



## A House Divided: Photography in the Civil War

**Essential Question(s):** How does photography of the Civil War illuminate our understanding of the period?

**Brief Introduction:** This activity provides an interactive look at photography from the Civil War. Participants examine a set of photographs and later place those shots into the historical context of the Civil War.

**Primary Subject and Grade Level:** Social Studies (5–12)

**Secondary Subject and Grade Level:** Visual Arts (5–12)

**National Standards:**

National History Standard Era 5: Civil War and Reconstruction (1850–1877)  
5.2 The course and character of the Civil War and its effects on the American people

**Components:** Historical Background, Lesson Plan, Classroom Activity, Classroom Assessment

**Additional Resources:** <http://rmc.library.cornell.edu/7milvol/>

**Materials:** Multiple sets of Civil War photographs and their accompanying text

**Keywords:** Civil War, Mathew Brady, Matthew Brady, Alexander Gardner, Vicksburg, Antietam, Photograph, Photography, North, South, Union, Confederate, Reconstruction, Medical, Medicine, Timothy O'Sullivan, History, American History, United States, United States History, Social Studies, Photograph, Photography, Daguerrotype, Camera

**Historical Background:**

The Civil War, the so-called first modern war, was also the first to be thoroughly photographed. Some 1500 photographers produced thousands of images in urban studios as well as in temporary locations in the field. Aside from the photographic portraits affordable to even the poorest soldier, the public could purchase group portraits of important officers, scenes of camp life, and pictures showing the marvels of military engineering such as bridges and fortifications. Battlefield photographs taken shortly after military action form a much smaller category. Photographers carrying cumbersome equipment kept their distance from the fighting, so almost no images exist that depict the action of battle. Though ironically the most often published, photographs of bodies rarely

were taken. The ravage of war is more often seen in photographs of a natural landscape decimated by the firestorm of battle. (from Merry A. Foresta. *American Photographs: The First Century*. Washington, D.C.: National Museum of American Art & Smithsonian Institution Press, 1996.)

**Overview:**

In examining seven Civil War era photographs and the accompanying text, participants should be able to link the photograph to its historical context. Teaching the Civil War through images is a powerful way to provoke discussion and provide a richer understanding of the landscape and the period.

**Procedure:**

Visual Analysis Exercise:

- Each group of students will be given seven images.
- They are to look carefully at the image and write a caption for it.
- The facilitator should model what a caption might look like, including using descriptive words and noting important details.
- These captions should be one to two sentences long and should describe the subject(s) of the photograph.

Hands-on Activity:

- After students have written their captions, the facilitator should circulate the labels (attached) describing the images.
- In groups, students should then try to match the label with the correct photograph, in each case highlighting words in the document and circling parts of the image that tipped them off to the possible match.
- After each group has matched the labels to the photographs, the facilitator will go image by image and make the correct matches with the help of the class.
- During the class matching portion, the facilitator should make sure to ask for those telling clues in the text and the photograph that allowed students to pair them correctly.
- After the correct pairs have been found, the facilitator should lead a discussion about the process, highlighting the difference between students' original captions of the photographs and their perceptions of the images after the background information was introduced.
- Conclusions should touch on the importance of considering contextual information when viewing period imagery and on the ways that photographs can enhance our understanding of historical events and concepts.

*New York 7th Regiment Officers*

[Egbert Guy Fowx](#)

about 1863

salted paper print mounted on paperboard

5 5/8 x 7 1/2 in.

Smithsonian American Art Museum, Museum purchase from the Charles Isaacs Collection made possible in part by the Luisita L. and Franz H. Denghausen Endowment

THE SEVENTH REGIMENT STEUBEN VOLUNTEERS.

This regiment, which is composed altogether of Germans, was first organized on the 8th of last January by experienced officers who saw some hard service in Poland, Hungary, Schleswig-Holstein and Greece. The regiment is now full, and mustered in the United States service. From the organization of the regiment up to the time it was admitted into the United States service, the men have been liberally supported by their officers. The uniforms of the men will be after the model of the United States Rifles, and they will be armed with Enfield's Minie muskets. All of them are young able bodied fellows, and they drill admirably according to Hardee's tactics. Both officers and men are extremely anxious to get en route, and are now only detained in consequence of having to wait for their equipments from the State. Several of the privates have left their families in very indigent circumstances, and the officers are doing their best to try and alleviate their distress.

