

*Ira G. Owen: US Civil War Era Photographer of Newton, New Jersey***By Gary D. Saretzky with Joseph G. Bilby****DOI:** <https://doi.org/10.14713/njs.v10i1.351>

*Like other studio photographers, Ira G. Owen, primarily active in Newton, New Jersey, in the 1860s, sought to profit from the strong demand for photographs so that he could have a comfortable middle-class life. Owen exemplifies the “you can make it if you try” kind of success story that came true for some able and motivated entrepreneurial Americans in a market economy in which small businesses could flourish under effective management. This article by Gary Saretzky traces the trajectory of Owen’s career, closely looking at his marketing and production methods, including posing styles employed to satisfy his many customers during the Civil War and postwar years in Newton, Hackettstown, and Scranton. For additional illustrations to this article, see the [Ira G. Owen Digital Portfolio](#). A special addendum to this article, by Joseph G. Bilby, outlines the military career of one of Owen’s subjects, Nathaniel K. Bray.*

Although there were about 3,000 professional photographers in New Jersey in the nineteenth century, many of them had their own businesses only briefly or worked for others, and remain, perhaps deservedly, obscure.<sup>1</sup> But some others stand out today because their products are encountered frequently by collectors and historians. Yet the lives of only a few of the more successful camera artists have been explored by photo historians.<sup>2</sup> One such hitherto obscure figure is Ira Gardner Owen (1835–1887).

---

<sup>1</sup> An abstract of the author’s database with more than 3,000 professional and serious-amateur nineteenth-century New Jersey photographers is available at <http://saretzky.com/history-of-photography-indexes-to-photographers.html>.

<sup>2</sup> For an overview, see author, “Nineteenth Century New Jersey Photographers,” *New Jersey History* 122 vol. 3–4 (Fall/Winter 2004): 36–143, revised and expanded at [http://www.gary.saretzky.com/photohistory/resources/photo\\_in\\_nj\\_July\\_2021.pdf](http://www.gary.saretzky.com/photohistory/resources/photo_in_nj_July_2021.pdf). Books about professional photographers active in New Jersey before 1900 include Tom Wolf, *Eva Watson-Schütze: Photographer* (New Paltz, New York: SUNY-New Paltz, 2009); Frank J. Esposito and Donald Lokuta, *Victorian New Jersey*:

The online collection of cartes de visite (cdvs) of Civil War soldiers at the New Jersey State Archives includes several by Owen, among them the illustrated example of Major Nathaniel K. Bray.<sup>3</sup> “I.G.” Owen, as he described himself, had a photo gallery in Newton, Sussex County, from 1860 to 1872. Newton, established in 1750 and significant for its courthouse built in the 1760s, remained quite small until the arrival of the Sussex Railroad in 1854 prompted development. The town was incorporated in 1864 but it continued to be the center of a quite rural county with a relatively small population that, for decades, boasted having “More Cows Than People.”<sup>4</sup> In 1870, Sussex had 23,168 inhabitants, of whom 2,403 lived in Newton.

Consequently, it is rather surprising that Owen had such a successful business compared to his contemporaries in urban centers who were also benefiting from the surge in demand for portraits during the Civil War and immediate postwar years. In New Jersey, as elsewhere in the Northeast, the conflict greatly increased what can be characterized as “picture hunger.”<sup>5</sup> Soldiers with uncertain futures wanted images to give to their families and to obtain visual reminders to take with them as they marched south. Mothers and spouses kept soldiers’ photos, along with those

---

*Photographs by Guillermo Thorn from the Kean University Collection* (Union, New Jersey: Kean University, 2005); George H. Moss Jr. and Karen L. Schnitzspahn, *Those Innocent Years, 1898–1914: Images of the Jersey Shore from the Pach Photograph Collection* (Sea Bright, New Jersey: Ploughshare Press, 1993); and George H. Moss Jr., *Double Exposure Two: Stereographic Views of the Jersey Shore, 1859–1910* (Sea Bright, New Jersey: Ploughshare Press, 1995). Links to the author’s previous journal articles about photographers, including some active in New Jersey, are available at <http://saretzky.com/history-of-photography-images-texts.html>.

<sup>3</sup> There are additional cdvs of Civil War soldiers by Owen at the New Jersey State Archives in the John Kuhl Collection, but as of December 2023 they have not yet been cataloged and made available on the State Archives webpage.

<sup>4</sup> Kevin W. Wright, “Home Page,” Newton, NJ: The Pearl of the Kittatinny, last updated May 7, 2011, <http://www.newtonnj.net/>.

<sup>5</sup> “Picture hunger” is from John Raeburn, *A Staggering Revolution: A Cultural History of Thirties Photography* (Urbana & Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2006), 7. Although Raeburn used the phrase in connection with the 1930s, it seems apt for the entire history of photography.

of other family members and celebrities, in cleverly designed albums with pocket pages for card photographs called cartes de visite (cdvs) and like-sized tintypes.<sup>6</sup>

Owen, more than most other photographers, benefited from the increased demand for portraits during and just after the war. His reported income during this period was the second highest among photographers in New Jersey, exceeded only by that of Joseph Kirk of Newark.<sup>7</sup> The extent of his operation is documented by his monthly income tax returns, which are available from December 1865 to December 1867. In October 1866, his busiest month, he had sales of \$850 at a time when a typical customer might have paid \$2.00 for a dozen cdvs or tintypes, mounted on aperture cards the size of a cdv and known as ferrotype cards.<sup>8</sup> Another indicator is that his cdvs are relatively common compared to most other New Jersey photographers of that era. Nearly 50 examples are in the William C. Darrah Collection at Penn State University, almost as many as

---

<sup>6</sup> Patented by A.A.E. Disderi in 1854 in France, the carte de visite was a photograph mounted on a rectangular piece of cardboard about 2 3/8 x 4 inches, usually with the photographer's imprint on the back. The cdv peaked in popularity in the 1860s but continued to be made for decades. From the 1850s to the 1890s, most photographs were printed on paper coated with albumen (egg white). James M. Reilly, *The Albumen & Salted Paper Book: The History and Practice of Photographic Printing, 1840–1895* (Rochester, New York: Light Impressions, 1980); Janice G. Schimmelman, *The Tintype in America, 1856–1880* (Philadelphia: American Philosophical Society, 2007).

