

Columbia River image is on stamp

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Cape Horn is just another big rock in Washington state.

When it comes to photography history, this must-stop photo opportunity on Highway 14, jutting into the Columbia River in Skamania County's southwest corner, is one of the more recognizable rocks on the planet.

Cape Horn, immortalized in a photograph by Carleton E. Watkins in 1867, is now celebrated on a postage stamp. Watkins' timeless image is one of 20 in the Masters of American Photography pane issued by the U.S. Forest Service.

Although the 3-cent price hike from 34-cent first-class postage does not take effect until June 30, the Masters of American Photography issues are 37-cent stamps. The stamps are chronologically arranged examples of portrait, documentary, landscape and fine art photography. Edward Steichen, Alfred Steiglitz, Edward Weston, Walker Evans, Imogen Cunningham and Ansel Adams are among the photographers whose works comprise these new stamps.

Watkins (1829-1916) was from Oneonta, N.Y. As a young man, he met a fellow Oneontan named Collis P. Huntington, who took him west to California to prospect for gold. Huntington, builder of the Central Pacific Railroad, was Watkins' longtime friend and patron.

By 1860, Watkins became established in San Francisco as a portrait and landscape photographer. He spent sum-

mers in the Yosemite Valley, taking pictures of this pristine natureland.

His photos influenced President Lincoln to name Yosemite Valley and the Mariposa Grove of giant sequoias as a public trust. This was the first time the federal government had set aside scenic lands to protect them for the enjoyment of all.

This idea allowed Yellowstone to become the first national park in 1872. Yosemite followed in 1890 and Mount Rainier in 1899.

Using a railroad pass provided by Huntington, Watkins traveled to Utah, Oregon, Washington and British Columbia during the late 1860s.

Cape Horn, a broad promontory rising 400 feet above the Columbia, was named Cape Heron in 1826 by a Hudson's Bay Company explorer named John Work. He saw heron rooting around the rock.

The name has become distorted to be identical to Cape Horn in Chile, a landmark point at the southern tip of the Andes.

Our Cape Horn is located across the Columbia from Bridal Veil Falls and Sand Island on the Oregon side of the river. The rock is surrounded by Douglas fir, maple and a narrow, rough road.

When Watkins made his photograph of Cape Horn in 1867, the shot was one of 60 huge negatives and 136 stereo images of Portland, Oregon City, Mount Hood, and the Columbia River.

In his 1983 book, "*Carleton E.*

Watkins: Photographer of the American West, California photography historian Peter E. Palmquist writes:

“One image in particular, ‘Cape Horn Near Celilo,’ owes much of its composition to the congruence of the railroad tracks with the natural environment; elementary simple, its total effect is that of a tightly controlled inter-action of light and dark.

“This is an example of Watkins’ vision at its most exciting, and it is not surprising that some modern writers have praised this image as ‘the single most beautiful photograph made in the 19th century’.”

Despite his talent, Watkins was a weak businessman. He lost his gallery and all his negatives when the Bank of California failed in 1874. A slimy competitor named Isaiah W. Taber grabbed control of Watkins’ works and sold the, under his name.

Watkins became manager of a photo gallery at Yosemite, selling photos and stereoscopic views to scientists, miners, homesteaders and tourists. He had a studio in San Francisco in 1906, but his negatives were destroyed by fire following the city’s epic earthquake.

There is a photo of Watkins, bearded and going blind and suffering terri-



Carleton E. Watkins’ 1867 Skamania County photo of ‘Cape Horn near Celilo’ is the subject of a new stamp.

ble shock, being escorted from his burning gallery.

Watkins never recovered. He was sent to the Napa State Hospital for the Insane at Imola, Calif. He died there at age 87 in 1916. He was buried in the hospital graveyard, but no stone marks his grave.