

Photographic Archives

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National Archives

LATE in May of 1853 a United States fleet under the command of Commodore Matthew Calbraith Perry entered the harbor of the principal city of the island of Lew Chew — now the city of Naha on the island of Okinawa. This visit to Okinawa was only a dress rehearsal. The main show was played in Japan, and at the final curtain the United States had a commercial treaty with that nation, which had previously allowed only Dutch trade and had limited that to one ship a year at the port of Nagasaki.

At Okinawa the Commodore, according to his report, "resolved to procure a house on shore, and gave notice to Mr. Brown, the artist in charge of the daguerreotype apparatus, that he must prepare his materials, occupy the building, and commence the practice of his art." The house chosen was in Tumai, not far from Naha. One of the lithographs published in Perry's report gives visual evidence that Brown did indeed commence the practice of his art. This lithograph, from a drawing, bears the credit line, "Drawn from nature by Heine, figures by Brown." Entitled "The Temple at Tumai," it shows a photographer bending over his camera, making a daguerreotype of the temple.²

Perry's published three-volume report is a very early, possibly the first, example of an official United States document illustrated by art works based on daguerreotypy. Among its many lithographs and woodcuts there are some 40 credited as from daguerreotypes by Brown or with the signature, "E. Brown, Jr., dag." These daguerreotypes apparently were taken where and when Brown was able to land. The places noted are on Okinawa or in Shimoda and Hakodate, the two ports in Japan opened to American trade by the treaty of 1854.

Perry's expedition had been in the planning stage for 2 years. Scores of artists, scientists, and writers had applied to accompany him. The Commodore, however, was able to procure most of the

¹ The author, a staff member of the Still Picture Branch of the National Archives, read this paper at the meeting of the Society of American Archivists in Columbus, Ohio, October 1957.

² *Narrative of the Expedition of an American Squadron to the China Seas and Japan*, 1: 154, lithograph opposite p. 194 (33d Cong., 2d sess., H. Ex. Doc. 97).

required specialists from the rank and file of the Navy. The three civilians whom he had to recruit, an agriculturist and two artists, joined the Navy as acting master's mates, a rank comparable to that of chief petty officer today, at \$300 per year. The artists were William Heine and Eliphalet Brown, Jr.

From the report of the House Committee on Naval Affairs on the petition presented in Brown's behalf for compensation for his services in the Japan expedition, we learn that Brown "provided himself with all the apparatus necessary to the daguerreotypist, and took over 400 pictures, all of which became the property of the government, and many were used in illustrating Commodore Perry's work on the expedition."³ Brown's furnishing of his own equipment is paralleled by the experience of photographers attached to the governmental surveys of the western United States in the sixties and seventies of the last century. They often had to supplement their income by selling stereographs that they had taken in addition to the photographs required as the product of their official duty.

In justification of Perry's having hired artists without specific authority to do so, the Committee said:

The authority to employ artists for the Japan expedition was not directly conferred by Congress on the department having charge of it. As the employment of artists was very essential to the success of an expedition like that . . . the failure on the part of Congress to confer the authority may safely be charged to inadvertency rather than design.

Thus an agency of the United States Government in connection with the transaction of public business had consciously created photographic records that were appropriate for preservation as evidence of its operations or as the embodiment of valuable information. The previous sentence paraphrases a part of the definition of records, including photographs, in the Records Disposal Act of July 7, 1943.⁴ To one who works with photographic archives this definition gives comfort that is not afforded by European definitions of archives. And the actual treatment of photographs as archives in the United States antedates by almost a century their acceptance as such by the British. The recent *Guide to the Public Records* of the British Public Record Office indicates a partial and grudging acceptance of the photograph into the archival family:

The task of the custodian has, in the most recent times, been increased not only by the deterioration in the quality of the old materials but by the invention of new ones. The most notable case is that of photographic materials which, by a

³ 36 Cong., 1st sess., H. Rept. 208, p. 1. The report is dated Mar. 3, 1860.

