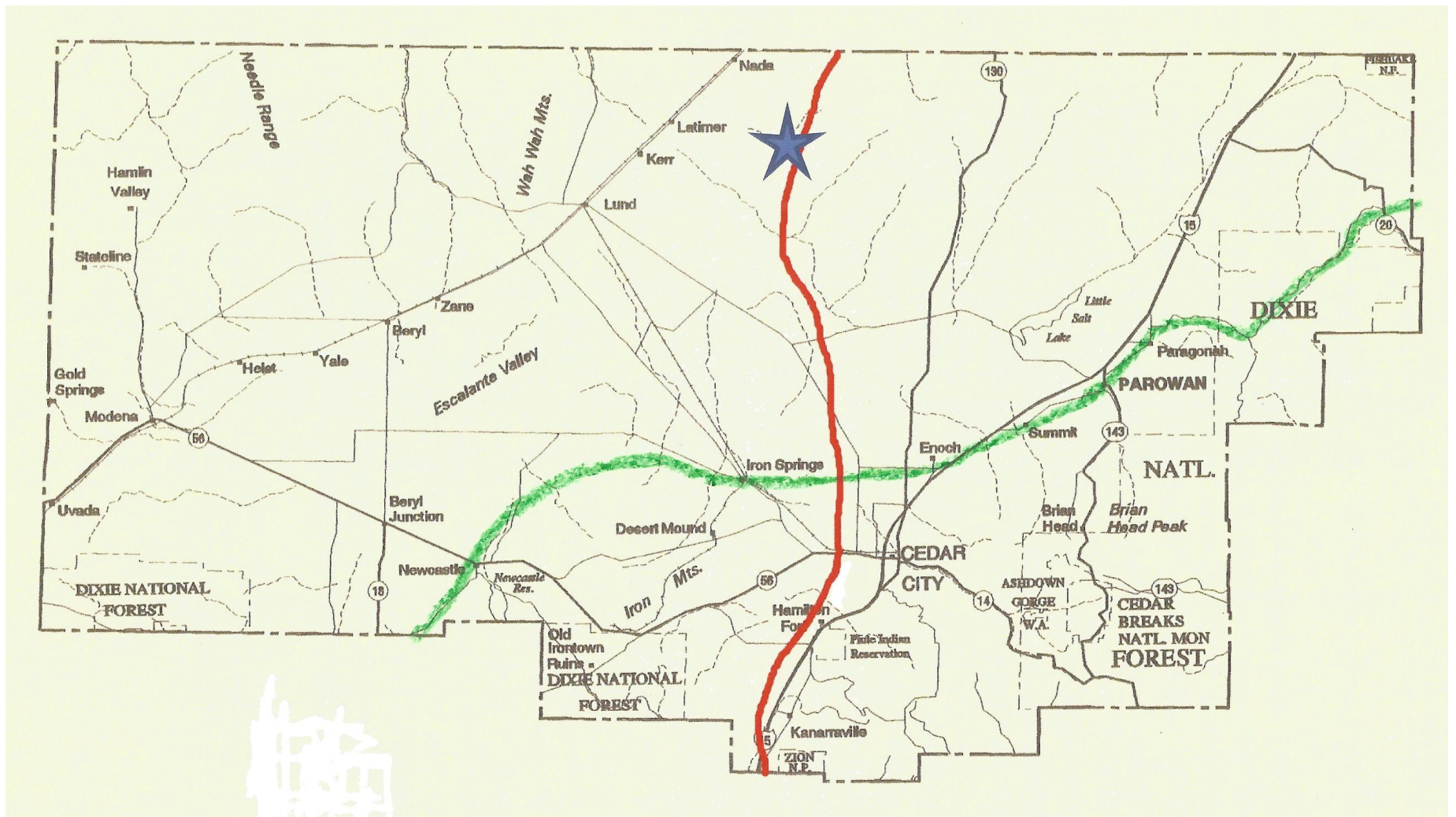


Dominguez-Escalante and the Old Spanish Trail

by Jay M. Jones



Map showing both the route of the Dominguez-Escalante expedition and the Old Spanish Trail through Iron County. The Dominguez-Escalante route is shown in red. The blue star is the approximate location of the Casting of the Lots site. The location of the Old Spanish Trail is shown in green.

On 11 October 1776, an expedition of approximately fourteen men paused on a small, remote hill overlooking what is now called the Escalante Valley in Southern Utah to settle a controversy that had the potential to destroy them.

Their leaders wanted to abandon the primary purpose of their journey, which was to find a way to the Spanish Mission at Monterey, California. Instead, they wanted to return home to Santa Fe, New Mexico.

The navigator and mapmaker of the expedition, Don Bernardo de Miera y Pacheco, had convinced most of the men that the opportunities for wealth and glory in California would exceed anything they could dream of in New Mexico. Miera probably emphasized how unlikely it would be for any in the group to have another chance to go to the land of fabled fortune. He was right on both accounts.

