

In Frozen in Time, Susan Snow Lukesh takes a mid-nineteenth century photo album from New Bedford, Massachusetts, created against the almost unmentioned backdrop of the Civil War, offering details of daily living, marrying, working, and dying.

FROZEN IN TIME:

An Early Carte de Visite Album from New Bedford, Massachusetts

By Susan Snow Lukesh

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Frozen in Time

An Early Carte de Visite Album from New Bedford, Massachusetts



Susan Snow Lukesh

SECOND EDITION

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Cover Images

Center: Abby Taber Hunt (1824-1905), compiler of the album.

Top: Sarah Gordon Hunt Snow (1860-1942), Abby's daughter and family archivist.

Bottom: Sarah's daughter Agatha Snow at ten years (1886-1963), annotator of the album in the early 1940s with the stories her grandmother, Abby, had told her.

Cartes de visite: small mass-produced and inexpensive photographs introduced in the United States in 1859, widely used in the 1860s, and then almost completely superseded by the larger cabinet card photographs in the 1870s.

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Prologue

Photography freezes a moment in time but anticipates the future, “creating a tangible image for the future for what will be the past.”¹ Like diaries, photograph albums can be viewed through a lens of history offering information on the social and professional lives and relationships of those portrayed, and, as we will see here, hints of the history surrounding the times of the album. And we see also that the lives portrayed may gain meaning from the association of their cartes de visite with those of others. Diaries, developed chronologically over time, are more directly understood. An album can be viewed as an artistic document, one whose interpretation “is more inferential and imaginative than the interpretation of a diary.”² Hence, while the album may shape our understanding of the people and lives portrayed, as with Agatha Snow’s comments—written on the pages of the album close to 80 years after her grandmother put the album together—succeeding generations may add additional shape to the album. This album offers two aspects that are rarely if ever found: names attached to each photograph; and added commentary (Agatha’s) that clearly reflects one of the narratives used to describe the contents—narratives that are crucial to others’ engagement with any photographic album.

The album presented here offers images of forty-two people, a slice of New Bedford, Massachusetts, in the early 1860s, yet a slice that while seemingly thin, in fact reflects much of the culture and activities of the city at the time. We can imagine these forty-two people as in a play acted out on a stage, visiting, and greeting each other during the course of the day or when meeting occasionally at the Taber House on Orchard Street. Perhaps we can consider these people, reduced to inanimate images here and frozen in time, as characters in a mid-nineteenth-century *Our Town*. Certainly, as if paralleling the play, the stage is bare, the language very spare, and what we have are archetypal characters who point to both the first half of the nineteenth century and the future second half of the century—all the while played out against the barely mentioned backdrop of the Civil War. And as with Thornton Wilder’s *Our Town*, there is both tragedy and social justice beneath the surface and reflected in the lives of the characters. As Donald Margulies wrote in a foreword to an edition of Wilder’s play, “The simultaneity of life and death, past, present, and future pervades *Our Town*”³ and so does that same simultaneity pervade this mid-nineteenth-century carte de visite album.

The contemporary stage manager was Abby Taber Hunt, who created the album; the twentieth-century stage manager was Abby’s granddaughter, Agatha Snow; and in the twenty-first century, the author is the stage manager, great-great-granddaughter of Abby Taber Hunt. The first two can be seen as both narrators and players, the third simply a narrator, although one who presents to the audience not

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only the past of the characters but also their future, much as the Stage Manager did in *Our Town* when he spoke about Joe Crowell, the eleven-year-old newsboy:

“Goin’ to be a great engineer, Joe was. But the war broke out and he died in France. — All that education for nothing.”⁴

The album was put together to present a collection of the exciting new photographic medium—cartes de visite—introduced in the United States in the summer of 1859. These cartes de visite quickly became a rich new social medium—as discussed in the section *Nineteenth-Century Social Media*—although not a photographic surrogate for the calling card—its literal translation—as some suggest. The album offers a compressed history and future of New Bedford through the forty-two onstage characters, some of whom do not have a speaking role, as well as a handful of offstage characters contemporaneously connected or now known to be connected in the subsequent few decades. It is unlikely that Abby Taber Hunt thought that the stories she told to her granddaughter about these players would be transcribed by the same granddaughter on the pages of the album eighty years after the album was compiled and over forty years after Agatha heard the stories. Nor did she likely think of the future of these characters or of a great-great-granddaughter who would illuminate their lives over one hundred and fifty years after she put the album together.

