

Royka Scores on Jack Naylor's Southworth & Hawes Photographica

by Jeanne Schinto

Three pieces of ephemera related to Albert Sands Southworth (1811-1894) and Josiah Johnson Hawes (1808-1901), arguably the most important daguerreotype portraitists of their day, were auctioned by Paul Royka at the Fairmont Copley Plaza in Boston on September 30, 2006, along with 173 other lots of early photography, in a single-collector sale that realized about \$95,000. The consignors was Thurman F. "Jack" Naylor of Chestnut Hill, Massachusetts.

One of the ephemera lots was a brief letter that Southworth wrote to his sister Nancy on January 24, 1844, asking her to leave home in Vermont and come to Boston to take a job working in the daguerreotype studio that he and Hawes had established the previous year. Signed "Yours Affectionately, Albert," the letter fetched \$2668 (including buyer's premium) from an Internet bidder who goes by the eBay name "preserv" and, according to eBay's "Advanced Search" feature, is based in New York state. "I think I can find you pleasant employment in my business," Southworth wrote to his sibling, who not only accepted her brother's invitation but in 1849 married his partner, making him and Hawes brothers-in-law as well as business partners.

A second letter written by Southworth brought \$3016 from another Internet buyer, "phild99," who, according to information available on the eBay Web site, is based in California. It was written on June 6, 1850, and mailed to Nancy from California ("8 miles below Beals [sic] Bar American River"). The Gold Rush was on, and Southworth had gone West to try his luck in the camps. "The gold is here and I am after it," he declared. In four, dense handwritten sheets, he also described in detail mining-camp life and conditions, including the disease and death often caused by dysentery. "Poor McCoy is dead," Southworth told his sister, referring to an apparent acquaintance of theirs who had become a fellow Forty-Niner. McCoy left behind "letters, miniature, etc. which leads us to conclude that he was engaged to an interesting young lady," Southworth continued. "The miniature of his lady I think was made at our rooms—but I am not sure."

Paul Royka found that last remark ironic. "Even he can't make a positive attribution," said the auctioneer.

The third and most interesting piece of ephemera was a lease agreement between the portraitists (referred to as "Southworth Co.") and their Boston landlords, Amos Adams Lawrence (1814-1886) and his uncle Abbott Lawrence (1792-1855). The contract, dated October 1, 1844, discussed the monthly fee and duration of their rental space at No. 5½ Tremont Row, as well as their concerns about competition. "It is further agreed that no person following the same business viz of making daguerreotype miniatures shall be allowed to occupy the same building," stated the lease that was signed by the younger Lawrence, the abolitionist and philanthropist who was a scion of the family that built a textile empire in New England.

Restricting competition was probably wise. At the time, many people were turning to the new profession of daguerreotypy, underemployed miniature painters among them. Southworth himself had previously been in the pharmacy trade, while Hawes, after apprenticing as a carpenter, had trained as a painter.

One detail contained in this otherwise simple legal document is noteworthy beyond its mere association with individuals who loom large in the annals of early photographic history. It is the phrase that gave those famous tenants permission to alter "...the light of a certain room in the attic..." The alteration created a 15' x 12' skylight, later claimed by Southworth to have been the first ever installed in America. From a practical standpoint, the ceiling window was crucial to their financial success because they were completely dependent upon daylight to make their images. Even more significant, the skylight redounded to their aesthetic success because it provided the dramatic illumination that became one of their trademarks—indeed, one that helped elevate their work to the level of fine art.

The lease brought \$4060 from a bidder on the phone who, Royka said, was a California collector.

The rest of the sale was devoted to some 475 examples of early photography, ten of them attributed to the Southworth & Hawes studio. We asked dealer Greg French of Early Photography, Jamaica Plain, Massachusetts, who bought a number of lots in person, how one goes about assigning the Southworth & Hawes attribution to a daguerreotype.

"It's really by feel, but there are some general guidelines," French said. "Since they didn't sign their work, everything is educated guesswork, except for identifying their recognizable furniture and studio props. Their emphasis was on dramatic lighting, which resulted in a light side and a dark side to the face. They purposely used a slightly soft, artistic focus. Physically, the crimp marks from plate holders used for buffing their plates were in the middle of the edges, not the corners, and the backs of their plates were silvered. They also gravitated toward certain frames, case, and mat styles."

