

Prehistoric Forts

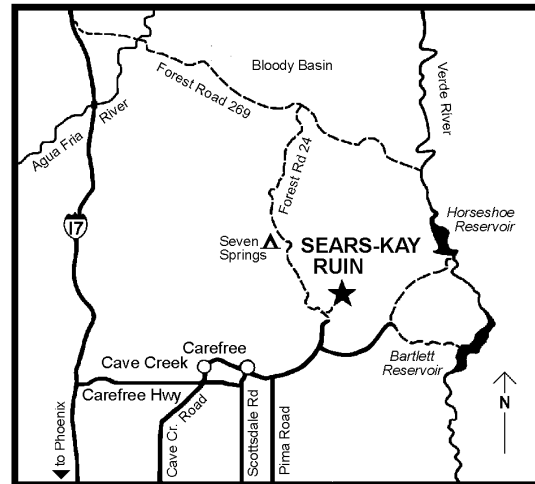
By about 800 AD, the Hohokam had developed fairly extensive irrigation systems in the major river valleys and had begun filling them with many small villages that would soon grow together into large towns. Many small groups left to find areas in which to live where competition for resources would not be so great, but where contact could still be maintained with the homeland. Most of these areas were already occupied by hunters and gatherers who quickly adopted Hohokam culture. Over time, this led to the development of distinctive local traditions that became increasingly different from the Hohokam of the river valleys. The desert foothills between the Agua Fria and Verde Rivers was one such area.

By the middle of the 11th century, these differences may have begun to outweigh the similarities. At the same time, the large villages and towns along the Salt and Verde Rivers were experiencing difficulties due to population growth and a changing environment. The result was apparently a prolonged period of social unrest and conflict that swept across the entire northern edge of the Phoenix Basin. By the time it was over, there were profound changes in the organization and economy of the river valley settlements with many outlying groups, like those in the desert foothills, had broken away from the mainstream of Hohokam development.

By 1100 AD, houses built of stone masonry appeared in the foothills around Carefree. During the 12th and 13th centuries, “fortified villages” protected by stone walls were built on prominent hilltops throughout the desert foothills area. Sears-Kay Ruin is just one such village. They appear to have been located and built so as to provide defense. Archaeologists believe that this pattern indicates competition for land and other resources. Whether they were built to keep the river valley people out of the foothills or to block movement from the north into the river valleys is hard to say, but the general feeling is that they were a local development intended to protect the foothills against incursions from the south.

Getting There

Sears-Kay Ruin is located just off the Seven Springs Road (Forest Road 24), 6 miles east of Carefree, Arizona. This road is paved past the turnoff to the ruin at Sears-Kay Road. The trailhead has several picnic ramadas, grills, and a toilet. From the trailhead, the site can be reached by foot along a steep trail about half a mile long. Bring water and dress according to the season. No facilities are available beyond the trailhead. A self-guided trail will take you through the ruins. The tour will take at least an hour to complete. ***Come discover Arizona's ancient past at Sears-Kay Ruin!***



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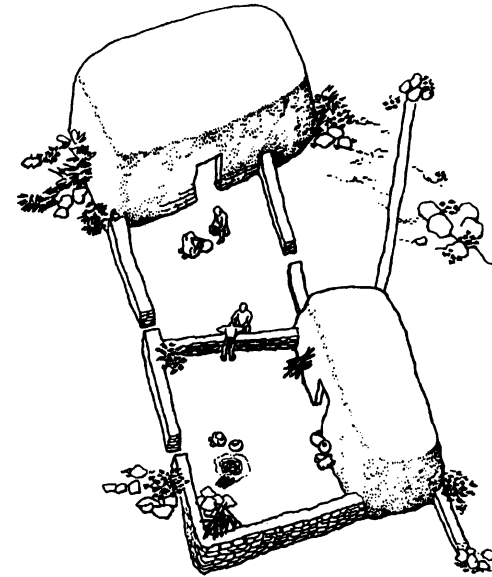
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Sears-Kay Ruin

Tonto National Forest



Trail to the Past

Nearly a thousand years ago, prehistoric people known as the **Hohokam** built a small village perched on a hilltop overlooking the desert north of what was to become Phoenix, Arizona. Today, Sears-Kay Ruin offers the visitor a glimpse of the distinctive lifestyle that existed long before Columbus.

