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## Photography as History in the American Civil War

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## Photography as History in the American Civil War

### Abstract

Throughout the American Civil War, northern photographers, many of whom were officially attached to the Union army, generated more than seven thousand images of Union commanders and ordinary soldiers, faraway landscapes, and scenes of unprecedented death and destruction. In doing so, they aimed to create a supremely objective, visual history of the war. Because these photographs have so thoroughly influenced how generations of Americans have understood and remembered the Civil War, it is imperative to examine how northern photographers, Union military and political officials, and the American public conceived of the pictures' contemporary enduring historical significance. In particular, this paper focuses upon the work of Mathew Brady, the first Civil War photographer to travel to the front lines and whose collection of Civil War negatives was purchased by Congress in 1875, and of Alexander Gardner, Brady's employee-turned-competitor, whose 1866 *Photographic Sketch Book of the War* was the first published book of American photographs. These bodies of work have been analyzed at length by historians of American photography, but they have not received adequate attention from political and intellectual historians of the Civil War and Reconstruction periods. Indeed, Americans' estimation of the relationship between photography and history serves to shed light on how they absorbed the war's events and how they perceived the role that history played in their own lives—an especially essential endeavor given the degree to which both Union and Confederate officials were concerned, even during the war itself, with how their respective causes would be remembered. While Brady, Gardner, and their compatriots asserted that their photographs held a unique claim to objectivity, and thus to historical significance, they were thoroughly implicated in the Union political project. Moreover, photography's technical limitations ensured that it could not capture in real time what nineteenth-century conceptions of history deemed most important—namely, epic scenes of battle. By focusing instead upon ordinary soldiers performing mundane activities or upon the corpses of the dead, Civil War photographers fundamentally challenged prevailing notions of what and who constituted history's rightful subjects.

### Keywords

photography, Civil War, history, Brady, Gardner, History, Stephanie McCurry, McCurry, Stephanie

### Disciplines

Cultural History | United States History

## Photography as History in the American Civil War

### Serena Covkin

After Mathew Brady's shocking photographs of the dead of Antietam were published in October 1862, his fellow photographers championed their documentary qualities: "As records of the great and vital struggle in which we are engaged, they possess a value far beyond that of any written descriptions; for they offer to the eye the dreadful actualities of scenes which the pen of the most skillful writer could only reproduce with a remote degree of accuracy."<sup>1</sup> The photographs, they asserted, were crucial "contribut[ions] to the historical memorials of our time."<sup>2</sup> How did this understanding of the relationship between photography and history influence how Civil War photographers produced and presented their work, and how the American public perceived it?

Brady was the first photographer to travel to the front lines, but he was far from unique. Throughout the war, more than three hundred photographers received permission to follow the Army of the Potomac as it fought in the war's Eastern Theater.<sup>3</sup> Taken together, northern photographers generated more than seven thousand images of Union commanders and ordinary soldiers, faraway landscapes, and scenes of unprecedented death and destruction.<sup>4</sup> Because these photographs have so thoroughly influenced how generations of Americans have understood and

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<sup>1</sup> "Photographs of War Scenes," *Humphrey's Journal* 14, no. 12 (October 15, 1862): 143, American Periodicals. The magazine changed its name many times, from *The Daguerreian Journal: Devoted to the Daguerreian and Photographic Art, Also embraces the Sciences, Arts and Literature* in 1850 to *Humphrey's Journal of the Daguerreotype and Photographic Arts and the Sciences and Arts Pertaining to Heliography* in 1852 to *Humphrey's Journal of Photography and the Heliographic Arts and Sciences* in 1862 to *Humphrey's Journal of Photography and the Allied Arts and Sciences* in 1865. For simplicity's sake, I will refer to it as *Humphrey's Journal* throughout this paper. The photographs were displayed as part of Brady's exhibition "The Dead of Antietam," but they were actually taken by one of his cameramen, Alexander Gardner. In fact, that Brady did not give him credit for the photographs was one of the primary reasons that Gardner stopped working for Brady and began his independent photography career in late 1862.

