Hell Or High Water
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Published by Utah State University Press

Adams, Eilean.  
Hell Or High Water: James White's Disputed Passage through Grand Canyon, 1867.  
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CHAPTER II  MAJOR POWELL

The second army officer with whom James White’s life would become inextricably linked was Major John Wesley Powell. In a strange series of interwoven coincidences, White and Powell each played a role in the exploration of the American West, but only one of them emerged with glory and made it into the history books.

Powell was the son of a well-educated English emigrant, a Methodist-Episcopal preacher who named his firstborn John Wesley as a rather broad hint that he was expected to walk in his father’s footsteps. He received a good education at home and at whatever frontier schools presented themselves during the family’s frequent moves.

As the time approached for college, it became clear that young Wes preferred science to religion; when he declined to follow the religious path, he found himself financially on his own. He taught in several different schools and broadened his education in the natural sciences through reading. With his brother-in-law’s assistance, he finally entered Wheaton College and later Oberlin. When the Civil War erupted, he enlisted as a private but was soon promoted to lieutenant, largely because of his education; at Shiloh he lost his right arm to a miníé ball and, after a long recuperation, returned as a captain of artillery and was honorably discharged as a major in September of 1864.
The Powell family had followed the Erie Canal immigration trail during the same years that the White family had lived in Rome, New York. Powell was born in nearby Castile, and both men in their youth resided in the same corner of Wisconsin in the 1840s, another set of coincidences. They could not, however, have been further apart in every other way.

By November of 1866, Major Powell was a professor at Illinois Normal University and the secretary of the Illinois Natural History Society. He was selected by both Normal and Wesleyan Universities to lobby the Illinois legislature on behalf of the society for funding for a natural history museum. He went to Springfield on three occasions that winter, and in his final proposal, he told the legislators,

> In order that the Society may carry out its purposes, it should have a general commissioner and curator, who can give his whole time to the work of the society; and whose duty it would be to superintend the researches and collections, take charge of the museum, carry on the exchanges, and make the distributions.

By February 26, 1867, the state’s house and senate had passed a bill incorporating Powell’s exact words; on March 26, 1867, Professor Powell was appointed curator of the new museum by the Illinois Board of Education.

Powell now turned his attention to a natural history expedition into the Rocky Mountains, which he had organized and set for that summer. Between March and June, he went hunting for the necessary funds: to Washington to obtain rations and an army escort through the good offices of his old commander, General Grant; to the various railroads for free transportation for his group and his expected specimens; to the Smithsonian for the loan of a few of their scientific instruments; and to several scientific institutions for additional support, preferably cash.

By October 1867, Powell had successfully completed his field trip along the front range of the Rockies. He had climbed Pike’s Peak, proving conclusively that the amputation of his right arm was no impediment to physical achievement. His guides were Jack Sumner, O. G. Howland, Billy Hawkins, and Bill Dunn, all experienced men and all shortly to become well-known names in Colorado River and Grand Canyon history.
Powell’s original plan for this summer of 1867 had included travel through the Dakotas. He had been promised a military escort from Fort Laramie through the Badlands, but General Sherman advised against stirring up the Sioux and recommended the southern route into the Rocky Mountains instead. Any disappointment Powell might have felt about this change soon vanished; he was fast becoming enchanted with this part of the country and its splendid possibilities.

The success of this trip encouraged him to make more ambitious plans for the following summer. In organizing this first trip, he had learned several lessons, especially about getting support for an expedition. In short he had learned the value of lobbying.

William Byers, editor of the Rocky Mountain News, had earlier proposed that Powell use his brother-in-law, Jack Sumner, as a guide and thus had both a personal and professional interest in the major’s activities. When, in a lecture on November 4, 1867, Powell announced his next summer’s goal was the Grand River, Byers’s newspaper published the major’s plans in its November 6, 1867, issue. Powell’s biographer records that “Powell spent the winter of 1867–1868 making preparations for a more ambitious expedition to culminate in a passage of the Grand River to its junction with the Colorado.”

