John R. Schorb

“It is only by being obliged to think for himself that he acquires that greatness of mind that distinguishes so few.” - John R. Schorb

John R. Schorb (1818-1908) was born in Neiderweilder, Germany on October 24, 1818, in what was then the Grand Duchy of Baden. His German name was Johann Schorb, but after moving to the United States he attempted to anglicize his name by changing it to John Shorb and later to John Schorb.

In 1834, sixteen year old Schorb came to America, spending his first two years in Buffalo, New York. From Buffalo he went to Canton, Ohio, then walked 400 miles to Michigan City, Indiana. He moved back to Buffalo about 1839.

Friends sent him to the Rochester Collegiate Institute in Rochester, New York, to prepare him for college. He remained at the Institute until (according to Hamilton College records) he entered Hamilton College as a sophomore in 1844. Here he came under the tutelage of Dr. Charles Avery, professor of natural philosophy.

Avery had a very strong interest in chemistry. He went to London, England to visit Jean Francois Antoine Claudet, who himself learned the method of making permanent pictures known as the daguerreotype process from its inventor Louis Daguerre. In turn, Professor Avery taught young Schorb the photographic process that would later make him one of America's first photographers and possibly the first commercial photographer in the country.

In 1847, according to Hamilton College records, John Schorb left the institution during his senior year. Schorb did not go directly into teaching, which is what his college education prepared him to do. Instead, he took his camera and traveled. Evidence indicates that, in addition to traveling through New York, he went through New Jersey, Virginia, Connecticut and possibly Indiana.

Around 1848 he made his way to South Carolina, apparently staying in Charleston in 1849 and then moving to Columbia in 1850.

All the while Schorb took pictures. Today photographs litter attics, closets, and antique boxes throughout the state. South Carolina has a strong claim to being the adopted state of the country's first traveling photographer.

In John Schorb's time it was very difficult to make a living as a photographer. Between 1850 and 1853, he moved to Winnsboro and got a position at Mount Zion Institute. Here he taught astronomy, chemistry, and “belles-lettres.” Schorb had time to get involved in community affairs and was a member of a drama troupe known as the Winnsboro Thespian Corps.

In 1853, he moved to Yorkville, now York, and began teaching at the Yorkville Female Academy. He also had a part-time position teaching at the Kings Mountain Military Academy. During this period Schorb continued to take photographs.
About 1869 he became a full-time photographer opening up a studio on his property on West Liberty Street. Schorb practiced photography until he was almost 90. He was also interested in art. Schorb designed and made the scenery and backdrops that he used for his photography.

Schorb became very active in the affairs of the Yorkville community, serving, for example, on the town council for twelve years and as the city's clerk and treasurer for eight. He was ordained as a ruling elder in the Presbyterian church and played the organ at church services on Sunday.

He was well educated with Greek, Latin, and mathematics being his favorite subjects. When he had time he tutored the neighborhood children.

On November 5, 1908, at the age of 90, John R. Schorb died. He is buried in the Rose Hill cemetery in York, his grave marked by one of the largest monuments there.

At his death, he left one son, George, and many grandchildren and great-grandchildren. He was preceded in death by his wife, Mary S. Schorb (1816-1883) and his daughter Annie Marie Schorb Dickson (1853-1907).

The digitized images on this website were produced from prints, tintypes, daguerreotypes, and glass plate negatives contained in the John R. Schorb Papers housed in the Winthrop University Archives and Special Collections. The papers were deposited by Mrs. Mary Kell Wade, great-granddaughter of John R. Schorb.

The John R. Schorb Papers, extending from 1841 to 1960, include biographical and genealogical notes, letters, newspaper clippings, positive print photographs, and over 200 prints, tintypes, daguerreotypes, and glass plate negatives.