

SAN JUAN BASIN ARCHAEOLOGICAL SOCIETY

Chapter of Colorado Archaeological Society



FIELD TRIP REPORT

Date: **July 12, 2018**

Destination: **Chimney Rock National Monument**

Leaders: **Barb and Lyle Hancock**

Number of Participants: **10**

Our group of ten SJBAS members met at Santa Rita Park, formed carpools, and drove to Chimney Rock National Monument. There are many changes afoot at the Monument, including a brand-new sign that is mounted in a replica kiva, new parking areas, and clearings for a planned amphitheater and new visitor center. We regrouped at the visitor cabin, signed in, paid our fees, and met our tour guide Michael Stillman, Chimney Rock Interpretive Association volunteer and SJBAS member. This was the first visit to Chimney Rock for nine of our participants.

Michael is a fairly recent transplant to our area from Golden, CO. Soon after arriving he got involved in exploring the archaeology in the Four Corners region and has taken most of the archaeology classes at Fort Lewis College. He has been a volunteer at Chimney Rock for four seasons and was a wealth of knowledge about the site.

We started out visiting the older pit house village, situated below the Great House Pueblo. Michael explained that the original Ancestral Puebloan people to populate the area came up from villages along the San Juan River. There are eight distinct village sites in the immediate area, most of them in the Piedra River valley where there was a substantial amount of acreage for agriculture. Speculation has it that the higher village site at Chimney Rock came about because it had a longer growing season, as the "cold air sink" in the valley below shortened that growing season by at least 10 days. This village of a dozen or so pit houses was built in approximately AD 925 and abandoned along with the Great House in 1125. We viewed a reconstructed pit house with thick stone walls built on bedrock and a 44-foot-diameter Great Kiva that was added in AD 1084, after construction of the Great House. Archaeologists have used dendrochronology, the modern science of using tree ring data to calculate the exact ages of wood beams used in construction.

After finishing the tour of the lower village, we headed up to the Great House Pueblo. Along the trail we came across more pit houses, including one that had been excavated during the first archaeology expedition in 1921-22. The archaeologists used the roof beams for firewood and neglected to backfill the rooms, thus eliminating the possibility of using dendrochronology to date the pit house and allowing future erosion to completely wash away the site.

Further up the narrow ridge, just below the Great House, we came to the site of what once was a tower constructed between two steep slopes in a manner that would allow people in the tower to control access to the Great House. Early archaeologists named this tower the "Guardhouse." Although this tower could have been used for defensive purposes, archaeologists believe it was more likely used for crowd control and to regulate who could visit the Great House. Because this ruin was very unstable after excavation and posed a hazard to visitors, it was removed by the Forest Service.



Michael explaining Chacoan construction details of the Great House Pueblo kiva

By studying the masonry of the Great House, archaeologists have determined that it was built in the Chacoan tradition. It was built in two stages, beginning in AD 1076 and being enlarged and finished in AD 1093. Each stage took about two years, and both construction periods coinciding with the 18.6-year lunar standstill cycle. There are 36 ground-floor rooms and two kivas.

Archaeologists believe that the Great House was ceremonial in nature and probably only housed a couple of families. It was constructed with the alignment of the lunar standstill corresponding to alignments of some of the exterior walls along with other archaeo-astronomical alignments.

A fire box is located on a higher point on the ridge, further east of the Great House. Research has determined that a large fire at Chimney Rock would be visible at Huérfano Mesa where another fire box has been found. Huérfano Mesa is visible from Pueblo Alto at Chaco 90 miles to the south, thus allowing quick communication between Chimney Rock and Chaco. The tour concluded at that point and we made our way down to the shuttle van. We had lunch at the visitor cabin picnic ground and then left for home.

Participants: Joan and Byron Kellogg, Lorraine and Hunter McCleary, Betsy Moore, Phil Bruckbauer, Chris Merlier, Mary Morehead, Ruth Guarino, and Lyle Hancock. Michael Stillman, also a SJBAS member, was our tour guide.

Chimney Rock Information

Follow this link for more information: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Chimney_Rock_National_Monument.

Chimney Rock Interpretive Association: <http://www.chimneyrockco.org/visit-chimney-rock-colorado/>

Chimney Rock excavation information - 2009: <http://www.taosarch.org/page-429349>

- by Lyle Hancock