

photography and failure

One Medium's Entanglement with Flops,
Underdogs, and Disappointments

Edited by Kris Belden-Adams

PHOTOGRAPHY AND FAILURE



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First published 2017 by Bloomsbury Academic

Published 2020 by Routledge
2 Park Square, Milton Park, Abingdon, Oxon OX14 4RN
605 Third Avenue, New York, NY 10017

Routledge is an imprint of the Taylor & Francis Group, an informa business

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British Library Cataloguing-in-Publication Data

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Belden-Adams, Kris, editor.

Title: Photography and failure: one medium's entanglement with flops,
underdogs and disappointments/edited by Kris Belden-Adams.

Description: London, UK; New York, NY, USA: Bloomsbury Academic, an imprint of
Bloomsbury Publishing Plc, 2017. | Includes some texts translated from Portuguese. | Includes
bibliographical references and index.

Identifiers: LCCN 2017008926 (print) | LCCN 2017009616 (ebook) |

Subjects: LCSH: Photography--Social aspects. | Photography--Psychological aspects. |
Photography--History. | Photographic errors.

Classification: LCC TR183.P48294 2017 (print) | LCC TR183 (ebook) | DDC 770--dc23
LC record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2017008926>

Cover design: Irene Martinez Costa

Cover image © Geoffrey Batchen

Typeset by Integra Software Services Pvt. Ltd.

ISBN 13: 978-1-4742-9338-9 (hbk)

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1 INTRODUCTION

Noble Failure: Photography as Tragic Muse

KRIS BELDEN-ADAMS

Photography's history is riddled with the appearance of celebrated figures who died penniless and largely forgotten by their contemporaries. Even the founders of the medium, Joseph Nicéphore Niépce, William Henry Fox Talbot, and Louis-Jacques-Mandé Daguerre, each flirted with bankruptcy at some point in their careers. Civil War photographer Matthew Brady lost his successful studio practice altogether, and André-Adolphe-Eugène Disdéri, the richest photographer in the world in 1861, created and fueled the *carte-de-visite* craze until it fell from favor and his fortune disappeared. Nevertheless, we tend to disregard the financial failures of photography's pioneers in our written histories, and instead celebrate only their successes. The history of photography is a story written as if there have been only victors.

This book, on the other hand, is about photography's failures. This makes it a no less challenging and fascinating story than the more standard approach, allowing for all sorts of interesting digressions and reflections. Indeed, to convey photography's connections to failure only in terms of a practitioner's financial success would provide a relatively limited view of its role. The medium itself is the *result* of incessant experimentation, which is a process rife with failures and setbacks, even if it simultaneously promises the sweet prospect of eventual success. The medium's earliest innovators wrote detailed accounts of their struggles to find the perfect blend of photochemistry and/or light reactivity, lenses, and camera design to work together (ideally) to produce an enduring image. Along with Niépce and Daguerre, Thomas Wedgwood is acknowledged as an important precursor and influence over the emergence of the medium, even if none of Wedgwood's

photographs have survived.¹ This is to say, our histories of photography are malleable, and able to include prehistories of the medium, including those avenues pursued to a dead end. The story of the medium has been traditionally premised on the art-historical model of object-based analysis (and is therefore partial to surviving material artifacts), but it has also been sympathetic to photography's experimental genesis. As Richard Chalfen has suggested, after photography's twentieth-century vernacular turn, certain "failures" of picture-taking became commonplace: double exposures, blurred images, forgetting to remove the lens cap or load the camera with film, dead batteries, neglecting to turn on the flash or make sufficient "room" for the digital storage of photographs in the camera.² Photography's historians must learn to forgive its practitioners' occasional failures to produce, maintain, or preserve lasting material images of a prescribed quality. Errors are more than just an acknowledged part of this narrative; they are an essential and implicit foundation.

