Black Civil War Portraiture in Context

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For those who had been or would be separated from their loved ones during the Civil War, photography offered a relatively quick and inexpensive way to remember these individuals as well as to keep them physically close.[2] Yet, in spite of the personal meanings many of these images held at the time that they were made, today both the subjects and makers of a large number of nineteenth-century photographic portraits of Civil War soldiers remain unidentified. There are a variety of reasons for this circumstance, including the terms under which the images were initially made—unsigned photographs were the norm—as well as sold, usually generations later in an estate sale or by an antiques dealer, and then acquired, often by an unrelated collector who has no way of reconnecting the images to their original contexts. For historians, this anonymity is especially challenging, since it makes determining the exact nature of the cultural and historical contexts in which these photographs flourished problematic. This difficulty is especially true of nineteenth-century photographic portraits of black soldiers. Not only are these photographs rare—most Civil War photographs depict African Americans as either civilians attached to the military or as "contraband" and refugees—but the seemingly private meanings of these images are additionally circumscribed by the fact that it was not until the passage of the Emancipation Proclamation on January 1, 1863, that black men could even lawfully enlist in the Union army. What, then, is the relationship of these photographic portraits to ideas of black freedom and equality and, by extension, manhood and citizenship? Did these images in fact function as sites of personal expression and autonomy or might they have equally served to restrict this sovereignty, albeit symbolically? Trying to uncover the kinds of meanings that photographic portraits of black Civil War soldiers had at the time of their making as well as illuminating some of the challenges that such a recovery poses for historians today is the subject of this essay.

An ambrotype in the *Mirror of Race* collection is like many nineteenth-century photographic portraits from the Civil War period in that, with the exception of what the

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[1] Updated on July 5, 2013, to include additional material on Sgt. Andrew Jackson Smith in the final three paragraphs of the essay.

[2] For more information about the kinds of uses of photography during the Civil War period, see Davis, Keith F., "'A Terrible Distinctness': Photography of the Civil War Era," in *Photography in Nineteenth-Century America*, ed. Sandweiss, Martha A. (New York: Abrams, Inc. in conjunction with the Amon Carter Museum, Fort Worth, Texas, 1991), 130–179.

image depicts—a Union infantry man—and when it was taken—between 1863 and 1865—no other information about it exists (Fig. 1).

Figure 1: Union soldier armed with musket, bayonet, and pistol, ambrotype, c. 1863–65. Maker unknown. Collection Greg French, Mirror of Race*.*

Still, careful looking and meticulous research can lead at least to a partial identification. For example, items of clothing, such as insignia on hats and belt buckles, can often be used to identify a regiment, while a distinctive curtain or floor pattern, such as is found in the unidentified *Mirror of Race* ambrotype, can be used to ascertain a photographer's studio.[3] In the archive at the State Library of Massachusetts, for instance, resides a group of photographs collected by Col. Alfred Stedman Hartwell, who was initially commissioned as lieutenant colonel of the Fifty-Fifth Regiment of the Massachusetts Volunteer Infantry. In four photographs from this collection, the subjects—like the Union infantryman in the unidentified *Mirror of Race* ambrotype—are posed next to a similar patterned curtain and stand on analogous decorative floor tiles.[4] Moreover, in one of these photographs, a carte-de-

[3] For a discussion of the identification of Civil War photographs based on these attributes, see the Liljenquist Family Collection of Civil War Photographs in the Library of Congress.
[4] For more about these images, see the Hartwell Collection in the Massachusetts State Library.

visite, the subject is identified in period pen on the verso as Sgt. Andrew Jackson Smith of the Fifty-Fifth Regiment (Fig. 2).

Figure 2: Sergeant Andrew Jackson Smith, carte-de-visite. Maker unknown. Colonel Alfred S. Hartwell Papers (Ms. Coll. 1), Special Collections Department, State Library of Massachusetts.

A second carte-de-visite, whose subject is not wearing a uniform and is identified in period pen on the verso merely as "Joe," is also given a location— "Headquarters, Camp Meigs, Readville, Mass" (Fig. 3). These period inscriptions, while not identifying the subject or maker of the unidentified *Mirror of Race* ambrotype, nonetheless provide pertinent clues to its history.

