

The First Five: A Brief History of the Uncompahgre Project (Gunnison)

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First described by Captain J.W. Gunnison in 1853, "as a desert unfit for cultivation and inhabitation only by savages," the southwestern Colorado territory attracted new people beginning with the westward movement of miners. The Ute Indians were forced to give up their lands between 1868 and 1881 and relocate to the Utah Territory, while their home lands opened to the public for settlement. With the development of the mining industry and the necessity for foodstuffs to be near at hand, enterprising farmers seized the opportunity to move into the Uncompahgre Valley and construct ditches, diverting water from the Uncompahgre River to irrigate the crops; the first shipments of hay were delivered to the mines.¹

The valley contained approximately 175,000 acres of irrigable land and the new settlers believed the river contained enough water for the fertile acres. In the early 1880s, the immigrants formed several canal companies, including the Montrose and Uncompahgre Ditch Company and the Delta Ditch Company, constructing over 110 ditches and 475 miles of canals. Besides providing water to the farm lands, a number of these companies delivered water to the burgeoning towns. As was typical in many western regions, the farmers and canal companies over estimated the amount of land that could be irrigated by the 1890s, putting only 30,000 acres under the plow. Water was in short supply, especially during the summer growing season and there was not enough to irrigate the agricultural lands.²

The farmers started looking elsewhere for an additional water supply, at first considering taking water over the divide from the Cimarron River. Then in 1890, F. C. Lauzon conceived the idea of building a tunnel from the Gunnison River to the Uncompahgre Valley. Although the U.S. Geological Survey conducted a reconnaissance survey of this project, the implementation of any plan involving the construction of a tunnel was beyond the means of the people in western Colorado. The Colorado Legislature was approached about assisting in this project and in 1901, the scions set aside \$25,000 for the construction of the tunnel. That same year, Frederick Newell allocated \$4,000 to survey the tunnel and canal location. The Geological Survey mapped the region as well as conducted several additional surveys, including the geologic structure of the tunnel route and the elevations of the region. The State of Colorado started construction on the tunnel in the fall of 1901, but the project was abandoned due to lack of funds.³

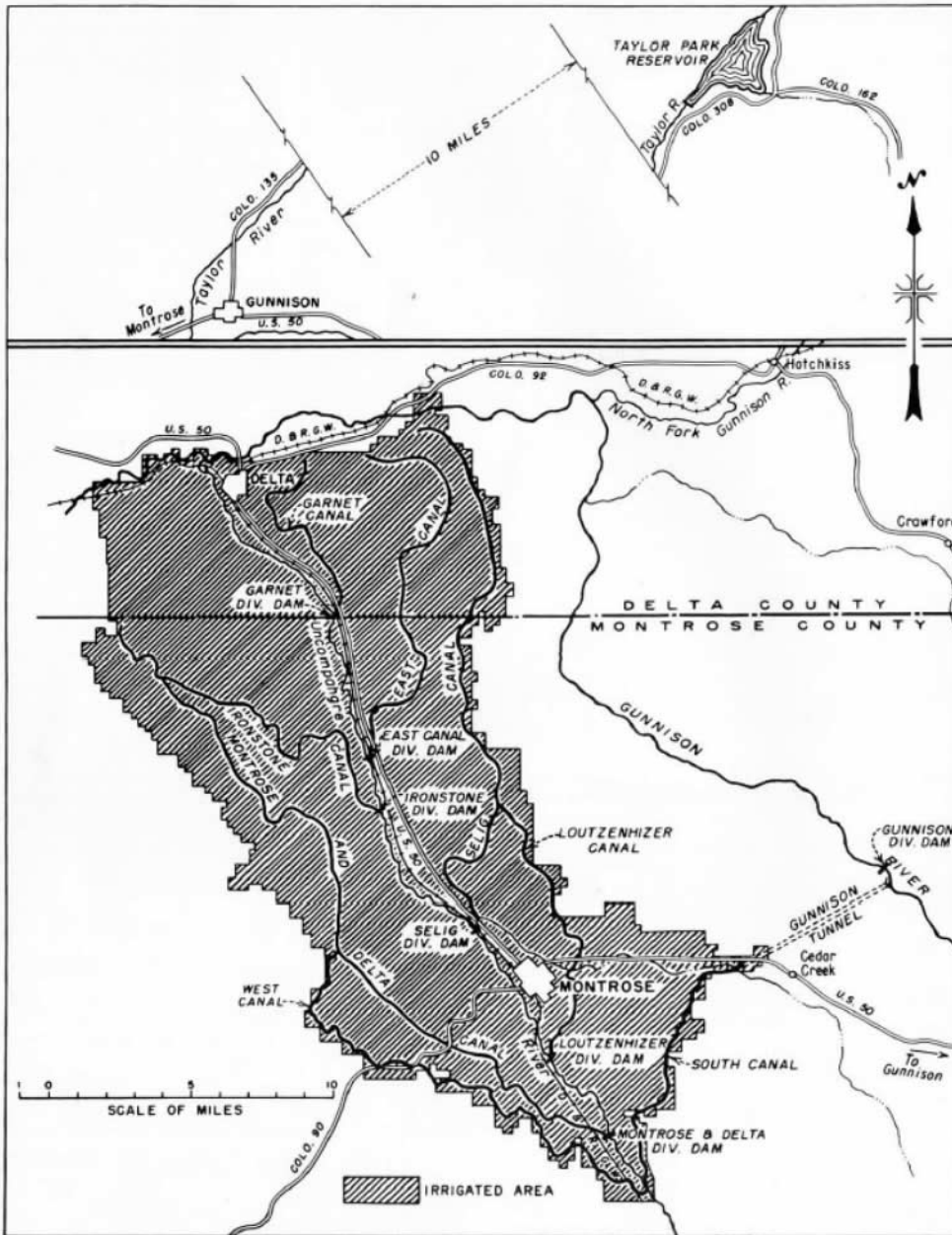
On Secretary of the Interior Ethan Hitchcock's initial list of five projects was the Gunnison Project. Beyond the initial expenditures made on surveying possible irrigation sites in southwestern Colorado, Walcott may have had other reasons for suggesting the Uncompahgre Valley as the location of one of the first reclamation projects selected. Congressman James Shafroth of Colorado, besides being a member of the House Committee on Irrigation, met extensively with Representative Newlands, Senator Henry Hansbrough of North Dakota, and Senator Warren and Congressman F. W. Mondell of Wyoming, following President Theodore Roosevelt's decision that reclamation would be a priority in his administration. While Shafroth initially introduced his own reclamation legislation, he worked with these men on a Congressional conference committee that eventually drafted the measure that became the National Reclamation Act; Shafroth was also the floor manager of the House when the Newlands bill came to a vote in Congress.⁴

