DOMINGUEZ AND ESCALANTE RUINS

Dolores, Colorado

U.S. Department of the Interior
Bureau of Land Management

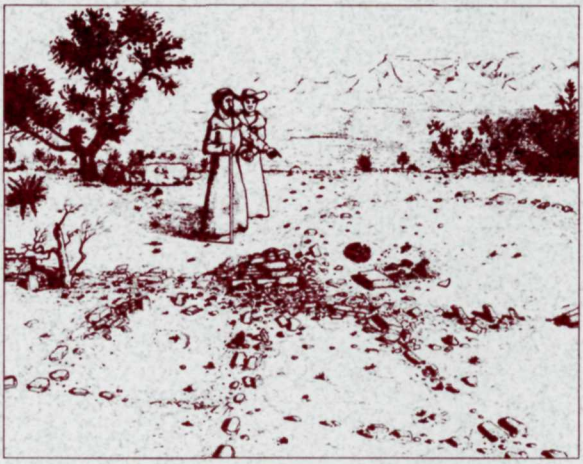
Welcome to the Dominguez and Escalante Ruins

The one-mile round-trip path to the past will take you approximately 45 minutes to complete. Please watch your step and enjoy your visit.

The Naming of the Ruins

On July 29, 1776, two Franciscan priests and eight civilians set out from Santa Fe to find and establish a route to the Spanish missions in California. Just two weeks later the party reached the Dolores River in southwestern Colorado. They arrived on August 13, the feast day of Our Lady of Sorrows, and named the river El Rio de Nuestra Señora de los Dolores, the River of Our Lady of Sorrows.

The expedition camped by the river and explored the nearby area. To the south, above their camp, Fathers Escalante and Dominguez, the party's leaders, found the ancient ruins of a small Indian village. The ruin was noted in Escalante's journal, the first record of a prehistoric site in Colorado. The Escalante Ruin may have been the "ancient settlement" described in the journal. A second site discovered nearby in modern times is the Dominguez Ruin.



The first Anasazi ruin discovered in Colorado

The adventurers journeyed through much of western Colorado, traveling as far as the Salt Lake Valley in Utah before illness and hunger forced them to abandon their search. The route to California remained a mystery, and the explorers returned to Santa Fe early in 1777.

Excavation of the Ruins

The excavation of the Dominguez and Escalante Ruins was sponsored by the Bureau of Land Management in 1975-76. Escalante Ruin, located on top of a small hill with a spectacular view of the Montezuma Valley and McPhee Reservoir, is a Chaco outlier. The Dominguez Ruin, nestled in a small depression just south of the Anasazi Heritage Center, is a small Northern San Juan Anasazi site built to house one, or, at most, two families. The site was somehow linked to the larger Escalante complex. The excavation of Dominguez revealed an unusually rich Anasazi burial.

The Anasazi

The deep canyons, rock palisades, high mesas, and open desert of the Four Corners area were home to a remarkable group of agricultural people we today refer to as the Anasazi -- the ancient ones. Dotted across the southwestern landscape are the dramatic remains of tens of thousands of dwellings made of rock and mud. These, along with bits of broken pottery and scattered fragments of tools, provide mute testimony that humans lived and worked and played here long ago.

From approximately AD 1 to 1300, the Anasazi farmed the arid section of the southwest known today as the Four Corners area. Their primary crops were corn, squash, and beans. They domesticated the turkey and some wild plant foods and hunted game to supplement their diet.

The Anasazi are noted for their remarkable building techniques. They constructed masonry homes that varied from simple underground pitstructures to large, multi-storied villages. Special structures, called kivas, were used for ceremonial and other social activities.

Evidence that pottery-making was an art at which the Anasazi were highly skilled is provided by the beautifully decorated bowls, ladles, mugs, and other intricate ceramic items found in ruins throughout the southwest. The fine work was in demand by other cultural groups, and Anasazi ceramics were traded throughout the region.

