

## **Photographs: Windows on the Past**

### **by Gail Caskey Winkler**

Photographs are one of the richest resources available to a homeowner wishing to document the past appearance of a house. For the researcher, they also offer a detailed view of the past usually absent from paintings. During the last quarter of the 20th century the importance of photographs to historians of American houses began to be recognized in a series of publications. William Seale was the first in 1975 with *The Tasteful Interlude: American Interiors through the Camera's Eye, 1860-1917* (New York: Praeger). In the tradition of Seale's book, in 1991 Cynthia Brandimarte published *Inside Texas: Culture, Identity, and Houses, 1878-1920* (Fort Worth: Texas Christian University Press). Those works have encouraged scholars to use photographic evidence in other areas of study, including wallpaper, furniture, and decorative textiles.<sup>1</sup>

As the above book titles suggest, the age of photography extends little more than 150 years, beginning in 1839 with the development of the daguerreotype by the French painter Louis J. Daguerre (1789-1851). His process used a polished metal plate with a silvered surface that required a twenty- to forty-second exposure time to capture an image. Samuel F.B. Morse (1791-1872), who was acquainted with Daguerre, introduced the process to the United States in 1840.<sup>2</sup> Daguerreotypes were typically protected behind glass in small, ornamental cases to prevent the image from being brushed away and to keep the silver from tarnishing. Portraits of individuals were the most common, followed by views of the landscape and exteriors of houses, both subjects that took advantage of strong natural light and rarely moved while the plate was being exposed. The Castine Historical Society has daguerreotypes in its collection, one example being the exterior view made about 1859 of the Ebenezer Perkins house (71 Main Street).<sup>3</sup>

By the mid-19th century two similar but less expensive photographic processes were developed: the ambrotype and the tintype. An ambrotype

captured an image on a prepared, wet glass plate, while a tintype used a thin iron sheet. All three early photographic processes produced a single, unique image that, incidentally, was reversed from right to left.<sup>4</sup>

The ambrotype may have suggested the next big advance in photography. In 1851 Frederick Scott Archer (1813-1857), an Englishman, introduced the “wet plate” process using a glass plate to create a collodion negative. This process solved the reversed image problem and allowed multiple copies to be printed until the plate was broken or recycled. However, this so-called “wet plate” process required the glass plate to be prepared, exposed, and developed all within fifteen minutes, requiring an adjacent darkroom or, in the case of an itinerant photographer, a darkroom in a wagon.<sup>5</sup> To make an expedition remunerative, a traveling photographer might make a series of images, hoping to sell some to residents of a community. Such a list of Castine views is found on the back of the stereoview of the Witherle family in their parlor taken by George E. Collins, an itinerant photographer from Portland (Figure 1).



Figure 1. The Witherle family, photographed about 1860 in the parlor of their house at 77 Main Street. From right to left are William Howe Witherle; his son,

Charles Bryant Witherle; his daughter, Lucy Moulton Witherle; and his wife, Sarah Adams Witherle. (*Castine Historical Society collections*)

Archer's "wet plate" process required an exposure of about six seconds in strong light, which explains the rigid postures adopted by the four members of the Witherle family photographed in their parlor about 1860. In addition, the "film" on the plate was highly sensitive to blue, which was overexposed and appeared as white, accounting for the strange appearance of William and Sarah Witherle's eyes.<sup>6</sup> Despite these issues, Collins has preserved for us a detailed view of a mid-19th-century parlor, complete with floral medallion carpeting installed wall-to-wall; Rococo Revival furniture, complete with marble-topped center table under a hanging light fixture; and a papered wall that seems to alternate between delicate paneling and overall motif of floral sprigs. The "antimacassars" on the backs of the armchairs were to protect the figured upholstery from hair oil. Louis Godey informed readers of his *Lady's Book* that the term was coined by Roland of London to advertise his product, Macassar Hair Oil, which contained alkanet, a red dye similar to henna.<sup>7</sup>

