Westwater Lost and Found

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First Touched by Man

Beginnings

Following the Colorado River northwest of Grand Junction, Colorado, an Amtrak train travels on its way to Salt Lake City along tracks laid down more than one hundred years ago. Briefly the train loses sight of the river after passing Loma, Colorado, site of one of several boat launches for river running and canoe trips. Later the river and train meet again between the majestic Wingate sandstone cliffs of Ruby Canyon and travel together to the Utah border, where the land begins to spread out. The train travels five miles further to Westwater, which is said to refer to the place where the train begins to head west, away from the Colorado River. Approximately fifty miles beyond Grand Junction, the Amtrak reaches its lowest elevation at Westwater, where a lush valley briefly reveals itself before the train begins its push uphill, northwest through deserts and mountains toward Salt Lake City. Probably few passengers on the speeding Amtrak notice the small valley, where a large ranch sits centrally located about a mile from the tracks. Ignored, the valley leaves little for these passengers to appreciate. Yet it exists primarily because of the Rio Grande Western Railroad that began stopping here in 1890.

Though seldom noticed by the trains passing through day and night, Westwater is far from forgotten by tens of thousands of
river enthusiasts and whitewater vacationers who have been visiting in increasing numbers since the 1950s, when recreational whitewater rafting and kayaking became popular. From I-70 two exits (220 and 225) leave the pavement to join generally well-maintained gravel and dirt roads that eventually follow Westwater Creek toward the Colorado River until the creek ducks beneath a Denver and Rio Grande Western Railroad bridge. Westwater Creek at this point is generally dry, with its source some twenty-six miles northwest in the Book Cliffs. It empties into the Colorado River at the head of Westwater Canyon. Just beyond the railroad bridge the road intersects with another dirt road that for many years was maintained for residents of Cisco and Westwater. The road southwest leads to Cisco; to the northeast is the Westwater ranger station and boat launch. The impressively maintained property that is fenced in to the southeast has been considered prime real estate for more than a century. Most years the ranch requires water pumps for its maintenance, but during extreme high water years such as 1983 and 1984 nearly the entire property was submerged. The ranger station and put-in that year became an island of the Colorado River. Currently the ranch raises cattle; formerly it belonged to Emmett Elizondo from Colorado, who ran sheep throughout this country beginning in the 1920s. Looking southwest beyond the ranch in the distance one sees cliffs of Wingate Sandstone that seem almost to pinch together. One cliff dominates above the rest and marks for those familiar with this part of the Colorado the gateway into Westwater Canyon.

The Westwater road follows the railroad tracks heading toward the Colorado River for about one mile before turning south to the launch. At this point, after driving on a dirt road for nine miles, most travelers are focused straight ahead. Few pay attention to this final mile before they put up camp for the night or begin rigging for their boating trips. Most private boaters miss everything since they seem to arrive throughout the night when the sky is blackened except for lights at Westwater Ranch and camp fires near the launch. This is unfortunate because this is where Westwater really begins. Taking a moment and looking up high on the Morrison bluffs, one will notice a few names painted or chiseled onto rocks. Most are dated in the 1920s and are likely
names of Denver and Rio Grande Western Railroad employees. These names and what stories might lay behind them plant the first seeds of curiosity about the area.

The Westwater launch is reminiscent of a park. Though not grassy, it is sectioned off with plenty of picnic tables and camping facilities. Several large, magnificent cottonwood trees shade the flat where boaters spend their nights prior to their trips downstream. A large ship anchor and chain surround part of the facilities, and today, well-maintained restroom facilities exist where not long ago there were only smaller, smellier, hacienda-type outhouses. Numerous improvements have been made to the Westwater launch since 1983, when much of it was washed away by the high water. An old fallen cottonwood tree, approximately five feet thick, used to lie in the Colorado River alongside the launch, and a beaver spent much time there near the rigging boaters. Not nearly as shy as most beavers encountered along the river, this one refused to budge from its home amongst boaters until the river took the tree and probably left it at Hite Marina 174 miles away.

At night the various boating parties entertain themselves with music, stories, and other festivities. It is generally a comfortable camping atmosphere even with large numbers of visitors. The sky at night is dark, highlighting the stars in the heavens above, where the constellations clearly reveal themselves. Visitors can generally pick out planets, as well as satellites. Trains regularly travel past the park throughout the night but do not seem to affect many campers with their noise. The thundering trains seem to be as much a part of the experience at the Westwater launch as the roar of the rapids is a part of the canyon—and rightly so, the trains having been there since long before the boaters came. Coyotes howl far off in the distance as morning arrives, prompting boaters to stir and begin rigging for the whitewater below.

Nervous anxiety may be the best description of boaters and kayakers preparing for their runs of Westwater. Numerous stories and yarns are told of the horrendous hole at Skull Rapid, extreme endos in Sock-It-To-Me, or circulating in the Room-Of-Doom. And then there is the Rock of Shock, the Magnetic Wall, and Razor Rock, among other obstacles that have made four miles of
Colorado River some of the most talked about whitewater in the western states. In the eighty-eight miles from Loma, Colorado, to Moab, Utah, the Colorado River drops in elevation 480 feet with an average gradient of 5.5 feet per mile. Of this total distance, in the seventeen miles from Westwater put-in to Cisco take-out the river drops approximately 155 feet with an average drop of 9 feet per mile. To further magnify these figures the four miles of river through the inner gorge of Westwater drops more than 75 feet for an average of approximately 20 feet per mile. The gradient, combined with the changing fluctuations of the river as it funnels through a narrow granitic crack in the earth, make each trip through Westwater a new experience. Knowing that the rapids are continually taking on different personalities, boaters are aware that sooner or later they can expect to flip and quite possibly have to swim through Skull Rapid—and a few have not survived. That is the nervous anxiety of boating Westwater. But still the canyon brings the same old boaters back, along with new friends every year, to enjoy the celebration after Last Chance Rapid of knowing they made another successful run.

