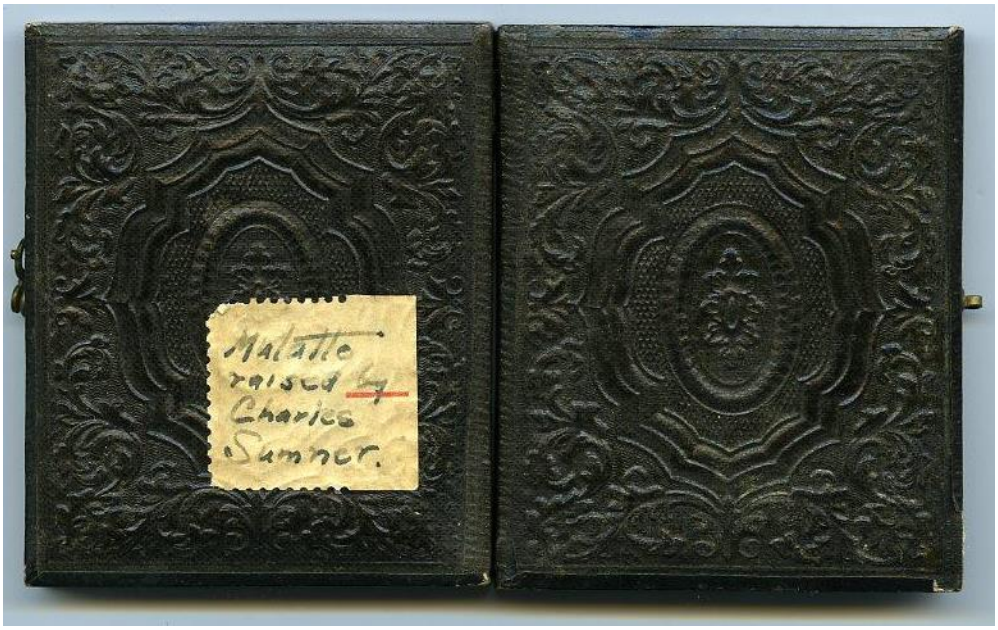
A White Slave Girl: "Mulatto Raised by Charles Sumner"

Joan Gage



The Story Behind the Photo

When I began collecting antique photographs about twenty years ago, like most collectors I started out buying everything I could find. Then, as I gained expertise, I began to specialize, gravitating toward early images of children, twins (which I wrote about in a April 29, 2010, blog post, "Diane Arbus and Spooky Twins"), and photographs that reflected attitudes toward race and slavery. (For example, I wrote about the image of "The Scarred Back of a Slave Named Gordon" in a post dated October 2, 2009. My information about that image was also printed in the *New York Times.*

While collecting slave photographs, I became fascinated with the "white slave children of Louisiana," as I call the series of CDV (carte-de-visite) photos of freed children from New Orleans who appear to be completely white. These small, cardboard-mounted photos were sold in great quantities by abolitionists during the Civil War. On the back of each photo was printed: "*The nett [sic] proceeds from the sale of these Photographs will be devoted to the education of colored people in the Department of the Gulf, now under the command of Maj. Gen. Banks*."

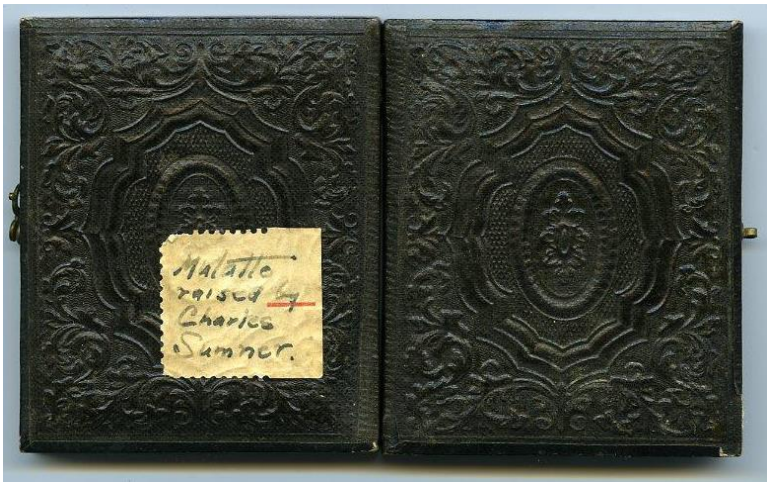
I had so many questions about these CDVs. First, why did the abolitionists go down to the schools of freed slaves in New Orleans and pull out only those who appeared to be white, then send the children up to New York and Philadelphia to be dressed in fine clothes and posed in sentimental scenes for photos to sell?

