Ulysses S. Grant: Portrait of an Unknown Soldier
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Early in the War Grant was unknown to Americans who were busily engaged in hero worshipping Generals George B. McClellan in the North and Robert E. Lee in the South. Meanwhile, appointed as Colonel of the 21st Illinois, Grant went quietly about the business of training his regiment in the late spring of 1861. Early in August he found himself promoted to the rank of brigadier general and was sent to Cairo, Illinois where he was assigned command of Union troops in southern Illinois and southeastern Missouri. While in Cairo in October of 1861, wearing his beard much longer than usual, Grant sat for his first photograph as a Union officer. By chance, William Grant, a long bearded beef contractor wearing a Union uniform, was photographed at the same studio around the same time. The convergence of these two men at this particular moment in Cairo later led to confusion in the press over the appearance and identity of the North’s most successfully general, Ulysses S. Grant.

Grant’s star rose fast in the early months of 1862 with the fall of both Forts Henry and Donelson. The public naturally wondered who this successful Union soldier was and what he looked like, probably imagining that he was a large man with a soldierly bearing and an imposing appearance. The editors of the illustrated newspapers of the day desperately needed a picture of the hero, so when presented with the picture of Bill the beef contractor, who conveniently had been in Cairo at the same time as Grant, used the same photographer as Grant, and even slightly resembled Grant, they readily believed this large man with a full beard and ramrod straight posture must be the general. They had no way of knowing that Grant’s hairline was not the slightest bit receding, quite unlike the beef contractor’s, and he was more likely to slouch than stand up straight. Harper’s Weekly and Frank Leslie’s Illustrated Newspaper used both the real and the spurious image of Grant for about two years. In one version of this image, “Grant” sports large epaulets on his shoulders; in the other he wears the insignia of the rank of major general, or two stars. The March 8, 1862 issue of Harper’s Weekly proudly displayed the epaulet portrait on its cover. The portrait showing the two stars on each shoulder was sold to the public in the CDV format. Even unsuspecting soldiers in Grant’s army purchased it, according to newspaper reporter Sylvanus Cadwallader. This CDV is being sold occasionally yet today on Ebay as an authentic picture of Grant. Other odd looking
portraits of Grant were painted by imaginative artists of the day, were not based particularly on any one individual and often bore only a slight resemblance to their subject. Only William Grant was unique in that he was a real person who had the honor of being mistaken for the true hero of the War.


**Bibliography on the Spurious Grant CDV**


3. "[Grant at Vicksburg]." *Harper's Weekly* 7 (1863): 376-77. Figure is on a horse and his arm is upraised. It is not Grant.

4. Harris, Brayton. *Blue & Gray in Black & White: Newspapers in the Civil War*. Washington: Brassey's, 1999. Has material on Grant, Sherman, and Cadwallader. Includes a comparison of Grant visages as published in the newspapers, including the one of William Grant, beef contractor, who was mistaken for the general. Times reporter Franc Wilkie's vivid description of Grant in camp is also included.


8. "[Spurious Picture of Grant]." *Harper's Weekly* 6 (March 8, 1862): 145. Large picture of the man believed to be Grant early in the War.
"Maj. Gen. Ulysses S. Grant" (Union).