

WRI- Family Activity

Today we continued our search for the old Pioneer Pile Dam. We did some research during the past week and found that we had seen it last week after all, on our short, second hike. This week we hiked down to it and played around it. Before sharing a little of our activity, I wanted to tell about the pioneers' history leading to the dam's construction, and the dam's significance.

From the arrival of the earliest pioneers to the St. George area flash floods had been a constant problem. Every river, stream, and wash was prone to flash floods that devastated land and property. Damming the local waterways was essential to irrigation and thus their livelihoods. Of all the troublesome rivers, the Virgin was the most tempestuous.

By the time St. George was settled in late 1861, the Virgin had already washed out a half dozen or more dams created by the first settlers, both along the upper Virgin (Springdale, Rockville, Grafton, Virgin) and the lower Virgin (Washington, Tonaquint, Heberville). By 1885 the

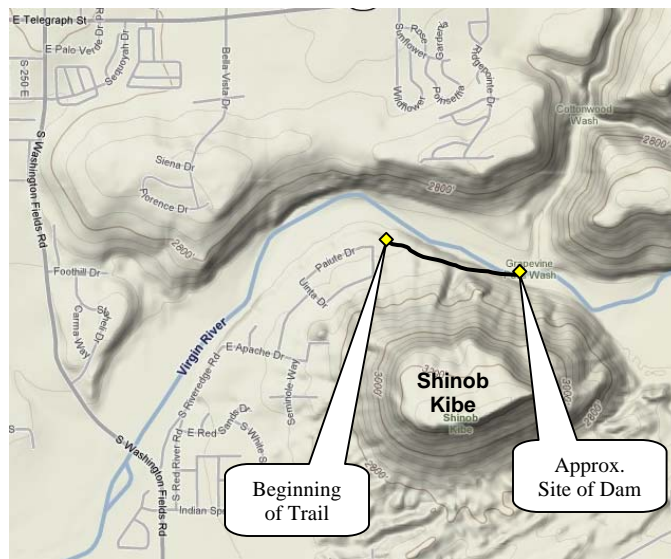


Figure 1 Parking Area and Approximate Path of Hike.

residents were feeling quite desperate and they decided to make a major investment to build a costly pile dam. The dam took four years to build and required hundreds of large trees to be hauled from Pine Valley Mountain and then driven into the river bed vertically. There were four or more rows of piles driven stretching the width of the Virgin River and these were then connected using cross timbers and bolted connections. The grid of timberwork was then filled with rocks and debris and reinforced on the leeward and wayward side with basalt boulders from the surrounding hills. It took four years of intensive work to build this great dam.

When completed there was great celebration and anticipation. It appeared that at last they would be able to provide their crops with the consistent water supply they sought.

The dam was finished in late 1889. I could not find an exact date. However, shortly after the dam was completed (December 7, 1889) the largest flood ever known on the Virgin struck and washed away half of the dam. A few weeks later another and even larger flood struck, completely destroying the dam. From all accounts these two floods were both larger than the flood of 1861 that had washed away Jacob Hamblin's home in Santa Clara and the entire town of Tonaquint. For two separate floods to hit back to back, and before the pioneers had been able to enjoy even a single growing season with their completed dam was more than many could handle. There were many other trials and challenges at the time but most books on the history of the area

attribute the destruction of this dam to the mass exodus which occurred over the next few years. By some records as many as half the inhabitants of Washington City left the area between 1889 and 1892. Many more would have gone too, but they were too poor to move.

For those who toughed out this great trial, a great blessing awaited. Within a year the current site was found and a dam which served for over a hundred years was built. The final dam was finished in March 1893. It will be the subject of a future activity.



Figure 2 Dirt/Gravel Road Above River

To get to the dam site, enter Indian Oaks Subdivision (just south of the Virgin River) from Washington Field Road onto Riveredge Road. Wind around to Paiute Drive and park at the end of the road. Here you will find a nice dirt/gravel road that parallels the river. The hike is only about a third of a mile each way and the road is completely flat.

You will be able to see the debris from the old dam from the dirt road, so even if you are not feeling adventurous, you can still take the enjoyable little hike. When you get near the dam site there is a nice little trail cut in the hillside that takes you right down to the river at the site of the old dam. You will know you are there when you see the many scattered boulders that the pioneers carried, pushed and slid down the hill. On the south side of the river the boulders are mostly from the Moenkopi and Shinarump layers which flank the river on that side. On the north side of the river and in the middle of the river you will mostly see basalt



Figure 3 Dirt Trail to Old Dam Site (rock debris of pile dam can be seen in the river above the kids)



Figure 4 Area Surrounding Old Pile Dam Site (Grapevine Pass on Left, Dam Debris Lower Right)

boulders carried from the hills above the dam site. We searched around for evidence of the old piles that we had seen in photographs, but we could not find anything. One author said that the

Quail Creek Dike Break had washed away the final remnants in 1989 (it happened on New Years Day).

After hiking around the boulders and exploring the hills we found a number of fun activities to do at the river. The kids found some cool willow branches that were more like a rope and had some fun playing with them and having a tug-o-war. Later they started digging in the sand and building things. The sand was perfect for shaping and digging. After we had gotten enough sand we headed up the hill and back to the car. We spent about 4 hours total on the activity but if you were just going to see it you could probably do it in well under an hour, including travel time (if you live in St. George of course).



Figure 5 Tug-o-war With a Long Vine



Figure 6 Caves in the Sand Along the River Bank