
NEW LIGHT ON THE VILLAGE OF KUAUA

AS A NEW ERA DAWNS AT CORONADO HISTORIC SITE,
MYTHS AND MYOPIA FADE FROM ITS LEGACY.

BY ETHAN ORTEGA





Few people are fortunate enough to experience sunrise at Coronado Historic Site. As the rays of light peek over the Sandia Mountains, they slowly reveal where the ancient village of Kuaua once thrived. Seamlessly rising out of the ground are weathered walls: reconstructions of the adobe rooms that still rest silently beneath. Thousands if not millions of artifacts lay scattered on the surface, each a small connection to the people who made this place their home hundreds of years ago. The Rio Grande lights up, reminding us why people lived here for so long, its shimmering water flowing by the ancient village, giving life to the valley and everything in it.

The story of Kuaua has been shared with the public for over seventy-five years at Coronado Historic Site and even longer in the oral traditions of the local pueblos. The stories we share are like that early morning sun, just a hazy, magical glimpse of what lies on the surface. To learn more, we turn to the artifacts, our direct physical link to the people who inhabited this unique community.

To study the artifacts of Kuaua, the history of its excavation and the formation of Coronado State Monument (later renamed Coronado Historic Site) need to be understood. During the early twentieth century, historic preservation was obsessed with reconstructions and dramatic pageants. During the 1930s, Dr. Edgar Lee Hewett stepped on the scene at Kuaua. A revolutionary figure in the historic preservation movement, he is attributed with playing a vital role in the development of the 1906 Antiquities Act, but is viewed by many in the archaeological community as an amateur. Despite his questionable scientific methods, Hewett was known for encouraging interest in the Southwest through preserving historic sites, buildings, and culture as well as creating crowd-drawing events. His goal was to do the same with Kuaua and Santiago Pueblos, and to capitalize on the approaching Coronado Cuarto Centenario, the 400th

anniversary of the explorer Francisco Vázquez de Coronado's arrival in the Southwest. Hewett and some of his contemporaries thought there was a very good chance that either Kuaua or Santiago was the village where Coronado and his entourage established their base camp from AD 1540 to 1541.

Excavations began at Kuaua and Santiago Pueblos in June of 1934 under the direction of Hewett in an attempt to confirm this theory. Graduate students from the University of New Mexico supervised various workers from New Deal programs at the two sites. After several months of digging, archaeologists had discovered a large number of Spanish artifacts at Santiago Pueblo. However, on February 14, 1935, a unique find allowed Kuaua to steal the spotlight. Archaeologists uncovered a square, underground chamber which revealed itself to be a kiva with interior walls covered in ancient paintings. Kuaua soon became the focus of the proposed Coronado Monument, and plans were prepared to restore the site to resemble an active village.

In 1934, while discussing monuments, Hewett stated, "We will allow no vandal hands to destroy or restore them, and let their noble walls testify to the spirit that built them. In short, the preservation of these monuments means the establishment of sanctuaries where a spirit of reverence may abide. We will not put back a single block of stone more than is necessary to arrest destruction, and we will let no work of our hands deface the work of theirs, nor belie the spirit that wrought them; for that spirit lives in every chapel in our Southwestern land and blesses simple native homes with a peace more precious than worldly wealth."

Hewett's attitude must have changed by 1938, as his crews had added over 200,000 adobe bricks to the structures at Kuaua. Due to a lack of funding from the New Deal projects, he gave the orders to abandon the plan of restoring Kuaua. Instead, he instructed crews to

This square kiva is a New Deal reconstruction and gives visitors an idea of what it would have been like to climb down into the structure almost six hundred years ago. The circular structure in the foreground outlines a buried kiva that was the last circular kiva to be constructed at Kuaua dating from approximately AD 1450 to 1550. Photograph by Chris Corrie.

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create walls to represent a “ruin.” The workers on-site were encouraged to use crude plastering techniques and stagger the walls to give the appearance of age. Despite financial deficits and political rivalries, Hewett and his crews wrapped up the Coronado State Monument project by the grand opening on May 29, 1940, although the excavations, museum, and artifact analysis were far from complete. Whether Hewett intended to or not, he accomplished two things: he created a deceptive reconstruction that led the public to believe that his recreation was authentic and ancient, and he attached Coronado’s name to Kuaua when there was actually very little archaeological evidence that the explorer was at the ancient village.

