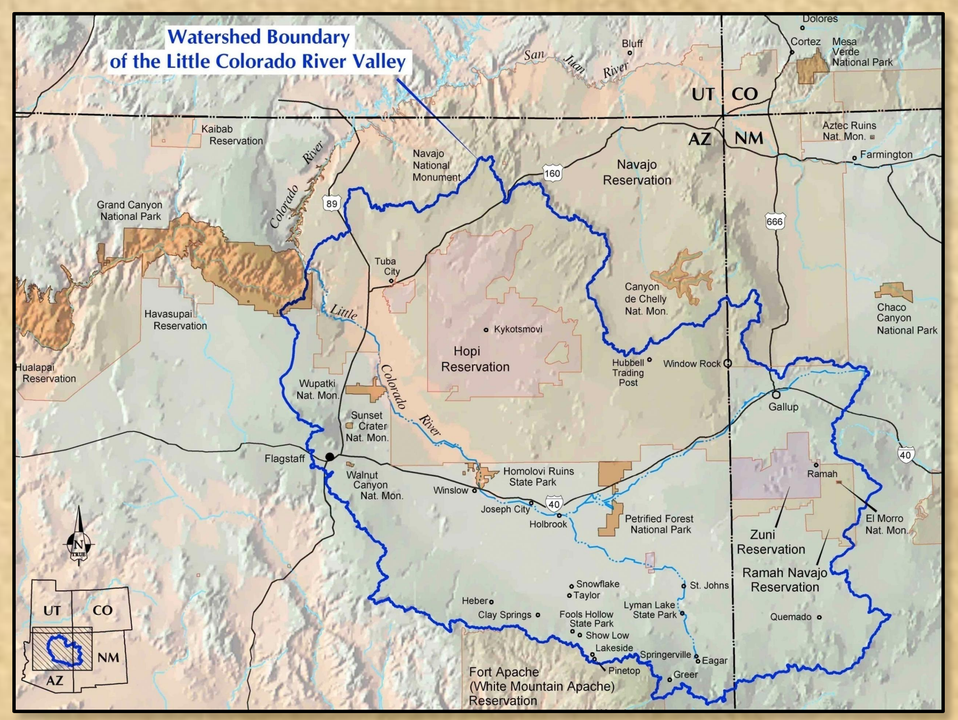
Old Trails Museum

Journeys To Winslow

The First Peoples of the Southwestern Colorado Plateau

Winslow sits almost 5,000 feet above sea level on the Colorado Plateau and within the watershed of the Little Colorado River. Long before the railroad arrived, the Little Colorado and its tributaries sustained the ancestors of the Hopi and Navajo peoples. In more recent times, members of both nations have continually migrated between their tribal lands and Winslow for trade, employment, education, and public services. This map of the Little Colorado River watershed is provided by Archaeology Southwest.



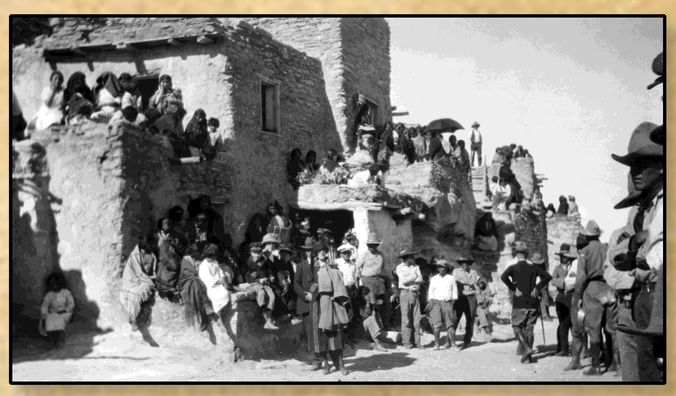
The Hopi People

Ancestral Puebloans, ancestors of the Hopi, populated the area from A.D. 200 through 1600. The Homol'ovi villages (the Hopi word for "place of the small buttes") northeast of present-day Winslow were at peak activity in the 1300s. Inhabitants mastered growing corn in the high desert. They likely traded cotton for pottery with the Pueblo villages on the mesas to the north. They likely migrated to those mesas along the Palatkwapi Trail at the end of the 14th century. The land they left behind now constitutes Homolovi State Park. The federal government established the Hopi Reservation to the north in 1882.

Homol'ovi IV, occupied from about 1250 to 1280, consisted of 150 rooms constructed from local sandstone. (Illustration by Douglas Gann; courtesy of Archaeology Southwest)

Spanish Explorers on the Palatkwapi Trail depicts the first non-natives to see the Hopi villages to the north in the 1540s. The Spanish introduced new crops, horses, and sheep to the Colorado Plateau and beyond, but neither Spain nor Mexico ever gained control of the southwestern portion of the plateau. (Painting by Joseph Cruz Rodriguez)

Seen here in 1903, the Hopi village of Walpi is located atop the western end of First Mesa, about 70 miles from Winslow.



Tourists join Hopis in witnessing a ceremonial dance at Walpi in 1924.

Tourists caravan from Winslow to Hopiland to observe ceremonial dances in 1951.

The Navajo People

The Athabaskans, hunter-gatherer ancestors of the Navajo people, likely came to the area from northern Canada in the 1400s. By the 1700s Navajos, or Diné (the people), were building wooden homes called hogans, growing crops, tending sheep, and trading with others on the Colorado Plateau. In the winter of 1864, the federal government forced nearly 9,000 Navajos on the "Long Walk" to desolate Fort Sumner at Bosque Redondo, New Mexico. Over 2,500 died from starvation and exposure, and more died from deplorable conditions at the fort. The survivors returned four years later to the newly established Navajo Reservation. The Navajo Nation, which borders Winslow to the north, is now the largest tribal entity in the United States in both area and population.

This woman, child, and weaver from the Navajo village of Dilkon pose for a photo in 1927. Dilkon is 36 miles from Winslow, which the Navajo called Béésh Sinil (the "place of steel rails").

The federal government provided thousands of sheep and goats for resettlement to the survivors of the "Long Walk." Navajos were expert sheepherders, like these two shearing sheep in a "Frashers Fotos" postcard from 1932.