A photograph is not only an image of a moment captured in time by the camera’s lens. Rather, photographs are important primary sources that provide insights into the motives of the photographers. Civil War photographers were some of the first documentary photographers in American history and recorded the conflict not by using a pen and paper, but by using their cameras.

Undoubtedly in American society today, war photography, particularly of dead American soldiers, makes an impact on the viewer and on society. In the 1860s, Alexander Gardner realized the potential of photography as a means of awareness and wrote in a caption that accompanied his photo, “A Harvest of Death,” that photography conveys “a useful moral: It shows the blank horror and reality of war, in opposition to its pageantry. Here are the dreadful details! Let them aid in preventing such another calamity falling upon the nation” (Gardner, Plate 36; see Figure 1). In order for Gardner to achieve his goal, he used advanced technology and artistry to make his images as realistic as possible in the hopes of showing Americans the true consequences of war. Those who saw the photos were met with an unfamiliar, harsh depiction of war that both intrigued and fascinated them; but to some, the photographs were too real and too painful.

Throughout the war, a handful of photographers took images of the dead. Gardner took more than 1,200 photographs during the conflict. Of these images, those taken of dead soldiers on the battlefields of Antietam and Gettysburg became the most famous (see Figure 2). Gardner and his team were the first to arrive at Gettysburg and the only photographers to take photos before the dead had been buried.

After receiving a significant amount of press from his images of the dead at Antietam, Gardner was determined to arrive at other battlefields as soon as possible to photograph the rotting corpses of America’s fallen men. He likely knew these shocking images would receive the most attention from the public, since never before had Americans seen the dead on a battlefield. Historian William A. Frassanito has concluded, “Of the approximately sixty negatives produced by Gardner and his team at Gettysburg, almost seventy-five percent contain as their main subject matter bloated corpses, open graves, dead horses, and related details of wholesale carnage” (Frassanito, p. 27). These were the shocking images that would grab the attention of Americans who had the opportunity to view them.
During the Civil War, many photographers used a special camera, a stereographic camera, which aided in making the photographs more realistic. The stereographic camera had a twin-lens. The twin-lens produced two side-by-side images, known as a stereoview, that gave a three-dimensional effect when viewed through a stereoscope. Stereoscopes, such as the one created by Oliver Wendell Holmes, were mass-produced and extremely popular (see Figure 3). “The mind feels its way into the very depths of the picture. The scraggy branches of a tree in the foreground turn out at us as if they would scratch our eyes out,” Homes wrote, “Then there is such a frightful amount of detail…A painter shows us masses; the stereoscope figure spares us nothing” (Holmes, 1859).

Stereoviews were extremely popular and different than any other artistic medium of the time. The popularity of stereoviews led photographers to take stereographic cameras in the field to show Americans the most vivid depictions of war for those who had never experienced it for themselves. According to historian Bob Zeller, “Of the 105 known Antietam images, seventy-eight were taken in 3-D, including all twenty images that show dead soldiers,” and of the estimated 7,000-10,000 documentary images taken during the war, seventy percent were taken in 3-D (Zeller, p. 80). Gardner’s photographs of the dead soldiers were graphic enough to be viewed as regular photographs, but the 3-D element made them all the more gruesome and realistic.

As if the 3-D images of the dead soldiers were not graphic enough, Civil War photographers employed another artistic element to enhance their photographs. Some of the stereoviews of the dead were hand-colored in an effort to make them look more shocking and realistic (see Figure 4). Red paint was even used to represent blood, and it was not used sparingly (see Figure 5). Not only could the photographs be viewed in 3-D, but the “blood” that was added to the images gave the black-and-white photographs an additional element of realism. For those individuals who did not witness the war for themselves, these images gave them an idea of what war was actually like.
In addition to photographing with stereo-graphic cameras and hand-tinting photos to add blood, Gardner and his men went a step further; they posed and rearranged dead corpses to further enhance the tragedy of war for the viewer. Gardner and his team are known to have used prop guns, blankets, canteens, and other items in their photos to make them more visually appealing. William Frassanito discovered that the dead young “sharpshooter” in the image entitled “The Home of a Rebel Sharpshooter” was dragged about forty yards and posed in the dramatic Devil’s Den at Gettysburg with a prop gun placed against the wall (See Figures 6-7). Frassanito argues that Gardner and his team were most likely struck by such a young man as a casualty of war, and that they wanted to showcase the real cost of war and make viewers feel what they felt. Gardner therefore manipulated the image so that viewers could more easily sympathize with the tragic loss of life.

In 1866, Gardner used this image in his book, Gardner’s Photographic Sketchbook of the War, but the text that accompanied the photo in his book told a different story. Gardner created a story about how the young sharpshooter had been wounded in the head and had laid down on his blanket waiting for death to take him. “The disordered clothing shows that his sufferings must have been intense,” Gardner wrote, “Was he delirious with agony, or did death come slowly to his relief, while memories of home grew dearer as the field of carnage faded before him? What visions, of loved ones far away, may have hovered above his stony pillow?” (Plate 41). Gardner was a former journalist and knew how words combined with pictures could make an emotional impact on people, especially those who had lost a loved one on the battlefield.

In order for Gardner to achieve his goal of showing Americans the reality of war, he needed the public to see his images. There were only two ways the public could view Gardner’s actual photographs of the dead. The general public could either purchase copies of his photographs or see the photographs displayed in a gallery. Gardner offered his images for sale via a mail-order catalog, with prices ranging from $.50 to $1.50 per image. Through this catalog, other galleries around the country could purchase Gardner’s images at wholesale prices and sell them in their own galleries. Zeller argues,

The relative popularity of the images back then would be reflected today by the relative frequency of seeing various images for sale…the images of the dead of Antietam and Gettysburg are among the most commonly found images by Gardner, so…both series, Antietam and Gettysburg, were very popular and sold very well (Zeller, email to author, 2010).

