



Photographer Profile: Charles Waldack

(September 5, 1831 to December 31, 1882)

Summary

Charles Francois Auguste Waldack was an internationally-recognized photographer who is best known as the first to photograph a cave system in America in 1866. A series of over forty images from his cave photography expedition stunned the world when published in the stereographic card series, *Magnesium Light Views in Mammoth Cave*. Waldack operated a successful photographic studio in Cincinnati from about 1857 to 1882. He was also an innovator, mentor and author who made major contributions to early photography in America. Unfortunately, the fate of Waldack's studio collection is unknown.

Chris Howes, a contemporary cave photographer and author from Wales, conducted extensive research on the career of Charles Waldack for his book, *To Photograph Darkness: The History of Underground and Flash Photography*, Southern Illinois University Press, Carbondale, Illinois, 1990. Chapter three, "Mammoth Cave," contains details about Waldack and landmark cave photography expeditions in 1866. Voyageur interviewed Chris Howes for the documentary 'Capturing Life' (1839-1869).



Portrait of Charles Waldack, salt print, ca 1856-1858, Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art.

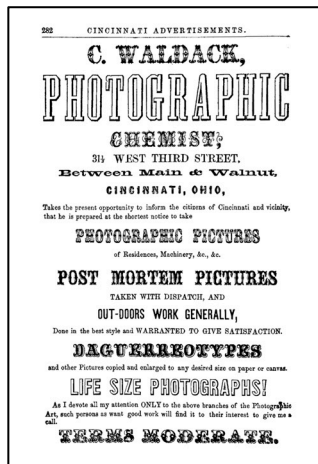
Background

Charles Waldack was born in Ghent, Belgium on September 5, 1831. His father was Ferdinandus Leopoldus Waldack. His mother, Paulina Lucia Andrieu, died in 1834 when Charles was an infant. (Ancestry.com) He graduated with a degree in chemistry from the University of Ghent by 1829, and became an aide in the chemistry department at the Ecole Industrielle in Belgium. (Magee, 2016). Waldack likely learned about the daguerreotype process during his chemistry studies.

In 1855, Waldack emigrated to the United States, landing in New York City. He moved to Cincinnati, Ohio where he eventually established a daguerreotype studio in 1857. Waldack's move to America may have been financed by the father of Leon Van Loo (1841-1907) who was a student of professor Waldack in Belgium (Magee, 2016). Leon Van Loo also moved to Cincinnati. He worked as one of Waldack's assistants before starting his own photographic studio. Van Loo, become wealthy from the cotton trade after the Civil War. Later in life, he collected art and founded the Cincinnati Art Club, serving as its president from 1894 to 1896.

Charles Waldack became a naturalized citizen of the United States in 1862. He married Mary (Tanner) Waldack, a native of Woodford County, Kentucky, on November 7, 1864 (Magee, 2016). Mary Tanner's brother, Joseph, also worked as a photographer. The 1880 US. Census lists that the Waldack household in Cincinnati included Elise Waldack (age 28) and Anna (age 2 and-a-half) but it's unclear how they are related to Charles and Mary Waldack. Mary worked in the family photography studio until the death of Charles in 1882. She took over ownership of the studio becoming one of the region's first professional female photographers. The "Mrs. Chas. Waldack Photographic Studio" operated in Cincinnati from 1882 until 1892.

Cincinnati Studios



Charles Waldack arrived in Greater Cincinnati when the region's economy was booming from river trade and industry. By 1850, Cincinnati had become the sixth largest city in America with a population of over 115,000. Waldack's first photographic studio was located at 31 ½ West Third Street in Cincinnati.

