

Naval Illustrators



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Alexander Simplot: 'Special Artist' for Harper's

By Gary McQuarrie

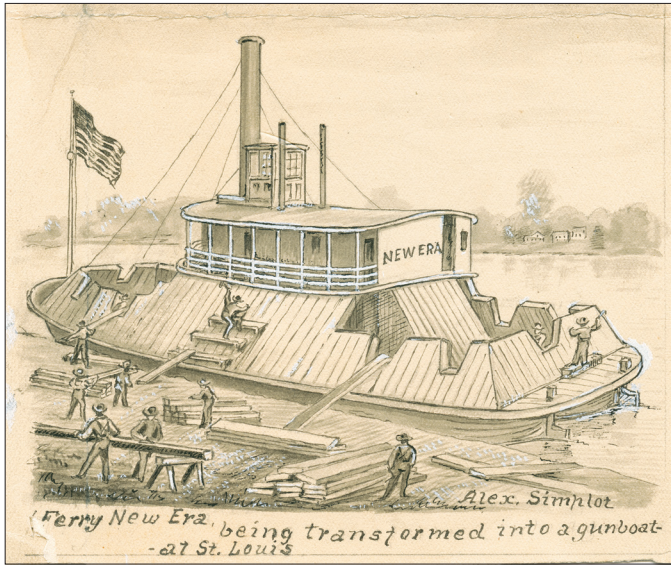
ALEXANDER SIMPLOT (1837-1914) worked for *Harper's Weekly* (1861-1863) as a 'Special Artist' during the Civil War. *Harper's* published 50 illustrations based on Simplot's sketches and drawings, the fourth highest total for *Harper's* and the thirteenth highest total for any identified 'Special Artist' among the illustrated newspapers during the war. Among the 'Special Artists' of the illustrated newspapers, Simplot lacked the formal artistic training and commercial experience, but he was a skillful artist in his own right.

Simplot was born to French immigrant parents on January 5, 1837 in a log cabin on Main Street in Dubuque, Iowa. In Dubuque, he made drawings of steamers as a boy and displayed considerable talent as an artist, but was discouraged by friends and relatives as this profession was looked down upon. Because of his father's business success, Simplot was very well educated, attending public schools in Dubuque, then spending four years at Rock River Seminary in Mount Morris, Illinois, where he was a classmate of John Rawlins, who would become General Ulysses Grant's chief of staff. After graduating from Rock River in 1855, he attended Union College, Schenectady, New York, graduating in June 1858. At Union College, while studying a classical course of study, he also



Alexander Simplot and his wife, Virginia, 1866. Image ID 86871. Courtesy of the Wisconsin Historical Society.

Alexander Simplot: 'Special Artist' for Harper's



Ferry New Era Being Transformed into a Gunboat at St. Louis, 1861. Pencil drawing by Alexander Simplot. Image ID 32891. Simplot, A. (Alexander), 1837-1914: A. Simplot papers and drawings, 1866-1911. Courtesy of the Wisconsin Historical Society.

furthered his drawing and oil painting skills. Afterward, he returned to Dubuque and taught school for a short period.

In response to President Lincoln's first call for volunteer troops, members of Dubuque's two volunteer companies boarded the river steamer *Alhambra* for departure on April 22, 1861. Simplot was in attendance in the large crowd at the riverfront—he sketched the scene of the troops' departure and promptly sent the drawing to *Harper's*, which published the illustration (*Harper's Weekly*, Volume V, No. 230, p 327, May 25, 1861). Based on his artistic ability, *Harper's* immediately requested that he provide further drawings from the western theater, as the newspaper lacked an adequate staff of artists early in the war—within a few weeks, Simplot traveled to Cairo, Illinois as a war correspondent for the newspaper, a relatively serendipitous development.



THE GUN-BOAT NEW ERA, JUST BUILT AT ST. LOUIS, MISSOURI.—[SKETCHED BY A CORRESPONDENT.]

The Gun-boat *New Era*, Just Built at St. Louis, Missouri. [Sketched by a correspondent.] Illustration published in *Harper's Weekly*, Volume V, No. 250, p 646, October 12, 1861. The pencil drawing shown nearby was the basis for this illustration.

