

In Context: The Mitchell Springs Complex

In this brief paper, I will attempt to describe aspects of settlement patterns and cultural evidence at the Mitchell Springs site within the context of the possible cultural forces at work in the Four Corners region. Later, I will also provide an overview of the discoveries made within the excavation unit to which I was assigned during the field school in the summer of 1996.

Among the sites we visited as part of our field school experience, only Mitchell Springs exhibits evidence of continuous occupation from the Pueblo I through the Pueblo III periods. In contrast, Escalante and Dominguez ruins were only briefly occupied during Pueblo III. While the Mesa Verde and Lowry town areas contained sites representing Pueblo I through Pueblo III, the locations of those sites changed from period to period.

Within the Lowry community, specific sites were abandoned and later period structures were built elsewhere within the same general area. Similarly, Anasazi groups moved around the mesa tops of Mesa Verde up through Pueblo II, and ultimately occupied the canyon alcoves during Pueblo III.

Only at the Mitchell Springs site are Pueblo I, II, and III structures found virtually one on top of the other. It is my opinion that the unique properties of the Mitchell Springs location motivated the inhabitants to stay in one spot. Specifically, the hill on which the ruins are situated has an excellent view of the likely farm lands below, and is bounded on two sides by a shallow canyon which provides three essential resources: Stone for building, clay for pottery, and water.

The best persisting evidence for use in cultural identification is provided by ceramics and architecture. The ceramic artifacts yielded by the Mitchell Springs site are representative of styles indigenous to the Montezuma Valley and its surrounding areas. These artifacts are similar in style to those found at all of the sites we visited, which would seem to indicate that the Mitchell Springs community functioned as part of the greater Northern San Juan Anasazi culture, with no apparent external influences.

In contrast, the architectural evidence at Mitchell Springs reflects elements of style and function which are not restricted to the local region. The hilltop P-III pueblo at M.S. shows strong similarities to the Escalante ruin, the Lowry ruin, and the mesa-top pueblos in the Far View community at Mesa Verde. All are planned, rectangular pueblos with one or more clan kiva internal to the pueblo. In each case the overall layout is Chacoan, but while some double-course, rubble-core walls are present, the overall masonry style is clearly Mesa Verde, or "Northern San Juan." The Mitchell Springs group also contains a Great Kiva, a widely accepted Chacoan feature.

This apparent contradiction between the ceramic and architectural indicators leads me to believe that while ideas may have been exchanged with the Chaco region, goods were not. Also, the relative absence of Chaco veneer and rubble-core construction in the Northern San Juan region seems to indicate not the arrival of populations from the south, but simply the arrival of their ideas.

The excavation unit in which I worked (i.e., Grid 21) provided string confirmation that a Great Kiva does exist at the Mitchell Springs site. Opened for the express purpose of finding a great kiva, we nonetheless were required to remove almost 120 centimeters before the alleged kiva's south wall was exposed.

The first 80 centimeters consisted of disturbed fill (likely caused by a pot-hunter's bulldozer), which was relatively loose and soft, and which contained a mix of artifacts representing the first three pueblo periods. Below 80 centimeters, identifiable strata were apparent. We encountered ash lenses, changes in soil color and texture, occasional concentrations of charcoal, and a gradual decrease in ceramics associated with Pueblo I.

Once we reached the great kiva wall, we were gratified to see that its position, curvature, and orientation were entirely consistent with the expectations formed from observing the kiva wall segment uncovered in the unit two meters to the East. In general, Grid 21 presents both sides of the cultural contradiction—sherds representing indigenous ceramic styles and the confirmation of a Chacoan Great Kiva.