

Capt. Samuel Adams

By John Weisheit and Michele Reaume

In Wallace Stegner's book [published by Houghton Mifflin Company, 1953], Beyond the Hundredth Meridian: John Wesley Powell and the Second Opening of the West, a mention is made about the adventures of Captain Samuel Adams on the Blue and Colorado rivers in 1869. The Blue River is a tributary stream of the Colorado River that runs through the town of Breckenridge, Colorado. Said Stegner of Adams:

"His career is a demonstration of how far a man could get in a new country on nothing but gall and the gift of gab, so long as what he said was what people wanted to believe. He was one of a tribe of Western adventurers and impostors and mountebanks [to beguile or transform by trickery], cousin-German to James Dickson and Walter Murray Gibson [see Across the Wide Missouri by Bernard DeVoto and Mormon Country by Wallace Stegner]; and if his schemes were not so grandiose as theirs and his imagination not so lurid and his personal ambitious godlike, he was still recognizably of that sib. As Dickson was to Sam Houston, as Gibson was to Brigham Young, so Adams was to Powell—a lunatic counterpoint, a parody in advance, a caricature just close enough to the real thing, just close enough to a big idea, to have been temporarily plausible and limitedly successful."...

"...in May, 1869, as Sumner [John C.] and the trappers were waiting in camp on the Green for Powell to return with the boats, a young man of impressive presence and a fast tongue climbed off the [newly completed] Union Pacific's passenger train and made himself at home in camp. He said that he was to accompany the expedition in a scientific capacity; his mouth was full of big names. He had letters and orders which he would present to Major Powell as soon as he arrived.

"When Powell arrived with the boats on May 11 Adams presented himself as one who had authorization from ex-Secretary of War Stanton to accompany the expedition. He might even have got away with his bluff if, as he thought, the expedition had been sponsored by the government. But Powell, who had himself planned and organized every detail of the trip, saw no reason why a retired Secretary of War should forcibly impose a recruit upon him, especially a lordly recruit who acted like a commander. He asked to see Adams' paper, and Adams brought them out: letters from Stanton and others [General Humphreys, Secretary of War Belknap and various Congressmen] thanking him kindly for his communication and wishing him success in the exploration he contemplated. Powell said later [in an 1872 letter to R. M. McCormick] that he read the letters and sent Adams about his business..." [Stegner then relates an amusing story of how Powell's men humiliated Adams.]

The letters of Samuel Adams are archived at the Huntington Library in San Marino, California.

The following is a chapter from The Floater's Guide to Colorado by Doug Wheat. CPRG thanks Chris Cauble, publishing director of Falcon Press, Helena, MT, for permission to reprint this story.

"Captain" Samuel Adams Challenges the Upper Colorado

by Doug Wheat

On July 12, 1869, "Captain" Samuel Adams stood proud and anxious on the banks of the Blue River, one of the Colorado's uppermost tributaries, near Breckenridge, Colorado. He was finally ready to begin his historic voyage of discovery from Colorado to California by way of the Colorado River.

Adams has blown into town only two months before. He had told the miners and townsfolk of an Eden down the Colorado, a river corridor of vast wealth and opportunity. Adams was a man of persuasion. He easily recruited ten men for the expedition. They hastily constructed four open boats of green pine. Hundreds of pounds of flour, bacon and coffee were loaded up. Rifles, ammunition and scientific instruments were carefully packed. The largest boat, 22 feet in length, was fitted with a flag inscribed by the ladies of Breckenridge with "*Colorado to California, Greetings!*"

It was a gala sendoff. Speeches were given by Judge Silverthorne and others. Adams praised the people of Breckenridge as possessing superior intelligence and moral worthiness even at these "*extreme limits of civilization.*"

Who was this Captain Samuel Adams and where had he come from?

In the Spring of 1867, E. M. Stanton, Secretary of War, received a letter entitled "*Communication from Captain Samuel Adams, Relative to the Exploration of the Colorado River and its Tributaries.*" Stanton, apparently impressed, ordered the letter printed in the record of the 42nd Congress. In this letter Adams stressed the "*great commercial importance of the Colorado of the West as being the central route between the Atlantic and Pacific oceans.*"

Adams, it seems, had been kicking around the lower 350 miles of the Colorado with Captain Thomas Trueworthy of San Francisco in a small, steam-powered sternwheeler.

