

Margaret



Futermeister

CHRONICLING SEEN AND UNSEEN WORLDS

1894-1909

by

JUDITH ARLENE BOOKBINDER

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The Milton Historical Society

Milton, Massachusetts

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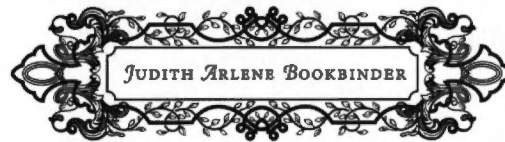
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I found Margaret Sutermeister's work preserved in her glass negatives in the archives of the Milton Historical Society where I had gone in search of visual material for an exhibition that I was curating on the history of southeastern Massachusetts. Getting to know her has been an exciting and illuminating experience. Sharing her life and her work with others has given and continues to give me much satisfaction. This effort would have been impossible without the enthusiastic cooperation and support of the Milton Historical Society. The Society not only permitted unlimited access to the Sutermeister collection of prints and negatives from which all the exhibited and published photographs have come, but it also provided initial funding for presentation materials as well as essential research assistance. Edith Clifford and Ann Thompson, who handled the daunting effort of local research assisted by Jeanette Peverly, supported these efforts every step of the way. Richard Heath, Kevin Donahue and Sunny Merritt guided the project over many hurdles.

Professor Ronald Polito of the University of Massachusetts/Boston confirmed my assessment of Sutermeister's work and provided invaluable guidance for my research. Dr. Catherine McCue read the manuscript and provided much wisdom and hands-on research help as well. Dr. Sarah Peabody Turnbaugh of the Museum of Primitive Art and Culture searched out the identity of the Native American basket makers, and Lorna Condon of the Society for the Preservation of New England Antiquities provided valuable information on contemporary local photographers. The support of Dr. Albert Whitaker of the Massachusetts State Archives, James Igoe of the Commonwealth Museum, Theodore Penn of the Duke's County Historical Society Museum, Marie-Helene Gold of the Schlesinger Library, Patricia Senechal of the Milton Public Schools, and Ann Neely and Gordon Chase of Milton Academy was essential to providing exhibition sites and support for funding requests.

Finally, this effort could not have succeeded without the help of my family, my sons Adam and Noah, whose enthusiasm is contagious, and my husband Paul who is always there no matter what to provide guidance and encouragement. In the spirit of Margaret Sutermeister's love of family, this work is dedicated to them.





1 Self-Portrait with Camera Case

Who Was Margaret Sutermeister?

An obituary in The Milton Record of June 2, 1950 announced that "Miss Margaret Sutermeister of 1631 Canton Avenue died on Tuesday at Milton Hospital after a long illness. She was born in Milton 75 years ago and lived all her life in the town." Beyond this scant assessment, little can be documented of Margaret Sutermeister's life. A former neighbor recalls her as the "flower lady" since she ran a floral nursery on the grounds of her home and cheerfully provided flowers for community events. Not long before her death, her pastor at the First Parish Church in Milton had quietly given her a small sum of money out of his discretionary fund because he worried that her neglected appearance was due to her inability to afford better care. She repaid his kindness by leaving a substantial bequest to the church in her will.

However, her most significant bequest to the future lay totally forgotten in a calico-covered crate in the barn adjacent to her home. There, in 1951 the new owners of the house at 1631 Canton Avenue found a cache of eighteen hundred glass negatives taken by Margaret Sutermeister between approximately 1894 and 1909. They were still stored in groups of ten in the original boxes in which the unexposed glass plates had been purchased. Each box was marked only with a hand-written sequential indicator from "First" to "One hundred and eighty-second."

In the collection of the Milton Historical Society, a set of one hundred "Views of Milton" in a fine oak box with a brass plaque recording the donation of the gift to the town in 1904 by James Munson Barnard corroborates the identity of the photographer who created the glass negatives. In the box along with the photographs neatly labelled in white and mounted on grey cardboard

is another sheet of cardboard stating that these photographs were taken by Margaret Sutermeister. The negatives of these photographs are among the eighteen hundred in Sutermeister's storage box. Two extant photographic albums from the attic on Canton Avenue contain the only other surviving original prints from the glass plates. A third and later album from the same location contains labelling which matches that used in the "Views of Milton" set.

Thus we are confronted by an enigma. How could the woman who lived and died so quietly have been the creator of such a large body of early photographic work without leaving a trace in the collective memory of the town she inhabited for seventy-five years and recorded with such diligence? What motivated her to undertake the arduous task of handling complex and cumbersome equipment to photograph the world around her? And, having done it, why did she abandon her effort to oblivion? The unraveling of the mystery begins with Margaret Sutermeister herself and the environment in which she came of age (1).

Sutermeister was the product of the same diverse forces which formed the multi-faceted character of her commu-

nity as a whole. On the side of her mother, Harriet Georgiana Davenport, she was descended from two families, the Babcocks and the Davenports, who had lived in Milton for generations. Robert Babcock, a farmer, had come to Milton from England in 1656, and John Davenport had moved to Milton from Dorchester in 1706 where his parents had first settled after coming from England in 1664. Both the Davenports and the Babcocks purchased land on Canton Avenue, and Nathaniel Davenport, Jr. established Milton's first professional flower nursery there around the turn of the nineteenth century. Lewis Davenport brought the two families together with his marriage to Margaret Babcock in 1834. They moved to 1631 Canton Avenue where Harriet Georgiana Davenport and her three sisters were born and where the family florist business continued to develop.

Emanuel Sutermeister, Margaret's father, came to Milton as a boy from his home in Boston to work in Lewis Davenport's nursery. He was the son of Franz Xavier Ludwig (Frank) Sutermeister who had recently immigrated to the United States from Switzerland in 1846 and had married his cousin Emma in Boston in the same year. They had nine children including Emanuel. Typical of large

working class families at the time, they sent Emanuel out early to earn his own living. He took to the florist business immediately and distinguished himself with his employer who continued to promote him and ultimately designated Sutermeister as his successor. Testimony to Sutermeister's professional success is evident in his obituary which appeared in *The Milton Record* at the time of his unexpected death in 1909. It presents a telling if somewhat "flowery" assessment of his talents and personality: "Fragrant and beautiful evidence of the high place held by the late Emanuel Sutermeister in the memory of his business associates and other friends, was given Sunday afternoon by a most magnificent floral display at the funeral services." In 1874, Sutermeister married Harriet Davenport, second oldest of Lewis Davenport's daughters, and they all lived together at 1631 Canton Avenue where Margaret was born in 1875 and her brother Edwin the following year (2).

Thus Margaret Sutermeister embodied both the richness and the tensions of a union of long-standing tradition and new talent, of insiders and outsiders. The world in which she grew manifested that same dichotomy of established order and exciting innovation. The nineteenth century was an age of intense

inventive and entrepreneurial activity, of a belief in the transforming nature of science, in progress, in the future. New technologies utilizing steam and electric power revolutionized transportation, bringing worlds closer together. Ideas could be communicated over miles through wires. Everything was moving at greater speed than before. People were drawn from rural communities to urban centers where jobs beckoned in new factories which mass-produced commodities such as furniture, utensils, tools and clothing of increasing variety and at decreasing cost, bringing comforts and conveniences to many households.

Women were particularly affected by these changes. The time and effort of household chores was reduced by labor-saving devices like the cast iron stove, and women were particularly encouraged to leave the farm and enter the factory where they labored many hours for low pay but still experienced new-found independence. The typewriter and the sewing machine, in particular, were inventions which took women into professional workplaces. Universal public education, widespread public library systems, and women's clubs brought increased literacy to the population in general and inspired the clamor for voting rights and improved higher

education for women in particular. The proportion of women who married, and birthrates among those who did, declined dramatically in the last four decades of the nineteenth century as women saw new opportunities beyond the prescribed sphere of traditional family life.¹

These new dimensions to life in the late Victorian period offered many opportunities but also presented real threats to the stability which most middle and upper class people cherished. This tension was reflected in the effort to absolutize the dominant values of Victorian society, to create structures that clearly defined the role of the individual, and to legitimize these values and structures by identifying them with tradition or nature. Thus, one's role was defined in terms of that which was natural or that which had always been. Victorian society glorified the woman as feminine, as mother, as supporter of husband, as caretaker within the home. Man was seen as the supporter of his family through his efforts outside the home: as primary earner, as creator or inventor, as entrepreneur.² The conflicted view of women's roles is evident in admonishments in contemporary journals:

NO WOMANLY WOMAN EVER TAKES THE HELM
AND SAILS OUT INTO THE STRONG WATERS
WITH ALL THE RESPONSIBILITIES OF LIFE
RESTING ON HER WITHOUT GREAT SUFFERING.³

◆◆◆

(WOMEN) SHOULD BE TRAINED TO DO SOME
SORT OF WORK BY WHICH (THEY) CAN EARN A
LIVELIHOOD, IF NEED BE.⁴

Thus Margaret Sutermeister's home provided reinforcement for both directions in the late nineteenth century world of her childhood and adolescence. She was surrounded by a close-knit family which looked back several generations in its identity with home and business—the Davenports were an established part of their community. She could also look to her father as an inspiration for the new—the outsider who brought with him new ideas and enthusiasm.

