



The Hidden Power of Microhistories

The rare tintypes of Jefferson and Varina Davis showcased in this issue share much in common with the portraits *MI* has long featured for its readers.

Since 1979, we've published thousands of portrait photographs. Soldiers and sailors from all walks of life and of all ranks compose the vast majority of images, though likenesses of nurses, vivandières and patriotic persons have graced our pages. Some of these images include details about salient features, including dress, weapons and equipment.

Others are accompanied by personal stories and biographical information.

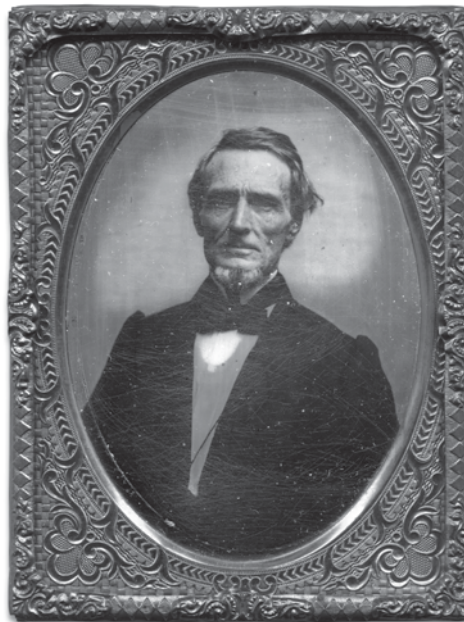
In every case, each image and its associated narrative is a microhistory—a historical investigation on the individual level. They are windows that shed light on the larger themes of the American experience.

Numerous examples can be found in this issue. You can read the story of a Massachusetts captain who was wounded and captured in a Virginia engagement, and learn how he became a casualty in a larger battle of wits between a Union general and the Confederate president. You can also read about the subtle but distinctive uniform details of the underappreciated staff officer and see representative images that capture the range of variations of styles in coats, pants and caps. You can look upon the faces of soldiers from North and South and perhaps see in their expressions of pride, patriotism and pain.

And so the same holds with the haunting portrait of Jefferson Davis. In his face, suggests author John O'Brien, we see a man at a critical moment in time between the dissolution of the United States and the rise of the Confederate nation. We also see Varina Davis, as she prepares to leave her friends and happy memories of political life in Washington for a life of uncertainty.

It is easy to overlook these small yet critical moments in history, as the steady drumbeat of time pushes them into the deepest recesses of our collective memory. Still, microhistories can bring them back into our consciousness and make them wholly relevant today. This is the hidden strength of portrait photographs in *MI*.

An appreciation of these microhistories can help us to better understand where we've come from and where we're headed in our ever-changing world.



Quarter-plate tintype attributed to Jesse H. Whitehurst of Washington, D.C. John O'Brien collection.

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