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"OUR SWEETHEARTS OF THE NORTH": CIVIL WAR PORTRAIT PHOTOGRAPHS AT THE GERMANTOWN HISTORICAL SOCIETY

By Susan Powell Witt

In the back corner of the Germantown Historical Society's library live a few dozen misunderstood photographs. They are a common sight in archives: small cased photographs on glass plates, with unidentified or barely identified sitters, scattered on back shelves, their cases rarely opened. On the outside, they are just beaten-up leather and plastic boxes, but on the inside they reveal a world of color, clarity, and personality. And they are inextricably linked to the moment of their production around the time of the American Civil War.

A small leather case, no more than three inches tall, fits easily in the palm of the hand (fig. 1). Its tiny latch swings open with the flick of a finger, the simple technology still sound. Inside, the case is lined with velvet, almost as soft and bright and saturated as it must have been 150 years ago. On the right side of the little leather and wood box sits a brass preserver, tucked snugly into the velvet. Behind the preserver's thin glass, a tiny glass-plate photograph of striking focus and clarity depicts Anna Hughes Brookes. The young girl of perhaps twelve or thirteen looks plaintively into the camera. She has dressed for the occasion in a plaid dress with wide cummerbund, a lace collar and brooch, dangling earrings, and a ring that appears to be cutting off circulation to the index finger on her right hand. Her pose is typical of commercial portraits around 1860, and even her somber expression is most likely due to the several-minute exposure during which she had to remain absolutely still rather than to any negative disposition.

But other elements stand out and make this image unique. Her foregrounded hands, for example, appear enormous, making her head appear quite small, despite its bejeweled attempts to demand the viewer's attention. A tension between head and hands makes us wonder about her occupation: Does she use her intellect? Or are her hands her most valuable asset as a domestic mother-in-training? Second, the tightly bound ring on her right hand may be simply an ill-fitting piece of her mother's jewelry, but suggests binding and tightening, even entrapment, made all the more poignant by her direct and questioning stare out of the picture plane. Finally, a photographic imperfection—a smudge of emulsion on her left cheek—gives poor Anna Brookes the appearance of having a black eye. Although the emulsion mark most likely occurred during the plate's processing, Brookes and her family kept the photograph, preserving for posterity this bruised version of a lovely little girl.

Fig. 1 Anna Hughes Brookes, ninth plate ambrotype, c. 1860. Germantown Historical Society.

Similar images line the shelves of historical societies and photographic collections around the country, but are largely ignored by scholars of art and visual culture. Nearly every historical society, archive, library, and antique shop in America holds photographic portraits from the 1850s and 1860s, and one can buy them on eBay for around $15. Yet, despite their ubiquity, or perhaps because of it, there is little writing on these images. An absence of critical understanding for these images has banished them to the recesses of our archives, to be brought out only as documentary evidence when the sitter can be identified. I have found, however, in the research for my dissertation,

that small cased photographs from the Civil War era, such as this one of Anna Brookes, were deeply engaged in a national wartime discourse of remembrance and reassurance, and were some of the most emotionally charged visual objects of their time.

Some of the most enduring images of the American Civil War are these individual portrait photographs, imbued not only with their own internal meanings, but also with a material history of objects borne at the front and treasured on the home front. In the hearts and minds of their bearers, these pictures take on a mythical or reliquary quality, often complete with lifesaving powers and a pseudo-religious iconic significance. The importance of such photos to the wartime psyche has become so ingrained in our collective consciousness that they appear everywhere: D.W. Griffith's 1915 *Birth of a Nation*, for example, shows how a small folding frame containing the photograph of a stranger preserved the sanity and compassion of a confederate soldier in the thick of battle, and the 2004 film of Charles Frazier's *Cold Mountain* opens with the desperate recovery of a girlfriend's photograph from a burning fort, later showing the moment of exchange of the same photograph.

