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An Original Daguerreotype of Oliver Cowdery Identified

Patrick A. Bishop

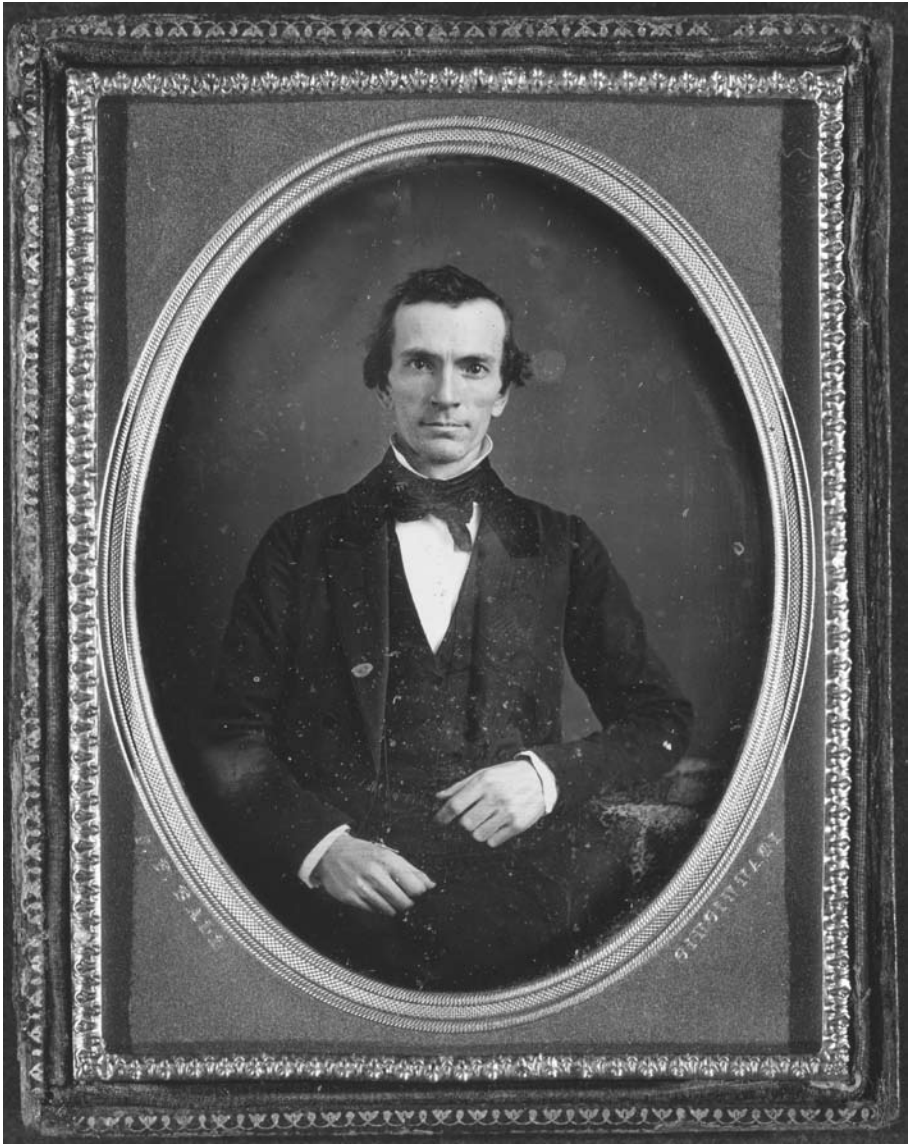
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Courtesy Prints and Photographs Division, Library of Congress

FIG. 1. Patrick A. Bishop discovered this daguerreotype while perusing the Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division. Preliminary comparisons to other known images of Oliver Cowdery suggests that this is an original daguerreotype of Cowdery.

