Hell Or High Water

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Once the Stanton visit faded, life in Trinidad went on much as before; some children left home, White grew older, and his drayage work lightened. He spoke less and less of the Colorado River and his raft journey.

Nine years later, in 1916, Thomas F. Dawson, a former journalist and now an executive clerk in the United States Senate, entered White’s life and opened one last chapter on the Grand Canyon of 1867. Dawson wrote to the Honorable Dan Taylor, mayor of Trinidad, inquiring about the possibility of investigating the story of James White. He wished, he said, to refute Major Powell’s claim of being the first man through the Grand Canyon and to give the credit to “a Colorado man.” Mayor Taylor shared the letter with White who, at seventy-nine, was reluctant to become involved; White’s family and friends, however, urged him to think it over. Taylor advised Dawson to contact White directly.

Four months passed without any further word, and the subject was dropped, but a letter from an unexpected quarter changed the picture considerably. It was from a William W. Bass, postmarked Grand Canyon, Arizona, and dated July 11, 1916. After explaining a little about himself and how he had learned about White, he mentioned meeting
Frederick Dellenbaugh, who, he said, “wrote an account of his trip with Powell in which he brands you as a fraud and accomplished liar for claiming you ever made the Raft trip as claimed.”

He went on

Now I am writing my own story of some of my experiences here . . . and I want a good chance to call Dellenbaugh to account for some of his statements, especially the one about you . . . and I want your own story of your trip . . . I will give you your just dues in all I have to say and also use all the evidence I now have to prove you told the truth.

White was mildly gratified by Bass’s opinions but hopping mad about the accusations; when Dawson finally wrote his letter on July 21, he was assured of a ready-made audience for his proposal. Dawson wanted the whole story: Captain Baker, the circumstances of their meeting, where he came from, etc. He wanted to know about Parry (whom he called “Professor Perry”), their meeting and interview, whether this account was accurate, and if he should make it the basis of his pamphlet. He asked about the strength of the raft, the eddy at the mouth of the Little Colorado and whether it could have been somewhere else, about distances and times and what White had to eat: everything.

He ended by saying, “I have no desire to rob Major Powell of any of his deserved fame. He . . . deserves much credit . . . but the fact that he did go through should not be used to rob you of the credit due you.” In telling White about the “effort that has been made and is being made to discredit you,” Dawson emphasized two points: “I intend to make Professor Perry’s . . . article . . . the basis of what I may say unless you pronounce it incorrect,” and “it is also pointed out that your estimate of distance from the mouth of the Grand to the mouth of the San Juan is erroneous, as is your estimate of the distance to the mouth of the Little Colorado.”

These statements, plus Bass’s letter, spurred White’s decision to work with Dawson as nothing else could have; he agreed that his daughters, Esther and Em, could take notes of his recollections and put together what details he could remember.

On August 2, 1916, Esther wrote the first of her many letters to Thomas Dawson. After the usual amenities, she said,
My father is growing old but his memory is fairly good. He is busy trying to recall the details and incidents of his trip through the Grand Canyon . . . and as soon as he shall be able to remember all the things he will be able to tell we will prepare a complete statement and forward it.

She explained their confusion over the names of Perry and Ferry, requested a copy of the “Perry article,” and concluded,

I wish to assure you that we will aid you in every way possible, in spite of the fact that our father has always been loath to talk about the trip and his experiences because of the horrors of the scenes enacted before his eyes and because he never sought fame or notoriety.

She forwarded the letter from Bass and one from the Colorado state highway commissioner, T. J. Ehrhart, written to White in January 1916, about the Goodfellow shooting incident at Brown’s Creek. Dawson had asked “whether after your rescue you wrote any letters concerning your experience to your folks back in Wisconsin,” but Esther made no mention of White’s Callville letter of September 1867. Of course, the letter itself had never been in White’s possession since he wrote it, and no one in the family had seen the copy published in the April 1907 issue of Outing Magazine. Dawson only learned of its existence shortly before completing his manuscript; its absence from Document No. 42 was probably due to the lack of time to locate it or incorporate it into the text at the last minute. He attempted to remedy the omission by publishing it in an article he wrote for The Trail magazine in 1919.

The next six weeks were filled with considerable and often hectic activity. Esther and Em poked around in White’s memory, often a little too insistently; he did not like it, but his girls were no longer children and refused to be put off or intimidated. He grudgingly gave in (up to a point), and together they finally produced the promised statement.

