

Depictions of War: a glimpse into the American Civil War as told by the *Harper's Weekly*

The American Civil War is important for many reasons: the most well-known is the preservation of the Union. However, it produced the first wartime photojournalists. Men, like Mathew Brady, Alexander Gardner, George Barnard, and several more, accompanied the armies into battle, lugging their photography equipment with them. Daguerreotype photography was the most advanced technology of the time. It was invented by a Frenchman named L. J. M. Daguerre. By 1860, there were several additional types of photography: primarily ambrotypes, tintypes, and the collodion process, which was the most popular. The collodion process used glass plates coated with collodion instead of metal plates. The process created a negative on glass, which could be kept and recreated numerous times. George S. Cook made an important advancement in combat photography: he was the first photographer to capture a photo of a battle while under fire. He did this at Fort Sumter on 8 September 1863.

Americans came to view photography as a kind of window to within. A photograph was believed to show a person's true character. Many people viewed photography as a way to understand themselves and others. Mathew Brady played on the American fascination with photography and became the most prominent photographer of the time and has remained to be an influence on current photojournalists. In 1849, Brady traveled to Washington D.C. to take the first ever photograph of a sitting United States president. By 1860 he supplied both major illustrated newspapers, *Harper's Weekly* and *Frank Leslie's Illustrated Newspaper*, with most of their photographs.

There were two types of cameras: the stereoview and the large-front camera. The stereoview was easier to transport, had shorter exposure times, and had the potential to make a double negative on one plate. The large-front camera had bigger negatives. Taking a photograph

took around ten minutes and had multiple steps: from coating the glass with collodion and placing it in the holder to developing the negative with a chemical bath in complete darkness. The process of taking a photograph during the Civil War was difficult and time-consuming. The necessary equipment could be easily ruined: the solution was highly susceptible to temperatures, debris could cling to the glass plates, and stray light had the potential to ruin a negative. Even after the photos were developed, they could still be destroyed; they were developed on heavy glass plates that could be shattered in combat.

If a photographer was taking a photo during a battle, it would be terribly blurred from the movement. Because of this, the photographers were forced to wait until after movement ceased to take their photographs. In addition to this, soldiers knew to be still while their photo was being taken. If a photographer wanted to take a photo from life, they would stop what they were doing and look at the camera or they would stand however the photographer instructed them. This is why many photos are not blurred. Photographic technology did not allow for a photograph to be taken quickly, so posing of the subject(s) was a necessary practice. Illustrations and photographs were used by the illustrated newspapers to increase volunteers. Thomas Nast, a notable illustrator and cartoonist during the war, contributed many of his illustrations to the *Harper's Weekly*. His work was good for recruitment because the illustrations depicted the army as appealing.

Throughout my research process, I have found that there are few academic sources that talk about or argue a skewed public view of the Civil War. However, there are few sources about altered photographs. Although Mathew Brady was arguably the biggest name in photography during the war, many photos were wrongfully attributed to him. By 1851, a decade before the breakout of the war in 1861, Brady was no longer photographing the field. Rather, he sent his assistants to do the photography for him and received credit nonetheless. When the war broke

out, he continued to do this, which means he did not take many of the Civil War photos for which he is famous. Brady's name was attached to photographs without giving credit to the actual photographer. They used his equipment, which led Brady to assume that their photographs belonged to him. Alexander Gardner eventually left Brady's studio and created his own. Unlike Brady, Gardner attributed the photographs to the rightful photographer, which is why we know many of the photos attributed to Brady were not photographed by him.

Even though Gardner allowed photographs to be attributed to their true photographers, he contributed to the skewed perspective of the war in other ways: throughout his photographic journey of the war, he falsified photographs. He used props, such as dead bodies, forgotten knapsacks, and abandoned rifles to satisfy his artistic vision. The two photographs in question are titled "A Sharpshooter's Last Sleep, Gettysburg, July, 1863" and "Home of a Rebel Sharpshooter, Gettysburg, July, 1863", which have endured scrutiny from several historians. Gardner staged these photographs with the same body and rifle. He set the scene the way he imagined it would have looked.

In this presentation, I will highlight several illustrations and photographs from the *Harper's Weekly*. They include illustrations by "an officer of Major Anderson's command", "our special artist", A. R. Waud, Theodore R. Davis, and Alexander Simplot, as well as photographs by Mathew Brady and Alexander Gardner.

First, illustrations by "an officer of Major Anderson's Command" appeared throughout the 1861 edition. On December 14, 1861, a two-page spread depicting "scenes at and around Fort Pickens" and showing soldiers in their daily life was published. The main sketch, **which I will pass around now**, had a subtitle of "Interior of Fort Pickens" and showed soldiers interacting with each other as they would any day. However, this spread was accompanied by a small blurb

several pages prior. According to this article, the illustrations showed “the recent conflict at and around Fort Pickens”. Despite the article’s claim that the illustrations depicted the 19 November 1861 conflict at Fort Pickens, there was no sign of violence in the illustration.