In March 1868, Powell traveled to Washington to ask General Grant for army rations but for an expedition to a new destination. Grant told him to put his request in writing, and on April 2, 1868, Powell wrote him the following letter:

GENERAL: A party of naturalists, under the auspices of the State Normal University of Illinois, wish to make a scientific survey of the Colorado River of the West. This work is to be a continuation of work done last year in north, middle, and south parks.

It is hoped that a survey of that river can be made from its source to the point where the survey made by Lieutenant Ives was stopped.

In addition to the general scientific survey a topographical survey of the region visited will be made. The services of two civil engineers have been secured for this purpose.

I most respectfully request that the proper officers be instructed to issue rations to this party to consist of not more than twenty-five persons.

I need not urge upon your attention the importance of the general scientific survey to the increase of knowledge. It
is believed that the grand cañon of the Colorado will give
the best geological section on the continent.

Nor is it necessary to plead the value to the War
Department of a topographical survey of that wonderful
region, inhabited as it is by powerful tribes of Indians, that
will doubtless become hostile as the prospector and the
pioneer encroach upon their hunting grounds.

You will also observe that the aid asked of the
Government is trivial in comparison with what such expen-
ditions have usually cost it. The usual appropriation for
such an exploration has been many thousands of dollars.

Invoking your favorable consideration of this request,
I am, with great respect, your obedient servant[.]

This letter reveals Powell’s new plan. He does not indicate why
his goal has changed from “passage to the Grand River to its junction
with the Colorado” to “a scientific survey of the Colorado River from
its source to the point where the survey made by Lieutenant Ives sur-
vey was stopped”—in other words, the Grand Canyon.

As in so many similar instances, Major Powell left no written
record which specifically revealed his knowledge of Parry’s report, but
there is evidence to indicate that the major was well aware of White
and his journey when he wrote his letter to General Grant. Parry’s
report, dated January 6, 1868, was presented by Dr. George Engleman
on February 17, 1868, at a meeting of the organization variously
referred to as the St. Louis Academy of Science, the St. Louis Academy
of Natural Science, and the Academy of Science of St. Louis. St. Louis
is about two hundred miles from Powell’s home in Normal, Illinois;
the St. Louis Academy of Science is a next-door neighbor to the
Illinois Natural Science Society. Professor Powell, as secretary of the
society and also curator of its museum, was, in his own words, charged
with the responsibility to “carry on the exchanges,” which must have
included fellow institutions.

Given Powell’s compelling interest in the subject, it is more log-
ical to give him credit for knowing about Parry’s report than insult
him by assuming that he remained ignorant of it. Also his activities in
the immediate wake of the report certainly seem to confirm such
knowledge.

Once the April 1868 letter to General Grant had been written,
Powell dusted off his lobbying skills and proceeded to line up support
from his Illinois congressional members, Rep. Shelby Cullom and Sen. Lyman Trumbull, to obtain the required legislative approval for federal assistance. On April 15, Cullom introduced House Resolution 251, which called for the authorization by the secretary of war to furnish supplies for Powell’s endeavor. The House, sitting as a Committee of the Whole, passed the resolution and sent it on to the Senate. There was, however, a delay of nearly six weeks during which the Senate conducted its momentous impeachment trial of President Andrew Johnson. At the end of the trial, this exhausted body took a nine-day breather before resuming more mundane deliberations. In the meantime, the usual behind-the-scenes activity led to the enlistment of new supporters. One of them was Representative Garfield, whom the sponsors hoped might put in a good word with his Ohio colleague, Senator Sherman, a member of the all-important Senate Appropriations Committee.

The Powell resolution came to the Senate floor on May 25. The *Congressional Globe*, forerunner of the *Congressional Record*, covered the proceedings. For some reason, it was Senator Wilson of Massachusetts who introduced HR 251. Vermont Senator Edmunds immediately interrupted to ask who Professor Powell was, and Wilson supplied a brief sketch but admitted to being personally unacquainted with Powell. Edmunds went on to object at length to the expenditure of government funds for an apparently private expedition but finally said, “I turn it over to my friend from Ohio, who knows whether we can afford it.”

