

In Search of the Small Settlement Observed by the Domínguez-Escalante Expedition on August 13, 1776

As a Site Steward for Reservoir Ruin I became interested in the history of the ruin in relation to the 1776 expedition of Domínguez and Escalante after archaeologist Kristie Arrington remarked to me that she thought Reservoir Ruin was probably the ruins observed by Domínguez and Escalante (D&E) instead of the Escalante Ruin adjacent to Canyons of the Ancients Visitor Center & Museum. Kristie's remark initiated my historical research concerning Reservoir Ruin.

On July 29, 1776 Antanasio Domínguez and Silvestre Vélez de Escalante in the company of eight others left Santa Fe, New Mexico on their expedition to find a route from Santa Fe to Monterey, California. In their company was Don Bernardo Miera y Pacheco who served as cartographer. Escalante kept a journal of their expedition, the original of which is lost.

On the 12th of August, 1776 D&E crossed the Dolores River where the river makes a bend to the north and made camp in a meadow on the north side of the river. On the 13th of August, Escalante recorded the following observation: "Upon an elevation on the river's south side, there was in ancient times a small settlement of the same type as those of the Indians of New Mexico, as the ruins which we purposely inspected show". While Miera's map (Figure 1), shows the expeditions progress across the Dolores River and a campsite on the north side of the river, there is no indication of the ruins on his map. Did something entice the Franciscan priests to cross the river from their camp on the 13th? Why not stay on the north side of the river to continue their journey the next day from their camp? It is tempting to suggest they spotted the ruins from the north side of the river and went to investigate.

Any attempt to identify the ruins observed by the Domínguez-Escalante Expedition have only two primary documents to rely upon; the journal written by Escalante and the map prepared by Don Bernardo Miera y Pacheco (Figure 1). Both are helpful for putting us in the general vicinity of their camp near the bend of the Dolores River but are not detailed enough to clearly identify the site they observed. I also relied on a number of secondary sources. Among these were H. W. Holmes report and map of the 1876 Geological and Geographical Survey of the Territories, J. W. Fewkes 1919 publication Prehistoric Castles and Towers of Southwestern Colorado, the 1976 bicentennial report The Route of the Domínguez-Escalante Expedition 1776-1777 and associated documents from the Research Center of the Utah State Archives and Utah State History, The Archaeology and Stabilization of the Dominguez and Escalante Ruins and various historical maps of the region of interest.

There are four possible sites to consider based on the above documents and maps. Three of those sites are near the area where the Dolores River first bends in a northerly direction: Reservoir Ruin, Sundial Ruin and the ruin Fewkes identified as Escalante Ruin. North of these sites at a second pronounced bend in the Dolores River is the fourth site claimed by the National Park Service to be the ruin in Escalante's journal, Escalante Ruin. The first three ruins would be literally south of the river if the camp was located on a small plateau where the river makes a short east-west turn before turning north again near Escalante Ruin.

Sundial and Fewkes Escalante Ruins describe structures unlike the settlements in New Mexico with which Domínguez and Escalante would be familiar. It would seem unlikely that these two ruins would have been seen by the expedition since they did not mention any structures of the type resembling a sundial.

If this assessment is valid, then Escalante Ruin and Reservoir Ruin are the two remaining candidates. A memo associated with the 1976 report relates observations of Merton Taylor, a long time resident and hardware store owner in Dolores, Colorado. Taylor recalled that when he was young, that “there were two conspicuous ruins on hills south of the river. One located just northwest of the junction of the Monticello Road with the old Cortez Road is apparently the one described by Fewkes as the Escalante Ruin. The other ruin was also near the road junctions and can be identified as Reservoir Ruin. Taylor also noted: “The ruin now designated by the BLM as the Escalante Ruin was never visible from the river, but the other two were.”

The comments by Taylor suggests the Reservoir Ruin would have been visible from the Dolores River in 1776 while The Escalante Ruin was likely not visible. The Reservoir Ruin was a small settlement on a low hill on the south side of the river and it would fit the description provided by Escalante in his journal.

Also, in 1876 Holmes noted that a set of ruins on the west bank of the Dolores river were set on the summit of a low hill at the second bend. This description fits the location of Escalante Ruin. The ruins were described as being in the midst of a dense growth of full grown piñon pines thus helping to shield the ruins from view.

Reservoir Ruin is the most likely candidate for the ruins of a small settlement observed by the Domínguez-Escalante expedition based on Escalante's journal, Miera's map, and reasonable conclusions drawn from later observations by Holmes, Fewkes, and Taylor.

The difficulty of the task of clearly identifying the ruins observed by the 1776 expedition can not be minimized. The conclusion concerning the Reservoir Ruin can only be framed as the most likely ruin they observed and can never be stated with absolute certainty. I believe the evidence and reasoning presented provide a strong case for concluding that Domínguez and Escalante observed Reservoir Ruin.

Figure 1



A Portion of Miera's Map of the Domínguez-Escalante Expedition Near the Bend of the Dolores River

References

Warner, Ted J. (editor)

1995 *The Domínguez-Escalante Journal*. Translated by Chavez, Fray Angelico. University of Utah Press, Salt Lake City.

Fewkes, Walter J.

1919 *Prehistoric Villages, Castes, and Towers of Southwestern Colorado*. Government Printing Office, Washington.

National Parks Service

<https://www.nps.gov/nr/travel/amsw/sw25.htm>, accessed March 30, 2020

Roberts, David

2019 *Escalante's Dream* W. W. Norton & Company, New York.

Miller, David E. (editor)

1976 *The Route of the Dominguez-Escalante Expedition, 1776/77* No Publisher shown

Holmes, W. H.

1876 *Report on the Ancient Ruins of Southwestern Colo. Examined during the summers of 1875 and 1876. U. S. Geog. Survey of the Territories, 10th Annual Report* Washington D. C.

Research Center of the Utah State Archives & Utah State History, email correspondence with the Reference Staff

Voces de Santa Fe, Source of the Miera map: <http://www.vocesdesantafe.org/explore-our-history/historical-documents2/864-bernardo-de-miera-y-pacheco-map-of-the-1776-dominguez-escalante-expedition>. The Miera map was downloaded from this site. According to the University of California, Berkeley, this map is a photocopy of a 1777 ms.map in the Ministerio de la Guerra, Madrid. <http://vm136.lib.berkeley.edu/EART/maps/g4300-1777-m52.html>