

Rainbow Bridge National Monument. Utah



In the semidesert country of Southeastern Utah stands Rainbow Bridge, nestled among canyons carved by streams that wind their way from the northern side of Navajo Mountain toward the Colorado River.

It is in one of the most remote and (until recently) inaccessible regions in the United States. So rugged is the surrounding Rainbow Plateau that few of the Navajo and Paiute Indians who live nearby have ever seen the bridge.

Colorful, symmetrical Rainbow Bridge is greater in size than any other known natural bridge. With a 278-foot span, the bridge gracefully arches to a height of 309 feet—as high as the Capitol in Washington, D.C. Thicker at the top than a 3-story building (42 feet), it is wide enough (33 feet) to accommodate the average highway.

**Discovery** The first white man to view the arch was probably a wandering prospector. No publicity was forthcoming, however, until the return of the Douglass-Cummings party from Rainbow Bridge in 1909. Dr. Byron Cummings, then dean of Arts and Sciences, University of Utah, and W. B. Douglass, a Government surveyor, had set out with separate parties in search of the great stone arch rumored by the Indians to be in the vicinity of Navajo Mountain. Subsequently, the two parties met and joined forces.

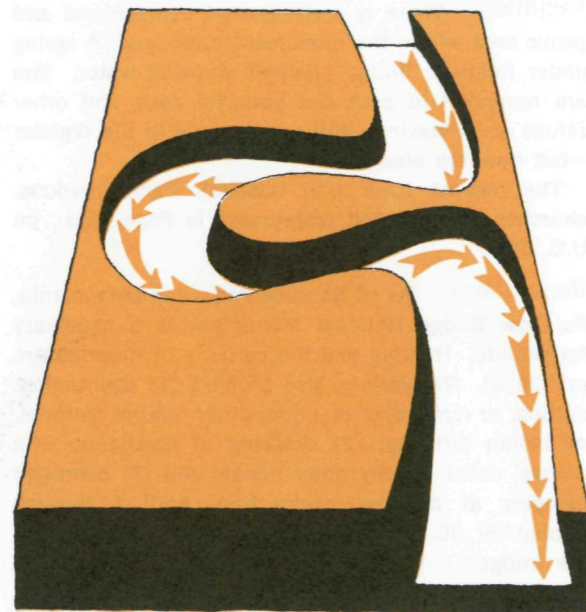
Guided by John Wetherill and Nasja Begay, the parties continued the search for several days. Wetherill was a trader at Kayenta and a self-taught archeologist. Nasja Begay, a Paiute Indian, knew the location of the bridge.

The explorers crossed canyons and slick-rock surfaces where the horses slipped and skidded. Frequently they had to retrace their steps, their progress blocked by rimrock ledges that the horses could not cross. They struggled through canyons that were dry and boulder-choked and others that contained water and dense brush.

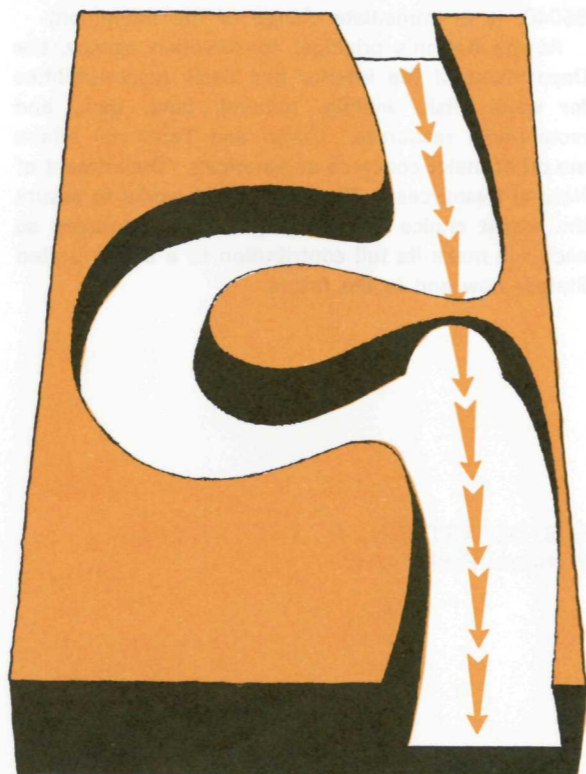
Across a scrub juniper flat and down into the last canyon they went. This was Nonnezoshi Biko, the Indian name for the canyon of the great stone arch, since named Rainbow Bridge Canyon.

Men and horses were exhausted, but they trudged onward. In the late afternoon of August 14, 1909, the party rounded a bend in the canyon and beheld the largest and most beautiful of all known stone arches, Rainbow Bridge.