Father Francisco Atanasio Dominguez, the leader of the group, realized that the odds of safely reaching Monterey that season were slim and diminishing. Five days earlier, a snowstorm in the area near Milford slowed them down dramatically. They did not have gear for winter travel, having left Santa Fe in July and expecting to arrive in California before winter. After traveling northwest through Colorado, they visited with friendly Ute Indians in Utah Valley near Spanish Fork. From there, they searched for a viable way west, one with water and grass for the pack animals. Finding no such route, they proceeded southward, always keeping watch for an opening to the west. Then their Native American guide abandoned them, their food supplies ran low, and Father Dominguez knew that returning home was the only prudent option.



View to the northwest from the Casting of the Lots site.

After camping at a site they called San Eleuterio near Brown Knoll in northern Iron County, most of the men went on ahead while Father Dominguez conferred with his second in command, Father Silvestre Velez de Escalante, who kept a daily record of the expedition's progress.

Sensing that a mutiny was a distinct possibility, Dominguez and Escalante caught up with the group and called all the men together. Father Dominguez reminded them of the details of their serious situation and the compelling reasons to return to Santa Fe. Since there were serious disagreements, they would settle the matter by casting lots, trusting in God for their ultimate fate. Dominguez told the group that if the lot fell on California, Miera would be responsible to guide them there and to answer for the safety of the men.

Escalante records: "We cast lots, and the one of Cosnina came out. This we all heartily accepted now, thanks be to God, mollified and pleased." Cosnina was the name of a Havasupai Indian village near the Colorado River that was believed to be on the way back to Santa Fe.

(Seventy-three years later in 1849 another group of travelers passing through a different section of the Escalante Valley would disagree on which route to take to reach the gold fields of California. They split up, with some following what by then had been established as the Old Spanish Trail to Los Angeles. Others went almost due west into unknown territory which they figured would be a shortcut to the gold fields. This supposed shortcut proved disastrous for several, and the tragedy which followed gave Death Valley its name.)

Following the casting of the lots, the Dominguez-Escalante expedition proceeded south by southeast through Horse Hollow and camped in Cedar Valley north of Cedar City, calling it the Valley of San Jose. Escalante described it as a "beautiful valley". The following night they camped west of present day Kanarraville, then proceeded over the Black Ridge. They crossed the Virgin River near Hurricane and continued south.

Learning that they could not easily cross the Grand Canyon and the Colorado River, the expedition turned east. After an exhausting search they found a spot where they could safely ford the river, which became known as the Crossing of the Fathers. That location is now under the waters of Lake Powell and Padre Bay.

Upon returning to Santa Fe, Father Dominguez found that the governor of New Mexico was not happy with the failure to reach Monterey and was not willing to finance another expedition, which Dominguez and Escalante had recommended.

Prior to the expedition, Father Dominguez had been sent from Mexico City to New Mexico to inspect the various missions and report on their status. Some of what he found was less than ideal, and he reported back exactly what he saw. By the time he returned from the expedition, word had come back from Mexico City that some serious changes were needed in the missions of New Mexico. The local leaders blamed Dominguez for their embarrassment, and he spent the rest of his life assigned to ministry in obscure outposts.

Father Escalante suffered from a kidney ailment that took his life a few years after the expedition. His journal of the expedition was sent to Mexico City, although copies were made and circulated among some western explorers, including John C. Fremont. Since Escalante wrote the account, many have assumed that he led the expedition. The expedition was led by Father Dominguez, with Father Escalante as second in command.

Knowledge gained by the Dominguez-Escalante expedition was a foundation for later exploration in the west.

The Old Spanish Trail

In November 1829 Antonio Armijo led a trade caravan of 60 men from Santa Fe to Southern California. They followed part of the Dominguez-Escalante route, fording the Colorado River at the Crossing of the Fathers site, and continuing west, roughly following what is now the Utah-Arizona state line. Upon reaching California they traded woolen blankets and serapes, products of New Mexico, for horses and mules from the California ranches. In May of 1830 Armijo and company returned to New Mexico over the same route, losing several animals to the rigors of the journey, and suffering additional losses to robbers while traveling through Navajo territory.



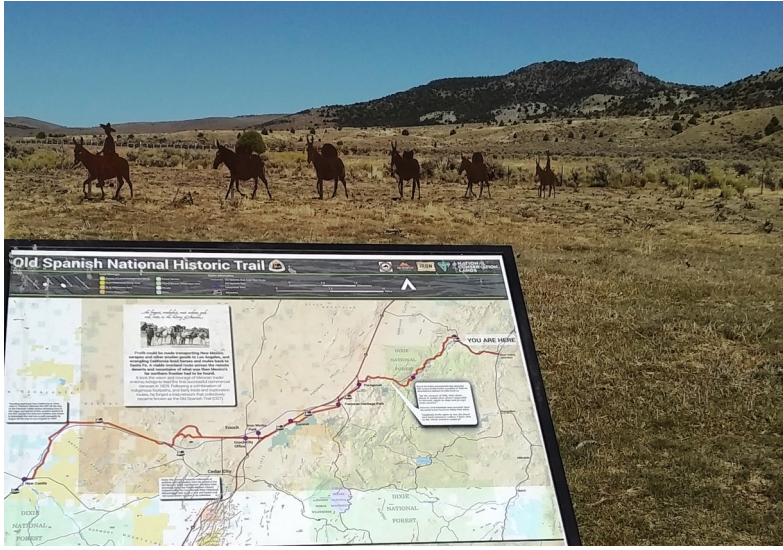
Sunset on Spanish Trail silhouettes southwest of Newcastle near Bench Road. Photo courtesy Al Matheson.

