

CALIFORNIA  
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2024

# Bulletin





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# Bulletin

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2500 ft. High

*Yosemite Falls*

*Photographs of*  
**Thomas Ayres's  
Original Yosemite  
Valley Drawings**

*By Dennis Kruska*

# THE YOSEMITE.

38-143223 - 634

Works of Art are among the most valuable of national possessions, and the Artist is one of its greatest glories, for a portion of its immortality is his. The Literature and Art of Greece will endure when her battles and conquests will have been forgotten, and the fame of Praxiteles prove more endurable than that of Alexander.

The author of the accompanying description of Yosemite Falls—one of the great sublimities of nature—and whose pencil so vividly illustrated what his pen so graphically described, was in its truest sense an Artist. He had an eye to perceive, a soul to feel and appreciate the beauties and wonders of nature, and a hand ready to transfer to paper or canvass the pictures he perceived scattered all along the landscape. His pencil and crayon sketches have seldom been equalled, while the results of his brush during the short time he applied himself as a painter, possess so many beauties and excellencies that we only the more deeply lament his early and sudden departure from the earth he found so beautiful and from the art he so much illustrated. As a man and companion he was as estimable as his artistic works are admirable. He was lost on the schooner *Laura Bevan*, which sailed from San Pedro on the evening of April 24th, 1858, bound to San Buenaventura, where she never arrived.

His crayon sketches of the Yosemite have been photographed by a friend, and the pictures are offered for sale for the benefit of his two orphan children. An Artist's orphans should be a nation's beneficiaries.

## A trip to the Yosemite Valley.

"To him who in the love of Nature  
Holds communion with her visible forms,  
She speaks a various language."—BRYANT.

earnest, and in an hour reached the level of the river, by a good though very steep trail, constructed by the enterprising citizens of Coulterville. Nature has done more for the descent by the Mariposa trail, but the route from Coulterville reaches the valley at a lower altitude (an important consideration, on account of the snows early in the season, when the falls are to be seen in their glory;) it also avoids the dangerous crossing of the South Fork on the Mariposa side. Yet the first view of the valley as seen from the Mariposa road is the best, and produces an impression never to be forgotten.

Resuming our journey up the valley, the first object that attracts our attention is the Cascade of the Rainbow, descending into the valley on our right from a height of nine hundred and twenty eight feet. The water comes over the sharp granite edge of the precipice, then descending, is broken into fleecy forms, sometimes swayed hither and thither by the wayward winds; at other times the sun lights upon its spray with all the colors of the rainbow, hanging like a prismatic veil from the sombre cliff. The surrounding peaks are risen into varied forms, most picturesque in their outlines, contrasting beautifully with the emerald meadows and masses of pine, cedars and oaks at their base. The stream has a large body of water, and has its source far away to the south, towards the divide of the San Joaquin River.

As we proceeded onward we were held in silent awe by the sublime proportions of "El Capitan," or the Chieftain of the Yosemite—a cliff of granite lifting its awful form on the left to the height of three thousand one hundred feet—a sheer precipice jutting into the valley.

Upon the opposite side of the valley (which is here only three-fourths of a mile in width) immense cliffs also occur, their serrated pinnacles piercing the very skies, and forming with El Capitan the colossal "Gateway of the Merced."

We rode slowly and almost reverentially along the base of El Capitan, and fording the river beyond, reaching the camp of Judge Walworth, directly opposite the "High Fall," where we remained during our sojourn in the Yosemite. The Judge and his companions, Messrs. Anderson, Walling and Epherson, have located lands, and partly completed a frame house, which is to be enlarged and

an inclined plain of granite, reaching a deep reservoir below; collecting again, they plunge over the lower fall, and reach the depths of the Yosemite valley by a succession of picturesque rapids some two miles below.

The general view of the Upper Falls from the shelf by which we reached them, is grand, as it embraces the surrounding peaks. Commencing at the extreme left, the South Dome rises with its bare granite column fifteen hundred or two thousand feet above the surrounding cliffs, an intervening mass is seen, while immediately to the left of the falls, a peak rises bare and abrupt to the height of a thousand feet above the edge of the precipice. Above and beyond the falls the mountains are lost in the distance, their ragged outlines softened by dark masses of pines and firs, the scene altogether having a wild, Alpine grandeur, sublimely beautiful.

