



Detail from [Quarters of photographers attached to Engineer Corps in front of Petersburg, Petersburg, Va. March 1865](#). Prints and Photographs Division, Library of Congress.
Reproduction number: LC-B8184-7347

Photographers often want to communicate a thought or emotion with their work. Although the camera lens views the world impartially, the photographer constantly judges, deciding what to photograph and how to photograph it -- focusing on creating a strong image that will communicate the desired message. The words that accompany a photograph may also influence the way we "read" the picture.

The examples in this special presentation have been drawn from Alexander Gardner's 1865 [Gardner's Photographic Sketch Book of the War](#). They reveal that in order to achieve a more striking effect or to cater to the interest of the public, Gardner sometimes rearranged the elements in his photographs or departed from the facts in his writing.

Alexander Gardner, Mathew Brady, and *Gardner's Photographic Sketch Book of the War*



Title page lithograph by A.R. Ward, from [Gardner's Photographic Sketch Book of the War](#), Volume 1, Washington, D.C., Philip & Solomons, 1865 and 1866; (Reprint: *Photographic Sketch Book of the Civil War*, New York, Dover Publications, Inc., 1959).

The photographs and narratives examined in this special presentation appeared in Alexander Gardner's two-volume *Gardner's Photographic Sketch Book of the War*, in editions published in 1865 and 1866 (Washington, D.C., Philip & Solomons). The photographic historian William Stapp argues that Gardner's *Sketch Book* is a "major document in the history of American photography" that demonstrates "an advanced understanding of the principles of the photoessay," (in Marianne Fulton, *Eyes of Time: Photojournalism in America*, Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1988, p. 23, 28.)

Alexander Gardner began documenting the Civil War as one of the photographers supplying negatives to Mathew Brady, whose organization was reproducing and selling images of the conflict. These photographers were authorized by the government to accompany Union troops during the campaigns. Many of their photographs were first published and sold as prints, advertised for sale in catalogs that listed scenes of certain

engagements or individuals. These naturalistic representations of the war brought to the public vivid scenes of carnage and caused a sensation at the time. In addition, periodicals represented an important market for the photographs, where artists used them as guides for the lithographs or wood engravings that illustrated journal articles.

In the book *Witness to an Era: the Life and Photographs of Alexander Gardner* (New York: Viking Studio Books, 1990), the writer D. Mark Katz reports that in 1863 Gardner opened his own studio in Washington, D.C., and began marketing prints in competition with Brady. In July of that year, Gardner arrived on the scene on July 5, just two days after the battle ended. Gardner's team, including the former Brady photographer Timothy H. O'Sullivan, captured vivid images of the dead soldiers still unburied. Arriving one week later, Brady missed the opportunity to photograph the bodies, however, he had access to more knowledgeable guides and thus captured images of key battle sites. In the end, the press used more of Brady's photographs than Gardner's to illustrate stories about Gettysburg.

The 1,118 images in this online collection of Civil War photographs have not been reproduced from Gardner's *Sketch Book* but rather from copy negatives made from other prints held by the Prints and Photographs Division. Only "Harvest of Death" (Sketch Book Plate 36) has as its source a copy negative made from a print from the book.

In the catalog (database) for this collection, the titles or "captions" provided for the photographs were developed by Library of Congress staff in the 1950's using the best historical information available and no effort was made to use Gardner's titles for pictures that also appear in the *Sketch Book*. The square brackets enclosing the titles mark them as the work of Library staff.