

FIRST DRAFT

NOT MEANT TO BE

Grand Junction was to be starting point for speculative Grand Canyon railroad

In 1889, a new Colorado company listed an ambitious goal: build a railroad from Grand Junction to Moab, through the Grand Canyon to Yuma, Ariz., then to San Diego and Los Angeles.

Led by Denver businessman Frank M. Brown, the principals were confident their plans for the Denver, Colorado Cañon and Pacific Railroad were reasonable, and the railroad would be profitable hauling coal and other goods from western Colorado to California.

By mid-July, however, Brown was dead, drowned in Marble Canyon, just downstream from Lee's Ferry. Two other members of his surveying expedition also drowned.

Even so, Brown's second in command, engineer Robert Brewster Stanton, continued to stump for the project. Stanton declared it was "not only feasible, but will be much easier of construction than generally supposed."

Although Stanton clung to the project, investors didn't. Within a few years, it was dead.

The plan seems outrageous today. But in the late 19th century, when people were convinced humans could conquer all natural obstacles, the project elicited great enthusiasm.

There were some skeptics, including John Wesley Powell and men who served on Powell's two expeditions through the Grand Canyon in 1869 and 1871-1872.

Despite naysayers, Brown exuded confidence. Gold, silver and coal could be found near the river and would help pay for the project. Consequently, he said, "the road is sure to be a success."

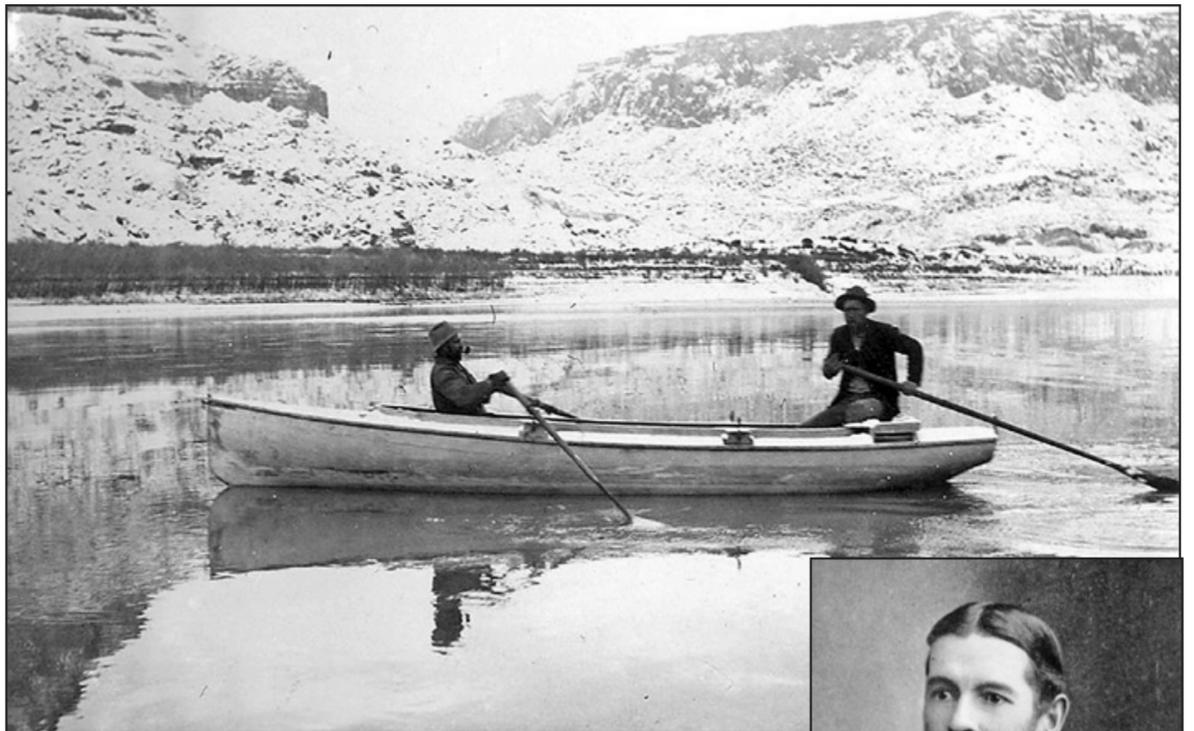
Surveying began in Grand Junction at 3:45 a.m. on March 28, 1889, when Brown and Denver engineer Frank Kendrick hammered the first stake into the ground. Then Brown headed east to recruit more investors, while Kendrick purchased a boat and hired a crew to survey the Colorado River from Grand Junction to its confluence with the Green River.

