



Mesa, Arizona 1929
Photo courtesy of Mesa Southwest Museum

A Brief History of Mesa, Arizona

Mesa's story is one of ancient peoples, Spanish expeditions, early American explorers, Mormon migrations, a diverse community, and continual growth.

Individuals and families have made important contributions to the development of Mesa.

Hohokam

The history of Mesa dates back at least two thousand years to the arrival of the Hohokam people. The Hohokam, whose name means "All Used Up" or "The Departed Ones", built the original canal system. The canals were the largest and most sophisticated in the prehistoric New World. Some were up to 90 feet wide and ten feet deep at their head gates, extending for as far as 16 miles across the desert. By A.D.1100 water could be delivered to an area over 110,000 acres, transforming the Sonoran Desert into an agricultural oasis. By A.D.1450, the Hohokam had constructed hundreds of miles of canals many of which are still in use today.

Why did the Hohokam leave? Several reasons have been advanced:

- A ring of prehistoric hilltop forts surrounding the Salt River suggests warfare between the Hohokam and other groups that began in the 1300's.
- The water table became too high, so the salts and minerals were not able to leach through the soil, preventing the crops from growing.
- A large flood is known to have occurred in A.D.1358 that may have destroyed the irrigation systems and disrupted the large population they supported.

- The land became overpopulated and could not sustain the number of people who moved here.
- Their culture did not disappear: it slowly transformed and is represented by their descendants, the people of the Salt River-Maricopa and Gila Communities.

Explorers and Apaches

Missionaries and explorers, including Coronado, Father Kino, and Marcos de Niza, came to Arizona (though not present day Mesa) during the 1500's and 1600's. A less known explorer was Esteban (also called Estevan or Estevanico), an African war captive, who searched for the city of gold.

The Apache, east of our area, drove the Spanish away in the 1700's. U.S. Army troops fought the Apaches in the late 1800's, opening the way for white settlement. Kit Carson and other explorers came through the Salt River Valley during the early part of the 19th century.

Maryville

Soldiers from Fort McDowell used a ferry to cross the Salt River when they needed to travel to the south. Maryville was settled in 1865 at the site of this ferry, west of what is presently Val Vista Road. Maryville had a post office, blacksmith shop, general store, hotel and an amateur drama troupe. The town was abandoned before the Lehi settlers came.

Mormon Battalion

Meanwhile, Mormons were settling Utah in order to escape persecution in the Midwest. The migration was partially subsidized by men who joined the U.S. Army during the Mexican War (1846-47) to donate their pay to the church. Because all except the officers were Latter Day Saints, the unit was called the Mormon Battalion. The soldiers created a wagon trail through Southern Arizona during their journey to San Diego. Their experience in Arizona made it possible for them to inform the church leaders that the native peoples were friendly and that the land was very suitable for agriculture.

Lehi Settlement and Fort Utah

The completion of the transcontinental railroad in 1869 in Utah increased pressure for expansion beyond Utah. Easier transportation had augmented

Utah's population, thus reducing the amount of available arable land. Consequently, the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints officials asked Daniel Webster Jones to lead a group to settle in Arizona.

Jones had explored parts of Arizona and Mexico in 1875-76, while he had been on a mission to the native people in the Valley.. Jones agreed to lead the colony, but requested families that had many children and were poor, so they would not be able to resettle elsewhere easily.

The Jones, Turley, Rogers, Steele, Biggs, McRae, Williams, and Merrill families gathered for their journey at St. George, Utah. They traveled in wagons for three months, and arrived in Lehi (just north of Mesa) in March of 1877. The route they took forced them to leave heavy equipment, such as stoves, sewing machines and plows, along the way.

The Lehi residents lived the United Order: that is, they shared the supplies and food raised. Their first building was a brush shed used as a school, church, and meeting place. In July 1877, they built Fort Utah with adobe bricks. A replica of this structure is in front of the Mesa Historical Museum, nearby its original location at Lehi and Horne Roads.

Jones' invitation to the natives to live with them became a contributing factor that caused half of the colony to leave. Those who left had brought more of the livestock, which they took with them to St. David, near Mexico. The Lehi group that was left was especially small and poor; it had a difficult time surviving.

