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Out of the Attic

Photography on the Front Line

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Image: Government hay barns, 1863, by Andrew J. Russell. Photo, Library of Congress.

On August 22, 1862, just three days before U.S. Gen. John P. Slough assumed his duties as military governor of Alexandria during the Civil War, Andrew J. Russell volunteered to serve in the Union Army at Elmira, N.Y.

Although born in Walpole, N.H., Russell was raised in Nunda, N.Y., a rural area where his father worked in the construction of canals and railroads. When he entered the Army there is some evidence that he was somewhat dissatisfied with his life and looking to change its direction.

He had married Catherine Duryee 12 years earlier at the age of 21 and together they had two daughters, Cora and Harriett. However, he is listed as living with them only in the census of 1860 and soon after, Duryee and the children moved to Minnesota.

As a captain in the volunteer infantry, Russell traveled to Washington and Virginia, and studied photography in his spare time. He quickly absorbed the then-prevalent wet plate photographic process that exposed light sensitive images to glass-plate panels specially coated with a chemical mixture called collodion, which is created by combining acetic or sulfuric acid with ethyl ether.

Once coated, the glass panels were immersed in silver nitrate, then sealed in a tight container and inserted into the camera just seconds before an image was to be recorded. By removing the cap on the camera lens for several seconds, exposing the glass plate to light and imprinting the image on its surface, an image was to be captured. The plate then had to be immediately washed, dried and sealed with varnish to create a permanent negative, which could be transferred to paper later on.

By mid-1863, U.S. Gen. Herman Haupt had Russell detached from his unit to act as the only official Civil War photographer, having been an active armed service member. Initially, Russell spent much of his time wandering through Union-occupied Alexandria, using his knowledge as a landscape painter and newfound photography skills to record military assets and resources.

However, this July 1863 photograph of mundane government hay barns adjacent to Alexandria's railroad depot illustrates the unusual depth of perspective and proportion in his imagery. Rather than





Office of Historic Alexandria City of Alexandria, Virginia

using the photograph as a routine record of the subjects, Russell focuses on the dimensionality of the buildings and their juxtaposition with the worn railroad tracks and trampled earth in the foreground. The dwarfed men and rickety wagon in the distance only add to the immense size and scale of the buildings whose sole purpose was to store feed for war horses.

As the months dragged on, the focus of Russell's work evolved from recording Alexandria's wartime environs to documenting military railroad and construction projects, subjects he had grown accustomed to as a child witnessing his father's trade. Ultimately, many of his photographs were utilized by the Army in what became the world's first technical manual to be illustrated by photography. Next week's column will continue to explore the evolution of Russell's photographic craft in 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.