Ruins Reframed: The Commodification of American Urban Disaster, 1861-1906

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Ruins Reframed: The Commodification of American Urban Disaster, 1861-1906

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ABSTRACT

This dissertation explores images of urban disaster and related events produced from the Civil War to the dawn of the 20th century, seeking to understand the role such visual media played in the formation of American identity and racial perceptions. Images of disasters that appeared throughout this period demonstrate a desire on the part of a largely white, native-born consumer class to share in a collective grieving process, one that initially recalled the comforts found in the communal suffering of the Civil War, but habitually eschewed the most tragic elements in favor of an optimistic, nationalistic narrative free of lasting trauma. Out of this desire for mutual grieving and recovery emerged a market for tokens of palatable tragedy in the final decades of the nineteenth century. This market was fed by a growing industry of disaster commodification that co-opted urban destruction in the service of an ultimately white supremacist formulation of American identity.

These images gave consumers the ability to experience disaster and loss remotely, in more immediate and vivid ways than news reports or letters. Yet a line of acceptability was drawn in the process of commodifying these disasters, and resulted in a wealth of imagery that tells a far different – and far more hopeful – story of each disaster than the death tolls and oft ignored tales of costly human error could ever have crafted. The images instead create a fantasy narrative of disasters and aftermaths firmly under human control, and a racist, ultra-nationalistic view of the world in which white Americans are challenged by adversity, but always persevere to construct a new and better world – often in spite of the efforts of the racialized monsters in their midst.
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Introduction:

Creating an Aesthetic of Urban Disaster in the 19th Century United States

This dissertation explores images of urban disaster and related events in the United States, focusing on those produced from the early days of the American Civil War through the 1906 San Francisco Earthquake and Fires. Delving into issues of race, nationalism, consumerism and image production, this work seeks to understand the role such media played in the formation of American identity. Images of disasters that appeared throughout this period demonstrate a desire on the part of contemporary white middle- and upper class consumers to share in a faux collective grieving process, one that initially recalled the comforts found in the communal suffering of the Civil War, but habitually eschewed its most tragic elements in favor of an exciting, optimistic narrative free of lasting trauma. Out of the combined appeal of maudlin tragedy, the danger and thrill of growing urban spaces, and the comforts to be found in collective mourning emerged a market for tokens of palatable tragedy in the final decades of the nineteenth century. This market was fed by a growing industry of disaster commodification, one that co-opted urban destruction and the fear of immigrant and non-white populations in the service of an optimistic and nationalistic formulation of American identity.

With the advent of inexpensive publishing and image reproduction methods during the period, American consumers could for the first time construct extensive personal collections of photographs, lithographs, picture-laden books, and other depictions of important events. This imagery was particularly popular when it covered destructive events in urban spaces. More than just documentation, however, such
depictions related a particular version of the events, often entirely reshaping the disaster’s narrative into one that was palatable for the most likely audience. In an era of macabre stories full of foul play, such disaster consumers were hungry for a story complete with villains, despite the seemingly “natural” forces behind such events. To sate this desire, authors and image makers conjured such villains out of each city’s most despised ethnic or racial community.

In an effort to unpack such images, then, this dissertation will explore the problematic ways in which documentarians exploited disenfranchised communities to create salable disaster narratives. The coverage of urban disaster in nineteenth and early twentieth century America represented the wealthy, white male dominance of the country’s growing cities. Quick-to-print “history” books, photograph series, stereographs and other forms of reportage marketed to consumers sought a narrative clarity that demanded clearly defined heroes and evildoers. Finding easy targets among classes too poor to consume or counter such luxury items, image makers created narratives that conveyed official and unofficial anti-immigrant mentalities that undergirded the American urban power structure.

I. Visual Urban Critique

The opinions held by average citizens of the 19th century American city can be explored by seeking out and evaluating the items that they used to actively frame and commemorate their own personal views of urban space. Looking back today at popular ephemera that took the city as its subject, it is quickly apparent which aspects and themes most held the public’s focus.
Peter Bacon Hales recounts in his book, *Silver Cities*, that when creating views of urban space for public consumption, image makers focused on the latest forms of commerce and industrialization, keying upon those aspects of the city that were new and spectacular. The city provided early daguerreotypists a ready subject, and they, in turn, were at least as interested in practicing the technical side of their craft as they were in putting forward any kind of message with their images. At times, photography helped to soften the appearance of industrialization by framing it as a source of wonder and awe rather than danger and technological encroachment. Miles Orvell writes in *American Photography* that “the very fact that photography was a mechanical process harmonized with a growing enthusiasm for technology, part of a national mentality that accepted change as a fact of life.”

To be sure, the development of photography as a form of recording views of the city paralleled the expansion of urban industrialization. More to the point, we should understand photography itself as a product of industrialization, a scientific and technical method of recording modern life. In its early stages, science rather than art propelled photography; daguerreotypes were developed and first successfully produced by French chemist Louis Daguerre, who explained his process of permanently fixing a photographic image on a copper plate in science journals in 1839. Daguerre's invention was heralded as a scientific breakthrough.

As the technology of the camera progressed, and public interest in the new process grew, so too did the sophistication of photographers’ choice of subjects. This new form of record making was turned toward other new forms on the landscape; within the

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first two decades after the daguerreotype's debut, photographers produced a vast catalog of image series depicting urban landmarks and sights for purchase in photography shops, bookstores, by mail and through door-to-door salesmen, focusing on the grand architectural spectacles to be witnessed in the burgeoning city centers of the country. Finding a willing and eager market, image makers focused their efforts especially on the new architecture of commercialization and industrialization.\(^2\)

Images became, in effect, the white middle- and upper class viewing public's way of safely observing the growth of this new, thrilling and frightening landscape, of collecting and owning a piece of what was, in many people's minds, a terrifying and thrilling new edifice. The preponderance of cheerful, celebratory industrial and commercial urban views among early collectable image series belied a darker understanding of the places those images recorded. This strange relationship between the consumption of photographs of the city, and the fear within those same consumers of the city itself, must be explored further. Image makers, especially, discovered this desire quickly, and sought to profit from the public's need to witness this ominous new built environment in a variety of ways.

While these images of buildings might seem to be dispassionate records of city sights by today's standards, they sold in the mid-to-late nineteenth century because they represented exactly the opposite: records of a new and alien landscape, attempts to provide rationalized views of the seemingly irrational. For a country that was still majority rural, ten-story commercial office buildings, sprawling factories, and block after block of apartment buildings and storefronts were not views they were accustomed to. As

Hales asserts, “urban photography in the last three decades of the nineteenth century had developed an aloof, transparent, visually opulent style that overlaid a rigid system of classifying or organizing its subjects.” 3 Image makers who produced views of the city knew that their clients were eager to try to understand urban space, whether their goal was to become comfortable with it, or to gain a greater awareness of the challenges that lay within its borders.

Recognizing these dual intentions, image makers knew that the same image could satisfy multiple needs. While playing that first desire for views of the terrifying new city, urban visual documentation was also employed as a means to lure new people and investment to the city. While some image makers sought to prey on fear, others worked to actively counteract the notion of the city as inhumane. It was through visual media’s inherent ability to bend interpretations of reality to fit the image maker’s desired perception of the scene that urban documenters found ways to play the role of boosters, as well. This form of, as Hales calls it, “Grand Style” photography was encouraged by industrialists and other financiers of the metropolis who sought to draw greater investment of capital and labor to the city. Images could propel the rise of the machine and the mechanical ordering of American life. Such pictures “defined the city not as a place of chaos, darkness and danger, but of order, light, and intelligibility.” 4

In depicting a rational city, image makers often in the employ of city officials or corporate underwriters worked “to create and disseminate the symbols of civilized urban life which the urban elite believed to be crucial indices to the preeminence of their nation

3 Ibid., 131

4 Ibid., 120.
not only in their time, but in the greater sweep of history." Hales recounts that, for example, the bird’s eye view of the city, often shot from atop the tallest building or highest point of observation, projected a sense of order onto the usually chaotic-seeming streets of nineteenth-century urbanity. From high above, those considering the value of the city could see it as a rational, planned landscape of square blocks, well-planned routes, and neighborhoods each devoted to specific industries, businesses, or styles of living. These photos and others served as visual artifacts of urban growth.

Images were also tools of city recruiters, for example in San Francisco, where photographers produced panoramas of the far-flung frontier city that demonstrated its civility and development. The photos of cities in the west demonstrated the potential to be found in the relatively under-explored frontier. Continued technological advancements allowed photographers to take aerial views and other more complex views of urban space, ones that dazzled viewers by showing them new ways to see their city. “City view books,” like George Fardon’s *San Francisco Album* (1856), were published that included page after page of such images, and became popular gifts from business leaders to potential clients. Stereoscopic photography, too, made its debut in the 1850s and with it came an exciting new way to see and experience the world in a faux three-dimensional way, adding novelty to views of the city that pushed aside the apprehension many might have otherwise felt. Photographers saw themselves as “mediators between the reality [of urban development] and the dream [of better living through development].”

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5 Ibid., 122.
6 Ibid., 64.
II. Urban Disaster, Ruin, and Meaning

While boosters had easy targets in the ordered, grand scale of the city, those image makers who sought to depict the dangerous side of the city were often forced to wait until danger presented itself in obvious, physical form. Hardly ever, though, did they have to wait long. Beginning with the Civil War and coinciding with the rise of photography as a popular medium of urban viewing and critique, American cities were regularly fired upon, flooded, shaken and burned to the ground. Rare is the American town that does not have some great fire or flood in its past, as towns were usually founded alongside waterways that transported goods into the city, and filled with cheap wooden buildings almost piled on top of each other to squeeze as much money as possible from every piece of real estate. From Bowling Green, Ohio to Chicago, Ill., most cities have at least some mass destructive event in their past to fill the halls of historical societies. In the nineteenth century, the advent of war and the use of flammable building materials in densely-packed urban spaces assured that cities were regularly turned to ash heaps throughout the era of urbanization.

Image makers found in such disasters the ultimate expression of the monstrous city. That these massive edifices could, in the relative blink of an eye, be leveled and take numerous human lives and property with them only added to the dangerous reputation of these new and towering spaces. In a way, images of disaster appealed to consumers for the same reason that images of the intact city did: this was a scene few had witnessed before. The fact that the large buildings themselves were new forms and scales of architecture also meant that anything that happened to and within them was equally fresh. This claim is borne out in the subjects image makers, especially photographers, chose to
depict. Commercial and industrial structures far outpaced domestic structures in the ranks of most oft-depicted themes. And just as boosters felt they could draw in potential investors by focusing on the new and unfamiliar, image makers too saw in the rubble of commercial and manufacturing structures the surest targets to appeal to mass audiences.

That photography and stereography provided novel new ways of seeing previously unfamiliar sights only furthered the rush to own a piece of the tragedy. But more than a simple desire to know the unknown, there exists within many of these images cause for a visceral, pleasurable or comforting reaction to seeing and experiencing that which is feared. These images provided a safe emotional and even physical rush for the viewer. In his book, *The Culture of Calamity*, Kevin Rozario argues that humans are born with the inclination to “pay special attention to anything unusual or threatening that happens” in their presence, and to “respond with heightened physical and emotional arousal,” demonstrated by increased adrenaline and other bodily and mental manifestations.7 Extending Rozario’s point, we can see that this fear becomes a pleasurable experience of exhilaration and relief once the danger passes, and so we are eager to see and experience more of the same so as to achieve that same reassuring result. For Rozario, the new forms of excitement and sensation in the nineteenth-century city catered to this desire; amusement park rides, for example, served such a role, and photography in effect allowed the viewer an experience that provided all the necessary information for a quick explosion of excitement, while also promising the safety of home and a calm atmosphere as the images are being viewed.

In effect, these images allowed the viewer to participate in the disaster, to own a piece of a story that in many cases would become a national phenomenon. When much of Chicago burned to the ground in 1871, the resulting images appeared in shops and catalogues across the country. People wanted not only to see what had happened, they wanted to buy a part of it, and be able to hold that part in their hands. Returning repeatedly to the images meant that they had the purchased for themselves the opportunity to feel a sense of the suffering and sense of loss that many of the actual victims did. Witnessing disaster in such a new form, and seeing it realistically depicted and viewable on demand, allowed for a whole new kind of participation in these events. These “prosthetic memories” of participation, as Allison Lansberg has called them, were for the first time in history easily experienced almost as if the viewer were standing in front of the disaster as it happened. Modernity had created a new way of interfacing with history, an experience which birthed prosthetic memory by allowing the viewer secondhand contact with real events and places in a way that was powerfully affective. And in the language of the companies that sold such imagery, the notion was front and center that events and places could be experienced without the need of physical presence.

III. The Evolution of Disaster Imagery and 19th Century Visual Media

When considering the role that images of disaster played in nineteenth-century life, it is useful to briefly explore the evolution of popular visual reportage in the second half of the 19th century, and the ways in which image makers incorporated urban disaster into their repertoires, so as to understand better the ways in which consumers accessed

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8 Allison Lansberg, *Prosthetic Memory*, 199
such media. First, long established forms of visual communication like engravings, drawings, and newspaper illustrations remained as vibrant chroniclers of calamity late into the century, even as such media came to be seen as increasingly archaic in the face of the development of presumably more realistic forms of photography and stereography. In news magazines and newspapers like Frank Leslie’s Illustrated Weekly and Harper’s Weekly, along with the hundreds of local newspapers across the country, anyone looking to feel disaster’s rush found vivid tales of death and loss written up with a flourish, stories of survivors’ harrowing journeys and victims’ terrible ends. While certainly not unique to the reportage of urban disaster, the wealth of exciting stories and macabre visual and mental imagery such catastrophic events provided was ripe for sensationalistic retellings in lurid prose that played on the fear of urban space.

Key to these retellings was the often grisly illustrations that accompanied the stories. Rare was the disaster story that was not illustrated with a drawing of a body in peril. Each macabre tale of a child being swept away by flood waters, or a father perishing as he rushed into a burning building to save his family was printed alongside a caricature of the tragic events. Mimicking the murder and fantasy novels that fueled the midcentury American cult of horror, such illustrations were typically the first visualizations, the forms in which the public saw the nineteenth century disaster. The result was that many destructive events took on a sheen of melodrama far removed from the actual facts of the catastrophe readers typically expect in early reports today. Embedded in the process of representation was the suppression of reliable accounts of damages and casualties, overtaken by embellished and even false details that appealed to the audience’s thirst for horror.
In the last two decades of the 19th century, the same type of sensationalistic writing and illustrations found in the weekly newspapers were adapted to a more sizable format. At least as early as the 1889 Johnstown flood, publishers began to offer for sale dozens of quick-to-print “histories” of urban disasters, books overloaded with the same kinds of hearsay and speculation to be found in the weeklies, but amplified by the sheer volume of such tales between the covers. Often, publishers would draw their stories directly from the newspapers, reprinting verbatim the wild tales of danger and rescue. The maudlin drawings came along, with most “histories” of this sort taking special care to state in advertisements and on their covers that they included a wealth of illustrations to further whet the potential buyer’s appetite. When turn of the century printing advances made it possible to reproduce photographs cheaply and effectively in books and newspapers, such images immediately filled the made their way into such books. Rarely did the volumes provide more than a passing reference to the causes of the disaster; readers sought excitement, and likely the audience these books found were the same audiences who had been keeping the true crime novel industry afloat for decades.

Each new destructive event would call back into action stock characters – the “Butchered husbands, slaughtered wives, [m]angled daughters, bleeding sons, [and h]osts of martyred little ones” honored in Isaac G. Reed’s 1889 poem about the flood that year in Johnstown, reprinted in one such book, The Story of Johnstown, by J.J. McLaurin.9 Gruesome drawings illustrated tales of rescuers finding bodies washed up and stuck in trees, of people searching for loved ones among rows of open caskets, and of criminals

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being strung up by the neck for starting ancillary fires. The veracity of the scenes illustrated was questionable at best, but of little consequence to authors who often readily admitted the dubious sources of each tale in the same paragraph in which they demanded that the reader feel outrage for such injustices.

From the 1850s, photography and stereography took over as the primary sources of visual reportage. And strikingly, the presumed veracity of these images – especially when viewers compared them to the more impressionistic drawings they were used to seeing – and the reputation of photography during the era as a scientific and technical process elevated photographs and stereographs above the status of mere illustration or novelty. Instead, these supposedly truthful images achieved a reputation among the viewing public that allowed them to serve as standalone reportage, often sold with very little accompanying text, rarely more than a caption of a handful of words labeling the scene depicted. This breakthrough shift in the status of visual media signaled the acceptance of imagery as documentary record by an audience naively unaware of the malleability of truth within the photographic frame. As this dissertation will demonstrate, this acceptance of the ‘truth’ of the photograph only thinly masked the subjectivity and sensationalism found in images like those coming from urban areas hit with disaster. As media possessed of a bias that is simply covert rather than absent, photography and stereography refined the craft of visually sensationalizing urban disaster rather than eliminated it. As a result, the depictions issuing from each disaster presented a multitude of sensationalized narratives crafted to maximize sales. But each new set of views differed in tone and content from previous iterations, image makers nevertheless injected
their own takes on the events, redrafting the narrative each time they deployed the
shutter.

Photography was front and center in this new visual reportage. Images of disaster
could be purchased in storefronts, from catalogues, and from salesmen across the country
within weeks of each new event. Buyers could select single images or richly produced
series of photos from many publishers. Aside from full-sized photographs, stereographs
arrived to provide an even more novel way of viewing far off scenes, both of destruction
and other sights. The sales techniques of one stereograph company are useful here as a
model for the industry, though it can be said that both photography and stereography
companies employed similar tactics in selling their wares.

By 1882, when brothers Elmer and Bert Underwood founded their image
distribution firm in Ottawa, Kan., they were already joining a crowded field of
competitors. Firms like the Keystone View Company, J.A. Pierce and Company, and
George N. Barnard were turning out hundreds and sometimes thousands of cards per day.
Like their competitors, the Underwood & Underwood firm employed an army of door-to-
door salesmen, hired via recruiting ads placed in newspapers around the country. These
ubiquitous ads called for enthusiastic and energetic salesmen, offering exciting images
that would sell easily. Events of national significance took center stage in the ads,
promising enterprising salesmen-in-waiting the opportunity to play a role in the event by
spreading exciting images through their neighborhoods.

In making their house calls, stereograph salesmen carried with them catalogues
full of thousands of images for purchase. These catalogues, printed on cheap paper and
flipped through by potential customers as salesmen waited — patiently or otherwise — at
the door, listed stereo cards that could be purchased as single images, or in series ranging in number from a handful of views, or “positions” as some catalogues called them, up to 100 or more cards.

The topics ranged from the mundane to the fanciful. In Underwood & Underwood’s 1905 catalogue, for example, customers still mourning the assassination of President William McKinley four years prior could order a set titled “McKinley’s Washington Life and His Journeys,” full of views of the slain president throughout his four and a half years in office. According to the catalogue,

These 60 outlooks show one of the greatest men of his time, in his private apartments in the White House; at his desk; with his chosen advisers in the Cabinet Room; revisiting his Ohio home and greeting old neighbors and friends; addressing audiences in various parts of the country. Their range includes also glimpses of the last honors paid to his memory by a grief-stricken people. These scenes, made under such varied conditions in all parts of the country, preserve to us a most graphic record of the life of a much-beloved man.10

Those looking for a lighter subject could purchase the twelve-card “Elephant Series,” which promised views of the massive beasts performing their duties throughout India, plowing fields, “hauling and lifting” timber, or just “basking in the sun in their beautiful native home, interior Ceylon.”11 The “Zululand Series” presented residents of the southern African kingdom as if they were a strange and exotic alien species.

What is perhaps lost to the twenty-first-century viewer of these catalogues is the unique experience they promised to customers. The notion of being able to own views of some of the era’s famous people, exotic locations, or peculiar animals was likely an


11 Ibid., 50.
enticing sales pitch. While movie theaters often showed travelogues, and lecturers occasionally came through town bearing stacks of slides and prepared remarks on far-off locales, neither these nor other options allowed the viewer to own the views, and to experience them in their own homes, free to do so whenever they pleased. The catalogues themselves, key selling tools of the door-to-door trade, offered tantalizing but opaque descriptions of the wares for sale; instead of a glossy spread of image reproductions, the catalogues of door-to-door distribution firms like Underwood & Underwood and H.C. White Co. were full of words only. Card titles were listed one after another, for a hundred pages or more, divided into series and cross referenced via subject headings and, occasionally, geographic locations. In effect, the salesmen were given the tools to knock on doors and inspire willing imaginations to run wild; whatever the quality of the stereographic pictures that eventually arrived might be, the customer was free to dream up their own scene. In this way, the imaginations of potential buyers were often the salesman’s most precious and effective selling points.

This fact could not have been lost on the manufacturers who issued these catalogues. Such images in the catalogue could easily be printed for the customers once an order was placed. It is possible, of course, that salesmen carried with them stereo card samples, but in the days around the turn of the century before the widespread use of automobiles – one finds it hard to imagine that laborers who sold stereographs were in possession of a good horse, either – it seems farfetched that the salesmen would have schlepped a truly representative set of samples could have been schlepped from one house to the next. And so, those who answered the door when an image distributor’s salesman knocked were soon asked to see themselves standing before vistas ranging from
the pyramids at Giza, to the parlor of the late President McKinley’s Ohio home. Images of disaster were just one of the many types of scenes the customer could select, and the catalogues were full of listings that offered views of a multitude of famous destructive events.

To heighten the feeling that the stereographs enabled an experience more than a simple passive gaze, the catalogues advertised the bulk of their series as “tours,” complete with exciting descriptions of the sites, and on some occasions, accompanying guide books. In 1907, H.C. White Company’s stereograph catalogue encouraged the potential buyer to recognize the convenience of its product, touting “Tours to All Points of the World – Without Leaving Your Fireside,” and showed an elegantly dressed couple seated before a fireplace, visions of remote lands and significant landmarks floating like a dream above their heads.12

The Underwood & Underwood catalogues of this era described the tours, which the company called “The Underwood Travel System,” as an experience equal or superior to that of actual physical treks:

In the usual mode of travel, the essential thing is not that a man’s body has moved from one place to another, but that his mind has come into contact through the senses with famous objects and places, that he has experienced sensations of pleasure or pain in their presence, which have inspired thoughts and produced states of feeling enriching his experience and adding to his happiness. To experience all this is to travel truly. Underwood & Underwood, by making use of a simple, scientific principle which they have spent twenty years developing, offer the means of actually securing these very mental experiences and benefits which

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12 Tours to All Parts of the World Without Leaving Your Fireside: Catalogue No. 27 (New York: H. C. White Company, 1907), front cover.
ordinary travel gives, and which may be attained by this means in one’s own home.\textsuperscript{15}

Citing the comforts of domesticity as a perfect location for “touring” is a ubiquitous strategy employed throughout these catalogues. Travel was an expensive and time-consuming ordeal, out of the reach of many of the residents whose homes the salesmen would visit. But buying a series from Underwood & Underwood was not meant to be an act of settling for second best, at least not in the language of stereograph catalogue copy writers. To draw in customers, the Underwood brothers’ catalogues assured the customer that they were buying the real thing, that movement from one place to another was not an essential element of travel, and that to experience a new locale one need not go there.

The H. C. White Company’s catalogue promised a similar mental journey in a letter to the customer titled, “The Choice of Stereographs.”

Books describe places, scenes, subjects — but it is the mission of the stereograph to reproduce with absolute fidelity the thing itself, presenting the reality, not the imitation, so that the mind receives the same impression as in the bodily presence of the object, — an imprint that is never effaced.\textsuperscript{14}

In its description of the “Trip Around the World” series, which begins on the Brooklyn Bridge and ends on the North American west coast, the catalogue discusses the trip in travel brochure language. “Sailing from New York,” the copy says, “we visit the historic spots of England, Ireland, and Scotland.” After an extensive voyage, “we return home via the Pacific Coast of California, visiting Canada and the most important sites of

\textsuperscript{13} \textit{Original Stereographs Catalogue No. 27} (New York: Underwood & Underwood, 1908), 5.

\textsuperscript{14} \textit{Tours to All Parts of the World}..., 6.
our own vast and varied country."\textsuperscript{15} One simply needed to trust that, in buying the
products of these companies, the customer was being given an expertly selected and
described series of images in a format that, even sixty years after its invention, would
provide a true travel-like experience through a system based on no more than a simple
optical illusion.

To seal the deal, many of the tours were accompanied by extensive books and
maps that acted as tour guides for the at-home sightseer. In the Underwood &
Underwood catalogues, each book was authored by a "conductor" as they were called,
men often with degrees who composed lengthy treatises on the places the customer
would be seeing via the stereoscope; their "United States Tour" series, for example, was
accompanied by a book of 177 pages including four unique maps.

In the same catalogues, Underwood & Underwood offered a number of alternative
forms through which to experience their images. Chief among these were slides that
could be rented or purchased for public display, lectures and presentations that would, as
the catalogue states, "Draw the crowds and hold their interest." Would-be exhibitors
could select from "250,000 original negatives taken by professional photographers for
stereopticon lantern slide uses," in forms ranging from sepia or colored slides to "plain"
black and white. Those seeking a more professional or even religious touch could order
from among the many "Travel Lectures and Lecture Sermons for Rent."

These prepared lectures and lecture sermons are illustrated with the finest lantern
slides made from our own original negatives. A large proportion of the slides in
each lecture set are very beautiful and artistically colored and the sets are

\textsuperscript{15}Ibid., 8.
accompanied by manuscript lectures by prominent professional lecturers, preachers, etc.  

Whatever the format – slides, stereograph cards, or professionally mounted 8x10s – the image distribution industry flooded the market with collectibles advertised as an in-home travel experience. Through their wares, customers were to see and experience sights previously inaccessible. The industry, which did not begin to decline until the early twentieth century when newspapers began reproducing photographs, enjoyed a longevity reflecting the eagerness of consumers to go along with the distributors’ travel fantasy. Photography in all of its various forms became a point of access for the American population to experience a changing world as never before.

While only a portion of their entire catalogue, images of disasters were present throughout the offerings of image publishing and distribution companies. Beginning with the 1871 Chicago fire, and continuing at least through the San Francisco earthquake and fires of 1906, stereograph and photograph distributors published disaster series that ranged from a handful of images of small events – such as the dozen or so stereographs George Barker’s publishing house produced of the 1898 Oil Creek flood in Titusville, Pa. – to extensive records of major events like the Johnstown flood and the 1900 hurricane that leveled much of Galveston, Texas.

Destruction and loss were major attractions. The 1907 H. C. White Company catalogue’s series on the San Francisco disaster, which included a relatively modest list of 33 images, described a night in which “thousands of families were made homeless.... The whole world paused for the time aghast. The heart [sic] of its people were touched.”

In purchasing the company's stereo views, the customer would receive a set of images that depict[ed] this most terrible catastrophe accurately, clearly and adequately. Scenes of desolation and destruction, awful rents in the earth's crust, street upheavals, twisted buildings, dismantled homes, magnificent structures gutted by fire, ruins of palatial residences, wrecked trolleys, suffering refugees, - all these and more from the permanent record of that awful 18th of April.17

While the San Francisco images found its way to customers at least a year after the disaster, other series were in print and ready to be shipped within days. A set of twenty handsomely mounted eight-by-ten photographs of the Johnstown flood's aftermath, issued by E. Walter Histed of Pittsburgh, kept its captions short and simple, and revealed at the same time that the series was released long before all of the facts were known: "Johnstown Flood, May 31st, 1889. Loss from 10,000 to 12,000 lives."

Such misstatements and exaggerations were a regular part of the reportage of urban disaster during the nineteenth century. Partly the result of a need on distributors' parts to rush their product to the market as quickly as possible, it can be assumed, as well, that exaggeration only heightened the desirability of each piece. Not a single image, caption, or description from this era ever underestimated the amount of loss in each disaster. Whether death toll, extent of damage to land and buildings, or financial cost, the estimations and outright guesses attached to such ephemera were as sensationalized as the melodramatic reports in newspapers and books.

17 *Tours to All Parts of the World...*, 96.
IV. Constructing Disaster Narratives Through Imagery

But then, it is a fact that 2,209 people lost their lives in the Johnstown flood, certainly no small number. Such wildly disproportionate estimations are still a hallmark of disaster even today; in the immediate aftermath of the September 11 terrorist attacks reportage announced that the toll at the World Trade Center site could be as high as 30,000. Underestimation has never been a part of calamity reporting.

The pictures themselves are just as susceptible to fabrication in the hands of even a moderately skilled image maker. “[W]e might say that a given image does not have a single meaning but, rather, multiple meanings, depending on the particular context and its purpose,” wrote Miles Orvell in American Photography.

To understand a photograph is therefore to recognize that any image is produced at an intersection of cultural determinants... Nevertheless, one must begin to understand a work by developing a historical sense of its original purpose. Most photographs, given the nature of camera imaging, contain both information and the interpretive organization of that information... but we may still see one function and purpose, rather than another, as dominant at a given time.18

Certainly, context shapes the viewer’s reading. For example, the daily inundation of images twenty-first century viewers experience has dulled the understanding of the singularity and wonder of a nineteenth century photograph, especially in the years immediately following the release of Daguerre’s process. And while Orvell’s explanation covers contextual differences, it is far more revealing to consider the intentions of the person behind the camera, pen, or paintbrush who is creating the image. This ability to covertly manipulate the narrative, especially when the image maker is producing a series of images meant to be advertised as an all-encompassing view, places a far greater deal of... 

18 Orvell, 15-6.
power in that image maker's hands than most audience members are aware. This dissertation will demonstrate that, while not entirely unique, nowhere was the ability of image makers to manipulate the meaning of the image's content more fully expressed than in the images of urban disaster.

The depictions of urban disaster produced throughout this era expressed a multitude of narratives, and rarely did these stories relate more than tangentially to the disaster depicted. While photography allowed many more people to see realistic views of these disasters, the content of the images could be chosen and framed to refocus the viewers' attention on a chosen subject, away from the more troubling aspects of the story. In some cases, image makers manipulated the scene depicted to make them more sellable. Other alterations sought to keep businesses from leaving the city. Many others sought to use images of recovery to boost up patriotic feeling – this country, they argued, was far too strong to allow the near decimation of a major city slow the pace of industrialization and urbanization.

While the subsequent chapters will delve into such narrative manipulations in detail, it is important to examine why consumers were, and in many ways continue to be, so eager to consume whatever narrative is provided to them. In his book, The Culture of Calamity, Kevin Rozario states that we have a "psychological addiction" to images of disaster, "though this varies in significant ways along registers of class, gender, and race."\(^{19}\) Disasters have long helped to form American national "identities, power relations, economic systems, and environmental practices."\(^{20}\) Employed often as a tool of

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\(^{19}\) Rozario, 2.

\(^{20}\) Ibid., 3.
rebirth, our national development has depended on disaster as a cause for renewal and progress.

As Naomi Klein has successfully argued in her book *Shock Doctrine*, liberal political and economic systems have depended on disaster to provide them with an excuse to reassert their authority by taking leadership roles and strengthening their hold on the public. In the midst of chaos, those with the greatest access to the channels of power inevitably step in to take control, overtly providing a means of reestablishing order and, often times, covertly furthering the reach of those already in charge. In his book *Acts of God*, Ted Steinberg argues that control over the construction of the post-disaster narrative has been a key source of power in wrecked cities throughout modern history. Having this power often meant being able to deflect blame from those people or groups directly or indirectly responsible, and aim victims' ire instead at nature or God. But while the “act of God” narrative was regularly propagated and willingly consumed by a public more interested in titillation than truth, the role of such factors as lax government oversight, or corporate interest over safety was never far below the surface.

The goal of placing blame on nebulous institutions like the natural and supernatural worlds allowed the power structure of the city to avoid blame, maintaining its hold on city governance and economics after it had failed to properly safeguard and maintain the city itself. As Steinberg writes, it

> is not simply that natural disasters bear a strong human component, but that those in power (politicians; federal, state, and city policymakers; and corporate leaders) have tended to view these events as purely natural in an effort to justify a set of

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responses that has proved both environmentally unsound, and socially, if not morally, bankrupt.  

While little evidence exists to suggest that image makers worked at the specific behest of city leaders to craft falsified or sanitized narratives of disasters' causes and effects, it is evident in the visual record that artists, photographers and illustrators often took the narratives being fed to the public and framed their images to mirror these fabrications. This argument is born out time and again in the acts of visual documentation for public consumption that took place in the work of photographers and artists throughout the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Time and again, later - and far more thoroughly researched - histories of each event detail the ways in which urban power structures manipulated the retelling of disaster narratives for their own gain. And in each instance, the popular forms of visual reportage not only reflect these nationalistic, racist, and often scapegoating narratives, but contribute their own interpretations that gloss over troubling aspects in order to produce the most viable products possible.

It is in the photographic documentation of the Civil War that we can see the first large-scale attempts to report on and frame destruction via solely visual means, and in a commercially viable way. For Americans far from the fighting, the images of death and ruin that poured out from the battlefields and shelled towns of the war exposed viewers to the most realistic views they had yet seen of mangled bodies and damaged buildings. But photography was not, of course, the first visual medium to take up disasters of either the body or the built environment as a subject. Drawings that appeared in newspapers and

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books, and lithographs that were sold to be hung in parlors and dining rooms, were the most popular, cheap, and widespread form of visual reportage in the 1860s. And when one examines the contents within the frames of these contrasting forms of imagery, it becomes readily apparent that differences exist far beyond the simple distinctions of the technology and skills employed to create the images.

One of the keys to understanding the ways in which image makers recorded death and disaster can be found in the depictions of two essential elements in such narratives: victims both living and dead, and the built environment. War, fire, flood, hurricane, earthquake and tornado all left their marks on bodies and buildings throughout the latter half of the nineteenth century, yet the especially graphic images of death produced by Matthew Brady and his fellow Civil War photographers were largely an aberration. Photographers who recorded subsequent deadly events regularly downplayed the most gruesome aspects of human suffering – the broken bodies that often littered destroyed urban spaces – while highlighting the destruction wrought upon man-made structures. Bodies still featured extensively in drawings, paintings, woodcuts and lithographs, but were always whole, often living, and typically engaged in the act of flight or sacrifice for the survival of others.

Such illustrations, drawn from memory or imagination rather than captured in the moment of disaster, placed the human body in romantic, melodramatic scenes, that appeared for their emotional effect more often than to highlight the deadly nature of disaster. More realistic mediums of visual documentation like photography and stereography, both of which had supplanting drawn and printed images as dominant record-making media by the turn of the century, typically avoided the bodies of the dead,
with a few notable exceptions. Instead, the focus became destroyed commercial buildings
and other man-made structures. Due to the realistic nature of photography, salability
again played the primary role in this omission rather than taste, or respect for the dead.
Ruined buildings, unlike corpses, could be replaced and improved upon. In an effort to
create a sellable product, image makers drew their audience’s attention away from the
tragedy of death and toward the optimism of an improvable built environment.

Consequently, while the photographic images of the Civil War pointed the way
toward the profitable business that could be conducted in disaster imagery, their
unwaveringly realistic depictions of battle’s aftermath contrast markedly with the work of
image makers who followed their lead after the war. Bodies still appeared on occasion,
but their frequency of appearance in media like photography and stereography
plummeted, and image makers appear to have taken great care to avoid producing images
of incomplete, injured, or decaying bodies like Alexander Gardner’s work at Bull Run
and Gettysburg. The rising consumer demand for disaster images in the following
decades, and the virtual disappearance of realistic depictions of gruesome death in those
same images, traced an evolution in the graphic nature of the material preferred for
collective mourning and private titillation can be traced. While consumers had largely
lost their taste for gazing at realistic gore after the war, they had found in these images a
source of comfort, and sought in the profusion of purchasable images of destruction new
routes through which they could conjure and share grief in exciting ways. Gore retreated
from the visual spectrum, while still playing a vital role in the sensationalist written and
illustrated reports of disaster. As these contrasts demonstrate, reading about violence and
viewing violence are two related but singular acts.
The images and writing that covered both the war and the disastrous events to be explored in the subsequent chapters demonstrate the level of desensitization brought on by the advent of modern forms of visual reportage. While bodies are indeed absent from the vast majority of photographic depictions, body counts are ever present, as the Histed's Johnstown Flood image and many others like it prove. In an increasingly industrialized and mechanized society, the same people who worried about losing their jobs and the value of their labors to machines were eagerly snapping up images that treated human victims as one more statistic to list alongside the value of property damaged. Loss in effect became entertainment, more a rush to be experienced than an actual event to be mourned. While many in the audience surely felt a wave of remorse in looking at the images of destroyed lives and cities, the commodification of these disasters prayed more on macabre fascination than empathy. Consumers wanted to see, experience, and participate in the disasters. Then, they wanted no more than to put them aside for the Elephant Series they had also ordered.

V. Literature Review

Urban disaster imagery in the United States rose in the midst of a public intellectuals' revolt against the city. In their book, *The Intellectual Versus the City*, Morton and Luticia White argue that, in the writings and statements of the early-to-mid nineteenth century public thinkers, the city itself was portrayed as a foreign and unnatural place. Prominent writers of the 1800s like Thomas Jefferson and the Transcendentalists Ralph Waldo Emerson and Henry David Thoreau believed that the city itself was a wholly unnatural phenomenon. For them, bringing nature into urban spaces was not a
possibility, unless the city was to be entirely removed from the landscape and replaced with a rural and agricultural (for Jefferson) or pristine natural (for the Transcendentalists) environment. For those of the firmly anti-urbanist bent in the decades prior to the Civil War, the city was an irredeemable landscape, and should be repelled in favor of an agricultural society. In *Notes on the State of Virginia*, Jefferson, an early proponent of, as Richard Hofstadter called it, the “agrarian myth,” wrote that American democracy would flourish as long as the country remained a wholly rural place. To Emerson, the city was useful only insofar as it provided necessities on occasion — those unburdened by urban life could still visit the city from time to time and take from it goods, services, and socialization. Thoreau’s *Walden*, meanwhile, named the entire urban enterprise appalling, the antithesis of what it meant to lead a truthful life, and argued actively against the fallacy he saw in all civilization. Andrew Jackson Downing and Frederick Law Olmstead, among others, sought to provide the city with a version of the rural through expansive parks and landscapes.23

It is a mistake, however, to assume that his anti-urban, anti-modern stand was a viewpoint relegated to a miniscule and eccentric group of philosophical writers. The Transcendentalists, Jeffersonians, and other pro-rural or pro-nature writers of the early and mid-century were simply the most confident and most celebrated voices in a growing chorus of intellectual anti-urbanists. Historians like Paul Boyer and T.J. Jackson Lears,  

among many others, have addressed the development of an extensive strain of anti-urban feeling among many of the same people who populated those cities during the middle and latter parts of the decade.  

