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Mathew Brady and the Civil War

When civil war erupted between the United and Confederate states in 1861, few

expected a conflict of such length which would claim over 600,000 American lives.[1] The

extent and violence of the Civil War cannot be pinned to any single cause—but may be

well explained by the technological and methodological state of warfare at this point in

history. Such devastating losses had never before been seen in warfare, and that this

conflict became one of the first captured by photography appears, at first glance, rather

unfortunate. But a connection between the ghastly photographs of countless casualties

and the mismatch of weapons and tactics cannot be ignored. Photography had advanced

to the point of portability, but could not yet capture the rapid motion inherent in battles.

What was left for Mathew Brady and his team of war photographers? Still life: portraits,

landscapes, and the motionless dead. Mathew Brady built his fame on photographing the

political heroes of the day, chose to photograph the Civil War, and fell to professional

ruin after the war ended. The length and destruction of the Civil War forever changed the

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[1] Pauline Maier, M.R. Smith, A. Keyssar, and D.J. Kevles. *Inventing America: a History of the United States.* (New York, NY, 2003) p. 521

face of American heroism, and Mathew Brady cemented his own professional demise by capturing the horrific effects of this "modern" war, replacing lists of dead and reports of violence with stunning photographic images. While his images create a sad record of the death in the Civil War, his rise to and fall from fame expose another powerful image: that of an entire nation wounded and forever changed by the Civil War.

No clear record exists of Brady's birth or early life. He claimed a county in upstate New York as his birthplace, and an unverifiable birth date of 1823.[2] He arrived in New York City in 1839, an uneducated young man seeking work. His immediate interest in the new field of photography allowed him to become one of the first professionals of the process. That he learned the trade from Samuel Morse did not hurt: Brady met his first famous customers through this man of distinction.[3] His reputation as an excellent portraitist snowballed throughout the 1840s and 1850s, and he began realizing his dream to capture the history of America through his professional medium. Brady quickly set up a studio and began photographing the rich and famous. Rapid success offered Brady the luxury of picking his own subjects, and he "tirelessly sought to make as complete and true a record as possible of all the great personages of his time."[4] Brady commented that "the camera is the eye of history." His future mission to photograph the civil war was for him a logical extension of this historical record-keeping.

In 1858 his pursuit of the historical heroes of the day led Brady to Washington D.C., the place which more than anywhere else "cherished memories of the past and of its first illustrious citizens, the Founding Fathers."[5] His work was well accepted. One critic wrote that Brady's collection "concentrates and embalms the greatness of an era," and

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[2] George Hobart, *Masters of Photography: Mathew Brady.* (Great Britain, 1984) p. 1
[3] Ibid., p. 2
[4] Ibid., p. 2
[5] Mary Panzer. *Mathew Brady and the Image of History.* (Washington, 1997) p. 93

another "seemed to suggest that the mere exposure to a portrait could preserve and convey the full personality of a man like John C. Calhoun to one who had never known him."[6] In a time of such political unrest, the portraits of deceased political heroes displayed alongside those of active politicians offered comfort to a troubled public. Looking upon current politicians in Brady's studio allowed citizens to see them as future political heroes, not the group of men threatening governmental collapse. Here the stunning power of Brady's portraiture is most evident. His talent allowed him to create images of politicians on the brink of disunion that emanated strength and power equivalent to those historical heroes of generations past, men like Calhoun, Adams, and Jackson, whom Brady photographed before their deaths.[7]

However calming, Brady's images of Washington in the late 1850s made little attempt to cover the political dissention of the day. In 1860 Brady released a large composite image in which he "combined individual portraits of all 250 members of the House and Senate into two enormous panels three by five feet."[8] The panels represented far more than the portraits they contained. Patching together individual portraits— instead of photographing the Thirty-sixth Congress as a group—offered a subtle visualization of a faltering political body. At this time the House and Senate represented a group of individuals consumed by "sectional loyalties," not a single body of government.[9] Whether intentional or not, Brady captured this shattered government mere months before southern secession cemented the issue.

