

Wetherill & Step House



Supervisory Archeologist Douglas Osborne with artifacts taken from sites on Wetherill Mesa.

Donation
if you take
it home.

50¢

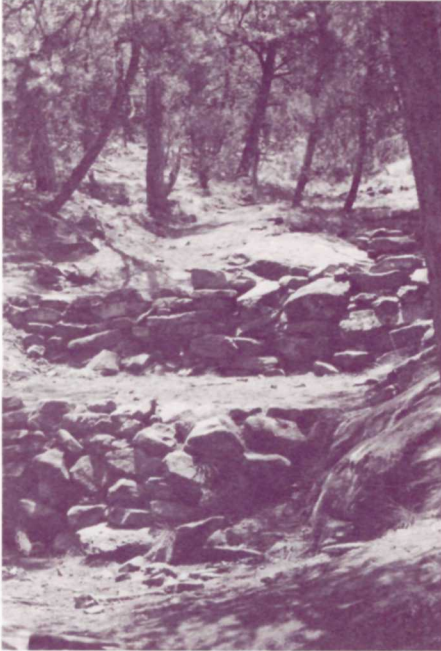
Aerial view of Wetherill Mesa looking south.



Wetherill Mesa, forming part of the western boundary of Mesa Verde National Park, contains the second largest concentration of ruins in the area. The 1958 archeological survey of the mesa documented close to 900 sites ranging in age from Modified Basketmaker pithouses (A.D. 450 - 750) to the Classic Pueblo cliff dwellings (A.D. 1200 - 1300). During its occupation this excellent location could have accommodated approximately 1000 to 2000 Anasazi (a Navajo Indian word meaning "ancient ones") people.

Flourishing settlements must have dotted Wetherill Mesa, for thousands of acres of flat mesa top land were available for the cultivation of corn, beans, and squash, the staple crops throughout Mesa Verde. Here a yearly average of 18 inches of moisture enhanced the deep, rich soil and nourished the crops. However, annual rainfall varied, and during drought years the Anasazi developed a system of water storage reservoirs and check dams which ensured at least a

minimal harvest. Close to 1000 of these check dams were constructed. In fact, near Step House a series of over 100 terraces within only one quarter mile have been found.



One of the many check dams found on Wetherill Mesa

In the fragile pinyon pine-juniper ecosystem of Mesa Verde, constant occupation and land use eventually took its toll. As the population expanded, pressure from over-farming decreased the productivity of the fields. Extensive clearing and use of trees for both construction and firewood could have depleted the valuable timber resource. Increased hunting of game animals probably reduced their numbers. These pressures, in combination with the serious drought of the late 1200's, created an environment in which the Anasazi could survive no longer. Gradually families abandoned their homes and moved elsewhere until by around A.D. 1300 only the empty cliff dwellings and broken fragments of the Anasazi culture remained.

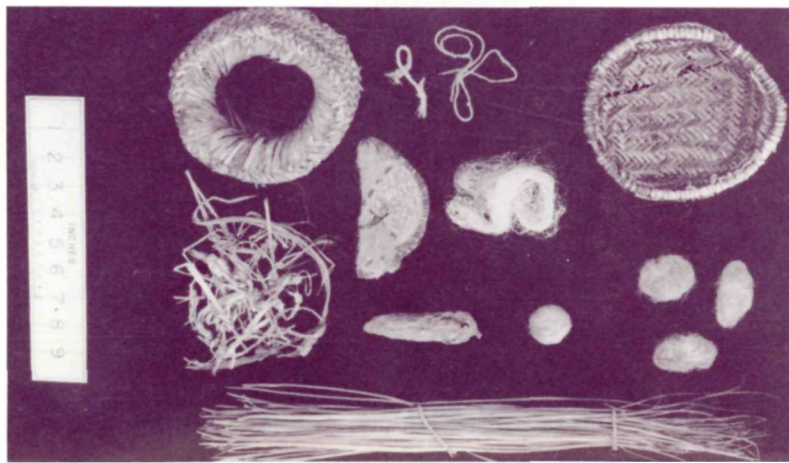


Corn, beans, squash



Al (center) and Richard (right) Wetherill with an early party of visitors to Mesa Verde

