ESSENTIAL CIVIL WAR CURRICULUM

Mathew B. Brady

By **Carol M. Johnson**

Mathew Brady is arguably one of the most important American photographers of the nineteenth century. His iconic photographs provide an in-depth view of the Civil War and the personalities involved, giving us a better understanding of the conflict. He was born circa 1823 to Andrew and Julia Brady, Irish emigrants who settled in Warren County, New York, located in the Adirondack Mountains. Very little documentation exists about his early life. Brady professed to have studied painting under the portrait artist William Page in Albany, New York, when he was in his teens. By 1839, Brady had moved to New York City. He may have worked as a clerk for the A. T. Stewart dry goods store before opening his own business. In 1843, Brady began manufacturing leather cases used to house miniature paintings and daguerreotypes, the earliest commercial form of photography. [1]

In the spring of 1844, Brady opened his first daguerreian studio on lower Broadway, an area popular with photographers. When visitors entered his gallery, they were surrounded by samples of Brady's work, especially portraits of the famous individuals who had sat for his camera. Those wishing to have their portrait made would ascend to the studio, one floor above the gallery. Brady hired an operator to work the camera, while he posed the sitters. Brady charged more for his portraits than most of his competitors, catering to the upper class. Artists, political figures, writers, actors, and actresses frequented his studio and often had at least two portraits made—one to keep for themselves and one to display in Brady's gallery.

Brady participated in the American Institute of the City of New York's annual fairs which displayed new inventions and awarded prizes for outstanding work. His daguerreotypes were consistently recognized for their technical superiority in the 1840s. His expertise in the field led him to teach the daguerreian process to beginning photographers.

In 1849, Brady expanded his business, opening a studio on Pennsylvania Avenue in Washington, D. C., near the Capitol. He visited the White House to make

[1] The daguerreotype process, invented in France in 1839 by Louis Jacque Mandé Daguerre, produced unique photographs on copper plates that had been coated with silver. They were direct-positive images, made without the use of a negative.

daguerreotype portraits of out-going President James K. Polk and later, his successor, Zachary Taylor. Unfortunately, his Washington studio closed within the year, when he lost his lease.

Expanding on his interest in portraits of important Americans, in 1850, Brady embarked on a project called the *Gallery of Illustrious Americans.* The series included large-scale lithographs made by Francis D'Avignon based on Brady daguerreotypes. Each portrait was accompanied by a biographical sketch authored by Charles Edward Lester. The series included portraits of John James Audubon, John Caldwell Calhoun, Lewis Cass, William Ellery Channing, Henry Clay, Millard Fillmore, John Charles Frémont, William Hickling Prescott, Winfield Scott, Zachary Taylor, Daniel Webster, and Silas Wright. The project, initially announced as twenty-four portraits, ceased publication after the production of the first twelve lithographs.

In 1851, forty-eight of Brady's portrait daguerreotypes were exhibited at The Great Exhibition at London's Crystal Palace. Brady's work received one of only five medals awarded for daguerreotypes. The jury described his work as "excellent for beauty of execution. The portraits stand forward in bold relief, upon a plain background." Brady and his wife Julia travelled to London to attend the fair and stayed in Europe for several months. [2]

In March 1853, Brady, moved his gallery north, up Broadway, to a more fashionable area. His studio boasted the largest reception room in town, elaborately fashioned, perhaps influenced by his European trip. While Brady was well-known for the beauty of his daguerreotypes, the field of photography was changing. New photographic processes that rivaled the daguerreotype were less expensive and quicker to execute. In order to stay relevant, photographers had to keep up with the latest technology, which often meant changing equipment and work methods. Studios would offer the new products with the old. Ambrotypes, another direct-positive process, made with an emulsion on a glass plate were popular for a brief period of time from the mid-1850s to the mid-1860s. Brady not only made ambrotypes, he designed a special viewing case for them that allowed customers to see the image from the front or back.

Perhaps the biggest change to photographic technology was the ability to mass produce paper prints with the use of glass plate negatives. Most photographers made contact prints; prints that were the same size as the negatives that were exposed in their cameras. The Brady studio also offered enlargements known as Imperial prints. These large prints, measuring roughly 19" x 16" were often heavily retouched. The studio suddenly went from offering one type of image—a daguerreotype—to several different photographic processes, in many different sizes.