<sup>7</sup> For a table listing the 19 highest grossing photographers in New Jersey in 1867, see the revised Table 2 in the author's "Nineteenth Century New Jersey Photographers," op cit. Kirk is profiled in author, "Joseph Kirk & the Huff Brothers," *Garden State Legacy*, Issue 41 (December 2018), <http://www.GardenStateLegacy.com>.

<sup>8</sup> Owen's prices have not been found for 1866 but \$2.00 a dozen was about average at this time for cdvs; small tintypes mounted on cdv-sized aperture cards (ferrotype cards) were about \$1.00 per dozen. At his Newton location, Owen paid 6 percent monthly income taxes, Dec. 1865: \$1.80 (on \$30.16); 1866: Jan., \$1.98 (on \$33); Feb., \$1.32 (on \$22); Mar., \$1.68 (on \$28); April, \$0.84 (on \$14); June, \$1.63 (on \$27); and July, \$0.60 (on \$10). He paid 5 percent income taxes in the second part of 1866: Aug., \$37.95 (on \$759); Sept., \$25.20 (on \$504); Oct., \$42.50 (on \$850); Nov., \$28.35 (on \$567). He paid 5 percent monthly income taxes in 1867: Jan., \$21.90 (on \$438); Feb., \$4.20 (on \$284); Mar., \$33.10 (on \$662); Apr., \$30.05 (on \$601); May, \$25.95 (on \$519); June, \$24.15 (on \$453); July, \$14.15 (on \$283); Aug., \$28.25 (on \$565, a very large sum compared to most other photographers in Aug.); Sept., \$28.50 (on \$562); Oct., \$31.95 (on \$639); Nov., \$26 (on \$534); and Dec., \$30.10 (on \$602). Internal Revenue Assessment records, National Archives, available on [ancestry.com](http://ancestry.com).

Kirk's.<sup>9</sup> Indeed, when Owen died, his obituary stated that he had made a fortune during the Civil War.<sup>10</sup>

Owen's father Gideon came from Port Jervis in Orange County, New York, where New York, New Jersey, and Pennsylvania come together. Ira was born in that county on May 30, 1835.<sup>11</sup> By 1840 if not earlier, the Owen family lived in Minisink in Orange County in a household of ten people.<sup>12</sup> According to the 1850 census, Gideon's 260-acre farm in Minisink was valued at an estimated \$10,000, about \$385,000 in 2023 dollars.<sup>13</sup> Among his livestock, he had 33 cows. Gideon had become a widower and was living with Ira, then 15, four other children, Johnathon, 20; George, 18; Minerva, 12; and Henry, 8, as well as two young women, Julia and Ester Wood, who likely were servants, although no occupation was listed for them. Minerva and Henry, whose full name probably was William Henry Owen, both became photographers. William H. Owen later became closely associated in the photography business with his older brother Ira G. Owen.<sup>14</sup> Ira

---

<sup>9</sup> "William C. Darrah Collection of Cartes-de-visite: 1860–1900," Penn State University Archives, <https://libraries.psu.edu/about/collections/william-c-darrah-collection-cartes-de-visite-1860-1900>. The Darrah collection contains more than 62,000 cdvs.

<sup>10</sup> *Sussex Register*, November 16, 1887, accessible via <https://www.fultonhistory.com/>.

<sup>11</sup> "Ira Gardner Owen Tombstone," Find a Grave, <https://www.findagrave.com/memorial/98300279/ira-gardner-owen>. County of birth from 1875 New York Census.

<sup>12</sup> 1840 US Census, Minisink, Orange County, New York, [ancestry.com](https://www.ancestry.com). The 1840 census only listed the head of household and the number of residents grouped by age. In addition to Gideon and his wife, there were eight children: five boys and three girls.

<sup>13</sup> "Value of \$10,000 from 1850 to 2023," CPI Inflation Calculator, <https://www.officialdata.org/us/inflation/1850?amount=10000>.

<sup>14</sup> 1850 U.S. Census, Minisink, Orange County, New York, including Non-Population Schedule that provides data on Gideon Owen's farm. In the 1860 US Census for Deerpark, Orange County, New York, William H. Owen lived with Gideon Owen, [ancestry.com](https://www.ancestry.com). In 1875, after his move to Scranton, one source found him as Henry Owen again. Linda A. Ries and Jay W. Ruby, *Directory of Pennsylvania Photographers, 1839–1900* (Harrisburg: Pennsylvania Historical and Museum Commission, 1999), 205. While it is likely the photographer William H. Owen and Henry Owen were the same person, a reference to a deceased William H. Owen in the *Scranton Tribune*, October 16, 1895, 5, refers to the late William H. Owen's father as Rudolph Owen, which is odd since Ira G. and Henry were raised in a household headed by Gideon Owen, not Rudolph Owen. While "Rudolph" could be an error, it is possible that William H. Owen was raised by his uncle Gideon. It is also not out of the question that the 1895 reference is to another William H. Owen. An online genealogical search for William H. Owen and Rudolph Owen did not provide clarification of this issue.

must have enjoyed the rural life, as he would live on an Orange County farm again after his photographic career.

By 1860, Ira G. Owen had become a photographer in Newton and was listed erroneously as J.G. Owen without a street address in the New Jersey State Business Directory.<sup>15</sup> Where he learned photography is unknown but he likely had acquired the knowledge by working for another photographer, as there were no schools for photography at that time. One possibility is that he apprenticed with a daguerreotypist named N. Owen who operated in Goshen in Orange County in 1850–1851.<sup>16</sup> Ira might also have worked for another photographer in Newton later in the 1850s. There were a few daguerreotypists operating in Newton in that decade but, as far as known, none stayed very long.<sup>17</sup> In any case, Owen was a photographer there by 1860 and soon developed a fine reputation. He was awarded the first premium for “best display of all” at the Eighth Annual Exhibition of the New Jersey Agricultural Society (the equivalent of the state fair), held in Newton, September 30, 1862.<sup>18</sup> By then, the Civil War was well underway and the public was reeling from the news of the bloody battle of Antietam on September 17. In 1863, Owen registered for the draft and the record indicates that he was a single 28-year-old photographer. Also registering the same

---

<sup>15</sup> *Industries of New Jersey* (New York, et al.: Historical Publishing Co., 1883), part 7, 1108, mentions that Owen’s gallery was on Spring Street in a profile of photographer A.C. Townley, who occupied the gallery formerly owned by Owen and then by Charles A. Smith until 1880. No likely J.G. Owen was found by the author in an online search of genealogical databases.