*7<sup>th</sup> Regiment New York Civil War Newspaper Clippings.* Retrieved May 25, 2006, from New York State Division of Military and Naval Affairs: Military History Web Site:  
<http://www.dmna.state.ny.us/historic/reghist/civil/infantry/7thInf/7thInfCWN.htm>

*Major H. A. Barnum, Recovery after a Penetrating Gunshot Wound of the Abdomen with Perforation of the Left Ilium, from the Photographic Catalogue of the Surgical Section*

[William Bell](#)

1865

albumen print on paper mounted on paperboard

8 1/2 x 6 5/8 in.

Smithsonian American Art Museum, Museum purchase from the Charles Isaacs Collection made possible in part by the Luisita L. and Franz H. Denghausen Endowment

As head of the photographic department of the Army Medical Museum established in Washington, D.C., after the Civil War, William Bell took pictures of veterans who had been severely wounded in battle. His work provides a visual archive of destruction quite different from the better-known albums of Alexander Gardner and George Bernard. Linking medical science with artistic formality, Bell's stark portraits of the wounded were compiled in a seven-volume publication entitled *Photographic Catalogue of the Surgical Section of the Army Medical Museum*. Accompanying each photograph was a detailed description of the injury to the body and the appropriate medical procedure.

Foresta, Merry A. *American Photographs: The First Century*. Smithsonian American Art Museum (online exhibition). Retrieved on December 12, 2006 from <http://americanart.si.edu/collections/exhibits/helios/amerphotos.html>

*Bivouac of the 45th Illinois near the Shirley House, Vicksburg, Mississippi*

[O. D. Finch](#)

1863

salted paper print mounted on paperboard

6 1/2 x 8 1/2 in.

Smithsonian American Art Museum, Museum purchase from the Charles Isaacs Collection made possible in part by the Luisita L. and Franz H. Denghausen Endowment

During the siege of Vicksburg, Mississippi, the Shirley House, residence of Unionist “Judge” James Shirley and his family, was caught in the crossfire of Union troops led by Ulysses S. Grant and Confederate troops under John C. Pemberton. Surrendering to Union forces, the family was removed from their home to protect them from cannon fire and housed in a manmade cave, like the ones (called sheebangs) in this photograph. The siege ended after six weeks when Pemberton, who was responsible for the city’s residents and more than 200,000 Confederate soldiers (many ill with disease and starvation), surrendered Vicksburg to the Union Army. The Union thereby gained complete control of the Mississippi River. The Shirleys retained their estate until 1902, when it was given to the National Park Service and became the Vicksburg National Military Park.

Foresta, Merry A. *American Photographs: The First Century*. Washington, D.C.: National Museum of American Art with the Smithsonian Institution Press, 1996.

*The Sick Soldier*

[studio of Mathew B. Brady](#)

about 1863

albumen print on paper mounted on paperboard

5 5/8 x 7 7/8 in.

Smithsonian American Art Museum, Museum purchase from the Charles Isaacs Collection made possible in part by the Luisita L. and Franz H. Denghausen Endowment

When the Civil War began, photographer Mathew Brady obtained permission for himself and his staff to travel with the troops. All photographs taken by Brady or any of his staff were published under the name Brady and Co. Like most photographers during the war, Brady and his staff rarely photographed actual battles. Cumbersome camera equipment and slow exposure times made it difficult to capture action. Instead, they focused on the aftermath of battle, military portraits, and scenes of camp life. Brady's expertise as a studio photographer may have suggested the posed drama of *The Sick Soldier*. His picture of a Northern soldier being aided by another played to the collective trauma of mid-nineteenth-century households, most of whom had suffered the loss of a relative or friend.

Foresta, Merry A. *American Photographs: The First Century*. Washington, D.C.: National Museum of American Art with the Smithsonian Institution Press, 1996.

*Ruins of Gaines' Mill, Virginia, from Gardner's Sketchbook of the Civil War*

[John Reekie](#)

1865/published 1865

[Printer: Alexander Gardner](#)

albumen print on paper mounted on paperboard

7 x 9 in.

