

Master of the Columbia

Photography by Carleton E. Watkins at the Oregon Historical Society

by Megan K. Friedel

ON JUNE 23, 1916, CARLETON E. Watkins, the great landscape photographer of the American West, died blind and penniless in the Napa State Hospital for the Insane in northern California. Aside from a few small, mostly unfinished projects during the early 1890s, Watkins took few photographs in the last decades of his life — and nothing on the scale of his earlier masterpieces of Yosemite and the Columbia River Gorge. The photographer's health had declined so precipitously by 1903 that he was almost completely blind and unable to work. Similarly, Watkins's finances, never his strong suit, were in disarray. He sold few photographs at all after 1890, and though a selection of his prints was exhibited at the Lewis & Clark Centennial Exposition in Portland during the summer of 1905, he was never paid for the work. Friends tried to help Watkins negotiate a sale of his negative and print collection to Stanford University,

but on April 18, 1906, further disaster struck: a devastating earthquake and fire destroyed the city of San Francisco and Watkins's entire studio, including his life's work, along with it.¹

It was an ignominious end for a man who had produced some of the grandest and most celebrated landscape views of the West during the nineteenth century and who revolutionized the practice of landscape photography with his large-format mammoth-plate prints. Shortly after Watkins's death, his close friend, the San Francisco photographer Charles Beebe Turrill, attempted to resurrect public interest in his colleague's work. Turrill's essay, "An Early California Photographer: C.E. Watkins," was the first published biography of the photographer, appearing in the January 1918 issue of *News Notes of California Libraries*, an imprint of the California State Library. The article was a reprint of text Turrill had written to accom-



OHS neg. ORHI 7027

Carleton E. Watkins, Clearing the channel, Cascades, Columbia River, Oregon
(*Boudoir D161*), 1883

pany a catalog of Watkins's "New Series" stereoscopic photographs for the library, and his intention was to bring notice to the scope of the photographer's life work as well as to its place in historical scholarship. As the editor's introductory note states, "it is believed that the work of Mr Watkins was a valuable one for California, and also that it is well to draw the attention of California libraries to the worth of these stereoscopic views, some of which every library might have."²

Turrill's article is notable not only for being the first substantive account of Watkins's accomplishments but also because of the audience for whom it was intended. Turrill turned first to libraries, as opposed to private art collectors, as the most fitting places to preserve Watkins's work. In doing so, he brought to light the historical, rather than the artistic, significance of the California State Library's collection of Watkins's stereoviews. Turrill donated many of his own stereoviews to the Society of California Pioneers, including seventy-five glass-plate negatives that had been stored at his home instead of at Watkins's studio during the 1906 earthquake and thus were saved from destruction.³ Many other institutions apparently followed Turrill's lead; the Bancroft Library at the University of California, Huntington Library, the Library of Congress, and Stanford University today hold some of the most substantial collections of Watkins material. Despite so many libraries taking note of Watkins's

influence and importance, little serious scholarship was published about Watkins until the mid 1970s.⁴

The Oregon Historical Society began actively collecting the photographs of Carleton Watkins well before he was rediscovered by scholars. Today, it holds one of the most significant collections of Watkins material in the nation. Housed at the Oregon Historical Society Research Library, the collection includes 268 stereoscopic photographs (commonly known as "stereoviews"); 43 other card-type photographs, including cartes de visite, cabinet cards, and boudoir cards; 100 mammoth-plate photographs; 2 photograph albums; and several loose-plate prints.⁵ Many of the Watkins photographs at the society, especially the mammoth prints and early stereoviews, are signed by the photographer himself, and all of the titles and numbers of the mammoth-plate photographs are written in pencil in his own hand.

What makes the Oregon Historical Society's archival collection especially remarkable is the large number of Watkins's photographs of Oregon and the Columbia River Gorge. Watkins first came to the Oregon in 1867 to photograph the Gorge and the settlements along the Willamette from Portland to Oregon City. He returned during the autumns of 1882 and 1883 and during the winter of 1884–1885. The society holds nearly all of the extant photographs that the photographer took on those voyages, making up the most comprehensive collection

