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Picturing Progress

Carleton Watkins’s 1867 Stereoviews of the Columbia River Gorge

DURING THE SUMMER AND EARLY fall of 1867, San Francisco–based photographer Carleton E. Watkins traveled to Oregon to photograph settlements along the upper Willamette River and, more significantly, the Columbia River Gorge. It was a momentous trip. Never before had a photographer attempted to so comprehensively navigate and document the Gorge’s steep shores and treacherous rapids. Between July and November, Watkins made forty-two mammoth-plate photographs of the Columbia River at locations between Portland and Celilo. Today, those prints are renowned as masterpieces of early landscape photography. The mammoth prints would not have been possible, however, without the photographer’s lesser known but equally noteworthy body of work — 139 three-dimensional stereoscopic photographs, or stereoviews, that Watkins also made along the river. The smaller, facile stereo format allowed Watkins to experiment in ways that the heavy and cumbersome mammoth-plate format could not. Using a stereoscopic camera, he systematically mapped the river’s landscape, searching for the perfect viewpoint, where he then assembled his mammoth-plate camera for the quintessential shot. Thus, for every Watkins mammoth print, there are multiple stereoview images that consider optional angles and alternate subjects. These stereoviews, furthermore, literally underwrote Watkins’s penchant for grand photographs at a grand scale. Whereas his mammoth prints were sold and exhibited to a select few, the photographer’s stereoviews were easily mass-produced and became popular in parlors all across a country obsessed with the camera’s ability to create “true” pictorial representations of the American West.
For all that, Carleton Watkins’s stereoscopic photographs are not simply the workhorses of his collection. In their very studiousness and efficiency, the Columbia River Gorge stereoviews necessarily tell a richer story than the mammoth prints. At a time when the Columbia was used almost exclusively for commercial travel, rather than for pleasure cruises, the stereoviews provide an exceptional chart of one man’s sensory journey along the river and offer the possibility that a landscape itself could be the reward of rigorous travel. They also offer the first visual chronicle of the rapidly changing history of Euro-American settlement in that formidable landscape, capturing the river as it lay in the balance between the pioneer era and more modern ways of life. Lastly, these photographs form a unique historical record of the ways the human relationships that Watkins formed during his travels in Oregon facilitated and informed his vision of the Columbia River Gorge.

The path that led Watkins to the Columbia River Gorge was one paved by equal doses of happenstance and hard work. Born in 1829, Watkins was raised in Oneonta, New York. In 1851, he left his pastoral birthplace to join the fast-growing tide of immigrants heading west to seek their fortune in California’s post–Gold Rush economy. Watkins headed west in the footsteps of his childhood friend Collis Huntington (1821–1900), who had established a hardware business in Sacramento, and took a job in Huntington’s shop, delivering mining supplies. Late the following year, a fire destroyed the hardware store, which was only a temporary setback for Huntington but put Watkins out of work. He moved to San Francisco and took a job as a
clerk with another Oneonta friend, George Murray, who had established a book and stationary store in the fast-growing city.

By chance, Murray’s store was adjacent to the studio of premier pioneer daguerreotypist Robert H. Vance (1825–1876). When Murray’s bookstore went out of business, Watkins went to work for Vance. He proved to be a good study of the process of making daguerreotype photographs, and Vance soon hired him to manage one of his two studios. Vance was one of the few California daguerreotypists who, in addition to the portrait trade, consistently took photographs outdoors; he made and exhibited hundreds of daguerreotypes of California scenery, for which there was considerable interest in the East. This relatively specialized field also appealed to Watkins, and he decided to make it the mainstay of his own photography business, which he opened in San Francisco in 1858.

Watkins soon discovered his natural talent as a landscape photographer. His first photographic triumph came in 1861, when his photographs of Yosemite, commissioned by Josiah D. Whitney, director of the California Geological Survey, helped persuade Congress to establish the area as a natural preserve in perpetuity. Watkins was the first American landscape photographer to construct a mammoth camera with the ability to produce prints from large-scale glass-plate negatives. These monumental and now legendary mammoth prints — made all the more dramatic by Watkins’s use of a state-of-the-art, wide-angle lens — glorified Yosemite’s equally monumental landscape. Photographs from later trips to Yosemite in 1865 and 1866, also commissioned by the California Geological Survey, won the photographer an award for “Mountain Views” at the 1865 Mechanics’ Institute Exhibition in San Francisco and another award at the Paris International Exposition of 1867, establishing Watkins as the premier photographer of the American West.

It was in the glow of these early successes that Carleton Watkins decided to travel to Oregon to photograph the Columbia River Gorge. This decision appears to have been motivated by several factors. By 1867, Watkins’s childhood friend George Murray had been working in Oregon as secretary of the Oregon Steam Navigation Company (OSN) for five years. The OSN maintained a virtual transportation monopoly through the Gorge and officials were doubtless interested in documenting the company’s material assets and in boosting its visibility with the kind of high-profile images that Watkins could create. Josiah Whitney, Watkins’s sponsor for the first Yosemite expedition, also had an interest in the geologic features of the Cascades Range and offered to help support Watkins financially if he would photograph the geologically rich setting of the Columbia River Gorge, particularly the volcanic peaks of Mount Hood and Mount Adams. Given logistical support
from Murray and a personal loan from Whitney, Watkins’s planned photographic excursion to Oregon became a reality. Still, photographing on the Columbia was a major undertaking. Watkins had to travel with his heavy, large-format mammoth-plate camera, a smaller stereoscopic camera, and hundreds of fragile glass negative plates, ranging in size from the eighteen-by-twenty-two-inch mammoth negatives to smaller ones for making stereo negatives. The wet collodion process with which Watkins worked required that the plates be coated with the collodion, exposed, and developed while they were still wet — usually about ten minutes. Watkins therefore had to carry a darkroom tent and all the chemicals needed for quickly processing his photographs in whatever rugged terrain he found himself. Nothing even remotely similar to the magnitude of Watkins’s effort had ever before been attempted in the Columbia River Gorge.\(^5\)

