

# THE UNITED (WATERSHED) STATES OF AMERICA

What if Powell's proposal had succeeded? What if all American states were defined by watershed boundary? It might look like this...

Before 1869, no one had successfully navigated the mighty Colorado River. But on August 13, 1869 John Wesley Powell, civil war veteran and geologist, and a small support crew stood at the confluence of the Virgin and Colorado Rivers after having done just that. Powell went on to float the Colorado again in 1872, and recounted the events of these adventures in his book later known simply as *Canyons of the Colorado*. Lesser known, but perhaps more important, Powell proposed in his 1879 Report on the Lands of the Arid Regions of the United States that the boundaries of the emerging western states be formed around watershed, rather than political boundary. This idea rested on the observation that because of an arid climate, a statewide organization decided by any other factor would lead to water conflict down the road.

But the railroad lobby, buoyed by Cyrus Thomas and his theory that "rain follows the plough", disagreed with Powell. This now discredited theory suggested that as new land was brought into agriculture, moisture from the soil was exposed to the sky resulting in increased precipitation. Since railroad companies owned substantial tracts of lands that would have been difficult – if not impossible – to capitalize on if Powell's proposal had taken root, they used Thomas' theory to successfully sway congressional opinion to accept state boundaries as we see them today.

