

## FIRST DRAFT

# The Long Walk

*Trek of the Navajos a tale of misery and resiliency*

One hundred sixty years ago this month, the first large group of emaciated Navajos began trekking eastward from their homeland to a new reservation. It became known as the Long Walk.

Escorted by the U.S. Army, the Navajos — Diné, as they call themselves — embarked upon a nearly 400-mile forced march to Bosque Redondo, near Fort Sumner in eastern New Mexico. There they lived — and thousands died — for the next four years.

Approximately 2,400 Native men, women and children left Fort Defiance, Ariz., in early March 1864, the first large group that made the Long Walk that year. Other smaller groups had begun the trek earlier, and some arrived at Fort Sumner in December of 1863, where they joined several hundred Mescalero Apaches, their traditional enemies.

Regardless of when they made the march, all accounts agree it was a brutal trip.

“People were forced to walk twelve to fifteen miles a day. They were constantly fatigued and weakened by near starvation,” wrote Navajo scholars Nancy C. Maryboy and David Begay. “Enemies followed the convoys, snatching captives [to become slaves] almost at will. This occurred under so-called military-escort protection.”

“Several other convoys which traveled later in March were hit by severe snowstorms, and hundreds of people died or disappeared along the way,” said Maryboy and Begay.

Navajo oral histories tell of pregnant women and elderly people being shot when they could not keep up on the march. Others, too weak to continue, were left to simply die along the trail. The Navajos were not allowed to stop and bury their dead.

As bad as the physical conditions were, the Navajos also suffered emotionally because they were uprooted from the land of the four sacred mountains, which marked the boundaries of the Diné homeland.

Despite the hardships, more than 10,000 Navajos eventually reached Bosque Redondo. When they were allowed to return home in 1868, an estimated 3,000 had died, either on the Long Walk or during their incarceration. Another 1,000 had escaped.

Navajos lived in Arizona, New Mexico, Southwestern Colorado and Southeastern Utah well before the first Europeans arrived.

Like other Native peoples of the Southwest, the Navajos obtained horses after the Spanish arrived in New Mexico in the late 1500s. The Navajos also acquired sheep from the Spanish. They became skilled

weavers and their sheep herds became a critical part of their culture.

The Navajos frequently raided New Mexico communities in the Rio Grande Valley for horses, sheep and other items. The raids continued after the United States gained control of the Southwest through the war with Mexico that ended in 1848.

Efforts to stop the raids and bring peace to New Mexico and Arizona failed. So, in the early 1860s, Brig. Gen. James H. Carleton, commander of the Department of New Mexico, determined that the way

to end Navajo attacks was to move them off their homeland and onto a reservation where they would be forced to become farmers and be educated in white men’s ways. But Car-

leton may also have had more selfish reasons for his plan.

“He felt that if the Navajos were removed far from their homeland, Americans could mine their territory, and men like himself could reap great profits,” wrote Maryboy and Begay.

So, he established the reservation near Fort Sumner. Then he ordered Christopher “Kit” Carson, by then a U.S. Army officer, to destroy the Navajos’ homes, crops and livestock to compel them to move to Bosque Redondo.

With a force of about 1,000 men, including 200 Utes and other Natives, Carson did just that, beginning in the summer of 1863.

Carson’s campaign “proved to be one of the most violent and decisive military campaigns ever waged against a major North American Indian tribe,” according to one history of the Navajos.

A crucial blow came in January, 1864, when Carson’s men swept through Canyon de Chelly, a spiritual center for the Navajos and a place of refuge. Carson’s forces destroyed hogans, orchards, crops and livestock. The man who led the sweep through the canyons reported that “All the Indian prisoners taken thus far were half-starved and naked.”

About 100 Navajos surrendered at Canyon de Chelly, but the raid convinced others it was futile to resist the scorched-earth tactics of Carson and his troops. By March 1, 2,400 Navajos had assembled at Fort Defiance to begin the Long Walk. More arrived in coming weeks.

Not all of Navajos surrendered, however. Some hid from the troops as far west as the Grand Canyon, or around Navajo Mountain in northern Arizona and at Bears Ears in southeastern Utah.

Meanwhile, Carleton’s plan for the Navajos at Bosque Redondo proved to be a disaster. The alkalai waters of the Pecos River and nearby soil

made farming nearly impossible. Corrupt officials stole beef meant to feed the Navajos, and other food was contaminated or inedible. The Navajo livestock died in large numbers.

