From their ancient perch deep within the sandstone walls of Bridge Canyon the Holy People gazed down in amazed bewilderment. Below them, in a scene never before witnessed, thirteen horsemen and assorted pack animals were moving steadily down Nonnezoshi Boko. Although only midmorning on this brilliant August day the heat was already intense, and the ten whites, two Paiutes, and one Navajo were sweat-soaked and caked with dust. The shod hooves of the white men’s ponies clanked noisily on the numerous rocks of the dry creek bottom as the party, stretched out now for nearly a mile, pushed their exhausted mounts relentlessly down canyon.

On they went, under the venerable gaze of Standing Rock, past Talking Rock, on toward Talking Boy Rock and Talking Girl Rock, and as the visitors passed by, these sacred sentinels sent word of this intrusion silently and swiftly down toward the twin rainbows of Tse nani ahigii.

Four of the party were clearly ahead of the others and were setting a quick pace. One man, tall, with jet-black hair angling out from under his tan hat, seemed determined to remain in the lead. As the others moved to catch up he would spur his tired pony forward, seemingly unmindful of even his own welfare, his gaze never wavering from the vistas opening up straight before him. The other three seemed to be riding as a group. The young Paiute rode with the calm assurance of one who knows the country and is confident of the trail. On his right was a quiet, wiry gentleman who exuded a somewhat aristocratic air born of education and many years of leadership. Occasionally the Indian would turn toward his companion and gesture ahead and to the left as if to give directions to the as-yet-unseen goal. Their companion seemed to hang back a little, deferring to the others. He sat his horse in the manner of one who had spent much of his life in the saddle. The party had been on the trail, such as it was, for five days, and only the quiet determination of the university professor and the skilled leadership of their outfitter had gotten them this far. Their horses had little stamina remaining, and the men were bone-weary.

Suddenly and without warning the creek bed turned abruptly left and the three riders pulled to a halt. Here, within sight of the Holy Water People in the sacred spring, the professor let out a loud cry and stood up in his stirrups. Straight ahead, shimmering in the heat-stirred air, was the Great Rock-Arch. The rider-in-a-hurry had passed right by the narrow viewpoint without seeing it, and now he came back to stand beside his companions. Then, as the teacher and his Indian guide quietly savored the fruits of so great an effort, the wrangler and the impatient one urged their horses up the steep embankment and began to race toward the bridge. The better horseman was victorious and for a few brief moments sat alone beneath the petrified rainbow, the first white man ever to do so. Within the hour, all members of the party had reached the bridge and what had heretofore been a combination of legend and rumor was now ready to be revealed to the world at large beyond this canyon hiding place.

The area around them seemed pristine; no evidence whatsoever showed the passing by of any man
since the Ancient Ones deserted the area many centuries before. No one in the party, however, believed himself to be the first to set eyes on this spectacle. After all, they had been guided here by an Indian who knew the way and therefore must have passed down this trail before. He likewise had probably been shown the way by others of his tribe. At least one member of the expedition, despite the lack of any tangible evidence, doubted that he was the first white man to see the arch and later inquired about it of others more knowledgeable than himself. What seems sure, however, is that previous to that day knowledge of the Rainbow-Turned-to-Stone had never reached beyond the rugged landscape of Navajo Mountain and the surrounding plateau. Hence, August 14, 1909, is officially recognized as the date of the discovery of Rainbow Bridge.

This date was not the beginning of the human history of the bridge, however. Perhaps the first man to see it was a hunter-gatherer of the Archaic period (7000 B.C.-A.D. 750), who might have stumbled upon it while out foraging for food. These people are known to us today as the Basketmakers, and while no evidence of their passing has been found in the National Monument, several archaeological sites of that period are known within a twelve mile radius. For example, Earl H. Morris of the American Museum of Natural History found a Basketmaker II burial in Charcoal Cave within Forbidding Canyon while exploring with the Bernheimer Expedition in 1922, and with such sites so close it seems unlikely that the bridge would have escaped their notice.¹

The first people to leave physical evidence of their presence at the bridge are the Kayenta Anasazi, who inhabited the Glen Canyon region between A.D. 1050 and 1220.² They left small storage structures and an occasional habitation throughout the area, but the lack of any significant refuse piles indicates that their occupation of these sites was decidedly short-term. The salvage studies conducted by the University of Utah in Glen Canyon prior to completion of the dam found seventy Anasazi sites in the main canyon between the mouth of the San Juan River and Lees Ferry, only five of which could be called habitations.³ The fact is there was little game in the canyons and almost no land suitable for farming, so while there is abundant evidence of the Anasazi in Glen Canyon, it is clear that any occupation was during short periods of time and at those scattered locations where some agriculture was possible. It has been speculated that what use there was of lower Glen Canyon in the twelfth century was due to the severe drought, which forced the Anasazi into the canyons to grow what little food they could before they finally abandoned the region completely.⁴ The numerous hand- and toeholds pecked into the canyon walls leading from the river to the benches above reinforce this theory.

Excavations in Rainbow Bridge National Monument itself have yielded one structure, one chipping area where tools and weapons were probably constructed, and two pecked trails, one leading to the bald rock area above the bridge and one down to its top.⁵

The lithic site is on the east side of the monument under a shallow alcove; the structure, located in a cave high up on the west side of the monument, consists of two parallel masonry walls which were once a single room. The site is accessible only by means of a shallow and precarious trail leading up from the steep talus slope below.

The prehistoric trail begins downstream from the bridge and climbs the west wall of Bridge Canyon by means of a series of pecked hand- and toeholds toward the mesa above the arch. From there it is possible to traverse south to the rocks above the bridge, where a dozen steps in two parallel rows lead down to the top of the arch. While there is some evidence of the use of metal tools in constructing this trail, it is the opinion of Northern Arizona University archaeologists that this work was done later by white men to improve an already-existing prehistoric route.⁶ It is almost certain that this is the path used by the Douglass survey party to reach the top of the bridge on the day of its discovery. Why the Ancient Ones wished to climb to the top of this immense span is unknown, unless they, like us, had a fondness for the view.

Then, of course, there is the matter of the stone altar or shrine. The discovery party of 1909 noted its existence on the east side of the canyon almost under the bridge itself. As described in chapter 3, it was most probably of Anasazi construction, but sometime between 1923 and 1930 it disappeared. Why it was destroyed and who did the deed will certainly never be known.

By the middle of the thirteenth century, all evidence of continued Indian occupation in Glen Canyon ceases, and so Rainbow Bridge undoubtedly sat unnoticed and unvisited until its rediscovery by the modern-day Paiutes and Navajos over six centuries.
later. No one knows for sure when Indians of the modern period found the bridge. Paiutes were certainly living south of the San Juan River on the north and east sides of Navajo Mountain by the early 1800s, and it may well be that they were the first to know of Rainbow Bridge in modern times.

Jim Mike,* one of the Paiute Indian guides on the 1909 discovery expedition, told the following story of his first view of the bridge, an event which probably occurred around 1880:

We lived in Paiute Canyon, I was a boy, and on this day we were looking for grass for feed for the horses in the canyons beyond the north slope of Navajo Mountain. It was me, my father, and Nasja,** who lived nearby. They were setting up camp and I went out to look for feed. I went into this canyon and saw this big rock with a hole in it. I never saw anything like that. I ran back scared and told my father. He and Nasja left without going to see it.

While there are those who have disputed the authenticity of Jim Mike’s story, it is certain that the Paiute community of Navajo Mountain knew of the bridge long before the first white visitor ever set eyes on it. Hence, scenes such as this certainly did occur among the Paiutes, perhaps several times, during the nineteenth century.

As was shown in chapter 3, significant Navajo settlement in the Navajo Mountain area did not occur until the time of the Long Walk, 1863–1864. Seeking to escape the relentless pursuit of Colonel Kit Carson’s troops, bands of Navajo refugees used the rugged canyons on the slopes of Navajo Mountain to hide and to scratch out a bare-bones existence until the soldiers gave up the chase. It is distinctly possible that some small band or individual came upon the bridge while traversing these canyons on foot or by horse. One Navajo legend has the bridge being discovered by the great chief Hoskininni himself, but in retrospect it seems more likely that it was first chanced upon by a member of Hoskininni’s band, a medicine man known variously as Sharkie, One-Eyed Man of the Salt Clan, or Blind Salt Clansman.† Karl Luckert relates the Navajo story of Sharkie’s discovery of Rainbow Bridge as follows:

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* Earlier in life Jim Mike was known as Mike’s Boy.
** The father of Nasja Begay, the Paiute who served as the main guide on the 1909 expedition.

If authentic, this would place the Navajo discovery of Rainbow Bridge sometime around 1868. It is certain that the elderly Blind Salt Clansman knew of the existence of the Great Rock-Arch, for it was he who first revealed it to Louisa Wetherill in 1907. His story to her is perhaps the first time word of the bridge had passed beyond the small, tight circle of Indians who knew of it.

The first passage of non-Indians through the Navajo Mountain country is the subject of controversy. When the Cummings Archaeological Expedition of 1909 discovered the great Anasazi ruin of Inscription House deep in Navajo Canyon, they found there what seemed to be a Spanish wall writing bearing the date 1661 together with the Latin inscription “Anno Domine.”‡ Both Cummings and other archaeologists who viewed the site considered the glyph clear and authentic, but its origin remained a mystery. No official Spanish record showed any religious or military expedition passing anywhere near Navajo Mountain. However, the inscriptions disappeared a decade later, probably due to vandalism, and now modern scholarship, with advanced computerized enhancement techniques, has cast doubt on the authenticity of this wall writing, leaving modern historians with a true enigma.

The first traverse of Glen Canyon is no mystery at all, for it belongs to the well-documented and famous exploring expedition led by Fathers Silvestre Vélez de Escalante and Francisco Dominguez, Franciscans of the New Mexico Province. Their party left Santa Fe on July 29, 1776, with the express intention of finding a secure northern route to the missions of California. However, the terrain forced them further and further north, away from their objective and through western Colorado and northeastern Utah. Out of time and critically short of supplies, they finally turned south at Utah Lake, passing through the deserts of western Utah and northern Arizona, and eventually encountering the mighty Colorado River at the mouth of the Paria on November 1. Unable to find a ford at what is today Lees Ferry, they turned north again, traveling along the cliffs above the river,
deter to find a crossing before being overcome by the cold, hunger, and thirst which now dogged their every footstep. Finally, near Gunsight Butte and not many miles above the mouth of Navajo Creek, they found the salvation for which they had prayed so hard. Crossing the river on November 7, they fired off their muskets in thanksgiving and headed quickly south toward the Spanish settlements. The starved and exhausted party arrived back in Santa Fe on January 2, 1877, grateful just to be alive. They had passed within thirty miles of Rainbow Bridge, but, of course, they knew nothing of its existence. The trail across the Colorado which Father Escalante pioneered, now known as Crossing of the Fathers, was used by an expedition from Mexico one more time—by the Antonio Armijo party in 1829. In 1848 control of the area passed to the Americans.

