



FIGURE 1

Unattributed: *A Teacher With Her Students*, sixth-plate daguerreotype , ca. 1854.

Collection of Leonard A. Walle

Frederick Birkhill and a Teacher with Her Students

By Leonard A. Walle

A TEACHER WITH HER STUDENTS

Condition has always been important for me but there are exceptions. So it is with the daguerreotype of *A Teacher With Her Students* (Figure 1). It came in a half-leather case with a scallop overmat that obscured all but a fraction of the young girl standing on the left. Thus the reproduction shown here is of the bare plate before it was carefully archivally sealed in its original housing.

What I find compelling about this image is the intimacy and individuality that has been captured. Achieving this result with a painting is not uncommon but doing so with a daguerreotype of a grouping of eight children and one adult is impressive. With many found daguerreotypes, details such as identity are relatively unimportant compared to the experience of viewing, and in this case even when there are scratches. That is what initially led me to purchase it. However, afterward I learned that this image has added significance.

Provenance can also be an important aspect of a photograph. This daguerreotype was acquired from Frederick Birkhill, Jr., “Daguerreian Artist.” It was given to him by his grandmother, was his first daguerreotype, and it inspired him to make daguerreotypes.

SIGNIFICANCE OF PROVENANCE

So, why is the fact that this daguerreotype influenced Frederick Birkhill significant? Frederick Birkhill is one of the five founding members¹ of the Michigan Photographic Historical Society (MiPHS). In May 1972, he travelled to Columbus, Ohio, for the Ohio Camera Collectors Society² Antique and Classic Camera Workshop and Trade Fair that was held at the Old Southern Hotel. There, with fellow MiPHS founding members Dick Wolfe and Nate Skipper, he attended a meeting that was held to discuss plans for a national organization of societies of photo collectors. That in turn led to the formation of the Photo-

graphic Historical Society of America as well as the Michigan Photographic Historical Society, which was initially established for collectors in the Michigan area to express their views involving a national association. It was while in Columbus that Birkhill met Walter Johnson who was his mentor. Johnson started making daguerreotypes in 1969 and was publisher of *The New Daguerreian Journal*.³ The 1972 issue⁴ lists eleven people who were involved with making daguerreotypes. Frederick Birkhill was one of them.



FIGURE 2

Joseph Lippincott: *Frederick Birkhill making a daguerreotype in front of Mariner’s Church, silver gelatin print, 1972.*

Courtesy of Frederick Birkhill

On August 18, 1972, the newly formed Michigan Photographic Historical Society (MiPHS) commemorated the 133rd anniversary of François Arago’s public announcement to the world of Louis Jacques Mandé Daguerre’s discovery of the first practical method of photography. They did this with a celebration that included a demonstration by Frederick Birkhill (Figure 2) on making a daguerreotype

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in front of Mariner's Church, one of the oldest buildings in Detroit. The event had coverage on TV and was a feature story in *The Detroit Free Press* published the following day with photographs by Joseph Lippincott, *Free Press* photographer and a member of MiPHS. Several members of the Society participated in the celebration by appearing in period costumes. One of the attendees was quoted about the experience: "One can hardly appreciate the unique qualities of the Daguerreotype until he stands, holding a pose, in ninety-degree August heat for five minutes to have his Daguerreotype made."⁵ Based on one of the photographs published in the newspaper, the resulting daguerreotype by Birkhill of the old Mariner's Church turned out reasonably well in spite of the challenging situation. In 1976 Frederick Birkhill revisited the subject and made a second daguerreotype under more controlled conditions (Figure 3).



FIGURE 3

Frederick Birkhill: *Old Mariner's Church Detroit Michigan 1976*, daguerreotype, 4 x 5 inches.

Collection of Leonard A. Walle, gift of the artist

In 1976 Frederick attended a meeting of practicing daguerreotypists that was held July 9–11 at Harvey Zucker's home on Staten Island, New York. It was called "The Convention of Modern Day Daguerreians." As shown in a July 31, 1976, letter from Irving Pobboravsky to Birkhill (see Appendix), finding a reliable source of reasonably priced quality plates was a problem. Birkhill was using plates from Silvercraft Inc., a local Detroit firm. He shared with me during a recent interview that an important aspect for good

daguerreian plates is the surface smoothness of the copper before it is plated with silver.

Frederick Birkhill, the Artist

Frederick Birkhill developed an interest in photography at an early age. In a photograph at age 8, young Frederick can be seen holding a 35mm camera. Later in high school, he provided photographs for the student yearbook and literary publication. However, it was a school trip to the Henry Ford Museum (Greenfield Village) in Dearborn, Michigan, that made a lasting impression. He visited the Tintype Studio and also saw a framework demonstration where a glass swan was created. He purchased the swan and gave it to his mother.



FIGURE 4

Andee Seeger: *Frederick Birkhill at Greenfield Village Tintype Studio*, silver gelatin print, 1970s.

