

The Reconquest of Fort Apache

The White Mountain Apache Tribe Reclaims Its History and Culture

Despite worldwide notoriety as the fierce military masters of the wild western frontier, the great Apache Nation is one of the least understood North American indigenous peoples. Weary of the caricatures and stereotypes perpetuated by the popular media market, the White Mountain Apache Tribe has launched a series of ambitious initiatives to regain control over—and responsibility for—their past. The overarching goal of these efforts is not simply to salvage or preserve what remains of Apache culture and history, but to revitalize the best and most useful elements of their past, to guide the Apaches through the present and into the future. The Apache people are creating opportunities to use their heritage to make their lives better, both materially and spiritually. Their elected and cultural leaders are committed to finding innovative and meaningful uses for their culture, language, and history in the areas of economic and community development.

Work being done in pursuit of this goal emphasizes cultural perpetuation rather than preservation. Like many other indigenous peoples across the globe, American Indians face serious problems stemming from poverty, disenfranchisement,

and substance abuse. AIDS, adult-onset diabetes, obesity, illiteracy, child and elder abuse, and other ills are rising faster on reservations than in non-Indian communities. The Apache are much younger, poorer, more fertile, and more likely to die before their time than the U.S. population at large. What follows is a case study of how the White Mountain Apache of the central Arizona uplands are fighting these trends.

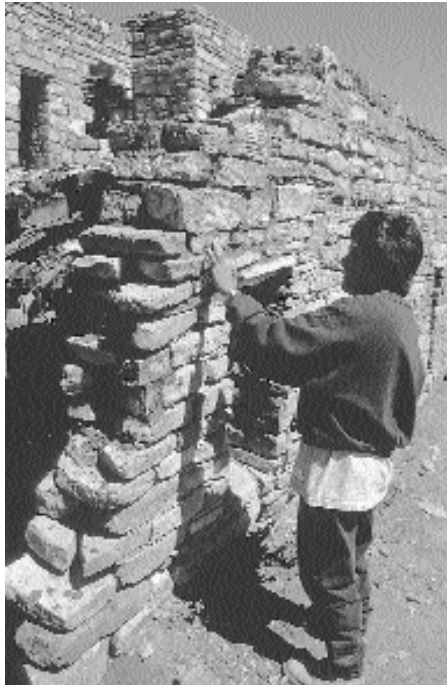
A Place in History

The tribe's plans for bringing the past into the present and countering more than a century of Anglo-authored accounts of Apache history and culture focus on Fort Apache. Made mythic by Hollywood, the deteriorating old fort sits above the confluence of the east and north forks of White River, just south of Whiteriver, the seat of government for the White Mountain Apache Tribe. It represents both pain and triumph. The U.S. Army sought to subjugate a proud people, and when the military abandoned the fort in 1922, Congress turned it into an Indian boarding school, intended to “civilize” the heirs of an ancient and amazing tradition by stripping away their language and culture. But neither the Army nor the Bureau of Indian Affairs was successful in breaking the Apache spirit.

Had the decision been made to bring in bulldozers, many individual Apache would not have missed the place. But with the 1993 adoption of the Master Plan for the Fort Apache Historic Park, the White Mountain Apache Tribal Council decided to capitalize on the fort's name recognition and convert Fort Apache from a symbol of oppression into a place to both explain their history to outsiders and serve the ongoing needs of their community. This far-sighted action once more demonstrated the long history of patience, flexibility, and persistence that has allowed the White Mountain Apache people to bend like willows without losing strength or sacrificing core values.

White Mountain Apache scouts, c.1916. Apache scouts worked for the U.S. Army from 1871 until 1949. Photo courtesy Lori Davisson Archive, White Mountain Apache Heritage Program.





Heritage Conservation Technician Mark Altaha working on Kinishba, a partially restored ancestral Pueblo village protected by the Heritage Program. Photo by John R. Welch.