These activities, plus Dawson’s comments about White’s errors in the distances traveled on the river, created a focus of unusual intensity on his raft journey and forced him to dig further into his memory than he had ever done. In the end, he came to the conclusion that although his party had been headed for the Grand River, they did not make it that far. His statement reflected that reevaluation:
We followed the Mancos down until we struck the San Juan. Then we followed the San Juan down as far as we could and then swam our horses across and started over to the Grand River, but before we got to the Grand River we struck a canyon. . . .

The statement was sent to Dawson with a letter in which Esther explained,

My father was born in 1837 but he is strong for a man of his age and his memory of the important incidents of the trip is still clear but it fails him when he is called on for names and similar data, and what he remembers comes to him in a disconnected manner.

In late November, Dawson sent a rough draft of his manuscript, which included Parry’s report, Calhoun’s article, and a Rocky Mountain Herald account dated January 8, 1869. All this was read to White, who kept up a steady stream of corrections. Parry’s report was only slightly marked, but the two articles were heavily red-penciled.

The draft was returned with Esther’s usual cover letter, but this time her comments hinted that all had not gone as easily as they thought it would.

Due to father’s age he does not remember distances or names very well. He is failing rapidly and his memory is not the best, but it seems to us that he remembers the important events of his journey. In fact he never paid much attention to distances and names at the time of his perilous voyage. And it must be remembered that when he was going through the canyon, all he was thinking about was how to get out, and not of the distances between streams and the names thereof.

Reading between the lines of this letter (and knowing her), I find evidence of my mother’s impatience with her father; she had an almost mathematically precise mind and would have preferred to pin down every last detail of distance and time. My Aunt Em had a more compassionate view and probably reminded her that their father might have had other things on his mind in the canyon. But neither of them recognized the psychological implications of his memory problems; not much progress had been made beyond the attitudes of the 1860s.
All that red-penciling could hardly change the reports, but it gave Dawson some insight into the wide discrepancies in the various accounts. Esther’s disclaimers provided a clue to White’s apparent state of mind but naturally could shed no light on the cause.

Christmas came and went. The year 1916 became 1917. Then, unexpectedly, a letter dated February 8 arrived from Dawson. He related a meeting he’d had in “Washington City” with “a gentleman who has given much attention to the history of the Grand Canyon.” It appeared that White’s story had been strongly assailed by this critic, and Dawson was writing

with a view to impressing upon you the importance of getting as definite a statement as you can from Mr. White as to his being on the Grand River. . . . this is the most insidious attack that has been made and should be met while your father lives and over his signature.

What was this? The statement they had prepared the previous fall had clearly placed the prospecting party in “a canyon before reaching the Grand,” so the two women were puzzled, especially by Dawson’s next instruction: “Get him to give all the reasons he can for believing he was on the Grand.” Even worse they were dismayed by the thought of tackling their father on the subject, but two days later, before they had had time to do anything, a second letter, dated February 10, arrived from Dawson. He was increasingly worried about the “opposition theory,” which sent White overland before coming to the Colorado River.

You will remember that I say in my article that it would have been almost as much of a fete [sic] to go overland as by water. That statement is predicated upon the theory that the party was on the Grand when Baker was killed. So, bring that fact out as clearly and strongly as possible over your father’s signature. . . . Our story is going to be attacked when printed, and we must make it as invincible as possible.

Esther and Em confronted their father with the news. They did not know at the time who this opposition was, but it was clearly someone important to cause Dawson so much anxiety. White’s persistent daughters dutifully coaxed their father into yet another discussion of
the Grand River. Their session was rather curiously documented by two sketches on the back of Dawson’s February 10 letter, both showed the telltale Y that represented the Grand-Green confluence with mysterious downstream squiggles—probably rivers—coming in from the east. Neither sketch was labeled, and all they reveal is a vigorous discussion of the problem.

In spite of (or maybe because of) Dawson’s two almost-frantic letters and the subsequent discussions, James White predictably lapsed into his stubborn mode; he refused to change his original statement, and of course he declined to write the letter Dawson had requested.

As if this uproar was not enough that February, yet another letter arrived, this one from a Mr. Robert B. Stanton. Dated February 19, it began, “My dear Miss White: You probably have not forgotten my visit to your father in the fall of 1907.”

