

THE WELLS PETROGLYPH PRESERVE – A BRIEF HISTORY

The Wells Petroglyph Preserve is located along the eastern slopes of the 12-mile long Mesa Prieta escarpment (also known as Black Mesa) overlooking the Upper Rio Grande Valley in Rio Arriba County, New Mexico. The Preserve includes more than 10,000 petroglyphs carved into the basalt boulders that date from about 7500 BCE to the Post-Contact Period (1598-1950 CE). The form and style of the glyphs vary greatly, with most corresponding to the Ancestral Pueblo Classic or Pueblo IV period (1300-1600 CE), when the area's inhabitants built large villages along the upper Rio Grande and its tributaries, and petroglyph making in the region reached its florescence.

During the Pueblo IV period, Mesa Prieta is believed to have been a center of ceremonial activity for the Tewa populations of Ohkay Owingeh, located just south of the site, the large pre-contact Pfioge Pueblo located east of the Rio Grande, to the south the Tewa pueblos of Santa Clara and San Ildefonso, and other smaller neighboring settlements. Many of the motifs recorded within the Preserve are suggestive of Pueblo ritual. Most images were produced by pecking through the dark patina covering the stone by means of one rock used as a hammer and another as a chisel.

The Wells Petroglyph Preserve is known for its number, variety and quality of shield images and its remarkable number of flute-playing animals - more flute playing animals have been documented at this site than at any other in North America. Most of the petroglyphs along the mesa and at the Wells Preserve in particular appear to be a northern Rio Grande (Tewa) variant of what researchers have referred to as the Rio Grande Style. There are many hundreds of more deeply carved and very heavily repatinated panels consisting of geometric and linear motifs that are typical of Desert Abstract Style rock art produced by Archaic hunter-gatherer peoples. The Archaic glyphs can be related to a site on Glorieta Mesa, east of Santa Fe, which has been studied and dated to as early as 3900 BCE, and also to numerous glyphs in the Taos area. Folsom pattern points found on the mesa indicate that the area has been occupied for at least 9,000 years.

Post-Contact images and inscriptions, which are rare at other petroglyph sites along the upper Rio Grande, are also present in significant numbers at the Wells Petroglyph Preserve. Along with Pueblo people of the time period, Spanish settlers, who moved into the region after 1598, created some of the post-contact rock images, including unique heraldic lions, along the mesa. In many instances, stylistic variations and motifs suggest Hispanic-Pueblo interactions or influence. Other features identified within the site include lithic artifact scatters, agricultural features such as grid gardens, check dams, a few small structures, water control systems, and a probable campsite. Pottery sherds from various periods have also been found.

Public and privately owned lands along the mesa near and adjacent to the Preserve also contain an abundance of petroglyphs. It is estimated that there may be as many as 100,000 petroglyphs on the mesa making it one of New Mexico's most significant sites. Portions of the mesa are seeing increased commercial land use and development. Concerns about the future of the site prompted Katherine Wells, Project founder, to create a conservation preserve with The Archaeological Conservancy. Her goal was to protect the property from future development, mining

and grazing, while still allowing for archaeological research, tours, and public educational programs at the site. In 2007, Katherine Wells donated nearly all of her land (the 156 acres) to the TAC. In 2015, the heirs of Katherine's late partner, Lloyd Dennis, offered their 25 acres for sale to TAC. This brought the total size of the Preserve to 181 acres.

In the late 18th and 19th centuries, the sides and top of Mesa Prieta were heavily used for sheep grazing; by the 1920's, plant life became too depleted to sustain large flocks. Overgrazing and subsequent erosion resulted in a proliferation of the number of arroyos and unimpeded runoff of water and sediment from heavy storms. The Mesa and Preserve have been severely affected by grazing, resulting in the increased fragility of some of the dense petroglyph areas on steep hillsides where soil-binding vegetation is sparse. The Mesa Prieta area has also been threatened by gravel and riprap mining operations on lands adjacent to the Preserve and other areas of the mesa where important archaeological resources exist. In 2014, the Preserve was named one of eleven most endangered landscapes in the United States by The Cultural Landscape Foundation.

In the summers of 1993 and 1994 the Archaeological Society of New Mexico's Rock Art Field School conducted a survey of the Wells site with a crew of 30 volunteers. Katherine Wells used this information in 1999 to have the site placed on the National Register of Historic Places. It is also on the State Register of Cultural Properties. In 2005, Mesa Prieta Petroglyph Project began re-recording the site using GPS, digital photography, and the Rock Art Council categorization system and measurement standards. The rerecording was completed in 2009 and revealed an increase of 30% in the number of images found. The Preserve's fine examples of Archaic petroglyphs, its extensive variety of images from the Rio Grand Classic/Pueblo IV period, and a large collection of Post-Contact, Spanish-inspired rock drawings concentrated in a relatively small area, make it an ideal site for research and a highly important area for long term protection.

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