

Charles B. Turrill, "Watkins and Vance, 1854," January 1918

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Charles B. Turrill, "An Early California Photographer: C. E. Watkins," *News Notes of California Libraries* (Sacramento) 13:1 (January 1918): 29–37.

Carleton E. Watkins was born in the State of New York and came to California as a young man. He was working as a clerk in a store on Montgomery street in 1854. . . .

It was about this time that Watkins began his life career. He became acquainted with R. H. Vance, who had a gallery in San Jose, as well as in San Francisco. It chanced that the operator in the San Jose gallery suddenly quit his job and Vance asked the young man Watkins to go down and take charge of the gallery until he got a new man. Those were the days of the daguerreotype. Watkins went by stage to San Jose, and the gallery was turned over to his care. He knew absolutely nothing in regard to photographic processes, and was simply for the first few days a care-taker of the place. In that town the great amount of business done in a photograph gallery—or as it was then called, a daguerreotype gallery—was on Sunday. On Friday or Saturday Vance visited San Jose to see how the young man was getting along. He had not gotten a new operator, so he showed the young man how to coat the daguerreotype plate and how to make an exposure for a portrait. This instruction occupied only a few minutes, and naturally did not go into the minutiae of the profession. Vance told Watkins that when the visitors came in on Sunday he could make a bluff at making the exposures and take their money and that when they came back the following week he would have an operator there to make over anything that had to be made over—it being the idea of both that the green young man would not succeed in his daguerreotype operations. As good fortune would have it, he did succeed, however, and no new operator was ever sent from San Francisco to take the place his predecessor had resigned. He remained for a short period operating and entirely conducting the Vance gallery in San Jose. While I am not at the present time absolutely certain about the two daguerreotypes of Mission Santa Clara, (one of which exists, and the other of which we have a Watkins photographic copy) both were probably made by Watkins during this San Jose career. In the Vance gallery in San Jose he found a number of landscape daguerreotypes. A few of these he copied. One is that of a daguerreotype (destroyed in the 1906 fire) of Sutter's Mill at Coloma, with Marshall standing in the foreground. While I do not recall that Watkins ever told me that this was a Vance daguerreotype. I have always considered that it was. That daguerreotype was made about 1850. Watkins had two other copies of the mining settlement at Mormon Island, which belonged to this same series of daguerreotypes. The daguerreotype of Mission San Jose now in the Golden Gate Park Memorial Museum was another of this old series. Watkins had made a photographic copy of this, probably at least thirty years ago. As a matter of verification, some three years ago, I also photographed the daguerreotype in the

Golden Gate Park Museum. The two photographs show distinctly that they were taken from but one daguerreotype.

[End of selected text.]

EDITOR'S NOTES:

Charles Beebe Turrill (1854–1927) was a California historian and promoter. See also Charles B. Turrill, *California Notes* (San Francisco: E. Bosqui and Co., 1876. The volume is self-described as a “little book . . . a useful guide to the Tourist, and a storehouse of facts for the Resident.”) The Bancroft Library holds a collection of Charles B. Turrill papers, “Guide to the Charles B. Turrill papers as manager, Preliminary World's Fair Exhibit, 1892.”¹

Watkins copy photograph of Sutter's Mill (with Marshal standing in the foreground) is reproduced in the chapter by Peter E. Palmquist, “The Sad but True Story of a Daguerreian Holy Grail,” in Drew Heath Johnson and Marcia Eymann, *Silver and Gold: Cased Images of the California Gold Rush* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press for the Oakland Museum of California, 1998): 43–73. In the caption, Palmquist questions, “could this print depict one of ‘the lost 300’?” It is very unlikely that any of the three hundred daguerreotypes exhibited by Vance were returned to him after their 1853 sale to Fitzgibbon. It is very reasonable to assume, however, that the original daguerreotype (copied by Watkins) was made at the same time as the one included in the New York exhibition. Vance would have likely made more than one plate at any given location.

For the catalogue description of Vance's daguerreotype of Sutter's Mill, see Robert H. Vance, *Catalogue of Daguerreotype Panoramic Views in California* (New York: Baker, Godwin & Company, 1851.): 6; listed as number 46: “View of Capt. Sutter's Saw-Mill and Dam across the American River.”²

Turrill specifically references other daguerreotypes as being from the “old series” (presumably by Vance): two daguerreotypes of a mining settlement at Mormon Island and a daguerreotype of Mission San Jose. Neither of these locations is referenced in the 1851 Vance catalogue.

The author would welcome additional information regarding the current location (or fate) of the daguerreotype of Mission San Jose.

1. <http://oac.cdlib.org/findaid/ark:/13030/tf1m3n98dn>

2. http://www.daguerreotypearchive.org/texts/F8510001_VANCE_CATALOGUE_DAG_VIEWS_1851.pdf

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