Double Exposure: Baldwin Coolidge and William Sumner Appleton

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There is no longer, as there was in earlier days, a Baldwin Coolidge Room in the library of the Society for the Preservation of New England Antiquities. Nor does the photographer's benignly elegant portrait look down from its walls, breathing life into the surrounding memorabilia of his Civil War service—Coolidge's last ration of tobacco, a final piece of hardtack, his white belt and gloves, and the bone napkin ring made at Fort Delaware for Lucy Ann Plumer, who later became his wife. The absence of these icons in no way diminishes the lasting significance which Baldwin Coolidge has had for the development of the society's photographic collections, however, nor does it minimize his achievements as an outstanding documentary photographer of New England life.

Over a hundred years have passed since he first set up shop as a photographer on Tremont St., Boston in 1878, and over sixty since he donated a remarkable series of more than 2,000 glass plate negatives to the society in 1918, doubling the size of its photographic holdings within a single year and setting the course for subsequent additions. These now make its collections of photographic prints and negatives among the nation's largest, and probably the most specialized with respect to regional architectural views. If Coolidge's work set a high standard for quality, William Sumner Appleton, the society's founder and long its corresponding secretary, deserves equal credit for pioneering the use of photography as a documentary source, and for meticulously pursuing every lead that would maximize its information value. Led by a sure instinct, abetted by a self-acknowledged "omnivorous appetite for anything and everything relating to New England pictures,"[1] Appleton saw the alternative to Coolidge's gift to be the sale of the negatives "for old glass," for which the photographer might have received a few cents apiece:

> This happens every year to thousands of negatives which would be in the best interests of New England to preserve. The problem of securing the best of these must be a perennial one for such a society as ours. To preserve the likeness of an object is often the best way to preserve the knowledge of it, and may be the only way in which it can be preserved at all . . . . But photography has never yet been classed a lucrative business, and accordingly the greater part of photographers are by no means in a position to give away their negatives during their lifetimes or to bequeath them on their death. There must be many, however who . . . are inclined to do so [and] it is to be hoped that Mr. Coolidge's generous conduct will rouse others to emulate the example he has set. He has built for himself . . . an enduring monument and for posterity a goodly heritage."[2]

Not content with rhetoric—even his own—Appleton characteristically began to track down every possible lead that would insure the documentary authenticity of the Coolidge collection. Thus began a warm, and often wryly amusing, correspondence between the ailing and eventually invalided photographer, who after a lifetime in New England had resettled in Pasadena, California, and the far younger Appleton, who since the time he was a boy had ad-

