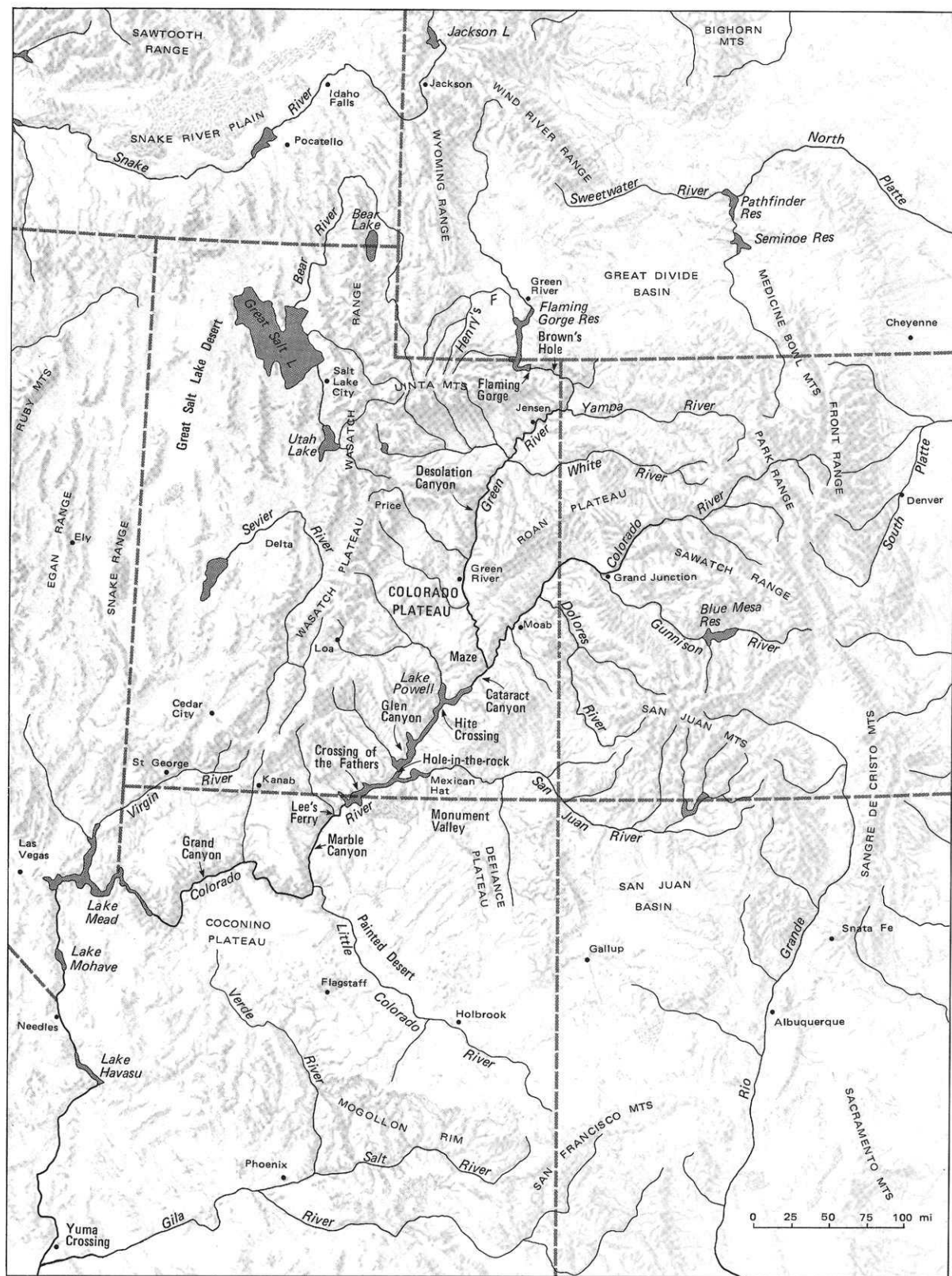




Map by Brian L. Haslam.

Before Powell: Exploration of the Colorado River

BY MELVIN T. SMITH

THIS IS NOT A STUDY OF THE COLORADO RIVER ITSELF, but rather an examination of those portions of the Green and Colorado rivers later navigated by John Wesley Powell and his crew in 1869. It is a brief look at the pre-Powell history of the river through the Indians, the Spaniards, the fur trappers, the miners, merchants, Mormons, and the military and government surveyors, and an evaluation of those early explorers as makers and recorders of western history.

One of the most poignant stories of the Colorado River is related by Catherine McDonald, a Nez Perce woman, who as a girl had traveled with a band of Indian trappers from the upper Green River in Wyoming south through Utah. When the party struck the Colorado at the mouth of the Virgin River, they killed horses to make hide boats to ferry across the river. Below Black Canyon the party, which included white men, possibly "Pegleg" Smith, attacked the Indians living there. Her account tells of Indian women trying to swim the Colorado River with their children—sometimes two or three small ones at a time—and drowning. The party continued south to the Gulf of California before returning north through Arizona to the Crossing of the Fathers on their way back to Wyoming.¹

Archaeological and linguistic evidence abounds confirming the Indians' long-time occupancy of many Colorado River canyons. Indians swam in the river, floated on it, and crossed it on reed rafts. Their knowledge of the river and its tributaries was intimate. Powell himself used the Indians' knowledge of the Grand Canyon area in his later surveys. In recent years mountain climbers have learned that

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¹Winona Adams, ed., "An Indian Girl's Story of a Trading Expedition to the Southwest about 1841," *Historical Reprints Sources of Northwest History* No. 11 (Missoula: State University of Montana, 1930).

seemingly inaccessible peaks and mesas in the Grand Canyon had been scaled by their prehistoric counterparts.²

Most of the Indians' knowledge of the river was never consolidated. The old Indian's drawing of a map of the river and its peoples for Alarcon in 1540 apparently was not recorded on paper. Nevertheless, much of the Indians' information did pass to their historic contemporaries, the Spaniards, and later the American trappers. As one Native American in 1976 told a committee researching the route of the Dominguez-Escalante trail, "White men did not discover the American Southwest, because the Indians knew where it was all the time."³ So it was with the Colorado River.