Outside of the circles of philosophical thinkers and wealthy escapers, the view was far more complex, far less purely anti-city. A number of historians have tracked the movement to the city by working-class American and immigrant groups, an influx of new residents who, perhaps long before their wealthier counterparts, realized the inevitability of the city as a center of mechanical and cultural production. In his book *The Incorporation of America*, Alan Trachtenberg writes that the city had become, by the 1860s, an incomprehensible space for many, but an inevitable place of residence for many more. Upon arrival, new lives had to be made; in his book *City People*, Gunther

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Barth writes that, as people moved from rural to urban areas from the 1830s on, they found themselves in strange environs surrounded by unfamiliar kinds of people. Barth and other writers have covered the growth of entertainment and escapism in the growing American urban landscape, demonstrating that those without the means to flee to the countryside for respite nevertheless were able to construct new comforts and adventures in the city.26 Parks stood in for green rural expanses, while baseball fields, vaudeville theaters and other crowded venues found new pleasures that served the high-density populations in the city.

In the realm of photography and reportage, activists like Jacob Riis worked to expose the limits of the elite’s kind of temporary and freely taken flight from urban space, cataloguing the worst conditions within the city to demonstrate the inability of many to simply escape the urban environment’s excesses and brutalities. Through Riis’s *How the Other Half Lives* (1890), thousands were exposed to graphic depictions of the awful conditions in New York City slums, an image easily transferable to many an inner-

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city neighborhood throughout urban America at the time.\textsuperscript{27} Still, Riis can be seen as equal parts hard line reformist and nosy tourist; as Keith Gandal writes in *The Virtues of the Vicious*, Riis “unknowingly assert[ed] an alternative ethics” in his work “with his shameless photographs and his dogged pursuits of exotic sights at the expense of both slum privacy and cleanliness, with his praise of pride and his shocking faith in the tough or gang member, with his rejection of disciplinary institutions such as the juvenile asylum, and with his advocacy of an aesthetic tenement architecture.”\textsuperscript{28} As Peter Bacon Hales so thoroughly describes in *Silver Cities*, other urban photographers eschewed views of people almost altogether, relegating the citizen to the role of prop in front of grand views of architecture and skylines. When creating views of urban space for public consumption, image makers focused on the new forms of commerce and industrialization, keying upon those aspects of the city that were new and spectacular.

The myriad visual forms that depicted the urban environment took part in a larger search for an American national identity throughout the 19\textsuperscript{th} century.\textsuperscript{29} As Robert Wiebe


\textsuperscript{28} Grandal, 9.

argued in *The Search For Order*, the split between rural America and urban America reached a fever pitch as industrialization pushed more and more citizens into cities. As a result, following the close of the Civil War and Reconstruction, urban populations exploded. So, too, did the volume of immigrants arriving to work in the United States. Numerous historians have covered the resulting popular anxiety - fresh from war, the nation faced major population shifts, and an influx of non-native workers.

This migration and expansion mirrored the struggle to define citizenship in a country built upon immigration, both forced and voluntary. This dissertation will argue

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that the fight over the nature of and access to citizenship shaped the understanding of urban disasters. Mathew Frye Jacobson's book, *Barbarian Virtues*, examines the ways in which the United States' push for global economic and military superiority affected, too, the ways that American citizens viewed those of different national origins. His work, and that of other historians working out the complex tangle of nationalistic, racist lenses through which the United States viewed the world, shape this dissertation's reading of the documentation of non-native and non-white populations, and how those views evolved over time.

Though the diversification of urban populations affected a great deal of change in cities during the latter half of the nineteenth century, so too did the rise of new means of production, shipping, and construction. Historians like Alan Trachtenberg and William Cronon have thoroughly examined the rise of the industrial American city, and the effects such environments had on the shaping of American identity, as well. And as this dissertation will cover thoroughly, with the rise of such cities came the ever-present

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prospect of mass disaster. My work here follows in the footsteps of authors like Kevin Rozario, who have examined disaster as a political, cultural, and social practice.32

Finally, the work of writers like Christine Boyer and Dolores Hayden, who have examined the essential role of history and memory in the urban landscape, provides critical insights into the ways in which the effects of complicated depictions of the human cost of disaster can linger long after physical traces have been erased.33 As news of each


successive urban disaster reached an eager audience, memories of disasters past shaped both the way those subsequent events were understood, and the ways in which image makers – including, eventually, amateurs – recorded the destruction.

VI. Dissertation Structure

The works cited above have helped provide a framework for the arguments made in this dissertation. To fully lay out those arguments, I will focus on the visual documentation of five particularly impactful destructive events which took place between 1861 and 1906, a period in American history wherein the nation grew from a collection of warring factions to a unified global power. In chapter one, I will argue that the Civil War-era work of image makers like Matthew Brady, George Barnard, and Alexander Gardner led the way in recognizing and exploiting a popular desire among white, native-born Americans to consume images of disaster and destruction. Capturing the carnage of a devastating war on American soil, Brady and his contemporaries exposed to the public to the ability of photography and newspaper illustrations to capture gruesome scenes of war in vivid detail. The destruction of American cities served as both backdrop and subject of many of those images. As Drew Gilpin Faust has successfully argued in This Republic of Suffering, the vast scale of the Civil War inspired the formation of new customs of collective mourning, as citizens shared in the suffering and loss inherent in

localized warfare. This chapter seeks to extend Faust’s analysis deeper into the real of visual culture, arguing that such a need for collective suffering extended beyond the bodies on the battlefield and into the ruined landscapes of cities and towns.

In her book *Murder Most Foul*, Karen Halttunen made clear that the mid-19th century was also the height of a “cult of horror” in the United States, one that found pleasure in the imagining of gruesome death and danger that could be found in seeming safe places. Taking into account Haltunnen’s thesis, this chapter will explore the ways in which the seemingly contradictory values of collective mourning and the cult of horror together conspired to form a consumer market ripe for the development of a popular and profitable trade in images of urban disaster. Finally, this chapter will briefly explore the ways in which image makers dealt with issues of race and identity during the war, tracing the beginnings of a theme that would gather increasing importance in the work of the visual documentarists of disaster in subsequent chapters.

Chapter two will examine the visual record of the Great Chicago Fire of 1871. The fire decimated one of the most important urban spares of the postbellum period, renewing and amplifying fears of the city even as urban populations grew at an ever-increasing pace. In this chapter, I will argue that this fear, along with a nostalgia for the collective mourning that grew out of the Civil War made images of Chicago’s ruins a hot commodity, relegating a far more deadly fire on the same day in Peshtigo, Wisconsin, to the back pages of newspapers at the time. Still, image makers recognized the need for a

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positive spin in their depictions of the disaster, and made the city’s recovery a central theme of the imagery. This chapter will further argue that, coming as it did during a wave of burgeoning anti-immigrant, nativist sentiment across the country, Chicago’s fire produced images that both reflected and inspired such racist trends, thanks chiefly to the anti-Irish myth of Mrs. O’Leary’s cow.

Chapter three is dedicated to the visual archive built up to document the Johnstown (Pa.) Flood of 1889. The passage of time between Chicago’s and Johnstown’s disasters is revealing – both in the extent to which the technology of documentation changed, and the ways in which problematic aspects of the documentation of Chicago had only deepened. In the photography and visual reportage of Johnstown, the washed out city becomes a surreal landscape. In this chapter, I will argue that this surreal depiction serves in part to mask the responsibility for the flood, turning the viewers’ attention away from the industrialists’ collapsed dam that brought the flood, and toward the gruesomely fascinating and macabre imaginary of burning and drowning victims in the water’s destructive wake. Further, this chapter will reveal the ways in which the nativist undercurrents that fueled the anti-Irish sentiments in Chicago’s imagery had built to a full-blown anti-immigrant rage by 1889. Johnstown’s visual and related accounts are rife with race monsters, imaginary (largely) Eastern European immigrants who scoured the wreckage for valuables and victims, living or dead.

The dawn of the twentieth century was marred by the deadliest “natural” disaster in American history, the 1900 Galveston Hurricane. Chapter four examines the larger implications of victims’ bodies in the visual record, a theme that had been largely avoided in prior disasters, but proved inescapable in Galveston. Further, the
documentation of Galveston reveals an important port city that, even after massive destruction, still reinforced the most shameful aspects of Jim Crow-era segregation. More than any other visual disaster narrative, Galveston will be shown to have been a largely hopeless tale of irreplaceable loss.

The San Francisco Earthquake and Fires of 1906 bridged nineteenth- and twentieth-century forms of visual documentation. Chapter five will argue that the 1906 disaster served both as the last gasp of old forms of visual disaster consumption, and the incubator of new means of disaster imagery dissemination. The overwhelming number of tourists that descended upon the city in the days after the disaster, and the multitude of photographs they produced, argue for a democratization of disaster reportage that would have been impossible before. But rather than bringing about new and more nuanced views of suffering, amateur photographers only reinforced the nativist currents present in older reportage, focusing this time on the much-maligned Asian immigrant population of the city. As the first truly twentieth-century disaster, San Francisco's calamity will serve as the culminating event of this work, tracing the end of some trends, the continuation of others, and the birth of still others.

The motivations for the production and consumption of such forms of amoral documentation as will be explored in the coming chapters are many and complex. It is difficult, further, to summarize the evolution of these motivations when an examination of the visual documentation of each disaster bears out differing interpretations and intended narratives. Of course, this is inevitable, as each event took place along a timeline where the nation itself was attempting to form its identity following its violent reunification through war. What can be asserted here, however, is that the images of
urban disaster produced throughout this era appealed to the public in part by playing to their fears and distaste for the city itself, and – in the eyes of native-born, white Americans – to the ever-present fear of populations new to the nation, and new to citizenship. Anti-urbanism persisted throughout the era in which the United States switched from a largely rural to a largely urban society.

So, while many other motivations are present in the production and consumption of disaster imagery – motivations that will be discussed in detail in the following chapters – a clear relationship between the desire to see urban destruction and the fears inherent in urbanization and industrialization is present throughout these series of images. The viewers’ interpretations of the images, in this sense, rest largely on their feelings toward the city – either such images further confirm the evils of industrialization and diversification by demonstrating the seemingly greater levels of destruction it can incorporate and produce; or the visualization of urban destruction provides the viewer with satisfying images that fulfill their need to see these discomforting places punished.

When looked at through the lens of the general mistrust of urban space that pervaded nineteenth century thought, the need to see these images had nothing to do with the people who actually suffered as a result of the depicted disaster. Rather, it is a product of the general fears of the growth of the city. The victims become simply another unsettling piece that contribute to, rather than define, the story of industrialization and urbanization’s distressing role in this new, modern America. So while many competing and evolving motivations for buying images of disaster persisted throughout the era, the industry of urban image making – and, for our purposes, urban destruction image making – developed into a popular and profitable industry because of the nation’s struggles to
come to terms with the new ways of living the city demanded of all residents. The photographers, stereographers, and illustrators provided a way of seeing the growth of the city and the great societal changes it entailed, of holding tangible proof of the coming of a new era in one’s hands, in ways that were both unsettling and comforting. The relative cheapness of the images – whatever their form – meant that viewers could witness the monster that was the city in the privacy and comfort of their own homes. Destruction only further served to drive home the point that the city was both a terrifying, dangerous place, and the site of a great deal of excitement. Within those competing understandings, image makers in the latter part of the nineteenth century sought to contribute to the arduous work of reforming and rebuilding a tangled and fraught American identity.
Chapter 1:

“Unearthly, hideous, terrific”: The Civil War and the Dawn of Modern Disaster

Imagery

"Through the shadowy vapors, it was, indeed, a 'harvest of death' that was presented."

-Alexander Gardner, recalling the morning after the end of fighting at Gettysburg, 1863

Amidst a throng of soldiers, spectators, and reporters, Harper’s Weekly illustrator Alfred R. Waud, photographer Mathew Brady and writer Dick McCormick rode together toward Centerville, Virginia on July 16, 1861. Along with Waud’s sketchpad and McCormick’s notebook came two wagons Brady personally designed and built to serve as mobile darkrooms, odd looking contraptions that would soon be dubbed the “Whatsits” by soldiers fighting in the American Civil War (illustration 1-1). The three men were traveling in a parade of soldiers, politicians, journalists and tagalongs from Washington, D.C. to cover what would turn out to be the first major clash between Union and Confederate forces. Brady, along with illustrators like Waud and his newspaper, surely recognized at this early stage just what a profitable spectacle the war would become, especially for those who could bring a view of the front to audiences far from the battlefield.

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Later accounts of the crowd caricatured them as boisterous; a naïve spirit of revelry filled many among the group, from the gaily dressed wives of the politicians carrying picnic baskets, to the untested soldiers who spent the first night of the march in Fairfax Courthouse, Virginia, engaged in drinking, light looting, and running through the streets in stolen ladies’ garments.3 When opposing forces were finally in range of each other a couple days later near Centerville, the potential for massive bloodshed had dawned on but a few; by one account, Brady himself was preparing mentally for the task of setting up in rough terrain, but did not seem to be aware of the extreme danger that awaited him. Brady, Waud, and others covering the approaching clash moved about relatively freely as small Union and Confederate detachments began to skirmish on July 20.

“I asked [Brady] if he could get the fellows who were fighting to stand still and look pleasant,” recounted one reporter who was present, New York Tribune correspondent William A. Croffut. “With a very serious face he said he supposed not, but he could probably get some scenes that would be worthwhile.”4

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3 According to historian David Detzer in his book Donnybrook, The Battle of Bull Run, 1861, these accounts were likely greatly exaggerated by southerners in the days and weeks after the fighting. Detzer asserts that the numerous civilians watching the battle at Bull Run were not simply a mass of picnickers seeking a good show. Rather, though some naïve hangers on were certainly among the crowd, the many witnesses on the surrounding hills were made up mostly of politicians who were eager to see how the first fight turned out; family members, employees, and servants of those pols; civilians who lived in the area; and slaves. However, accounts of finely dressed fools in carriages being served champagne and lamb by waiters imported from Washington hotels were likely exaggerations made up by Confederates to shame the defeated and naïve Union army. David Detzer, Donnybrook: The Battle of Bull Run, 1861 (Orlando, Fla.: Harcourt, Inc., 2004), 309-17.

The relative ease with which the journalists and image makers made their way through the area in the first few days of the expedition would be remembered later as having provided a false sense of safety, especially considering what was to come. Early on the morning of July 21, the two armies met in a series of battles centered around a small creek southwest of Centerville known as Bull Run. As Union forces claimed initial victories and daylight crept over the horizon, Brady set up and began to shoot. But as the Confederate army gained the upper hand later in the morning and the disorganized Union began to panic and scatter, Croffut again caught sight of the photographer, trapped suddenly in the midst of a battle far more fierce than he—or indeed any of the participants—had expected. “I saw [Brady] dodging shells on the battlefield. He was in motion, but the machine [his camera] did not seem effective.”

The Union forces, along with the civilian cohort of politicians’ families and journalists, ran in panic. In his 1946 Brady biography, Mr. Lincoln’s Camera Man, Roy Meredith vividly describes Brady’s wagons as they were drawn into the retreat, careening through fields and across deep-rutted roads that proved more than much of the delicate equipment contained therein could handle; plates he had exposed earlier in the day shattered as he and his wagons bounced away from the scene. What had begun as a farcical outing for inexperienced soldiers and a giddy audience of civilian excursionists

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5 Ibid.  
6 Meredith, 10. In his book Photography and the Civil War (2013), Jeff L. Rosenheim asserts that Brady’s assistants Alexander Gardner and George N. Barnard were on the trip that day, as well. Further, it is likely that it was Gardner and Barnard, rather than Brady, who exposed the plates that day, under the direction of Brady. Jeff L. Rosenheim, Photography and the American Civil War (New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2013), 63-4.
would end with a day of terror in which over 4,000 casualties were recorded, including close to 1,000 combined dead between both armies.

Meredith's account continues with a possibly apocryphal tale of Brady's actions as the sun began to set on the evening of the 21st:

Nightfall brought further terror, but it also brought an end to the pursuit by the Confederates. In the darkness Brady became separated from his companions. Not knowing where he was, he lead [sic] his horse into the comparative safety of the woods. During the night it rained. Brady, exhausted, fell asleep on the wagon seat with a bag of oats for a pillow. After a short time he was startled by someone shaking his foot. He found it was a [soldier], a straggler from a New York regiment.

The infantryman, who was deserting the army and running back to New York, advised Brady that the woods were full of soldiers from both sides, and gave the photographer his sword for protection. Whether this story is true or a fanciful creation to fill a gap in the photographer's known whereabouts on that fateful day, Brady can be seen wearing such a sword in a self-portrait taken the following afternoon (illustration 1-2). The soiled appearance of his clothing and the dazed look on Brady's face testify to a calamitous few days, whatever the specific details.

A keen record maker in the service of posterity, Brady made sure to document not only the battle, but also the personal, physical state in which he was left following his experience of the fighting and the subsequent flight back to Washington, as illustration 1-2 attests. The presence of a number of image makers during the First Battle of Bull Run suggests that they recognized the potential role their medium could play in documenting the war. The bevy of images produced during the war attests to the fact that the public

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7 Ibid., 10-1.
interest drummed up by such depictions was sustained throughout the four years of fighting. And the fact that many image makers documented not only the battles themselves but their own presence amid numerous other illustrators and photographers, further suggests they fully recognized their unprecedented role as visual reporters and indeed authors of historic narratives designed for public consumption – and profit (see, for example, Timothy O’Sullivan’s 1863 image of Waud at work near Gettysburg in illustration 1-3).

The commodification and spread of modern visual reportage certainly did not begin in the 1860s. The advent of war did provide also a fortuitous spectacle the likes of which rapidly developing visual media had never before been in such a perfect position to record. Image makers like Brady and Waud saw subjects ripe for visual documentation in the never-ending casualty lists and the rubble of battlefields that stretched from countryside to urban areas. During the years 1861 to 1865, the stature of images of current events rose from novelty and supplemental illustration to be seen as vital sources of news, information, and documentation in their own right. From the time Brady attempted to set up his camera equipment amidst the bullets at Bull Run, these visual journalists saw as their duty the recording for posterity of the unprecedented events of their times.

Certainly, it is true that the American Civil War was not the first war to inspire visual reportage; the Mexican War of 1846-8 and the Crimean War of 1854-6 both were documented to a small extent by photographers. But, echoing other historians, Mandy Reid notes that it was “Civil War photographs mark the nascent beginnings of using visual testimony to report newsworthy events.” Mandy A. Reid, “Photography.” Civil War America: A Social and Cultural History. Eds. Maggi M. Morehouse and Zoe Trodd. (New York: Routledge, 2013), 214.
In developing a way of publishing and commercially distributing images of the Civil War, American image makers began, too, a process of codifying a new aesthetic of trauma and disaster, combining romantic traditions of picturesque ruins, scenes of shared suffering and loss, and a spirit of valorous adventure to create a new and affecting genre of visual documentation. In search of record making and profit, photographers and illustrators tapped into Americans’ desire to witness and be a part of the war developing around them. Image makers built a vast archive of images that allowed civilians far from the battlefield to witness and share in the misery of the war firsthand, constructing an industry out of the desire to share grief, a need that influenced the production of disaster imagery for decades to come. Civil War image makers, newspaper publishers, and photographic distributers crafted a market for visual documentation that served to codify, and provide a basis for the commodification of, subsequent depictions of urban-based disasters.

This chapter explores the Civil War’s vital role in inspiring and informing the subsequent, late 19th century market for urban disaster imagery. The four-year conflict defined the early aesthetics and subject matter of the form, and made clear to image makers the extent to which such documentation could be employed toward specific political and social ends. Of course, the war and devastation largely took place rural areas and not cities. Still, an examination of Civil War imagery – including those depictions produced in urban spaces – is vital to this project because of the ways in which image makers who tracked the fighting learned to negotiate a select number if issues that would be prominent in urban calamities over the succeeding few decades. Primary among those issues were death and bodily destruction, race and the limited agency of non-white
subjects, and the symbolism found in destroyed buildings and damaged cities. This chapter will deal with each of those issues in turn, as well as explore the ways in which image makers distributed their views to the public.

I. Technological Challenges Faced by Civil War-Era Photographers

The images that Civil War photographers could produce were in many ways limited by the technology and the terrain. The war’s unpredictability and mobile nature demanded that photographers learn how to travel quickly and with large amounts of equipment into areas where fighting was either taking place, or had just finished. Everywhere they turned their lenses was devastation: bodies, buildings, and infrastructure all lay in ruin across a landscape difficult to navigate. And of course, few battles took place within easy distance of a darkroom or photography studio. The solution for those who sought battlefield views was to mobilize the darkroom. Brady and his contemporaries traveled with a number of heavy contraptions, including wooden boxes “as large as a beehive”\(^9\) that hung from their shoulders and held their cameras, and carriages in which they built entire darkroom setups for the purpose of developing images in the field (see illustration 1-1).

Rather than just an innovation for convenience’s sake, though, these carts were a necessity. The wet plate photographic process photographers employed was a long and laborious one, ill-suited for the battlefield, particularly as fighting was taking place. The dry plate process of photographic production, which required far less immediate chemical work, was not introduced until the 1870s, meaning that photographers working in the

\[^9\] Statement by William A. Corffut, quoted in Zeller, 57.
field still had to prepare and develop large glass plates on the spot. Assistants helped with the process, but even under ideal circumstances no more than a few dozen plates could be prepared and exposed in a single day. In addition, the time necessary for plate preparation, exposure, and development meant that photographers simply could not work on the battlefield during fighting; target or collateral, photographers were too easily injured or killed to risk mid-battle image making.

Instead, photographers typically covered the aftermath of the battle, while illustrators offered fighting images. Thanks to the efforts of these image makers, for the first time non-combatants were able to experience a seemingly realistic depiction of the destructive power of war through visual means. While the war influenced every American in some way, most were not within visual proximity of the fighting itself, and therefore could not witness firsthand the devastation wrought by the war. Written reports and word of mouth remained the most common ways of experiencing the fighting for noncombatants. Image makers sought to bring home the war in striking and emotionally affecting ways, using relatively new forms of media never before employed on such a scale.

Estimates of the number of photographers who created images of the war range from 1,500 to over 2,000, though it should be noted that the vast majority of these were studio portraitists rather than field photographers.10 The number of those involved in the illustrating process – from in-the-field artists like Waud to those back at the publisher’s

office — was likely smaller, but their reach was typically far greater. Their illustrations appeared before hundreds of thousands of eyes each week. Subjects ranged from posed group portraits of officers, to camp scenes and battle recreations; from damaged and destroyed cities like Charleston, Atlanta, and Richmond to fields of dead soldiers on rarer occasions. To a public used to photography as a means of producing keepsake portraiture, the flood of images of war preparation and carnage was a shock, particularly when photographers arrived in the aftermath of fighting to record the dead. Few were prepared for what they saw.

II. Death, Corporeal Ruin, and the 1860s Viewing Public

In the fall of 1862, some Americans got their first look at the gruesomeness of battle at an exhibition in Brady’s New York Studio. Bob Zeller, whose 2005 book, *The Blue and Gray in Black and White*, delves into the arduous work of battlefield photographers during the war, writes that the photographs in the exhibit, “The Dead of Antietam,” “were the first [photographic] images of American dead on the battlefield, and their ‘terrible distinctness’ altered at once the vision of the conflict for those on the home front.” O’Sullivan and Alexander Gardner, both working for Brady at the time and the actual photographers for the images on display, took especial care to capture what they felt was the true cost of war, and in doing so hoped to provide a lesson in collective grief to a shocked audience.

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11 Rosenheim refers to Brady’s gallery show was “the nation’s first ‘spot news’ war photography exhibition.” Rosenheim, 12.

12 Zeller, xi.
To explain these images' impact on collective grief, it is important to note the origin of the shock viewers felt in looking at them. The maimed bodies stand out as shocking depictions to us today, just as they did in the 1860s. But the cause of our shock is different than theirs in important ways. As historian Franny Nudelman contends, those viewing the lifeless human body in photographs did not necessarily react to the mutilations done to the body by war. Viewers at the time were far more accustomed to viewing and even handling corpses than modern audiences. Additionally, Nudelman points out that postmortem photographs of dead loved ones were a common keepsake associated with processes of nineteenth-century memorialization, and held little more shock value than portraits of the living. Pictures of corpses, therefore, did not record a wholly taboo subject in the bodies themselves.13

The origin of the bodies depicted, too, played a role in the reaction of witnesses. In his book *Traces of War*, Timothy Sweet notes that the dead bodies in Civil War images were more often presented to a largely Northern audience as Confederate rather than Union, and were usually shown intact rather than destroyed — in other words, photographers chose scenes that would be the most palatable to their audiences. Maimed, living men were rarely depicted. Sweet argues that this is in line with the pastoral mindset of the photographers. “Images of intact, dead bodies show that death in general is ‘natural’; in contrast, wounds appear to be ‘unnatural.’”14 Death being natural, viewers could look upon it as a sad but familiar form of destruction.


While those who created and consumed the images may well have perceived death itself as a natural process, though, the shock and trauma to contemporary audiences resulted from the physical condition of the dead. In a society that considered ritual care for the dead to be a sacred obligation, the photographs of unburied, often decaying corpses made clear that these soldiers were not being accorded the honor and respect dictated by religious and familial tradition. Hands-on care for the dying was a common experience at the time, as was the loving preparation of the recently deceased for burial. These images demonstrated that many soldiers had not received such care; instead, they had died violently and then been discarded. Worse still, their deaths had become both anonymous and public by way of the photographs. The anonymity and neglect of those bodies marked the soldiers' deaths as lonely and uncelebrated, despite their depiction in images that spread across the nation within weeks. Such scenes were so upsetting that photographers and publishers would often include romanticized captions that included fanciful stories of the bravery of those depicted, so as to soften the blow for the viewer.15

For example, an image captured by Gardner and sold by Brady shows a lone dead soldier lying in a field; on the back, the description is printed, “CONFEDERATE SOLDIER Who, after being wounded, had dragged himself to a little ravine on the hill-side, where he died.”16

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15 Rosenheim states that such romanticized captions served to “relieve the viewer from the gruesome, graphic charge of the image itself, and thus make it more marketable. Ironically, the raw animal power Gardner worked so hard to capture with the camera [at Antietam] has been diminished for modern viewers by the blatant romanticism of [Brady’s] caption, which adds the softening gauze of fiction to the otherwise unfiltered view of the facts of life and death during the war.” Rosenheim, 8.

16 Ibid., 7. The image is credited to Brady’s Album Gallery, and is numbered 554.
Yet the particular shock and sadness felt by 1860s viewers of images of death and destruction had a more positive effect, as well. The portrayals of dead soldiers that continued to emerge from areas of fighting galvanized the viewing public; for the audience, these images not only framed the battle, but also contributed to a formalized process of mourning. Many lost someone close to them during the war, and most did not get a chance to see their loved one’s body after they were killed, or give them a proper burial. Many others had lost property, or witnessed the destruction of cities, towns, and other locales that had special significance to them. The sacred nature of the soldier’s body, especially when photographed for such purposes, is further supported by the fact that only in the aftermath of a handful of the hundreds of Civil War battles did photographers create images of the war dead. Placed upon a pedestal of sorts, then, these images reinforced the notion that the country was suffering through an especially tragic period, but doing so collectively, reassuring those who had suffered loss that their loss was shared by millions of others who also could not properly say goodbye. Therefore, the real suffering in the photos is not represented by the bodies, necessarily, but rather by the audiences who beheld the photographs. Mourning, rather than shock, was the image makers’ goal.

And while both living and wrecked bodies were sure markers of tragedy, so too were images of the built environment in shattered form. In cataloging loss and disaster during the war, photographers took pains to demonstrate that the human form was not the only entity in which loss was embodied. Familiar sites damaged or reduced to rubble had

17 On page 86 of his book, Zeller states that bodies were photographed following “Antietam, Corinth, 2nd Fredericksburg, Gettysburg, Spotsylvania, [and at] 1864 burials in Fredericksburg, and Petersburg.”
a similar effect, in that they demonstrated the impact of the loss in similarly compelling ways while upsetting the notion of a stable and protective built environment. Like people, the built environment is present in the formation of memories, and often stood in for dead soldiers as a site of mourning. When the elements of a memory are damaged or destroyed, the shock of that loss resonates, whether those elements were animate or inanimate. And often, image makers chose the bloodless destroyed over the bloody.

III. Depicting the War-Torn American City

As only one arena of the fighting, of course, urban destruction made up a relatively small portion of the visual record of the Civil War. The dearth of Southern photographers further limited the images of cities that suffered heavy damage. Photographic supplies were hard to come by in the South; photographers therefore confined themselves mostly to studios to conserve what little they could get. As a result, a substantial body of Southern Civil War non-portrait photography never emerged.\(^{18}\) As the disasters over the subsequent decades in Chicago, Johnstown, and elsewhere would show, much of the visual production came from local and regional image makers, who would then sell their images through distributors nationwide. Such local photographers could not function in the South.

Still, affecting images of urban ruin emerged in the immediate aftermath of destructive battles, as Northern photographers assigned to or following the Union army shot images before moving on to keep pace with the soldiers. Perhaps one of the most extensive examples of such production is the photographic work of George N. Barnard,

\(^{18}\) Huddleston, 177.
who was attached to General William T. Sherman's troops as they captured Atlanta in the summer of 1864, and then continued their march to the sea in the late fall. In his capacity as official army photographer for the Military Division of the Mississippi, Barnard recorded dozens of scenes in and around Atlanta after Union occupation began.

Many of his images would be published in his 1866 portfolio, Barnard's _Photographic Views of Sherman's Campaign_. Two shots of Atlanta from the book exemplify his work during the campaign. In "City of Atlanta, Ga., No 1,” Barnard found an elevated vantage from which to shoot the city's ruined roundhouse, a likely victim of Sherman’s push to destroy all Southern infrastructure he encountered (illustration 1-4). “City of Atlanta, Ga., No 2,” another image taken from above ground level, shows a more surreal scene. Amid otherwise complete and undamaged buildings, a Greek-style bank building sits in ruins on a busy street corner (illustration 1-5). Like the roundhouse, Barnard might have seen in this destroyed bank an example of Sherman's efforts to render the South unable to continue the war; in this case, a potential means of funding the Confederate army has been leveled.

Publishing house E. & H. T. Anthony and Co., a major equipment and chemical supplier and image distributer, released a number of the stereographs Barnard captured in his time in Atlanta as part of their _WAR VIEWS_ series published around the time the war came to an end. In a pair of examples from these scenes, Barnard turns his dual-lens camera not toward scenes of destruction, but instead toward other interesting sites for an audience that had never been to the city. For example, Barnard captures a wide view of a Federal encampment in a downtown park (illustration 1-6). In another, he records the
façade of a shuttered slave auction house (illustration 1-7). Branard appears to have recognized the value to his largely Northern audience of such unfamiliar scenes.

The following April, after the fall of Richmond, Alexander Gardner produced a series of images in the Confederate capital that captured similarly symbolic vistas. The photographer captured strategically important buildings like the Confederate arsenal (illustration 1-8), and the Virginia capital building atop a hill overlooking the devastated, burned business area of the city (illustration 1-9). Further, a series of panoramic views (such as illustration 1-10, taken from a hill west of downtown), show the extent of the devastation wrought by the Confederate army’s desperate attempt to burn supplies of value as they evacuated the city. Perhaps most exciting for his audience – and most frustrating for Southerners – Gardener also produced images of former slaves traveling freely through the city. Illustration 1-11, for instance, shows a Gardner photograph of a number of African American travelers as they make their way down the city’s Kanawa Canal, surrounded by ruined mills and warehouses. An unattributed image, likely also produced by Gardner, shows a solitary African American man sitting contemplatively among the ruins of the Richmond & Petersburg Railroad Station, a damaged locomotive looming over his shoulder (illustration 1-12).¹⁹

Gardner wasn’t the only photographer to see the value in recording the ruins of Richmond. Union army-employed photographer Andrew J. Russell captured scenes such as the Richmond Customs House, used as an office building by the Confederate government during the war, surrounded by rubble (illustration 1-13). Russell also produced one of the most striking images of the aftermath of Richmond’s capture when

¹⁹ This tentative attribution is based on the similarities of the stereographic image and its condition to others confirmed by the Library of Congress to have been taken by Gardner.
he stood across the canal’s turning basin and captured a view of the capital building that recalls images of the Parthenon towering over the ruins of Athens (illustration 1-14).

Published alongside images of fighting and battlefields, these photographs of the condition of Southern cities near the end of the war made clear to the audience that Union victory was nearly in hand and unquestionable. Such images asserted that Union fighters had destroyed the Confederates’ ability to further conduct both the fighting, and the way of life that had led the country into civil war.

As Barnard followed Sherman through Georgia, illustrator Alfred R. Waud was in Virginia alongside Gardner and Gardner’s brother James, a presence recorded by James and immortalized in Alexander’s *Photographic Sketchbook of the War* in 1866 (illustration 1-15). It appears that Waud was with the Union troops when they took Richmond in April of 1865. Sketching for *Harper’s Weekly*, Waud made a uniquely impressionistic drawing of his first sighting of Richmond’s church spires peaking over the northern horizon, as seen in illustration 1-16. His subsequent drawings, which would then be taken back to artists at *Harper’s* to be fleshed out and turned into woodcuts for publication, were far more detailed. Like his photographer peers, Waud recognized the symbolism in Richmond’s ruins, and sought to capture them for a national audience. His sketches included a scene of firemen attempting to put out a fire on the first day of Union occupation (illustration 1-17), and a panoramic view of the burned district (illustration 1-18), among many others. Waud’s images sometimes bordered on political cartoon, as well, as in his drawing of a pair of wealthy women reduced to accepting Federal largess in the wake of the fire (illustration 1-19). But more often, Waud made a practice of
capturing scenes of battle-related action throughout the war, as the 1865 image of fires in Columbia, South Carolina in illustration 1-20 attests.

Obviously, Brady, Waud, Gardner, Russell, and the many other image makers buzzing around the soldiers were well aware not only of posterity, but the marketplace, as well. As their images made their ways into the hands of the viewing public, many buyers proved eager to collect them as souvenirs in a formalized practice of mourning the country’s physical and corporeal losses. Viewers tempered their terror in the process, and built new memories via the second-hand experiences gained through viewing the images. Alison Landsberg’s theory of prosthetic memory contends that people claim memories despite not witnessing an event firsthand, due to a desire to participate in and own an important event.20 Photographs and illustrations made destruction and death more immediate, rather than remote, for viewers. By collecting and owning these images, viewers were in effect creating for themselves a new set of memories, making order out of the unknowable world of the battlefield for those not experiencing the fighting firsthand day-to-day, but still suffering the consequences.

Recognizing these desires, image makers tapped into the war-time desire to share grief and mourning on a large scale, as described by Drew Gilpin Faust in her book, This Republic of Suffering. Faust argues that the mutuality and ritualization of nationwide suffering not only served to formalize processes of grieving for those who endured or witnessed loss as most of the country had, but also provided a source of comfort for mourners via the knowledge that their suffering was recognized and empathized with by others throughout the country. By producing images of the war, photographers,

illustrators and printmakers were serving the desire to document and transmit a realistic picture of the horrors of war. By selling many of those images, they were making a livelihood for themselves by profiting from both curiosity and the human need to belong.

IV. Visual Documentation of War as Consumer Product

Importantly, then, the audience was not repulsed by images of destruction and death, and in fact found important routes of identification and comfort. In fact, many left Brady’s 1862 exhibition of the dead at Antietam with their own copies of the images displayed. In his book *Photography and the American Civil War*, Jeff L. Rosenheim quotes a *New York Times* article announcing the exhibit on Oct. 6, 1862, which states that the images were made available for purchase in “a size convenient for albums.” But those who wanted to view photographic images of the war did not have to travel to New York and visit Brady’s studio. Many photographers including found ways to distribute their products widely and relatively cheaply as soon as the war began. For example, George S. Cook of Charleston produced an image of Major Robert Anderson, Union commander of the forces at Fort Sumter, a few days prior to the outbreak of fighting there that touched off the war in mid-April, 1861. Even as fighting between Confederate and Union forces continued to rain destruction in and around Charleston across the harbor from the fort, Cook’s photograph was mass reproduced by E. & H.T. Anthony Co. at a rate of 1,000 images per day. The photograph was sold both in the city and around the

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21 Rosenheim, 7. Civilians and even soldiers would carry these and other photographs with them as mementoes in pocket-sized portfolios and or large binders.
country throughout that month. Green himself sold copies of the portrait for 25 cents at his local studio.22

Another photographer, Alma A. Pelot, made his way to the ruined fort in Charleston Harbor the day after its surrender by Union forces on April 14. Pelot captured images of Confederate soldiers and citizens celebrating by posing on captured artillery and ruined walls. He recorded, as well, general views of the damage that Confederate Brigadier General Pierre G. T. Beauregard's 500 troops had inflicted on the island fort through two days of bombardment. The five images Pelot produced, along with a few more made in subsequent days at batteries on the shore, were exhibited and made available for sale in the gallery of Jesse H. Bolles, Pelot's Charleston employer. As the site of the first conflict in the war, Charleston photographers and distributors were first to cash in on public desire for photographic mementos, and many other local image makers sold their own images in the days and months after this first battle of the war.23

Green's example was followed by the many photographers that came after; mail-order catalogs, for example, touted images of the sites of many battles, portraits of famous military and political leaders, and camp scenes, often grouping the photos into series from which customers could order individual images or entire sets. Dealers also sold popular images in storefront windows and at bookshops. Specially produced—and far more expensive—full albums of images were published as well, especially costly

22 Davis, 137.
23 Rosenheim, 35-41. Despite this initial advantage, the impact Green and the other Southern photographers who shot images of this early battle were not to recur again as the war dragged on. Due to supply shortages in the South throughout the war, very few photographers—or photographs—emerged to cover the fighting for Southern audiences. Though the fighting took place largely within the bounds of the Confederacy, the mostly Northern photographers produced images for a mostly Northern audience.
because each image had to be developed, rather than printed as would be done later in the century.24

The market for photographic views of the war was, therefore, recognized and fostered very early on. As the fighting progressed, itinerant entrepreneurs would even cross the country with temporary galleries that could be quickly set up in tents.25 Whether temporary or housed in brick-and-mortar storefronts, galleries prominently featured images of the war for people far from the front. Seeing an opportunity in these exhibits to further his own fortunes, Gardner left Brady’s employ a few months after the Antietam exhibit to set up his own gallery. As one 1864 view of the front façade of Gardener’s gallery demonstrates, images of the fighting and its aftermath were primary to his business and reputation; a giant, one-story tall sign, “VIEWS OF THE WAR,” dominates the wall above a street-level canopy.26

Typical of his contemporaries and competitors, Brady sold series of photos of destructive and non-violent scenes, as well, including one series entitled “Brady’s Incidents of the War,” and another, “Illustrations of Camp Life.” Brady sold the images for 30 cents, and though more expensive versions were available, this relatively inexpensive cost made ownership of such depictions possible for a very wide audience. Sweet writes that Brady and other sellers of such images worked to shape the meaning of

24 Huddleston, 14.


26 Rosenheim 27.
the scenes for viewers by organizing them into categories in their catalogues. He asserts that, “The organizing categories of [photography] catalogues were primarily geographic in location and military structure (company, regiment, and the like); thus they subsumed individual images under a single ‘emergent totality’ that gave meaning to the parts.”

