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INTRODUCTION

Gathering the Dead

ANTIETAM (SEEING)

FOR THE FIRST decades of the young medium's existence, photography was most closely associated with portraiture. Men, women, and children sat before the camera to have their likeness captured. These portraits registered an animate presence, even if long exposure times necessitated many seconds of stiff motionlessness in order to avoid any blurring. The dead had an easier time with this, and photographs of deceased loved ones—especially children—became increasingly common. Some were shown on their deathbed or in a coffin, while others were made to appear alive again, dressed in their best clothes, sitting with relatives or held in a mother's arms.¹ But during the mid-nineteenth century a very different type of photograph emerged, a kind of perverse hybrid between a postmortem portrait and an outdoor view: dead bodies lying on a battlefield. The first photographs taken of the dead immediately after battle were made in 1860 in China during the Second Opium War (1856–60) by Felice Beato, a native of the Ionian island of Corfu, which was then under British colonial rule (fig. 2). In 1858 during the Indian Rebellion Beato had taken photographs that depicted the decaying remains of Bengalese soldiers killed by the British at the Secundra (Sikander) Bagh at Lucknow four months earlier (fig. 3).² British bodies had, by contrast, been quickly interred.³ Beato's images taken in India and China were intended for an English audience. They were exhibited in

Detail of Antietam, Md. Bodies of Confederate Dead Gathered for Burial (see fig. 4).



FIGURE 2. (left) Felice Beato, *After the Capture of the Taku Forts*, 1860. Albumen silver print, 10 1/4 × 11 3/4 in. (26 × 29.9 cm).



FIGURE 3. (right) Felice Beato, *Interior of Secundrabagh After the Massacre*, c. 1858–62. Albumen silver print, 9 7/16 × 11 5/16 in. (24 × 28.7 cm). Printed by Henry Hering.

London and sold in sets; engravings of the photographs of the captured Chinese fort at Taku (Dagu) also appeared in the *Illustrated London News*.⁴ In the United States, battlefield pictures were first produced on September 17, 1862, the Civil War's single bloodiest day (23,000 casualties). Unlike Beato's images, which focused solely on foreign, nonwhite, "enemy" bodies, the American images showed white bodies on domestic ground. When these photographs of the Battle of Antietam were exhibited in New York City, published in the press, and sold as stereographs and cabinet cards, the American public saw war as never before.

Taken by a young Scottish immigrant, Alexander Gardner, who was working at the time for the celebrated studio led by Mathew Brady, these photographs depict the rolling farmland of Maryland punctuated by corpses and debris. The dead lie scattered about in some images, a wagon or a house sometimes joining them. In others they can be seen in the sunken dirt road that would become known as "Bloody Lane," where many fell and were later buried. But I want to focus on one (fig. 4) notable for its order and symmetry. A line of bodies occupies one side of the picture, beginning in the center foreground and curving out to a point at the left edge before turning back to the center again, forming a kind of boomerang shape, a geometric dynamism at odds with the immobility of the dead that would have been particularly emphasized in the stereographic version. All but the nearest man are turned in the same direction, feet facing in, heads out, with arms often stretched above or stiffened hands eerily reaching up into the air, their poses in death frozen as rigor mortis set in. The closest body, angled straight toward us, provides the visual link between the viewer and this grim procession.



Following the chaos of battle, the deceased have been neatly gathered, as if mustered into formation for their last roll call. The arrangement does not appear to have any immediate relationship to the requirements of burial. Typically, the enemy dead, like these Confederate soldiers, would be interred in mass graves consisting of long trenches or a series of shallow consecutive graves.⁵ The earth remains unbroken around these bodies, and where and how they will be put into the ground is unclear. Here they are, instead, laid out for view: to be seen by those they fought against on this very field and to be seen—as a photograph—by the northern public. There is a morbid military geometry at work that attempts to impose structure on the carnage and that presents a sense of dutiful service, as much a commentary on the Union troops who respectfully made these lines of bodies as about their fallen southern adversaries.

FIGURE 4. Alexander Gardner, *Antietam, Md. Bodies of Confederate Dead Gathered for Burial*, September 19, 1862. Wet-plate collodion stereoscopic glass negative (right half).



FIGURE 5.
*Unidentified Soldier
in Union Frock Coat
and Forage Cap with
Bayoneted Musket and
Revolver, c. 1861–65.*
Hand-colored tin-
type, 3 3/4 × 3 1/4 in.
(9.5 × 8.3 cm).

The audience for these images would have been accustomed to seeing soldiers standing erect in uniform, caps on their heads, weapons by their side (fig. 5). Countless such photographs were taken in cities and towns across the United States as boys and men enlisted or before they went into battle, ducking into a simple canvas tent that served as a makeshift portrait studio near the front lines, where a cheap tintype could be made and sent home to loved ones, proof of being alive, at least at that moment. Gardner's photographs presented the other possibility. Installed in the gallery on Broadway of the most famous portrait photographer in the United States (fig. 6), where the visages of "Illustrious Americans" could be contemplated from dimpled velvet banquettes, these pictures brought the dead home.⁶ They arrived not in coffins bedecked with flowers, but as "dripping bodies, fresh from the field, laid along the pavement." They elicited not the detached attention of witnessing a "funeral next door," but the sensation of having "the corpse ... carried out over your own threshold," as a *New York Times* reviewer put it. In the same remarkable and oft-cited article, the writer describes the "crowds of

people" who have come to see this exhibition announced by "a little placard, 'The Dead of Antietam.'" These viewers stand close to the photographs, "loath to leave."