Esther was puzzled. In 1907, she had been seventeen years old and still in high school; she had no immediate recollection of this Mr. Stanton. She asked Em and her mother about him. Tavvy, who up to now had stayed clear of this Grand Canyon project, remembered the man vaguely, but, as usual with “men’s business,” she had not been a party to his visit. Em’s memory was equally thin, but she had the impression that her father had considered the visit a pleasant one. Scarcely the wiser, Esther read on.

Recently when in Washington City I heard that he was in poor health and I am writing to give you some information which I hope will please you all.

You will remember that in my interview with your father, I was convinced that everything he told me about his experiences on the Colorado River in 1867, was entirely truthful and in no way, at that time or in his interview with Dr. Parry in January 1868, intended to misrepresent the facts as he knew them, but I was satisfied that the story [Dr. Parry] wrote was distorted and that I intended to write a defense of your father against the untruthful and very unjust charges that has [sic] been made against him by others.

That defense was written in 1908, but, for reasons I need not explain, I have not yet been able to publish my book on that and other things connected with the Colorado River.

Only recently I found the original paper on which was written the notes taken by Dr. Parry during his talk with
your father in Arizona in January 1868. These notes prove positively that at that time he told Dr. Parry the exact truth and in almost the same words that he used to me in 1907. Showing as I told you that there was not the least blame attached to your father for any thing Dr. Parry wrote afterwards. So that in a postscript to my book I have written the following, based on those original notes:

“It may not be out of place to remark [sic] here that finding at this late day in Dr. Parry’s note the record of this ‘one big rapid’, and only one, just as White wrote in his letter, and also testified to me 40 years afterwards . . . .”

At this point, an aside may be in order: Parry’s notes contain the phrase, “one fall 10 ft?” but also the phrase, “continuous rapids.” White’s letter speaks of going over falls from ten to fifteen feet high and of his raft tipping over three and four times a day. Even in Stanton’s interview, White spoke of “many rapids . . . every day,” which Stanton then and in the letter chose to ignore.

“Even after 40 years, all the time being misled by Dr. Parry’s account into believing that he had gone to the Grand River, and passed through all the great Cañons of the Colorado, his honesty was not affected in the least when I gave him positive proof that there were hundreds of big rapids on the Colorado. He never budged an inch, but positively re-affirmed that he went over one one [sic] big rapid and that there was only one such on the river—truthfully qualifying the last statement by, ‘Where I went.’ And now after 49 years we find in Dr. Parry’s own handwriting (written at the time) the proof that White stated the same thing to him in January 1868. Truly White is absolutely vindicated and absolved from the oft repeated charge that he was the biggest liar that ever told a tale about the Colorado River.”

When my book is published I shall be pleased to send you a copy.

Won’t you write me a few lines and tell me how your father is. Give him my kindest regards and best wishes for his health and happiness.

Esther and Em were stunned. They wondered what on earth this Mr. Stanton was really saying. Could he honestly think it would please them to hear that he was about to inform the world that their father had not gone through the Grand Canyon? Did he imagine that
they would be glad to receive this news, to know that Stanton was accusing Parry of misleading their father into believing he had passed through all the great canyons of the Colorado? What did he mean by only one rapid?

It is little wonder that they did not know what to do. They did not want to read this letter to their father, nor did they wish to bother Dawson with it, coming as it did right in the middle of his manuscript preparation. But the letter reminded them of Dawson’s “gentleman who has given much attention to the history of the Grand Canyon.” Could Stanton and that gentleman possibly be one and the same?

They were rapidly becoming sick and tired of trying to solve the Grand River problem to everyone’s satisfaction. They did not look forward to another session with dear papa. For nearly two weeks, they dawdled and did nothing.

The stalemate was broken by the arrival of another letter from Dawson, dated March 8. This letter is not among the White correspondence because it was returned to Dawson a month later at his request. (My mother steadfastly insisted that she could not remember its contents, but her subsequent letters, attitude, and actions during that time period pretty strongly suggest what they were.)

Whatever else the missing letter disclosed, it categorically connected the pieces of the Stanton–Grand River puzzle to form a picture that, to put it mildly, infuriated Esther. At last she and Em knew who the opposition—to them, the enemy—was. They realized that the most basic foundation of their father’s story was being undermined, and they now understood Dawson’s panic. What they still could not understand was Stanton’s letter with its platitudes and the unbelievable suggestion that he was doing White and his family a favor! Still, the letter had to be answered.

