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Richard & Dottie Oates
816 Handover Road
Deland, Florida 32724
305.766.8270

Richard@blindhorsebooks.com

THE RIVER BEFORE IT CHANGED—A RIVER STILL UNTAMED

Benjamin A. Gifford and the Columbia River

Original Photographs of the Columbia River, The Dalles, Cascade Locks, River Commerce, Fishing, Agriculture, and Landscape

Early Twentieth Century

Documented images dated 1901–1908

Benjamin A. Gifford (1859–1936), photographer

Eighteen photographic prints representing fifteen distinct images from Gifford's numbered Columbia River series.

INTRODUCTION

THE COLUMBIA AT THE TURN OF THE CENTURY

At the opening of the twentieth century, the Columbia River remained both a formidable natural landscape and one of the essential working corridors of the Pacific Northwest. Before the great dams, modern highways, and large-scale river engineering transformed it, navigation still confronted rapids and cascades, steamers connected settlements and markets, ferries carried livestock across the river, fish wheels harvested salmon, and agricultural products accumulated along its banks awaiting shipment.

Benjamin A. Gifford photographed this landscape during his years working from The Dalles, Oregon. His Columbia River photographs encompassed the scenic subjects expected of a Western landscape photographer — Cape Horn, Mount Hood, Memaloose Island, rock formations, and the Cascades — but his camera also recorded the economic life unfolding within that landscape.

LANDSCAPE AND COMMERCE

That combination gives this group its particular strength. A steamer appears beside the riverbank; sheep crowd a ferry landing; immense quantities of bagged wheat await transport; fish wheels stand in the current; Cascade Locks provide passage around an ancient geological obstruction. Natural spectacle and human enterprise repeatedly occupy the same photographic space.

The eighteen photographs presented here represent fifteen distinct images and include several subjects in more than one contemporary format. Most retain Gifford's negative numbers and titles photographically within the image, allowing the group to be connected with his larger numbered Columbia River series.

A DOCUMENTED SEQUENCE

Surviving negatives, copy negatives, and photographs in institutional collections provide independent identification and, in several cases, dates for images represented here. Documented examples currently establish a span from **1901 to 1908**, while the physical prints themselves have not been individually dated.

The importance of the group therefore lies not only in individual views but in their cumulative record. Seen sequentially, Gifford's photographs present the Columbia as **landscape, transportation route, workplace, economic resource, and natural obstacle** — a river in the process of being used and altered, but not yet fundamentally remade.

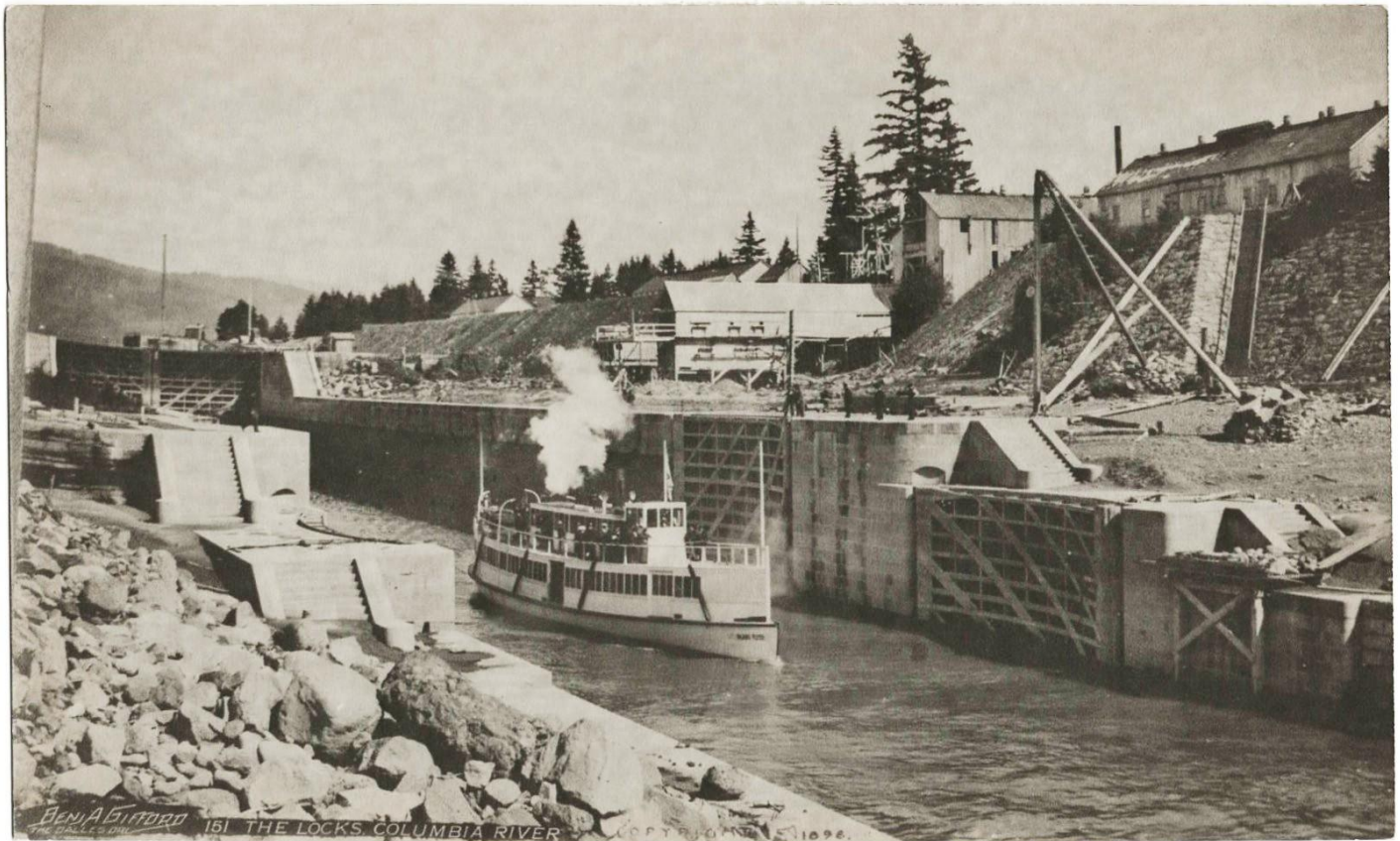
The following illustrated inventory examines each photograph individually, recording its visible title and negative number, physical format, subject, historical context, and institutional documentation where available.

