



Tonto Basin's Prehistoric People of the Salt River



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Shallow caves overlooking today's Theodore Roosevelt Lake in central Arizona shelter dwellings that are nearly 700 years old. Lying between the northern Colorado Plateau and the southern Sonoran Desert, Tonto Basin is one of many valleys and basins with evidence of early farming activity.

Tonto Basin's 300 square miles support diverse animals and plants, from mountain pines to desert cacti. Tonto Creek and the Salt River deposit rich soils along the valley floor, nourishing mesquite, Arizona walnut, and sycamore. Hill-sides and mesas are blanketed with saguaro, cholla, prickly pear, agave, and jojoba, the higher elevations with oak, juniper, pinyon, and ponderosa pine. Deer, rabbit, quail, and other wildlife are integral parts of this ecosystem. For thousands of years people took advantage of the basin's bountiful offerings.

The first people to settle here permanently arrived between the years 100 and 600. Eagle Ridge, a village of 15 pit houses, is one of Tonto Basin's earliest farming communities. Like their hunter-gatherer predecessors, Eagle Ridge residents harvested plants and hunted animals but, unlike their ancestors, they grew corn, beans, and cotton. A valuable archeological find, Eagle Ridge allows us to see people in the transition from hunter-gatherers to sedentary farmers. They were the forerunners of agricultural groups soon to emerge. About the year 600, people left this community, with no evidence of human activity in Tonto Basin for the next 150 years.

By 750 people from the lower Gila and Salt River valleys (near today's Phoenix) built pit house villages in Tonto Basin. Identified by the patterns of their villages and their red-on-buff pottery, they were an extension of the southern Hohokam farmers. For 400 years they used irrigation farming to grow corn, beans, squash, and cotton. They traded goods across a network that reached from Colorado to the Gulf of California. Populations to the north and east had grown too. They were the puebloan groups, and by 1100 their populations rivaled the desert Hohokam.

Starting in the 1100s population centers approached their social and economic peak. Archeological evidence indicates that drought, plant and animal depletion, and population growth pushed resource availability to critical levels. Faced with instability, many northern pueblo groups left their homelands, and the Colorado Plateau and Central Mountain populations declined. According to the traditions of their descendants, people settled, then moved on, as part of their quest to find permanent homelands. Social

migrations and fulfill their destiny. Migrations took them to what are now western New Mexico and central, southern, and eastern Arizona. Evidence of such a migration emerged in Tonto Basin's archeological record. By 1250 people occupied prime land on the valley floor, and the new arrivals began settling in the basin's upper elevations.

As people arrived, communities absorbed their new ideas, technologies, and philosophies, resulting in changes to Tonto Basin's cultural identity. At this time Salado polychrome pottery appears in the archeological record. Named for the *Río Salado* (Salt River) that flows through the basin, this pottery style reflects the changing times (see *polychrome pottery on the other side of this brochure*). Migrations continued, and populations grew. By 1275 thousands of people lived in Tonto Basin. Archeologists call this mixed-cultural phenomenon Salado.

During the early 1300s climate favored the people of the basin. Moisture increased farming potential, and plant and animal populations flourished. Around 1330 a dramatic change occurred. The region became more arid—lowering water tables. The changing climate decreased farming and increased hunting and gathering, severely impacting the ecosystem. Important plants and animals declined or disappeared. Competition for dwindling resources created stress among the villagers.

As tensions grew, people left their smaller villages and crowded into communities on the valley floor. At the same time people moved into the Tonto cliff dwellings. Some built defensive walls around villages, while others built on defensible hilltops and in caves. In the late 1300s resource depletion intensified, and populations declined.

The 1300s were also marked by catastrophic flooding of the Salt River that destroyed lowland farms and villages. When the waters receded, many of the 100-year-old irrigation canals were undermined or destroyed, and hundreds of acres of farmland were useless. By 1450 those struggling to maintain their way of life gave up—and another migration began. Oral histories say this migration from Tonto Basin took their ancestors in many directions, guiding each to the place their descendants now call home.

The cliff dwellings at Tonto National Monument are but two of hundreds of once-thriving communities in Tonto Basin. Preserved and protected by the National Park Service, they stand as icons of people who flourished and struggled as their world changed.



# Your Visit to Tonto National Monument

**Things To Do** The park is open daily except December 25 from 8 am to 5 pm. The visitor center offers information, exhibits, a video, and bookstore. The steep but paved one-mile round-trip trail ascends 350 feet to the Lower Cliff Dwelling; it is open daily. This trail closes to uphill travel at 4 pm. Guided tours to the Upper Cliff Dwelling are November through April; reservations required. Contact the park.

**Facilities** A picnic area is near the visitor center. Camping is not permitted in the park; camping is available at Theodore Roosevelt Lake. Find services in Roosevelt, Globe, and Payson.

**Accessibility** The visitor center's first floor, museum exhibits, restrooms, and picnic area are accessible to visitors in wheelchairs. Service animals are welcome.

**Climate** Summers are hot (100°F or higher); winters are generally mild. Rainy seasons occur in the winter months and summer monsoons. Wildflowers bloom in late winter or early spring.

## For Your Safety and the Park's Protection

- Do not climb or lean on walls.
- Pets, leashed and under control, are allowed only on Lower Cliff Dwelling trail; pets are prohibited in the cliff dwelling.
- Stay on established trails. Steep grades and uneven surfaces can create hazards. Visitors with heart or respiratory conditions should use caution, especially in hot weather.



