



Courtesy L. Tom Perry Special Collections, Harold B. Lee Library, Brigham Young University, Provo, Utah

**FIG. 1.** Brigham Young, ca. 1852-1854, attributed to Marsena Cannon. This daguerreotype measures  $2\frac{3}{4} \times 3\frac{3}{4}$  inches and is preserved in its original 1850s velvet case with a folding clasp lock. Because Cannon did not use a corrective prism, the image is laterally reversed, giving us a mirror image.

# A Superlative Image

## An Original Daguerreotype of Brigham Young

*Richard Neitzel Holzapfel and Thomas R. Wells*

In July 2005, the *Deseret Morning News* in Salt Lake City published a story with the punning headline “Old Young Photo donated to BYU.”<sup>1</sup> Even though Mark and Suzanne Richards had donated the rare 1850s daguerreotype of Brigham Young to BYU in December 2004, the donation did not draw media attention until just days before the July 24 pioneer holiday in Utah. For historians, especially photographic historians, the story was compelling—one of those rare moments when something thought to have vanished suddenly reappears. It was known that this particular precious daguerreotype had been created because a later photographic copy of it existed and had been printed in 1936. However, researchers feared that the original had been lost—a victim of the ravages of time. The numerous news stories provided the public, the large extended Young family, and historians a sense of satisfaction that this priceless treasure from the past had found its way into an institutional repository where professional preservation methods could ensure its longevity.

What Mark and Suzanne Richards donated to Brigham Young University in December 2004 was an original 1850s daguerreotype (fig. 1)—an image captured through the medium of a thin, shiny, silver-coated copper metal plate and a camera. As it was exposed, the sitter attempted to sit or stand still for what must have seemed a very long time. Daguerreotypes, introduced to the world by Frenchman Louis Jacques Mandé Daguerre in 1839, are crisp and detailed and do not easily fade. Early sitters were often shocked by the stark realism of the image. Their bright, mirrored surfaces seem to accentuate and hold each subtle detail and nuance of light when the images are positioned properly by the viewer. Daguerreotypes were amazingly accurate and were inexpensive when compared to other forms

of art, most costing between one and five dollars, including a leather or gutta-percha case. The process took Europe and North America by storm.

### Daguerreotypes among the Early Saints

At this time, most Latter-day Saints found themselves on the fringes of the young country's frontier—far away from the camera's eye. But in August 1844, a Daguerrean artist brought his knowledge, talent, and equipment to Nauvoo. Lucian Foster, a Latter-day Saint convert from New York, began advertising in the *Nauvoo Neighbor* that he could make “an image of the person, as exact as that formed by the mirror, that is transferred to, and permanently fixed upon a highly polished silver plate, through the agency of an optical instrument.”<sup>2</sup> A few of Foster's images capturing the Nauvoo Temple and some Saints have been preserved, either in the original format or in photographic copies of daguerreotypes.<sup>3</sup> Foster disappears from Church records after the Nauvoo era, and today we lack any daguerreotypes of the epic movement west.

In the fall of 1850, another Daguerrean artist, Marsena Cannon, a native of Rochester, New York, arrived in Salt Lake and set up shop. Brigham Young's first visit to his studio was on December 12, 1850. The studio experience in the early days was always staged. Candid images were unknown; photographers produced only formal portraits in a very controlled environment.

Sometime before June 1854, Brigham once again sat before Marsena Cannon's camera in Salt Lake City. Remarkably, two precious small treasures have survived from that day—two daguerreotypes in their original cases. One of the images is housed in the National Portrait Gallery in Washington, D.C., and was gifted to the United States by the J. Willard Marriott Jr. Charitable Annuity Trust several years ago. The other image, donated by Mark and Suzanne Richards, is now housed in the L. Tom Perry Special Collections, Harold B. Lee Library, Brigham Young University, Provo, Utah (see fig. 1). Viewers can notice the slight shift in hand position in relation to the jacket when they compare the two images. Daguerreotypes in the very early years were colorless, but by the time this image was taken, some artists added



Courtesy, L. Tom Perry Special Collections

FIG. 2. The velvet case housing the Brigham Young daguerreotype.

gilding after exposure. As can be seen in figure 1, Brigham's watch chain, rings, and masonic pin have been gilded. The daguerreotype bears the hallmark of a French plate maker who produced plates from 1850 to 1858.<sup>4</sup> The image is housed in a beautifully crafted blue velvet case, a much finer type of case than the usual leather or gutta-percha (fig. 2).

