

*“Horace Hanford and the History of Photography”* Excerpt from:  
**The Hanford Photographs**

A Catalogue of the Photographic Collection at Hanford Mills Museum  
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## **Introduction**

Like many Americans in the final decade of the nineteenth century, residents of East Meredith, New York were fascinated by photography. What once had been the exclusive domain of professional studio photographers became part of everyday life. The camera appeared in the workplace, at family outings, and other social events, recording the intimate as well as the public scenes of people’s lives.

In East Meredith and neighboring towns, a number of individuals had begun experimenting with photography by 1890. The hundreds of prints by local photographers which have survived attest to the popularity of the activity. Still, many images probably were discarded, not recognized for the value they would hold for succeeding generations.

Fortunately, the photographic images of Horace Hanford have survived. His glass plate negatives provide a picture of life in East Meredith over a period of thirty years. Perusing the images, one senses that the viewer is looking over Horace’s shoulder as he took the photographs. They bring the viewer into his world to share his point of view.

## **The Popular Art of Photography**

*“Photography is growing more and more in favor the world over. It affords greater attraction than all the arts heretofore introduced in popular form, for while it answers fully the requirements of mechanical taste, it offers constant opportunities for the exercise of other intellectual qualities.”*

Rochester Optical Company Catalog, 1898

This enthusiastic statement neatly summarizes the status of photography in the last decade of the nineteenth century. Photography gave everyone the chance to be an artist, whether or not that person had any training with pen and brush. Constructed of finely machined brass parts, the camera was a fascinating new piece of technology which could be mastered with a moderate amount of determination. Associated with scientific experimentation, photography also provided an opportunity to participate in the pursuit of knowledge. In light of these general perceptions, it is not surprising that Horace Hanford took to photography with passion.

Photography’s growing popularity corresponded to major changes in photographic technology. Before 1880, most photographers used the wet plate collodion process, which required a cumbersome portable darkroom when work was done outside the studio. Before taking a photograph, the photographer coated the glass negative with collodion, an alcohol and ether based solution, in the darkroom. Immediately after exposing the plate, the photographer processed the negative to avoid losing the sensitive image. The investment of time, money, and effort was such that few people pursued photography.

The introduction of a dry plate negative in the early 1880s brought several changes. Dry plates freed the photographer from dependence on a portable darkroom. They could be stored for a period of time before use, and did not require processing immediately after exposure. Also, emulsion sensitivity from negative to negative was more consistent in dry plates, offering a photographer more predictable results. Because the negatives could be stored, manufacturers could mass-produce them and market them directly to customers by mail.

At the same time, manufacturers began to produce and market silver bromide printing papers, which were far more sensitive than previous photographic papers. They also developed a variety of inexpensive cameras. In the 1880s, a typical camera cost from \$15 to \$40 and negatives could be purchased for \$1.65 per dozen. By 1890, when many Americans took up photography, the process had become relatively simple and inexpensive, and supplies were readily available. Local merchants, such as Ervin Davis of nearby Davenport Center, not only provided amateur photographers with supplies, but also offered processing of negatives and prints, as well as technical advice for beginners.

It is difficult to determine what type of camera Horace Hanford used except through his surviving negatives. When Horace began taking photographs around 1890, he used 5 x 7 inch negatives. In 1895, he started using 6½ x 8½ inch photographs, which suggests that he acquired a new camera.

*Horace Hanford and friends at Goodrich Lake (now Pine Lake), c. 1900. Seated left to right are Mabel Gibson, Helen Gibson Hamilton, Mary Hamilton Hanford. Standing left to right are John Douglass, Arthur Hamilton, and Horace D. Hanford. The camera pictured is probably Horace Hanford's. Photograph by Ervin Davis. Courtesy of Jean Kelso.*



A group portrait taken of Horace and friends on a picnic outing shows the type of camera Horace was using in 1895.\* The adjustable view camera permitted the photographer to control distortion by tilting the front and back standards and by raising or lowering the lens board. When folded, the camera fit into a carrying case (seen behind the tripod) which also stored the negatives.

Between 1900 and 1905, Horace again changed formats, switching to smaller 3¼

x 5½ inch negatives. To accommodate this new size, he might have purchased a different back for his view camera. However, the inferior quality of the photographs compared to the sharpness of his larger negatives suggests that he bought a new camera which, although smaller and more portable, had a poorer quality lens. In addition to being small enough to be hand held, the camera's size was perfect for contact printing negatives on postcards. The amateur photographer could purchase these cards at a local drug store, print a favorite photograph on the front, and mail them to friends and relatives around the country. To what extent Horace did this is uncertain, but he did print postcards of the snowstorm of 1914.