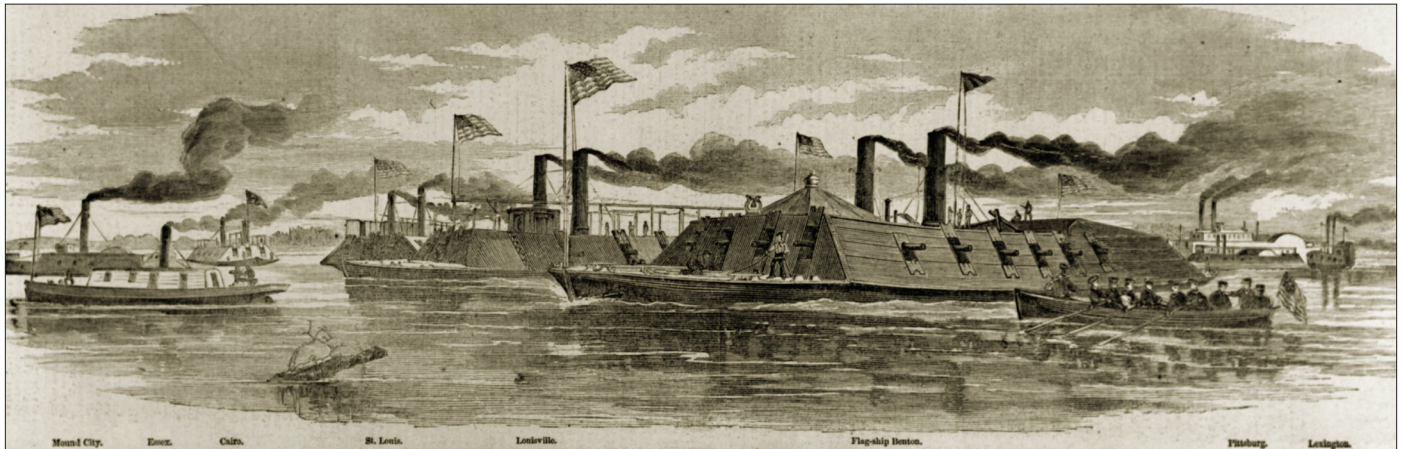
Simplot's sketches of Cairo, the river, the crowded steamers, and numerous local military camps soon appeared in *Harper's*. The heat and boredom of that summer was occasionally disrupted by the arrival of newly constructed mortar boats from Cincinnati and Carondelet, Missouri (below St. Louis). Simplot traveled to St. Louis (and to Carondelet), where he sketched gunboats under construction and other activities (*Harper's Weekly*, Volume V, No. 249, p 630, October 5, 1861; *Harper's Weekly*, Volume V, No. 250, p 646, October 12, 1861; *Harper's Weekly*, Volume V, No. 251, p 667, October 19, 1861) (some shown nearby).

Harper's was urging Simplot to get into the field with the armies and in early September, he promised to accompany the next campaign. In St. Louis, news correspondents were gathering to chronicle the anticipated achievements of Major General John C. Fremont, the "Pathfinder," who had been assigned command of the Department of the West. Simplot became one of the group of war correspondents from the New York, Chicago, and Cincinnati newspapers that came to be known as the 'Bohemian Brigade' for the "wild and carefree life we led," which also included 'Special Artist' Henri Lovie of *Frank Leslie's Illustrated Newspaper*. The gathering point for the army (and hence the Bohemian Brigade) was Jefferson City, Missouri. (NB: Simplot produced one of the only known illustrations of the Bohemian Brigade, a humorous depiction of how these correspondents killed time at the Virginia Hotel in Jefferson City [described by Simplot as a "wretched little tavern, eminently first class in its prices"]; this pencil drawing is now owned by a private collector.) And so, from early October to November, Simplot traveled on horseback with Fremont's army in Missouri. He had become a significant contributor to *Harper's* early pictorial coverage of the western theater (with numerous illustrations published during August, September, October, November, and December), before returning to St. Louis (a few weeks after Fremont was relieved of command) and then to Cairo (where many of the Bohemian Brigade had arrived), where General Grant was in command. There, Simplot met with Grant, recalling the following:

Having a letter of introduction to the general from his old time employer in the tannery business at Galena, Mr. Collins, and knowing Captain Rawlins, his adjutant general, in my school days when attending Rock River Seminary at Mount Morris, Illinois, I called at the headquarters to present my credentials. This was established in the second story of a three-story building fronting the levee and showed a series of unpainted desks and benches in a long store room. I found General Grant and Captain Rawlins both in, and on the presentation of my letter and recalling myself to the captain was pleasantly received, the general inquiring regarding his old friend, while Captain Rawlins recalled to mind many schoolmates of those days.

