

Tsaile and The Navajo Nation

A Basic Study Guide

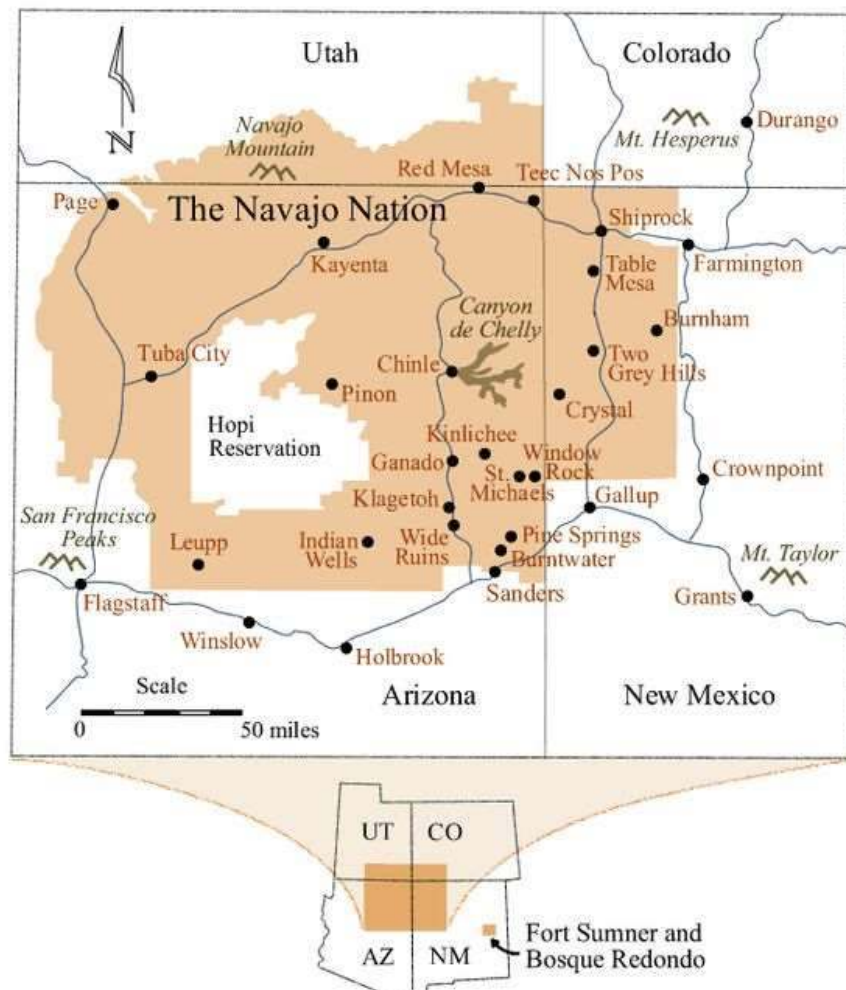
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Introduction

Sierra Service Project's Navajo Nation site is currently located in Tsale, Arizona. 2018 will be our 6th summer serving there continuously, and we have served in other areas of Navajo Nation since 1994. While in Tsale, our volunteers and staff live at Diné College, the first community college to be founded by and for Native Americans, in 1968. We are very grateful to be hosted by the College and the wider community, and it is an honor to get to know these people and their land.

Navajo Nation is 27,000 square miles, overlapping the borders of Arizona, New Mexico, and Utah. This current territory is part of where the Diné (meaning "the people") lived prior to European settlement – this area, known as *Diné Bikéyah* or *Diné'tah*, is surrounded by the four sacred mountains. Although it is not a state, the Navajo Nation government is similar to a state: they have their own elected officials, agencies, and schools that all interact with the federal government in various ways. There are 175,000-250,000 people currently living in Navajo Nation, with about the same number of Diné living outside its borders, making them one of the largest populations of indigenous people who report a single (rather than mixed) heritage.ⁱ



