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Tim Graves at right and Scott Cole excavate within Pit Structure 1 at the Merchant Site. They are defining features located on the floor of the structure that was dug in prehistoric times through almost two feet (60 cm) of hard caliche. Graves and Cole are also discovering clues about an earlier excavation by members of the Lea County Archeological Society in the 1960s. The Merchant Site is one of only a few known villages in the Mescalero Plain. Learn more about this important site inside this newsletter.

Introduction to the Permian Basin Programmatic Agreement (PA)

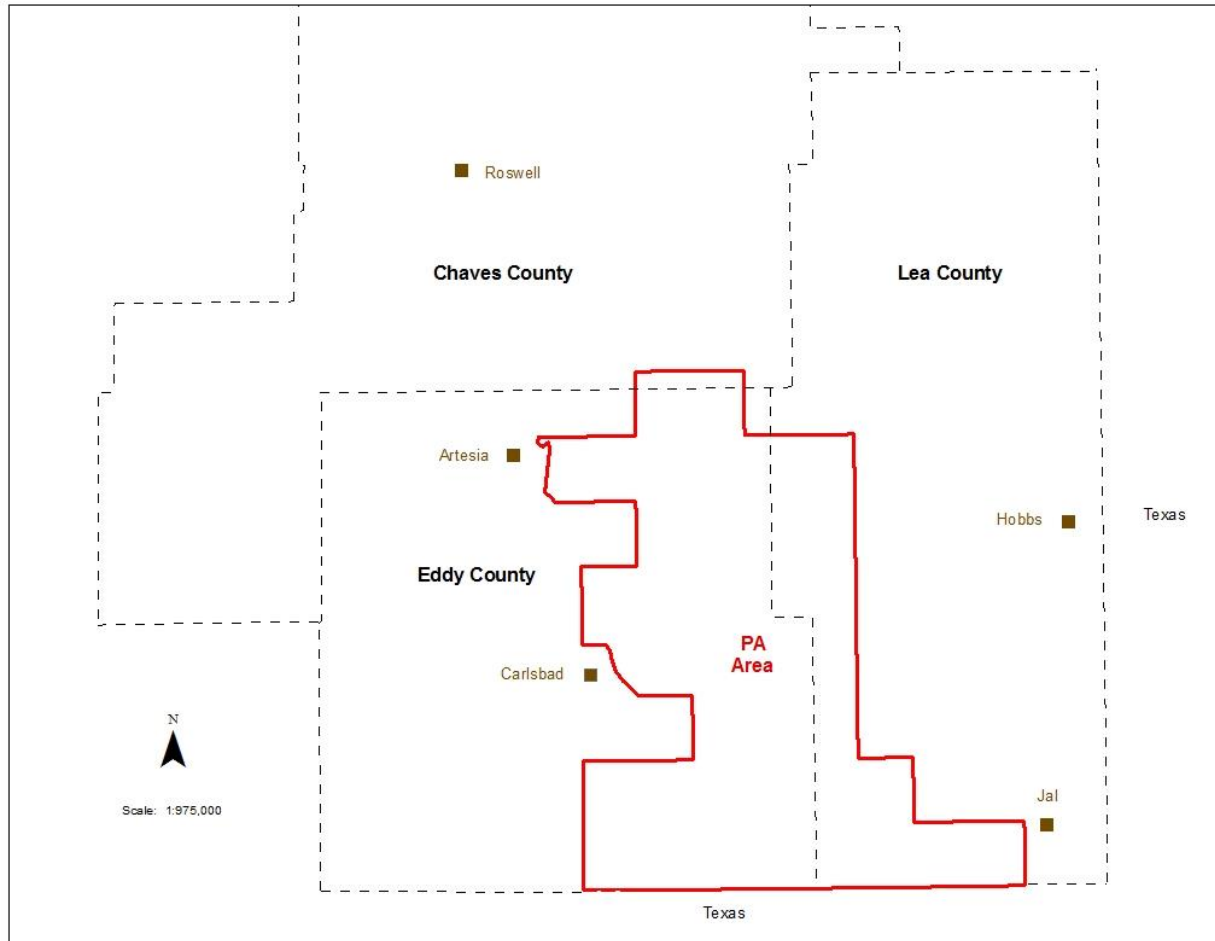


Figure 1. Map showing the Permian Basin PA Area.

