Chapter 16  Battle of *The Trail*

Senate Document No. 42 did not resolve the controversy over White’s journey; indeed, it merely added fuel to the fire of Robert Stanton’s unrelenting opposition to White. In 1919, Thomas Dawson had two articles about White published in *The Trail* magazine. Stanton’s response appeared in the September issue.

Before discussing the substance of the article, it seems relevant to examine Stanton’s somewhat petulant attitude toward what the magazine’s space limitations forced upon his evidentiary references. He complains that: “a hundred or so other reports, diaries, notes, letters and facts considered as one, analyzed and tried by the rules of evidence and the facts of nature and science, are given in full in the manuscript I have written.” “All this evidence in the case can not be given here, for it would require perhaps 300 pages of the size of The Trail . . . but, I think I have the right to expect [that] the reader shall accept every quotation I have made and shall make from these documents are [sic] correctly quoted, even if in some cases . . . they are paraphrased”; and “the proofs are all given in my larger manuscript.” He also included a disclaimer: “It is much to be regretted that space forbids giving you the full notes and my analysis,” and a rebuke: “Would that you had the space to publish my full review of the pamphlet.” He finally declared, “If I am unable to
publish my book, . . . I will have a complete typewritten copy of my manuscript, including my review of [Dawson’s] 1917 pamphlet, deposited with the Historical Society of Denver, where anyone can verify each quotation and its bearing by chapter, paragraph and line.” Research in Colorado historical archives has not turned up this copy, and the manuscript exists in printed form only as three posthumously edited and published books. None of these contains this review, although his *Colorado River Controversies* may include some of it.

Paraphrasing Stanton’s elaborate rhetoric is insufficient to demonstrate the lengths to which his passion and intensity carried him on this subject; his own words are not only relevant, but essential.

Stanton explained why he “consented to write this brief synopsis”:

> Everyone who has discussed this story, particularly Mr. Thomas F. Dawson, . . . has done so on the basis of the possibility and probability of its truth . . . with little knowledge of the historical facts [and] with extremely little knowledge of the true nature of the Colorado and the interior of its cañons.

In contrast, he said, “My investigations were made from an entirely different standpoint.” Stanton was alluding to his own experiences on the river and claimed, “I had but one idea—to get at the truth or falsity of the tale by gathering facts, not the theories or opinions of men.” He cited his finding of original documents and his own 1907 interview with White. As already noted, he made special reference to his own two-volume, unpublished book on the “truth of the Grand Canyon controversy.”

He then launched into an evaluation of White’s character, prefaced by this statement: “After talking with him so many hours, and corresponding with him for several years . . .” This misrepresentation seems to be typical of Stanton. Actually he spent one-and-a-half hours with White in 1907, and his correspondence was meager, most of it addressed to either “Miss White” or Roy Lappin, who relayed the messages.

Stanton characterized White as “an honest, truthful and sincere man, as far as his mental abilities would permit him to be . . . on the other hand White is a man of simple mind . . . lacking in any logical, reasoning faculty.” Stanton found White’s story to be made up of personal experiences, clearly and truthfully related but with certain supposed
facts, told to him by others and implicitly believed, which “he embellished with his own faulty memory.” White, he said, having “no logical reasoning faculty whatever . . . had no conception that his embellishments were direct contradictions of the various claims he was making.” These, Stanton continued, were “not untrue in themselves, but were misplaced as to time and space.” Then he stated, “I attempted to separate the truth from the fiction by extending my cross-examination,” a reference of course to his interview. He concluded with “his personal experiences on the river, and his real knowledge of what he saw, the truth of which does not depend upon time and place, is [sic] shown to be absolutely correct.” Stanton, in arguing that White’s description of the sixty-mile stretch between Grand Wash Cliffs and Callville was absolutely correct, revealed the driving force of the entire article.

Stanton next evaluated the men who, at one time or another, had written in support of White. He denigrated all statements made by Dr. Parry, Major Calhoun, Dr. William Bell, General Palmer, and especially Thomas Dawson. The evaluation included such terms as “palpably misleading assertions,” “unsupported opinions,” “dogmatic assertions,” “bad memory, inattention to valuable information . . . and want of careful observation.” Most of these were reserved for Dawson and used examples from his letters to impugn his motives and imply that he had willfully distorted the truth. Stanton devoted six-and-a-half pages to this subject.

On the sixteenth page of the article, Stanton returned to the lynchpin of White’s point of entry: the 1907 interview into which he had inserted the notation, “[actually forty-five days],” after White’s answer of “two days” (to reach the side canyon from the San Juan). Having already defined the stupidity and ignorance that he said had led to this enormous mistake, Stanton now focused on two of White’s descriptions—the canyon walls and the river and its rapids—and argued that

White, even with his limited abilities, was capable of observing the general nature and character of the cañon walls and the character of the river . . . and he was and is perfectly capable of remembering them, and describing them in such a manner that his description can be readily and clearly recognized by anyone acquainted with the conditions that . . . exist in the cañons and on the river . . .
Stanton hinted of White’s spiritual qualities—or lack thereof:

he is even more capable of remembering clearly and distinctly to his dying day his personal physical experiences on his trip, such as come to every man going down the Colorado, and such as are so often and so suddenly driven deep into one’s brain, and which chill one to the very marrow . . . all we of the cañons have experienced them.

And he defined the workings of White’s memory:

such personal experiences become fastened on the memory indelibly, and remain clear and distinct ever afterward. . . . White is no exception to the rule . . . he had and has an abundance of intelligence to see such things and to feel and note his personal experiences in the rapids and clearly and accurately to remember them to this day, and more correctly and distinctly to describe them.

But why did Stanton insist that White was capable of remembering details of the river accurately and distinctly yet consider his estimates of time and distance on land so grossly inaccurate? Even if he was unaware of White’s six years of travel across the West, common sense would suggest that his land descriptions would be far more accurate because he was well clothed, well fed, and under no particular strain rather than any observations he might make while he was near starvation, severely battered by the hostile environment of an unknown river, and in mortal fear for his life. This entire evaluation of White’s mental abilities seems to have less to do with logic than obsession.

In this article, Stanton also stated that he gave White a twenty-five-dollar check in 1907, maintaining that he “demanded” money to tell his story. (Roy Lappin, in a 1953 letter to Deseret Magazine, said that Stanton “pressed a $20 gold piece into his hand.”) Stanton’s canceled check, in fact, still exists, and no one denies that he gave White the money, but White’s version of the transaction will never be heard. One clue argues for a different interpretation: the undeniable fact that White invited Stanton to come to Trinidad to discuss the canyon.

Stanton went to his grave certain that he had prevailed, and he was not far from wrong. His arguments and conclusions were believed by a great many people. Many consider them to this day the final word on the journey of James White.