For the next four decades Glen Canyon remained serene in its isolation, little visited and unexplored. Then, in 1869 there came floating by one of the most daring and romantic exploring expeditions ever undertaken in North America. John Wesley Powell was an American original. Born in Morris, New York, on March 24, 1834, he grew up with precious little formal schooling and remained largely self-taught throughout his life. Yet, in spite of this, he was eventually appointed to head the Bureau of American Ethnology and the U.S. Geological Survey. However, it is not for his monumental scientific achievements that he is best remembered, but rather for his exploration of the Colorado River and its canyons. He conceived the idea of such an expedition in 1867 while exploring the headwaters of the Grand. He was to meet them at Crossing of the Fathers a hundred miles down river. On the morning of October 5 they passed the mouth of the San Juan and paused once again at Music Temple. Frederick Dellenbaugh described what happened next:

Leaving Music Temple ..., we soon arrived at a pretty rapid with a clear chute. It was not large, but it was the only real one we had seen in this canyon and we dashed through it with pleasure. Just below we halted to look admiring up at Navajo Mountain ..., The Major contemplated stopping long enough for a climb to the top but on appealing to Andy for information as to the state of the supplies he found we were near the last crust and he decided we had better pull on as steadily as possible ...

The "pretty rapid" Dellenbaugh describes is undoubtedly the one at the mouth of Aztec Creek. Therefore, had the Major decided to climb Navajo Mountain he would, in all probability, have hiked directly up Bridge Canyon and become not only the explorer of Glen Canyon but the discoverer of Rainbow Bridge as well. Sadly, for the lack of a few supplies, the bridge was to remain hidden from the world for another thirty-eight years.

The next missed opportunity resulted from what was perhaps the strangest notion for the use of the canyons of the Colorado ever conceived. While
prospecting for gold and silver in the country just east of Flagstaff, S. S. Harper of Philadelphia hit upon the idea of building a railroad along the Colorado River which would link Grand Junction with San Diego. The proposed route would follow the river at water level through its enormous canyons to the terminus on the Gulf of California, where the line would turn westward to the Pacific. The idea attracted the attention of Frank M. Brown, a Denver businessman with money to invest, and on March 25, 1889, the Colorado Canyon and Pacific Railroad Company (CCPRR) was formed. Brown hired Robert Brewster Stanton as chief engineer and gave him the responsibility of conducting a survey as to the feasibility of the idea.

Stanton had been born in Woodville, Mississippi, in 1846 and educated at Miami University of Ohio, graduating in 1871. He decided to become a civil engineer and worked at various projects in Ohio, Kentucky, and Tennessee before becoming a division engineer for the Union Pacific from 1880 to 1884. He then set up a private engineering practice and stayed with it until joining the CCPRR.

Stanton’s main survey party set out from Green River, Utah, on May 25, 1889, with sixteen men in six boats, President Brown in command. By the time the party reached Glen Canyon on June 24 they were down to three boats and eight men; the others, having had their fill of rapids and muddy water, had gone home. The small party spent eight days in Glen Canyon, and Stanton makes much of the beautiful glens and alcoves and the fine coloring of the sandstone walls. However, they rarely ventured far from the main river and, therefore, never found Rainbow Bridge.

Still, like Major Powell before him, Stanton got a second chance. On July 10, disaster struck the party in Marble Canyon and President Brown was drowned. On July 15, two more of the party drowned, and the remaining men abandoned the canyon near Vasey’s Paradise. Not one to give up easily, Stanton secured additional funding and by December 10 was back on the river with new boats and, with three exceptions, a new crew. This time his men hauled the boats overland to the head of Glen Canyon and started there. On December 19, Stanton noted a collection of ruins at the mouth of a side canyon just below the confluence with the San Juan. The area was complete with wide bottomlands where cultivation might have been possible, and from his description it seems obvious that Stanton had found the ruins at the mouth of Aztec Creek. He also mentions hiking up the side canyon at least a mile, meaning that he was probably the first white man to come within five miles of Rainbow Bridge.

On April 26, 1890, Stanton’s party reached the mouth of the Colorado River and thereby completed the survey. The railroad, while probably feasible from an engineering standpoint, would have been enormously expensive and was never built. Stanton, however, had been bitten by the mystique of the canyon country, and a few years later he was back in Glen Canyon with another scheme for making money from the river. Despite his coming so close, however, there is no record of him ever seeing Rainbow Bridge.

The exploring expeditions of Powell and Stanton certainly made the outside world aware of the canyon country and of the Colorado River in particular, but the lack of resources in the area and the difficulty of travel within it kept most white men many miles away in the Mormon settlements of Escalante and Kanab on the west and Blanding and Bluff on the east. This isolation would begin to disappear when gold was discovered in Glen Canyon during the late 1880s. The magic metal had actually been found decades earlier at Padre Creek by Pardyn Dodds, George Riley, and John Bonnemort, who had been engaged by Major Powell to resupply the 1871 expedition at the Crossing of the Fathers. While waiting for the Major’s party to come down the river, the three panned for a little color and actually found some very fine specks in the river sand. However, this minor discovery prompted no further efforts, and Glen Canyon’s resources of gold would not be systematically exploited for another dozen years.

The pivotal event that would eventually lead to a mini gold rush in Glen Canyon actually occurred far to the east in Monument Valley. In 1879, a prospector by the name of James Merrick visited the Mitchell family, then living near the San Juan River on the banks of Montezuma Creek, and persuaded Ernest Mitchell to join him in a search for a mythical silver mine supposedly in the area. The Navajos had long been famous for their ornamental work in silver, but the source of their raw material remained a mystery. Rumors abounded of Spanish treasure or a lost mine, and it was this that Mitchell and Merrick set out to discover. In March of 1880, the two were killed by Navajos in Monument Valley, and when the bodies were discovered their pockets were found to contain samples of high-grade silver ore. Speculation ran
rampant that these men had actually found the lost Spanish silver mine and were killed by the Indians to prevent them from revealing its whereabouts. This news sent prospectors all over the plateaus and canyons of the San Juan River country in a vain search for the lost Merrick-Mitchell mine.

One of those who came to the Southwest to search for the lost mine was Cass Hite. Long ago seduced by the dreams of wealth possible only by striking it rich, Hite had prospected in Montana and Colorado before moving into Navajo country in the early 1890s. His search proved as fruitless as that of everyone else, but he had the good fortune to be befriended by Chief Hoskininni, who told him that he might find gold by moving west to the Colorado River. Following the revered chief’s advice, Hite took the Mormon Trail from Bluff toward Glen Canyon and eventually worked his way to the river near the mouth of White Canyon, arriving there in September 1883. He discovered gold in the gravels on both sides of the river and located more by exploring up and down the canyon. He named his new home Dandy Crossing, and he became a fixture on the river for decades before his death in 1914.

When news of Hite’s discoveries got out, a mild gold rush put miners and prospectors onto every gravel bar and side drainage of Glen Canyon. Dandy Crossing, which was the only really accessible ford of the river for many miles in either direction, became a small village (named Hite) complete with its own store and post office. The initial rush of gold fever lasted about seven years, but shortly after activity subsided in Glen Canyon it flared along the Colorado River. Following the revered chief’s advice, Hite took the Mormon Trail from Bluff toward Glen Canyon and eventually worked his way to the river near the mouth of White Canyon, arriving there in September 1883. He discovered gold in the gravels on both sides of the river and located more by exploring up and down the canyon. He named his new home Dandy Crossing, and he became a fixture on the river for decades before his death in 1914.

In the end the gold of Glen Canyon defeated all attempts to extract it profitably, and not long after the turn of the century virtually all mining activity had ceased. When the Kolb brothers passed down the canyon in 1911 during their dramatic reenactment of the Powell Expedition they encountered only a few scattered individuals. From the standpoint of Rainbow Bridge, what is truly surprising and a bit enigmatic is that, in spite of this considerable activity, the great rock rainbow, located only a few easy miles from the river, remained unmentioned and unknown. It is scarcely credible to believe that no prospector ever wandered up Bridge Creek from the river, especially in view of the short distance and lack of obstacles, but it is equally incredible to believe that such a find would remain unspoken among what must have been a fairly close-knit and insular community of prospectors. Some have contended that the bridge was visited by numerous white men during the mining and prospecting days of the late 1800s, and perhaps earlier, but that men in search of minerals had little use for scenery and simply ignored the bridge or just forgot to mention it. Such an assertion is belied by the fact that other scenery of much less splendor did rate a mention by the very men thought to have ignored Rainbow Bridge.

In September 1883, Cass Hite and a group of other prospectors discovered three natural bridges in...
the upper reaches of White Canyon. Word of the discovery spread quickly among the ranching and mining families in the vicinity of Bluff, and the attention of the scientific community was aroused. The discovery was announced to the world in August 1904 through the pages of Century Magazine and in September of that same year by National Geographic. These articles mentioned cliff dwellings in the area, thereby prompting the University of Utah and the Archeological Institute of America to launch an expedition during the summer of 1907 to study the White Canyon bridges and to explore the country north of the San Juan River. The expedition was led by Byron Cummings, then dean of the School of Letters and Science at the University of Utah.

Byron Cummings, pioneer American archaeologist and a man of unimpeachable character, was born on September 20, 1860, in Westville, New York. He was educated at the colleges of education in both Potsdam and Oswego, New York, before earning his M.A. at Rutgers in 1892. He earned his living by teaching mathematics, Latin, and Greek in the secondary schools of New York and New Jersey before coming west to take up an appointment as instructor of Greek and Latin at the University of Utah in 1893. He was made full professor and chairman of the Department of Ancient Languages and Literature in 1895, and became dean of the College of Arts and Sciences in 1905. His rapid rise up the academic ladder bespeaks a man of considerable academic talent and leadership ability, and, concluding from his popularity with colleagues and students, a person of great personal warmth and humanity. His pupils on the archaeological digs simply referred to him as “the Dean,” a title he carried with him throughout his academic career.

It is not known what or who might have piqued his interest in southwestern prehistory, but in 1906 Cummings traveled alone into Nine Mile Canyon in eastern Utah’s Carbon County, the location of a great many intriguing pictograph and petroglyph panels. From that point on the subject of archaeology became his passion, and all other academic pursuits were abandoned. He spent weekends, holidays, vacations, and sabbaticals in the scorching heat, bitter cold, wind, and rain seeking knowledge of the ancient inhabitants of southern Utah and Arizona and revealing them bit by bit to the modern world.

