



Photographs of the Lincoln White House

LYDIA T E D E R I C K

Abraham Lincoln assumed the office of president of the United States on March 4, 1861, an innovative period for photography. He was the first president to be photographed extensively and is thought to have sat for as many as thirty-six photographers on sixty-six occasions.¹ His White House also became the subject matter for a growing number of photographers. Their work enables us to see the Executive Mansion at an important time in our nation's history.

By the 1860s, photography had undergone several important developments. The most significant change was the ability to produce paper prints from glass negatives. Photographic images no longer had to be unique but could be reproduced for a larger audience. Average people could now afford to have their portraits made at a studio and to buy images of celebrities and scenic sites for their own collections.

Early photographic formats, such as daguerreotypes, ambrotypes, and tintypes, were unique, or one-of-a-kind, images exposed on nonpaper supports. A daguerreotype, for example, was a positive image made directly on a sheet of copper, plated with a highly polished coating of

silver. It could appear as either a positive or a negative depending on the angle it was tilted. The only way it could be copied was by rephotographing the original. Subject to corrosion and abrasion, the fragile daguerreotypes were displayed behind glass in small hinged cases.²

Prints on paper, on the other hand were easier to produce and display. Made from glass plate negatives, they could be copied endlessly and were subsequently more affordable. Glass negatives were prepared using the wet collodion process, a technique that was popular from 1855 until it was replaced in the 1880s by the gelatin dry-plate negative process. In a dark room, a glass plate was covered with collodion, a syrupy liquid, and a silver nitrate solution and then placed into a special holder for protection. If the photographer was outside the studio, this step was undertaken in a specially constructed tent or covered wagon. Timing was important because the exposure had to be made while the plate was still damp. The subject was posed and placed into focus before the plate holder was inserted into the camera. A protective shield and the lens cap were then removed to expose the plate. The exposure could take approximately fifteen to thirty seconds. To avoid blurriness, studios often used props or headrests to help the sitter remain still. The exposed plate then had to be developed in a darkroom and washed. When the negative was dry, it was placed on a sheet of light-sensitive paper and exposed to the sun to create a positive print. The paper most commonly used from the mid-1850s

Tad Lincoln stands on the North Drive of the White House in this carte de visite by Henry Warren, a detail of the photograph reproduced in its entirety on page 34, taken in March 1865.

until the early twentieth century was coated with albumen, an emulsion of egg white, and brushed with light-sensitive silver salts.³

Multilens cameras were developed that could expose several images simultaneously on a glass plate. With a four lens camera, where two pairs of images were created, each pair was stereoscopically related. When printed, the images could be mounted as two stereographs or separated as four smaller cartes de visite. A large number of photographs could be produced quickly from original negatives.⁴

Cartes de visite and stereographs were perhaps the most popular photographic forms available during the 1860s. A carte de visite was a photograph mounted onto a card that was similar in size to a calling card, approximately 2¼ by 4 inches. A stereograph had two nearly identical images mounted side-by-side. When seen through a special viewer, a three-dimensional effect was achieved. Any antique shop today is likely to have for sale “stereo slides.” Perhaps millions were made, many by amateurs, and among the amateurs were many women.

Cartes de visite were acquired to such an extent that special albums were sold to house the collections. Prints of family members were displayed along with Civil War heroes, political leaders, and scenic views. The Lincoln family was no exception and had an album while living in the White House. Their album contained views of Washington, D.C., including the White House, Lafayette Square, the War Department, the Treasury Building, the Capitol, the Post Office Department, and the Smithsonian Institution.⁵

Determining the photographer of a particular image can be very difficult. Many were simply not identified. At that time, it was not uncommon for publishers or major studios to buy the negatives from other photographers and print and publish them as their own. E. & H. T. Anthony & Company, for example, was a New York publisher and photographic supply firm that employed many photographers and purchased negatives from outside sources. Images published under the Anthony logo rarely name the actual camera operator. Mathew Brady's studio, while it was managed by Alexander Gardner, did make a special agreement with Anthony. The publisher was furnished with negatives to be mass-produced and distributed, for which Brady was paid a fee and given a credit line. Operators working for Brady, however, were not recognized.