<sup>2</sup> "Photographs of War Scenes," *Humphrey's Journal* 14, no. 12 (October 15, 1862): 143, American Periodicals.

<sup>3</sup> Beaumont Newhall, *The History of Photography: From 1839 to the Present*, 5<sup>th</sup> ed. (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 2012), 91.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*

remembered the Civil War, it is imperative to examine how northern photographers, Union military and political officials, and the American public conceived of the pictures' contemporary enduring historical significance.

In particular, this paper will focus upon the work of Mathew Brady, the first Civil War photographer to travel to the front lines and whose collection of Civil War negatives was purchased by Congress in 1875, and of Alexander Gardner, Brady's employee-turned-competitor, whose 1866 *Photographic Sketch Book of the War* was "America's first book of photographs."<sup>5</sup> These bodies of work have been analyzed at length by historians of American photography, but they have not received adequate attention from political and intellectual historians of the Civil War and Reconstruction periods. Indeed, Americans' estimation of the relationship between photography and history serves to shed light on how they absorbed the war's events and how they perceived the role that history played in their own lives—an especially essential endeavor given the degree to which both Union and Confederate officials were concerned, even during the war itself, with how their respective causes would be remembered.<sup>6</sup> While Brady, Gardner, and their compatriots asserted that their photographs held a unique claim to objectivity, and thus to historical significance, they were thoroughly implicated in the Union political project. Moreover, photography's technical limitations ensured that it could not capture in real time what nineteenth-century conceptions of history deemed most important—namely, epic scenes of battle. By focusing instead upon ordinary soldiers performing mundane activities or upon the corpses of the dead, Civil War photographers fundamentally challenged prevailing notions of what and who constituted history's rightful subjects.

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<sup>5</sup> Jeff L. Rosenheim, *Photography and the American Civil War* (New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2013), 82.

<sup>6</sup> See, for example, "Patrick Cleburne's Proposal to Arm Slaves," January 2, 1864, accessed May 5, 2014, <http://www.civilwar.org/education/history/primarysources/patrick-r-cleburne-et-al.html>.

If he wanted to become a “pictorial war corresponden[t],” Mathew Brady knew that he would need to secure permission from some of the highest-ranking Union officials; luckily, he had photographed Secretary of War Edwin Stanton and President Abraham Lincoln before the war and continued to maintain a personal relationship with both men.<sup>7</sup> Indeed, Brady received authorization from intelligence director Allan Pinkerton, Stanton, and Lincoln, who, in the spring of 1861, “probably half-humorously...scrawled ‘Pass Brady’ on a paper.”<sup>8</sup> Despite their ready acquiescence, however, the officials refused to fund Brady’s operation.<sup>9</sup> Brady hired a vast team of photographers at his own expense. “I had men in all parts of the army, like a rich newspaper,” he recalled in 1891.<sup>10</sup>

One such man was Alexander Gardner, who had managed Brady’s Washington, DC gallery before the war. Gardner took many of the war’s most famous images, including those displayed in Brady’s “The Dead of Antietam” exhibition in October 1862. A few months later, unhappy that he had not received recognition for his own images, Gardner left Brady’s employ. Instead, he “accepted [a]...commission as a photographic copyist of maps and documents for the Army of the Potomac,” becoming the first photographer to achieve the “honorary rank of captain.”<sup>11</sup> In fact, Gardner became “the world’s first official war journalist.”<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> George Alfred Townsend, “Still Taking Pictures,” *The World*, April 12, 1891, accessed April 13, 2014, [http://www.daguerreotypearchive.org/texts/N8910001\\_BRADY\\_WORLD\\_1891-04-12.pdf](http://www.daguerreotypearchive.org/texts/N8910001_BRADY_WORLD_1891-04-12.pdf); Roy Meredith, *Mr. Lincoln’s Camera Man: Mathew B. Brady*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (New York: Dover Publications, Inc., 1974), 90.

