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The 1776 Route of Father Francisco Garcés into the San Bernardino Valley, California: A Reevaluation of the Evidence and its Implications

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A number of attempts have been made to reconstruct the route of Fr. Francisco Garcés into the San Bernardino Valley, California, during his entrada from the Colorado River to Mission San Gabriel in 1776. One of the first efforts was made by Hubert Howe Bancroft when he tentatively suggested a route through Cajon Pass (Bancroft 1886:275 fn.). Some fourteen years later, Elliott Coues proposed a route which crossed the San Bernardino Mountains by following the Mojave River and then passed through Bear or Holcomb Valley (Coues 1900: 245-246 fn.). Beattie and Van Dyke (Van Dyke 1927) subsequently posited a route which followed the Mojave River to the vicinity of Las Flores ranch and then passed over the crest of the San Bernardino range in the vicinity of Sawpit and Cable Canyons (see Fig. 1). It is this interpretation which has become the most widely accepted reconstruction of the route and has also been used as the basis for a number of inferences regarding both the route of the Old Mojave Trail and the locations of various proto-historic and historic period rancherias. A reevaluation of the evidence upon which these previous reconstructions were made reveals that they are inconsistent with the journal entries made by Fr. Garcés and are quite probably in error.

BACKGROUND

Previous attempts to reconstruct the route of Fr. Garcés' 1776 entrada have focused upon the desert crossing from the Colorado River to an apparent point of entrance into the San Bernardino Valley. However, conspicuously little effort has been made to justify the respective points of entrance with the journal entries for the balance of the trip to Mission San Gabriel. In order to accurately assess these entries, it is first necessary to examine the journals of Juan Bautista de Anza's 1774 expedition to Alta California, of which Fr. Garcés was a member. This venture was prompted by the need to establish a reliable overland supply route to the missions of Alta California from the city of Tubac in the present-day state of Arizona. According to Bolton's (1930) reconstruction of the Anza trail, the expedition crossed the Santa Ana River near present-day Rubidoux enroute to Mission San Gabriel on March 21, 1774. After crossing the river, the expedition proceeded five leagues to the northwest and encountered a "good" arroyo (Bolton 1930: I:153, II:204). This is equivalent to a distance of between 13 and 15 statute miles since a league in that day varied between 2.6 and 3 miles (Bolton 1930: IV:vii). This arroyo was probably the drainage now known as Cucamonga Creek since it is the first of two major streamcourses which cross the particular portion of the San Bernardino Valley traversed by the expedition. From this arroyo the expedition continued northwest two more leagues (between 5.2 and 6 miles) where a "better" arroyo was encountered (Bolton 1930: I:153, II:204). This apparently refers to modern San Antonio Creek, the second and largest of the two drainages which cross this portion of the valley. The above conclusions regarding the present-day names of the encountered drainages are, at least in part, further substantiated by the fact that they are