The PA is an alternate form of compliance with Section 106 of the National Historic Preservation Act of 1966, as amended, that is offered to the oil and gas industry, potash mining companies, and for other industrial projects located in southeastern New Mexico. The PA can be used for federal projects located on Bureau of Land Management (BLM) land or BLM sponsored projects located on private property. Originally begun as a Memorandum of Agreement (MOA), it was extended for a period of three years in April 2013 as a Programmatic Agreement (PA) and the PA was further extended for a period of 10 years beginning in May 2016. The PA area is located partially in Chaves, Eddy, and Lea counties. Proponents of projects within the PA area may contribute to a dedicated archeological research fund in lieu of contracting for project specific archeological surveys, provided their proposed projects avoid recorded archeological sites. This dedicated fund is then used to study the archeology and history of southeastern New Mexico.

Current PA News

Merchant Site Remediation Project is Completed

Editor's note: the following article was written by Myles Miller, the archeologist in charge of the Merchant Site remediation project and the principal author of the Merchant Site report. He has more than 30 years of experience excavating sites and studying the archeology of west Texas and southern New Mexico.

THE MERCHANT SITE: A LATE PREHISTORIC OCHOA PHASE SETTLEMENT IN SOUTHEASTERN NEW MEXICO

by Myles R. Miller, Tim B. Graves, and Robert H. Leslie

The Merchant site (LA 43414) is a Late Prehistoric Period pueblo settlement located in the southeastern corner of New Mexico near the boundary where the basin-and-range region merges with the southern Plains. The Merchant site is representative of the Ochoa phase, a poorly understood time period of southeastern New Mexico dating from around A.D. 1300/1350 to 1450. The Ochoa phase, and the El Paso and Late Glencoe phases of the closely related Jornada Mogollon region to the west, are contemporaneous with the Pueblo IV period of the greater Southwest, the Antelope Creek phase of the southern Plains, and the Toyah phase of central Texas. As such, Merchant and other Ochoa phase settlements were part of the widespread patterns of population aggregation, migrations, and diasporas and accompanying developments in social and ritual organization that occurred throughout the Southwest, northern Mexico, and southern Plains during the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries.

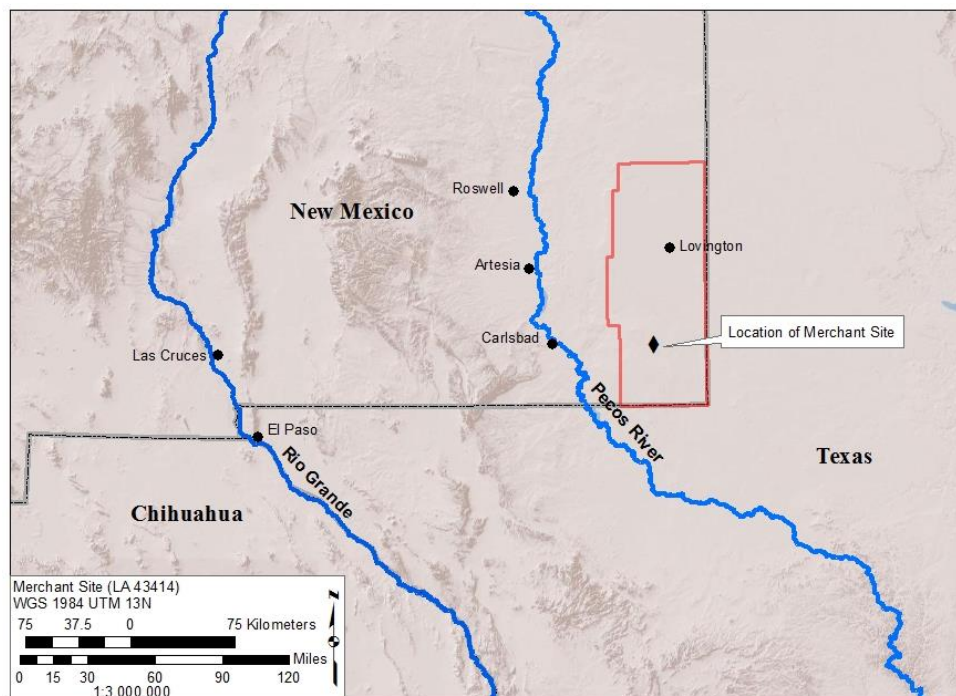


Figure 2. The location of the Merchant Site in southeastern New Mexico (after Miller, Graves, and Leslie 2016:Figure 1.1).