Charles Kelly, an archaeologist working for Hewett, wrote in his final site report, “It is to be regretted that a study of the artifacts of the Lummis Section [the southeastern portion of Kuaua, excavated by Charles Lummis] is not available for insertion here. Such is not the case, however, and probably will not be the case for some time to come. If excavation continues at Kuaua perhaps many of its secrets may be cleared up, much that is now merely hypothesis or worse be borne out and much that is held theoretical now be disproven. If so a good paper may be written in which the real story of the pueblo shall come to light. Speed that day.”

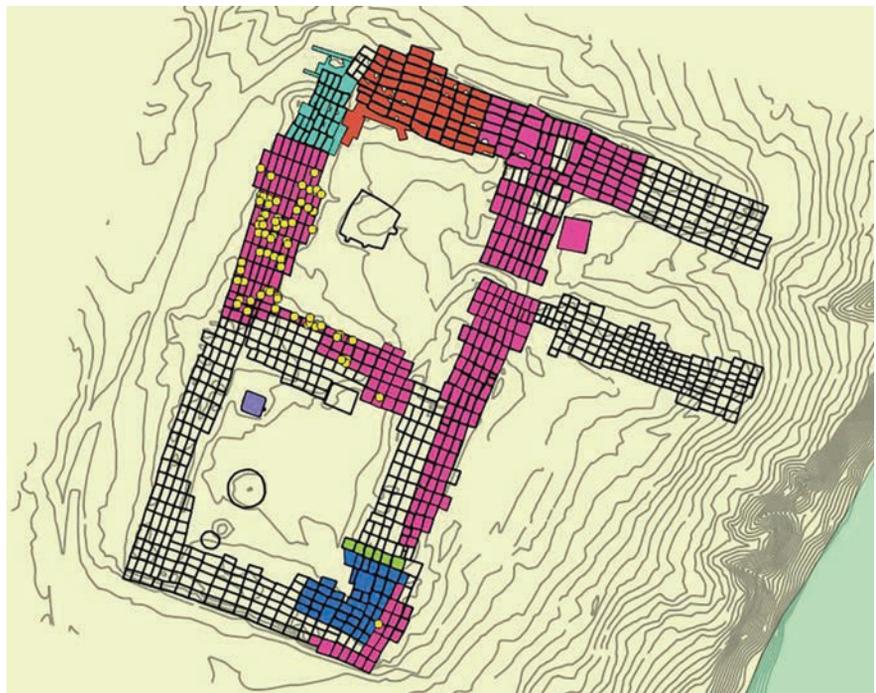


Ranger Ethan Ortega works with a volunteer.

Fast-forward over eighty years. Most of the research has revolved around the murals that were recovered from the Painted Kiva in 1935. These were a revolutionary find in terms of prehistoric culture and ideology in the Pueblo world, but the