The types of photographic images for sale varied, as well. Most popular was the carte de visite, a small, generally two-inch by four-inch photograph mounted on thick cardboard. It was inexpensive in comparison with other forms, easily produced and made readily available nationwide as a result. In addition, and though they were more expensive, the production of full-sized copies of daguerreotypes had been possible since the early 1850s. Subjects of these larger pictures included large group shots, and landscape scenes. Other sizes were available, as well, including large images mounted on 11x14 board. Collectors could purchase commemorative portfolios in which such photos could be stored and displayed. Stereographs of war scenes were produced, as well, by cameraman with dual-lensed contraptions that produced a twin image which, when viewed correctly, could produce a three-dimensional view of the scene.

V. Mourning and Myth-Making in Civil War Imagery

But despite the variety of image formats and the extent of their spread, the inability of photographers to capture fighting as it took place and the long exposure times

27 Sweet, 109.
28 Zeller, 21.
29 Davis, 134.
30 Rosenheim, 68-72.
for the wet plates limited the subjects cameramen could capture. The result was an aesthetic regularity across the work of numerous war photographers. Those who left the portrait studio to shoot in the field followed the early examples of Brady, Gardner, O'Sullivan and others by making the aftermath of fighting the primary subject of photographic images. Audiences therefore saw few photographic scenes of in-battle warfare, and those that did exist were taken from great distances, showing mostly smoke clouds rising. Instead, viewers were far more likely to see photos of the aftermath, such as illustration 1-21, taken by Brady immediately following the action at Bull Run on July 21, 1861. While such expectations were set partially due to constraints inherent in the processes rather than aesthetic choices, the post-action shots produced during the war nevertheless helped define what audiences expected to see in subsequent “on-the-spot” visual reportage at dangerous sites for decades to come. As photographic images of the Chicago fire a few years later would attest, such aesthetic choices and necessities were firmly ingrained in the framing of disaster – and in the expectations of consumers – in the coming years.

According to Sweet, working in these static and motionless scenes, the early photographers of the Civil War relied on conventions of the landscape painting genre, popular in the mid-19th century. “Adherence to conventions that derived from the contemporary landscape aesthetic produced a set of regularized representations – an archive of straight-on shots and compositionally balanced images taken at middle to long distances.” Thomas Cole was of particular influence to Brady and his circle. Much like

31 “In-action” shots of fighting and disaster would not have been unprecedented. George S. Barnard took what could perhaps be the first urban disaster photograph in 1851, capturing a series of images of a mill fire in Oswego, New York. The images very clearly show the mills ablast.
the point of view of popular landscape paintings, "the camera was nearly always placed at normal eye level, usually angled slightly or moderately downward. Except for portraits, the horizontal dimension of the image is greater than the vertical dimension, as in contemporary landscape paintings."  

Newspaper illustrators, meanwhile, had few limitations in what they could depict, and were much more mobile than photographers. The enterprising field illustrator created his images with the actual subject directly in front of him. Despite this direct observation, though, it is typical that the illustration first captured in the field took great liberties with the scenes depicted. Field illustrators were asked to capture the essence of battles far too complicated and filled with motion to ever fit within the purview of a camera lens. Having witnessed the fighting firsthand, however, illustrators worked to create a single image or small series of images that captured key events, important figures, landmarks, and the general scope of the battle all upon a single page. Publishers and audience found no other form of visual documentation sufficient to tell an entire story in one piece until the advent of the moving picture three decades later.

Still, many of those illustrations owed a debt to photography; woodcuts often sought to recreate as closely as possible some of the photographic images issuing from studios and from the field. Before publishers had the ability to print photographs in newspapers, illustrators back at the newspapers' home offices would recreate photographs that depicted portraits of important leaders, scenes where battles had taken place, and even, famously, some of the shots recorded by photographer John Reekie in

32 Sweet, 107.
his post-Cold Harbor images of battlefield dead (see, for example, illustrations 1-22 and 1-23).

The newspaper woodcut became the most widely used and available source through which Americans gained visual understandings of the war. Every week Northern papers like *Harper's Illustrated* and *Frank Leslie's Illustrated Weekly* would include a wealth of new illustrations depicting the latest battles, or providing the readers with a face to go along with the names mentioned in the accompanying stories.33 Timeliness was prized as one of the key selling points of the medium; the latest events needed to be captured and retold.

Those looking for a less ephemeral illustration most often turned to publishing houses like Currier and Ives, Kurz and Allison, and a host of smaller businesses for lithographs and prints. Similar to the work of woodblock illustrators at the newspaper offices, images produced by these printmakers ranged in subject from groups of military and political leaders (for example, illustration 1-24) to fancifully recreated battle scenes and wholly allegorical patriotic compositions (see illustrations 1-25 and 1-26 for examples). Importantly, images of urban destruction were prominent, as well, as can be

33 According to Jennifer Raab, the South answered the North's *Leslie's* and *Harper's* with Richmond's *Southern Illustrated News*, though it was not their equal in terms of quality. "There was, in fact, a shortage of illustrations in the *Southern Illustrated News*, and those that did appear in its pages were mostly portraits copied from outdated photographs, or even images reproduced from northern periodicals," she reports - Jennifer Raab, "Painting and Illustration." *Civil War America: A Social and Cultural History*, Edited by Maggi M. Morehouse and Zoe Trodd. (New York: Routledge, 2013), 222. William F. Thompson writes that the newspaper only lasted 26 months, from September 1862 to November 1864. The publishers advertised for skilled engravers, but none could be found. As a result, the "illustrated" paper had few illustrations, and most that it did have were, as Frank Leslie chided, "Wonderfully bad woodcuts." Lack of supplies to create and print the paper was also a problem - William F. Thompson, *The Image of War: The Pictorial Reporting of the American Civil War* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1994), 23.
seen in the Curier & Ives print of Richmond burning in 1865 (illustration 1-27). But unlike the newspaper illustrations, lithographic prints were often intended less as overt documentation, and more as visualized political ideology. The prints issuing from these publishers were set apart, likewise, by a number of aspects that elevated them to the realm of keepsake and even decorative piece. For example, most prints were full color, outdoing their newspaper brethren by reproducing the deep red of a soldier’s blood-stained shirt, or the orange and yellow fires above bombarded cities. The images were larger than those found in newspapers, as well, and were therefore able to contain more detail and proclaim a grander intent as a result. And unlike the woodcuts found in Leslie’s and Harper’s, which were typically thrown out with the rest of the paper, these colorful prints were intended to be kept. Often such images were hung in parlors, dining rooms, or other such prominent places in the home, or at public places like bars and offices.

Historians Mark E. Neely, Jr. and Harold Holzer make a convincing argument that such images were produced for the walls of working class and middling households that could not afford to commission grander paintings like those found in the parlors of the wealthy. Such inexpensive decorative depictions carried simple messages with bright colors and artistic flair, focusing especially on patriotism and idolization of heroic figures. “People bought prints that reflected their values, commitments, and ideals,” Neely and Holzer write, “and used them as modest domestic altarpieces in the most sacred room of the Victorian home.” As perhaps the most overtly political of the myriad
visual means of representing the war, lithographic prints combined caricature and art with simple emotional appeals to create an effective and desirable product.  

Much like photographs, lithographic prints were sold via advertisements in newspapers, by itinerant salesmen (who themselves bought prints in bulk through classified ads placed in newspapers), pushcart vendors, and in the windows of shops. The role of newspaper advertising in making these prints available demonstrates the relative ease with which lithographs traveled far beyond urban spaces where they were printed, and into the homes of rural and city dwellers alike.

All of these images, from lithographs and illustrations to field photographs and stereographs, worked in tandem with the simple portraits of loved ones away at war that photographers produced in droves throughout the fighting. Civilians and soldiers alike collected both images of the destruction and violence, and portraits of those from whom they were separated during the fighting. It is likely that the combining of such images in albums only served to further personalized the war's destruction, as page after page showed studio portraits of loved ones next to sites of battle and ruin. The commemoration of loss, whether those losses were temporary or permanent, can be seen in the traditional portraits of soldiers kept by families back home— and, indeed, such images were the most often produced photographic subjects throughout the war.

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36 Soldiers carried small, leather bound, pocket-sized photo albums— according to an advertisement printed on page 149 of Rosenheim's book, one such album with space for twenty photos was sold by a New York manufacturer for one dollar. He asserts that such items were common.
The portraits played a familiar role for photography at the time; gathering mementos has been a tradition for as long as loved ones have existed apart from each other. It is true, as well, that such pieces became treasured totems of permanent loss when a soldier did not return home. But the graphic portrayals of war’s costs taken in the field rather than in the studio marked a collective kind of loss; indeed, the images of death and destruction produced by photographers, illustrators and printmakers marked a form of loss that had never been visually captured before in such an extensive way. In the most powerful examples of this new visual documentation of war-borne disaster, the graphic images of death on the battlefield were especially forceful. Americans individually commemorated war’s heavy cost in the portraits they kept of lost loved ones, but a nation experienced collective loss through the graphic depictions of ruined bodies left on the field, and destroyed cities left in war’s wake.

All of these elements combined to make visual media a powerful form of mourning and myth making during and immediately after the war. Image makers occupied a unique place in the journalistic documentation of the war, working in a medium seen as both an arbiter of truth in its record of the war, but also as a site of emotional empathy and release. “Verbal representations of such places, or scenes, may or may not have the merit of accuracy,” Gardner wrote soon after the war. “[B]ut photographic presentments of them will be accepted by posterity with an undoubting faith.”37 Inevitably, photography’s perceived veracity and emotional impact provided a means through which many image makers could frame singularly political and social messages in their images, while the public largely took them at face value. Especially

37 Gardner, insider cover.
with a new medium like photography, the veracity of which was still largely held as a given, image makers played a powerful and highly influential role in the war, without ever carrying a weapon or commanding a soldier.

Crafting a war narrative

As the war continued, Brady’s own fascination with the depiction of bodies waned. Gardner’s break from Brady’s team in late 1862 or early 1863 largely ended Brady’s capturing of morbid photos of war dead. As scholar Mary Panzer has written, Brady followed Gardner’s tenure at the studio by “concentrat[ing] on portraiture of individuals and groups in camp, in the field, on board ships like the Monitor, and in battlefields from which all evidence of war had vanished.” Still, Brady and his reconstituted team ventured out into the field throughout the succeeding years. Brady’s cameras focused on camp portraits of military leaders and groups, and descriptive images of camp life. Panzer notes that most often, “Brady’s operators and their sitters brought along a set of conventions that had become synonymous with the art of portraiture itself.” As much as possible, those depicted and those creating the depiction stuck to the traditional lighting and posing of the portrait style Brady’s studios had become so famous for in the preceding decades.

But of course, Brady and his former assistants continued to recognize the value of narrative in the frame, and sought to shape not just what the viewers would see, but how they understood it, as well, often including information outside the frame that directly


39 Ibid., 103.
contradicted the truth of the scene depicted. One well-known example of such narrative manipulation can be found in Gardner’s Photographic Sketchbook of the War, released in two volumes of fifty images each in 1866. The book was a collection of shots taken by either Alexander Gardner himself, or photographers working with him in the field (unlike Brady, Gardner took pains to credit each original image maker), and included a two or three paragraph caption paired with the image. These supplementary captions stood as directions to the viewer on how best to interpret the image, and therefore offer a privileged look into the intent of the photographer in selecting the subject for the image, and the image for this popular collection.

Two shots, “A Harvest of Death” and “Field Where General Reynolds Fell, Gettysburg, July, 1863,” Plates 36 and 37 respectively, feature the same half-dozen dead soldiers lying in the field, shot from two different angles. Gardner’s captions for the two images make clear his intent to deceive the viewer into believing that the two pictures depict two different sets of soldiers, one Union, and one Confederate. “A Harvest of Death” (illustration 1-28), attributed to Timothy H. O’Sullivan, ascribes them a Confederate origin, and chastises the dead for their “frantic efforts to break the steady lines of an army of patriots.” The rebels “paid with life the price of their treason, and when the wicked strife was finished, found nameless graves, far from home and kindred.” Gardner’s caption marks the depicted soldiers as deserving of their inglorious deaths for having fought against Northerners protecting the union.

In “Field Where General Reynolds Fell, Gettysburg, July, 1863,” (illustration 1-29) also attributed to O’Sullivan, the same soldiers, now shot from the opposite perspective in an effort to conceal the ruse, and labeled as Northerners, lie as heroic
martyrs for that same Union. "The dead shown in this photograph were our own men," he writes in the accompanying caption. The text talks of the final pose of the dead soldiers, stating that some appeared to be praying, others resigned to their fate, others still confident in their knowledge that they gave their life for a good cause. In essence, these soldiers – or at least this version of the soldiers as conjured by Gardner’s words – died heroically, while the same soldiers in the previous photograph died as traitors. Gardner relies on the perceived veracity of the images and the audience’s willingness to believe his descriptions. By doing so, he gains an ability to advance a pro-Union, pro-North agenda that has little to do directly with the scene depicted, except perhaps by chance.40

A few plates later, Gardner repeats the ruse in plate 40, “A Sharpshooter’s Last Sleep” and plate 41, “The Home of a Rebel Sharpshooter, Gettysburg” (illustrations 1-30 and 1-31, respectively). Gardner took two photos of the body of a dead soldier and his weapon (or, at least, a weapon ascribed to him in the caption), but went so far as to reposition the fallen fighter in a completely different part of the battlefield for at least one of the shots. So, while the soldier – a martyr in the first shot, vilified in the next – is the same body in both, Gardner ascribes to him two different histories, as two different people. Gardner’s simple games revealed a larger ability granted by the perceived veracity of the photographed image: namely, photographers could tell whatever story they wanted to, as long as they could craft a convincing depiction to fit their story – even when that meant manipulating bodies that aid their work. When the image was the product of a pen or a brush rather than a camera, that ability to craft a subjective story was just as powerful.

40 Gardner, facing plates 36 and 37.
Why they fought

Of course, while these examples cover conveniently detectable deception, the work of image makers in documenting disaster for the public often aimed at a far larger political project than two reframed scenes might suggest. Image makers were playing roles that were at various times hidden or plainly in view, contributing to the larger project of ascribing meaning to the continuing fighting, and, following the war, to the efforts to rebuild the nation and frame a newly unified national identity.

All parties involved knew that the outcome of the Civil War would radically alter the American perception of its own contested nationhood. Burying two percent of its population in the course of a four-year, wildly destructive battle, the nation would also lay to rest any latent notions of a sustainable sectional split that would make two countries of the 80-year-old United States. With this violent and seemingly intractable reunification would come a search for a new definition of American nationhood, one that took as a given that the United States formed one country, rather than a collective of states – in Abraham Lincoln’s phraseology, a “nation,” no longer a “union.” Of course, Lincoln’s terminological evolution during the war represented his recognition that the close of fighting would only begin the postwar struggle to define the nation; he harbored no false belief in the war’s ability to end all sectional, political, and ideological divides.

Central to those divides, and to the very impetus for the war itself, were issues of race, slavery, and equality, and image makers sought to contribute to this fraught

\[41\] In his first inaugural address, Lincoln used the word “union” twenty times to describe the United States, and never uttered the word “nation” in the same context. By the time of the Gettysburg Address in 1864, Lincoln had forgone the word “union” entirely, and employed “nation” five times in his short remarks.
conversation, as well. I would argue that the visual ephemera of the period provide us with an important window into the realities of northern views of slavery during the war. To explain, it is important to first consider some of the most recent takes on soldiers’ and civilians’ views of the role of the peculiar institution in bringing about the war. Chandra Manning wades into the debate in her 2007 book, *What This Cruel War Was Over*, arguing that soldiers – whatever their own personal motivations – believed that they were fighting to end slavery. “Broad consensus existed within each army as to why war needed to be fought in the first place. Whatever else occupied their minds, ordinary Union and Confederate soldiers recognized slavery as the reason for the war.”

In 2011’s *The Union War*, meanwhile, Gary Gallagher argues that the primary motivation of Northern soldiers and their supporters was to preserve the union, while emancipation was gradually accepted as a necessity to accomplish that task. Put more succinctly, soldiers fought to save the union, not end slavery. “Issues related to the institution of slavery precipitated secession and the outbreak of fighting, but the loyal citizenry initially gave little thought to emancipation in their quest to save the union.”

In Gallagher’s take, an optimistic and exceptionalist view of the value of the “American Experiment” drove soldiers into the field to counter their rebelling southern countrymen. Gallagher contends that

Victory meant keeping aloft the banner of democracy to inspire anyone outside the United States who suffered at the hands of oligarchs. It meant affirming the rule of law under the Constitution ad punishing slaveholding aristocrats whose

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selfish actions had compromised the work of the founding generation. And it meant establishing beyond question the northern version of the nation – of America, of the United States – that left control in the hands of ordinary voting citizens who were free to pursue economic success without fear of another disruptive sectional crisis.\textsuperscript{44}

In this view of the fighting, the end of slavery meant punishment for the southern planting class, and also the conclusion of the types of fights over the extension of slavery that had so often rendered the country’s continued stability tenuous over the previous seven decades. Once Union soldiers bought into the notion of the war as an end to slavery, that push was largely political rather than moral.

In Manning’s conception, though, the war had a particularly transformative influence on white northerners’ views of both slavery and racial equality. “When ordinary northern men... actually met black people face to face [during the war] and often came to rely on the aid, comfort, and military intelligence that former slaves offered to the Union Army, they found reasons to discard old views.”\textsuperscript{45}

Alice Fahs writes in her book, \textit{The Imagined Civil War}, that the acceptance of the necessity of slavery’s end is reflected in the popular ephemera of the time. Along with newspapers, “Song sheets, illustrated envelopes, popular novels, and stories also all explored the emerging story of black freedom during the war, thus revealing to what extent a fascination with black actions permeated a wide-ranging popular literature.” Depictions of black soldiers, slaves, and free blacks shifted over the course of the war from “buffoonish, minstrelsy-based images” to far more realistic ones as emancipation

\textsuperscript{44} Ibid., 34.

\textsuperscript{45} Manning, 221.
approached; the clownish caricatures "gave way to illustrations that articulated black manhood and even, occasionally, black heroism."46

Such depictions, though, were not likely intended for African American audiences; those literate few who might have viewed such depictions may well have picked up on the patronizing message contained in the frame. As Fahs reminds her readers, African Americans were portrayed in popular literature of the time as gaining manhood upon enlistment. Fahs prudently cites W.E.B. DuBois' critique that such a transformation tale only furthers the notion that black men had to become violent to have their manhood accepted by a white audience. Once they became dangerous, though, these depictions further required that they be dispatched at the end of their newfound manhood's usefulness. "Stories of black soldiers in battle tended to circumvent the implications of a new black manhood by refusing to imagine the continuing lives of black men. Rarely, indeed, did popular literature attempt to imagine the continuing life of the black soldier. Instead, the imagined popular trajectory was straight to death."47 In such stories slaves escaped and punished the South in battle – honored in the process by a virtuous North that took them in and gave them a uniform of manhood – and then died in time to avoid the complexity of dealing with postwar racial equality on the home front.

The ultimately threatening prospect of armed, heroic African American men was, therefore, fully apparent in the popular culture of the time. Both as freed slaves and as warriors, African American characters mostly served as a trope in support of white Northern political goals, rather than as inspiring models for blacks themselves; little

47 Ibid., 171.
evidence in the visual record supports Manning’s assertion that the vast majority of Northerners felt a deep moral duty to end slavery. Rather, Gallagher’s assertion that “Genuine concern for African Americans seldom preoccupied a population that remained profoundly prejudiced”\textsuperscript{48} is clear in the popular literature and visual media of the time. No mainstream newspaper dared to publish exclusively heroic images of black soldiers; even as such depictions became more prominent, “contraband humor” comics, which depicted escaped slaves as gibbering fools baffled by the ‘refined’ North, continued to be a popular, weekly feature.\textsuperscript{49}

In the states of the Confederacy, meanwhile, the caricatures were far more monstrous, but just as divorced from reality. In examining the southern view of northern fighters, Jason Phillips writes of a type of propaganda he calls the “atrocity story,” a regular feature in the southern press. Appearing with great regularity in newspapers in the South, such exaggerated or outright false stories accused Union forces of terrible acts. “Yankees bayoneted and shot Rebel prisoners, slit the throats and cut out the tongues of Confederate wounded, and even fired at Southerners while they helped wounded Federals caught between the lines. Some stories accused the Yankees of using poisoned bullets.”\textsuperscript{50}

Especially ghastly stories were attributed to black soldiers as they marched through Georgia with Sherman’s army. In these atrocity stories, “Most accounts of sex or rape involved blacks.... Stories of black soldiers and slaves raping white women produced the

\textsuperscript{48} Gallahger, 77.

\textsuperscript{49} Fahs, 194. Due to difficulty in getting photographic supplies and finding talented illustrators, very little illustration made its way into the Southern media.

greatest loathing.” Philips cites stories told in letters and newspaper accounts of
unconfirmed, usually secondhand, and vague stories of black soldiers pulling white
women off their horses and having their way with them, and others propositioning them
in public. “Whether true or false, these stories vitalized Rebel images of invading hordes
and muddied the delineation between legitimate acts of war and crimes, between myth
and reality.”

Southerners used non-white monsters to prove the superiority of the audience,
even in the face of loss, suggesting that Confederates would never stoop so low as to
unleash non-white barbarians on the white populace of the South. Southern readers were
also horrified by the notion of the sexual mixing of races, and by the potential for
subjugation to a North rife with miscegenation. Their fear, Phillips claims, drove the
aghast reactions to black troops, and the farcical stories of sexually ravenous black men
freed to defile the white female population of the South. While that fear certainly was
central to the proliferation of such stories, I would argue that it was partnered with a
desire to maintain pride in the face of an increasingly hopeless rebellion. By charging
Union forces with the endorsement and perpetuation of such acts – in effect, the narrative
made clear that it was the North that gleefully set such monsters free in the South –
southerners were also asserting their own honor. In a South without northern interference,
vViolent miscegenation was not possible. In this view, southerners were the honorable
people; these stories allowed southerners to maintain their belief in their cultural
superiority, even as battlefield losses spelled potential doom for their way of life.

51 Ibid., 79.
As Phillips notes, such atrocity stories are regularly used in fighting to motivate soldiers and citizens alike. As the succeeding chapters will argue, though, similar racist stories arose out of the ashes of peacetime disasters, as well. And as will be covered, such instances further suggest that the conjuring of non-white and foreign monster-caricatures was a key element in the process of recovery following disaster in the latter half of the 19th century.

**Conclusion**

Certainly, symbolism was a vital part of the visual record of the Civil War; no single image seems to exist with hinting at some larger truth or belief. But Barnard, Waud, Gardner, and their contemporaries also captured less obviously symbolic images as well, such as Barnard’s photos seen in illustrations 1-32 and 1-33, which seemed to revel in ruin for ruin’s sake. Likewise, Russell turned his lens toward scenes of anonymous buildings (illustration 1-34). Of course, the ruin itself was symbolic of Union victory and Confederate defeat, but these views also foreshadowed the images of urban destruction that would follow over the next few decades. As the following chapters will show, lessons learned by image makers during the Civil War informed the work of visual documentarists in the wake of other destructive events. Absent the bloody conflict that resulted in the ruin of Atlanta, Richmond, and numerous other Southern cities, image makers who captured ruined American urban spaces in the coming decades still found scenes rife with symbolism that appealed to audiences far from the sites themselves. And the connections these image makers would draw were in many ways seeking to achieve the same mournful, nationalistic tone Barnard, Brady, Waud, and others sought. But,
freed from the weight of civil war when Chicago burned six years later, these image
makers could also produce pictures more overtly titillating, as well.

With the war concluded, then, the struggle began in earnest to shape the American
nation anew. The contributions made by illustrators and photographers contributed to the
efforts to rebuild the nation following the war, and to form a unified national identity.
Within this new identity, old notions of who constituted a citizen would be challenged,
but in a way that largely maintained the white supremacist divides that dominated the
pre-war United States.
Chapter 2:
The Great Chicago Fire and the Rise of an Aesthetic of Calamity

And they view with the most acrimonious hate
That regurgitant cow at O'Leary's back gate,
As she stood on the night of October the 8,
When she kicked at the lamp
that set fire to the barn
That caused the Great Fire in Chicago!
-From C.C. Hine's poem, “Mrs. Leary's Cow”

Five square blocks of southwestern Chicago burned on the night of Saturday, October 7, 1871. That night, the majority of the city's firefighters had turned out to help put out what was the biggest fire the city had seen in years. Few were surprised such a fire had come; the city — and, in fact, the entire Midwest — had been suffering through months of near-complete drought, and the thousands of wooden structures encircling the downtown business district had become a growing cause for concern even as the taller buildings in the center of the city turned to stone and masonry construction. The regularity of structure fires in the city made alarms such as the one heard again the following night feel like a tired refrain. “There is a fire every Monday and Thursday in Chicago!” one resident recalled a friend saying as he refused to rise from bed to watch the latest flames begin to spread on the night of the 8th.

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The battle of the day before had left the already small fire department in a state of fatigue. As fire fighters gathered up their energy to take on another fire in the southwest section of the city, they could not have imagined that the damaging blaze they’d conquered the night before would soon pale in comparison to the conflagration they were about to face. By the time this fire died out over twenty-four hours later, a third of the city’s residents would be rendered homeless, and the burgeoning, 300,000-person city – through which the vast majority of all rail traffic and money flowing between the two coasts passed – would lose more than 18,000 structures, including the entire downtown business area. The estimated death toll for the fire settled at 300.3

Two hundred and fifty miles to the north in Peshtigo, Wisconsin, population 1,700, dry conditions in that rural logging town were raising fears of similar fires in early October. On October 8, Peshtigo, too, heard the call for firemen to muster and take on a blaze that was quickly consuming the lumberyards around the town. Much like the concurrent fire in Chicago, the conflagration in Peshtigo soon grew out of control, spreading at a rate far greater than the men and equipment fighting it could match. By the next day, Peshtigo and surrounding communities were gone, and an area covering 2,400 square miles smoldered around them. Finding an area constructed as if it were meant to feed flames, the fire burned through the dry wooden buildings, surrounding forests, and massive stockpiles of logs at such a dizzying speed that many residents of the town were surrounded by flame before they could reach safe ground.4 The horror of the scene is captured in a few extant eyewitness reports. One survivor, who wrote a report in the

3 Ibid., 2.

immediate aftermath of the fire at the behest of the Wisconsin legislature, stated that
victims believed they were witnessing the end of times. Those who believed so, he wrote,

fell upon the ground and abandoned themselves to [the fire’s] terrors. Indeed this
apprehension, that the last days were at hand, pervaded even the strongest and
most mature minds. All the conditions of the prophecies seemed to be fulfilled.
The hot atmosphere, filled with smoke, supplied the signs in the sun, and in the
moon, and in the stars; the sound of the whirlwind was as the sea and the waves
roaring; and everywhere there were men’s hearts failing them for fear, and for
looking after those things which are coming on the earth; for the powers of
heaven shall be shaken.\(^5\)

While the property loss from the Wisconsin fire was no match for Chicago’s in
terms of monetary value, the death toll in Peshtigo and surrounding communities was
staggering no matter the comparison; an estimated 2,400 people burned to death in a few
short hours.\(^6\) The loss of life in Peshtigo outranks the death tolls of any American fire
before or since, and ranks as one of the single most deadly disasters in American history.

Yet despite the far deadlier and more sizeable results of the rural Wisconsin fire
of October 8 and 9, 1871, the loss of Peshtigo passed with relatively scant coverage,
while the “Great Chicago Fire” grew into the most sensational news event in the United
States since the Civil War had ended. Just as they had during the fighting six years prior,
consumers flocked to images of the destruction, and image makers kept a steady stream
of photographs, stereographs, lithographs, and illustrations pouring into the market for
months after. Taking a number of cues from the work done by photographers, printers,
and newspapers of the previous decade, creators of urban disaster imagery crafted a


\(^6\) Penna and Rivers, 131.
salable spectacle out of the Chicago fire, while leaving Peshtigo’s remains to disappear virtually undocumented.

This chapter will first explore the continuities between Civil War imagery and the visual documentation of the Chicago fire – the first major instance of urban destruction since the war’s end – from both aesthetic and thematic perspectives. Similarities in both subject matter and composition choices reveal important connections between visual documentation of the fire, and of the war. Differences are revealing, as well, demonstrating a desire to see more carnage, but a new and restrained limit on just how much physical trauma viewers were willing to examine.

The second section of the chapter will then delve into the reasons behind the national preference for images of urban over rural destruction. In part, it will examine the preference for images of damage to buildings rather than bodies that pervades the visual documentation of urban disaster from Chicago forward. Further, this section will explore the narrative of rebirth that developed alongside the melodramatic survival and death narratives, revealing an eagerness that drove the long-term market for disaster images to celebrate American exceptionalism despite the destruction.

Following these examinations, the final section of this chapter will look at the lessons to be learned from the visual documentation of the Chicago fire in the larger context of American reunification and nation building during the era. As the United States struggled to evolve from a union of states to a nation of citizens under one flag following a divisive war, visual media played a vital role in supporting and abetting this process. And in the documentation of urban disaster, viewers could find early attempts by image makers to turn potential national setbacks into unifying and optimistic symbols of
American progress. Through racial signification, image makers participated in an ironically exclusionary reunification effort that sought to limit those who were allowed to claim status as a true citizen. While these attempts were crudely executed in 1871 in comparison to later efforts, we will see through the following chapters that, as the United States worked to build a national character and an international reputation in the decades following the war, visual media refined itself into a highly effective propagandistic machine to support American exceptionalism by the early twentieth century. This chapter, then, will reveal the myriad ways in which the documenters of urban disaster began the process of crafting Americanism out of rubble.

I. The Civil War and the Chicago Fire

A few short years after the end of fighting, the burning of Chicago provided a fresh new event for Americans to mourn and consume. Practices of selling and collecting images of the Chicago fire were in many ways similar to those of the Civil War image industry, and the volume of coverage in both the visual and written media demonstrates that documentarians of the time recognized immediately the profit that could be made from reporting even the most minute details of the disaster – real or false – to the public. In turn, consumers purchased images and illustrated retellings of the fire’s events in droves. Much like those who collected and viewed images of the Civil War wanted to own a piece of the tragedy – and thereby claim the comfort of mourning and the thrill of disaster for themselves – some Americans likely saw in the fire that ruined Chicago a brand new and epic disaster through which they could suffer together as a nation.
Continuities between the imagery of the Civil War and the visual documentation of the Chicago fire are evident not just in the aesthetic choices of image makers, but in the names attached to many of those images, as well. Prominent Civil War photographer George N. Barnard had relocated to Chicago in 1871, and saw his studio burn in the fire. Using borrowed equipment, he produced a number of views of the aftermath that echo many of his images from the warfront. Illustrator Alfred R. Waud, as well, found himself in the vicinity of the fire on October 8. In St. Louis on assignment for the magazine *Every Saturday*, Waud made his way to Chicago upon hearing news of the fire and produced 31 drawings of the event, many of which eventually appeared in *Every Saturday*.\(^7\)

As can be seen in his production during and after the fire, Waud brought the same flair for melodrama and excitement he had employed during the war to his work in Chicago. Suggestions of frenetic movement were present, as in his drawing, “Trying to Save a Wagonload of Goods,” wherein a team of horses struggle speedily past burning houses as their tails and manes whip the air (illustration 2-1). In “Fleeing from the burning city,” Waud captures the panic of Chicagoans caught in the path of the flames, showing dozens of terrified citizens fleeing down a crowded street with what few possessions they could gather lugged over their shoulders (illustration 2-2).

Recalling the landscape painting tradition that informed so many of the images of the Civil War, Waud also sought to depict the fire from a more expansive, panoramic viewpoint. “Looking from the Lake near the River” is reminiscent of the many battle scenes Waud illustrated during the war; numerous smaller vignettes of activity and suffering occupy the foreground of an expansive view of the city-as-backdrop.

Whether the battlefield at Bull Run or the burning city of Chicago, Waud continued to make images that captured multiple instances of human drama framed by the larger calamity that inspired them. In “Scene on the Prairie, Monday Night,” the artist looks back at the faraway, fire-silhouetted skyline, capturing the misery of those who escaped the city to watch helplessly in the foreground (illustration 2-4).

Waud’s “West Side from Lake St. Bridge Chicago” places the viewer near eye level with other spectators watching from a bridge across the Chicago River (illustration 2-5). Many of his drawings, in fact, sought to place the viewer in the event, just as he had tried to accomplish during the war. In “Halt! Who Goes There?” The viewer is witness to an interrogation by an armed soldier of two men making their way into the burning district (illustration 2-6). A week after the fire, and from a slightly elevated viewpoint, Waud drew a scene of a crowd gathered in the streets to witness a sermon in “Preaching at the Methodist Church… Sunday, Oct 15th” (illustration 2-7).8

Barnard, meanwhile, had cut his teeth in the ruined urban landscapes left behind by General William T. Sherman’s troops during the war.9 Barnard’s Photographic Views of the Sherman Campaign had been published in 1866, garnering the photographer a reputation as an astute chronicler of nationally significant subjects, including the ruined built environment. The images he produced following the fire certainly mimic his work with the Union army. Chicago publishing firm of Lovejoy & Foster published a series of stereographic images produced by Barnard entitled “Among the Ruins of Chicago.”

8 These images were sent immediately to the Every Saturday offices to be turned into woodcut illustrations for publication – so, while these illustrations are source images rather than the final product, they capture the same scenes that would have appeared in the magazine credited to Waud.

9 See chapter one for discussion of Barnard’s work with Sherman.
Consumers would have been familiar with Barnard’s name as a prominent photographer of the war; scenes in the series, then, likely inspired recollections of the photographer’s previous work, attaching a nostalgic and patriotic meaning to even pedestrian views like “Fifth National Bank, N.E. cor. Clark & Washington Sts. looking east” (illustration 2-8). Much like he had in Atlanta, Barnard cataloged the destruction for viewers far from the city; stereographic images like “Bigelow House” (illustration 2-9) show the general devastation caused by the fire, while “Court House Seen Through Ruins of East Side of Clark Street” (illustration 2-10) and “Bryan Block, Northwest Corner of Monroe and LaSalle” (illustration 2-11) demonstrate an artful eye for framing ruins within ruins.

Much like Barnard’s photographs of Sherman’s March, the images of devastation in Chicago presented a picturesque view that rendered one of America’s most important cities a ruin akin to the ancient Greek and Roman landmarks that had fascinated viewers for years in books and romantic paintings. Certainly, romantic depictions of ruin and danger had been popular in paintings and other forms of imagery throughout the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, and such fascinations lingered up to the turn of the century. In his book *The Culture of Calamity*, Kevin Rozario notes that observers of the era “celebrated calamities as ‘sublime’ events that could stimulate the senses and inspire appreciation for the mysteries of life.” Writing on the “sublime” in life and art in 1757, Edmund Burke characterized it as the extreme pleasure to be derived from experiencing or seeing danger, and the delight felt, in Rozario’s words, by those viewers with “an expectation of physical safety.” 10 Such a conception would have been familiar

to observers of images of the Chicago fire in 1871. And this conception likely guided – subliminally, at least – the consumption of images of the fire’s dramas and aftermath.

But such historic trends were no guarantee that people would want to buy images depicting such recent calamities, disasters that had claimed the lives or livelihoods of populations more familiar to them. Therefore, it had to be more than a simple romantic fascination with ruins. Instead, I believe that the similarities between images of the Civil War and of the Chicago fire reveal that Americans hungered for images of loss within which they could find a point of identification, a way for them, too, to feel some part of the tragedy. Evidence in the images they bought demonstrates an aesthetic fascination with destruction and loss among consumers, as themes of tragedy mixed with a sense of adventure, a nostalgic view of ruin, and an optimistic view of rebirth. As such, an industry that profited from documenting tragedy during the war knew that, because of the human needs such images met, future disasters like the Chicago fire could make for equally profitable business opportunities.

By echoing their well known Civil War work, Waud’s drawings and Barnard’s photographs provided a readily apparent continuity for the viewer from one event to the other. Waud, Barnard – and, of course, their contemporaries – learned the lessons of marketing war imagery well: by framing the conflict as a universally accessible event, customers would find points of identification within the frame that led to ever greater audiences and sales. Such logic was easily applied to the Great Chicago Fire – a well known, important city had burned, and just as in the war, viewers across the nation clamored for a view they could own and, by extension, a share of the suffering that they could personalize. In turn, the pleasures derived from collective suffering and mourning,
so contributory to the success of images of the Civil War,\footnote{See Drew Gilpin Faust's \emph{This Republic of Suffering}, addressed in chapter one of this dissertation.} were so appealing to Americans that a new major catastrophe reignited the desire to own a piece of, to momentarily at least, suffer from, a great new tragedy. Image makers and publishers recognized this desire, and sought to nurture it into a fully-developed market for shared tragedy that centered on the destruction of urban space.

The difference between the fire and the war, of course, was that most of those who bought the images had little if any direct connection to the city itself, or the tragedy; buying the depictions was, in effect, buying their way into a kind of ownership of Chicago’s fire via a firsthand view of the disaster. Consumers, then, were buying a piece of the tragedy to consume and feel at will, but one that could be put down once the desire for that feeling of communal suffering and grieving had been sated.

To build such a desire for thrill, many artists constructed scenes that played up the melodrama of the fire to a fevered pitch, though their aesthetic creativity at times seems to have been limited. In one lithograph, “Chicago in Flames,” artists of the Union Publishing Company show Chicago engulfed in impossibly high and dense flames, as if the entire downtown areas was swept up at once in a tower of flame thousands of feet high (illustration 2-12). The bird’s eye view of this image matched similar dramatic angles in a number of other equally exaggerated views of the fireball. Thomas Kelly’s lithograph, “Destruction of Chicago by Fire” looks almost like a black & white copy of the Union Publishing Company lithograph, though Kelly’s flames are far more modest (illustration 2-13). Two lithographs produced by publishers G. F. Cram and Currier & Ives, respectively, similarly appear virtually identical (illustrations 2-14 and 2-15).
Cram’s claim at the top of the image that his work was “The first picture in Chicago after the fire” is true, it is entirely possible that the much larger publishing house of Currier & Ives plagiarized the local artist. Plagiarism of coincidence, each of these images show just how eager viewers were to see the hellish scene from a panoramic perspective.

