Wetherills of the Four Corners

The proximate cause of this aide mémoire was an Amerind Museum program, “Footsteps of the Wetherills.” Conducted in May 2015 by Harvey Leake and Carolyn O’Bagy Davis, the itinerary included stops in Arizona, Utah, Colorado, and New Mexico—the Four Corners.

Harvey Leake, great grandson of John Wetherill, compiled a photographic booklet for the tour that he called “Wetherills of the Four Corners.” We stole his title—and, with his permission, have included some of the historic photographs he used.

There were six (surviving) Wetherill siblings. (Alice died in infancy.) Pictured at right are the five brothers: Benjamin Alfred (Al), Winslow, Richard, Clayton, and John. Anna—whose husband, Charles Mason, became “one of the boys”—completes the list.

**Why the Wetherills?** Mesa Verde, Chaco Canyon—familiar places.

Perhaps Rainbow Bridge and Navajo National Monuments, may ring some bells. Before we get to those, however, it’s best to start at the beginning.

Though there is never a real beginning to a family tree, the Wetherill family tree *in Mancos, Colorado*, has a beginning. It starts with Benjamin Kite (B.K.) and his wife Marion. With their six children, they came to Mancos from Pennsylvania, with stops in Iowa, Kansas, Missouri, and Utah. In 1880 they began the Alamo Ranch.

(A detailed history is available at [http://wetherillfamily.com/wetherill_history.htm](http://wetherillfamily.com/wetherill_history.htm).)
Benjamin Kite Wetherill grew up a Quaker in Chester, Pennsylvania, not far from Philadelphia, and received his education at Westtown Boarding School, a Quaker institution. The Quaker emphasis on nonviolence and the Inner Light he passed to his sons. Historians, and the family today, credit the Quaker influence with the Wetherill ability to acknowledge the Utes who lived around them in Mancos—and, later, Navajos and Hopis in Arizona and New Mexico—as fellow human beings, something many white settlers failed to do. In time, their willingness to learn native languages and establish mutually beneficial relationships with Indians would get them in trouble with white officials and neighbors.

The Alamo Ranch. B.K. and his eldest son Richard, who was 22 when they moved to Mancos, began with a small herd of cows to “ranch” what was land Utes assumed was their own. They allowed the Wetherills and their cows to roam where they willed. That may be one of the reasons Richard and Charlie were “allowed” to find Cliff Palace.

But let’s jump now to the end of the Alamo Ranch for the Wetherills. By 1894 a drought had decimated the ranch. In 1898 B.K. died. By that time Richard was living in Chaco, John was away and so were the other siblings; except for Al. B.K. left the Alamo Ranch to his wife, Marion, and to Al. Unfortunately, the ranch was mortgaged beyond what B.K. could handle. And, though Al had offers to buy the ranch, perhaps to turn it into a trading post, he chose not to meet a $3000 note ($80,000+ today). So, in 1902, the Alamo Ranch was sold at auction.

Subsequent owners, until today, have kept the name, “Alamo Ranch.”
The Wetherills are best known for their discovery, in December 1888, of Cliff Palace on the Mesa Verde. Al Wetherill glimpsed Cliff Palace in 1885 but Richard gets the credit because—along with their Ute friend, Acowitz—he and Charles Mason (Anna Wetherill’s husband) first explored it.

In his own dramatic fashion, Frank McNitt tells the story: “Richard and Charlie Mason were on top of Mesa Verde tracking strays...Suddenly, with an exclamation of astonishment, Richard grasped Mason’s arm...Mirage-like in the falling snow and outlined against the cave’s darkest shadows, were ghostly traceries of the largest cliff dwelling either had ever seen.” (McNitt, Richard Wetherill, Anasazi: Pioneer Explorer of Southwestern Ruins, 23f).

In the late 19th century artifacts were everywhere and the Wetherill brothers were not averse to developing “collections,” which they, unlike many of their contemporaries, sold to museums and took to exhibitions such as the Chicago World’s Columbian Exposition (1893) and the Saint Louis World’s Fair (1904).

In 1891 a young Swede, Gustaf Nordenskiöld, interrupted his world tour to view the cliff dwellings the Wetherills had found. He used the Alamo Ranch as his base—and never made it to Japan. Though suffering with tuberculosis, he enhanced the Wetherill brothers expertise in the rudiments of scientific archaeology. They guided him to Cliff Palace and many of the other Anasazi ruins they had discovered. He took photographs and wrote books. The Cliff Dwellers of the Mesa Verde (1893) is still available in the museum store at Mesa Verde National Park.
Mesa Verde National Park

During the 1890s many visitors came to the Alamo Ranch to be guided to Cliff Palace and other of the cliff dwellings, many of which had been located and excavated by the Wetherills. But the people whom the brothers hosted were not the ones B.K. Wetherill was concerned about in 1889 when he wrote to the Smithsonian: “We are particular to preserve the buildings, but fear, unless the Govt. sees proper to make a national park of the Canons, including Mesa Verde, the tourists will destroy them.” But nobody in Washington was interested in a national park just to protect some old Indian things. Besides, the Smithsonian curator himself was a rival to the Wetherills for collections from Mancos Canyon.

In 1900 the Colorado Cliff Dwellings Association was started by Virginia McClurg and Lucy Peabody to preserve the cliff dwellings of the Mesa Verde. Eventually, in 1906, President Theodore Roosevelt signed the bill that created Mesa Verde National Park. But by that time B. K. was dead, the family was scattered, the Alamo Ranch sold.