An Original Daguerreotype of Oliver Cowdery Identified

Patrick A. Bishop

During my graduate studies I took on the project of obtaining photographic images of each apostle of this dispensation. The task proved difficult, but I found photographic likenesses for all but seven members of the First Presidency and Quorum of the Twelve Apostles of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. My interest in collecting daguerreotypes has continued since that day, and it has led me to the discovery of what I believe is an original daguerreotype of Oliver Cowdery.

One criterion for authenticating an image is to see if the clothing fashions worn in the photo correspond to the person's age in that time period. Many websites have viewable copies of daguerreotypes. One of the best sites to find photographs of early clothing styles is the Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division. On the evening of February 6, 2006, I was studying images thought to contain 1840s clothing styles, when daguerreotype 1363 (fig. 1) came up. This original daguerreotype, located at the Library of Congress Archives in Washington, D.C., was entitled "Unidentified man, half-length portrait, with arm resting on table with tablecloth." There were also more facts about the daguerreotype on the information page.¹ I surmised that the portrait may contain the image of Oliver Cowdery. As I gave more consideration to this newly discovered image over the next few days, I decided to do a preliminary comparison between the image and other likenesses of Oliver Cowdery.

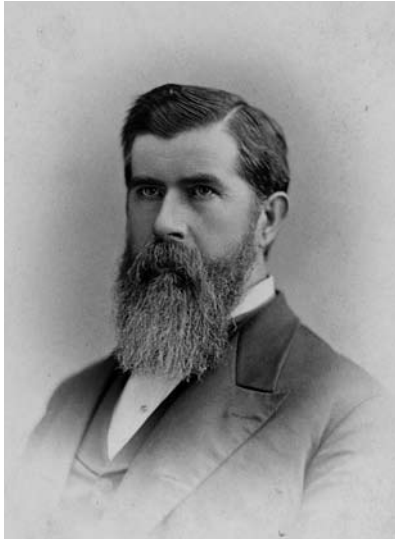
Known Likenesses of Oliver Cowdery

In 1883, Junius F. Wells (fig. 2) decided to make an engraving of the Three Witnesses for publication in the October issue of the *Contributor*.²



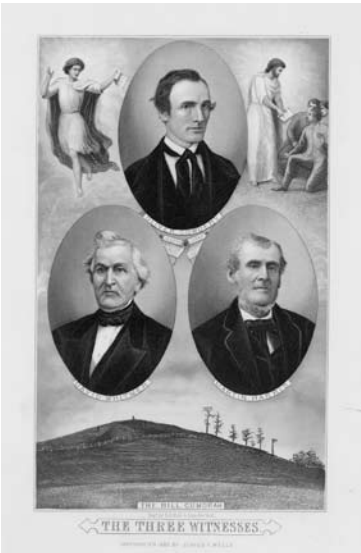
Courtesy LDS Church Archives, Salt Lake City. © Intellectual Reserve, Inc.

FIG. 2. Junius F. Wells.



Courtesy LDS Church Archives, Salt Lake City. © Intellectual Reserve, Inc.

FIG. 3. James H. Hart.



Courtesy LDS Church Archives, Salt Lake City. © Intellectual Reserve, Inc.

FIG. 4. Engraving of the Three Witnesses printed for the October 1883 issue of the *Contributor*. This engraving of Cowdery was taken from an original daguerreotype that was destroyed in a fire.



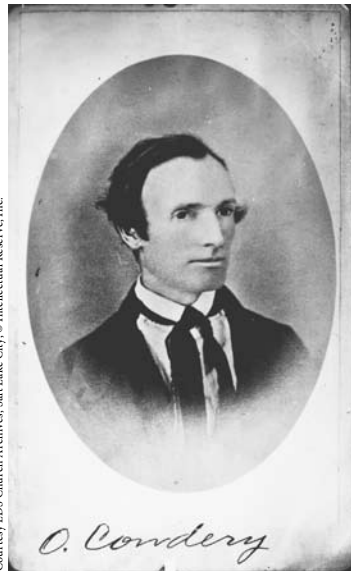
Courtesy Joseph Smith Birth Home, Sharon, Vermont

FIG. 5. Painting of Cowdery by John Willard Clawson.

