

# The Journal of John Wesley Powell



Major John Wesley Powell (1834 - 1902)

Major John Wesley Powell is credited with being the first Caucasian to run the Colorado River through the full length of the Grand Canyon and to explore its unknown depths. He completed this trip successfully in 1869 after a 3-month expedition that began at Green River, Utah, on May 24, 1869, and ended at the Grand Wash Cliffs at the western end of the Grand Canyon on August 29, 1869. Powell tried to repeat the expedition again in 1871, to gather more knowledge about the region, but was forced to abandon the attempt midway through the Grand Canyon.

Powell earned his rank as major during the Civil War. He enlisted in the Union army as a private following the start of the war, and rose quickly through the ranks. He lost his right arm during the Battle of Shiloh in 1862. Following the war, in 1865, he taught geology at Illinois Wesleyan University, where he stayed for two years. In 1868 he decided to explore and map the Colorado River, including the region that contained the Grand Canyon, which until that time was a blank spot on all maps. The journal from his expedition, *The Exploration of the Colorado River and Its Canyons*, provides some very interesting reading.

Excerpt from\*

## *The Exploration of the Colorado River and Its Canyons*

BY JOHN WESLEY POWELL

*Preface*—When I returned from my first exploration of the canyons of Colorado, I found that our journey had been the subject of many newspaper accounts. A story of disaster had been told, with many details of hardship and tragedy. Most people in the United States thought that everyone on the expedition had been lost, except for one person. A good friend of mine had collected many obituary notices, and it was interesting and rather flattering to me to discover how well thought of I had been.

In my supposed death I had attained status and glory which I fear during the rest of my life did not continue.

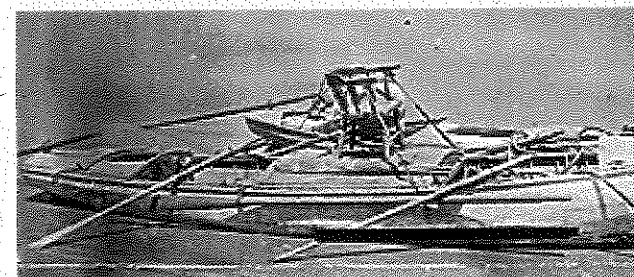
The exploration of the Colorado River was not made for adventure, but for scientific purposes, for the study of geography and geology. I had not intended to write about it, but only record my observations for scientific results. When I returned, I was immediately interviewed several times. These interviews were published in the

daily newspaper. I thought that all interest in our expedition would end when these interviews were published. But, in 1874 after our second expedition, the editors of Scribner's Monthly asked me to publish a popular account of the expedition. I agreed and prepared four short articles. The articles were elaborately illustrated from photographs in my possession.

During the expedition, I kept my daily journal on long, narrow strips of brown paper. I gathered these into little books that were bound in leather in camp as soon as they were completed. After thinking about it for a long time, I decided to publish this journal, revising and making corrections only as needed after the hasty writing in camp.

I thought about how difficult it was to describe the strange and wonderful land we explored. I thought my words were not enough, so I included many illustrations. I used illustrations from magazines and scientific reports that had already been published.

May 24, 1869—The good people of Green River City turn out to see us start. We raise our little flag, push the boats from shore, and the swift current carries us down.



The Emma Dean

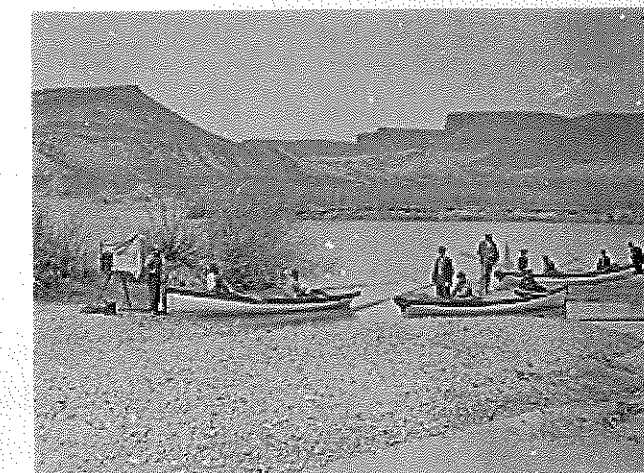
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We have four boats. Three are built from oak and are 21 feet long. They are sturdy boats with double ribs and double stem and stern post. The bulkheads are also strengthened; they are

divided into three compartments. Two of the compartments, fore and aft, are decked and form watertight cabins. We hope that these welterweight compartments will help buoy the boats should waves roll over them in rough water. The empty boats can be carried by four men.



