

THE DAGUERREIAN ANNUAL 2001

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“Shoot, If You Must, This Old Gray Head”

The Daguerreotype of an American Patriot

Ross J. Kelbaugh

ON SEPTEMBER 5, 1862, the ragged ranks of the Confederacy's Army of Northern Virginia under the command of General Robert E. Lee crossed the Potomac River into Maryland, taking the Civil War to the north for the first time. With the intent of freeing it from the yoke of Northern oppression, the Confederate government hoped that Marylanders would rally to fill the ranks of their liberating forces, and the Old Line State would then freely join the secession of her sister states to the south. The following day, the Confederate army, under the command of General Thomas J. "Stonewall" Jackson, entered Frederick to a decidedly cool reception from the local population and quickly instituted martial law during the occupation that lasted until the withdrawal of the last of Lee's rear-guard on September 12.

As Jackson's men entered Frederick, it was reported that the homes of the local population were mostly closed up, with their inhabitants peering anxiously from behind their window blinds at their southern liberators. The city was divided almost equally into those who wanted to openly welcome the army and celebrate their arrival, and those who hated and feared their presence. Among the latter was the venerable ninety-six-year-old Barbara Frietchie.

Barbara Hauer Frietchie was born in 1766 in Lancaster County, Pennsylvania, and moved with her family to Frederick while still a child. Among the notable events of her early life was her encounter with George Washington when he stayed in the city at Mrs. Kimbal's Hotel in 1791. Barbara lent her prized Liverpool china for the general's table during his visit, and she later served as a pall bearer at the



FRONTISPIECE

Jacob Byerly,
Barbara Frietchie.

Sixth-plate daguerreotype.
Collection of the author.

This was taken in 1858 when Frietchie was ninety-two years old. The magic of Daguerre's medium enables us to look upon the face of a person who was born before the creation of the United States. It also reveals the patriot's lack of the noted "gray head" of hair described in John Green leaf Whittier's poem.

Wednesday Evening, Oct. 7, 1863.

Barbara Frietchie.

BY JOHN J. WHITTIER.

Up from the meadows rich with corn,
 Clear in the cool September morn,
 The clustered spires of Frederick stand
 Green-walled by the hills of Maryland.
 Round about them orchards weep,
 Apples and peach-trees fruited o'op,
 Fair as a garden of the Lord
 To the eyes of the famished rebel hordo.
 On that pleasant morn of the early fall
 When Lee marched over the mountain wall—
 Over the mountains winding down,
 Horse and foot, in Frederick town—
 Forty flags with their silver stars,
 Forty flags with their crimson bars,
 Flapped in the morning wind, the sun
 Of noon looked down, and saw not one.
 Up rose old Barbara Frietchie then,
 Bowed with her four score years and ten;
 Bravest of all in Frederick town,
 She took up the flag the men hauled down;
 In her attic-window the staff she set,
 To show that one heart was loyal yet.
 Up the street came the rebel tread,
 Stonewall Jackson riding ahead,
 Under his slouched hat left and right
 He glanced: the old flag met his sight.
 "Halt!"—the dust-brown ranks stood fast,
 "Fire!"—out blazed the rifle-blast.
 It shivered the window, pain and woe;
 It rent the banner with seam and gash,
 Quick, as it fell, from the broken wall
 Dame Barbara snatched the silken scarf;
 She leaned far out on the window sill,
 And shook it forth with a royal will.
 "Shoot, if you must, this old gray head,
 But spare your country's flag," she said.
 A shade of sadness, a blush of shame,
 Over the face of the leader came;
 The nobler nature within him stirred
 To life at that woman's deed and word;
 "Who touches a hair of your gray head
 Dies like a dog! March on!" he said.
 All day long through Frederick street
 Sounded the tread of marching feet;
 All day long that free flag tossed
 Over the heads of the rebel host.
 Ever its torn folds rose and fell
 On the loyal winds that loved it well;
 And through the hill-gaps sunset light
 Shone over it with a warm good night.
 Barbara Frietchie's work is o'er,
 And the rebel rides on his raids no more.
 Honor to her! and let a tear
 Fall, for her sake, on Stonewall's bier.
 Over Barbara Frietchie's grave
 Flag of Freedom and Union wave!
 Peace and order and beauty draw
 Round thy symbol of light and law;
 And over the stars above look down
 On thy stars below in Frederick town.

honorary funeral held locally after his death. In 1806, she married a local glover named John Casper Frietchie and lived a relatively unremarkable life except for the fact that in the course of time and luck of the fates, she became the last person locally who had actually met George Washington. This fact elevated her to some local prominence and might have come into play regarding events with which her name would forever be associated.

