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### Lesson 3: Photography and the Civil War

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#### Background

Greater Cincinnati served as a major recruitment and training ground for the Union Army during the Civil War. The Ohio River was also a regional border between free states (Ohio, Pennsylvania and Indiana) and slave states (Kentucky). And Cincinnati was a center for the abolitionist movement, including Levi and Catherine Coffin who operated a route through Cincinnati for freedom seekers escaping slavery along the Underground Railroad. When the Civil War began in April of 1861, the region's economy, which relied on steamboat and rail trade with southern states, dropped dramatically. However, Cincinnati served as a headquarters and staging depot for the Union Army, supporting businesses such as steamboat builders, tent manufacturers, wagon makers and warehouses. Photography studios were also busy taking portraits of tens of thousands of soldiers before heading off to war.

#### Prompt

How does photography form a visual record of the events leading up to and culminating in the Civil War?

#### Reference Images



Image 1

[Three soldiers], 18th Ohio Infantry, carte-de-visite, 1861-1864. Library of Congress.



Image 2

[Freedom Seeker], (front and back), carte-de-visite, September, 1862, James P. Ball, Library of Congress.

### Academic Fields

#### Social Studies:

- Disputes over the nature of federalism, complicated by economic developments in the United States, resulted in sectional issues, including slavery, which led to the American Civil War.
- Key events and significant figures in American history influenced the course and outcome of the Civil War.
- Cultural biases, stereotypes and prejudices had social, political, and economic consequences for minority groups and the population as a whole.
- Historians analyze cause, effect, sequence, and correlation in historical events, including multiple causation and long- and short-term causal relations.

### Documentary Reference Clips

Clip 1: James Presley Ball, 22:32 -30:35.

Clip 2: Photography Goes to War, 30:44 - 38:40.

Clip 3: Documenting the Underground Railroad, 37:52 - 40:56.

Clip 4: Battlefield Photographers, The Homefront, 35:48 - 38:42

### Discussion Questions

- How was photography used during the Civil War?
- Why are images like Ball's *Freedom Seeker* rare? What dangers did James Ball face for taking this image?
- How does the growing number of Black and/or female photographers align with American civil rights movements beginning in the mid-1800s. (Ball, Seneca Falls convention, Civil War, etc.)

### Activities

- Create a Civil War timeline using photographs found from archival sources.
- Talk about the structure of *Freedom Seeker*. What do you think is happening based on the composition and subject? Then watch the clip and talk about the image again. Research original sources that describe events surrounding the *Freedom Seeker*. How do they help us understand this photo?

### Online Resources

- [Three Soldiers] photograph: There are numerous books about photography and the Civil War photography. National and regional archives have tens of thousands of photographs of Civil War soldiers and sailors in the form of daguerreotypes, ambrotypes, tintypes and carte-de-visite. Some soldiers are identified. Many are not. We have chosen as an example one studio photograph of three soldiers from the 18<sup>th</sup> Ohio Infantry taken by Isaac Bonsall who had a

studio in Cincinnati before serving as an official photographer of the Union's Army of the Cumberland.

- [Three soldiers], carte-de-visite, 1861-1864, Isaac Bonsall. Library of Congress. LOC title: [First Lieutenant Robert S. King, Second Lieutenant James W. Slater, and Captain Milton W. Halsey of 18th Ohio Infantry Regiment, in uniforms with American flag and cigars]. Library of Congress Archive link: <https://www.loc.gov/item/2017659644/>
- [Freedom Seeker] photograph: A number of scholars, including Dr. Theresa Leininger-Miller, University of Cincinnati, have conducted extensive research on this rare photograph which is preserved in the Library of Congress (see link below). The carte-de-visite, taken by James Ball, documents a rare moment on the Underground Railroad. Our knowledge of this image stems from several resources:
- The [Freedom Seeker] photographs, Library of Congress. LOC title: *Jesse L. Berch, quartermaster sergeant, 22 Wisconsin Regiment of Racine, Wis. [and] Frank M. Rockwell, postmaster 22 Wisconsin of Geneva, Wis. / J. P. Ball's Photographic Gallery, No. 30 West 4th St., betw. Main and Walnut Sts. Cincinnati, O.* Library of Congress Archive link: <https://www.loc.gov/item/2017659644/>
- An autobiography written by Levi Coffin. *Reminiscences of Levi Coffin, the reputed president of the underground railroad: being a brief history of the labors of a lifetime in behalf of the slave, with the stories of numerous fugitives, who gained their freedom through his instrumentality, and many other incidents.* "Rescue of a Slave Girl by Two Union Soldiers," pp. 606 – 618, Library of Congress Archive link: <https://www.loc.gov/item/13005748/>
- E.B. Quinner's Military History of Wisconsin, Chapter 30, 22 Wisconsin Infantry Regiment, p. 698 (Cincinnati and Kentucky). Wisconsin Historical Society Archive link: <https://content.wisconsinhistory.org/digital/collection/quiner/id/16635>

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**Leininger-Miller**, Theresa. "James Ball," African American National Biography, Vol. 1, New York, NY: Oxford University Press and Harvard University, 2008, pp. 244-245.

**Leininger-Miller**, Theresa. *An American Journey: The Life and Photography of James Presley Ball*, exhibition review, Cincinnati Museum Center (May 1-Oct. 24, 2010), Nineteenth-Century Art Worldwide, Vol. 10, Issue 2 (Autumn, 2011): n.p. <https://www.19thc-artworldwide.org/autumn11/review-of-an-american-journey-the-life-and-photography-of-james-presley-ball>

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