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Author(s): Peter Iverson
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# Historical Commentary

# Knowing the Land, Leaving the Land: Navajos, Hopis, and Relocation in the American West

**by Peter Iverson**

It is the kind of country that few outsiders appreciate and fewer understand. Isolated from city and suburb and noteworthy for its erratic precipitation and its ubiquitous wind, it is an area even marginal for the grazing of livestock. Although harsh in appearance to the untutored eye, it is land that has taken on not only beauty but also power for its residents. Its cultural meaning has been reinforced with each generation for the people stubborn enough to remain there. This territory is linked through history to a president who is almost entirely forgotten today.

Even in his own day, Chester Alan Arthur seemed destined for obscurity. A president by accident, denied nomination for re-election by his own party, he did little in his administration that appears worthy of notice. Yet, the fleeting years of the Arthur presidency proved to be important ones for the American West. Transcontinental railroads were completed, for example, and all over the region non-Indians pushed for the reduction of Indian landholding.

Other than alphabetically, Mr. Arthur never got very close to Arizona. But in one of the less publicized actions of his term he left a lasting mark on the history of the state. On December 16, 1882, his signature on an executive order established a reservation of almost two and a half million acres "for the use and occupancy of the Moqui and such other Indians as the Secretary may see fit to settle thereon."[1]

The language of Arthur's executive order has been subjected to many interpretations, but in 1882 it may have seemed clear enough. Moqui was a label affixed to the Hopis during the era. Political and economic realities of that generation continued to force the settlement and relocation of Indian communities. As the frontier accelerated toward its demise, there seemed no place left for the Indians. In Wyoming, for example, just four years previously a thousand Arapahoes had been relocated on the land of Washakie's Shoshones. The Shoshone leader must have sensed that the imposition would be more than temporary, for he protested strongly against the arrangement. Today, the two tribes still share the Wind River reservation, even though the memories linger of conflicts more than a century old.

Slightly more than a hundred years after the morning of December 16, 1882, we can imagine the northern Arizona country encompassed on paper by the executive order. We think of Hopi cornfields, the etched villages clinging to the mesas, the sky of piercing clarity, and the San Francisco peaks looming in the west. At Keams Canyon, a government agent named Fleming would be wondering about the final disposition of the suggested boundaries he had forwarded to a distant federal bureaucracy. He soon heard that the borders he had proposed had been adopted, and he celebrated by resigning his post the day after Christmas.

J. H. Fleming departed, but others in addition to the Hopis remained. Navajos had moved into the region, although they were outnumbered by the Hopis whose population continued to be concentrated on the three mesas that came to be known rather unpoetically as First, Second, and Third. Many of the Navajos had been forced to relocate to east-central New Mexico in the 1860s as part of General James Carleton's ill-fated attempt to assimilate the tribe through imprisonment on the alkaline shores of the Pecos River. Not all the Navajos had been incarcerated at Fort Sumner; more than a few had escaped the Long Walk and had fanned into the western reaches of what would be reclaimed as their reservation. The 1868 treaty with the Navajos had recognized a portion of their former homeland, and two additions had been made to that base prior to 1882. Except for the southern boundary, the 1882 area

1. For additional perspectives on this subject, see Jerry Kammer, *The Second Long Walk: The Navajo-Hopi Land Dispute* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1980); Thayer Scudder, *No Place to Go* (Philadelphia: ISHI, 1982); Hollis A. Whitson, "A Policy Review of the Federal Government's Relocation of Navajo Indians Under P.L. 93-531 and P.L. 96-305," *Arizona Law Review* 27:2 (1985): 371-414; U.S. Senate, Committee on Indian Affairs of the Committee on Interior and Insular Affairs, "Partition of the Surface Rights of Navajo-Hopi Land," Hearing on H.R. 1193, Winslow, Arizona, March 7, 1973 (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1973). I have also been assisted by Orit Tamir, a doctoral student in anthropology at Arizona State University, who is doing a dissertation on resettlement from the former joint-use area.