The task of revising our histories of photography must therefore be driven by the tacit acknowledgment of the medium's imperfections and failures, *as-is*, if we are to accurately and compellingly speak for the medium, its multifarious practices, and its social and cultural engagements. Any history focused exclusively on success inherently omits, neglects, and/or overlooks certain practices, practitioners, or institutions that may (or may not) have made important contributions to the overall narrative. Some images even come and go from history. After its "disappearance" into storage around 1905, Niépce's *View from a Window at Le Gras* (1827) was rediscovered and reacknowledged as the oldest-surviving camera-made photograph by Helmut and Alison Gernsheim in 1952. This propelled the image back into history.³ Consequently, Niépce's role in the establishment of the medium rose from the shadows of near-obscurity to the early pages of our survey histories. Perhaps the very definition of "success," then, is to embrace history as an imperfect, Western-centric document that is in a constant state of flux and revision, and which obligates us to examine and sometimes integrate overlooked contributions, to dig deeper, and to provide a more inclusive narrative (even though such a story ultimately is destined for revision itself). Failure, in this sense, is a precondition to the writing of history, just as it provides the subject and inspiration for it.

This anthology brings together a global collection of writings by scholars who examine various facets of failure's essential and persistent role in the history of photography. Their work insists on the ongoing task of recording, revising, and re-presenting the medium's history. These authors look beyond familiar stories about familiar figures to feature previously unpublished tales of failure and causal missteps from throughout photography's history. They include the trials and errors of several of the medium's earliest innovators and practitioners in both fine-art and commercial practices. Many of these stories examine ways in which the medium was *supposed* to change or preserve culture, but didn't. They take a closer look at

how photography failed to reach its intended audience, and how its theorization has failed to speak for contemporary practice. The authors in this book also take a look at the failures of institutions, historians, curators, philosophers, and theoreticians to highlight and preserve the medium's various practices for posterity.

Perhaps even more significantly, several of the essays in this volume point to the failure of photographic images *themselves* to exemplify a perceived "essence" of the medium—whether as a purveyor of a prescribed degree of "truth," as an expression of time/space, as an expression of documentary realism, or as an agent for societal preservation or change. As such, this volume implicitly argues that photography's rhetorical voices are as varied and diverse as its multifarious practices. Its definition is equally elusive and variously understood. Thus, from a study of "failure" also comes a keener appreciation of the nature of the medium's success as a means of expression. It embodies modern culture in all its aspects, good and bad, successes and failures. An antidote to our usual winner-takes-all attitude, this book forces us to ask which of these we are more likely to learn from.

Notes

- 1 Thomas Wedgwood and Humphry Davy, "An Account of a Method of Copying Paintings Upon Glass, and of Making Profiles, by the Agency of Light Upon Nitrate of Silver" (1802), in *Photography: Essays and Images*, ed. Beaumont Newhall (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 1980), 15–16.
- 2 Richard Chalfen, *Photo-Gaffes: Family Snapshots as Social Dilemmas* (Indianapolis, IN: Dog Ear Publishing, 2012), 2. I thank Annebella Pollen for bringing this book to my attention.
- 3 Helmut Gernsheim and Alison Gernsheim, "Re-Discovery of the World's First Photograph," *The Photographic Journal*, Section A (May 1952): 118–120, 129.

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- Gernsheim, Helmut and Alison Gernsheim. "Re-Discovery of the World's First Photograph," *The Photographic Journal*, Section A (May 1952): 118–120, 129.
- Wedgwood, Thomas and Humphry Davy. "An Account of a Method of Copying Paintings Upon Glass, and of Making Profiles, by the Agency of Light Upon Nitrate of Silver" (1802), in Beaumont Newhall, ed., *Photography: Essays and Images*, New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 1980: 15, 16.



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2 “NOTHING WORTHY OF NOTICE”? THE DAGUERREIAN GALLERY OF T. P. AND D. C. COLLINS IN PHILADELPHIA

ANNE VERPLANCK

In 1856, *The Photographic and Fine Art Journal* described the Philadelphia gallery of T. P. and D. C. Collins gallery as producing “Daguerreotypes, nothing worthy of notice. The specimens are mostly muddy and dim, and show great want of care and taste.”¹ Yet the Collinses recorded that they produced over 21,000 images between 1845 and 1854. How does one explain remarks such as “I have taken three pictures this week for which I have received but seven dollars” and “every dollar that can be obtained must be saved to pay on debts”² in the context of the studio’s output? What accounts for the discrepancy between quantity and (seemingly marginally acceptable) quality?

