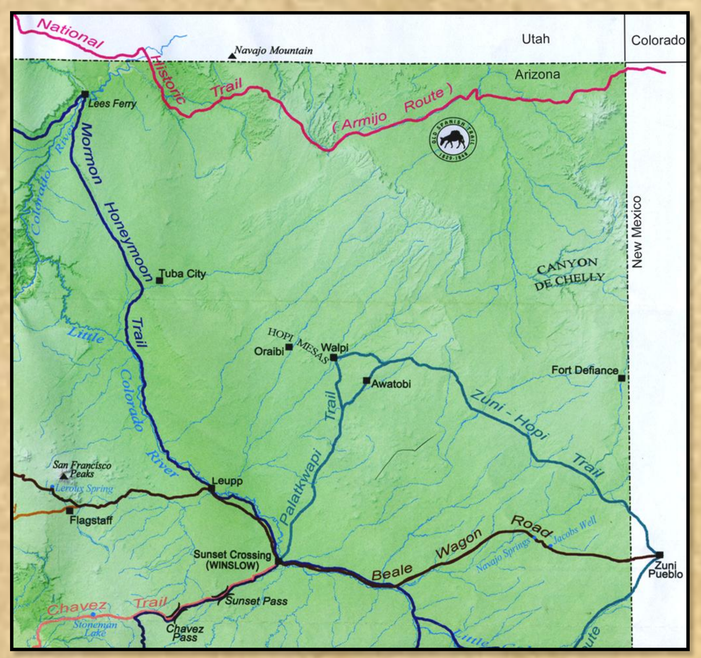
Old Trails Museum

Journeys To Winslow

Early Trails across the Little Colorado River Valley

The Little Colorado River and its tributaries supplied a vital water source to the area's earliest inhabitants and travelers. The watershed sustained the nearby Homol'ovi villages of the Ancestral Puebloans. A passable ford across the river also brought prehistoric trails, scientific expeditions, pioneer wagon roads, and Mormon settlers through the area long before the railroad arrived. The Winslow area was at the intersection of a network of historic trails including the Palatkwapi Trail, the Beale Wagon Road, and the Mormon Honeymoon Trail. This map of northeastern Arizona's historic trails is provided by Arizona State Parks.



The Beale Wagon Road

The federal government began sending military expeditions to map potential east-west railroad routes across the West in the mid-1800s. In 1853, Lt. Amiel W. Whipple charted a route along the 35th parallel that crossed the Colorado Plateau. He also recommended the development of a wagon road along the same route. Lt. Edward F. Beale established that road in 1857, which crossed the Little Colorado River at Sunset Crossing and continued through the future townsite of Winslow. The Beale Wagon Road was a popular pioneer trail during the 1860s and 1870s. It later became the base corridor for the railroad, US Route 66, and Interstate 40.

Beale famously used camels during his expeditions in the semi-arid West. They were faster and stronger in the desert than horses, but the experiment did not result in their permanent use. (*The Beale Wagon Road* by Joseph Cruz Rodriguez)

The Mormon Church's Brigham City

Church leader Brigham Young sent the first settlers of European origin to the Winslow area in 1876. They traveled the Mormon Wagon Road (later called the Mormon Honeymoon Trail) from Salt Lake City in Utah Territory to establish the first Mormon settlements in Arizona Territory. Two hundred men, women, and children set up Brigham City just one mile north of present-day Winslow along the Little Colorado River. But the fort failed due to alternating floods and drought as well as labor shortages. The settlers were released from their calling in 1881 and moved to other Mormon settlements in Arizona Territory.

Joseph Cruz Rodriguez's *Tucker Flats-West of Winslow* illustrates the Mormon wagon train that established four settlements along the Little Colorado River. His wife, author Vada Carlson Rodriquez, wrote about the arduous journey in the 1980 booklet, *They Came to the Little Colorado:*

"Regardless of the difficulties and the drudgery the journey imposed, they urged the plodding oxen and the tired horses on and on, relentlessly, looking forward to the sight of the northward-flowing Little Colorado . . . At last they came to the north bank of the Little Colorado and saw before them the crossing at Grand Falls . . . Now it trickled across the hardened lava, innocently during the dry season . . . It must have been with a sigh of relief that they found that the crossing presented no impossible obstacle . . ."

Grand Falls (left), 45 miles northwest of Winslow, is an impressive sight when running strong with spring thaw from higher elevations.

Members of Winslow's Mormon Church formed Brigham City Restoration and are restoring the original Brigham City fort. On March 24, 2012, over 100 regional church members commemorated the first Mormon settlements in Arizona with a 150-mile trail ride from Lee's Ferry to the partially reconstructed fort.