

CIVIL WAR DRAWINGS
FROM THE BECKER COLLECTION





The Aura of War

I suppose that I was the youngest artist sent to the field during the war. In parting with me Mr. Leslie said, solemnly, "Joseph, I don't expect to ever see you alive again." I was a slender, delicate fellow, and nobody believed that I could stand the wear and tear of the life I was to lead.

—Joseph Becker, December 14, 1905

LITTLE DID FRANK LESLIE KNOW in 1863, when he bid Joseph Becker a pessimistic farewell, that the frail young errand boy turned artist-correspondent would blossom and thrive while embedded with the Union armies during the American Civil War. Becker and his colleagues had a fairly straight-forward mandate – to meticulously observe and record the events and conditions of the war for the most popular illustrated newspaper of the day. Special Artists, as they were called, were sent to the field with drawing supplies, money, and an occasional assistant; but they were entirely dependent upon the armies for their safety and well-being. Some of the drawings in the exhibition were created to reward the generosity of a beneficent officer.

The sensitivity of a firsthand drawing was worlds apart from the machine aesthetic of a mass-produced engraving. The Special Artists sent their images to New York for printing knowing full-well that the subtlety and personality of their drawings would be erased in the works' subsequent iterations. Yet this did not deter the artists from including irreproducible and "inappropriate" details that they *knew* would never be published in the paper. Perhaps it was this very condition that compelled them, whether consciously or not, to include representations of the war's more repugnant aspects, and to encode the drawings with private meanings retained within the original artifacts, but sacrificed in print for the sake of propriety.

It is fascinating to consider the cathartic function of the drawings in relationship to the work of artist Kara Walker (whose Cooley exhibition preceded this one). In a 2005 print series, Walker appropriated engravings from *Harper's Pictorial History of the Civil War* (1877), disrupting their meanings with strange, oracular figures. Both Walker's prints, and the drawings in the Becker Collection, illuminate the capacity of the artist to act as witness to human suffering.

Stephanie Snyder

John and Anne Hauberg Curator and Director
Douglas F. Cooley Memorial Art Gallery

The Charge of "Fremont's" Body Guard by Major Layton
200 men
on 1500-2000 Secessionists
Springfield Mo

