Freeman Studio
in the Picture Gallery

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The Picture Gallery presents highlights from the pictorial collections of the State Library of New South Wales.

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A selection of images from the Freeman Collection can be viewed online at <www.sl.nsw.gov.au/picman>.

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This year marks the 150th anniversary of the arrival of photographer William Freeman in Sydney and the start of a photographic tradition. The Freeman Studio in Sydney is the oldest continuously operating photographic studio in Australia and one of the oldest in the world.

To mark the sesquicentenary of Freeman, the State Library of New South Wales is exhibiting a small selection of portraits, newly printed from its Freeman collection of glass negatives. The Library is fortunate to have acquired the studio’s entire output from 1875 to the present day - a collection of over a hundred thousand negatives.

The Freeman Collection is a genealogical treasure, enabling us to see our forebears and their fashions. Royalty, the rich and famous, visitors and locals flocked to Freeman to have their likenesses captured for posterity. As a visual documentation of our society, it is without peer.

Dagmar Schmidmaier
State Librarian & Chief Executive
August 2003
Freeman & Co. advertisement, Supplement to the Australasian Photographic Review, 21 July 1900
Freeman Studio: a photographic tradition

For 150 years, the name Freeman has been synonymous with photography in Sydney. When William Freeman arrived from London in April 1853, he worked at John Wheeler’s Sydney Photographic Rooms in Bridge Street. His brother James joined them in October 1854 and a month later the studio, which had moved to rooms in George Street, advertised as Freeman Brothers and Wheeler.

James Freeman was already a highly experienced photographer. He had been a daguerreotypist since 1844, having purchased the licence for Somersetshire from Daguerre's English representative Richard Beard, only a few years after the invention of photography. Freeman practised at Beard’s former gallery in Bath, before moving to London in 1851 and emigrating to Sydney two years later.

By early 1855, the company was simply Freeman Brothers and a move to new premises with 14 m² of skylight enabled portraits to be taken in any weather. They had established a reputation for using the latest techniques and in 1856 were rewarded with permission to photograph the first responsible government in New South Wales — provided the image was not shown in the colony. Fortunately the Library has several copies of the rather prosaic paper photograph of five men around a table.

Until that time, most portraits taken by Freeman Brothers were unique images on silver-plated copper sheets called daguerreotypes. Daguerreotypes were expensive to make and sitters had to endure lengthy exposures (as long as 30 seconds) and rigid immobility imposed by head clamps, but their novelty ensured that a steady stream of wealthy citizens visited Freeman’s Sydney Gallery of Photographic Art.

1856: a new process

By 1856, a new process on glass (which James Freeman had brought to the colony but abandoned because it was not as attractive as the daguerreotype), suddenly became fashionable and Freeman was able to exploit the faster medium. Nevertheless, it was still not possible to produce a photograph with less than several seconds’ exposure. (This meant portraits of small children remained difficult and studios commonly charged double for children under four years of age, only photographing toddlers during the middle of the day when the sun was brightest.)
In 1859, James Freeman recalled the unusual consequence of one such lengthy exposure.

I remember a trifling incident which occurred during my experience in portrait taking. A lady of nervous temperament was sitting for her portrait and rose suddenly from her seat, during the period of exposure in the camera. I hastily closed the shutter and developed the picture, which turned out moderately good, but lo and behold her dress which was a plain silk one, presented a fine showy scroll-like pattern on its surface! How was this? The chair on which she sat, and which was covered with a blue figured velvet, had taken its part in the tableau and ere I could cover the lens had also imprinted its portrait or rather pattern on the lady's dress.

1860s: a revolution in photography

The 1860s witnessed a revolution in photography, with the introduction of the carte-de-visite, a small paper photograph the size of a visiting card. Printed from a glass negative, the carte-de-visite could be mass-produced. Consequently, the price of photography plummeted from 1 guinea ($2.10) for the daguerreotype to a shilling ($0.10) for a carte-de-visite and for the first time it was possible for the working class to be photographed. They flocked to the studios and Freeman produced over 30,000 carte-de-visite negatives by 1870. Unfortunately, these early negatives were destroyed and the Library has no carte-de-visite negatives prior to 1875, although 18,000 exist after that date. Nevertheless, the quality of Freeman Brothers work achieved international recognition when they won silver and bronze medals for photography at the London International Exhibition in 1862.

