



It was near this spot that J. D. Lee operated his ferry across the Colorado.
Photo Paul Fretheim

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Topo Map: Glen Canyon Dam; Coordinates: 36° 52' N - 111° 35' W

Lee's Ferry, Lonely Dell Ranch and Navajo Bridge by Paul Fretheim

The deep canyons and churning turbid waters of the Colorado River have long presented a formidable barrier to travel. Before the ferry was built at the mouth of the Paria river by J. D. Lee in December of 1871, there was no safe or dependable place to cross the Colorado River between Moab, Utah and Searchlight, Nevada, a distance of over 1000 kilometers. Even today, there are only three bridges over the river between Moab and Hoover Dam near Las Vegas. They are: the bridge at the mouth of the Dirty Devil River, the Glen Canyon Dam Bridge and Navajo Bridge.

The Escalante Expedition

The history at Lee's Ferry is a long and colorful one. The first European explorers through the area were the Franciscan Priests Atanasio Dominguz and Silvestre Velez de Escalante. They traveled through the area in 1776 trying to find a trade route between the Spanish settlements at Santa Fe, New Mexico and Monterey, California. They found the travel very difficult, and the early first snows of winter in the high country to the north and west of the Paria River forced them to abandon their mission and return to Santa Fe. On their return trip they searched for a way to cross the Colorado River and spent several days at what later became Lee's Ferry trying to ford the river unsuccessfully. They eventually were able to ford the river some 60 kilometers east as the crow flies at a place that came thereafter to be called "El Vado de los Padres" or "The Crossing of the Fathers." This site is now submerged under the waters of Lake Powell, the reservoir behind the Glen Canyon Dam. You can hike to the area of today's Padre Bay through the Escalante Canyons-Kaparowitz Plateau-Grand Staircase National Monument and the Glen Canyon National Recreation Area.

There were very few European visitors to the mouth of the Paria for 100 years after the Spanish Padres were there. John Wesley Powell and his men camped there on Powell's first expedition in 1869 and again spent time there on the expedition of 1871-1872.

Lonely Dell

When Lee settled there in late 1871, he and his wife Emma, set up a ranch which they named 'Lonely Dell.'" Several of the old log structures are still standing and you can visit this most interesting historical site which is located a few kilometers from Lee's Ferry on a bend of the Paria River at the entrance to the Paria Canyon-Paria Plateau Wilderness Area.

The Mountain Meadows Massacre

J. D. Lee was involved in what was probably the darkest chapter in the history of Mormon settlement of the Indian Territory. Joseph Smith had reportedly found the gold tablets with the words of the angel Moroni in western New York. He and his followers were perse-



A covered wagon, stock and two men are ferried across the Colorado River on a skow at Lee's Ferry in 1900.

Photo F. H. Maude - GRCA #31350

cuted and forced in to exile a number of times before his survivors, led by Brigham Young, fled to the Great Salt Lake valley in 1847.

One of the places the Mormons tried to settle along the way was in Missouri. The followers of Joseph Smith's teachings were no more kindly treated there than they had been in New York or Illinois before, and were forced to leave Missouri. The persecution and prejudice they had suffered in Missouri led to a deep seated resentment and even a desire for revenge among some of the followers of the Mormon church. Reportedly a group was formed among the church members known as the "Avenging Angels." They believed that it was their mission to make sure that Utah would be for the Saints only and that others would not be allowed to settle there. This sentiment arose, at lest in part, from the belief that if other people did begin to settle in Utah in large numbers, the Mormons might once again face the prospect of persecution and exile.



Lee's Lonely Dell Ranch. The Paria river runs along the red cliffs across the open field. Its waters were diverted to irrigate the ranch. When Lee and his family farmed here, their orchard was located here. The Park Service, which administers Lonely Dell Ranch today, has planted an orchard near the old homestead in the interest of restoring the historic flavor of the ranch. Fruit from the orchard is available to the public at little or no cost in season.

Photo Paul Fretheim

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J. D. Lee was one of the members of the "Avenging Angels." When, in 1858, a wagon train of 128 men, women and children from Missouri was passing through western Utah near the present day town of Enterprise, a group of the Avenging Angels was whipped up into an emotional fury of revenge by Lee and others. They dressed up as Indians, surrounded the wagon train, and over a period of a few days, massacred all the members of the train over the age of six. The youngest children, it was believed, would not be able to



Arizona's Historic Navajo Bridge spans Marble Canyon in a graceful silvery arch approximately 470 ft. above the Colorado River. The original 1928 bridge that replaced Lee's Ferry is on the right. The newer, wider bridge on the left was completed in 1995. *Photo Paul Fretheim*

report on what had happened to the train, and were adopted into local Mormon homes.

Lee Exiled, Later Executed

News of the massacre did, however, get out eventually and fears of being brought to justice led J. D. Lee to hide out at the mouth of the Paria River, which was then one of the most remote locations anywhere. Lee's nearest non-Indian neighbors were weeks of difficult travel away through unknown territory.

Lee was commissioned by the church to set up a homestead and operate a ferry across the Colorado at the mouth of the Paria. Lee's Ferry became an important part of the route between the Mormon settlements on the Virgen River, such as St. George, and Salt Lake.

Eventually pressure both from within and without the church to bring the perpetrators of the massacre to justice led to J. D.

Lee's arrest in 1877. He was returned to the site of the massacre at Mountain Meadows and executed by firing squad.

The ferry operated at this site for 50 years and was eventually replaced by the Navajo Bridge which was completed in 1928.

See Also: [J. D. Lee and Lonely Dell Ranch from Dellenbaugh](#)



J. D. Lee and two of his wives. This picture was taken in 1875 when Lee was hiding out at the Lonely Dell Ranch. Nearest wife to Lee appears to be pregnant. Further wife appears to have been "hitting the corn squeezns."

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