

# SEEING AMERICA: James Henry Beard's *The Night Before the Battle*, 1865

**T**he *Night Before the Battle*, painted shortly before the end of the Civil War, “makes the spectator glad that peace is come” (*Seeing America*, 81).



James Henry Beard, (1814 – 1893)  
*The Night Before the Battle*, 1865  
Oil on canvas  
Gift of Dr. Ronald M. Lawrence, 78.15  
Collection of the Memorial Art Gallery of  
the University of Rochester

## The Art

Reality and fantasy co-exist in James Henry Beard's *The Night Before the Battle* where the artist has combined precisely rendered details of a Civil War encampment with the fantastic figure of a skeleton manning a cannon.

The painting is divided horizontally into three bands. In the foreground, illuminated by moon light and the embers of a fire, are a small gathering of sleeping soldiers. From the uniforms and the flag draped across the foremost figure, we recognize these men as Union soldiers. Also included in the foreground—painted with great precision and lit so they will not be missed—are a hand of cards, letter-writing paraphernalia, and a standard issue tin cup.



The middle ground is defined by the fortified wall of the encampment. Two cannons point out toward an unseen battlefield. The left-most cannon reflects the light of the full moon that also illuminates the skeleton's head and left hand. Off to the right, almost unseen, a sentry patrols in the darkness.



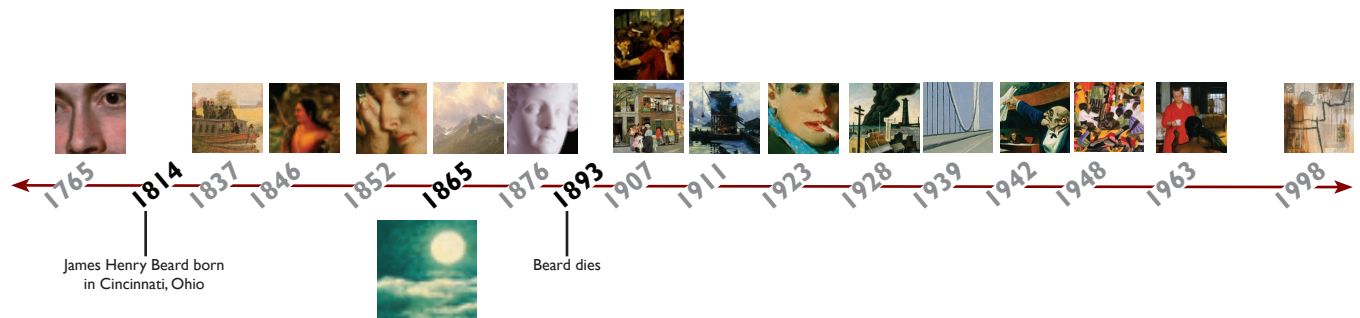
Sky fills the upper third of the painting. At the far left, a full moon emerges through and dramatically lights a bank of clouds. Other than moonlight, the painting's only other light is an indistinct ruddy glow in the distance.

*The Night Before the Battle* was painted in 1865 and first exhibited in May of that year at the **National Academy of Design**, just weeks after the end of the Civil War and assassination of President Lincoln. The horrific truth of the War is poignantly captured in both the painting's accurately rendered military details and the watchful, ever-present specter of Death.

### Glossary

**National Academy of Design:** Founded in 1825, as a professional organization of artists, its annual exhibition in the 19th century was the premier venue for American artists to show their work.

## The Artist



James Henry Beard (1814–1893) lived through an incredible transformation in America. An astute observer of momentous events and human nature, Beard depicted many aspects of nineteenth-century American life. Almost entirely self-taught, Beard was inspired by exhibitions that came to his home town, Cincinnati, Ohio, and by reports that his younger brother, artist William Holbrook Beard, brought from his travels to Europe.