<sup>16</sup> John S. Craig, *Craig’s Daguerreian Registry, Volume 3* (Torrington, Connecticut: John S. Craig, 1996), 429.

<sup>17</sup> Owen’s known predecessors in Newton included George Treat in the summer of 1850, Charles Farrand in 1851, and John Trusdell Jr. in 1851 and 1860. Born in 1817, Trusdell, sometimes known as Truesdell, returned to Newton in 1864–April 1865, 1880, and 1885. He also was a photographer in Clinton, circa 1864–1866, and Deckertown, 1879–1880. He then returned to Newton where he was active until near his death in 1886.

<sup>18</sup> *Newark Daily Advertiser*, October 4, 1862, 2. Owen, erroneously identified as J.G. Owen of Newark, was given a silver cup. Possibly Owen lived in Newark before moving to Newton.

day, and likely working with him, was his younger brother, photographer William H. Owen, 21 years old and single.<sup>19</sup> No record has been found that either of them actually served in the military.

In Newton, Owen worked primarily in the *carte de visite* (cdv) format. The vast majority of his Newton cdvs have the imprint “I.G. Owen” on the back but cdvs with “I.G. and W.H. Owen” also exist, although in far fewer numbers. When found, the imprints with both brothers’ names are on cdvs with rounded corners, indicating a date of about 1870.

Some of the Owen cdvs found today have revenue stamps on the back. From August 1, 1864, to August 1, 1866, there was a revenue tax on photographs. For a retail price up to 25 cents, the tax was 2 cents, 3 cents on 26 cents up to 50 cents, and 5 cents from 51 cents to a dollar.<sup>20</sup> To show that the tax was paid, the photographer affixed a revenue stamp to the back of the cdv or other type of photograph, such as a ferrotype card. Since there were no specific revenue stamps for photographs, any revenue stamp could be used and the stamp was supposed to be canceled with the photographer’s name or initials and dated so it could not be used again. Many photographers did not follow the cancellation rule but Owen usually did.

---

<sup>19</sup> US Civil War Draft Registration Records, New Jersey, 4th, Volume 1 of 3, 99, [ancestry.com](https://www.ancestry.com). In the middle 1860s, William H. Owen was a photographer in Evansville, Wisconsin, a small town south of Madison, as evidenced by a reported cdv with a revenue stamp on the back. “Langdon’s List of 19th & Early 20th Century Photographers,” <https://www.langdonroad.com/>, site discontinued but still available via the Internet Archive. Other examples by W.H. Owen in Evansville are in the William C. Darrah Collection, Penn State University.

<sup>20</sup> In March 1865, the tax was amended and photos less than 10 cents were taxed one cent. One cent revenue stamps are much less commonly found than two and three cent revenue stamps on photographs. All examples of dated one cent revenue stamps seen by the author are from 1865–1866, but none of these were by Owen. William C. Darrah noted that some photographers charged a dollar a dozen, so the cards were taxed at one cent each, creating another explanation for one cent stamps on cdvs. Five cent stamps on photos, even less common, are almost always found on large photographs. Revenue stamps in this period are also found inside cased ambrotypes and tintypes. William C. Darrah, *Cartes de Visite in Nineteenth Century Photography* (Gettysburg, Pennsylvania: W.C. Darrah, 1981), 87. Although she does not discuss the 1865 tax revision, see also Kathleen Fuller, “Civil War Stamp Duty; Photography as a Revenue Source,” *History of Photography* 4, no. 4 (October 1980): 263–282. For many excellent examples of revenue stamps on photographs, see Revenue Collector: Carte de Visites [sic], <https://revenue-collector.com/cgi-bin/ecom/cancelsearch.cgi?SearchType=CDV>. Some of the illustrations in the Revenue Collector presentation were previously included in Bruce Baryla, *Catalogue of Civil War Era Photographer Revenue Stamp Cancellations*, self-published CD-ROM, 1997.

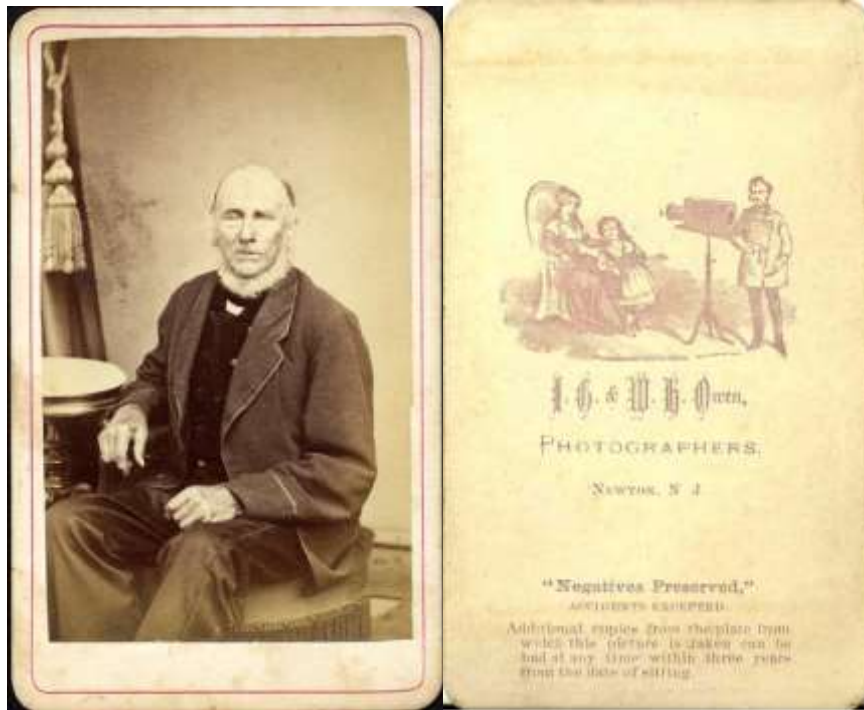
Photographers of this era usually sold multiples of cdvs and, depending on the price, one or more of the batch would have the revenue stamp affixed. Consequently, many cdvs produced in these years do not have these stamps. Owen's cdvs with revenue stamps are found with two cents Bank Check, Internal Revenue, Playing Cards, or Proprietary revenue stamps.<sup>21</sup> For canceling the stamps, he employed Holt's Patent Ribbon Hand Stamp, which used a silk ribbon for the "coloring matter" to prevent ink stains when stacking cards.<sup>22</sup> Owen applied the cancellation, which included the date, before the revenue stamp was affixed, so the complete cancellation is not always present on the stamp. Examples with stamps have been found from Owen's branch studio in Hackettstown, which he ran from 1865 to 1868, but these are much less common than those from Newton, as predictable from revenue tax records that indicate that his sales volume was much lower in Hackettstown.<sup>23</sup>

---

<sup>21</sup> Many cdvs and tintypes from the mid-1860s, including some by Owen, are found without stamps.

