The Visual Documentation of Antietam: Peaceful Settings, Morbid Curiosity, and a Profitable Business

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Abstract
On September 17, 1862, Confederate General Robert E. Lee led the Army of Northern Virginia into Sharpsburg, Maryland to confront Federal General George McClellan and the Army of the Potomac. The battle that followed became the single bloodiest day in American history. There were approximately 25,000 American casualties and battlefields were left in desolation, strewn with corpses needing burial. The Battle of Antietam, or Sharpsburg, is a well-documented and important battle of the Civil War. Endless research has been done regarding its impact on the war, military strategies, and politics. However, there is a unique aspect of Antietam which merits closer attention: its visual documentation. [excerpt]

Keywords
Civil War, Antietam, visual documentation, battlefield sketches, battlefield photographs

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On September 17, 1862, Confederate General Robert E. Lee led the Army of Northern Virginia into Sharpsburg, Maryland to confront Federal General George McClellan and the Army of the Potomac. The battle that followed became the single bloodiest day in American history. There were approximately 25,000 American casualties and battlefields were left in desolation, strewn with corpses needing burial. The Battle of Antietam, or Sharpsburg, is a well-documented and important battle of the Civil War. Endless research has been done regarding its impact on the war, military strategies, and politics. However, there is a unique aspect of Antietam which merits closer attention: its visual documentation.

Artists have been creating battlefield paintings for centuries, making it an art form of its own. However, the mass production of such paintings was completely impractical and, unless displayed in public, they were rarely seen. Technological advances, like cameras and the printing press, made mass distribution of materials much more efficient. Such development came about in the mid-1800s, just before the Civil War, making it the first publicly visible war.

The Battle of Antietam, and other Civil War battles, were visually documented using two basic forms: sketches and photographs. Sketches became widely accessible, giving sketch artists the chance to editorialize whatever aspect they deemed important. Some images depicted more realism than others, but oftentimes they reflected the artist’s opinion. Political cartoons, for example, which have been utilized in the United States since before the Revolution, were wildly popular during this time. Photography was simply the next step in war documentation. It gave sketch artists a new foundation to work from, and brought the curious public a new level of objectivity. Battlefield photos were frequently reproduced using wood carvings, enabling mass publication in newspapers like Frank Leslie’s Illustrated Newspaper and Harper’s Weekly. These popular printed circulations made images of the war easily accessible.

Antietam was the first battle ever to be documented photographically. The resulting images allowed the public to see the devastation of war for the first time. Like later photographs of the period, the images captured at Antietam brought “reality” to the civilian population. Unlike a sketch, a photograph is sometimes considered a complete, accurate, and unbiased replica of the target. But is this true of Antietam photographs? Author Alison Devine Nordstrom says, “The illusion of reality and inclusiveness which
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1. I would like to thank Dr. Brooks D. Simpson, Foundation Professor in the School of Historical, Philosophical, and Religious Studies at Arizona State University, for his guidance and support.
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It has been well documented that some photographs, like “A Sharpshooter’s Last Sleep,” taken by photographer Alexander Gardner in 1863, were inaccurate, falsified images. It is believed that the body of the decedent was moved prior to the photograph being taken. Although there is no evidence to suggest Antietam photographs were similarly staged, many of them reflect levels of subjectivity. Like sketches, they reveal interesting views of their creators, the war, and society of the time.

The visual documentation of Antietam and its popularity in the North reveals three interesting points. First, a majority of the photographs reflect only a peaceful and pastoral tone because the public needed to see the war through such lenses. It is important to remember that the people of the North had fathers, brothers, husbands, sons, and all manner of loved ones fighting in these battles. Their only perception of the events came from the few letters they received and skewed newspaper articles.

Second, some people simply had a morbid curiosity. Mathew Brady’s exhibit in New York, called The Dead of Antietam, created quite a response from the public and attracted hundreds of patrons. Accounts of these exhibits and sketches depicting battlefield onlookers demonstrate their curiosity. Lastly, creating and selling battlefield photographs became a profitable business. Brady’s exhibit not only attracted viewers, but also promoted his name and made him money. Although much
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of Brady’s profit came from portraiture photography, battle images catapulted photography into popularity.