He faced stiff competition from dozens of established photographic studios in the region, including Ball & Thomas, William Porter and John Winder. Waldack announced his photographic services in a full-page advertisement in the 1857 *William's City Directory*. In the ad, Waldack calls himself a Photographic Chemist. He lists a range of services from daguerreotype portraits and post-mortem pictures to life-size photographs and what we would today call commercial photography, "Photographic Pictures of Residences and Machinery." At the same time, Waldack was working with Peter Neff, Jr. on a guide book about a new form of photography entitled *Treaties of Photography on Collodion*, which was originally published in 1857. The book was a detailed guide to the wet-plate collodion process introduced by Frederick Scott Archer of

England in 1851. Waldack's understanding of the wet-plate collodion process made it easier for him to take his camera into the field.

Cincinnati Views ca. 1860

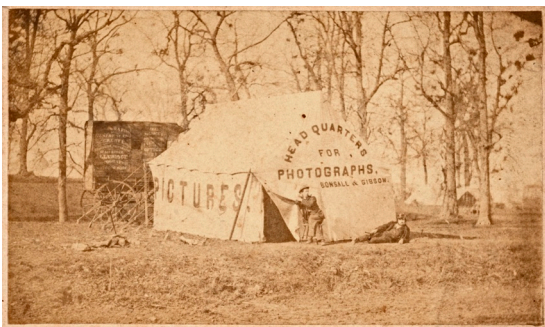
Charles Waldack was one of the region's most prolific photographers, but his photographs are rare. His studio collection has been lost to time. Four of his photographs are preserved in an unlikely archive, The Royal Collection Trust at Windsor Castle in England. Waldack's four salted-paper prints of Cincinnati were purchased by Albert Edward, The Prince of Wales (future King of England as Edward VII), when he visited Cincinnati in September of 1860 during his grand tour of Canada and the United States. The four photographs show views of Cincinnati that Waldack took from the rooftop of a building on Sixth Street. See the website of the Royal Collection:

<https://www.rct.uk/collection/2700748/cincinnati>



View of Cincinnati east, salted paper print, ca. 1860, Charles Waldack, Royal Collection Trust.

Civil War field photography wagon - ca. 1864.



Charles Waldack used a wagon to transport his photographic field studio during the U.S. Civil War. Several local photographers set up mobile photographic studios near encampments and battlefields, including Camp Dennison, a massive recruitment and training center for the Union Army located just east of Cincinnati. A photograph from the Library of Congress shows Waldack's field studio wagon behind the photographic tent of Bonsall & Gibson that was taken at Camp Dennison around 1864.

[Mobile photographic tent studio of Bonsall & Gibson in front of wagon studio of Charles Waldack], carte-de-visite, ca., 1864, Dewey & Gibson, Cincinnati, Library of Congress.

Mammoth Cave expeditions - 1866

Charles Waldack is best known as the first person to photograph a cave system in America. In the summer of 1866, Waldack made a series of photographs deep inside Mammoth Cave in Kentucky. Chris Howes, a cave photographer and author living in Wales, provides a detailed account of Waldack's landmark photographic expedition in *To Photograph Darkness: The History of Underground and Flash Photography*. Most of Waldack's photographs from the Mammoth Cave expedition are available Library of Congress website. Link: <https://www.loc.gov/pictures/item/2005684364/>

Waldack was approached to take the Mammoth Cave photographs by John Procter and John O'Shaughnessy, two businessmen from Cincinnati. The two men wanted to use photography in order to promote tourism at Mammoth Cave. Once a popular destination for visitors, Mammoth Cave languished during and after the Civil War.

Waldack was a highly skilled photographer, but he needed a reliable source of light. Fortunately, the American Magnesium Company had recently started selling commercial magnesium (Howes, 1989). Magnesium is a metal that when burned produces a brilliant light. In order to burn magnesium, Waldack needed to create a taper, which is three strands of magnesium ribbon twisted together (Howes, 2024). At the start of the expedition, one taper cost about \$6.50, according to Chris Howes, who adds, "By the end of the whole project, Waldack said he'd spent \$500," which is about \$10,000 in 2024.