Archeological investigation on Wetherill Mesa began in 1891 when Gustaf Nordenskiöld, a Swedish landowner, came to visit the Benjamin Wetherill family in Mancos, Colorado. With the assistance of this ranching family, Nordenskiöld explored, excavated and photographed many cliff dwellings. His book, *The Cliff Dwellers of the Mesa Verde*, contains vivid accounts of their adventures.



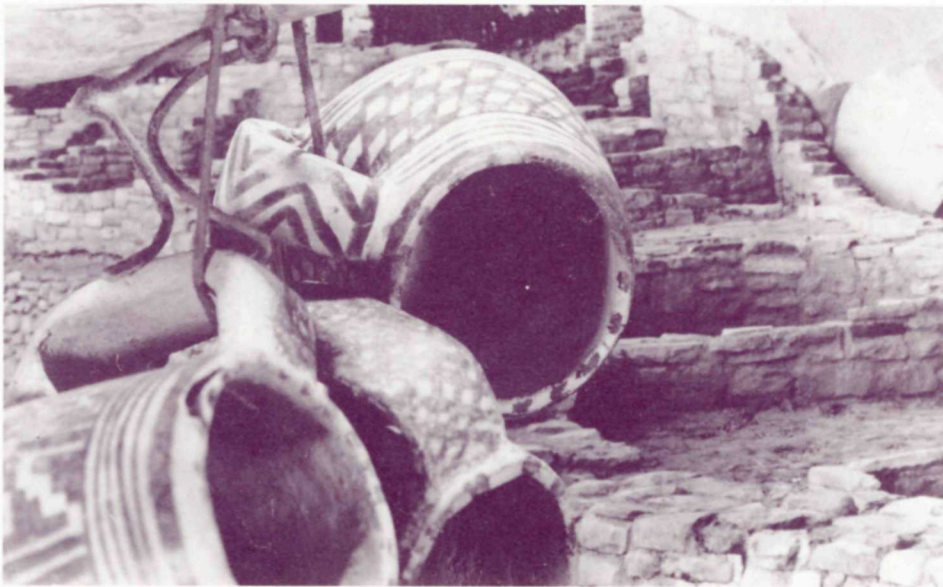


1926 excavation in Step House under the direction of Supt. Jesse Nusbaum.

Yet these men were basically interested in artifact collecting, for the science of archeology itself was still in its infancy.

With the passage of the Antiquities Act in 1906 the government authorized the protection of such valuable archeological areas and

created Mesa Verde National Park. Still, only sporadic excavation and stabilization work occurred on Wetherill Mesa until the 1950's when the National Park Service in cooperation with the National Geographic Society decided to launch a scientific survey and partial excavation of the mesa.



Wetherill Mesa Project archeologists excavating a burial in Badger House.

Using the latest archeological techniques, the Wetherill Mesa Project was designed not only to excavate the dwellings but also to develop a reasonably clear picture



Porfirio and Dora Montoya from Santa Ana Pueblo, New Mexico. The Montoyas and other Pueblo people came to Mesa Verde as consultants about possible connection with the Anasazi culture.



Sorted Wetherill Mesa potsherds awaiting analysis.

of the prehistoric way of life at Mesa Verde, including the reasons for its abandonment and the subsequent movements of its emigrants. No longer were the archeologists limited merely to the study of pottery fragments or skeletal remains. Bird and mammal bone identification, dental

analysis, climatic research, human fecal analysis, and host of other investigation methods were applied to the work. This maturation of archeology established a firm base of knowledge upon which researchers continue their exploration of this ancient civilization.

