



The historic Flagstaff Train Station built in 1926 is still in use today. It is the current home of the Flagstaff Visitor Center. Photo courtesy Flagstaff Convention and Visitors Bureau.

Visitor Center Services

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Open daily in the historic downtown train station. Call 800-842-7293 or 928-774-9541 for more information.

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Photo C: Courtesy Museum of Northern Arizona.

Photo D: Courtesy NASA, Earth Observatory.

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Front Cover: San Francisco Peaks, 2007. Courtesy Flagstaff Convention and Visitors Bureau.



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HISTORY OF FLAGSTAFF SERIES



The History of the San Francisco Peaks in Flagstaff



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The History of the San Francisco Peaks

By James A. Hardy, Visitor Center Historian

Towering at 12,633 feet, the mountains stand their lonely sentinel over a vast plateau; the forested gem in the crown of a great desert state. To some they are a sacred place, to some they are a place of recreation and to others, one of introspection. But to all they are a place of awesome majesty and beauty that is unrivaled throughout the region. These are the San Francisco Peaks.

The Genesis of a Mountain

Millions of years ago the entire region that is now Northern Arizona lay buried beneath shallow seas. Through the ages layer upon layer of sediments fell and formed a thick crust on the sea bottoms. As the face of the land changed over the ages, the seas subsided and the region was uplifted, in part, by wells of magma deep beneath the earth to become the Colorado Plateau—a vast region of high, flat desert, covered by awe inspiring canyons and rock formations that stretches from Northern Arizona, throughout the four corners region and up to Idaho and Montana.



Photo A: The San Francisco Peaks, circa 1948. Illustration shows one theory of what the volcano might have looked like prior to its eruption.

In Northern Arizona, these wells of magma were able to break through the thick sedimentary crust to form large volcanic fields. Today the San Francisco Volcanic Field boasts over 600 volcanoes of various shapes and sizes covering over fifty miles of terrain from west to east. The most recent eruption, believed to be between the years 1040-1100, was at Sunset Crater, 15 miles northeast of Flagstaff.



Photo B: SP Crater, in the San Francisco Volcanic Field, is a cinder cone. The lava flow extends for four miles.

The San Francisco Mountain is a stratovolcano, made up of many layers of lava and ash that piled up as the volcano violently erupted over the years. Formed over an extremely long period—from 2.8 million to 200,000 years ago, this mountain would have looked much different than it does today. The original profile would have been of a very steep mountain with a sharp pyramid-like peak much like Japan's Mt Fuji. Either a large sideways eruption or glacial erosion—or both—collapsed and carved out the northeastern side of the mountain, forming the five familiar peaks as they exist today. *Continued >*

The Sacred Peaks

The San Francisco Peaks are revered and held sacred by no fewer than thirteen Native American tribes including the Hopi, Navajo, Hualapai, Havasupai, Yavapai, Zuni, Southern Paiute, Acoma, and five Apache tribes.



Photo C: Traditional Hopi kachina, or “katsina” carving.

The Hopi, who call the peaks *Nuva'tuk-iya-ovi* or “Place of the High Snows”, are the abode of the Kachina People—spirits who come down during the growing season to visit the Hopi Villages and bless them with bountiful harvests, rain and good health. The Navajo call the peaks *Dook'òoslid*—“Shining on Top”, or *Diichili Dzil*—“Abalone Shell Mountain”, and are the home of Talking God, White Corn Boy and Yellow Corn Girl, and also mark the southwestern-most boundary of Dineta their ancestral homeland.

The Spanish

In the 1540's, explorers under the command of Coronado entered into the region near the Hopi Mesas while searching for the fabled Seven Cities of Gold. They discovered the Peaks but chose to move on in order to search for the “grand” canyon they had heard stories about to the north.

In 1629, Franciscan Friars visited the same mesas in their missionary work among the Native People. They gave the name San Francisco to the Peaks to honor their Patron Saint—St. Francis of Assisi.

The Expeditions and the Settlers

Lured by the discovery of gold in California, the first of many expeditions was led by Capt. Lorenzo Sitgreaves, of the Army Corps of Topographical Engineers. In 1851, Sitgreaves' party, along with guide Antoine Leroux, discovered the ruins at Wupatki as they traveled through the region.

Later, in 1853, Lieutenant Amiel Weeks Whipple lead one of five expeditions sent to scout out possible routes for the transcontinental railroad. In their search for water they camped on the northwestern slopes of the Peaks near Fort Valley. Here they found water at a spring named for Antoine Leroux—a name the springs bear to this day and still an important source of Flagstaff's municipal water supply.

Between 1857 and 1860, Lieutenant Edward Fitzgerald Beale built a wagon road across New Mexico and Arizona along the 35th parallel route that Whipple and Sitgreaves had followed. Once the “Beale Road” was established, emigrants began to come past the San Francisco Peaks on their way to California.

