

FIRST DRAFT

BROKEN DREAMS

‘Navigable’ Colorado, Green Rivers long raised hopes of explorers

In 1866, U.S. Army Col. Anson Mills, then at Fort Bridger, Wyoming, wrote a letter to Judge Christian Eyester, of Colorado’s Territorial Supreme Court. He sought Eyester’s support for a plan to send a steamboat from the mouth of the Colorado River upstream to Green River, Wyoming.



BOB SILBERNAGEL

Three years before John Wesley Powell made the first full excursion down the Green and Colorado rivers, Mills believed the river could be navigated in the opposite direction.

If he launched his steamboat at the mouth of the Colorado, “I could reach this latitude, (near present-day Flaming Gorge Reservoir) in 30 days,” Mills proclaimed to Eyester. “I am satisfied that Green River is more susceptible of navigation than the Missouri (River) far above this point for over four months in the year.”

Anson Mills was no fool. He served with distinction for the Union Army during the Civil War. He designed and patented an ammunition belt that made him wealthy. He had various posts during the Indian wars and retired as a Brigadier General. He served on the Boundary Commission between the United States and Mexico and wrote much of the 1907 treaty that divided the waters of the Rio Grande between the two nations.

But in 1866, Mills succumbed to the prevalent belief that the Green River and lower Colorado River were navigable waterways that could significantly boost transportation and commerce in the West. He was far from alone.

Spanish adventurers, American explorer Zebulon Pike, California gold rush participants and early Mormon leaders, as well as military officials, all sought to navigate the river.

In his letter to Eyester, Mills said he planned to ask Secretary of War Edwin Stanton to fund his project. But the effort went nowhere. Perhaps that’s because the Army already had a report in hand, making it clear that there were limits to navigation on the Colorado River.

On Dec. 31, 1857, Lt. Joseph Christmas Ives of the Army Corps of Topographical Engineers, set sail from the mouth of the Colorado River in a small steamship, the U.S. Explorer. The ship had been built in Philadelphia, dismantled and shipped to Panama, ferried overland to the Pacific, then hauled by boat to the mouth of the Colorado River, where it was reassembled.

Ives and his crew of 27 men eventually made it 420 miles upstream to the Black Canyon, near the location of today’s Hoover Dam. He determined that was as far as the Explorer could travel.

After stopping at the lower end of the Black Canyon, Ives and three members



U.S. GEOLOGICAL SURVEY

Map of the Colorado River Basin from Wyoming to the Gulf of California.

of his crew used a skiff to continue upstream, with many portages around rapids, to the mouth of the Virgin River and the lower end of the Grand Canyon.

Ives wrote his expedition report later in 1858. However, it wasn’t published until 1861. Even so, top officials in the Army would have known of Ives’ conclusions by the time Anson Mills suggested a steamboat could make it all the way upstream to Green River, Wyoming.

Long before Europeans and Americans arrived to begin exploring the river system, Natives were familiar with it. “Indians swam in the river, floated on it and crossed it on reed rafts,” wrote former Utah Historical Society Director Melvin T. Smith in 1987. “Their knowledge of the river and its tributaries was intimate.”

However, the Natives’ river knowledge was not consolidated into a description of its entire length. Different groups knew only about specific river sections.

Spanish explorers reached the mouth of the Colorado River in the early 1500s, and others visited different parts of the river on foot and horseback. Navigator Hernando de Alarcón is believed to be the

first European to sail up the Colorado River as far as present-day Yuma, Arizona, a distance of about 120 miles.

In 1540, Alarcón had sailed from Acapulco north to the Gulf of California and the mouth of the Colorado River with supplies for Francisco Vázquez de Coronado’s overland expedition. While he waited for Coronado, he made his foray up the river. Alarcón and Cortez never connected.

Other Spaniards, such as Fathers Dominguez and Escalante, crossed the Colorado River, but did not attempt to navigate upon it.

Pike didn’t reach the Colorado River during his 1806 expedition to the West. But, while he was held by Spanish authorities in Santa Fe, he saw maps of the river and he later reported that it was navigable for at least 300 miles upstream.

He also suggested a connection could be made between the Arkansas River and the Colorado — with a 200-mile overland portage — that would allow travel between the Mississippi River and the Gulf of California.

Within a decade of Pike’s expedition, fur traders were exploring the

Green-Colorado River system and looking for ways to make travel and trapping along the rivers easier.

Most famous of these was William Ashley, who with seven men attempted to float from Green River, Wyoming, downstream. After nearly drowning in what became known as Ashley Falls (today under the waters of Flaming Gorge Reservoir), they continued southwest past today’s Jensen, Utah, and the Uintah River before abandoning their journey.

In 1837, trapper and explorer Antoine Leroux claimed to have traveled the river downstream in wooden canoes from the Virgin River all the way to the mouth of the Colorado.

Several parties of California gold seekers hoped to speed their travels to the Golden State by boating part of the Green and Colorado rivers. One party, led by William L. Manly, attempted to use a wooden boat to float the Green River in 1849, and made it as far as the Uintah River before being warned of the increasing danger of the river by Ute Chief Walkara. They abandoned the river and headed overland.