Watkins’s decision to bring both his mammoth and stereoscopic cameras to the Columbia River was a practical one. Though his mammoth images bore the beauty and brilliance of the signature style for which he had garnered international fame, stereographic prints were the most familiar form of landscape photography in Victorian times. The stereoview — also known as the stereograph — was introduced to the United States in 1854 by Philadelphia photographers William and Frederick Langenheim and, by 1867, was widely popular among middle class Americans. Early photographers created a stereoview by either using two cameras at the same time or making two exposures of one subject, but Watkins used a stereoscopic camera with two lenses mounted a few inches apart, simulating the average distance between human eyes, to take two near-identical photographs on one glass-plate negative. The paired images on the negative were printed on heavy cardstock, generally 3.5-by-7 inches in size, and viewed through a hand-held or tabletop stereoscope consisting of a hooded pair of lenses attached to an adjustable holder into which one inserted the stereoview card. Through the stereoscope, the left eye saw the left-hand photograph and the right eye the right-hand one, resulting in a three-dimensional image that remarkably approximated human vision itself — an “effect so heightened,” wrote Oliver Wendell Holmes, whose Atlantic Monthly essays about the stereoview were instrumental in popularizing the technique for American audiences, “as to produce an appearance of reality which cheats the senses with its seeming truth.”\(^6\)

Exposure times for stereo negatives were relatively brief in contrast to mammoth negatives. Because of this, as Douglas R. Nickel has written, Watkins “could use [the stereoscopic camera] to photograph a greater range of subjects over a greater range of conditions” and to experiment with composition and contrast.\(^7\) Whereas only the prosperous could afford
to purchase mammoth prints, which could sell for as much as $150 per set, furthermore, Watkins was able to sell stereoviews for five dollars per dozen. By 1867, stereoviews were immensely popular. Spurred by increasing concern for self-education and a burgeoning national pride in the post–Civil War nation, Americans bought the inexpensive stereoviews by the millions, using them to visually teach themselves about the world. Stereoview historian William Culp Darrah has estimated that over five million stereoviews were published and sold in America from 1854 to the early 1900s, more than any other format of photograph in the nineteenth century. Stereoview cards depicted subjects ranging from fine arts to comedy and from natural history to Native cultures, as well as, of course, the wilderness of the American West. Most middle-class families owned a stereoscope for entertainment and education, and Watkins’s stereoviews of the Columbia River Gorge would have been viewed in parlors from New York to San Diego. The three-dimensionality of stereoscopic photography afforded Americans the opportunity to learn about and experience the landscape of the Gorge — and to travel within it and with the photographer — as if they were literally seeing it with their own eyes.

Watkins numbered his stereoviews of the Columbia River Gorge by his own system, as he continued to do with all the photographs he published during his career. Because he numbered them sequentially and titled them according to locale, it is possible to re-trace the path of his travels along the river. The vast majority of his images were made of or in close proximity to steamer landings and rail portages at the rapids of the Cascades and along the OSN’s portage from The Dalles to Celilo Falls, as Watkins’s movements would necessarily have been tied to the extant system of transportation in the Gorge. In numerical order, therefore, the stereoviews consecutively follow his travels by boat and railroad as he made his way upriver from Portland to Celilo, crossing back and forth from the north bank in the Washington Territory to the south bank in Oregon, and then back to Portland from July through November 1867. David Featherstone, in the seminal study of Watkins’s travels in Oregon, Carleton E. Watkins: Photographs of the Columbia River and Oregon, has pointed out the importance of recognizing that the photographs may not have been made in the order in which they were numbered. Nevertheless, the mammoth prints that Watkins created in Oregon in 1867 follow the same numerical and geographical pattern as the stereoviews, a pattern that logically corresponds with the route Watkins would have taken to navigate through the Gorge under the direction of the OSN and his guide, John Wellard Stevenson.

Though Watkins’s travels through the Columbia River Gorge in 1867 may have been facilitated by the steamships and railroads of the OSN, Ste-
Friedel and Toedtemeier, Carleton Watkins’s 1867 Stereoviews

G. W. Stevenson was the man who literally made Watkins’s travels possible. George Murray likely assigned Stevenson to act as the photographer’s guide and navigator through the waters of the Gorge, and Stevenson’s familiarity with the Columbia River landscape and with the OSN’s operations made him an excellent candidate for the position. Born in 1835, Stevenson emigrated with his family from Edwards County, Illinois, to the Columbia River valley in 1853. Four years later, at the age of twenty-two, he filed a donation land claim for property just east of Cape Horn, the picturesque basalt cliffs on the Washington Territory side of the Columbia River, northeast of Rooster Rock on the Oregon side, which Watkins famously photographed in 1867. Stevenson’s family — which included his father, also named John Wellard Stevenson; his mother Sarah Tait Stevenson; and younger siblings George and Jane — lived on a claim nearby. The 1860 census for Skamania County, Washington Territory, lists twenty-five-year-old John as a farmer, but in 1863, the OSN hired him to work at the company’s sawmill at Eagle Creek, on the Oregon side of the river, under the supervision of Joseph Bailey.