Prior to the middle of the 1800s, capturing an image required hours for a single exposure, which inevitably would disappear over time. Such circumstances made it extremely impractical, if not impossible, to photograph anything that moved even the slightest. These obstacles meant images like the ones captured during the Civil War did not previously exist. A new method called daguerreotype allowed photographers to capture images which were previously impossible. In 1839, some twenty years prior to the Civil War, a French chemist named Louis Daguerre developed a way to capture permanent images in just minutes. His process directly exposed an image onto mirror-like silver, coated with silver halide. The pictures came out on small plates as negatives, allowing for reproduction of paper prints. This made the daguerreotype wildly popular in battlefield and portraiture settings. But it was the mobility of this process that made photography a commercially viable business and incredibly popular during the war.

While photography may have gained mobility, it was still difficult and dangerous. It required large, bulky equipment, which filled an entire wagon. Civil War photographers often lived in similar circumstances to soldiers. They carried their equipment, personal supplies, and food, camping alongside armies. This meant when soldiers started firing, the photographers were at great risk. For

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example, historian Mark Katz writes that on Sunday, July 21, amongst the retreating Federal army at Bull Run, photographer Mathew Brady, accompanied by three men and two black-covered wagons, found himself, “Totally engulfed by the retreating army. Although his wagons were overturned, Brady managed to retrieve some of his wet plates before following the troops back to Washington. Later the next day, July 22, he arrived in Washington and immediately had a portrait of himself taken in his soiled linen duster.12 Because of the dangers and the still photographic process, there are few images of battles in progress. Instead, the majority of the photos were taken afterwards.

Brady’s name became synonymous with Civil War images, including multiple portraits of President Abraham Lincoln. Although Brady began the Civil War taking battlefield photographs, his failing eyesight left him at a disadvantage and he increasingly delegated assignments. Using his name, Brady financed an enterprise, employing and capitalizing on other Civil War photographers, including Alexander Gardner, George Bernard, and Timothy O’Sullivan. However, Brady’s involvement was obscured by his fame.13 Mortgaging his successful New York studio, he was able to provide the necessary equipment, but often retained the rights to the photographs taken by his employees.12 It was these men who created the images we see today. Author Donald Keyes describes Civil War photos being, “Uncompromising images by Brady and his men [in]g[ing] a startling, moving record of the Civil War.”13

The Battle of Antietam was photographed by Alexander Gardner, although Brady’s name was still attached through his exhibit, The Dead of Antietam. Gardner, a successful Scottish-born artist, journalist, and businessman, became interested in chemistry and began pursuing photography in 1855. The next year, he migrated to New York with his family. There, he initiated a meeting with Brady, who was already successful by this time, and, with Gardner’s excellent business background, they quickly became partners. Gardner photographed multiple battles during the war, but it was Antietam that jump-started his notability. It is unclear when Gardner originally arrived at Antietam, although some argue that he was already with McClellan at his headquarters in Rockville, Maryland,14 and there is some evidence suggesting he was on the battlefield as early as September 17, 1862.15 Even if this was the case, Gardner did not begin taking photos until the Union armies had control of the battlefield.

During the Civil War, burying the dead was a priority. Besides the emotional ties to deceased comrades, and sometimes enemies, decaying flesh was extremely difficult to stomach, and disease was a justified worry. Typhoid fever and cholera were highly infectious, lethal, and spread by corpses and the insects they attracted. Soldiers were often assigned to burial duty in efforts to contain an outbreak.16 Because of the magnitude of Antietam, the bodies of thousands of dead Confederate soldiers were left behind, awaiting burial. In a family letter, U.S. General Alpheus S. Williams described, “they [Confederate Army] sneaked out of ‘my Maryland’ at night leaving their dead and wounded on the field. Even dead generals were left within their lines unburied.”17 This left a daunting task for Union soldiers on burial detail. The dead who were buried first depended on who had control of the field. The losing side’s decedents were buried after fallen comrades, especially at large, high-casualty battles such as Antietam. The decedents of the opposing side were often times placed in long, mass graves in effort to save time.18 A New York Times correspondent for Frank Leslie’s Illustrated Newspaper reported that the task was so large the majority of the 130th Pennsylvania Regiment was assigned to bury the dead. He said, “Our own were taken care of first... our dead were buried in separate graves, with a headboard stating their names and regiment. The Confederates were laid in long trenches, from three to four feet deep, sometimes as many as 30 in a trench.” It is fair to say the majority of the evidence explains why Antietam photos only show dead Confederate soldiers. However, dated photos suggest that Gardner was in fact at Antietam on the day of the battle. This raises an interesting point that perhaps Gardner refrained from taking images of dead Union soldiers he possibly had access to. If so, perhaps this means that Gardner’s political ideals influenced his objectivity, or his good business sense led him to believe that the northern population may not want to see such photos.19 Without having Gardner’s feelings on the matter, it will remain a mystery.
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9. The result of the photographic collodion process, invented by Frederick S. Archer, uses a solution of pyroxylin, ether, and alcohol to make photographic plates, which allow for the printing of multiple paper copies of one exposure.
Illusions of Peace