Oct 25. 61

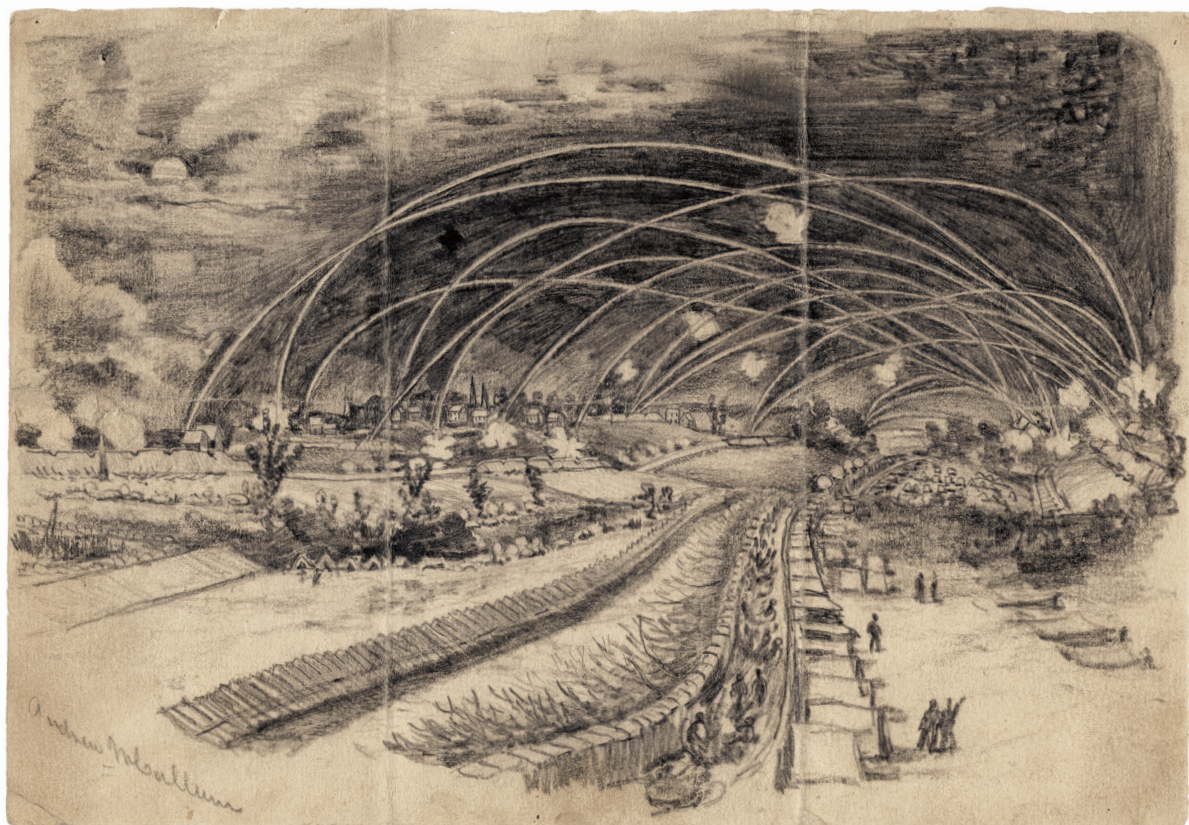
near sunset
clear sky -

Secessionists all
common dress.

Secessionist
Cavalry,



2 or 3 horses shot in the charge up the hill
went up in slow trot.



Civil War Drawings from the Becker Collection

Judith Bookbinder & Sheila Gallagher

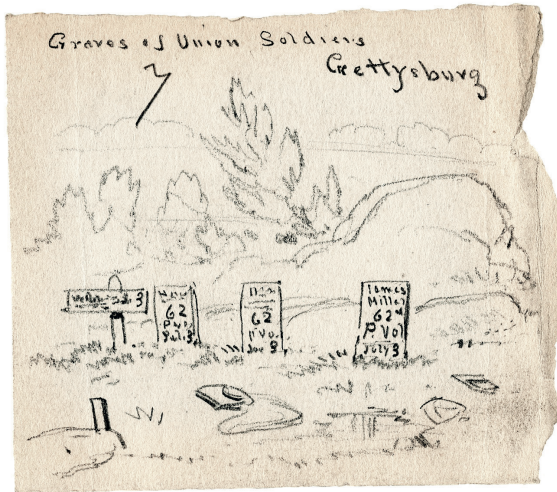
Civil War Drawings from the Becker Collection presents over one hundred and forty original drawings from the Becker Collection at Boston College, the largest body of American Civil War drawings in private hands. The collection was assembled by American artist Joseph Becker (1841–1910), who worked as an artist-reporter for *Frank Leslie's Illustrated Newspaper*. Becker and his colleagues documented and described the war while embedded with the Union armies. At a time when photography could only capture staged or still moments, the Special Artists risked their lives in order to witness history as it unfolded around them.

The drawings in the Becker Collection depict many of the Civil War's defining moments and rituals. Having survived the vagaries of battle, travel, and editorial whim, they are among the era's most informative artifacts. As the United States observes the sesquicentennial of the Civil War, these remarkable, somewhat humble works of art provide invaluable insight into the contributions that nineteenth-century pictorial artists made to the development of American journalism, and the history of American art.

BETWEEN ART AND INFORMATION

In nineteenth-century America, news was consumed by a voracious reading public. Three quarters of Americans were literate, and books, magazines, and newspapers reached readers by road, water, and eventually rail. The telegraph and the Transatlantic Cable made national and international news more accessible and immediate. Publishing became increasingly centralized in New York, Philadelphia, and Boston, and new printing and engraving technologies brought text and image to the public with ever increasing speed.

