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Progressive Revelation: North Carolina’s First Landscape Photograph and Associated Images

Part I

In the seductive world of researching important unidentified photographs, objectivity sometimes marries possibilities. Such is the case with a mysterious daguerreotype of downtown Wilmington, currently housed in the Amon Carter Museum in Fort Worth. The photograph, complete with developed fingerprints, is published in *Eyewitness to War: Prints and Daguerreotypes of the Mexican War, 1846 – 1848*, by Martha Sandweiss, Rick Stewart and Ben W. Huseman. Shot from the window sill of a building sitting at roughly 18 feet above sea level, the camera is aimed east on Market Street towards St. James Church, at 30 feet above sea level. Today trees obscure some of the same view, but the church and the house in the foreground have survived. The house on the right was razed in the 1950s.1

In 1981, Martha Sandweiss, curator of photographs for the Amon Carter Museum, in Fort Worth, submitted a photocopy of the picture to Dr. Jones, then curator of the North Carolina Collection at the University of North Carolina. The sixth-plate daguerreotype was part of a collection of fifty-three daguerreotypes that the museum was about to acquire. Most of the photos could be dated 1847. All but handfuls were images of the Mexican War (1846 – 1848).

Dr. Jones, an authority on North Carolina photographs, asked Wilmington historian Leora H. McEachern (1909-1982) to help identify the house on the right, the Hill-Wright-Wooten House, at 11 South Third Street. He established that it was Wilmington’s first known photograph, identified the object on the right as a street lamp globe, and searched newspaper records to find names of photographers working in Wilmington at the time. Others helped with the initial investigation into the photographer’s identity: Janet K. Seapker and Harry Warren of the Cape Fear Museum; and Steve Massengill, curator of photographs for N. C. Department of Cultural Resources. In the end, a number of photographers seemed to be possibilities: Samuel D. Humphrey, E. W. Clark, and Henry William Bradley.ii Despite the fact that the occasion officially remains a mystery, the photo contains images that are rich in history, and the three structures pictured have many ties. The eighteenth-century Hill-Wright-Wooten House on the right was a four-story landmark before it was razed in 1952, but few photos exist.

St. James Church and Burgwin – Wright House, c. 1847
Its many porches and proximity to the street made it appear in danger of tumbling over the curb. Originally, the dwelling was home to the family of William Hill (1737-1783), a Bostonian and Harvard graduate who moved to southeastern North Carolina, in 1754. Three years later, Hill married Margaret Moore of Orton Plantation. The Hill’s eldest son, Dr. John Hill (1861-1832), a banker, physician, and state senator, was living in the house when it suffered a fire in 1799. By the time the photo was taken Mr. and Mrs. (Eliza Ann Hill) William Augustus Wright, owned the house at 11 South Third Street.

The large house in the foreground was the home of William Wright’s brother, Dr. Thomas Henry Wright. Dr. Wright married Mary Allan. By January 1848, Mary and Thomas Wright had eight children and Eliza and William had four. There would have been first cousins crossing Third Street with regularity.

The house at 224 Market Street served as Dr. Wright’s town house his entire life. Wealthy Wilmington merchant John Burgwin built the handsome structure in 1700.

In 1771, Captain Thomas Wright, William and Thomas’ grandfather, entered into an offer-to-purchase agreement with Burgwin, but died a few months later. However his family continued to lease the house until 1799, when the youngest child, Judge Joshua Grainger Wright, made good on the offer to purchase with 3500 pieces of eight.\(^4\)

The 1839 St. James Church building is still brand spanking new in this photo. The Gothic Revival structure was designed by Thomas U. Walter, a Philadelphia architect who had drawn plans for a number of other churches during the 1830s. St. James replaced a small, plain eighteenth century Colonial-style church that used to protrude, mid-block, into Market Street. Brick from the original building was incorporated into the new structure that was dedicated March 29, 1840, by the Rt. Rev. Levi Silliman Ives. The photo showcases the clock’s original handsome black face, installed in 1841, and displays all the finials, many of which would be lost to storms within twenty years.\(^4\)

**Who and Why?**

But what is the occasion and who took the photograph? In the absence of clear-cut documentation, many interesting possibilities emerge. Since the photo was found in the midst of Mexican War images, associated events warrant close examination. Three war-related
events in Wilmington were noted: the funerary
return of Samuel Ringgold, Louis Wilson and
John H. K. Burgwin.