Images of Martin Harris and David Whitmer were obtained quite easily. Obtaining Oliver Cowdery's image, however, proved to be much more difficult. After much research, Wells discovered that Cowdery's daughter, Mrs. Charles Johnson, had both a portrait painting and a daguerreotype of her father. Elder James H. Hart (fig. 3) was sent by Junius F. Wells to obtain the daguerreotype.

After obtaining the image, Elder Hart gave the daguerreotype to H. B. Hall and Sons Engravers in New York to make a copy and the subsequent engraving that was published in the October 1883 *Contributor* (fig. 4). Elder Hart then returned the daguerreotype to the Johnsons' home. Not long after, the Johnsons' home was destroyed by fire, and both the original portrait and the daguerreotype of Cowdery were destroyed. Hence, the only portraits available are based on the engraving in the *Contributor*.³

Probably the best of these portraits is the one painted by John Willard Clawson that hangs in Joseph Smith's birth home in Sharon, Vermont (fig. 5). This portrait image was used for the program cover for the 1911 dedication of the Oliver Cowdery memorial monument in Richmond, Missouri.



Courtesy LDS Church Archives, Salt Lake City, © Intellectual Reserve, Inc.

FIG. 6. It is believed that Charles W. Carter took this photograph of an original daguerreotype of Oliver Cowdery, which was owned by Mrs. Charles Johnson. The original daguerreotype was subsequently destroyed in a house fire.

One of the most popular images of Oliver Cowdery is the Charles W. Carter image (fig. 6). Some have assumed that this image is an actual photograph of Cowdery. The image appears to stem from the original that was destroyed by fire. The features are not as sharp and defined as the portrait by John Willard Clawson or the engraving by Hall and Sons. Ronald E. Romig, head archivist of the Community of Christ Library-Archives, indicated that the Carter image given me was a copy of the glass plate negative of Cowdery (also by Carter) that is held in the LDS Church Archives. I then contacted William W. Slaughter, photo archivist of the LDS Church, and he confirmed that there is not a record of what image Carter used for his photograph. It is obviously not an original picture of Oliver while living, as Oliver had died a decade before

Carter started taking photographs. There is no known record of Carter ever coming into contact with the Johnsons to copy the daguerreotype.

Carter's photograph is most likely taken from a copy of the original daguerreotype. It was a common practice in those days to photograph paintings or other photos and make copies to be distributed. For example, Carter took a photograph of an oil painting of Joseph Smith that is now owned by the Community of Christ (fig. 7). That photograph is sometimes mistaken for an original daguerreotype of Joseph taken while he was living (figs. 7a, 7b).⁴

Regardless of the origin of the Carter photo of Oliver, it is another witness to the reliability of the other renderings of the original Oliver Cowdery daguerreotype. Because each image is so similar, examiners have a very good knowledge of what he looked like. All these likenesses provided the means necessary to identify the newly discovered daguerreotype.

Provenance

The most disappointing part of the discovery is the lack of provenance for the image. As seen on the notes from the Library of Congress, the image was sold to them in 1999 by Anthony Barboza, a photograph collector who currently resides in New York City. Because the image did not become available to public view until 1999, it is likely no attempt was made to identify it until now. I contacted Anthony Barboza to ask him where he had obtained the image. He indicated that he bought most of the images in the 1970s and sold them to the Library of Congress. He kept



FIG. 7. Oil painting owned by the Community of Christ. **FIGS. 7a, 7b.** These two images are often mistaken for original daguerreotypes of Joseph Smith while living.

no records from where or from whom he had purchased them. Since he bought the images thirty years ago, Barboza could not remember where he had obtained this particular daguerreotype.

