

THE CLAY DAGUERREOTYPES BY ROOT

The man who might have been President—Henry Clay—sitting for his portrait that March day, the 7th, 1848, nearly one hundred years ago, was of troubled mind; the death of his friend, John Quincy Adams, and the prospects at the age of 71, whether he should accept the Whig nomination for President and if so, would he be successful in his election to the high office that he had tried for before.



(Photo courtesy of the Hist. Soc. of Penna.)

Located in and owned by the Historical Society of Pennsylvania. Portrait used on the Blood's Penny Post, the 15 cents 1902 issue, and on various revenue tax stamps.

Clay had left his beloved Ashland to go to Washington in December of 1847, where he later accepted the invitation to visit New York on the behest of Horace Greeley, intending to stop off at Baltimore and Philadelphia. On the eve of his departure, Feb. 21, 1848, his friend J. Q. Adams had a paralytic stroke, Clay immediately went to his bedside before leaving for his trip.

Clay was royally greeted and received at Baltimore, but before his departure for Philadelphia on the 23rd of February he received the news that Adams had passed away on that day.

Clay arrived in Philadelphia on the 24th, there being greeted with a parade of honor and had many receptions. A few days later the body of Adams was received in Philadelphia, being brought to Independence Hall with the suitable funeral cortege, later going on to Boston for burial.

This somewhat spoiled the festivities of the Clay visit and may have tempered the enthusiasm of the later New York Clay celebration.

However, the Philadelphia daguerreotype photographers did not let the opportunity of Clay's visit pass, because every one of the "leading artists" clamored for sittings.

The first portrait was taken on February 28th by W. & F. Langenheim, on the third floor of the Exchange. England & Gunn advertised in the PUBLIC LEDGER on the 6th of March that, "a day or two ago" that they had had the honor of a sitting by Clay. On the 8th M. P. Simons stated in the LEDGER that Clay had sat for them on the Saturday previous. But of the portraits that philatelists, later, were to know through postage stamps, there were no mention of them in the LEDGER of those days. On March 4, 1848, M. A. Root did advertise that "Mr. Root's Daguerreotype Gallery, No. 140 Chestnut Street, is open from 8 o'clock A. M. to 6 P. M. for visitors and those who wish to have a good picture taken at short notice will call and examine the interesting collection of military officers and others, and judge for themselves of these beautiful specimens of art."

However Root did take some portraits of Clay at that time for we find on page 945 of the September, 1897 issue of McClure's Magazine, one of these portraits, which had been used as model of design for the Blood's Penny Post stamp, in 1855 in Philadelphia and later by the Bureau of Engraving and Printing for the 1902, 15 cent postage stamp. The location of the daguerreotype shown in McClure's was given as, owned by the Historical Society of Pennsylvania. A. L. Van Nest of Chicago in 1940 wrote to the Society for a copy of the photograph and much to his surprise they forwarded to him not the reproduction that was shown in McClure's but another, the portrait of Clay such as was used to model the design for the 15 cents 1890 postage stamp, produced by the American Bank Note Co., later used



(Photo courtesy of the Hist. Soc. of Penna.)

Location and owner of daguerreotype unknown. Portrait used on the 1890, 1894 and 1898 15 cent issues.

for the 15 cents 1894, 1895 and 1898 postage stamps. The writer, having a copy of the first mentioned reproduction and wishing also to get a photograph the same as Van Nest had gotten, wrote to the Society for a copy but still received a copy of the first mentioned portrait as before.

Being in Philadelphia, for a time in 1941, the writer on going to the Society's headquarters found that though they were in possession of the first mentioned daguerreotype they had no record of the second daguerreotype, they later came to the conclusion that it had been on exhibit at some time and that a reproduction of it had remained.

However an account of the happenings at the time the daguerreotypes were taken was found in CAMERA and the PENCIL and as told by Root, the photographer,

"In 1848 an appointment being made for my taking the Daguerreotype of Henry Clay, I requested the Mayor of our City and the Sheriff of the County, together with several others of Clay's friends, who were present to keep the statesman in brisk comment till I was ready to expose the plates of the image; as I wished to catch the intellectual, lively look natural to him under such conditions. The Mayor turning to Mr. Clay said, "Mr. Root

desires us to continue talking, as he wishes to daguerreotype your thoughts, to catch if possible your smiles." "Smiles," exclaimed Mr. Clay, "I can give him frowns, if he wants them." Upon which he smiled, while his face was radiant with intelligence as well. In twenty seconds three good portraits were taken at once; the plate removed from the instrument and four fresh ones got ready. In a few seconds more, Mr. Clay the while conversing pleasantly with his friends, all else was prepared, and then his likeness again was daguerreotyped by four cameras at once, a 1 representing him as we then saw him, engaged in conversation, mentally aroused and wearing a cheerful, intellectual, and noble expression of countenance. Thus seven portraits were taken in but 13 minutes. Mr. Clay remarked after inspecting them—"Mr. Root, I consider these as decidedly the best and most satisfactory likeness that I have ever had taken, and I have had many." These words he left in my register, with his autograph. One of these portraits has since been engraved, as the finest likeness of him extant, and may be seen in the Portrait Gallery published by Rice and Hart."

Marcus Aurelius Root was born in Granville, Ohio, August 15, 1808. According to M'Elroy's directory of Philadelphia we find that in 1837 he was a Professor of Penmanship at 134 Chestnut Street, his home, 171 Vine. In 1840 he conducted a writing Academy at S. W. 8th and Mulberry, above the stairs. 1847, he was a Teacher of Writing at 140 Chestnut, and his home at Sch. 8th below George.

On June 20, 1846 he had bought out J. E. Mayall at 140 Chestnut and had proceeded to get acquainted with the new fad, the Daguerreotype, which his brother Samuel had been studying since 1839. By 1848 he had given up the penmanship business and did photography exclusive, going into partnership with his brother in 1850. He died in Phila. on April 12, 1889.

Compiled by F. L. Ellis.

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