artist, and had lived for four years in an apartment in the third loft of 50 Fulton street. The police tried for three days to find out what had become of the aged artist, but failed, as there was no record at Bellevue to show his identity. His whereabouts were discovered on Feb. 27 through a letter from the supposed insane patient, written in a perfectly rational style. In it the old artist said that he was lying in the hospital at death's door, and begged Mr. Drummond as an old friend to see that he had a decent burial in "the Varick street graveyard," where, he wrote, some of his family slept. The letter said that in return for this kindness Mr. Drummond might have the contents of two leather trunks, fully half a century old, that were in the third loft of 50 Fulton street. The writer said that they would be found to be valuable.

Mr. Drummond hurried to Bellevue and found his old pensioner lying very ill, in charge of Dr. Douglass. Tears came into the old man's eyes, and he seized Drummond's hand feebly.

"It's the same old Jimmie Lenney," he said, "will you see that I get a Christian burial when I go?"

Mr. Drummond resolved, if possible, to secure the removal of the patient to a home where his surroundings might be more comfortable.

Yesterday morning he opened the two trunks in the Fulton street loft, and found a multitudinous array of oil paintings, water colors, and wood engravings, pencil sketches, boxes of paints, books on art, and hundreds of letters. There were scores and scores of daguerreotypes in excellent preservation. Artist Brown would never permit any one to see these and would lock himself in the loft whenever he had occasion to open the trunks. With the aid of the letters and other memoranda, Mr. Drummond was able to trace out the story of his old pensioner's career.

"Mr. Brown," he said, "was born at the corner of Morris and Greenwich streets on April 15, 1820. His father was a Greenwich street fruit merchant of some means. He apprenticed young James to a silversmith at Fulton and Dutch street, but the boy was fonder of making sketches than fussing over silverware. His catechism issued in 1829 by the Sunday school attached to old Trinity shows this. His brother, Charles Brown, who was a brother-in-law of "Billy" Moloney, the Reading Clerk of the Board of Aldermen, was able, through Clerk Moloney's influence, to get young Brown admitted to the antique school of the National Academy of Design, and he became a student in 1841. He was a proficient student, and, after graduation he set up a portrait studio at 181 Broadway. He was skilled at painting in water colors, and was one of the founders of the American Society of Water Color Artists.

"When the art of daguerreotype making was introduced it interfered seriously with portrait painting, and Mr. Brown accepted an engagement from Mathew Brady, a noted photographer, whose studio in Broadway, below St. Paul's Church, is pictured in old woodcuts of antebellum days. He had, previous to this, declined an invitation from Commodore Perry to accompany the Japan treaty exhibition. Perry wanted him to make photographs of this historic trip. Mr. Brown's knowledge of chemistry and art enabled him to turn out exceptionally fine daguerreotypes. He excelled in the art of posing his subject. Some specimens of his work were sent to the London Exposition of 1851, and won the gold medal over competitors from other countries.

"He went back to his painting of portraits and landscapes after winning this medal and founded the Ruskin life class of the National Academy, where the students worked exclusively with the brush instead of the pencil. He went to St. Louis later, still as a photographer and portrait painter, and his letters show that he made the acquaintance of Gen. Beauregard and other distinguished Southerners, and painted portraits and took daguerreotypes of them. The outbreak of the war compelled him to sell out his photographic business at a sacrifice, and with the money he received he went to Paris and studied with Thomas Couture, the French painter, who highly commended his ability as an artist in water color.

"He returned to New York after the war, but found business rather dull, and was obliged to live frugally. His last employment was as assistant to R. A. Lewis, a photographer in old Chatham street. Lewis's death left him practically penniless. He had been a wood engraver for the Bible Society and for the Harpers and Frank Leslie, but he always lived up to him means. He belonged to the Seventh Regiment for four years. I have discovered from his correspondence that he was acquainted with the Emperor Napoleon III., Samuel F. B. Morse, Charlotte Cushman, Edwin Forrest, Gen. McClellan, and a number of other Northern Generals."

Mr. Drummond spent an hour yesterday afternoon showing some of the treasures in the battered trunks that the old artist guarded so zealously. There were many

daguerreotypes of Mr. Brown, showing him as an intellectually handsome man, with flowing black hair and a full beard. His forehead was high, and the expression of his face kindly. There were studies in oil made in the Tuileries and the Louvre, and many water colors of children at play, resembling the work of J. G. Brown. These things show that the old artist was particularly fond of gamin life.

Among the first things found in the trunks were copies of the famous wood engraving of Actor F. S. Chanfrau as *Mose*, for which Chanfrau posed to Mr. Brown. There were wood engravings of scenes from other local plays of old New York life, and sketch books, in the pages of which the artist had jotted down characters whom he saw in walks in the Battery, along Broadway, and in City Hall Park. They included all sorts of street gamins and peddlers, and the sketches were well done.

One of the curios was a tin box of Windsor & Newton colors made to order, with the colors in triangular pockets instead of square spaces. The triangular pockets permitted a larger stroke of the brush and save time in getting the color in the camel's hair. There were numerous charts showing that Mr. Brown had been at work on a system of charts intended to teach beginners the principles of color blending. The charts were ingenious, and made up of sunshine and shadow hues, and the effects of running water, still water, and the like. Other charts showed that he had been experimenting to improve the method of taking daguerreotypes.

"These things," said Mr. Drummond, "ought to bring in enough money when sold to keep Mr. Brown in comfort during the short time that he will live. I have eight children and a wife to support or I would undertake to keep him unaided. He needs medical attendance, and a man with such a career certainly deserves to spend his last days somewhere besides on a cot in Bellevue."

[End of text.]

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**EDITOR'S NOTES:**

An abbreviated version of this text appears in "Obituary," *Anthony's Photographic Bulletin* (New York) 24:9 (13 May 1893): 282.

An illustrated advertisement for Brown's gallery at 181 Broadway is in *Lantern* (New York) 2:43 (30 October 1852).<sup>1</sup>

Brown is discussed in "Fitzgibbon's Gallery," *Photographic and Fine Art Journal* (New York) 9:4 (April 1856): 128:

The life-size colored Photographs at this establishment are really beautiful. We recognized many faces of ladies and gentlemen that we were acquainted with. The miniature size colored Photographs are finished by Mr. J. Brown, of New York, who has lately become attached to this famed gallery, and it give us pleasure to speak of his skill as an artist. We consider his coloring much more brilliant and softer in tone than any Wenderoth ever did when he was engaged at this establishment.<sup>2</sup>

The text references some of Brown's daguerreotypes being "sent to the London Exposition of 1851." The present author locates no reference of entry under Brown's own name. It is likely that the referenced daguerreotypes were taken by Brown—as operator for Mathew Brady—and entered under Brady's name.

Additional information regarding James Sidney Brown is found in John S. Craig, *Craig's Daguerreian Registry* revised ed. vol. 1 (Torrington: John S. Craig, 2003): 51–52; Peter E. Palmquist and Thomas R. Kailbourn, *Pioneer Photographers from the Mississippi*

to the *Continental Divide: A Biographical Dictionary, 1839–1865* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2005): 130–31.

1. [http://www.daguerreotypearchive.org/advert/A8520001\\_ADVERT\\_LANTERN\\_1852-10-30.pdf](http://www.daguerreotypearchive.org/advert/A8520001_ADVERT_LANTERN_1852-10-30.pdf)
2. [http://www.daguerreotypearchive.org/texts/P8560004\\_FITZG\\_PFAJ\\_1856-04.pdf](http://www.daguerreotypearchive.org/texts/P8560004_FITZG_PFAJ_1856-04.pdf)

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