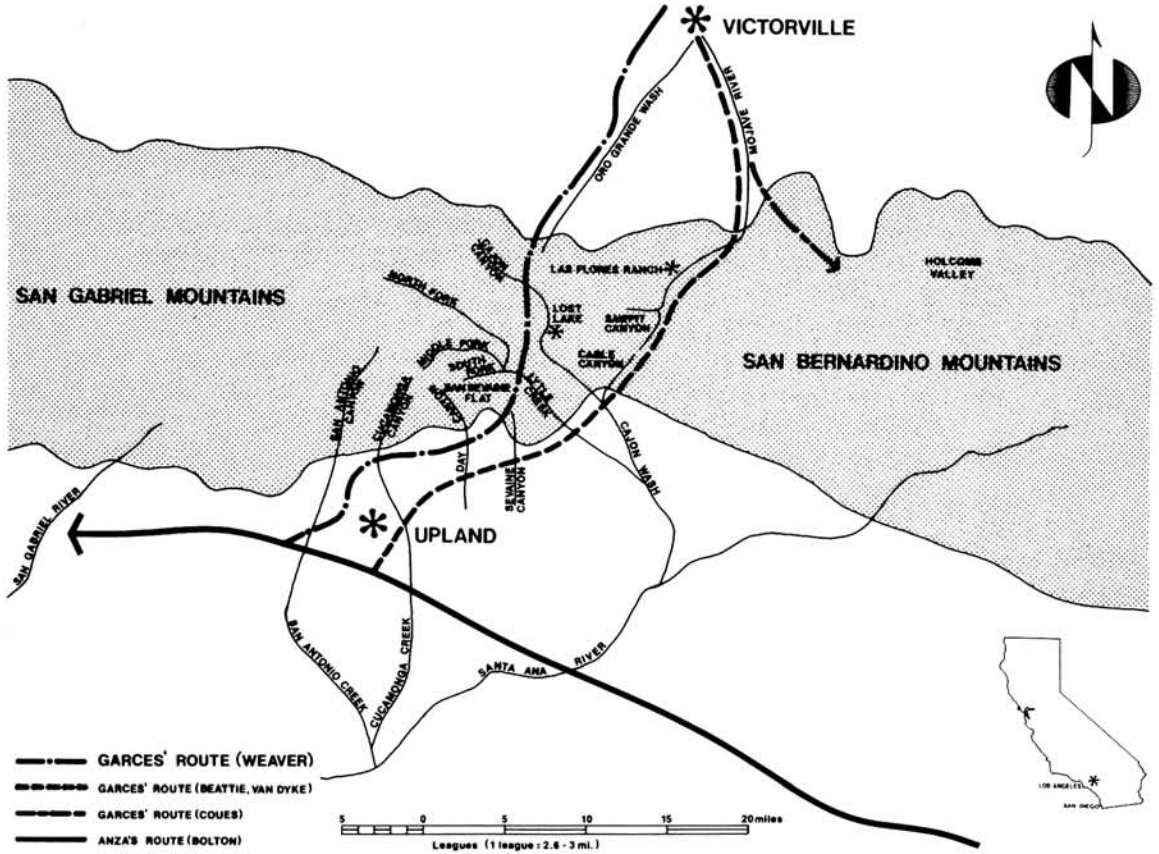


Fig. 1. Map showing both the various reconstructions of the 1776 route of Fr. Francisco Garcés into and through the San Bernardino Valley, California, as well as the route of the first Anza expedition.

the only streamcourses of any relative size which are the specified distance apart.

Both the Bolton (1930) and Coues (1900) reconstructions leave doubt as to the names originally applied by the expedition to each of these drainages since they state that both the names *Arroyo de Osos* and *Arroyo de Alisos* refer to present-day San Antonio Creek (see Bolton 1930: I:153 fn., II:346 fn., III:78 fn.; Coues 1900: 247-248 fn.). However, Anza's journal entry for March 21, 1774, specifically refers to the second streamcourse as *Arroyo de Osos* (Bolton 1930: I:153, II:95). The only expedition diarist known to have referred to this drainage by a different name was Fr. Garcés, who called it *San*

Antonio, the name by which it is known today (Bolton 1930: II:346). This appears to clarify the reference terms used by the expedition members for the second stream. As for the first drainage, Anza's journal entry for May 3, 1774, while on the return trip from San Gabriel to Tubac appears to resolve the question. In this entry Anza notes:

At two o'clock in the afternoon I set out from the mission of San Gabriel toward the east and east-southeast, straightening out as much as possible the road which I followed on coming, as I shall continue to do in order to shorten the distances. Having traveled this afternoon *five leagues* we halted for the night at a stream called *Arroyo de los Alisos*, the first one which we mentioned on our

first arrival at San Gabriel as running out to the neighborhood of that mission from the Sierra Nevada [Bolton 1930: II:225-226; emphasis added].

Fr. Juan Díaz, another of the expedition's diarists, also noted camp this day as having been at *Arroyo de Alisos* (Bolton 1930: II:294).

Considering the above data, it would appear that the expedition members knew present-day San Antonio Creek as *Arroyo de Osos* (or *San Antonio* in the case of Fr. Garcés) and that Cucamonga Creek was referred to as *Arroyo de Alisos*.

THE GARCÉS ENTRADA

Fr. Garcés' 1776 expedition into the San Bernardino Valley began with Anza's second trip to Alta California. Upon his return to Tubac, Anza was ordered to lead an expedition of colonists over the newly established trail to Mission San Gabriel and then on to San Francisco Bay. There he was to establish a settlement in order to prevent encroachment by Russian settlers upon lands claimed by the Spanish crown. As was the case with the first expedition, he was again accompanied by Fr. Garcés.

After crossing the Colorado River, Anza led the main party along the previously established route through the Anza-Borrogo region to Mission San Gabriel. Fr. Garcés, however, left the group at the river and traveled north to the vicinity of present-day Needles. From there he turned west and by, presumably, following the Old Mojave Trail reached the San Bernardino Valley enroute to San Gabriel. He was guided on this journey by Sabastián Tarabal, a runaway from Mission San Gabriel, and several Mohave guides. The various routes into the San Bernardino Valley suggested by Bancroft (1886: I:275), Beattie (Van Dyke 1927: map following p. 356, 357 fn.), and Coues (1900: 245-246 fn.), all require that Fr. Garcés reached the foot of

the mountains on the valley side either in or east of Cajon Canyon (see Fig. 1). With the preceding clarification of the journals of the first Anza expedition, a close scrutiny of Fr. Garcés' journal entries relating to this traverse is in order.