Her formal education may have been within the public system, or she may have been educated in private schools. While she photographed many locations at Milton Academy, a private school with, at the time, separated campuses for male and female students, the sites and subjects she chose were at the boys' school, and she cannot be located with certainty there or at Milton High School as a student.⁵ Her own household may

have been the source of her pivotal educational experiences. Her mother had been a music teacher in the Milton public schools while two of the aunts who shared their home were teachers in Boston private schools. Mary Lucretia Davenport was a poet, publishing two collections of verse, as well as a teacher; and Maria Louisa had attended Miss Wilby's School in Boston and taught art there and at Mrs. Walker's School in Jamaica Plain for forty years.⁶ The two aunts also taught students privately at home. Thus learning, and particularly the arts, were an integral part of the atmosphere at 1631 Canton Avenue, Milton (3).

Margaret Sutermeister soon became aware of a wonderful new device which could provide an outlet for a young woman with much enthusiasm, artistic talent and an appreciation for the world around her—the camera. By the later decades of the nineteenth century, the camera had become the locus of many of the forces acting on Victorian society as a whole. The mid-nineteenth century French writer, Théophile Gautier, expressed the wonderment of the age at the new possibilities which seemed to be manifested everywhere and captured in the camera:



* * *

IN A WORLD WHICH IS EXPANDING DAY BY DAY, LITERATURE IS NO LONGER ENOUGH. THE INTELLECT IS FORCED TO ABSORB A NUMBER OF IDEAS WHICH ONCE SEEMED BEYOND COMPREHENSION...SPACE AND TIME HAVE CEASED TO EXIST, THE PROPELLER CREATES ITS VIBRATING SPIRAL, THE PADDLE-WHEEL BEATS THE WAVES, THE LOCOMOTIVE PANTS AND GRINDS IN A WHIRLWIND OF SPEED; CONVERSATIONS TAKE PLACE BETWEEN ONE SHORE OF AN OCEAN AND THE OTHER; THE ELECTRIC FLUID HAS TAKEN TO CARRYING THE MAIL; THE POWER OF THE THUNDERSTORM SENDS LETTERS COURSING ALONG A WIRE. THE SUN IS A DRAUGHTSMAN WHO DEPICTS LANDSCAPES, HUMAN TYPES, MONUMENTS; THE DAGUERREOTYPE OPENS ITS BRASS-LIDDED EYE OF GLASS, AND A VIEW, A RUIN, A GROUP OF PEOPLE IS CAPTURED ON THE INSTANT. THE ACHIEVEMENTS OF SCIENCE HAVE GIVEN US A WHOLE NEW SENSE OF THE PICTURESQUE, AND THIS MAKES NEW DEMANDS WHICH MUST BE SATISFIED...OUR BUSY AGE DOES NOT ALWAYS HAVE TIME TO READ, BUT IT ALWAYS HAS TIME TO LOOK.⁷

* * *

A photograph album found in Sutermeister's attic contained professional studio portraits called "cartes de visite" because these small-sized photographs were commonly given to friends at the time of social visits. Among the

first placed in the album is identified as Sterling Price Fergusson, a friend of Sutermeister, and is dated 1893. Therefore, by the age of eighteen, Margaret Sutermeister, or Daisy as she was generally known, was interested in collecting photographs, and that interest quickly expanded into creating them as well. Sutermeister was hardly alone in her efforts. By the 1880's and 1890's, photography had become a major activity for legions of amateurs as well as professionals.

Most professional photographers were engaged in creating portraits. The invention of a workable photographic process by the 1840's had revolutionized the possibility of immortality for everyone. Prior to the first photograph or Daguerreotype, the permanent preservation of a more or less accurate likeness was restricted to those who could afford to commission a painted portrait. While some middle class clients had been able to have their appearance and status recorded by painters and engravers at least since the seventeenth century, this opportunity for immortality was rarely available to craftsmen and farmers, soldiers and peasants. The camera changed all that. Portrait photography could capture the wealthy and prominent, but it could also be

done cheaply enough to meet the needs of those with little to spend. Some elitists like the French poet Charles Baudelaire were chagrined by the democratizing of portraiture through the camera. He complained: "photography, that upstart art form, was the natural and pitifully liberal medium of expression for a self-congratulatory, material bourgeois class."⁸ However, most people were delighted with its possibilities. The camera could record anyone in life and even after death. The demand for portraits was enormous, and a growing army of photographers earned their living in response to it.

While some professional photographers also photographed landscapes and others were commissioned to record cataclysmic events such as war, most of the exploration of the expanded possibilities of photography was carried out by amateurs. Many amateur photographers were true explorers, carrying their cameras and equipment to exotic sites, motivated by the lure of the unfamiliar and the challenge of bringing back the image. A few used photography in connection with their professions, such as the archaeologist Prosper Mérimée who used photographs to document archaeological excavations



1. Portland Price Fergusson near the Putermeister House



2. Emanuel and Harriet Putermeister with Margaret



3. Putermeister Family Celebrating Independence Day



in Syria and Egypt in 1841 and the painter Baron Gros who brought home exotic sites in Bogota, Colombia to inspire his romantic paintings.⁹ As early as the 1850's and 1860's, traveling photographers recorded sites in Jerusalem (Auguste Salzmann, 1853), Constantinople (Robertson, 1856), Uxmal, Mexico (Désiré Charnay, 1860), Peking (Le Bas, 1864), Hiroshima, Japan (anon., 1864), Bolivia (Courret, 1868), and Rio de Janeiro, Brazil (Marc Ferrez, 1890).¹⁰ The excitement of discovery was linked with the empowerment of technology, and amateur photographers personified the assertive, optimistic spirit of the age.

Margaret Sutermeister's growing interest in photography in her young adult years was fed by an expanding source of information in photographic journals and activity in camera clubs. A proliferation of new organizations and publications developed after 1880 to serve the needs of an increasingly diverse population of amateur photographers. The Union List of Serials which lists no amateur photography periodicals prior to 1870 records an increasing number throughout the 1880's.¹¹ Close to home, *Amateur Photographer*, which had begun publishing in Brunswick, Maine, moved

to Boston in 1891 and then on to New York. *Photo Era* was published throughout the 1890's at 180 Tremont Street, Boston; and it, like its competitors, published articles on photographic techniques, new technologies, exhibitions, competitions, and camera club news. It also presented aesthetic points of view and reproduced the work of contemporary photographers.¹²

Camera clubs were the locus of much of the dynamic activity of the new medium, and these organizations sprouted everywhere. *Photo Era* declared itself to be the "official organ of" the Boston Camera Club, the Photographer's Club of New England, the Valley Camera Club of Phoenix, Rhode Island, and the Harvard University Camera Club. It also published news and notices for clubs in Providence, Melrose, Haverhill, New Haven and Detroit. Boston and Cambridge had the largest clubs in the area, but smaller towns like Milton also supported camera groups. Photographs by Sutermeister, such as the one of Sterling Price Fergusson (4), capture young men and women with cameras and bicycles and probably record outings of a local camera club. The bicycle was an important adjunct of amateur photographic activity since it provided a pleasant and vigorous means

of transportation for people interested in journeying relatively short distances to find picturesque subject matter. In the bicycle, mechanical technology paralleled and supported photographic technology.

Camera clubs added to the atmosphere of enthusiasm by sponsoring photographic exhibitions, often bringing together examples of contemporary work from distant locations and presenting the work of prominent practitioners to serve as models for novices. In March, 1898, the Pittsburgh Amateur Photographers' Society staged an international salon at the Carnegie Art Gallery which generated such an enthusiastic response that the exhibition was extended to accommodate all the visitors. In October and November of the same year, an exhibition at the Philadelphia Academy of Fine Arts included European photographers as well.¹³ These exhibitions built on the momentum generated in 1897 by an exhibition sponsored by the George Eastman Company in London which brought together the work of major European photographers like Paul Martin, Frank Sutcliffe, J. Craig Annan, Henry Peach Robinson, and Frederick Evans along with hundreds of photo-

graphs by amateurs. The twenty-one day exhibition was seen by twenty-one thousand visitors. The show then traveled to New York where Americans such as Alfred Steiglitz joined the European exhibitors, and twenty-six thousand people flocked to view it in twelve days.¹⁴ Inspired by such exhibitions, camera clubs sponsored amateur competitions with a wide variety of categories including standard formats such as landscape, architecture, winter scenes, country houses, and marines, but also often including themes premised on the experience of amateur photographers such as "best series taken on a cruise of at least six days" and "best photograph by a cyclist" (the prize in this category was a tricycle).¹⁵

Although the Boston Camera Club began to accept women in 1895, there is no record of Sutermeister belonging. Nevertheless, she probably encountered several of its prominent members who photographed sites in Milton which she also recorded. Wilfred French, founder and officer of the Boston club, and Henry Hadcock, a club member, photographed the Crossman Farm in the Blue Hills area of Milton in the 1880's as Sutermeister did some years later (5).¹⁶ French was particularly interested in seventeenth century architecture,