Byron Cummings and his crew of student volunteers from Salt Lake City completed the survey in White Canyon that same summer (1907) and sent a report on their work to the General Land Office, the precursor of today’s Bureau of Land Management. Established by Congress in 1812 as an arm of the Treasury Department, the GLO was charged with all matters relating to the administration of the public domain. This was, it may be noted, nine years before the creation of the National Park Service and the same summer in which Congress passed the Antiquities Act, which gave presidents the authority to set aside designated tracts of land as national monuments. The Cummings report was the basis for the proclamation of Natural Bridges National Monument on April 16, 1908, by President Theodore Roosevelt, the first reserve of federal land for park or monument purposes in Utah.

For some reason, now obscure, the GLO was not satisfied with the Cummings survey and, in 1908, sent its own team to Natural Bridges for a new look around. This new survey prompted the inclusion of more ruins, a renaming of the three arches from Edwin, Caroline, and Augusta to Sipapu, Kachina, and Owachomo, and a new presidential proclamation accomplishing the changes (September 1909). The leader of the survey crew was William Boon Douglass.

Douglass had been born at Corydon, Indiana, on June 30, 1864. After graduating from high school there in 1882 he took a two-year course in civil engineering at Indiana University, and then read law in the offices of his father, Judge Benjamin P. Douglass. He passed the bar of the Harrison Circuit Court in 1885 and became deputy prosecuting attorney in the Third Judicial District of Indiana. He seemed a bit restless with the law, for in 1886 he was appointed surveyor of Harrison County. Soon thereafter, however, Douglass was back reading law, this time at Georgetown University, from which he received a master of laws degree in 1888. From there he went to work as a clerk in the General Land Office, then to a computer position in the Census Bureau, and finally back to the GLO as U.S. inspector of surveys in 1904. His first assignment was to settle a dispute between the state of Minnesota and a number of Indian tribes as to timber rights. In 1906 he did a location survey of Multnomah Falls in Oregon, and in 1907 he surveyed in Crater Lake National Park. By 1908 he was in the Southwest where he was to spend the better part of the next twenty years. Interestingly, Douglass’s report on his survey of Natural Bridges...
Figure 14: Byron Cummings at Oljato, 1909. Probably the first non-Indian to see Rainbow Bridge.
National Monument makes no mention whatsoever of the Cummings survey the previous year. From this, and in light of subsequent events, it would seem obvious that early on William Douglass had a certain animosity toward Byron Cummings. The origin of this bad feeling is difficult to determine, as the two would not even meet until August, 1909. Whether resulting from professional jealousy or some imagined slight, Douglass’s feelings toward Cummings would go on to color the Rainbow Bridge discovery and create sparks for years thereafter.

His reconnaissance in Nine Mile Canyon and the survey in White Canyon had only whetted Byron Cummings’s appetite for archaeology, and in the summer of 1908 we find him again in southern Utah, this time digging on Alkali Ridge near Montezuma Creek east of Blanding.25 He was accompanied as usual by a select group of students from the University of Utah intent both on scientific research and enhancing the university’s collection of southwestern artifacts. Cummings’s level of knowledge concerning proper excavation techniques at prehistoric sites is difficult to determine with any precision. This certainly was not his academic specialty, but the science of archaeology, at least in America, was at this early date primitive at best, and he seems to have been able to get the proper permits from the General Land Office. When the work on Alkali Ridge was finished, Cummings and his crew packed up and rode west toward Bluff. He had an appointment to meet John Wetherill and, as it turns out, a rendezvous with destiny.

John Wetherill was born in 1866 on an island in the middle of the Missouri River.26 His father, Benjamin K. Wetherill, was appointed government trail agent for the Chisholm Trail, and so the family moved that same year to the trailhead at Leavenworth, Kansas. A few years later we find Ben and his family farming along the San Juan River near Bluff, but the relentless cycles of drought and flooding forced the family off their land and into western Colorado. Hence, by the late 1870s the Wetherills were farming in Mancos, Colorado, at the foot of Mesa Verde. In 1888 John’s brother, Richard, discovered Cliff Palace in what would later become Mesa Verde National Park, and the interests of the family, at least those of their sons, changed from farming to artifacts and archaeology. Collections accumulated by the Wetherill brothers from the canyons around their home were sold to private collectors and museums all over the country, adding a bit to the family’s economic base and establishing their place in history. Although often denigrated as pot hunters or worse, the Wetherills actually excavated their finds with a great deal of care and precision and kept meticulous notes. For example, during an 1893 expedition to Grand Gulch in southeast Utah, John and Richard found a number of burials accompanied by baskets instead of pottery. Recognizing that they had uncovered a culture more ancient and primitive than the cliff dwellers, they called them the Basketmakers, a name still in use today.34

In 1896 John Wetherill both lost his father and gained a wife. His marriage to Louisa Wade, also of Mancos, prompted him to give up full-time archaeology and return to farming, but his bad luck and, perhaps, his lack of skill doomed his career as a farmer. Three successive failures with his wheat crop, caused in turn by frost, drought, and rust, convinced John that he would never earn his way in the world by farming, and so in 1900 the young family, now augmented with a son and daughter, packed their belongings and moved west.35

Louisa Wade Wetherill had been born in the mining camps of Nevada around 1877.27 Her father, Jack, by turns a miner, frontiersman, and rancher, finally settled his family in the Mancos Valley in 1879, just about the time the Wetherills were also settling in. Louisa grew to be a tall, thin, comely girl, and John was attracted to her almost upon his first notice. They were married on March 17, 1896, and on December 28 of that same year little Benjamin was born. Georgia Ida came next on January 17, 1898, and their family was complete. A way had to be found outside of farming to support this energetic brood.

John’s first job upon leaving Mancos was the management of a trading post at Ojo Alamo on the eastern fringes of the Navajo Reservation. It was owned by the Hyde Exploring Company, which wanted John to do archaeology while Louisa minded the store. This arrangement was working fine until Louisa’s brother, John, who had come to assist at the trading post, caught pneumonia and lay for a time at death’s door. Alone and unable to communicate with any of her neighbors, Louisa was near to panic. Her brother later recovered, but the experience taught her an invaluable lesson—if she were to remain in this country she would need to learn the language and customs of the Navajo. She was not only an able and willing student, but a loving and compassionate friend as well. Called by the Navajo “Aston Sosi” (Slim Woman), her neighbors came to revere her as
Figure 15: John Wetherill at Betatakin, 1912. Explorer, Indian trader, and first custodian of Rainbow Bridge National Monument.
Figure 16: Louisa Wade Wetherill. The first white person ever to hear of Rainbow Bridge.
a healing angel and sweet-spirited companion. Both Hosteen John and Aston Sosi were known to be fair
and generous people whose word was as good as hard
currency.

The Hyde Exploring Company pulled out of
the area in 1902, leaving John and Louisa to run the
trading post on their own. Things went along well
enough for a time, but John Wetherill grew restless
and figured he could do better elsewhere. In partner­
ship with Clyde Colville and John Wade, he set out
in February, 1906, to find a new home. He found it
on March 17 at an oasis on the western edge of Monu­
ment Valley called Oljato—the Place of Moonlight
Water. At first the local Navajos were adamantly
opposed to having any whites in their midst, and it
appeared that the traders would have to move or be
killed. John Wetherill, however, figured he had as
much right as the next man to settle where he chose,
and by standing his ground he soon won the grudg­
ing acquiescence of Chief Hoskininni and his son,
Hoskininni Begay. It was a decision that neither side
would ever regret. While Louisa, her brother, and
Clyde Colville ran the business of a thriving trading
post, John was back out in the field continuing in
Tsegi Canyon the work he had begun at Mesa Verde.

Wetherill had been guiding scientific and ar­
chaological expeditions into the heart of the Colo­
rado Plateau ever since he left Mancos, and he was
known to be an expert wrangler and knowledgeable
guide. Hence, there was nothing very unusual in his
being asked to guide a party from the University of
Utah into the virgin archaeological territory of north­
er Arizona. By prior arrangement he met Cummings
at Bluff and then guided them south toward his new
trading post. Neil M. Judd, one of the student mem­
bers of the expedition describes their journey:

Wetherill was in a hurry and we traveled fast. We
forded the river (the San Juan) at the mouth of the
Chinle; overtook and passed a company of U.S. Cav­
alry just beyond Gypsum Creek, and reached Oljato
the second day. Wetherill guided us to Segihatsosi
and then to Segi. We saw numerous caves and cliff
dwellings, visited most but did no digging.

The Tsegi ruins had been seen ten years earlier by
Richard Wetherill and Charles Mason, but Cummings
was the first archaeologist to visit them. The sight of
the great silent city of Keet Seel must have been
absolutely overwhelming, certainly more
spectacular than any ruin he had visited previously.

William Douglass, whose headquarters were at Bluff,
learned of Cummings's explorations and made a re­
port on them to the GLO. Douglass's report was the
basis of President Taft's proclamation of March 20,
1909, creating Navajo National Monument. There
were now two national monuments on the Colorado
Plateau, and Douglass and Cummings were instru­
mental in creating both. There was to be yet one more.

Sometime in 1907 Louisa Wetherill learned of
a great rock arch somewhere in the canyons behind
Navajo Mountain. The One-Eyed Man of the Salt
Clan had just returned from guiding a party of whites
to the recently discovered arches in White Canyon,
probably at the direction of John Wetherill, and he
inquired of Louisa why men would make such a long
journey just to gaze at rocks. Louisa replied that to
her people such things were incredibly beautiful and
that there were no other bridges like these in the
world. The old Navajo scoffed at her lack of knowl­
edge and replied,

They are not the only bridges in the world. We
have a better one in this country. It is in back of
Navajo Mountain. Only a few go there. They do not
know the prayers. They used to go there for cer­
emonies, but the old men who knew the prayers are
gone. I have horses in that country, and I have seen
the Bridge.

This revelation caused quite a stir at Oljato, and John
Wetherill secured a promise from the Salt Clansman
to guide him to the bridge. However, during the win­
ter of 1907-1908 the Navajo discoverer of Rainbow
Bridge died. The Wetherills probably knew most of
the Indians living in the Navajo Mountain region,
and by diligent inquiry they found another guide, the
Navajo singer Hosteen Luka, who said he knew the
way. Early in 1908 they set off for Navajo Mountain
and actually made it as far as Beaver Creek (Cha
Canyon). At that point the guide proved less knowl­
dgeable than advertised and the trail through the
slickrock domes proved impossible to find. After one
of their pack animals tumbled down a steep slope,
scattering their meager supplies, they decided to re­
turn to Oljato and await a better opportunity.

In August, 1908, the Wetherills told Byron
Cummings about the Salt Clansman's tale of the great
arch. With the proviso that a reliable guide be found,
the Dean proposed an expedition for the following
June, when he planned to be back in the area for an­
other season of excavation in Tsegi Canyon. He was
able to finance such an expedition from funds provided by the University of Utah and the Archeological Institute of America, for he had been authorized to not only excavate but to explore the country as well. John Wetherill accompanied Cummings back to Bluff, from whence the Utah party was scheduled to return to Salt Lake City, both men already looking forward to the next season of digs and discovery. It would prove to be a momentous summer.