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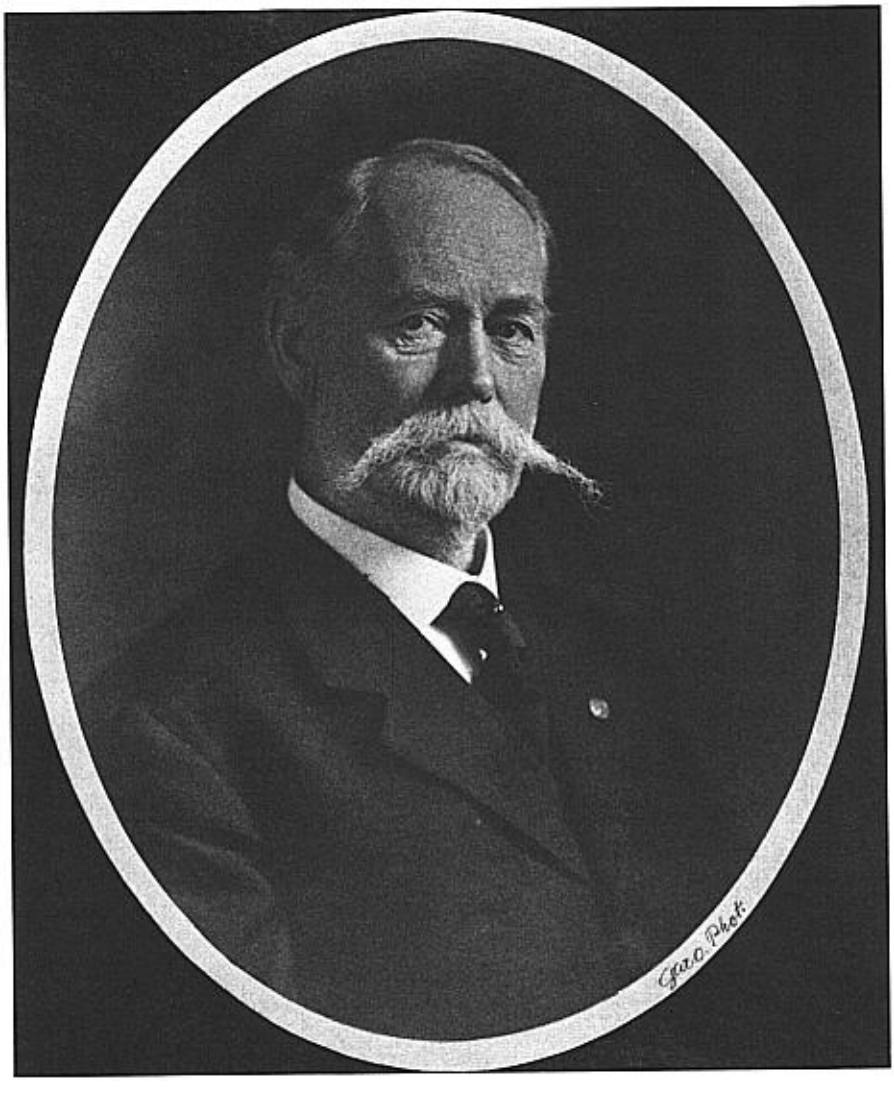


BALDWIN COOLIDGE. This picture was taken by John Garo, whom Coolidge considered the foremost portrait photographer of his day; the time is before Coolidge's move to California in 1917. (SPNEA archives.)

mired Coolidge and his work. At stake was the correct identification of 1,546 eight-by-ten, 500 five-by-eight, and four fourteen-by-seventeen glass plate negatives (approximately one tenth of the 20,000 negatives Coolidge had made during his career), depicting scores of streets and buildings throughout Boston and its surrounding towns. Included among the photographer's subjects were scenes in Oak Bluffs, Nantucket, and Woods Hole, as well as pastoral and marine views taken in Windham, N.H. and Biddeford Pool, Maine, besides hundreds of studies made from portraiture in the Museum of Fine Arts, where he had been a staff photographer for thirty years.

Other than Coolidge's failing memory, and the information provided by his long-time assistant, Marie Howe, the records of his business were few, and those which were accessible were in a chaotic state. "Mr. Coolidge," according to Mrs. Howe, who knew him from twenty years' experience, "personally was very careless in small details, and as, until I went there, he had many changes in help, I found many negatives packed away in cardboard boxes that had never received a number."[3] Or, if they had been numbered, Coolidge steadfastly refused to allow them to be classified by subject, preferring a questionable system of listing them serially. This caused no end of difficulties in the functioning of his business, "on [whose] details his ideas were very vague,"[4] and hampered Appleton's efforts to produce a reliably dated subject catalogue of his work. The Rosetta Stone for deciphering his numbering system was a much-worn record book, which peregrinated periodically from Mrs. Howe to Appleton to Coolidge, and has now been lost sight of. Appleton's persistent efforts to enlist Mrs. Howe's aid in decoding Coolidge's system were frustrated by her new employer, the proprietor of Babbidge's Busy Candy Store in Melrose, Massachusetts, who misanthropically "frowned on any conversation, even with customers and [presumably would regard] a telephone call as an unpardonable sin."[5] Despite these obstacles, Appleton eventually succeeded in identifying the majority of Coolidge's glass plates, though their precise dating seems to remain unconfirmed.