Robert A. Sobieszek and Odette M. Appel mention in their book *The Spirit of Fact: The Daguerreotypes of Southworth & Hawes, 1843-1862*, the catalog for the eponymous 1976 landmark exhibit, an additional indicator: size. "Contrary to the prevalent use of the sixth plate [2¾" x 3¼"], which was by far the most popular size for portraits in America, the standard sizes used in the Southworth & Hawes studio were mostly quarter [3¼" x 4¼"] and whole [6½" x 8½"] plates," they wrote. "The inordinate use of whole plates remains a particular trademark of the Southworth & Hawes studio and accounts for most of their portraits of notables and landscapes."

Interestingly, the auction's top lot did not carry a Southworth & Hawes attribution in Royka's catalog, but very possibly it did come from that studio, judging from the provenance related to us after the sale by Matthew R. Isenberg of Hadlyme, Connecticut, the eminent collector and historian of the daguerrian era. The image was a whole-plate (6½" x 8½") daguerreotype of a very unusual subject, a picture frame. Made of wood carved and gilded by Henry Moise of San Francisco, the frame was decorated with firefighting motifs, including firefighters, ladders, women in distress, and an eagle soaring above flames. "The California Fireman's Certificate Frame, dedicated to the Fire Departments of California," it said in part on the paper backing inside the daguerreotype frame, along with the date, January 1856. Meant as an advertisement, the picture, which could more easily be shown to buyers than the frame itself, sold to a phone bidder for \$9280.

"I have a history with the plate," said Isenberg to begin his story. "It goes back over thirty years. When I first saw it, it belonged to Harry Gross." Gross wrote *Antique and Classic Cameras* (1965), one of the first books on collecting photographica. "Harry got this particular one in a larger group from a fellow named Raborn Phillips." Albert Raborn Phillips, Jr. began to collect photography in the 1930's and '40's, along with other trailblazers. "And Ray got them from Holman's Print Shop in October 1942."

Holman's Print Shop of Boston is itself a storied place, where the Hawes family consigned quantities of Southworth & Hawes images, starting in 1934. The Southworth & Hawes collections now in the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York City, the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, and the George Eastman House in Rochester, New York, all stem from Holman's, whose records (1870-1977) are hallowed enough to be stored at the Smithsonian Institution's Archives of American Art in Washington, D.C.

Holman's Print Shop was not far from Abraham Feigenbaum's Tremont Camera Exchange, owned by the father of David Feigenbaum (1917-1998), whose cache of 70 full-plate Southworth & Hawes daguerreotypes, along with 42 lots of half- and quarter-plate images, were sold by Sotheby's in a historic \$3.3 million sale in New York City on April 27, 1999 (see [M.A.D., July 1999, p. 26-D](#)).

"Ray Phillips was there at Holman's before Feigenbaum, I would guess," said Isenberg, whose own, legendary collection of Southworth & Hawes images includes many examples with a Holman's provenance. Among other places over the last 20 years, Isenberg's images were exhibited in the 2005-06 traveling exhibition *Young America: The Daguerreotypes of Southworth & Hawes* at the International Center of Photography in New York City, the George Eastman House, and the Addison Gallery of American Art in Andover, Massachusetts.

"The daguerreotype of the frame wasn't named as being a Southworth & Hawes in Royka's catalog because the provenance got 'snipped' somewhere in the middle," Isenberg continued. "And as you know, provenance is a chain that's only as strong as its weakest link, and once it's broken, it's gone. But it went from Holman's to Ray Phillips, who advertised a whole bunch of full plates for sale in 1955 in a California paper, and Harry Gross bought them."

Isenberg said he was shown the images by Gross in Oregon in the mid-1970's. A couple of years later, he and a partner were able to buy them. ("Harry hadn't been ready to sell them a couple of years earlier.") The daguerreotype of the frame was resold by Isenberg and his partner to a California collector, "an antiques dealer, a high-end guy."

