

Earliest Known Photograph of Zoar Separatists

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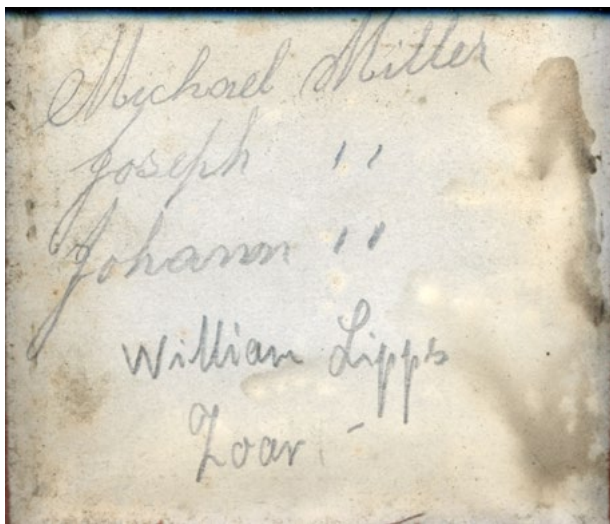
Unidentified photographer:

Michael, Joseph, and Johanna Miller, Zoar Separatists.

Sixth-plate daguerreotype (2.75 x 3.25 inches), Wm. B. Becker Collection

The name “Zoar”, found pencilled onto the hidden inner lining of a daguerreotype case, connects the image inside the case to life in one of the most successful utopian communities created in the 19th century. The liner note further identifies the sitters in the daguerreotype, who are Michael J. Miller (1807 -1893), his second wife Johanna Bader Miller (1800 – 1874), and their son Joseph (April 11, 1840 - 1900). It also contains the name of Michael and Johanna’s son-in-law, William Lipps (1846 -1921), although he is not pictured.

Daguerreotypes are unique images—there is no negative, so each one must be exposed individually in a camera. To make a daguerreotype, a flat piece of silver-plated copper was buffed to a mirror-like shine, then fumed



Pencil inscription found in the case beneath the daguerreotype. "William Lipps" refers to F. William Lipps (1846 - 1921), who married Michael and Johanna's daughter Louisa (1836 - 1914) in 1870.

with vapors of iodine and bromine. The fumes create a light-sensitive coating on the daguerreotype plate. After exposure in the camera (generally for a few seconds, rarely for a minute or more) the plate is returned to a darkroom where the image is developed with mercury vapor. The finished picture retains the mirror-like quality of the buffed plate, and needs to be held at a precise angle for viewing, but a well-made daguerreotype presents a wealth of sharp details and delicate gradations of light and shade. The surface of a daguerreotype is fragile and susceptible to being wiped away by the slightest touch, so the finished product was delivered sealed behind glass, and further protected by placement inside an embossed leather-covered folding case.

The daguerreotype process was the world's first practical method of photography, invented in France by the artist and showman Louis Jacques Mandé Daguerre (1787-1851) and made public in August of 1839. Within a month, daguerreotypes were being taken in the United States. During 1840, the first commercial portrait studios opened in major American cities. Later, smaller communities would get their own daguerreotype galleries, and itinerant photographers would bring photography to villages and crossroads throughout the country. Millions of daguerreotype portraits were made before technological advances in other photographic methods led to the near-abandonment of the daguerreotype process by the start of the Civil War.

Although many American communal societies were at their heights of population and prosperity in the 1840s and 1850s, daguerreotypes of their members and settlements are extremely rare or entirely unknown today. The Miller family portrait is thought to be the only daguerreotype to survive from Zoar, the utopian community located 38 miles south of Akron, Ohio.¹

The founders of Zoar, known as the Separatists, numbered nearly 300 when they escaped religious persecution in the kingdom of Württemberg in April of 1817, enduring a three-month ocean voyage to America. Importantly, women outnumbered men by two to one, and many of the immigrants were elderly or children. Among them was Michael J. Miller, then just ten years old.

The Separatists were aided financially by Quakers in both England and the United States. Shortly after their arrival in Philadelphia, the immigrants borrowed money to purchase 5,500 acres along the Tuscarawas River in Ohio. An advance party of Separatists attempted to build a settlement in the fall and winter of 1817 - 1818, and the rest of the group arrived in the Spring of 1818.² A disappointing first harvest and the challenge of supporting so many dependent children and elders led to dramatic changes to the immigrants' plans.

