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Florence Eunice Felton, Prescott, MA; Henry L. Lovell Studio, Amherst, MA, 1896–1900.

PHOTO ESSAY

“Something of the Character Within”: Children of the Swift River Valley

SHEILA DAMKOEHLER



Editor’s Introduction: *This essay explores nineteen late-nineteenth-century photographs from the Swift River Valley Historical Society. The photos are all studio portraits of children and collectively form a lens on the life of five “lost towns” of Western Massachusetts that were destroyed to create the Quabbin Reservoir. Some of the photos have handwritten identifications on the back, but several do not; their subjects are unknown to us. But they still present enough information for historical inquiry—with help from modern technology—to uncover intriguing details about a time, and several places, long gone.*

* * * * *

How many photographs of children might be tucked away in boxes and folders in Massachusetts’s many small historical societies? The Swift River Valley Historical Society in New Salem, Massachusetts, certainly has its share. The society was formed in 1936, nine years after the Swift River Valley Act was passed by the Massachusetts Legislature—mandating the damming of the Swift River to create a huge reservoir to quench the thirst of the growing city of Boston 65 miles to the east. By mid-1939, the towns of Dana,



Unidentified Girl, Prescott, MA; A. J. Schillare Studio, Northampton, MA, 1881–93.

Enfield, Greenwich, and Prescott, a number of villages, and parts of New Salem and other nearby towns, were cleared of all structures and vegetation to create the Quabbin Reservoir and its watershed. More than 2,500 people lost their homes, farms, and businesses; 7,500 graves were relocated.

Residents of the towns and villages being destroyed brought their possessions to the nascent society: household objects, agricultural implements, letters, diaries, certificates—and photographs.

This photo essay examines some of those photographs found in the society's collection, specifically, studio portraits of children taken in towns or cities near New Salem and the four “lost” towns during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

Sometimes there are names or locations written on the backs of these images, but all too often, no marks at all. Descendants of those first families have also donated photographs. With these more recent acquisitions, we must ask ourselves who wrote the information on the backs of those images. The first generation of displaced families? The second? Or the third? Can we trust their accuracy? Sometimes there is enough evidence in other photographs or documents to confirm identifications, but often there is not.

In some instances, fashion or evolving technology can help us date the scene. For example, the Fauntleroy suit was made popular when Frances Hodgson Burnett's popular novel *Little Lord Fauntleroy*, accompanied by Reginald Birch's illustrations, was published in 1886. Transitions from the popular *carte-de-visite* format to the larger cabinet card and the evolving styles of the mountings and borders of those photographs can also provide clues to a date. Many studio photographs include the name and location of the photographer or studio. In *A Directory of Massachusetts Photographers, 1839–1900*, Chris Steele and Ronald Polito present an extensive directory of Massachusetts studio photographers and the years they were working, further helping us determine a date range for those images.¹

With little or no identification, and perhaps knowing only where or when the photographs were taken, can we glean anything substantive about these images found in our collections?

WE MIGHT ASK . . .

What were the circumstances surrounding the photograph? Did other family members also have portraits taken that day? With the modern snapshot not widely available until the 1900s, we know that going to the studio for a portrait was an important occasion. In *Dressed for the Photographer, Ordinary Americans and Fashion, 1840–1900*, Joan Severa writes, “A camera portrait





Facing page: Rena Louise Stone, Prescott, MA; George H. Thompson Studio, Orange, MA, 1885–99. *This page:* Punch Gillette, Enfield, MA; studio unknown.

had somewhat the same momentous significance in the early years as a painted portrait and was undertaken with the same sense of destiny.”²

Was the child’s family well-to-do? It might appear so, but sometimes studios provided props like fur hats and muffs. Clothing and shoes might



This page: Unidentified Boy, New Salem, MA; Fred N. Johnson Studio, Orange, MA, 1895–96. *Facing page:* Unidentified Boy, New Salem, MA; George H. Thompson Studio, Orange, MA, 1885–99.