After it was understood that the war would last longer than Lincoln’s ninety-day prediction, the rising death rate started to sink into the minds of everyone, taking a toll on both civilian and military populations. Also during this time there were multiple fractures, not only in political parties, but also within religious sects. Nature became a societal focus as Transcendentalism began to influence the population. Literature from Ralph Waldo Emerson and poet Walt Whitman grew in popularity, emphasizing the salience of nature. Gardner also had a self-conscious photographic artistry and impulse to control the graphic nature of images, transforming violence into sights of patriotism.

Antietam pictures are all pastoral by nature due to the sensitivity of the targeted image, Gardner’s artistic editing, and simply because the North was not ready to encounter the realities of war. Gardner, in his Photographic Sketchbook of the Civil War, described the “terrible affect of the canister” and spoke of chaos and death, even quoting the shouts and discharge sounds. While Dunker Church may have in fact hosted such a graphic scene, the photographs taken of it show otherwise.

Dunker Church

Located on a ridge near Sharpsburg, Dunker Church was a small white building that was often mistaken for a schoolhouse. In fact, it was a Baptist church belonging to a group of German Brethren known as Dunkers. Because of its high geographic location, control of the church was a strategic advantage. Union General Joseph Hooker knew if he could seize the plateau area surrounding the church, he could destroy a good portion of the Confederate army, which he did. While its location made it a military commodity, it was the pastoral and beautiful setting that made it a visual icon of Antietam. In Gardner’s Photographic Sketchbook of the Civil War he described the “terrible affect of the canister” and spoke of chaos and death, even quoting the shouts and discharge sounds. While Dunker Church may have in fact hosted such a graphic scene, the photographs taken of it show otherwise.

Dunker Church was picturesque. It sat on a plateau, against the clouds, surrounded by a thick green forest known as the West Woods. Besides its peaceful surroundings, it was a church, making it pastoral in nature. Figure 8 is Dunker Church photographed after the Confederate Army had withdrawn. Although there was some structural damage, it was significantly less than one may have expected. Most of the image’s frame is filled with the surrounding scenery, but is centered on the little church. Notice the partial view of the dead horse in the bottom right corner, making it appear as if the horse was simply asleep. The photos of Dunker Church became some of Gardner’s most well known. He briefly described the damage it sustained during the battle as being severe. However, when he photographed it, he showed something different. Instead of capturing severe damage, he created a pretty picture. Figure 9 is another post-battle image. This one, unlike the first, begins to show some of the reality of war. In the foreground, there are several dead Confederate soldiers waiting for burial. Notice two interesting aspects of this photograph. First, the soldiers are lined up, on their backs, and, like the horse, look as if they are sleeping. Second, even though they are the focus of the photograph, they are in the foreground of a church. The photograph portrays death pastorally.

20. Philosophical movement in the 1800s, linking the importance of nature to God.
22. Sears, Landscape Turned Red, 6-7.
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Sleeping Death

