Amistad

National Park Service
U.S. Department of the Interior

Amistad National Recreation Area
Texas

Archeology & Rock Art

World-Class Archeology

Amistad National Recreation Area is known for world-class boating and fishing. It is less well-known that the park also preserves and interprets the spectacular prehistoric rock art and archeology of the Lower Pecos Canyonlands region of southwest Texas.

Ancient hunters-gatherers were drawn to the area's abundant water and left behind complex and vibrant paintings on the canyon walls. Careful study of these and other things they left behind at well-preserved archeological sites in the region provide an unusually detailed window to the past, making this one of the most interesting and significant areas of study in North American archeology.

What is a Pictograph?

Ancient rock paintings (pictographs) are found on the walls of many of the area's rockshelters. These were made using a brush of plant fiber or hair and a liquid paint mixture of ground minerals, animal fat, and plant materials. There are five main styles of pictographs found in the region. The oldest of these, the Lower Pecos River style, were painted between around 4200 and 2950 years ago. These are very stylized and follow formal conventions. Archeologists study pictographs by examining their associations with other archeological evidence and by looking for commonalities between their imagery and the symbols and beliefs of traditional peoples living today or in the recent past. The Lower Pecos River rock art may have served to record and pass on the stories, histories and beliefs of the culture that painted them.

How to See Rock Art

Hiking to Rock Art

Seminole Canyon State Park and Historic Site: Located 45 miles west of Del Rio on US Highway 90, offers exhibits on regional history and guided tours to Fate Bell Shelter. Tours are Wednesday- Sunday at 10 am and 3 pm (no 3 pm tour June to September) and are moderately strenuous. Longer hikes that visit more sites are offered once a month from September through May. 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 site at 12:30 on Saturdays from September through May. They also lead tours of other rock art sites located on private land within the region. Call 888.925.9907 or go to www.rockart.org for the tour calendar and more information.

Boating to Rock Art

Panther Cave and Parida Cave on the Rio Grande can be reached only by boat, and may not be accessible at low lake levels. There are no regularly scheduled tours to either of these sites. If you do not have a boat, you can hire a fishing guide to take you. Locations of these sites are shown on the park map. Call 830.775.7491 ext. 0 or go to www.nps.gov/amis for more information and access status.

Panther Cave: The large, densely painted mural at this rock shelter includes the site's namesake, a nine-foot mountain lion painted in red. Access requires climbing up a steep stairway from the dock at the site.

Parida Cave: This large rock shelter with pictographs offers unmatched peaceful ambiance and a view of the Rio Grande. It was a railroad stop in the 1880s.

Amistad NRA Area Pictograph Styles

(All dates Before Present)

Pecos River	Red Linear	Red Monochrome	Bold Line Geometric	Historic
4000 BP	2000 BP	1000 BP	800 BP	500 BP

Cultural Periods of the Lower Pecos Canyonlands

Native peoples called this region home from the end of the last ice age through historic times. Our current knowledge of these cultures results from decades of detailed scientific study by archeologists and historians.

For more information on the region's history and prehistory, please visit www.texasbeyondhistory.net and click on Lower Pecos on the map. The park's website (www.nps.gov/amis) includes more in-depth information and links to scholarly reports.

Paleoindian
14,500-8,500 BP
All dates are given in years before present (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 large animals such as saber-toothed cat, ground sloth, mammoth, bison, tapir, camel, and the giant armadillo. However, smaller animals and plant foods were also a very important part of their diet. They made distinctive stone points that were used to tip spears that were likely thrown at game with atlatl spearthrowers. Exhibits at Seminole Canyon State Park and on Texas Beyond History discuss the famous Paleoindian buffalo jump-kill site at Bonfire Shelter near Langtry.