Several explorers, including Derby, Johnson, and Ives, had voyaged up the Colorado in steamers and told of a great central chasm—the Grand Canyon—and an impassable river beyond. In his letter to Stanton, Adams ridiculed and disparaged these accounts, insisting that "*none of those dangerous obstructions which have been represented by those who may have viewed them at a distance*" existed. "*The Colorado must be, emphatically, to the Pacific Coast what the Mississippi is to the Atlantic.*" Adams implied that he was better suited than anyone to explore the river. That exploration would "have the grand result of proving the misrepresented stream to be the central route which is to connect us more firmly in the bonds of common nationality, and of reflecting honor upon your administration. The legislators may have taken Adams with a pinch of salt. At any event, they replied in kind:

"Resolved by the House of Representatives, (the council concurring,) that the thanks of this legislature are due and hereby tendered to Hon. Samuel Adams and Captain Thomas Trueworthy for their untiring energy and indomitable enterprise as displayed by them in opening up the navigation of the Colorado River, the great natural thoroughfare of Arizona and Utah territories."

Not quite two years later, in April 1869, Jack Sumner, Seneca and Oramel Howland, Billy Hawkins, and Bill Dunn were waiting in Green River, Wyoming, to join Major John Wesley Powell, who had taken the train east to oversee construction of river boats, secure funds, and gather supplies for his exploratory voyage down the Green and Colorado rivers. As they sat around their tent drinking whiskey, a fast-talking dandy jumped-off the train and made himself at home at their camp. It was that pioneering proponent of the Mississippi of the West, the Honorable Captain Samuel Adams. Somehow Adams had gotten wind of Powell's plans. As this expedition fitted his imagined destiny, he rushed off to join. He arrived with the letter from Congress and various communications from Stanton to try to convince Powell that he had been ordered to accompany the expedition as a scientific advisor.

Powell's motley, inebriated crew, however, quickly caught onto Adams and made fun of him just as Congress had done two years before. Hawkins upset Adams almost to the point of his leaving when, after Adams asked why the coffee tasted so bad, Hawkins pulled a dirty sock out of the pot.

There must have been some wild storytelling during those nights beside the Green River waiting for Powell's return—Adams describing his heroic exploits on the lower Colorado and Jack Sumner telling of his first ascent of Long's Peak with Major Powell the previous August. The men must have informed Adams of their trek down the Grand River (as the Colorado above the Green River confluence was called at that time) through Middle Park, eight months before. They must have told him about the little mining town of Breckenridge up on the Blue River.

Finally, on May 11, Powell arrived with the boats. Adams, assuming the expedition was government sponsored, presented his papers. But Powell had organized the entire expedition using private funds. The letters from Congress and the Secretary of War meant nothing to him. Powell sent Captain Adams on his way.

"If you can't join'em, beat em," Adams probably thought to himself, and scurried off to the Grand River drainage on the other side of the great Y formed by the two branches of the Colorado to put together his own expedition at Breckenridge.

Barely two months after his unsuccessful attempt to join the Powell expedition, Adams was off on the Blue River with his own band of hearty adventures.

About eight miles below the confluence of the Blue and Ten Mile Creek, Adams and his string of crudely built boats approached Boulder Creek. *"On turning a bend in the river, our real danger burst upon us, as we saw, for the first time, the white foaming water dashing for one-mile ahead of us."* Chaos ensued as the boats crashed into the rocks. Although

much equipment was lost, the men managed to get the boats to shore. Adams named the short stretch extending two miles below Boulder Creek *"Rocky Canyon"*. In the next three days one of the boats broke into two pieces and was left a *"complete wreck"*. Four men deserted.

The following day Adams named the short canyon in which the Green Mountain Dam was later built *"Cove Canyon"*. Another boat was lost then.