Beard painted genre scenes and portraits. Among his most famous portraits was that of the distinguished military hero, William Henry Harrison, who was elected on the Whig ticket in 1840 to the presidency of the United States. Reportedly, Harrison planned to appoint Beard to a diplomatic position, which would have allowed him to study in Europe, but the president died of pneumonia after only one month in office and Beard never was given the job.

Although he was in his early fifties, James Henry Beard enlisted in the Union Army. According to his son Daniel, Beard led and financially underwrote a mission to bring wounded Union soldiers back to the Covington, Kentucky/Cincinnati, Ohio, area for medical treatment. Beard was familiar with the battlefield and the many forts surrounding the Cincinnati area as this was a strategic region. Located in a free state but directly across the Ohio River from the slave state Kentucky, Cincinnati had become a major stop on the Underground Railroad. The city was also strategically important to the Union. Shipyards manufactured gunboats, and other factories produced boilers, armor plating, and cast iron cannons. The city also was a major distribution point for grain, pork, beef, other food, and military supplies to the Union armies serving in the Western Theater. The Confederate Army had planned to attack Cincinnati in September 1862, but the plan did not succeed.

In 1870 James Henry Beard moved to New York City, where he was elected to the National Academy of Design. Much of his later work featured animals, particularly dogs. Several of his six children became artists, but his most famous child was Daniel Carter Beard, who founded the Boy Pioneers, which in 1910 became the Boy Scouts of America.



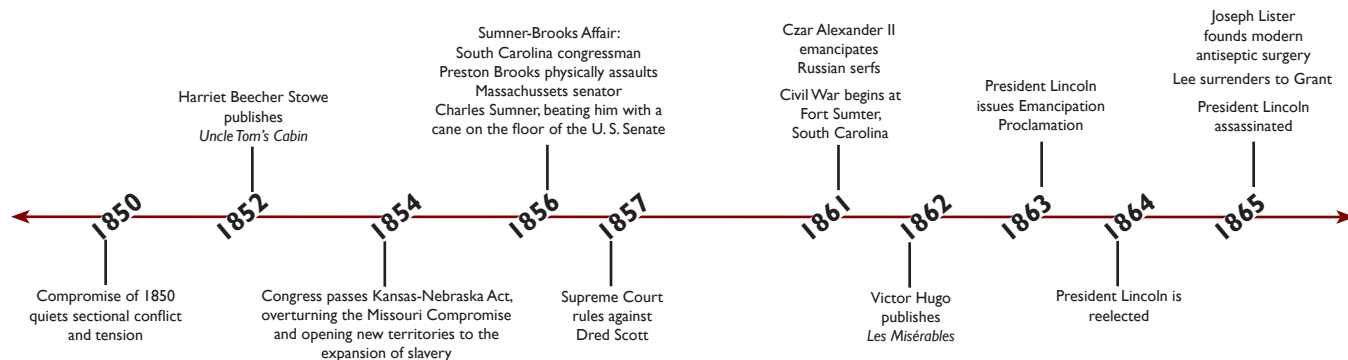
FRANK LESLIE, ART DIRECTOR, ILLUSTRATION OF THE BARRACKS OF THE OHIO RIVER, FIRST DRAWN BY GEORGE HENRY AS A BARRACKS CAMP, AND LATER BY THE VIEW AS A FORTIFICATION CAMP BY COURTESY OF THE WAR

Frank Leslie  
*Camp Dennison near Cincinnati, Ohio, 1862*  
*Leslie's Weekly Illustrated*



Samuel A. Cooley  
*A 200-pound Parrott rifle in Fort Gregg on Morris Island, S.C., 1865.*  
 National Archives and Records Administration  
 165-S-128

# America



1865 was one of the most significant years in American history. April that year marked the end of the Civil War and the assassination of President Lincoln. A war that both North and South had anticipated would be ended swiftly and victoriously for their cause lasted four years—almost to the day—and claimed the lives of more than 600,000. Hundreds of thousands more were wounded, widowed, orphaned, and impoverished. In his Second Inaugural Address in March 1865, war-weary President Lincoln spoke to the American people of his vision of peace to come. “With malice toward none, with charity for all, with firmness in the right as God gives us to see the right, let us strive on to finish the work we are in, to bind up the nation’s wounds, to care for him who shall have borne the battle and for his widow and his orphan, to do all which may achieve and cherish a just and lasting peace among ourselves and with all nations.”

