

Digital Reconstruction and Enhancement of a Photograph of S/S *Imo* Captain, Haakon From (1870-1917)

By Joel Zemel © 2017

Captain Haakon From was a victim of the explosion that took place on the morning of Thursday, 6 December 1917 at 09:04:35 a.m. in Halifax Harbour, Nova Scotia Canada.

The two photographs used for this experiment involved an obituary photograph of Captain Haakon From taken from the *Sandefjord Blad* newspaper from 1917 (Fig. 1) and a family photograph of the three From brothers - Ragnwald, Einar and Haakon - probably taken in the late 1800s (Fig.2). These images were forwarded to me by journalist, Kjetil Saugerstad. I extracted a high-resolution image of the captain from the newspaper. The family photograph was provided by the captain's descendant, Arne From.



Fig.1: Captain From, ca. 1917



Fig. 2: From Brothers, ca.1890

Although the newspaper file itself was a high resolution TIFF, the photograph had several severe quality issues, notably, the heavy distortion on the right side of the subject's nose and an overt lack of visibility around the eyes and mouth (Figs. 3 & 4). These distortions caused a distinct imbalance within the overall newspaper photograph. Barring some unknown accident that may have affected his features, I suspected this image, for the most part, to not be an accurate representation of the captain. This notion presented itself even before I became aware of the family photograph.



Fig. 3: eyes and nose



Fig. 4: mouth

The purpose of my experiment was not to create a high-quality enhanced photograph of Haakon From, but to determine how the man may actually looked in adulthood. Although not a scientific method, by any means, the end result would at least provide a better approximation of his appearance. The first hurdle to overcome was to establish that the content of the caption written beneath the family photograph (Fig. 5) did not indicate the positions of the two seated brothers. The wording implies the brother on the left is Haakon, and that the brother on the right is Einar. As well, the figure on the left is wearing what appears to be a captain's cap. Understandably, this would cause someone viewing the image for the first time to presuppose that that the brother wearing such a cap would indeed be Haakon From. However, I did not believe this is the case.

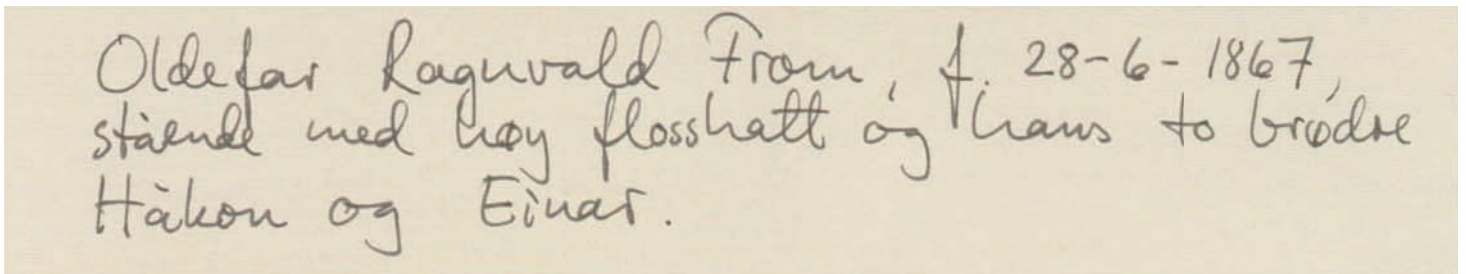


Fig. 5: caption from photograph

Subsequently, I discovered that Einar From (1872-1972) was a well-known landscape painter. Therefore, In order to move forward, further corroboration of young Einar's identity in the photograph (fig. 6) was required. I asked Kjetil to locate photographs of the artist, if possible. He accomplished this task within a relatively short time and forwarded a fairly decent newspaper photograph of Einar (fig. 7) to me. The resemblance looked unmistakable and thus, confirmed the identity of Einar in the family photograph. Haakon's identity was established by default. It is Einar who is seen on the left of the image wearing the captain's hat and Haakon on the right sporting the derby (see Fig. 2).



Figs. 6 & 7: Einar From

Now that the identities of the brothers had been established to my satisfaction, I was able to continue with my attempt to enhance the newspaper photo of the captain. The first step was to partially get rid of the distortion primarily around the captain's nose, eyes and mouth in the Photoshop document using the family photograph as a guide, a relatively simple process (Fig. 8).



Fig. 8: partially retouched image

I then created another image using a section of the young Haakon's face from the family photograph (Fig. 9) that included his eyes, nose and mouth. I feathered the edges for a smooth transition to the above photograph but decided to not add any sepia to the overlay image (Fig. 10).



Fig. 9: young Haakon



Fig. 10: feathered overlay

I incorporated another program to import the newspaper photo and the portion of the From Brothers image. Luckily, though taken many years apart, Haakon From posed for the camera in an almost identical facial position. The only thing that had to be done was to properly angle the overlay as shown below in Fig. 11. The parameters of the overlay image (height and width) were constrained, so, all that was left to do was to determine the proper spot on the image and then downsize the overlay to match the newspaper photo. I then adjusted the opacity in stages to meld the images properly.



Fig. 11: newspaper image + angled overlay image

The interim result (fig. 12a), a screenshot with opacity at 21%, is almost there. Even with the difference in modes (RGB and Greyscale), the two images blended together quite well. My goal of approximating the actual look of Captain Haakon From had been achieved. The final result, a screenshot on the right (Fig. 12 b), has the opacity at just 15%. It is certainly not ideal but I think the composite image gives a better approximation of the captain's true appearance.



Fig. 12a: 21% overlay



Fig. 12b: 15% overlay

Recently, Kjetil (a great detective, by the way) tracked down the original obituary photograph. He discovered that the captain's obituary may not have appeared in the *Sandefjord Blad* but another paper, the *Vestfold Dagblad*. Luckily, the accompanying image, shown below (unaltered), is of much better quality than the one he initially had forwarded to me (Fig 12c).

My experiment, though not entirely on the mark, clearly demonstrates that nothing should be taken for granted when working to discover the provenance of an historical artifact.



Fig. 12c