<sup>22</sup> Illustrated ad for this device in Fuller, Figure 8, 272, from *Philadelphia Photographer* 2 (October 1865). Owen used stamp type H.

<sup>23</sup> In Hackettstown, in September 1867, Owen paid 5 percent income tax of \$23.50 (on \$421). A note in the record states that this was for the period from October 1, 1866, to September 30, 1867. He also paid \$14.21 for a "certificate." In October 1867, he paid \$1.05 tax (on \$21). It is quite possible that William H. Owen was in charge of this branch gallery.



**Old man with neck whiskers, circa 1870. Carte de visite by I.G. and W.H. Owen, Newton, New Jersey. Author's digital collection. Recto and verso.**

Owen arranged his portrait subjects in several poses that he and other photographers of the era often used. In the early 1860s, the customer usually stood with one hand held onto the back of an upholstered chair or pedestal for support and, if they had a hat, held it with their other hand or placed it on a nearby table. Some of Owen's subjects also stood next to a wooden chair with an ornately carved wooden back and a padded seat. Less commonly in Owen's cdvs, a woman stands next to a table on which there is a thick cdv album, which she holds vertically for support. About 1864, Owen acquired a posing chair with a fringed adjustable arm that became very popular with photographers.<sup>24</sup> Increasingly, subjects sat in this chair for their portraits, although some, especially children, stood next to it. However, Owen's upholstered chair continued to appear in some portraits. Unlike some of his contemporaries, Owen did not use a painted backdrop. In

<sup>24</sup> These posing chairs were sold by the E. & H.T. Anthony company, a major supplier of photographic goods. A page from the Anthony catalog showing the chairs is reproduced in William and Estelle Marder, *Anthony, An American Photographic Pioneer: The Man, The Company, The Cameras*: (Pine Ridge Publishing Co., 1982), 239.



addition to these posed shots, Owen did vignette head and shoulder portraits, as did many other photographers in this decade. Less frequently encountered today, he also made ferrotype cards with the small tintype, showing the head and shoulders of the subject, mounted behind an oval aperture with an embossed border and Owen's name and location in italics below. There is no imprint on the back of these ferrotype cards. Since they were the same size as cdvs, they could be inserted into the cdv photo albums with pocket pages popular at the time.<sup>25</sup>

Owen's earliest cdvs were typical of photographers from 1860 to 1862. In one example in the William C. Darrah Collection at Penn State University, a woman wearing a hoop dress stands next to a column behind which there is a drape. The front of the card does not have border lines unlike Owen's later ones. On the back is a very small plain imprint on the bottom of the card. Owen's next cdv imprints, typical of the Civil War era, feature a patriotic eagle motif on the back of the card. On the front, these cdvs have a double gold-line border with the lines of equal width, a design that usually dates from 1863 to 1865. Owen's portraits of uniformed Civil War soldiers usually have the eagle on the back, such as one in the collection of the Library of Congress of Captain James Walker, Co. D, 15th New Jersey Volunteers, who was killed at the Battle of Spotsylvania on May 12, 1864. After the eagle, Owen had at least five other major back designs, three of which have been found with revenue stamps that appear on some cdvs from 1864 to 1866. The earliest of these three has a cartouche encircling Owen's name and location. One example depicts a seated bearded man holding a crutch, perhaps the result of a war injury. The other designs found with revenue stamps either have an ornate rectangle framing Owen's text, with one of

---

<sup>25</sup> The cdv format spread from Europe to the United States in the fall of 1859 when Charles D. Fredricks and George Rockwood began making them in New York. By the end of 1860, it had become a very popular fad. In 1860, Queen Victoria reportedly began the custom of placing cdvs in albums, which were available in the US by early 1861. At least 15 patents for albums were granted between 1861 and 1865. Robert Taft, *Photography and the American Scene* (New York: Macmillan, 1938), 140–143; William Welling, *Photography in America: The Formative Years, 1839–1900, A Documentary History* (New York: Thomas Y. Crowell Company, 1978), 143.

several surrounding light geometric patterns, or a double ovoid shape with the geometric pattern around it. One example of the latter, of a young boy with a drum, has a back printed in olive green with the entire imprint inside a double ovoid shape, around which is a pattern of small squares connected at the corners. An undated revenue stamp dates this cdv to 1864–1866.<sup>26</sup>



**Young woman, circa 1860–1862. Carte de visite, by I.G. Owen, Newton, New Jersey. William C. Darrah Collection, Penn State University. Recto and verso.**

Subsequent to these cdvs, Owen's back design featured two putti holding a camera, a motif used by many other photographers from 1865 to 1872. This is the most common design found among Owen's extant cdvs. Like most of Owen's later cdvs, they have square corners and a double

---

<sup>26</sup> Less common was a combination design with the rectangle inside the double ovoid, which is surrounded by a geometric pattern. An example in the William C. Darrah Collection at Penn State depicts two couples. On the back is the credit to Owen in black print in a fairly plain rectangle inside a double ovoid, around which is a diamond pattern. The double ovoid and diamond pattern are printed in orange, with "Negatives Preserved," "Accidents Excepted," and the statement about additional copies available in small black print at the bottom. At least four different double ovoid shapes and seven different geometric patterns have been seen by the author on Owen's cdvs.

lined gold border with lines of unequal width and the text “Negatives Preserved” on the back. Double gold-line borders with the outer line thicker began about 1863 and continued in use until 1869. On the cards with the putti and the double ovoid, Owen added “Accidents Excepted” or “Accidents excepted” after “Negatives Preserved.”<sup>27</sup>

An uncommon Owen imprint has a violet decorated double-curved frame around the credit lines of text on the verso. The front of these Newton cards has a single-line border and rounded corners, and they probably date to 1870. In that year or just after, Owen introduced a new back design depicting a photographer with a camera pointing at a seated mother and child. These cdvs are credited to both I.G. and W.H. Owen. After I.G.’s move to Scranton, discussed below, some of Owen’s cdvs had “Owen’s Gallery” in a large ornate font, followed by his address and a statement that copies from the glass plate negatives were available at any time. Owen’s Scranton cdvs have also been found with the putti, probably the earliest from this location, and others have a rectangular frame around the credit.<sup>28</sup>

Historians have commented that the commodification of affordable portrait photography in the nineteenth century enabled the middle class to emulate the aristocratic elite that could afford paintings of their upper-class faces and sartorial splendor. Owen’s cdvs, like those of his contemporary photographers, employed conventional poses, as Amanda Ramamurthy has explained, that were “already established within painted portraiture.”<sup>29</sup> What distinguished Owen was his high volume of work. Owen employed effective business strategies, such as regular

---

<sup>27</sup> Some but not all of Owen’s cdvs with the double ovoid on the back also have “Accidents excepted.”

