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When Narrative Fails: Context and Physical Evidence as Means of Understanding the Northwest Boundary Survey Photographs of 1857–1862

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Cover Page Footnote

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When Narrative Fails: Context and Physical Evidence as Means of Understanding the Northwest Boundary Survey Photographs of 1857–1862

Archivists responsible for nineteenth-century photography are likely to encounter documentary sets of photographs. These images may have little or no written record, and their original order and intended narrative or purpose may be unclear. It is important for those managing collections of early photography to understand the kinds of details that can illuminate otherwise obscure histories of images. The photographs of the Northwest Boundary Survey, taken chiefly in 1860–1861 to document the international border between modern British Columbia and the American Pacific Northwest, provide a useful case study in the close reading of physical attributes of photographs.¹ They also afford an opportunity to compare imagery and evidence across known sets, and to draw conclusions from sequencing, variant captioning, and other details. This study of selected images from the Boundary Survey serves to raise awareness of the potential usefulness of minute physical evidence and in turn help archivists make good decisions about depth of cataloging, digital imaging choices, and online presentation of sets of nineteenth-century photographs. The observations that follow are the result of the first in-depth analysis of the survey sets in British and American collections and are part of a larger ongoing project to better document and assess the photographic record created by the Boundary Survey.²

¹ Referred to variously as the North American Boundary Survey, the North American Boundary Commission Survey, and the North-West Boundary Survey, carried out by the Joint Commission for Determining and Marking the Land Boundary between the British Possessions and the United States, on the 49th Parallel of North Latitude West of the Rocky Mountains, 1857–1862.

² For an exhibition and articles in the 1970s, Andrew Birrell had access to the British collections and the collections of Yale's Beinecke Library. Since that time, a previously unknown set was acquired by the Library of Congress, and the set at Berkeley's Bancroft Library has come to light. The author is engaged in a broader study of the images, and hopes to pursue an inter-institutional project to more fully describe and present the work of the 1858–1862 survey photographers.

The photographs of the Northwest Boundary Survey of 1857–1862 are among the earliest extant sets of North American survey photographs.³ They are important as incunabula of the genre of survey photography, as an early visual record of the Pacific Northwest and Native Americans of the region, and as documentation of the survey that created them. However, they are poorly documented and extremely rare, making their study and appreciation particularly challenging. Few specifics regarding their creation and intended use are recorded in the surviving records of the survey, therefore their history must be reconstructed from small references and clues.

The British and American Joint Boundary Commission was established to mark and map the border between western Canada and the Washington Territory from Puget Sound to the summit of the Rocky Mountains. The land border, as agreed by treaty, was along the 49th parallel, which necessitated locating the parallel through astronomical observation and marking the border by means of wide cuts through forests, erection of cairns, or setting of iron pillars throughout some four hundred miles of mountainous, swampy, or forested wilderness. An American party and a British party worked independently, coordinated by periodic meetings between the survey commissioners and cross-checking one another's work. Both parties sought to include photography as one means of achieving their broader goals of documenting the region, its resources, and inhabitants. Both found wet plate photography to be cumbersome and ill-suited for the rugged terrain, however the British managed to produce an impressive body of approximately one hundred extant photographs, eighty-one of which constitute the official sets produced, presumably, to accompany survey reports. This success can be credited to the early adoption of photography by the Corps of Royal Engineers, and the introduction of a formal training program in photography for officers and enlisted sappers of the corps.⁴ No photographs by the American party are known, and their photographic efforts are assumed to have been failures. Photographic equipment

³ The only sizable body of North American survey photographs that predate these are approximately thirty-eight prints by Humphrey Lloyd Hime taken on the 1858 Canadian Assinaboine and Saskatchewan Exploring Expedition under Henry Youle Hind. For an account of this and other early attempts to use photography in American surveys, see Martha Sandweiss, *Print the Legend: Photography and the American West* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2002), 88–154.