According to Coues, Fr. Garcés' journal entry for March 22, 1776, states:

I went three leagues and passed over the sierra by the southsouthwest. The woods that I said yesterday reach to the summit of this sierra, whence I saw clearly the sea, the Rio de Santa Anna, and the Valle de San Joseph. Its descent is little wooded. At a little distance from its foot I found another rancheria where the Indians received me very joyfully. I continued westsouthwest, and having traveled three leagues along the skirt of the sierra, I halted in the Arroyo de los Alisos [Coues 1900:246-247].

The reference to having observed the ocean from the summit clearly locates Fr. Garcés at higher mountain elevations and not in the bottom of a drainage such as Cajon, Sawpit, or Cable canyons. Based upon cross-section topographic plots of the area, a minimum elevation of approximately five thousand feet seems necessary to view the Pacific Ocean over the crest of the intervening Peninsular Range. The excellence of such a vantage point in turn helps clarify a more critical concern.

The diarists of both Anza expeditions clearly described the *Valle de San Joseph* (San Bernardino Valley) as having been a grass-covered plain with the trees along the stream-courses being the only source of timber and firewood (Bolton 1930: II:95, IV:172). Given this characterization in conjunction with Fr. Garcés' excellent vantage point and prior knowledge of the valley, it seems virtually impossible that his reference to having halted at *Arroyo de los Alisos* (Cucamonga Creek) could have been in error. Therefore, it would appear that Fr. Garcés did not enter the San Bernardino Valley by traversing the San Bernardino Mountains or by following the length

of Cajon Canyon as has been suggested by various authors, but rather he crossed the San Gabriel Mountains approximately three leagues east of Cucamonga Creek. Based upon a reverse plotting of the recorded directions and distances from the foot of the sierra to Cucamonga Creek, the evidence suggests that Fr. Garcés reached the base of the mountains somewhere between Day and San Sevaine canyons (Fig. 1). The most likely location for crossing the crest of the mountains in this area is in the vicinity of San Sevaine Flat.

This interpretation is further substantiated by an examination of Fr. Garcés' journal entry for the following day which records the balance of his journal to the San Gabriel River about two leagues southeast of the mission. Coues (1900: 247-248) interprets the March 23, 1776, entry as follows:

I traveled half a league westsouthwest and one south at the instance of some Indians who met me and made me go to eat at their rancheria. Thereafter having gone another league westsouthwest, I came upon the road of the expedition, which I followed at a good gait (*á paso largo*) till nightfall; and having gone eight leagues in this direction and to the northwest, I halted [on the Rio de San Gabriel, at or near a place now called El Monte].

Plotting the indicated directions and distances from Cucamonga Creek reveals that Fr. Garcés encountered the expedition road almost precisely where Bolton (1930) indicated it should be. More significantly, both the Cajon Canyon route suggested by Bancroft (1886: I:275) and the widely accepted Sawpit Canyon-Cable Canyon route suggested by Beattie and Van Dyke (Van Dyke 1927: map following p. 356, 357 fn.) would require that Fr. Garcés failed to record some three leagues of travel after traversing the mountains. Coues' (1900: 245-246 fn.) Holcomb Valley route would require an even greater error by Fr. Garcés. Errors or omissions of such a magnitude would be inconsistent with

the apparent accuracy of journal entries by Fr. Garcés for other reconstructed portions of his route. The route suggested here is consistent with the journal entries and requires no assumptions of error.

There are several comments and inferences that can be made based upon this new interpretation of a portion of Fr. Garcés' route. First of all, it refutes the contention of Black (1975:xii) that Fr. Garcés was the first Anglo-European to visit the historic-period rancheria of Cucamonga since the habitations noted were clearly not on Cucamonga Creek. General locations can, however, be inferred for those rancherias that he did encounter. The rancheria recorded in his journal entry of March 22nd must have been very near his point of descent between Day and San Sevaine canyons. Similarly, the village mentioned in his journal on March 23rd would appear to have been located in the vicinity of present-day western Upland.

The foregoing reconstruction of a portion of Fr. Garcés' route into and through the San Bernardino Valley requires that a reassessment also be made of at least a portion of his route across the Mojave Desert. There are conflicting opinions regarding the exact location of the majority of this crossing, but for present purposes it suffices to note that both Coues (1900: 244-245 fn.) and Van Dyke (1927: 356-357) agree that Fr. Garcés reached the vicinity of present-day Victorville on March 20, 1776. From this point on, however, not only do the Coues and Van Dyke interpretations disagree, but they are inconsistent with the journal entries made by Fr. Garcés. According to the Coues (1900: 245-246) translation, the journal entry for March 21, 1776, states:

Leaving the river I set forth southwestward, and having gone two leagues through a cañada and some hills, I arrived at a rancheria of five huts (*xacales*) on the bank of the river. I continued on a course to the south

and entered into a cañada of much wood, grass, and water; I saw many cottonwoods, alders, oaks, very tall firs, and beautiful junipers (sabinos); and having gone one league I arrived at a rancheria of about 80 souls, which I named (Rancheria) de San Benito. I was received with great joy, and they made me the same obeisance.