Partnership with the noted English photographer Victor Prout in 1866 gave them additional status, and Freeman & Prout began to advertise as ‘photographers to their Royal Highnesses the Prince and Princess of Wales and His Excellency the Governor’. In fact by 1900, the firm had held the appointment of photographers to each succeeding Governor in New South Wales from the time of Sir Charles FitzRoy in 1854.

William and James Freeman returned to England in 1868 after renovating Edwin Dalton's studio in George Street, leaving the business in the hands of their staff. William came back to Sydney after the death of James in 1870 and continued to produce carte-de-visite and larger portraits from several premises along George Street. Freeman Brothers continued to cater to the upper end of the market and won first prize for photographs at the 1870 Sydney Intercolonial Exhibition, the 1887 Adelaide Jubilee International Exhibition and the 1888 Centennial International Exhibition in Melbourne.

The studio passed into the hands of long-time employee William Rufus George soon after William Freeman retired around 1890. George had been at Freeman's for 16 years and became managing director through the turbulent 1890s.
1890s: price war

In 1893, Sydney photographers became embroiled in a price war, brought about by an economic depression and declining custom. The ability of Mark Blow’s Crown Bromide Enlargement Company to undercut established studios exacerbated the situation. Despite a price-fixing agreement, Blow’s company — with 58 employees — took the lion’s share of the market. Under William George, Freeman & Co. continued to aim at ‘producing the highest and most permanent class of work’ in an effort to maintain prices, so that a quarter of their photographs in the 1890s were expensive platinum prints. Mrs George, continuing a tradition from the 1860s, painted miniatures from photographs. William George’s son Alfred became proprietor by 1903.

New century: new problems

The new century brought its own problems for traditional photographic studios. George Eastman’s Kodak cameras had made photography easier and fewer people required formal portraiture. In 1896, 3000 Pocket Kodaks were sold in Australia in just two months – more than the total number of professional photographers in Australia for the entire nineteenth century. It wasn’t long before most families had a folding camera of their own and began energetically recording themselves and their surroundings.

Harold Cazneaux, who had joined Freeman & Co. in 1904 as an artist and become a photographic operator and later managing director, saw the firm’s difficulties in another light and was scathing of Freeman’s old style:

The main output was the artificial make-up of stuffy overexposed figures against painted backgrounds and surrounded by fake furniture and what nots. 4

Cazneaux resigned in 1918 after an argument with owner Alfred George about ownership of his photographic work outside the studio.

World War I saw a boom in formal portraits of soldiers, although this was not Freeman’s normal market. Weddings provided much of their business and still represent an important part of studio portraiture today.

1930s – 1950s: street photographers & sales tax

Valentine Waller, who had bought into the studio in 1924, became sole proprietor in 1933. The Depression gave rise to a new threat to professional studios – the street photographer. Using small format cameras and snapping passers-by with the hope that some would purchase their photographs, street photographers worked without the normal overheads of studios and could easily undercut them. The aggressive pursuit of custom by some forced the State Government in 1937 to introduce registration and regulation of street photographers.
The Government wasn’t always so helpful. In 1956, Waller, then President of the Professional Photographers Association, complained that the Government’s recent increase in sales tax on photographs from 8% to 33% was causing studios to close.5

Waller had a particular interest in early photography and much of Freeman & Co. practice became the copying and restoration of old photographs.

1970 to present: colour, weddings & another century

In 1968, William Pooley bought the business. After nearly 100 years in George Street, Freeman Studios moved around the corner into Hunter Street, due to the demolition of their old premises. Nevertheless, the move was short-lived and within three years they were back in George Street, opposite Wynyard Station. Pooley and his partner Stuart Brown continued the firm’s tradition of portraiture and copy/restoration work, introducing colour photography in 1970.

In 1971 Rick Sherwin joined the firm, becoming a partner in 1973. He began photographing weddings off site, although the mainstay of the business remained portraiture and the copying of client’s old photographs. Sherwin left in 1982 and was bought out two years later.

In 1989 Freeman Studio passed to award-winning photographer Mofid Guirguis and in 1998 moved to its present location at 193–195 Clarence Street, where it is known for its corporate, portrait and wedding photography. Digital photography was introduced in 2003.