I decided to contact the Library of Congress again and ask if I might schedule a trip to Washington, D.C., to view and study the image. I had high hopes that the image contained some other clue to positively match the image to Cowdery. My desires were met with much resistance; I was told that because the original was so fragile, the only image they allowed anyone to view was a surrogate copy.

I called again later, hoping to finally prevail, but the request was again denied. This time, however, I persuaded the head curator to study the original image. The only additional information was given via email on February 27, 2006. It included the measurements and type of case the image is contained in.⁵ All other information about the image is given on the information page of the website.⁶ Thus the quest to positively trace the image from the Library of Congress back to Oliver Cowdery ended rather quickly.

Proximity of Oliver Cowdery and J. P. Ball

Engraved on the brass plate just below the image of Cowdery is both the name of the daguerreotypist, James Presley Ball (fig. 8), and the city of Cincinnati where he was employed. “A black daguerreian,” J. P. Ball

reportedly first learned the process in 1845. . . .

In the same year Ball opened a studio in Cincinnati, Ohio. In the spring of the following year, penniless, he closed his gallery and moved to Pittsburgh, Pa., and then to Richmond, Virginia, taking a job as a hotel waiter. When he accumulated a little money, he opened daguerreian rooms there.

In 1846–1847, he traveled as a daguerreian in Virginia and Ohio, and in 1847 opened *Ball’s Daguerreian Gallery of the West* in Cincinnati, Ohio.⁷

From 1847 to 1850 Ball operated his studio alone. In 1851 his brother-in-law Alexander Thomas became his partner, and in 1858 the studio was renamed “Ball and Brothers” or “Ball and Thomas.”⁸ During the 1850s, it is likely that all the daguerreotypes the studio produced etched the names of Ball and Thomas into the case, as seen in many of the daguerreotypes housed in Library of Congress. As the identified photo has only Ball’s name engraved on the case, it is strong evidence that Ball took the daguerreotype sometime between 1845 and 1850 in Cincinnati or while he traveled in Ohio in 1846.



Courtesy Esver Hall Mumford, *Scarlett's Black Victorians*

FIG. 8. James Presley Ball, a daguerreian that may have had contact with Oliver Cowdery.

After Oliver Cowdery was excommunicated from The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints in 1838, he moved back to Kirtland, Ohio, to study and practice law. In 1840 Cowdery moved to Tiffin, Ohio, where he practiced law and became a prominent civic leader and ardent Democrat.⁹ Richard Lloyd Anderson writes of these years:

Several remarkable estimates of Cowdery as a person stem from his political activities in two states while out of the Church. In Tiffin, Ohio, he was regularly before the public as an active party worker, public speaker, and occasional candidate for civil office. In 1842, 1844, and 1845, he was elected by the party township meeting as delegate to the Democratic county convention. In all these years he was named

on the resolutions committee at the county convention because of his characteristic role as an articulate party spokesman. He was regularly sent to political rallies as a persuasive stump speaker. In 1845 he was elected as one of three township trustees, defeating his nearest opponent by a twenty-six percent vote margin. In his last year of political activity in Tiffin, 1846, Cowdery was promoted for the office of state senator at a tri-county convention by a dozen delegates who were loyal to him through two ballots.¹⁰

If the daguerreotype is of Oliver Cowdery, it was undoubtedly taken during the years from 1845 to 1847. No hard evidence has been found yet placing J. P. Ball and Oliver Cowdery in the same place on the same day; this research is ongoing. However, the following information is worthy of note: First, J. P. Ball's studio was in operation in 1845 while Cowdery was being "regularly sent to political rallies" around the state. It is not unlikely that Cowdery would have gone to Cincinnati for one of these rallies. Second, J. P. Ball was traveling the state of Ohio taking photographs in 1846. Oliver Cowdery would have been a prime photographic candidate as a prominent civic leader and a respected lawyer in Ohio. Finally, while Junius F. Wells was trying to ascertain whether a photo existed or not, some friends of Oliver Cowdery indicated that a daguerreotype had been taken four years before his death.¹¹ This information would date the daguerreotype to 1846. After Hart received the now-lost daguerreotype from Mr. Johnson to make the engraving for the *Contributor*, the Johnsons and the Whitmers stated that that image of Cowdery was taken when he was about age forty-two, dating that image to 1848.¹² Could it be that the newly identified daguerreotype is the one Cowdery's friends reported being taken in 1846?

