

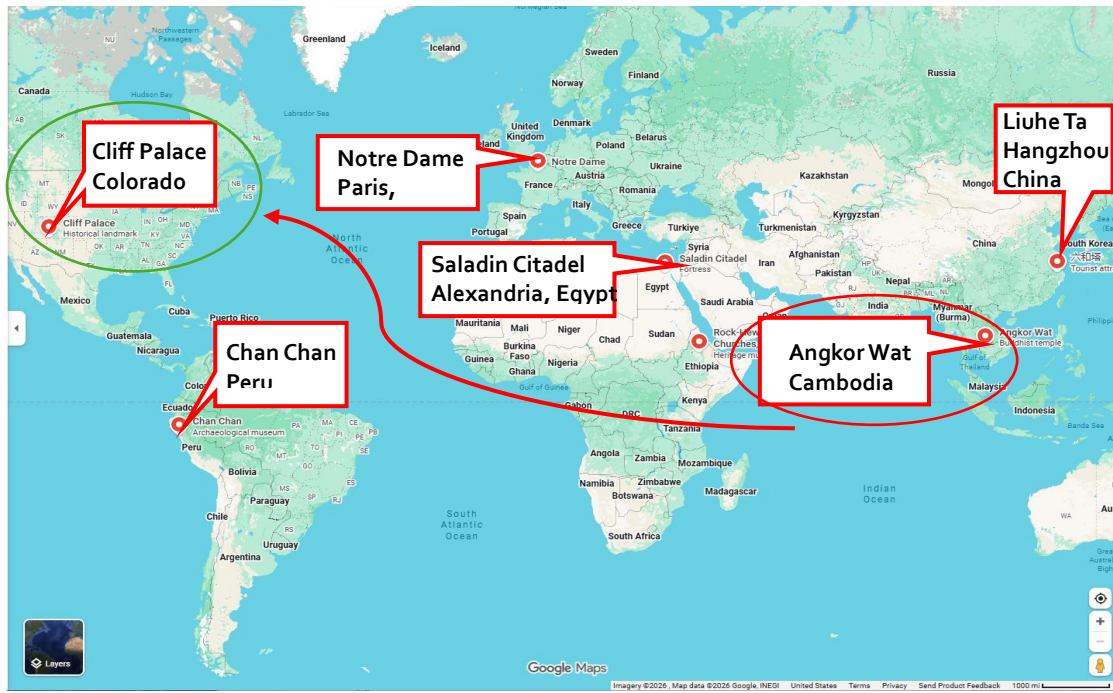
English Conversation Club – Saratoga Library

April 16, 2026

Ancient People and Architecture

A few weeks ago, we traveled back to the 12th century C.E. to explore outstanding works of architecture in the world that still stand today. These structures reflected the people and cultures that were great regional powers during those times.

We started with Cambodia and Angkor Wat shown in the map below. Today, we will explore the culture of the **Ancestral Puebloans** who lived on the **plateau** where present-day Colorado, New Mexico, Arizona, and Utah of the United States now meet. First, review the vocabulary.



Vocabulary: Match the words to their meanings. The next page has photos of some of these words.

- | | |
|---------------------------------------|--|
| 1. ancestral (an-ses-truhl) | A. a flat-topped, steep-sided hill or small plateau |
| 2. check dam (chek dam) | B. a person or animal that is the offspring of a specific ancestor |
| 3. cliff (klif) | C. relating to family members or a group of people from the past |
| 4. descendant (dih-sen-duhnt) | D. a large, flat area of land higher than the land around it |
| 5. dwelling (dwel-ing) | E. a large natural or artificial lake used as a source of water supply |
| 6. irrigation (ir-i-gay-shuhn) | F. rain that flows off from the land or roof into a river or container |
| 7. mesa (mey-suh) | G. the watering of land by people to help grow plants or crops |
| 8. plateau (pla-toh) | H. a house, apartment, or other place to live in |
| 9. reservoir (rez-er-vwahr) | I. a small dam built across a ditch or channel to slow down water |
| 10. runoff (ruhn-awf) | J. a high area of rock with a very steep side, often on a coast |

ANSWERS : 1 – C; 2 - I; 3 - J; 4 - B; 5 - H; 6 - G; 7 - A; 8 - D; 9 - E; 10 - F

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Examples of Vocabulary Words



a check dam made of stone

(Image Source: <http://erosioncontrol.okstate.edu/check-dams>)



cliff

(Photo by Brocken Inaglory taken at [McWay Falls](#) at Julia Pfeiffer Burns State Park, California)



mesa (Photo by J Brew)



plateau (The Pajarito Plateau in New Mexico is an example of a volcanic plateau., By Patrickfisher1 - Own work, CC BY-SA 4.0, <https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=64956435>)



Crystal Springs Reservoir, California

(Photo by [glavin](#) at [English Wikipedia](#))



Water runoff into a city creek after a storm in Oakland, CA
(Photo by Barbara J Mahler for the US Geological Survey)

DIALOG

Tim: I'm going to visit my uncle this summer. He's a geologist and helps build **check dams**.