<sup>8</sup> James D. Horan, *Mathew Brady: Historian with a Camera* (New York: Crown Publishers, Inc., 1955), 37-38.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 38

<sup>10</sup> Townsend, “Still Taking Pictures”

<sup>11</sup> Rosenheim, *Photography and the American Civil War*, 15

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*

Though no original record of the quotation exists, it is widely acknowledged that Mathew Brady once proclaimed, “[t]he camera is the eye of history.”<sup>13</sup> It is with this conviction that he and his corps of photographers set off to test the bounds of their new visual medium and document the war. In this way, according to art historian Beaumont Newhall, Civil War photography exemplified a shift in photographic practice, as artists began to “us[e] photography quite simply and directly as a means of recording the world about them.”<sup>14</sup> “Photographers the world over,” Newhall writes, “were recording history in the making, the look of faraway and often hitherto unexplored places and the people living there, the familiar ‘sights’ worth seeing and remembering by travelers, and man’s most recent architectural and engineering accomplishments.”<sup>15</sup>

That photographers faithfully and exactly replicated these “faraway...places” and “familiar ‘sights’” was widely assumed. In fact, this realism left photography open to criticism. For example, an 1862 article in *The Albion, A Journal of News, Politics, and Literature* contended, “a photograph...is *too* like nature, a *too* literal copy...Two photographs are as like to one another as possible; they are in fact mere impressions of natural objects, just as they might be seen in a looking-glass, and however perfect and wonderful, they are only capable of inspiring a very limited kind of admiration.”<sup>16</sup> Thus, many northern photographers viewed the Civil War as an opportunity to demonstrate the value of their new artistic medium.

Brady, Gardner, and the journalists who reviewed their work frequently asserted that this maligned realism would in fact introduce necessary objectivity to media coverage of the war.

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<sup>13</sup> Wayne Youngblood and Ray Bond, ed., *Mathew B. Brady’s Civil War* (New York: Chartwell Books, Inc., 2011), 12.

<sup>14</sup> Newhall, *History of Photography*, 85

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>16</sup> “The Relation of Photography to Art,” *The Albion, A Journal of News, Politics, and Literature* 40, no. 47 (November 22, 1862): 561, American Periodicals.

After Brady published the first photographs of the Battle of Bull Run, for example, an unnamed author (who scholars now believe may have been in Brady's employ) wrote in *Humphrey's Journal*, "the first commercially produced photographic magazine," "The public are indebted to Brady, of Broadway, for numerous excellent views of 'grim-visaged war'...His are the only reliable records of the fight at Bull's Run."<sup>17</sup> No other party was protected from the writer's censure: "The correspondents of the rebels newspapers are sheer falsifiers, the correspondents of the Northern journals are not to be depended upon, and the correspondents of the English press are altogether worse than either; but Brady never misrepresents."<sup>18</sup> Moreover, the writer claimed, Brady's photographs would "immortalize those introduced in them."<sup>19</sup> The *New York Times* agreed with this assessment of the photographs' staying power, writing that they "will do more than the most elaborate descriptions to *perpetuate* the scenes of that brief campaign [emphasis mine]."<sup>20</sup> Not only were these images significant to a contemporary audience, but they would endure, more readily, even, than written accounts would because the pictures were supremely objective.

