Introduction

The Civil War was the intertwining of the nexus of the history of death and technology in American history. The Civil War was the bloodiest conflict in U.S. history, and due to the high casualty rate, the war disrupted America’s relationship with death and changed the funerary and grieving process. Not only did the Civil War dement Americans’ ideals of how to die, but it also disrupted Americans’ notions of who should die and as Clark Braden wrote to his local newspaper: “This loss of noble life—this premature death of great talent and virtues is the irreparable loss of the war.” Americans adapted to the change in their lives through the new technologies of the time, like photography. Because of the high casualty rate of the Civil War, Americans started embalming corpses to extend the funerary process in addition to giving the bodies of the dead a more significant role in the lives of the living. Another way Americans grew the grieving process was through pictures of their loved ones dead or alive to supplement the funerary death rituals at home. The growth of the funerary process through new technologies gave families a final moment to remember their loved ones and have one last memory of the dying loved one. Newspaper clippings, obituaries, and photos written and taken during the Civil War show the change in Americans’ attitudes toward death and their adaptations to the funerary process. In this study, looking at these primary sources through a cultural lens, one can understand how death/dying during the Civil War changed American perceptions of death through a bottom-up perspective.

Histography of Death

The historiography of the Civil War is vast with analysis of its violence. However, only in the last twenty years have new interests in the Civil War raised questions about the broader impact of battlefield slaughter and mass carnage. Historians such as Drew Gilpin Faust, Ian Finseth, and Kirik Savage suggest that such mortality, even in a society far more accustomed to death than our own, must have exerted a profound influence on Americans’

perceptions of the world around them as well as their hopes for a world to come. When looking from a bottom-up perspective of the Civil War, these historians gave insight into how the Civil War affected families and traditions during and after the conflict.

In the middle of the nineteenth century, Americans embarked on a new relationship with death through the rise of new technologies changing how Americans remember, celebrate, or honor the dead. As Charles O. Jackson explains, death was domesticated and sentimentalized in America between the mid-eighteenth and mid-nineteenth centuries. The effect of this movement was to increase the role of death and the dead in the world of the living. Death was perceived increasingly by Americans within the context of a growing attachment to life and the uncertainty of an existence after death.

Death’s significance for the Civil War generation also derived from how it violated prevailing assumptions about life’s proper end, who should die, when and where, and under what circumstances. As Drew Gilpin Faust explains, soldiers died far from home, disrupting the family order and grieving process. Americans, however, adapted to this change by extending the grieving process since the soldiers could not have a proper death at home. Soldiers and their families struggled in various ways to mitigate such cruel realities and construct a Good Death, even amidst the chaos of the Civil War, to substitute for missing elements or compensate for unsatisfied expectations. Americans believed that to have a ‘Good Death,’ one should die amidst family assembled around the deathbed to witness the death and to assess the state of the dying person’s soul. Another important reason for death in the home with loved ones present is that it provided a critical means through which the deceased could continue to exist in the lives of the survivors. Last words played a central role in the tradition of dying for Americans before the Civil War but had to take a new shape due to death away from home. Americans adapted their last words in the form of letters and photos to allow the grieving family to have a means by which the deceased could continue to exist in the lives of their family.

Historians have debated how death impacted the Civil War with mixed results. As Nicholas Marshall argues, this is because some historians interpret the impact of Civil War carnage from a modern point of view, centering much

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3 Ibid.
6 Ibid., 11.
7 Ibid., 13.
8 Ibid.
of their interpretation on the factually correct death statistics, exaggerating the war’s impact. He argues that this violates one of the central pillars of historical analysis and that of avoiding presentism.\textsuperscript{9} However, in focusing too much on the problem of relying on statistics, Marshall undersells the cultural impact that death had on Americans’ personal lives.

**Historiography of Photography**

Historians such as Josephine Cobb, Eliza Richards, Sarah L. Thwaites, Annie E. Proulx, and Alan Trachtenberg analyze the impact of new technologies, such as photography, on Americans’ perceptions of death during the Civil War. With the relatively new photography technology, people could see the carnage of war closely, therefore altering the American perception of death. The Civil War was not only the bloodiest conflict in American history but also took place during the Industrial Revolution, which produced many new and deadly technologies emerging throughout the world.

