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Lt. Dixon’s Tintype: A Certainty Becomes a Mystery

By Jonathan M. Leader

The Hunley project has been full of surprises. Each new fact shifts the balance, chases shadows from the past, provides a fresh perspective, and enhances our understanding. The analysis of the tintype of Lt. George Dixon is a case in point.

The tintype was found among the historic photographs preserved by Queenie Bennett Walker and her descendants several years ago. The young man in the photograph matched an historic description given for Lt. Dixon. No one was absolutely sure that the photograph was of Dixon; but in the light of the research at that time, it was a plausible identification.

There were several points in the published photograph, which only showed the head and torso of the young man, that were unusual. These disparities were noted early on by several of the Hunley project team, including Senator McConnell. In and of themselves the points were insufficient to rule the photograph out. These points took on greater significance and weight as new information surfaced. Eventually, there was sufficient information available that serious doubt was attached to the photograph being Lt. Dixon. A definitive answer was required by the Hunley Commission.

At Senator McConnell’s request, SCIAA assembled an analysis team to answer the question. The team included Mr. Jon Ahladas, Curator of the Museum of the Confederacy, tools included stereoscopic microscopy at variable magnification and under multiple light sources including ultraviolet light.

Ms Juanita Leisch was unable to physically examine the photograph due to the tragic circumstances of September 11, 2001. Nonetheless, she was a full member of the analysis team and provided valuable insight and suggestions for the analysis and the conclusion.

The tintype measures 3 1/2 inches by 2 1/2 inches. Tintypes predate the War and continued in use for several decades after it. Careful examination by direct sight, under stereoscopic magnification, and under the varied light sources produced no studio appellation, photographer’s name, city name, state name, tax stamp, or other distinguishing mark on either the obverse or reverse sides. The tintype does show the unmistakable marks of having been made for a custom case. Unfortunately, the case does not survive. The tintype has been kept for many years in an antique photographic album that postdates the War. The associated items in the album both predate and post date the time period in question.

The previously published photograph focuses on the head and
torso of the young man who is the subject of the tintype. This is only a small portion of the tintype. The tintype is actually dominated by the photographic studio. Starting with a close examination of the man's clothing, it was possible to identify some important points. The four-in-hand tie he is wearing is below the folded collar, not enclosed by the collar. He has no pocket watch fob or chain visible in his waistcoat. The waistcoat and coat lapels are wide and notched. The young mans boots are clearly visible, non-military, and show distinct left and right forms. There is a ring visible on his left hand, although the detail of the ring cannot be made out. The coat and waistcoat lapels, tie, and boots strongly suggest a post War date. The precise date is unclear.

The studio furniture includes a wheeled ottoman that the young man is sitting upon; drapes; and, a series of carved or modeled items with mythological themes. The ottoman and some of the statuary is more familiar from the post War period. One or two of these elements could be argued as being the result of a studio photographer up on the latest imported fashions. However, the aggregate of the costume and studio items visible within the tintype makes a date of 1864 or earlier extremely difficult. Of equal interest is that the young man is in civilian clothes. Military officers during this period of time were invariably photographed in uniform. The decision of a man as dedicated to the military effort as Lt. George Dixon to wear civilian attire in time of war would be hard to fathom. For these reasons, the analysis team concluded that the tintype is not Lt. George Dixon; and, that it is from a later time period.

The SCIAA team's analysis was definitively confirmed when the Smithsonian forensic team did a point for point comparison of Lt. Dixon's skull against the photograph. This was made possible by the recovery of Lt Dixon's mortal remains in the last year. There was no match. The final facial reconstruction of Lt. Dixon has now been publicly unveiled. The result is that there are renewed efforts to locate period photographs and to make an additional effort to fully document the life of this extraordinary individual.