

The eye of the camera does not pass judgment on its subjects. Yet Civil War photographers could stir patriotism with their photographs, praising their compatriots while pitying their foes. Photographer Alexander Gardner wrote poignant narratives to accompany his photographs, occasionally inventing stories to make his point. In his *Sketch Book*, Gardner used two photographs of these dead soldiers, identifying them first as Confederate and then as Union.

Compare the photographer's 1865 narratives with a contemporary analysis:

[Harvest of Death](#) | [Field Where General Reynolds Fell](#) | [Anaylysis](#)

A Harvest of Death



Copied from Gardner's Plate 36.

[Full Image](#) | [Bibliographic Record](#)

LC Caption: Incidents of the war. A harvest of death, Gettysburg, July, 1863. Photographed by Timothy H. O'Sullivan, July 1863. Prints and Photographs Division, Library of Congress.

Reproduction number: LC-B8184-7964-A

By Alexander Gardner

Text for Plate 36 in *Gardner's Photographic Sketch Book of the War*, published, 1865-66.

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 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 battle has been often the subject of elaborate description; but it can be described in one simple word, *devilish!* and the distorted dead recall the ancient legends of men torn in pieces by the savage wantonness of fiends. Swept down without preparation, the shattered bodies fall in all conceivable positions. The rebels represented in the photograph are without shoes. These were always removed from the feet of the dead on account of the pressing need of the survivors. The pockets turned inside out also show that appropriation did not cease with the coverings of the feet. Around is scattered the litter of the battle-field, accoutrements, ammunition, rags, cups and canteens, crackers, haversacks, &c., and letters that may tell the name of the owner, although the majority will surely be buried unknown by strangers, and in a strange land. Killed in the frantic efforts to break the steady lines of an army of patriots, whose heroism only excelled theirs in motive, they paid with life the price of their treason, and when the wicked strife was finished, found nameless graves, far from home and kindred.

Such a picture conveys a useful moral: It shows the blank horror and reality of war, in opposition to its pageantry. Here are the dreadful details! Let them aid in preventing such another calamity falling upon the

nation.

Field Where General Reynolds Fell. Battle-Field of Gettysburg.



Copied from glass, wet collodion negative from which Gardner made Plate 37.

[Full Image](#) | [Bibliographic Record](#)

LC Caption: Gettysburg, Pa. Bodies of Federal soldiers, killed on July 1, near the McPherson woods. Photographed by Timothy H. O'Sullivan, July 1863. Prints and Photographs Division, Library of Congress. Reproduction number: LC-B8171-0234

By Alexander Gardner

Text for Plate 37 in *Gardner's Photographic Sketch Book of the War*, published, 1865-66.

About nine o'clock on the morning of the 1st of July, 1863, the Federal cavalry, under General Buford, met the Confederates two miles beyond Gettysburg, on the road to Chambersburg. The rebel infantry was preceded by a small body of their cavalry, which dispersed the militia wherever met with, and which, charging into our cavalry, was captured, not a man escaping. The Confederates immediately threw a division of infantry into line, and advanced upon our cavalry, which dismounted, and by slowly falling back from one stone wall to another, impeded the progress of the enemy very materially. The cavalry had just taken up the last available line of defence beyond Gettysburg, when, eleven o'clock, General Reynolds arrived with the 1st corps on a double-quick. The enemy then halted for a short time, re-formed their lines, and prepared to charge, which was met by a severe fire from the advance of our infantry, which went into line as rapidly as the regiments could be brought up. General Reynolds, appreciating the importance of holding the Seminary Ridge, rode out into the field, and directed the posting of the troops, and while engaged in this work, received a shot in the neck, falling lifeless to the earth. His remains were brought off the field under a withering fire, which lasted until night, our troops, overwhelmed by numbers, slowly falling back, and finally taking a position on Cemetery Ridge, which was next day occupied by the rest of our army, and became the battle-ground of the succeeding days.

The dead shown in the photograph were our own men. The picture represents only a single spot on the long line of killed, which after the fight extended across the fields. Some of the dead presented an aspect which showed that they had suffered severely just previous to dissolution, but these were few in number compared with those who wore a calm and resigned expression, as though they had passed away in the act of prayer. Others had a smile on their faces, and looked as if they were in the act of speaking. Some lay stretched on their backs, as if friendly hands had prepared them for burial. Some were still resting on one knee, their hands grasping their muskets. In some instances the cartridge remained between the teeth, or the musket was held in one hand, and the other was uplifted as though to ward a blow, or appealing to heaven. The faces of all were pale, as though cut in marble, and as the wind swept across the battle-field it waved the hair, and gave the bodies such an appearance of life that a spectator could hardly help thinking they were about to rise to continue the fight.

The Analysis



Plate 36. Incidents of the War. A Harvest of Death. [Full Image](#)

Copied from Gardner's Plate 36. LC Caption: [Incidents of the war. A harvest of death, Gettysburg, July, 1863.](#) Photographed by Timothy H. O'Sullivan, July 1863. Prints and Photographs Division, Library of Congress. Reproduction number: LC-B8184-7964-A



Plate 37. Field where General Reynolds Fell. Battle-Field of Gettysburg. [Full Image](#)

Copied from the Glass, wet collodion negative from which Gardner made Plate 37. LC Caption: [Gettysburg, Pa. Bodies of Federal soldiers, killed on July 1, near the McPherson woods.](#) Photographed by Timothy H. O'Sullivan, July 1863. Prints and Photographs Division, Library of Congress. Reproduction number: LC-B8171-0234

In the text accompanying the first photograph -- Plate 36, titled *Incidents of the War. A Harvest of Death*. -- Alexander Gardner describes the soldiers as dishonored **Confederate** troops who paid for their treason with their lives, dying a lonely battlefield death, buried by strangers in graves far from home.

Close examination indicates, however, that the men in Plate 36 are the same soldiers seen in the second photograph -- Plate 37, titled *Field where General Reynolds Fell. Battle-Field of Gettysburg*. -- for which Gardner wrote a melancholy description of **Union** troops, calm and peaceful in death, so tranquil that they seem about to wake and rise.

Several clues indicate that the images are two views of the same scene taken from opposite sides. One of the most obvious clues is a piece of rumpled clothing that shows the diamond badge worn only by Union 3d Corps soldiers. The numbers identify the individual bodies; to confirm these identifications, researchers may wish to compare the placement of hands and feet. Other features of the men's uniforms permitted Frassanito to identify them as Union. Topographic clues convinced him that the photographs were made in open fields near the Rose farm and close to the Emmitsburg Road. Under General Dan Sickles, the Union 3d Corps suffered heavy losses around Emmitsburg Road. General John Reynolds, commander of the 1st Corps and mentioned in Gardner's title, fell at a different location.