



On the Mesa Tops
Mesa Verde people grew crops and hunted game on the mesa tops. The soil was fertile and, except in drought, about as well watered as now. The vegetation is also about the same today as it was then, but with less pinyon and juniper. The people cut pinyon and juniper for building materials and firewood and to clear land for farming. They reached their fields by hand-and-toe-hold trails pecked into the canyon walls.

Farming
At Mesa Verde the people grew their staple crops of squash, corn, and beans in fields scattered across the mesa tops. They worked the soil with digging sticks and often built check dams along draws to catch and hold rain and snow.

Ancestral Puebloans and Their World

About 1,400 years ago, long before Europeans explored North America, a group of people living in the Four Corners region chose Mesa Verde for their home. For more than 700 years they and their descendants lived and flourished here, eventually building elaborate stone communities in the sheltered alcoves of canyon walls. Then, in the late 1200s, in the span of a generation or two, they left their homes and moved away.

Mesa Verde National Park preserves a spectacular reminder of this ancient culture. Archeologists have called these people Anasazi, from a Navajo word sometimes translated as "the ancient foreigners." We now call them Ancestral Puebloans, reflecting their modern descendants.

Ever since local cowboys first reported the cliff dwellings in the 1880s, archeologists have sought to understand these people's lives. But despite decades of excavation, analysis, classification, and comparison, scientific knowledge remains sketchy. We will never know the whole story: they left no written records and much that was important in their lives has perished. Yet for all their silence, these structures speak with a certain eloquence. They tell of a people adept at building, artistic in their crafts, and skillful at making a living from a difficult land.

The structures are evidence of a society that, over centuries, accumulated skills and traditions and passed them on from generation to generation. By the Classic Period, from 1100 to 1300, Ancestral Puebloans were heirs of a vigorous civilization, whose accomplishments in community living and the arts must be ranked among the finest expressions of human culture in North America.

Using nature to advantage, Ancestral Puebloans built their dwellings beneath the overhanging cliffs. Their basic construction material was sandstone that they shaped into rectangular blocks about the size of a loaf of bread. The mortar between the blocks was a mix of dirt and water. Living rooms averaged about six feet by eight feet, space enough for two or three persons. Isolated rooms in the rear and on the upper levels were generally used for storing crops. They were experienced builders, as the construction testifies. Walls are tall and straight and have withstood the tests of time and the elements.

Many daily activities took place in open courtyards in front of the rooms. Fires built in summer were mainly for cooking. In winter, when alcove rooms were damp and uncomfortable, fires probably burned throughout the village.

Smoke-blackened walls and ceilings are reminders of the biting cold these people lived with for several months each year.

Ancestral Puebloans spent much of their time getting food, even in the best years. Farming was their main work, but they supplemented crops of beans, corn, and squash by gathering wild plants and hunting deer, rabbits, squirrels, and other game. Their only domestic animals were dogs and turkeys. Fortunately, Ancestral Puebloans tossed their trash close by—scraps of food, broken pottery and tools, anything not wanted, went down the slope in front of their homes. Much of what we know about daily life here comes from these garbage heaps.

Someone standing across the canyon from Spruce Tree House in the mid-1200s could have witnessed a scene like the illustration above. This was one of the largest villages in Mesa Verde. It had 129 rooms and eight kivas. Some 60 to 90 persons lived here at any time.

The season depicted is autumn, the villagers' busiest time of year. The harvest is underway. Some men are still gleaning the fields, while others are spreading the crops on a roof top to dry. These are the stores that will see them

through the long winter and even the next year or two if there is drought. Women are making pottery and grinding corn. Children scamper about, and old men sit in the sun telling stories. Hundreds of years before this village was built, their ancestors probably lived in pithouses in this same shelter.

This scene is conjectural but entirely plausible. We probably will never know a great deal more about these people than we do today.



Family Life at Mesa Verde

This Ancestral Puebloan family (left) is wearing hides, warm footwear, and feather-cloth robes for winter. The turkey was important in their economy—providing food, feathers used in weaving, and bones used for tools.

