Richard L. Hunster and His Photographs of Cincinnati Steamboats

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At the beginning of the twentieth century there were a number of commercial photographers in towns along the Ohio and Mississippi rivers who took a personal interest in taking photographs of steamboats. While portraiture was usually their primary source of income, steamboat photography became their secondary one. And just as the collecting of picture postcards became a popular pastime during this period so did the collecting of steamboat pictures. In fact several of these photographers issued their steamboat pictures as postcards. One of these "steamboat" photographers lived in Cincinnati. He was Richard L. Hunster, a black photographer who enjoyed steamboats and photographed many of the boats which operated in the Cincinnati area.

Richard Hunster's parents, Alexander A. Hunster and Catherine Campbell Hunster, were free blacks whose families had settled in Cincinnati in the 1830s. Alexander was born in Alabama in 1825 and, like other men in his family became a barber. Catherine was born in Vicksburg, Mississippi in 1830. The two were married in Cincinnati in 1846.

About 1858 Alexander and Catherine Hunster left Cincinnati with their daughter Carrie and their son Andrew and moved to Madison, Indiana. Here, Alexander continued to work as a barber. The Hunsters had three more children while in Madison: Griffen, Richard, who was born in July 1862, and Albert.

Around the close of the Civil War, the Hunsters moved again. This time they moved their family to Portsmouth, Ohio, where their youngest son Robert was born. It is not known why they moved at this time, but it is known that at some point Alexander Hunster began working as a barber aboard the packet boats which regularly ran in and out of Portsmouth. Because his father was associated with
steamboats and his family continually lived in towns along the Ohio River, it seems quite natural that Richard Hunster developed a fondness for steamboats which remained with him his entire life.

In 1877 when Richard was fifteen-years-old, his father died of consumption. About five years later, Richard apparently decided to leave his family in Portsmouth and move to Cincinnati, the city where his parents had lived so many years before.

During Richard Hunster’s first years in Cincinnati, he worked as a porter. However, by the late 1880s he was employed as an artist. One of his employers at this time was Isaac Benjamin. Benjamin, a photographer who, with his brother Henry, owned a business which specialized in the reproduction of photographs on china. Richard Hunster’s experience as an artist with Isaac Benjamin may have been one reason he eventually became a photographer.

The Cincinnati city directories first list Richard Hunster as a photographer in 1897. Unfortunately, outside of his work taking photographs of steamboats, very little is known about Hunster as a commercial photographer. Hunster’s photographs usually cannot be traced back to him since his name does not appear on his prints and very few of them contain his initials. In fact, if it were not for the writings of Captain Frederick Way, Jr., and the identifications which Captain Way placed on the steamboat pictures that he purchased from Hunster, the importance of Richard Hunster’s work as a steamboat photographer would be largely unknown.

Unlike some of the photographers who issued printed lists of the steamboat pictures they had for sale, Hunster laboriously wrote his picture lists out by hand. It was from one of these handwritten lists that Captain Way set out to acquire as many Hunster pho-

The picture of the New South on May 18, 1902, is one of the few Richard Hunster initialed and dated. (From the collection of the Public Library of Cincinnati and Hamilton County)
tographs as he could possibly afford. In 1915 Way, a fourteen-year-old youngster, obtained Hunster's address from Ed Ojeman, who worked on the Louisville and Cincinnati Packet Co.'s wharfboat in Cincinnati, and began corresponding with Richard Hunster.

The prices which Hunster charged for his photographs were considered quite reasonable. He sold postcard views for five cents each and 6 1/2 x 8 1/2 inch prints for twenty-five cents, or five for a dollar. His photographs of Cincinnati steamboats were quite excellent. Many of them depict the packet boats of steamboat lines like the Louisville and Cincinnati Packet Co., the Pittsburgh and Cincinnati Packet Line, and the Greene Line. He occasionally also photographed towboats and other steam vessels in the Cincinnati area.

Some of Hunster's images show dramatic scenes of steamboats under way, like the Queen City bound for Pittsburgh or the Boston on her final trip, with clouds of black smoke billowing from her smokestacks. Other images show tragic scenes such as the aftermath of the burning of the Indiana in 1916 or the remains of the City of Cincinnati and the City of Louisville following the terrible winter of 1917-1918 when they were crushed by ice.

In addition to selling original photographs of steamboats which he viewed along the Cincinnati riverfront, Richard Hunster also sold "copy" prints; that is, he would buy or borrow old steamboat pictures from collectors or other photographers, and then he would make copy negatives which he later printed and sold. Such practices were quite common among steamboat photographers, and it would not be surprising to find that some of these photographers made copy prints of Hunster's steamboat pictures. The copy prints which Hunster sold however, were not of the same quality as his own original photographs. Some are extremely poor. But regardless of their quality, Richard Hunster did preserve a number of steamboat pictures dating back to the 1860s which are still enjoyed by steamboat enthusiasts today.

After corresponding with Hunster for a couple of years, Fred Way decided to visit him while on a trip to Cincinnati in July 1917. Captain Way later described this visit in a 1935 article on steamboat pictures:

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On August 29, 1899, from Ludlow, Kentucky, Richard Hunster photographed the Boston on her final trip down river. After twenty years of service she was on her way to Jeffersonville.