You will see hushed, reverend groups standing around these weird copies of carnage, bending down to look in the pale faces of the dead, chained by the strange spell that dwells in dead men's eyes.... These pictures have a terrible distinctness. By the aid of the magnifying glass, the very features of the slain may be distinguished.⁷

The text contends with the shock of such recognition. It is not the recognition of personal familiarity, but rather of the photograph's power to show us individuated death at scale. While the list of the names of the dead was published every morning in newspapers across the North and posted in town squares, "the horrible significance that dwells amid the jumble of type" is easily forgotten: that each name corresponds to a corpse. These men did "not give the sun sittings" for their photographic portrait in any conventional sense. Instead, the pictures were "taken



as they fell.” “Sun pictures”—so often the moniker for photography in its early years—acquires a new resonance here; the sun has blistered the skin of the dead, “hastening corruption” of the body, while simultaneously enabling the photographer to expose his plate and record the scene in “perpetuity.” The sun decomposes the bodies as the photographer uses this same solar power to capture an image of the dead before their features disappear. If there was, as Walt Whitman wrote in 1846 after visiting a daguerreotype gallery, a “strange fascination of looking at the eyes of a portrait,” there was also, as the *Times* reporter found, “a terrible fascination” in looking into a dead man’s eyes.⁸

What death in wartime actually looked like was undeniably grotesque. Throughout the article, and in an earlier *New York Times* notice about the photographs, the writers focus on this abject element (“bleeding, mangled corpse[s]”; “blackened faces, distorted features, expressions most agonizing”) that would have been visually unfamiliar to all but the battlefield veteran.⁹ History paintings omitted such aspects of military engagement. Death was clean, narratives of sacrifice and honor apparent. Artists’ representations printed in the weekly illustrated newspapers drew closer to

FIGURE 6. A. Berghaus, “M. B. Brady’s New Photographic Gallery, Corner of Broadway and Tenth Street, New York,” *Frank Leslie’s Illustrated Newspaper*, January 5, 1861. Wood engraving.



FIGURE 7.
“Scenes on the Battle-
field of Antietam,”
Harper’s Weekly,
October 18, 1862.
Wood engraving.

the bodies, but still eschewed the distressing particularities of wartime death and suffering until later in the conflict. Even the engraved translations of Gardner’s Antietam photographs, which appeared in a full-page spread in *Harper’s Weekly* (fig. 7) at the same time as the photographs themselves were on view at Brady’s gallery, lacked the specifically shocking elements. The bridge over Antietam Creek—the site of a particularly long and ferocious engagement between Confederate sharpshooters and Union infantry—occupies the largest and most central space of the layout and features only two patrolling soldiers amid an otherwise serene scene. The overall effect is a kind of pastoral stillness, as if this landscape—scrubbed of the human debris of battle and without the explicit signs of trampled and scorched earth—had already been turned into a sacred place, where bodies had come to rest in a place of church-like quiet that bore no overt signs of violence.

In the engravers’ interpretation of the photograph of bodies arranged for burial (fig. 8), slight changes enable this tonal shift. The row has been centered to create



FIGURE 8.
Detail of “Scenes on
the Battle-field of
Antietam” (see fig. 7).

a more symmetrical composition in the print, the boomerang shape has become a gentle arc echoed by the billowy clouds above, the bodies blur into a repetitive similarity, the singed and scrubby grass is rendered unremarkable as a series of quick lines and areas of shade, a stone wall has been added and defines the middle ground, a far hill and another large tree now mark the background, the sky consumes far more of the picture. If the photograph brings the dead close, the print keeps its distance.¹⁰

Oliver Wendell Holmes—a physician, poet, and early essayist on photography—wrote about the visual challenges posed by Gardner’s Antietam photographs.

Let him who wishes to know what the war is look at this series of illustrations. These wrecks of manhood thrown together in careless heaps or ranged in ghastly rows for burial were alive but yesterday.... It was so nearly like visiting the battle-field to look over these [photographic] views, that all the emotions excited by the actual sight of the stained and sordid scene, strewed with rags and wrecks, came back to us, and we buried them in the recesses of our cabinet as we would have buried the mutilated remains of the dead they too vividly represented.¹¹

To “look at” or “look over” Gardner’s “views” both recalls the “actual sight” of the battlefield for Holmes and triggers the same repressive impulse. He had witnessed that “stained and sordid scene” when he had gone in search of his son, Oliver Wendell Holmes Jr., a future Supreme Court justice, who was wounded at Antietam and nearly died. The photograph—with its excessive visibility—enables an extraordinary proximity to the dead and necessitates a “burial” away from consciousness, deep in the crypt-like “cabinet” of the mind. The essay “Doings of the Sunbeam,” published in the *Atlantic Monthly*, largely focuses on the chemical (and chimerical) aspects of photographic production, detailing the making of a negative into a positive print, the workings of a commercial studio, and the range of photographic portraiture.¹² The discussion of Gardner’s photographs is a strange interlude in the middle of the text that ends as quickly as it arrives, as if Holmes is demonstrating the necessity of placing these disturbing images back into the “recesses” of memory, away from the light of the sun, reversing their exposure and returning them to the realm of the unseen.¹³

GETTYSBURG (SPEAKING)

The war continued and the bodies remained visible. Less than a year after Antietam, arguably the most famous photograph of the war was taken following a battle waged on a wheat field in Gettysburg, Pennsylvania: Timothy O’Sullivan’s *A Harvest of Death* (fig. 9). Two details lend the image its particular charge. One is the spectral figure on horseback in the hazy depths of the picture. Like a grim reaper come to take these souls away, he offers an allegorical framework through which to read the image, especially in light of the photograph’s title. The background encourages generalization, the horseman as Death.¹⁴ In the foreground, the other detail—the face of the central figure rendered in devastatingly crisp focus—eludes symbolism entirely and instead confronts us with time’s marked effects on the body. The face is turned toward us, eyes squeezed shut, lips heavily swollen, mouth agape as if to speak. We immediately linger here, intuitively reading for emotion. The mouth, Oliver Wendell Holmes writes in “Doings of the Sunbeam,” is the “facial sign” that “reveals the nature of the individual.” This is where so many “muscles of expression converge” and where “the battles of the soul record their varying fortunes and results.” The photograph of the mouth is the visual equivalent to tone in the voice.¹⁵ But in O’Sullivan’s picture, character traits have been silenced. The body’s decomposition is, instead, vividly represented. When *Harper’s Weekly* would later publish an engraving, they chose to create a composite of four photographs taken



at the battle (fig. 10). The man on horseback is no longer a striking feature. All the faces in the foreground appear peaceful, mouths closed or lips gently parted, as if to accept their fate.

