Alexander Gardner (1821 - 1882)
*Gettysburg*, 1863
Albumen print from a collodion negative
1967.330

The American Civil War was the first conflict to be thoroughly photographed, with cameramen on hand from the early Union defeat at Bull Run in 1861 to the final surrender of the Confederate forces at Appomattox in 1865. While credit is due to Matthew Brady for recognizing photography’s role as historian of the war, it was actually a number of photographers from his successful portrait studios in New York City and Washington D.C. who photographed the majority of the war images. These assistants, or “operators”, included Alexander Gardner, George Barnard, and Timothy Sullivan. Using 16 x 20”, 8 x 10”, and stereograph cameras, they photographed all aspects of the conflict except actual battles; the slowness of recording an image on the wet plates made action photographs an impossibility. Work was cumbersome and conditions were difficult; cameras, glass plates, lenses, and chemicals needed to be carried and processing took place with impure water and ever-present dirt in cramped tents or special wagons. In total, over 7,000 images were made, with Brady publishing most under his name. This false crediting angered Gardner and the others and led to their establishment in 1863 of an independent photography corps and publishing enterprise that credited images of individual photographers.
Some of Gardner’s most moving photographs include those of the Battle of Gettysburg on July 1 - 3, 1863. In this small town in Southern Pennsylvania, the Army of the Potomac, under General George Meade, defeated Robert E. Lee’s forces in what is regarded as the greatest battle of the war. Lee’s daring charge, led by General George Pickett, almost broke through the center of the Union lines, but reserves finally held the key positions and the effort of the Southern troops failed. It was the battle that marked the beginning of the end for the Confederacy, and Gardner’s stirring photographs document its casualties strewn across the otherwise barren battlefield.

The high volume of photographs produced of Gettysburg and other Civil War conflicts was largely in response to the demand of weekly illustrated journals like Harper’s for war images. Photographs were copied as wood engravings and then reproduced in magazines. The public could be kept up-to-date as events unfolded. Gardner took the last portrait of Abraham Lincoln, shortly after the surrender at Appomattox on April 10, 1865 and also documented the hangings of Lincoln’s conspirators on July 7 of the same year. These photographs, taken from the roof overlooking the gallows in the courtyard of the Arsenal (or Old) Penitentiary building, form the first photographic essay of an event as it happened. MR
QUESTIONS & ACTIVITIES

1. In an age of television and video, we constantly witness events as they are happening or shortly afterward. Have students cite examples of recent events that they have viewed through images. What has been the impact? What are the advantages and disadvantages of such access? What are the privileges and abuses of such access?

2. What similarities are there between the production of photography under Matthew Brady and the production of furniture such as the Boston desk and bookcase (slide 2)? Encourage students to voice their opinions on this issue of labor and recognition in art. Can they think of other examples in the arts of this practice? In what other industries does it exist?

3. In studying the Civil War, have students research primary and secondary sources of “news from the front” such as personal correspondence and articles in illustrated journals such as Harper’s. How did reporters get their news? How do reporters get their stories today? One example of personal correspondence from the Civil War is typed on the following page.
Major Sullivan Ballou  
2nd Rhode Island Regiment

Written to his wife in Springfield one week before Manassas

July 14, 1861  
Camp Clark, Washington

My very dear Sarah:

The indications are very strong that we shall move in a few days -- perhaps tomorrow. Lest I should not be able to write again, I feel impelled to write a few lines that may fall under your eye when I shall be no more...

I have no misgivings about, or lack of confidence in the cause in which I am engaged, and my courage does not halt or falter. I know how strongly American Civilization now leans on the triumph of the Government, and how great a debt we owe to those who went before us through the blood and sufferings of the Revolution. And I am willing -- perfectly willing -- to lay down all my joys in this life, to maintain this Government, and to pay that debt.

Sarah my love for you is deathless, it seems to bind me with mighty cables that nothing but Omnipotence could break; and yet my love of Country comes over me like a strong hand and bears me irresistibly on with all these chains to the battle field.

The memories of the blissful moments I have spent with you come creeping over me, and I feel most gratified to God and to you that I have enjoyed them so long. And hard it is for me to give them up and burn to ashes the hopes of future years, when, God willing, we might still have lived and loved together, and seen our sons grow up to honorable manhood, around us. I have, I know, but few and small claims upon Divine Providence, but something whispers to me -- perhaps it is the wafted prayer of my little Edgar, that I shall return to my loved ones unharmed. If I do not my dear Sarah, never forget how much I love you, and when my last breath escapes me on the battle field, it will whisper your name. Forgive my many faults, and the many pains I have caused you. How thoughtless and foolish I have often times been! How gladly would I wash out with my tears every little spot upon your happiness....

But, O Sarah! if the dead can come back to this earth and flit unseen around those they loved, I shall always be near you; in the gladdest days and in the darkest nights...always, always, and if there be a soft breeze upon your cheek, it shall be my breath, as the cool air fans your throbbing temple, it shall be my spirit passing by. Sarah do not mourn me dead; think I am gone and wait for thee, for we shall meet again...

Sullivan Ballou was killed at the first battle of Bull Run.