ILLUSTRATED INVENTORY

The following inventory presents the fifteen distinct images represented by the eighteen photographic prints in numerical order according to Gifford's negative numbers. Titles are transcribed from the captions incorporated photographically into the prints. Where a number or wording is incomplete, that limitation is noted rather than reconstructed without supporting evidence.

Institutional documentation is recorded where an image has been independently identified in a public collection or other reliable source. Dates cited for individual images refer to the underlying Gifford photograph where documented and should not necessarily be understood as the printing date of the particular example in this collection.

NO. 151 — THE LOCKS, COLUMBIA RIVER



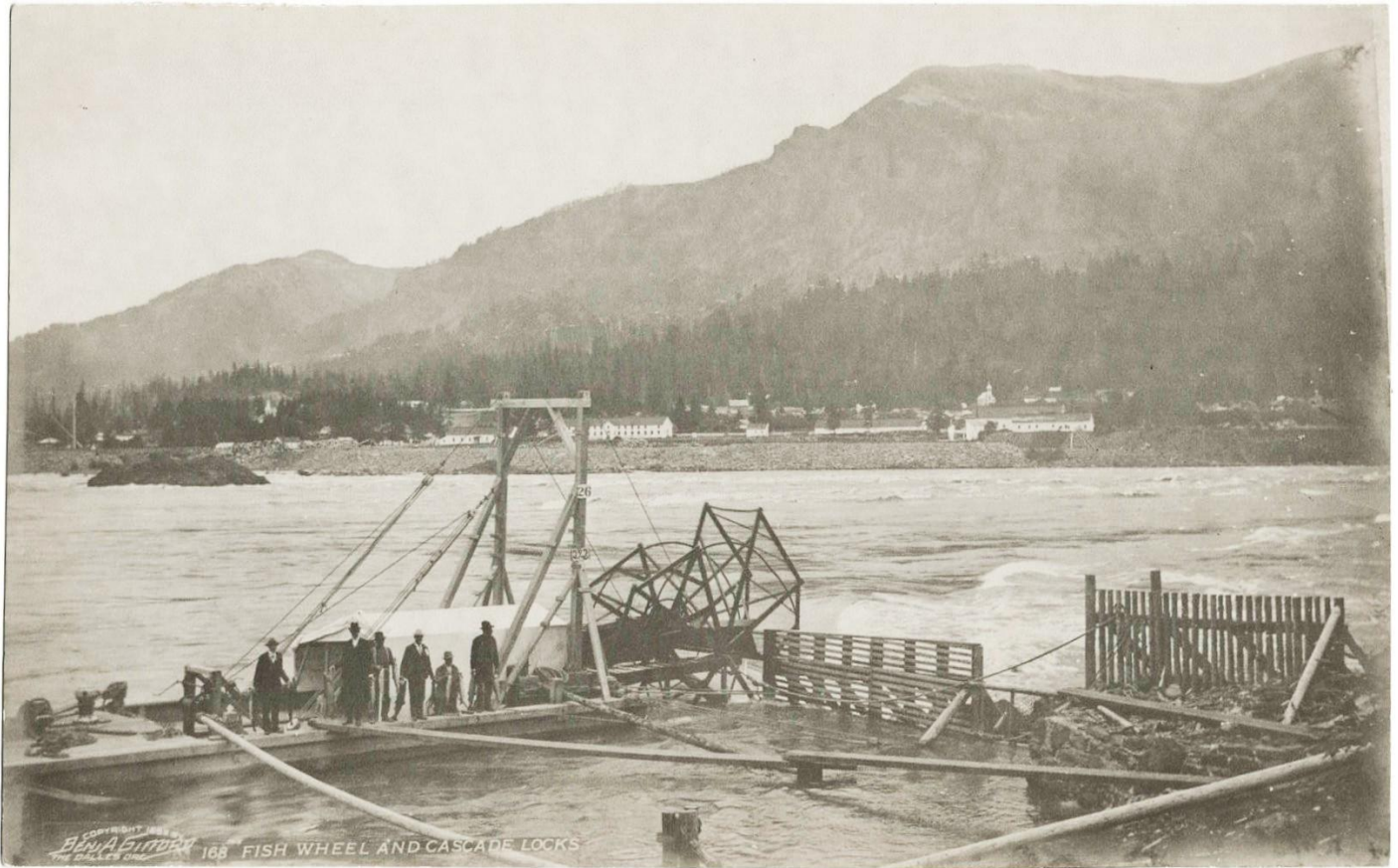
Gifford looks across the Columbia River locks as a small steamer passes through the engineered channel. The photograph records an important early attempt to overcome one of the river's principal obstacles to navigation: the Cascades, whose difficult waters interrupted continuous steamer traffic between the lower and middle Columbia.

