



Civil War Photoshop

By Gloria Swift, BGES Historian – October 22, 2019



General Grant at City Point | Library of Congress

The American Civil War was the first war covered by the emerging medium of photography. For the first time, the public was able to see the cost of war on the battlefields. Also for the first time, popular icons emerged, as photographs of officers from North and South became widely available. The images from this period are usually straightforward, but on occasion, just like today, a photographer would “adjust” an image to present a certain scene.

Take, for instance, the photo above of "General Grant at City Point." But is that General Grant ... or his horse? Looking closely, Grant's head is situated at an odd angle, and his body seems a bit too big. He is missing some stars on his shoulder bars, and none of Grant's horses had a white sock on a left foot with a mane falling to the left. This photograph is marked on the lower left corner "General Grant at City Point," which should put to rest any doubt. But if you look more closely, doubt is definitely there.

This photo is actually a composite, or montage. It was created in 1902 by Levin Handy, who, as a boy, became an apprentice to his uncle, Mathew Brady. Becoming a photographer in his own right, he had access to many of Brady's images from the Civil War. He made Grant's image by cutting apart and putting together several prints and photographing the final.

Let's take a look at what he used to create the above image. Handy used the image of Grant at City Point in 1864 to procure the head for his montage. He used the human body and horse from a photograph of Maj. Gen. Alexander McCook that was taken in Washington, D.C. Finally, for the background, what better image than that of Confederate prisoners at Front Royal being guarded by Union troops in 1862? Handy may not have had Photoshop, but he had fun with this, and his image certainly fooled many people. The mystery of this photograph was not solved until 2008.

For more details and a close-up of the composite photo, visit the Library of Congress website at: www.loc.gov/pictures/collection/cwp/mystery.html.



Edgar Guy photo of Grant (cropped) | Library of Congress



Alexander McCook in D.C. (cropped) | Library of Congress



Captured Confederates after the Battle of Front Royal | Library of Congress

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