5 Crossman Farm



photographing sites throughout eastern Massachusetts including Boston, Danvers, Dedham, Saugus, and Medford as well as Milton. His architectural studies which carefully caught both the overall character of the building and its detail strongly parallel Sutermeister's many "house portraits" of new prosperous Milton homes and more humble farm dwellings. French's photographs were often published in *Photo Era* during the late 1890's, and rural scenes like *Peterboro, New Hampshire* and *The Dairy Maid* may have inspired some of Sutermeister's work.¹⁷

While Henry Hadcock occasionally photographed relatively remote locations such as cottages on the coast of Cape Cod at Wellfleet as Sutermeister did on vacations in Cohasset, he generally preferred to record the neighborhood surrounding his home in Roxbury where he was a professional pharmacist. During the 1880's and 1890's, he captured his family, friends and surroundings in precise, clear, but spontaneous images which documented the material culture and social life of Boston's middle class.¹⁸ The immediacy of these photographs anticipates Sutermeister's record of her own middle class environment. In addition to venturing

south from Roxbury to Milton, Hadcock traveled to Norton in the early 1890's to photograph Wheaton College, perhaps working on assignment, and recorded lively students there as well as the structures of the campus. These images resonate in Sutermeister's photographs at Milton Academy and in her domestic interiors. In spite of at least twenty years of photographic activity, Hadcock's obituary in the *Boston Evening Transcript* in 1931, like Sutermeister's nearly twenty years later, does not mention his photography.¹⁹

Understatement, if not anonymity, was a common characteristic of local women photographers contemporaneous with French, Hadcock and Sutermeister. Emma Lewis Coleman lived an artistic and literary life in Deerfield, Massachusetts, and was an active photographer during the 1880's and 1890's. She was influenced by the Barbizon painters to create nostalgic images of rural life, concentrating on aesthetic rather than reportorial issues. Her images of an itinerant Gypsy couple and of farm women find affinities in Sutermeister's work but substitute lyrical distance for Sutermeister's reportorial immediacy. Yet, consistent with Sutermeister's

pattern and in spite of her commitment to her work, Emma Coleman also made no effort to promote her work or gain recognition for her contribution to photography.²⁰

Obscurity was also the fate of Lena Osgood Long until 1975 when the contents of her home in Saxton's River, Vermont were to be dispersed, and 353 photographs were found in paper bags in her attic. While she had been remembered as "a prim little lady who had rarely ventured out of her house except to attend church or to work in her flower gardens," she had, in fact, between 1892 and 1908, traveled by foot and carriage to record scenes and events of rural life with a compelling clarity. She also photographed the coming of the new age in the construction of dams at Chittenden and East Pittsford, Vermont. After her marriage in 1908, her photography ended, and she never mentioned her work in her diaries.²¹

Chansonetta Stanley Emmons had been modestly recognized in her time as an insightful recorder of rural life in northern New England and the Carolinas, but she was all but forgotten after her death in 1937.²² Like Sutermeister, she sought out the poetic in photographs of

domestic life in Dorchester, Massachusetts where she lived as a young wife and mother and of the passing rural world of Franklin County, Maine where she was born and returned in summer. Like Sutermeister, she had an instinctive respect and admiration for the dignity of poor farm workers, black and white, north and south, and she worked hard and traveled far to record their reality. Unlike Sutermeister, Chansonetta Emmons continued to photograph throughout her life, supported by her brothers F.E. and F.O. Stanley, manufacturers of Stanley Dry Photographic Plates in Newton, Massachusetts and inventors of the Stanley Steamer.²³

Thus we return to the enigma of Margaret "Daisy" Sutermeister. We can come to an understanding of her inspiration for becoming a photographer in the early to mid 1890's, but why did she stop her work in 1909, and why did she permit one of the largest bodies of work by an amateur photographer of the period to rest in oblivion? Glass dry plates were replaced with flat film by approximately 1910. Sutermeister has left no trace of the later photographic materials, and the styles of clothing worn by her subjects suggest no images later than the first decade of the twentieth

century. What caused her to put her camera away prior to 1910?

On October 21, 1909, Margaret's father, Emanuel Sutermeister, died suddenly. He was fifty-eight years old. His widow was sixty-seven, and his three sisters-in-law ranged in age from forty-four to seventy. His son, a year younger than Margaret, was working for the federal government in Madison, Wisconsin. The issue was who would take over management of the family floral business; who would provide for the four aging Davenport sisters. Within days of his death, Margaret Sutermeister applied to the district court to become administrator of her father's estate.²⁴

The energy which she had brought to her photographic work would be channeled into her management of a business which three generations of men had developed. Sutermeister took her strength and enthusiasm, her independence and her commitment and directed these energies into assuming her role as head of her family and director of the floral nursery. Her commitment to support her family would transcend her commitment to record them and many others. Her youthful efforts to explore and chronicle her

world had to be put aside as irrelevant to immediate needs. Thus the glass plates were stored carefully in the calico-covered box. The albums were placed randomly in the attic perhaps with the wooden camera which has since disappeared.

¹ C. Jane Gover, *The Positive Image: Women Photographers in Turn of the Century America* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1988), p. 2. See also Daniel Scott Smith, "Family Limitation, Sexual Control, and Domestic Feminism in Victorian America" in Nancy F. Cott and Elizabeth H. Pleck (eds.), *A Heritage of Her Own* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1979), p. 223.

² Gover, p. 3.

³ "Woman and Business." *The Century* 23 (1880-1881), p. 954, in Gover, p. 18.

⁴ Heloise Hersey, "The Educated Woman of Tomorrow," *The Outlook* (Aug. 1, 1903), p. 841, in Gover, p. 18.

⁵ Enrollment records for the Milton Public Schools and Milton Academy begin in 1895.

⁶ See "Obituaries" in *The Milton Record* (May 28, 1921; Oct. 2, 1926; Oct. 31, 1933).

⁷ Théophile Gautier, commentary in *L'Univers Illustré* (1858), quoted in Michel F. Braive, *The Photograph A Social History*, David Britt (trans.) (London: Thames and Hudson, 1966), p. 186.

⁸ Alan Thomas, *Time in a Frame: Photography and the Nineteenth-Century Mind* (New York: Schocken Books, 1977), p. 8.

⁹ Braive, pp. 208-209.

¹⁰ Braive, pp. 214-215.

¹¹ Grace Seiberling, *Amateurs, Photography, and the Mid-Victorian Imagination* (1986: University of Chicago Press, Chicago), p. 108.

¹² See *Photo Era*, Vols. I-III (1898-1900).

¹³ William Welling, *Photography in America: the Formative Years 1839-1900* (New York: Thomas Crowell Co., 1978), p. 383.

¹⁴ See "The Eastman Exhibition" *British Journal of Photography* (Oct. 29, 1897), p. 698 and "Letters to the Editor" *The Amateur Photographer* (Nov. 12, 1897), p. 397 also cited in Roy Flukinger, Larry Schaaf and Standish Meacham, *Paul Martin. A Critical Biography* (Austin, Texas: University of Texas Press, 1977), p. 59.

¹⁵ Seiberling, p. 111.

¹⁶ See Wilfred French photographic file at the Society for the Preservation of New England Antiquities, Boston.

¹⁷ See Wilfred French photographs in *Photo Era*, Vols. I-II (1898-1899).

¹⁸ *Guide to the Archives* (Boston: Society for the Preservation of New England Antiquities), pp. 7-8.

¹⁹ Susan Mahnke, *Looking Back: Images of New England 1860-1930* (Dublin, New Hampshire: Yankee Publishing Company, 1982), p. 95.

²⁰ Mahnke, p. 31. The Society for the Preservation of New England Antiquities has 250 glass negatives by Emma Coleman.

²¹ Mahnke, p. 71.

²² Marius B. Péladeau, *Chansonnetta, The Life and Photographs of Chansonnetta Stanley Emmons, 1858-1937* (Waldoboro, Maine: Maine Antique Digest, 1977), p. 7.

²³ Péladeau, p. 11.

²⁴ See Petition No. 44,840, Probate Court, Norfolk County, Vol. 238, p. 424.





6 Mother and Child



7 Child with Doll



8 Young Father and Baby

Chronicling Seen and Unseen Worlds

15

Margaret Sutermeister's photography was a projection of the social and cultural forces acting on her and her world. The dichotomies that defined her personal identity as the product of the union of established tradition (her mother) and outside innovation (her father) were a microcosm of the forces of Victorian structure and revolutionary change that defined the dynamic tensions of her world. These conditions, in turn, were manifested in the images which she chose to capture and in the attitudes of her subjects toward the camera and the photographer and toward the self-images they wished to project.

Within the firmly defined world of late-Victorian middle class society, Sutermeister functioned as a recorder of the emblems of Victorian values, the home and the family. Whether she was commissioned to create formal portraits or chose to photograph her family, friends and neighbors informally, the internalized ideal of the harmonious family, the attentive, tender mother with well-cared for and obedient children and the strong though caring father, constitutes the overriding principle defining these images.¹ Her "house portraits" of the homes of affluent residents are an extension of the Victorian belief that success comes to those who work hard and persevere and constitute the other factor of the basic Victorian equation of home and family.² Together, the formal and informal portraits and house portraits present a conscientious effort by Sutermeister, her subjects and clients to make manifest and permanent their external reality, the world as they saw it, and the principles that structured that reality.

