Notes on “The Voyage of the USS Juniata (1883–1885)”

John Dowling, Curator

The images included in the June 2013 Cross-Currents photo essay, “The Voyage of the USS Juniata (1883–1885),” are digital scans made from a set of five-by-eight-inch glass plate negatives depicting scenes from a three-year (1883–1885) naval expedition to the Far East by the USS Juniata. The photographer was Asa M. Mattice, an officer on board (figure 1). Mattice, a native of New York State, graduated from the U.S. Naval Academy at the head of his class as a cadet engineer in 1874 and was later appointed to the teaching staff at Annapolis. He served on the USS Juniata beginning on November 30, 1882, when the ship departed from New York to join five other ships at the Asiatic Squadron. Mattice left the navy in 1889 and for the next ten years was associated with E. D. Leavitt of Boston as a consulting engineer. He later served as chief engineer for the Westinghouse Electric and Manufacturing Company. In 1920 he was an advisory engineer for the Remington Arms Union Metallic Cartridge Company. He died suddenly of pneumonia on April 19, 1925, at the Engineer’s Club in New York, where he lived, and was buried upstate in Buffalo.

The negatives of the images featured here were acquired from an antique dealer in Syracuse, New York, in 1998 by a friend and business associate with whom I share an interest in vintage photography.¹ My friend, Sue, has authored several books on vintage clothing and was seeking photographs to document the period garb illustrated in her books. She purchased the box of negatives from the dealer at the Regional Market in Syracuse, who had, in turn, acquired them from a “picker” who specialized in glass. I traded some photographic services on my friend’s book in exchange for the negatives.

Digital scanning enabled me to improve the quality of the prints by removing dust spots, cracks, and areas where the photographic emulsion had peeled away; I also
adjusted contrast and tone to make the images more true to the original scenes and to enhance the viewing experience. Contact prints made directly from the negatives were featured at the 29th Annual Light Work Grant Exhibition at the Robert B. Menschel Media Center at Syracuse University in 2003. This exhibition was the first step in an ongoing research and restoration project with the Mattice Collection. In 2012, contact prints and several enlargements made from high-resolution scans were shown at the Institute of East Asian Studies gallery at the University of California at Berkeley in an exhibit titled “Of Power and Profit: American Seamen in Asian Waters.”

Figure 1. Self-portrait by Asa M. Mattice. Source: Private collection of John Dowling.

When I acquired the collection, the negatives were stored in a cardboard box in separate paper envelopes, some of which had handwritten numbers and identifications on them. Numbers were also scratched into the photographic emulsion of some negatives, a common practice among practitioners of the “wet plate” process that was carried into the “dry plate” era during which Mattice worked as well. This minimal information formed the basis of my research. The captions provided in the photo essay and in these comments contain information provided by Mattice, as well as information that I have gathered over the years from a variety of primary and secondary sources, including original ships’ deck
logs in the “Records of the Bureau of Naval Personnel,” correspondence from the “Letters Received by the Secretary of the Navy from Captains” housed at the U.S. National Archives, and related photographs and illustrations found on the Internet and in books. The deck logs list the names of officers and personnel onboard and give a day-by-day record of the ship’s location and direction. Weather conditions, disciplinary actions, passenger exchanges with other ships, and other mundane matters are also noted. Matters of greater consequence regarding the ships’ missions are more likely to be discussed in Letters to the Secretary.

I also consulted the detailed journals of Dr. George W. Woods, the forty-six-year-old ship’s surgeon aboard the Juniata, which are in the library collection at Washington State University (WSU) and were, coincidentally, published by the Institute of East Asian Studies (IEAS)—home of Cross-Currents—at the University of California at Berkeley (Bohm and Swartout 1984). Woods’s extant writings begin in Singapore in September 1883, when the Juniata assisted in relief efforts following the eruption of Krakatoa, and end when the Juniata was in Zanzibar in the summer of 1885. According to Bohm and Swartout, five of the thirty-one folders that comprise the collection deal specifically with Woods’s visit to Korea; the remaining unpublished folders deal with Dr. Woods’s travels in China and Japan and his return voyage to New York by way of Zanzibar and Madagascar.

