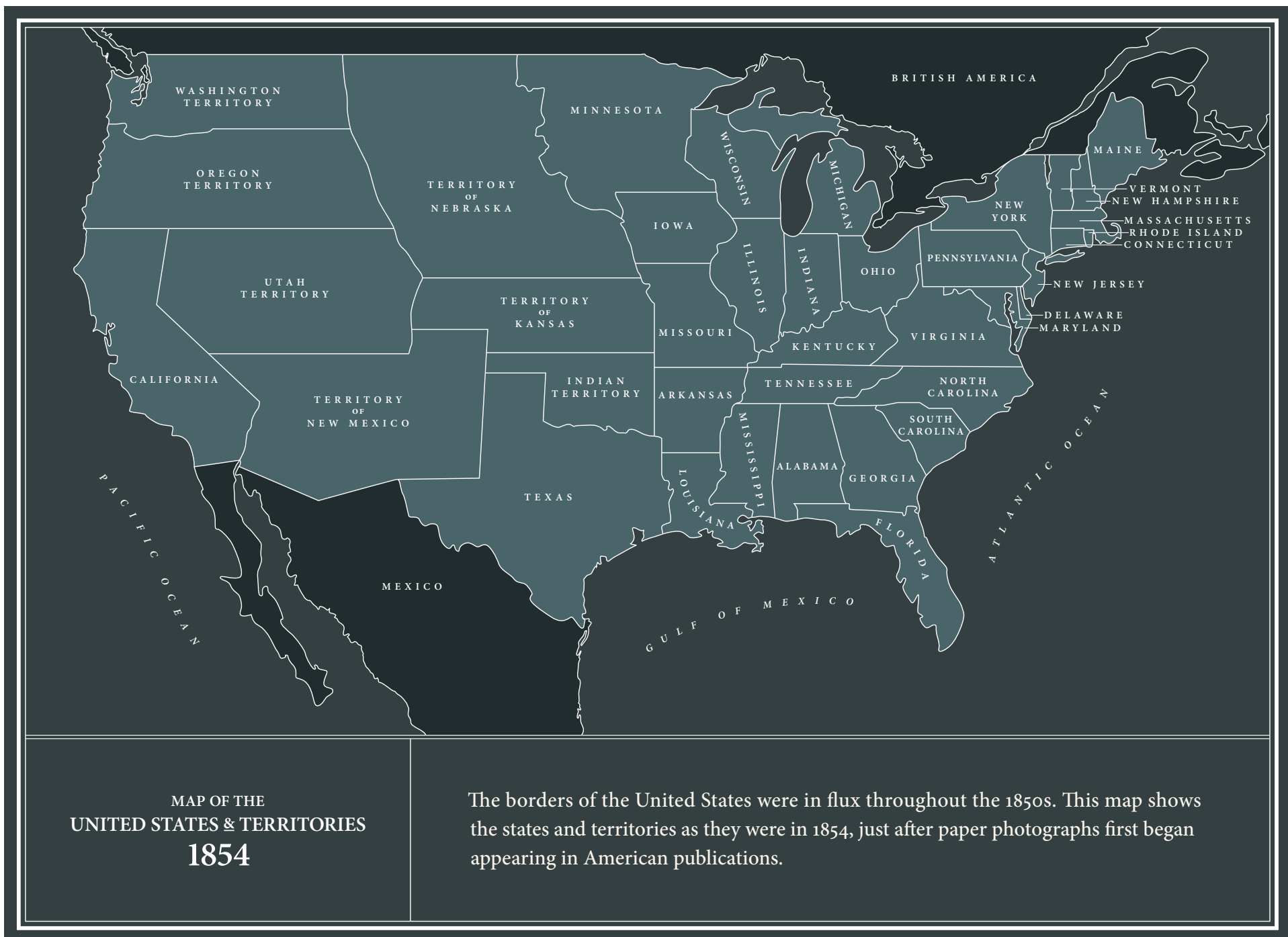


# PAPER PROMISES

## EARLY AMERICAN PHOTOGRAPHY

Today we rely on photography to share images of the world quickly, easily, and affordably, but at first the capacity to produce photographs in duplicate was not fully appreciated in the United States. While Europeans quickly adopted techniques that enabled photographs to be printed from negatives in multiple, Americans initially preferred processes that resulted in unique photographs on metal or glass. Nonetheless, in the late 1840s and into the 1850s a few intrepid entrepreneurs tested the advantages of producing paper photographs from negatives. Some of the rare negatives and paper photographs from that early era of American experimentation are on view here. By demonstrating the promise of photography on paper, they helped to pave the way for a surge in demand for photographic reproduction as Americans moved westward and onto the battlefields of the Civil War. Paper photographs not only documented the development of the country during a tumultuous time, but also shaped and circulated perceptions of the nation's transformation.





# EARLY EXPERIMENTATION

Early American photographers experimented with a range of techniques and formats, many of which produced singular images on metal or glass that could not be easily duplicated. Seeking a medium best suited for the burgeoning nation, some photographers used negatives to print photographs on paper in multiple. To secure the widest possible market, they made images for a variety of purposes: scientific investigation, celebrity portraiture, tourism, historic preservation, corporate and self-promotion, and firsthand documentation of newsworthy events. Ranging from intimate mementos to political propaganda, paper photographs made from paper or glass negatives promulgated ideas about America and Americans, profoundly influencing the nation's cultural and political course.