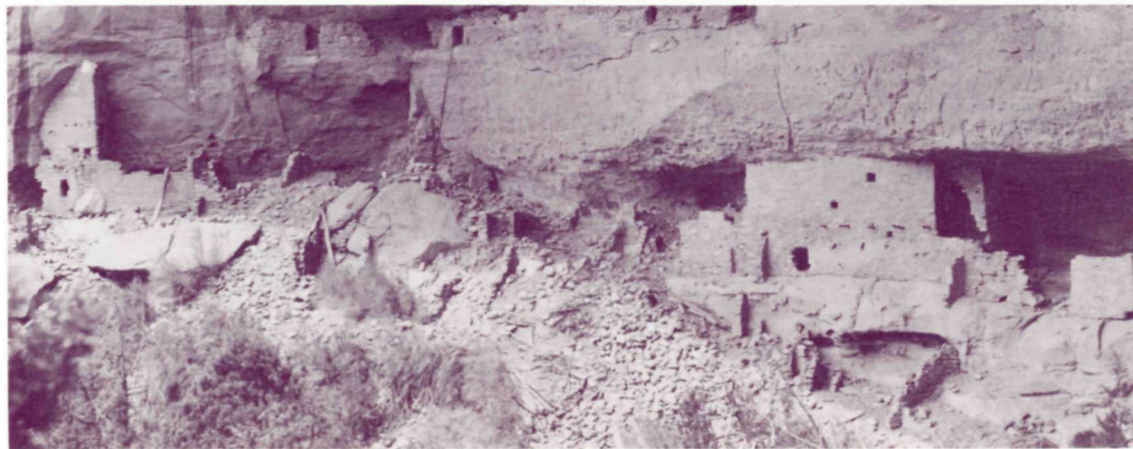


"Of all these houses the one most remarkable for what we found in it was the Mug House, so named because of four or five mugs found tied together with strings through their handles." A narrative by Charlie Mason, a Wetherill family inlaw.

Long House, the second largest cliff dwelling in Mesa Verde, contains some 150 rooms, 21 kivas, and an unusual large central plaza. So named because of its long overhang, the dwelling's intricate network of living rooms could have accommodated some 150 to 175 people. Although in construction Long House is characteristic of the hundreds of cliff dwellings throughout Mesa Verde, its size is much larger than the more typical 10 to 15 room unit. Using only

simple stone axes the Anasazi built rooms of shaped sandstone blocks which in some sections were three stories high. In the ledges above the main part of the pueblo are remnants of storage rooms, once easily reached by ladder from the roofs of lower rooms. Construction work and other daily activities required water, and the inhabitants of Long House were fortunate to have an extensive seep spring system directly in the back of the cave.

A customary practice of the Anasazi was to dispose of refuse in front of the dwelling. The talus slope at Long House served as the trash heap for this community. Refuse included food remains, broken pieces of pottery, discarded sandals, bone or stone tools no longer used, and a wide assortment of other daily utensils. In addition, archeologists found 28 burials in the Long House trash dump. These burials, along with their associated artifacts (blankets, pottery, jewelry,



*Long House
shortly after
its discovery*

etc.), provided a wealth of information about the different practices of the original occupants.

The unique feature of Long House is the large central plaza. Generally considered a great kiva or dance plaza, it probably would have been used for ceremonial and secular activities of the village. Benches along the side walls would have been perfect viewing areas for the participants. Along either side of the large rectangular firepit are



Anasazi vessels such as these were used to dip water out of the spring in Long House.



