Amistad

National Recreation Area
National Park Service
U.S. Department of the Interior

Archeology & Rock Art

World-Class Archeology

Amistad National Recreation Area near Del Rio, Texas is known for world-class boating and fishing, but the park preserves and interprets spectacular prehistoric rock art and archeology.

Ancient hunters and gatherers used the area's resources and left behind 4,000 year-old pictographs- rock paintings whose meanings are lost in time. Other archeological sites, along with ethnographic analysis of the pictographs, give us a window to the past.

What is a Pictograph?

Pictographs are prehistoric rock paintings found in many of the area's rockshelters. These pictographs were made by using a plant fiber brush and a liquid mixture made from ground minerals, animal fat, and plant materials. There are four main styles of pictographs found in the Amistad area. The oldest of these, the Lower Pecos River style, were painted about 4,000 years ago.

Many pictographs resemble human and animal figures. Archeologists interpret pictographs by studying them in conjunction with other archeological evidence. Most archeologists believe Lower Pecos River rock art represents a shamanistic tradition. However, it is impossible to decipher these ancient murals with any degree of certainty.

How to See Rock Art

There are two ways to see rock art in the Amistad NRA area- on guided walking tours or with a boat.

Hiking to Rock Art

Seminole Canyon State Park and Historic Site: located 45 miles west of Del Rio on US Highway 90, offers exhibits about regional archeology and guided tours of Fate Bell Shelter. Tours are Wednesday-Sunday at 10 am and 3 pm (no 3 pm tour June to September) and are moderately strenuous. Call 432.292.4464 or go to www.tpwd.state.tx.us for more information.

Rock Art Foundation: Offers guided tours of the White Shaman and other rock art sites located on private land near Amistad NRA. Call 888.925.9907 or go to www.rockart.org for more information.

Boating to Rock Art

If you have a boat, you can visit two rock art sites in Amistad NRA. There are no regularly scheduled guided tours to these sites. If you don't have your own boat, you can hire a fishing guide to take you; call 830.775.7491 ext. 0 or go to www.nps.gov/amis for more information.

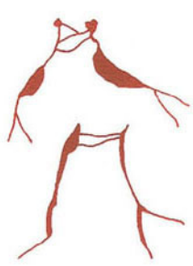
Panther Cave, one of the area's largest rock art sites, has numerous human and animal figures. The cave's namesake is a nine-foot mountain lion. Located at the confluence of Seminole Canyon and the Rio Grande, the NPS provides a boat dock. Access requires climbing up a steep stairway from the dock.

Parida Cave is located on the Rio Grande, about a mile downstream from the confluence of the Pecos River and the Rio Grande. An NPS boat dock is provided.

Amistad NRA Area Pictograph Styles

(All dates Before Present)

Pecos River
4000 BP



Red Linear
2000 BP

Red Monochrome
1000 BP

Bold Line Geometric
800 BP

Historic
500 BP

REMEMBER: Within National Parks ALL natural and cultural objects are protected

Cultural Periods of the Lower Pecos

The brief synopsis below summarizes the long record of human habitation in the Amistad NRA area. This knowledge is the result of years of detailed scientific study by archeologists and historians. The park's website (www.nps.gov/amis) includes in-depth information and links to scholarly reports. In addition to the websites listed in this brochure, see www.texasbeyondhistory.net**.**

Archeologists have named these ancient cultures, but fundamental questions such as what they called themselves, who they were, what languages they spoke, and what happened to them will probably never be uncovered by an archeologist's trowel.

All dates Before Present (BP).

Paleoindian 14,500-8,500 BP

The first people arrived at the end of the last Ice Age. Their world was one of vast grassland savannahs and pine forests filled with Pleistocene animals such as saber-toothed cat, ground sloth, mammoth, bison, tapir, camel, and the giant armadillo.

