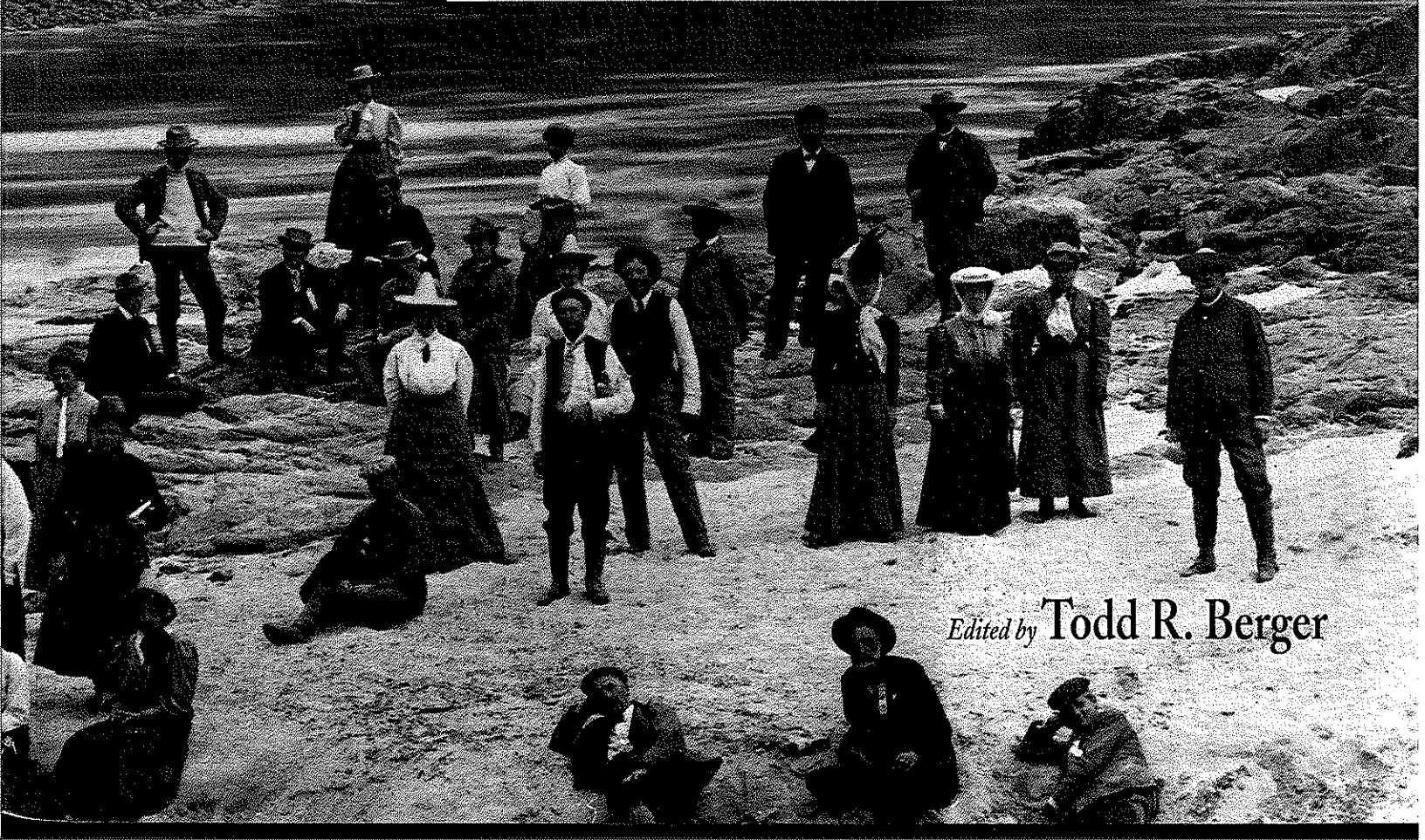
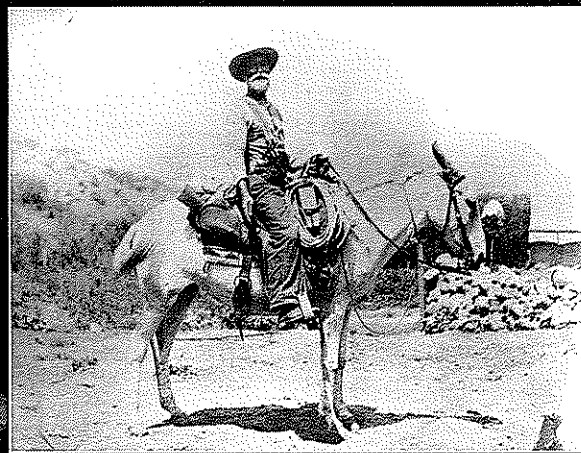