Within the author’s ancestral family from the time of their arrival in North America, whether on the *Mayflower* or slightly later in the seventeenth century, there are many constellations of families intermarrying and working together, but none is yet so clearly demonstrated and detailed as the one in this album. There is no reason to assume—and in fact, we know differently—that these people were the sum of the family’s social and professional network in New Bedford, but it is an example of a network selected and displayed, perhaps for posterity, and one that over 150 years later, when studied, reveals details of the lives and associations of those included. As mentioned earlier, this publication may be seen as one example of *petite histoire*, the account of particular households and neighborhoods.

New Bedford was known in the nineteenth century for many things, and one specifically harkens back to its establishment, freedom of religion. The city housed many churches offering a variety of Christian religions to its citizens as well as to those who passed through, particularly seamen employed on the ships coming and going through the port of New Bedford. As mentioned in *A Brief History of New Bedford* that follows, the 1859 New Bedford City Directory offers twenty-three houses of worship, ranging from Quaker (Friends) to Unitarian-Congregationalist, and First Universalist, as well as Roman Catholic, numerous Methodist Episcopal, and missionary churches. Thus, that this assemblage of people who were guests at the home of Henry and Sally Taber and their daughter Abby Taber Hunt has a variety of Quakers, Methodists, and Unitarians is not surprising. Unitarians are also dancing

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offstageⁱ since we know that two cousins, one, the granddaughter of Henry Taber, Sarah Gordon Hunt, and the other, the granddaughter of both Henry Taber and Jireh Swift (5)ⁱⁱ, Gertrude Swift Taber, would become life-long Unitarians.

The city was also well-known for its abolitionists and as a place where many slaves and freed African Americans sought refuge. The presence in this group of Reverend William Studley and his family—he a Methodist Episcopal minister who was so anti-slavery that ultimately the ministry in Brooklyn, N.Y., would not continue his contract—and the Reverend Moses Thomas, Unitarian, and his family members, reinforces the diversity of religions. And then there are the Quakers—the life-long ones, like the Tabers and the Howlands—and some of those who moved to the Unitarian Church after the Quaker schism in the 1820s—like the Grinnells and James Arnold—both of whom had become members of the Unitarian Congregationalist church by 1838. Another Unitarian dancing offstage, as it were, was one of the author's great-great-grandfathers, Loum Snow (2)ⁱⁱⁱ, a member of the same church and an abolitionist whose house today is a designated station on the Underground Railroad. His family was very much part of these neighborhoods, both social and professional, and would join the Taber family as relatives when his son, Robert, married Abby Taber Hunt's daughter, Sarah Gordon Hunt, in 1881, a signal of the widening of the extended but still closely connected families.

The original defining industry of pre-Civil War New Bedford—whaling and commercial shipping—and the defining post-Civil War industry—the cotton mills—are well represented by the people in the album. The Howlands, the Grinnells, the Hathaways, the Tabers, James Arnold, Captain Sullivan, and, of course, in one sense, the family of the sister of Herman Melville all represent the original defining industry. Still offstage but becoming members of the extended family beginning as early as the 1860s, were the whaling and shipping families of the Swifts and Snows. All of these families put their profits from whaling and commercial shipping into more whaling, and into the insurance and banking industries as well as into the mill industry. The Grinnells and the Howlands represent the transition to the mill industry, as do the Snows to a lesser degree. The houses and often the gardens built in the antebellum years by these prominent families—especially the gardens of James Arnold—and others not portrayed in the album (Rotch, Rodman, and so forth) helped define the city. As Melville wrote:

ⁱ We have categorized the major players in this New Bedford *Our Town* as onstage—that is those whose cartes de visite are included in the album—and offstage, family members and professional associates closely connected to those appearing onstage. Family archivists, many connected to these people, are the third category.