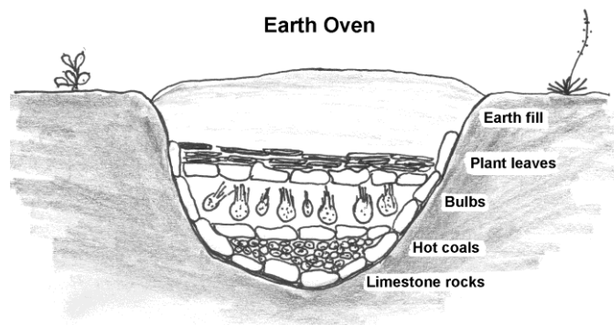
Archaic
8,500-1,200 BP

The cooler, wetter Ice Age environment disappeared as the climate became warmer and drier. Plants that are common today such as prickly pear, sotol, and lechugilla were well established by 9000 BP. People responded with new economic strategies, shifting from hunting herds of big game to a dependence on smaller animals, fish, and – most importantly – the gathering and often laborious processing of wild plant foods.

Among the most important technologies to emerge early in the Archaic period was the earth oven. These were pits dug into the ground, lined with rock and loaded with firewood. After the fire had burned down the hot rocks were covered with an insulating layer, then food plants, and finally covered with earth and left to cook for up to three days using the heat stored in the rocks. Earth oven cooking breaks down the defensive toxins of plants such as sotol and lechuguilla and reduces complex starches to simple sugars, improving their digestibility and taste.

The Lower Pecos River style rock art appears during the middle part of the Archaic, continuing into the Late Archaic.

Although peoples in the southwest began adopting agriculture during the Late Archaic, it did not catch on here. The peoples of the Lower Pecos Canyonlands likely found the region's rainfall to be too unreliable, and so remained hunter-gatherers pursuing wild species well adapted to the region's frequent and extended droughts.



Late Prehistoric
1,200-500 BP

The Late Prehistoric was a time of both major technological change and continuity. Earth oven cooking of wild plant foods remained a cornerstone of peoples' lifeways. However, the atlatl spearthrower was replaced by the bow and arrow around 1200 years ago. This new weapon provided several important advantages over the atlatl including improved range, accuracy, stealth, and ammunition capacity. Arrow points (sometimes called bird-points by collectors) are much smaller than the larger atlatl dart points (what most people think of as "arrowheads"), but were potent enough to kill even animals as large as buffalo.

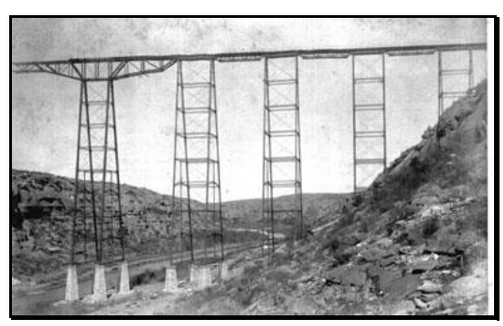
Another major innovation was pottery, first seen here around 1000 years ago.

Historic
500 BP-Present

The historical record begins here in 1590 when Spanish explorer Gaspar Castano de Sosa documented his expedition through the region from Monclova, Mexico to the Pecos Pueblo of New Mexico.

More recent events include:

- Mexican Independence from Spain: 1821
- Texas Independence from Mexico: 1836
- Texas Statehood: 1845
- San Antonio-El Paso Road: 1850- 1883
- Seminole-Negro Indian Scouts, Fort Clark and Fort Duncan, 1860s & 1870s
- San Felipe irrigation canals completed: 1871
- Completion of Southern Pacific Railroad: 1883
- Val Verde County created: 1885
- Laughlin Air Force Base established: 1942



Pecos High Bridge
Southern Transcontinental Railroad, 1892

- Completion of Amistad Dam: 1969
- Establishment of Amistad NRA: 1990

Learn More

The Visitor Center is located six miles west of the Hwy 90/Hwy 277 intersection at 9685 U.S. Hwy 90 W. Open daily 8:00 am - 4:30 pm.

For additional information on Amistad National Recreation Area, visit www.nps.gov/amis or call (830) 775-7491, Extension 0.

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