

Carleton E. Watkins

By Unknown

1829-1916 Famed photographer Carleton E. Watkins spent time in the Columbia River Gorge taking photographs of Oregon's unique landscape in 1867 and again from 1882-1885. His impact on the evolution of photographic methods in Oregon and across the nation was substantial. He revolutionized the art of landscape photography with his mammoth-plate prints, many of which are archived at the Oregon Historical Society Research Library.

Born in New York in 1829, Watkins traveled to California in search of gold when he was 23. He landed a job as a clerk in a San Francisco store and befriended a customer, successful daguerreotypist (glossary) R. H. Vance. In 1854, Vance hired Watkins, who had no experience as a photographer, to run his studio in San Jose. Watkins learned quickly and moved back to San Francisco in 1858 to open his own studio.

Much of Watkins's commercial work included photographing property, mines, and railroads for various industrialists. In 1861, Watkins was hired by the California Geological Society to document the Yosemite Valley in an attempt to convince Congress to protect the area as a natural preserve. Watkins constructed the first mammoth camera (glossary), allowing him to produce prints from large-scale glass-plate negatives. These renowned mammoth prints of Yosemite established Watkins as the leading photographer of the western United States.

In 1867, his triumph in Yosemite led him to Oregon and the unique landscape of the Columbia River Gorge. He hauled his mammoth-plate camera, a stereoscope camera, hundreds of glass negative plates, and the equipment he needed to develop the negatives through the rugged terrain of the Gorge—before the railroads (except for short portage rail lines) and before the Columbia River Highway made the area more accessible. The attempt alone was groundbreaking; the photographic results were monumental.

His stereographs were extremely popular, benefitting from the already fashionable stereograph market which produced millions of prints throughout the nation. His mammoth images were unique in both subject and form. He produced 59 mammoth-plate photographs from that 1867 trip along the Columbia River between Vancouver, Washington and Celilo Falls.

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Watkins returned to the Columbia River in 1882, 1883, and 1884-1885. The Gorge looked very different to Watkins fifteen years later and his photographic collection from those years documents the many changes he observed. A railroad had been built connecting Portland to Wallula, Washington, through the Gorge, and many of the Native American camping sites had been replaced by Oregon Railway & Navigation Company workers, mainly Chinese immigrants. The railroad company had blasted tunnels through rock faces; the salmon fishing industry had installed numerous fishwheels along the river; and the Cascades canal and locks had been built. Significantly, in this later trip, Watkins contrasted his earlier photographs of a beautiful and sometimes treacherous landscape with his later images of a land on the brink of industrialization.

Watkins's success as a photographer did not translate into his success as a businessman. Although his work was nearly always in demand for much of his life, he was not good with money. He married Frances Sneed in 1880, and in 1885 the couple and their two children were forced to move into a boxcar to save money. By 1903, Watkins's health had declined—he was nearly blind—and he was dealt a serious blow in 1906 when the San Francisco earthquake destroyed his studio and much of his life's work. He died in 1916 in the Napa State Hospital for the Insane.

Watkins's photography became popular again in the 1970s and he has long been considered a master American photographer. In 1979, two of his albums, containing 100 photographs, sold for a combined \$198,000. His contribution to the early documentation of the Oregon landscape and its people and to the art of photography is immeasurable.

<https://www.oregonhistoryproject.org/articles/biographies/carleton-e-watkins-biography/>