With the catalogue nearly complete, there began several years of equally persistent negotiations to insure that the negatives would be printed and stored in a manner consistent with Coolidge's original artistic and technical standards. With his customary zeal, Appleton succeeded in raising almost $7,000 for this purpose by 1920, the result of an enthusiastic appeal to the society's membership, some of whom "seemed to have struck oil and are helping accordingly." Even with this amount, "this won't give us the collection mounted, but . . . is the first step," he predicted.[6] Luckily the buck stopped here, in spite of Appleton's confident predictions, saving the prints from what would almost certainly have been the damaging effects of acid mounting papers and chemically unstable adhesives then in use.

Coolidge was understandably concerned about the quality of processing, though "truly delighted" with the success of Appleton's appeal. "Now a new fear haunts me," he noted. "What kind of workman is to do the printing? Again, how will he mount them? I sincerely hope not with common aqueous paste, so that the mounted prints will curl up. IF ONLY I WERE HOME," he emphasized, "the mounting would be done IN A PERFECT WAY," adding anxiously, "Do you blame me?"[7]

Responsibility for making the finished prints was in the hands of Samuel Wood of Cornhill, who made a calculated effort to duplicate the mellow brown tones and matte finish typical of the "Aristo Commercial" printing-out papers which Coolidge had generally employed, even though the newer developing papers were superior "in giving black and white tones . . . and better results in detail and contrast." Developing papers also made sunlight unnecessary for obtaining a printed image, making them understandably popular among "the majority of photographers because it makes them independent of the weather." However, Coolidge "disliked" them, wrote Mrs. Howe, because they lacked the "permanency" of Aristo papers and required unusual care in handling to avoid staining. Unlike many professionals, who hired technicians to do their processing, Coolidge apparently did his own work, except for occasional orders requesting the use of developing papers which were sent to a woman identified as Miss Holt to be printed.[8]

The photographer's high regard for "permanency" in technical matters finds a visual equivalent in Coolidge's apparent preference for such photographic subjects as buildings and landscapes, whose substantial forms expressed his devotion to "New England Antiquity" and his pride in having shared its long heritage. Coolidge traced his descent from the Mayflower's Elder Brewster; his great-great-grandfather was Loammi Baldwin, whose 1661 mansion adjoined the Coolidge Farm (ca. 1750) in Woburn. Born there to Benjamin and Mary (Manning) Coolidge, in July, 1845, he lived at the farm for many years until 1917, when he moved to "the loneliness and homesickness of this sunshiny and flowery land of murders, divorces and burglars" that was California.[9]

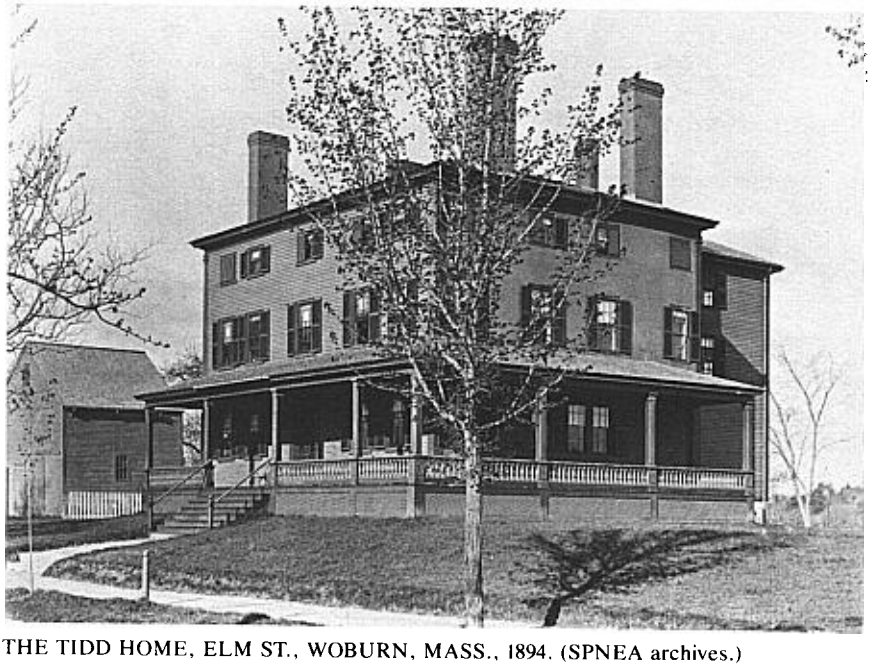
Like his ancestor Colonel Loammi Baldwin, engineer-designer of the Middlesex Canal which linked Lowell to Boston, Coolidge practiced engineering before turning to art and photography, serving as the first city engineer of Lawrence, Massachusetts until the opening of his studio in 1878. Possibly his engineering background influenced his preference for architectural subjects, as well as his photographic style, which focused on the rich minutae of structural and decorative details to the near exclusion of romantic or impressionistic effects.

