

Cedar City Chapter of Sons of the Utah Pioneers



SUP Monument # OST-10 West Side of Highway 91 at top of Utah Hill

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Longitude: -113.879527; Latitude: 37.0708678; Elevation 3290'; SUP ##; OST-10 Top of Utah Hill



Two silhouettes at the top of Utah Hill west of Santa Clara, Utah.



The Old Spanish Trail followed routes long used by Native American traders and hunters. Northern New Mexico traders used this route as a pack trail to California between 1829-1848. Their mules carried woolen goods from Santa Fe to Los Angeles. They returned herding highly prized California mules and horses. Many of Southern California’s future leaders traveled down “Utah Hill” in the mid-1800’s.

Top Left: Areal view of the Castle Cliff portal. It was here that Mexican trade caravans left the mountains and entered the Mojave Desert on their way to California. (photo courtesy of Al Matheson)

Top Right: The Joshua Tree symbolizes the Mojave Desert. Castle Cliff represents the northeastern extent of the Joshua Tree Forest. (photo courtesy of Doug Knudsen, Old Spanish Trail Association)

Middle Right: A rare, historic mule petroglyph along the Santa Clara River near Castle Cliff. (photo courtesy of Al Matheson)

Bottom Left: Various routes of the Old Spanish Trail converged at the Castle Cliff portal.

Castle Cliff – Where the Mountains meet the Desert.

Castle Cliff is where Mexican trade caravans from New Mexico left the mountains of the Great Basin and entered the Mojave Desert on their way to California. The relative certainties of mountain travel were quickly replaced with new obstacles ... a merciless sun, trackless wastes of sand, and constant thirst that lay between the and their Los Angeles destination.

Returning caravans from California reentered the mountain portal with depleted supplies and exhausted livestock. The caravans of horses and mules were a little more than a third of the way to New Mexico. Castle Cliff was the first indication that they just might make it home.



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A Brief History of the Old Spanish Trail (OST)

There was money to be made in transporting serapes and other woolen goods from New Mexico to Los Angeles and in wrangling California-bred horses and mules back to Santa Fe. There was likewise a strong economic incentive to move contraband goods and Indian slaves, over this same route. A viable overland route had to be found, though, to cross the remote deserts and mountains of Mexico's far northern frontier.

In 1776, during the Spanish period, priests Francisco Atanasio Dominguez and Silvestre Velez de Escalante left Santa Fe and explored far and wide through northern New Mexico, western Colorado, and southern Utah. Much of this county would later be part of the Old Spanish Trail. During this same time period, Franciscan priests, the Spanish military, and civilian explorers were beginning to settle various coastal valleys in Alta California. No one, however, made the trek connecting California and New Mexico.

It took the vision and courage of Mexican trader Antonio Armijo to lead the first commercial caravan from Abiquiú, New Mexico to Los Angeles in late 1829. Following suit over the next twenty years, Mexican and American traders continued to use routes similar to the one he pioneered, frequently trading with Indian tribes along the way. It was from a combination of the indigenous footpaths, early trade and exploration routes, and horse and mule routes that the trail network known collectively as the "Old Spanish Trail" evolved. (The name was a term rooted in John C. Frémont's report of his 1844 journey over the trail for the U.S. Topographical Corps., guided by Kit Carson. While the name acknowledges the fact that parts of the trail had been known to the Spanish since the 16th century, the 700-mile trail was not established until the Mexican period.) Many prominent members of both New Mexican and Californio families traversed this route as part of annual caravans. In one celebrated, well-documented instance, two toddlers made the trip while packed into the mules' saddlebags.

Thanks in part to the Old Spanish Trail, Santa Fe emerged as the hub of the overland continental trade network linking Mexico and United States markets—a network that included not only this trail, but also the [Santa Fe Trail](#) and [El Camino Real de Tierra Adentro](#). After the United States took control of the Southwest in 1848, other routes to California emerged, a wagon route was opened to southern California, and use of the Old Spanish Trail sharply declined.

From: <https://www.nps.gov/olsp/learn/historyculture/index.htm>

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