

# VIEW from the Hill



Courtesy of John Dowling

Asa Mattice photographed this scene at a tea house in Nagasaki, Japan, in 1884.

## Unraveling a 19th-Century Journey

In 1882, Asa Mattice boarded the *U.S.S. Juniata* in New York and embarked on a three-year expedition to Asia. Mattice served as an engineer aboard the steam-powered naval vessel and documented the journey with photographs. More than a century later, Syracuse-based freelance photographer John Dowling '98 brought Mattice's travel pictures to light in *The Voyage of the Juniata*, which was featured at the 29th Annual Light Work Grant Exhibition at the Robert B. Menschel Media Center. For Dowling—one of three Central New York artists awarded a \$1,000 Light Work grant this year—the exhibition was one step in an ongoing research project with his Mattice collection.

Dowling acquired the set of 40 glass-plate negatives, which were stored in a cardboard box, a few years ago from Sue Langley, an antiques dealer and friend who thought he'd be interested in them. "I was amazed they had survived," says Dowling, a frequent contributor to *Syracuse University Magazine*. "Here was this treasure trove of images that could have been sitting in a box since the late 1890s, but some people along the way must have realized they were valuable and kept them intact."

Unraveling the mystery of the pictures and discovering their historical significance was no small feat for Dowling. Initially, the only information he had was Mattice's name and some handwritten notes scrawled on the paper envelopes that the plates had been stored in. He researched post-Civil War naval history and traveled to the National Archives in Washington, D.C., where he combed through ships' logs and captains' letters. Ultimately, he connected Mattice with the *Juniata* and began plotting the ship's route through Asia and parts of Africa on a trading mission. He

developed contact prints from the plates and, piece by piece, worked on matching the photos with locations on the route.

There are pictures of Commander P.F. Harrington and the crew; the *U.S.S. Trenton* and *U.S.S. Enterprise*, which the *Juniata* had joined up with on the Inland Sea of Japan; and scenes from Shanghai, Seoul (including the Wall of Seoul, which dates back to the 14th century), Nagasaki, Madagascar, and Zanzibar. Among Dowling's favorite photos is one of the Palace of Zanzibar, which he identified by comparing the picture to illustrations of the palace that he located on the Internet. There is also a photo of Percival Lowell, the renowned astronomer who claimed there was life on Mars. "The envelope said 'Percival Lowell and Korean Group' on it," Dowling says. "The name rang a bell and I wondered if it was the famous astronomer. I did some research on his life and found out that between the ages of 21 and 30 he had been a writer living in Japan and had traveled throughout Asia, so it made sense that this was *the* Percival Lowell."

Dowling first became interested in historical photographs when he did research on Civil War photographer and Central New Yorker George Barnard for his photojournalism master's thesis at the Newhouse School. He continues to learn more about the *Juniata's* journey and examine Mattice's photos, including two from 1888 that form a panorama of the White House. "I think photographs have been underestimated in terms of their historical value," Dowling says. "You can go back to old written records for information, but pictures themselves can give good direction in helping us understand a time period, too."

—Jay Cox