



Fairfield Museum
AND HISTORY CENTER

***Family/History: Exploring the Randolph-Ward
Photographic Collection***

On view April 16-August 28, 2022

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The Randolph-Ward Photographic Collection spans approximately 100 years of family and photographic history in Fairfield and Bridgeport. The Collection, donated by family member Gwendolyn Ward, helps to deepen our understanding of local history. The addition of this collection allows us to trace the family histories of the Randolph and Ward families alongside the development of photography as a medium. The photographs featured here reach back to some of the earliest forms of popular photography up to studio portraits from the 1950s of Charlotte Ward Congo by her husband Ralph.

The photographs in the Randolph-Ward Collection are formal, casual, posed, and candid. They reveal the nexus between photography as an art form, a method of documentation, and a way to assert presence and respectability when Black communities were experiencing racism and discrimination across the nation. Through the medium of photography, the collection celebrates family, community, love, connectedness, and resilience.

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Portrait of Gwendolyn Ward by Corbit Studio, c. 1940s. Gift of Gwendolyn Ward, 2018, Ward and Randolph Family Collection, MSB 142.

Gwendolyn Ward (b. 1924)

Gwendolyn Ward donated the photographs that comprise the Randolph-Ward Collection to the Fairfield Museum in 2018. She was born in 1924 and grew up in Fairfield, attending Roger Sherman Elementary School and Roger Ludlow High School. After she graduated in 1942, she worked on the small appliance assembly line at General Electric (GE) in Bridgeport, and in 1947 she married George R. Thomas who was then in the U.S. Coast Guard. Ward continued to work at the GE plant for the next 45

years. She lived in a house at the intersection of Round Hill and Barlow Roads in Fairfield, the home of the Randolph family since the late 1800s.

By making this extraordinary donation of photographs to the Fairfield Museum, Gwendolyn Ward has preserved an important archive of her family history and contributed greatly to the Museum's knowledge of Fairfield's multi-faceted community. This extensive photographic record of the Randolph and Ward families allows the Museum to deepen research on the underrepresented stories of Black families in Fairfield. At the same time, her role as a keeper of generational knowledge is just as meaningful. Gwendolyn underscores the importance of Black women's roles in maintaining and preserving their family's history through images.

The Randolph-Ward Family History

The Randolph-Ward Photographic Collection spans four generations, reaching from donor Gwendolyn Ward back to her great grandparents. Their family history is recorded in this collection; the earliest represented relative of Gwendolyn is Edward Randolph, Sr., who was born into slavery in Virginia. He moved to Fairfield in the 1870s with his wife, Lottie Wilson and her sister Ida, who married William Miller. The next generation is represented with Ida Miller's nephew, Howard Wilson and her niece Lottie E. Randolph.

The Randolph and Ward families intersected in 1918 with the marriage of Harriet L. Randolph and Frederick W. Ward. Harriet and Frederick had six children: Charlotte, Nathaniel, Gwendolyn, Edith, Frederick Jr., Nelson, and adopted Stanley Jones. Many of the images identified by Gwendolyn feature the lives of her parents and siblings. The selection of images that were on display in the exhibit illustrated the personal ties and familial history represented in the collection.