With war now imminent, Brady made a personal decision to photograph the approaching conflict. He later commented on the decision to document the war, "I felt

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[6] Ibid., p. 96
[7] Ibid., p. 99
[8] Ibid., p. 99
[9] Panzer, *Mathew Brady and the Image of History,* 101

that I had to go. A spirit in my feet said 'Go,' and I went."[10] What drove Brady from his successful studios in Washington D.C. and New York City? Why did he leave his international fame—his position of "society photographer supreme"[11]—for the dangerous, largely anonymous fields of battle? War photography was a new enterprise, as was all photography, but Brady was not the first. Roger Fenton's work on the Crimean war of 1855 would have been readily available at this time. His work combined with the portability of new photographic methods provided for a "universal and immediate" connection "between war and the camera."[12] Brady's drive also surely represents "an extension of his earlier efforts to accumulate portraits of men who could claim some significance for the present, and for posterity,"[13] yet exposes a deeper connection between Brady and his quest than earlier works suggest. Amassing wealth and fame collecting images of the rich and famous in a comfortable studio is one thing, but securing "permission from Washington officials to photograph the 'coming unpleasantness'—at his own expense"[14] represented an entirely different level of dedication. Brady truly viewed his art as "the eyes of history" and felt photographers held the duty of collecting such history. He collected, trained, and funded entire teams of photographers to follow him into the war. One thing is certain: Brady exhibited peculiarly keen insight into the coming change in American heroism. Politics failed to avert the Civil War—the conflict's resolution would emerge on the field of battle. Military leaders would replace the politicians in public esteem, and Brady positioned himself to capture these new heroes.

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[10] Ibid., p. 18
[11] Dorothy Kunhardt, and P.B. Kunhardt Jr. *Mathew Brady and His World.* (Alexandria, Virginia: 1977) p. 200
[12] Panzer, *Mathew Brady and the Image of History,* 101
[13] Ibid., p. 103
[14] Webb Garrison, *Brady's Civil War.* (Guilford, Connecticut, 2002) p. 6

Many believed that the Civil War would end within a few months, but as the "rebellion" became a full scale war both sides made haste in acquiring the most powerful and effective new weaponry. These new rifles represented a significant improvement over older muskets, decreasing the time required to load the weapon and increasing both firepower and accuracy. Soldiers armed with rifles could accurately attack enemies up to one hundred yards away and fire many times while marching before actually reaching enemy troops. In musket warfare of the past, soldiers could not expect to inflict damage past fifty yards, and might fire two or three times before engaging their opponents in direct combat. Because the Civil War was the first major military engagement to employ the new rifles as standard equipment, no tactics were available regarding their use on a large scale. Top military commanders of the time, such as Robert E. Lee and George B. McClellan, were well taught in the tactics of musket warfare and immediately applied these tactics on the first battlefields of the new rifle era. These engagements would prove a bloody testing ground for modern war: "This change [in weapon technology] made attacking more difficult and defense more effective. It took military officials some time to figure out what was going on and to change their tactical manuals accordingly."[15] This new technology, paired with aged tactics, created a dangerous situation where casualties from single battles reached levels before seen only over entire wars. One might consider the photographic documentation of the Civil War unfortunate—the most experienced military leaders had not witnessed violence of this level, yet Brady and his contemporaries provided such images to all of America.

This new level of warfare contained an interesting connection to the documentation of this violence: technology. The decades prior to Southern secession

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[15] Maier, et all, *Inventing America* 522

provided not only vast improvements in military technology but show a paralleled rapidity in civilian technological advancement. The invention and development of photography is an excellent example of this civilian progress. In the late 1830's, when Mathew Brady arrived in New York City looking for work, a French inventor released "one of the first methods of capturing an image by chemical means."[16] The process involved no negative, instead directly producing a single image, or "daguerreotype." Brady mastered the process. But the daguerreotype might be said to represent "musket" photography, and quickly became obsolete. A professional could only produce images approximately three by three inches in size, and each exposure created a single photograph—the lack of a negative meant no additional copies could be printed. By the 1850s a new method of photography replaced the old daguerreotype. A new "rifle" of photography, the collodion process created a glass negative that could be used to produce limitless copies of various sizes, including occasional life sized prints.[17] Brady quickly adapted to the change in equipment and mastered collodion, or glass-plate photography, as he had daguerreotypy.