# PORTRAITURE

Photographic portraits on metal and glass, like the earlier painted miniatures they were meant to resemble, were typically passed from hand to hand among tight-knit communities. But paper portraits could be shared with friends and family farther afield, tucked into correspondence, for instance, and bound into albums. Sitters eager to promote themselves as upright members of the professional class turned to photographic portraits on paper. As the use of negatives to produce photographs in different formats began to catch on, studios rushed to photograph celebrities, demonstrating the promise of photographic reproduction as a mass medium.



# SHAPING THE IMAGE OF THE COUNTRY

Reproducible photographs were crucial in many of the most contentious debates of the middle to late nineteenth century. Photographers documented the people and places of territories annexed by the United States as disputes over state and federal sovereignty intensified. Paper photographs of American Indian and Japanese delegations to Washington, D.C., were reproduced in newspapers, putting a face to escalating struggles over domestic and international treaty negotiations. Intellectual property claims became as contested as land claims, and photography proved useful in testing patent applications as well as challenging property boundaries. All the while, news reports fretted that con men were using paper photographs to counterfeit currency. Photographs of construction in the nation's capital reflect the degree to which the country's identity and the new medium of photography were being forged in tandem at midcentury.



# WESTWARD EXPANSION

During the gold rush and the ensuing expansion of American territories, photographs became increasingly instrumental in shaping debates about the country and its future. While the detailed resolution of daguerreotypes was highly valued, paper photographs were more adaptable: they could be printed in different sizes, combined with captions, sequenced into narratives, and more widely distributed. Making their way into courtrooms, halls of government, and house-hold parlors, paper photographs informed assessments of the West as a resource ripe for exploitation and settlement.