⁴ 57 Stat. 380.

recent ruling (1946) of the Master of the Rolls, must in certain circumstances be treated as Public Records.⁵

Photographic records have been created by our Government for many different purposes. One is to supplement the written record of exploration with visual information; this purpose has held from the time of the Perry expedition to the current Antarctic explorations. Another is to increase the public's knowledge of their national resources, as in photographs taken by the National Park Service and the Forest Service. More routine is the use of photographs for identification purposes; hence the files of pictures of Army officers, from the Civil War and earlier, and of the graduates of flying schools of the Air Force. (The largest producers of photographic records are the military; holdings of the Department of the Air Force, for instance, amount to 8,000,000 cut-film aerial negatives, 100,000 rolls of aerial film, and 1,250,000 photographs of Air Force activities and aviation.) Another purpose of Government photography has been to publicize a problem or an opportunity; hence "The Plow That Broke the Plains," of the Resettlement Administration; the many WPA photographs; and photographs by the Reclamation Service of irrigated areas available for farming. In the 20th century aerial photography has been increasingly used in mapmaking, and extensive photographing has been done for comparative purposes in agricultural and other research.

Not all photographs taken for official purposes should be preserved, of course. The problem of advance selection for permanent preservation is as pressing with photographs as with textual records. Like other Government records, some photographs may have only a limited or one-time use and should not be kept as archives. This is true, for instance, of many photographs taken during research projects, such as hundreds of pictures of ears of corn made during the development of hybrid corn, or hundreds of portrait studies of white mice in successive stages of nutritional deficiency. Of these many photographs perhaps the few considered useful for illustrating research reports should be retained. Their publication has made their existence known; hence they may be requested for other purposes.

Some agencies of the Government have set up definite criteria for the retention of photographs. Identification photographs, especially of miniature size, are almost always considered not worthy of permanent preservation. The Air Force, however, considers identification photographs of all graduates of advanced flying schools to be records. When flyers are lost, their photographs are wanted by

⁵ *Guide to the Public Records*, part 1, "Introductory," p. 44.

newspapers. Illustrative of good retention criteria are those of the Resettlement Administration:

There are three ways of evaluating photographs: (1) as a mere record . . . (2) for their immediacy and news value . . . and (3) as works of art, decision being based on the adequacy of the technique utilized by the photographer. In the Resettlement Administration it was decided to submit all material to the three foregoing criteria.⁶

The process of eliminating nonrecord photographs should go on continually in the agencies. One control, of course, is or can be applied before a picture is taken — that is, standards can be set to guide not only the photographer but the person responsible for ordering the making of pictures. A “camera-happy” photographer or an overenthusiastic staff member may easily cause the creation of more pictures than can or should be preserved. Another control of picture quality is, through hiring or through training, to get good photographers.

When a photograph goes into agency files, or later into the National Archives, the record copy should be identified. The record photograph in the case of a black-and-white still picture is the original negative if it exists; in color photography, it is the original transparency; in motion picture film it is the master negative. Two other copies of a motion picture should be kept: a master positive and a duplicating negative. To avoid damage to the master negative, projection prints of a movie are made from the duplicating negative. In the case of any photographic record, if the original negative or transparency is not available as a record copy, the next form that will give the best reproduction becomes the record. The first photographic record that comes to an archives may not, of course, be the original negative. This is true, for instance, of captured film and purchased or donated photographs.

Photographic archives present special problems distinct from those inherent in textual records. One is that of preservation. The Public Record Office *Guide* already cited speaks feelingly of photographic records,

in particular those taking the form of “film.” There is not known at present to be any form of . . . [films] of a permanently enduring quality and on the other hand some are definitely known to be subject to automatic deterioration, consequently their acceptance as Record involves not only special storage conditions but the two provisions that they shall be examined at suitable intervals and (a revolutionary provision) that if they show signs of deterioration photographic copy shall be made and substituted for them.⁷

⁶ Resettlement Administration, *First Annual Report*, 1935-36, p. 97.