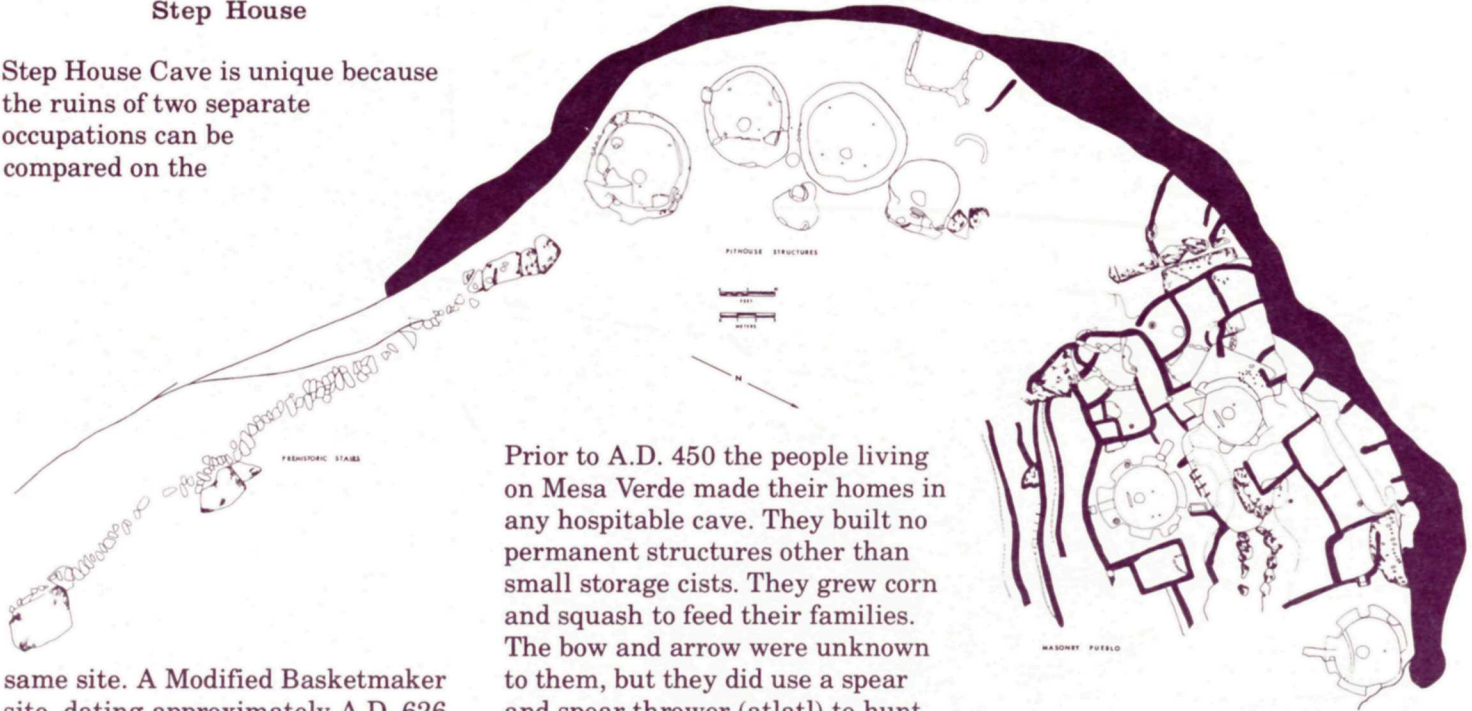
Regularly scheduled guided tours of Long House are available during the summer months.

recessed areas which may have served as foot drums. Try to imagine the sounds emanating from these foot drums and echoing down the canyon as the Anasazi performed their ceremonial dances. The only counterpart to this plaza in Mesa Verde is in Fire Temple (in Fewkes

Canyon on Chapin Mesa). Whether the people living in Long House were innovators of this style or merely attempted to copy the layout of Fire Temple, the plaza has certainly provided interesting speculative material for the archeologists.

Step House

Step House Cave is unique because the ruins of two separate occupations can be compared on the



same site. A Modified Basketmaker site, dating approximately A.D. 626, is situated between the old stone steps on the left and the large boulders on the right. The rest of the cave is occupied by the masonry pueblo dating to Classic Pueblo times (A.D. 1226).