On December 15, 1846, Wilmington
gave a “melancholy greeting to the remains of
the gallant Major Ringgold.” Major Samuel
Ringgold, an 1818 West Point graduate,
organized a novel strategy that helped the
Americans win the Battle of Palo Alto. However,
a Mexican cannon ball hit Major Ringgold and
he died on May 11, 1846. vi

Ringgold’s escorted body passed
through Wilmington, from ship to railroad depot,
a usual process because Wilmington was the
southernmost depot. Local musicians played,
“Dead March,” and the Clarendon Horse
Guards processed. A large crowd gathered to watch as
Ringgold’s body was loaded onto the train,
headed for Baltimore. He was buried there on
December 22, 1846. vi

By 1846, photographers Samuel Dwight
Humphrey, J. L. Bryan, Dr. E. W. Clark, and Dr.
J. S. Ware were already working in Wilmington,
but most of them moved away after a few
months. Samuel Humphrey was still in business
the month that Major Ringgold’s body was taken
through the town. Humphrey, who also taught
photography in Wilmington, later became
successful as a New York daguerreotypist.
During the early 1850s, Humphrey parlayed his
knowledge into a periodical he called
Humphrey’s Journal of the Daguerreotype
and Photographic Arts. vii

Then on February 6, 1848, the remains
of Col. L. D. Wilson, a victim of “malignant fever,”
died in Vera Cruz, on August 12, 1847.
Col. H. T. Clark and William Northfleet traveled to
Vera Cruz, from North Carolina, to accompany
the body. On the morning of February 6, they
arrived aboard the steamer Governor Dudley, at
the Market Dock, and their reception was grand.
Church bells rang, flags flew at half-mast, and
minute guns fired perpetually from the time the
steamer came into sight on the Cape Fear River
until the train carrying Wilson’s body left the
Wilmington station for Tarboro. viii

The crowd was estimated to be the
biggest to assemble in Wilmington in many
years. Pallbearers General Marsteller, The
Masonic Fraternity attended as a group,
particularly mournful since Col. Wilson was
their fellow member and former lodge
president. ix

Wilson’s prominence in the Lodge is
interesting because the photo was almost
certainly taken from the westernmost second-
story window of the Masonic Building, at 125
Market Street. The expansive Carolina Hotel,
just east of the Masonic Building, was once
considered a possibility, but a 1855 drawing in
Ballou’s Pictorial Drawing Room Companion
shows that a mature tree blocks the view of Piety
Hill from the building’s windows. The gas street
lamp in the foreground shows up in another
photo taken about 1900. Obviously electrified by
that time, the globe sits in front of the Masonic
Building window.

By the time Col. Wilson’s body arrived,
more photographers had opened studios in the area: J. W. Patterson, Samuel Broadbent, N. S.
Bennett, T. Huggins, W. H. Frear, and an
accomplished daguerreotypist named John
Plumbe, Jr. They advertised regularly in local
newspapers, announcing the “new and beautiful
art” that was “entirely different and superior.”
Several of them, like W. H. Frear, also
advertised photography classes. Mr. Frear also
said, “Sick and deceased persons taken at any
time or weather.”

J. W. Patterson, who charged $2 to $15
a photo, stated that he was “possessed of a large
and superb German camera, and new sensitive
chemical preparations.” He was working in
Wilmington when John C. Calhoun “passed
through this place,” on March 5, 1847. Patterson,
who cited his success in Philadelphia and
Baltimore, did not tarry in Wilmington. In fact,
most of the daguerreotypists didn’t stay long in
Wilmington and one even announced it ahead of
time: “Mr. Broadbent will remain but a short
time,” he advertised Oct. 30, 1847, not long after
his ads first appeared. x

On May 19, 1848, the remains of John
Henry King Burgwin arrived aboard the steamer
Governor Dudley, and the town’s reaction was
large enough to eclipse Col. Wilson’s
’reception.’ Burgwin was a Wilmingtonian who
lost his life in the Battle of Taos. This 1830
graduate of the U. S. Military Academy came
home to Cape Fear a hero and a reminder of
promise lost in war. The Clarendon Horse
Guard, Wilmington Band of Music, General
Alexander MacRae, the Wilmington Militia and
“thousands (with) tear-stained faces,”
accompanied the body from the dock to the steps
of the Bank of Cape Fear where orator Joshua Grainger Wright, brother of Thomas and William, delivered a lengthy eulogy. He spoke correctly when he said “We receive his moldering remains,” for poor Captain Burgwin had been dead for 15 months. He died February 7, 1847. xi

Photographer Henry W. Bradley (1813-1891) is a creditable guess as photographer of the group of images. Bradley, a Wilmington native possibly studied photography with Samuel Humphrey in 1846. He moved to San Francisco in 1850 and became a well-known photographer. After living in California for nine years, Bradley made the trip cross country to marry Betsy Euphemia Cutlar at St. James Church on September 21, 1858.xii

With many known events and photographers, there are still no definite answers. But we know more than we did in 1981. Perhaps one day, with more research and with the increased sharing of archival material, the event and artist will be revealed.