One of these pieces of technology was the camera, which sparked the photography profession, allowing photographers to capture or freeze a moment in time much faster than the painter’s craft. However, Josephine Cobb explains that keeping good supplies and avoiding debris and bad weather was challenging.\textsuperscript{10} During the photo-taking process, even a breath of wind ruined the chance of obtaining a picture because of the unreliability of the new technology. However, as Cobb has noted, photography was still profitable, with towns holding exhibits of war views from photographers.\textsuperscript{11}

However, Civil War photographs are vulnerable to the same obscurities of other forms of evidence, as Alan Trachtenberg warns. He argues that historians should take a closer look at photos during the Civil War and be just as skeptical of their context as other primary sources.\textsuperscript{12} The reason for Trachtenberg’s warning is primary sources such as Alex Gardner’s photo sketchbook that arranges the dead bodies of soldiers to dramatize and romanticize death.\textsuperscript{13}

Sarah L. Thwaites, in her essay, explains how photography came of age during the Civil War era and how their images gave Americans what

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\item \textsuperscript{10} Josephine Cobb, “Photographers of the Civil War,” *Military Affairs* 26, no. 3 (Autumn 1962), 129.
\item \textsuperscript{11} Ibid.
\item \textsuperscript{12} Alan Trachtenberg, “Albums of War: On Reading Civil War Photographs,” *Representations*, no. 9 (Winter 1985), 2.
\item \textsuperscript{13} Ibid., 11.
\end{itemize}
seemed to be unmediated witness to terrible battle scenes and war tragedies.\textsuperscript{14} Photography was able to freeze the terrors of war in Americans’ minds while also extending the grieving process. Photographs such as Gardner’s did not shy away from the dreadful reality of death in combat: many of the images in his text show twisted and distorted corpses lying bloodied and abandoned across mud-swamped battle sites. Often, the faces of the dead were deliberately turned directly toward the camera, gaunt and ghostly, and the pictures were consumed as much with fascination as with repulsion.\textsuperscript{15}

Annie E. Proulx, in “Dead Stuff,” explains how photography, while depicting death, was also used to extend the grieving process through memorial photography.\textsuperscript{16} Dead loved ones would be posed on chairs or sofas as though reading or asleep, which showed the importance of these keepsake photographs in the previous century when death was intimate, with the funerary process taking place at home. Proulx explains further that the photographic record of the Civil War often shows broad landscapes with distant horse and human corpses like rocks or heaps of turned earth; the feeling is one of remote sadness, implying that in war, death is both massive and inescapable as weather.\textsuperscript{17} Some families of slain Civil War soldiers were willing to pay to have the bodies sent home by train for burial, creating a new profession to embalm, arrange, and repair the broken corpses for the last ride home.\textsuperscript{18}

The Nameless Dead

As Ian Finseth argues, one crucial issue relating to death and photography during the Civil War is the “nameless dead.” Of course, the dead soldiers were not nameless, but a lack of documentation attached to civil war photography rendered them so. As noted by Finseth, “the unprecedented numbers of the dead made difficult to account for, identify, or adequately intern the body of the fallen soldier, not to mention those of slaves or other noncombatants whose lives the war had claimed—and thus appeared the figure of the unknown soldier.”\textsuperscript{19} Thus, the emergence of the figure of the unknown soldier, a single entity imbued with the spirits of all unidentifiable and unrecoverable soldiers, the unknown soldier gave the death of a soldier when nothing else could, both during and

\textsuperscript{15} Ibid., 51.
\textsuperscript{16} E. Annie Proulx, “DEAD STUFF,” \textit{Aperture} 149 (Fall 1997), 30.
\textsuperscript{17} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{18} Ibid., 31.
\textsuperscript{19} Ian Finseth, “The Civil War Dead: Realism and the Problem of Anonymity,” \textit{American Literary History} 25, no.3 (2001), 535.
after the Civil War. Finseth explains how a subtle and probably unintentional social exclusion created anonymity for the “nameless dead.” A condition in which the dead body is preserved for circulation and contemplation while the name is representationally absent: unknown, irrelevant, and a distraction.