Finally, Carleton was relieved of command. Navajo leaders Barboncito, Manuelito and a delegation of other chiefs traveled to Washington to plead to leave Bosque Redondo. In May 1868, Lt. Gen. William Tecumseh Sherman and fellow Peace Commissioner Samuel Tappan visited the reservation. They were appalled at what they saw.

In Sherman’s words, “The Navajos had sunk into a condition of absolute poverty and despair.”

He initially proposed moving the Navajos onto crowded Indian Territory in today’s Oklahoma. But the Navajos, led by Barboncito, rejected the idea.

“I hope to God you will not ask me to go to any other country but my own,” Barboncito said.

On June 1, 1868, a treaty was signed between the United States and the Navajos, allowing them to return to their homeland, which would become their reservation. Equally important, the treaty recognized the sovereign state of the Navajo Nation.

In mid-June, 1868, the Navajos began their long trek home. Many burst into tears when they saw the first of their sacred mountains, Mount Taylor, near Grants, N.M.

Their return home didn’t end the Navajos’ problems. Treaty goods did not arrive as promised. There were still conflicts with neighboring whites and other Native tribes. They had to begin building their sheep and horse herds from almost nothing. The reservation initially was much smaller than the Diné homeland. It was expanded to its current size with a series of additions approved by Congress over the next 60 years.

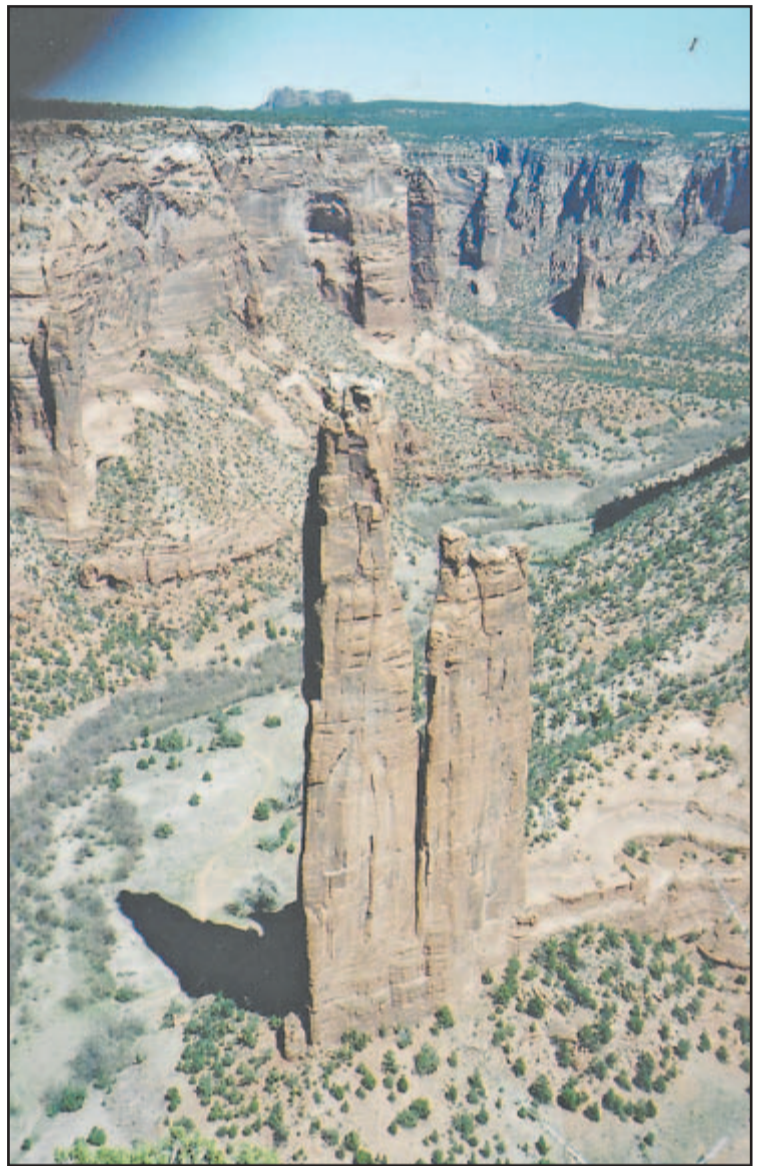
But despite the cruelty and despair they faced as a result of the Long Walk, four years of captivity, and later conflicts, the Navajos persevered. Today, they are the largest group of Native Americans in the United States, with an enrolled population of nearly 400,000 in 2021. The Navajos have robust cultural, political and economic systems. At 17.5 million acres, the Navajo reservation is the largest in the country, a little bigger than the state of West Virginia.