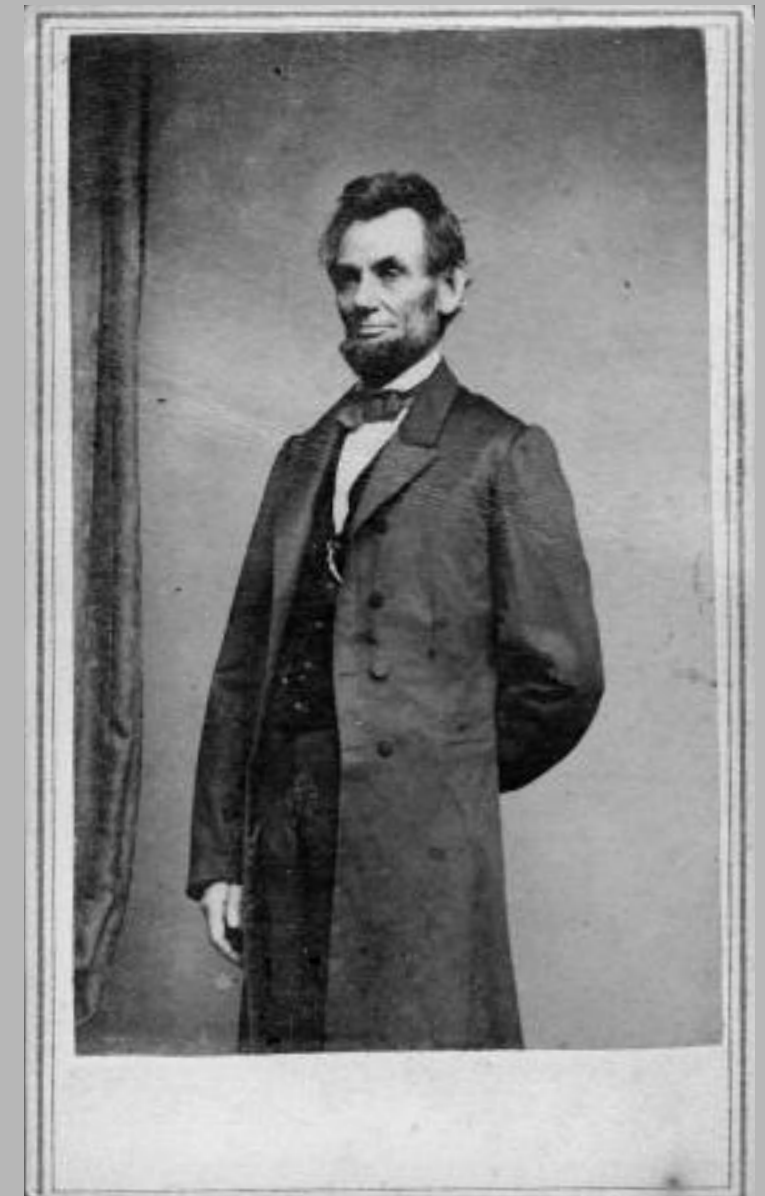
Photographs made by his employees were credited to Brady himself.⁶

Photographs of the White House from this period predominately feature the exterior of the building. Lighting interior spaces presented many challenges for photographers, and there are only a few images that show the interior of the house prior to the later 1860s.⁷ The photographs selected for this article are from the White House collection unless otherwise noted. The dates of some examples are not known, but they were selected because they reflect the appearance of the Executive Mansion while Lincoln was president.

Mathew B. Brady

With a gallery already established in New York, Mathew Brady opened a studio in Washington, D.C., in 1849 in hopes of making daguerreotype portraits of important Americans. The National Photographic Art Gallery, located on Pennsylvania Avenue between Fourth and Sixth Streets, NW, was not profitable, however, and closed after a few months. Brady returned to Washington in 1858 and tried again with Brady's National Photographic Art Gallery on Pennsylvania Avenue near Seventh Street in the top three floors of Gilman's Drugstore. This venture, initially managed by photographer Alexander Gardner, met with great success. It was established at a time when the innovative wet collodion process was being used and photographs were more affordable. Bad business deals and financial problems would eventually cause Brady to close his New York studio and declare bankruptcy in 1872. His Washington business did not close until 1881.⁸

Among his many accomplishments, Brady is also remembered for his efforts to document the Civil War. Under his name, teams of camera operators in specially equipped wagons were sent on location to photograph military life, battlefields, and the war's aftermath. Brady himself appeared in several of the images.⁹



Portrait of Abraham Lincoln, Carte de Visite by Mathew Brady, 1864

Mathew Brady was well known to the Lincoln family, all of whom were photographed in his Washington studio. Lincoln was first photographed by Brady on February 27, 1860, prior to the presidential candidate's delivery of his seminal speech at the Cooper Union in New York. That portrait was widely distributed, appearing on campaign buttons and cartes de visite. It was also copied by engravers for newspapers, books, and campaign posters. Lincoln would later say the Brady portrait and the Cooper Union speech put him in the White House.¹⁰ From a January 8, 1864, sitting at Brady's gallery, five poses were taken of the president, including this carte de visite image.¹¹ The reverse is marked with Brady's logo.