Simplot then accompanied Grant on his march to Belmont, Missouri, downstream from Cairo. By early February 1862, Grant and Flag Officer Andrew Hull Foote, in command of the Western Flotilla, transported almost 15,000 troops up the Tennessee River to a point several miles from Fort Henry. Simplot and *Leslie's* 'Special Artist' Henri Lovie, made the trip with Grant and his staff aboard *New Uncle Sam*, a large steamer with comfortable accommodations. When the gunboat bombardments of Fort Henry began on February 6, both 'Special Artists' went on deck to observe, but their view was obscured by heavy smoke from the guns. Following the surrender of the fort, both artists inspected the fort and prisoners. Most of Grant's army then marched to Fort Donelson on the Cumberland River, with the remainder transported along with the gunboats. After encircling the fort and shelling it from the gunboats, Grant anticipated a siege would be needed; however, by February 15, the Confederates left the fort to attack the right wing of Grant's army, and by the following day, the Union forces had overwhelmed the fort. Despite this great victory, both Simplot and Lovie had missed most of the fighting. Simplot did not leave Fort Henry until the morning of the 15th and it was late afternoon before he reached the army. The following day, he sketched the interior of Fort Donelson and reboarded *New Uncle Sam*. Both Simplot and Lovie turned to the reporters who had been with the army to gain information that could be used for sketches.

Alexander Simplot: 'Special Artist' for Harper's



Commodore Foote's Gunboat Flotilla on the Mississippi.—Sketched by Mr. Alexander Simplot. Illustration published in *Harper's Weekly*, Volume VI, No. 265, p 52, January 25, 1862.