Between 1861 and 1865, *Frank Leslie's Illustrated Newspaper*, *Harper's Weekly*, and the *New York Illustrated News* sent artist-correspondents to live and travel with the Union armies. Embedding Special Artists with the military was a new practice. Hungry for images of the conflict, readers eagerly studied the intricate depictions of officers, soldiers, battles, and army life that appeared in *Leslie's* pages. During the war years *Leslie's* published 2,336 engraved reproductions based on the drawings of the Special Artists.



IN THE MIDST OF BATTLE

Each Special Artist was attached to a particular division of the Union armies, but moved as circumstances changed. With smoke and noise filling the air, bodies falling around them, and chaos on every side, they worked to capture the conflict's action while highlighting salient details. After a battle, Special Artists often returned to the scene to speak with survivors, revising and annotating their work. The artists labored in cold, dank tents, if they were fortunate, or outside on the ground, surrounded by carnage. As they finalized their drawings, Special Artists often embellished them with their opinions, commenting on the vanity of an officer, or the bravery of a regiment. They also added specific instructions for the engravers in New York.

TIME AWAY FROM CONFLICT

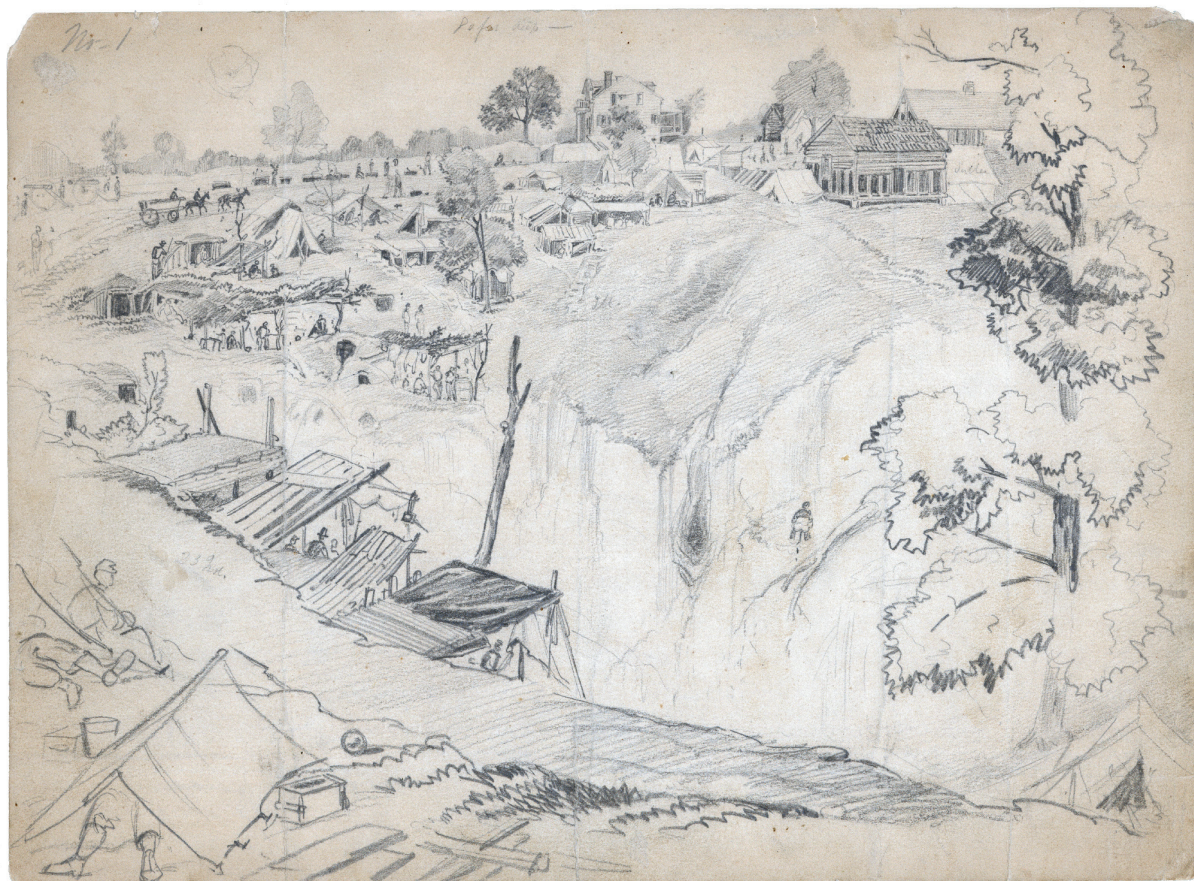
Only a modest portion of a Civil War soldier's life was spent in active combat, which meant that in addition to more dramatic images of battles and ravaged cities, Special Artists also documented executions, special