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History

Early history

Diné scholar Jennifer Nez Denetdale says this about early Diné history: “We Diné trace our origins into Dinétah by a journey from the First World into this present one. The Holy People created the world as we know it today. From the Holy People, the Diné received knowledge, material gifts, and rituals and ceremonies for a proper life. The Holy People also provided knowledge on proper relationships between the world and all beings.”ⁱⁱⁱ

Other scholars note that the Diné language is part of a common family with other native languages – called Athabaskan – spoken in the Southwest that can also be traced to Western Canada, suggesting that the Diné and other native groups migrated to their current land somewhere between 800-1400 CE (there are a wide variety of opinions on when exactly this happened).^{iv} (Speakers of the Athabaskan family are also located along the Pacific Coast – such as Tolowa speakers around another SSP site, Smith River!)

Sometimes scholars write that, before American **colonization** in the 19th century, the Diné were not well-organized. While they certainly were not organized into the Navajo Nation government structure they have today (which in many ways follows U.S. government structure), it is inaccurate to say that they were unorganized. Diné families and society are oriented around a clan system, which determines extended family relationships.

Colonial period

The word “Navajo” originated in 1626 and comes from the Spanish, who had been present in the Southwest since 1541. By 1598, the Spanish were clearly establishing settlements and missions, in order to try to control and convert to Christianity the **indigenous** people living there (significantly Pueblo). Over the next several decades, sometimes there was peaceful trading between the Spanish and the native people living in the area, but other times the indigenous people raided the Spanish settlements in an effort to resist their colonization. In 1692-1696, the Spanish “reconquered” the region, a bloody conflict that gave them significant control. Over the following 200 years, there continued to be a pattern of raiding, as the Diné and other indigenous groups struggled against Spanish presence.^v

In the first half of the 19th century, white Americans began to move farther westward, and they too began to settle in this region. As with the Spanish, and later Mexicans, these latest arrivals also experienced conflict with the native people there. When the United States “officially” gained control of the New Mexico Territory through the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo in 1848, they began a long series of “treaty negotiations” with the Navajo. For various reasons – including changes of heart on both sides, a lack of central authority for the Diné, and Congress’ failure to act – the majority of these treaties were never signed.

That the Diné were impeding the white settlement of New Mexico Territory was incredibly frustrating for U.S. officials, and so they took increasingly severe military action. This culminated in 1863-1868, which is known as the Long Walk period. The U.S. government

decided that the best way to stop the raiding and gain access to the land of Dinétah was to remove the Diné from it. They physically removed the Diné and forced them to Fort Sumner, an internment camp about 300 miles southeast. This forced march began during the harsh winter, and many Diné died of cold or starvation along the way. In order to compel the Diné to be marched to Fort Sumner, the U.S. Army, led by Col. Kit Carson, executed a “scorched earth policy,” which involves burning all vegetation, hogans, and killing livestock so that the Diné would have nothing left to live off of if they stayed. This campaign was incredibly effective, but there were also many Diné who were able to escape, some hiding in the canyons or mountains. Those at Fort Sumner endured food shortages, outbreaks of disease, and government officials attempting to force them into new ways of living, including English/Christian schools and a different style of homes and community.

Although these experiences were traumatic, **oral histories** also describe Diné continuing to speak their own language and practice their own ceremonies, a testament to their resilience, which made it possible for Diné language and culture to be alive today. In 1868, a group of Diné leaders successfully negotiated release from Fort Sumner. This treaty allowed the Diné to return to their homeland and established the boundaries of the Navajo Indian Reservation, now Navajo Nation. The U.S. Army escorted the Diné back home, and eventually all who had been interned were given sheep and farming tools in an effort to help them reestablish themselves.