⁴ Sappers were enlisted men, a designation originating as a reference to trench digging. For more on photography and the Royal Engineers, see John Falconer, "Photography and the Royal Engineers," *The Photographic Collector* 2, no. 2 (Autumn 1981): 33–64.

was requisitioned, but the surviving written record of the survey makes no reference to its successful use to document the region.⁵

The story of the survey photographs of the 49th parallel is obscured by early bureaucratic and archival failures, the lack of a complete and authoritative master set, and sparse textual documentation. Neither government published a full report at the survey's conclusion. The manuscript of the American report and most of the official documentation was lost. The British documentation was lost for more than three decades and rediscovered in the late 1890s, and no complete set of the survey's total photographic output survives.⁶ Several historians, most notably Andrew Birrell and Martha Sandweiss, have written accounts of the survey's use of photography, but the great majority of the photographs produced have never been published and the complete body of photographic work has not been fully identified and enumerated.⁷ Histories of the survey itself rely on surviving personal correspondence of party members, official dispatches and periodic reports filed by the British commissioner, and records of requisitions and supply

⁵ Andrew Birrell, "Survey Photography in British Columbia, 1858–1900," *BC Studies: The British Columbian Quarterly*, no. 52 (1981): 43, and Sandweiss *Print the Legend*, 148–49. More detail on the American photographic efforts is recorded in a typescript draft of an unpublished book chapter by Birrell ("North American Boundary Commission: 1857–1862," dated March 1981 and laid-in Royal Engineers Archive, album 6/33). Here Birrell quotes correspondence about camera and manual procurement by Commissioner Archibald Campbell (cited as US NARA RG 76, File E 190, A. Campbell to John G. Griffen, June 2, 1858); correspondence of American party member Joseph Harris referring to Dr. Kennerly, of the American party, studying and learning to use the equipment in the spring of 1859 and taking Harris's "likeness" (cited as Beinecke Library's Western Americana Collection, Joseph Harris to his brother, April 28, [1859]); and the offer (not accepted) from experienced photographer J. N. Pein to join the party (cited as NARA RG 76, File E 190, J. N. Pein to A. Campbell, July 14, 1859). The Birrell typescript also states that "no photographs of the American work exist and none are mentioned in Kennerly's or Campbell's reports" (Birrell, "Boundary Commission," 10). Joseph Harris wrote to his brother on June 9, 1860: "So someday you may see the effigy of scenes I have visited in the last three years even though the photograph is given up for the present as an impracticable burden to carry round" (C. Ian Jackson, *Letters from the 49th Parallel, 1857–1873: Selected Correspondence of Joseph Harris and Samuel Anderson* (Toronto: Champlain Society, 2000), 209.

⁶ Otto Klotz, "The History of the Forty-Ninth Parallel Survey West of the Rocky Mountains," *Geographical Review* 3, no. 5 (May 1917): 382–87.

⁷ See Birrell, "Survey Photography," 39–60, and Sandweiss, *Print the Legend*, 148–54.

shipments.⁸ Photography is very rarely referenced in these sources, photographers are not named, and no listing or account of successful views is provided. Extant sets of the photographs differ considerably in content and some sets contain unique images. The analysis of these images, therefore, requires close attention to the scant evidence that survives: the physical evidence of the prints and their presentation, evidence of sequence, and variations in existing captions or annotations.

Two copies of sets termed the “official sets” survive in British collections; one at the Victoria and Albert Museum’s study room for prints and drawings, the other at the library and archives of the Corps of Royal Engineers, in Chatham, Kent. These British sets are identical in that the same eighty-one views are present in each and that each is in the same numbered sequence and bears identical captioning.⁹ Subsets of the British photographs are preserved in several American collections: at Yale’s Beinecke Library, the Library of Congress, and Berkeley’s Bancroft Library.¹⁰ Each of these sets had originally been owned privately, the Beinecke and Bancroft sets having belonged to American survey party members Joseph Smith Harris and George Clinton Gardner, respectively. The Library of Congress set came from an English estate, and may have belonged to Dr. David

⁸ In particular, the letters of Joseph S. Harris and Samuel Anderson (Beinecke Library), and the journal of Charles W. Wilson (Provincial Archives, Victoria, BC). The Harris and Anderson letters have been selectively edited and published in Jackson, *Letters from the 49th Parallel*. The Wilson journal was published as Charles William Wilson, *Mapping the Frontier: Charles Wilson’s Diary of the Survey of the 49th Parallel, 1858–1862, While Secretary of the British Boundary Commission* (Toronto: Macmillan of Canada, 1970); Otto Klotz and Great Britain Foreign Office, *Certain Correspondence of the Foreign Office and of the Hudson’s Bay Company: Copied from Original Documents, London 1898* (Ottawa: Government Printing Bureau, 1899). Although not consulted for this article, relevant original records are found in “North West Boundary and Island of San Juan,” The National Archives of the UK (TNA): FO 5.