The focus on the face in *A Harvest of Death* contrasts with Alexander Gardner's Antietam photograph, in which we make contact with the image through a dead man's feet, angled out toward us, before quickly continuing through the solid chain of bodies. In O'Sullivan's picture, our attention is narrowed—one might even say snared—on the face. From there we may notice that this man's limbs and chest are distended, that he lacks shoes (no doubt scavenged by those still living), that his right knee is raised at an angle that obscures the face of the man beside him.¹⁶ When Gardner published O'Sullivan's image in his *Photographic Sketch Book of the*

FIGURE 9. Timothy H. O'Sullivan, *A Harvest of Death, Gettysburg, Pennsylvania*, July 4, 1863. Albumen silver print, 7 × 8 11/16 in. (17.8 × 22.1 cm). Printed by Alexander Gardner.



FIGURE 10. “The Harvest of Death, Gettysburg, July 4, 1863,” *Harper’s Weekly*, July 22, 1865. Wood engraving.

War (1865–66), two volumes of fifty photographs each with a short text, he chose to place it one-third of the way through, as plate 36.¹⁷ All the previous plates feature unremarkable landscapes, aspects of military infrastructure, or key wartime locales. Nothing prepares the viewer for this photograph. “Here are the dreadful details!” the text exclaims. “Let them aid in preventing such another calamity falling upon the nation.”¹⁸

As in Gardner’s *Confederate Dead Gathered for Burial*, here we see many fallen soldiers. But unlike the earlier image, they are not neatly arranged for burial and, what is more, they occupy the entire frame. They are cropped off at the edges; they are in full view at the center; they dissolve into the distance beyond. These bodies had been lying on the field for days, not out of neglect or disrespect, but because there was no other choice. Burial required time, men, and resources, and as the war entered its third year, even the most basic rituals of death became difficult if not impossible to perform. This is what made Clara Barton’s work so necessary.

To consecrate the cemetery at Gettysburg on November 19, 1863, Abraham Lincoln uttered what would become the most famous speech of the war and arguably in the whole of American history. After Edward Everett's two-hour keynote oratory, Lincoln rose to deliver his three-minute address. "Now we are engaged in a great civil war, testing whether that nation, or any nation so conceived, and so dedicated, can long endure. We are met on a great battle-field of that war. We have come to dedicate a portion of that field, as a final resting place for those who here gave their lives, that that nation might live." If Everett gave the rhetorical equivalent of a whole cycle of large-scale history paintings, Lincoln gave an address that has a certain photographic sensibility. There is a precision and specificity, a focus on the field on which they stood that day. Lincoln's insistent use of the word "here" also aligns his language with the indexical nature of photography. This one-syllable word, which he repeats like an incantation, is an index of both time and space, past and present.¹⁹ It turns a field into a sacred site and a sacred site into a collective resolution. There is no "I" in the speech, only "they" (in the past) and "we" (in the present). Where the dead and the living meet, where devotion is given (in blood) and renewed (in language), is "here."

The world will little note, nor long remember what we say here, but it can never forget what they did here. It is for us the living, rather, to be dedicated here to the unfinished work which they who fought here have thus far so nobly advanced. It is rather for us to be here dedicated to the great task remaining before us—that from these honored dead we take increased devotion to that cause for which they gave the last full measure of devotion.²⁰

Soldiers who had died at the Battle of Gettysburg were reburied in the new national cemetery that Lincoln dedicated on that November day. But winter's early arrival had frozen the earth and halted the reinterment of bodies until the spring.²¹ The task was not yet complete; the "unfinished work" remained even on those very fields.

Lincoln well understood the power of the new medium of photography and often had his portrait taken. In his early years as a politician, he sat for Mathew Brady and, during the war, for Alexander Gardner, who had by then left Brady's studio to establish his own in Washington, DC, taking his Antietam photographs with him and employing Timothy O'Sullivan. Lincoln was reportedly Gardner's first customer in the new space in the nation's capital. It is likely that Lincoln saw the battlefield photographs of Gettysburg during one of his visits, and that he had seen the Antietam photographs at Brady's gallery earlier in the war. The president had

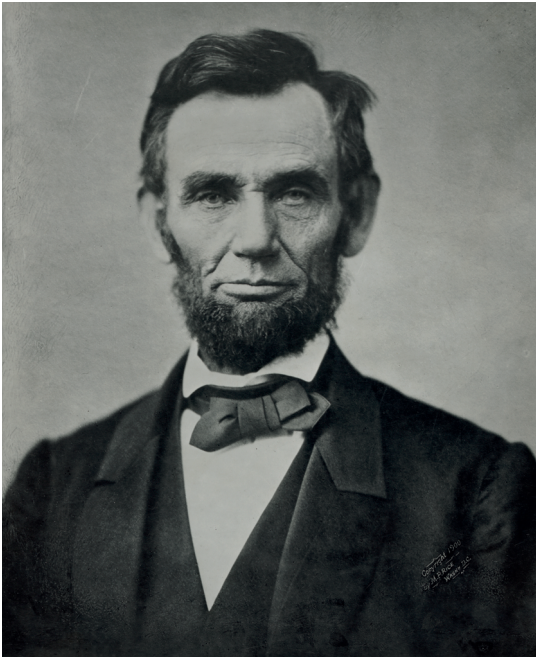


FIGURE 11.
Alexander Gardner,
Abraham Lincoln,
November 8, 1863.
Photographic print.
Printed c. 1900.

