



Peabody Museum
of Archaeology & Ethnology
at HARVARD UNIVERSITY

The Zealy Daguerreotypes Frequently Asked Questions

The Peabody Museum's daguerreotypes of African and African-American slaves are especially rare and historically important, both because of their subjects and because of the circumstances of their creation. Taken by Joseph Zealy, they were commissioned for Louis Agassiz, who hoped they would bolster the erroneous theory of polygenesis, which held that people of different races were of different origins.

FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

What are daguerreotypes?

Daguerreotypes are early photographs, most commonly produced from 1840 to 1860. Unlike later photographic processes, they are not produced using negatives. While negatives can be used to create multiple photographs, daguerreotypes are made directly "in-camera," making these types of photographs unique.

Why do they require special care?

Daguerreotypes are very fragile. They are complex objects made up of three components: an image layer of microscopic particles on a metal plate; a thin mat and cover glass; and a protective case. These components comprise a variety of materials, from silver to leather. Daguerreotypes are at risk from mechanical, biological, and chemical deterioration. In particular, some daguerreotypes can still be light sensitive and in recent years there has been concern regarding photochemical deterioration of images. Damage caused by light is permanent and cumulative. Because of the fragility of daguerreotypes, conservators recommend using digital surrogates to limit handling of the originals. The Peabody Museum works closely with the photographic conservation team at Harvard's Weissman Preservation Center to ensure the Zealy daguerreotypes are preserved and cared for in accordance with the highest professional standards.

Why are the Peabody Museum's daguerreotypes only shown twice a year?

The Weissman Preservation Center has undertaken extensive assessment of the condition of the Peabody Museum's daguerreotypes, including those taken by Zealy. Because of their importance, condition, age, and rarity, the Weissman Preservation Center has recommended that all daguerreotypes in the Peabody Museum's collections be limited to 10 hours of light exposure per daguerreotype per year.

The Peabody Museum coordinates these viewings to maximally accommodate faculty, classes, students, and researchers. While we understand that our viewing schedule may not work for all interested parties, we regret that we are unable to make exceptions. During the viewings, the Peabody Museum is careful to follow all guidelines provided by the Weissman Preservation Center, ensuring light levels are within recommendations and minimizing the amount of time the daguerreotypes are exposed. To this end, the Peabody Museum also provides faculty, classes, students, and researchers with viewing procedures to follow when working with the daguerreotypes (see *Class Visits to View Daguerreotypes*).



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Showing the daguerreotypes twice a year balances access for current faculty, students, and researchers with preservation needs, allowing the Peabody Museum to offer the unique opportunity of learning from these unique and important objects to future generations of scholars.

Does the Peabody Museum have other daguerreotypes and can I view those?

Yes, the collection does include other daguerreotypes, which can also be viewed in accordance with our policy for *Class Visits to View Daguerreotypes*.

Where can I view the Zealy daguerreotypes online?

The Zealy daguerreotypes, along with the rest of the Museum's daguerreotypes, may be viewed digitally at the Peabody Museum's Collections Online (<http://pmem.unix.fas.harvard.edu:8080/peabody/>).

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