In the same vein as Ian Finseth, Kirk Savage uses a photo taken by Alex Gardener as a springboard to explore the broader dilemma of text and image. Savage argues that photography tapped universal fears surrounding death and culturally specific anxieties brought on by the rupture of the Civil War. He focuses on the unknown dead, how easily the physical body became disconnected from its name, and how fragile personal identity was. Savage argues that the search for solutions to this predicament of the unknown dead fueled a new system, indeed a new art, of commemoration.

Photography was able to give the dead an everlasting image. It affected perceptions of death among Americans. Eliza Richards explains through the lens of the Northern literary expression of writers at the time; she compares the essays of Oliver Wendell Holmes and the poems of Emily Dickinson as a method to explore the divergent ways that two writers on the home front thought of the ramifications of distant violence. Holmes celebrates how photography can expose and heal the illnesses of the nation, while Dickinson contrasts him and emphasizes the narrow singularity of any insight photography can provide.

The historiography of the Civil War regarding death and photography has a commonality in changing the grieving process for Americans. This study seeks to link the commonality between death and photography and how Americans used photography to adapt to the tragedies of the Civil War death. This study will utilize a bottom-up analysis of photography during the Civil War to better understand the cultural impact that photography had on the change of the grieving process for Americans.

**Americans’ Death during Colonial Times**

The attitudes to death in America were grim from the seventeenth to eighteenth centuries. Death was generally accepted as a commonplace if harsh reality to be followed by the entrance, at least for the righteous, into a somewhat ill-defined heavenly state. Americans came to accept death as

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20 Ibid., 542.
21 Ibid., 536.
22 Ibid.
25 Jackson, “American Attitudes to Death,” 299.
a natural occurrence and never denied it because colonial times were harsh. With an average of 8.8 births per family, every couple could expect to lose two to three children before age ten.  

Most people could not have gotten along without losing more than one person in their immediate circle of relatives and friends. The culturally proper place for death was in the home, with loved ones gathered to witness the final moments. Ideally, the dying person “presided” over the event in full knowledge of their condition.

Because the great majority of inhabitants of colonies of North America lived in small communities with mutual decency and familial relationships, colonists experienced death as a community. In turn, the community rallied in various ways to assist the bereaved family in the crisis. Colonists accomplished the grim business of the deceased’s final disposition. Preparing the dead for burial typically included dressing, “laying out,” and attending the body in the home until burial; constructing a coffin; bearing the body to the burial site; and digging and covering the grave. The respect paid, and interment completed the impact of death passed with reasonable rapidity, bereaved spouses often remarrying within a short period. An interval of less than a year was not uncommon.

### The Early History of Photography

Although photography sprouted and spread like wildfire in the United States between the 1840s and the 1870s, historians agree that it did not have any of its wondrous births in the United States. The French, British, and Brazilians each claimed the invention of photography. Regardless of who and what image process is said to be workable, the advent of photography was in the 1820s and 1830s. Even though the United States was not the source of the birth of photography, it may well claim the dawn of the “history of photography.” The American versions of the history of photography, with no claims of priority to carry or defend the birth of photography, developed differently. The broader American audience did not take photography seriously until the 1930s because it was primarily commercial and not the assumed worthwhile materials to study, like paintings.

Photography came of age in the United States during the Civil War era, with more than a million photographs about the war taken, comprising battle
scenes and portraits. As photography became more affordable, there was a new surge of interest in images of soldiers wearing their uniforms, with many photographs taken to be mailed home as keepsakes for loved ones.\(^{34}\)

As the Civil War progressed, a mass of stark photographic evidence was available to the nineteenth-century consumer, providing what seemed to be an unmediated witness to the terrible scenes of battle and a new way to have a “Good Death.”