The men camped for a week where the Blue meets the Colorado, probably making repairs and wondering how Captain Adams managed to get them involved in this fiasco. On July 30, Adams reported, the party *"started down the Grand River with our two remaining boats; ran four miles southwest to the Grand Canyon of the Grand River"*. It is perhaps ironic that a canyon hundreds of miles down river, which Adams did not believe existed, was later given one of his place names. Today, the canyon he had reached is called Gore Canyon. Captain Adams had finally learned a lesson. He ascended the right wall at the head of the canyon to reconnoiter. The scene inspired a poetic flair:

"Struck by the beauty of the scenery, I this evening ascended a point above, the great chain of mountains far in the distance rising higher and still higher toward the snowy range, while Mount Lincoln, [Mount Lincoln is not visible from this point; probably he saw Eagles Nest Peak] towering far above these, bathed in the brilliant moonlight, was superbly magnificent."

Captain Adams should have stayed with philosophy and poetry. In his rapture he neglected to scrutinize the pounding fury below. Adams was a pious man. The party never traveled on the Sabbath. But no amount of piety could save them from hell into which he was about to hurl his tiny fleet.

Fortunately, he did not try to run boats through Gore Canyon. Carrying his heavy, unwieldy vessels, however, was an impossible task. While lowering the biggest boat through the second big drop with rope, Adams wrote, *"She swung out into the current, filled with water, was held struggling an hour in the mad element, when the line parted and our best and largest boat disappeared forever. By this accident we were reduced to one boat; almost everything necessary for the trip had been lost. here I gave the box in which I had carried my instruments to the waves. We divested ourselves of almost everything of weight, and prepared to try our fortunes in the last boat."*

It took them four days to go three quarters of a mile. On the fourth day, August 7, the last boat broke loose and was dashed to bits on the rocks. Three more men deserted. Captain Adams was undaunted. He knew the river would flatten out all the way to the Gulf of California in just a few miles. Since logs in the river were rounded and worn about the same amount as those he had observed three years before near the mouth of the Colorado, he reasoned that the river must be calm from here on.

Left with two faithful followers, Twible and Lillis, Adams began hiking down river. The weeks of hard labor and disappointment had obviously taken their toll. He was

desperate to put a few positive items, though absurdly exaggerated, into his journal:

August 11- "*Built a cedar raft five by sixteen feet, and upon this we took passage, ran down the river 30 miles passing through...wheat we found over 6 feet in height.*"

Adams next point of reference he called "*Rapid Canyon*". Here, he reported, "*We pushed her out and in a moment she shot like an arrow down the rapid descent. We both grabbed the cross-piece on the raft to which our provisions were lashed; she sank four feet under the surface, but rose again in the distance of eight yards, when in turning an abrupt angle in the river, she struck and parted. here we lost a huge portion of our [remaining] provisions.*"

Did Captain Adams quit? Not a chance. They built another raft and descended another 40 miles. The destruction of this last raft left the party with only five days' worth of flour and bacon. Captain Adams finally called it quits.

He had probably reached a point some distance above the Eagle River confluence, 150 miles down the Blue and Colorado rivers. This section has a drop of about 3,000 feet, far less than the 6,000 feet he claimed in his journal. Although no one drowned, four boats and four rafts had been sacrificed and eight of his ten men had fled. Somehow Adams rationalized that only a "*narrow territory*" divided him from the lower Colorado upon which he and Trueworthy had driven their little steamer three years before. Again poor Adams was wrong. The most difficult portion of the route actually lay ahead in the thundering cataracts of Glenwood Canyon, the black gorge of Westwater, the graveyard of the Colorado—Cataract Canyon, and the immense depths of the Grand Canyon.

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At the time Adams turned away from the river, Powell and his men were passing the junction of the Little Colorado River, headed for the heart of the Grand Canyon. Powell became the hero of the Colorado, Adams the goat. Yet Adams persevered heroically. Most men would have quit after the first disaster, far up the Blue River at Boulder Creek Rapids. If Adams had been honest in the account of his trip, entitled "*Expedition of the Colorado River and Its Tributaries, a Wonderful Country Opened Up*"; if he had avoided condemning his adversaries; he might have found more of a place in history. In point of fact, he was the first to descend the upper Colorado, a river which still attracts hordes of river runners each Summer.

