

Photography had a profound effect on how Americans experienced the Civil War. As the review of Brady's Antietam exhibit indicates, photography brought the violence and destruction of the battlefield to the doorsteps of the American public and elicited a strong emotional response, even from people far removed from the fighting. Photographers such as Brady and Gardner cultivated their reputations as the war's most accurate and impartial observers, describing their work as a visual record unvarnished by sentimentality or political bias. They also turned the war into a commodity available for purchase. Their claims to rendering the war in objective, unfiltered truth must be weighed against their efforts to market the war for public consumption in a way that suited their own commercial and artistic purposes.

Using the Source: Civil War Photographs

In 1860, there were more than three thousand photographers working in the United States. During the Civil War, they took tens of thousands of pictures of military subjects: individual and group portraits of soldiers, scenes of camp life and field hospitals, battlefield and city landscapes, railroad depots, fortifications, and shipyards. To use these images as a source, you must first familiarize yourself with the history, technology, and terminology of nineteenth-century photography.

The age of photography began with the invention of the daguerreotype in the late 1830s. Named for one of its inventors, Louis-Jacques-Mandé Daguerre, the daguerreotype was a fixed image produced on a silver-coated copper plate. Shortly after Daguerre introduced his invention in Europe, Samuel F. B. Morse brought the technology to the United States, where he taught the craft to several students, including Mathew Brady. During the 1840s, daguerreotypists opened studios in cities throughout the United States, drawing as their customers members of the urban middle and upper classes, who sat for their portraits individually, with their children, or as married couples. A successful daguerreotypist ran a kind of factory, keeping a public gallery and reception area where he displayed samples of his work to attract customers, a studio where he posed his subjects, and back rooms where workers prepared and developed his plates and fit them into frames for display at home. As one of many daguerreotypists in New York competing for business, Brady built his reputation by photographing famous politicians, authors, and actors, styling himself the "national historian," and publishing *The Gallery of Illustrious Americans*, a book based on his daguerreotypes, in 1850.

The next great leap in photography's development came in the mid-1850s with the invention of the wet-plate process. Unlike the daguerreotype, which was a one-time, nonreproducible image, the wet-plate process used glass plates immersed in a solution of photosensitive chemicals to produce negative images from which "positive" paper copies could be made. The wet-plate process expanded the market for photography, making possible mass-produced copies