

Historical Threads

Major John Wesley Powell Describes His Epic Journey

By Jay M. Jones



Postage stamp commemorating the 100 year anniversary of John Wesley Powell's 1869 expedition down the Colorado River.

150 years ago, Major John Wesley Powell made an epic voyage down the Green and Colorado Rivers. Starting from Green River, Wyoming on May 24, 1869 with a party of 10 men in 4 boats, Powell finished up at the confluence of the Virgin and Colorado Rivers below the Grand Canyon on August 30.

Following are a few descriptions by Major Powell on the middle part of this adventure, taken from a government publication of 1875 titled "*Exploration of the Colorado River of the West and its Tributaries*". A free PDF file of the full illustrated report can be read and downloaded at

<https://pubs.usgs.gov/unnumbered/70039238/report.pdf>

“July 20 — This morning, Captain Powell [Major Powell’s brother Walter] and I go out to climb the west wall of the cañon, for the purpose of examining the strange rocks seen yesterday from the other side. Two hours bring us to the top, at a point between the Green and Colorado, overlooking the junction of the rivers. . . . Climbing the face of a cliff, a man will walk along a step or shelf, but a few inches wide, without hesitancy, if the landing is but ten feet below, should he fall; but if the foot of the cliff is a thousand feet down, he will crawl.”

The next day, an oar was lost in the rapids. Continuing on for a time without the oar, the explorers find some driftwood and make a suitable replacement. The boats, which have begun to leak, are calked, and Major Powell and his brother climb up 1500 feet (according to barometric readings) to collect resin from pine trees used for pitching the boats.

“July 23 — On starting, we come at once to difficult rapids and falls, that, in many places, are more abrupt than in any of the cañons through which we have passed, and we decide to name this Cataract Cañon.”

Major Powell describes a gorge “grand beyond description.” The river, he says, “rolls in solemn majesty.” Arriving in the early afternoon at the head of some rapids and falls, the weary travelers decide to pull off the river and camp.

The men check their records, calculating the distance they have traveled and the elevation loss so far. They estimate the distance left to go and the additional elevation loss expected. They conclude that if the rapids and falls ahead are distributed like heretofore, they should be able to get through. Knowing that conditions ahead could be very different than those they have already encountered, they speculate on what the future could bring.

“July 25 — Still more rapids and falls today. In one, the "Emma Dean" [Major Powell's boat] is caught in a whirlpool, and set spinning about; and it is with great difficulty we are able to get out of it, with the loss of an oar. At noon, another is made; and on we go, running some of the rapids, letting down with lines past others, and making two short portages. We camp on the right bank, hungry and tired.”

On July 28, the lead boat enters the mouth of a stream coming in from the right. One of the men in the following boat shouts ahead, asking if it is a trout stream. Instead, the water is extremely muddy and “has an unpleasant odor”, and William Dunn responds with some disgust, calling it “a dirty devil”, which remains the name of this tributary to the Colorado.

“July 29 — We enter a cañon today, with low, red walls. A short distance below its head we discover the ruins of an old building, on the left wall. There is a narrow plain between the river and the wall just here, and on the brink of a rock two hundred feet high stands this old house. Its walls are of stone, laid in mortar, with much regularity. It was probably built three stories high; the lower story is yet almost intact; the second is much broken down, and scarcely anything is left of the third. Great quantities of flint chips are found on the rocks near by, and many arrow heads, some perfect, others broken; and fragments of pottery are strewn about in great profusion. . . .”

Shortly before sundown, Powell climbs up to get a view of the surrounding country. He finds a stairway cut into the rock by hand, and what he believes to be a lookout post built by ancient people. Darkness overtakes him, and he carefully makes his way back to camp, arriving about midnight.

“July 31 — We have a cool, pleasant ride today, through this part of the cañon. The walls are steadily increasing in altitude, the curves are gentle, and often the river sweeps by an arc of vertical wall, smooth and unbroken, and then by a curve that is variegated by royal arches, mossy alcoves, deep, beautiful glens, and painted grottos.

“Soon after dinner, we discover the mouth of the San Juan, where we camp. The remainder of the afternoon is given to hunting some way by which we can climb out of the cañon; but it ends in failure. “

As one of the men sang for the group as they camped on August 1, they found “that this hollow in the rock is filled with sweet sounds.” This natural acoustic treasure “made for an academy of music by its storm born architect” was named Music Temple.

