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A Tennessee Chapter in the Story of John Wesley Powell

By Kevin E. Smith

While better known for his pioneering explorations of the American West, John Wesley Powell's career began somewhat inauspiciously as a 17-year-old Illinois schoolteacher — with half the pupils older than himself.

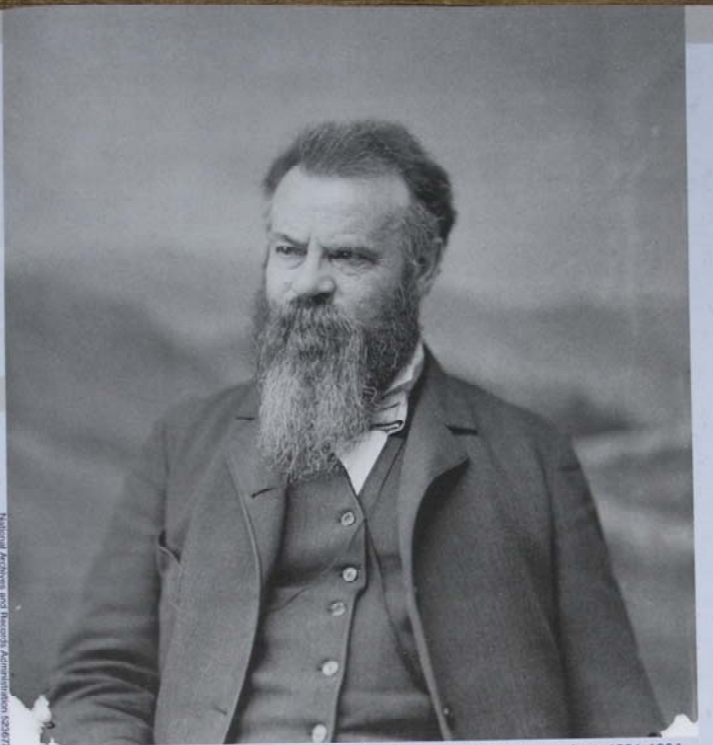
In his spare time, restless energy and interests in natural history led him on exploring and collecting trips — beginning in 1855 when he crossed Illinois to explore the Mississippi River. Born the fourth of nine children to English immigrants in 1834, John Wesley (or "Wes" as he came to be known) seemed destined to follow the footsteps of his father Joseph in the Methodist ministry. Fate, however, was to set his seemingly boundless energy and talents to other tasks.

In May 1861, the young schoolteacher set aside his chalk and books to enlist as a private in the 20th Illinois Infantry. Soon thereafter, while stationed at Cape Girardeau, Missouri, he recruited and became captain of an artillery battery that would become Battery "F" of the 2nd Illinois Light Artillery. Although he may have left his chalk behind when he joined the Union Army, he never abandoned his passionate interest in natural history — between battles, he explored the geology, paleontology and archaeology of the surrounding area.

Nor did he abandon his cousin and sweetheart, Miss Emma Dean. Shortly after enlisting, Powell was granted a leave of absence for a hurried visit to Detroit where he married Emma in November 1861. She returned with him to the field and was at his side less than six months before another life-changing event. At the Battle of Shiloh on April 6, 1862, Captain Powell raised his right arm to signal the artillery to commence firing — a minié ball struck his upraised forearm and surgeons were later forced to amputate the infected limb.

National Park Service Digital Image Archive 17226

John Wesley Powell, *right*, and his brother, William Bramwell Powell, *left*, in Civil War uniforms, circa 1865.



National Archives and Records Administration 526677

John Wesley Powell served as the second director of U.S. Geological Survey from 1881-1894.

After a medical leave of only about two months, Powell was back on active duty on condition that his wife continue at his side.

During the siege of Vicksburg (which he later described as "the forty hardest days of my life"), he collected fossil shells for his natural history collection from the trenches excavated by his troops.

