

**“Centenary of Dr. John William Draper, First Portrait Photographer,” June 1911**

(keywords: John William Draper, Samuel F. B. Morse, Mathew B. Brady, history of the daguerreotype, history of photography)

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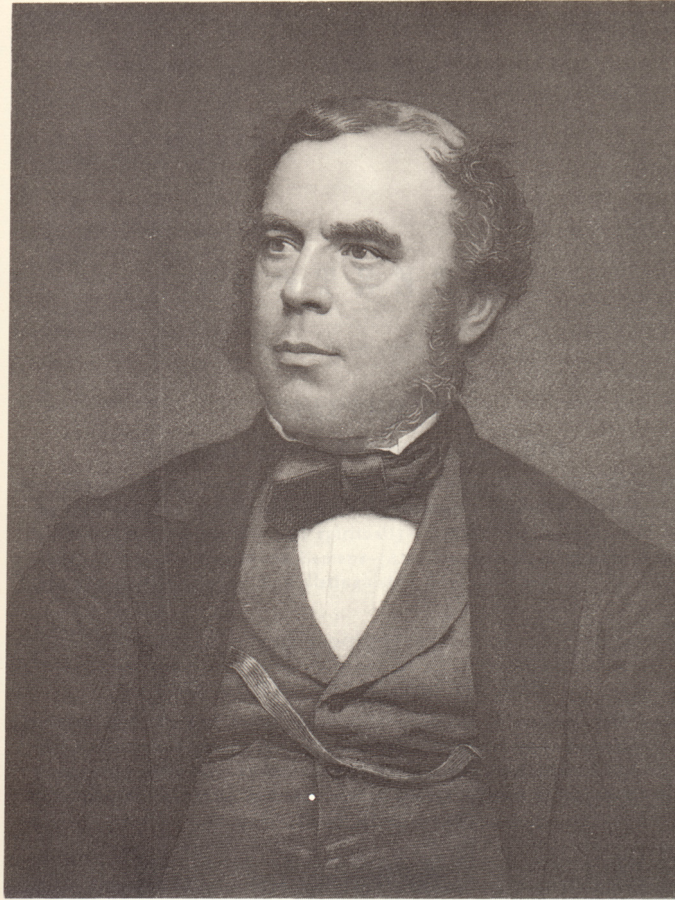
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*Wilson's Photographic Magazine* (Boston) 48:654 (June 1911): 247–50. The portrait of Draper appears as the frontispiece for the issue and is from a steel engraving by John Sartain, Philadelphia. (See “Embellishments”; front matter.)

[ SEE NEXT PAGE FOR GRAPHIC ]



*Engraved by John Sartain, Phil<sup>a</sup>*

*John W. Draper.*

JOHN WILLIAM DRAPER  
First Portrait Photographer  
BORN MAY 5, 1811      DIED JANUARY 4, 1882  
Made First Portrait, 1839

## CENTENARY OF DR. JOHN WILLIAM DRAPER, FIRST PORTRAIT PHOTOGRAPHER

WITH the celebration on May 5 of the centenary of Dr. John William Draper, the first person to make a photographic portrait of a human being, many “old New Yorkers,” and other residents of this city not so old, will be getting out daguerreotypes of themselves, or of grandfather and grandmother, and taking mental jaunts back to the '40s and '50s, when lovers exchanged daguerreotypes, and families vied with each other in loading the center-table and the parlor mantelpiece with the pictures that made the family portrait painter feel there was no use for him.

Those were the good old days! There has never been a photograph made since the time of the daguerreotype, in spite of all kinds of newfangled ways, that could equal the daguerreotype's exquisite beauty, delicate minuteness, and charm of color. The daguerreotype was made to last forever, and, what is more, it told the truth and nothing but the truth, no matter whether the truth consisted of freckles, a crooked nose or superfluous hair. Whatever the human defect was it was there to stay, for no process of retouching made possible a “Before” and “After.” The girl who said, “I mayn't be pretty but mother says I got the intellects in me,” saw in a daguerreotype of herself nothing but her homeliness; for the photographer, or rather the daguerrean, or daguerreotyper, could not remove the freckles and substitute the “intellects.” That feat remained for a later day.

Taking it all in all, those really were the good old days! When you went to have yourself daguerreotyped all you had to do was to dress according to several pages of directions, get your face whitewashed and sit for the third of an hour with your body and head screwed in a chair while the sun roasted you in a “skylight parlor” or the daguerreotyper's back yard. Of course, that was before a lot of improvements were made in the process, in the good old time.

