

St. Petersburg, Florida

Benefit Auction Breaks Records, and Mystery of "Daguerreian Holy Grail" Revealed at Lecture

by Jeanne Schinto
Photos courtesy Daguerreian Society

On the evening of October 29, 2011, at the Hilton St. Petersburg Bayfront Hotel in St. Petersburg, Florida (one week before the Skinner sale of Rod MacKenzie's early photography at its Boston gallery), the Daguerreian Society's annual benefit auction took place, offering 52 lots of photographic images. The sale netted over \$12,500, a record for the nonprofit organization. The organizers claimed another record for the sale's sell-through rate. Usually it's about 85%; this year, all but one lot found buyers.

"What we're especially proud of is that this happened in a down economy, at a time when the market for early photography is down with it," said society board member and auction organizer Greg French of Jamaica Plain, Massachusetts. "We're bucking the trend."

Collector organizations are the lifeblood of any collecting field. Many are experiencing a shrinking base of active members, and the Daguerreian Society is no exception. In the past some 200 attended the symposium to listen to lectures, shop

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the trade fair, and socialize with other collectors, dealers, auction-house representatives, and independent and institutional scholars. This year, half that number attended. But absentee bidders made the difference at the auction. According to French, prices were so strong this year because 27 absentee bidders placed almost 100 bids, another record. Two years ago they had exactly four absentee bids.

Anyone, not just society members, can leave bids, but the majority of bidders were members of the organization who could not be in St. Petersburg on that weekend. French said he and his colleagues "tend to think of absentee bidders as remote, but the revelation is that these are mostly members who can't attend for whatever reasons, and this is their way of staying involved."

The society's stated mission is dedication to the "history, science, and art of the daguerreotype." Reflecting society members' primary interest, most of the auction was devoted to vintage images, but the sale's top lot was a pair of contemporary daguerreotypes. They were made by society co-president Mike Robinson, owner of Century Darkroom in Toronto. Widely recognized as one of the few accomplished modern practitioners of daguerreotypy, Robinson has had works acquired by George Eastman House in Rochester, New York; Amon Carter Museum of American Art in Fort Worth, Texas; and several Canadian institutions.

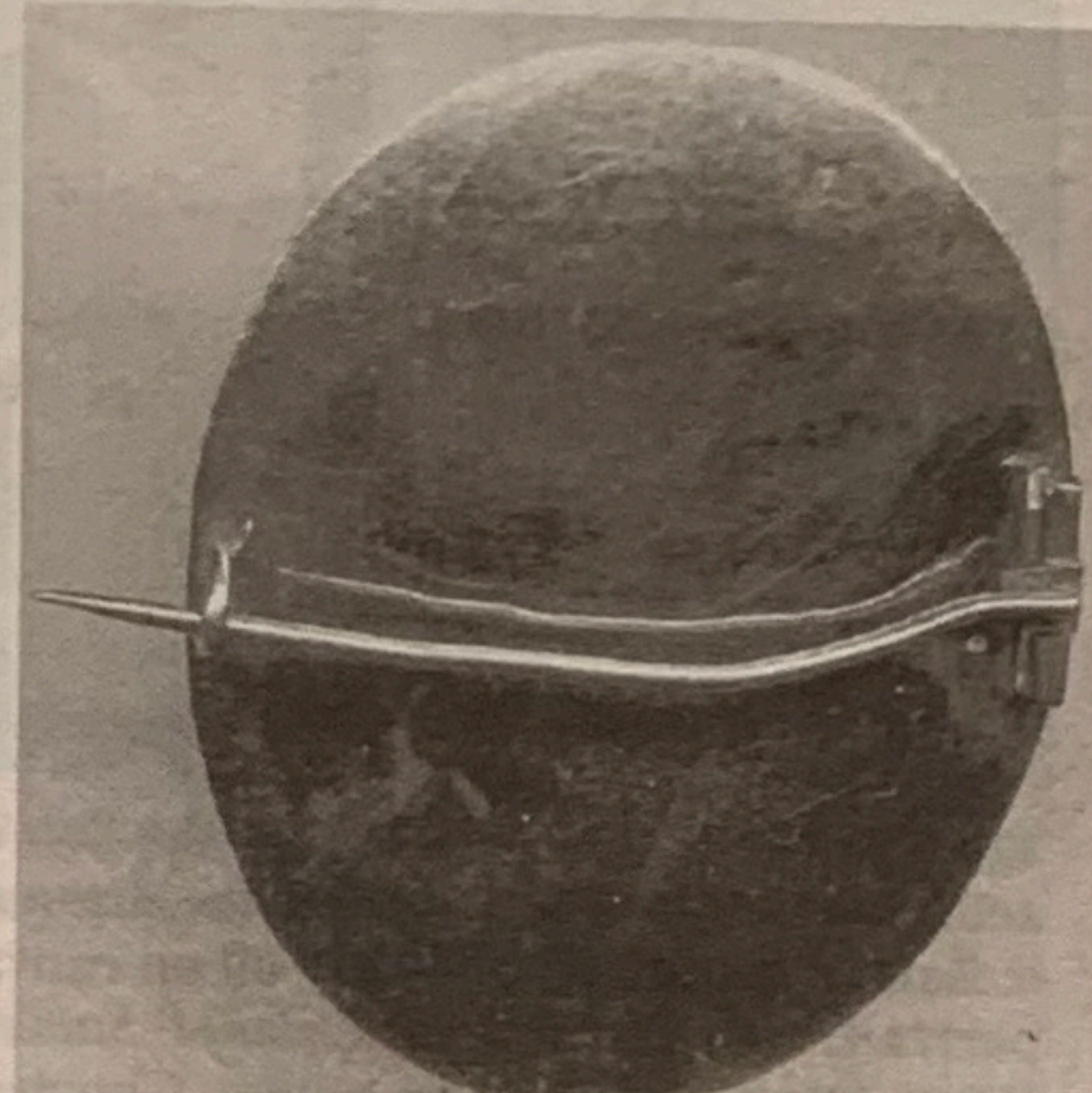
The subject of the daguerreotypes that sold at the symposium auction was Lacock Abbey in England, once home of W. Henry Fox Talbot



