



Alexandria Times

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Out of the Attic

A view of War

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Image: Photo, U.S. Fire Department, 1863. Andrew J. Russel, Library of Congress.

One of the developments of the American Civil War was the rise of photography and the unprecedented view of the battlefield it offered civilians.

Photography was in its infancy when the war began. The practice of refining and publicly distributing intensely realistic images of death and carnage did away with the myths of heroism and romance that were formerly associated with the battlefield.

Along with advances in weaponry and military tactics, the Civil War also saw progress in the areas of battlefield medicine and sanitation, which was prompted by the overwhelming reaction to horrific photographs displayed far from the fields of conflict.

At the war's start, there were few professional photographers at the battlefield. This was because of the difficulty of transporting large pieces of heavy equipment and unstable chemicals before recording and immediately developing the images in cramped, unsafe conditions.

But an American public ravenous for their work rewarded photographers who made the effort, such as Matthew Brady and Timothy O'Sullivan. For the first time, the news of battle was supplemented by precise visual references, which had a profound influence over each side's morale.

Although primarily known as a landscape painter before the war, a major photographer to emerge during this period was Andrew Joseph Russell. A New Yorker, he had created artistic works for the Union's recruitment efforts.

In 1862, Russell enlisted in the Union Army as part of the 141st New York Volunteer Regiment and quickly found himself in Virginia. He soon became fascinated by the advancing art of photography and paid \$300 to an associate in Brady's studio, Egbert Guy Fox, to teach him the dangerous collodion wet-plate process that was standard at the time.

Borrowing a camera from Fox, Russell began taking photographs of fortifications, railroads and military assets in and around Alexandria. Artistic and detailed, they enabled the viewer to fully comprehend the effects of war. Within a year, Russell was appointed the official military photographer for the Union Army, and his photos were soon incorporated into official reports and records.

This July 1863 image, taken early in Russell's photographic career, captured newly bought steam-powered forward fire engines obtained by Union authorities after the city's fire equipment was largely misused or destroyed during the first two years of the war. The engines were housed at the U.S. Fire Department building, located on the southwest corner of Princess and North Lee streets. One of the magnificent pumpers still is owned and maintained by the Alexandria Fire Department.





Office of Historic Alexandria City of Alexandria, Virginia

In the weeks ahead, this column will continue to focus on Russell and his amazing photographic legacy of Civil War Alexandria.

“Out of the Attic” is published each week in the Alexandria Times newspaper. The column began in September 2007 as “Marking Time” and explored Alexandria’s history through collection items, historical images and architectural representations. Within the first year, it evolved into “Out of the Attic” and featured historical photographs of Alexandria.

These articles appear with the permission of the Alexandria Times and were authored by Amy Bertsch, former Public Information Officer, and Lance Mallamo, Director, on behalf of the Office of Historic Alexandria.