

# ESSENTIAL CIVIL WAR CURRICULUM

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## Photography and the Civil War

By **Bob Zeller**, Center for Civil War Photography

Photography is the medium that binds us so intimately to the Civil War. Our visual understanding of the events and the horrors of this country's greatest conflict has been immeasurably enhanced by the photographers who, like the armies, braved the heat and the cold, camped in drafty tents, drove their wagons down muddy, rutted roads and mastered the tricky techniques of wet plate collodion photography to provide, for all time, a visual record of the war.

Practical, marketable photography was 22 years old when the American Civil War started at Fort Sumter in Charleston Harbor in the spring of 1861.

Introduced in 1839, it was one of several remarkable inventions, including the telegraph, the reaper, the sewing machine and the steam locomotive, that transformed a rapidly progressing and expanding nation in the early part of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and helped spawn the sense of modernity and sophistication that also stimulated the abolition movement.

Photography rapidly matured after it was introduced to the world in France in 1839 in the form of the daguerreotype—a photograph on a highly polished silver plate. America adopted the daguerreotype (Fig. 1) as its own, and by the mid-1850s, thousands of photographers plied their trade. Nearly every village and small town had its own photographer, and larger cities supported dozens of photographic galleries.



Fig. 1 – The daguerreotype, such as this pair of circa 1855 images, was a beautiful photographic image with rich tones and stunning resolution, but its mirror finish made viewing a bit elusive.  
(Bob Zeller Collection)

As photography blossomed, advancements came swiftly, and by the Civil War, the daguerreotype was obsolete, replaced by ambrotype photographs on glass and ferrotype or tintype photos on a thin sheet of metal. (Fig. 2) In 1851, Frederick Scott Archer of England introduced the wet plate collodion process, in which a glass plate negative is exposed, developed, fixed and then used to create paper photographic prints.



Fig. 2 – Most of the common soldiers who served in the Civil War had their photographs made as an ambrotype, a photo on glass, such as the Union soldier (above), or as a tintype, a photo on metal, such as the Confederate cavalryman (below).  
(Bob Zeller Collection)



The glass collodion negative revolutionized photography on the eve of the Civil War. For the first time, a single negative could be used to produce dozens, hundreds or thousands of prints. The mass marketing of photographic prints was born, and in 1859 and 1860, two types of photos exploded in popularity—the card photograph and the stereo view.

The card photograph was primarily used for portraits, and American families by the thousand began putting the photographs of family members in elaborate photograph albums. During the war, those albums were also often filled with the images of leading generals and statesmen.

A pleasing portrait of Abraham Lincoln by Mathew Brady when the Illinois lawyer first visited New York in December 1860 was reproduced by the thousands, and gave Northerners and Southerners alike a visual understanding of the face of the man whose speech-making was electrifying the North and infuriating the South. It also helped get Lincoln elected.

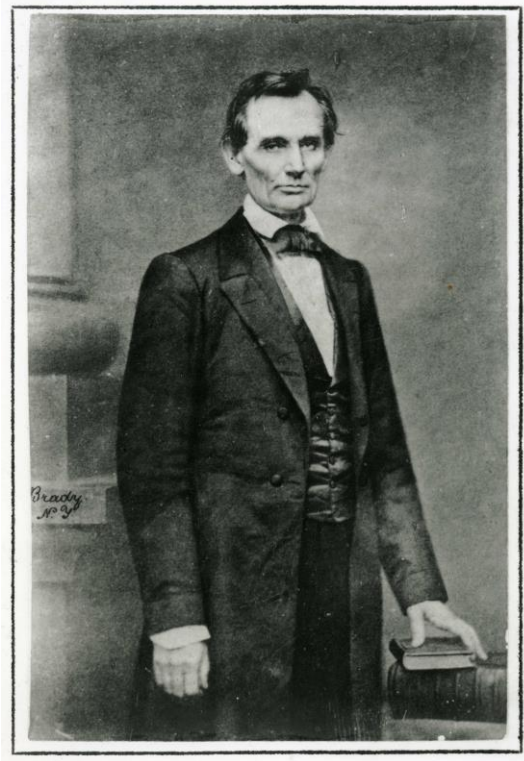


Fig. 3 – This photograph of Abraham Lincoln by Mathew Brady was reproduced by the thousands as a card photograph and helped him get elected as president in 1860. The card photograph was about the size of a typical baseball card, but not quite as wide.  
(Library of Congress)

