Matthew R. Isenburg Photography Collection Sells Privately for $15 Million

by Jeanne Schinto
Photos courtesy Matthew R. Isenburg

Matthew R. Isenburg of Hadlyme, Connecticut, has sold what is widely considered to be the world's finest private 19th-century American photography collection to the Archive of Modern Conflict (AMC) for $15 million.

The 85-year-old Isenburg said he is not allowed to name publicly the principal of AMC, and I've promised not to print it here, but it's an easy process to discover it by Googling AMC and "owner." Eventually, with only a little diligence, the name is revealed. Much more important than whose money bought this world-class collection, however, is the story of what it consists of, why it's so important, and how Isenburg was able to keep it together—every collector's dream—when the time came for it to be sold.

One summer day a few years ago, I was invited by Isenburg to see the collection. He's a dynamo of a man, a brilliant raconteur with a crystalline memory for details and the tendency to break into song at the drop of a phrase that belongs to a famous lyric. My energy flagged at about midnight, long before his did.

Much of the collection was on display in a private museum in the third-floor finished attic of his 1780 residence. More of it was in two libraries, one inside the house, the other attached to a six-car garage. Prior to my visit, I was aware that my host had one of the most important daguerreotype collections in the world, because I had seen some of it on display in major museums through the years. I had also read a 2005 issue of *Worth* magazine in which Grant B. Romer, then curator at George Eastman House (www.geh.org) in Rochester, New York, declared that Isenburg had "the premier collection, far better than ours."

There was, for example, a half-plate (4¼" x 5½") daguerreotype by John Plumbe Jr. showing the eastern elevation of the U.S. Capitol in the winter of 1846. Daguerreotypes of outdoor scenes, no matter what they show, are rare enough. It's estimated that 90% of the approximately 15 million daguerreotypes made in the United States between 1840 and 1860 were portraits. This is one of only three of the earliest-known photographs of the structure. The others are at the U.S. Library of Congress and the J. Paul Getty Museum in Los Angeles.

He also had one of the four best Southworth & Hawes collections in the world. Albert Sands Southworth and Josiah Johnson Hawes, who formed the firm Southworth & Hawes in Boston in 1843, are universally regarded as among the finest daguerreotype artists the medium has ever known. The other three best collections of their work are in public collections at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York City, the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, and George Eastman House.

Yet the depth of Isenburg's collection still astounded me, not only because of the richness of the images but because of the related objects and ephemera he amassed along with them. "Most elite collectors want just heavy hitters," said collector/dealer Greg French of Jamaica Plain, Massachusetts. A longtime friend of Isenburg, French brokered the deal with AMC. "Matthew had the heavy hitters, then filled in all the details."

The fill-in-the-details items relating to Southworth & Hawes alone will give you an idea of Isenburg's comprehensive approach. The collection includes the only known posing chair from the partners' studio; albums of albumen silver prints, tintypes, and cartes de visite from both men's families, covering a period of about 50 years; an oil on canvas portrait of Hawes's wife, Nancy, who was Southworth's sister and the colorist in the Southworth & Hawes studio; Southworth & Hawes stationery; an invoice form with advertising for their studio; multiple pieces of correspondence, including a series of letters written over a two-year period by Southworth to Nancy from California when he decided to join the Gold Rush. Isenburg even managed to find the 1849 partnership agreement drawn up by the men when Southworth decided to go West, in which each agreed to an equal share of the other's profits, Southworth's from mining and Hawes's from photography back home in the Boston studio.

The Gold Rush itself is well represented in the collection with well over 50 images, making it arguably the best of its kind anywhere. One of the most amazing pieces is a whole-plate (6½" x 8½") daguerreotype by George H. Johnson showing more than two dozen miners on the American River near Sacramento in about 1852. We tend to think of the Gold Rush period as frenzied, but these men have stopped work to pose at length for Johnson's camera. Looking closely, I noticed a little girl, six or seven years old, standing with them. What could her life have been like? It didn't occur to me until I saw her that children had been part of the scene.

Such an image is the reason why, according to Isenburg, the AMC curators told him, "This collection will be enough material for six hundred Ph.D. theses." And if some scholar were to choose a topic related to the Gold Rush, he or she would be well served with, among other supplementary materials, mail-order catalogs that Isenburg used to figure out where the miners bought their clothes.

