

THE G. M. WRIGHT INSCRIPTIONS

by Jim Knipmeyer

Except for trapper Denis Julien in the 1830s, no one individual seems to have carved more inscriptions along the canyon walls of the Colorado River in southern Utah and northern Arizona during the 19th century than George M. Wright. He left his name and the date at seven sites along the river and at a possible eighth one. He also left another carving at the top of the Vermilion Cliffs, just some nine miles from the rim of Marble Canyon.

The only information concerning Wright's life comes from an eleven-year period of time extending from 1891 to 1901. Where he came from prior to then or what happened to him afterward is not known. What has been gleaned from mining records, two or three personal references from people who knew him, and his own carved inscriptions is summarized quite well in P. T. Reilly's history of Lee's Ferry, Arizona. Here I would like to simply emphasize the key points of Wright's sojourn in Utah and Arizona, dwell a little more on his various inscriptions, add a few details that Reilly did not include in his book, and correct two or three errors that somehow slipped into the book's account.

In the 1891 Salt Lake City, Utah, directory, George M. Wright is listed as a "miner" residing at 4 Fifth Ave. In the late summer of the following year, 1892, he was hired by two groups in Salt Lake City, the Alliance Mining Company and the Conklin Sampling Works, to prospect for gold along the canyons of the Colorado River in southern Utah and northern Arizona. They and Wright had probably been inspired by accounts of Colorado River gold from the Stanton and Best expeditions in 1890 and 1891, respectively.

Wright more than likely embarked from Green River, Utah, at the end of August or beginning of September, 1892, because his first carved inscription, still to be seen near the head of Mile-Long Rapid in Cataract Canyon, is dated "SEP. 16." [In Reilly's book the day date is mistakenly given as the 18th.] Like others before him, as well as many river runners afterwards, he probably stopped here on the right bank at Mile-204.6 to examine one of the rougher stretches of whitewater in Cataract Canyon.

Wright continued to cut his name, always in block-style capital letters reading "G. M. WRIGHT," and the date, as he progressed down the Colorado. His next entry was below the dangerous rapids of Cat, near the mouth of the tributary called Sheep Canyon. The date here was "OCT. 11." This is interesting, as it shows that

Wright made only some thirty-seven miles in twenty-five days. Undoubtedly he was prospecting as he went.

The "possible" Wright inscription mentioned earlier was left not far below, near the head of Glen Canyon. On one of the inside walls of the so-called "Fort Moqui," the prehistoric ruin perched on the canyon rim across the river from Hite, were the initials "G. M." There was no last name or date, unlike all of his other inscriptions, so it is rather problematic if this was left by G. M. Wright or not. Unfortunately this inscription, the one upstream at Sheep Canyon, and the next two on down in Glen Canyon, are all now beneath the waters of Lake Powell reservoir.

Wright's next inscription was at the mouth of Aztec Creek, dated "NOV. 6." [Reilly's book mistakenly says early in December.] He took twenty-six days to come some 108 miles, a much better daily average than through Cat. While he probably had been prospecting more in Glen, the slower and more careful traverse of Cat's many dangerous rapids more than likely slowed him up along that stretch.

Seven days later found Wright about forty-four miles farther down Glen at a long bar deposit on the right bank. He evidently camped in a shallow cave-overhang near the head of the bar, where he cut his name and the date, "NOV. 13." Here he made his big discovery of the voyage: thin nuggets of coarse gold in some of the narrow crevices of the cave walls, evidently deposited there during high water stages of the river. On the 14th he located the "Pure Gold" claim in the names of himself, his wife L. [Lillie] C. Wright, A. [Abraham] Hanauer, Jr., president of the Alliance Mining Company, and five members of the Markland family, Charles B. Markland being co-proprietor of the Conklin Sampling Works. On the 15th he did some placer prospecting around the bar itself.

This discovery must have hurried Wright on, as his next camp, the day after leaving the Pure Gold claim was fifteen miles down canyon. There, on the right bank, he carved his characteristic capitalized block-letter name and the date, "NOV. 16." Being below the present site of Glen Canyon Dam, at Mile-10.4, this inscription can still be easily seen cut into the canyon wall a few feet above the top of the talus slope.

The next day Wright reached the end of Glen Canyon at the Colorado River crossing of Lee's Ferry. He memorialized the conclusion of his prospecting voyage with the incising of his name and the date of "NOV. 17." This, too, can still be found with a little searching near the sunken remains of the old Charlie Spencer steamboat. All of Wright's inscriptions, of course, included the year date "1892."