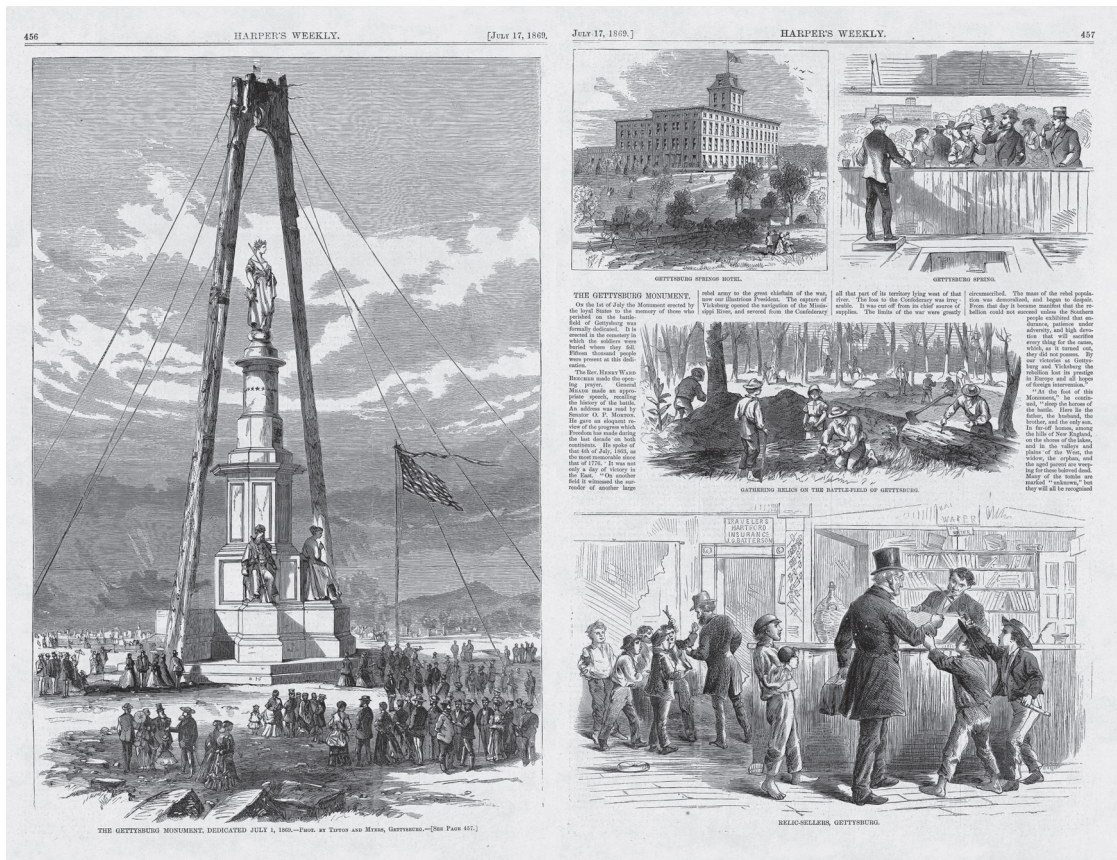
sat for his portrait at Gardner's studio on November 8, 1863 (fig. 11), less than two weeks before he would consecrate the cemetery at Gettysburg. He would write his famous speech in the days leading up to the ceremony. David Ward has argued that the Gettysburg Address was, in part, shaped by Lincoln's "photographic encounter" with the dead. The "chasteness" of his language responds to—and, indeed, honors—the fallen. The spare force of the Gettysburg photographs may have offered a source for a new rhetorical form.²²

As Lincoln delivered his famous address, townspeople sold relics from the battle on tables set up on the surrounding sidewalks.²³ When a monument was erected there after the war, an article about its unveiling featured not only an engraving of the sixty-foot classical column with an allegorical figure of Liberty atop it, but two facing images depicting the gathering and selling

of relics (fig. 12).²⁴ Such objects served as small, fragmentary reminders of the horrors that had occurred on those fields; at Gettysburg alone there were approximately 50,000 casualties over three days. An object from the site of death marked a presence, an invocation of "here."

COLD HARBOR (BURYING)

In the final month of the war, John Reekie, a photographer working for Alexander Gardner and also a Scottish immigrant, took a photograph of five African American men digging graves. *A Burial Party, Cold Harbor, Virginia* (fig. 13) is one of the most haunting images of the war. Two men stoop over their shovels, one rests against his, another (rather blurry) appears to bend down to grasp a skull, the closest man sits just behind a mangy array of bones, skulls, bloodied cloth, and body parts. There are several mounds of fresh earth. The Antietam pictures captured the casualties of the Civil War for the first time. *A Harvest of Death* brought us in to look more closely at a single face while suggesting a symbolic framework through which to understand the entire scene. In Reekie's photograph there are no discrete corpses; on the stretcher is a mass of decomposing flesh and bones left over from two battles fought



long before: Gaines' Mill (June 1862) and Cold Harbor (June 1864). Here is why the task of naming and identifying the dead that Clara Barton took up at nearly the same moment would always be insurmountable. This photograph asks us not only to consider how impossible the traditional rituals of death and burial have become, but also *who* is doing this burying, what their relationship with the dead is, and what it means to look at the face of a Black man beside a bleached white skull in 1865.

Who dug the graves of the soldiers killed in action was a fraught issue. When it became clear early in the war that casualties would be high and that the conflict would not be brief, the Union Army issued an edict making commanding officers responsible for the burial of the soldiers "who died within their jurisdiction." Each grave should be marked with an inscribed headboard (name, state) and a register should identify the dead and their place of interment.²⁵ But, as Drew Gilpin

FIGURE 12. "The Gettysburg Monument, Dedicated July 1, 1869," "Gathering Relics on the Battle-field of Gettysburg," and "Relic-sellers, Gettysburg," *Harper's Weekly*, July 17, 1869. Wood engravings.



FIGURE 13.
John Reekie, *A Burial Party, Cold Harbor, Virginia*, 1865.
Albumen silver print,
10 × 15 1/8 in. (25.5 ×
38.5 cm).