Currier & Ives put out another lithograph, this time in black and white, that combined all of the above scenes. “The Great Fire at Chicago, Octr. 8th 1871” seems to stretch to the limit the number of boats, buildings, and flames the artists could incorporate (illustration 2-16). But not all lithographers chose such expansive views. The publishers Kellogg & Bullkeley, for example, printed a frightening lithograph titled “The Fire Escape,” depicting women and children on a burning platform above a sea of blood-red smoke (illustration 2-17). The caption sums up the over-the-top drama of such narrative images, likely conjured in the imagination of an artist: “A family awakened at midnight and using the only means of escape from the burning building – a bridge connecting the roof of one house with another.” For a family so rudely pulled from their beds, they are surprisingly well dressed, a tactic of class signification that will be discussed in detail later in this chapter.

Such symbolism, though, made for another point of identification for the bourgeois collector of such images; seeing bodies in the frame similar to their own, the largely white, middle- and upper class consumers could see themselves amidst the danger. Still other aesthetic strategies were employed as well. Other image makers sought a more hauntingly familiar, yet alien scene to display the horrors of the city’s carnage. For example, an unattributed image, seen in illustration 2-18, shows the northeast corner of Clark and Washington streets. The photographer shot the image from eye level, at a
point where thousands of people would likely have passed every day; had the city not been destroyed, the scene portrayed would have been both literally and figuratively a pedestrian one. Framing the image in a way that would give it the feel of a typical view found during a stroll, the photographer captures a horrifying moment of disaster tinged with familiarity. The ruined streetlight, and the still-standing walls of the destroyed buildings on either side of the view create a post-apocalyptic vista, into which the viewers could insert themselves.

II. Visualizing Chicago Over Peshtigo

In the midst of the postwar project to shape the United States into a unified, internationally important and powerful nation, the images of the Chicago fire did their part to support these efforts. In one illustration by Jules Taverner, published in Harper's Weekly on January 6, 1872, a collage of allegorical and realistic depictions of Chicago and Paris put the American city on level with one of the oldest and grandest cities in Europe (illustration 2-19). At the top of the image is a depiction of the French Army reclaiming the city from the Communards during the “Bloody Week” in May that ended the 1871 Paris Commune, complete with phoenix rising from the ashes of the Tuileries Palace. At bottom, the scene is matched by an image of Chicago and its thriving shipyards burning. The middle of the composition depicts the allegorical figure of Father Time handing off an hourglass to a female figure representing the new year of 1872, along with other robed women mourning the two fires.

The comparison between an intentional, rebellion-led destructive event, and an accidental fire is a fraught one. As will be addressed in more depth later in the chapter,
those who viewed images of the Chicago fire would certainly have been aware in early 1872 of the uplifting themes of rebirth that by then had infused Chicago fire reportage. Reports of the fall of Paris to socialist revolutionaries in March of that year reached America full of sensationalized accounts of crime wonton destruction. It is quite possible, then, that the Taverner illustration may well have contained an implied message of American superiority: while France burned itself down, the United States rebuilt. Despite the absence of explicit images of Chicago’s rebirth in this drawing, such a narrative was so well recognized by January 1872 that it would have been implicit.

Others used the ruined buildings themselves as allegories for American exceptionalism. While far subtler, images of the fire’s aftermath recalled an aesthetic that was already familiar to many who would be viewing and buying them in the coming months. Namely, the depictions of the ruins of Chicago, especially in photographs, resembled popular images of the eighteenth and early nineteenth century that depicted romanticized European ruins, images that had long inspired viewers to consider the historic importance of ancient empires across the continent (see, for example, illustrations 2-20 through 2-23). In the depictions emanating from Chicago, the United States could demonstrate that it, too, had grand ruins comparable to those found at Pompeii, Rome, and across Europe, evidence of an historical claim to both longevity and legitimacy. Illustrators took the argument further, as in illustration 2-24, matching the allegorical

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12 According to Philip M. Katz in his essay, “‘Lessons from Paris’: The American Clergy Responds to the Paris Commune,” The Commune was big news in the United States. But, such news “tended to emphasize the most sordid, sensational aspects of the French uprising.” Not surprisingly, then, American readers viewed the Commune as a decidedly negative event. Much like the coverage of American disasters, news of the Commune was shaped into a narrative that served readers’ interests more than truth. (Church History 63, no. 3 (1994), 393-406).
rhetoric of the Civil War by personifying tragedy, assistance and recovery in the form of Greek goddess-like figures.

The architectural grandiosity led image makers to turn their craft toward Chicago and away from the frontier environs of Peshtigo. Taverner’s comparison of Paris and Chicago implies not just that the United States was exceptional in its ability to create rather than destroy, but that the United States had cities that were worthy of comparison to the cultural and economic capitals of the Old World. The uniquely urban views and problems that were present in Chicago – and absent in Peshtigo – made Chicago a better visual subject to serve the popular narratives of national rebirth and American exceptionalism in postwar America. While Peshtigo’s calamity was covered in the written press, the visual press found far more useable ruins in Chicago.

Nearly wiped off the map was a city that by 1871 was one of the most important in the United States. The biggest city on the Great Lakes by that time, Chicago hosted not only the most rail lines in the nation, but provided a vital water link between eastern cities and the American west, via rail and canal connections to Lake Michigan and the numerous population centers beyond. Chicago was a major site of trade in the west, while Peshtigo was a tiny frontier community with one telegraph wire, inaccessible and

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13 As historian William Cronon has argued in *Nature's Metropolis: Chicago and the Great West* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1991), Chicago’s history and founding was a process of building up a new network of trade and commerce across the American west, linking rural areas with a main center of collection and distribution for products from both the east and west – Chicago’s important function as a hub of industrial transit made it, by the mid-nineteenth century, one of the country’s most important cities. In fact, according to Anthony N. Penna and Jennifer S. Rivers, much of the lumber in Peshtigo was meant to pass through Chicago. Penna and Rivers write that Chicago merchants were responsible for the construction of the timber mills in the city (*Natural Disasters in a Global Environment*, chapter 4).
remote. Chicago presented photographers with photogenic ruins that were easily accessible via train. Peshtigo was surrounded by wilderness and littered with bodies.

Fate gave visual documentarians the opportunity to select between two massive disasters that took place on the same night. The choices made have resulted in a near-complete historical erasure of the events in Peshtigo from collective memory; most people today have heard of the Great Chicago Fire, but few outside of the immediate vicinity of the fire further north know of Peshtigo’s calamity. Largely because they could be rebuilt, it was the ruined buildings and streets of Chicago, and not the burned bodies of Peshtigo, that flooded the market for visual records of destruction, thereby capturing the nation’s attention and reignited their desire to share in the tragedy via the collection of mementos of the disaster.

In the process, photographers were choosing between two tragic stories, selecting the one that could be presented as both universally exciting and universally mournable – and then, forgettable when necessary. Peshtigo suffered from a lack of similar coverage in large part because the tragedy to be witnessed on the ground in Wisconsin – the thousands of dead and burned victims – would never be “rebuilt.” The finality of death was far harder to enjoy and then dismiss than the temporary ‘death’ to be seen in the built environment. Therefore, even though the printing press at Currier & Ives likely consumed more red ink in the days and weeks after the Chicago Fire than it ever had before (as in illustrations 2-15 and 2-17), but the ink was only used to color fire and brick, never blood nor flesh. A vibrant show of color would draw the kinds of customers such printers sought: those seeking a grand, terrifying, and exciting view of the disaster that could be hung prominently in their homes. Through such choices – buildings rather than bodies –
image makers sought to ease any guilt or lethal grief the buyer might have felt by reassuring the audience that such loss could – and, triumphantly, would – be fixed. Chicago’s disaster became a national phenomenon precisely because it presented a terrible story that promised a happy ending.

While the Civil War dead allowed a mourning nation to consider the fate of the men it sent into battle, the bodies that would have filled the frame in Peshtigo held murkier lessons that, even if deciphered, appealed to very few potential consumers. The ruins of Chicago’s commercial center, as we shall see, presented a far greater potential for salable themes and narratives. Chicago presented a seemingly civilized area to document, while the rural, frontier town of Peshtigo lacked a desired refinement.

III. Optimism and Rebirth

And so ironically, despite the fields of destroyed buildings, commerce, and bodies, the Chicago fire was shaped into a narrative which presented American exceptionalism, positioning the country as uniquely prepared to face such a tragedy and uniquely motivated to recover from it. Following such a disaster, citizens across the country offered assistance in the rebuilding process. For visual documentarists and reporters, the recovery became the primary lens through which the nation viewed the disaster within mere days of the conflagration’s end. The October 28 edition of Harper’s Weekly summed it up in the first lines of the issue’s lead article, “The Silver Lining of the Cloud”:

The silver lining of the black Chicago cloud is evident. It is the response of this country and of England to the catastrophe that has befallen the great and prosperous city. While the fire was yet burning, meetings of sympathizing crowds assembled in the largest cities and little towns, and every railroad in the country
was bearing succor to the suffering, and the lightning of the telegraph could not speak swiftly enough the promises of aid. If the calamity is unprecedented, the spirit it evokes is ennobling.... The grief of Chicago is the sorrow of the country, and private citizens and public bodies are rivals in generosity.  

At the time of the fire, of course, the nation was still in the midst of a far larger project of reconstruction throughout the South. Though support began to decline even in the North during the early 1870s, the great project of postwar Reconstruction had turned grand-scale rebuilding into a national project, and government intervention in local affairs into an occasionally, if begrudgingly, accepted phenomenon. To wit, Chicagoans generally welcomed the presence of federal soldiers who arrived in the city to help in the days after the fire, despite protests from Illinois Governor John M. Palmer who argued

that they lacked the legal standing to do so. The welcoming of troops to Chicago was part of a larger push to maintain law and order in the city amidst claims of crime and violence on the part of a largely non-white criminal element. Quite possibly, Chicago’s burning answered for the growing resentment felt among soon-to-be “Redeemers” and other Americans, a belief that military deployment in the South was a grave overstepping of federal powers, and punished Southern whites while also attacking white supremacist groups like the Ku Klux Klan. Here, in Chicago, the military worked to serve and protect a vulnerable (in ways both real and imagined) white population. Aside from the money for recovery going to a cause represented in the media as largely white and middle-to-upper class, the funds were going to restore a prosperous city, rather than provide what many wealthy whites saw as undeserved charity to non-whites.

15 According to Andrew L. Slap in his article, “The Strong Arm of the Military Power of the United States’: The Chicago Fire, the Constitution, and Reconstruction”, General Philip Sheridan angered Governor Palmer by taking control of the city by military means following the fire. Palmer sent state militia companies to help, while Sheridan brought in another five companies of soldiers. As Slap writes, by Oct. 11, rumors of real and fabricated crime rampant had caused local citizens and the mayor to beg Sheridan to take control of the patchwork forces, despite the fact that Sheridan had no constitutional authority to do so – which could only have been granted by Palmer. The governor’s protest, and his argument against the constitutionality of the federal military presence, became an issue of national interest during October. Slap compares the debate to the simultaneous national debate over federal military presence in South Carolina to counter the Ku Klux Klan under the guise of Reconstruction. Far more people, it seems, approved on the federal presence in Chicago than they did in South Carolina. The debate over Chicago, especially in the press, fell largely along political lines. Predictably, Republican-leaning papers supported Sheridan, while Democratic-leaning papers took Palmer’s side(157-8). But, the controversy quickly faded from Republican papers; Harper’s Weekly avoided the issue altogether. Those Republican papers that mentioned it at all after mid-November mentioned admitted that Palmer was technically correct, but nevertheless that the federal troops were a necessity whatever the law. (“The Strong Arm of the Military Power of the United States’: The Chicago Fire, the Constitution, and Reconstruction.” Civil War History 47, no. 2 (2001): 151-9).
The drive to provide financial and material assistance to the city was so popular, in fact, that it became a divinely ordained mission, as one poet (possibly the Reverend Edgar Johnson Goodspeed of Chicago) described it:

Destruction wasted the city,
But the burning curse that came
Enkindled in all the people
Sweet charity’s holy flame.
Then still to our God be glory!
I bless Him, through my tears,
That I live in the grandest nation
That hath stood in all the years.16

Consumers were eager to see their fellow citizens of the “grandest nation” tapping into that greatness and heavenly favor to rebuild the burned city. The reconstruction of Chicago, in fact, kindled a reconsideration as to the benefits of urban industrial growth in the United States. Historian Carl Smith has successfully argued that, while the fire exposed anxieties that many felt regarding urbanization and the city, the reconstruction after the fire offered a story of resurrection and reassurance that urbanization and industrialization could offer a bright future for the country if executed correctly.17 Chicago photographer P.B. Greene, in a series he produced titled “Views of Chicago Before and after the Fire,” was one of many image makers to dramatize this excitement in optimistic images. Greene ruminated on the novelty of what was destroyed in the fire and

16 Edgar J. Goodspeed, The Great Fires in Chicago and the West (Chicago: J. W. Goodspeed, 1871), 60. The possible attribution comes from Goodspeed’s own unattributed use of the poem, and the fact that it is included in the book amidst text penned by the author.

what escaped the flame in his photograph shown in illustration 2-25. In this image, Greene captures the ruins of the National Watch Company building, a prominent structure at the corner of Lake and Clark streets. His caption states that the “Contents of [the] Vaults [were] uninjured.” Both wealth and life survived the flame in this structure: “A live mouse [was] found in the lower Vault [on] the second day after the fire.” Another photographer, unknown, produced a similar view in illustration 2-26, photographing the rubble of the Second National Bank. As the image shows, again this bank’s vault remains similarly unharmed. Both photographers are highlighting an important theme of the coverage of the disaster; namely that Chicago is in physical ruin, but the most cherished things in the economically vital city – life and wealth – are sustained, and can recover to their pre-fire levels.

Interest in the recovery effort sustained an energetic market for images of new construction in the ensuing months and years. Many images demonstrate this rampant desire to see recovery taking place. For example, Chicago photographer J. Battersby scaled the top of the Randolph Street Bridge to photograph the triangular confluence of Lake and Water streets at least twice in the weeks after the fire. In the earliest view found (illustration 2-27), the vista Battersby finds is filled with ruined buildings, but a number of hopeful signs exist, as well: ships, a sure sign of the rebuilding of commerce, have returned to the Chicago River, and rubble has already been cleared from the streets. Battersby returned soon after to the bridge, capturing the evolution of the same location over a short period of time (illustration 2-28). The existence of a number of temporary wooden commercial structures put up directly atop the ruins demonstrates the rapid pace with which the city was already working to recover. Though not found in the archives
consulted for this work, there is a strong possibility that Battersby may have returned to
the same site numerous times over the coming months to check the progress of this
important intersection.

Other photographers similarly sought to capture Chicago’s recovery progress; after the fire, the speedy pace of the replacement of business blocks became one of the primary subjects of image makers. An early unattributed image, shown in illustration 2-29, shows the work of Schock, Bigford & Company to reestablish their business in the burnt district, selling “Cigars, Tobacco, Grapes, Apples & Cider” at “Old Prices,” as their temporary stand’s hand-painted signage proclaims. Another photograph, taken by Michigan photographer Jex Bardwell, shows a tidy row of new wooden commercial structures along a recently rubble-strewn block of Michigan Avenue (illustration 2-30). The buildings include a milliner, a grocer, and a tea shop, among others.

Perhaps the most depicted immediate post-fire structure, though, was the Kerfoot Block, a one-room real estate office housing the business of William D. Kerfoot at 89 Washington Street. The building’s claim to fame, as its own sign proclaimed, was that it was the “First in the Burnt District,” the first building to be put up after the fire. In the unattributed photograph seen in illustration 2-31 one can see what gave Kerfoot his advantage; the building sits in a cleared spot in the rubble, composed of likely scavenged boards and windows. Whatever the quality of his structure, Kerfoot’s entrepreneurial drive gained him a great deal of notoriety; within weeks his building would be prominently featured in national coverage of the fire via woodcut illustrations by T. R.
Davis in *Harper’s Weekly* (illustration 2-32) and another unnamed artist in *Leslie’s Lady’s Journal* (illustration 2-33).

The zeal for Chicago’s rebirth continued long after the initial shock of the disaster wore off. On both the one-year (illustration 2-34) and two-year (illustration 2-35) anniversaries of the fire, local boosters produced broadsheet-sized books with grand depictions of new buildings and businesses in the formerly burned district. The first anniversary book even included an illustration of a fanciful (and never built) monument to the fire constructed out of safes that survived the conflagration (illustration 2-36, detail in illustration 2-37).

Such images underscore the nation’s desire to see the city rebuild, and their dependency on Chicago’s future to continue the project of westward expansion. In *Urban Disorder and the Shape of Belief*, Smith writes that many of the boosters – image makers among them – who took hold of the post-fire narrative framed the fire as the best thing that could have happened to the city, an event that set Chicago on a path of development and optimism. The fire became a moment of transition, when old, outmoded ways were cleared away, and new, efficiencies took their place. The ruins were portrayed as a romantic site by writers, a new history to be cleaned up and built atop of.19 These are themes that simply could not have been found in the dreadful aftermath of Peshtigo’s calamity. The fact that Peshtigo saw no major efforts at visual documentation suggests, as well, that depictions of recovery were of high importance to the audience for disaster.

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18 The fame of the Kerfoot Block is further confirmed by the existence of the building’s hand-lettered signage among the collection of the Chicago History Museum.

19 See chapter five, “The Fire and Cultural Memory,” in Smith’s *Urban Disorder and the Shape of Belief*. 
imagery. And while some of the glee in seeing these images certainly arose from the
desire to see the industrial city for the dangerous monstrosity that it was, the fact that the
rapid recovery became such an overwhelming theme of the visual documentation
demonstrates the ironic dependence of the nation on the same kind of cities they feared.
Chicago's reconstruction was important to the nation, both for its ego, and for its
economic vitality.

IV. Fire's Effects on Class, Race, and Ethnicity

But the fire's story was never just about recovery. In playing to a nation eager for
images of disaster, image makers sought to craft narratives within the destruction that
titillated, as well. The specific points of identification provided by image makers reveal a
great deal about exactly who they expected to purchase and consume these depictions. In
many ways, from subliminal to nakedly plain, image makers tapped into a deep strain of
hostility toward non-white and non-wealthy people by scapegoating a menagerie of
conjured race monsters. The reportage of Chicago began a trend of placing blame for
urban disasters and the crimes committed in their wake squarely on the shoulders of those
who could least defend themselves. In the process, by providing a wealth of depictions of
monsters, image makers and other reporters gave future researchers a wealth of
information, too, on those who would be viewing those monsters.

The strongly hierarchical view of class and race found in much of the visual
documentation of the fire is exemplified in George L. Barclay's *The Great Chicago
Fire*, one of the first quick-to-print, illustrated disaster accounts of the era. The 80-page
book provides a number of clues to its rushed publishing schedule, most evident in the
quality and variety of the illustrations themselves. Later such books would often draw
their illustrations from the best works of artists employed by Leslie, Harper, and other
popular newspaper houses; but compared to the work of illustrators who covered the
Civil War for the popular press, the woodcuts that appear in *The Great Chicago Fire!*
are undeniably crude and cartoonish (see illustration 2-38, for example).

Their subjects similarly distinguish them from newspaper illustrations. Barclay’s
drawings focus solely on people, with the burning city playing only a background – if
ominous – role. This suggests that the illustrations were created in an office far from the
burned district, and without any reference photographs to rely upon. As we have seen in
chapter one, illustrators of the era took pride in depicting scenes as realistically as
possible. Barclay, by contrast, downplayed realism (see, for example, the cover in
illustration 2-39); his work was both imaginative and entirely imagined, and undermined
the accompanying text in the process. Barclay spent little time on a sustained narrative;
paragraphs follow no logical order, turning from descriptions of burned victims to
estimates of the value of grain lost, to accounts of the first bells to ring when fire broke.
The book’s cheapness, sloppy organization, and rapid publication suggest an audience
hungry to consume the details and sensations of the tragedy quickly, and with scant
interest in truthfulness; it was the melodrama that drew them. The book is organized
around a sequence of images with no logic, and the accompanying text suggests that
viewers cared little for chronology and causation.

More importantly, the illustrations in *The Great Chicago Fire!* reveal a strongly
biased class agenda throughout. Just as crudely conjured as the images themselves,
simple signifiers in the depiction of clothing show that all victims are to be understood as
wealthy white residents, while the villains who robbed the sufferers and spread the flames come universally from lower classes. Heroic women, for example, save family members (illustration 2-40) and other dependents (illustration 2-41), all while outfitted in their finest dresses. The punished troublemakers meanwhile are dressed in plain clothing. The images always include spectators in finery – well-postured men in top hats and tails look on as hatless criminals in short coats and ragged mustaches and beards dangle from light poles and are beaten to death (as can be seen in illustrations 2-42 and 2-43). While some images are more vague as to the class rank of the victims (see, for example, illustrations 2-44 and 2-45), the rigidly adhered to hierarchy of attire in those images that include criminal elements leads the viewer to assume an equally upper class, white background for the depicted victims. For Barclay, the hat truly does make the man, and provides the dividing line between sympathy and disgust (see illustration 2-46).

While the book presents a relatively low number of illustrations compared to later books in the disaster “history” genre – nine woodcut engravings in eighty pages – it is clear that Barclay knew the illustrations themselves would be the book’s greatest selling point. This is evidenced by dual captions for each image, as seen in the illustrations referenced in the previous paragraph. While the book’s text is written in English, each image has both an English and German caption. The fact that Barclay included German translations for the image captions and did not bother to do the same for the text suggests that the publisher believed that those who purchased the book would be far more interested in the illustrations than the accompanying stories. The book was opened to a second, German-reading audience via its illustrations.
Class distinctions in the depictions of Chicagoans like those in Barclay’s booklet are rife, and follow a pattern that would be repeated each time a new urban disaster demanded visual documentation. In a related way, racial and ethnic divisions were depicted and reified in the visual coverage of the Chicago fire. The story of Catherine O’Leary’s cow and its role as cause of the Great Fire is well known and still popularly believed, though many investigations have since proven the story unfounded. Soon after the fire, Chicagoans and all other followers of the story would come to believe the false tale that the fire was brought about by an overturned lantern, kicked over by Mrs. O’Leary’s cow. As soon as local newspapers could return to publishing, the beginnings of the legend took hold. According to historian Richard Junger, the Chicago Evening Herald published the first local account of the animal’s responsibility:

Amid the confusion and general bewilderment, we can only give a few details. The fire broke out on the corner of DeKoven and Twelfth streets, at about 9 o’clock on Sunday evening, being caused by a cow kicking over a lamp in a stable in which a woman was milking. An alarm was immediately given, but owing to the high southwest wind, the building was speedily consumed, and thence the fire spread rapidly.

Blame, in other words, fell squarely on a woman who had supposedly forgotten to milk her cow until late at night, when artificial illumination would be required to complete the task. Soon enough the story was embellished further; reporters, locals, and those following the story around the world were eager for a villain, the owner of the maligned

21 Quoted in Richard Junger, Becoming the Second City: Chicago’s Mass News Media, 1833-1898 (Champaign, Ill.: University of Illinois Press, 2010), 71.
cow. Within a few short days, reporters had supposedly traced the fire’s spark to the barn of the O’Leary family, in the middle of a working class Irish neighborhood. Mrs. O’Leary became the target of widespread ridicule.

But while the fire likely did begin in the vicinity of the O’Leary’s property, the cow and lantern story was a complete fabrication. Mrs. O’Leary rose at the time as a convenient target for a city’s anger, searching as it was to find someone to blame for a disaster that cost hundreds of lives and leveled a major portion of the city. With her recognizably Irish surname at a time when the Irish-born working class were seen as a separate, brutish, and ignorant race, Catherine O’Leary’s ethnicity and immigrant status made her the perfect scapegoat for the city’s suffering. Her derogatory treatment in the press served as “a lurid example of all of the worst characteristics ascribed to Irish immigrants by the native-born.” Despite her approximate age of 44 at the time of the fire, journalists and image-makers conjured a decrepit witch straight out of Grimm’s Fairy Tales (illustration 2-47), seeking revenge on a city that wouldn’t provide her with undue

22 The origins of the fabrication are lost to history. Junger writes that numerous journalists would later claim that they had planted the story’s seed, including Chicago Republican writer Michael L. Ahern who stated in 1921 that he, along with a Tribune reporter, fabricated the tale after finding a “a broken kerosene lamp in the wreckage of the O’Leary’s barn at 137 DeKoven Street” (72). Ahern, however, is just one of many who were in Chicago at the time who later claimed authorship, and no single person has ever been proven as the culprit. In their book, Natural Disasters in a Global Environment, Penna and Rivers cover a peculiar theory by Robert M. Wood and some others that a comet might be responsible for both the Chicago and Peshtigo fires, along with a number of other smaller fires that night that all appear to have started within a few minutes of each other. This, they say, would explain the coincidence of the timing, and lend credence to the claims of many witnesses to the fire that “fire was falling in torrents” (131-2).

23 Sawislak, 44.

charity. In reporting on her motivation for setting the fire, a journalist for the *Chicago Times* claimed that “The old hag swore she would be revenged on a city that would deny her a bit of wood or a pound of bacon.” In a largely unreported episode, the city formally exonerated her following her own testimony. Even so, the vilification continued unabated in the press for months afterward.25 Photographers would release supposed images of O’Leary (illustration 2-48), her cow, and her house (illustration 2-49) as souvenirs in the fire’s wake.26 The persistence of the story at the time is reflected in the cementing of the legend that has taken place over the last century and a half.

But O’Leary’s fellow Irish Chicagoans were not the only fire victims to find themselves portrayed as evil outsiders in the disaster’s wake. In reporting on the many personal stories of tragedy suffered during the fire, *Leslie’s Lady’s Journal* broke from its macabre tales of tragic death and maiming long enough to laugh at three tales of woe wherein unnamed characters lost their possessions, livelihoods and even family members to the Chicago fire. What set them apart from the tragic characters in the article were their ethnicities. The subheading “Some Comedic Incidents,” presented an Irishwoman struggling with a scared pig, a “colored” woman whose meager possessions caught fire as

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25 Sawislak, 44.

26 The house images were likely the actual house the O’Learys lived in at the time of the fire, which survived the conflagration. The couple left soon after the fire, though stayed in Chicago. Catherine O’Leary, however, refused to participate in the furthering of the legend, and likely never would have posed for such images. The cows in the O’Leary barn, by O’leary’s own account, did not survive the fire, and so would not have posed for photographs, either. See the Chicago History Museum’s website *The Great Chicago Fire and the Web of Memory*, particularly the essay “The O’Leary Legend” (http://www.greatchicagofire.org/oleary-legend) and “Kate the barn is afire” (http://www.greatchicagofire.org/oleary-legend-library/%E2%80%9Ckate-barn-afire%E2%80%9D), a transcript of police interviews with Catherine O’Leary in which she states that every animal in the barn burned, save one calf.
she hauled them to safety, and an “immense Dutchman” and his family who abandoned a wheelbarrow containing all of their food, beer, and clothing to escape the rushing flames. The nativist strain flowing through this “silver lining of comedy,” as the writer calls it, flows proudly throughout Chicago fire reportage. In such cases, their loss does not differ materially from the losses of other victims. The language of ethnic and racial hierarchy, however, was certainly well ingrained to the point that rending the victims non-white meant also rendering their suffering as trivial and comedic.

Conclusion

In his book *Barbarian Virtues*, Matthew Frye Jacobson describes as “crucial political work” the nativist, anti-immigrant and racist stories told in popular media of the time. As Chicago’s story hints, and as the disasters to be covered in the next three chapters will further reveal, the task performed by the vilification and derision of foreign-seeming peoples in the decades surrounding 1900 played a vital contributory role in making the case for world dominance of American and western forms of civilization. Often, this drive to expand a distinctly Protestant, white culture around the globe was justified with claims to benevolence, harkening back to pro-slavery arguments that depicted forced subservience as a civilizing gift to a previously savage people. The work of chroniclers of American disaster during this same era proves, however, that the veneer of imperial benevolence was thin. Those villains and buffoons described above are rendered irredeemable, revealing the fallacy of benevolence behind the potential

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Americanization of foreigners that so thoroughly infused most contemporary views of non-white and non-native-born people living in the United States. The deftness with which writers conjured caricatures of immigrants biting off ringed fingers in the wake of a fire, or city leaders work to move entire racial populations to less conspicuous areas of the city, laid bare the true malevolence of such crucial political work.

I would argue, then, that such an imperialistic, nativist framing was necessitated by a recognition among contemporary viewers — and especially, image makers — of the horrendous defeat such disasters could potentially represent. In the images and stories that emerged from the disaster zones, viewers risked seeing not the triumphant imperial American nation, but a ruined and defeated one. Reportage in the aftermath of each calamity sought first to titillate the audience with macabre tales of death and struggle. But coverage quickly turned each time to the city’s inevitable recovery, and the speed at which city political and business leaders would build an even greater metropolis from its ruins. Such optimistic stories, so bent on proving American superiority, had no use for the assimilable foreigner. Rather, foreigners were called on instead to fill the role of either unrepentant and purely evil monster, or one-dimensional, hapless buffoon. The Irish, Hungarian, or Chinese immigrant who engaged in villainous or self-defeating and irredeemable acts served as a counter to the potential perceptions of the disaster as a sign of American defeat. In this version of the events, it is not the fallen city by which native-born Americans are to be judged, but rather by their ability to die, suffer and recover with dignity, while the foreign masses are punished for their heretofore latent savageness. In this conception, then, the ruined city is no longer a symbol of American loss, but instead becomes one more backdrop for American civility in a savage world.
Chapter 3:

“A Carnival of Slaughter”: The Johnstown Flood, Industrial Monsters, and the Theater of the Macabre

“A week of corpses by the mile,  
One long, long week, without one smile...”
-from a poem by Isaac G. Reed

Describing one of the many awful scenes unfolding throughout the Conemaugh Valley in early June, 1889, author William Fletcher Johnson published a familiar comparison: “The scenes at Heanemeyer’s planing-mill at Nineveh, where the dead bodies are lying, are never to be forgotten. The torn, bruised, and mutilated bodies of the victims are lying in a row on the floor of the planing-mill, which looks more like the field of Bull Run after that disastrous battle than a workshop.” Whether Johnson had actually visited the mill-turned-morgue at Nineveh – a village outside of flood-ruined Johnstown, Pa. – matters little; the description could as easily have been evoked after looking at the front

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2 Ibid., 155. It should be noted that the Nineveh to which Johnson’s book refers is a different locale from the village that shows up much farther west in 21st century maps of Pennsylvania. In his history of the flood, David McCullough mentions that a village called Nineveh was located a few miles further down the Conemaugh River from Johnstown in neighboring Westmoreland County. Over 100 bodies washed up in that Nineveh in the days after the flood. David McCullough, *The Johnstown Flood* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1968), 244.

3 In fact, it is very likely that Johnson never did see the scene at Nineveh. The same text quoted here is found in at least one other instant history book, James Herbert Walker’s *The Johnstown Horror!!! Or, Valley of Death* (Philadelphia: National Publishing Company, 1889), and was likely lifted without credit from a newspaper account – a common practice among instant history “authors” of the time like Johnson and Walker.
page of the June 15th edition of Frank Leslie's Illustrated Weekly (illustration 3-1). That image was surely as widespread as were Alexander Gardner's photos of Civil War dead. In citing the comparison, Johnson trusted the readers of his sensationalist instant-history book, History of the Johnstown Flood, would be very familiar with both.

The many gruesome stories in Johnson's book exemplify the selective, lurid, and sensationalist view that so much of the reportage of the disaster took in the weeks after the flood. Yet the deluge that leveled much of Johnstown, Pa., on Friday, May 31st, 1889 had all the makings of a significant tale of class and race struggle, and martyrdom in the face of inequality on a massive scale. Johnstown was hit by a wall of water on Memorial Day afternoon, following the collapse of a poorly maintained dam fourteen miles upriver at an elevation of 380 feet above the city. The dam, which held back picturesque, man-made Lake Conemaugh, was owned and maintained as part of an exclusive resort by a group of Pittsburgh industrialists, among them Andrew Carnegie, Andrew Mellon, and Henry Clay Frick. Once broken unleashed a wall of water that destroyed a city largely populated by working class and immigrant steel workers.

But rather than focus on the politically fraught story of industrialist luxury killing helpless workers, image makers reframed the 1889 Johnstown flood narrative, turning an act of industrialized murder into a palatable – and, importantly, sellable – spectacle of macabre entertainment devoid of all but brief and perfunctory analyses of the flood's cause, aimed at generating profit from the workers' suffering. The few short analyses of

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4 Kaktins Uldis, Carrie Davis Todd, Stephanie Wojno and Neil Coleman, "Revisiting the Timing and Events Leading to and Causing the Johnstown Flood of 1889," Pennsylvania History 80, no. 3 (2013), 339.
the flood's origin were soon inundated by sensationalistic images of struggle and ruin that quickly followed.

If Chicago's fire in 1871 suggested the potential for disaster in the industrial city, Johnstown's flood shouted it, presenting deadly chaos that touched on nearly every single aspect of urban space that had seemed threatening to residents. The reportage created a Johnstown that was the ultimate expression of the industrial city's ever-present threat to urbanites. In stories and images spread nation- and worldwide, flood victims met death via drowning, barbed wire strangulation, crushing by machine and factory wall, and other grisly ends that each titillated the imagination of disaster enthusiasts and urban detractors. Many of the corpses were then supposedly further desecrated by marauding bands of monstrous immigrant characters bent on stealing valuables from the dead and defiling their bodies. In these retellings, the flood could not have better satiated the demand for urban destruction tales.

Every last detail of the flood's cause and destructive path—and many more details entirely fabricated by writers—was soon well-known in each corner of the United States. Coverage of the flood held the nation's attention for weeks, perhaps the biggest news story in the second half of the 19th century after Lincoln's assassination. Despite the mountainous terrain and the destruction of rail lines into the city, Johnstown was crawling with both tourists and media within a few days of the flood. Two days after the deluge, the first journalists had arrived, accompanied by photographers and sketch artists seeking to be the first to send back the most harrowing portraits that could be created.5 By the time the last image maker left Johnstown, only the combined four years of

5 McCollough, 189.
coverage of the Civil War could match the volume of images that had flowed from the
decimated steel town and its surrounding villages.

Desire to consume such events had obviously not abated in the preceding two
decades. The Johnstown flood struck in the midst of a continuing broad American
fascination with the visceral gruesomeness of gothic misfortune. Death and painful loss
remained hot-ticket items on bookstore shelves, theater stages, and tabloids. When the
bursting of the South Fork Dam brought such fictions into the real world, publishers
looked back to the glut of images produced during events like the Civil War and the
Chicago disaster, and recognized another opportunity to cash in.

Those writers who covered the flood’s aftermath occasionally participated in the
delicate balancing perverse pleasure with investigation into the flood’s causes, but image
makers focused entirely on the side of aesthetic pleasure and simplistic lessons. The
images they produced fall mainly into two categories: newspaper and lithographic
illustrations both lurid and maudlin, and photographs and stereographs that render the
disaster a picturesque study of macabre ruin. And while written media made at least
perfunctory attempts to explain the cause of the flood, the visual media avoided such
work altogether, instead playing to the deeper visceral desires of the audience, who
sought the emotional rush of witnessing tragedy. Missing entirely from the visual record
is empathy for any of the victims identified as foreign or of the lowest economical
classes. And with a high immigrant population staffing its steel mills, Johnstown
provided a wealth of easily “othered” individuals who could take the place of the hunting
club’s patrons as the flood’s primary ghouls and criminals.
This chapter will examine the work of illustrators and photographers who covered the flood, along with some relevant texts attached to such images, seeking an understanding of the visual documentation of the flood so as to reveal the numerous, often contradictory, and seldom objective stories being told. Paying only minimal attention to the cause of the disaster and its troubling symbolism, the Johnstown flood was framed instead as the ultimate horror story, a profitable tale of the many different and terrifying ways to die in the modern industrial city. Johnstown became one grand, nightmarish landscape, with streets full of monsters. Most importantly, the visual representations of Johnstown converged on the immigrant laborer as one of the most fearsome problems, while avoiding the culpability of industrialists like Carnegie and Frick who had brought them to the valley to work.

Image makers and reporters covering Johnstown’s disaster followed the example of their forebears in Chicago by creating monsters out of the city’s ethnic minorities. By 1889 such efforts evolved into a far more sophisticated and insidious depiction. Gone was the fable-like Mrs. O’Leary character. In her place stood an entire population of ghoulish characters united by their uncommon ethnicities, their foreignness, and their supposed greed. Conjured from the white nationalistic subconscious of a late-nineteenth century nation that feared an ever growing influx of immigrants, even as it was putting the finishing touches on a grand statue to liberty in the Hudson Bay, the monsters of Johnstown arrived on the scene to steal property and lives. The Johnstown Flood provided image makers with a disaster that fit perfectly into nativist and exceptionalist political readings, all couched in a series of critiques of urbanization and industrialism. And as the gothic imagination both produced and fueled the market for coverage of the
event, the real story of the disaster faded quickly in the face of these far more sellable half-truths and fallacies.

I. The Mill City and the Hunting Club

The Conemaugh Valley of the 1880s presented a wealth of jarring contradictions and segregated spaces that reveal the extent to which class and race shaped the region and, consequently, the disaster. Carnegie and his fellow Pittsburghers had staked out a well-appointed resort camp on a plot of land on property outside the city, in the form of the private South Fork Fishing and Hunting Club, on the shores of an artificial lake that had once supplied water for a canal system in the middle of the century. Upon purchasing the property for the camp in 1879, the club inherited a deteriorating 30-year-old earthen dam that had been neglected since its construction. It had been years since the damn had held back its originally intended water levels; breaks and decay had necessitated repairs that were never properly done. Instead, successive owners had rendered the dam weaker and weaker through shoddy patching and the removal of safety features; the draining system, for example—a pair of pipes that could be opened to release water when the lake exceeded the dam's intended capacity—had been taken out and sold for scrap by the owner who then sold out to the Pittsburgh steel men. Founders of the South Fork Fishing and Hunting Club chose to repair the dam cheaply and hurriedly, patching leaks with inferior materials, failing to replace the vital emergency drainage pipes, and filling the
dam with water far beyond it originally intended capacity.\textsuperscript{6} Analysis by engineers in later years concur that, following these actions, disaster was inevitable.\textsuperscript{7}

A severe storm visited the area beginning on the morning of May 31, 1889, rapidly adding to the water level behind the overtaxed dam. Despite the best efforts of the club’s engineer – who, along with a team of Italian laborers working at the camp, attempted to raise the level of the dam with mud and sand during the storm – Lake Conemaugh blew out the center of the saturated, loosely-packed barrier at around 3 p.m. and drained 15.5 million tons of water in 75-80 minutes.\textsuperscript{8} The water moved faster than the lines of communication and warning that existed in the valley at the time, and few below the lake knew what was coming before the massive surge was already upon them. The great wall of the flood, which reached heights of more than 75 feet at times, tore through one small valley town after another, collecting debris ranging from houses and the families inside to trees, locomotives, and a brick viaduct as it continued down the valley toward unsuspecting Johnstown. The floodwaters were finally stopped at the far end of the city, where an arched stone railroad bridge blocked the great wave of debris while water trickled through. Many more residents would die in the debris at the bridge, as the pile caught fire soon after it started to collect there. In total, an estimated 2,209

\textsuperscript{6} For a full description of the dam’s condition and the faulty series of repairs that led to the dam’s break, see McCullough’s \textit{The Johnstown Flood}, especially pgs. 55-56 and 72-76.