A constitution, signed by 53 men and 104 women in April of 1819 established Zoar as a communal society; the signers renounced private property, agreed to pool their assets, and pledged to make no claim for compensation of their labors if they were to leave the Society. Their directors and managers would be elected.

Despite the sharing of property, the new community struggled to pay its mortgage, leading to another dramatic change: the Separatists adopted celibacy in 1822, and even already-married couples were expected to live apart. The intent was to enable women to devote their time to farming and other productive labor, rather than to rearing children. Celibacy was officially ended in 1829, the result of a change in fortune for the Separatists and a devastating event that followed.

The fortuitous change for the Zoar Separatists was the construction of the Ohio & Erie Canal, whose route between the Ohio River and Lake Erie crossed seven miles of Zoar's land. The Separatists dug a section of the canal themselves, by hand, earning \$21,000 and enabling them to pay off the community's mortgage. Men and women labored together, carving out the 40-foot wide canal to a depth of at least four feet.³

Ironically, some of the Separatists had bitter experience with the back-breaking work of digging, in Württemberg, prior to their escape to America. About 60 Separatists were arrested and imprisoned in a fortress,

some for as long as 20 years, under orders of King Friedrich II. While there, they were forced to dig an artificial lake on the grounds of an old castle near the fortress. Since Friedrich did not want to see any prisoners when he visited the castle, their forced labor took place at night, even during cold weather—leading to illness, exhaustion, and even death.⁴

What incurred Friedrich's wrath? The group that eventually left Württemberg was part of a religious movement called Radical Pietism. This particular sect coalesced around a visionary Swiss-born woman named Barbara Grubenmann in the village of Rottenacker, around the year 1801.⁵ As explained by the scholar Elizabeth Siber White in her meticulously-researched Master's Thesis, this group developed a dozen "*Grundsätze*" (basic religious principles) that "conveyed a strong aversion to the ceremonies of the Lutheran Church, such as baptism, communion, confirmation, and marriage. These they considered not only useless but harmful and stated that these were the chief cause of their separation from the Church... Another *Grundsatz* disclosed their refusal to send their children to the state schools, since these 'schools of Babylon' taught 'wickedness and debauchery.' In addition, the Separatists refused to serve in the military and to render homage to their social superiors by bowing (and) removing their hats."⁶

Friedrich considered the Separatists to be enemies of the state for their refusal of military service, and the religious authorities were also threatened by the Separatists' defiant opposition to the sacraments of the Lutheran Church. As Elizabeth Siber White explains, "Their *Grundsätze* inevitably brought them into open conflict with the Württemberg government, which tended to regard religious rebellion as a threat to its existence. It is important to recognize that church and state remained united in German territories from the Peace of Augsburg in 1555 until 1918... Persecution would not be long in coming."⁷

Around the time of the persecution, Barbara Grubenmann fled the village of Rottenacker and disappears from the historical record.⁸ She was eventually replaced as a leader of the Separatists by a pipe maker named Johann Michael Bäumler (often Anglicized to "Bimeler"), who led the exodus to the group's place of refuge in Ohio.

Bimeler was a natural leader and a fluent speaker who delivered religious discourses without notes. He held the group together through the difficult sea voyage and the early struggles to carve out a settlement along the Tuscarawas River. And he led the Zoar Separatists through perhaps their biggest crisis, a cholera epidemic that killed a third of the Zoarites in 1834. The death toll was more than 50. The disease, caused by intestinal bacteria, was almost certainly brought into the community by

the newly-built canal — a devastating event that followed Zoar's change of fortune. Nearly half a century later, Michael Miller, who is depicted in the accompanying daguerreotype, spoke about the epidemic to an outsider who lived among the Separatists:

Michael, the Nestor of Zoar, has a reverent memory for Beimler,(sic) the old King of the Zoars. He tells how, when the cholera devastated the village, he would fearlessly go about ministering to the sick. He seemed to have a charmed life, for neither disease nor accident had power to quench his dauntless spirit. Michael's wife died miserably of cholera, and he, with one other only, buried her, without ceremony, as soon as life had departed. He attributes his immunity from the disease to an injection administered by a woman seven years older than he, whom afterward he married. One Notter he saw driving a four-horse team, at three o'clock one afternoon, perfectly well. Early next morning, at the cemetery, burying the dead, he asked, "Who is this?" and it was Notter. He died during the night. When one was taken with the deadly symptoms, a box was sent straightway to the house, and when breath left him he was hurried to the grave.⁹

It is difficult to know what "injection" is referenced in Michael Miller's reminiscence; a vaccine against cholera was many decades away, although treating the disease with infusions of saline solution was discussed in medical journals starting in 1831.¹⁰ Other details of this anecdote are correct: Johanna was Michael Miller's second wife, and also seven years his senior. She, too, lost a spouse to cholera.