On July 4, 1876, one such party of emigrants camped at a small spring near the looming Peaks overhead. In honor of the nation's centennial they stripped a pine tree of its branches and bark and raised an American flag. Their “flag staff” became a landmark for all those who followed.

Explorers Give Their Names to the Peaks

In 1882, the Atlantic and Pacific Railroad reached the region of the San Francisco Peaks bringing with it pioneers who built up the small community at the Peaks' foothills and valleys.

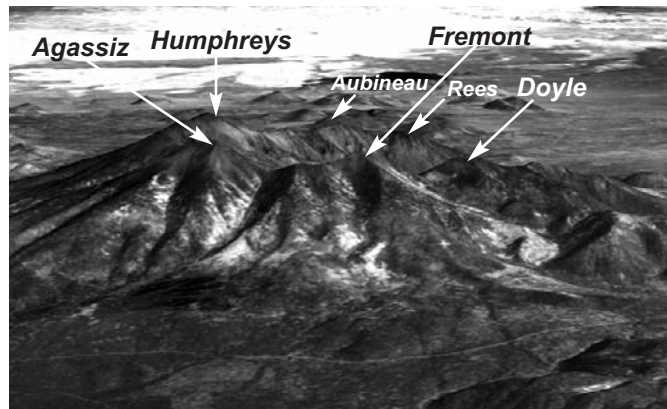


Photo D: The San Francisco Peaks today. The major peaks are noted.

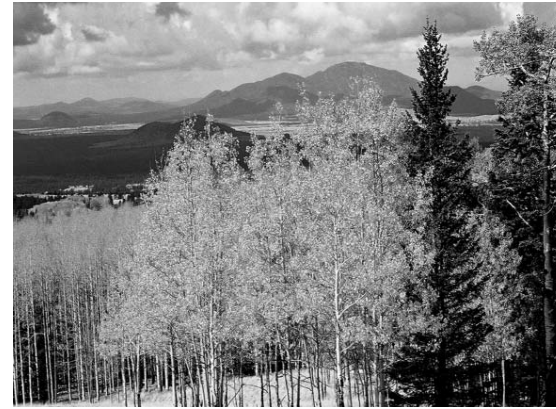


Photo E: The changing aspens and cool weather make the Peaks a favorite destination in Fall.

These explorers gave their names to the individual peaks of the mountain. The tallest peak was named Humphreys Peak for Andrew Atkinson Humphreys, a Brigadier General during the Civil War responsible for interpreting the survey information that was collected by expeditions through the area. The next tallest was named Agassiz Peak for Jean Louis Rodolphe Agassiz, a Swiss naturalist, geologist and zoologist who taught at Harvard in the late 19th Century. Fremont Peak was named for John C. Fremont, who achieved fame as an explorer, a general in the Mexican War and the Civil War, and as territorial Governor of Arizona at the time Flagstaff was being settled. Doyle Peak was named for Allen Doyle, a local cattleman who achieved some renown by guiding Zane Grey when he visited this region and for building a cattle trail into the peaks, and a road to the Grand Canyon. Some of the lesser hills and summits were named for explorers or locals, bearing names like Schultz, Rees, Aubineau, Elden, O'Leary, Kendrick and Sitgreaves.

A Road to the Top

By the time the automobile came to the region in 1920, John Weatherford, proprietor of the Weatherford Hotel and the Orpheum Theater

sought to build a highway to the top. The “San Francisco Mountain Boulevard” was completed as far as Fremont Peak by August of 1926, but when the depression began Weatherford lost all of his investment. The Forest Service later bought the road and although the automobile road to the top of the peaks never came to be, Weatherford's road continues to be used today by hikers and bikers as a favorite trail into the peaks.

Recreation in the San Francisco Peaks

The San Francisco Peaks have remained relatively unspoiled through the ages. Miles of trails along the mountain's slopes lead through canyons and forests, tundra and volcanic stone to the very summit of our state—Humphreys Peak, the highest point in Arizona at 12,633 feet.



Photo F: The Snowbowl Sky Ride takes visitors to the top of Agassiz Peak in the summer and fall months.



Photo G: Arizona Snowbowl at the top of Agassiz Peak, circa 1973.

In the winter thousands come to the mountain to ski at the Snowbowl or to play in the snow that otherwise is a rarity in our desert state. In the fall season people enjoy leisurely drives or walks through the bright gold of changing aspen leaves. In the summer and fall a ride on the Snowbowl sky ride takes visitors to an awe inspiring view atop the slopes of Agassiz Peak. The awesome beauty of it's unspoiled

wilderness make the Peaks truly a destination for all seasons, and for all tastes.