ⁱⁱ The line of Jireh Swifts begins with a son of William Swift, the father appearing in public records in Watertown, MA in 1634, as reported in *Representative Men*. Jireh Swift (1) lived from 1665-1817. The line moves directly down to Jireh Swift (7) who lived from (1889-1965). There are three other related Jireh Swifts: two grandsons of Jireh Swift (1) and one son of one of these grandsons. All descendants of William Swift. The Jireh Swifts who appear in this narrative are (4) and (5). See Appendix A-6.

ⁱⁱⁱ The line of Loum Snows begins with Loami/Loum Snow (1) who lived from 1779-1823. His son, Loum Snow (2) lived from 1810-1871; Loum Snow (3), 1840-1816; Loum Snow (4), 1865-1949; after a generation skip, Loum Snow (5), 1912-1990; Loum Snow (6), 1935-1990). See Appendices A-5 and A-6.

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New Bedford itself is perhaps the dearest place to live, in all New England. It is a land of oil, true enough... nowhere in all America will you find more patrician-like houses: parks and gardens more opulent, than in New Bedford. Whence came they?... Go and gaze upon the iron emblematic harpoons round yonder lofty mansion, and your question will be answered. Yes, all these brave houses and flowery gardens from the Atlantic, Pacific, and Indian Oceans, one and all, they were harpooned and dragged up hither from the bottom of the sea.⁵

The last page of the album carries cartes de visite of three young men from Harvard's class of 1863. One is family, Abby's half-brother, Henry Arnold Taber, who would marry the daughter of Jireh Swift (5) in 1866 and die of consumption^{iv} in 1868, three months after his daughter was born. The group of classmates is an important signifier of changing times in two ways. First, education at this time was no longer exclusively for those who wanted to be clergy or practice law, the two reasons higher education was sought in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Two of these men would go into family businesses after graduation, not following the heretofore traditional route of others in the album—apprenticing themselves or working in counting rooms to learn a business. This parallels the developing shift in the training of engineers, who in the early nineteenth century apprenticed themselves to develop the needed body of knowledge, as both **John Chipman Hoadley** and **Zoheth Durfee** did. (The Rensselaer School, founded in 1824, becoming Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute in 1861, and M.I.T, founded in 1861, were among those that would offer the body of knowledge to aspiring engineers in the second half of the nineteenth century, thus offering a new path to this profession.) Second, the grouping on the last page is also significant as it points to a breaking away from the social and business networks developed primarily within the local geographic neighborhoods during the previous centuries; now the circle of friends established at college offers strong contacts in a much wider world. That Arthur Lincoln's daughter would be friends with his classmate Henry Arnold Taber's daughter, as Agatha comments, despite living in different towns, bears evidence to these widening social networks.

While this album has no images of the Civil War or its soldiers and sailors, or even the politicians, the Civil War is the ever-present backdrop of the album. And the album itself is symbolic of the Civil War, as photography not only allowed families—those at home as well as members on the battlefields—to have images of their loved ones, but photography also enhanced the image of political figures and, most critically, enabled the public to see for the first time the battlefield horror—images of which were previously reserved for the combatants.

Finally, the album and this book are acts of preserving family on a number of levels: that of the woman who put it together, Abby Taber Hunt, perhaps beginning

^{iv} Consumption today is known as tuberculosis. Its impact on these times is discussed in the section, End of Life, in *A Brief History of New Bedford*

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around the time her husband died of consumption in 1862; the second, Abby's granddaughter, Agatha Snow, some 80 years later, when she penciled around the images on the album pages the stories Abby had told her when a child;^v Abby's daughter (and mother of Agatha), Sarah Hunt Snow, who preserved the family records including this album; and today when the album and the stories of the people included are presented to interested people of the twenty-first century. In one of Agatha's penciled comments, she offers us an image of herself, at Quaker meeting with her grandmother who had brought a stack of paper and various pencils for Agatha to occupy herself drawing during the long service. One can envision her on other occasions sitting with her grandmother who *read* the album to Agatha, telling the stories behind the various people – Agatha received an introduction to the history of New Bedford and her family through the stories of the album. Agatha was artistic and creative and the small journal of her 1912 trip to Europe comprises pages of drawings with captions and comments;⁶ her creativity here is especially reflected in the comments penciled around the images in the album. Agatha's mother, Sarah Hunt Snow, was the daughter of Abby, who kept journals that detail and preserve family relationships and the history of family possessions. The end result of this preservation of family history echoes the Stage Manager in *Our Town*.