MAPPING KUAAUA

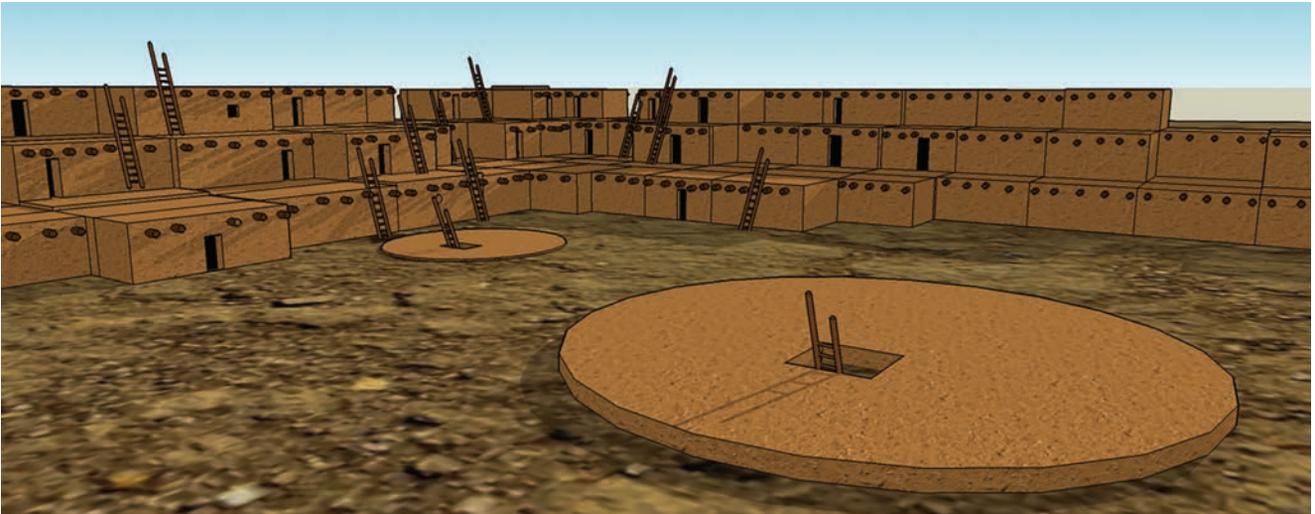
As part of this research project, historic maps and sketches have been combined with satellite imagery to create an accurate and comprehensive map of the remains of Kuaua Pueblo. Areas with solid color represent rooms that were excavated in the 1930s. Each color represents an individual archaeologist who was working at the site. The yellow dots mark artifacts that were found by Albert Ely in 1938. By mapping the architecture and artifacts in this way, we can begin to recognize patterns and interpret the site more accurately.



VIRTUALLY RECONSTRUCTING KUAUA

The digital map of Kuaua has been used to illustrate what the village might have looked like toward the end of its occupation. Based on architectural features and the archaeologists' excavation notes, and with some artistic license, a three-dimensional model was created depicting the 1,200-plus rooms of the village

structures, up to three floors high in some places, all centered around the three plazas of the village. This reconstruction helps visitors to understand the adobe mounds and disintegrating walls visible on the surface at Kuaua today.



murals cast a shadow over all the other artifacts and information that was collected from the village. Virtually every other aspect of village life was ignored.

To amend this situation, our staff and dedicated volunteers have created a research program with an overarching goal to clarify the site's history by centralizing all information about Kuaua Pueblo and Coronado Historic Site in one database, which resides in the Research Library at the site. This resource will be available for staff, researchers, and volunteers to consider future research avenues and add to the knowledge of the site as a whole.

To accomplish this, our team has spent hundreds of hours in the dark basements of museums in Albuquerque and Santa Fe dusting off boxes (some of which have not been opened in over eighty years) to handle items that were produced in the village of Kuaua over 700 years ago. The group has inventoried and documented over 50,000 objects, including complete ceramic vessels, stone tools, jewelry, bone tools, and pottery sherds. These items are being photographed in detail to aid in their research and study, and eventually the images will be made available online. Thousands of pages of historic documents are

in the process of being meticulously scanned and digitized, including field notes, artifact catalogs, and correspondence relating to the New Deal programs. All of the information gathered is then combined into a database housed at Coronado Historic Site and will be available to researchers interested in studying the village in 2017. To make this large data set more useful, a computer mapping program helps us to visualize the structure of the ancient village and denote where the objects were originally found. When researchers click on any excavated room of the village, all known artifacts, documents, and photographs pertaining to that room will be displayed. This type of mapping is becoming a common practice in archaeology, but Coronado Historic Site is the first New Mexico state historic site to tackle such a project.

A spatial understanding of the site leads to a better understanding of its chronology. Every day visitors ask, "When did people live here?" For the last seventy-five years, the answer was from AD 1300 to 1600. We now know that the Coronado Historic Site property has a human occupation that goes back over 2,000 years. During our research, we realized that there are older sites within a few hundred meters of the village,

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This large bowl was found in the North Plaza of Kuaua. It is dated from approximately AD 1425–1515. Notice the upside down geometric bird motif on the right.

including several pithouses and even Archaic campsites. On the opposite end of the timeline and within a short walk from Kuaua, a site identified as the hacienda of Diego Montoya was part of a much larger *encomienda* system likely associated with the village of Kuaua. There is even archaeological evidence to suggest that the Montoya hacienda may have been burned in 1680 during the Pueblo Revolt. The archaeologists who excavated the remains of the structure named it Casa Quemada (burned house). Research also indicates that the village of Kuaua itself was occupied longer than previously believed, likely starting at the turn of the fourteenth century and extending possibly into the beginning of the eighteenth century.

