

Yucca House Visitor Guide

National Park Service
Department of the Interior
Yucca House National Monument



AS YOU ENTER YUCCA HOUSE...

...you see two areas with large mounds of rubble covered with vegetation. Toward the base of Ute Mountain is the “West Complex,” a large pueblo with an estimated 600 rooms, over 100 kivas, and a great kiva (that perhaps served the entire community). A productive spring flows through the middle of the complex. “Upper House,” the highest portion of the West Complex, rises 15 to 20 feet above the nearby architecture, dominating the surrounding landscape. It must have been an impressive building. To your east is the “Lower House” with some of the only visible standing masonry at the site. The “Lower House” is an L-shaped pueblo with at least eight first-story rooms. A low wall encloses the plaza with a great kiva at its center. Yucca House, one of the largest archeological sites in southwest Colorado, acted as an important community center for the Ancestral Puebloan people from A.D. 1150-1300.



Stabilized wall at Yucca House, Mesa Verde in background.

YUCCA HOUSE or AZTEC SPRINGS?



Cattails define marshy locations watered by springs.

Yucca House was first written about by Professor William H. Holmes in 1878 in a United States Geological Survey Report. Impressed by the most immense dwelling found on the survey, Holmes described a prolific spring surrounded by rubble on three sides. He drew the first map of the site, sketching the fallen walls and piles of stone. At the time of his visit, archeologists believed these ancient sites were built by the Aztec people of Mexico. Holmes named the site “Aztec Springs.”

Although archeologists have only known about the site for the last century and a half, the Utes and Navajos living in the region and the Pueblo people further south have known about this site for centuries. Furthermore, rich oral traditions tie the Pueblo people to this land. The modern Puebloans are the descendants of the people who built Yucca House. The site was renamed for its location at the base of Sleeping Ute Mountain to clarify that it was not built by the Aztecs and to avoid confusion with nearby Aztec Ruins National Monument. Sleeping Ute Mountain is known to the Utes and other tribes as the “mountain with lots of yucca growing on it.” Thus, “Aztec Springs” became “Yucca House.” Interestingly, there is no yucca growing in the monument today.

YUCCA HOUSE AS A HOME

Like any other group of people in the Southwest, the Ancestral Puebloans built their villages around springs. The water was used for drinking, making mud mortar, and irrigating crops. These springs also provide an important resource for the wildlife living in the area today. Rattlesnakes, bobcats, mule deer, and songbirds all live in and around Yucca House National Monument. The monument preserves and protects the local vegetation. The Desert Shrub environment within the monument boundaries includes sagebrush, four-winged saltbush, cacti, and a number of grasses. The monument also protects one of the largest claret cup cactus in the area. Please help us protect both the natural and cultural resources.

As you walk around, take a moment to think about what it may have been like to live in Yucca House. In A.D. 1200 it was a vibrant pueblo, full of people and surrounded by farmland. Imagine the sun’s rays reflected on the carefully planted clumps of corn, beans, and squash. Families tended their fields and weeded with pointed digging sticks, hoping for summer rain showers. Smoke of Utah juniper filled the air and mixed with the smell of roasting turkey as the sun went down in the evening. Elders shared stories of “when the world was soft, beginning” in the circular, subterranean rooms called kivas.

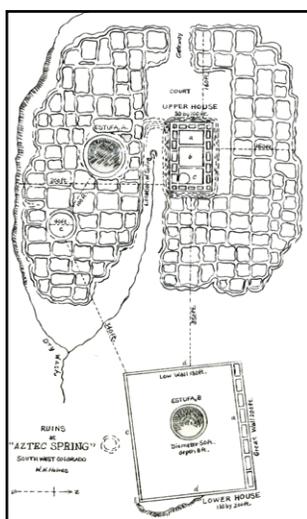


Ancestral Puebloans harvesting yucca plants and preparing fields for planting.

RECENT RESEARCH

Since Holmes mapped this site in 1878 and Jessie Walter Fewkes studied and re-mapped the pueblo in 1918, there have been two recent periods of archaeological research at Yucca House. In 1964, Al Lancaster and his crew exposed and stabilized the northwest corner of the Lower House - the masonry wall that you see as you enter the site. That same year, after some limited testing, Al Schroeder discovered that some of the walls north of "Upper House" were constructed of adobe, unusual for sites dating to the 1200s in this region.