⁹ Two items are missing from the Royal Engineers set, first noted in approximately 1978.

¹⁰ The British Columbia Archives hold a small set of prints related to the survey that are dated to 1858–1859 and attributed to Arthur Vipond. A small set of Royal Engineers views in the Canadian National Archives, Ottawa, has been cited, but catalog records indicate these are copy photographs made from the Royal Engineers set at Chatham. Some collections (Bancroft Library, US National Archives) hold sets of selected Boundary Survey images copied by Alexander Gardner circa 1866 for use in hearings of the British and American Joint Commission for the Final Settlement of the Claims of the Hudson’s Bay and Puget Sound Agricultural Companies. These copies are not considered in the present discussion.

Lyall, surgeon to the British party.¹¹ Each of the American sets is incomplete, but contains images not included in the British official sets. The British sets consist of images apparently deemed appropriate as official survey documents, but omit most photographs made around Victoria, BC (not on the 49th parallel and not directly relevant to the survey), and portraits of survey party members. If these Vancouver Island views and portraits exist in any British collection they have not been identified.¹²

The Bancroft Library set provides an excellent starting point for a case study of the evidence these views present. It was received as part of a private collection that included papers of G. Clinton Gardner and drawings by survey artist James M. Alden from Gardner's collection. The photographs, on light card stock, are entirely uncaptioned and unannotated. They were, in fact, not identified in any way, and it is only by association with Gardner's other material that they could be identified as likely Boundary Survey photographs. This identification was borne out by comparison to survey imagery published in twentieth-century histories.¹³ Since the forty-five photographs are individually mounted, rather than bound in an album or grouped with multiple images on a single mount, no sequencing or original order could be determined, and no sensible order could be imposed without reference to identified views in other sets. Assembling like images together in an attempt to establish order revealed that some views formed panoramic pairs or trios, a fact obscured by the mounting of the individual views that makes their close alignment impossible.

Identification of individual views was enabled by the digitization and online availability of the Library of Congress set, and online availability of selected images from the Beinecke Library and the Victoria and Albert Museum. Examination of originals in the British official sets reveals further details. However, the evidence presented by comparison of images and sets raises further

¹¹ This tentative provenance is suggested in the 1996 catalog description by William Reese Co., booksellers. A group portrait of the British survey officers identifies sitters by full name, except David Lyall who is identified only by the initials "D.L.," suggesting it was his own photograph and he needed no full identification. William Reese, email message to author, July 27, 2015.

¹² It is clear from the official sets that the purpose of the photographs was not to document the activities and personnel of the survey itself, but to document the region. This is evident from the absence of portraiture of survey members, but also from the absence of dates on images. Some of the views that were in private hands are dated, as would be expected for personal mementos.

¹³ For example, Mark Haworth-Booth, *The Golden Age of British Photography, 1839–1900* (Millerton, NY: Aperture, 1984) and Falconer, "Photography and the Royal Engineers."

questions, and these can be categorized as questions of sequencing, captioning, and physical evidence.

The importance of original order is well known to archivists. The concept is suited to analysis of photographs, which may be sequenced to relate a visual narrative.¹⁴ Who imposed that arrangement, and how “original” is it? What narrative does the sequence tell? These questions must always be asked. The Boundary Survey photographs are arranged differently in each American set, and only exhibit a clear and intentional original order in the British sets. Both British sets have captions written in ink on small labels affixed to the corner of each print. These captions are preceded by a number, from one to eighty-one. The Royal Engineers set is bound in albums, following the numeric sequence, and the Victoria and Albert set is unbound, but may have been disbound from an album. The numbers establish an order that takes the viewer through the geographic regions of the survey, beginning with the British party’s first headquarters near Victoria, on Vancouver Island, then south to Vancouver, Washington and up the Columbia River to the Fort Colville region of eastern Washington, and then following a sequence moving from the east side of the Cascade Mountains eastward along the 49th parallel to the Rocky Mountains. Nearly all views in the British sets can be dated to 1860–1861, and include no photographs documenting the 1858–1859 survey work in the Cascades and the western end of the land boundary.¹⁵

There are some exceptions to the west-to-east geographic sweep of the narrative, such as portraiture of Native Americans inserted among the views at two places in the sequence. One placement falls adjacent to Fort Colville area views where the 1860–1861 and 1861–1862 winter quarters were established (items 43–48). The other group of portraiture falls at the very end of the set (items 77–81). The portraiture and Colville area views are placed after the views taken in the survey

¹⁴ For an interesting analysis of sequence and unofficial captioning of Timothy O’Sullivan’s survey photographs from the King Survey, see François Brunet, “Revisiting the Enigmas of Timothy O’Sullivan: Notes on the William Ashburner Collection of King Survey Photographs at the Bancroft Library,” *History of Photography* 31, no. 2 (2007): 97–133.