Part II

About the time I thought the article was essentially complete, I obtained a rare copy of Eyewitness to War, through interlibrary loan. I thought that in studying the whole Amon Carter daguerreotype collection, I might discover some clue. Sure enough, I soon turned a page and found myself staring deeply into the lucent eyes of a familiar soul: Dr. Thomas Henry Wright. Identified only as “unidentified Mason,” I recognized him from a handsome portrait, owned by a Wright family member, that I have published several times. However, the daguerreotype, even with its obvious corner on accuracy, is more poetic, bearing out the words of the Rev. Robert Drane: “In deportment and manners, he had all the gentleness of a woman, but was a man of marked decision and energy of character.”xiii

The illumination of Dr. Wright’s eyes is explained by an advertisement for the photographer, who leased Plumbe’s former studio space in January, 1848. “S. Broad bent has removed to rooms over Messrs. Hart and Polley’s store where he has a sky light built expressly for the daguerreotype. There are several advantages of a skylight. The pictures are stronger, more effective, and in a more pleasing character than those done by a side light — the objection of one side of the face being light and the other dark is obviated, and blue eyes can be as well taken as others.”xiv

John Plumbe Jr.

The inclusion of Dr. Wright sent me back to my notes. They pointed to John Plumbe, Jr., (1809-1857) as the photographer. Plumbe, already known for taking famous landscape scenes, eventually operated studios in a number of cities, including Boston, his home base. His National Plumeotype Gallery, in New York employed 12 fellow photographers to make about 500 photos per day. Plumbe took daguerreotypes that have become national treasures, like his image of the White House, and the U. S. Capitol, with its old copper covered wooden dome. If Plumbe took the first photo of St. James Church, there would be a touch of irony. The same architect who designed Wilmington’s St. James Church, Thomas Ustick Walter, also designed the capitol dome that exists today.

John Plumbe set up a temporary studio and gallery during his short time in Wilmington. “Persons who have not as yet observed likenesses of themselves will do well to pay this interesting gallery a visit, for there are upwards of 200 likenesses, mostly of persons of notoriety...Portraits taken in any weather. Also, likenesses of invalids and deceased persons taken at their private residences...” Though Plumbe ran ads for all his franchises, this particular advertisement is the one that Plumbe used when he himself was behind the cumbersome camera. Characterizing Plumbe as a “civil engineer, author, photographer, print maker, inventor and the first effective advocate for a United States transcontinental railroad”, author Cliff Kraisnik makes the case that Plumbe not only pioneered the concept of franchising, but also brand-name recognition.

I returned to the library to reread the microfilmed newspaper accounts of the period in which Plumbe advertised in Wilmington. After a few hours, the lens of historic fact seemed to twist a bit and the circumstantial picture gained some clarity. The Mexican War shots, many tagged with handwritten identifications, certainly would have fit nicely into Plumbe’s traveling gallery.

Photograph on the next page. Dr. Thomas Henry Wright, c. 1847. Martha Sandweiss, Rick Stewart and Ben W. Huseman, Eyewitness to War: Prints and Daguerreotypes of the Mexican War, 1846-1848. (Amon Carter Museum)
Could his traveling gallery be the answer to Martha A. Sandweiss's question about the Amon Carter Collection: "Were they intended to reach a wider audience through either exhibition or reproduction?" \textsuperscript{xvi}

But simply operating on the theory that Plumbs took the local shots, and based on Plumbs's short stay, Dr. Wright's photo was almost certainly taken on December 27, 1847, shortly before or after the celebration of St. John the Evangelist, at the Masonic Hall. Plumbs's studio was only roughly a block away from the hall. He could have attended the meeting and taken a break to pose his camera on the window ledge, turned it outward, and take the photo of Dr. Wright's house and St. James Church. In so doing, he stood inside one of Wilmington's rare Gothic Revival buildings and shot a photo of another, and much rarer one.\textsuperscript{xvii}

Ironically, within the small Amon Carter Collection, there are daguerreotypes of yet another Gothic Revival structure: Oaklands Mansion, home of the supposed collector, John William Tudor Gardiner, in Gardiner Maine. Designed by Richard Upjohn, father of Gothic architecture in America, Oaklands features the same crenellated parapet as St. James Church. Oddly enough, Richard Upjohn's grandson, Hobart Upjohn, would, in 1922, draw plans for a St. James addition: The Great Hall. Additionally, Hobart Upjohn designed the 1928 First Presbyterian Church.