Although the beginning of the seventeen-mile river run begins at Westwater’s launch, the setting for the human history in this book begins four miles upstream at the Utah-Colorado border, follows along the banks of the Colorado River, and includes the once inhabited locations of May Flat, Jones Canyon, Little Dolores, and Westwater, where the combination of land and water attracted man to the area. We cannot fully comprehend the human history within Westwater Canyon without first learning what originally enticed people to the region. This historical journey, therefore, begins near the town of Westwater. Afterwards, we’ll take to the river, follow it downstream from the head of Westwater Canyon through nearly ten miles of whitewater, and end the trip at Cisco.

Along the banks of the Colorado River through Westwater Canyon sites such as Wild Horse (or Miner’s) Cabin and Outlaw Cave briefly introduce the region’s history. Their remote surroundings generally prompt questions about their origins and how anybody could live at such locations. In the canyon, there are few side canyons that can be accessed from the river; even fewer can be reached by vehicle because of the difficult terrain
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The short canyon is geographically protected to the south by the nearly uninhabited regions of the Dolores Triangle and Glade Park. Parts of the rim can be approached by four-wheel-drive vehicles, but the roads are not maintained and in some cases, due to ongoing wilderness study, traveling on them may be prohibited. It is considerably more difficult to reach Westwater through the southerly accesses because of poor road conditions and the distance from either Grand Junction or Moab. It seems inconceivable that anyone would reside in the remote confines of Westwater Canyon. And yet they did.

There are reminders at several strategic locations throughout Westwater that Native Americans were there. Near where Westwater Creek empties into the Colorado River, evidence of prehistoric Indians first appears in the form of faded pictographs painted on an eastern-facing sandstone cliff. Interestingly, all of the Indian rock art found in Westwater is at primary access points into the canyon and near additional water sources such as springs, washes, or creeks. The pictographs (painted) and petroglyphs (pecked, incised, or carved graphics) are located where the Colorado River is tranquil—above or below whitewater—and where crossings may have occurred. In addition to the paintings at Westwater Creek, Indian rock art is found at Little Hole, Little Dolores, and Cottonwood Creek, and some has been reported at the mouth of Agate Wash.

The Indian graphics are not extensive, and in a few locations they are difficult to find because of fading and their small size. The Little Hole glyphs are the best known rock art in the canyon. On a cliff near the top of the canyon are several scattered images, which include an elk. The most noticeable graphic at this location is a parade of bighorn sheep on a large flat-surfaced rock. Within the canyon, there is little evidence that might help archaeologists determine which Indian cultures created the rock art and why they were in the region.

In 1981, Dee Holladay of Holiday River Expeditions invited representatives from the University of Utah on a Westwater trip to examine the rock art. Their research resulted in brief descriptions that categorized most of the images as “probably Fremont.” This synopsis seemed inadequate for the effort, but then, there
are no signatures that tie art to an individual artist in the pictographs and petroglyphs of the Colorado Plateau. Although efforts to date Indian rock art have improved over the past few decades, controversy remains over their reliability. Scientific dating has been attempted on the pigments from pictographs and on growths and deposits, such as desert varnish and lichen, that cover or surround the art. Other tests include dating soils, artifacts, and structures that are assumed to be associated with the people who made the graphics. A useful tool for visually determining the possible age of the art and thereby the identity of its artists is the patination of the pictographs. Patination darkens rock over time, producing desert varnish, and the darker the pictograph, the older the culture of its origination.

Although scientific dating and comparing patination of rock art can be speculative, we can reasonably assign some graphics to a historical culture when they contain images such as the Indian mounted on a horse located at Little Dolores. This pictograph is considered to be Ute because the Ute culture was the predominant Indian culture in the region after horses were introduced sometime in the seventeenth century. Other familiar cultural images might include use of the atlatl (spear throwing device), the bow and arrow, or other recognizable artifacts associated with various cultures or periods.

Archeologists assign a rock art style, when they can, to a particular Indian culture; that style is then compared to other sites for similarities. Given that there were different artists, even from the same people, the logic is that styles were trendy amongst various cultures during different phases of their existence. One of the more recognizable rock art styles is attributed to the Archaic culture and named Barrier Canyon. Its ghostly anthropomorphic (human-like) shapes are found throughout the Colorado Plateau, including in Middle Canyon (which also is called Westwater Canyon), where Westwater Creek exits the Book Cliffs on its way to the Colorado River. This and other rock art styles found nearby allow the reasonable assumption that there were four primary Indian cultures that over time inhabited or visited the Westwater region: Desert Archaic, Fremont, Anasazi, and Ute.

Paleo-Indians, members of an earlier culture, also likely came into the region, but they probably can be excluded as
artists at Westwater because there is no known rock art attributed to them. Excluding them as artists does not mean they did not enter the region. Paleo-Indians means ancient Indians and refers to the oldest known culture on the American continents. They are believed to have arrived in the New World by crossing the Bering Strait between eastern Siberia and Alaska. Primarily hunters, Paleo-Indians pursued mega-fauna (mastodons, woolly mammoths, giant bison, and other large game) across an exposed land bridge between 30,000 and 10,000 years ago, entering the New World. Once here, some followed their prey southward along the Pacific Coast and others down the eastern slope of the Rocky Mountains. Although there is no direct evidence of Paleo-Indians on the Colorado Plateau, artifacts from these people have been discovered in nearby New Mexico, confirming that they were near the region as early as 11,200 to 10,000 B.C.\(^5\) It is conceivable that, being a nomadic people, these prehistoric Indians followed their prey into regions near Westwater; the remains of three mammoths have been unearthed in Grand County, Utah.\(^6\)

The Archaic, or Desert, Culture, arrived next, in approximately 8,000 B.C., when a semi-arid climate similar to our own prevailed. This culture likely superseded Paleo-Indians after mega-fauna vanished at the end of the last ice age. Originally huddling near lakes and rivers where abundant game was found, Archaic Indians eventually ventured out in pursuit of larger game in the mountain regions. Living a hunter-gatherer existence, Archaic Indians learned to identify and utilize seasonal resources available to them as they strategically migrated on foot to familiar locations.