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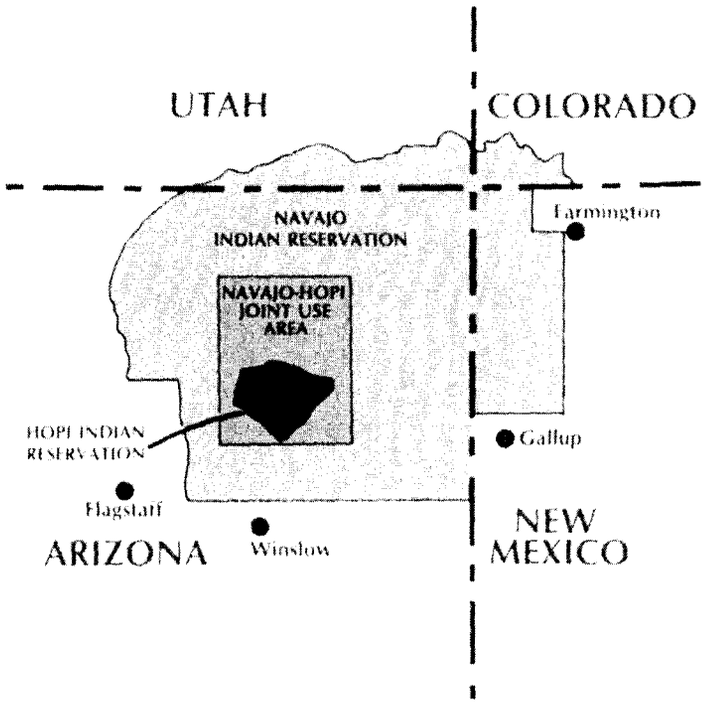
thus would be surrounded by the Navajo reservation by 1901 (a tiny portion on the southeast side would be added in the twentieth century).

The customary and convenient images of the Navajos and the Hopis portray them as totally different peoples—the former nomadic, marauding, warlike, aggressive; the latter sedentary, retiring, peaceful, unassertive. Even if they help us to understand the "bad guys"/"good guys" typecasting that has been imposed upon the two communities, such black-and-white configurations are more apparent than real. Farming, for example, has long been an important part of Navajo economy and culture; the Hopis raided the Zunis in the first decade of the eighteenth century to discourage the spread of Christianity. In the country away from the Hopi villages but within the boundaries of the 1882 order, both tribes found secular and sacred uses for the land and its resources. The Navajos, however, increasingly resided on and made the most consistent use of this territory.

After the era of the Long Walk, the next time of crisis for the Navajos came during the days of the New Deal. This period of livestock reduction is remembered for a callous, forceful attack on the size of the Navajo herds. But the 1930s and early 1940s were significant for other reasons as well. First, the period marked the end of Navajo reservation expansion. During the years to come the Navajo Nation no longer could expand, given other, non-Indian claims to surrounding lands. Second, this time symbolized the end of isolation from the outside world and the limits of the livestock-oriented economy and culture; the larger world put increasing demands on the Navajos and the Navajos themselves grew progressively more urbanized, gradually leaving the most remote reaches of the reservation more and more to the care of people less acculturated to the ways of Anglo-American society. And third, just as it had meant the encirclement of the Navajo lands, the Hopi lands were surrounded as well by the final additions to the Navajo reservation and by the specific creation of livestock grazing district #6 in 1943, which became synonymous with the Hopi reservation. These developments directly affected the subsequent confrontation. Both tribes felt as though they could gain no more land elsewhere, and both recognized the growing stake they had in the 1882 area.

Although district #6 emerged larger in area than what had initially been proposed, it still comprised less than a fourth of the executive order domain. Within district #6 the Hopis held sole grazing and use rights, but they protested being limited to this area and were determined to extend their land base even if few Hopis lived outside of the district. The Navajos, for their part, were equally firm in their desire to maintain their presence in the remainder of the region. Their resolve stemmed not only from Navajo occupancy of long standing but also from an




Map by Biff Karlyn

Utah Historical Society

**Hopi Indian village, Moenkopi, Arizona**

2. In Sam and Janet Bingham, eds., *Between Sacred Mountains: Navajo Stories and Lessons from the Land* (Tucson: Sun Tracks and University of Arizona Press, 1984), 263.