The image is particularly effective within this collection because it juxtaposes the monumental landscape with the infrastructure being constructed within it. Locks, retaining walls, buildings, and the vessel itself transform the river from natural barrier into transportation corridor — one of the recurring themes throughout Gifford's Columbia series.

DOCUMENTATION: Gifford negative No. 151. Title *The Locks, Columbia River* incorporated photographically along the lower margin.

FORMAT: Approximately 8 by 5 inches.

NO. 168 — FISH WHEEL AND CASCADE LOCKS



A fish wheel occupies the foreground along the Columbia, with Cascade Locks and the settlement visible across the river. In a single view, Gifford records two technologies closely associated with the working Columbia: the fish wheel used in the commercial salmon fishery and the locks constructed to permit navigation around the Cascades.

The photograph consequently reaches beyond picturesque river scenery. Fishing and transportation — two industries dependent upon the Columbia but using it in very different ways — share the same landscape.

This image is represented by **two differently sized photographs** in the collection, making the pair useful evidence for the production and circulation of Gifford's numbered Columbia River views in more than one format.

DOCUMENTATION: Gifford negative No. 168, *Fish Wheel and Cascade Locks*. An example is independently recorded by the Library of Congress under this number and title.

FORMAT: Two examples: one approximately 8 by 5 inches; the second approximately **7.75 by 4.25 inches**.

NO. 169 — STEAMER DALLESS CITY



The side-wheel steamer *Dalles City* lies along the Columbia shoreline, passengers and crew visible aboard and along the landing. Gifford's photograph presents the vessel not as an isolated ship portrait but within the landscape and transportation environment in which it operated.

Steam navigation was central to the movement of passengers, freight, and agricultural products along the Columbia. Within this group, *Dalles City* provides the human and mechanical counterpart to the photographs of locks, ferries, wheat shipments, and fishing operations — individual components of a larger river transportation system.

DOCUMENTATION: The photographic caption identifies the vessel as *Dalles City*. The negative number appears to be **169** and is recorded here provisionally pending final confirmation from the original print.

FORMAT: Approximately 8 by 5 inches.

NO. 178 — A SEA OF SAND — AMONG THE BREAKERS



THE RIVER AS LANDSCAPE.

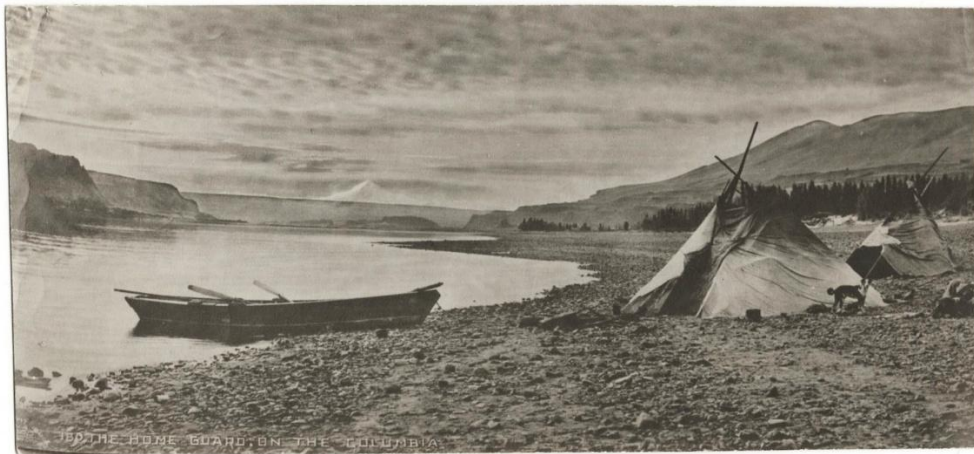
Wind-shaped expanses of sand fill the foreground and middle distance, interrupted only by a solitary figure who provides a striking sense of scale. Beyond, the Columbia and the enclosing basalt landscape remain visible, but Gifford has made the accumulated sand itself the subject.

The photograph is particularly effective within the larger series because it records another physical difficulty of the undeveloped river corridor. Alongside rapids, rocky channels, and steep gorge walls, shifting deposits of sand formed part of the landscape through which transportation and settlement developed.

DOCUMENTATION: Gifford negative No. 178, *A Sea of Sand — Among the Breakers*. Number and title incorporated photographically along the lower margin.

FORMAT: Approximately 8 × 3.75 inches.

NO. 180 — THE HOME GUARD ON THE COLUMBIA



LIFE ALONG THE RIVER.