Among the more than two dozen employees at the Brady Studio, one stood out in particular. Alexander Gardner, originally from Scotland, had the business acumen to

[2] *Reports by the Juries on the Subjects in the Thirty Classes Into which the Exhibition was Divided.* (London: Spicer Brothers, 1852), 277.

help Brady manage his studios. When Brady decided to reopen a studio in Washington, D.C., he chose Gardner to run the southern location. The Washington studio, located on Pennsylvania Avenue, opened in January 1858. Meanwhile, Brady expanded his New York business, opening a second, larger studio at 359 Broadway. The following year, Brady consolidated his New York businesses to one location on Broadway.

Throughout his career, Brady was renowned for his portraits of celebrities and political figures. Several contemporary published accounts provide descriptions of Brady's character and his skill socializing with the famous men and women who patronized his studio. They repeatedly praised his decorum with clients and described him as sincere and attentive. "Few men among us who have attained great eminence and successes in business pursuits are more deservedly popular than Mr. Brady, from claims purely personal; for none can be more distinguished for urbanity and geniality of manners, and an untiring attention to the feelings and happiness of those with whom he comes in contact." [3]

In 1860 presidential candidate, Abraham Lincoln, entered Brady's New York studio prior to his pivotal speech at the Cooper Union. The awkward, country lawyer from Illinois was transformed by Brady's skill in posing sitters. Brady had Lincoln stand next to a column to emphasize his height, adjusted his shirt collar to disguise Lincoln's long neck, and placed his left hand on a stack of books, adding a scholarly touch and creating a dignified portrait. The image was produced and commercially sold as a carte de visite, a small 2-1/2" x 4" photograph mounted on card stock. The portrait was used as the basis of an engraving that appeared on the cover of Harper's Weekly magazine on May 26, 1860, introducing Lincoln's image to the American public when he received the presidential nomination. The same image was used again, after he won the presidential election. Brady claimed that Lincoln said: "Brady and the Cooper Institute made me President." While president, Lincoln continued to patronize the Brady studio. In 1864, Anthony Berger, a photographer working at Brady's studio, made a portrait of Lincoln which would later be used as the basis of the engraving that appeared on the five dollar bill between 1914 and 2007. [4]

Carte de visite (cdv) photographs, primarily used for portraits, dominated the photographic market in the 1860s. These small, mounted images, were collected by the middle-class. The cartes de visite were placed in photo albums and shared with friends and relatives. Portraits of famous individuals were intermixed with family portraits. In addition, Brady's cartes de visite of famous personalities were printed and sold commercially by the photographic supply house E. and H. T. Anthony, making them available to an even wider public. The back of the photographic mount referenced both firms and included the statement "Published by E. & H. T. Anthony, 501 Broadway, New York, From photographic negative in Brady's National Portrait Gallery," emphasizing the importance of the photographer's archive of portraits.

[3] "M. B. Brady," in *American Phrenological Journal* 28, no. 5 (May 1858):65-67.
[4] George Alfred Townsend, "Still Taking Pictures," *The World*, April 12, 1891, 26.

The Civil War marked a turning point for the nation as a whole, but it also had an enormous impact on the Brady Studio. The work of the studio, normally performed indoors, was about to become more mobile. Soldiers from raw recruits to seasoned Generals had their portraits made both at the studio and in the field. For many soldiers, a photographic portrait was a special keepsake to leave with their families. If they did not have a portrait made before they left for the war, they could have one made in camp, and send it home. As photography was a fairly recent invention, it may have been the first time some soldiers sat for the camera.

Brady sent photographers out in the field to cover the war. Photography could not capture action, but it could document camps, fortifications, and the aftermath of battles. But while Brady's name is synonymous with the Civil War, the team of photographers that Brady employed, deserves equal credit. Over the course of the war many photographers worked for the Brady studio, including George N. Barnard, Alexander Gardner, James F. Gibson, Timothy H. O'Sullivan, and others.

The military camps surrounding Washington, D.C., provided subjects for one of Brady's early wartime series in 1861 called *Illustrations of Camp Life*. These views often depicted intimate portraits of individual soldiers or groups of soldiers posed in front of their tents. These photographs were made before the soldiers had participated in any battles. Images from this series are very rare. [5]

In July 1861, Brady, himself, traveled to Manassas, Virginia, with at least one of his photographers to document and witness the Battle of First Bull Run. The photographic press vividly described Brady's images of the first major battle of the Civil War: "The public are indebted to Brady, of Broadway, for numerous excellent views of 'grim-visaged war.' He has been in Virginia with his camera, and many and spirited are the pictures he has taken. His are the only reliable records of the fight at Bull's Run…Considering the circumstances under which they were taken, amidst the excitement, the rapid movements, and the smoke of the battle-field, there is nothing to compare with them in their powerful contrasts of light and shade." Yet this report contradicts reality as no photographs of this battle have ever surfaced. With the confusion on the battlefield and the Union's surprising defeat and hasty retreat, Brady's photographic wagons were damaged and the fragile glass plates broken. The First Battle of Bull Run inspired Brady's resolve to document the war. In an interview decades after the war Brady stated: "My wife and my most conservative friends had looked unfavorably upon this departure from commercial business to pictorial war correspondence, and I can only describe the destiny that overruled me by saying that, like Euphorion, I felt that I had to go… After that I had men in all parts of the army, like a rich newspaper… I spent over $100,000 in my war enterprises.[6]