The second half of the 1850s saw the birth of new photographic processes that arose out of earlier daguerreian techniques. Ambrotypes, tintypes, and certain forms of paper photographs, including *cartes de visites*, were both cheaper and easier to produce than the daguerreotype, so that more photographers could produce more pictures, and a larger socioeconomic group could afford them. By the start of the Civil War, photographic studios operated in nearly every U.S. city, and Americans were in the throes of what cultural historian John Stauffer has called an "exuberant love affair" with photographs.[1]

There is evidence of pervasive collecting and exchanging of these images during wartime—an emotional economy in tiny portrait photographs. William H. West of the 6th Maine Volunteers, for example, sent and received photographs regularly, as evidenced by his diary entries. References to photographs, such as "Got an ambrotype from Emma Ingles" and "had a letter from Bell and answered it, sent her my ambrotype," appear consistently throughout the journal.[2] The Simmons sisters of Boston sent a picture taken of them in the late 1850s to a loved one in the South sometime in the 1860s, accompanied by a homespun poem.[3] The Lyon family, a middle-class African-American family from New York City, had portraits taken in 1862, and exchanged them among themselves, later proving especially valuable when the family was separated after the Draft Riots in the summer of 1863.[4] Another black family, the DeGrasses of Massachusetts, had likenesses made in the early 1860s before John van Surly DeGrasse's service as a surgeon in the Union army separated them for some time.[5] Henry Bird, of the 12th Virginia Infantry, and Margaret Randolph exchanged photographs at the outset of the war, and Henry wrote to her of gazing at her picture in camp.[6]

Moreover, many small photographs were found in the wake of the armies, like that of an unidentified child, whose ambrotype was found by Thomas Timberlake of the 2nd Virginia on the battlefield of Port Republic. It was positioned dead center, the story goes, between the slain bodies of a Union and a Confederate Soldier, impossible to tell to whom she belonged. These few anecdotes represent just a small handful of the hundreds if not thousands of examples of photographs changing hands during wartime.

Germantowners and Philadelphians participated in this discourse of photographs. Elizabeth Davis, for example, wrote of her experience at Matthew Brady's studio in 1861 as a major event in her life.[7] Elizabeth Ingersoll Fisher also wrote about having her picture taken in Philadelphia while her husband, Sidney George Fisher, was away in 1864.[8] Elizabeth McCall wrote in correspondence with her husband of her penchant for collecting contemporary portraits photographs, particularly those of Federal generals.[9] And Anna Thorpe Wetherill collected photographs of prominent abolitionists, and incorporated them into scrapbooks and albums.

Portrait photographs also appear in popular literature of the war era. Louisa May Alcott's 1864 short story "On Picket Duty," for example, shows four men on picket duty in a Union encampment.[10] Forced to stay awake and

1 John Stauffer, "Daguerreotyping the National Soul: The Portraits of Southworth & Hawes, 1843-1860" in *Young America, The Daguerreotypes of Southworth and Hawes* (New York: International Center for Photography and George Eastman House, 2005) 57.

2 William H. West, William H. West Papers, Coll. No. MS.N-145, Massachusetts Historical Society, folder 1.

3 "Simmons Sisters, c.1855," Photo Collection 2.21, Box 3, Massachusetts Historical Society.

4 See Maritcha Remond Lyons, *Memories of Yesterdays: All of which I saw and part of Which I* Was, 1928 (Harry A. Williamson Papers, New York: The Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, The New York Public Library, Astor, Lenox and Tilden Foundations. Sc Micro R-3984, Reel 1), and Tonya Bolden, *Maritcha: A Nineteenth-Century American Girl* (New York: Abrams, 2005).

5 DeGrasse-Howard Photographs, c. 1861-1976, Photo Collection 36, Massachusetts Historical Society.

6 *Bird Family Papers, 1825-1980*, Collection No. Mss1 B5323 a, Virginia Historical Society.

7 *William Morris Papers*, Historical Society of Pennsylvania, Collection No. 164. Letters of Elizabeth M. Davis to Lydia Brown, 1861-1865. http://www.hsp.org/default.aspx?id=129

8 *Sidney George Fisher Papers*, Historical Society of Pennsylvania, Collection No. 1850A.

