My first step was an attempt to learn more about Grand Canyon history. From Marston’s copious data and my own extracurricular reading, I began to assemble the scattered pieces.

The most ancient history of the Grand Canyon and its aboriginal inhabitants lies in the sporadic discoveries of archaeological ruins and resultant speculations. The old legends impart an aura of mystery and myth, but they are not part of this discussion. I have great regard for the American Indian tribes, and I do not doubt that these people, especially the Anasazi, long ago preceded the white man onto the Colorado River and into the Grand Canyon; however, the white man’s history is more relevant to the present purpose.

In the beginning were Francisco Vásquez de Coronado and his 1540 expedition seeking the fabled Seven Cities of Cibola; García López de Cárdenas, the so-called discoverer of the Grand Canyon; Francisco Tomas Garcés, the Franciscan missionary who “rediscovered” the canyon in 1776; Fray Silvestre Vélez de Escalante and Francisco Atanasio Domínguez, who discovered the famous Crossing of the
Fathers in Glen Canyon. Representing the Spanish heritage of the Colorado River and Grand Canyon, these explorers looked into the canyon from its rim. If they found a way down to the river, it was simply to cross it in their anxiety to get out of there as fast as they could. There was, after all, no gold in it to steal, no souls in it to save; they had no interest in it—except perhaps for a brief admiration of the awesome landscape.

Those curious Yankees who came later explored the United States from top to bottom and side to side by way of the soldier, trapper, prospector, settler, just plain adventurer, and ultimately, the scientist. In spite of their efforts, they were remarkably slow in getting around to the Colorado River’s Big Cañon. Lieutenant Ives and his steamboat Explorer tiptoed up the Colorado River as far as Black Canyon in 1857, and a few Mormon boatmen floated sixty miles downriver from Grand Wash Cliffs to Callville in the spring of 1867. Many others were sniffing around the edges; they were creeping up on it, but these forays did not reveal the estimated five hundred to seven hundred mile mystery of the Grand Canyon.

Then, on September 7, 1867, James White appeared on his raft at Callville and started a new and contentious chapter in Colorado River and Grand Canyon history. The three newspaper accounts of White’s journey appeared before the month was out, two in California and one in Prescott, Arizona Territory; Dr. Parry’s report was read in the St. Louis Academy of Science in February of 1868 and published shortly thereafter in its Transactions. Front-page accounts of White’s journey appeared across the country in the midwestern and eastern press. The stage was set for controversy.

Less than two years after the White story appeared, Major John Wesley Powell embarked on the Green River in May 1869. He claimed that he had contemplated and prepared for his expedition for years before launching his boats. His statements that White’s journey had not happened and that he, Powell, was first through the Grand Canyon successfully discredited White’s earlier acclaim. The United States government and the majority of published books gave official credit to the major, endorsing his journey as a discovery.

From his first expedition in 1869 through his second in 1871–72, Powell was in sole possession of the canyon. Stories have been
advanced that he believed himself to be not only the first to make the journey but the last. It even looked that way after Frank Brown’s 1889 disastrous attempt failed and killed three men, including himself. Of course such exclusivity was never possible; where one man went, another was bound to follow. Seventeen years after Powell, the strong-willed and determined Robert Stanton succeeded with his 1890 voyage, proclaiming for himself the title of second through the Grand Canyon.

By the time Stanton and Dawson had their verbal shootout in The Trail in 1919, thirty years had passed since Stanton’s expedition. Only a handful of adventurous men had followed him down the river and through the canyon: Flavell and Montez in 1896, Galloway and Richard in 1896, Wooley in 1903, Russell in 1906, Stone (with Galloway) in 1909, the Kolb brothers in 1911, and Russell again in 1914. David Lavender, in his book River Runners of the Grand Canyon, defines this group as freelancers who pursued no grand design.

Seven years later, the USGS began trolling for dam sites. William Darrah, writing Powell’s biography in 1951, states, “[Brown’s] proposed railroad, if authorized and constructed, would interfere with the reservation of the canyons as a potential source of irrigation waters, and the major envisioned great storage dams in the Colorado River.” Darrah also relates that “[Powell’s] vision of harnessing the Colorado River is becoming reality. Hoover Dam in the Boulder project was erected a few miles north of a site which the major had long ago considered feasible.”