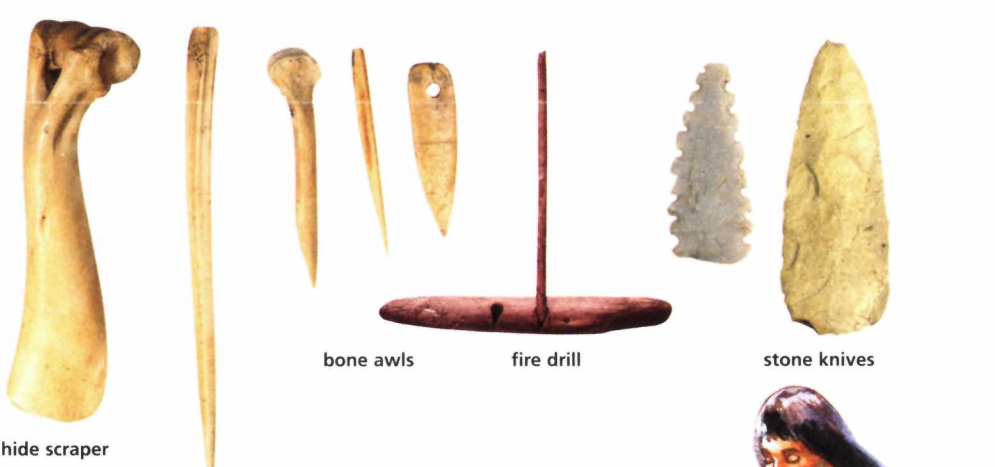
Archeology has yielded some facts about Mesa Verde's ancient people, but without a written record we cannot be sure about their social, political, or religious ideas. We must rely for insight on comparisons with modern Pueblo people of New Mexico and Arizona.

In the Classic Period at Mesa Verde—from 1100 to 1300—several generations probably lived together as a household. Each family occupied several rooms and built additional rooms as it grew. Several related families constituted a clan, which was probably matrilineal, tracing descent through the female line. If the analogy with current Hopi practice is correct, each clan would have had its own kiva and rights to its own agricultural plots.

Tools

Ancestral Puebloans used all available materials, with no metals. From locally available trees, plants, animals, and stone they made tools for grinding, cutting, pounding, chopping, scraping, perforating, polishing, and weaving.

They used the digging stick for farming, stone axe for clearing land, bow and arrow for



Basketry and Pottery

The finest baskets made at Mesa Verde were created before the people learned how to make pottery. Using the spiral twilled technique (right), they wove handsomely decorated baskets of many sizes and shapes and used them for carrying

water, storing grain, and even for cooking. They waterproofed baskets by lining them with pitch and cooked in them by dropping heated stones into the water. The most common coiling material was split willow, but

sometimes rabbitbrush or skunkbush was used. After the introduction of pottery about 550, basketry declined. The few baskets found here from the Classic Period, 1100 to 1300, are not as well made as the earlier baskets.

These were very accomplished potters, making vessels of many kinds including pots, bowls, canteens, ladles, jars, and mugs. Corrugated ware was used mostly for cooking and storage, while the elaborately decorated,

smooth-surfaced black-on-white wares may have had both ceremonial and everyday uses. Women were probably the potters. Designs tended to be personal and local and most likely were passed down from mother to daughter.

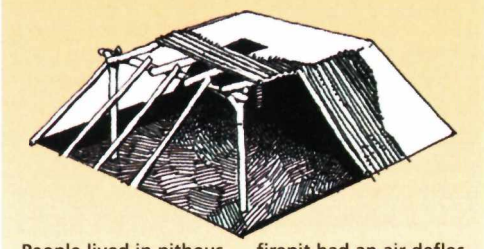
Design elements changed slowly, a characteristic that helps archeologists and modern descendants date and possibly track the location of early populations.

Before the Cliff Dwellers

The first Ancestral Puebloans settled in Mesa Verde (Spanish for "green table") 1,400 years ago. They are known as Basketmakers for their skill at the craft. Formerly nomadic, they were beginning to lead a more settled way of life. Farming replaced hunting and gathering as their main livelihood. They lived in pithouses clustered into small villages usually built on mesa tops but sometimes in cliff recesses. They learned to make pottery and acquired the bow and arrow, a more efficient weapon for hunting than the atlatl, a spear thrower.

These were fairly prosperous times for the Basketmakers, and their population multiplied. About the year 750 they began to build houses above ground, with upright walls fashioned of poles and mud. They built their houses one against another in long, curving rows, often with a pithouse or two in front. (Pithouses would later evolve into kivas.) From then on, these people are known as Pueblos, a Spanish word meaning "village dwellers."