Because of the collection's depth, some of it crosses over into outright Americana. There is, for example, a carved and painted American eagle with a more than 8' wingspan. It is possibly by Laban S. Beecher, and its design includes a cannon, drum, flag, and sword. It's a nice circa 1865 example, but what makes it noteworthy is that it's actually just a big elaborate frame for an 1855 whole-plate daguerreotype set inside a central medallion held by the eagle's talons.

That daguerreotype shows the Warren Light Guard, mustered in Lawrence, Massachusetts. It was named after American Revolutionary War hero General Joseph Warren. Behind the men, who are wearing full-dress uniforms with high feathered hats, are the textile mill city's factories and perhaps a boarding house for the mill girls. Daguerreotypes of military companies are particularly rare. This one was among the first units to be mustered after Fort Sumter. Sent to Baltimore in April 1861, the company lost four men there on April 19, making theirs part of the first blood spilled during the Civil War.

Besides daguerreotypes, Isenburg also sought superior examples from the whole history of photography—paper prints, stereoviews, tintypes, ambrotypes. Nothing he bought was ordinary. His superior carte de visite collection, for example, boasts named photographers posed with their cameras and outside their studios.

The collection includes one of the best collections of early American cameras too. "The Eastman House has fewer than a dozen Daguerreian-era American-made cameras. I have about two dozen," said Isenburg. He has another three dozen early wet-plate cameras. He also collected photographers' equipment—for example, a circa 1854 plate-sensitizing box; three circa 1848 coloring outfits for tinting daguerreotypes; and two canvas

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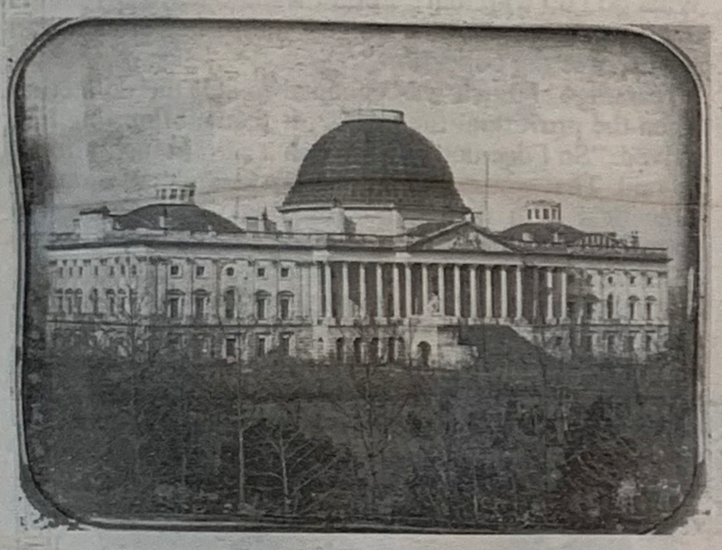

A half-plate (4¼" x 5½") daguerreotype by John Plumbe Jr. (1809-1857) shows the eastern elevation of the U.S. Capitol in the winter of 1846. It is one of three; the other two are at the U.S. Library of Congress and the J. Paul Getty Museum in Los Angeles.

A circa 1854 whole-plate (6½" x 8½") daguerreotype of Niagara Falls with unusual hand tinting in color by Platt D. Babbitt (active 1853-70).

An 1854 stereo daguerreotype of Portsmouth Square in San Francisco by Robert H. Vance (1825-1876), this is made up of two sixth-plates in a half-plate case. The detail shows a broadside that clearly names Laura Keene as playing Oberon in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. Isenburg said she played this role in San Francisco at the American Theater in 1854, thus dating the image. Keene was also the female lead at Ford's Theatre the night President Lincoln was assassinated.

Part of the collection is an extensive library of important books about photography from the 19th and 20th centuries. They were housed by Isenburg in an air-conditioned humidity-controlled library in the house and in a heated humidity-controlled second library in one of the property's outbuildings.

backdrops from the studio of a known ambrotypist. These items are even rarer than the cameras.

The hardware is particularly important to this collection's story because camera collecting is where Isenburg began. The owner of car dealerships since 1956, he began his interest as an amateur photographer in his 30's. In 1967, when he was 40, he shot a wedding. He didn't want payment, but as a token of appreciation the family gave him a 1926 Leica, the first production model.