Faust points out, the Union Army had neither “regular burial details” nor “graves registration units.” The Confederate Army passed similar regulations, but likewise lacked the infrastructure or personnel to accomplish their aims. Burying the dead after battle became “an act of improvisation.”²⁶ A cease-fire or truce could be brokered to enable the wounded to be tended to and the dead buried, but—as at Cold Harbor—such negotiations could be long and contentious, resulting in yet more fatalities on the field. If retreat occurred first, the victor was expected to contend with the casualties on both sides, as at Antietam. If tactical matters forced both armies to leave the field, the local townspeople might dig the graves.²⁷ At Cold Harbor, no one would bury the dead until the men pictured by Reekie were assigned the task more than a year later.²⁸

The burdens of burial fell first to ordinary soldiers, and those lowest in the military hierarchy were often conscripted for the morbid duty. These might be privates

or orderlies; they could be white or Black. In Gardner's photographs of Antietam, only white Union troops oversee (on horse) and enact (on foot) the tasks of burial. This was before African Americans could enlist (enabled by the Emancipation Proclamation of January 1863), although many free and recently self-emancipated men were already part of the Union war effort as servants, cooks, and laborers. By the end of the war, when Reekie took his photograph, African American soldiers were a large and vital part of the Union Army: approximately 180,000 enlisted, comprising 10 percent of the forces (another 20,000 served in the Navy). A majority—an estimated two-thirds—had been enslaved when the war began.²⁹

In *A Burial Party*, four of the men are identifiable as Union soldiers: they wear the “forage cap” of the Union uniform (based on the French kepi) with its unmistakable flat and sunken shape. They toil on this open field in the southern heat without their military-issued jackets, which would have marked them even more distinctly. Here, in other words, is an image of soldiers burying soldiers.³⁰ While we may not know these soldiers' names and personal histories, and while they may be charged with a morbid and menial task, we must acknowledge the signs of their military status and their military service. The image also makes visible the inequities at work in such service. As John David Smith notes, Black soldiers were routinely assigned the harshest duties, including “an excessive amount of fatigue labor.”³¹ One sees more of this labor in other photographs taken by Reekie that same day, which were reproduced later in the century as stereographs (fig. 14).

The central figure in *A Burial Party* is more perplexing. He does not wear a Union cap, but rather a dark knit hat. He dons a jacket, possibly cotton felt or boiled wool, but it bears no military signs: no brass buttons, insignia, or belt around the waist. He sits apart while, around him, the other men dig. Is he a man who had been, until recently, enslaved, and was now working with these troops, but not a member of their regiment? Taken in Virginia, the epicenter of the southern plantocracy, on fields less than a dozen miles from the Confederate capitol, this seems like a distinct possibility. He may have crossed Union lines to escape enslavement and pursue his freedom. Most likely he had not enlisted; with \$3 of a Black soldier's monthly salary of \$10 given in the form of clothing, it would seem likely that he would be wearing some parts of his uniform if he had joined this regiment.³² Reekie also calls attention to this man's different status by seating him alone in the foreground. The low vantage point places us on the ground with this man and these bones and burial mounds.

We know that Civil War photographs were often highly composed. William Frasanito proved that Gardner's iconic *The Home of a Rebel Sharpshooter, Gettysburg*,



FIGURE 14.
John Reekie,
*Collecting Remains
of the Dead*, 1865.
Stereograph card,
4 × 7 in. (10 × 18 cm).
Printed later.

Pennsylvania (fig. 15) was not as it might seem. In the caption published in his *Photographic Sketch Book*, Gardner tells a tale of finding “the covert of a rebel sharpshooter,” where this Confederate soldier had “laid down upon his blanket to await death” upon being wounded in the head. The photographer then asks the viewer to engage in affective speculation: “Was he delirious with agony or did death come slowly to his relief, while memories of home grew dearer as the field of carnage faded before him?”³³ But Gardner had, in fact, moved the body forty yards on a blanket to a rocky enclosure, placed a knapsack under the head, turned the face toward the camera, propped up a rifle (not the type used by a sharpshooter) prominently against the rocks, and arranged the dead man’s right hand (with trigger finger) to rest peacefully on his stomach.³⁴ He had created a scene of war from what lay on the battlefield not to deceive the public, but to offer a photograph as a metaphor for the kind of death that combat denied. So we might usefully ask of Reekie’s picture how it too might have been conceived and composed. To do this is not to cast doubt on its basic premise—that we are looking at the remains of the dead and the living who labor to put them to rest—but to emphasize that this is an intentionally framed image. How does it choreograph meaning?



Camera technology did not yet allow for capturing battlefield action. Photographers like Gardner and O'Sullivan and Reekie were always working in the aftermath; their photographs "betray" this belatedness, as Anthony Lee has argued.³⁵ By the end of the war all had become savvy, even brilliant, at communicating aspects of what could not be photographed. Reekie shows us a grotesque pile of body parts on a "Halstead" litter (fig. 16), a new model of stretcher widely used in the war and designed to carry one dead or wounded body (fig. 17). The bodies at Cold Harbor were no longer intact; they had disintegrated to such a degree because the armies who had fought on this ground had not had the chance to bury them, and then the townspeople had neglected them. Perhaps the civilians had refused to do this work because these were the remains of Union soldiers in the heart of the Confederacy.³⁶ So we glean from this photograph the brutal past: the fierce combat and fatal injuries that occurred; the exposure of the dead to the elements and to scavenging birds and

FIGURE 15. Alexander Gardner, *The Home of a Rebel Sharpshooter, Gettysburg, Pennsylvania, July 1863*. Albumen silver print.

FIGURE 16.

“Halstead’s Litter,”
*The Medical and
Surgical History of the
War of the Rebellion*
(1861–65), vol. 2, part 3
(Washington, DC:
Government Printing
Office, 1870–88).

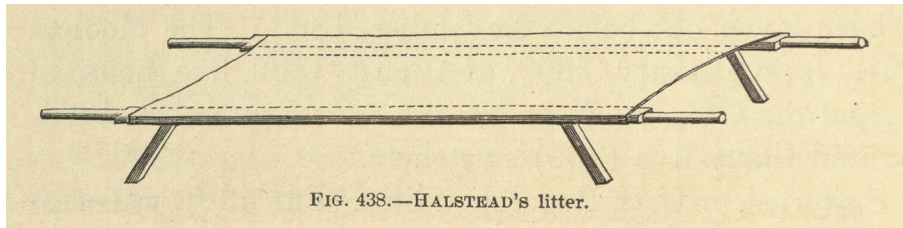


FIGURE 17.