Archaeologists are still puzzling over the unsolved riddles of the Anasazi. Why did they gradually abandon the Four Corners area by AD 1300? Their movements seem to be related to drought, rainfall, and cool winters; and it is possible that population density overtaxed the resources needed to support the inhabitants. Where did they go? Only time and further research eventually will solve the mystery of the ancient ones.

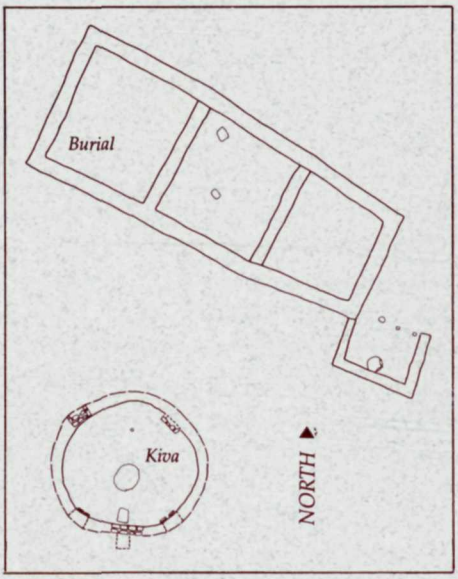
The Chaco Anasazi

The architecture, pottery and other artifacts, possibly even the language and dress, and other characteristics of the Chaco Anasazi were different from the Northern San Juan Anasazi. In contrast to the agricultural and populous northern group who occupied the upper Dolores River valley, the inhabitants of Chaco Canyon developed a relatively complex society. Chaco Canyon is nearly 200 miles to the south in New Mexico. By AD 1000, the Chacoans had developed a widespread area of administrative, political, and religious influence and were comparatively advanced in architectural styles and construction.

The major Chaco towns are large, four- and five-storied structures with elaborate kivas, called Great Kivas. The largest of these towns, Pueblo Bonito, rises to at least four stories, contains 600 rooms and 33 kivas, and exhibits extremely fine masonry. A series of roads extend north and south from a dozen or so Chacoan central towns to other Chaco villages. A large number of Chaco towns, or outliers (such as Escalante), have been found

throughout the San Juan Basin of Colorado, Utah, and New Mexico.

An irrigation system was constructed in the Chaco Wash near the central towns where intensive agriculture was practiced. Even so, the Chaco people apparently were forced to operate an extensive trading enterprise through their system of outliers to supplement food supplies at home. The Chacoans traded finely crafted items for food and other raw materials. They also may have exercised considerable religious and political influence over other Anasazi groups.



Map of Dominguez Ruin

Dominguez Ruin

The Dominguez Ruin is located at the base of the hill below the much larger Escalante Ruin. Today, the site consists of four rooms with low stone walls--all that remains of the roofed structure constructed approximately AD 1123. The pecked, block-like stone identifies it as a Northern San Juan Anasazi form of construction. A dirt-walled kiva, 4 feet deep and 11 feet in diameter, lies just south of the room block. It was not possible to stabilize the kiva because of its dirt walls. Dominguez was home to about 8 to 10 people, probably one or two households.

Social and ritual ceremonies took place in kivas

Although it may seem small and architecturally undramatic, the site is significant in several ways. Unlike Escalante, the building style and dates indicate that the Dominguez Ruin belongs to the Northern San Juan Anasazi Tradition. However, because of its proximity to Escalante and overlapping dates, archaeologists believe the site may have been associated with activities at the Chaco outlier on top of the hill.

