

George Young Bradley, Shoemaker, Soldier, Explorer, Chronicler

George Young Bradley, best known for his role as oarsman, assistant geologist/naturalist, and primary diarist among the members of [John Wesley Powell's](#) 1869 seminal exploratory voyage down the Green and Colorado Rivers and through the Grand Canyon, was born here in 1836. His parents, [George and Elizabeth Young Bradley](#), had immigrated from England to West Newbury in 1829.

Bradley grew up here, familiar with the Merrimack, which he mentioned in his diary. He [left school in 6th grade](#), working as a [shoemaker and living with his family](#) until he joined Major Boyd's Company A of the Mass. 19th Regiment, in [August, 1862](#). He served until he was injured, shot in the thigh, in the [battle of Fredricksburg, VA](#). The summer of 1863 found him back in [Town, making shoes](#) and serving in the [reserves](#).

In early 1867 Bradley rejoined the Army, which sent him to the Nebraska Territory. According to the [Utah Historical Society's history](#) of the Powell expedition, "Life on the plains, guarding the route of the Overland Stage Company and the construction of the Union Pacific Railroad and 'chasing Indians,' turned out to be far less adventuresome than Sergeant Bradley had expected...." Bradley said in his diary he "would be willing to explore the River Styx" as a preferred alternative, and so at Powell's request to President Grant, Bradley was released to join Powell's crew of 9 men.

A wiry 5'9" at 150 pounds, Bradley was described by a team member as ["tough as a badger."](#) He sported a [handlebar mustache](#), and, according to [one author](#), "He was a gifted writer and an intelligent man who knew one end of a boat from another. He was also unassuming, very capable in all that he did, and apparently he got along with everyone...." Never married, Bradley held strong connections to his family back in Massachusetts. His [diary entries](#) eagerly anticipated letters from home and lamented the effects of river water on the family photos he had brought along.

[Bradley wrote](#) that on May 24, 1869, the expedition started out from Green River, WY, with 4 boats and 10 men "for the purpose of exploring the Green and Colorado Rivers." A few days later he described countryside "grand beyond conception. The river winds like a serpent...between nearly perpendicular

cliffs 1200 ft high but instead of rapids it is deep and calm as a lake." Not long after, the travelers were laboring relentlessly, shooting through and often portaging around dangerous rapids. [They lost a boat and provisions in early June](#) as well as a crew member who hiked away in the beginning of July.

In mid-July, [Bradley commented](#), "The whole country is inconceivably desolate, as we float along on a muddy stream walled in by huge sand-stone bluffs that echo back the slightest sound. Hardly a bird save the ill-omened raven or an occasional eagle screaming over us; one feels a sense of loneliness as he looks on the little party, only three boats and nine men, hundreds of miles from civilization, bound on an errand the issue of which everybody declares must be disastrous. Yet if he could enter our camp at night or our boats by day he could read the cool deliberate determination to persevere that posses[ses] every man of the party and would at once predict that the issue of all would be success."

Late July and August brought [100° heat and extreme hardship](#). As supplies dwindled, boats were more often hauled rather than risk loss in worsening cataracts. The men suffered dousings and scorching sun. Nearing starvation toward the end of August, they came upon a place where sheer cliffs precluded portage around terrifying rapids. Three left the expedition. [Bradley ran the rapids and was feared lost](#), but bobbed up, swinging his hat to signal all's well. On August 30, the expedition came upon the Virgin River with Mormon settlements, ending their voyage near [Callville, NV](#), now submerged under Lake Mead.

Bradley continued down the river, making his way to California. [Voter rolls place him in San Diego in 1870, and later near Los Angeles](#). In 1885, when dying of encroaching paralysis, Bradley returned home. He died on November 13, 1885, in the North Andover household of his sister, Elizabeth Bradley Morss, where his mother also lived. [Bradley is buried with his family](#) at West Newbury's Bridge Street Cemetery.

Bradley sought neither fame nor profit from his role in the Grand Canyon expedition. He kept his diary secret from his fellow explorers and his family. It did not come to light until after 1916, when his nephew [donated the manuscript to the Library of Congress](#).



Depiction of George Bradley using his drawers as rope to save Powell (who had lost an arm in the battle of Shiloh) during a cliff climbing crisis Source: [Scribner's Monthly vol. 9 \(Nov. 1874-Apr. 1875\)](#)



THE START FROM GREEN RIVER STATION.

Depiction of the expedition's beginning. Source: [Scribner's Monthly vol. 9 \(Nov. 1874-Apr. 1875\)](#)

Aug-12-69. Have copied my notes to date and now am anxious to be on the move. Major got latitude last night which we find ourselves as far south as Callville so that what we see now must be west from this point. Major has is out on the mountains with the barometer so we shall find them bright when he comes in. There remains nothing more to be done that is absolutely necessary for but the work is sufficient and we ought to be away in the morning. Don't know whether to start or not. It is looking like a shower but I am surprised to find it raining nearly every night in a way when they say rain seldom falls.

Aug 13-69. Started about 9 a.m. and have made 15 mi

Excerpt from Bradley's diary in the Library of Congress Manuscript Collection.

Source: [Edward Dolnick, Down the Great Unknown: John Wesley Powell's 1869 Journey of Discovery and Tragedy Through the Grand Canyon](#)