

Early Conservation Photography

An Enduring Legacy

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In 1833, six years before the invention of photography would be announced to the world at a meeting of the French Academy of Sciences in Paris, a brigade of mountain men led by Joseph R. Walker was clinging to the Humboldt River as they inched their way westward across the barren landscape of the Great Basin. By early October, they approached the eastern flank of the central Sierra Nevada Mountains. Tattered and half-starved, the men began their arduous ascent amidst early mountain snows and a labyrinth of steep canyons and mountain peaks. By late October, they would be the first Euro-Americans to witness the sublime landscape that would become one of the world's natural wonders: Yosemite National Park.

The first known photographs of Yosemite were made by Charles Leander Weed in 1859. But it was the photographs of Yosemite made by Carleton Watkins during the summer of 1861 that would elevate landscape photography beyond pure documentary to inspire and persuade in the cause of environmental conservation.

Watkins' 1861 photographs were obtained with a special camera that was designed to house large glass plates that could produce "mammoth" plate negatives of about 18 x 22 inches. The camera, glass plates, lenses, tripods, chemicals, and dark tent that were needed to make the negatives were hauled by horses and mules more than 75 miles from Mariposa to Yosemite Valley. During July, Watkins produced 30 mammoth plate negatives of Yosemite. California Senator John Conness is believed to have shown the photographs to President Abraham Lincoln, which helped persuade Lincoln to sign in June 1864 a congressional act granting the Yosemite region to California, with the proviso "that the said State accept this grant upon the express conditions that the premises shall be held for public use, resort and recreation; shall be inalienable for all time..." So in 1864, inspired in part by Watkins' photographs, a radical, far-reaching concept was born: the setting aside of public lands in perpetuity for the enjoyment of all citizens. Yosemite would become the Nation's third national park on October 1, 1890.

Like Watkins' photographs of Yosemite, William Henry Jackson's photographs of Yellowstone nearly a decade later would play a central role in persuading the Forty-Second Congress of the United States to set aside Yellowstone as a "pleasuring-ground for the benefit and enjoyment of the people." Jackson was part of the 1871 federally funded geological survey team led by Dr. Ferdinand Hayden whose charge was to document the natural resources of the Yellowstone region and to determine if reports of geysers, boiling springs, and other natural wonders were true, or simply yarns spun by the occasional visitors to the region. The veracity of Jackson's photographs would provide the necessary evidence to confirm the existence of Yellowstone's natural wonders.

The landscape photographs of Watkins and Jackson have an enduring legacy, one that inspires individuals to use photography as a means to preserve and protect the environment. Annie Griffiths Belt, Robert Glenn Ketchum, Frans Lanting, and Thomas Mangelsen are among today's renowned conservation photographers who continue the work pioneered by Watkins and Jackson.



Sentinel Rock, 3,270 Feet, View up the Valley, Yosemite, 1861. Albumen print from collodion negative; Carleton Watkins © J. Paul Getty Museum

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