This fork of the river has its source some thirty miles directly east of the valley, among the highest peaks of the Sierra Nevada, contributing the largest body of water to the Yosemite. Having determined to visit the Falls of Ta-sa-yuc, on the South Fork (another tributary coming into the valley to the right of the middle fork,) we left its confluence with the latter stream some four miles above camp and commenced the ascent of the cañon leading to the falls; and of all the rocky places of the Yosemite this certainly takes precedence. The gorge is about two miles in length, bounded upon either hand by immense cliffs which seem to have vied with each other in contributing their share of rocks, some of which have been added lately, as seen by the shattered remains of immense boulders whose fragments have flown like thunderbolts amid the surrounding rocks and trees. Crossing and recrossing the foaming torrent with much difficulty we approached and entered the amphitheatre which forms the head of the cañon. The water comes over the cliff to the left like a gust of living light from heaven, foaming into feathery spray, descending five hundred feet, then glancing over a portion of the cliff (scarcely removed from the perpendicular,) descends into the pool below. Returning down the cañon the scene looking down the gorge is sternly magnificent. Awful precipices of granite frown upon either side, immense masses of rock cumber the chasm through which the torrent descends, while far,

Recently, a fellow book collector bequeathed to me a set of photographs he purchased in London over 35 years ago. Astonishingly, I recognized that the large photographs portrayed the original pencil sketches Thomas Almond Ayres (1816–1858) made during his two celebrated exploratory trips to Yosemite Valley in 1855 and 1856. These photographs, a rare and significant find, offer a unique glimpse into the early depictions of Yosemite Valley.

It's important to note that Thomas Ayres accompanied James Hutchings on the historic 1855 tourist party into Yosemite Valley. On that trip, Ayres made the first known pencil and charcoal sketches of Yosemite. His sketch of Yosemite Falls was produced as a lithograph, "Yo-Hamite Falls," and offered for sale by Hutchings in late 1855. This was a significant moment in the history of art and photography, marking the first portrayal of Yosemite to reach the skeptical public eye.

After his 1856 return trip to sketch Yosemite Valley, Ayres traveled east in 1857 to exhibit some of his artwork and to create new sketches of eastern America under contract to Harper Brothers

of New York. Ayres planned to furnish the publishers with drawings to illustrate a series of articles for *Harper's New Monthly Magazine*.

During Ayres's return to California, while on the schooner *Laura Bevan*, a raging storm pounded the ship. The vessel struck submerged rocks offshore of Malibu, California, sinking on April 26,

1858. All 11 passengers aboard perished, including 42-year-old Thomas Ayres.

Additional research confirms that the photographs discussed herein replicate the actual sketches Ayres made during his 1855 and 1856 trips to Yosemite Valley. I consulted with several knowledgeable photo collectors, but none knew of the photos themselves or their origin.

*Dennis Kruska is a celebrated authority on the Yosemite Valley and the Sierra Nevada. In 2009 the Book Club of California published his magisterial James Mason Hutchings of Yosemite: A Biography and Bibliography. He is the co-author with Lloyd W. Currey of Bibliography of Yosemite, the Central and the Southern High Sierra, and the Big Trees 1839-1900 (1992). In addition, Mr. Kruska is an intrepid mountaineer and photographer.*

Finally, my friend Michael Dawson, a noted photo historian and appraiser, confirmed that the photos were indeed old, perhaps dating back to the late 1850s. He confirmed that the nine-by-twelve-inch photographs are not salt prints but rather early large albumen photos.

So, my online research began. After many hours of searching for information on the pedigree of the previously unknown and unrecorded photographs, I discovered the key to the mystery in a brief mention of a library holding a similar photographic set, along with a descriptive sheet describing Ayres's life and demise.