As the Confederate army approached Frederick, the story that is recounted tells that Frietchie hung an American flag out of a second-story attic window of her house (fig. 1). As Confederate troops marched by, Jackson allegedly ordered his men to fire on the banner upon which he had previously sworn his loyalty, and the flag fell from its broken shaft. The story goes on to say that Frietchie leaned out her window and retrieved her colors, which she proceeded to wave defiantly in the face of the troops. Moved by the bravery of this old patriot, Jackson ordered his men to leave her alone, and for the remainder of the day, Barbara Frietchie's star-spangled banner continued to wave over the marching rebel ranks below.

The story of Frietchie's defiant bravery was reported locally in the press and was eventually passed on to poet John Greenleaf Whittier. He immortalized the old woman and the legend in his poem "Barbara Frietchie" (fig. 2), first published in the *Atlantic Monthly* in October 1863. Unfortunately, Frietchie had died on December 18, 1862, taking with her the truth of what actually happened on that fateful day; her family continued to promote the story memorialized in Whittier's poem. Historians

FIGURE 2

"Barbara Frietchie" by Whittier, from a Frederick newspaper.

Collection of the author.

This copy of John Greenleaf Whittier's poem from a local newspaper was pinned to the interior case pad of the Frontispiece and was among the first printings of the work. Note the misattribution to John "J." Whittier.

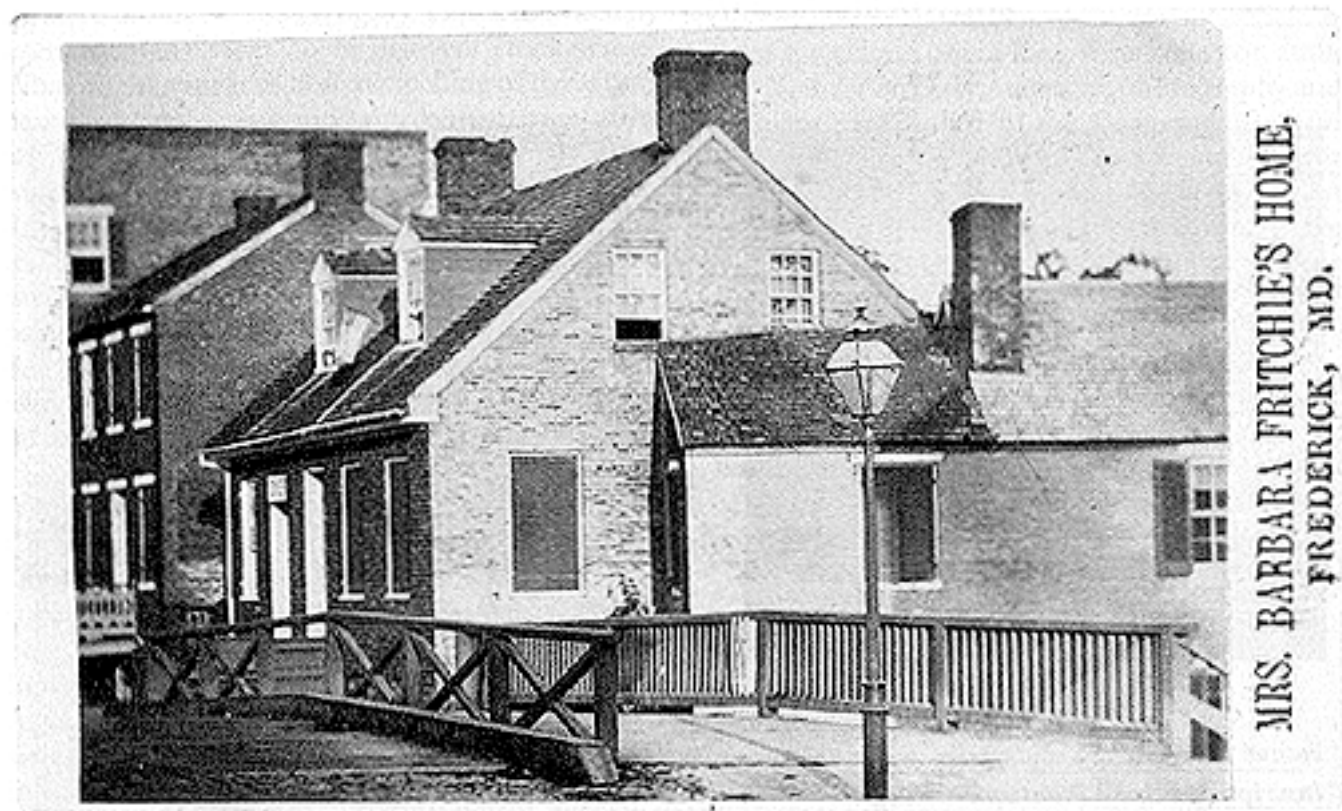


FIGURE 1

Jacob Byerly.
Frietchie's Frederick Home.

Carte de visite.
Collection of Gil Barrett.