A sixth-plate daguerreotype of a girl holding a pictorial book of Wild West scenes sold for a bargain \$770. The image is by Samuel Broadbent (1810-1880/81) of Philadelphia.



A daguerreian brooch encasing a 1 1/4" x 1" image of a child with a curl and a toy trumpet brought \$1100. It was the top price of the vintage material in the sale.



A 3 1/2" x 2 1/2" tintype of a Native American family with a white man, perhaps a scout, sold for \$935. The price included Charley Reynolds: Soldier, Hunter, Scout and Guide by John E. Remsburg and George J. Remsburg.

(1800-1877), inventor of the paper negative-positive photographic process. Their buyer in the room was dealer Alex Novak of Vintage Works in Chalfont, Pennsylvania, who paid \$3630 (includes buyer's premium).

The top vintage lot was a piece of daguerreian jewelry, an image encased in a brooch. It went to collector Robert E. Haines of Kingston, New York, at \$1100. The underbidder, society vice-president and symposium organizer Sally Anyan, said, "I took Bob to the limit. I made him pay."

Haines said, "Yes, I paid top dollar, but it's very rare to find a brooch with an image with interesting content." Usually they're just straight portraits. "But there was that little boy with a curl on the top of his head, sitting in an old velvet chair, with that toy trumpet he's holding in both hands, as if he's about to play it. I loved that thing from the minute I saw it in the book." He was referring to the 2005 book about photographic jewelry, *Tokens of Affection and Regard: Daguerreotype American History Photography* by Patricia A. Abbott and Larry J. West.

"I've been collecting daguerreotypes since 1959 when I was eighteen," Haines went on. "My great-aunt gave me some family daguerreotypes, and I ran to the antiques store uptown [in Kingston] and bought a whole box of twenty images for twenty dollars. It had in it three Civil War soldiers and



Bidders debated over whether this was a postmortem or a sleeping baby. The buyer, who paid \$770, thought it was the former. For having been made out of doors rather than in a studio, it was an unusual image in either instance.