The website for WSU’s archives describes the doctor’s journal thus:

[Woods’s] descriptions of persons, places, scenes, costumes, architecture and customs reveal a questioning spirit and an inquiring mind. He is, perhaps, the epitome of the American tourist: with a guide and possibly an interpreter, Woods set out to see all the sights, visit all the curio shops and exclaim at the curious customs of the natives. At the height of anti-foreign feeling in China, he walked unaccompanied through the city streets savoring the sights, sounds and smells of the Orient. As a doctor Woods was often called upon to treat those in need and so had access to the houses and palaces of the humble and the mighty, the poor and the rich.

In addition to information provided by primary sources, some general historical background information is necessary to provide a context for viewing the photos and appreciating their historical significance. While the Civil War brought many
technological advances in military hardware, from firearms to ironclad vessels, the end of that conflict was followed by a period of de-emphasis on military advances in favor of rebuilding a shattered nation. Strategic planning at this time was largely guided and influenced by the writings of Rear Admiral Alfred Thayer Mahan, whose ideas were outlined in *The Influence of Sea Power upon History, 1660–1783*, published in 1890. Eventually, persistent efforts by naval officers would persuade Congress and the Department of the Navy to restructure the fleet in the early 1880s. Growing trade with the Far East and an increasing desire to be independent of England for protection on the high seas helped to generate widespread support for this effort. The transition from a policy of isolationism to one of imperialism would require ships capable of distant operation with armored hulls and long-range guns.

Mattice’s photos help document the period between the end of the Civil War and the beginning of the “new navy,” an era considered by some to be “a time of naval doldrums in the United States” (Apt 1997, 88). New construction during this period reverted back to wooden hulls and coal-burning steam engines aided by sails. Firepower lagged behind as well. Ironically, this period of recuperation from war did not serve the navy badly. As Lance Buhl (1984) points out, other nations paid the price of experimenting with new designs, while the American navy waited and watched. When the United States decided to build new ships of competitive strength, American engineers had no difficulty closing the gap. Until then, the country relied largely on ships like the USS *Juniata*, a steam screw sloop-of-war built in 1862 (figure 2), and the USS *Trenton* and USS *Enterprise*, built in 1876 and 1877, respectively.

The USS *Juniata*, named after a river in Pennsylvania that empties into the Susquehanna, is a vessel rich in history. During the Civil War, she patrolled the West Indies out of Havana, where she gained notoriety capturing English ships trading with the Confederacy. She captured the British steamer *Victor* eight miles off Morro Castle, Cuba, on May 28, 1863. On June 13 she took the schooner *Fashion*, which was loaded with chemicals critically needed by the Confederacy. The next day she captured the schooner *Elizabeth*, followed on July 2 by the *Don Jose*. She continued to cruise the West Indies, escorting California-bound ships to safe waters and watching for Confederate cruisers and blockade runners until she returned to New York at the end of 1863. She spent the
first half of 1864 under repair in Philadelphia before departing on August 12 in search of the Confederate cruiser *Tallahassee*, reported off Sandy Hook, New Jersey. Five days later she joined the North Atlantic Blockading Squadron operating out of Hampton Roads.

![Figure 2. The USS Juniata firing a salute with crew members manning the yards in the rigging, c. 1980s. Source: Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division (LC-D4–20028).](image)

In December 1864 she steamed to Wilmington, Delaware, a powerful stronghold and blockade running center, to participate in offensive operations by the Union Army against the Confederacy. During this operation, as reported in the *Dictionary of American Naval Fighting Ships (DANFS)*,

she was in the thick of the fighting during the first attack on Fort Fisher, closing Southern batteries to get in position for effective bombardment. Her daring on this occasion, which cost her two officers and three men killed and eleven men wounded, was again displayed during the second attack on Fort Fisher from January 13–15, 1865. Five more of her men were killed and ten wounded in this assault, which wrestled Wilmington from Confederate hands, sealing off the Confederacy from effective foreign aid. (Mooney 1968, 577)
The Juniata was then transferred to the South Atlantic Blockading Squadron. After visiting Port Royal to repair some of the damage sustained at Fort Fisher, she supported General Sherman’s drive north into South Carolina. After the Civil War she sailed to South America, Africa, and Europe before being decommissioned in the Boston Navy Yard on July 10, 1872. Recommissioned in 1873, she sailed for the west coast of Greenland in search of survivors of the USS Polaris, whose hull had been crushed by ice while the ship explored the Arctic. After a cruise in the Caribbean, the Juniata sailed for the European station on May 6, 1874, and she remained on duty there until returning to Baltimore on February 6, 1876. She decommissioned at Norfolk on September 1, 1876, but, rising once again like a phoenix, was recommissioned in New York on October 30, 1882.

