

“Boys left us”: From the Powell Memorial to the Plaques at Separation

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For almost 80 years, since 1939, any Grand Canyon river runners traveling on the Colorado River from Lee’s Ferry to below Diamond Creek have been able to see the cenotaph at Separation Canyon near river mile 240. This bronze plaque is dedicated to William H. Dunn, Oramel G. Howland, and Seneca B. Howland, three crew members who left Major John Wesley Powell’s 1869 river expedition at the head of Separation Rapid, on August 28th, and climbed out Separation Canyon to an unknown fate.

This talk is not about Powell’s expedition or the events leading to the so-called “Affair at Separation,” but about the history of the four plaques associated with it and why three plaques have been placed at Separation, but only one is there now—and it is not in its original location.

Powell died September 23, 1902, and in 1909 Congress appropriated \$5,000 for a Powell monument at Grand Canyon. Completed December 1916 and dedicated May 20, 1918, nine months before Grand Canyon became a national park, the plaque on the monument left off the names of the Howlands and Dunn, thus separating their names from those of the rest of the crew. Thus it became the first of the Separation Plaques.

The blame for the omission can be traced directly to a member of Powell’s second river trip, Frederick S. Dellenbaugh. A self-appointed member of the monument designing committee, Dellenbaugh thought the men deserters and recommended their names not be placed on the plaque.

The Major surely would not have approved of doing so...This is correct, leaving off the names of the two Howlands and Dunn because of desertion. It would be a graceful thing perhaps to put up on Shevwit Plateau near Mt. Dellenbaugh a simple monument to them for they went within a day or two of the end of the voyage and the Major was never condemnatory.

After Julius Stone’s and Robert Brewster Stanton’s books came out in 1932, with wording on the books’ dust jackets seeking to rectify the three men’s reputations, in 1934 “The Dusty Dozen,” including the Hatch family and Doc Frazier, brought the next two Separation plaques, one a cast-bronze (#2) and the other a copper sheet (#3), to the location and wired them to the rock. Stone and Frazier thought the wording on the cast plaque needed some more explanation, so in 1939 mounted the large cenotaph (“empty tomb” in Greek, and Separation Plaque #4), removing the 1934 cast plaque (#2), which Frazier took home. A nearly-full Lake Mead and floods in 1942 and 1943 inundated the cenotaph, which got moved higher in December 1943, where it remains today.

The rest of the presentation will detail the movements and whereabouts of the plaques #2 and #3, which, fortunately, are still extant.

1934 (#2)



1934 (#3)



1939 (#4)



Separation Plaques Timeline (rdq)

1869 May 24: Major John Wesley Powell's first river expedition launches at Green River City, Wyoming.
1869 Aug. 28: William Dunn, Oramel G. Howland, and Seneca B. Howland leave Powell's trip at Separation Canyon, to an unknown fate.

1902 Sep. 23: John Wesley Powell dies.

1909: Congress appropriates \$5,000 for a Powell monument at Grand Canyon. Frederick S. Dellenbaugh, crew on Powell's 2nd river trip, self-appoints himself to the design committee. In the interim, Dellenbaugh recommends not including the names of Dunn and the Howlands on the monument.

1916 Dec.: Monument (Memorial) completed on Sentinel Point, Grand Canyon.

1918 May 20: Monument dedicated, without the names of Dunn and the Howlands on the plaque (#1).

1919 Feb. 26: Grand Canyon National Park established.

1932: Julius Stone's *Canyon Country* and Robert Brewster Stanton's *Colorado River Controversies* are published. Dust jackets state: "...it removes from the names of three men, members of the first expedition, the undeserved stigma of cowardice."

1934: "Dusty Dozen" (including Doc Frazier and the Hatch family) wire bronze plaque (#2) and copper plaque (#3) to the rocks at Separation.

1939 Aug. 28: Stone, Frazier, and others replace #2 with #4, a larger cast cenotaph (#4). Frazier takes home #2. No mention of copper plaque (#3).

1942 May and 1943 June: floods overtop cenotaph (#4).

1943 ~Dec. 25: Cenotaph (#4) moved above high water mark, 40' higher than in 1939, where it is today.

1962-63: Boatman Jerry White (with Harris-Brennan) finds copper plaque (#3) fallen off rock at Separation.

1968 Nov. 12: Doc Frazier ships bronze plaque (#2) to the Utah State Historical Society (USHS).

1971 Jun. 1: Doc Frazier's daughter, Frankie Strathairn, gets bronze plaque (#2) from USHS.

1971 Nov. 26: Bronze plaque (#2) returned to Separation, mounted above cenotaph (#4) by: Frankie, Dock Marston, and NPS ranger Jim Bailey.

1979 ca.: GCNP rangers Marv Jensen, Steve Martin, John Thomas, and Sam West remove bronze plaque (#2), as it had been damaged and loosened by vandals. Intent was to re-mount it more securely.

1980s: Ranger Curt Sauer inherits bronze plaque (#2) from Jensen.

1980s-mid: GCNP Park Archaeologist Jan Balsom inherits bronze plaque (#2) from Sauer.

1983 Jul. 9: Jerry White writes to Bus Hatch's son Don that he will send copper plaque (#3) to Hatch in Vernal.

2019: Powell Memorial plaque (#1) still without the names of the Howlands and Dunn.

2019: Bronze plaque (#2) in the Grand Canyon National Park Museum Collection.

2019: Copper plaque (#3) with the Hatch family in Vernal, Utah.

2019: Cenotaph (#4) on the cliff, downstream side of Separation Canyon.

1918 (#1)



1934 (#2)