

Chaco Canyon Place Names

In 1849, the Washington Expedition, a military reconnaissance under the direction of Lt. James Simpson, surveyed Navajo lands and viewed and reported on the ancestral Puebloan and Navajo cultural sites now associated with Chaco Culture NHP. As he described the individual sites for his report, he chose to give them their proper names. He called on the expedition's Navajo, Jémez Pueblo, and Mexican guides, Sandoval, Hosta, and Carravahal for assistance. Although each guide related different names, Simpson used the names given to him by Carravahal. Many of the names now used for these Chacoan sites come from that early encounter, but the origins and meanings of many other Chacoan place names have not been recorded.

Casa Chiquita—"little house" in Spanish, named because this site is small in comparison with the major great houses in Chaco Canyon. The Spanish name may be a translation of one of the Navajo names for this site, *Kin Yazhi Hooghan*, "little house home."

Casa Rinconada—"cornered house" or "house where the canyons meet" in Spanish. Rinconada is from *rincon*, or "corner." In the Spanish of New Mexico and southern Colorado *rinconada* came to mean "dead end," "box canyon," or "secluded place." Casa Rinconada is located where a side canyon joins Chaco Canyon. Among several Navajo names for this great kiva are *Kin Nahazbas*, or "circular house" and *Kits'ill tl' oo' yaanáalk'id*, or "many sherds ruins."

Chaco—A map drawn in 1778 by Spanish cartographer Bernardo de Miera y Pacheco identified the Chaco Canyon area as "Chaca"; a Spanish colonial word commonly used during that era meaning "a large expanse of open and unexplored land, desert, plain, or prairie." "Chaca" is believed to be the origin of both "Chacra" and "Chaco." The Acoma placename for Chaco, *W'aasrba shak'a*, meaning "place of greasewood," may have been shortened to "Chaca." Another possibility is that "Chaca" may be a Spanish translation of the Navajo word *Tsékoh*, meaning "rock-cut" or "canyon" —or *Tzak aih*, meaning "white string of rocks" (the latter refers to the appearance the sandstone atop Chacra Mesa). The Hopi place name for Chaco Canyon is *Yupkoyvi*, "the place beyond the horizon."

Chetro Keti—The meaning and origin of this name are unknown. There are several Navajo names for this site, *Tséjiiitah*, and *Tséyitah*, or "Inside-Among-Rocks" (a reference to the site location in a corner of the canyon wall), *Tsé Bidádi' ni 'ání*, "covered hole" (referring to sealed concavities in the cliff behind the site), and *Nastl'a Kin*, "house in the corner."

Fajada Butte—Fajada means "belted" or "banded" in Spanish and describes the black seam of lignite coal exposed midway up the butte. The landmark occurs in several Navajo stories as *Tsé Diyinnii*, or "holy rock." Another Navajo term is *Asdzáá Halgóni Bighan* or "The Home of She Who Totally Dries You Out," a reference to the home of an evil witch who enticed young men to her home at night and abandoned them during the day. With no hope of getting down the sheer cliffs, the men would slowly die by starvation. Fajada Butte and Una Vida share this Navajo story.

Hungo Pavi—The name may relate to Shongopovi, or "Reed Spring Village," the largest Hopi village on Second Mesa, Arizona. The best evidence linking the names *Shongopovi* and *Hungo Pavi* is a map drawn in 1776 by Spanish cartographer Miera y Pacheco. The map shows the Hopi town as Jungo Bavi. The spelling similarities between the two words seem too close to be coincidental. The name may derive from the Navajo word *Haak' asgo baa'íi*, or "Crooked Nose" (a reference to the distinctive nose of *Niihwiilbiih*, the Great Gambler in the Navajo creation story).

Kin Bineola—"drafty house," "whirlwind house," or "house in which the wind swirls" from the Navajo *Kin Bii'naayoli*. This is one of more than 150 Chacoan great houses found in the San Juan Basin and beyond, and linked by architecture, shared culture, and many miles of prehistoric roadways. The name occurs in the Navajo Excess Way.

Kin Kletso—*Kin Litso* or "yellow house" in Navajo, describing the light-colored sandstone used to construct the great house.

Kin Klizhin–*Tsin Lizhin* or “black wood” in Navajo, possibly in reference to the dark charcoal or charred timbers found at the site. The name is a variant of the Navajo *Tsin Nitl’iz* or “hard wood,” “black wood,” or “charcoal place.” Kin Klizhin is a small great house with a tower kiva southwest of Chaco Canyon.