of Watkins's Oregon photographs ever assembled by an institution. These include all but two of the fifty-nine rare mammoth-plate photographs that Watkins took on his first expedition to Oregon in 1867, as well as a complete set of the stereoviews that he also made during the trip; these photographs are the first substantive images ever taken to document the Columbia River Gorge between Vancouver, Washington, and Celilo.⁶ The collection also includes another complete set of Watkins's "New Series" stereoviews from his photographic surveys of the Columbia River during the 1880s. ("New Series" refers to the work that Watkins completed after 1875, when financial troubles forced him to hand over his studio and his earlier negatives to creditor John Jay Cook and photographer Isaiah West Tabor. Tabor printed these pre-1875 negatives under his own imprint, forcing Watkins to re-photograph many of the earlier sites he had visited.⁷) Other items of special note in the society's collection include three-part mammoth panoramas of Portland and the Willamette River and of Oregon City and Willamette Falls in 1867, the first such views ever to be made of those areas, and boudoir cards documenting the blasting of the channel between Bradford Island and the Oregon side of the river during the construction of the locks at the Cascades of the Columbia in about 1882.

The society's collection also contains two unique photograph albums that detail Watkins's voyages to Ore-

gon and the Columbia River between 1882 and 1885. One of these volumes is entitled *Sun Sketches of Columbia River Scenery* and was assembled by Watkins after his travels to the river in 1882 and 1883. The photographs in *Sun Sketches* revisit many of the landmarks Watkins had photographed in 1867 — Castle Rock, Multnomah Falls, and the Cascades of the Columbia, to name a few — but also explore new locations such as Oneonta Gorge and Mitchell Point. After his previous trip, in 1867, Watkins had not published any photographs of the stretch of sheer precipices and basalt cliffs on the Oregon shore between what are now Bonneville and The Dalles, as the Oregon Steam Navigation Co. (OSN) steamer he traveled on would have bypassed those locations on its way east to its next landing at Dalles City. When Watkins returned in the fall of 1882, however, a freshly completed railroad line from Portland all the way to The Dalles, owned by the Oregon Railway & Navigation Co. (OR&N), had just opened that spring. Traveling those rails, the photographer could turn his attention to new landmarks, especially man-made ones such as the ongoing construction of the canal at the Cascades, the salmon wheels used in the blossoming fishwheel business at the Cascades rapids, and Tunnel No. 3, the OR&N's tour-de-force, a 550-foot-long tunnel that had been blasted through the bluffs four miles below Rooster Rock with fifty thousand pounds of dynamite in 1881.⁸ But *Sun Sketches* does not focus on



Carleton E. Watkins, The Summit of Mt. Hood from the Hood River Ascent (O.45), 1883

technological achievement alone; it also includes examples of the pure landscape photography that Watkins was best known for. These images of the Gorge's natural splendor include one that Watkins had waited fifteen years to make: a photograph of Mount Hood taken from its northern flank, just the sort of photo that California geologist Josiah Whitney had commissioned Watkins to make in 1867 but that the photographer, stymied by the rugged and inaccessible Oregon interior, had failed to produce on his earlier visit.⁹

The second volume of photographs at the Oregon Historical Society is untitled and, unlike those from his previous visits to Oregon, con-

tains images that Watkins could not have planned to take in advance. On December 18, 1884, a blizzard hit the Columbia River Gorge and stranded 148 passengers traveling on an OR&N train. The locomotive, caught between drifts that reached heights of thirty to thirty-five feet, was stuck for three weeks on the tracks at Viento, between Cascade Locks and Hood River. The passengers were not rescued until January 7, 1885. Though it is not known exactly when he arrived in Oregon, Watkins happened to be in Portland around the time of the storm, likely intending to travel on the OR&N and Northern Pacific Railroad's transcontinental lines from Portland to Montana and thence onwards to photograph

Yellowstone National Park.¹⁰ Though the storm may have delayed those plans, the photographer made the most of the situation; he accompanied OR&N rescue workers to the snowed-in stretch between Rooster Rock and Oneonta Falls and photographed both their attempts to dig out the tracks and the welcome arrival of relief trains from The Dalles and Portland. At the same time, Watkins was also able to capture the Gorge pictorially as it had never been seen before: Oneonta and Multnomah Falls frozen, in words he later used to caption the resulting photographs, like a “crystal veil,” the river itself iced over; and the Needles,

the basalt cones at the base of Bridal Veil Bluffs, stark against the wintery landscape.