Philadelphia quickly became a major center for the production and consumption of photographic images in the early 1840s. Members of the city’s amateur and scientific communities refined techniques for taking daguerreotypes, drawing on their knowledge of fields such as chemistry and optics.³ Others capitalized on the widespread interest in the medium. In 1846, there were approximately sixteen businesses that produced daguerreotypes in the city. A decade later, about 113 galleries sold daguerreotypes, ambrotypes, and, in some cases, paper photographs.⁴

Yet when the small, family-owned firm of T. P. and D. C. Collins opened their gallery in Philadelphia in 1845, they embarked upon an endeavor for which there were no direct business models. Instead, the Collinses incorporated knowledge from past pursuits, modeled some of their practices on those of other studios, and

employed novel strategies to attract customers and distinguish themselves from other daguerreotypists. The trajectory of the Collins firm provides an alternative narrative to those of large, urban daguerreotype firms and rural, often itinerant, practitioners in the United States, Britain, and Europe.⁵ Although some elements of the studio's evolution may be specific to the family, their extraordinary written records articulate some of the challenges small, urban firms faced during the height of the medium's popularity. Analyzing how T. P. and D. C. Collins created, sustained, and lost their business allows us to comprehend many of the forces that affected daguerreotype studios in the 1840s and 1850s. Studying the firm also elucidates the extensive interconnections among various capitalist enterprises associated with artistic production, such as printing, book publishing, and chemical manufacturing.

The earliest practitioners in New York and Philadelphia and the initial reception of daguerreotypes are well-documented.⁶ Research on individual daguerreotype firms in Philadelphia after the early years shows that they varied in scale and trajectory. Some were short-lived, others more enduring. Some daguerreotypists left to work in other cities, then returned to Philadelphia. Partnerships were created, then broken. Knowledge of how these firms operated over time remains elusive, however, as the surviving data, other than for the Collinses, are limited.⁷ Far more is known about the high-end firms in Paris, London, New York City, and Boston than the small studios that were the mainstays of the business in the United States. The majority of work on European daguerreotypes has focused on the timing and circumstances of discovery, with limited attention to work outside Paris.⁸ Much of the scholarship on early British photography centers on William Henry Fox Talbot's development of paper-based images roughly concurrently with the advancement of daguerreotypes in France. His Talbotypes (calotypes) were paper photographic images that could be produced in multiples from paper negatives. Whether a result of Richard Beard's control of the patent for daguerreotypes in Britain, or citizens' interest in the paper images developed by their countryman, Talbot, there were relatively few daguerreotypists in Britain compared with the number in the United States.⁹ Several cultural studies that have examined the ongoing reception and use of the medium in the United States, such as the substantial analyses of two large urban firms—Mathew Brady and Southworth & Hawes in Boston—offer a framework for understanding the goals of the Collins firm.¹⁰ The extensive literature on inventions and improvements in photographic equipment and materials provides a context for the new products available as well as daguerreotypists' access to an expanding market economy.¹¹

To compete with other firms and secure a living, the Collinses rebuilt an older studio, installed an innovative skylight, garnered income from other jobs, and sublet space to different businesses. They attracted some famous clients whose daguerreotypes they could display to entice visitors, but they had less success with this approach than others did. The Collinses relied on staff members (often

family members) to convince prospective customers to have their daguerreotypes taken, establish a rapport with clients, and take good images. They won occasional prizes in crucial fora, and the annual mechanics fairs at the Franklin Institute and elsewhere, but attained far fewer than those earned by the city's major firms. The Collinses appear to have had limited interest in photographic innovations. One exception was the Talbotype, which they offered by 1852. Yet the fees to acquire the rights to use the patented process may have contributed to their economic downfall.¹² Last, the strengths and weaknesses of individual family members involved in the business also had significant effects on the firm. This constellation of factors, some within their ability to control, such as the quality and pricing of their daguerreotypes, and some beyond their control—other firms' innovations and skills—had an impact upon the family's livelihood.

