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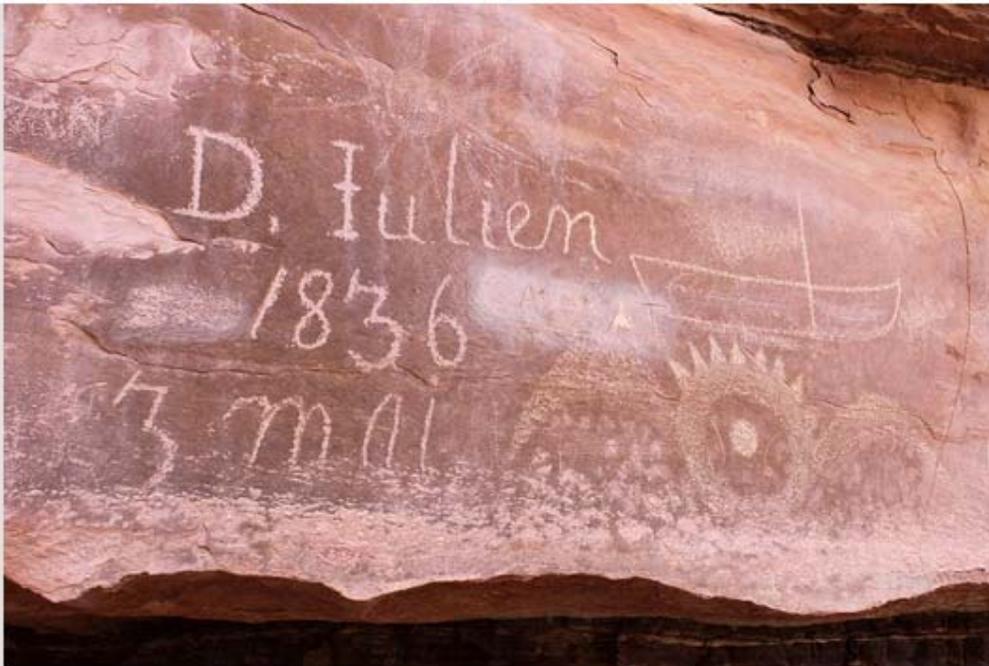
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19th-century fur trapper Denis Julien traveled against the current



Courtesy of Andrew Gulliford



ABOVE: This rock art inscription in Hell Roaring Canyon by Denis Julien explains how he traveled upstream solo on the Green River. The first Euro-American to leave a record of his travels in Grand County, Utah, Julien paddled a French flat-bottomed boat or pirogue. Wider than a modern day canoe, Julien's boat had a mast and sail to use afternoon upriver winds.

TOP: The inscription of Julien's boat and sail.

Thursday, Dec. 10, 2015 1:24 AM

Above the white sand beaches in Whirlpool Canyon lies a 19th-century secret lightly etched in ancient stone. Two initials and the date 1838 tell of a lost world and one man's singular perseverance.

For years, I've been looking for Denis Julien. A Creole French-American beaver fur trapper, Julien lived his life on the fringes of 19th-century frontier society. While many trappers worked as "company men" for St. Louis firms, he traveled alone. The fur trade pivoted between the northern and southern Rockies, yet Julien explored the middle. He left inscriptions with his name and date in Green River canyons across Utah and Colorado, and I've been trying to find them. It's taken me decades.

One of the many mysteries about Julien is why and how he was paddling solo upstream. Most canoeists "go with the flow" downstream, yet by studying the dates of his inscriptions, it's apparent that he traversed the Green from south to north, leaving his initials and dates in what is now Canyonlands National Park, on Bureau of Land Management lands in Labyrinth Canyon, below the Book Cliffs close to the Utah/Colorado state line, on a bluff near the Uinta River and in Dinosaur National Monument.

Obscured by tamarisks, willows, and nearly two centuries of overgrowth, some of these inscriptions are difficult to find. Added to the mystery are Julien's dates. He paddled upstream searching for beaver after the fur market started to fall in 1834. Once as important to world economics as oil is now, the value of beaver pelves plummeted. Gentlemen in Paris, London and New York had previously demanded fur felt hats, but tall-masted clipper ships found their way to China. The new fashion rage was silk hats.

