

## Historical Threads

# Major John Wesley Powell Concludes His Epic Journey

By Jay M. Jones

Major John Wesley Powell made an epic voyage down the Green and Colorado Rivers 150 years ago. Starting from Green River, Wyoming on May 24, 1869 with a party of 10 men in 4 boats, Powell finished 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 last 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>

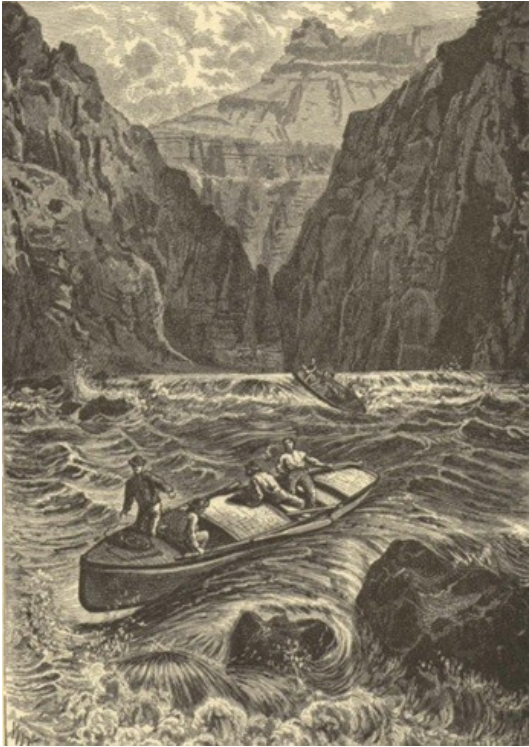
On August 16, Powell and his men come to a beautiful little stream flowing into the Colorado River in the Grand Canyon. They name it “Bright Angel” in contrast to the tributary they dubbed the “Dirty Devil” previously.

**“August 17 — Our rations are still spoiling; the bacon is so badly injured that we are compelled to throw it away. By an accident, this morning, the saleratus [precursor to baking soda] is lost overboard. We have now only musty flour sufficient for ten days, a few dried apples, but plenty of coffee. We must make all haste possible. If we meet with difficulties, as we have done in the cañon above, we may be compelled to give up the expedition, and try to reach the Mormon settlements to the north. Our hopes are that the worst places are passed, but our barometers are all so much injured as to be useless, so we have lost our reckoning in altitude, and know not how much descent the river has yet to make.”**

The days were hot - with a thermometer reaching up to 115°, but there were also periods of rain showers as well as drenching river torrents. Their ponchos were lost to the river, as were many of their hats and blankets. Nights were cold and often sleepless -- at times more exhausting than a day's toil.

**“August 18 — The day is employed in making portages, and we advance but two miles on our journey. Still it rains. “**

While the men worked at making portages, Powell climbed up the walls of the canyon, trying to see what their prospects were for moving beyond this magnificent prison. All he could see was “a labyrinth of deep gorges.”



**“Running a rapid.” Figure 28 of John Wesley Powell’s 1875 report.**

**“August 20 - The river is still rapid, and we stop to let down with lines several times, but make greater progress as we run ten miles. We camp on the right bank. Here, on a terrace of trap, we discover another group of ruins. There was evidently quite a village on this rock. Again we find mealing stones, and much broken pottery, and up in a little natural shelf in the rock, back of the ruins, we find a globular basket, that would hold perhaps a third of a bushel. It is badly broken, and, as I attempt to take it up, it falls to pieces. There are many beautiful flint chips, as if this had been the home of an old arrow maker.”**

On August 25, they come to a lava field. Powell notes: **“What a conflict of water and fire there must have been here! Just imagine a river of molten rock, running down into a river of melted snow. What a seething and boiling of the waters; what clouds of steam rolled into the heavens! Thirty five miles today. Hurrah!”**

The next day, they come across a garden plot, planted by Native Americans and watered by springs at the foot of the cliff. There is a good crop of corn, not yet mature, and several nice, green squashes. **“We carry ten or a dozen of these on board our boats, and hurriedly leave, not willing to be caught in the robbery, yet excusing ourselves by pleading our great want,”** is how Powell rationalizes the event.

**“After dinner we push on again, making fine time, finding many rapids, but none so bad that we cannot run them with safety, and when we stop, just at dusk, and foot up our reckoning, we find we have run thirty five miles again.”**

On August 27, they come to the most difficult passage in the river they have encountered. As Powell is scouting for a way around the falls and rapids, he finds himself clinging to a cliff with his only arm (his right arm was lost in the Civil War battle at Shiloh). The men extract him from his predicament, and Powell plans a portage route for the next morning.