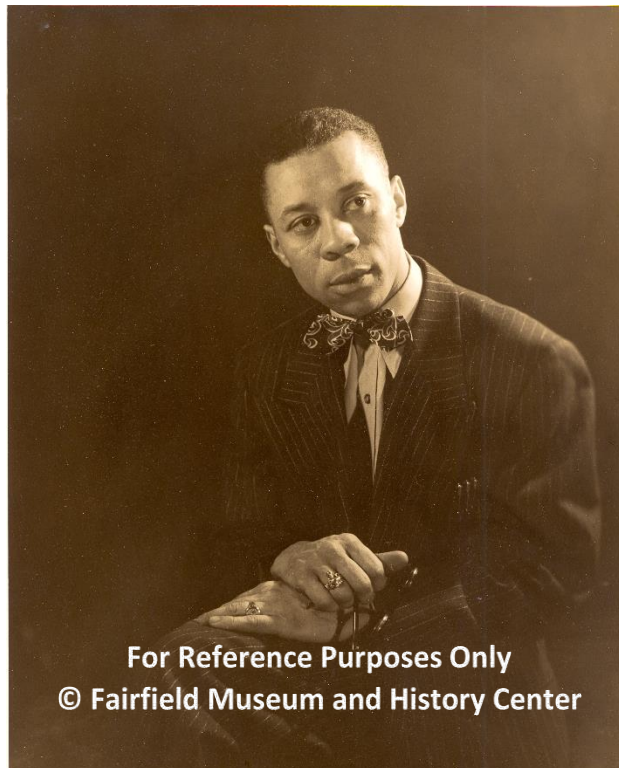
Harriet (left), Gwendolyn (center), and Charlotte Ward (right) at the White Swan in Norwalk, CT, c. 1943. Gift of Gwendolyn Ward, 2018, Ward and Randolph Family Collection, MSB 142.

Charlotte Ward Congo (1919-2015)

Photography seemed to be of special significance to Gwendolyn Ward's older sister Charlotte. Born in 1919, Charlotte Ward graduated from Roger Ludlowe High School in 1937. She was in the National Honor Society and was active in extracurricular activities, including the Camera Club, formed in 1936. Ward served as chairman of the Club's program committee. Perhaps this interest in photography stemmed from an already significant collection of family photos. She followed her interest in art and design when she enrolled at

New York University to study art. It is possible that she met her future husband, the photographer Ralph Earle Congo, at that time.

Charlotte Ward's dedication to community involvement continued into her adult life. She enrolled in the Women's Army Auxiliary Corps in 1942 and served in Iowa, Massachusetts, and Kentucky. She was a member of the Red Cross in Bridgeport, working as a secretary in the home services department. Ward was also active in the Order of the Eastern Star—a group related to the Masons that allowed women to be members. Later photos and ephemera in the Randolph Ward Collection demonstrate her continued involvement in the community and relationships with family and friends. She passed away in 2015, but is remembered in the numerous photos and documents found in this Collection.



Studio portrait of Ralph Earle Congo, c. 1930-40s. Gift of Gwendolyn Ward, 2018, Ward and Randolph Family Collection, MSB 142.

Ralph Earle Congo (1916-1977)

Marking his photographs with watermarks or stamps of his name and studio as a photographer, Ralph Earle Congo ties together the significance of Black representation in photography and the Ward family history. Congo was born in Pennsylvania in 1916 and by 1940 had moved to Fairfield. However, it would be a number of years before Congo became a professional photographer. He lodged with the Wards and

juggled a number of jobs, working as a chauffeur, a shoe shiner, and an oiler in an aluminum factory on Post Road.

In 1940, Ralph and Charlotte Ward were married. His stamped and marked photographs in the Randolph-Ward Collection, paired with information in city directories, help trace his career as well as his dedication to the medium. By 1949, Ralph had established Bel-Vue Portrait Studio in Bridgeport. The studio's name would change to Congo Portrait Studio just a year later.

Over the years, Congo operated a photography studio in no less than five different locations, in Bridgeport, Stratford, New Haven, and even in the home of the Ward family on Round Hill Road in Fairfield. He continued to operate a photography business until 1965. Congo's importance lies in his career as a local Black photographer and in his use of the medium to assert representation of Black Americans with respect, artistry, and even grandeur.

Black Photographers in Connecticut

The photographic collection of the Randolph and Ward families poses a vital question: Who took these photos? The Wards and Randolphs traveled to Bridgeport for their photographs to be taken, and while there is not yet evidence to suggest Black photographers were employed there, cities were often the sites of studios where Black photographers worked. Hartford was one such city, where relatively well-known Black photographer Augustus Washington operated his daguerreotype studio on Main Street.