¹⁵ Charles W. Wilson made passing reference to taking photographs in the Chilliwack area in October 1859 (Wilson, *Mapping the Frontier*, 75), but no such photographs are known. Photographs by Royal Engineers dated to 1858–1859 survive in the Beinecke, Library of Congress, and the BC Archives, but were taken in the vicinity of Victoria and Puget Sound, not along the boundary where survey teams were working. The one view in British sets that may be earlier than 1860 is the first in the official sets, captioned *Officers’ Quarters . . . Esquimalt, V.I.*

region of the 1860 summer and fall season (between the Similkameen and Pend Oreille Rivers), and prior to views of the region that the British did not enter until the 1861 season (from the Kootenay and Moyie Rivers to the Rocky Mountains).¹⁶



Figure 1: *British Commission winter-quarters at Colville, on left bank of Columbia river, No. 1 (right) and No. 2 (left).* Aligned, mounts cropped, and tones balanced digitally. Courtesy Bancroft Library (BANC PIC 1963.040:07 and :08).

This suggests that the first cluster of portraits was made during the winter of 1860–1861 and that the overall sequence of the set is chronological, or nearly so. The portraiture positioned at the end of the series consists of three portraits identified as “Flathead Indians” in the British sets and as “Kootenai Indians” in the Library of Congress set, as well as several portraits of the mixed-race children of Angus McDonald of the Hudson’s Bay Company post at Colville. The three Kootenai portraits have the same background of a blanket draped over a log cabin wall. This blanket does not appear in the Native American portraits positioned earlier in the sequence, indicating that the latter portraits were taken at a different time and place. It is tempting to conclude that chronology was the strongest factor in the arrangement of the British sets, otherwise portraits of Native Americans would surely have been grouped together rather than dispersed through the narrative.

¹⁶ Most of the photographs are difficult to date with confidence. Birrell indicates that the photographers traveled with British Commissioner Hawkins on his October 1860 tour of inspection between the Similkameen and Pend Oreille Rivers (Birrell, “Survey Photography,” 44). The source of this information is presumed to be Hawkins’s unpublished dispatches in The National Archives of the UK (TNA): FO 5.

Beyond an overall narrative created by the sequencing or original order, proximity or adjacency of individual views can provide evidence for study. One example of the significance of proximity is found in the final two photographs of the British sets, captioned *Cristine [sic] McDonald, Daughter of H.B.C. chief-trader at Fort Colville* and *Half-breed child in cradle, with Indian ornamental trappings* (figs. 2–3). The close relationship between these subjects is revealed by the unofficial captions found on versions in American collections. The Beinecke copy is captioned *Youngest Child of A. Macdonald [sic] HBC* and the Library of Congress copy bears the more personal identification *Young MacDonal[d] [sic] suspended against the wall*. The final two portraits are siblings in a family that was well known to the surveyors after two winters spent as neighbors.¹⁷



Figure 2 (left): *Christine [sic] McDonald* . . . (Library of Congress 1999:001, no. 1, leaf 49: LC-USZC4-11448)

Figure 3 (right): [*Young MacDonal[d] suspended against the wall.*] (Bancroft Library 1963.040:37.) Relative sizes of originals are not represented by reproductions, the Christine [or Christina] McDonald portrait being smaller than the Young McDonald print. Mounts cropped and tones balanced digitally.

¹⁷ According to unverified information in family trees on Ancestry.com, “Young MacDonal[d]” could be Alexander McDonald (b. 1860; d. August 16, 1861) or his half-brother Angus Pierre McDonald (b. October 15, 1861; d. 1924).

Adjacency of landscape views is also significant, revealing compositional strategies employed in attempts to document the landscape. Both the Beinecke set and the British sets preserve numbering that functions as subtitles to specific captions, such as *The Dalles of the Columbia, No. 1* and *The Dalles of the Columbia, No. 2* (fig. 4). A close relationship between the images is made explicit.



