

## The Importance of the Newly Identified Alcott-Pratt Photographs

By Kristi Martin

The newly discovered photographs of Anna Alcott Pratt and her husband, John Bridge Pratt, are an important and exciting development. John and Anna are easily recognizable. John appears as he does in the already documented portrait. There is a characteristic softness about Anna's features in her photograph that differentiate her from the 1862 silhouette portrait her sister Louisa, difficult to adequately qualify in words, but particularly remarkable around the eyes. The relationship between John and Anna is subtly indicated in the portrait layout within the album, facing one another from adjoining pages. It is not difficult to imagine that these portraits might have been taken around the time of their marriage in 1860, though there is no visible date associated with the images. The mislabeled portrait of Anna was, nonetheless, closely compared against known images of Louisa and Anna to verify her identity. While a recovered image of Louisa May Alcott would have been gratifying, those of her sister and brother-in-law offer stimulating revelations for Alcott studies that are as noteworthy, thrilling, and perhaps more insightful than a new image of Louisa could have been.

These photographs of Anna and John Pratt are significant for several reasons. Firstly, the existence of multiple photographs of John, evidentially taken during the same portrait sitting, could suggest that there may have been multiple poses of Anna as well. The newly identified portrait of her is a silhouette. Perhaps there was also an anterior portrait. Perhaps it will still be recovered. Indeed this discovery reminds us that there is more Alcott family ephemera to be found and learned from. Furthermore, this finding adds to our collection of known portraits of Anna Alcott. Putting this photograph of Anna together with other well-known and more rarely seen portraits reveals that there are approximately as many portraits of Anna Alcott as there are of her famous literary sister. This is remarkable, considering the same is not true of siblings Elizabeth and May. This could, in part, be due to the eldest sisters having lived longer than the younger two. Yet, several of the images of Anna were taken when she was a young woman, including the newly identified photograph, which augments that distinct contrast and leads to questions. We might expect there to be more portraits of Louisa May Alcott, who was a celebrity after the publication of *Little Women*. How and why was it that Anna Alcott was photographed as frequently? Why was the same not true for their youngest sister, May (who unlike Elizabeth lived long enough to have opportunities for more portraits to be made)?

The portraits of John Bridge Pratt are perhaps more striking and illuminating than those more well-known wife Anna Alcott. While the portraits of John appear similar to a known photograph, one in particular – that which appears independently of Anna in the album - captures a glimpse into John's personality, a photographic quality that can be rare due to the limitations and conventions of nineteenth century portraiture. With a

half-smile on his lips and a charming gentleness appears to shine in his eyes, this image of John offers us visual insight into aspects of the man that the Alcotts loved and the personal qualities that they recorded of his character. Looking at the portrait, one can seem to come to a more personal acquaintance with John than through previously known images offered.

Lastly, Anna and John are integral to the same *Little Women* legacy that would distinguish a previously unknown portrait of Louisa May Alcott as important. As is well-documented, Alcott created the fictional characters “Meg March” and “John Brooke” in likenesses of her sister and brother-in-law. The very existence of *Little Men*, the second book in the March family trilogy, was written as a response to the untimely death of John Pratt, in an effort to support his widow and children. Anna embraced her public role as “Meg,” and readily adopted her alter ego to engage with fans and promote the family’s literary legacy. Their portraits are, therefore, arguably, as significant an addition to Alcott ephemera as a new portrait of Louisa May Alcott would be.

These photographs would still be unknown if it weren’t for Ray Angelo’s dedication to the memory of Anna Alcott’s father-in-law. Angelo’s work on Minot Pratt is as important to scholarship as these portraits. Thanks to Angelo, Minot Pratt’s central importance to Concord’s nineteenth literary community is revived. We have a new context for the Alcott family’s community, and significantly the botanical studies of their friend, Henry David Thoreau. There is now a touchstone connecting Minot Pratt to historically-minded pilgrims in Concord’s Sleepy Hollow cemetery, a tangible location where visitors can honor the memory of the naturalist, as well as his literary friends.

The rediscovery of these Alcott-Pratt family portraits is a result of an endearing labor of love, which with the cooperative spirit of scholarship, concludes in a kindred fulfillment that draws so many of us to do this work, and to perpetuate the legacy of the Alcotts.