Prior to A.D. 450 the people living on Mesa Verde made their homes in any hospitable cave. They built no permanent structures other than small storage cists. They grew corn and squash to feed their families. The bow and arrow were unknown to them, but they did use a spear and spear-thrower (atlatl) to hunt game. Pottery was not yet in use so cooking was accomplished by placing food in tightly woven baskets and dropping heated rocks in the food until it was hot. Their basketry had developed into such an

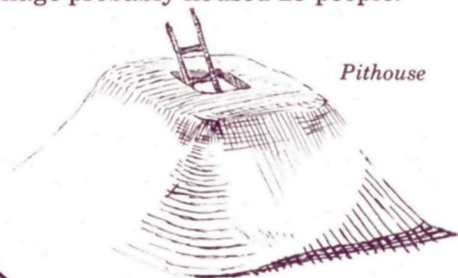
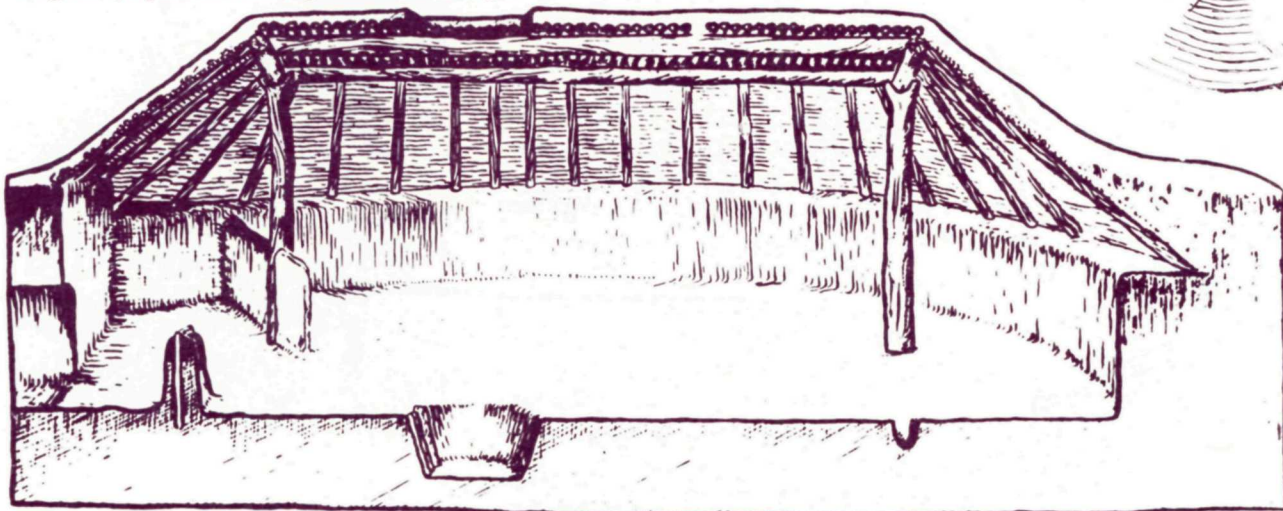
art that the early explorers, impressed with their talent, gave them the name Basketmakers. No Basketmaker sites have been found in the Park to date.

1 Before you are the remains of four pithouses. These were the homes of the next cultural stage in Mesa Verde — the Modified Basketmakers A.D. 450-750. By this period a majority of the Anasazi had moved to the mesa tops although some, like the people in Step House, chose to live in the

overhangs. The development of the pithouse was the biggest cultural change for the Anasazi at this time. Pithouses have a ventilator shaft to allow fresh air to enter the room, a firepit for warmth and cooking, cists for storage, and a roof entryway. Further developments included the addition of beans to the diet as well

as the introduction of pottery and the bow and arrow. Turkeys were domesticated, and their feathers were used to make blankets and warm clothing. This small pithouse village probably housed 25 people.