Yet there is another body of Sutermeister work that does not fit into this formula, that does not find its reason for being in the Victorian value system. These photographs capture the images of those who played unrecognized roles in late nineteenth century

middle class society. Some, in fact, lived lives so remote from those of prosperous Milton, Massachusetts residents that their reality seemed not to exist at all. And yet Sutermeister sought them out – laborers and laundrymen, maids and peddlers, poor African American farmers and Native American basket weavers. She found them nearby and far away, and they embodied the world unseen by most. She reached out to them and formed a bond which allowed her to capture their hidden reality. She and they shared the role of outsider.

Sutermeister's willingness to venture outside the world prescribed by proper Victorian practice, to risk and challenge, is also manifested in many of her environmental photographs. While some are elegant variations of romantic contemplations of nature derived from nineteenth century painting and acceptable for a young lady photographer, others reflect her dogged determination to endure significant physical hardship to get the shot she wanted. Her exuberance and confidence are evident most clearly here. Here, too, is an historical record of a time and place in transition, when and where rural life was being altered by the inroads of technology. Sutermeister was, at the same time, sensitive to the

beauties and nobility of the old and excited by the possibilities of the new.

Thus as we begin to investigate Sutermeister's work more closely, we see a complex pattern of choices driven by the various factors in her personal life and in the world around her, choices of subject, location, composition, and method. We also see that those she photographed made choices as to if and how they were to be recorded by the camera, choices motivated by how they saw themselves within society and in relation to the woman with the camera.

Sutermeister's earliest photographs were probably an extension of her own album of professional cartes de visite which she began to collect in 1893. These formal portraits of friends and family taken by professional photographers mostly in Boston, beginning with the image of a prominent Milton physician, Dr. Christopher C. Holmes, present the reality of physical likeness combined with dignified poses to convey the ideal of Victorian respectability. Sutermeister's own portraits would carry the same commitment to dignity but within a much more relaxed framework. The many images of young parents and small children and grandparents and children photographed

indoors suggest that these may have been commissioned portraits. They often adapt the conventions of standard studio portraiture in the use of neutral backdrops, furniture and studied poses. Family groups photographed in Sutermeister's garden may also have commissioned their portraits although she used the outdoor setting for informal images of her own family and friends as well. In all cases, however, the message of family comfort and security in a relaxed atmosphere is clearly conveyed.³

While her middle class subjects, such as *Mother and Child* (6), are invariably well dressed in formal clothes, they present themselves casually to suggest that their appearance typifies their everyday lives rather than a special occasion, making the projected image universal rather than restricted to a unique moment. The mother's smiling gaze down at her baby at once seems indifferent to the camera but actually includes the viewer in the adoration of the child. Mary Cassatt, the American painter who worked closely with Edgar Degas in Paris, often depicted the mother-child relationship in this intimate way, and her images reflected those Victorian values that motivated many painters and photographers particularly, though not exclusively,

women. Lest the lesson not be clear, the little girl in *Child with Doll* (7) has been given a baby doll as a Christmas present so that she can learn early on to play the role for which she is destined. Sutermeister transcends an otherwise trite subject by capturing a thoughtful expression on the child's face which suggests a deeper substance beyond the obvious message. Fathers, too, have a clearly defined role to play. The *Young Father and Baby* (8) exudes confidence. Both figures are well dressed, and the father holds the baby in a secure but relaxed manner. He smiles benevolently at his child demonstrating that the father has a clear and direct role in the family unit.

In contrast, an African American mother in *Mother and Child in White Dress* (9) holds her baby tensely, and her face reveals deep lines of worry. While she looks away from the camera and clearly trusts the photographer, her glance is motivated by distraction rather than confidence. The emergence of the mother's head out of the deep shadow of the doorway and the stark contrast of the infant's white dress, perhaps a christening dress, is a powerful metaphor for the tension of the mother's joy mixed with uncertainty.



9 Mother and Child in White Dress



11 Women and Children in Back Yard



10 Family Group in Front of Home



12 Family Group Portrait

13 Emanuel and Harriet Paternoister with their Granddaughter



14 Bertha Paternoister Playing with her Daughter in a Stroller



15 Woman in White Dress with Dog



16 Woman with Two Cats

Sutermeister's search for an understanding of the structure of the poor African American family is graphically evident in her group portrait of a father, mother and eight children outside their dilapidated home (10). The father sits isolated to the right of the doorway, his head turned momentarily toward his family as if indifferent to the camera, the photographer and all potential viewers. The tension between the father and the other members of the family has been made visible. His wife and children, crowded to the left, sit and stand in apparent unease. They stare warily at the lens, willing to have their picture taken but unsure of the process and the results. The camera is an unfamiliar presence, and their world is harsh and uncomfortable. It is a tribute to Sutermeister's empathy with this family and others (11) that they were willing to gather and pose for the extended period needed to take a picture that they would probably never see and which would serve no real purpose in their lives.

When, however, the African American family achieves middle class status, the visual conventions reflect that identity. Family members in *Family Group Portrait* (12) are dressed in fine clothes and have assembled for a formal portrait.

While some of the children are intrigued by the camera and look directly into the lens, the mother and one child take on the more sophisticated three quarter pose. In all, they present themselves as a proud family unit and as comfortable members of the greater society.

Middle class subjects rarely look directly at the camera. They assume that the camera, the photographer and the viewer are part of their world because their world is all-inclusive. They are comfortable within it, and they wish to convey that sense of security to the observer. They do not need to confront the photographer out of uncertainty or curiosity since they are self-assured and fully knowledgeable about the camera. Sutermeister's photograph of her parents and their granddaughter Margaret (born to her brother Edwin and his wife Bertha in 1906) conveys that message as the senior Sutermeisters gaze affectionately at the child who is the only one unsophisticated enough to acknowledge the presence of the camera (13). *Bertha Sutermeister Playing with her Daughter in a Stroller* (14) again captures the intimacy of the mother-child relationship suggesting, in the rounded forms of Bertha's soft and delicately flowered dress, parallels to the feminine image in painters like Renoir.

The young women in *Woman in White Dress with Dog* (15) and *Woman with Two Cats* (16) also convey feminine grace and could have posed for the impressionists.

Images of farm families, in contrast, express unease if not suspicion of the camera. In two photographs of farm families, *Family Seated Outdoors* (17) and *Family in a Barn* (18), the figures sit and stand stiffly and frontally. Their expressions are grim and their formal clothes are too tight. The group in the barn seems particularly oppressed by the barriers that confine their space. They appear to be enduring a procedure which they have decided is worthwhile if unpleasant.

In capturing these images Sutermeister was playing a role which society had deemed the most admirable for women photographers. She was bolstering the traditional values of the family and perpetuating for future generations the memory of those who had preceded them. Photographic publications hymned praises to the power of the portrait to preserve the reality of those who were absent either because necessity had taken them elsewhere in war or in search of a better life or because they were now deceased:





17 Family Packed Outdoors



18 Family in a Barn

WHO CAN BE WITHOUT A DAGUERRETYPE OF HIM OR HER THEY LOVE! THAT EMBODIMENT OF THE FORM'S SPIRIT...IT DOES RAISE THE MIND FROM EARTH TO HEAVEN, AND BRING TO THE IMAGINATION THE FAIRY, SPIRITUAL FORMS OF THE DEPARTED.⁴

(THROUGH PHOTOGRAPHY) OUR LOVED ONES, DEAD AND DISTANT, OUR FRIENDS AND ACQUAINTANCES, HOWEVER FAR REMOVED, ARE RETAINED WITHIN DAILY AND HOMELY VISION.⁵

While likenesses of the living were probably of the greatest comfort to their survivors after their death, there was a strong motivation to photograph the dead throughout much of the nineteenth century. "Portraits after death" were a standard service of professional photographers.⁶ Particularly in the case of infants and children where life portraits might not have been taken, postmortem photographs were the only way of preserving the appearance of the deceased. This type of photograph called for the greatest sensitivity on the part of the photographer and trust on the part of the family. These photographs were neither exhibited nor sold but were a private keepsake.

By the 1870's, postmortem photography had become uncommon in middle class white society but remained in practice

among rural African Americans. Sutermeister's *Postmortem Photograph of an Infant Held by Two Women and a Girl* (19) is a striking example of this genre and a ringing testimony to her ability to establish a sense of rapport with people far removed from her background. Only in an atmosphere of trust could this image have been created. Once again, the figures confront the camera directly and seem to present the child to an unseen audience. The harsh light powerfully models the forms and captures the stark sorrow of the tragedy. The placement of the diamond-shaped figure grouping, with its apex at the woman's hat and its base at the infant's shroud, against the receding diagonals of the walls of the cabin creates a tense structure which reinforces the drama of the event. Here Sutermeister has succeeded in chronicling the human capacity to transcend tragedy through stoic dignity.