William Wolfskill and George C. Yount pioneered a more northerly alternative to Armijo's difficult route in 1831. This is also known as the Main Route of the Old Spanish Trail and passes through Iron County. Although longer than Armijo's route, the Main Route offered better water and grazing resources for the trade caravans.

A tragic part of the legacy of the Old Spanish Trail is the slave trade. Local Paiute Indian women and children were captured and sold as slaves for domestic service in New Mexico and California.



Informational sign at the Casting of the Lots site, explaining the significance of this location to the Dominguez-Escalante expedition.



Informational sign, with Old Spanish Trail silhouettes in the background, near the intersection of Utah Highway 20 and Little Creek Road.

From east to west, the Iron County portion of the Old Spanish Trail starts from the junction of U. S. Highway 89 and Utah Highway 20 and proceeds west to the Little Creek Road in Bear Valley. The trail then follows Little Creek Road to Paragonah, then roughly south on Old Highway 91 through Parowan and Summit to Enoch. Turning west on Midvalley Road, the trail continues to Iron Springs and Antelope Road. Picking up again at Newcastle, the trail roughly follows Bench Road and then Utah Highway 18 to Mountain Meadows. The trail then goes to Veyo and Gunlock, then over Old Highway 91 to Las Vegas, then on to Los Angeles.

To help motorists know where the Old Spanish Trail was located, Iron County resident Al Matheson leads an ongoing effort to place iron silhouettes of pack mules and muleteers on the Old Spanish Trail. With help from other volunteers, many of these silhouettes have been placed near roads and highways, marking the path of the Old Spanish Trail

throughout Iron County and beyond. Some of the roads that follow the trail are unpaved and may not be passable in wet weather. Some locations are remote and may not have cell phone service, so carrying some food and water along while exploring the trail is essential to modern travelers, as it was long ago.

Sidebar: Two Distinct Trails

Dominguez-Escalante Expedition

- Passed through Iron County Oct. 1776, north to south
- One time, one-way, small exploration party
- Mission to find overland route from Santa Fe, NM to Monterey, CA

Old Spanish Trail

- Mexican trade route from 1831 to 1849
- Used multiple times, large trading caravans, many horses and mules
- Santa Fe to Los Angeles, both directions
- Passed through Iron County in east-west and west-east directions

Remembering Pioneer Trails

Howard Driggs, one of the original faculty of the Branch Normal School, which later became Southern Utah University, went on to teach at New York University. He had a keen interest in history and became the president of the Oregon Trail Memorial Association. That organization expanded to commemorate other western trails and became the American Pioneer Trails Association in the 1930's.

William R. Palmer and other local residents became interested in the Dominguez-Escalante trail and the Old Spanish Trail. They corresponded with Howard Driggs and began early efforts to mark the local trails.

Monuments and markers were erected along the trail and in nearby towns and cities. An early example was a monument built in Cedar City and dedicated to Father Escalante. It featured a bronze plaque designed by noted American sculptor Christian Peterson.

The Old Spanish Trail Association carries on the work of preserving the trail and its history, as well as educating the public on the significant part the trail played in the development of Western America. New members to the association are always welcome, and more information can be found at their website, www.oldspanishtrail.org

Southern Utah University Library Special Collections is the repository for the documents of the Old Spanish Trail Association. The library also holds historical collections of William R. Palmer and Howard R. Driggs, key promoters of both the Old Spanish Trail and the route taken by Dominguez-Escalante expedition.



Monument memorializing the Dominguez-Escalante expedition of 1776. The plaque was designed by Christian Peterson, a noted American sculptor, and placed outside the El Escalante Hotel in Cedar City in 1930. After the demolition of the hotel, the monument was moved across the street to the city park. The monument is currently in a location not open to public viewing. Jay Jones Photo



Old cement marker near the route of the Dominguez-Escalante expedition in the Escalante Valley near the Casting of the Lots site.



Sign identifying a portion of the Dominguez-Escalante expedition trail at Horse Hollow northwest of Cedar City.



Old Spanish Trail informational sign near the Little Creek Road east of Paragonah.



Old marker of the Old Spanish Trail east of Newcastle.



Volunteers from the Sons of Utah Pioneers assist in placing silhouettes along a portion of the Old Spanish Trail near Newcastle. Photo courtesy Al Matheson.



Informational sign about the Old Spanish Trail in Heritage Park in Parowan.



Silhouette of a rider on the Old Spanish Trail. Photo courtesy Al Matheson.



Silhouettes of a rider followed by a pack mule on a segment of the Old Spanish Trail. Photo courtesy Al Matheson.

