First Flash?

UPDATE!

The Mystery of the Woodrow Wilson Photograph...

by Gordon Bond

1. William T. Cox.
2. Unknown.
3. Unknown.
4. May be John K. English, a former Assistant Prosecutor known to have been there. There is a photo on www.findagrave.com that was added by Theresa Woodrow-Lettman identifying English as a young man. The person in the grave was born 1906 and, obviously, can't be the man shown in 1913. However, an older gentleman does look like 4 in the 1913 photograh, perhaps later in life. Possibly father and son with the same name?
5. Unknown.
6. President Woodrow Wilson.
7. Unknown.
8. Major General Dennis F. Collins.
9. Unknown.
10. Metuchen historian Tyreen Reuter suggested that this might be George S. Silzer, a political gadfly who would have been likely to make sure he was at the center of the action. He was NJ Governor between 1923 and 1926.
11. Unknown.
12. This is almost certainly Joseph Patrick Tumulty, Wilson's personal assistant at the time.
13. Possibly James Fairman Fielder, the Governor who replaced Wilson. Note the shape of the eyes, jawline, dimple in the chin and shape of the mustache. If this is indeed Fielder, it would be curious as no newspaper account mentioned his presence.

One of the benefits of the advent of online publishing is that what gets "published" can become a dynamic and even interactive product. Back in June of 2012, I first published the article "First Flash: The Mystery of the Woodrow Wilson Photograph." If you haven't read it, you can get caught up here:

http://gardenstatelegacy.com/files/First_Flash_The_Mystery_of_the_Woodrow_Wilson_Photograph_Bond_GSL16.pdf

The short of the story is that a 1913 photo was published in the *Newark Star Ledger* purported to be the first flash photograph taken outdoors at night. Why this was of interest to GSL was that it was taken in Elizabeth, New Jersey, recording a visit by President Woodrow Wilson. I was able to track down the story behind Wilson's visit and the photograph itself—and no, it was not really the first flash photo taken outdoors at night.

The idea struck me at the time that it might be fun to take GSL's readers "along for the ride," so to speak, making short

video "diary" entries of my research progress. These can now be found here:

http://gardenstatelegacy.com/GSL_Research_Video_Reports.html

Since so many GSL readers do their own research, this was a pretty popular idea, sharing the thrill of the chase that a lot of us so greatly enjoy. But between all these "products," it also meant that the story could continue to evolve, if anyone had new information. While the purpose of Wilson's visit and the lack of the photo being a first were established, a loose end remained—who were some of the men seen crowding around the President that night?

Man Number 8

Among the more striking figures in a photo full of them was the portly man standing to the right of Wilson (number 8 in the photo here) whose mustache reminded more than one reader of actor and oatmeal ad spokesman Wilford Brimley. At the time, I speculated that he could have been associated with the Elizabeth, New Jersey police department, given a gentleman of similar appearance I found in a pictorial history of the town.

Then in July of 2013, Lois Jeanne Jane contacted GSL through its Facebook page, "I can assure you the mystery portly man in the Woodrow Wilson photograph is Major General Dennis F. Collins, my brother-in-law's grandfather. His aunt who lived in Syracuse, N.Y. had an original print of the photograph." When I asked her to confirm that we were talking about the same man (since there are two mustachioed men who could be described as "portly"), she replied, "Yes, the man on the right of President Wilson is Major General Dennis F. Collins. He was a veteran of the Spanish-American War and was appointed Major General of the N.J. National Guard by the then-Governor Woodrow Wilson."

A photo of Major General Collins appeared on the Facebook page of the National Guard Militia Museum of New Jersey and the two do indeed look like the same man. Additionally, the Museum identified him as "a brewery executive and banker [who] was Woodrow Wilson's NJ campaign manager and

Left: "Man number 8"
Right: Major General Dennis F. Collins image from the National Guard Militia Museum of New Jersey's Facebook page.

frequently elected to office in Elizabeth."

The *Trenton Evening Times* for June 9, 1916 (three years after the photo with Wilson), for example, reported General Collins winning Comptrollership of the city of Elizabeth and noted his support for a smaller board of freeholders in Union Township—an apparently contentious issue set for special referendum election. The connection with Wilson had been solidified years earlier. On July 30, 1911, the *Evening Times* also transcribed a letter of thanks from then-Governor Wilson. The Second and Third Regiments of the state's National Guard had returned from training at Sea Girt where they had performed exceptionally well. As part of General Collin's Regiment, Wilson wrote personally, "I want to give myself the pleasure of telling you how much I enjoyed my association with you during the past week, and of thanking you very cordially for the admirable service you have rendered in command of the brigade. It is delightful to be associated with so capable an officer and I feel that our

Another contender for "man number 8" was Michael J. Mulcahy, Chief of Police for Elizabeth from 1913 to 1935. He's the man at far left in this image. Though of the same large physcal build, he appears to possibly be sporting a full beard here in 1914. Given the stronger likeness with Major General Collins, it seems Mulcahy was likely not "man number 8."

friendship has been strengthened by the association."