Reservation period

Earlier in the 19th century, the U.S. government sought to control the Diné and other native groups by removing them from their land and/or isolating them from white Americans – policies that were only moderately successful. After the Long Walk, the government switched tactics, now desiring to making native people more like white Americans, a policy known as **assimilation**. A significant element of this was through “education” policy used against Diné and native people nationwide. Under this system, native children were taken from their families and brought to **boarding schools** where they were forced to conform to white standards of dress, culture, and behavior, including speaking English and becoming Christian. Beyond the trauma of being isolated from their families, languages, and cultures, native children were treated violently when they did not conform.

In the late 19th and early 20th century, the Navajo Indian Reservation became more connected to the U.S. economy. Their livestock industry (mostly sheep) provided wool and mutton, which was accessible throughout the west via the newly developed railroad lines. In the 1920s, oil companies began drilling in the reservation, though the lack of central government (the Navajo Nation had not yet been formed) created a lot of back and forth about whether those companies were allowed to do so.

The Citizenship Act of 1924 made the Diné legal citizens of the U.S., so when a draft began for WWII in 1940, young Navajos became involved in the war (though many others were suspicious of and resistant to the draft). Many Navajos who were drafted did not speak English, which was initially a problem for the military, but this eventually became an advantage: because of the

complexity of the Navajo language, it was used as a “code” that could not be broken.^{vi} Some Navajo “Code Talkers” are still alive.

In the period following WWII (1946-1986), uranium mining boomed on the reservation and beyond (uranium is used for nuclear power and weaponry). Hundreds of Diné men worked in these mines, but the negative consequences were far-reaching. The miners themselves were not given proper education or safety equipment, and their families lived near the mines and drank contaminated water, and the consequences were deadly.^{vii} Today, work is being done to clean up the mines, but the health effects, including kidney disease and cancer, are ongoing.^{viii}

Navajo Nation government^{ix}

The Navajo Nation government was initially formed as a tribal government in 1923, and officially became the Navajo Nation in 1969 in order to assert **sovereignty**. Today, the Navajo Nation government is generally structured similarly to the U.S. government, with judicial, legislative, and executive branches. Navajo Nation is divided into five Agencies (regions), and each of these agencies is made up of Chapters. These Chapters are the core of local government, and they are also some of the main community organizations Sierra Service Project partners with: we are currently working with the Lukachukai and Tsaile/Wheatfields Chapters. Chapter Meetings allow residents to stay up to date and share their opinions with Delegates to Navajo Nation Council, the legislative branch. The Chapters also oversee various services, such as schools, senior centers, and other resources.

Culture, religion, and language

One of the most important elements of Diné culture is the clan system: each person is “born for” a particular clan (via their mother) and also has ties to three other clans (via their father and grandmothers). These clans offer a rich network of kinship, and each clan is traditionally responsible for a particular aspect of ceremonies or other communal responsibilities. In addition to the extended network the clan system provides, many Diné people have close ties to their immediate family members as well. Extended families may all live in the same piece of land, connected through their grandmother.

As a part of Diné culture, there are creation narratives and other stories about how the world works and how people should properly relate to it, and there are ceremonies that revolve around those right relationships. This all may seem like religion, but many people don’t see “religion” as separate from “culture.” Many Diné are also part of another religious tradition, including various forms of Christianity.

An important element of Diné culture is their language. Many of the elders we serve only speak Diné, so we use translators in order to communicate with them. However, many older people will also lament the fact that not all Diné children are learning their language, and they worry about what will happen when the elders pass on. Diné College (as well as some elementary and high schools) is one of the places that is working to keep the Diné language alive! Diné is originally only a spoken language, but it has been **transliterated**, and now people can write in it.

In fact, at the College, you will notice that the names of the buildings we stay in are printed in both English and Diné!

