

# Two Victorian Portrait Albums

By Inga Milbauer

Portrait photography was introduced in the United States in the 1840s when the first daguerreotype portrait studios were established in New York, New York and Boston, Massachusetts.

These early portraits were a form of daguerreotype photography which was named for Louis-Jacques-Mandé Daguerre (1787-1851). Daguerre invented the technique in collaboration with Nicéphore Niépce (1765-1833) in the 1830s in France. They discovered that a permanent image could be made by coating a copper plate with silver iodide, expose it to light in a camera, then fume it with mercury vapor and stabilize this with a salt solution.<sup>1</sup> After this invention was introduced to the public in Paris in 1839 it spread rapidly around the world.

Samuel F.B. Morse (1791-1872) brought daguerreotype photography back to the United States from his visit to Paris, France and taught it to students in New York, New York. One of his students was Mathew B. Brady (c.1823-1896) who opened his own studio in New York and later in Washington D.C. He became a well-known photographer of American presidents, from John Quincy Adams to William McKinley. Many portraits of Abraham Lincoln were taken by him. When the Civil War began, he proposed to “photograph the war as a complete chronicle from beginning to end” and secured permission from President Lincoln.<sup>2</sup> Ross F. Collins, Professor of Communication at North Dakota State University, Fargo writes in the article *Photography and Photojournalism - a Brief History*, that Mathew Brady “financed 20 teams of photographers to cover all the major battle sites. The technology of the time was not fast enough to photograph actual battles, but his haunting photos of battle aftermath perhaps forever changed the picture of war for ordinary civilians.”<sup>3</sup>



**Daguerreotype Portrait**  
*BHSM Collection*

The daguerreotype technique was replaced by the wet-collodion process, invented by the Englishman Frederick Scott Archer (1813-1857) in 1851. “The process involved adding a soluble iodide to a solution of collodion (cellulose nitrate) and coating a glass plate with the mixture. In the darkroom the plate was immersed in a solution of silver nitrate to form silver iodide. The plate, still wet, was exposed in the camera. It was then developed by pouring a solution of pyrogallic acid over it and was fixed with a strong solution of sodium thiosulfate, for which potassium cyanide was later substituted.”<sup>4</sup> This technique produced ambrotype photographs and ferrotype, or tintype photographs which became very popular from the mid- to late 1800s. The tintype photograph was a unique image made on metal, instead of glass which was used for the ambrotype photograph. Tintype photographs “did not approach the brilliancy of daguerreotypes but were popular, first among Civil War soldiers and then among immigrants and working people in general, because they were durable, easy to make, and inexpensive.”<sup>5</sup>

Wondering if you have a daguerreotype or tintype photograph in your family collection? The daguerreotype is more reflective, almost mirror-like. Many find the easiest method to determine which type of photograph they have is to put a small magnet to the photograph, since the tintype would be attracted to the magnet and the daguerreotype would not.

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**Mirror-Like Effect**  
**Daguerreotype Photograph**

The Boylston Historical Society and Museum has two small Victorian photograph albums in its collection which contain portraits from this era. The first is a small leather album designed to display four photographs on each page.

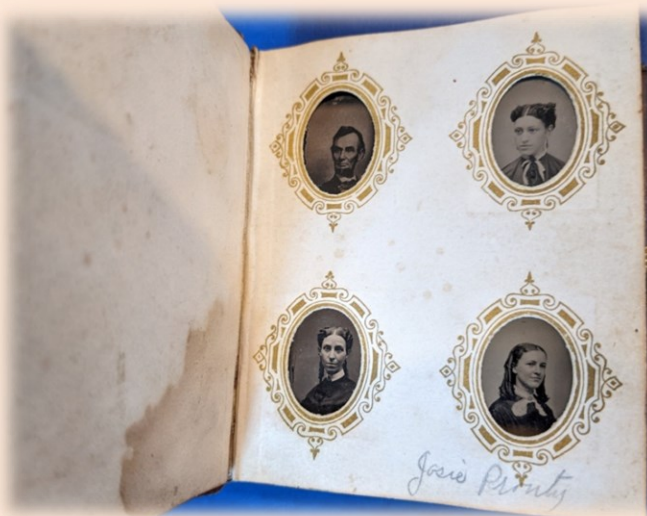


**Album Cover**  
*Front View*  
BHSM Collection



**Album Cover**  
*Back View*  
BHSM Collection

This very small album measures 3 ¼ inches by 3 7/8 inches when closed it is 1 inch thick. It is made of leather with gold colored decoration and a metal clasp. Each page has four oval cut outs which measure 5/8" by 13/16".



**Portrait Album**  
*Inside View*  
BHSM Collection



**Details of Clasp and Cover**  
**Portrait Album**  
*Side View*  
BHSM Collection

This album contains tintype portraits, and interestingly on the first page it shows a portrait of President Abraham Lincoln.

The album was part of the estate of Goldie Prouty Benson and donated to the Boylston Historical Society and Museum by Robert Taft in 1984. Goldie Elizabeth Prouty, born on May 23, 1896 in Boylston, Massachusetts, was the daughter of George H. Prouty and Nellie May Vickery Prouty.<sup>5</sup> On 28 June 1917, Goldie married George Edward Benson, the son of William H. Benson and Cora A. Blanchard.<sup>7</sup> Goldie died 15 May 1972 in Worcester, Massachusetts.<sup>8</sup>

Another Victorian photo album from the collection of the Boylston Historical Society and Museum is this tiny leather-bound album with a metal clasp. It measures 1<sup>3/4</sup>” by 1<sup>3/4</sup>” and is 7/8” thick when closed. Each page has an oval cut out that measures 5/8” by 7/8”. This album was donated to the Boylston Historical Society and Museum by Ruth C. Peinze in 1973. The twelve-page album contains nineteen portraits.



**1 ¾ inch Portrait Album  
with single tintype portraits**

*Inside View  
BHSM Collection*

*Stay tuned for more information on the women who appear in these portraits!*

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*Acknowledgements:*

<sup>1</sup> <https://www.britannica.com/technology/daguerreotype>

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.ndsu.edu/pubweb/~rcollins/photography/article3.html#:~:text=In%201840%20the%20world's%20first,Everyone%20had%20to%20have%20one>

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.ndsu.edu/pubweb/~rcollins/photography/article3.html#:~:text=In%201840%20the%20world's%20first,Everyone%20had%20to%20have%20one>

<sup>4</sup> <https://library.eb.com/levels/referencecenter/article/wet-collodion-process/76702>

<sup>5</sup> <https://library.eb.com/levels/referencecenter/article/tintype/72580>

<sup>6</sup> <https://www.findagrave.com/memorial/124352599/george-homer-prouty>

<sup>7</sup> Boylston Marriage Records

<sup>8</sup> Massachusetts Death Index

<https://www.britannica.com/biography/Frederick-Scott-Archer>

<https://www.britannica.com/biography/Louis-Daguerre>

<https://www.britannica.com/technology/camera-obscura-photography>

[https://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/adag/hd\\_adag.htm](https://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/adag/hd_adag.htm)

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*Published*

*Boylston Historical Society and Museum, Inc.*

*3 February 2023*