Sears-Kay Ruin is one of a series of prehistoric hilltop villages located between Phoenix and the mountains to the north. It contains the remains of about 40 rooms in 5 separate walled buildings called *compounds*. The site was discovered in 1867 by soldiers from Camp McDowell visiting the area on patrol. J. M. Sears established the Sears-Kay Ranch nearby in 1887, but the ruin was not officially recorded until 1929. It is now listed on the **National Register of Historic Places** and has been partially stabilized with the assistance of the Desert Foothills Chapter of the Arizona Archaeological Society.

The People

The name given by archaeologists to the people who built Sears-Kay Ruin is derived from a word used by today's O'odham (Piman) Tribes to describe their prehistoric ancestors. The Hohokam culture flourished in central and southern Arizona between about 300 and 1450 AD. They built hundreds of miles of irrigation canals and farmed thousands of acres of corn, beans, squash, and cotton in the broad valleys of the Sonoran Desert. They also harvested many wild plant and animal resources. Large villages and towns were built where the modern cities of Phoenix and Tucson are today. The Hohokam were also gifted craftsmen who made a wide variety of tools and textiles for trade as well as ornate items of rare materials with which to adorn themselves and practice their religion. Their trading partners ranged from Mexico to the Colorado Plateau.

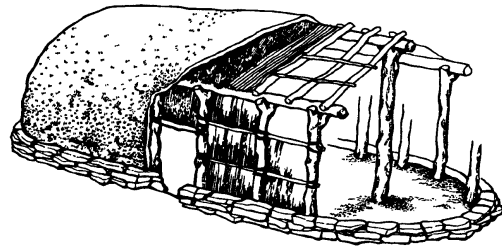


The Village

The site of Sears-Kay Ruin was first occupied about 1050 AD. At that time it may have been made up of only a few pithouses. These were probably replaced rather quickly with surface rooms built in the same oval shape as the earlier pithouses. The latest rooms were rectangular. By the time it was abandoned at about 1200 AD, it had grown to five compounds, the uppermost one fortified with a massive retaining wall that levelled off the hilltop. Each of these compounds contained a variety of rooms and courtyards within their outer walls. The rooms were used for sleeping and storage. The courtyards were used for most other daily activities such as food preparation, cooking, and tool making, which frequently took place under light shade structures called *ramadas*. During this time, the compound represented a basic unit of Hohokam social organization; each combination of room and courtyard represented one family.

The fortified hilltop compound is the most complex unit within the village. Built on two levels, it contains a number of the same room and courtyard units seen in the smaller compounds lower down the ridge. It also has a central courtyard which is shared by a long row of residential and storage rooms. The fact that this compound contains a number of small rooms presumably used for storage suggest that it provided a common storehouse for the entire village. During times of conflict, this structure probably also served as a haven for the people living in the lower compounds as well as those living on the hilltop itself. The massive architecture and position of this structure, which has a commanding view of the surrounding area, are clues to the extent of the social unrest of the 12th century.

By the turn of the 13th century, social conditions in the foothills had changed and sites like Sears-Kay Ruin were abandoned in favor of villages farther north in less defensive locations.



Oval Room

Most of the rooms in the hilltop compound were built with full-height masonry walls. Those in the lower compounds typically had masonry foundations with walls of wood and adobe. Most rooms had only a single small doorway with a small firepit just inside to provide heat and light. Many of the doorways at Sears-Kay Ruin were highlighted by the use of lighter colored rocks for sills and jambs, a distinctive characteristic of this area. A number of rooms in the upper compound have no apparent doorways. These were probably entered through hatchways in the roof. The roofs themselves were built up of adobe on a framework of wooden beams and poles.

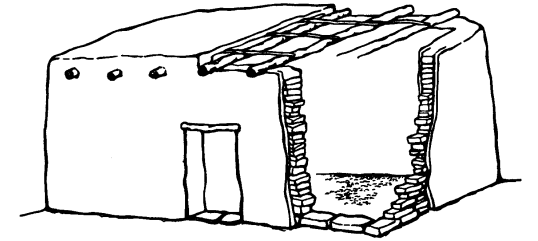
Most of the stone used in the masonry walls at Sears-Kay Ruin were found nearby, but not all. The light colored rocks used for the doorways and many of the massive basalt rocks used as lintels and in the construction of the hilltop retaining wall were carried to the site from miles away.