Miller Farm is located north of Dunker Church and straddles Hagerstown Pike. In the early hours of the battle, it was occupied by U.S. Generals Meade and Ricketts. From there, the Union Army moved south to battle the Confederates occupying the West Woods surrounding Dunker Church. The farmland became a burial ground for the Confederate dead and a topic of interest for Gardner. Figure 10 is a photo taken on September 19, 1862.²⁵ Like the images of Dunker Church, notice how the dead are all Confederate soldiers and are lined up on their backs as if asleep. The image includes the peaceful surrounding area, but is centered on the line of soldiers. Others, however, depict the scene much differently. Author and collector Bob Zeller described the photographs, saying the result of Antietam produced, “a number of graphic and gripping pictures of the casualties, of bloated bodies frozen stiff in death, that tore the mask of romance from the brutal face of war.”²⁶ Another description came from Lieutenant Origen G. Bingham of the 137th Pennsylvania. He said, “Tongue cannot describe the horrible sight which we have witnessed . . . I would not describe to the appearance of the dead even if I could, it is too revolting . . . I was up for permission to buy some liquor for our boys to keep them from getting sick.”²⁷ It is important to remember that Antietam photos were the first of their kind. They showed death in a way no one had ever seen before. However, comparing them to written descriptions of the carnage, the brutality is not accurately depicted. Like photographs of Dunker Church, the images collected at Miller Farm depict the battle in a peaceful and pastoral manner, instead of

Figure 10: Bodies of Confederate dead gathered for burial, photograph by Alexander Gardner, September 1862, from Selected Civil War photographs, 1861-1865, Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division.

Figure 11: Sketch of “Dead Confederates.” Harper’s Weekly, October 11, 1862.

²⁵. Ibid, 105.
²⁶. Gardner and Zeller, Incidents of the War, 7.
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showing the brutality. Even with the new aspect of realism, there are no photographs of Antietam which truly show the grotesque nature of war.

The public had access to the images through an exhibit in Brady’s studio and illustrated newspapers like Harper’s Weekly and Frank Leslie’s Illustrated Newspaper. Many times, photos were duplicated into woodcarvings, which allowed for mass reproduction. Figure 11 is a sketched replica of the Miller Farm photograph, published in the October 18, 1862 edition of Harper’s Weekly. Sketches were relatively accurate, but their lack of life-like qualities made them less accurate than photographs. Notice the third soldier from the bottom of the picture. Although his face is hidden, his right hand is visible and severely bloated. This is among the most graphic and realistic of all the Antietam photos. Note how the disfigured hand is not in the duplicated sketch. This meant, with photographs depicting the battle peacefully and sketches eliminating things like obvious signs of decomposition, the majority of people who saw such images were led to believe something unrealistic.

One photograph, while one of the lesser known, is a prime example of how peaceful the war could be represented. Figure 12 is a photograph taken by Gardner on September 20, 1862 at Miller’s Farm. The picture shows a light-colored dead horse, which may have belonged to a Confederate colonel. The body of the horse is positioned as if it was sleeping, and any injury it may have received during the battle is not noticeable. The horse is the focus of the image and, like Dunker Church, is in the foreground of large, full trees. Overall, the image portrays a sense of serenity as a beautiful white horse sleeps in a clearing, surrounded by nature. While riding over the battlefield, General Williams saw what is believed to be the same horse. He says, “One beautiful milk-white animal had died in so graceful a position that I wished for its photograph. Its legs were doubled under and its arched neck gracefully turned to one side, as if looking back to the ball-hold in its side. Until you got to it, it was hard to believe the horse was dead.”

Although his description is from September 18, two days prior to Gardner’s photograph, it is clear they both saw the same horse. This description and the fact that Gardner chose this particular horse to photograph out of the many that were killed show that this kind of sight was rare.

Bloody Lane

The last group of pastoral photos was taken “down the slope, over a sunken road strewn with dead and dying” said U.S. Lieutenant Josiah Marshall Favill as he looked over the carnage of Bloody Lane. Sunken Road, as it was once known, began as a rural shortcut that had been worn down two to three feet by wagon wheels and rainwater. It was located just south of Dunker Church, and went southeast from Hagerstown Pike, stopping halfway between Sharpsburg and where Boonsboro Pike met Antietam Creek. Following the battle, the blood-soaked lane, full of dead soldiers, was deemed Bloody Lane. Journalist David H. Strother wrote the following description:

29. Williams, From the Cannon’s Mouth, 13.
32. Frassanito, Antietam, 41.
showing the brutality. Even with the new aspect of realism, there are no photographs of Antietam which truly show the grotesque nature of war.

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Although his description is from September 18, two days prior to Gardner’s photograph, it is clear they both saw the same horse. This description and the fact that Gardner chose this particular horse to photograph out of the many that were killed show that this kind of sight was rare.