*Fredericksburg,
Va. Burial of Union
Soldiers* (detail),
May 1864. Wet-plate
collodion stereo-
scopic glass negative
(left half).



beasts in the intervening months and years; the acts of refusal or neglect that kept the bodies on the ground; the racial hierarchy that brought these men to the field and tasked them with such hideous work.

The man in the knit cap in Reekie’s photograph stares directly out at the camera, but there are no overt signs of emotion readable in his expression. His gently tilted head and slightly wrinkled brow give the entire scene a sense of indeterminacy. When I examined the glass plate negative, with details now clearer than in the positive print, I realized that the soldiers in the background appear to be wearing a piece of cloth—perhaps a dark bandana—to cover their nose and mouth, no doubt to lessen the stench of rotting corpses. We cannot read their expressions at all. I had looked at Reekie’s photographs countless times and never noticed this. It was only during the COVID-19 pandemic, while so often wearing a mask myself, that I saw these masked men in the picture. And then the man in the foreground, without any protection for his face, stood out even more. What must he be smelling? Is his indeterminate expression an attempt to *not* visibly react to the putrefying flesh around him while Reekie exposed the plate?

Reekie has not captured a casual pose, a man taking a little break from grave digging. No one chooses to sit next to decaying bodies. A whole booted foot is sticking out from the stretcher, leg still attached, pants still covering it.³⁷ The upright skull has been intentionally placed to face the camera, orientated in the same

direction as the seated man, the low angle ensuring that head and skull are also the same size.³⁸ This may seem to invite a comparative study of two heads—one Black, one white—and thus suggest an engagement with phrenology: the cranial features as indicative of personality traits and mental capacity in the service of pseudo-scientific theories about human evolution. The skull had a particular resonance in the mid-nineteenth-century United States, where examining and measuring the cranium was understood as a means to determine race and intelligence (fig. 18).³⁹ Caucasian features were considered the most “advanced”—Greek sculpture and the Apollo Belvedere as the model—while those of African ancestry were categorized as lesser humans, closer to apes, a taxonomy that would launch a virulently persistent anti-Black cultural trope (fig. 19).⁴⁰ Josiah C. Nott and George R. Gliddon’s *Types of Mankind* (1854), which promoted this theory, was enormously popular, going through ten editions in fifteen years.⁴¹ So by presenting this man next to a skull—the skull of a white soldier—the photograph could appear to be trafficking in this form of comparative anatomy as racist ideology.

But if this were the aim, the photograph could have made this much more explicit. The fact that four Black soldiers are burying fellow Union soldiers seems to actually work against any manifestly racist analogy being set up in the foreground. Instead, the skull can be seen as a memento mori and the man in the knit cap as the figure who confronts death in life. The photograph, then, becomes about memory, both general and specific: remembering that death comes to all and remembering *these* dead on *this* field who are only now being buried. Here burial and photography are twinned acts of memorialization.

The skull connects the image to the vanitas genre and its exploration of the transience of worldly pursuits (fig. 20). But rather than a tabletop of beautiful, valuable possessions (whether tulips or instruments or an adjacent

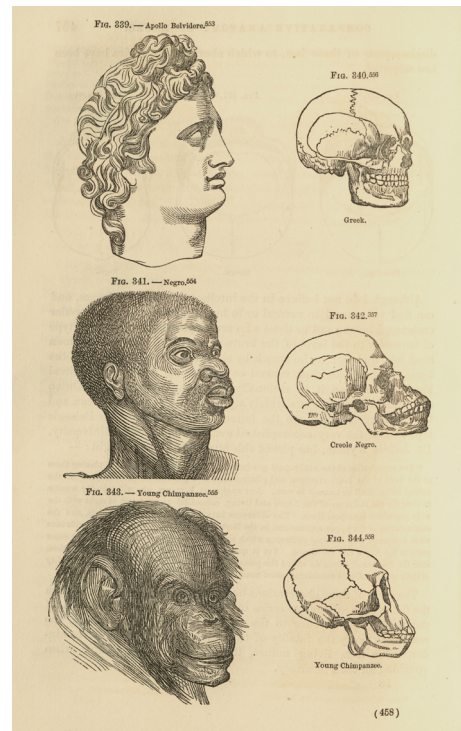
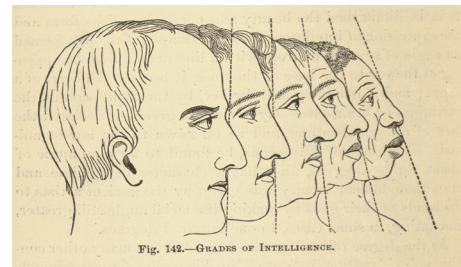


FIGURE 18. (top) Samuel R. Wells, “Grades of Intelligence,” *New Physiognomy: Or, Signs of Character as Manifested Through Temperament and External Forms, and Especially in ‘The Human Face Divine’* (New York: Fowler and Wells, 1866).

FIGURE 19. (above) Josiah C. Nott and George R. Gliddon, *Types of Mankind: Or, Ethnological Researches, Based Upon the Ancient Monuments, Paintings, Sculptures, and Crania of Races, and Upon Their Natural, Geographical, Philological, and Biblical History* (Philadelphia: Lippincott, Grambo & Co., 1854).

celebrity (fig. 21)—famously performed the role of the prince of Denmark for one hundred nights in the final winter of the Civil War; his younger brother, John Wilkes Booth, a very unaccomplished actor, would gain infamy as Lincoln’s assassin that spring.⁴² Photographs of the elder Booth in his *Hamlet* costume became collectible items. The Unionist Edwin would reprise his renowned role just six months after Lincoln’s burial, to rapturous acclaim, despite his family ties—a testament to the extent of the public’s devotion to the Shakespearean actor. In the strangeness and shock of its details, Reekie’s photograph shares a sense of the macabre with the *Hamlet* scene. All bodies turn to dirt and dust; even Alexander the Great might now be used to “stop a beer barrel” or “patch a wall to expel the winter’s flaw!”⁴³ An emperor and a jester both return to the clay of the earth. So too will the mad prince and the shrewd gravedigger. And so too will white bodies and Black bodies. Perhaps, then, the photograph can even be read as a riposte to the racist phrenology circulating at the time. Here is a skull—and a man’s head. Shall we compare their features, amid all this human carnage and suffering? How can race be read from a femur and scraps of cloth? How shall we arrange a hierarchy from body parts and bits of blistered skin? And where would you like this boot?