"So I put it up on the mantel, and every time I went past it, I took a look at it," Isenburg recalled. As it serendipitously happened, within the month a young man walked into his office at the car dealership wanting to trade a Jaguar for a Ford Thunderbird. The deal was almost done when the buyer said he liked the flashy hubcaps he saw on another model and offered in trade a 1956 M2 Leica. Isenburg said OK.

"I put them side by side on the mantel, and suddenly I was a collector. That's how I started. But since they were professional cameras, I wanted to know: Who used these cameras? What pictures did they take? When did the company start? Then I found out there was a Leica collectors' society." The man with the endlessly inquiring mind went to a meeting in New Jersey, "and I was a Leica collector."

Isenburg said, "I instantly set up a network. I told camera stores that any Leica that comes in I'd pay full retail for." But Leicas weren't enough for long. "I started to wonder when amateur cameras began. Then wanted to go all the way back to the beginning, where photography really started. So within a year or eighteen months I was already collecting early stuff."

By 1970, he estimated, he was collecting "seriously." He never did buy much at auctions or shows. "I used to advertise that I would pay more than anybody," he said. "If people were good, I would teach them how to recognize the stuff. They'd bring it to me, and I would buy it." By the time Greg French started collecting in 1981, he said, "Matthew was already a legend."

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In 1988 Isenburg cofounded the scholarly Daguerreian Society (www.daguerre.org.) with John Wood. Along the way, he did such things as buy and read an entire year (1851-52) of the *New York Daily Times*, reading a page a day to immerse himself in the period. In 1989 *American Daguerreotypes: From the Matthew R. Isenburg Collection*, a 178-piece exhibition, went on view at the Yale University Art Gallery in New Haven, Connecticut, to celebrate the sesquicentennial of the announcement of Daguerre's invention in 1839.

Multiple loans to major exhibitions followed, most recently in 2005-06, when some of Isenburg's best Southworth & Hawes images toured with *Young America: The Daguerreotypes of Southworth & Hawes*. Curated by Grant B. Romer and Brian Wallis, it was a tour de force, exhibiting nearly 2000 examples at the George Eastman House, at the International Center of Photography, New York City, and at the Addison Gallery of American Art, Andover, Massachusetts. The catalog includes a sophisticated research essay by Isenburg on the photographers' genealogies, based on the family albums.

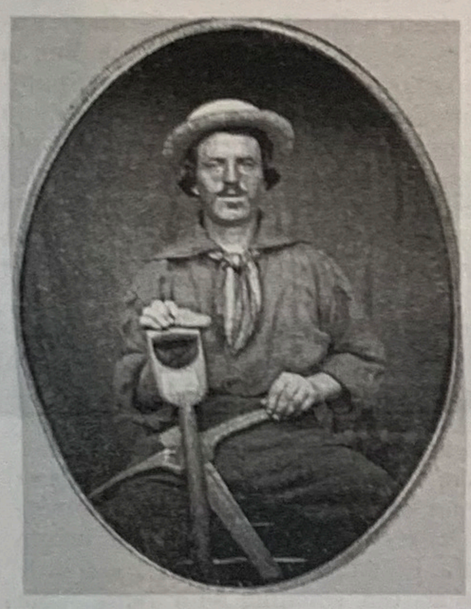
After I visited Isenburg in 2008, I ran into him at the Ephemera Society of America shows in Old Greenwich, Connecticut, at Papermania in Hartford, Connecticut, and elsewhere. He seemed as robust as ever, regaling me with stories of a trip he and his wife took to Egypt. A couple of years ago, his health started failing him. In early 2012 he had a life-threatening condition leading to surgery that, in Greg French's words, began giving him "bouts of mortality."

Isenburg, for his part, recalled, "I was hitting a time in my life when I was starting to divest, so my wife and kids won't have to think about 'What do I do with this? What do I do with that?' I don't want to leave any unfinished situations, and the biggest unfinished situation in my life was the collection."

Years ago, French was engaged to sell the collection when the proverbial time came. It seemed the time had arrived. "So I decided to approach a certain institution," he said. That was AMC. "I had just completed a rather large deal with them, and after that, I advanced the notion to them that this collection could be had."

