



S'edav Va'aki Museum

A Brief History of the S'edav Va'aki Museum

The central portion of the Ancestral O'Odham village of S'edav Va'aki was first preserved in 1924. In that year, Thomas Armstrong, former president of the Arizona Archaeological and Historical Society, purchased the S'edav Va'aki platform mound and the surrounding three acres with his own money and donated the property to the City of Phoenix. He and others hoped to preserve some of the ancient history of the Salt River Valley that was being rapidly destroyed by farming and development. Later, that same year, Omar Turney, the City of Phoenix Engineer, convinced the City to purchase nearly 10 acres of property south of the platform mound known as the Park of Four Waters. This land contained the preserved remains of major irrigation canals that had supplied water to most Ancestral O'Odham villages on the north side of the Salt River.

By 1929, the city hired Odd Halseth as the first Museum Director and City of Phoenix Archeologist (the first city archeologist in the nation). Odd Halseth's vision was to incorporate professional archaeological investigations of the site and create a museum that would provide educational programs for schools and visitors.

In 1933, Halseth decided to begin construction on the first building of his planned Museum. Help from volunteers, Mexican American laborers supplied by Friendly House, as well as the Arizona R.F.C. helped with the construction. They were able to salvage materials from other City projects. In addition, they also used the back dirt that was excavated from the Va'aki (Platform mound) to make adobe blocks. In 1935, the Museum was completed and the total cost for the City was only \$14.95 because Halseth only charged them for the nails. Halseth also managed to conduct vast amounts of archeological work under the auspices of the Public Works Administration (PWA), Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC), and Works Progress Administration (WPA), all Depression Era work programs.

During Halseth's tenure, S'edav Va'aki acquired approximately 14 additional acres of land to the west and north of the platform mound, effectively doubling the size of the park. The property to the north of the mound was purchased from the Tovrea Stockyards and contained the ballcourt, excavated by Donald Hiser in the mid-1950s, as well as the Tovrea Zoo. Besides expanding the size of S'edav Va'aki, Halseth was also instrumental in the revitalization of Maricopa pottery in the 1930's.

Upon Halseth's retirement in 1960, Donald Hiser became the Museum Director and City Archaeologist. A few years after Hiser became Director, the National Park Service recognized the S'edav Va'aki platform mound and surrounding compound, and the Park of Four Waters as two separate National Historic Landmarks, the

former in 1964 and the latter in 1963. Between 1968 and 1986 the City acquired an additional 72 acres surrounding the site, bringing the total acreage of S'edav Va'aki Museum and Cultural Park to over 102 acres. These land acquisitions brought together into one unit the original donation of the platform mound in 1924 and the Park of Four Waters, which until the 1970s had been separated by private property. Due to the proposed construction of the Hohokam Expressway and the imminent expansion of Sky Harbor Airport, the two National Historic Landmarks at S'edav Va'aki were combined into one all-encompassing landmark in 1974, covering the entire 102+ acres of the park.

In 1974 the old Museum building constructed by Halseth, forty years earlier, was replaced by the present main Museum building. Designed to represent a truncated pyramid, hinting at the relationship between the Ancestral O'Odham and Mexican cultures, the new Museum building was more than just functional, it was beautiful as well. Red-colored Ancestral O'Odham-inspired ceramic designs in bas-relief were incorporated onto the outside walls of the building at the front entrance portal and the east patio entrance portal and pillar. Two wooden double entry doors with Ancestral O'Odham pottery designs, hand carved in Mexico, were installed at the front and patio entrances.

The Museums Auxiliary, a private non-profit support organization, was established in 1977 to help create a crucially needed volunteer program and to raise additional funds. The Auxiliary created the first annual Indian Market held at the Museum in 1977 as a fundraiser. At one time it was one of the largest Native Art Market in the state. It continues to this day, with the 47th market held in December 2024.

In 1984 David E. Doyel, Ph.D., became the third Museum Director and City Archaeologist. Doyel continued the projects that Hisler started. In 1988 the National Park Service began evaluating the erosion of the site's ancestral features and conducted stabilization on the ballcourt and Va'aki. This project included the establishment of a trail system complete with interpretive signage. In 1989 the S'edav Va'aki Museum Archival Project finally began, establishing a set of goals and procedures for the study, organization, and preservation of the Museum's archives.

In 1990, Doyel resigned as Museum Director and City Archaeologist. The Museum then went through a reorganization. With the overwhelming responsibilities the position held, it was decided to split the position of the Museum Director and City Archaeologist into two separate positions. Roger Lidman became the new Museum Director while Todd Bostwick became the new City Archaeologist. A new 20-year master plan was created to improve the Museum's facilities. In 1995, two additional buildings were added, a community room and permanent collections storage. This effectively doubled the size of the Museum complex.

In 1999, S'edav Va'aki Museum was accredited by the American Association of Museums. Out of 33,000 museums nationwide, only 1,112 currently have the honor of being accredited. Accreditation is a lengthy process of self-reviews,

evaluations, and site visits by a review team. The Museum received reaccreditation in 2009 and 2023.