Though the bulk of the Oregon Historical Society’s collection details Watkins’s Oregon and Columbia River photography, it is rounded out by a judicious selection of photographs he took in his home state of California and farther afield in other Western states. The society holds mammoth prints of California coastal views of Mendocino and the Farrallon Islands; a series documenting the northern California peaks Mount Lola, Round Top, and Mount Shasta; and three of Watkins’s renowned views of Yosemite

Carleton E. Watkins, From Rooster Rock to Oneonta Falls. Great Winter Storm of the Winter of 1884–5. Columbia River, Or. Lower Multnomah Fall (D.127), 1884–1885



OHS neg., OHI 7064



Carleton E. Watkins, Sugar Loaf Islands, Farallons, 1869

dating from about 1878 to 1881. Other significant California images include *carte de visite* and stereoscopic photographs of the Mariposa Grove at Yosemite — where Watkins took the first known photograph of the “Grizzly Giant,” an ancient sequoia, in 1861 — and stereoviews documenting the city of San Francisco from 1864 to 1877. The society’s collection also includes images from Watkins’s travels to Seattle, Puget Sound, and Victoria in 1882; a series of stereoviews that he took of the Union Pacific Railroad in Utah in 1873; and another group of stereoviews entitled “Watkins’ Pacific Railroad,” which were originally taken by Alfred A. Hart, the official photographer

for the Central Pacific Railroad from 1862 to 1869, and reprinted by Watkins under his own name after 1870.

The collection also contains examples of Watkins’s portraiture, an aspect of his commercial studio work that is far less known than his landscape photography. Cabinet card photographs at the society depict several American financiers and businessmen, at least one of whom played a role in making Watkins’s 1867 journey to the Columbia River Gorge possible. Simeon Gannett Reed (1830–1895), a Portland entrepreneur, was one of the principal stockholders in the OSN, whose steamers and railroads Watkins relied on for his seminal journey to the Gorge in

1867. Reed had his photograph made by Watkins sometime between 1871 and 1875, in Watkins's Montgomery Street studio in San Francisco, and the resulting cabinet card portrait in the society's collection is inscribed with Reed's signature. The other portraits in the collection include Cyrus West Field (1819–1892), who led the Atlantic Telegraph Company's efforts to lay the first trans-Atlantic telegraph lines in 1858 and 1866, and the entire family of Cornelius C. Beekman (1828–1915), a banker from Jacksonville, Oregon, including a stunning image of his wife Julia Elizabeth Hoffman Beekman and two of their children. It is not known what, if any, personal relationship Watkins had with Field or the Beekmans. Like Reed's portrait, Watkins made these photographs around 1871 to 1875, and it is possible his subjects simply came to visit his San Francisco studio, drawn by the great photographer's growing fame in the wake of his successful photographs of Yosemite and the Columbia River.

Interestingly, the provenance of many of the photographs at the Oregon Historical Society can be traced

directly to the personal relationships that afforded Watkins the means to produce such great work. Some of the stereoviews of Oregon and the Columbia River in the collection are stamped with the imprint of Charles Turrill and the Society of California Pioneers, indicating that the images were among those collected by Turrill during his first push to preserve Watkins's stereoviews for posterity.¹¹ Other photographs at the society have a more direct connection to the photographer's time in Oregon. Frank



OHS image no. bh003941

Carleton E. Watkins, cabinet card portrait of Julia E. Hoffman Beekman, from about 1871–1875

B. Gill, historian for the Oregon-Washington Railroad and Navigation Company, included a number of Watkins photographs with a 1924 *Oregon Historical Quarterly* article on the Oregon Portage Railroad. Gill had obtained the images from Barbara Stevenson Bailey, sister of Watkins's guide in the Gorge in 1867, who Gill claimed owned a significant collection of Watkins's photographs.¹² Some of these photographs, including a rare stereoview portrait of Barbara and her family at their home on Eagle Creek, are now in the society's collection (see page 394 of this issue of *OHQ*).

The society's collection also reflects the commercial relationships that Watkins built in order to financially sustain his interest in landscape photography, particularly his relationship with the burgeoning Western railroad industry. Watkins's trips to Oregon were likely sponsored by the railroad and steamship companies that operated along the Columbia River — in 1867, by the OSN and, in the early 1880s, by the OR&N.¹³ Josiah Myrick, a former steamboat captain and stockholder with the OSN, appears to have owned a large collection of Watkins's photographs of the Columbia River, and his wife, Maria Louisa Myrick, was instrumental in founding the Oregon Historical Society. Sometime after Josiah's death in 1906, his daughters decided the society was a fitting home for their father's Watkins photographs. The Myrick family donation indicates the work Watkins did was appreciated and collected by those involved with the OSN, as do the two albums in the

society's collection. Both photograph albums were originally owned by Charles H. Prescott (b. 1839), treasurer and manager of the OR&N from 1881 to 1887, the period during which Watkins returned to photograph the Gorge. Each album is inscribed with Prescott's signature and the year he acquired the album, 1884 for the *Sun Sketches* album and 1886 for the winter storm album.

