

PHOTOGRAPHY AS AN AID TO LOCAL HISTORY.

BY GEORGE E. FRANCIS.

LOCAL histories tell us a great deal else that is interesting and valuable, but they do not show *how* a town grew up. They give figures and facts; tell us that in such a year was the first settlement; that twenty years later there were so many farms; and that after twenty-five years more there were so many children at school. We can find in these accounts the names of the early inhabitants; and possibly we can ascertain from them just where were their dwellings, and where were the church and the mill. Facts of all sorts, with authorities quoted, from which we can form a fair opinion of the rate of growth of a given community; of its prosperity in a business way; of the public spirit, the patriotism, the religious zeal, the liberality, the health of its people; but nowhere, as I believe, can we trace the process of evolution of a farm into a hamlet, into a village, into a town. This is indeed impossible to be done by literature: such changes can only be recorded pictorially. No words can adequately bring to our minds the chain of little, gradual alterations in the houses, the roads, fields, woods, water-courses, as would a series of accurate pictures taken at short and regular intervals: something like the family photograph album, where are treasured all the likenesses, it may be, of the youngest son, from his infancy to his manhood.

We know that the stalwart, bearded man was once a baby; all experience and analogy go to prove it. But what words can indicate how his meaningless features took on in turn the look of intelligence, of inquiry, of mischief,

vanity, ambition and all the rest. These dozen photographs tell us the most of the story; with their help we can know the real growth of that man-child more truly than by poring for hours over his written biography, with the pictures left out.

Imagine what a help it would be in the philosophical study of New England history and growth, to be able to refer to a continuous photograph album,—not of the people of a town, but of the town itself. I think that if it were possible to obtain such a complete, historical series of views and pictures of a single town, we should agree that our library must have it, whatever the cost.

Students of history and of social science, in future generations, may treat these subjects differently and more profoundly than those of our day; but it is very unlikely that any contemporary records which we shall leave for their use will be satisfactory to them unless they reach the highest standard of completeness which we are able to set to ourselves. Our ancestors had not foreseen that their ways and doings would be objects of interest and profound study to their great-grandchildren; possibly they would have scorned the idea that time should be found for such trifling pursuits; and, moreover, they had no photography. To us, who see that some leisure is at the command of almost every man, and that historical investigations attract more and more, as years go by, it becomes a serious duty to preserve all such memoranda as we should wish had been saved for us.

It seems to me that if we wish, as individuals, and as a society, to do our full duty to posterity, we must not fail to hand down to them the best possible picturing of our lands, our buildings, and our ways of living.

There can be no question that photography is the best method of securing these graphic records. It is by far the most accurate, the easiest, and the cheapest of all methods known at the present day. Some better way may be found

next year, or next century; but now there is nothing else but photography. This additional advantage it has, that it is more nearly free than any other graphic process, from error caused by the bias or prejudice of the operator. Not absolutely secure, however, because it is quite easy to make a photographic picture of a house, for instance, so as to give an idea of something very much unlike the reality, both in size and proportions. The very best of lenses are not optically perfect, and by skilful use of their distortions an expert could furnish to order a picture to prove or disprove many a disputed point. It is hinted that certain great corporations, who use in court the testimony of photographs, have discovered the advantage of letting the photographer clearly understand, in advance, just what the lens is expected to testify. But it is exceedingly unlikely that any of our number would attempt to distort facts to prove theories, and still less likely that any of us will become sufficiently expert with the camera to succeed in any such attempt.

While I rapidly run over some of the features of our time and environment which seem to specially call for photographic record, I beg you to bear in mind that much of what now is, was not made or changed by our hands or in our time; the land, watercourses, hills, woods and most of the architecture have been for years much as they are now. They remain as records of our predecessors; and they also must be included in the gathering of that which is of to-day.