Lower Cliff Dwelling

- If you see a rattlesnake, retreat slowly and report the sighting to a ranger.
- Do not collect or disturb any plants, animals, or archeological objects; all are protected by federal law.

**Emergencies: call 911.**

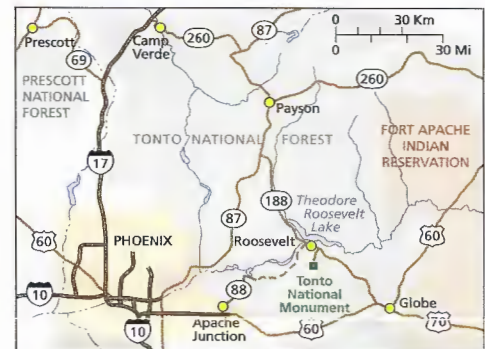
**Location** Tonto National Monument is 110 miles east of Phoenix, Ariz. (see map). Possible routes: Ariz. 188 west from Globe; 188 east from Ariz. 87 (Beeline Highway); or Ariz. 88 (Apache Trail) beginning at Apache Junction (the easternmost 22 miles of this road are unpaved and mountainous).

## More Information

Tonto National Monument  
26260 N. Arizona HWY 188, #2  
Roosevelt, AZ 85545  
928-467-2241  
email: [tont\\_superintendent@nps.gov](mailto:tont_superintendent@nps.gov)  
[www.nps.gov/tont](http://www.nps.gov/tont)



Upper Cliff Dwelling



Tonto NM is one of over 390 parks in the National Park System. To learn more about

national parks and National Park Service programs, visit [www.nps.gov](http://www.nps.gov).

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## Reading the Salado Past

Distance and rugged terrain isolated the cliff dwellings from the modern world until the mid-1870s when ranchers and soldiers came to the Tonto Basin. Construction began on Theodore Roosevelt Dam in 1906, bringing attention to the dwellings. The following year, recognizing the need to protect the sites from vandals and pothunters, President Theodore Roosevelt set the area aside as a national monument.

Today these cliff dwellings give rise to questions about the Salado people and their way of life. Most of what we know—or think we know—about the Salado has been reconstructed from what remains of their material culture, their personal and community belongings. Taken together, Salado artifacts give us a picture of an adaptable people who coped successfully with a dry, harsh climate and made the most of their environment. Some of the findings: Salado dwellings were permanent, indicating

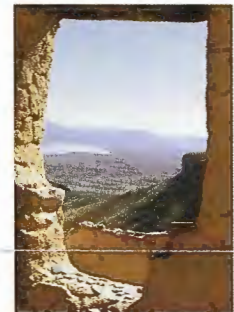
a farming people were on hand year-round to tend crops. Outlines of irrigation canals were visible until flooded by Theodore Roosevelt Lake. Decorated earthenware and intricate textiles reveal that not all of the people devoted their efforts to farming; some had the interest and time to master other skills. Seashells found here came from the Gulf of California and macaw feathers from Mexico, showing that the owners participated in trade with remote groups. Ideas made the circuit along with trade goods, for much of Salado technology resembles that of other native people.

We are fortunate to have available for study the very objects the Salado created for their own use or obtained in trade. Plants and animals that made up their natural environment still thrive here. Like pieces of a puzzle, each

element contributes to the larger picture of Salado culture. As you explore this ancient place, please remember that you, too, are responsible for its preservation. Keep the pieces of the puzzle together. What you find here, leave here.

The ancient people built dwellings in the valley and on hillsides and diverted water for crops. Cattle grazing in the 1800s destroyed some plant species and increased erosion.

Today Theodore Roosevelt Lake covers old farmlands and supplies electrical power and water for irrigation and recreation.



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**Plants and Animals of the Sonoran Desert**

The Salado looked to the desert to supplement cultivated foods and fulfill their material needs. Mammals, birds, and reptiles were important to their diet. They made tools from bones.

Yucca provided edible stalks and buds, sewing needles from leaf tips, leaf fiber for rope, nets, mats, and sandals, and roots for making soap. Tender new leaf pads and fruit from the prickly pear offered seasonal variety, as did the

sweet, red fruit of the saguaro. Saguaro ribs were used to build ceilings. Beans from the mesquite tree, eaten raw or roasted, or ground into flour, were rich in protein.



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**Polychrome Pottery**

We can identify Southwestern cultures by their pottery because the vessels and shards survive for centuries, and because the artistry and materials vary from place to place. Like other Pueblo people, Salado women fashioned plain and decorated wares for

cooking, storage, and ceremonial use. Red clay came from local pits along the river or on hillsides, and coloring was derived from plants and minerals. These polychrome wares, a jar and bowl, are prime examples of the Salado's art and imagination.

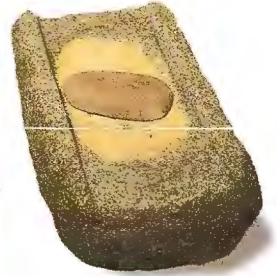


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**Woven Sandals**

Footwear was made from yucca or agave fibers. Many Tonto specimens are exquisitely crafted.

Matting might be woven from nolina or sotol. The Salado made a variety of close-coiled and coarse baskets.



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**Stone Grinding Tools**

The mano and metate were commonly used in Southwestern agricultural societies to crush corn, beans, seeds, and nuts.



Elf owl

Saguaro cactus

Yucca

Mesquite tree

Cactus wren

Teddy-bear cholla

Gila monster

Prickly pear cactus