Posing with some of the élan that distinguished their exploits, these surviving Frenchmen are likely the earliest uniformed soldiers ever caught on film.
We are all familiar with photographs of Civil War veterans, and of bearded, aged Britons who charged at Balaclava with the Light Brigade, but perhaps the earliest photographs of veterans are a series of 15 original sepia views of members of Napoleon’s army taken when these old soldiers were well in their 70s and 80s. The photographs are now in the Anne S.K. Brown Military Collection at Brown University Library, although it is not known how Mrs. Brown acquired them. They measure 12 inches high by 10 inches wide and are mounted on stiff card. At some time during the last century, the name and regiment were inscribed in pencil on the verso of each.
These remarkable photographs provide probably the only surviving images of veterans of the Grande Armée and the Guard actually wearing their original uniforms and insignia, although some of the uniforms have obviously been recut by tailors of the 1850s. Each is a formal portrait of an individual photographed in a studio. Some of the men stand in front of a blank or paneled wall on an elaborately decorated carpet, while others are seated. One old veteran, who appears to have lost his right eye, Monsieur Lorier of the 24th Mounted Chasseur Regiment and a Chevalier of the Legion of Honour, stands against a piece of furniture that also appears in other portraits by a curtain. It is not known who the photographer was and the blurring on one or two suggests the difficulty aging subjects had in standing still for several seconds while the plates were exposed.

Who are these grand old men? The tall soldier striking an elegant pose and wearing the grenadier bearskin is Sergeant Taria in the uniform of the Grenadiere de la Garde of 1809-1815. The Mameluke de la Garde is Monsieur Ducel who fought between 1813 and 1815. The dashing figure holding a plumed shako in his right hand is Monsieur Dreuse of the 2nd Light Horse Lancers of the Guard, circa 1813-14. There is Monsieur Mauban of the 8th Dragoon Regiment of 1815 seated, Monsieur Lefebre, a sergeant in the 2nd Regiment of Engineers in 1815, standing wearing a plumed shako; and Monsieur Maire of the 7th Hussars circa 1809-15.

Wearing a fine shapka is Monsieur Verlind of the 2nd Lancers, 1815, and seated in a grand hussar uniform is Monsieur Moret of the 2nd Regiment, 1814-15. Monsieur Vitry of the Departmental Guard leans against a piece of furniture by a curtain, while Monsieur Dupont, who was fourier for the 1st Hussars, stands with a Mameluke sword. There is the portly Quartermaster Sergeant Delignon in the uniform of a Mounted Chasseur of the Guard, 1809-1815. Completing the series are Quartermaster Fabry of the 1st Hussars, Monsieur Schmit of the 2nd Mounted Chasseur Regiment, 1813-14, wearing a floppy cap, and finally Grenadier Burg of the 24th Regiment of the Guard of 1815 with his white beard. A carte-de-visite (postcard) exists of Moret in a slightly different position than the studio photo.

When and why these men were photographed is a mystery, but some clues are offered in Henri Bouchot’s book L’Epopée du Costume Militaire Français, published in Paris in 1898, and containing pictures by the famous French military illustrator, Job. There is a color plate with a
transparent overlay bearing the title “Les Vieux de la vieille, Le 5 Mai, 1855.” This depicts 10 Napoleonic veterans in their full uniforms passing the column in the center of the Place Vendôme erected by Napoleon to commemorate the battle of Austerlitz. A Second Empire Zouave of the current French Army looks at the hunched and slow-moving procession. Most significant is the fact that two of the veterans are carrying wreaths. If one compares the individuals in the photographs, they match up very well with the figures crossing the square.

The date of the event—May 5, 1855—provides the clue about why these men were in Paris. It was the anniversary of the death of Napoleon, and every year on that date veterans gathered in the capital, as the Times of London noted: “The base and railings of the column of the Place Vendôme appear this day decked out with the annual offerings to the memory of the man whose statue adorns the summit. The display of garlands of immortelles, and other tributes of the kind, is greater than usual ... the old soldiers of the Empire performed their usual homage yesterday at the same place.”

On the same day, a funeral service was held in the chapel of Les Invalides, attended by Prince Jerome and other dignitaries. The entire personnel of the Invalides as well as soldiers of the First Empire were present. Paris in May 1855 was full of visitors who had come to see the Universelle Exposition, which opened on the 15th, and it is quite possible that the veterans were photographed at the exposition. It is also known that several artists sought these old veterans in their original uniforms to serve as models in paintings of Napoleonic battles.