“Our Special Artist” was attributed a one-page spread in the *Harper’s Weekly- 1862 Edition*. In this series of illustrations, two different battles were illustrated: the November 1861 and January 1862 assaults at Fort Pickens. In these illustrations, canons and gunfire appeared, along with soldiers running for their lives along the walls of the fort. The artist showed men being blown apart from “shells” plummeting through the air. These illustrations gave a glimpse of the horrors of war, unlike the previous illustration by “an Officer of Major Anderson’s Command” that claimed to have depicted the same event in November 1861. The accompanying article to these illustrations was a recap of the assaults. It stated the casualties and how much damage there was, which, according to the article, was “little...only one man in the fort being killed”. Illustrations attributed to “our special artist” and “an officer of Major Anderson’s Command” are not credible; anyone could have produced the illustrations. Therefore, they could be fabrications of the battle. Without an artist, the illustrations become less credible and, transitively, less believable.

Mr. A. R. Waud provided many illustrations to *Harper’s Weekly* during the war. The first of which I discuss appeared on 15 February 1862. This illustration showed a firefight in Occoquan, Virginia. One man fired a rifle from the window of a house, presumably his own. He opened fire on eleven men, according to the illustration that portrayed a view from the outside. One man was dead, and another was injured. No one else had yet suffered injuries. They were firing upon each other at close range, extremely close to be using the rifles with which they were armed. Unlike the previous article/illustration combination, this article did not describe the

illustration accurately at all. According to the article, which was a firsthand account of the events, the house was surrounded by a “detail of fifty men...and the firing commenced, and was continued until every rebel except two was killed”.

On 9 January 1864, *Harper's Weekly* published two illustrations by T. R. Davis depicting the assault at Fort Saunders. In the first illustration, Davis depicted the battle as somewhat non-chaotic. Ground explosions and shells were not used. Although smoke billowed from the Fort in the background, which suggested a fire inside the structure. The American flag continued to fly from the burning building. Soldiers were not organized in their assault and moved about the battlefield with no particular plan. Groups of men were scattered, and some fought amongst themselves while others ran to help their brothers in arms. The other illustration appeared as a two-page spread depicting a fatal confrontation. An explosion blew a man into the sky. Others resorted to using their rifles as blunt objects, and one man used an axe to oppose a man with a bayonet. Several other soldiers were dead and strewn across the ground. One illustration was much more chaotic than the other. Fortunately, an article was written to accompany both illustrations. According to the article the illustrations depict two different positions the rebels took outside the fort. One illustration took place “over the slope in front of the fort”, and the other took place in “a deep ditch, twelve feet wide”, which is why the two illustrations appeared differently.

Mathew Brady, a famous Civil War photographer, was credited with a photo showing President Abraham Lincoln's funeral procession that appeared on May 13 1865. An article was not written to go with the photo. Soldiers marched at attention with their rifles held behind their backs. Horses pulled a grand looking casket along the street. Crowds filled the streets to watch the procession of President Lincoln. Hundreds of people attended the ceremony to pay respects.

Because this illustration originated from a photograph from life, the inaccuracies were a result of the reproduction process. The largest inaccuracy of the photo was the photographer. Because Brady preferred to send his assistants to photograph, he most likely did not take this photo.

A photo of the aftermath of Gettysburg appeared on 22 July 1865 and was taken by Alexander Gardner. The photo showed soldiers scattered around the battlefield waiting to be retrieved for burial. A wagon fell during the battle and remained where it fell, still attached to the dead horse that was arguably the cause of the wagon's demise. In the background, a few men were scouring the battlefield looking for the living, but as far as the photo shows, dead bodies were all that was present. Alexander Gardner's reputation for staging photos makes me question that accuracy of this particular photograph. It was at Gettysburg that he staged the photos of the sniper and the sniper's victim using the same bodies, which means this photo could have been staged as well.

Many Americans during the Civil War could not read, which meant they would not be reading the articles that accompanied the illustrations. Most Americans obtained their news through the illustrations printed in newspapers like *Frank Leslie's Illustrated Newspaper* and the *Harper's Weekly*. Many of the articles and illustrations did not reinforce each other, so it was difficult to decide which source to believe. However, at the time, many did not have a choice, and many did not know they were differing because they could not read the articles, which meant they were receiving incorrect news and information about the war. Even now, many Americans only looked at photos without reading the article, and they, too, were not receiving the whole of the information being presented by the journalist or writer.

A photograph can only contain what the lens of the camera can reach. Because of this, we do not see what is happening behind or on either side of the camera. Photography has become a

huge part in the way we view news and the world. The fact that we might not see everything that is going on is incredible. My research analyzes how the Civil War was reported to the public, who I argue did not have a good sense of how the battlefield actually looked because the artist may have been focused on one part of the battle more than another, much like a modern photographer can be distracted. It shows that people did not always know the whole truth of what was going on, much like we do not know much about ongoing military involvements. We have access to aerial photography now, but the photographer still has the ability to focus on specific aspects of an event. The public is always an important part of war, even if they are not directly involved. Public support can make or break the war effort, so understanding how and why the Civil War was reported the way it was is important to study the public perceptions and support of the war.