Yet Julien paddled north, alone, looking for beavers in river channels and trapped out sidestreams. Even if he found furs, their price had declined. He was far from anywhere, far from friends, far from the boisterous camaraderie of other French trappers, *coureurs de bois*, who loved to sing, dance, drink and carry on. What was he doing in these remote Southwestern canyons? I wanted to know. And part of that knowing was to find his inscriptions.

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The rest of the group stayed on the beach. I took my canoe to paddle upstream on the Green. Staying close to the far shore to avoid the main current, I struggled for half an hour slowly making my way upstream, paddling first on the left and then the right. Finally, I tied off and scrambled through the brush looking for the inscription that was supposed to be there. No luck. Just scratches on my arms and face. Twigs down my T-shirt. Turning into the current, in minutes I was back at the beach ready for beer and dinner.

The next year, in high water, I found it. Scratched on the rock with his distinctive block printing: 16 mai 1836. What was he doing out here alone? If it took me 30 minutes of hard paddling to go less than a mile, how could he have traveled hundreds of miles upstream?

Mountain men from Missouri, Kentucky and Tennessee moved north up the Platte and Arkansas river valleys on horseback, trailing a pack horse, rifle cradled in one arm, reins in the other hand. They learned the low mountain passes and how to avoid steep snow-covered north-facing slopes as they sought out creeks and streams to set their traps wading thigh deep in ice cold winter water. Mountain men treasured their horses, but the French trappers chose America's waterways. Instead of horses, they used canoes and wore bright red sashes. Raised Catholic, they said their prayers.

Married to an Ioway Indian wife named Catherine, Julien baptized three children in the St. Louis Cathedral and buried one between 1798 and 1804. By 1808, governor of Louisiana Territory Meriwether Lewis described him as "an old and much respected (sic) trader among the Iaways (sic)." As a young man, he had a small farm and established a trading business on the Mississippi with a clerk and hired help. But something happened. Maybe other farmers moved in. Maybe he ran up debts for merchandize he couldn't sell. As an older man, he went west. He paddled the Green River in canyons still remote almost two centuries later, and he left inscriptions from 1831 to 1844.

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I've found his initials and dates in Whirlpool Canyon in Dinosaur National Monument. We had to clear away poison ivy and hack down tamarisk, but there on river right are his initials D.J. and the year, 1838. It's difficult to land a raft there. Few people get out. The inscription is in deep shade so it's hard to see, but it's there at arm's length.

No one will ever know why he continued to travel Western rivers and trap furs after the market had faltered. Some men are like that, especially in the West. They cling to a way of life after it is gone. Maybe it's the landscape that compels them to stay. But for at least one of Julien's secrets, he left a large clue on a boulder in Hell Roaring Canyon just north of Mineral Bottom and the start of Canyonlands National Park.

We left our canoes in the shallows and hiked toward his inscription. Of all his carvings, this is the largest and most dramatic. He took the time to spell out his name, D. Julien 1836 3 mai, to draw what may be a flying bird and the shape of his flat-bottomed boat, or in French, his pirogue, perhaps 18 feet long. On the boulder, he revealed his secret – how he traveled upstream mile after mile. He etched a mast. His boat had a sail.

Of course! On river trips, wary of afternoon winds, guides try not to evoke the river gods and never use the word "wind." Instead, they speak of the "W" so as to refer to wind without actually calling it by name. In late spring and summer, afternoon winds blow upstream sometimes with enough force to stop a fully loaded raft or to at least hamper its passage. Ingenious.

Julien had a collapsible mast and sail on his boat. He traveled in late afternoon at exactly the same time that modern river trips are setting up camp. River guides warn of the "W" picking up, fearful of their clients' lightweight tents blowing away and sleeping bags rolling into the water.

He knew the river and the canyon's moods. He didn't fight nature; he used it.

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As for the man himself, he disappears from American history after leaving his mark in canyons. What we know of him has been carefully researched by scholars from archives and historical data, but it is precious little. Hardly enough to do a sketch of his life, and certainly not a full portrait.

Nine Julien inscriptions have been discovered. There may be more. In time, they'll be located. I'll keep searching. I think of him just before dark when the winds die down, guiding his boat upstream, on his knees, looking for beaver in the last of the day's light, perhaps singing a French love song to the women he left behind.

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