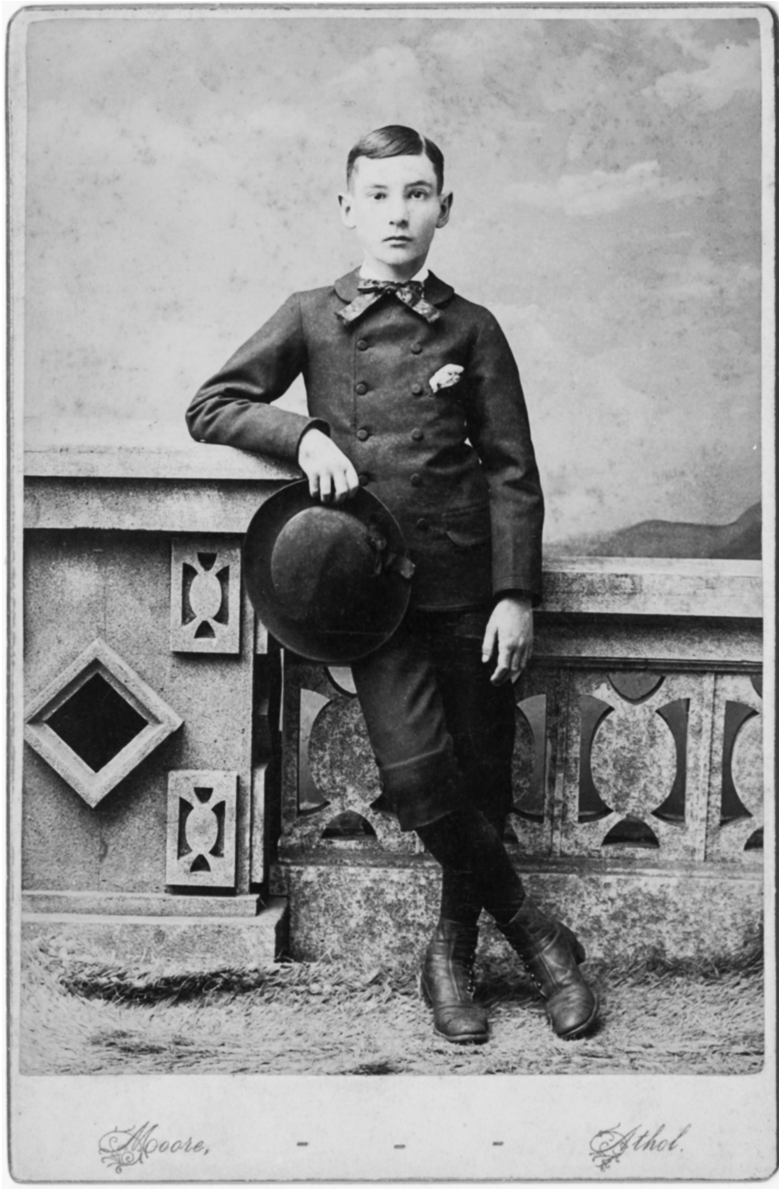


Atwood Collins Page, Prescott, MA, May 5, 1892; studio unknown.



Mildred Nevins, Prescott, MA; Alvin B. Harlow Studio, Ware, MA, 1889–89.





Facing page: Grace Haskins, Dana, MA; Amos H. Locke Studio, Athol, MA, 1872–81. *This page:* Unidentified Boy, Greenwich, MA; Moore Studio, Athol, MA, 1892 or 1866–87.



Unidentified Boy, Greenwich, MA; A.V. Brown Studio, Springfield, MA; 1885–90.



Rena Louise Stone, Prescott, MA; George H. Thompson Studio, Orange, MA; 1885–89.



This page: Ruth Reid, Greenwich, MA; undated photo, studio unknown. *Facing page:* Unidentified Girl, Prescott, MA; undated photo, studio unknown.





Margaret Brown, Dana, MA; A. N. Gaouette Studio, Monson, MA, 1889–97.



Henry White, Prescott, MA; Fred N. Johnson Studio, Orange, MA, 1895–96.

have been borrowed. Was the dress or suit a special piece of clothing that strained the family's budget—or just one of many lovely outfits? Unless we know something of the family, which we often do not, we cannot determine the child's economic status by looking at the photograph.

What about the photographs' backgrounds? Children are often posed in front of the studio's painted gardens, pillars, or elegant parlors. Being seen as stylish and cultured was a widely held value for both middle and upper class families in nineteenth-century America.

What can we learn from the child's demeanor in the photograph? Unlike today's fashion, which calls for the broad smiles we now don for the camera, social norms of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries called for a dignified pose and expression—even for children.

A fancy outfit may not indicate wealth, a background of pillars may not indicate culture, and a formal expression may not indicate seriousness. Can we accept anything as real in these studio images? In the foreword to Joan Severa's *Dressed for the Photographer*, Claudia Brush Kidwell and Nancy Redford discuss social norms and the constraints of early photography:

Photographers posed their sitters with more or less skill, showing them how to lean gracefully against chairs, cut-off pillars, trees, and fences. Often the sitter's individuality was lost in the conventionality of the pose . . . But occasionally photographers managed to transcend the conventions in which they worked and show something of the character within.³

Perhaps the only thing real the photographers could depict was “something of the character within” these children of the Swift River Valley. Did they succeed? The viewer will be the judge.

Acknowledgements

The initial inspiration for this photo essay came from a 1999 exhibit created by Elizabeth Peirce, curator and former president of the Swift River Valley Historical Society. My understanding of the influence of social norms in early photographs has been informed by the 2009 exhibit at Memorial Hall Museum in Deerfield, MA, titled “Don't Smile for the Camera,” curated by Suzanne L. Flynt.

The Swift River Valley Historical Society, located in New Salem, Massachusetts, is open to the public from late June through September. Archives are available for research year-round. Information can be found at www.swiftrivermuseum.org.

Notes

1. Chris Steele & Ronald Polito, edited by Ronald Polito, *A Directory of Massachusetts Photographers, 1839-1900* (Camden, ME: Picton Press, 1993).
2. Joan Severa, *Dressed for the Photographer: Ordinary Americans and Fashion, 1840-1900* (Kent, OH: Kent State University Press, 1995), Preface xix.
3. Claudia Brush Kidwell with Nancy Redford, Foreword to *Dressed for the Photographer: Ordinary Americans and Fashion, 1840-1900* by Joan Severa, xiii.