

# Picturing History

## The Story of Mathew Brady and His Camera



Mathew Brady was fascinated with the new camera portraits being taken in France in the late 1830s. They were called daguerreotypes (deh-gehr-uh-tipes). While working at other jobs, Brady studied chemistry and learned everything he could from people who knew how to take these photo portraits. In 1844, he opened a studio in New York City and began doing this kind of photography himself.

Until daguerreotypes, portraits had to be painted by artists. Often, the artist would improve how the subject looked in order to charge more money for the portrait. Shot with a camera, portraits were true to life, but making daguerreotypes was very difficult.

The photographer first had to prepare a silver surface, or plate. The plate was exposed to iodine vapors to make it sensitive to light. Then the plate had to be kept away from light until it was time to take the picture. To get an image on the plate, the surface had to be exposed to light at just the right time and for the right amount of time. The person being photographed had to sit motionless for up to 30 minutes while his or her image “burned” onto the plate. Then the plate had to be covered again quickly and taken to a darkroom.

Working in dim candlelight, the photographer placed the plate in a box and exposed it to heated mercury. After the image appeared, it was fixed with a salt solution. The picture was very delicate. Even brushing against it with a soft cloth could rub away the image. To protect the image, the picture was put inside a glass box. If an

image was damaged or had turned out too light or too dark, there was no way to fix it. The whole process had to be done again.

Many famous people came to Mathew Brady to have their pictures taken. Except for William Henry Harrison, Brady photographed all of the U.S. presidents from John Quincy Adams to William McKinley. He took many photos of Abraham Lincoln. In fact, a portrait of Lincoln is one of Brady's most well-known pictures. Singers, actors, and authors also came to Brady to be photographed. Even King Edward VII of England took time for a portrait at Brady's studio when he stopped in New York on his way to Canada. In the 1850s, Brady opened another studio in Washington, D.C., and had to start hiring assistants to help with the workload. Brady also needed the assistants because his eyesight, which had always been poor, was getting worse.

In 1860, when the American Civil War began, Brady thought that taking pictures was important to preserve the war for history. Because the pictures had to be developed right after they were taken, Brady carted his equipment, his darkroom, and his assistants to battlefields and army camps. When the Union Army retreated in the battle of Bull Run, Brady's wagon was destroyed, forcing him and his crew to make their way back to Washington, D.C., on foot. Even so, Brady and his assistants continued to photograph battles that took place near the nation's capital.

Brady's Civil War pictures were published in books, but few people bought the books. At the time, people didn't want to be reminded of the war. Because Brady had spent so much time and money on those photos, his studios began to fail. To save his photography business, he tried to sell the Civil War collection to the government. In 1871, Congress agreed to buy 2,000 photographs but didn't set aside money for the purchase.

Unable to pay his debts, Brady lost his New York studio. He was able, however, to carry out many loads of portraits and photographs before sheriff's deputies arrived to

evict him. He managed to keep his other studio and continue his work in Washington, D.C. Although the government finally paid him \$25,000 for many of his pictures, Brady had to close his remaining studio in 1881.

Despite his popularity and his contributions to 19th-century history, award-winning photographer Mathew Brady, died alone and penniless in 1896. Many of his photos did not survive, either. The government did not take care of the plates it had purchased from Brady and would not pay to restore the damaged collection. As a result, many priceless, historical photo-documents were lost forever.

Today, when we see copies of the Brady photos that have survived, we know what Abraham Lincoln and many other famous people really looked like. We also see actual scenes from the American Civil War because Mathew Brady was there with his assistants and his camera.

## Questions About Picturing History

1. Before cameras were invented, how did people get pictures of themselves?
2. What were some of the challenges in making a daguerreotype? List at least three.
3. Why might Mathew Brady have been considered a reporter for the Civil War?
4. Why didn't people want to buy Brady's books of Civil War pictures?
5. Why was Brady's work with the camera important?
6. Name the advancement in today's photography that you think would surprise Brady the most.

## Vocabulary

*A. Match each word to its definition.*

carted	image	preserve	evict	exposed	plate
restore	darkroom	daguerreotypes	portrait	mercury	studio

1. a head and shoulders picture of a person
2. to bring back to brand-new condition
3. a picture or likeness of someone or something
4. a chemical element that is often seen as a silvery liquid
5. a flat, thin sheet of a hard material such as metal or glass
6. pictures made using a very early photographic method
7. the main work area of an artist or a photographer
8. to keep from being lost or destroyed
9. a place with no light rays to damage photo images
10. carried or moved as if in a small wagon
11. left out in the open, unprotected
12. to remove from a rented property by legal means

*B. Read each pair of definitions below. Write the word they define and the letter of the definition used in the story.*

1. A. set or fastened firmly in place  
B. repaired or mended
2. A. the answer to a problem  
B. a mixture of a solid dissolved in a liquid

## Sequencing

A. *Write the missing steps for making a daguerreotype.*

1. Prepare a silver surface, or plate.
- 2.
3. Expose the plate to light.
- 4.
- 5.
- 6.
7. Expose the plate to heated mercury.
- 8.
- 9.

B. *List, in order, each of the seven dates that appear in the story and write a brief description of what happened at or around that time.*

## Problems and Solutions

*For each problem below, write Mathew Brady's solution.*

1. Problem: The only way to have a portrait done was to hire an artist to paint one.

Solution:

2. Problem: An image that was "burned" onto the plate would be damaged by light until it was fixed with a salt solution.

Solution:

3. Problem: An image turned out too light or too dark.

Solution:

4. Problem: Brady's workload increased greatly in the 1850s.

Solution:

5. Problem: Any photographs that Brady took on a battlefield or in an army camp had to be developed immediately.

Solution:

6. Problem: No one bought Brady's books of Civil War photographs.

Solution:

## Write About It

*Write an argument that Brady could have used to convince the United States government to buy his photos of the Civil War.*