The Desert Environment

The desert foothills are located in a transition zone that divides the Sonoran Desert to the south from the Colorado Plateau to the north. They contain plants and animals common to both of these areas, making the region attractive to small groups of people practicing a mixed subsistence economy of farming, hunting, and gathering. Then as now, the foothills provided ideal habitat for large and small game such as deer, mountain sheep, and rabbit. Saguaro, mesquite, prickly pear, cholla, and many other native plants in the area provided a large part of the Hohokam diet. Yucca and agave would have provided fiber for weaving cloth and making cordage. In addition, agave was also a major food source. Desert plants were also used for medicines, dyes, tools, fuel, and construction. Other important resources present include a variety of types of stone for construction and making tools.

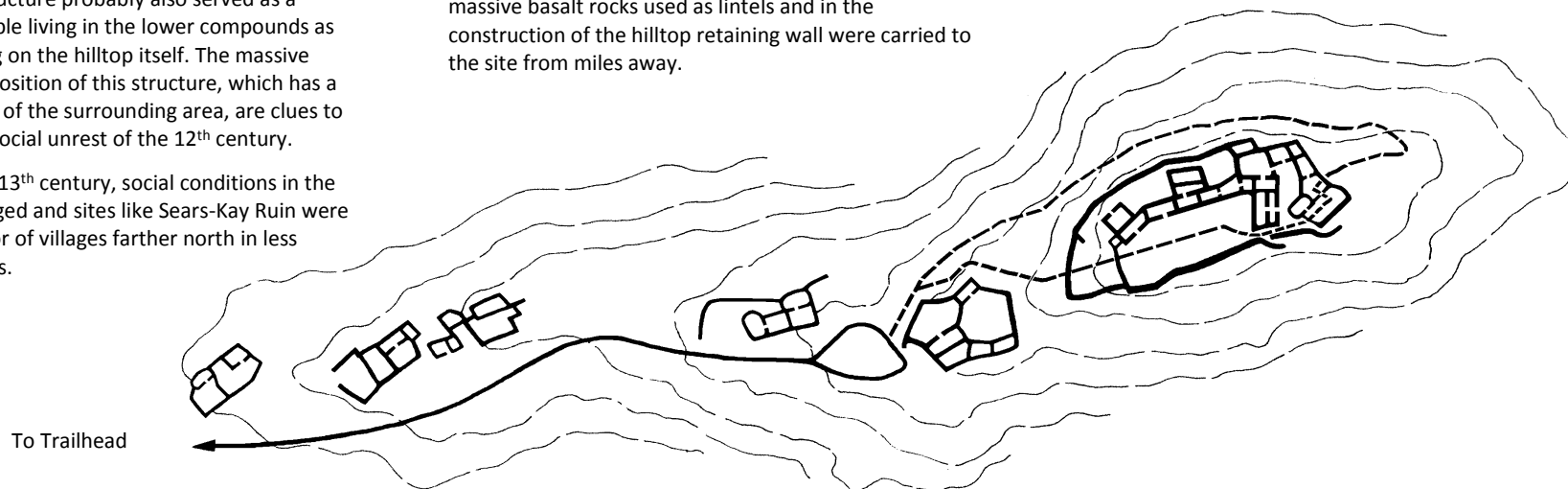
The environment surrounding Sears-Kay Ruin is similar today to what it would have been like in the past except that more surface water would have been available 800 to 1000 years ago. Nearby Camp Creek probably flowed year-round and the upland springs common throughout the foothill zone would have provided water not available in the desert lowlands.

A mild climate and a 330-day growing season allowed Hohokam farmers to produce a wide range of crops, including corn, beans, squash, and agave. Agriculture without irrigation was accomplished by planting some crops on the small floodplains lining spring-fed drainages and by building stone terrace and checkdams across slopes and small drainages to capture rainwater.



Rectangular Room

The prehistoric people of the desert foothills enjoyed a long and successful adaptation to the local environment. Changes in their culture are apparent as they adapted to new environmental and social conditions. However, they did not survive in the foothills beyond the 14th century. Archaeologists are actively working to solve this mystery, to determine what may have happened and where they might have gone.



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