The five-man team included Kendrick, assistant engineer Thomas Rigney and three Grand Junction men, Frank Knox, George Cost and Charles Brock.

Kendrick's crew made the first recorded journey down this entire 160-mile stretch of the river. Their 37-day trip was uneventful, although they portaged 12 miles around Westwater rapids.



BOB SILBERNAGEL



GRAND CANYON NATIONAL PARK HISTORIC RIVER PHOTOS

Robert Brewster Stanton rowing a boat on the Green or Colorado River, probably in late 1889. Second man is not identified.

It took them another two weeks to muscle their boat up the Green River to the town of Green River, Utah, where they connected with Brown's main survey party. Kendrick then took a train to Denver and consulted with Brown. He decided to stay in Denver rather than join the main expedition.

Brown joined Stanton and the main crew to launch from Green River on May 25. There were 16 men and six boats. Stanton was appalled when he first saw the boats, but he said nothing.

Frederick Dellenbaugh, who had been with Powell's second expedition, wasn't so reticent.

"They were entirely inadequate, built of cedar instead of oak [Powell's boats were oak] and only fifteen feet long and three feet wide," he wrote. "They would have been beautiful for an ordinary river, but for the raging, plunging, tumultuous Colorado, their name was suicide."

Furthermore, he said, cork life preservers were a necessity for every member of the crew. But Brown's party didn't have any.

The Brown expedition soon faced problems. Cooking utensils and provisions were lost when boats were slammed against rocks. Two of the boats were destroyed and others were badly damaged. Most of their food was gone by the time they reached Hite, Utah, on June 24, where they replenished supplies and split into two groups.

One group was to take its time making a detailed survey for the railroad, while Brown, Stanton and six others rushed downstream, taking photos for potential investors. They stopped at Lee's Ferry for a couple nights, then launched into Marble Canyon.

On July 10, Brown and oarsman Harry McDonald pushed off first. McDonald said they were approaching a rapid and he tried to row to an eddy. But the boat was hit by a large wave and capsized. McDonald made it to shore. Brown was carried into a whirlpool and was never seen again. Only his notebook floated out.

After searching for Brown's body for several hours, the expedition continued onward. Five days later, another boat capsized. Peter Hansbrough and H.C. Richards drowned. Again the survivors continued down the river until they found a place to hike out. They made their way to Kanab, Utah, and eventually caught a train to Denver.

Stanton refused to give up. He met with the board of directors of Brown's railroad, and persuaded them to continue with the project. Then he headed to Illinois and had three oak boats with watertight compartments built. He went to New York to solicit more money.

He also got into a public spat with John Wesley Powell, who, in an interview in Washington, D.C., declared that Frank Brown had underestimated the dangers of the river. Powell called the railroad proposal "quite impracticable."

Stanton defended the railroad proposal in the Engineering News, challenging Powell's description of the river.

In October 1889, the Rocky Mountain News reprinted portions of Stanton's response. Stanton asserted, "There are no walls towering thousands of feet nor other serious obstructions," in the portion of the river he had traveled.

Even though Stanton hadn't been through the Grand Canyon proper, as Powell had, he was certain it wouldn't present any more formidable obstacles.