Smithsonian American Art Museum, Museum purchase from the Charles Isaacs

Collection made possible in part by the Luisita L. and Franz H. Denghausen Endowment

“Gaines’ Mill” is the place from which the battle of June 27<sup>th</sup> 1862, takes its name. Situated near the center of our line, it was the scene of severe fighting, and at the close of that bloody day, the building was used as a hospital. All of the structure that would burn, was destroyed in one of the raids around Richmond, leaving only the brick superstructure, above which, scorched by the fire, the dead trees spread their blackened branches. In front, the partially exposed skeleton illustrates the hasty manner of the soldier’s burial, it being by no means uncommon for the rains to wash away the shallow covering, and bring to view the remains of the dead. The owner of the mill did not have a creditable reputation in the army.... If this is true, he suffered no more than his deserts, in the destruction of his property.

Gardner, Alexander. *Gardner's Photographic Sketchbook of the Civil War*. New York: Dover Publications, 1959.

*Quarters of Men in Fort Sedgwick, Known as Fort Hell*

[Timothy H. O'Sullivan](#)

1865

albumen print on paper

7 5/8 x 10 in.

Smithsonian American Art Museum, Museum purchase from the Charles Isaacs Collection made possible in part by the Luisita L. and Franz H. Denghausen Endowment

This view exhibits the bomb-proof quarters occupied by both officers and men in Fort Sedgwick. Excavations were made in the ground and covered first with heavy pieces of timber, over which a layer of earth, of several feet in thickness, is thrown, sufficient to resist the penetration and explosion of any shell that might fall upon them. . . . Fort Sedgwick is one of the most advanced points of the United States lines, standing boldly forward, and constantly inviting attack. The work is a very irregular one and is thrown across the Jerusalem Plank Road, one of the most important thoroughfares leading out of Petersburg [Virginia]. . . . Scarcely a day passed without witnessing a heavy artillery duel, and each hour of those many long and weary months, as two brave armies lay opposite to each other, could be heard the shrill, sharp report of some leaded messenger of death. It was here, as elsewhere, that only the reckless would dare expose the slightest part of the person even for a second, and well does this noted spot deserve the not very euphonious name to ears polite, as given by the soldiers, of "Fort Hell."

Gardner, Alexander. *Gardner's Photographic Sketchbook of the Civil War*. New York: Dover Publications, 1959.

*Burnside Bridge, Across Antietam Creek, Maryland, from Gardner's Sketchbook of the Civil War*

[Alexander Gardner](#)

1862/published 1865

albumen print on paper mounted on paperboard

7 x 9 in.

Smithsonian American Art Museum, Museum purchase from the Charles Isaacs

Collection made possible in part by the Luisita L. and Franz H. Denghausen Endowment

One mile below Sharpsburg [Maryland] on Antietam Creek, a stone structure, known as the "Burnside Bridge," crosses the stream. ....

It was at this point that some of the most desperate fighting of the battle of Antietam occurred. The right of the Federal line was several miles above, and with the center hotly engaged, the Confederates slowly forcing them back, while General Burnside, commanding the Ninth Corps, was ordered to carry this point and turn the enemy's right. As is partially shown by the photograph, the banks of the stream were very steep, and well defended by rifle pits which were covered by the guns of the Confederates on the ridge in the background. The assaulting column suffered heavily as it approached the bridge, and, in crossing, was exposed to a murderous fire, through which it rapidly pressed, breaking over the lines of the enemy like a resistless wave, and sweeping him from the hillside. Here our troops again formed under a heavy artillery fire, and pushed forward into the standing corn, out of which a second line of Confederates suddenly arose and renewed the contest, which lasted for many hours, finally resulting in our victory. At the close of the fight the dead and wounded on the field here presented seemed countless. The Confederates were buried where they fell, and our own dead carefully interred in groups, which were enclosed with the material of fences overthrown in the struggle. The stone wall extending from the bridge still bears evidence of the battle, and is the only monument of many gallant men who sleep in the meadow at its side.

Gardner, Alexander. *Gardner's Photographic Sketchbook of the Civil War*. New York: Dover Publications, 1959.