Likewise, proponents of photography contended that the medium could convey the graphic reality of war in a way that words could not. Brady's Antietam exhibit drew extensive praise for the realistic way in which it "brought bodies and laid them in our dooryards along the

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<sup>17</sup> John Hannavy, ed. *Encyclopedia of Nineteenth-Century Photography* (New York: Routledge, 2008), 366; "Photographs of War Scenes," *Humphrey's Journal* 13, no. 9 (September 1, 1861): 133, *American Periodicals*; Rosenheim, *Photography and the American Civil War*, 63

<sup>18</sup> "Photographs of War Scenes," *Humphrey's Journal* 13, no. 9 (September 1, 1861): 133, *American Periodicals*.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>20</sup> Quoted in Alan Trachtenberg, *Reading American Photographs: Images as History, Mathew Brady to Walker Evans* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1989), 72.

streets.”<sup>21</sup> It was not only the war dead that photography “brought home” to the American public. As Reverend H. J. Morton claimed in an 1864 article entitled “Photography as a Moral Agent,” photography promised to “awake[n] the sympathies of a whole people by setting before them faithful pictures of what their brave defenders have become in distant prisons, and sti[r] up millions of hearts to resolve in the glorious revenge of rendering good for evil! It brings the world face to face with its great men, its orators, its poets, its statesmen, its heroes.”<sup>22</sup> These photographs were deliberately intended for “home consumption.”<sup>23</sup> The Antietam exhibition marked “the first public presentation of photography,” and the *cartes de visite*, or individual photographic cards, that Brady produced were marketed and sold as “ready-made war relic[s].”<sup>24</sup>

Additionally, Brady and Gardner packaged their photographs in new ways aimed at conveying their historical significance. For example, “Brady’s Incidents of the War,” published continuously throughout the war, constituted “the first intentionally produced collectible series of photographs in American photography.”<sup>25</sup> Gardner, too, subsequently produced a series of photographs, also titled “Incidents of the War.”<sup>26</sup> Moreover, he published his *Photographic Sketch Book* in 1866 as a “mement[o] of the fearful struggle through which the country has just passed,” confidently asserting that the photographs included therein “will possess an enduring interest.”<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> Quoted in Drew Gilpin Faust, *This Republic of Suffering: Death and the American Civil War*, Reprint (New York: Vintage Books, 2008), xvi-xvii.

<sup>22</sup> Reverend H. J. Morton, “Photography as a Moral Agent,” *The Philadelphia Photographer* 1, no. 8 (August 1, 1864): 116, American Periodicals.

<sup>23</sup> Trachtenberg, *Reading American Photographs*, 88

<sup>24</sup> Rosenheim, *Photography and the American Civil War*, 7-8

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 69

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 82. After the war, Gardner altered the title to “Memories of the War.”

<sup>27</sup> Rosenheim, 81



Brady and Gardner's attitudes toward history seem to accord with a phenomenon described by historian Alan Trachtenberg in *Reading American Photographs: Images as History, Mathew Brady to Walker Evans*: "[t]he difference between a page of history and a page of newsprint notably diminished as mass-produced woodcuts (of sketches and photographs) conjoined happily with 'national difficulties' to produce the first mass-circulation market for history in the guise of 'news.'"<sup>28</sup> Photographers were not alone in this enterprise. Hundreds of sketch artists and illustrators also followed the Union army in the field, and their images, along with those of photographers, were regularly printed in illustrated magazines such as *Frank Leslie's*, *Harper's Weekly*, and the *New York Illustrated News*.<sup>29</sup> These efforts represented a novel approach to documenting and disseminating history: it was saturated with images, broadcast as it was happening, and deliberately directed at the American public. These images minimized the psychological distance between the battlefield and the home front, just as Union General William Tecumseh Sherman's March to the Sea, for example, minimized its physical distance.

However, Trachtenberg explains, even this "sense of 'history' happening here and now" was largely a patriotic construction actively promoted by the northern media.<sup>30</sup> Lincoln himself had articulated this idea in his very first inaugural address, when he declared, "'we cannot escape history.'"<sup>31</sup> Brady, too, propagated this idea of history as an inescapable force, recalling in 1891, "I can only describe the destiny that overruled me by saying that, like Euphorion, I felt that I

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<sup>28</sup> Trachtenberg, *Reading American Photographs*, 81

<sup>29</sup> Anthony W. Lee and Elizabeth Young, *On Alexander Gardner's Photographic Sketch Book of the Civil War* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007), 16-18.