Some may argue that in this new image Cowdery appears older than in the 1848 image obtained from the Johnsons. It should be noted that the extant image from the Johnsons is a copy; engravers and a portrait artists often leave out the aging features of the face such as wrinkles and scars.

Cowdery had traveled to Cincinnati, Ohio, in response to a revelation stating, "And again, verily I say unto you, my servants, Sidney Rigdon, Joseph Smith, Jun., and Oliver Cowdery, shall not open their mouths in the congregations of the wicked until they arrive at Cincinnati" (D&C 61:30).

Two revelations are all that directly connect Cowdery to Cincinnati. They are both given in August 1831, fifteen years before the daguerreotype would have been taken. It is common, however, for one to go back to places of importance to visit or reflect on significant events in the past. Perhaps Cowdery was drawn to visit Cincinnati because of past events or associations made in that city.

Dating the Clothing and Photograph

As stated above, one criterion for authenticating an image of a person is to match the clothing fashions worn in the time period to the age of the person in the photo. It follows that the man in the image should have mid-1840s clothing on:

1840's men's fashion was marked by tightly tailored coats and trousers. . . . The coats were noticeable for their fitted sleeves and often featured oversized buttons. Frocks and cutaway coats were the most common style.



FIG. 9.

Vests were still de rigueur and are seen in both notch and shawl collar variants as well as single and double breasted styles. Shirts featured a high straight collar, though some did appear with a slight turn-down over the cravat.

At the outset of the decade cravats were relatively thin and often worn in the familiar bow tie style. But by the end of the decade, gentlemen wore very wide cravats, some of which featured frames to hold the fabric in place throughout the day. . . .

In contrast to the 1840's, the 1850's reflected a marked preference for bolder styling particularly seen in frock coats with wider lapels and

looser cuts. Waistcoats became fancier with bold patterns and metal buttons. In the early part of the decade, gentlemen wore extravagant, heavily starched, assymmetrically tied cravats, which subsided later in the decade to reflect softer styling. At the beginning of the decade many gentlemen wore their hair parted on the side styled with an extreme frontal wave on top, but once again this subsided toward the end of the decade.¹³

The daguerreotype concurs with this criteria for the clothing Cowdery would have worn in the mid-1840s. The man in the image (fig. 9) has a tightly fitted coat especially in the arms, a high collar, and a thinner cravat tied in a simple bow tie style. In 1846, Cowdery would have been forty years of age, matching the approximate age of the man in the image.

Facial Identification

In the mid-1990s Ephraim Hatch published a book entitled *Joseph Smith Portraits: A Search for the Prophet's Likeness*. In his book, Ephraim used a gridline system to verify whether or not facial features from portraits of Joseph Smith were a match to his death mask. This system is a good starting place. In doing a gridline comparison, the engraving from the original daguerreotype of Cowdery was used, as it provides the most accurate comparison. As seen in fig. 10, the newly found image and the engraving match with exactness.

As the above method only takes into account the spatial orientation of the facial features, each individual feature should be examined closely.