[5] *Illustrations of Camp Life* were photographs sold by Brady in a card series with that title under the image and "Brady" and "Washington" under that title.
[6] "Photographs of War Scenes," *Humphrey's Journal*, September 1, 1861, 133; George Alfred Townsend, "Still Taking Pictures," *The World*, April 12, 1891, 26.

In the fall of 1861, Brady's trusted photographer, Alexander Gardner, joined the U. S. Army Corps of Topographical Engineers as a photographer for the Army of the Potomac. Photographers were assigned to various tasks, such as copying maps that could be shared among troops, in addition to photographing the troops. Around the same time, Timothy H. O'Sullivan was actively making Civil War views in South Carolina and Georgia. While George N. Barnard and James F. Gibson, photographed sites in the area of the First Battle of Bull Run. Photographers typically used two cameras in the field, one for stereographs, and a larger format camera that accommodated 8" x 10" glass plate negatives.

Stereographs consist of two nearly identical photographs, mounted side-by-side to produce the illusion of a single three-dimensional image, when viewed through a stereoscope. Stereographs popularity soared during the Civil War, especially among the middle class. They were a form of entertainment, with subjects ranging from humorous stories to current events. Seeing the Civil War through a stereoscope is a powerful experience.

Brady's photographs appear on a wide variety of photographic mounts in various sizes during the war. In 1862, he published a series of views under the title *Brady's Album Gallery*, a group of more than fifty photographic prints on cards. The views focus on scenes and group portraits made at Antietam, Maryland; Hampton, Virginia; Yorktown, Virginia; and locations near Richmond, Virginia. Made from one side of the stereo negatives, he was able to make two products from one exposure—a stereograph and a single print. Information printed on the front of the mount identified the photographer. Labels on the back of the mounts provided a title, caption, and often a date, as well as copyright information. Brady was one of few photographers during the Civil War to copyright photographs in order to protect his ownership of the images. The label on his *Album Gallery* prints stated"The Photographs of this series were taken directly from nature, at considerable cost. Warning is therefore given that legal proceedings will be at once instituted against any party infringing the copyright." [7]

In the fall of 1862, Brady produced large mounted prints as part of his *Incidents of War* portfolio series. These photographs were suitable for framing and could be purchased as a portfolio. Brady's views of the war were sold at his photographic studios in both Washington and New York City. They were also listed in E. & H. T. Anthony's 1862 sales catalog.[8]

In October 1862, *The New York Times* mentioned a display of Antietam photographs at the Brady's New York Gallery. Photographers Alexander Gardener and James F. Gibson made primarily stereographs on the Antietam battlefield after the conflict. Several views graphically showed dead soldiers waiting to be buried and others

[7] *Brady's Album Gallery* can be viewed online at the Library of Congress at http://www.loc.gov/pictures/item/2005688698/ accessed June 1, 2015.
[8] The Metropolitan Museum of Art owns a tooled-leather portfolio of *Incidents of the War* described at http://www.metmuseum.org/collection/the-collection-online/search/285984 accessed June 1, 2015.

showed landmarks such as Dunker Church and Antietam Bridge. A later report in the *Times* went into more detail: "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 the streets, he has done something very like it. At the door of his gallery hangs a little placard, 'The Dead of Antietam.' Crowds of people are constantly going up the stairs; follow them, and you find them bending over photographic views of that fearful battle-field, taken immediately after the action… You will see hushed, reverend 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." The audience most likely saw the Civil war through stereographs, the three-dimensional views that were a novelty at the time and would give the audience a closer look at the realities of the war. This exhibition was the first to show Civil War dead in a public space. [9]

Oliver Wendell Holmes, who had witnessed the Antietam battlefield just four days after the conflict when he came to search for his wounded son, wrote in the *Atlantic Monthly* about the photographs produced by Brady's Gallery. "These terrible mementoes of one of the most sanguinary conflicts of the war we owe to the enterprise of Mr. Brady of New York. We ourselves were upon the battlefield upon the Sunday following the Wednesday when the battle took place. It is not, however, for us to bear witness to the fidelity of views which the truthful sunbeam has delineated in all their dread reality. The photographs bear witness to the accuracy of some of our own sketches…The 'ditch' is figured, still encumbered with the dead…Let him who wishes to know what war is look at this series of illustrations." Viewing the Antietam photographs was "so nearly like visiting the battlefield to look over these views, that all the emotions excited by the actual sight of the stained and sordid scene, strewed with rags and wrecks, came back to us, and we buried them in the recesses of our cabinet as we would have buried the mutilated remains of the dead they too vividly represented." [10]

