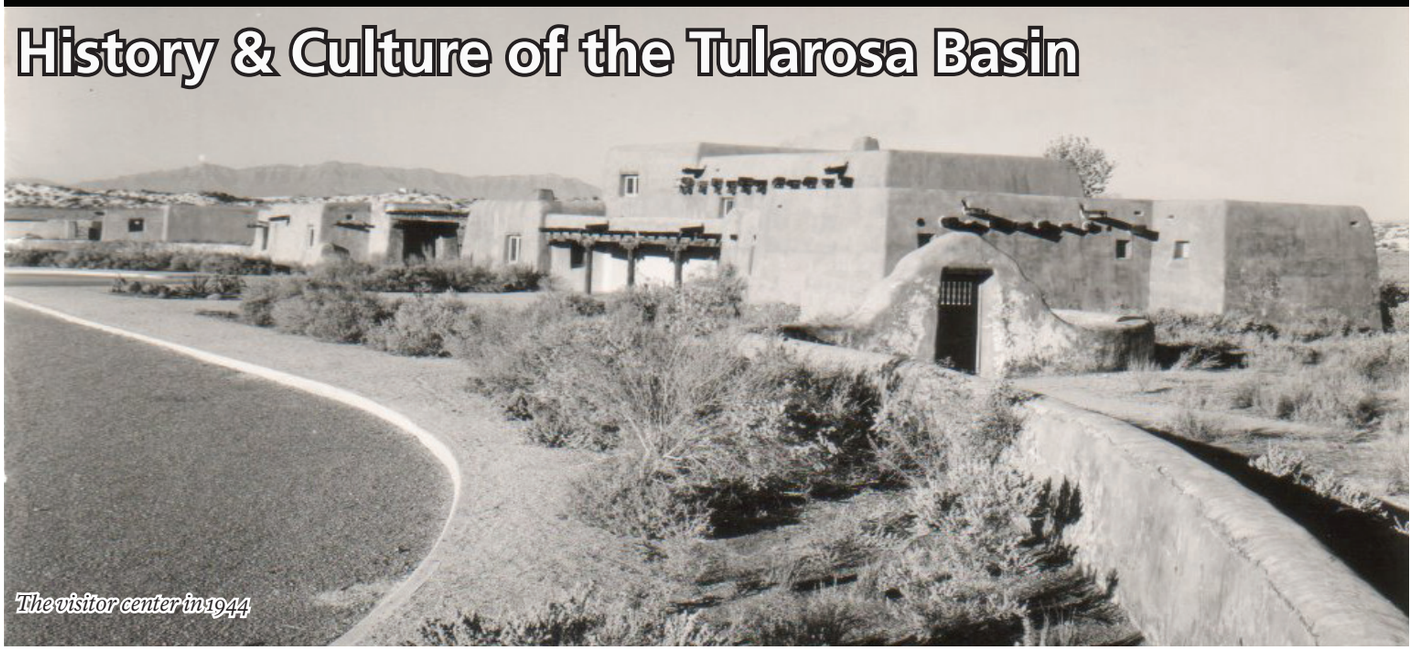
White Sands

National Park Service
Department of the Interior
White Sands National Monument

History & Culture of the Tularosa Basin



The visitor center in 1944

Who were the peoples that called the Tularosa Basin home? Where did they live? How did they live? Over the last 12,000 years, this seemingly barren basin has been home to numerous populations and each of these cultures left their mark on the land.

Paleoindians: Ancient Hunters
8,000 - 12,000 years ago

Small bands of nomadic hunters roamed the basin tracking large game animals that once lived here, like mammoths and camels. Fossilized tracks, evidence of these giant mammals, still exist within park boundaries. Chipped stone spear points and other traces of "Folsom" technology have been found across the lowlands and along the shorelines of ancient lakes throughout the Tularosa Basin.

Archaic Period: Hunter–Gatherers
6,000 BC - 200 AD

As the climate began to change, becoming warmer and drier, paleoindian hunters began to change their way of life. With large game animals now extinct, people began to hunt the remaining smaller animals. Since smaller animals provided less meat, the people began to depend more on plants for food and became known as hunters and gatherers. Eventually these people began to trade with others from different cultures and areas and started to settle near water sources.

Jornada Mogollon
(hor-nah-dah moh-gee-own)
200 AD - 1350 AD

Mimbres "black-on-white" potsherd

The start of this period coincides with the first appearance of pottery and semi-permanent to permanent living structures. The Mogollon were hunter-gatherers who settled down and became farmers in this region. Evidence suggests they grew corn, squash and beans although they still hunted and collected wild plant foods to supplement their diet. Some believe they traded far and wide with other cultures—from Mexico and across the Southwest to as far away as the Pacific Ocean.

The Mogollon became known for their distinctive style of pottery, pit houses, and later pueblos. They disappeared from the area around 1350 AD, most likely because of drought. Numerous settlements in the Southwest were abandoned around this same time.