**Sources:** “The Navajos of Utah,” by Nancy C. Maryboy and David Begay, in “A History of Utah’s American Indians,”; “Canyon de Chelly: The Story of its Ruins and People,” by Zorro A. Bradley, National Park Service; “Hwéeldi – The Long Walk,” by Raymond Darrell Austin, Diné Nihí Kéyah Project, Navajo Nation Land History, Law and Custom, <https://dinelanduse.org/hweeldi>.

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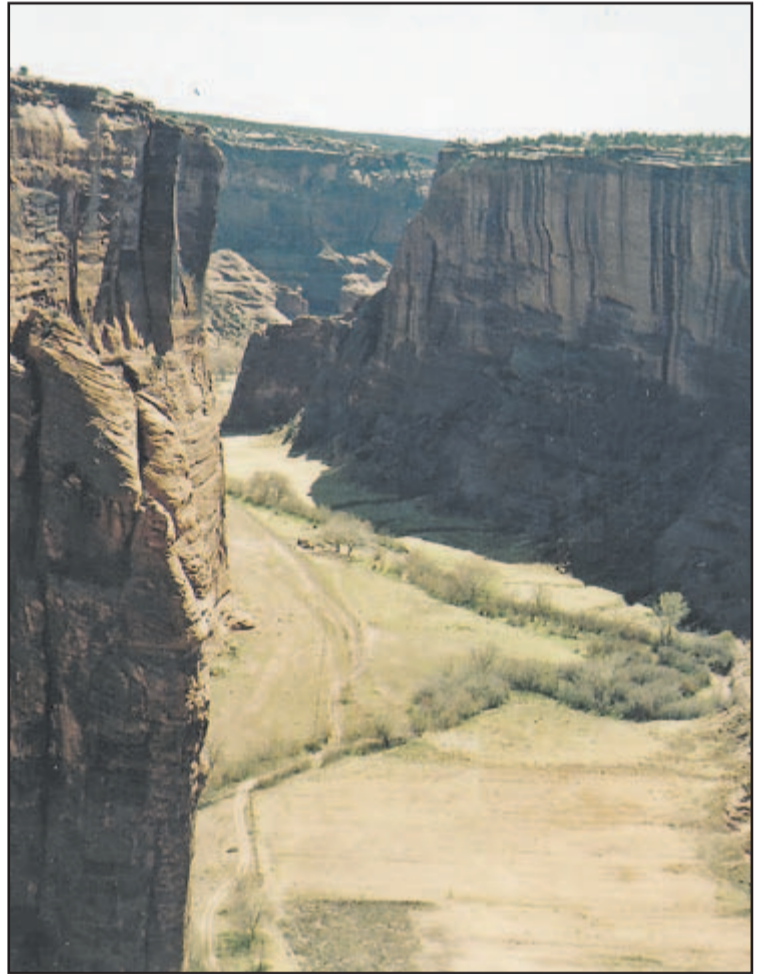


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Spider Rock, at the junction of Canyon de Chelly and Monument Canyon, is one of the most recognized formations in Canyon de Chelly National Monument.



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Canyon de Chelly has been called “the soul of Navajo land.” Navajos still grow crops and raise livestock in the canyon floor today. When troops under the command of Kit Carson destroyed Navajo homes, crops and livestock in Canyon de Chelly in 1864, most Navajos throughout their homeland agreed to surrender and move to Bosque Redondo.



This map shows the main trail used by the Navajos on the Long Walk from Fort Defiance in Arizona to Fort Sumner in southeastern New Mexico. Most walked nearly 400 miles in brutal conditions. Canyon de Chelly, now a national monument is roughly 50 miles northwest of Fort Defiance.



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Navajo spiritual leader Barboncito was one of the last Navajo leaders relocated to the reservation at Bosque Redondo and was the lead negotiator for the Navajos in the Treaty of 1868, which allowed them to return home.