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Starting point on the Green River National Archive photo

The fourth boat is made of pine. It is 16 feet long and has a sharp cutwater. It is built for fast rowing and divided into compartments like the others.

We take rations enough for ten months. We take abundant supplies of clothing. We expect that we will layover somewhere when winter comes and the river is filled with ice. We also have a large quantity of ammunition and two or three dozen traps. For building cabins, repairing boats, and meeting other presently unknown needs, we have axes, hammers, saws, augers, and other tools, plus a large supply of nails and screws. For our scientific work, we have two sextants, four chronometers, a number of barometers, thermometers, compasses, and other instruments.

We have flour, sugar, coffee, beans, bacon, and other food. We hope to add fresh meat and fish to our diet along the way. Each of the larger boats has an axe, hammer, saw, auger, and other tools. All of the food is divided into three equal parts, as well as the other supplies. Each large boat takes a share. If one boat is lost, we will not lose everything. In the small boat we pack some of the scientific instruments, three guns, and three small bundles of clothing. I will use the small boat to go ahead of the others to explore the channel.

J. C. Sumner and William H. Dunn are my boatmen in the small boat, the *Emma Dean*. *Kitty Clyde's Sister* follows with W. H. Powell and G. Y. Bradley. Next comes the *No Name* with O. G. Howland, Seneca Howland, and Frank Goodman. Finally, there is the *Maid of the Canyon* with W. R. Hawkins and Andrew Hall.

Sumner was a soldier during the Civil War. Since then he has traveled the wilds of the Mississippi Valley and the Rocky Mountains as an amateur hunter. He is fair-haired and delicate-looking, but is very experienced. He has crossed the Rocky Mountains in the middle of winter on snowshoes. He spent the winter of 1886-87 in Middle Park, Colorado, where he made some natural history collections for me. While there, he succeeded in killing three grizzlies, two mountain lions, and a large number of elk, deer, sheep, wolves, beavers, and many other animals.

Dunn was a hunter, trapper, and mule-packer in Colorado for many years. He wears buckskin clothing with a dark, oily luster. This is probably because he lived on fat venison and killed many beavers since he first donned this

outfit many years ago. His black hair falls down his back; he will have nothing to do with shears or razors.

Captain Powell was an artillery officer during the war and was captured on the 22<sup>nd</sup> day of July, 1864, at Atlanta. He spent ten months in prison at Charleston where he was placed with other officers. Powell is moody, silent, and sarcastic, although sometimes he enlivens the camp at night with song. He is never surprised by anything. His coolness never leaves him. He would choke the belching throat of a volcano if he thought the spitfire meant anything but fun. We call him "Old Shady."

Bradley was a lieutenant during the war and an orderly sergeant in the regular army since then. He was discharged by order of the Secretary of War a few weeks before we started our expedition. This was just so he could go on the trip with us. He is very careful and any little mishap works him into a passion. But when there is work to be done, he is always at hand with his powerful arm, rapid judgment, and unerring skill, even in danger. Difficulty or peril changes his ill-humored spirit into a brave and generous soul.

O. G. Howland is a printer by trade, an editor by profession, and a hunter by choice. When busily employed he usually puts his hat in his pocket. His thin hair and long beard stream in the wind, giving him a wild look, much like that of King Lear. (We have an illustrated copy of Shakespeare which circulates through camp.)

Seneca Howland is a quiet, thoughtful young man. Everyone likes him.

Goodman is a stranger to us—a stout, willing Englishman, with reddish, healthy face and more elaborate anticipations of a glorious trip.

Billy Hawkins is the cook. He was a soldier with the Union Army during the war. When he was discharged at the end of the war, he went west. Since then he has been working as a teamster on the plains or a hunter in the mountains. He is an athlete and a jolly good fellow who hardly seems to know his own strength.