In the meantime William Douglass had also learned of the bridge. It was during the summer of 1908 while he was engaged in the resurvey of Natural Bridges National Monument that a young Paiute whom he had employed as an axman described a great arch near his home south of the San Juan River. He demonstrated its shape by means of a stick bent so that both ends were stuck into the ground, and he told Douglass that he could guide him to it. Douglass communicated this information to the commissioner of the General Land Office by letter on October 7, 1908. It said, in part:

I have had in my employ a Paiute Indian named “Mike’s Boy.” He informs me that a larger and prettier natural bridge [exists] about 80 or 100 miles west of Bluff. That the bridge is a white sandstone like a rainbow more delicate . . . than the Augusta Bridge. Mike’s Boy says that no white man has ever seen this bridge and that only he and one other Indian know its whereabouts . . . I have secured a promise that nothing be said about it.

This could be investigated by me after disbanding my party . . . and I strongly recommend that such an investigation be made. 42

Douglass received a reply from Washington dated October 20, 1908, authorizing him to undertake the suggested expedition and to segregate the enclosed lands. Douglass was off and running.

He made arrangements with Jim Mike to meet him at Oljato and left Lake City, Colorado, on November 27, 1908, with two chainmen, reaching Bluff on December 2 and Oljato at noon, December 4. Apparently, Douglass intended to hire Wetherill to outfit an expedition to the bridge and use Mike’s Boy as a guide, but several factors conspired to prevent the expedition from ever taking place. First, Mike’s Boy failed to appear at Oljato, and was instead waiting patiently for his boss near Bluff. 43 Second, Wetherill had insufficient livestock and supplies to mount a major exploring expedition, particularly in the winter, and announced that he had no immediate prospect of resupply. The final blow was received on December 8 when Clyde Colville arrived from the south and reported that the trails to the Tsegi ruins and Navajo Mountain were blocked by snow. 44 Clearly, the project would have to be put off until spring.

It also seems that at this time Wetherill and Colville deliberately gave Douglass some misinformation about the bridge. Douglass relates that these men discounted his information about a large stone arch behind Navajo Mountain and insisted that Mike’s Boy was either fabricating a story or simply misinformed. Instead, they reported that the local Indians knew of a large arch in Navajo Canyon. 45 It is obvious that by this time both Wetherill and Colville knew about the bridge and its approximate location, so it is difficult to understand why they misinformed Douglass. Several explanations are possible, among which is that they simply took an instant dislike to him and preferred to have the more agreeable Cummings be the first to see the bridge. Another possibility is that Wetherill himself wished to be the discoverer but in the end found neither the time nor the resources to get there on his own. Either way, this lie and the flow of subsequent events convinced Douglass that he was the source for Cummings’s and Wetherill’s knowledge about the existence of Rainbow Bridge. He went to his grave believing that he alone should be given credit for the discovery.

For Byron Cummings the summer of 1909 would be a momentous one, and he seemed to realize it early on. He finished his teaching and administrative duties in late May, acquired a sabbatical for the fall, and headed for northern Arizona as soon as was practical, this time accompanied by three University of Utah students and his own eleven-year-old son, Malcolm. The party left Salt Lake City by train on Monday, June 7, and arrived in Thompson at 4:30 A.M. the next day. They then took the stage to Moab, where they spent two days waiting for luggage, and then headed south toward Bluff and beyond. They crossed the San Juan on Thursday, June 17, and arrived in Oljato on June 19 itching to begin excavation. 46 The party was outfitted at Wetherill’s trading post and by June 23 they were in the field at Segie-ot-Sosie (Narrow) Canyon in Monument Valley.

One member of the party new to excavation that year was Stuart M. Young, grandson of the Mormon
leader, Brigham Young. Stuart was nineteen at the time and a student of mechanical engineering at the University of Utah when he heard around campus that Byron Cummings was forming a new team to excavate Anasazi ruins in southern Utah and northern Arizona.

"I wanted to go along with the expedition, so I applied as a photographer, a hobby I had practiced for several years. I carried my bulky camera and equipment in a knapsack on my back throughout the trip that summer."47

The presence of a camera on that expedition was to have a lasting consequence. Young's skillful use of the cumbersome machine secured his enduring place in history at Inscription House, Betatakin, Keet Seel, and Rainbow Bridge.

The plan Cummings had formulated was to excavate in Segie-ot-Sosie until mid-July and then mount an expedition to search for that great arch. During the winter of 1908-1909 the Wetherills had located two Paiute Indians, Nasja and his son, Nasja Begay, who lived near Navajo Mountain and who claimed to know the location of the bridge and the trails to it. Old Nasja was too advanced in years to join the expedition himself, but he assured John Wetherill that his son would serve as guide. Cummings was anxious for a look at the mythical stone structure, but his passion for archaeology put his fieldwork ahead of his desire to explore. Meanwhile, William Douglass was in western Colorado surveying the Durango reservoir grant in the Needle Mountains, while Wetherill and Colville were tending to business at their trading post and making trips to Bluff and Gallup. For men supposedly engaged in a "great race" to discover Rainbow Bridge, an exploring party to do just that was not anyone's top priority.

Cummings broke camp in mid-July as scheduled and returned to Oljato. However, instead of making for Navajo Mountain, he and his archaeological expedition headed for Tsegi Canyon and the great stone ruin of Keet Seel. Cummings blames Wetherill for the delay and change of plan, while Wetherill blames Cummings.48 Whatever the reason, the Utah Archaeological Expedition now settled into serious excavation work at a place which had been proclaimed a national monument barely four months previous.

When William Douglass heard about Cummings's work in Navajo National Monument, he turned livid. He fired off a letter from Bluff to Dr. Walter Hough of the U.S. National Museum expressing outrage at the Utahn's presumption:

The expected has happened! I learn here that Prof. Hewett and Prof. Cummings went into the reserved ruins about six weeks ago, and as they have not come out I fear they are excavating.

If any permit whatsoever was issued to them I feel certain it was done under a misunderstanding as to where they intended to work . . . I have just wired and written the General Land Office for authority to stop the work and prevent the removal of any archeological remains.

P.S. Since writing the foregoing I have just seen Mr. Wetherill. He says that the GLO issued a permit to Prof. Hewett . . . He is not in the field now (in California) and Prof. Cummings is doing the work. He has obtained a very remarkable collection and unless stopped it will land in the museum of the University of Utah. 49

The "Prof. Hewett" that Douglass referenced was Edgar Lee Hewett, director of research for the Archaeological Institute of America and one of the country's foremost authorities on southwestern archaeology. He had been with the Cummings party when it left Salt Lake City, and, according to Stuart Young's diary, accompanied the Utah expedition to Oljato and beyond. Young writes that Hewett left Segie-ot-Sosie on June 25 for Gallup and the railroad, but before leaving, Dr. Hewett had undoubtedly set out the plan of research for Cummings and his students and certainly new where the excavations would be carried out. The permits issued by the GLO were valid and, in retrospect, the actions of Douglass in trying to get them cancelled looks to be pure spite.

John Wetherill had been forewarned of Douglass's intentions by means of a letter from Bluff, and he set out immediately for Douglass's headquarters to try to make peace between the two men. His motives are not hard to discern. Guiding both scientific and government expeditions in this remote corner of the West had become an important source of income for Wetherill and Colville, and the last thing they needed was a war between two factions of their customer base. Louisa Wetherill wrote that her husband's efforts were futile, and that he returned to Tsegi Canyon to disclose the bad news to Cummings and his party.50 By prearrangement, Wetherill was to meet Cummings at Keet Seel with the supplies to mount...
an expedition in search of the rock arch, and, as the appointed time had arrived, Wetherill came to the archaeologist's camp ready for the journey. Word had already been sent to Nasja in Paiute Canyon to expect the expedition's imminent arrival and to have his son ready to serve as guide.

Byron Cummings was genuinely shocked that Douglass would go so far as to attempt cancellation of his excavation permits and confiscation of his artifacts. He was certain that this must be the result of a misunderstanding and was determined that a face-to-face meeting was the only solution. The opportunity for such a meeting was actually at hand, for another piece of news Wetherill brought with him to Tsegi was that Douglass was also mounting an expedition in search of the rumored arch and that his party was expected at Oljato in four days. Wetherill was certain that Douglass's guide would be unable to find the trail around Navajo Mountain, and that, in any case, the head start they already had guaranteed them victory in the contest for discovery. He therefore urged Cummings to take the expedition west according to the original plan. However, the Dean would have none of that. As he was later to write:

He [Wetherill] brought with him a letter from a friend of ours in Bluff that a deputy surveyor of the U.S. Government, one W. B. Douglass, was telegraphing back to Washington seeking to get our permit for archeological investigation annulled. We thought this a strange procedure, and, thinking that any government representative would be a reasonable man, we decided to turn back to Oljato and await the arrival of Mr. Douglass to find out if possible what was the trouble.9

Hence, on or about August 8,* over John Wetherill's very vocal objections, the Utah Archaeological

* At this point the chronology as recorded by the eyewitnesses begins to break down. Wetherill gives the date of August 9 for the discovery of Betatakin, which means that the Utah Archaeological Expedition could not have reached Oljato before evening on that date. Stuart Young's diary lists August 11 as the date the expedition set out for
The expected confrontation between Douglass and growing antipathy towards the Dean could not be leaving the area the party had one bit of unfinished business. The Wetherills had heard Navajos in the area tell of a second large Anasazi ruin in the Tsegi, and so John Wetherill got Cummings to pay Clatsozen Benully five dollars to guide them to it. In less than half an hour the party was standing beneath Betatakin. Cummings had discovered Inscription House earlier that summer and was now able to add this magnificent structure to his list of accomplishments.

Cummings very much wanted to confront Douglass over the excavation permit issue, but apparently his patience had a limit. The party determined to wait until the afternoon of August 10 and then set off for Navajo Mountain, Wetherill being uncertain how long Nasja Begay would wait. In his diary entry for that date, Stuart Young writes:

The morning was spent getting things ready, with the idea of starting for Navajo Mountain just after dinner. While we were eating, an Indian came to the window and told us "Pelicano come." It proved to be Douglass and his party. The professor stopped and asked him to come with us, as it was also his intention to find the Bridge. Because of this delay, etc., we did not get started till 5:00 . . . Douglass' party was pretty slow and we were held back all the time by them.

The expected confrontation between Douglass and Cummings over the excavation permit never materialized. By this time Douglass must have realized that he was seriously in the wrong over the issue and probably did not wish to argue a losing case. However, his growing antipathy towards the Dean could not be hidden. Cummings was later to write:

Mr. Douglass was very noncommittal about what he had been doing or trying to do. He was very condescending toward our party, said he was going to find the big arch he had heard about, that his Paiute guide, Mike's Boy, knew the country, had been to the bridge, and that we might go along if we wanted to. A wonderful privilege under the circumstances.