9 *McCall Papers*, Historical Society of Pennsylvania, Collection No. 1786.

10 Louisa May Alcott, *On Picket Duty and Other Tales* (Boston: James Redpath, 1864).

on watch through the night, the men decide to pass the time by telling each other how they met their wives, each revealing a small photograph kept in his pocket, which Alcott describes in detail. It would have been just as easy for Alcott to have each man describe his wife to the others, and the effect might be the same on the reader. But Alcott instead foregrounds the photograph precisely because of its heightened status and pathos in wartime culture.

In one respect, portrait photography served as a mode of inventorying— taking account of family members and friends in a moment of anxiety and frequent loss of loved ones. By the war's end, close to eighteen percent of men ages 17 to55 had died in the South, and twelve percent in the North, and the nation was fraught with the fear of losing an entire generation of men to war. In 1865, a Philadelphian named A.H. Platt patented a photograph album titled, "The Photographic Family Record." The full title is a mouthful, but telling: "The photographic family record of Husband, Wife and Children adapted to recording in a plain, brief and intelligent manner, the name, birth-place, date of nativity, names of parents, number of brothers and sisters, education, occupation, politics, religion, marriage, stature, weight, habit, complexion, color of eyes and hair, health, time and place of death, disease, age and place of interment of each member of any family, with album leaves for the insertion of photographs of the same." The album reveals a deep and obsessive desire to record and inventory family members. In a moment when narratives of loss and physical separation dominated news stories, popular fiction, and visual imagery, Platt's album provided a space to record each family member's presence rather than absence.[11]

Fig. 2 Anna May and Frank Maris, sixth plate ambrotype, c. 1860. GHS.

Intergenerational portraits, such as those of the Maris Family of Germantown, serve a similar purpose— recording one's ability to reproduce and providing evidence not only of the presence of generations but the perpetuity of the family. This aim of portraiture is an American tradition. A luminous portrait of Anna May John Maris and her first child, Frank Maris (fig. 2), reads much like the famous seventeenth-century portrait of Elizabeth Freake and her child, one of the earliest surviving American paintings of white Americans.[12] Shown in their finest fur bonnets, coats, and lace collars, Anna May and Frank Maris become symbols of the wealth and health of this American family, just as the turkey-work chair, the imported lace, and other elements in the Freake portrait stake a claim for the legitimacy of another American family. In both pictures, the child is the crowning jewel in the long litany of the family's riches, a symbol of virility, fertility, and perpetuity. Furthermore, both pictures represent families on the North American continent at a moment when nationhood is in question. Hence the birth of the American child becomes a symbol of nation building, and in the case of little Frank Maris, a reassuring symbol of the Union's own perpetuity.[13]

The impetus to have one's likeness taken also stems, however, from a spiritual veneration of photographs already extant in antebellum America. Surrounding the photographic portrait in its early decades was a larger debate about the ability of the camera to show the "true nature" of a person or their "inmost soul."[14] "That the

11 A.H. Platt, *The Photographic Family Record...*, (Philadelphia 1865). CDV Album, Collection No. 77:0515:1-23, George Eastman House, Rochester, NY.

12 Freake Limner, *Portraits of John and Elizabeth Freake*, Worcester Art Museum, Worcester, Massachusetts. For more on the Freake pictures, see Wendy Katz, "Portraits and the Production of the Civil Self in Seventeenth-Century Boston," *Winterthur Portfolio* vol. 39, no. 2/3 (Summer/Autumn 2004) 101–128.

13 The use of children as symbols of reassurance becomes a common trope in wartime art, particularly in painting and illustration, where sentimentalism and images of home dominate the visual landscape. For more on this phenomenon, see John Davis, "Children of the Parlor: Eastman Johnson's Brown Family and the Post-Civil War Luxury Interior" (*American Art*, x (Summer, 1996), pp. 50–77), or H.T. Tuckerman, "Children," *Galaxy* vol. IV, 1867, 315-321. Furthermore, the narrative of childbirth as a symbol of the nation's strength and future is bound up in an extensive historical discourse, but becomes official rhetoric of the Union with the Gettysburg Address and Lincoln's famous invocation of a "new birth of freedom."