Why Prescott owned these albums is unclear. Did Watkins gift them to the OR&N in appreciation of financial support they gave for his travels along the Columbia during 1882 to 1885? Did Prescott buy them on his own volition, out of regard for the photographer's skill? Or were they simply works for hire? Very little is known about Watkins's movements and motivations in Oregon during his travels there in 1882 to 1885, and indeed, he makes for a slippery study in general. He was an imprecise documentarian, and part of the struggle with interpreting Watkins's photographs as primary-source materials is that he often misattributed dates to his own works. As Turrill noted in his biography of Watkins, the photographer "kept no definite record on his negatives as to when they were taken and it was difficult in his old age for him to state definitely when certain negatives were made."¹⁴ To further complicate matters, there is little existing written record of Watkins's journeys at all, particularly when it comes to where and how he traveled in the Pacific Northwest during the 1880s.¹⁵ From his letters to his wife, Frances "Frankie" Watkins, and

a notice in the *Oregonian* newspaper, we know that the photographer was in Portland on September 19 and 20, 1882.¹⁶ On September 22, a notice in the *Seattle Post Intelligencer* places him in Seattle, where he made some of his photographs of Puget Sound.¹⁷ In his September 19 letter to his wife, Watkins indicated his intention to photograph the Gorge only after his trip north to Washington Territory was completed. "I expect to get through with the Puget Sound work in about ten days," he wrote, "and then I have all that Columbia River work to do and the Lord knows when I will get through with that." Since, according to historian Peter Palmquist, Watkins left Oregon on October 11 on board the steamer *California* bound for San Francisco, it appears that Watkins must have created some of the *Sun Sketches* and "New Series" photographs of the Columbia River Gorge in late September and early October of 1882.¹⁸

True to form, however, Watkins did not publish dates with any of the images he took during this trip, nor did he date those he made during a third trip to Oregon during the fall of 1883. The photographs from the two trips are often published together, as in the *Sun Sketches* album and "New Series" stereoviews at the Oregon Historical Society, and it is therefore difficult to determine on which trip Watkins made each image. Even less is understood about the photographer's whereabouts in Oregon during 1883. The only known written record of Watkins's presence on the Columbia is a letter — first brought to light by

historian Peter Palmquist — from C.F. Newcombe, a visitor to The Dalles, to his wife on November 18, 1883: "Watkins the photographer who took my Yosemite views is here," Newcombe wrote. "He has a sleeping car to himself and is put onto a siding wherever he wishes." Palmquist has also pointed out that Watkins's son, Collis, had been born on October 4, 1883, so it is possible that the photographer did not arrive in the Gorge until late October or early November of that year, though we can be no more specific than that.¹⁹

As with any photographer, there is also the question of what Carleton Watkins did not photograph. Most Oregonians can easily notice the most significant gap in his series of images of the Columbia River Gorge: photographs of Celilo Falls. Watkins traveled the entire OSN route from Portland to Celilo in 1867 and the same route on the OR&N in 1882 and 1883. On both trips, he would have passed and noted the rushing tumult of the falls, especially as it was one of the two major impasses to boat traffic on that eighty-four-mile section of the Gorge. Watkins extensively photographed the rocky channel of the Cascades and the railroads' efforts to circumnavigate its rapids. Likewise, he published images of the railroad lines that bypassed the churning waters at Celilo. So it is odd indeed that Watkins appears to have taken no photos of the falls itself.

One can only speculate on the absence of images of Celilo Falls. It is possible that Watkins, who seems to have avoided photographing Native

people living along the Columbia on any of his trips to the Gorge, also avoided the seasonal Indian fishing villages at Celilo. It is also possible (though unlikely, given the lengths he went to climb the rocky narrows of the Passage of the Dalles to photograph its straits) that he could not find an easily reachable vantage point from which to take a suitable image of Celilo. Watkins traveled with hundreds of fragile glass plate negatives with which to make his photographs; undoubtedly, in the course of hauling them back and forth along the river's rails and steamer passages, many were broken and lost, and perhaps those of Celilo were among them. Perhaps most likely, Celilo may simply have made a visually uninteresting study for the photographer. Watkins would have reached the falls sometime between August and November of 1867 and at the same time during 1882 or 1883, when river levels would have been low enough that Celilo may have looked like just another series of rocky shoals in the narrows of the Dalles rather than the rushing cascade it was come springtime. Without further scholarly exploration, however, we cannot know for sure why no photographs of Celilo Falls exist today in Watkins's photographs of Oregon and the Columbia River Gorge.