Rainbow Bridge, a clear impossibility if the bridge was reached on August 14. This latter date is one all agree upon, so the expedition must have left Oljato on August 10. Judd states that the party waited two days at Oljato for Douglass, which, if true, means that Cummings must have been at Oljato on August 8 at the latest.

Because of the late start, the first night's camp was only a few miles north of Oljato near Hoskininni Mesa in Monument Valley. On August 11, however, the expedition was up at 4 A.M. and riding at a brisk pace down Copper Canyon toward the San Juan River. The combined parties at this point numbered twelve men. The Utah Archaeological Expedition consisted of Cummings, Young, Neil M. Judd, Donald Beauregard, and Malcolm B. Cummings. The government party was made up of Douglass, John R. English, F. Jean Rogerson, Daniel Perkins, John Keenan, and Mike's Boy. Cummings had hired a Navajo, Dogeye Begay, who was also familiar with the Navajo Mountain country, to assist with the horses and gear, and it was he who rounded out the party.

In Wetherill's day the route down Copper Canyon was a fairly well-used wagon road which led to several mining operations along the San Juan. For about ten miles it wound through western Monument Valley, past Organ Rock and Jacobs Monument before plunging into the narrows between No Mans Mesa and Monitor Butte. At the mouth of the canyon the wagon road followed a bench above the San Juan River west to the mouth of Nokai Canyon. Their second camp was made a short distance up this canyon near some water pockets. It had been a long, hot day in the sand and rock in country totally devoid of water, and, to add inconvenience to misery, they arrived at camp to discover that one of the pack animals had thrown a shoe. No one had thought to bring a shoeing outfit, so Wetherill had to improvise using nails from an old tomato carton.

The next day, August 12, was to be a critical day for the expedition. The route out of Nokai Canyon led to the summit of Paiute Mesa by a steep and precarious trail which hugged the side of the mesa all the way. Judd reports that at several points some of the less experienced pack animals had to be unloaded and led up the trail. Once across Piute Mesa the trail led down into Paiute Canyon and past the green fields and cornstalks of Nasja's farm. The father was at home in his hogan, but his son had tired of waiting and had gone off to the summer pastures with the family's sheep and goats. The old man promised to send for his son immediately and then worked out with John Wetherill a general outline of the route ahead and an expected rendezvous with his son. Hosteen John was certainly familiar with the country up to this point, but from here the route would be
Figure 18: The route of the Cummings-Douglass Expedition from Oljato to Rainbow Bridge is shown. For much of the way the country was largely unexplored and uninhabited.

across trackless slickrock waste about which Wetherill had only a cursory knowledge.

After a lunch of melons and Indian fry-bread the expedition climbed a short, steep incline up a tributary of Piute Canyon and onto the Rainbow Plateau. At this point the expedition was on the north side of Navajo Mountain and heading nearly due west. Had they known where they were going it would have been an easy ride to Bridge Canyon, but this group clearly did not know where it was going. It became apparent early on that neither Mike’s Boy nor Dogeye Begay knew the route ahead. In fact, Dan Perkins, axman and flagman of the Douglass party, states flatly that Mike’s Boy had heard of the bridge but had never seen it. Fortunately, the first few miles across the plateau were relatively easy, and the party headed Deep Creek and Desha Creek, towards evening sliding into camp along the shaded banks of Beaver Creek (Cha Canyon) near where the modern trail to Rainbow Bridge begins. Camp that night must have been an anxious one, as the guide Douglass had hired was clearly out of his element and Nasja Begay was still many miles away. In addition, Douglass’s horses were not used to such rugged country and were already in a bad way. In fact, according to Malcolm Cummings, William Douglass had already concluded there was little point in continuing and was in the mood to turn back. However, the Dean and John Wetherill were not similarly discouraged and expressed their intention to press on and find the arch, if, indeed, such a thing actually existed. Wetherill told Douglass it would take longer to find the arch without a guide, but, with or without Nasja Begay, he intended to continue. To Douglass this sounded like a challenge he was in no mood to decline, but in order to follow Wetherill he knew he would have to make the load lighter for his horses. Consequently, his party jettisoned about half their gear before mounting up the next morning.

The Indian guides were likewise discouraged and resistive. Mike’s Boy told Wetherill that the white men’s ponies could not make it beyond Beaver Creek and that it was useless to continue. Wetherill answered their fears with ridicule and appealed to their pride by threatening to tell their neighbors that their nerve failed them when white men remained steadfast. In the end, the expedition remained intact, but it took all the persuasive skill Wetherill possessed in order to keep it so.

August 13 proved to be exhausting, psychologically devastating, and dangerous. The country was
largely slickrock, domes of Navajo Sandstone which had to be traversed blindly and which often led to steep pitches down which the exhausted horses slid in terror. The largest obstacle in their way was the huge defile known today as Bald Rock Canyon. The modern trail, carved out by the Civilian Conservation Corps in the 1930s, crosses it easily high up near the foot of Navajo Mountain, but for some reason the discovery expedition turned down-canyon and were unable to cross until it widened near the present high-water shoreline of Lake Powell. Once across, the party had little choice but to follow Bald Rock back up-canyon while searching for a way into and across Nasja Creek.

Finally, they located a narrow pass complete with an ancient trail leading down toward the little stream. Called today the Hoskininni Steps, the trail had been pecked into the slickrock, perhaps by the Navajo refugees seeking to avoid Kit Carson's troops. The trail was steep and precarious, however, and two of the horses, now being led riderless, panicked, left the steps, and tumbled their way to the bottom, baggage and all. No permanent damage was done, but the strain was telling on both men and animals. Fortunately, when the creek was reached, the exhausted party found a well-watered basin, called Surprise Valley, which provided good camping and feed for the horses. A halt was called, and the horses were turned loose to rest and graze while the tired and discouraged men stretched out beneath the pinyon and juniper to contemplate their next move.

Judd describes the group that night as "tired and partially disheartened." The August heat beating down on the treeless slickrock was nearly unbearable, the route so far unpredictable and treacherous, and the goal shadowy and elusive. Mike's Boy and Dogeye Begay were now close to asserting that the bridge, for which they had come so far, was a myth. Wetherill and Cummings believed that the great arch truly existed and that it was nearby, but how was it to be found? The canyon maze around them contained a hundred places that might hide the most massive of arches, and it was distinctly possible that they had passed it by already. The way ahead was totally unknown, and, while they had left Oljato well-supplied, they could not stay out in this barren and inhospitable country forever. As the men sat down to a supper of boiled rice, canned corn, Dutch-oven biscuits, and alkali-flavored tea, few of them were convinced there was any point in going further.

What occurred next is one of those unlikely but fortuitous miracles which seem to play such a large role in most discoveries—Nashjaw Begay rode into camp. How he was even able to locate the party in the thick darkness enveloping Surprise Valley is nearly unexplainable, and even more remarkable was his apparent ability to negotiate a tough trail in the gathering twilight. Nevertheless, there he was, as promised, and not a moment too soon. Donald Beauregard, one of the student members of Cummings's party, describes the scene:

It was then (the night of the 13th of August) that Nashjaw Begay, . . . came up through the dark hugging our trail with a perspicaciousness that was long ago patented by the red man. After considerable hemming and bowing and a monotonous series of grunts we were informed that the bridge lay a half-day's ride ahead in a canyon that emptied into the Colorado and that he (Nashjaw Begay) would lead us there and out again for three silver dollars a day.

That meant to us what rain means to wilted sunflowers, and we swung into the saddle next morning all expectation.

Neil Judd relates that as the party broke camp on August 14 some of the men were whistling and spirits were high. There were eight miles of rugged country still ahead, but the party was now certain of its mission; there would be no turning back. The route they followed approximates the modern-day trail, which leads past Owl Bridge west of Nasja Creek, crosses Oak Creek high up near Navajo Mountain, and descends into Bridge Creek by a short, steep tributary on the east side. Cummings named this tributary Red-Bud Pass, unfortunately the same name unwittingly used by Charles Bernheimer for the western route into Bridge Creek which he opened thirteen years later. (This duplication of names has been a source of much confusion among later writers commenting on the discovery.)

With the goal now in sight and the laurels of discovery virtually assured, the mood of William Douglass shifted dramatically. Heretofore pessimistic and reticent, he now began an enthusiastic dash for the bridge that was little short of amazing. In a report to the National Park Service written ten years later Neil Judd recalled,

Throughout the last day's travel Mr. Douglass exhibited the uncontrolled enthusiasm of the amateur explorer and he was so utterly disregardful of possible danger to other members of the party as to
Figure 19: The discovery party descends into Bald Rock Canyon, 1909.
arouse the disgust of all. He seemed to lead the party
and crowded the other riders from the narrow trail
as he repeatedly forced his tired horse to the front.
Mr. Douglass was the only member of the expedi­
tion engaged in this wild race ... 65

Douglass himself confirms his excitement on
that final morning. Writing in his field notes in 1910
he states, "On the morning of the last day's travel we
were told by the Indian guides that the bridge would
be reached by noon, the excitement was intense. A
spirit of rivalry developed between Professor
Cummings and myself as to who would first reach
the bridge."66 Judd states that had Cummings known
that there was a race between himself and Douglass
he would have been the most surprised man in the
world. However, Malcolm Cummings noticed that
once the party reached the bed of Bridge Creek the
pace noticeably quickened. He also notes that the
descent down into Bridge Creek was precipitous and
that the boulder-strewn floor of the canyon was hard
on horses and riders alike. Judd recalls, "... that first
trip through Rainbow Bridge Canyon stands out as
the most trying I have ever experienced."67

William Douglass was setting the pace, deter­
mined to remain in the lead. To this end he rode his
large roan horse mercilessly, keeping his eyes fixed
straight ahead on what appeared to be a large, cave­
like structure on the right. Close behind rode
Cummings, Wetherill, and Nasja Begay, who pointed
ahead and to the left indicating where the bridge
would first come into view. Neil Judd describes the
moment of discovery:

... I urged the brown horse over the crest of a
rounded knoll and saw Professor Cummings some
rods in advance, suddenly draw rein and point down
the canyon. Then Wetherill reached his side; they
stood in silence as others gathered. Of course, I
sensed that Nonnezoshe itself had at last come into
view, and I am sure my rope plied the brown pack
horse more vigorously than was necessary. I caught
my first glimpse of Rainbow Bridge just as Mr.
Douglass joined the silent group on the rim of the
inner gorge. Never shall I forget that moment.68

The viewpoint from which Cummings first
catched sight of Rainbow Bridge was a narrow one,
and the impetuous Douglass had ridden right past it.
His hearing was quite bad, so it took a good deal of
shouting and waving to get him to turn around and
retrace his steps. It was approximately 11 A.M. on Sat­
urday, August 14, 1909.
Both Cummings and Wetherill had dismounted and were leading their horses up the next incline, but Douglass, seemingly intent on reaching the bridge first, remained mounted and spurred his horse ahead. Wetherill, seeing what was about to happen, leaped on his horse and raced Douglass down-canyon. He was by far the better horseman and his mount better suited to the country, so John Wetherill stood alone for a few moments beneath Rainbow Bridge, the first white man to reach it. Douglass and Cummings followed, in that order, to be joined shortly by the others as, one by one, they drifted down the canyon. Last to arrive was young Malcolm, who relates that by the time the others reached the bridge he was too tired to care whether he saw it or not.