Over a period of three centuries, the Spaniards discovered and rediscovered the Colorado River. The major force behind the earliest expeditions was the quest for wealth. Francisco de Ulloa sailed north on the Sea of Cortez in 1539 and found that a large river emptied into the sea and that Baja California was a peninsula. A year later the Coronado expeditions reached the river at three points: Alarcon with ships upriver from the Gulf perhaps as far as fifty to eighty-five leagues (150-255 miles), though some claim only to the mouth of the Gila River (roughly 100 miles); Melchior Diaz overland from Sonora to approximately the same place; and Cardenas from Oraibi to the Grand Canyon. Coronado's men recognized that the "Rio Tizon" of Diaz was Cardenas's river in the great canyon to the north and east and that it drained a vast interior.⁴

Spanish tenure in those early years was quixotic. At the beginning of the seventeenth century, Juan de Onate traveled across northern Arizona to the Colorado River near the Needles. He followed its east bank south to the Gulf, which he reached on January 23, 1605. This expedition made Onate a well-traveled authority on the Colorado River, but unfortunately he misinterpreted the Indians' information

²Melvin T. Smith, "The Colorado River: Its History in the Lower Canyons Area" (Ph.D. diss., Brigham Young University, 1972), chap. 3; H. M. Wormington, *Prehistoric Indians of the Southwest* (Denver: Colorado Museum of Natural History, 1947); John Wesley Powell, *The Exploration of the Colorado River and Its Canyons* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1875); J. Harvey Butchart, "Summits below the Rim: Mountain Climbing in the Grand Canyon," *Journal of Arizona History* 17 (Spring 1976): 21-38.

³George P. Hammond and Agapito Rey, eds., *Narratives of the Coronado Expedition, 1540-1542* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1940), p. 138. The old chief identified twenty-three language groups on the river. The other quotation comes from a meeting of the Dominguez-Escalante State/Federal Bicentennial Committee in Dolores, Colorado, in April 1975 at which the author was present.

⁴Hammond and Rey, *Narratives of the Coronado Expedition*, pp. 119-26, 288. See also George P. Hammond and Agapito Rey, eds., *Obregon's History of Sixteenth Century Exploration in Western America* (Los Angeles: Wetzel Publishing Co., 1928), p. 22.

about the area to conclude falsely that the Colorado River headed to the northwest and that Baja California was an island.⁵

A century later it was primarily the quest for souls, not gold, that brought Spanish explorers into the area. Paramount among the Jesuit missionaries was "the padre on horseback," Father Eusebio Francisco Kino, who by 1700 had explored from Sonora to the Colorado River. During the next two years Kino crossed the river several times and explored southward to the Gulf. He believed California was a peninsula and recorded quite correctly that "this Colorado River, which is the Rio del Norte of the ancients, carries so much water, it must be that it comes from a high and remote land as is the case of other large volumed rivers." Kino's successors speculated that the source of the Colorado may have been the "Sierras of the Great Teguayo, or Gran Quivira."⁶

One adventuresome Jesuit, Father Sedelmayr, traveled from the Gulf overland to the Bill Williams River and south along the Colorado in 1750 looking for settlement sites. Unfortunately, Charles III's capricious expulsion of the Jesuits in 1767 occurred before any colonies could be established. Juan Maria Antonio Rivera, leading a trading expedition, reached the Colorado River, which he called "Rio Tizon," near Moab, Utah, on October 20, 1765.⁷

The Spaniards' settlement of San Diego in 1769 brought urgent demands for usable overland routes to California from Sonora and Santa Fe. The Gila route to the south was pioneered in 1774. Two years later the intrepid Padre Francisco Garces traveled upriver from the Yuma crossing to the Mohave villages. During the next several months his travels would take him first to California, then back to the Colorado River and eastward into Cataract Canyon, past the Grand Canyon (which he called "Puerto de Bucarrelí"), and on to Oraibi. Garces spent the momentous Fourth of July 1776 searching for means to go east to Zuni and Santa Fe. Failing in this, he retraced his route to

⁵George P. Hammond and Agapito Rey, eds., *Don Juan de Onate, Colonizer of New Mexico, 1595-1628* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1953), Part 2, pp. 1023-24.

⁶Herbert E. Bolton, *The Padre on Horseback: A Sketch of Eusebio Francisco Kino, S. J., Apostle to the Pimas* (San Francisco: Sonora Press, 1932); *Rim of Christendom: A Biography of Eusebio Francisco Kino, Pacific Coast Pioneer* (New York: Macmillan Co., 1936); and *Spanish Explorations in the Southwest, 1542-1706* (New York: Barnes & Noble, 1957), p. 450; Rufus K. Wyllys, ed., "Padre Luis Velarde's Relacion of Pimeria Alta, 1716," *New Mexico Historical Review* 6 (April 1931): 115.

⁷Hazel Emery Mills, "Father Sedelmayr, S. J.: A Forgotten Chapter in Arizona Missionary History," *Arizona Historical Review* 7 (January 1936): 3-18; a copy of the diary of Juan Maria Antonio Rivera is in possession of G. Clell Jacobs of San Diego, California. See also Donald C. Cutler, "Prelude to Pageant in the Wilderness," *Western Historical Quarterly* 8 (January 1977): 7-14; and Leroy R. and Ann W. Hafen, *Old Spanish Trail* (Glendale, Calif.: Arthur H. Clark Co., 1954).

the river and home.⁸ Traveling alone much of the time with only an Indian guide, Garces covered a vast amount of unknown country.