The colloidon process offered huge advancements to portrait photography, but was limited in a non-studio setting by the time a glass-plate negative needed to be exposed to light. In the best of conditions, the chemical processes required four second exposures. For portrait photography before the Civil War, a subject would have no problem remaining motionless for such a short length of time. On the battlefield, however, soldiers were much less willing to stop and remain motionless for a four second exposure—the accurate weapons of their enemies could prove deadly in that time. Brady

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[16] Hobart, *Masters of Photography*, 1
[17] Ibid.*,* p. 4

and his contemporaries did amazing work with the technology of the day, yet leave us with a skewed memory of the Civil War in which battles remain conspicuously absent. One photograph displays blurred masses approaching one another on the fields of Antietam, obscured by smoke from their own weapons. Yet in this image, the sole photograph of Civil War battle, "the viewer feels the battle rage—but does not really see it."[18] Brady and his contemporaries risked everything to collect images of the Civil War, but the technology of the time forced an odd, partial record of the war in which conflict could not be directly photographed. The subjects remaining for war photographers included landscapes, portraits of generals and armies, and the dead. This incomplete account of the Civil War serves as our only visual description of the event, and has a great effect on how the conflict is remembered. Gone are the notions of glorious warfare, majestic battles, and honorable commanders depicted in paintings of ancient battles. Photography of the time replaced these glorifications with the darker reality of war's aftermath: shattered cities, trampled fields, and piles of dead strewn about like discarded dolls.

An interesting connection between these horrific images and the conditions which produced such scenes exposes why Brady's Civil War collection contains so many tragic photographs. In the late 1850s, both the military and photography sat in precarious developmental positions. New rifle technology vastly increased the power of weaponry, yet the leading generals of the age were instructed and experienced in tactics suited for musket warfare. Photography had become portable, freeing it from the confines of a studio—yet could not capture the action inherent in most non-studio situations. Had the war occurred before rifles became mainstream weapons, one might imagine a much less

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[18] Kunhardt, *Mathew Brady and His World.* 226

destructive war—a war that would have produced no photographs. If the war was delayed until generals educated in the use of rifle technology replaced their elder commanders, one might expect tactics designed to limit exposure of soldiers to enemy gunfire, thus drastically reducing casualties. Such a delay would also allow photography the time needed to develop processes capable of capturing rapid motion—and war photographers would most likely concentrate on the battles themselves, not the aftermath. Yet the reality of the Civil War is much different: war broke out in an unstable period between these two points. Soldiers fell dead in great numbers, and photography offered no means of capturing battle—only through photographing the excessive death and destruction of the Civil War could Brady and his contemporaries adequately describe the conflict.

While the Civil War eventually destroyed his source of business, Brady's experience in the war matured his photographic art, which reached a level unmatched by his pre-war photographs. Brady became one of the first individuals to embrace photography as art, not simply a means of capturing images. His early portraits differ little from paintings, with regally positioned figures in formal studio settings. This phenomenon is quite prevalent in the history of invention: the first automobiles looked nearly identical to horse drawn carriages, early motion pictures resembled plays, and the first computers might be confused for typewriters with screens. Over time, inventions such as these gain their own identities.