Pithouses



People lived in pithouses here from about 550 to 750, as settled agriculture began. The pithouse (above) featured a living room sunk a few feet in the ground. Four corner timbers supported the roof. The firepit had an air deflector. An antechamber might contain storage bins or pits. The sipapu was a hole for passage to the underworld, from which the people had come. Pithouses later evolved into kivas.

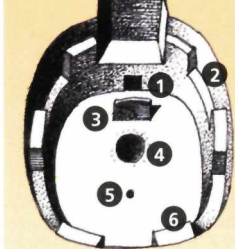
By 1000 the people of Mesa Verde had advanced from pole-and-adobe construction to skillful stone masonry. Walls of thick, double-coursed stone often rose two or three stories high and were joined together into units of 50 rooms or more. Pottery also changed, as black drawings on a white background replaced simple designs on a dull gray background. Farming accounted for more of their diet than before, and much mesa-top land was cleared for agriculture.

Between 1100 and 1300, the Classic Period, the population may have reached several thousand. It was mostly concentrated in compact villages of many rooms, often with the kivas built inside the enclosing walls rather than out in the open. The stone walls of the large pueblos are regarded as the finest ever built in Mesa Verde, with their straight courses of carefully shaped stones. Baskets show evidence of decline in quality, possibly because widespread use of pottery meant less attention to the craft. About 1200, another major population shift saw people begin to

move back into the cliff alcoves that sheltered their ancestors centuries before. Why did they make this move? We don't know: perhaps for defense; perhaps alcoves offered better protection from the elements; perhaps for religious or psychological reasons. Whatever the reason, or reasons, it gave rise to the cliff dwellings for which Mesa Verde is most famous.

Most of the cliff dwellings were built from the late 1190s to late 1270s. They range in size from one-room houses to villages of more than 150 rooms—Cliff Palace. Architecturally, there is no standard ground plan. Builders fit the structures to the available space. Most walls were single courses of stone, perhaps because alcove roofs limited heights and protected the walls from erosion by the weather. Masonry work varied in quality—rough construction is found alongside walls of well-shaped stones. Many rooms were plastered on the inside and decorated with painted designs.

Kiva



1 ventilator
2 bench
3 air deflector
4 fire-pit
5 sipapu
6 pilaster
Kiva is a Hopi word for ceremonial room—here underground chambers that may be comparable to later churches. Based on modern Pueblo practice, Ancestral Puebloans may have used kivas for healing rites or to pray for rain, luck in hunting, or a good crop. Kivas were gathering places and sometimes also places to weave. Pilasters supported a beam-and-mud roof. Entry was by ladder through a hole in the center of the roof. The small hole in the floor (left) is a sipapu, or symbolic entrance to the underworld.

Ancestral Puebloans lived in the cliff dwellings for less than 100 years. By about 1300 Mesa Verde was deserted. Several theories offer reasons for their migration. We do know that the last quarter of the 1200s saw drought and crop failures—but these people had survived earlier droughts. Maybe after hundreds of years of intensive use the land and its resources—soils, forests, and animals—were depleted. Perhaps there were social and political problems, and the people simply looked for new opportunities elsewhere.

When the cliff dwellers of Mesa Verde left, they traveled south into New Mexico and Arizona, settling among their kin who were already there. Whatever may have happened, some of today's Pueblo people, and maybe other tribes, are descendants of the cliff dwellers of Mesa Verde.

Exploring Mesa Verde



Spruce Tree House

Mesa Verde National Park was created in 1906 to preserve the archeological heritage of the Ancestral Puebloans, both atop the mesas and in the cliff dwellings below. The park includes over 4,500 archeological sites; only 600 are cliff dwellings. Plan to spend at least half a day discovering the unique opportunities in the park.

Getting Here Mesa Verde National Park can be reached by air, with daily flights into Cortez and Durango, and rail (terminals in Grand Junction, Colo., and Gallup, N.Mex.); buses from those points serve Cortez. The park's only entrance and main park road are open 24 hours every day.

