

Images of Common Wealth

Linda A. Ries

It is a pleasure to present the following essays on historical photography in Pennsylvania. Photographs have much to tell us about human nature; an image made long ago or as recently as yesterday adds to this the perspective of time. A single image properly examined can contain a wealth of visual and artifactual information about its creator and its subject. Many images collectively examined offer new vantage points for social history.

All too often historical photographs are used to embellish a published work, presented as 'eye candy,' something to provide a break from pages of text. Images are frequently researched as an afterthought, that is, after text is prepared and ready for the printer. Sometimes cropped, or not provided with proper captions and provenance, the image's original integrity is lost. The page is turned, and the photograph, having provided its marketing usefulness, is passed on by the reader, until the next several pages when another is presented.

This is somewhat ironic, for often a master negative or transparency, present in the camera the moment the action took place, is sometimes the only surviving primary resource, a silent eyewitness, for a particular subject or event. Written analysis and research occur minutes, hours, or years after the fact. Image research, conducted in conjunction with the written record can modify or profoundly alter perceptions and conclusions about the past.

The visual record is now valued by a growing number of historians as a significant tool for studying and investigating history. This is perhaps due in part to recent consciousness-raising among photograph historians, and the realization that image-making is not just a fine art, another irony, for photography struggled in its infancy to be recognized as such. The best known and dramatic example of the ability of photography to alter the perceived past is probably William Frassanito's analysis of images of the dead on the battlefield at Gettysburg. Frassanito shattered a century-long belief that the corpses, photographed by Alexander Gardner, were both northern and southern, and proved, among many other matters, that certain groups were simply the same bodies photographed from different angles. Gardner had manipulated these images in order to support his ideas about the nature and horror of war. Frassanito's works, *Gettysburg: A Journey in Time* (1975), and *Early Photography in Gettysburg* (1995), have contributed to the current phenomenal interest by the amateur public in nineteenth-century photographs and the Civil War in general.

The voracious and growing appetite of broadcast media constantly demands 'new' images (or possibly never before seen by a particular audience). Filmmaker Ken Burn's various documentaries, and public television programs such as *The American Experience*, *American Masters*, and cable TV's The History Channel, not to mention the local media, have created a burgeoning national market for photographs to the delight of the historical institutions in which they languish.

It is also perhaps due to the growing interest for individuals and families to discover their own past, and their place in it. Though records of birth, marriage and death provide vital information, it is the family photograph which gives a long dead ancestor a soul.

Pennsylvania entrepreneurs, especially in the Philadelphia region, were pioneers in photography's scientific and artistic development. Among the many events and personages: Philadelphian Joseph Saxton created the earliest known surviving example of a daguerreotype in the western hemisphere. His delicate image of the Central High School for Boys survives today among the collections of the Historical Society of Pennsylvania. Robert Cornelius, also of Philadelphia, opened one of the world's first commercial photography studios (then called galleries) in the Spring of 1840. Working with chemist Paul Beck Goddard, Cornelius experimented with various chemical agents to successfully shorten exposure times. Marcus Root, who, along with his brother Samuel, had galleries at mid-century in New York and Philadelphia, was a nationally known advocate of photography, and considered one of the premier portraitists of his day. The creation of modern aerial photography, aerial mapping, and photogrammetry equipment was pioneered by the Brock and Weymouth Company, and their technical applications advanced even farther by the Aero Service Company, which began at Patco Field just after World War I. Many more achievements can be added to this brief list.

Pennsylvania is equally blessed to harbor a number of pioneering and internationally recognized historians of photography, some of whom have authored works in this issue. In the 1980s the late William C. Darrah of Gettysburg College wrote the definitive and still unsurpassed texts on cartes-de-visite and stereographs. Kenneth Finkel of the Library Company of Philadelphia (now with the William Penn Foundation), is an acknowledged expert on the early photography and photographers of that city. William Frassanito, mentioned above, continues to discover vital information about images of Gettysburg and the people who took them. Heinz Henisch, now retired from Penn State University, founded and was first editor of the acclaimed journal *History of Photography*. He and his wife Bridget have collaborated on a number of publications, most recently a study of overpainted photographs. Jay Ruby of Temple University is a scholar on the anthropology of visual communication.

Rather than concentrate on 'movers and shakers,' pioneering aspects, or important images, the emphasis here is on social aspects of the medium. How was the camera used, whether by private or professional photographers, and why a certain way? What were the reactions to certain images by their viewers? Several essays deal with the advent of the hand-held camera in the late 1880s. By the mid-1890s, photography was a full-blown popular pastime for the amateur or non-professional. As this began just over one hundred years ago, it seems appropriate to celebrate it now. Several types of photographers are also examined, from the freewheeling styles of Horace Engle and Francis Cooper, the 'amateur experiences' of Julius Sachse, to the formal professionalism of Elias Goldensky. An effort has also been made to represent the state geographically, not just the Philadelphia area.

Though these essays are Keystoneian perspectives on the history of photography, they can be considered a microcosm of the medium's evolution worldwide. This issue of *Pennsylvania History* features the first ever color pages to grace the journal. The editor wishes to thank Ray Holland for his generous support in the production of this special issue. May there be many more.