Origin and History

Although the exact time of arrival of the first Athabaskans in the Southwest, as well as their route of travel from groups farther north (in Canada) is not entirely clear, most scholars from varying fields agree that it was approximately 1,000 years ago, and the Navajo and other Apachen groups separated from each other after this date. Whether early Apaches traveled as one group or in bands is not clear either, but it appears that they migrated southward due to famine or other ecological disasters, arriving in the area which is now occupied by the current Navajo tribe (Dinetah, meaning ‘Navajo homeland’) around A.D. 1300. The name ‘Navajo’ is most likely derived from the early Spanish appellation Apaches de Nabajó, as the Spanish observed that Apachian languages and Navajo were mutually intelligible and thus referred to the Navajo as the “Apaches” who lived in the “Nabajó region.” The Spanish Nabajó appears to be borrowed in turn from the Tewa navahuu meaning ‘field + wide valley’ (Harrington 1940, in Brugge 1979). Early Spanish records dating from approximately 1630 also indicate that Navajos were more agricultural than other Apachen groups, and in this way more like their Puebloan neighbors. These records describe a semisedentary people who planted maize but also hunted, traded with the Pueblos around them, had many local headmen including both peace and war chiefs, and were skillful warriors (Brugge 1979). Horses were not introduced to the Navajo until the arrival of the Spanish. During the 18th and 19th centuries the Navajo people continued to live in Dinetah, fighting sporadically with Mexican colonists and Ute Indians from the north, and eventually with American colonists and military representatives. In 1863 Kit Carson was instructed by the U.S. government to round up all members of the Navajo tribe and incarcerate them at Fort Sumner, New Mexico. About 6,000 people were forced to make the trek of several hundred miles and then kept against their will at Ft. Sumner, where many died of hunger and illness. In 1868, the U.S. government agreed to allow them to return to their traditional homeland. Today the Navajo tribe numbers well over 200,000 (Grimes et al. 1998) and is the second largest Native American tribe in the United States, after Cherokee.