

ROCKBRIDGE EPILOGUES

NUMBER 61



SPRING-SUMMER 2026

HOME, SWEET HOME

By David Ellington

Fortnightly Club, December 11, 2025

OUR TOPIC TONIGHT is Michael Miley, the post-Civil War photographer most famous for his photographs of Robert E. Lee while Lee was president of Washington College and for his part in the development of color photograph. His home was on White Street here in Lexington from the late 1870s until his death in 1918.

That house has been my home from 1984 until the present. A previous owner of this home was Professor

David Ellington is a graduate of Lexington High School and Virginia Military Institute. In 1984, after medical school and nine years in the Army, he, his wife, Jane, and their two children moved back to Lexington and settled into the Miley House, where they have lived ever since. He practiced family medicine in Lexington for the ensuing four decades.

Above: Miley's boyhood home, near Fairfield, 1893.

William G. Bean, teacher of Civil War history at Washington and Lee University, who wrote *The Liberty Hall Volunteers: Stonewall's College Boys*. It was known for years to Lexingtonians as the "Bean House," which always precipitated rounds of giggling from my sons as they were growing up.

At some period in the first half of the 20th century, the house reputedly had boarders in some of its rooms. Such local luminaries and legends as former Fortnightly member Matthew W. Paxton Jr. and Coach Pete Brewbaker were said to have lived here, as did others whose names are familiar in Lexington, such as Alta Fowler and Jean Wolfe.

Although Miley's name sounds Irish, the reality is the family was of Swiss heritage. His first attributable relative was Hans Meili (1583–1651), a Swiss Anabaptist

teacher and leader who with his family endured imprisonment, confiscation of their property and finally banishment from Zurich in 1640. The family left Switzerland and fled to Germany. For the next 50 years the family was constantly fleeing persecution for their religious beliefs and crisscrossed Europe seeking places to hide and worship. Finally, William Penn heard of their problems and arranged for their emigration to America. He also provided



Michael Miley, 1866

them with some land near what is now Germantown, Pennsylvania, and there they settled.

Henry Miley Sr. moved to Rockingham County, Virginia, around 1806. His son, Henry Miley Jr. (1814–69), Michael's father, moved to Rockbridge County, about three miles from Fairfield, at some point after Michael was born in 1841. There, Henry Jr. ran a funeral business with one of Michael's older brothers.

Not much is otherwise known about Michael's early life, but in 1862, when he was 20 or 21, his life underwent a tumultuous change: He enlisted in Thomas J. Jackson's Stonewall Brigade and was off to war. Two months after enlisting, he was captured on patrol and then exchanged two months after that. He was again captured in the Battle of Spotsylvania Courthouse just two days after his older brother Jacob was mortally wounded in that battle.

This time, Michael was imprisoned — held at Fort Delaware, on an island off the coast of New Jersey. He almost died from malnutrition and developed a severe case of scurbutus, which we would today call scurvy, the result of a grossly inadequate diet. While in prison, he worked on the janitorial staff and spent his spare time with Philip Huffman, who was from Collierstown (and who also suffered from scurbutus). Miley survived partly by trading his tobacco ration for food, which kept him

minimally fed. He was finally exchanged in February of 1865 and paroled in Staunton in May.

After the war — and for no apparent reason, with no education in chemistry, physics or photography — Miley decided that he wanted to become a photographer. He “apprenticed” in Staunton for about a year (the exact dates are not known) with one James Harvey Burdett, from whom he learned the relatively new “wet plate” technique of taking

and developing negatives for photographic prints.

After a short time with Burdett, Miley moved to Lexington, where he partnered with Andrew Plecker, “a traveling photographer from Lynchburg.” This too was a short-lived association, involving some studio work as well as travel in a wagon similar to the one often associated with the other Civil War era photographer Mathew Brady. The wagon contained their cameras and a darkroom to develop the pictures. It is believed that Miley was associated with Plecker in 1866 when he took the popular and iconic photograph of Lee on Traveller at Rockbridge Baths, the only photo of Lee in uniform after he had become president of Washington College. Evidently, multiple exposures had to be taken because of the constant swishing of Traveller's tail in the horse's attempt to ward off a horde of flies.

During the Civil War, Miley had fought under the command of both Jackson and Lee, and Miley maintained tremendous respect for Lee. Lee returned the sentiment and was a frequent visitor to Miley's studio in Lexington while at Washington College.

For more on Michael and Henry Miley's work, see the article “Michael and Henry Miley's Pioneering Color Photography,” by Mame Warren and Henry Miley (*Rockbridge Epilogues*, No. 10, 2017).