Visitor Centers To get the most from your trip, start at a visitor center. Far View Visitor Center, 15 miles from the park entrance, is open from early April to mid-October. Exhibits display regional arts and crafts. Chapin Mesa Museum, 21 miles (45 minutes) from the park entrance, is open all year. Exhibits and dioramas trace the development of the Ancestral Puebloans.

Interpretive Programs Ranger-led tours through Cliff Palace, Balcony House, and Long House require tickets; buy them at Far View Visitor Center. A variety of interpretive programs are offered seasonally. Check our website (www.nps.gov/meve) and posted schedules for current programs.

Visitor Services Far View Lodge and associated services (lodging and restaurant, cafeteria and gift shop nearby) are available from late April through late October. For reservations contact: ARAMARK Mesa Verde, P.O. Box 277, Mancos, CO 81328, 1-800-449-2288; www.visitmesaverde.com. Concession bus tours of Chapin Mesa leave from the Far View Lodge.

Spruce Tree Terrace, near the Chapin Mesa Museum, sells food, gifts, and souvenirs year-round.

Camping Morefield Campground, open from mid-May to mid-October, has single and group campsites available first-come, first-served. Campsites have tables and fireplaces with grills. Some utility hookups are available. There is a RV dump station. Campground services include groceries, carry-out food, firewood, showers, and laundromat. Camping is limited to 14 days. Commercial campgrounds are located near the park entrance.

Hiking and Backpacking Hiking is permitted only on designated trails. No overnight backpacking or cross-country hiking is allowed in the park. Hikers must register at the trailhead for the Petroglyph Point and Spruce Canyon trails. It is essential that hikers carry enough water in summer months. Trails can be muddy and slippery after rain; proper footwear is essential. Visitors with

health problems should be aware that all trails except Soda Canyon Overlook Trail and Knife Edge Trail are strenuous, with steep elevation changes. Trails are closed by snow in winter.

Bicycles Bicycling is permitted only on the park's public roads, except for the Wetherill Mesa Road. There are no designated bicycle lanes; bicycling is not recommended.

For Your Safety and Protection Visits to cliff dwellings can be strenuous. Trails are steep and uneven, with steps and ladders to climb. Visiting cliff dwellings or hiking is not recommended for those with heart or respiratory problems. Major cliff dwellings can be seen from overlooks. Parents—watch your children—especially at the sites and near canyon rims. Do not throw rocks or objects into the canyons; there may be people below. Emergency first aid is available; check with a ranger.

Park roads have sharp curves and steep grades. Be alert for falling rocks. Do not park on roadways; use the pullouts. Roads and trails may be hazardous in winter; ask for information at the entrance station.

Park visitors can be targets of professional thieves who rob campsites or parked vehicles. Take your valuables with you or leave them in a secure place. Locked cars and trunks are not completely safe. Report all thefts to the nearest ranger station.

Accessibility Overlooks are wheelchair-accessible with assistance. Wheelchairs with wide-rim wheels are recommended. Trails may not meet legal grade requirements. Ask for an accessibility brochure at ranger stations, Far View Visitor Center, and Chapin Mesa Museum.

Regulations • Visitors to cliff dwellings must be accompanied by a park ranger during scheduled tours or open hours. • Camping is permitted only in the designated campground. • Feeding, capturing, or teasing wildlife, and picking, cutting, or damaging plants is prohibited. • Pets must be physically restrained at all times; animals are not allowed in public buildings or on trails. • Be careful with fire. One careless match can wipe out the growth of a lifetime. • Loaded firearms are prohibited. Unloaded weapons must be broken down and stowed while in the park. • Motor vehicles are allowed only on roadways, pullouts, or parking areas. • Report all accidents or injuries to a park ranger.

Stewardship and Preservation Most cliff dwellings are unexcavated and closed to the public. The Antiquities Act of 1906 and

the Archeological Resources Protection Act of 1979 prohibit the excavation, injury, or destruction of any archeological site on federal land and the defacing, destruction, or removal of any object of antiquity within the park. The latter act provides for fines of up to \$100,000 and imprisonment for up to 20 years for violations. Sites in the park are fragile. Please help us protect them for future generations.

For More Information Mesa Verde National Park P.O. Box 8 Mesa Verde National Park, CO 81330 970-529-4465 www.nps.gov/meve

The National Park Service cares for these special places saved by the American people so that all may experience our heritage. To learn more about national parks visit www.nps.gov.

