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The
Archaeology
of Navajo Origins
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Edited by
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Bradford, and Cherie Scheick all provided site data. Miranda Warburton showed me the Lone Tule Wash site. David Brugge, in numerous conversations over the years, supplied information on a wide range of topics that ended up being discussed in this paper. Dave Wilcox has had a similar degree of influence on my Navajo research and allowed access to the Museum of Northern Arizona's site files and collections. Barbara Thurber and her staff at the MNA library were helpful as always. Beth Grindell of the Arizona State Museum (ASM) looked up Thomas Lee's site locations; Art Vokes of ASM pulled Lee's collections for my inspection. Kelley Hays-Gilpin identified the Hopi sherds in Lee's collections at ASM.

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The Early Navajo Occupation of the Grand Canyon Region

RICHARD M. BEGAY

ALEXANDRA ROBERTS



INTRODUCTION

Current research by the Navajo Nation is documenting Navajo occupation of the Grand Canyon region that predates the Fort Sumner era of 1864–1868. The study is part of the background research for an environmental impact statement for modified operations at the Glen Canyon Dam, near Page, Arizona. The Glen Canyon Environmental Studies–Navajo Cultural Resources Project (GCES-NCRP) encompasses the Colorado River corridor between Lake Powell and Lake Mead, a total distance of 225 river miles (360 km) (Figure 9.1).

The ongoing project includes three primary elements: reviewing popular and scholarly literature, interviewing knowledgeable Navajo residents of the Grand Canyon area about places in and around the Grand Canyon, and revisiting potential Navajo archaeological sites recorded by the National Park Service in the Grand Canyon. The combination of archaeological and ethnohistorical data collected from these sources provides a basis for reconsidering early Navajo history in and around the Grand Canyon.

THE LITERATURE

Except for a cryptic reference to Navajo migration into the Grand Canyon from Canada about A.D. 1500 (Belknap and Evans 1969:71), most popular interpretations of Navajo history in the Grand Canyon region suggest that Navajos arrived only very recently, in the 1850s or 1860s (e.g., J. D. Hughes 1978:29; Martin 1989:81; Rusho and Crampton 1992:7).

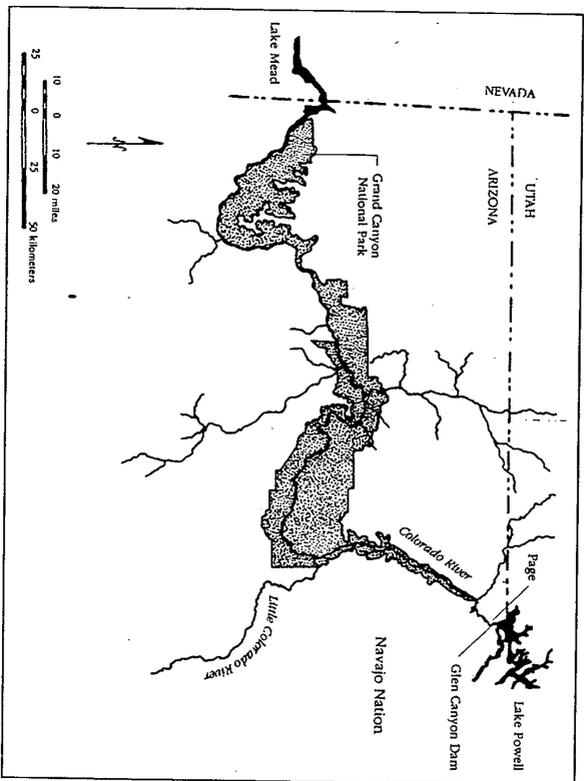


FIGURE 9.1. Navajo occupation and project area near the Grand Canyon.