**How Was It Formed?** Many millions of years ago sluggish streams flowed to the south and west across



THE CUTTING OF A NATURAL BRIDGE.



a broad floodplain. The streams deposited sand and mud in thin beds that later consolidated to form reddish-brown to purple strata—the Kayenta Formation, the upper part of which is now exposed beneath Rainbow Bridge.

Following this period, there was a gradual change to desert conditions. Winds from the west and north-west brought great quantities of sand, depositing it in large, sweeping dunes. This sand, now weakly cemented, has been named the Navajo Sandstone—the cliff-forming, pale orange to pale reddish-brown rock in which Rainbow Bridge and Rainbow Bridge Canyon have been formed.

For the next nearly 100 million years the region was alternately desert, floodplain, swamp, or partially covered by lakes or shallow marine waters. The Navajo Sandstone was buried under 5,000 feet or more of strata.

Then, some 60 million years or more ago, there began a slow, general uplift of the Colorado Plateau. In places, as at Navajo Mountain, the uplift was locally exaggerated as masses of molten rock, or magma, moved upward, doming the overlying rock.

The present landscape is the result of erosion by streams (some of which became the Colorado River and its tributaries) cutting into thousands of feet of ancient rock layers raised high above sea level. In the earlier stages, downcutting of the streams was slow, and their paths meandered widely. But as further uplift occurred and the tilting of the land became more pronounced, the streams acquired more force—speeding up the downcutting of their own meanders.

Rainbow Bridge was formed during the entrenching of Bridge Creek, which flows today from Navajo Mountain northwest to the Colorado River (Lake Powell). The canyon of Bridge Creek was carved through the Navajo sandstone into the top of the Kayenta formation. As it reached the lowest levels of the sandstone and the hard Kayenta rock, downcutting became more difficult. The stream began widening its path, undercutting the canyon walls, until it cut through the base of a thin spur, or neck, of one of the meander loops. Taking the more direct course, the stream widened the break; and a natural bridge of sandstone was thus formed.

The predominant color of the arch is salmon-pink, with dark streaks or stains caused by iron oxide or hematite. As rain falls on the upper part of the arch,

hematite in the sandstone is washed down the sides and deposited by evaporation—leaving streaks of variegated reds and browns. The coloring becomes brilliant in the afternoon sun, possibly the basis for the Indian legend that the arch is a rainbow changed to stone.

**Springs and Plants** Water dripping into the pools near the bottom of Rainbow Bridge Canyon is also from rainwater, seeping down through the Navajo sandstone. When the water reaches impervious rock layers in the underlying Kayenta, it accumulates but eventually seeps out along the walls of the canyon as springs.

Plants grow in profusion near these springs. Maidenhair fern and wild orchid thrive in the shade. Growing on drier slopes are Indian paintbrush, lupine, daisy, aster, yucca, sunflower, evening-primrose, onion, scarlet bugler, and sego lily, to name only a few. In April, the redbud, a shrub, blooms beautifully along the course of the stream.