Food sources in the Westwater region would have included bighorn sheep (as depicted on the Little Hole petroglyph), deer, rabbit, mice, lizards, snakes, grasshoppers, and various seeds from grasses. But over time Archaic Indians’ diets became increasingly diverse as they ate a greater variety of small and large animals and increased their consumption of seeds, nuts, and plants. Understandably, as their diets diversified so did the tools they used for hunting, gathering, and processing their food and making clothing. The final phase of the Archaic Desert culture included agriculture after maize (Indian corn) was introduced to the region in approximately 400 B.C. and became an important supplement to some Archaic Indians’ diets. Although
they did not rely exclusively on agriculture, the Archaic Indians’ ability to count on a supplemental food source facilitated an increasingly sedentary lifestyle. They began storing surplus foods in granaries near favorite camps, which allowed them to reduce their travel and remain at a location for an extended time. It is possible that with this somewhat sedentary life, their religious beliefs became more elaborate as they continued to reverence the resources that provided them with sustenance and express their gratitude and beliefs in the form of rock art.

Identifying the Indians at Westwater becomes even more complicated following the Archaic period. From approximately A.D. 400 to A.D. 1350 Anasazi and Fremont Indians lived contemporaneously with each other in regions along the Colorado River. In fact the Colorado River has often been considered an approximate dividing line between the two cultures—the Fremont living north of the river and the Anasazi to the south. Though the two were contemporaneous, archeologists don’t agree on whether the Fremont were related to the Anasazi. Some believe the Fremont, similarly to the Anasazi, “developed out of the existing groups of hunters and gatherers” of the region. Evidence exists that the two peoples traded with each other along the Colorado River, but that trade did not extend much deeper into the Fremont region to the north. In fact some archeologists have had difficulty determining whether some of the sites along the Colorado River are Anasazi or Fremont because the digs produce a considerable number of artifacts from both cultures. Also, the rock art in the Colorado River region is difficult to assign to a specific culture because there are overlapping stylistic influences.

Fremont Indian sites are generally identified by a distinctive gray pottery and, in some cases, clay anthropomorphic figurines. Even among various so-called Fremont sites, there are considerable differences, except usually for the recognizable gray vessels, from region to region. Hence, Fremont is a somewhat artificial category, covering varied prehistoric remains that may represent diverse groups. Jack Marwitt in 1970 attempted to classify the Fremont Indians into several different variants because of these differences. He listed the variants as Great Salt Lake, Sevier, Parowan, Uinta, and the San Rafael. Westwater would be included in the San Rafael Fremont classification.
The Fremont and Anasazi cultures coexisted during a period when there was an environmental shift to warm, wet summers, which contributed to their becoming dependent on agriculture. The wetter climate allowed members of both cultures to develop a horticultural lifestyle because of the longer summers and cooler temperatures. Though the Fremont did not work the ground as extensively as their neighbors, many of them still depended on it. One of the factors given for the abandonment of the area by both of these cultures was that the climate became too dry and cold for horticulture.

Nearly as soon as the Fremont Indians mysteriously disappeared, the Utes established themselves throughout Utah and western Colorado. Some theorize the Fremont and Ute are one and the same, based upon similarities in their rock art. The most accepted theory is that the Utes entered the region from the southwest corner of the Great Basin in southern California between A.D. 1000 and 1300, either pushing the Fremont Indians out or replacing them in areas they already had departed. The primary evidence for the Utes entering Utah from the Great Basin is that their Numic language is related to the languages of the Shoshoni and Paiute Indians who live further west and apparently originated from the same location. The Utes claim they have always been in their historical homelands.11

The Ute Indians were hunter-gatherers, similar to the earlier Archaic Indians. Until they acquired the horse in approximately A.D. 1680, they traveled by foot and carried only essentials from camp to camp, leaving heavier items behind as they made their seasonal migrations, which usually took them to higher elevations where seeds and berries were ripening during the summer and fall months and to warmer, lower elevations during the winter. Temporary wickiup shelters were built with willows, juniper bark, and grass. Teepees were not used until after the horse arrived and they could be transported to the various camps.

As implied above, the introduction of horses to the Utes created dramatic cultural changes for them. Jan Petit wrote: “The acquisition of quantities of horses changed Ute lifestyle faster than any other event in their history. The style of Ute homes changed as did the quantity and quality of clothing, food,
First to make use of the horse were the Utes of Colorado, who became familiar with them while serving as slaves and servants in New Mexico after the Spanish settled there around 1598. Then in 1680, the Pueblo Rebellion freed many of the Ute slaves and servants from their Spanish taskmasters and made numerous horses available to them. By 1776, when the Catholic Fathers Escalante and Domínguez searched a route from Sante Fe to California, they found horses among the Utes throughout Colorado and bordering parts of eastern Utah. As they traveled north from the Gunnison River east of Westwater, the Escalante and Domínguez party met eighty mounted Ute Indians. Farther west the Utah Utes were at a disadvantage until they acquired horses in the early 1800s. With horses, Utes extended their hunting grounds to include the plains, for bison, and their great horsemanship made them feared warriors. Understandably, the importance of horses in Ute lives showed up in their rock art.