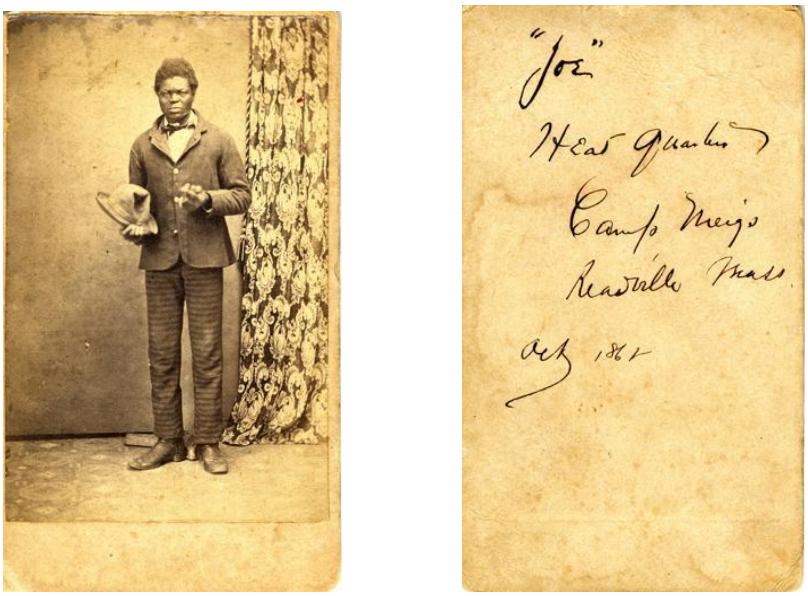

Figure 3: Soldier photograph—Joe, carte-de-visite. Maker unknown. Colonel Alfred S. Hartwell Papers (Ms. Coll. 1), Special Collections Department, State Library of Massachusetts.

In addition to these images housed at the State Library of Massachusetts, a collection of photographs located at the Massachusetts Historical Society also includes a number of cartes-de-visite with the same curtain and floor pattern as found in the unidentified *Mirror of Race* ambrotype. Collected by Capt. Luis F. Emilio, a commander of Company E, from the more well-known Fifty-Fourth Regiment of the Massachusetts Volunteer Infantry, this second group of images is different from the collection of Colonel Hartwell in that its subjects are not exclusively black. In one carte-de-visite, Capt. Orrin E. Smith of the Fifty-Fourth Regiment has also been posed next to the same patterned curtain and he stands on decorative floor tiles similar to the ones shown with other black subjects in both Colonel Hartwell's collection and the *Mirror of Race* ambrotype (Fig. 4).[5]

[5] These cartes-de-visite of the Fifty-Fourth Regiment are also reproduced in Emilio, Luis F., *A Brave Black Regiment: History of the Fifty-Fourth Regiment of Massachusetts Volunteer Infantry, 1863–1865* (Boston: Boston Book Company,1894; reprint, New York: Arno Press, 1969) and at least one of them resides in the Fifty-Fourth Massachusetts Volunteer Infantry Regiment carte-de-visite album in the Massachusetts Historical Society.

Figure 4: Captain Orrin E. Smith, carte-de-visite. Maker unknown. Courtesy of the Massachusetts Historical Society.

From the similarities between these images, several conclusions can be made. First, given that these photographs depict soldiers from both the Fifty-Fourth and Fifty-Fifth Regiments, it is likely that the curtain and floor tiles were props from a photographer's studio set up at Camp Meigs, which was located some ten miles outside Boston and was where both the Fifty-Fourth and the Fifty-Fifth Regiments trained prior to being mustered into service.[6]

Second, given that the same studio props can be found in images made from a variety of photographic processes—cartes-de-visite, tintypes, and at least one ambrotype—it is possible that a single photographer or even multiple photographers may have used the studio, depending on the needs of the client. That leaves the question of why the subject of the