Camp was made at the bridge and the horses were turned loose to drink and graze at will. Judd states that most of the animals were now without shoes and their hooves were worn and bleeding. In fact, they were so weary that they did not go in search of grass until late afternoon.

About 3 P.M. Cummings, Judd, and Beauregard decided to hike down Bridge Canyon to the Colorado River, a distance they estimated to be about six miles. Even though they were fatigued from the long journey, they made the trip at a running walk, and by late afternoon reached the river at the mouth of Aztec Creek. Here they found some prehistoric Anasazi structures and pictographs together with a fair amount of debris left behind by prospectors, who had obviously used the good-sized beach for camping. They also found three names written in charcoal on the canyon wall. The return hike was made in twilight and pitch-blackness. The walls of Bridge Canyon closed in to nearly the width of a man’s reach, and the canyon bottom sheltered boulders and deep pools. The party banged knees and shins on the rock and stumbled into the pools, and so it was a bruised, soaked, and weary group that dragged themselves into camp about midnight.

In the meantime Wetherill had found a way to reach the top of the bridge. Douglass states that he
scaled the walls of the cliff, but in all probability Wetherill found an ancient Anasazi pecked trail leading up the sandstone just a short way below the bridge. Once a sufficient height had been reached he contoured along a ledge until he was above the west abutment, from which he could then reach the top of the bridge by letting himself down with a rope.* The route was relatively safe, and the access it afforded enabled the government party to measure the dimensions of the bridge. Douglass relates that two steel measuring tapes with a combined length of 333 feet were lowered off the top of the bridge to the creek bed below, yielding a height of 309 feet. The tapes were then stretched across the canyon from the east abutment to the west, yielding a span of 278 feet. (These measurements stood as official until 1978, when a resurvey showed them to be in error.)

The next morning Cummings and his party reached the top of the bridge by the same route and then began preparations for the return journey. A longer stay would have been desirable, but supplies were running dangerously low and the student members of the expedition needed to return to Salt Lake City and their university studies. Douglass needed another several days to complete the survey of what would become Rainbow Bridge National Monument, and then wished to go on to Tsegi to survey Navajo National Monument. Accordingly, Byron Cummings asked Neil Judd and Dogeye Begay to remain with the government party and guide them south via a

* Many visitors to the bridge followed Wetherill's route until the rising waters of Lake Powell cut off access to the trail.

Figure 22: The discovery expedition at Rainbow Bridge, August, 1909. Back row from left to right: Ned English, Dan Perkings, Jack Keenan, Vern Rogerson, Neil Judd, Don Beauregard. Front Row, left to right: Mike's Boy (Jim Mike), John Wetherill, Byron Cummings, William Douglass, Malcolm Cummings. Not shown: Nasja Begay, Dogeye Begay, Stuart M. Young.
shorter trail around the east flank of Navajo Mountain. The remainder of the Utah Archaeological Expedition left Rainbow Bridge about noon and headed back the way they had come. Their supplies were exhausted within a day, so Cummings and Wetherill took the party back to Nasja’s home in Piute Canyon hoping to purchase supplies. The old Piute had nothing to offer but an aged goat and some ears of green corn. Beauregard states that the goat meat was virtually inedible, but that and some parched corn were all they had for the remainder of the journey.

To add insult to injury the weather turned sour and rain poured down on the beleaguered group most of the way. The tired, hungry, and soaked expedition finally rode into Oljato four days after leaving the bridge.

Douglass and the government party, plus Judd and Dogeye Begay, remained through the next several days tying down the four corners of the proposed national monument. Douglass laid out the boundaries in the shape of a square a half-mile on a side with Rainbow Bridge approximately in the center. The resulting 640-acre plot became the basis for the presidential proclamation of Rainbow Bridge National Monument issued by William Howard Taft on May 30, 1910. It remains to this day exactly as Douglass surveyed it.

Another of Douglass’s accomplishments was selecting a name for the bridge. He seems to have had a penchant for Indian names for southwestern features, as witnessed by his renaming of the three arches at Natural Bridges using Hopi terms, and he wished to do the same thing here. Wetherill had in mind the Navajo term nonnezoshe, which he had heard local Indians use in reference to the bridge. It literally means “lies side by side across” and is the term in Navajo for a log or plank bridge. Douglass believed, perhaps rightly, that the term only applied to artificial bridges and rejected it. He chose instead the Paiute word barahoine, which literally means “rainbow.” In his field notes Douglass called the arch Barahoine (Rainbow) Bridge, but in Taft’s proclamation only the English term was used.

Douglass finished his survey on August 17, and that evening his party ate the last of their supplies, one biscuit and a spoonful of beans per man. On August 18 they broke camp and headed back to the Rainbow Plateau. They retrieved the supplies left behind at Beaver Creek, but even with that larder awaiting them, they still were without food for more than the day it took to reach it. They crossed the upper reaches of Piute Creek, rounded Navajo Mountain, and descended into the Tsegi via Bubbling Springs Canyon. The government party was encamped at Keet Seel by August 21, and Judd and Dan Perkins left for Oljato the following day. The Utah party left Oljato for Salt Lake City on August 24.

Cummings was on sabbatical during the fall quarter and so he stayed in the area until December, continuing his excavations at Betatakin and other sites in the immediate vicinity. Douglass finished his surveys of Navajo National Monument in early September and was back at his headquarters in Cortez by September 11.

Word of the discovery spread quickly. The Montezuma Journal of Cortez carried the story in its morning editions of September 2, as did Moab’s Grand Valley Times. The Deseret News of Salt Lake City carried the report in its evening edition on the same date, and then did a feature article, complete with a photograph, on October 2. Perhaps the most famous report of the newly discovered arch was penned by Byron Cummings in the February, 1910 issue of National Geographic. The bridge which had lain hidden for so long was now known to the whole world.

What did the discoverers think of the great arch which had cost them so much anxious toil to reach? No one from the government party seems to have left any written account of his impression, but the Utah Archaeological Expedition was not so reticent. Neil Judd wrote in 1927,

Nonnezoshe awes one into silence. I don’t know why, but it does. Perhaps one is impressed there, as in other rare corners of the world, with the near presence of the Master Builder... Before such unmistakable evidence of the Supreme Architect one stands as in a temple.  

Stuart M. Young wrote in his journal,

That which has been sought was found. It gives one a feeling of elation to be a member of a party that first beholds such a work of nature. There was excitement and scurrying to reach it. Even the animals seemed to feel that something unusual had occurred... The longer we stood and looked the more

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* The Navajo term for natural bridges is tsé nání'abi (rock extends across) but neither Douglass nor Wetherill seemed to know of this word.
WHEREAS, an extraordinary natural bridge, having an arch which is in form and appearance much like a rainbow, and which is three hundred and nine feet high and two hundred and seventy-eight feet span, is of great scientific interest as an example of eccentric stream erosion, and it appear that the public interest would be promoted by reserving this bridge as National Monument, together with as much land as may be needed for its protection;

NOW, THEREFORE, I, William H. Taft, President of the United States of America, by virtue of Section two of the act of Congress approved June 8, 1906, entitled, "An Act for the Preservation of American Antiquities," do hereby set aside as the Rainbow Bridge National Monument, one surveyed tract of land, embracing said natural bridge, containing one hundred and sixty acres of land, in square form, the southeast corner of which bears from mile post No. 179 of the Utah-Arizona boundary line, north sixty degrees and twenty-five minutes West, seven miles and sixty-seven and eighty-seven one hundredths chains distant, as shown upon the diagram hereto attached and made a part of this proclamation.

Warning is hereby expressly given to all unauthorized persons not to appropriate, injure or destroy any object hereby included in a National Monument, nor to settle upon any of the lands reserved and made a part of said Monument by this proclamation.

IN WITNESS WHEREOF, I have hereunto set my hand and caused the seal of the United States to be affixed.

Done at the city of Washington this thirtieth day of May, in the year of our Lord one thousand nine hundred and ten and the Independence of the United States the one hundred and thirty-fourth.

By the President:

P. C. Knox
Secretary of State
RAINBOW BRIDGE
NATIONAL MONUMENT
UTAH

Embracing 160 acres of land in square form, the south east corner of which bears from 179th mile corner on the Utah and Arizona boundary, N. 60°25'13"W. 7 miles 67.87 chs. distant,

Figure 24: The map accompanying the proclamation establishing the boundaries of the national monument. It remains today just as Douglass surveyed it in 1909-1910

DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR
GENERAL LAND OFFICE
Fred Dennett, Commissioner
we realized how weak and frail a thing man is. That night we made our campfire beneath it.\textsuperscript{79}

Byron Cummings wrote in a memoir published in 1952, "We were all overwhelmed at the sight of this mighty towering arch that stretches its graceful curving sides across the canyon... Even then its towering arch is dwarfed by the bare sandstone cliffs that rise far above it on every side. The wealth of color reflected from the cliffs and the deep shadows of the gorges make you feel you are in some giant paradise of long ago...\textsuperscript{80}

The regard these men had for the great arch is also attested by the number of return visits they made. Byron Cummings was back at the bridge in July, 1919, on August 3, 1920, and again in 1936. Neil Judd returned in 1923 and again in 1966, this last trip by boat on Lake Powell. William Douglass returned in the summer of 1910 for further survey work, but there is no evidence that he ever visited the bridge just for the pure pleasure of seeing it again.

So, who should get credit for the discovery of Rainbow Bridge? The opinion of most of the members of the discovery expedition was summed up nicely by Byron Cummings:

"I was the first white man to see the Rainbow Bridge and John Wetherill was the first white man to pass under this great arch. Its real discoverers were the two Paiute Indians, Noscha and Noscha Begay.\textsuperscript{81}

The significant role played by Nasja Begay in leading the expedition to the bridge is attested by almost everyone who wrote about the discovery. Wetherill wrote that "the real credit belongs to the Paiute Nasja Begay, without whose knowledge of the trail the bridge would probably not have been discovered for some years to come.\textsuperscript{85}

Only William B. Douglass refused to join in the chorus of praise for Nasja. In his field notes he
wrote, "To Jim [Mike's Boy] is due the credit of bringing to the world the first knowledge of this remarkable monument; to the General Land Office belongs the credit for the discovery to civilization and preservation as a National Monument." No other testimony for the significance of Jim Mike's contribution can be found, however. Stuart M. Young wrote, "Douglass, with his Indian guide, stood small chance of finding it." Wetherill was more blunt: "I do not feel that Jim is entitled to any credit whatsoever."

