

# Point and Shoot

*How photography put the Civil War in perspective*



Timothy O'Sullivan's famously gripping photograph (on the right) of the Gettysburg aftermath, "Home of a Rebel Sharpshooter" (1863), was later determined to be a picturesque fabrication. Photographer A.J. Meek captured the same setting 131 years later (left) as he traveled to the five original Civil War battlefield parks. "Rebel Sharpshooter" credit: Library of Congress, Prints and Photographs Division [LC-DIG-cwpb-04337].

In 1993, photographer A.J. Meek embarked on a project: to photograph the five original national battlefield parks in the United States. Now retired, Meek was a Professor of Art at Louisiana State University at the time and had published several books of his photography.

He carted his cameras and film up and down the countryside with the purpose of calling attention to these parks, home to manmade monuments, renowned landforms, and the ghosts of ferocious conflict. Meek feared their loss to an indifferent nation that was allowing encroaching parking lots and shopping malls without so much as a peep.

As he visited Gettysburg, Chickamauga-Chattanooga, Shiloh, Antietam, and Vicksburg, Meek trod on what he called "sacred grounds." Over a century earlier, pioneers in Meek's field canvassed the same earth with their cameras. Of course, the grounds were not yet sacred and hardly forgotten. After all, a war was being waged.

## **A MANUAL OPERATION**

Though the Civil War was not the first to be captured with a camera, the brother-against-brother conflict is

strongly associated with the advent of photography and the public's evolving perspective of military action. Photographs exist of both the preceding Crimean and Mexican wars, among other conflicts, but by 1861, the technology had developed enough to give the Civil War wide coverage as teams of photographers were dispatched throughout the country to bring visuals home to galleries and newspapers.

Before photography, civilians understood war through the rosy lens of poetry and sculpture—think Homeric epics; bronzed statues; boys marching off with upturned chins and righteous pride.

But photographs stripped war of its romance. Thanks to the efforts of photographers such as Mathew Brady (dubbed the father of photojournalism) and his former employees, Alexander Gardner and Timothy O'Sullivan, the Civil War was recorded in all its realistic, visceral mire.

But was it journalism? Or was it art?

## **TAKING LIBERTIES**

Brady and company may not have invented the new documentary technology, but they faced a vast frontier insofar as wartime photography was concerned. Battlefield visuals were a novelty; almost any picture would have been a contender to dangle below screaming headlines.

Brady and his peers did not content themselves at that. Let's step once more into the blistering boots of a nineteenth-century photojournalist.

The arsenal of photographic equipment and chemicals lugged around by these men required a much larger investment than the popular "point-and-shoot" camera of today. And the operations manual detailed quite a few more steps between "point" and "shoot." Before the camera was even hauled out to the battlefield, the photographer had to mix his own chemicals, primarily a mixture called collodion that contained ethyl ether and acetic or sulfuric acid, among other toxic ingredients.

The cutting-edge image-capture technology of 1861 used plate glass that was coated with collodion, immersed in silver nitrate, and inserted into the camera in a light-proof container. To imprint the desired image onto the plate glass, the lens needed to be open for at least two to three seconds, ruling out the feasibility of sharply depicting subjects in motion.

Photographers were therefore forced to compose their images. In other words, as Henri Matisse explains in his essay *Notes of a Painter*, Civil War photographers were engaged in the "art of arranging in a decorative manner the diverse elements at the painter's command to express his feelings."

Handed the responsibility of framing war for Americans, of saying "Look, *this* is war," the era's photojournalists and media outlets made a choice. They crafted stories.

Mathew Brady (himself a former student of painter and inventor Samuel F.B. Morse) had made his name as a portrait artist in the early days of the medium with a popular gallery in Washington D.C.; the list of notables who sat before his lens included over a dozen presidents, royalty, Edgar Allan Poe, P.T. Barnum, and more.