The card photograph, or *carte de visite*, was a photographic keepsake. The stereo view, on the other hand, was a photographic viewing experience. The principal of stereoscopic, or 3-D viewing, had been introduced almost at the same time as photography, and even during the daguerreian era, photographers were producing the side-by-side daguerreotypes that worked together in 3-D.

The wet plate collodion process opened the door to a whole new photographic business—the mass marketing of scenic views, such as Niagara Falls, New York City and the Hudson River Valley. E. & H.T. Anthony & Co., the country's largest supplier of photo supplies, quickly became the nation's largest seller of stereo views. The first numbered collectible cards were sets of stereo views, which were offered for sale in some of the country's first mail order catalogs.

At least 6,000 photographers plied their trade in the United States at the beginning of the war. Most of them, however, spent their days taking portrait photographs of people and families. Only a few photographers in some of the larger cities mass produced and marketed stereo views and card photographs of famous people.

Thus, a key to understanding Civil War photography is to know that there were two basic categories of Civil War photography. The first was portraiture, which is, by far and away, was the most common form of photography during the war. The second was the photography of battlefields, camps, outdoor group scenes, forts and landscapes – the documentary photography of the Civil War —most commonly marketed at the time as stereoscopic views.

Of the millions of men who served, both in the North and South, most had their photographic portrait taken at one time or another. Most common soldiers had their photos taken as tintypes, while higher ranking officers would more likely appear on card photographs, which could be easily reproduced and distributed among the men as a keepsake.

Photography was in such demand that each division of the federal Army of the Potomac had its own approved civilian “photographer” and an assistant or two, their names recorded in pen on Army of Potomac civilian registers now kept at the National Archives.

Today, tintype and ambrotype portraits of soldiers, and card photographs of soldiers and officers are popular collectibles among Civil War collectors. An estimated eight out of every 10 of these images show unidentified soldiers, since folks back then knew who they were and more often than not saw no need to write an identification on the photograph.

The stereo photograph served a far different purpose during the war. The stereo view was the video of the Civil War era American—an image filled with depth and nuance that provided a photographic viewing experience. A majority of the documentary photographs of the war—70 percent by rough estimate—were stereo views.

Only a fraction of the country’s photographers—generally the largest and most influential photographers—devoted the time and resources to shoot documentary stereo views and photographs in the field. These included Mathew Brady, the most famous American photographer before the war, George Stacy, the Anthony Company, G.N. Houghton, Haas and Peale, and in the South, Osborn & Durbec, J.D. Edwards, George S. Cook and a few others.

The first photographs of the Civil War were taken by Southern photographers Alma Pelot and partners J.M. Osborn and F.E. Durbec. They showed damage in the aftermath of the bombardment Fort Sumter. Osborn and Durbec shot exclusively in stereo and their series of more than 40 3-D views stands as one of the most extensive photographic records of any engagement or battle, north or south. (Fig. 4)



