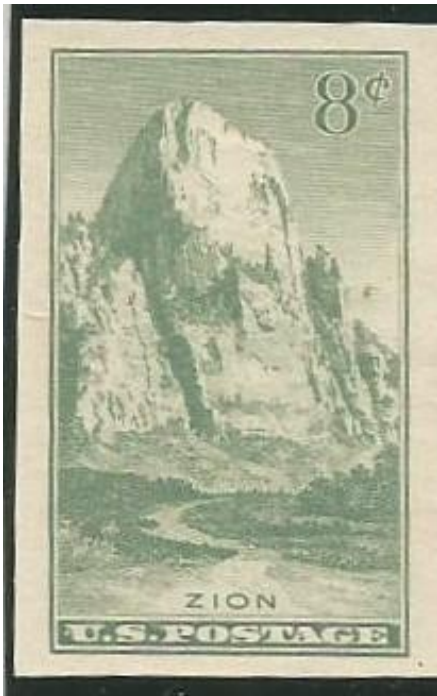


Early Explorers of Zion National Park

by Jay M. Jones



U.S. Postage stamp issued in 1934 featuring Zion.

This year marks the centennial of the creation of Zion National Park.

Native Americans had been familiar with Zion Canyon for centuries. Many Euro-American explorers passed near the cliffs that became Zion National Park. One of the earliest recorded explorations of Zion Canyon itself was in 1858 by Nephi Johnson, who led the settlement of the nearby town of Virgin. A few years later there were several neighboring settlements, including Rockville, Springdale, Grafton, and Shunesburg.

The year after his famous river trip through the Grand Canyon, John Wesley Powell hiked down the East Fork of the Virgin River in September 1870. He noted that “everywhere this deep passage is dark and gloomy, and resounds with the noise of rapid waters.”

Powell also took time to hike into Zion Canyon and described the towering cliffs, with springs of water at their base, calling the canyon “Mukuntuweap,” a Paiute word meaning “Straight Canyon.”

A member of Powell’s second expedition, John Hillers, took photos of the expedition, of Native Americans, and of southwest landscapes, including Zion.

Captain Clarence Dutton of the U. S. Geological Survey continued Powell’s work of exploring and mapping the Colorado Plateau. In a report issued in 1880, he described a view from the Gooseberry Mesa area near present day Apple Valley:

“In an instant, there flashed before us a scene never to be forgotten. In coming time it will, I believe, take rank with a very small number of spectacles each of which will in its own way, be regarded as the most exquisite of its kind which the world discloses. The scene before us was the Temples and towers of the Virgin.”

Another Powell associate in exploring the West was Frederick S. Dellenbaugh, who accompanied Powell on the second trip down the Grand Canyon. The year 1903 found him in Springdale, Utah, where he painted several scenes of Zion. The following year these paintings were displayed in the St. Louis World’s Fair, where they gained a significant amount of attention.

Dellenbaugh also wrote an article for *Scribner’s Magazine* in January of 1904, popular in the Eastern U. S. at the time. Speaking of his first view of the West Temple, he writes:

“One hardly knows just how to think of it. . . . There is almost nothing to compare to it. Niagara has the beauty of energy; the Grand Canyon of immensity; the Yellowstone of singularity; the Yosemite of altitude; the ocean of power; this Great Temple of eternity – ‘The Titan fronted blowy steeps, that cradled Time.’ “

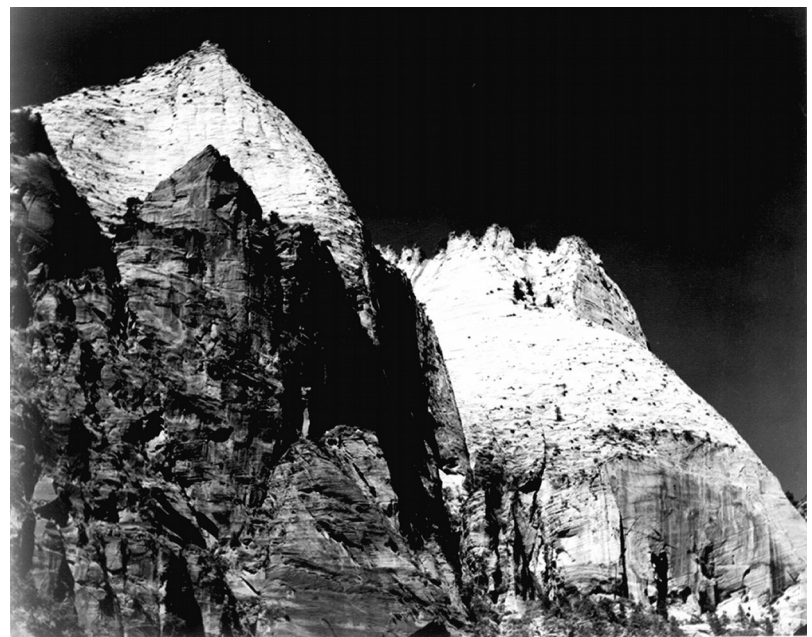
Leo A. Snow of St. George, a United States Deputy Surveyor, was assigned the task of surveying the upper part of Zion gorge, part of which was reported as “unsurveyable.” In his report, Snow described the view from what is now known as Observation Point:

“A view can be had of this canyon surpassed only by a similar view of the Grand Canyon of the Colorado. At intervals along the west side of the canyon streams of various sizes rush over the edge of the chasm forming water falls from 800 to 2000 feet high. The stream in the bottom of the canyon appears as a silver ribbon winding its way among the undergrowth and occasionally disappearing from view. In my opinion this canyon should be set apart by the government as a national park.”

Soon after the report was submitted to Washington D.C. in 1909, the Acting Secretary of the Interior recommended to President Taft the creation of Mukuntuweap National Monument. President Taft signed a proclamation the same day.

Ten years later, the Mukuntuweap National Monument became Zion National Park. Boundaries, which were later extended, were based on information provided by Leo Snow of St. George and Richard Thorley of Cedar City.

Zion National Park was officially established November 19, 1919. A formal dedication of the new national park was held on September 15, 1920, with a large crowd and many dignitaries attending.



Rock formation against dark sky. Photo by Ansel Adams. National Archives Identifier 520022.