Photography made such advancements largely as a result of war documentation. Once Brady took his equipment into the field, he was forced to re-examine how he photographed portraits. He and his teams found limitless new backdrops to replace blank
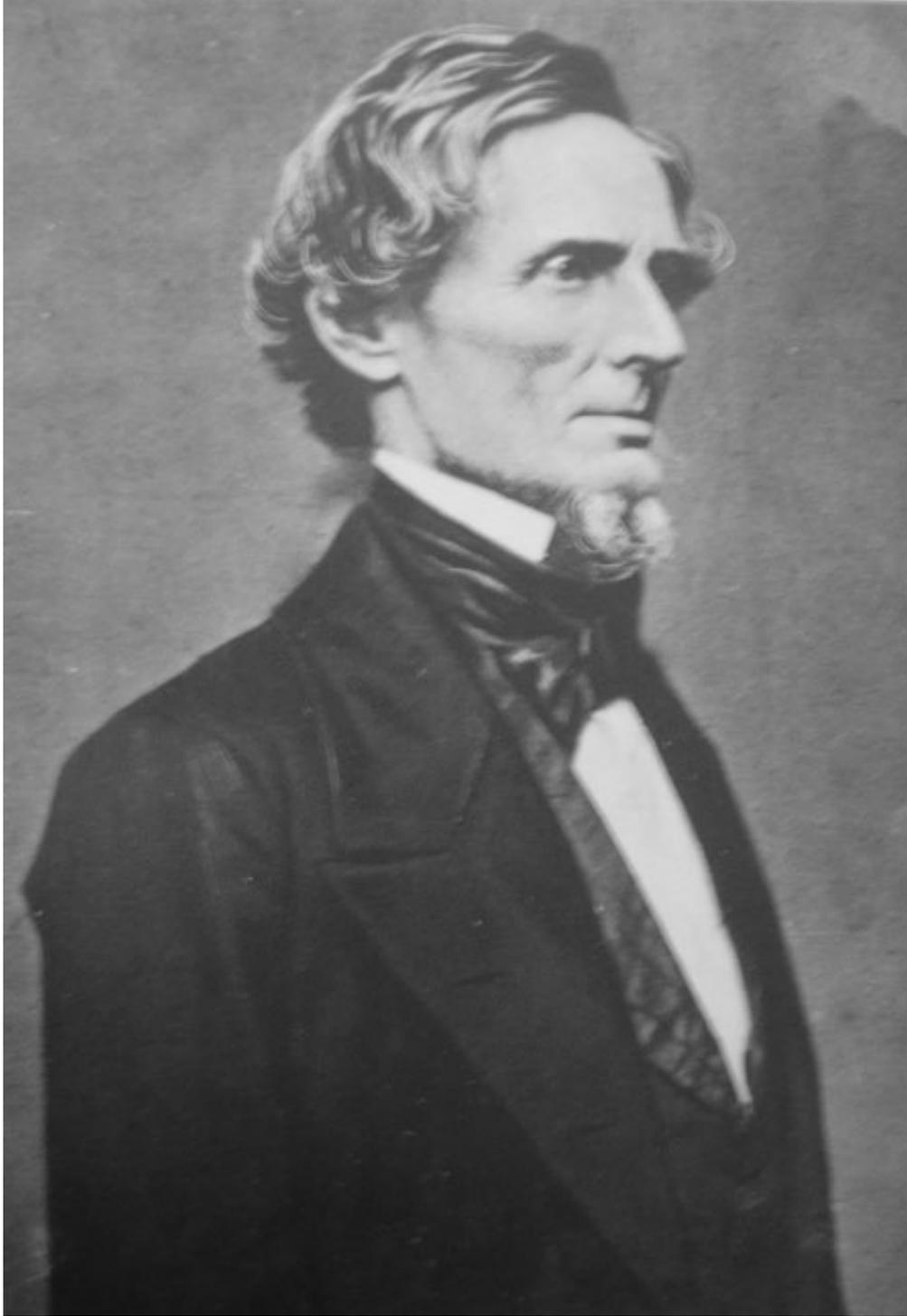
Brady's pre-war studio portraits exhibit many likenesses to painted portraits. Photography offered no reason to avoid transitory details, but Brady's early work did not explore these strengths. The art of photography had yet to emerge from the shadow of painting. Brady and his team explored the strengths and weaknesses of photography throughout the Civil War, when studios were rarely convenient. Image Source: Garrison, W. *Brady's Civil War.* (Guilford, CT: 2002) p. 216.

studio walls: campsites, forests, and landscapes. The settings of his wartime portraits represent only a small change in his art form. In the painted portraits of the past, "the ideal quality of a portrait depended upon the portraitist's ability to separate the essential from the circumstantial."[19] Brady could duplicate this separation in carefully controlled studio settings. But when he and his teams entered the business of photographing war, they were confronted with a change in the very nature of their work. No longer did they capture only the makers of history—taking their equipment into the field allowed the photographers to capture history itself, as it unfolded. And they found that in the field, the circumstantial details became essential. The soldiers and locations so prominent in Brady's war collection would never have made it to his pre-war studio, because "these figures occupy a distinct place and time; the location of the camp, the hour of the day, the very objects that surround the sitter all fix the subject within a particular historical moment."[20] Without the circumstantial surroundings, such photographs carried little weight. Through exercising the portability of photography and its distinct ability to capture transient details, Brady pushed his portraiture from a replication of painting techniques to an original form of art and documentation. This advancement in his art alone did not provide enough momentum for his professional survival after the war ended.