The Merchant site was first excavated by the Lea County Archaeological Society (LCAS) between 1959 and 1965, but the results of the excavations were never fully reported. Robert Leslie published a brief

paper on the site in the 1965 *Transactions of the First Regional Archaeological Symposium for Southeastern New Mexico and Western Texas*. Since the publication of Leslie's paper the Merchant site attained a somewhat mythical status in New Mexico archaeology. This status was partially due to the fact that the LCAS excavations and Leslie's 1965 publication gave tantalizing details on rooms with formal stone foundation walls (or cimientos), two large and deep pit structures that were called rooms or pithouses but had intriguing similarities to civic-ceremonial rooms of prehistoric and historic Southwestern cultures, thousands of projectile points and formal tools, a new indigenous ceramic ware called Ochoa Indented, and ceramics and marine shell obtained from distant sources. The mythical status was also due to the fact that although the abovementioned details were known among the avocational and professional archaeological communities of southeastern New Mexico, aside aside from Leslie's brief and basic overview, little was truly known of the site beyond an amalgamation of hearsay and oral traditions.

The membership of the Lea County Archaeological Society (LCAS) consisted of several energetic and dedicated amateur or avocational archaeologists. Several of the members—Robert “Bus” Leslie, John Corley, John Runyan, and Calvin Smith—produced the bulk of the archaeological knowledge and publications for southeastern New Mexico prior to the 1980s. Unfortunately, other members of the society were energetic and dedicated artifact collectors. Both the avocational and collector factions participated in the early investigations of the Merchant, Laguna Plata, and Boot Hill sites, and it appears that there was some form of détente between the two groups and certain parties were allowed to dig in certain areas and retain the artifacts they recovered. Several passages in Robert Leslie's unpublished manuscript on the Merchant site also refer to “diggers” that apparently were a third group of much more zealous and destructive looters that destroyed large parts of the Merchant site at the same time that the LCAS was attempting to conduct some form of controlled excavation.



Figure 3. Members of the Lea County Archeological Society excavating at the Merchant Site in 1964 (after Miller, Graves, and Leslie 2016:Figure 3.1 upper panel)

Leslie's site notes and manuscript describe a continual destruction of rooms and deposits by looters. Some rooms were first exposed in potholes left by looters and were cleaned and documented by Leslie

and LCAS members, while other rooms in the process of being excavated were damaged by looters while LCAS members were away from the site. Leslie's notes indicate that most of the rooms were damaged by looters. The uncontrolled excavations loosened and displaced the cobbles of room walls and often penetrated through floors, making it difficult for the LCAS excavators to recover architectural information. Despite the constant damage by looters, however, Leslie and the dedicated members of the LCAS managed to salvage and document an impressive amount of information on the site.

The excavated units and features were never backfilled. In order to remedy this situation, the Carlsbad Field Office of the Bureau of Land Management contracted Versar, Inc. to perform remedial mitigation and investigation of the Merchant site under the Permian Basin Programmatic Agreement. The 2015 fieldwork included a high-resolution Transect Recording Unit survey, surface mapping and collections, remote sensing, hand and mechanical excavations, and geomorphic studies. The entire site of LA 43414 was surveyed and mapped, identifying several areas of prehistoric occupations including possible agricultural fields. The primary focus of the fieldwork was the village area excavated by the LCAS and the possible agricultural fields located 100 meters to the north.

Figure 4. Parallel caliche cobble alignments exposed in a cattle trail indicate possible agricultural plots between them (after Miller, Graves, and Leslie 2016:Figure 7.8 upper panel).



Figure 5. Aerial view of the re-excavated Pit Structure 1. Looting episodes in the 1960s have destroyed the original wall outlines and make it impossible to determine the original shape of the structure (after Miller, Graves, and Leslie 2016:Figure 6.21)

The primary occupation of the Merchant site consists of a group of domestic rooms with stone foundation walls, two deep pit structures, and extensive trash middens. Excavations in two large and deep pit structures excavated by the LCAS in 1959 and 1960 determined that they served as civic-ceremonial structures. One of the potentially most significant findings was the discovery of possible agricultural gridded fields to the north of the village area. Geomorphological, archaeological, and botanical studies were conducted in two possible agricultural features but the results are equivocal. If future investigations confirm the presence of such features, they will represent the easternmost expression of Southwestern intensive farming practices.