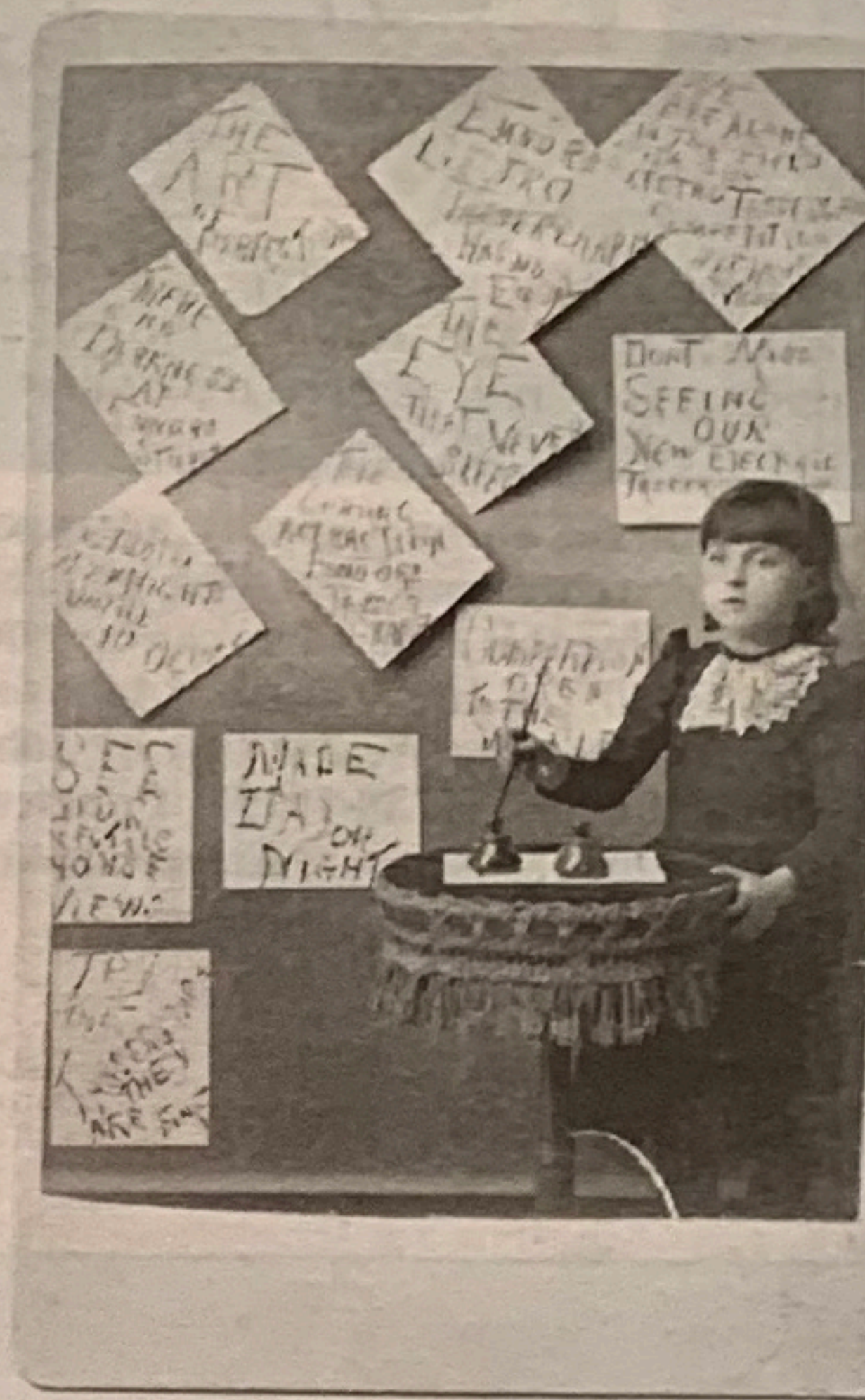
an ambrotype of a fireman."

At the trade fair in St. Petersburg, Haines bought two ninth-plate tinted daguerreotypes of a firefighter in two different poses in thermoplastic frames for \$2500. "When I saw them on the dealer's table, I had to have them," he said.

Haines took them out of the frames when he got home and found the original trade cards of their maker, Boston daguerreotypist Addison A. Fish, along with a handwritten identification of the sitter, Asa D. Smith. A brief computer search turned up an Asa Dodge Smith (1804-1877), who was the seventh president of Dartmouth College, serving from 1863 until his death. Comparing images of that Smith with the volunteer in the daguerreotypes is the next step.

Though she wasn't successful on the brooch, Anyan did win another great image, paying \$605 for a sixth-plate daguerreotype of two little girls clutching dolls. "I don't collect images of dolls, but I had two sisters, one surviving. The other we lost to breast cancer," said Anyan. "So that image spoke to me about my family."