<sup>28</sup> For a guide to dating cdvs, see Darrah, 194–196.

<sup>29</sup> “Spectacles and Illusions: Photography and Commodity Culture,” in *Photography: A Critical Introduction*, 6th ed., ed. Liz Wells (London & New York: Routledge, 2021), 270. Ramamurthy follows closely the arguments of John Tagg, *The Burden of Representation: Essays on Photographies and Histories* (London: Macmillan, 1988) and Elizabeth Anne McCauley, *Industrial Madness: Commercial Photography in Paris, 1848–1871* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1994).

newspaper advertising, affordable prices, and buying out competitors, that enabled him to succeed financially more than other photographers. On July 18, 1866, he took out a long ad in the *Sussex Register* that ran for many months into the following year.<sup>30</sup> It provides insights into his commercial practices.

In his ad, Owen first stated that his products “will be made with promptness and no vexatious delays permitted.” He then cut to the quick about his price advantage, stating “My FERROTYPES are about THREE TIMES AS LARGE and are usually made at the same price. Particular attention given to making enlarged and colored Photograph copies of old pictures, which I am enable to do in a manner superior to most copying, as I have apparatus made exclusively for that purpose.” Owen does not mention the nature of his copying apparatus in this ad but in one a few years later, he explained that he had a lens for this purpose that prevented distortion. Owen continued that he had available two special types of photos “at one half the city rates”: the Opalotype and the Porcelain Picture.<sup>31</sup> Owen further stated that he had acquired the negatives of two other Newton photographers, John Trusdell Jr. and John P. Percival, who worked successively at the Newton Gallery.<sup>32</sup> Although not confirmed, it is likely that Owen bought out Percival and thus eliminated all or most of his competition in Newton.

---

<sup>30</sup> *Sussex Register*, January 3, 1867, 1. The ad mentions that Owen’s gallery was located in “D.R. Hull’s Brick Building.”

<sup>31</sup> Opalotypes, introduced in 1857 and sometimes known as “milk glass positives” were printed on white opaque glass and compared by some photographers to ivory miniatures, e.g. ad by Lorenzo Henry Russell, Manchester, England, quoted by Helmut Gernsheim, *Creative Photography: Aesthetic Trends 1839 to Modern Times* (New York: Bonanza Books, 1961), 56. Porcelain Pictures, also known as ceramic photos, are still made today and often used for headstones.

<sup>32</sup> For Trusdell, see note 17. Born in England in 1833, John P. Percival bought a nine-month license for \$11.25 to practice photography in Newton in August 1865, [ancestry.com](http://ancestry.com). It is likely that he succeeded Trusdell at the Newton Gallery. After his sojourn in Newton, Percival moved to Hackettstown, where he operated a gallery over Thomas Shield’s clothing store until April 1877, when he left town. Percival is also known to have been a photographer in Port Jervis, New York, dates unknown. In 1891, having become destitute he committed suicide by gas in a cheap hotel room in New York, leaving his wife Lucy and four children. He died at the New England Hotel on Bowery. Percival had been living on Essex Street in Brooklyn. Ross J. Kelbaugh, *Directory of Civil War Photographers. Volume Two. Pennsylvania, New Jersey* (Baltimore, Maryland: Historic Graphics, 1991), 79; *Warren Republican*, February 6, 1891, page not noted; Linda A. Ries and Jay W. Ruby, *Directory of Pennsylvania Photographers, 1839–1900* (Harrisburg: Pennsylvania Historical and Museum Commission, 1999), 211.

Owen specified in his July 18, 1866, ad that reprints from the negatives of his former competitors could be ordered in person or by mail. He then informed his clients that photos could be colored at “a small additional expense,” an add-on to which few customers agreed, judging from more than 50 examples seen by the author. Owen followed with a caveat, “Ladies should avoid wearing pink, blue or purple dresses, as they take light.” The reason for this warning is that the collodion process then in use for glass plate negatives was not equally sensitive to all parts of the color spectrum; it was overly sensitive to the short wave lengths (indigo and blue) and rather insensitive to the longer wave lengths (pink and red). The result was, for example, a red dress would record very little density on the negative, which would print the dress as black with no detail. Finally, Owen mentioned that he also sold photograph albums, frames, and tassels “cheap.”

On September 12, 1866, Owen, who was still running this ad in the *Sussex Register*, added, “Notice is hereby given that the NEGATIVES for making Photographs or Cards taken by Mr. John Trusdell, at the Newton Gallery, for the year ending April 1, 1865, will be preserved until February 1st, 1867, and ‘Duplicate Pictures’ therefrom may be ordered at OWEN’S GALLERY until that time, after which date they will be destroyed. Until that time, I will sell the ‘Negative Plates’ to those wishing to preserve their own or those of absent or deceased friends for making pictures hereafter.” It is likely that Owen was running out of space to store Trusdell’s negatives or that he was not reaping much benefit from them.

