

# Introduction

## *The “Great Unknown”*

It has been 150 years since John Wesley Powell’s famous voyage down the Green and Colorado rivers, yet he is still an icon. Why? The answer to that question, as this volume makes clear, depends upon whom you ask. Some would say it is because Powell was the first person to run the Grand Canyon’s world-class rapids. Others might mention that he made the US Geological Survey into a modern, effective agency. Still others would point to Powell’s groundbreaking ideas on water and land policy, or his prodigious work in ethnology and anthropology. A few academics might recognize that he was an industrious researcher, and arguably an even more influential supervisor of others’ research, during the latter part of the nineteenth century. And, finally, some might draw attention to the fact that, by any reasonable contemporary standard, Powell would be considered an overt racist. Indeed, one would be hard-pressed to find a more complex, varied, and eclectic individual in the annals of US history than John Wesley Powell. In this volume, we delve deeply into the man, his time and ours, and the relative value of his ideas in guiding us into a future that will be markedly different from our past.

On May 24, 1869, Major Powell’s Colorado River Exploring Expedition stood along the banks of the Green River in Wyoming Territory. Powell, his right arm missing from a wound received seven years earlier at Shiloh, launched four clumsy wooden boats into the current and entered *terra incognita*. As he subsequently described it, Powell and his crew had begun a journey down the “Great Unknown.” Roughly three

months later—after extraordinary challenges not to be recounted here—the expedition arrived at the Virgin River’s mouth in southern Nevada, having run not only the Grand Canyon (and affixing its name en route) but several hundred miles of the Green and Colorado rivers in Utah and Colorado territories. A landmark event in US history had taken place, a journey comparable in import to the Lewis and Clark Expedition that would capture our collective imagination for the next 150 years.

Yet Powell was far more than an adventurous explorer and wounded Civil War veteran. He played a pivotal role in the intellectual and scientific development of the United States. A “man of letters” in the finest sense of the term, Powell authored more than 250 articles, monographs, and books during his lifetime, though he never quite adapted to writing with his left hand and had to dictate most of his work. As reflected in his voluminous publications, not only did Powell master multiple scientific disciplines over his career, he contributed significantly to the creation of several of them. Franz Boas worked for Powell during his formative years, for example, later moving on to a prestigious position at Columbia University where he founded the discipline of anthropology. Powell similarly employed and provided training to Lester Frank Ward, who later established the discipline of sociology. In addition, Powell helped leading universities such as Harvard, Yale, and the University of Wisconsin establish cutting-edge science programs.

Powell also created a host of enduring institutions. He started the Cosmos Club in 1878—an exclusive organization based on intellectual accomplishment. One year later, Powell organized the National Geographic Society with a small group of friends and simultaneously helped create the Anthropological Society of Washington, predecessor of the world’s largest anthropological organization, the American Anthropological Association. In a similar fashion, Powell was instrumental in establishing the Smithsonian Institution’s Bureau of Ethnology—later renamed the Bureau of American Ethnology—including serving as its first director (1879–1902). This directorship preceded, and for thirteen years ran concurrently with, Powell’s position as second director of the US Geological Survey (1881–94), which he molded into the scientific bastion it is today.

These and other intellectual achievements garnered Powell national and international recognition. He was awarded an honorary law degree from Harvard University, an honorary doctorate from Illinois Wesleyan, a “doctor of laws” from George Washington University, and a

Ph.D. *in absentia* from Heidelberg University in Germany. Powell likewise accepted France's Cuvier Prize on behalf of the US Geological Survey. All told, John Wesley Powell was a giant in late-nineteenth-century intellectual endeavors, with an enduring legacy that still shapes contemporary pursuits. Not bad for a one-armed college dropout.

Notwithstanding his robust career and scientific accomplishments, Powell is most famous today for the 1869 Expedition, an enterprise so hazardous it is properly characterized as a dangerous stunt. He organized a "scientific" expedition to descend the Colorado River Basin's wild, often tempestuous canyons, yet none of his crew had scientific expertise. Nor did they have experience rowing boats through rapids. With characteristic perseverance and force of personality, however, Powell completed this pathbreaking adventure successfully, and all crew members who obeyed his orders and stuck with him survived. Unfortunately, that was not the fate of the expedition's full complement of ten men, but those who remained steadfast emerged from the Grand Canyon as national heroes. And Powell's entrepreneurialism and leadership propelled him through an illustrious career of public service and government science.

Powell's place in American history and culture has eclipsed most of his contemporaries. Other leading voices on water resources and geography at that time—W. J. McGee, Grove Karl Gilbert, Clarence Dutton, John Strong Newberry—have been largely forgotten. Powell's competitors in the post-Civil War surveys of the West—George Wheeler, Ferdinand Hayden, and Clarence King—generally live on only as place names on maps. Similarly, Powell's political nemeses—Senator William Stewart of Nevada, Congressman Hilary Herbert from Alabama, and irrigation booster William Smythe—are the stuff of historical trivia. But Powell rose to the status of icon.