\textsuperscript{7} Using modern GIS measurements of the original contours of the reservoir, Kaktins, et al, discovered that the dam was constructed to safely hold 388 million cubic feet of water. On the day of the flood, it was stressed beyond its limit, holding back as much as 495 million cubic feet (Kaktins, et al, 337-8).

\textsuperscript{8} Ibid., 356-8.
people died in the flood, with many more suffering death via disease in the filthy town over the next few months.

Johnstown before the flood had witnessed the growing tide of immigration occurring often uncomfortably all around the country. As an industrial city full of low- and medium-skilled jobs in a growing economic sector – steel and coal – that in turn fed the growth of cities across the nation, Johnstown seemed the promised land for the thousands of European workers and their families who made their way to the city to fill new jobs in Carnegie’s rapidly expanding Cambria Iron Works. The faces, languages, and customs of the new arrivals were unfamiliar to native-born Americans. A 1911 report by the U.S. Immigration Commission stated that, “Prior to 1880 the iron and steel workers were exclusively of native stock or of races from Great Britain and northern Europe.” All of this would change over the following decade. The “new” immigrants – hailing from lands outside of previous immigration arteries like Germany, Norway, and the British Isles – began arriving early in the decade, and kept on coming. By 1930 at least 27 million immigrants had arrived from countries like Italy, the Ukraine, and Hungary. Eighty percent of these new arrivals made their permanent home in the northeastern United States; approximately 18 million settled in the industrial centers in New York, New Jersey, Pennsylvania, and parts of New England.

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11 Ibid., 53.
By one estimate, 80 percent of the laborers among this new wave were "unskilled,"\(^{12}\) hailing from rural, agricultural sectors, and gambling on the rapid growth of American industry to provide jobs. The gamble rarely failed to pay off, as cities like Chicago, New York, and Pittsburgh hosted mining, construction, and factory jobs for millions of eager arrivals.\(^{13}\) Most set sail for America based on either word-of-mouth characterizations of the burgeoning employment market in the United States – an informal but highly efficient network that also made new arrivals aware of enclaves of immigrants of similar background in each industrial city – or as a result of recruiting trips made by steel companies to previously untapped sources of immigrant labor.\(^{14}\)

The promises of employment passed around through this word-of-mouth network bore fruit as the United States transformed from an agricultural to an industrial nation. In 1880 the population of non-farm laborers topped the population of agricultural workers for the first time in the United States, 8,807,000 to 8,585,000. From then on the gap continued to grow; by the end of the decade, non-farm workers outnumbered agricultural laborers 13,380,000 to 9,938,000.\(^{15}\)

These great waves of new immigrants indicate an optimism on their part regarding new opportunities in America, but this optimism did not always translate into happiness and success. As historians Leonard Dinnerstein and David Reimers have written, “The immigrants came with high hopes, and although in some places they got on

\(^{12}\) Ibid., 57.

\(^{13}\) Perry, 10.

\(^{14}\) Ibid., 90.

\(^{15}\) Ibid., 18.
well, in general they were unprepared for the coolness with which so many Americans received them.” With nativist tensions running high, and with the arrival of millions of new immigrants bringing unfamiliar customs, religious practices, and languages, factories like the Cambria Iron Works were uniquely situated to serve as a stage for the construction and enforcement of deliberate ethnic hierarchical hiring practices. By 1890, the Pittsburgh-Johnstown region’s labor force was 53-percent foreign-born, up from 47 percent a decade before. Immigrants from southern and Eastern Europe were largely relegated to unskilled jobs in the factories, while native-born workers, along with some lucky immigrants from well established emigration points like Scotland and Germany, served as foremen, supervisors, and plant managers. As labor historian Joseph MacGarity Perry has written, “The later the arrival” of an immigrant group of specific national origin, “the lower the position in the job hierarchy.” Not surprisingly, then, “native labor usually dominated the management structure of a mill, receiving the highest wages and salaries, and accumulating the profits.”

Whether by choice or limited options – and almost universally it was the latter – new immigrants were placed in dangerous and low paying jobs that many of the “older immigrants and native born workers would not tolerate.” The unskilled jobs filled by immigrants from southern and eastern Europe were especially prone to volatile drops in

16 Dinnerstein and Reimers, 54.
17 Perry, 92-3.
18 Ibid., 97
19 Ibid., 103.
20 Dinnerstein and Reimers, 56.
wages. Lingering memories of the financial panic of 1873, and the resulting near-decade-long depression led businesses to routinely slash wages at the first signs of a jittery market.\footnote{John Higham, \textit{Strangers in the Land: Patterns of American Nativism, 1860-1925} (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 2002), 37.} The steady flow of new immigrants seeking employment, and the relatively little training necessary to place an able-bodied man in an unskilled position, meant that the new immigrants had little choice but to accept employment in jobs that offered little economic or physical security. Unsteady wage levels combined with a lack of advancement opportunities left many of the newer arrivals in a precarious position.

The managers of the mills often considered “new” immigrants more desirable than “old” immigrants. They were far less likely to dispute their pay,\footnote{Perry, 109.} and far more likely to be either uninterested or even hostile to unionization.\footnote{Ibid., 101.} Dinnerstein and Reimers quote the \textit{Pittsburgh Leader}, a labor organ that claimed immigrants from eastern Europe especially made “a better slave than the American.”\footnote{Dinnerstein and Reimers, 56.}

Aside from expressing outright racism – for only those of British and northern European descent were considered “white” during the Gilded Age – the attitudes toward new immigrants also appear to have arisen out of the fear that these new arrivals would take jobs away from able-bodied American workers. On their regular recruiting visits to Europe in the 1880s, steel companies furthered these fears by deceptively signing on new workers to serve as strikebreakers.\footnote{Perry, 90-1.} The fear of new immigrants in the 1880s ran high,
creating a gulf between new arrivals and native-born Americans that often played out in racist and vilifying ways. Culturally, immigrant groups were portrayed as pariahs and monsters; socially, they were segregated and isolated.

Johnstown typified this type of segregation in the late 1880s. The class and ethnic differences in the city were apparent everywhere on the landscape. Individual neighborhoods of Johnstown, along with the villages filling the valley between the city and the lake, were sharply divided along ethnic lines, each with their own churches and markets. The city and the valley were home to enclaves and neighborhoods of southern Germans, Hessians, Swedish, Welsh, Scottish, Cornish, Serbs, Croatians, Slovenes, Poles, Slovaks, Hungarians, and Ukrainians. Each site had its own official language of sorts, depending on the national origin of the residents. Working class residents filled the ethnic enclaves that surrounded the center of the city and lined the South Fork Creek and the Little Conemaugh River, the successive water routes that connected the city to the dam.

Typical of other growing industrial centers, the new immigrants of Johnstown sought the familiarity of neighbors who had recently arrived from the same country from which they had departed – both to establish connections, and to insulate themselves from the prejudices of the native born. According to Dinnerstein and Reimers, the fact that the new immigrants “spoke a foreign language when they arrived in America… placed an immediate stigma upon them.” While the ethnic enclaves provided safe harbor, they also stifled the ability of immigrants to gain the necessary communicative skills to more fully

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navigate their new home nation; living among compatriots meant that the immigrants “had even less reason to learn English quickly. Immigrant women felt particularly isolated because they rarely left the insulated community.”

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Life at the club

While some of the mills’ managerial class resided in and around the business district in the middle of Johnstown, far more called home the neighborhoods up the sides of the Allegheny Mountains that made up the picturesque walls around the city. A few were even members of the exclusive and secretive club that surrounded Lake Conemaugh, paying the membership fees that could reach $1,000 or more.

Still, club membership was far beyond the reach of most Johnstown residents. According to McCullough, ten dollars per week in the steel mills was considered the top of the scale for the working classes of the city. “Many of the millworkers lived in cheap, pine-board company houses along the riverbanks.” Far from a placid locale, the Conemaugh River contained all the odious run off that poured from the mills, factories, and butcher shops in town.28 With a population of steel workers and their families making up the bulk of Johnstown’s residents, the city and the club were together a living allegory for class division in industrial revolution-era America.

According to Johnstown historian Michael McGough, membership in the South Fork Fishing and Hunting Club was “restricted to influential men who were invited or ‘sponsored’ by members.” Members were required to purchase stock in the club for

27 Dinnerstein and Reimers, 63.

28 McCullough, 26.
prices as high as one thousand dollars, a figure that alone restricted membership only to the upper reaches of the economic hierarchy. Membership was not only selective, but came with an informal gag order; the public was apparently kept largely unaware of what life was like at the club. “Because of their desire for privacy while the Club existed, and because of the Club’s rapid demise after May 31, 1889, there is very little credible history of the lifestyle enjoyed” at Lake Conemaugh, McGough writes. Far enough from prying eyes in Pittsburgh, and nearly devoid of membership from the immediate region around the club, South Fork Fishing and Hunting Club members found it easy to enjoy their retreat with little observation.

The club members sought to project an aura of rusticity onto their club, but its opulence belied those efforts. The “cottages” where many of the residents stayed on their yearly sojourns were humble in name only; many stood as high as three stories, with wrap-around porches, numerous fireplaces, intricate decoration, and many of the other luxuries that the Pittsburgh families had supposedly exited the city to leave behind. Many of the cottages of the South Fork Fishing and Hunting Club were of a far costlier construction and appointment than any of the homes down the river in Johnstown.

Based on the few extant photographs of activity at the club, it is apparent that members and their families were dressed in only the fanciest clothing while staying on site. The images confirm that club members indulged in an aristocratic, leisurely lifestyle. Photographs taken by member Louis S. Clarke include group shots of unidentified members and guests relaxing in fine attire that clashes notably with the nature scenery

30 Ibid., 27-33.
around them. Images show members relaxing in cots, playing banjo, hiking, performing in costume pageants, and being served elaborate meals.\textsuperscript{31}

The flood brought this frivolity to an end. Following the disaster, as club members quickly and quietly left town and divested of any interests they had in the club, the ruined towns and city below began to deal with the aftermath. Newspaper reports of the flood’s damage confirm the acute class consciousness of the Johnstown’s residents; even the bodies of victims were sometimes afforded special care based on perceived status. For example, a \textit{New York Times} article published three days after the flood states that, “On the upper floor [of one damaged building] five bodies are lying unidentified. One of them, a woman of genteel birth, judging by her dress, is locked in one of the small rooms to prevent possible spoliation.”\textsuperscript{32} Even in death, the wealthy were kept apart and afforded a greater level of protection.

The striking class differences on the landscape were readily apparent to any resident, and though they played an important part in the destruction wrought by the flood, image makers largely turned away from this part of the story, instead turning to the macabre. Of course, by avoiding one politically-charged story, they were only wading into another.

Buried in the newspaper reports of the time were brief explanations of why the flood happened. “The cause of the frightful calamity which recently visited the Valley of the Conemaugh,” wrote an unnamed reporter in the June 15 edition of \textit{Frank Leslie’s Illustrated Newspaper}, “can be fixed without difficulty.” The author recounts the dam’s

\textsuperscript{31} Ibid, 48-67.

deteriorated state, and the repairs made by the club that only made the condition worse. He goes on: “While the wealthy gentlemen constituting the club were enjoying their summer outings in the hills above, observant men – some of them practical engineers – living in the valley below, predicted that an awful calamity would some day put an end to the dam and to the fishing-club’s existence.” Similar reports had appeared in newspapers around the country over the preceding week. Yet this story, and many others like it, immediately turn back to lurid tales, following a brief exploration of cause with a colorful celebration of effect. The perpetrators of the tragedy were discovered, reported, and then promptly swept aside and forgotten in favor of the more exciting and maudlin details. A hungry public was too busy consuming the latest tales of death and images of destruction, seeking adventure and fun rather than vengeance; in the end, no one associated with the dam’s collapse was ever prosecuted. While working class families suffered quietly the loss of cherished loved ones, and the popular press continued to publish stories of mad foreigners looting the dead, the South Fork Fishing and Hunting Club simply ceased to be, and its wealthy members quietly packed up and returned to Pittsburgh, otherwise free from personal penalty.

II. Drawing Danger, Real and Imagined

But even as Johnstown’s remaining residents had barely begun to understand the full aftermath of the flood, images of the destruction were spreading across the country. The first images to reach the public were drawings, found in newspapers, weekly magazines, and illustrated faux-history books issued within days of the disaster. As seen following the fire in Chicago in 1871, and with real news hard to come by, each of these
publications was filled with outlandish fictions and made up accounts, and the illustrations did their best to keep up. Suffering and outrage were played up as much as possible.

Nowhere is this eagerness to immediately and graphically capture the results of the flood depicted better than in the three weekly editions of *Frank Leslie's Illustrated Newspaper* published between June 8 and June 22. In a rare move, the June 8 edition featured the town’s name stamped over top of the masthead’s familiar depiction of the United States capitol building (illustration 3-2), effectively changing the paper’s name to *Frank Leslie's Illustrated Johnstown Newspaper*. While the dailies may have had a week’s head start, Leslie was apparently eager to recapture the title of primary news source for his paper. In a full-page cover drawing and inside, illustrators labored to capture the horrors of the flood. On the eighth page of the edition, four dramatic illustrations captured the crash of the waters and the death of Johnstown citizens (illustration 3-3).

The June 15 edition had removed the word “Johnstown” from its masthead, but featured expanded coverage of the flood. One quarter of its 16 pages were given over to illustrations, with as many pages more describing the events of the flood, real or imagined. Dramatic depictions of victims either dead (illustration 3-4) or swept up in the waters and soon to meet with death (illustrations 3-5 and 3-6) again fed the audience’s desire for graphic tragedy, while scenes of heroism (illustration 3-7) and panoramas of the aftermath (illustration 3-8) claimed their own space. The cover was perhaps the most eye-catching of all (see illustration 3-1), an image of survivors circulating through a field of open coffins in search of dead loved ones. On June 22, *Leslie's* chose the grim work of
pulling down ruined buildings (illustration 3-9) for its cover, and included a two-page
collage of general ruin and misery (illustration 3-10), before turning the focus of its
illustrations in the next edition to a major fire in Seattle that burned 32 blocks of that
town (illustration 3-11).

Newspaper headlines proclaimed “Johnstown Wiped out of Existence,”33 “The
City Becomes a Monstrous Cemetery,”34 and “Dismal Scenes Such as Dante Never
Conceived.”35 Others sought to cash in on the tragedy in related ways. For example, a
few days into its coverage, the Altoona, Pa., Morning Herald ran an advertisement for
“Mourning Goods,” including black dresses, “Nun’s Veiling,” and a “Camel Hair
Mourning Cloth” on the front page right next to its latest story about the flood. Typically,
each of these headlines would be paired with a thrilling illustration. In the June 9
Harrisburg Telegram, a weekly paper published in the state’s capital, a fanciful drawing
of a locomotive outrunning the floodwaters spanned four columns at the top of the first
edition put together after the flood (illustration 3-12). A week later, a general view of the
destruction again spread across two thirds of the newspaper’s front page (illustration 3-
13). The illustrations provide an interesting contrast; the former the product of an
illustrator’s imagination based on eyewitness accounts, the latter a woodcut based on a
photograph of the town. As is true throughout the record of disaster imagery, the further
image makers strayed from the photographic record, the greater the opportunities for
imbuing melodrama and excitement.

33 Somerset Herald, June 4, 1889.
34 Bedford Gazette Supplement, June 7, 1889.
35 Harrisburg Morning Telegram, June 9, 1889.
Perhaps most fanciful of all was a large lithograph produced by Kurtz and Allison (illustration 3-14), an over-the-top rendering of the scene at the stone railroad bridge where many Johnstown victims perished. Within the frame are seen graphic depictions of countless tragedies—a dead mother clutching her lifeless baby, a man rescuing the corpse of his beloved from the water, families torn apart, houses dashed against the unrelenting bridge. Such lithographs most often hung in family dining rooms and at fine bars and restaurants. Tragic, melancholy images like these are the types of images the public craved. The mood here is titillation, not empathy.

Their work’s prominence shaped much of the post-disaster narrative. Illustrators and lithographers created art that spread across the country through books, newspapers, and lithographs, highlighting the human suffering of the flood, real and fictitious. Within these drawings readers were witness to a truly devastated population, artistic renderings matched in their tragedy and gruesomeness by the sensational tones of the words they accompanied. Such drawings showed up in “history” books published in the weeks after the disaster (see examples in illustration 3-15).

In examining both the text and the illustrations inside, it is apparent that such books were published for an audience little concerned with blame for the flood; publishers worked to satisfy a reading public eager for grisly stories and pictures. The South Fork Fishing and Hunting Club received universally minor mention and even lesser blame in this genre of books. In The Story of Johnstown, for example, published by flood survivor J.J. McLaurin in early 1890 (illustration 3-16), poet Isaac G. Reed provides a vivid window into the almost bloodthirsty fascination with which many viewers approached the flood. Reed’s depiction of the flood deems it both brutal and needless:
Many thousand human lives-
Butchered husbands, slaughtered wives,
Mangled daughters, bleeding sons,
Hosts of martyred little ones
(Worse than Herod’s awful crime)
Sent to Heaven before their time;
Lovers burnt and sweethearts drowned,
Darlings lost but never found!

All the horrors that Hell could wish,
Such was the price that was paid for – fish!

A dam which vomited a flood
Of water turning into blood;
A deafening, rumbling, groaning roar
That ne’er was heard on earth before;
A maddening whirl, a leap, a dash-
And then a crush – and then a crash-
A wave that carried off a town-
A blow that knocked a city down.

All the horrors that Hell could wish,
Such was the price that was paid for – fish!

An hour of flood, a night of flame,
A week of woe without a name-
A week when sleep, with hope, had fled,
While misery hunted for its dead;
A week of corpses by the mile,
One long, long week, without one smile,
A week whose tale no tongue can tell,
A week without a parallel!

All the horrors that Hell could wish,
Such was the price that was paid for – fish!

But despite Reed’s allusion to the flood’s cause, the club members and their fish are no
more than a motif in the service of the far more exciting tales of “Mangled daughters”
and “bleeding sons.” Evidence for this basic dismissal of the club’s responsibility is
apparent throughout the book; McLaurin’s tome, with 380 pages of extensively illustrated
text, devoted only one 9-page chapter to the dam. Within that small section, only one
paragraph explicitly mentions the club’s negligence among the potential causes of the
dam break. William Fletcher Johnson’s 1889 *History of the Johnstown Flood* similarly
devotes only a few perfunctory words to the dam’s state among its 459 pages, while
James Herbert Walker’s 504-page *The Johnstown Horror!!!*, published the same year,
contained not one single remark on the topic.

Instead, the drawings in McLaurin’s book illustrate tales of survivors finding
bodies all over the landscape (illustrations 3-17 and 3-18), and victims begging for
release from the wreckage (illustration 3-19). The images and poems demanded a
visceral, instinctive response from the viewers; there was little effort made to incite
within the reader anything more than a cursory consideration of larger issues of social
meaning. The flood was being packaged as a horror tale, rather than a call to action or
reexamination; the perpetrators were ignored, while the victims were recast as either
tragic heroes and heroines, or ghouls. In the pages of books and newspapers, the roles
played by such club members and Johnstown residents seem to bear little resemblance to
the complicated reality in which they actually lived.

*Immigrants recast as monsters*

Immigrants took the place of club members as the flood’s monsters. In all of the
many history books and newspaper accounts produced, stories of villainy centered on
those outside the mainstream. Accounts featuring largely poor, foreign-born workers as
the villains of the flood are prevalent, despite that same population’s true status as
greatest victim of the disaster. The industrial city had required their presence and now, it
seemed, unleashed its full fury on the already suffering native population of Johnstown.
Three days after the flood, the *New York Times* was already broadcasting horror stories of fiends among the wreckage, taking special care to assign each monster a race.

[J]ewelry,... money and ornaments on the bodies have been the causes of fearful crimes by men devoid of honesty or the sense of shame. Digging in the ruins for whatever of value might come to their hands, Hungarians and negroes, finding men or women with finger rings or earrings, have not hesitated to mutilate the bodies to get the valuables. They have ripped the clothing of the dead to pieces to procure money in their pockets. They grew bold in their greed and they drew attention and bullets on themselves.  

Due to their especially large presence among Johnstown residents, Hungarian immigrants became the primary target in the written accounts of the villainy inspired by the flood. In *The Johnstown Horror!!!*, Walker reprints a letter written by “An eyewitness from Pittsburgh”:

A number of Hungarians collected about a number of bodies at Cambria which had been washed up...The ghastly spectacle presented by the distorted features of those who had lost their lives during the flood had no influence upon the ghouls, who acted more like wild beasts than human beings. They took every article from the clothing on the dead bodies, not leaving anything of value or anything that would serve to identify the remains.

After the miscreants had removed all their plunder to dry ground a dispute arose over a division of the spoils. A pitched battle followed and for a time the situation was alarming. Knives and clubs were used freely. As a result several of the combatants were seriously wounded and left on the ground, their fellow countrymen not making any attempt to remove them from the field of strife.  

Another account tells of a group of Hungarians scouring for loot, including one who cut off the finger of a dead woman to steal her ring. Chased by local farmers, “the inhuman monster whose atrocious act has been described,” along with three of his co-

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37 Walker, 55-6.
conspirators, were forced into the raging floodwaters to drown.\footnote{Ibid., 58.} Another band of Hungarians were found “in the act of cutting pieces from ears and fingers from hands of the bodies of two dead women.” Johnson’s \textit{History of the Johnstown Flood} recounts similar tales. Searching another purported robber, a posse found “a bloody finger of an infant, encircled with two tiny gold rings.” According to the story, the entire party of bandits was hung from the surrounding trees immediately, a case of “justifiable homicide” in the estimation of the author.\footnote{Johnson, 241.} “The Hungarians are the worst,” wrote yet another correspondent in Walker’s book. “They seem to operate in regular organized bands. In Cambria City this morning they entered a house, drove out the occupants at the point of revolvers and took possessions. They can constantly be seen carrying large quantities of plunder in the hills.”\footnote{Walker, 59.}

Illustrators worked to personify these monstrous, foreign caricatures and highlight their grotesqueness, drawing frightful comic strip ghouls in the same frame as handsome, native-born Americans. For instance, the June 15 edition of \textit{Leslie’s} illustrates its tales of ethnic henchmen with the image shown in illustration 3-20, titled “Arrest of Plunderers of the Dead.” The contrast between the gallant-looking, square-jawed American soldiers and the hideously deformed criminal is as striking as it is cartoonish. Walker uses the same illustration in his book, but has altered the caption to render the figure’s ethnicity — and social distance from the soldiers — unmistakable: “Soldiers Guarding a Hungarian Thief” (illustration 3-21). Walker’s book also includes illustrations celebrating the lynching and
forced drowning of thieves whose grotesque features and oversized noses mark them as
decidedly foreign, in contrast with the vigilante group restoring justice through violence
(illustration 3-22).

While they bore the brunt, however, stories of atrocities were not confined to
Hungarians, instead covering the range of largely eastern European ethnicities previously
to be found in the steel mills of Johnstown. One correspondent in Johnson's book writes
that

[Incoming trains from Pittsburgh brought hundreds of toughs, who joined with
the Slavs and Bohemians in rifling the bodies, stealing furniture, insulting women,
and endeavoring to assume control of any rescuing parties that tried to seek the
bodies under the bushes and limbs of trees.... They became beastly drunk after a
time and were seen lying around in a stupor.][41]

MCLaurin's book includes a roster of nationalities and races taking advantage of
the dead, only to be discovered and dispatched by noble locals. "A reputable resident of
Conemaugh Borough actually saw a party of Italians drag a female body from the ruins
and outrage the inanimate form!... Another was detected on Sunday... in the attempt to
assault a young girl whom he had pulled half-dead from under a lot of boards." Many of
those "reputable residents" are credited with doling out punishment to villains like the
one just described. The necrophile "was taken to the woods by several incensed men,
who strung him to a tree until his worthless life ended, then cut down the carcass and
chucked it into a mudhole." Further on, "A negro pilfering a trunk was shot at and
wounded in the arm by an indignant bystander." Returning to a familiar ethnicity,
McLaurin writes of a Hungarian who, found "plundering corpses lying along the shore...

[41] Johnson, 203.
was forced at the muzzle of a Winchester rifle, in the hands of a prominent citizen of Johnstown, to disgorge his booty and wade into the river. He could not stem the current and was soon dispatched to Hades. \(^{42}\) None of the vigilantes are ethnically labeled; it is taken as a given by both author and reader that they are white locals. The distinction McLaurin makes between “reputable residents” and “citizen of Johnstown,” and Hungarian, black, and Italian monsters surely speaks far more to the impossibility of foreign residents being considered American or equal by the author or his audience, than it does to moral revulsion toward the criminal acts.

In an illustration from McLaurin’s book, another grotesque – this time a woman – broke the decorum seen among the respectable residents, running and screaming through the rubble. Her misshapen face and lack of dignified suffering clearly mark her as a grieving member of the immigrant classes (illustration 3-23). And as often happened during reportage of the Chicago fire, her loss of sanity – and the supposedly criminal actions of other similarly foreign people in Johnstown – marks her as the perfect counterpoint to the white, native-born sufferers who are repeatedly shown living and dying with dignity.

In a rare instance of gallant action by a non-white Johnstonian chronicled in these books, McLaurin kept racial distinctions clear. The author relates the story of George Skinner, “a colored man,” who saved young Gertie Quinn from the waters as she sailed by on debris. In assessing Skinner’s heroism, McLaurin noted that “George has a black

\(^{42}\) McLaurin, 114.
skin, but his soul is white, and his heart is in the exactly the right place.\textsuperscript{43} McLaurin grants “white” status to Skinner as if re-racing him were an award.

But publishers of illustrated texts like McLaurin’s, Johnson’s, and the numerous reporters covering Johnstown were far more eager to simply cast all non-native and non-white people in the area of the flood as criminals and perverts, littering their books and stories with tales of such monsters being summarily punished by more respectable folk. Such stories were simply false, the product of a public seeking a monster to abhor. In analyzing the press coverage following the flood, Kathy Merlock Jackson examined behind-the-scenes communications between writers and newspaper editors exposing the fallacy of such reports, revealing them as simply irresponsible hearsay and speculation among outsiders. Yet, few corrections were ever printed, and the stories continued to be published uncontested in books and newspapers for months afterwards; each villain had an ethnicity. Each sufferer assumed to be American and lily white. While today’s observer certainly doesn’t need Jackson’s hard evidence to see the fallacy in these stories, prevalent attitudes of the time make it very likely that nineteenth century readers mostly bought into the lurid tales, or at least purchased them in droves.

\textbf{III. Photographing Nightmare Landscapes}

The wealth of illustrations and stories of peril and danger spread quickly, but other images were not far behind. Photographs of the flood told a less melodramatic but equally unreliable and false story. And as both the instant history books and the photographs were often sold by the same people, it is likely that many of the same

\textsuperscript{43} Ibid., 172.
customers collected both. Photographic images spread throughout the nation via a number of means, but chiefly in the forms of numbered series of commemorative images. Collectors could order individual images from catalogues, or buy the entire set outright. Advertisements in newspapers, displays in photography shops and at book sellers, general stores, department stores, photography studios (illustration 3-24), and even at least one optician’s office (illustration 3-25).

Photographers far outpaced their fellow image makers in the illustration field in terms of volume produced. Advertisements for photographic portrayals of the ruined city began to appear in newspapers within days of the disaster itself right alongside similar ads for books. The Pittsburgh Dispatch, for example, was filled with calls to interested customers who sought a true view of the destruction. On June 14, the Pittsburgh firm of Joseph Eichbaum & Co. advertised that they had in their shop “Johnstown Photographs, Taken Saturday, June 1, showing [the] flood at height.”44 Two days later, Kaufmann’s department store was excitedly offering “Free! Free! Photos of the Flood!” in the form of “A complete set of large, finely finished photographs” to customers who spent at least five dollars in their store.45 A month after the flood, photographs of the disaster were so prevalent that advertisements appeared touting the financial windfall due any agent willing to sell views of the destruction: “Agents are making $20 a Day Selling Johnstown flood photographs… ‘They sell like hot cakes.’”46 (illustration 3-26).

44 Pittsburgh Dispatch, June 12, 1889, 5.
45 Pittsburgh Dispatch, June 14, 1889, 2.
46 Pittsburgh Dispatch, June 29, 1889, Section 2, 9.
According to another story in the *Dispatch* on June 9, interest in the photographs spread far beyond the Johnstown region. The newspaper published a letter from the French newspaper *Le Monde Illustre* requesting views be sent as quickly as possible:

DEAR SIR — Can you provide me with some photographs of Johnstown and the present horrible disaster? They would be for our grand illustrated paper, *Le Monde Illustre*, Paris. Their publication would call the attention of the French public to the pressing needs of so many fellow-men and swell any subscription already started in Paris. I am, my dear sir, yours very truly, A. VOSSIER.47

By the time photographers began selling depictions of the flood, a system had developed among publishers whereby one photographic item attempted to sell the next. To wit, photography publishers built up series of images to sell to the public. On the back of each image in the series would be listed the titles of all the other images in the series (see, for example, illustrations 3-27 and 3-28). By hooking a customer with just one good image, photographers and publishers sent them home with a listing of all the other available, similar images, along with instructions for pricing and ordering individual pieces, or the rest of the set.

The descriptions included on the back were often far more banal than the images they described, trusting that the imagination of the customer could fill in the blanks with horrific details. R.A. Bonnine, a photographer from Altoona, Penn., included a list of sixty-four flood images on the back of his mats. The titles largely catalogued nothing more than the locale within the frame ("Trestle, Washout and Full Curve at Buttermilk Falls, Looking West," "Stone Bridge Debris partly cleaned out"), seemingly assuming that the interested customer would be familiar enough with the lurid details that they

47 Pittsburg *Dispatch*, June 09, 1889, section 2, p. 11.
could imagine the image they would be ordering. The Philadelphia photography firm of
Rothengatter & Dillon was similarly prosaic in its listings, offering for sale images with
such titles as “General View from the Mountain, below the Bridge,” and “View of the
Gorge and Ruined City from the P.R.R. [Pennsylvania Railroad] Bridge.” Photography
publishers worked to make a product that appealed to as many people as possible, as
demonstrated by the back of one unattributed stereoscopic image in the archives of the
Johnstown Area Heritage Association, which includes the image’s title, “The Johnstown
Calamity – General View of the Wrecked City, U.S.A.,” in six different languages,
including French, German, Spanish, and Russian.

In these photographs, the depictions of the ruined city ranged from site of
adventure and exploration (illustration 3-29), to romantic ancient ruin (illustration 3-30);
from awe at the destructive power of the water (illustrations 3-31 and 3-32), to the
impotent forces sent to Johnstown with the hopeless task of restoring order (illustration 3-
33). At first look, the difference between the drawings previously discussed, and the
photographs now examined, is striking. While the illustrators sought to show death as a
gruesome spectacle, photographers captured scenes that were significant, in part, because
of the lack of bodies. Yet, I would argue that the stories being told in both genres are
complementary; those who purchased Walker’s book likely hoped to have copies of
photographs as well – not as an escape from the melodrama, but instead to heighten the
sense of realism, and thereby increase the thrill of that same melodrama.

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48 Johnstown Area Heritage Association, Beal Collection, image number “Beale 56.”

49 Ibid., “Beale 57.”
To provide a realistic setting for the fears that the well-known stories of death and violence inspired, the photographers catalogued every conceivable angle of the ruined built environment. The images captured both ruined buildings and oddities that would immediately cast the scene in an uncomfortable, otherworldly light. In images like those found in illustrations 3-34 through 3-39, photographers sought to capture general views of the mayhem, showing ruined streetscapes, wrecked buildings, and piles of unidentifiable debris. Other images captured surreal juxtapositions; a chaise lounge swept into an open field (illustration 3-40), a vault sitting upright in a pile of rubble (illustration 3-41), and larger objects like a boxcar and a house tossed like toys onto their sides (illustrations 3-42 and 3-43). Photographers even shot images of the many tourist groups that descended on the city in the weeks after the disaster (illustrations 3-44 and 3-45).

To further entice thrill-seeking buyers, photographers would regularly overstate the already shocking number of dead, 2,209, associated with the disaster. One stereographic image, published by E.E. Murray and Company, stated that “12,000 LIVES [were] Lost” (illustration 3-46). Another somewhat more rational publisher, the Johnstown Developing Company, states on the back of a photo of the broken dam that “nearly three thousand lives... were lost” (illustration 3-47). Importantly, though, those lives lost are rarely depicted in the photographs themselves. Viewing the wealth of photographs produced in the wake of the flood, it is clear to see that what differed most from the drawings was the near complete lack of bodies of victims; in an extensive search of the photographic record, I have come across only two images that appear to show actual deceased victims, though at least a few photographers appear to have employed willing assistants to stand in for the dead.

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Instead of the gruesomeness depicted in the drawings, the photographers showed some restraint by allowing the broken and crushed houses of the victims to stand as surrogates for the victims themselves. Certainly, bodies would still have been everywhere to see in Johnstown by the time photographers arrived in the first days of June; newspaper reports of the time state as much. On June 11, for example, long after photographers had arrived, a headline in the Pittsburgh Dispatch reports the seemingly routine discovery the day before of “Thirty-Five More Unfortunates” among the ruins. Yet, while photographers avoided depictions of the bodies, there nevertheless seemed to be an eagerness for descriptions of the victims that far surpasses 21st century standards of decency. The same Dispatch article records that

Those taken out of the water were in a much better condition than those found among the debris. The latter were not only horribly bloated and distorted in feature, but decomposition had set in, and the stench arising therefrom was so unbearable that the men at the various morgues found it a disagreeable duty to wash them.... The bodies now are almost beyond recognition. Many are black as negroes, and where they are bruised the faces are sunken into a jellied mass.

Therefore, it is most likely that an economic calculus took place in the minds of those behind the camera – both an understandable, natural desire to show some respect to the dead, and an assumption that customers would not be interested in such graphic views, even while they clamored for explicit descriptions like the one above. The gulf of perceived veracity between drawing and photography made ruined bodies desirable in one medium, unacceptable in the other. Two versions of morgue scenes exemplify the differences. In The Johnstown Horror the unnamed illustrator depicts a series of bodies lined up in the morgue (illustration 3-48), and what can only be described as a pile of dead infants cast on the floor (illustration 3-49). Typical photographs like those shown in
illustrations 3-50 and 3-51, meanwhile, demonstrate that photographers either photographed closed caskets outside of the morgue, or similar caskets elsewhere in the city to stand in for the dead themselves. The viewers of visual documentation of the disaster did not need to be shown photographs of victims' bodies to know they were there. Photographs of real corpses may well have stripped the fun and thrill out of the venture by humanizing the victims – quite contrary to the goal of most of the image makers.

The lack of a body in photographs is especially important to subsequent generations of viewers because photographs of the disaster have become the primary way through which we visually recall the event. Illustrations have not had the same staying power, and do not typically stand in to visually explain history as they were allowed to do during the nineteenth century. Instead, readers of modern histories of such disasters will almost always be presented with photographs of the ruins, treated as documents with unquestionable veracity. Still, in contrast to the macabre tales told and depicted in illustrated newspapers and books, the photographs sought to capture for contemporary audiences the potential in the mechanized city for overwhelming, life changing disaster with little notice. As with Chicago, the industrial city here had become the ultimate monster, and photographers brought their cameras to produce views of that dangerous landscape for consumers to purchase and marvel at. At the same time, viewers doubtless took some pleasure in seeing the machines themselves, along with the built environment of the increasing unnatural industrial city, in ruins. The images of Johnstown show not only a white, native population in danger, but also an entire industrial landscape punished.
Conclusion

The macabre fascination and overstatement of death tolls lasted long after official totals had been determined and the city had been rebuilt. For example, the postcard featured in illustration 3-44, published at least 18 years after the disaster, states that "over 3000" died in the flood. Books like those cited above were top sellers well into the next decade. Regardless of the specific subjects within the frame, those who sought to profit off of the American fascination with the flood all had a shared goal in mind, which was to present the flood’s aftermath in a way that replaced substance and critical analysis of the tragedy with sensual pleasure. Photographers, illustrators, newspaper publishers, book printers, and even makeshift tour guides saw a potential for profit, reality be damned. Trains and other carriers sold tickets to Johnstown that allowed the especially curious to witness the aftermath themselves, and perhaps even have a picnic. Locals who survived the carnage sold visitors souvenirs from among the rubble, and bottles full of flood water became a hot item.

Interest in the flood lasted long after the city itself was rebuilt. For decades after, world’s fairs would include reenactments of the flood in specially-designed theaters. Far from mere illustrations, then, image makers and their ilk produced versions of the flood that would sell, and more importantly for this analysis, would define the understanding of

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50 Though the card itself does not include a copyright date, its approximate age can be determined by the "divided back" of the card, as seen in illustration 3-52. The United States Postal Service did not allow backs of cards to be divided – for the purpose of writing a message on the left, and an address on the right – until 1907.

the Johnstown flood across the country, and the emotions tied up in recalling its devastating effects.
Chapter 4:

"The Dreadful Burden of the Dead": Death, Life, and Race after the Galveston Hurricane of 1900.¹

"To add to the horror of the situation, human hyenas moved stealthily among the dead, robbing those who were powerless to resist."

-Paul Lester, *The Great Galveston Disaster*²

Panicked children cling to the tumbling walls of their homes as splintered boards impale their neighbors. Wave after rushing wave hurls capsized fishing boats, shattered masts, untethered barrels, and the odd horse at the distressed town of Galveston, Texas, erasing the distinction between shore and churning ocean. Bodies are everywhere; dogs, mules, cows, children and adults, black and white— all the corpses mixing with the detritus of the wrecked city, while those who still cling to life plead to the heavens for mercy. Upraised arms and anguished faces seemingly cannot be heard over the roar of destruction everywhere around them.

