

## **Finding Aid for the**

### **William Bell Collection**

#### **OHA 111**

#### **Otis Historical Archives**

#### **National Museum of Health and Medicine**

#### **Armed Forces Institute of Pathology**

*Compiled by:* Rudolf J. D'Souza

**Date of Records:** 1872-1910

.5 Linear Feet, 2 Boxes

Accession Number: 1988.0007, 2008.0001

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#### **Biographical Note**

Most of the Army Medical Museum's early photographic work was done by William Bell in the Museum's studios. Bell joined the Museum staff, re-enlisting in the Army as a hospital steward, on February 22, 1865. (Although Brinton says in his biography, *"In the latter part of the summer [or 1864], a photographic bureau was added to the Museum, and I had to see to engaging the proper artists and outfit. I succeeded after much trouble in procuring an excellent artist, named Bell..."* p. 284)

A professional photographer in civilian life, Bell replaced Wills as the main photographer in the Museum while Wills stayed as his assistant. (Lamb, 33, 35) Bell, a Philadelphian, might have been recommended to Otis by Constant Guillion, the president of the Philadelphia Photographic Society.

William Bell was born in Liverpool, England, was described as being 5' 7 1/2" tall with a ruddy complexion, blue eyes and brown hair on his discharge in 1868. He had served in the Mexican War with the 6th Louisiana Regiment, U.S. Volunteers. After the war, he moved to Philadelphia and worked as a daguerreotypist. In 1862, he again enlisted in the Army, this time in the 1st Pennsylvania Volunteers, fighting at Antietam and Gettysburg.

Other hospital stewards were assigned to assist Bell in the photograph gallery. G.O. Brown joined the staff on November 2, 1865. (Lamb, p. 37) In March 1866, Thomas Heavers worked in the gallery at laborious duties which precluded him being a night watchman. (Woodhull to Otis, March 22, 1966) Frank Langley resumed his duties under Bell on March 30, 1866. (Otis to Langley, March 30, 1866)

The first Medical Museum photographs were published in sets of fifty, titled Photographs of Surgical Cases and Specimens or distributed individually as Surgical Photographs. The first volume of 50 photographs, taken by Bell's anonymous predecessor, was printed in an edition of 40 sets which were distributed to Medical Directors in the Union Army (Lamb: History of the US Army Medical Museum, p.35). Completed by January 1869, the next three volumes contained photographs 51-200 mostly taken by Bell. These were made available to interested parties, including the College of Physicians of Philadelphia and the Royal College of Surgeons in Dublin, Ireland (Lamb, p. 52). In 1871 the first five volumes were formally published as Photographs of Surgical Cases and Specimens Taken at the Army Medical Museum, and a partial index to the set, written by Otis, was published around this time. (Lamb, p. 61). The later volumes more frequently showed patients who survived successful operations that a doctor could consider using himself. They also showed problems arising from improper treatment and odd pathological conditions that had no possible treatment. The final three volumes had apparently been published by late 1881 to complete an eight-volume set of 400 photographs. Bell had long since left the project and was replaced by other photographers who were anonymous except for E.J. Ward. Ward did many of the photographs in the last three volumes. Selections of these photographs were also bound as Gunshot Fractures of the Femur by George Otis.

In addition to photographing specimens and wounded veterans who visited the Museum, Bell did other photographic work, little of which has been credited to him. Bell, and later Ward, took dozens of portraits of notable Washington personalities and visitors. Bell photographed General Seth Williams at the Medical Museum. Otis recalled, *"The picture was taken at the Army Medical Museum, and a few prints were prepared, after which the negative was sent to Brady, from whom a number of General Williams' friends have procured copies of the photograph. The negative is still in the keeping of Mr. M.P. Brady, (Brady & Co) 352 Penna Avenue, Washington, D.C."* (Otis to George E. Hastings, June 15, 1866) The negative, taken with a carte de visite camera, actually had four images of Williams on the plate. Broken in half, one section remains in the Medical Museum while the other is in the National Archives credited to Brady. In 1865, Bell and Dr. Reed Bontecou, a proponent of medical photography, roamed Virginia battlefields taking photographs including stereographs of the Wilderness battlefield. One hundred and twenty-one negatives of the Wilderness were taken, although 21 were missing by 1874; they had not been printed since Bell's departure from the Museum in 1868. (Otis to Keen, March 8, 1879; Otis to Bontecou, October 8, 1866; Parker to Otis, February 9, 1874, none are still in the Museum) Bell took stereograph negatives of the Spotsylvania battlefield.

