



Smithsonian American Art Museum

December 2011



Bivouac of the 45th Illinois near the Shirley House, Vicksburg, Mississippi
1863

O. D. Finch

salted paper print

sheet and image: 6 1/2 x 8 1/2 in. (irregular)

Smithsonian American Art Museum,

Museum purchase from the Charles Isaacs

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1994.91.49



When researcher Liz was looking at this photograph under a loupe, she discovered a detail in the entrance to one of the structures that intrigued her. She decided to try to identify the equipment in that opening, which is circled in red in the image above.

- What is the box in the left middle ground of the photograph that appears to have the photographer's name printed on it, and what was it used for?
- What were some of the technical challenges for photographers working in the field during the Civil War?

I discovered by looking at the photograph under a loupe that there is a box with the photographer's name on it at the entrance to one of the structures on the hillside. I wondered if this might possibly be equipment for processing wet plate glass negatives in the field. David Haberstick, curator of photography at the National Museum of American History, told me about a wet plate processing kit, also known as a darkroom tent, which belonged to photographer George Bretz. He suggested contacting a curator of photographic history at NMAH. I contacted Shannon, and because there was no photograph available of the darkroom tent, she offered to take me to the Smithsonian's storage facility in Maryland.

I had never been to the storage facility before, and it is a bit like walking into an Indiana Jones movie. The warehouse-like facility has several stories of shelves containing everything from a rhinoceros shot by Teddy Roosevelt to fossilized plesiosaur skeletons. Shannon and I went to the photographic history storage section on the mezzanine, where rows of metal lockers contain artifacts from photographic history—from cameras to lenses to outdated film and photographic paper. Among the treasures that I saw were chemical bottles belonging to William Henry Fox Talbot, one of the inventors of photography.

The George Bretz darkroom tent was a wooden case or box that was opened like a suitcase and had the photographer's name painted on the front. It had leather bellows on the sides to block out light and leather sleeves through which the photographer could put his hands inside the box. A square window in the front held red glass that allowed only red light, as the glass plates had to be coated and processed in red light or total darkness.



Shannon explained that the Bretz outfit was for processing small negatives (probably 4 x 5 inches). Since the O. D. Finch photograph was most likely contact-printed and is a larger image, Shannon said that the box needed to process the plates would have been much larger. She said that the box in the O. D. Finch photo was indeed most likely a darkroom tent for processing collodion plates. I observed that the rectangular opening just barely visible in the photograph might very well be the red glass darkroom window.

Shannon mentioned that the greatest challenge to photographers in the field was keeping the collodion on the glass plates from drying out. Once it dried, it was no longer very sensitive to light. The humidity of the Mississippi summer may have helped keep the collodion moist, although dust and heat would certainly have been problematic. Temperature of developing chemicals must stay within a certain range for successful development of glass plates, so that may explain why the box is at the entrance to the "cave," where it would have been sheltered from the heat of the July summer sun.

Who was O.D. Finch and what was his relation to the Battle of Vicksburg?

There is no consensus on the identity of the photographer, O. D. Finch, and to my knowledge, no one has found photographs by him in other collections. I followed Shannon's suggestion that I look at the reference work *International Photography: George Eastman House Index to Photographers, Collections, and Exhibitions*. The name "O. D. Finch" did not appear in the Eastman index, although there was a Finch Company listed in the collections of the Oneida Co. Historical Society in Utica, N.Y., and a Finch Studio in the J. Paul Getty Museum.

On Friday, I visited the Prints and Photographs Reading Room at the Library of Congress (LOC) to look at the [group of eight photographs from Vicksburg](#), including an image that is a cropped version of our print. The photographs (mounted on board) are filed in cabinets by subject and are prints from LOC's collection of Civil War negatives. There are actually fourteen images in this group (some are double-mounted) and include images of the Confederate cannon "Whistling Dick," street views of the city, Union barracks and entrenchments, and images of African-American Union soldiers in uniform. There is no indication of which photographer was responsible for specific images, and the various sizes suggest that they may have been taken by multiple cameras/photographers (or the prints cropped).

At LOC, I was able to read part of a book on the E & H. T. Anthony Company. Anthony was a photographer and the first retail distributor in the United States of photographic supplies and chemicals. During the Civil War, Anthony outfitted numerous photographers with cameras, supplies, and travelling darkrooms in exchange for their negatives of Civil War subjects that he later published and sold as single and stereograph images. Some of the photographers who collaborated with Anthony included Northerners Mathew Brady, Alexander Gardner, George Barnard and T. C. Roche, and Southern photographer George S. Cook. I was surprised to learn that Anthony supplied chemicals and equipment to photographers in the North and South and even prevailed upon Lincoln to reclassify photo chemicals as "quinine" so that they could be provided to Southern photographers.

The Anthony book also provided some more detail on the provenance for the LOC Civil War photographs. The Vicksburg photos at LOC are prints made from the Anthony-Taylor-Rand-Ordway-Eaton Collection. When Mathew Brady declared bankruptcy after the war, Anthony, as one of his creditors, became the owner of many of his negatives. The federal government also purchased 8,000 negatives from Brady in 1874. Anthony later sold his set of negatives to private collectors General Albert Ordway of Washington, D.C., and Colonel Arnold A. Rand of Boston. These collectors added two thousand negatives by Alexander Gardner and sold their amassed collections to John C. Taylor of Hartford, Connecticut. Edward B. Eaton, president of *Connecticut Magazine*, bought these from Taylor. The negatives were stored in a basement for almost thirty years, but were acquired by LOC in 1943. Other Brady images were obtained by LOC from Brady's nephew, Levin Hardy. LOC also acquired the Meserve-Brady Collection (purchased from Anthony & Scovill Co., a later reincarnation of E & H. T. Anthony), which included images by Roche, Barnard, and A. J. Russett.

Perhaps Finch worked with one of the named photographers who supplied images to Anthony, or perhaps he worked independently. I am going to turn over my unanswered questions to our new volunteer, Jeana, who has a background in photographic history, since I need to move on to researching other works of art.

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