

WOMEN IN PHOTOGRAPHY: 1840 - 1900

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INTRODUCTION:

The role of women in the history of photography is being explored in an increasing number of essays, papers, monographs and books. In the past ten years this topic has assumed an urgency, due to its neglect in previous decades, with a sense that there is a great deal of “catching up” to be accomplished. All of the studies have been useful to varying degrees; a large number of them, however, have suffered from a suspicion that the author has a hidden agenda which is not being revealed to the reader. In some cases this agenda is deliberately withheld in order that social manifestoes can masquerade as historical truth. In far more cases there are no willful distortions but merely a failure to state what questions are being asked of history. And without knowing the questions then the answers have marginal usefulness.

Every historian must walk this tightrope between the willful selection of facts in the direct service of a personal prejudice or a social cause and the notion that the inquirer should have no preconceived ideas, not even questions or working hypotheses, because The Truth exists once enough facts have been accumulated. On the one side the pit of selectivity; on the other, the oblivion of objectivity.

The dangers of selectivity are self-evident although a clever author can camouflage the traps for the unwary reader. One clue to uncovering the pitfall is when the essay attempts to combine a social manifesto with a scholarly paper in a single operation. The result is usually double-trouble: a boring manifesto and bad history.

The dangers of objectivity are far more complex and, therefore, more insidious. Objectivity presumes that a general truth will emerge if the historian knows everything about the subject. This result is also double-trouble: it commits the author to the pursuit of an impossible goal by an impractical means.

(It also presumes that the historian is capable of conducting an enquiry without the aid of preconceived questions, assumptions, prejudices, presumptions and theories. As Rudyard Kipling said: “them that asks no questions, isn’t told a lie,” and it is equally true that “them that asks no questions, isn’t told a truth.”) Objectivity cannot work in practice because there is no practicable limit to the number of facts which would be relevant to even the tiniest historical problem and, even if all these facts could be collected, they would not add up to any general truth due to their chaotic and contradictory nature.

One last point about (photographic) history in general before stating the particular theme: too many histories are conducted from an outside-in point of view. This means that the

author interprets history as if it was taking place now. The danger here is that past events are judged according to contemporary ideas and sensitivities, leading to a history of “what should have been” rather than “what was.” Much more useful is to study photographic attitudes and events in relationship to the opinions and prejudices in the surrounding culture in its own time, usually very different from that of modern times.

It was important to state these problems surrounding any historical article because the topic of women in early photography is a particularly sensitive one in this day and age - and therefore especially open to charges of bias due to the ideology/gender of the author. In this case it is essential that the questions asked of history are clearly spelled out at the beginning of the enquiry and that these questions are focused, unambiguous and relevant. The alternative is to render judgments based on assumptions.

The purpose of the present study, therefore, is to ask the following questions:

1. How many women were engaged as professional photographers during the 19th century in Britain and America?
2. What trends become evident from a decade-by-decade study of the numbers of female photographers?
3. Did Britain and America share a common pattern in photographic development during the 19th century, particularly regarding the numbers of female photographers?
4. Is it true, as often asserted, that the percentage of women photographers dramatically increased during the 1880s/1890s due to the introduction of the more convenient dry plate process?

NUMBERS OF WOMEN PHOTOGRAPHERS IN THE 19TH CENTURY

An examination of census reports of the 19th century reveals fascinating, and surprising, information regarding the numbers of female photographers operating professionally in the medium. Equally interesting is a comparison between the British and American figures, even though there is a slight discrepancy in the dates of the reports.

First, the numbers of male and female photographers in Britain, decade by decade:

1851: 50 males and 1 female
1861: 2789 males and 168 females
1871: 4021 males and 694 females
1881: 5352 males and 1309 females
1891: 8102 males and 2469 females
1901: 11,148 males and 3851 females
1911: 11,899 males and 5016 females

Several comments and observations on these figures will place them in perspective.