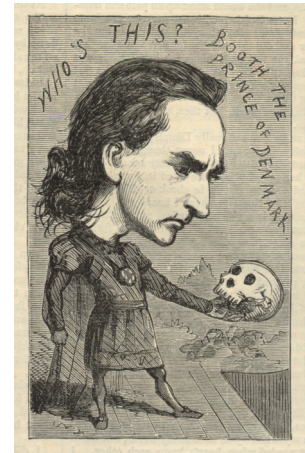


FIGURE 21. Thomas Nast, “‘Who’s This? Booth the Prince of Denmark,’ Grand Masquerade Ball Given by Mr. Maretzek at the Academy of Music, April 6, 1866,” *Harper’s Weekly*, April 14, 1866. Wood engraving.

ANDERSONVILLE (TOUCHING)

If the dead were eventually buried, their relics were kept by the living. Mere months after the Confederacy’s surrender at Appomattox in April 1865, Clara Barton (fig. 22) traveled from Washington, DC, to Andersonville, Georgia, to the site of the infamous Confederate prison camp (officially known as Camp Sumter) where 45,000 men were incarcerated and nearly 13,000 died. The town had been a tiny railroad depot, and was turned into the largest Confederate POW facility in the final year of the war primarily because of its remote location—far from the front lines—and because of the availability of enslaved labor. Enslaved people cleared the land, dug the earthworks, built the stockade, and, later, buried the dead.⁴⁴ The open-air stockade was designed to contain 10,000 people at most, but the prison population quickly multiplied many times over, making Andersonville the fifth-largest city in the South. One-third of the men died within seven months of arrival and 40 percent of those who came through the prison perished.⁴⁵ Barton initiated an army expedition to this city of the dead, approved and arranged by Secretary of War Edwin Stanton, that included Dorence Atwater, a former Andersonville prisoner who would become

her close collaborator. While incarcerated, Atwater had been part of the camp's burial detail and had kept an official record of the dead. Fearing that Confederate officers would eventually destroy such proof of high mortality rates, Atwater copied the record (name, unit, cause and date of death, grave number), smuggled it out of the camp shortly before the war ended, and later brought its existence to Barton's attention.⁴⁶ This "death register" inspired the trip. The group carried it with them along with 7,000 unlettered headboards and fencing to construct a proper cemetery. Barton and her companions endured the long and arduous journey to southern Georgia during the heat of the summer, passing through the ruins of Atlanta and Macon, so that they could identify the dead, count the numbers and record the names, and notify the families. But this was not all they did there; she and Atwater also collected objects left behind by those thousands of men who had lived and died on a mere twenty-six acres of land, without any permanent structures to shelter them. These were, she wrote in her diary, "the Andersonville relics."⁴⁷

Barton envisioned a public life for these relics. Displayed in her office, during her lectures, and at a national fair, they accompanied her work of identifying the missing and the dead. Relics were physical connections to the men who had been lost. They had been touched by the men who would become martyrs. When she had the relics photographed, Barton brought a new visibility to her work and to these martyrs. But the vision that she constructed for the camera is not a familiar one; the photograph that resulted does not sit easily alongside the images of the Civil War that are well-known and well-studied. Despite being sold and circulated widely by famed photographer Mathew Brady, *Relics of Andersonville Prison* has received almost no attention.⁴⁸ Why is this?

Through an insistently vernacular sensibility, *Relics of Andersonville Prison* evokes both bodily suffering and devotional practice. This presents a challenge to a history of photography traditionally predicated on disembodied opticality and a rigid medium-specificity, one that understands photography as the technology of modernity and modernity in terms of secularization. This dominant twentieth-century conceptualization of photography has been nuanced and challenged by many recent scholars to whom my project is indebted, among them Geoffrey Batchen, Tina Campt, Elizabeth Edwards, Fred Moten, and Thy Phu. Their work centers the sensory, sonic, and haptic nature of photography, and dismantles the centrality of authorship and origin stories.⁴⁹ "Listening to images," Campt writes, "designates a method," one that "gives us access to the affective registers" of vernacular photographs and thus to "alternative accounts of their subjects."⁵⁰ I join them in attending to such alternative accounts and the new histories that might unfold.



FIGURE 22. Brady & Co., *Clara Barton*, c. 1860–65. Wet-plate collodion glass negative.

Barton's photograph of relics is not merely about *what* is pictured inside the frame but about *who* is not seen and yet intimately felt and *how* the transfiguration of pain and death takes shape. My interest is in how the photograph *itself* might function as a relic, what the material and ontological significance of such a characterization could be, and how the relic as object and as photographic image provided a means to contend with the dead of the Civil War.

While the photograph at the center of my inquiry contends with the dead, it also sets the terms for their continued presence in the realm of the living. *Relics of Andersonville* addresses the most fundamental consequences of the war—the unprecedented violence, the staggering casualties, the many who went missing on the battlefield, the many more left behind at home—without picturing a single body. This is a radical departure from the photographs we have just examined. *Relics of Andersonville* was taken a year after the end of war when the desire to see those “weird copies of carnage” that had so mesmerized the *New York Times* reviewer in 1862 had markedly diminished.⁵¹ It enacts a crucial process of displacement whereby physical and emotional intensities are transferred to another realm. Bodies are nowhere to be seen in this image, but are still evoked by these hand-hewn relics as well as their corporeal arrangement. The missing and the dead, and the suffering endured by thousands, find a new expression in these inanimate things.