In the early years, one of the frequently asked questions from visitors was, “Where did the Ancestral O’Odham live?” To answer that question, staff, with funding from the Auxiliary, constructed full-scale replicas of a Classic Period compound and a Pre-Classic pit house cluster along the expanded interpretive trail system. These replicated houses were completed in 2000.

Other museum changes during Lidman’s tenure included a second museum collections storage facility and an archaeological office area added in 2004. Due to the construction of the Metro light rail maintenance and storage facility, S’edav Va’aki Museum’s acreage was reduced from 102 acres to 95 acres in 2005. In 2009, the Native Plant Oasis program added an additional interpretative stop along the trail to enhance discussion of plants found in the Sonoran Desert.

Dr. Bostwick was instrumental in creating the city’s compliance program, ensuring that all construction work taking place on city – owned land complied with federal and state archeological protection laws and city ordinances. He also worked diligently on the Archival Project, ensuring that volumes 1, 2, and 4 were completed.

Dr. Bostwick retired in 2010 and was replaced in 2011 by Laurene Montero as the first female City of Phoenix archaeologist. Rodger Lidman retired in early 2015 and was replaced by Nicole Armstrong-Best.

In 2014 during monsoon season a portion of the trail collapsed and significant damage to the Va’aki occurred. Due to the storm, the National Park Service in consultation with Montero completed an assessment and assisted in the creation of a long-term treatment stabilization plan before the repair work started.

During her tenure as the City Archeologist, Montero worked hard to expand on the relationships that Lidman and Bostwick had created with the tribes associated with the Ancestral O’Odham – the Akimel O’Odham and the Piipash. Due to her work, and the work of Collections Curator Lindsey Vogel-Teeter, tribal consultation with the Salt River-Pima Maricopa and the Gila River Indian communities became a monthly meeting that has fostered enduring trust relationships and mutual respect. Montero brought together many professional working and retired archaeologists to begin digitization of “legacy” projects. Many archeological excavations took place within the ancestral boundaries of the S’edav Va’aki site which stretches beyond the preserved acres (44th Street east to 48th Street and south from the Salt River bed and Sky Harbor Airport north to Van Buran St.). Many of these projects were never published, nor were details of what were found plotted on maps. This project expanded to include other legacy projects in the Salt River basin and continues today. Montero retired in 2024 and was replaced by Dr. Christopher Schwartz.

After completing his Ph.D. in Anthropology, Dr. Schwartz was a postdoctoral researcher at Arizona State University and lecturer at Northern Arizona University. His academic research examines the social impacts of long-distance exchange and long-term human-animal relationships in pre-Hispanic North America and has been funded by various institutions, including the National Science Foundation, National Endowment for the Humanities, and the Society for American Archaeology. He works primarily in the U.S. Southwest and Northern Mexico and specializes in zooarchaeology, isotopic systems, and Geographical Information Systems. He is the lead editor of *Birds of the Sun: Macaws and People in the Pre-Hispanic U.S. Southwest and Mexican Northwest*, published by the University of Arizona Press. He has won various awards for scholarships and teaching, most recently including the 2021 Powers Prize at the Pecos Conference and the 2022 Book Subvention Award from the Arizona Archaeological and Historic Society.

Most recently, Dr. Schwartz has been leading a cultural resources department for a private company. He was responsible for the management of more than \$3 million of cultural resources projects, oversight of archaeological field operations, compliance and report preparation, and the management and development of a team of 14 archaeologists and specialists.

Nicole Armstrong-Best, Museum Director since 2015, is focused on expanding the interpretation of the site beyond archaeology. As the descendants of the people who not only built the large villages in the Salt River basin, but also the extensive canal system that sustained them, the O'Odham and other affiliated tribes, such as the Piipaash, Hopi, and Zuni, should have their ancestral stories told and celebrated. In order to bring these stories into the museum, Armstrong-Best has expanded tribal consultation to include discussions around museum interpretation, exhibit planning, and visitor programming. During her tenure a new entrance to the museum grounds from the Grand Canal has been created, including a bridge and themed gate; a large mural by a contemporary O'Odham graffiti artist has been added to the wall of the Community Room building; new interpretive signage has been added along the trail that includes O'Odham oral history and song culture; a complete renovation of the lobby and one exhibit area was completed in 2024 and a renovation of the main exhibit gallery is scheduled for 2025. What she is most proud of accomplishing is the renaming of the museum itself, in 2023. The previous museum name, Pueblo Grande, did not reflect the connection to the O'Odham and in fact, perpetuated the erasure of the O'Odham from their homeland by the Spanish who were the first Europeans to colonize the southwest. Working with City and Tribal administrations, the name was chosen to reflect the central location of the ancestral site within the Salt River basin (s'edav) and the large adobe feature (platform mound) preserved at the site (va'aki). Armstrong-Best is working on several projects, hoping to get them accomplished by 2029 when the museum celebrates its 100th anniversary.