The census reports clearly reveal the depressed state of photography in Britain during the first decade of the medium. By 1851 there were only 51 photographers in the country (50 men; 1 woman - a Miss Wigley who operated a studio at 108 Fleet Street, London). By contrast there were nearly 700 photographers in America. The reason for this low figure in England is not difficult to discover.

All photographic processes were subject to rigorously controlled patent restrictions. In spite of the fact that the French government had given the daguerreotype process "free to all the world", Daguerre had previously crossed the Channel and patented his process in England - the only country in the world so restricted. It is true that would-be professionals could purchase a license to practice the daguerreotype process but few could raise the money. A license cost around L200, which might not seem very much today but in the 1840s it represented the total annual wages of the average semi-skilled worker for 6 years.

Photographers fared no better with Fox Talbot's calotype process. His patent restrictions were ruthlessly upheld and woe betide any photographer who dared practice photography without paying the fee. Talbot and his solicitors intimidated photographers, brought court actions and closed down studios with alacrity at the first whiff of infringement. It is not usually appreciated that even amateurs were required to pay Talbot a license fee, and obey all his dictates. Eventually pressure from colleagues caused Talbot to relent - a little. In 1852 he relinquished control of his process, except for the taking of portraits for profit. Of course, this was precisely the use most demanded by professional photographers, so little changed. Talbot patented the albumen-on-glass process in England, even though it had been invented in France. He also claimed that the collodion process, which F. Scott Archer had generously published in 1851 without restrictions, infringed his calotype patent. After closing down several photographers and threatening many more, Talbot's unjust and absurd monopoly of photography was contested in court by a French-Canadian, Silvester Laroche, who operated a studio in London. In an historically celebrated trial, Laroche won the right to practice the collodion process without interference from Talbot. But the decision had far greater repercussions than one man's business. Through Laroche's courageous stand, the collodion process was now free to anyone, and England, for the first time, was on equal footing with the rest of the world. The date was 20 December 1854. Photography instantly boomed. The rapid rise in the number of professionals is reflected in the figures. During the same decade, 1851-1861, the number of American photographers increased by a factor of 3.8, whereas the number of British photographers increased by a factor of 56.0. The increase was so dramatic that within a 6 year period the total number of photographers in England (2,957) surpassed the number in America (2,623). Equally surprising is that women were becoming professional photographers at a faster rate than men. In 1851 there was one woman (literally) to 50 men; in 1861 the proportion had dropped to one woman for every 17 men. This is an extraordinary statistic not only because it reveals that women were "waiting in the wings" to enter the profession but also that the messy, inconvenient wet-

plate process was not a deterrent to women photographers, as is commonly believed. This trend continued throughout the 19th century. Females entered the profession of photography in comparatively greater numbers than males decade by decade. By 1871 there was one woman for every 6 men, by 1881 there was one woman for every 4 men; by 1891 there was one woman for every 3.3 men. Another surprising fact which emerges from these figures is the rate of increase in the numbers of photographers during the 1860s. It has been assumed by historians that this decade, following the introduction of the collodion process and the popularity of ambrotypes, tintypes, cartes-de-visite and stereoscopic views, witnessed a massive upsurge in professional photography.

This assumption is not supported by the figures. Although the total number of photographers (males plus females) increased during the 1860s from 2,957 to 4,715, a factor of 1.6, the rate of increase compared to the previous decade actually declined. The figures reveal an even more interesting fact when they are divided into male and female photographers. During the 1860s the number of male photographers increased by a factor of only 1.4 whereas the number of female photographers quadrupled. In other words, while the rate of increase for male photographers declined during the 1860s, the rate of increase for female photographers accelerated rapidly. The complicated, messy wet-plate process was not a valid reason for assuming that women were not active professionals during this period.

Another assumption, which is not supported by the figures, is that the introduction of dry-plates, around 1880, witnessed a massive upsurge in the number of female professional photographers. Certainly, there was a marked increase in both the numbers and the rate at which women became photographers. However, the significant point is that male photographers entered the medium in greater numbers and at a faster rate than women during both the 1880s and 1890s. The dry-plate, therefore, was not the much-vaunted signal for women to suddenly consider photography as a profession from which they were deterred in previous decades.

