

## FIRST DRAFT

# GOAL ACHIEVED

## Dominguez and Escalante had their greatest success in the Utah Valley

Members of the Dominguez-Escalante expedition had just trekked through Spanish Fork Canyon on Sept. 23, 1776. Then they climbed a small rise, now called Dominguez Hill, and beheld a wonderful sight.

Before them lay Utah Lake and the Utah Valley. “We also saw that all around us they (the local Natives) were sending up smoke signals one after another, thus spreading the news of our coming,” Father Silvestre Velez de Escalante wrote in his journal.

The expedition with 10 men had left Santa Fe, in what was then called New Spain, two months before, on July 29, 1776.

The ostensible purpose of the journey was to find an overland route from Santa Fe to Monterey, California. But on the very day the small party left Santa Fe, Escalante wrote a letter to one of his superiors, saying he didn’t expect the group to reach Monterey.

He was more focused on trying to determine whether there were bearded Europeans, perhaps the descendants of earlier Spanish expeditions, living north of the Colorado River. Baptizing Natives and discovering suitable locations for future Spanish colonization efforts also appear to have been part of the goal.

In that regard, their visit to Utah Lake was one of the most successful parts of their five-month, 1,700-mile journey that took them through Colorado, Utah, northern Arizona and New Mexico.

Dominguez, Escalante and their group spent just over a month to travel from Santa Fe to west-central Colorado. They reached the Gunnison River near today’s Delta at the end of August. Then, guided by members of the Sabuagana

band of Utes, they headed east, up the North Fork of the Gunnison, before climbing toward the top of Grand Mesa.

They spent a day with the Sabuaganas, trading, acquiring fresh horses from the well-mounted Utes, and attempting to convert the Natives to Christianity. But they had little success in converting the Sabuaganas, who were more interested in establishing permanent trade relations with the Spanish than in accepting their religion.

From Grand Mesa, the expedition headed north toward Plateau Creek, and camped just outside of today’s Collbran on Sept. 4. They ignored the Sabuaganas’ warning that they would encounter Comanches and might be killed if they continued north. They had no problems with Comanches.

They crossed the Colorado River between today’s De Beque and Parachute, then headed over the Roan Cliffs and descended toward the White River through the canyon that still bears the name they gave it: Canyon Pintado, or Painted Canyon, because of the abundance of ancient rock art.

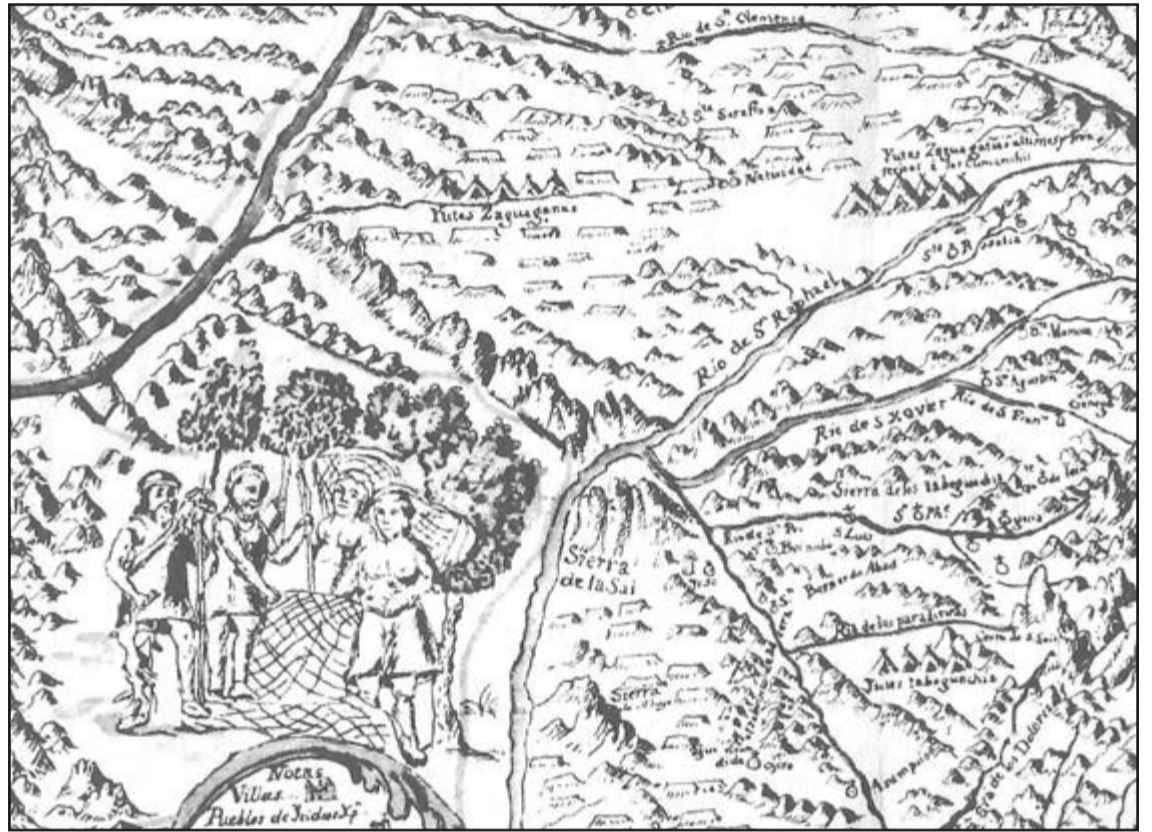
On Sept. 13, they reached a spot just inside Utah’s eastern boundary, which they called Las Fuentes de Santa Clara (the Fountains of Santa Clara).