But what brought John Plumbe, Jr. to Wilmington was probably not a Masonic event, or the beautiful new church, even though his parents, Dr. John Plumbe and Frances Atherton Plumbe, were Episcopalians, and John Jr. entered the church on the cradle roll. If he was here, it was his almost evangelistic drive for a national railway that brought him here. Before he ever learned of Louis Daguerre or the camera he made famous, Plumbe helped survey for a possible rail system across the Allegheny Mountains. He also did civil engineering work for the railroads in North Carolina. According to Clifford Kaimik, "In 1839 he drafted a proposal to Congress for construction of a railroad from Lake Michigan to the western boundary of Iowa. He considered this the first step in construction of a transcontinental railroad." \textsuperscript{xviii}

After Plumbs's studios failed, he embarked on an impassioned campaign to build a coast-to-coast railroad, meeting with officials anytime he could. Directors of several railroads planned to meet in Wilmington, January 6, 1848. "Rail Road Convention," announced The Commercial, December 28, 1847. Someone identified only as a "Petersburg Stockholder" underwrote an entreaty to extend the "Wilmington road to Manchester and to connect the railroads from Baltimore to New Orleans. "If cheapness be added to the present inducements, the travel will be 'prodigious.'"

Interestingly, John Plumbe, Jr. had once held a position with the Petersburg railroad and had also owned studios in New Orleans, as well as the city once spelled Petersborough. Dr. Thomas Henry Wright, in addition to his continuing duties as a founder of the Wilmington and Weldon Railroad, had just been named president of the Wilmington and Manchester Railroad.\textsuperscript{xix}

By January 12, Plumbs had returned to Washington where he photographed President James K. Polk. "I gave a sitting in the dining room to-day for my Daguerreotype likeness. It was taken by Mr. Plumbs," wrote President Polk in his diary. But Plumbs's advertisements ran in Wilmington until January 25. Perhaps Henry Bradley or one of Plumbs's many known associates minded the noisy store, located over the shops of S. P. Folley and Levi A. Hart, copper and tinsmiths who also repaired firearms. Or perhaps Samuel Broadbent, who took over Plumbs's workspace in late January, filled in for him. Broadbent suddenly began to
advertise the use of a skylight about the time
Plumbe would have left town. Additionally,
Brodhent's previous office was only about 15
feet north of Plumb'e's. Interestingly, Bradley's
brother had an office next door, south, to
Plumbe's office. All of them were located on the
eastern side of the zero block of South Front
Street.\textsuperscript{xxi}

Another railroad association, certainly
parenthetical, is that handsome clock in the
tower of St. James Church. Installed a year after
the 1840 church consecration, the clock and
chimes were the gift of Platt K. Dickinson, a
lumber plant owner who is credited with the idea
of the Wilmington and Weldon Railroad. Mr.
Dickinson, according to historian James Sprunt,
"remained through life the leading director." Mr.
Dickinson, guardian to his wife's nephew,
Pembroke Jones, died in 1867.\textsuperscript{xxi}

Yet another rail connection almost
certainly is an Amon Carter daguerreotype
labeled "Unidentified Citizen." The somber
gentleman bears remarkable resemblance to N.
C. Governor Edward Bishop Dudley. Sworn in
New Year's Day, 1837, Dudley was the state's
first popularly elected governor. The first
president of the Wilmington and Weldon
Railroad, he was instrumental in increasing the
state's investment in railroads. And Dudley had
ties with another of Plumbe's famous subjects:
President James K. Polk.\textsuperscript{xxii}

Another real possibility is that Plumbe
trained Henry Bradley then moved to San
Francisco when Bradley relocated there.
Eventually Henry Bradley partnered with
William H. Rulofson to create one of the most
famous daguerreotype businesses in America.
But while Bradley's heart was in photography,
John Plumbe continued his pursuit for a
transcontinental railroad. In the 1850s, Plumbe
moved to Dubuque where he suffered health
problems, additional financial setbacks, and the
knowledge that he was not succeeding in his
Trans-continental railroad plan. On May 29,
1857, Plumbe took his own life.\textsuperscript{xxiii}
Along with the exquisite seduction offered
researchers by mysterious old photographs,
comes professional danger. One day a frayed
letter or flowery journal may emerge that will
put an end to the speculation about the Amon
Carter daguerreotypes. But the risks of guessing
in print are not without pleasure.