Characters

Simeon Collins (1823–1873) was the patriarch and a not-particularly-silent partner in his sons' daguerreotype business. He was from Westfield, Massachusetts, knew Philadelphia from his book-peddling days, and settled there by 1840. His sons soon joined him in the book business. Their early work in the book trade probably provided the template for several practices that characterized the family's later daguerreotype business, such as careful recordkeeping. In 1844 and 1845, his sons worked with daguerreotypists Marcus A. Root and M. P. Simons, respectively, and presumably learned daguerreotypy from them before starting their own firm. In 1846, Thomas (1823–1873) and David (1825–1909) rebuilt Simons's former studio and opened it under the name of T. P. and D. C. Collins.¹³

Thomas considered himself to be the senior partner, and records make it clear that he was more skilled and more stable than David. Thomas took daguerreotypes in Philadelphia until 1849 when he began an itinerant daguerreotype business, working intermittently at the firm in Philadelphia.¹⁴ The Philadelphia business bore both of the sons' names for much of the time after Thomas's departure. David's health and other problems had significant effects upon the business and the family. Frequent references to his tardiness and lack of drive, as well as inferences about mental health and perhaps alcoholism, fill family correspondence; their effects are corroborated by Dun's business records.¹⁵

Throughout Simeon's participation in the daguerreotype business, as well as his later endeavors, his wife, Cynthia Painter Collins (1791–1880), primarily lived in her family's ancestral home in West Haven, Connecticut.¹⁶ Despite the distance, Cynthia had a hand in the business. Simeon regularly reported tallies of income to her, and she commented on aspects of this business as well as his later work as a

peddler.¹⁷ The daguerreotype business appears to have supported and involved the Collins family in Philadelphia and West Haven.

The business

Running a successful Philadelphia gallery required drawing a steady stream of patrons. Like other firms, the Collinses approached business development through newspaper advertisements, entries in competitions, and a well-trafficked location.¹⁸ In their early years, their building straddled the divide between commercial and residential structures on Chestnut Street, then a prime location for daguerreotype firms. Their renovations to Simons's space created a 72-foot-long picture gallery on the first floor to display their daguerreotypes. Clients waited in this parlor-like space, and potential patrons could peruse daguerreotypes of celebrities and others.¹⁹ Conforming to Victorian-era ideas about gendered spaces, the Collinses built "three distinct operating rooms, whereby Ladies can be enabled to sit without fear of intrusion," and several daguerreotypists could work at once.²⁰

Displaying a firm's daguerreotypes of celebrities was an important tactic that many establishments employed to draw in potential customers, and the Collinses competed with other firms for this privilege.²¹ In 1847, the Collinses touted "a beautiful picture ... of the Thumb family" and mentioned "[t]he accomplished little General himself, his fine looking mother, noble featured protector, Mr. Barnum, his tiny carriage, footman, driver, and prancing ponies." They added their hope that the image of Tom Thumb would stay permanently, and, in doing so, implied some urgency in coming to view it among the "large collection" in their "spacious and elegant saloon."²² Many others daguerreotyped Thumb, including the Langenheims in Philadelphia and Mathew Brady and E. and H. T. Anthony in New York.²³ Thomas Collins relayed the intensity of some daguerreotypists' pursuit of celebrities when he wrote to David,

[Mexican War] Col. May arrived in town last eve and [stayed] at the L Hotel. Father went over by my request to get him to come and sit but he was at breakfast so he left a note for him. [Simons?] was sitting there waiting to catch him but I think it probable that Root will get him very likely having written to him before he came to the City.²⁴

We know that Root was particularly proud of his image of Edwin Forrest, displayed the same year.²⁵ Pursuit of portraits of famous men and women was important to daguerreotypists.

The Collinses outfitted their galleries with a range of images to attract visitors. At 97 Chestnut Street, their temporary space during the summer of 1846, they exhibited "numerous collections of Portraits"²⁶ and city views, including "A Panorama of

Fairmount” (Franklin Institute), as well as daguerreotypes of seven other sites. To this announcement he added, “public or private buildings daguerreotyped in a superior manner and on the lowest terms.”²⁷ In their 100 Chestnut Street saloon, they displayed portraits of nationally known personalities, such as Tom Thumb and Sam Houston, and those of more local interest, such as the Reverend Thomas M. Clark.²⁸