Coues and Van Dyke both interpret this entry to mean that Fr. Garcés left the Mojave River in the vicinity of Victorville and cut across Hesperia Mesa to encounter the river again. The implicit assumption here is that both references to the "river" refer to the Mojave River. From this point on the two interpretations of the route diverge: Beattie and Van Dyke (Van Dyke 1927: map following p. 356, 356-357, 357 fn.) suggesting the Sawpit Canyon-Cable Canyon crossing of the mountains and Coues (1900: 245-246 fn.) proposing a traverse by way of Holcomb Valley.

Neither of these routes is feasible given the fact that Fr. Garcés must have crossed the mountains in the vicinity of San Sevaine Flat. Both routes would require that Fr. Garcés actually traveled in a southeasterly rather than his recorded southwesterly direction after leaving the vicinity of Victorville. Coues (1900: 245-246 fn.) notes this discrepancy, but dismisses it with the only apparent reason being that Cajon Canyon was incredibly rough. As previously noted, Fr. Garcés' journal entries appear to have been relatively exact, and a recorded directional error of some 90° would seem notoriously inconsistent. Further, a southeasterly course as proposed by both Coues and Van Dyke would be similarly inconsistent with Fr. Garcés' unsuccessful attempt on March 17th to have his guides take a more westerly route (Coues 1900: 243-244).

Given the foregoing, I submit that Fr. Garcés did in fact set out from the vicinity of Victorville in a southwesterly direction, apparently following one of several drainages

in the area which trend in that direction. After he encountered the small rancheria consisting of five huts, he cut south until a second, and much lush, streamcourse was encountered. This drainage was probably modern Oro Grande Wash since it is both of substantial size and leads directly toward the most obvious pass in the mountains: Cajon Pass. Any other major drainage in the area would have led him away from the pass as he could have observed directly or learned from his guides.

The following day, the journal entry for which has previously been given, Fr. Garcés proceeded three leagues to the southwest and passed over the crest of the mountains. The most likely, although admittedly rough, route would seem to involve following Oro Grande Wash to its source above Cajon Canyon and then paralleling Cajon Canyon to the vicinity of Lost Lake. In this area the landform changes from a northeast-southwest orientation to one trending northwest-southeast, a direction contrary to that which Fr. Garcés noted as having traveled. Therefore, I suggest that he crossed into the Lytle Creek drainage and from there climbed to the summit of the mountains in the vicinity of San Sevaine Flat.

As before, there are several inferences that can be made regarding the rancherias visited by Fr. Garcés during this portion of the journey. First of all, it would seem that the small rancheria consisting of five huts that he noted on March 21st was situated on an unnamed drainage located immediately north of Oro Grande Wash. More significant, however, are the implications involving the village that Fr. Garcés named *San Benito*. It has been suggested (see Suss 1974:71, 71 nt. 42) that this rancheria was later known as *Guapiabit* and that its remains are located near the confluence of Deep Creek and the Mojave River. In light of the analysis presented here, this interpretation would appear to be incorrect. At present the most that can be stated

with any degree of certainty is that the village of San Benito was located not on the Mojave River, but rather on Oro Grande Wash.

The final point to be examined in this report relates to the route of the Old Mojave Trail. It has long been assumed that the trail crossed into the San Bernardino Valley by way of Sawpit and Cable canyons; the same route which Beattie (Van Dyke 1927: map following p. 356, 357 fn.) suggested that Fr. Garcés traveled. If Fr. Garcés was in fact following the main alignment of this trail, it would appear that the trail actually followed Oro Grande Wash to the head of Cajon Canyon. Such a conclusion in part substantiates the contentions of Bancroft (1886:275) and Farmer (1935:155) that both the Old Mojave Trail and Fr. Garcés passed through Cajon Canyon. However, if Fr. Garcés was tracing the main trail, it does not appear as if the trail followed the entire length of the Cajon Creek drainage into San Bernardino Valley. If the main trail did in fact follow the length of this drainage, it is reasonable to assume that at the very least Fr. Garcés was traversing a branch route of this important travelway.

CONCLUSIONS

It has been shown that previous reconstructions of the 1776 route of Fr. Francisco Garcés into and through the San Bernardino Valley, California, have been in error. Based upon a reevaluation of this route, there is also evidence to suggest revisions in both the existing views of the route of the Old Mojave Trail and the locations of various proto-historic/historic-period rancherias.

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