The fact is that Douglass was totally convinced that credit for the discovery of Rainbow Bridge belonged to himself and to his guide, and he continued to assert his prerogative at every opportunity throughout his life. In 1916 Herbert E. Gregory had written a footnote on page 45 of the U.S.G.S. Water Supply Paper No. 380 stating that Wetherill had gotten his information on the existence of Rainbow Bridge from a "Paiute herdsman." Douglass, on seeing the note in its published form, immediately fired off a letter to the secretary of the interior complaining,

"Douglass, on seeing the note in its published form, immediately fired off a letter to the secretary of the interior complaining, "Certain persons are trying to deprive the Interior Department and the General Land Office of the credit for the discovery of the world's greatest natural bridge, now the Rainbow Bridge National Monument... Professor Gregory was misinformed as to where Mr. Wetherill got his information. He received it from me in 1908, when in November of that year I stopped at his house at Oljato, Utah..."

A year later he wrote to the National Park Service his own version of the discovery expedition, in which he stated, "They planned to beat me to it but failed, as I reached it before Cummings. I made no effort to get in front of Wetherill any more than I did to get in front of the Indians. However, it never occurred to me that Cummings would attempt to take credit for the bridge."

Cummings continued to assert the prerogatives of himself and the Utah Archaeological Expedition but in a much more low-key and less obnoxious manner than Douglass. Judd, on the other hand, could be quite blunt in defense of his leader and friend. He described Douglass's continued assertions as a "pretty squabble" and asserted that Cummings had not and would not stoop to engage in it.

In all fairness to Douglass, however, the information he was given on the fateful November night in 1908 led him to believe that, previous to his conversation with Wetherill at Oljato, the bridge was unknown to almost everyone except himself and Jim Mike. He was given to understand that the Wetherill-Cummings Expedition to the bridge was derived from his own, using information that he had willingly divulged, and that credit for the discovery properly belonged, therefore, with himself and the General Land Office. Apparently Wetherill never disabused him of this wrong impression, so Douglass went through life believing himself to be totally in the right. The Utah party likewise did not understand the origin of Douglass's mistaken impression and therefore considered him an egotist and a self-serving blowhard.

It is harder to explain Douglass's championing of Jim Mike as guide in the face of clear and convincing evidence that he had little to do with the discovery of Rainbow Bridge, and still harder to explain Douglass's hostility toward Byron Cummings. Douglass blamed Cummings for trying to deprive him of credit for discovering the bridge, for prematurely divulging information about the GLO survey of the bridge, for trying to deprive the government of important artifacts from Navajo National Monument, and even for problems he encountered in recruiting workers for his survey crew. His reports to the GLO failed to mention the Dean's contributions to the establishment of Natural Bridges National Monument or the assistance he gave in supplies and men to the survey of Rainbow Bridge National Monument. As has been shown earlier, this apparent antipathy stretched back at least a year before the two men had even met. Cummings himself was mystified by Douglass's attitude, later writing, "We tried to aid Mr. Douglass in every way possible, telling him of ruins—Inscription House, Kitsil, and Betatakin—which we had previously discovered, and persuaded one of the students, Mr. Neil M. Judd, to stay back with Mr. Douglass' party..."

As has been shown, the members of the Utah Archaeological Expedition were perfectly willing to acknowledge their Indian guide, Nasja Begay, as the man responsible for the success of their expedition and the real discoverer of Rainbow Bridge. The times being what they were, however, Douglass and Cummings got all the publicity and were naturally reckoned as the discoverers. That was to change, however, and in a most dramatic fashion.

Around 1920 Mr. Raymond Armsby of Burlingame, California, rode to the bridge as a paying customer of John Wetherill and heard from him the story of the discovery and Nasja Begay's impor-
tant role in it. Mr. Armsby decided that the young Paiute had not received sufficient credit nor publicity for his contribution, so on his own initiative he
began to pester the Park Service about erecting a plaque commemorating and explaining Nasja Begay's part in leading the white explorers to the bridge. He
even offered to donate the plaque, but this was one of those matters which had to go through the proper bureaucratic channels. Once permission was obtained
from the highest level of the Park Service administration, Mr. Armsby commissioned Jo Mora to design the plaque, had it cast in bronze, and shipped it
to Flagstaff via the railroad. By this time transportation to the Navajo Mountain area was much advanced from earlier years and so the plaque could be hauled
by truck to Ben Wetherill's new trading post on the east side of Navajo Mountain. Getting it the rest of the way was a problem, as the plaque was too large and
heavy to carry on a pack mule. John Wetherill solved the problem by designing an old-fashioned travois, essentially a platform between two poles,
which could then be pulled behind a horse or mule. The plaque was placed on the platform and then basically dragged about twenty miles by a mule named
Phoebe. Mr. Billy Keir was the stone mason who set the plaque in its present location in the national monument. It required a full day to put in place and
was secured to the canyon wall by expansion bolts and concrete. It was dedicated on September 2, 1927, at a ceremony attended by sixteen invited guests, in­
cluding John and Louisa Wetherill and Frank Pinkley, National Parks superintendent of the southwestern monuments. Unfortunately, Nasja Begay could not
be in attendance. He and nearly his entire family died in a flu epidemic which swept the Navajo Reservation in 1919. His only surviving child, a son, died in a
similar epidemic in 1921.

In the meantime, however, Jim Mike also was to have his partisans. Douglass continued to tell his version of the story until his death in 1947, but others
soon became interested in the case. Clarence Rogers of Blanding, Utah, became acquainted with Jim Mike, who was now living at White Mesa not far to the
south, and took up his case. No one in the Utah media seemed particularly interested, but Zeke Scher of the Denver Post became involved, and soon the Park
Service was persuaded to honor Jim Mike as well. In a 1974 ceremony at the bridge, Secretary of the Interior Rogers C. B. Morton presented Jim, now 101 years
old, with a blanket, fifty dollars in back pay, and a

citation. A temporary marker was later installed, and on July 4, 1984, a permanent plaque was set up. Sometime after the erection of the temporary monu­
ment, someone tore down Nasja Begay's plaque and dumped it into Lake Powell, but it was recovered and subsequently restored to its former location. Hence,
today Nasja Begay and Jim Mike, who died at White Mesa, Utah, on October 1, 1977, are together honored at the bridge in the same manner as they rode
down the trail, side by side, that fateful August day so many years before.*

Several members of the discovery expedition went on to distinguished and noteworthy careers. William Boone Douglass continued to do survey
work and exploration in the Southwest. His name is associated with Bandolier National Monument, Pajarito Park, and the Jemez Mountains, and by 1921 he was
appointed U.S. cadastral engineer with headquarters in Santa Fe. He became an important force in the National Parks Association in its attempts to get new
national parks and monuments established in the Southwest. In 1923 he retired from the Interior Department and set up a legal practice in Washington,
D.C., specializing in patent law. He died on July 7, 1947, at the home of his daughter, Jesse, in Sullivan's Island, South Carolina. He was eighty-three.

The year after his discovery of Rainbow Bridge, Byron Cummings traveled to Germany and did postgraduate work in archaeology at the University of
Berlin. He returned to the University of Utah in 1911 and continued to do excavations in Tsegi, Navajo Mountain, and the Lukachukai Mountains. In 1915
he was recruited by the University of Arizona to set up their new department of archaeology and to head the Arizona State Museum. In his professional caPa­
cy he continued to do extensive research and excavations. He is responsible for the first unearthing of Archaic remains in southern Arizona when, at
Double Adobe near Tucson, he found grinding stones

* The plaque honoring Jim Mike was much smaller than the one honoring Nasja Begay, and so in the 1980s Jerry Jones of the Navajo Generating Station at Page prevailed
upon officials of the Salt River Project to donate $6,000 to cast a more appropriate memorial. The new plaque was delivered to the National Park Service but was stored and
forgotten until late in 1996, when it was found in a packing crate in the basement of the Glen Canyon visitors' center. In July, 1997, this plaque was mounted next to the
Nasja Begay memorial at Rainbow Bridge and dedicated on September 30, 1997. The smaller plaque was removed and given to Jim Mike's descendants.92
in a layer below elephant bones. In 1924 at the request of the National Geographic Society he excavated in Mexico at Cuicuilco, uncovering a pyramid which was at that time the oldest monumental structure found in the Americas. He wrote three books, thirty-five articles, and, in 1935, established Kiva, the journal of the Arizona Archaeological and Historical Society. He retired from university life in 1938 after having twice (in 1921 and 1927) been named interim president of the University of Arizona. He died in Tucson on May 21, 1954, at the age of ninety-three.

Neil M. Judd followed in the footsteps of his friend and mentor and became a distinguished archaeologist in his own right. From 1919 to 1929 he was curator of American archaeology for the U.S. National Museum, serving as that institution’s head curator from 1930 to 1949. He was field director for various archaeological expeditions for the Smithsonian, and from 1921 to 1927 he directed the National Geographic Society’s excavations at Chaco Canyon. He was a fellow of the American Association for the Advancement of Science and, in 1939, one of its vice-presidents. He died in Washington, D.C., on December 19, 1976, age eighty-nine.

Stuart M. Young graduated from the University of Utah and worked as a mining engineer in Utah for several years. In 1925 he moved to California and was named manager of a J.C. Penny’s store in Los Banos. He continued with the Penny’s company until 1939 when he moved to Chowchilla and opened his own department store. He died there in 1972 at the age of eighty-two.

John and Louisa Wetherill continued to operate their trading post at Oljato for one more year, with John still guiding and outfitting scientific expeditions, government parties, and private individuals into the canyons and ruins of the Rainbow Plateau. With the discovery of Rainbow Bridge his notoriety increased and he then got the added business of guiding tourist parties to the bridge. In 1920 word was received that the government intended to build a new school south of Oljato at a place known as Todenasty (Where the Water Runs Like Fingers out of a Hill), so the Wetherills decided to move their business to what they were sure would be a major meeting ground for the local Navajo. John renamed the place Kayenta, and here the Wetherills remained for more than a decade. In 1924 they sold the Kayenta business and purchased a guest ranch on the Arizona-Mexico border, from which they conducted tours into the surrounding country. John died in November, 1944, and Louisa followed him in September, 1945. They are buried in the desert somewhere above Kayenta.

Hoskininni, perhaps the man most responsible for planting and preserving the sacred character of Rainbow Bridge in the collective mind of his people, died on October 30, 1909, a scant two months after Rainbow Bridge was revealed to the white man. While returning to Oljato from Tsegi, Douglass and Wetherill could see the smoke rising from his burning hogan, a Navajo custom marking the passing of one of the last of the great traditional elders.