Middle class babies and toddlers, however, are depicted as adorable cherubs. Photographing their fleeting gestures was a challenge with the limited available technology, and Sutermeister's *Two Toddlers* (20) is a skillful interpretation of this aspect of the Victorian ideal which was clearly if cloyingly articulated in a poem published in *The Photographic Art Journal* (the author was the wife of the editor):

THE BABY IN THE DAGUERRETYPE

WHAT! PUT HER IN DAGUERRETYPE!
AND VICTIMIZE THE PET!
THOSE RUBY LIPS, SO CHERRY-RIPE,
ON LIFELESS SILVER SET!
THE FRISKING, LAUGHING, BOUNCING THING,
SO FULL OF LIFE AND GLEE -
A RESTLESS BIRD UPON THE WING -
A SUNBEAM ON THE SEA!
PUT SHADOWS ON THAT FOREHEAD FAIR -
THAT LOOK OF QUICK SURPRISE -
AND GIVE A DULL UNMEANING STARE
TO THOSE BLUE LAUGHING EYES!
NOW, DO YOU THINK A CHANCE
YOU'VE CAUGHT!
OUT WITH THE COLORS QUICK;
SHE'S SCREAMING AT THE VERY THOUGHT
OF SUCH A SHABBY TRICK.
NOW SHE IS STILL - FLY TO THE STAND;
THE SMILING FEATURES TRACE!
IN VAIN - UP GOES A TINY HAND
AND COVERS HALF HER FACE.
GIVE UP THE TASK - LET CHILDHOOD BE
NATURE'S OWN BLOOMING ROSE!
YOU CANNOT CATCH THE SPIRIT FREE,
WHICH ONLY CHILDHOOD KNOWS.
EARTH'S SHADOWS O'ER THAT BROW
WILL PASS
THEN PAINT HER AT YOUR WILL;
WHEN TIME SHALL MAKE HER WISH, ALAS!
SHE WERE A BABY STILL.⁷



Therefore, while the Victorian baby might resist the camera, others clearly reveal their state of being in their demeanor. Middle class subjects, comfortable in their world and with the camera, pose gracefully and glance toward one another inviting the viewer to participate with them. Farmers, workers, the poor reveal their discomfort in stiff poses and their confrontation with the camera. Structure, which for the middle class Victorian means stability and security, may be oppressive for the farmer and the poor.

Victorian values and strong composition combine to evoke meaning in Sutermeister's interior studies. In *Woman Reading Near a Hutch with Porcelain* (21) and *Woman Sewing in Bow-front Town House* (22), the character of the settings conveys the nature of middle class women's lives and values. Other local photographers such as Henry Hadcock and Aimée Lamb had captured middle class interiors but rarely with the human insight that Sutermeister could engender. The reading woman sits proudly, easily in her chair. She is surrounded with the accoutrements of comfort – carved furniture, porcelain vases, tropical plants, gilded frames and lace curtains. There is visual activity everywhere. It occupies the subject and the viewer. It defines

the achievements of her status, but it also limits the range of her options. Yet she is secure within this world and she wishes to be identified with the material luxuries she has carefully assembled.

The sewing woman sits bathed in suffused light that glorifies her genteel activity. She, too, sits in an enclosed space surrounded by objects that please her – fine furniture, framed paintings, drawings and photographs, books and glass vases, even lilies and palms for Easter. The repeated rectangles of the windows, mirror, and frames create a grid that structures her world which is comfortable, protected, but circumscribed. Her position is clear. It gives her security, but it sets real limits as surely as the crutches against the chest of drawers confirm her restricted life. Through her window, we can see a brick town house probably similar to the one she occupies. She lives in town. She may be a friend of Sutermeister or a member of her father's family some of whom may have continued to live in Boston. Whatever her identity and that of the reading woman, they are living the Victorian concept that "a woman's place is in the home."

In the Victorian view, women who worked did so because there was no man to support them. Almost all

women who worked were poor. Yet Sutermeister was drawn to photograph such women. The *Gypsy Peddler* (23) presents herself to the camera openly. She confronts the viewer with a jaunty pose, a light in her eye and a smile. She is out in the world and seems unafraid. Sutermeister's own pose in her self-portrait, hand at her waist, is a more restrained version of the Gypsy's stance. She would also eventually be a woman who worked. Emma Lewis Coleman had photographed Gypsies, but the staid introversion of their demeanor stands in sharp contrast to the lively interaction of Sutermeister's Gypsy who eagerly engages the viewer, perhaps a potential customer.

Less sure of themselves are the Native American basket makers who offer their wares to an alien public that might or might not appreciate them. They must try to weave the best baskets they can but always without knowing how their works will be received by those with the resources to purchase them. *Two Women Basket Makers and Child* (24) are either Abenaki or Micmac who sold their baskets in their native Maine and New Hampshire or traveled to the larger market of the Boston area. Sutermeister chronicles them as they typically present themselves surrounded





19 Postmortem Photograph of an Infant
Held by Two Women and a Girl

20 Two Toddlers



by their wares some of which feature “cow-wiss” or “porcupine twist” (twisted-splint) decoration.⁸ Whether she has traveled north to photograph them or has encountered them closer to home, she has captured feelings of wariness and resignation in these women as they relate to the white middle class photographer while at the same time conveying the dignity of their effort.

Perhaps the strongest image of the ambivalence of Native American craftsmen is *Man and Woman Weaving Baskets* (25). Its power comes from the multivalent implications of the image. Most obviously, the man and woman sit on the porch of their cabin each performing part of the traditional process of basket making – the woman weaves and the man cuts the splints – both somewhat wary of the camera. Together, their bodies form a strong triangle, a metaphor for their unified effort to provide a livelihood for themselves and their family. While there is a clear understanding between them, a commitment to do their parts, there is a tension between them as well. They face away from each other. Each is his or her own person; their thoughts are their own. They are neither simple nor obvious, but complex and subtle; and Sutermeister has captured their complexity.

In addition to its social significance, this photograph contains unique historical information. The man and woman have been identified as probably members of the Maliseet who lived along the southern St. John River in New Brunswick and into Maine.⁹ The Maliseet were reputed to have made baskets with dyed decoration, but documented extant specimens of their work have been limited to undecorated pieces. This photograph provides visual testimony of their decorative style. Among the Maliseet, the Micmac and others, the women dyed splints and wove baskets, and the men pounded out and prepared the splints and shaped the rims and handles.

The Maliseet identification and New Brunswick location of Sutermeister’s basket makers are suggested by a comparison of this photograph with others taken by a contemporary photographer, William Mechling, who documented Maliseet life. In one of his photographs taken in 1910 a Maliseet family sits in front of their home which is constructed like the one in Sutermeister’s photograph with similar shingles and six-over-six windows.¹⁰ The theory that Sutermeister photographed Maliseet basket makers in New Brunswick is confirmed by the positive identification

of a building in another Sutermeister photograph as the officers’ quarters at Fort Anne, Annapolis Royal, Nova Scotia.¹¹ Therefore, we know that Sutermeister did travel as far as Nova Scotia and could have photographed Maliseet basket makers working in their home environment.

Victorian men were often depicted at work, since that was their natural province and their responsibility within the family. Emanuel Sutermeister was frequently photographed in his greenhouse attending to his plants (26). His daughter captures him surrounded by foliage. He wears a full business suit appropriate to his status, and he looks proud and happy as he casually ignores the camera while inviting the viewer to admire his accomplishments. His workmen were also photographed in the greenhouse or on the nursery grounds. In *Nurseryman with Chrysanthemums* (27) a workman confronts the camera and directly presents flowers to the viewer. He is dramatized and clearly structured by the diagonals of the glass roof, but his frontality suggests greater self-consciousness in comparison to his employer’s ease although he also confidently presents the results of his efforts. *Stable Hands and Grooms* (28), probably photographed at one of the





21 *Woman Reading Near a Hutch with Porcelain*



22 *Woman Sewing in Bow-front Town House*



23 *Gypsy Peddler*

25 Man and Woman Weaving Baskets



26 Two Women Basket Weavers and Child

farms near Sutermeister's home, also suggests this ambivalence in the casual and confrontational poses of the men within the structure of the barn doorway. While these men are not part of the Victorian middle class, the relative security of their positions is reflected in their positive self-presentations.

In contrast, the African American *Seated Farmer* (29) sits near the corner of his rough-hewn log cabin, an image of total exhaustion. He has removed one shoe, and the pain of his aching foot seems visible. His shoulders stoop, and his large hands rest limply. Yet there is an intense light in his eyes and dignity and nobility in his image. Sutermeister seems to know how hard he works. He is willing to let her see his exhaustion. They both recognize his effort, and she has used subtle posture, gesture and light to capture the poignancy of his condition without overdramatization. This photograph, perhaps more than any other, conveys Sutermeister's respect and sympathy for those left behind by the progress of the nineteenth century.