Another stereoview dating to the 1870s shows the double parlors of a handsome yet unidentified house in Castine (Figure 2). The three sitters have posed themselves to appear at ease. The camera is angled to peek from the front parlor through the pocket doors to capture most of the back parlor, used as a sitting room/library. (Books on the *étagère*, the graceful stand of shelves, in place of the usual ceramic accessories are a nice detail.) The two rooms have been finished *en suite* with wall-to-wall carpeting in a Turkish pattern, and the walls are papered in an overall diamond pattern containing a stylized star, or quatrefoil, that may have been printed in gold metallic, which would explain its dark appearance. The furniture ranges from the 1840s (footstool and Elizabethan side chair in the foreground) to the 1850s (box piano, tufted sofa) and the 1860s (fully upholstered *bergère*, or French armchair). Three items are of special interest: the use of a picture rail rather than a wallpaper border at the top of the wall; the sealed fireplace opening papered to match the walls, while the room is

heated by the radiator in front of it; and the large “Wardian case” next to the windows, where shutters appear as the only window coverings.<sup>8</sup>



Figure 2. A handsome double parlor in an unidentified house in Castine, about 1875. Does any reader recognize it? (*Castine Historical Society collections*)

In 1880, the “wet plate” process was replaced by a dry process in which the glass plates could be prepared in advance with an emulsion of silver halides suspended in gelatin. The plates were convenient as well as more sensitive to light, thus further reducing the amount of exposure time and resulting in predictably successful photographs of building interiors. About 1890, Charles W. Noyes and his wife, Elizabeth Bartlett Noyes, asked A.H. Folsom, a professional photographer from Boston and a seasonal resident of Castine, to photograph their house at 21 Pleasant Street, built by Samuel Noyes in the 1820s. The occasion may have been the extension of the house and conversion of the kitchen to a formal dining room. Folsom produced seven large-format views of the two parlors, the formal dining room, and an office/library. The sitting room (Figure 3) contains the assortment of furniture one would expect to find in a house occupied by three generations of one family. The oldest item might be the pair of



brass andirons, possibly bought for the new house. The newest items include the carpeting, Oriental rugs, fireplace mantel, the wallpaper and border, and the adjustable hanging kerosene light fixture. Between those extremes are the box piano (just visible on the right), the ca. 1840 pier mirror on the left, and the sofa, rocking chairs and center table from about 1860. The resolution is so good one can see the door to the back hall was painted in two colors.



Figure 3. The house at 21 Pleasant Street built in the 1820s for Captain Samuel Noyes (1784-1859) and photographed about 1890, when Charles William Noyes and his wife, Helen Bartlett Noyes, the third generation of the family, lived in it.  
*(Courtesy of Penelope Tonry)*

The combination stair hall and living room (known as a “living hall”) became fashionable during the last quarter of the 19th century. The one in Stone

Cottage (Figure 4) offers an intriguing view of a room whose occupants had apparently not yet settled on the final decoration, or perhaps they just marched to a different drummer; the walls are ornamented with several wallpaper patterns, and the border on the fireplace wall meets a different pattern over the doorway on the right. The portieres (doorway curtains) are not the same textile as the curtains next to the stairs. The room displays several items found in Colonial Revival schemes, including a large Oriental rug laid on a polished wood floor, the fireplace crane, and what appears to be an 18th-century corner chair. More surprising is that a chamber pot is apparently suspended beneath the chair seat, suggesting the chair's original use was in a bedchamber.



Figure 4. View of Stone Cottage, located at 5 Perkins Street, around 1890, and apparently taken while the occupants were debating wallpaper patterns. (*Castine Historical Society collections*)

In 1885, George Eastman (1854-1932) created the first flexible photographic film by coating one side of a strip of paper with a gelatin emulsion embedded with silver halide crystals. Following a quick exposure time, the image

on the film was chemically developed before printing. In the early days, the camera containing the exposed film had to be sent away so the film could be removed and processed, and then the images were printed and returned along with the reloaded camera. Rolls of flexible film on a plastic celluloid base (unfortunately quite flammable) followed in 1889, thus ushering in the age of the amateur photographer.