A small encampment occupies the Columbia shoreline: two canvas shelters, boats drawn close to shore, and a dog beside the nearer tent. The deliberately humorous title, *The Home Guard on the Columbia*, gives the photograph a distinctly different character from Gifford's views of locks, steamers, fisheries, and monumental scenery.

The image introduces an intimate human scale into the series. Whatever the precise identity or purpose of the occupants — which we should **not attempt to infer without evidence** — Gifford records temporary habitation directly at the river's edge, with the broad Columbia and gorge landscape stretching behind it.

DOCUMENTATION: Gifford negative No. 180, *The Home Guard on the Columbia*. Number and title incorporated photographically along the lower margin.

FORMAT: Approximately 8 × 3.75 inches.

NO. 181 — AT THE FERRY, COLUMBIA RIVER



An immense flock of sheep crowds the Columbia shoreline as animals are directed toward a ferry landing, with vessels waiting at the water's edge. Among the photographs in the collection, this is one of the strongest records of the Columbia as a working transportation corridor.

The scale of the flock transforms what might otherwise have been an ordinary ferry scene into a document of regional agriculture and livestock movement. River transportation connected ranching districts and settlements separated by a geographical barrier that could not yet be crossed routinely by bridge.

Oregon State University independently preserves the underlying Gifford image and identifies the location more specifically as the **ferry crossing near Maryhill, Oregon**, dating the original photograph to **1908**.

DOCUMENTATION: Gifford negative No. 181, *At the Ferry, Columbia River*. Oregon State University's Benjamin A. Gifford Photographs preserves the image through a copy negative made by Gifford's son Ralph, probably during the 1930s. The institutional record identifies Benjamin A. Gifford as photographer and dates the original image 1908; the later reference prints were produced after the collection entered Oregon State University.

FORMAT: Approximately 8 by 5 inches.

NO. 185 — 80000 SACKS OF WHEAT



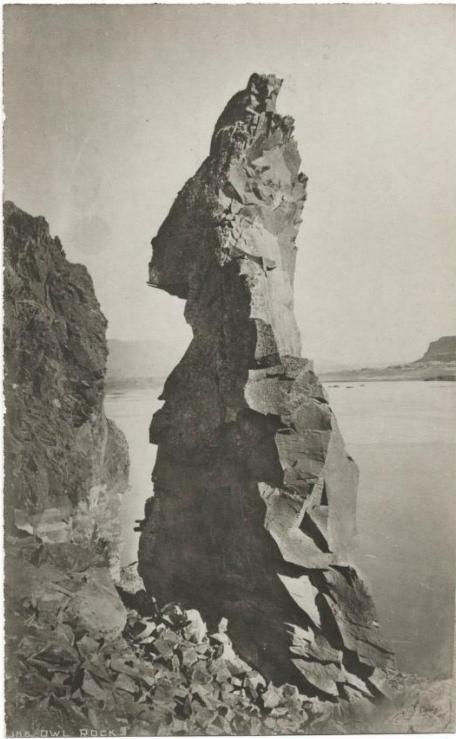
Ranks of filled wheat sacks dominate the Columbia waterfront, stacked in enormous quantities awaiting shipment while vessels lie offshore. Gifford's unusually specific title — *80000 Sacks of Wheat* — makes the photograph almost statistical in character: the landscape becomes a measure of the extraordinary volume of agricultural produce moving through the river system.

The image provides particularly strong evidence of the relationship between inland agriculture and Columbia River transportation. Wheat grown throughout the interior Northwest was brought to river and rail shipping points for movement toward larger markets. Here Gifford records not merely a vessel or waterfront but the commodity that gave much of that transportation its economic purpose.

DOCUMENTATION: Gifford negative No. 185, *80000 Sacks of Wheat*. The number and title are incorporated photographically into the lower margin.

FORMAT: Two approximately 8-by-5-inch examples. One has a diagonal corner crease.

NO. 186 — OWL ROCK



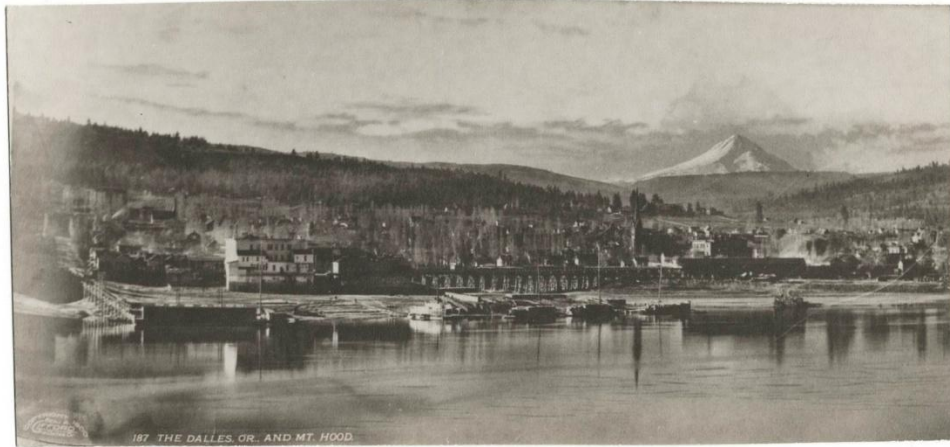
A dramatic isolated rock formation rises beside the Columbia, photographed by Gifford as one of the geological landmarks encountered along the river route. Such formations formed an important component of the Columbia's visual identity and of the scenic vocabulary through which the region was presented to travelers.