[6] All three of the black units raised by the Commonwealth of Massachusetts received their training at Camp Meigs. They included the Fifty-Fourth Regiment Infantry, the Fifty-Fifth Regiment Infantry, and the Fifth Regiment Cavalry. The Fifty-Fourth Regiment was the sixth black regiment to be authorized by the War Department. The Fifty-Fifth Regiment was formed from the excess of recruits responding to the call for the Fifty-Fourth Regiment. For more information about Camp Meigs, see Emilio, *A Brave Black Regiment*; Stokinger, W. A., Schroeder, A. K., and Swanson, Capt. A. A., *Civil War Camps at Readville* (Boston: Reservations and Historic Sites, 1990); Trudeau, Noah Andre ed., *Voices of the 55th: Letters from the 55th Massachusetts Volunteers, 1861–1865* (Dayton: Morningside, 1996); and *Record of the Service of the Fifty-fifty Regiment of Massachusetts Volunteer Infantry* (Cambridge: Press of John Wilson and Son, 1868; reprint, Freeport: Books for Library Press, 1971).

unidentified *Mirror of Race* ambrotype would have chosen to have his likeness made with a process that was typically more expensive than a tintype and did not have the reproducibility of a carte-de-visite. Trying to answer this question requires looking beyond the object itself to the larger social and historical context in which it was produced and circulated.

Even though military regiments of black American men had been formed prior to the time that this unidentified ambrotype was made, as mentioned already, it was not until the passage of the Emancipation Proclamation on January 1, 1863, that black men could lawfully enlist in the Union army. For many black American men, this opportunity represented a crucial step in what historian David Blight terms "the quest for the irrevocable recognition of manhood and citizenship."[7] In other words, for black American men, military service in the Union army allowed them for the first time to assert not only a sense of self-worth and equality as men but, more importantly, their rights and privileges as US citizens. As Frederick Douglass duly recognized: "Once let the black man get upon his person the brass letter U.S.; let him get an eagle on his button, and a musket on his shoulder, and bullets in his pocket, and there is no power on the earth or under the sun which can deny that he has earned the rights of citizenship in the United States."[8] It would seem then, even without knowledge of the actual identity of the subject or the maker of the *Mirror of Race* ambrotype, that this image fulfilled a sense of freedom and equality for its black subject. Moreover, given that the subject chose to have his likeness reproduced in an ornately framed quarter-plate ambrotype, it would also seem that the ideals of freedom and equality that it represented—at a moment when many black American men legally entered the war for the first time—were not only personal but precious.

Yet, as the war progressed and the need to affirm the role of black men within the body politic, at least in the North, grew as well, these private ideals took on a much more public persona. In *Harper's Weekly*, for instance, seven months after the Emancipation Proclamation took effect, the editors published wood engravings based on two now widely circulated cartes-de-visite of Pvt. Hubbard Pryor before and after having enlisted with the Forty-Fourth US Colored Troops (Figs. 5 and 6).[9]

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[7] Blight, David, *Frederick Douglass's Civil War: Keeping Faith in Jubilee* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1989), 14. For more information about the relationship between manhood, citizenship, and black Union soldiers, see Cullen, Jim, "'I's a Man Now': Gender and African American Men," in *Divided Houses: Gender and the Civil War*, ed. Clinton, Catherine, and Silber, Nina (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), 76–91; and Samito, Christian G., *Becoming American under Fire: Irish Americans, African Americans, and the Politics of Citizenship During the Civil War Era* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2009).

[8] Douglass, Frederick, "Negroes and the National War Effort," an address delivered in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, July 6, 1863, in John W. Blassingame, ed., *The Frederick Douglass Papers Series 1: Speeches, Debates, and Interviews, vol. 3* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1979), 596.

[9] "A Typical Negro," *Harper's Weekly*, July 4, 1864, 429.

Figures 5 and 6: Hubbard Pryor, before and after enlistment in the Forty-Fourth US Colored Troops, April 7, 1864. (The date October 10, 1864, in the National Archives photograph record indicates the submission date of the military report on black recruitment with which the photographs were included.) Photograph by A. S. Morse, photographer, Department of the Cumberland. Courtesy of the National Archives, Records of the Adjutant General's Office, ca. 1775–ca. 1928, ARC Identifier #849127 and #849136.