Diagram of a pithouse showing construction design.

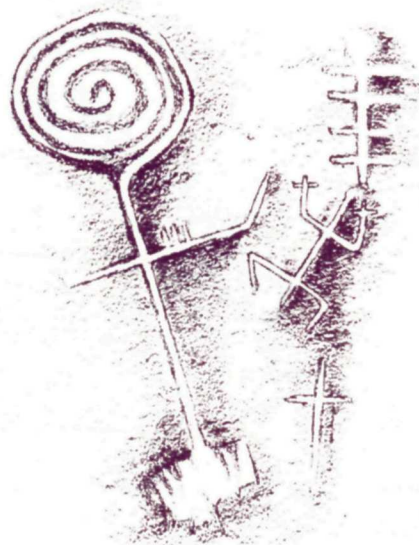




*Artist's reconstruction of
a hand and toe hold trail.*

2 The boulders in front of you indicate the evidence of both ancient and modern man. The grooves worn into the sandstone above you and to your right resulted from the Anasazi rubbing stones back and forth to sharpen stone axes or to form hand grinding stones (manos). The series of small indentations in the rock were used as hand and toe holds to enable the occupants to climb up to upper rooms. Paths similar to this were used to gain access to the mesa top. The No. 21 inscribed into the rock was put there by Gustaf Nordenskiöld in 1891. Each ruin in which he excavated received a site number. Please proceed to the ladder and climb it to the next period of occupancy.

3 Directly ahead of the ladder on the vertical face you can see many designs (called petroglyphs) pecked into the sandstone. Animal, plant and human forms as well as geometric designs are recognizable.



Petroglyphs

This is one of the larger concentrations of rock art in Mesa Verde. Above the petroglyph rock are the remains of walls on top of the boulders. You can see how the Anasazi had to work around the natural obstacles to build their homes. This section of rooms was probably two stories high.