Attempting to open up yet another route from Santa Fe to California, Fathers Atanasio Dominguez and Silvestre Velez de Escalante headed north in 1776 into Colorado, crossed the Green River near present-day Jensen, Utah, reached Utah Lake, and journeyed south along the Sevier River, where they decided to return to Santa Fe rather than continue west to California. Their route brought them eventually to Lee's Ferry, where they were unable to cross the river, then to the old Ute crossing in Glen Canyon, thereafter known as the "Crossing of the Fathers." A few days later the party reached Oraibi on their way back to Santa Fe.⁹

By 1777 the Spaniards knew that the Colorado River extended far north into the continent's interior and that it traveled through miles of deep canyons that could be crossed only with difficulty. Its major tributaries were known, named, and mapped. Don Bernardo Miera's beautiful map of 1777 provided a wealth of geographical data, though it also incorporated his miscalculations that the Green and Sevier rivers were the same, and that major streams flowed west from Sevier Lake and the Great Salt Lake.¹⁰

Over a period of three centuries the Spaniards gave the Colorado River its name and accumulated a great deal of geographical knowledge about it. Only its discoverer, Alarcon, in his upstream voyage in 1540 from the Gulf, sailed any distance on the river, though Escalante launched a driftwood raft at Lee's Ferry. Except for contrary waves that forced him back to shore, Escalante could have become the first non-Indian to venture into Marble Canyon, and likely he would have become its first casualty.

The American explorers who began to supplant the Spaniards in the area of the Colorado River in the early nineteenth century fell heir to their predecessors' geographical knowledge. One of the most direct transfers came with Zebulon Pike's capture by the Spaniards in 1806. While in Santa Fe he saw Father Ambrosio's map and library and later reported that the Colorado River was over one thousand miles in

⁸Elliot Coues, ed., *On the Trail of a Spanish Pioneer: The Diary and Itinerary of Francisco Garces . . . 1775-1776* (New York: Francis P. Haufer, 1900), vol. 2, pp. 300-301.

⁹David E. Miller, ed., *The Route of the Dominguez-Escalante Expedition, 1776-1777* (Salt Lake City: Dominguez Escalante State/Federal Bicentennial Committee and Four Corners Regional Commission, 1976); Ted J. Warner, ed., *The Dominguez-Escalante Journal: Their Expedition Through Colorado, Utah, Arizona, and New Mexico in 1776* (Provo: Brigham Young University Press, 1976).

¹⁰Don Bernardo Miera y Pacheco's 1777 map is reprinted as part of Herbert E. Bolton's *Pageant in the Wilderness: The Story of the Escalante Expedition to the Interior Basin, 1776* (Salt Lake City: Utah State Historical Society, 1950).

length and navigable from its mouth for at least three hundred miles. He also proposed a transcontinental route up the Arkansas River, with a two-hundred-mile portage to the Colorado's navigable water.¹¹

In time the fur trade brought a new breed of men to the mountains from the northwest, from St. Louis, and from Santa Fe, and the mountain men quickly absorbed the Spanish and Indian facts about the river. For them the Rio Colorado meant furs and a possible route to ships at sea. The mountain men became the first white men to make serious repeated attempts to navigate the river. In the fall of 1824 four men from the Provost-LeClerc company outfitted a canoe and headed downriver several miles from the crossing near present-day Green River, Utah. On April 19, 1825, William H. Ashley, with a government permit to trade with the Snake Indians "at the Junction of the Buenaventura and Colorado River of the West," reached the Green River in Wyoming. With seven men he planned to float and trap downriver to determine the relationship of the "Sketskedee" (Green) to the Colorado and Buenaventura.¹²

Ashley's river expedition was epic. In a buffalo hide "bull boat" laden with supplies, he and his men pushed off on April 25, 1825. Because the boat was overloaded, the party stopped the following day to kill four more buffalo and construct another boat before continuing their trip. At Henry's Fork they cached the rendezvous supplies and then plunged into the "Slit cut into the Uintah Mountain" (Flaming Gorge). They almost lost their lives as they dashed over rapids and upended at Ashley Falls before emerging into the parklike area of Brown's Hole where the river was less severe. They reached Ashley's Fork of the Green on May 16, 1825, where they met two of the Provost trappers who related their river experiences of the previous fall. Ashley then shifted from his bull boats to dugout canoes but abandoned the river expedition at Minnie Maud Creek. His adventure may not have been as harrowing as Jim Beckworth recalled in his memoirs, but it was a remarkable trip through unknown country with less than ideal equipment. As a result of his experience, Ashley learned that the Sketskedee was not the Buenaventura flowing west to the Pacific Ocean but a major tributary of the Colorado itself, a

¹¹Donald Jackson, ed., *The Journals of Zebulon Montgomery Pike* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1966), 1:403 and 2:25-26, 48-49, 174.

¹²Dale Morgan, ed., *The West of William H. Ashley* (Denver: Old West Publishing Co., 1964), p. 112ff. See also David S. Weber, *The Taos Trappers: The Fur Trade in the Far Southwest, 1540-1846* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1971), pp. 74-75; U.S. Congress, House "License to Trade with the Indians," 19th Cong., 1st sess. (1825-26), Serial 136, *House Misc. Doc.*

relationship confirmed in 1826 by Jedediah Smith, who called the river he crossed at the mouth of the Virgin the "Seeds Skeeden."¹³

In July 1826 Lt. R. W. H. Hardy of the British Royal Navy reached the mouth of the river in his schooner *Bruja*, but contrary winds and the tidal bore greatly restricted his attempts to explore the delta area. It has not been determined that Hardy was attempting to establish a trade route for Peter Skene Ogden and other Hudson Bay Company trappers, even though some writers believe the unlikely theory that Ogden trapped down the Colorado River to the Gulf of California in 1829-30.¹⁴

Only a month later Jedediah Smith and his men explored from the Virgin River along the Colorado River through Boulder Canyon to the Black Canyon area. At that point lava cliffs and deep canyons forced them back from the river. The following year Smith bypassed the Colorado's "Great Bend" by heading southwest for the Mohave villages.¹⁵

Late in 1826 trappers from Santa Fe, including James Ohio Pattie, Ewing Young, and Thomas L. Smith, reached the Colorado near the mouth of the Gila and began to trap upriver. Some of George Yount's men built dugout canoes "after the manner of the Indians in the area," and used them to trap upriver some distance. In so doing they became the first Americans to navigate this portion of the Colorado River. While it is difficult to follow the exact route of these trappers, it seems probable that some of them reached the lower end of the Grand Canyon before heading north onto the Virgin River or southeast for Santa Fe.¹⁶

Pattie and his father returned in the fall of 1827 to trap with canoes from the mouth of the Gila River to the Gulf of California.