Today, Fort Apache has become a forum for celebrating Apache survival and sharing Apache perspectives on their culture and history. In 1997, the tribe opened Nohwike' Bagowa—the new Apache Cultural Center and Museum. The museum's main exhibit features beautiful Apache basketry, and ancillary exhibits have featured work by noted Apache artists, including Michael Lacapa and Allan Houser (Houzous). While visiting the 288-acre historic site, which includes 27

historic buildings, the tribe's guests are invited to tour the c. 1871 log cabin that housed General George Crook and Army Surgeon Walter Reed. Sandstone and wood frame buildings that served as officers' quarters from the 1880s through the 1920s line one side of the huge parade ground. Buildings that make up the Theodore Roosevelt Indian Boarding School—imposing symbols of federal authority—border the other sides of the parade ground.

A visit to Fort Apache should also include a walk through a restored Apache village or a 13th-century Pueblo ruin; a trip to the stables and barns that supported the U.S. Cavalry field operations; and a viewing of petroglyph panels on the sheer, sun-bronzed basalt walls of the canyon below the fort. Apache guides are available to tour guests through the park or to take them to scenic, culturally rich areas of the reservation that are otherwise closed to outsiders. Those intrigued by the more remote past may visit the partially restored, 800-year-old Kinishba ruins a few miles from the fort. Action-minded adventurers can make arrangements for canyoneering along lower Cibecue Creek during warm and dry weather. Trained Apache guides can explain the many uses of native plants, discuss the natural history of the region, and offer insights into the culture of a people with intimate and complex connections to the land. Future interpretive exhibits at Fort Apache will for the first time offer the Apache

side of the too-often-sensationalized history of the post and its amazing legacy.

At no other place has an American Indian tribe adopted a frontier military outpost that was established to control them, and, on its own initiative, decided to re-embrace that place and use it to promote their interests. Through a unique integration of physical restoration and social reconciliation, the White Mountain Apache Tribe is asserting its understanding of Fort Apache as a significant, though still-foreign, place within an Apache landscape. The tribe has set the course for a new phase of history.

Putting History in its Place

It makes sense that the pragmatic and courageous White Mountain Apache Tribe should turn a painful history to their advantage. In contrast to the violent resistance of Chiricahua Apache war leaders like Cochise and Geronimo, White Mountain Apache leaders responded to non-Indians who invaded their country with shrewd caution and restraint.

Although the Fort Apache vicinity was home to both Apache and Pueblo peoples for countless generations prior to the arrival of Europeans, the fort's recent history begins in July of 1869, when Major John Green led an expedition into the White Mountains, seeking a place for a military post that could be used to keep the White Mountain Apache out of the increasingly unmanageable hostilities erupting farther to the south. However, the White Mountain people had shown courtesy and hospitality to the few non-natives who had wandered through their territory, and relied more on foraging and farming than raiding, like the Chiricahua Apache, whose territory lay in the direct path of white settlement.

Now on a search for White Mountain bands and on a mission to destroy their crops and prevent them from providing corn and supplies to hostile bands, Green had invaded. He rode into the heart of the White Mountain Apache territory and set about burning Apache cornfields. But to his surprise, the Apache greeted him as a friend, insisting that they wanted peace. Meetings with local band leaders led Green to select the site for what was to become Fort Apache, the place the Apache call *Tlokhagai* ("Where the White Reeds Grow"). Green described it in glowing terms:

It seems this one corner of Arizona were almost a garden spot, the beauty of its scenery, the fertility of its soil and facilities for irriga-

tion are not surpassed.... This post would be of greatest advantage for the following reasons: It would compel the White Mountain Indians to live on their reservation or be driven from their beautiful country which they almost worship. It would stop their traffic in corn with the hostile Tribes.... It would make a good scouting post, being adjacent to hostile bands on either side.