*New York 7th Regiment Officers*  
ca. 1863  
Egbert Guy Fowx

salted paper print mounted on paperboard  
sheet and image: 5 5/8 x 7 1/2 in. (14.3 x 19.1 cm.)

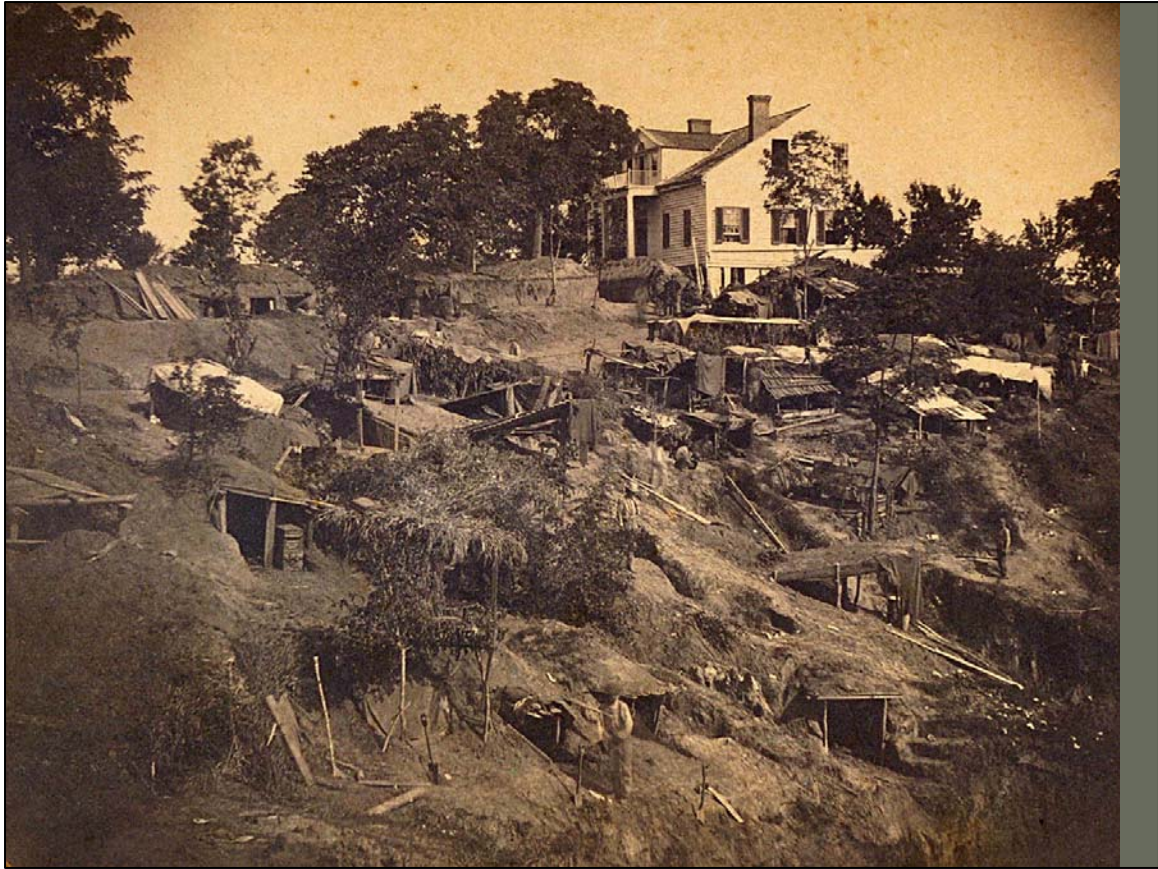


*Major H. A. Barnum, Recovery after a Penetrating Gunshot Wound of the Abdomen with Perforation of the Left Ilium, from the Photographic Catalogue of the Surgical Section*

1865

William Bell

albumen print on paper mounted on paperboard  
sheet and image: 8 1/2 x 6 5/8 in. (21.6 x 16.8 cm.)



*Bivouac of the 45th Illinois near the Shirley House, Vicksburg,  
Mississippi*  
1863  
O. D. Finch

salted paper print mounted on paperboard  
sheet and image: 6 1/2 x 8 1/2 in. (16.5 x 21.6 cm.)



