

John Wesley Powell: White Water to White City
By Marcia Thomas, professor, Illinois Wesleyan University
2009 Guides Training Seminar

When John Wesley Powell began his voyage down the Colorado River in May 1869, he knew that capturing public attention was critical to acquiring public funds for a survey of the unmapped Colorado River Plateau. Throughout the summer, Powell and members of the expedition maintained frequent correspondence with editors of the *Chicago Tribune*, *Rocky Mountain News*, and other prominent newspapers. By the time the Powell emerged from the Grand Canyon, he had achieved the status of national hero. His savvy employment of the flourishing popular media and cultivation of political allies helped him secure simultaneous directorships of the Bureau of (American) Ethnology in 1879 and the U.S. Geological Survey in 1881. Powell held the BAE post until his death in 1902, but resigned from the USGS in 1894, following the demise of his ill-fated Irrigation Survey. Powerful political and economic interests, eager to profit from the development of the nation's remaining public lands, crushed Powell's plans to establish a progressive land policy for western settlement. When Powell spoke before the International Irrigation Congress in 1893, the audience jeered at his proclamation that there was "not enough water to irrigate all this arid region." That same year, Frederick Turner declared that the American frontier had closed -- less than twenty-five years after Powell and his men first entered the uncharted Grand Canyon.