According to two letters written by Permelia Johnson, wife of the ferry operator at Lee's Ferry, Wright, his wife Lillie, and two companions returned to Glen Canyon in September of the next year, 1893. They set up a tent

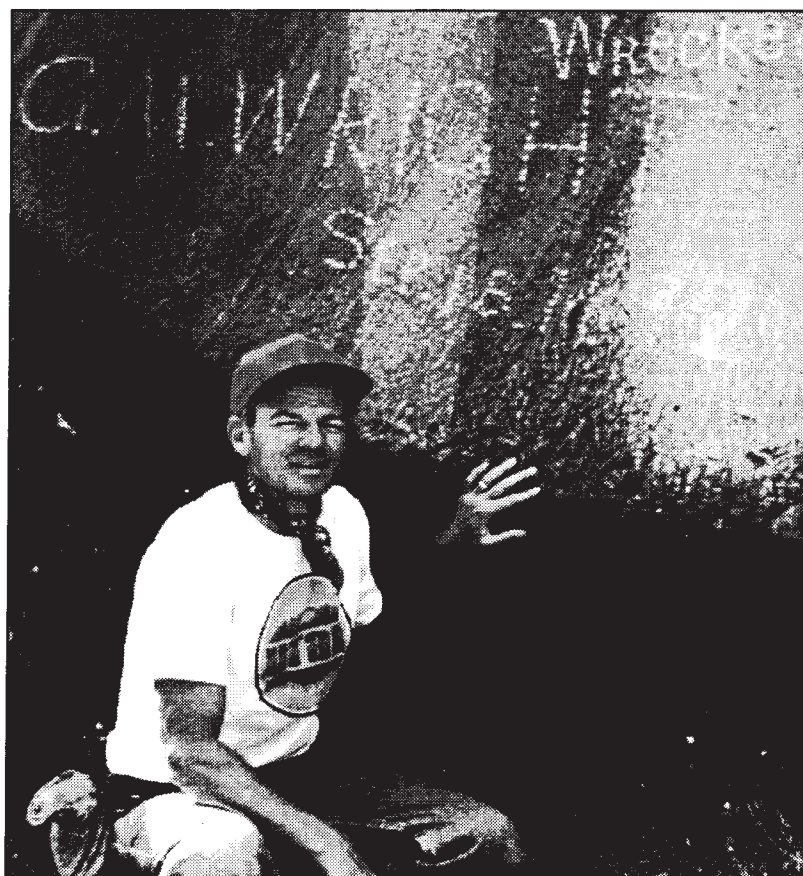
near the Johnson's house and would travel upriver in a small skiff to work the Pure Gold claim. They took out enough gold and it became common enough knowledge that the site between twenty-four and twenty-five miles above Lee's Ferry became known as Wright Bar.

Traveling upstream against the Colorado's current took parts of two days, and on at least one occasion Wright stopped at the large alcove-cave seven or eight miles below his claim that later was called Outlaw Cave. There, high up on the back wall, he left his name and the date, "DEC. 23. 1893." This inscription is now drowned by reservoir water.

Wright worked his claim all winter and probably removed most of the easily accessible gold. On April 13, 1894, he sold one-eighth interest in the Pure Gold claim to ferryman Warren M. Johnson. Perhaps this was also to pay for the supplies obtained from Johnson throughout the winter. Wright continued to maintain his base camp at Lee's Ferry but now began prospecting along the Vermilion Cliffs to the southwest. On April 20, he cut his name and that date [In the Reilly book it is erroneously given as the 30th] at the top of an old Indian trail above Jacob's Pools.

On June 27, Wright and Johnson notified their six co-owners of the Pure Gold claim that the assessment work had been completed for the previous year, 1893, and to pay their share of the cost or lose their interest in the claim. Any result from this notification is not known. On November 19, 1894, Wright was a witness to a mining claim filed by A. W. Ivins on the eastern side of House Rock Valley, and this is the last reference to Wright and gold mining prospects in the Glen Canyon region.

For the next two years after 1894, nothing is known of Wright's activities, but he more than likely continued with prospecting and mining. The 1896 Salt Lake City directory does list a Mrs. Lillie Wright as a teacher in the Wasatch School District but nothing of a George M. Wright. His name next appears in connection with a mining claim in the Agua Fria District of Yavapai County, Arizona, in 1897. This was followed by claims each year from 1898 through 1901, all in the Walker Mining District near Prescott, Arizona. After the latter date, however, there is nothing more that has been discovered about George M. Wright.



Jim Knipmeyer at the Wright inscription in Cataract Canyon.
The word "Wrecked" is part of a different inscription. Photo by Richard Quartaroli