Placed within this collection, *Owl Rock* also provides a useful counterpoint to Gifford's photographs of engineering and commerce. The river corridor being increasingly exploited for transportation, fishing, and agriculture remained a landscape defined by formidable geology.

DOCUMENTATION: Gifford negative No. 186, *Owl Rock*. Number and title incorporated photographically into the image.

FORMAT: Approximately 8 by 5 inches.

NO. 187 — THE DALLES, OR. AND MT. HOOD



The waterfront settlement of The Dalles stretches across the middle distance while snow-covered Mount Hood rises beyond. The panoramic format gives the photograph an unusually broad geographical perspective, connecting town, river, transportation infrastructure, and the Cascade landscape.

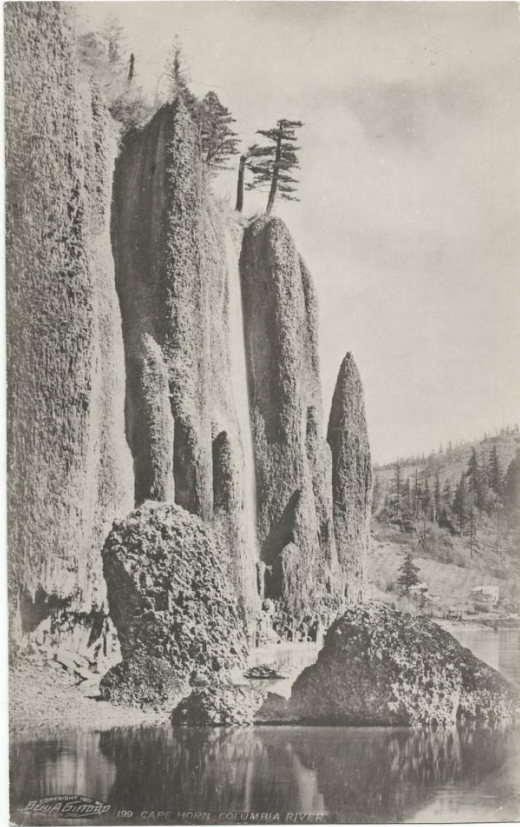
The image is particularly relevant to Gifford himself. The Dalles became his base during an important period of his photographic career, placing him directly within the Columbia River environment that supplied so many of his subjects.

Two examples are present, allowing the same commercial image to be seen as a repeated product rather than merely as a unique surviving photograph.

DOCUMENTATION: Gifford negative No. 187, *The Dalles, Or. and Mt. Hood*. Title and number incorporated photographically along the lower margin.

FORMAT: Two panoramic photographs, approximately 8 by 3.75 inches.

NO. 199 — CAPE HORN, COLUMBIA RIVER



LANDSCAPE AS LANDMARK.

Gifford's view of Cape Horn records one of the Columbia Gorge's most recognizable geological formations before the modern highway reshaped access to the river corridor. The massive basalt face rises almost directly from the water, with trees clinging to its upper reaches and a small craft near the shoreline providing scale.

Unlike the photographs of locks, steamers, fisheries, and agricultural commerce elsewhere in the group, Cape Horn presents the river primarily as a formidable natural landscape. Its inclusion demonstrates the dual character of Gifford's Columbia series: documentation of a working transportation corridor alongside views intended to convey the grandeur of the Pacific Northwest.

DOCUMENTATION: Gifford negative No. 199. Oregon State University preserves a Gifford negative under this title and dates the image to **1901**, providing independent confirmation of both identification and date.

FORMAT: Approximately 8 × 5 inches.

INSTITUTIONAL COMPARISON

Oregon State University preserves Gifford No. 199, *Cape Horn, Columbia River*, among the glass positives in the Benjamin A. Gifford Photographs. The institutional example is dated 1901, providing an independent identification and date for the underlying image.



Oregon State University reference image — Gifford No. 199, 1901. Shown for documentary comparison.

OSU SCARC: Benjamin A. Gifford Photographs (P 218-SG 1), Box 38.

NO. 208 — MEMALOOSE ISLAND, COLUMBIA RIVER



A LANDMARK WITH A DEEPER HISTORY.

A broad view across the Columbia toward Memaloose Island, its low rocky profile standing prominently within the river. Long known as an Indigenous burial place, the island was already a recognized landmark to travelers along the Columbia when Gifford made this photograph.

The image adds another dimension to the collection. The Columbia documented by Gifford was not simply a scenic landscape or developing commercial route, but a place carrying histories that long preceded Euro-American settlement and the transportation systems recorded elsewhere in the series.

DOCUMENTATION: Gifford negative No. 208. Title incorporated photographically along the lower margin.

FORMAT: Approximately 8 × 5 inches.