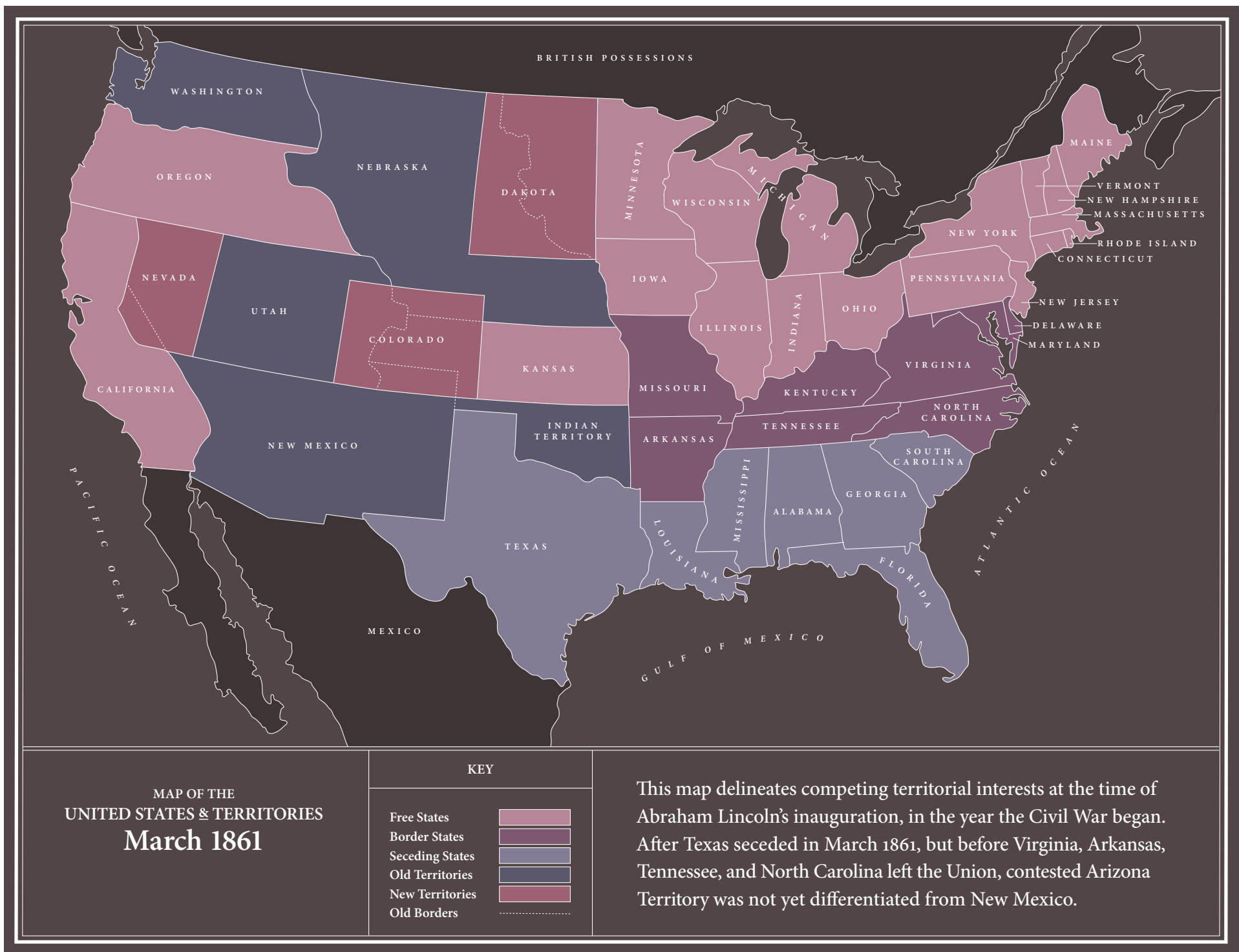
# CIVIL WAR

Paper photographs from negatives proliferated during the American Civil War as families torn apart by the conflict sought personal mementos that could be easily shared and saved. Soldiers had their portraits made upon enlistment, and civilians clamored for images from the battlefield. Paper photographs were used to distribute information among officers as well as to sway public sentiment. Images of slaves and of Abraham Lincoln, for example, rallied support for the Northern cause. Alongside the other graphic arts of the time, reproducible photographs informed people's opinions about the causes and costs of the war.

“America swarms with the members of the mighty tribe of cameristas, and the civil war has developed their business in the same way that it has given an impetus to the manufacturers of metallic air-tight coffins and embalmers of the dead. The young Volunteer rushes off at once to the studio when he puts on his uniform, and the soldier of a year's campaign sends home his likeness that the absent ones may see what changes have been produced in him by war's alarms.”

—*The American Journal of Photography*, October 1, 1862







# THE POSTWAR ERA

By the end of the Civil War, reproducible photographs had become commonplace. Stereo photographs were an increasingly pervasive medium, offering both education and entertainment to consumers hungry for images of family dramas, newsworthy events, and sites of interest. Many households had a hand-held viewer, while some had a larger cabinet viewer. Much as television today offers a collective visual experience, families gathered to share stereographic series, both out of curiosity about the wider world and as an escape from their daily lives. Stereographs remained a popular form of instruction and amusement into the early twentieth century.



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