14 Nathaniel Hawthorne, "The Prophetic Pictures," in *Twice-Told Tales* (1837). See also, John Stauffer, "Daguerreotyping the National Soul: The Portraits of Southworth & Hawes, 1843-1860" in *Young America, The Daguerreotypes of Southworth and Hawes* (New York: International Center for Photography and George Eastman House, 2005) 57-74.

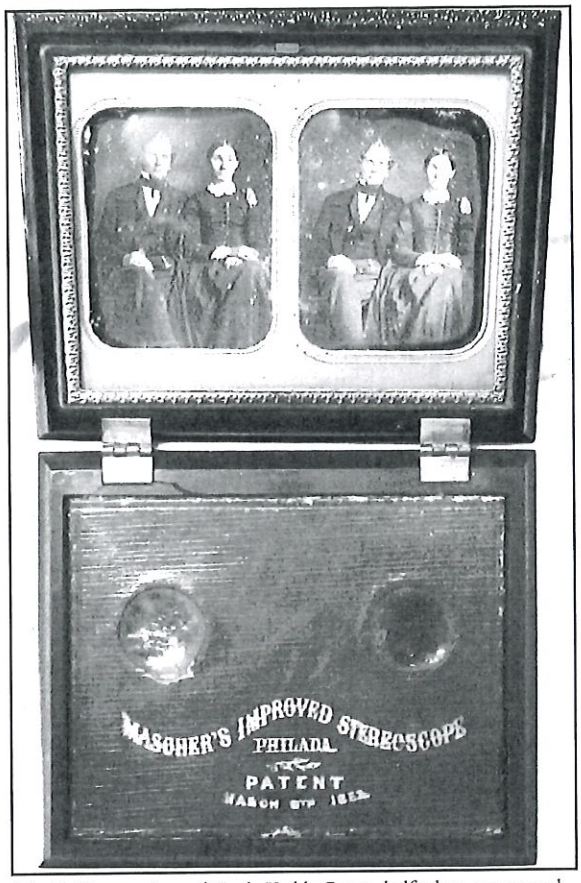

Fig. 3 Thomas L. and Leah Yeakle Bates, half plate stereograph daguerreotype in thermoplastic "Lord's Prayer" case with Mascher Stereo Viewer, c. 1855. GHS.

properly photographed face could be seen as a transparent expression of inner life, of character, of soul," Alan Trachtenberg writes, "emerged as a fundamental given of the discourse of... photography..."[15] In Hawthorne's 1851 *House of Seven Gables*, for example, the character Holgrave says of the photograph, "while we give it credit only for depicting the merest surface, it actually brings out the secret character with a truth that no painter would ever venture upon, even could he detect it."[16] And in 1864, Marcus Aurelius Root noted that a photographic portrait "is worse than worthless if the pictured face does not show the *soul* of the original—that *individuality or selfhood*, which differences *him* from all beings, past, present, or future."[17] The effect of closeness, presence or truth in the photograph, resulted in what Trachtenberg has called a "fetish of the portrayed or imaged face" in nineteenth-century America.[18]

Stereographic images—two plates side by side made to look three-dimensional via a pair of lenses—were one manner in which photographers attempted even more closely to represent this inner truth of human beings. The Germantown Historical Society has a beautiful example of a stereograph daguerreotype from the 1850s, complete with its own attached viewer (fig. 3). These early, glass-plate stereotypes are very rare (the reader may be more familiar with paper stereotypes viewed with large, free-standing viewers from the following decades), as they were far more expensive to produce than a single glass plate image, but they provide insight into the lengths to which both photographers and consumers were willing to go to achieve the lofty goal of representing the soul.