As early as 1888, George Eastman had introduced a roll-film box camera, the "Kodak", which he advertised with the slogan, "You press the button. We do the rest." Through most of his years as a photographer, however, Horace persisted in using glass plate negatives, not switching to flexible film until after World War I. Horace may have preferred glass plates simply because he was most comfortable with them. Considering his fascination with the mechanical aspects of technology, it is also possible that he preferred the demanding manipulations of a view camera to less complicated devices.

Horace's photographs varied considerably in quality. Only a few exhibit the level of technical skill seen in the work of professional photographers. His subject matter was typical of amateur photography of his day. He photographed new machines, signs of progress, community events, and the people he knew. However, his photographs are more than mere snapshots, and go beyond the capturing of moments. Rather, through his photography, Horace Hanford both documented and participated in his world.

Horace's photographs from the early 1890s reflect his interests of the time. From the vantage point of surrounding hilltops, he photographed East Meredith and the mill complex.



*Kortright Creek in winter, c. 1890. Taken from behind the mill looking west toward the D.J. Hanford home on the left and the George White home on the right. Note the clear-cut hillside behind the buildings. Historic print signed by Horace Hanford. From glass plate negative. HHC 29*

\* This photograph, taken by Ervin Davis, may actually show Horace's camera. It appears to be identical to the camera passed down to Horace's great-grandson.

Photographs taken within the period of a few months show several new buildings, early signs of the growth that would come later in the decade.\*\* In addition to general views, Horace photographed such everyday scenes as a bobsled load of logs, delivery wagons, and men gathering at the N.C. Parris market.

One unusual photograph taken from behind the mill depicts a snow scene (see photo on previous page). The absence of an obvious subject suggests that Horace took the picture simply for the beauty of the scene. Although photographic literature from the time period promoted the artistic potential of photography, it is apparent from his photographs that Horace rarely considered this aspect when composing his views.

Horace, however, did experiment with different photographic techniques. He attempted indoor portraiture, a task complicated by limited available light and slow emulsions. He retouched negatives, which he printed in the darkroom located in a corner of the mill.

The most intriguing example of his experimentation is a glass plate positive which he copied from an 1890 view of the mill. Much larger than typical lantern slides, the image would have been viewed by holding the plate up to a light source, but a print would have been far easier to see.

Horace's photography, following the purchase of a new camera in 1895, reflects not only better equipment but also an increasing interest in the growing activity of the community. He documented such events as the installation of a new steam boiler at the mill and the construction of the new Presbyterian Church. He also photographed a demonstration of the first corn harvester in the area, an occasion which attracted a number of men from the community.



*Main Street, East Meredith, c. 1890. Buildings left to right are the Parris House, Thompson's store, Henderson's store, and C.O. Hanford's house. Opaque paper was glued on the negative over the sky increasing the contrast. From glass plate negative. HHC 30*

These photographs indicate that, although dry plates had improved considerably, the large camera mounted on a tripod still limited Horace's ability to take photographs. To secure a good photograph he had to interact with his subject. Because of this, Horace's photographs are more than simple records of events, they suggest attitudes.

Several photographs indicate Horace's intent, and perhaps that of his subjects, to record process as well as accomplishment. In a photograph showing the construction of the church foundation, the stone masons purposely posed themselves and their tools to include greater information about their work than had Horace photographed them unannounced (see next page). Similarly, in a view of a firewood operation, the subjects positioned themselves and their equipment, including the drag saw, to portray their individual roles.

Horace not only documented the major events of the community, but he also provided a service. He photographed family gatherings, Sunday school classes, funerals and community picnics, providing prints to those who requested them. By documenting both public and private events, he helped to maintain family and community identity.

Horace also photographed milestones in his own life. In 1897, he posed for a portrait with his new bicycle (see next page). That same year, he photographed his new house, which had been built in anticipation of his marriage. Perhaps most interesting is a close-up view of two cabinet cards propped up on a chair. One is a portrait



*(Top) Delivery of the steam boiler, photographed in front of the mill's lumber shed, 1895. From glass plate negative. HHC 14*



*(Bottom) Demonstration of a new corn harvesters, probably the first one in the area in 1896. From glass plate negative. HHC95*

\*\* To see these two photographs and a later one from the same vantage point, see the end of the article.