The “Ivy Room” in the George Wheeler house (Figure 5), photographed in the 1890s, is an example of the idiosyncratic decorations frequently found in late 19th-century furnishing schemes. In 1869, the same year Dr. Wheeler and his wife Margaret arrived in Castine, Catharine Beecher and Harriet Beecher Stowe published *The American Woman’s Home*, in which they recommended ivy for window decoration. They instructed readers that if the plant’s leaves were washed in soapsuds once or twice a year, it “will live and thrive and wind about in a room year in and year out . . . and do almost any thing [sic] to oblige you that you can suggest to it.”<sup>9</sup> Incredibly, three small pots in the bay window seem to be the source of the ivy strung throughout the room. Light from the kerosene lamp on the center table was augmented with a kerosene floor lamp, outfitted with an amazing drapery shade briefly popular in the 1890s. The fireplace mantel shelf is embellished with a swag ornamented with fringe, another decorative effect popular toward the end of the 19th century, as well as a pair of Oriental fans that acknowledge the “Japanesque” elements introduced to American households following the Philadelphia Centennial in 1876. The easy chair in the corner is an American Craftsman version of the reclining “Morris chair,” named for the British designer William Morris (1834-1896). Amidst such fashionable details, one can only wonder if the spittoon on the hearth was for ornamental or practical purposes.





Figure 5. The so-called “ivy room” at 204 Perkins Street when Dr. George A. Wheeler lived there, between 1868 and 1910. The house was built about 1812.  
*(Courtesy of the Wilson Museum)*

The handsome staircase and wainscoting at 71 Main Street reflect the 1807 date when the house was built for Ebenezer Perkins (Figure 6). When this view was published in 1896, the house belonged to George Witherle. He had Oriental rugs on the floor, mismatched portieres at the parlor doors, a gas ceiling fixture, ashlar wallpaper (as recommended by design critics for stair halls), and a coordinating ceiling paper visible under the stairs. Caribou antlers might seem an odd decoration, but the taste for game trophies popular in German hunting lodges had been introduced to the English-speaking world by none other than Prince Albert, consort of Queen Victoria. The antlers hang over what must have been a seriously uncomfortable box sofa, covered in (probably black) horsehair



with a button-tufted back. What appear to be two fire buckets hang toward the back of the hall and, strangely, the stair carpet ends just below the first tread rather than extending to the floor.



Figure 6. The stair hall at 71 Main Street, photographed about 1890 when George H. Witherle owned the property. (*From Castine: Past and Present*, by George A. Wheeler, Boston: Rockwell & Churchill, 1896)

The final image (Figure 7) illustrates the open plan of parlor and dining room in the second Frank P. Wood house, Boulder Cottage. The center drop-leaf table with wings extended, covered with an unusual runner, holds an assortment of objects, including binoculars, books, a flower arrangement, and a kerosene lamp. In a nod to the Colonial Revival style, a muzzleloader and two powder horns are displayed above the fireplace mantel, and a “colonial” brass bed warmer hangs to the left above a flax wheel. Silver is displayed in the fall-front desk in the dining room, an unusual use. The textiles are handsome. The two footstools are covered in the same fabric as the rocking chair, and the portiere

between the rooms does not match a window curtain (possibly a William Morris print) just visible to the left of the easel. The long runners in the parlor and dining room are actually strips of wall-to-wall carpeting woven in twenty-seven-inch widths. The pair of sunflower andirons is an important example of the British Aesthetic Movement, popularized by Charles L. Eastlake in *Hints on Household Taste* (1868).<sup>10</sup>



Figure 7. The parlor and dining room of Boulder Cottage, built for the F.P. Wood family near Dyce's Head and subsequently demolished. (*Castine Historical Society collections*)

In 1908, Kodak introduced so-called “safety film” made of cellulose acetate that, together with easy-to-load rolls and box cameras, made photography a hobby open to nearly everyone. Suddenly families could record their celebrations, their children, their vacations, and their homes. Today there must be hundreds of

thousands of old photograph albums in the hands of family members who do not know what to do with them. One suggestion: offer them to your local historical society and thus to future scholars. The new storage facilities at the Castine Historical Society are secure as well as temperature- and humidity-controlled, to insure photographs are well preserved. Finally, recognize that photographs represent a rapidly diminishing method of documenting American life, now that every cell phone (and not a few computers) can transmit our images. Those methods, unfortunately, produce mainly ephemeral images, with the result that the 21st century will actually leave few photographic records for later generations to study and enjoy.

