Civil War Photos
Interpretation and Analysis

The Civil War coincided with the emergence of photography as a mass medium. For the first time, Americans were able to see presidents, generals, orators, and other public figures as they were—not just as they existed in the mind of an artist. In this activity, you'll examine a variety of photos and other images from the Civil War and analyze their significance.

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Part I. The Technology of Civil War Photos
Read the LOC's description of photographic technology in the 1860s. Then answer the questions below.

[Unknown location. Wagons and camera of Sam A. Cooley, U.S. photographer, Department of the South]. c.1860-1865.
http://www.loc.gov/pictures/item/cwp2003001044/PP/

Taking Photographs During the Civil War

During the Civil War, the process of taking photographs was complex and time-consuming.

- Photographers mixed their own chemicals and prepared their own wet plate glass negatives.
- The negatives had to be prepared, exposed, and developed within minutes, before the emulsion dried.

It was a difficult process to master in a studio setting and even more difficult to work outdoors. Photographers transported their supplies in a wagon, improvised a darkroom, and learned to use their chemicals in both the blistering heat and bitter cold.

The Wet Plate Process

Producing photographs from wet plates involved many steps.

- A clean sheet of glass was evenly coated with collodion.
- In a darkroom or a light-tight chamber, the coated plate was immersed in a silver nitrate solution, sensitizing it to light.
- After it was sensitized, the wet negative was placed in a light-tight holder and inserted into the camera, which already had been positioned and focused.
- The "dark slide," which protected the negative from light, and the lens cap were removed for several seconds, allowing light to expose the plate.
- The "dark slide" was inserted back into the plate holder, which was then removed from the camera.
- In the darkroom, the glass plate negative was removed from the plate holder and developed, washed in water, and fixed so that the image would not fade, then washed again and dried.
- Usually the negatives were coated with a varnish to protect the surface.
- After development, the photographs were printed on paper and mounted.

In the 1880s dry plate negatives were introduced. These glass negatives were commercially available and did not need to be developed immediately after the exposure.

Questions
1. What do you think was the biggest challenge facing Civil War photographers? How might they have solved it?

2. What do you think people valued most about photographs in the 1860s?

3. How do we value (or not value) photographs now? How does this reflect changing photographic technology?

Part II. Slavery in Art and Photos

Frederick Douglass, widely known as "the nineteenth century's most-photographed American," was a strong early advocate for photography as a tool for social and political transformation. Douglass saw "the picture-making faculty" as "a mighty power" that removed the subjectivity of artistic portraits and replaced it with "true pictures" of objective reality. Though we would today question the assumption that photos are objective, Douglass was certainly correct about the leveling effects of photography, lauding photography for being "within easy reach of the humblest members of society."

To test Douglass's theory, examine the set of drawings and photos of enslaved people, and answer the following questions:

1. What are some similarities between the photos and drawings? Think not just about content (i.e., what the images contain), but overall tone and feel.

2. What are some differences? Again, think about the tone and feel of the images.

3. What do the photographs add to our understanding of slavery that the drawings do not?

4. Look specifically at the final three portrait photos (of unidentified enslaved man, Sojourner Truth, and Douglass). Do you agree with Douglass that such photographs served to dignify and humanize enslaved people? Why or why not?

5. How do people today use images to define themselves? How is this similar to, and different from, the kind of behavior Douglass described?

Part III. Documenting War

Read the article "How Civil War Photography Changed War": http://news.discovery.com/history/us-history/civil-war-photography-warfare-110411.htm

Think about some of the subjects of Civil War photography:
- Portraits (leaders)
- Portraits (ordinary soldiers and citizens)
- Technology
- Battlefield scenes
- Daily life for soldiers
- Daily life on the homefront
- Slavery
- Prisoners of war
- Women

Imagine that you are an 1860s journalist tasked with documenting the Civil War. Choose one of the above themes (or make up one of your own) and find **three** photos from the LOC's Civil War collections that could help illustrate the theme you chose. Then answer these questions:

1. Why did you choose the photos you did? What do they tell us about your chosen theme?

2. How would these photos have contributed to Americans' understanding of the Civil War?

3. What do the photos **not** tell us? What further information would be necessary to understand this theme? What sources could best supply that information?