In 1864, he was transferred to Nashville where he protected the city with 16 batteries of artillery during Hood's Tennessee campaign. Years later, Powell recalled digging a prehistoric Indian mound with stone-lined graves while stationed there. That mound, built by Native Americans around A.D. 1100, was probably located just north of the modern Jefferson Street Bridge that is more famous as the locale of Monsieur Charleville's trading post that provided Nashville's original name of "French Lick."

Upon his discharge in 1865, gaunt and weighing only about 110 pounds, Powell left Nashville for his home in Illinois where he accepted a position as professor of geology at Illinois Wesleyan University. Two years later he set off on his first scientific expedition to Colorado as curator of the Illinois Natural History Museum. Again, Emma was at his side. Alongside her husband and 10 other men she became the first woman to ascend the "unclimbable" Pikes Peak, reportedly making the trek in the high-top shoes, long dress, and petticoats then deemed appropriate attire for a proper lady.

Powell returned to Nashville in August 1877 to attend the annual meeting of the American Association for the Advancement of Science, this time as a nationally renowned explorer and scientist. Never one to let bureaucratic duties interfere with scientific interests, Powell took the opportunity to conduct one of the first large-scale archaeological explorations of a prehistoric Native American mound site in Tennessee. Along with his companion, Dr. T.O. Summers Jr. of the Vanderbilt University Medical School, Powell joined forces with Frederic Ward Putnam of the Peabody Museum at Harvard to explore five prehistoric earthworks at the site where Aquinas College now stands. These mounds housed the mortal remains of native peoples who lived along Richland Creek between about A.D. 1100 and 1400, a period described by archaeologists as The Middle Cumberland Mississippian Culture.

As reported in local papers (Wednesday, 12 September 1877, *The Daily American)* under the headline of "An Ancient Indian Cemetery Unearthed:"

"Maj. J.W. Powell of the Smithsonian Institute, and Prof. T.O. Summers, Jr. have been engaged for several days past in opening the stone graves in the vicinity of the city... These stone graves are well constructed of slabs in the form of a box, in which the body was laid, with whatever utensils and implements which their ranking or relation indicated. Maj. Powell and Dr. Summers have thoroughly explored a large mound of graves, west of the city, from which they have obtained a good many fine crania, and in some places almost complete skeletons, with some interesting specimens of pottery and shells...Maj. Powell deserves much credit for the great work he has set on foot, looking to the elaboration of North American ethnology, and we trust that all who are interested in his work will lend a helping hand and furnish him with all the material which comes under their observation...We understand that there is a prospect of persuading the Major to deliver us a lecture upon his travels in the canons of the Great West and the Indian mythology of that region. We hope that he will do so, and are sure that a large audience will be on hand to hear him."

Whether the Major provided the promised lecture remains uncertain, but the impacts of his Nashville explorations were profound. As only the second meeting of the AAAS in the southern states, the Nashville conference served to energize local interest in the sciences, including geology and archaeology. The widely publicized explorations of Nashville's mounds and graves by Powell and Putnam, as representatives of the nation's most prestigious museums, led to an unprecedent-

ed interest in their contents by locals. Unfortunately, the majority of those results are best described as undocumented looting, leaving many of Nashville's Native American cemeteries and mounds plundered and their contents dispersed without scientific study. By 1886, for example, a Nashville collector writing in a local newspaper described the vast Noel site cemetery north of Glendale Park as follows: "the graves originally covered about thirty acres, but so many have been dug that they are now comparatively scarce."

The Daily American (Saturday, 15 September 1877) reported that Powell fully intended to write up his Tennessee discoveries: "We understand that the results of the work performed by Maj. Powell...will be brought out...in full in one of the Ethnological volumes to be issued by the Government under the direction of Maj. Powell." Unfortunately, Powell never completed that report. Shortly after concluding his archaeological explorations in Nashville, Powell began his lobbying efforts to create both the Bureau of Ethnology within the Smithsonian Institution and the United States Geological Survey, tasks he completed by 1879. The former was a stunning accomplishment at a time when not a single American university offered regular courses in ethnology or anthropology.