Nevertheless, the Oregon Historical Society's collection is a testament to the power of Charles Beebe Turrill's fore-

sight that scholars of history and art alike would one day recognize Carleton Watkins as a great master of American landscape photography. Watkins's photos at the society play three roles. On one level, they document the changing face of Oregon — and, by extension, the whole of the American West — during the mid nineteenth century, as rapid-fire technological developments allowed people to harness the natural power of landscapes like the Columbia River Gorge. On another, they are specimens of the rare and skillful eye for the natural landscape that Watkins possessed, allowing his combination of innovation and artistry to make even the dullest mountainside a breathtaking precipice. Finally, they offer a window into the particular relationship that Watkins kept with Oregon and the Columbia River for over eighteen years. Whether it was a personal relationship or simply a marriage of convenience — a way to milk a few more dollars from the railroad industry — we may never know. Whatever Watkins's motivations for returning again and again to Oregon, the Carleton E. Watkins photographs collection at the Oregon Historical Society is, in its own right, one of the most stunning collections of the photographer's work ever assembled and some of the most comprehensive visual documentation of the Columbia River Gorge at a turning point in the river's history.

NOTES

1. Peter Palmquist, *Carleton E. Watkins: Photographer of the American West* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press for the Amon Carter Museum, 1983), 80–83.
2. Charles Beebe Turrill, “An Early California Photographer: C.E. Watkins,” *News Notes of California Libraries*, 13:1 (January 1918): 29.
3. Eric Hill, “Carleton Watkins,” *Stereo World* 41:1 (March–April 1977): 5.
4. Weston Naef, *Era of Exploration: The Rise of Landscape Photography in the American West, 1860–1885* (Buffalo: Albert-Knox Art Gallery, 1975), was the first published scholarly examination of Watkins’s work. It was soon followed by James Alinder, ed., with essays by David Featherstone and Russ Anderson, *Carleton E. Watkins: Photographs of the Columbia River and Oregon* (Carmel, Calif.: Friends of Photography, 1979); and Palmquist, *Carleton E. Watkins*.
5. These photographs are located in the Carleton E. Watkins photographs, Org. Lot 93, at the Oregon Historical Society Research Library, Portland. A guide to the collection is available at <http://nwda-db.wsulibs.wsu.edu/findaid/ark:/80444/xv99202>.
6. The two mammoth-plate photographs that the society does not have are Mammoth #420, *Cape Horn, Columbia River*, and Mammoth #440, *Islands in the Columbia, Upper Cascades*.
7. See Palmquist, *Carleton E. Watkins*, 51–53.
8. Eugene Virgil Smalley, *History of the Northern Pacific Railroad* (New York: Putnam, 1883), 423.
9. Palmquist, *Carleton E. Watkins*, 33.
10. *Ibid.*, 74.
11. Accession records at the Oregon Historical Society indicate that the Society of California Pioneers (SCP) donated thirty-three stereoviews to OHS in 1960. It is likely that the SCP gifted these photographs to the OHS because they depicted locations in Oregon, not California, and thus might have been considered out-of-scope for the SCP’s collections.
12. Frank B. Gill, “Oregon’s First Railway: The Oregon Portage Railroad at the Cascades of the Columbia River,” *The Quarterly of the Oregon Historical Society* 25:3 (September 1924): 172.
13. Douglas R. Nickel, *Carleton Watkins: The Art of Perspective* (San Francisco: San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, 1999), 14–15.
14. Turrill, “An Early California Photographer,” 31.
15. Palmquist, *Carleton E. Watkins*, 70.
16. Carleton E. Watkins to Frances Watkins, September 19, 1882, in Carleton Emmons Watkins letters, BANC MSS 78/92 c, at the Bancroft Library, University of California–Berkeley; Watkins is listed in the “Hotel Arrivals” for the Esmond Hotel in the *Oregonian*, September 20, 1882, p. 4.
17. Quoted in Palmquist, *Carleton E. Watkins*, 72.
18. *Ibid.*
19. Charles Frederick Newcombe to Marion Newcombe, November 18, 1883, in the Newcombe family fonds, MS-1077, British Columbia Archives. Quoted in Palmquist, *Carleton E. Watkins*, 73.