



S'edav Va'aki Museum

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

The Museum sits on an extraordinary archaeological site, occupied for over a thousand years. Early settlers and archaeologists called the creators of the civilization the Hohokam (Ancestral O'Odham). The descendants of these people called themselves O'Odham and Piipaash but are known better as the Pima and Maricopa. They currently reside within Phoenix and in two nearby reservations the Salt River Pima-Maricopa Indian Community and the Gila River Indian Community. The remnants of this Ancestral O'Odham village are located on the north side of the Salt River and two miles west of the Papago Buttes. It was given the name Pueblo Grande, Spanish for "Large Town", by Omar Turney in the 1920s. He named Pueblo Grande after its most prominent feature, a platform mound. It being one of the largest of over forty similar structures built by the Ancestral O'Odham in the Salt River Valley.

The Native American occupation of the Salt River Valley dates back to the Archaic Period 12,000 years ago. O'Odham occupation in Central Arizona was first documented in the 1500s by Spanish explorers. They named the people and villages they encountered – occupied or unoccupied (prehistoric sites), using Spanish words. The Euro-Americans that came later did the same as well but added English words. For example, Pima, Papago, Maricopa, and Hohokam were all terms created by non-native peoples. Actions like these lead to an erasure of the history of the O'Odham and Piipaash (Pima, Papago, and Maricopa) ancestors and their homes. This contributes to the historical trauma that members of these communities feel. It is time that people acknowledge these ancestral lands and sites by the names that the elders of these communities deem appropriate. For S'edav Va'aki, it was thought that the uniqueness of the site and its history needed a fitting name for what it represents. The name also needed to preserve and bring awareness to the Indigenous communities and serve the rest of Phoenix's citizens. Doing this also would lead the museum to the forefront of change to address the erasure Indigenous communities have suffered for so long.

With the museum being a National Historic Landmark (NHL), Museum leadership at that time decided to reach out to the Federal agency that manages NHLs to discuss a possible name change. They very enthusiastically supported the change. The State Historic Preservation Office, an agency charged with oversight of archaeological resources in the State of Arizona, also endorsed this change. The museum staff received four letters in support of the name change, including the State Historic Preservation Office, Gila River Indian Community (GRIC), Salt River Pima-Maricopa Indian Community (SRPMIC,) and the Pueblo Grande Museum Auxiliary dba Friends of Pueblo Grande Museum. They believed the name change would be a great benefit to the descendants of the Ancestral O'Odham, as well as align with the Parks Board Land Acknowledgement Statement adopted on 6/24/21.

On March 23, 2023, the City of Phoenix Park and Recreation board voted to change the name of the Museum from a colonial Spanish term to an O’Odham name that reflects the importance of the site to the community. The name that was decided upon was S'edav Va'aki and it was chosen by the Tribal Historic Preservation officer of the Salt River Pima Maricopa Indian Community from a list submitted by a tribal elder. The term “S'edav” (meaning Central) refers to the prehistoric village being central to the salt river valley and the canal system. The term “Va'aki” (meaning Ceremonial House) reflects the importance of the large rock and adobe feature preserved at the site and referred to by archaeologists as a platform mound. Renaming the Museum was the right thing to do, for all the right reasons. It showcased the City of Phoenix’s commitment to recognizing the ancestral occupation of the Salt River Valley.

The Village of S'edav Va'aki appears to have been settled sometime before A.D. 500, perhaps related to an early canal system, which the Ancestral O’Odham built at the southern edge of the site in the area now, called "Park of Four Waters." By about A.D. 750, S'edav Va'aki had grown into a sizable village containing domestic pit houses, cemeteries, trash mounds (middens), and possibly a ball court. The S'edav Va'aki canal system had been expanded considerably by this time and irrigated approximately 20,000 acres of farmland. In the Sedentary Period (A.D. 900- 1150), a small circular platform mound may have been built at the site.

During the Classic Period (A.D. 1150-1450), the large platform mound was initially constructed and expanded on several different occasions. This mound was once two smaller mounds that became a single big mound as each expanded in size resulting in them merging. The latest manifestation of the platform mound, which is still visible today, is approximately the size of a modern-day football field. Many of the structures during The Classic Period consisted of coursed-adobe houses arranged in at least 20 apartment-like compounds, replacing many of the previously occupied pit houses. It is also inferred that the tower-like "Big House" structure, like the one still present today at Casa Grande in Coolidge, AZ, was likely built at this time as well. This structure was located near modern-day Van Buran Street and was allegedly destroyed in the early 1800s when EuroAmerican’s were documenting the site. Furthermore, several large irrigation canals were constructed in the Park of Four Waters. One of these canals was over 2 meters deep, 10 meters wide, and 7 miles long. Another canal was as much as 15 miles in length, an impressive engineering feat considering that the canals were dug by hand with digging sticks, stone tools, and baskets (other than the dog, the Ancestral O’Odham had no domesticated animals to perform laborious tasks).

The population of S'edav Va'aki had possibly reached its peak in the Classic Period, with as many as 1000 people living in the village all at once. At its largest extent, it was estimated that the size of the village was approximately 500 acres or one mile in diameter. Studies of burials excavated from the site indicate that the population was suffering from malnutrition, despite their utilization of all available resources, including the intensive harvesting of fish from the Salt River and local

irrigation canals.

Large floods were recorded for the Salt River in A.D. 1358 and 1380-1382-~~these.~~ These floods possibly contributed to the restructuring of Ancestral O'Odham society at S'edav Va'aki and elsewhere during the 1400s. Around A.D. 1450 the Ancestral O'Odham abandoned S'edav Va'aki as well as other villages in the Salt River Valley. ~~For reasons still under investigation, more than~~ Following the conquest by Elder Brother, a 1000 years of occupation at S'edav Va'aki came to an end. The Ancestral O'Odham relocated along the middle Gila River, where many of their descendants, the Akimel O'Odham, continue to live today.