A flood in Lehi in 1891 destroyed Fort Utah and carried away acres of valuable farmland in low-lying areas. Because Lehi was prone to flooding, had a more limited land area and fewer irrigation ditches, Mesa outgrew Lehi. When the railroad was placed in Mesa about 1895, the growth pattern accelerated. Lehi became part of Mesa in 1970, but it has maintained its independent, more rural character.

First Mesa Company

The First Mesa Company, comprised of 85 members, left Utah and Idaho in September 1877. The company leaders, some of whom were polygamous, were Crismon, Pomeroy, Serrine, and Robson. They took a different route from Jones, crossing the Colorado River at Lee's Ferry, where there is a steep cliff.

The leaders of the Mesa Company reached Utahville, as Lehi or Jonesville was then called, in January of 1878; the rest of the company came in February. Daniel Webster Jones invited the group to stay, but they decided to move up to the mesa. They marked off land and immediately began work clearing the original Hohokam canals. Water entered the canals in April of 1878.

Second Mesa Company

The Second Mesa Company, which came from Idaho in 1879, included the Phelps, Hibbert, Dana, and LeSueur (pronounced *Le Sweer*) families. In 1880 the Rogers, Standage, and Pew families came. Because the best land had been taken, the 1880 pioneers established Stringtown, along what is now Alma School Road.

The Standage Farm became the University of Arizona Experimental Farm on Main Street between Alma School and Dobson. The property stood undeveloped until the late 1990's when a Wal-Mart Shopping Center and the East Valley Institute of Technology were built on the site.

Diversity in Mesa's Early History

The present day Salt River Pima-Maricopa, descendents of the Hohokam, were in the Valley long before the Mormons arrived. Earlier mention was made of the canals and their friendship with Daniel Webster Jones. Anna Moore Shaw has written *A Pima Past*, which describes their culture and social life.

The first African-American family, the McPhersons, arrived in 1905. Dr. James Livingston, a Black veterinarian came before 1910; other African-Americans who arrived before 1920 were the Kemp, Moore, Hall, McKelvy, and Ferguson families.

Chinese and Japanese immigrants were farmers and business owners in Mesa, mostly arriving about 1910. Willie Wong, the mayor of Mesa from 1992-1996 and the first Asian-American mayor of a major city, is the descendent of such a family. The Lees, Yees, and Homs were other Chinese families here near the turn of the century. Early Japanese included the Ikeda, Ishikawa, Okazaki, Horiba, Sugino and Nishida families.

Hispanics were in the area at least by the early 1890's; the Aros, Candelaria, Castro, Garcia, Rivera and (Police Chief) Mendoza families were residents.

Mesa City - 1878 to Depression

On July 17 1878, Theodore Serrine went to Florence to register Section 22, now called the Town Center: the square mile from Mesa Drive to Country Club and University to Broadway. There is some confusion about early names for Mesa because of Post Office designations; however, the town itself was always called Mesa City. Postal authorities considered the name Mesa unacceptable at first, as it was thought it would be confused with Mesaville on the San Pedro River. The first Post Office name was Hayden's Ferry (not to be confused with Tempe), operated by Fannie Macdonald in 1881. In 1886, the Post Office name was

changed to Zenos. In 1889, the Post Office Department finally allowed the name Mesa City.

After shelters were built and crops prepared, the Mesa settlers built a school. Zulu Pomeroy taught the first classes there in 1879.

Five years after the founding, in 1883, the 300 residents incorporated Mesa City and chose Alexander F. Macdonald as the first mayor. Early buildings included a pest-house adobe structure to control smallpox, a city hall, and saloons for Roosevelt Dam workers.

The Mesa Free Press newspaper began in 1892; it has run continuously since then under various names, currently The East Valley Tribune. The City of Mesa Library has most of the local newspapers on microfilm from mid 1893, with the exception of the years 1901-1914, which were lost in a fire at the newspaper office. (If anyone knows where these issues are, please ask them to contact the Mesa Room at 480-644-3730.) The library contracted indexing of all issues of the Tribune microfilm held by the library covering the years 1893 to 1921.

Dr. A.J. Chandler, who later started the city bearing his name south of Mesa, built a retail/office complex in Mesa before 1911. This building was located on the northwest corner of Main and Macdonald. It used the first evaporative air-cooling system in Arizona.