The practice of producing printed or daguerreotypic copies of daguerreotypes of famous sitters, undertaken in Philadelphia and elsewhere, provided further publicity for the firm and the sitter, as well as increased income. Antislavery advocate and politician Cassius Marcellus Clay deemed Thomas’s “daguerreotype likeness of me the best taken of me in Philadelphia”; it was reproduced as a print by Albert Newsam.²⁹ The Collinses’ daguerreotype of Dr. Jehu Justis Clay, the rector of nearby Old Swedes Church, served as the basis for a mezzotint by Welch and Walters.³⁰ These images, like the daguerreotypes of Thumb and May, speak to the public’s fascination with famous figures and the ability of daguerreotypists to produce quick, relatively inexpensive, and seemingly accurate images for duplication for local and, in some cases, national markets. The prints also highlight the reproductive capabilities, marketing acumen, and artistic and economic interrelationships among Philadelphia’s daguerreotypists, artists, engravers, and publishers.³¹

A daguerreotype of Louis A. Godey, the publisher of *Godey’s Lady’s Book*, serves as another example of the multiple ways in which an image was used for studio promotion. Godey, whose business was a few blocks away, was the first customer listed in the ledger of Simons and (Thomas) Collins in 1845. In June 1846, the Collins brothers touted a *United States Gazette* remark about the “very large and exquisitely finished daguerreotype” of Godey just taken by T. P. Collins.³² That same month, Godey published a short puff piece about T. P. Collins’s gallery, commenting on the “familiar faces” there as well as his reasonable prices and speed.³³ Seeing Godey’s approbation as a significant boon to their business, the Collinses included this remark, as well as a similarly positive later one, in advertisements.³⁴ The amount of press a studio garnered, who commissioned a given firm’s daguerreotypes, and a firm’s ability to promote various accolades contributed to its reputation, income, and, ultimately, success.³⁵

The Collinses, like daguerreotypists in Philadelphia and other cities, advertised to attract clients. Thomas mentioned placing notices in two newspapers, adding, “It is absolutely necessary I think for the Establishment to keep up a running fire in the advertising line,” and remarking upon Root’s effective practice of “making noise.”³⁶ The Collinses advertised about twice a month in local papers; the notices for Root, M. P. Simons, the Langenheims, and others appear in the same places. The Collinses noted their low price (“one dollar and a half while others charge three”) that they took images on both clear and cloudy days, and their daguerreotypes were “guaranteed satisfactory or no charge.”³⁷ Their advertisement appeared

below that of M. P. Simons, who announced his new location, its superior light that enabled him to take images in all weather, and his first medal at the Franklin Institute. Root emphasized his gallery's quality and speed, whereas John Plumbe focused on his prizes and low prices. All invoked seasonality, price, and quality, and noted the images that could be viewed in their saloons; the close placement of their notices invited comparisons.³⁸ Moreover, the Collinses publicized their involvement with temperance, antislavery, and other benevolent causes in both mainstream (*The Public Ledger*) and cause-specific newspapers (*The Pennsylvania Freeman*), presumably to draw like-minded patrons.³⁹

Highlighting awards won from mechanics' fairs in New York, Philadelphia, and Boston was another promotional strategy. Judges in these competitions, as well as critics in journals and newspapers, applied criteria such as the degree of clarity of the image, the amount of contrast among elements, the depth of field, and the smoothness of the surface of the daguerreotype plate.⁴⁰ Early on, when no firm truly dominated the market in Philadelphia, the Collinses met these criteria, but over time, they had increasing difficulty achieving the standards of the field. The Collinses won two silver medals—the highest honor—one at the New York Mechanics Fair in 1845 and the other at the Franklin Institute in 1846. Newspaper commentary on the Franklin Institute exhibitions in 1845 and 1846 complimented their work, "Collins makes a fine and large display of views of public places, in and near the city; and full length portraits, which are excellent likenesses," but praised the Langenheims and Root more highly.⁴¹ In 1848, the Collinses referred to their earlier prizes, publicized Thomas's recent trip to London and Paris, and noted the improvements that he reaped from his visits with the "first artists" in those cities.⁴² At the same time, Root spoke of more recent medals at the New York, Boston, and Philadelphia fairs.⁴³ The Collinses touted their two awards year after year, while other firms made it clear that their prizes were more current.⁴⁴

