

BACKGROUND

HISTORY

'What history?' you ask. Unlike the rest of the ruin-laden Southwest, traces of Las Vegas' early history are scarce. Native Americans inhabited this valley for almost two millennia before the Spanish Trail was blazed through one of the last parts of the country penetrated by Europeans. Colorful characters have sought their fortunes in Sin City for over a century. Contrary to Hollywood legends, there was much more to this dusty, desert crossroads than ramshackle gambling dens, railroad tracks and tumbleweeds before gangster Benjamin 'Bugsy' Siegel opened the glamorous, tropical-themed Flamingo casino hotel on the world-famous Strip in 1946.

PREHISTORY & THE PAIUTES

It was almost 2000 years ago that the first Southern Paiutes followed the Colorado River basin across the jutting peaks of the Black Mountains and down into the Las Vegas Valley. This Native American tribe belonged to the Uzo-Aztec language family, among whom are numbered the Northern Paiute tribe, who inhabited the Great Basin areas of eastern California and western Nevada, and the Western Shoshone tribe, whose territory reached into central and eastern Nevada and Death Valley in southeastern California.

The Southern Paiutes camped on a seasonal basis at the valley's natural-springs oasis, which dried up in 1962. Indigenous to the desert, the Paiutes roamed the Mojave, gathering seeds, roots and berries in conical baskets; hunting wild animals, such as rattlesnakes, rabbits and deer; and practicing floodplain farming. For rites of passage and to protect their skin against the blistering desert sun, both sexes applied red paint to their bodies; to insulate their feet from the hot desert sands, they wore yucca-fiber sandals.

In the unforgiving desert, the Paiutes not only endured, but advanced as a culture. They believed that ear piercings could help assure longevity and entry into the afterlife, and facial tattooing was occasionally practiced. Although marriage ceremonies were not very intricate, funerals lasted for days as the corpse was cremated or buried in a cave, precious animals were sacrificed and families abandoned their homes forever.

Just how forbidding was the Paiutes' territory? Spanish explorers, the first Europeans to claim jurisdiction over Nevada, skirted this region during their North American exploration in the 16th, 17th and 18th centuries. They were content to leave sections of their domain uncharted, calling the blank space on their maps the 'Northern Mystery.' Despite its proximity to well-trodden areas of colonial New Spain, such as California and Mexico, the Las Vegas Valley was one of the final parts of the USA to have European settlers, along with the Colorado Plateau around the Grand Canyon.

TRAILBLAZERS, TRADERS & TRAPPERS

Except for infrequent raids during the 18th century by Navajo and Ute slave traders, who had learned how to ride horses thanks to early Spanish explorers, the Southern Paiutes lived a peaceful if arduous existence around the Las Vegas Valley. Their undoing as the dominant

TIMELINE

300 BC

Southern Paiute tribespeople are the first Native Americans to set up seasonal desert camps by the natural-springs oasis that feeds the entire Las Vegas Valley.

AD 1829

Rafael Rivera, a scout for a Spanish trading expedition from Santa Fe, stumbles on the valley's natural springs, becoming the first European to visit what becomes known as *las vegas* ('the meadows').

1855

Mormon missionaries and pioneers arrive from Salt Lake City; they industriously build a fort and an agricultural and mining settlement, but then abandon the project just two years later.

top picks

WEBSITES FOR LOOKING INTO THE PAST

- www.1st100.com Based on AD Hopkins and KJ Evans' book *The First 100: Portraits of the Men and Women Who Shaped Las Vegas* (2000), this site provides colorful historical profiles of Old West pioneers, as well as modern casino moguls.
- www.pbs.org/wgbh/amex/lasvegas Companion e-guide to the PBS documentary *Las Vegas: An Unconventional History* features interactive maps, a timeline and entertaining articles on the Atomic Age, casino architecture, real-life wedding stories and more.
- www.lvstriphistory.com Bypass the annoying personal rants on the home page to uncover detailed histories of Strip casinos illustrated with rare vintage photos.
- www.lasvegas2005.org/historical Surf the city's centennial site for free downloads of off-the-beaten-path walking tours.
- www.classiclasvegas.com Devoted to preserving the city's lesser-known history, including of the women who helped build Las Vegas, it's an insider's guide to finding old-school haunts still standing today.

One celebrated traveler on the Spanish Trail was John C Fremont, an army officer who explored and mapped the area surrounding Las Vegas in 1844. The US government published his map the next year, which became a bible for emigrants headed west. Las Vegas' main downtown artery, Fremont St, bears his name today. In 1848 the Treaty of Hidalgo ended the Mexican–American war and gave the USA possession of Spanish colonial holdings in the New World, including present-day Nevada. After gold was discovered in California the same year, the Spanish Trail was flooded by rough-and-tumble miners, who then quickly abandoned it in favor of more direct east–west routes.

MORMONS ON A MISSION

Amid the hard-scrabble legions of miners on the Spanish Trail was a group of men hell-bent on doing God's work in Indian country. These were Mormon pioneers and missionaries, sent from Salt Lake City on May 10, 1855, by leader Brigham Young to colonize the expanding

people of the region began with the arrival of Europeans.

In the 1820s, anybody who was anybody in Europe wore a beaver-pelt hat, and a secretion from the animal's musk glands was thought to be a cure-all. American fur traders and trappers went to extreme lengths to meet the demand. One such trader, Jedediah Smith, abandoned his usual stomping grounds to blaze a trail toward the Pacific Ocean. Leaving what is now Utah and traveling through the Mojave Desert into California, he was one of the first Europeans to set foot in present-day Nevada, although he probably didn't visit the Las Vegas Valley. Smith opened up the Spanish Trail later used by traders journeying between Santa Fe and Los Angeles. Much of the trail, which remained busy into the 1850s, was paved over in the 20th century after WWII to become interstate freeway I-15.

In 1829 Rafael Rivera, a scout for a Mexican trading expedition, was likely the first European to find the natural springs in the Las Vegas Valley. Most of the people who ventured along the Spanish Trail around that same time were caravan traders. Some were settlers anxious to get to California, and all were looking for greener pastures of one kind or another. These the valley had in abundance, and travelers' diaries from the time describe lush, spring-fed *vegas* (Spanish for 'meadows') that, along with cottonwood and willow trees, provided grazing and much-needed shade for the caravans.

1864

The federal territory of Nevada, which had been created in 1861 to help finance the Union's war efforts with silver and gold bullion from local mines, becomes a US state.

1905

The railroad between Los Angeles and Salt Lake City is finished; the city of Las Vegas is founded beside the tracks as real-estate lots are auctioned off in a bidding frenzy.

1909

Nevada initially bans gambling, then permits only poker games in 1911, only to ban all gambling again in 1913, then reverses itself to allow limited gaming in 1915; the National Prohibition Act of 1919 makes alcohol illegal until 1923.