In early 1870, Owen relocated to 224 Lackawanna Avenue, Scranton, Pennsylvania, likely leaving the Newton business to be run by William H. Owen, although Boyd’s 1872 State Business Directory still listed both of them in Newton. In an ad on March 10, 1870, in a German language newspaper, the *Scranton Wochenblatt* (Weekly), he announced that (in translation), “I have recently acquired the photographic workshop of D.K. Brownell and have already successfully run

the business for a number of years.”<sup>33</sup> Advertising in a German newspaper suggests that Owen was marketing his services to immigrant workers who wanted to send portraits home to their families in the old country. Owen’s move to Scranton made sense financially. The *carte de visite* “cartomania” craze of the 1860s had waned and Owen’s volume in Newton likely was declining. Meanwhile, by reason of its expanding coal and steel industries, Scranton had become much larger than Newton and was growing rapidly, from a population of 9,223 in 1860 to 35,092 in 1870, a whopping 280.5 percent increase. I.G. Owen remained involved in the Scranton business until 1874.<sup>34</sup>

In his *Scranton Wochenblatt* ad of March 10, 1870, Owen listed his available products: calling cards (cdvs), ferrotypes (tintypes), ivorytypes, ambrotypes, stereoscope (presumably stereoscopic views), imperial cards (probably referring to an out-of-date term for cabinet cards), and porcelain pictures. Ivorytypes, a rarely used process, involved painting two paper prints and face mounting one to glass and the other behind it on a backboard.<sup>35</sup> Ambrotypes were underexposed collodion negatives that looked positive when placed in front of a dark backing. Patented by James Ambrose Cutting in 1854, ambrotypes had gone out of fashion by the mid-1860s, so it is surprising that Owen was still offering them in 1870.<sup>36</sup> Both ivorytypes and ambrotypes were housed in cases like daguerreotypes. Stereoscopic views, consisting of a pair of images, usually on paper mounted to cardboard, appear three-dimensional when viewed in a

---

<sup>33</sup> The gallery was on the ground floor and was accessed through Mercereau’s jewelry store, which had a marble front that Owen mentioned on the back of his cdvs. *Scranton Wochenblatt*, March 10, 1870, 3. The author thanks Frank Sauer for translation. I.G. Owen continued advertising in this newspaper until September 12, 1872. Brownell had opened his gallery in Scranton at another location in 1861. Ries and Ruby, 36.

<sup>34</sup> Ries and Ruby, 204–205.

<sup>35</sup> “American Ivorytype Process,” The Historic New Orleans Collection, <https://www.hnoc.org/virtual/daguerreotype-digital/american-ivorytype-process>. The author thanks Frank Sauer for translation of the ad in the *Scranton Wochenblatt*.

<sup>36</sup> Owen stopped offering ambrotypes after his ad in the *Scranton Wochenblatt*, January 19, 1871, 3.

stereoscope. They were ubiquitous from the latter half of the nineteenth century to the 1920s. No stereoscopic views by Owen are known; he may have sold local views by other photographers. A few outdoor scenes on cartes de visite with Owen's imprint are extant.<sup>37</sup>

Ira G. Owen's subsequent ads in another local newspaper reveal evolving trends in the photography profession. On January 28, 1871, he stated, "In addition to the common styles of pictures, he makes the REMBRANDT, OR SHADOW PICTURES . . . ."<sup>38</sup> Rembrandt lighting became very popular in portrait photography in the early 1870s. Unlike the flat, shadowless lighting that characterized most cdvs in the 1860s, the key element of Rembrandt lighting is differential lighting on the two sides of the face, with an illuminated triangle under the eye of the subject on the less illuminated side. Beginning about 1870, some photographers began taking close up portraits employing this lighting technique but no examples of Owen's work employing Rembrandt lighting have been seen by the author.

Owen's ad of April 12, 1871, promised prints in three days and mentioned that for copying he had a "globe lens" that was "used by the U.S. Coast Guard Survey, because it enlarges mathematically correct. Photographs from life, or copied and enlarged from old pictures, copied with oil, water [watercolor], or India Ink, by superior artists."<sup>39</sup> Enlarged photographs in this era were known as "crayon portraits." Enlarging was done with a solar enlarger onto uncoated salted paper that was sensitized in a bath of silver nitrate.<sup>40</sup> The resulting image could be rather rough but was greatly enhanced through hand-applied color.

---

<sup>37</sup> The author thanks Robert Mayer very much for sharing three farm scenes and other cdvs from his collection. See digital portfolio accompanying this article.

<sup>38</sup> *The Tribune* (Scranton), January 28, 1871, 2.

<sup>39</sup> *The Tribune* (Scranton), April 12, 1871, 1.

<sup>40</sup> For the process of preparing salted paper prints, see Reilly, op. cit.

In his ad of November 22, 1871, Owen stated, “Rembrandt or Shadow Effects Made Without Extra Charge for all who desire, and by judicious finishing or re-touching of the negatives of all photographs, any freckles or imperfections on the face are avoided, giving a picture free therefrom and pleasing to the patron.”<sup>41</sup> Previously, in the 1860s, retouching generally was done on the prints. If freckles were not eliminated with makeup before exposure, they would come out as unsightly black dots because the freckles were reddish. Today, because many photos from the 1860s have faded, alterations by hand on prints have become more noticeable, as is the case with a few of Owen’s extant cdvs.

Retouching glass negatives was popularized by Cleveland photographer James F. Ryder through his exhibit at the first convention of the National Photographic Association held in Boston on June 1, 1869. After seeing some examples from Europe, Ryder had secured the services of a German negative retoucher, Karl Leutgib, who had desired to immigrate to the US. According to Ryder, his exhibit of “new finish” work at the convention created a “sensation.” “It caught like measles, and became an epidemic. Now came a craze for retouching and retouchers.”<sup>42</sup> Retouching the negative was of course more cost effective and time saving than altering each print since the work only had to be done once. It also became much more desirable because in the 1870s, the cdv was being challenged by the larger format cabinet card, about 4 1/4 x 6 1/2 inches. With faces larger in the prints, blemishes became more noticeable. The larger format had been introduced in the United States by Mathew Brady and other New York photographers as the imperial carte de visite. By 1866, the term *cabinet card* had been introduced in England for this size and it was

---

<sup>41</sup> *The Tribune* (Scranton), November 22, 1871, 3.

<sup>42</sup> Quoted in Welling, 199–201. See also James F. Ryder, *Voigtlander and I: In Pursuit of Shadow Catching* (Cleveland: Imperial Press, 1902), 232–235.



adopted that year by American photographers.<sup>43</sup> While it did not supersede cdvs in volume until the 1880s, by the early 1870s, cabinet cards had become commonplace.



**Group of six men and women, circa 1866–1870. Carte de visite, by I.G. Owen, Newton, New Jersey. Library of Congress. Recto and verso.**

On March 16, 1874, Owen announced that the “Largest Gallery in the City” was moving to 311 Lackawanna Avenue over Engle’s jewelry store. He also included his prices: \$3.00 per dozen for card pictures in all sizes from retouched negatives and duplicates of same were \$2.50 per dozen.<sup>44</sup> When the gallery opened at its new location, now described as 309–311 Lackawanna Avenue, it had a new photographer in charge, William H. Owen.<sup>45</sup> He continued the business much

<sup>43</sup> Welling, 185.