However, in spite of this lower rate of increase, the proportion of female to male photographers was still rising. By 1901 for every 2.9 male photographers there was one female photographer. This is an extraordinary and little-known fact, which might, and should, alter our perception of the typical Victorian photographer. It is particularly surprising in light of the well-documented social inferiority of women during the Victorian age. There is a temptation to assume that these women were not photographers per se, but engaged in ancillary studio activities, such as preparing plates, printing, hand-coloring, assembling frames, receptionists, and so on. But the assumption would be false, for two reasons: 1) women in these other activities, other than operating a camera, would be included in separate census figures and not under the category of "photographers" and 2) a careful reading of the 19th century literature reveals that female photographers commonly owned their own studios or were employed as operators by large studios.

It remains to be answered why, in light of these facts, so few names of 19th century women photographers are known and why this phenomenon is never discussed in the history textbooks.

As a final note it should be emphasized that all such census figures, on which the graph is based, are open to some modifications. These figures do not reveal the numbers of separate studios because several photographers were often based in one studio. Also the figures do not include the amateurs who sold their prints through stationers or print distributors, or the photographers who often combined picture-making with another trade (such as bootblacks, ice cream vendors, hat-makers, blacksmiths, and dentists) and would be included in the census figures under a separate category, or the large numbers of fly-by-nighters, the street rogues who saw in early portraiture an easy way to make a quick killing from the public's ignorance of photography. Most significantly of all, it is difficult, if not impossible, to separate from these figures the actual owners, managers or operators of the studio. The figures are slightly "tainted" to varying degrees by other studio workers.

Although these numbers are not exact, they provide a fascinating indication of the growth of photography during the 19th century and the important role played by women in the medium as practicing professionals.

If the British census figures are inexact they are still models of simplicity compared to the American reports.

The earliest census takers in America sallied forth across vast areas during August of 1790, attempting to locate isolated homesteads and extract information from suspicious and independent immigrants. They tallied less than 4 million people. By 1840 the population had grown to 17 million spread across an even wider territory. By 1870 the population had exploded to almost 49 million. Meanwhile the census takers were asked to document an ever-greater number of statistics. It is hardly surprising that as the census became more complex, the incidence of errors, in both data collection and tabulation, increased alarmingly. Some of the results of the 1880 census, for example, were not available until a full eight years after the data had been collected.

In this context, the American census reports have additional problems. The most significant one is that female occupations were not recorded until the 1870 census. But an additional source of confusion is that the 1850 report only lists daguerreotypists; the 1860 census has two separate categories, both daguerreotypists and photographers; the 1870 census, for the first time, lists photographers without differentiation.

If the American census reports are much less reliable than the British reports they do have a singular advantage: the figures are available state by state. This fact allows a fascinating comparison of the numbers of photographers according to geographical region as the 19th century progressed. However, a word of warning is in order. Some territories/states, particularly in the West, radically changed their borders during this period and this should be taken into consideration when examining the data.

In spite of all these discrepancies and sources of error, the census reports for America during the 19th century reveal fascinating information on the medium of photography and the role of women as practicing professionals.

It would be possible to spend a lifetime exploring the significance, ramifications and implications of these figures. As a beginning, however, the following information can be extracted from the mass (and mess) of data.

In the 6 years following release of all patent restrictions on photographic processes the number of British photographers leaped ahead of the number of American photographers who had been practicing the medium without restraint since its introduction. However the rate at which American photographers entered the profession rapidly accelerated during the 1860s whereas the rate of British photographers declined. Thereafter, America would always record a greater number of total (male plus female) photographers than Britain.

Much more significant, in this context, is that the rate of increase of female photographers in America remained relatively flat until 1880 whereas women photographers in Britain were posting dramatic gains even during the 1860s. American female photographers entered the medium at a much faster rate than their British counterparts during the 1880s and 1890s. (It should be noted, however, that American male photographers became professionals at an even faster rate than females during these decades, as in Britain).