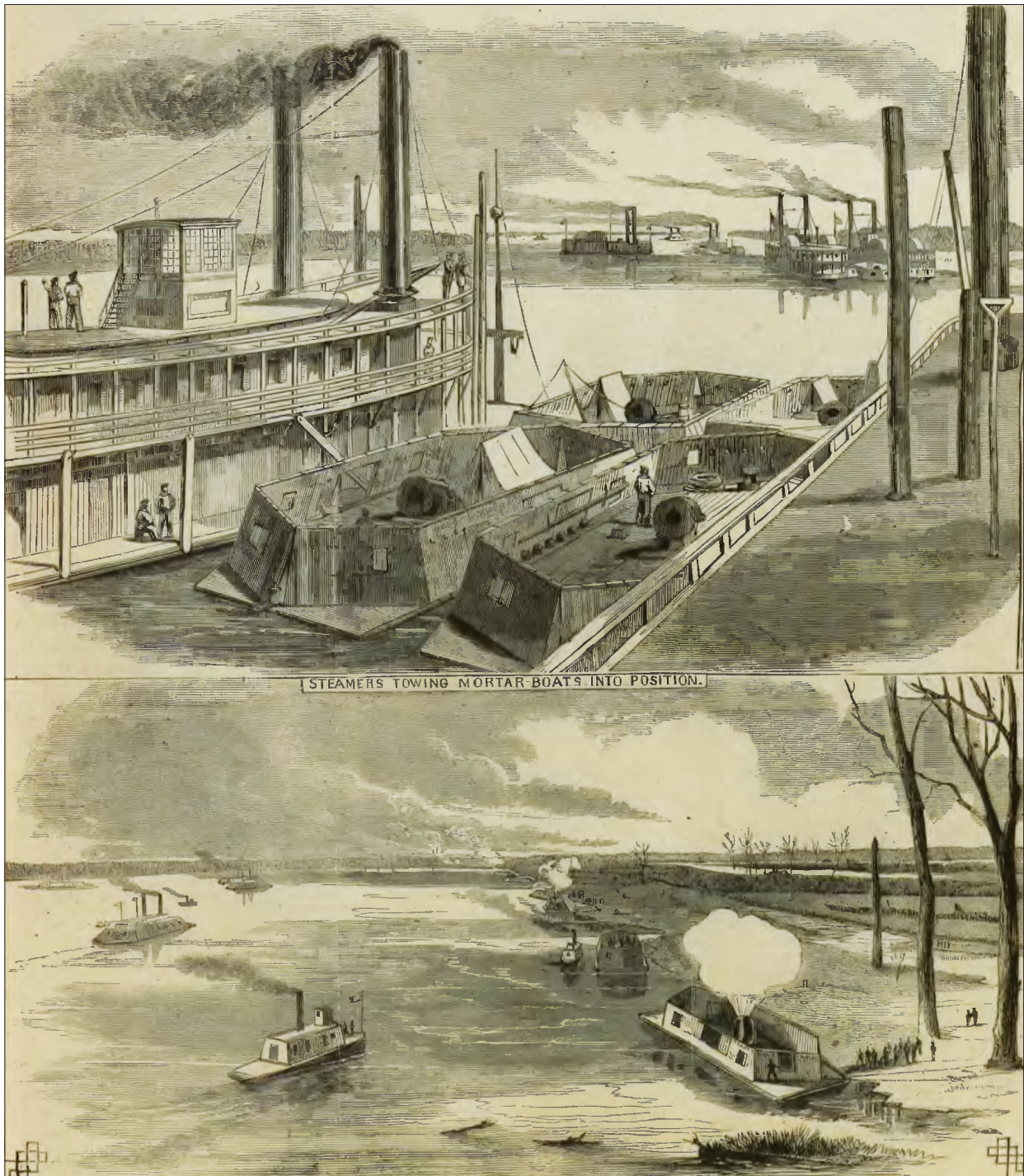
The Attack on Fort Henry, Tennessee.—Sketched by Mr. Alexander Simplot. Illustration published in *Harper's Weekly*, Volume VI, No. 270, p 133, March 1, 1862.



The Gun-Boat Attack on the Water Batteries at Fort Donelson.—Sketched by Mr. Alexander Simplot. Illustration published in *Harper's Weekly*, Volume VI, No. 272, p 164, March 15, 1862.

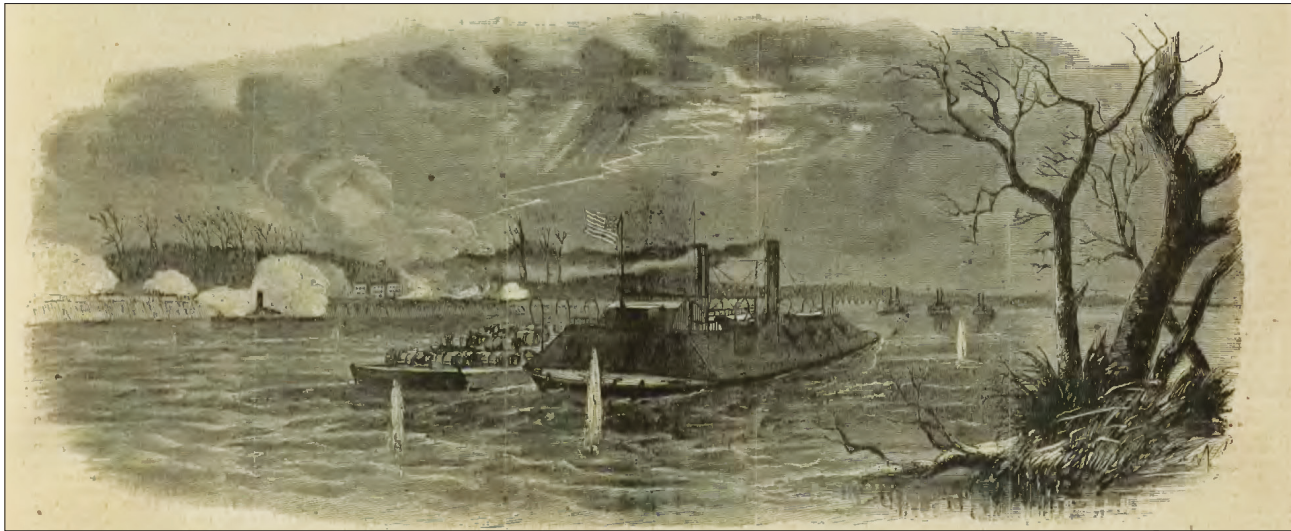
Both artists accompanied Foote's squadron downriver to Island No. 10 and observed the numerous bombardments during the siege of the island. Simplot stayed with the squadron, while Lovie moved on. Before the siege ended, Simplot returned to Cairo and traveled by train to New Madrid where General John Pope had just prevailed—thus, Simplot ended up missing the