The addition of an overhead skylight in 1846, "an exceedingly heavy expense," was their primary innovation and contributed to their rivalry with Root.⁴⁵ Others used sidelights and, over time, added skylights. More light meant shorter exposure times, but risked a reduction in artistic shading from overexposure.⁴⁶ The Collinses included the skylight prominently in their advertisements immediately after its installation in 1846 and in subsequent years, and they trumpeted it on the linings of their daguerreotype cases.⁴⁷

The skylight fueled a controversy with Root that tells us much about the business. In December 1846, when Root ran a newspaper advertisement above the Collinses's, he commented that daguerreotypes taken under the skylight produced "white, bald-headed pictures" and put sitters, "to the inconvenience and danger of going to the top of a high building."⁴⁸ By January 1847, the dispute about the skylight and the caliber of the Collinses's daguerreotypes had heightened, and they challenged Root to a contest with a \$100 prize. The proposals and counterproposals suggest that the Collinses required multiple attempts to take a satisfactory image,

and that the skylight produced a lack of contrast, especially on bright days.⁴⁹ The notices also make clear the difficulty in taking images without a skylight at places such as Root's on a cloudy day.⁵⁰ The contest appears to have been tabled, but the debate was not; subsequent advertisements show that both firms took the competition spurred by the skylight seriously.⁵¹ Later in 1847, Thomas wrote David that a gentleman had just come from Root's, "having got tired of waiting there. He says he saw twenty taken while he was there and he should think there was as many more waiting. D[am]n Root." That day, Thomas had only a handful of commissions that morning, yielding \$11, and "Not a single customer the whole afternoon."⁵² Judging from the newspaper notices around the installation of the skylight and comments such as Thomas's, Root was their primary rival.

Despite efforts such as the skylight, the lack of awards given to the Collinses after 1846 suggests that the caliber of their daguerreotypes declined with time or did not keep pace with others' improvements. The *Photographic and Fine Art Journal* noted in 1856, "nothing worthy of notice. The specimens are mostly muddy and dim, and show great want of care and taste."⁵³ These comments were published after the gallery had closed, and long since Thomas, generally regarded as the more talented daguerreotypist, had departed for New England. How, then, do we balance these remarks with the evidence that the Collinses' daguerreotypes themselves provide, in addition to their sheer numbers?

Assessing the relative quality of daguerreotypes is challenging, as we look at them with modern eyes, few Collins daguerreotypes are dated, and most appear to have been taken after 1850. It is often difficult to determine which family member or employee took an image, and the condition of the images and the quality of modern reproductions vary among institutions. If one compares the work of the Collinses after 1850 with that of the Langenheims and Root, one sees few differences among them. The daguerreotype of Margot Griscom McCord Smith (Figure 2.1) was probably taken about 1854 by the Collinses's gallery. It shows comparable clarity, contrast among elements, and depth of field to the Langenheims's *Juliana Randolph Wood* (Figure 2.2) and Root's *Kate Richardson* (Library Company of Philadelphia). Both the Langenheims and the Collins studio also took images that, at least to modern eyes, appear less skillful.⁵⁴

The visual evidence suggests that the products of these firms varied greatly at any given time. As important, we learn that Thomas was not the only skilled daguerreotypist in the Collins firm, despite the earlier associations of his name with the firm's most prominent sitters. David took a portrait of his sister about 1850, ostensibly asleep at the Franklin Institute (Figure 2.3). The diagonal layout of the image shows his ability to artfully compose an image, and the sharp contrast among elements—her light-and-dark clothing, the fabric on the chair, the chair runners, and the background—further suggest his photographic skills. Individual family members' proficiency in taking daguerreotypes, then, does not appear to have been the central factor in the demise of the business.



FIGURE 2.1 Collins Gallery, *Margot Griscom McCord Smith*. One-half plate daguerreotype, c. 1854. Courtesy of The Library Company of Philadelphia, P.9421.

Despite his apparent ability to take daguerreotypes, David Collins was a central part of the firm's problems. Frail since childhood, he developed significant hearing issues that led him to consult both specialists and quacks.⁵⁵ Family members' references to his behavior suggest poor judgment, tardiness, the sowing of wild oats, alcoholism, mental health issues, or some combination of these factors.⁵⁶ Writing in June 1849, Simeon noted that "It would be the height of folly for [David] to return before Sept[ember] unless he wishes to loan his life or bankrupt our