War offered another change in portraiture, the photography of the dead. Gruesome images of lifeless bodies strewn carelessly about by rifle fire—or worse, lined up in neat rows for burial—provided civilians across the North a direct view into the horrors of war. The public viewed these images with "a terrible fascination" during the

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[19] Panzer, *Mathew Brady and the Image of History,* 106
[20] Ibid., p. 106

Campsites and battlefields of the Civil War offered countless new backdrops for Brady and his team. The use of these backdrops and a lack of complete control over simple details changed Brady's photography. For example, notice the man on the far left who has a pipe in his mouth and a cigar in his hand—such a mistake in the posing of subjects in the studio would not occur. Instead of photographing the makers of history, Brady was photographing history itself. Image Source: Garrison, W. *Brady's Civil War.* (Guilford, CT: 2002) p. 40.

war and rejected them completely afterwards.[21] Warfare always produced casualties, yet

never on this scale—and never delivered such images directly to the public. An 1862

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[21] Panzer, *Mathew Brady and the Image of History,* 109

New York Times review of Brady's work at Antietam commented that war casualties appeared "like a funeral next door… We recognize the battle-field as a reality, but it stands as a remote one," and "our sensations might be different if the newspaper carrier left the names on the battle-field and the bodies at our doors instead." The review continues to claim that Brady's photographs did just this: "If he has not brought bodies and laid them in our door-yards and along the streets, he has done something very like it."[22]

These photographs captivated the public while war raged on, yet in the end contributed to a larger shift in American heroism during and after the Civil War. By producing such images, Brady aided in the downfall of his old political "hero," offering visualizations of the destruction which these politicians only temporarily evaded through compromise. The post-war public, which five years earlier held such compromisers in great regard, saw such political tactics as a direct cause of the Civil War, and afterwards "their ideals of moderation and compromise inspired no one."[23] Brady offered images of a new hero to the American people: military leaders of Mexican War fame who firmly took sides on the secession issue and bravely fought for their beliefs. The public voraciously consumed images of "the glamour and pomp of Scott and McClellan."[24] One reporter remarked that such military leaders "are as brilliant but as distant from us as planets; it is a pleasure to have these planets photographed and be upon whispering terms with the Generals who are now to the nation as gods."[25] But the war dragged on, and these majestic fighters met with little success, a new breed of military leaders took their place. These men—men like Sherman and Grant—provided the tactics and force

[22] Ibid., p. 106-107
[23] Panzer, *Mathew Brady and the Image of History,* 110
[24] Ibid., p. 110
[25] Ibid., p. 103

required to bring about an end to the civil war. Yet they were no heroes. They won battles through "ruthlessness and efficiency," and sacrificed great numbers of lives in the pursuit of victory.[26] When war finally ended, the public was left with no true heroes who might stand up to the ideal heroism which America subscribed to before conflict broke out. A new "hero" arose from the common, anonymous soldier. These men represented, for post-war Americans, the only figures in the war not marred by playing a role in secession or directing the deaths of so many. Brady's work not only exposed the brutality of military leaders, but also supported this new private hero. His photographs "allowed viewers to see the war through the eyes of their loved ones,"[27] and provided images in which "the private soldier has just as good a likeness as the General."[28]

During the war, the photographs which facilitated changes in American heroism met with great success and increased Brady's fame. Images of battlefields, soldiers, and generals provided an exciting look into the conflict that words simply could not reproduce. Landscapes supplied "a screen on which [viewers] could project a private version of the battle."[29] Even the photographs of dead produced a sense of wonder in the minds of people who knew casualties as lists of names and no more.

Yet Brady fell from fame and fortune in the years after the Civil War ended. He returned to his studios in New York expecting to amass a fortune on selling his Civil War collection, after which he could return to photographing the distinguished leaders of the day. "For Brady and his generation, the nation's past was still almost within reach of personal memory, and the future stretched ahead, a long, continuous procession of great men," even though his own personal work helped destroy the foundations of this

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[26] Ibid., p. 110
[27] Ibid., p. 110
[28] Ibid., p. 106
[29] Panzer, *Mathew Brady and the Image of History,* 109

