



AERA GRAM

VOL. 14 NO. 1

Spring 2013

ANCIENT EGYPT RESEARCH ASSOCIATES

Groundbreaking Archaeology

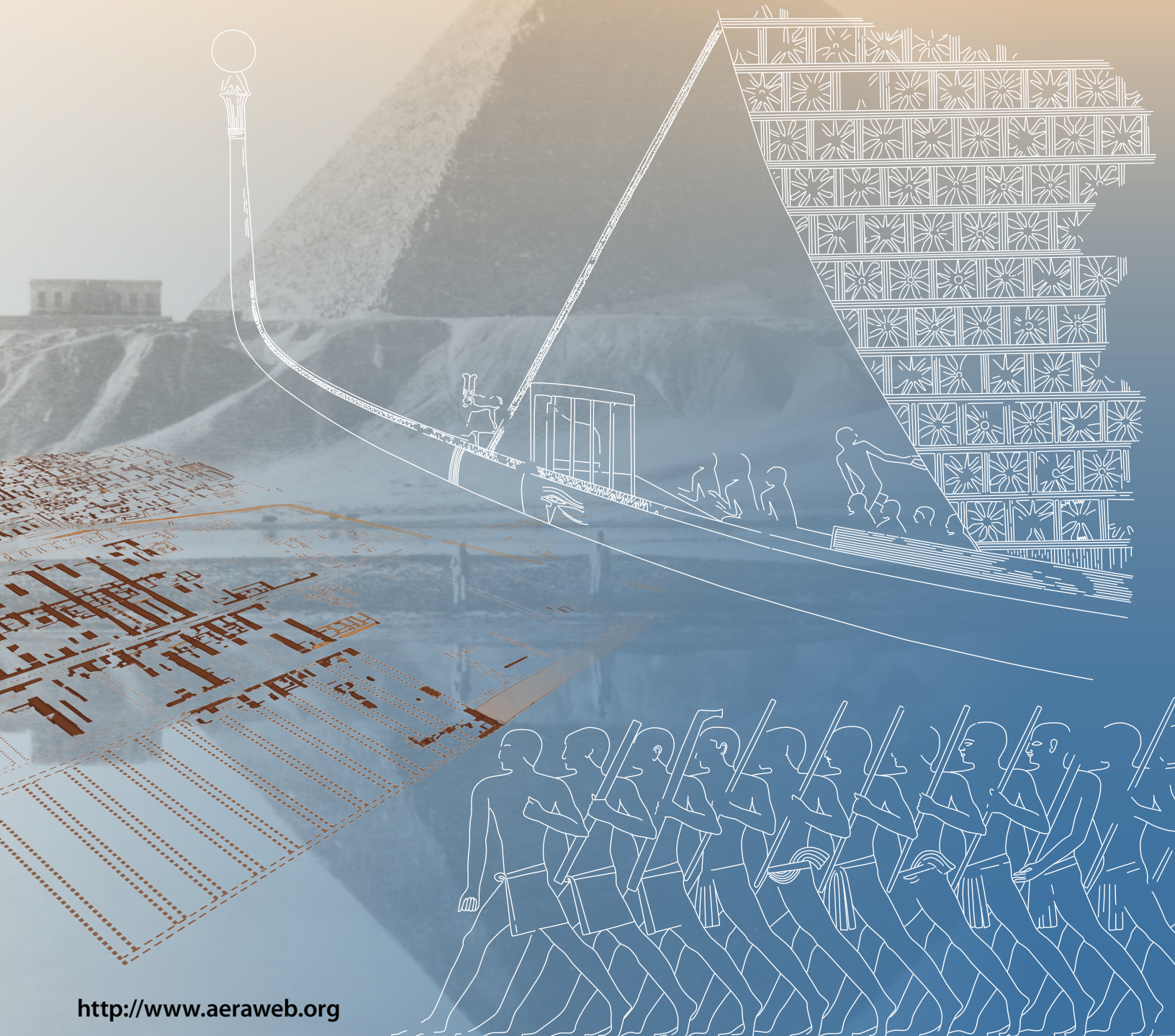
ISSN 1944-0014

The Lost Port City of the Pyramids

The Heit el-Ghurab site reveals a new role as part of a major port on the Nile 2

How the Pyramid Builders May Have Found Their True North 8

First Photos Taken from the Great Pyramid Summit 16



First Photos Taken from the Great Pyramid Summit

by George L. Mutter and Bernard P. Fishman

Last December our annual AERA holiday card featured an 1882 stereoview photo (with 3D glasses included)—the first photographic record of the site where the Lost City of the Pyramids settlement (Heit el-Ghurab) lay buried. The image (shown on the right) is even more notable as the first photo ever taken from the summit of the Great Pyramid. George L. Mutter and Bernard P. Fishman, creators of Photoarchive3D, a vast digital archive of original 19th and 20th century stereoviews, kindly provided the image along with background information. As we were able to include only a few lines about the photographer, E. L. Wilson, inside our holiday card, we asked Mutter and Fishman to write an article about Wilson and this historic photographic undertaking in January 1882.