According to Powell’s account, Howland informs Powell that three of the men will not continue down the river. They consider the river ahead too dangerous. Powell estimates that there are about 80 or 90 river miles to the mouth of the Virgin River and wants to continue on the river.

**“August 28 — At last daylight comes, and we have breakfast, without a word being said about the future. The meal is as solemn as a funeral. After breakfast, I ask the three men if they still think it best**

**to leave us. The elder Howland thinks it is, and Dunn agrees with him. The younger Howland tries to persuade them to go on with the party, failing in which, he decides to go with his brother.”**

The remaining six men on the expedition are able make a portage and then navigate the river and rapids without accident. After noon, they come to another bad place, and narrowly avert disaster.

**“August 29 — We start very early this morning. The river still continues swift, but we have no serious difficulty, and at twelve o'clock emerge from the Grand Cañon of the Colorado. We are in a valley now, and low mountains are seen in the distance, coming to the river below. We recognize this as the Grand Wash.”**

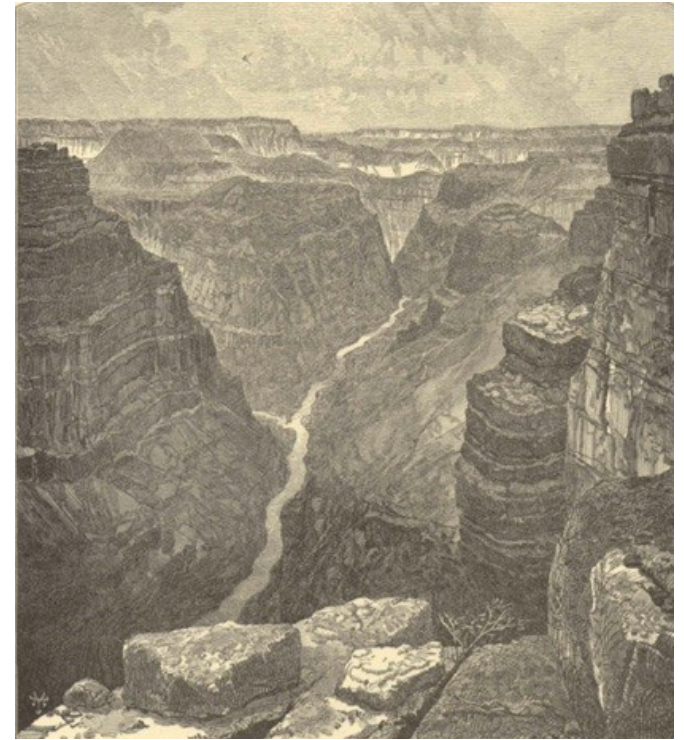
The Colorado River had been explored and documented from this point to the Gulf of California, so they knew they were out of danger. They believed they had a few more days on the river before reaching Fort Mohave.

In the afternoon of August 30, as the men looked for the confluence with the Virgin River, they saw a boat. **“As we come near, the men seem far less surprised to see us than we do to see them. They evidently know who we are, and, on talking with them, they tell us that we have been reported lost long ago, and that some weeks before, a messenger had been sent from Salt Lake City, with instructions for them to watch for any fragments or relics of our party that might drift down the stream.”**

Bishop James Leithead of the community of St. Thomas (now covered by Lake Mead) sent much needed food and supplies. Major Powell and his brother went to St. Thomas, and then to Salt Lake City. The other four men took the boats down the river to Fort Mohave, and from there traveled overland to Los Angeles.

The following year, Powell took Indian scout Jacob Hamblin to the Arizona Strip area to inquire about the three men that left the party and were not heard from again. After a friendly council with leading Indians, Powell relates:

**“Then their chief replies: ‘Your talk is good, and we believe what you say. We believe in Jacob, and look upon you as a father. When you are hungry, you may have our game. You may gather our sweet fruits. We will give you food when you come to our land. We will show you the springs, and you may drink; the water is good. We will be friends, and when you come we will be glad. . . . We are ignorant.**



**“The Grand Canyon, looking west from Toro'-weap.” Figure 33 of John Wesley Powell’s 1875 report.**

**Last year we killed three white men. Bad men said they were our enemies. They told great lies. We thought them true. We were mad; it made us big fools. We are very sorry. Do not think of them, it is done; let us be friends. We are ignorant — like little children in understanding compared with you. When we do wrong, do not get mad, and be like children too.’ “**

John Wesley Powell and his men continued to explore, map, and study the Colorado River area for several years. His contributions to the understanding of the land, the geology, the water resources, and the native people remain influential today.

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