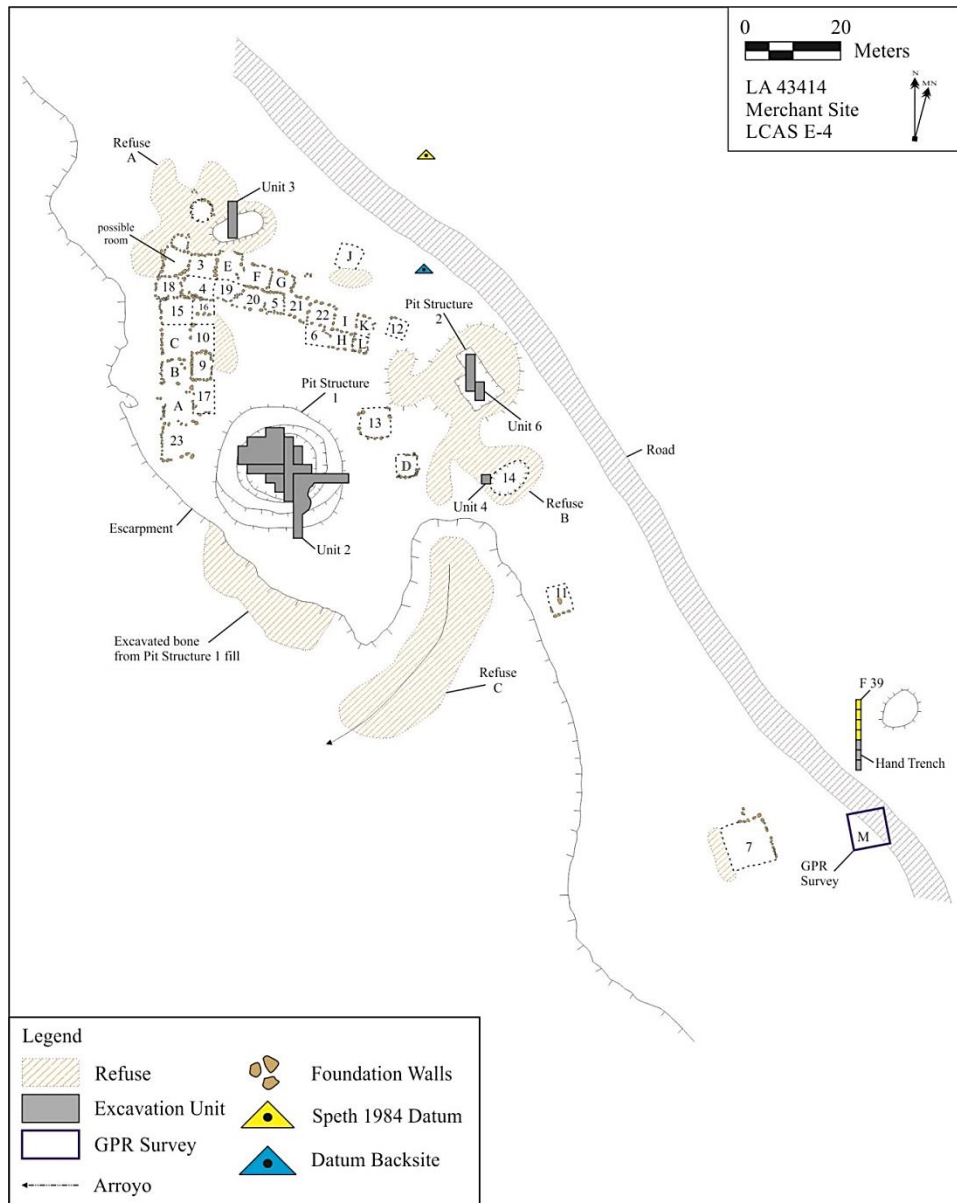


Figure 6. Map illustrating the distribution of surface rooms, pit structures, and excavation units at the Merchant Site. This site had more than one occupation, but the sequence of building has not yet been discovered (after Miller, Graves, and Leslie 2016:Figure 5.3).

Very few items from the Merchant collections carry any form of iconographic expression that could be used to link the inhabitants to fourteenth century ideological movements of the western Jornada, the greater Southwest, or other regions. One item, a freshwater shell pendant, is of interest. If the item is oriented with the prongs facing to the side it appears to have a semblance of a crudely-executed horned serpent (Figure) similar to examples executed in several media at settlements in southeastern New Mexico. If the identification as a horned serpent is correct, a fascinating and critical connection to Southwestern ideology would be established, as well as a crucial piece of the puzzle regarding the origin of the Merchant site inhabitants.