Key words

- **Diné Bikéyah** or **Dinétaah**: These are the Diné (Navajo) words for the Diné homeland, most of which is now made up of by Navajo Nation. The boundaries are traditionally marked by the four sacred mountains, in English known as Blanca Peak (east), Mount Taylor (south), the San Francisco Peaks (west), and Hesperus Peak (north).
- **Colonization**: Colonization can take a variety of forms, but generally speaking, it involves a group of people taking over, or conquering, a particular territory and the people who live there for the benefit of the colonizers. The case of the United States and Euro-American colonization of native people and lands is known as “settler colonialism” because the colonizing power not only took control of the area, but set about making it home.
- **Indigenous**: Similar to “native.” In the case of indigenous people living in what is now the United States, this refers to people or cultures here before European arrival in the 15th/16th centuries. While indigenous (i.e., “indigenous people”) can be used in place of terms like “Native American,” it is also used more broadly: the word indigenous is used globally, including within South American, African, and Australian contexts.
- **Oral histories**: Unlike our traditional sense of “history,” which usually involves historians who write things down, oral histories (as part of an oral tradition or oral culture) are told and shared through oral storytelling. Oral histories are sometimes considered “inaccurate” because they lack the formality and consistency of written histories, but they often present a truer picture of how everyday people remember the past.
- **Assimilation**: The process in which a non-dominant group becomes like the dominant group, eventually blending in, or assimilating. In the context of the United States, assimilation usually refers to non-white ethnic and racial groups making their behaviors, language, food, clothing, etc. more like what is considered “normal” by white Americans.
- **Boarding schools**: One of the tools the U.S. government used to assimilate native children, which involved forcibly removing children from their families and communities. In these schools, the children were coerced to speak English, wear Euro-American clothing, and learn skills deemed appropriate for Americans to know (regardless of traditional cultural values). Though these violent practices have ended, the trauma of these experiences remains in many native communities.
- **Sovereignty**: The idea that a group of people is in control of its own government and affairs. For example, when the United States declared itself independent of Britain, that was claiming sovereignty. Although Navajo Nation has sovereignty in some areas, it is also subject to U.S. control and jurisdiction and therefore is not completely independent, or sovereign.

Additional resources

- Read about a public school that focuses on keeping Diné language and culture alive: <https://indiancountrymedianetwork.com/education/native-education/navajo-nation-school-focuses-language-revitalization/>
- To learn more about the history and lasting effects of uranium mining read *Yellow Dirt: An American Story of a Poisoned Land and a People Betrayed* by Judy Pasternak or listen to an interview with the author: <https://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=130754093>
- Jennifer Nez Denetdale is an incredible Diné scholar, and her book *The Long Walk: The Forced Navajo Exile* was written for youth and is very accessible.
- Diné College is celebrating their 50th anniversary in 2018! To learn more about the College and its history: <http://www.dinecollege.edu/about/history.php>

Footnotes

ⁱ <https://www.census.gov/tribal/?aianihh=2430>

Jennifer Nez Denetdale, *Reclaiming Diné History: Legacies of Navajo Chief Manuelito and Juanita*, p. 13

ⁱⁱ <https://www.pinterest.com/pin/69665125464070289/>

<http://www.statemuseum.arizona.edu/exhibits/navajoweave/contemp/map.html>

ⁱⁱⁱ Jennifer Nez Denetdale, *Reclaiming Diné History: Legacies of Navajo Chief Manuelito and Juanita*, p. 10

^{iv} Garrick Bailey and Roberta Glenn Bailey, *A History of the Navajos: The Reservation Years*, p. 11

^v Garrick Bailey and Roberta Glenn Bailey, *A History of the Navajos: The Reservation Years*, p.12-17

^{vi} Garrick Bailey and Roberta Glenn Bailey, *A History of the Navajos: The Reservation Years*, p. 198-199

^{vii} Peter Iverson, *Diné: A History of the Navajos*, p. 219

^{viii} <https://www.npr.org/sections/health-shots/2016/04/10/473547227/for-the-navajo-nation-uranium-minings-deadly-legacy-lingers>

^{ix} <http://www.navajo-nsn.gov/index.htm>