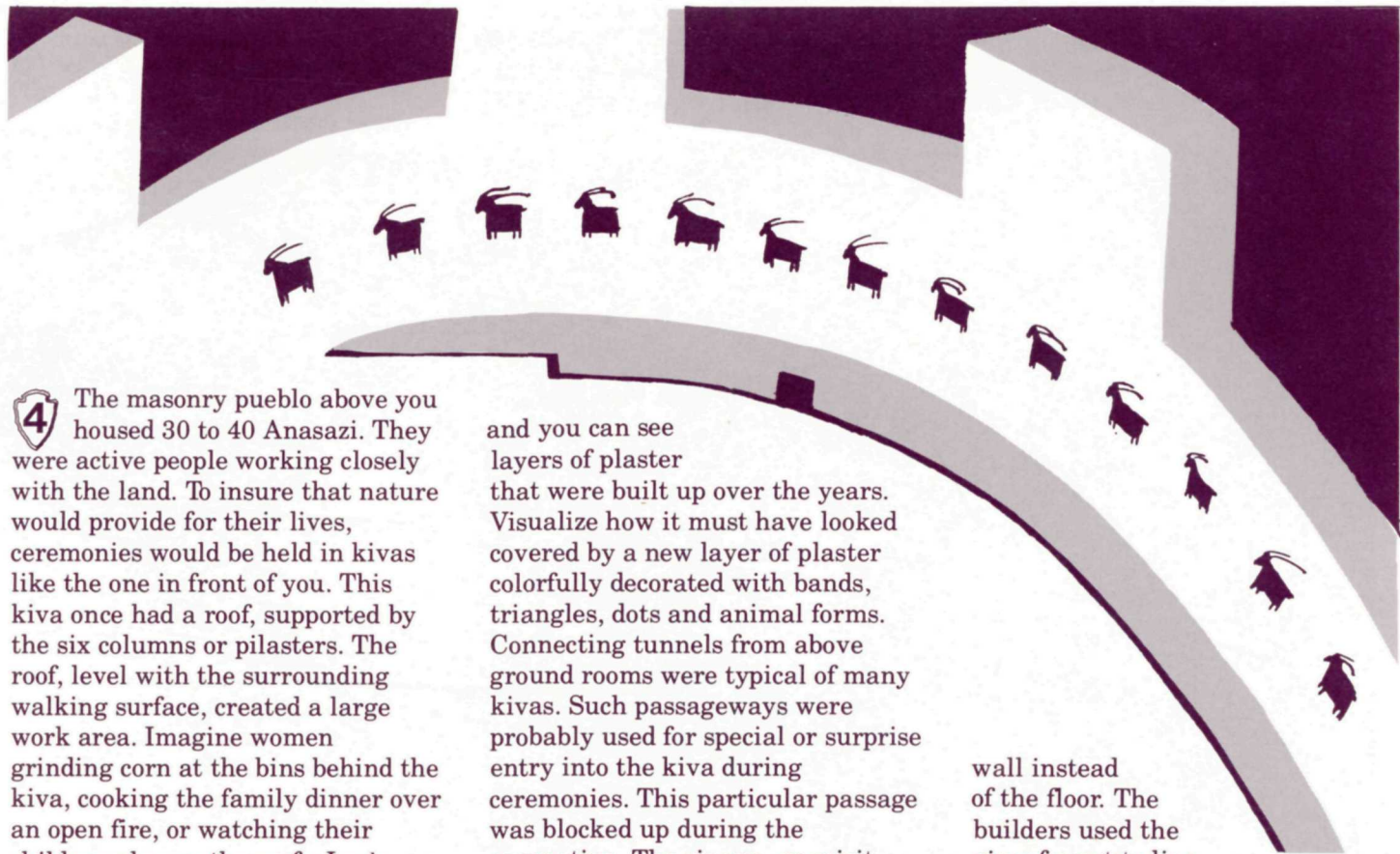


The masonry pueblo above you housed 30 to 40 Anasazi. They were active people working closely with the land. To insure that nature would provide for their lives, ceremonies would be held in kivas like the one in front of you. This kiva once had a roof, supported by the six columns or pilasters. The roof, level with the surrounding walking surface, created a large work area. Imagine women grinding corn at the bins behind the kiva, cooking the family dinner over an open fire, or watching their children play on the roofs. Look carefully at the walls of the kiva

and you can see layers of plaster that were built up over the years. Visualize how it must have looked covered by a new layer of plaster colorfully decorated with bands, triangles, dots and animal forms. Connecting tunnels from above ground rooms were typical of many kivas. Such passageways were probably used for special or surprise entry into the kiva during ceremonies. This particular passage was blocked up during the occupation. The sipapu, or spirit hole, in this kiva is located in the

wall instead of the floor. The builders used the rim of a pot to line this sipapu.

Kiva mural





Food and pottery



This area was probably another large work area since no evidence of a roof was found.

Archeologists believe that this was a food preparation area. A corrugated jar buried in the floor contained the seeds of 10 different

native plant species. 1682 corn cobs were found in the debris (or fill) near the floor. The rooms in front of you were at least two stories high,

extending to the upper ledge. In the room to your right notice the original juniper wood lintel in the upper part of the small doorway. The beams in this room had been robbed in prehistoric times, possibly to build homes elsewhere. Perhaps Step House was abandoned earlier than many of the other cliff dwellings. Stand in front of the Number 5 and look directly above you on the cave ceiling. There are several black "x's" put there by the inhabitants. Referred to as "Navajo stars" because of the number found on Navajo lands, no one knows their meaning or significance.

6 Small rooms such as the ones you see on the ledge above you were probably used for food storage. The small hand and toe hold trail on the rock face was the main access to the ledge. Turn and look across the cave and up the slope to the south (along the cliff). Those are the series of original stone steps that gave Step House its name.



Prehistoric stairs in Step House



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