



Foundation Document Overview

Casa Grande Ruins National Monument

Arizona



Contact Information

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Purpose



CASA GRANDE RUINS NATIONAL MONUMENT was set aside for the preservation and interpretation of the Casa Grande and surrounding features and objects of prehistoric interest.



Significance

Significance statements express why Casa Grande Ruins National Monument resources and values are important enough to merit national park unit designation. Statements of significance describe why an area is important within a global, national, regional, and systemwide context. These statements are linked to the purpose of the park unit, and are supported by data, research, and consensus. Significance statements describe the distinctive nature of the park and inform management decisions, focusing efforts on preserving and protecting the most important resources and values of the park unit.

- Casa Grande is the only surviving example of a multistory, freestanding earthen Great House structure from the Hohokam culture. It represents the final evolution of the architectural tradition of the late classic period.
- The establishment of Casa Grande Ruins National Monument as the first archeological reserve in 1892 initiated the U.S. government's archeological preservation movement. The integrity of the resources remains high due to the early date of the site's establishment.
- Casa Grande Ruins National Monument is a sacred place for many American Indians who have an affiliation with the Ancestral Sonoran Desert People.
- Casa Grande Ruins National Monument exemplifies early adaptation to the desert environment by the Ancestral Sonoran Desert People, including use of nearby Gila River and others for creating the most extensive prehistoric irrigation-based agricultural desert society in North America.



Fundamental Resources and Values

Fundamental resources and values are those features, systems, processes, experiences, stories, scenes, sounds, smells, or other attributes determined to merit primary consideration during planning and management processes because they are essential to achieving the purpose of the park and maintaining its significance.

- **Casa Grande Ruin**
- **Compounds and Associated Archeological Sites**
- **The Sonoran Desert Setting (viewshed and night sky)**
- **Ethnographic Resources (sacred animal and plant life, stories/songs about the site, petroglyphs, and ceremonies)**
- **Museum Collections and Archives**

Casa Grande Ruins National Monument contains other resources and values that may not be fundamental to the purpose and significance of the park, but are important to consider in management and planning decisions. These are referred to as other important resources and values.

- **The Shelter Over Casa Grande**
- **Civilian Conservation Corps Historic District**
- **Sonoran Desert Ecosystem**



Interpretive Themes

Interpretive themes are often described as the key stories or concepts that visitors should understand after visiting a park—they define the most important ideas or concepts communicated to visitors about a park unit. Themes are derived from—and should reflect—park purpose, significance, resources, and values. The set of interpretive themes is complete when it provides the structure necessary for park staff to develop opportunities for visitors to explore and relate to all of the park significances and fundamental resources and values.

- Diverse oral traditions of the Ancestral Sonoran Desert People and the evocative Casa Grande Ruins provide insight into the ability of humans to thrive within the constraints of challenging natural conditions, which raises questions about the sustainability of modern society that does not live within those constraints.
- The Ancestral Sonoran Desert People applied traditional knowledge of engineering, hydrology, and astronomy, and practiced economic and resource planning that enabled them to live comfortably throughout the region.
- The cultural landscape of the Gila River Valley, which includes Casa Grande Ruins and surrounding communities, has been home to the Ancestral Sonoran Desert People and their descendants for thousands of years. This landscape is sacred to the people of eight traditionally associated tribes and speaks of ancestral homeland, identity, and tradition.
- The establishment of Casa Grande Ruins as the first archeological reserve in 1892 initiated the beginning of America's archeological preservation movement, from which we all benefit today.
- The physical prominence and sophisticated construction of the Casa Grande made it a landmark in early European exploration and western migration and it continues to be a dominant feature on the landscape today.



Description

President Benjamin Harrison set aside the “Casa Grande Ruin Reservation” by executive order on June 22, 1892, to protect the large, multistoried Casa Grande, marking one of the first efforts by the federal government to protect the nation’s archeological heritage. President Woodrow Wilson proclaimed Casa Grande Ruins a national monument on August 3, 1918, transferring management to the National Park Service.

The Casa Grande, meaning “great house,” was so named by early Spanish explorers. The O’otham people call it Sivan Vah’Ki. Archeological evidence indicates the structure was completed about 1350 CE (Common Era). After 600 years of continuous exposure to the harsh Sonoran Desert environment, what remains is still impressive. Four stories high and 60 feet long, it is the largest known structure of its type built by the Ancestral Sonoran Desert People. More than 3,000 tons of local caliche, a hard concrete-like mixture of sand, clay, and calcium carbonate (limestone), were used in its construction. Layers of mud formed walls 4 feet thick at the base, tapering toward the top. Hundreds of juniper, pine, and other trees, some from more than 60 miles away, anchored the walls, with timbers supporting both ceiling and floor.

The walls face the four cardinal compass points. Near the top of the western wall, a circular hole aligns with the setting sun on the summer solstice. Other openings align with the sun or moon during specific times of the year. Its height allows visibility over a great distance. Fires on its roof could have been seen for miles in any direction and used as signals.

The Ancestral Sonoran Desert People were a mostly sedentary, agricultural people. The term “Hohokam” is used by archeologists to define the set of chronologic periods within a broad cultural time frame. However, the Ancestral Sonoran Desert People also had contact and traded with ancient peoples in today’s California, the Great Plains, the Colorado Plateau, and Northern Mexico.

During the classic period (1175–1450 CE) walled compounds appeared, in addition to existing pit house villages. The Casa Grande and surrounding structures were built during this period. The Ancestral Sonoran Desert People’s culture and influence is well known in southwest archeology, along with the importance of the Casa Grande.

Frederick Law Olmsted Jr. and National Park Service architect Thomas Vint designed and built the large shelter over the Great House in 1932, replacing an older wooden protective cover. This unique structure has survived high winds, frequent storms, and blasting heat, still offering protection to the Casa Grande ruins. Between 1931 and 1939, Civilian Conservation Corps members built 14 structures that remain part of the landscape.

Today, the monument’s 472.5 acres of Sonoran Desert landscape are surrounded by agricultural land, businesses, and residential neighborhoods in Coolidge, Arizona. Visitors can enjoy firsthand experiences with archeological features and landscape, including the Casa Grande.