In recognizing the strength of the Apache ties to their lands, Green had glimpsed a fundamental truth about Apache culture. In his book, *Wisdom Sits in Places*, Keith Basso, who has worked among Apache for more than 40 years, explains that the Apache have named countless springs, hills, meadows, outcroppings, and other landscape features. Many of these places are linked to stories about the ancestors who conferred the name, and many of these stories poignantly and elegantly refer to central elements of Apache culture and morality. A deep knowledge of places thus remains essential to the maintenance of Apache society. Perceiving the terrible power of the invaders, White Mountain Apache leaders resolved to do what was required to retain control over most of the landscape that was—and still is—the greatest source of Apache knowledge, wisdom, vitality, and sovereignty.

Favorably impressed by the White Mountain Apache and seeking to keep this formidable group out of hostilities brewing elsewhere in Arizona Territory, Green's expedition resulted in the establishment of Fort Apache, and also in a significant twist in federal policy. By the time fort construction began in May of 1870, the purpose of the post had shifted from conquering the White Mountain Apache to protecting their land from the incursions of white settlers.

Beginning in 1871, many White Mountain warriors enlisted as scouts for the Army, generally fighting loyally and effectively alongside white soldiers, typically against other Apache bands with which they were rivals before the Army's arrival.

The soldiers, usually led by White Mountain scouts, divided their time between building the fort and patrolling the rugged region for hostile bands. Apache leaders struggled to control their warriors and deal with the

whites. Several times, soldiers and white settlers attacked peaceful White Mountain bands, perhaps mistaking them for Chiricahua and Tonto Apache bands. Each time, Apache chiefs kept the fighting from spinning out of control. These and later events tested the White Mountain Apache commitment to peace. In 1875, the Indian Bureau decided to force the White Mountain Apache to move to San Carlos, to cut reservation expenses and open more land to settlement. Many Apache refused to move, and even after most of them reluctantly relocated, many continued to slip away and live in the places that knew them.

Resentment over forced relocation helped fuel a religious movement led by a former scout named Nockaydelklinne, who promised the return of dead chiefs to evict the white invaders. Warriors from mutually hostile bands were drawn to his ceremonies, and even enlisted Apache scouts grew restless. Late in August of 1881, the U.S. Army sent a detachment accompanied by Apache scouts to arrest Nockaydelklinne on Cibicue Creek, but shooting broke out, the scouts mutinied, and the soldiers killed Nockaydelklinne and his wife and son. Enraged warriors attacked the soldiers who escaped back to the fort after losing one officer and six enlisted men to wounds. The warriors briefly besieged the fort, which marked the only Apache attack on a fort. The Cibecue incident triggered several months of unrest, including an outbreak by Chiricahua bands that had been living peaceably on the Fort Apache Reservation. White Mountain warriors who participated in the Cibecue fight were ultimately subdued in the

Crown Dancers perform at the grand opening of Nohwike' Bagowa, the Cultural Center and Museum at Fort Apache. The facility is dedicated to preserving the wisdom of the past to serve the needs of future generations of the White Mountain Apache people. Recent exhibits include work by illustrator and storyteller Michael Lacapa, and the late Chiricahua artist, Allan Houser. Photo by John R. Welch.



Battle of Big Dry Wash, the last serious armed conflict between the Cavalry and White Mountain Apaches. Following a controversial mutiny trial that presented only vague testimony against the former scouts, the Army executed three White Mountain Apache in Globe.

Despite these setbacks, the White Mountain Apache preference for peace prevailed. White Mountain scouts played central roles in subduing Geronimo's Chiricahua. After the Chiricahua surrendered in 1886, the military value of Fort Apache declined quickly, leaving more time for construction of the many Army structures and facilities that served the Army until the post was shut down in 1922. The fort continues to operate as a boarding school—initially established to “civilize” Indian children removed unwillingly from their homes. Today, the school is becoming a center for the study and appreciation of Apache culture. Students attend classes in the Apache language and learn songs and ceremonials, and community members can attend lectures, demonstrations, and open-air performances.