Enterprise and Communism

The community recovered from the cholera epidemic, bringing in hired laborers and new immigrants from Germany. Zoar became a tourist magnet, with visitors arriving by canal or a later railroad link. Journalists and historians recorded the Separatists' unique social structure, often marveling at the cleanliness and cohesiveness of the village, where German was spoken and where women were entitled to equality of rights and duties. Food, clothing, and other necessities were distributed without exchange of money, as were locally-produced beer, wine, and hard cider. For many years, children were housed communally rather than in family units.

Constance F. Woolson, at the start of an important literary career, declared Zoar to be “Happy Valley” in *Harper’s Monthly* in 1870:

The inhabitants of Happy Valley, ignorant of the value of money, and living in the simplest manner, are yet a rich community, owing to their industrious habits and systematic labor. Their domain consists of over ten thousand acres of highly cultivated land, a coal mine, and a bed of iron ore; they have several large mills and factories, as their invariable rule is to manufacture every thing they use; their cattle are models of beauty, and their horses powerful and well groomed. One bakery supplies all the bread, one laundry attends to the washing, and one nursery receives all the little ones, while their mothers take part in the active labors of the field or dairy. Their morality is without a flaw, for since the foundation of the community there has never been a case of law-breaking among them, and their lives flow on as peacefully as though the hills were permanent barriers between them and the noisy, busy, wicked world.¹¹



A Harvest Scene, Zoar, late 1880s. The Ohio History Connection identifies the older man in the center as Michael J. Miller. However, the same source identifies him as Society of Separatists Trustee Jacob Ackerman in another listing (number 2595) for this image. Courtesy Ohio History Connection, number 3198.

Michael J. Miller's multiple occupations reflected the numerous enterprises of the Separatists. In his youth, he herded cattle on Zoar's farms, later working in milling, carpentering, and engineering.¹² The 1850 census lists his occupation as "founder", presumably working at the community's Fairfield Furnace, producing pig iron using coal and iron ore extracted from Zoar's property. In the 1860 census, he was listed as "Mast. Iron Founder", perhaps indicating he was in charge of the foundry. In the 1860 census, Joseph, then age 20, was also working at an iron foundry. No occupation was specified for Johanna in either 1850 or 1860, although Mary Platz, a 56-year old woman who lived a few doors away from the Millers, had an occupation listed in the 1860 census: "Mast. Baker."

By the time the census takers arrived in 1870, both Michael J. Miller, age 63, and his 70-year-old wife Johanna, had retired from active labor; under the heading "Profession, Occupation, or Trade of each person, male or female" they are described as "At home." Joseph Miller was no longer living in Zoar, the result of a contentious split with his parents and community early in the Civil War.

While the Zoar Separatists were staunchly opposed to slavery and strongly pro-Union, one of their "*Grundsätze*" (basic religious principles) was a prohibition against military service. Despite this, seven young men from Zoar were recruited into the Union army in September, 1861. Of these, five left before assuming any military duties - either brought back by the community for being too young to serve, or leaving of their own accord in a day or so.¹³ One of the young recruits who did not serve was 21-year-old Joseph Miller.

Ordinarily, at the age of 21, Joseph would have been expected to sign the Covenant to become a voting member of the Society of Separatists. Instead, his parents sent him away to the Rappite community of Economy, Pennsylvania, another utopian experiment started by German Radical Pietists who fled Württemberg. Michael Miller explained the situation in a letter to R. L. Baker, the Senior Trustee and Spiritual Leader of Economy:

Dear Friend Baker,

Circumstances force me to write you a few lines. The person bringing this letter to you is my son. He committed an error in my absence by becoming a volunteer soldier, along with others. They were not all yet adults and could get free from the recruiters, who have no right to recruit minors. We could also obtain my son's freedom because it could be shown that the recruiters almost forced them to sign, though [our action] was complicated and gave the Society a bad name. And he regretted it and told me

he would leave himself. So his mother and I have given him the advice to go to you, which he willingly accepted, though he wishes that none would know where he is. I gladly agreed to this, for my conscience does not [allow me to] permit him to become a soldier if he regrets [having taken that step].¹⁴