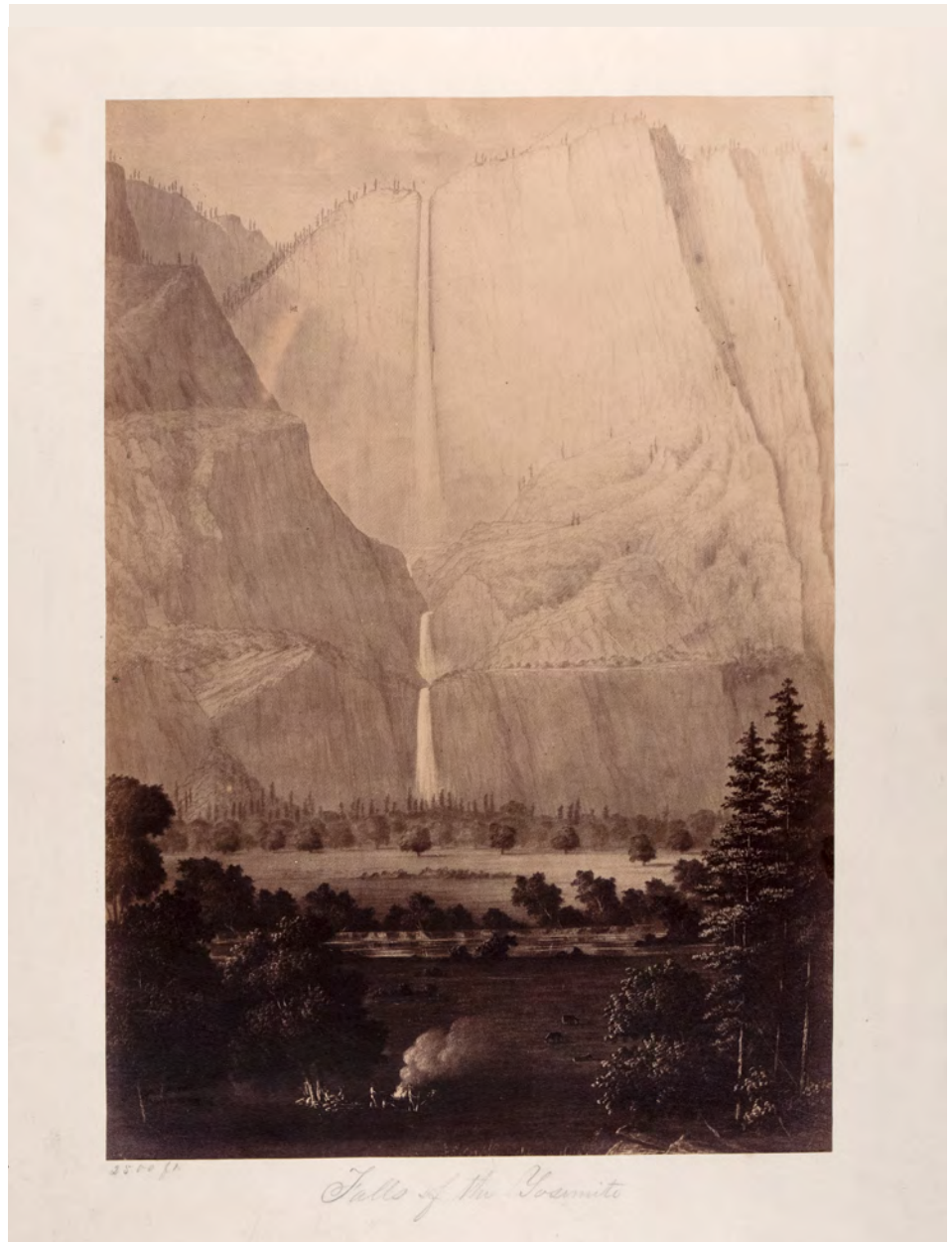
The American Museum of Natural History [AMNH] in New York City holds the same Ayres photographs of his drawings as the few photos I inherited. The items are listed in their catalog as a Rare Folio, a designation that signifies their unique and valuable nature in the museum's collection.

Here is the AMNH catalog entry: "*The Yosemite. Image [between 1858 and 1862].*"

*More Author/Title Info: [Thos. A. Ayres]. Physical Description: 10 photoprints: black and white; 24 x 32 cm. or smaller, mounted on boards 42 x 31 cm. Notes (General): In portfolio, 44 x 34 cm. The portfolio includes text (1 sheet), with 'A trip to the Yosemite Valley,' by Thos. A. Ayres. Sepia photographs of Ayres's pencil and crayon sketches were published after his disappearance at sea on April 24, 1858, to raise funds for the benefit of his two orphan children."*

The printed sheet accompanying the photos, provided on page 3, discusses Thomas Ayres's life and artistic contributions and prints his article, "A Trip to the Yosemite Valley," which he wrote after his 1856 trip to sketch its wonders. This article was printed in the *Daily Alta California*, San Francisco, on August 6, 1856.

Most noteworthy is the key paragraph in the introduction of Ayres's Yosemite Valley essay hinting at the origin of my rare photographs, most of which illus-



trate this article.

The paragraph states, "His crayon sketches of the Yosemite have been photographed by a friend, and the pictures are offered for sale for the benefit of his two orphan children. An Artist's orphans should be a nation's beneficiaries."

Another clue to the origin of the photographs was found in an article published in *Overland Monthly*, Vol. 1, No. 1 (July 1868), pp. 28-34, by B. P. Avery.

This excerpt from the Avery article "Art Beginnings on the Pacific" adds some important information regarding

the history of Ayres's original drawings. Avery wrote in his discussion of Ayres artistry that, "A set of ten of Ayers' [sic] drawings was sold after his death, by his friend Shaw, for the benefit of his children, for three hundred dollars."

Now having information about the source of the photographs, I needed to complete the rest of the story. Who was Ayres's friend named "Shaw" who sold the original drawings? And who was the fortunate purchaser of the pencil and chalk sketches?

A search in the 1858 *San Francisco*