Spruce Tree House
Balcony House
Square Tower House
More Wetherill Sites

The Wetherills visited and excavated many cliff dwellings in the canyons of the Mesa Verde—many more than the ones, such as Cliff Palace and Balcony House, that are publicly available in the national park. Sites in the Ute Mountain Tribal Park, back to back with the National Park, contain unexcavated cliff dwellings that look much like 1891 photographs of Cliff Palace. Wetherill signatures are in them all.

Cliff Dwellings at Ute Mountain Tribal Park

Eagle’s Nest  Morris 5  Lion House

Grand Gulch

Perhaps the most significant archaeological find by the Wetherills was in December 1893 near Grand Gulch in Utah. The Hyde Exploring Expedition had located six alcoves before, in the 7th, Richard came upon skulls that were different from those found at Cliff Palace and other Mesa Verde cliff dwellings. Basketmakers!

Moreover, there was evidence of violence. Richard wrote to Talbot Hyde that “In the cave we are now working we have taken 28 skeletons [from] under the ruins, three feet below any cliff dweller sign. They are a different race from anything I have ever seen. They had feather cloth and baskets, no pottery—six of the bodies had stone spear heads in them.”

For many years the location of Cave 7, where Richard Wetherill first identified the Basketmaker culture, was lost—but Fred Blackburn, Owen Severance, and Winston Hurst determined to find it. And find it, they did. For more information, click on this URL: http://wetherillfamily.com/richard_wetherill.htm
Traders

All five Wetherill brothers left signatures in ruins scattered about the Four Corners; they were archaeologists and tour guides. And all of them, at some point in their lives, were traders, too.

Remember, they lived in the late 19th and early 20th century. It was the wild, wild West, a very different world from that in which we live today. The Civil War was a recent memory. Only in 1868 was the Navajo reservation established for the Diné who were returning from Bosque Redondo in New Mexico—the Long Walk. With the reservation system the trading post, as an institution, become feasible. Traders were white men and women who literally traded goods from the white world for goods from the Indian world.

The list of Wetherill trading posts in Utah, Arizona, and New Mexico is long: Tiz-Nat-Zin, Ojo Alamo, Kimbeto, Oljato, Chavez, Chaco, Two Grey Hills, Kayenta, Shonto, Thoreau, Black Mountain, Salana Springs.

Successful traders spoke Indian languages, used pawn as a rough banking system, and encouraged weavers.

Richard and John were the most effective of the brothers at trading. John at Kayenta and Richard at Pueblo Bonito. Each of them died where they had been trading.
John Wetherill

John and Louisa Wetherill left the Alamo Ranch to operate trading posts in New Mexico, including at Ojo Alamo in the Bisti Badlands northwest of Chaco, a post that had been started by Richard for the Hyde Exploring Expedition. In 1906 they acquired a partner, Clyde Colville, and set up a tent for trading at Oljato (“Moonlight Water”) near Monument Valley in southeast Utah.

In 1910 John and Louisa, with Clyde Colville, moved across the state border into Arizona where they started trading at Kayenta in the heart of the Navajo Nation. The original trading post is long gone, sold by Louisa and Clyde when John died in 1944.

John did not limit his activities to trading. While living at the Alamo Ranch, he not only accompanied his brothers on expeditions but functioned as an outfitter and guide for people such as Gustaf Nordenskiöld, with whom he became a particular friend.

While leading the 1909 Cummings-Douglass Expedition to the natural wonder, John was the first Anglo to walk under Rainbow Bridge.

Bryon Cummings and John Wetherill explored Keet Seel in 1908 (first entered by Richard in 1895) and, then, in 1909 they discovered Betatakin (in the large alcove pictured at left)—these two, with Inscription House, are the three cliff dwellings that comprise the Navajo National Monument. These buildings were only in use during the last half of the thirteenth century. The last tree-ring cuttings date to 1286. For thirty years John Wetherill served as volunteer custodian of the Monument.

For appreciations of John Wetherill, see the biographical sketch by Harvey Leake: http://wetherillfamily.com/john_wetherill.htm
Richard Wetherill

Richard Wetherill accompanied the collections he and others had made of material from the Mesa Verde cliff dwellings to the 1893 World’s Columbian Exhibition in Chicago.

There he met Talbot and Fred Hyde, Jr., whom he had known earlier that summer at the Alamo Ranch. These young men, heirs to “Babbitt’s Best Soap,” founded by their grandfather, were to affect the balance of Richard’s life. While in Chicago, they mapped out the rudiments of what became the Hyde Exploring Expedition, which Richard led to Grand Gulch, and supported his move to Chaco Canyon in 1897 after his marriage to Marietta Palmer.

From the beginning, the Wetherills’ exploration of Mesa Verde and their expeditions into other parts of the Four Corners generated controversy. Initially, their concern to protect the ruins ran into objections from neighbors who simply wanted to collect artifacts.

At Chaco, Richard traded with the Navajos while he investigated Pueblo Bonito. The Hyde brothers asked Frederic Putnam from the American Museum of Natural History for academic assistance. He sent his student, 23-year-old George Pepper, with whom Richard had a difficult relationship.

The original trading post, created by Al, was against the back wall of Pueblo Bonito. Supported by the Hyde brothers, Richard expanded the trading operation on the other side of the pueblo toward Chaco Wash.

On June 22, 1910, Richard and a cowboy, Bill Finn, had rounded up some cattle and were driving them toward Chaco Wash when shots rang out. A Navajo, Chis-Chilling Begay was convicted of the murder and served five years in prison. The Wetherill family is conducting research to understand the motives that led to the killing.

For more on the murder of Richard Wetherill see:
http://wetherillfamily.com/murder_of_richard_wetherill.htm