There were numerous bands of Utes, depending on the territory of Utah and Colorado that they occupied. Identification of a specific Ute group in the region of Westwater and surrounding Grand County has not been conclusive and suggests that the region may have been used for hunting by various Ute bands rather than for continuous residence. In his history of Grand County, Richard A. Firmage wrote that “Grand County was an area frequented by many different Ute groups” that included the “Weeminuche band of western Colorado, and other Ute bands such as the Parianuc Grand River Ute and the Tabeguache (Uncomphagré).” Another possible band, the Seuvarits (Sheberitch), or Elk Mountain Utes, was primarily located in the La Sal Mountain region approximately thirty miles southwest of Westwater. Some maps intended to illustrate the borders of the different Ute bands suggest Westwater was within Parianuche—or Grand River—Ute territory, which extended along much of the Colorado, formerly the Grand, River in Colorado and eastern Utah.

The first contact settlers made with Ute Indians in Grand County occurred in 1855 when Brigham Young, prophet of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, sent forty men under the leadership of Alfred N. Billings to establish a mission in the
vicinity of Moab for the dual purpose of teaching the Indians the Mormon gospel and establishing a settlement. Although the Utes frequently traded with Spaniards and Mexicans, mountain men, and the new Mormon visitors, they were suspicious of this attempt to settle deep in their territory. Referred to as the Elk Mountain Mission, the settlers arrived in the Spanish Valley (Moab) on June 15, 1855. Journals from the party indicate they were leery of the Indians at first because they saw so few of them. Eventually the Indians came around asking for presents or to trade.

The Mormons came to realize there was considerable Ute and Navajo traffic at their location near a major crossing of the Colorado River. Some stealing by the Indians occurred, and hostilities and threats arose among some of the Utes and Navajos. Then on September 23, 1855, after more than half of the Mormon settlers had left for Salt Lake City to visit their families, the Indians killed three missionaries. The Mormons abandoned their mission and returned to their Wasatch Front homes. It was another nineteen years before another settlement in the region was attempted by cattlemen. There was further friction with the Indians in the sparsely settled region, but eventually the settlers prevailed.

Utes remained in the Westwater and LaSal Mountains area at least as late as the 1880s. On September 13, 1892, a Salt Lake Herald headline stated, blaming white violence on Indians, “The Indians left there [Westwater] over ten years ago—yet the law of violence which they were wont to practice under seems to have remained and the white settlers who are possessing the country have been disturbed with not infrequent eruption in the way of bloodshed.” The newspaper thereby implied that Utes had lived in Westwater Valley, but possibly the reference was to their more general, known inhabitation of the Grand Valley region that included Grand Junction. The headline probably referred to the 1881 Pinhook Draw Massacre in the La Sal Mountains, which left ten white men and twenty-two Indians dead. The Pinhook Draw Massacre helped provide Colorado with an excuse to expel the Utes to a reservation in Utah’s Uinta Basin.

We can be certain that Utes at least visited Westwater because horses were included in the Little Dolores petroglyphs.
Who created the other Indian rock art in the canyon remains speculative: the Desert Archaic, Anasazi, or Fremont? We can reasonably assume that more than one of these cultures appeared in the area from the numerous rock art styles located in Middle Canyon, approximately twenty miles north of Westwater, next to Westwater Creek in the Book Cliffs. There, at least five different techniques were used to create a montage of rock art. This indicates that clearly this was an important site for several cultures. It was not uncommon for these peoples from different eras to follow the same trails. Commingling of campsites of various cultures can create difficulty for archeologists attempting to decipher the hodgepodge of artifacts and data from such sites.

The difficulty encountered trying to identify the Indian cultures at Westwater is not uncommon. Many Indian sites remain unidentified because of missing data. Although much is known about what became of the Ute and Anasazi, archeologists are not certain of the fate of the Paleo-Indian, Archaic, and Fremont cultures. Plenty of assumptions exist, but fragmented archeological findings make it impossible to positively connect prehistoric cultures with later Indian groups.

Unfortunately, a considerable amount of archeological evidence that might have cleared up some of the uncertainty about prehistoric Indians was lost to collectors during the past two centuries. Throughout the 1800s, explorers and surveyors gathered numerous Indian artifacts and shipped them to museums and private collectors in the East to be studied, displayed, and horded. Private citizens continued the looting into the twentieth century. With no laws to protect ancient Indian sites, there was considerable interest among civilians in collecting artifacts and in cashing in on them. In 1897 two dentists, James E. Miller and O. D. Babcock, made a voyage down the Colorado River from Glenwood Springs through Westwater Canyon to the confluence with the Green River for the sole purpose of locating “Cliff Dwellers.”

In an attempt to halt major looting and destruction of Indian sites, Congress, on June 8, 1906, passed a law titled, “An Act for the Preservation of American Antiquities.” Although the act may have protected some sites, it didn’t deter some individuals from
collecting artifacts. In 1927, Moab’s *Times-Independent* reported that several Westwater visitors hiked the canyons looking for Indian ruins.\(^{21}\) Apparently no one was concerned that their activities might violate the 1906 act. It was not until the mid-1970s that federal and state governments began to enforce disturbances of historical Indian sites, citing anyone caught with pots, shards, arrowheads, or other ancient Indian artifacts. Penalties for damaging petroglyphs, pictographs, ruins, and archeological dig sites were also enforced.\(^{22}\) In the nearly one hundred years after the Ute Indians were moved to reservations in 1881, it is reasonable to conclude that considerable evidence of Utah’s Indian history was removed or destroyed.