To supplement the flow of the Uncompahgre River, the federal engineers used the original plan of diverting the Gunnison River by a tunnel six miles in length and a canal almost twelve miles long. The Reclamation Service started work almost immediately and over the next several months the government acquired the rights to the tunnel, although it took several years before the arrangements became final. Under the aegis of the Reclamation Service, contractors began digging the tunnel, but within a year, the builders went bankrupt and the federal engineers continued to direct the crews on the project, having to change the location of the tunnel. As a testament to the engineering efforts, a model of the Gunnison tunnel was prepared and shown at the St. Louis exhibit in 1904 and President William Howard Taft was the guest of honor at the grand opening ceremonies for the Gunnison-Uncompahgre Tunnel on September 23, 1909. During the ensuing decades, the Reclamation Service built additional diversion dams and either purchased private canals or constructed new ones, totaling approximately 470 miles, to bring the water to the project lands. In 1932, the Uncompahgre Valley Water Users' Association accepted control of the project from the federal government.⁵

When the Uncompahgre Project was authorized in 1903, the reclamation engineers estimated that approximately 171,000 could be irrigated, with 116,000 acres being already in private ownership and about 43,000 open for

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reclamation homestead entry. As construction continued on the irrigation works, water was delivered as soon as the Gunnison tunnel was completed. Although the epigram of Charles Dana Wilber that "rain follows the plow," was part of the Myth of the Garden in the nineteenth century Great Plains, in the West where there is water people will come, is a truism. The population of the Uncompahgre Valley grew as well as the cultivated lands. The population in the Uncompahgre Valley was 5,171 in 1912 with 3,464 living on the project farms, which increased to over 6,000 in 1923. In 1913, the Uncompahgre Project canals delivered water to 37,000 acres while the private irrigation structures transmitted water to 13,600 acres. While the major crops were alfalfa, potatoes, oats, wheat, sugar beets and apples, the Project Engineer suggested the farmers' diversify their products to include dairy stock, as well as better prepare the soil, acquire better seed, and improve the methods of water delivery and use. Within the next decade, the acreage increased to 64,180 acres irrigated within the project.⁶



Uncompahgre Project

Notes

1. U. S. Reclamation Service, "Project History: Uncompahgre Valley Project 1901-1912," vol. 1,4-5. Typescript. U.

- S. Bureau of Reclamation, *Uncompahgre Project*, 1994. Internet version. U. S. Reclamation Service, *First Annual Report*, 134.
2. U. S. Reclamation Service, *First Annual*, 134. U. S. Reclamation Service, "Uncompahgre Valley Project: Project History 1901-1912," vol. 2. U. S. Bureau of Reclamation, *Uncompahgre Project*, 1994.
 3. U. S. Reclamation Service, "Project History: Uncompahgre Project," vol. 1: 6, 9. U. S. Reclamation Service, *First Annual Report*, 137.
 4. Donald Pisani, *To Reclaim a Divided West*, (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1992), 312. According to Frederick Newell's diary, he met with Shafroth and other legislators in 1900 to discuss federal reclamation. Frederick Newell, "Autobiography," typescript, University of Wyoming, American Heritage Center, [61, 65].
 5. Acting Director, U.S. Reclamation Service to Secretary of the Interior, July 6, 1903. National Archives, Denver, Record Group 115, Entry 3, Box 987. David Clark and William Joe Simonds, "Uncompahgre Project," U.S. Bureau of Reclamation, 1994. Internet version.
 6. Fred D. Pyle, "Uncompahgre Valley Project," report to the Uncompahgre Valley Water Users' Association, Feb. 3, 1914. National Archives, Denver. U.S. Department of the Interior, *Federal Irrigation Projects*, 21. Clark and Simonds, "Uncompahgre Project."