¹³Morgan, *The West of William H. Ashley*, pp. 106-7. See also Harrison Clifford Dale, *The Ashley-Smith Exploration and the Discovery of a Central Route to the Pacific, 1822-1829* (Glendale, Calif.: Arthur H. Clark Co., 1941), pp. 135-317, 100-129. The size of the bull boats is uncertain, but Morgan estimates they were about twelve feet by thirty feet with a twenty-inch draft. Although not very maneuverable, they were rugged and held together remarkably well. Maurice S. Sullivan, *The Travels of Jedediah Smith* (Santa Ana, Calif.: Fine Arts Press, 1934), pp. 28, 120-23.

¹⁴Lt. R. W. H. Hardy, *Travels in the Interior of Mexico, 1825, 1826, 1827, & 1828* (London: Henry Colburn and Richard Bentley, 1829), as quoted in Godfrey Sykes, *The Colorado Delta* (Washington, D.C.: Department of the Interior, 1937), pp. 13-14 and maps; Alice Bay Maloney, "Peter Skene Ogden's Trapping Expedition to the Gulf of California, 1829-1830," *California Historical Society Quarterly* 30 (December 1940): 310-12. See also Ted J. Warner, "Peter Skene Ogden and the Fur Trade of the Great Northwest" (M.A. thesis, Brigham Young University, 1958).

¹⁵Sullivan, *The Travels of Jedediah Smith*, pp. 70-75.

¹⁶Charles L. Camp, ed., *George C. Yount and His Chronicles of the West* (Denver: Old West Publishing Co., 1966), p. 33; Smith, "The Colorado River," pp. 110-16.



D. Julien inscription in Hell Roaring Canyon, apparently chalked over to enhance photograph. USHS collections.

Trapping was excellent, but a tidal bore nearly drowned their whole party.¹⁷

During the next decade trappers' interest in the lower river continued but produced little new information. Antoine Leroux claimed to have built skin canoes at the mouth of the Virgin in January 1837 and floated down the river to a point where he found timber out of which he built seven wooden canoes and continued all the way to the Gulf. If Leroux's account is correct, and his later claim that the Colorado was navigable all the way from the Virgin River to the Gulf suggests it is, then his party was the first to navigate the whole of the lower river.¹⁸

Denis Julien left his name written on the rocks at points along the Green and in lower Cataract Canyon, indicating that he trapped there in 1836. Some French words and the date 1837 on the right bank of Glen Canyon opposite the mouth of Lake Canyon are of dubious

¹⁷Timothy Flint, ed., *The Personal Narrative of James Ohio Pattie of Kentucky* in Reuben Gold Thwaites, ed., *Early Western Travels, 1746-1846* (Cleveland: Arthur H. Clark Co., 1904), pp. 190-95.

¹⁸*Daily Alta California*, May 31, 1857.

authenticity, though some have suggested a connection with Julien that would establish his presence in that canyon as well.¹⁹

Other mountain men enjoyed less successful experiences on the river. According to one account, Louis Ambrois and Jose Jessum tried to canoe down the Green in 1831 but were forced to abandon the stream and climb the canyon walls to safety. Joseph Reddeford Walker and others tried to travel on the frozen surface of the Green from the Uinta Basin to the Gulf of California.²⁰ In spite of occasional unsuccessful attempts to navigate the river, the American trappers by 1840 had learned a great deal about the Colorado River below the Grand Canyon and the Green River. They had penetrated major canyons at several river crossings and explored lengthy portions of the river, though the extent of continuous navigability was as yet undetermined.

During the heyday of Manifest Destiny in the 1840s the quest for furs largely gave way as a motive for western exploration to the quest for gold, the search for good trails for settlers, and the need for information about the vast area claimed by the Mormons as the State of Deseret. The Mexican War (1846-48) heightened the urgency of all of these quests by bringing into the public domain virtually the entire American Southwest and by making possible the discovery of California gold by Mormon soldiers.²¹

Some of the early gold hunters attempted to use the Green River as a river route to California. One unidentified party left the Oregon Trail early in 1849, built a boat, and descended the Green below Ashley Falls. They became discouraged in the venture and left a note warning others of the hazards of the river before they themselves aban-

¹⁹Otis R. "Dock" Marston, "Denis Julien," in LeRoy R. Hafen, ed., *Mountain Men and the Fur Trade of the Far West* (Glendale, Calif.: Arthur H. Clark Co., 1969), 7:170-90. On the supposed 1837 inscription in Glen Canyon, see C. Gregory Crampton, *Historical Sites in Glen Canyon: Mouth of Hansen Creek to Mouth of San Juan River* (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 1962), University of Utah Anthropological Papers, No. 61, pp. 44-45.

²⁰*Daily Alta California*, June 28, 1858; Ardis M. Walker, "Joseph R. Walker," in Hafen, *Mountain Men and the Fur Trade of the Far West*, 5:370-75.

