

# Looking at Western Message Petroglyphs

In August 2020, Museum of Northern Arizona research associate and Flagstaff Open Space Site steward Robert Mark discovered two historic rock



LEIGH MARYMOR

engravings located in one of Flagstaff's Open Space Preserves. This discovery sheds new light on a quirky group of rock-writing sites located in California, Nevada, Arizona,

New Mexico, Utah, Colorado, Wyoming and Idaho. Known as Western Message Petroglyphs (WMPs), this far-flung group of images — numbering 38 known sites in all — is thought to date to the last quarter of the 19th century.

The Flagstaff site is somewhat secluded and placed in an area that enjoys a long view across the terrain to the distance where it overlooks the historic Beale Wagon Road and the Atlantic and Pacific (Santa Fe) Railroad right-of-way.

The engravings are curious to say the least. The two small images are readily seen on the face of a considerably sized basalt boulder and were clearly engraved with a metal-edged tool.



LEIGH MARYMOR, COURTESY

The Western Message Petroglyph was recently discovered near Flagstaff by Robert Mark.

The lower image, set just below and to the right of the other, is a neatly executed circle with five short serpentine lines that radiate outward, with dots set in between them.

Looking closely, one can see the “ghost shadow” of a hand that had long ago been painted and pressed upon the rock. The radiating circle image sits squarely in the palm of the hand.

The upper image is composed of a weeping-eye motif

in the “Egyptian” style with a small pedestal and the letter M above it. This image, too, was engraved upon the ghost shadow of a hand, once painted and impressed upon the rock. Just above the eye, three vertical lines were engraved; these delineate the middle fingers of the upright shadow hand.

The two left-hand shadow prints indicate the presence of two individuals; one hand features a “straight” thumb while

the other features a “curved, or bent,” thumb. The forward facing, upright embellished hands seem to have a heraldic intent, perhaps announcing the passing by of these two individuals with their uniquely claimed identities.

The mystery of these “Flagstaff Hands” is revealed, if only in part, when considering them in the context of the other 37 WMP sites. The classic WMP site includes a multi-line text of picture images, often with one or more of these heraldic motifs appearing above, below, or off to the side of the text. Arranged in one or more parallel lines, the “dictionary” of images is composed of a mash-up of late-historic Native American sign gesture language and picture-writing traditions, intermixed with other motifs borrowed from all around the world. The Egyptian weeping-eye, the circle with radiant arms, and the faded painted handprints with embellished palms are all found repeated at other WMP sites.

The map of WMP sites reveals important clues that frame the time period when these rock-engravings were made. All of the sites where WMPs are

# Petroglyphs

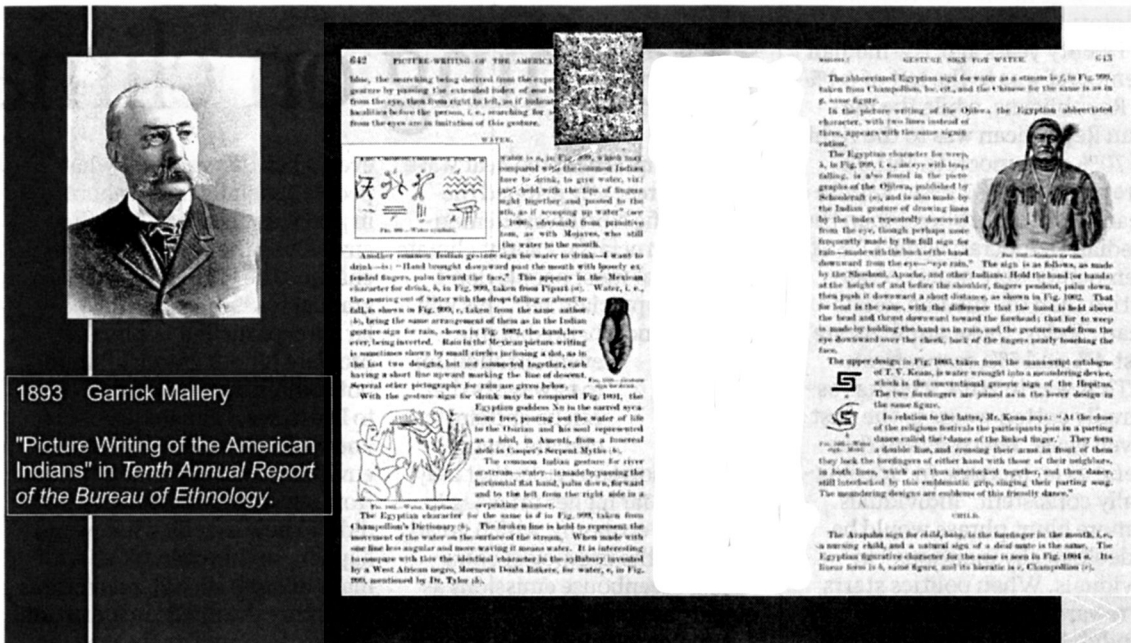
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found appear in landscapes featuring historic railroad rights-of-way, wagon roads, boom-and-bust mining towns, and often overlook Mormon towns, trails and routes of commerce.