After the departure of the Mogollon, the basin remained empty of human inhabitants until the Apachean peoples arrived.

Apachean
1450 - today

The Apachean cultural groups are believed to have arrived in this area around 1450 AD, although some historians say it may have been earlier. Apachean peoples are descendants of the Athabaskan speakers from Alaska and western Canada. They established seasonal villages in the Tularosa Basin near the Sacramento Mountains to hunt and gather plants.

Encountering few outside influences, the Apache lived in relative peace until the late 1800's. Beginning in the 1860's, Euro-American and Hispanic farmers and ranchers began settling in the areas of La Luz and Tularosa. Conflicts between Indians and Europeans became commonplace. The Mescalero Indian Reservation was established in 1873 and today encompasses 463,000 acres. Ranching and tourism are major sources of income for the tribe.

Spanish Colonialism and Exploration
1536 - 1800's

In 1536, the first Spanish explorers came to New Mexico, led by Cabeza de Vaca. He was followed by Francisco Vasquez de Conorado in 1540 who was searching for the fabled cities of gold reported to be in New Mexico. No gold was ever found. The greatest legacies from their visits were the horses and cattle left behind. These forgotten animals were the sources of all the wild herds that roamed the area.

The remaining cattle formed the first of the Spanish cattle herds. In the late 1700's and early 1800's, Spaniards came from El Paso to gather salt from the dried up beds of Lake Otero. They hauled the salt back to El Paso in "carretas," or carts, pulled by oxen. In 1821, Mexico declared Independence from Spain. In 1846 the Mexican American War began, ending in 1848 as New Mexico was annexed to the United States.

Early Settlers & Wild West
1800's - 1930's

Infamous gunman Billy the Kid

After New Mexico was named a U.S. territory, European settlement of the Tularosa Basin began in earnest in 1850. Lush grasslands attracted ranchers who established the towns of La Luz and Tularosa, building on the eastern edge of the basin where water was readily available. Homesteads were established to control permanent water sources as well as agricultural and grazing lands.

By the 1890's, the land was becoming overgrazed. The verdant grasslands disappeared and became desert. Conflicts among ranchers and farmers and other ethnic groups led to dispute resolution old-West style. Well-known figures of this period include rancher and gunfighter Oliver Lee, ranchers Jose and Felipe Lucero, Sheriff Pat Garrett, and William McCarty, also known as Billy the Kid.

Other key economic activities at this time were largely based on mineral mining operations. During the early 1900's, the gypsum sands and salt flats were being mined to produce plaster of Paris, salt, and other minerals.

The largest town in the basin, Alamogordo (Spanish for fat cottonwoods) was founded as a planned railroad community in 1898. The streets of Alamogordo were laid out and cottonwood trees planted to attract settlers. Only one area of the town could sell liquor per the town's early ordinances, which would remain in effect until it was challenged in the 1980's.

In 1912, New Mexico became the 47th state in the Union, before the Great Depression and droughts of the 1930's brought the frontier era to a close.

Modern History
1930's to Present

Soldiers at White Sands in September, 1942

Like many areas of the country, the Great Depression brought many changes to the Tularosa Basin. First, White Sands National Monument was established in 1933 by a decree from President Herbert Hoover to preserve the gypsum sand dunes. As part of President Roosevelt's *New Deal*, the adobe buildings at the monument were constructed by the Works Progress Administration.

The greatest changes in the history of the basin came as a result of World War II. The Alamogordo Bombing and Gunnery Range was the first land withdrawn from the basin for military purposes. Comprised of 1,243,000 acres of grazing allotments and private land, this property encompassed most of what is now White Sands Missile Range and Holloman Air Force Base.

In 1942, construction began on both the Alamogordo Army Air Field (now Holloman Air Force Base) and White Sands Proving Grounds (now White Sands Missile Range).

On July 16, 1945, the first atomic bomb was detonated at the Trinity site located about 100 miles north of the monument on the White Sands Testing Range. This momentous event heralded the birth of the nuclear and space ages, all right here in the Tularosa Basin.

Both Holloman Air Force Base (HAFB) and White Sands Missile Range (WSMR)continued test and research activities following the war. Today, they play a major role in the Tularosa Basin's culture and economy. HAFB remains an important training ground not only for American and but for German pilots as well. WSMR continues to break new ground in scientific and technological research.

The Monument Today

Since its first year as a national monument, visitation to the park has steadily increased. Today, we are one of the most visited national parks in New Mexico. Almost half a million people from all over the world come to explore this amazing landscape. The dunes themselves act as a living laboratory, providing insights into our past and glimpses of our future. From drought resistant microbes that help plants grow in waterless regions to understanding the gypsum dunefield on Mars, new discoveries are being made all the time. Modern or ancient, stories about the geology, culture, and ecology of White Sands continue to add to a legacy that began long ago.