occasions, and the war's particular architecture – the trenches, observation towers, and prisons. Images such as Joseph Becker's scene of Thanksgiving preparations during the Siege of Petersburg gave families back home a reassuring vision of domesticity and hope. In other drawings, soldiers are shown relaxing, procuring food, convalescing, worshipping, and laundering. Such images offered respite from the seemingly endless death and destruction reported in the press.

FROM THE FIELD TO THE PUBLIC

Before revolutionizing pictorial journalism in the United States, Frank Leslie (b. Henry Carter in Ipswich, England, 1821) was an accomplished engraver for the *Illustrated London News*. In 1848 he emigrated to New York City, where he established *Frank Leslie's Illustrated Newspaper* in 1855. By 1860, the paper had a weekly circulation of nearly 100,000 and a reputation for aggressive reporting.

During the war, Frank Leslie not only had the most Special Artists in the field, but he also employed over



one hundred and twenty craftsmen to transform the drawings into printable engravings. The process required great skill. First the drawings were copied onto blocks of hard Turkish boxwood. Then *Leslie's* engravers carved the images into the blocks by precisely removing the areas of the wood that would not be inked. Brilliantly, Leslie divided the boxwood into as many as forty smaller sections. Once the individual blocks were complete, they were fastened back together, and a durable electrotyped metal plate was created from the wood matrix, enabling mass printing onto paper. *Leslie's* craftsmen could complete the entire process within two to three days after receiving an original drawing from the field.

POST WAR STORIES

At the end of the war, Frank Leslie turned to other stories, dispatching Joseph Becker to Ireland in 1865 to record the connection of the eastern end of the Transatlantic Cable. In 1869, Becker traveled westward by train as the rails were completed, drawing Chinese laborers and other immigrants at work. Once in San Francisco, Becker drew scenes of Chinese immigrant life. *Leslie's* published Becker's western drawings from 1869 to 1871 in the

series *Across the Continent*. In October 1871, Becker and James Taylor traveled to Chicago in the aftermath of the Great Fire. Their drawings of the city's recovery efforts raised *Leslie's* circulation to a record high of 470,000. In the early 1870s Becker depicted the thriving Shaker community in Mount Lebanon, New York. In 1873, *Leslie's* reproduced a group of Becker's Shaker images. The artist's keen eye for the beauty of Shaker ritual, and the distinctiveness of Shaker architecture, made the illustrations a popular success, and they were reprinted five times within twelve years.





ILLUSTRATIONS

COVER:

Edward F. Mullen (American, active 1859–1872), *Drumming Out a Coward Officer* (detail), date unknown, Graphite on wove paper, 6.75 x 9 in.

OVERLEAF:

Henri Lovie (American, b. Prussia, 1829–1875), *Charge of Fremont's Bodyguard at Springfield, Missouri* (detail), October 25, 1861, Graphite and ink on wove paper, 9 x 14 in.

INTERIOR, left to right:

Andrew McCallum (1821–1902), *Siege of Petersburg, A Night Attack*, March 31, 1865, Graphite on wove paper, 6.5 x 9.5 in.

Joseph Becker (American, 1841–1910) *Graves of Union Soldiers at Gettysburg*, September–October 1863, Graphite on paper, 4 x 3.5 in.

