

A Brief History of Chaco Culture National Historical Park

AD 850 to 1250

Chaco Canyon served as a major urban center of ancestral Puebloan culture. Remarkable for its monumental public and ceremonial buildings, engineering projects, astronomy, artistic achievements, and distinctive architecture, it served as a hub of ceremony, trade, and administration for the prehistoric Four Corners area for 400 years—unlike anything before or since.

1250 to present

Members of affiliated clans and religious societies from Hopi and the Pueblos of New Mexico continue to return to Chaco on pilgrimages to honor their ancestral homelands.

1500s

By the 1500s (possibly decades earlier), what archeologists recognize as Navajo settlement patterns were already well established in the Dinéyah area, northeast of Chaco in Blanco, Largo, and Gobernador canyons.

1680

The Pueblo Revolt of 1680 briefly unified the Pueblo peoples of New Mexico and their allied neighbors, and expelled Spanish settlers from the Southwest.

1692

Spanish re-conquest forced Pueblo patriots into exile. Many took refuge with Navajo people living in the Dinéyah region, and the resulting cultural interactions included intermarriage; the exchange of ceremonial knowledge; and conflict and competition.

1700s

By the 1700s, what archeologists recognize as Navajo settlement patterns were well established in Chaco Canyon.

1774

A map produced by Don 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.” This term may be a Spanish translation of the Navajo word *Tsékołi*, meaning “rock-cut” or “canyon” or *Tzak aih*, meaning “white string of rocks.” (The later refers to the appearance the sandstone atop Chacra Mesa.)

1823

As José Antonio Viscarra led a military force west from Jémez Pueblo onto Navajo lands, he noted many fallen Chacoan buildings along the route.

1849

The Washington Expedition, a military reconnaissance under the direction of Lt. James Simpson of the Army Corps of Topographical Engineers, surveyed Navajo lands, and wrote accounts of Chacoan cultural sites. Attached to the expedition, the Kern brothers produced excellent illustrations of the sites for a government report.

1877

W. H. Jackson with the U.S. Geological and Geographical Survey (headed by Ferdinand Hayden) produced expanded descriptions and maps of Chacoan sites. Jackson noted Pueblo Alto and Chacoan stairways carved into cliffs. No photos were produced, because he experimented with a new photographic film process at Chaco, which failed.

1888

Victor and Cosmos Mindeleff of the Bureau of American Ethnology spent several weeks at Chaco surveying and photographing the major Chacoan sites for a monumental study of Pueblo architecture. Their photographs documented vandalism and looting. These photos, the oldest known, provide the park with a starting point for determining the modern effects of visitation, looting, vandalism, and natural collapse on these sites.

1896–1900

After excavating Mesa Verde cliff dwellings (1888) and other ancestral Puebloan sites in the Four Corners area, Richard Wetherill moved to Chaco in 1896 to begin excavations at Pueblo Bonito. The Hyde Exploring Expedition, led by George H. Pepper from the American Museum of Natural History in New York City, established full-scale excavations at Pueblo Bonito, assisted by Richard Wetherill. Their main focus was the accumulation of artifacts for the museum collection; and numerous crates of artifacts from Pueblo Bonito they shipped to the museum, where they remain today.

1901

Richard Wetherill filed for a homestead deed on land that included Pueblo Bonito, Pueblo Del Arroyo, and Chetro Ketl. While investigating Wetherill's land claim, General Land Office special agent S. J. Holsinger described the canyon's physical setting and the sites, noted prehistoric road segments, stairways, prehistoric dams and irrigation systems. His report strongly recommended the creation of a national park to preserve Chacoan sites. The claim was modified to exclude these major structures, and it was not until 1910, after his death, that the Wetherill family received the deed.

1902

Edgar L. Hewett of the School of American Research, Museum of New Mexico, and University of New Mexico mapped many Chacoan sites.

1906

Hewett and many others helped to enact the Federal Antiquities Act of 1906. Our nation's first law protecting antiquities, the Antiquities Act was a direct consequence of the controversy surrounding Wetherill's work at Chaco. The law also granted new powers to the President, allowing him to establish Mesa Verde National Monument, and the following year, Chaco Canyon National Monument.

1907

Chaco Canyon National Monument was established on March 11, 1907.

1910

Richard Wetherill remained in Chaco Canyon, homesteading and operating a trading post at Pueblo Bonito until his controversial murder in 1910. Chiishchíilin Biy was charged with his murder, served several years in prison, but was released in 1914 due to poor health. Wetherill is buried in the small cemetery west of Pueblo Bonito.

1920

Hewett returned to Chaco to excavate Chetro Ketl.

1921–1927

Neil Judd of the Smithsonian Institution excavated several hundred rooms at Pueblo Bonito, as well as portions of Pueblo del Arroyo and several smaller sites for the National Geographic Society. One of his expedition's goals was to preserve the excavated portions of Pueblo Bonito as a monument to its prehistoric builders. The site received extensive preservation treatments, in which previously vandalized walls were repaired, walls were strengthened, broken masonry was patched, and missing door lintels were replaced.

