

**ARCHAEOLOGY NORTH OF THE RIO COLORADO:
THE LEGACY OF NEIL M. JUDD**

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“My sights had been set on the little-known region north of the Grand Canyon--the region that had tempted me repeatedly.” Unable to resist that temptation, Neil M. Judd came west and spent the years from 1915 to 1920 examining the archaeology of southern Utah and the Arizona Strip.

While working for the U. S. National Museum (Smithsonian Institution), Judd left Washington, D.C., behind, traveling by rail, Model T, horse and buggy, and pack mule train to examine this region’s prehistoric ruins. He was particularly interested in the area now of concern to the Grand Canyon Trust and the Kaibab Vermilion Cliffs Heritage Alliance in the Strip’s remote eastern section.

In 1918 Judd briefly explored sites on the Kaibab Plateau and in House Rock Valley where he “drew rein at Cane Springs, headquarters of the Grand Canyon Cattle Company for a dinner of canned corn and peas with the cowboys”—today’s Kane Ranch owned by the Trust. His horseback reconnaissance gave him a feel for the wide range of puebloan architectural styles in the region--a phenomenon we continue to grapple with. “No two of them,” he found, “were exactly alike. Each was distinct within itself, and yet each possessed certain characteristics common to others.”

In 1920 Judd went up onto the Paria Plateau “Sand Hills” to inspect prehistoric sites that had been reported. Once again he also rode south through House Rock Valley to Bed Rock Canyon and on across the Kaibab to Bright Angel Creek. In each of these localities he continued to sketch site layouts and note differences in pottery.

In the spring of 2009, with the help of a hardy group of volunteers out of St. George and Kanab, Utah, I set out to relocate the White Butte site that Judd had sketched and photographed in the early twentieth century. With tires partially deflated for traction, we chugged through deep, dry sand, in a 4x4 truck loaded with a week’s worth of supplies provided by the Grand Canyon Trust. We were heading east on Judd’s route, more or less, through the Sand Hills to Joe’s Ranch, an outpost established by Joe Hamblin in 1884. Son of Mormon pioneer Jacob Hamblin, Joe was Judd’s host and guide on the Paria.

Neil Judd’s work, among the earliest professional observations on the archaeology of southern Utah and northern Arizona, has long held a special fascination for me. And this wasn’t my first experience attempting to relocate his sites. I have literally and figuratively been following in his footsteps for much of my career as a federal archaeologist, and since then as a consulting archaeologist—not too surprising given that most of Judd’s investigations were conducted on lands now managed by the U.S. Bureau of Land Management, U.S. Forest Service, and National Park Service.

A self-described “student of archaeology,” Judd left an official account of his investigations that presaged some later, important archaeological concepts. He revealed an emerging awareness of chronological sequence (the Pecos classification wasn’t developed until 1927), and an awareness of regional differences in architecture and pottery. He noted, “Taken as a whole (ceramics) establish a close relationship between the occupants of the Paria Plateau, House Rock Valley and Kanab Creek” as well as “the very gorge of the Rio Colorado.”

In the spring of 2009, we continued on, driving along a short wash with excellent farming potential (given a wetter climate regime), and then spied an isolated sandstone butte through a screen of pinyon and juniper trees. Judd’s photographs confirmed that this was White Butte—and in comparing his photo to the scene today we found that little had changed, except for the saddled horse in the foreground of his picture. White Butte was the largest ruin Judd visited on the plateau, although he noted it was “long since in ruins.” Arguably, the steep-sided butte was a defensive oriented site much like others we have mapped as part of our extensive survey; certainly it was the hub of a small community, probably an extended family of agriculturalists whose field houses dotted the surrounding landscape.

What Neil Judd had virtually no idea about was exactly *when* these sites were occupied. The science of tree-ring dating had not yet been developed, but the Paria Plateau sites have little potential to yield suitable timbers anyway. A few weeks after our excursion to White Butte, we visited a site I had seen from the air while flying over the plateau with aviator/photographer Michael Collier. A dark area on the slope of a butte similar to White Butte suggested the presence of a rockshelter. Timbers were not likely here, but there was the potential to collect organic samples for radiocarbon dating.

A week later I worked up a steep slickrock incline to a narrow crevice in the butte immediately below the site. Scattered sherds in the area were similar to those on other sites we had surveyed, indicating the occupation dated roughly to Late Pueblo times (A.D. 1050-1150). The crevice was not suitable for a dwelling, but lying on the surface of a packrat midden were three small corn cobs. (Packrats incorporate into their nests anything they can carry, but only things that lie within a 50-meter-diameter area. By collecting the corn cobs and preserving them in their nest, the little critters had done their part for science.) Maize is the ideal material for radiocarbon dating, and we are presently analyzing results of the dates obtained by this method on this corn. Delineating chronological relationships is an essential step towards understanding the economic and social relationships between the various localities that Judd noted. Eventually, we hope to flesh in the chronological sequence of events for each locality on the eastern Arizona Strip.

Another aspect of architectural variability is adaptation. Clearly, the environments of each locality offered different opportunities to early farmers: some fields were focused on high-elevation, dry-farm settings; others were located on slopes that display extensive agricultural terraces; steeper slopes

employed masonry check dams to prevent downcutting caused by intense summer rainstorms; and sub-irrigated fields were planted in the alluvium along the Colorado River. How these very different agricultural strategies were related to one another has become a focal point of research. Other questions arise too: Were the localities occupied sequentially, perhaps as a response to a changing climate? Or, was each locality part of a larger economic system that buffered the disaster of a crop failure in one area by sharing a successful harvest in another? If so, how was this system organized?

The landscape of the eastern Arizona Strip offered puebloan agriculturalists both challenges and opportunities. As archaeologists, our challenge is to frame the appropriate questions and develop the methods to answer them.

In the concluding paragraph of his memoir, Neil Judd stated “I wish once more to emphasize the fact that I never considered myself one to point the way.” But he did lead the way for a generation of archaeologists, ninety years after his recognition of the architectural diversity across this spectacular and varied landscape. We are just beginning to address the economic, social, and environmental implications of that diversity.

Since retiring from the Bureau of Land Management, Doug McFadden has been working as a consulting archaeologist out of Kanab, Utah. Under contract with the Grand Canyon Trust, he has conducted significant archaeological research on the Paria Plateau and other parts of the Arizona Strip for the past several years.

References

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- 1927 Archeological Observations North of the Rio Colorado. Bureau of American Ethnology Bulletin No.82. Washington D.C.
- 1968 *Men Met Along the Trail*. University of Oklahoma Press. Norman.

Spangler, D. Jerry

- 2007 Vermilion Dreamers, Sagebrush Schemers. An Overview of Human Occupation in House Rock Valley and the Eastern Arizona Strip. Prepared by the Colorado Plateau Archaeological Alliance for the Grand Canyon Trust.



6. Ruin-covered butte, Paris Plateau

May 1920



April 2009



11. Ruin 1 mile north of New House Rock corrals

May 1920



May 2009