North Facade, Carte de Visite by Alexander Gardner, 1862

On various occasions during the Civil War, crowds were permitted to assemble around the North Portico for presidential addresses. From the center window over the main doorway, visible between the columns, the president would appear and speak to the gathering. It was from this location on April 11, 1865, two days after the Confederates surrendered at Appomattox Court House, that Lincoln spoke publicly for the last time.

Photographed from the central lawn, the north façade appears beyond an iron anthemion-patterned fence. The iron fence was placed along the north edge of the driveway in 1833 and, until its removal in 1872, enclosed a small garden where a bronze statue of Thomas Jefferson was displayed. A similar railing was also installed between the North Portico columns and as a parapet on either side of the portico; both were removed in 1902. The ornamental fences were inspired by an anthemion-band cornice placed in the East Room by architect James Hoban.



The White House, by Mathew Brady, c. 1860s

This photograph is affixed to a decorative Brady mount and shows the bronze statue of Thomas Jefferson that was a prominent fixture in front of the Executive Mansion during the mid-nineteenth century. Made in 1833 by French sculptor Pierre-Jean David (1788–1856), it was a gift to the United States Capitol by Uriah Phillips Levy (1792–1862), a naval officer and Jefferson admirer who purchased the late president's home, Monticello, in 1834.¹² At the request of President James K. Polk, the statue was moved to the North Lawn of the White House in 1847. It was returned to the Capitol in 1874 when President Ulysses S. Grant had it replaced by a fountain.



North Drive, 1860s

Opposite: Seen here as a carte de visite, this northeast view was also published as a 3-D stereograph (No. 1304 by E. & H.T. Anthony & Co.) and as such doubtless adorned many a souvenir album and parlor table. It shows Lincoln's White House from the northeast, looking up the broad stone sidewalk beside the graveled drive. This was the public entrance to the president's office and residence. The two lanterns in front of the corner of the building were added to the stone piers of an interior gate in 1852. The gates were removed in 1872 along with the northernmost lanterns and piers; the remaining lanterns were taken down in 1902. The southern gate piers remain to the present day.