We can recognize this opposition theory—that White had never passed through “all the great Cañons of the Colorado”—as arising from Stanton’s 1907 interview, but as of 1916 neither the interview nor its conclusions had been published. The transcript of the interview had never been sent to White. Stanton himself had admitted to Edwards that he did not want White to see it. The women were learning of this interview for the first time.
Yet, from what Em said, their father apparently had a good opinion of Stanton; they didn’t know why that was, but Esther thought it prudent to avoid identifying its author when they told him about this “south of the San Juan” theory. It was absolutely necessary for her father to make a strong response to it, but they feared any entanglement in personalities, and at this point, White was unpredictable.

It took her nearly a month, but on April 13, Esther finally wrote to Dawson:

I am enclosing herewith a letter I have written to Mr. Robert B. Stanton, together with a copy of the letter I received from him sometime ago and am returning to you the letter you wrote to me of date of March 8, 1917, as per your request.

If Mr. Stanton contends that father went over one big rapid there is a mistake somewhere for when he has related his story to us he has always mentioned going over several rapids both large and small and has also made mention of going over one big rapid near the end of the canyon.

I have tried to answer Mr. Stanton’s letter in accordance with your suggestions and have kept the contents of your letter strictly confidential.

Answering Mr. Stanton’s letter was a hard task as all the way through I wanted to denounce him but refrained from doing so.

Her reply to Stanton of the same date was restrained but included the following:

I have read your letter carefully to father and he wishes me to correct your statement in regard to the “one big rapid.” . . . he said he went over “several rapids” a day, both “big and little,” and he also mentions going over one rapid that was larger than the rest, but, as before stated, he went over “several rapids” a day, both “big and little” and not over “only one” big rapid.

Restraint aside, her repetition, quotes, and underlines manage to betray both her anger and her reasons for wanting “to denounce him.”

By keeping Stanton’s name out of the discussions, she had no trouble preparing her father’s final letter to Dawson. Dated April 20,
1917, it was sent over White’s own signature and was his last word on the subject:

Dear Sir: I have come into knowledge of the fact that a charge has been made that I did not reach the Colorado River above the San Juan, but below it. You will notice from the account that I sent you of my trip that when our party started on our prospecting trip we were headed for the Grand River, as Baker said there was gold in that part of the country; but Baker was killed before reaching the Grand River in a canyon between the San Juan and the Grand. . . . Mr. Baker also carried a compass and kept us informed as to the direction we were traveling, and he told us that we were going north to the Grand River.

Baker was killed after we crossed the San Juan River in a canyon between the San Juan and the Grand, being north of the San Juan.

I guess the story will be attacked when printed, but I am willing to talk to anyone and convince them that I entered the Colorado River above the San Juan and not below it.

The underlines are White’s, or perhaps they were Esther’s only way of conveying her father’s sentiments with the necessary emphasis.

Some have thought that the three iterations of the men’s positions vis-a-vis the Grand, the Colorado, and the San Juan represent a case of protesting too much, but before this year, White had not given much thought to any outside accounts of his Grand Canyon experience. He had not asked Dr. Parry to interview him in 1868 or General Palmer to meet with him in 1869; he had not sought out Stanton’s attention in 1907, nor Dawson’s in 1916. White was nearly eighty years old; he was a stubborn old man, who, like anyone who has survived a traumatic event, became confused over details. But this time he had put in his own two cents worth and defended himself. He was certain he had finally set the record straight.

Dawson was not so sure. The manuscript was submitted to the Senate on May 25, 1917 (forty-nine years to the day since that august body had debated helping Major Powell with his Grand Canyon expedition) and was published later that summer. In a final letter, dated September 1, 1917, Dawson confided to “Miss White”: “He [Stanton] criticizes the booklet very severely in his letters to me and tells me he
is preparing to publish his long-promised book this fall. He will jump all over us, but I don’t think we ought to care very much.” Just how much Stanton was preparing to “jump” on the booklet, the long-suffering Dawson had only a short wait to discover.

But Dawson, ever the gentleman, did not end his letter on a negative note. He concluded, “I want to tell you . . . how much I appreciate your help . . . without it the work would necessarily have been far less complete. You have been not only a willing worker, but an intelligent one.”

He promised to send a dozen copies of Senate Document No. 42 and, as a parting gift for her, one special, bound, and embossed one. Mr. Dawson was as good as his word.
Figure 8.
Esther White’s leather-bound copy of Senate Document No. 42, 1917
a gift from Thomas Dawson.
(Photograph by R. E. Adams)