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appreciation of the trauma of past relocations, including Fort Sumner and the urban relocation program sponsored by the federal government during the 1950s. Moreover, the Navajos recognized that those people forced now to relocate were among those least equipped to make that transition. Relocatees would be among those most unfamiliar with the language and values of Anglo-American culture, and their very survival off the reservation would be problematic. Off-reservation relocation would take place, for the remaining on-reservation lands were almost entirely claimed through customary use rights and the Navajo population was growing rapidly. So even if non-Indians could see "empty" Navajo lands and plenty of room within the borders of the Navajo Nation for relocation (a perception in Indian-white relations that dates back at least to John Winthrop), there was in fact no acreage available.

The recent stage of the argument defies ready summation. There are certain key developments that led to the present situation. Public Law No. 85-247 (1958) permitted a lawsuit to decide the rights in the area, and in *Healing v. Jones* (1962) the court ruled that the two tribes had joint and equal interests and subsurface resources (thus establishing the notion of a joint use area). Public Law No. 93-531 (1974) authorized the District Court of Arizona to divide the area on an equal basis. Such partitioning inevitably led to relocation of individuals—almost all of them Navajos—and a relocation commission came into being to carry out the final decision. Relocatees could obtain another house in another location, usually a reservation border-town community such as Flagstaff, but of course they would be then situated in a very foreign environment, separated from a known physical and cultural terrain. Those people who succeeded in relocating on the reservation gained a homesite but not grazing land. The potential internal repercussions within the Navajo Nation remain to be measured, but clearly there will be disagreements and difficulties in this realm as well.

It should have been obvious that such a large-scale relocation of people—the most sizable effort since the Japanese-American internment camps of the Second World War—would have been met with protest and with tragic results. It is nonetheless not surprising that the partition took place and that relocation was chosen as the "solution" to the dilemma. Public officials ultimately made decisions about people that they did not understand and about places they did not know.

While the joint use area includes mineral resources, I agree with those analysts who argue that even though energy companies complicated the issue and had a stake in the outcome, they should not be used as a convenient explanation for the policy that was implemented. I am convinced that relocation would have taken place even if mineral resources had not been involved. I am also persuaded that the general fate of the relocatees, particularly the more elderly, was extremely predictable. As of July 1987, 1,185 Navajo families and 14 Hopi families have been forced to move. More will follow. Many have not fared well in their new and unfamiliar surroundings.

There are many more losers than winners in this saga. Navajo families have had their lands confiscated and their lives shattered. Former Navajo Tribal Council Chairman Peterson Zah, from Low Mountain in the joint use area, lost a bitterly contested battle for re-election in the fall of 1986; his inability to alter the course of relocation hurt him badly during the campaign. Hopis and Navajos have had friendships ended and future cooperative efforts curtailed; memories of this feud will fester for generations. The dispute has also exacerbated internal political rifts within the Hopi community, for not