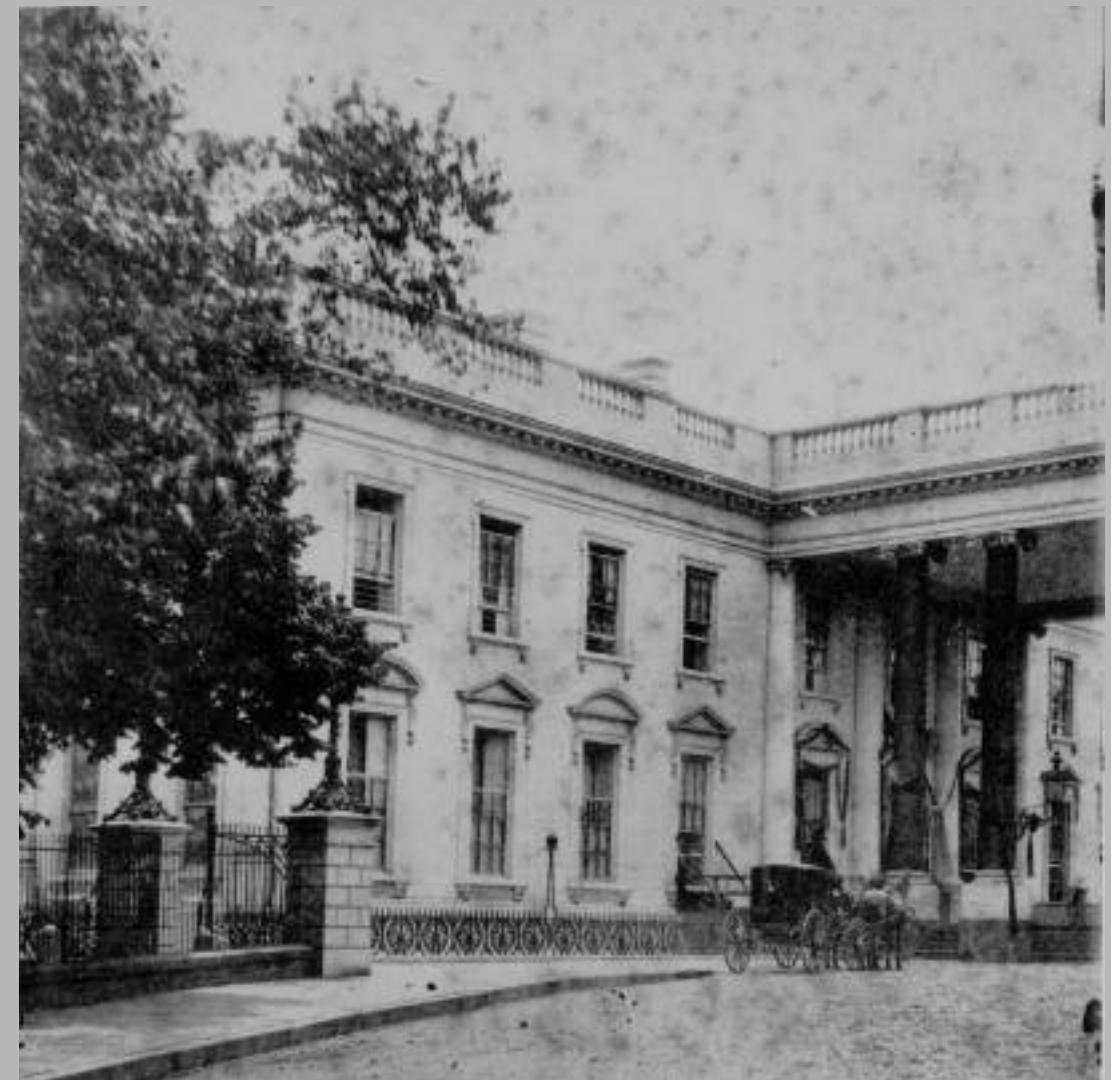
Above: The camera has been moved a bit to the west in this similar view of the north side of the White House dated 1864. General Montgomery C. Meigs (1816–1892), the owner of this print, was an engineer and architect who served as the quartermaster for the Union Army during the Civil War. A camera buff, he occasionally supplied images to Mathew Brady.¹³



Tad Lincoln, Carte de Visite by Henry Warren, March 1865

The boy standing on the roadway in front of the north facade is Lincoln's youngest son, Thomas "Tad" Lincoln (1853–1871). Soldiers appear in the background and may well be members of Company K, the 150th Pennsylvania Volunteers, also known as "Bucktails." The Bucktails, so nicknamed because of deer tails worn on their hats, provided protection for the president and his family during the war. Tad was popular with the soldiers, and as a memento, the Bucktails presented him with an album containing their autographed photographs.¹⁴

Late in the war, photographer Henry F. Warren from Waltham, Massachusetts, hoped to photograph the president but had no means of gaining access to him. A chance meeting with Tad, however, enabled Warren to establish a contact using the boy as an intermediary. On March 6, 1865, the busy president agreed to pose on the South Portico, and three images were taken.¹⁵ These are believed to be the last photographs taken of him.



The White House Draped in Mourning, Stereograph, 1865

This haunting stereographic slide is a rare view of the White House draped in black crape for the slain Lincoln. It must date from between April 15 and May 22, 1865, thirty days being the official period of mourning for a president. The photographer is not known. The house has been decorated by the longtime White House decorator and upholsterer, John Alexander, who supervised the other funeral arrangements, including building the catafalque, which still survives, upon which Lincoln's coffin rested in the East Room and in the Capitol. Note the platform or drawbridge built to the East Room window, to allow exit to viewing mourners and the six hundred people invited to attend the funeral.¹⁶

Editor's note: The moment captured by the picture gives pause: It might be surmised that the black crape is either being put up or taken down. If the latter, then perhaps the carriage—a White House carriage—is that which transported a grieving Mrs. Lincoln, Tad, and her seamstress, Elizabeth Keckley, to the railroad depot. While pure speculation, the sad, quiet departure might certainly have inspired a photographer as well as explain the odd angle of the picture.¹⁷