The Antietam photographs produced by Brady's Gallery certainly impacted those who were able to view the images in person. Others may have seen wood-engravings made from the photographs reproduced in the October 18, 1862 issue of *Harper's Weekly Magazine*. The double-page spread included eight images, many showing dead soldiers. While these views also showed the horrors of war, the black & white engravings were much less realistic than the three-dimensional stereographs. The caption attributed the photographs to Mr. M. B. Brady, crediting the studio, rather than individual photographers.

The fall of 1862 marked a turning point for Mathew Brady when Alexander Gardner left Brady's employ to open his own photographic studio in Washington, D. C. Gardner took his Civil War glass plate negatives with him, possibly in exchange for debts owed by Brady. A short time later, Timothy O'Sullivan, George Barnard, and James Gibson also left the Brady studio, joining Gardner.

[9] "Brady's Photographs; Pictures of the Dead at Antietam," *New York Times,* October 20, 1862, 5.
[10] Oliver Wendell Holmes, "Doings of the Sunbeam," *Atlantic Monthly*, July 1863, 11-12.

With the loss of so many talented photographers, it was time for Brady to return to reliable, celebrity portraiture. The Brady studio was the official photographer for Tom Thumb's wedding to Lavinia Warren in December 1862. The resulting cartes de visite were sold by both Brady and the wedding couple, adding a popular subject for the public to collect for their photo albums.

In July 1863, after the Battle of Gettysburg, Brady accompanied his two photographers, David Woodbury and Anthony Berger, to the scene of the conflict. They arrived several days after the battle and well after Alexander Gardner and his team had completed their photographs. Brady's men captured quiet landscapes, some even included Brady, shown at a distance, looking away from the camera.

Brady's photographers also made portraits of John Lawrence Burns, "The Hero of Gettysburg." Burns was sixty-nine years old at the time of the Civil War and reportedly had participated in the Revolutionary War. Not one to stand on the sidelines, Burns joined Union soldiers on July 1, 1863, near McPherson's Ridge equipping himself with a rifle and ammunition from a wounded soldier. Burns, himself, was wounded in three places: his arm, thigh, and leg. He became a national hero. His portrait photographs were avidly collected and the poet, Bret Harte, even wrote a poem about him.

In 1864, Brady's photographic team followed General Ulysses S. Grant's campaign through Virginia, making views at Belle Plain Landing and Fredericksburg, Virginia. His views of the latter location include images of wounded soldiers and dead soldiers prior to burial. A few months later, Brady and his men documented White House Landing, Virginia, an important Union supply base. The photographers then arrived at Cold Harbor about a week after Grant's devastating loss and what would be General Robert E. Lee's last Confederate victory. They made several photographs of Generals Grant, Hancock, Meade, and Wilcox posed with their staff. Brady appears in a view showing General Ambrose Burnside reading a newspaper. Later, Brady and his team followed the army to Petersburg.

Brady traveled to Richmond, Virginia, in April 1865, shortly after the city fell to Union forces. On his way to the former Confederate capitol, Brady photographed Grant at City Point. Brady and his photographers spent several days photographing the devastation to Richmond's commercial district. Brady also captured a poignant portrait of Confederate General Robert E. Lee in his Confederate uniform. Brady's luck in capturing Lee was mentioned in the *New York Times*: Gen. R. E. LEE still remains in this city, and keeps himself so secluded that nobody would suppose, unless so informed, that he is still among us. Few, I believe, have ventured to intrude upon his privacy, beyond the circle of his own friends; but one Northern gentleman was necessarily bound to call upon him in the ordinary pursuit of his business. I yesterday met Mr. BRADY, the celebrated photographer of New York, who had just been favored with an interview by the General, and had taken splendid cabinet portraits of him and all his staff. It will doubtless add an interesting item to his already splendid gallery of notabilities. Mr.

BRADY says the General received him with the utmost affability and cordiality of manner.[11]

When Brady was still in Richmond, President Lincoln was assassinated while attending a performance at Washington's Ford Theatre. Brady documented the interior of Ford's Theatre, including Lincoln's box seat.