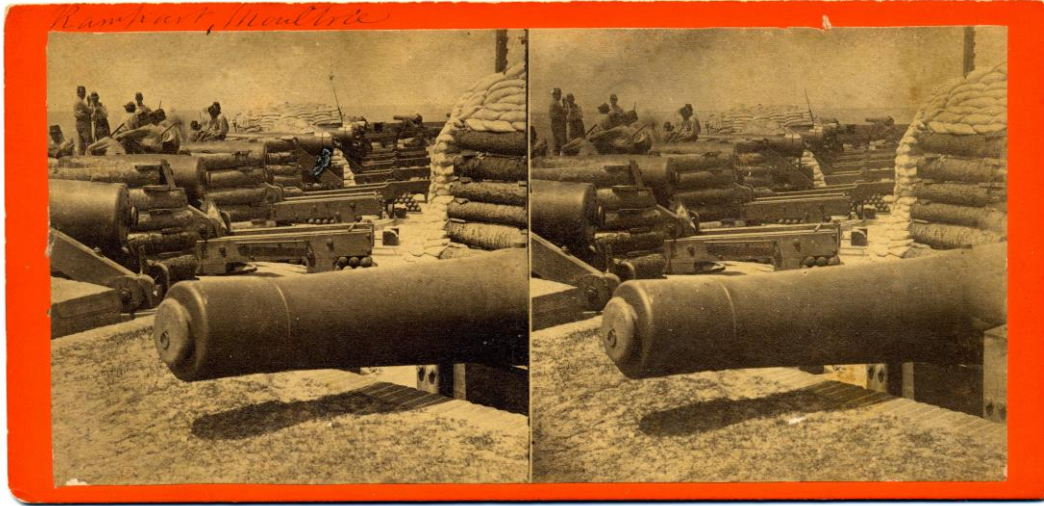


Fig. 4 – This original Osborn & Durbec stereo view card shows Fort Moultrie in Charleston Harbor a few days after the April 1861 bombardment, with Confederate veterans of that first engagement gathered on the parapet. It is one of the images that gave Confederate photographers the distinction of taking the first photographs of the war. (Bob Zeller Collection)

The first photographs of American dead on a freshly scarred battlefield were taken after the battle of Antietam by Alexander Gardner, the manager of Brady's Washington gallery who subsequently left Brady to open his own gallery.

Gardner took 20 photographs of the dead at Antietam, everyone a stereo view. They caused a sensation when they were displayed at Brady's New York gallery in mid-October 1862, about a month after the battle. Long lines formed to see them. Harper's Weekly, the North's largest and most influential weekly illustrated newspaper, reproduced eight of the Antietam photos in a two-page centerspread. The images were reproduced as woodcut engravings since the technology for newspapers to print actual photographs did not arrive until around 1880. The New York Times reported on the exhibition on Oct. 18, 1862, stating: "If Brady has not brought bodies and laid them in our dooryards and along our streets, he has done something very like it." These images did have some impact, although it was more limited than the kind of impact that images had, say, during the Vietnam War. (Fig. 5)



Fig. 5 – This Brady's Album Gallery stereo photograph by Alexander Gardner shows dead Confederate artillerymen near their limber, with the Dunker Church in the background, after the Battle of Antietam. It was one of 20 photographs at Antietam that showed, for the first time, American dead on a battlefield.  
(Bob Zeller Collection)

Gardner repeated his accomplishment at Gettysburg, shooting images of both Union and Confederate dead before they were buried. Props such as muskets, canteens, shells and other items were added to some photos. And there are a few shots of live men playing dead. But his image, taken by associate Timothy O'Sullivan, of a dead Confederate in the so-called sharpshooter's nest at Devil's Den is the only instance of photographers moving a body to get a better photograph.

Although photographers in the field during the war frequently took historic and newsworthy images, they did not consider themselves only photojournalists. Gardner, Brady and the others in this small group who mass marketed documentary images saw themselves as artists—akin to painters—as much as anything else. It was just that their art was painted by the sun. But they clearly saw themselves as providing the vision for the art—in other words, what to aim the camera at.

Civil War photographers had a lot of work to do to make a photograph in the field during the war. They had to create their "film" on the spot, and develop it on the spot. The "film" was a glass plate negative—either 7x9 inches or, for stereo, 4 by 10 inches. The glass looks like regular window glass, but the photographers had to coat it with light-sensitive emulsion right on the spot and expose the picture while it was wet and then immediately develop the negative.