Figure 6. Incidents of war. A sharpshooter’s last sleep, Gettysburg, July, 1863. [c. 1865] Frassanito argues that the soldier depicted in this photo was dragged to Devil’s Den and re-photographed.

Figure 7. [Gettysburg, Pa. Dead Confederate soldier in Devil’s Den]. [1863] Also known as “The Home of the Rebel Sharpshooter.”
Gardner’s photographs sold fairly evenly as both stereoviews and Imperial carte-de-visites. With no sales figures available though, it is difficult to assess how many of Gardner’s images made it into the hands of the general public or how many of the over 6,000 photographers’ galleries sold Gardner’s images.

Members of the public could also view Gardner’s photographs of the dead by visiting a gallery in a city, such as New York or Washington, D.C. (see Figure 6). Of all of the exhibits of his photographs, the one commented on the most was a particular exhibit at the New York gallery of famous Civil War photographer Mathew Brady, with whom Gardner was working at the time. In October of 1862, Brady hung a placard on the door of his gallery that read, “The Dead at Antietam,” and it was at this exhibit that Americans would see, for the first time, photographs of dead soldiers on the battlefield. A number of Gardner’s gruesome photos were displayed in this exhibit, and the public’s reaction to the images was one of horror and fascination. A writer for Harper’s Weekly, who viewed the original photos, wrote,

Minute as are the features of the dead…you can, by bringing a magnifying glass to bear on them, identify not merely their general outline, but actual expression. This, in many instances, is perfectly horrible, and shows through what tortures the poor victims must have passed before they were relieved from their sufferings. (Harpers Weekly, 1862).

A writer for the New York Times wrote a lengthy and eloquent article about the photos as well. The article stated,

The living that throng Broadway care little perhaps for the Dead at Antietam, but we fancy they would jostle less carelessly down the great thoroughfare, saunter less at their ease, were a few dripping bodies, fresh from the field, laid among the pavement… As it is, the dead of the battlefield come up to us very rarely, even in dreams. We see the list in the morning paper at breakfast, but dismiss its recollection with the coffee. There is a confused mass of names, but they are all strangers; we forget the horrible significance that dwells amid the jumble of type.

Mr. Brady* has done something to bring home to us the terrible reality and earnestness of war. If he has not brought bodies and laid them in our dooryards and along streets, he has done something very like it… Crowds of people are constantly going up the stairs; follow them, and you find them bending over photographic views of that fearful battle-field [sic], taken immediately after the action. Of all objects of horror one would think the battle-field should stand preeminent, that 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 loth to leave them. You will see hushed, reverend [sic] groups standing around these weird copies of carnage, bending down to look in the pale faces of the dead, chained by the strange spell that dwells in dead men’s eyes (New York Times 1862).

*Because Gardner was working for Brady at the time, many of his photographs were attributed to Brady.
The people who did walk through the gallery during this exhibit realized that war was no longer what was depicted in the heroic and romanticized paintings and illustrations that were so prevalent up to that time.

Although some individuals seemed to be fascinated by the images, others were repulsed, and the feelings that were brought on by viewing the images were sometimes too much to handle. Holmes “acquired a set of these Antietam photos but found the images ‘almost unbearable to look at’” (Henig and Niderost, p. 254). Holmes knew the horrors of the battlefield first-hand. His son was shot in the neck at Antietam but survived, and Holmes went to the battlefield to look for him there. Holmes remarked on the photographs,

Let him who wishes to know what war is look at this series…It is so nearly like visiting the battlefields to look over these views that all the emotions by the actual sight of the stained and sordid scene…came back to us, and we buried [the photos] in the recesses of our cabinet as we would have buried the mutilated remains of the dead they too vividly represented (Holmes, 1863).

Gardner made one last attempt to get his photos before the public’s eyes. His Gardner’s Photographic Sketchbook of the War was published in 1866 in two volumes and contained a total of one hundred photographs with descriptive text (see Figure 7). It was priced at $150, a price that is equivalent to approximately $2,000 today. Because a cost-efficient way of printing photos had not yet been invented, original albumen photographic prints were placed inside the pages. Only two hundred copies of the book were ever printed, reaching only a few extremely wealthy individuals. The cost of the book was most likely the main cause of its failure, combined with the fact that Americans had just finished fighting a lengthy war and did not want to relive it in photographs.

All in all, most Americans, in one way or another, were affected by the Civil War. Civil War photographers such as Gardner had a specific goal in mind for their photographs, and that was to showcase for the public the tragedy of war in the most realistic way possible in an effort prevent another war from occurring in the future. Gardner chose photographs as his primary medium to document the war. For him, there was nothing that could offer a truer representation of war to someone who had never seen it up close. Through 3-D images, hand tinting, and carefully thought-out compositions, Gardner brought the tragedy of war to anyone who viewed his photographs.

Gardner’s images did make the impression he had hoped for on some people, particularly Holmes. “Yet war and battles should have truth for their delineator,” Holmes wrote, “The honest sunshine ‘Is Nature’s sternest painter, yet the best’; and that gives us… some conception of what a repulsive, brutal, sickening, hideous thing it is.… The end to be attained justifies the means, we are willing to believe, but the sight of these pictures is a commentary on civilization” (Holmes, 1863). Gardner’s photographs stand as grim reminders of the reality and cost of war and offer invaluable, visual insights into the Civil War.
Resources