These places all suggest that the WMP engravers were moving about the Western U.S. as early as 1880. A close read of the ethnographic literature of the day reveals many examples of obscure picture images that the WMP author surely lifted from these books and engraved on the rock walls. Images lifted from publications confirm that some WMP panels could not have been engraved prior to 1880, and others no earlier than the mid 1920s.

Viewed as a whole, albeit through a dusty, sepia lens, we can begin to see the travels of a small group of eccentric individuals, all in-the-know, sharing their secret handshake, and moving about the western U.S. at the close of the 19th century.

If you want to learn more about the history of Western Message Petroglyphs, you can access a YouTube video lecture at <https://www.youtube.com/>



1893 Garrick Mallery

"Picture Writing of the American Indians" in Tenth Annual Report of the Bureau of Ethnology.

Garrick Mallery and a pair of typical pages in his 1893 book, illustrated with line drawings of Native American petroglyphs and world symbols. The "vocabulary" of Western Message Petroglyph engraved symbols appear to have been taken from Mallery's book and similar published sources of the time.

watch?v=U7mN9tQ84sA&t=4163s (begin viewing at approximately the 6 minute, 30 second mark).

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president of the American Rock Art Research Association. His interest in North American and world rock art spans more than 40 years.

The NPS/USFS Roving Rangers volunteer through a unique agreement between the Flagstaff

Area National Monuments and the Coconino National Forest to provide Interpretive Ranger-guided walks and talks in the Flagstaff area.

Submit questions for the 'Ask a Ranger' weekly column to [askaranger@gmail.com](mailto:askaranger@gmail.com).



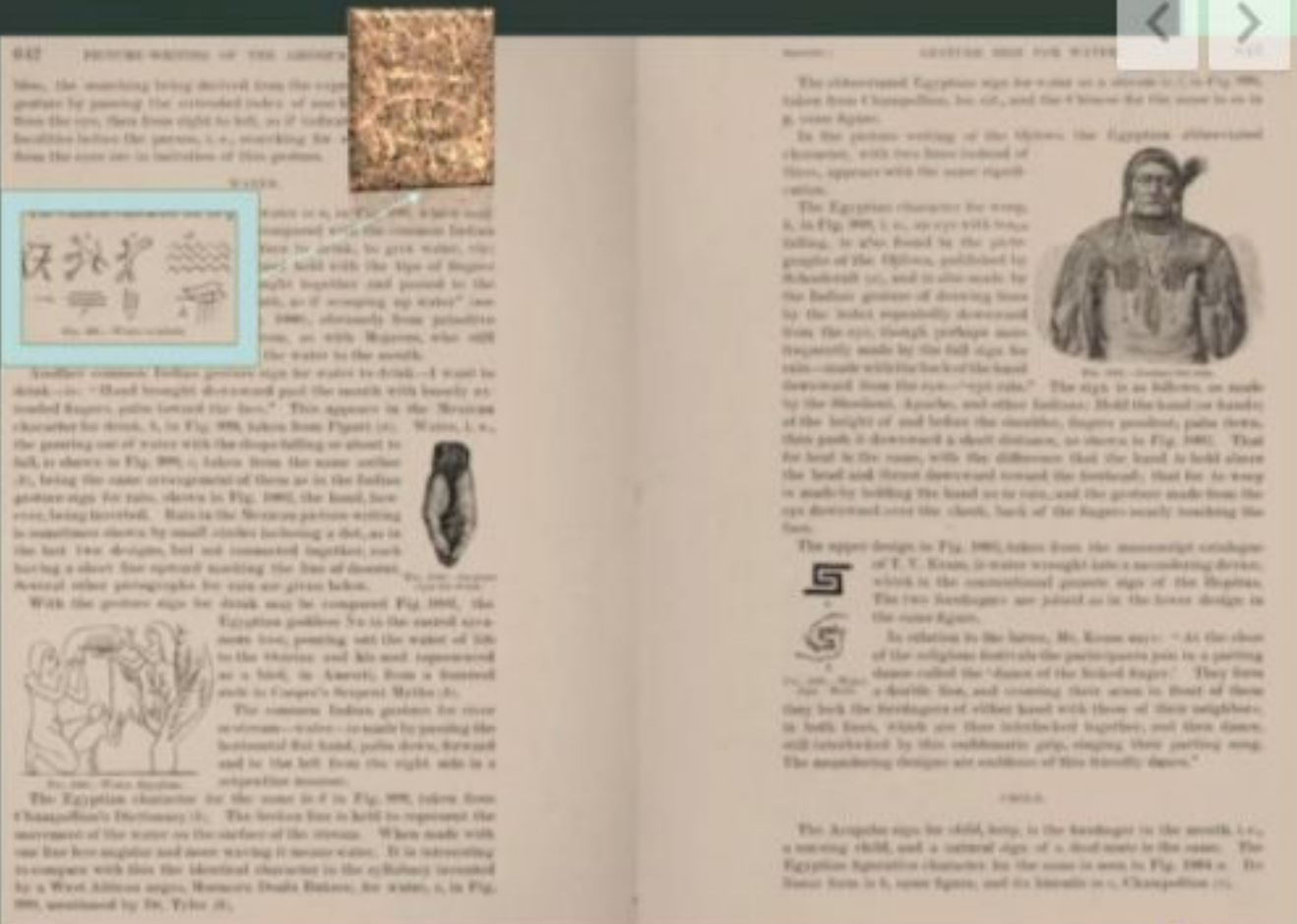
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Leigh Marymor, courtesy