After 150 years, the firm begun by James and William Freeman continues to photograph Sydneysiders. The technology of photography has changed but portraiture remains a challenge for the photographer. After 42 years of portrait photography at Freeman & Co., Valentine Waller wryly concluded that the vanity of people never changes:

In those days the handsome subjects thought the pictures did them justice, while the plain ones complained that they didn’t. The same thing happens today.6

Alan Davies
Curator of Photographs


3. The actual authorship of photographs produced in a studio system is difficult - if not impossible - to determine. For much of the nineteenth century, Freeman employed a team of photographers in the studio, who remain anonymous. As late as 1969, Freeman Studio photographers were still trained to sign prints with a facsimile of the Freeman signature, despite the fact that James Freeman had been dead for nearly a century. More problematically, not all negatives in the Freeman collection necessarily originate in that studio. For instance, Freeman acquired the negatives of Edward Dalton when they purchased his premises in 1868 and sold reprints as their own. More recently, there is evidence that they acquired the large format portrait negatives from John Hubert Newman’s studio, only two doors away, when it closed in 1908.

4. Harold Cazneaux, letter to Jack Cato, NLA M S 5416

5. Letter to the editor, Sydney Morning Herald, 19 March 1956, p. 2


A microfiche index to names in the Freeman Collection of negatives is held in the Mitchell Library at PXA 337. It covers the periods 1875-1919 and 1926-1935.
BY SPECIAL APPOINTMENT
TO HIS EXCELLENCY THE GOVERNOR

ART PHOTOGRAPHERS

Freeman & Co

346 (late 360)
George Street

SYDNEY N.S.W
Sir Edward Deas Thomson was appointed Colonial Secretary in 1837, which automatically gave him membership of the Executive and Legislative Council. It was to Deas Thomson that Edward Hargraves delivered his payable gold sample from Ophir, claiming to be the discoverer. Here Deas Thomson is dressed in the robes of Chancellor of the University of Sydney, a position he held from 1865 to 1878. The edge of the fake table would have been cropped in the final print.
Lady Deas Thomson

c. 1874

Contact print from wet plate negative 30.5 x 25.5 cm

ON 6 25 x 30 cm box 24

Anne Maria Bourke was second daughter of Governor Bourke when she married Edward Deas Thomson in 1833. This photograph was taken at the same session as that of her husband, but the studio furniture has been rearranged and ‘feminised' with flowers and a sewing basket of embroidery.
This full-length photograph showing Mrs Harrison’s new bustle dress to best advantage required an exposure of several seconds. Concealed behind her is a rigid studio head clamp holding her still. The bustle was a complex construction of layers, with the overskirt bunched at the rear in a revival of the 18th century polonaise. Not surprisingly, the silhouette of the fashion conscious woman of the 1870s was satirically compared to that of an emu.
Although she was widowed with three children, Mrs Bettington’s solemn expression is probably a reflection of the tedium of being photographed. She has simple flowers tucked into her hairnet, but the enormous string of pearls hints at her wealth. Victorian women did not wear make-up and pale skin was a mark of gentility, although by the end of the century actresses and socialites wore more than a touch of rouge. The studio furniture looks much the worse for wear.
Miss H. Day
c. 1875
Contact print from wet plate negative 30.5 x 25.5 cm
ON 268 box 3

Miss Day’s high dressed coiffure is crowned by a chignon of artificial hair. The industry for chignons imported from France was so great in the late 1860s to the mid 1870s that lurid rumours of their production abounded.

Ladies who wear chignons will be glad to know that it is not true that the hair for chignons is procured from corpses of people who die in hospitals ...

The Queen, January 1867
The children of coal and produce merchant William Harris of Paddington display conspicuous wealth in their astonishing array of fringing, ruching, ruffles and lace.

Never was there so much jewellery worn as at the present moment, and never were dresses longer and fuller than they are now at the back. It takes thirty five metres or more if they be yards, of silk to make a dress according to present fashion ... 

The Ladies Treasury, April 1877
The family of Sir Edward Knox and his wife Martha struggle unsuccessfully to remain motionless during the exposure. In fact, this is the best of six similar wet plate negatives. The men look statesmen-like into the distance and the youngest member of the clan shows his enthusiasm for the family snap. Knox was the founder of CSR, a banker and Member of the Legislative Council.
Captain Francis Hixson, his wife Sarah and their six children are much more relaxed in this later dry plate photograph, as the faster emulsion eliminated the need for head clamps. Hixson commanded the NSW Naval Brigade from 1863 and the Naval Forces from 1888. His three sons all became lieutenants in the volunteer Naval Forces in the mid 1890s.
Frederick Sloper, on his brand new Rover tricycle, was a chemist and druggist with pharmacies in Liverpool and Oxford Streets. Tricycles were thought to be safer for women and 'more dignified' for men like doctors and clergymen than penny-farthing bicycles. The painted studio backdrop with rustic fence and grass on the floor was an attempt to simulate an outdoor setting, although Mr Sloper and the photographer seem oblivious to the falling sky.
10