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Reflections of Grand Canyon Historians

Ideas, Arguments, and First-Person Accounts



Edited by **Todd R. Berger**

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Cover background photograph: Grand Canyon visitors along the Colorado River at
the end of the Bright Angel Trail, November 14, 1906. Photograph courtesy of the
GCNP Museum Collection (#13655)

Cover inset photograph: Louis Boucher atop his mule, Silver Bell, circa 1910.
Photograph courtesy of the GCNP Museum Collection (#5972)

*It is the mission of the Grand Canyon Association to cultivate knowledge,
discovery, and stewardship for the benefit of Grand Canyon National Park
and its visitors. Proceeds from the sale of this book will be used to support
the educational goals of Grand Canyon National Park.*

THE JAMES WHITE DEBATE

BY BRAD DIMOCK

The story of James White is one of the true Grand Canyon controversies. When he was plucked from the Colorado River sixty miles below Grand Canyon in September 1867, starved, sunburnt, contused, abused, confused, and nearly naked, the story of how he got there was born. The two papers that follow, delivered in debate format at the 2007 Grand Canyon History Symposium, are simply another chapter in the unending debate of where James White launched his river odyssey: did he, or did he not, float through Grand Canyon in 1867, two years before Maj. John Wesley Powell claimed to be the first man through?

White's background can be traced with little controversy, up to a point some weeks before his river epic began. He was born in Rome, New York, in November 1837, and raised in Kenosha, Wisconsin. With little in the way of an education, he was working as an apprentice carpenter for his father when the itch to go west took hold. In 1861 he wandered west to Denver, then on to Virginia City, Nevada Territory, in search of fortune. Finding none, he continued on to California. With the Civil War beginning, he succumbed to the financial incentive of joining the army. From Sacramento he was shipped to San Francisco, then by boat to San Diego. In 1862 he marched east to Yuma, Arizona Territory, where he spent most of a year stationed along the Colorado during the heyday of steamboating, when regular service was available for nearly 400 miles upriver. From Yuma his group marched east to Tucson, then to El Paso, Texas. Here White was court-martialed for allegedly stealing coffee. Convicted, he was sentenced to a year of hard labor and a dishonorable discharge. But before his term was up the war ended, prisoners were pardoned, and with an honorable discharge, White headed north. After a stop in Denver he wandered east to Kansas, where he spent much of 1866 and early 1867 as a stage driver for Barlow and Sanderson, on the run from Fort Dodge to Cimarron Crossing.

There he met three men: Captain Charles Baker, whose history seeking riches in the San Juan Mountains is shady

and controversial (Baker's Park—now Silverton—bears his name); George Strole, about whom little is known; and Joe Goodfellow, who remains even more of a mystery. Baker convinced the group to head west in search of gold.

First, however, they needed horses, and they orchestrated a raid on an Indian camp near Mulberry Creek. Goodfellow failed to show up, however, and when he caught the other three men heading west with their booty, they refused to cut him in on a share. Eventual bile between White and Goodfellow led them to a shootout. The latter was injured in the foot and left behind. White, uninjured, continued to the San Juan Mountains with Baker and Strole.

They spent the Fourth of July in Baker's Park before crossing to the Mancos River and following it down to its confluence with the San Juan. They then followed the San Juan downstream, prospecting as they went, until further progress was thwarted by steep canyons. At this point, sometime in August, they left the San Juan. And at this point, accounts begin to differ radically on what they did and where they did it.

Most agree on the basics of the tale after this point:

- The trio left the San Juan.
- The trio proceeded overland to the Colorado River.
- They were attacked by Indians.
- Baker was killed outright; the others fled to the river.

- White and Strole built a log raft and headed downstream.
- They floated into rapids and Strole went overboard and drowned.
- White was plucked from the river at Callville, Nevada, on September 7, 1867.

The disagreement comes with where they launched the raft. With only White's sparse and sometimes contradictory remembrances to go on, two drastically different interpretations have emerged.

Those who believe White floated through Grand Canyon say the trio went north about sixty miles, reaching the Colorado, most likely in the vicinity of Glen Canyon, and that White floated more than 450 miles down the Colorado. Those opposed to White's passage of Grand Canyon claim the trio went south from the San Juan about 450 miles, met the Colorado just below Grand Canyon, and White floated a mere sixty miles to Callville.

The debate continues. . . .