Figure 4: *The Dalles of the Columbia, No. 1* and *The Dalles of the Columbia, No. 2*. (Courtesy of the Royal Engineers Museum, Library & Archives, 6/33A nos. 18–19.)¹⁸ Nearly contiguous views, digitally aligned, with mounts cropped digitally.

This relationship is much more cryptic when adjacency has not been preserved or, worse, when it has been obscured by binding in an album that does not preserve these physical adjacencies. *View in the Rocky Mountains, from eastern terminus of the Boundary looking north of west* is not obviously part of a panoramic pair until viewed next to the image that follows: *View in the Rocky Mountains, from eastern terminus of the Boundary looking south of west*. This pair is bound in the Library of Congress album so that they are not on consecutive pages, nor are their captions phrased in a way that suggests their close connection (fig. 5).¹⁹

¹⁸ These prints of *The Dalles* stand out from others in their silver/gray tonality and matte surface. Upon casual inspection they appear to be salted paper prints rather than albumen, a difference that is unexplained.

¹⁹ In the Library of Congress album they are captioned *Rocky Mountains looking west from boundary cairn, July 1861* and *Summits of Rocky Mountains near lat. 49°N., July 1861* (1999:001, no. 1, leaf 41 and leaf 44).

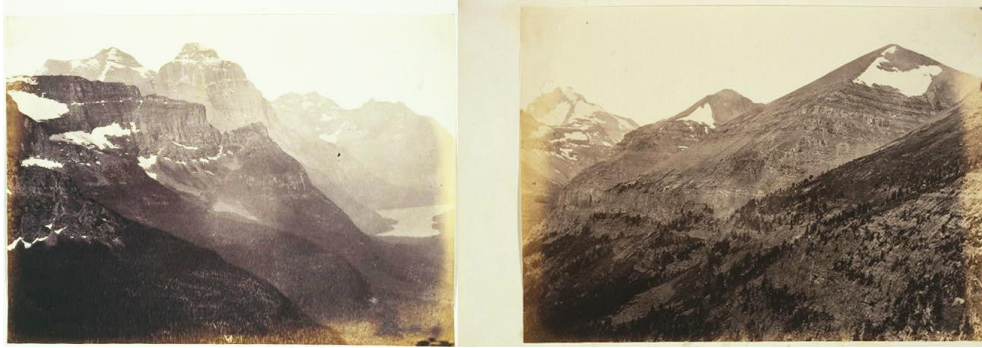


Figure 5: *View in the Rocky Mountains, from eastern terminus of the Boundary looking south of west (left) and . . . looking north of west (right).* (Library of Congress 1999:001, no. 1, leaf 41 and leaf 44; LC-USZC4-11443 and LC-USZC4-11440.) Mounts cropped and tones balanced. Captions supplied from the British sets.

The importance of identifications provided by original captions is self-evident. The significance of variant captions among different copies of an image can provide deeper insights, as demonstrated by several examples already discussed. How much can be inferred from the contrast between *Half-breed child in cradle, with Indian ornamental trappings* and *Young MacDonald suspended against the wall* (fig. 3)? The latter is clearly a familiar reference, and perhaps jocular. The former, offensive terminology aside, removes the personal individuality of the subject, and presents him as an example of a type: one element in a still life composed of exemplars of “Indian ornamental trappings.” It is not surprising that the official photographic record of the survey as assembled in London should generalize and attempt to portray types for study rather than document individuals. However, it must be noted that many of the official captions record the names of some of the Native Americans pictured, such as Chief Garry of the Spokanes or Skulpu-e, a relation of Angus McDonald’s wife. It is possible that some individuals were named because of their influence in local tribal communities. This information could be considered strategic and useful as imperial powers prepared the region for further white settlement, close on the heels of the Yakima War of 1855–1858. Chief Garry was certainly a well-known figure, described as educated, who discouraged armed resistance to the influx of white settlers. Those related to Hudson’s Bay Company staff by marriage were also likely allies or potentially helpful as liaisons. Portraits of survey members present in unofficial sets are omitted from the British sets, further reinforcing the idea that named individuals were generally not represented in the official photographs, unless they had strategic significance vis-à-vis white settlement of the region.

Other small clues can be found from unofficial captions, such as *United States military post, Fort Vancouver, Columbia River—General Harney's house beside flagstaff, May 1859*, as contrasted with the official caption *United States Military Post, Vancouver W.T. U.S.*²⁰ Similarly, *A 60 lb. Columbia River salmon* provides detail lacking from the official *Columbia River salmon, caught at Kettle falls* (fig. 6).²¹ These divergences from the official captioning are evidence of first-hand knowledge on the part of the caption writer.