So, I'm going to have a copy of this play put in the cornerstone and the people a thousand years from now'll know a few simple facts about us – more than the Treaty of Versailles and the Lindbergh flight... So – people a thousand years from now – this is the way we were in the provinces north of New York at the beginning of the twentieth century. – This is the way we were: in our growing up and in our marrying and in our living and in our dying.⁷

^v Agatha's comments appear in the relevant biographical sketches; a complete transcript of them is available in Appendix B.

Epilogue

The Prologue suggested that the simultaneity of life and death, past, present, and future pervades the album – and in fact any such album. The stories of the people in this album have confirmed this. The Prologue also introduced a line from *Our Town* that could serve as an epitaph for the album as well as this book.

This is the way we were: in our growing up and in our marrying and in our living and in our dying.²⁷⁹

The biographical sketches show the progress from the early nineteenth century – indeed late eighteenth century when account is taken of the connections to the Revolutionary War – to the late nineteenth century, simply by looking in some detail at the lives of the people whose cartes de visite fill the album, even though the people at the moment the images were taken remain frozen in time. And yet while the images may be frozen in time, what their subjects started before the image was created, and what they did subsequently, present a powerful although abbreviated story of mid-nineteenth century New Bedford. We also see that, while the organization at first glance may appear haphazard, Abby had organized the cartes de visite into a coherent whole.

The biographical sketches also clearly show the sense of community that these people shared, a community bound by affective and occupational/business ties rather than the members' own self-interest. The sketches demonstrate a network or neighborhood held together by shared values and a sense of obligation to one another and to the wider worlds of New Bedford and the United States and indeed to the world.

We saw how the onstage and offstage characters lived near to one another and how they often were buried in proximity to one another. We saw how they named children in respect for and honor of friends, and in remembrance of those whose lives were often cut short. Importantly, we saw that although war was scarcely mentioned, it is nonetheless part of the past, present, and future of the people whose images are in the album.

The Revolutionary War is reflected in ancestors of two onstage players, **Mrs. Hathaway** and her grandmother, Molly Gilbert, and Captain William Gordon, father-in-law of **Henry Taber**. The War of 1812 is involved with the efforts of Captain William Gordon, again, as well as with Captain Loum Snow, father of our offstage player, Loum Snow (2). The Civil War is reflected in numerous instances: the abolitionists in advance of the War; Humphrey Hathaway Swift's efforts to secure materiel before the Civil War; and Loum Snow (2)'s trips behind the lines in Washington D.C. Indisputably the loss of whaling vessels to the Confederate Navy was a major although not sole factor in the demise of the whaling industry, and the

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reparations for those losses paid subsequently by the British could not bring back the industry.

Having met the onstage and the offstage folks and considered the family archivists and seen how and where these players lived, married, and died, we can confirm that the past, present, and future pervade the album. The author of this book reports that she followed Wilder in his desire “to pile up a million details of daily living and dying... it is the business of writing to restore that sense of the whole.”²⁸⁰ And as an archaeologist herself, she concurs in his opinion—drawn from his formative experience studying archaeology in Rome—of the archaeologist’s eyes:

An archaeologist’s eyes combine the view of the telescope with the view of the microscope. He reconstructs the very distant with the help of the very small.²⁸¹

This reconstruction of the neighborhoods within the album has taken seemingly small mundane items and events and worked to restore a sense of the whole, to bring back parts of the lives of some of those who preceded us.

We end with some words of the *Our Town* Stage Manager, from Act III.

