



SILVESTRE VÉLEZ DE ESCALANTE, THE SPANISH THAT EXPLORED UTAH

By Don Ignacio del Pozo

On September 23, 1776, the missionary expedition of the Franciscan Fathers Silvestre Vélez de Escalante and Francisco Antonio Domínguez reached a wasteland known today as Spanish Fork. From there it can be seen the valley of Lake Utah, today the territory of the State of the same name (USA). Silvestre was the first European to reach the place and, since then, there is a large cross called "Escalante Cruz" in memory of the event.

The distant Provinces of the North: presidios, missions and towns

In the northern area of New Spain the limit of the Spanish expansion during the first half of the eighteenth century was formed by a series of settlements (presidios, missions, towns, real mines and ranches). Those were scattered over a wide territory ranging from the north of Baja California to Espiritu Santo Bay in Texas, passing through northern Sonora, southern Arizona, northern New Mexico to Taos and the San Antonio de Béjar strip. That was the broad border area, scarcely populated and difficult to defend, an immense "no man's land". The Crown was satisfied with a greater Franciscan presence in the area.

The Franciscans

For this reason, in the late seventeenth century, the west and southwest of the current United States were widely explored by the Franciscan monks, who founded innumerable missions in California (Junípero Serra and Juan Crespí), Nevada (Francisco Garcés) and finally Utah (Velez de Escalante)

Fray Silvestre Vélez de Escalante (Treceño, 1749 - New Mexico (USA), 1782), was a Franciscan missionary-explorer who, together with Fray Francisco Atanasio Domínguez, was given the mission to explore and discover new ways between the Presidio of Santa Fe (now New Mexico) and Monterrey, in Northern California. He led the explorations of recognition throughout the Colorado River region (New Mexico, Utah, Arizona ...), describing and mapping territories with more than 20 native tribes of the American West.

The expedition

Fray Silvestre together with Fray Francisco and 10 soldiers in 1776 were commissioned to find a good route that would unite the mentioned cities. In addition, they should check the status of the missions founded in the area by the Jesuits, who had been expelled from all Spanish territory in 1772 by Carlos III. Part of the route they made is the nowadays called Spanish Old Trail. It crosses the Mojave Desert and with a length of 200 kms was formerly used to join New Mexico with California. This is one of the many routes opened by Spaniards in the territory of the current United States. Several of them are the "Anza National Historic Trail" (Juan Bautista de Anza) from Mexico to San Francisco or the De Soto Trail (Hernando de Soto) from Tampa (Florida) To Memphis (Tennessee).

Although they did not achieve their purpose, the monks toured extensive areas that took them through the southern part of Colorado to border the eastern part of the Grand Canyon and the desert areas of New Mexico. The expedition travelled territories of the present states of Utah, Colorado and Arizona. They had contact with Yuta Indians, Comanches, Lagoons, Cosninas, Tyrangapuy and Barbones. During the expedition, the soldier and cartographer Bernardo Miera y Pacheco, drew a detailed map of the zones that they travelled . Later, it would be widely used, among others, by the explorer and naturalist Alejandro Humboldt, which included him in his works. The legacy of Father Escalante in the area today is innumerable streets and institutes that bear his name, a National Park and a river called Escalante.