It was while the dealer owned it that some damage occurred. "He put it on his wall without a piece of glass in front of it," Isenberg recounted. "And one day he was cleaning his daguerreotypes, and with the same soft cloth that he used for glass he cleaned that one, which resulted in the light rubbings that you saw on it. He was a perfectionist, and that bothered him so much, he sold it. He told me, 'I got so upset at what I had done, I didn't want to keep it any longer.' I don't know if he sold it directly to Jack [Naylor] or if someone else did, but I do know the next time I saw it, it was in this sale."

Isenberg thought he might want to own the daguerreotype of the frame again—"It's the one that got away"—but he didn't care to go the full distance, content enough to be the underbidder and provider of the back story. "And whoever bought it paid enough of a price that they're entitled to know the provenance that I know," he said.

We asked Isenberg if he thought that Southworth had made the image in California. "There is no written indication that he ever trafficked with a camera during his entire stay out there," he said. "He did have relationships in California, and a lot of people who were out there came back." One of them may have come back with the frame. "I'm not one for speculation, but it's my belief that the image was made here on this coast because I know of no incident where Southworth ever had possession of, used, or was even next to a camera while he was in California."

That Isenberg knows the territory is an understatement. In addition to his private museum of world-class images, he has related photographica, including, as characterized by Romer and Wallis in *Young America*, "...the greatest collection of Southworth & Hawes's work and related documents now in private hands." These materials include a whole series of letters written by Southworth during his two-year stay in California. "They were written on the same stationery, same size paper, and have the same handwriting" as the ones in Royka's sale, Isenberg said. "Even the 'Dear Nancy' is the same, almost like it was rubber-stamped." Although he was not the buyer of the ones in this sale, he was glad to see them bring the prices they did. "They brought what they should," he said, "and that's what I like to see happen at an auction."

"All the good pieces brought very good prices," Isenberg continued. "I think that's where any mature field heads. As a field of collecting matures, the better pieces hold their strength. That's the universal truth; it's nothing that I made up. That's the way it is."

To end our conversation, Isenberg made another general comment about the sale, praising both consignors and venue. "I thought it was wonderful. In fact, I enjoyed it for two reasons: one, for the material provided by Naylor, and two, because of the spirit provided by Paul Royka. That combination made it very exciting. Paul is truly the hardest working new guy on the block."

The previews for this sale were at Royka's new gallery on Boston's Newbury Street. The second-floor space is very congenial. White paint covers the former baby blue, and there are high ceilings, large windows, and a carved mantel over a fireplace that was flickering with an artificial fire during our visit. More important, the Boston office of Christie's and the venerable Vase Galleries are across the street, and another Boston art world landmark, Childs Gallery, is on the same side, a couple of blocks closer to Boston Common. "I needed to be on Newbury Street," said Royka, who in addition to auctioneering and appraising takes items on consignment and arranges private sales.

His original gallery in Lunenburg, Massachusetts, about 40 miles northwest of the city, is still open, but, as Royka explained, "I am dedicating most of my time to Boston these days. I had clients drive out to Lunenburg one too many times. They said, 'It would be nice if you were in Boston, and we could go to a Red Sox game afterwards.' I have clients come in and spend some time. They notice things that they probably wouldn't have noticed otherwise. It's all about the right objects and the right people and giving them options. Some things sell better privately than they do at auction, and some people, if they are given the opportunity to buy something that nobody else has seen, will pay a premium."

The consignment of the Naylor materials, which was mostly portraiture, came about after Naylor bought for \$4988 an image of a breast-feeding mother and child at Royka's May 28, 2006, sale in Lexington, Massachusetts. Naylor subsequently approached Royka about selling these lots. "He called me and said, 'I want you to come to the house.' When I got there, he showed me some boxes of dags that he was storing in an unused steam shower." They were not part of the private museum collection that Naylor is trying to sell for \$20 million, both auctioneer and consignors stated separately (see [related story on page 44-B](#)).

"Dags are something I wanted to get more active in," said Royka, who sold a group of Gold Rush-era daguerreotypes and ambrotypes, along with related letters, for \$80,500 as the star lot in a general sale on October 26, 2004, at the Holiday Inn in the Boxborough, Massachusetts. This was after finding the materials during an estate appraisal in a house on Boston's North Shore. The photographs were on the house's front porch, the letters in the attic. The buyer was a collector who is "a dealer in a category other than photography," Royka said.