The first subject to be named, is the farm, the starting point of all. Here we have unlimited scope, the great difficulty being in selection. But in a general way it might be proposed that in towns designated as typical, or interesting, or peculiar, certain of the farms should be selected as specimens, in three classes at least: the best, the worst and the average or medium. Of course there must be some sort of agreement arrived at in advance as to the standard by

which farms should be rated, and the relative value of different points, as size, productiveness, etc.; but this would chiefly concern the comparing of farms in different towns and regions. In any one neighborhood there ought to be little difficulty in picking out samples of the best, the poorest and the average. Again, a selection might be desirable of the oldest, the youngest, and the middle-aged farms; they might afford an opportunity for some interesting comparisons. It might appear that on the whole the oldest farms are now the best farms; or it might be discovered that the asserted decline in farming property away from cities, is most marked where the soil has been longest tilled. So there may be reasons for wishing to be able to compare hill farms with those in lower levels; large farms with small ones; those near large ponds or streams with those distant from water.

Whatever farms are selected should be pictured both in general and in detail. To get a good idea of the whole estate, its levels, its subdivisions, and its relations to roads, streams, hills, woods and neighbors, a distant view is needed; perhaps more than one. These would give only a general idea, because the details in the picture would be on an excessively small scale. To show the buildings, the camera must be brought much nearer, and the rear view is even more essential than that of the front of the house; much more individuality is apt to be shown on the side away from public view. Not only is the dwelling to be portrayed, but every barn, shed and out-building of every description; and, moreover, the inside of every building that is big enough to swing a tripod in, where admittance can be gained. Whenever it can be managed, it would be a great improvement to include some living object in the view; it looks better to see signs of life and occupation, and a man or a horse by the side of the barn makes a good standard by which to measure the size of the building.

Villages might be treated after the same rules; to represent the general and the particular. Where it is possible,

it would be instructive to show the oldest site as the centre, and its relations to subsequent growth, as well as to the natural features of the country.

One leading consideration should have been earlier referred to. In deciding what farms or buildings are to be photographed as material for history or study, a marked preference would naturally be given to such as could have a history written from authentic and attainable records. But even without an accurate knowledge of its past, it might be wise to preserve the present aspect of a building, village or town, for comparison with what the future may make of it.

Remember that all this new accumulation is not so much for present use as for possible or probable future need, precisely as our Librarian saves every little pamphlet or printed page containing facts. All these pictures may seem commonplace enough to us, as the pamphlets and newspapers certainly do; but when we remember how very precious would seem to us such a collection of pictures of almost any date that could be named, even but fifty years ago at the East, or twenty years ago in many a western city, we cannot err in believing that posterity will bless us for all the thoughtfully planned work of this sort that we are likely to attempt.

But fortunately in following out some lines that naturally suggest themselves we may hope that the immediate results would be singularly interesting and instructive; as for instance, a series of pictures showing the successive phases of the school-house in country and city. No doubt some very ancient specimens are still to be found, but little changed in all these years. The variety or the similarity in form, size, material and location, and the very gradual evolution out of the primitive, rude structure, would perhaps furnish opportunity for valuable study. So with regard to the churches, and their surroundings; the graveyards; the pounds and lock-ups, and the taverns. But most particu-

larly important seems to me the prompt collection in a systematic way, of everything that can be pictured relating to the developing of mechanical industries in New England. It is highly probable that it is not too late to make a very complete presentation, with the aid of the camera, of the evolution of the modern factory out of the little, brook-side mill. Many of the little buildings must still be standing which were the cradles of infant industries. There is still to be seen on Grove street in Worcester, the very small structure which gave shelter to those first attempts at wire-making, which have culminated in the great Washburn and Moen Manufacturing Company. Perhaps in Leicester we might find some relics of the shop where the first machines for making card-clothing began their complicated motion. But these remains of the early days of manufacturing are fast passing away. The antique mill architecture, like the old-fashioned machinery, is of no use whatever.

For reasons not altogether agreed upon, there seems to have arisen such intense competition that no profit can be made, in most manufactures, save under the best conditions of economy. And, among these essential conditions, must be reckoned the best planned buildings, as well as the most improved machinery. In Lowell, the older mill buildings have been mostly torn down to make room for better housing for the new machinery. Quite lately I was told that one of the great corporations there found it necessary to put in newer and more rapid looms, in place of the old ones, which were by no means worn out. But these old looms could not be sold for enough to pay for taking apart and putting together; and as the most profitable way of disposing of them, they were tumbled out of the big windows, and the wreckage sold to the junk dealer. And the day comes when the old buildings must be torn down, to make room for something better planned. So the old is rapidly vanishing from the face of the manufacturing world; but enough is left to supply a very complete series for the collection I propose.

