

Settlement in Flagstaff

Flagstaff has been home to many people over time. Early settlers shared the cool pine forests with bison, antelope, and camel 15,000 to 20,000 years ago. They hunted, gathered wild plants and developed an agricultural lifestyle. Their diet mainly consisted of beans, squash, and corn.

Prehistoric cliff dwellers (the Sinagua) lived in what is now Walnut Canyon National Monument. Before the Sunset Crater Volcano erupted sometime around 1064-1065 A.D., the Sinagua lived in pit houses and farmed the open meadows. When the volcano erupted, they left Walnut Canyon for settlements in nearby Wupatki and the Verde Valley. After the eruption, they returned to rebuild most of the cliff dwellings, which are located in Walnut Canyon. They stayed in the area for nearly 200 years.

Those who moved to Walnut Canyon used the Kaibab Limestone ledges in the canyon to form natural shelters. Outsiders did not easily reach a cliff dwelling, so it also acted as a natural fortress. From these protected places, people could see great distances.

The red sandstone at nearby Wupatki provided excellent building material. They made beautiful pueblos out of sandstone mortar, which was the red sandstone mixed with mud. In each area, springs, rainfall, and seasonal streams offered sources of drinking water. Corn, beans, and squash were planted along the washes and placed on slopes to take advantage of rain runoff. They also built small dams to help guarantee crops would grow.

In the mid-16th century, the Spanish explorer, Coronado, traveled through the Mogollon Rim with 1,400 men and 1,500 animals. The Sinagua were already gone by this time. He was in search of legendary cities of gold, which he mistakenly believed were in the area. He never found the cities (which probably never existed), but his men encountered Zuni, Hopi, and Pueblo Indians and Coronado and his men saw the Grand Canyon. They returned to Mexico in 1542.

Mountain men traveled through the region in the 1830s and 1840s. In 1857, the Beale Expedition came through Flagstaff while mapping a roadway across Arizona from New Mexico to California. A diary from one of the men in the Beale party contained this following excerpt:

Beale, with his party, traveled west until they reached the east side of the San Francisco Mountains and then camped to wait for us not knowing what had caused the delay as he expected us to meet him a long way further east. When we arrived at their camp there was great rejoicing by both parties. Delaware Dick and Little Axe, a Shawnee, two Indian hunters, and guides with Beales [*sic*] party had an abundance of bear meat, venison, and wild turkeys in camp when we arrived in camp. We had great feasting for several days. While in camp at the San Francisco Mountains, Kit Carson the great scout and Indian fighter came into camp.

L.A. Spitzer, 1859

American settlers did not move into the Flagstaff area until the 1870s, right after the Apaches had been driven into southeastern Arizona. A few settlers arrived in 1876 and established a community called Agassiz near the San Francisco Peaks. This party of emigrants camped a few miles southeast of the San Francisco Peaks. They celebrated the one-hundredth anniversary of the signing of the Declaration of Independence by stripping a large Ponderosa pine to use as a staff for a flag, which gave the settlement its name—Flagstaff. Unlike the Sinagua who farmed the area for hundreds of years, these early settlers believed that the land was not suitable for farming. However, a sheepherder named Thomas Forsythe MacMillan settled there finding that the land was very well suited for raising sheep.

The Atlantic and Pacific Railroad (now the Santa Fe) reached Flagstaff on August 1, 1882, and guaranteed the community's growth. Before the railroad came, Flagstaff, for all its natural beauty, timber, grass and water, was a relatively uninhabited area of the United States. The railroad not only brought more tourists and settlers, but it also provided many jobs.

Today, Flagstaff is a city with a population of over 50,000 people of different cultures and backgrounds. The Sinagua, mountain men, and early settlers have gone, but their legacy remains.