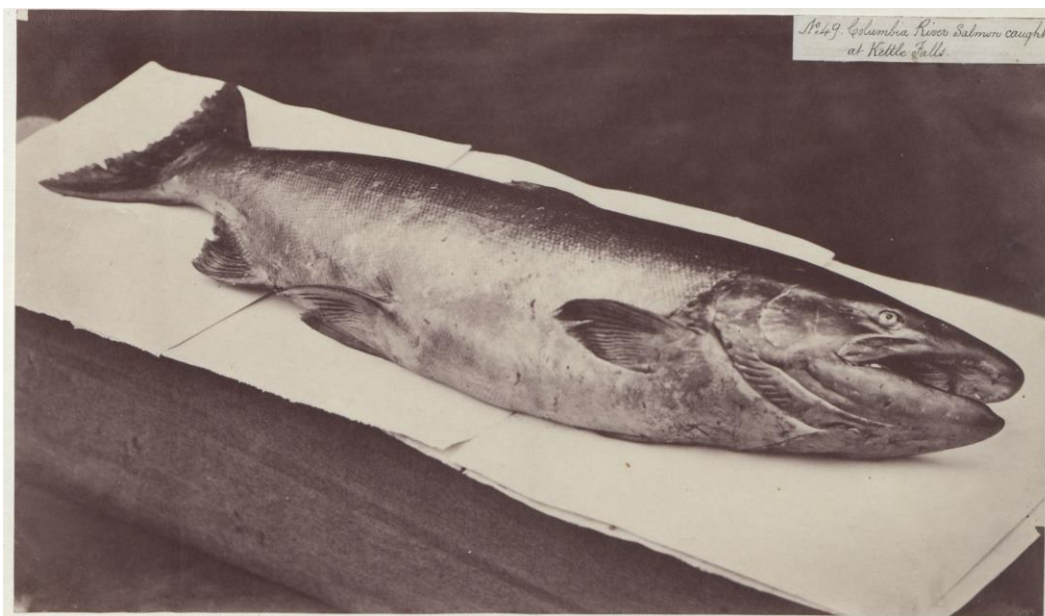


Figure 6: *Columbia River salmon, caught at Kettle falls*. (Courtesy the Royal Engineers Museum, Library & Archives, 6/33B no. 49.)

Close physical examination of the prints and their mounts provides still further insights and reveals characteristics across sets or peculiar to specific sets. The photographs at Beinecke and Bancroft libraries, both with provenance through American party members, are all mounted on individual lightweight card stock typical of the early 1860s. Mounts on the Gardner set at Bancroft measure 26 x 35 cm, and those from the Harris set at Beinecke measure 28 x 35 cm, suggesting

²⁰ Caption from Library of Congress album (1999:001, no. 1, leaf 8). Note that the 1859 date is suspect, as the survey party is known to have passed through Fort Vancouver in May 1860; Royal Engineers 6/33, no. 9.

²¹ Library of Congress album (1999:001, no. 1, leaf 52).

they were made available to survey colleagues from the American party using very similar, if not identical presentations.²² (Of course, Harris and Gardner could have received unmounted prints that they had similarly mounted upon return to the East Coast. They remained colleagues in Washington, DC for some years after returning from the Pacific Northwest and, in fact, became brothers-in-law by marrying sisters.) The Library of Congress collection includes a nineteenth-century album believed to be original, as well as unbound, unmounted prints.²³

The prints in British collections are mounted on heavy weight cream paper. The Royal Engineers set is bound into two albums that date to the late 1970s, presumably replacing earlier albums that had deteriorated.²⁴ The paper pages of the album provide the only support for the typically thin paper of the albumen prints. The albums were created by conservators and beautifully made with nineteenth-century-style bindings, but the housing they replaced is not documented. The Victoria and Albert set are mostly on paper mounts, and these mounts may have been album pages at one point. Blind stamps and earlier museum shelf marks on the mounts have often been trimmed through, suggesting they may have been disbound from albums, cropped, and placed in window mats by the museum. However, they were logged into the photographs register of the museum in June of 1863 as a “portfolio” and not albums, suggesting a possible convoluted history of accession as individual numbered prints that were bound upon intake into the Department of Science and Art (as evidenced by blind stamps) and, later in the nineteenth century, were transferred into the National Art Library (within the museum), then in 1909 were transferred to the Department of Prints and Drawings where they were disbound. This is conjectural but plausible given