Somehow, and without exception, the rushing waters have torn the shirts from every adult woman. The scene (figure 4-1) is typical of the melodramatic images produced by printing house Kurtz & Allison. The print, "Galveston’s Awful Calamity— Gulf Tidal Wave," is filled with cartoonishly gruesome and titillating detail. And while the destruction and wreckage wrought by Galveston’s September 8, 1900 hurricane are

¹ Quote from Murat Halstead, *Galveston: The Horrors of a Stricken City* (Chicago: American Publishers’ Association, 1900), 64.

² Paul Lester, *The Great Galveston Disaster* ([Unknown place of publication]: Horace C. Fry, 1900), 224.
visible even at a glance, closer examination rewards the viewer with a wealth of small, tragic tableaus sprinkled throughout the lithograph. Here a family marooned on the roof of a floating home pull a nude victim from the water as splintered boards threaten to impale him. There a baby clings desperately to his dead mother’s bare breast as the water sweeps them out of the frame.

The actual hurricane caricatured therein was an instant national sensation. The first signs of distress were an eerie silence from the town as the massive, region-wide storm raged; the telegraph lines, strung across bridges from Galveston Island to the mainland, had gone quiet, and it would be at least a day before a boat from the city reached the mainland to recount the extent of the disaster. As word began to trickle out on the 9th, the New York Times reported that the loss of life could reach 2,600; by the following day, excitement and the wealth of facts and fantastical hearsay emerging from the Gulf coast led the paper to adjusted that figure up to 10,000. The story had captured the nation’s attention due to the sheer deadly size of the disaster. Some newspapers reported that the entire city was simply gone.

Once official estimates were finally in and all missing had been either accounted for or written off, to hurricane was estimated to have taken the lives of about 6,000 residents. It also laid waste to a prosperous shipping city — the largest cotton port in the

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4 “Number of Dead May Reach 10,000,” New York Times (New York) Sept. 11, 1900. The Times gave over its first three entire pages to the disaster on the 11th.
United States, and a key shipping point for many other exports — strategically located on the shore of the Gulf of Mexico.

With the economic benefit of their geographic location, however, came the ever-present fear of harsh weather. The gulf has always posed a threat to Galveston Island. In 1900, prior to efforts over the next decade to raise the island’s height, the average elevation on the 28-mile-long sandbar upon which Galveston stood was 4.5 feet above sea level. Broadway, the main route through the city, sat at the island’s peak — a mere 8.5 feet above the shoreline a few blocks away. Despite this precarious position, the city’s greatest previous disaster would soon seem paltry to early 20th century residents in hindsight - on October 3, 1867, a hurricane submerged much of the city, raising water levels a foot or two up into the first floors of shops and houses. No one died during that previous calamity.

The 1900 federal census put Galveston’s population at 37,789 people. As a major port, the city featured a relatively diverse population; 7,328 of those residents were born outside of the United States, another 8,300 were African American, and the rest were largely native-born white. According to historian Susan Hardwick, the city was a major entry point for immigrants seeking work in Texas and beyond; the 1899-1900 Galveston city directory included listings for foreign consulates “representing fifteen nations: Belgium, Costa Rica, Denmark, Germany, Great Britain, Italy, Japan, Mexico,


6 Ibid., 89.

7 Ibid., 66.
Netherlands, Norway, Russia, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland, and Venezuela. Their native-born neighbors sought to maintain a segregated city, and most of those immigrants could only find cheap housing in the especially endangered sections of the low, flat city. On the day of the 1900 storm, many of the residents who may have taken advantage of the services of these consulates were residing in the areas hit hardest by the storm.

Water levels had already reached the height of that 1867 calamity in the first few hours of the 1900 storm. It was apparent, quickly, that Galveston was in the midst of a cataclysmic and deadly storm, which built in intensity at a rate never before seen in the city. The deluge just continued to rise; by 3:30 that afternoon, water covered every part of the city. An hour and a half later, the tide was nine feet above normal; waves of 15 feet and higher battered the unprotected town. Shops, homes, utilities and people were swallowed up by the storm at an incredible rate; by the time the winds subsided, many neighborhoods of the once impressive port town had been reduced to nearly featureless wastelands.

This chapter will explore the troubling visual record created in the wake of Galveston's ruin. With a dearth of structures left even partially standing, image makers instead found a landscape of overwhelming death and misery. The first section of this chapter will examine the varying attempts made by photographers to represent the loss in Galveston, part of a larger debate over the depiction of the human body. While a few photographers avoided images of the dead as in representations of previous urban

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9Mason, 105.

10Hardwick, 94.
calamities, other image makers put corpses at center stage, resulting in perhaps the most shocking and gruesome visual archive of any American disaster before or since. As this chapter will discuss, such images were everywhere, prevalent especially in collectible series of photos, and in faux history books sold across the country.

More than in any other disaster, the visual documentation of the Galveston hurricane is revealing of a number of ugly truths that the storm laid bare. The carnage wrought upon human bodies was likely as shocking to witnesses of the time as it is to 21st century viewers. But the ways in which living human bodies are depicted – and sometimes absented – in the frame is also revealing when examined today, demonstrating a Jim Crow-era culture of racial oppression and segregation that was unremarked upon by the documentarists who recorded the storm’s aftermath. To examine these apparently routine breaches of basic human rights, the rest of the chapter will explore the ways in which image makers treated the bodies of the non-white, non-native population, with a particular focus on the cruel treatment of Galveston’s African American community, as captured extensively in the visual archive. That these inequalities are so easily read in the images today is all the more troubling considering how natural they appeared to be to the image makers and reporters covering the aftermath in 1900.

The second section will examine the image makers’ exploration ruined communal sites in Galveston, which focused on the destruction of native white social, religious, and educational institutions while ignoring parallel losses among other communities in the city. Having highlighted the prominence and importance only of white cultural institutions, image makers then turned to the effort to restore order and begin removing the human wreckage from the city. In section three, this chapter will look first at the all-
too-familiar conjured racialized monsters among the ruins, before turning to a newly prominent strain in the imagery, the violent and dehumanizing treatment of minority residents in the cleanup process, in section four. In images and stories of corpse collection and disposal, the forced conscription of non-white residents in the worst of these jobs is both ever-present, and casually accepted as natural among author and photographer.

The visual record of Galveston’s hurricane reveals two unfortunate truths: the storm was the most deadly in American history, and it provided surviving white residents the opportunity to further the city’s violent racial hierarchy. Thanks to the dehumanizing effects of the false monster stories, it only seemed fitting to viewers of the time that these supposedly uncivilized ghouls be forced to take on the most horrifying tasks in the storm’s wake. The real people behind the caricatures, however, were victimized twofold – suffering even greater losses during the storm, and then reduced to virtual slave status in its aftermath.

I. Struggling with the depiction of bodies

Viewing the wreckage upon her arrival a few days after the hurricane, Clara Barton stated that “No description could adequately serve its purpose.” Barton’s papers at the Library of Congress speak to the horror she witnessed; when the personal files of the founder of the American Red Cross were transferred to the library’s collections, they included numerous photographs of the devastation in Galveston, visually capturing what words could not, in her mind, describe. At 79 years old, Barton’s own zeal for assisting

\[1\] Quoted in Mason, 226.
the disaster stricken continued unabated. And as the papers in the Library of Congress’s collections demonstrate, she had also amassed a 44-image collection of photographs, only a few of which could realistically be read as visual records of the Red Cross’s relief efforts. It would seem that Barton, too, was a collector.

Even more tellingly, Barton enlisted the help of photographer W.A. Green to press her fundraising efforts, aligning the need to raise recovery money directly with the well-known desire among the public to amass collections of images. Among her collection of images are 42 roughly square photographs, mounted on identical five-inch square mats. Many of them are stamped with Green’s name and the series number for the photograph.

More interestingly, though, is the evidence of their use as fundraising tools. On the back of a number of the cards (for example, figure 4-2), printed rather than stamped, appears the following message:

Galveston, Texas, October 7, 1900.

APPEAL FOR THE HOMELESS OF GALVESTON.

Does the evidence here portrayed bring to you a thought of the distressing need of Galveston’s homeless survivors? Do you not feel that it is your duty to contribute your portion to the worthy work of procuring shelter and household goods for those who are now without shelter? Do you realize that a small sum from each sympathizer will aggregate an amount sufficient to meet this great and pressing need? All money should be remitted to

MISS CLARA BARTON, President,

American National Red Cross, Galveston, Texas. 12

12 This appeal appears on the reverse of only five of the cards in Barton’s papers, but as Figure 4-2 demonstrates, Green was selling them individually. It is not entirely clear, then, exactly how Barton’s message was transmitted to the viewing public. The images in her collection could be early prints, while the matting containing her plea came later. Or,
Clearly, Barton recognized such images as a key means of communication with a public fascinated by the latest disaster. With a little prodding, perhaps they could be convinced to contribute to the city’s relief fund, as well.

Green’s series includes a host of images covering the carnage wrought upon the built environment of Galveston. These photographs catalogue the kind of scenes of destruction now common in the wake of disaster: wooden sidewalks and yards torn up and scattered across a road (Figure 4-3), city hall surrounded by a field of debris (Figure 4-4), train cars knocked from their tracks and toppled (Figure 4-5), and residents wearily making their way through the storm ravaged city (Figures 4-6 and 4-7). What emerges from these pedestrian views is a catalogue of usual scenes – the familiar world made unfamiliar by catastrophe.

But Green was not satisfied with shooting only the typical scenery photographed in the days after past disasters. In one ominous photo (Figure 4-8), the viewer sees an unidentified object floating in the midst of an open sea. Could this be a body? While, as previously covered, most photographers shied away from depicting the bodies of real victims, Green strayed far from this unofficial rule. In fact, alongside Green’s pedestrian images are some of the most disturbing ever produced for general sale in the wake of an urban disaster. Far more than any photographer during previous disasters, Green had no qualms about photographing the actual dead. The photographs in Barton’s collection show many of the views he took of the dead; roughly half of the images include at least one (often more) body or body part in the frame.

perhaps the series began as a single set – with Barton’s plea making its way to every collector – but was eventually broken up and sold in individual pieces once desire for an entire set had waned.
Figure 4-9 depicts a gruesome and tragically common scene among the ruins of Galveston, the construction of a cremation pile on the beach. Seen in the shot are a few men piling wooden debris atop and around the body of at least one victim. On the back of the image, Green has stamped “Beach & 19th St. Where, over 100 bodies was creamated [sic].” Another shot (Figure 4-10) shows workers loading a wagon with corpses. The stamped caption on the back attests to the regularity of such a scene in the storm’s aftermath: “On Church, St-LoadIng 73 wagon loads of storm victims buried at SeA, on SEPT-10 1900 [sic].” Though Green’s distance from the cart lends some anonymity to the corpses, he has nevertheless shot a scene that, in disasters past, would have never been considered for distribution. Other images included captions like “At dawn sept-9 1900, dead could be seen at every Turn [sic].”

Green’s primary interest, in fact, appears to have been the victims rather than the ruins. In numerous images he captures the piles of corpses as they are being gathered. In figure 4-11, five men stand inspecting a pile of corpses atop what appears to be a flatbed railway car or barge. The features of the dead are distinct – ears, noses and mouths discernable, along with limbs and torsos. Such graphic detail is rarely seen in publicly disseminated pictures of the dead. One could perhaps liken them to images of Nazi concentration camps that emerged at the end of the Second World War, though the graphic nature of holocaust images served an overtly political purpose – that is, to demonstrate the horrors of which humankind is capable when left to its own most evil desires. Galveston, of course, was no manmade holocaust, though arguments have convincingly been made that place the blame for the death toll on the unwillingness of

13 Green was not a terribly careful speller or typesetter.
locals to acknowledge their precarious position next to the sea and provide some protection for the city.

Green’s purpose — and his seemingly unfettered access — remain something of a mystery. From piles of corpses like those cited above, to images of single victims among the ruins (figures 4-12 and 4-13), Green photographed the victims from close range doing little to shield the viewer from gruesome, vivid details. By the time the viewer arrives at an image of three men tending to a cremation pile on Galveston Beach (figure 4-14), Green’s lateness to the event — only capturing unidentifiable ash, debris, and smoke — makes for an almost placid scene.

But showing up late to the pyre wasn’t always a hindrance to Green’s quest for a graphic record. Perhaps most gruesome of all of his photographs is an image Green produced of the remains of partially cremated bodies on the beach. In “Near bay bridge, 30 days after the storm, Creameating [sic] the DEAD,” Green captures a shocking tableau (Figure 4-15). In a pile along a desolate stretch of beach can be plainly seen smashed ribs, two partial skulls, vertebrae, and numerous other unidentifiable pieces of bone. More horrifying still is the fact that many of these pieces still cling to the decayed remains of the muscle and tissue of their deceased owners. Perhaps more than any other commercially sold urban disaster image of the era, Green’s “Near bay bridge” is uncompromising in its abject, grisly depiction.

It is possible that Green had greater access than most people to these sights because of his status as a local. He was likely familiar to some of those living people in the images that he shot. Still, the graphic nature of the images stands out — not just because he was able to take them, but because he chose to take them and publish them.
As mentioned previously, bodies seemed to be off limits to photographers at events like the Johnstown flood and the Chicago fire — possibly due to circumstance, but more likely due to self-imposed restrictions. A few years later, when San Francisco shook and then burned, little evidence is apparent in the visual record of the hundreds of lives lost there. Yet, Green’s camera exposed these corpses and mangled remains to the world. More interesting still, Barton lent her name and organization’s might to their publication. Her printed plea — and personal collection — of Green’s work lends at least a tacit endorsement to the notion that these sights are acceptable for general consumption.

When viewing the historical record, it is clear that Green was not the only photographer to turn a camera on the dead, and then sell those images to the public. In author Paul Lester’s 1900 quick-to-print “history” of the hurricane, *The Great Galveston Disaster*, the publisher seemingly had no qualms about displaying the deadly nature of the storm, including a photograph directly at the top of the book’s cover of a team of men carrying a very visible corpse from the wreckage (figure 4-16). Inside the book are dozens of photographs, ranging from the mundane to the gruesome. None are attributed, but the dimensions of the images, and the varying photographic skill and subject matter, make it clear that these images are the work of multiple photographers. Images of wrecked buildings (figure 4-17) follow shots of barges loaded with bodies about to be buried at sea (figure 4-18). A distant fire is contrasted with a bloated corpse in the foreground of another illustrating photograph (figure 4-19). Lester’s book is rife with images of destruction, both of the corporeal and the constructed environment.

Of course, some publishers and photographers stuck to the traditions of leaving the victims largely out of the frame. Halstead’s *Galveston: The Horrors of a Stricken City*
which promised to "Portray... by pen and picture the awful calamity that befell the
Queen City on the Gulf and the terrible scenes that followed the disaster" — differed from
Lester’s work and that of many of the photographers by depicting only the ruined
physical environment, going another step further by avoiding even drawings of the
dead.14 The opening pages include images of the destruction, including one unique image
titled “The First Duty of Stricken Galveston — Conscripting Men to Bury the Dead”
(figure 4-20), wherein dozens of faceless men are lined up, single file, on a main road in
the town. Other images in the opening pages include the “Wreck of the Ursiline Convent”
(figure 4-21), and images of churches and other damaged or destroyed institutions
(figures 4-x, 4-22 and 4-23). Yet nowhere is to be found the gruesomeness of the Green’s
depictions and Lester’s illustrations.

Interestingly, Halstead’s book combines photographs and drawings, a rare choice
among the publishers of such tomes. It is likely that the drawings are based partly or
entirely on photographs taken at the scene; the subject and framing directly echo many of
the photographs found in the pages of other books and in the frames of stereographs and
photographs of the event. In the drawings, it is difficult to tell invented elements from
faithful adaptations. In “Conscripting Men to Bury the Dead,” the street seems to have
been traced from a photograph, while the line of men are so uniform in height and
regimentation that they were almost certainly drawn into the picture. Another image,
“Disposal of the Dead – Burial By Fire” (figure 4-24), could be a tracing of a photograph,
or a conjuring of the artist’s imagination, or anything in between; the men appear to be
roughly sketched, but the scene is so similar in its elements and framing to many of the

14 Halstead, i.
photographs that emerged from 1900 Galveston that it is difficult to figure out the image's origins.¹⁵

Nathan C. Green’s 1900 book *Story of the Galveston Flood* presents a more varied collection of images, ranging from photographs of fields of debris, to photographs of bodies, to images copied directly from *Frank Leslie's Illustrated Newspaper*.¹⁶ Aside from the illustrations taken from Leslie's, few of the images are of particular, individual note. A series of remarkably similar shots of fields of splintered boards (figures 4-x25 and 4-26) fill many of the illustration pages. Only a few stand out for special consideration. One unique image of apparent survivors in a tent, titled “A Refugee Camp” (figure 4-27), provides one of the few extant visual records of the shelter provided to those made homeless by the storm. Another image of note, titled “Volunteers Removing Debris to Open Street, Under Guard, Twenty-First Looking North” (figure 4-28) shows a group of largely African American men lined up in the thin, clear path of the street, piles of debris as high as their heads on either side. As with the other quick-to-print histories of the hurricane, the images here appear to have come from multiple sources, though none but those from Leslie's are attributed.

The book continues along these largely pedestrian lines until, near the end, the reader is shocked by a photograph taken inside “One of the Morgues” (figure 4-29). In this image, the bloated faces of the dead are clearly visible, shocking not just to the

¹⁵ The images in the book are unattributed and don't match any photographs I have seen, further complicating any efforts to identify their origins.

senses of the viewer, but to the historian accustomed to seeing far less graphic depictions of the disaster, even when corpses fill the frame. The image mimics the floor of a factory, as if the cold productivity of the storm to kill at such a grand scale has rendered it an industrial-era triumph of efficiency. The image contains no sentimentality in its presentation of bodies and loss.

In fact, the sheer scale of the tragedy in Galveston seems to have presented a challenge to those image makers that arrived by boat in the days following the disaster, and these books bear that debate out. Ruin was everywhere. For those photographers and other artists who clung to the belief that human remains were off limits, the port city still provided a wealth of readymade signs of loss and suffering. The fact that at least a few photographers ignored traditional prohibitions on the photography of bodies speaks, perhaps, to the likelihood that finding a scene without human remains in a city of 6,000 dead was itself an actual challenge. The photographers who sought to depict the deadly reality of the hurricane’s aftermath were deviating from long-developing traditions of viewing death in American culture. In his study of changing attitudes toward death in the United States at the time, Inventing the American Way of Death, 1830-1920, James J. Farrell writes that during his long period of examination, “the denial of death in America took the form of a quest for control, with each instance of control an attempt to keep death out of mind by keeping it out of sight.” Much like “the denial of death” of which Farrell speaks, late 19th century urbanization was no less a quest for control, in this case over the frontier, so ripe for development and the support of a sprawling and prosperous nation. The destruction of one of those cities was a serious blow to the notion that control

was ours, both over nature and over death; losing our handle on nature, as in 1900 in
Galveston, meant losing our handle on life. In previous disasters the deaths were most
often hidden behind the picturesque landscapes of ruin that remained after the fire or
water had swept the city clean of residents. In Galveston, swept as it was of truly
monumental architecture and ruin, the landscape was inundated with corpses. The scale
was too much to hide. And so, lacking the cover of picturesque ruins, the victims took
center stage. Death, in Galveston, simply could not be kept out of sight.

II. The representation and erasure of Galveston’s segregated social institutions

At least ten – and likely many more – companies and individuals published
photographs and stereographs in the immediate aftermath of the storm. While some of
those already mentioned included a morbidly corporeal element to their work, others did
dtheir best to shoot only the ruined built environment. Chief among the landmarks that
garnered attention were cultural and community centers. Churches – the institutions
around which so many African American and recently arrived immigrant residents
gathered and grew in towns like Galveston and Johnstown, Pa. – suffered greatly. In her
book *Mythic Galveston*, geographer Susan Hardwick points out that the churches, schools
and orphanages that were lost also took with them the strong ties they provided in the

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18 Among those images of the 1900 hurricane in the Library of Congress’s Prints and
Photographs Division files are prints by Keystone View Company, Griffith and Griffith,
Underwood and Underwood, C.L. Wasson, American Stereoscopic Company, The
Universal Photo Art Company, Standard Scenic Company, The Whiting View Company,
and W.A. Green. A number of other images are included that have lost their publishing
information over the decades. Lester’s book, as well, contains numerous uncredited
images. Publishers of these books always relied on numerous sources for their images –
meaning that the uncredited images in *The Galveston Disaster* are almost certain to have
been gathered from many different photographers and agencies.
community. According to Hardwick, the city was home to 34 Protestant churches. Of those, 22 were completely destroyed, and the rest suffered extensive damage. In addition, St. Patrick’s Cathedral, “which served so many of the Irish immigrants and other Catholics in the city,” was ruined. St. Mary’s Orphanage lost nine of the ten nuns charged with taking care of their wards, along with “almost all of the children.”

Among others, The Keystone View Company published stereographs that captured the ruin of these cultural institutions. The shattered façade and exposed interior of the Sacred Heart Church (figure 4-30) attest to the destructive power of the hurricane. The Universal Photo Art Company photographed the same building from the opposite end of the façade, though the composition is nearly the same, save for a man standing in the ruins in the foreground (figure 4-31).

Such eerie images reveal to the viewing public the damage wrought by the hurricane to both the buildings and the cultures they represent and foster. In such images, viewers who bought a copy could save for themselves an image of a wrecked place of worship, a site wherein hundreds of the devout had gathered every week to profess their religion and love for their neighbor. It could not have been lost on the customer purchasing these images that such a scene represented the cessation of such important, community-building rituals. Even if that cessation were temporary, the viewer was surely also aware that many of those who once filled the church were now dead, and it was more than the building that would never be the same.

While the churches depicted in the images of the hurricane’s aftermath were either exclusively native white or immigrant places of worship, the sizeable African

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19 Hardwick, 101-3.
American community in Galveston was not spared its churches, either, according to historians Patricia Bellis Bixel and Elizabeth Hayes Turner. Such buildings “were decimated by the hurricane. Along with the buildings, years of records and historical information were also destroyed.”20 But while they suffered right along with other residents, no images of African American churches can be found in the visual record, even as the storm hit such houses of worship especially hard; of the fourteen churches that served the black community in Galveston in 1900, not a single one survived the hurricane. In the years leading up to the storm, those same churches had been focal points for the black community, serving, as historian Turner puts it in her own book, as “the mainstay of the African American community and the focal point for racial awareness and self-help.”21 Turner, surveying the progressive reform movement among women in Galveston around the turn of the century, sees in the churches of the era “common ground for community solidarity, self-identity, and even radicalization.”22 To lose them was, in a sense, to lose most immediate physical manifestation of those efforts, and a vital incubator for further achievements in the community.

This blow to Galveston’s black religious institutions was surely painful, coming as it did in the midst of city-, state-, and nationwide efforts to disfranchise black voters and remove African Americans from elected leadership roles. Five years prior to the storm, the city had voted to switch from a ward-based electoral system – in which the


22 Ibid., 240.
diverse neighborhoods of Galveston could hope to elect representatives from their own race and/or nation of origin — to an at-large system. The move immediately and intentionally set in motion the ouster of a number of elected black city officials. By the time the storm raged through Jim Crow-era Galveston, further “voting reform” efforts were already in the works; as Turner reports, “coupled with the reorganization of city government into a single commission in 1901 and the introduction of a poll tax in 1902, disfranchisement and diminishment of black political power in Texas became nearly complete.” Those African American churches missing from the visual record had been, then, of increasingly important value to Galveston’s black community, and surely seen as threats to the white supremacist political structure of the city. The fact that their loss was absented from the historical visual record is revealing but unsurprising.

The reasoning for that absence is easy to guess at; two potential explanations stand out. It is possible that — in the midst of an era of rampant racial violence that saw 283 black Texans lynched between 1898 and 1918 and entrenched segregation from public spaces to the privacy of the voting booth — image makers descending on Galveston ignored the suffering of African Americans represented in the built environment as a matter of habit; it is not hard to imagine that many of the photographers and illustrators shared the view that an American racial hierarchy was both natural and righteous. Equally as likely is the possibility that the buildings that served Galveston's African American community simply did not produce the same kind of photogenic buildings —

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23 Ibid., 231.

24 Ibid., 234
and resulting ruin – that those serving the white citizenry did, as a result of wealth disparities between white and black congregations.

The gulf between white and African American pay for similar work was well known in the city at the turn of the twentieth century. Race riots over differences in pay between white and black longshoremen had paralyzed the docks in Galveston as recently as 1898.25 According to Turner,

salaries for school administrators were not equal. In 1896, the principal of [all-white] Ball High earned $2,300 a year, while the principal of [all-black] Central High earned $1,800. Elementary principals for three of the four white schools earned $2,200 a year – more than Central High’s principal. Black elementary principals earned $1,500 a year.26

Turner further reports that many of Galveston’s African American churches were built decades earlier, some during Reconstruction, and some prior to emancipation by the city’s small free black community. It stands to reason, then, that the edifices constructed by these congregations could not have matched those built by their white counterparts in either grandiosity or structural strength. When image makers arrived in Galveston in the days following the hurricane, their gazes turned to the monumental ruins such as those depicted in the stereographs above. Either the poorer churches were entirely leveled, or simply didn’t catch the eye of the photographer or illustrator.

Far from a mere oversight, of course, the absence of African American religious structures in the visual record is demonstrative of Jim Crow-era racism that had created separate congregations and segregated public spaces for generations. The images both reflect the society that created such inequalities, and served to reinforce it, as well,

25 Ibid., 233.

26 Ibid., 249.
reifying the primacy of white cultural landmarks through the erasure of much of black
culture from the landscape. The hurricane simply made the job easier, leaving only one
monumental building from the black community recognizable: Central High School.

As Bixel and Turner point out in their joint book, churches were only one of many
building styles that were especially prone to damage during hurricanes. The immense-
yet-fragile design of a large space like the walls of a church’s mass hall gave winds a
broad and brittle target to push at and through. With similarly large, wide open rooms
surrounded by thin, cliff-like walls, schools suffered, as well.27 The all-black Central high
School can be seen in the middle distance in the stereograph shown in figure 4-32, titled
“Looking North from Ursuline Academy, Showing Wrecked Negro High School
Building, Galveston, Texas.” In a segregated city where more than one in five residents
was classified as black, this image represents the lone representation of an acknowledged
African American structure found so far in the visual record.

The visual record instead – unsurprisingly – records the odd and the beautiful
found among the more substantially built environments of Galveston. One building that
became a particular favorite of photographers was the public school at 25th Street and
Avenue P. While the crash of the ocean and lash of high winds sheered away one whole
corner of the building, the second floor – with desks bolted in place – hangs at a surreal
angle over the void below (see, for example, figure 4-33). Time and again, photographers
captured this surreal scene. Such an image marked for the viewer not only what the storm
had wrought, but – with its shattered view of the recognizable remains of ruined
normalcy – what it had taken away.

27 Bixel and Turner, 35.
This particular stereograph, sold by publishers Griffith & Griffith, further speaks to the spread of such images of destroyed commonplace scenes. With Griffith & Griffith’s European reach (the American firm also had offices in England, Germany, and Italy) such images propelled American urban disaster imagery overseas. The nativist, white supremacist view of the ruins reinforced by the absence of African American and immigrant signifiers, surely arrived intact overseas, as well.

Fraternal organizations played another key role in the strengthening of communal bonds in cities like Galveston. While many communities within the city formed their own (always exclusive) organizations, the role of such fraternal organizations was especially important in cities where political power for black and non-native white residents was virtually nonexistent. Galveston, in fact, was the first city in Texas to have its own African American Masonic Lodge.28 Another image by Griffith & Griffith demonstrates that such fraternal organizations bore the storm’s wrath as well. The Gothic-inspired Masonic Temple in figure 4-34 caught the eye of photographers, its roof collapsed and portions of its façade peeling off.

However, it is not clear – nor is it at all likely – that the African American Masons met at the lodge pictured. And therein lies yet more evidence of a key erasure that takes place during the visual documentation of urban destruction: most often, when image makers sought landmarks to capture, they trained their eye on grand (white occupied) edifices. Nowhere in the visual record either of this or the previous disasters is there solid and identifiable vein of documentation focused on the cultural losses of non-native and non-white populations. As has been explored in depth in previous chapters, the

appearance of such populations in the stories and images of urban disasters typically coincides with myths of savage brutality in the disaster's aftermath, or comical bumbling during the event itself. Compounding this distortion is the virtual erasure of the reality of the storm's burden on non-native and non-white residents from the visual record, in large part due to the fact that few of these populations could afford to construct edifices grand enough to merit documentation once they poetically crumbled. Even in this insidious ways, the routine denial of economic and political power left such groups with little social or political capital nor meaningful or realistic representation in the story. To be cynically mourned by image makers – and therefore, to enter the historical record once their images became seen as documentation rather than interpretation – a grand ruin was required. That is, of course, only if the record makers sought a positive portrayal.

III. Racial violence and Jim Crow in the hurricane’s wake

As in previous disasters, those who told the stories often paired with the images spared little room for positive portrayals of any victims or residents that did not fit the nativist, white supremacist view of the suffering. The dividing line between white victim and non-white aggressor was laid down immediately in the press. The *New York Times* of September 12 drew a distinct comparison when discussing the formation of all-white, armed patrols sent out to protect the city from looters: “The city was patrolled last night by regular soldiers and citizen soldiery. No one was allowed on the street without a pass. Several negroes were shot for not halting when ordered. It is reported that three of the citizen soldiery were shot by negroes.”29 The dividing line between “citizen” and “negro”

here is obvious and telling. The reliance on unnamed sources — “It is reported” — made it that much easier to paint a monstrous picture that may or may not have reflected anything like the truth.

In Nathan Green’s book *Story of the Galveston Flood*, another witness went further. Here the author Green quotes an unnamed “marshal” under the heading “NO AMERICANS AMONG THE GHOULS.:

“The best men!” said the marshal. “They’ve left their own misery and come down here to do police duty. We needed them. They had to shoot down twenty-five men yesterday for looting the dead. Not Americans, not one of them. I saw them all — negroes and the poor whites from Southern Europe. They cut off the hands of their victims.”  

In this account, being black again amounted to being a non-citizen. And being a non-citizen, according to this witness, was certainly tantamount to committing a crime.

The author Green’s book further drives home the stories of supposed black treachery with an illustration pulled from *Frank Leslie’s Illustrated Weekly* titled “No Mercy for Ghoulish Looters at Galveston” (figure 4-35). In the image, a white rifleman aims his weapon at a pair of African American men picking their way through piles of belongings. The guard has just fired his gun, as evidenced by the white flash emitting from his rifle’s muzzle, while one of the looters has his hand wrapped around the wrist of a chastely dressed female corpse. The looter’s head is thrown back and his mouth is open, having received the fatal bullet from the guard’s gun. The other “ghoul” winces in fear. The scene is full of signs of middle class domesticity — trunks, beds, dressers, and plush chairs float in the same puddles as another dead woman clutching her equally lifeless

30 Green, 91.
baby. The contrast between those comforts of home and the ghoulish appearance of the black caricatures only further reinforces the contrived horror of the scene. Such illustrations stand alongside the fanciful stories of non-native and black treachery that were a common part of the reporting, reinforcing each other.

On September 12, the front page of the *New York Times* shouted “Ghouls Shot on Site,” and heralded the deaths of fifty looters since the hurricane, shot as “the ghouls were holding an orgie [sic] over the dead.” The secondhand account from a supposed telegraph continues:

The majority of these men were negroes, but there were also whites who took part in the desecration. … not only did they rob the dead, but they mutilated bodies in order to secure their booty. A party of ten negroes were returning from a looting expedition. They had stripped corpses of all valuables, and the pockets of some of the looters were fairly bulging out with fingers of the dead, which had been cut off because they were so swollen that the rings could not be removed. … [N]ot only were the fingers cut off, but ears were stripped from heads in order to secure jewels of value.31

Rare, of course, is the attribution of even a small portion of the looting to white residents, and the fact that they are not given a European country of origin means that the *Times* likely expected the reader to assume they were American. Nevertheless, the portrait is much the same: the majority of the vaguely defined looting mob were black, and those specifically engaged in the most gruesome work were exclusively “negroes.”

Some few correspondents spread the blame for the desecration of corpses across races; an unattributed eye-witness account of the days following the hurricane, published in Lester’s *The Great Galveston Disaster*, marveled that the treachery spread beyond the usual suspects: “A horde of negroes and whites – even white women – were in the ruins

of the city. They were robbing the dead and dying, killing those who resisted, cutting off fingers to obtain rings and ears to obtain earrings.” But such instances were rare, and the seeming surprise on the part of the eye-witness that white women would even join in is more telling than anything else; from “negro” residents, it seemed, this was to be expected. But witnessing the participation of whites – and women, no less – was even more shocking.

But the more detailed and fanciful horrors are again attributed to black residents alone. The correspondent goes on to describe a “horde of armed negro thieves” surrounding a group of men guarding one of the main hospitals in town. “Several hundred shots were exchanged. Sergeant Camp killed four negroes with his rifle, and about ten or twelve were killed by the squad.” The eyewitness does not explain how the guard squad, surrounded as they were, escaped without a single apparent casualty, or why a band of thieves from a group with little access to weaponry would find themselves armed and surrounding a fortified hospital, rather than combing the streets, filled as they were still with thousands of bodies ripe for the picking. The story, like many other of its kind, simply does not stand up to scrutiny, but was taken as fact and published in numerous accounts of the disaster.

The news of supposed treachery spread across the country rapidly. On September 13, the Butte (Montana) Weekly Miner included tales of robbery in its update on the storm, “Grief in Galveston”: “As soon as the storm subsided the negroes stole all the liquor they could get, and beastly drunk, proceeded with their campaign of vandalism. ...

32 Lester, 44.
33 Ibid., 45.
God help the survivors in Galveston.” Blacks were not survivors, nor were they citizens, or Americans. When they appeared in the stories of the hurricane’s aftermath, they were exclusively villains.

Far more believable in these stories was the notion that white residents saw the disaster as an opportunity to arm themselves and fire upon black residents, regardless of whether a crime was being committed. As the eyewitness states, “Every hour during the night a fresh negro shooting was reported to headquarters.” Whether such an account was rumor, fantasy, or fact, the hurricane provided an opportunity not only to deem African American Galvestonians as monsters, but to act out violent fantasies against them, as well, with little recourse. Another visitor to the city, J.C. Roberts, who arrived soon after the hurricane to check on the property and family of his employers, claimed to have seen similar shootings. “Roberts witnessed one of the guards shoot five negro looters. He observed one of the men robbing a dead body. The man refused to desist and the guard shot him dead as he knelt on the sands. Four companions of the ghoul started to assault the guard, when he threw himself on his stomach, and, firing rapidly, killed them all.”

One page later, Lester reports that, in the days immediately following the storm, “ninety negroes [were] executed for robbery.” On the same page, “negro looters held high carnival” during an unguarded moment.

Among newspapers, the Times and Weekly Miner were by no means unique in this racist work. The Daily Picayune of New Orleans placed a bold black-lined box at the top

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34 “Grief in Galveston,” Weekly Miner (Butte, Mont.), Sept. 13, 1900.

35 Lester, 64.

36 Ibid., 65.
of its September 13 recap of the latest news from the hurricane, titled "NEGROES SHOT FOR LOOTING." Though a brief two sentences, the dispatch, sent from Houston, echoes the awful details of a tall tale that had become synonymous with urban disasters: "It is learned that twenty-five negroes were shot by order of a court-martial. Their pockets were found to be full of human fingers and jewelry of which the dead were stripped."37

As had been repeated in the days after the Chicago and Johnstown fires in the preceding chapters, the accounts of barbarism on the part of some large, local, non-white group—whichever was most despised and most vilified by those who had control of the media—had become a traditional aspect of the recounting of disaster’s aftermath. Once again, the grotesque action of collecting pockets full of fingers and ears torn off for their jewelry is attributed to the group least able to defend itself in the same communicative arena. In 1900, Texas found its monsters in the black residents who had clamored for more equal treatment at the same time they were being ostracized in greater and greater numbers from the political, social, and economic landscape.

The newspaper articles and accounts published in these books are typical of the quick-to-print histories that came out in the months immediately following the hurricane: each one was rife with stories of black monsters, and no black heroes. Conversely, whites always played the roll of protector, and only a few fallen members of the race strayed into the world of crime. Death and ghoulish black crime stood side-by-side in the stories told. That there was no pictorial evidence that bore this out is little consolation, but great confirmation for the fallacy of the stories themselves.

37 Daily Picayune (New Orleans), Sept. 13, 1900.
The actual story, far less ghoulish, was no less awful. While the institutions respectfully depicted in the images and stories represented larger physical and collective emotional losses among the mostly native, white populations they served, Hardwick demonstrates that the storm had a predictably disproportionate effect on the city’s non-white and non-native born population. Lacking a seawall at the time, Galveston’s neighborhoods stretched all the way to the sandy shore. According to Hardwick, the neighborhoods closest to the beach line were home to concentrations of Italian immigrants and other recent arrivals to the United States. It was these “small houses that absorbed the onslaught of the hurricane.” Ignoring the warnings to seek higher ground in this area proved disastrous; “If they did not evacuate into the interior of the island, all of these residents died in the storm.”

Galveston’s Italian immigrant community, was hit especially hard. The population of Italians shifted greatly after the hurricane, moving further from the water and abandoning previously tight-knit neighborhoods. The loss, however, was not just in homes and people; the well established Italian business community was hit hard. “Most Italians were small business owners,” Hardwick writes. Grocery, produce, ice cream, liquor, and candy stores were among the most popular business choices for Italians, and many of these small shops did not survive the hurricane. “A count of all Italian-owned businesses listed in the city directory the year before the storm included 92 saloons, 79 groceries, 9 oyster dealers, and 9 fruit markets. There were also a number of clerks, salespeople, bookkeepers, and barbers.” Few of the shops survived the hurricane, as thin

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38 Hardwick, 100.
pre-storm profit margins did not allow for reconstruction, or extended breaks in
revenue. 39

Meanwhile, 21st century readers could only see as appalling the actual treatment
of non-native, non-white Galvestonians after the storm. On September 12, the New York
Times published a story on its front page quoting correspondence from a Houston Post
reporter just back from Galveston:

I will not attempt to describe the horror of it all; that is impossible. When I left
Galveston men armed with Winchester rifles were standing over burying squads
and at the point of rifles compelling them to load the corpses on drays, to be
hauling by barges, on which they are towed into the Gulf by tugs and tossed into
the sea. 40

The reporter, who was among the first party of survivors to leave the island and report its
destruction to the rest of the world, recorded the armed, forced conscription of “burying
squad” members as a minor detail of a much greater horror. Still, it is hard to believe that
those who were forced at gunpoint to gather the decaying bodies of their neighbors and
carry them to mass graves could have looked upon their state as anything less than one
great horror piled atop another. Surely, most everyone in town would have recognized
that the immediate issues of clearing the streets of corpses was a top and shared priority.
That it would require force on the part of some citizens to get their fellow Galvestonians
to do their part is somewhat surprising. More likely, it wasn’t a matter of will so much as
an exercise in immediately reestablishing the power structure of the city post-hurricane.

