

Tucson History Series

This is the first of a six-part series on the history of Tucson. Author Bob Ring challenged himself to capture the “what,” “when”, and “how” of the important events that shaped Tucson’s development. Here’s the series schedule:

Part 1: Tucson’s First Residents: Hunter-Gatherers to Farmers

Part 2: The Hohokam and Descendants

Part 3: Spanish Missionaries

Part 4: The Spanish/Mexican Presidio

Part 5: Tucson in U.S. Territory

Part 6: Tucson in the State of Arizona

Part 1 – Tucson’s First Residents: Hunter Gatherers to Farmers

9,000 BC to AD 450

The first Tucsonans were probably descendants of people who followed herds of large game animals from Siberia across a land bridge in the Bering Strait into Alaska between about 45,000 BC and 12,000 BC. Subsequent generations of these Paleo-Indians (ancient ones) gradually spread southward to populate the Americas. (Note: There are alternative migration starting points, routes, and dates currently under intense study.)

Estimates are that by about 9,000 BC, small bands of hunters had reached the Tucson Valley. The post Ice Age climate was cooler and wetter than today’s dry Sonoran Desert. Grasslands thrived. The Santa Cruz River, along with the Rillito River, Pantano Creek, and Tanque Verde Creek, flowed year round. The mountains surrounding Tucson had forests of juniper and pine that extended much farther down their slopes than these trees do today.

Hunter-Gatherers

Populating this landscape were huge mammoths (13 feet high at the shoulders), large bison, giant beavers, grizzly bears, camels, deer, elk, and horses. Besides hunting these animals, the first Tucsonans probably also hunted smaller game and gathered plant food.

No skeletal evidence of these early hunter-gatherers has yet been found and they left few traces of habitation. Only a single campsite is known in southeastern Arizona - near Sierra Vista. They ranged over large areas, lived in small groups of 25-30 people, and didn’t stay long in one location. Their movements were probably determined by the amount of game, the season, and availability of native plants.

Hunters trapped mammoths and other large animals along streams and lakes and killed them with spears tipped with large razor-sharp, distinctively grooved spear points, called Clovis points, after Clovis New Mexico, a center for this Paleo-Indian Clovis culture.

Five deeply buried kill sites, along with Clovis points and other stone tools, have been found among the bones of mammoths and bison in the San Pedro Valley to the east. Archaeologists have yet to find a kill site in Tucson, but have found two Clovis spear points, one along the Santa Cruz River in the southern Tucson Valley and another in the northern Tucson Valley.

As the effects of the last Ice Age receded, the southern Arizona climate continued to warm and dry. Mammoths and other big game animals began to die off, probably because they couldn't adjust to the climate changes, but perhaps because they were killed off by their human hunters. By about 7,500 BC the large mammals were mostly gone.

Desert Culture

People of the Tucson Valley now hunted smaller game such as rabbits, deer, birds, and bighorn sheep at higher altitudes. They stayed in one place longer than their predecessors, supplementing their diet with berries, seeds, nuts, and grains. They maintained seasonal migratory patterns but returned to the same place. They lived primarily in the open, but probably built temporary shelters.

The beginning of this Desert Culture is marked by the appearance for the first time of seed-milling equipment in the form of hand-held stone grinding slabs. Porridge and bread were now a part of the diet.

The only habitation site from this period identified so far in the Tucson Valley was found in what is now known as Dove Mountain in the southern Tortolita Mountains.

By about 3,000 BC the desert people's grinding equipment had evolved to deep basin bottom-stones or mutates, small round handstones or manos, mortars, and large stone pestles. Tucson area sites from this period have been discovered in the Catalina foothills, the Rincon and Santa Rita Mountains, the lower hills of the Tucson Mountains, and alongside the Santa Cruz River and its tributaries.

The Tucson area climate had stabilized by about 2,500 BC, closely resembling the Sonoran desert climate of today.

Farming Begins

In about 2,000 BC corn was introduced to the Tucson Valley from Mexico. Agriculture was an important step to people who had previously relied only on hunting and gathering. The desert people planted corn near camps with permanent water supplies. After planting they resumed hunting and gathering native plant foods, returning to harvest the ripened crop.

By 1,500 BC these early farmers were constructing short irrigation canals along the Santa Cruz River. Flood farming during the summer monsoon season was practiced along the banks of the river and its tributaries by at least 800 BC.

Small farming camps had grown into small agricultural settlements by 400 BC. Such sites have been found in the Tucson Valley on low terraces overlooking the floodplains of Tucson's waterways or buried deeply in floodplain sediments. One such settlement was partially excavated on the site of Tucson's first mission, the historic San Agustin Mission, just east of A-Mountain. Plant remains recovered from these settlements reveal that the farmers grew maize and eventually beans, squash, cotton, and agave.

Excavation of some of these sites has revealed small round or oval pit houses, bell-shaped storage pits, roasting pits, small fire pits, carbonized fragments of corn, and human burials. Other artifacts from this period include marine shell beads and small pendants. Small fire-hardened clay human figures and beads have also been found.

Fired figurines, shell jewelry, bell-shaped pits, and corn farming all developed in Mexico centuries earlier than in Arizona. Marine shells and some of the other materials used in tools and ornaments were not locally available in the Tucson area, suggesting that early Tucson farmers traded with Mexico. Thus began the long-term influence that Mexico would have on Tucson.

By AD 100, undecorated, unpolished pottery (brownware) was widely used in the Tucson Valley as containers or for storage. Reliance on crops continued to increase. Populations grew. Trade in shells, turquoise, and obsidian increased along newly developing trade networks.

The next 350 years saw a long developmental sequence that resulted in increasing the scale of the desert farmers' society. By AD 450 people started coming together in more permanent settlements, built more substantial buildings and massive irrigation systems, and formalized their games and rituals.

As Arizona's well known historian Marshall Trimble puts it, "These desert people were the link between the ancient elephant hunters and prehistoric Hohokam."

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Sources: Arizona: A Cavalcade of History (Marshall Trimble, 1989), Arizona: A History (Thomas E. Sheridan, 2012), Cultural History of the Tucson Basin (J. Homer Thiel and Michael W. Diehl, 2004), The Hohokam Indians of the Tucson Basin (Linda M. Gregonis & Karl Reinhard, 1979), The Hohokam Millennium (Suzanne K. Fish and Paul R. Fish, 2008), People Without Pots: Pre-ceramic Archaeology of the Tucson Basin (Bruce B. Huckell, PhD, 1994), A Thousand Years of Irrigation in Tucson (Jonathan B. Mabry and Homer Thiel, 1995), www.discoverseazhistory.com: The Paleo-Indians.



*Eleven thousand years ago Woolly Mammoths roamed the Tucson area.
(From Tucson's International Wildlife Museum, courtesy of Bob Ring)*



*Early Tucson residents hunted mammoths with spears tipped with grooved Clovis points like this one,
chipped out of stone. (From Wikimedia Commons, courtesy of Virginia Dept. of Historic Resources)*