The nearest known Indian occupation site to Westwater is approximately five miles to the south, near the Little Dolores River, which eventually empties into the Colorado River in Westwater Canyon. A 1956 report, titled *Archeological Investigation on the Uncompahgre Plateau at Glade Park*, gave details of artifacts and other cultural debris that were uncovered from several Indian caves along the Little Dolores River, including Luster Cave, named after the area’s ranch owner.\(^{23}\)

The Luster Cave dig produced numerous artifacts, including a variety of projectile points used for arrows and possibly spears, drills, scrapers, knives, beads, manos, metates, a few small potsherds (in colors ranged from brown to dark grey), and even a fish hook (not likely to have been used on the normally low volume Little Dolores River). One of the projectile points was considered an enigma, being much older than the rest of the artifacts. Dietary evidence included numerous bones and teeth of rodents and deer, maize, yucca fiber, acorns, pinyon nuts, and juniper berries. Of particular interest to the archeologists was a well-preserved antelope skull that was “wrapped in a juniper bark mat before burial.”\(^{24}\) No carbon 14 analysis or tree ring dating was completed, but a comparison of the artifacts found in Luster Cave with other previously examined sites suggested repeated Indian occupation between A.D. 900 and approximately A.D. 1300. These estimates correspond with late Fremont and Anasazi and possibly early Ute occupation. Maize comparisons placed the site after A.D. 1000.\(^{25}\) The caves would have been within easy reach of Westwater by foot for hunting or fishing activities.
Sheep petroglyph at Little Hole. Is it a hunting scene or directions out of the canyon?

A Book Cliffs pictograph that Nina Bowen described as possibly a boat. Photo courtesy of Nina Bowen.
We will likely never know if any artifacts were taken from Westwater. Former Westwater resident John L. Malin said that there was a flint site near his father’s ranch above Westwater Gulch where he found spear points and arrowheads. In the same area, according to his sister Ila Reay, he found what she described as a basket, or sack, that held bones in it. The bones reminded them of knives or eating utensils. Others have reported granaries near Cottonwood Creek, and a mano was found within the canyon. These are the only reported material evidences of possible occupation at Westwater. It seems unlikely that people lived in the deep canyon, but since the land surrounding Westwater Canyon was populated successively by Archaic, Fremont, Anasazi, and Ute Indians and numerous nearby rock art sites represent these cultures, Westwater may have been a route between places such as the Book Cliffs to the north and the caves of Glade Park to the south. It likely was primarily used by hunting parties but may also have been a river crossing for migrations to other regions.

The area offered a natural low water ford, but river crossings by boat might be supported by a speculative interpretation of rock art found in the region. In 1998, Nina Bowen wrote an article for a publication of the Utah Rock Art Research Association (URARA) describing images of possible boats that are found at several desert locations in Utah and northern Arizona. One of the pictographs is located in the Book Cliffs. A photograph of the pictograph shows what she interprets as six figures on what could be a flat boat that has run onto a rock. The closest navigable water to this image is the Colorado River between the state line and Westwater. One interpretation of the bighorn sheep (or quadruped) petroglyph at Little Hole is that it was created to give directions out of the canyon. If true, this would imply that Indians being directed out of Little Hole arrived at the mouth of the canyon by some other means.

The first European credited as being in the area of Grand County and possibly in the vicinity of Westwater south of the Colorado River, was Juan Maria Antonio de Rivera in 1765. He certainly made it to Moab, according to his journal, which was found in Servicio Historico Militar in Madrid, Spain in 1969. Rivera made two expeditions in 1765. Supposedly searching for
silver, he departed for his first expedition from Abiquiu in the Province of New Mexico on June 25, traveling in a northwesterly direction as far as the Dolores River in Colorado. There he named the river “el Rio de Nuestra Senora de Dolores, or the River of Our Lady of Sorrows, for Maria the Mother of our Savior.”\textsuperscript{32} The discovery of his journals revealed that silver was not the actual reason for the expedition but that he was commissioned by the local Spanish government to “verify the existence of the Colorado River . . . and map the trail to its only purported crossing.”\textsuperscript{33} The Utes in the area were suspicious of the Spanish military, so Rivera and his company entered the hostile land unarmed and disguised their intentions by seeking silver. Rivera returned to Santa Fe, New Mexico, at the end of July.

Later that same year Rivera was charged by the governor of New Mexico to return to the region for further exploration and to gather information about the Indians as he continued his presumed search for silver. In early October 1765, Rivera’s company returned by the same route to the Dolores River; only this time they entered into Utah, and after purposely being misled by Indian guides, they eventually arrived at the Colorado River near Moab. The Indians evidently did not want the Spanish explorer to know of the Ute Crossing of the Colorado there that eventually would become part of the Spanish Trail. Rivera’s journal indicates that on his return route he mostly followed the Colorado River east of Moab until he reached the vicinity of Professor Valley approximately forty miles downstream from Westwater. From there his description was that he “returned to Sante Fe by the shortest route at the speed of laden mules.”\textsuperscript{34} Although it is unlikely Rivera’s expedition reached Westwater, his journal provides evidence that the Spanish had knowledge—though limited—of the region. Other expeditions likely followed.

In 1847 a story written by David H. Coyner, claimed that fur trappers James Workman and Samuel Spencer had separated from the mountain man Ezekiel Williams in 1809 and became lost. The pair thought they were following tributaries to the Rio Grande expecting to reach Santa Fe, New Mexico, but instead they inadvertently descended the Gunnison and Grand (Colorado) Rivers, possibly being the first English-speaking men in Grand County, Utah. David J. Weber who researched the
names and stories from Coyner’s book, *The Lost Trappers*, dismissed the existence of the two mountain men and, as do other historians, believe their journey to have been fiction.  