Stevenson’s relationship with the OSN was personal as well as professional by the time Watkins met the young sawyer. Bailey employed only twelve to fourteen employees, including Stevenson, who quickly rose to the position of head carpenter. The crew oversaw the operations of the OSN’s Oregon Portage Railroad around the Cascades of the Columbia, operated the sawmill to produce lumber for repairing the company’s Oregon and Washington portages, and made repairs to the Oregon line. Bailey had also hired Stevenson’s younger sister Barbara, age twenty-seven in 1863, to work as the housekeeper for his employees. Bailey soon asked Barbara to serve as his personal housekeeper, and the two were married in January 1864, four months after her date of hire. They had children by the time Watkins arrived, and the family lived near the sawmill. Because Stevenson’s own residence at Cape Horn was quite a distance from Eagle Creek and he was then a single man without his own family, it is likely that Stevenson spent much time with his sister and brother-in-law during the six years he worked at the sawmill.

Life and work at Eagle Creek would have been relatively isolated. Bailey’s sawmill was located at the middle of the 4.5-mile route of the Oregon portage railroad around the Cascades of the Columbia, a series of rocky, shallow rapids that posed a serious navigation problem for people travelling by boat. The low bulk of Bradford’s Island physically and visually separated the Eagle Creek side of the river from the Washington side, and the channel that ran between the sawmill and the island was narrow and impassable by boat. Tooth Rock to the west and the steep drainage of Eagle Creek itself also made Bailey’s settlement difficult to reach. By the time Watkins visited in 1867, the sawmill and its employees were both commercially and geographically
figure 1: Carleton E. Watkins, portrait of John Stevenson, 1867

figure 2: Carleton E. Watkins, portrait of the Joseph and Barbara Bailey family of Eagle Creek, 1867
isolated, Joseph S. Ruckel had built the portage railroad around the Oregon side of the Cascades in 1858 and 1859 so as to compete with a tramway operated by Daniel and Putnam Bradford, which ferried military and trade goods around the rapids on the Washington side. In 1861, after the OSN acquired Ruckel’s railroad, the company was the first in the state of Oregon, as well as the Gorge, to lay down iron rails for the use of a steam locomotive, the Oregon “Pony” engine. Beginning in 1863, however, the OSN closed down the Oregon side to all but the transportation of livestock; the line was too prone to disrepair caused by seasonal flooding to carry the heavier steam locomotives that were used by the company’s railroad to ferry freight and human traffic past the treacherous rapids. The company shifted the bulk of its operations to a newer and safer railroad line on Washington side, near the settlements between Fort Cascades on the west end and Fort Lugenbeel on the east end of the Cascades.

It is clear from Watkins’s 1867 stereoviews of the Columbia River that he developed a close relationship with Stevenson and was taken with the sawyer’s extended family and their life at remote Eagle Creek. Throughout the 1867 stereoviews, Stevenson and Bailey appear both as distant figures and as immediate subjects: Stevenson is pictured at the doorway of his log home at Cape Horn and eating an apple in his orchard, and Bailey stands with livestock near the water’s edge or posed on the log slide that filled the Eagle Creek ravine below the sawmill. Bailey also appears repeatedly in the stereoviews on a mule-drawn cart ostensibly used to transport Watkins over the railroad tracks, indicating that he as well as Stevenson was in some way personally responsible for the photographer’s movements along the Oregon side of the Cascades. Watkins took an unusual number of stereoviews of the landscape and people along the isolated channel between Eagle Creek and Bradford’s Island — twenty-five images in total, more than he photographed in any other geographic area of the Columbia except The Dalles — indicating that he may have stayed for an extended period with the Bailey family. Such a long visit enabled Watkins to more thoroughly explore with his camera the Oregon side of the Cascades than the Washington side.

The most significant examples of Watkins’s closeness with his guides are two rare portrait stereoviews of Stevenson and the Bailey family that are today part of the collection of Carleton E. Watkins photographs at the Oregon Historical Society (figures 1 and 2). This portrait of Stevenson is the only known version of the original print, and other photograph collections at the Society also contain a modern copy print of the portrait that was made for and given to the institution by Frank B. Gill, who interviewed Stevenson and Barbara Bailey for a 1924 Oregon Historical Quarterly article on the Oregon Portage Railroad. That copy includes a hand-written note
on its verso indicating that the original stereoview was owned by Barbara Stevenson Bailey, who may have received it directly from Watkins, perhaps as a gift for her hospitality in 1867. Likewise, the portrait of Joseph and Barbara Bailey and their five children, taken at their home at Eagle Creek, is also a rare stereoview, one of only two copies known to the authors, and may also have been owned by Barbara Bailey. Both stereoview portraits are unnumbered and were not published as part of Watkins’s series of stereoviews documenting his 1867 trip to Oregon.