We cannot be certain where Sutermeister took this photograph or others of rural African Americans. The structure of the cabin in this portrait

is not characteristic of New England farms, and this image may have been recorded in a southern state.¹² Twenty years later, Chansonetta Stanley Emmons photographed rural African Americans in the Carolinas with some of the same sympathy, and in the 1930's Dorothea Lange saw in the faces and gestures of displaced sharecroppers in Texas, Oklahoma, Georgia and California the same suffering and dignity.¹³ *Field Hand with the Pitchfork* (30) also conveys a sense of the dignity of farm work. He stands simply, reinforced by the verticality of his implement. He confronts the camera with an expression of caution and reserve and was probably photographed in the same region as the *Seated Farmer*.

Sutermeister sought out laborers under many circumstances. Some may have been permanent workers at the nursery or on nearby farms. *Man Sawing Wood* (31) and *Fruit Vendor* (32) capture the strength and vigor of these workers who eye the lens with bemused wonder at the interest taken by the young lady with the camera. While they may not know why she wishes to photograph their efforts, they are willing to cooperate. In return, she uses the diagonals of saw and saw-horse and the

mass of the basket to point the viewer to the work of the man. Again, it is the honesty of that effort and the directness of the vision which produce images of great dignity and power.

The *Asian Laundryman* (33) stands in a stately pose amid the shelves and partitions of his shop. His space is confined against the wall of vertical paneling covered with scraps of paper and other remnants of his trade. He is comfortable within these walls because he is able to earn his living here. The harmony of his world is presented in the strong but relaxed vertical of his body, echoed in the lines of the partition and in the umbrella he holds. The bundles of laundry stacked neatly are the manifestations of his accomplishments. While he confronts the camera, he seems at ease. The shopkeeper occupies a palpable space between the self-assured sophistication of the middle class entrepreneur and the self-consciousness of the poor farmer and laborer. The elegant composition of asymmetrical vertical elements, large surfaces and decorative detail is one of Sutermeister's finest and signifies the at least relatively secure situation of the Asian shopkeeper.





26 Emanuel Petermeister in his Greenhouse

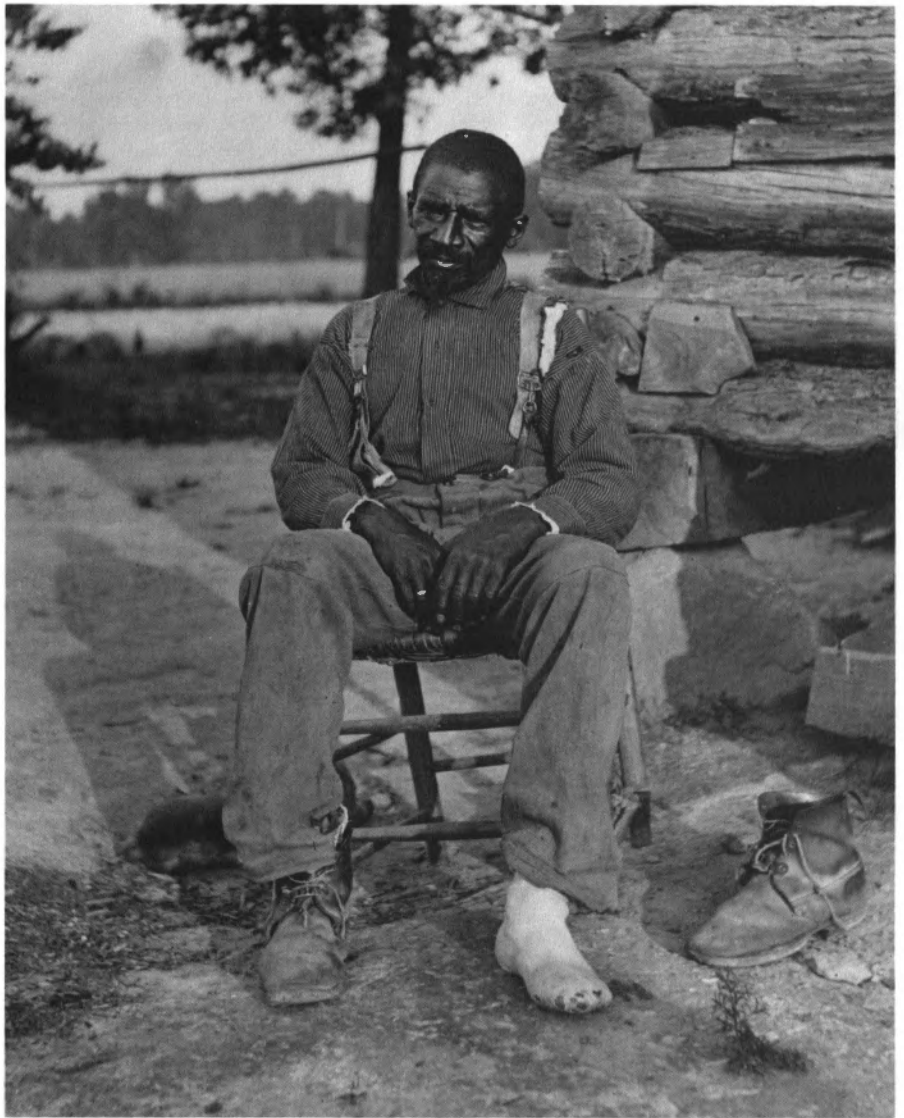


28 Stable Hands and Grooms

27 Nurseryman with Chrysanthemums



29 Peated Farmer





30 Field Hand with Pitch-fork



31 Man Sawing Wood



32 Fruit Vendor



33 *Asian Laundryman*

Sutermeister also uses strong composition to characterize the lives of women and children who live near the ocean and perhaps assist their husbands and fathers in drawing a livelihood from their environment. In *Women and Children with Rowboat* (34) the strength and determination of the figures is conveyed in the powerful pyramidal format in which the oar becomes a central mast transforming the small boat into a more substantial sailing vessel. These women and children may not actually put out to sea, but they perform important tasks in support of their fishermen husbands and fathers. This photograph has parallels in the monumental images of fishermen, sailors and particularly fishwives taken by David Hill and Robert Adamson in the 1840's along the Scottish coast at Leith Harbor and Newhaven. Like Sutermeister, Hill and Adamson used strong, clear compositions to capture at once the specificity and dignity of their subjects.¹⁴

When middle class Victorians went to the coast, it was for recreation. Sutermeister vacationed frequently in the area of Hingham and Cohasset, south of Boston. She spent much time photographing the friends who accom-

panied her such as the *Young Woman at the Coast* (35) in the rather formal clothing typical of the period, yet in informal poses suggesting serious middle class efforts to relax. Structure and restrictiveness accompanied Victorians, particularly women, even on their holidays. Sutermeister captures this dichotomy graphically and amusingly in her photograph of *Little Girls Bathing at the Shore* (36). The children frolic in the shallow water of a pool almost totally enclosed from the ocean by large stone barriers. As if this protection were not enough, the girls cling to ropes to steady themselves and prevent anticipated disasters. Like the older women photographed in domestic interiors, their world is protected, secure but circumscribed. There are no boys present at the bathing pool. The boys are most likely climbing freely over the rocky shoreline or playing in the surf without constraints just as the *Little Boys on the Jungle Gym* (37) perform fearless acrobatics. Little girls must enjoy themselves cautiously within clearly defined guidelines observed by older female chaperones who sit formally dressed nearby.



34 *Women and Children with Rowboat*



35 *Young Woman at the Coast*





36 *Little Girls Bathing at the Shore*



37 *Little Boys on a Jungle Gym*



38 Fishing Shacks Along the Coast

40 *Cascade in a Forest*



39 *Boy in a Rowboat Framed by Paul's Bridge, Milton*

Sutermeister herself rebelled against the physical constraints placed on Victorian women. She pushed the limits of turn-of-the-century propriety by climbing over rocks along the shore to photograph the coastline, the breaking waves, and the dilapidated shanties that other visitors ignored or avoided. The stark image of *Fishing Shacks Along the Coast* (38) could only have been taken with this effort. In her long dress and petticoat, tight bodice and hat, Sutermeister ventured out in rowboats, armed with her heavy and cumbersome equipment to capture offshore scenes including Minot's Light off Cohasset harbor. She also navigated the Neponset River in a rowboat to create the compelling composition of the *Boy in a Rowboat Framed by Paul's Bridge, Milton* (39).¹⁵ The clarity of the texture of the stones of the arched bridge testifies to Sutermeister's steady hand under unstable conditions, particularly considering the relatively long exposure time needed to catch the shaded areas of the passage as well as the light beyond.

