

Today in Columbus History, December 27, 1870, a photographer named E.S. Wormell advertised his services in the *Weekly Sun*, for the second week. Wormell's gallery was headquartered in R.B. Gunby's building on St. Clair Street (now Eleventh Street, possibly toward the river). The only other traces of Mr. Wormell in Columbus – or anywhere in Georgia – was an ad in the previous week's *Enquirer* and two more ads in the *Enquirer* in subsequent January issues, announcing he would only be staying in town six weeks. After some research, I discovered that there were two Wormell photographers. E.S. (Elestus Springer, the elder) and E.O. (Elias Oldham, the younger) were brothers, both born in Maine, who practiced photography for most of their lives, with a little adventure thrown in along the way.

Born into a large family in Maine about six years apart (Elestus in Saco in 1838 and Elias in Peru in 1844), the brothers descend from 17th-century Swedish immigrants. Although their father, Hiram Wormell, is listed as a laborer in both the 1850 and 1860 Maine census, with very little personal estate, his obituary states he had been in the police force. In fact, his eldest son Cyrus was sheriff of Oxford County, Maine, for many years, and may have played a part in solving a later difficulty that Elias, the younger brother, got himself into.

A Family of Union Soldiers

Elias and Elestus (as well as their father and at least two other brothers) enlisted in the Union Army in 1861, soon after war was declared, each in a different Maine regiment. All would survive and father Hiram in 1899 was named the oldest veteran of the Grand Army of the Republic by the *Boston Globe*. However, the sectional strife took its toll on our two subjects, who were both badly hurt in the war and continued to have problems throughout their lives.

Elestus was wounded in the arm at the Battle of Gaines' Mill (Virginia, June 27, 1862, a Confederate victory), and mustered out in January of 1863. According to his obituary, at Gaines Mill,

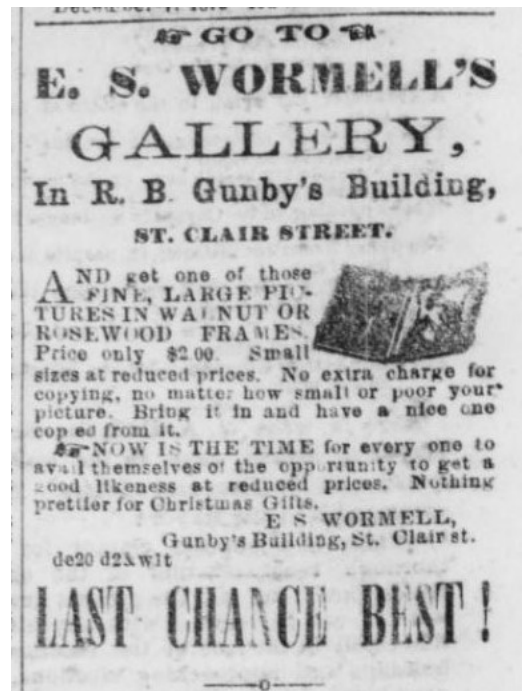
“He was promoted to Color Sergeant, and bore the colors at this battle where though badly wounded three times, once having the colors shot from his hands, he succeeded in saving them, and bringing them off the field. He was sent north to a hospital, as was supposed in a dying condition, but rallied, and his after life has been a continuous fight against disease contracted in the service and the effect of wounds received in battle.”
–*Republican Journal* (Belfast, Maine), December 20, 1888

Elias was also wounded with dire and lingering consequences. According to his obituary in 1908,

“[he suffered] a wound in the wrist at Antietam and a wound in the abdomen from a fragment of a shell at Winchester. While in the hospital he contracted erysipelas, which settled in his eyes and ultimately Oct. 7, 1889, caused total blindness...” – *Burlington Daily News*, June 20, 1908

