

# PHOTOGRAPHY

## From "Encyclopedia of the American Civil War: A Political, Social, and Military History"



Copyright © 2000 by David Heidler and Jeanne T. Heidler

As a modern war in many respects, the Civil War was the first great media event in American history and the first war to be documented by what was then a new technology, photography. Photographers covered a wide range of aspects of the conflict, bringing the war home to Americans with a graphic reality that no other medium at the time possessed. The demand—from both the civilian public and the military—for views of the war remained steady, at least in the North. Nonetheless, the photographic report was fragmented, and it was insignificant as far as strategy and organization of forces were concerned.

The main limitation to comprehensive photographic coverage of the war was the technology itself. The wet-plate process had replaced the daguerreotype, so an almost limitless number of prints could be made from a glass negative, whereas previously only one original image had been possible. Yet the process was still a very elaborate one. The glass plate, kept free of dust, had to be coated with the necessary chemicals in a darkroom, then carried to the camera that had already been planted with the lens brought into focus. After the plate was exposed, it was rushed back to the darkroom while still wet to be developed. A photographer working in the field needed a portable darkroom. Equipment was cumbersome and expensive. Exposure times ranged from about ten to thirty seconds, depending on the light, so photographers were limited to stationary or posed scenes. After the plate was exposed, a variety of things—a breeze, a speck of dust, or an insect on the wet coating, even leaves in a stream where the photographer washed the plates—could ruin the photograph.

It is not surprising, then, that images depicting battles are virtually nonexistent. Most images were produced days after the fighting was over, showing corpse-strewn fields, shattered buildings, and maimed countryside. Also, theaters of war within fairly easy reach got documented heavily, whereas others were neglected. The majority of campaigns, as photographic historian William Frassanito puts it, went completely unrecorded. Generally, outdoor photography focused on inanimate objects such as buildings, fortifications, weapons, ships, and camps. In addition, the U.S. Army Medical Department had photographs taken of extraordinary injuries, medical operations, or peculiar amputations, a collection that was assembled in seven volumes after the war. The overwhelming majority of the images of war, however, were portraits, either of individuals or groups of soldiers. There are no records, but it is safe to assume that several hundred thousand images were produced during the four-year struggle. Some estimates place the number as exceeding a million. More than 90 percent of these were portraits.

On the eve of the Civil War, photography had acquired a mass audience. Firms such as E. & H. T. Anthony in New York catered to an increasing demand for images of persons, events, and scenery, selling such images as paper prints from 25 cents upwards. The Civil War provided a great opportunity to enterprising photographers, recorded by the 1860 census as numbering more than 3,100 in the United States. They followed the armies, put up tents or makeshift studios next to army camps, and offered to take the likeness of soldiers to be sent home as private mementos to family and friends for as little as one dollar per image. It is said that the Bergstresser brothers produced up to 160 portraits every day while with the Army of the Potomac for two years. Others waited until the war came to their hometowns to offer their services to soldiers. For photographers, pecuniary interests and the hope to enhance one's professional or social

standing mingled with patriotism and a sense of the conflict's historical dimensions.



Quarters of photographers attached to the Engineer Corps near Petersburg, Virginia, March 1865

#### (Library of Congress)

Although a list compiled by the National Archives gives the names of some three hundred photographers who received passes from the Federal military authorities to record images in and around encampments, the actual number of operators producing images of war must have exceeded this number considerably. Possibly as many as 100 additional photographers came from and worked in the South. Possibly as many as 1,500 men and a few women took pictures of the war for the public, the illustrated press, and in a few cases the military.

The Confederacy produced the first photographers of the war. Jay D. Edwards, Osborn and Durbec, Andrew Lytle of Baton Rouge, George S. Cook of Charleston, Charles J. Quinby, Richard Wearn, F. K. Houston, and J. W. Petty were among the better known. After a few months, supply shortages considerably curtailed their production. Some managed to get fresh supplies from blockade runners or even through more traditional channels. George Cook, for one, could restock the necessary chemicals with the help of the Anthony brothers in New York until the fall of 1863. Others had to ration their materials, with the result that there were markedly fewer photographers in the South and thus fewer images from their point of view.