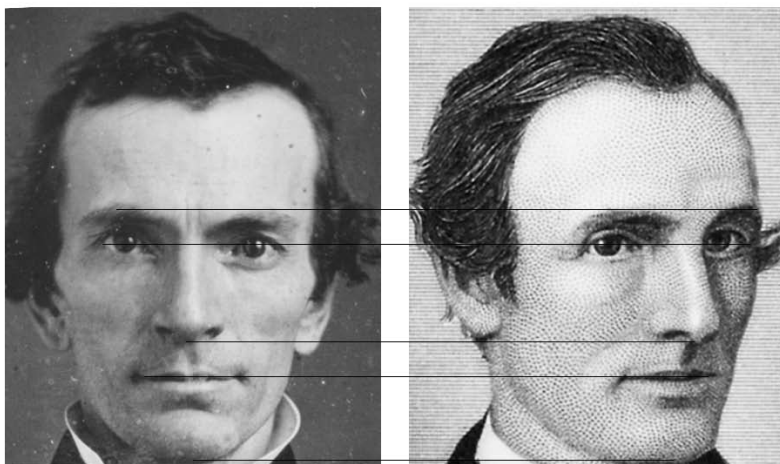


FIG. 10. This gridline comparison of facial features matches with exactness.

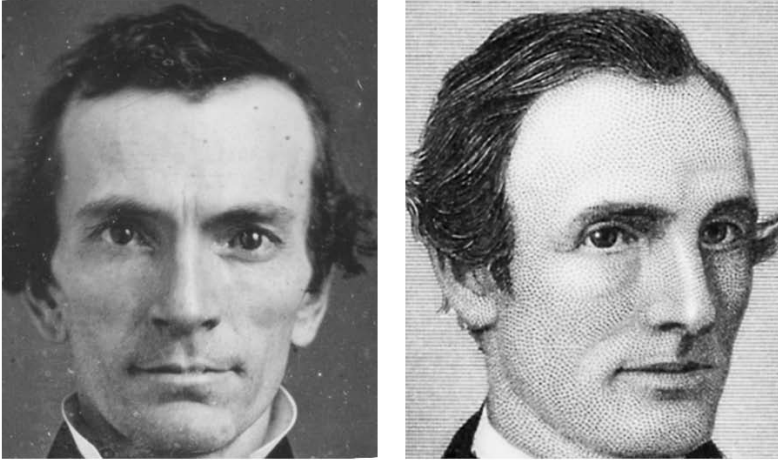


FIG. 11. Without the gridlines, each individual feature can be examined.

Again using the two above images with the gridlines removed (fig. 11) each feature will be examined.

Starting with the hair and moving down it can be seen very clearly that the hair line in both images match with a slight widow's peak. The hairstyle is also an exact match in both images, with the part on the same side, the slight wave on the comb-over in the front, and the sides combed forward with a distinctive "winged" look. The shape and size of the eyes and eyebrows are also excellent matches. Both noses are long and wide at the base, having the same shape from top to bottom. The lips on each are wide but thin, having a "clenched mouth" with slight creases in each corner of the mouth. Finally, the chin in both images is broad and gently pointed.

William Lang, an associate partner of law with Cowdery, wrote of his impressions of Cowdery while writing a history of Seneca County, Ohio. In that work, Lang produced the following description:

Mr. Cowdery . . . had an open countenance, high forehead, dark brown eye, Roman nose, clenched lips and prominent lower jaw. He shaved smooth and was neat and cleanly in his person. He was of light stature, about five feet, five inches high, and had a loose, easy walk. With all his kind and friendly disposition, there was a certain degree of sadness that seemed to pervade his whole being.¹⁴

As one reads this description by William Lang it seems to be describing this newly found daguerreotype in every way.

Research Is Ongoing

While the observations in this article are not absolute, they do provide convincing evidence that this is indeed a heretofore unknown image of Oliver Cowdery. Hopefully this preliminary study will be used as a platform to bolster further research and prove conclusively that the image is that of Oliver Cowdery. To establish a better provenance, further evidence might be collected by searching newspaper clippings, advertisements of the day, or other public records to see if Oliver Cowdery and J. P. Ball can be connected more substantially. Searching the journal entries of friends and family from both parties may also prove helpful. A facial recognition expert could also further authenticate the image. These are beyond the realms of my capabilities at present.