### Provenance

At some point after Brigham purchased this daguerreotype from Cannon, it came into the possession of Clarissa Young Spencer, one of Brigham's daughters. In the 1930s, when Preston Nibley began working on a biography of Brigham, Clarissa gave Nibley several items belonging to Brigham including a handkerchief, a spoon, and this daguerreotype.<sup>5</sup> Nibley, who worked at the Church Historian's Office in Salt Lake City, first published a series of articles on the life of Brigham Young in the Church Section of the *Deseret News*. These articles were then collected and published in book form in 1936 as *Brigham Young: The Man and His Work*. The volume included seven images of Brigham that were printed on polished paper and inserted at specific points throughout the book. Three of them were based on copies of daguerreotypes. Nibley writes for the caption of the one recently donated to Brigham Young University, "President Young about 1858 or 1859 [*sic*; it was prior to June 1854]. This photograph is from a daguerreotype in possession of the author."<sup>6</sup> The Young family treasures remained in Nibley's possession until his death in 1966 and were then held by his widow, Ann Parkinson Nibley. She held onto the collection until her own death in 1980, when it was passed to her grandson Mark Richards, who at the age of sixteen already had a reputation in the family for being interested in history and antiques.

Years later, when Mark began thinking about the "old photograph" of Brigham in his possession, he approached William W. Slaughter, the Church photographic archivist at the Church Archives in Salt Lake City. Slaughter was naturally delighted to see the original and showed Mark the photographic copy of it made by Nibley before the publication of his book. He also informed Mark that historians thought the original image had been lost. A series of visits to Mormon Americana dealers in Salt Lake City to determine the value of the daguerreotype eventually brought him in contact with Richard Nietzel Holzapfel. Holzapfel arrived at Benchmark Books in Salt Lake City at the behest of Curt Bench. Holzapfel has often been disappointed by items people have brought to him, thinking they had an original image of Brigham or some other famous Latter-day Saint. But this time, when Mark Richards carefully unwrapped the original though damaged case, Holzapfel saw that it was



Photo by Mark A. Philbrick/Brigham Young University

FIG. 3. A full view of the daguerreotype shown in figure 1.

indeed a precious treasure (fig. 3). Something remarkable happens when we hold in our hands or first see with our eyes the original of a piece of beloved artwork. Holzapfel felt he was coming face to face with Brigham.

### Dating the Daguerreotype

In dating the image, Nibley was off by five or six years. This sitting was copied in the form of a woodcut and published in *Gleason's Pictorial Drawing-Room Companion* on June 3, 1854.<sup>7</sup> By comparing the two images, one can see that the woodcut was clearly copied from the Cannon daguerreotype. Obviously, the image was taken before June 3, 1854. It is unknown whether this daguerreotype, its companion, or another possible daguerreotype taken at the same sitting was the basis for the woodcut.

*Gleason's Pictorial* was a popular illustrated newspaper printed in Boston. It is likely that its publisher contacted Brigham Young and asked for the use of a daguerreotype and that the daguerreotype was sent with a missionary going east. Taking into account the time that correspondence and travel took, we can assume that the image was taken in 1852 or 1853.

To further substantiate the latest likely date, we can take a look at the text of an advertisement which appeared in the *Deseret Weekly News* on August 3, 1854. Chaffin and Cannon advertised, "We have a new stock

of plates, cases and other materials pertaining to the business; all of best quality; three German cameras that can't be beat, with speculum attached for taking views without reversing. Everything we have is new except the workmen, and they are far better than new."<sup>8</sup> Daguerreotypes made by Cannon before he procured his new German cameras "with speculum attached" would all appear as the reverse of real life. Writing would be backwards, hair would be parted on the wrong side. Everything would appear as it does when you look into a mirror. In this daguerreotype, Brigham Young's hair is indeed parted on the wrong side, indicating that the photograph was taken prior to August 1854.