When two old New Yorkers get together their reminiscences are bound to wander some time or other to daguerreotypes. “Now you are not to use our names or daguerreotypes,” said one of two who got to “going it” when daguerreotype was mentioned, “because my daguerreotype seems—well, anyhow I don't think it was good of me at that time, even though I did get it taken at Brady's. I remember ‘Brady's Famous National Gallery’ as if it were yesterday when I got that old ‘dag’ taken. Brady first had his place in Fulton Street when it was one of the main business thoroughfares in New York. He also had a place in Brooklyn. Brady—why, everybody from the President and Daniel Webster down knew him—later moved from Fulton Street to Broadway, near Prince Street, and afterward had his ‘gallery’ at the corner of Broadway and Tenth Street.”

“That's where I had this daguerreotype made,” said the other old-timer. “I guess I was a pretty proud youngster at the time. I showed it to an old darky servant we had brought up from the South. He studied it for a little while and then burst out, ‘Lawd bless me, if dat ain't *you*, young Massa.’ I then explained to him what it was, asking him if he did not wish to have a daguerreotype of himself. ‘Ah don't want one of dem dagger things made on me foh all dere is in heben, 'cause Ah's skeert at it.’”

In the little pile of framed daguerreotypes on the table was one of locket size showing a girl about twenty dressed in antebellum style. She was pretty, despite queer curls and ruffles. The old man who did not wish his name mentioned picked it up with a sad, faraway look. The other, seemingly knowing what was coming, started to talk about the crowds that used to go up to New York University, as his father had told him, to get their daguerreotypes taken by Dr. Draper and Prof. Morse, of telegraph fame. But the thoughts

of the old man were not to be so easily changed. "I think you know about it, but somehow I can't get over her marrying somebody else when I see that little daguerreotype."

In 1839 people verily swarmed to the New York University building at Washington Square when it was announced that Dr. Draper, with a box, glass and chemicals, could make the likeness of a person. His process was based largely upon that of Louis Jacques Mande Daguerre, whose invention for taking pictures of buildings, landscapes and other forms of "still life," it seemed to the inventor and others, could not be applied to living subjects. When Prof. Morse was in Paris in the summer of 1839, in the interests of his invention of the telegraph, he heard about the beautiful pictures that Daguerre was making by a secret process. In answer to Morse's question as to how he might get to see them, the American Consul, Robert Walsh, suggested that Morse invite M. Daguerre to see the telegraph apparatus, and the inventor of the daguerreotype would certainly return the courtesy.

The plan worked so well that Prof. Morse was asked to come at once to the Diorama, where Daguerre had his pictures. Morse was delighted with the views of Paris streets and boulevards, the Louvre and Notre Dame. The following day, while Daguerre was examining Morse's work, the Diorama, with all Daguerre's apparatus and pictures, was burned. But Daguerre soon replaced them and the French Government rewarded him for the investigations he had carried on for twenty years, a part of the time with M. Joseph Niepce, by granting an annual pension of 6000 francs. In consideration of this, Daguerre gave his process to the world, with the exception of England, where it had been patented.

Through the kindness of Daguerre, Prof. Morse, who had returned to New York, received full information of the daguerreotype process before it was published in the Paris journals. Prof. Morse and his two brothers, Sidney and Richard, began experimenting with the new art, as did also Dr. Draper. The Morses built a room with a glass roof on a building at the northwest corner of Nassau and Beekman Streets. This "palace of the sun," as they called it, was the first complete American home for daguerreotyping. Until this room was ready Prof. Morse conducted experiments in a room of the New York University building, and his first entirely successful picture was one of the Unitarian Church, taken from the window of a staircase on the third floor of the University after an exposure of fifteen minutes.

This was undoubtedly the first daguerreotype taken in America. The process was the same as that of Daguerre's. After a metal plate covered with silver iodide had been exposed in a photographic camera the plate was transferred to a dark room and exposed to the vapor of mercury, which developed the latent image, afterward made permanent by a solution of sodium chloride. The story is told that Daguerre discovered the part of the process connected with the "developing" by accident. One day he exposed a plate, but no image appeared. The next morning when Daguerre went to get the plate from a cupboard in which he had placed it he found a perfect image of the object before which the plate had been exposed. A lot of chemicals were in the cupboard, but by a process of elimination he found that vapor from the mercury had been the cause.