**Bloody Lane**

The last group of pastoral photos was taken “down the slope, over a sunken road strewn with dead and dying” said U.S. Lieutenant Josiah Marshal Favill as he looked over the carnage of Bloody Lane.30 Sunken Road, as it was once known, began as a rural shortcut that had been worn down two to three feet by wagon wheels and rainwater.31 It was located just south of Dunker Church, and went southeast from Hagerstown Pike, stopping halfway between Sharpsburg and where Boonsboro Pike met Antietam Creek.32 Following the battle, the blood-soaked lane, full of dead soldiers, was deemed Bloody Lane. Journalist David H. Strother wrote the following description:

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I was astonished to observe our troops [Union] moving along the front and passing over what happened to be a long, heavy column of the enemy without paying it any attention whatever. I borrowed a glass from an officer, and discovered this to be actually a column of the enemy’s dead and wounded lying along a hollow road – afterward known as Bloody Lane. Among the prostrate mass I could easily distinguish the movements of those endeavoring to crawl away from the ground; hands waving as if calling for assistance, and others struggling as if in the agonies of death.

Figures 13-14 are images of Bloody Lane. Although they show the carnage more directly than the image of a sleeping horse, notice the similarities they share with images from Dunker Church and Miller Farm. The majority of the bodies are positioned on their backs, none are disfigured or decomposing, and they look as if they are asleep. Even the name “Bloody Lane” suggests there were hundreds dead, yet Gardner chose to photograph only those in relatively good condition.

There is enough evidence from countless written descriptions to conclude there were multiple mangled limbs and bodies littering the fields of Antietam. This would have surely carried the stench of death and horror. And yet the pictures show none. In contrast, later photographs of the war do show grotesque reality. Figures 15-16 were taken by John Reekie in 1865. Notice the differences evident in those taken at Antietam. They are much more graphic, one showing human skulls and the other showing a mangled body and a rib cage. Even one picture of an injured horse or a soldier who was missing a limb would have a more realistic depiction. This does not imply that the men from both sides who died during Antietam did so in vain, or should be regarded less honorably. But by analyzing photographs taken at Dunker Church, Miller Farm, and Bloody Lane, it is clear that Gardner chose to photograph mainly that which was peaceful and pastoral in nature. The civilian population was not ready to see the brutalities of battle. Death’s significance violated previous assumptions about life’s proper end, who should die, when and where, and under what circumstances.

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The Sight of Death

The magnitude of Antietam attracted attention in two waves. The first response was directed at the battlefield from local farmers living near Sharpsburg. Why was the civilian population attracted to the sight of death? It was a simple case of morbid curiosity. While burying the dead, the soldiers “were surprised by the appearance of a number of farmers from the adjacent parts, wandering about among the dead and dying; in several cases these farmers were attended by women,” reported Francis Schell, illustrator of *Frank Leslie’s Illustrated Newspaper*. Even more interesting is his description of their reactions. He said, “While some of their faces wore the semblance of profound sorrow, as though aware of the solemn horror of the scene, many seemed utterly indifferent to the appalling spectacle.”

There is a saying “like a bad car accident” used today in U.S. culture. The premise is the same. It was as if people were simply curious to see what the war in their backyard was like. Lieutenant Favill wrote in his journal, “The country people flocked to the battlefield like vultures, their curiosity and inquisitiveness most astonishing.”

Doctor Thomas T. Ellis, a Union surgeon saw, “a number of farmers came on the field to witness the sight, of which they had so often heard but never seen.” The families living in the area could not escape the sounds of muskets and cannons, and were curious. There was another, less acceptable occurrence that took place on the battlefield. There are accounts of both civilian and Union soldiers looting dead Confederate soldiers. There is one account of a Union officer who was horrified when he found his men “stealing a dead Confederate’s wedding ring with a knife.” Both Dr. Ellis and Lieutenant Favill noted similar experiences. Ellis described, “The [farmers] collected as relics every thing portable: cartridge-boxes, bayonet scabbards, old muskets, and even cannon-balls were carried away by them.”

