

Mathew B. Brady

ca. 1823 – January 15, 1896

Mathew Brady arrived in New York City at the age of sixteen. Soon after taking a job as a department store clerk, he started his own small business manufacturing jewelry cases. In his spare time, Brady studied photography under a number of teachers, including Samuel F. B. Morse, the man who had recently introduced photography to America. Brady quickly discovered a natural gift. By 1844, he had his own photography studio in New York.



Brady soon acquired a reputation as one of America's greatest photographers -- producer of portraits of the famous. In 1856, he opened a studio in Washington, D.C., the better to photograph the nation's leaders and foreign dignitaries. As he himself said, "From the first, I regarded myself as under obligation to my country to preserve the faces of its historic men and mothers." He became one of the first photographers to use photography to chronicle national history.

At the peak of his success as a portrait photographer, Brady turned his attention to the Civil War. Planning to document the war on a grand scale, he organized a corps of photographers to follow the troops in the field. Friends tried to discourage him, citing battlefield dangers and financial risks, but Brady persisted. He later said, "I had to go. A spirit in my feet said 'Go,' and I went."

Mathew Brady did not actually shoot many of the Civil War photographs attributed to him. More of a project manager, he spent most of his time supervising his corps of traveling photographers, preserving their negatives and buying others from private photographers freshly returned from the battlefield, so that his collection would be as comprehensive as possible. When photographs from his collection were published, whether printed by Brady or adapted as engravings in publications, they were credited "Photograph by Brady," although they were actually the work of many people.

During the Civil War, the process of taking photographs was complex and time-consuming. Two photographers would arrive at a location. One would mix chemicals and pour them on a clean glass plate. After the chemicals were given time to evaporate, the glass plate would be sensitized by being immersed -- in darkness -- in a bath solution. Placed in a holder, the plate would then be inserted in the camera, which had been positioned and focused by the other photographer. Exposure of the plate and development of the photograph had to be completed within minutes; then the exposed plate was rushed to the darkroom wagon for developing. Each fragile glass plate had to be treated with great care after development -- a difficult task on a battlefield.

In 1862, Brady shocked America by displaying his photographs of battlefield corpses from Antietam, posting a sign on the door of his New York gallery that read, "The Dead of Antietam." This exhibition marked the first time most people witnessed the carnage of war. The New York Times said that Brady had brought "home to us the terrible reality and earnestness of war."

After the Civil War, Brady found that war-weary Americans were no longer interested in purchasing photographs of the recent bloody conflict. Having risked his fortune on his Civil War enterprise, Brady lost the gamble and fell into bankruptcy. His negatives were neglected until 1875, when Congress purchased the entire archive for \$25,000. Brady's debts swallowed the entire sum. He died in 1896, penniless and unappreciated. In his final years, Brady said, "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."

Despite his financial failure, Mathew Brady had a great and lasting effect on the art of photography. His war scenes demonstrated that photographs could be more than posed portraits, and his efforts represent the first instance of the comprehensive photo-documentation of a war.



Matthew Brady & Co.

(clockwise from upper left):
 Albert Berghaus, *Brady's Salon, NYC, Broadway & 10th*, 1861
 (wood engraving from *Frank Leslie's Illustrated Newspaper*)

Brady, *Antietam*, 1862

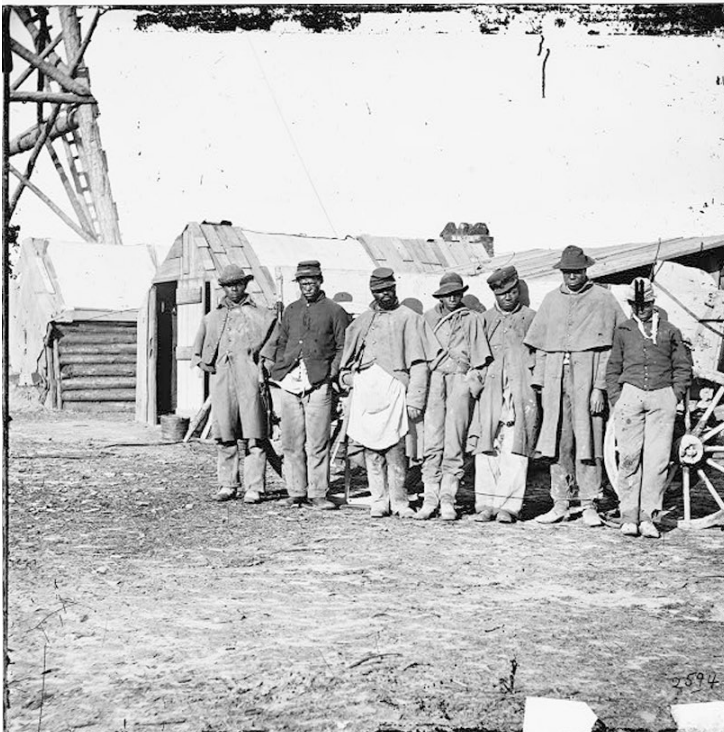
unknown, *African-American Teamsters Near the Signal Tower*, c.1862

