

HISTORICAL INVESTIGATION

PROJECT TITLE: Who was Mr. Lincoln's Camera Man?	
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SCHOLARSHIP & RESEARCH

1. Primary Investigative Question(s) –

1. Who was Mathew Brady and why was he important?

Contextual Essay

To many, Mathew Brady is a renowned Civil War photographer. His photographs take us to Gettysburg and Antietam, Fredericksburg and Richmond. His somber and shocking images of war awakened America to the tragedy of battle. However, Civil War photography is only part of Brady's story. So, who else was Mathew Brady? What else did he accomplish? Why else are Brady and his photography important?

We know much about the mid to late 19th century because of Mathew Brady and his contemporaries, although not much is known about Brady's personal life. He wrote no diaries or autobiography, and he gave only a few interviews in his lifetime (Sullivan, 1994, p. 6). He was born from immigrant parents most likely in 1823, although no certificate of his birth exists. For the first part of his life he lived in rural, upstate New York (Sullivan, 1994, p. 8). After befriending a budding artist, William Page, Brady moved with him to New York City at age 16. Within four years of living in the city he had started his own business making jewelry cases. It was around this time in 1843 that Brady sealed his fate and met Samuel F. B. Morse. Morse was one of the first Americans to take a photograph and helped to introduce photography to America, and to Mathew Brady (Sullivan, 1994, p. 9). Within a year, Brady was making his own daguerreotypes and had opened his own gallery named the "Daguerrean Miniture Gallery" at Fulton and Broadway in New York. This was just the beginning of his success.

In 1849 Brady opened another gallery in Washington D.C. "seeking trade among congressmen, senators, Presidents and their cabinets, and famous visitors" (Trachtenberg, 1989, p. 33). In 1850 Brady presented his *Gallery of Illustrious Americans*, "twelve daguerreotype portraits of representative Americans rendered as lithographs by Francis D'Avignon"

(Trachtenberg, 1989, p. 45). Shortly after his latest critically acclaimed gallery presentation, Brady took his family to Europe. While in Europe, Brady entered photographs into the London World's Fair photography competition. American won all of the photography awards. Brady won a medal "for general excellence of his work" and the *New York Tribune* called attention to the sweep in its' headlines back home (Sullivan, 1994, p. 41). In the late 1850's Brady made several good business decisions. His best decision was to hire Alexander Gardner in 1856. Gardner helped Brady forced Brady innovate photography even more. They began to produce extremely large photographs that were "17 by 21 inches" called Imperials. The larger size brought larger profit margins. Thankfully Gardner had a mind for accounting and got Brady to "hire a bookkeeper and install professional accounting procedures" (Sullivan, 1994, p. 48) During this time Brady also continued opening galleries in Washington D.C. and New York City, each more impressive than the last. He opened his most impressive and lavish gallery on Tenth and Broadway. It was represented in Frank Leslie's Illustrated Newspaper in 1861. Frames covered every inch of the gallery. The walls were lined with "bankers, millionaires, clergymen, scholars, lawyers, doctors, orators, statesmen" including Daniel Webster, Henry Clay, Walt Whitman, Martin Van Buren and Clara Barton to name a few (Trachtenberg, 1989, p. 42). By this time Brady had achieved the highest praise from his contemporaries for his craft, he had popularized photography with the public, and he had branded his name. " 'Brady of Broadway' was recognized as one of the choicest popular-art commodities of the age" and everyone wanted a piece of the fame. (Trachtenberg, 1989, p. 42).

Everyone included soon to be president Abraham Lincoln. The famous Cooper Institute photograph that Brady took of Lincoln in early 1860 became the image of his presidential campaign. It was in Harper's Weekly "and in countless other publications...It was duplicated by the tens of thousands as a card photograph and was also reproduced on banners and buttons. (Sullivan, 1994, p. 60). This was the beginning of Lincoln's relationship with Brady. Brady and his associates took almost half of the 126 photographs taken of Lincoln. Although there is no direct evidence about how Lincoln and Brady felt about each other, it can safely be assumed both men had a level of mutual respect because Brady "photographed members of his (Lincoln's) family, close friends, then members of his cabinet, the members of Congress at the time..." (Sullivan, 1994, p. 62). Before Lincoln's death, he posed so many times for Brady and his associates that Brady gleaned the nickname Mr. Lincoln's Camera Man.