Battle of Shiloh. Simplot returned to Island No. 10 just before its surrender on April 8. Having heard of the action at Shiloh, Simplot proceeded to Cairo and secured transport aboard the hospital steamer *Imperial* on its way to pick up the wounded. After reaching Pittsburg Landing and observing the battlefield, Simplot promptly decided to return to Cairo and descend the Mississippi



Steamers Towing Mortar Boats Into Position (above) and Bombardment of Island Number Ten by the Mortar Fleet, March 16, 1862 (below).—Sketched by Mr. Alexander Simplot. Illustrations published in *Harper's Weekly*, Volume VI, No. 275, p 213, April 5, 1862.

Alexander Simplot: ‘Special Artist’ for *Harper’s*



The Gun-Boat “Carondelet” Running the Rebel Batteries at Island No. 10.—Sketched by Mr. Alexander Simplot. Illustration published in *Harper’s Weekly*, Volume VI, No. 278, p 268, April 26, 1862.

River with the expedition against Fort Pillow and Fort Wright. Aboard the commissary steamer, Simplot illustrated the naval operations above Fort Pillow, bombardments of the fort, and abandonment of the fort. Then importantly, Simplot observed the abandonment of Fort Wright on the passage to Memphis and the naval battle before Memphis (First Battle of Memphis) on June 6th, for which he was the only eyewitness illustrated newspaper artist and is recognized as providing significant pictorial illustrations of this engagement. After the war, Simplot also painted this naval battle before Memphis based on his illustration (shown nearby). *Harper’s* published multiple illustrations of the city of Memphis by Simplot (*Harper’s Weekly*, Volume VI, No. 288, p 417, 420, July 5, 1862).

After the naval battle at Memphis and occupation of the city by Union forces, the next illustration of Simplot’s in *Harper’s* (July 12, 1862 issue) depicted the explosion of USS *Mound City* during a naval engagement with Confederate batteries at St. Charles, Arkansas. This occurred during an expedition up the White River on June 14th to resupply Union forces near Jacksonport, consisting of several gunboats and troop transports, and resulted in the capture of the fort there.

Like most ‘Special Artists,’ Simplot remained in one theater. Following the naval battle of Memphis, Simplot continued on with Grant’s army. Simplot’s next credited

illustrations were Grant’s supply depot at Columbus, Kentucky (*Harper’s Weekly*, Volume VI, No. 301, p 636, October 4, 1862), followed by several others ([Scenes at Jackson, Tennessee] Volume VI, No. 302, p 649, October 11, 1862; [Battle of Corinth] Volume VI, No. 305, p 692, 701 [2-page spread], November 1, 1862; [La Grange and Grand Junction, Tennessee] Volume VI, No. 312, p 804, December 20, 1862). After the Van Dorn raid on Grant’s supply base at Holly Springs, Mississippi in mid-December 1862, Grant was forced to withdraw and soon afterwards returned to Memphis—Simplot’s drawings vanished from the pages of *Harper’s*, with the drawings of Theodore Davis largely supplanting those of Simplot in the theater. For many years, this was a mystery—but found among Simplot’s papers and sketches decades after the war was a note written by the artist, “Having returned to Memphis where I again fell victim of chronic dysentery, I left for Dubuque, where I spent the rest of the war.” Simplot’s last credited illustrations in *Harper’s*, of Holly Springs, appeared in January 1863 (*Harper’s Weekly*, Volume VII, No. 315, p 29, January 10, 1863). Although Simplot was one of the younger ‘Special Artists,’ he had become a casualty of the conflict from disease, like so many others, despite not having endured even lengthier and more challenging physical conditions in the field than some of his fellow artists who sketched through the duration of the war. His notebooks showed that he sold his sketches to *Harper’s* for \$5 to \$25 each, so



The Great Naval Battle Opposite the City of Memphis, June 6, 1862. Oil-on-canvas painting by Alexander Simplot. ICHI-069961. Courtesy of Chicago History Museum.

the artwork he produced had not been particularly profitable for his efforts.