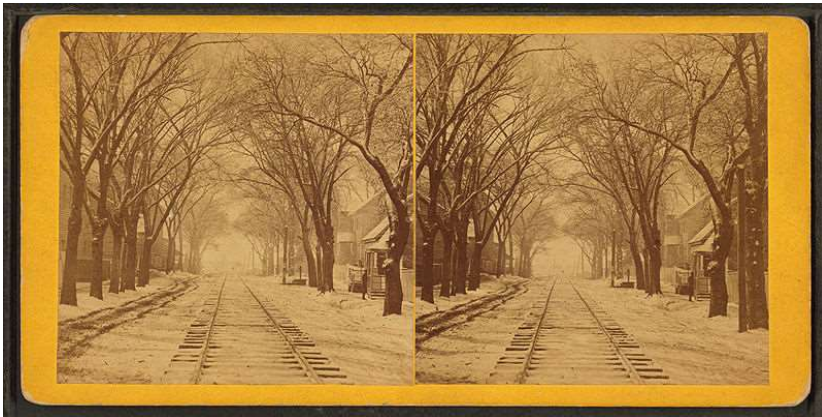
With antibiotics, erysipelas today is not the deadly disease it once was. Also known as St. Anthony's Fire and, most often, caused by a streptococcal bacterium, it was responsible for 2,800 deaths in the 1860 census (*Dartmouth Medicine*). Elias may have been partially blind after he recovered – a real liability for a photographer, but he seems to have managed well enough – except for a rough period just after the war in 1865, as we will see.

Elestus Springer (E.S.) Wormell – Having mustered out in early 1863, and despite the unnamed infirmities due to his war wounds, Elestus opened a photography business on Middle Street in Portland, Maine (the largest city) by December 1864. He married in 1865, but his wife, Augusta, died in 1868. That year, his business advertisement names



1 Columbus Weekly Sun, December 27, 1870, p. 3.

a partner, J. Packard, Jr. Elestus soon married Annie Packard, likely the sister of his partner. Wormell and Packard also had a studio in Nashua, New Hampshire, around the same time.



2 E.S. Wormell, "Hancock Street, New Bern, North Carolina," stereoscopic albumen print, undated (approx. ca.1870-1874), from New York Public Library's Digital Library (Wikimedia Commons)

With someone else able to mind the store(s) in New England, Elestus may have felt free enough to begin traveling south every year. His trip to Columbus in late 1870 may have been an experiment in itinerancy that didn't work out since he never seems to have returned. He did find a niche in North Carolina, however. Elestus opened an account at the Freedman's Bank of New Bern, North Carolina, in 1871, and made regular deposits through 1874, the year the bank collapsed due to mismanagement, fraud, and effects of the Panic of 1873. The Freedman's Bank and Trust was formed primarily to assist newly freed African

Americans in becoming financially established, but some white people also used its services.

Between 1871 and 1878, E.S. apparently traveled regularly from New England to North Carolina, where he had a photographic business and also sold Singer sewing machines in New Bern. In 1872, he was listed as a member of the North Carolina Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals. In 1875-76, he operated out of Raleigh. Around 1878, he also worked in Tarboro, NC, and his wife Annie may have lived in North Carolina year-round during at least some of those years. The couple is in Tarboro for the 1880 census, with Annie's father in the household (they never had any children). But in February 1881, they moved back to Maine for good – likely to Searsport, where they lived until his death. Elestus Springer Wormell died December 11, 1888, in Fitchburg, Massachusetts (possibly on a business trip?) and was buried in Searsport Village Cemetery, in Searsport, Maine.

E S Wormell and family left for their old home in Maine on yesterday. We regret to lose them and wish them a safe journey.

3 Tarborough Southerner, February 17, 1881

Elias Oldham (E.O.) Wormell – Soon after the war, Elestus' younger brother Elias also had a "daguerrian" saloon in Portland, on a different street, as well as one in Lewiston, about 35 miles north of Portland, until the late spring of 1865. It was then that Elias and another man, Moore, were arrested for participating in a robbery and murder in Lewiston. A few days later, more details came out. Their 19-year-old accuser (newly married to a jealous arsonist, the newspaper added) had been arrested and then denied knowing about the murder. (She claimed that she had run off as Wormell and Moore robbed the victim, named Napoleon Chapman.) The accuser also backpedaled on her identification of Moore. According to the *Bangor Daily Whig and Courier*, both Elias Wormell and Mr. Moore were known in Portland, Elias possibly being less well thought of: "Wormell does not seem to bear a character altogether above reproach," the reporter wrote, then went on, "The two young men seem overwhelmed with grief. Moore is respectably connected in this city. Both of them are apparently shocked at the charges, whose truth they deny in toto." (*Bangor Daily Whig and Courier*, Tues., June 15, 1865, reprinted from the *Lewiston Herald*)

THE CHAPMAN INQUEST.—We learn from the Journal that the jury of inquest on the body of Napoleon Chapman, have returned a verdict that he "came to his death by drowning, either in the Androscoggin river or in one of the canals in Lewiston, leading into the said Androscoggin river, on the night of Dec. 7th, A. D. 1864." The friends of the deceased are much gratified at recent developments, as they seem to favor the supposition of accidental drowning.