<sup>44</sup> *The Tribune* (Scranton), March 16, 1874, 4.

<sup>45</sup> *The Tribune* (Scranton), April 20, 1874, 3. After I.G. Owen’s departure, William H. Owen became the gallery proprietor, assisted by his wife Kate and Ira’s sister, Miss Minerva J. Owen, at various times. Ries and Ruby, 204–205, reports that, in 1875, William H. was also listed as Henry at 311 Lackawanna. The 1880 US Census for Scranton listed William Owen, photographer, 37, with wife Kate, 36, daughter Carrie, 7, sister Minerva Owen, 40, four boarders, and an Irish servant, Delia Joyce, 16. This census provides additional evidence that William was the brother of Ira and Minerva.

as before, including selling frames, until 1892. In 1875, he began offering the “Cameo Medallion” and the “Burnished Finish” to his customers.<sup>46</sup> Cameos were card photographs put into a press so that an oval protruded from the rest of the card. Burnishing was a widely practiced technique to add gloss to the print. W.H. Owen’s work in Scranton seen today is most often cdvs and cabinet cards.

Ira G. Owen did not stay in Scranton after turning over the business in 1874 to his brother. He became a whip manufacturer in Windsor, Broome County, New York, living there with his wife Ruth and sister Minerva by June 1875.<sup>47</sup> In the 1880 Census, Ira and Ruth were listed along with a bookkeeper and two servants born in Germany. In addition to making whips, Owen had a modest farm with a milk cow and 20 chickens. Nearby was another whip manufacturer, Edwin Sanford, 34, a native of Windsor, with his first wife Mary M. (née Marshall) and son George, 3.<sup>48</sup> A future event discussed below suggests that the Owens and Sanfords socialized.

In 1887, Owen, by then living in Goshen, New York, went to Pueblo, Colorado, for his health but died of consumption at the age of 52 two months later on November 7, just four days after the arrival there of his sister, Minerva, known as Minnie. His body was brought back to the Windsor Village Cemetery for burial. An obituary commented that he had conducted a whip factory in Windsor, New York, for 16 years before moving to Goshen, suggesting a start date of 1871, before he turned over the gallery management to William H. Owen. He was described as “a quiet unassuming gentleman, prompt to respond to the calls of charity and every worthy cause.”

---

<sup>46</sup> *The Tribune* (Scranton), February 13, 1875, 2. In 1875, W.H. Owen advertised regularly in this paper and in *The Morning Republican* (Scranton). He continued advertising in *The Tribune* until January 10, 1891, with gallery at the same address.

<sup>47</sup> 1875 New York Census, [ancestry.com](https://www.ancestry.com). The 1900 US Census in Westfield, Hampden, Massachusetts, indicated that Ruth (then Mrs. Edwin L. Sanford) was born in January 1846 in New York to parents born in New York and had not given birth to any children. Consequently, it seems likely that I.G. Owen did not have any direct descendants.

<sup>48</sup> 1880 US Census, New York, Broome County, Windsor, including Schedule 2 for Owen’s agricultural holdings.

He had been active in, and a substantial contributor to, the Presbyterian Church and was the son of the late Gideon J. Owen, who had died in Brooklyn.<sup>49</sup>

In 1892, Ella Sanford, the second wife of Owen's former neighbor Edwin Sanford, died and in 1894, Owen's widow Ruth (née Dusenbury) married him. Ruth Sanford thus had the distinction of having been married to two whip manufacturers.<sup>50</sup>

Like other studio photographers, I.G. Owen sought to profit from the strong demand for photographs so that he could have a comfortable middle-class life. Like many other photographers, he moved on to a different source of income, in his case whip manufacturing, after about 14 years running photo galleries. Had he lived into the automobile age, it is probable that he would have moved on from whips as the use of animals for transportation declined. Perhaps he would have become an auto dealer or an auto parts distributor. Owen exemplifies the "you can make it if you try" kind of success story that came true for some able and motivated entrepreneurial Americans in a market economy in which small businesses could flourish under effective management.

## Addendum

**Nathaniel K. Bray**

**By Joseph G. Bilby**

---

<sup>49</sup> *Evening Gazette* (Port Jervis), Nov. 21, 1887: Owen died of consumption after going to Pueblo two months prior. *Tri-States Union* (Port Jervis), November 17, 1887, 4: Owen's father was Gideon J. Owen of Port Jervis, New York. Ira G. Owen had been living in Goshen. See also *Sussex Register*, November 16, 1887, 1. These newspapers are available via <https://www.fultonhistory.com/>. Owen's sister Minerva Jane Owen (October 23, 1837–December 29, 1903) also has her name and life dates on the tombstone in the Windsor Village Cemetery. "Ira Gardner Owen Gravestone," Find-A-Grave, <https://www.findagrave.com/memorial/98300279/ira-gardner-owen>.

<sup>50</sup> Edwin L. Stanton's wife Mary died in 1883, and Edwin married Ella Adele Chamberlin in 1885 and moved to Westfield, Massachusetts. Ella died in 1892 at age 40. Find a Grave. <https://www.findagrave.com/memorial/54176208/ella-adele-sanford>. The 1900 Census found Edwin, 56, manager, whip factory, and Ruth, 54, in Westfield, living with Edwin's sons, Leigh, 19, and Ray M., 17, and an Irish servant, Mary Desmond, 29. Edwin Sanford died on June 10, 1913, and was survived by his third wife Ruth. Find a Grave. <https://www.findagrave.com/memorial/54175725/edwin-lucius-sanford>.



**Major Nathaniel K. Bray, 33rd Regiment, New Jersey Volunteers, 1864–1866. Carte de visite by I.G. Owen, New Jersey State Archives. Recto and verso.**

Nathaniel K. Bray was born in 1834 and grew up in the town of Frankford, in Sussex County, New Jersey. He married Mary Philips, with whom he would have seven children, in January 1862 and on September 3, 1862, enlisted in the 27th New Jersey Infantry, one of 11 regiments raised in the state for nine months service with volunteers stimulated by local and county bounties to avoid the need for a state-imposed draft. The 27th, composed of men from Sussex and Morris Counties, was organized at Newark's Camp Frelinghuysen, bordered by the Morris Canal and today's Roseville and Park Avenues and Orange Street.