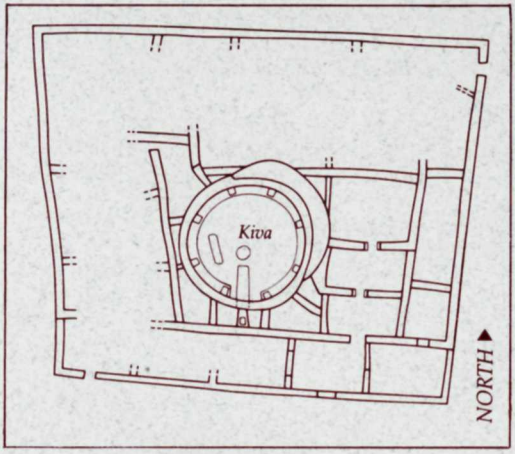
Excavation of Dominguez revealed, beneath the floor of the westernmost room, the burial of a 35-year old woman, presumably of high status and influence. A rich variety of unusual grave offerings was associated with the burial:

—6,900 turquoise, jet, and shell beads
—a unique shell and turquoise *frog pendant*
—3 turquoise and shell mosaics
—ceramic vessels, bone scrapers, the impression of a burial mat, and other items.

There is speculation that the woman was a distinguished visitor from the Chaco area because of the elaborately constructed and unusual frog pendant. She may have played an important role in the trade network established by the Chacoans.

Just another small Anasazi ruin? Hardly! The excavation unfolded the fascinating story of an Anasazi woman of high status. While we do know a few things about her, we can only wonder at what remains to be discovered.

Was the Dominguez frog worn by a visitor to the Escalante community?



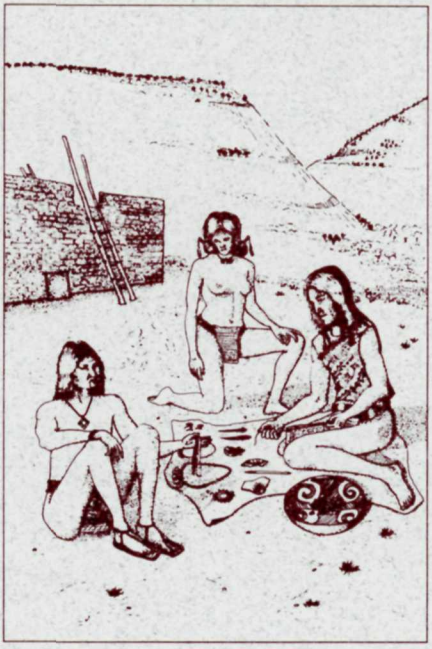
Map of Escalante Ruin
(Handicapped accessible)

Escalante Ruin

Archaeologists have used tree-ring dates to determine there were three periods of occupation at the Escalante Ruin. Emigrants from the Chaco area constructed the main complex in AD 1129 and occupied the site for at least nine years. During the initial occupation, Escalante was probably a Chaco trading center, and the inhabitants of the upper Dolores River valley would have been assured of an unfailing supply of trade goods and other resources. It may have served as a religious center, too.

Escalante is considered one of the northernmost Chaco outliers—one of many such sites in the Southwest which show strong influences from the Chacoan Anasazi. Outliers appear to have been part of a vast trading and resource distribution system developed by people of the Chaco Canyon area. It extended throughout much of Colorado and New Mexico and into Utah.

The pattern of the site is similar to other Chaco outliers. It is composed of a square or rectangular room block with enclosed Chaco-style kivas, or ceremonial structures. The complex consisted of rooms used for living and for storage. Rooms are considerably larger than those found in the Northern San Juan region. The masonry is typical of the Chaco Canyon style. The walls are constructed of stones of a similar size and shape. Placed in horizontal rows, the blocky stones alternate with a band of smaller stones, called spalls. This stone facing, or veneer, encloses a core composed of sandstone rubble. It appears that the Chaco Anasazi who lived at Escalante tried to maintain the same lifestyle as that of their friends and relatives to the south.



A trader arrives at Escalante

Two kivas were also part of the Escalante community. Only one of the special structures has been excavated, and the features found in the excavated kiva resemble those of the Chaco area. The room contains a bench, eight pilasters

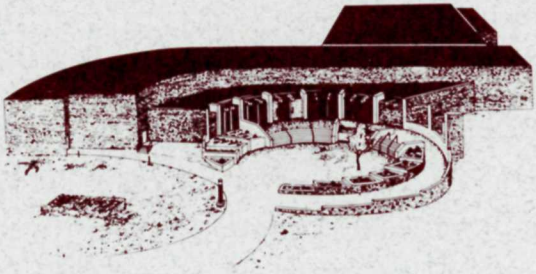
(bases for roof supports), a fire pit, and a sub-floor ventilator used for creating a fresh air draft. A sub-floor vault may have been used as a foot drum.