Today the spot is called Musket Shot Springs because Escalante wrote in his journal that the group visited “two large springs of fine water, a musket shot apart” — roughly 300 yards — on a “well beaten trail” familiar to their Native guides.

They stopped briefly, the continued westward and reached the Green River near today’s Jensen, Utah. Escalante said it was “the largest river we have crossed” and that it



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HISTORY COLORADO, DOMINGUEZ-ESCALANTE BICENTENNIAL MONUMENT AT THE UTE MUSEUM, MONTROSE COLORADO

Enlargement of a portion of the map drawn by Don Bernardo de Miera y Pacheco, depicting bearded Natives visited by the Dominguez-Escalante Expedition.

was the dividing line between the Yuta (Ute) nation and the Cumanche (Comanche).”

He also wrote, “Here it has meadows abounding in pasturage and good land for raising crops, with facilities for irrigation.”

They spent three days along the big river, resting their animals and allowing them to eat heartily before pushing on to the Utah Valley, where they had their greatest success in gathering Christian converts.

But first they had to convince the Natives there — Timpanagos, a branch of Shoshone Indians closely allied with the Utes — that they posed no threat. The Timpanagos were initially wary, fearing that the Spaniards might be Comanches “or some other hostile people,” Escalante said.

But Father Francisco Atanasio Dominguez rode forward to their village accompanied by two young Timpanog men — called Silvestre and Joaquin with the Spaniards — who served as guides for that part of the expedition.

“Some men came out to meet them with weapons in their hands to defend their homes and their families,” Escalante wrote. “But as soon as Silvestre talked to them, the guise of war was changed into the finest and simplest expression of peace and affection.”

The Spaniards spent two days near present-day Spanish Fork, Utah, visiting with Timpanog leaders, baptizing many of the people they met, and telling them that other Spanish people would be coming soon to live among them, build churches and teach them to farm and raise cattle.

“They listened gladly and replied that they were ready to do all this, thereby exhibiting from then on their great docility,” Escalante said.

There was considerable good land around the lake where settlements could be built, Escalante said, and farms established. “In all of it there are good and very abundant pastures, and in some places it produces flax and hemp in such quantities that it looks as though they had planted it on purpose,” he wrote.

The members of the expedition



HISTORY COLORADO, DOMINGUEZ-ESCALANTE BICENTENNIAL MONUMENT AT THE UTE MUSEUM, MONTROSE COLORADO

Relief panel depicting members of the Dominguez-Escalante Expedition of 1776, including a young Native American guide.

also learned of an even larger lake to the north, the Great Salt Lake, but they did not visit it. The Timpanagos told them that its waters were “noxious and extremely salty,” Escalante said, adding, “a person who moistens any part of his body with the water of the lake immediately feels much itching in the part that is wet.”

Describing the Timpanagos, whom Escalante also called Lagunas because they lived near the lake, the priest said, “They have good features and most of them (the men) have heavy beards.”