Was Byron Cummings really the first white man to see Rainbow Bridge? Perhaps because of the miners’ debris at the mouth of Aztec Creek and the names written there in charcoal on the canyon wall, the Dean himself had doubts. Accordingly, he consulted the one man who he was sure would know, Cass Hite, then living at his homestead on Ticaboo Creek at the head of Glen Canyon. Why would Hite be the man to ask? Aside from living and exploring in Glen Canyon longer than anyone else, he also ran the post office at Dandy Crossing and had, therefore, talked with just about every prospector who entered and left the canyon. A feature as large and magnificent as Rainbow Bridge would not likely escape his knowing. On being asked about the bridge by Cummings he made the following statement:

The bridge found near Navajo Mountain is located in about the only spot in the region that I did not explore or prospect. No, I don’t think any white man ever saw it until your party did.  

Don Beauregard noted only a month after returning to Salt Lake City, “No sign of any previous visit by white men was visible nor probable.” This undoubtedly meant no graffiti, campfire circles, or sign of shod horses. The Dean and his people were satisfied, as were most historians for a generation.

In subsequent years three white men stepped forward with claims of prior visitation. One of these was Joe Lee, grandson of John D. Lee, who claims that as a seven-year-old he went with Nasja into the Navajo Mountain country during the winter of 1880–1881. When the snow came the Indians moved their livestock down into the canyon, and Lee states that their main camp was pitched in a great cave next to the natural bridge. The stock was allowed to spread into the tributary canyons and on down to the Colorado, while the main party stayed in Bridge Canyon.
Figure 26: Chief Hoskininni at Oljato, 1909. He was the man most responsible for preserving and fostering the spiritual view of Rainbow Bridge among his people.
In addition, Bridge Creek has only one short tributary below the bridge before joining Aztec Creek, and the latter is impassable to cattle and horses only a short distance above the junction. Hence, there were no places for the livestock to "spread." The beach at the mouth of Aztec Creek could have supported a few animals for a short time, but certainly not for an entire winter. Several months in this area would most certainly have meant starvation for the livestock. Second, a family living through the cold, dark months of winter in the great alcove at Echo Camp would have needed a great deal of wood for warmth and cooking, and wood here is in short supply. Also, the ashes from their fires would have remained in the protected alcove for a long time, but such obvious evidence of occupation escaped notice by the discovery party and all subsequent archaeological digs. Finally, a herd of stock could not get into Bridge Creek from Navajo Mountain without a trail. There was no trail in 1909, and both Neil Judd and Malcolm Cummings testify as to the difficulty of leading a single horse into the canyon.

The second claimant to priority was William Franklyn Williams, prospector and miner, who, in a statement given to his sister in 1929, claimed to have been to the bridge twice. The first time was on November 20, 1884, in the company of his father, J. Patterson Williams, and of Chief Hoskininni, who guided them to the bridge. The second visit was on February 15, 1885, when William's brother, Ben, was also along. The statement claims that on both occasions entrance was made into Bridge Creek via Cliff Canyon, which means the Williamses must have crossed over Redbud Pass decades before Bernheimer and Wetherill had dynamited a passage wide enough for pack animals. The statement also claims that on both occasions William observed a number of names carved into the base of the bridge on the freestanding end plus several more names written in charcoal on the canyon walls.

The final claimant was James W. Black, who gave his statement in 1930 reporting visits to the bridge in 1890–1891 and 1894–1895. His route was likewise down Cliff Canyon and over Redbud Pass, and he, like Williams, recalls numerous (about thirty) names cut into the arch and written on the canyon walls. The oldest inscription he remembered was W. E. Mitchell (1861). He also claims to have named Aztec Creek.

Both statements were undoubtedly made sincerely and honestly, but there are numerous instances in which strain credulity. With respect to Redbud Pass, both men claim to have negotiated it easily on horseback, Williams going so far as to state, "We had absolutely no difficulty getting through there." Bernheimer, at the same place in 1922 states:

Trail-making down this slit was impossible . . . Wetherill planned and directed the tedious hand-drilling and blasting . . . One of the rock wedges to the left had to be blown up as well as part of another, and the dislodged masses plunged down to fill a deep and wide-gaping hole.

All that effort yielded a passage barely negotiable to the pack animals. When the Richardsons tried to make the passage into a safe and efficient tourist trail a few years later they required $10,000 in dynamite. Today, barely thirty years after commercial horseback parties ceased using the route, the trail is no longer passable to horses and barely so to hikers. That Williams and Black in the late 1880s simply rode through the pass with no difficulty is scarcely believable.

Black claims to have ridden out via the east "trail," pioneered decades later by the Cummings-Douglas Expedition. He states that it was "a real good trail that had been used by the Indians for years and years." The topography of the area is such that the Cummings-Douglas route is the only logical entrance to Bridge Creek from the east. There was no trail there in 1909, and it is impossible to believe that a well-worn trail in that arid country could simply disappear completely in the space of less than twenty years.

Williams claims to have been guided to the bridge by Hoskininni himself, but it is scarcely likely that the spiritual leader of his people would take two white men to a place he would visit himself only to pray. Black claims to have heard of the bridge from Mormons in Bluff who had been told about it by the Utes, but if the bridge were that well-known Wetherill, who traveled frequently to Bluff and had many friends there, would have surely found out about it long before 1907–1908. Black also claims to have discussed the bridge with Cass Hite, who, he says, saw the bridge years before settling in Glen Canyon. Yet, as has been shown, Hite told Cummings that he had never visited the area and knew of no one who had seen Rainbow Bridge prior to 1909.
The inscriptions present a special problem. There were no inscriptions there in 1909 and no trace of any prior to 1909 has ever been found. In addition, the hostility between Douglass and Cummings virtually guarantees that there was no collusion between the leaders to erode evidence of previous visitation. In fact, when Stuart M. Young began carving a visitation record in the rocks beneath the bridge to commemorate the discovery, he was severely upbraided by Douglass for vandalism in a future national monument. In any case, Black remembers seeing the Williams's names (or initials) carved in the bridge, but William Franklyn Williams states, "We did not cut our names on the base of the Bridge." Williams remembers seeing James Black's name on the bridge, but Williams was at the bridge years before Black and never claims to have been there afterward.

The foregoing is not meant to imply that either man was lying or that neither man ever visited Rainbow Bridge. It does imply, however, that these statements are insufficient to establish conclusively that any white man was at the bridge prior to Cummings and Douglass. It must be remembered that both Black and Williams gave their statements years after the fact and that time does strange things to memory. In addition, both men were in that country years before any maps were available, and it would certainly be easy to be confused on matters of geography, especially in such wild and lonely country.

Stephen C. Jett postulates two more visitors to the bridge prior to the 1909 discovery expedition—John and Louisa Wetherill. It is Jett’s hypothesis that they visited the bridge in 1907 or 1908, guided there by either the Blind Salt Clanman or Nasja Begay. According to Jett, this would explain how Wetherill was able to lead the 1909 expedition so unerringly through the slickrock to Surprise Valley without the benefit of any guide. If true this would mean that the 1909 expedition was simply a masquerade, a put-up job stage-managed by Wetherill to give credit for the discovery to Byron Cummings. Jett has no real evidence for such speculation, and it is difficult to understand why Wetherill would even wish to do such a thing. There would certainly have to have been a conspiracy of silence between John, Louisa, Clyde Colville, and Nasja Begay to have pulled it off, and such conspiracies are notoriously difficult to maintain.

A subsequent researcher, Christopher G. Johnson, adopts Jett’s hypothesis and carries it one step further. He concludes that not only was Wetherill at the bridge prior to 1909 but that he eradicated the names and inscriptions carved there by previous visitors. Both Jett and Johnson accept the testimony of Williams and Black at face value, and so the problem of the inscriptions becomes critical. Jett offers no explanation as to what happened to them, but Johnson offers several possible scenarios, concluding that Wetherill was the most likely agent of their obliteration. One thing is certain nearly beyond question—the discovery party of 1909 found no inscriptions, no evidence of previous visitation, and obliterated nothing. The leaders of the expedition were not sufficiently close to hatch a conspiracy of such magnitude, and their subsequent lives reveal a depth of integrity and strength of character which would make such scheming highly unlikely.

Fortunately, the members of the discovery party had the opportunity to directly confront that very accusation. In 1925 the Los Angeles Examiner noted stories then circulating about names carved on the bridge and accused the discovery party of erasing them. Neil Judd responded angrily,

The story is an utter lie. There were no names on Nonnezoshe before August 14, 1909; every name carved since has been removed by John Wetherill in his duty as government custodian of a National Monument.

Wetherill actually admitted to erasing names carved into the rock of the national monument, but only in his official capacity. In a letter to National Parks superintendent Stephen Mather he wrote,

The names erased were put on the rock by Zane Gray, and David Robinson. I removed them to keep from having to report them. I notified both parties later that I had done so. Gray’s name was put on May 13, 1913, and Robinson’s in 1916.

The method he used to erase the names, probably using another stone to simply wear the names away, left tell-tale marks which were noted by subsequent visitors and probably led to the supposition that the obliterated names were very old inscriptions.

The scenario that Johnson imagines would have Wetherill riding down to the bridge, noting the dozens of inscriptions, and then, by using tools such as a chisel and hammer (items not normally carried on a horseback trip), removing the names not only from the bridge but also from surrounding rocks and the canyon walls themselves. He must have been very
thorough in his work, leaving not a single inscription anywhere, and he did it in such a way that the results of his effort were forever undetectable. He cleaned up the area, removing all traces of campfires, trails, and even evidence of his own presence, and then rode back out of the canyon, returning the next year with Cummings and Douglass to view an absolutely pristine Rainbow Bridge. The problem with such a scenario is that not only is it extremely unlikely but Johnson offers not one single shred of evidence that any of it actually took place.

So, who should be given credit for the discovery of Rainbow Bridge? In view of the lack of any reliable evidence to the contrary, priority certainly belongs to the Cummings-Douglass Expedition. Even if one accepts the testimonies of Lee, Williams, and Black at face value, their stories did not become known outside their own families for many years after 1909 and were certainly unknown to Wetherill and other members of that expedition. By taking to the trail, Cummings and Douglass, under the leadership of Nasja Begay, ventured into uncharted territory and found an arch whose very existence was mere speculation and rumor. They made known to the outside what has proven to be the world's largest natural bridge, and were responsible as well for its preservation as a national monument. By any measure, then, they discovered Rainbow Bridge, even if it might be shown sometime in the future that they were not the first to see it. The names of Nasja, Cummings, and Douglass will, therefore, be forever associated with the bridge they found and thus serve for us today as examples of courage, character, and love of adventure. All subsequent generations remain in their debt.