Hall is a boy from Scotland, only 19 years old. He seems to us to have a "secondhand head." His head appears to be older than his body; he probably inherited it from some knight in his family. He has deep-set blue eyes and a beaked nose. Young as he is, Hall has had experience in hunting, trapping, and fighting Indians. He makes the most of it, for he can tell a good story. He is never bothered by unnecessary scruples as he often embellishes his stories with extra details to make them more complete. He is always ready for work or play and is a good hand at either.

Our boats are heavily loaded. It is only with utmost care that we float in the rough river without shipping water. A mile or two below town we run into a sandbar. The men jump into the stream and thus lighten the vessels, so that they drift over the sandbar, and on we go.

In trying to avoid a rock an oar is broken on one of the boats. The boat is crippled, the current is swift, and the boat is sent reeling and rocking into an eddy. In the confusion two other oars are lost overboard. The men are quite frustrated and embarrassed, much to the amusement of the others. Catching the oars and starting again, the



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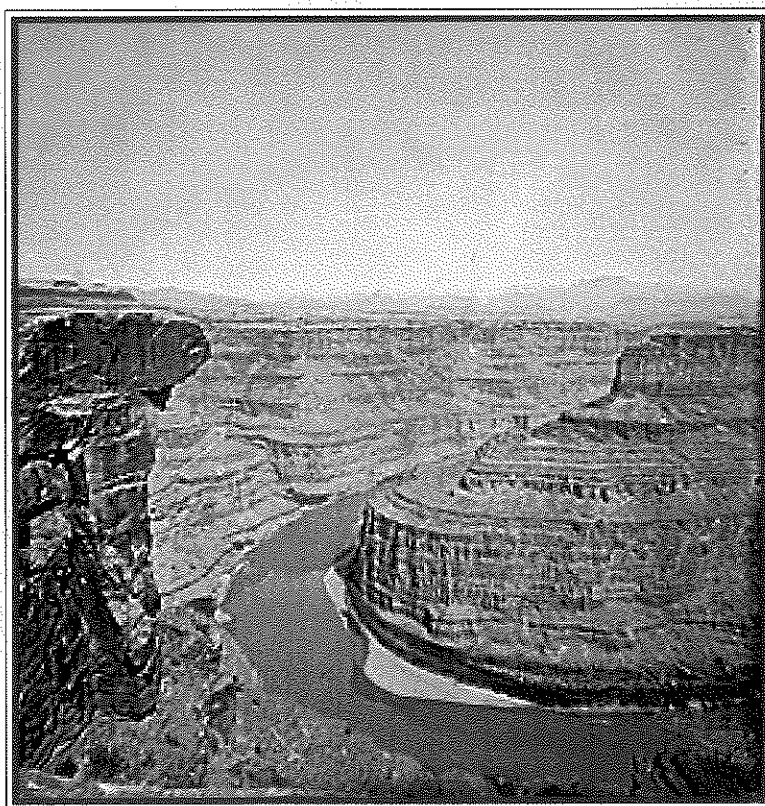
boats are once more floated downstream. We land at a small cottonwood grove on the bank and camp for noon and lunch.

During the afternoon, we run down to a point where the river sweeps the foot of an overhanging cliff. Here we camp for the night. The sun is yet two hours high, so I climb the cliffs and walk back among the strangely carved rocks of the Green River badlands. These are sandstones and shales, gray and buff, red and brown, blue and black layers. They lie nearly horizontal and are almost without soil and vegetation. They break up easily. The rain and streams have carved them into quaint shapes. Barren desolation is stretched before me, yet there is a beauty in the scene. The fantastic carvings imitate architectural forms and suggest rude but weird statuary. The bright and varied colors of the rocks make a scene that someone living in a forested land could scarcely appreciate.



Standing on a high point, I can look off in every direction over a vast landscape. Rocks and cliffs glitter in the evening sun. Dark shadows are settling in the valleys and gulches. The heights are made higher and the deeps deeper by the glamour and witchery of light and shade. Away to the south the Uinta Mountains stretch in a long line—high peaks thrust into the sky, and

snow fields glitter like lakes of molten silver. Pine forests are somber green, and rosy clouds play around the borders of the high mountains. Heights and clouds and mountains and snow fields and forests and rocklands are blended into one grand view. Now the sun goes down, and I return to camp.



Desolation Canyon

National Archive photo

\* Note: Slight modifications have been made from the original journal for ease in reading.