Why did black-appearing children not get chosen for this? And how did these former slave children feel about being taken away from their mothers, paraded up north for the media like zoo animals, and then sent back down south? (They even got kicked out of their hotel in Philadelphia when the owner discovered they weren't "really" white.)

Through research, I've learned the answers to some of these questions about the Louisiana CDVs, but that story is for another day when I'll have enough space to analyze this early attempt to raise funds and arouse antislavery sentiment through the newfangled "scientific" process of photography.

Today I'm only focusing on one photograph that was made about nine years before the Civil War CDVs. It's a ninth-plate daguerreotype of a little girl in a plaid dress that I bought on eBay in 2000.

The seller, from Tennessee, included with this cased image information on where it was found. "This…photograph was purchased at Headley's Auction in Winchester, VA, July 1997. It came…out of the "Ashgrove" estate in Vienna, VA. The house originated as a hunting lodge in 1740…and was sold to James Sherman in 1850, who would never own or hire a slave. He died in 1865 and passed it to his son, Capt. Franklin Sherman, Tenth Mich. Cavalry. Capt. Sherman's wife Caroline (Alvord, a native of Mass.) came to the country in 1865 to teach the children of the newly freed slaves."



I put this image aside in 2000 along with the papers the buyer had sent me about the Ashford plantation, and forgot all about them.

Then, last November, I had a visit from Greg Fried, a professor at Suffolk University in Boston, who wanted to scan some of my photographs for a new website he was preparing called "Mirror of Race." I showed him the Louisiana CDVs and the daguerreotype of the "Sumner-raised" child. After he left, I went on Google and typed in the words "Charles Sumner" and "slave." I discovered a short article from the New York Times dated March 9, 1855, which read:

A WHITE SLAVE FROM VIRGINIA. We received a visit yesterday from an interesting little girl, — who, less than a month since, was a slave belonging to Judge NEAL, of Alexandria, Va. Our readers will remember that we lately published a letter, addressed by Hon. CHARLES SUMNER, to some friends in Boston, accompanying a daguerreotype which that gentleman had forwarded to his friends in this city, and which he described as the portrait of a real "Ida May," — a young female slave, so white as to defy the acutest judge to detect in her features, complexion, hair, or general appearance, the slightest trace of Negro blood. It was this child that visited our office, accompanied by CHARLES H. BRAINARD, in whose care she was placed by Mr. SUMNER, for transmission to Boston. Her history is briefly as follows: Her name is MARY MILDRED BOTTS; her father escaped from the estate of Judge NEAL, Alexandria, six years ago and took refuge in Boston. Two years since he purchased his freedom for $600, his wife and three children being still in bondage. The good feeling of his Boston friends induced them to subscribe for the purchase of his family, and three weeks since, through the agency of Hon. CHARLES SUMNER, the purchase was effected, $800 being paid for the family. They created quite a sensation in Washington, and were provided with a passage in the first class cars in their journey to this city, whence they took their way last evening by the Fall River route to Boston. The child was exhibited yesterday to many prominent individuals in the City, and the general sentiment, in which we fully concur, was

one of astonishment that she should ever have been held a slave. She was one of the fairest and most indisputable white children that we have ever seen.

This discovery got my adrenaline going. I googled "Mary Mildred Botts" and learned that the white-appearing slave child who was admired by the *New York Times* was discussed in a 2008 book called Raising Freedom's Child: Black Children and Visions of the Future after Slavery, written by a University of New Orleans professor, Mary Niall Mitchell, who (small world!) was someone I had communicated with six years ago while trying to research the Louisiana CDVs. I immediately ordered the book from Amazon.

When it arrived, I was stunned to find on page 73 a photo of Mary Botts that was the *mirror image* of MY dag. (The one in the book was from the collection of the Massachusetts Historical Society.) Professor Mitchell gave more explanation about why this young girl was photographed and brought north by Charles Sumner.

"By the eve of the Civil War, abolitionists recognized the potential of white-looking children for stirring up antislavery sentiment . . . Although it was the image of a raggedy, motherless Topsy that viewers might have expected to see in a photograph of a slave girl, it was the 'innocent', 'pure,' and 'well-loved' white child who appeared, a child who needed the protection of the northern white public.

"The sponsors of seven-year-old Mary Mildred Botts, a freed child from Virginia, may have been **the first to capitalize on these ideas, as early as 1855**. Her story also marks the beginning of efforts to use photography (in Mary Botts's case, the daguerreotype, as the carte-de-visite format was not yet available) in the service of raising sentiment and support for the abolitionist cause." (Boldfacing mine.)