In the late 1990s, Hallie Ismay, who owned the land surrounding the monument from 1921 to 2002, donated 24 acres to provide an alternative route to Yucca House National Monument and protect several nearby sites. This donation also provided an important opportunity for new, non-invasive archeological research to take place at Yucca House in 2000. This fieldwork, directed by Donna Glowacki, was a joint research project by Crow Canyon Archaeological Center and Mesa Verde National Park. Since the only available maps of the site were done more than 100 years ago, the primary goal of the project was to thoroughly map all of the visible architecture at the site using modern techniques. They also analyzed the pottery lying on the surface to better understand site chronology and surveyed the newly donated land, documenting three new sites. We now have a much better sense of the spatial relationship of the site's architectural features, and we know that much of the visible architecture dates to the Pueblo III period (A.D. 1150-1300). Although this work added greatly to our understanding of the site, much can still be learned by limited testing at Yucca House. For example, when was the peak occupation; what was the social relationship between the "Lower House" and the "West Complex;" what was Yucca House's role as an important center within the region; and when did people leave? Perhaps the answers to some of these questions can be found in the future as our techniques for learning about the past improve.



William Holmes' map of Yucca House when it was first documented in 1878.

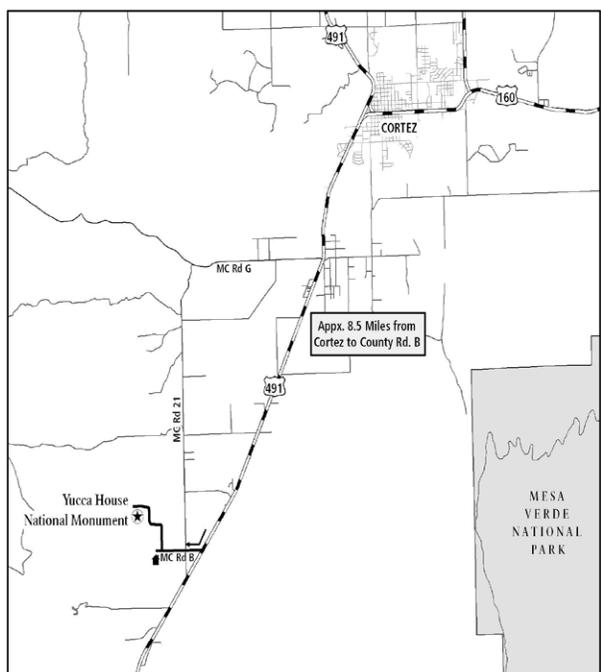


D. Glowacki, W. Dale, and S. Traslener's 2001 map of Yucca House.

FOR FUTURE GENERATIONS

At the request of noted archeologist Jesse Fewkes, Henry Van Kleeck, who was a Denver pioneer and the original landowner, deeded 9.6 acres of land, including most of Yucca House, to the federal government on July 2, 1919. He hoped it would be excavated in the near future. Due to its significance as an excellent example of a valley pueblo, Woodrow Wilson made Yucca House a National Monument by Presidential Proclamation on December 19, 1919. Yucca House National Monument, one of our earliest examples of public/private stewardship of our cultural resources, remained well protected with the assistance of Hallie Ismay until her death in 2002. In fact, Hallie was honored by the U.S. Department of the Interior for 62 years of service as the unofficial custodian of Yucca House National Monument.

Today, Yucca House is surrounded by productive agricultural lands and has beautiful views across the Montezuma Valley. Although many archeological sites in the region have disappeared through urban development or have been irreparably damaged by vandalism, Yucca House National Monument will remain protected well into the future. The long-term preservation of Yucca House ensures that archeologists will be able to continue studying Ancestral Puebloan society and what caused them to migrate from this region in the late 1200s.



Directions: From the entrance of Mesa Verde, take Hwy. 160 West through Cortez, to Hwy. 491 South. Continue driving south approximately 8 miles from the intersection of Hwy. 160 and Hwy. 491 and take a right on MC County Road B, which is a dirt road one mile south of MC Road C. Drive 0.8 miles, crossing a paved road and take the next dirt road on the right -before the farmhouse on the left. Follow this road north and west for 1.4 miles, head towards the white ranch house with the red roof on the west horizon. Please be courteous toward the private landowners and close all gates behind you as you enter to prevent livestock from escaping. Once at the ranch house, Yucca House National Monument is on the left side of the driveway.

Facilities: There are no visitor facilities or services available, such as gasoline, food, water, or bathrooms. The closest gasoline and lodging are in Cortez, CO. Pets and camping are not allowed in Yucca House National Monument. Motor vehicles are allowed only on roadways, at pullouts, or in parking areas. Please pack out what you take in.

Regulations: The Federal Antiquities Act of 1906 and the Archeological Resources Protection Act of 1979 prohibit the removal of any object of antiquity or the destruction of any architectural site on federal land. Report any damaging behavior immediately to a Park Ranger at Mesa Verde. Be respectful of the wildlife and plants in the monument.

For Information: Mail -Superintendent, Mesa Verde National Park, Yucca House National Monument, PO Box 8, Mesa Verde NP, CO 81330. Phone: (970)529-4465. Internet address: www.nps.gov/yuho/.