Taken by Union photographer A. S. Morse on April 7, 1864, at the request of commanding officer Col. Reuben D. Mussey, the first image depicts Pryor seated meekly, wearing the ragged clothing of a fugitive, while in the second, he stands proudly, wearing a clean uniform and holding a musket.[10] Included in a report by Mussey about the successes of black recruitment in Tennessee that was sent to Maj. Charles W. Foster, chief of the Bureau of the United States Colored Troops, these cartes-de-visite, both within this report and as reproduced on the pages of *Harper's Weekly*, were intended to visually substantiate for white northerners how the act of becoming soldiers transformed blacks into men and citizens. But, at the same time these photographs were used to recognize black equality and

[10] The depiction of enslaved African American men "standing up" as metaphors for emancipation was a common, though frequently fraught, visual trope in the nineteenth century. See, for instance, Savage, Kirk, *Standing Soldiers, Kneeling Slaves: Race, War, and Monument in Nineteenth-Century America* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997).

manhood, they also served a larger ideological function—namely, to limit the actual freedom represented through them. That is because, even though Pryor is depicted as an enlisted soldier, his manhood and citizenship, instead of being represented on their own terms, are necessarily tethered to his previous status as a fugitive slave and a contraband.[11] In other words, his manliness and place within the body politic is bounded by the submissive terms of his slavery past, which serves to differentiate him and thus deny him full access to American freedom and equality.[12] I propose that the seemingly private meaning and autonomy that I previously aligned with the *Mirror of Race* ambrotype is equally circumscribed.

To help support this proposition, I turn now to another photograph in the *Mirror of Race* collection: a carte-de-visite of James Monroe Trotter (Fig. 7).

[11] In making this argument, I do not mean to downplay the ways in which ideas of manhood and citizenship were equally attached to the male fugitive slave in the antebellum period. See, for example, Douglass,Frederick, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave*, ed. Blight, David W. (1845; Boston: St. Martin's Press, 1993). However, despite Douglass's attempt to link manhood and citizenship to the fugitive slave, he also advocated black enlistment in the Union army as an equally compelling path toward securing the rights of citizenship. See Blight, David W., "Douglass and the Meaning of the Black Soldier," in *Frederick Douglass' Civil War*, 148–174.

[12] Hubbard Pryor's experience fighting for the Union army is a case in point. During a battle in Dalton, Georgia, the Forty-Fourth Infantry was forced to surrender to Confederate troops, who, while freeing the white officers, robbed the black soldiers of their clothes and shoes and put them to work rebuilding southern railroads and other facilities. Out of fear for his life, Pryor kept his Union service a secret until 1890, when he inquired whether at the war's end he had been listed as a deserter or a prisoner. Listed as a prisoner, and thus eligible for a pension, he died before he could apply. For more information about Pryor and the photographs taken of him, see Davis Jr., Robert Scott, "A Soldier's Story: The Records of Hubbard Pryor, Forty-Fourth United States Colored Troops," *Prologue* (Quarterly of the National Archives and Records Administration), 31:4 (Winter 1999), 267–272; and Wallace, Maurice, "'How a Man Was Made a Slave': Contraband, Chiasmus, and the Failure of Visual Abolitionism," *English Language Notes 44*, no. 2 (Fall/Winter 2006), 175–180.