During the Civil War, the geographic separation of thousands of families made the question of a portrait's "truth" perhaps even more poignant, for the photograph might afford some degree of presence to those absent. The newly developed ambrotype allowed for a new mode of viewing that seemed even more wholly to represent the subject. A unique image created on a glass plate, an ambrotype is actually a negative image that appears positive when viewed against a dark background. Most ambrotypes were therefore painted on the reverse, or placed in a preserver with a dark piece of paper or fabric, or even produced on dark or "ruby" glass. Some, however, were housed

Fig. 4 Emma L. John and Anna May John, sixth plate ambrotype, c. 1860. GHS.

15 Alan Trachtenberg, "The Daguerreotype in Antebellum America," in *Young America, The Daguerreotypes of Southworth and Hawes* (New York: International Center for Photography and George Eastman House, 2005) 18.
16 Hawthorne, *House of Seven Gables,* 1851 (NY: Norton critical edition, 1967) 177.
17 As quoted in Stauffer, "Daguerreotyping the National Soul," 59.
18 Trachtenberg, "The Daguerreotype in Antebellum America," 18.

in cases that opened from both sides, each side serving as a dark background, using the process's unique transparency to create a seemingly three-dimensional image. The result is a reflective glass image that appears to present both sides of a person's face and body, furthering the sense of "truth" or wholeness in the image. The Germantown Historical Society has several of these reflective and transparent ambrotypes, which were only produced en masse from about the late 1850s to the mid 1860s, though none are housed in this particular type of case. An ambrotype of Anna May John Maris and Emma L. John (fig. 4), for example, appears almost to glow as if backlit, as a result of the ambrotyping technique.

The notion of a picture's ability to depict the soul also changed during the war to mean something even more powerful. Alcott's Thorn, the oldest of the soldiers in "On Picket Duty," and described as the more experienced, wiser man of the group of four, believes that his wife Mary's photograph has literally saved his life, as a bullet aimed at his heart had to first pass through the leather and glass of the little case before it could reach his body. He has saved both the slug and the shattered picture as objects of great significance and praise. Holding it like a rosary in his hands, or carrying it like a cross on his person, the photograph has become both the object and the symbol of Thorn's prayers. The presence of the "soul" seems here to become the presence of the "sacred." Another character in the story even kisses the photograph of his wife after showing it to the others, believing that, "the poor picture was a more perfect work of art than any of Sir Joshua's baby-beauties, or Raphael's Madonnas."[19]

Real-life stories give similar accounts of the increasing pseudo-religious iconicity of photographic portraits. A photograph of Helen Davidson and her daughter, of New Orleans, was "injured," like Thorn's picture, in the war. As if it were an invalid member of the family, the injured picture was cared for, placed in prosthetic frames, kept and eulogized.[20] The Germantown Historical Society has a similar picture that has been mysteriously damaged and lost its own frame, and has been placed in another, larger 1860s frame as a sort of bandage (fig. 5) A badly damaged daguerreotype of John Hood, an officer with the Department of the Interior who fought in the defense of Washington, and his wife Harriet, may also have suffered the same fate (fig. 6). And

Fig. 6 John H. and Harriet Miller Hood, sixth plate daguerreotype, c. 1858. GHS.

Fig. 5 Unidentified sitter, ninth plate ambrotype in sixth plate thermoplastic case and brass preserver, c. 1860. GHS.

19 Alcott, "On Picket Duty," 6.

20 *Mrs. Mortimer Turner (nee Helen Davidson) and small girl*, New York Historical Society, PR-012-2-185.

Fig. 7 Mary Stratton, ninth plate tintype, c. 1860. GHS.