With the mill we must hunt up the tenement houses for the operatives. This line of inquiry opens up an immense field, full of valuable material. The housing of the operative and artisan, from the very primitive architecture of the early days of mill building, through many changes, always aiming at greater comfort, down to the very complete and convenient tenement houses built within a year or two, shows a prodigious advance in the chance given to the working class to possess a satisfactory home life. When comparison can be made, by their photographs, of the dwellings of the old days and now,—of those in small country towns, and the newest and best in cities; when to these views are added notes of the rentals paid, accurate measurements of the rooms, and full accounts of the plumbing and other conveniences, then the student of some phases of social science will find at his hand an enormous addition to the useful material now available.

I shall not attempt to pursue farther this portion of what I have to say; but very much more might be said concerning these and other subjects for profitable work. The most extensive, perhaps, may be alluded to in passing:—the growth of a city.

As you all know, the art of photography has made enormous strides within the last few years, advancing in quality somewhat,—in quantity, enormously. The introduction of the dry plate was the great factor which revolutionized the whole practice, and made it easy, cleanly and as little laborious as any pastime. To-day there are amateurs by the hundred able to make a useful picture; in ten years more, it is probable that there will be ten times as many. And as is natural, these amateurs are rapidly organizing and forming Camera Clubs and the like in every city, and many of the towns. These societies have been occupied in work which was interesting and profitable to their members; it is time now to ask them to do some good work for historical students, and for posterity.

It is my belief, not hastily formed, that if this Society should think it wise to enter upon the task of collecting photographic records and should present a carefully considered plan for such work to the various associations of amateur photographers, the response would be prompt, hearty and genuine.

As an illustration of the sort of associated work which is already undertaken by these societies I will read an appeal published since this paper was written :—

“The Boston Camera Club has decided to take the initiative in a scheme for interchanging among the different amateur photographers, illustrated descriptions of their respective cities. The plan is to make negatives and lantern slides of from seventy-five to one hundred leading objects of interest in and about its city; a text will be prepared of ten thousand to twelve thousand words; a print from the negative will be mounted on each page of manuscript, with its description, so that the whole will form an illustrated book (type-written).

The manuscript will be accompanied by a set of lantern slides, one from each negative, so that any club or society desiring to give a public entertainment to its friends, can select some one to read the descriptive text aloud, and the views be shown by the aid of a stereopticon.

For the benefit of any amateurs examining the prints or slides, an invoice will accompany the whole, giving all technical information as to processes employed. Every effort will be made to have each print and slide of high merit.”

If this Society desires to set in motion an army of volunteers who are most of them really anxious to find some useful work for their lenses, it has only to plan the work, invite the co-operation of photographers, and presently care for the resulting harvest of contributions. To decide upon a plan of work may prove no easy task; it should be done thoroughly, by wise heads, after abundant deliberation. A great many points will have to be considered and decided, so that any appeal made by us to the photographic public

may be full and explicit. We must state exactly what objects we desire to have photographed, what points are to be brought out, what sizes and kinds of prints or negatives we prefer, what data should accompany them, etc., etc. It is hardly practicable to prepare our plans in time to have much work done for us during the coming summer, but the work of preparation can be most thoroughly done before the opening of 1889.

If what I have already said has not shown the value, nay, the necessity of promptly establishing a new department of our library, I can only regret that I have not succeeded in fairly presenting the question. It is impossible that the immense worth and use of systematic and comprehensive photographic records of our country and our time can much longer fail to be recognized. It means no change of policy, simply the adoption of a new method in addition to our former ones; it is only to attempt to bring together pictorial records with the same thoroughness that marks our storing of books and manuscripts.

Let me in closing refer to the very recent and very successful attempt of the astronomers to extend and improve their observatory work by making the heavenly bodies imprint their own photographic images. Our success may well be as sudden and as complete as theirs. It is but a year or two since it was demonstrated that even a small telescope fitted to a camera will produce a far better representation of sun, moon, nebula or star group than human hand can draw; and now the whole heavens are being pictured in the most elaborate way by enthusiasts all over the globe, all working upon a system which has been adopted after careful deliberation.

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