

On the front line of American history: Remarkable photos capture life in besieged Washington during the Civil War

By [Beth Stebner](#)

PUBLISHED: 00:33 EST, 26 July 2012 | **UPDATED:** 10:05 EST, 19 September 2012

These are the striking black-and-white images which capture America on the cusp of monumental change during the Civil War.

But instead of portraying dramatic events such as the bloody Battle of Antietam or Abraham Lincoln's historic address at Gettysburg, the images reveal day-to-day life for those caught during wartime in Washington DC.

Defending the nation's capital, which was ripe for invasion by Confederate forces that had set their sights on the city, became a top priority for the U.S. government.



Capital defense: A Washington, D.C. Park of Wiard guns at the Arsenal photographed in 1865



Medical service: Workmen and paramedics standing in front of a DC Ambulance Shop in April of 1865



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Historic address: Washington DC quarters of Union General Alfred Pleasonton and 'Government Horse Shoeing Shop' that were located in April of 1865 at 21st Street

The war transformed Washington from a modest semi-rural city below the Mason-Dixon line into an urban hub as people, government institutions and infrastructure all converged there, setting the stage for the rapid expansion of the city throughout the latter half of the 19th century.

Civil war broke out in 1861 when the South had seceded from the United States over the hot-button issue of slavery and its expansion into the western territories.

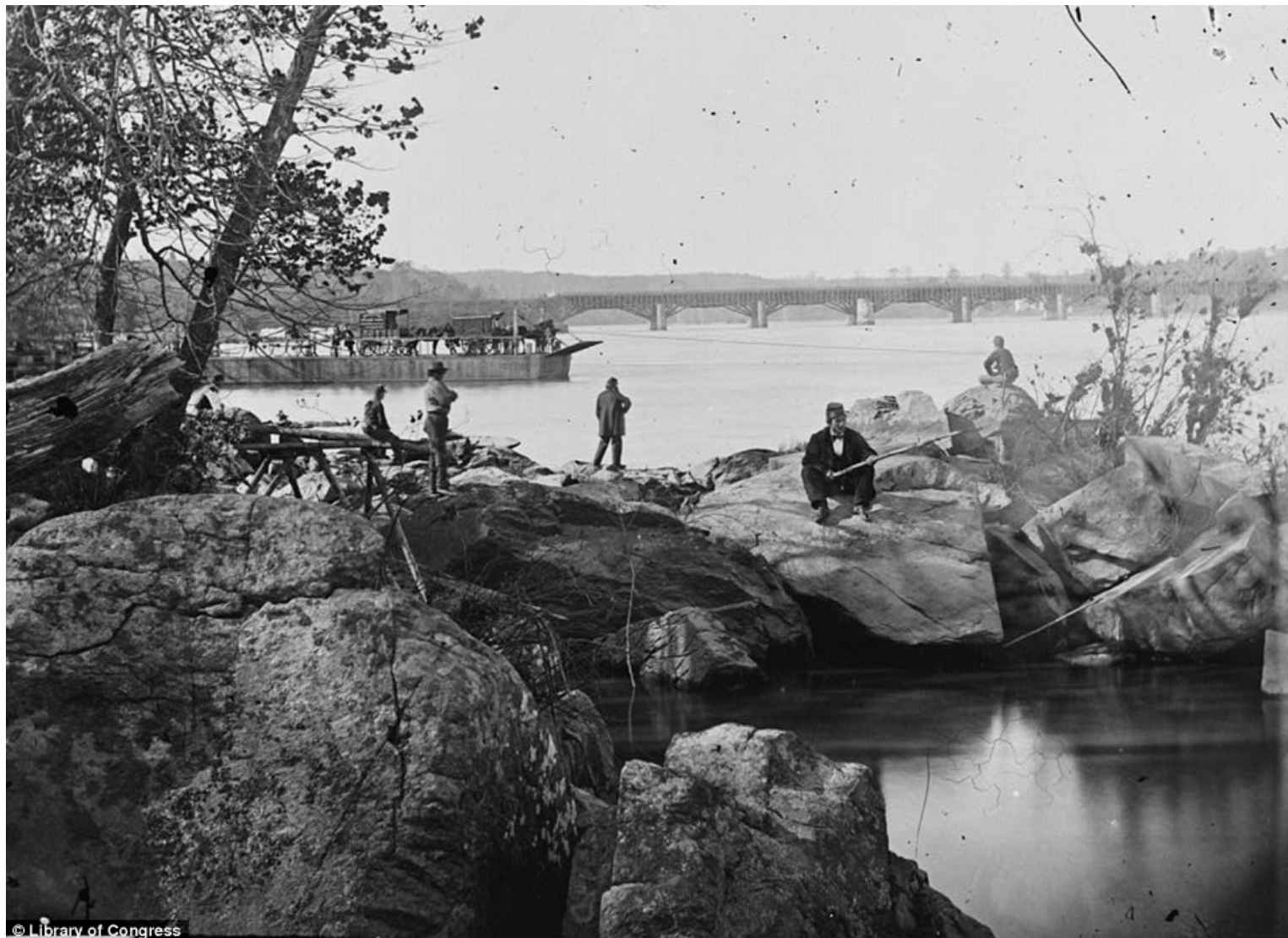
As the conflict dragged out, Washington DC became a military headquarters and logistics center - and local photographers rushed to capture the developments.

Thousands of volunteers streamed into the city to fight for the Union and local residents embraced the new arrivals.

The armies of the North desperately needed infrastructure, and so warehouses, supply depots, ammunition dumps, and factories were established to provide and distribute material. Civilian workers and contractors followed the arriving troops into the city to help the war effort.



