



# Introduction to "Preserving collective memory: Nineteenth-century Harvard class books and albums", Harvard Library Bulletin, Volume 26.3

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# Introduction to the Essays

*Megan Sniffin-Marinoff*

THE INSPIRATION FOR THIS GROUP OF ESSAYS WAS THE 2015 EXHIBITION “We Carry With Us Precious Memorials”—Harvard Class Photograph Albums 1852–1865, mounted in the Pusey Library Lammot du Pont Copeland Gallery, Harvard University. This exhibition, presented in partnership by the Weissman Preservation Center (WPC) and the Harvard University Archives (HUA), brought together conservators, curators, and archivists, all of whom probably spent more time talking than they ever imagined they would about photographs taken of students. They focused in particular on Harvard students of the nineteenth century and the keeping of memories or “memorials.” The conversation about these photographs and class albums, and their meanings, began as a result of a university-wide project undertaken by the WPC to preserve and enhance access to salt prints at Harvard. The project encompasses the identification and condition survey of photogenic drawings, paper negatives, and salted paper prints found throughout the university’s libraries, archives, and museums.

Today the options for acquiring images are increasingly varied. They are captured not only with formal portraits in yearbooks but also increasingly with informal online images, some taken by a student of himself or herself on a smartphone—or what is now known as a “selfie”—and posted on web sites, some of which may last over time. As Melissa Banta notes in her essay, it was the introduction of photography in the mid-nineteenth century that profoundly changed and enhanced the ability of a Harvard student to remember his college years. This memorializing through images created by some of the biggest names in early Massachusetts photography—John Adams Whipple, James Wallace Black, and George Kendall Warren—began with the use of daguerreotypes in 1852 (see figure 1.1). Banta also describes how the need to store or assemble the nineteenth-century images led to the first class albums. She traces the evolution of the early albums from small notebooks to large volumes and the evocative ways students chose to memorialize the college years at a time when Harvard itself was transforming from a college into a major university.

Elena Bulat’s work explains how an examination of Harvard’s salt print collections broadens our understanding of seminal technological developments in photography and pioneering uses of the medium. She discusses the new methodologies underway to identify and analyze historic coatings on salted paper photographs. A greater understanding of this medium will enable photographic curators to stabilize images such as those found in Harvard’s class albums so that the volumes will, indeed, last

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Figure 1.2. Aaron Molyneux Hewlett, instructor and curator of the Harvard Gymnasium, Class of 1864 Album, George Kendall Warren, 1864, Salted paper print. 19.7 x 14.8 cm on an album page, 32.2 cm. HUD 264.04.2.

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an even longer time than they have already. Bulat provides some details of a project in partnership with the Center for Nanoscale Systems at Harvard. This joint study is leading to new approaches to the conservation of photographs.

The essays by Caroline Tanski and Kate Bowers focus on the enduring desire on the part of Harvard students to remember their classmates and their time at the University, to maintain some of these friendships, and, through their gifts as alumni, to show their hope that these memories would be preserved by Harvard's librarians and archivists. As Tanski points out, in addition to the visual memories, the written memories of students, alumni, faculty, and librarians enhance the visual and allow researchers to better understand long friendships—the 'beating heart' of the past—and provide some further context for images that start to appear more readily in the nineteenth century. Particularly poignant is the Class of 1880 and their relationship with the classmate who became President Theodore Roosevelt. Bowers's selection of images from the collections of the HUA reveals the ways that the visual and the textual intersect and play off of one another, using as an example, Henry David Thoreau's entry in the Class of 1837 class book. She focuses on how more intimate memories are captured, and some of the choices students made in memorializing people and objects (see figure 1.2). Both authors credit the hardworking and often long-suffering Harvard class secretaries who needed—and still need—to push and prod alumni to send in updates on their lives, such information being key to creation of the rich documentation at the HUA for the study not only of the experiences of Harvard students but of men and women over the course of their lives.

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