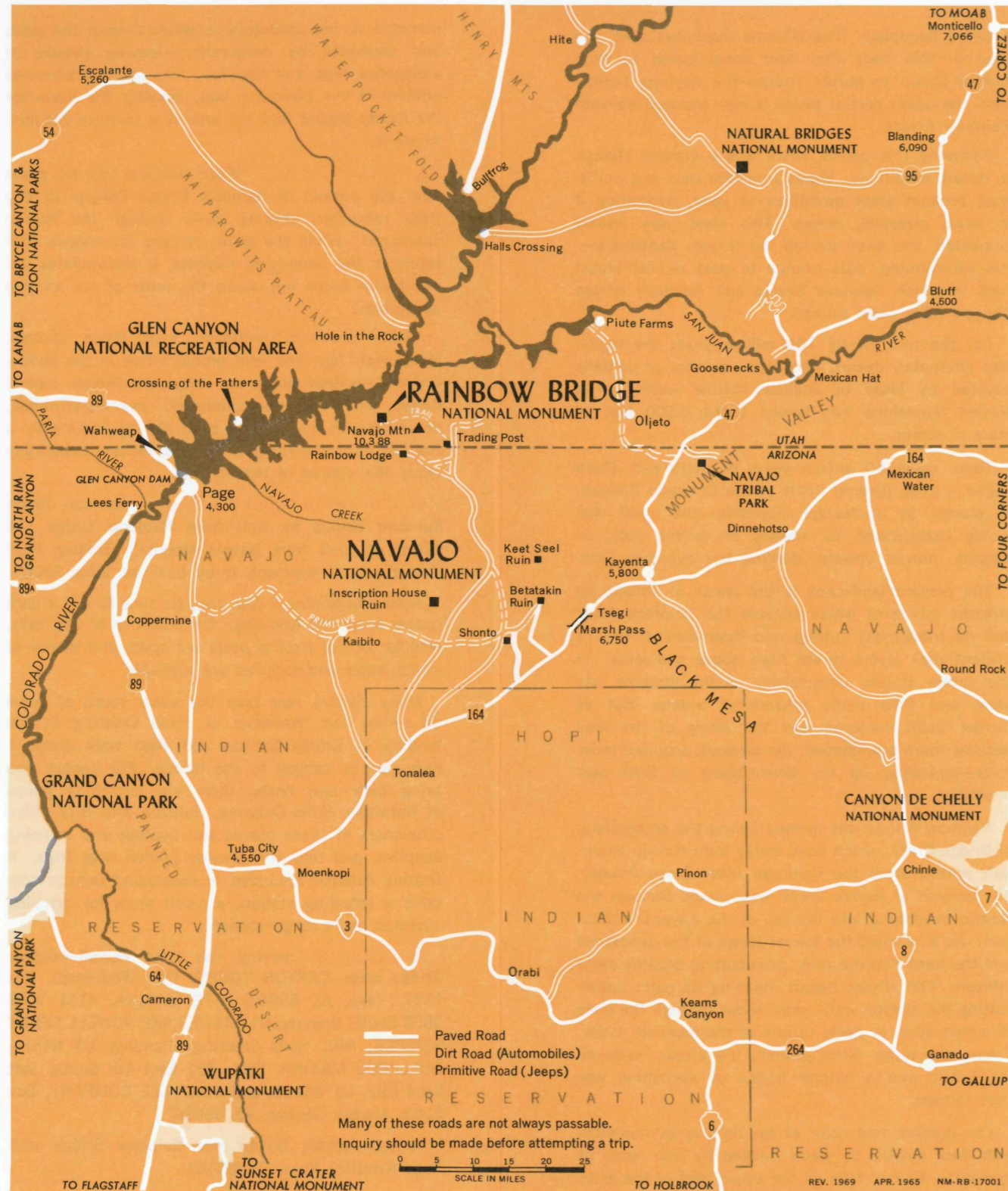
**How To Reach Rainbow Bridge** You can reach Rainbow Bridge by trail from Rainbow Lodge (14 miles), by trail from Navajo Mountain Trading Post (24 miles), or approach it by boat on Lake Powell.

*Before beginning a trail trip, be sure to ask a park ranger about the following: the condition of the trails, whether or not trading posts are open, and places at which water and supplies are available.*

Many visitors now take the water route of some 55 miles from Wahweap or Halls Crossing to the landing in Bridge Canyon and then walk about 1 mile up the canyon to the bridge. For people who bring their own boats, there are launching ramps at Wahweap, Halls Crossing, Bullfrog, and Hite. Concessioners at these places sell boating and camping supplies, and they will provide guided boat trips. A floating complex anchored in Forbidding Canyon contains a refueling station, a small store for camping supplies, and a ranger station.

**Concessioners** serving the Lake Powell-Rainbow Bridge area: CANYON TOURS, INC. (Wahweap), Box 1597, Page, AZ 86040; HITE MARINA, 4131 West 3860 South, Granger, UT 84119; LAKE POWELL FERRY SERVICE, INC., Halls Crossing, Blanding, UT 84511; BULLFROG MARINA, INC., 231 East 4th South, Salt Lake City, UT 84111; and FORT LEE COMPANY, Box 2103, Marble Canyon, AZ 86036.

Arrange scenic flights over Rainbow Bridge with Page Aviation, Page, AZ 86040.



**Facilities** There is a designated campground and picnic area within the monument boundary. A spring under Rainbow Bridge provides drinking water. You are reminded to pack out your tin cans and other refuse when leaving. Write your name in the register—but nowhere else.

The nearest town with hospital, bank, markets, churches, motels, and restaurants is Page, Ariz., on U.S. 89.

**Regulations** As all National Parks and Monuments, Rainbow Bridge National Monument is a sanctuary for wildlife. Hunting and the carrying of firearms are prohibited. Regulations also prohibit (1) destruction, cutting, or removal of plantlife, other natural features, or Indian artifacts; (2) defacing of sandstone with names, dates, or any other marks; and (3) overnight camping at courtesy docks from April 1 through September 30. A walk-in campsite is available near the bridge.

**Administration** Rainbow Bridge National Monument, established on May 30, 1910, and containing 160 acres, is administered by the National Park Service, U.S. Department of the Interior.

The superintendent of Glen Canyon National Recreational Area, whose address is Box 1507, Page, AZ 86040, is in immediate charge of the monument.

As the Nation's principal conservation agency, the Department of the Interior has basic responsibilities for water, fish, wildlife, mineral, land, park, and recreational resources. Indian and Territorial affairs are other major concerns of America's "Department of Natural Resources." The Department works to assure the wisest choice in managing all our resources so each will make its full contribution to a better United States—now and in the future.

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