²¹Gen. Stephen Watts Kearney's "Army of the West," which included a unit of topographical engineers under Lt. Col. W. H. Emory and the "Mormon Battalion" under Philip St. George Cooke, explored a route from Bent's Fort, Colorado, to Santa Fe and through southern Arizona along the Gila Trail to southern California during the Mexican War and added much to geographical knowledge of the Southwest. See Lt. Col. W. H. Emory, *Extract From Report of a Military Reconnaissance Made in 1846 and 1847* (Washington, D.C.: Beverly Tucker Printers, 1885), pp. 6, 17-20; Capt. A. R. Johnston, "Journal of Captain A. R. Johnston, First Dragoon," in U.S., Congress, House, *House Exec. Doc. No. 41*, 30th Cong., 1st sess. (1847-48), pp. 609-10. Johnston believed the Gila and Colorado to be navigable and that the area might "one day fill a large space in the world's history." See also Ralph P. Bieber, ed., *Exploring Southwestern Trails, 1846-1854, by Philip St. George Cooke, William Henry Chase Whiting, and Francis Xavier Aubry*, in Southwest Historical Series (Glendale, Calif.: Arthur H. Clark Co., 1938), 7:185-87. Cooke tells of sealing the wagon beds with pitch to make them waterworthy. Cooke's several guides included Antoine Leroux, Toussaint Charbonneau, and Pauline Weaver.

doned it. A second party composed of William L. Manly and six companions put an old ferry boat into service that summer and set off on the river. Below Ashley Falls the hazardous Green pinned their boat to a rock, so the men built three dugout canoes and continued their trip to the Uinta Basin, probably near present-day Green River, Utah. Although the Ute chief Walkara warned the party of the dangers of the river, two of the men continued a little further before joining the rest in resuming their travels overland. Neither of these expeditions added significantly to knowledge of the river.²²

In the meantime, California-bound emigrants on the Gila Trail needed a safe ferry at the Yuma crossing, and federal troops were sent to establish a garrison at that point. In 1850 Lt. George H. Derby, USN, brought the 120-ton schooner *Invincible* to the mouth of the river. Although he explored very little, Maj. Samuel P. Heintzelman became well acquainted with the lower river during a trip in January 1851 from Yuma to pick up supplies for his troops at the mouth of the river and on another trip a few months later pursuing Indians upriver for 150 miles, all of which he believed to be navigable. Regular supply runs from the mouth of the river to Fort Yuma were begun by James Trumbull's steamer *Uncle Sam* in 1852. George A. Johnson ultimately became the primary figure in steam navigation on that part of the river.²³

The military also looked to the river as a supply avenue for other posts. Capt. Lorenzo Sitgreaves, guided by Antoine Leroux in 1851, pronounced the river navigable south of the 35th parallel in high water, a conclusion confirmed by Lt. Amiel Weeks Whipple in his transcontinental railroad survey reports of 1853-54. Soon after this two other surveys were proposed, one upriver by Col. Randolph B. Marcy and a balloon survey by John Wise. Neither was funded.²⁴

²²Milo M. Quaife, ed., *Death Valley in '49*, by William L. Manly (Chicago: R. R. Donnelley and Sons Co., 1927), pp. 84-85, 86-125.

²³Douglas R. Martin, *Yuma Crossing* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1954); George H. Derby, *Topographical Reports* (San Francisco: California Historical Society, 1933), pp. 61-62; Godfrey Sykes, *The Colorado Delta*, p. 19; "Letter of Major Samuel P. Heintzelman to Major Emory," *San Francisco Daily Herald*, October 22, 1851; Lt. Thomas W. Sweeney, "Journal," *Military Occupation of California, 1849-53*, published in *Journal of the Military Service of the United States* (January-February 1909) and (March-April 1909); Arthur Woodward, *Feud on the Colorado* (Los Angeles: Westernlore Press, 1955), pp. 22-24. See also Francis Hall Leavitt, "Steam Navigation on the Colorado River," *California Historical Society Quarterly* 22 (March 1943): 1-2.

²⁴Capt. Lorenzo Sitgreaves, *Report of an Expedition down the Zuni and Colorado Rivers* (Washington, D.C.: Armstrong Public Printers, 1853), p. 17. Sitgreaves did not explore upriver. Lt. Amiel W. Whipple, *Reports of Exploration and Surveys to Ascertain the Most Practicable Route for a Railroad from the Mississippi River to the Pacific Ocean, 1853-1854* (Washington, D.C.: A. O. P. Nichols, 1856); Randolph B. Marcy, *Thirty Years of Army Life on the Border* (New York: Harper & Bros., 1866), pp. 280-82. Material on John Wise's proposed balloon survey comes from John F. Hoffman, San Diego, California.

Mormons in Utah read the government reports with interest. When Brigham Young sent missionaries to the Indians at Las Vegas in 1855, he also instructed Rufus Allen and William Bringham to determine the navigability of the Colorado River. Allen made a limited survey of the west bank of Black Canyon in June, and Bringham followed the river east from the Great Bend to Boulder Canyon in December. Both reported those portions navigable.²⁵

Of greater consequence were the explorations of Lt. Sylvester Mowry, who had been too solicitous of one of Governor Young's daughters-in-law while in Utah and was encouraged to leave. Mowry reached Las Vegas at the same time the Mormon missionaries were exploring the river. Continuing on to Fort Tejon, California, he recommended an upriver survey to the high point of navigation, then overland to Salt Lake City. He offered to conduct the survey himself. Mowry's request was not granted, though Capt. T. J. Cramm of the Department of the Pacific did ask for \$10,000 for the purpose, the project to begin that September. In 1856 steamboat captain George A. Johnson asked Secretary of War Jefferson Davis for \$50,000 for a survey. Maj. Robert Allen contacted Johnson regarding the project, but evidently deemed Johnson's fee of \$3,500 per month for use of his steamer too high.²⁶