Joseph Becker (American, 1841–1910) *Opium House*, 1869–1870, Gouache and graphite on toned paper, 9.5 x 9.5 in.

Joseph Becker (American, 1841–1910) *Something to Coax the Appetite: Exhuming the Bodies of Union Soldiers During the Siege of Petersburg*, November 2, 1864, Graphite on wove paper, 9.75 x 13.25 in.

Unknown artist, *At the General Hospital in Richmond, Virginia*, April 1865, Graphite on toned paper, 5.25 x 9 in.

Frederic B. Schell (American, active 1862–1886), *Siege of Vicksburg, Life in the Trenches*, May–June 1863, Graphite on heavy gauge wove paper, 9.5 x 13.5 in.

Joseph Becker (American, 1841–1910) *Workmen Digging the Railroad Bed*, 1869–1870, White gouache and graphite on toned paper, 6.5 x 10 in.

Edward F. Mullen (American, active 1859–1872), *Crows Nest Signal Station on the James River*, date unknown, Graphite on wove paper, 9.5 x 5.25 in.

Henri Lovie (American, b. Prussia, 1829–1875), *Brigadier General Rosecrans and Staff in Clarksburg, West Virginia*, July 1861, Graphite on wove paper, 9 x 14 in.

Joseph Becker (American, 1841–1910) *Mode of Punishing Negro Soldiers*, October 31, 1864, Graphite and charcoal on wove paper, 6.5 x 10 in.

CIVIL WAR DRAWINGS FROM THE BECKER COLLECTION

February 5 – April 20, 2013

Douglas F. Cooley Memorial Art Gallery, Reed College

The Douglas F. Cooley Memorial Art Gallery, Reed College, is proud to present over one hundred and forty original Civil War era drawings from the Becker Collection at Boston College. The Becker Collection contains over six hundred previously unexhibited and undocumented drawings by American artist Joseph Becker and his colleagues – nineteenth-century artists who worked as artist-reporters for *Frank Leslie's Illustrated Newspaper* during the Civil War.

Artist-reporters were charged with recording detailed images of the battles, troop movements, and daily activities of the era. Completed in the field, the drawings were couriered to *Leslie's* offices in New York where they were transformed into engravings and printed. This truly unique exhibition provides an opportunity to study and appreciate these national treasures, not only for their aesthetic qualities, but also for their relationship to contemporary forms of illustrated journalism.

Drawings from the Becker Collection premiered at the McMullen Museum at Boston College in the exhibition *First Hand: Civil War Era Drawings from the Becker Collection* which was organized by the McMullen Museum and underwritten by Boston College and Patrons of the McMullen Museum.

Civil War Drawings from the Becker Collection is curated by Judith Bookbinder and Sheila Gallagher from the Department of Fine Arts at Boston College. The exhibition is organized for tour by Curatorial Assistance Traveling Exhibitions, Pasadena, California (CATE), a nonprofit organization dedicated to creating opportunities for access, outreach, and education in the visual arts through the origination and circulation of diverse and innovative exhibitions for museums and art organizations worldwide.

The exhibition is organized for the Douglas F. Cooley Memorial Art Gallery by Stephanie Snyder, John and Anne Hauberg Curator and Director; Colleen Gotze, Registrar and Program Coordinator; Gregory MacNaughton, Education Outreach and Calligraphy Initiative Coordinator; Allison Tepper, Curatorial Assistant; and Cooley Gallery interns Nick Irvin and Santiago Leyba. The publication is designed by Heather Watkins, Portland, Oregon.

Public programming is organized by the Cooley Gallery in collaboration with Crystal Williams, Dean for Institutional Diversity and Associate Professor of Creative Writing, and an interdisciplinary group of Reed College faculty. Please visit the Reed Public Events website for information: www.reed.edu/ppls

HOURS: NOON TO 5 P.M., TUESDAY – SUNDAY, FREE
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The mission of the Douglas F. Cooley Memorial Art Gallery is to enhance the academic offerings of Reed College with a diverse range of scholarly exhibitions, lectures, and publications.

COOLEY

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