Each year the symposium is hosted by an institution. This year it was the Museum of Fine Arts, St. Petersburg, which has lately become one of the major repositories of photography in the southeastern United States. The transformation occurred because two gifts increased its holdings from about 1500 images to more than 14,000, and they cover almost all known photographic methods from earliest



A 6 1/2" x 4 1/4" cabinet card of the Famous Bay Window Photograph Gallery in Stevens Point, Wisconsin, brought \$192.50. The girl's handwritten signs (e.g., "Made Day or Night," "Studio Open Nights Untill [sic] 10 O'clock," "There is no Darkness at Ennors Studio," "The Eye That Never Sleeps," "The Art of Perfection") document the studio's marketing savvy.



A 3 3/8" x 2 1/2" tintype, perhaps members of the so-called Broom Brigade, sold for \$357.50. Of the women's organization that spread throughout the country in the 1880's, Mark Twain wrote in *Life on the Mississippi*: "It is composed of young ladies who dress in a uniform costume, and go through the infantry drill, with broom in place of musket...I saw them go through their complex manual with grace, spirit, and admirable precision. I saw them do every thing which a human being can possibly do with a broom, except sweep."

daguerreotypes and salt prints to mid-20th-century gelatin silver prints. Most of the images were originally collected by Dr. Robert L. and Chitranee Drapkin, longtime friends of the museum. More recently, Ludmila and Bruce Dandrew acquired a large part of the Drapkins' collection. In 2009 the Dandrews gave approximately 9500 images to the museum. The Drapkins added 2900 more in 2010.

To coincide with the symposium, the museum opened a new exhibit, *Sitter and Subject in Nineteenth-Century Photography*, featuring approximately

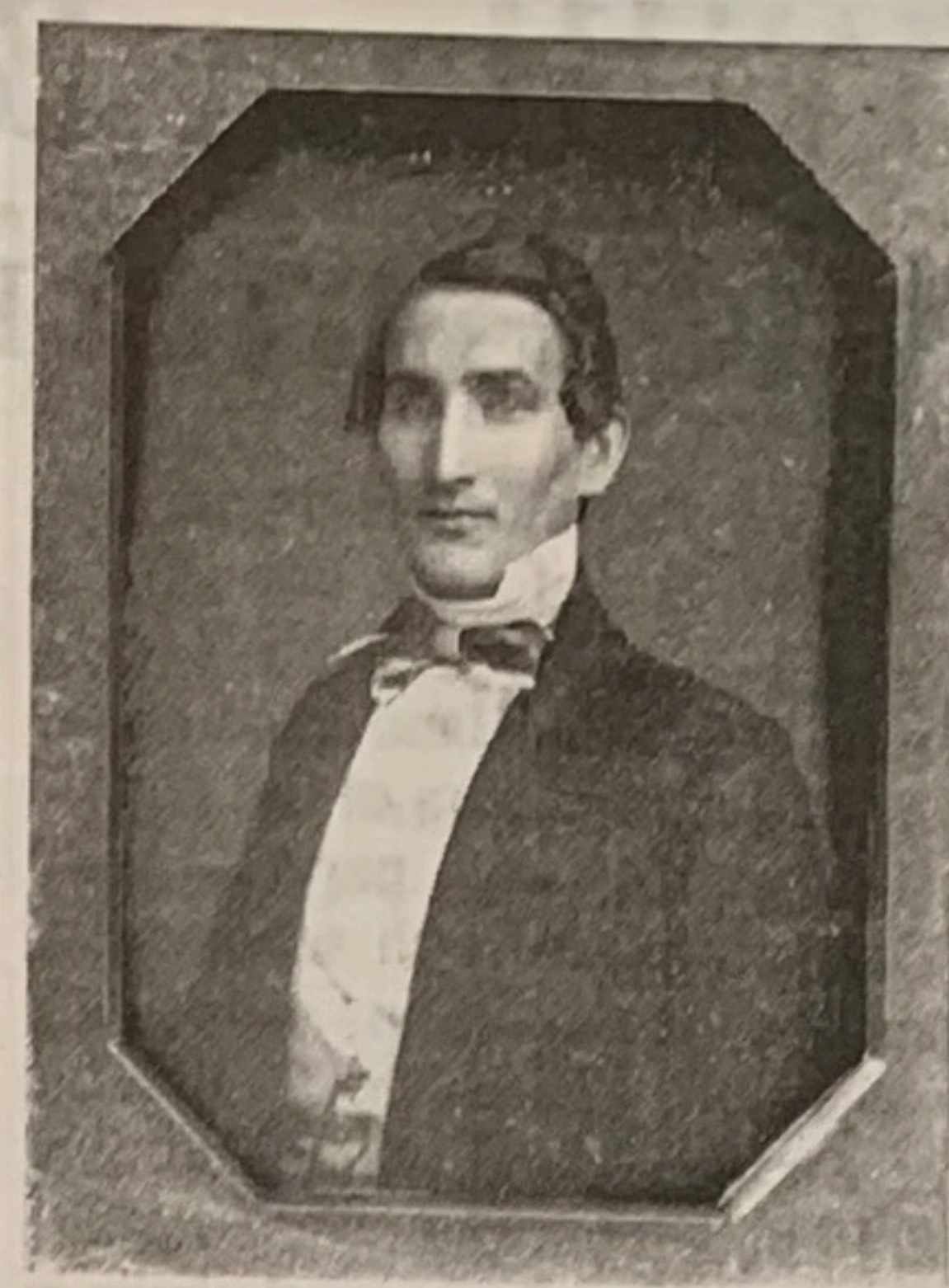
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A quarter-plate daguerreotype of a mother and three children in a very unusual case sold to an absentee bidder for \$550. The front is typical of a pressed-paper example with mother-of-pearl inlay, but the back features a gold, red, and green parakeet in jappaned paint.