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historical works and she is native to and resides
in Wilmington, North Carolina.}]

\textsuperscript{1} Robert Williams. Hugh Caldwell, City of
Wilmington.
\textsuperscript{ii} H. G. Jones: \textit{North Carolina Illustrated, 1524-1984,
files. North Carolina Collection.}
\textsuperscript{iii} Margaret Tannahill Hall, "The Burgwin-Wright
House," \textit{Lower Cape Fear Historical Society Bulletin,
Volume XXII, Issue 2. Author's interview with
Thomas H. Wright (1918-1990), 1990. New Hanover
County Deed Book L, 656.}
\textsuperscript{iv} Bruce Laverty, Curator of Architecture at The
Athenaeum of Philadelphia. St. James Collection
Randall Library Special Collections, UNC-W.
James M. Goode, \textit{Architecture, Politics, and Conflict:
Thomas Ustick Walter and the Enlargement of the
United States Capitol, 1850-1865.}
\textsuperscript{v} \textit{Wilmington Journal}, December 18, 1847
\textsuperscript{vi} \textit{Wilmington Chronicle}, May 24, 1848.
\textsuperscript{vii} \textit{Wilmington Chronicle}, January 30, 1846, December
25, 1846, February 4, 1846, April 1, 1846. Stephen E.
Massengill, "The Mysterious Daguerreotype of
Market Street," \textit{Waves & Currents} (Cape Fear
Museum), Vol. 15, No. 2.
\textsuperscript{viii} \textit{Wilmington Chronicle}, May 24, 1848.
\textsuperscript{ix} \textit{Wilmington Journal}, February 11, 1848.
\textsuperscript{x} \textit{Wilmington Commercial}, October 26, 1847; October
30, 1847, November 2, 1847. \textit{Wilmington Journal},
\textsuperscript{xi} \textit{Wilmington Chronicle}, May 24, 1848. Walter
Burgwin Jones, \textit{The Jones-Burgwin Family History,
Montgomery, Alabama, 1913.}
\textsuperscript{xii} Peter E. Palmquist, photographic notes on file at the
N. C. Library, courtesy of Steve Massengill, archivist.
Handwritten note by the Rev. R. B. Drane, presented
documentation of the marriage: Custar family file,
Lower Cape Fear Historical Society Archives.
\textsuperscript{xiii} The Rev. R. B. Drane, "An Address Delivered in St.
James Church, Wilmington, North Carolina, at the
interment of Dr. Thomas Henry Wright." North
Carolina Collection, Wilson Library, University of North
Carolina.
\textsuperscript{xxiv} \textit{Wilmington Commercial}, January 29, 1848.
\textsuperscript{xxv} \textit{Wilmington Commercial}, January 1, 5, and 6, 1848
(including advertisement issuance date of Dec. 29,
1847). Getty Museum site:
http://www.getty.edu/art/collections/bio/a1979-1.html
\textsuperscript{xxvi} Martha A. Sandweiss, \textit{Print the Legend:
\textsuperscript{xxvii} Plumbe's biographer, daguerreotype authority Cliff
Krainik, agrees that this is Plumbe's signature ad, but
makes no official comment on the possibility of
Plumbe being the Amon Carter daguerreotypist.
\textsuperscript{xxviii} Conversation and correspondence with Clifford
Krainik, 2003. Daguerreotype.com
\textsuperscript{xxix} \textit{Wilmington Commercial}, December 28, 1847;
November 4, 1847.
xx Archivist Marvin W. Kranz, Diaries of President Polk, Library of Congress. (According to John S. Craig, author of Daguerreotype.com, one firm in Saratoga Springs once filled in for N. S. Bennett “after a boat explosion prevented Bennett from going there.”)


xxii Wayne Cutlar, Polk Presidential scholar.

xxii Clifford Kranik.

On the right, United States Building, John Plumbe, Jr. c. 1846 (J Paul Getty Museum)