

Geology

Gunnison Country's landscape formed by heavy erosion of violent volcanic activity occurring roughly 23-30 million years ago. The West Elk Mountain volcano (A) is estimated to have originally been over 17,000 feet high. Nearby is one of the world's largest clusters of laccoliths (B) (non-surfacing magma intrusions). Clearly visible volcanic calderas surround Cochetopa Dome (C) and Creede (D). For those seeking passage west, Cochetopa pass offers the lowest pass across the continental divide between New Mexico and Wyoming. However, the heavy erosion between the West Elk and San Juan mountains left many deep and difficult canyons to cross. Also the basin's topography causes bitter winter weather by creating a slow flowing cold air inversion. The process starts because thinner and dryer air absorbs less heat from ground radiation. The colder air sinks down from mountains into the basin's wide valley. Here the sun heats the flatter surface more evenly and is less able to break the inversion. The cold flow picks up speed as it funnels down the narrow Gunnison River canyon, protected from the higher prevailing westerly winds.

Think About It

Most travelers were heading to/from the San Luis Valley and north of Delta. Depending on the season, obstacles included deep snow and swollen rivers. Utes may want some of your supplies. What route would you take?

Early Humans
Folsom period humans living 8,000 years ago occupied the Gunnison basin. One of their settlements was on top of Tenderfoot ("W") Mountain (E) just south of the City of Gunnison. In contrast to previous belief that these people were solely migratory hunter-gatherers, evidence suggests that they wintered here living in houses made of rock, dried mud, tree poles, and brush. The Tenderfoot site provides an excellent vantage point to view game that would come down from the mountains in the winter for forage and less snow. Also, the site's elevation provides some relief from the bitter cold temperatures of the valley floor. While the site can be windswept in the summer, windy conditions are not common in the winter months, and trees were likely plentiful.

Ute Indians

The Ute tribe was one of the last free roaming Native American tribes in the lower 48 states, consisting of several bands generally occupying the mountain regions of Colorado and most of Utah. The Uncompahgre (Tabeguache) Ute band in general wintered in the Uncompahgre Valley; in the summers, individual family units spread out into the Gunnison Basin and other Western Colorado mountain areas. Horses were acquired from the Spanish in the 1600s, and traders initially found the Utes friendly, until white intrusion intensified.

Early Plants & Animals

Cochetopa Pass means "River of Buffaloes" in the Ute language. The journals of early American explorers in 1853 speak to the large herds that once traveled over the pass, describing several locations where "elk horns and buffalo skulls lay scattered whitening on the hills." (F) The journals also describe many areas in the Gunnison basin containing "luxuriant grasses" where today there is predominately sagebrush. These changes likely occurred very quickly under the early range management techniques used after the Utes left. Notice the grass and lack of sagebrush in the engraving below created from a photograph of the Dillon Pinnacles. The photo was taken from a bench high above the river during Fremont's 5th expedition, December 1853.



Camp at Dillon Pinnacles, Fremont 5th Exp. (G)

Spanish Traders

Spanish explorers from the Santa Fe and Taos areas began trading with the Utes in the 1630s. Evidence of early Spanish mines within the Gunnison basin exist in early written accounts, although little physical evidence remains. In 1776 Franciscan priests Dominguez and Escalante sought to find a route from Santa Fe to their mission in Monterey, CA. They journeyed up the Dolores River in southwest Colorado and into the Uncompahgre Valley near Montrose. They then traveled further east up the North Fork of the Gunnison in order to meet with Utes camped north of Somerset before heading towards the Great Salt Lake. In the following years, trade routes further developed, but it wasn't until 1829 that the first roundtrip occurred between Santa Fe and Los Angeles. Traders took woven woolen goods and returned with horses and mules, establishing the Old Spanish Trail. In winter, traders from Taos preferred a northern branch through Gunnison, as the cold dry snow kept their moccasins dry compared to warmer snow in New Mexico's mountains.

Fur Trade

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Gunnison Country - Early History & American Explorers

Pre-1860

Early History Routes	American Explorer Routes
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Early main trails used by the Utes and later by the Spanish and Fur Traders Early Recorded Explorers: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Dominguez-Escalante 1776 Juan Bautista de Anza 1779 Zebulon Pike Expedition 1806 Northern Branch of the Old Spanish Trail (Santa Fe to Los Angeles) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Common Explorer Route Deviations from common route: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Beale Expedition 1853-June Beale Resupply to Taos 1853-July Fremont 4th Expedition 1848-Dec. Fremont 5th Expedition 1853-Dec. Gunnison Expedition 1853-Sept. Loring Expedition 1858-Aug. Marcy Expedition 1857-Dec. Camps color coded (date, mileage)

Although controlled by Ute Indians, the Gunnison Country lies within the area originally claimed by Spain and administered as New California. After winning the Mexican-American War in 1848, the U.S. placed the area on this map into three territories. West of the Continental Divide was Utah, while Kansas and New Mexico were to the east with a parallel dividing line near the Town of Saguache.

The Dominguez-Escalante party find a Ute camp of about 30 lodges. Utes warn against going northwest because of unfriendly Indians.

The Grand Mesa is one of the world's largest flat topped mountains.

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This route entails crossing a much larger Gunnison River downstream at Delta.

Large Ute camp somewhere in this area. Beale is brought to camp, the chief provides a delightful meal, and Beale joins an adventurous Ute hunt.

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This route avoids high run-off but adds Ohio Pass.

Gunnison's campfire starts a grass fire. Ute reply with smoke signal from their summer hunting grounds to the southwest.

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Note the daily distances traveled by Gunnison with wagons versus Beale without wagons, the speedy Beale resupply, and Fremont in December.

Russell Springs was a common stop for travelers. The lakes are now a National Natural Landmark.

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Fremont camps next to Ute camp in December of 1853.

The valley route is more level and has less snow in winter.

Known Ute camp (Kezar).

In spring of 1853, Utes still wintering warn seven whites moving sheep to California to not cross line of elk horns. Whites ignore warning and perish.

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