Sally Anyan bought this sixth-plate daguerreotype for \$605.



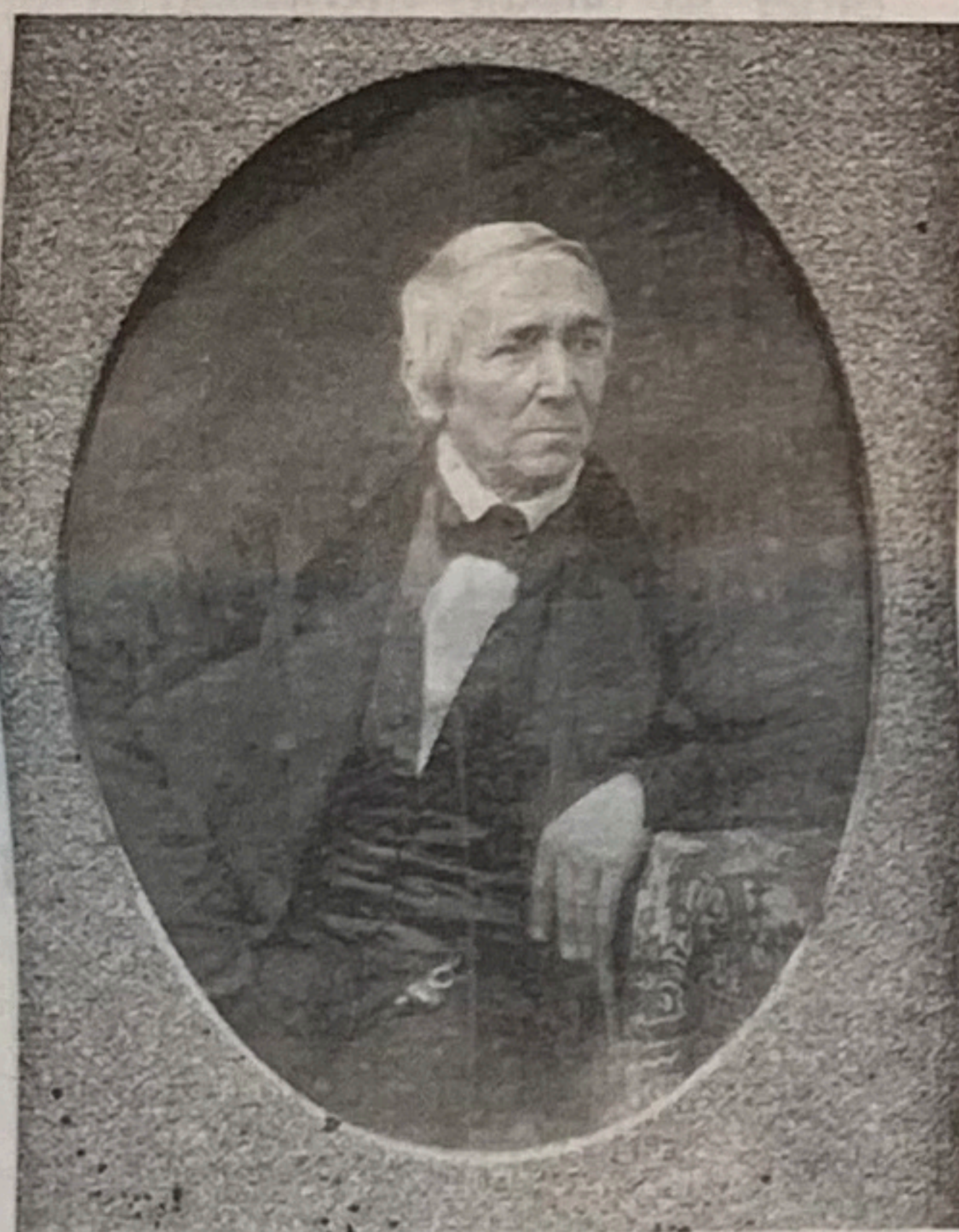
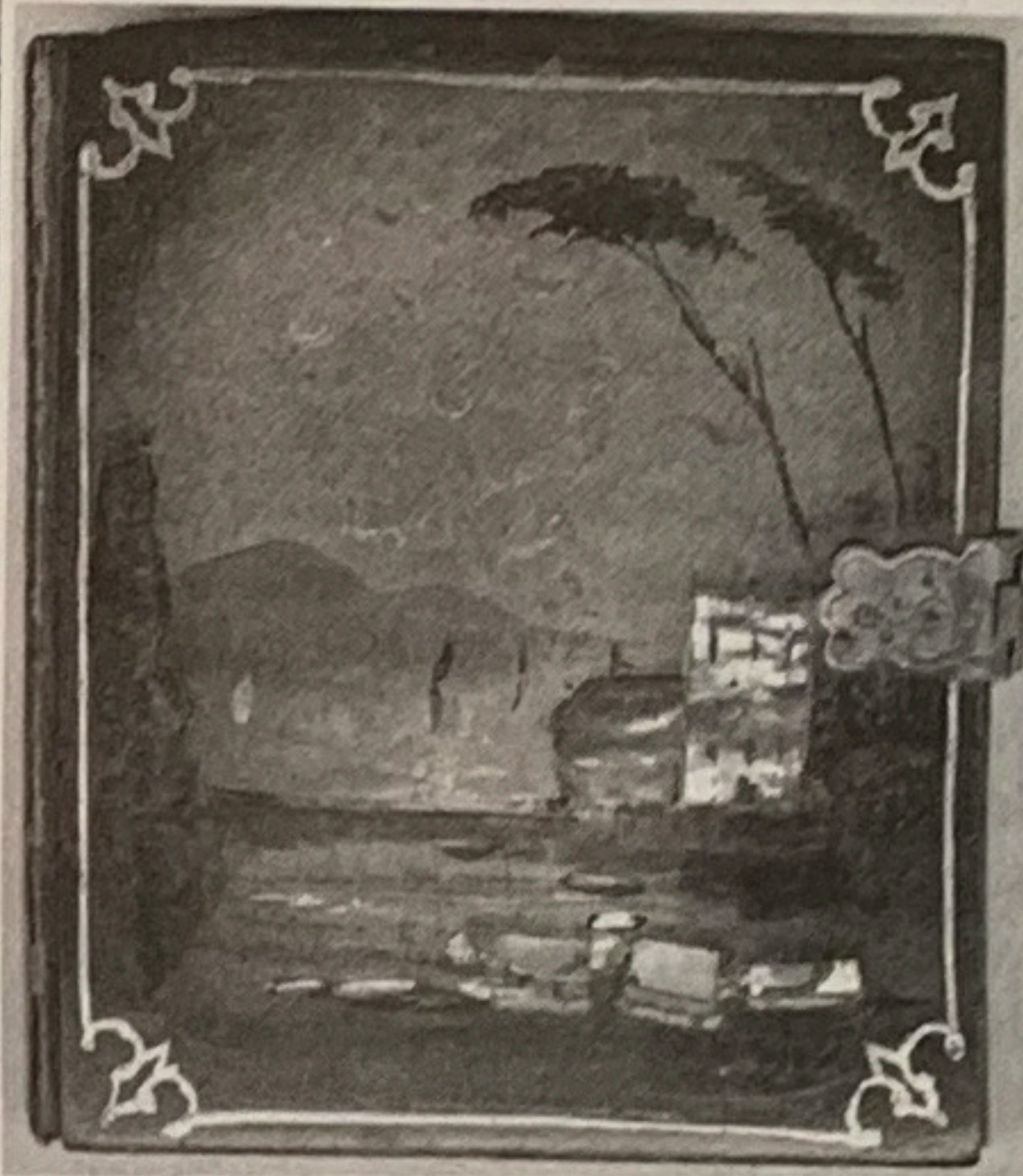
A quarter-plate daguerreotype of a young man by Mathew Brady fetched \$935. It was made in the Brady studio at 205-207 Broadway, New York City. Both the underbidder and the winner said they were attracted by that particular Brady address.