John Horbury Hunt and Lloyd Tayler

1889

Enlargement from wet plate negative 30.5 x 25.5 cm
ON 6 25 x 30 cm box 7

Horbury Hunt, newly elected president of the Institute of Architects of New South Wales, lounges in a studio chair with his Victorian counterpart Lloyd Tayler. Hunt, a brilliant architect, was also eccentric. He wore a knee-length frock coat of plum or cerise, which had special pockets for his drawing instruments, while his hat concealed a compartment for sheets of paper. He even rode a bicycle with a built-in drawing board and ink reservoir to jobs around Sydney.
Dr John Pierce
c. 1876
Contact print from wet plate negative 30.5 x 25.5 cm
ON 268 box 3

Dr Pierce, surgeon at Maitland hospital, had his portrait taken during a visit to Sydney. He is dressed in the uniform of East Maitland Volunteer Regiment, one of the many militia units formed to defend the colony in the nineteenth century. His cocked hat is decorated with the black feathers of a medical officer.
Dr Benjamin Fyffe, surgeon and physician, seems every inch the prosperous professional gentleman. He arrived in the colony in 1875 and opened his rooms in George Street at the corner of Hunter Street, but spent only two years in Sydney, before moving to Fitzroy in Melbourne.
Sir Alfred Stephen was Chief Justice of New South Wales from 1844 to 1873 and occasionally acting governor. Known for his severe sentences, he nonetheless tried unsuccessfully from 1886 to 1890 to extend the grounds for divorce for women. It was said that Stephen’s main fault was his ‘meddling in matters that did not concern him’. Overworked, he implored his colleagues:

... kill no more Chief Justices. Do not allow them to be tortured, not merely by the law, but by “the law’s delay”.
Sir Samuel Griffith

C. 1891

Enlargement from dry plate negative 21.5 x 16.5 cm

Premier of Queensland from 1883 to 1888 and from 1890 to 1893, Griffith lived in Sydney for extended periods. A brilliant student, he earned the nickname ‘Oily Sam’ for his ‘ability to argue on any side of any subject’. He is best known for his drafting of the Federal Constitution in 1891 and was chosen as the first Chief Justice of the High Court of Australia in 1903.
Aged 27, William Lygon (pronounced Liggon), seventh Earl Beauchamp, was appointed Governor of New South Wales in 1899, but endeared himself to neither the colonists nor government. Ostensibly to leave Government House free for the first Governor-General of Australia, Beauchamp went on leave in October 1900 and didn’t come back until 1932. The character Lord Marchmain in Evelyn Waugh’s epic novel Brideshead Revisited is based on Beauchamp.
Governor of New South Wales from 1902 to 1909, Rawson was straightforward ‘to the verge of bluntness’ and it is said he governed the State as if from his own quarterdeck. Annoyed by the verbosity in Macquarie Street, he suggested that politicians be fined 10 shillings for every column of speech in Hansard over three columns. He also has the distinction of winning the world’s shortest war, the 38-minute Battle of Zanzibar in 1896.
17

Sir Henry Parkes and his third wife Julia

1895

Enlargement from dry plate negative 21.5 x 16.5 cm

Sir Henry Parkes, five times premier of New South Wales between 1872 and 1889, was the largest figure in nineteenth century Australian politics. Best known as the ‘Father of Federation’, Parkes was a political survivor. He married his third wife, 23-year-old Julia Lynch, in October 1895, when he was 80. He died six months later.
The Duke of Cornwall and York, later King George V, visited Australia with the Duchess of Cornwall and York to open the new Federal Parliament in Melbourne in May 1901. In Sydney he attended a reception at Government House and was formally presented to 2000 dignitaries, which proved a trial.

The process of presentation was a tedious one for the Duke, but onlookers found much to interest them, as they criticised the Court manners of those who came after them.