Among those who supported the Union cause were men like Mathew Brady, the most famous photographer of the war, who busily fostered the image of himself as **the** photographic chronicler of the war. Yet Alexander Gardner, George N. Barnard, and Timothy O'Sullivan also did important work. Gardner left Brady's employ and set up his own business in 1863 because Brady refused to give credit to the photographers who had actually taken pictures, insisting instead that the images be publicized under the name of the Brady firm. It is not always easy to ascribe a picture to one photographer, in any case, since the elaborate process required the joint efforts of two or more operators. It is not surprising, however, that some of Brady's best photographers joined Gardner's venture.



Wagons and camera of Sam A. Cooley, Union photographer, Department of the South

(Library of Congress)

A few photographers had semiofficial status by carrying out assignments for the military and thus could charge the War Department for their work. Only one photographer had official status, and he happened also to be a soldier. Captain Andrew Joseph Russell held a commission from the Bureau of the U.S. Military Railroad to record the engineering problems created by the field activities of the army.

Contemporaries were willing to believe that the images were as “truthful as the records of heaven,” as a catalogue of Brady’s photographs put it in September 1862. Yet the images seen in galleries or as engravings in papers such as **Harper’s Weekly**, **Frank Leslie’s Illustrated Newspaper**, or the **New York Illustrated News**—photographs could be reproduced in the press only after the invention of the halftone process in the 1880s—might be carefully staged scenes or at best represent the subjective views of the photographers. The photographs consequently made people see the war through the eyes of the photographers. The images also allowed people to connect to events in a more immediate way than before and associate those events with the reasons the war was being fought. In any case, war photography deeply moved Americans, and sometimes, as in the case of Brady’s first pictures of battlefield dead, it shocked them. The public would never again be able to shut its eyes to the terrible reality of war.

**See also**

**Brady, Mathew B.; Gardner, Alexander; O’Sullivan, Timothy.**

**For further reading:**

- Carlebach, Michael L. **The Origins of Photojournalism in America** (1992).
- Davis, Keith F. “‘A Terrible Distinctness’: Photography of the Civil War Era.” In *Photography in Nineteenth-century America* (1991).
- Davis, William C., ed. **The Image of War, 1861-1865** (1981-1984).
- Frassanito, William A. **Grant and Lee: The Virginia Campaigns 1864-1865** (1983).
- Miller, Francis Trevelyan, ed. **The Photographic History of the Civil War: Thousands of Scenes Photographed 1861-1865** (1911).

**Angela Schwarz**

Persistent URL to the Entry: <http://search.credoreference.com/content/entry/abcacw/photography/0>

### APA

Schwarz, A. (2000). Photography. In D. Heidler & J. Heidler (Eds.), *Encyclopedia of the American civil war: A political, Social, and military history*. Santa Barbara, CA: ABC-CLIO. Retrieved from <http://ezproxy.lancs.ac.uk/login?url=http://search.credoreference.com/content/entry/abcacw/photography/0>

### MLA

Schwarz, Angela. "Photography." *Encyclopedia of the American Civil War: A Political, Social, and Military History*. Eds. David S. Heidler and Jeanne T. Heidler. Santa Barbara: ABC-CLIO, 2000. *Credo Reference*. Web. 7 Oct 2015.

### Chicago

Schwarz, Angela. 2000. "Photography". In *Encyclopedia of the American Civil War: A Political, Social, and Military History*, edited by David S. Heidler and Jeanne T. Heidler. Santa Barbara: ABC-CLIO. <http://ezproxy.lancs.ac.uk/login?url=http://search.credoreference.com/content/entry/abcacw/photography/0>

### Harvard

Schwarz, A (2000) Photography. [Online]. In D Heidler & J Heidler (eds.). *Encyclopedia of the American civil war: A political, Social, and military history*. Santa Barbara, CA: ABC-CLIO. Available from: <http://ezproxy.lancs.ac.uk/login?url=http://search.credoreference.com/content/entry/abcacw/photography/0> [Accessed 7 October 2015].