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Colorado National Monument

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### **Native Cultures of Colorado National Monument**

National Park Service

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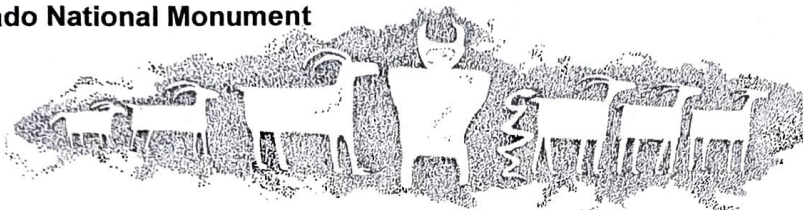
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# Colorado



National Monument  
National Park Service  
U.S. Department of the Interior

## NATIVE CULTURES of Colorado National Monument



Imagine making your living in the rugged canyon environment of Colorado National Monument, where you can expect only 11 inches (27.5 cm) of moisture each year. In fact, this area has been inhabited for thousands of years. The latest archeological survey located over 100 sites in or near the Monument. The artifacts found at the sights suggest that there has been continual human activity in the area for 8,000 years!

### PALEO INDIANS

It is likely that the Paleo Indians (paleo=ancient) visited the canyons even earlier, perhaps when glaciers still lingered to the north. These hunters left behind finely worked spear points, particularly Clovis and Folsom points. No Paleo points have been reported in the Monument, but they have been found nearby.

Paleo Indians were constantly on the move, following herds of huge ice age mammals, such as mammoth and an extinct form of bison. These nomadic hunters ate large quantities of meat when it was available. Between hunts, they survived on various plants and smaller animals.

### ARCHAIC INDIANS

As the glaciers receded and the giant mammals disappeared, it became necessary for early humans to look for new sources of food. This marked the beginning of a new culture known as the Archaic.

Deer, bighorn sheep, and smaller mammals were hunted. Strips of meat were smoked and dried to store for use during cold winter months. Hair was removed from hides with stone scrapers. The skins were then tanned and made into carrying pouches, moccasins, and clothing. Bones were sharpened and used to punch holes in the tanned skins through which sinew (the stringy tendons of deer and other game) was pulled to sew the leather pieces together. Thus, very little of the animal was wasted.

Meaty nuts from the pinyon trees were harvested every few years, the sweet fruit collected in the fall, and roots and young leaves of numerous plants were sought to round out a fairly well-balanced diet during summer months. Various grass seeds were ground on flat stones called *metates* using smaller handstones called *manos*. The ground flour was mixed with water to make bread and cakes.

Shelter during the winter months was found beneath rock outcrops and in overhangs in the sandstone cliffs. Solar energy was put to maximum use by choosing southern exposures. Several springs in the Monument and runoff from rainstorms provided precious water.

This hunting and gathering way of life persisted for thousands of years. Then, around 400 AD, the Archaic lifestyle began to change and a new culture appeared.

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## FREMONT INDIANS

Cultural traits--primarily from the region of southwest Colorado and surrounding areas--filtered north. The most significant of these traits was farming. Although farming was not practiced to the extent it was in the Mesa Verde region, some corn was planted behind small stone check dams. Water running down the slopes after summer storms was trapped behind the dams, soaking the roots of the plants. Four such check dams have been identified in the Monument.

Additional evidence in the Monument of this sedentary culture is the rock art. Petroglyphs (rock carvings) exhibit typical Fremont Characteristics--human figures wearing earbob hairdos with antennae-like projections extending from the head. Fremont petroglyphs became the most elaborate and advanced form of all western rock art.

Fremont occupants of the Monument also left behind small storage cists constructed of sandstone. Nine hundred years after their use, some of these cists still contain well-preserved kernels of corn.

The fate of the Fremont is an archeological mystery. Severe climatic changes--which contributed to the abandonment of the Mesa Verde region--along with pressures from nomadic raiders may have affected the Fremont. No traces of the Fremont culture appear in northwest Colorado after 1250 AD

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## UTE INDIANS

Replacing the Fremont in the Monument area were the Shoshoneans from the deserts of California, Nevada, and Utah, called Utes. They were possibly present in the area at the same time as the dwindling Fremont population.

Similar to the earlier Archaic peoples, the Utes also followed a hunting and gathering subsistence pattern. When they acquired horses from the Spanish through bartering and raiding in the early 1600s, the Utes banded together in large hunting groups. They rode over the Rockies to hunt the plains bison, able to retreat quickly to avoid conflict with the Cheyenne and Arapahoe.

Although these tribes were enemies, the Utes incorporated many of the cultural traits of these Plains Indians, including beautiful beadwork and large bison skin tipis which were occasionally dragged behind horses on *travois*, platforms supported by 2 poles.

Increased mobility enabled the Utes to become the most powerful tribe in Colorado. Old-timers in the town of Fruita recall when Chief Atchee, a sub-chief of the local Uncompahgre Utes, would cross the Colorado River just west of the Monument and take his band up the Ute Trail to Glade Park. Until recently, burial platforms, stone tools, and arrowheads were observed along the route.

The Utes were removed from northwest Colorado in 1881 and escorted by the military to a reservation in Utah. Today, only the remains of their campsites and their rock art panels attest to their occupation of the area.

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## VISITING ARCHEOLOGICAL SITES

Congress passed the Antiquities Act of 1906 and the Archaeological Resources Protection Act of 1979, making it illegal to appropriate, excavate, injure, or destroy any objects over 50 years old found on public land.

It's important to understand that, once objects are disturbed or removed, the information to be gained from finding them *in situ* (in place) is lost.

Enjoy the discovery...but leave things as you find them! Report any significant findings or disturbance to the National Park Service at the Colorado National Monument Visitor Center or by calling (970) 858-3617.