

1776: The Dominguez-Escalante Expedition

In July 1776 a 10-man exploration team left Santa Fe, New Mexico. (Meanwhile, back in Philadelphia, the Continental Congress had approved the Declaration of Independence...)

Two Franciscan priests led the expedition: Fathers Francisco Atanasio Dominguez and Silvestre Velez de Escalante. Their six-month journey is known as the Dominguez-Escalante Expedition. They were trying to establish an overland route between Santa Fe (in present-day New Mexico) and Monterey, California.

Escalante's diary.

During the journey, Father Escalante wrote about their experiences and the lands they traveled through. From his valuable journal, we know that the party traveled north through what is now Colorado. They entered Utah from the east near the present town of Jensen, Utah (in the Uinta Basin), around September 11, 1776.



Traveling westward, the group crossed the Wasatch Mountains by way of Diamond Fork and Spanish Fork canyons. Utah Valley, with its many mountain-fed streams and rich soils, impressed them.

Father Escalante's detailed diary described plant and animal life; geography; and the appearance, dress, and foods of the Ute and Paiute Indians. The Juan Maria Antonia Rivera journals, the Escalante diary, and Miera's map are the first documents in Utah history.

A hospitable welcome.

When the Spaniards reached Utah Lake, they visited the Timpanogots Utes at their village near the lake. The Utes were friendly and willingly learned about Christianity as the priests taught them. The priests promised to return (but never did).

The trip aborted.

The group headed south along where I-15 is today. In October, as they camped in Iron County (in what is now called Escalante Valley!) they decided they could not reach Monterey with winter coming on. So they turned south again, back toward Santa Fe. When they reached the Colorado River and the steep rock walls of Glen Canyon, they searched for twelve days for a way to cross the river. They finally crossed on November 7, 1776, but they called the canyon *Sal Si Puede* -- Get Out If You Can.



They reached Santa Fe on January 2, 1777.

Effects of their journey

Because Dominguez and Escalante documented their journey and made maps of the area, this opened up trade between the Utah natives and non-native groups. They would trade things such as guns and metal pots with the natives. Without the Spanish visitors to Utah, we would not have had written records of the native Utah tribes.