By the time the Civil War was underway, Brady had a new dream. His dream was "to make a complete record of the conflicts 'prominent incidents'" (Sullivan, 1994 p. 76). Even despite numerous warnings from friends about "battlefield dangers and financial risks" (Civil War Photographs) Brady insisted upon the project. It was Brady's insistence on comprehensively covering the war battle by battle that helped him become known as "the photographic historian of the United States of his day." (Meredith, 1946, Introduction, para. 1). Brady did not take most of the famed photos for which he is given credit. Brady took upon a managerial role during the war by "supervising his corps...preserving negatives and buying others from private photographers" so that he could realize his dream of total war coverage (Civil War Photographs). His team of photographers photographed the camps, soldiers and battlefields of the war. They took a "portable darkroom": a "horse-drawn wagon" outfitted with a "light-tight canopy...built-in containers for chemicals, and shelves and compartments for the cameras, lenses, and other supplies and equipment." (Sullivan, 1994, p. 76)

Even though Brady did receive some recognition when he displayed photographs in 1862 at his Broadway gallery entitled the “Dead of Antietam”, he never gained the notoriety or monetary success he expected. Once the war ended Brady “found that war-weary Americans were no longer interested in purchasing photographs of the recent bloody conflict” (Civil War Photographs). His dream was a gamble. His gamble sent Brady into bankruptcy. Although Congress finally purchased his negatives for \$25,000 in 1875, Brady was never able to get out of debt. Near the end of his life Brady was quoted as saying “No one will ever know what I went through to secure those negatives. The world can never appreciate it. It changed the whole course of my life.” (Civil War Photographs). Brady unfortunately died before his greatness as a photographer was reclaimed.

So who was Mathew Brady? Why is this photographer so important? He was a dedicated, hardworking man. He was an artist. He was a brave visionary who lost everything on a terrible, wonderful gamble. He was a pioneer in photojournalism. He popularized a new art form almost overnight. His photographs captured moments in our history, as well as the faces. Early on Brady understood the importance of photography, of images. This quote captured his foresight: “I regarded myself as under obligation to my country to preserve the faces of its historic men and women.” (Sullivan, 1994, p. 25) Because of Brady’s entrepreneurial spirit, we have thousands of portraits, landscapes, and battlefield photographs. We have the ability to weave together the images of history.

“An excerpt from Stanzas, Suggested by a Visit to Brady’s Portrait Gallery by Caleb Lyon

Like a spirit land of shadows
They in silence on me gaze,
And I feel my heart if beating
With the pulse of other days.” (Meredith, 1946, p. viii)

Annotated Bibliography

Civil War Photographs: Mathew B. Brady--Biographical Note. (n.d.). *American Memory from the Library of Congress - Home Page*. Retrieved March 14, 2011, from <http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/cwphtml/cwbrady.html>

Summary: This is the Library of Congress' biographical note about Mathew Brady. It is a succinct summary of his life and achievements. This site provides an easy timeline and overview to follow as well as a few quotes from Brady. It could give young researchers a place to read about Mathew Brady that is not too overwhelming.

Meredith, R. (1946). *Mr. Lincoln's camera man, Mathew B. Brady*, . New York: C. Scribner's Sons.

Summary: This book contains one of the best collections of Brady photographs and numbers over 300 photos developed from the Library of Congress negatives. The photographs span Brady's career. The text of the book tells the history behind the photos and is rich with detail and description. This book includes the pictures taken of Lincoln for the five dollar bill and includes the negative's numbers to make research of the image easier.

Sullivan, G. (1994). *Mathew Brady: his life and photographs*. New York: Cobblehill Books.

Summary: This book tells the story of Mathew Brady from his birth to his death. Although the author admits in the Author's Note that this book was incredibly difficult to write due to a lack of evidence, it is still comprehensive. The author explains how Brady changed as an artist as the various mediums of photography changed. The language is simplistic and the chronological order of the book makes it easy for a researcher to find information that she needs.

Trachtenberg, A. (1989). *Reading American photographs: images as history, Mathew Brady to Walker Evans*. New York, N.Y.: Hill and Wang.

Summary: This book combines the history of Mathew Brady with analytical commentary on his photography and business ventures. Trachtenberg gives meaning and context to the photographs of Brady and his contemporaries. This context leads to a greater understanding of photography during the mid to late 19th century.