The Australian Town and Country Journal, 8 June 1901, p. 14
Corsetted and bustled, Mrs McQuade is restricted in her tweed walking dress, with its unusual matching jacket fastened diagonally with exaggerated brass buttons. Her skin-tight kid gloves are designed to accentuate her small hands - a sign of gentility. The lucky horseshoe pin at her throat and matching earrings are typically Victorian. The fake studio furniture, Chinoiserie and painted backdrop add to the sense of confinement.
Diana was not the first Princess of Wales to influence women’s attire. Mrs Blackwood’s outfit clearly emulates the elegantly fashionable Alexandra, wife of the future Edward VII. Tightly curled and frizzed, her hair is dressed up over a pad at the front to give height and is held in place with a pin and silk ‘invisible net’. The ruffled jabot at her throat adds a feminine touch to an otherwise austere and ‘masculine’ outfit.
The Womanhood Suffrage League of New South Wales was formed in 1891 with the goal of votes for women. The centre row is identified as Rose Scott, Annie Golding and possibly Louisa Lawson. All contributed to the successful passage of the Women’s Franchise Bill in 1902, but the league was never a united organisation, fragmenting even before achieving their aim.
Mrs Annie Burbury

1895
Enlargement from dry plate negative 21.5 x 16.5 cm
ON 268 box 4

Mrs Burbury of Forest Lodge wears a huge-sleeved, wide-lapelled fitted jacket and simple gored skirt emblematic of ‘the modern woman’. The more adventurous replaced their skirts with knickerbockers and scandalised society by riding the new safety bicycle. In the mid 1890s, the leg-of-mutton or ‘gigot’ sleeve reached its maximum dimensions and the ultra-fashionably attired were forced to sidle crab-like through doorways.
Ruth Dangar's languid pose may have had something to do with her duties as bridesmaid at a society wedding. Her fine pintucked 'jap' silk gown is likely to have been imported in advance of the local fashion. The daughter of Henry Carey Dangar, barrister and politician, Ruth Dangar was raised in privileged circles in Potts Point. In 1914 she married Rear Admiral Charles La Primaudaye Lewin RN.
Mrs Abdy from Paddington was fond of having her portrait taken and even appeared in a contemporary advertisement for Freeman Studio. Here she has ‘emptied the jewellery box’ for the sitting. The sleeves of her evening dress are decorated with butterfly motifs worked in sequins, which at that time were made from gelatine. Her organza boa and ruffled shoulder straps contributed to the new softer look of the late 1890s.
The wealthy Mrs Orr wears the very latest accessory — a wristwatch or watch bracelet as they were called. Women’s wristwatches first appeared in Sydney in 1891 and preceded men’s, but were still a rarity until the twentieth century. Her pearl beaded evening gown gives the impression that she has dropped into Freeman’s on her way to a ball, but she is clearly photographed in natural light and other negatives at the same session show her in a variety of outfits.
Miss Brady

C. 1905

Enlargement from dry plate negative 21.5 x 16.5 cm
ON 268 box 4

Miss Brady’s locks are rolled and knotted on top of her head in the full pompadour style of the era. Edwardian women wore multiple petticoats and the soft rustling sound they made as they walked was called ‘froufrou’. As one author put it:

Truly there can be no sweeter sound to ears masculine upon a golden summer afternoon — or any other time for that matter — than the soft “frou-frou” that tells him She is coming.

Jeffrey Farnol, The Chronicles of the Imp, 1912
Dressed like a pupil from the movie Picnic at Hanging Rock, Beatrice (Trixie) Manning has been posed in a winsome manner, which belies her age. Her yoked dress with gathered fabric was the universally approved style for girls aged four to nine years. For older girls the waist was marked with a sash or belt and hair was worn down until the age of seventeen, when it was drawn up. Trixie’s picture hat is probably a studio prop.
28
Helene Rose
c. 1905
Enlargement from dry plate negative 21.5 x 16.5 cm
ON 268 box 4

Photographs of actresses were an important source of revenue for photographers, as devotees of the stage bought souvenir images of the stars in large quantities. The influence of Art Nouveau in women’s fashion at the turn of the century is reflected in the asymmetry of the bodice and the mushroom gills of chiffon that line her hat.
Eleanor (Nellie) Stewart began her stage career aged five in 1863. She sang in pantomime and grand opera before her acting career and in 1901 sang the memorial ode Australia at the opening of the first Commonwealth Parliament. The following year she first played Nell Gwynne in Sweet Nell of Old Drury, a part for which she was always remembered. Perennially youthful, it was said of her 'probably no other woman has played young roles as successfully so late in life'.
Nellie Stewart’s appeal even reached the big screen, when she appeared in a Raymond Longford film version of Sweet Nell of Old Drury (1911), which ran for six years. The early twentieth century saw the emergence of stage and screen stars as a fashion influence. As thespian Mrs Brown-Potter put it:

The stage does influence Society if the dress is right. Only you must convince smart women that it is right. Women can be living pictures, and if they can’t go to Worth, they can go to Nature and pick a flower to pieces.