Office workers: Clerks photographed in front of the office of Commissary General of Prisoners on F Street at 20th Street Northwest



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Picturesque: Georgetown ferry boat carrying wagons, and Aqueduct Bridge beyond. Photographer George N. Barnard captured the image from rocks on Mason's Island



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City under siege: Ward guns were placed at the Arsenal to protect the city, left, and signal stations were established to alert residents in case of an attack, right

At the beginning of the war, Washington's sole defense was one old fort built back in 1809. When Major General George B. McClellan assumed command of the Department of the Potomac, he became responsible for the capital's defense. He built fortifications on hills around the city and placed batteries of field artillery like Viard guns in the gaps between these forts.

Hospitals and ambulance stations, known at the time as ambulance shops, in the Washington area became significant providers of medical services to wounded soldiers returning from the front lines.

Slavery was abolished throughout the District on April 16, 1862 - eight months before Lincoln issued the Emancipation Proclamation - with the passage of the Compensated Emancipation Act.

As a consequence, Washington attracted a large population of freed slaves, and many were employed in building the ring of fortresses that eventually surrounded the city for protection.



Work force: Employees standing in front of the Trimming Shop in April 1865



DC's backbone: Officers and clerks on a porch at Signal Corps headquarters in May of 1865



Power brokers: Colonel Benjamin F. Fisher standing between two officers on steps of Signal Corps headquarters at 1816 F Street NW





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City in flux: Batteries of field artillery like the Wiard guns ringed the city, which continued to expand with the arrival of volunteers



© Library of Congress

Travel route: A view of Cabin John Bridge in nearby Maryland



A moment in time: Photographer William Morris Smith captured a view across Chain Bridge over the Potomac in 1865

Among the most significant of these Civil War hospitals were the Armory Square Hospital, Finley Hospital, and the Campbell Hospital. More than 20,000 injured or ill soldiers received treatment in permanent and temporary hospitals in the capital.

During the war, the U.S. Patent Office, and, for a time, the Capitol building itself, were used as medical centers.

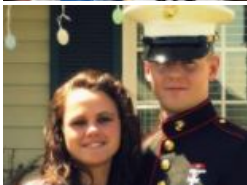
Some of the most important public figures of the era even served as nurses or medical assistants, among them poet Walt Whitman, American Red Cross founder Clara Barton, and Dorothea Dix.

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You guys sure are idiots. It was about slavery, the southern states seceded because they feared that election of Lincoln would mean the end of slavery. The states rights you are talking about was about the states right to keep slaves.

- [Bence Papp](#) , new york city, United States, 11/9/2012 01:47

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These are some of the photos I have never seen. I had an entire book of Matthew Brady photos and none of these were in it. I wonder just who the photographer was on these photos as they seem so calm and well posed unlike the battlefield photos Brady took that looked like they were literally the aftermath of battles.

- [Linder](#) , Ohio USA, 28/7/2012 23:54

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Kitty is correct. Slavery was not the reason for the war. Three Northern states had slavery when the war began and Lincoln was quite prepared to accept the Southern states retention of slavery if they rejoined the Union. It is amazing how history becomes warped by the victor - assisted later by Hollywood. The constitutional rights of the states within the Union were trampled. They still are.

- [D. Howie](#) , Dalmuir, UK, 28/7/2012 22:47

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The South did not secede due to slavery; that is Yankee propaganda. Only 8% of Southerners owned slaves; do you think the rest of them fought and died so 8% could keep owning slaves?? OF COURSE NOT! They seceded because of unfair Tariffs and Taxes. And the term "civil war" is incorrect. The correct term is "The War of Northern Aggression" which proved that the States (according to the Yankees) did not and do not have Sovereignty as far as they (the Yankees) were and are concerned.

- [Kitty](#) , Oregon, USA, 28/7/2012 20:11

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To the people mentioning an "apparition": these cameras used very long exposures, at least one second, so anyone moving during the exposure would be blurred and you can see right through them. Sorry to burst your bubbles.

- [jay](#) , philadelphia pa, 27/7/2012 23:37

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Jane, USA, 26/7/2012 18:06 is right. In the first picture there is a guy in the background who is partly transparent. You are able to see the cannon balls through him. Looks like a male with some sort of uniform on, wearing a flat hat. Very interesting.

- [Alicat](#) , Las Vegas, NV, 27/7/2012 01:07

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Great job DM! I love looking at all of these pictures of my "hometown" a hundred years before I was born there. I especially like that picture of the Chain Bridge, an area I have spent a lot of time in. Thanks for all these wonderful articles (and I still like all the bikini pics too!)

- [Chris](#) , Virginia, USA, 27/7/2012 00:31

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Looking back in my family history I find both paternal and maternal ancestors sailed from from Bristol to the New World. Some how they ended up on the opposite sides in the Civil War, how could this be ? They followed the teaching of the Lord, their descendents still want to carry guns.

- [Anne](#) , West Midlands E.U, 26/7/2012 23:14

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Very keen eye "- Jane, USA, 26/7/2012 18:06". There does appear to be an apparition.

- [VintHillFarm](#) , USA, 26/7/2012 23:08

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I wonder what the people were like back then. Were they friendlier and less rushed? Less narcissistic and selfish? Did they respect their elders and appreciate the little things? I wonder how they treated each other as they walked down the street, tipping their hat at a woman and nodding to the men is more of what i would guess. Fascinating photos.

- [Me](#) , USA, 26/7/2012 21:48

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