Sam: Oh, cool. I heard geologists also work on **reservoirs** and **irrigation** systems.

Tim: Water management is so important. We need to capture the **runoff** in case of droughts.

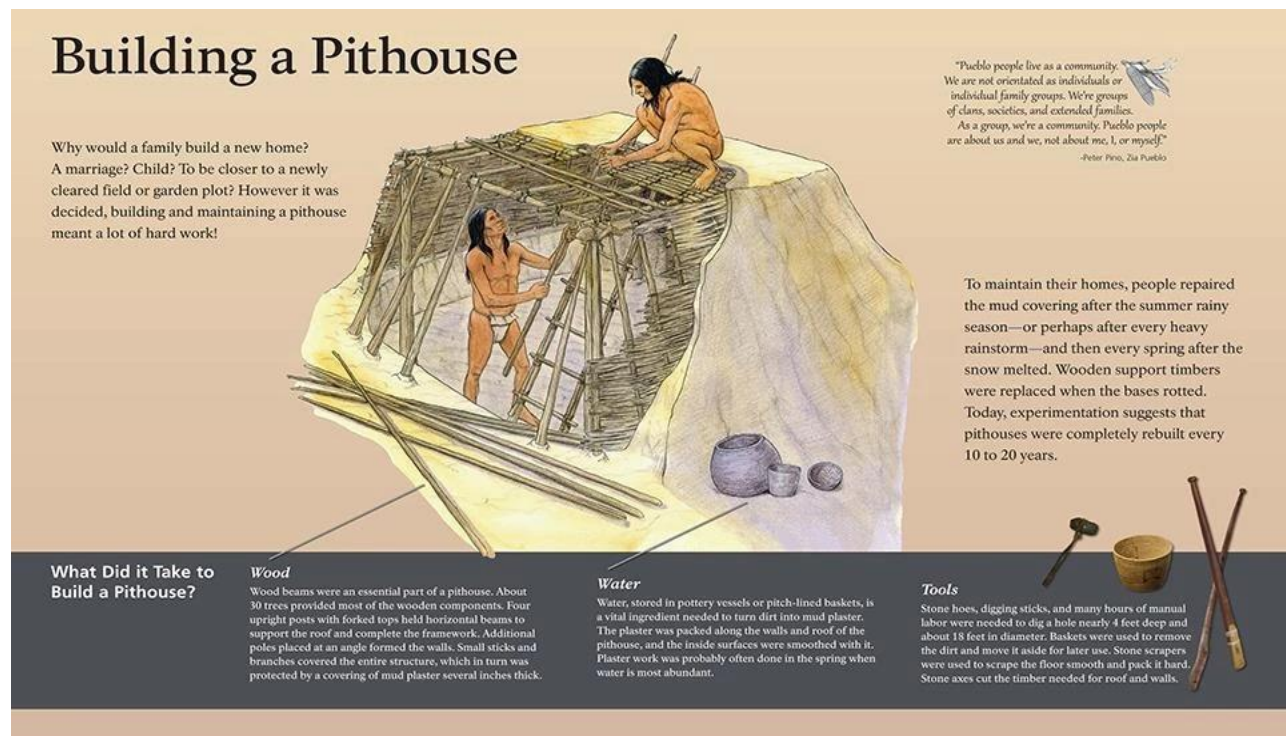
Sam: We can learn from **ancestral** people who have been doing that for hundreds of years.

The Ancestral Pueblo

The **Ancestral Puebloans**, also known as **Ancestral Pueblo** people, were an ancient Native American culture. *Pueblo* means "village" and "people" in Spanish. The Spanish explorers who came to the Americas used this word to refer to these people and the types of homes or dwellings they had.

Researchers continue to debate when this distinct culture came about. They generally agree that the origin of the **Ancestral Puebloans** was around the 12th century BCE or about 3200 years ago. The culture of the **Ancestral Pueblo** reached its height between about 700 and 1300 C.E. At first the Ancestral Pueblo people hunted, gathered wild plant foods, and farmed corn.

They typically lived in caves or in shallow pit houses which are structures of poles and earth built over underground pits. They also created pits in the ground that were used for food storage. As farming became more important, they built **irrigation** structures such as **reservoirs** and **check dams**—low stone walls used to catch **runoff** from the limited rains.



Hunting and gathering eventually became secondary to farming, and the Ancestral Pueblo did not move around as much. Originally, they built partly underground houses in caves or on the tops of high, rocky **plateaus** called **mesas**.

Later they built above-ground **dwellings**, both on **mesas** and in canyons. Using stone masonry, they constructed a number of very large communities, some with more than 100 adjoining rooms. **Kivas**—underground circular spaces used mainly for ceremonial purposes—became important community features. **Pottery** came into widespread use.

The architecture of the Ancestral Puebloans reached its height with the **cliff dwellings**. Built between 1150 and 1300 C.E., these large, apartment-like structures were built along canyon and mesa walls or within openings of the **cliffs**.