While more widely recognized for his geological contributions, his anthropological publications on Native American language and culture are twice as numerous as those in geology. For 23 years, as the first director of the Bureau of Ethnology, he built a solid foundation for the fledgling science through his brilliant research, writing, and organizational skills. As if one such position was not enough to keep Powell busy, only two years later, President James A. Garfield also appointed him as second director of the U.S. Geological Survey (1881-1894.) Under his leadership, the U.S. Geological Survey became not only the largest organization of its kind, but the largest scientific organization of any kind in the world. Thus for the last decade of the 19th century, Powell simultaneously held two of the most prestigious and powerful scientific positions in the world.

Library of Congress image by John K. Hillers, 1872, LC-DIG-Stereo-1s00756

From a stereograph of John Wesley Powell's boat, the "Emma Dean," with chair attached, shown on the banks of the Colorado River.

National Archives and Records Administration, 523655, ca. 1875-ca. 1907

Major John Wesley Powell, *left*, with Wild Hank Sharp, Kentucky Mountain Bill and Jesus Alviso dressed as frontiersmen.

Betwixt and between, he also managed to serve as founder or incorporator of the American Anthropological Association, the National Geographic Society and a host of similar organizations. Powell died quietly at his summer home in Haven, Maine, on September 23, 1902, in his 69th year. In recognition of his national service, he was laid to rest with full honors in Arlington National Cemetery, where Emma finally joined him in 1924.

Given his multitude of later accomplishments, we should perhaps excuse Major Powell for not finding the time to publish an account of his 1877 explorations of the Walnut Mound at Miss Bowling's farm.

Among the over 100 objects recovered during Powell's Nashville expedition are superb examples of prehistoric

Photo Courtesy of Metro Nashville Archives

Smithsonian National Museum of Natural History A32024-0. Photograph by Kevin E. Smith

Smithsonian National Museum of Natural History A32060-0. Photograph by Kevin E. Smith

Above: **A typical handled ceramic jar used by Middle Cumberland people in cooking. The jar exhibits two handles — the white specks throughout the paste are crushed mussel shell added as a tempering agent. Note the label with the Smithsonian accession number, location, and "Maj Powell."** ***Above, left:*** **A 1876 plat of the Charles Bosley estate with inset showing the former location of the "Putnam Mound" and "Powell Mound" in an unknown hand.** ***Left:*** **An engraved marine shell pendant. These Scalloped Triskele gorgets were created by Middle Tennessee artisans beginning around A.D. 1250** ***Below, right:*** **Destiny Weeks, a member of the Natchez Trace State Park Outdoor Classroom, studies the Powell's Battery plaque at Shiloh National Military Park. Powell's Camp was the first position in the line of battle on April 6, 1862, where he received the injury resulting in the loss of his arm.**

Nashville artisanship including decorated ceramics, flint knives, marine shell gorgets, cooking pots and construction tools. If Powell's notes from this excavation survive, they have not yet surfaced — but the objects themselves have many stories to tell. While not excavated using careful modern archaeological techniques, they promise to provide new insights into the ancient peoples who resided along the banks of Richland Creek a millennium ago. Safely housed in the Smithsonian's collections for nearly 150 years, John Wesley Powell's carefully labeled objects from an ancient Nashville cemetery now allow us to add yet another chapter to his fascinating story.

Powell on Watersheds

John Wesley Powell, first director of the Bureau of Ethnology and second director of the U.S. Geological Survey, is quoted on the EPA website answering the question of "what is a watershed?"

The website http://water.epa.gov/type/watersheds/whatis.cfm quotes Powell who said a watershed is "that area of land, a bounded hydrologic system, within which all living things are inextricably linked by their common water course and where, as humans settled, simple logic demanded that they become a part of a community."

(*Kevin E. Smith* is professor and director of anthropology at Middle Tennessee State University. He is co-author of *Speaking with the Ancestors: Mississippian Stone Statuary of the Tennessee-Cumberland Style* (University of Alabama Press, 2009). His interests in *John Wesley Powell's* Tennessee expedition are part of a larger on-going research project on the history of early archaeological research in Middle Tennessee. Visit his webpages on Tennessee archaeology at: www.mtsu.edu/~kesmith.)

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