



# Alexandria Times

Established in 1797 as *The Alexandria Times and Advertiser*

## Out of the Attic

### A Civil War photographer who died in destitution

*Alexandria Times, March 26, 2015*

*Image: Alexandria waterfront during the Civil War. Photo, Library of Congress.*

This iconic photograph taken on the Alexandria waterfront during the Civil War is one of thousands of images bound together by a common back story that traces the evolution of photography in America. Although taken during wartime, the photo depicts the Union frigate “Pensacola” centered in the distance, while small groups of men — some workers and some in silk top hats — discuss the news of the day.

The photo was probably taken early in 1862 by James F. Gibson, who at the age of 34 followed Major Gen. George McClellan’s forces from Alexandria to his intended assault on Richmond in the “Peninsula Campaign” that took place from March to July in that year. Gibson was born in New York City and worked at the photography studio of Mathew Brady that opened there in 1844.



Although he received training as a portrait painter, Brady himself had studied the photographic process with inventor Samuel F. B. Morse, and became known as one of the most prominent portrait photographers in the United States. He eventually opened another studio in Washington, D.C., which Gibson co-managed with another well-known photographer, Alexander Gardner.

When the Civil War began, Brady saw a commercial opportunity to photograph soldiers as a keepsake for their loved ones with the motto, “You cannot tell how soon it may be too late.”

As the market for soldier portraits flourished, Brady became further engrossed in the war and embarked on a massive project to record the actual reality and horrors of the conflict. At the time, the process of capturing and developing an image was painstakingly slow and relied on both a steady camera and a carefully staged dark room. But Brady was able to establish a series of portable studios enabling more than 20 photographers from his studios to take the emerging art form directly to the battlefield.

Many of the most famous Civil War photographs are attributed directly to Brady, but in actuality he took very few war photos himself. His eyesight had begun to deteriorate in the 1850s and he was no longer able to sustain unimpeded vision for extended periods of time. Yet by using his own photographers and special equipment, Brady was able to assume his rightful place in American history in the evolution of photography as an important new media.



## Office of Historic Alexandria City of Alexandria, Virginia

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For example, just days after the Battle of Antietam, the bloodiest battle in American history, Brady was able to exhibit photos of its aftermath by Gardner and Gibson, at his New York studio.

During the war years there was an insatiable demand for the work of Brady's studios, and even the Alexandria image seen here was developed into personal keepsakes including small "carte de visite" mementos and for the stereopticon, an early precursor of the 3-D image.

After the war, Brady's photo record fell out of favor as the public sought to put the conflict behind them. He had expected the federal government to purchase the entire collection as a war record, but Congress refused and caused Brady to go into bankruptcy. He died penniless in a New York hospital in 1896 after a tragic streetcar accident and is buried at the Congressional Cemetery in Washington D.C. Gibson died nine years later at the age of 77.

*"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.*