

Trumbull's American Revolution painting. O'Sullivan's photograph testifies to the crisis that the massive casualties of the Civil War caused in the traditional values

nineteenth-century Americans associated with military service. Studying these photographs also reveals much about how civilians experienced the war. Photographers such as Brady and Gardner sold prints of their work almost as quickly as they made them, constructing a history of the war for public consumption while the conflict was still under way. Stereographs brought the war into the home for viewing the same way television does today, and *cartes-de-visite* made celebrities of political and military leaders of the war. By studying the arrangement of photographs in private collections or in the catalogs that advertised them for sale, historians can recover the civilian effort to make sense of the brutality and destruction the war unleashed.

One disadvantage of working with Civil War photographs is that there was no "blanket coverage" of the war by photographers. Their work favored the North and East at the expense of the South and West. The photography industry in the Confederacy all but collapsed after 1861 as the economic privations of the war increased. Also, the farther removed the scene of battle was from eastern urban centers, the less likely it was to be photographed. Antietam and Gettysburg were the most thoroughly photographed battlefields of the war. Not coincidentally, both were within ninety miles of Washington, D.C., where Brady and Gardner had galleries. By contrast, little to no photographic evidence exists of many campaigns west of the Appalachian Mountains.

Another disadvantage to bear in mind when looking at Civil War photographs is the technological limits on photographing battles as they occurred. Cameras had to be mounted on tripods and required exposure time measured in minutes rather than a fraction of a second. Because the glass plates had to be prepared, exposed, and developed in one continuous process, before their chemical coating dried and rendered them useless, photographers had to bring their darkrooms with them. As one historian of nineteenth-century photography has noted, these technical limitations meant that we have many "before" and "after" images of Civil War battlefields but no "during," because the photographers and their equipment were not mobile enough to capture the actual battles.

The chief disadvantage to working with Civil War photographs is that the photographers manipulated their subjects, dead as well as living, for commercial purposes. Brady, Gardner, and their peers were businessmen, and they took pictures that they thought would sell. If they could increase sales by posing their subjects in a particular manner, they did not hesitate to do so. Then and now, people invoked the phrase "the camera never lies" to emphasize the accuracy and impartiality of photography. Knowing something about how Civil War photographs were made, however, should dissuade you from taking that adage too literally when dealing with this source. When soldiers, officers, and civic leaders posed for their portraits, they assumed postures and carried props meant to broadcast their bravery, leadership, or virtue, but because of the long exposure time required for early photographs, even less formal scenes of camp life or field hospitals had to be carefully arranged by their photographers. One might assume