

## 1.2

# General Wool and His Troops in the Streets of Saltillo, 1847

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It's the world's first photograph of war. And perhaps the world's earliest example of photojournalism; that is, a photograph made of an event for its newsworthy value. But the most remarkable thing about this image is that virtually no one ever saw it. The daguerreotype of General John Wool and his staff marching through the streets of Saltillo in occupied Mexico in early 1847 had absolutely no impact at all.<sup>1</sup> The anonymous daguerreotypist was almost certainly an American, one of several following the American troops through northern Mexico during the hostilities of 1846–48. The Americans called it the Mexican War. Many Mexicans still call it the US Invasion. Either way, it was an American land grab that resulted in the US acquisition of California and much of the present-day Southwest.

Daguerreotypes of the Mexican–American War are exceedingly rare. The photographic process had been announced only a few years before, in Paris in 1839, and though improved technology rapidly decreased exposure times, in 1847 it remained impossible to capture a clear image of a moving object. Photography was ill-suited to capturing combat, or action of any sort. For good reason, the vast majority of daguerreotypes were studio portraits, made in carefully controlled conditions, with subjects tightly clamped into special stands to keep them motionless while the photographer exposed his plate.

Nonetheless, the two extant collections of daguerreotypes relating to the Mexican–American War—at the Beinecke Library at Yale University and the Amon Carter Museum in Fort Worth, Texas—include a number of images made outdoors. The most dramatic depicts General John Wool parading with his troops down a street in occupied Saltillo. The photographer set up his tripod in the street, mounted his camera, and awaited the troops' arrival. He must have spoken to the General, directing him to halt the horses so he could make his photographic view. The General paused in his military duties; his men stopped behind him. The photographer made one image. The troops readjusted themselves slightly in the street. Then the photographer made another, as a dog looked on from the sidewalk and a bystander leaned out a window to watch.

The two resulting daguerreotypes are small, visually unimpressive objects, about 2 ¾ inches x 3 ¼ inches each. But examined up close, they are like magic talismans of the past. A daguerreotype is a unique image, made without a negative. The silver-coated copper plate, itself, is what is exposed in the camera. One winter day in 1847, light bounced off General Wool, hit a light-sensitive plate and left its lasting mark on its surface. Like a mirror with a memory, our plate still retains the impression of that fleeting moment. It was *there*.



**Figure 1.2** Unidentified photographer, *General Wool and Staff, Calle Real to South*, daguerreotype (sixth-plate image), c. 1847. Courtesy of Yale Western Americana Collection, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library.

But how could it be that the world's first photographs of war were never exhibited, never reproduced as engravings in the popular press, never given to the printmakers churning out imagined scenes of distant battles? Americans were hungry for news from the Mexican battlefields. Journalists took advantage of the new technology of telegraphs and steamships to convey their stories home with unheard of speed. And popular printmakers like Nathaniel Currier (later of Currier and Ives) hawked images on street corners to satisfy public curiosity about far-off events. But the daguerreotypes of the War found no market at all.

We now take for granted photography's value as a tool of documentation. But mid-nineteenth-century audiences didn't see things that way. They had to *learn* to value the literal realism of the new medium. They were accustomed to other ways of getting visual information about the war. Popular lithographs

conveyed dramatic narrative stories about heroic combat and brave deaths. These imaginative prints could compress events, highlight the moments that hindsight deemed decisive, and use printed captions to highlight the moral superiority of the American troops. Similarly, “transparencies” conveyed a heroic image of war no daguerreotype could match. These enormous back-lit paintings on wax-primed linen or cotton hung from buildings during public celebrations of the nation’s military triumphs. They combined imagery of current-day events in Mexico with heroic images from the nation’s past. Pictures from the American Revolution mingled with those from the Mexican battlefields; George Washington appeared alongside the generals who led the charge at Buena Vista and Vera Cruz. Daguerreotypes simply couldn’t compete. The small difficult-to-see image on the reflective surface of the daguerreotype plate could convey no patriotic associations, no narrative drama, no heroism at all. And those were precisely the things Americans had come to expect from visual representations of important events.

If the American public couldn’t quite figure out what to do with the photographic realism of the Mexican–American War daguerreotypes, it’s also fair to say that the photographers couldn’t quite figure out how to position their pictures in the visual marketplace. The daguerreotypes could not be mass marketed; they were singular objects. And although they could be given to printmakers to be redrawn and then printed as engravings or lithographic views, only one daguerreotype made in Mexico—a portrait of General Zachary Taylor—is known to have been reproduced. The photographers following the troops through Mexico were a ragtag bunch, without deep connections to American journalists or printers or consumers. Americans might have been interested in their work, but the daguerreotypists didn’t know how to bring their images before the public eye.

How fast the world changed. Fifteen years later, the photographs from the Civil War were public sensations. The invention of the glass plate negative process had made it possible to produce multiple paper prints from a single negative, make large format views, and attach descriptive captions to the photographs themselves. Immersed in a world of shocking battlefield images, Americans learned to read them as art and evidence. And photographers learned to cater to that popular demand.

One wants to make a hero of the enterprising photographer who followed the American troops in Saltillo, to enshrine him as the first of a long list of heroic photojournalists who risked much to make sure the world could see the true human cost of combat. But our photographer was no role model at all. Just a precursor, perhaps, whose lack of success points us to larger stories about how photographs became valued as documents of newsworthy events.

## Note

- 1 This essay is based on material developed at greater length in my essay, “Daguerreotypes of the Mexican War,” in Martha A. Sandweiss, Rick Stewart, and Ben W. Huseman, *Eyewitness to War: Prints and Daguerreotypes of the Mexican War, 1846–1848* (Washington, DC: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1989).