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Two Early Photographs of Amana

By Peter Hoehnle

Two *carte de visite*¹ albumen prints of scenes of the Amana Society in Iowa have been located among the papers of an Amana family. The two images depict the Amana calico print works and the Amana woolen mill and date to the early 1870s. These photographs are the earliest datable images of any of the Amana villages and, as such, merit consideration.

Both images bear the stamp of William H. Masters, a pioneering photographer whose career spanned the 1850s to 1880s and led him from Illinois to Iowa and, finally, to Kansas.

William H. Masters was born on March 12, 1823, in Warren County, Kentucky, the son of Richard Clemment (1781-1872) and Agnes Cochran (1782-?) Masters.² The family farm was a scant four miles from a Shaker community, and undoubtedly the young Masters had some association with Shakers while growing up. The family had migrated to Bureau County, Illinois, by 1833.³

By 1850 Masters was living in Dover, Illinois. During the following decade, as early as 1855, he opened a photographic studio in Princeton, Illinois. Masters was likely the first photographer to operate in Princeton, a small city today best known as the home of abolitionist Owen Lovejoy.⁴

Masters advertised his “Skylight Ambrotype Gallery” in an early Princeton directory, in which he not only advertised his photographs but also offered to give instruction “in all branches of the Art” and to supply other photographers with apparatus and collodian.⁵ Clearly, Masters was an experienced practitioner of the craft by the time of this advertisement.

Masters’ “gallery” was located above Converse and Thomson’s store. An editorial in the *Bureau County Republican* of 1860 noted that “Mr. W. H. Masters, whose skill in the ambrotype and melainotype type business has won the praises of hundreds in Princeton and elsewhere, is making the most beautiful and life-like pictures at his Gallery.”⁶

A long standing tradition in Princeton states that during a July 4, 1858, visit to town, friends urged Abraham Lincoln, then a prominent Illinois attorney, to visit Masters’ studio to have his picture taken. Decades after the

event, William Masters' nephew printed and sold copies of what he alleged was the portrait taken that day but which historians have since determined is a retouched version of a better known photograph taken by Alexander Hessler of Chicago. Masters could well have photographed Lincoln, but if he did so, the original image is lost.⁷


Masters' first wife, Cynthia, died in November 1859 of typhoid fever. The widowed Masters married Hannah Wilson in 1861.⁸ Masters continued his photography work in Princeton until the late 1860s. In 1866 he briefly

entered a partnership with Henry Imke, which ended after only six months, then took as his apprentice his twenty-three-year-old nephew, Charles, who returned to Princeton after being wounded during the Civil War. The younger Masters opened his own studio in 1869, presumably the year that his uncle left Princeton, and remained an active photographer until 1910.⁹

In 1866 Masters had relocated his studio to "Cohen's Block, No. 80 Main Street" in Princeton, a move that he advertised in the local paper, noting, "I beg leave to inform my patrons that I have removed to my New Gallery as above, where I have larger and more commodious Rooms, with a superior light, new and improved apparatus, and every other facility for all

68BUSINESS DIRECTORY.

W. H. MASTERS'
SKY-LIGHT
AMBROTYPE
GALLERY,



NORTH SIDE OF THE PUBLIC SQUARE,
TWO DOORS WEST OF MAIN STREET.

**PEARL WHITE AMBROTYPES,
COMMON AMBROTYPES,
STEREOSCOPIC AMBROTYPES,
AMBROGRAPHS,
DAGUERREOTYPES,**

And everything else new and beautiful in the Art, may be found
at this Gallery.


LIKENESSES

Taken in all kinds of weather, and put up in the very best
manner, and at reasonable prices.

A good assortment of plain and fancy CASES constantly on
hand, and fitted to order.

Pictures fitted to Lockets, Pins, &c., with neatness and dispatch.

INSTRUCTIONS given in all branches of the Art, and
Apparatus furnished, upon reasonable terms.

 A superior article of COLLODION furnished to neigh-
borhood operators.