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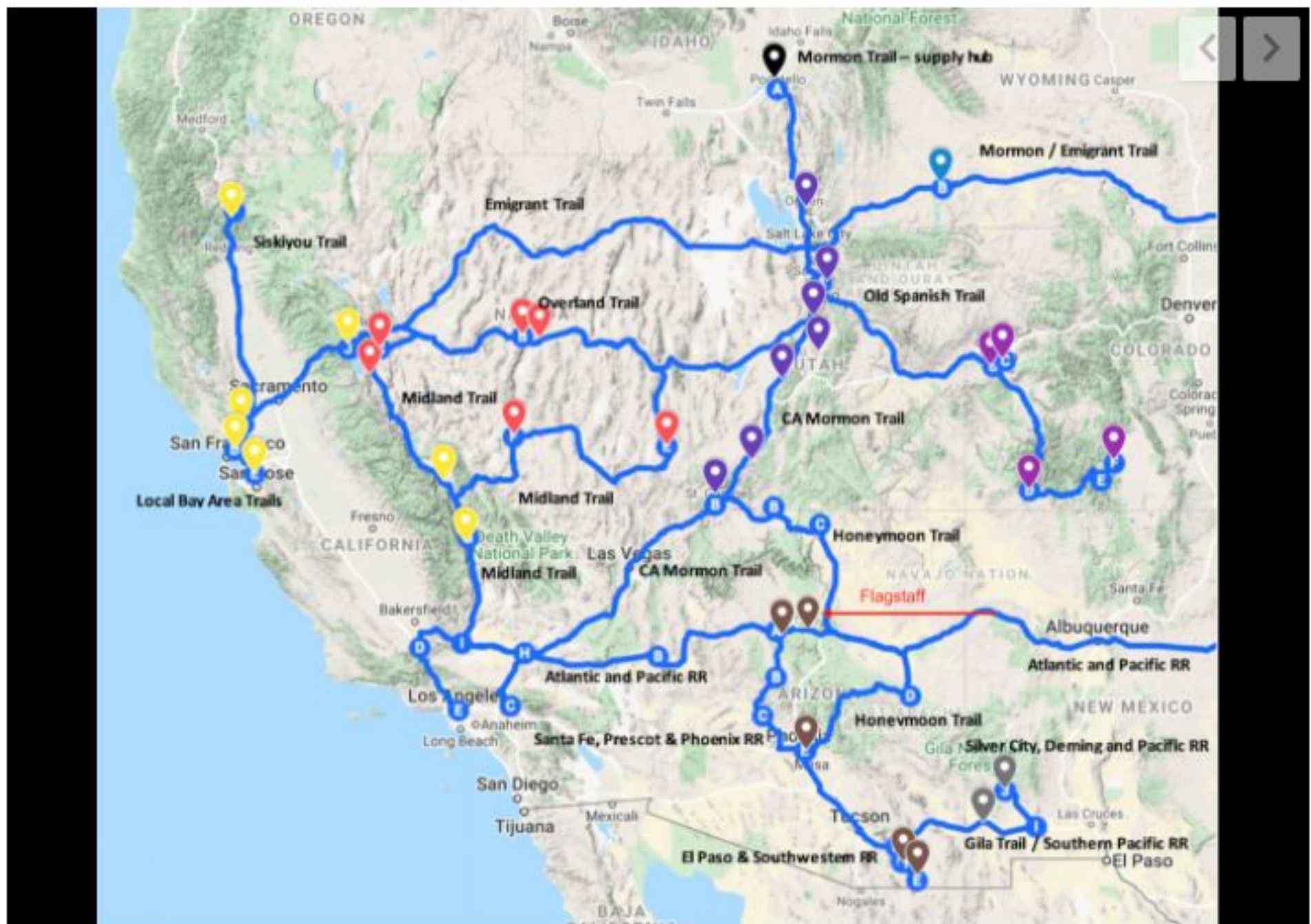
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A classic Western Message Petroglyph from the San Luis Valley, Colorado, is shown. The site overlooks the old wagon road to the Summitville gold mine.

Leigh Marymor, courtesy



Colored markers show the locations of Western Message Petroglyphs. Note the proximity of all WMPs to early railroad lines, wagon roads and early Mormon travel routes (blue lines).

Courtesy