

## **John Wesley Powell**

John Wesley Powell, originally a professor of botany, histology, comparative anatomy, physiology, zoology, biology, natural philosophy, natural sciences, geology, and mineralogy at the Illinois Wesleyan University became in 1867 the official curator of the Illinois Natural History Museum. A war veteran of the civil war he even gave his right arm for the Union fighting alongside the Illinois Thirty-third Schoolmasters Regiment of the Normal University. In July of 1866, at the Natural History Society in Bloomington, Powell requested a committee with the State Board of Education to appropriate funds for the museum. Powell, wanting to advance his research and go on explorations of the Rockies felt that the Normal University, with the headquarters of the Natural History Society, would serve far better for his explorative purposes than Wesleyan. Powell's recommendation for funds was granted in 1867 and Powell chosen as the curator unanimously.

Powell's expedition proposal to the Rockies was granted and initially \$500 was set aside by the Normal University for funding. As more funding was needed in order to make the expedition viable, Powell went elsewhere to look for his much needed funds. First, Powell went to Washington to receive aid from his former comrade in arms, General Grant, who at the time was head of the War Department. He succeeded in obtaining rations, and an escort of soldiers. Seeing an opportunity to secure a teaching position to fall back on, Powell took a leave of absence from Wesleyan University, with implied hopes to return to a teaching position. He also went to the University at Urbana, the Industrial University as it was called, and requested a professorship and received \$500 in funds by agreeing to donate duplicate specimens to the University from his expedition and his private collection. His funds by the end of his requisitions totaled \$1100 from Normal, Urbana, Chicago Academy of Sciences, and the U.S. Government. Roughly one half of the costs at his estimate. The rest was supplied by Powell himself.

Powell was also able to solicit free transportation for his men and supplies (shipping costs that would have cost him \$1700. The Smithsonian even supplied him with scientific equipment in exchange for copies of the data he had obtained during his explorations. The expedition consisted of a variety of specialists, a herpetologist, mineralogist, two zoologists, botanist, entomologist, two ornithologists, a photographer/artist and Powell as geologist and mission leader.

The expedition began to collect an immense amount of specimens of birds, mammals, fish, reptiles, plants, insects, and fossils as they needed to collect duplicates of everything. He agreed to send back and supply the following institutions with copies of everything found, Chicago Academy, the University at Urbana, Illinois Wesleyan museum, and the Normal University museum. At the end of the first expedition, which ended in Denver Colorado, Powell went before the Board to present his financial statement which totaled \$2138 and his plans for a second expedition into the West. They agreed with his proposal for a second expedition and appropriated a sum of \$300 for expenses for making his private collection available to the museum and \$600 for his second expedition.

During his time between his expeditions, Powell and four assistants labeled, catalogued, and arranged exhibits from the collections of the summer's finds. During this tenure, the Industrial University of

Urbana elected Powell a professorship which he tenuously accepted despite his current position at Wesleyan and Normal.

In June, the Board met and took a tour of the museum and of the specimens collected by Powell. This coming on the heels of his resignation from Wesleyan University. The tour showed a collection of 900 birds, several hundred plants, thousands of insects, and a series of no insignificance, of rocks, lizards, minerals, fossils, skeletons, and skins.

The second expedition began in Chicago where the party was transported to Cheyenne. The Natural History Society voted on another \$400 for Powell to acquire instruments to explore the Colorado River. This Colorado journey turned up artifacts of over half a ton, including 500 birds, 250 specimens of animals, and a wealth of topographical, geographical, and observation notes. This amount of information to be had in the mountains and wilds of the West led Powell to resign from the post at the Industrial University he had never filled. His resignations from both the Industrial University and Wesleyan led to concern and realization that Powell never intended on returning to the museum in Old Main.

Upon his return from his expeditions (1869-1870), Powell returned to an immense amount of unopened boxes, untreated specimens and a disgruntled University. Despite being rocketed to national renown as a great natural scientist, Powell focused his efforts on regaling students of his adventures than focusing on his work.

Powell was eager to make another journey into the Colorado region and began to plan anew for a two year expedition. But this time funds were not as easy to come by, the Industrial University was insulted at his denouncing of his professorship and offered no funds. But, from the General Assembly he was expecting roughly \$1500 of the museum's annual maintenance and improvement funds. He also aimed at government funds and again, free transportation courtesy of his friend Grant and the railroads.

By 1870 the Old Main museum was bursting with collected artifacts and specimens valued at \$95,000. The botany collection; 100,000 specimens, \$25,000. Fossils; 15,000 specimens, \$20,000. Shells alone totaled 15,000 and was listed at \$15,000. This is not including the other countless specimens and thousands of books accrued during Powell's curatorial tenure. There was no way to display or care for the collection properly in Old Main as it was.

A committee was designated to look into building a two story fireproof building 50 by 70 feet with a basement including a workshop and three storerooms. The building was slated to cost \$60,000 and fully equipped at another \$15,000; the General Assembly did not wish to put forth \$75,000 for a collection it (the state) did not own. So in 1871 the Appropriation Act was passed which made the collections, cases, and equipment of the Natural History Society, held at the time in Old Main, be handed over to the state for satisfactory care and preservation.

In 1872, Powell resigned amid his national fame, handing over his curator position to Stephen A. Forbes. At this point the museum totaled 24,230 specimens (much confusion was to be had over what was the property of the museum or Powell's private collection). To combat the confusion, Jesse W. Fell was

appointed to monitor the curator in preventing any persons from removing any contents of the museum except on order of the committee.

Powell, now in great disfavor by the University, ignored all sanctions and began to ship a great quantity of the collections to the Smithsonian and his new home in Washington. The committee began to correspond with the Smithsonian in an attempt to return the artifacts removed by Powell but to no avail. Now in federal employ, the materials were to remain at the Smithsonian, that is until years later when Powell, of his own initiative returned specimens to the Old Main museum.

From 1879 until his death he headed the Bureau of Ethnology, and under his leadership that office organized the nation's first systematic research into Native American life ways. From 1881 until 1894, he also was director of the U.S. Geological Survey, leading what would become under his administration the largest scientific organization in the world. For twelve hectic years he was director of both institutions, and by 1888 he was heading the federal government's scientific triumvirate of topographic, geologic, and hydrologic surveys.

President James Garfield appointed Powell the Geological Survey's second director. The survey's role and annual budget increased exponentially during Powell's tenure, and by 1890-1891, the annual appropriation for the Geological Survey neared \$750,000, a remarkable sum for that period and enough to make it the largest scientific organization in the world. One of the most significant accomplishments of Powell's tenure as director was the initiation of a comprehensive topographic survey of the nation, a project that necessitated 54,000 maps and was not completed until 1991.

Powell died September 23, 1902, at the age of sixty-nine. "His passing away will be a loss not only to the local institutions of learning, but to the world of science at large," declared the Pantograph. Powell earned fame out West as an explorer, and influence in the nation's capital as a scientist, reformer, government leader, and conservationist. Today, his name remains most closely associated with the Grand Canyon and the federal science bureaucracy. But for Powell, prior to the treacherous currents and canyons of the Colorado River there were the more placid rivers of the Middle West; before the Geological Survey there was the Illinois Natural History Society. Indeed, Major John Wesley Powell's ideas, character, and determination were forged in the Illinois prairies and backwaters.