In the majority of his images, Watkins’s primary purpose is to give a sense of place along the river, including settlers’ relationship to that place — not to make portraiture. Where people do appear in the Watkins stereoviews, they are usually engaged in the work that allowed them to live in the rough conditions of the Columbia River landscape, such as standing with steam locomotives at the Lower Cascades engine buildings or lounging in the OSN’s warehouse at Celilo, or included as tiny figures, used by the photographer as scale to emphasize the grandeur of the mountains of the western Gorge. In contrast, the portraits of Stevenson and the Baileys are static, formal, and exquisitely detailed; the focus is not on place or activity but people. The attention and care that Watkins took with these portraits, so unlike any other photographs he made along the river, may indicate his intimacy with his subjects and his desire to give them a special place in his story of the Columbia River. Stevenson and the Baileys literally enabled Watkins to see the Columbia River Gorge and to understand the place that Euro-American settlers were building for themselves within its natural beauty.

Stevenson likely provided the means for Watkins to take one of the first stereoviews that he made in the Columbia Gorge: Stereoview 1228, Rooster Rock, Columbia River (figure 3). Immediately after his arrival in Portland in July 1867, Watkins apparently made a brief rendezvous up the Columbia to examine the photographic potential of the rapids at the Cascades. A notice posted in the July 15, 1867, Morning Oregonian newspaper in Portland read, in part:

Mr. C. E. Watkins, a gentleman who has been for some time engaged in taking photographic views of notable places in California, came passenger on the Oriflamme and goes up the Columbia this morning for the purpose of taking observations from various points preparatory to photographing Mt. Hood. . . . [He] will return from the Cascades this evening and enter immediately upon his preparations for the prosecution of his work.

On this first survey, Watkins saw the Columbia Gorge from the deck of a sternwheeler coming upriver from Portland. Passing the confluence of the Sandy River and rounding the broad bend at Reed Island, boats entered a mile-wide expanse of river bracketed on both sides by 800-foot tall cliffs. Rooster
Rock would have been the first notable water-level geologic feature on the Oregon shore, and the photographer apparently found the rock formation a good entrée for beginning his photographs of the Gorge when he returned a short time later to photograph the river in earnest. The embayment there would have been an easy place for a steamer to pull ashore, but as Featherstone has noted, a sailing barge moored at the base of Rooster Rock indicates that Stevenson himself likely brought Watkins by boat to the beach pictured here. The vessel is blurry and barely visible in Stereoview 1228, moved by the current as Watkins exposed his negative, but is more easily visible under magnification and in the corresponding mammoth print that Watkins made of the same view, the first mammoth that he took in the Gorge.20 The white triangular form on the beach in the center of the Rooster Rock stereoview is Watkins’s “dark tent” or portable darkroom, and from within the confines of this small enclosure he coated and processed his stereo and mammoth negatives. Through a magnifying glass, it is possible to see Stevenson standing just to the right of the tent. Later photographs that Watkins took on islands off the shallow waters near Castle Rock (now Beacon Rock) also seem to indicate that Stevenson and his boat allowed Watkins the freedom to visit sites in the Gorge that would have been unreachable if Watkins had relied solely on the tight schedule of the OSN’s steamships.

About four miles upriver from Rooster Rock lay the Cape Horn riverboat landing and Stevenson’s residence, where Watkins may have spent his first
nights in the Gorge. Precisely how long he stayed there is unknown, but he made several stereoviews and mammoth prints of cliffs of Cape Horn and of Stevenson’s home and apple orchard. Life was certainly challenging for early settlers such as Stevenson, but Watkins shared his appreciation of their accomplishments in images such Stereoview 1231, *Cape Horn, Columbia River* (figure 4). This photograph shows Stevenson (on the right) and another unidentified man at the Cape Horn boat landing just below Stevenson’s home, loading or unloading apples, probably from Stevenson’s orchard, onto skiffs that would be used to transport them elsewhere on the river. It is a quiet, almost bucolic photo that, like the Rooster Rock stereoview and many other images Watkins took in the Gorge in 1867, depicts not hardship but an almost peaceful sense of human life in harmony with the magnificence of nature’s beauty.

From Cape Horn, Watkins and Stevenson crossed the river to photograph Multnomah Falls. Though the waterfall is the second tallest year-round falls in the United States and today the most famous scenic feature in the Columbia Gorge, it was not an easy location to access in 1867 because of a dense forest that separated the falls from the shoreline of the Columbia. Watkins made several photographs of the falls, including two bearing the same title: *Multnomah Falls, Columbia River*, Stereoviews 1238 and 1239 (figures 5 and 6), which show the lengths to which the photographer went to locate a point where both the upper and lower falls could be pictured harmoniously, in relation to each other. The location Watkins selected in Stereoview 1238 is
ideal save for a small tree in the foreground that leans at an awkward angle, partially bisecting and disrupting the composition. In Stereoview 1239, however, the tree is gone, cut down by Watkins or Stevenson to make for a less distracting photograph — though at close examination, the stump is still visible in the foreground. This pair of stereoviews is an excellent example of Watkins’s use of the stereo format to experiment with composition and framing, often physically manipulating the landscape to achieve an ideal image. His stereoview images set the stage, so to speak, for the photographer to create a “perfect” view, and it is from this spot, after the tree had been cut down, that he made his now classic mammoth photograph of Multnomah Falls. Though the falls have since been photographed untold millions of times, Watkins’s 1867 stereoviews and mammoth print of Multnomah Falls are the first substantive images made of this iconic place.