COLLECTION OF BOB ZELLER

SOUTH VIEWS



COLLECTION OF BOB ZELLER

Encampment on the South Grounds, Stereograph, c. 1861

A stereograph view, No. 1311 published by E. & H. T. Anthony, shows troops encamped on the South Grounds.¹⁸ The President's House and the East Terrace are visible through the trees in the background. During the initial months of the Civil War, troops were quartered in public buildings throughout Washington, including the East Room of the White House. Army barracks were also placed nearby on the "White Lot"—one day to become the Ellipse, an open space located south of the White House.



Children on the South Grounds, Carte de Visite, c. 1861–66

Children in Lincoln's time pose around a fountain that was built on the south grounds in 1858. It was a striking fountain consisting of two tiers and a shaft of entwined sea serpents rising over a large round pool, but the water jet rarely worked. By 1869, the fountain itself was removed.

But there is more. The west and east colonnaded terraces, seen to the left and right of the residence respectively, built at the suggestion of Thomas Jefferson to house service areas, were topped on the west in 1857 by a simple wood and glass greenhouse, seen at left. It burned in 1867 and was replaced with a larger structure. The East Wing was demolished in 1866 and not replaced for thirty-six years.

Who the children might be is not known—possibly Tad and Willie and their friends, as the grounds were made public only at special times so the boys could play there.





Soldiers on the south wall, Carte de Visite by Mathew Brady, 1862

In this carte de visite, which is actually dated, soldiers pose on the 12-foot stone wall built by Jefferson fifty-four years before to terminate the south grounds. The wall was demolished 1871–72. In the background, in front of the South Portico, the fickle fountain gives one of its rare performances, while the flagpole awaits its weekly surround of a tented platform from which the Marine Band played for a public afternoon. Performances were held on these otherwise restricted grounds throughout the Civil War, with the exception of the coldest winter weeks and the mourning period for Lincoln's son Willie. The president liked to lie on a sofa in the Blue Room, which opened at the top of the portico steps, and with shutters closed listen in privacy to the music.¹⁹



COLLECTION OF SET MOJMIAN

Workers Rolling the Grounds, Carte de Visite by Mathew Brady, 1862

Grounds workers “roll” smooth the president’s graveled walks with heavily weighted, water-filled “rollers.” At one time the grass had also been rolled regularly, but since the invention of the lawn mower in the 1830s the more or less level cutting reduced the desirability; yet the lawn was still occasionally rolled in the Lincoln period, to create the perfect carpet. This rare image of a commonplace activity at Lincoln’s White House is probably the earliest photograph of White House staff members at their daily work.

ALEXANDER
GARDNER



Lincoln's Last Sitting, Carte de Visite by Alexander Gardner, 1865

Alexander Gardner (1821–1882) emigrated from Scotland in 1856 and began working for Mathew Brady in New York. In 1858, he moved to Washington to manage Brady's newly opened gallery. In addition to being a savvy business manager, he was a talented photographer who was an expert in the wet collodion process. He left Brady in 1862 to work for the Army of the Potomac, under General George B. McClellan, photographing soldiers, campsites, and battlefields, especially the carnage left behind. Gardner photographed Lincoln on numerous occasions in the studio and at outside locations. When Gardner's own establishment opened, the president agreed to be his first subject and posed on August 9, 1863.²⁰ Gardner was on hand to document several momentous occasions during Lincoln's presidency, including both the 1861 and 1865 inaugurations, the president's meeting with General George McClellan after the battle at Antietam, October 3, 1862, and the dedication of the cemetery at Gettysburg, Pennsylvania, where the president delivered his famous address, November 19, 1863. He also photographed the Lincoln assassination conspirators and their executions on July 7, 1865.