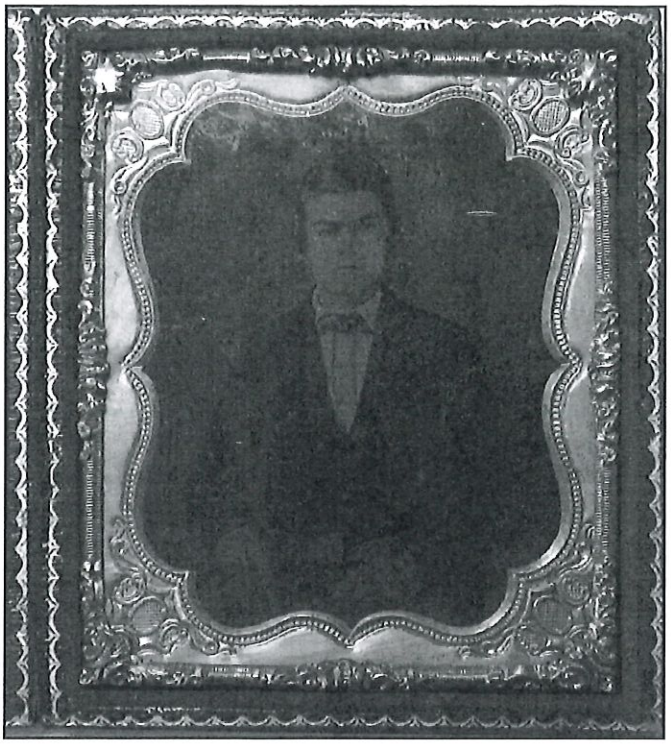

Fig. 8 Unidentified sitter, sixth plate ambrotype, c. 1860. GHS.

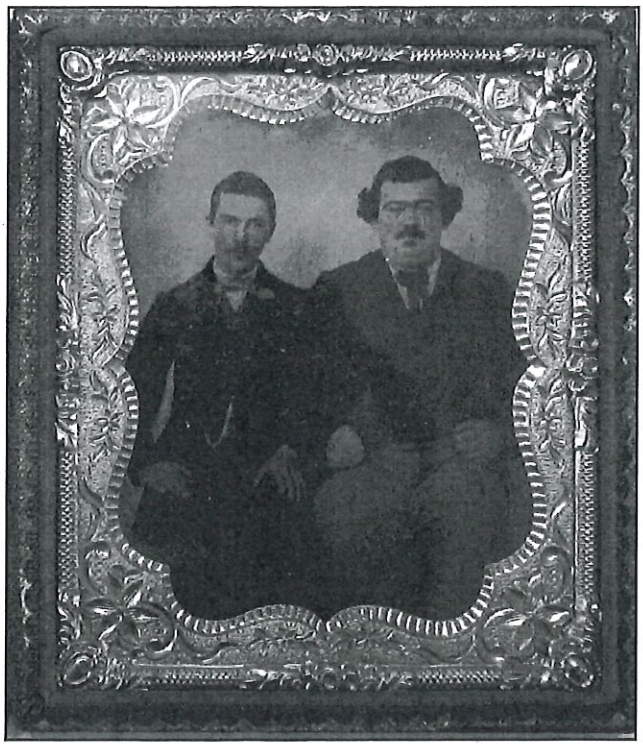

Fig. 9 Unidentified sitters, sixth plate ambrotype on white glass, c. 1860. GHS.

the process of picture-making itself often gave the photograph a sacred appearance. In a tiny ambrotype at Richmond's Museum of the Confederacy, for example, found in the saddlebags of a dead artillery horse, Mary Fitzgerald appears angelic with emulsion marks occurring in an aureole above her head.[21] As in the photograph of Anna Brookes, mistakes in the chemical processing give the picture a wholly different and here spiritual character.

Written evidence corroborates these observations. In an 1861 letter to his sister Mary, for example, Walter Stone Poor of the 10th New York Volunteers writes, "I will carry two tresses of hair which you have seen, and one dear, sweet face besides your own, dear Mary, will always be near... Knowing that I have your good wishes and your blessing, ...I firmly believe in Heaven's blessing on our cause." Like many other Civil War soldiers, Poor conflates his talismanic faith in photographic likenesses and locks of hair with his faith in heaven and the Union cause.[22]

We cannot know for certain whether the individual photographs at the Germantown Historical Society went to the front, lived in purses or haversacks, or shielded men from bullets. Nevertheless, they are an integral part of a large and varied group of images that was at the forefront of the American imagination during the Civil War precisely because of these qualities—the potential for portability, whether or not they were carried, the potential to so vividly

21 *Mary Fitzgerald*, ninth-plate ambrotype with hand-coloring, The Museum of the Confederacy, Richmond, Virginia.
22 Walter Stone Poor, Letter to Mary Poor, April 18th, 1861, New York Historical Society.