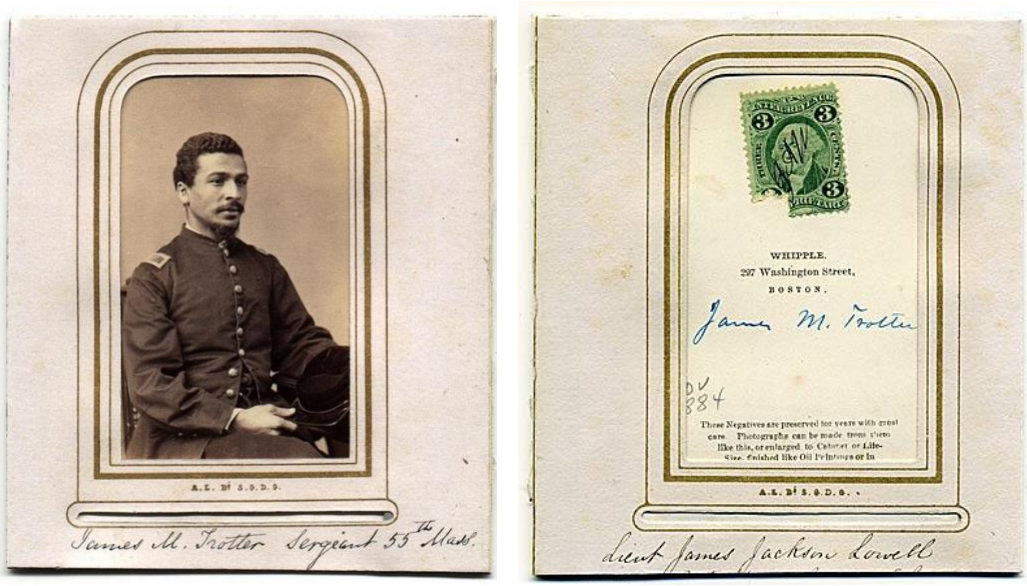

Figure 7: John A. Whipple, James M. Trotter, carte-de-visite, c. 1864. Collection Greg French, Mirror of Race.

Unlike the unidentified ambrotype, more factual information about this image is known. For instance, besides the name of its black subject—James M. Trotter—which is inscribed in period pen on both the album page and the reverse of the image, two stamps appear on the reverse of the image, which serve to identify the photographer—John A. Whipple—and also to date the image to the period of August 1864 to August 1866. From this information, it is possible to piece together with greater accuracy the conditions under which Trotter came to have his likeness made and the terms under which it was circulated as a carte-de-visite.

James Trotter was born in 1842, in Grand Gulf, Mississippi, to a slave named Letitia and her owner, Richard S. Trotter.[13] Around 1854, Richard Trotter sent Letitia and her children to the free city of Cincinnati, Ohio, where, after attending several schools in the area, the

[13] There is some discrepancy in the exact date of Trotter's birth. In *Record of the Service of the Fifty-fifty Regiment of Massachusetts Volunteer Infantry* (Cambridge: Press of John Wilson and Son, 1868; reprint, Freeport: Books for Library Press, 1971), his birth is listed as February 7, 1842. Robert Stevenson, on the other hand, lists Trotter's birth date as November 8, 1842. He bases this information on records in the National Archives. See Stevenson, Robert, "America's First Black Music Historian," *Journal of the American Musicological Society* 26, no. 3 (1973), 383–404. Trotter died of tuberculosis on February 26, 1892, in Hyde Park, Massachusetts, after several important accomplishments, including, in 1878, a tribute to African American musical talent entitled *Music and Some Highly Musical People* (Boston: Lee and Shepard, 1880), as well as the appointment by Pres. Grover Cleveland in 1887 as US recorder of deeds, a position formerly held by Frederick Douglass. For more biographical information about Trotter, see "Trotter, James Monroe," Palmer, Colin A., ed., *Encyclopedia of African American Culture and History: The Black Experience in America, 2nd ed.* (Detroit: Macmillan Reference USA, 2006), 2205–2206.

young James Trotter worked as a hotel and a riverboat cabin bellboy as well as a teacher. In 1863, after being recruited by John Mercer Langston, Trotter moved to Massachusetts, where he enlisted on June 11, 1863. Within less than two weeks, he was mustered into Company K of the Fifty-Fifth Regiment of the Massachusetts Volunteer Infantry as a first sergeant. On November 19, 1863, he was promoted to sergeant major and, on April 10, 1864, he was promoted to the rank of second lieutenant, which was quite unusual for African Americans serving in the Union army. In the carte-de-visite in the *Mirror of Race* collection, Trotter wears the uniform and officer's shoulder straps of a second lieutenant, which makes the rarity of this image even greater and most likely contributed to its initial collection and placement in the personal album of the French nobleman the Count Agénor de Gasparin. In 1865, the count compiled a personal album with over 201 images of important Civil War figures, which included, in addition to that of Trotter, depictions of such individuals as Abraham Lincoln, Andrew Johnson, Ulysses S. Grant, George A. Custer, and Frederick Douglass, among others.[14] The presence of Trotter's carte-de-visite in this album suggests that as a second lieutenant in the Fifty-Fifth Regiment of the Massachusetts Volunteer Infantry, Trotter had acquired a certain celebrity status, at least among Civil War soldiers. This fame is further substantiated by the inscription in period pen of Trotter's name on both the verso of the album page and on the recto of the carte-de-visite, which serves to attest not only to his likeness but, more importantly, to his distinction and the rarity of his having served as a black commissioned officer in the Union army.[15]

From this information, it would seem then that like the unidentified ambrotype in the *Mirror of Race* collection, this carte-de-visite of James Trotter also functioned as a site of personal expression and autonomy for its black subject. The authority of this reading, however, becomes complicated once one begins to situate this photograph within the larger social and historical context in which it was produced and circulated. As already noted, with the passage of the Emancipation Proclamation, black American men could actively as well as legally be recruited into the Union army. Nonetheless, there remained a reluctance by the army to commission any of its enlisted black soldiers and a great deal of trepidation among its white officers when qualified black enlisted soldiers were considered for promotion to

[14] The album was sold to a dealer on February 20, 2001, at an auction held by Swann Galleries, New York. See "The Auction Block," *Military Images* 22, no. 6 (May/June 2001), 6–8.