After leaving Multnomah Falls, most of the places that Watkins photographed along the Columbia were tied to the OSN’s operations. He took photographs of both the Washington and Oregon sides of the Cascades rapids, and the 1867 stereoviews from the north bank make a marked contrast to images from the south bank. Whereas the Oregon photographs reveal the isolation of the settlement at Eagle Creek, the impasse of the rocky rapids around the south side of Bradford’s Island, and the treacherous landforms such as Tooth Rock that made construction and repair of the Oregon portage a challenge for Bailey and his crew, Watkins’s stereoviews from of the Washington side of the Cascades show industry, settlement, and a recent history of more comfortable habitation and community. By 1867, the north side of the river was the locus for the OSN’s steamship and railroad transport around the Cascades of the Columbia River. At the Lower Cascades, on the western end of the rapids near what is now North Bonneville, Washington, steamships from Vancouver and Portland brought freight and passengers to and from the OSN docks, where they were loaded on steam locomotives and ferried along the portage railroad six miles eastward to the Upper Cascades, now Stevenson, Washington. There, another steamer would meet the railroad and carry its cargo eastward to The Dalles and the OSN’s other portage railroad past Celilo Falls; the system also ran in reverse, carrying goods downriver from Celilo to Portland.

In 1867, the Lower and Upper Cascades were home not only to most of the railroad’s operations but also to thriving townsites. Three military blockhouses — Fort Cascades, Fort Rains, and Fort Lugenbeel — had been built in 1855 and 1856, during the height of the Yakima Indian War, along the Washington side of the Cascades. The forts guarded from the threat of Indian attack both the Bradford brothers’ portage tramway and a new military road under construction around the Cascades. By the fall of 1855,
FIGURES 5 AND 6: Carleton E. Watkins, both named Multnomah Falls, Columbia River (Stereoview nos. 1238, top, and 1239), 1867
settlements had developed small communities at all three sites to serve the needs of soldiers garrisoned there. The military left the Cascades area during the early 1860s, but civilian residents stayed, taking jobs and doing business with the newly formed Oregon Steam Navigation Company. The 1870 federal census, taken just a few years after Watkins’s visit, documents over 130 residents living in Skamania County, Washington Territory, most in the six-mile strip of land along the OSN’s portage railroad; nearly one-quarter of those residents were farmers or farm laborers, with the rest working as carpenters, machinists, dock workers, and engineers for the OSN or as grocers, tanners, and blacksmiths for the settlements.

Watkins was concerned with depicting not only the natural beauty of the Columbia River Gorge but also the recent history of human habitation within that landscape. Many of his stereoviews linger over the steam engines and outbuildings of the OSN, which appear freshly modern and full of progressive potential in the hazy Gorge light. These photos most obviously reveal Watkins’s intent to repay George Murray and the OSN for their investment in his Oregon trip. Photographs for hire were the bread and butter of Watkins’s career and, as Martha Sandweiss has written, many of his projects combined a “record of [a] site’s commercial potential together with photographs seemingly composed for the sheer delight of making pictures.” Though Watkins’s stereoviews of Rooster Rock and Multnomah Falls demonstrate his fascination with the natural landscape of the Gorge, the images of the OSN’s operations document in detail the technology his employers were using to subdue that natural landscape and make it navigable for Euro-American settlement and business.

Watkins’s photography does not, however, document only the absolutes of wilderness or the advances in recent settlement. Instead, the photographer’s 1867 stereoviews from the Columbia River Gorge show his exploration of the interplay between land and man as well as between the landscape’s past and present. One of the most explicit examples of those dual purposes is revealed in a series of seven stereoviews of the Middle Block House on the Washington side of the Columbia River Cascades, four of which are depicted here (figures 7 through 10). The blockhouse, also known as Fort Rains, was the middle of the three forts built by the military to protect the Cascades portage. As was also the case with Fort Cascades to the west and Fort Lugenbeel (otherwise known as the Upper Block House) to the east, a small community developed around the Middle Block House shortly after its construction in 1855. For nearly four years, the structure housed a small detachment of soldiers who manned a howitzer lodged in its second story; however, the only time they put its forces to use was in March 1856, when a company of Cascade, Yakima, and Klickitat Indians besieged the fort for

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Figure 7: Carleton E. Watkins, The Middle Block House, Cascades, Columbia River (Stereoview no. 1259), 1867

Figure 8: Carleton E. Watkins, The Middle Block House, Cascades, Columbia River (Stereoview no. 1260), 1867
two days. By the time Watkins reached the Middle Block House in 1867, the
building had been abandoned for over eight years. Still, the few buildings of
the settlement that had grown up around the blockhouse to serve its former
military detachments remained.24

Watkins took a number of stereoviews around the area of the Middle
Block House that capture both the fort’s geographic and historic significance.
The first image that he took in this location, The Middle Landing, O.R.R.,
Cascades, Columbia River (Stereoview 1258), looks across the river from the
block house to the Middle Landing of the Oregon portage railroad, just east
of Bradford’s Island and Bailey’s Eagle Creek settlement. By beginning his set
of Middle Block House photographs with this image, Watkins established
a frame of reference within the Gorge landscape, orienting viewers to the
interdependence of the OSN’s portages on both sides of the river and also
to the remoteness of the Oregon operations. In the second stereoview in
the series shown here, Stereoview 1259, The Middle Block House, Cascades,
Columbia River (figure 7), Watkins turns his camera eastward, again cap-
turing the far Oregon shore and the river, but this time also depicting the
assemblage of buildings on the bluff where the Middle Block House sat. The
blockhouse itself is the square, peak-roofed building on the upper right of
the bluff above the river, and historian Stephen Dow Beckham has identified
the other buildings as the Palmer Saloon on the upper left, the Griswold
family house below it on the bank, and the Seymour or Palmer store at the
high-water line to the right, below the Middle Block House.25 This view
establishes the fort’s prominence in the landscape and its importance in the
protection of the Middle Cascades.

