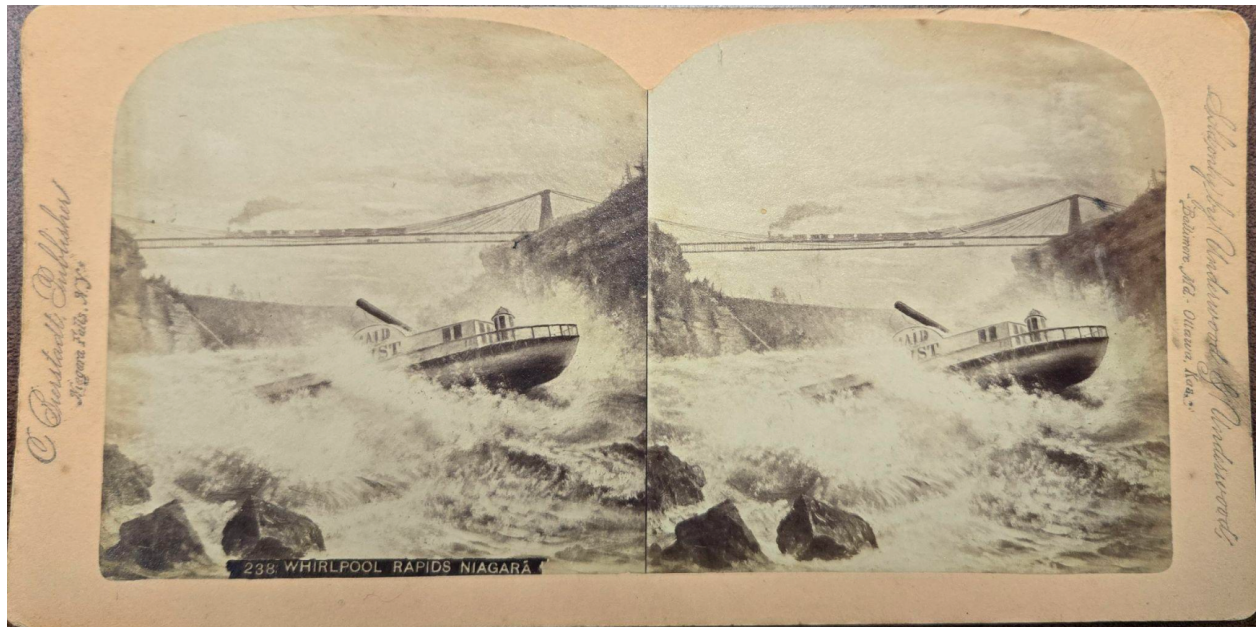


Whirlpool Rapids, Niagara (photographic stereocard published by C. Bierstadt and sold by Underwood and Underwood). Niagara Falls Stereo Cards Collection 1854-1905, RG 599

Researched by Brianne Bousfield



The object is a stereo card from the mid to late 1800s.¹ Photographed by C (Charles) Bierstadt in Niagara Falls, New York, and sold by Underwood and Underwood²; the card shows two near identical photographs, taken at slightly different angles, featuring the Maid of the Mist and the Niagara Suspension Bridge over the Whirlpool Rapids. The nose of Maid of the Mist is shown breaking through a rapid with the name of the ship partially visible. The suspension bridge appears to have carriages on the lower deck and a train on the top deck. The object is from RG 599, in the second box under the file 1.11 Maid of the Mist, dated 1901-1902.

This object is a remarkable example of 19th-century technology. The stereo card depicts one of North America's oldest tourist attractions, the *Maid of the Mist*, which is closely tied to Canadian culture and economy in the 19th century.³ This photograph likely captures the boat's passage through the Great Gorge Rapids, Whirlpool Rapids, and the Lower Devil's Hole Rapids (as

compared to figures 1, 2, and 3), when Captain Joel Robinson delivered the Maid of the Mist to its Canadian buyers.⁴ This event has become a part of Canadian folklore. It's probable that this stereo card was altered to exaggerate or fabricate the scene—a common practice aimed at enhancing its visual appeal.⁵

Also featured in the image is the suspension bridge, which served as a critical border crossing between Canada and the United States.⁶ Beyond its significance as an engineering marvel (being the first bridge to support rail travel over such a vast distance), it facilitated the movement of people and goods, boosting the economies of both nations.⁶ The bridge also provided an escape route for enslaved individuals seeking freedom in Canada during the Civil War.⁷

Importantly, the photographs are presented on a stereo card - another piece of historic technology. Stereo cards were extremely popular in the 19th century, offering a three-dimensional viewing experience based on binocular vision. Our eyes, spaced about 2.5 inches apart, send slightly different images to the brain, which combines them into one image.⁸ The use of a stereoscope allowed the right eye to view the right image and the left eye to view the left image, creating the illusion of depth. When viewed through a stereoscope, these cards provided the sensation of 3-D, immersing the viewer as if they were seeing the scene in person. The ability to reproduce collodion images cheaply led to the mass production of paper stereo cards, making stereo photography accessible to middle and upper-class homes. The stereo craze became one of photography's biggest successes of the 19th century, remaining popular until about 1910.