When he died in November of 1930, *The New York Times* ran his obituary and summed up his career. Born May 3, 1868, he had been brought to Elizabeth by his widowed mother from Ireland and his first work was as a clerk in a grocery store. His military career began in 1888 when he enlisted as a private in the State Militia. He was promoted to Captain of the Third New Jersey Volunteers in the Spanish-American War and retired from the National Guard in 1914 with the rank of Major General. When not serving in the military, Collins was Vice President of the Peter Breidt Brewing Company in 1891 and by 1904, when Breidt died, its President and General Manager. Prohibition dissolved the company, but by 1920 he had already become a founding member of the People's National Bank and would become involved with other banks and insurance interests in Elizabeth and Newark. Collins was described as an ardent Democrat who championed Governor Wilson's campaign for President and remained Wilson's representative in New Jersey after he was elected. He served on the Elizabeth Council for seventeen years and was elected controller in 1916, 1919, 1922, and 1928.

While the identity of "man number 8" seems pretty to now be pretty-well established, Robert Baptista, now of Orange, Texas, suggested another possibility. Number 8 reminded him of a face he had seen while researching his book *Elizabeth, New Jersey, Then and Now.* "I read your fine article on the Wilson photograph possibly taken with the first nighttime flash," he told me in a recent email. "I believe the portly man with the walrus mustache (no. 8 in the photo) is Elizabeth Police Chief Michael J. Mulcahy. He served from 1913 to 1935." As evidence, he referenced a photo used in his book taken in 1914 showing the Elizabeth Police Department's first automobile patrol car (top speed 50 miles per hour!).

A close examination and comparison leads me to believe that "man number 8" is not Mulcahy. It is possible that Mulcahy was the unidentified man in the police department photo I had found and speculated on when I was first researching the article. There seems to have been no shortages of portly men in public

Note what appear to be framed photographs on display in the window of the shop at left. This is apparently 109 Fulton Street in Elizabeth, the shop of photographer Isidore Fieldman who took this image as well as the Wilson flash photo. According to U.S. Census records, the building on the right is 111 Fulton Street where Fieldman lived.

office with impressive mustaches! The resemblance of "man number 8" to General Collins, however, and considering Collins' personal link to Wilson leads me to believe that he was mystery man number 8!

Fieldman's Shop

While Baptista may not have identified "man number 8," however, he does add an interesting detail to the story. The imprint on the original Wilson photograph identified the photographer as "Fieldman," who we can say with reasonable certainty was Isidore Fieldman, a professional photographer known to be working in Elizabeth during the period. Baptista sent me a scan of another photo from his book which he describes as being "an early 1900s photo taken by Isidore

"Man number 1" has been identified as William T. Cox by his great, great grandson. Cox was active with the Elizabeth fire department. The significance "SS" or "55" on his hat's badge remains a mystery.

Fieldman. I believe it was taken outside his studio at 109 Fulton St. (the building on the left). The 1919 Elizabeth city directory lists Fieldman with a studio at 109 Fulton St." If one looks closely at the building in question on the left of the image, there indeed seems to be rows of framed photographs in the shop window, as one would expect for a photographer looking to display his work for prospective clients. In all likelihood, it was in a darkroom within this building that the flash photo of the President was developed and prints made.

Man Number 1

At least one of the prints made appears to have been obtained by William T. Cox and remains on the wall of his great, great grandson, Brian Kasper. "I read your article and watched your YouTube videos discussing the claim of the Woodrow Wilson photograph," he emailed me. "I found it very interesting,

William T. Cox

particularly because one of my relatives is readily identifiable in the shot. We have a copy in our family records along with a notation of Wilson's purpose in Elizabeth on that visit."

Kasper's great, great grandfather is the man at far left of the photograph—"man number 1"—who I speculated was a uniformed member of the Secret Service because of what appeared to be an "SS" badge on his hat. Kasper asserts, "I do know for a fact that the man is my great, great grandfather who was not a secret service agent." His name was William T. Cox and Kasper explained that "he is in uniform because during his lifetime he served as the chief of the volunteer fire department as well as a member of the board of fire commissioners for the paid fire department in Elizabeth. I do not know exactly what the 'SS' is, perhaps it is a number representing the department."

"He owned a tug boat line in Elizabeth," Kasper adds, "and donated much of his time and resources to the city of Elizabeth. He used his tug boats as make shift fire boats to protect the ports and docks of the city. One account in the Elizabeth library mentions an oil spill and fire which threatened the city, but was extinguished due to the efforts of the tug boats protecting the port."

A photo provided by Kasper which he definitely identifies as being of Cox does indeed appear to be "man number 1" in the photo. So what about the "SS" or "55" badge on his hat? "To my knowledge, William T. Cox was not associated with any specific firehouse in 1913," Kasper says. "He had recently retired from his commission on the Elizabeth Board of Fire Commissioners. We do have a good deal of fire paraphernalia associated with his various positions, including his fireman's hat at the time of his posting as chief. Unfortunately, it is not the same dress hat that appears in the photograph. I am also guessing that the numbers changed or were formed after the system shifted from volunteer to paid." So for the moment, at least, that remains a mystery.

It is wonderful how these things can take on a life of their own and one photograph leads to discovering a number of individual histories. If you can identify anyone else, please email me: gordon@gardenstatelegacy.com