

Hole-in-the-Rock Trail
(Mormon Trail)
Bluff vicinity
San Juan County
Utah

HAER No. UT-29

HAER
UTAH,
19-BLUFF
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PHOTOGRAPHS

WRITTEN HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA

Historic American Engineering Record
National Park Service
Rocky Mountain Regional Office
Department of the Interior
P.O. Box 25287
Denver, Colorado 80225

HISTORIC AMERICAN ENGINEERING RECORD

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Hole-in-the-Rock Trail
(Mormon Trail)

HAER No. UT-29

Location: Southeastern Utah, between Escalante and Bluff
Bluff vicinity, San Juan County, Utah
(ca. 180 miles in length)

UTM: Northwest 12 598100E 4149950N
Southeast 12 600100E 4148100N

Quad: Cedar Mesa, Utah

Date of Construction: 1879-1880

Present Owner: Bureau of Land Management
San Juan Resource Area
P. O. Box 7
Monticello, Utah 84535

Present Use: Jeep trail

Significance: The Hole-in-the-Rock Trail was used by Mormon pioneers to settle the area around Bluff, Utah, and transportation from their origin around Escalante, Utah. The trail is an example of the engineering feats accomplished and hardships endured by these settlers.

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The Hole-in-the-Rock Trail (also known as the Mormon Trail) was the route traveled by Mormon pioneers during the last quarter of the 19th century (1879-1880) to settle the area around Bluff, Utah, located in the extreme southeast corner of the state. The trail was recently listed on the National Register of Historic Places.¹ Pioneers from the Escalante, Utah, area, believing that "they were a part of a divinely inspired and directed mission"² sought to inhabit the area around the present town of Bluff in order to preserve this locale for Mormon use. An influx of non-Mormons (Catholics and Indians) into the area put Mormon control in jeopardy and, as such, the 'divine' mission was inspired. In order to traverse the approximately 180 miles of rugged terrain between Escalante and Bluff, a road or trail was necessary to move wagons, belongings, and families.

Much of the trail route required considerable engineering feats in order to traverse the formidable natural barriers in their path. Some of the more remarkable achievements were the crossing of the Colorado River Canyon at the Hole-in-the Rock, the descent of Grey Mesa, the crossing of Clay Hill, and the ascent of San Juan Hill. The construction of the trail through these areas required from one to eight weeks each. Although blasting powder was available for some of the road construction, most of the route was cleared by human and animal labor; removing rocks, boulders, and trees, so as to allow wagon passage. Although the journey from Escalante to Bluff was expected to take six weeks, over six months were necessary to complete the trip.

The portion of the trail under discussion here was relatively easy to construct, with only pinyon and juniper trees inhibiting passage, with most of the route passing through open sage flats. A few axe-trimmed trees are still present along the trail in the areas where we are presently concerned.

Considering the more spectacular and arduous tasks required to move the pioneers across the major barriers mentioned above, the short segment of the trail between Long Flat and Owl Creek in San Juan County, Utah, was a relatively easy and uneventful trip. The 2840 meters of the trail, required for the Shell Oil Company well access, is neither particularly difficult nor outstanding for events which transpired during the pioneer journey, and saw no meaningful events associated with the trip. No significant engineering feats were necessary along this stretch of the trail, nor was this area a major camping or staging locale. In fact, Miller², the principal source of documentation for the trail and events which transpired during its construction and use, mentions only in passing that there were a lot of cedar trees in the area, and persons were sent out ahead of the wagons to clear a path. In essence, the segment of the trail between Long Flat and Owl Creek is a rather mundane and routine segment, having witnessed neither eventful nor unusual episodes of the journey.

Also, of the 2840 meters of the trail to be affected by the Shell Oil project, 1860 meters have already been heavily bulldozed and bladed to a width of 40 feet, and all of the remaining portion of the trail has been bladed. Only 360 meters of the trail is in pinyon-juniper areas, with a total of 12 axe-trimmed trees present. Construction of the Shell Oil access road should not significantly distract from the integrity of the trail, and will have no impact to portions of it where significant historic events or engineering feats took place.

FOOTNOTES

- 1 A. Kent Powell, National Register of Historic Places Inventory - Nomination Form. Submitted to the U. S. Department of the Interior, Heritage Conservation and Recreation Service (1981).
- 2 David E. Miller, Hole in the Rock: An Epic in the Colonization of the Great American West. Salt Lake City, University Press (1959).