These interpretations derive from prevailing scholarly theories that in the early nineteenth century the extreme western periphery of Navajoland extended no farther than contemporary Hopiland (Bartlett 1942:16-17, 1945:42-44; Hester 1962a:83-84). Ellis (1974:408-42), for example, argues that Navajos fled west into the Grand Canyon region about 1860 in response to increasing pressure from the United States Army just prior to its full-scale campaign against the Navajo people in 1863. According to Ellis, pressure from the U.S. Army was combined with pressure from other Indian tribes, including Hopis, Utes, Paiutes, and Apaches, who took advantage of the United States' position against the Navajo to wage their own hostilities. Locke offers a similar interpretation of Navajo westward expansion just prior to 1863:

[The Navajo's] only line of defense was to retreat as far as they could into their mountains and canyons and hope to avoid both Carson's volunteers and the hordes of New Mexican, Ute and other Indian raiders . . . most of the tribe fled west, beyond the Hopi villages and as far as the Grand Canyon. (1976:355)

Descriptions such as Ellis's and Locke's conjure up surreal images of

thousands of Navajos looking east one day in 1862, dropping their farming implements, abandoning their livestock, and running across the Arizona desert with the United States Army and its Indian allies on horseback in hot pursuit. Navajos, arriving at the great precipice of the mysterious and unknown Grand Canyon, jump in and stay there for four years. Dobyms and Euler (1972:53) propose that they did not cross the Little Colorado River until after their release from captivity by the U.S. Army in 1868, and Euler (1969:9, 12) apparently does not believe that Navajos were in the Grand Canyon at all prior to the 1880s.

Ellis (1974:425) acknowledges that ethnohistorical accounts establish Navajo presence on Gray Mountain (Cocconino Point) on the eastern rim of the Grand Canyon by 1825. She concludes that Gray Mountain was good pinyon-nut country, where Navajos came from long distances during good harvest years (every seven years or more) and were permitted by other Indian tribes (Hopi or Havasupai) to stay for two or three months during the harvest before returning to their homes in the east.

Historical and ethnohistorical accounts collected by the Navajo Nation for land claims submitted to the Indian Claims Commission in the 1950s and 1960s (Navajo Nation 1963), however, document ancestral Navajo use of the Grand Canyon-Cocconino Plateau region by the end of the seventeenth century. By the early to mid-1700s, Navajo occupation of the Cocconino Plateau was well established. Bandler (cited by Correll 1976:20) maintains that the Navajo were at war with the Havasupai and, by 1686, the latter were defeated and retreated permanently into the Colorado River gorge. Sixty-three tree-ring dates from hogans and other Navajo structures west of the Little Colorado River, including the Cocconino Basin, Gray Mountain, and Red Butte areas, range from 1709+incG (Navajo Land Claims [NLC] site W-LLC-C-B, 2.5 miles south of Desert View Tower) to 1798incG (Stokes and Smiley 1964). After evaluating the tree-ring dates from these sites, Ron Townner (personal communication, 1993) suggests that the 1709 date is an anomaly probably representing the reuse of old wood, but tree-ring samples from NLC sites W-LLC-C-B, W-LLC-C-OO, W-LLC-C-MM, and possibly W-LLC-C-D are strong cases for 1780s to 1790s construction dates. These tree-ring dates suggest that the area west of the Little Colorado River was available for settlement after the Havasupai were defeated by the Navajo in 1686 and Navajos became established on the eastern and southern rims of the Grand Canyon during the eighteenth century (Correll 1976:20-24; Navajo Nation 1963:28-37, 47; Stokes and Smiley 1964:15-17). Brugge (1983:490, personal communication 1993) agrees that by 1800 Navajo settlement was clearly established along the Colorado River, west of the

Little Colorado River on Gray Mountain, and within the Little Colorado River drainage.

Well-established nineteenth-century Navajo settlement on the eastern border of the Grand Canyon country is also supported by Navajo birth records and ethnohistory. In addition to records for Navajos whose specific birth locations are known, records exist for ninety-one Navajos born within the western Navajo area (west and northwest of the 1882 Executive Order Reservation surrounding the Hopi villages) between 1809 and 1868 (Navajo Nation 1963:52). Ethnohistorical information indicates that the predecessors of current residents of the Wupatki Basin southeast of Gray Mountain were born on Gray Mountain beginning in 1823 (Navajo Nation 1963:55-69; A. Roberts 1992:25-32). During the nineteenth century these related families moved seasonally over an immense region that extended from the Grand Canyon, or even farther north, south to present-day Williams, Flagstaff, and Leupp, and from west of the San Francisco Peaks east to the Moenkopi Plateau.