We can say with some certainty that the daguerreotype was taken in the winter because Brigham wears a dark vest. It was the fashion to wear a dark vest in the winter and light in the summer.

### **Earlier Daguerreotypes of Brigham Young**

Six known images of Brigham Young predate these two daguerreotypes, only two of which survive in their original form as daguerreotypes. The others survive only as photographic copies of the nonextant daguerreotypes.<sup>9</sup> The daguerreotype recently donated to BYU is one among four known original daguerreotypes of Brother Brigham in existence today. The six known images that predate are as follows:

1. A 1934 paper print copy of an 1846 daguerreotype, attributed to Lucian Foster. This image shows Brigham standing in a doorway in Nauvoo holding a cane and a top hat—most likely the earliest known daguerreotype of Brigham.

2. An original daguerreotype taken on December 12, 1850, by Marsena Cannon in Salt Lake City now preserved in the Church Archives in Salt Lake City. This wonderful image shows Brigham wearing a black vest and a Masonic pin.

3. Paper print copies of two daguerreotypes taken in 1851–52 found in the Church Archives, other institutional collections, and private collections. In these prints, Brigham is wearing a white vest. At least two views were taken, most likely on the same day.

4. A paper copy from an unknown source (possibly a copy of a copy of a daguerreotype) found in the Widtsoe Family Photograph Collection at the Utah State Historical Society.

5. An original daguerreotype of Brigham and Margaret Peirce Young, about 1852–53, in the private possession of Richard M. Young of Logan, Utah.<sup>10</sup> It is possibly the only extant portrait of Brigham with a wife.

6. A copy print of a photograph of a daguerreotype, about 1850–54, of Brigham Young and an unidentified wife. In this mysterious image, a large smear or scratch obliterates the wife's face. The existence of this image was

rumored but uncertain until it was found in the collections of the *Deseret News* in 2002.<sup>11</sup>

### A Well-Preserved Treasure

The media attention this donation received will hopefully spur others to consider donating their treasures to institutional repositories. Professional preservation methods ensure the artifacts will be seen by generations to come. Today, institutions often provide copies for the donators' personal enjoyment. Donations also provide access for family members who may not have even known that such an item existed. Thoughtful individuals are making sure that their family treasures will survive for future generations by donating artifacts to responsible institutions. It is an immense pleasure that Brigham Young University finally has within its important collection a beautiful and fine daguerreotype of its namesake.

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1. Tad Walch, "Old Young Photo Donated to BYU," *Deseret Morning News*, July 21, 2005, B-1.
2. "Miniature Likenesses," *Nauvoo Neighbor*, August 14, 1844, 3.
3. Richard Nietzel Holzapfel and T. Jeffrey Cottle, *Old Mormon Nauvoo and Southeastern Iowa: Historic Photographs and Guide* (Santa Ana, Calif.: Fieldbrook Productions, 1991), 21, 22, 34, 36.
4. Floyd Rinhart and Marion Rinhart, *The American Daguerreotype* (Athens, Ga.: University of Georgia Press, 1981), 424.
5. Mark Richards, phone conversations and e-mails to author, July 30, 2005, through August 11, 2005.
6. Preston Nibley, *Brigham Young: The Man and His Work* (Salt Lake City: Deseret News Press, 1936), plate between pages 338 and 339.
7. The engraver who created the woodcut was Frank Leslie, an important contributor to the development of photojournalism in the nineteenth century. Leslie's name on the lower left edge, just under Brigham's right hand, indicates that Leslie engraved this particular block for the *Pictorial*.
8. *Deseret Weekly News*, vol. 4, no. 21, August 3, 1854.
9. For a full discussion of the photographic record of Brigham Young, see Richard Neitzel Holzapfel and R. Q. Shupe, *Brigham Young: Images of a Mormon Prophet* (Salt Lake City: Eagle Gate; Provo, Utah: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University, 2000).
10. Richard Neitzel Holzapfel and Robert F. Schwartz, "A Mysterious Image: Brigham Young with an Unknown Wife," *BYU Studies* 41, no. 3 (2002): 50.
11. Holzapfel and Schwartz, "A Mysterious Image," 48.