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A Living Image: Newspaper Sketches in the American Civil War

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A Living Image: Newspaper Sketches in the American Civil War

Abstract

Photography: the ability to capture a moment in time exactly as it appeared, to then preserve it for posterity, even mass produce it for a wide viewership. A relatively new concept by the beginning of the American Civil War, photography quickly came into its own in the hands of such legends as Matthew Bray and Alexander Gardner as they sought to document the furious storm which had swept over the land. Photographs of the Civil War are prolific, and for many the memory of the conflict is intertwined with black-and-white photographs of unsmiling men and corpses bloating in the sun. Yet as I sat in Gettysburg College Special Collections, reverently paging through original issues of some of the era's most famous illustrated newspapers, I could not help but notice the deficiencies inherent in Civil war photography when compared with other media, most notably the work of sketch artists. [*excerpt*]

Keywords

The Gettysburg Compiler, Civil War, 150th Anniversary, Gettysburg, Civil War Memory, Sesquicentennial, 19th century newspapers, Harper's Weekly, Frank Leslie's Illustrated, photography

Disciplines

American Art and Architecture | History | Photography | United States History

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This blog post originally appeared in [The Gettysburg Compiler](#) and was created by students at Gettysburg College.

THE GETTYSBURG COMPILER

ON THE FRONT LINES OF HISTORY

A Living Image: Newspaper Sketches in the American Civil War

February 21, 2014

By: Bryan Caswell, '15

Photography: the ability to capture a moment in time exactly as it appeared, to then preserve it for posterity, even mass produce it for a wide viewership. A relatively new concept by the beginning of the American Civil War, photography quickly came into its own in the hands of such legends as Matthew Bray and Alexander Gardner as they sought to document the furious storm which had swept over the land. Photographs of the Civil War are prolific, and for many the memory of the conflict is intertwined with black-and-white photographs of unsmiling men and corpses bloating in the sun. Yet as I sat in Gettysburg College Special Collections, reverently paging through original issues of some of the era's most famous illustrated newspapers, I could not help but notice the deficiencies inherent in Civil war photography when compared with other media, most notably the work of sketch artists.

Sketch artists, known as Special Artists or "Specials," were routinely employed by northern newspapers during the Civil War to travel with and document the actions of the army. These men traveled light and unarmed, ready to move wherever required at a moment's notice in order to capture scenes of camp life, armies on the march, and even battle as they occurred. In contrast, photography crews rarely traveled with the army as it campaigned and might take days to reach a battlefield after the action had been concluded. Here, then, lies the divide between Civil War photography and sketch art: photographers could frame the aftermath of battle in stunning, often horrifying detail and accuracy but could not capture images of combat as it progressed. Yet the men who appeared on the scene, sketchbook in hand, were able to portray scenes of human strife, men locked in bloody contest with one another, striving to their utmost for victory; in short, the face of battle itself.



Photographers of course did not confine their work to battlefields, as countless pictures of soldiers abound in the historical record. Due to the nature of nineteenth-century photography, however, in which the subject was required to keep still for over a minute, these photographs do not capture organic scenes of men's lives but are instead cold and emotionless, posed for the benefit of the photographer. The sketches of Specials, on the other hand, were restricted only by their artistic abilities. A perfect example of this lies in the drawing entitled "Through the Wilderness" which portrays the men of an artillery battery struggling to move their ordnance through the muck and mire of that region of tangled undergrowth known as the Wilderness. The mud of the narrow dirt road coats the wheels of the artillery carriage, the horses toss and strain in the traces, the men cling to their mounts and to the gun, shouting encouragement. Such a vibrant scene would not have been possible to capture using photography, where every movement would have simply become a blur, yet the sketch encapsulates the essence of the event.

Photographs thus show exact detail, the precise image of what occurred, but without the warmth of human interaction. Sketches may not be strictly historically accurate, as they did depend after all on the artist's personal recollection, but they are a much more empathic medium, conveying the emotions and feeling of events far better than a photograph ever could. While the nature of these two forms of nineteenth century media thus conflict with each other, when examined together they present a more complete understanding of this great American conflict than if each were studied alone.

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Image:

Forbes, Edwin. "Through the Wilderness." Gettysburg College Special Collections.