

History

In Arizona, history is not something you just read about in a textbook. It's not even something contained in the rarefied galleries of museums. It's something to experience when you travel around the state. It's in the cliff dwellings at Navajo National Monument or Canyon de Chelly; scenic roads that follow the Coronado and Apache Trails; the Wild West towns of Jerome and Chloride; the notorious territorial prison in Yuma; Hoover and Glen Canyon Dams. This is history you can hike to, drive along, walk the streets of and gape at in wonder. If you thought history was supposed to put you to sleep, you've come to the wrong state.

THE FIRST AMERICANS

The history of sun-baked Arizona begins not with heat but with freezing cold. It was during the last ice age, roughly 25,000 years ago, that the first people reached the North American continent from Asia by way of the Bering Strait. These first Americans were hardy nomadic hunters who, armed with little more than pointed sticks and the courage born of hunger, pursued ice age mammals such as mammoths, cave bears and giant sloths.

As the climate warmed, the glaciers that covered much of North America receded and the nomads began moving south. The earliest artifacts of ancient peoples living in the southwestern US date to some 11,000 years ago. Oral histories offer various other scenarios explaining their arrivals in Arizona, usually with ancestors and animal spirits passing through multiple worlds and overcoming various cosmic challenges before arriving in this one.

After many large ice age mammals became extinct, people began hunting smaller animals such as deer and rabbits, while also foraging for wild berries, seeds, roots and fruits, and the hunter-gatherer was born in the United States. Baskets used to collect food were so tightly woven that they held water and could be used for cooking when heated stones were dropped into the water. After 3000 BC, contact with farmers in what is now central Mexico led to the beginnings of agriculture in Arizona. Primitive corn was grown, and by 500 BC beans and squash were also cultivated. Cotton followed soon afterward.

ANCIENT SOUTHWESTERN CULTURES

By about AD 100, three dominant cultures were emerging in the Southwest: the Hohokam of the desert, the Mogollon of the central mountains and valleys, and the Ancestral Puebloans – formerly known as the Anasazi.

Those Who Came Before, by Robert H and Florence C Lister, is an excellent source of readable information about the prehistory of the Southwest and about the archaeological sites of the national parks and monuments of this area.

TIMELINE

AD 100

The region's dominant indigenous cultures emerge. The Hohokam settle in the desert, the Mogollon in the mountains and valleys and Ancestral Puebloans (formerly called Anasazi) build cliff dwellings around the Four Corners.

1300–1400

The entire civilization of Ancestral Puebloans living around the Four Corners area moves or is absorbed by other tribes, leaving behind a sophisticated network of cliff dwellings throughout the region.

1540

A small group of Spanish explorers, led by Don García López de Cárdenas, become the first Europeans to see the Grand Canyon, after being guided there by Hopi Indians.

The Hohokam & Mogollon

The intrepid Hohokam culture existed in the deserts of Arizona from 300 BC to AD 1400, adapting to desert life by creating an incredible river-fed irrigation system. They also developed low earthen pyramids (perhaps serving as temples) and sunken ball courts with earthen walls. These features clearly point to a Hohokam connection with the cultures of Mexico and Guatemala. The dead were cremated, so archaeologists have learned little by excavating burial sites. A rich heritage of pottery attests to Hohokam artistry, and their ceramics and other artifacts can be seen in such places as the Arizona State Museum in Tucson (p242). Hohokam sites can be visited in the Pueblo Grande Museum, Phoenix (p87) and the Casa Grande ruins, between Phoenix and Tucson (p254).

In addition to using stone tools to dig miles and miles of 15ft-wide canals, the Hohokam augmented farming by collecting wild desert foods and lived in simple mud shelters over shallow earthen depressions.

The Mogollon (mo-guh-yohn) culture, named after the mountains of the same name in western New Mexico and the Mogollon Rim in eastern Arizona, settled near the Mexican border from 200 BC to AD 1400. They lived in small communities, often elevated on isolated mesas or ridge tops, and built simple pit dwellings. Although they farmed, they depended more on hunting and foraging for food. Growing villages featured the kiva – a circular, underground chamber used for ceremonies and other communal purposes. Around the 13th or 14th century, the Mogollon were likely being peacefully incorporated by the Ancestral Puebloan groups from the north.

Ancestral Puebloans

Ancestral Puebloans inhabited the Colorado Plateau around the Four Corners area. This culture left us by far the richest heritage of archaeological sites and ancient settlements in the Southwest. Until recently this culture was called the ‘Anasazi,’ a Navajo term meaning ‘enemy ancestors,’ but modern Pueblo people living in New Mexico, who trace their ancestry to the ancient cliff dwellers, prefer the more accurate term Ancestral Puebloan.

Like the Hohokam and Mogollon, the earliest Ancestral Puebloans were hunter-gatherers who slowly added farming to their repertoire of methods of obtaining food. The people lived in pit houses and gathered food in baskets; the excellence of their basket weaving has led archaeologists to refer to these as the Basket Maker periods. Toward the end of the Basket Maker III period (AD 400 to 700), pottery became increasingly important.

The Pueblo periods, which followed the Basket Maker periods, saw much development in pottery and architecture. Larger villages, some with more than 100 rooms, were built, many of them in shallow caves under overhanging cliffs. Among Arizona’s most important Ancestral Puebloan sites are those at Canyon de Chelly National Monument (p209) and Navajo National Monument (p206), both within the Navajo reservation.

Today, the oldest links with the Ancestral Puebloans are found among the Hopi tribe. Here, perched on a mesa top, the village of Old Oraibi has

Cochise County in southeastern Arizona has yielded the remains of baskets and stone cooking implements over 10,000 years old.

1736

Large silver deposits are first discovered, bringing Spanish settlers in Arizona’s first mining rush.

1752

The first permanent Spanish settlement in Arizona is established at Tubac. It is – what else? – a military garrison.

1846–48

The battle for the West is waged with the Mexican-American War. The fight ends with the 1848 signing of the Guadalupe-Hildago treaty that gives most of present-day Arizona and New Mexico to the USA.