Collection of Leonard A. Walle

Upon graduating from high school in 1969, Frederick entered Eastern Michigan University and obtained a bachelor of science degree in general science in 1974. It was during this time period that he took an introductory stained glass course at the Hen-

Frederick Birkhill and a Teacher with Her Students

ry Ford Museum followed by glass making courses in the Detroit area at the Birmingham-Bloomfield Art Association and at Eastern Michigan University. He also worked summers part-time during the week in 1972 and 1976 at the Greenfield Tintype Studio making tintype photographs (Figure 4). It was there that Frederick met Dick Wolfe, fellow founding member and first president of the Michigan Photographic Historical Society. Dick worked at the Studio on weekends.



FIGURE 5

Frederick Birkhill: Farris Windmill at Greenfield Village, Dearborn, Michigan, daguerreotype, 4 x 5 inches, 1972.

Courtesy of the Photographic History Collection, Smithsonian Museum of American History, Washington, DC

After learning the craft of making tintypes, Frederick Birkhill decided to follow in the footsteps of Charles Tremer, the noted twentieth-century daguerreian, who operated the Greenfield Village Tintype Studio from 1929 to 1943.⁶ As mentioned previously, in the early 1970s Frederick took on that challenge and in 1972 he made a daguerreotype of the Farris Windmill in Greenfield Village (Figure 5),

which is now in The Photographic History Collection, National Museum of American History, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, DC.

After graduating from Eastern Michigan University, Frederick travelled to Europe where he studied the Renaissance and graphic arts, visited museums, and then returned to Michigan to study furnace glass at the Center for Creative Studies in Detroit, followed by a trip to Murano, Italy, to study studio art glass and glass sculpture. After additional study both abroad and in the U.S., he built his own studio in Michigan and enrolled at the University of Michigan-Ann Arbor in the Department of Art and Design, concentrating in sculpture and painting. Although Frederick moved on to become a glassworks artist, he continued to respect the importance of nineteenth-century photography by maintaining his membership in MiPHS, attending The 2009 Daguerreian Society Symposium in Philadelphia, and acquiring the work of daguerreian Michael Robinson.

Today, Frederick Birkhill is recognized worldwide as a glasswork artist. He is the subject of a book, *Glassworks: The Art of Fredrick Birkhill*, published in 2020.⁷ His work is in numerous museum collections, including The Corning Museum of Glass, the Museum of Arts and Design, the Mint Museum, the Detroit Institute of Arts, and the Smithsonian.

I am honored to have in my collection both the daguerreotype of *The Teacher and Her Students* and the daguerreotype it inspired Frederick Birkhill to make of *Old Mariner's Church Detroit, Michigan*.

ENDNOTES

1. The founding or "Initiating Members" of the Michigan Photographic Historical Society were Richard I. Wolfe 1-I; Nathan R. Skipper, Jr. 2-I; Frederick Birkhill, Jr. 3-I; Louis Arach 4-I; James J. Magyar 5-I.
2. The Ohio Camera Collectors Society (OCCS) was organized in 1968 and is the oldest camera collecting organization in the United States. It continues to meet monthly to discuss topics of interest involving photo history and camera collecting.
3. At the time, Walter Johnson taught a History of Photography class in the Department of Photography & Cinema at Ohio State University. Reference the September - October 2006 *Daguerreian Society Newsletter* (Vol. 18, No. 5, 9-13) Walter Johnson, "Teaching the Daguerreotype During Photography's Glory Years."

Walter Johnson was also editor and publisher of *The New Daguerreian Journal* (1971-1975). "The publication of the journal was instrumental to my knowledge of the

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Daguerreotype process and the tools used” — Walter Johnson, “The History of The New Daguerreian Journal,” p.6. Reference: Resources section of: CDags.org.

4. *The New Daguerreian Journal* (Vol. 1, No. 5, April 1972), 11.
5. N. R. Skipper, Jr., editor, *The Photogram*, Vol. 1, No. 2 (Newsletter of the Michigan Photographic Historical Society, September 1972), 6.
6. David Tinder, “Charles Herbert Tremear ‘The Patriarch of Twentieth-Century Daguerreotypy in America,’” *The Daguerreian Annual* 1993, 44–73.
7. Samantha De Tillio, Dr. Dedo von Kerssenbrock-Krosogk, Amy Schwartz, Stuart Reid and Doreen Balabanoff, *Glass Works: The Art of Fredrick Birkhill* (North Adams, Massachusetts: The Artist Book Foundation, Museum of Contemporary Art, 2020).

