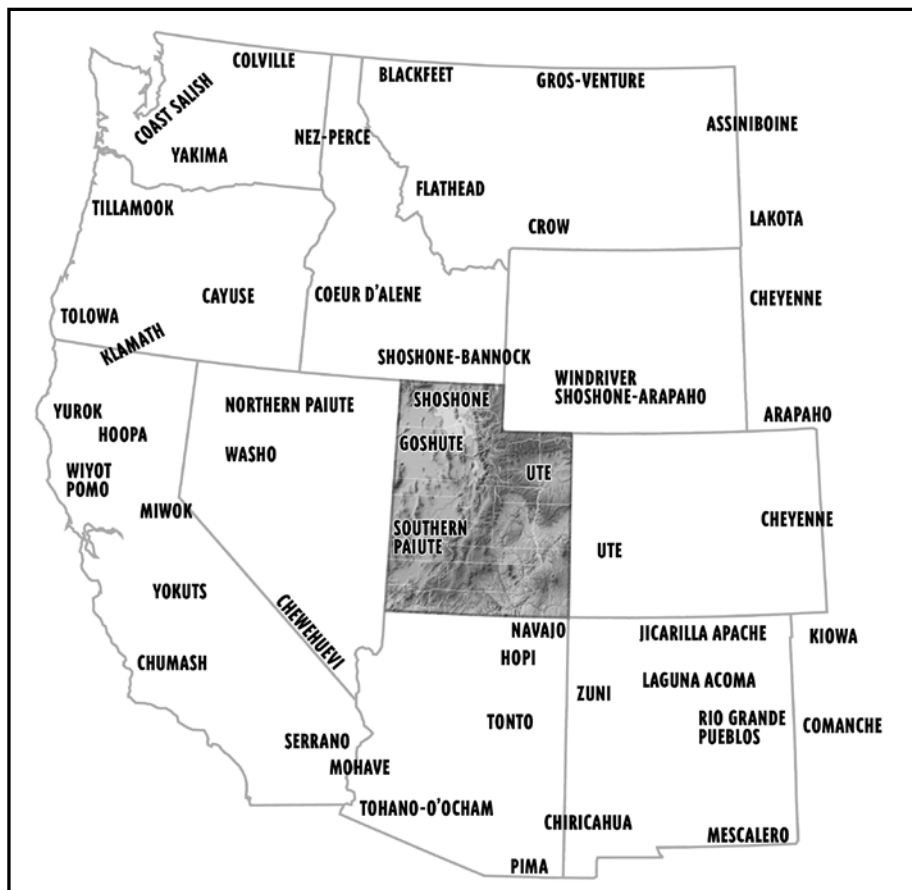


THE FIVE TRIBES OF UTAH

A BRIEF INTRODUCTION TO KEY CHARACTERISTICS AND HISTORICAL DEVELOPMENTS BY FLOYD O'NEIL, DIRECTOR EMERITUS, AMERICAN WEST CENTER



The area of the United States west of the hundredth meridian contains dozens of tribes, but the five tribes—the Northwestern Shoshone, the Southern Paiute, the Ute, the Navajo, and the Goshute—with whom we deal in this curriculum material are in many ways unique. They dwelt in the driest region of the United States. Droughts were a common feature, and this placed additional burdens on the inhabitants. Utah's tribes had the lowest population density and were surrounded by other, more numerous tribes. To the north were the Shoshone-Bannocks, Nez Perces, Crows, and Cheyennes; to the south, the Navajos, the Comanches, and the Pueblos of New Mexico. On the east the area was protected by the Rocky Mountains, where the Utes were in residence. And to the west was land that was so inhospitable that it was little desired by other native groups.



Another characteristic of the region of study is that it was not so much an area of conflict between tribes as was often the case elsewhere. The Rocky Mountains and the Great Basin were both defined by terrain and climate features that made them difficult for enemies to invade. These same barriers also slowed European colonial powers. Relative to other tribes in the U.S., Great Basin Indians encountered Europeans quite late. The first non-Indian contact came from the south when the Spanish empire thrust northward two thousand miles from Mexico City, stopping at the southern border of the Ute area in northern New Mexico. The Spanish occupation of the Pueblo area of New Mexico, which began more than four hundred years ago, had already alerted the Great Basin tribes to the European invaders. The Europeans introduced diseases previously unknown to North America's native populations, and also brought with them new fauna, flora, and goods, including wheat, horses, sheep, steel tools, and cooking pots. These diseases, animals, plants, and new technologies dramatically changed the world of Native Americans in the West, just as they had throughout the U.S.

