



## Photographer Profile: Dr. John Locke

(February 29, 1792 to July 10, 1856)

### Summary

Dr. John Locke was a remarkable scientist who lived in Greater Cincinnati from 1822 to 1856. Dr. Locke was a medical doctor, chemist, botanist, geologist, professor, author, illustrator and inventor. Locke was also the first person to create and display a photograph in the United States when he exhibited his experimental “photogenic drawings” in the bookstore of Alexander Flash on Third Street in Cincinnati in the spring of 1839 (USMDR, 1839). Dr. Locke also gave the region’s first lecture on the daguerreotype process in May of 1840 (CDG, 1840).



Portrait of Dr. John Locke, date and artist unknown, Plate IV, Bauer (1899)

### Background

In order to understand Locke’s contributions to American photography, you need to know more about his remarkable career.

John Locke was born on February 29, 1792 in Fryeburg, Oxford County, in eastern Maine. His father, Samuel Barron, was a millwright who owned a large private library. Samuel taught his son how to work with his hands and tutored him in mathematics and languages. (Tucker, 1852/Bauer, 1899). In 1818, Locke briefly served as a surgeon’s mate for the U.S. Navy (Tucker, 1852). Locke studied chemistry under Benjamin Silliman and botany with Dr. Elon Ives at Yale University. He graduated from Yale with a degree in medicine in 1819. Dr. Locke traveled west in 1821. He settled for a short time in Lexington, Kentucky where he established an academy for female students. In 1822, Locke moved to Cincinnati where he also established the Cincinnati Female Academy.

John Locke married Mary Ann Morris, a niece of Nicholas Longworth, in 1825. The couple had ten children. Locke became a well know figure within the academic and artistic community in Greater Cincinnati. He befriended several influential residents, including philanthropist Nicholas Longworth, lawyer Ethan Stone, and sculptor Hiram Powers.

### Scientific Studies

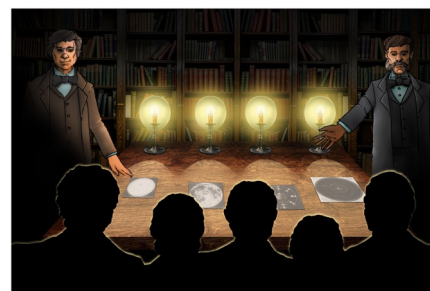
Dr. John Locke was a true Renaissance man. Early in his career, he wrote several textbooks on botany and grammar, including his self-published and long-titled book *Outlines of Botany...* in 1819. In 1835, Dr. Locke was appointed professor of chemistry and pharmacy at the Medical College of Ohio, which was located in downtown Cincinnati. Locke would often battle Dr. Daniel Drake over academic issues with during his on-and-off tenure with the medical college from 1825 to 1853.

Dr. Locke was also a surveyor and geologist. In 1838, he wrote a detailed chapter of the geology of southwest Ohio for the Second Annual Report on the Ohio Geological Survey of the State of Ohio. His chapter included illustrations of various strata, as well as a survey Fort Hill, an ancient American earthwork. Locke was officially appointed as Assistant Geologist in the State of Ohio in 1838 (Tucker, 1852). Locke helped found several academic institutions, including the progressive Cincinnati Female Academy and the Ohio Mechanic's Institute, which was the site of his many public lectures. In 1838, Locke was asked to investigate the deadly explosion of the steamship *Moselle* on the Ohio River. His investigation concluded with recommendations for federal safety standards for steamship boilers. However, Locke's greatest scientific achievements came in the field of earth's magnetism. His research culminated with the invention of the "Electro-Chronograph," a precise instrument for keeping time. In 1849, the U.S. Congress awarded Locke a massive grant of \$10,000 for his Electro-Chronograph and his overall contributions to science.

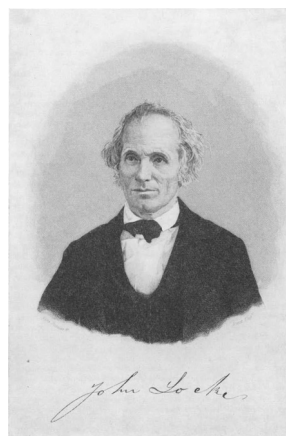
## Dr. John Locke and American Photography

### Photogenic Drawings, spring 1839

In the spring of 1839, Dr. John Locke was the first American to display a photograph when he presented a public exhibit of his photogenic drawings in the bookstore of Alexander Flash on Third Street in Cincinnati (Davis, 2007; USMDR, 1839; Getty, 1998). An 1839 Cincinnati City Directory lists Alexander Flash as owner of a Bookseller and Stationer on Third Street between Main and Walnut. The directory notes that Flash was from the "West Indies." Locke often used Flash's bookstore to sell tickets for his lectures. John Locke's display of photogenic drawings was first recorded in the *Cincinnati Republican* newspaper in March of 1839. This newspaper article was re-published in *The United States Magazine and Democratic Review*, Vol. 5, No. 18, "Notes of the Month," Photogenic Drawing, pp. 611-612, June, 1839, Washington D.C.



Artist's rendering: Dr. John Locke displays "photogenic drawings" at the bookstore of Alexander Flash, Cincinnati, in the spring of 1839. Artist: Thomas Miller, Atomic Art, 2024, Voyageur Media Group, Inc.



Sketch of Dr. John Locke, date and artist unknown, *Bulletin of the Historical and Philosophical Society of Ohio*, 1852.

