

The Historic Huntsville Quarterly

Volume 24
Number 1 *Restoration and Remembrance: The
Huntsville Pilgrimage*

Article 9

3-20-1998

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Recommended Citation

Robb, Frances Osborn (1998) "'Mementoes of Affection': A Lost Daguerrotype of Maple Hill Cemetery," *The Historic Huntsville Quarterly*. Vol. 24: No. 1, Article 9.
Available at: <https://louis.uah.edu/historic-huntsville-quarterly/vol24/iss1/9>

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“Mementoes of Affection”: A Lost Daguerreotype of Maple Hill Cemetery

by Frances Osborn Robb

On June 17, 1851, daguerreotypist William H. Thomas advertised in *Southern Advocate*:

I wish to have in my Gallery every thing that is useful and interesting. I propose on Friday the 20th, at 7 p.m. to take a Panoramic view of the Huntsville cemetery, and those splendid monuments. I will be pleased to see many of the friends and relations near the Mementoes of affection; meet me there. It is pleasant to meditate among the Tombs.

Thomas' lost view may have emulated award-winning panoramas like the 1878 daguerreotype series depicting the waterfront at Cincinnati, a significant wholesale center for the Tennessee Valley. The cemetery's memorial associations may have influenced Thomas' choice of site: an 1851 advertisement suggested that portrait sitters “please retain that good and pleasant expression which is caused by the thought of blest immortality living after Death.”

Artist/daguerrean Thomas came to Huntsville in 1850 from Columbia, Tennessee. He opened Daguerrean Art Gallery on the southeast corner of the public square (possibly on the site of the Historic Huntsville Foundation's newly acquired Hundley building), where he installed a skylight—Huntsville's first. He relocated to Tusculum in 1852.

Little is known of Thomas. Nevertheless, his unusually informative advertisements sum up the impulses that drove the most adventurous 1850s daguerreans: the search for novelties to elicit admiration and custom, the urge to equal great daguerrean achievements and the bitter-sweet pleasure of memorializing the dead.

Thomas' panorama may have comprised a single daguerreotype or a series of several images taken from left to right across the cemetery. Today, his cemetery view may be tucked away in a box or chest of drawers, forgotten and awaiting rediscovery.



The McGee Monument, Maple Hill Cemetery, was erected by Mollie McGee, in honor of her father, hotel proprietor Henry McGee. Courtesy Ann Montes.