



A Brief History of Chaco Culture National Historical Park

900s BC

The first dated evidence of human occupation of Chaco Canyon comes from an archaeological site protected by a cliff overhang. This sheltered area protected fragile materials that were able to be dated. Early peoples were likely hunting and gathering throughout the canyon. Human occupation of the canyon likely began much earlier.

200s AD

Pithouses, or partially subterranean features with 1-2 rooms begin to appear throughout the canyon. Starting in 500 AD, large pithouse villages containing 20-80 pithouses and features are constructed within the canyon.

700s

Small house sites, visible at Casa Rinconada, begin to be constructed.

850-1150

Chaco Canyon served as a major center of ancestral Puebloan culture. Remarkable for its monumental buildings, distinctive architecture, astronomy, artistic achievements, it served as a hub of ceremony, trade, and administration for the Four Corners Area—unlike anything before or since.

1150-1250

People stop constructing Great House sites and begin migrating to other locations. These people become the Pueblo Peoples of New Mexico and the Hopi of Arizona and many maintain their connections with Chaco today.

1600s

By this time, what archaeologists recognize as Navajo settlement patterns begin to appear in the canyon, although evidence of Navajo occupation in the larger region is already established. Some oral histories place the Navajo, or Dine, people in Chaco Canyon much earlier.

1680-1700s

The Pueblo Revolt of 1680 briefly unified the Pueblo peoples of New Mexico and their neighbors. However, the Spanish returned in 1692 and re-conquered the area. This forced many of the Pueblo peoples into exile.

Many of these people sought refuge with the Navajo people in Chaco Canyon and the surrounding area. These people intermarried and exchanged ideas. In the canyon, archeologists discover defensive Navajo sites that reflect this era of conflict.

1774

Don Bernardo de Miera y Pacheco, identified the Chaco Canyon area as “Chaca” on a Spanish map.

1823

Jose Antonio Viscarra, the Spanish Governor of New Mexico, led a military force west of Jemez Pueblo onto Navajo lands. He noted many Chacoan buildings along the route.

1849

The Washington Expedition, a military reconnaissance under the direction of Col Washington passed through Chaco. On that expedition Lt. James Simpson, of the Army Corps of Topographical Engineers, surveyed Navajo lands and wrote reports of the Chacoan sites while the Kern brothers drew illustrations of the buildings.

1877

William Henry Jackson, with the US Geological and Geographical Survey, produced expanded descriptions and maps of Chacoan sites, in addition to identifying additional structures including a stairway in the cliffs. Jackson took photos of these sites, but none turned out as he experimented with a new photographic process that failed.

1888

Victor and Cosmos Mindeleff of the Bureau of American Ethnology spent several weeks surveying and photographing the major Chacoan sites. Their photographs document early vandalism and looting which now help the park determine the modern effects of visitation, natural processes, and vandalism to the sites.

1896-1900

After excavating Mesa Verde cliff dwellings and other ancestral Puebloan sites, Richard Wetherill petitioned to excavate the sites at Chaco. The Hyde Exploring Expedition was formed. Led by George H. Pepper from the American Museum of Natural History in New York City, funded by the Hyde family, and led by Richard Wetherill, the Expedition established large excavations at Pueblo Bonito.

The focus of the expedition was the accumulation of artifacts for the museum collection and thus numerous crates of artifacts were shipped to the American Museum of Natural History in New York. The excavation was a large undertaking with many local workers. In order to supply these workers and turn a profit the expedition built several trading posts.

1901

Samuel Joseph Holsinger, directed by the Commissioner of the General Land Office, came to Chaco to investigate the Hyde Exploring Expedition. He spent weeks compiling an 80 page report with over 125 photographs of Chaco Canyon. He recommended the creation of a National Park to protect the archeological sites. The investigation halted work in progress with the Hyde Exploring Expedition.

In the same year, Richard Wetherill filed a homestead claim on land that included Pueblo Bonito, Chetro Ketl, and Pueblo del Arroyo. The claim was granted in 1910 after Wetherill's death.

1902

Edgar L. Hewett of the School of American Research, Museum of New Mexico, and University of New Mexico mapped many Chacoan sites.

1906

The Federal Antiquities Act was passed with the help of Hewett and many others. This was the first federal legislation to protect archeological sites .

1907

Chaco Canyon National Monument was established on March 11, 1907 by Theodore Roosevelt. The monument was administered by the General Land Office until the establishment of the National Park Service in 1916 and was monitored through inspections and by canyon residents.

1910

Having been prohibited from further excavation, Richard Wetherill continued to ranch in Chaco Canyon. In 1910, Richard Wetherill was murdered by Chiishch'ilin Begay. Wetherill is buried in a small cemetery west of Pueblo Bonito.

1920

Hewett returned to Chaco to excavate Chetro Ketl, but his expedition was short-lived.

1921-1927

Neil Judd, of the Smithsonian Institution and sponsored by the National Geographic Society, excavated several hundred rooms at Pueblo Bonito, as well as portions of Pueblo del Arroyo and several smaller sites. Artifacts from the expedition were sent to the Smithsonian Institution. Neil Judd also worked to preserve the excavated portions of the building by repairing walls and replacing door lintels. He believed the great houses were large apartment complexes.

1923

A. C. Griffin was appointed the first part-time custodian of the park. He came to the canyon in 1921 to run the trading post and continued to live in the park until 1936, after his official work ended in 1928.

1927

Frank H. H. Roberts excavated the pithouse village, Shabik'eschee. One of the few excavations of pithouse villages, this site became the archeological "type-site" or example for such sites.

1928-29

Dr. A. E. Douglas of the University of Arizona applied the new method of tree-ring dating, or dendrochronology, to Pueblo Bonito and many other sites in Chaco Canyon for the National Geographic Society.