This year, 2006, will mark the two-hundredth anniversary of Oliver Cowdery's birth. I hope that this newly identified image will be accepted and used as widely as possible to celebrate the accomplishments of this great man and his witness to all the key events of the Restoration of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.

Patrick A. Bishop (bishoppa@ldsces.org) is Church Educational System Coordinator for the Casper, Wyoming, Seminary and Institute. He received his master's degree in human development from Utah State University in 2004. Bishop gives thanks to Ronald E. Romig of the Community of Christ Library-Archives, William Slaughter of the LDS Church Archives, and to his wife for her patience during his long hours of study.

1. Library of Congress, Prints and Photographs Online Catalogue, <http://lcweb2.loc.gov/pp/dagquery.html> (accessed February 6, 2006).

TITLE: [Unidentified man, half-length portrait, with arm resting on table with tablecloth]

CALL NUMBER: DAG no. 1363

MEDIUM: 1 photograph : quarter-plate daguerreotype.

CREATED/PUBLISHED: [between 1847 and 1860]

CREATOR: Ball, James Presely, 1825-1905

NOTES: Case: back only - Rinhart 108.

Barboza number: 6019.028.

Stamped on brass mat: J. P. Ball, Cincinnati.

Purchase; Anthony Barboza; 1999; (DLC/PP-1999:022).

Forms part of: Daguerreotype collection (Library of Congress).

REPOSITORY: Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division, Washington, D.C. 20540 USA

CARD #: 2004664581

2. For a full account of this story see Junius F. Wells, "The Three Witnesses," *Contributor* 5 (October 1883): 34-36.

3. Junius F. Wells, "The Engraving of the Three Witnesses," *Improvement Era* 30 (January 1927): 1024.

4. Ronald E. Romig and Lachlan Mackay, "What Did Joseph Smith Look Like?" *Saints Herald* 141, no. 12 (December 1994): 9.

5. Personal email from Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division to Patrick A. Bishop, February 26, 2006, copy in author's possession, as follows:

The daguerreotype #1363 has the following measurements:

Length (top to bottom) 12 CM or 4 $\frac{3}{4}$ inches

Width (side to side) 9.5 CM or 3 $\frac{3}{4}$ inches

Height (thickness) 1 CM or $\frac{3}{8}$ inches

The front cover of the case is missing. The back cover has an embossed design of flowers. All other marks and other unique information have been included in the online bibliographic record. There are no other marks etched, embossed, engraved or otherwise written on the back case. Since the front cover is missing, I am unable to tell you of anything that may have been included in the interior of the case.

6. <http://lcweb2.loc.gov/pp/dagquery.html>.

7. Craig's Daguerreian Registry: The Acknowledged Resource on American Photographers 1839-1860, www.daguerreotype.com (accessed February 18, 2006). See also Deborah Willis, *Reflections in Black* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2000), 4-5; and Deborah Willis, *J. P. Ball, Daguerrean and Studio Photographer* (New York: Garland, 1993), xiv-xv.

8. Willis, *J. P. Ball, Daguerrean and Studio Photographer*, 303.

9. Richard Lloyd Anderson, "Cowdery, Oliver," in *Encyclopedia of Mormonism*, ed. Daniel H. Ludlow, 4 vols. (New York: Macmillan, 1992), 1:338.

10. Richard Lloyd Anderson, *Investigating the Book of Mormon Witnesses* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1981), 42-43.

11. Wells, "The Three Witnesses," 34.

12. Wells, "The Three Witnesses," 35.

13. Gentleman's Emporium, "Gentleman's Portrait Gallery 1840's," <http://www.gentlemansemporium.com/1840-victorian-photo-gallery.php> (accessed February 5, 2006).

14. William Lang, *History of Seneca County* (Springfield, Ohio: Transcript Printing, 1880), 365.