Sutermeister jumped from stone to stone amid cascading water to record rushing forest streams. A series of photographs of a waterfall makes clear that the water was rushing around the rocks on which she stood or sat to capture that location (40). Although her equipment

limited the clarity of her images, the precariousness of the situation is evident as well as her effort to get the shot she wanted. While, for a woman photographer from staid New England, she seems particularly adventurous, Sutermeister was not unique in taking risks. The exploits of Mary Winslow, a contemporary California photographer, were chronicled by *The San Francisco Examiner* and carried Sutermeister's independence further:

SHE TRAVELS IN A BUGGY ALONE, AND THINKS NOTHING WHATEVER OF DRIVING HER OWN HORSE OVER ANY ROAD WHERE SOMEBODY ELSE'S HORSE HAS DRIVEN BEFORE. SHE IS TWENTY-FIVE YEARS OLD, SHREWD, SELF-RELIANT AND NOT AFRAID OF ANYTHING. HER ONLY ARMS ARE A REVOLVER AND A MAN'S HAT, AND SHE GOES WHEREVER SHE PLEASES. SHE MAKES VIEWS AND OUTDOOR PORTRAITS, AND THEY ARE GOOD ONES, TOO, BUT IT WAS NOT ALWAYS THUS. WHEN SHE STARTED ON HER FIRST PHOTOGRAPHIC TRIP SHE WAS FAMILIAR WITH THE THEORY OF PHOTOGRAPHY AND UNDERSTOOD CHEMICAL REACTIONS, BUT AS FAR AS PRACTICAL KNOWLEDGE OF THE APPARATUS WAS CONCERNED SHE HADN'T THE LEAST BIT, BUT SHE WAS TIRED OF THE CITY AND CITY LIFE, SO SHE LEFT SAN FRANCISCO WITH THE DETERMINATION TO MAKE PICTURES OR DIE, AND SHE MADE PICTURES.¹⁶

Yet, not all of Sutermeister's environmental photographs reflect feats of daring and risky technique. Some images are thoughtfully realized studies of romantic praise to nature in which humanity is presented as a modest player upon a large stage. While Victorian man believed that man-made progress could overcome whatever challenges nature could present, the romantic searched for a rapprochement with nature, an agreement based on man's admiration and respect for forces ultimately beyond his control. Caspar David Friedrich, the German romantic painter, expressed this awe of nature in images which, while significantly more theatrical and contrived, compare to Sutermeister's *Man Contemplating Houghton's Pond at Blue Hills* (41) and *In a Japanese Garden* (42).¹⁷ In these works, the figures face into the picture inviting the viewer to look over their shoulder and join in the admiration of the environment. Sutermeister sets the figures asymmetrically against the larger forms of water, hills and foliage. Even when small, the figures hold their own in a carefully modulated balance. Beyond romantic awe there is Victorian control.





41 Man Contemplating Houghton's Pond at Blue Hill

42 In a Japanese Garden



44 Horse and Rider in Dogt Snow



45 Woman Skating with Baby's Plough on Snowy Pond



Sutermeister ventured out into the snow and ice of New England winter to take advantage of the visual opportunities created by ice on tree branches and snow which placed everything else in silhouetted relief. Motivated partly by romantic pleasure in the wonders of nature, partly by the spirit of adventure and challenge, and partly by the desire to conquer and control the environment by recording it, she carried her equipment down snowy roads or transported it in a horse-drawn sleigh to capture images like *Woman Skating with Baby's Sleigh on Frozen Pond* (43) and *Horse and Rider in Deep Snow* (44). In both, the poetic reversal of dark figures against a white environment is striking. Nature is transformed as tree branches arch gracefully to the white ground weighted down by jewel-like sheaths of ice and as tree trunks stand as dark sentinels against a white expanse.

Winter sometimes strains the human capacity to insulate oneself from the rigors of the environment. Sutermeister was sensitive to the ongoing struggle, the challenge of dealing with nature. Her photograph of *Men Repairing Damaged Chimney* (45) demonstrates her ability to see the significance of workmen struggling on a winter day to make a house, a shelter, secure from the cold

and snow. At the same time, she was able to step back from the immediate event (which was occurring at her own home) and objectify it as a photograph. One can only surmise the chagrin of her mother, who leans out of a first floor window, at seeing her daughter calmly standing on a snow-covered rise to take a picture of this disruptive effort to repair her house.

Houses were of keen interest to Sutermeister and constitute a significant proportion of her thematic material. As a romantic, she viewed them as shelter from the forces of nature. As a Victorian, she viewed them as a material projection of the identity of a family. As an outsider, she viewed them as the manifestation of the human condition often determined by economic struggle and the effects of time.

Sutermeister frequently photographed the stately homes of prosperous Miltonians, and these "house portraits" clearly project the sense of place and the pride of accomplishment characteristic of the Victorian view. The vernacular architectural vocabulary, often used on a grand scale, as in the *Captain Robert Bennett Forbes House, Milton Hill* (46), reflects interest in formal architectural styles and a desire to apply them to these residences. The neo-

classical style used in the Forbes House, for example, conveys a message of sober strength in its clean geometry, restrained decoration, and columned porches.

A somewhat homier architectural setting and more human scale is captured in *Man and Woman with Dog on Porch* (47). While the poses of the figures hint at an anecdote that we can only conjecture, the strong architectural setting with its receding rectangles creates a clear statement of middle class Victorian life within the home. The profusion of foliage softens and feminizes the severe architectural geometry of the wood frame house and provides a challenge to Sutermeister's technical skill. She rises to this challenge and creates an image of intense clarity and precision as well as human interest.

The same geometric purity is evident in her study of *Interior of the First Parish Church, Milton, Decorated for Christmas* (48), the church which she attended regularly for seventy-five years. The holiday decorations intensify the geometry of the architectural details, but Sutermeister was not content to handle the space as most other photographers did – from a safe angle at the side of the building. Instead she stands in the center aisle and shoots straight ahead



45 Men Repairing Damaged Chimney

46 Captain Robert Bennett Forbes House, Milton Hill





47 *Man and Woman with Dog on Porch*

creating a powerful symmetrical composition without compromise. The clarity of the form is synonymous with the conviction of the faith, a faith harmonious with Victorian belief in the structures of society and the rewards of diligent effort.

Yet Sutermeister sometimes turned away from the prestigious structures of her neighborhood to wander down country roads or over rocky coastlines searching out the houses of the poor, some occupied, some abandoned. Houses like the *Crossman Farm* had a romantic charm that appealed to many local photographers. *Fishing Shacks Along the Coast* has a strong visual and textural impact. Underneath, however, both suggest Sutermeister's sensitivity to the struggle of the less fortunate to survive and to the sadness of their defeat by time and the elements. *House with Winter Tree* (49) is a profound statement of that bleak struggle for survival. The blunt geometry of the deteriorating buildings with their angular roof lines is intensified in the cutting angularities of the tree sharply silhouetted against the milky sky. The oblique angle of Sutermeister's view and the centrality of the tree add to the power of the image. It is a risky composition, but she attempts it because it confronts directly,

challenging the viewer to deal with the other, the unseen, side of reality.

Thus we see Sutermeister moving comfortably between the worlds in which she played the part of chronicler. Her work reveals the ambiguity of her own background – her joy and pride in family, friends, and home; her exuberance and sense of adventure; her empathy with the uninherited. Yet, in its multifaceted focus, her work also documents the complexity of turn-of-the-century society. Victorians reveal themselves in how they dress, how they move, where they live, and how they wish to be recorded for posterity. The differences in the self-images of whites, Asians, Gypsies, African Americans, and Native Americans, all of whom pass before Sutermeister's lens, may be due in part to ethnic factors, but seem more strongly affected by issues of economic and social status. The vociferous declarations of middle class Victorian values evident in images of the “seen” world stand in stark contrast to the uncertainties and tragedies which remained “unseen” for most people.

Sutermeister was privileged to see the unseen because of her enthusiasm and empathy for all strata of society and because of her willingness to go

wherever necessary to get the shot she wanted. In so doing, she succeeded in amassing evidence of a dynamic world with interconnected social, economic, and ethnic layers and one which was at a unique point of transition. Her record of that time of transition constitutes the final portion of her legacy.

¹ For discussion of the Victorian ideal see C. Jane Gover, *The Positive Image: Women Photographers in Turn of the Century America* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1988), pp. 104-105.

² For discussion of Victorian images of success see Alan Thomas, *Time in a Frame: Photography and the Nineteenth-Century Mind* (New York: Schocken Books, 1977), p. 48.

³ For a discussion of informal Victorian portraiture see Thomas, pp. 74-77.

⁴ “Gossip,” *The Photographic Art Journal* (March, 1851), p. 188 in Gover, p. 29.

⁵ M. A. Root, *The Camera and the Pencil* (New York: D. Appleton and Co., 1864), p. 26 in Gover, p. 29.

⁶ Michel F. Braive, *The Photograph A Social History*, trans. David Britt (London: Thames and Hudson, 1966), p. 82.

⁷ Mrs. Anna L. Snelling, “The Baby in Daguerreotype” *The Photographic Art Journal*, vol. 1, no. 2 (February, 1851), p. 126 in Peter Palmquist (ed.), *Camera Fiends and Kodak Girls* (New York: Midmarch Arts Press, 1989), p. 13.

⁸ Sarah Peabody Turnbaugh, Director Museum of Primitive Art and Culture, Peace Dale, Rhode Island, 1992 personal communication.

⁹ Turnbaugh, 1992 personal communication.

¹⁰ The characteristic form of this architecture which is somewhat different from the homes of other groups led Turnbaugh to conclude that Sutermeister was photographing Maliseet people.

¹¹ Peter Ennals, Professor of Geography, Mount Allison University, Sackville, New Brunswick, 1992 personal communication; see also “Raising the Dead: Reconstruction Within the Canadian Parks Service,” *Cultural Resources Management* United States Department of the Interior – National Park Service Bulletin, vol. 15, no. 5 (1992), p. 20.