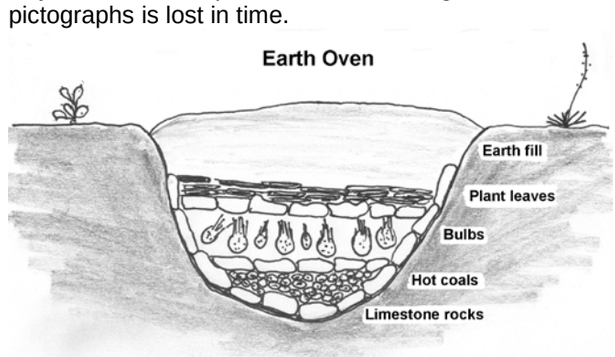
The most common type of Paleoindian artifact is the chipped-stone projectile point, also known as a spear or dart point. These points were used with spears and atlatls, or throwing sticks. Archeologists have defined a limited number of specific point styles including Folsom, Angostura, Golondrina, and Plainview.

Archaic 8,500-1,200 BP

The cooler wetter Ice Age environment rapidly disappeared as the climate became warmer and drier. Today's well-known plants, such as prickly pear, sotol, and lechugilla were well established by 6,000 BP. People responded with new subsistance strategies, changing from big game and herd animal hunting towards small game hunting and plant gathering. They exploited a wider range of both animal and plant resources, produced more ground stone artifacts for processing plant materials, and increased their reliance on aquatic riverine resources.

Earth ovens are among the most common Archaic archeological sites. They are shallow, excavated pits filled with wood, rocks, and food plants; they were then covered with earth for extended periods of time. Earth oven cooking reduces the complex starches in sotol and lechugilla bulbs to simple sugars, thus improving their digestibility and taste.

Lower Pecos River style rock art dates from about 4,000 BP. Within their yearly cycle of nomadic hunting and gathering, they spent time inside the many rock shelters located along the area's major rivers. Archeologists believe that, like most hunting and gathering societies, shamanic traditions dominated their spiritual lives. Beyond this assumption, the full meaning of the pictographs is lost in time.



Late Prehistoric 1,000-500 BP

The Late Prehistoric witnessed the introduction of the bow and arrow, the appearance of wikiup rings, and the presence of pottery. Arrow point styles, such as Scallorn and the later Perdiz types, replace the larger spear and dart points of the Archaic period as the new technology of the bow replaces the use of spears and the atlatl. The appearance of wikiup rings (circular features consisting of multiple stones) suggests the use of brush shelters, tipis, or wikiups in upland areas.

Several Late Prehistoric sites include the remains of modern bison, occasionally driven southward from the Great Plains by extreme weather in the late fall and winter.

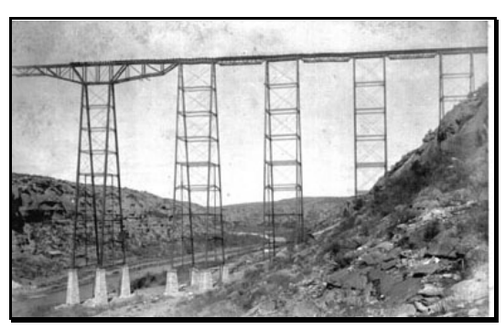
A preference for earth oven cooking technology and a general use of riverine and canyon land resources continues into this period.

Historic 500 BP-Present

Modern history begins in the region in 1590 with Gaspar Castano de Sosa's journey from Monclova, Mexico to the Pecos Pueblo of New Mexico. DeSosa's journal refers to the Lower Pecos region as "*despoblado*" or uninhabited. Researchers believe that nomadic and horse-mounted Native Americans traversed the region, but were misidentified or stereotyped by the Spanish and other explorers as being Apache or Comanche.

More recent events include:

- Texas Statehood: 1845
- San Antonio-El Paso Road: 1850- 1883
- Seminole-Negro Scouts, Fort Clark: 1860s & 1870s
- Completion of Southern Pacific Railroad: 1883
- Completion of Amistad Dam: 1969
- Establishment of Amistad NRA: 1990



Pecos High Bridge
Southern Transcontinental Railroad, 1892

Visitor Information Center, US Hwy 90 W, six miles west of the Hwy 90 and 277 N intersection
Open: Tuesday – Saturday 8 am to 4:30 Closed: Sunday and Monday
Amistad National Recreation Area 830.775.7491 ext 0 www.nps.gov/amis

8/27/2013