

Can a blithe spirit
find contentment in
Government service?

One did, for

THREE SHORT, HAPPY MONTHS



By WILLIAM A. STANLEY, Coast and Geodetic Survey

How would the Coast and Geodetic Survey deal with a draftsman who was habitually late, frequently absent, given to graffiti, and inclined to doodle on its official charts?

You guessed it. But today, after more than a century, such a man remains one of that august agency's most highly regarded alumni.

He was James McNeill Whistler, famed for his magnificent portrait of his mother and for many other works of art. But to his superiors in the survey, where the first evidence of his artistic potential was expressed in its charts, he was trouble with a capital T.

A native of Lowell, Massachusetts, born July 10, 1834, he belonged to a family of soldiers, Scotch-Irish by decent. At the age of seventeen, after spending some time in St. Petersburg, where his father was carrying on an engineering assignment for the Czar, he entered West Point. He spent three years there, departing in his senior year due mainly to his disinterest in obeying rules, chief of which had been his lack of promptness.

His father's plan was to apprentice him to a friend who had connections with a locomotive works in Baltimore, Maryland, and where his stepbrother George was then employed. Whistler soon saw enough of the locomotive works, however, to know

that he did not want to be an apprentice, and it was not long before he left Baltimore and headed for Washington, D.C.

In November 1854, after he tried to enter the Navy, his ability as a draftsman induced another friend of his father's to recommend him for a position in the engraving department of the U.S. Coast Survey. He was appointed on November 7, 1854, and at the age of 20 began a short but colorful employment with the Federal Government.

It has been reported that Whistler remarked, "I shall always remember the courtesy shown me by that fine Southern gentleman Jefferson Davis, through whom I got my appointment with the Coast Survey." Whistler continued, "It was after my little difference with the Professor of Chemistry at West Point that it was suggested—all in the most courteous and correct West Point manner—that perhaps I had better leave the Academy." With an introduction by Jefferson Davis he reported to Captain Benham, his new Coast Survey boss, who assigned him to the position of draftsman at the salary of \$1.50 a day.

In the Coast Survey, then located on the northwest corner of New Jersey and C Street, SE., Whistler, the draftsman, was considered a playboy of sorts as he performed the duties of an assistant in the cartographic

section of the Survey; even in those permissive days when offices closed at 3:00 p.m. and it was quite the custom to send out the messenger for a bucket of ale. Whistler would engage his time by drawing caricatures and sketches in unconventional places somewhere in the building. It was said that he would bring an extra hat to the office and when a superior came looking for him he would find his hat on the peg, assuming then that James was in the building. However, it is said he was wearing the other hat on his way to a nearby tavern.

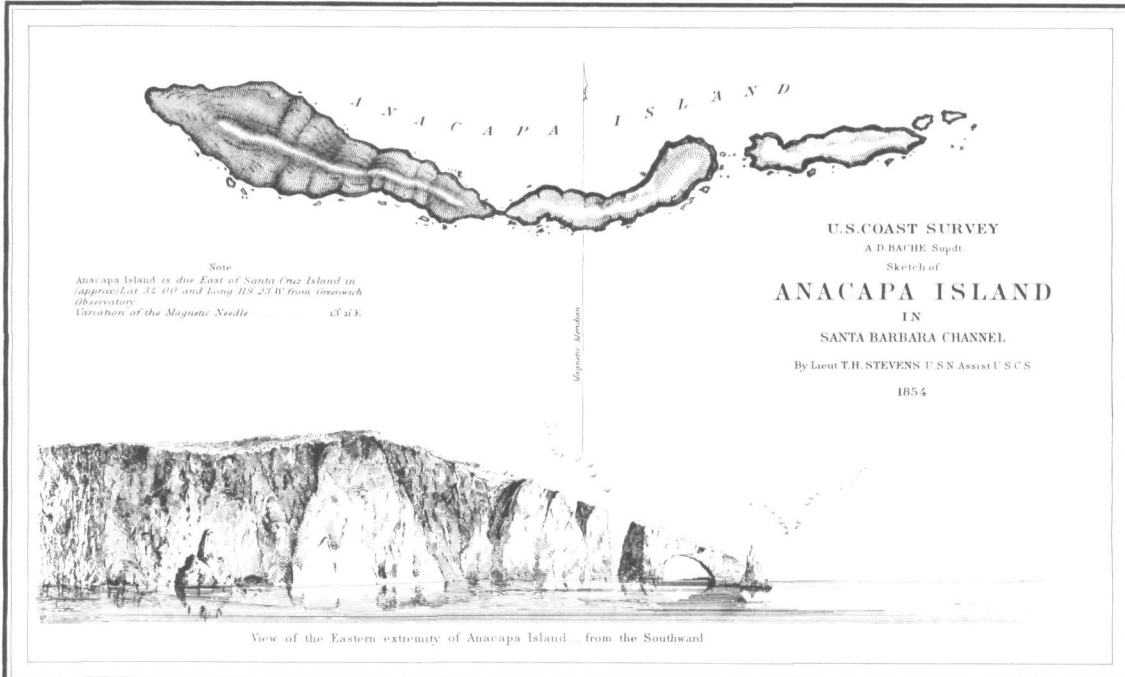
During his stay he was regarded as a person who could not adjust himself to any form of regular routine. He would say "It was not that I was late; the office opened too early." He worked only intermittently on his assignments and took great delight in occupying his time with odd sketches on any available fabric that presented a suitable surface—an envelope, or a copper-plate upon which he might have been assigned to engrave a chart.