"Out for the Last Time," stereograph No. 6, single side, 1866, *Magnesium Light Views in Mammoth Cave*," Charles Waldack, Library of Congress. Waldack is in the middle between Procter and O'Shaughnessy.



"Deserted Chamber," stereograph No. 7, 1866, *Magnesium Light Views in Mammoth Cave*," Charles Waldack, Library of Congress.

Armed with magnesium tapers, Waldack, Procter and O'Shaughnessy, traveled to Mammoth Cave for a trial run in June of 1866. They hired veteran cave guides to navigate passages within one of the world's largest cave systems. Waldack soon discovered that wet-plate photography deep inside a cave was a technical nightmare. The team transported their equipment through tight, rocky passages. Humidity warped their stereoscopic cameras. Dust ruined wet collodion plates. Waldack burned dozens of magnesium tapers, hung in reflectors, just to get a single photograph. The photography crew worked quickly before magnesium smoke completely

obsured a cave passage. Magnesium smoke is seen at the top of the photograph "Deserted Chamber."

Waldack produced eight photographs inside Mammoth Cave that he deemed "acceptable" during the first expedition. He shipped some of the photographs to Edward L. Wilson, Editor, of the prestigious journal, *Philadelphia Photographer*. In his review, Wilson was stunned.

"We think that, if Daguerre and Niepce were here, they would weep. These pictures now lie before us, and are the most wonderful ones we have ever seen. ...It hardly seems possible. Daguerre never dreamed of it. Five years ago, we would have laughed at it: and today we can scarcely believe what we see. If Mr. Waldack modestly considers these mere experiments, we have much hope for the next trials."

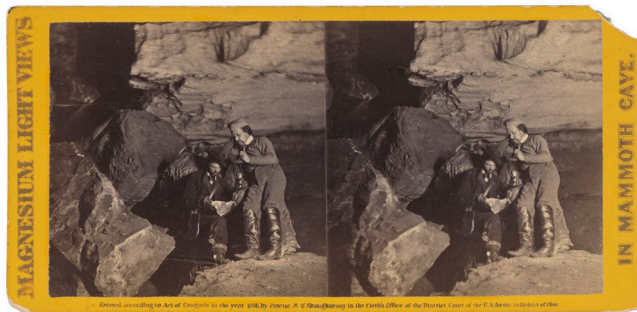
- Edward Wilson, Editor, *Philadelphia Photographer*, August, 1866

Charles Waldack returned to Mammoth Cave for a second photographic expedition from July to October, 1866 (Howes, 1990). The results were spectacular. In all, Waldack produced over forty-eight photographs. Over forty were printed for a popular stereographic card series, “Magnesium Light Views in Mammoth Cave,” which generated revenue for the next six years (Howes, 1990).

One of the original glass-plate collodion negatives from Waldack’s Mammoth Cave expedition was uncovered during production of the documentary “Capturing Life” (1839-1869). The photograph is in the Frederick Hill Meserve Collection of the National Portrait Gallery. The image is labeled Unidentified Men, and is attributed to the Mathew Brady Studio, c. 1860-1870. American photographers routinely shared their work. Waldack likely sent one of his glass-plates to Brady, or Brady secured it from another source.



Unidentified Men, glass plate collodion negative, c. 1860-70, Mathew Brady Studio, National Portrait Gallery.



“Beyond the Bridge of Sighs,” stereographic card, *Magnesium Light Views in Mammoth Cave*, 1866, Charles Waldack, Library of Congress.

The same image is seen in “Beyond the Bridge of Sighs,” card No. 8 in the stereographic series *Magnesium Light Views in Mammoth Cave*. The card label reads: *This view represents two of the guides, just having crossed the bridge towards “Reveler’s Hall.” They are facing the “Bottomless Pit,” overhanging which is the rock in the foreground.* The two guides are likely Abe Merideth (left) and John Procter (right), according to research conducted by William Gross Magee.

Chris Howes provides a concise summarized of Charles Waldack’s achievement in his interview for the documentary “Capturing Life” (1839-1869).