1927

Frank H. H. Roberts excavated the pithouse village called *Shabik'eschee*. This site pre-dated the period of the construction of Chacoan great houses (monumental public buildings), and became the archeological "type-site" (example)

for the Basketmaker III period in the Pecos classification of Pueblo cultures.

1928–1929

Dr. A. E. Douglas of the University of Arizona applied the new method of tree-ring dating (dendrochronology) to Pueblo Bonito and many other sites in Chaco Canyon for the National Geographic Society.

1929–1949

Hewett and Donald D. Brand of the University of New Mexico field school excavated at Chetro Ketl and numerous small sites.

1933–1937

Gordon Vivian began major site preservation work, at Pueblo Bonito, Chetro Ketl, and Casa Rinconada, and set NPS standards in ruins stabilization in the Southwest.

1937

A 200-person Civilian Conservation Corps camp was constructed west of Fajada Butte. The group constructed extensive erosion control structures (earthen berms); planted 100,000 cottonwood, tamarisk, plum, and willow trees throughout the canyon; and improved many roads and trails. They initiated a project to build a vehicle road to the top of the cliff, directly above Pueblo Bonito, but World War II interrupted construction, and the project was abandoned after some construction.

A second Civilian Conservation Corps group began work at Chaco with an all-Navajo crew of stonemasons who repaired many of the large excavated Chacoan buildings, which were now threatened due to years of exposure to wind, rain, and freeze-thaw cycles. Preservation measures continue to this day, and several members of the NPS preservation crew are second- and third-generation Chaco stonemasons.

1941

On January 21, 1941, after a year of record rains, Threatening Rock fell and crushed about 60 rooms at Pueblo Bonito that had been excavated by Neil Judd in the 1920s.

1947

Tomasito, the last Navajo resident living in Chaco Canyon, was removed from the monument. Monument boundaries were fenced to exclude livestock grazing, and an era of rangeland recovery began.

1949

The University of New Mexico deeded state-owned lands in Chaco Canyon National Monument to the National Park Service, in exchange for continued rights to conduct scientific research in the area.

1959

The park visitor center, staff housing, and campgrounds were constructed during the National Park Service "Mission 66" construction boom (1956-1966).

1969-1982

The National Park Service and the University of New Mexico established the Division of Cultural Research or "Chaco Center" under the direction of Dr. Robert H. Lister and later Dr. James Judge. Multi-disciplinary research, archaeological surveys, and excavations began. The Chaco Center extensively surveyed Chacoan roads. The results of the Center's research at Pueblo Alto and other sites dramatically altered our interpretation of the Chacoan world. As a result of this research, Chaco became known as a regional center of ceremony, administration, trading, and resource distribution, where year-round residents may have been few, and others may have assembled temporarily for annual events and ceremonies. For the first time, a complete inventory of cultural resources in the park was accomplished. The project initiated studies of the Chaco "outliers," and Archaic period and Navajo occupations.

1980

On December 19, 1980, Chaco Canyon National Monument was re-designated Chaco Culture National Historical Park. An additional 13,000 acres were added to the park. The Chaco Culture Archaeological Protection Site program was inaugurated to jointly manage and protect Chacoan sites on lands managed by the Bureau

of Land Management, United States Forest Service, State of New Mexico, San Juan County, and the Navajo Nation.

1987

On December 8, 1987, Chaco Culture National Historical Park was designated a UNESCO World Heritage Site, joining a select list of protected areas “whose outstanding natural and cultural resources form the common inheritance of all mankind.”

1981 to present

Archeological excavations in Chaco Canyon today are limited, because a major philosophical change in archeology has shifted attention away from costly, large-scale excavations. Brought to the fore is an important new concern about the beliefs of many Pueblo and Hopi Indians and others that these sites and the ancestral human remains should be left to naturally return to the earth without being disturbed.

Modern methods such as remote sensing now allow archeologists to gather a great deal of information without ever disturbing sites. Sites continue to be surveyed and mapped, and sampled for tree-ring dating studies. Pottery sherds, lithics, and other artifacts are studied and dated. Museum collections are re-examined. New ideas emerge from the existing data that has been collected over the last 100 years. The oral history traditions of Pueblo, Hopi, and Navajo Indian

descendants provide researchers with complimentary insights and understanding of these sites. Efforts continue to focus on preserving the enormous backlog of excavated sites, using conservation treatments such as backfilling (re-burying rooms with sand).

1990 to present

Chaco Culture National Historical Park inaugurated the Chaco American Indian Consultation Committee and began consulting with affiliated American Indian tribes to help better understand the history and the legacy of their Chacoan ancestors. Representatives now actively consult with the park on important management issues during bi-annual meetings, sharing their knowledge and history of the area with park staff and visitors and providing valuable assistance with museum collections, site preservation, and public education.

2000–2006

The Chaco Synthesis Project summarized the archaeological work completed by the Chaco Center's Chaco Project (1971-1982). A series of seven conferences consolidated information concerning different aspects of Chacoan archaeology. Subject-matter experts produced both technical and popular publications.