In Coolidge's handling of landscape and occasional human subjects, the same "straight" and primarily documentary emphasis prevails, though with occasional exceptions, such as his studies of Windham, New Hampshire whose subdued sentimentality tells a good deal about his evident feeling for a fast-vanishing rural way of life. There is about much of his work something oddly surreal, not uncommon to nineteenth-century photography generally, in which the subjects seem frozen and disconnected from time, their very ordinariness made extraordinary by being captured with an unsparingly sharp focus and steady lens, without the softening effects of studio props and lighting. While this makes them eminently readable as factual documents, as subjective documents which reveal Coolidge's emotional response to his subjects they are puzzling and curiously unrevealing. This opaqueness may be partially due to the fact that much of his work was commissioned, rather than inspired by personal choice, working as he did for "many noted organizations and individuals," such as the Museum of Fine Arts, several of the Boston Hospitals and the Boston Public Library, "while on his books were the names of eminent physicians, surgeons, architects, painters, sculptors and members of Boston's oldest families."[10]

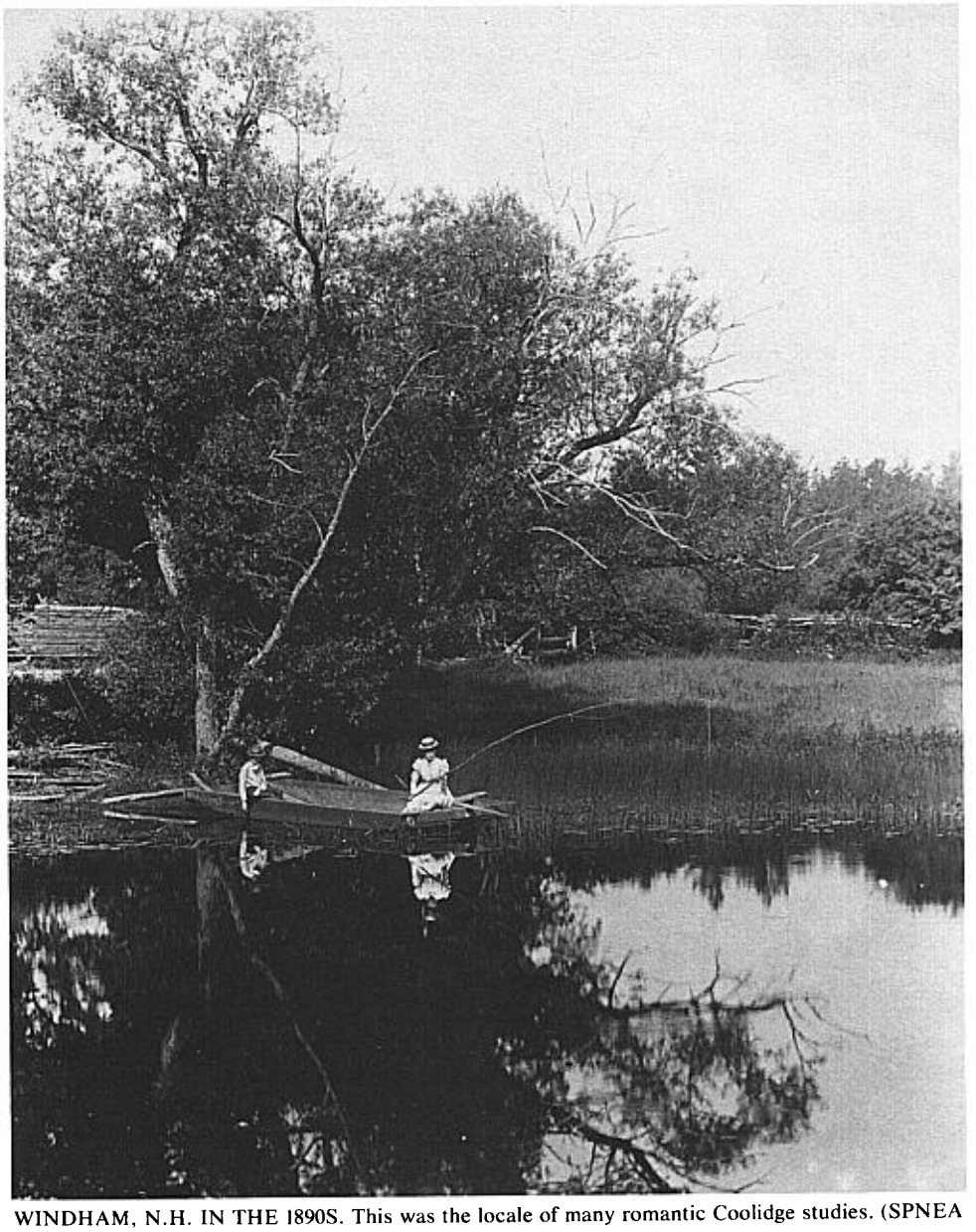
As an artist-photographer, rather than a commercial photographer, Coolidge can be most truly glimpsed from his studies of Cape Cod, where he maintained a summer home and studio at Cottage City, as well as the work resulting from his excursions to Maine, New Hampshire, and even the Boston waterfront, the mood of which, to these eyes at least, is more delicate, more sensitive to atmosphere and emotional possibilities than the general run of his photographs, though resembling them in a striking clarity of detail.

