

A History of Arizona's Counties and Courthouses

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Apache County lies in the northeast corner of the State of Arizona. The region was first visited by the Coronado expedition in 1540. When that party reached the southern end of present Apache County, Coronado named a range of mountains there Sierra Blanca. Today, they are known as the White Mountains, famous for recreational facilities.

The northeastern portion of Arizona was dominated for centuries by the Navajo and Apache Indians who presented a formidable barrier to Spanish and Anglo settlement of the territory. Lack of mineral wealth and lack of water also retarded settlement. But the area was visited and crossed many times by the Spanish expeditions as they proceeded west from the Rio Grande valley; by Mexican traders; by American trappers; "49'ers"; and military survey parties, working west from the newly acquired New Mexico Territory.

Apache County was created entirely from Yavapai County by the Tenth Territorial Legislative Assembly on February 24, 1879. Solomon Barth of St. Johns, and C. A. Franklin (also known as A. F. Banta), had worked actively for the establishment of the county. They had hoped that their town would become the county seat, but the citizens of Globe had also petitioned the Assembly for the creation of a new county with their town as the county seat. The county was created, but neither St. Johns nor Globe immediately became the seat of the county government. That honor went, temporarily, to the Mormon community of Snowflake, with the provision that a popular election would decide the permanent seat.

In November of 1879 that election was held. Again Solomon Barth led the fight for St. Johns. The votes of the mining town of Clifton, then in Apache County but presently in Greenlee County, helped St. Johns secure the county seat. It has held that honor to the present except for a short interval when County business was conducted in the town of Springerville.

Originally, Apache County encompassed all of present day Navajo County, part of Gila County, and part of Graham County, but those latter areas were extracted by 1881. Navajo County was established in 1895, further reducing the dimensions of Apache County. However, Apache, with 7,151,360 acres, remains an extensive region today.

Apache and the surrounding counties have had an interesting history. C. E. Cooley, Henry W. Dodd, and A. F. Banta, came into the area in 1869 prospecting for mines. Cooley eventually settled in the vicinity... The town of McNary was originally called Cooley in his honor, but the name was changed when the McNary Lumber Company of Louisiana bought the mill and cutting contract there.

In 1870, John Walker, a freighter between Fort Wingate, New Mexico and Fort Apache, Arizona, built a cabin at the Little Colorado River crossing about five miles south of St. Johns. Within a year a Mexican community had gathered around the cabin. In 1872, José Seavedra and his father arrived. They built the first bridge over the river. Until that time, freighters hauling between Zuni and Fort Apache had used a ford which gave the town the name “El Vadito”, the little crossing. Solomon Barth is credited with having changed the name of the crossing to San Juan. It is generally accepted that he did this to honor the first woman resident there, Señora Maria San Juan Baca de Padilla. The name was later anglicized to St. John and finally to St. Johns.

In 1877, Brigham Young, the patriarchal leader of the Mormon Church, instructed Ammon M. Tenney, a noted churchman, to locate sites for Mormon colonization in northern Arizona. Tenney traveled extensively in Arizona and New Mexico, but he recommended only a few places for settlement and all were situated near St. Johns. Early in 1879, with Tenney’s report as a guide, Jesse N. Smith attempted to negotiate the purchase of land from the Mexican settlers and from Solomon Barth, but without success. Ammon Tenney was more successful later that year. An agreement was made on November 16 providing for the purchase of land for a settlement in exchange for 770 head of American cows furnished by the church. This colony made some adjustment in location, increased its numbers, and took the name of “Salem”. A post office was secured, but due to the objections of earlier non-Mormon residents, the town site retained the name of St. Johns. By 1881 a log school house was built, and Mrs. Anna Romney became the first teacher.

Springerville is another community prominent in the affairs of Apache County. This settlement was originated by William Milligan, Marian Clark, Anthony Long, and Joe McCollaugh in 1871. Harry Springer of New Mexico was one of the town’s first merchants, but unfortunately, he trusted the wrong people with credit and he went broke. His neighbors, in sympathy, named the town site after him. Springerville and the surrounding Round Valley, due to its remote location, sparse settlement, and lack of lawmen, became a haven for outlaws. St. Johns and vicinity also had its share of them, but lawmen such as “Don” John Lorenzo Hubble, sheriff from 1882 to 1886, and Commodore Perry Owens, his successor, finally brought order to the entire area.

Mexican settlers founded the village of Concho sixteen miles west of St. Johns in 1865. The name means “shell” in Spanish and refers to the shape of the valley in which it is located. Here too Mormon settlers came, settled, and tried to give the village their own choice of a name. They called it Erastus in honor of Erastus Snow, but the name didn’t last long and all returned to the use of the original Concho. These Apache County communities remain today, a lasting tribute to the faith and hard work of many persevering men and women.

Much of Apache County is made up of government land. The Apache and Navajo Indian Reservations cover 63.42 percent of the County. The Navajo Reservation, in the north, has several settlements of historical importance. Fort Defiance, on Bonito Creek, was Arizona’s first military post. It was established in 1852, “in defiance of and to,”

hostile Navajo Indians. It is at this time a Navajo community and the site of an Indian school. Nearby is the Navajo tribal capital of Window Rock.

Ganado is another important community on the reservation. The word is Spanish for cattle or livestock. However, the settlement was named for a Navajo friend of John Lorenzo Hubbell, Tom Ganado, who had a camp at the Pueblo Colorado Wash. Ganado owned many cattle, horses, and sheep, hence his nickname "Cattle Tom". When Hubbell started a trading post near the wash in the late 1870's, he called it Ganado. Today Hubbell's famous trading post is preserved as a National Historic Site and the town of Ganado survives as a trading, hospital, and educational center.

Chinle, another Indian trade center, is the gateway to the spectacular Canyon de Chelly National Monument. Pronounced "de chay", it is probably a corruption of the Navajo term "tsegi", meaning "the rock canyon". The canyon's history spans many centuries. Prehistoric ruins are found there. It is the site of Kit Carson's famous campaign against the Navajo where thousands of Navajo were captured and started on the infamous "long march" [or "long walk"] to and imprisonment at Bosque Redondo, New Mexico. Today Navajo peacefully farm within the canyon.

The Apache Indian Reservation is located in the south of Apache County around the settlement of Fort Apache. It was established by the U.S. War Department on January 31, 1870, and it was declared a reservation by President U.S. Grant on November 9, 1871. It is the ancestral home of the White Mountain Apache (Coyotero), and the Tonto Apache. Today the formerly warlike Apache are occupied in ranching and lumbering. Also, they have opened their lands for recreational purposes; camping, fishing, hunting, and visitors are welcome.

The history of Apache County has included a wide variety of different elements. Across its valleys, plains, and mountains, and through its forests, have passed explorers, warriors, traders, merchants, herders, cattlemen, and religious groups of many ethnic strains. The descendants of those men and women who first settled in Apache County remain today, a living reminder of the area's rich and dramatic past.