[15] The singularity of this carte-de-visite, especially within African American history, has only augmented over time. This largely because of the accomplishments that James Trotter would go on to achieve (see note xiii above) as well as those of his son, William Monroe Trotter, who became an important editor of the independent newspaper *The Guardian*, as well as an outspoken civil rights activist. For more information about William Trotter, see Fox, Stephen B., *The Guardian of Boston: William Monroe Trotter* (New York: Atheneum, 1970).

officer.[16] Trotter experienced this fear firsthand. Even though he had been promoted to the rank of second lieutenant on April 10, 1864, because of ongoing contract disagreements between commissioned black soldiers and the US government—which had largely been brought about by white backlash over the appointment of black officers—he was not mustered to this rank until a little over a year later, on July 1, 1865, less than two months before the Fifty-Fifth Regiment was itself mustered out on August 29, 1865. For black Union soldiers this bureaucratic delay only further attested to ongoing racial discrimination that existed within the Union army, which, while advancing claims to inclusion and equality, nonetheless continued to provide inequality in pay and an unfair share of noncombat labor duty to its enlisted black soldiers.

It is my contention that this contradiction within black military experience during the Civil War is also alluded to, albeit symbolically, in the carte-de-visite of James Trotter. Despite the honor of having his likeness collected as part of the album of Count Gasparin, who was well-known as an abolitionist sympathizer, in the period pen inscription on the album page, Trotter is listed as a sergeant, even though he wears the uniform and officer's shoulder straps of a second lieutenant, his actual rank when the carte-de-visite was most likely made (at the time that the Fifty-Fifth Regiment was mustered out).[17] In short, although the lieutenant uniform that Trotter wears in this carte-de-visite would have connected him to other white officers of similar rank and thus visually substantiated his position and privilege as a black officer in the Union army, I propose that the inscription of sergeant under his likeness *symbolically* kept this power in check. From this slippage in Trotter's military rank

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[16] For more information about the relationship between black enlisted soldiers and white officers in the Union army, see Glatthaar, Joseph T., *Forged in Battle: The Civil War Alliance of Black Soldiers and White Officers* (New York: The Free Press, 1990); Reid, Richard M., ed., Practicing Medicine in a Black Regiment: The Civil War Diary of Burt G. Wilder, 55th Massachusetts (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2010); and Trudeau, ed., *Voices of the 55th*.

[17] On September 23, 1865, the Fifty-Fifth Regiment was formally discharged in Boston, Massachusetts, and it is most likely that the Boston portraitist John Adams Whipple, whose photography studio is stamped on the verso, made this carte-de-visite of Trotter at that time. Other factors that corroborate this date include the initialed three-cent tax stamp located on the verso of the carte-de-visite, which dates the image between August 1864 and August 1866. In addition, the imprint of Whipple's name and address at 297 Washington Street on the verso also provides further evidence, since Whipple moved to that location on July 1, 1965. Moreover, around 1865, Whipple made at least three, if not more, cartes-de-visite of officers from the Fifty-Fifth Massachusetts Infantry Regiment, including surgeon Burt G. Wilder and Col. Charles B. Fox, who visited Whipple's studio at the end of their commissions to have their cartes-de-visite made. These images are part of the Association of Officers of the Fifty-Fifth Massachusetts Infantry Regiment carte-de-visite album housed at the Massachusetts Historical Society Photo Archives in Boston, Massachusetts. For more information on John Adams Whipple, see Pierce, Sally, *Whipple and Black: Commercial Photographers in Boston* (Boston: The Boston Athenæum, 1987).

inscribed on the album page, then, a more complex and multifaceted depiction of black military experience in the Union army begins to emerge and to suggest that, despite the argument of Massachusetts's governor, John A. Andrews, that enlisting black men would give them "a *chance* to vindicate their manhood, and to strike a telling blow for their own race, and the freedom of all their posterity,"[18] pervasive racism continued to exist within the Union army.