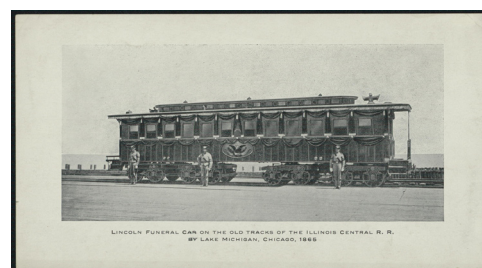
A month later, Abraham Lincoln became the first United States president to be assassinated, another victim of a war that continues to shape American history in the 21st century.

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See also Susan Dodge Peters Daiss, “James Henry Beard: The Night Before the Battle (1865),” in Marjorie B. Searl, ed., *Seeing America: Painting and Sculpture from the Collection of the Memorial Art Gallery of the University of Rochester* (Rochester, NY: University of Rochester Press, 2006), 81–84.



Winslow Homer (1836 – 1910)  
*The Surgeon at Work at the Rear During an Engagement, 1862*  
 Wood engraving  
 Gift of Howard and Florence Merritt, 86.28  
 Collection of the Memorial Art Gallery of the University of Rochester



*Lincoln funeral car on the old tracks of the Illinois Central Railroad by Lake Michigan, Chicago, 1865*  
 Photograph  
 Library of Congress, Rare Book and Special Collections Division, Alfred Whital Stern Collection of Lincolniana  
 Portfolio 5, no. 48/49



## Classroom Activities: Seeing America Through Artists' Eyes

### Observing Detail

What clues in the painting tell where and when this was?

How does knowing the title, *The Night Before the Battle*, shape the meaning in this painting?

What questions would you ask the artist?



### Comparing and Contrasting

Much like a painter, Civil War photographer Alexander Gardner was known to arrange the subjects of his photographs for maximum effect on the viewer. Compare the details of the painting *The Night Before the Battle* with Gardner's photograph. Compare the psychological effect of the painting with that of the photograph.



James Henry Beard, (1814 – 1893)

*The Night Before the Battle*, 1865

Oil on canvas

Gift of Dr. Ronald M. Lawrence, 78.15

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Alexander Gardner (1821 – 1882)

*The Home of a Rebel Sharpshooter*, Gettysburg, July 1863

Library of Congress

LC-B817-7942

## Exploring the Context/Drawing Conclusions

From 1861-1865 Americans relied upon its artists and photographers to show the public images of the war front. Winslow Homer did frequent drawings and sketches from the battlefield for *Harpers Weekly*. What information could the public learn from these engravings?



Winslow Homer (1836 – 1910)

*A Shell in the Rebel Trenches, 1863*

Wood engraving

Gift of Howard and Florence Merritt, 86.30

Collection of the Memorial Art Gallery of the University of Rochester



Winslow Homer (1836 – 1910)

*The Union Cavalry and Artillery Starting in Pursuit of the Rebels Up the Yorktown, 1862*

Wood engraving

Gift of Howard and Florence Merritt, 86.27

Collection of the Memorial Art Gallery of the University of Rochester



Winslow Homer (1836 – 1910)

*The Army of the Potomac - A Sharp Shooter on Picket Duty, 1862*

Wood engraving

Gift of Howard and Florence Merritt, 86.29

Collection of the Memorial Art Gallery of the University of Rochester



Winslow Homer (1836 – 1910)

