

## Early life

**John Wesley Powell** (March 24, 1834 – September 23, 1902) was a U.S. soldier, geologist, and explorer of the American West. He is famous for the 1869 Powell Geographic Expedition, a three-month river trip down the Green and Colorado rivers that included the first passage through the Grand Canyon



Powell was born in Mount Morris, New York, in 1834, the son of Joseph and Mary Powell. His father, a poor itinerant preacher, had emigrated to the US from Shrewsbury, England in 1830. His family moved westward to Jackson, Ohio, then Walworth County, Wisconsin, then finally settling in Illinois in rural Boone County. He studied at Illinois College, Wheaton College, and Oberlin College, acquiring a knowledge of Ancient Greek and Latin but never graduating. Powell had a deep interest in the natural sciences, and a restless nature. As a young man, he undertook a series of adventures through the Mississippi River valley.

In 1855 he spent four months walking across Wisconsin. In 1856 he rowed the Mississippi from St. Anthony to the sea, in 1857 he rowed down the Ohio River from Pittsburgh to St. Louis, and in 1858 down the Illinois River, then up the Mississippi and the Des Moines River to central Iowa. He was elected to the Illinois Natural History Society in 1859



## Civil War and aftermath

Powell enlisted in the Union army as a topographer and military engineer. Serving first with the 20th Illinois Volunteers. At the Battle of Shiloh, he lost most of one arm when struck by a Minie ball. The raw nerve endings in his arm would continue to cause him pain the rest of his life.

Despite the loss of an arm, he bravely returned to the army and was present at Champion Hill and Big Black River Bridge on the Big Black River. Further medical attention to his arm did little to slow him; he was made a major and served as chief of artillery with the 17th Army Corps. In 1862 he married Emma Dean.

After leaving the Army he took the post of professor of geology at the Illinois Wesleyan University. He also lectured at Illinois State Normal University, helping found the Illinois Museum of Natural History, where he served as the curator, but declined a permanent appointment in favor of exploration of the American West.

## Expeditions

From 1867 he led a series of expeditions into the Rocky Mountains and around the Green and Colorado rivers. In 1869 he set out to explore the Colorado and the Grand Canyon. He gathered nine men, four boats and food for ten months and set out from Green River, Wyoming on May 24. Passing through dangerous rapids, the group passed down the Green River to its confluence with the Colorado River (then also known as the Grand River upriver from the junction), near present-day Moab, Utah. The expedition's route traveled through the Utah canyons of the Colorado River, which Powell described in his published diary as having ". wonderful features carved walls, royal arches, glens, alcove gulches, mounds and monuments. From which of these features shall we select a name? We decide to call it Glen Canyon." One man quit after the first month and another three left at Separation Rapid, only two days before the group reached the mouth of the Virgin River on August 30, after traversing almost 932 Miles.

# CALIFORNIA

## EXPLORERS

### John Wesley Powell



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It is speculated that the three who left the group late in the trip were later killed by a band of the Northern Paiute. However, exactly how and why they died remains a mystery debated by Powell biographers. Powell retraced the route in 1871-1872 with another expedition, producing photographs (by John K. Hillers), an accurate map, and various papers. In planning this expedition, he employed the services of a missionary who had cultivated excellent relationships with the Native Americans. Before setting out, Powell used him as a negotiator to ensure the safety of his expedition from local Indian groups who he believed had killed the three men lost from his previous journey

#### After the Colorado

In 1878, the intellectual gatherings Powell hosted in his home were formalized as the Cosmos Club. In 1881 he became the second director of the US Geological Survey, a post he held until 1894.

He was also the director of the Bureau of Ethnology at the Smithsonian Institution until his death. Under his leadership, an influential classification of North American Indian languages was published. In 1875 he published a book based on his explorations of the Colorado originally titled *Report of the Exploration of the Columbia River of the West and Its Tributaries*, revised and reissued in 1895 as *The Exploration of the Colorado River and Its Canyons*. Powell was buried in Arlington National Cemetery.

“Thus the Grand Canyon is a land of song. Mountains of music swell in the rivers, hills of music billow in the creeks, and meadows of music murmur in the rills that ripple over the rocks. Altogether it is a symphony of multitudinous melodies. All this is the music of waters.”

--John Wesley Powell

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