The Museum also printed 1,500 carte-de-visite photographs of three of Lincoln's assassins, John Wilkes Booth, David Herold, and John Surratt, to be mounted on a reward poster in April 1865. (Henry, p. 46-8) Bell copied drawings for General Rucker, perhaps of the ambulance Rucker designed, and was told to *"also print, and send to General Rucker one copy of the large picture of the Hon. Secretary of War,"* implying that the Museum, like the Brady studio, took portraits. (Otis to Bell, July 2, 1866) Bell also took pictures for Quartermaster General Montgomery Meigs, a noted amateur photographer and connoisseur. Otis wrote to Meigs, *"I am instructed by the Surgeon General to send you, with his compliments, the accompanying photograph which was recently taken by Mr. Bell of the Army Medical Museum with a six-and-a-half inch*

*Dallmeyer triplet lens. It is thought to be a good representation of one of the most celebrated monuments of your service as an engineer.*" (Otis to Meigs, September 25, 1866) Meigs, called "the medium's most important official patron during the war," ordered the taking of many photographs for his department during the war. (Davis, p. 162-165). The subject of the photograph is almost certainly the U.S. Capitol building, which Bell and Treasury Department photographer L.W. Walker photographed on September 12. The photograph was published in July 1867's Philadelphia Photographer. (Pitts, p. 26-7) Meigs may have been familiar with Bell's work earlier as Otis had sent him a portfolio of photographs from the Museum in June, 1865 (Otis to Meigs, June 24, 1865) Bell also did small jobs for other government agencies such as photographing crania for the Smithsonian Institution. (Otis to Gill, January 11, 1866)

When his second term of enlistment lapsed on February 22, 1868, Bell returned to Philadelphia and opened the Bell & Silver photographic studio. He continued working for the Museum. Bell continued working for the Army and went with Lieutenant Wheeler's expedition to the West in 1872. He returned to Philadelphia in 1875 and was the photographer for the Pennsylvania Railroad until once again joining an official expedition, this one to Patagonia in 1882 to photograph "The Transit of Venus" across the face of the sun. Bell did early work in designing a dry plate negative, making photography far easier, safer and cheaper. He died in Philadelphia in January, 1910. (Bell collection)

Bell was replaced in the Museum by E.J. Ward.

#### **Item List:**

1. Photograph (8 x 10) of William Bell in study, ca. 1900
2. Photographer Commission, Navy Depart and letter introduction, William Bell to photograph Transit of Venus in Expedition to Patagonia in December 1882. Department of Navy.
3. Original discharge from services as Army Photographer, Hospital Steward, U.S.A. (Honorable) Dated February, 1868. Signed by General Gore, U.S.A. Lambskin.
4. Small Oiled painting of Camp, Transit of Venus Expedition, Patagonia Dated December 16, 1882. Mounted on Board.
5. Original obituaries, newspaper (5 mounted on lined paper) Dated 1-30-1910
6. Original Commission, W. Bell to Hospital Steward dated February, 1865. Signed by Generals Halleck and Townsend, U.S.A.
7. Commission, Department of State, Transit of Venus Expedition, Patagonia, with legation stamps.
8. Stereographs (various subjects) Total 54; Listed below:

#### **[I] Wheeler Survey (1872)**

{i} Set of twenty seven (27) mounted stereographs from the published series, Explorations West of the 100th Meridian. Expedition of 1872, Lieut. Geo. M. Wheeler, Com'dg. Three series represented as listed. \*Stereographs have Handwriting on reverse. All W. Bell, Photography.