Lieutenant Favill noted “hundreds were scattered over the field, eagerly searching for souvenirs in the shape of cannon balls, guns, bayonets, swords, canteens, etc.” But not all onlookers were interested in looting. While it was common for the winning side to bury their comrades first, it did not always mean they mistreated the wounded opposition. U.S. General Alpheus S. Williams said, “All over the ground we had advanced on, the Rebel dead and wounded lay thick . . . those we were obliged to leave begg’d so piteously to be carried away. Hundreds appealed to me and I confess that the age of battle had not hardened my heart so that I did not feel a pity for them. Our men gave them water and as far as I saw always treated them kindly.”

There is another account of a Union soldier on burial duty who saw a dead Confederate with a piece of paper strapped to his uniform, bearing his name and where he lived. The Union soldier buried him “as tenderly as could be under the circumstances [then] cut on a board, letter for letter what was on the paper and place it at the head of the grave.” There were both enemy soldiers and curious civilians who treated the dead with respect, while seeking satisfaction for their curiosity, despite those who stole from the dead.
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41 There were both enemy soldiers and curious civilians who treated the dead with respect, while seeking satisfaction for their curiosity, despite those who stole from the dead.
The second wave of curiosity came afterwards, far from the battle. One month after Antietam, Mathew Brady opened The Dead of Antietam in his New York studio. The exhibit’s popularity led a stream of visitors to his door. The photographs were housed on the second floor of the studio, and captured the attention of morbidly curious spectators. Author Jennifer Armstrong describes how some patrons lingered by one or two photos, while others “averted their eyes in haste, only to return and then study the next.” Three-dimensional images were created and viewed using special glasses, similar to those used today. This made the images even more real to the visitors. Among the many viewers was a reporter from The New York Times. His article was printed on October 20, 1862 and described the morbid curiosity which led people to the exhibit. Fascinated by this, the reporter says:

Crowds of people are constantly going up the stairs; follow them, and you find them bending over photographic views of that fearful battle-filed . . . . It should bear away the palm of repulsiveness. But on the contrary, there is a terrible fascination about it that draws one near these pictures, and makes him [want] to leave them . . . chained by the strange spell that dwells in the dead men’s eyes.43

Other newspapers reported that dead soldiers in the photos could be identified, but there is no evidence to prove this was true. On the contrary, the soldiers were nameless, and oftentimes faceless, making them even more intriguing to viewers. With nameless soldiers, the viewer could replace the unknown with his or her family who was serving in the war.44 This made the exhibit both appealing and appalling.

Prior to photographic documentation, people only heard about the war in the newspapers. The accuracy, however, often depended on the political ideals of the newspaper. Northern reports claimed that General Lee retreated and Antietam was a northern victory.45 Southern newspapers expressed a different view. They reported that “the battle at Sharpsburg had ’resulted in one of the most complete victories that has yet immortalized the Confederate arms.”46 Both sides regarded Antietam as a dark day in American history.47 In a letter to his daughter, General Williams wrote, “The newspapers will give you further particulars, but as far as I have seen them, nothing reliable . . . other statements picked up by reporters from the principal headquarters are equally false and absurd. They are laughably canard.”48 Again, the truth lay with the dead on the battlefield, and people were curious.

One interesting problem war photographers faced was the challenge of satisfying civilian curiosity by making the horrors of war visible without undermining faith in the cause. One solution was to present the pictures in bound form, like a stereograph series. This gave the photographer an opportunity to narrate his thoughts and feelings for each image.49 Multiple series were produced, but one of them became a prominent collector’s item of the war. In Gardner’s Photographic Sketch Book of the War, published in 1866, he was able to give detailed description of Antietam’s battle scenes and locations. His collection was widely accepted throughout the North and the included descriptions aided the population in understanding the story surrounding each picture. It also allowed Gardner to make his political views known.

The illustrated newspapers became wildly popular during this time. Sketch artists like V. H. Schell and Edwin Forbes duplicated photographs in sketch form, using woodcuts to reproduce the images for mass publication. Newspapers were numerous and written based on political affiliation. Illustrated newspapers allowed the population of the North and South to have an image to accompany written description. Although neither photographer nor sketch artist were ever completely objective, despite their efforts, visual representation gave the population its own ability to politicize how they wished. The papers also aided in the fulfillment of their curiosities. Morbid curiosity attracted local men and women of Sharpsburg and surrounding areas to the battlefields of Antietam. It also led people to Brady’s New York studio, where they could not help but look at countless unknown soldiers. Illustrated newspapers fulfilled the same curiosity along with Gardner’s Photographic Sketchbook of the War.