HHC 99

of Horace and the other is of his fiancé. This photograph does not reflect Horace's attempt to copy the portraits. He could have easily obtained copies from the studio photographers. Rather, by photographing them side-by-side, Horace uniquely recorded his new relationship with Mary Hamilton, the young woman he would marry in December, 1897.

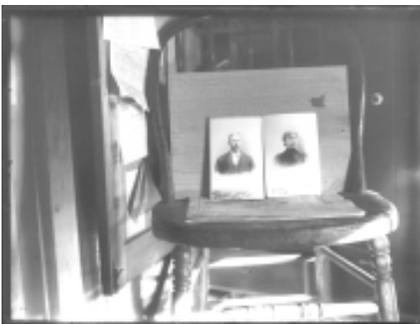
Horace's photographs after 1905 seem to become more personal. Freed by a portable camera and faster emulsions, he no longer had to position his subjects. The images suggest that the subjects often were unaware that they were being photographed. Even when they were aware, the photographic relationship was casual.



HHC 79

His interests, however, remained much the same. He photographed activity at the mill, events in the community, and new technologies, such as the train and the automobile. Around 1910, Horace again hiked to the hilltops to photograph East Meredith and the mill, documenting the extent of their growth. Following the birth of his son Ralph, he also began to photograph his family.

The railroad and the automobile gave Horace and his family the chance to travel further from home, and his photographs reflect their larger world. He photographed baseball games and firemen's parades in nearby towns. On family vacations, he recorded such sights as excursion boats, dancing bears, and grand hotels.



HHC 78

What is missing from these views is an intriguing as what is recorded. Newspaper and diary accounts indicate that Horace often visited New York, and that he and his wife traveled by train to Seattle in 1910. Yet, no images of these travels exist. The absence of any photographs taken by Horace after 1915 is even more perplexing. Perhaps Horace abandoned photography as the new camera became more familiar, his interests turned to other topics, or his business claimed more of his attention. More likely, one can attribute the missing pieces to the fortunes of history. About 1915, Horace did begin to use flexible negatives. Perhaps because of their smaller bulk, they were more easily discarded or lost than his glass plate negatives.

The changing world of East Meredith, however, can be seen in a small group of photographs taken by Horace's son, Ralph Hanford, around 1920s. These images, which had been tucked into a shoe box with Horace's glass plate negatives, show a stable, rural community. The last new house to be constructed in town had been completed a few years previously. Mill business was steady, but it was not expanding. Ralph's photographs include quiet images of children at play, family members, friends, and neighbors about town.



HMM 19

In contrast, this small collection of negatives also abounds with images of motorcycle races, automobiles, airplanes, factories, and glimpses of his life as an engineering student in Urban Troy, New York. Horace Hanford's ambitions in 1890 had been to own fine horses, to build a family business, and to gain stature in the community. His son, Ralph, living thirty years later, recognized that he had to leave his hometown's tranquil setting to pursue his own goals in a changing world.



RHC 15

*Caption for HHC 99: Masons building the foundation of the East Meredith Presbyterian Church, June, 1895. The Baptist Church in the background was moved to another location and used as a feed store. Caption for HHC 79: Horace Hanford's new house, 1897. Caption for HHC 78: Cabinet card photographs of Horace Hanford and his future wife, Mary Hamilton, September, 1896. Caption for HMM 19: Horace Hanford with his bicycle in Davenport Center, 1897. This photograph was taken by Ervin Davis. Caption for RHC 15: Airplane photograph taken c. 1920 by J.Ralph Hanford.*

## Documents of History



Compare the 1890, 1891, and 1909 photographs taken from the same location. Note the new and missing buildings as well as additions to the mill.

*View of the mill complex, 1890. Buildings from left to right are: D.J. Hanford's house, the mill, dairy barn, 1850s horse barn, 1880s white barn, tannery, meat market with roof under construction, and a hardware store. Also note the Ulster and Delaware railroad grade in the background. HHC 19*



*View of the mill complex, 1891. Buildings from left to right are: D.J. Hanford's house, the mill, dairy barn, 1850s horse barn, lumber shed, 1880s white barn, the meat market, and the foundation of the hardware store which burned May, 1891. Also note the Ulster and Delaware railroad grade in the background. HMM 06*



*View of the mill complex, c.1909. Buildings from left to right are: John Hanford's house, the mill, dairy barn (with hardware store right behind), 1850s horse barn, lumber shed, 1880s white barn, the meat market, Will Hanford's house, and Horace Hanford's house built on the foundation of the burned hardware store. Also note the Ulster and Delaware railroad has been built and the large white building in the background is the Empire Creamery. HHC 209*