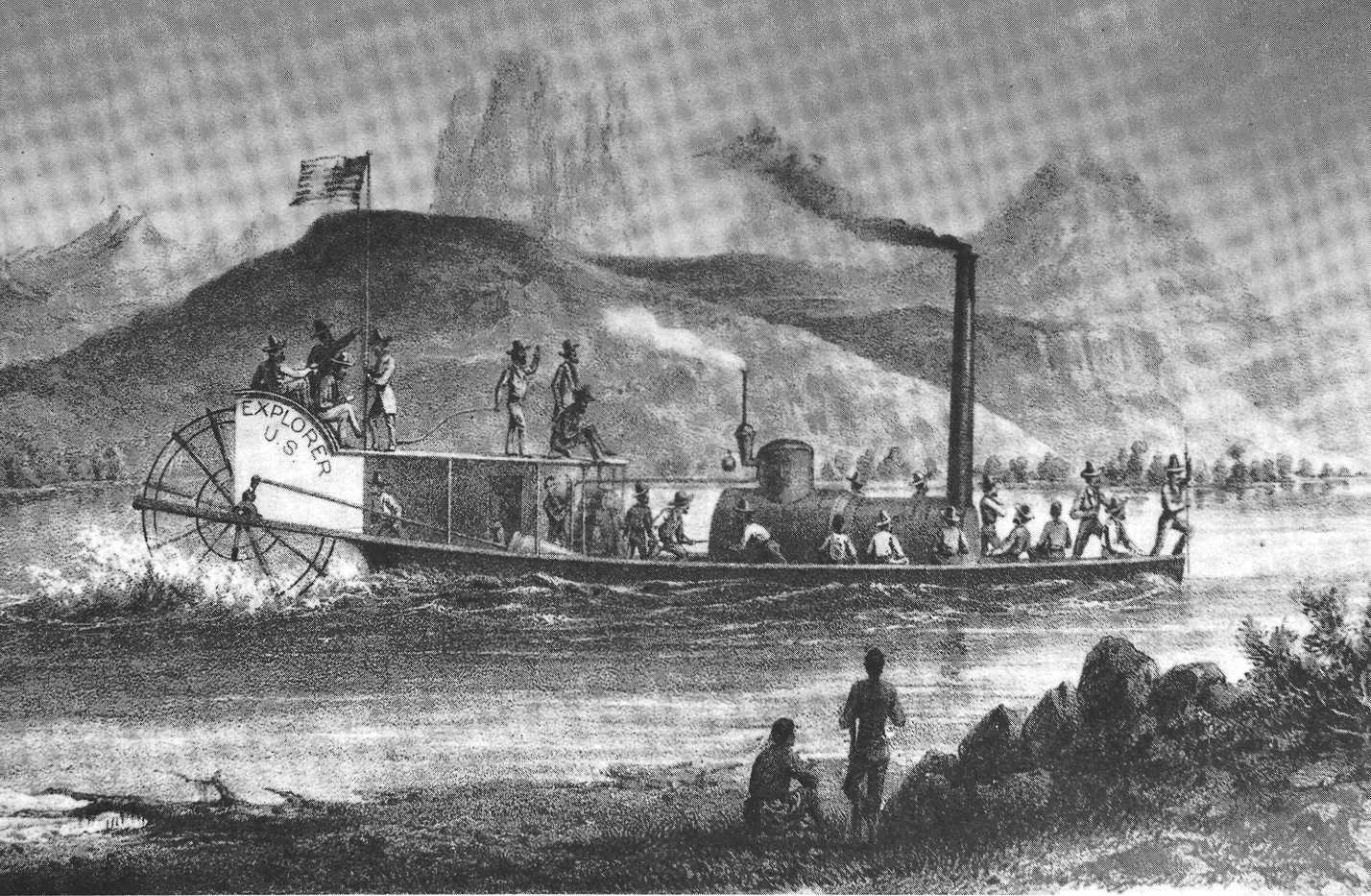
Miffed at his rejection by the army, Johnson decided to make the survey on his own. First he sent a Yuma Indian to the Mohave villages from which he floated downstream on a raft, noting sandbars and other navigational hazards. Johnson then enlisted the army's support, as reports of hostile Indians and Mormons upriver were rampant. The *General Jesup* steamed from Fort Yuma on December 31, 1857, with Lt. James White and a detachment of soldiers aboard, together with more than a dozen trappers. They eventually reached Pyramid Canyon above Mohave Valley, supporting Johnson's claim that the river was navigable for some 320 miles above its mouth.²⁷

The survey contract previously recommended by Mowry and Cramm and sought by Johnson went to Lt. Joseph C. Ives. As Ives's boat, *Explorer*, gathered steam, so did the Mormons' conflict with the

²⁵Andrew Jenson, comp., "The History of the Las Vegas Mission," *Nevada State Historical Society Papers, 1925-1926* (Reno: Nevada State Historical Society, 1926), pp. 119-284. Bringham's party arrived June 14, 1855, and Allen's party came at about the same time. See also Stanley W. Paher, *Las Vegas: As It Began, As It Grew* (Las Vegas: Nevada Publications, 1971), especially chap. 2 and pp. 201-2.

²⁶Lynn R. Bailey, ed., "Lt. Sylvester Mowry's Report on His March in 1855 from Salt Lake City to Fort Tejon," *Arizona and the West* 7 (Winter 1965): 330-39. The young lady's husband was absent on a mission for the LDS church. Woodward, *Feud on the Colorado*, pp. 61-62.

²⁷Woodward, *Feud on the Colorado*, pp. 79-101.