NO. 209 — MEMALOOSE ISLAND, COLUMBIA RIVER



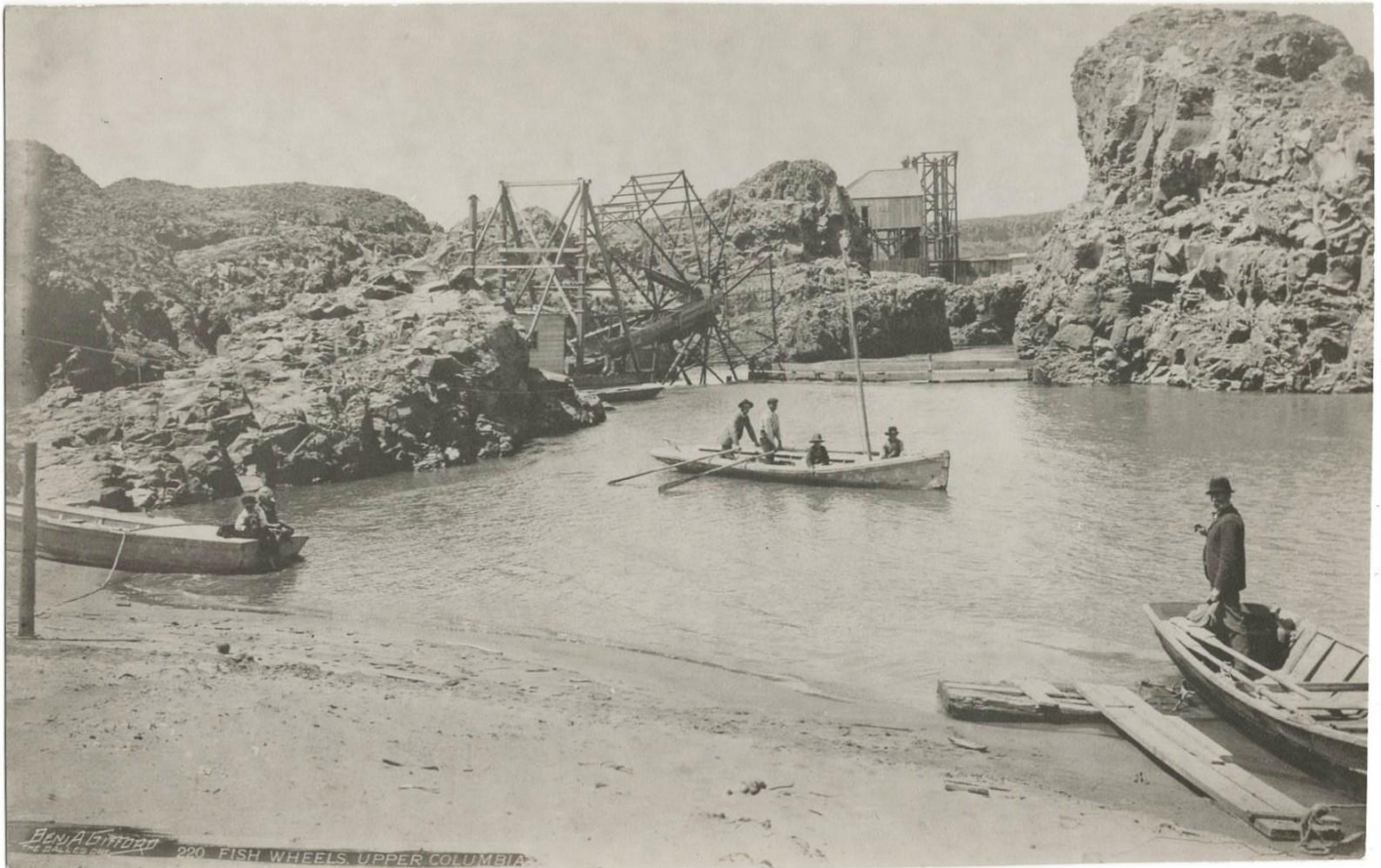
A SECOND VIEW OF THE ISLAND.

Gifford returns to Memaloose Island from a different vantage point, placing the island farther within the river landscape and framing the scene through foreground trees and rocks. Paired with No. 208, the photograph demonstrates the systematic character of his Columbia River work: significant places were recorded through multiple views rather than represented by a single picturesque image.

DOCUMENTATION: Gifford negative No. 209. Title incorporated photographically along the lower margin.

FORMAT: Approximately 8 × 5 inches.

NO. 220 — FISH WHEELS, UPPER COLUMBIA



THE SALMON FISHERY AT WORK.

Gifford records a cluster of fish-wheel structures along the Upper Columbia, with small boats and figures in the foreground. Unlike the more distant fish wheel visible in No. 168, this photograph places the machinery itself at the center of the scene, showing the scale of the structures built into and beside the river.

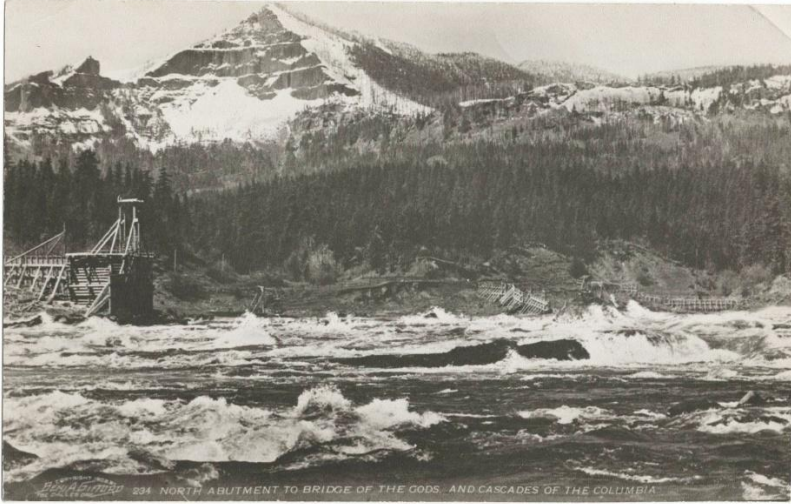
Fish wheels became one of the most distinctive features of the commercial Columbia River salmon fishery. Driven by the current, their rotating baskets lifted migrating salmon from the river and delivered them into holding areas for collection. Their efficiency made them commercially important — and eventually controversial — elements of the Columbia fishery.

