

# Recalling More Than a Pretty Place

## War, Reform & Cyrus Gates' Other Woodstock

Some names are given to mark a place as new and different, some to recall something about a distant place known earlier by the same name. Some place-namers use their chosen 'toponym' to recall something quietly, something personal, obscure and complex and even alive with different stories for different times and different listeners, whether or not the stories are ever revealed.

We know Cyrus Gates named his place on Chuckanut to recall Woodstock, Vermont; we know he loved the national flag (there were 2 poles at Woodstock, South Bellingham); and we know he advocated, created and donated public parklands and plantings. But we really don't know his reasons or feelings concerning the name "Woodstock." It must also be admitted that what passes for wisdom and hindsight can hide the truth—many of us are prone to speculating, even gushing, under the influence of our present-day world views, hopes and fears.



Before coming to Fairhaven, Washington in 1890 Cyrus Gates was employed in Rutland, some 20 miles east of Woodstock, Vermont. He

had grown up in Castleton, another 8 or 9 miles west. To a thoughtful adult citizen of the late 1800's Woodstock was not only beautiful woods and fields but also the home of respected leaders, men like rational and optimistic land use reformers and conservationists George Perkins Marsh and Frederick Billings.

Transformation of the land and struggles against injustice, intemperance and waste surrounded young Cyrus.

Woodstock had Vermont's second largest African-American community and, like much of Vermont, a long and popular tradition of church-based anti-slavery.



**Cyrus Gates and his mother Harriet E. (Hawkins) Gates**

Gates' boyhood Vermont, much of it deforested for timber harvest and lye-making, was gradually becoming more industrial. Railroads provided access to quarry rock and its mountain gorges were ideal for hydropower.

In 1858 the farmers and land managers of Rutland County had listened to a seminal address by Woodstock's Marsh, calling for wholesale revamping of Vermont's destructive agricultural, logging and waterway practices. (Marsh was also working to establish the Smithsonian at the time and would soon travel to the Middle East as a diplomat and keen observer of Mediterranean landscape change.)

When Cyrus was 6 years old, his father Salmon Gates, a deputy sheriff and temperance advocate, enlisted in the Union Army, perhaps at Woodstock, the “Vermont Pentagon,” the headquarters of the state’s Adjutant General. Salmon Gates joined partly to relieve the obligations of younger draftees around Castleton. He did not return. Here are some of the family and public records on the matter.



**Salmon K. Gates in uniform. His bound set of Harpers’s Magazine now occupies a bookshelf at Bellingham’s Woodstock Farm.**

### **8-30-64 LETTER FROM SALMON GATES ON THE FRONT TO A BROTHER, 1 MONTH BEFORE HIS MORTAL WOUND**

*“We reached the front near St. Petersburg on the 13<sup>th</sup> and have been in the trenches ever since...for the first 10 days the shells and bullets flew thickly and some were wounded daily...my health has been excellent and I have been able to endure hard marches day and night in the heat and dust and rain... the chances of receiving a promotion are good if my health and life are spared...I receive letters from Harriett every 4 or 5 days. I should be pleased to get a letter from you, and let it be a good one.”*

### **10-5-22 LETTER TO CYRUS GATES FROM A SISTER RESEARCHING THE DEATH OF SALMON GATES**

*“I enclose a clipping from some paper written with regard to our father at the time of his enlistment. It was among some of mothers things and I had brought it home that my sons would know what sort of a man our father was. All have read it, so you need not return it.*

### **EXCERPTS FROM TWO LETTERS SENT TO CYRUS GATES AS NEWSPAPER CLIPPINGS BY HIS SISTER**

**Letter from Salmon Gates in Castleton Aug. 30, 1862 to the sheriff of Rutland County re his resignation to as a deputy:**

*“I have volunteered to serve for nine months in lieu of drafted men. The towns of Castleton, Fairhaven [!], Poultney and Hubbardton have combined their quotas to form a company... [I] hope that should I escape the perils of war and again return, our acquaintance be renewed”*

**Letter in reply from Sheriff of Rutland County:**

*“You shall be reinstated when your term of service expires, provided my life is spared... may your example stimulate others to like sacrifices... in protecting the best government on earth from being destroyed.”*

Both the newspaper editor and the Sheriff noted that Salmon Gates was legally exempt from military service because of his public office and his young children. He died on April 12, 1864 in the Confederate State Hospital in Petersburg, Va. For many years his family knew little of his fate; they delved for a few facts in later years (above) but, as Cyrus’ sister’s letter continues, they also honored their elder’s request for obscurity:

*“...Mother told me... about the letters she received from father while he was away and that they were to be burned when she was gone. She always kept them in a tin box which was painted green and had “Friendship” on the cover. Do*

you remember it? Well, I burned them as she wished, and without reading one of them.”

BY Tim Wahl

**SPECIAL THANKS** for supporting information and research: Bobbie Scheerer Morris & Anna Minsky

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## Also From Gates' Boyhood War Years: Rational, National Landscapes for Human Enjoyment & Sustenance

Woe and loss were widespread in Gates' Civil War youth, but hopes persisted too. Perhaps they were nurtured across the continent in California, where, just before Gates' birth, industrialist Frederick Billings (later of the Northern Pacific Railway and namesake of Billings, Montana) and his colleagues had called for putting the Yosemite Valley off limits to mining, ranching and logging, as a public preserve. In 1864 President Lincoln declared Yosemite the nation's first national park. (Billings reestablished his home base in Woodstock in 1861 and bought the farm of George Perkins Marsh there in 1869.)



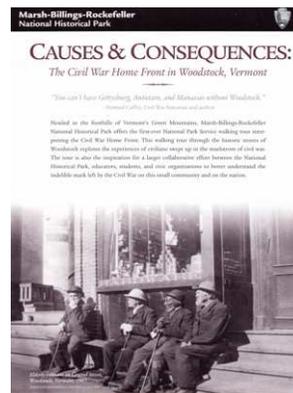
View of Inspiration Point in Yosemite Valley  
by Frederick Ferdinand Shafer

In 1864, Marsh published *Man and Nature* which challenged the idea that “the environment” was a thing apart from and unaffected by human actions. The book called for worldwide recognition of the environment as

a vital resource vulnerable to degradation by human acts, often inadvertent and unremarkable ones sustained over generations.

1864 also saw the opening of most of Central Park, an unprecedented, carefully planned conversion of valuable urban land into public open space, expressly for nourishment of civic life and the human spirit and to complement New York City's built environment.

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## For More Information

See the Marsh-Billings-Rockefeller National Historic Park Brochure *Causes and Consequences, The Civil War Home Front in Woodstock, Vermont.*