In 1880 there were 3 times as many female photographers in Britain as in America but by the turn of the century the numbers were almost the same.

The actual figures representing the numbers of women photographers in America and Britain are:

	1870/1	1880/1	1890/1	1900/1
America	183	449	1,792	3,572
Britain	694	1,309	2,469	3,851

Between 1880 and 1900 the numbers of British female photographers had not tripled whereas American female photographers had increased their number by 8 times. American gains are even more dramatic when increasing the time span to include 1870, the first year census reports recorded female photographers as a separate category. Between 1870 and 1900 women in Britain increased in number by 5.5 times while women in America increased in number by nearly 20 times.

The dramatic jump in the total number of American female photographers in the 1880s, coinciding with the introduction of the dry-plate, will come as no surprise. What is intriguing is the question why the new convenient process caused such a significant increase in the rate of female (and male) professionals entering the medium in America

but had a much less effect in Britain. Nevertheless, in spite of the rate of increase in the numbers of female photographers in America, their actual numbers were not only fewer than in Britain but also represented lower percentages compared to the total number of photographers.

% Women	1870/1	1880/1	1890/1	1900/1
America	2.6%	4.6%	8.9%	13.3%
Britain	14.7%	19.7%	23.4%	25.7%

The only state in America which had a higher percentage of female photographers than in Britain was Oregon (27%) in 1900, which had jumped from 27 female photographers (15%) in 1890 to 77 in a single decade. Particularly interesting is the fact that Washington recorded no female photographer in the state in 1890 but 76 in 1900, representing 21.4% of the total of professionals.

The rapid rise in the number of American women photographers entering the profession during the 1890s is vividly demonstrated in the figures from individual states. California, for example, reported 1 woman photographer in 1870; 18 in 1880; 79 in 1890; and 214 in 1900. Similarly, Massachusetts reported 8 female photographers in 1870; 57 in 1880; 123 in 1890 and 245 in 1900. Michigan's figures are comparable: 7 female photographers in 1870; 28 in 1880; 112 in 1890 and 216 in 1900.

Similar patterns were being set in other geographical areas, especially in the North-Eastern states. However, there are some intriguing anomalies. The numbers of female photographers in New Hampshire remained static in 1870 and 1880 at 16, jumped to 44 in 1890, and increased only to 48 in 1900 - which reversed the normal trend in that the percentage of women photographers actually decreased in the last decade of the century.

As might be expected the largest number of female photographers occur in New York where 335 were employed in 1900, although this represents only 10% of the total number of professionals. The next most populous state for women photographers was Illinois reporting 298 females (13%) in the profession by 1900.

Also noteworthy is that the Deep South reported disproportionately fewer photographers than Northern states throughout the 19th century.

It remains evident that a great deal needs to be examined in light of these census figures. One obvious line of enquiry would be to compare the proportion of photographers (male and female) to the total population of each state in each decade. But it is also evident, even from the crudity of these figures, that some common assumptions need to be revised concerning the numbers of photographers and the active role of women in the profession during the 19th century.

And, as the figures reveal, we cannot assume that Britain and America shared a common photographic history during the 19th century, especially in regards to female activity in the medium.

The two most surprising trends, perhaps, were 1) women played a much more active role in photography in Britain prior to 1880 than has been realized - and by comparison there were far fewer female photographers in America during the same period, but 2) this situation dramatically changed after 1880 when the number of female photographers skyrocketed in America but the rate of increase was relatively modest in Britain. It is worth reiterating that in both countries it was the males who registered sharper increases in numbers because of the dry-plate, not the females as is often assumed.

The fact remains that there were 7,423 professional women photographers in Britain and America by 1900, which means that there was one female to every 4.6 male photographers. This is a much higher ratio than is reflected in the historical literature, and this fact alone deserves some explanation.