Fictitious or not, it is likely that some mountain men visited the area in search of lucrative beaver pelts. Yet little evidence exists other than the Antoine Robidoux inscription located fifteen miles up Westwater Creek near the Book Cliffs. Translated, the inscription reads:

Antoine Robidoux  
Passed here November 13  
1837  
to establish a trading house on the river Green or White

As mentioned earlier, Westwater Creek may have been a well-established Indian trail long before fur trappers entered the region. The creek bed provided an easy route for mountain men, railroad surveyors, and explorers to make their way to the Book Cliffs when traveling within the region between Grand Junction and Green River. A trapper trail following it was possibly the only feasible route heading north through the Book and Roan Cliffs to the Uinta Basin region. A document attributed to river historian Otis “Dock” Marston advanced this idea. He wrote:

The Book and Roan Cliffs together present a three thousand foot high barrier to passage, and I am not inventing the extent of this obstruction to prove some theory of mine, when I say that extending from the Colorado-Utah state line westward to Soldier Creek, considerably more than one hundred miles, there is no passable road across in this year of 1954. At one time a road was built up Westwater Canyon [Middle Canyon] and over the divide to some asphalt deposits. If there is any route through the Book and Roan Cliffs (in this long stretch) to the highlands of the Roan Plateau practical for a modern highway, Westwater Canyon will be the selection, with perhaps, no alternative.

Marston noted that Lieutenant John W. Gunnison, who investigated a railroad route through the region for the United States War Department in 1853, mentioned “the number of heavy Indian trails leading in that direction which they crossed. Not all these trails led eastward along the route which Robidoux used.
Antoine Robidoux inscription located near Westwater Creek in Middle (Westwater) Canyon in the Book Cliffs.
Some kept to the south crossed the Grand River and ascended a difficult trail up the Dolores River into Colorado...”

Kit Carson used the trail up Westwater Creek at least once when he was trying to locate some trappers who were reportedly in the Wasatch Mountains north of him. He “followed the Dolores River and the northern trail, or nearly so. At a Ute village he asked for a guide. A chief’s son, who had only an old, useless Spanish rifle, offered to go in return for a good rifle. Kit accepted. This young guide took the party up the Book Cliff Range by way of Westwater, crossed the summit and struck Twowater Creek, a branch of Bitter Creek, which led them to White River. The White took them to Ouray, where they found an adobe fort” that belonged to Antoine Robidoux.38 The story does not indicate where Kit Carson crossed the Colorado River to get to the northern trail. Although there could be numerous Indian crossings between the mouth of the Dolores River and Westwater, it is conceivable that one ford, which would lead directly to Westwater Creek, was near the present Westwater ranger station.

During a road-building expedition from Camp Floyd in northern Utah to New Mexico, Colonel William Wing Loring noted in his journal on August 12, 1858, when his men were in the vicinity of Westwater: “Passing through this valley there are numerous Indian trails, leading to Salt mountain [Lasals] and to San Miguel and Dolores rivers.”39 An interview conducted by Bureau of Land Management (BLM) ranger Linelle Wagner in 1982 with a former Westwater resident, Nee Ring Pennington, revealed that an old ford existed at Westwater. Pennington said that during low water her family could wade or take a four-wheel-drive vehicle across the river to the other side.40 Ranchers as early as 1892 were making frequent visits from across the Colorado River to the railroad station at Westwater, some coming from as far as the Little Dolores River. Because of the numerous Indian trails in the vicinity of Westwater Creek and the Book Cliffs, Marston proposed that the Antoine Robidoux inscription was made as an advertisement for a trading post he briefly established north of that point between the Green and White Rivers.

Frenchman Antoine Robidoux was born into a family of fur traders. His father Joseph Robidoux II, had an independent trading establishment in St. Louis. The fur from beaver was used to
make felt hats that were quite popular for prominent Europeans. This ignited the penetration of mountain men into unexplored regions of North America. In the aftermath of Mexico’s independence from Spain in 1821, Antoine and his brother Louis in the spring of 1824 left their other seven siblings to go to Santa Fe. Shortly after Antoine’s arrival he joined a group of trappers headed by Etienne Provost to explore territory that eventually made up western Colorado and eastern Utah. Some of the party went as far north as Wyoming, where they sustained casualties at the hands of Arapaho Indians. Not discouraged, Antoine saw considerable potential for a trading post amidst the friendlier Ute Indians and the numerous beaver streams on the western slopes of the Rocky Mountains.

Politics briefly stood in the way of Robidoux’s plans because Mexico owned the territory and was not allowing Americans to trap anything north and west of Santa Fe. Fortunately for Robidoux an option was given to foreign trappers that if they became Mexican citizens, they would be allowed to trap. Both Antoine and his brother took the opportunity. Four years after arriving in Santa Fe, Antoine married the Mexican governor’s adopted daughter and shortly afterwards was given “what amounted to an exclusive license to trade and trap in what would someday become western Colorado and eastern Utah.”

Strategically located Fort Uncompahgre was built in 1828 near present day Delta, Colorado, two miles below the confluence of the Gunnison and Uncompahgre Rivers, within a reasonable distance to the California Trail, and nearer to a favorite Ute gathering place. The trading post relied heavily on trade with the Utes, and while it was in operation, until 1844, it not only traded furs and goods from Santa Fe but was also involved in illegal trade with the Indians that included firearms, Indian slaves, and a liquor called Taos Lightning. About the same time Fort Uncompahgre was built, William Reed and Denis Julien established a smaller trading post in northeastern Utah at the confluence of the Uinta and Whiterocks Rivers. Ken Reyher wrote, “Reed’s Trading Post, as the enterprise came to be known, was little more than a one-room, log structure next to the river. Inventory was limited, and from a logistical standpoint (including the problems of supply and distance from Santa Fe), it was impractical for two men to maintain such an operation.”
1832, a year after he was granted authorization for a second trading post by the Mexican government, Antoine Robidoux purchased Reed’s Post. It became known as Fort Uintah. The Utes located in the region of Westwater and the LaSals probably traded at both of Robidoux’s forts.