Kin Ya’a–“house rising up high” in Navajo. *Kin Ya’a* is a great house near Crownpoint with a tower kiva. According to one Navajo story, it is a place where a group of Navajos settled with Chacoan people. They later became known as *Kin yaa’ aanii*, the “towering house clan.”

Peñasco Blanco–“white cliff” or “white bluff” in Spanish, named for the light-colored sandstone bluff beneath the site. The name of this geographical feature (but not the site itself) appears in a Spanish military report written by Jose Antonio Vizcarra in 1823. The site is referred to in the Navajo Flintway story (Navajo oral history) as *Táalakin*, “plateau house” and “Flat Topped Building or House.” This site is the origin point of the Navajo Lightning Way. Called *Hastin Atsinniltl’ish Bigan* (The Home of Old Man Lightning and Thunder), the story revolves around Old Man Lightning and Thunder aiding a man who overcomes the Gambler. The story is integrated with *Kin Bii’ naayooli* (Kin Bineola).

Pueblo Alto–Spanish for “high village.” Situated on top of the mesa due north of Pueblo Bonito, this great house was mapped and named by William H. Jackson in 1877. In choosing the name Jackson was obviously imitating the Spanish place names recorded by James Simpson some 28 years earlier, for example, “pueblo” or “casa” followed by a simple adjective (compare Pueblo Bonito, Pueblo Pintado, Casa Chiquita, Casa Rinconada, etc.) The Navajo name for Pueblo Alto *Nihwiilbiih Bikin* or “The Home of One-Who-Always-Wins-Them-Over” refers to the Great Gambler and the Excess Way story (Navajo oral history) in which the site figures prominently. Unlike the Spanish names in the canyon, which simply describe obvious features of the sites, the Navajo names often reveal how the Chacoan sites had been incorporated into the culture and history of the Navajo people.

Pueblo Bonito–“pretty village” in Spanish. Like most Spanish place names in Chaco Canyon, this one was recorded during the Washington Expedition by Lieutenant Simpson and his Mexican guide, Carravahal. The Navajo name *Tsébiyaanii’ áhá*, “rock-attached-as-a-support-beam,” “leaning rock gap,” or “rock that braces and supports the structure from below” refers to Threatening Rock, a large sandstone rock detached from the cliff wall, that towered above the rear wall of Pueblo Bonito. The rock was braced by Chacoan masonry and timbers, but eventually fell and crushed the northeast portion of the building in 1941. The Navajo name occurs in two traditional stories.

Pueblo del Arroyo–“village by the wash” in Spanish. As in the case of Casa Chiquita, the Spanish may be a translation of a Navajo name, *Tabaah Kini*, which has a similar meaning.

Pueblo Pintado–Spanish for “painted village.” Pueblo people on the Washington Expedition called it Pueblo de Montezuma. This site was also known as Pueblo de los Ratones, or “village of the mice,” Pueblo Colorado or “red village,” and Pueblo Grande, or “large village.” Its Navajo name is *Kin teel*, or “wide house.”

Tsin Kletzin–The name of this small great house atop South Mesa has been translated from Navajo as *Tsin Nitl’iz* or “hard wood,” “black wood,” or “charcoal place.” The reference may be to charred timbers found at the site.

Una Vida–“one life” in Spanish, a shortened form of Pueblo (de) Una Vida, the version which Simpson received from Carravahal, although there is no convincing explanation of the Spanish name. The Navajo name *Asdzáá Halgóni Bikin*, “Place-that-Totally-Dries-You-Out,” is associated with Fajada Butte and the home of “She-Who-Dries-You-Out,” the witch sister of the Gambler or the Gambler himself in the guise of a woman.

Wijijij–from *Dewoozhii*, Navajo for “greasewood.” This is one of several Navajo names for this building. Another name *Kin Dootl’izhii*, “blue house” or “turquoise house,” and the site is referred to in Navajo stories.

Other Puebloan, Hopi, and local Navajo names exist for many of the Chacoan sites. Some of these have been omitted do to their sacred, sensitive, and non-public nature. Chaco is part of the sacred homeland of the Hopi people of Arizona, the Pueblo peoples of New Mexico, and the Navajo people of the Southwest. The people continue to respect and honor Chaco in prayers and songs expressed in many languages. Please help the park preserve this special place for all the people of the world.