Money Makers

The development of the daguerreotype not only created art, it created artists.

The desire to visually capture history was a sincere motivation of many Civil War photographers, including Gardner.50 But to put food on their tables, they exploited their vocation to make money. As technology advanced, commercial photography grew by leaps, although was not an immediately lucrative field. Like many new artists, early photographers struggled financially to make ends meet. Portraiture photography began making money during the middle of the 1850s, but it was not until the photos of the Civil War that it became a credible business. Brady in particular, with help from Gardner’s business skills, capitalized on war images. He created an empire where he “produced lavish galleries, produced imperial-sized portraits, and made beautiful the ugly.”51 But Brady differed from other photographers. He surely had his political ideals, although trying to understand his thoughts by simply looking at his images leads only to confusion. He had a wide variety of images, spanning from portraits of Lincoln, to Civil War battlefields, to a full-length portrait of Mrs. Davis, wife of Confederate President Jefferson Davis. Although Brady did not produce images for the South during the Civil War, he did before and after it. This suggests Brady was more dedicated to monetary gain, and to the art itself, not the politics of the war.

42. Armstrong and Brady, Photo by Brady, 63.
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War photography, beginning with Antietam, took on a more mercenary complexion. It was common for both northerners and southerners alike to collect images of their favorite generals, much like modern baseball cards. Similarly, the popularity of carte-de-visite exploded. Soldiers wanting to be photographed in their new uniforms, collected and sent them home to their families. They were easily and cheaply reproduced, making them both practical and affordable souvenirs for anyone. Second, it completely modernized photojournalism, and created a demand for real-time photos. After Antietam, the public expected war images, which created a demand for additional photographers. Photos taken in field hospitals were also in demand, and were sold to doctors and surgeons, who used them as medical research.

Private collectors and the average public also created revenue. Exhibits like The Dead of Antietam helped to promote sales. The images for sale were available in many formats; however, they were all relatively expensive. Stereographs cost fifty cents, while larger folio-sized prints were $1.50, the equivalent of a day’s wage for the common laborer. This meant that most images were sold to middle to upper class collectors like author and physician Dr. Oliver Wendell Holmes, who was very outspoken about the dark magnetism such photographs carried. After seeing the carnage at Antietam, he wrote essays promoting the usage of cameras on the field. Interestingly, Dr. Holmes amassed a large private collection, but could not bring himself to view them. Other collectors had large portraits of Lincoln or Grant hanging in their parlors. They were also very expensive. Working class citizens had access to these images, even if they were unaffordable. Reproducing the pictures in illustrated magazines allowed the layman to view images and boosted circulation sales. This indirectly helped the value of sketches rise, which brought revenue to sketch artists in demand. Another avenue for capital came with the selling of bound sketchbooks. They too were expensive, however, selling for more than $100 each. Artists justified the large expense by arguing the value of fine art and targeting a particular audience.

Other photographers began to find that “images of the dead could serve a significant ideological function.” Interestingly, those who could afford high-priced Civil War art were usually of Republican persuasion. This alludes to the political philosophies of the photographer, especially Gardner, who was an avid supporter of the North and had even worked for General McClellan. Gardner, among others, imposed world views onto film (or plates), even if it not consciously choosing to do so. Unlike Brady, Gardner seemed to have a broader social concern, as well as an artistic focus. But even Gardner understood capital possibilities. He began to copyright his images and in time, broke away from Brady, whose popularity slowly diminished.

Antietam is not only remembered for being the bloodiest day in U.S. history, but also as the first battlefield visible to the world. The images collected at Antietam reveal that the public was not ready so see the bleakness of war. Gardner seemed to balance his political ideals, creativity, and business sense by editing the content of his Antietam photographs to make them peaceful. Despite his efforts, the images were still shocking to civilians who had never experienced war. And yet they could not seem to look away simply because of their morbid curiosity. This turned the field of photography into a profitable business. These photographs are a window into the Civil War and reveal more than who, what, when, and where.

52. Gardner, and Zeller, Incidents of the War, 8.
53. Small, cheap, images printed on cardboard and mass produced in the nineteenth century.
54. Sweet, Traces of War, 78-106.
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