Joseph worked in Economy for nine and a half years. He married German-born Maggie Schellkopf in 1867, and they moved to Bolivar, Ohio, about three miles from Zoar. There, Joseph owned a greenhouse and worked as the foreman of a planing mill.¹⁵

The End Times Come to “Happy Valley”

Johanna Miller died in 1874; her official cause of death was “Old Age”. Michael Miller lived out his days in Zoar as an esteemed elder; a photograph, probably from the 1880s, shows him smiling and holding an open book. At his death in 1893 he was the last of the original refugees who started Zoar.¹⁶ Five years later, in 1898, the remaining members of the community voted to dissolve the Society of Separatists. The property of the Society was divided among the members, while livestock and pieces of equipment were sold at auction. Thus ended an experiment in utopian living that prospered in Ohio for most of its 80 years.

What brought about the end? Those who have studied Zoar’s history offer a number of explanations. The canal, and later the railroad, brought outsiders into the community’s “Happy Valley,” ranging from roughneck canal boatmen to hired farmhands to genteel tourists eager to gawk at the Separatists in their quaint Old World clothing. On a deeper level, as the original immigrants died off, younger generations lost touch with the memories of the persecutions that caused the Separatists to leave their homes, to brave being tossed by the ocean for three long months, and to survive hardships and disease. Finally, the death of Zoar’s spiritual leader Joseph Bimeler in 1853 is widely regarded as the beginning of the community’s long decline. Bimeler’s leadership was not limited to religious matters; he is also credited with guiding Zoar on its path to prosperity.

A member of the Oneida Community in Central New York, William Alfred Hinds, traveled to Zoar along with other utopian and socialistic societies around the country, in preparation for his 1878 book, *American Communities*. Summing up his visit to Zoar, he recounted an exchange with an unidentified Separatist (*could it have been Michael J. Miller?*):

In reviewing my observations at Zoar I am forced to admit that I saw there few signs of superior culture, and that many a village of the same size in our Northern States surpasses it in enterprise and in facilities for educational development; but when I asked, "What advantages do you enjoy over common society by reason of your Communism?" I got an answer that made me think their life might be richer and nobler than appears from any consideration of externals: "The advantages are many and great. All distinctions of rich and poor are abolished. The members have no care except for their own spiritual culture. Communism provides for the sick, the weak, the unfortunate, all alike, which makes their life comparatively easy and pleasant. In case of great loss by fire or flood or other cause, the burden which would be ruinous to one is easily borne by the many. Charity and genuine love one to another, which are the foundations of true Christianity, can be more readily cultivated and practiced in Communism than in common, isolated society. Finally, a Community is the best place in which to get rid of selfishness, willfulness, and bad habits and vices generally; for we are subject to the constant surveillance and reproof of others, which, rightly taken, will go far toward preparing us for the large Community above." ¹⁷



J. C. Haring (active Masillon, Ohio): Michael J. Miller late in life, reading Cabinet card, 1880s. Courtesy Ohio History Connection, number 3236.



Professor Wade (b. England, active in Ohio, USA): “Likeness of (John) Edward Luckenbach and Wife,” Sixth plate daguerreotype (2.75 x 3.25 inches), 1849.

Professor Wade was the only person in Tuscarawas County, Ohio with the profession “Daguerrean Artist” in the 1850 Census.

Wm. B. Becker Collection/PhotographyMuseum.com

Addendum

Who made the daguerreotype portrait of the Millers of Zoar?

One possibility is a mysterious photographer who lived and worked in the town of Canal Dover, about eight miles by road from Zoar, or 9.7 miles by canal. He went by the name Professor Wade, and shows up in the 1850 census, where his first name seems to be recorded as “Profisser” and his occupation is “Daguerrean Artist.” Wade was born in England and was 30 years old, living in a multi-family house along with 17-year old Matilda Wade and two children, one-year-old Victoria Wade and two-month-old Albert Wade.