Revisiting and physically touching each object at Kuaua has provided a deeper connection to the site, and in that process

we have found many interesting artifacts that had previously been overlooked. Our volunteers work tirelessly, counting thousands of broken pieces of pottery. Every so often, an exclamation of “Oh!” or “Wow!” can be heard in the laboratory when the researchers run across something of interest. Mixed in with the pottery sherds we have found small clay animal figures, stone tools including fibrolite axes, and turquoise jewelry, as well as a hand-rolled cigarette, likely from one of the archaeologists working with the artifacts in the 1930s. Some artifacts connect us directly to their creators, such as an adobe fragment with a handprint impression, likely from a Pueblo woman constructing her home, or corrugated pottery where the fingerprints of the potter can still be seen in each indentation of the clay. This is why we study archaeological sites and artifacts: to connect with people from the past.

UNIQUE POTTERY FRAGMENTS

Bowl fragments of a very rare type of ceramic glazeware have been noted in the collection. The coils that were used to create the vessel are exposed on the exterior, creating a ribbed effect, while the interior is smoothed. Glaze decorations were painted over the textured exterior, unlike any other Pueblo ceramics from that time period. This unusual pottery has only been noticed by archaeologists at a few other sites near Albuquerque, and in very low quantities. Several large sherds recovered from Kuaua provoke intrigue and merit future research.



HEALED TURKEY BONES

Many bone artifacts have been found that suggest interesting human behavior at Kuaua. In several turkey leg bones, researchers noticed healed breaks and fractures, which suggest animal husbandry. Whether or not that is the case, this discovery opens many questions: Why were the villagers interested in keeping the turkeys alive? Were they splinting the legs and nurturing the animals back to health? Although it is very likely that they were keeping the turkeys alive for feathers to be used in blankets and ceremonial items, we may never know the answers.



While we are giving tours of Kuaua, the question “Who were the people that lived here?” arises often. This is a tricky question to tackle. Historically Kuaua has been identified as a Tiwa-speaking village, and the name is translated as “evergreen village.” Now we are beginning to understand that through time there were likely other Pueblo cultures that played a role in Kuaua’s history, including the local Keres-speaking pueblos. The current inhabitants of Tamaya, also known as Santa Ana Pueblo, know our ancient village as Kua, meaning village to the south, and claim a cultural affiliation.

New information produced from this research project has already been used in a variety of ways. Our computer map has helped ensure the accurate location and layout of future reconstructions. Selections of the artifacts are being featured in new exhibits in the Visitor’s Center, which were designed in cooperation with Highland University’s Program for Interactive Cultural Technologies (PICT). Students from the PICT program have also created innovative and unique interactives for visitors, including an iPhone app that guides visitors through the site—an archaeology video game. A revolutionary physical-digital interactive has also been created, allowing visitors to use 3D printed portions of Kuaua to “rebuild” the village. As each scale model of a structure is added to the touchscreen,

people emerge out of the doorways and begin working in the village. The more structures that are added to the screen, the busier Kuaua gets, with people harvesting crops and gathering water from the Rio Grande. Animals such as dogs and turkeys also appear and begin roaming around the village.

All of this work revolves around a village, one that is inspiring people to work together almost 800 years after its initial creation. Relationships are not only being built between the institutions that house the Kuaua materials and our local cultural stakeholders, but also with students and volunteers who have dedicated their time to understanding this special place. Not surprisingly, new attention to and enhancements of the site have led to increased numbers of visitors in the last few years. With a new generation of visitors, one of the hardest concepts to convey is that the original rooms of Kuaua Pueblo still exist buried underground. Even though they are not visible, they are still here, and there is a lesson to be learned from them. Like the original walls, their stories and history still exist. We just have to shine light on them, and more importantly, share them. This village is still living, with many stories to tell. It has just been waiting for us to listen. ■

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