The need for forced conscription quickly becomes clear when one looks closer at
the pictures of such “burying squads” and sees those doing the actual burying work. In

39 Ibid., 104-8.

African Americans seem to outnumber white workers four-to-one, an incredible imbalance in a city where the actual population saw whites outnumber black residents by similar numbers. This is due in large part to martial law having been declared in the wake of the storm by Mayor Walter Jones, Chief of Police Edward Ketchum, and Major L.R.D. Fayling who had, collectively, granted themselves absolute control in the storm’s immediate aftermath. With this complete power in hand, the particular eyewitness mentioned above from Lester’s book further confirms what the pictures seem to bear out:

The stench from the dead by Monday [Sept. 10] morning was unbearable. The triumvirate ruling the city pressed citizens into service to take the dead out in barges and bury them in the Gulf. The soldiers impressed into service, at the point of bayonet, every wagon that came along and every negro to assist in throwing the dead into the sea.41

In Green’s account of the disaster, another eyewitness reports on further degradations suffered by black Galvestonians. At the docks on Sept. 10,

An armed guard brought up fifty negroes. The latter were driven on the barges, and the guard went with them. The barges were taken out into the Gulf and remained there all night until it was light enough for the negroes to fasten the weights and throw the bodies overboard. When the barges returned those negroes were ashen in color.42

Halstead’s Galveston: The Horrors of a Stricken City, as well, is rife with such common tails of the conscription of black Galvestonians, and the violence that ensued. One account of the forced enlistment of African Americans demonstrates a particularly cold detachment from the humanity of black residents:

41 Lester, 45.

42 Green, 274-5.
The city has a considerable element of negroes. When the citizens organized for the burial of the dead some of the negroes held back and refused to help. "We want you," a white man said to a negro. "I don't have to work," was the reply. A shot rang out. A little later the lesson was repeated. After that everybody, when called upon, took up the duty assigned to him. 43

Photographs and drawings of the disposal of bodies do not, however, back up such stories. The images bear out the notion that either black Galvestonians were proportionally far more willing to help than whites, or that white residents idled while their African American neighbors were forced to do the majority of the work themselves. In other images, African American faces are replaced by Hispanic ones (such as figure 4-39 and 4-40), while the imbalance remains the same: the crews doing the most difficult and sickening jobs are made up of people from groups that had little power before the storm. Despite the destructive power of the hurricane, the storm, in effect, served to reinforce the hierarchy of the city rather than wipe it clean.

The images demonstrate that the horrors of the hurricane hit non-native and non-white populations in the city especially hard. The entire population felt the effects of the storm. But, due to Jim Crow and nativist attitudes in the city, those outside of the seats of political, social, and economic power found their horrors compounded by a greater share of the death, and a greater share of the workload after the fact. Based on the published accounts and the lack of outrage on the part of the image makers, the scenes in the images themselves were unremarkable in their racism, perhaps even entirely natural. Added to the continuing tradition of demonizing oppressed populations in the post-disaster coverage, the fates suffered by black and immigrant populations is especially conspicuous to 21st century viewers due to a complete lack of sympathy in the views of

43 Halstead, 94.
those who produced such images. The horror that they consciously witnessed was entirely contained to the corpses and ruined landscapes they depicted. To today’s viewer, the horror to be seen in those elements is compounded by the horrors left either unseen, or unremarked upon.

Conclusion

Among the disasters covered in this dissertation, optimistic signs of the city’s recovery were uniquely scarce among the depictions of the storm’s aftermath. In Halstead’s *Galveston: The Horrors of a Stricken City*, an image of a relief train from Chicago (figure 4-41) is featured among the other photographs and drawings therein, but even images such as this are a rare exception. As the mass of images discussed in this chapter make clear, the victim’s body was foremost in the visual understanding of the 1900 Galveston hurricane.

The brazen depictions of death that issued from the wreckage of Galveston are a challenge to explain in light of the coverage of events before and after the 1900 hurricane. It is most likely, however, that the gruesome nature of the Galveston record derives from a combination of the sheer scale of human loss involved, and the failure of a truly optimistic story of reconstruction to develop in the weeks following the city’s decimation. After all, Galveston would never again recapture its primacy as a major American port city. What is evident is that the coverage of the event in the visual media is relatively scant when compared to the depth of the catastrophe. This may have been due to the difficulty of reaching Galveston, and the lack of many picturesque ruins. In
Galveston, it seems, all that could be seen was death, and little else was available to
document.

As a result, image makers had a few select grand ruins upon which to focus,
surrounded by a wasteland of shattered boards and broken bodies. The scale of the
violence among the ruins in Galveston was such that disposing of the dead became a
painfully drawn out process in this instance. In the first days following the hurricane,
barges were put to work carrying corpses out to sea, and citizens—willingly or by force—
were made to push their deceased neighbors into the water. The cruel result of this effort
was to see most of those burials at sea wash back up on shore, rejected by the waters via a
powerful tide that swept into the city and dropped the remains on the beaches. As the
work turned to mass burials and then, finally, mass cremations, the process of physically
recovering a semblance of normalcy in the city was put on hold for weeks. As many
witnesses repeated, the smell around town was nearly unbearable. Assaulting multiple
senses, the dead were a burden that eclipsed all other typical post-disaster efforts.

Image makers, then, descended upon a city with little to show for itself beyond
grief and death. With economic interests outweighing ethical interests, photographers
especially must have felt they had little choice but to shoot what they saw. The public
clamored for images, and profit could not wait for the island to be scrubbed of viscera.

But the bodies of the dead were not the only ones offered up for record. The grisly
work of corpse disposal required a large workforce, and so the bodies of those ridding the
city of corpses became part of the scenery, as well. And in this circumstance, historians
can find an unintentional record of one the unremarked upon tragedies of the hurricane.
While the written record suggests that few at the time questioned the scenes depicted, to
the 21st-century viewer it is plain to see that African American Galvestonians suffered a particularly ignoble fate at the hands of their fellow citizens. Their overrepresentation among the burial crews, so seemingly unremarkable to their contemporaries, today stands as a horrifying record of forced labor by threat of death. While sympathy for black residents is impossible to find in the written record, vitriol, mockery, and dismissiveness are abundant. Those African Americans laboring to dispose of dead Galvestonians apparently had little choice in their post-storm conscription. And, compelled at gunpoint to undertake the ghastly work of body disposal while their white counterparts brandished the rifle in place of the spade, the horror of the Great Hurricane was multiplied for them.

This, of course, was not the primary understanding of those viewing the images at the time, if the books and newspaper articles are any indication. No one appears to have raised a public cry against the forced conscription; to all viewing the work, it seemed natural, or for black viewers, likely disgustingly inevitable. Instead, white journalists, eyewitnesses, and unnamed correspondents sated themselves on imaginative tales of barbarous negroes with pockets full of body parts, drunk off of ill-gotten booze, and shooting down noble white guardsmen for sport. The fact that such tales were so common in the wake of disasters of the era puts the lie to the notion that many – if any – of these accounts held even a kernel of truth. To the late nineteenth-century popular imagination, the pocket full of fingers and ears was just as much a part of the post-disaster narrative as the heroic father saving his family, the dead mother clutching her lifeless baby, and the noble edifice reduced to noble rubble. All contained a touch of thrill, and a wealth of fantasy. And all of those elements, in their own ways, worked to maintain a white
supremacist view of American urban destruction, reserving only for native-born whites
the crown of heroism, and damning all others to be shot down like rats in the waterlogged
streets.
Chapter 5:

New Monsters: The Audience Joins the Image Makers among the Ruins of 1906 San Francisco

"As I walked I noticed that groups of people were standing at each intersection looking down at the fire. They just stood there as if spellbound."
- W. W. Lyman, tourist.¹

If the image can be summed up in one word, it would surely be “surreal.” Arnold Genthe captured a scene that mixed the familiar with the alien, the panic of encroaching disaster with the eerie calm of transfixed spectatorship. On one side of the street, the façade of a residential structure had seemingly been sheered away, the furniture inside tossed around and overturned in place: an apartment building reinterpreted as a kicked dollhouse. On the other side of the road, the shattered stumps of chimneys crowned another home: the mark of destruction already wrought, and a harbinger of the fiery second phase of the disaster soon to come. A group of men beneath the dollhouse building had pulled out a stack of folding chairs and were sitting, all nine of them, watching the spectacle as fans would watch a horse race. Rubble lay scattered in the long, sloping street, mingling with hundreds of frozen spectators, all focusing their attention on a spectacular scene a few blocks ahead (figure 5-1). The mesmerized crowd was watching the city of San Francisco burn.

Genthe’s famous images of the 1906 San Francisco earthquake and fires were the rare instance of a celebrated photographer at work during a disaster. His efforts captured

a handful of important scenes that engaged the viewer, not so much for their catalogue of
the destruction, but rather for the fascination, and even at times thrilled excitement, of the
crowd of both residents and tourists watching the events unfold. “Looking Down
Sacramento Street, San Francisco, April 18, 1906,” as described above, is perhaps the
most well known. But as will be seen in this chapter, it is far from the only record of a
specific and surreal kind of spectatorship that took place in the wake of San Francisco’s
disaster, both in the city and around the country.

At around 5:12 a.m. that morning of April 18, 1906, the San Francisco Bay Area
awakened to a powerful earthquake. Forty-five seconds of violent shaking knocked down
buildings and chimneys all over the city. But stories of the terrible early-morning
earthquake were soon replaced with reports of far more destructive fires that swept the
city, leveling business and residential districts alike. Those same chimneys that had just
crumbled were now causing fires to spread building-to-building and block-to-block. By
the time the last fire was finally extinguished, hundreds upon hundreds of blocks had
burned. Chroniclers were quick to point out that the fires had spread across an area that
exceeded any prior American urban disaster; one souvenir book published days after the
fire overlaid the silhouettes of previous large urban fires on San Francisco’s map, finding
that those earlier conflagrations just did not measure up (figure 5-2).

The earthquake and fire struck a city that served a dual role as the shining
accomplishment of Westward Expansion – the beacon of refined civilization for which
the United States Army had fought so hard to clear a path through American Indian
territory – with elements of its rough and tumble past clinging to the fringes of the city
and its reputation. Longstanding battles against an influx of Asian immigrants in the city
and across the nation were codified in the Chinese Exclusion Acts of 1882. Continuing into the twentieth century they only furthered reinforce the idea that the privileges that expansion entailed were reserved for native-born whites, and especially for those wealthy enough to pay for the building of this new city. In staking this claim, landowners had constructed their city at an astounding pace and, more quietly, with little regard for safe building techniques.

Finally, the area was home to the United States’ Pacific Naval Fleet, a collection of vessels meant to assert America’s position as a dominant military force, fresh from a decade’s worth of empire building in the Philippines. San Francisco was a vital center of trade and defense on the western seaboard, a place far enough away from other population centers to maintain some of its mystique and exoticism. As its fortunes grew, the city’s population expanded as rapidly as its building stock. In the three decades before the turn of the century, San Francisco’s population had tripled; by 1900, more than 400,000 people called the city home. When the earthquake hit that morning, photographers both professional and amateur appeared almost immediately to begin producing a visual record that celebrated San Francisco’s resilience, aimed at saving the city’s prosperous position, whatever the cost.

Photographers were eager to play the role of booster in the decades surrounding the disaster. As discussed previously, Peter Bacon Hales has written extensively on the important role photographers played in attracting new money and residents to growing

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cities in the medium's first decades. In post-quake San Francisco, photographers took this role to new heights, framing the disaster as a moment of creative renewal that put the residents' resilience at the forefront of the narrative. In crafting this picture of order and rebirth among chaos, however, the most vulnerable citizens were marginalized and forgotten in favor of those with the social and economic capital to rebuild their lives with relative ease.

To craft this image of exclusionary rebirth, numerous factors converged on the 1906 calamity, marking it as a unique turning point in the history of American urban disaster. The first section of this chapter will examine the evolved view of the turn-of-the-century city as an accepted, natural environment full of danger—rather than the previous view of urban space as itself a dangerously unnatural place—and the ways in which this changed understanding informed image makers of all stripes capturing the city's destruction. At the same time, technological innovations in photography and publishing meant that photographs could be reproduced cheaply and in high quality in the pages of newspapers, in new photo books, and on postcards, allowing this modified understanding of the city to be dispersed quickly, even in the wake of tremendous disaster. Newest and most exciting of all to viewers of the time, motion pictures for the first time played an (albeit limited) role in documenting the disaster, as well.

The reach of such disaster images—both from 1906 and from previously discussed disasters—is evident in the visual treatment of the 1906 earthquake and fires. Section two considers the startling similarities between amateur and professional image making and framing choices. Innovations like the Eastman Kodak Company's Brownie

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camera opened the form to the masses, and these same masses descended on the city in the hours, days, and weeks following the disaster, producing an unprecedented amateur visual archive of the ruins. The photographs produced by hobbyists and tourists in San Francisco confirmed the extent to which previous efforts by disaster had built a formal aesthetic of ruin. This section will argue that, through emulation, amateurs signaled to future viewers their great familiarity with — and enthusiasm for — the work of those professionals that preceded them.

But while technology advanced and the field of image makers expanded greatly, some things had changed little. Section three will examine the visual treatment of San Francisco’s most vilified community, the denizens of Chinatown. Residing in the most populous neighborhood of Asian immigrants in the United States, the Chinese of San Francisco suffered ignominious post-disaster fates similar to the African Americans of Galveston, and the Hungarians of Johnstown, painted as monsters and clowns even as they suffered extreme loss. In the midst of both de facto and de jure oppression across the country, Chinese immigrants found few American defenders, even as the nation lavished its fallen city with relief funds and supplies.

The final section will delve into the depiction of a rebirth narrative that guided much of the visual coverage of San Francisco’s calamity after the initial shock began to wane. More than in any previous disaster, the largesse of American citizens was mixed with a relatively major federal response, as President Roosevelt and congress sought to quickly rebuild the strategic city on the bay. Professional photographers worked hard to show the rest of the country — and the world — just how spectacularly that aid was being received and employed in San Francisco’s rebirth. In the midst of the United States’ push
for international respect and power, the ruin of one of its most important cities was recognized as a potentially grievous development. Through a deliberate, positive depiction of smiling refugees and rapid reconstruction, image makers sought to counteract that narrative and reposition the quake as a positive, cleansing experience.

In these ways, San Francisco stood as both the last 19th century urban disaster in the United States, and the first 20th century urban calamity. Mimicking its predecessors in spectacle and monster tales, the 1906 San Francisco earthquake and fires also represented a new era of urban disaster coverage, in both technological ways, and in the grand imperial narrative it was reshaped to serve.

I. Changing Cities, Evolving Imagery

New technologies had rapidly changed the work of visual reportage in the first years of the 20th century. By 1906, the machinery necessary to print photographs in newspapers was so prevalent and inexpensive that the drawn illustrations of past disasters had virtually disappeared. Unlike previous urban disasters, the 1900 Galveston hurricane and the San Francisco earthquake and fires received miniscule coverage in the illustrated press, even as both were covered extensively and thoroughly via photographic means. And while professionals rendered a detailed record of Galveston’s aftermath, San Francisco’s disaster is unique as the first major destructive event where amateur and hobby photographers contributed a significant amount to the visual record – and to the contemporary public’s interpretation of the event.
Yet, as Ben Singer has convincingly argued, the pictorial-sensationalist press had hardly disappeared during these years. While focused mainly on the precedents for early 20th century cinema, Singer argues that the visual media in general reveled in the kinds of violent death, both real and imagined, that could be found within industrial American cities of the period. For Singer, the preponderance of images of street violence—especially the death of pedestrians via streetcar—demonstrates that the sensationalist press gloried in the fear of mechanized danger inherent in the industrial city.

In this context of heightened sensations, Georg Simmel and other urban sociologists of the early 20th century found a fascinating study in the form of growing modern cities while lamenting urban spaces’ effects on human intellect. In a similar vein, the sensationalist press turned its attention away from nature’s vengeful wrath upon the unnatural city and its inhabitants, and toward the wrath of the city itself upon the physical well-being of urban dwellers, allowing those who sought to visually record the post-disaster city to find an ultimately hopeful message—disaster gave city leaders the opportunity to recreate the city as a place where technology could be of great benefit to its residents.

In his essay “Metropolis and Mental Life,” Simmel describes the “rapid crowding of changing images” on the urban landscape, which contrasted with the rural society from which populations across the globe were increasingly moving away. According to

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5 Georg Simmel, “Metropolis and Mental Life” (1900), *The Sociology of Georg Simmel* Trans. by Kurt Wolff (New York: The Free Press, 1950), 410. Wolff’s book is considered one of the seminal translations and treatments of Simmel’s work, along with D. N. Levine’s *Simmel on Individuality and Social Form* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1972), as well as David Frisby’s work *Sociological Impressionism: A*
Simmel, the industrial, turn-of-the-century city induced a “heightened awareness” in its residents, a level of intellectual interaction necessary to match the multitudinous stimuli. At the same time, this constant volley of stimuli demanded that residents seek a high degree of regimentation in their lives to compensate for this overstimulation. Simmel saw in this regimentation a loss of personal autonomy, the erasure of personal connections and the substitution of a role for the individual within a larger organization, the organism that is “the city.” Simmel, understood the city itself is an organism whose influence extends beyond its own physical boundaries to remake ideas of both the individual and the nation.

In effect, the early 20th century urban environment became a site where the role and safety of the individual was constantly in question. Disaster and violence threw into chaos the hard-fought regimentation so many city dwellers had built. Judging by the wealth of sensationalistic, grisly imagery that continued to pervade the popular press, those examples of destruction that were witnessed on a daily basis were generic instances of the kinds of death regularly visited upon city dwellers; the cartoons and illustrations Singer finds in abundance are either generalized depictions of the harried and violent pace of the burgeoning metropolis, or run of the mill (if tragic) individual instances of strange deaths to be found in the urban environment.6

While the imagery was thoroughly grounded in the dangers to be found throughout the modern city, the depictions themselves focused on individual incidents.

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6 For example, on page 85 of his book, Singer shows an illustration of a boy choked to death while trying to climb through a transom window. In another (page 89), a boy on the sidewalk is crushed by a man who fell from a higher window.
By 1906, the city had come to be accepted as an inevitable development in the evolution of mankind, rather than the unnatural environment condemned by preceding generations. Focus shifted from destroying the city to removing the dangers that threatened city dwellers. In sum, death was a regular occurrence in the popular visual press, and so it was, too, a common presence in the minds of residents. But large-scale disaster, producing hundreds or even thousands of deaths, remained rare enough to warrant continued major attention and excitement — along with extensive visual documentation. Lovers of disaster imagery could sate themselves with the sensationalistic images found in the popular press of grisly individual deaths, but it was the grand disaster that turned viewer into consumer in ways no other kind of visually depicted death could. And by showing a destroyed city but a happy population among the ruins, image makers could assuage the fears of imminent death and instead instill a sense of thrill in the viewer, one that encouraged consumption of said images and the messages of reconstruction that they carried.

While these massive natural or unintentional disasters were a relatively rare occurrence, city dwellers nevertheless sought such entertainments even when their cities weren’t actually burning. Amusement parks of the era offered popular simulated disaster experiences; as David Nasaw explains in his study of early 20th century urban entertainments,

The most popular disaster shows were recreations of actual events, such as the Johnstown and Galveston floods, the eruptions of Mt. Vesuvius and Mt. Pele, and the San Francisco earthquake, although crowds were also drawn to fictional
apocalypses inspired by Dante’s *Inferno* or “suggested by certain Biblical passages.”

These kinds of thrill rides, and the type of disassociation seen in images like Genthe’s “Looking down Sacramento Street” suggests that disaster had become such a spectacle of the urban environment by 1906 that, with the exception of some of those most directly affected by it, victims and witnesses had trouble seeing destruction as anything other than a thrilling show.

When Singer turns to the sensationalist visual archive to contextualize the ways in which city dwellers of the era entertained themselves, he finds a wealth of gruesome drawings like those of trolley cars running down helpless pedestrians and of workers being consumed by machines. In effect, sensationalist visual critiques of the city, so dependent as they were on visceral shock, followed the fashionable urban critiques of the day, moving away from the notion of the urban environment as incompatible with human life, and instead attacking elements within the city that made urban life dangerous. As the destruction in Galveston and San Francisco during this era produced scenes that drew purveyors of realist visual media from across the nation – and resulted, especially in San Francisco’s case, in immense photographic archives – mass disaster became an ever more realistic and immersive experience: while the drawn illustrated press began to remove itself – both due to advances in photo printing, and an increased focus on the everyday violence wrought by murderers and runaway streetcars – the photographic press and its greater perceived veracity dominated the popular visual record.

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Most emblematic of this transition was the concurrent rise of photographic coverage in newspapers and the publishing of picture books which, by 1906, had largely replaced the numbered series of matted images so popular in previous urban calamities. At the same time, popular 19th century forms of photographic depiction survived into the 20th century, especially the stereographic images sold door-to-door and in shops and newstands across the country. And if the volume of such stereo cards surviving in 21st century archives is any indication, this format reached its apex in 1906, and will be explored later in this chapter.

But, the newest form of still-image, photographic commemoration was the mass-produced picture booklet. It was likely the cheap printing cost and easy reproducibility that led to a flooded market of picture books in the immediate aftermath of the disaster. At least twenty, and likely many more, of these books were printed in the weeks and months following the earthquake; the sheer number of them attests to the rampant desires to experience and commemorate the earthquake and fires among the public. The paper upon which each booklet was printed was often exceedingly thin. Covers of cardboard or slightly heavier paper were the norm. A few higher-priced editions included color illustrations on the cover, though their price, too, never exceeded a dollar (see figures 5-3, 5-4, and 5-5 for examples of such covers). The booklets ranged in price from 25 cents (comparable in price to a magazine) to a dollar. Inside, the number of photographs from

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8 In my research I came across twenty different examples of these picture books, though I am certain that more were likely to have existed. The ephemeral nature of the books, and the flimsy materials used, likely meant that many of these books never survived long enough to make it into the archives and collections I searched.

9 For comparison, National Geographic and Cosmopolitan cost 25 cents per issue in 1906. Magazine prices generally ranged from 10 to 50 cents in 1906 (based on a review of prices printed on the covers of 1906 magazines found through internet image
ten to dozens, and the printing from sharp and high quality (figure 5-6) to blurry and high contrast (figure 5-7). The books were notable for the variety of images, as well; though the photographers glommed on to similar themes and sights – which will be covered throughout this chapter – each book's particular images are unique.

The books themselves mark an important transition in the means by which professional photographers and publishers made pictures of the disaster available to an eager public. The usual quick-to-print “histories” of the disaster reached shelves within days of the city’s destruction, but the number those books paled in comparison to the wealth of short, cheap picture booklets that rolled off the press in the same period. And while previous disasters had made the ownership of a few select images a privilege open to many, the relative cheapness of the multi-photograph picture books likely opened ownership of the disaster to far more people across the country. The souvenir booklets created a new and simple way to transmit greater numbers of images than ever before.\textsuperscript{10}

In the process, the spread of photographs also influenced older forms of visual documentation. Kurtz and Allison, the lithography company that had produced so many melodramatic disaster posters for previous events, put together a new kind of print for this first truly 20\textsuperscript{th}-century disaster. As can be seen in figure 5-8, photorealism and photography’s seemingly greater veracity had pushed the art of cartoonish drama to the margins.

\textsuperscript{10} Such books have not turned up in the many archives related to the other disasters I have searched in the research process for this work. Due, therefore, to the much higher volume of images available to the consumer for approximately the same price as would have purchased a single image previously, I assert that these mass-produced books made ownership of a greater number of images far easier than in previous events.
Newer still was the employment of movie cameras to capture films of the disaster’s aftermath. Presumably, these pre-newsreel films were produced both by amateurs and by entrepreneurs for use in nickelodians, Kinetoscopes, and Mutoscopes. Interestingly, much of the footage created in the days following the fires could best be described as living panoramas – that is, the films attempt to mimic the form of panoramic views by shooting from a largely stationary vantage point, slowly swinging the camera across a wide arc and capturing people and carts moving through the wrecked city. The more innovative scenes are those shot from the back of streetcars, providing a glimpse of the destruction to the viewers similar to that which could be found in the travelogue movies popular over the preceding two decades. The topics covered in these films match those covered in the photography discussed throughout this chapter, from landmarks and general rubble to relief camps and the rebuilding process.

II. Tourists and Hobbyists: Amateur Views In and Of the Ruins

Among the extensive photographic record of the disaster are hundreds of images of people posing with the ruins. Though in most cases it is impossible to tell if the witnesses portrayed are visitors or residents, their behavior in the frame easily labels all

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11 Much of the footage to be found today is contained in online archives such as the Internet Archive and the Library of Congress, including a wealth of films from the Prelinger Collection. Unfortunately, they are largely free of any bibliographic notes that would reveal their makers, or purpose. It is possible to conclude, however, that at least some of the films were produced for commercial purposes, as many of those found at the Archive include title cards similar to those placed in other commercial films of the day. Unfortunately, none of those title cards I have found so far contain a maker’s mark. Certainly, these films deserve a much fuller exploration than I have been able to provide here; without access to the originals (and the production information likely held therein), however, I include this paragraph of acknowledgement that such important films exist, and hope to be able to conduct such research at a future date.

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of them as tourists of the disaster, gleefully immersing themselves in the experience of exploring the post-apocalyptic landscape of the “burned district.” Technological advancements allowed these tourists to mark their presence; a new, cheap style of box camera opened the hobby to thousands of new hobbyists. The decade prior to the disaster saw the introduction of such inexpensive equipment as Kodak’s revolutionary Brownie, a simple one-dollar camera that debuted in 1900 and was within the reach of millions of new middle-class hobbyists.\textsuperscript{12} As a result, residents and visitors alike produced images that captured the sense of wonder that infused the city, a surreal view of the ruined environment as a not-quite-real adventure park that lent itself to exploration (figure 5-9) and play (figure 5-10). The age of the amateur disaster documentarist was at hand; by 1906, approximately one out of every three Americans had access to a camera. Photography had become a decidedly middle-class affair.\textsuperscript{13}

In the days and weeks following the disaster, residents of the surrounding area and the nation streamed into San Francisco to witness the destruction firsthand, and put these new cameras to use. Unlike previous disasters, such as those that took place in hard-to-reach areas like Johnstown and Galveston, San Francisco was still easily accessed by ferry, horse, and automobile. Seeing the smoke of San Francisco’s fires begin to rise about the ruined skyline, excited travelers from across the bay made their way to the city


\textsuperscript{13} Ibid., 41. West states that Kodak brought about a revolution in photography at the turn of the century, bringing the Brownie and other relatively inexpensive cameras to consumers it described as “amateur” extensively in its advertising. West writes that by 1900, “the amateur photographer [had] metamorphose[d] into a middle-class person who might well be a woman, someone interested in a hobby that required little or no technical expertise or intellectual effort” (41).
by the still-running ferries. Figure 5-11 likely shows one such gaggle of onlookers, approaching the opposite shore as the entire city is engulfed in black smoke. Two stereographs produced by the H.C. White Company show what appear to be tourists streaming out of the Ferry Building down the partially cleared Market Street (figures 5-12 and 5-13). Once they arrived, whether by ferry or by other means, visitors sought to capture their own presence among the ruins, and it is these posed images that stand out the most among those taken by and of visitors.

In one example, a man stands on O'Farrell Street, a block west of the burned out Call Building – San Francisco’s tallest building at the time, and home to local newspaper the *San Francisco Call* (figure 5-14). His pose is typical of tourist images still taken today – that of the visitor who simply wants a record of his or her having been there, proof that they were there among the famous rubble. As the biggest news story of the time, the disaster and its aftermath were a big tourist draw. The wealth of standard, detached, posed pictures such as those found in figures 5-15 and 5-16 attests to the need on the part of visitors to record their presence for posterity.

Other visitors went further in their posing, capturing pictures either in the heroic pose of an explorer of ancient ruins, as seen in figure 5-17, or in the midst of acrobatic climbs to the top of elements still standing in the landscape, as seen in figure 5-18. Still others were simply captured by photographers checking out the scene – to the point that the act became a regular subject found in the record of the disaster. Traditional, numbered photo series like those produced in the past included images of people watching as buildings went up in flames. One numbered image from an unknown series (figure 5-19) includes the poetic caption on its reverse, “Early morning scene on Market St., S.F., April
18, 1906, 6 A.M.: While the city burned the sun hung like a ruby danger signal in the sky.” Bear Photo Service, which had photographers on the ground within hours of the quake, captured a similar shot in figure 5-20, as did the unnamed photographer who captured the image in figure 5-21. A representative amateur and uncredited real photo postcard image, likely taken a few days after the fires died down, shows yet another image of people gathered around to watch, though this group (figure 5-22) may be watching either the opening of a safe or the recovery of a body; the distance of the photographer adds a sense of either modesty or mystery to the shot.

Genthe and other photographers also captured images of tourists further from the action, taking in panoramic views of the events from atop the hills just outside the burned district. In one scene, Genthe captures a scene (figure 5-23) of men and women lounging on Russian Hill as billowing clouds of black smoke rise over the city, approaching the Chinatown district below. Another similar photo (figure 5-24), mimicking the work of Genthe but produced by an unnamed amateur, shows a woman and small girl standing atop another hill with a similar vantage point a few days later.

Visitors also sought souvenirs of the earthquake and fire; photos (for example, figures 5-25 and 5-26) demonstrate that some tourists scoured – or looted – the ruins for treasures. The practice was acceptable enough that those collecting souvenirs did not stop even when a photographer approached. Postcard printers also produced keepsakes in the form of miniature reproductions of the front pages of local newspapers listing the names of known dead (figures 5-27 and 5-28), and collages of landmarks that had been destroyed in “the City of Sighs and Tears” (figure 5-29).
The fact that these tourists were composed both of visitors and resident San Franciscans is significant. As Kevin Rozario recounts, even locals “responded to their disaster as spectators, experiencing many of the same chills and thrills as the millions of men, women, and children across the country who purchased and read sensational newspaper reports or who entertained themselves in theaters watching reproductions of the event.”14 The city’s accessibility in the days and weeks after the earthquake opened it up to tourists as no other disaster had in the past. With the sudden flood of cheap cameras available to those who came to witness the ruins, the San Francisco earthquake and fires of 1906 stand as the first disaster wherein amateurs helped to define the narrative in a significant way. Interestingly, the images these amateurs produced at times mimicked the work of professionals working in the same area, as can be seen when one compares more of the work of Genthe (figure 5-30) to the photography of amateurs roaming the same area (figures 5-31 and 5-32).

The public reactions and similar images demonstrate that disaster imagery had long been an important genre in the United States, promulgated to the point that the San Francisco quake tourists could likely recall a familiar feeling of excitement and danger found in numerous past calamities. For decades, the images of disasters in places like Chicago, Johnstown, and Galveston had been so thoroughly disseminated and consumed that they had, in effect, created a visual vocabulary of disaster spectatorship, turning potentially horrifying and tragic events into spectacles of fun and adventure, events for everyone to share vicariously and safely, either by collecting images or, now, by traveling

14 Rozario, 121.
to the site itself. Adventure seekers could even visit amusement parks for elaborate recreations of real and imagined disasters.¹⁵

It is this long tradition of treating disaster as consumable spectacle that allowed people to, as Rozario puts it, “perceive the fire as an artistic composition or as a dramatic spectacle,” one that seems to have steadied men and women as they beheld the disaster. After all, spectacle is not only a way of seeing the world but a strategy for ordering its unruly aspects. Through the framing device of spectacle, spectators in San Francisco could gaze at the conflagration and enjoy, as one observer phrased it, ‘something almost pleasant in looking at a monster.’¹⁶

No greater proof of this assertion exists than in another image shot by Genthe as the fires burned – this one an alternate take of the same scene pictured in figure 5-23. The two women standing in the foreground atop Russian Hill have, in this version, turned around and noticed the camera’s gaze. As the city burns down behind them, their smiles could barely be wider (figure 5-33).

Now that the Brownie camera and its ilk were available, the images produced by amateur and hobby photographers served to help define the story for people far from the scene. With the ability to print photos on postcard paper and send them through the mail, images shot by tourists spread far and wide, while the availability of cheap cameras

¹⁵ According to Nasaw, parks across the country regularly included disaster exhibits among their lists of attractions. “The most popular disaster shows were recreations of actual events, such as the Johnstown and Galveston floods, the eruptions of Mt. Vesuvius and Mt. Pele, and the San Francisco earthquake, although crowds were also drawn to fictional apocalypses inspired by Dante’s Inferno or ‘suggested by certain Biblical passages’” (89). Such exhibits began at least as early as 1892. The Chicago History Museum has in its collection of ephemera related to the 1871 fire a pamphlet from the “Fire Cyclorama,” an exhibit at the 1892 Chicago World’s Columbian Exhibition.

¹⁶ Rozario, 123.
greatly expanded the number of such images. But while the amateurs were not always as technically skilled as their professional counterparts, their visual language was quite similar. The conditioning the American public had gone through over the previous forty years in reading and understanding images of urban destruction had firmly set an aesthetic of disaster. The thousands of one-off, “real photo” postcards that issued from the disaster zone attest to the universality of this aesthetic by 1906.

Image makers had, for decades, been asking viewers to see the events as spectacle, and read their visual interpretations no differently than they would a stack of images of exotic locales like those sold in stereograph catalogues of the day. The disaster photography genre featured many of the same tropes as travel series: photographers focused on prominent structures, sweeping vistas, and the strange habits of natives. When faced with disasters in American cities, photographers turned to the same views: for San Francisco, they captured the Call Building, the Ferry Building, and City Hall; they hiked to the tops of the city’s many hills and created panoramic views; and they turned their lenses, as well, and the multitudes of victims, capturing the strange residences to be found in relief camps, and communal dining to be seen in streets and repurposed parks. That amateur photographers framed their images with the same conventions is, considering their decades of “training,” not so surprising. That they often felt the additional motivation to place themselves and their travel partners in the images as if they were explorers in these exotic lands is revealing of the extent to which visual media had turned such events into alien, exciting spectacles. The tourists within the amateur images proved that these travelers, too, had conquered the wild.
III. Ruined Chinatown as Subject and Spectacle

While the entire city had been turned into a site of perverse carnival for many viewers, another area that had long been objectified by outsiders, Chinatown, suffered a fate that revealed the darker side of this new disaster tourist trade. The fires that swept through following the earthquake reduced to ashes the largest and most concentrated neighborhoods of Asian immigrants in the United States at the time. Despite decades of official and unofficial exclusion of Chinese immigrants from the American economic system, San Francisco's workforce was seven percent Asian, of which Chinese immigrants were the vast majority. Due to exclusionary federal policies, between 78 and 90 percent of Chinatown residents were men, a figure that reflects the desire of many immigrants to come to work in the United States' male-dominated labor industries; most of the Chinese workforce labored in garment factories, laundries, cigar factories, fishing, and as peddlers. Despite this relatively sizeable representation among the city's population, Chinese immigrant life in San Francisco was largely confined to the relatively miniscule area of Chinatown, a 15 square block area home to 15,000 people.

Within the confines of this small area, Chinese immigrants had created a relatively self-sufficient city, both by choice — in an effort to maintain cultural practices not to be found elsewhere in the city — and from necessity. Chinatown had its own school;

17 William Issel and Robert W. Cherny, San Francisco, 1865-1932: Politics, Power, and Urban Development (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986), 71. Issel and Cherny state that “In 1890, the Chinese population of San Francisco was 90 percent male. As late as 1920, the figure was 78 percent.” Though women were not allowed to emigrate due to the Chinese Exclusion Acts, many had arrived prior to the restriction.

18 Ibid., 72.

but it was the only one in the city that permitted Chinese children to attend. Mostly Chinese-run businesses within the quarter catered to the needs of residents, and both buildings and land were owned by Chinese landlords and corporations – a point that would be of especial import in the wake of the fires. According to historians William Issel and Robert W. Cherny, Chinatown “was a city within a city, with its own social and economic systems, virtually autonomous with its own forms of government exercised through clan and district associations and the Chinese Consolidated Benevolent Association,” a powerful collective of immigrant-owned corporations in the quarter. All of this was erased from the landscape in the space of 24 hours; the earthquake and fire devastated Chinatown, and opened up its residents to the mistreatment so often reserved for a disaster-struck city’s most reviled population.

Most San Franciscans saw Chinatown, though, as more of an exotic den of vice than refuge for thousands of otherwise unwelcome workers. Houston & Harding publisher’s The Old San Francisco and New, published a few weeks after the disaster on June 21st, began its recounting of the fires with a celebration of Chinatown’s destruction on its first page, revealing how little the rest of the population thought of the neighborhood.

Dame nature appointed April 18th, 1906, as housecleaning day for the “City Beautiful.” Chinatown, with its murdering thugs, highbinders and dens of vice was located in the very heart of the city and no power, civic or religious, could either reform or remove it. Nature did both in less than a minute.

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20 Issel and Cherny, 73.

21 Ibid., 70.
Beginning with the effort to quash the spreading flames, the city was placed under virtual martial law by order of Mayor Eugene Schmitz, and Chinese residents would face the brunt of military excess as a result. Army troops arrived to conduct firefighting and rescue operations, and the justice system was replaced by an order to kill on site anyone caught looting. Such orders were little more than licenses to kill for the military and police forces of the city; as the previous photographs of looting suggest, white residents and visitors felt no danger gathering their own souvenirs. For non-white and non-native residents, this command was a potential unprovoked death sentence.²²

No doubt, the military’s own leadership in the area helped encourage the worst treatment of Chinese immigrants. Commanding the troops who fought fires and killed “looters” was General Frederick Funston, a decorated veteran of numerous American imperialist engagements of the preceding decade, most notably the Spanish-American War and the Philippine-American War. Funston was, at that point, an already well-known figure in American society, thanks to his much-reported service in fighting to spread American-style civilization far beyond national borders. As Sydney Tyler recounts in his book *San Francisco’s Great Disaster*, published just weeks after the earthquake, General Funston “measured up to the national idea of the soldier.”²³

Funston’s notion of civilization by whatever means, so representative as it was of “big stick”-style militarism of the time, made his order to summarily execute those who challenged the basic rights of private property seem only natural. Author Tyler eagerly


threw his approval behind the new legal system, writing that “The civil tribunal as well as the civil official must give way and in place of judge and jury must be substituted the death-dealing ball…. San Francisco is better off without [criminals] so lost to shame, and dead to honor.”