"The right person" to make known the "very interesting story of his life" has yet to be found,[11] nor are its full dimensions yet known. At Coolidge's death in 1928, Appleton appealed to the taciturn Mrs. Howe for just such an account, which she summarily declined to write, stating merely that "There are many notable names on his family tree with great achievements to their credit; while he, himself, had been successful in two other occupations before taking up photography. I am not the one to write such an article, even if you wished so full a history."[12] Because of her reluctance to serve as his biographer, a few details about Coolidge's life may be worth mentioning here, on which the "right person" may eventually build a more solid edifice. Some, like his ties to Woburn, have been mentioned in passing. Besides these, he

RESIDENTS OF THE TIDD HOME, WOBURN, MASS., 1894. The home is still in existence. (SPNEA archives.)



THE TIDD HOME, ELM ST., WOBURN, MASS., 1894. (SPNEA archives.)



WINDHAM, N.H. IN THE 1890S. This was the locale of many romantic Coolidge studies. (SPNEA archives.)

GAY HEAD LIGHTHOUSE, 1887. (SPNEA archives.)

DENTAL CLINIC, TUFTS UNIVERSITY DENTAL SCHOOL, HUNTINGTON AVE., 1909. The source of one of Coolidge's many institutional commissions, the school has since moved to Washington St. (SPNEA archives.)

THE AMES BUILDING, MAY 4, 1891. The Old State House is at the left in this street scene, one of a series of urban studies Coolidge made in the vicinity of his studio at 410A Boylston St. (SPNEA archives.)

had substantial ties to Lawrence, where he married Lucy Ann Plumer in February, 1866, shortly after his discharge from Company K of the Sixth Massachusetts Regiment of the Light Artillery, of which he was a life member.[13]

