

**The Carleton E. Watkins Photographs of the Golden Gate
and Golden Feather Mining Claims**

by

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Photographs of the progress of construction of the Oroville Dam are frequent reminders to us of this latest phase of men's attempts to use the mighty Feather River for their purposes. Several previous ventures involving major construction in the river channel near the dam site were attempted in the nineteenth century, but unfortunately a visual record of these, excepting one, is generally lacking.

Miners attempted ^{unsuccessfully} apparently as early as 1850 ~~unsuccessfully~~ to blast a new channel for the river at Long's Bar, a short distance below the site of the Oroville Dam. Miners also constructed several flumes to divert the river between the points of Oroville and Bidwell Bar, 1855-1859. Some of these diversions were large in size. The flume of the Montezuma Company in August, 1856, was 1,800 feet long, 45 feet wide, and over 6 feet in height. The adjoining Junction Company flume was 1,600 feet long. Together the companies diverted the river nearly two-thirds of a mile. Probably the most successful of the early river mining operations was the Cape claim, which flumed the river about a mile and a half above Oroville in 1857. The Cape claim reportedly yielded \$330,000 in gold that season. The Union Cape Company flumed the river just below the Cape claim in 1858, but did not yield as well. Theodore Hittell noted in his History of California that the operation of the Cape and Union Cape claims above Oroville was "one of the most stupendous mining enterprises of the state." Construction included a ditch nearly a mile long, excavated out of solid rock and a flume made of lumber sufficient to divert the

entire river for 5,000 feet. Eighteen pumps, operated by water power, drew water from the river bed. The largest river mining operation, constructed between the current dam site and the site of the first after-bay, was the Golden Gate Mining Company and the Golden Feather Mining Company, built 1889-1891, on what had been, according to George Mansfield in his History of Butte County, the Greak, the Cape, and the Union Cape claims. A rare set of photographs of these latter mining enterprises presented ^{have}discloses their large scope, even though they ^{were}dwarfed by comparison to the current Oroville project.

General Manager of both the Golden Gate and the Golden Feather claims was Frank McLaughlin, a first-class promoter. He had already been involved in the consolidation of hydraulic mining operations at Cherokee and in the Big Bend Tunnel project before he promoted the organization of these two mining companies. It was perhaps to promote the operations or to send encouraging news to his British backers that he had the following photographs taken. Whatever his motives, it appears that McLaughlin had Carleton E. Watkins of San Francisco take these photographs as a commercial assignment. It is doubtful whether a better choice could have been made, for Watkins was one of the leading photographers in California at the time.

When were the twenty-eight photographs included here taken? They are in The Bancroft Library in a portfolio which was presented by Frank McLaughlin in 1891 to Warren G. Sanborn, the Chief Engineer and Superintendent of the Golden Feather Mining claim. Dates are included in handwriting on the margins of some of the photographs. The date, November 19, 1891, is on Nos. 9, 10, 12, 13 and 14; that of November 20, 1891, is on Nos. 15 and 18; and that of November 21, 1891 on No. 19, all in the second series on the Golden Feather claim.

A brief comparison of Nos. 1 and 2 in the same series indicates quite obviously that Watkins was on the site on different occasions. If we accept the November 19, 1891, date on No. 13 of the second series, which pictures the "completed Dam," it appears that the dated pictures were taken toward the end of construction. It would be impossible on the basis of information at hand to attempt to date closely the others. Construction started in 1889 and continued for about twenty-seven months. The earliest photograph perhaps was the first in the second series, which was taken after the preliminary development of roads and camp sites and the building of the rock wall. Allowing several months for this, the ^{views were} ~~series was~~ photographed probably in 1890-1891.

The Golden Gate Mining claim, which began at Long's Bar and continued down to the beginning of the rock wall in the channel of the river, is presented in the first series of eight photographs. The flume into which the entire flow of low water could be diverted was 40 feet wide, 5 feet deep, and 3,880 feet long. George W. Dyer was Superintendent of this claim when the views were taken. The second series consists of twenty photographs of primarily the Golden Feather Mining claim, which extended 6,000 feet down the river along the diversion wall. The explanatory descriptions included with each picture are as they appear in the folio. Further identification of buildings, which is included within parentheses with some of the photographs in the second series, is based upon the "Topographical and Construction Map, Golden Feather Channel, Limited," which appeared in the California State Mining Bureau publication, *Eleventh Report of the State Mineralogist, Two Years Ending September 15, 1891* (Sacramento, 1893). Mr. John Barr Tompkins, Head of Public Services, The Bancroft Library, called attention of the author to the shadow of Watkins and his camera in No. 9 of the same series. Watkins' photographs as presented here are reduced in size from the original; they no doubt suffer somewhat in the change. Yet, they carry the mark of a master

artist as well as inform the viewer on the projects. The two complete series are reproduced here for the first time, and through the courtesy of The Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley.

