

Hole in the Rock

From MormonWiki

The **Hole in the Rock** is etched into the stories of sacrifice and endurance of early Latter-day Saints pioneers who blazed the Hole in the Rock Trail in southern Utah.

Settlers in Parowan, Utah, and elsewhere in that region were asked by their Church leaders to leave their homes and settle in what is now San Juan County. The trail they blazed saved many miles from a route north through Green River and Moab or south through northern Arizona, crossing the Colorado River at Lee's Ferry.

However, the shorter route, which came to be called the Hole in the Rock Trail, was an extreme challenge because of the difficult passage through the deep rock canyon formed by the Colorado River.

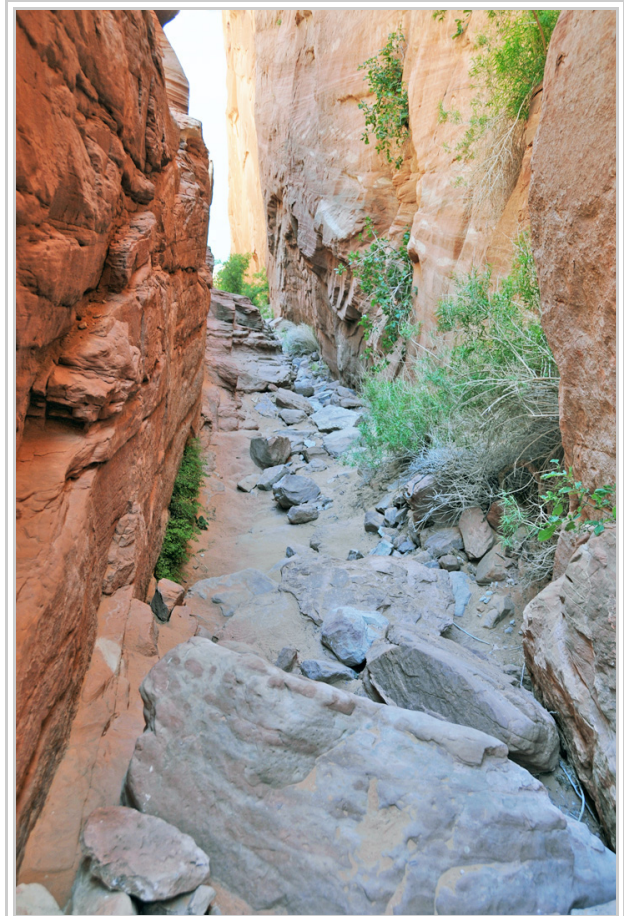
The first leg of the journey went from present-day Escalante, Utah, to the crevasse or chute known as Hole in the Rock. The route covered a distance of 55-60 miles. The "hole" was a "steep natural crevasse, or notch through the sandstone down to the Colorado River. . . . The route follows a relatively easy path down past Dance Hall Rock (a large sandstone formation shaped like an amphitheater) to a point several miles before reaching the crevasse or hole in the rock, which descends with a very steep incline to the river. Pioneers widened the hole to allow wagons to pass through.

The second leg or segment of the journey came after crossing the Colorado River. This forbidding route ran up through nearly impassible land to Salvation Knoll, where scouts could finally see some landmarks to get their bearings. The final third of the journey took them down through Snow Flat to Comb Ridge, up over San Juan Hill to what they would settle as Bluff, Utah.

Although their trek to the San Juan River was supposed to take six weeks, their arduous journey to the southeastern corner of Utah took six months. The journey included the frightening task of descending some 1,000 feet from a high plateau. By the end, the pioneers were nearly destitute.

Necessity required them to establish means of feeding their families. Under the leadership of Platte D. Lyman and Jens Nielson, they formed crews to harness the San Juan River and survey and establish lots and farms. Some went to Colorado for employment or community supplies. Apostle Erastus Snow advised them to consolidate their settlement into a central "fort" for protection from the Navajo, Ute, and Paiute peoples whose intersecting borders they now occupied.[1] (<https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/church/news/pioneer-descendants-preserve-history-of-the-hole-in-the-rock?lang=eng>)

After the pioneers built cabins, the co-op store, and the rest of Bluff Fort, they established other



View from within the Hole in the Rock chute looking up toward the opening. Photo by Kenneth Mays.

communities, such as Mexican Hat, Blanding, and Monticello—all in today’s San Juan County, Utah—as well as areas which later became part of Colorado, Arizona, and New Mexico.[2] (<https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/church/news/newest-church-historic-site-dedicated-in-utah-bluff-fort?lang=eng>)

Bluff Fort became one of the most prosperous communities of the State of Deseret by selling a portion of the increase of their fields, herds, and flocks to the cattle companies and Indians in that corner of what would become the State of Utah. Bluff Fort was dedicated as a Church historic site on October 12, 2013. The fort is staffed by Church-service missionary couples.

A memorial wall to the original Hole in the Rock pioneers was planned, installed, and dedicated in 2004 by then-Presiding Bishop H. David Burton. After much more work, the majority of the “square” was acquired, a visitors’ center was opened, and plans were made for reconstruction of the co-op store.