After moving to Boston in 1878 to set up the photography shop at 147 Tremont Street, he lived in various rooms until finally returning to the family homestead in Woburn in 1888, presumably with his wife, and their only child, Marie, later Mrs. Joseph Henry. Of some interest is the fact that from 1879-1883 Coolidge listed himself in the Boston City Directory as an artist, rather than a photographer, and this may be the other of his two successful careers to which Mrs. Howe alluded. (He evidently taught clay modelling, counting among his pupils "his old physician, Dr. Samuel Robinson" who later left Boston for Santa Barbara, California, where he and Coolidge would meet in 1920.)[14] After 1883 he is regularly listed as a photographer, operating from various addresses on Tremont Street. Four years after his wife's death in 1904, he moved to his final studio at 410A Boylston Street, where he worked and lived until failing health and mounting expenses made the move to his daughter's home in Pasadena essential. While in California, he seems to have returned to sketching and watercolors, rather than photography, though he made generous gifts of over a thousand photographs to public libraries in Pasadena, Santa Barbara, and Los Angeles, possibly with other papers of biographical interest. At his death he was cremated, and his ashes returned for burial in Woburn.

Coolidge's ties to William Sumner Appleton, and through him to the society which Appleton founded (and which elected him a patron), were long-standing, though they provide relatively few clues to the still untold story of his life. Appleton recalled coming to the Coolidge studio to buy prints, both "as a boy and later as a young man,"[15] and on at least one occasion, Coolidge was commissioned to photograph an Appleton family portrait. Possibly these youthful contacts stimulated the development of Appleton's "omnivorous appetite" for New England photography; certainly they provided an outstanding standard for his own not inconsiderable efforts as an architectural photographer, as well as a model for his photographic collecting.

From his early encounters Appleton also retained a curious memory of a "wonderful collection of strands of hair," which hung among the many wall decorations in Coolidge's shop on Boylston Street. After Coolidge's departure for California, Appleton regretfully noted that the hairs had been "placed too far away to see,"[16] the change somehow depriving him of a significant and strangely powerful image of their personal relationship. Eleven years later, Appleton still remembered the display vividly enough to write about its whereabouts to Coolidge's daughter, in a letter dated two days before Coolidge's death, almost as if the recollection anticipated the breaking strands of their long friendship. "Mr. Coolidge," he wrote, "had, I remember, a number of interesting things in his possession, but I imagine that most of them have been given away by this time in the same way as his collection of negatives and photographs was broken up. I remember, however, that he had an extremely interesting collection of strands of hair, arranged in gradations of color and that this collection filled many especially made cardboard boxes. It seems to me that this collection which Mr. Coolidge made in the course of his photographic work would be an interesting addition to the collection we shall eventually have related to the general subject of hair and allied subjects."[17] Whether their "disposition" was finally settled in Appleton's favor is not certain, nor does it really matter. Far more substantial strands remained to connect Coolidge to Appleton, through the society which they both nourished, and which perpetuates their

mutually far-sighted recognition of the role of photography in preserving the history of New England in the form of its present photographic collections, whose strong foundation was their joint achievement.

Notes

1. William Sumner Appleton to Baldwin Coolidge, 8 March 1918. This and subsequent reference material from the SPNEA microfilm files, unless otherwise noted.

2. William Sumner Appleton, incomplete manuscript account of Baldwin Coolidge's life and work.

3. Marie Howe to William Sumner Appleton, 20 November 1918.

4. Ibid.

5. Marie Howe to William Sumner Appleton, 3 December 1918.

6. William Sumner Appleton to Baldwin Coolidge, 3 February 1920.

7. Baldwin Coolidge to William Sumner Appleton [Pasadena], 11 February 1920.

8. Marie Howe to William Sumner Appleton, 3 December 1918. For details on the professional debate surrounding the use of printing-out versus developing-out papers, see William Welling, *Photography in America; The Formative Years 1839-1900* (New York: Thomas Crowell, 1978).

9. Baldwin Coolidge to William Sumner Appleton, 7 May 1920.

10. Marie Howe to William Sumner Appleton, 9 January 1929.

11. Ibid.

12. Ibid.

13. Obituary on file with the Woburn Public Library, Woburn, Mass.

14. Baldwin Coolidge to William Sumner Appleton, 11 May 1920.

15. William Sumner Appleton to Ralph T. Howe [son of Marie Howe], 4 February 1941.

16. William Sumner Appleton to Baldwin Coolidge, 8 March 1918.

17. William Sumner Appleton to Mrs. J.H. Henry, 11 December 1928.