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New Digital Tool Redefines Photo Sleuthing

A powerful new online research tool designed to help identify Civil War soldiers made its debut at the recent GBPA Civil War Show in Gettysburg. CivilWarPhotoSleuth.com, or CWPS, is a website that brings together technology and community, creating an entirely new approach to researching Civil War portraits.

The project has been years in the making. It represents a wide-ranging collaboration between *Military Images* magazine editor and publisher Ron Coddington, Virginia Center for Civil War Studies director Paul Quigley, and Professor Kurt Luther and his students at Virginia Tech's Department of Computer Science. CWPS is also guided by a stellar advisory board that includes Center for Civil War Photography President Bob Zeller, Civil War historian Matt Gallman of the University of Florida, and computer vision expert Devi Parikh, of Facebook and Georgia Tech.

CWPS aims to bring Civil War photo enthusiasts together, and provide them access to cutting-edge technologies and customized resources to support their research. It does this in three interconnected ways: an online photo archive, research tools, and an online community.

CWPS seeks to be the world's most comprehensive online archive of Civil War-era portraits, including soldiers, sailors and civilians. CWPS will encourage owners of photos scattered across computers, websites, books and shops around the world to add scans to our archive, making them accessible and searchable in one centralized place.

Powerful research tools to aid users identify portraits of unknown soldiers will augment this online archive. To search a mystery photo, the user can upload the image to CWPS, and "tag" it with whatever clues are visible, including unit and rank insignia, photographer details, and inscriptions. State-of-the-art face recognition software will then detect the soldier's face, analyzing dozens of unique reference points per face, and compare the points against tens of thousands of identified photos in our archive. Face recognition allows us to find matches even when the soldier's facial hair changes, or if a different view of him is in our archive.

Finally, CWPS will serve as an online community for Civil War photo enthusiasts. While technology remains a valuable tool, photo sleuthing ultimately involves a human process, requiring hard work and careful research from ourselves, and building on those who came before us. One of the greatest strengths of the site is that the more people use it, the more valuable it becomes. When you add an identified photo from your collection, it may instantly match a mystery photo that another user has been trying to identify for years. Likewise, if you search an unidentified photo and don't find a match at first, you will be automatically notified if a potential matching photo appears on the site at any point in the future.

The beta version of the site is now available. Visit CivilWarPhotoSleuth.com to join the email list and be among the first users to test and provide feedback about the software.

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