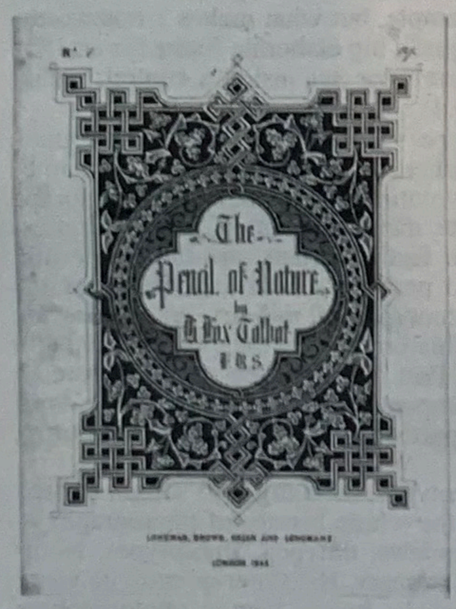
Described on its Web site (www.amcbooks.com) as "an independent publisher based in London," the curiously named entity, which does not publish books only about warfare, has another base in Toronto, where this collection was trucked after the sale was consummated in May. On the 21st floor of a building in that city, the more than 30,000 pieces in what will be known as the Matthew R. Isenburg Collection are currently being

Five half-plate images in the Isenburg collection make up an 1851 view of Portsmouth Square with San Francisco Harbor in the background. (The middle image of five was missing the glass, thus it turned black and awaits possible restoration.) In this image is the Parker Building, a wooden hotel to the right of the El Dorado Casino. Isenburg's research shows that it burned down in May 1851 and was replaced by a stone building, the Jenny Lind Theater, which later became the San Francisco Town Hall.



Two circa 1851 daguerreotypes of gold miners. There is gilt-tinting of the gold nugget in the hand of the one with his pickaxe over his knee and of the gold nuggets at the bottom of the other's pan. The latter is a sixth-plate; the former is a quarter-plate (4¼" x 3¼").

A circa 1847 sixth-plate (3¼" x 2¾") daguerreotype by Southworth & Hawes of Nancy Southworth Hawes in front of an oil painting of her, attributed to Albert Gallatin Hoit (1809-1856) in a letter by Nancy. The Isenburg collection also includes the painting, still in its original frame.



The library includes the first two editions of William Henry Fox Talbot's *The Pencil of Nature, Volume I & II*, published in London in 1844. Talbot's was the first published book to be illustrated with photographs and is considered today a milestone in the history of book publishing and of photographic history. Fewer than three dozen copies are known to exist.

The sixth-plate daguerreotype of Willy and Etta Chappell.

The medallion at the center of the carved and painted eagle holds a whole-plate daguerreotype of the Warren Light Guard of Lawrence, Massachusetts, in 1855, the year it was mustered (seen in the detail). Note Lawrence's Industrial Revolution era skyline in the background. Four soldiers from this company were among the first to die in an official action of the Civil War, trying to quell the Baltimore riots of April 1861. Their burial back in Lawrence was treated as a state funeral, as reported in *Gleason's Pictorial Drawing-Room Companion*, an illustrated magazine of the time. Isenburg speculated that the image was housed in the circa 1865 eagle to commemorate the company and its members who represented the war's "first blood."

On the table (right front and also seen in a detail) is another piece of Americana, a rotating photo display stand trimmed with walrus ivory. It is almost identical to one in the New Bedford Whaling Museum in New Bedford, Massachusetts. The museum's description names William H. Chappell as the maker of theirs. It adds that Chappell was a carpenter on the ship *Saratoga* of New Bedford for Captain Ephraim Harding on the Kamchatka whaling grounds (off Siberia) during 1852-56. The description also states that he was "a prodigious maker of scrimshaw, of which this is almost the only piece that has been identified."

Isenburg said of his carousel, "The special collections division of the Providence [Rhode Island] Public Library has Mr. Chappell's log of his trip on the whaling ship, which he started exactly one year to the day after the voyage started. There are thirty-two entries concerning the making of the two carousels. They say that he made two of these, one for the captain and one for himself. This is the latter." Isenburg said the log also mentioned that Chappell wanted to make something to house a daguerreotype of his son Willy and daughter Etta. Isenburg's example has that image.

photographed and cataloged at an expense of millions more.