The Ascent of Khufu

It was a big production, but then Edward Wilson was a flamboyant showman. Escorted early in the morning to the Giza Plateau by his friend Emil Brugsch, Wilson and his crew were placed in the hands of eight Egyptians directed by Abraham Hamed, the Sheik of the nearby Pyramid Village. Wilson sat them all down on the sand just to make the foreground a bit

*We waved our American flags, emblems of the youngest nation, on the monuments of the oldest in the world.*¹

~ William Rau, chief photographer to Edward Livingston Wilson, 1882

more interesting for a quick 3D stereophotographic long shot of the angular horizon. Sun to his back, his shadow reached towards the Great Pyramid he intended to climb.

An ant-like column of porters lined up along the northeast edge of the Great Pyramid while wooden boxes of extra film plates were unloaded for the ascent.

“You are not allowed to ascend alone... your right hand man and your left help you in your long steps, and the other gives you a “boost.”² Climb they did, with some extra tourists thrown in to liven up the composition.

It all was caught by the camera, in sequence, so that in parlors across America the experience could be relived, virtually. The pyramids had been photographed extensively since the 1850s, but always from the ground. This day was different though, because the camera and ready-made plates (no portable darkroom required) would go all the way to the summit.

Conveniently, there were staggered blocks at the top where his growing entourage could pose for the first aerial image at Giza. Huddled around the base support of a 40-foot vertical wooden survey marker erected by General Charles Pomeroy Stone Pasha for an 1879 government tax survey, the scene uncannily resembles a contemporary tour group posing under a radio tower on a skyscraper roof. Having satisfied his immediate audience, and mindful of the historic moment, it was time to hoist the colors. The American flag, emblazoned on specially made vests, was displayed in portraits of Wilson with two Egyptians, and then by a solitary William Rau, a professional photographer Wilson had worked with at the Centennial Exhibition. In the E. L. Wilson photo the Sphinx appears just above his tarboosh in the background far below. Dead center in this same image the Wall of the Crow cuts a jaunty angle across the otherwise featureless plain to the southeast.



With a stereoscope, also called a stereo viewer, one could look at stereocards, such as the one shown here that E. L. Wilson created, and see a 3D image. Stereocards were very popular in the US in the late 19th–early 20th century.





Above: E. L. Wilson sits atop the Great Pyramid, wearing a vest fashioned from the American flag, flanked by two Egyptians. Top right: Wilson's team and tourists climb the Great Pyramid with help from guides. Far right: After reaching the summit of the monument, the group poses for a photo.

The 40-foot wooden survey marker was supported by a tripod of bracing supports, one of which appears in the photo. Based on the numbering of the photos, the photo on the far right was the first one taken at the top of the Great Pyramid.

Immediate right: The top of the Great Pyramid taken in the 1990s. Photo by Mark Lehner.



On the Giza Plateau

After making their descent back down to the ground, the group then completed its “pyramidal perambulation.” The Khafre Valley Temple, first excavated by Auguste Mariette in 1853 and 1858, was a sunken hole of monoliths that lined up nicely with the Sphinx and Khufu Pyramid. Within that buried temple, a prominent then-underground doorway facing towards the Sphinx was rumored to be the entry point for a mysterious connecting tunnel. When cleared of its overburden, it later became obvious there was nothing subterranean about the door in the Old Kingdom, and no tunnel.*

The group then entered the Great Pyramid to take a few flash photos. It was a messy affair. The burning “magnesium...caused a great consternation amongst the bats.”² “After duplicating the exposures [in the King’s Chamber]

* The dark doorway was the opening of a corridor winding from the lower causeway corridor up to the open second level terrace.





we found the chamber so full of smoke that we were forced to leave.”¹ Charles Piazzzi Smyth had exactly the same problems when he made the first successful magnesium wire flash pictures of the pyramid’s interior in 1865.

Were These Really the First Summit Photographs?

We know of no earlier photos from the summit of the Great Pyramid, but would be delighted to be proven wrong. There were plenty of talented photographers who recorded the Giza Plateau in the 1850s through 1870s. Outstanding professional series were first produced by the Englishmen Francis Frith (1856–57, 1857–58, and 1859–60), Francis Bedford (1862), and Frank Good (about 1865). These show now-lost structures, such as the Khufu causeway that was mostly destroyed by 1869 and topographical features later obscured by excavation tailings, but no views from pyramid tops.