The first direct influence of the Spanish on the Great Basin tribes was through trade. The Utes were engaged with the Spanish by the early seventeenth century, exchanging goods and often meeting with Spanish governors. Both sides profited, with the Spanish using the opportunity of friendship with the tribe to protect their borders. The desire by Spanish governors and military officials for a road to connect their outposts in Alta California to their settlements in New Mexico prompted the first visit of non-Indians into the Great Basin. Two Franciscan priests, Dominguez and Escalante, led the party into Utah in 1776, and their well-written account gives us insight into the conditions of Utah's tribes during this period. After the Dominguez-Escalante party spread word about the area, illegal trading began from Santa Fe and Taos, New Mexico. Spanish traders, for example, visited Utah Lake in 1805 and 1811.

The fur trade brought an increasing number of traders into the Great Basin area by the early 1820s, further destabilizing tribal patterns. Besides the early traders who came from Santa Fe and Taos in the south, new groups of British traders came from the north while Americans came from the east. Antoine Robidoux opened the first trading post in Utah in 1837. The Utes in particular traded both furs and horses, activity that increased following the opening of a trail from Santa Fe to Los Angeles by the Mexicans in 1829. The Utes prospered as a result of this trade, but the Goshutes and Paiutes suffered. As part of this new network of exchange, they were captured by the Utes and sold as slaves. In the 1840s, the fur trade declined very rapidly as alliances fractured. As part of these developments the Utes burned Ft. Robidoux in 1844 and drove out the trappers.

In 1847 the arrival of a huge tide of permanent Mormon settlers massively—and permanently—changed the lives of Utah's American Indians. These immigrants were agriculturists, and they sought arable land that could be irrigated. They spread quickly into Ute, Goshute, Northwestern Shoshone, and Southern Paiute lands. This moved the white settlers into areas where nearly all of the native population lived. In traditional pattern, non-Indians pushed the natives off their land; hence, armed conflict with settlers and then U.S. government forces followed.



Following the Treaty of Guadalupe-Hidalgo in 1848, the federal government had begun to play an increasingly large role in the lives of Great Basin Indians. The government gradually built forts across the west, including Camp Douglas at Salt Lake City, to defend immigrants. The most violent confrontations occurred in the removal of the Utes. The Southern Paiutes had a small, scattered population; they were more easily dominated. The eastern end of Goshute land was soon lost; likewise the southern end of Northwestern Shoshone territory. The Navajos also suffered at the hands of the government and settlers prompting their expansion northward into Utah after 1868.

The two Great Basin wars that resulted from Indian-white conflicts were principally over resources. These wars confirmed that resources would become a constant point of tension between native people and settlers and that the government would have a significant oversight role in regard to the tribes. Besides employing the military, the federal government used the Bureau of Indian Affairs to exercise control over the day-to-day interaction with the tribes. Between 1848 and 1869 the government also signed treaties with the Great Basin tribes, while after that point they signed agreements. These two types of instruments were meant to regulate relations between sovereign nations, but the U.S. government broke many of these treaties and agreements. During this period Indians were placed on reservations. Even the so-called “reserved lands” were not safe from loss, as the government constantly valued the non-Indian population’s hunger for more land over its obligations to the tribes. Still, it should be noted that federal government modes of control would prove very different for each group: direct for the Utes, sporadic for the other tribes. Unlike the U.S. government, local town and city governments and the government of Utah largely ignored the tribes until conflicts between these parties over resources emerged in the twentieth century.

Late nineteenth- and twentieth-century developments are covered in the KUED documentaries and in the following lesson plans, but it is safe to say that since World War II the tribes have become more vocal. They have also developed vibrant relationships with other tribes. Indian voices are now bringing more attention by local citizens to the issues facing Utah’s tribal peoples. These lessons are a part of that enhanced voice.