Whistler sometimes drew uncomplimentary images of the Bureau officials on the bare white walls leading to the Superintendent's office. He would not overcome the temptation to stop frequently on his way up or down the stairs to correct, change, or add to his caricatures.

This was a time of uncertainty for him, when visions of his real career were beginning to form. In the brief period of less than four months Coast Survey employment, from November 1854 to February 1855, one fact was certain; he had no ambition to become a permanent government employee.

John Ross Key, fellow draftsman in the Coast Survey, and the grandson of Francis Scott Key, recalled in later years that he and Whistler roomed in a house of Thirteenth Street, near Pennsylvania Avenue and that Whistler usually dined in a restaurant close by on Pennsylvania Avenue. He also lived for a while in a house at the north-east corner of Twelfth and E Streets, NW., a two-story brick building which is no longer standing. His rent was ten dollars a month at the rooming house, a considerable sum in the light of his small government pay.

He produced two works which have been referred to by historians as "Coast Survey No. 1" and "Coast Survey No. 2, Anacapa Island" (engraved by J. Whistler, J. Young, and C. A. Knight). The latter, which includes an etching by Whistler of the headline of the eastern extremity of Anacapa Island, California, has been reproduced and issued as Coast and Geodetic Survey plate number 414A, but there is no record of the former.