²² Testifying about one Boundary Survey view in 1866, G. C. Gardner states that copies of “most of [the British survey photographs] have been presented to the American Commissioner [Archibald Campbell], and also a set of them to me.” He does not mention a set going to his colleague Harris. See British and American Joint Commission for the Final Settlement of the Claims of the Hudson’s Bay and Puget’s Sound Agricultural Companies, *Evidence for the United States in the Matter of the Claim of the Hudson’s Bay Company Pending before the British and American Joint Commission for the Settlement of the Claims of the Hudson’s Bay and Puget’s Sound Agricultural Companies* (Washington: M’Gill & Witherow, 1867), 193.

²³ This set (the only known set with a provenance through British private ownership) and the official British sets differ from the Harris and Gardner sets in that they do not have any card mounts.

²⁴ The albums were created by conservators or binders of Archives Canada as part of a loan agreement, following the exhibition of many of the prints in *Into the Silent Land: Survey Photography in the Canadian West, 1858–1900* (catalog, 1975), curated by Andrew Birrell of the National Photography Collection. Email between Andrew Birrell and the author, June 5, 2015.

their history of transfer within the institution, and the cropped paper mounts suggest significant transformation of presentation through time.²⁵

The condition of the Royal Engineers set suggests they may have existed as unmounted prints for a considerable period. Although in beautiful condition tonally, with the rich deep brown of albumen prints not often viewed or exhibited, there is often significant crinkling to the print surfaces. They are mounted in albums with adhesive applied only at the corners, so this mounting, on flexible paper leaves rather than rigid mounting board, could contribute to these surface imperfections. However, the crimps or creases more likely suggest handling of the thin albumen prints with no secondary support whatsoever. The manner of applying caption labels reinforces the likelihood that the prints remained unmounted for a significant period, and were not intended to be mounted. Both British sets are captioned on paper labels pasted to the corners of the prints themselves (fig. 7). Why adhere paper labels directly to the prints, obscuring some of the image area itself? It was far more common to caption mounts, not prints, directly by hand or by using paper labels. One possible reason is that those producing the prints preferred unmounted prints because of the numerous panoramic pairs or sets present. Bound in albums or mounted with wide margins it is impossible to line up the prints and create the sweeping panoramic views as they were composed. Unmounted prints make such assembly possible.²⁶

²⁵ Conversation with curatorial staff, Prints and Drawings Study Room, Victoria and Albert Museum, May 2015.

²⁶ Another option, of course, would have been mounting panoramic sets together on larger mounts. This, however, would produce a set with varying mount sizes, complicating storage and use.



Figure 7: Paper label typical of those appearing on British official sets. (Royal Engineers 6/33B, No. 47.)

Another example of useful physical evidence is found on four prints. Four views of the obelisk marking the 49th parallel at Point Roberts, the westernmost point of the land survey, may all be early reproductions. The edges of some examples reveal the edge of the original photographic print and a wooden backing board to which the print is pinned for photographic copying (fig. 8). This was first observed on prints at Bancroft Library, leading to conjecture as to whether the Bancroft set consisted of nineteenth-century copy photographs rather than prints from the original negatives.²⁷ This visible backing board, however, can be seen on some of the obelisk views in the British sets as well, and has not been observed on any of the other survey photographs, at Bancroft or elsewhere.

²⁷ Peter E. Palmquist and Thomas R. Kailbourn, *Pioneer Photographers of the Far West: A Biographical Dictionary, 1840–1865* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2000), 185.



Figure 8: [Boundary monument at Point Roberts, west face—Treaty of Washington June 15th, 1846] and detail view of the same print at right. Early copy photograph with backing board and pin visible at bottom. Copies in other sets tend to be cropped more closely, but the board is visible in two Point Roberts obelisk views in British sets. (Bancroft Library BANC PIC 1963.040:01.)

