At one moment in time, a Georgia lad posed for a photograph. No hint of a smile touched his lips, but the dawning beard of manhood shadowed his jaw line and chin. No pain clouded his eyes, where light danced merrily across shining, brightly-colored irises. No scar marred his hands, though with those hands he gripped the dreadful tools of war. At one moment in time, a photographer removed the lens cap from his camera and exposed the glass plate, and his work was done.

Nearly 150 years after that moment in time, a “picker” came across the photograph of the Georgia lad at an antique store near Athens, Georgia. He used his cell phone on a Sunday afternoon early this year to call David W. Vaughan, an Atlanta collector of Civil War photographs. Then he described to Vaughan the 1/2-plate ambrotype of the Georgia lad, encouraging him “to get there immediately, as another picker was in the store calling his own network of collectors.” At that moment in time, the picker’s work was done.

David Vaughan couldn’t make the drive to Watkinsville before the store closed that afternoon, so he drove over early the next morning. There, after viewing the remarkable photograph of the Georgia lad, which had likely remained concealed among his family’s keepsakes for generations, Vaughan quickly estimated its worth, made an offer, and consummated the deal. So the ambrotype of the Georgia lad—Private William Houston House, 16th Georgia Cavalry Battalion—joined the stunning array of photographs of Civil War soldiers in Vaughan’s collection.

“I was very fortunate,” Vaughan observed during a recent interview, “as I later heard that a couple of other collectors were right on my heels.”

Serendipity is commonplace in the world of antique photographs, where chance often guides the collector to the right place at the right time. Vaughan is quick to note that he has been the beneficiary of serendipity on more than one occasion.

“One time,” he recounts, “a fellow collector and I were driving back from the D.C. photo show in Alexandria, Virginia. On Skyline Drive in Shenandoah National Park, I looked down from the road to a parking lot where there were about 30 cars with trunks open. I could see antique rifles and a canteen and a few other items, so I told my friend, and he locked down the brakes and whipped the car off the highway into the parking lot, where there was a ‘trunk show’ going on.”

Vaughan soon learned that once a month this group would get together to buy, sell, swap or trade antiques right from their cars. “So,” he continues the story, “we went and looked in everybody’s trunk. Surprisingly, I found a 1/9-plate image of a Union boy who is unidentified, but he’s photographed in a Federal regulation four-button sack coat, kepi, and canteen with his initials, R.H.K. The letters are reversed because the photographic process produces a negative. His initials are reversed because the photographic process produces a negative.

Federal regulation four-button sack coat, and his initials R.H.K. and his company are stenciled on his canteen. He was just a young boy; couldn’t be more than 16 or 17 years old. That was more than 20 years ago, and I still have that in my collection today. It’s a wonderful photograph.”

To date, Vaughan hasn’t been able to establish the identity of the soldier wearing Union blue despite the benefit of those initials on the canteen. Sometimes, though, a collector succeeds in identifying a soldier in an old photo. Such occasions usually require more than serendipity. Persistence and good instincts play an important role.

“You know,” Vaughan says, “many times when these photographs leave an estate, no one has ever taken the time to write the name on the back of the case or to identify the veteran. Over the years, though, I’ve been able to identify probably a dozen photographs using other known photos and research. And to me, it is just a thrill to be able to save a piece of history and reunite a soldier’s name with his photo.”

Asked to give an example, Vaughan, a 52-year-old director of marketing and sales for a large real estate law firm in Atlanta, ponders a moment and then breaks into a smile.
“Actually, just recently, I was able to identify an image of a Confederate surgeon I recently bought at an auction in Jefferson, Georgia,” he recalls. “I had a wonderful conversation with the consignor.” The man’s grandmother, Vaughan learned, had passed away, leaving the man with a trunk full of memorabilia. “He was very interested in the history of the photograph, but didn’t know anything about it.”

Vaughan, who picked up some clues from details in the photo, told the man, “You know, after studying his uniform I’m almost positive this guy was a doctor. He has a black collar and cuffs on his Confederate jacket, which is the signature color of the Medical Corps, and his collar bears a star, denoting the rank of major. Major was the pay grade for a surgeon.”

Given this information, Vaughan felt sure the officer was a surgeon. “He was an older gentleman, he was at least 40, and he really just struck me as a surgeon by the way his jacket looked.”

While this information interested the consignor, he still wasn’t convinced he had a physician in his family tree. He told Vaughan, “Well, David, we don’t have any doctors or surgeons in our family, and I don’t know how this photograph ended up in my grandmother’s trunk.”

When Vaughan looked into the family’s records, he too didn’t find any reference to a physician. He was nearly ready to throw in the towel when he had an idea. “I went back to the consignor one more time and said, ‘This is it. I have one more shot here.’ I said, ‘Do this for me, go back and look through the family papers, but don’t look at it trying to identify this person. Go back and see if you can find any mention of a doctor or a surgeon in any of the paperwork.’”

“He called me back in about three days and said, ‘David, I found this odd piece of paper. It looks like it may have been attached to the image at one time.’ It was basically a biographical sketch that had been Xeroxed out of *Memories of Georgia, The Southern Historical Association, 1895*, and it stated that the man’s name was Doctor Elijah Fletcher Starr from Nacoochee, White County, Georgia. The sketch detailed that Starr was the regimental surgeon of the 24th Georgia Infantry as well as a “pro-Union” signer of the Georgia Ordinance of Succession. He was originally part of Company C in the 24th Georgia Infantry, the White County Marksmen, organized in northeast Georgia’s White County.