A sixth-plate daguerreotype of a street scene fetched \$825.



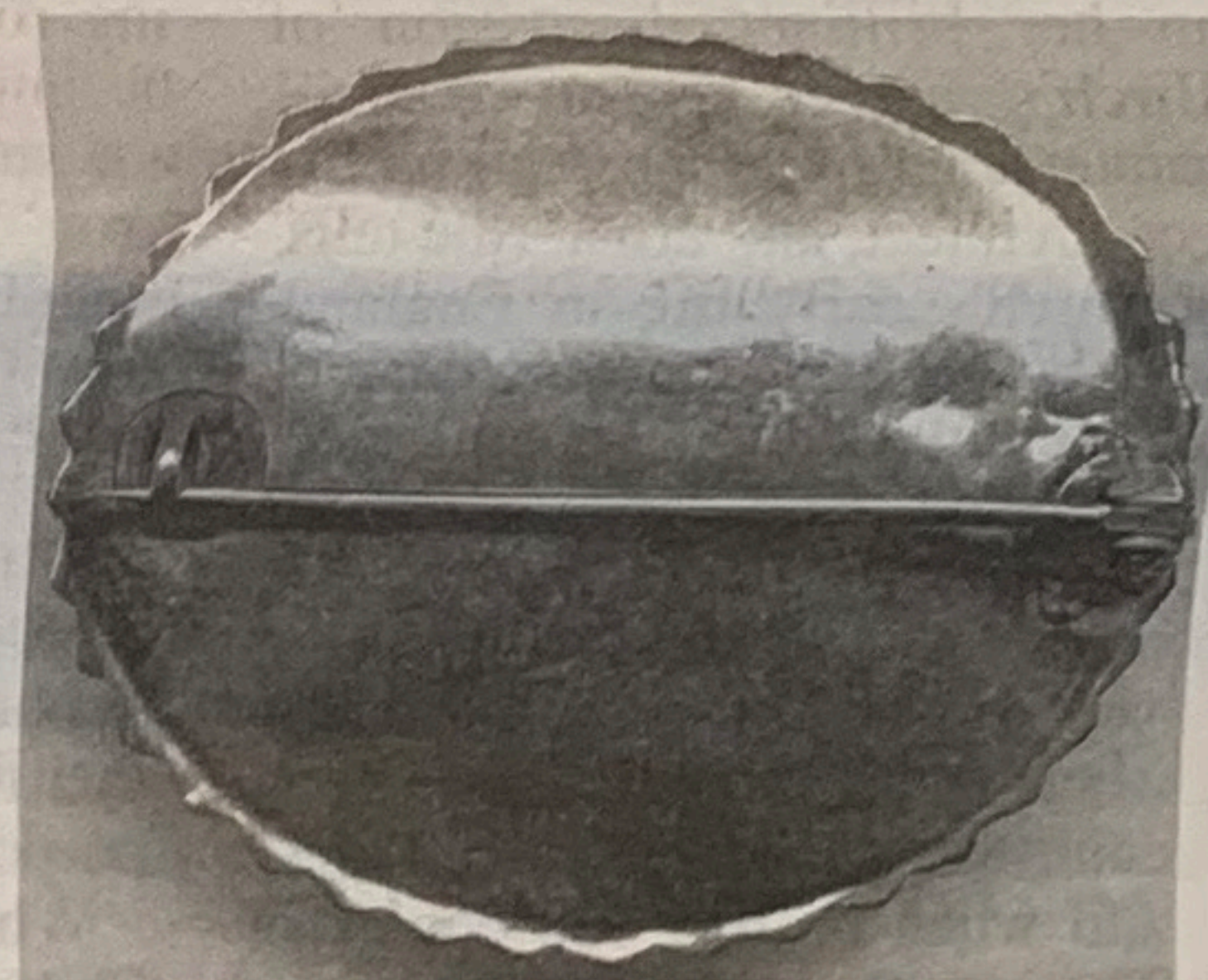
A sixth-plate daguerreotype of a girl with hand-tinted pink bow and cheeks sold for \$577.50. The case is pressed paper jappaned with a tropical motif.



