



## Early Inhabitants



Long before Capitol Reef National Park was established, humans discovered the many resources the area had to offer. For thousands of years, people have lived in the Capitol Reef area—hunting, growing crops, fashioning tools, and developing cultures.

### Archaic

Between 7000 and 500 B.C.E. (Before Common Era), small groups of nomadic hunter-gatherers began using what is now Capitol Reef National Park to hunt bighorn sheep, deer, elk, and pronghorn using atlatls with distinctive stone points. They snared

small game and fished. They also created characteristic petroglyphs (carvings) and pictographs (paintings). Archeological evidence suggests they followed annual regional migrations, living in alcoves in canyon walls and, later, in pithouses.

### People of Long Ago

The Hopi Tribe calls them the People of Long Ago, the *Hisatsinom*. To the Paiute Tribe, they are known as the *Nengwoots*, the People Who Lived the Old Ways. They inhabited the Capitol Reef area from about 300 to 1300 C.E. (Common Era), with their most prosperous time from 600 to 1200 C.E. Archeologists named them the Fremont Culture for the Fremont River canyon where they were first defined as a distinct group.

The *Hisatsinom* were semi-nomadic farmers, cultivating beans, squash, and a distinct variety of corn. They supplemented these crops by gathering a wide variety of berries, nuts, bulbs, and tubers, as well as pinyon nuts, yucca, ricegrass, buffaloberry, and prickly pear cactus. Bone fragments found by archeologists indicate the *Hisatsinom* also hunted rabbits, hares, woodrats, deer, and bighorn sheep. An abundance of artifacts made from bighorn indicate the animal's significance as a source for food and utensils.

These farmers probably inhabited the same locale for a few years at a time, though some sites might have been used for only

a few months. In the Capitol Reef region the *Hisatsinom* lived on small, dispersed farmsteads consisting of one to three pithouses and associated outdoor work spaces. They may have socialized and shared resources with neighboring mesa top farmstead groups. They dwelt in alcoves, seasonal camps, and mesa top pithouses. Small granaries and slab-lined cists stored food and seed. They constructed irrigation ditches to water their crops in fertile valleys.

Imagine living in a pithouse on top of the mesa, looking down onto the crops below. Irrigation ditches shimmer before you, brimming with water from the Fremont River. It is time to start making the midday meal, so you send a child to fetch water from the river. You hand her a coiled basket, tightly woven and watertight, to carry the water from the river up the steep path to your pithouse. If she daydreams, trips, and spills the water, the basket will not break the way a clay jar would, and she will only have to return to the river to fill the basket again.



Fremont Culture bighorn sheep petroglyphs.

## Material Culture



Unfired clay figurine.

The *Hisatsinom* left behind many everyday objects like grayware pottery and unique moccasins made from the lower leg hide of large animals with dew claws left on the sole. Other material objects include woven mats, fur cloth, projectile points, atlatls, bows, arrows, disk beads, nets, and snares, which help us imagine how the *Hisatsinom* lived in this area for a thousand years.

One of the more characteristic aspects of their utilitarian objects is rod-and-bundle-style basketry. It is the same style as the Archaic, indicating some continuity between the cultures.

Everyday items give us insight into what daily life might have been like for the *Hisatsinom*, but more finely crafted items demonstrate their creativity. Unfired clay figurines, male and female pairs, are one of the intriguing items the *Hisatsinom* left behind. Most of the figurines have breasts and flattened backs, pinched noses, punched eyes, and leg or foot nubs, and traces of paint remain. The more intricate ones have incised, punched, or applied body decorations, necklaces, and aprons. The exact purpose of the figurines is unknown, although they might be associated with fertility. Most do not show wear the way toys or everyday objects and tools would.

The figurines bear a resemblance to human-shaped petroglyphs (carved or pecked into the rock) and pictographs (painted) found in this region, with trapezoidal-shaped bodies often decorated with jewelry or sashes and

large heads capped by ornate headdresses. Necklaces, earbobs, headdresses, and sashes portrayed on the petroglyphs have real counterparts found in some archeological sites. Human-shaped petroglyphs, and abstract designs, geometric shapes, and handprints are not the only carvings that remain. Bighorn sheep are the most common animal in *Hisatsinom* petroglyph panels, but birds, deer, dogs, lizards, and snakes also appear occasionally.

The Hopi Tribe identifies *Hisatsinom* petroglyphs and pictographs as maps, tales of journeys, clan signs, animals, calendars, deities, and activities of daily life. These images are perhaps the most visible link to modern tribes like the Hopi. Oral traditions also associate the *Hisatsinom* with the Hopi, Zuni, and Paiute. What is now Capitol Reef is also part of the historic Ute territory. Navajo oral traditions link them to this area as well.

Although the *Hisatsinom* thrived in the Capitol Reef area for about 1,000 years, this changed around 1300 C.E. No new traces of *Hisatsinom* traditional ways of life are found after that date. A gap of about 200 years exists between *Hisatsinom* artifacts and those specifically associated with Numic-speaking groups (Ute and Paiute). The Ute and Paiute may have been in this area earlier than that, though. Ute, Paiute, and Navajo were in the Capitol Reef area at the time early explorers and Mormon settlers arrived.

## Where Are They?

What happened to the People of Long Ago? Archeologists suspect the *Hisatsinom* abandoned the area and emigrated south, which supports the Hopi Tribe concept that the *Hisatsinom* departed the Capitol Reef area to complete their migration to the center of the universe. Relatively short-term climate changes such as drought or extreme cold could have precipitated the move. Disease, overuse of resources, or assimilation into other cultural groups could also have been an incentive to leave. Though other locations in northern Colorado and the eastern Great Basin show signs of abandonment during the same time period, it should not be assumed that all were influenced by the same factors.

Active research in a number of fields including archeology continues at Capitol Reef. Archeologists investigate the relationship between *Hisatsinom* and their

contemporaries, the Ancestral Puebloans (formerly referred to as Anasazi). The Capitol Reef region is at the northwestern boundary of Ancestral Puebloan territory. There are very few Ancestral Puebloan-specific sites in the park, though there are sites that have artifacts from both cultures, indicating trade. Perhaps Ancestral Puebloans used the area for resource procurement and ventured into the Waterpocket Fold to trade with the *Hisatsinom*.

As you explore and enjoy this land, remember all the people who lived here for thousands of years. Were they also inspired by this landscape? What did they learn from it? What are you learning from Capitol Reef, and how will you protect it for the education, recreation, and inspiration of future generations? How will you tell these stories to your children?

## Preserve and Protect

Looting and relic hunting has damaged, destroyed, or completely removed much of the archaeological record in Capitol Reef National Park. This impacts our ability to understand prehistoric cultures. **It is illegal to collect anything (plant, animal, mineral, or artifact) within national parks.**

Despite the scientific methods of modern archeology, there is still inference involved in piecing together what prehistoric life was like. As new evidence comes to light, interpretations of these cultures will undoubtedly change.

Grinding stone with modern inscriptions.