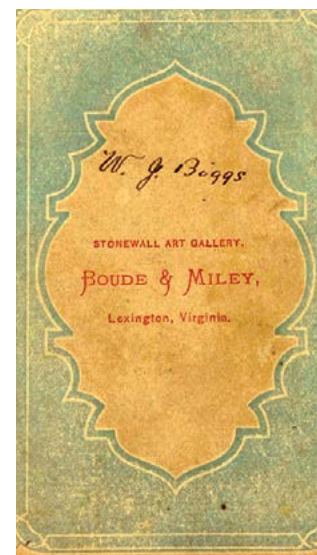


Photo holder from the Stonewall Gallery

Miley next teamed up with Captain John Boude, who provided the needed financial backing for Miley to open a studio they named the Stonewall Art Gallery, near the corner of Main and Nelson Streets, directly across from the Lexington Presbyterian Church. It was from an upstairs window of the Gallery in 1870 that, hanging out a second-floor window, he took another well-known picture:

Lee's funeral procession as it passed down Main Street.

In 1870 Miley bought out Boude and became, for the first time, sole owner of his business. Throughout the rest of his career, he concentrated on two main subjects: portraits, both individual and group, and local landscapes. In addition to his many portraits of Robert E. Lee, Miley documented a host of other famous, infamous, national and local figures. Among those whom he photographed in his studio were Jefferson Davis; Generals John C. Breckenridge, G. T. Beauregard and Jubal Early; John Randolph Tucker; Bigfoot Wallace; and, from Virginia Military Institute, Francis H. Smith, J. T. L. Preston, Scott Shipp and Professors John Mercer Brooke and Matthew Fontaine Maury. He also took childhood pictures of Mary Monroe Penick, the celebrated long-time organist and choir director at Lexington Presbyterian Church, with her sister, Emily Penick Pearse (who played the organ at my wedding), D. Allen Penick Sr., local builder and contractor W. W. Coffey and Cyrus McCormick when he visited Lexington.

Miley's subjects ranged from weddings and engagement pictures to Washington and Lee fraternity groups, academic classes at both VMI and W&L, church and civic organizations, and athletic teams, among them the VMI football squad that included George C. Marshall. Add to these Miley's local landscape photographs, including both colleges, the town and, in particular, the

R. E. Lee's funeral procession, October 15, 1870



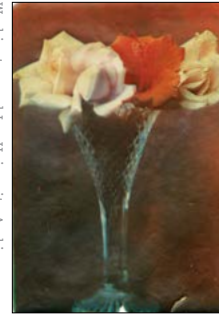
Maury River (North River then), House Mountain and Natural Bridge. A point of some retrospective

interest is the number of Black individuals and groups that Miley photographed. Although this was still a period of deep reckoning about the place of Blacks in American culture and society, those divisions apparently made little difference to Miley, who documented Black individuals, families and organizations in Lexington after the Civil War.

Once entirely on his own, Miley began experimenting and testing ways to improve the quality of photos that he was taking. A constant problem for photographers in that era was halation, which created a “halo-like effect in certain areas of the picture” when light reflected from the photographic plate back onto the photo itself. Miley experimented with various emulsive coatings and found that some colors, yellow in particular, were much slower to reflect light than others, notably blue — meaning that if one applied a yellow emulsion directly to the plate, then applied a blue filter, the yellow would, in effect, trap the light on the plate and prevent the light from reflecting back and causing halation. Not bad intuitive thinking and experimentation for a somewhat uneducated photographer working in a rural area.

A W&L professor was so excited that he implored Miley to start a business to produce such coated plates. Miley demurred but did share his findings with some photographers in New York, and about a year later, the photographic plates he described began to appear commercially. Halation became a problem of the past.

ALSO DURING THIS TIME, Miley began producing some of the best three-color pictures available. Miley has been called by some the unsung originator of color photography, but that is a bit



Flowers, excerpted from an early (but undated) Miley three-color photograph

of an overstatement. The title actually belongs to Frenchmen Louis Arthur Ducos du Hauron and the Lumière brothers; the German Herman Vogel; and the American Frederic Ives of Philadelphia, all of whom contributed to the birth and evolving development of color photography. Even as early as 1897, Ives developed a technique for applying color to motion pictures. What cannot be disputed, however, is that “experimenting in isolation and working out his problems in his own way, [Miley] was responsible for some of the earliest color photographs ever produced, and some of the best produced during the experimental age of color photography.”¹

In 1902 Miley was granted a U.S. patent for his method of processing color photos involving the subtraction of certain primary colors using various filters to produce vivid three-color pictures. In 1905, the Franklin Institute in Philadelphia awarded him its Edward Longstreth Award for scientific innovation in recognition of his discoveries on ways to deal with halation and his work with color photography.