Des^d by W.E. M. Moore

Eng^d by J.A. Whistler, J. Young & C.A. Knight

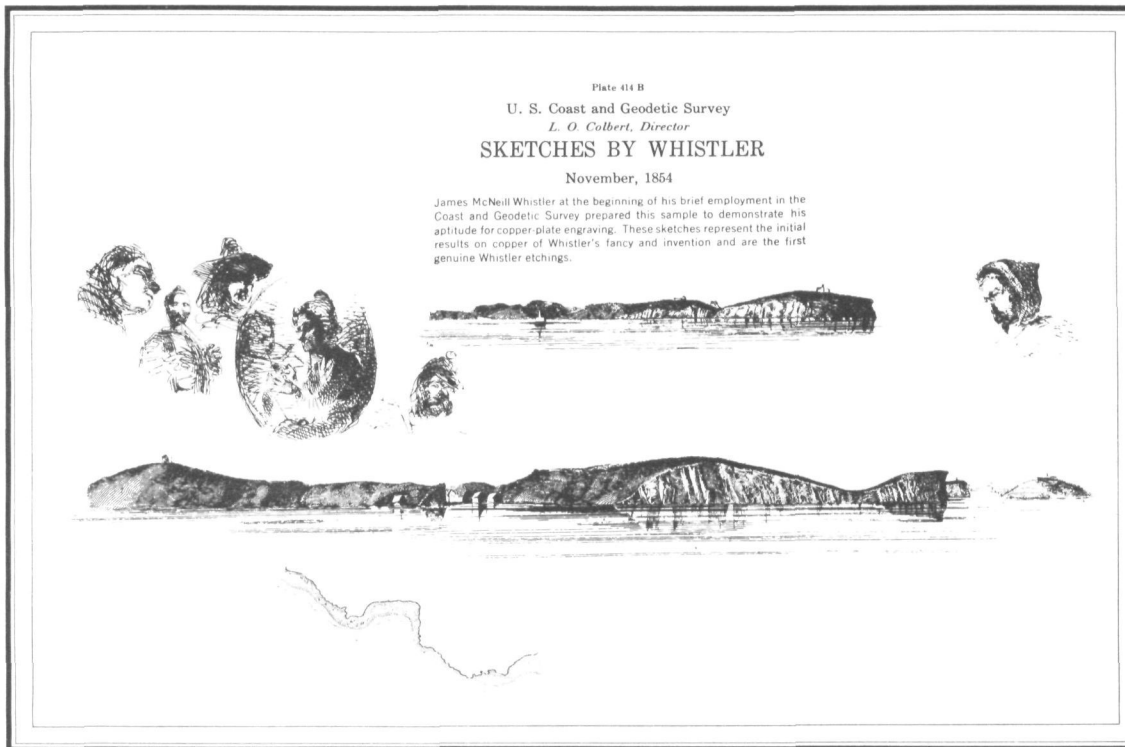
provide unique examples of his accomplishments before his artistic ability was known.

Legend has it that on occasion he would also give play to his genius by inserting drawings of dignified and scientific characters that might not have been in the original plan of a seacoast; however, no one could prove it. It has also been reported, but this cannot be verified either, that late in 1854 he engraved a sketch of a portion of the Atlantic coast. This drawing in copper is said not only to include some graceful sea serpents and beautiful mermaids but also several large and smiling whales. His Coast Survey supervisor reportedly told him that if he ever again desecrated on the Survey's charts with animal life, he would be discharged.

His next assignment was the sketch of Anacapa Island, previously described, showing the natural bridge which the waters of the Pacific Ocean had carved. Whistler did the work with extra care. He finished his pictorial view in approved style, although to him it looked humdrum. With his extreme feeling of personal frustration when not allowed to express himself freely, and with due consideration given to his job, he had to fix it—and fix it he did. He added two flocks of gulls sailing gracefully over the rocky headland as if heading south for winter quarters. These gulls may be seen today on plate 414A. When informed of wrongdoing and confronted with possible discharge Whistler replied, "Surely the birds don't detract from the sketch. Anacapa Island couldn't look as blank as that map did before I added the birds."

Due in large part to tardiness, James McNeill Whistler in mid-February 1855 terminated his employment with the U.S. Coast Survey and went off to Paris and London to achieve undying fame as one of the world's great artists. He is now known the world over, and by some authorities has been acclaimed the greatest of American artists. During his early training in the Coast and Geodetic Survey, he came in contact with some of the most talented engravers in the country.

As his legend is handed down from one generation to another of Coast Survey personnel, there is a feeling of pride that the Agency helped, even briefly, to launch one of the great careers in American art. □



USCOMM-CGS-DC-A 414B

These two plates are not, however, Whistler's first efforts as a copperplate engraver in the Coast Survey. Upon his entrance to duty he received technical instructions in the art of etching and copper engraving, which are reflected in a series of practice sketches. First place should be accorded to those which are the initial efforts on copper of his fancy and invention, and the

first genuine Whistler etchings. The sketches are in the shapes of little heads that intrude on the blank spaces of the copper above and around two neatly engraved views of portions of the coast of Boston Bay. At intervals, while doing the topographical view, he paused to etch on the upper part of the copperplate the vignette of a soldier's head, a suggestion of a portrait

of himself as a Spanish hidalgo and an etching of a motherly figure which has attracted considerable interest in recent years. The original copper engraving is regarded as priceless. It was donated to the Freer Gallery of Art, where it is now displayed. A photographic negative was obtained by the Survey, from which copies have been reproduced as plate 414B. This plate and 414A