The 27th, as with the rest of the nine month service regiments raised in 1862, was technically considered a militia unit, and so elected its own officers. Bray was elected to the rank of 1st Lieutenant of the unit's D Company. After some confusion and a conference with Cortland Parker, an influential civilian and friend of the late General Philip Kearny, the regiment's officers

elected Captain George Mindil, a German-born officer of the 3rd New Jersey who had served on Kearny's staff, as colonel and regimental commander, even though he was but 19 years old.

The 27th left New Jersey for Washington by train on October 10, 1862. On arrival at a camp near the capitol, Colonel Mindil initiated a comprehensive training program for the regiment's officers and men. At the end of the month, the regiment crossed the Potomac River and settled in a new camp at Confederate General Robert E. Lee's estate at Arlington, Virginia, which one soldier described as "a first rate place for games."

After a stint digging fortifications in the area, the 27th was assigned to the IX Army Corps. The Army of the Potomac was then under the command of General Ambrose Burnside, who had ambitious plans to attack the enemy. Largely deployed in reserve positions, the regiment only suffered two men wounded in the bloody Union defeat at Fredericksburg.

The 27th entered winter quarters after Fredericksburg and was transferred south in February to Newport News, Virginia, where Colonel Mindil established an exemplary camp and proceeded to weed out incompetent officers. In March, the regiment was ordered west. On arrival in Cincinnati, several of the 27th's soldiers were arrested by Colonel Mindil after a drunken brawl caused a local newspaper to characterize the whole unit as drunks, which in turn caused Lieutenant Bray to advise the *Sussex Register* that his men had "character untarnished and habits unpolluted," and that the Ohio paper was "a secession sheet of deepest dye."

Bray and his regiment went on to chase rebel raiders south out of Kentucky and into Tennessee, crossing the Cumberland River. On their way back north, the men of the 27th suffered a noncombat tragedy when they crossed the Cumberland again and a boat holding 50 men sank. Thirty-three men drowned, including 19 from Rockaway Township. The regiment moved through Kentucky and Ohio, halting near Pittsburgh and volunteering to extend its service briefly as

General Lee invaded Pennsylvania. The Jerseymen arrived back in Newark on June 28 and were discharged from Camp Frelinghuysen on July 2, 1863.

Colonel Mindil's military career was far from over. Appointed to command a new three-year service volunteer regiment, the 33rd New Jersey, he was soon back at Camp Frelinghuysen organizing the unit. To attract recruits, the 33rd was uniformed as "Zouaves," in a loose copy of the garb of the famed French North African infantrymen ordered by the New Jersey Quartermaster General, and paid state and local enlistment bounties up to \$615 to recruits to avoid a federal draft. Unfortunately, the money attracted "bounty Jumpers," who collected the cash and then deserted. Mindil requested assistance and was sent a Vermont unit that shot several men trying to desert. The 33rd was mustered into service on September 2, 1863, proceeded to Washington DC by boat, and then marched to the Army of the Potomac's camp at Warrenton, Virginia, where it was assigned to General Oliver Otis Howard's XI Corps. The corps was transferred to Tennessee shortly afterward, where Colonel Mindil was elevated to brigade command and the regiment was employed to build and secure roads to assist the Union army besieged in Chattanooga, then moved on to the city, joining the main army. At the end of November, the army in Chattanooga, under the overall command of General Ulysses Grant, attacked and routed the Confederates and the 33rd gave a good account of itself in the battle.

Shortly afterward, Nathaniel Bray returned to the war, most likely at Colonel Mindil's request, as a captain in the 33rd on January 1, 1864. In the spring he moved south with the regiment in General William Tecumseh Sherman's army to Atlanta, fighting at Mill Creek, Resaca, Kennesaw Mountain, and other battles and surviving an ambush on June 28 at Peachtree Creek, where the unit's state flag was captured when its color guard was shot down. Over 300 men from the 33rd were killed, wounded, or captured in the Atlanta campaign and, after a brief rest, served

under General Sherman in his “March to the Sea” and capture of Savannah on December 21. Sherman’s army then marched north, and the 33rd fought at Averasboro and Bentonville, North Carolina, and after the Confederate surrender, continued on to Washington to march in a Grand Review, in which the newly promoted Major Nathaniel Bray was at the head of the column with Colonel Mindil. The regiment encamped near Arlington until it was formally mustered out of service and returned to Newark in August 1865.

Colonel Mindil had lobbied to be promoted to general and, in his final months of service, had been elevated to brigadier and major general with brevet or honorary promotions. He remained in the regular army after the war. Major Bray was mustered out of service with the 33rd Regiment and returned to Sussex County, where he worked as a farmer and served as a justice of the peace through 1910. During the next decade he entered the New Jersey Home for Disabled Soldiers in Kearny and died there at an undetermined date prior to 1921. He is buried in Branchville, New Jersey.

*Gary D. Saretzky, archivist, educator, and photographer, worked as an archivist for more than 50 years at the State Historical Society of Wisconsin, Educational Testing Service, and the Monmouth County Archives. Saretzky taught the history of photography at Mercer County Community College, 1977–2012, and served as coordinator of the Public History Internship Program for the Rutgers University History Department, 1994–2016. He has published more than 100 articles and reviews on the history of photography, photographic conservation, and other topics, including “Nineteenth-Century New Jersey Photographers” in the Fall/Winter 2004 issue of the New Jersey History journal, a revised version of which is available at <http://saretzky.com>.*

*Joseph G. Bilby received his BA and MA degrees in history from Seton Hall University and served as a lieutenant in the 1st Infantry Division in Vietnam, 1966–1967. He is the assistant*

*curator of the New Jersey National Guard and Militia Museum in Sea Girt, a columnist for the Civil War News, and a freelance writer, historian, and historical consultant. He is the author, editor, or co-author of more than 400 articles and 21 books on New Jersey, the Civil War, and firearms history. Mr. Bilby has received the Jane Clayton Award for contributions to Monmouth County (NJ) history, an award of merit from the New Jersey Historical Commission for his contributions to the state's military history, and the New Jersey Meritorious Service Medal from the state's Division of Military and Veterans Affairs. In November 2018, he was awarded the Richard J. Hughes Prize by the New Jersey Historical Commission for his lifelong contributions to New Jersey history.*