Within this collection, No. 220 strengthens the recurring theme of the river as an economic resource. Gifford's Columbia is not simply traversed by steamers and ferries; the river itself is being systematically harvested.

DOCUMENTATION: Gifford negative No. 220, *Fish Wheels, Upper Columbia*. Number and title incorporated photographically along the lower margin.

FORMAT: Approximately 8 × 5 inches.

NO. 234 — NORTH ABUTMENT TO BRIDGE OF THE GODS, AND CASCADES



A RIVER STILL DIFFICULT TO CROSS.

The Columbia churns through the Cascades beneath the mountainous river gorge, while construction associated with the north abutment of the Bridge of the Gods appears along the shoreline. Gifford's photograph brings natural force and human engineering into unusually direct confrontation.

The image belongs naturally beside his photographs of Cascade Locks and river transportation. Together they record successive attempts to negotiate a landscape in which the river itself remained an obstacle to movement as well as the principal transportation corridor.

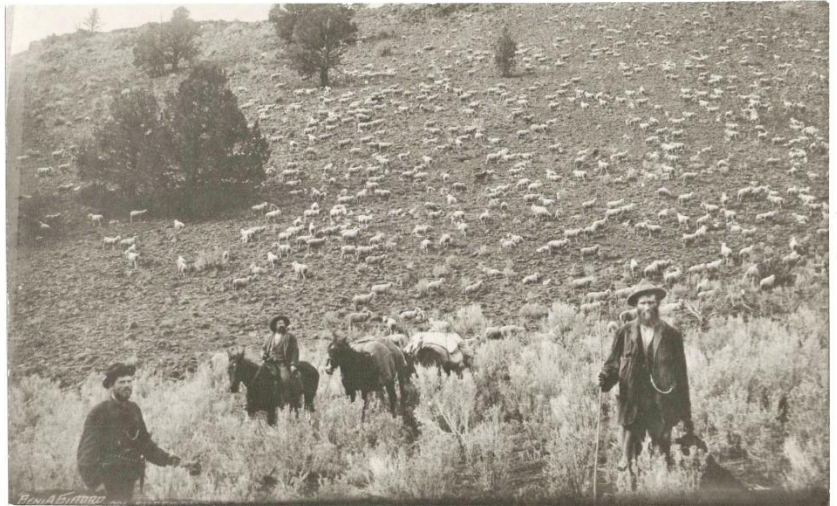
DOCUMENTATION: Gifford negative No. 234, *North Abutment to Bridge of the Gods, and Cascades of the Columbia*. Oregon State University preserves Gifford No. 234 under this title and dates the image to **1902**.

FORMAT: Approximately 8 × 5 inches.

NO. [PARTIALLY VISIBLE] — SHEEP HERDING SCENE

LIVESTOCK ALONG THE COLUMBIA.

A large flock of sheep spreads across the hillside while several herders, horses, and pack animals occupy the foreground. Unlike No. 181, where sheep are concentrated at a Columbia ferry crossing, this photograph records the livestock economy away from the immediate riverbank and places the animals within the broader interior landscape.



Together the two sheep photographs extend the collection's agricultural narrative beyond transportation itself: livestock had first to be gathered and moved across the surrounding country before entering the ferry and river transportation system.

DOCUMENTATION: Gifford title is not preserved within the visible portion of the photograph. The negative number is partially cut off; the final digit appears to be **1**, while the preceding digits cannot presently be established with confidence.

FORMAT: Approximately 8 × 5 inches.

HISTORICAL AND PHOTOGRAPHIC SIGNIFICANCE.

THE WORKING COLUMBIA.

Taken together, these photographs document the Columbia River during a period of profound transition. Gifford records a landscape still governed by rapids, cascades, geological formations, and the immense scale of the river itself, while simultaneously showing the systems being developed to use and overcome it. Steam navigation, Cascade Locks, ferries, bridge construction, commercial fishing, livestock movement, and agricultural shipping appear within the same photographic sequence.

LANDSCAPE BECOMES COMMERCE.

The importance of the group lies partly in this intersection of scenery and economic activity. Cape Horn, Memaloose Island, Mount Hood, Owl Rock, and the Cascades belong to the established visual language of Western landscape photography, yet Gifford repeatedly places human enterprise within that landscape. Eighty thousand sacks of wheat await shipment; sheep crowd a ferry landing; fish wheels harvest migrating salmon; the *Dalles City* serves the river corridor; engineering works attempt to make difficult water navigable and crossable.

The photographs consequently preserve more than picturesque views of the Columbia. They document the river as transportation route, workplace, economic resource, natural obstacle, and inhabited landscape during the early twentieth century.