⁷ Part 1, “Introductory,” p. 44.

Aside from the danger of deterioration of ordinary modern film, a copying program should be routine for film received by an archives if the film is of nitrate rather than acetate composition. The explosive qualities of deteriorated nitrate film are by now well known. There is always a loss of image in the copying process, but it is also possible that a copy of an existing photographic print may be better than a print from an original but deteriorated negative. The deterioration of nitrate, older acetate, and some glass-plate negatives has enhanced the value of reference prints.

Another problem with photographic stills and transparencies is the necessity of protecting the negative from light or scratches. Negatives, whether glass-plate or film, must be kept in special negative preservers and when removed for duplicating must be replaced in their jackets with care, to avoid scratching and damaging the emulsion.

The storage of glass-plate negatives is complicated by their sheer weight; yet often these older plates are more valuable than modern film. The problem of weight can be serious enough to influence or modify the ultimate arrangement of archival holdings. It may be necessary to break up a series, storing the heavy negatives on lower shelves and lighter print materials above them. Or it may be necessary to provide storage areas with reinforced flooring to support the weight safely.

Often, too, a file of photographic negatives received at an archives may include negatives of widely varying size or may even consist of glass and film negatives interfiled. This unsatisfactory arrangement could have been avoided in some instances if proper thought had been given to it in the photographic laboratory where the negatives were originally made. But filing all negatives of one size together is often expensive both in time and materials and is therefore not done. This is especially likely to be the case if the laboratory uses the time-honored device of numbering its negatives serially.

Still another problem with photographic records is their identification. The textual record usually contains internal evidence that identifies it. Reports, letters, memoranda — these as a rule are self-identifying as to place, date, sender, and recipient. But many photographic records bear nothing more than a serial number. Unless an index or list by serial numbers has been kept and transferred to the archives with the pictures, the archivist is in for trouble. The record negative should be completely captioned on the jacket in which it is kept. The purpose of captioning is to answer the same questions that are answered in the lead of a good news story: who?

what? when? where? why? In addition the photographic caption should include the name of the photographer, the identification number of the corresponding photograph, and information concerning its publication or other use.

The number or letter-number combination assigned during the laboratory captioning process is often changed on the photograph. This is illustrated in the National Archives by the Jackson series of photographs, of the Geological Survey. In 1875 the Survey issued, as *Miscellaneous Publication* no. 5, *Descriptive Catalogue of the Photographs . . . for the Years 1869 to 1875, Inclusive*. Some time later these photographs were renumbered. In 1951 the Survey's Photographic Library had to issue a *Correlation List of New and Old Numbers*, so that items described in the catalog could be found in the renumbered collection.

The negative photographic record is rarely used for reference. This is not merely because it is difficult to visualize a picture by looking at the negative, though that is true enough for most persons who come to an archives looking for "pictures." It is better practice to furnish the customer with a file of prints of uniform (and small) size than to let him handle large and awkward negatives, with the attendant danger of exposure to light, scratching, or other damage. During the period when photographs are current records the general rule is that only laboratory personnel are permitted to handle the negatives. Later on the archivist must handle them, but any reference service must be given with print materials. The file of prints used for reference service is often only a fraction of the size of the file of negatives. If it has been well selected with historical values rather than current use in mind, the file may serve the searcher's purpose better than a more voluminous and unscreened file, in which he cannot see the woods for the trees. The print file in use by the Forest Service, for instance, which was judiciously selected, has about 40,000 mounted prints representing a file of over 400,000 negatives.

The photograph is a medium for the immediate communication of ideas. The Chinese say, "a picture is worth 10,000 words." In spite of the special problems they must deal with, archivists in charge of photographic records are lucky people. I shall always remember in this connection the remark of one of our searchers at the National Archives. After spending a whole afternoon poring over the Brady collection of Civil War photographs, he turned to me and said, "When I retire I'd like just to come here and work for nothing."