

AN INTRODUCTION TO AMERICAN INDIAN HISTORY

AT A GLANCE: **UTAH'S INDIANS AND FIRST CONTACT**

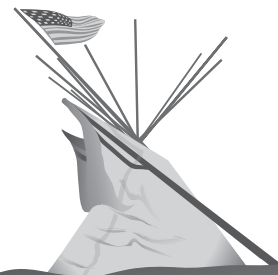
The moment of first contact between American Indians and Europeans—whether between Columbus and the Taino people in the Caribbean or between members of the Dominguez-Escalante expedition and the Utes in what is now Utah—initiated massive changes in the lives of native people. The arrival of Europeans brought new animals and trade goods, but it also brought disease, dislocation, poverty, and war. Well before non-Indians began to settle their homelands in the mid-nineteenth century, Utah's Indians experienced the effects of contact and exchange. While contact with Europeans often had tragic consequences for Indians, it is important to note that these cultures survived this period of immense change and remain a part of Utah's culture to this day. The story of first contact, both in the Caribbean and in what we now call Utah, is one of different cultures coming together, beginning a period of irrevocable change.

The people that Columbus met in the western hemisphere, on the island of what the Spanish would call Hispaniola (what is now Haiti and the Dominican Republic) were the Taino people. Hispaniola was a densely populated island, and while hunting and fishing were still an important part of their economy, the Tainos also practiced agriculture. Their main crop was cassava or manioc, but they also grew a number of other crops. A peaceful people, the Tainos initially were friendly to the Europeans, but warfare, slavery, and perhaps most importantly, the diseases brought from the other side of the Atlantic left them all but extinct by the end of the sixteenth century. This pattern—of war, slavery,

and disease—would take its toll on all America's native peoples, including the Indians of the Great Basin.

In looking at first contact in the Great Basin, one of the best ways to understand the impact it had on native peoples is to look at what life was like prior to European settlement. While the Indians who lived in the Great Basin had distinct cultures and communities (see specific tribal lesson plans and histories for more information), these groups also had several things in common. The people of the Great Basin were nomadic or semi-nomadic, moving with the seasons to make the best use of animal and plant resources. This lifestyle required detailed and diverse knowledge of the uses of plants and animals for food, medicine, clothing, and shelter. They usually traveled in small groups, allowing them to live more easily off the scarce resources that the arid land provided; however, several times each year these smaller groups would come together for larger hunting and gathering purposes or simply to trade and socialize.

The cultures and economies of the Indians of the Great Basin changed dramatically after the Spanish settlement of the American Southwest. The Spanish founded the colony of New Mexico in 1598, and the effects of settlement were felt by tribes who lived to the north, often even before the Indians and Europeans first met. The Spanish introduced new livestock that altered the economies of Great Basin tribes, most notably horses and sheep. The Utes, Navajos, and Shoshones adopted the horse as a means of transportation and as a result could travel and trade over



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greater distances and hunt more efficiently. The Goshutes and Paiutes used the horse as a new food source. Sheep, which were useful for their meat, skins, and wool, became an important part of the Navajos' economy and culture.

Though there was a previous Spanish expedition into the Great Basin, the first recorded encounter between native peoples and Spanish explorers was the Dominguez/Escalante expedition, began in July 1776 and led by two Spanish padres, Francisco Atanasio Dominguez and Silvestre Veléz de Escalante, who wanted to establish a trade route from the Spanish colony at Santa Fe to the newly founded colony on the West Coast at Monterey. Spanish officials were also interested in finding potential converts to Christianity, exploring Spain's northern frontier, and in learning of its peoples, plants, and animals. Spanish accounts of this expedition provided the earliest historical record of many of Utah's Native Americans. The padres preached Christianity to the Timpanogos Utes they met in Utah Valley, and they later described the Utes as friendly and helpful. The fathers promised to return the following year to establish a permanent mission among the Utes and to baptize them; however, the governor at Santa Fe refused to authorize a new colony.

While they did not have to deal with Spanish settlement on their homelands, some Great Basin tribes did begin to trade with the Spanish. The Spanish had a number of desirable goods, and tribes that wanted to obtain horses, metal, tools, or weapons found themselves embroiled in the violent Spanish slave trade. Spanish officials in New Mexico felt that physical labor was beneath them and needed Indian slaves to support their economy. Slave raids and violence became common, and people from all Great

Basin tribes, especially groups like the Paiutes and later the Goshutes, were kidnapped and sold into slavery. Slave trafficking increased in the 1830s and 1840s, after the opening of the Old Spanish Trail, a trade route that connected New Mexico (by then under Mexican control) to the Pacific Ocean.

New Spain slowly lost control of its northern frontier, including the land that would become Utah. While Utah's lands remained at the center of Native American worlds, the area came more firmly under American control as fur traders and trappers from Britain, New Spain, and America started to compete over the region's rich furs in the 1820s and 1830s. These fur traders greatly impacted Utah's Native American tribes. Native Americans married the trappers, worked for them, and became trappers themselves. In doing so they participated in an international economy, a fact that transformed their own cultures and economies. The Utes, in particular, adopted more of a hunting, raiding, and trading economy as a result of their participation in the fur trade. They acquired horses and firearms, which dramatically altered their culture. The Southern Paiutes, however, bore the brunt of Ute slave raiding.

In the 1840s, Anglo emigrants began to traverse Utah on their way to the West Coast. In 1841, a group from the Bartleson-Bidwell Party became the first Euro-Americans to bring overland wagons through Utah. Government explorer John C. Fremont was not far behind; he led explorations into Utah in 1843, 1844, and 1845. Fremont's published accounts of these explorations were widely read, and he greatly expanded the available knowledge about western lands and their potential for settlement. Before departing for the West from Illinois, members of the Church

An illustration of a hand emerging from a dark, wavy background, holding a flag with stars and stripes. The hand is rendered in a light gray tone, and the flag is also in shades of gray.

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of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints read Fremont's report and used it to determine potential settlement locations. The perceived isolation of the Great Basin kept most overland immigrants moving westward, but that very isolation attracted Mormons settlers.

Unfortunately, all of these explorers and overland travelers failed to recognize that the region's Native American peoples had long-standing claims and deep cultural ties to the land that is now Utah. Already dealing with changes from contact with non-Indians, Utah's tribes would face an even greater challenge when outsiders began to settle their homelands (for more information on the story of white settlement of

Utah and its impact on Utah's tribes, see the "Rethinking Manifest Destiny" lesson). Too frequently the story of Utah's settlement ignores the Indian perspective. However, it is important to see history from the Indian point of view because, ultimately, the story of contact—with the Spanish, with traders, with emigrants moving through, and with settlers coming to stay—illustrates the great resilience of Utah's Indian people.