I hope the above information will be a useful contribution to the field but, more important, that it will allow a discussion of women in 19th century photography based on evidence rather than assumption. It is now evident that the following assertion taken from a recently published book on women and photography is an exaggeration: "Before the 1880s photography, like many areas of professional endeavor, was inaccessible to women." The author, in a chapter entitled "A New Profession for Women" stated that "In the years 1880 to 1980, photography . . . emerged as a career option and a vocation for women," and that this was the "first generation of women and photography."

It is true, as we have seen, that photography as a profession received an enormous boost from the introduction of dry-plates, but that this was not a female phenomenon. Indeed males entered the profession at a much faster rate than females during this era. And, most important of all, that women were far more active in the profession of photography in earlier decades than had been previously assumed.

NOTES AND REFERENCES:

1. The British census reports of the 19 century used in this article comprise figures from England and Wales combined, and do not include Scotland and Northern Ireland.
2. There is a one-year discrepancy between the British and American census reports. The British reports are issued for 1851, 1861, 1871 etc., whereas the American reports are issued for 1850, 1860, 1870 etc. For the purposes of this comparison I have ignored this discrepancy.
3. The census figures are confirmed by other contemporaneous surveys. For example, in London alone in 1891 there were 610 female photographers to 1,635 male photographers (37%); in 1901 there were 703 female photographers to 2,235 male photographers (31%). The city figures therefore accurately reflect the national percentages.

4. Census figures are notoriously difficult to determine with certainty, often because the reports were amended and variously reorganized in subsequent editions. In addition, they are often interpreted differently by historians and commentators. However, the figures used here are the most accurate I have been able to determine and any slight discrepancies between these and other reported figures do not affect the percentages or conclusions. For example, the census figures quoted by Helmut Gernsheim in *The History of Photography*, McGraw-Hill, 1969, p. 424 are uniformly and slightly higher than my own figures, for both males and females in Britain and for the totals in America. He does not comment on the source of these figures so the origin of the discrepancy is unknown. However, all the increases are by about the same percentage so the conclusions remain valid for both sets of figures.

5. Even though I have contradicted the author's statements, I still feel she has written a most valuable and accurate assessment of the subject, very well worth reading. The book is *The Positive Image: Woman Photographers in Turn of the Century America*, C. Jane Gover, State University of New York Press, 1988.

WOMEN IN 19th CENTURY PHOTOGRAPHY CAPTIONS

1. Numbers of male and female photographers in Britain (England and Wales) from 1841-191 Note that photography remained flat during the first decade due to harsh patent restrictions on all processes. The medium witnessed a dramatic surge during the 1850s following release of patents at the end of 1854. The rate of increase of male photographers declined during the 1860s and 1870s but accelerated for female photographers. It accelerated again during the 1880s and 1890s but at a faster rate for males than for females. Nevertheless, by the turn of the century, for every 2.9 male photographers there was one professional female photographer.

2. Ratio of male photographers to female photographers in England and Wales decade by decade. In 1851 there was one (literally) female photographer to 50 males, but in the following decades women constituted a higher ratio of professionals. By 1881 (the end of the wet-plate era) there was 1 female photographer for every 4 males at a time when it has been assumed that women were deterred from the medium because of the inconvenience of the collodion process.

3. Comparison of female photographers in America and Britain from 1850 - 1900. (No American figures are available prior to 1870). Britain recorded a greater number, and higher percentages, of female photographers than America throughout the century. However, American women entered the medium at a much faster rate following the introduction of dry-plates around 1880. By 1900 there were nearly as many American women photographers as in Britain although they still constituted a lower percentage of the total number of photographers than in Britain - 13.3% in America to 25.7% in Britain.

4. Total numbers (male plus females) of photographers in America and Britain. Following the release of patent restrictions British photographers exceeded the American numbers by 1861. Thereafter American photographers entered the medium at a faster rate than their British counterparts for the remainder of the century.

5. Numbers of male and female photographers in America, 1840-1900. Although female photographers entered the medium at an accelerated rate after 1880, as has been assumed, male photographers joined the ranks of professionals at an even greater rate. The proportion of female to male photographers remained astonishingly low compared to the ratios in Britain.

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