Many questions remain about the Chaco outliers. The concept that Chaco Canyon was a center for complex administrative, religious, and regional exchange activities certainly challenges the idea many of us have of "simple Anasazi farmers." Because Escalante is only one of the way stations in an extremely complex system and because future research is likely to yield even more interesting facts, the site conveys an excitement at which the silent stone walls can only hint.

After a short abandonment, the pueblo was reoccupied about AD 1150 by people of the Northern San Juan Anasazi Tradition. A final occupation, also by a small group of Northern San Juan Anasazi, was of very short duration and occurred sometime around AD 1200.

The Anasazi Heritage Center

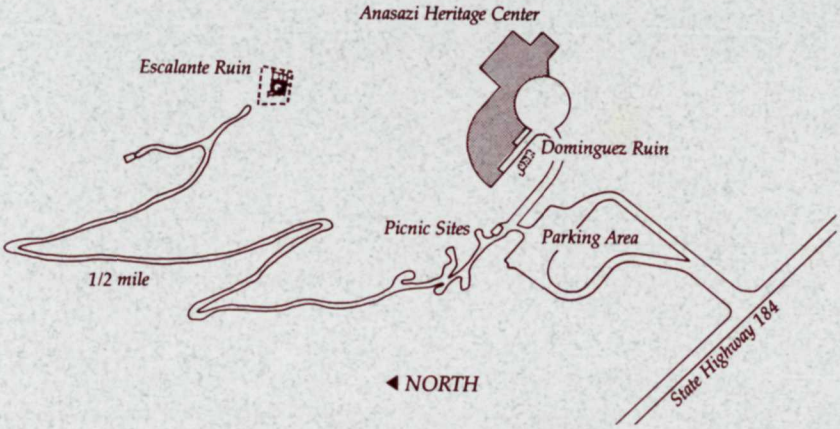
The Anasazi Heritage Center is an active research and interpretive facility for the study of prehistoric cultures in the Four Corners area, one of the richest archaeological areas in the United States. The museum is operated by the Bureau of Land Management, and the staff currently manages about two million artifacts, samples, and documents. The majority of the collection resulted from the Dolores Archaeological Program, the largest single archaeological contract awarded in the United States to date. Many of the Project items are displayed and interpreted; the remainder are available for study and research. The Center houses research laboratories, collections storage, library and archives, a theatre and conference rooms, a museum shop, and interpretive exhibits.



Anasazi Heritage Center

Preservation of Our Cultural Resources on Public Lands

Escalante and Dominguez Ruins should be enjoyed as part of the heritage of our nation's lands and resources. Please leave them as you found them for others to enjoy, too. The Archaeological Resources Protection Act of 1979 and the Antiquities Act of 1906 prohibit anyone, without authorization from the appropriate Government agency, from removing or destroying cultural material or artifacts found on Federal lands.



Trail map of Dominguez and Escalante Ruins
Handicapped accessible.

The Dominguez and Escalante Ruins are adjacent to the Anasazi Heritage Center on State Highway 184 three miles from Dolores in southwestern Colorado. The heartland of the Northern San Juan Anasazi, as well as the varied landscape of Montezuma County today, can be seen from the trail at the Escalante Ruin.

In the same general area are the Lowry Pueblo Ruins, Mesa Verde National Park, Hovenweep National Monument, and the San Juan National Forest.

Hours of Operation:

May 15-September 15: Monday-Saturday 9 a.m. to 5 p.m.
Sunday 10 a.m. to 5 p.m.

Remainder of year: Call for days and hours of operation.

Closed New Year's Day, Thanksgiving Day, and Christmas Day.

BUREAU OF LAND MANAGEMENT
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