The “Good Death”

By the mid-nineteenth century, Americans’ attitudes toward death changed; The dead were more significant in the living world, and a more sophisticated perspective had developed on dying and the deceased. \(^{35}\) The reason for this change was the evolution of Western thought with the coming of the “Good Death.” American culture treated passing as an art, with the “Good Death” as a goal that all men and women should struggle to achieve. \(^{36}\) From the fifteenth century onward, texts describing the *Ars Moriendi* (“art of dying”) provided readers with rules of conduct of how to meet death through the religious faith in God. \(^{37}\) Further texts on the tradition of the *Ars Moriendi* spread throughout American culture, seeping into popular literature like Emily Dicken’s *Little Nell*. \(^{38}\) The Good Death reached a broad spectrum of the American population in the mid-century and would become a central aspect of the Civil War’s popular culture, songs, stories, and poetry. \(^{39}\)

Death during the Civil War: Adapting to War

The Civil War proved bloodier than any other conflict in American history. The number of soldiers who died between 1861 and 1865 parallels the number of American fatalities across the sum in the Revolution, the War of 1812, the Mexican War, The Spanish-American War, World War I, World War II, and the Korean War combined. \(^{40}\) Even in a society far more accustomed to death than our own, such death must have profoundly influenced hopes for a world to come. \(^{41}\) The Civil War separated families, and not only did soldiers die far from home, but their loved ones also died far away. American families could no longer experience death the same way. They had to wait for the bodies to come home by train. During the lengthy process of sending the bodies home,

\(^{34}\) Thwaites, “Battle-Pieces, Drum-Taps,” 51.
\(^{35}\) Jackson, “American Attitudes to Death,” 300.
\(^{37}\) Ibid.
\(^{38}\) Ibid., 7.
\(^{39}\) Ibid., 8.
\(^{40}\) Ibid., 5.
\(^{41}\) Ibid., 4.
morticians embalmed the body to freeze the body in time for the grieving families. The dead became domesticated and beautified.\textsuperscript{42}

The increasing fatalities during the Civil War forced Americans to adapt how they had traditionally carried out funeral practices and rituals about death and dying. As Americans faced the horrors of the war, through the numbers of the dead, they sought ways to problematize their ability to cope with the carnage and their commitment to the war efforts, to the point of questioning the righteousness of their own God. For example, Clark Braden reflected on the death of a young man. In a letter to the local newspaper, he wrote, “How many noble lives have been sacrificed by the unholy rebellion!”\textsuperscript{43} In this writing, he expressed significant concerns about “copping” and the “patriotic” frustrations of this “second war of Independence.” He concluded by stating, “All of these fond hopes have been buried in his early grave, solaced only by the thought that he gave his life heroically to his country.”\textsuperscript{44} This writing illustrates the anxieties about death during the Civil War. The Civil War exacerbated the struggle to achieve the “Good Death.” Much of the “Good Death” ritual focused on the \textit{hors mori}, the hour of death. According to the hour of death, the ritual must be witnessed, scrutinized, interpreted, and narrated.\textsuperscript{45} The sudden and all-but-unnoticed end of a soldier slain in battle and the unattended deaths of unidentified wounded men too ill to reveal their last thoughts denied these long-cherished consolations. Not only did the Civil War disrupt how people died, but it also departed from the prevailing assumptions about who should die. As Clark Braden says: “This loss of noble life, this premature death of great talent and virtue is the irreparable loss of the war.”\textsuperscript{46} The loss of these soldiers during the Civil War robbed Americans of their “Good Death” and separated death from the context of the home.