Senator Sherman, Edmunds’s friend from Ohio, obliged by bemoaning the expense, in general, of government-funded surveys and explorations in the West and then stated, “The eastern division of the Pacific railroad, as it is called, is now engaged in exploring its route under a very competent man, General Palmer, from Santa Fe or Albuquerque, westward. These surveys cannot be of any service to it.”

Senator Trumbull of Illinois now rose for the first time and, without referring to Sherman’s statement, began to describe Professor Powell and his 1867 explorations in Colorado. His final words led to the following interesting exchange:

**MR. TRUMBULL (Illinois):** He [Professor Powell] proposes this year to survey the Colorado River. The Colorado River, as laid down upon our maps, for some six or seven hundred miles has never been seen by a civilized man.
MR. SHERMAN (Ohio): It was run recently, during the last fall, I believe, by three men to escape the Indians and one of them got through alive.

MR. TRUMBULL: The whole distance?

MR. SHERMAN: Yes, to the Great Cañon.

MR. TRUMBULL: I was not aware of it. Is that authenticated?

MR. SHERMAN: Yes, the man lives. He went in at one end and came through at the other.

Trumbull made no further response and resumed his dissertation on Powell as though Sherman had never interrupted. This strongly suggests that Trumbull may well have been hearing about these “three men” for the first time.

But while Trumbull remained silent on the subject, his ally from California promptly emphasized the point:

MR. CONNESS (California): I had some conversation with General Palmer on the subject and he furnished me with an article contributed to a magazine, giving an account of what is known of the Colorado river, of the upper part of it, and also an account of the progress of the three men spoken of through a portion of the cañon of the river.

Since this information had reached Sherman and Conness, it seems certain that Powell knew it as well, which makes Trumbull’s apparent ignorance of the report somewhat puzzling.

After a sharp exchange between Senators Conness and Howe, Trumbull rather brusquely interrupted to state that he had “communications which will explain very fully this whole transaction if Senators will pay attention.” He then read into the record Powell’s letter to Grant with the General’s endorsement; the report of the commissary general, subsistance, to the secretary of war; and a letter from Professor Henry of the Smithsonian Institution. The debate ended with the usual fiscal concerns. In this regard, it is tempting to speculate that the references to General Palmer and “the progress of the three men . . . through a portion of the cañon of the river” may have helped reassure the penny-pinchers in that august body that they were not risking taxpayers’ money on a first-time, hopelessly dangerous, or even impossible project. At any rate, with twenty-five “Yea’s,” including Trumbull, Conness,
and Wilson, seven “Nays” including the redoubtable Sherman, and twenty-two absent, the senators voted Powell his assistance. Powell later rewarded Trumbull by naming a mountain after him.

In August 1868, Powell was back in Middle Park in the Colorado Rockies, where he met Samuel Bowles, later the author of two books about his travels in the West: *The Switzerland of America* and *Our New West*. Bowles describes the major’s upcoming expedition and James White’s 1867 journey in almost the same breath. He refers to White’s trip as “a fact that calls keenly for further exploration and description” and then mentions Powell’s long-range plans. Curiously, however, Bowles comments, “before even this experience was known, Professor Powell . . . had secured government assistance in a personal plan for exploring the Parks and Mountains of Colorado, and then going down the Canyon of the Colorado.” Bowles could only have received this information from Powell himself, and there is no suggestion that Bowles had surprised Powell with news of White’s “experience.” His comments, coupled with the evidence from the *Congressional Globe*, appear in fact to confirm Powell’s determination to promote the idea that he had for many years considered the Grand Canyon his goal, not the “passage of the Grand River to its junction with the Colorado” noted in the *Rocky Mountain News* of November 6, 1867, and confirmed by Powell’s biographer, William Culp Darrah, in *Powell of the Colorado*.

Some historians and river runners believe that Powell’s change of plans was Jack Sumner’s idea. But while the possibility of exploring the Colorado River through the Grand Canyon might have been in many minds, the fact remains that until White’s journey in 1867 became known, no one, including Powell, attempted it.