A Future for the Past

Tribal members are well on their way toward making Fort Apache once again a distinctly Apache place, with an increasingly complete set of stories, meanings, and uses. The tribe has already cobbled together almost \$5 million worth of grants and projects to rescue the fort's historic structures. The White Mountain Apache Tribe is committed to using Fort Apache's name recognition and national significance in order to draw attention to Apache perspectives on Apache history and to celebrate cultural survival and local traditions.

Since publication of the master plan, nine of the fort's 26 historic buildings have been restored and assigned new roles. With the most imminent threats to individual structures addressed, the tribe has initiated a series of interpretive and site development projects intended to return Fort Apache to active duty—this time in support of, instead of against, the Apache community. To remake Fort Apache into a source of Apache pride and employment, the tribe has obtained grant support for

diverse projects; chartered a 501(c)(3) corporation—the Fort Apache Heritage Foundation; and forged or expanded partnerships with the World Monuments Fund, the National Park Service, and Arizona State Parks.

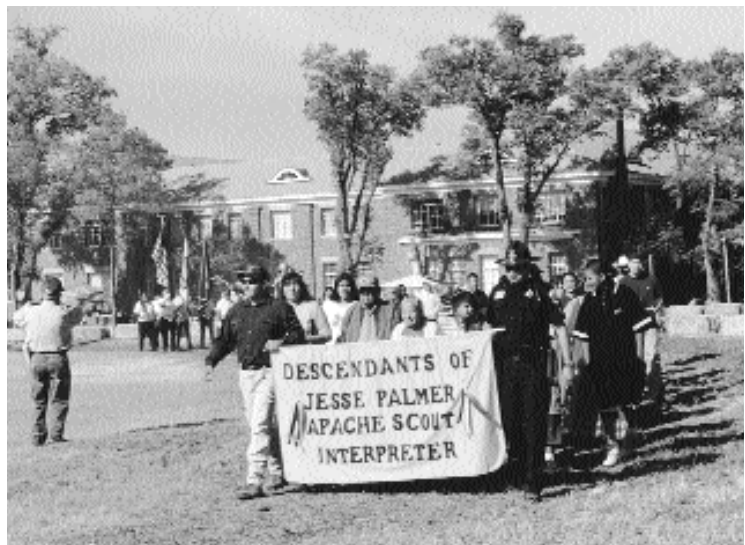
Fort Apache is now an official Save America's Treasures project, as recognized by the White House Millennium Council. Additionally, the Rivers and Trails Conservation Assistance Program of the National Park Service is providing technical support for an ambitious interpretive planning effort made possible by the National Endowment for the Humanities. The representation for the public of Fort Apache as a place with multiple, distinctive histories is the central theme to be explored in the interpretive planning process. The process will be completed in 2001, and will provide the basic plans for relating previously unavailable White Mountain Apache perspectives on regional culture and history.

Reconciliation and Historical Reconstruction

The White Mountain Apache Tribe ushered in the next chapter in the history of Fort Apache with the first annual Great Fort Apache Heritage Reunion. On May 20, 2000, more than 4,000 people who share in the history and legacy of the fort and care about local history and culture came together to launch community involvement in the Fort Apache revitalization effort.