Vaughan later discovered and obtained copies of 20 letters from the Special Collections and Archives at Auburn University that Starr had written to his wife, Hannah, during the war. Referring to these and other family documents in the grouping, he confirmed the family connection between the surgeon and the estate in which his photograph was found. “So...
I had a positive I.D. at that point,” he notes with satisfaction. “The process probably took about three or four months, but I’m 100% sure now that photo is of Starr. And, to my knowledge, there are not any other known photographs of him.”

Vaughan, who has been collecting Civil War photographs for 25 years, says that the industry has changed quite a bit over the years. At first, there were relatively few images available as the children and grandchildren of Confederate veterans had close ties to the photographs and were therefore unwilling to part with them. Then things began to change. “As that generation passed away,” he notes, “it seemed like a lot of photographs were coming out of estates.”

Today, awareness of the value of antique photos is increasing. “Things have changed a bit now,” he says. “The average person on the street—the average consumer, if you will—is much more educated, in part due to television programs related to antiques. You have Antiques Roadshow, Pawn Stars, American Pickers, and several others that are really geared toward estates and historic memorabilia. So people understand when they have something of value.

Reflecting on the changes in collecting over the years, Vaughan tells an unusual story about one of the first photos he

Private A. W. Vaughan, Co.H, “Goshen Blues,” 38th Regiment Georgia Volunteer Infantry, Army of No. Virginia, CSA. Vaughan was photographed wearing an eight button frock coat. He was wounded at the Battle of Fredericksburg, wounded a second time and captured at the Battle of Gettysburg. Later released, he rejoined the regiment and served the duration of the war.

Private Ezekiel Taylor Bray, Co. A. “The Madison County Grey,” 16th Regiment Georgia Volunteer Infantry, Army of No. Virginia, CSA. Bray is clad in a dark blue or black four-button frock coat with one brass military and two bone buttons. He was severely wounded in a skirmish near Seven Pines, VA and never regained full use of his leg. He was wounded again at the Battle of Sharpsburg while serving as a regimental nurse.
obtained. “In 1992, I ran an ad in the back of *Southern Living* magazine, and I got a call from a woman in South Carolina. She said, ‘Let me describe this uniform to you. It looks like it’s a dark blue jacket and it has ‘Confederate Cases’ embossed on the felt padding on the inside of the case.

Her uniform description sounded to Vaughan like a Union jacket. “I was just very, very hesitant to make her an offer over the telephone,” he says. “So, I said, ‘Listen, this one’s a hard one because you’ve really described something I’m a little uneasy about. You’re really describing a Union uniform.’”

There was a pause on the other end of the line. “She just about hung up the phone,” Vaughan laughs. “She said, ‘Honey, there are no Yankees in my family!’ She was very indignant about that. So I backed up and said, ‘Well, I can tell that there weren’t any Yankees in your family, but they sure have a way of popping up in the most unlikely places.’ She got tickled at my comment, and we hung up the phone.

Three days later, Vaughan received a package from the lady. “The photo arrived in the mail without any padding, without any type of support, and it was a glass-plate photograph—an ambrotype. It was not broken and I was amazed. She said she wanted me to have it and the range of price that I was mentioning to her was acceptable, so I ended up paying her a little more, because once I got it, I realized that it was a Confederate soldier in a very early-war uniform that was either black or dark blue.”

Over the years, Vaughan has acquired more than 400 Civil War ambrotypes, tintypes, carte de visite, albumen, and salt prints. Of that number, he estimates that more than 100 are confirmed Georgia soldiers. “I’ve really tried to be very disciplined over the last few years,” he adds. “I’ve actually passed on some very nice Confederate photographs, trying to pace myself and to be able to keep up with the images that are offered from Georgia.”

So, which Georgia photograph is his favorite?

“It’s just about impossible for me to pick just one,” he says. “But one of my favorites is a little ¾-plate image—a tintype of a little drummer boy from Social Circle, Walton County, Georgia, named Tommie Wood. He was orphaned about a year before he was mustered...
into Confederate service. He went to Richmond, but before his company was actually deployed, he contracted pneumonia and died. He was 16 years old. A reverend from Atlanta wrote his obituary, which appeared in the 

*Augusta Chronicle*, and reading it will bring tears to your eyes.”

Given the size and quality of his collection and the reputation he has built over 25 years, it comes as no surprise that Vaughan is noticing an increasing interest in his photographs. “It seems like I have a meeting every other week with a museum or institution or I’m asked to speak to a group,” he says. “I’ve recently been on Georgia Public Television’s, *Treasures in Your Attic. The History Detective* just filmed a segment in New Orleans that will air this fall. I currently have 70 images in an exhibit at the Columbus Museum of Art in Columbus, Georgia, which runs until October 31. And the curator of photography from the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York wants to include some of my significant Confederate photographs in a display commemorating the sesquicentennial of the Civil War. To me, that’s a real honor.”

What does Vaughan believe the future holds for collecting Civil War photographs?

“I think there are many more images that have never been seen still in the possession of families,” he theorizes. “And, for a
collector, that's an exciting thing to know—that there are images out there that may be better or possibly more spectacular than anything we've seen before.”

As you would expect, this thought drives Vaughan in his quest to find, identify, and acquire photographs of Confederate soldiers from Georgia. “I saw my first Civil War photograph when I was a young man, and immediately was captivated with it. I knew at that moment that that was what I was going to collect. I’ve spent a lot of time—a tremendous amount of time—researching and networking. It has just been a fabulous 25 years, but I can’t wait to see what the future holds.”

At this moment in time, it seems, the work of the collector is not done.

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