<sup>30</sup> Trachtenberg, *Reading American Photographs*, 81

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*

had to go. A spirit in my feet said, “Go,” and I went.”<sup>32</sup> If history was unavoidable, historic Union victory seemed similarly inevitable.

Indeed, Trachtenberg explains, both history and photography are fundamentally political constructions:

The historian’s task resembles the photographer’s: to make the random, fragmentary, and accidental details of everyday existence meaningful without loss of the details themselves, without sacrifice of concrete particulars on the altar of abstraction. The historian employs words, narrative, and analysis. The photographer’s solution is in the viewfinder: where to place the edge of the picture, what to exclude, from what point of view to show the relations among the included details. Both seek a balance between “reproduction and construction,” between passive surrender to the facts and active reshaping of them into a coherent picture or story. Ordering facts into meaning, data into history, moreover is not an idle exercise but a political act, a matter of judgment and choice about the emerging shape of the present future. It may be less obvious in the making of a photograph than in the writing of a history, but it is equally true: the viewfinder is a political instrument, a tool for making a past suitable for the future.<sup>33</sup>

As photographers who deliberately aimed to document history, Brady, Gardner, and the hundreds of photographers in their employ exemplified this principle.

It is now widely believed that one of Gardner’s most celebrated images, “Home of a Rebel Sharpshooter, Gettysburg,” was staged.<sup>34</sup> Less famously, Trachtenberg writes, “Civil War photographers frequently resorted to stagecraft, arranging scenes of daily life in camp to convey a *look* of informality.”<sup>35</sup> Though contemporary viewers accepted that the images represented pure, objective truth, this was far from the case.

Brady, Gardner, and others like them were officially attached to the Union army, and had received authorization to document the war from Union military and political officials; as such, their photographs were inescapably implicated in the Union political project. This partisan bias

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<sup>32</sup> Townsend, “Still Taking Pictures”

<sup>33</sup> Trachtenberg, *Reading American Photographs*, xiv

<sup>34</sup> Rosenheim, *Photography and the American Civil War*, 97

<sup>35</sup> Trachtenberg, *Reading American Photographs*, 72

was perhaps most evident in two adjacent photographs in Gardner's *Sketch Book*. Scholars now recognize that, in the text accompanying these images, Gardner identifies the same group of fallen soldiers as southerners and, subsequently, as northerners.<sup>36</sup> His first caption condemns the Confederates: "Killed in the frantic efforts to break the steady lines of an army of patriots, whose heroism only excelled theirs in motive, they paid with life the price of their treason, and when the wicked strife was finished, found nameless graves, far from home and kindred."<sup>37</sup> His second champions the defenders of the Union cause:

Some of the dead presented an aspect which showed that they had suffered severely previous to dissolution, but these were few in number compared with those who wore a calm and resigned expression, as though they had passed away in the act of prayer. Others had a smile on their faces, and looked as if they were in the act of speaking. Some lay stretched on their backs, as if friendly hands had prepared them for burial.<sup>38</sup>

While the southerners are left to suffer because of their "treason" and their "wicked strife," the northerners are granted some semblance of the "Good Death."<sup>39</sup> Because these photographic subjects were, in fact, the same men, these dramatically different captions expose Gardner's ulterior political motives.

Likewise, the journalists who praised Brady's and Gardner's work were overtly Unionist. As early as September 1861, *Humphrey's Journal* reported, "We have been cautioned by some of our Southern subscribers that our Journal had given offence on account of its expression of

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<sup>36</sup> Rosenheim, *Photography and the American Civil War*, 94. While it is conceivable that this arose from a notational error, most scholars agree that this was probably deliberate on Gardner's part.

<sup>37</sup> Quoted in Rosenheim, *Photography and the American Civil War*, 95

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>39</sup> For an explanation of the "Good Death," see Drew Gilpin Faust, *This Republic of Suffering: Death and the American Civil War*, Reprint (New York: Vintage Books, 2008).