Dr. Draper, after studying the whole process, decided that it could be improved upon in some way to take pictures of anything living. His studies in chemistry and physics helped him greatly, and finally, working on the top floor of the New York University building, he made the first portrait of a person by a photographic process. The subject was his sister, Dorothy Catherine, and his camera was a cigar box fitted with a spectacle lens. Prof. Morse had failed to get any portraits of his daughter and her friends, although he had tried often.

Together he and Dr. Draper conducted a studio in the University building to accommodate the people who wanted to sit for daguerreotypes. The two professors felt justified in making charges for their work and for the lectures they gave concerning the process in order that they might be remunerated for the expense of their experiments. This was in 1840, and they took the daguerreotypes of many notables of the time, Dr. Draper operating the camera and Prof. Morse posing the sitters and attending to the artistic details.

In order to protect from the heat of the sun the person sitting for a daguerreotype, Dr. Draper used blue glass and a glass tank containing ammonia sulphate, by which the rays of the sun were intercepted. In writing about other requirements, he said: "The chair in which the sitter is placed has a staff at its back, terminating in an iron ring, which supports the head, so arranged as to have motion in directions to suit any stature and any attitude. By simply resting the back or the side of the head against this ring, it may be kept sufficiently still to allow the minutest marks on the face to be copied. The hands should never rest upon the chest, for the motion of respiration disturbs them so much as to make them of a thick and clumsy appearance, destroying also the representation of the veins on the back, which, if they are held motionless, are copied with surprising beauty...

"The eye appears beautifully; the iris with sharpness, and the white dot of light upon it with such strength and so much reality and life as to surprise those who have never seen it before. Many are persuaded that the pencil of the painter has been secretly employed to give this finishing touch."

While Dr. Draper and Prof. Morse were busy with their daguerreotyping, Daguerre sent to this country M. Francois Gouraud to make his invention generally known. While in New York here he learned the process of portrait making from Dr. Draper. Among Gouraud's directions was this:

"The person, if a man, must be dressed in a clear gray coat; pantaloons of a little deeper hue; a vest of a fancy ground—yellow, orange, if possible— with figures of a color to make a contrast; the whiteness of the shirt contrasting with a cravat of a gray ground either a little less dark or more deep than the coat. The toilet of the lady should be of the same shades, and in all cases black must be constantly avoided, as well as green and red."

Here in the city Gouraud put on exhibition a large number of daguerreotypes made by Daguerre himself. They attracted a great deal of attention among the residents of New York City and vicinity, eliciting great praise from all.

The newspapers and journals of the time joined in the general praise and gave long accounts of the pictures and the process of making them, in reply to demands of readers. Washington Irving's magazine, the *Knickerbocker*, has this to say as part of a two-page article:

"We have seen the views taken in Paris by the 'Daguerreotype,' and have no hesitation in avowing that they are the most remarkable objects of curiosity and admiration, in the arts, that we ever beheld. Their exquisite perfection almost transcends the bounds of sober belief. Let us endeavor to convey to the reader an impression of their character. Let him suppose himself standing in the middle of Broadway, with a looking glass held perpendicularly in his hand, in which is reflected the street, with all that therein is, for two or three miles, taking in the haziest distance. Then let him take the glass into the house, and find the impression of the entire view, in the softest light and shade, vividly retained upon its surface. This is the Daguerreotype!"

After an ecstatic description of the pictures was the following: "Busts, statues, curtains, pictures, are copied to the very life; and portraits are included, without the

possibility of an incorrect likeness. Indeed, the Daguerreotype will never do for portrait painting. Its pictures are quite *too* natural, to please any other than most beautiful sitters. It has not the slightest knack at ‘fancy-work.’ Matthews used to sing in his ‘Trip to Paris’:

Mrs. Grill is very ill!  
Nothing can improve her.  
Until she sees the “Tooleries,”  
And waddles through the Louvre.

“This was truthful satire in the great mime’s day; but illness, with sea voyage cures, must decline now; for who would throw up their business and their dinners on a voyage to see Paris or London, when one can sit in an apartment in New York, and look at the streets, the architectural wonders, and the busy life of each crowded metropolis?”

The general interest that was excited caused people to wish for daguerreotypes, and amateurs and regular daguerreans appeared all over the country. By the end of 1840 the methods were so improved that they justified practising daguerreotyping as a means of livelihood. A few daguerreotypes displayed at a door or in a window attracted eager spectators. “Studio wagons” reached those in the country districts and towns not supplied with “galleries.”