*A process similar to that of M. Daguerre, of France, and Mr. Fox Talbot, of England, has been tried successfully by a gentleman of Cincinnati. The Republican newspaper gives the following account of his mode of making pictures. (Quoting the Cincinnati Republican) "Some experiments on photogenic drawings have been made by professor Locke, of the Medical College of Ohio, with entire success. He prepared paper chemically for this purpose, and placed it under some astronomical diagrams, which were then exposed to the sun's rays. The new picture was in a few minutes formed and removed, and a process used, by which the figures were permanently fixed. The specimens thus produced are in every respect satisfactory. They look as though they had been most carefully engraven."*

- *The United States Magazine and Democratic Review*, Vol. 5, No. 18, "Notes of the Month," Photogenic Drawing, pp. 611-612, June, 1839, Washington D.C.

Dr. Locke traveled to Europe in 1837 where he was "cordially received by scientific men," according to biographer L.A. Bauer. Locke, like many American professors, traveled to Europe in order to procure apparatus for teaching chemistry, medicine and other academic fields. While there are no records from his trip, Locke may have heard about the photogenic studies of

William Henry Fox Talbot during his trip to England. As a professor, Locke also had access to European and American newspapers and journals that were already describing the photographic experiments of Talbot and Louis Daguerre in early 1839. Concurrently, two students from Harvard University, Edward Hale and Samuel Longfellow, "repeated Talbot's experiments" in photogenic drawings in April or May of 1839 (Davis, 2007).

## Daguerreotype lecture, May 14, 1840.

Dr. John Locke continued to experiment with various photographic processes. On May 14, 1840, Dr. Locke gave a series of photography lectures at the Cincinnati College. Locke was “prevailed” to present the lecture by Dr. Augustus Rostaing, according to the *Cincinnati Daily Gazette*. Rostaing, nicknamed the “Dentist Francois,” lived and worked in Cincinnati in the 1840s. Rostaing was also an artist who “executed cameo likenesses and fancy heads in shells,” according to historian Charles Cist, in *Sketches and Statistics of Cincinnati in 1851*.

In 1840, Dr. Rostaing visited his home country of France which was consumed by “daguerreotype mania,” as depicted in a famous cartoon by the French satirist Théodore Maurisset. Rostaing recognized the value of this revolutionary medium. He returned to Cincinnati armed with daguerreotype apparatus and a few daguerreotype pictures of Paris. Rostaing also convinced Dr. Locke to give a series of three lectures about photography (*Gazette*, 1840).



*La Daguerreotypomanie*, lithograph, Théodore Maurisset, 1839, Library of Congress.

**THE DAGUERREOTYPE.**  
MR. ROSTAING has the pleasure of announcing to the citizens of Cincinnati, that he has prevailed on Professor Locke, of the Medical College of Ohio, to give three Lectures explanatory of the Daguerreotype, and the principles of Optics and Chymistry on which its operation depends.  
The first Lecture will be on optics; the second, on the Chymical properties of the substances employed, and upon Photogenic drawing; the third, upon the manipulations and use of Daguerre's apparatus, which was made in Paris under the direction of Daguerre himself, and which will be exhibited on this occasion; also, a number of beautiful specimens of its successful application.  
The Lectures will be delivered on the evenings of *Thursday, Friday, and Saturday* next, commencing at 7½ o'clock, at the Cincinnati College, on the corner of Fourth and Walnut.  
TERMS.—Single ticket for the course, \$1.00.  
Double Tickets, admitting a gentleman and two ladies, \$2.00.  
Single tickets for one evening, 50 cts. Children half price.  
To be had at Flash's Bookstore, west Third st, near Main, and at the door of the College.  
ap 11  
Republican and Daily News please copy. 76tt

Daguerreotype lecture advertisement, *Cincinnati Daily Gazette*, May 13, 1840.

The lecture series is described in an advertisement and article published in the *Cincinnati Daily*

*Gazette*. Locke's first lecture was on optic. His second lecture covered Chymical [sic] properties and Photogenic drawings. Locke's third lecture was on the “manipulations and use of the Daguerreotype process.” The lecture advertisement notes that a single lecture ticket could be purchased at Flash's Bookstore and at the door for 50 cents. The full lecture series was one dollar. Double tickets, admitting a gentleman and two ladies, were two dollars.

Unfortunately, Locke's photography lecture series did not ignite public interest. The editors of the *Cincinnati Daily Gazette* reported that Locke's first (Heliographic) lecture was “thinly attended.” The newspaper editors even

admonishing the “good people of Cincinnati” for being indifferent to things of “substantial interest and value.”

## Epilogues

Dr. Locke went on to work on experiments in photography with Ezekiel Hawkins, who would establish the first daguerreotype studio in Cincinnati in 1841. In 1853, Locke moved to Lebanon, Ohio for a few years. Suffering from poor health, Locke returned to Cincinnati where he died at the age of sixty-four on July 10, 1856. He is buried in Spring Grove Cemetery in Cincinnati, Ohio.

Dr. Rostaing eventually moved back to France. Rostaing sold his dentistry practice to James Taylor in 1842 (Mills, 1940). Voyageur was not able to trace Rostaing's life after her returned to France.

## Author

Thomas M. Law, Project Director, “Capturing Life” (1839-1869), Voyageur Media Group, Inc. © 2024, Voyageur Media Group, Inc. This profile is provided free for research and educational purposes.



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