*The Sick Soldier*

ca. 1863

Studio of Mathew B. Brady

albumen print on paper mounted on paperboard  
sheet and image: 5 5/8 x 7 7/8 in. (14.3 x 20.0 cm.)



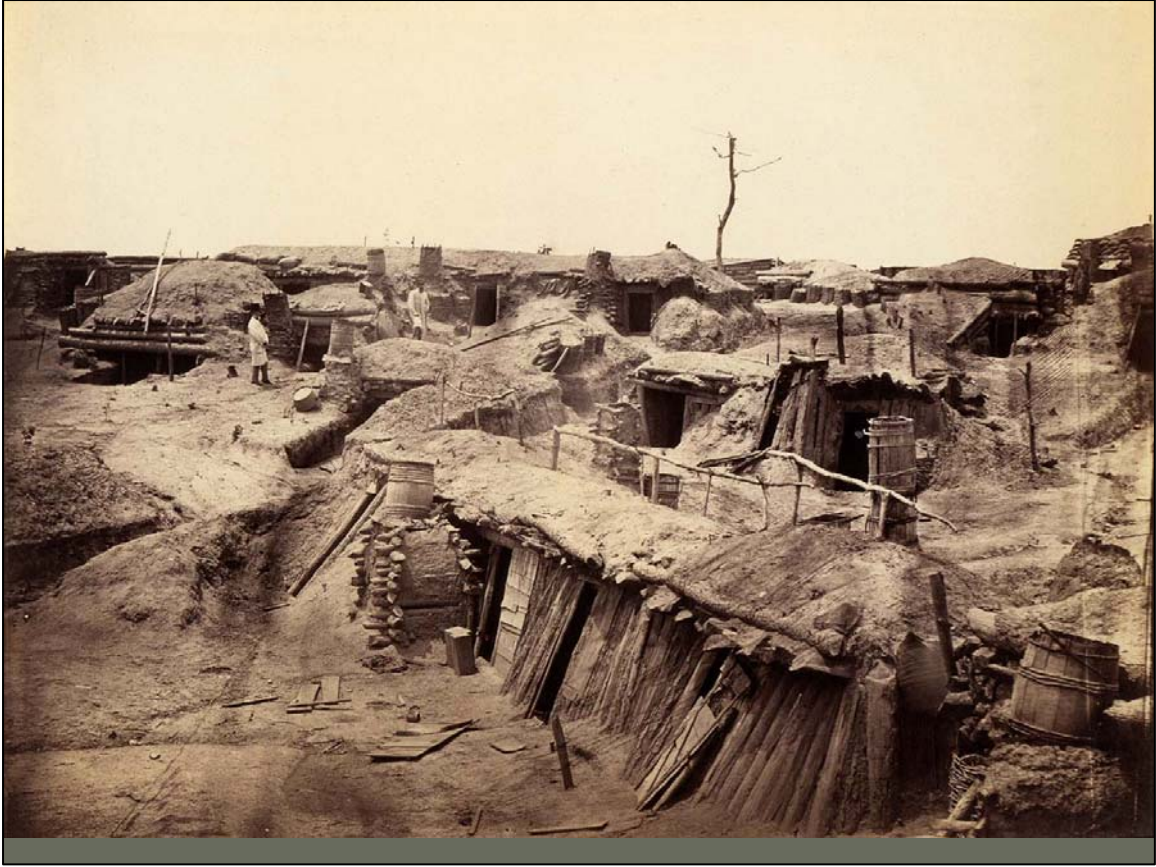
*Ruins of Gaines' Mill, Virginia, from Gardner's Sketchbook of the Civil War*

1865/published 1865

John Reekie

Printer: Alexander Gardner

albumen print on paper mounted on paperboard  
sheet and image: 7 x 9 in. (17.8 x 22.9 cm.)



*Quarters of Men in Fort Sedgwick, Known as Fort Hell*

1865

Timothy H. O'Sullivan

albumen print on paper

sheet: 7 5/8 x 10 in. (19.4 x 25.4 cm.)



*Burnside Bridge, Across Antietam Creek, Maryland, from Gardner's Sketchbook of the Civil War*

1862/published 1865

Alexander Gardner

albumen print on paper mounted on paperboard  
sheet and image: 7 x 9 in. (17.8 x 22.9 cm.)