

BRADY, MATHEW B. (ca. 1823-1896)

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



Copyright © 2000 by David Heidler and Jeanne T. Heidler

Little is known about Mathew Brady's early life except that he was born in Warren County, New York, to Andrew and Julia Brady around 1823. Afflicted with an eye inflammation as a teen, Brady traveled to Albany and Saratoga in search of a cure. During his time in Saratoga, Brady probably met portrait painter William Page. Through this acquaintance, he most likely met Samuel F. B. Morse, who in the 1830s was experimenting with the new medium of daguerreotypy, an early form of photography. As Morse was offering lessons in the new art at the time, most scholars believe that this is where Brady first learned what was to become his trade.



Brady's photographic outfit near Petersburg, Virginia, ca. 1864

(Library of Congress)



Mathew Brady (**center, in hat**) and troops under fire before Petersburg, Virginia, 21 June 1864

(Photograph by Mathew Brady Studios / **National Archives**)

In 1843 Brady was living in New York City and manufacturing cases to house daguerreotypes, jewelry, and painted miniature portraits. By April 1844 Brady had opened his first studio, the Daguerrean Miniature Gallery, on Broadway. In October of the same year, he exhibited his work at the American Institute's annual fair and won the premium (or highest) award, which he won again in 1845, 1846, 1849, and 1857.

Shortly thereafter, Brady began his lifelong endeavor of collecting images of notable Americans. He opened a studio in Washington, D.C., in 1849 so that he could obtain portraits of the important political personages in the city. To this end, he made daguerreotypes of Henry Clay, Daniel Webster, John C. Calhoun, Zachary Taylor, and Millard Fillmore. In 1850 Brady published his collection in a book entitled **The Gallery of Illustrious Americans**, which sold for \$15 a copy. At around the same date, Brady married Juliette Handy.

Brady's work continued to win the praise of others working with daguerreotypy. In 1851 he won a medal at the Fair of All Nations in London, England, and in 1854 he won a bronze medal at the New York Industrial Exhibition at the Crystal Palace for his daguerreotypes.

By 1858 Brady had two studios on Broadway, the largest with twenty-six employees. One of these employees was a Scottish immigrant named Alexander Gardner. When Brady decided to open a new studio in Washington, D.C., to replace the earlier studio that had eventually failed, the photographer chose Gardner to manage it. Brady's National Photographic Art Gallery, on Pennsylvania Avenue, enabled him to acquire photographs of the politicians in the city, including presidential candidates Stephen A. Douglas and Abraham Lincoln, as well as all the members of the House of Representatives, some of whom would become notable for their roles in the Confederate cause.

By the outbreak of the Civil War, Brady's business was near its peak. The advent of carte de visite cameras enabled a photographer to take multiple pictures simultaneously. Exposed on paper and mounted on card stock, these new photographs provided inexpensive likenesses for a wider portion of the public and thus expanded Brady's business in both New York and Washington. At the same time, his photographers were in the field with the Union army, recording the events of the war. Engravings based on Alexander Gardner's photographs of the aftermath of Antietam were the first graphic images of battlefield dead and were published in **Harper's Weekly**. The original photographs, on display at Brady's New York studio, caused an outcry of horror among his patrons.



Brady's photographic gallery, at the corner of Broadway and Tenth Street, New York

(Frank Leslie's Illustrated Newspaper / Library of Congress)

Throughout his career, though he had many wealthy and influential friends and was able to amass property and investments, Brady could not manage his finances. Constantly in debt, he managed to procure loans on his good name and artistic talent. By the end of the Civil War, however, Brady was in serious financial difficulty. The photographic medium that he helped make popular, the *carte de visite*, undermined the attraction of his New York and Washington galleries. Now that the images of famous personages could be reproduced in quantity and sold to the public, individuals could collect their own small portrait galleries.

At the end of the war, Brady negotiated to sell his massive archive of photographs to the prestigious New York Historical Society. The profits of the sale were intended to pay off his outstanding debts. To his great disappointment, the deal fell through. In 1870, Brady then traveled to Washington to try to sell his collection to the federal government. His debts too large to ignore, in 1872 Brady sold his opulent New York studio and filed for bankruptcy. Finally, in 1875 the U.S. Congress bought the title to the Brady collection for \$25,000. The embattled photographer was then able to pay off his debts.

Brady remained in Washington and worked with his nephew Levin Handy, also a photographer. Though his enthusiasm for the art had waned, Brady continued to take portraits of notable people, though he no longer pursued them with as much vigor as he had twenty years earlier.

After his wife's death in 1887, Brady's health deteriorated, exacerbated by alcohol and depression. He managed to open his last studio in 1890 in Washington, where, instead of his portraits, he was the main attraction. As the only survivor of the many photographers who recorded the Civil War, Brady became popular among journalists interested in the great upheaval of the previous generation. Regaining some of his interest in the promotion of his work, he began compiling a slide lecture of his old photographs. In 1895, a traffic accident aborted his plans and left him with a broken leg. He never fully recovered from the injury and died a year later, on 16 January 1896 in New York.

Brady was ever popular with the former soldiers of the Civil War and with the New York art world, and his funeral was financed by artists and the veterans of the New York 7th Regiment Veterans Association. He was buried beside his wife in Congressional Cemetery in Washington, D.C.



"Brady, the Photographer, Returned from Bull Run," 22 July 1861

(Library of Congress)

See also

Photography.

For further reading:

- **Panzer, Mary. Mathew Brady and the Image of History (1994).**
- **Sullivan, George. Mathew Brady: His Life and Photographs (1994).**

Heidi Campbell-Shoaf

Persistent URL to the Entry:

http://search.credoreference.com/content/entry/abcacw/brady_mathew_b_ca_1823_1896/0

APA

BRADY, MATHEW B. (Ca. 1823-1896). (2000). 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/brady_mathew_b_ca_1823_1896/0

MLA

"Brady, Mathew B. (Ca. 1823-1896)." *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

"Brady, Mathew B. (Ca. 1823-1896)". 2000. 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/brady_mathew_b_ca_1823_1896/0

Harvard

BRADY, MATHEW B. (Ca. 1823-1896) (2000). [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/brady_mathew_b_ca_1823_1896/0 [Accessed 7 October 2015].