Dr. Chandler enlarged the Mesa Canal with heavy machinery in 1895 to allow enough water flow to start an electric power plant. The City of Mesa purchased the utility company in 1917, becoming one of the few cities in Arizona to own utilities. Utility earnings enabled Mesa to pay for capital expenditures without bonds until the 1960s.

Utility earnings provided the shared funds that allowed construction and service projects to be implemented during the Works Progress Administration during the Depression. Some of the improvements were paved streets, sidewalks and curbs in the Town Center, the first hospital not converted from a residence, a recreation department and park facilities, and a modern city hall/library with expanded library hours.

World War II to Present

In 1941 two bases were constructed to provide training for World War II pilots. Falcon Field, now Falcon Field Airport, was built for the British Royal Air Force. Williams Field, later Williams Air Force Base, and now Williams Gateway Airport, was built for U.S. pilots. After the war, many military families, including that of John J. Rhodes, later Minority Leader of the U.S. House of Representatives, decided to settle in Mesa.

In the late 1940's air conditioning came into more common use and tourism began as a major force. The decade of the 1950's brought more commerce and industry to Mesa, including early aerospace companies. However, until 1960 more than 50 percent of the residents earned their living directly or indirectly from farming, mainly citrus and cotton.

The 1960's through 1990's saw more high-technology companies, now over 100 firms. Health facilities grew especially during the 1980's and 1990's to service the larger population. The latest Economic Census figures from 1997 show Mesa employment percentages as retail – 31.2%, office – 25.7%, public – 16.1%, industrial – 14%, other – 11.6%.

Historical Buildings

There are several important historical buildings in Mesa still in existence. The Lehi School, built in 1913, is the oldest standing school building in Mesa today. The former elementary school, located at Lehi and Horne, is now the Mesa Historical Museum.

The Sistine House, built in 1895, is an attractive brick structure at 160 North Center, restored by the Mesa Historical Society and the City of Mesa. Some other historic buildings in Mesa's Town Center are the Ellis-Johnson home at 49 West First Street, the Alhambra Hotel at 43 South Macdonald, and the Southside Hospital, now the Department of Economic Security, at Hibbert and Main Streets.

The Vance Auditorium, once located at 250 West Main Street, was built in 1907. The gala Grand Opening was held on February 14, 1908. It was the largest auditorium in the Southwest, praised as having the best dance floor in the region. Broadway productions traveling from New York performed at the Vance Auditorium, drawing residents of Phoenix, who came via train.

The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints purchased the auditorium in 1919. The name was changed to Mezona in 1926. Dances at the Mezona were the main entertainment on Friday nights until 1972 when the building was demolished and the Mezona Inn replaced it.

A large grain elevator owned by Frihoff and Nielson, still located at Macdonald and Broadway, serviced an important crop in early Mesa. Citrus followed as a valuable commodity, especially in northeast Mesa. There is still a citrus warehouse by the railroad line on Broadway Road west of Country Club, although most of the citrus groves in the city have been converted to housing.

Growth

With the exception of the decade of the 1920's, when the cotton prices plummeted, Mesa increased by at least 79% every decennial census through 1990. In 1990 the census showed Mesa to have the highest growth rate of any city over 100,00 in the United States. The population grew 89% from 152,404 in 1980 to 288,091 in 1990.

In 2002, Mesa's population was estimated to be 426,841, according to the U.S. Census Bureau. In fact, Mesa's population grew by more than 37 percent between 1990 and 2000, much higher than the national average growth rate of 13 percent. With a progressive vision for the future, low cost of doing business, reasonable tax structure, well-educated workforce, low crime rate, superior schools, affordable housing and quality regional transportation system, Mesa is one of the fastest-growing cities in the nation.

From humble beginnings, Mesa has developed into the third largest city in Arizona and the 40th largest city in the United States. The Census Bureau now designates the Valley as the Phoenix-Mesa Metropolitan Statistical Area. Mesa's pioneers might not recognize the present-day city, but surely would be proud of what they began.

Written with assistance from Sarah Zafra, Charles Crismon, Reta Reed Otis Kellis, and Barbara Nielsen, Mesa Historical Society; Jerry Howard, Mesa Southwest Museum, and Sandra Apsey, City of Mesa Library. Revised July 2003. Reprinted with permission.