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<sup>1</sup> For example, see Richard C. Nylander, Elizabeth Redmond, and Penny J. Sanders, *Wallpaper in New England* (Boston: Society for the Preservation of New England Antiquities, 1986); Katherine C. Grier, *Culture & Comfort: People, Parlors, and Upholstery, 1850-1930* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1988); and Gail Caskey Winkler, *Capricious Fancy: Draping and Curtaining the Historic Interior, 1800-1930* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2013).

<sup>2</sup> Daniel A. Fink, "Positive Processes: Photographs from the Early Nineteenth Century," *Nineteenth Century* 5:3 (Autumn, 1979), p. 34.

<sup>3</sup> The ca. 1859 daguerreotype view of the Ebenezer Perkins house on Main Street was illustrated on the front page of the Spring, 2013 issue of *The Castine Visitor*.

<sup>4</sup> There were a few methods to correct the reversal, but most portrait sitters did not mind because that was how they saw themselves in mirrors. (Fink, p. 38.)

<sup>5</sup> The teams sent out by Mathew Brady (1823?-1896) to record the Civil War used the "wet plate" process to capture the images of the carnage that remain seared into our nation's collective memory.

<sup>6</sup> The silver halide coating of glass plates and early films processed blue as white and red as black. This accounts for the cloudless skies in exterior views and the black of sunburned cheeks. Metallics used on some wallpapers also appeared as black. Finally, in 1906 two brothers, Auguste (1862-1954) and Louis (1864-1948) Lumière of Lyon, France, created "panchromatic" black and white film that was sensitive to all wavelengths in the visible spectrum.



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<sup>7</sup> Between 1848 and 1877 nearly 100 patterns for “tidies” were printed in the *Lady’s Book*. Godey used the term “antimacassar” for the first time in the June, 1854, issue of his magazine.

<sup>8</sup> The “Wardian case” is named for the English botanist Nathaniel B. Ward, who used the device for transporting plants that prefer moist environments, such as ferns. Wardian cases came in various sizes and were popular in Victorian parlors and sitting rooms.

<sup>9</sup> Catharine E. Beecher and Harriet Beecher Stowe, *The American Woman’s Home: or, Principles of Domestic Science* (New York: J.B. Ford, 1869), p. 96. They praised “Ward’s cases” and also suggested growing slips of German ivy in a bottle of water that could be hidden behind a picture; they assured readers “the ivy will seem to come from fairyland, and hang its verdure in all manner of pretty curves around the picture.” (p. 98.) The owner of the unidentified house in Figure 2 copied both suggestions in the double parlor.

<sup>10</sup> Charles L. Eastlake, *Hints on Household Taste in Furniture, Upholstery, and Other Details* (London: Longmans, Green, 1868). In England, Eastlake’s voice was only one of many encouraging new, simpler, and more tasteful designs following what reformers deemed to be the embarrassing debacle of English manufacturers at the 1851 Crystal Palace Exhibition. Here in America, however, Eastlake’s book was a revelation when it was first published in 1872. Remarkably, eight more American editions were issued between 1874 and 1886. (See Winkler, *Capricious Fancy*, p. 135.) Harriet Prescott Spofford, an American disciple of Eastlake, wrote of his book in 1878: “not a young marrying couple who read English were to be found without *Hints on Household Taste* in their hands, and all its dicta were accepted as gospel truths.” Spofford, *Art Decoration Applied to Furniture* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1878), p. 147.