Abel Fletcher (1820-1890) Collection

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Descriptive Summary
Title: Abel Fletcher (1820-1890) Collection
Dates: 1772-1940
Collection Number: P-003
Creator/Collector: Fletcher, Abel. Fletcher, M.M.
Extent: 1.5 linear feet (Boxes: legal, 5x7, postcard)
Repository: Seaver Center for Western History Research, Natural History Museum of Los Angeles County
Los Angeles, California 90007-4057
Abstract: The Abel Fletcher Collection consists of one carte-de-visite, and a number of ambrotypes, daguerreotypes, Fletchotypes, negatives, reprints, tintypes, books, clippings, letters, postcards and ephemera.
Language of Material: English
Access
Research is by appointment only
Publication Rights
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Preferred Citation
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Biography/Administrative History
In 1843, four years after the invention of photography, Abel Fletcher set up his portrait studio on the west side of South Erie Street, just south of Main Street in Massillon, Ohio. Skylights provided natural illumination. From the east and west arched studio windows he recorded panoramic views of the 1840s-era bustling little town; from the riverbank looking east he captured Massillon’s earliest downtown streetscape, about 1852. As a young Universalist preacher in Virginia, Fletcher had been experimenting with optical lenses for seven years. In Massillon, he left the ministry and concentrated on making daguerreotypes—small one-of-a-kind images on polished copper plates, a cumbersome process. Continuing to experiment, Fletcher developed the first paper negative process in the United States, making it possible for photographers to make multiple prints of the same image. Photographs became affordable for the general public. At his first success, he penciled on an envelope of paper prints: “My first experiments made with paper negs before glass was used about 1845.” That envelope and the enclosed images are preserved by the Smithsonian Institution. Although William Henry Fox Talbot had created a similar system of picture making in England prior to Fletcher’s U.S. development, communication was slow, so no one in this country was aware of Talbot’s “calotypes,” until after Fletcher’s invention was made public. While he was testing chemicals in 1859, Abel Fletcher was blinded by a darkroom explosion, a tragic early end to a landmark career. However, his wife, M.M. Fletcher, had worked along with him, so she was able to take over the studio, becoming one of the first American women photographers.
Scope and Content of Collection
The Abel Fletcher Collection consists of one carte-de-visite, and a number of ambrotypes, daguerreotypes, Fletchotypes, negatives, reprints, tintypes, books, clippings, letters, postcards and ephemera. The collection consists of over 200 items that span the years from approximately 1772 to 1940, though most of the photographs themselves are undated. Thus, a moderate amount of detective work was necessary to identify some of the photographs. The bulk of the collection consists of daguerreotypes created by either Abel Fletcher or M.M. Fletcher. Most of the daguerreotypes are portraits of unidentified individuals; however there are a few daguerreotypes of art images. One of the identified daguerreotypes is of Betsey Mix Cowles, an education reformist, abolitionist and women’s suffrage advocate.
Indexing Terms
Camera, early photography & moving pictures

P-003 Abel Fletcher Collection finding aid