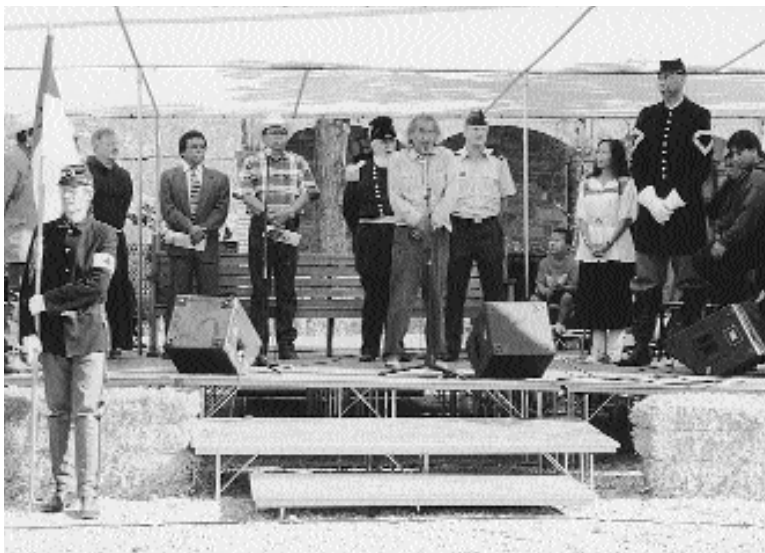
Presentations of song and dance were intermingled with violence-free historical re-enactments by military groups and personages, including General George Crook. Participants were encouraged to join formal and informal reconciliation programs, such as the listening post, where

A commemorative procession of tribal, military, and spiritual leaders opened the first annual Great Fort Apache Heritage Reunion. Photo by John R. Welch.



Review stand at the Great Fort Apache Heritage Reunion, featuring White Mountain Apache Chairman Dallas Massey, Vice-Chairman Frank Endfield, Father Ed Fronske, Fort Huachuca Commanding Officer Col. Michael Boardman, Mary Kim Titla, and Kareem Abdul-Jabbar. Photo courtesy Kareem Productions.

people shared memories and feelings about the fort and the boarding school. The objective was to encourage Apache and non-Apache alike to confront their ambiguous, even hostile sentiments and to think about the relationship between history and the future. Engaging a reconciliation effort was a necessary first step in building community consensus regarding the historical messages contained in the complex history of a place that heralded so many dramatic changes for the Apache people.



Over the course of the next year, program staff will be interviewing community elders and tribal leaders to determine how Fort Apache can best serve and represent the White Mountain Apache community. In addition to standard military history, the stories to be told at and through Fort Apache will likely include references to boarding school experiences—both painful and triumphant—and to the still-unfolding saga of Apache-American relations.

Conclusion

As a new foundation for cultural education and community representation, the White Mountain Apache Tribe has rejected caricatures of their forebears and embraced their historical identity as a diverse group of foraging-farming peoples that briefly impeded Manifest Destiny. At the same time, the popular draw of stereotypical images of the Apache as the fierce military masters of the frontier Southwest is recognized as a potentially effective marketing tool for promoting tourism during an economically critical time. The struggle to balance economic development

with accurate, thoughtful, and useful presentations of the past will be played out at Fort Apache in the years to come. The White Mountain Apache Tribe has decided to bring their past with them into the future, and is committed to continuing Fort Apache's role as a context for cross-cultural interactions and the resulting production of history.

John R. Welch began working on the Fort Apache Indian Reservation in 1984, completed Ph.D. studies in anthropology at the University of Arizona in 1996, and today serves as the White Mountain Apache Tribe's Historic Preservation Officer.

Nancy Mahaney holds B.A. and M.A. degrees in anthropology and museum studies from the University of Colorado, Boulder, and Arizona State University. She serves the White Mountain Apache Tribe as Museum Director and Interim Fort Apache Heritage Program Director.

Ramon Riley was born on the Fort Apache Reservation, helped to establish the tribe's Apache language radio station and Tribal Employment Rights Office, and serves as the tribe's Cultural Resources Director and NAGPRA Coordinator.

The Fort Apache Historic Park is open every day from 8:00 until sunset. The White Mountain Apache Cultural Center is open Monday through Friday from 8:00 a.m. until 5:00 p.m. From Memorial Day through Labor Day, the Cultural Center is open Tuesday through Saturday. For additional information, please call the Cultural Center and Museum at 520-338-4625. The Fort Apache Heritage Foundation can be contacted through the Historic Preservation Office, P.O. Box 507, Fort Apache, Arizona 85926; 520-338-3033.