The Ancestral Puebloans

The Ancestral Puebloan Culture evolved on the plateau of northeastern Arizona, northwestern New Mexico, southeastern Utah and southwestern Colorado.

Archaeologists believe they developed from an archaic culture of small nomadic bands that lived in the more mountainous parts of the territory. The introduction of pottery, probably from the south, signals the beginnings of the culture previously called Anasazi. *Anasazi* is a descriptive term of Navajo origin. Archaeologists applied the term to villagers who lived and farmed in the Four Corners area of the Southwest between the years AD 1 and 1300. Today, however, no doubt remains that these prehistoric people were the ancestors of modern Pueblo Indians living in New Mexico and Arizona.

This region's earliest inhabitants were hunters and gatherers. In time, agricultural knowledge came north from Mexico. Evidence exists for some corn agriculture by 1500 BC. By AD 1, people archaeologists call the Basketmakers, because of their outstanding basket-making skill, began to rely on dry farming (using soil moisture from melted snow, summer rainstorms, and occasional springs). The first farmers probably did not plant crops and leave them to survive
on their own. Most archaeologists believe that agriculture requires people to settle down in order to be successful. Major crops eventually included corn, beans, and squash. They made fine basketry, woven mats and cords, and used digging sticks and stone tools.

There is a whole group of Ancestral Pueblo people called the Basketmakers because of their superior basket making skills. As they began to transition from a hunter-gatherer to an agricultural lifestyle, baskets were used for collecting seeds, nuts, fruits, and berries, but they were sometimes coated with pitch on the inside, which allowed them to hold water and also be used for cooking.

Farming developed and became the mainstay of the Ancestral Puebloan economy. The Puebloans farmed mesa tops, plains, or canyon bottoms, depending where they lived. They planted large and small patches of land wherever there was sufficient water, warmth, and light to support a few plants. The Ancestral Puebloans gradually farmed more and hunted less over time, but they continued to hunt and gather wild plants long after they had settled in year-round villages. The weather in the Southwest was unpredictable and crop failures were probably fairly common even in the best of times.
Drought and other climatic changes were constant threats. Surplus corn was stored to provide food during bad years. Large storerooms became prominent features of communities. Changing rainfall patterns, shortened growing seasons, and/or cool summers could, and probably did, spell disaster for many local settlements.

Hunting and gathering were never totally abandoned. When crops were reduced by drought or cold weather, or as the population grew larger, communities were forced to rely more on game and wild plants to make up the difference. Meat remained the major source of protein. Piñon nuts, yucca fruit, berries, and other wild plants were still part of the diet. The people also gathered plant materials to make baskets, clothing, and tools. Garden plots actually made hunting easier by attracting rabbits, birds, and mice. The people also hunted deer and elk in the mountains, and antelope and bighorn sheep at lower elevations. Turkeys were domesticated and used mainly for feathers or as pets. They also were good for keeping bugs out of gardens.

Pottery and agriculture usually appear in ancient cultures at about the same time. Pottery is more practical for settled people who do not move frequently. Nomads commonly use baskets for storage and transport, but pottery better protects stored food from insects and rodents. Archaeologists are not sure if Ancestral Puebloans discovered pottery on their own or imported it from the Mogollon to the south. Whichever the cause, they soon saw the advantages of pottery over baskets for storage and cooking.

Much of the earliest Puebloan pottery is not decorated. Because of the type of clay in the Four Corners area, the method of firing results in a gray or white pottery. Later, simple decorations (lines, dots, zigzags) begin to appear. Pottery designs usually are bold geometric patterns in black-on-white, although sometimes they include representations of birds, lizards, or humans. Late in the culture a black-on-red type appears, but it is the beautiful black-on-white designs for which the culture is so well-known.
This mug, made in the 13th century (A.D. 1200s), represents Ancestral Puebloan pottery which typically featured black geometric patterns applied with a yucca paintbrush on a grayish white background. These patterns were remarkable for their balance and design.

Ancestral Puebloans have created and lived in a variety of shelters over their 1300 years in the Four Corners area. The earliest constructions were family unit pithouses, which were shallow pits dug in the ground roofed over by earth and wood. Pithouses were circular, square, or rectangular in shape. They had a central hearth in the floor for both cooking and heating. Small villages would develop where water and farming conditions allowed.