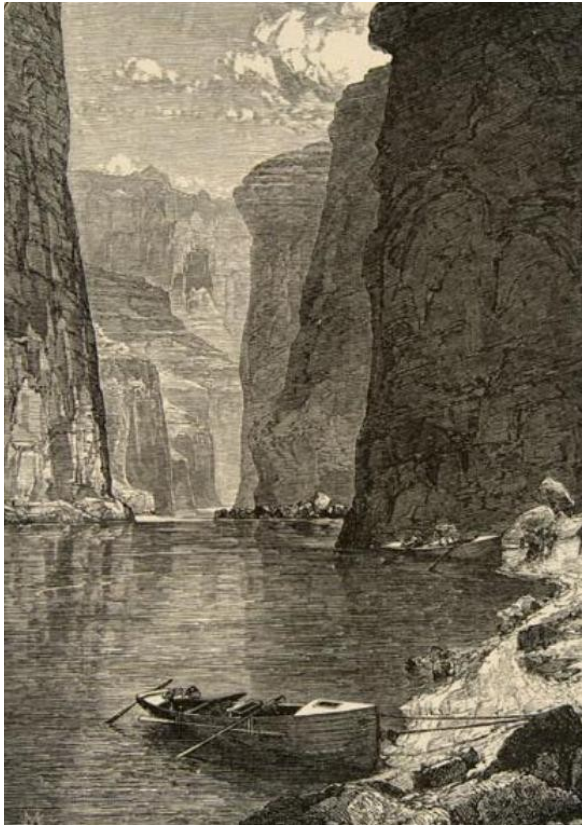
“August 2 — I wish to obtain a view of the adjacent country . . . and at last I reach a point of commanding view. I can look several miles up the San Juan, and a long distance up the Colorado; and away to the northwest I can see the Henry Mountains; to the northeast, the Sierra La Sal; to the southeast, unknown mountains; and to the southwest, the meandering of the cañon. Then I return to the bank of the river.”

Powell’s expedition camps another night at Music Temple, which since the construction of the Glen Canyon Dam is covered by the waters of Lake Powell.

“August 3 -- On the walls, and back many miles into the country, numbers of monument shaped buttes are observed. So we have a curious ensemble of wonderful features — carved walls, royal arches, glens, alcove gulches, mounds, and monuments. From which of these features shall we select a name? We decide to call it Glen Cañon.

“Past these towering monuments, past these mounded billows of orange sandstone, past these oak set glens, past these fern decked alcoves, past these mural curves, we glide hour after hour, stopping now and then, as our attention is arrested by some new wonder, until we reach a point which is historic. “

Powell describes “Crossing of the Fathers”, where Fathers Dominguez and Escalante crossed the Colorado River on their return to Santa Fe, New Mexico during their 1776 journey. Having read Escalante’s account, they were able to recognize this location.



***“Noon day rest in Marble Canyon.”
Figure 25 of John Wesley Powell's
1875 report.***

“August 7 — The almanac tells us that we are to have an eclipse of the sun today, so Captain Powell and myself start early, taking our instruments with us, for the purpose of making observations on the eclipse, to determine our longitude. Arriving at the summit, after four hours' hard climbing, to attain 2,300 feet in height, we hurriedly build a platform of rocks, on which to place our instruments, and quietly wait for the eclipse; but clouds come on, and rain falls, and sun and moon are obscured.”

It is late when the Powells start back to camp, and as darkness comes they have difficulty feeling their way among the rocks. As a torrential rain storm begins, they can neither climb up nor go down to find shelter, and they “weather out” that night on the rocky cliffs.

“August 9 — And now, the scenery is on a grand scale. The walls of the cañon, 2,500 feet high, are of marble, of many beautiful colors, and often polished below by the waves, or far up the sides, where showers have washed the sands over the cliffs. . . . we call it Marble Cañon. “

As they reach the mouth of the Little Colorado River, Powell takes time to hike upstream three or four miles. A few days later, on August 13, Powell declares that “we are now ready to start on our way down the Great Unknown”, referring to the Grand Canyon. Many dangers lie ahead, rations are getting low, and survival competes with adventure as their primary concern.