Washington was born in New Jersey and was the son of a former slave. He learned the technique of taking daguerreotypes to help pay for expenses while he studied at Dartmouth in 1843. He left Dartmouth for Hartford in 1844, where he taught in a school for Black students before opening a photography studio in 1846. Despite his success in Hartford, Washington was concerned for the affairs of Black Americans—that freedom from slavery would not be enough to give them truly liberated lives. Washington decided to resettle in Liberia with his wife and children in 1853, where he continued to operate a daguerreotype studio and later became involved in the House and Senate.

Other Black photographers based in urban centers were Orrin J. Williams in Hartford in the 1870s, and in the early 20th century, Matthew Johnson, Richard Brown, Henry W. Mosley,

and Arthur Perkins in New Haven, and Erving Booker in Waterbury. These individuals likely worked in studios for other photographers, as was the case for Hartford-born Robert Coles Johnson. By the age of 25, Johnson was working as a photographer, an occupation he would continue for at least twenty years. With studios primarily specializing in portraiture, Black photographers like Johnson could aid in the effort of respectful representation of their communities.



Augustus Washington (1820 -1875), Senator John Hanson, c. 1856, Daguerreotype, Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division

This portrait of Liberian Senator John Hanson was taken about three years after Washington and his family had settled

in Liberia. This portrait was a part of eleven portraits of members of Liberia's senate.

The Early History of Photography

Photographic images first became available to the public in France in 1839, when Louis Daguerre built upon the pioneering work on heliographs (sun drawings) by fellow Frenchman Nicéphore Niépce. Not long after Daguerre's namesake technique the daguerreotype became accessible, it found its way across the Atlantic to America. In 1842, major manufacturer Scovill Manufacturing Company, located in Waterbury, Connecticut, became the first to produce daguerreotype plates in the United States. As the medium gained popularity, business took off.

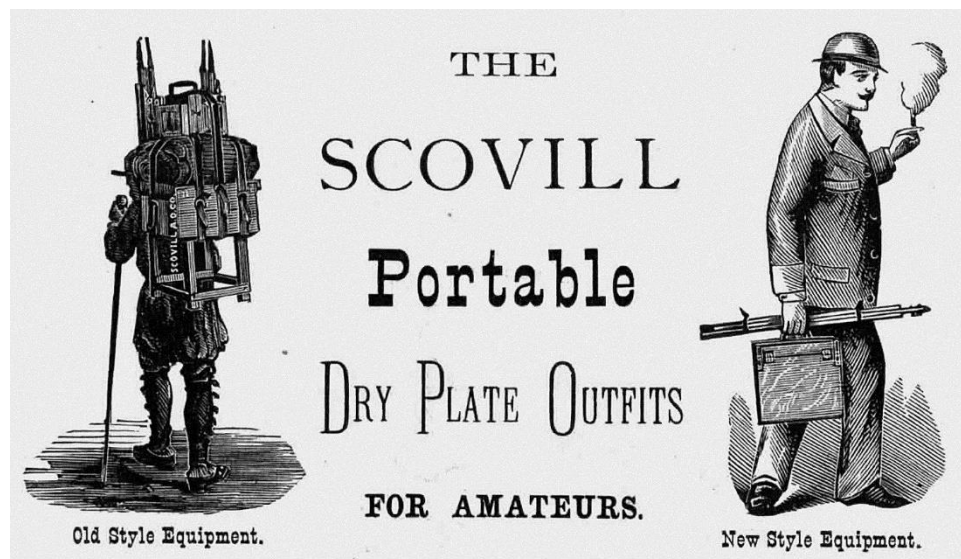


Illustration for Scovill Portable Dry Plate Outfits, c. late 19th century

Other forms of photography quickly developed after the daguerreotype, which made the technique simpler and more accessible. A popular form of portrait photograph in the late 19th century was the cabinet card. A less expensive process that resulted in multiple prints, cabinet cards were more accessible to the middle class than earlier forms of portrait photography. Cabinet cards can be found in the Randolph-Ward Collection, underscoring the meaning of photography for the Randolphins and Millers as a means of presenting themselves as respectable Black families only a couple decades after the Emancipation Proclamation was issued.