The explanation lies in the relatively late date of the obelisk views. The imposing granite marker was erected by the British at the conclusion of the survey. It was scheduled to be completed in the fall of 1861, and some sources give 1861 as the date of the photographs that document it. However, evidence suggests that bad weather delayed erection, and the installation was not completed until late spring or summer, 1862.²⁸ By this date most of the British survey party, presumably along with its photographers, had returned to England. Most likely the views of the obelisk were taken and printed in the Pacific Northwest and prints were sent to the Royal Engineers in England, where they were copied for inclusion in the survey sets. If this scenario is correct, it also suggests that Americans Harris and Gardner may have received their personal sets of prints after returning east, as the presence of obelisk views suggests the sets were made up after those prints

²⁸ Correspondence of Captain Charles Darrah, May 2, 1862, and later, credited to the British Columbia Archives and quoted in "Initial Point—The Boundary Obelisk," *Opposite the City* blog, October 29, 2012, <https://oppositethecity.wordpress.com/2012/10/29/initial-point-the-boundary-obelisk/> (accessed July 25, 2015).

became available. There is some indication that photographs were being printed in the field at the Colville winter quarters of the British Commission.²⁹ While this may be true, the later date of the obelisk views suggests Harris's and Gardner's sets were acquired, at least in part, after the conclusion of the survey.

Physical evidence, subtle differences among extant prints, and other small details may be minutiae that fail to provide conclusive evidence, but in the absence of first-hand commentary and detailed written documentation these minutiae may be the only evidence at a scholar's disposal. They can lead to conclusions about the creation, purposes, and dissemination of photographs. If it can be proven that the official Northwest Boundary Survey sets were originally produced as unmounted prints, this may be illuminating when considering the high proportion of panoramic pairs and trios present. Another factor in the analysis is the question of why these views were either bound in albums or mounted with wide margins and apparently never presented as multi-plate panoramas.³⁰ Behind these questions is the broader question: how did their creators imagine these images would be used? Similarities and differences among the captioning and mounting of the personal sets now at Beinecke and Bancroft libraries, and that of the set at the Library of Congress may suggest the way in which individuals received photographs. Did they request or purchase the images that appealed to them? Were presentation sets made as goodwill gestures by the British commissioner? If so, why would the images in each vary significantly, and why would the captioning not be uniform? Did Harris and Gardner receive their photographs while in the Pacific Northwest, or after returning home?

While the case under discussion presents questions that are, perhaps, unanswerable, it serves as a useful study for archivists and curators of nineteenth-century photograph collections. It demonstrates the close analysis that historians need to bring to early photography in particular. The nature of mounts or bindings and the manner of captioning are of extreme importance and should be presented with as much detail as possible in descriptions, digital images, or reference copy prints. In digitization projects, capturing the entire mount area and, if possible, the

²⁹ Sandweiss, *Print the Legend*, 149.

³⁰ The Victoria and Albert currently maintains two sets of three images each mounted as panoramas. These were likely mounted together for exhibition prior to the mid-1990s, but there is no evidence of the date or reason other than their transfer to off-site oversized storage at that time. The original 1863 accession log implies they were acquired as individual prints.

backs of items is highly desirable. Attention should be given to highlighting physical variations among the items in a collection. Furthermore, redundancy of originals can be extremely valuable in the study of early photography. Small variations among duplicates of an image, whether in the same collection or in different repositories, can be informative. Differences (and similarities) provide clues to dissemination and purpose, and collection custodians must give careful thought before removing so-called duplicates. Finally, the importance of sequencing of images and original order can hardly be overstated. Full sets of survey images should be digitized whenever possible, in order to reveal this sequencing and context. Online presence of another repository's similar set does not necessarily reduce the importance of digitizing another set, particularly for rare early photography. Collection descriptions must record the presence or absence of any discernable original order, and online image retrieval interfaces should, ideally, present images in this sequence or permit sorting so that the intended order can be replicated on screen.

The Northwest Boundary Survey set at the Bancroft Library, lacking numbers and identification, posed a puzzle for arrangement and description. Few images from the Boundary Survey had ever been published, and no full listing of the known photographs could be located. Eventually the online presence of digital images from the Library of Congress, along with the incomplete captioning available on items in that collection, allowed most of the Bancroft images to be identified and arranged in a reasonably sensible geographic order. Ultimately, comparison to the official survey sets in British repositories revealed far more information about the best order of images as determined by the British authorities responsible for the survey, and provided the most authoritative captions. Further comparison of these official captions to sets at Beinecke and Library of Congress yielded variations and additional information. The close study necessary to develop a more full understanding of a body of early photographs is, of course, best done in person. But the geographic dispersal of such collections usually makes this impractical, if not impossible, for the scholar. Through careful cataloging, representation of entire series or collections, and carefully considered online presentation of digital surrogates, collection custodians can greatly assist in this scholarship.

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