Stereo pictures were a sensation because they offered affordable home entertainment. Their compact size made them easy to handle, and there was a sense of magic in their illusion. Stereo cards allowed people to "travel," learn, and be entertained without leaving home. They served as both educational tools and sources of entertainment, with photographs depicting geography, historical events, and famous individuals, allowing viewers to explore places and

people they might never otherwise encounter.¹⁰ This object is an incredibly fascinating example of 19th-century technology, education, and entertainment.

Relevant keywords: Maid of the Mist, Niagara Suspension Bridge, Stereo cards, Whirlpool Rapids, Niagara Falls).

Notes

¹ Brock University Library. Archives. *Niagara Falls Stereo Cards Collection, 1854-1904, n.d., 1854.*

² Jordan Ritchie, *Underwood and Underwood Company: Early Twentieth Century Pioneers of American Photojournalism*. ProQuest Dissertations & Theses, 2019.

³ Sharon L. Dean "History and Representation in 'The Falls.'" *Studies in the Novel* 38, no. 4 (2006): 525–42.

⁴ Orrin E. Dunlop, "Niagara - The Scene of Perilous Feats," 1902. Article accessed through Brock Archives & Special Collections, Niagara Falls/Niagara Power collection RG 86.

⁵ Mia Fineman, *Faking It: Manipulated Photography before Photoshop*. New York New Haven: Metropolitan Museum of art Distributed by Yale University Press, 2012.

⁶ Paul E. (Paul Eugene) Lewis, *Niagara's Gorge Bridges: Marvels of Engineering*. St. Catharines, Ont: Looking Back Press, 2008.

⁷ William H Seiner and Thomas A Chambers. "Harriet Tubman, the Underground Railroad, and the Bridges at Niagara Falls." *Afro-Americans in New York Life and History* 36, no. 1 (2012): 34.

⁸ Robert Hirsch, "Pictures on Glass: The Wet Plate Process." In *Seizing the Light* (Routledge, 2017), 85-112.

⁹ Hirsch.

¹⁰ Hirsch.

Further Reading

Brewster, David. *The Stereoscope: Its History, Theory, and Construction: With Its Application to the Fine and Useful Arts and to Education*. London: J. Murray, 1856.

Brock University Library. Archives. *Niagara Falls Suspension Bridge Company Fonds, 1875-1876, 1878, 1884., 1875.*

Gray, Nicholas J., Richard W. James, and Ben Burt. *Niagara: Miracles, Myths and Magic*. United States: Destination Cinema, 1986.

"History of Niagara Falls Daredevils - Captain Joel Robinson." Niagara Falls Info, February 8, 2017. <https://www.niagarafallsinfo.com/niagara-falls-history/niagara-falls-tourism-history/daredevils-of-niagara-falls/captain-joel-robinson/>.