While studio photography and professional photographers were the main market for equipment manufacturers like Scovill Manufacturing, there was a growing interest in amateur photography. The process of taking photographs would truly be democratized by George Eastman, founder of the Kodak Company. By 1888, Eastman had developed the Kodak Camera, which came loaded with film that Kodak would then develop, print, and replace. Now accessible to the broader public, it was not long before further photographic developments allowed snapshots of family and friends to be just as common as portrait photography earlier in the medium's history.

From Studio to Snapshot

Self-representation was particularly important to Black Americans as a means of resistance. Sitting for a studio portrait meant crafting an image that countered racist or stereotypical perceptions of Black bodies. Portraits demonstrated Black Americans' ability to harness the new medium of photography to communicate respectability and humanity beginning in the Civil War era and into Reconstruction, when enslavement and emancipation were still vivid in public memory.

In the latter part of the 19th century, the images that comprise a sizeable portion of the Randolph-Ward Collection also demonstrate the families' middle-class status, which is evident in the clothing worn by the sitters and in the very nature of getting professional images taken. As time progressed and the medium of photography became more accessible thanks to companies like Kodak, more formal studio portraits gave way to informal snapshots. As early as 1888, with the Kodak No. 1 camera hitting the market, photography was increasingly in reach of Americans as a hobby. Soon, other cameras would be developed and taking pictures was no longer restricted to a studio.



Eastman Kodak Company Advertisement, *The Independent* (New York) May 6, 1909. Vol. LXVI, no. 3153. Archive.org

By the late 1910s and 1920s, cameras like the Kodak Brownie would become even more common, and portraits of family members would no longer feature rigid poses against painted backdrops. Alongside these formal representations, we see laughing friends from trade school, Harriet Randolph Ward and Frederick Ward, Sr. in front of their home, and groups of children in the pages of a family album. Sometimes blurry, sometimes over-exposed, these snapshots hold just as much significance as earlier portrait photography, with family members capturing intimate representations of Black joy, community, and togetherness.

Photography for Family

Careful inscriptions on some of the photographs in the Randolph-Ward Collection suggest a tradition of exchanging photographs between family members. These images and their exchange underscore how important photography was for these families to present their presence, worth, and connection both in the community and their family. Many of the photographs in this collection are unidentified, leaving us with more questions than answers. The rare note on a photograph becomes crucial to the understanding of an archive and often allows figures in other photographs to become identifiable.

Some inscriptions are more direct in identifying the person in the image and to whom it was given, like those between the Ward daughters and their parents, indicating a practice of giving photographs as gifts in the Ward family. Other inscriptions suggest more private meanings, like two small unidentified portrait snapshots that were displayed here. One shows a woman in a fur coat standing by a fence with a question posed on the reverse: “Do you know this old soul.” Who is pictured and for whom this was intended is unclear. This is the case with another snapshot of a man dressed in a suit, smiling by the steps of a house with a similar fenced garden behind him. The shadow of the photographer is cast across the bottom right corner. Perhaps it is the woman from the other inscribed photo, but it cannot be known for certain. The inscription on the back of this image asks, “And what do

you/think about this/Leonard.” We can sense the distance between us as outside observers and the relationships between the photographer, subject, and receiver. Yet we can still recognize the story and significance of photographs like these in revealing connections between family, friends, and community.



Group Portrait of Tuskegee Institute Singers, late 19th to early 20th century, inscribed on the reverse from Howard Wilson to his aunt Ida Wilson Miller and her husband William Henry Miller. Gift of Gwendolyn Ward, 2018, Ward and Randolph Family Collection, MSB 142.