

GARDNER, ALEXANDER (1821-1882)

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The first child of James and Jean Glenn Gardner, Alexander Gardner was born in Paisley, Scotland, on 17 October 1821. Shortly after Alexander's birth, the Gardners moved to Glasgow, where twins Agnes and Catherine (1826) and a brother James (1829) were born and completed the family.

Encouraged to pursue academic studies, Gardner excelled in the subjects of astronomy, botany, and chemistry. At fourteen he became an apprentice to a Glasgow jeweler. In 1847, Gardner became manager of the Clydesdale Discount and Loan Company and became a member of the Glasgow Athenaeum. The Athenaeum membership enabled Gardner to develop friendships with notable thinkers throughout the Scottish city as well as gave him the privilege of using the club's reading rooms and reference library.

Influenced by the writings of reformer Robert Owen, Gardner embarked on his own experiment in utopian communities. In 1848, he formed the Clydesdale Joint Stock Agricultural and Commercial Company. By 1850, nine Scots—including Gardner's brother James, and their future brother-in-law, Robertson Sinclair—embarked on the long journey to the United States. The Clydesdale Company was established in Clayton County, Iowa, five miles west of the Mississippi River and was based on a shares and dividend system. Though he did not make the trip himself, Gardner oversaw the company from Scotland.

In 1851, Gardner bought the **Glasgow Sentinel** newspaper, in which he regularly wrote editorials supporting the rights of the working class. The same year he attended the Crystal Palace Exhibition at which he may have met photographer Mathew Brady. In 1852, however, Gardner changed course again, becoming less involved in the **Sentinel**, possibly due to the failure of his utopian experiment in Iowa. His brother James returned home from the United States in 1853. During this time, Gardner became interested in the medium of photography, though it is unclear where the first impetus struck him. He first offered his photographic services in 1855.

Perhaps due to unfavorable business or perhaps to try his luck in a new land, Gardner decided to emigrate to America. The spring of 1856 found Gardner, his mother, his wife Margaret, his brother James, son Lawrence, and daughter Eliza aboard a ship bound for the United States.

Upon arriving in the United States, Gardner discovered the remnants of his utopian experiment nearly in ruins. Thus, instead of traveling to Iowa to settle, he remained in New York, where he came into contact with Mathew Brady. Working the Brady Studio, Gardner not only honed his photographic skills but also worked on trying to right Brady's muddled finances. Brady recognized Gardner's varied abilities and sent him to Washington, D.C., in 1858 to administer his studio there.

In Washington, Gardner introduced to the Brady establishment the carte de visite, a 2- by 4-inch calling card-sized photograph. Though Brady found the artistic merits of the format lacking, economically the affordable, mass-produced photograph was a shrewd business investment.

The onset of the Civil War brought new photographic opportunities for both photographers. Brady and Gardner were equally eager to go to the field and record the great conflict. Brady received permission from

President Abraham Lincoln to accompany and photograph the army, and Gardner used his connection with Scotsman Allan Pinkerton to gain access to the troops. Gardner was permitted complete access to the Army of the Potomac. He and photographers under his employ recorded scenes from the Peninsula campaign to Culpeper, Second Manassas to Antietam, and their photographs brought the horrors of war to the Northern populace.



Alexander Gardner and his photographic wagon at Fort Riley, Kansas, 1867

(Library of Congress)

A couple of months after Antietam, Gardner severed relations with Brady to embark on his own photographic endeavors. In 1863, he and his staff photographed military scenes from Aquia Creek, Falmouth, and Fredericksburg. In July of the same year, Gardner was prepared to photograph the impending battle at Gettysburg, Pennsylvania. Traveling to Pennsylvania he had missed the three-day's action, but upon arriving at Emmitsburg, Maryland, just south of the state line, on 5 July he was promptly captured by retreating Confederate soldiers under the command of General J. E. B. Stuart. Gardner was detained only briefly and by the next day was on the Gettysburg battlefield with his camera recording the aftermath of the decisive battle.

In September 1863, Gardner published the **Catalogue of Photographic Incidents of the War**. In the catalog, his war photographs were offered for sale in a variety of sizes and prices. Meanwhile, Gardner's staff remained in the field with the armies, photographing scenes at Belle Plain, Cold Harbor, Petersburg, and Appomattox. After the surrender at Appomattox, Gardner decided to publish a compendium of war photos in book form. **Gardner's Photographic SketchBook of the War** appeared in two volumes and cost \$150 in 1865. The next year, Gardner issued a second edition of his work. Approximately 200 sets of the book were produced, of which only one-tenth survive intact.

Gardner was present and photographed the trial and hanging of the Lincoln assassination conspirators. After that, he set his sights to the west, where he undertook a project to record the life and faces of the

native peoples of the Plains and far west. In 1872 Gardner was named the official photographer for the Office of Indian Affairs.

Retiring from photography in 1879, Gardner turned to philanthropy in an effort to aid the poor. He was elected president of the Masonic Mutual Relief Association in 1882, the same year he was elected president of the Equitable Co-Operative Building Association, an organization that helped individuals buy their own homes.

In December of 1882 Gardner fell ill and his condition progressively grew worse. On 10 December 1882, Alexander Gardner died at the age of sixty-one.

See also

Brady, Mathew; Photography.

For further reading:

- **Katz, D. Mark. Witness to an Era: The Life and Photographs of Alexander Gardner: The Civil War, Lincoln, and the West (1991).**

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