The Escalante-Dominguez Expedition of 1776: The first known expedition of Europeans into Utah

Two hundred and thirty-four years ago this week, in the same year the Declaration of Independence was signed, a group of Spanish explorers entered present-day Utah Valley. The Franciscan friere named Silvestre Velez de Escalante and Francisco Dominguez, the expedition was launched to find a northern path from New Mexico to one of Spain’s newest colonies, California.

Dominguez and Escalante left Santa Fe in July 1776, traveling north. By the time they reached what is now Colorado, they recruited twelve other Spaniards and two Ute men, members of the Timpanogos band that lived on the shores of Lake Utah, to join them. The two Native Americans agreed to guide the Spanish to Utah Valley. Their trail from Colorado took them near what is now Dinosaur National Monument, up the Strawberry River, and down Spanish Fork Canyon. On September 29, they climbed a hill near the present-day Spanish Oaks Golf Course, and were treated to a panoramic view of the pristine valley below them, with its sparkling emerald lake and ring of steep mountain ranges. Intending to push on to California, the Spaniards recruited a new Timpanogos guide and turned southwest. But their guide didn’t stick around for long and by October they were marching through snow, so they revised their plans and headed back to New Mexico.

The Dominguez-Escalante expedition diminished the competing claims people made to the land we now know as Utah. The territory remained on the fringes of the Spanish Empire even after word of the expedition got out. Occasional trading, trapping, and exploring expeditions made their way through the region, but few if any Spaniards chose to settle there. Still, the Spanish and the Mexicans—who won independence from Spain in 1821—claimed the area as theirs. The Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo, which ended the war between the United States and Mexico in 1848, legally turned the region over to the American government, but older traditions and claims still remain.

When Mexicans immigrated across the border into the United States, they often didn’t refer to the name of the nation they’re moving into. Instead they call the land “El Norte”—the North—or “El Sur”—the South. Their trail from Colorado to Utah crossing what is now Utah Valley, with memories of the Beehive Archive.

The Beehive Archive is a product of the Utah Humanities Council. Sources consulted in the creation of the Beehive Archive and additional information may be found at www.utahhumanities.org/Beehive Archive.htm.

The San Juan Record will run stories from the archive on an occasional basis.