"In his own characterization of Mary Botts," Mitchell continues, "Sumner set a pattern that other abolitionists would follow. In a letter printed in both the *Boston Telegraph* and the *New York Daily Times*, he compared Mary Botts to a fictional white girl who had been kidnapped and enslaved, the protagonist in Mary Hayden Pike's antislavery novel, *Ida May*: 'She is bright and intelligent—another Ida May. I think her presence among us (in Boston) will be more effective than any speech I can make.'"

This comparison of Mary Botts to the fictional kidnapped white girl worked well for Sumner and the Abolitionists and made the little freed slave quite a local celebrity. Professor Mitchell quotes the diary of a Quaker woman named Hannah Marsh Inman, who saw Mary Botts at a meetinghouse in Worcester, Massachusetts (which happens to be where I live now). On March 1, 1855, Hannah wrote: "Evening all went to the soiree at the Hall. Little Ida May, the white slave was there from Boston." Sumner realized that he was onto a good thing and circulated daguerreotypes of the child to prove her whiteness to those who might

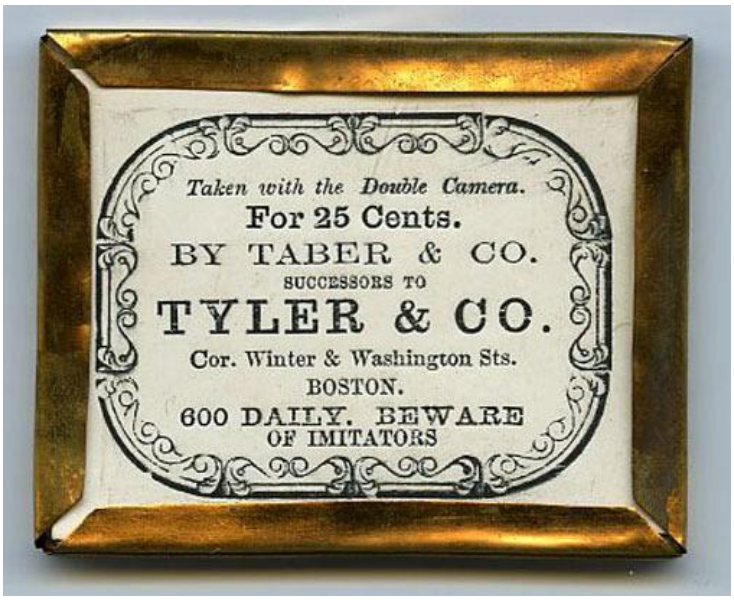
doubt. (Keep in mind, the daguerreotype process was the first one ever made available—by Daguerre in 1839—and the images "written by the sun" on the silvered copper plate were considered undeniable scientific proof of the sitter's appearance.)

Sumner passed a daguerreotype of Mary Botts around the Massachusetts State Legislature "as an illustration of slavery" and sent one to John. A. Andrews, the governor of Massachusetts.

Only a year after parading Mary Botts through New York, Boston, and Worcester and dubbing her "The real Ida May," Charles Sumner was led by his devout abolitionist views to a crippling disaster, when, in 1856, he was so badly beaten on the floor of the Senate by South Carolina Rep. Preston Brooks, who broke a cane over his head, that it would take years of therapy before Sumner could return to the Senate.

As soon as I realized that my dag of Mary Botts was one of the images used by Sumner himself to advance the abolitionist cause, I got into an excited email correspondence with the book's author, Professor Mitchell, and Prof. Greg Fried, who pointed out something I'd forgotten: an advertising card on the back of my image showed that it was "Taken with the Double Camera For 25 Cents by Taber & Co., successors to Tyler & Co. Cor. Winter & Washington Sts. Boston," while the mirror image that belonged to the Massachusetts Historical Society was taken by Julian Vannerson, probably in Richmond, Virginia, and seems sharper than mine, so mine must be a copy dag. (The only way to reproduce a

daguerreotype is to make a new photograph of the original image, because daguerreotypes are not printed from negatives. Each daguerreotype is one of a kind. Taber's price of twenty-five cents sounds affordable but, at the time, the average working man made only about a dollar a day.)



Professor Mitchell is currently working on a book about Mary Botts that will tell more about this former slave's life, including the drama of how Sumner purchased her and spirited her out of Virginia, how he introduced her to the media and society as a living advocate for the abolitionist cause, and how her family settled in the free black community in Boston.

I'm eager to learn the rest of the story but for now it's enough of a thrill just to know that the daguerreotype, taken in 1855, which is part of my collection may represent one of the first efforts EVER to use the modern discovery of photography to touch people's emotions and change their minds. This small image of a seven-year-old girl may be one of the first times photography was used for propaganda (another is the famous Branded Hand portrait of Jonathan Walker, also in the *Mirror of Race* website), but it was certainly not the last.

About the Author

Joan Gage is a former journalist and currently a photographer and artist in Massachusetts. Check out her blog on travel, art, photography, and life after sixty.