AMC has a second Web site (www.amc2.org) devoted to the first and apparently only issue so far of a journal, "published at irregular intervals," that "brings together different groups of work that illuminate lost corners of our cultural life." Promised links to extracts of the articles do not deliver them, however, except for a couple of pictures. Only a little more illuminating is this Web site's statement about AMC's collecting interests, expressed in the broadest possible terms as "material dating from prehistory to the present day." Thankfully, it goes on to say, "Photography is, as ever, the keystone of the collection." So at least that much is clear.

Although AMC had long bought photographs actively, it had never before bought something of this magnitude, according to French. And at first, it "didn't want the whole thing, only a portion," he recounted. "So there were negotiations about that. I explained the wisdom of keeping the collection together, and after some thought, they went for it."

The Isenburg collection wasn't cataloged, and that was a stopper for other potential buyers. "Many institutions would rather get a lesser collection that's cataloged than one like this that's better but uncataloged," he said. "That's what's so impressive about this buyer—that they had the faith to look at the collection and say, 'You know what? This is too important to pass up.'"

In the end though, said French, "what sold them wasn't just the collection but Matthew's stories." In fact, the AMC entourage, which descended on Hadlyme for more than a month, included a videographer, who taped Isenburg talking about the collection for a couple of hundred hours.

"We did the videotaping for two reasons," French said, crediting AMC's agent, Neil MacDonald, with the "stroke-of-genius" idea. "One was to create a documentary. The other was to help the catalogers, so that when they're looking at something down the road, the video will give them the details. They're going to refer to these videos to learn. Matthew will say, 'The patent on that was 1851,' or 'You'll see the same lithograph on page thirty-two of such-and-such.' And you go look it up, and inevitably he's right."

MacDonald, who is AMC's photographic curator, said, "If you've ever had the privilege of visiting Matthew, and you're interested in photographic history, you know it's a magical experience. First, it's a fantastic and amazingly well-put-together collection, and second, there's Matthew. If you see the collection, yes, it's the best you could possibly imagine, but with Matthew telling his stories about it, it becomes animated."

More often than not, said MacDonald, his buying for AMC is conducted at estates or at auctions. "And by then, it's too late. It's like a postscript. The collector's gone. So I saw this as a unique opportunity. The information Matthew has, which he uses to connect the dots, wasn't data based. I had asked him, 'Do you have these notes in any way, shape, or form that's downloadable?' No, it was all in his head. So the videotaping was what I saw could be done and what should be done. I mean, half of the collection is the collector."

Now, he said, AMC "has the collection, which is very deep and layered, and we also have the story of it, recorded. Narrations, connections, information about where things came from, how he bought something, or the experience it took to capture a particular prize, after years or even after decades, because some of the stories span forty years."

Asked how the $15 million figure for the collection was arrived at, French said, "I set the price. I showed the buyer that we could get easily halfway there with just thirty images. In the end, I think it's a bargain, because I don't think a collection like this can be created again."

I asked Isenburg if anything was held back. He said unequivocally no. "Every single thing in this house that's photographic, except my digital cameras, has left. I wanted them to walk out of this house with everything photographic."

Not even French was given the opportunity to buy a piece he has coveted for nearly a decade. The owner of a premier collection of photographs of African-American portraits, he wanted a carte de visite of a slave who became a Massachusetts resident. "Matthew bought it on eBay for twelve hundred dollars. I told him I would pay him three thousand or trade him something worth even more. He thought about it all night, called me the next day, and said no, because he wanted everything kept together. That's the integrity of the collection."

I asked Isenburg if he would miss the collection. He replied, "As Dickens would probably have said, 'It's gone to a far, far better place.'"

The Southworth & Hawes posing chair. That's Greg French on the ground and an Isenburg family friend, Peter Procko, in the cherry picker.

The collection filled one tractor trailer truck, and one more was needed to move the rest.

Matthew R. Isenburg on moving day.

Some of the early cameras in the collection. The attic's stairs were too narrow for either the eagle or the Southworth & Hawes posing chair. They went out the rear deck via a cherry picker. They had come up over 20 years earlier by rope.