

The dreaded Ashley Falls

Once the most feared rapid on the Green River, Ashley Falls has been entombed deep in the waters of Flaming Gorge Reservoir since before the dam was completed. This major rapid is only a few miles upriver from Flaming Gorge Dam, so as soon as the cofferdam was completed in 1957 Ashley Falls was covered. For over 100 years before that, however, Ashley Falls was the stuff of nightmares for anyone trying to navigate the canyons of the upper Green River in Daggett County. Just about in the middle of Red Canyon's 30-mile length, Ashley Falls was formed when huge boulders fell from the canyon wall and all but blocked the river. That makes it unique among Green River rapids, for most are formed from boulders washed down side streams. And the boulders were massive; the one in the middle was the size of a house, while the ones on either side of it were the size of cars. At low water, when the Green would all but dry up, a person could get a boat through the rocks on the right side, but the other side was blocked by rocks. When the seasonal floods came, however, the Green could run as much as twenty times more water than is let out of the dam today, and Ashley Falls became a raging cataract that could be heard for a mile upriver.

It got its name from a simple inscription on a boulder on the left side of the canyon. In 1825, William Ashley and his party of trappers passed by it and Ashley painted his name and the date "Ashely 1825" and went on. John Wesley Powell saw that in 1869 and gave it the name. After that, many more travelers stopped to add their names, creating what's known as a "river

register.” And they had time to paint their names, too, for getting past Ashley Falls was no easy task. In the days before people regularly ran rapids, you had two options to keep going: line or portage. Lining meant attaching long ropes to your boat and letting it down along the side of the river. It was difficult enough when there was a beach, but incredibly arduous on a shore that was just huge boulders. Even as they let the boats down, all the supplies and gear had to be carried on their backs around the rocks, to be reloaded into the boat. At Ashley Falls this was only possible on the left side, so it’s no wonder so many people commemorated that task with their name and the date. But finally people began to look at the rapid and think “I could get through that...” The first recorded run of it was in 1896 by George Flavell, but no doubt the first to run it was Nathaniel Galloway, the famous Utah river runner, who first ran the Green in the 1880s. By the time Norm Nevills came along in 1940, some of the fear had worn off and people were taking their boats through it on a regular basis, although not without much scouting and discussion and chin-stroking beforehand. Nevills wrote “After some study I decided to run thru on the left, with passengers. Its a bit tricky, tho not dangerous.” After his successful run, he added his name to the river register. And Nevills was there in June, on high water. Virtually all previous parties who ran it did so at low water in the fall or winter. At high water the usual right-side run was dangerous; huge waves came sideways off the rocks and were almost certain to capsize a boat. The left side of the huge central boulder, though, was a straight shot through two giant standing waves. What Nevills noticed was that below Ashley Falls was a long quiet pool; it was over a mile before any more rapids; that made it much safer in the event of a capsize. There was even a cattle trail that used a ford right below the rapid.



A K Reynolds 1950

By the time that the gates closed on the coffer dam and water began to rise over Ashley Falls, people were even swimming through it in their life jackets!

This story is reprinted with the permission of the author, Roy Webb and is from the forthcoming book, "I had arrived at perfection": The Lost Canyons of the Green River, to be published by the University of Utah Press in 2012. All photos are from the Special Collections Department, J. Willard Marriott Library, University of Utah.