Union sentiments! What! did the gentlemen expect that we were for disunion?—Not until we have suffered a dozen more Bull Run defeats shall we incline to a dissolution of the Union.”<sup>40</sup>

This partisanship even found expression in the journal’s frequent assessments of photography’s “state of business,” including this article from January 1862:

The Photographic art down South has completely died out in consequence of the war. The miserable rebels are shut up like a rat in a hole. A mighty power is compressing them on all sides, and they will soon be obliged to ‘give it up.’ The Photographic art here at the North is flourishing finely, and we positively hear no complaints of hard times among operators. A few galleries have been sold out to other parties, but we have heard of none being ‘slaughtered;’ they have brought good prices. Whether business will continue to be good after the holidays is an open question.<sup>41</sup>

In this article, northern and southern photographers’ successes or failures are taken as a proxy for the nations’ respective military fortunes—and *Humphrey’s Journal* was quite forthright about which cause it supported, and which it believed would triumph (even though, in January 1862, Union victory was far from assured).

In a similar piece a year published on the following New Year’s Day, the journal excoriated the “thousands of sympathisers [sic] here at the North who chuckle over a Rebel victory, and give no sign of rejoicing at any success of what they style the Abolition Army.”<sup>42</sup> In assessing the business of photography in this year, the publication could not help but “ge[t] more into the Political than the Photographic vein.”<sup>43</sup> “[E]verything hinges on politics,” the article

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<sup>40</sup> “Photographs of War Scenes,” *Humphrey’s Journal* 13, no. 9 (September 1, 1861): 133, American Periodicals.

<sup>41</sup> “New Year’s Day, 1862,” *Humphrey’s Journal* 13, no. 18 (January 1, 1862): 271, American Periodicals.

<sup>42</sup> “The New Year,” *Humphrey’s Journal*, 14, no. 17 (January 1, 1863): 222, American Periodicals.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid.

conceded, “and Photography, like everything else, is affected by the political state of the country.”<sup>44</sup>

Northern photography remained connected to the Union cause even after the cessation of fighting. As noted above, Alexander Gardner’s enduring patriotism found expression most clearly in his *Photographic Sketch Book of the War*, published in 1866. In fact, according to art historian and curator Jeff L. Rosenheim, the work’s overt political content may have damaged its marketability. Though Brady and Gardner sold many photographs—even those of dead soldiers—during the war itself, both struggled in the war’s immediate aftermath. Rosenheim notes that the *Sketch Book*’s publication coincided with an “acrimonious political debate about the future of the former Confederate states and how they might best be admitted into the Union,” and speculates that Americans’ desire to “move on with their shattered lives and leave their memories of the war behind them” may have prompted Gardner to abandon the book’s initial title, “Memories of the Rebellion.”<sup>45</sup>

In 1875, when Brady approached the United States Congress to request that they purchase his complete collection of negatives, it was in an attempt to recover the thousands of dollars of debt he had accrued financing his war photography.<sup>46</sup> It seems likely that Congress complied with Brady’s request precisely because of the photographs’ political nature. The acquisition occurred in the midst of the government’s decades-long effort to collect and publish the Official Records of the War of the Rebellion. Just as Congress only gathered documentary evidence relevant to the Union experience of the war and consigned Confederate records to a

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<sup>44</sup> Ibid.