He predicted, rightly, that the buyers at this September sale would be "a very specialized crew that know what they're looking at. Nothing's going to slip by them." He also realized, however, that most of the images, some of which were being sold in groups of six, eight, and more, would not make headlines. "Trains, Civil War scenes, and landscapes that are of historical interest," being the biggest money, said Royka. As a group they are genuinely rare. By contrast, approximately 95% of all daguerreotypes were portraits, the vast majority undistinguished by anything other than the fact that they were a likeness.

Estimates have not been quoted because the sale was unreserved. As for the estimates that appeared on the Internet ("\$100/\$100,000" and "\$1000/100,000"), Royka said he put in those numbers because blank spaces needed to be filled in on the eBay Live Auctions form.

In the end, Royka did do well by eBay Live Auctions, reporting participation by 139 Internet bidders from 11 countries, and the auction was notable for the high degree of high-end activity that came from cyberspace. Bethesda, Maryland's "phild99," an eBay bidder who goes by the name of "antiqu-photo" bought a top lot. That one was a mammoth-plate (12¾" x 10¼") daguerreotype by another of Southworth's (and the nation's) earliest and most prominent daguerreotypists, John Adams Whipple (1822-1891). The subject was 12 members of a family believed to have been from Maine, and the price, \$7540, was the second highest achieved at the sale.

Judging from eBay information and other Internet sources, the identity of the Whipple winner was Sebastien Lemagnen, who has galleries in Paris and Toulouse, France and sells via a Web site ([www.antiqu-photo.com](#)), but the real news is the identity of that lot's underbidder, "gnashx." It's fairly common knowledge in the photography collecting world that the identity belongs to Rock and Roll Hall of Fame member Graham Nash. Readers who go to his Web site ([www.grahamnash.com](#)) will learn that he has pursued two arts, music and photography, in parallel all along. His interest in collecting photography has been a longtime pursuit as well.

Although "gnashx" did not win the Whipple, he was successful on two other lots in the sale. One was a daguerreotype by Samuel Root (1819-1889), who worked in New York City in the 1840's. For this whole-plate image of a family, including two men, two women (either twins or merely dressed as twins), and a baby, he paid \$1997.50. His other purchase was a sixth-plate (2¾" x 3¼") daguerreotype of a woman whose gaze is pointed away from the camera's eye and the image's unknown maker. The price was \$638.

royka said another British-born rock star who collects photography also bought items in the sale. "He has a recognizable collection, a recognizable everything. It was not Elton John, but on that same level."

As for we mortals, it's heartening to know that by scholarly affordable, anonymous portraits can sometimes be repaid by honoring affordably sleuthing afterward. Photographer-collector Leo Stashin wrote on that subject in the April 1973 issue of *The Magazine Antiques*. Aware that collectors were chiefly concentrating then, as today, "...on outdoor scenes, soldiers in uniform, artisans with the tools of their trades, large images, groups, post mortems, and works by daguerreotypists of note," Stashin nonetheless spent his time collecting and attempting to identify unlabeled portraits.

"Certain unemphatic doubters maintain that no identification can be accepted unless a picture is labeled or has been verified in family records," Stashin stated. "I feel that this is a stifling, overspecialized, overcautious approach..." To prove his point, he illustrated his article with images of 34 personalities he had identified with the help of his wife, an anatomist. They included Harriet Beecher Stowe and two of her siblings: John Brown; Asher Brown Durand; Millard Fillmore; John Charles Frémont and his wife, Jessie Benton Frémont; Samuel Houston; Washington Irving; Jenny Lind; Samuel F.B. Morse; Charles Sumner; Zachary Taylor; Cornelius Vanderbilt; and two brothers of John Wilkes Booth, Junius Brutus Booth and Edwin Thomas Booth.

The magazine's editors published a disclaimer with Stashin's article, saying that the attributions remained "...of necessity speculative to varying degrees." Nevertheless, they hoped and expected that "...greater knowledge and further research will confirm or correct the attributions in years to come!"

For more information, contact Paul Royka in Boston at (617) 578-0400 or in Lunenburg at (978) 582-8207; Web site [www.roykas.com](#).