

San Bernardino County history: The Mojave River

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Jedediah Smith was the first American to travel to California by following the Mojave Indian Trail.

Located on the eastern side of the San Bernardino Mountains, the Mojave River has played a critical role in the early exploration of San Bernardino County.

Over 8,000 years ago, the Vanyume, a Serrano Native American tribe, were among the first to settle along the Mojave River. In 1776, Spanish missionary Francisco Garcés was the first to explore the length of the river and named it “Rio de las Animas” or “Spirit River of the Souls.”

In 1826, Jedediah Smith was the first American to travel to California by following the Mojave Indian Trail.

Upon his discovery, he renamed the river “Inconstant River.” In 1844, John C. Fremont, an American explorer and military officer, intercepted the route and redirected parts through what is now known as the Cajon Pass.

Fremont renamed the river to the “Mohahve” after the Mojave people that lived in nearby mountain ranges. Through the years, the Mojave River Trail was used by Mormons who traveled between Utah and California; it became known as the Mormon Road. During the Great Drought of California in the 1860s, the Mojave River was a refuge for ranchers who needed water to keep their livestock alive.

In the 1880s, journeys along the Mojave River came to an end as the Santa Fe Railroad had reached this area. This route gradually became part of what we now know as the National Old Trails Road or U.S. Route 66.

Today, the Mojave River flows underground in most places including the cities of Hesperia, Victorville and Barstow. It never reaches the ocean; instead, it sinks into Soda Lake’s sandy bed. Nowadays, when driving on the 15 freeway through Victorville, you are driving on top of the Mojave River. For more information about the Mojave River, please visit their website at https://www.mojaveriver.org/app_pages/view/41.html.

The information in this historical feature was originally part of a video series produced by the Assessor-Recorder-County Clerk’s office.