In Stereoview 1260, The Middle Block House, Cascades, Columbia River
(figure 8), Watkins moved close in to create a tremendous view of the fort
itself. Taken from the steep, rocky slope between the blockhouse and the
water, this image contrasts greatly with Stereoview 1259, revealing the fort’s
actual irrelevance on the river in 1867. Long abandoned, the blockhouse is
in visible disrepair, with beams missing from the roof and logs in the west
wall slipping from their moorings. At the same time, it is a visually stun-
ning photograph. By situating the boulders in the foreground and closing
the camera lens just around the shoulders of the building, Watkins made
the Middle Block House appear more prominently in its landscape than it
actually may ever have been; when viewed through a stereoscope, as it was
meant to be seen, the boulders in the foreground are solid fortifications
themselves, drawing viewers’ eyes away from the poor condition of the fort
and instead making it seem solid and sound.
The composition of this stereoview at once depicts the importance of the Middle Block House in the history of the Columbia River Gorge and indicates how quickly that history was being replaced during the 1860s with newer stories about the relationship between settlers and Indians, as well as settlers and the river. By the time Watkins arrived in 1867, the Washington side of the Cascades was not a military enclave but a hub of commercial activity centered around the OSN. Through the stereoviews of the Middle Block House, Watkins conveyed to both armchair tourists and potential OSN travelers that, while the Columbia River Gorge may have been an adventurous place to travel, it was only the terrain that offered danger. The threat of Indian attack, which forts like the Middle Block House once served to guard against, was long past.

The rest of the stereoviews in the Middle Block House sequence again show Watkins’s dual purposes in celebrating the river’s past while highlighting the progress settlers were making on its shores, this time with a focus on the evolution of railroad travel along the Cascades. To create stereoview 1263, View on the Columbia River, Middle Block House, Cascades (figure 9), Watkins set his camera on the old plank portage tramway, which was first constructed by Francis A. Chenoweth in 1851 to connect the upper and lower portages, six miles apart, and then improved by Daniel and Putnam Bradford in 1856. Looking back, westward, toward the Middle Block House, the fort’s outlines on the bluff above the river are visible; to the right of the tramway are the ruins of the High Bridge, built by the military in 1860 to cross the Hamilton Creek drainage.26 The composition of the image, set as if the tramway runs straight and true into the western horizon, is such that the old road appears as sturdy and well made as any of the OSN’s iron rail lines along the river — a marked contrast to the newer, ruined bridge beside it. In this stereoview, Watkins shows that the progress of industry along the river was neither inevitable nor inexorable; the river’s capricious floods and winter weather could just as easily wipe out a bridge made with the latest technology and to the latest standards as leave untouched a simple wooden tramway.

The stereoview of the tramway might appear to indicate Watkins’s romantic preoccupation with the Gorge’s past, were it not for the abundance of other stereoviews he made that carefully document the OSN’s efforts to offer customers safer, more modern passage by the Cascade rapids. In Stereoview 1265, Ruins of the High Bridge, Middle Block House, Cascades (figure 10), Watkins moved his camera up the bluff so that the resulting image looks down at the river to again show the collapsed bridge. Just as Stereoview 1263 pairs the ruined structure with the sturdy tramway, Ruins of the High Bridge pairs it with the OSN’s standard-gauge railroad line, built
Figure 9: Carleton E. Watkins, View on the Columbia River, Middle Block House, Cascades (Stereoview no. 1263), 1867

Figure 10: Carleton E. Watkins, Ruins of the High Bridge, Middle Block House, Cascades (Stereoview no. 1265), 1867
only two years after the bridge, and depicts a steam locomotive that appears to move swiftly over it (though the long exposure times required for his wet collodion negatives indicate that the train had actually stopped while Watkins took the image). Again, this stereoview demonstrates how Watkins sought to capture the intersection of old ways of life with the advancement of technological progress along the Columbia River in 1867. Even so, the dualism of Watkins’s photographs is uneven: Stereoview 1263 is the better artistic photograph of the two, focused as closely as it is on the diminishing perspective of tramway line rather than the landscape around it. In contrast, the stereoview of the new railroad looks like an afterthought, something Watkins may have created only to reassure Murray and his future patrons that transportation around the Cascades measured up to current standards of safety, speed, and comfort.