GIFFORD AND THE COLUMBIA.

Benjamin A. Gifford was among the significant photographers working in Oregon at the turn of the twentieth century. During his years at The Dalles, the Columbia River and its surrounding landscape became major subjects of his work. His photographs circulated commercially as individual views and in numbered series, while his broader career encompassed landscape photography, promotional imagery, and work associated with the developing transportation and tourism economy of the Pacific Northwest.

The surviving photographs in this collection reflect that dual purpose. They possess the compositional qualities of Western landscape photography while also functioning as documentary records of transportation, industry, agriculture, settlement, and everyday activity along the river.

A COHERENT DOCUMENTARY GROUP.

The value of the collection lies not simply in the individual photographs but in their survival together. Eighteen physical prints represent fifteen distinct Gifford images, including repeated subjects in differing formats. The numbered captions connect the photographs to Gifford's larger commercial Columbia River series, while surviving institutional examples independently confirm several identifications and establish documented image dates from 1901 through 1908.

Viewed sequentially, the photographs create a broader record than any single image can provide. They preserve a Columbia River already being engineered, exploited, traveled, and promoted, yet still recognizably the formidable natural river that preceded the dams, highways, and large-scale infrastructure that would transform the region during the twentieth century.

PHYSICAL DESCRIPTION

Eighteen original black-and-white photographic prints representing fifteen distinct images from Benjamin A. Gifford's numbered Columbia River series. The photographs occur in two related formats, the larger approximately 8 × 5 inches and the panoramic approximately 8 × 3.75 inches, with some variation. Three subjects are represented by more than one print, including No. 168, *Fish Wheel and Cascade Locks*, which occurs in differently sized formats. Titles and negative numbers are incorporated photographically along the lower margins of most images, in several instances

accompanied by Gifford's name or studio mark. Examination under magnification shows continuous photographic image structure rather than the dot pattern of a halftone reproduction. The precise photographic printing process has not been independently established.

CONDITION

Surviving working prints, generally clear and well defined with good tonal range. Light surface marks, occasional spotting, edge handling, minor soiling, and small corner bends are present. One copy of No. 185, *80000 Sacks of Wheat*, has a diagonal corner crease. Captions and negative numbers remain generally legible; the identifying number on the sheep-herding photograph is partially cut off. Individual variations are visible in the accompanying photographs.

THE GIFFORD NUMBERED SERIES

The numbers appearing within these photographs identify them as part of Benjamin A. Gifford's commercial series of Columbia River views. This numbering provides an important documentary framework: examples preserved in institutional collections can be matched to photographs in the present group, permitting independent confirmation of titles, locations, and, in several cases, dates. The surviving institutional record also demonstrates that Gifford's negatives continued to be preserved and reproduced after his lifetime, making the photographic numbers particularly useful in distinguishing the underlying image from the date of any later institutional print.

RESEARCH REFERENCES

Oregon State University Special Collections and Archives Research Center. *Benjamin A. Gifford Photographs, P 218-SG 1*. Particularly Series II, Columbia River, 1899–1915, numbered plates, *Snapshots on the Columbia*, 1902, and *Gifford's Snapshot Series, Columbia River Views*, 1905. The finding aid identifies Gifford's Columbia River work, surviving negatives and positives, and individual numbered images including Nos. 199 and 234.

Oregon Digital, Oregon State University Special Collections and Archives Research Center. *Benjamin A. Gifford Photographs, circa 1885–circa 1920 (P 218-SG 1)*. Individual catalog records were consulted to compare Gifford's surviving Columbia River images with photographs in the present collection and to confirm titles, locations, and dating where available.

Oregon Digital, Oregon State University Special Collections and Archives Research Center. *Sheep at ferry crossing near Maryhill, Columbia River*. Benjamin A. Gifford, 1908. Institutional example of the same image represented in the present collection. The catalog record identifies the historic Maryhill Ferry location and documents the later copy negative and reference-print history of the OSU example.

Friedel, Megan K. *Benjamin A. Gifford (1859–1936)*. The Oregon Encyclopedia, Portland State University and Oregon Historical Society. Useful for Gifford's career, The Dalles period, commercial photographic practice, railroad promotion, photogravures, and major institutional holdings.

Cascade Booksellers. *List 18-3: Pacific Northwest*. Item 7, Benjamin A. Gifford Album. Catalogue description of a fifty-photograph Columbia River album containing many of the same numbered photographs represented in the present collection. Offered at \$6,500.

Historic Photo Archive. *Gifford, Benjamin A. (Portland, The Dalles)*. Biographical and negative inventory information, including Nos. 169, 185, 187, and 199–201.

Holabird Western Americana Collections. *B. Gifford Columbia River Photograph c1899*, auction record, November 25, 2024. Original example of No. 185, *80000 Sacks of Wheat*, approximately 8 by 5 inches.

Library of Congress record, via public-domain image index. Benjamin A. Gifford, No. 168, *Fish Wheel and Cascade Locks*, identifying the subject as men on a fish wheel at Cascade Locks on the Columbia River.

Toedtemeier, Terry, and John Laursen. *Wild Beauty: Photographs of the Columbia River Gorge, 1867–1957*. Oregon State University Press, 2008. Standard contextual reference identified by *The Oregon Encyclopedia* for Columbia River Gorge photography.

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