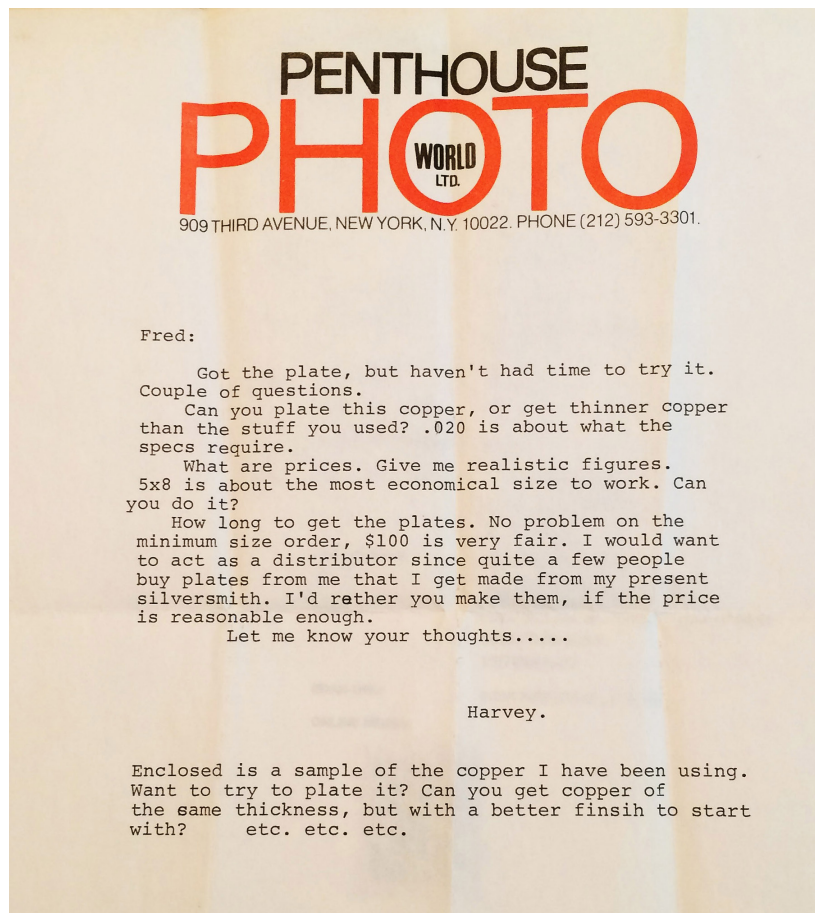
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Frederick Birkhill and his wife, Jeannie (Frederick’s archivist), were very gracious in providing me the opportunity to conduct an interview in their

home while practicing social distancing during the COVID-19 pandemic. In doing so, I was able to ask Frederick numerous questions about his experience as a daguerreian and tintype photographer, examine his records from that time period, and gain an appreciation for his work as a glassworks artist. The gift of his daguerreotype of Detroit’s Old Mariner’s Church was unexpected and will remain an important part of a collection of contemporary daguerreotypes that I have carefully assembled over many years.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Leonard Walle is a charter member of The Daguerreian Society. With a combined interest in history and art, Len has been collecting and studying photography since 1971. Following an education in chemistry and business, he worked professionally in the graphic arts industry for 33 years.



APPENDIX

Harvey Zucker letter to Frederick Birkhill, 1976.

Courtesy of Frederick Birkhill

DAGUERREOTYPIST

Irving Pobboravsky, 835 Crittenden Road, Rochester, NY 14623

31 JULY 1976

F. BIRKILL
31 SHADY HOLLOW
DEARBORN, MICHIGAN 48124

DEAR FRED,

JIM RANTILLA dropped by yesterday and passed on the plate and letter. I thank you very much - a reliable source of reasonably priced good quality plates is presently a problem facing modern daguerreotypists - so your efforts are doubly appreciated. When time permits I will try your plate out and Grant Romer, myself and maybe even Jim Rantilla will put in an order. The two sizes I've been using are $3\frac{1}{4} \times 4\frac{1}{4}$ and 5×7 inches and since I have access to a metal shear it is usually more economical to order multiples - for example - $6\frac{1}{2} \times 8\frac{1}{2}$ plates when cut result in 4 $3\frac{1}{4} \times 4\frac{1}{4}$ size plates. So if you are inquiring about the cost of plating day-plates in the 1976 I would appreciate quotes on $6\frac{1}{2} \times 8\frac{1}{2}$ and 7×10 sizes. We (Grant and myself) have ordered the $6\frac{1}{2} \times 8\frac{1}{2}$ size from Theiss in St. Louis but the last batch took 4 months for mine and Grant may still not have gotten his after more than 4 months. Grant had to return his last 9 out of 12 plates of the batch he had gotten and as far as I know he is waiting to get the replacements promised him. Fred, do you think if you could show the plater the kind an example of the finish needed on the silver he could get closer to that quality - which would mean less buffing for the dag'ist. I could send you such a example if you would think it would not antagonize the plater.

I hear you have been working with stained glass in England. Do you find time to work the silver plate? Your presence at the Staten Island daguerreian gathering shows your continuing interest.

Again thanks for your thoughtfulness in sending the plate and your offer to check with your plater.

Sincerely

Irving

Daguerreotype Portraits and Views by appointment

Irving Pobboravsky letter to Frederick Birkhill, July 31, 1976.

Courtesy of Frederick Birkhill