At least two other daguerreotypes by Professor Wade are known, taken just over a month apart in 1849. Shown here is a portrait of the Canal Dover tinsmith John Edward Luckenbach (1819 - 1898) and his wife

Amanda Josephine Grider (1828 - 1856). In addition to a note penned on the case liner, the back of the daguerreotype plate itself has an inscription scratched into the copper: “Likeness of Edward Luckenbach and wife Canal Dover Tuscarawas County Ohio USA. Taken by Prof Wade in 44 seconds Aug 22, 1849”

A sixth-plate of a man and his dog, another rare example with the exposure time recorded, is in the collection of the Nelson-Atkins Museum in Kansas City, object 2005.27.4726. An enclosed note reads, “Benjamin Helsing, taken Canal Dover, Ohio, September 20, 1849, by Professor Wade in 8 seconds PM.”

Another possible maker of the Zoar daguerreotype is listed in *W. W. Reilly & Co.'s Ohio State Business Directory for 1853-4* (Cincinnati: Morgan & Overend, Printers, 1853, p 177). The only entry for Tuscarawas County under the heading “Daguerrean Artists” is for O. B. Walling of Canal Dover. No further information seems to be available on this daguerreotypist.

A Daguerreian “Pentimento”

A vertical line running adjacent to Johanna Miller’s bonnet on the right side of the daguerreotype (next page) looks at first glance like it might be a seam in a backdrop, but turns out to be something else entirely. Using a popular image-editing program, the area behind the figures was increased in color saturation, then the R-G-B color levels were manipulated separately to bring out a fragmentary hidden image. The vertical line next to Johanna Miller now looks like it might be part of a fence post or sign, and there is the suggestion of lettering and, perhaps, something braided appearing over Michael Miller’s head. This ghost image is almost certainly a trace of a previous exposure that was buffed from the plate’s surface so that it could be re-used for the Miller family.

In the world of paintings, a detail that the artist tried to cover up and paint over will sometimes bleed through (or otherwise become visible), or be detected at a later date. The term for this is “pentimento,” from the Italian word for repentance.



Notes

1. Photographs of Zoar and its residents from later in the nineteenth century are available; Kathleen M. Fernandez published examples from the Ohio Historical Society (now known as Ohio History Connection) in *A Singular People: Images of Zoar* (Kent, Ohio: Kent State University Press, 2003).
 2. Elizabeth Siber White, *The Wiedergeburt in the Religion of the Zoarites*, Master's Thesis, Western Michigan University, 1985, p. 10.
 3. Ibid., 62-63. See also: Ohio History Central, "Ohio and Erie Canal," accessed online August 2021, https://ohiohistorycentral.org/w/Ohio_and_Erie_Canal.
 4. Eberhard Fritz, "From Wuerttemberg to Zoar: Origins of a Separatist Community," *American Communal Societies Quarterly* 13, no. 1 (January 2019): 44-45.
 5. Ibid., 36.
 6. White, *The Wiedergeburt in the Religion of the Zoarites*, 5-6.
 7. Ibid., 6.
 8. Fritz, "From Wuerttemberg to Zoar," 44.
 9. Alexander Gunn, *The Hermitage-Zoar Note-book and Journal of Travel* (New York: De Vinne Press, 1902), 51-52.
 10. Walter J. Daly, Herbert L. DuPont, "The Controversial and Short-Lived Early Use of Rehydration Therapy for Cholera," *Clinical Infectious Diseases* 47, no. 10 (November 15, 2008): 1315-19.
 11. Constance F. Woolson, "The Happy Valley," *Harper's New Monthly Magazine* 41, no. 242 (July 1870): 285.
- Kathleen M. Fernandez notes that Woolson exaggerated the amount of land owned by the community, which was never more than 8,724 acres, and less at the time of Woolson's article.
12. *History of Tuscarawas County, Ohio* (Chicago: Warner, Beers & Co., 1884), 788.
 13. Philip E. Webber, *Zoar in the Civil War* (Kent, Ohio: The Kent State University Press, 2007), 11-12.
 14. Ibid., 12. Translated from the German by Prof. Webber, who cites the location of the original letter as MSS 110 AV, box 86, folder 1 of the Zoar manuscript collection, Ohio Historical Society.
 15. *History of Tuscarawas County, Ohio*.
 16. Fernandez, *A Singular People*, 151.
 17. William Alfred Hinds, *American Communities: Brief Sketches of Economy, Zoar, Bethel, Aurora, Amana, Icaria, the Shakers, Oneida, Wallingford and the Brotherhood of the New Life* (Oneida, New York: Office of the American Socialist, 1878), 38.