A Masters advertisement in an early Princeton,
Illinois, directory

kinds of first class work in the PHOTOGRAPHIC ART.” Masters also noted that he had acquired “an improved Solar Camera.”¹⁰

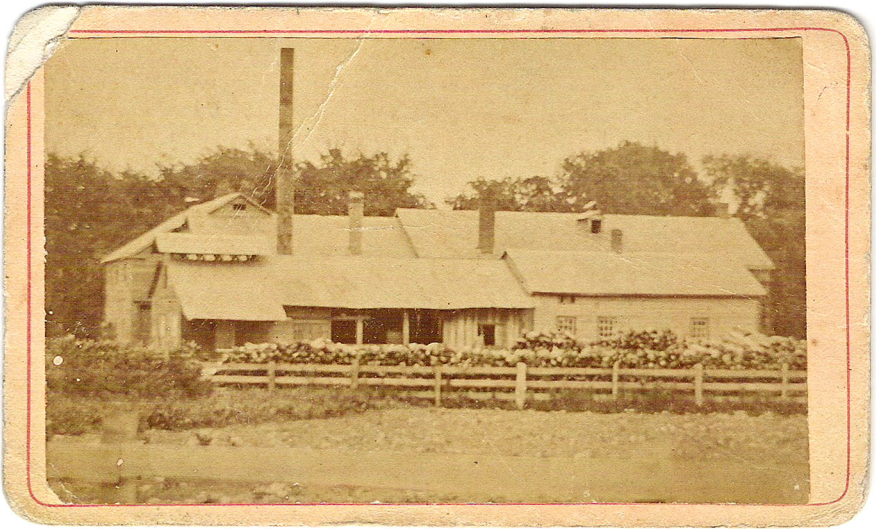
At some point between 1866 and 1870 Masters moved his family to the Iowa County, Iowa, town of Marengo. The 1870 census of Marengo records Masters as a forty-seven-year-old photographer living with his (third?) wife, Eliza, and son William, age eight. By this time, Masters was operating a studio and billing himself as a “Photo Artist” on the reverse of the *cartes de visite* that he produced.¹¹

At least six small *carte de visite* images survive from Masters’ time in Iowa. Two portraits are in the collection of the State Historical Society in Iowa, while an additional photograph of the Marengo town square is in the collection of the Iowa County Historical Society. The final two images, of the factories in Amana, are the most intriguing.

The first Masters image of Amana depicts the Amana calico print works, and is identified by an inscription on the cardboard backing. The calico print works was established in 1860, and printed designs on muslin fabric purchased by the Society from eastern cotton mills. Masters’ image shows the original wooden buildings of this enterprise, virtually all of which were replaced by larger brick structures in the late 1880s and early 1890s.

Masters probably made his photograph of the Amana woolen mill, which is nearly adjacent to the calico print works, on the same day. The woolen mill photograph shows the original 1859 stone and frame mill building, the brick power house and the square brick smokestack of the steam engine that powered the mill in periods of low water, when the mill race the colonists had completed to the south of the factory buildings was unable to turn the water turbines. In 1891 the first section of a long brick weaving building was built in the area shown in the foreground of the Masters photograph, and the original smokestack was replaced in 1896.

Clearly, the Masters images predate 1889 when the new brick buildings were erected at the site of the calico print works. It is clear, however, that the Masters images are much earlier, for several reasons. Masters does not appear on the 1880 Iowa County census, taken after he had moved to Kansas. Thus, the photographs have to date from between 1867 —when Masters left Princeton— and the late 1870s when he left Marengo. The fact that Masters used a *carte de visite* format, which was generally falling from favor by 1870s and almost completely abandoned by 1880, supports this early date.



Above The Masters CDV of the calico print works, 1870s.

Below A photograph taken in January 2011 from the same angle as the Masters photo above. All of the buildings in Masters photo were replaced. The two brick buildings in the center and left were built in about 1890.





Above The Masters CDV of the Amana woolen mill, 1870s. The building was constructed in 1859.

Below A photograph taken in January 2011. The weaving building in the modern picture hides the original woolen mill building seen above. The weaving building and the woolen mill sales room (far left) were constructed in three phases in 1891, 1908 and the 1950s. The smokestack in the background replaced the square stack in the Masters photo in 1896.