<sup>45</sup> Rosenheim, *Photography and the American Civil War*, 99

<sup>46</sup> The \$25,000 sum that Brady received was barely enough to cover his debts, and “[h]e died in 1896, penniless and underappreciated.” See “Matthew Brady – Biographical Note,” Library of Congress, accessed April 2, 2104, <http://www.loc.gov/pictures/collection/cwp/bradynote.html>.

separate collection, they only displayed interest in the photographic output of an official Union photographer. It was in this context that Brady's state-sponsored, self-described "'complete Pictorial History of our great National Struggle'" seemed valuable.<sup>47</sup>

Brady's claim to historical significance was complicated, however, by a variety of factors. First, northern photographers and commentators had long argued that photography was historically valuable because it was supremely objective; however, their photographs were fundamentally implicated in the Union political project. Moreover, photography's technical limitations ensured that it could not capture what nineteenth-century conceptions of history deemed most important, particularly in wartime—namely, epic scenes of battle. Instead, northern photographers portrayed "rotting corpses, shattered trees and rocks, weary soldiers in mud-covered uniforms or lying wounded in field hospitals."<sup>48</sup> This shift in emphasis fundamentally challenged prevailing notions of what and who constituted history's rightful subjects. The "soldiers" were represented "not as heroes but as soldiers."<sup>49</sup> Brady, Gardner, and their compatriots "saw the war essentially in its quotidian aspects, as a unique form of everyday life."<sup>50</sup> In fact, Trachtenberg argues, it was this novel focus that made it clear to the American public that the war was not a far-away abstraction, but "an event in real space and time."<sup>51</sup>

As historian Anthony W. Lee describes, Civil War photography depicted "only the sites and remains of events already passed; it registered, mostly by implication and imaginative reconstruction (and through the services of the letterpress), the marks of history; and it

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<sup>47</sup> Trachtenberg, *Reading American Photographs*, 85

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.* 74

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, 83

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, 74

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*

everywhere betrayed its own belatedness.”<sup>52</sup> The depicted landscapes were devastated and empty. By the time the photographers arrived on the scene, the battles had already been fought. Without explanatory text, moreover (Gardner’s *Photographic Sketch Book of the War* was a notable exception in this regard), the images could not reveal who had won or lost a given battle.<sup>53</sup> The photographs’ subjects were ordinary, often unnamed soldiers, who could have been the viewer’s own sons or husbands and whose fates remained unknown. These average soldiers, whose experiences had been minimized by other forms of artistic expression, were made newly visible. They became this visual history’s new subjects.

At the same time, though Union photographers deliberately attempted to engage history as never before, this focus on discrete, ordinary figures and moments in time made it difficult to construct a comprehensive historical narrative. This, too, became most apparent in Gardner’s *Photographic Sketch Book*. Many of the war’s most important events were not represented. For example, Gardner had not been present at the Battle of Bull Run. Furthermore, though Gardner mostly arranged his photographs chronologically and added narrative text to provide the reader with necessary context, the work had “no overarching narrative,” Lee explains.<sup>54</sup> It was “only a ‘sketchbook’ account, full of digressive and disconnected musings that spoke to the personal experience and to the view of the photographer on the ground and his very human effort to engage events, usually belatedly.”<sup>55</sup>

Without a clear, overarching historical narrative, some of the photographs’ “political meaning” was stripped away, despite their partisan nature.<sup>56</sup> In the 1880s and 1890s, the

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<sup>52</sup> Lee and Young, *On Alexander Gardner’s*, 29

<sup>53</sup> Rosenheim, *Photography and the American Civil War*, 92

<sup>54</sup> Lee and Young, *On Alexander Gardner’s*, 9, 36

<sup>55</sup> Ibid.

<sup>56</sup> Trachtenberg, *Reading American Photographs*, 75

American public displayed renewed interest in Civil War photography, including images of the Civil War dead; and these photographs, both during the war and afterward, were particularly resistant to “political meaning.” On the one hand, they presented a formidable challenge to northern morale—every mangled body raised “the unspeakable question: Was union worth the cost?”<sup>57</sup> According to art historian Beaumont Newhall, while corpses had always featured in battlefield paintings, they had been mostly “accessories” or “stage setting”; each photograph of a fallen Confederate or Union soldier, however, was a shockingly detailed and poignant “portrait.”<sup>58</sup> Thus, what Brady’s Antietam exhibition demonstrated, for example, was not the virtue or success of the Union cause, but the “Horrors of the Battle-field.”<sup>59</sup> The dead were not only patriotic soldiers, but unexceptional brothers, fathers, and husbands. The *New York Times*’ coverage of the exhibition is particularly revealing:

We recognize the battle-field as a reality, but it stands as a remote one. It is like a funeral next door. The crape on the bell-pull tells there is death in the house, and in the closed carriage that rolls away with muffled wheels you know there rides a woman to whom the world is very dark now. But you only see the mourners in that last of the long line of carriages—they ride very jollily and at their ease, smoking cigars in a furtive and discursive manner, perhaps, and, were it not for the black gloves they wear, which the deceased was wise and liberal enough to furnish, it might be a wedding for all the world would know. It attracts your attention, but does not enlist your sympathy. But it is very different when the hearse stops at your own door, and the corpse is carried out over your own threshold—you know whether it is a wedding or a funeral then, without looking at the color of gloves worn. Those who lose friends in battle know what battle-fields are, and our Marylanders, with their door-years strewn with the dead and dying, and their houses turned into hospitals for the wounded, know what battle-fields are.<sup>60</sup>

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<sup>57</sup> Trachtenberg, *Reading American Photographs*, 92

<sup>58</sup> Newhall, *History of Photography*, 94

<sup>59</sup> “Horrors of the Battle-field,” *American Phrenological Journal* 38, no. 3 (September 1863): 80, American Periodicals.

<sup>60</sup> Quoted in Rosenheim, *Photography and the American Civil War*, 8-9



Though the *Times* correspondent primarily employed this analogy to express that the photographs had brought home the reality of the battlefield, it also reminded the reader that the unfortunate subjects would be mourned by their surviving loved ones.

Moreover, the dead featured in these photographs (both at Antietam and elsewhere) were northerners and southerners alike. In fact, that Gardner was able to misidentify (whether deliberately or not) the same group of soldiers as both southerners and northerners demonstrates how difficult it was to determine from a photograph whether a given soldier fought for the Union or the Confederacy.<sup>61</sup> These graphic representations of deceased soldiers not only minimized the importance of political distinctions, but made them difficult to discern.

Thus, in the postwar decades, these photographs may have contributed to the process, described by historian Drew Gilpin Faust in *This Republic of Suffering: Death and the American Civil War*, by which the Civil War “Dead” became an apolitical class whose memorialization unified northerners and southerners:

Without agendas, without politics, the Dead became what their survivors chose to make them. For a time they served as the repository of continuing hostility between North and South, but by the end of the century the Dead had become the vehicle for a unifying national project of memorialization. Civil War death and the Civil War Dead belonged to the nation. The Dead became the focus of an imagined national community for the reunited states, a constituency all could willingly serve.<sup>62</sup>

In the 1880s and 90s, when Americans again became fascinated by Civil War photography, many written histories of the war, such as those produced by the members of southern women’s patriotic organizations, “increasingly boiled memories of the Civil War down to individual experiences of grief and loss and eschewed sweeping political questions.”<sup>63</sup> Just as these

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<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*, 95

<sup>62</sup> Faust, *This Republic of Suffering*, 269

<sup>63</sup> Francesca Morgan, *Women and Patriotism in Jim Crow America* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2005), 39.

histories helped facilitate national reconciliation (albeit, in this case, on ex-Confederate terms), it seems reasonable that Brady and Gardner's photographs—still presumed to be supremely objective—may have played a role in this process. Indeed, these images of the Civil War dead remain the war's most famous.

As Jeff Rosenheim relays in *Photography and the American Civil War*, Civil War photographs formed a “national visual library” through which generations of Americans have processed and remembered the war.<sup>64</sup> Though not nearly as objective as their practitioners claimed, these images were, and continue to be, of paramount historical significance. They have not only informed how we collectively recall and imagine the Civil War, but have profoundly influenced how we conceive of history itself.

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<sup>64</sup> Rosenheim, *Photography and the American Civil War*, 1