The quality and scale of their work is remarkable considering that the light-sensitive photographic emulsions they used had to be poured fresh onto glass, then exposed and developed within minutes while still wet. This required a portable darkroom tent, outfitted with

Top: The Sphinx projecting above the sand, long before it was fully excavated. View to the northwest.

Left: The entrance to the Great Pyramid, the descending passage.

Facing page:

Top: The Khafre Valley Temple, the Sphinx, and the Great Pyramid; view to the northwest. Until the facade of the temple was excavated in 1909, no one knew that it was free-standing rather than a subterranean structure. It was sometimes called the Temple of the Sphinx until the real Sphinx Temple, was excavated just to the north between 1926 and 1936.

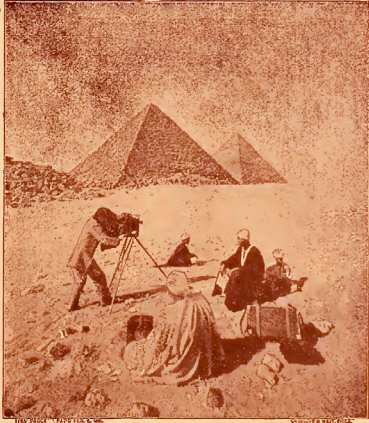
Bottom left: View of the pyramids from the south (rather than the east, as the caption on the card reads). The small, stepped structures in front of the large pyramids are Menkaure’s queens’ pyramids.

Bottom right: Members of Wilson’s team contemplate the Great Pyramid before their ascent.



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Above: An ad for Wilson's stereo cards, which appeared in his *Philadelphia Photographer* magazine.

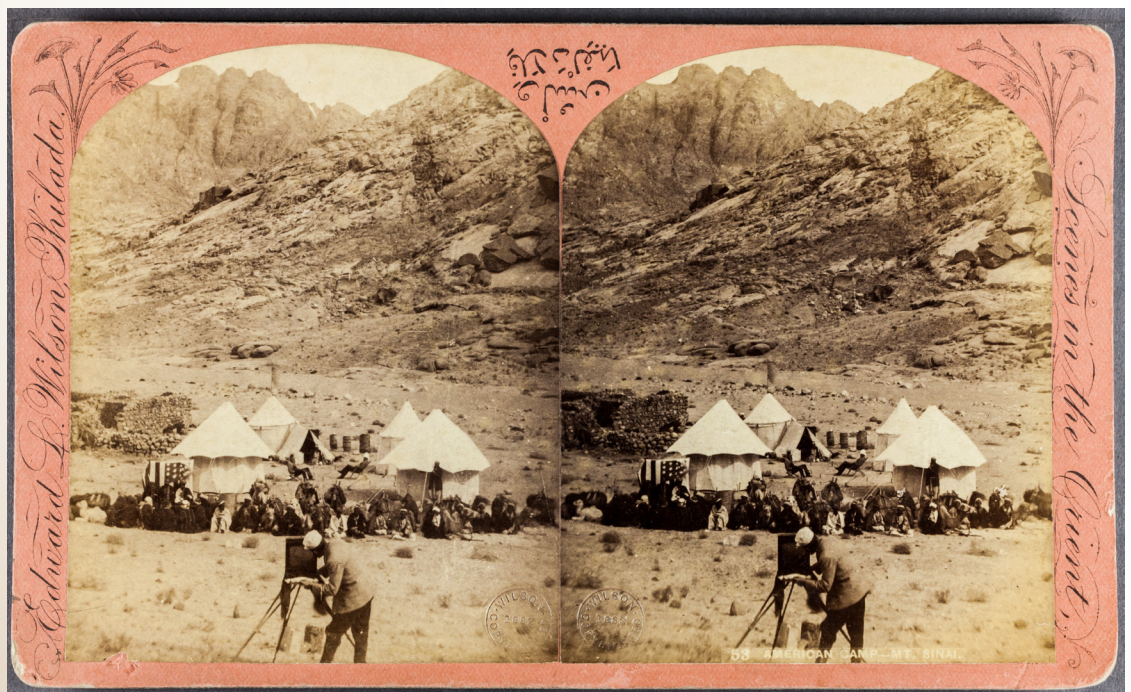
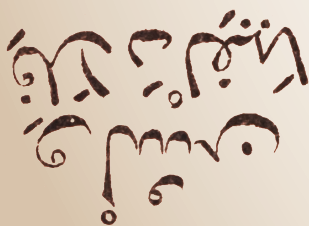
highly volatile chemicals that were prone to boiling in the heat. Not something easily managed on a stone surface 455 feet off the ground, which probably explains why the early photographers never ventured any summit shots. Late in the 1870s a stable dry plate with long-sensitive bromide-based emulsion was invented, and as E. L. Wilson was the first to bring these to Egypt, he had a distinct advantage over his predecessors. Plates were prepared in Philadelphia in November 1881, "carried on the sea, overland by rail, across the desert on camelback, and over the mountains on horseback for nearly 12,000 miles...and then back to America where they were developed during July, August, and September (1882)."³ All that was needed was a dry lightproof box of plates and a camera that could be loaded quickly in the field. Mobility and spontaneity of composition were greatly enhanced, and Wilson and Rau made the most of it. With the new technology, Wilson and his assistant were full of confidence. Based on the numbering of the plates, the group portrait under the survey marker was their first taken at the summit.