A. Utah Series

- No. 3 Mt. Nebo Foot-hills, from the West
- No. 6 Willow Creek Canon, Near Mt. Nebo
- No. 19 Mt. Range; Castle Valley in distance
- No. 31 Kanab Canon

B. Colorado River Series

- No. 38 Headlands, Colorado Basin
- No. 40 Jacob's Pool, Colorado Basin
- No. 41 Jacob's Pool, Colorado Basin
- No. 45 Kanab Wash, Colorado Basin
- No. 53 Kanab Wash, Colorado Basin
- No. 58 Mouth of the Paria
- No. 60 Grand Canon of the Colorado
- No. 64 Grand Canon, Mouth of the Kanab Wash
- No. 71 Grand Canon, Sheaowitz Crossing
- No. 76 Grand Canon, Sheaowitz Crossing
- No. 83 Devils Anvil, Sheaowitz Crossing
- No. 84 Plateau of the Grand Canon
- No. 85 The Bear, Colorado Plateau

C. Geological Series

- No. 95 Cross-bedded Sandstone, Kanab Utah
- No. 102 Colorado River, below the Paria
- No. 103 Colorado River, below the Paria
- No. 105 Grand Canon of the Colorado
- No. 106 Grand Canon of the Colorado
- No. 110 Mouth of the Paria
- No. 111 Perched Rock, Rocker Creek, Arizona
- No. 113 Chocolate Mesa, Rocker Creek, Arizona
- No. 114 Kanab Wash, Colorado Basin
- No. 118 Limestone Walls, Kanab Wash

{ii} Set of Nine (9) Stereographs, unpublished from the Explorations West of the 100th Meridian, Expedition of 1872, Lieut. George M. Wheeler, Com'dg. labeled on reverse by Bell.

1. Upper Wiscohicken (187.)
2. Yellow Stone
3. Colorado Canon
4. Colorado Canon
5. Jones Pool, Refuge of J.L. Lee, Utah
6. Kanab Wash, Colorado Basin, Wheeler Expedition 1872
7. Sevier Range, Utah
8. View of Wall showing the Ruins with part of Canon, Dechilli, N.M.
9. Mountain Lake, Wasatch, Mts. Utah

{iii} Set of three (3) stereographs unlabeled, unpublished from Exploration West of the 100 the Meridian, Expedition of 1872, Lieut. George M. Wheeler, Com'dg. William Bell, Photographer.

## **[II] Transit of the Venus Expedition 1882**

Set of five (5) mounted stereographs from the Transit of Venus Expedition to Santa Cruz, Patagonia in December 1882. Photographed by William Bell.

Labeled on reverse.

1. Botanical Gardens, Rio.
2. Botanical Gardens, Rio.
3. Montevideo
4. Botanical Gardens, Rio, Corcovado Mt.
5. Botanical Gardens, Rio

The following views in the Collection were not photographed by Mr. William Bell.

## **[III] Views of Santa Fe, New Mexico**

Set of seven (7) mounted stereographs, published. Photographer, Henry Brown.

- No. 18 The Oldest House in Santa Fe
- No. 33 Western Part of Santa Fe
- No. 37 The Guadalupe Church
- No. 73 The Ruined Pecos Pueblo, North Plaza
- No. 77 Carved Timbers of Old Pecos Church
- No. 108 The Old San Miguel Church
- No. 275 The Indian Pueblo of Acoma.

## **[IV] Views of Denver, Colorado**

Set of two (2) mounted stereographs, presumably published, on printed cards. Photographer, W. H. Jackson - Labeled on reverse.

1. Arapaho Street, Denver, 1881
2. Colorado, 1881 (Two men hanging-railroad)

## **[V] Views of Rocky Mountains, Geological Survey**

One (1) mounted stereograph from published Set, Views among the Rocky Mountains of Colorado, Department of the Interior, V.S Geological Survey of the territories, Prof. F. V. Hayden, in charge. Photographer, W. H. Jackson. Published by E. & H.T. Anthony & Co., New York

No. 146. Estes Peak. Head of the Big Thompson

9. Dageurreotype depicting a man with ptosis (drooping eyelid) in full leather case. Velvet of case embossed "W Bell, Jenny Lind Gallery, 86 N Second St Phil[adelphia]" circa 1852. Purchase made with the support of Frederic A. Sharf. (Acc. No. 2008.0001)

updated 2/12/2008 by Kathleen Stocker