With three men from the first expedition and eight new men, Stanton hauled his boats by rail and wagon to the start of Glen Canyon, where they launched on Dec. 10, 1889, with life preservers. After Christmas at Lee's Ferry, they headed



IMAGE FROM "THE ROMANCE OF THE COLORADO RIVER," BY FREDERICK S. DELLENBAUGH

Robert Brewster Stanton as he appeared early in the 20th century.

into Marble Canyon.

On Jan. 1, photographer Frank Nims fell and broke his leg. Stanton hiked back to Lee's Ferry and hired a wagon to haul him to safety.

Stanton was more cautious than Brown had been, lowering boats by rope through the worst of the rapids. He and his party reached the tidal waters of the Gulf of California on April 26, and Stanton was soon back in Colorado promoting the railroad.

Interviewed by the Rocky Mountain News in June, 1890, Stanton declared that due to the gold that could be found along the route, "a railroad can be built at an infinitesimal cost."

Stanton's notes describe a rail line that could be built at a modest grade, costing much less than mountain railroads. Rock benches could be used to keep the tracks above high-water line, he said, and tunnels could be bored in the winding sections.

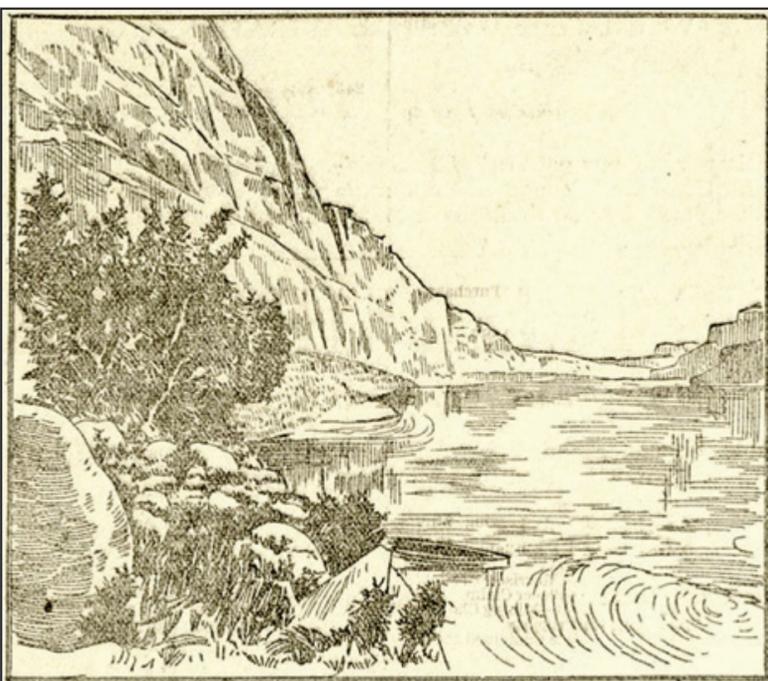
Stanton never completed his official report of the survey. He got caught up instead in writing a lengthy history of the river from prehistoric times to the early 1900s.

Later, Stanton worked for mining firms across the West. He led an unsuccessful attempt to use a dredge to mine gold in Glen Canyon in 1908. He died in Connecticut in 1922.

By then, the Denver, Colorado Cañon and Pacific Railroad was a blurry memory as recreational boaters took to the canyons of the Green and Colorado rivers more and more frequently.

Sources: "The Colorado River Survey, Robert B. Stanton and the Denver, Colorado Cañon and Pacific Railroad," edited by Dwight Smith and Gregory Crampton; "The Romance of the Colorado River," by Frederick S. Dellenbaugh; "Down the Colorado in 1889," by Helen J. Stiles, Colorado Magazine, summer 1964; historic newspapers from www.newspapers.com and www.coloradohistoricnewspapers.org.

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GLEN CANYON—Worst Place for Building.

ROCKY MOUNTAIN NEWS, COLORADO HISTORIC NEWSPAPERS

This drawing appeared in the Rocky Mountain News in October, 1889, accompanying an article in which Robert Brewster Stanton stated there were few serious obstacles to building a railroad along the Colorado River.

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