Edward Livingston Wilson (1838–1903)

E. L. Wilson was an avid popularizer of early photographic processes in America, founding in 1864 the first us photographic journal, *The Philadelphia Photographer*. In Philadelphia he met Emil Brugsch, who had come to install the Egyptian display at the 1876 Centennial Exposition, where Wilson had a monopoly on official photography. Brugsch later became secretary of the Boulaq Museum and an official of the fledgling Antiquities Service under Mariette and Maspero, where he had occasion to apply his photographic talents learned directly from Wilson himself. Wilson's motivation to go to Egypt was primarily commercial, with the goal of "publishing" stereo and lantern slide photographs for edu-

Right: E. L. Wilson photographing his encampment in the Sinai, 1882. Left-right stereo pair mounted on card.

Below: Wilson's logo "Wilson Philadelphia" in Arabic, upside down. It appears on the stereo card in the center at the top.





George Mutter (left) and Bernard Fishman (right). Wet plate ambrotype, 2011, by Mark Bingham of Portsmouth, NH.

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

George Mutter is a Harvard- and Columbia-educated Professor of Pathology at Harvard Medical School. Bernard Fishman was trained as an Egyptologist at the University of Pennsylvania and worked in Luxor at the Oriental Institute's Epigraphic Survey. He now leads the Maine State Museum. Meeting by chance at a photo trade show in 2009, Mutter and Fishman subsequently recognized that their collections of some 30,000 19th and early 20th century photographs, including many early images of Egypt, constituted an important historical archive of general interest. They founded Photoarchive3D (<http://www.photoarchive3d.org>) to publicize these rare examples of early photohistory and use them to better comprehend the past.

cational and entertainment use. He landed at Alexandria in January 1882, and lists 463 numbered Egyptian views (30 from Giza) as far as Abu Simbel, before turning to the Sinai where he took another 195.⁴ While in Luxor he photographed Maspero, Brugsch, and "reformed" thief Mohammed el-Rassoul at Deir el-Bahri tomb #320, site of the 1881 discovery of the cache of the royal mummies. Although Wilson was head of the expedition, many of the images were taken by William Rau. Both wrote separate journals, which were published in serialized form in the *Philadelphia Photographer*, detailing their experiences in Egypt. They departed Alexandria in July 1882, passing the English fleet which had just arrived to bombard the city in order to suppress anti-Western riots. A busy lecture circuit awaited on return to the USA, but sales of the expensive photographic paper prints mounted on card were declining, as half-tone photomechanical reproduction made photographs easy to reproduce in books and periodicals. Leftover stock was sold in bulk to a successor, Roberts and Fellows. The rare original photographs printed from negatives, mounted as right-left stereo pairs on ornate peach cards labeled "Wilson, Philadelphia" in Arabic letters, are illustrated here.

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(Please note: references are numbered sequentially in the order in which they are cited in the text.)

1. Rau, W. H., "Photographic Experiences in the East." *The Philadelphia Photographer*, vol. 19–20, serialized, 1882–1883.



Above: William Rau sits atop the Great Pyramid wearing another American flag vest. The Khafre Pyramid stands in the background. Rau wrote in his serialized account of the trip to the Egypt in *The Philadelphia Photographer*, "we ... arrived at the foot of the great pyramid about 8.30. One is so filled with wonder and admiration that it takes a few minutes to bring one's self to work."¹

2. Wilson, E. L., "Echoes of the Orient." *The Philadelphia Photographer*, vol. 19–20: serialized, 1882–1883.

3. Wilson, E. L., *Photographic Mosaics*. Philadelphia, 1883, pages 26–27.

4. Wilson, E. L., *Catalogue of Stereoscopic Views of Palestine, Arabia Petraea, and Egypt*, Philadelphia, 1882.