Soldiers died far from home, and no one was there for them in their final moments. Nevertheless, Americans tried their best to adapt to this horrific change. Since families could not grieve their dying loved ones in the context of the home with them, they developed a more significant relationship with their departed through the funerary process once they were already gone. The dead became precious. The attention to the burial receptacle and the body ensured that the deceased, adequately reposed in an aesthetically pleasing setting, did not die for a long time.\textsuperscript{47} First, the bodies had to return home, which took some time. The introduction of embalming corpses started during the Civil War to prevent the body from decaying on the trip home.\textsuperscript{48} Embalming helped freeze

\textsuperscript{42} Jackson, “American Attitudes to Death,” 300.
\textsuperscript{43} Braden, “M. W. Adams,” 1.
\textsuperscript{44} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{45} Faust, “The Civil War Soldier,” 10.
\textsuperscript{46} Braden, “M. W. Adams,” 1.
\textsuperscript{47} Jackson, “American Attitudes to Death,” 304.
\textsuperscript{48} Jeremiah Chiapelli and Ted Chiapelli, “Drinking Grandma: The Problem of Em-
their final moment in time to make it back home for an adapted “Good Death” in which the dying no longer took part. Other than embalming, another way in which Americans froze their loved ones in a moment in time was through photography.

Photography as a Remedy: Post-mortem Photography

Fig. 2

The living and dead alike were prisoners of war. The Civil War rendered soldiers incapable of dying with dignity with their loved ones nearby, while in turn, the war also robbed the family of experiencing death domestically. In an obituary written in a newspaper about a one-year-old baby who passed when her father was off in the war: “The bereavement is accordingly a sad and heavy one—rendered but the more severe by the absence of the father as a prisoner of war—thus leaving the stricken and devoted mother in her lonely grief to mourn apart.” Americans could not correctly mourn their dead on or off the battlefield. With this problem came the obsession to remedy it. One of these remedies was the photography of the living and dead. For example, in Figure 2, a photo of a mother posing with the body of her infant daughter who passed away, one can see how the dead became precious and had a place in the world of the living. In doing this for the dead, Americans could prevent, delay, or adapt the grieving process to rationalize the carnage of the Civil War.

Post-mortem photography is the process of taking photos of the dead; it was a common practice from 1839 to the 1930s. Since death was frequent
during the war, many people, especially children, had no photographs taken of them when they were alive. However, due to the need to memorialize them and freeze their likeness in history, families would have pictures taken of the body alone or with the family posing next to or with the body. For example, in Figure 3, a stereoscope with the image of a dead baby, one can see that Americans were willing to capture the likeness of their loved ones, dead or alive. Family members’ pet post-mortem photographs of the pets’ bodies further express the deep emotional attachment humans feel toward animals and death. For example, in Figure 4, a person lovingly or sorrowfully posed with their deceased dog.

![Figure 3](image1)

![Figure 4](image2)

**Photography in War**

Some families of killed Civil War soldiers were willing to pay to have the bodies sent home for burial. The embalming, arranging, and repairing the broken corpses for the last ride of life sparked the new profession of a mortician. By the beginning of the 20th century, the dead, now beautified and arranged, were in the hands of the undertakers and funeral parlors, and the first gap of distance had opened between the living and the dead. Photography’s part in the Civil War was not significant to military or naval operations but a boon and curse for the people. Due to the technological limitations at the time, the primary aesthetics in Civil photography is that of the aftermath, in which

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51 Anderson, “Post-Mortem Photography.”
52 Ibid.
54 Ibid., 34.
the photos depicted that which is, in the wake of action, ruined or uncanny. The photographs reveal scenes that appear lifeless, empty, or obliterated by the effects of war.55 This style encourages the viewer to reflect on the ruins and dead of the war. Photography gave the dead an everlasting image; on a personal basis, it was an effective tool to remember their loved ones pictured dead or alive. It affected perceptions of death among Americans.

Photographers did not shy away from death, with photos of the dead on the battlefield.56 A photograph in Alex Gardener’s Sketch Book shows dead Union soldiers littered on the battlefield. Gardener gives a flowery description of the carnage that attempted to beautify the dead while trying to understand or rationalize their final moments:

With those who wore a calm and resigned expression as though they had passed away in the act of prayer. Others had a smile on their faces and looked as if they were in the act of speaking. Some lay stretched on their backs as if friendly hands had prepared them for burial.57

Figure 5. Field Where General Reynold Fell, Gettysburg, July 1863

Gardener embraced the Civil War conflict and tried rationalizing it through a patriotic and religious understanding rather than dismissing it. His pictures take meaning from their place within a specific event concerning an imminent whole: the war. He uses photography to memorialize the effects of