Lithograph of Ives's boat, Explorer, was used in his Report upon the Colorado River of the West. Original sketch was made by H. B. Mollhausen. USHS collections.

federal government. As he began his upriver journey, a Mormon expedition moved south from Las Vegas to near the Mohave villages with the purpose of investigating him. A meeting between Ives and Thales Haskell aboard the steamer in Cottonwood Valley reassured the Mormons of Ives's peaceful purpose, and Ives continued upriver to the mouth of Black Canyon where the boat struck a rock. While his crew repaired the damage, Ives and Captain Robinson rowed a skiff up through Black Canyon to the mouth of Vegas Wash, which Ives erroneously believed to be the Virgin River. Returning to the Mohave villages, Ives left the river to begin a pack train trip to Fort Defiance, stopping on the way to descend Diamond Creek to the Colorado. Ives's report of 1858 literally put the Colorado River from the Great Bend to its mouth on the map.²⁸

²⁸Melvin T. Smith, "Colorado River Exploration and the Mormon War," *Utah Historical Quarterly* 38 (Summer 1970): 212-21; see also Amasa Lyman Journal No. 16, in the Utah State Historical Society Library, Salt Lake City, pp. 111-12. Joseph C. Ives, *Report Upon the Colorado River of the West*

Mohave Indian hostilities brought the military to Mohave Valley above the Needles in 1859. Many of the California volunteers were miners who quickly located promising ores along and near the Colorado River. Mining soon expanded steamboat service up the river, which prompted both merchants and Mormons to examine carefully the upriver navigational limits of the Colorado. This interest reached a high point in 1864.

Jacob Hamblin and his Mormon missionaries had crossed the Colorado River several times between 1858 and 1862 at Kane Creek and west of the Grand Canyon. In 1863 they took a sixteen-foot skiff built by Isaac Riddle to the river at the mouth of Grand Wash and rowed upriver two or three miles to the approximate later location of Pearce's Ferry a short distance below the Grand Canyon. Theirs was the first recorded boat on that stretch of water.²⁹

Reports of explorations multiplied. James Moss claimed that he and some Indian guides and soldiers had built a raft above the Grand Canyon and floated through it in 1861, though verifiable evidence for that unlikely feat is lacking. Samuel Adams, a perennial promoter of the river, claimed he floated from the Virgin River three hundred miles downstream on a raft in the spring of 1864. Adams's claim, too, seems doubtful, and even if true adds nothing of importance to the historical record, for it duplicates Antoine Leroux's trip of 1837. A reporter from El Dorado Canyon recorded on March 10, 1864, that "There has been a small steamer pass through Black Canyon above here." George A. Johnson was a likely person to have been making such a trip, but the report identifies neither boat nor captain.³⁰

Another newspaper report a month later said that "Messrs. Butterfield and Perry passed here [Fort Mohave] a few days ago to go upstream 200 or 300 miles." It would seem likely that Perry was James Ferry, who, the article notes, "had been on the Virgin River" before.

(Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1861), pp. 5-6, 21, 39, 92-131. News of the Mormon unrest reached Ives via newspapers and letters given him by Captain Wilcox, who passed the *Explorer* on December 31, 1857, just after the steamer got under way. Haskell attempted feebly to conceal his identity from Ives, who reported that such behavior "did not argue well for the bishop's sanctity"; Ives was also well aware that the Mormons were making allies of the Mohave Indians for possible warfare against the federal government. See also letter of A. A. Humphreys to Joseph C. Ives, quoted in William H. Goetzmann, "The Topographical Engineers and Western Movement," *New York Westerners Posse Brand Book*, No. 4 (1958), pt. 3, p. 382.

²⁹James G. Bleak, "Annals of the Southern Utah Mission, Book A," at Utah State Historical Society, pp. 100-101.

³⁰San Francisco *Daily Morning Call*, April 9, 1877; Samuel Adams, "Exploring the Colorado River and Its Tributaries," in U.S., Congress, House, 41st Cong., 3d Sess. (1870-71), *House Misc. Doc.* No. 12, pp. 103; Odie B. Faulk, "The Steamboat War That Opened Arizona," *Arizoniana* 5 (Winter 1964): 1-9; *Daily Alta California*, April 6, 1864.

Details of their trip were reported on June 12. The river was said to be navigable for 180 miles above Fort Mohave, and the party claimed to have been upriver some 250 miles and to have discovered sources of timber, a vein of coal, and salt. That mileage above Fort Mohave would have taken them through the Grand Canyon, which is improbable. Apparently Ferry and Butterfield made a second trip in June 1864. From El Dorado Canyon they rowed upriver to Vegas Wash and Circle Valley (Call's Landing) and on into the Grand Canyon, where Indians supposedly reported that the junction of the Green and Grand rivers was only 140 miles away. It is probable that this second Ferry-Butterfield trip was in fact the Octavius D. Gass expedition of 1864 reported by Lt. George M. Wheeler. If so, Gass, Ferry, Butterfield, and an Indian were the first explorers by water from the mouth of the Virgin upriver into the Grand Canyon some nineteen miles. At that point they placed rock markers on each side of the stream, markers that Wheeler located on his 1871 trip.³¹

When Mormons read James Ferry's claim that steamers could deliver goods to Circle Valley, which meant that freight could bypass the very difficult Virgin Hill on the regular freight route from California, they again focused their attention on the Colorado River as a transportation route for both goods and Utah immigrants. During the summer Jacob Hamblin was commissioned to locate a good road to the high point of navigation, which was presumed to be the Virgin River. Although that trip apparently was cancelled, he and some others launched a skiff, the *Virgin Adventurer*, on the Virgin River near St. George in an attempt to float down to the Colorado. They gave up when the waters disappeared underground in the Virgin Narrows. Late in 1864 Mormons began building the short-lived settlement of Callville, but by mid-1865 their support for the project waned, in part because James Ferry had filed on the land on which it was located.³²

³¹*Daily Alta California*, May 14, July 4, and August 6, 1864. Capt. George M. Wheeler, *Report upon Geographical and Geological Surveys, Principally in Nevada and Arizona* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1875), vol. 1, pp. 151, 163; Otis R. "Dock" Marston, "Early Travel on the Green and Colorado Rivers," *The Smoke Signal* 21 (Fall 1969): 233. Marston places leadership with James Ferry and identifies markers nineteen miles inside the Grand Canyon. The fourth member of the party, he claims, was an Indian, not a Mr. Cowan. Further grouping is suggested in a letter from George Brimhall to George A. Smith, December 10, 1865, in the LDS Church Library-Archives, Salt Lake City, in which he reports his own arrival at the Colorado River in June 1865, where he met three men, "Mr. Parry [James Ferry], Mr. Gass [O. D. Gass], and Mr. Cowan."