4 Portland Daily Press, June 24, 1865, p. 3



5 *Portland Daily Press*, December 14, 1867, p. 1

By the end of the month, the *Portland Daily Press* reported that the victim Chapman had not actually been murdered at all but drowned accidentally after having had too much to drink. No mention was made of the robbery again and I have not been able to find more about the fates of anyone involved. At this point, it might be helpful to remember that Elias' oldest brother Cyrus was the longtime sheriff of a nearby county. Who knows what sort of influence might have assisted Elias to shake off that bad situation? The next year, Elias married Angelette

Martha Folsom in Lewiston and was back in the business of making tintypes in Portland in 1866 and 1867.

In 1870, Elias moved his family and business to Burlington, Vermont, and seems to have lived there until his death in 1908. At some point, he was in partnership with someone named Morse. One exciting event: in 1885 Elias sued the New England Telephone and Telegraph company for \$2,000 for blocking the light outside his studio window with their telephone poles. He won a settlement of \$300 and got the company to move the poles to another location.

The Wormell brothers – separately and together – did most of their business in making and selling tintypes, which were extremely popular, because they were affordable, ordinary, and informal. One author compares tintypes to Walt Whitman's poetry, “direct and unpretentious.” Probably encouraged by the low cost, it is not uncommon in old tintypes to find people acting funny or foolish, or dressing up in costume. (Schimmelman)

There are many questions left unanswered about the Wormell brothers. For example, how did Elestus hear about Columbus? What made him venture south to what had been essentially enemy territory, only five years after the war? Most itinerant artists I've read about, whether painters or photographers, would stay in Columbus for a year or more, or return every so often. Why did he not return to the town that had a long tradition of being so welcoming to itinerant artists and photographers?

And how did the brothers learn photography in the first place? Was it during the war, or had they both – or one of them – dabbled in it in the 1850s? Maybe someone will get curious and try to learn more about the brothers Wormell. – **Rachel Dobson**

Our weekly snippets of Columbus history are usually based on a few days of searching through the most popular sources for Muscogee County history. Meant to inspire readers to explore more about Columbus history, they are not exhaustive dissertations on the topic and may contain mistakes. If you have corrections or additional information, feel free to share them with the group.

OBITUARY.

Elias O. Wormell.

(From Friday's City Edition.)

Elias O. Wormell died at 9:30 last evening at his home at 17 Grant street after a wasting illness of two and a half months. The funeral will be held tomorrow afternoon, with prayers by Rev. C. J. Staples at the residence at 3 o'clock followed by burial at Lake View cemetery under Masonic auspices.

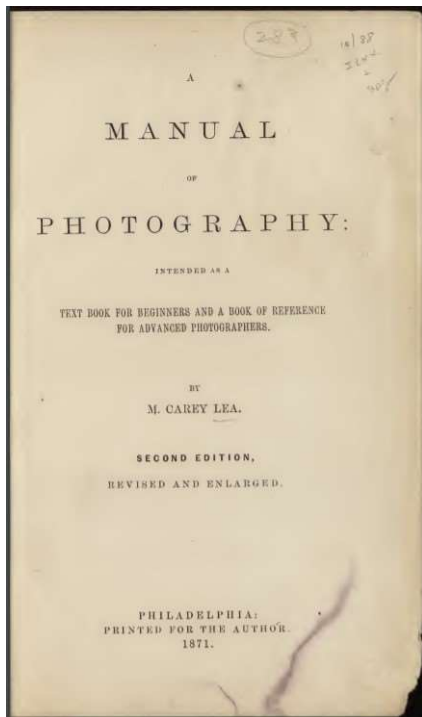
Mr. Wormell was born in Saco, Maine, October 31, 1844. He enlisted in the 10th Maine volunteers in October, 1861, and served with credit, suffering a wound in the wrist at Antietam and a wound in the abdomen from a fragment of a shell at Winchester. While in hospital he contracted erysipelas, which settled in his eyes and ultimately Oct. 7, 1889, caused total blindness, from which he suffered to the day of his death.