As I wrote in *The Blue and Gray in Black and White*:

For the men behind the lenses, the great adventure was fraught with hardship and danger, frustration and doubt. They were bedeviled by the same flies and

gnawed by the same mosquitoes that plagued the soldiers in the trenches. They were hardened by same soaking rains and the same baking sun that tormented the long lines of men trudging beside their wagons. In Charleston in 1863 and 1864, George S. Cook not only had to wage a daily battle against Confederate inflation, he had to endure the daily bombardment of the city.<sup>1</sup>

Despite the additional hardships of being in the South, Cook achieved great distinction on Sept. 8, 1863 when he became history's first combat photographer, taking two images of Union ironclads in action while himself under fire in Fort Sumter. (Fig. 6) Cook's achievement was reported in newspapers in both the north and south.

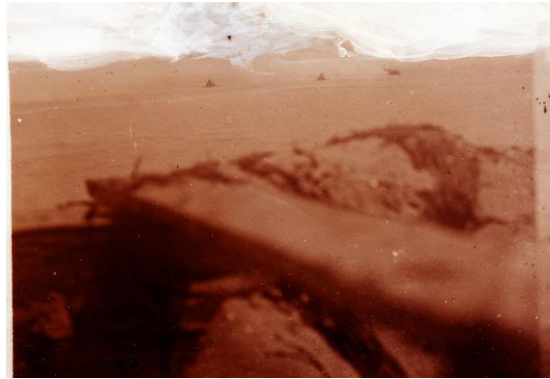


Fig. 6 – From one of two original negatives taken by George S. Cook from the battle-damaged parapet of Fort Sumter, we see enemy Union ironclads in action in Charleston Harbor, with the USS New Ironsides in the lead, firing at Fort Moultrie.  
(Cook Collection, Valentine Richmond History Center)

In addition to serving as personal keepsakes and documenting history, photographs were used in a number of other ways during the war. Many of the civilian photographers who followed the armies or were near their camps were employed by the army to make photographs of maps for easier distribution. The Union Army also hired contract photographers to document events or provide visual intelligence of places or strategic locations. Union Capt. Andrew J. Russell was the only Union Army officer who was a full-time army photographer. Russell worked for the U.S. Military Railroads, photographing bridges, engineering projects and documentary photographs, including tremendously historic post-battle photos after the Second Battle of Fredericksburg on May 3, 1863.

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<sup>1</sup> Bob Zeller, *The Blue and Gray in Black and White: A History of Civil War Photography* (Santa Barbara, CA: Praeger, 2005).





Photography was also used by doctors to document various types of wounds and the conditions of prisoners of war. It was used as propaganda, such as the series of photographs of light-skinned “slave children” of the South, and for fund-raising purposes, often by disabled soldiers who sold photographs of themselves with their missing limbs. (Fig. 8)



Fig. 8 – After losing both arms to amputation after being wounded in an attack on Petersburg, Va., in 1864, Pvt. Alfred A. Stratton of the 147<sup>th</sup> N.Y. Volunteers sold card photographs of himself as a way to help make a living.  
(Bob Zeller Collection)

By the end of the war, photographers were using stop-action cameras and were taking multiple images of historic events as they happened, such as the flag-raising at Fort Sumter on April 14, 1865 and the hanging of the Lincoln conspirators in July 1865 in Washington.

While the total number of photographs of soldiers and officers undoubtedly reached into the millions, a conservative estimate of the number of documentary photographs of war scenes and subjects taken in the field would be 10,000.

Today, the Library of Congress owns the core collections of the most active commercial documentary photographers, namely Alexander Gardner and his associates and the E & H.T. Anthony & Co., Gardner took some 2,000 photos, including about 1,100 stereos and the Anthony Company's output included the War for the Union series, a stereo card series of some 1,100 stereo views of Civil War photos at the end of the war.

Much of Mathew Brady's work is incorporated into the Gardner and Anthony negative collections, but hundreds of Brady images from the field and hundreds more portraits are part of the Brady Collection at the National Archives.

Although the Civil War's photographers were motivated primarily by making money, they were well aware that they were recording history, and proud to be part of this momentous time in history.

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