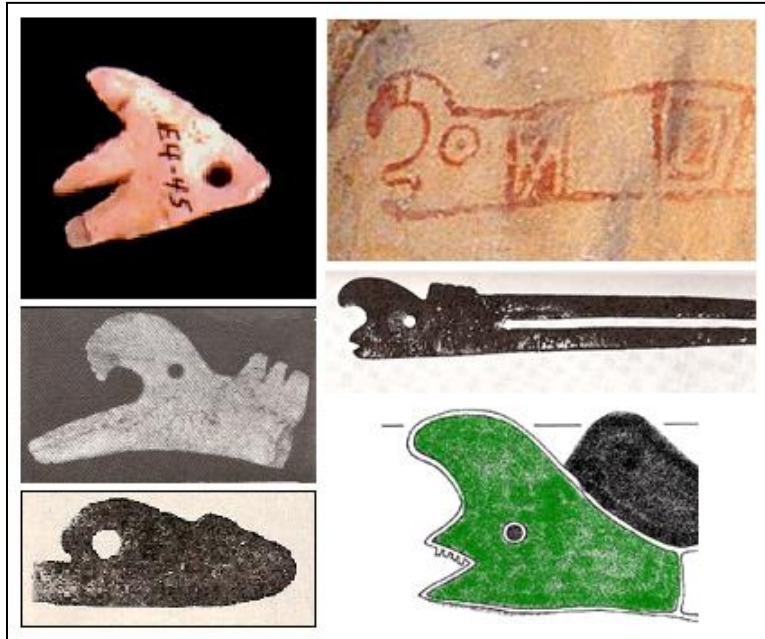


Figure 7. Freshwater shell effigy from the Merchant site (upper left) compared to horned serpent images in shell, bone, and murals. Upper right is an El Paso Archaeological Society photograph of a pictograph from Picture Cave on Fort Bliss; lower right is a wall mural in the civic-ceremonial structure of the Fox Place; the three bone and shell artifacts are from Bloom Mound and other pueblo sites (after Miller, Graves, and Leslie 2016:Figure 13.5).

There are other more common means of social signaling and expressing identity, one of which is through the plastic medium of ceramics. The Ochoa Indented Corrugated ceramics recovered from the Merchant site and other Ochoa Phase sites represent a Southwestern textured ceramic tradition transplanted to the southern Plains. There is little dispute over the fact that textured ceramics were a prehistoric Southwestern technological and stylistic innovation. Across most regions of the Southwest (the Jornada being a notable exception), cooking vessels changed from plain pots to textured and corrugated pots between A.D. 600 and 1000 and then changed back to plain vessels during the 1400s. Ochoa ware was clearly part of the larger Southwestern tradition, with corrugated surface treatments similar to Tusayan Indented Corrugated (or specifically Medicine Gray Indented Corrugated) from the Tusayan region of northern Arizona and Reserve Indented Corrugated from the Mogollon region of New Mexico and Arizona. Both of these Tusayan and Mogollon types predate the occupation of the Merchant site and production period of Ochoa Indented Corrugated, and they also lack the distinctive smoothing or flattening of the indentations typical of Ochoa ware. This distinctive surface treatment renders Ochoa ware a unique style in and of itself, and its distinctive chemical attributes, likely reflecting the use of a distinctive temper, establish that Ochoa

Indented Corrugated was an indigenous ceramic ware of the Late Prehistoric period of southeastern New Mexico.



Figure 8. Ochoa Indented Corrugated sherds from the Merchant Site (after Alvarado 2009).

The most significant finding of the reinvestigation of the site is that the architecture and material culture of the Merchant site and other Ochoa phase settlements represents a mixture or hybrid or something entirely new of Southwest and Plains traditions. The collective observations on architecture and material culture establish that the inhabitants of the Merchant site—whether involving one or several resident groups—forged new social identities and perhaps even some manner of hybrid material culture on the southern Plains of the 1300s and early 1400s. The creation of the unique Ochoa Indented Corrugated ware among the Ochoa phase people of southeastern New Mexico is a visible and prominent identifier of the new social identity of the Ochoa phase migrant communities. The manner in which the Plains hunters and pueblo agriculturalists interacted—whether symbiotically through exchange, by merging and creating new expressions of ethnicity and identity, or through conflict and warfare—is an important and fascinating topic of investigation for Southwestern and Plains prehistory and broader anthropological theory. The Merchant site and other Ochoa phase settlements of southeastern New Mexico have much to offer for such pursuits.