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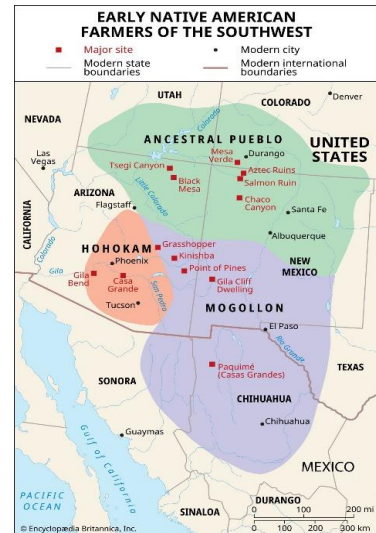
The Ancestral Puebloans moved their residences from the middle of the canyon floor to the canyon walls and **cliffs**, which provided natural protection from their nomadic neighbors and enemies.

On June 29, 1906, President Theodore Roosevelt established Mesa Verde National Park in Colorado to preserve the cultural heritage of the Ancestral Pueblo. Mesa Verde National Park preserves the spectacular **cliff dwellings** of this ancient culture.

The park contains nearly 5,000 known archeological sites including **cliff dwellings**, the **mesa**-top pit houses, pueblos, masonry towers, and farming structures. Out of over 600 **cliff dwellings** within the boundaries of the park, 75% contain only 1-5 rooms each, and many are single room storage units.

The Ancestral Puebloans constructed their cliff homes from hand-cut stone blocks and mortar made from adobe, a heavy clay soil.

Dwellings often consisted of two to four stories. Each floor was set back from the one below it, giving the buildings a stepped appearance. The roofs of the lower rooms served as terraces for the rooms above.





Cliff Palace

Among the most impressive of these **cliff dwellings** at Mesa Verde National Park is **Cliff Palace**. It has 150 residential rooms, and 23 underground ceremonial rooms called *kivas* (kee-vahs). These massive **cliff dwellings** were built between 1150 and 1300, as the Ancestral Puebloans shifted from hunting and gathering to a life that relied primarily on farming.

While farming remained the main economic activity, craftsmanship in pottery and weaving also achieved its finest quality during this period. Although the local area provided most of the people's needs, there were some things that could only be obtained by trade.

Locally produced items such as pottery, obsidian, woven goods, corn, and piñon nuts were traded for turquoise, salt, seashells, and colorful macaw feathers. They came from places as far away as Mexico and the coast of California.

The Ancestral Puebloans abandoned their communities by about 1300. A **drought** lasting from 1276 to 1299 probably caused massive crop failure. At the same time, conflicts increased between the Ancestral Pueblo and neighboring groups. The Ancestral Pueblo moved to the south and the east, near better water sources.

Today, there are 21 Pueblo tribes living in the greater Southwest part of the United States. They are the descendants of the Ancestral Puebloan people. Modern day Pueblo tribes have strong cultural connections to the homes of their ancestors.

It is important to protect Ancestral Puebloan sites out of respect for living Pueblo people, and out of respect for the past. Respecting and protecting archaeology sites preserves them for future generations and helps us all to learn from and about these people.

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Discussion Questions

1. Have you ever been to Mesa Verde National Park in Colorado? If not, would you like to go there?
2. What is your impression of the Ancestral Puebloans?
3. What other cultures build their homes in cliffs, plateaus, mesas and mountains? Have you heard of the:
 - a. Incas and Machu Picchu?
 - b. Cliff of Bandiagara or the Land of the Dogons in Mali?
 - c. Cappadocia in Turkey?
4. Why do some cultures build their homes and cities on cliffs or high areas?
5. What kind of skills did the Ancestral Puebloans have to build their cave dwellings?
6. Have you been to other national parks in the United States? If so, which ones? Describe your experience there.

If you want to learn more about the Ancestral Puebloans and their cliff dwellings, go to https://www.nps.gov/meve/learn/historyculture/cliff_dwellings_home.htm.

If you would like to visit the Cliff Dwellings, this website has helpful information: https://www.nps.gov/meve/planyourvisit/cliff_dwelling_tours.htm.

References

The material for this week is based on the content from these sources.

- <https://www.ebsco.com/research-starters/anthropology/ancestral-puebloan-civilization-flourishes-american-southwest>
- [https://www.nps.gov/meve/learn/historyculture/upload/ancestral_pueblo_people_2018_508_01-24-18-2.pdf#:~:text=Archeologists%20have%20called%20these%20people%20Anasazi%2C%20from,\(Spanish%20for%20%E2%80%9Cgreen%20table%E2%80%9D\)%20about%20A.D.%20550.](https://www.nps.gov/meve/learn/historyculture/upload/ancestral_pueblo_people_2018_508_01-24-18-2.pdf#:~:text=Archeologists%20have%20called%20these%20people%20Anasazi%2C%20from,(Spanish%20for%20%E2%80%9Cgreen%20table%E2%80%9D)%20about%20A.D.%20550.)
- Ancestral Puebloans, Wikipedia, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ancestral_Puebloans#Migration_from_the_homeland accessed April 12, 2026.
- Pit House graphic from National Park Service, <https://www.nps.gov/meve/learn/kidsyouth/jr-mtl-online.htm>

Photo Credit for Cliff Palace and Dwellings: *U.S. National Park Service*