³²Bleak, "Annals of the Southern Utah Mission, Book A," pp. 146-47, shows that on June 11, 1864, the High Council selected Jacob Hamblin, Isaac Duffin, David H. Cannon, and Leonard H. Conger, but apparently they did not go. Later the council gave the assignment to Hamblin, Angus M. Cannon, and David Cannon. Letter of Daniel Bonelli, *Deseret News*, March 1, 1865; Leonard J. Arrington, "Inland to Zion: Mormon Trade on the Colorado River, 1864-1867," *Arizona and the West* 8 (Autumn 1966): 239-50.

The year 1866 produced new stories of river exploration. Samuel Adams claimed to have descended much of the Grand River of Colorado and to have gone above Boulder Canyon for a second boat trip down the Colorado. Several Montana miners reported embarking on the Muddy River, following it to the Virgin and on down the Colorado, though Mormon settlers on the Muddy did not note seeing them. Col. Randolph B. Marcy reported that mountaineers in Utah told him of a party of trappers that built a large rowboat to descend the canyons but were never heard of afterward.³³

Marcy himself proposed a second survey using small rowboats, which he believed "would not be hazardous if the direction of travel were upstream," but his expedition was not funded. Lt. Anson Mills believed he could run a steamer upriver from the Gulf, through the Grand Canyon, to the Green, and on to Wyoming. When Col. James F. Rusling reported to Secretary of War William W. Belknap in November 1866 on the merits of the Colorado-Callville-Salt Lake City route, he added, "Should I continue in the service, I would like no better duty than to ascend the Colorado from its mouth upward and explore all these rivers (Green, Grand, San Juan) to the head of navigation." In May 1867 Rusling wrote from Fort Yuma about people who reportedly had gone into the big canyon. When he met Colonel Carter, secretary of Arizona Territory, he was told that Carter was going to pole upriver with ten or twelve men in two small boats past Callville and the mouth of the Rio Virgin, "and pass through the alleged Big Canyon, if possible, to the junction of the Green, Grand and San Juan rivers above." Carter believed the Colorado to be no more difficult a stream than the Tennessee River. His expedition apparently was never launched.³⁴

Mormon church leaders in St. George, still hoping to capitalize on the transportation possibilities of the Colorado River, sent an expedition to the river at Grand Wash. In April 1867 they launched a sixteen-foot skiff manned by Jacob Hamblin, Henry W. Miller, and Jesse W. Crosby. The men first rowed upriver a mile and a half, then turned downstream with Callville as their destination. They reported in detail on the river, noting rapids over which the skiff was lowered with lariats, and a large canyon below Grand Wash and another through the Virgin Range. They spent their first night at Tower Rock, reaching the Virgin

³³Adams, "Exploring the Colorado River and Its Tributaries," p. 3; "Report of James F. Rushing from Yuma," (May 16, 1867) in U.S., Congress, House, 42d Cong., 2d sess. (1871-72), *House Exec. Doc. No. 166*, pp. 6-7; Marcy, *Thirty Years of Army Life on the Border*, pp. 280-82.

³⁴"Report of Colonel James F. Rusling," pp. 1-7.

River the next morning. The following day they floated through the awesome cut of Boulder Canyon and landed at Callville, previously the high point of navigation for them. They were the first river travelers to report in detail about this part of the Colorado River, and their report became available to John Wesley Powell.³⁵

Finally there was James White, a controversial Colorado miner who was prospecting with two partners on the upper San Juan River in 1867 when they made a fateful decision to move over to the Colorado River. After being attacked by Indians who killed one partner, White and the other companion built a crude raft to escape down the river. The other partner was drowned, but White said he rode the raft all the way through Marble and Grand canyons, reaching Callville in an emaciated condition in September. White was undoubtedly confused in his geography, for the details of his description of his journey cannot be certainly linked with known features; but he has attracted numerous believers in his feat. Most students of the episode, though, have come to follow approximately in the footsteps of Robert Brewster Stanton, who concluded that White was simply lost when he first struck the Colorado River and in fact embarked somewhere downstream from the mouth of the Grand Canyon.³⁶

By the time of John Wesley Powell's first expedition in 1869, then, a large body of reliable information on the course, nature, and tributaries of the Colorado River was available, much of which had passed into the literature from the earliest Indian and Spanish sources, from the mountain men who had guided later military surveys, and from the Mormons who wished to settle along the river and utilize its transportation potential. Consequently, when Powell and his men floated down some 1,000 miles of the river, they covered only 250 miles that were still completely unknown; and when they emerged from the mouth of the Grand Canyon, they knew where they were. Nevertheless, Powell's achievement was remarkable; the reasons the unexplored portions of the river had remained obscure are the same reasons Powell's venture was heroic. He and his men, though not the first to try, were the first to succeed through these remote and hazardous canyons of the Colorado River.

³⁵Albert E. Miller, *Immortal Pioneers, Founders of St. George, Utah* (St. George, Utah: Privately published, 1946), pp. 67-70; *Deseret News*, July 3, 1867.

³⁶Robert Brewster Stanton, *Colorado River Controversies* (New York: Dodd, Mead & Co., 1932), pp. 3-93. A modern supporter of the James White story is Richard E. Lingenfelter, *First through the Grand Canyon* (Los Angeles: Glen Dawson, 1958); a modern skeptical view is Otis R. "Dock" Marston, "The Points of Embarkation of James White in 1857 [*sic*]," *Los Angeles Westerners Corral Branding Iron*, 75 (December 1965): 1ff.