Again, in context, nobody had ever seen an image of a cave. And, Waldack was just supreme on how he found a problem, and a way around it. These pictures didn’t just arise by chance. He was always looking for solutions on how to get a better picture - not just a picture. And, that has always impressed me. Waldack was a true innovator. He was experimenting, and he was coming up with the results - big time.

- Chris Howes, 2024

“Dining in Great Relief,” stereographic card (cropped), *Magnesium Light Views in Mammoth Cave*, 1866, Charles Waldack, Library of Congress.

Charles Waldack – the mentor

Charles Waldack traveled several times between his home in Cincinnati and his hometown of Ghent, Belgium. He travelled to Europe from August of 1862 to August of 1863, with fellow photographer John Carbutt. His assistant, Leon Van Loo, ran the studio while Waldack was away (FOMU, 2024). Waldack travelled to Belgium again from 1874 to 1877, this time with his wife, Mary. He established a studio in Ghent, and became a founding member of the Association Belge de Photographie (Magee, 2016). This rare

cabinet card (right) of Charles Waldack, provided by the National Cave Museum and Library in Park City, Kentucky, has interesting studio markings. "Portrait of Waldack, the initial CW, and Album Gand. The word Gand is a French spelling for the city of Ghent in Belgium. This cabinet card may have been made by Waldack while working in Belgium.

Waldack also mentored two members of the region's second generation of photographers, Louis Rombach and Theodore Groene (Baily, 2010). The studio of Rombach & Groene would become one of the region's most successful commercial studios.

Charles Wadlack - Epilogue.

Charles Waldack continued to work as a photographer in Cincinnati. In 1875, he published another stereographic card series, *Cincinnati and its Suburb: A Series of Stereoscopic Views*. Waldack's photos of Spring Grove Cemetery won awards in Cincinnati Industrial Expositions 1870 and 1872. In 1882, Charles Waldack, gravely ill, traveled back to his hometown of Ghent Belgium. He soon died there at the age of 51 on December 31, 1882 (Taylor, 1883).



Portrait of Charles Waldack, cabinet card, date unknown, by Charles Waldack, Gand (Ghent) Belgium, National Cave Museum.

Mary Tanner Waldack



[Two girls in tartan dress], cabinet cards, Mrs. Chas. Waldack's Photographic Studio, 1882-1892, University of Kentucky.

Mary Tanner Waldack took over her husband's studio in Cincinnati after his death in 1882. Mary Waldack was one of the region's first professional female photographers, and the first women to own a photographic studio in the Midwest (Scaggs, 2024). Mrs. Chas. Waldack's Photographic Studio operated successfully at several location in Cincinnati from 1882 to 1892. Mary Tanner (Waldack) was born in Woodford County, Kentucky, in 1847. Her family moved to Northern Kentucky by 1860. Mary's younger brother, Joseph, is also listed as a photographer in U.S. Census records. However, there are no known images of Mary Tanner Waldack, and few records of her life beyond some census records and studio advertisements in newspapers and city directories. Even the date of her death remains a mystery, as well as the fate of the Waldack studio collection.

Fortunately, some of the cabinet cards made by Mary Tanner Waldack have survived. The Cincinnati Museum Center holds four of Mary Tanner Waldack's cabinet cards. And, Deirdra Skaggs, Associate Dean for Research and Discovery, Special Collections Research Center, University of Kentucky, has collected twelve cabinet cards made at Mrs. Chas. Waldack's Photographic Studio. Link: <https://exploreuk.uky.edu/fa/findingaid/?id=xt7n8p5vb48r>.

Deidra Scaggs has conducted extensive research on Mary Tanner Waldack. "Mary Tanner Waldack certainly is one of the first female photographers in this region," says Scaggs, adding, "I think that, coupled with how early she was operating the studio as the proprietor, is unique and significant, and pretty amazing for our region."

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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