Racism against black Civil War soldiers did not end with the war. Sgt. Andrew Jackson Smith, for instance, who was photographed next to a patterned curtain and decorative floor tiles similar to those in the unidentified Mirror of Race ambrotype (see Fig. 2), was mustered into the Fifty-Fifth Regiment after being a fugitive slave. Like Trotter and other black noncommissioned soldiers, as a corporal in the Fifty-Fifth Regiment, he faced inequities in pay and had to endure an unfair share of noncombat labor duty. Nevertheless, Smith continually exhibited a great amount of courage and loyalty, especially in the notorious battle of Honey Hill, in which the Union army attacked a well-defended Confederate fortification called Honey Hill in South Carolina on November 30, 1864, in hopes of cutting off the railroad linking Charleston, South Carolina, with Savannah, Georgia. The battle ended up being a particularly bloody one for the Fifty-Fifth Regiment. In less than five minutes, over one hundred men were killed, including the revered color-bearer. When Smith saw him get hit, he is purported to have picked up the American flag, along with the fallen regimental banner from the mortally wounded color-bearer, and carried them throughout the rest of the battle. This heroic act earned Smith, who two months after the battle was promoted to sergeant, a nomination for the highest distinction in the US military, the coveted Medal of Honor.[19]

In 1916, Smith's former regimental surgeon, Dr. Burton Wilder, recommended Smith for the medal; however, although two white Civil War veterans were honored that year, Smith's nomination was denied by Woodrow Wilson's War Department with the claim that no official record of Smith's feat at Honey Hill could be found. Yet, according to Robert Beckman, a high-school history teacher from Dunlap, Illinois, who, along with Illinois State University professor Sharon MacDonald, later found Smith's service records in the National Archives, it is "very reasonable" to attribute racial discrimination to this decision since, as he further explains, "There was rampant racism in the country, and Woodrow Wilson was a Southerner. They made a one-day search of the records—a couple of hours, really—and

[18] Andrews, John A., quoted in Abbott, Richard H., *Cotton and Capital: Boston Businessmen and Antislavery Reform, 1854–1868* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1991), 119.
[19] For more information about Andrew Jackson Smith and his participation in the battle of Honey Hill, see Kilian, Michael, "Honored at Last," *Chicago Tribune*, January 17, 2001, and "The USCT Chronicle," November 30, 2011.

claimed they couldn't find anything."[20] Moreover, as Chicago Tribune reporter Michael Kilian points out in an article about Smith, "Of 1,196 Medals of Honor awarded in the Civil War, only 16 went to black soldiers, though nearly 300,000 served and many took part in hard fighting."[21] To rectify these past racial injustices, 137 years after the battle at Honey Hill and 69 years after his death, Smith's heroic actions were finally acknowledged, thanks largely to the tireless effort of Sen. Dick Durbin and former Rep. Thomas Ewing, both of Illinois, who, along with the help of Robert Beckman and Sharon MacDonald, pushed legislation through Congress so that in 2001, Smith was posthumously awarded, via his ninety-three-year-old daughter, the Medal of Honor by Pres. Bill Clinton at a ceremony at the White House.[22]

It is precisely the complexity of this historical context that cannot be forgotten when trying to determine the meaning of the unidentified *Mirror of Race* ambrotype, whose subject—as a black noncommissioned soldier in the Fifty-Fourth or Fifty-Fifth Regiment—would have likely faced the same kind of racial discrimination that Trotter and Smith experienced both during and after the Civil War. Though the private function of this ambrotype may encourage one to read it as an uncomplicated depiction of black freedom and equality, I would argue that its meaning, especially as it developed over time, is circumscribed by exactly what is not visualized in the photograph, namely the racism that black Union soldiers also experienced as part of their involvement in the American Civil War.

About the Author

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[20] Beckman, Robert, quoted in Kilian, "Honored at Last."
[21] Kilian, "Honored at Last."
[22] For details about Corporal Smith's Medal of Honor, see his entry in the "Congressional Medal of Honor Society."