The section of the Hole in the Rock Trail from Escalante to the hole or steep chute down to the river (now part of Lake Powell) lies within the borders of the Grand Staircase-Escalante National Monument. It is open to the public without charge. One may make the descent to the river on foot, but that is “challenging and not possible for many. Contemplating the process of pioneers taking wagons and livestock down through that steep, narrow chute truly boggles the mind.”[3] (<https://ensignpeakfoundation.org/hole-in-the-rock-road-escalante-ut/>)

In a regional conference talk (https://site.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/ensign/2011/07/faith-to-answer-the-call?lang=eng&adobe_mc_ref=https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/ensign/2011/07/faith-to-answer-the-call?lang=eng&adobe_mc_sdid=SDID=7368CC3F28B33075-3AA245F88D73D21D%7CMCORGID=66C5485451E56AAE0A490D45%40AdobeOrg%7CTS=1688071819&v=V01) given at Brigham Young University in September 2010, Elder Jeffrey R. Holland recounted some of the courage required to travel through the Hole-in-the-Rock:

At the quarterly conference of the Parowan Stake in 1879, 250 people accepted the call by President John Taylor to establish the San Juan Mission. With 80 wagons and nearly 1,000 head of cattle and horses, they began to cut their way toward and through imposing, unexplored territory of snow-capped mountains and towering stone pinnacles.

Seeking the shortest route to San Juan, those first explorers overcame one obstacle after another but soon faced the largest and most intimidating barrier of all: the impassable gulf of the Colorado River gorge. Miraculously their weary scouts found a narrow slit in the canyon—a crevice running 2,000 feet (610 m) down the red cliffs to the Colorado River below. This lone, near-lethal “hole in the rock” seemed to offer the only possible passage to the eastern side.

For the most part, the slice in the sandstone was too narrow for horses and in some places too narrow even for a man or woman to pass through. Sheer drops of as much as 75 feet (23 m) would seem to have made it impossible for a mountain sheep, let alone loaded wagons. But the hardy Saints were not going to turn back, so with blasting powder and tools, working most of December 1879 and January 1880, they cut a precarious, primitive road into the face of the canyon precipice.

With this roadbed finished, such as it was, the task was now to get the first 40 wagons down the “hole.” The other wagons, waiting five miles (8 km) back at Fifty-Mile Spring, would follow later.

They organized themselves in such a way “that a dozen or more men could hang on behind the wagon” with long ropes to slow its descent. Then the wheels were brake-locked with chains, allowing them to slide but avoiding the catastrophe of the wheels actually rolling.

In one of the great moments of pioneer history, one by one the company took the wagons down the treacherous precipice. When they reached the canyon floor, they eagerly started to ferry across the river with a flatbed boat they had fashioned for that purpose. As it turned out, the Joseph Stanford Smith family

was in the last wagon to descend that day.

Stanford Smith had systematically helped the preceding wagons down, but somehow the company apparently forgot that Brother Smith's family would still need help as the tailenders. Deeply disturbed that he and his family seemed abandoned, Stanford moved his team, wagon, and family to the edge of the precipice. The team was placed in front and a third horse was hitched behind the wagon to the rear axle. The Smiths stood for a moment and looked down the treacherous hole. Stanford turned to his wife, Arabella, and said, "I am afraid we can't make it."

She replied, "But we've got to make it."

He said, "If we only had a few men to hold the wagon back, we might make it."

Replied his wife, "I'll do the holding back."

She laid a quilt on the ground, and there she placed her infant son in the care of her three-year-old, Roy, and five-year-old, Ada. "Hold little brother 'til papa comes for you," she said. Then positioning herself behind the wagon, Belle Smith grasped the reins of the horse hitched to the back of the rig. Stanford started the team down the hole. The wagon lurched downward. With the first jolt the rear horse fell. Sister Smith raced after him and the wagon, pulling on the lines with all her strength and courage. She soon fell too, and as she was dragged along with the horse, a jagged rock cut a cruel gash in her leg from heel to hip. That gallant woman, with clothes torn and a grievous wound, hung on to those lines with all her might and faith the full length of the incline all the way to the river's edge.

On reaching the bottom and almost in disbelief at their accomplishment, Stanford immediately raced the 2,000 feet (607 m) back up to the top of the cliff, fearful for the welfare of the children. When he climbed over the rim, there he saw them literally unmoved from their position. Carrying the baby, with the other two children clinging to him and to each other, he led them down the rocky crack to their anxious mother below. In the distance they saw five men moving toward them carrying chains and ropes. Realizing the plight the Smiths were in, these men were coming to help. Stanford called out, "Forget it, fellows. We managed fine. Belle here is all the help a fellow needs [to make this journey]."^[1]

The novel *The Undaunted: The Miracle of the Hole-in-the Rock Pioneers*, by Latter-day Saint author Gerald N. Lund, chronicles the journey of the pioneers called by President John Taylor to open the San Juan Mission.

Note

1. See David E. Miller, "Hole-in-the-Rock: An Epic in the Colonization of the Great American West," (1959), pp. 101–18.

External Sources

- Ensign Peak Foundation, "Hole in the Rock Road, Escalante, UT" (<https://ensignpeakfoundation.org/hole-in-the-rock-road-escalante-ut/>)
- Church News, "Pioneer Descendants Preserve History of the Hole in the Rock" (<https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/church/news/pioneer-descendants-preserve-history-of-the-hole-in-the-rock?lang=eng>)

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- This page was last edited on 29 June 2023, at 16:31.