During his early time at Cairo in 1861, Simplot also submitted a number sketches rejected by *Harper's* to the *New York Illustrated News* (at least six of which were published, Volume IV, No. 85, p 106 (2), June 22, 1861; Volume IV, No. 92, p 212 and 221, August 5, 1861; Volume IV, No. 97, p 293, September 9, 1861; and Volume IV, No. 101, p 360, October 7, 1861) under the pseudonym A.S. Leclerc, which was based on his initials and the French form of his mother's maiden name, Leclere. After Simplot joined Fremont's expedition in September 1861, he stopped submitting sketches to this newspaper. His last sketch submitted to this newspaper was credited to his true identity (*New York Illustrated News*, Volume IV, No. 104, p 405, October 28, 1861).

After the war, in 1866, Simplot married Virginia Knapp

(a former student of his), who was 10 years younger. Together, they had eight children, seven of whom survived. After the marriage, Simplot took over the family mercantile business and ran it for a number of years, but his artistic interests led him to forsake the family business and open a small but fairly successful patent office and engraving shop. He practiced the Presbyterian faith and was active in the Dubuque Early Settlers Association. Through his father's and his own business success, Simplot was a fairly wealthy person; however, he lost a large sum of money in 1877 after a grain speculation failed. In early November 1899, Simplot began publishing a weekly column in the *Dubuque Sunday Times* entitled 'Story of the War: Pen and Pencil Reminiscences,' which would provide many details of his war experiences, and he also wrote of his war experiences in a personal diary. Simplot died on October 21, 1914, at the age of 77 and was buried at

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Battle at St. Charles, White River, Arkansas.—Explosion of the “Mound City”.—Sketched by Mr. Alexander Simplot. Illustration published on the front page of *Harper’s Weekly*, Volume VI, No. 289, p 433, July 12, 1862. Depicts action between Federal gunboats and Confederate shore batteries on June 17, 1862. USS *Mound City* was disabled by a shot that penetrated her steam drum, causing heavy casualties. Other Union ships present were the ironclad *St. Louis* (right foreground) and timberclads, *Lexington* and *Conestoga* (one of these in left center). NH 50057 courtesy of Naval History and Heritage Command.

Linwood Cemetery in Dubuque. He was considered a good man, loving father, and honest citizen and one of the most historic individual citizens from Dubuque.

During his approximately one and half years with *Harper’s*, Simplot produced a respectable body of work comprising mainly army scenes, but also many drawings of the gunboats and their actions on the western rivers. The Wisconsin Historical Society holds 73 of his Civil War sketches and drawings (<https://wisconsinhistory.org/Records?terms=Alexander+simplot>), including a number that were the basis for published illustrations in *Harper’s*. While a few other ‘Special Artists’ at *Harper’s* were responsible for the preponderance of Civil War naval-related illustrations appearing in the newspaper during the war and in later special-edition *Harper’s* publications, Simplot produced a significant number of on-scene war drawings for the newspaper, particularly in

the pictorial coverage of key naval-related events on the Mississippi River in 1861 and 1862 from Cairo to Memphis and is deserving of such recognition.

Sources

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Clayton Metz, Editor. Alexander Simplot. Unpublished, edited transcription of Simplot’s diary written well after the war describing his time as a ‘Special Artist’ during 1861-1863, with an introductory Simplot family history written by Metz, who was the great grandson of Simplot. April 1992. The transcription is held at the Wisconsin Historical Society Library (Identifier ocm30083641), Madison, Wisconsin, p 3, 6, 8, 9, 11, 13, 14, 19, 22, 23, 26, 41, 44, 45, 49, 62, 66, 67, 71, 73-79.

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