56 Ibid.
war. He tells a story through the pictures and can convey the terrors of war through photographs.\textsuperscript{58}

Photography garnered as the medium for death due to how it came to be in the United States during the Civil War. The persistent documentary reputation of photography and the continuing public belief in an objective role for the photographer’s eye has funneled much of the illustration of death out of literature, sculpture, and painting and into photography. Americans refused to deal with mortality and accept death for what it was: an end to life. Americans used photography to suspend and delay death. It reminded Americans of their loved ones but in a false reality. Some pictures would pose the dead in a way to imitate life; for example, the post-mortem photos discussed earlier. Rather than extending the grieving process, photography alleviated the burden of death away from home for certain families who got pictures of their loved ones dead or alive. However, the problem of the “unknowable dead” and “nameless dead” prevented this from taking full effect because not every dead body was identifiable after a battle, or some families did not have enough money to embalm and transport the body back home.

Alex Gardner noted the impossibility of honoring the fallen soldier when he stated, “How many skeletons of such men are bleaching today in out-of-the-way places no one can tell... But there are hundreds [of dead] that will never be known of, and will moulder into nothingness among the rocks.”\textsuperscript{59} Laying the war dead to rest was almost impossible. The dead were restless bodies that circulated physically, spiritually, and ideologically in a society that struggled to solve the predicaments they created. The “unknown dead,” or what one would call unidentified, collectively became a substantial cultural crisis during the Civil War, which photography helped remedy.\textsuperscript{60} During this time, a person who lost his name had a second death, a death by disappearance.\textsuperscript{61}

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\textsuperscript{58} Trachtenberg, “Albums of War,” 14.


\textsuperscript{60} Savage, “The Unknowable Dead,” 83.

\textsuperscript{61} Ibid., 90.
Namelessness had a paradoxical effect: while it rendered the dead susceptible to symbolic appropriation and the cultural logic of abstraction, it also made them elusive as objects of awareness and historical constructs. The nameless dead in photos allowed Americans to imbue meaning in the anonymous bodies’ deaths. For example, in Alex Gardner’s photographic sketch book, he made the dead seem dramatic or heroic. In Figure 5, Gardner arranged a Confederate sharpshooter to convey a dramatic scene. The nameless dead Confederate soldier now represents a historical construct and is removed from their previous identity of the domestic and family into the collective memory of America as a whole. Americans wanted the Civil War and the death that came with it to mean something. Mainstream American culture during the nineteenth century shows that Americans did not let go of the Civil War dead nor accept them on terms other than those of heroism and sacrifice. Clark Braden puts it best: “But as we cherish the names of the heroes of the Revolution, so should and will we cherish the memory of the noble men who fall in this our Second War of Independence.” Rather than accepting the death of the Civil War, Americans held to their notions of patriotism, creating a false reality that the death of their loved ones had some higher meaning. This notion is also reflected in Gardner’s photo sketchbook: “With those [dead] who wore a clam and resigned expression, as though they had passed away in the act of prayer.”

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63 Finseth, “The Civil War Dead,” 537.

64 Braden, “M. W. Adams,” 1.

Conclusion

The Civil War was the intertwining of the nexus of the history of death and technology in American history. The Civil War was the bloodiest conflict in U.S. history, and due to the high casualty rate, the war disrupted America’s conceptualization of death and funerary processes. Americans adapted their funerary processes and conceptions of death by utilizing new technologies like embalming and photography to achieve the “Good Death” even through the carnage of war. Because of the high casualty rate of the Civil War, Americans started embalming corpses to extend the funerary process to give the bodies of the dead a more significant role in the *Ars Moriendi*. Americans took pictures of their loved ones, dead or alive, to supplement the process of death at home, gave families a final moment to remember their loved ones, and the ability to freeze a memory in an object like a photo. This adaptation or change over the course of the Civil War in newspaper clippings, obituaries, and photographs written and taken during the Civil War shows the impact that photography had on how Americans experienced death during the Civil War.