CIVIL WAR PHOTOGRAPHS: NEW TECHNOLOGIES AND NEW USES
This resource was created by Sam Klotz, the 2014 Liljenquist Family Fellow at the Library of Congress

The Civil War era was a particularly important moment in the history of photography. During this era photographs began to dominate American visual culture, as new technologies and new formats brought depictions of battle scenes, wartime leaders, and everyday soldiers into private homes as never before. Examining the photographs produced by these new technologies can both shed light on the culture of the era and provide insights into the history of this powerful form of visual communication.

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

Primary Photographic Technologies in Use
The Daguerreotype (1839-1890, common use 1840-1860) – is a photograph sitting on a silver coated copper plate made light sensitive with chemicals before exposure. Because of its intense detail and attractive shiny mirror-like surface, it achieved success as a cheaper alternative to oil painting for portraiture, even though to have a daguerreotype taken, the subject had to sit facing direct light for several seconds without blinking or moving. The daguerreotype eventually went out of fashion later in the 19th century with the introduction of cheaper and more efficient processes like ambrotype or tintype and paper prints.
The Salted Paper Print, or Salt Print (1840s-1850s) was among the first methods for creating a photographic print on paper. The process involved soaking paper in a sodium chloride solution, then coating it with silver nitrate. The paper was then exposed to sunlight while in contact with a negative. Salt prints were later replaced by albumen prints, which were more clear and had a glossy look.

Salted paper print

The Wet-Plate/Collodion Process (1850s-1900s) was a developmental breakthrough from earlier photographic technologies such as the daguerreotype and the calotype. The collodion process involved coating a glass plate with light sensitive chemicals and exposing it to get a negative image. This process was significant because of its short exposures and efficiency, and it was used to create the types of photographs listed below.

Collodion negative with hands for scale

The Ambrotype (1850s-1860s) – a collodion negative placed against a dark background, which made the image appear positive. Ambrotypes were not reproducible because the positive image could only be created by manipulating the negative. After developing ambrotypes, photographers often added watercolor to give their images a life-like effect. The ambrotype was a preferred portrait medium because it was both cheap and easy to make. Its name is derived from the Greek word “ambrose,” meaning immortal, suggesting the image’s capacity to immortalize a constructed image of the self.

Two ambrotypes of different sizes
The Tintype (1850s-1930s) – a collodion negative, like the ambrotype, but printed on iron (not tin, despite the name). It also was not reproducible. The tintype peaked in popularity during the Civil War Era because of its durable surface. The tintype, like the ambrotype, was often colored, and superseded the ambrotype as the preferred portrait medium because it was the cheapest and most efficient form of photography at the time. These photographs cost as little as twenty-five cents and thus were often more casual in nature.

Two tintypes of different sizes

The Albumen Print (1850s-1900) – a collodion negative printed on paper coated with a surface layer of a beaten egg-white solution. This layer gave the prints great brightness and detail, consistent quality, and tonal range. Unlike the ambrotype or tintype, photographers could produce many albumen prints from one negative. Albumen prints were used to capture everything from landscapes to portraits.

Albumen print

Other technologies included opalotypes and ivorytypes, glass negatives similar to the ambrotype and tintype, though more expensive and notable for their rich color.

Ivorytype

Opalotype
Photographic Presentations of Technologies

*The Stereograph (1850s-1920s)* – consisted of two albumen prints placed side by side on a small card, captured by a camera with two lenses separated by two-and-a-half inches. The compound image was viewed using a stereoscope, a device that merged the two images into one. This gave the illusion of three dimensions and allowed the stereograph to make distant places come to life.

![Stereograph card](image)

*Carte-de-visite (1850-1860s)* – a small albumen print mounted on a piece of cardstock measuring approximately two-and-a-half by four inches. Like the tintype, though less durable, the carte was a cheap and easily producible way for people to preserve images of themselves. Cartes were also used to depict celebrity figures, tourist attractions, and to convey promotional messages.

![Carte-de-visites](image)

Photographic books also became increasingly popular during the Civil War, and newspapers and magazines used photographs as the basis for printed engravings. Sometimes, photographers even photographed illustrations for reproduction.

![Gardner’s Photographic Sketch Book of the War](image)
Today, we see photographs everywhere. The Civil War era marked the first time photographic technologies brought many people into visual contact with subjects outside of their daily life. Ask students to discuss how images of current events in faraway places affect how they think about those events. Invite them to imagine how they would relate to an event they cannot see. How would being able to see images shape their response?

Ask students to study the technology visible in “Wagons and Camera of Sam A. Cooley” and then think about the photographic technology they most often use. How would the size of the camera affect use? Invite students to list as many other factors as they can that would affect how and where they would take photographs. As a follow up, students might research photographic processes from the Civil War era and consider how that has changed over time.

Historians have discovered that in the photograph “Home of a Rebel Sharpshooter”, Alexander Gardner moved the body into position and added the rifle, which is not a sharpshooter’s rifle but a Springfield rifle, from his own belongings. Ask the students: Given that we often assume photographs to be accurate representations of the world, how does this information change your perception of the photograph, its title, and the accompanying prose description? How does this information affect your perception of other photographs that you might not expect to be posed? What questions can we ask to discern how true to life a photograph is?

Ask students to choose and examine a photograph they like. What aspects of the image could be controlled by the photographer? What could not be controlled? How do these considerations affect the way you respond to the photograph?

In the 21st century U.S., most people can take a photograph whenever they want. During the Civil War, however, having one’s photograph taken was rare enough to warrant carefully composing every aspect of the photo. Ask: If you were preparing for the only photo you would ever have taken of yourself, what would you want your photograph to say about you? What items, animals, or other people would you have with you? How would you pose? What would you stand in front of? Who would you send it to? If time permits, ask students to bring their items to class and take their “only” photograph.
Additional Resources

The Liljenquist Family Collection of Civil War Photographs
http://www.loc.gov/pictures/collection/lilj/

The Gladstone Collection of African American Photographs
http://www.loc.gov/pictures/collection/gld/

Civil War Glass Negatives and Related Prints
http://www.loc.gov/pictures/collection/cwp/

Gardner’s Photographic Sketch Book of the War
http://www.loc.gov/pictures/item/01021785/

Popular Print Processes Represented in the Prints and Photographs Division
http://www.loc.gov/rr/print/coll/589_intro.html