A half-plate daguerreotype by Root's Gallery in a leather case with eagle motif made \$440. Pictured in *Nineteenth Century Photographic Cases and Wall Frames* by Paul K. Berg, it houses a daguerreotype portrait of an elderly man. Thermoplastic cases are more desirable, but the eagle is a rarity on a leather example.



A brooch/locket sold to Bob Haines for \$330. The cover of the locket shows an enigmatic scene of a mountain and lake with a circular staircase. Inside (not shown) is a daguerreotype, slightly smaller than 1 1/4" x 1", of a bearded young man with tousled hair.



60 portraits from the Dandrew-Drapkin collection. Highlights include a pair of important full-plate daguerreotype portraits by Boston's Southworth and Hawes. One is of New Hampshire statesman Daniel Webster; the other is of Alvin Adams, the shipping magnate whose company later became Adams Express. The exhibit will be on view until at least April 15, said curatorial assistant Sabrina Hughes. For more information, see the museum's Web site (www.fine-arts.org).

Throughout the weekend, scholars presented new research on Joseph Nicéphore Niépce, Mathew Brady, and Robert H. Vance. None was more noteworthy than Gary Ewer's slide lecture on Vance (1825-1876), whose approximately 300 spectacular full-plate daguerreotypes of the cities, towns, and landscapes of California during the gold rush period were exhibited in New York City and St. Louis before all traces of them disappeared.

Ewer began collecting daguerreotypes and other cased images in 1980. In 1993, he said, "When my tastes outgrew my pocketbook, I shifted my focus toward scholarship." A member of the society since its inception, he has served as secretary and as Web site developer for the organization. He has also published articles in the society's *Daguerreian Annual* and lectured at symposia in the past. He characterized his Vance lecture as "likely to be the best story that I will ever get to tell."

Vance arrived in San Francisco in late 1850 to embark on an ambitious endeavor that was "both unprecedented and monumental," said Ewer. The result was multiple panoramic views of San Francisco, Sacramento, Coloma, Placerville, Stockton, Sonoma, Nevada City, and other towns; views of miners while at their work; images of native

Californians; and a handful of views of other cities along the Pacific route. Finishing his task in the summer of 1851, Vance then took his views to New York City, had them framed in rosewood and gilt, and opened his exhibition at 349 Broadway in October of that same year.

The exhibition received excellent reviews but wasn't widely advertised and failed to attract a paying audience. Vance quietly closed the exhibition, returned to San Francisco, and left the collection in Manhattan. He subsequently sold it in 1853. The last published research, done by photography historian Peter E. Palmquist (1936-2003) in 1998, located the collection in St. Louis in 1857 with its subsequent fate entirely unknown.

Vance's lost images were referred to by the esteemed Palmquist as "a Daguerreian Holy Grail." "I dare say we've

all fantasized about finding them, haven't we?" Ewer asked his audience. "The whereabouts of the collection has been the most tantalizing 'unsolved mystery' of nineteenth-century American photographic history."

Partially supported by a grant from the Peter E. Palmquist Memorial Fund for Historical Photographic Research, Ewer spent two years engaged in fresh primary-source research that has resolved the question regarding the collection's fate. The lecture followed its trail from New York City to the Midwest through exhibition advertisements in newspapers and magazines. It was publicly revealed for the first time at the symposium what happened subsequently. Ewer has discovered proof that the images were unfortunately destroyed in the Great Chicago Fire.

It happened because their last owner, who bought the collection in 1864, was Colonel Joseph Wood. Something of a P.T. Barnum-type figure, Colonel Wood had them displayed in his Chicago museum when the Great Fire destroyed four square miles of the city's

center. Ewer found that the museum and all its contents were destroyed. There is a newspaper photograph of Colonel Wood's museum in ruins that Ewer showed at the lecture. All that was retrieved was a silver pistol. The date and time of destruction was Monday, October 9, 1871, at approximately 2 a.m.

Ewer concluded, "While to uncover them would have been the better story, it is now appropriate and possible to assemble the certain history that puts the matter to rest."

The next Daguerreian Society symposium will take place in Baltimore, Maryland, November 8-11, and will be hosted by the Maryland Historical Society. The following year, 2013, is the society's 25th anniversary, and big plans are underway for the symposium to be hosted in Paris and in the city of Bry-sur-Marne, where Daguerre spent the last third of his life and where there is a museum devoted to him. For more information, see the Web site (www.daguerre.org).