In this atmosphere of imperialist rule, it was inevitable that San Francisco’s most reviled population, the Chinese, would come up for special derision. But while the reportage of San Francisco’s calamity rehashes the same well-worn tales of corpse robbery and home invasion seen in so many other previous disasters, tales of the acts of Chinese residents more often hewed to the turn-of-the-century caricature of the subservient, opium-besotted Oriental, rather than the drunken mischief and violence associated with previous disaster race villains.

Following a description of many sad scenes in the temporary camps around town, Richard Linthicum adds a seeming afterthought to one section of his 1906 history, *Complete Story of the San Francisco Horror*, wherein Asian residents arrive at one relief camp seemingly in search of an immediate restoration of the pre-quake racial hierarchy. As the first day after the earthquake passed into evening, “A few Chinese made their way into the crowd. They were trembling, pitifully scared, and willing to stop wherever the soldiers placed them.”

Still the Chinese were made into caricatures far from docile or subservient. Their grotesqueness, correspondents suggested, was one that white San Franciscans preferred to confine to Chinatown, like a jail without walls. The disaster only served to render the

24 Ibid.


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wicked Chinese defeated. Another correspondent in Linthicum's book recounts a journey through Chinatown as the flames did their work:

From this place I, following the fire, saw hundreds of crazed yellow men flee. In their arms they bore their opium pipes, their money bags, their silks, and their children. Beside them ran the baggy trousered women, and some of them hobbled painfully.... These were the men and women of the surface. Far beneath the street levels in those cellars and passageways were many others. Women who never saw the day from their darkened prisons and their blinking jailors were caught like rats in a huge trap. Their bones were eaten by the flames.  

The Chinese had, of course, been demonized by Californians and Americans for decades prior to 1906. The white working class of California was galvanized against the Chinese immigrants by union leaders, as Chinese workers and the men who employed them were blamed for native-born white American workers' ills. The root of the hatred of Chinese immigrants rose out of fears that Asian immigrants were coming to the states to steal jobs from native-born workers by accepting wages and treatment far below the standards of native-born white workers. In her 1991 book on the Chinese quarter of San Francisco, Chalsa Loo writes that “Political and economic motivation fueled a xenophobic media campaign aimed as portraying Chinese as inferior, diseased, morally degenerate, and a peril to the purity of the white race,” the essence of which would be codified by commentators as “The Yellow Peril.”

26 Ibid., 112.


28 Tchen, 7-8.

Economic turmoil across the nation led to the outright legal exclusion of new immigrants from China in 1882. Afterwards, Chinese people in the United States were forbidden from acquiring citizenship, marrying outside their race, or providing testimony in court. According to Issel and Cherney, "One immediate consequence was that Chinese from small towns throughout the West flocked to the relative safety of San Francisco's Chinatown." Once there, local laws forbid them from living anywhere outside the district, "except in laundries or as domestic servants."\(^{30}\) Along with those who emigrated voluntarily, a number of western cities took the initiative to round up Chinese within their borders and ship them directly to San Francisco; by the 1890s, Chinatown had become a "crowded slum."\(^{31}\) On the morning of the earthquake, the population density of Chinatown measured 1,000 people per block, in a district where buildings did not rise above five stories. But even as they worked to enclose the exceedingly burdened Chinese population within the walls of the troubled district, white San Franciscans exoticized and dehumanized Chinatown into a tourist destination. Images of the district prior to the 1906 earthquake regularly show curious white onlookers strolling through the district as tourists at a zoo — even funeral processions in the quarter were interrupted by hoards of tourists.\(^{32}\) As Issel and Cherny stated, "To white San Franciscans, Chinatown seemed sometimes bizarre, sometimes revolting, but always exotic."\(^{33}\)

\(^{30}\) Issel and Cherney, 73.

\(^{31}\) Loo 43.

\(^{32}\) Dicker, 82.

\(^{33}\) Issel and Cherney, 70.
The disaster of April 18 reduced the population of Chinatown from 15,000 to 10,000.\textsuperscript{34} The majority of this drop resulted from subsequent out-migration following the devastation of the quarter, but loss of life in Chinatown, though unrecorded, was nevertheless substantial; according to one historian, “charred bodies were found throughout the quarter.”\textsuperscript{35} The only known image of the body of a victim of the fires – white, Asian, or any other – was taken by Genthe in the Chinese quarter. Yet despite their equal share in the suffering during the earthquake and conflagration, the Chinese were perceived by post-quake white San Franciscans just as they always had been, as a cheap labor force above anything else. The soldiers who guarded white property from looters also pressed into service many of the newly homeless Chinese, forcing them to gather bodies and clear streets at the point of a gun.\textsuperscript{36}

While white, native residents felt the immediate and full weight of American largess in the days and months after the disaster, the denizens of Chinatown were virtually shut out. Following rampant discrimination on the part of the city and citizen-led Relief Committee, representatives of the Chinese Qing government had to step in to begin caring for the displaced Chinese of San Francisco. According to historian Yong Chen, the Qing government began by erecting more than a hundred cabins to house the most vulnerable of the Chinese population, especially those who had lost breadwinning family members: orphans and widows. Vice and laziness were strictly forbidden. “When [the cabins] were nearly completed strict regulations were adopted to insure the proper

\textsuperscript{34} Dicker 85.

\textsuperscript{35} Tchen 125.

\textsuperscript{36} Rozario 118.
use of the dwellings.... No opium would be allowed, and any man who did not go to work within about a month of moving in would be removed." Chinese officials also helped to organize and provide food and housing, and arranged for the destitute to return to China for free. Further, Chinese citizens sent money to their fellow citizens in the US, a reverse in the flow of remittances to China from immigrant workers in the states.  

While representatives of the Chinese government worked to provide basic necessities to their compatriots, local officials seemed bent on actively making post-quake life for Chinese immigrants all the more difficult. Rozario writes that, "As a final indignity, because they were denied passes to return to their homes, they could only look on while national guardsmen and 'respectable' white citizens looted the embers of Chinatown for souvenirs." In figure 5-34, one photographer captured what appears to be two of those "respectable" white looters taking their crime a brash step further, selling "Chinatown Relics" that were almost surely looted from the rubble of the district.

This and many similar stories to be found in the written and photographic record reinforce the notion that Chinatown in San Francisco, though sitting in the heart of the city itself, was virtually walled off to the non-Asian residents of the city. Or, perhaps more correctly, the rest of the city was walled off from the Chinese — so successfully had the Chinese been relegated to the confines of the district that the suffering to be found there after the disaster was of little importance to outsiders. City officials even considered sacrificing the entirety of Chinatown during the fire for the benefit of surrounding residents — witness Helen Hillyer Brown later recollected that "The talk then [in the first


38 Rozario, 118.
hours after the earthquake] was that Chinatown was to be blown up” to create a fire break39 - and for removal afterward. Mayor Eugene Schmitz proposed moving the Chinese off of Chinatown’s valuable real estate and onto Hunter’s Point south of the city, rebuilding Chinatown as a tourist attraction – and seizing the valuable land upon which Chinatown had long sat for the wealthy white elite.40 Only through the intervention of the Chinese government41 and the Chinese Consolidated Benevolent Association42 – both of whom threatened an international incident – were the Chinese allowed to rebuild on their own land. The city’s attempt in the wake of the disaster to relocate every resident of Chinatown to a less valuable tract of land on the outskirts of the city only reinforced this notion that the district was itself a single, homogenous unit, culturally disconnected from the metropolitan area, and best kept out of sight.

The plight of Chinatown and its immigrant population is especially important in analyzing post-quake images because Chinese suffering is largely absent from the visual record. Dismissed as either monsters or servile buffoons, the Chinese population of San Francisco nevertheless suffered a fate at least proportionate to their white counterparts in the city, but their few appearances in the visual record take the familiar form of curiosity rather than equal sufferer. On the rare occasion that Chinese people occupy the frame, they are depicted by image makers as exotic “others.” Figure 5-35, “First Refuge House in the Ruins of Chinatown” shows a postcard image of the odd, eight-sided home put


40 Chen, 165-6.

41 Ibid., 166.

42 Loo, 44.
together by a mixed race couple, Mrs. Mae Wong Sun Yue Clemmons and her husband. The home itself is a curiosity, but their relationship certainly must have stood out as well – there is no clear indication whether their marriage was legally recognized, considering the anti-miscegenation laws in place at the time. The poses of the couple, and the handwritten notes on the card, demonstrate the exoticist overtones the image maker hoped to portray; these people and their home were curiosities among the curious ruins, rather than markers of recovery.

Few images of the segregated Chinese camps surfaced. The stereograph seen in figure 5-36 shows a “Chinese Camp Kitchen,” an apparently rare foray by a professional photographer into the Chinese camps. Considering the extensive professional photographic record of the disaster, and the popularity of the images among consumers, it would appear that the exoticism of the Chinese had lost some of its luster as a result of the earthquake and fires. While Chinatown was a site of fascination among white San Franciscans and tourists alike, once the quarter was destroyed and its residents displaced, that curiosity dissipated, and the Chinese themselves were seen as unfit for interest, visual depiction, and photo sales; after all, seeing them as victims would have required image makers to acknowledge their humanity. As monsters and exotic others, they were far more sellable. Their plight largely forgotten in the visual press, the story of Chinese suffering appears to have disappeared from the public consciousness before it had time to register. An image of Chinese residents milling about after the earthquake (figure 5-37) stands out all the more for its subject’s rarity. Aside from these few shots mentioned, the visual record is otherwise silent on the fates of 15,000 residents living in a vibrant
community in the heart of the city. Their plight, it seems, did not fit the narrative that photographers sought.

IV. Developing a Positive Narrative of Recovery and Reordering

Obviously, few — if any — image makers saw the earthquake and ensuing fires as reason to reassess the attitudes that had created the walled off city-within-a-city that was Chinatown. As demonstrated by the “Dame Nature” excerpt quoted earlier, the cleansing nature of the fire was an important theme in the recovery. By way of encouraging a rebirth in the city, some image makers sought to craft San Francisco’s destroyed landscape into a romantic, Ancient Greece-inspired ruin, one that eschewed entirely the suffering of not just the immigrant population, but of the entire population of the city. Upon this grand ruin, then, could be constructed a new and greater city. Chief among these Grecian-like ruins was City Hall, the columns of which toppled into the street like a building on the Athenian Acropolis (figure 5-38). City Hall’s Greek- and Roman-inspired architecture certainly lent it to such ancient comparisons. Other photographers chose to frame its wrecked skeleton in the arched doorway of another ruined building (figure 5-39) or simply depict the building on its own: a monumental structure even more evocative of its architectural antecedents upon its ruination (figure 5-40).

Other buildings in the city, especially those of similar stylings, received similar photographic treatment. The observatory at Golden Gate Park, a semi-round building featuring a grand colonnade, collapsed poetically, and its resulting romantic ruin was framed by numerous photographers (see, for example, figures 5-41 and 5-42). Other photographs sought similar visual expressions, whether in the form of fallen commercial
buildings (figure 5-43), or general views of the landscape (for example, figures 5-44 and 5-45). Tourists sought to make explicit their connection to great explorers among ancient ruins, such as the visitor standing atop a rocky outcropping in figure 5-46, while others sought to create the same mood regardless of their subjects’ knowledge, as shown in figure 5-47, or the Acropolis-like scene in figure 5-48.

According to Nicholas Yablon, however, not all photographers agreed that this was a proper approach to capturing the ruins. In his book Untimely Ruins, Yablon writes that “Photographers (and observers more generally) disagreed over whether the relics should viewed as ignoble or ennobling, objects of shame or pride.” However, Yablon writes, their disagreement lay within their assessment of the triumph – or failings – of the technological city that they were building – and attempting now to rebuild. In essence, they asked, were the ruins a beautiful sight, or an embarrassing revelation of the modern city’s shortcomings?

If the visual record is any indication, however, no embarrassment was felt about the treatment of non-white, non-native residents. The presence of the Chinese in California, fraught as it was with racist violence and derision, also contributed a great deal to the strengthening of white supremacist ties across the state and nation. According to cultural historian Tomas Almaguer, “anti-Chinese sentiment among the white population brought together various white ethnic groups in a common cause, helping to bridge even the most diverse cultural, religious, and linguistic differences among white immigrants.” As was the case in previous disasters, the presence of Chinatown also

44 Almaguer, 179.
allowed for white San Franciscans to unite and define themselves against a perceived lesser race, emerging from the loaded comparison with a solidified reputation as the stable, confident, and eager race ready to survive with pride and dignity.

Helen Hillyer Brown’s recollections of the post-disaster society that emerged in those early days subtly reveals that it was not just the Chinese that provided a model for the native born, white population to compare themselves against.

The public parks had become tent cities with both Army and Civilian overseers. The sanitary conditions were looked after, and that the general health of the people was so good and that no disease of any kind broke out is the saving clause of the whole calamity. The weather remained exceptionally good and the spirit and good nature of the people wonderful. Many of the poorer classes never lived so well or had a better time. It was a regular picnic for them – the Italians, Spaniards, Portuguese, Poles and Russians from Telegraph Hill. 45

Those same “poorer classes” – foreign, one and all – had also just lost everything they owned. It is hard to believe that, had they been asked they would have stated their preference for the camp as Brown assumed. That this perception stuck with Brown in the intervening decades before she wrote her memoir suggests that such perceptions were well established among the “wealthier classes.”

Still, writers of all stripes chose to highlight a resilience in the city’s residents that would be reflected in the photographs produced by professionals and amateurs alike. For the opening page of a picture book titled San Francisco Before and After the Great Earthquake, April 18, 1906, the Governor of California, George Pardee, composed an introduction dated one day after the temblor:

San Francisco is in ruins and the people are for the time discouraged, but our beautiful city will rise again and will even be greater and more prosperous than

45 Brown, 11.
before the awful disaster. The air of the entire State is filled with gloom and depression, but I am glad to notice that despair is furthest from the minds of the people. A brief struggle and San Francisco will be her old self again, arrayed in new clothes, it is true, but ready to prove to the world that she is not peopled with men and women who cringe before even the most terrible of experiences.46

Photographers captured these same sentiments in the landscape of the post-fire city. One stereograph (figure 5-49) by publisher Tom M. Phillips of Chicago shows a sign in the midst of the rubble of the Schloss Building that states “CRASHED! BUT NOT CRUSHED!” and shows the proprietor’s new temporary address. Another stereograph (figure 5-50), produced by Griffith & Griffith, is titled “Resuming Business in a Tent of the Sidewalk,” depicting the new temporary location of a barber’s place of business.

As they sought a positive spin on the story in the weeks to follow, photographers fixated on relief camps. Shots of temporary service offices within the camps were popular; Underwood & Underwood published two stereographs (figure 5-51) with the identical title “A crude post office – reorganizing the mail service after the earthquake” and shot from the same angle at an unnamed camp. In one version, a smiling little girl has stepped into the frame; customers could choose to purchase the view with or without this additional sign of optimism. Happy girls were seemingly popular additions to any view; other stereo views, such as “A band of little homeless refugees” (figure 5-52) and “Refuge Tents in the Golden Gate Park” (figure 5-53) capture gatherings of grinning children among the tents, and the stereo view “Cheerful in Adversity” (figure 5-54) shows children and adults. Other images include shots of well-dressed refugees relaxing.

in the shade (figure 5-55), gleefully mocking their own tent homes (figure 5-56), and even a few lucky refugees who have commandeered streetcars to build wood shingled homes (figure 5-57).

Other images showed the results of the largesse demonstrated by thousands of relief donors across the country. Underwood & Underwood published multiple stereographic views of relief supplies piled and ready to be distributed, such as the ones seen in figure 5-58. Griffith & Griffith did the same, including figures 5-59 and 5-60, showing the delivery of tons of food supplies arriving in the city. Additional views being sold included lines of campers awaiting their rations in a bread line (figure 5-61) and the relief workers themselves handing out the supplies (figures 5-62 and 5-63).

And as the images of the relief camp showed an ordered, peaceful, and happy recovery process for the all-white victims depicted, the business sector was depicted as returning to prosperity, as well. Quickly moving past the tent shops like the barber's discussed earlier, the weeks after the fires saw many residences that survived the fire converted into shops, and photographers were there to record and transmit the results, as in figures 5-64 and 5-65. Other businesses took up temporary residence in structures that had survived the fire, advertising their coming rebirth at a more adequate location, such as the Humboldt Savings bank (figure 5-66) and the massive Emporium department store (figure 5-67); on its card, the Emporium enthusiastically proclaimed that they would soon “again be California’s Largest, America’s Grandest, Department Store.” General shots of the reconstruction of permanent structures downtown featured prominently as well, as seen in figures 5-68 (which shows the newly rising Humboldt Savings Bank tower at far right) and 5-69.
Such optimistic images presented a city that was quickly searching for order and rebirth among the ruins. In the images of the city, photographers sought to project an interpretation of the disaster’s aftermath as the ultimate case of rebirth. The city was finding order, safety, and even fun among the ruins, a message that, judging by its frequency in the commodified visual record, was eagerly consumed by viewers across the country. On the ground, this effort to quickly reorder the city played out in the immediate clearing of San Francisco’s streets. Photographers helping to create the positive reconstruction story glommed on to this important marker of order. Even as a seemingly mundane and aesthetically uninteresting element on the landscape, the street stood as the literal framing element alongside which the rest of the reconstructed environment would necessarily take shape, and through which the urban travelers moved along on an ordered path.

Even as the recovery was only beginning to get underway, the streets of San Francisco served as a kind of stage upon which image makers could construct the melodramatic disaster narratives so prevalent in the visual record. This role for photography, of course, was not particularly foreign to the viewers, but it took a once-in-a-decade disaster to bring the role into focus. In reality – or at least in the embellished recountsings of supposed eyewitnesses and quick-to-print “history” book writers – the streets were often the site of real drama. Urban streets served as evacuation and safe passage routes, and were the backdrop to a dangerous and at times malicious form of street theater, as evidenced in the accounts covered both in this chapter and the preceding ones. Images from the visual historical record show how the street was employed for this kind of storytelling.
The city street was a lively place for residents of these cities, made all the more lively during disasters. In these thin strips of the urban landscape, an often macabre, always animated kind of street theater played out during the disaster. In tapping into this rich vein of drama, image makers found a universally recognized setting that made the disasters that much more real to the viewer, a landscape in which they could place themselves and vicariously participate in the drama. The action taking place—or supposedly taking place—in the street served to frame the audience's understanding of the disaster, and personalize the dramatic storylines.

The street was not, however, only a stage. As the wealth of tourist imagery produced during and after the disaster shows, it could also serve as a site of spectatorship, and for making sense of the events. Within the visual record, we see the street serving both as a place for city residents and tourists to watch the destruction and view its aftermath, and a safe vantage point from which image makers could produce their images. Genthe's "Looking Down Sacramento Street" discussed at the beginning of this chapter brings such roles into focus: the photographer orders the burning city by featuring the street upon which many witnesses to the spectacle of the fire had also arrayed themselves.

Accounts told by witnesses to the destruction help to illustrate the vital role of the street as a site of spectatorship. W.W. Lyman, a 21-year old junior at the University of California-Berkeley at the time, published his experience of the fires on the fiftieth anniversary of the disaster in his *Recollections of the San Francisco Earthquake and Fire of 1906*. Lyman was one of the multitudes of tourists to arrive in San Francisco from across the bay via ferry, and therefore one of the first to play audience member in the
street. His vivid recollection of the first moments of what he saw highlights the importance of the viewer/witness’s search for order in the midst of chaos.

When we landed and I went through the [ferry] building and looked up Market Street there was another remarkable spectacle. The whole scene was draped in a haze of smoke of various densities and, in the distance, flickering flames. ... Along the curb in front of the ferry building I noticed three or four shapes wrapped in cloth. These may have been dead bodies but I did not investigate. Complete silence came from all around except now and then a far off boom which I knew to be that of the dynamiting of buildings.

I walked along the Embarcadero to the north seeking a street by which I could go up into the city. The first one clear of smoke and fire was Broadway, up which I went. At this time I was quite alone. There was nobody in sight anywhere. As I walked up Broadway and looked down on the lower city it reminded me of what might be the visions of Dante in the underworld. There was no sunlight but only smoke of various shades rising straight up into the sky with flames flickering through it, and over toward the California Market were sheets of flame.... As I came abreast of Kearny Street I looked over and saw the Call Building at the southwest corner of Third and Market – at the time one of the tallest buildings in the city – with flames shooting out of the upper windows.47

Such a story, when viewed alongside the images, demonstrates that disaster image makers were contributing to a form of viewing that combined their long-established documentary role with the eyewitness role of the resident/tourist to create a visual form of what E. Ann Kaplan calls “vicarious trauma.” It can be argued that the people in the frame and in Lyman’s anecdote are little different than those who view the images, in terms of their desire to see the disaster, to experience it in as thrilling of a way as possible. And so the photos from and of the streets are for distant audiences what the actual street is for visitors. In this conception of the role of the street, then, these open areas of the city landscape acted as the primary site of spectatorship, a vantage point both

47 Lyman, 6-7.
for those who were on the ground, and those who later experienced the disasters through images.

As an ordering element basic to the urban area, the street helps the city traveler to find their way, and in similar ways helps the viewer of disaster images to make sense of the scene. Breaking this visual connection either in the actual urban space, or in the urban disaster photograph, meant that the risk of feeling lost became a likelihood. This sense of being lost is obvious in the imagery devoid of markers of order – the image shown in figure 5-15, for example, has emptied the frame of reliable ordering elements, and it comes as little surprise that such an image was produced by a non-professional. When the streets are covered or obscured by rubble, a sense of order on the landscape is virtually non-existent. In this version of the depicted city – that is, the city of immediate aftermath – the risk of getting “lost” in the sense urban theorist Kevin Lynch describes increases greatly. As Lynch argues,

To become completely lost is perhaps a rather rare experience for most people in the modern city. We are supported by the presence of others and by special way-finding devices: maps, street numbers, route signs, bus placards. But let the mishap of disorientation occur, and the sense of anxiety and even terror that accompanies it reveals to us how closely it is linked to our sense of balance and well-being.48

While those who experience the disaster firsthand certainly knew this feeling of being lost, it is equally true that Lynch’s statement can be applied to the viewer of disaster imagery. Just as those people seeking way-finding signs in the streets of Lynch’s modern cities become lost when such elements disappear, so too, does the image viewer, when presented with a scene devoid of the typical markings of the city. Losing these points of

reference causes the viewer to become un-tethered from the city, disconnected from the ordered reality typically associated with 19th- and 20th-century urban images.

Recognizing this potential disorientation, image makers who participated in the uplifting, optimistic form of disaster storytelling did so with the help of the street. In the damaged city, the streets were the first things cleared, meaning that their clearance was the first sign of recovery and a return to order. In disaster images, the street attracted image makers just as often as the piles of endless ruin, as it promised a sense of order and recovery unavailable in the rubble. Clearing the streets was important for two reasons: first, because it meant that people could again begin to move through the city for the purpose of rescue, recovery, and rebuilding, and second because it was symbolic of this beginning of the return to order. The image makers’ strategy of depicting the street to show disorder (figure 5-70) appeared occasionally in the images of urban disaster. But revealing the city streets, meanwhile, and bringing them back into the city, allowed residents to once again find their way through familiar thoroughfares, and viewers to begin to make sense and order of the scene, and believe in the resurrection of the city itself.

This sense of order played a vital role in the optimistic reconstruction narrative told by photographers in the aftermath of the San Francisco earthquake and fires, that of a return to prosperity, and a return of the city itself. The fact that the street grid still existed to be photographed served as reassurance for the viewer that the city itself still existed. In scenes of the barren wasteland of post-burn San Francisco – see, for example, figure 5-13 – the street grid was an indestructible component of the urban environment, an element that anchored the city in place and would remain regardless of the disaster. The continued
presence of streets assured that modernity would triumph over nature, and that disasters
could level a city without destroying it. In these images, then, the street stands as a sign
of hope.

For the viewer looking for an optimistic narrative to justify their reveling in so
much destruction, the city street provided as happy a point of reference as the smiling
girls of the relief camps. Even for those who had never been to San Francisco and knew
nothing of the city’s layout, finding a thoroughfare framed in the image helped to orient
the eye and provide an understanding of what was and what could be within the scene.
The street was a familiar urban element, and in these images often the only recognizable
element that was still intact. As painter Harry Washington Seawell captured in his dream
of the city in the not-too-distant future (figure 5-71), the streets were the first step toward
a reordered grid that would have appealed to new investors. They provided a vision of the
city’s future that was clean, orderly, and celebratory of its rightful place in the historical
trajectory from ancient Greece to present America – and, as Seawell’s utopian vision
showed, free of the disruptive incongruity of “foreign” neighborhoods like Chinatown.

Conclusion

By both chance and choice, in crafting this peculiarly optimistic story from the
ashes of the city, the images ignored the most devastating revelation of the disaster, that
San Francisco was even more susceptible to earthquake than previously thought. Because
of the speed with which fires began and quickly burned areas that had already crumbled
in the quake, few images exist showing the full devastation wrought by the earthquake.
Instead, the photographers and stereographers could only record mid- and post-fire
scenes. As can be seen in the image seen in figure 5-37, a handful of post-quake, pre-fire
images exist; the Hall of Justice that towers over the scene would later burn, as evidenced in figure 5-72 and countless other shots of San Francisco landmarks. Certainly, this situation rose in large part out of circumstance, as the fires began almost immediately after the predawn earthquake, and spread quickly across the city. Many were the result of the toppling of chimneys during the quake; San Franciscans unaware of the damage to their chimney started many of the fires after lighting their ovens to cook breakfast.49

In the aftermath of the fires, when local boosters were making pitches to financiers and insurance companies for rebuilding funds, the images of a burned – rather than shaken – city allowed them to cover up the earthquake’s devastating effects and focus on the fire, the logic being that fires could be eliminated through better construction, while ‘acts of nature’ like earthquakes were unpredictable and far more expensive to guard against. The resulting higher insurance rewards and the spate of “fireproof” structures in the Bay Area stand as testament to this deception, and allowed planners to largely ignore the far more expensive regulations necessary for the rebuilt structures to have been made earthquake resistant.50 The avoidance of depictions of dead bodies, as well, served to preserve the notion that San Francisco’s disaster was less traumatic than it really was.

The constructed narrative, then, presented to the world a city determinedly going about its reconstruction, and a nation with the expertise to assure that no such disaster would ever bother its well-cared-for citizens again. Eliminating both the earthquake

49 See Dennis Smith, San Francisco is Burning: The Untold Story of the 1906 Earthquake and Fires (New York: Plume/Penguin Group, 2005), for extensive exploration of how and where the fires began.

50 Ibid., 234-8.
damage and the poor treatment of immigrant populations made the story of the disaster much more palatable and appealing for potential investors. As future events from the 1966 race riots to the 1989 Loma Prieta earthquake demonstrate, both were lies for which the city and nation would pay a great price in the ensuing century; racial disharmony had only increased, and earthquake resistant construction would elude San Francisco for decades to come.

The desire for images of smiling refugees is perhaps easy to understand; the disaster engendered a great deal of relief collection and donation across the country, and it is likely that those who contributed wanted to see that their donations were making a difference. But more importantly, the images of smiling and healthy children in a quickly recovering capitalist city served to demonstrate a nation capable of protecting seemingly even its most vulnerable populations.

While the earthquake and fires destroyed an enormous section of San Francisco, killed hundreds – if not thousands – of the city’s residents, the images that were produced in the wake of the disaster most often recognized only the losses in the built environment while celebrating the maintenance of the political, economic and racial hierarchy upon which the city had been built. Structures might fall, a few unseen people might die, but in 1906 America, it would take more than a devastating fire to burn away the power structure in one of the country’s great cities. The images reinforced this notion in a number of ways. First, an unprecedented number of images sold around the country showed the relief camps that had sprung up in the parks across the city, camps that echoed the tidy frontier forts of prior decades of U.S. military expansion across the American west. White children, dressed nicely and well fed, smiled at the viewer from
stereographs and photo books, reassuring the audience that similar San Francisco families had survived the events without too much suffering.

The visual record barely mentions the harsher conditions suffered by immigrant and poor residents, who were relegated to camps that had to be repeatedly abandoned and relocated due to lax government maintenance. Photographs and stereographs of the recovery period showed a city that had barely paused for the disaster, watching their buildings burn, but maintaining their dignity and social status in the process. Those survivors who did not fare so well during the recovery hardly appeared at all, a fact conspicuous to today's eyes through the absence of impoverished, non-white residents in the visual narrative of rebuilding and new beginnings. The carefree attitude that instead reigned was further reflected in the numerous photographs produced by amateur photographers who traveled as tourists to the still-burning city to pose among the ruins. The 1906 disaster was a rebirth for the city; anyone who experienced it otherwise was unwelcome within the frame.
Conclusion

This dissertation has sought to examine the visual documentation of urban disasters as readable texts, adding to previous analyses of such events by looking at the ways in which contemporary image makers helped shape the disaster narrative through their work. In exploring these myriad images, the preceding chapters have uncovered a number of previously unnoticed or under examined facets found in a wealth of images so often dismissed as illustrating figures rather than texts in themselves. In this conclusion, I will highlight the three overarching claims my dissertation has advanced, and finish by considering potential future directions for this research.

I: Consuming Disaster

As seen in the visual reportage of the Civil War, images of disaster and suffering drew large audiences curious to see drama they had previously only read about. In the pages of the nation’s newspapers and the lithographer’s catalog, viewers witnessed dramatic drawings of deadly battles, so grand and detailed that they required a team of illustrators to compose. In the studios of war photographers, Americans were introduced to war’s grim realities of death, destruction, and dismemberment, a view previously restricted to those whose lives were in direct danger. These images both literally and figuratively brought home the fears and the shock of loss inherent in disaster. Viewers could witness the ‘true’ cost of the war, thereby sharing in a national, collective sense of suffering that proved both palliative and titillating.
And as this dissertation has demonstrated, when visual documentarians of the war turned their attention to the damaged and ruined built environment, the first sparks of a viable urban disaster genre flourished. Freed to see the ruin of cities as either a triumph over rebellion or the fall of a glorious cause, urban disaster images of the Civil War were freighted with far more meaning than just the loss of the specific structures depicted. Following the war, subsequent urban calamities took on greater meaning in similar ways, conflated to national tragedies by image makers eager to cash in on the waiting market for depictions of destruction. Consumers sought to share in the oddly pleasurable feeling of loss and excitement, while image makers sought to profit from this desire.

In crafting appealing photographs, drawings, and illustrations for public consumption, image makers appealed to the emotions and vanities of their customers. The images concretized the fears that many 19th century observers felt as they watched industrial metropolitan areas grow and new and unimaginable forms of danger become routine parts of the landscape. The excitement of the urban landscape, and the dangerous and thrilling entertainments contained therein, were fully present within the frame as well. Finally, due to the efforts of those same image creators in reshaping a potentially tragic narrative, many of the images served as confirmation for the nativist, nationalistic notions of American Exceptionalism, even in spite of the scene depicted. All of these themes could be purchased and possessed by viewers, an act so common today as to be unnoticeable, but so new and novel to 19th century observers that customers bought these images in droves.
II: The Formation of an Aesthetic of Disaster

In the process of creating a sellable product for public consumption, the visual documentarians of 19th century destructive events fashioned an aesthetic of urban disaster that, by the early 20th century, had become so commonly understood as to seem natural. More specifically, I have argued that two separate but ultimately complimentary aesthetics emerged – one, in the form of lithographs and drawings, that was tied to older, maudlin notions of melodrama and horror; and the other, in the form of photography and stereoscopy, that sought a more realistic-yet-haunting view of the destruction. In crafting these aesthetics, image makers in both camps worked to appeal to the desires of a public hungry for images that satisfied dueling nationalistic and “cult of horror” motivations.

In the drawings and lithographs discussed throughout this dissertation, artists regularly put human bodies in peril, employing crushed limbs and limp spines to inspire horror and shock in the viewer. But rather than offend, of course, these images were intended to titillate. Viewers may have professed remorse and sadness for the figures in the images, but the written accounts of the events paired with these images were brutally descriptive nearly to the point of being pornographic. The images helped to fetishize suffering, and the medium provided just enough separation from reality that those who sought excitement in the maudlin tragedy could find it and enjoy it, guilt free.

Nevertheless, these images were meant to be consumed privately in the home. The photograph series that emerged later in the 1800s offered a heightened sense of veracity while largely excluding the more grisly facets of the disaster. It is possible that, in frames lacking the destroyed bodies so common in drawn images, viewers found a place for themselves, an empty stage upon which to imagine themselves acting out some
maudlin tragedy. Regardless, the proliferation of these images makes clear their status as a desirable object among 19th century Americans. The private viewing environment, and the element of choice that came when the collector ordered specific images or series, allowed for the creation of collections of disaster imagery which could be brought and examined whenever the owner needed a fix.

Within the frame of the disaster photograph, prominent buildings and vantages replaced bodies to illustrate loss. Photographers sought to depict familiar scenes in unfamiliar conditions, a disquieting view of reality that preyed on many Americans' fear of urban space in the midst of industrial expansion. But photographers sought, as well, to highlight a patriotically hopeful message in the frame – despite the destruction, the United States would recover and be even stronger as a result. As has been demonstrated, in the wake of each disaster, photographs of rapid reconstruction, of refugee camps full of smiling children, and trains full of donated food were sold right alongside the images of burned out city halls and destroyed banks. I have argued that, more than just a message of hope, these images served a larger, more sinister purpose as well.

III: White Nativism and Imperialistic Nationalism in Disaster Imagery

These two aesthetics – drawn and photographed depictions – worked in the service of a nativist, nationalist narrative that infused many of the recovery efforts of the late 19th- and early 20th-century urban disasters. Far from a feel-good story of a nation pulling together, the exclusionary narratives of urban calamity applied a racial and ethnic hierarchy to notions of victimhood and villainy, and the work of visual documentarians regularly abetted this project. As has been shown in each chapter, the visual record
reflects and amplifies a common narrative in which white, native born, wealthy Americans are mourned as victims and celebrated as triumphant rebuilders, while non-white and non-native born victims—often disproportionately affected by the disasters—play the role of either comic foil or monstrous scavenger.

Certainly, these images emerged during a seminal moment in the development of the contemporary United States, an era of imperialistic expansion, increased de facto and de jure segregation, and racial violence born out of the search for a national identity in the wake of civil war and unprecedented waves of immigration. While the fear of the new city is obvious in these images, the white fear of racial and ethnic others is just as prevalent, though hidden a bit deeper below the surface. But as I have striven to show in this dissertation, that fear—and the often violent hatred that developed in tandem to it—is every bit as important to understanding the visual response to urban disaster during this period. These are images that inadvertently record deep racial fears, even as they work to affirm and reassert a white supremacist view of disaster response and reconstruction. Put most succintly, the visual record of urban disaster between 1861 and 1906 sought to contribute to the shaping of a white-dominated racial hierarchy in the United States, abetting American imperialist work abroad by shoring up racial and class pride at home when such notions were most greatly challenged. In the face of disaster, these images sought to create a thrilling, tragic, maudlin, shocking, but ultimately reaffirming view of American urban growth among its largely white, upper class audience.
IV: After 1906

Disaster imagery continued to evolve following the early twentieth-century technological and democratizing changes in visual reportage exemplified in the documentation of the 1906 San Francisco earthquake and fires. Photography itself became a different animal – as the medium became available to anyone with an interest and a dollar to buy a Brownie camera,

While the democratization of the medium of photography surely had, to an extent, lifted the veil of absolute veracity from the work of disaster documentation, it is possible that the narrative control inherent in the genre instructed two very distinct eras of photography in the ensuing decades. The lines of inquiry that have guided this dissertation may well serve an examination of the relationship between late 19th- and early 20th century disaster imagery, and the imagery of the Depression and World War II. Lessons learned in the controlling of disaster narratives may well have influenced the Farm Security Administration in their creation of a New Deal-inspired take on Depression-era rural suffering, before World War II proved that the reality contained within the frame was too complicated to be simplified into stories of rebirth. These two record sets, I would argue, might well represent two opposite but equally inevitable end points for the disaster aesthetics narratives and aesthetic devices employed in ruined American cities in the preceding decades.

Visual documentation of disasters of all kinds continued unabated and enthusiastically in the decades following the 1906 earthquake in San Francisco, encouraged by the zeal of amateurs who turned their images into one-off postcards to send to friends and family, the rise of newsreel journalism, and improvements in printing technologies that allowed newspapers to cheaply recreate photographs on their pages of
such disasters as the 1918 fire in Cloquet, Minnesota, the 1919 Boston Molasses Disaster, and the 1927 Mississippi floods.

It was not until the 1930s, when the Dust Bowl and an international economic collapse ravaged towns and cities across the country, that disaster photography regained its prominent position in the conceptualization of American national identity. Roy Stryker and his team of photographers at the Farm Security Administration built upon the decades of lessons learned from disaster imagery, while at the same time turning to a more socially conscious view of the Depression, and produced heroic figures out of the sufferers themselves, finding optimism in their desire to rebuild their own lives rather than just their failing cities.

While it is possible that Stryker dusted off the lessons of previous generations of visual documentarists—both in the city and outside of it—in crafting his heavily controlled view of the nation’s suffering, it is arguable that the advent of the Second World War rendered the likelihood of such a single, unified, and all-encompassing narrative of disaster both virtually impossible and largely undesirable. Such controlled, positive, and largely fabricated narratives were impossible to achieve in the face of strict government control of depictions of the Second World War. Simply put, there was no easy way to put a positive spin on the Allied bombing campaigns that leveled cities in Europe and Japan; the devastation was too great, the motivations too obviously centered upon destruction rather than rebirth. Now that mankind possessed the ability to wipe out cities as easily as nature had in Chicago, Johnstown, Galveston, San Francisco, and countless other locales, optimistic stories of reconstruction were harder to sell. Decades of more stringent building codes and safer construction practices had not eliminated
urban disaster, but had reduced the number of preventable calamities like the Chicago fire and Johnstown flood. In the 1940s, by eliminating as much as possible the visual documentation of destruction in leveled cities like Dresden, Tokyo, Hiroshima and Nagasaki, the United States military in effect acknowledged that urban disaster was now at least as much within the purview of man as it was of nature. By the time images of American urban disaster returned to the front pages in the late 1940s and 1950s, the subjects had turned to the decidedly manmade disasters of race riots, central city decay, and urban renewal. The story could hardly have changed more. In the following decades, images of disaster would often be co-opted to serve decidedly non-nationalistic narratives, lending a far more nuanced light to readings of urban disaster that extends from the urban unrest of the 1950s and 1960s to twenty-first century depictions of such events as September 11 and Hurricane Katrina.
Appendix:

Figures
Key

The following images were drawn from a number of archives and online resources. After each caption, an abbreviation is listed in acknowledgement of the original source of the image. The abbreviations used herein are listed below.

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<th>Abbreviation</th>
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