Along with Mathew Brady, Gardner was an early advocate for photographic documentation of the Civil War. In 1866, his war photos were published in a two-volume set entitled, Gardner's Photographic Sketch Book of the War. One hundred hand-mounted photographs were featured and captioned by Gardner. For each, he added a credit line that acknowledged the work of the photographers under his employ and the individuals who made the prints.²¹

The image above is a retouched print of a likeness from Lincoln's last sitting with Gardner on February 5, 1865. The addition of the ribbon suggests that it was printed after Lincoln's death.²²

NOTES

- Lloyd Ostendorf, *Lincoln's Photographs: A Complete Album* (Dayton, Ohio: Rockywood Press, 1998), ix.
- James M. Reilly, *Care and Identification of 19th-Century Photograph Prints* (Rochester: Eastman Kodak Company, 1986), 50.
- Ibid., 4–5. Mary Panzer, *Mathew Brady and the Image of History* (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press for the National Portrait Gallery, 1997) 11, 13. See also www.npg.si.edu/exh/brady, a special website presentation that was created in conjunction with *Mathew Brady's Portraits* an exhibition held at the National Portrait Gallery, September 26, 1997–January 4, 1998. The site includes a glossary and an animated demonstration of the wet collodion process.
- Ostendorf, *Lincoln's Photographs*, 81, 83, 131.
- Mark E. Neely Jr. and Harold Holzer, *The Lincoln Family Album: Photographs from the Personal Collection of a Historic American Family* (New York: Doubleday, 1990) ix–x, 74. Photographs were removed from the family albums long ago. The albums and family-owned photographs, many of which could have been in the albums, are now in the collection of Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library in Springfield, Illinois. The Lincoln Museum in Fort Wayne, Indiana also has family-owned photographs that may have been in the albums. E-mail correspondence of the author with James M. Cornelius, Curator, Lincoln Collection, July 8, 2008, Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library.
- D. Mark Katz, *Witness to an Era: The Life and Photographs of Alexander Gardner* (Nashville: Rutledge Hill Press, 1991), 19, 31.
- Photographs of Lincoln-era rooms include those taken by Anthony Berger, of Brady's gallery, of the president in his office on April 26, 1864, one of which will be illustrated in William Allman's article in *White House History* no. 25, and a northeast view of the East Room published previously by the White House Historical Association. See William Seale, *The White House: The History of an American Idea*, 2d, ed. (Washington, D.C.: White House Historical Association, 2001), 104.
- Kathleen Collins, *Washingtoniana Photographs* (Washington, D.C.: Library of Congress, 1989), 24–25. See also Panzer, 18–20.
- Dorothy Meserve Kunhardt and Philip B. Kunhardt Jr., and the Editors of Time-Life Books, *Mathew Brady and His World* (Alexandria, Va.: Time-Life Books, 1977), 200–11.
- Ostendorf, *Lincoln's Photographs*, 34–37. See also Panzer, *Mathew Brady*, 15, 17.
- Ostendorf, *Lincoln's Photographs*, 168–69.
- The sculptor was David d'Angers. Susan R. Stein, *The Worlds of Thomas Jefferson at Monticello* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1993) 120.
- Katz, *Witness to an Era*, 20. Collins, *Washingtoniana Photographs*, 142.
- I would like to thank Dr. Wayne C. Temple for his observations and for the suggestion as to the identity of the soldiers. See also Margaret Leech, *Reveille in Washington* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1941), 303. Tad's album with its contents is in the Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library. See also Neely and Holzer, *The Lincoln Family Album*, ix.
- I would like to thank Keya Morgan, Keya Gallery, New York, for his assistance with documenting this carte de visite. This image, as well as several others that appear in this article, were acquired from Mr. Morgan. See also Ostendorf, *Lincoln's Photographs*, 213–15, 365–66, and Clifford Krainik, "Face the Lens, Mr. President: A Gallery of Photographic Portraits of 19th-Century U.S. Presidents," *White House History*, 16:28–30.
- Leech, 422. William Seale, *The President's House: A History* (Washington, D.C.: White House Historical Association, 2008), 408.
- Seale, *President's House*, 411
- Garry E. Adelman and John J. Richter, *99 Historic Images of Civil War Washington* (Oldsmar, Fla.: Center for Civil War Photography, 2006), 3.
- This custom began during the presidency of John Tyler and ended during the Herbert Hoover administration. Elise K. Kirk, *Music at the White House: A History of the American Spirit* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1986), 56. See also Seale, *President's House*, 390.
- Katz, *Witness to an Era*, 50–51. See also Collins, *Washingtoniana Photographs*, 212 and Ostendorf, *Lincoln's Photographs*, 122–23, 130.
- Alexander Gardner, *Gardner's Photographic Sketch Book of the Civil War 1866* (Reprint: New York: Dover Publications, 1959), introduction.
- Ostendorf, *Lincoln's Photographs*, 230–31.