Steve Hinchman, *High Country News*, Paonia, Colorado

**Carrie Begay near Rio Puerco on the Navajo Indian Reservation in 1986**



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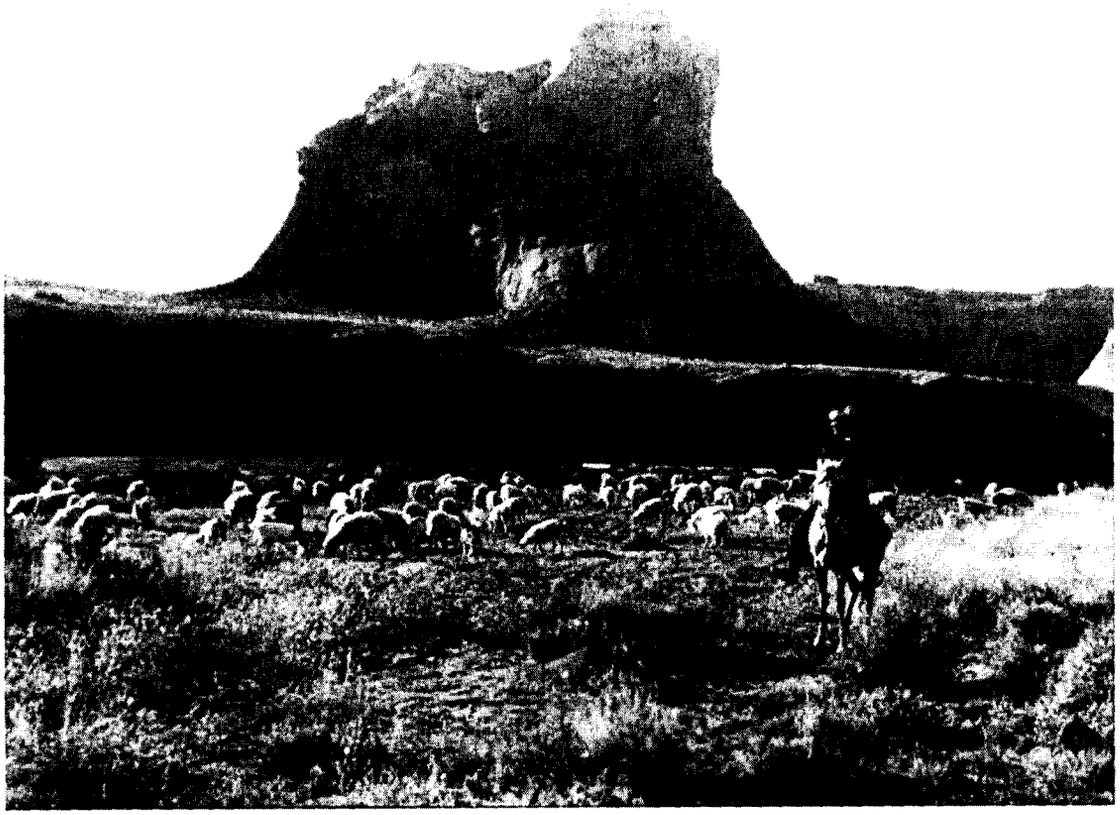

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**Navajo man tending his sheep**

all have supported the assertive, aggressive tactics of a tribal government that always has enjoyed considerably less than unanimous endorsement. Navajo Tribal Council Chairman Peter MacDonald benefited in the short run from the political fallout from relocation, but he may be harmed by the longer term response to the results. Such political stalwarts as Morris Udall and Barry Goldwater backed the "winning" (that is, Hopi) side while demonstrating a less than comprehensive grasp of the many facets of the struggle; historians are not likely to give them high marks for their efforts.

The events of the past generation have not gone unnoticed in the United States. They have attracted the inevitable film-makers, the hordes of well-meaning support groups, the quick and dirty analyses from the national media. As relocation continues slowly and inexorably, it will cease to be "news," and the film-makers, defense/offense committees, "20/20," and their ilk will proceed to new "hot" topics. Judges and politicians retire. Life goes on.

Like President Arthur, many readers of this journal will never journey to the country where this story has been playing out. But if the details are unfamiliar and the landscape unknown, the larger contours should be recognizable. For the rural West, decisions are being made by urban people, actions are being taken by federal policy makers, conclusions are being drawn by influential folks who do not know what it means to be attached to a particular tradition or to be a part of the land. In an increasingly urbanized West, rural people regardless of race or nationality are being driven from places they have been bonded to for generations. Whether we speak of land that has grazed Navajo sheep or Montana beef cattle, whether we write of one sky or another, we continue to witness loss and relocation for which there cannot be satisfactory reparation or compensation. A Navajo tenth-grader wrote:

I am sitting outside my hogan
I am thinking,
Looking at the red rocks,
the ridges, the sheep,
the plants,
and all in my world.
I look at my parents.
They are getting old,
weak and limping.
There aren't any of my
sisters and brothers
around.
I am thinking
What it will be like here
In the future.
—Thomas Littleben[2]

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PETER IVERSON has taught at Navajo Community College and the University of Wyoming and is currently professor of history at the west campus of Arizona State University. He is the author of *The Navajo Nation* and other works on Indians and the West in the twentieth century.



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