(From the collection of the Public Library of Cincinnati and Hamilton County)
Anybody who collects steamboat pictures will hear, sooner or later, of Richard L. Hunster. He was a colored man; a small, thin-faced fellow, shabbily dressed, who was stung with the mania of photographing every steamboat in the Cincinnati vicinity. . . . I first heard of him in 1915 and completely drained my financial resources by ordering, from time to time (as the bank account would allow) all of his 400 post card pictures and his three score or more “six and a half [sic] by eight and a half.” In 1917 I hunted him up in Cincinnati, at his Gilbert avenue address. It was a rainy day . . . and I found Hunster on the second floor of a shabby building entered through a narrow alley. He made a great fuss about this visit from a 16-year-old boy, and spread newspapers on a chair for my convenience and comfort. Then he dug out films and plates. I must take this picture, and this one. Oh, no; no pay this time; I was a guest. Three happy hours with this little colored man. It was still raining when it was time to leave. “No umbrella!” he exclaimed, and despite insistence to the contrary, he unfurled the best he had, hoisted it over my head, and walked me down to Fountain Square. My visits to Cincinnati since 1917 have been legion but none will ever compare with this rainy day with Hunster and his pictures for pure joy, pleasure, and wealth of association.²

The photographs which Way took away on that rainy summer day in 1917 were perhaps some of the most interesting he had ever acquired from Hunster. They were views of steamboat cabin interiors which showed the crews seated at dinner tables. In all their correspondence with one another, Hunster had never mentioned these photographs, apparently thinking Way would not want them. But in reality, as Way described them many years later, “they were pure gold.”³

Richard Hunster photographed steamboats from about 1896 to at least 1918, perhaps a few years longer. The city directories last list him as a photographer in 1924. According to Captain Way, he last saw Hunster in 1926 working as a porter at the

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**Captain Wray described the views of steamboat cabin interiors as “pure gold.” A view of the cabin of the Courier pictured the crew seated for dinner. The open stateroom doors on each side allow one to see the bunk beds inside. (From the collection of the Public Library of Cincinnati and Hamilton County)**
Sources used for this article include city directories, census records, cemetery records, court records, periodical articles, and scrapbooks which the author located in Cincinnati and Portsmouth. The Inland Rivers Library, Rare Books and Special Collections Department, Public Library of Cincinnati and Hamilton County has a large number of Richard L. Hunster’s photographs in the Fred Way Collection.


Palace Hotel. The city directories merely list him as a laborer during the last years of his life. On January 23, 1928, Richard Hunster died in Cincinnati of a cerebral hemorrhage. He is buried in Union Baptist Cemetery.

What happened to the negatives of Richard Hunster’s steamboat pictures? No one has satisfactorily answered this question. It has long been speculated that they were carted off to a dump. At the time of his death, his brother Andrew was the only member of his immediate family who was still living, and there is the possibility that the negatives were removed to Portsmouth. However, this seems unlikely. According to the inventory of his estate, the only property listed as being appraised were some United States Postal Savings System Certificates of Deposit valued at $2,380.00. It is possible that he sold his photographic equipment and negatives to obtain the certificates of deposit. However, his negatives have not resurfaced making it appear highly probable that they were discarded and destroyed.

The outstanding views of Cincinnati steamboats which came from the camera of Richard L. Hunster record the work of a man who loved steamboats and felt compelled to record as many of them as possible on film. He probably never realized it at the time, but he was visually capturing a piece of Cincinnati history that would not occur again.

In 1926 the last time Captain Way saw him, Hunster was working as a porter at the Palace Hotel in downtown Cincinnati. (CHS Photograph Collection)
About 1912 he photographed the Lucille Nowland just below the Central Bridge which was demolished in 1992 and replaced with a new bridge. (From the collection of the Public Library of Cincinnati and Hamilton County)

Hunster occasionally photographed towboats such as the Hercules Carrel pictured here at the Cincinnati wharf. (From the collection of the Public Library of Cincinnati and Hamilton County)
Low water at the head of Medoc Bar around 1910 layed up the City of Cincinnati. Medoc bar is on the Kentucky side of the river just below North Bend, Ohio. (From the collection of the Public Library of Cincinnati and Hamilton County)

Hunster corresponded with Frederick Way, Jr. In a December 3, 1915 letter Hunster included an addition to his list of "old time steamers." (From the Collection of the Public Library of Cincinnati and Hamilton County)
He probably shot the first Island Queen in 1896, her first season, as she pulled away from the foot of Vine Street on her way to Coney Island. The white smoke seen between the smokestacks is coming from the calliope. (From the collection of the Public Library of Cincinnati and Hamilton County)
The *Queen City* was shot as she headed up river to Pittsburgh with the L & N bridge in background. Hunster took a number of photographs from this location which is where Sawyer Point is today. (From the collection of the Public Library of Cincinnati and Hamilton County)

About 1900 the *Courier* was docked at a wharfboat. The building in the center with the cupola is the Cincinnati Union Bethel, an organization originally founded to give aid to rivermen. (From the collection of the Public Library of Cincinnati and Hamilton County)
In 1909 the *Bonanza* docked at the Cincinnati wharf to await dismantling. (From the collection of the Public Library of Cincinnati and Hamilton County)

A picture of the cabin of the *Bonanza* taken in May 1897 is especially sharp and even shows the carpet pattern. If one looks at an original print of this scene, the image of Richard Hunster can be seen in the mirror at the rear of the room. (From the collection of the Public Library of Cincinnati and Hamilton County)
By looking at the calendar on the wall one can determine that this photograph of the pantry of the City of Louisville was taken in June 1897. (From the collection of the Public Library of Cincinnati and Hamilton County)
A close-up shot of the Virginia shows the pilothouse and texas about 1900. (From the collection of the Public Library of Cincinnati and Hamilton County)
The Indiana burned on May 1, 1916. Its hull and machinery were later used in the construction of the America which came out in 1917. (From the collection of the Public Library of Cincinnati and Hamilton County)

Hunster's photo shows the aftermath of the winter of 1971/1918 when ice crushed the City of Cincinnati (center) and the City of Louisville (right). The boat on the left is the Queen City. (From the collection of the Public Library of Cincinnati and Hamilton County)