

NAVAJO PUEBLITOS OF THE DINETAH

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Navajo refugee sites, or pueblitos, are a unique archeological phenomena, centered in the northwest quarter of New Mexico. This region encompasses the mesas and entrenched canyons of La Jara, Gobernador, and Largo and is referred to by the Navajo as the Dinetah. It is here that the Navajo creation story is focused and the geography and place names of the Dinetah reflect its role in both the creation story and clan migration legends of the Dine people.

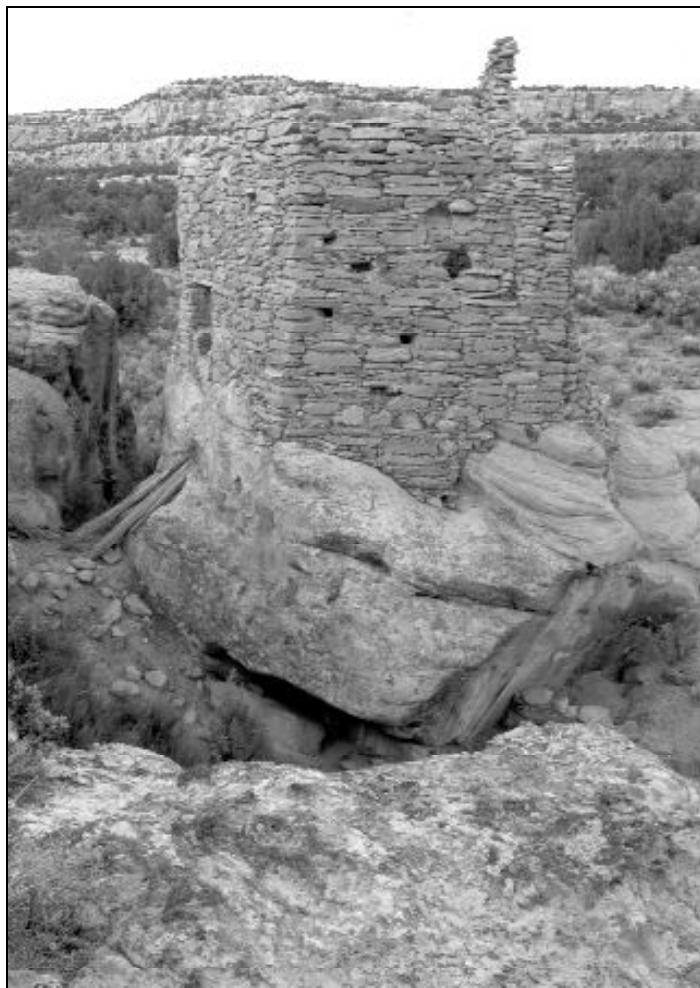
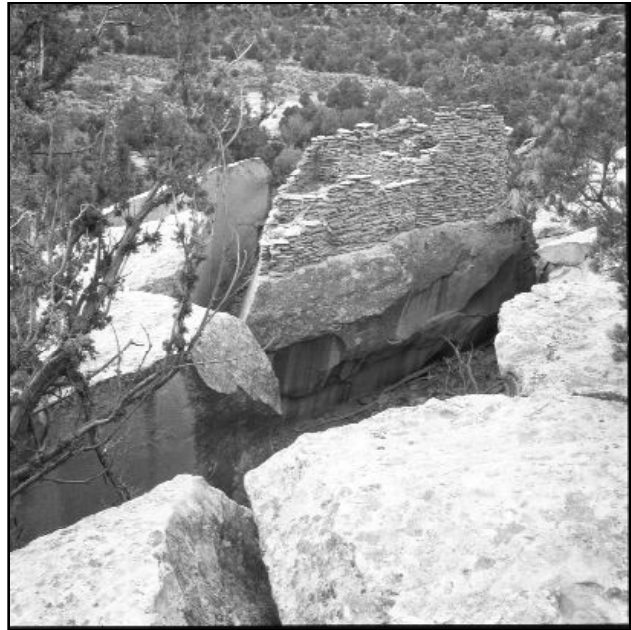
Navajo and Pueblo Indians first encountered one another sometime after A.D. 1500. Although periodic Navajo raids against the Pueblos were carried out, the Navajo-Pueblo relationship was generally one of trade. As a result of these periodic contacts, Pueblo influence is evident in 18th century Navajo ceramics, rock art, and architecture. Most notable and enigmatic is the Puebloan architectural influence seen in the multi-roomed masonry dwellings referred to as pueblitos.

The majority of Navajo pueblitos were occupied during the Gobernador phase at a time of social disruption, turmoil, and hostility beginning soon after the Pueblo Revolt in 1680 and ending about 100 years later. Construction of pueblitos increased dramatically after 1700 and the occupation peaked between 1715 and 1735, probably in response to Ute attacks that threatened the survival of the Navajo and Pueblo people in the Largo-Gobernador areas after 1715.

The pueblitos were built on mesa tops, cliff faces, and large boulders and were obviously positioned for defense. Most pueblitos also have expansive views to the surrounding territory and have line-of-sight to other pueblitos nearby. In addition to topographic and visual defense, architectural elements often contributed to the defensive nature of the pueblitos.

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Small observation ports, called loopholes, were almost always angled downward for visual sightings along access routes into the pueblitos and presumably for shooting projectiles down onto unwanted visitors. Although the pueblitos were often surrounded by steep-sided cliffs or embankments, points of access from below were blocked by masonry walls or log roofs over crevices. Entryways were secured by using dead end entries, serpentine passages, narrowed entrances, single points of access to room complexes, and removable logs for bridges and ladders.



The size of the pueblitos varies from single rooms to large multi-storied buildings up to 38 rooms in size. Many of the sites still have standing walls and intact roofs. Recent comprehensive inventories of lands surrounding the pueblitos documented a multitude of features associated with the pueblitos. It has become apparent that these structures were used as fortified places of refuge which provided safe havens for only a few days at a time. Pueblitos are invariably surrounded by actual habitation areas which include forked stick hogans, ramadas, corrals, sweat lodges, and work areas.

Increasing influence from Spanish missionaries, the constant pressure of Ute raids, and a possible drought in the late 1770s brought an end to this period of Navajo history. The pueblitos of the Dinétah region were gradually abandoned as the Navajo shifted to the south and west. Left behind were some of the most dramatic and remarkably well preserved masonry structures in the entire Southwest.