The structure was later destroyed in a flood and was reconstructed to house a museum today. Note the alternate spelling, "Fritchie's", along the border on the left.

have since proven that Jackson and his troops never even marched by Frietchie's home and raise the possibility that Whittier's account was actually based on the actions of other less prominent citizens that were embellished in the retelling of the tale. The existence of Frietchie, whose face was forever preserved by the mirror image, remains beyond dispute.

Based on existing imagery, it appears that Frietchie was photographed at least twice during her long life. The earliest is a sixth-plate daguerreotype that was initially acquired from descendants of the Frederick daguerreotypist Jacob Byerly (see Frontispiece). Byerly opened the first permanent daguerreian studio in Maryland outside of Baltimore around 1842. The Byerly studio remained a

major Frederick photographic institution into the twentieth century as ownership passed to Jacob's son and eventually his grandson.

The analysis of the Frietchie daguerreotype reveals much about the Byerly studio. His plates are finely polished and executed with technical mastery. The image is laterally reversed, as are many of Byerly's plates. The plate, with its mat and cover glass, is sealed in the typical fashion with paper tape along the four edges, and this package is held inside the preserver. Consequently, a problem in attribution exists with Byerly's work, since it typically bears no gallery markings and is so similar to that produced by legions of other American daguerreotypists. For the benefit of posterity, inscribed in ink in the case behind this daguerreotype is, "Taken By Birely on

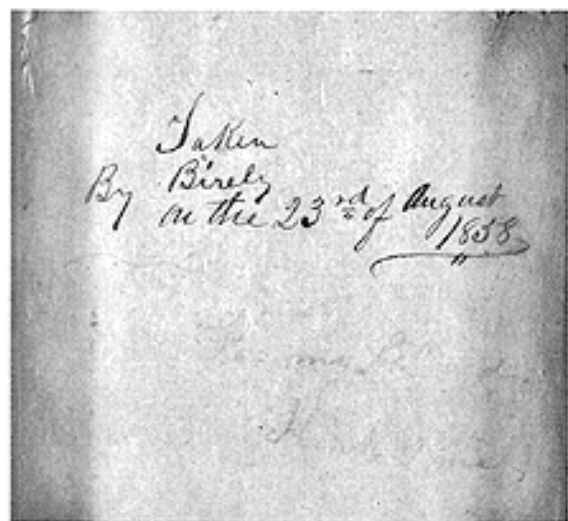


FIGURE 3

Inscription behind Frontispiece image.

Collection of the author.

The inscription written in the miniature case behind the Fritchie image confirms its Byerly attribution, since the artist did not usually sign his daguerreotypes.



PLATE 1

Jacob Byerly.

Barbara Fritchie, Legendary Patriot.

Carte de visite.

Collection of Gil Barrett.

This photograph, probably the last made of the old patriot, was extensively copied after the Civil War as the legend of Fritchie grew.

the 23rd of August 1858" (fig. 3). This is followed by a sentiment in pencil: "To my Beloved/ Think of me." What might appear to be a misspelling of the artist's name is actually an important confirmation of its attribution. The original spelling of the artist's name was Birely, and it was Jacob who chose for some now unknown reason to change the "i" to a "y" and transpose the "r" and the "e". This change produced the spelling that was recorded on all of the many paper photographs produced by the studio until its demise in the early twentieth century. As to the identity of the recipient of this precious memento, perhaps it was the second wife of the daguerreotypist.

Jacob Byerly had two wives during his lifetime who both bore the same first name. His first wife, Catherine Baer, gave birth to Byerly's son John Davis, who took over his father's photography studio in 1868. This wife died sometime around 1842 and the daguerreotypist remarried in 1849 to Catherine E. Hauer, who bore two daughters. At least one source states Catherine Hauer was a sister of Barbara Fritchie, though the difference in ages raises some question and a need for further research. But regardless of the exact nature of the relationship, Barbara very possibly gave this daguerreotype to her "beloved" Catherine, and the image remained in the Byerly family until the 1970s.

Though the truth of what really occurred on that "cool September morn" in 1862 will probably never be really known, the act of an American standing by the flag and continuing to wave it in the face of seemingly overwhelming adversity inspired the generations of the Civil War era as it did almost to the day 139 years later when New York fireman raised the banner amidst the rubble of September 11. "Shoot if you must this old gray head, but spare your country's flag," Whittier's Fritchie said. Through the medium of the daguerreotype, the old heroine's timely message lives on.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

ROSS J. KELBAUGH is a long-time collector, author and lecturer on early American photography and a frequent contributor to the *Daguerreian Annual*. His publications include the *Directory of Maryland Photographers, 1839-1900* and *Introduction to Civil War Photography*. Selections from his collections have been featured in both the Sept./Oct. 1995 and 1999 issues of the society's *Newsletter*.

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