Between the years of 1830 and 1840 beaver fur began losing its fashion appeal, and prices dropped significantly. Robidoux experienced only minor competition within eastern Utah and western Colorado for almost a decade while the trapping business took a downturn. Toward the end of the 1830s, though, competition entered the Mexican territory as Hudson’s Bay Company trappers based at Fort Hall in present-day Idaho moved south into Utah. With prices for beaver pelts dropping and the animals becoming scarce at the same time, it is assumed the Hudson’s Bay trappers focused on Utah to increase their volume and compensate for reduced revenues. Although previous, smaller trading establishments in the area had not seemed to affect Antoine Robidoux, the Hudson’s Bay move into his once exclusive domain did. Apparently he responded by deciding to establish a third trading post. Thus, he set out to establish Fort Robidoux near the Green and White Rivers and (according to Marston’s theory) chiseled an advertisement for his new venture onto a rock.

Except for that inscription at Westwater Creek there is no evidence the trading house was actually built. It is assumed that if it was established it was only temporary and may have been a ploy to discourage the Hudson’s Bay trappers. If so, the ploy did not work. In 1838 Hudson’s Bay officials tried to build a trading post at the confluence of the Green and Duchesne Rivers. “Acting in his own interest and as a legitimate representative of the Mexican government, Antoine brought his own men to the site and attempted to confiscate the opposition’s horse herd. Unable to put their animals out to graze for fear of losing them, the Hudson’s Bay men soon abandoned their venture and returned to Idaho, leaving their adversary firmly in control of the Uintah Basin. Fort Robidoux was abandoned about the same time.”

An alternative possibility is that the Antoine Robidoux inscription was intended to advertise Fort Uintah, about which there is some disagreement concerning when it was purchased. Although historian Ken Reyher claims Fort Uintah was purchased from Reed and Julien sometime in 1832, after Robidoux received
permission from the Mexican government, other historians believe the purchase was around 1838, coinciding with the advertisement. Historian Charles Kelly, on the other hand, believed that Robidoux was considering a third trading post in the vicinity of the White and Green Rivers that did not materialize. With little evidence of it being established, this could be correct, but if that trading post never existed, could the inscription have referred to Fort Uintah? Support might be found in a single letter from one word of the Frenchman’s inscription. That word could be Wiyte, which Kelly theorized was Robidoux’s phonetic spelling of the English word White in a mostly French inscription, or it might be Winte, an old spelling of Uintah.  

Another trapper who may have been in the Westwater area is the mysterious Denis Julien. Little is known about him except that he left inscriptions in several places along the Green and Colorado Rivers. It has been thought that he was a casualty of Cataract Canyon. However, his 1836 inscriptions appear to have been made going upriver, beginning with one in lower Cataract Canyon that is now under Lake Powell. Substantiated inscriptions continue upstream past the confluence and on to the Green River, where, at Hell Roaring Canyon, he inscribed what looks like a boat with the date of May 3, 1836. Still further upstream is the date May 16, 1836. The first indication of Julien’s presence in eastern Utah was the establishment of Reed’s Trading Post by him and William Reed around 1828. In 1831 he chiseled his first known inscription near the trading post at the junction of the Uinta and Whiterocks Rivers in northeastern Utah. Julien’s family may have followed the Robidouxes when they came down from Canada and settled in the St. Louis area in approximately 1771. Denis Julien probably was born between that date and 1775. He remained in the St. Louis vicinity until the early 1800s when he traded with Indians in Iowa and later was granted a license to trade along the Missouri River. At some point after 1825 Denis Julien headed south to Taos, New Mexico, where he was employed by Antoine Robidoux’s brother Louis. His first entry into Colorado and possibly eastern Utah was in 1827 with another brother, Francois Robidoux, to recover some furs that were cached on Ute land. Little else is known of Julien. He may have gone to California to live sometime after 1844. That is the year of the last
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reported Denis Julien inscription, in the Devils Garden section of Arches National Park. The validity of this inscription, dated June 9, 1844, has been questioned, but of the ten reported possible Julien inscriptions, this one is closest to Westwater. One argument in support of the inscription's validity is that in 1844 after Mexican militia killed ten innocent Ute Indians, captured three others, and took the camp's livestock, the Utes turned hostile towards intruders on their land. The Mexican volunteers were chasing renegade Navajos, who had raided several ranches near Santa Fe in 1843, when they happened upon the Ute camp. Although young Ute warriors wanted retribution for the murders, they were overruled, and a delegation of six Ute chiefs with over one hundred warriors rode to the city of Santa Fe on September 7, 1844, to address the crimes against them with the Mexican governor. Shortly after the meeting a fight broke out, and one chief was killed along with seven Ute warriors while trying to escape the city. The Utes went on a rampage, and in their course back home they left over one hundred Mexican men, women, and children dead. Not done, they headed to Antoine Robidoux's trading posts where, again, more Mexican employees were killed and the forts burned. Traders and trappers like Robidoux and Julien were no longer welcome in Ute territory.

Most of the known Denis Julien inscriptions were located near rivers and their tributaries, which is an argument against the validity of the Arches inscription. According to James Knipmeyer, the fact that Ute Indians in the region were hostile in 1844 is circumstantial evidence that the inscription is valid because frontiersmen would have shunned being out in the open and stayed away from the main trails under such conditions. Some historians believe Denis Julien ended up going to California, where he later died. Although little evidence has turned up to substantiate this claim, Julien may have followed his former employer Louis Robidoux to California. Louis Robidoux purchased property in California in 1843 and by late 1844 had completed moving all of his family and belongings from Taos, New Mexico, to his new home in California.

