GOVERNOR JOSEPH RITNER
Daguerreotype by William W. Stocq.

Courtesy Pennsylvania Historical and Museum Commission
JOSEPH RITNER: A DAGUERREOTYPE

BY WILLIAM N. RICHARDS*

THERE are several very well known pictorial representations of Joseph Ritner, Pennsylvania's Governor from 1835 to 1839. Among them is a formal portrait by Jacob Eichholtz, a copy of which is owned by The Historical Society of Pennsylvania. Another is the famous campaign lithograph of 1838, showing a portly Governor Ritner standing by a newly-turned furrow of earth with his hand on a plow. A good portrait of the gentleman is in the collections of the Historical Society of Dauphin County. Ritner's biographers have made extensive use of these pictures in one form or another.

It is now possible to make an important addition to this list: a daguerreotype of Ritner taken several years after he had ceased to be governor. A reproduction of the picture accompanies this brief note.

The daguerreotype comes to us as a second-hand item. The Pennsylvania Historical and Museum Commission now owns a collection of some twenty-five hundred photographic glass negatives made by the late William W. Stoey, a Harrisburg taxidermist, naturalist, and amateur photographer. In that collection is one negative catalogued as follows:

938 Gov. Joseph Ritner Copy Aug. 23rd 1901. Taken 40 years ago Dagoo. type.

*Mr. William N. Richards, Assistant State Historian, is in charge of the television work of the Pennsylvania Historical and Museum Commission. In this connection he has recently been examining the Commission's extensive collections of old pictures, with the interesting result described in this article. Mr. Richards wishes to acknowledge the advice on daguerreotypes so kindly given by Mr. John Witthof, State Anthropologist.
A print made from this plate revealed that Mr. Stoey had tacked the original daguerreotype of Ritner to either the wall of his studio or a fence in his garden and had photographed it, thereby producing the negative now owned by the Commission. Stoey’s negative shows both the tacks he used and the grain of the wood in the wall or fence. It shows also the striations or burnishing marks which are typical of all daguerreotypes.

Unhappily the present whereabouts of the original daguerreotype are unknown, and the only positive identification of Ritner as the subject of the picture lies in Stoey’s catalogue citation. However, the fact that Stoey’s mother was a cousin of the Governor, her maiden name being Rachel Ritner, gives substance to the conclusion that the identification is correct. Possibly the daguerreotype was a family possession. It is doubtful that the original itself would yield more information than that given by Stoey, since daguerreotypes were rarely identified either as to subject or photographer. The face of this picture, as printed from the copy negative, sheds no light on the identity of either person.

The condition of the daguerreotype at the time Stoey copied it some fifty years ago indicates that it had not been well cared for. The picture had evidently even then been out of its protective case for a long time. Both the face and the edges of the plate were badly scratched and marred. It is unlikely that the original would be in usable form for copying if rediscovered today. Indeed, the chances for locating it now appear to be very remote, since Stoey’s daughter, now deceased, disposed of his belongings and collections after his death in 1926.

It should be noted that the dark striped area in the upper portion of the picture, cutting across the face of the subject just at the eyes, is the result of Stoey’s efforts to improve his own negative. He attempted to eliminate the very bad scratches above Ritner’s head by varnishing the glass plate and rubbing the varnished area with graphite. The efforts were obviously unsuccessful, although the procedure was a standard photographic technique.

There is some room for doubt concerning the time when Ritner posed for the daguerreotype. In his catalogue, Stoey frequently entered the date on which he made a particular negative. In this case it was 1901. The note, “40 years ago,” in his entry for the Ritner picture would place the date for the original in 1861. The art of
daguerreotypy, introduced into this country at New York late in 1839, was swiftly made obsolete by the invention of the wet colloidion process in 1851. Because of its great advantages, the wet plate process was accepted very rapidly by most photographers. While there is no assurance of accuracy in the estimate, the suggestion that Ritner posed for his daguerreotype portrait during the 1840's, that is, within ten years after leaving office or when he was between the ages of 59 and 69, must not be taken lightly. The use of daguerreotypy as a photographic procedure as late as 1861, when Ritner was 81 years old, was most unusual, although not unknown.

Barring complete error in the identification of the subject as Ritner, it seems quite likely that this might be the earliest known photographic representation of any of the men who had served as governors of the Commonwealth. Ritner’s term ended before daguerreotypy had been introduced to America, but his long life span carried him well into the years when it and better processes were common. Only three of his predecessors in office lived long enough to become possible subjects for photographic portraits: William Findlay lived until 1846; John A. Shulze until 1852; and George Wolf until 1840. Perhaps photographs of these men exist; if so, they are at present unknown and the Historical and Museum Commission would be pleased to have copies of them. Photographs of Ritner’s successors should be less difficult to find.

But, whether a “first” or not, this picture of Ritner, revealing as it does his rugged countenance bearing so determined and stern an expression, is an interesting and valuable addition to the growing photographic record of Pennsylvania history. It may serve as an incentive for the publication of other early daguerreotypes.