Soldiers and civilians alike were consumed by collecting objects from battlefields and other sites of the war—bullet shells, bits of cloth, pieces of wood and metal.⁵² And collecting them “quickly became a mass pastime,” as historian Teresa Barnett has argued.⁵³ Rather than detritus or debris, these things were most often referred to as relics and were intimately connected with the body and with death. When Oliver Wendell Holmes found relics on the field at Antietam, he described them as “trodden and stained,” marked by the body and the earth in ways that other categories of objects were not. Holmes identifies three types: trophy, memento, relic. The first implies vanity: an object meant for display and symbolism, presumably something larger, rarer, and thus more valuable. The second appeal to Holmes because they are small and can be politely consumed, stashed silently in the pocket (which he does: “a bullet or two, a button, a brass plate from a soldier’s belt, served well enough for mementos of my visit”). They each relate to a larger object: gun, jacket, belt. They function as memory devices for this place but they could just as easily relate to another battlefield, another uniform, another anonymous soldier. Holmes’s lead and brass mementos “serve well enough” precisely because they are not marked or marred by injured bodies or trampled earth, unlike the “trodden and stained relics.” Such relics, by contrast, bear a physical connection to the events on the field. They

elicit both emotion (Holmes finds them “repulsive”) and analogy (“like the table of some hideous orgy left uncleared”).⁵⁴ They offer evidence of death and suffering, their original purpose hideously transfigured. To touch them is to touch the dead. For Holmes, whose son had survived the battle, these items prove too difficult to contemplate or keep. For those whose loved ones had not lived, for those who could not rush to the scene and search, for those who would wait months and years for news of the missing, *Relics of Andersonville* offered a means to make contact with the dead. The carte de visite was sized for the mourner’s hand.

Relics of Andersonville proposes a new, and sometimes contradictory, means of representing and comprehending death during the immediate postwar period. To investigate this, the book is structured in three parts: naming, collecting, and evidence. Through naming, I consider the bureaucratic project undertaken by Barton—who wrote and received tens of thousands of letters as part of her work of identifying the missing and dead, and who was the first woman to operate an official government office⁵⁵—how this is materially registered by the photograph, and the ways in which the image emerges from structures of writing, repetition, and reading. The photograph is a form of political and social advocacy that speaks *to* (male) statesmen and legislators and that speaks *for* the mothers, wives, sisters, and daughters without a voice or a vote. It asks what might stand in when a body could not be found. This section also begins the book’s consideration of how mourning and martyrdom are racialized, even in the seemingly neutral act of circulating a photograph or publishing a list of names. In her preface to *A List of the Union Soldiers Buried at Andersonville*, Barton presents the pain of (the implicitly) white soldiers as unnatural and exceptional, using the testimony of Black witnesses whom she had met in Georgia to compare imprisonment to enslavement. I seek to tell a fuller story of the African American presence at Andersonville, where generations served as caretakers for the cemetery and as memory keepers of its history until they were forcibly displaced to make way for a national park and museum.

Through the question of collecting, I explore how these objects were gathered, circulated, and seen, how the “relic” was understood as both sacred and secular in nineteenth-century America, and how the photograph itself offers a devotional space. *Relics of Andersonville* helps us to rethink the gendered assumptions too often made about artistic authorship and to reconceptualize the role of photography as essential not just in documenting war, but in navigating its aftermath. Barton’s relics were first publicly displayed—and the photograph likely taken—at the “National Fair” in Washington, DC (fig. 23). A major philanthropic event, it raised funds for an orphanage for the children of soldiers and sailors. Many of the organizers

and prominent participants, including the president of the United States, framed the endeavor as above sectional divisions; both Union *and* Confederate orphans should be supported. But only those who were white. An early example of the move toward national reconciliation on the basis of racial segregation, the fair provides the opportunity to see *Relics of Andersonville* in light of an emerging effort to present whiteness as the common basis for national reunion, as David Blight has memorably argued, with military sacrifice as the shared experience.⁵⁶ Whose bodies—whose suffering—is tacitly excluded from this evocative tableau and what historical consequences does this have? How did Black communities advocate for their orphans under increasingly repressive and even violent conditions?

The book then moves to the legal sphere to think about the photograph's relationship to evidence. The trial of Captain Henry Wirz, the Confederate officer in charge of Andersonville, marks the earliest use of photographs in a criminal case in which the death sentence is at stake, a key moment in the history of photography and in legal evidence, which has never been discussed before. The veracity of photography—and what seeing a photographic image entails—was debated in the courtroom and in newspapers from New York to Louisiana to London. Photographs of emaciated survivors were admitted into evidence, published in government reports, and widely reproduced by the media. *Relics of Andersonville Prison*, produced several months after Wirz's execution (an event photographed by Alexander Gardner), must be understood in light of the Wirz trial and its inclusion of photography. This image, I argue, consolidates both an ameliorative and an accusatory position; it offers a space of (and for) remembrance and reconciliation while also functioning as a material indictment of the guilty and a justification for retribution. It speaks to the many who sought to deny or excuse the deplorable conditions and high death rate at Andersonville. Arranged on plain paper, each object visible and labeled, these relics appear like exhibits in the legal sense, mute witnesses to the crimes of war.

The conclusion mirrors the structure of the introduction, considering *Relics of Andersonville* in light of three other (nonphotographic) objects: a marble monument, a small plaster sculpture, and an oil painting. Each proposes a different memory of the war and a different vision of the postwar period. Winslow Homer's painting *Near Andersonville* (see fig. 112), a portrait of an enslaved Black woman with captured Union soldiers on the margin marching to the prison camp, offers a new form of history painting whereby (white) military figures are adjacent to a (Black) individual's lived experience. Black enslavement, rather than white imprisonment, is centered here. So too is this Black woman's subjectivity. She, and the brutal system of chattel slavery, are what is "near" Andersonville. John Rogers's tabletop sculpture



FIGURE 23.
Relics of Andersonville Prison from the collection brought from there by Miss Clara Barton and Dorence Atwater, Aug., 1865, and photographed by Brady & Co. for the great National Fair, Washington, June 1866. Carte de visite, 4 3/8 x 2 3/4 in. (11 x 7 cm). Printed and distributed by Brady & Co.

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