

JAMES MCCLEES: “BEST ADAPTED TO THE BUSINESS”

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Abstract: This vignette examines the business of Philadelphia photographer James McClees who successfully made the transition from daguerreotypes to paper photography.

Keywords: photography, daguerreotypes, Philadelphia

*B*orn in Coatesville, Pennsylvania, in 1821, James McClees moved to Philadelphia as a young boy. Philadelphia became a center for early American photography with the city's first commercial daguerreotype studio opening in the spring of 1840, and in 1844 McClees joined this new profession by working in the studio of Montgomery P. Simons. What attracted McClees to daguerreotyping is not known, but this was the start of a successful career that would span more than two decades and reflect the evolution of photographic processes and the profession.

Montgomery Simons may have trained McClees too well in the art of daguerreotyping for within a few years McClees had opened his own competing studio with a partner, former engraver Washington Lafayette Germon. McClees and Germon in an 1848 advertisement described their studio as having “every advantage of light, location and genteel privacy” and apparently the public agreed. As with most daguerreotypists, the bulk of McClees and

Germon's business centered on taking studio portraits, but the two men also advertised that they could produce "views of public buildings, store fronts, &c. taken according to order." The partners also gave instructions in taking daguerreotypes and sold photographic equipment.¹ McClees and Germon stayed in business together at different Philadelphia locations for almost a decade, producing award-winning daguerreotypes. When fire destroyed their studio in 1855, however, McClees decided to go into business on his own.

Although McClees may have been exaggerating slightly when he declared in an 1856 advertisement (fig. 1) that his was "the only establishment in the city in which all styles of photography are produced," he was certainly accurate in his implication that all his fellow daguerreotypists were not successfully making the transition to the newer forms of photography being introduced in the 1850s.² As early as 1853, McClees was making images by using glass negatives and printing the photographs on paper. The Library Company of Philadelphia's collection includes approximately seventy-five paper photographs of Philadelphia taken by McClees during the 1850s, making his work some of the earliest paper photographic views ever produced of the city. McClees traveled around Philadelphia, photographing churches, schools, residences, banks, hotels, bridges, and other noteworthy sites and printing them in both small and large formats (see fig. 2).


A year after McClees went into business on his own, the *Photographic and Fine Art Journal* published a series of articles evaluating studios in New York and Philadelphia including McClees' establishment. "We cannot speak too highly of this gallery," declared the article. "It is well arranged and fitted up and contains a splendid array of pictures. . . . The gallery is light, and shows the pictures to advantage. It is an excellent studio."³ The *Philadelphia Press* urged its readers "who have taste to admire and appreciate works of real merit" to visit McClees' gallery and view the works on exhibit.⁴

These reviews highlight the mid-nineteenth-century belief that McClees' studio, as well as other first-class photographic studios, were not just places of commerce—a site where one went to have one's portrait taken—but were destinations for those seeking cultural enrichment. Photographic manuals advised photographers to place sculpture, engravings, paintings, and other works of art in their waiting rooms to enhance the potential customer's experience. These status symbols also served to remind the public that top-notch photographers considered themselves to be artists on an equal footing with painters or sculptors.⁵ Endorsements from respected artists also added to a photographer's cachet. The 1848 advertisement for McClees and Germon's

new studio, for example, declared that it enjoyed the patronage of “the best Painters and Engravers in the city.”⁶

James McClees’ interest in aligning his photographic business with the fine arts may also have been an indication of the direction his career was to

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(SUCCESSOR TO MCLEES & GERMON.)



P H O T O G R A P H E R,
No. 160 CHESTNUT ST., bel. SEVENTH,
PHILADELPHIA.

.....

This Establishment is the *most elegant and best adapted* to the Business of any in the United States, not only are the arrangements the most complete for every Style of the **Daguerreotype**, but also, for **Photography upon Glass, Paper, or Canvass** of all Sizes, from **LOCKET** to **LIFE SIZE**; plain or finished in **Oil or Water Color**, or in **Indian Ink or Crayon**.

Parties residing at a distance, who may possess a Daguerreotype of a **VALUED FRIEND**, can by sending the Daguerreotype, per Express, have returned to them a **Large Picture**, in either of the above Styles. Pamphlets containing full particulars will be sent on application. This is the only Establishment in this City, in which all Styles of **PHOTOGRAPHY** are produced.

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FIGURE 1: Advertisement in *Byram's Illustrated Business Directory of Philadelphia*, Philadelphia: J. H. Byram, 1856. The Library Company of Philadelphia.



FIGURE 2: James McClees, *Engine house of the Twenty-Fourth Ward Water Works . . . Philadelphia*, salted paper photograph, ca. 1854. The Library Company of Philadelphia.

move next. In 1867 he sold his Philadelphia studio to one of his employees and became a dealer in fine art. He had already given up the Washington, DC, photographic business he had opened in the mid-1850s. James McClees remained a fine arts dealer until his death at age sixty-seven in the spring

of 1887. The *Philadelphia Photographer* noted that with McClees' death, "one more 'father of photography' had gone to rest."⁷ McClees' career, which began when photography was in its infancy, diversified to include the selling of equipment and the giving of instructions, and evolved to embrace new technological advances as they became available. McClees' success was based on his talents and his ability to adapt to circumstances.

NOTES

1. Broadside, *McClees & Germon Daguerreotype Rooms, S.E. Corner of Chestnut and 8th Sts., Philadelphia* ([Philadelphia, Pa.]: G.S. Harris, printer, No. 119 N. 4th St., [1848?]), The Library Company of Philadelphia (sm # Am 1848 McClees 105443.D (Doret)).
2. *Byram's Illustrated Business Directory of Philadelphia, 1856* ([Philadelphia, PA]: J. H. Byram, 1856), 51.
3. Cuique Suum, "The Photographic Galleries of America. Number Two—Philadelphia," *Photographic and Fine Art Journal*, April 1, 1856, 125.
4. James E. McClees, *Elements of Photography* (Philadelphia: J. H. Jones & Co., printers, 1855), 35.
5. Philadelphia photographer Marcus Root wrote extensively about this topic particularly in *The Camera and the Pencil; or the Heliographic Art* (Philadelphia: Lippincott; New York: Appleton, 1864).
6. *McClees & Germon Daguerreotype Rooms*.
7. "Obituary," *Philadelphia Photographer*, June 1887, 373.0.