WATKINS’S 1867 STEREOVIEWS of the Columbia River capture the Gorge at a crossroads in terms of the ways people lived in and moved along its waters. By the time he returned during the 1880s to photograph the river again, he would have felt these changes on a personal level. Joseph Bailey died in November 1869, of pneumonia caught while fighting devastating fires that threatened the Oregon portage railroad during that summer; after his death, the OSN closed the Oregon railroad for repairs until 1879, and the Eagle Creek sawmill was abandoned. 27 It also appears that John Stevenson left both Eagle Creek and his residence at Cape Horn around 1870, moving northeast to the Yakima Valley to homestead on the Cowiche River and marry Hannah Lewis, who gave birth to their son, also named John Wellard Stevenson, in 1873; the elder Stevenson did not return to Cape Horn until the late 1880s or 1890s. 28 Not only were Watkins’s former companions gone, but the very nature of travel along the river had also changed by the time he made his first return trip in 1882. In 1879, Henry Villard bought the OSN and renamed it the Oregon Railway & Navigation Company (OR&N). Villard’s company rebuilt the railroad on the Oregon side of the river, opening an unprecedented passenger and freight train route from Portland to The Dalles in May 1882 and then all the way to Wallula, Washington, in November of that year.

Although Watkins’s photographs of the Middle Block House and the original portage tramway seem to indicate that he found the Gorge’s history a more compelling pictorial subject than its future, his 1867 stereoviews do not deny that more modern ways of life were coming to the river. As Peter Bacon Hales has written, Watkins’s interest in the romantic past of the Gorge was not a rejection of the river’s future but an “apologia” that change was inevitable. 29 His images memorialize the past at the same time as they signify
the future of life on the river, and one 1867 Watkins stereoview in particular seems particularly prescient of how human settlement in the Gorge would evolve: Stereoview 1326, *Indian Camp at the Head of the Dalles, Columbia River* (figure 11). Watkins took this stereoview on the second section of his 1867 trip through the Gorge. Leaving the Upper Landing, he took an OSN sternwheeler upriver to Dalles City, then followed the OSN’s portage railroad eastward out of the city, ending at the railroad’s terminus at Celilo. Watkins photographed Stereoview 1326 along the rail line, at the eastern head of what was then known as Fivemile Rapids, part of the series of rocky basalt narrows and treacherous cataracts that posed an even trickier passage for boats than the Cascades of the Columbia. This image depicts what was likely a summer fishing camp, located where Native American seasonal fishing villages ran alongside the rapids to Celilo Falls. Despite his proximity to those Native communities, Watkins took only four images in 1867 — including *Indian Camp* — that documented traditional ways of life on the Columbia.\(^3\) He took all four images at a distance from their subjects, and one in particular, *Indian Ranch on the Columbia, during Salmon Fishing* (Stereoview 1331), features no visible settlement as the title suggests but only the grand, rocky landscape of the passage of the Dalles. Likewise, *Indian Camp* is indistinct enough that viewers cannot quite make out many details of the residence or its inhabitants. Just as stereoviews like the Middle Block House reassured viewers that the threat of Indian hostility was long past, Watkins’s
photographs of Native American life on the Columbia create the (mistaken) impression that Columbia River Indians were nearly invisible, if not gone from the landscape entirely.

Watkins’s documentation of Euro-American progress along the Columbia but not Native communities leaves a negative space in his 1867 photographs — an omission perhaps explained by the removal, beginning in 1855, of many Native Americans from their traditional settlements to reservations. As Andrew H. Fisher and others have written, however, a large number of Columbia River Indians moved on and off reservations as they pleased, especially during salmon season, when many returned to the Columbia River to fish. In this context, the lack of Native subjects in his photographs may indicate a more willful omission on Watkins’s part. Perhaps the photographer, tied as he was to the OSN and the settlers who relied on its operations, sensed how Euro-American industry would eventually change Native ways of life on the Columbia — especially in the area known as the Passage of the Dalles, where both the *Indian Camp* and *Indian Ranch* stereoviews were taken. It is also possible that Watkins’s employers and coworkers dissuaded him from taking any photographs of Native peoples that would indicate they still had a presence along a river the company was so rapidly developing. Or, ever the documentarian, perhaps he was simply recording what he saw: the token evidence of Indians’ presence.

Watkins returned fifteen years later, in 1882, to the very spot where he’d taken *Indian Camp* and found it much changed. From the same vantage point, he made the stereoview entitled *Chinese Camp at the Head of the Dalles, Oregon* (figure 12), and that photograph shows how industrial progress had visibly altered the demographics of who was living along the river’s shores. Though *Chinese Camp* depicts the same location as *Indian Camp*, the Native American structures are gone, replaced by the tents of Chinese immigrants, most likely laborers the OR&N had hired between 1879 and 1882 to construct its railroad east of The Dalles and to complete its line from Portland to Wallula, Washington. Though Indians still fished the river in 1882 and had sizeable fishing villages at Wishram and Celilo, it is possible that the ongoing construction of the railroad during this time forced them away from some of their traditional seasonal camps, including this one. The *Chinese Camp* stereoview is a testament to a trend of increased Chinese immigration to the Middle Columbia and eastern Oregon during the late 1870s and 1880s. In the 1860 federal census, four Chinese residents were recorded as living in Wasco County; by 1880, there were 1,158 Chinese residents in the county, 1,020 of whom were listed as employees of the railroad. Watkins could not have known that his stereoview of the tent camp would memorialize yet another change along the Columbia River that would leave as quickly as it
had come. By the 1890 federal census, with the railroad long completed, the numbers of Chinese in Wasco County had dwindled to 205.¹²