Powell left a lasting legacy for water and land management in the Colorado River Basin and broader region. His *Arid Lands Report* has been described as prophetic, prescient, revolutionary, and visionary. But Powell's other field of study, anthropology, has virtually disowned him. His work is regarded today as ethnocentric claptrap. Why? How could a single individual have such dramatic success and failure in so many fields of academic study and public policy? This volume sheds light.

In an age of social media, it is perhaps difficult to conceive of a "media star" in the age of telegraphs. But John Wesley Powell was precisely that. His stardom partly explains why today there is something of

a “Powell cult” among river runners, scholars, and water and land managers. Yet Powell’s most enduring legacy is in public policy and academia. Powell reinvented himself over and over again, usually excelling at whatever new task he adopted. He set a new standard for being an eclectic polymath. That is why his life and work are the subject of so many writings, why he is still regarded as a major figure in US history, and why it is fitting upon the 1869 Expedition’s sesquicentennial to delve into his ideas and proposals for their relevance to the past, present, and future of the Colorado River Basin.

Yet, although *Vision & Place* grows out of the sesquicentennial, it does not heavily emphasize Powell’s river adventures. A large body of work already exists on the 1869 Expedition (and a subsequent 1871–72 Expedition) as well as on Powell’s other exploits across the West. His most important contributions were not in running rapids, but rather in the two areas just noted: public policy and academia. The goal of this volume is to explore all facets of the man, not just those that are thrilling or involve the more attractive aspects of his ideology and actions. In short, it aims to see John Wesley Powell as a whole.

The cast of contributors serves this goal. Contributing authors consist of sixteen scholars with deep-rooted connections to the Colorado River Basin. They represent diverse fields such as American studies, anthropology, environmental studies, geography, history, law, Native American and Indigenous studies, political science, and watershed management. Accompanying these authors are eight visual artists whose images—coupled with maps produced by two cartographers—complement the volume’s text.

This rich content is divided into three parts, on water, public lands, and Native Americans. Powell’s opus revolved around these subjects, and they are unmistakable in contemporary discourse about the Colorado River Basin. For example, consider that roughly 40 million people now rely on the basin for water, including major population centers like Los Angeles, San Diego, Phoenix, Tucson, Las Vegas, Denver, Salt Lake City, and Albuquerque. This dependence belies climate change’s impacts on the basin’s hydrology and a two-decade drought that has depleted the basin’s reservoirs by half. In a similar vein, the basin’s abundant national parks and other public lands have been a powder keg for decades, most recently lit by a US President’s attempt to invoke the Antiquities Act to reduce Bears Ears and Grand Staircase-Escalante national monuments. This attempt is being litigated in federal court. Finally, no study of Powell and the Colorado River Basin would be

complete, credible, or fair without including the twenty-nine Native American tribes residing on reservations throughout the basin, including the largest tribe in the United States, the Navajo Nation. These Indigenous Peoples have survived over four hundred years of Euro-American attempts at colonization. It is impossible to capture the vexing, unresolved issues of cultural integrity, economic inequality, and social injustice facing the basin's tribes. But that is precisely what this volume attempts.

Each chapter has standardized elements. The first element is historical and concerns Powell's vision of water, public lands, and Native Americans in the Colorado River Basin and broader arid region. The second element, in turn, consists of contemporary material assessing the relative influence of Powell's vision on the physical and cultural landscape of the basin in modern times. Finally, the third element is prospective and prescriptive. It focuses on the basin's future, including authors' visions of water, public lands, and Native Americans going forward, as well as the relationship between these visions and Powell's own. This three-part format offers a unique combination of retrospective and prospective angles.

Our unifying theme is Powell's famous reference to the "Great Unknown." Powell penned this phrase on August 13, 1869, while at the confluence of the Colorado River and Little Colorado River in the Grand Canyon. "We are now ready to start on our way down the Great Unknown," he wrote. "We have an unknown distance yet to run; an unknown river yet to explore. What falls there are, we know not; what rocks beset the channel, we know not; what walls rise over the river, we know not. Ah, well! We may conjecture many things." Powell's "Great Unknown" phrase is apropos to the Colorado River Basin today. There is no precedent for how the basin is being inhabited and utilized. Again, roughly 40 million people rely on its water in an era of anthropogenic climate change. Tourism and recreation on the basin's public lands are at unprecedented levels. And we relish in stating the obvious: the basin's tribes have *not* vanished. They have persisted through Euro-American colonization and now hold significant claims to both water and land—claims with profound implications for human rights, postcolonialism, and multilevel governance in our constitutional democracy.

From this vantage point, *now* is the time we collectively launch into the "Great Unknown." How should we envision the Colorado River Basin's future? What would we like to see the basin become as a place?

Commemorating the historic 1869 Expedition's sesquicentennial, and revisiting John Wesley Powell's tremendous body of work for grounding, *Vision & Place* is rooted in these foundational questions. Our aim is to foster awareness and promote dialogue about the new "Great Unknown." Ultimately, it is this essential theme, and the love of place and sense of stewardship tied to it, that unify the volume.