Between 1921 and 1923, the USGS made several exploratory trips to locate potential dam sites. These early explorations eventually led to Boulder Dam and Glen Canyon Dam. There were even proposals for dams within Grand Canyon itself, but Major Powell would probably have had no enthusiasm for these. The Colorado River runners of this period included Freeman, Dodge, Lint, Kolb, Blake, Moore, and Birdseye.

A typically 1920s era of Grand Canyon exploration now began. Pathé-Bray set out to make the big Grand Canyon moving picture. Clyde Eddy raced to beat them to it, introducing a bear and a dog into the now fascinating realm of firsts. He need not have hurried; the Pathé-Bray film was never released. Eddy returned for another go, but
his competition gave up. Although these pioneers did not exactly set the world on fire, they awakened greater interest in the Colorado and the canyon with their press coverage and deliberate publicity.

In 1928, newlyweds Glen and Bessie Hyde appeared in the canyon and disappeared there forever; they were something of an enigma and their fate has only recently been explored and explained in Brad Dimock’s excellent book *Sunk Without a Sound*. But their disappearance at the time attracted the press and fed the lure of the mystery and romance of this place. It could hardly be long before the boating entrepreneurs discovered the commercial possibilities. The Great Depression probably slowed development, but Boulder Dam may have given it a boost.

In 1937, however, before the tours arrived, Buzz Holmstrom made his lonely voyage from Green River to Boulder Dam. He did not fit into any of the existing categories. He was a brave young man with an agenda more spiritual than practical, another enigma of the river. His trip was heralded by “Believe-It-or-Not” Ripley as the first solo voyage through the Grand Canyon. In 1938, Norm Nevills and his guided tours became the new pioneers. One of their early passengers was Barry Goldwater—a great endorsement for this exciting new pastime.

But before the tour business got off the ground, river travelers were few and far between. By 1940, nearly three-quarters of a century after James White’s journey, only a hundred brave men (depending on your arithmetic) had run the Colorado through the Grand Canyon, not to mention two women, one bear, and a dog. The men kept diaries and logs and wrote lots of letters; a few wrote books. These few, however, established a river-runner tradition. The opinions of most later boatmen reflected their own experiences, but they were influenced by the declarations of Powell, Dellenbaugh, and Stanton. Keeping faith with the tradition, most of them echoed to some degree the defamation of White’s character and a strong disbelief in his journey.

Darrah, Powell’s biographer, reports in *Powell of the Colorado* that “there were others who, with loud fanfare, challenged [Powell’s] priority,” implying that James White had legions of champions, whereas in reality that “loud fanfare” barely rose above a whisper. Indeed, it was
hard to find anyone in Powell’s lifetime, except General Palmer, who was willing to come to White’s unqualified defense. But Darrah still complained that “even though White . . . has been discredited, the shadow of doubt, the ever present question, remains in documented history. The underdogs have had their defenders even against uncontested truth and fact.”

A remarkable example of this gospel occurs in Edwin Corle’s book *Listen, Bright Angel* in the suggestively Biblical declaration: “Stanton’s book concludes the argument. It leaves no room for doubt. It answers every question. It is final.”

To be fair to river runners, neither Darrah nor Corle ran the Colorado River, but their books championed their heroes and reflected their biases without the leavening of personal experience and promoted the denigration of James White just as much, if not more, because they gave the appearance of objectivity.

Along the way, an occasional article surfaced that fell outside the traditional view. In 1922, a piece by J. Cecil Alter appeared in “Tribune Travelogs,” a regular feature of the *Salt Lake Tribune*. Alter was for a time director of the Utah State Historical Society and a solid historian. He adopted the premise of Senate Document No. 42 and took White’s opponents to task. He accused Dellenbaugh of jealousy, scolding him for denouncing Ives and Wheeler for taking government backing when, as a member of Powell’s second expedition, he knew that the major had also been financed by the U.S. government. He also scolded George Wharton James, another writer with limited experience on the Colorado, for a criticism of White that he had borrowed from earlier detractors. Forty years later, Alter wrote in a letter to Dock Marston, “I didn’t get much of a ‘hand’ for the White narrative,” but he maintained, “I have not changed my mind; White COULD have done, just what he said he did.”

