



William Henry Jackson



Man of Many Talents

William Henry Jackson is best known as the first person to photograph the wonders of Yellowstone. His images adorned the parlors of millions of American households and aided in the effort to create the world's first national park. Jackson was also an accomplished artist who recorded his experiences as a young man. His drawings, photographs and paintings provide valuable insights to life in a time when America was suffering through the Civil War and venturing westward in search of a national identity.

Early Years

Growing up in Keeseville, New York, Jackson could not recall a time when he was not drawing pictures. His mother was an accomplished painter of watercolors, and he credited her encouragement with his later success. At the age of 10, Jackson received his first formal artistic training, learning to use perspective and form, color and composition. His drawings now began to take on a more realistic and mature appearance.

His first job as an artist was not a glamorous one. In 1858, he was hired as a retoucher for a photographic studio in Troy, New York, where he worked for two years. His job was to warm up black and white portraits by tinting them with watercolors and to enhance details in the photographs with India ink. During this time, he learned how to use cameras and the darkroom techniques of the time.



Military Career



Jackson might have continued to learn his trade and settle into a stable and lucrative career, but events beyond his control would soon take him in a new direction. In August 1862, the 19 year old William H. Jackson enlisted as a member of the Light Guard from Rutland, Vermont. With the exception of occasional guard duty, there was little for the aspiring artist to do. Jackson passed the long, boring hours sketching his friends and scenes of camp life to send home to show his family he was safe. In June 1863, Jackson's regiment was in the Gettysburg campaign, but never saw action in the battle. Soon after his enlistment, Jackson returned to civilian life. Luckily, his mother saved the pencil sketches created during his military service, and they show a record of an infantryman's life in the Union army.

Seeking Fortune in the West

On his return home, the young veteran quickly found employment in another photographic studio. After a year, he became engaged to a young woman from a prominent family. However, a lover's spat in 1866 brought Jackson's world crashing down. Too ashamed to face his family after the breakup, the heartbroken young man decided to leave Vermont to seek his fortune in the silver mines of Montana. Jackson and two friends set out for the western frontier, making their way to the Nebraska Territory – a jumping off point for freighting caravans headed west. There the three young men signed on as "bullwhackers" for a freight outfit bound for Montana. Despite knowing nothing about oxen or hauling freight, Jackson soon grew proficient in handling the powerful draft animals.



Documenting the Frontier

The hard work and new country did much to mend Jackson's broken heart. Soon he was back to his old habits of sketching the things he saw and the people he met. Forsaking his dream of striking it rich, Jackson left the freight train near South Pass in Wyoming and headed south for Salt Lake City and eventually California. His experiences in the West struck a chord in Jackson, and he began to realize that documenting the settling of the frontier might become his life's work.

With assistance from his father, Jackson established his own photographic studio in Omaha, Nebraska, in 1869. He began photographing American Indians from the nearby Omaha reservation and the construction of the Union Pacific Railroad across the great plains.

These photographs soon came to the attention of Dr. Ferdinand Hayden, who was organizing an expedition that would explore the geologic wonders along the Yellowstone River in Wyoming Territory. Hayden realized that a photographer would be useful in recording what they found.

Photographing the West

Anyone else might have been daunted by the thought of transporting delicate camera equipment and glass plate negatives across the West, but Jackson's experience as a bullwhacker would serve him well. The images he brought back caused a sensation. For many years, stories about geysers and waterfalls were thought to be tall tales, but Jackson provided proof of their existence.

Public interest resulted in the U.S. Congress officially designating Yellowstone National Park in 1872, and Jackson's name became a household word.



Hayden Expedition



For the next seven years, Jackson worked with Dr. Hayden for the U.S. Geological Survey. The Survey took him to such unique and unexplored places as Mesa Verde and Yosemite, which Jackson documented with thousands of photographs. His most famous image would be taken in 1873. For years, stories of a mountain with a large cross etched in its side had been circulating, but it wasn't until Jackson risked climbing Colorado's Rocky Mountain western slope that its existence was proven. Within a few months of the photograph's publication, his image of the "Mount of the Holy Cross" adorned the parlors in thousands of American homes. Jackson's work for the U.S.G.S. ended in 1878. He continued to work in the West, opening a studio in Denver, returning to portrait photography as well as documenting railroad construction to mining towns in the Rockies.

No Retirement

At an age when most men have already retired, William H. Jackson embarked on a new career. He chose to put down his camera and pick up a paintbrush in his late 80's. Jackson's eye for composition, coupled with the fact that he had experienced the transformation of the West firsthand, gave added creditability to his work. Soon his paintings of western scenes were in demand for illustrating books and articles. Jackson completed approximately 100 paintings, mostly dealing with historic themes such as the Fur Trade, the California Gold Rush and the Oregon Trail. Jackson revisited many of the sites he depicted in his paintings so he could paint them as accurately as possible. For those scenes that predated his own lifetime, he sought out and interviewed surviving participants.

William Henry Jackson's Death

William Henry Jackson died on June 30, 1942, at the age of 99, and was laid to rest in Arlington National Cemetery. His long and active life paralleled the formative years in the life of the United States, and his many contributions as a soldier, bullwhacker, photographer, explorer, publisher, author, artist and historian have left a lasting legacy that the National Park Service is proud to perpetuate.

After Jackson's death, many of his paintings, sketches, photographs and memorabilia went to his friend, Howard Driggs and The American Pioneer Trails Association. As president of the Association, Dr. Driggs looked for a good home for the collection. Scotts Bluff National Monument was chosen due to Jackson's ties to the overland trails and the monument in particular. The Association contributed funds towards building the William Henry Jackson Memorial Wing to display the collection. Today the monument has the largest single holding of Jackson's paintings.