In fact, Abraham Lincoln credited his presidency to the portraiture skills of Brady. Lincoln first visited Brady's studio on February 27, 1860, when he was running for office. The same day, Lincoln gave a rousing speech to a large crowd of Republicans at the Cooper Union in New York. *Harper's Weekly* used Brady's photo alongside its item on the successful address, and subsequent articles on Lincoln's triumphs used the picture as well. Brady admitted to tugging his subject's collar higher so as to make his neck appear more youthful and

substantial.

Said Lincoln later, “Brady and the Cooper Institute made me president.”

With one of his most memorable shots, “Home of a Rebel Sharpshooter,” Timothy O’Sullivan tugged a collar too. But instead of subtly rejuvenating a presidential hopeful, Sullivan was repositioning—okay, dragging—a corpse to a prepped location, one later dubbed “the sharpshooter’s den,” at Gettysburg. He turned the dead soldier’s head to face the camera and propped his own gun nearby.

This type of manipulation was not uncommon. Brady, too, had relocated bodies to pack a punch, emphasizing the tragedy of casualties both individual and en masse.

Brady and Alexander Gardner both headed up teams of photographers who spread across the country, documenting the destruction for their employers. Many of the resulting shots were credited to either Brady or Gardner and published in compilations of their work. (O’Sullivan’s “Rebel Sharpshooter” was credited to Gardner in *Gardner’s Photographic Sketch Book of the War*, published in 1866.)

Another of O’Sullivan’s images, “A Harvest of Death,” was printed in the book (this time with proper credit). Gardner wrote the accompanying words, lending color and emotional context to the visual:

*Slowly, over the misty fields of Gettysburg—as all reluctant to expose their ghastly horrors to the light—came the sunless morn, after the retreat by [General Robert. E.] Lee’s broken army. Through the shadowy vapors, it was, indeed, a “harvest of death” that was presented; hundreds and thousands of torn Union and rebel soldiers—although many of the former were already interred—strewed the now quiet fighting ground, soaked by the rain, which for two days had drenched the country with its fitful showers.*

A clear document of the battlefield action proved unattainable for these artists, but the images they could capture gave the artists and their publications ample material to shape and share. Sometimes they caught soldiers between skirmishes, posing them comfortably to endure the camera’s three-second exposure. More often, the photographers were setting up their byzantine cameras as the surviving soldiers moved forward and the dust—and the dead—reunited with the earth.

## MEEK INHERITS THE EARTH



**Left: “Sunrise over the Valley of Death,” snapped by A.J. Meek at Gettysburg in 1994, captures lowlands that saw terrible bloodshed on the second day of the July 1863 battle.**

One hundred and thirty years later, A.J. Meek waited for people to stop moving. They spilled out of a tour bus onto the Gettysburg grounds, littering the battlefield park where Meek had his lens trained.

“People ruin everything,” he half-joked when recalling the shoot in 2014. But the shots he had in mind for his project did not include milling tourists.

As he documented the battlefield parks in their

1993—1994 conditions, Meek worked in the present, considering the light and the composition of each frame. He carried with him the best equipment for precisely the photographs he wanted to make.

He was not out for a gimmick or to recreate the recognizable works of others. Ultimately, he brought his own perspective—one borne out of moving through the sacred grounds and accepting places as both tangible and transient—to a medium that rests uneasily between credibility and subjectivity.

Meek's photographs were published in *Gettysburg to Vicksburg: The Five Original Civil War Battlefield Parks* (University of Missouri Press, 2001). Writer Herman Hattaway provided the accompanying text, giving historical background to Meek's visual trek.

In the "Photographer's Comments" at the front of the book, Meek verbalized his experience. And like Brady, Gardner, and O'Sullivan, he did not trifle with impartiality:

*No longer can we hear the terrible noise of battle—men's cries amid exploding shells. Gone also is the destruction of war—the torn earth, the broken trees, the smell of death and black powder. Trees and grass have serenely covered the hills and rills of breastworks and gun emplacements. Yet, the feelings of profound sacrifice and strife remain.*

—A.J. Meek, "Gettysburg to Vicksburg: The Five Original Battlefield Parks"



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