The photographer, Carleton E. Watkins, was largely self-taught. Born in Oneonta, Oswego County, New York, on November 11, 1829, he was the youngest of five children of a Scottish innkeeper. He came to California by ship a short time after James Marshall's discovery of gold. Few facts are known of his early life in the state. He was a clerk in a store on Montgomery Street in San Francisco in 1854. He turned to photography largely by chance. R. H. Vance, a daguerreotypist who had studios in San Francisco, Sacramento, and San Jose, asked him to become caretaker in the latter establishment on a temporary basis. Watkins was to meet customers and take their money; Vance would come to San Jose to take their pictures. But the proprietor could not find a replacement, and Watkins, after a few minutes of instruction and the study of books on photography in the studio, began his career in photography. He returned to San Francisco in 1857 or 1858 to establish his own studio.

Watkins established his reputation in photographing landscapes rather than in studio work. He traveled through the Pacific Coast states, photographing its natural wonders during summer months. He photographed the Mariposa Grove in 1858-1859, and Yosemite Valley in 1861. To do the latter, he took his equipment into the mountains by pack animal. He usually traveled by muleback or in a two-horse wagon. He prepared his glass plates on the site, and exposed and developed them immediately in a portable dark tent or dark room on his wagon. These efforts gained him some fame, for he won in 1868 the award of first prize by the Committee on Photographic Landscape at the Paris International Exposition. Creation and sale of stereoscopic views was an important part of his business

in the 1870s and 1880s. Watkins had become acquainted with Collis P. Huntington while in Ontario, and the two men maintained a life-long friendship. As fortune favored Huntington, he was able to be of some assistance to Watkins. The photographer, after employment by the Central Pacific Railroad Company in copying plans, specifications, and legal documents, received an annual pass, which he used in some of his travels, from Huntington. But fame and this friendship did not lead to prosperity for Watkins. His pictures were once sold by creditors while he was absent from San Francisco.

Even after his marriage in 1880 and the birth of two children, Watkins continued his practice of spending the summer months traveling throughout the state photographing the wonders of nature and mining operations. He made one trip by wagon along the mission chain, photographing the crumbling remains from the Hispanic era.

Watkins' health, particularly his eyesight, began to fail in the late 1890s. As the years passed he became nearly blind. He had entered into negotiations for the sale of his principal asset, his vast collection of glass plates and photographs with Stanford University when most of them were destroyed in the San Francisco earthquake and fire, April 18, 1906. An old friend, Charles Turrill, went to Watkins' studio at Ninth and Market that fateful morning. There he found Watkins in a state of confusion and frenzy. He had been ordered to vacate the building, and yet he was unable to pack his collection in the time allotted. Watkins was led from the building as flames licked its roof.

Watkins never recovered from the shock of his losses. He retired to a small ranch near Capay, Yolo County, which had been deeded to him years before by his friend, Collis Huntington, but his decline continued. Committed to

the Napa State Hospital in 1910, he died there at the age of eighty-seven on June 23, 1916.

The destruction of most of his plates and photographs in 1906 may have deprived Watkins of deserved fame. Collections of some of his works within California are in the California State Library, the Huntington Library, the Society of California Pioneers, the Stanford University Library, The Bancroft Library and the Hearst Mining Building of the University of California. At least two authors in recent years have written articles which have brought him to attention again. One of these, Helen S. Giffen, concluded that, "For some fifty years Watkins was a leader in the field of California photography." The other, Joe William Johnson, professor of hydraulic engineering at the University of California, Berkeley, has done more extensive writing on Watkins. Johnson concluded in 1950 that "the engineering profession is indebted to G. E. Watkins" for his preservation of "a pictorial record of important engineering works of early mining days." In 1960, Johnson dubbed Watkins "the foremost photographer of California's natural beauties" for half a century.

The twenty-eight photographs of the Golden Gate and the Golden Feather claims are perhaps the best still available to an understanding of the construction and operation of this last great attempt at river mining in Butte County. An engineering success, the operation was a mining failure. Some gold was obtained from the channel but not in sufficient amounts to make the claims successes. Working of the channel continued through 1895 and 1896. In the former year, 400 feet of the Golden Feather Channel were worked and 500 feet stripped. Fifty men, under George E. Evans, Superintendent, were employed in the 1896 season. But in 1897 the operation was closed, the dams destroyed and the river returned to its channel.