After Miley obtained his color-process patent in 1902, Benjamin Cable, a New York businessman and former chairman of the Democratic Party, heard about his innovations and came to Lexington specifically to try to persuade Miley to set up a publicly traded company that would mass-produce color photos for commercial sale. Finally — possible recognition and remuneration for all Miley’s hard work and lonely experimentation were at hand.

It was not to be. Perhaps Michael Miley retreated to his old German-Swiss heritage when he replied: “I do not want anyone to buy stock in a company that will connect the name of Miley with inferior craftsmanship.”

Back to the darkroom.

1. Marshall Fishwick, *General Lee’s Photographer* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1954), p. 16.

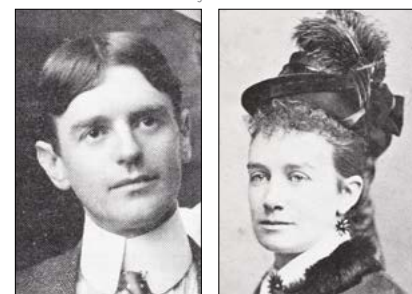
IN 1907 MILEY WAS DEVASTATED when a block of storefronts on Main Street, among them his second-story studio, was engulfed in fire, thought to have originated in a defective chimney in the adjacent *Rockbridge County News* office. All the studio’s negatives from 1884 to 1905 were destroyed, although others survived, including color photos of Washington and Lee’s entire Custis Lee Collection, among them Charles Willson Peale’s famed portrait of George Washington — all of which had been brought to the studio to be photographed, but returned to W&L just weeks before the fire.

By this time, his son Henry had graduated from the university and had come to work with his father. The two didn’t let the catastrophe end their work in photography; they merely moved the studio down the street and were back in business in a couple of weeks. All told, the pair made around 500 distinct color prints together, including one of the monumental mural by Benjamin West Clinedinst, “The Battle of New Market,” which hangs in Jackson Memorial Hall at VMI.

AFTER 1910, Miley left most of his studio and landscape photography work to Henry, while he stayed busy continuing to experiment with color, watching early motion pictures to further examine the connection with lighting and filmmaking, and working in his gardens and greenhouse.

Miley’s profound curiosity was not limited just to photography and color, but also extended into gardening. He added a greenhouse to the east side of the house on White Street and kept a large garden in the back yard. He used both areas to raise enormous beds of flowers and vegetables, and he cultivated several apple trees, one of which produced four varieties of fruit thanks

Both: Frances Isabel Mackey Huffman



Among the family members on White Street were Henry Miley, Michael Miley’s son and partner, and Martha Mackey Miley, his wife.



Michael Miley took this photo of the family house around 1900. His son Henry is standing on the porch, smoking. Michael Miley’s fascination with exotic horticulture is evident.

to his grafting experimentation. His son Henry said of his father’s gardening interests: “He used to get up early in the morning to go out and watch everything grow. Sometimes he would sit up all night tending the fire to keep the greenhouse warm. We burned as much coal in the greenhouse as in the house.”

ALTHOUGH HE CONTINUED to assist his son in their photographic studio, as the world of the early 20th century was engulfed in war, Miley’s experiences in the Civil War led him to his greatest hope: to be able to say he lived to see the end of the World War with an Allied victory.

Five months before Armistice Day in 1918, however, Michael Miley died a quiet death. True to the modest

way he led his life, his tombstone in our Lexington cemetery is in the corner of another family’s plot and simply reads: “M. Miley 1841–1918.”

Henry Miley kept the studio going until 1935, when he retired after contracting tuberculosis, requiring treatment in a sanatorium. At that time neither W&L or VMI was about to purchase Henry Miley’s collection of photographic plates, so they were sold to the Virginia Historical Society in Richmond. (W&L already owned a



Etched-glass transom window over the front door



The Miley House today

number of plates.) In 1954 W&L's professor of American studies, Marshall Fishwick, in cooperation with the Historical Society, wrote a book on Miley. In it Fishwick



Parlor fireplace and mantel

described Miley's life and work and reproduced a number of Miley's portraits and landscape photos.

At the White Street house there have been a few upgrades to the plumbing, heating,

kitchen and bathrooms since Miley died a little more than 100 years ago, but the floor plan and many of the floors remain the same. No hidden discoveries have been made except for small pieces of white china that are frequently uncovered in the garden during spring plowing.

DO OFTEN WONDER, when I look at a Miley print, what would Miley think about the technical progress and innovations that have been made in the realm of photography since his time — especially the small, hand-held device that functions as a telephone, camera and computer. I suspect he would be very curious.

