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Powell 150: Exhibit Panels

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Major John Wesley Powell (1834-1902), a Civil War officer who lost his right arm at Shiloh, became popularly known for his exploration of the American West and most famously his descent of the Colorado River. His voyage, funded by a Congressional authorization only to secure rations at army posts and otherwise supported by grants from universities, museums, and individuals, is considered one of the great feats of North American exploration.

Powell and his party arrived in Green River Station, Wyoming in May 1869, shortly after the opening of the newly connected transcontinental railroad, which facilitated easy transport of boats and supplies from the Midwest. They embarked May 24th. While the Spanish had described parts of the Colorado as early as the 1540s, Powell’s voyage is widely credited with providing the scientific and popular accounts that ultimately led to the creation of the U.S. Geological Survey, shifting the focus of western expeditions from the study of military or political concerns to questions relating to geology, cartography, ethnography, and the use of natural resources (particularly water) by future populations.

"...the canyons of this region would be a Book of revelations in the rock-leaved Bible of geology."

J.W. Powell
J.W. Powell's 1869 Exploration was one of four major surveys of the American West. Three were led by civilian scientists (primarily geologists), while one was led by the War Department's Corps of Engineers. During the early 1870s, tension increased between the surveys as they came in closer proximity and competed over funds, attention, and research methods. Powell and others lobbied Congress to ensure future funding and to eliminate the competition between the engineers and the geologists.

In the 19th century, industrialization, war, and westward expansion combined to compel government agencies to conduct and/or support scientific endeavors. A nation, growing in both size and population, required knowledge of its resources and topography. As scientific activities increased, the government created new bureaus to promote investigations that would help better understand and utilize Western territories.

Powell contributed significantly to these efforts. He excelled at explaining the scale of the West to Washington. Through scientific reports and testimony to Congress, his influence led to the creation of not one but two new bureaus dedicated to the scientific causes he had pioneered in the West. His work would become an integral part of federal science.

"A government which patronizes and sustains such investigations has the unquestioned right to demand in return results which shall be not merely for the benefit of the scientific, the learned, and the cultured, but for the immediate use and wants of all classes."

J.W. Powell