References Cited

Alvarado, Luis

2009 Compositional Analysis of Corrugated Wares and Brownwares from the Texas Southern Plains and Southeastern New Mexico. *Friends of the Texas Archaeological Research Laboratory Newsletter*, December 2009:10-13.

Miller, Myles, Tim B. Graves, and Robert H. Leslie

2016 *The Merchant Site: A Late Prehistoric Ochoa Phase Settlement in Southeastern New Mexico*. Permian Basin Programmatic Agreement, BPA Project, No. 4, Versar, Inc., Richardson, Texas.

Other News from the Permian Basin

Merchant Site Booklet is Available

A booklet entitled *The Merchant Site: A 14th Century Village in Southeastern New Mexico* is available from the Carlsbad Field Office. This 14 page publication summarizes the archeological remediation work undertaken at the site and describes some of the key discoveries made. Readers interested in getting a copy of the booklet can get one at the office or send a U.S. Postal Service mailing address to me (cstein@blm.gov).

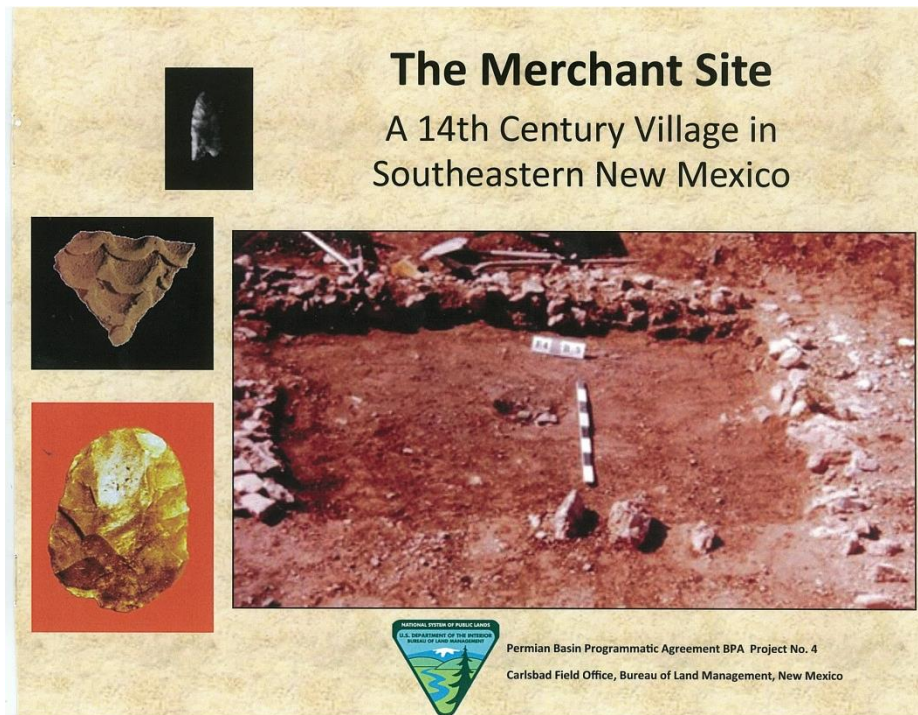


Figure 9. The cover of the Merchant Site booklet is illustrated.

Carlsbad Field Office Staff Consult with the Hopi Tribe

Tye Bryson, Acting Field Manager, and Permian Basin Coordinator, Martin Stein, traveled to the Hopi Reservation to consult with staff of the Hopi Cultural Preservation Office and members of the Hopi Cultural Resources Advisory Task Team about the results of the Merchant Site remediation project and the operation of the Permian Basin Programmatic Agreement. Assisting them was Myles Miller of Versar, Inc., the archeologist in charge of the project and principal author of the report of the work. Certain Hopi clans have ancestral ties to southeastern New Mexico and they were interested in the Merchant Site and the results of the remediation and research project.

The Hopi Cultural Resources Advisory Task Team is composed of representatives from all of the Hopi villages, and a number of prominent clans, priesthoods, and religious societies. These members are experts in Hopi culture and possess important information regarding cultural resources.



Figure 10. This road sign points to the location of Kykotsmovi village.

The meeting took place at the Hopi Cultural Preservation Office in Kykotsmovi village. Myles Miller presented an illustrated talk about the remediation project which was well received by those in attendance. Discussion afterward included comments about pottery types and their distribution, the nature of the civic-ceremonial rooms at the Merchant Site, the tribe's views concerning the excavation of archeological sites, and recognition of the many paths that the Hopi people took before finding their current homes on the mesas of northeastern Arizona.

Newsletter Contact Information

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