At first nearly all daguerreotypes were taken by side windows. The first studio with a skylight was established at the corner of Broadway and Chambers Street, on the top of the Granite Building, and soon “skylight pictures” were features in the advertisements. The best known of New York daguerreotypers were Meade Brothers, Bogardus, Powelson, and Pickwell. Meade Brothers, as the firm called itself, had the most spacious galleries in New York on the second floor of the Astor House. They had the distinction of being the only daguerreotypers in the world to take a daguerreotype of Daguerre himself.

Along with Brady, Gurney enjoyed a national reputation, but Brady was the better known. Besides his “Famous National Gallery” in New York he had one on Pennsylvania Avenue, Washington, D. C. There Brady and his employees took daguerreotypes of men who were to play a prominent part in the Civil War. Brady was enterprising, and after the war had begun he sent out wagons that followed the troops.

American daguerreotypers were acknowledged to be the world’s leaders. At the World’s Fair in Paris, 1851, when they numbered over 10,000, the daguerreotypers of this country took the first prize with a remarkable exhibition. In England, France, and Germany the superiority of American daguerreotypers was acknowledged by advertisements of “the American process.” The best daguerreotypers in London was an American, Mayal [Mayall—ed.], and in Paris the same held true with Thompson.

The price of daguerreotypes varied from \$1.50 to \$15, according to the size and case. There was no extra charge for wax to keep wing-shaped ears from standing out or for wads of cotton called “plumpers” to fill out hollow cheeks. The reduction of the time of exposure to a minute or so helped to decrease the cost. The ordinary size of a daguerreotype was 2 3/4 inches to 3 inches, and it cost from \$2 to \$3. The largest size was 13 inches by 14, while the smallest was made for a locket.

In 1896 the only daguerreotype studio in the United States was at 19 Tremont Row, Boston. It was in charge of Mr. Hawes of the old firm of Southworth & Hawes, and there among daguerreotypes of Webster, Pierce, Garrison, Sumner, Jenny Lind, Charlotte Cushman, and Harriet Beecher Stowe any one who had the inclination and the money could sit for a daguerreotype. But now there are no daguerreans; the present generation has no use for daguerreotypes except as mementoes.—*N. Y. Evening Sun*.

[End of text.]

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**EDITOR'S NOTES:**

See also "To Mark Draper Centenary," *New York Times* 60:19448 (24 April 1911): 8; "Centenary of Maker of First Portrait Photograph," *New York Times* 60:19454 (30 April 1911): 14 (magazine section); "Mark Draper Centenary," *New York Times* 60:19460 (6 May 1911): 10; "Centenary of Dr. John William Draper," *Boston Medical and Surgical Journal* 164:19 (11 May 1911): 694. The 30 April 1911 article is especially informative and includes four illustrations of which one is a portrait of Draper.

It must be remembered that with all reminiscences of those who witnessed the unfolding of photography, details may be inexact when recounted decades later. Such is the case with this present text; two examples will suffice. The author states that Morse failed to get any portraits of his daughter and her friends. Yet, in 1855, Morse writes:

I have now the fruits of these experiments, taken in September or the beginning of October, 1839. They are full-length portraits of my daughter, single, and also in group with some of her young friends.

—M. A. Root, *The Camera and the Pencil: or the Heliographic Art* (Philadelphia: M. A. Root, 1864): 346. An illustration of a daguerreotype of Morse's daughter and friend appears on page 347.

The author also states that Morse received process instructions prior to the publication of process in Paris. Again, this is contrary to the information provided by Morse:

Daguerre received his pension, and the process was published. Some copies of the work were immediately sent to this country, one of which I received . . . and immediately I had made for me the apparatus from the description in the book.

—M. A. Root, *ibid.*, p. 345

The text cites a passage from *Knickerbocker*. The full citation is: Lewis Gaylord Clark [attrib.], "The Daguerreotype," *Knickerbocker, or New-York Monthly Magazine* (New York) 14:6 (December 1839): 560–61.<sup>1</sup>

1. [http://www.daguerreotypearchive.org/texts/8390004\\_CLARK\\_KNICKERBOCKER\\_1839-12.pdf](http://www.daguerreotypearchive.org/texts/8390004_CLARK_KNICKERBOCKER_1839-12.pdf)

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Graphic scanned from the 1971 Helios reprint edition of M. A. Root, *The Camera and the Pencil: or the Heliographic Art, its Theory and Practice in all its Various Branches* (Philadelphia: J. B. Lippincott & Co., 1864). (The graphic is same as *Wilson's Photographic Magazine*.)

Original spelling/punctuation/grammar generally maintained without correction. Any in-text corrections are bracketed.

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