¹² There is no record of Sutermeister traveling to the South and much local hearsay that she generally remained close to home. However, since photographic evidence indicates that she did travel north to New Brunswick and Nova Scotia, it is at least possible that she also made a trip to some of the southern states. It is difficult to place the images of rural African Americans in eastern Massachusetts although there were a small number of Blacks who came north after the Civil War. Generally, however, these people worked as domestics and craftsmen. See Federal Census of 1890-1900.

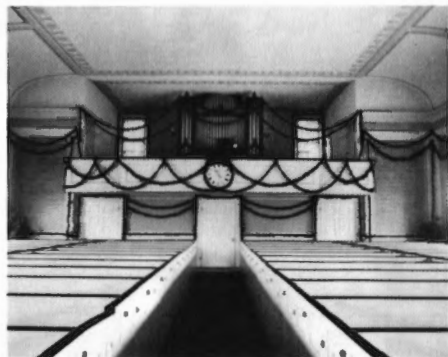
¹³ Peladeau, p. 78; Anne Tucker, *The Woman's Eye* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1975), p. 63.

¹⁴ Helmut Gernsheim, *Creative Photography* (New York: Bonanza Books, 1962), p. 36.

¹⁵ The topography of this location does not allow for the particular angle of the photograph from any point on the river bank.

¹⁶ “Mary Winslow's Travels,” *The San Francisco Examiner* (March 14, 1895) in Palmquist, p. 74.

¹⁷ See Caspar David Friedrich, *Monk by the Sea* (1810), *Landscape with Rainbow* (1810), *Garden Terrace* (1811), *Wanderer over the Sea of Fog* (1818), *Woman before the Setting Sun* (1818), and *The Chalk Cliffs of Rugen* (1818) for representative examples of the man/woman contemplating nature theme in Joseph Leo Koerner, *Caspar David Friedrich and the Subject of Landscape* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990).



48 Interior of the First Parish Church, Milton,
Decorated for Christmas

49 House with Winter Tree





50 Dr. Botch and his Assistant Launching Meteorological Balloon

Chronicling a Time of Transition

Margaret Sutermeister took so many photographs within the fifteen years of her activity that it was almost inevitable that many of those images would provide insight into the character of the time regardless of whether or not she specifically had that revelation in mind as a goal. Fortuitously, the time of her photographic activity coincided with a great outburst of technological invention, and she was keenly aware of its implications. Like many Victorians, she was ambivalent about the advent of the new technology. For the most part, she welcomed it and reveled in its exciting possibilities. Her devotion to the camera, itself, reflects her receptivity to new invention, and she used the device to record technological breakthroughs. At the same time, romantic nostalgia and sensitivity to the human struggle made her conscious of the losses which were an inevitable by-product of the new technology.

As we enter her photographs, we become participants in that time of transition, a brief moment when the pastoral quiet seems to balance in equilibrium with a new age of dynamic activity which Sutermeister witnessed in her own town of Milton, Massachusetts and in other localities she visited. Milton, like many turn-of-the-century towns in the northeastern United States, had been a rural farming community since the seventeenth century although mills had been built along the Neponset River since the second half of the eighteenth century.¹ However, mechanization in general, combined with "Yankee" ingenuity and the material demands of the Civil War, led to new inventions, creating new industries which would irrevocably alter the rural character of Milton and its neighboring communities. Replacing the old mills, new factories throughout the area produced shoes and clothing in standardized sizes, non-perishable foods like chocolate and crackers, textiles and paper.² These industries, in turn, spawned other industries to produce the tools, equipment, and materials needed to produce the final products.

Initially the factories operated on water power generated through dams. Steam engines were sometimes introduced, but it was electric power which would revolutionize factory production and would be carried in wires down every road to every home. The power of the horse would be converted to the power of the trolley car and the automobile, again altering the face of the land and expanding the horizons of the people. In Sutermeister's photographs, we sometimes find conscious chronicling of the new technology, sometimes purposeful recording of the passing of the old ways, sometimes fortuitous accidents juxtaposing the old and the new.

Her clearest statement of consciousness of innovative technology is evident in the numerous photographs she took of meteorological experiments at the new observatory at the top of Blue Hill in Milton. Abbott Lawrence Rotch, a Milton resident, had built a stone observatory there at his own expense in 1884 upon his graduation from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology.³ Dr. Rotch pioneered the study of the upper atmosphere since until that time meteorology had been confined primarily to ground level observations. He made the first accurate cloud height and velocity measurements using a

wide variety of existing mechanical devices while modifying and inventing others to suit his needs. He and his staff sent up the first kites carrying recording instruments in the United States to heights up to three miles. They began working with kites in 1894 when a temperature and humidity registering apparatus invented by Rotch's assistant and Sutermeister's friend, Sterling Price Fergusson, was sent into the upper atmosphere.⁴ Sutermeister was there to record this and other experiments with kites and balloons (50). She also photographed the various winches used to control the ropes and wires which anchored them apparently aware of the technological value of these otherwise unphotogenic apparatuses. Perhaps she even participated in the effort in 1895 to photograph Blue Hill with a kite-borne camera.

In photographing scientific work, Sutermeister was part of an established practice begun with early daguerreotypes of astronomers and their instruments. The French photographer Louis Blanquart-Evrard recorded physicist Henri Victor Regnault and his telescope in 1847, and Louis Jules Duboscq captured the Italian physicist Melloni, the inventor of the thermoelectric cell, with his instruments in an unselfconscious,

smiling, informal pose in 1852.⁵ The camera soon became a recording tool of other sciences as well. Louis Rousseau and A. Deveria published *La Photographie zoologique* in 1853, and the archaeologist Louis-Félicien de Saulcy proved his theories for dating architectural remains in Jerusalem to the time of Solomon through the use of photographs. He brought his friend, the photographer Auguste Salzmann, to the Middle East where he took two hundred calotypes of architecture, sites and details which proved de Saulcy's case to a previously skeptical public. Salzmann stated: "Photographs are not second-hand reports; they are brutal facts."⁶

If photographs could document new scientific discoveries, the technologies of the future, they could also document a disappearing world of draft animals, carriages, and dirt roads (51); of farmland just beyond large cities, of rural isolation. Sutermeister used her camera to chronicle this passing world. In *Two Men with Horse-drawn Plow* (52) we feel the strain of the animals as they lift themselves and the plow up and over the uneven terrain of her family's back property. Typical of New England, the soil is rocky and unyielding, and men and horses must work hard to conquer it even for a while. To the far right is





52 Two Men with Horse-drawn Plow



54 School Wagon

the corner of a flower bed, and the roof of one of the greenhouses is visible beyond a short drop in the terrain testifying to the accomplishments of hard work. Most articulate, however, is the barren stretch of earth to the left that awaits work balanced by the effort of the men and animals to the right.

While the horse-drawn plow might be part of man's effort to control his world, the horse-drawn carriage could evoke an image of peaceful harmony with the environment. Sutermeister's *Horse-drawn Carriage near Blue Hill* (53) chronicles a time of slow rides down winding, dirt roads to experience rural isolation. The curving forms of the trees to the left parallel the bend in the road and convey the overall harmony of the scene. Although occupying the center of the photograph, the people and their carriage remain a small and temporary part of the place. When they pass by, only the tracks of the carriage wheels will remain in the dirt along with a rough wooden fence among the trees to testify to human presence.

However, the rural scene changes forever with the introduction of electric power and the telephone. Wooden poles strung together with electric wires begin to outline farmland and country

roads. They enter Sutermeister's landscape photographs whether invited or not. They appear in town centers where the streets are still unpaved but new electric trolley tracks have already altered the road surface. Sometimes a horse-less carriage is even parked next to a horse-drawn wagon in front of a village store. These images document a changing world. At the time, the new intrusions may have seemed unobtrusive. With hindsight, we recognize how radical they were to become. Sutermeister helps us to recapture that moment in which the past and the future were briefly joined.

Thus Margaret Sutermeister's photographs comprise a true mosaic of her time. Within herself, she embodied the coexistence if not the blending of the dynamic forces of the age: the urge for stability and order based on real or perceived traditional values and the drive to explore the unexplored. She documented a world that wished to be remembered as it ideally pictured itself, and she documented a world which almost no one of her time had ever noticed. She recorded the new and exciting, and she recorded the old and forgotten. Laid out side by side or bound together, her images present a kaleidoscopic view of a world in

the throes of changes which she intuitively sought to capture. Through her work, we enter that world and live its contradictions for a while.

¹ Judith Bookbinder, *In Olden Days: Southeastern Massachusetts a Century Ago* (Canton, Massachusetts: Codex Corporation, 1988), p. 13. For an extended discussion of the Milton mills see Edward Pierce Hamilton, *A History of Milton* (Milton, Massachusetts: Milton Historical Society, 1957), pp. 63-82.

² Bookbinder, pp. 12-13.

³ Pierce, p. 215.

⁴ Pierce, p. 216.

⁵ Braive, p. 219.

⁶ Braive, pp. 211-212.



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53 *Horse-drawn Carriage near Blue Hill*