1929-49

Hewett and Donald D. Brand of the University of New Mexico directed field schools at Chetro Ketl, Casa Rinconada and other sites. Many of the students on those field schools became Chacoan scholars or future employees of the Park Service.

1937

Gordon Vivian began a long career with the park. Throughout his tenure he worked to preserve many sites including Pueblo Bonito, Chetro Ketl, and Casa Rinconada, setting NPS standards in ruins stabilization in the Southwest.

1937-1942

A local division of the Civilian Conservation Corps, or CCC, designed to put people to work during the Great Depression, was established at Chaco. Comprised of local Navajo men, the Mobile Unit worked to repair, stabilize and protect portions of 6 sites in the canyon. The program's success led to the establishment of permanent Ruins Stabilization Units in many other parks including Chaco.

1939-1941

A general CCC camp known as CCC Camp NP-2-N was established at Chaco. The camp's nearly 1000 young men who worked at the park over 3 years created erosion control by planting thousands of trees and shrubs and creating berms, developing infrastructure, and constructing roads.

1941

On January 21, 1941 Threatening Rock, a large boulder behind Pueblo Bonito, fell and crushed 30-60 rooms at Pueblo Bonito.

1947

Tomasito, the last Navajo resident living in Chaco Canyon, was removed from the Monument. Monument boundaries were fenced to exclude livestock grazing.

1949

The University of New Mexico deeded state-owned lands in Chaco Canyon National Monument to the National Park Service, in exchange for continued rights to conduct scientific research in the area.

1959

A new park visitor center was dedicated in its current location, replacing an old building on the west end of the canyon. Staff housing and campgrounds were also built as part of the National Park Service "Mission 66" construction boom from 1956-1966,

1971

Jonathon Raymon proposed that a corner door at Pueblo Bonito marked the winter solstice. This launched the study of archaeoastronomy which attempts to understand the astronomical practices of ancient peoples. This work was followed by discoveries of alignments at Casa Rinconada by Ray Williamson and the discovery of the "Sun Dagger" by Anna Sofaer in the 1970s.

1969-1982

The National Park Service and the University of New Mexico established the Division of Cultural Research or "Chaco Center" under the direction of Dr. Robert H. Lister and later Dr. James Judge. Multi-disciplinary research, archaeological surveys, and excavations began. For the first time, a complete inventory of cultural resources into the park was established. The project also excavated portions of Pueblo Alto and investigated Chacoan roadways, outlier sites and both earlier and later periods of occupation in the canyon. The results of this research led to changing ideas about the Canyon and drastically reduced population estimates for the Great Houses.

1975-1981

The Rock Art Field School, led by James Bin and sponsored by the Archaeological Society of New Mexico, began rock art surveys with the help of volunteers. Petroglyphs and pictographs had been sporadically noted before, but this began the first organized effort to document rock images. Since then other groups including the Chaco Rock-Art Reassessment Project and the Chaco Navajo

Rock-Art Project continue to document and protect these images.

1980

On December 19, 1980, Chaco Canyon National Monument was re-designated Chaco Culture National Historical Park, an act passed by Congress. An additional 13,000 acres were added to the park. The Chaco Culture Archaeological Protection Site program was inaugurated to jointly protect Chacoan sites on lands managed by the Bureau of Land Management, United States Forest Service, State of New Mexico, San Juan County, and the Navajo Nation.

1987

On December 8, 1987, Chaco Culture National Historical Park was designated a UNESCO World Heritage Site, joining a select list of protected areas "whose outstanding natural and cultural resources form the common inheritance of all mankind."

1981-present

Around this time a major philosophical change in archaeology shifted attention from costly, large-scale excavations. New concerns about respecting Native American beliefs regarding the archaeological sites also came to the fore. Many groups believe that the buildings should not be disturbed. Their oral histories offer new insights into Chaco. Instead of excavating buildings, other techniques such as remote sensing are used to gather information without disturbing the sites.

1989

In this year Chaco National Historical Park began consultation with native groups. This was one year before NAGRPRA or the Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act was passed mandating that all institutions receiving federal funding return burial remains. The process involved identifying which groups were culturally affiliated with the Chacoan sites and how those groups like us to take care of the remains. In 2005, the burial remains and objects in the park's possession were reburied within the park.

Today, Native American representatives actively consult with the park on important management issues, sharing their knowledge and history and

providing valuable assistance with museum collections, site preservation, and public education.

1998

Working with the Albuquerque Astronomical Society, Chaco established the first observatory in the National Park Service. The observatory dome and telescope were donated by Jon Sefick and assembled and operated by dedicated volunteers. The observatory has been used for research and public programming. Chaco, remotely located, also preserves dark night skies. Today the park is engaged in on-going efforts to protect night skies in the San Juan Basin.

2000-2006

The Chaco Synthesis Project summarized the archaeological work completed by the Chaco Center's Chaco Project (1971-1982). A series of seven conferences consolidated information concerning different aspects of Chacoan archaeology. Subject-matter experts produced both technical and popular publications.

2005

Chaco began the first park wide inventory of paleontological resources, building on past efforts to record the fossils and geology of the park.

2012

The park completed construction of a new Visitor Center.

Present

Research continues in the park. In recent years Patricia Crown of the University of New Mexico (UNM) discovered cacao on cylinder jars found at Pueblo Bonito offering further information on these valuable objects. Wirt Wills of the UNM excavated portions of the mounds in front of Pueblo Bonito which had been previously excavated by Neil Judd in the 1920's. He has also led excavations at Richard Wetherill's trading post. This research offers new insights into the park.

The park continues to protect these important places by monitoring sites with the help of students and volunteers. We continue to share the stories of these past peoples.