Mr. Wormell came to Burlington about 1870 and until incapacitated by blindness followed the occupation of photographer.

He was a member of Post Stannard, G. A. R., of Burlington Lodge, No. 100, F. and A. M., and of Burlington chapter No. 3, R. A. M.

He is survived by a wife and by two brothers, the latter living respectively in Maine and Massachusetts.

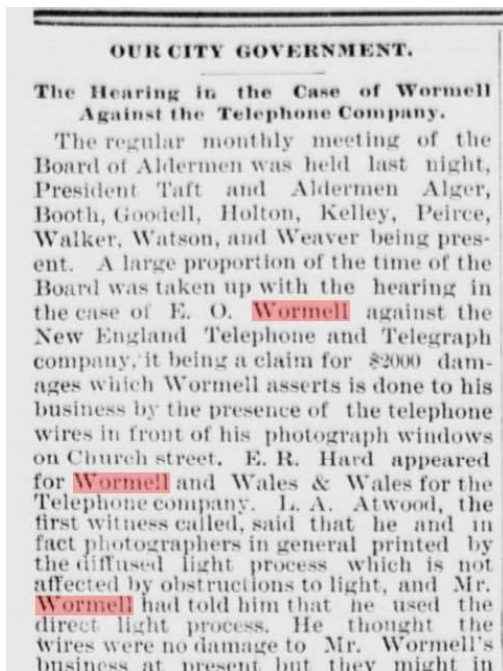
6 *Burlington Daily News*, June 20, 1908.



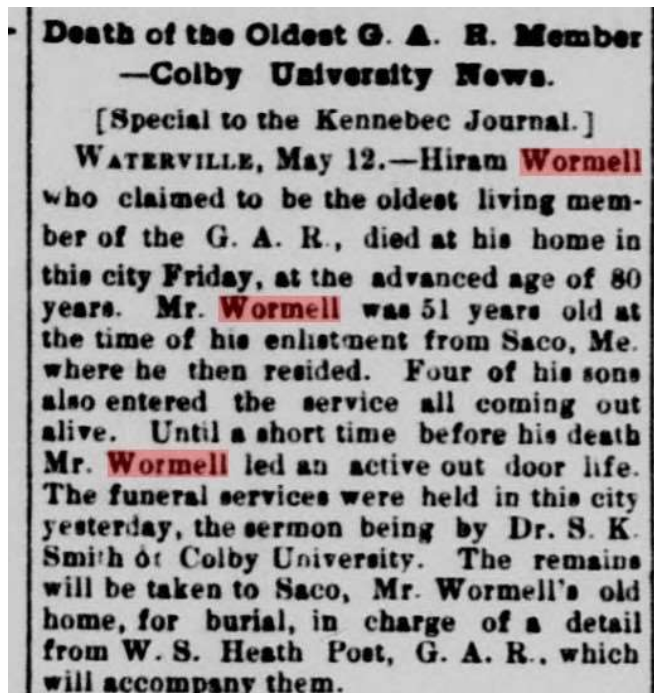
The Wormell brothers may have used this book as a reference in their work, first published in 1868, *A Manual of Photography - Intended as a Text Book for Beginners and a Book of Reference for Advanced Photographers*, by Mathew Carey Lea, Philadelphia, 1871 (Internet Archive)



E.S. Wormell, "Man, unidentified. Hand colored studio portrait...His cheeks have been tinted pink; there are ink marks on his face and suit. The photograph is mounted in a gilt decorated paper mat," 6 x 4 cm., undated, from Haverhill Public Library, Haverhill, Mass.



Burlington Weekly Free Press, December 11, 1885, p. 3 (first part of the story)
<https://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn86072143/1885-12-11/ed-1/seq-3/>



Daily Kennebec Journal (Augusta, Maine), May 13, 1890. It was the *Portland Daily Press* (May 13, 1890, p. 1) that said he had been in the police force.

SOURCES

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<https://digital.ncdcr.gov/digital/collection/p16062coll9/id/565310>

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and http://www.luminous-lint.com/app/photographer/E_O_Wormell/A/

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