He, like others, followed the Spanish Trail, the main branch of which crossed the Colorado River downstream from Westwater. Few of those who followed the trail in the 1830s and 1840s are known. It is likely, though, that some trappers reached
it by traveling through Westwater. Like Robidoux and Julien, numerous trappers worked the Green and Colorado Rivers and their tributaries with regularity between 1820 and 1840.

After the well-traveled Spanish Trail and Old Trappers Trail, the next oldest trail through the area passed directly through Westwater and was made for wagons. In the fall of 1878 Rollin J. Reeves was in the Westwater area surveying the Colorado and Utah border when he referred to the road in his notes. He wrote: “The only other road we encountered was what is known as the old Salt Lake wagon road. This is in better condition, has been
considerably traveled and worked. It was first built by U.S. Troops, many years ago, and has been much used since.”

Colonel William Wing Loring and three hundred military men returning to Fort Union, New Mexico, built the Old Salt Lake Wagon Road. Colonel Loring had come to Utah in the spring of 1858, following a northerly route through Colorado from New Mexico to bring reinforcements to Colonel Albert Sidney Johnston for the conflict between the federal government and Mormon Church that became known as the Utah War. The conflict was settled that spring, though, and on July 19, 1858, Colonel Loring with his men and fifty wagons left Camp Floyd, located west of Utah Lake near Fairfield, Utah, and began a southeasterly trip back to Fort Union. On their return they were apparently assigned to improve existing roads and build their own. They traveled nearly directly south to Ephraim, Utah, headed east to Green River, and eventually reached the Colorado at McGraw Bottom approximately twenty-eight miles downstream from Westwater. They kept a short distance away from the Colorado until they again reached the river’s edge at Cisco and at Westwater. An 1894 survey of Westwater by Frank E. Baxter and a 1911 plat map for the Henrylyn Orchards Colony indicate that part of the Salt Lake Wagon Road appears to be the same well-traveled dirt road that follows the railroad tracks into Westwater put-in today, except that it veers toward Bitter Creek and into Colorado upon reaching the river.

Previously, in 1853 Lieutenant John W. Gunnison and John C. Frémont had conducted separate railroad surveys in the region north of Westwater. However, Westwater seems to have been excluded from surveys in the West until 1875 and 1876, when geologist Ferdinand Vandeveer Hayden extended his Colorado explorations into regions of Utah Territory along the Colorado River. F. V. Hayden was probably the most prominent surveyor during the 1860s and 1870s and gained much of his notoriety both nationally and internationally from his 1871 and 1872 fieldwork in Yellowstone prior to its designation as a national park. Afterwards Hayden turned his attention to Colorado, subsequently surveying the entire state and parts of western territories, including Utah, between 1873 and 1876.

Hayden did not participate directly in all of the survey work but organized teams of specialists to expedite the work. The 1875
Hayden survey crew included Henry Gannett, topographer; Dr. A.C. Peale, geologist; William R. Atkinson, assistant topographer; William S. Holman, barometric observer; L. Dallas, general assistant; four packers; and a cook. Most of their work was done south of the Grand River in the region of the Dolores Triangle and the Sierra La Sal in Utah Territory, which was known to be “infested by a band of troublesome Indians.” During 1875 the party surveyed and made observations of tributaries draining into the Grand River, including Little Dolores Creek. Throughout the region between the Grand and Gunnison Rivers, they seemed impressed by their discovery of “Archean Rocks” and surmised correctly that these metamorphic rocks were extensive. The expedition continued southward to the Abajo, or Blue Mountains, where they were attacked by Indians and abandoned their equipment and samples, including the Archean rocks they had gathered at the Little Dolores. The following year the Hayden explorers returned and surveyed the territory north of the Colorado River going as far west along the river as McGraw Bottom; then they headed north to the Book Cliffs.

A review of the reports of the 1875 and 1876 Hayden surveys suggests that they did not enter Westwater Canyon, which made their information incomplete. Particularly obvious is the contrast between their detailed geologic observations of the Little Dolores Creek and their report of the Grand River, which simply said it had “walls 500 or 600 feet high, presenting bluff faces of massive blood-red sandstones.” Until you hike above the inner gorge at Westwater, you cannot appreciate how deceptive the canyon can be. It is a magnificent and intimidating sight viewed from above the deep blackened gorge. But there are some locations, such as near Big Hole, where from a distance one would never know the canyon exists. I suspect the Hayden party observed Westwater Canyon from a distance. Otherwise it would have mentioned the Archean rock found there as well. When the party returned in 1876 Henry Gannett reported that they “followed the Salt Lake wagon-trail down the Grand River to the mouth of the Dolores, then, leaving the river, we struck north, toward the crest of the Roan or Book Cliffs.” Probably just upstream of mile 143 on Belknap’s *Canyonlands River Guide*, where Salt Creek enters the Colorado River, the survey followed
the road bypassing Ruby and Westwater canyons and reached the river only a few more times near Bitter Creek, Cisco, and eventually McGraw Bottom.

After the mountain men and surveyors, the next visitors to the area were gold-seeking prospectors and outlaws who entered the area to escape the law. Several Grand Junction news items during the late 1880s reported that horse rustlers and train robbers regularly headed in the direction of the Book Cliffs, Westwater, and the infamous Dolores Triangle formed by the Dolores and Colorado Rivers. Newspapers published in the young towns of Moab, Utah, and Grand Junction, Colorado, help piece together some of the wild history of Westwater.