Forty tree-ring dates from Navajo archaeological sites date to between 1803+G and 1867inc and attest to entrenched pre-Fort Sumner settlement west of the Little Colorado River in the upper and lower Coconino Basin, within the contemporary boundaries of Grand Canyon National Park, on Gray Mountain, and in the Kaibab National Forest (Correll 1976:73; Navajo Nation 1963:53-95; Stokes and Smiley 1964:15-17). Throughout this period, Navajos were collecting plants and minerals (salt and red ochre) in Marble and Grand Canyons from Lee's Ferry to at least the confluence of the Little Colorado River. They were hunting on the Coconino Plateau as far west as Havasu Canyon (where the father of a prominent Navajo headman was born in 1855) and crossing the Colorado River to hunt north of the Grand Canyon on the Kaibab Plateau.

Immediately prior to the incarceration of Navajos at Fort Sumner, New Mexico, in the mid-1860s, Navajos moved into the Grand Canyon year-round. Five Navajo families farmed and lived with Havasupai families for two years at the present-day site of Indian Garden below Grand Canyon Village on the upper river terraces (site form NLC site W-HC-LH-KK, Brewer 1937). Later, these same families moved to Cataract Canyon (Navajo Nation 1963:89) with the Havasupai families. Members of some of these Navajo families were the parents of Clyde Peshlakai, who recalls:

My mother and father traveled . . . down into the Colorado River in Grand Canyon. This was the beginning of their travel on the way to Fort Sumner. They stayed in the Grand Canyon for a year then came back on top where the Richardson Ranch is now. That is in the upper

basin. Then they went back to the Colorado River and followed the benches and breakers into a place now known by White men as Indian Farms in the Grand Canyon, which is at the foot of the El Tovar Trail into the river from the El Tovar Hotel. From there they came back to the mountain, up to where El Tovar is now. They had to use a yucca rope to hoist their goats up on top to where they would go south towards Red Butte. (1961:23)

A short time later, some of the families moved to Supai Canyon, and "stayed in that canyon for one summer and the following winter and the following summer until late fall. When they came out of Supai canyon they met up with a group of Navajos who were living at the top of the canyon" (Peshlakai 1961:3). Clyde Peshlakai's sister, Ethyl Robbins, relates that "My [maternal] grandmother, 'White Woman,' told me that they lived with the Supai people on top of Supai Canyon and part of the time in Supai Canyon before Fort Sumner. The Supais were friendly at that time so they lived with them for quite a number of seasons" (Robbins 1961:34). Oral history collected during the GCES-NCRP documents Navajo families living upriver from Indian Garden during the same period in the Little Colorado River gorge and along the beaches and terraces of Marble Canyon. Stories told by several elderly members of the Cameron and Gap/Bodoway communities relate that this time was called *Lii dibaa dabits hin needaa* (When Horses Died of Thirst), referring to a period of major drought. This may have been the drought of 1865-1864 described by Ellis (1974:425-27).

One woman in her early seventies describes her grandfather as the leader of a group of families living in Marble Canyon. Other interviewees remember some of their ancestors as members of the families living in the canyon. Bringing donkeys, nine horses, sheep, and goats, they moved into the canyon and planted corn during the spring. After planting, they moved back up to the rim and descended again in the summer to harvest the crops. Subsisting on corn and wild plants, they remained in the canyon through the winter. Similar stories are told about families living in the Little Colorado River gorge. Clyde Peshlakai's father, who was born about 1850, described his family's movement in and out of the Grand Canyon about 1864:

A long time ago we used to live in the bottom of the Grand Canyon—I was about 14—because Apaches raided us. We took our horses and sheep down with us on a trail about four miles upriver from Kin Nez (Hopi Tower). We stayed all summer and came out in the fall. There