Mormon leaders sent explorer Jacob Hamblin on multiple trips to examine portions of the Lower Colorado River and seek a river route for supplies to today’s Utah.

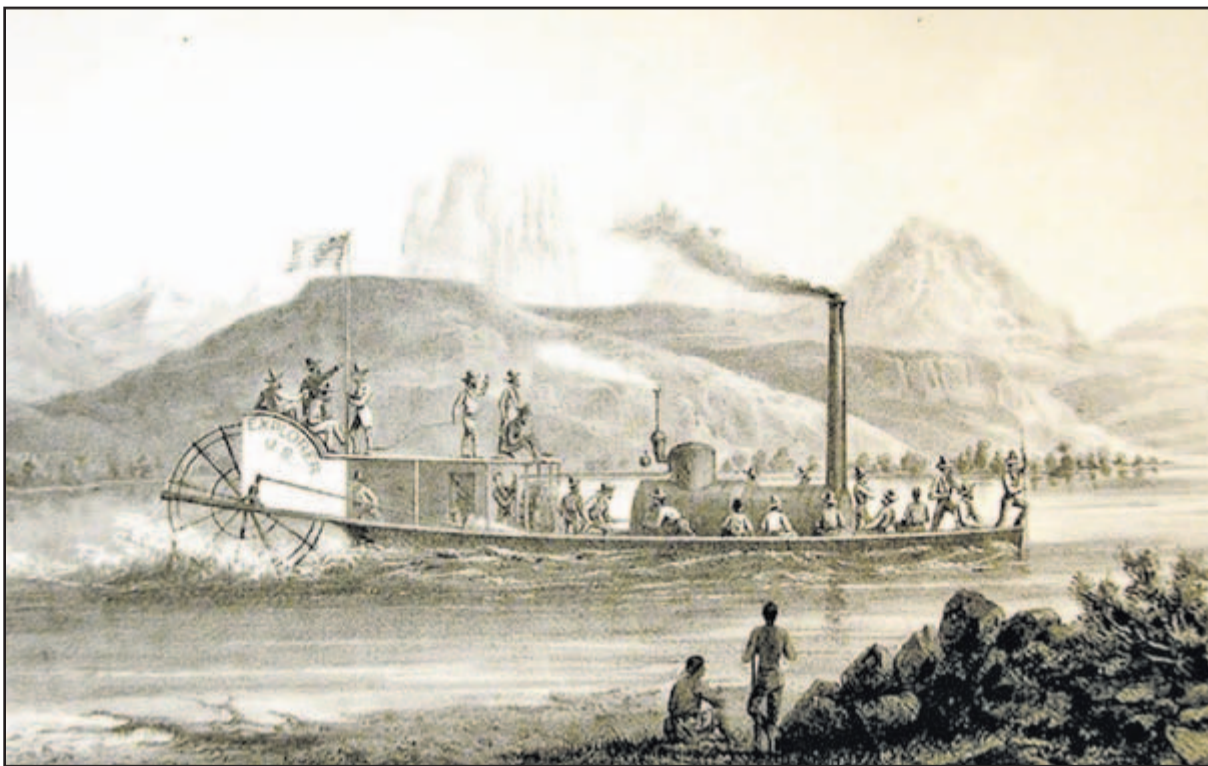
Lt. Ives wasn’t the first man to captain a steamboat on the lower Colorado. James Trumbull began making regular supply trips from the mouth of the river to Fort Yuma in 1852. George A. Johnson sought a government contract to explore the river in his steamboat, the General Jesup, the same year Ives undertook his exploration. Angry that Ives was authorized to explore what he proposed, Johnson went upstream anyway, but didn’t get as far as Ives.

After Ives’ journey, others eventually navigated the river even further upstream in small steamboats. In July 1879, Capt. J.A. Mellon made it as far upstream as the mouth of the Virgin River in his ship, the Gila.

Beyond the Virgin River are the raging rapids of the Grand Canyon, which have thrilled downstream travelers from the days of John Wesley Powell’s expeditions. But they proved to be an insurmountable obstacle to upstream travel, and a major reason that Anson Mills’ vision was never completed.

Sources: “Before Powell: Exploration of the Colorado River,” by Melvin T. Smith, Utah Historical Quarterly, Spring 1987; “Proposals for Navigation of the Colorado River, 1866: Letter from Col. Anson Mills to Judge C.S. Eyester,” Colorado Magazine, January 1937; “Joseph Christmas Ives,” by Dr. William B. Ashworth, Jr., Linda Hall Library, <https://www.lindahall.org/about/news/scientist-of-the-day/joseph-christmas-ives/>.

Bob Silbernagel’s email is bobsilbernagel@gmail.com.



WIKIMEDIA COMMONS

Led by Lt. Joseph Ives, the crew of the steamboat Explorer make their way upstream on the Lower Colorado River. They traveled about 420 miles, to the site of today’s Hoover Dam near Las Vegas, before turning around.



WIKIMEDIA COMMONS

Col. Anson Mills as he appeared about 1876, 10 years after he proposed sailing a steamboat from the Gulf of California to the Upper Green River in Wyoming.

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