Washington, D.C. held a celebration for the Union troops on May 23 and 24, 1865 called the Grand Review of the Armies. Brady's photographer was one of at least three camera operators at the event, capturing thousands of soldiers parading down Pennsylvania Avenue towards the White House.

The end of the war also marked the end to Brady's prosperity. While he continued to run portrait studios in both Washington and New York City, his business faltered. In September 1864, Brady had joined forces with James F. Gibson, one of his former employees. Gibson purchased half of Brady's Washington portrait studio. But Gibson soon filed a lawsuit against Brady, alleging that he was not paying his bills and his employees. Gibson mortgaged the Washington gallery and then promptly left the D.C. area for Kansas. Brady's Washington Gallery went into bankruptcy, and was sold at a public auction. For the sum of $7,600, Brady won back his business.

Unfortunately, while he was getting his Washington business back on track, his New York City gallery was suffering. Julia Brady sold a piece of land that she owned in New York City to help settle their New York debts.

Realizing the historical importance of his collection of portraits and war views, Brady approached the New-York Historical Society about archiving his collection. They did not follow through with the acquisition. The New-York Historical Society would eventually become home to a large collection of Brady's portraits.

In 1869, Brady asked the U. S. Congress to buy his collection, but the asking price was too high. By 1872, Brady was bankrupt. He owed money to dozens of individuals and companies. Without Brady's knowledge, some of his negatives that had been in storage were sold for $2,500 to the War Department. The War Department purchased a second set of negatives directly from Brady for $25,000. J. Mott, the War Department's lawyer, justified the expense as "the pictures were of national interest and importance, but that they were secured in time of war and under circumstances of unusual difficulty and danger." [12]

Brady and his wife moved from New York City to Washington, D. C, in 1873. By the end of 1875, Brady had reopened his Washington gallery. Portraits had changed from the small carte de visite to larger cabinet cards. Although Brady's studio continued

[11] J. R. Hamilton, "Condition of the Public Mind in Richmond," *New York Times*, April 30, 1865, 2.
[12] J. Mott to Belknap, April 9, 1875, Records of the Office of the Adjunct General, RG 94, Box 4944, National Archives and Records Administration, Washington, D.C.

to cater to senators and congressmen, his financial problems endured. His nephew, Levin Handy, became more active in the business, and would eventually take over the studio. In 1887, Brady's wife, Julia, died.

1894 Brady was injured by a horse-drawn street-car as he crossed Fourteenth Street. He recovered at the home of his nephew. Once he was feeling better, Brady moved back to New York City. He had planned to present lantern slide lectures based on his war-time photographs. Brady died on January 15, 1896 at Presbyterian Hospital due to a kidney infection before he was able to give his first slide presentation. His body was returned to Washington, D.C., and was buried at the Congressional Cemetery, next to his wife.

Mathew B. Brady

Born	Circa 1823 Warren Count New York
Died	January 15, 1896, New York City
Buried	Congressional Cemetery Washington D.C.
Father	Andrew Brady
Mother	Julia Brady
Career Milestones	1844 opened his first daguerreian studio in at 205-207 Broadway in New York City | 1849, opened a studio on Pennsylvania Avenue in Washington, D. C. which closed within a year | 1850 Gallery of Illustrious Americans project | 1850 married Juliette Handy | 1851 Exhibition of 48 of Brady's portrait daguerreotypes at the Great Exhibition in London England won a medal | 1853 opened his second New York studio at 359 Broadway | 1858 opened his National Photographic Art Gallery in Washington under Alexander Gardner at 350-352 Pennsylvania Avenue NW, opened a second larger studio in New York at 359 Broadway | 1859 opened third New York studio at 643 Bleecker Street | 1860 opened fourth New York Studio at 785 Broadway | 1860 Brady made his first of many portraits of Abraham Lincoln | 1861 published *Illustrations of Camp Life* | July 1861 Brady attempted to photograph the aftermath of the Battle of First Bull Run | 1862 published *Brady's Album Gallery* | 1862 published *Incidents of*

	War portfolio series | October 1862 Brady's New York Gallery displayed the famous collection of Antietam photographs taken by Alexander Gardner | 1863 photographed the Gettysburg battlefield | 1864 sold half his Washington gallery to James Gibson his manager | 1868 repurchased Gibson's half of the Washington gallery sold at auction to pay its debts | 1873 declared bankruptcy and loses all his galleries | 1875 sold his collection of negatives and prints to Congress for $25,000 | 1881-1894 opened and closed a series of studios in Washington D.C. | 1887 Juliette Handy Brady died | 1895 seriously injured by a horse-drawn streetcar in Washington, moved to New York City and entered the Presbyterian Hospital | Died 1896

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