"continuous procession."[30] The <u>New York Times</u> offered a more successful prediction, expecting Brady's images to "make common mortals of many a… living idol."[31] However, the use of Brady's images as news reporting died with the war, and would only re-emerge as historically important documentation decades later. In addition, the men returning home needed no reminder of their experiences: "the truth of the war was too much to bear for those who had suffered through those four horrible years."[32] The conditions in which Brady rose to fame involved a society willing to pay high prices for high quality photographs of political heroes. War effectively destroyed the heroism in politics and offered no replacement—post-war Americans preferred photographs of family members to political heroes, and Brady could make no money in such an enterprise. America now desired low cost, low quality personal photographs. In the words of Rose Greenhow, a Confederate spy, the pre-war years seemed "to belong almost to another state of being," than the post-war society.[33] Brady fell into poverty under such conditions, and sacrificed much of his collection to fund the storage of what remained.

Why was Brady able to follow the changing trends of heroism into the Civil War, yet unable to predict or prepare for the eventual destruction of the "hero" on which he built his fame? Brady was reluctant to sacrifice the belief that a "continuous procession of great men" would stretch out from the Civil War.[34] He obviously understood—as he struck off to photograph the war—that his beloved political heroes would give way to new definitions of heroism. Yet his belief in photography as an art form, and his love for capturing the images of rich and famous Americans must have inflicted him with a

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[30] Ibid., p. 110
[31] Ibid., p. 110
[32] Hobart, *Masters of Photography*, 8
[33] Panzer, *Mathew Brady and the Image of History,* 111
[34] Ibid., p. 110

Brady's Civil War collection remains one of the few sources of images relaying the devastation of the war. While the photographs of fallen soldiers were often staged by Brady's teams, even those untouched by the photographers had been "posed". The bottom photograph, taken after the battle of Antietam, is one of many lines of dead men captured on film. Note the visual likeness to the top image, a photograph of officers observing a court martial hearing. But the posing of the dead in the bottom photograph was not done by photographers—these men were arranged for burial. Brady photographed battlefields after truces between opponents allowed for the burial of fallen men, nearly eliminating the chances of completely untouched scenes of death. Image Source (both images): Garrison, W. *Brady's Civil War.* (Guilford, CT: 2002) p. 217.

stubborn blindness to the approaching elimination of his trade. How else could a man of such insight into heroism emerge from the war unable to remain out of debt? Perhaps Brady was simply unwilling to give up his artistic pursuits in conjunction with the public desire for inexpensive "portraits for their family albums, showing men and women who inspired more private memories."[35] He felt an unexplainable draw to historically significant images, and "an old [photograph] sent home by a soldier, or the frank charm of a picture of an actress,"[36] hardly satisfied his understanding of the camera as "the eyes of history." In this time where photography of historical importance drifted from public interest, so did Brady "slip into quiet obscurity."[37]

Yet in some way this fall from fame represents no blindness or false judgment at all, but instead another stride in Brady's attachment to the historical significance of his Civil War collection. Just as he sacrificed his life and fortune to follow United States armies into battle against the Confederacy to collect photographs, Brady surrendered his chances at emerging from poverty for the protection of as much of his collection as possible. He slowly auctioned off single negatives to fund the storage of those remaining, saving as many as he could until Congress eventually purchased what was left of the collection.[38] Brady suffered ten years of poverty to preserve his precious historical photographs when he might have easily moved to other, more profitable measures and allowed his collection to fall into ruin. While only a fraction of his original ten thousand photograph collection survived until the present, history owes a debt of gratitude to Brady: that any images survived is amazing, given the circumstances.

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[35] Ibid., p. 111
[36] Ibid., p. 111
[37] Hobart, *Masters of Photography*, 8
[38] Hobart, *Masters of Photography*, 8

Mathew Brady quietly passed away in 1896, leaving the world in the same obscurity with which he entered. For a brief period in history Brady enjoyed great fame that he sacrificed in the pursuit of his desire to photograph the Civil War. But Brady's intuition into the historical importance of photography, while providing his eventual demise, cemented his position as a great historical figure. His images expose the horrific violence of the Civil War in a way with which words could not hope to compete. Furthermore, Brady's rapid rise to fame before the war and even quicker fall after the conflict ended exposes much about the societal and political changes which the Civil War created in America. An analysis of the work and life of Mathew Brady offers an interesting, original view of a traumatic time in American history. While Brady's photographs provide direct images of moments in time, his life exposes a grander image of the entire historical period in which he lived.

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