Amid all the denunciations, an occasional glimmer crept into a criticism that actually strengthened White’s cause. Lewis Freeman, one of the post-World War I river runners who were investigating the dam sites, pointed out in 1923 what he thought was surefire proof of the impossibility of White’s voyage:

Riding a loosely-bound bunch of logs in really rough water—I can think of no more certain preliminary to
inevitable suicide than such an action. . . . On a make-shift raft like White’s by letting go and getting completely away from the floundering logs when they were drawn under, a man *might* come up himself with enough wind to last him until he struck the next eddy. But tied to the logs, the only question would be as to whether drowning would precede or follow a rap on the head from his wallowing if not dissolving raft.

Freeman, however, was actually describing a method of survival which White had reported to Stanton in 1907 when he described his lariat rope as “50 feet long tied to the raft and tied around my waist” and his method of retrieval as “I took hold of the rope and jumped into the river and pulled myself to the raft and climbed on.”

Another interesting critic was Virginia McConnell. Her specialty was Captain Baker, the slain leader of White’s party. She believed it “highly probable” that White had killed Baker. Back in 1861, Baker had led a party of gold seekers into the San Juan Mountains, but when these intrepid prospectors found horrendous weather, terrible hardships, hostile Utes, and no gold, they blamed Baker and were ready to kill him. Her reasoning went like this: since Captain Baker was eminently killable in 1861, it should be assumed that White killed him in 1867. Although her opinion was certainly anti-White, her research had one redeeming factor: the well-documented fact that Baker knew the San Juan Mountains, the Dolores and San Miguel Rivers, and points north extremely well, too well in fact for him to be as lost as some of White’s other critics claimed.

Barry Goldwater, after running the river through the canyon with Nevills, wrote his book *Delightful Journey down the Green and Colorado Rivers*, which persuasively stated this 1946 opinion:

To those who say that such a voyage could not be made on a raft, I answer that men in desperate circumstances have accomplished more dangerous feats than running Colorado River rapids on a raft, although I would never, in my weakest moments, venture such a trip. To those who say that White is wrong on certain points, I say to imagine yourself starved, cold, and scared as hell in the middle of the Colorado River on a raft, and then ask yourself whether you would give a tinker’s damn about the scenery or details of it. I repeat that nothing yet has been
brought forward to make me accept anyone other than White as the first through here.

In 1948, he was still of that opinion, but twenty-one years later the senator wrote a letter to Dock Marston which revealed some ambivalence on the subject:

I don’t know where you get the information that I hoped that White was the first man through Canyon. . . . All I have ever hoped was that somebody would someday conclusively prove that he wasn’t. I frankly have my doubts, but I also recognize that a man could do what he reports that he did and clarification in this field . . . is needed as in any other connected with our favorite river.

Yet in 1994, Goldwater wrote a generous letter to me: “I understand you are writing a book about James White’s journey. I can’t tell you how pleased I am. I’m sure you are doing all you can to finish this in time for all us old timers to be able to read it.” I think Goldwater, like many Colorado River runners, may have had doubts about the raft journey but believed it deserved further investigation.

In 1955, Bill Beer and John Dagget swam the Colorado through the Grand Canyon. They started on Easter Sunday, April 10, with provisions stowed in waterproof boxes which they used as underarm flotation devices through the rapids. They emerged on May 5 with some nasty cuts, scrapes, and bruises but quite alive. Their adventure caused some mellowing on the subject of White’s journey and the appearance of a few new tentative believers, but no one was truly going out on a limb.

An interesting video, *Call of the Canyon*, chronicles the 1988 experience of Manfred Kraus, who swam the entire length of the Grand Canyon in two weeks. It was suggested that Kraus’s trip lent credence to the White voyage of 1867; indeed the entire video was pro-White. It even included a clip of Bob Euler explaining why there was good reason to consider White’s voyage viable.

What is possibly more intriguing is one remarkable metamorphosis in White’s story; his voyage was still denied, of course, but a transformation of magical proportions seems to have occurred. In a 1982 article in *The American West* magazine, David Lavender resurrected the
accusation that White had murdered his two companions, citing the shooting of Joe Goodfellow as proof that White was capable of “passions.” But only three years later, when Lavender’s book *River Runners of the Grand Canyon* appeared, White and his raft had turned into a rather benign twentieth-century legend, a “modern folk story” somewhat akin to George Washington and the cherry tree but without the noble sentiment. Lavender neatly transformed White and the controversy over him into an irrelevant footnote.

These discoveries and rediscoveries are as many and varied as the layers of spectacular walls that flare from river to sky within this magnificent chasm. Our investigation into the validity of James White’s 1867 Grand Canyon journey is but the latest layer of rediscovery.