Alexander Gardner, *Antietam*, 1862

Timothy O'Sullivan & Gardner, *Gettysburg*, 1863



Images from either Library of Congress,
 or *Photography: A Cultural History*,
 Mary Warner Marien, Prentice-Hall/Abrams, 2002





Two examples of critical photographic agitprop during the British war in Crimea and the American Civil War.

(above): James Robertson, *Interior of the Redan, 1855*, salted paper print (widely reproduced in engraving, and counter to Roger Fenton's often pleasant views of the British nobility and gentry at war)

(left): (unknown), *Frank Leslie's Illustrated Newspaper, 1864*, woodblock print (anti-South agitation reportedly showing the horrible treatment Union soldiers were receiving as captives of the Confederates, though it was the North's punitive blockades of food and medicine to the South that created these starvation conditions. These kind of war views were also published in contrast to Brady's often sanitized views of wartime ceremony and celebrities)

both images from *Photography: A Cultural History*, Mary Warner Marien, Prentice-Hall, 2002

Jacob A. Riis

American, 1849-1914

America's first journalist-photographer, in fact a muckraker with a camera, Jacob Riis was known at the turn of the century as the "Emancipator of the Slums" because of his work on behalf of the urban poor. His brutal documentation of sweatshops, disease-ridden tenements, and overcrowded schools aroused public indignation and helped effect significant reform in housing, education, and child-labor laws.



Riis was self-taught. His photographs, taken over a 10-year period, were made without artistic intent, yet they deeply influenced the course of American documentary photography. Riis wrote: "I came to take up photography ... not exactly as a pastime. It was never that for me. I had to use it, and beyond that I never went." The camera was a weapon of propaganda he wielded in his fight to ameliorate the living conditions of countless underprivileged people who would have remained unseen if not for his passionate social concern.

Riis was born in Ribe, Denmark, the third in a family of 15 children (one of them adopted). In opposition to his father's wishes, he was a carpenter's apprentice in Copenhagen from 1866 to 1870, when he emigrated to the United States.

Riis lived in poverty in New York City for some time before he found a job with a news bureau in 1873. He became a police reporter for the New York Tribune and the Associated Press in 1877. Horrified by the squalor of immigrant life, he began a series of exposes on slum conditions on New York's Lower East Side. In 1884 he was responsible for the establishment of the Tenement House Commission.

In 1888 he left the Tribune for the Evening Sun and began work on his book *How the Other Half Lives*. Riis was among the first photographers to use flash powder, which enabled him to photograph interiors and exteriors of the slums at night. He worked at first with two assistants but soon found it necessary to take his photographs himself. Primarily a writer, he wanted pictures to document and authenticate his reports, and to supply the vividness that would ensure attention.

Sections of *How the Other Half Lives* appeared in Scribner's magazine in December 1889. The full-length book attracted immediate attention upon publication some months later and was reprinted several times. It had a powerful and lasting effect on movements for many kinds of social reform.

For the next 25 years Riis continued to write and lecture extensively on the problems of the poor. He published over a dozen books, including his autobiography, *The Making of an American* (1901), and many articles. He became known as "the father of the small parks movement" after his success in creating a park in the infamous Mulberry Bend section of lower Manhattan. Following a decade of heart trouble, Riis died in Barre, Massachusetts, at the age of 65.

Riis's photographs fell into obscurity for many years until Alexander Alland was able to find and salvage them in the early 1940s. Riis's son presented 412 4" X 5" glass negatives, by Riis and his assistants, to the Museum of the City of New York in 1946. A major exhibition of prints from these negatives was held at the Museum in 1947. Riis's home in Richmond Hill, New York, was designated a National Historical Landmark in 1971.