*The Surgeon at Work at the Rear During an Engagement, 1862*

Wood engraving

Gift of Howard and Florence Merritt, 86.28

Collection of the Memorial Art Gallery of the University of Rochester



Winslow Homer (1836 – 1910)

*Christmas Boxes in Camp - Christmas, 1861, 1862*

Wood engraving

Gift of Howard and Florence Merritt, 86.25

Collection of the Memorial Art Gallery of the University of Rochester



## Exploring the Context

Genre paintings give us a picture of people's everyday lives and are a window into the social, political and economic issues of their times. Two works of art painted at approximately the time as James Henry Beard's Civil War painting *The Night Before the Battle* reflect other issues facing the Americans of 1865: labor unrest and life on the frontier. What can you learn from these paintings?



Mortimer Smith (1840 – 1896)

*Home Late*, 1866

Oil on canvas

Marion Stratton Gould Fund, 75.139

Collection of the Memorial Art Gallery of the University of Rochester



David Gilmour Blythe (1815 – 1865)

*Trial Scene (Molly Maguires)*, ca. 1862–1863

Oil on canvas

Marion Stratton Gould Fund, 41.24

Collection of the Memorial Art Gallery of the University of Rochester

## Exploring the Context

Letters, such as the one on the gunpowder cask next to the sleeping soldier in *The Night Before the Battle*, provide very valuable insights into the lives of the soldiers and the War. Discover more about these men by reading some of their letters. Many are available online at <http://www.civilwarletters.com/index.html> or <http://spec.lib.vt.edu/cwlove/>.

## Exploring the Context

Artists are keen observers and commentators on the world in which they live. Use *The Artist* and *America* timelines to consider the effect of American history and art history as reflected in their artwork. In what ways did the artist capture or reflect the events, mood and/or values of his/her America? In what ways did the artist continue or alter the American art traditions he/she would have seen?

## Finding and Analyzing Point of View

Compare James Henry Beard's painting of *The Night Before the Battle* with a popular song from 1865 with the same title. Hear the music (no verses) <http://www.pdmusic.org/civilwar2/65tnbtb.mid>.

“The Night Before the Battle” (1865)

Words by Robert Morris, Esq.

Music composed by Jean Louis

1.  
‘Twas night before the battle,  
The moon was beaming bright,  
But death’s red storm would rattle  
With morning’s early light.  
A soldier from his bosom,  
A beauteous portrait drew,  
And kissing it he murmured,  
IN LIFE OR DEATH I’M TRUE.  
CHORUS  
And kissing it he murmured,  
In life or death I’m true.

2.  
I knew her in her childhood,  
And loved her even then,  
We wandered through the wildwood,  
Oh! may we meet again  
What ever fate betide me,  
His sword he slowly drew,  
I never can forget her,  
In life or death I’m true.  
CHORUS  
I never can forget her,  
In life or death I’m true.

3.  
My home, where birds are singing  
Amidst each summer’s bloom,  
And green vines, round it clinging,  
My quiet cottage home.  
God bless my white-haired father,  
My mild-eyed mother too,  
They gave me to my country  
For they are tried and true.  
CHORUS  
They gave me to my country  
For they are tried and true.

4.  
He fought as fight the fearless,  
‘Twas often hand to hand,  
And when the day was over,  
His name rang through the land  
And she who sat in silence,  
Each breath in tremor drew;  
But see, He comes a victor,  
All hail! the tried and true.  
CHORUS  
But see, He comes a victor,  
All hail! the tried and true.

We are grateful for the generous support of this project from the Anne and Vincent DeClue family and our School Program sponsors: Dominion, Bank of America, the Mary W. Clark Trust and two anonymous donors. Additional support is provided by Thomson Reuters, the Chester and Dorris Carlson Charitable Trust, Mr. and Mrs. Thomas F. Judson Jr., Rochester Gas and Electric Corporation, Hammer Packaging, the estate of Estelle B. Goldman and an anonymous donor for the McPherson Director of Education.





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