It is at this point that the story documented by the images in the accompanying photo essay begins. Under Commander George Dewey, the Juniata departed on a three-year voyage that took her around the world, through the Strait of Gibraltar and the Suez Canal to Bandar Abbas, Karachi, Bombay, Ceylon, Madras, Calcutta, Rangoon, Singapore, Hong Kong, Shanghai, Nagasaki, and Seoul. Her return took her from Singapore to Zanzibar, Mozambique, Madagascar, Cape Town, and back to New York. Among the officers listed in the ship’s log was Passed Assistant Engineer Asa M. Mattice.

Most of the information I have been able to obtain about these images is included in their individual captions. Several images stand out as being particularly interesting. Take, for example, “Percival Lowell and Korean Group” (the title Mattice wrote on the envelope containing the negative) (figure 3). I wondered if this Percival Lowell was the renowned astronomer who claimed that there was life on Mars. Through my research, I discovered that, indeed, between the ages of twenty-one and thirty, that same Lowell had been a travel writer living in Japan and had traveled throughout Asia. He later published several books, including Soul of the Far East (1888). Lowell settled in Korea after some years in Japan and accompanied the first Korean delegation to the United States in 1883, a visit resulting from the Treaty of Friendship between the two countries. The group in the photo appears to be situated on a hill, perhaps overlooking a city, as suggested by the
map at the base of the camera tripod. The map is being held down by the lens cap of the camera and a stone next to a bottle of Bass Pale Ale.

Figure 3. Percival Lowell and Korean group, Jenchuan, Korea (1884). Photograph by Asa M. Mattice. Source: Private collection of John Dowling.

Another image I enjoyed researching is one that Mattice titled “Palace of the Sultan of Zanzibar” (figure 4). Knowing little of the history or architecture of East Africa, I confirmed Mattice’s identification by comparing the photograph to illustrations and later photographs of the palace available via the Internet.

Figure 4. Palace of the Sultan of Zanzibar, Tanzania (1885). Photograph by Asa M. Mattice. Source: Private collection of John Dowling.
The palace appears to have been the central, and oldest, structure of a group of buildings on the seafront called “Beit-al-Sahel.” Later, it was connected by pedestrian bridges to the adjacent buildings. The building to the left of the palace was called “Beit-al-Hakum,” or Harem House; the building to its right was called “Beit-al-Ajaib,” or House of Wonders. Several factors complicated my search. The original palace with its distinctive arches was nearly destroyed by the British bombardment of 1896 (figure 5). The Beit-al-Hakum was totally destroyed. Subsequently, the sultan and his harem moved to the Beit-al-Ajaib, which became known as the Sultan’s Palace. With the addition of a clock tower, this building is today the dominant structure on the waterfront and serves as the Palace Museum (figure 6).

Figure 5. Destroyed buildings after the attack in the Anglo-Zanzibar War, 1896. Photo by Richard Dorsey Mohun (1865–1915). *Source:* Wikimedia Commons.

Figure 6. Stone Town view showing the Palace Museum with clock tower, Zanzibar. *Source:* Wikimedia Commons.
There is a thrill in making connections between resources that have never been
connected before. In photography, this thrill can come from something as simple as
ascribing credit to a previously unknown artist or placing a name to a previously
unidentified place or face. It can come from exhaustive investigation chasing down leads
and following hunches, or it can be as serendipitous as the case here, in which one
writer’s journal has been connected with a photographer’s images of the same journey.

I plan to continue to research the Juniata’s journey and Mattice’s photos by
examining George Woods’s manuscripts relating to China, Japan, and other places along
the ship’s route. I believe that photographs, when analyzed carefully, can have great
historical value. A fast-paced culture has made our understanding of the world more
visual than it used to be. Written records provide essential information, but pictures can
provide a complementary, and thus more complete, understanding of the past.

John Dowling is a photographer who has been working in corporate, advertising, and
editorial markets in Central New York since 1981.

Notes

1 I first became interested in historical photographs when I did research on Civil War
photographer and New Yorker George Barnard for my master’s thesis in
photojournalism. Barnard was a modest man who created many photographs
credited to Mathew Brady during and after the American Civil War. He is best
known for his documentation of the General William Tecumseh Sherman’s
campaign.

2 Available at http://ntserver1.wsulibs.wsu.edu/masc/finders/cg105.htm.

References

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