



PHOTOGRAPHER: **BRYAN R. JOHNSON**

(b. 1834)

SITTERS: "Young Couple With Baby"

DATE: 1865

FORMAT: enlarged reprint of original
carte de visite

IMPRINT: "From B. R. Johnson's Photographic Establishment, Doyle's Building, Main Street, Petaluma."

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This is an exceptionally fine carte de visite of a young couple with their toddler. The composition of two standing parents flanking the seated child is unusual, but highly successful. Posing the child on the end column of the studio balustrade creates a casual feel which eliminates the stiffness that often defines group portraiture. The photographer caught all three family members in a moment of ease and self confidence. The mother rests her right forearm on the column beside the baby and, echoing her gesture, the father supports the baby with his left arm. The little fellow sits at ease with one foot tucked under the opposite leg and both hands resting assuredly on his knees in a gesture of almost defiant self-assertion. Finally, this family's demeanor is striking, most probably because all three gaze directly and resolutely at the viewer.

The family's attire is simple but elegant, fashionable but sensible. The father is dressed in the standard 1860's combination of long, loose, black, frock coat, matching vest, white shirt and narrow, black tie. The father sports a Shenandoah beard, which was common among Petaluma gentleman at this time, and may have been a personal statement of his support for the Union Army. The Civil War was raging in 1865 when this portrait was taken, and the Union leader, President Lincoln, was known for this unusual style of facial hair. The mother wears a simple dress with a gored skirt, which required a hoop and petticoats, and a front-closing bodice with decorative fringe trim. A simple, self belt with a small buckle cinches her waist, and bishop sleeves ending with tight, white cuffs echo her collar. She wears no jewelry, and her hair is modestly restrained in a crocheted snood. The baby wears a two-piece woolen suit consisting of a top jacket which is firmly buttoned to his knickers to ensure a tidy appearance. His hair is parted on both sides and piled up in the middle to form a top mound.



Alexander Gardner's famous portrait of Abraham Lincoln, taken Nov. 8, 1863