Additional Images

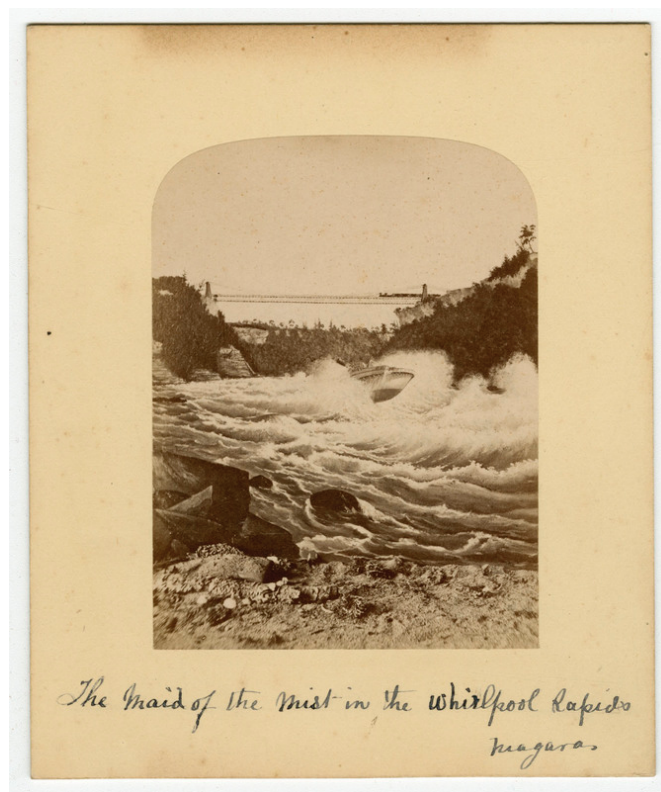


Fig. 1: George E. Curtis, *Maid of the Mist in the Whirlpool Rapids*. Brock University Archives & Special Collections, George E. Curtis Photographs of Niagara Falls Collection, ca. 1860s-1870s

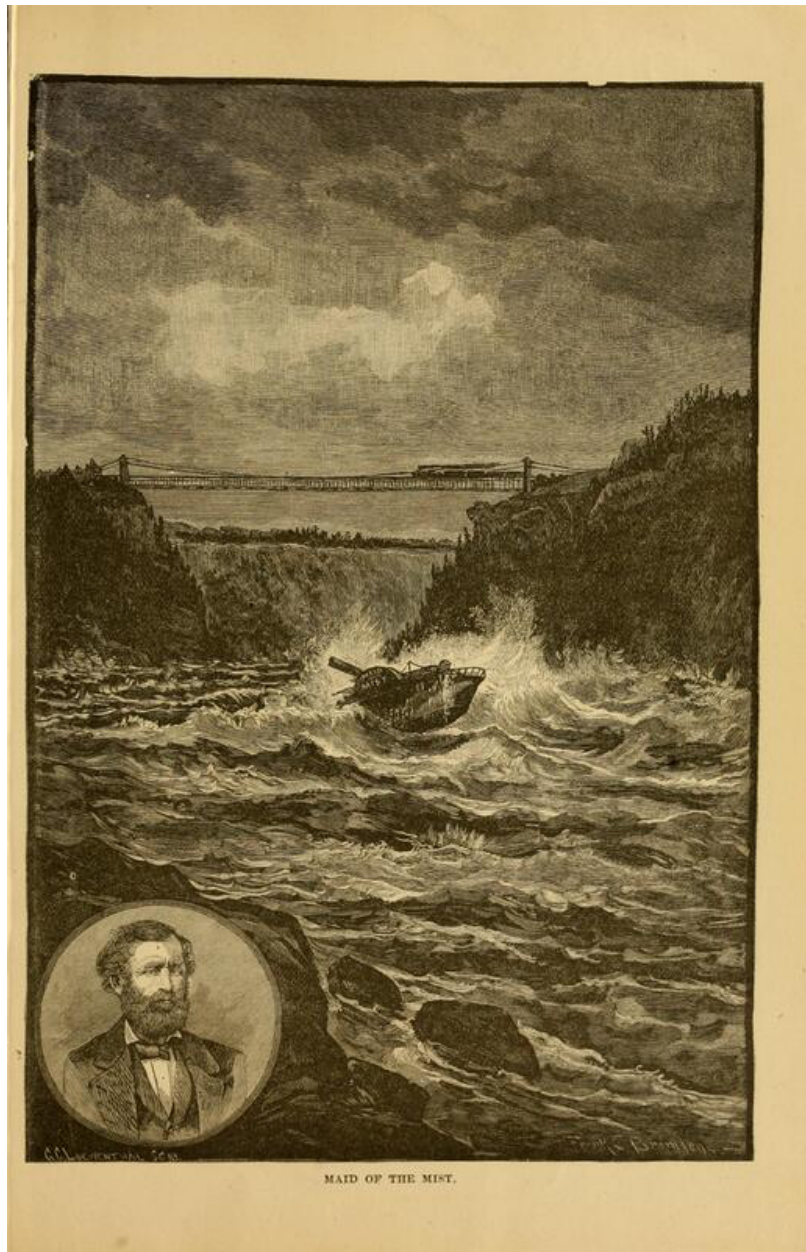


Fig. 2: Journey of Captain Robinson, drawing by G.C. Loewenthal.
Source: *Niagara Park Illustrated*, edited by Alice Hyneman Rhine. Brock University Archives & Special Collections, F 127 N8 N64, 1888.



Fig. 3: George Barker, *Maid of the Mist in the Whirlpool Rapids--Niagara*. Niagara Falls Ontario.
[Stereograph c.1862-1886] Image Source: [Library of Congress](#)