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The Army of the Potomac- A Sharpshooter on Picket Duty, from Harper's Weekly, November 15, 1862

Winslow Homer

Born: Boston, MA, 1836

Died: Prout's Neck, ME 1910

Wood engraving on paper

Image: 9 1/8 x 13 3/4 in.

Smithsonian American Art Museum

The Ray Austrian Collection

Gift of Beatrice L. Austrian, Caryl A.

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1996.63.50

[Collections Webpage and High Resolution Image](#)

This image of a soldier was made during the Civil War. It was published in a popular illustrated newspaper, Harper's Weekly. The artist, Winslow Homer, sometimes traveled with the Union Army. Researcher Ann began with the following questions:

- **How and where did Homer see sharpshooters like the one in this picture?**
- **How did Civil War sharpshooters fight, and what kinds of guns did they use?**

First I looked carefully at the image. After studying the illustration in reproduction, I looked at it in person on the wall of the museum. I looked for a long time and took notes so I wouldn't forget what I had seen. I always see much more in person than in even a good reproduction. I studied how Homer drew the gun, with the long telescopic sight fixed along the top of the barrel. I could see how heavy the rifle must have been by the way the soldier supported it with a tree branch.

I searched our museum library's online catalog to find books on Homer and checked out ones I thought would be relevant. I wanted important general books on Homer as an artist and about his images of the Civil War. I then searched online databases to find books about Homer in other

libraries and I put in orders for books that looked good to be sent to me through interlibrary loan. Then I searched online databases for journal articles. Some of these I printed from online services, while I copied other from magazines in our library. I also searched the web for archival sources about Homer, including his papers at the Archives of American Art, part of the Smithsonian Institution. I didn't try to get everything published-just the sources that would be the most useful. But it was still a lot of information!

Multiple books explain that Homer was a newspaper illustrator during the Civil War (Simpson, 1988, *passim*). Why weren't Civil War era newspapers illustrated with photographs like they are now? Photography had been invented, but there was not yet a photographic means of reproducing images in newspapers and magazines; also early photographic exposure times were too long to capture figures in motion. The only way to illustrate the fighting and other events of the Civil War was for artists to draw what happened (Davis, 1991). Homer saw Union sharpshooters in action when he traveled with the Army of the Potomac, part of the Union Army (Simpson, 1988). He sent drawings back to the headquarters of *Harper's Weekly* in New York City so the pictures could be engraved on wood blocks and printed in newspapers that were read by people all over the country. Illustrations like *Sharpshooter* usually appeared in *Harper's* only a few weeks after the events had happened (Davis, 1991). That seems very slow to us, but it was fast work in those days!

Sharp-shooter appeared on November 15, 1862-months after the Siege of Yorktown, Virginia, in April 1862, where Homer first observed sharpshooters according to a letter he wrote to his friend George G. Briggs in 1876 ([Box 1, Folder 1, Winslow Homer Collection, Archives of American Art](#)). The delay was because the illustration was based on a partially completed painting (*The Sharpshooter on Picket Duty*, 1863, Private Collection) that Homer made from his Yorktown sketches rather than directly on the sketches themselves (Cikovsky and Kelly, 1995). The wood engraving of Homer's illustration appeared with a caption that did not specify when and where it was drawn-"The Army of the Potomac-A Sharp-Shooter on Picket Duty," so it could apply to army actions months later. The November 15, 1862, issue of *Harper's Weekly* as it appears on the online database HarpWeek shows that "Sharp-Shooter" appeared alongside current reports on the Army of the Potomac in Virginia. (*Harper's Weekly*, vol. VI, no. 307 (November 15, 1862), 721-734). There were also illustrations that, like Homer's, were captioned without saying where and when they were drawn, such as "The Army of the Potomac-'Little Mac' [General George B. McClellan] Making His Rounds," by Thomas Nast. (*Harper's Weekly*, vol. VI, no. 307 (November 15, 1862), 725).

Books alerted me that in 1896 Homer wrote a letter to his friend George G. Briggs describing how he saw sharpshooters. Homer said "I was not a soldier-but a camp follower & artist." He saw the sharpshooters "when they were in a peach orchard in front of Yorktown in April 1862." The artist even included a drawing of what he saw when one of the soldiers let him look through his rifle sight (Simpson, 1988). [This letter](#), in the Homer collection at the Archives of American Art, is a vital primary source about this image. A search for related images revealed another

primary source-[an illustration of the Siege of Yorktown based on other drawings by Homer and an artist named Alfred Waud](#). Sharpshooters, as drawn by Homer at the Siege of Yorktown, appear at the lower left. Homer's original drawing of these sharpshooters has recently been rediscovered in a private collection, as I found out from an article in *Winterthur Portfolio* (Giese and Perkinson, 2011).

I looked for sources about Civil War sharpshooters in the notes and bibliographies of books that talk about Homer's illustrations, but I also searched libraries and databases. I found fairly recent publications as well as newspapers and books from Homer's era. A book by the historian of Berdan's Sharpshooters, as the most famous units of Union Army sharpshooters were called, tells the story of those sharpshooters at the Siege of Yorktown in the very peach orchard where Homer's recalled seeing them:

From the peach orchard fence the Sharpshooters proved themselves. In a very short time they succeeded in silencing a number of cannon in their front, which the enemy were unable to load, so fast and thick did Colt [revolving rifle], Sharps [rifle] and target-rifle bullets come in upon them...They were completely silenced, and the Sharpshooters thus demonstrated their efficiency for such an occasion." (Stevens, 1892)

This told me that Homer's illustration not only documented how a sharpshooter looked—it was made at a key early moment in the Civil War when Union Army sharpshooters proved they could be effective fighters against the Confederate Army.

What was a sharpshooter? A book on the history of rifles in the Civil War describes three kinds of fighting sharpshooters did: sniping, picket duty, and skirmishing. When sniping, a rifleman hid himself and used the recently introduced telescopic sight (like the one Homer shows mounted on the top of the rifle barrel) to pick off distant enemy soldiers with a long-range rifle. Men on picket duty, like Homer's *Sharp-shooter*, were guards around the edges of a force camping between battles. Skirmishers advanced in an open line in front of the main force during a battle, firing to break up the enemy force before the main body of men fought them. Most sharpshooters used lighter rifles without telescopic sights (Hess, 2008).

The Union Army's riflemen were excellent shots recruited by a famous marksman named Hiram Berdan. Here is a photograph from the collections of the Library of Congress of a proud [Union sharpshooter with his rifle](#). The Confederate army also had many excellent sharpshooters. The Union Army's sharpshooters were equipped with Sharps rifles and Colt revolving rifles (Plaster, 2008). What kind of rifle does Homer show? When I compared the rifle shown in Homer's illustration to the pictures of Sharps rifles and Colt rifles, it didn't match either one. You can see those rifles at this web site ([Target rifle](#), [Colt revolving rifle](#), [Sharps rifle](#)) but I used published photographs to be sure of their accuracy (Marcot 2007). At the suggestion of a fellow researcher, I e-mailed a curator at the National Firearms Museum to help me. He said that Homer's sharpshooter is using a target rifle that he brought from home, as books document many

sharpshooters doing. They used such a variety of rifles that they are hard to identify by comparing pictures (Marcot, 2007). I often consult an expert when I am researching topics that are new to me. But I do my home work first!

Putting together what I found and more information from the sources where I found it, I can start answering larger questions, including:

- **What was it like to be a Civil War sharpshooter?**
- **What was it like to be under fire by a Civil War sharpshooter?**
- **How did sharpshooters make the Civil War different from previous wars?**

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