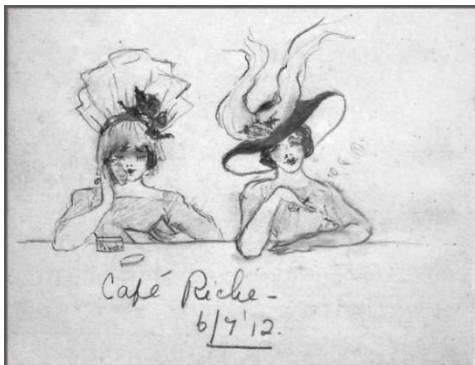
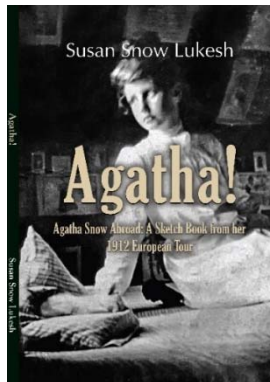
Now there are some things we all know, but we don’t take ’m out and look at ’m very often. We know that *something* is eternal. And it ain’t houses and it ain’t names, and it ain’t earth, and it ain’t even the stars ... everybody knows in their bones that *something* is eternal, and that something has to do with human beings. All the greatest people that ever lived have been telling us that for five thousand years and yet you’d be surprised how people are always losing hold of it. There’s something way down deep that’s eternal about every human being.²⁸²

Before You Go

You met some of the folks and read some of the history of New Bedford from the 1860s photo album. Now, how about following the story of Agatha herself when she and three companions toured Europe in 1912? Agatha's sketchbook captures the sights and sounds of some of their adventures that unfolded from April to August of 1912. Lukesh presents the small sketchbook, annotating the stories Agatha briefly offers, and suggesting yet another time and place to visit.

Wonderment. Delight. Stimulation. All here, compliments of Agatha Snow and Susan Snow Lukesh. I will call this the most recent archaeological dig by Lukesh [who] knows how to dig, whether it be literally for broken pottery from ancient Italian sites or, as here, figuratively into the adventures of her Great Aunt Agatha, whom she knew late in Agatha's life. Prediction: you will find Agatha utterly absorbing—and funny; and you'll be grateful to Lukesh for giving her to us. ... It's exactly right that Lukesh should entitle this work Agatha! Bon voyage!

Richard Flanagan, Professor of Creative Writing, retired.



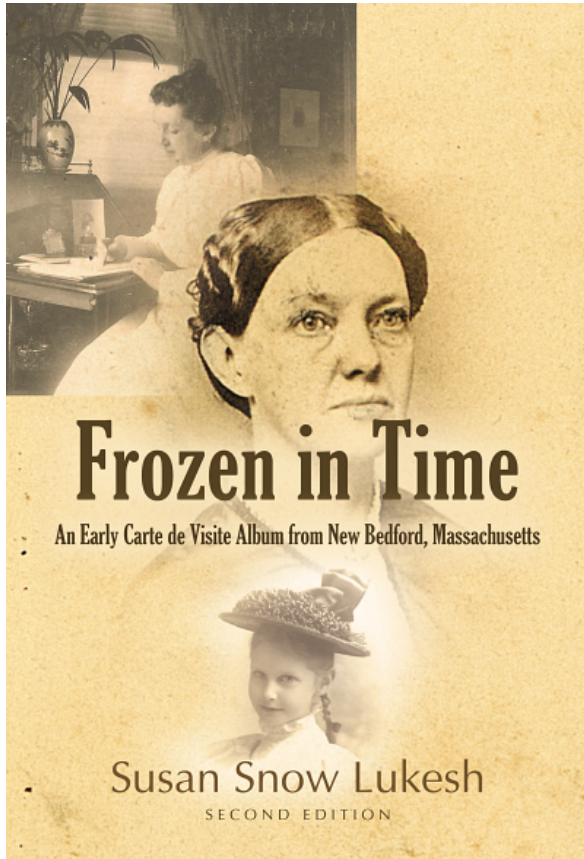
← Paris, France
Café Riche -
6/7 '12

Salisbury, England
→ A nice little
fillet of beef,
yes, a nice little
fillet - Salisbury
-
7/24 '12



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