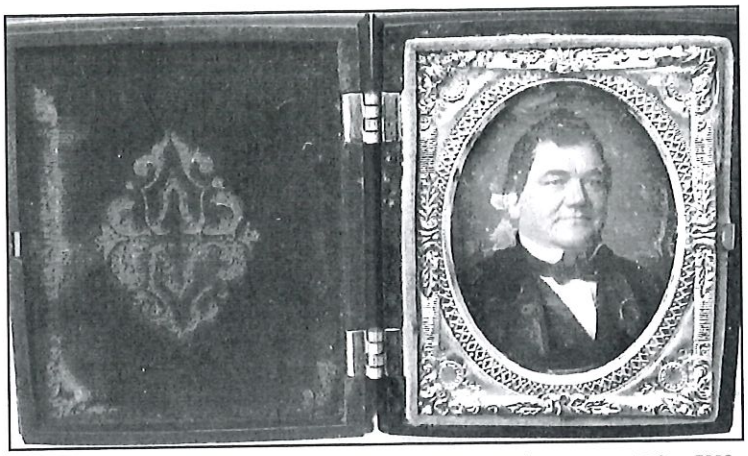

Fig. 10 Namaan Keyser, ninth plate daguerreotype in thermoplastic case, c. 1860. GHS.

represent a person's soul as to become a sacred object, whether or not they were so honored.

A tiny tintype image of a young Germantown woman named Mary Stratton (fig. 7), an ambrotype of an unidentified adolescent boy (fig. 8), and a comic portrait of two men of opposite stature (fig. 9) are just a few of the visually energetic pictures that compose this group. If we can begin to look at images like these not as "unidentified sitters" but as objects carried, adored, lost, written about, and spoken about in a wartime culture defined by separation and loss, suddenly they take on more nuanced meaning. An extremely well-preserved pocket-sized portrait (fig. 10) is in fact a far more intimate and physical object than a simple portrait, and a photographic brooch or lapel pin (fig. 11) can be seen as something familiar and worn rather than formal and distant.

Germantowners actively participated in what I call the cult of photographs during the Civil War. Residents had studio portraits taken, including those now in the Historical Society's collection. Soldiers in the Pennsylvania Bucktail Regiment, such as Germantown natives Harvey Fisher and Langhorne Wister, had their portraits taken both at home and at the front.[23] And amateur writers engaged in Alcottean narratives, invoking loved ones and their likenesses in support of their cause. Patrick Mulhatton, for example, a Germantown private in Company B of the 150th Pennsylvania Regiment, wrote a poem imploring "our sweethearts of the north" to be "generous" to the soldiers of the 150th, tying together the bonds of husbands, wives and lovers with the goals of war.[24]

Fig. 11 Unidentified sitter, sixteenth plate daguerreotype set in a brooch frame with fastener, c. 1865. GHS.

23 See Patrick A. Schroeder, *Pennsylvania Bucktails: A Photographic Album of the 42nd, 149th, and 150th Pennsylvania Regiments* (Daleville, Virginia: Schroeder Publications, 2001) 244-246, 276-277.

24 Private Patrick Mulhatton, *Company B, 150th Regt. P. Vls, Bucktails*, 1863 or 1864. Civil War Collections, Germantown Historical Society.

Portrait photographs are crucial to a nuanced understanding of the visual culture of wartime America. Too often overlooked by scholars of art, these images are both documentary and symbolic, and they transcend class and racial boundaries. In my dissertation, I look at the ways in which various social groups (women, African Americans, veterans, etc.) may have experienced keepsake portraits differently, and the ways in which photographs' meanings changed as families and identities changed throughout the war. The photographs at the Germantown Historical Society are an important part of that story.

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