Watkins’s photographs of the Columbia from the 1880s capture other changes that were happening along the river: tunnels built by the OR&N along the Oregon shore to bypass the treacherous rock outcroppings and high-water lines that the OSN had struggled with during the 1860s, the development of the salmon fishing industry, and the construction of the canal and locks at the Cascades. Even though he documented those transformations, Watkins’s later images of the Columbia River Gorge never quite capture the comprehensive view of the river that the 1867 stereoviews provide. Though there are gaps in the 1867 series, particularly in the lack of images taken between the Upper Cascades and Dalles City, these photographs provide the most complete representation of what the river looked like and who was living on its shores that any photographer was able to produce before or after. They also reveal Watkins’s process, his meticulous composition and documentation of the river’s geography that he would later refine in precise studies of specific landmarks, such as Oneonta Gorge and Eagle Creek, taken during his trips to the river between 1882 and 1885.

Arguably, the real treasure of Watkins’s 1867 stereoviews is that they capture the Columbia River Gorge at a rare moment of perceived calm. Viewed through Watkins’s lens, man and river live in harmony with one another,
the recent tumult and challenges of pioneer life giving way to a peaceful idyll of settlement and industry. At the same time, the Columbia River Gorge in these stereoviews seems poised on the brink of a more modern era, its wild beauty increasingly framed by the blossoming railroads of the OSN and growing urban areas like Dalles City. Watkins’s images therefore avoid sentimentality. Instead, they are inherently laced with an awareness of what it meant to the photographer to be in that place during that particular time, caught in the rush of progress between the pioneer era and the era of industrial transportation. By documenting the river’s peoples, their life and work, and their relation to the landscape as it was evolving, Watkins literally captured the Columbia River Gorge in stereoview in 1867 as it had never been seen before and never would be seen again.

NOTES

1. A collection of Watkins mammoth-plate, stereoview, and other card-format photographs are held in the Carleton E. Watkins photographs, Org. Lot 93, at the Oregon Historical Society Research Library, Portland [hereafter OHS Research Library]. The library’s collection contains the most comprehensive group of Watkins photographs of Oregon assembled by an institution. All of the stereoviews referred to in this article are held in that collection.

2. The most thoroughly researched biography of Carleton E. Watkins is Peter E. Palmquist, with a foreword by Martha Sandweiss, Carleton E. Watkins, Photographer of the American West (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press for the Amon Carter Museum, 1983). We have relied on this book to supply all biographical information about Watkins prior to his arrival in Oregon in 1867.


4. Ibid., 18–20, 29–32.


10. William Culp Darrah, Stereoviews: A History of Stereographs in America and Their Collection (Gettysburg, Penn.: Times and News Publishing, 1964), 91. Darrah has called the period from 1868 to 1878 the “grand flowering” of the stereoview format.


15. Ibid., 208.

16. We have noted that John Wellard Stevenson is visible in Watkins’s Stereoviews 1231 (man on right), 1234 (man on left), 1236 (in foreground), and 1299 (man second from left on cart). He is also likely the man standing to the right of Watkins’s darkroom tent at Rooster Rock in Stereoview 1228. Joseph Bailey first appears in Stereoview 1288 (man on cart holding the axe over his shoulder) and then in 1295 (standing in the dark jacket and white shirt on the railroad bridge), 1296, 1299 (first man from left on cart in white shirt), and 1302. Stevenson can be identified by his Van Dyke beard and slight stature, as seen in the unnumbered portrait stereoview of him located at the OHS Research Library, whereas Bailey has an unusual dark black goatee and usually wears a light shirt and dark vest or dark jacket, which he also wears in the unnumbered portrait stereoview of the Bailey family also located in the Society’s collections.

17. Frank B. Gill, “Oregon’s First Railway,” The article contains many photographs of the Oregon Portage Railroad and its surroundings that were taken by Watkins and given to Gill for reproduction by John Wellard Stevenson’s sister, Barbara Stevenson Bailey.


19. Morning Oregonian, July 15, 1867.


23. Foreword by Martha Sandweiss in Palmquist, Carleton E. Watkins, xi.

24. Beckham, This Place is Romantic and Wild, 124–25.

25. Ibid., 81.

26. Ibid., 100.


28. In History of the Yakima Valley, Denison reports that Stevenson left for the Cowiche in 1870 and moved back to Cape Horn in 1890 (p. 199). In Across Rushing Waters: A History of the Washougal River and Cape Horn (Camas, Wash.: Post-Record, 1982), Mark Parsons writes that Stevenson may have returned to Cape Horn in 1883. The 1880 federal census for Skamania County, Washington Territory, lists Stevenson in residence with his wife Hannah. Daphne M. Ramsay, 1880 U.S. Census: Skamania County, Wash. (Stevenson, Wash.: D. M. Ramsay, 1975). The authors have not been able to determine the actual dates of Stevenson’s departure and return to Cape Horn.


30. The other three photographs of Native Americans or Native settlements taken by Watkins in 1867 are Salmon Fishing in the Cascades, Columbia River (Stereoviews 1267 and 1268), which depicts a native man fishing on the Oregon shore, and Indian Ranch on the Columbia, during Salmon Fishing (Stereoview 1311).


32. U.S. Census Office, Eighth Census of the United States, 1860; Ninth Census of the United States, 1870; Tenth Census of the United States, 1880; Eleventh Census of the United States, 1890.