He added, “They speak the Yuta (Ute) language but with notable differences in the accent and in some of the words.”

The expedition also encountered bearded Native men in early October, when they arrived at Sevier River in west central Utah. A few days later and farther south, they were struck by a day-long snowstorm that prevented them from traveling. Members of the expedition reluctantly voted to abandon the effort to reach California and instead head southeast toward Santa Fe.

They arrived there in January 1777, weary with all 10 members having survived. They hadn’t reached California, but they had determined

there weren’t Spaniards or other Europeans living in this unexplored territory, there were bearded Natives.

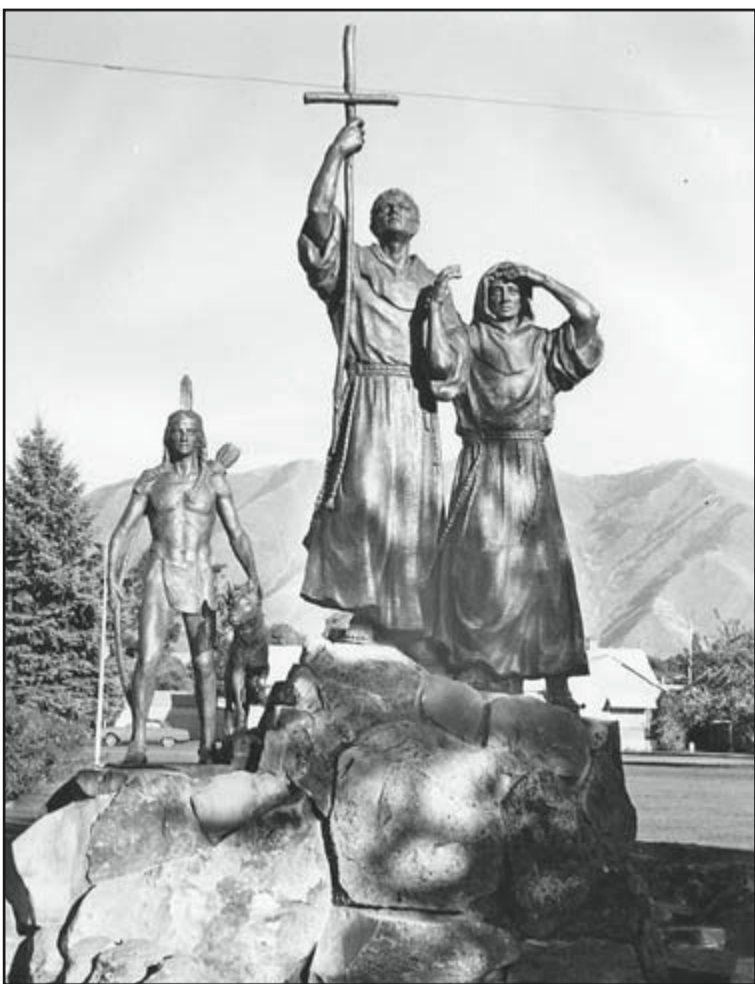
Don Bernardo Miera y Pacheco, the expedition’s cartographer, also produced some of the earliest, reasonably accurate maps of the region.

Additionally, in the Utah Valley they had found an area ideal for Spanish settlement and people eager to welcome them. In fact, the Timpanagos “offered the Spaniards all their land so they might build their houses wherever they pleased,” Escalante said.

Dominguez and Escalante may have sincerely believed that Spanish colonists would arrive soon, but it never occurred. After Escalante turned in his report of the journey, with no evidence of an easy route to California or of precious metals in the region, Spanish authorities lost interest in the territories visited by the expedition.

Sources: “Pageant in the Wilderness,” by Herbert E. Bolton; “Historic Mysteries of Western Colorado,” by David P. Bailey; “Why is this Place Called Musket Shot Springs?” Interpretive sign on Bureau of Land Management historic marker off U.S. Highway 40 in Utah.

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EUGENFBANKS THROUGH WIKIMEDIA COMMONS

A bronze statue in Spanish Fork Utah depicts Fathers Dominguez and Escalante as they entered the Utah Valley in 1776, accompanied by their Timpanagos guide, Joaquin and a dog.

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# GO-AND-DO