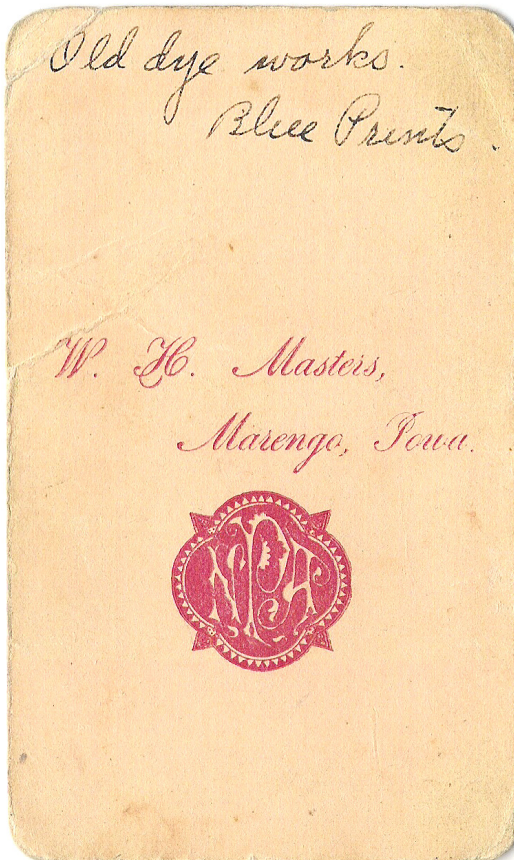


Prior to the discovery of the two Masters photographs of Amana, the earliest conclusively dated images of the villages were from the 1888-1889 period.

Precisely why Masters made the trip to Amana to create these photographs is unclear. Likely, other images of Amana scenes by Masters exist and remain to be discovered. A tantalizing possibility exists that Masters was commissioned to take photographs of Amana by Charles Nordhoff, the New York journalist whose 1875 *Communitic Societies of the United States* contained the earliest illustrated accounts of the Society. The expense of sending an artist to the Society, so far from his base in New York, could well have encouraged Nordhoff to enlist the services of a local

photographer to take photographs to be used by a wood cut artist in fashioning engravings. The woolen mill is depicted in Nordhoff's book, although from a distance. The mill, however, is shown from the same angle and closely resembles the Masters photograph, although no concrete evidence links Masters to Nordhoff, and the later did not include an image of the print works as an illustration in his book.

By 1880, the Masters family had left Marengo and moved to Salamanca Township, Cherokee County, Kansas, where they were residing at the time of the federal census. In the 1885 Kansas state census, the last in which



The Masters print mark on back of the calico print works CDV.

Masters can be found, he is listed as living in Blue Mound, Kansas, with his wife, Lucy, evidently his fourth, who is listed as a “Tayloress.” Masters, then age sixty-two, gave his occupation as “Photographer.”¹² Masters was again widowed when Lucy died on November 4, 1890.

William H. Masters died on August 8, 1894, at age seventy-one, and was buried in Pleasant View Cemetery in Blue Mound, Linn County, Kansas.

Notes

1. The curator of the Eastman House notes that there are two common misconceptions about *cartes de visite*: that they were only portrait shots, and that they were used as calling cards. The two photographs discussed here are pictures of buildings.
2. <http://trees.ancestry.com/tree/17652247/person/538972052>, accessed on August 19, 2010.
3. Marie Czach, “Masters, William H.,” in *A Directory of Early Illinois Photographers* (Macomb, Ill.: Western Illinois University, 1977).
4. Czach, “Masters, William H.”
5. *Sketches of the Early Settlement and Present Advantages of Princeton, Illinois, Including Valuable Statistics, Etc. Also, a Brief Sketch of Bureau County and a Business Directory* (Princeton, Ill.: Isaac B. Smith, 1857).
6. *Bureau County Republican*, February 23, 1860.
7. In 2009 the Bureau County Historical Society produced a post card in honor of the bicentennial of Lincoln’s birth featuring the supposed Masters photograph. The oval sized portrait as reproduced is marked “Pub by C. H. Masters Princeton, Illinois” along with a reproduction of Lincoln’s signature and the caption, “From an original by W.H. Masters, July 4, 1856.”
8. *Bureau County Republican*, 24 November 1859. Cynthia Masters is buried in Oakland Cemetery in Princeton.
9. Czach, “Masters, William H.”
10. *Bureau County Republican*, September 20, 1866.
11. A *carte de visite* in the collection of the Iowa County Historical Society, Marengo, Iowa, bears the stamp “W. H. Masters, Photo Artists, Marengo Iowa. Every style of Picture, from card to life size, taken from life or copied. Negatives preserved.”
12. Kansas State Census, 1885 for Blue Mound, Linn County, roll KS1885-77.