By AD 700 a change occurred. Pithouses were being replaced by multi-family pueblos built with shaped stones. One major advantage to pueblo construction is that adding rooms to a pueblo is much easier than digging a new pithouse. The first pueblos were single story buildings, but developed into larger multi-level complexes beginning about AD 900-1000. Pueblo-type villages resemble modern apartment blocks but with many rooms devoted to food storage. The actual living space in Ancestral Pueblo villages was usually outside on a rooftop or plaza during good weather. Indoor areas were mainly for sleeping or working in wet, windy, or cold weather. Most of the rooms in a pueblo were storage rooms, like a house full of closets.
The Ancestral Puebloans generally did not make adobe or mud bricks. The earliest pueblos often had walls made of clay covering a lattice of sticks, called *jacal* construction, usually anchored to a row of foundation stones. Roofing was layers of brush and clay over a frame of sticks and logs.

Pithouse-type villages and pueblo-type villages overlapped in time. The earliest pueblos were really a semicircle of storage rooms behind a cluster of pithouses. Gradually the above-ground storage rooms became living/sleeping/working rooms, while the pithouses became deeper and less numerous. After this transition, archaeologists often refer to the pithouses as kivas. Kivas were located in the center of a plaza and were the community and ceremonial center of the Ancestral Puebloan village. In a few places, Ancestral Puebloans built very large kivas. These circular kivas might have been used to host celebrations with people from outlying communities.

![A kiva at Mesa Verde National Park](http://www.nps.gov/meve/forteachers/artifact_gallery.htm)
Between AD 1200 and 1300 in the Four Corners region, many large and small pueblos were built into shallow caves. Known today as cliff dwellings, these village sites offer several advantages: They shelter the buildings from rain and snow, they usually have a good solar direction (shade in the summer, sun in the winter), a spring is often found at the back of these caves, and cave villages do not occupy scarce agricultural land. However, the absence of cliff dwellings before AD 1200 and their sudden, widespread adoption throughout the Four Corners region after that date suggest other reasons for this change. Many cliff dwellings have very defensible locations and defensive architecture, even though the difficulty of access must have been a disadvantage to some inhabitants. Recent evidence indicates that starvation and famine were common during this period and that violent events such as attacks from enemy groups sometimes took place. Cliff dwelling architecture may represent a response to these events.
Cliff Palace in Mesa Verde National Park is the largest cliff dwelling in North America.

Ancestral Puebloan communities were not isolated from each other or from other cultures in western North America. They participated in a far-reaching network of trade that brought exotic items from as far away as the Pacific coast, the Gulf of Mexico, and the Great Plains. Such items probably traveled by passing from person to person, or group to group. Trade items arrived from other cultures to the south, but most trade took place among different Ancestral Puebloan areas stretching from Colorado to Nevada. The Puebloans obtained California sea shells, parrots, and copper bells made in western Mexico. They probably received these products through trade with the Mogollon culture living to the south. The Hohokam, living around Phoenix, produced cotton which the Puebloans received, perhaps also through trade with the Mogollon.
The Ancestral Puebloans were also artists and traders, trading with a network of tribes to bring shells such as these from the Gulf of California to wear as ornamental jewelry.

Little clothing has been found because it is so perishable. The people wove textiles from cotton obtained in trade from southern areas. Footwear included sandals usually made of woven yucca fibers. Animal hides may have provided material for some clothing. Jewelry was common. Necklaces, earrings, bracelets, hair combs, and pins were traded or made from wood, bone, shell, and stone beads made of turquoise, slate, and other minerals.

Sandals woven from yucca fiber were typical footwear of the Ancestral Puebloan. Yucca fibers were boiled or soaked and then pounded to expose the inner fibers. These fibers were also used to produce rope, snares, mats, baskets, belts, and much more.
The Ancestral Puebloan farmers were relatively successful in the Four Corners area for over a thousand years, but by AD 1300 they had left the entire region. Long-term climate changes that reduced crop yield may have been among the reasons that they moved away from their former homeland. Tree-ring records and other tools used by archaeologists show that continual drought affected this region during several prehistoric periods, including the early 900s, the early 1100s, and the late 1200s. Each of these periods matches to shifts in Ancestral Puebloan settlement patterns. The last period (late 1200s) witnessed the final, widespread Puebloan migrations out of the Four Corners. Other factors responsible for this exodus may have been deforestation or other kinds of environmental changes, a growing scarcity of land or other resources, and/or political conflicts related to these problems.

The Ancestral Puebloans may have reached the limit of the natural resources available to them. When crops consistently failed, the people moved to a better location. The Ancestral Puebloans did not disappear. They moved and adapted to changing conditions in the Southwest and their lives.

Adapted from:
http://www.beloit.edu/~museum/logan/southwest/anasazi/introduction.htm

Standards Connections: Grade 6
Social Studies: Strand 1 Concept 2 PO 3
Reading: Strand 1 Concept 4, Strand 3 Concept 1